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The Female Soothsayers/ Palm readers in the Ahikuntika Village of Kudagama as a Subaltern Community

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මුද්‍රාපද:

සාස්තරකාරයන්, අත්ල කියවන්නන්, අභිගුණ්ඨික,
නාමිකයන්, උපාශ්‍රිත ප්‍රජාව

සංශ්ලේෂණය

මෙම අධ්‍යයනයේදී අවධානය යොමු කෙරෙන්නේ ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ කුඩාගම නම් ගම්මානයේ, අභිගුණ්ඨික හෙවත් “ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ නාමිකයන්” යනුවෙන් හඳුන්වන ප්‍රජාවට අයත් කාන්තා සාස්තරකාරයන්/අත්ල කියවන්නන් උපාශ්‍රිත (Subaltern) ප්‍රජාවක් ලෙස අධ්‍යයනය කිරීමයි. මෙම පර්යේෂණයේදී ඔවුන්ගේ මූල්‍ය දුෂ්කරතා හේතුවෙන් ජීවිතයේ මුහුණ දෙන අරගල සහ අසමාන මානව හිමිකම්, විශේෂයෙන්ම ඔවුන්ගේ සමාජ, දේශපාලන හා සංස්කෘතික අයිතිවාසිකම් ගවේෂණය කෙරේ. ගයත්‍රී චක්‍රවර්තී ස්පිවැක්ගේ “Can the Subaltern Speak?” නම් රචනාව, මෙම කාන්තා සාස්තරකාරයන් උපාශ්‍රිත ප්‍රජාවක්ද යන්න පරීක්ෂා කිරීමට භාවිතා කෙරේ. මූලික දත්ත කුඩාගම අභිගුණ්ඨික ප්‍රජාවට අයත් පුද්ගලයින් සමග පැවැත්වූ සම්මුඛ සාකච්ඡා තුළින්ද, ද්විතීයික දත්ත දැනට එම ප්‍රජාව පිළිබඳ පවතින පොත් සහ ලිපිවලින්ද එකතු කරන ලදී. කාන්තා සාස්තරකාරයන්ගේ ප්‍රජාව ඔවුන්ගේ ස්ත්‍රී-පුරුෂභාවය සහ සංස්කෘතික අනන්‍යතාවය හේතුවෙන් සමාජයෙන් කොන් කර ඇත. එම නිසා, ඔවුන් ප්‍රධාන ධාරාවේ සමාජය හා ඒකාබද්ධ වීමට උත්සාහ කරන්නේ පූර්ණ සමාජ, දේශපාලන හා සංස්කෘතික අයිතිවාසිකම් ලබා ගැනීමේ අරමුණින්ය.

Introduction

The female soothsayers, also known as palm readers (“සාප්තරකාරයන්”) in Sri Lanka who belong to the Sri Lankan nomads- “the gypsies in Sri Lanka,” can be considered as a multiply marginalized community. They struggle in life due to financial difficulties and unequal human rights, particularly social, political and cultural rights. The research aims at studying the female soothsayers/ palm readers as a “Subaltern” community.

Such a community of soothsayers/ palm readers live in the Ahikuntika village of Kudagama which is situated within the jurisdiction of the Mihintale urban council. The men of the community engage in snake charming (“නයි නැටවීම”) and training performing monkey (“රිලව් නැටවීම”) while women exercise their traditional mode of livelihood- palm reading (“සාප්තර කීම”) in public places around the sacred city of Anuradhapura. Their culture and identity are based chiefly on their traditional profession- snake charming and palm reading.

The traditional profession of palm reading/ soothsaying is passed down from one generation to another. Females of the community learn the art of soothsaying/ palm reading from their mothers or grandmothers in order to continue the tradition and use it as a means of living. While engaging in their traditional profession, they live a gypsy life style travelling from one place to another, putting up temporary tents to spend the nights in lands during their tours. However, palm reading does not provide them sufficient financial support to live.

They identify themselves as “Lankan Telugu” people as Telugu is their mother tongue which is also the state language of Andhra Pradesh in India. Many embrace the Hindu religion, especially Hindu Gods like God Kataragama and God Vishnu. They are believed to have supernatural powers which include healing, taming of devils and casting of spells and charms.

The aim of the study is to analyse the community of female soothsayers/ palm readers as a “Subaltern” community according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak discusses the inability of the subaltern to speak within Western discourse in her post-modernist feminist work “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

If the subaltern has no history and cannot speak in the context of colonial production, the subaltern as the female is more deeply in shadow. The subaltern

as a woman has no voice. A woman becomes agent as class, as oppressed, as caste and other hierarchies. (Spivak, 2010, p. 306).

“Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the “third-world woman” caught between tradition and modernization” (Spivak, 2010, p. 306).

