Caste and Gender Issues in the Myths of South Indian Untouchable Castes

N. SUDHAKAR RAO
Assam Central University
Silchar

This paper examines and analyses some myths of South Indian untouchable castes in a structuralist perspective. Though myths of untouchables have been recorded extensively, for instance, in the works of Aryookuzhiel (1983: 13-20, 170-7), Elmore (1915), Mishra (1992: 27-8), Moffatt (1979: 10-125, 270), Ramanujam (1986: 58-60), Rao (1998: 128-33, 209-10), Reddy (1952: 334-5, 363-4), Thurston (1909: 296-7), Whitehead (1921: 118-19) and others, only a few analysed them for drawing meaningful conclusions. Among the above-mentioned works, those of Moffatt (1979) and Mosse (1994) prominent. But they provide contradictory interpreta-tions; while one argues that the untouchables accept an assigned inferior status the other adopts a diametrically opposed theoretical viewpoint.

Moffatt analyses three myths to show that untouchables agree on the point that their low position is due to their stupidity, greed and impure duties. He writes: 'In their definition of their own identity and its lowness in *toRil* and myth, then, the Harijans of Endavur are in fundamental consensus with the higher castes. They define them-selves as low for the same reasons as the higher castes do, and they agree with the evaluation that persons with their characteristics should be low' (Moffatt 1979: 129). Mosse, however, does not accept Moffatt's theory of the consensus amongst untouchables regarding the low status assigned to them. He also rejects the argument that works towards 'cultural consensus'. In this regards he observes that, 'Harijan myths of origin generally describe their position in social order as undeserved, a consequence of misfortune, histori-cal accident, and the deception and trickery of dominant groups, and —implicitly or explicitly—legitimise attempts to actively reject, abandon or withdraw form inferior service roles.' (Mosse 1994: 82-3)

The apparent problem in both the interpretations lies with the

view that myths are statements of the actors. Leach similarly finds that myths validate rights of particular groups of people (1964: 264-78). Against this view point, following Mauss (1967), I maintain that one should consider myth as 'total social facts' (Debanath 1989: 321). Furthermore, myths do not always represent social facts, as contended by Levi-Strauss, who states that, 'The myth is certainly related to given facts, but not as a representation of them. The relationship is of a dialectic kind, and the institutions described in the myth can be the very opposite of the real institutions. This will always be the case when the myth is trying to express a negative truth.' (Levi-Strauss 1977: 172). He opines that there is an unconscious meaning of myth; problem and solution both are embedded in it. For Needham, however, myths serve as instruments of mediation between contradictions in cultural values. The analysis should delve into the elementary constituents of the culture and their polythetic combination (Needham 1978: 55). From the perspectives of Levi-Strauss and Needham, the myths of the untouchable castes need to be viewed differently from the way Moffatt and Mosse did, in order to grasp the meaning and function of the myths.

I argue that the myths should be analysed in a wider cultural background without leaning towards any particular theoretical position. In order to analyse the myths of untouchable castes objectively and comprehensively, their scope should be extended beyond the mere acceptance or rejection of a caste status or a surface structure. These myths seem to address the problem of caste and gender inequality in the dominators' construction of social hierarchy. They also make the mysterious cosmos intelligible to simple folk. Myths attempt to resolve this problem by bringing the idea of 'social/biological necessity' to counterbalance the weight of inequality. Against this background, the paper attempts to understand deeper structures in the construction of hierarchy and subordination, and articulation of power relations as exhibited in popular Hindu culture and mythology which has been little discussed in the sociological literature of myths.

Data for this paper comes from myths recorded by Moffatt (in the village of Endavur in Chengalpat district of Tamilnadu) and Reddy (in the southern districts of Andhra Pradesh) and from myths collected by me in Anthatipuram and Chinnakomerla villages in Nellore and Cuddapah districts of Andhra Pradesh. After presenting the myths of untouchable castes and other related myths in the first and second section, I shall analyse the myths in the third section and conclude the paper with a summary of the arguments.

I

Myth 1

At the origin there was nothing in the world. There was no life. There was nothing except for one woman, AaDi ['origin']. She was all alone, and she wanted a husband. So she made a sacrificial fire (*yagam*) and started meditating, fasting and not opening her eyes. Lord Vinayagar [Ganesha] came out of the fire, and called to her, 'What, mother?' AaDi replied, 'No, no, I don't want you. I want a husband, not a son.' Vinayagar disappeared and she continued her meditation. Lord Vishnu came out of the fire and said to her, 'What do you want, younger sister?' AaDi said to him, 'No, I don't want you. I want a husband, not an elder brother.' Vishnu disappeared. She again began to meditate. Finally a handsome man emerged from the fire. According to her wish, he married her. He was none other than Iswaran [Siva]. The couple lived happily.

