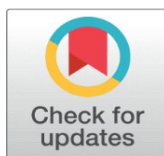
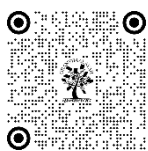


BHUTA KOLA RITUAL SPIRIT POSSESSION IN MANGALORE: THROUGH THE SPECTACLES OF IDENTITY POLITICS

Thomas Monteiro¹, Sakshi ²

¹Research Scholar, CDMS, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi & Assistant Professor, K.R. Mangalam University, Gurugram, India

²Assistant Professor, School of Law, Sushant University, Gurugram, India



DOI

10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.4898

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

In modern times politicization, popularization and commercialization of Bhūta Kōla, is with a particular purpose. As it is said today politics is played by mass mobilization of the people. The best way to mobilize the people is through identity. Appealing to the identity of the people is done through folk stories, myths, or any other social identities (race, religion, caste). Identity Politics is played in either way, it can be used by the dominant group to legitimize the existing social and political structures by legitimizing the anti-structural resistance performed through certain rituals and celebrations like that of Bhūta Kōla. It helps them to neutralize and further legitimize the silent background consensus. In this way the dominant group makes use of identity politics only to legitimize the power not for the real concern for transformation. On the other hand the dominated (marginalized) group too makes use of Identity Politics to question the existing relations of power.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bhūta Kōla ritual spirit possession is prevalent among Tulu speaking community of South Canara, Udupi districts of Karnataka state and Kasaragod district of Kerala. These three districts comprise of Tulunadu of pre-independent India. Tulu language belongs to Dravidian linguistic stock and Tulu speaking communities mainly Billavas, Gouds, Bunts and Dalits call themselves Dravidians.

Contemporary context theory of Identity Politics has been gaining momentum. It means continuous appealing of non political identities like race, gender, caste, disability, etc to alter or legitimize the existing relations of power. It is either way exploitative and follows the politics of exclusion. Transformation and Politics of Inclusion is very rare. That is why Post Modern Approach rejects essentialist aspect of New Social Movements and seeks to develop multiple identities.

Appealing to the identity is done through reflexive ability of human beings to go back to the past and attempting to answer the questions like; 'who we are?', 'where we are going?', etc. These questions have no direct answer rather answered through myths, dramas, movies, songs, poems and rituals. These are made alive through cultural performances like ritual worships of mythical heroes. Ritual performance of these myths brings solidarity in the community or the

group. In this essay an attempt has been made to analyze Bhūta Kōla as the performative culture which reinforces or instills the identity of the particular community.

2. BHŪTA KŌLA

Bhūtas refer to a group of Spirits. According to Ganesh Amin (Professor in Kannada Literature at Aloysius College in Manglore) there are three types of Bhūtas, they are Bhūtas originated and sent by gods and goddesses. Many of these Bhūtas have their origin in Siva which is indicated in the Pad-dana or epic songs about their origin and activities, mainly sung during Kōlas. Second type of Bhūtas have their origin in dead human beings. Certain dead human beings turn out to be Bhūtas. Third type of Bhūtas have their origin in animals. They are called spirits or Bhūtas of animals. Bhūtas are revered and worshiped through performance of rituals to appease and solicit assistance from them. Occasional or annual visit of Bhūtas seems to be blessing for the community. Therefore, they seek to appease and seek its assistance by offering prayers, rituals and in special way blood of chicken, goat or pig. There are differences of opinion about the number of Bhūtas existing in the region. Sanjiva Prabhu enlists 282 names of Bhūtas, he purposely leaves out sanskritized names of Bhūtas which are not famous they are Annapoorneshwari, Amritheshwari, etc. They can be appellations given by the Brahmins (Gawda, 1990: 33). Some of the prominent names among Bhūtas are - Guliga, Panjurli, Koti-Chennaya (Baidyerlu), Raktheswari, Ullalthi, Kodamanithaya, Malaraya, koddhabbu, Orthe, Chikku, Haiguli, Annappa, Nayer, Jumadi, Koragathaniya etc.

Kōla is an annual celebration of Bhūta ritual worship. There are various names for this celebration. The sanskritized name for this is Nema which is widely used in the region. Jatre is another term used which shows the commercialized aspect of this particular celebration. Parba (Parva) is another term indicates holyday or celebration. Parba is a simple celebration which consists of offerings at the "Bhūta Stone." Bhūta Stone is understood as the dwelling place of Bhūta, recent times with the influence of the Brahminic tradition they have started building small temples or gudis for the Bhūta where the Bhūta stone is planted. It is also called Bhūta-Sthana. Kōla, Nema and Jatre are all bigger level celebrations on fixed days. It consists of detailed preparation for about a month with different rituals and main celebration consists of wearing costume and playing dramatic role of Bhūta performed mainly by men belonged to the former untouchable castes. The Performer of Bhūta is called as Pātri. It is believed that Bhūta enters his body, possessed by Bhūta he performs Bhūta dance, he sometimes violently shakes himself and sometimes gives blessings or curses, gives oracles and at the end of the day's celebration (usually Kōla happens in the night) he drinks the blood of the Chicken or pigs. There are only three caste communities that perform this they are Nalike, Parava and Pambada castes. This main celebration varies depends upon financial condition of the owner of the particular Bhūta, or depends upon importance of the Bhūta. Sometimes Kōla can last for a week, or three days or even a day.

Bhūta Nrityas are ritual dances performed during Bhūta Worship. The performer is called a 'pātri'. He has to don a particular makeup and decorations. These details are passed on from generation to generation. They wear different masks representing different Bhūtas. These masks are usually kept in the temple. They are evocative of different aggressive emotions. Each Bhūta has its own set of weapons (trishul, sword, fire) which the pātri has to take up after he is dressed up.

The dance is usually accompanied by back ground instruments such as tembare, Dōlu, nāgasvara etc. These dances have various movements and postures which are reminiscent of Yakshagana. pad-danas are Tulu songs delineating the story of particular Bhūtas. Many of them have literary merits.

Kōla involves devotion, inspiration, entertainment and is an important form of community life. Usually it is an annual ceremony. It takes place on fixed dates as per the solar year. It may be at the family level, village level or at the level of a group of villages. Bhūtaaradhade or Bhūta Kōla has various stages in its ritual celebration. There are sixteen stages called as Padinaar Kattu (Amin, 2009: 22). It proceeds in various stages like cutting of a plantain bunch, (Gone kadiyuvudu), a cock fight ritual (Koligoota), arrival of the Bhandara, (Bhandara ilisuvudu), hoisting the flag (Dhvajarahana or kodi), taking the veelya (formal invitation to start), make up, wearing the bells (Gaggara), grand meals (offering Barane), wearing the big hallow like back-gear, possession and dance, speaking by the spirits, giving protection - word (abhaya), One of the last parts of the Kōla is offering of food to the Bhūta. Food includes both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food, liquid and non-liquid food such as tender coconut water, alcohol, milk and some Bhūtas drink blood of chicken and pigs. For e.g. Shiradi Bhūta, Panjurli Bhūta, Kalkuda-Kallurti Bhūta, Malarayi Bhūta, etc, drink the blood of the chickens and pigs. The costume and make up have distinct style and the Bhūta worship presents a very good costume make up model. The makeup, costume, dance, forceful background music, the dialogues, possession - all together create awe and Trans like environment. The head of the family or the community or a person assigned, has to speak to the Bhūta on various

matters concerning the rituals. The dialogue follows a broad pattern. The language used in these conversations and by the Bhūtas in their independent wordings (Nudi) is poetic and stylized called Mudipu.

The songs sung in the Kōla performances are called 'Pad-danas' (prayers or 'Pad'-songs). They are long narrative epics. They are an interesting literary genre containing the birth and geographical spread of a Bhūta, its exploits, miracles, greatness etc. The pad-danas are sung only at certain stages of a Kōla performance. They include many historical and cultural details, along with the story of a Bhūta.

Bhūta Kōla is attended by various people belonged to different castes of the village and also from far off villages. Bhūta assures blessings and gives oracles to all those who attend the celebration. Bhūta Kōla is officiated by Pujari belonged to the Billava community not of the Brahmin Caste. But now a days due to Vaidikarane (this is a Tulu word and its literal translation can be Vedicization/Sanskritization, this concept was took it from Dr. Ganesh Amin during my interview with him) of the Billava community they call Brahmin priest at certain point of the celebration to decide about the dates and time of the Kōla.

The Bhūta Kōlas have history of nearly a thousand years. Although in modern times there are many changes that have brought about in the celebration of the Bhūta Kōla but the central aspects or procedures remains the same. Changes are mainly due to the modernization of the Billava community and also commercialization of the whole celebration.

3. IDENTITY POLITICS

The Identity politics concept emerged in the multi-cultural context in Canada. The first use of it was in 1979 by Anspach who defined Identity Politics as "activism by people with disability to transform both self and societal conception of people with disabilities" (Bernstein, 2005: 47). Bernstein enlists three approaches to Identity Politics, they are Neo-Marxian approach, who prioritize class-politics over identity or status based politics. For them identity of a person is derived from that of class. Therefore role of identity politics is to challenge the relations of power. New Social Movements Approach gave importance to social identities which is cultural politics, manufactured and constructed by the society. It aims at "elaboration, expression or affirmation" (Bernstein, 2005: 51) of one's identity. Post-Structuralist Approach gave importance to multiple identities and it questioned the essentialist position of New Social Movements. They go beyond binary understanding of identity therefore, opens door for non-structuralist way of identity politics.

The understand identity Politics in the modern times defends upon the politics which is driven by mass mobilization and not just the decision taken in closed doors of parliament by few bunch of cabinet ministers. It is in this context mobilization of public plays an important role. The only simplest way to mobilize public is to mobilize them in the name of identity. Human beings thrive under mutual recognition. We cannot form stable personal or collective identities without others recognizing them (Dusche, 2010: 84). Identity relies on commonly understandable ways of representing a person in discourse. This discourse is expressed through the medium of language. Therefore as Dusche claims there is "dialectic relationship between language and identity" (ibid.,).

Mobilization of identity is to gain power or for the purpose of politics. Politics involves power to make decisions which is binding on all. Collective decision is made by those who participate in the political process which is binding on all even on future generations of the group. Many a times it is the dominant group who influence and hijack the deliberations. But once these decisions are made they represent the ethical and legal identity of the people in the group. Therefore, political identity is "silent background consensus that constitute and upholds a polity" (ibid., 92). On the contrary Identity Politics can function two ways one by the dominant who make use of myths and other pre-political identities (sex, race, caste) to gain power, whereas for the excluded or dominated group it is a platform "to question the existing hegemonic legal frameworks" (ibid., 98) on which power relation are rested. Many of the identity politics movements are not to build inclusive politics but to establish an alternative framework where new groups are excluded.

It is true because one can construct a group identity only in opposition to the "other." One way it unites a particular community in the name of victimhood or as denigrated culture, the flip side of it is that it can thrive in its identity only when it demonizes the "other." That is why in India at macro level identity politics, Pakistan is being portrayed as the "Other" as opposed to "Us." The "Other" is creation of media which is the tool in the hands of dominant groups. It is the media which creates public discourse about the "Other" through certain images which gives boost to the self-identity of the group. For Dusche, Identity Politics is "the continuous formation of identities of "Us" and "Them" through influencing public discourse" (Dusche, 2010:49).

4. IDENTITY POLITICS OF THE BILLAVAS THROUGH BHŪTA KŌLA

Billavas are single largest community in Tulunadu (South Canara, Udupi and Kasaragod). Billavas were toddy tapers and also engaged in agriculture. They were peasants and many of them served as tenants of landlords who were Bunts. They were restricted from entering Hindu temples. Traditionally they worshipped Bhūtas or spirits. These Bhūtas had their own temples called Bhūta-sthana. They had their own officiator of rituals called Poojary who belonged to the Billava sub caste of called Poojary. Bhūta Kōla played tremendous role in the life of Billavas.

Reflexivity enables individually or collectively to articulate identities: narratives of self, tell a story of who one is, where one has come from and what makes one distinct from another. These narratives of identities begin with mythical roots of origin, legends that link the past with the present to establish a distinct people and ensure its continuity over time. Ancestral myth often involves story of gods, heroes who personify cultural ideals and values. Cultural performances are not just myths and stories but it includes scripts that are expressed in the ritual performances that sustain solidarity and affirm distinct roles and personae (Langman, 2003: 224).

Bhūta Kōlas and Yakshagana (Yakshagana is a dramatic and dance form of narration of the folk story/myths), form important aspect of identity formation of Billavas. Bhūta-sthanas (temple of the Bhūtas) are mainly owned by the Bunts, Billavas and Mogeru castes. These casteg groups administer the Bhūta Kōla and possession rituals are performed by Dalits. Pad-dana (Epic-song) which narrates origin and movements of particular Bhūta talks much about social identity of worshipers. Billavas are proud of their association with these mythical heroes. According to Amitav Ghosh, "By tradition, the Billavas are also associated with the martial arts and the single most famous pair of Tuluva heroes, the brothers Koti-Chennaya, are archetype heroes of this caste which symbolizes the often hostile competition between the Billavas and the Bunts." The cultural performance of these mythical heroes like Koti-Chennaya, brings solidarity among them.

Rituals united people into a community... Worship of the society... rituals are performative moments and enactment of embodied identities, were located with in complex system of song, dance and a number of restricted dietary and sexual taboos. Rituals are celebrated with bodily decoration and ecstasy... and emotions are displayed which are contagious and dramatized. It reinforces the power of sacred in the mind of the audience and builds solidarity (Langman, 2003: 225).

The orderly performance of the rituals and other cultural performances require that certain identities remain submerged either through repression or isolation. Victor turner calls this aspect as "liminal sites of resistance". "Even though social controls limit thought and conduct for the sake of preserving the regularities of social life, there are anti-structures, liminal sites of resistance, inversion and repudiation where social norms can be safely flaunted (V.Turner, 1996 cited in Langman, 2003: 224). These liminal resistance are sporadic expressions allow individuals to articulate otherwise submerged identities and tabooed desires in highly ritualized forms. It also serves as social stability in the society through controlled violation of the cultural rules. These articulations usually are forbidden or taboo. Such space provides space for spontaneity, equality, freedom and role reversal. Through Liminal moments we access the submerged identity and experience alternative.

Structure of domination fosters resistance. But domination also follows certain counter ideologies or strategies to neutralize the resistance. In the age of globalization consumer culture rules our life. It also provides opportunity for the transgression. These acts of resistance and transgressions are highlighted as spectacles. The proponent of this theory of Spectacles Societies was Guy Debord, who wrote the book *The Society of the Spectacles* (1967) later made in to movie in 1973. 'Spectacles' means act of reification or creation of 'false consciousness' in Marxian terminology. He argues that "the spectacles presents itself both as an instrument of unification of society and as providing common ground for the deceived gaze and false consciousness" (Guru, 2012: 41). In the case of Bhūta Kōla, the "spectacles" is mass-mediated Bhūta Kōla. Bhūta Kōla has the history of over 1000 years. Ancient times it played purely religious, spiritual and ritualistic function. Now it has turned out to be a consumer product, in the words of Adorno and Horkheimer it is 'culture industry.' It means culture is a commodity which is advertised marketed and consumed. In short, it is commercialization and commodification of Bhūta Kōla which has brought about lot many external changes in the celebration. That is why the commercial term like Jatre (Fair/entertainment) has come into picture.

Some of the commercialization aspects are, earlier the whole ritual celebration of Bhūta Kōla was performed with out artificial lightings and sounds rather they used fire, special light emanating from Sute or Koltiri (torch made out of coconut leaf). It used to be conducted in the paddy field but now we have cemented floors, plastic chairs for the audiences and pandal or canopy above. All these are sponsored by political parties or business people. We also find political party

flags being hoisted at the Kōla places. One of the main changes that are noticed by people that I have interviewed was that the various organizational aspects like calling the Pātri, persons to dramatize the particular Bhūta that is people who are able to get possessed by the Bhūta, organization of preparation and distribution of food, and other activities are given in centralized contract. Earlier it was always decentralized. Centralized contract involves businessmen, contractors and also monopoly of the market. Most of the time centralized contract is taken by dominant groups in the society. They make use of the opportunity to play party politics.

Another aspect of spectacles is the liminal space given for resistance is being made use to further cement their hegemonic domination. Liminal space here is it is anti structural. The cultural frame of mind or structure of Indian society is based on purity and pollution. Liminal space of resistance here is people of all castes (even Brahmins and Dalits) gather at Bhūta-Stāna, small temple where Bhūta is believed to be dwelling. Usually temple owners belonged to Billava Caste (an agriculture caste). Even women and children are allowed to attend this ritual celebration. It is liminal space or anti-structural because it gives space for resistance and it is legitimated by the society where people follow strict purity and pollution. In normal circumstances women and dalits are not allowed to enter the Hindu temples. At Bhūta-Stāna and Bhūta Kōla all are welcome.

Another most special aspect of this liminal space of resistance is the main person who impersonates Bhūta (Pātri) is from former untouchable castes, Nalike, Paraya or Pambada caste. He becomes the centre of attraction, who is able to say oracles, sing Pad-dana (sing the epic song of the Bhūta), when he come near audience all get up, bow and receive blessings even Brahmins seek his blessings. This stands as the extreme form of anti-structure against the structure of purity and pollution. This is only a window to further re-impose the hegemonic domination of the dominant class or caste politics in the society or to further legitimize the caste structure in the society. Even though, numerically Billavas are the largest caste groups in Tulunadu, they were reduced to tenants or small peasants during the time of Zamindari system. Most of the Zamindars were Bunts or Brahmins. These dominants castes needed support of the Billavas as soldiers and peasants and in the farm real labourers were Nalikes, Parayas and Pambadas. This liminal space during Bhūta Kōla helps people to forget about the exploitative caste and class structure after the period of harvest season; where they might have felt the inequality, injustice and exploitation that is meted to them. At the same time before the next rainy season they enter in to the same exploitative structure to till the land of the dominant caste and class. These anti-structural celebrations used by the dominant groups to legitimize further the exploitative structures by neutralizing and naturalizing the resistance. Therefore, it is also "Spectacles" or false conception.

After 1974 that is after the Land Ceiling Act, many of the Billava tenants became owners of the land and they benefited most from this act. On the contrary it was their political opponents Bunts who incurred heavy loss. Since then Billavas have been gaining sharp upward mobility in the economic, social, political dominance. They make use of Billava identity politics in these Bhūta Kōlas to unite Billavas as against their political opponents mainly Bunts. It is also used as vote bank politics, specially to garner the support of the Dalits in their fold not with the really motive of transforming the oppressive social structures. They have created an alternative political structure which excludes and oppresses the "Others" mainly the Dalits.

5. CONCLUSION

Rituals united people into a community... Worship of the society... rituals are performative moments and enactment of embodied identities, were located with in complex system of song, dance and a number of restricted dietary and sexual taboos. Rituals are celebrated with bodily decoration and ecstasy... and emotions are displayed which are contagious and dramatized. Which reinforces the power of sacred in the mind of the audience and builds solidarity (Langman, 2003: 225).

Bhūta Kōla has all the elements that Langman is talking about in the above mentioned statement. In modern times politicization, popularization and commercialization of Bhūta Kōla, is with a particular purpose. As it is said today politics is played by mass mobilization of the people. The best way to mobilize the people is through identity. Appealing to the identity of the people is done through folk stories, myths, or any other non-political identities (race, religion, caste). Identity Politics is played in either way, it can be used by the dominant group to legitimize the existing social and political structures by legitimizing the anti-structural resistance performed through certain rituals and celebrations like that of Bhūta Kōla. It helps them to neutralize and further legitimize the silent background consensus. In this way the dominant group makes use of identity politics only to legitimize the power not for the real concern for transformation. On the other hand the dominated (marginalized) group too makes use of Identity Politics to question the existing relations of power. In the process any New Social Movements like that of Billava Samaj Movement makes use of Identity Politics to built

alternative relations of power or cultural frame works where new groups are excluded and exploited. Therefore, purpose of these new social movements too is not for transformation or inclusive politics rather for building new power structure through politics of exclusion. The words of Michael Dusché seems to be very true, Identity Politics is “the continuous formation of identities of “Us” and “Them” through influencing public discourse” (Dusché, 2010:49).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bernstein, Mary (2005). “Identity Politics” Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 31, pp. 47-74.
- Dusché, Michael (2010). Identity Politics in India and Germany. New Delhi: Sage Publication India Pvt Ltd.
- Gowda, Chinnappa (1990). Bhutharadhane: Janapadiya Adyayana. Manglore: Madipu Prakashana.
- Guru, Gopal (2012). “The Rise of the Dalit Millionaire: A Low Intensity Spectacle,” in EPW, Vol. XLVII, No. 50 (December 15), pp. 41-49.
- Huddy, Leonie (2001). “From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory,” in International Society of Political Psychology. MA: Blackwell Publications, pp127-156.
- Langman, Lauren (2003) “Culture, Identity and Hegemony: The Body in a Global Age” in Current Sociology, Vol. 51 (May/July 2003), pp 223–247.
- Sankamar, Amin Ganesh (2009). Maya Mattu Joga. Manglore: Siri Prakashana.