As the female becomes the object of colonialist historiography and the subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. According to the above mentioned quotations, the subaltern cannot speak for themselves or represent themselves therefore, they must be spoken for. The subaltern woman is silenced by the combined violence of colonialism and patriarchy. Thus, the research will attempt to explore whether the female soothsayers/ palm readers of the Ahikuntika village in Kudagama who experience unequal human rights, particularly social, political and cultural rights are “subaltern” women marginalized due to colonialism and patriarchy.

Materials and Methods

Data for the research purposes was collected in two main ways. Primary data was collected by conducting individual interviews with people of the Ahikuntika community in Kudagama. When choosing interviewees, their age and gender factors were taken into consideration for the purpose of recognizing if there is a difference of the social, political and cultural aspects of their lives. Therefore, five females and five males of different age groups from the community were chosen to be interviewed. Secondary data for the study was gathered from already existing books and articles published on the Ahikuntika community in Sri Lanka. A qualitative analysis of the data thus collected was done by the researcher.

Results and Discussion

In the recent past, most of the Ahikuntika families in Kudagama who engaged in their traditional mode of livelihood were struggling with poverty. Due to their poverty and subjectivity to patriarchy, the female children of such Ahikuntika families were forced by their parents to give up on their school education at a young age and become victims of child marriage. Young girls who were taught the art of palm reading/ soothsaying by the female elders of their community, continued the family

traditions after marriage by engaging in the profession to financially support their new families. This is evident from the following statement given by a forty-seven year old female soothsayer who has been engaging in the profession since the age of ten,

“පහ වසර වගේ ඉගෙන ගත්තා, අපේ අම්මලා කැමති උනේ නෑ ළමස්සි කෙල්ලෝ තනියෙන් ඉස්කෝලෙ යන්න, බන්දලා දුන්නා”

(Meena Amma, personal communication, December 2, 2019).

“I learnt until grade five, but my parents did not like to send young girls like me to school alone, so I was given into marriage” (Meena Amma, personal communication, December 2, 2019).

At present, the profession of soothsaying has become limited to the female older generation. Due to the change in social, political and cultural aspects of society with time, the contemporary adult female soothsayers seem to have moved away from their traditional nomadic lifestyle and completely intertwined with the local mainstream lifestyle. In order to maintain their families and educate their children, they engage in daily wage labour apart from palm reading due to their financial difficulties.

Furthermore, due to rapid urbanization, the Ahikuntika community is facing the threat of losing lands where they used to stop and put their temporary tents to spend the nights during their tours around the country. They were also given lands for permanent residence by the government in 1984. Thus, they were compelled to give up their gypsy life style which is their main means of living. This has a major diminishing effect on their traditions and cultural identity. It has affected their economic status too.

Most of the female palm readers who were interviewed for the study, have not even completed their secondary education. Hence, most of them do not know any profession other than palm reading/ soothsaying which was taught to them by their mothers or grandmothers. At present, some soothsayers go to work in garment factories as soothsaying does not bring them enough money. Although working in garment factories is undervalued by the privileged and upwardly mobile members of the mainstream community, it has become a good alternative to earn their livelihood for the soothsayers.

“දැන් අපේ සමාජේ අය යන්නේ නෑ, ලැජ්ජයි වගේ, අම්මලන් කැමති නෑ, ඉස්සර ඉඳන් කරපු අය තමයි යන්නේ, දැන් සමාජේ අය යන්නේ නෑ, ජොබ් එකක් කරනවා” (Sanduni, personal communication, December 7, 2019).

(Young girls of the Ahikuntika community) in present society do not engage in the profession of palm reading/ soothsaying. (We) feel ashamed. Our parents too dislike (the idea of us engaging in that profession). (Women) who were engaged in palm reading in the past are the ones who still practice it. (Young girls) at present do not practice palm reading, they do other jobs. (Sanduni, personal communication, December 7, 2019)

The female palm readers get discriminated as “Others” or “Untouchables” by the mainstream community. They are not given much recognition by the mainstream society and are belittled as “Sri Lankan gypsies” even when they seek for other jobs to financially support their families. When considering the above mentioned statement given by Sanduni who is the daughter of an old female palm reader, it can be understood that the younger generation feel ashamed of their cultural identity as a result of the society’s reaction to them. Therefore, the younger generation is encouraged to climb up the social ladder through education, as the traditional mode of living practiced by their older generation is disreputable and does not bring them enough money to live. Many young females pursue their school education and leave the village to find jobs in other parts of Sri Lanka or leave the country for house maid jobs in Middle East countries due to the lack of employment opportunities in their village. At present, there are a few members of the Ahikuntika community in Kudagama who pursue their higher education in state universities too.