After some time four children were born to AaDi. The gods were satisfied that everything was complete, except for the creation of the castes. So they planned for it. According to their plan, the four children, who had become adults, were made to cook beef one day. The eldest son offered to do the cooking. While the meat was boiling, one piece fell from the pot. The eldest son saw it fall on the ground, and thought that it would bring a bad name to his cooking. So, meaning well, he hid it under the heap of ash. Immediately the others accused him of theft, and scolded him for stealing a big piece of meat for himself. They shouted at him, '*Paraiyaa, maraiyaadi!*' ['*Paraiyan*, do not hide (that)']. Hence the name '*Paraiyan*'. Eventually the elder brother was forced to live separately, and he was called '*Paraiyan*'. (Moffatt 1979: 120-121)

Myth 2

The origin and development of the world had been a slow and tedious process. Each of the eighteen ages marks a major step in this long evolution. In the Ananta age (the beginning) the whole world was filled with water. There was a small snail over which Adi-Jambava took life. Jambava did penance for 1,80,000 years at the end of which a drop of sweat fell from his body. Out of this grew Adi-Sakti, the embodiment of all cosmological force. When she came of age, her sexual urge was irresistible and she began making amorous advances to Jambava. But the latter thought it improper

to mate with his own child and, to avoid the awkward situation, transformed the Adi-Sakti into a couple of birds. After a spell of connubial life the female of the species was impregnated but, in the process, the male was absorbed and assimilated, leaving behind one and only Adi-Sakti in the form of a duck.

She laid three eggs which she kept folded in her wings and incubated for 1,80,000 years. At last they were hatched. Out of the first egg came Brahma and of its shell the lower part became the earth and the upper the sky. Vishnu was born of the second one and the parts of this shell constituted the sun and the moon. Out of the third emerged Siva. The upper half of the third shell became the stars and lower half all the living things on earth. When Brahma, Vishnu and Siva came of age Adi-Sakti wanted to have them as her consorts. They protested that they were her own sons and hence could not commit that abhorrent incest. But as she insisted, the perplexed Trinity approached Jambava for advice. The latter suggested they should pretend acceptance of her proposal and secure from her, as a prior condition, the trident and the book of miracles, thus depriving her of her enormous powers. They followed Jambava's suggestion and, with the aid of the new vestments that had accrued to them, transformed Adi-Sakti into ashes. Dividing it into five parts, they severally resuscitated the ashes. Thus sprang up the three consorts of the Trinity, namely, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati. The fourth one was Chandramadevi who became the wife of Jambava. The fifth constituted Adi-Sakti herself, not in her former force and might but in a diminutive form. She became the guardian deity of this world, reigning in various forms. The descendants of Brahma became Brahmins, the sons of Siva, Kamsali or smiths those of Vishnu, Sudras. (Reddy 1952: 334-335)

Myth 3

In Kruthayugam (the first epoch of the Hindu classical four-fold cycle of periods) there was nothing in the world except water. Adi-Sakti took the form of a swan, and built a nest in the middle of water and laid three eggs. She brooded for three months and later found that one egg was empty. This was thrown up to become the sky; another egg which had an undeveloped embryo was thrown on water to become land. The last egg contained three compartments, out of which came the Trinity—Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara.

Adi-Sakti became a beautiful woman and wanted to marry any one of these three gods, for there was no one other than these three. She first approached Brahma and proposed to marry him, but he refused saying he could not marry his own mother who was responsible for his birth. Then she came to Vishnu who likewise refused her proposal. Then she came to Ishwara to fulfill her sexual desire. Ishwara agreed to marry but on the condition that she give him the third eye she possessed. He knew that this was his best opportunity to possess the powerful third eye, and she would not mind parting with it for she desperately needed to fulfill her sexual desire. Adi-Sakti agreed to the condition and gave the eye to Ishwara, who fixed it in his forehead. He then opened the third eye and Adi-Sakti was immediately reduced to ashes. The three gods divided the ashes into three portions and mixed magic water with them. From that came forth three beautiful ladies, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati, who were married to the three gods.

Myth 4

Adi-Sakti burst open the earth and came out, but there was no creature with whom she could do anything. She was overcome by sexual desire but there was no male person to satisfy her. She then fell into the sea in order to cool down her heat (of body and sexual desire). She came out and started drying her hair by bringing it on her face and beating it with a cloth. The *bottu* (vermilion spot) from her forehead fell down, from which rose a beautiful lady who laid three eggs. She brooded three months and on the last day, she opened the first egg only to find it empty, and the second egg contained an undeveloped embryo. She heard three voices in the third, and when she broke open the egg she found, the Trinity. Then the woman, Adi-Sakti, approached the three gods to marry her, but Brahma and Vishnu refused to marry her. Ishwara agreed to the proposal but on a condition that she should give him the space of three feet. Adi-Sakti agreed to do so. Ishwara put his first leg on the sky, second on the land but there was no more space for the third foot. Then Adi-Sakti offered her head. No sooner did Ishwara put his leg on her head than she turned into a heap of ashes. The Trinity divided the ashes into three portions, from which came three goddesses, whom they later married.

Myth 5

Vishwamithra, a *rishi* (sage), who was known for his short-temper, had a *kamadhenu* (sacred mystical cow which provided all varieties of foods instantly whenever asked for) presented by gods as a gift. Two of his *sishyas* (disciples/apprentices) used to take the cow out everyday from the hermitage for grazing.

One day they desired to taste the milk of the cow. So, one of them held the cow, and the other milked her. When they tasted the milk, it was unimaginably delicious. Then, they thought that since the milk were so tasty the meat of the cow would be extremely delicious. So, after some days, when they took the cow out, they killed her and cooked the meat. While one of them was cooking the meat, the other went out for some work. The person, who was cooking the meat, wanted to find out if the meat was properly cooked. So he scooped out a piece and began tasting it. At that juncture the second disciple arrived on the scene and finding him eating the meat, said that he was a thief and hence inferior to him. Because the cow failed to return home in the evening, the *rishi* discovered through his divine power what had happened. He was furious and drove the two disciples out of the hermitage, cursing them that they would be menials for other people. The descendants of these cursed men are called Mala and Madiga. The Mala claims superiority over the Madiga, because the latter had 'stolen the sacred cow's meat'.

II

A cursory reading of all these myths together indicates that the myth-makers are attempting to comprehend the mystery of the origin and the process through which the universe (which includes celestial, immortal and mortal beings who are divided into castes) came into existence. More explicitly they appear to construct the origin of untouchable castes from Brahmins or high castes who had fallen from their high positon because of their bad deeds or stupidity. The bone of contention between Moffatt and Mosse, as mentioned before, pertains to this external feature. But the latent meanings of the myths become evident only when the myths of the creation of the universe—which includes untouchable castes—are more closely examined. This can be done by comparing and conjoining other related myths. So, let me present the other myths

as well. One is the widely known myth of creation of castes enshrined in the *Rigveda* and the other is the story of Gone Katam Reddy preserved in the oral tradition of untouchable castes. The latter myth is rendered during village rituals of Andhra Pradesh by an untouchable caste person called Asadi. In brief the myth explains why the village goddess, Peddamma or Maremma —a transformed deity of Adi-Sakti or Parvati, the consort of Siva— is worshipped in the village.

The *Rigveda* myth quoted by Klass (1980: 35-36) runs thus:

Myth 6

Thousand-headed Purusha, thousand-eyed, thousand-footed—he, having pervaded the earth on all sides, still extends ten fingers beyond it.

Purusha alone is all this—whatever has been and whatever is going to be. Further, he is the lord of immortality and also what grows on account of food.

Such is his greatness; greater, indeed, than this is Purusha. All creatures but one quarter of him, his three quarters are the immortal in heaven...

When the gods performed the sacrifice with Purusha as the oblation, then the spring was its clarified butter, the summer the sacrificial fuel, and the autumn the oblation.

The sacrificial victim, namely, Purusha, born at the very beginning, they sprinkled with sacred water upon the sacrificial grass. With him as the oblation the gods performed the sacrifice, and also the Sadhyas ... and the *rishis*...

From it horses were born and also those animals who have double rows...of teeth; cows were born from it, from it were born goats and sheep.

When they divided Purusha, in how many portions did they arrange him? What became of his mouth, what of his two arms? What were his two thighs and his two feet called?

His mouth became the Brahman; his two arms were made into the Rajanya; his two thighs the Vaishyas; from his two feet the Shudra was born.

The moon was born from the mind, from the eye the sun was born; from the mouth Indra and Agni, from the breath (*prana*) the wind (*vayu*) was born.

From the navel was the atmosphere created, from the head the heaven issued forth; from the two feet was born the earth and the quarters (the cardinal directions) from the ear.

Thus, did they fashion the worlds..(de Bary 1958:14-15)

Myth 7

Gone Katam Reddy belonged to a Reddy sub-caste, the Motati Kapu and lived during the *Thretha yuga* (the third epoch of the Hindu classical four fold cycle of period). In his family was born Adi-Sakti (the implication is birth of a daughter). She told Katam Reddy that she would bless him abundantly with all the riches in the world, if he worshipped her. Initially he agreed to do so. She gave him jewels, pearls, gold, silver, numerous cattle, sixty-four pairs of bullocks, and everything else. She herself built overnight a strong fort with a width of 23 feet, and a height of 23 feet with only seven stones. Katam Reddy's son, Raghava Reddy, and daughter-in-law Rajamma, and his grandson became ardent devotees of Adi-Sakti, whereas he himself refused to worship her. He became very proud of his riches and said that he would not worship a female; instead he became a devotee of Siva. Rajamma advised her father-in-law to worship Adi-Sakti, who blessed him so much, and it was ungrateful on his part not to worship her, but Katam Reddy did not care for this advice. One day she told him that she had a dream in which she herself, her husband and her son went to the heaven in their mortal bodies (which was considered to be a great boon) whereas Katam Reddy and others had been to hell. For this Katam Reddy, felt very sorry and wondered how this could happen. Meanwhile his son-in-law, Vema Reddy, on a visit found that his father-in-law was very sad. When he asked him for the reason of his sadness, Katam Reddy told him that Rajamma and her family were going to heaven with mortal bodies and the rest of them were going to hell. At this, Vema Reddy replied that what Rajamma had said was all false. Then Katam Reddy called on Rajamma and beat her with his hand for telling lies. In response to this, Rajamma did not get angry, but expressed her sympathy that perhaps her father-in law's palms got hurt. She further said that he could call on the Veda Brahmins and find out if what she said was true, or not. Katam Reddy called Veda Brahmins and asked whether what Rajamma has said was true, and the latter affirmed and supported Rajamma. Then Rajamma told Katam

Reddy that Adi-Sakti and her agents were going to destroy all his property, and misfortune was to befall on him shortly. Even then Katam Reddy refused to worship Adi-Sakti. Soon everything began to die, one by one. Also there were no rains. Disease struck the village, and people began to die of small pox and other diseases. The entire village was filled with sobs and cries, yet Katam Reddy did not worship Adi-Sakti.

Except for the family of Katam Reddy, only a mother and her young son remained in the village. Vultures and birds were hovering and feeding on the carcasses of cattle and corpses. Katam Reddy's other sons and son-in-law took all the corpses on the bullock cart and dumped them outside the village. The village was stinking and became uninhabitable. The surviving mother, giving a handful of jewels, told her son to leave the village and go elsewhere, lest he should also die. So the boy started his journey on a bullock cart, but no sooner had he reached the village gate that an old woman (the disguised Adi-Sakti) appeared. The boy was terrified and stood motionless. The old woman asked him where he was going and begged him to take her to the next village. The boy replied that everybody had died in the village, and his mother had advised him to leave and live elsewhere. He pitied the old woman and asked her to sit on the bullock cart. As they were going, the old woman asked the boy to do her a favour. She said that the greatest merit was to remove thorns from the feet, to give water to thirsty people and to delouse a person suffering from lice. She requested him to delouse her, for which, she said, he would get heavenly merits. The old woman looked very ugly but the boy pitied her. He stopped the cart and started to delouse her. When he touched her hair and parted it he was shocked with the sparks of one thousand eyes on her scalp. The old woman asked him what happened and why was he shocked. The boy replied, 'Grandmother, you look so ugly, but I see your scalp full of eyes and the sparks from them shocked me.' Then the old woman revealed to him that she was Adi-Sakti who was punishing Gone Katam Reddy for being ungrateful to her. The boy had luckily escaped death by being kind to her. She had, in fact, wanted to test the boy. If he had failed she would have killed him too because she did not like anyone escaping death in that village.Though he had escaped death, his mother would die.

The situation in the village became so grim that even the water in the wells was polluted. Katam Reddy was then afflicted with

diarrhea, and no medicine could cure him. He asked his son-in-law to bring fresh water from the well. The latter went to the well and found that the water contained puss and blood. Then Rajamma went to the well, and when she drew water, it was as good as coconut water. Katam Reddy then requested his son-in-law to find a female soothsayer who would reveal to him the reasons for the misfortunes in the village and for his ill-health. Vema Reddy replied that though almost everyone on the village had died, he would still search for his father-in-law's satisfaction. So he went in search of a soothsayer but found none. As he was returning home disappointed, he found an old soothsayer woman (the disguised Adi-Sakti) near the well. He was surprised to find her so near their house, for he had searched without success all over the village. He called out to her using a very derogatory term and asked her to come to his house. But she refused, saying that unless he humbled himself and requested her with appropriate reverence, she would not go. Vema Reddy got angry and said, *'Erikala lanjaku intha pogara!'* (Oh! this soothsayer prostitute is so proud). He then went home, but Katam Reddy insisted that she should be brought home. So Vema Reddy went back and requested her politely to come to Katam Reddy's home. To this she replied that she would go only if a palanquin was sent for her and if she was offered *siri chapa* (a mat made of reeds used for sitting on the floor) —an honour reserved for high caste people. He went back home and told Katam Reddy, who ordered the palanquin to be sent to the soothsayer. After coming to his home she was offered *siri chapa,* but Katam Reddy said very arrogantly and indecently, *'Emi Erikala munda pilesthe antha pogara. Ni tho avasaram vachindi le gadde chepu'* (What, Erikala widow, you are so proud. Now we have work with you. What to do? Tell me the future or give a forecast or reasons for the misfortunes). For this the soothsayer said that unless he talked to her properly she would not say anything. Katam Reddy could do nothing but accept all her demands. Then she took his palm to examine his hand. The moment she touched him, he felt shock and his eyes were opened and began to tremble. She asked him if he was prepared to taste her blow and die instantly. At this, Katam Reddy instantly fell on her feet, admitted his wrongs and sought forgiveness. Then Adi-Sakti revealed her real persona and ordered him to worship her and receive her blessing. As long as he worshipped her he would not lack anything.

<center>III</center>

In order to unravel the hidden messages, let us start with careful examination of the myths 1 to 5 together and the Rigvedic myth. It is clear that the untouchable caste myths appear as different versions of a single myth. But the simultaneous comparison of these myths with the Rigvedic myth reveals significant similarities which require serious consideration. In both cases, first, the primeval force/power or person brings out different elements of the universe. Second, the elements of the universe are formed through the process of transformation—sacred grass being transformed into horse, different parts of Purusha into different *varna*, egg shell turning into sky and earth, and Adi-Sakti being transformed into different goddesses. Thirdly, in both, there is a divine basis or sanction for caste categorisation. Owing to these similarities, it would not be wrong to give historical precedence to the Rigvedic hymn over the myths of the untouchable castes because the former is known to have come from the oldest Hindu sacred text. It might, therefore, be correct to assume that the untouchable caste myths are transformations of the Rigvedic myth.

Once we credit the Rigvedic myth with being the primary source, several questions follow. Who are the authors of the myths of untouchable castes? Are these myths the constructions of the high castes in order to justify subordination of untouchables? If one believes that the Rigvedic myth justifies general Hindu social categorisation, hierarchy and corresponding social inequality with divine authority, it is not wrong to think that the myths of untouchable castes function to sustain a similar objective and motive. One may even ask, whether these are creations of untouchables in order to carve out a place for themselves in the Hindu universe? Are these part of constructions of subordination by the untouchables? Perhaps, one way to answer these questions is to look at the way these myths have been transformed from the original or Rigvedic myth. To understand the nuances of transformation, the differences between the Rigvedic myth and myths of the untouchable castes need to be examined.

While the Rigvedic myth fixes the origin of castes in Purusha, the male primeval being, the untouchable castes' myths place female primeval power Adi-Sakti at the centre of creation. There is non-sexual origin of beings in the former, but in the latter the sexual relationship is the means of human reproduction. Incest,

uncontrolled sexuality and disorder as opposed to controlled sexuality and order are the concern of the untouchable caste myths. These are totally absent in the Rigvedic myth. While the trinity of male gods and their consorts came into existence from the female primeval power, the gods and *rishis* have no relationship with Purusha except Indra who originated from the mouth of Purusha. The untouchable caste myths have replaced the all-powerful male being of the beginning, Purusha, by an all-powerful female being of the beginning, Adi-Sakti. Sexuality takes a leading role wherein the female assumes a dominant position, though she is ultimately overpowered by male power. The transformation that occurs in the sacrificial elements of the Rigvedic myth has been transposed to egg shells in the untouchable caste myths. While *varnas* are the transformed body parts of Purusha in the Rigvedic myth, gods and goddesses are transformed energy derived from sacrifice or meditation or power of primeval female power in untouchable caste myths. Different castes in the untouchable caste myths enjoy mystical parentage of gods and goddesses which is absent in case of the Rigvedic myth. Finally, it can be said that the untouchable caste myths have incorporated several social elements in the process of their transformation from the Rigvedic myth. These elements in the myths of untouchable castes belong to the human world rather than the divine world. These include beef-eating, opposition between high castes and untouchable castes, conflict between male and female sexes, fulfillment of sexual urge and so on. Thus, these myths are closely associated with the social order or human society. In other words, they reflect the social universe along with certain perplexing and unsolved social problems and issues. In them, we shall find the complexity of Hindu society which is saddled with gender inequality, caste hierarchy, domination and exploitation by the high castes, subordination of untouchable castes and the like.

I have summarized the entire analysis of the myths in the matrix in terms of constituent elements, units of oppositions, parallels, equations, derivations and transformations (See Appendix). A more detailed analysis can certainly throw light on how each of the myths has appropriated and transformed certain elements of the Rigvedic myth, but it is not undertaken here for want of space. However, it must be said that these myths are similar in their structures with a couple of episodes which are in a syntegmatic relation. They are in a paradigmatic association with each other. It can be noted from the matrix that the opposing elements are firstly concerned with

male and female in relation to either forbidden incest or socially approved sexual union. Secondly, there is opposition between castes, between teacher and taught and between good and bad deeds. In elements of parallels and equals, the following are important: sibling equality; equation between sweat, incest, and untouchable; son equal to male; mother equal to female; cow equal to Brahmin and embryo equal to creation. The transformations deal with the refraction of powerful Adi-Sakti into less powerful goddesses, the exclusion of a brother who had stolen meat and pupils who killed the cow and became untouchables, and the turning of egg shells into sky, land, stars and so on. The elements such as sacrifice, meditation, snail, birds, swan and cow mediate between the abode of divine beings and humans, land and water, land and sky, and *rishi* and his pupils.

The oppositions mentioned above, which are mainly based on differences, inhere power relations, and in this case gender appears to be a primary concern. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the power relations between sexes. The feminine power, in these myths is represented in two ways: as a human reproductive agent and as a counter power to the male. As a reproductive agent, Adi-Sakti brings humans into this world, and as a counter power to the male, it is unruly and disorganised. Gender is a substantial issue of controversy in Hindu society as noted by several scholars, notably Bennett (1983), Daniel (1980), Reynolds (1980) and Wadley (1977, 1980). Briefly, we shall recall the gender issue. The axiom which says 'the land is blessed where woman is worshipped' contradicts the inferior social status assigned to a Hindu woman. Further, within this inferior status there is a hierarchy where the status of a married woman is superior to that of a widow. Again, a mother or mother-in-law's status is higher than that of a married young woman. But there is no status gradation in case of men. While the status of a woman changes after marriage, the status of a man does not change. A divorced or widowed man can remarry or can be polygamous, but a widow cannot remarry and the question of polyandry does not arise (apart from a few exceptions). A divorced woman is always looked down upon and her remarriage raises eyebrows. Virginity is highly valued only in the case of a woman but not in that of a man. A woman's extra-marital relations are intolerable and punishable, but in case of a man they are tolerated. These value-loaded differences between a man and a woman's status and sexuality put woman in a disadvantageous and defenseless position.

The myths of untouchable castes, in view of the above, raise the

issue of gender. They portray woman, as represented by Adi-Sakti, as very powerful and possessing an uncontrollable sex drive. The myth makers convey the message that the sexuality of woman endangers the order of society, and should therefore, be brought under control. The myths seem to suggest that woman is morally weak or stupid, so much so that great power has been given up for frivolous gains. But the male is depicted as having stronger will-power to reject immoral sexual advances and as being intelligent enough to benefit from the stupidity of the female. In these myths, while woman is identified with social disorder, man is identified with social order. Thus, the myths reflect the gender bias of Hindu society in a symbolic form. But it must be mentioned here that there is a reversal of the woman's status. Woman, though of an inferior status in real life, has been elevated in these myths to the position of a powerful being who is the creative force of the entire universe. What necessitated such a change?

The elevation of woman's social status to that of a deity, is rooted in Adi-Sakti, the primeval power of creating the universe. It signifies the importance that woman has in Hindu society. Though men and women participate equally in several activities, it is only women who bring forth children and help in the continuation of human-kind. Woman, who is the symbol of fertility, is deified and worshipped (Bennett 1983, Rao 1996a) but not man. Her presence is more important because the perpetuation of patrilineal and patriarchal society depends on the fertility of woman. A lineage ceases to exist forever if women in the lineage fail to produce a male child. But ironically, such a woman is relegated to a secondary status. This, inferior status assigned to woman is the fundamental question raised in the myth of Katam Reddy. The reason for conflict between Adi-Sakti and Katam Reddy is the latter's ingratitude and recalcitrant behaviour towards Adi-Sakti. Katam Reddy refused to bow down and worship Adi-Sakti just because she was a female. When all instructions and requests failed, Adi-Sakti resorted to coercive action against the arrogant Katam Reddy and his son-in-law in order to humble them and make them accept her superiority. At a deeper level it recognises the importance of female reproductive power and the belief that if there is no regeneration of species and reproductive activity by females, there will be barrenness and desolation. Thus, the myths of untouchable castes prominently reflect the gender issue of the entire Hindu society regardless of caste.

Similar to the gender issue, is the secondary concern of the myths with caste inequality. The symbolic representations in the myths indicate similarities between Adi-Sakti and the untouchables which may be represented as in the following:

All powerful Adi-Sakti + Lust—>Less Powerful Goddess—> Mortal Humans/ Castes

Children of Siva = Pupils of *Rishi* + cheating/killing cow—> untouchable castes

Adi-Jambava x Chandramadevi (degraded form of Adi-Sakti—> untouchable caste/

Therefore owerful Goddess/High Castes + Lust/Misdeeds —>Subdued/Less Powerful goddess/untouchables

The myths seem to suggest that like Adi-Sakti, who lost her power and form due to an uncontrollable sexual urge, the untouchables who were of divine origin or high ranking Brahmins, lost their status due to their misdeeds. However, they argue that their importance in society cannot be undermined. The untouchables undertake menial jobs such as scavenging, grave-digging or assisting at funerals, and indulge in behavioural patterns detested by higher castes. The high castes, require such services of untouchable castes, who also constitute the body of farm servants and the main labour force. At the same time, the latter also have to associate themselves with the high castes for earning their living. The interdependence is such that the untouchables cannot be totally excluded from the affairs of the high castes. For example, no village-level ritual will be complete without the participation of untouchables. In spite of their importance in village life, the untouchables have been relegated to an inferior status. Therefore, the issue of caste inequality along with gender inequality has been addressed by the untouchable castes through these myths.

Finally, the affective relationships that they evoke are also important for understanding these myths. We shall now examine how these relationships act as means through which women and untouchables construct their subordination. In the case of woman, as already stated, Adi-Sakti represents woman *per se*. The attribute of power to Adi-Sakti refers to fecundity of woman in which she takes pride. Therefore, the worship of Adi-Sakti in the form of village goddesses—who may be Peddamma or Maremma—is in fact a glorification of woman. The status of feminine power is elevated by way of worshipping a fierce, unmarried female deity though it is

temporal and the entire ritual contains elements of an anti-structure (cf. Turner 1969) which swings back to the structure of male domination. Ideologically the implication is that of honouring all women because of the metonymic association with the female deity. Unruly feminine power is subdued in these myths in order to indicate the idea of bringing unruly sexual power under control through marriage. It is very much present in Hindu culture (cf. Babb 1975: 118, 230-1) and one such ritual is recorded by Moffatt (1979: 270-79). A married woman attains the superior status of motherhood. Therefore, a woman's subjugation through marriage provides a new and higher status. A more powerful deity becomes a less powerful goddess—a consort of the male deity worshipped by all. Through these myths women construct their subordination by means of an elevation of status which recognizes their capacity to reproduce the human species. They are symbols of the regeneration of plant and animal life on which survival of human society depends.

The untouchable castes construct their subordination out of the intrinsic relationship that they establish between themselves and the deity Adi-Sakti. Since both untouchables and Adi-Sakti are subjected to the domination of superiors, the untouchables take pride in the elevated status of feminine power, Adi-Sakti. In one of their myths, they claim themselves as ardent and sincere devotees of Adi-Sakti, unlike Katam Reddy who represents a dominant higher caste (Rao 1998: 209-10). They narrate the myths of Adi-Sakti or the village goddesses and their knowledge of the lore of Adi-Sakti provides them with a privileged status in the village rituals wherein the goddess is propitiated by the high castes. Their participation in the village ritual is inevitable and viewed by them as a divinely established norm. The myths are, therefore, necessary for asserting their position in society, despite the low status assigned to them by higher castes.

IV

In conclusion, it may be said that the interpretation of these myths simply in terms of the acceptance or rejection of an ascribed status by the untouchables is very superficial. Whether an individual accepts or rejects the low status assigned to him depends on the context. The precarious social and economic conditions and the dominant position of the high castes under which the untouchables live, normally prompt them to reconcile with their lowly status. They

tend to accept this lower position because they are not in a position to confront the landlords' inferences for fear of antagonizing them. (c.f. Manickam 1982; Raj 1987). They may even accept the given status due to the hegemonic influence of the powerful high castes (see Lorenzen 1988) and are, moreover, unable to organise themselves to protest against the domination of high castes. If, and when, such protests do arise, they are unorganised and individual. (cf. Oommen 1984, 1991; Mosse 1994; Rao 1996a) Similarly, it can be argued that the Hindu woman's responses are ambivalent; she can either accept or reject her inferior status. A woman enjoys a higher position as a mother but occupies an inferior position as a wife. Therefore, she can neither claim absolute superior position nor accept an inferior position to man.

The myths serve as mediating agents in establishing certain relationships between and within social reality and abstract ideas. This can be explained with the concepts of sign and symbol that Leach explicates. While a sign has intrinsic prior relationship with the object and conveys information when it is combined with other signs or symbols, a symbol has no intrinsic prior relationship and it asserts arbitrary similarity with the object. Sign relationships are metonymic, while symbol relationships are metaphoric (Leach 1976: 13-14). In this perspective, humans, gods, actions, and several others take either sign or symbolic value. The interpreters of the myth decipher them from their own perspective and vantage point. Therefore, the myths provide a metonymic relationship between gods and high castes, and the same between untouchables and disorder. Adi-Sakti and women are provided with the same metonymic relationship. The creation of castes in the myths is a symbolic representation of the social universe. Similarly the behaviour of Adi-Sakti represents gender relationship and conflict. By transposing the social reality through signs and symbols, the myths mediate between abstract ideas and social reality. They raise social issues to an abstract level and bring abstract ideas into social reality.

Interdependence of men and women is axiomatic in any human society, but the Hindu ideology bestows a higher position on males than on females, and using their privileged position men dominate women in several ways. Thus, there is a conceptual problem of integrating male and female; the superior male has to concede to the significant role played seemingly by the inferior female in reproduction. Here myths mediate between the reality of culturally constructed reproduction and hierarchical gender relations. The

myths grant greater power to the female, but this power is shown as destructive. Uncontrollable feminine power is brought under control by male deities for apparent constructive use. But the myths fail to grant absolute power to the male because superior males may control anything but not reproduction which is carried out only by female. Thus, the myths of the untouchable castes are primarily concerned with contradictions of gender in Hindu society. The caste inequality very subtly goes along gender inequality as a secondary element in consonance with the feminine power in its degradation.

Since the authors of myths are anonymous, it is difficult to support the claim made by Moffatt and Mosse. It might well be possible that their authors belong to the higher castes. The reasons for such an assumption is that these myths are developed on the themes found in the *sanskritic* texts which were in fact not accessible to untouchable castes because of their illiteracy and the customary proscription on their hearing or reading them. As Needham points out, the interpretation of myths is difficult because of the freedom exercised by myth-makers as well as myth-interpreters (Debanath 1989: 334). Therefore, the meaning of myth always remains enigmatic and elusive.

APPENDIX

Matrix of Myth Analysis

Theme	Contents	Oppositions	Parallels and Equals	Transformations	Mediation
Myth 1. Origin of universe	Adi fire sacrifice meditation Lord Vinayagar Lord Vishnu Ishwaran parental incest	parent x child incest x regulated sex	children = brothers = equal fire = sacrifice = meditation	fire/sacrifice/meditation → gods	fire/sacrifice/meditation - earth ↔ heaven
Origin of untouchable castes	children cooking stealing meat	gods x human parents x children high castes x untouchable castes	children = brothers	children / bad deed→ untouchable castes brothers = equality → inequality bad deed → expulsion	
Myth 2. Origin of universe	water snail Adi-Jambava sweat Adi-Sakti parental incest birds eggs earth sky sun moon stars living beings trident book of miracles	male x female Adi-Jambava x Adi-Sakti sage x gods Brahma x Saraswati	sweat =dirt=disorder= Adi-Sakti trident+ book of miracles = power	Adi-Sakti → 2 birds → 1 bird egg shell → earth → sky → sun → moon → stars life →loss of power → ashes	penance - earth ↔ heaven snail - land ↔ water bird - sky ↔land

	Brahma Vishnu Siva ashes Saraswati Lakshmi Parvati Adi-Sakti	Vishnu x Lakshmi Siva x Parvati		power of Siva ↓ ashes → life Adi-Sakti → ashes → goddesses all powerful female power → less powerful female deity	
Untouchable castes	marriage Brahmin Kamsali Sudra untouchables	father x daughter mother x sons high castes x untouchable castes	sweat =Adi-Sakti- incest = untouchable	gods → high castes sage → untouchables	
Myth 3. **Origin of universe**	Adi-Sakti swan eggs sky land Brahma Vishnu Maheswara sexual urge incest third eye heap of ashes Saraswati Lakshmi Parvati	mother sons male x female mother x sons Brahma x Saraswati Vishnu x Lakshmi Siva x Parvati	third = powerful Adi with out third eyes = powerless Adi powerful Adi > male gods powerless Adi < male gods	mother = female egg shell → sky → land sons = male power of Siva ↓ ashes → life Adi-Sakti → ashes → goddesses all powerful female power → less powerful female	swan - water ↔ land

				deity	
Myth 4. **Origin of universe**	Adi-Sakti lady eggs space undeveloped embryo mature embryo Brahma Vishnu Maheswara sexual urge Incest space of three feet sky land head of Adi-Sakti heap of ashes Saraswati Lakshmi Parvati	mother male x female sons mother x sons = incest male	mother = female undeveloped embryo = incomplete universe mature embryo = complete universe sons = male	Adi-Sakti → ashes → goddesses all powerful female power → less powerful female deity	
Myth 5. **Origin of untouchable castes**	rishi cow taking care apprentices milk meat cooking stealing curse untouchable	rishi x apprentice taking care x killing Brahmin x untouchable Mala x Madiga	cow = Brahmin untouchable = Mala/Madiga	apprentices Adi- → untouchable Brahmin → Untouchable	cow - rishi ↔ apprentices

page

side

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aryookuzhiel, A.M.A. 1983. *The Sacred in Popular Hinduism: An Empirical Study in Chirakkal, North Malabar.* Madras: C.L.S.

Babb, Lawrence. 1975. *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India.* New York: Columbia Press.

Bennett, Lynn. 1983. *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High Caste Women in Nepal.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Collier, J.F and Yanagisako, J.S. (ed.). 1987. *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis.* California: Stanford University Press.

Daniel, Sheryl. 1980. 'Marriage in Tamil Culture: The Problem of Conflicting "models"'. In Susan S. Wadley, (ed.), *The Power of Tamil Women.* Syracuse: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. pp 61-91.

Debanath, Biswanath. 1989. 'The Analysis of Myth: Its Legacy and Potentialities'. *The Eastern Anthropologist.* 42.4: 321-44.

de Bary, William Theodore. (ed.). 1958. *Sources of Indian Tradition.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Dirks, Nicholas. 1987. *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of An Indian Kingdom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dumont, Louis. 1980. *Homo Hierarchicus.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Elmore, W. T. 1915. *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism: A Study of the Local and Village Deities of Southern India.* Nebraska University: University Studies. Vol.XV.

Fuller, C.J. 1992. *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Klass, Morton. 1980. *Caste: The Emergence of the South Asian Social System.* Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.

Leach, E.R. 1954. *Political Systems of Highland Burma.* Boston: Beacon Press.

———. 1976. *Culture and Communication: The Logic by which Symbols are Connected.* London: Cambridge University Press.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1977. *Structural Anthropology.* Volume II. London: Penguin

Lorenzen, D. 1988. 'Traditions of Non-Caste Hinduism - The Kabir Panth'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology.* 21.2: 263-283.

Manickam, S. 1982. *Slavery in the Tamil Country: A Historical Over-view.* Madras: C.L.S.

Mauss, M. 1967. *The Gift.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Mishra, P.K. 1992. *Harijans in Hindu and Tribal Social Structures.* New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House.

Moffatt, Michael. 1979. *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus,* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Mosse, David. 1994. 'Idioms of Subordination and Styles of Protest among Christian and Hindu Harijan Castes in Tamil Nadu'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 28.1: 67-106.

Needham, R. 1975. 'Polythetic Classification'. *Man* (n.s). 10: 349-69.

Oommen, T. K. 1984. 'Sources of Deprivation and Styles of Protest: the Case of the Dalits in India'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology n.s.* 14.1: 45-61.

———. 1991. 'Erving Goffman and the Study of Everyday Protest'. In. Riggins (ed.). *Beyond Goffman: Studies on Communication, Institution and Social Interaction.* New York: Mouton De Gruyter.

Pandian, Jacob. 1983. "The Sacred Symbol of the Mother Goddess in a Tamil Village: A Parochial Model of Hinduism'. In Giri Raj Gupta, (ed.) *Religion in Modern India.*. