Part 1 Madigas for themselves

Chapter 3 Performing arts: Madigas as performers and patrons (3)

Moving onto the metro-global stage

Report from UN World Conference Against Racism, Durban 2001


When the world danced to Suresh Lele,


http://www.ambedkar.org/chandrabhan/Whenthe.htm

No, I would not like to describe how Heather M. Acs looked. The New York born girl has just crossed her teens. She is a White American, usually accompanied by her friend Mama S. Diouf, a Black girl of about the same age and appeal. Then there is the tall Brazilian girl Eleniw Ornisa. I wonder for what reasons have Indian women been winning beauty titles. They and over three dozen young women, men-White, Black, Brown, Coloured- from all parts of the world, danced to the tune of Suresh Lele.

Suresh, a Telugu Dalit, is theorising Dalit culture. About six months ago, I had argued that the next breakthrough in Dalit movement would come from Andhra Pradesh. Telugu Dalits have not let me down, as it was Suresh under whose leadership they made a statement in Durban. This doesn't mean I am taking away contributions of his entire team, which is represented by Dalit women of Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and other states. Let us not forget the very special contributions of Gorati Venkanna and Masterji, who have been performing excellently.

Here in Durban, cultural teams from several countries have been performing every day. It was exactly 7 pm on August 28 when Suresh's drum was first heard at the gates of the Natal Cricket ground. There were about 1000 delegates from all over the world sharing their experiences, distributing literature and arguing their cases. Suresh's entire team played the music at high pitch. About two dozen Dalits began singing and dancing. Then I saw Eleniw dancing madly with Fr. Thomas Pallithanan, a Telugu priest, his personality defined by nobility and conviction. Heather and Diouf, too, joined Dalit men. It continued for about 20 minutes and by 7.30 pm, a large number of people had gathered, all enjoying the event.

The first round was over. While fully aware that Suresh was performing an anti-caste number, those who had joined did so only to explore their youthfulness and joy.

Overwhelmed, I wanted to thank Eleniw for joining in. Only to realise that she didn't know English, and I didn't know Spanish. But she wrote her name and e-mail ID on a piece of paper, shook hands with me. We both stood cursing language barriers. Heather, who too was relaxing there, approached me asking if she could help me out. I grabbed the opportunity and thanked her for dancing with Dalits. ‘Oooh! Are they Dalits? I have been hearing so much about them,’ she asked. ‘Yes, they are
Dalits. I am one too.’ ‘Nice to meet you, but what is great in dancing with Dalits and why are you thanking me for that,’ she asked.

Then I explained how the dance in which she had participated had anti-caste overtones. ‘Non-Dalit men rape Dalit women but their women can't dance with us, dine with us and this is a reality in most parts of rural India,’ I explained. Before I could conclude, she hugged me. I felt a bit embarrassed as her hug was too tight, too long, and people were watching. She virtually screamed, exhorting everybody to dance again, this time to an anti-caste number. I requested Suresh to play the drum again and what followed was total euphoria.

Word spread at lightning speed and everybody present there wanted to share their joy with Dalits. The celebration continued for some 40 minutes. What happened later changed the entire mood of the Durban meet. The place where Suresh and his team performed is surrounded by a host of make-shift offices, where representatives from all over the world gather in the evening, assess their performance during the day and prepare for the next day. This is the first time Dalits have established a cultural contact with global delegates. By now, the term "Dalit" has occupied the minds of most. They now have some clarity of Dalit agenda, and a fair amount of understanding as to how "untouchability" has deprived Dalits, including tribals, from access to anything good for an honourable human existence in India. Despite Thursday's setback, the caste question is gaining ground.

Hats off to Suresh, on whose music, the world danced, symbolically though.

Chindu, pillar of Dalit art forms
Deccan Chronicle, 17 September, p.3.
http://ambedkar.org/News/Pillltrrtfrms.htm

Forum promotes heritage; Durban treated to Dappu beats
One of the most significant events in recent times was the World Conference Against Racism at Durban. People who are discriminated against converged and gave vent to their pain at being treated like pariahs. For the first time in history, people from the oppressed communities voiced their concerns at a UN conference.

One of the groups that participated from India was the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, a forum of members of 250-odd Dalit groups. Among these was the organisation Dappu from Hyderabad. ‘Dappu,’ says Paul Divakar, ‘symbolises the assertion and celebration of Dalit groups and Dalit empowerment’. Divakar is the convenor of Dappu. A very significant part of the Dappu collective is the cultural body Chindu - perhaps the only Dalit cultural forum of its kind in Hyderabad, which participated in the world summit at Durban.

Chindu literally enlivened the summit with the sounds of the Dappu, a musical instrument closely associated with the Dalits of AP. ‘Although we have numerous cultural evenings in Hyderabad, there are few instances where we see performances of these forms of art that recount the rich history of Dalits except, of course, in the shows organised by the administrative units of the government, where tribal and folk dances and other related art forms get centrestage,’ Divakar said. Chindu, in association with Dappu, was set up about one-and-a half-years back. According to Suresh, convenor of Chindu, who returned recently from Durban, ‘We are not a mouth-piece of any organisation, as cultural units generally are. Chindu treats Dalit art and art forms as a way of life, as a part of history and culture.’ He informs that Chindu also conducts research and documentation of Dalit art forms. The aim is to build an alternative (Dalit) culture.’
The organisation imparts training in Dappu dance and recently started the concept of ‘playback’ theatre. In this kind of theatre, the audience ‘writes’ its own play, and the actors perform spontaneously. The actors stand in the midst of a group of people and enact a story based on their real-life experiences. People recall real events and share moments of anguish, pain, joy they felt, and Chindu actors enact it for them. Chindu has staged such shows in many of the 14 districts of the State, besides Bangalore, Chennai and at the Hyderabad Central University.

Suresh says of his Durban experience, ‘It was a tremendous boost for us. The Zulus and the South Africans have such a tremendous body rhythm. We communicated with them through our own Dappus. They all understood the historic link between Dappu and the Dalits of Andhra.’ Meanwhile, Chindu is busy preparing its future course of cultural activities on the Dalit issue.

See also WCAR articles

From our bureau, Hyderabad 2001.
City artistes bag programmes, accuse Dalits. Deccan Chronicle, 8 November, p. 6.

Real dappu takes a backseat
The Dalit communities boast of their own cultural forms – be it in music or dance, and they closely [link] with the magical sound of dappu. While some cultural platforms do promote dappu and other marginalised forms on rare occasions, most Dalit performers do not have a worthy public platform. Especially those who hail from rural backgrounds, who do not know the ‘right’ kind of people, or the ‘right’ kind of networks that work in organising cultural performances.

Chiluka Bhaskar, one of the dappu artistes, living in the remote bylanes of Boduppal, says, ‘I come from a madiga family. My father was a cobbler who came to Hyderabad. At school, I was inspired to sing and use my dappu. I worked through nights, and studied simultaneously. I managed a teacher's job through sheer struggle. But my fellow dappu artistes are wage labourers and paint houses,’ he says.

For them, a programme now and then fetches Rs 250 per performance, that too if a VIP is visiting or for the propaganda programmers of DPRO, he says.

Bhaskar has composed around 100 songs. He uses these in the typical gollasuddulu genre. Gollasuddulu are the shepherds' songs, which Bhaskar converted into pallesuddulu or village songs. He says, ‘What we do is the traditional dappu. Hyderabadis use steps and sounds that we do not understand. We are not allowed in TV shows since we come from rural background. Telugu University teaches dappu, but where do people have the kind of money to pay,’ he asks.

Bhaskar also alleges that at Shilparamam and Lalita Kala Thoranam, ‘Only those who know the officials get a chance, and the same people are called every time there is a programme,’ Bhaskar complains. ‘Classical singers, and famous artistes get chance to perform, not us. Even people who were sent for the Independence Day programmes were the potarajus from Hyderabad, not rural Andhrites.’

This allegation is substantiated by an official, albeit ‘unofficially’, at the Lalita Kala Thoranam, who admits that ‘some of these “folk” artistes are not from rural Andhra. Some Hyderabad-based people perform as rural folk artistes.’

Bhaskar says, ‘We do get some programmes like the literacy campaign and Janmabhoomi, but that is once in a while. Doordarshan did not even allow us inside -- they ask us to record our own video first. Where do we go for the resources required for all this,’ he asks.
Bhaskar is fortunate due to his educational background, but his passion lies in his dappu, and in keeping alive his 15-member team of artistes. He continues to write songs but his dream is that the official machinery will include the ‘truly rural’ Dalits in more respectable platforms.

**Mahadiga** *The man descending from above*

a film (43 mins) directed by Suresh Lele & Sabrina Francis


**Reviews**

**Chandrabhan Prasad 2004.**

Despair and hope of the Mahadiga, *The Pioneer*, 8 September

http://countercurrents.org/dalit-prasad080904.htm

The very idea of a Suresh Lele in a Dalit Film Festival might sound utterly ridiculous. But such is the Dalit condition in India. Lele's film Mahadiga was screened at the Cochin International Film Festival (CIFF) held between August 6 and 12.

Contrasting the Dalit situation in India with the Blacks of the US can be interesting. While CIFF began on August 6, where a Dalit filmmaker got the opportunity to screen his film, another film festival had just ended on August 5, in the city of Newark in the US. Beginning June 30, the Fleet Newark Black Film Festival (FNBFF) concluded on August 8, a 40-day exercise, where dozens of Black filmmakers competed for best film, actor, director and soundtrack awards. The FNBFF was celebrating its 30th anniversary, indicating that the annual exercise had begun in 1974. I understand that the FNBFF is not alone, there are many more similar agencies hosting Black film festivals all across the US. Will there be a Dalit film festival, say by 2020? By our standards, that would be a milestone in the history of the Dalit movement, albeit half a century behind the Black movement. [...] I do not know many Dalit filmmakers. My own nephew Pankaj K Pracheta, a trained filmmaker, makes small documentaries, often for private producers. And there is Suresh Lele of Andhra Pradesh, whose first film Mahadiga I had the opportunity to watch. There could be a few more. But I do not know. [...] The American Blacks and Indian Dalits have identical legacies of exclusion, suffering and rebellion. Both have identical aspirations of freedom, dignity and equality. The goal is far from being achieved but in relation to the Blacks, the Dalit situation remains pathetic. Films and newspapers and the TV media largely shape public opinion. How amazing it is to note that there is not a single Dalit Film Festival? Which means portrayal of the Dalit world is left to the mercy of non-Dalits.

Watching Mahadiga, a film produced by Chindu, a Hyderabad-based Dalit Cultural Resource Centre and co-directed by Suresh Lele, a Dalit culture theorist, and his colleague Sabrina Francis is like a march through the bylanes of Dalit history. Though in Telugu, the film has excellent English subtitles and narrates the Madiga (a major Dalit sub-caste, historically engaged in leather work) life with complete artistic passion. The film begins with: ‘...I am the Madiga. No! I am Mahadiga. The man descending from above.’ Lele uses Dappu, a musical instrument, to narrate the life of the Mahadiga. This itself is a very high form of imaginative genius. The narrative through the song form makes the viewer stand still, in terms of his/her imaginative existence. For instance, while warming up Dappu, the maker thunders: ‘I am the sacrificial fire, I smoulder in the fires of hell and the smile of flowers! I am the thunder of Dappu’. About Mahadiga children, the film centres on the deepest corner of human imaginary: ‘I am the mutinous child of the caste system. I am a magic-child of the demon. I move fast to seek the evil uncertain.’ Mahadiga is a 42-minute film one must watch, not only to understand Madiga life in totality - the suffering, the happiness, despair and hope - but to also understand what difference a Dalit
filmmaker can make. One little caution though: untouchables have little reason to be nostalgic, but the film moves in that direction. Hope the Dalits go on to have many more Leles. And it will be a glorious day when the Dalits organise a Dalit Film Festival, the way FNBFF did, lasting 40 days.

The story of the oppressed
[Mahadiga, with image]
The Hindu, 9 September