Apart from the financial difficulties that the old female palm readers face, the lack of some of their identity records, such as birth certificates, identity cards, marriage certificates, death certificates etc. has removed the privilege of enjoying some basic human rights from them. For instance, they were not allowed the right to vote in the past. Their lack of documentation also has made it difficult to register their children in schools.

“මම දෙයියො බුදුන් අදහනවා, බුදුනුයි කතරගම් දෙවියොයි. දෙයියො මාව ආරක්ෂා කරනවා. ඔය පොඩි පොඩි ප්‍රශ්න තමයි තියෙන්නේ, වියදම් වැඩි” (Uskala Achchi, personal communication, December 7, 2019).

“I embrace Gods and Lord Buddha. God Kataragama protects me. (I) have small problems like financial issues” (Uskala Achchi, personal communication, December 7, 2019).

According to the above statement given by Uskala Achchi, most of the people of the Ahikuntika community in Kudagama embrace Buddhism and Christianity apart from worshipping Hindu Gods like God Kataragama and God Vishnu. They have consciously avoided the use of their Telugu surnames which removes their Telugu identity from them. Their children have been given modern Sinhala Buddhist or Christian/Catholic names to ensure that they are not marginalized as “Sri Lankan gypsies” in society. Thus, the cultural identity issues that the Ahikuntika community face shows that they have been highly victimized as a minority community.

“ඒ සිරිත් අයින් වෙනවා. දැන් ඉතින් ජොබ්වලට රට යන අය ඉන්නවා. ඉගෙන ගන්නවා” (Uskala Achchi, personal communication, December 7, 2019).

“Those traditions are disappearing. Now people migrate to find jobs abroad, and/or study (in Sri Lanka)” (Uskala Achchi, personal communication, December 7, 2019).

In order to assimilate into the mainstream society, the elders of the Ahikuntika community in Kudagama encourage their younger generation to learn Sinhala as their first language even though they recognize their community as “Lankan Telugu” people. They give priority to teaching Sinhala instead of Telugu to their children because their mother language occupies a less important place in Sri Lanka. They love their identity, but at the same time are forced by their necessity to adapt to the ways of the mainstream society. They want to integrate into the mainstream community and disappear, and on the other hand they want their difference to be recognized and appreciated. However, as stated above by Uskala Achchi, in order to exercise agency they make their children seek education to assimilate into the mainstream society.

Conclusion

When studying the case of old female palm readers/soothsayers of the Ahikuntika village in Kudagama, it is evident that most of them were victimized by patriarchy when they were young. Their right to education was removed from them, so they lost their only opportunity to upward social mobility. The reason their parents did not allow them to pursue further education could be because they could not afford

to raise the female children anymore and/or provide them with an education due to poverty. Another reason could be that the parents too were subjects of patriarchy, therefore they followed the social norm of giving the female children in marriage at a very young age.

After their childhood marriage, they were left with the only option of continuing their family tradition of soothsaying to earn their livelihood as that was the only profession they were taught by their female elders of the Ahikuntika community. Instead of allowing these female children to enjoy their childhood by sending them to school, they were given in marriage to bear children and begin a family life at a very young age while engaging in their traditional mode of livelihood for finance. Thus, the female children not only lost their right to education, but the basic human right to freedom as children.

Due to the necessity to adapt to the change in the social, political and cultural aspects of society, the female palm readers had to assimilate into the local mainstream lifestyle as they grew up. They chose other modes of earning money in order to support their children and family while engaging in palm reading. However, they are belittled as “Sri Lankan gypsies” due to their cultural identity when they attempt to integrate with the mainstream society. Therefore, in order to avoid being marginalized as a community, they have given up their cultural identity by changing their Telugu surnames and embracing religions other than Hindu, such as Buddhism and Catholicism/ Christianity. Furthermore, they encourage the younger generation to learn Sinhala as their first language instead of Telugu in order to pursue education and climb up the social ladder. The old females of the community discourage the young females in continuing their traditional mode of living- palm reading/ soothsaying for the fear of their young ones too being discriminated by the mainstream society.

Additionally, the lack of identity documentation of some old female palm readers/ soothsayers has removed the privilege to exercise their political rights as citizens in Sri Lanka. Simply stating, some of the old females of the Ahikuntika community are not even identified as citizens of the Sri Lanka under its population census.

In conclusion, it could be stated that the community of female palm readers/ soothsayers are silenced by the combined violence of colonialism and patriarchy. When they were young their right to education was stolen from them and given

into child marriage. As they grew up to be soothsayers, they were highly victimized by the mainstream society for their cultural identity. Therefore, the young female generation of the Ahikuntika community are encouraged to give up their cultural identity completely in order to integrate into the mainstream society with the intention of gaining full social, political and cultural rights. Hence, the old female palm readers/soothsayers in Sri Lanka who belong to the Ahikuntika community can be called as “Subalterns” who are subalternized in terms of their gender and cultural identity.

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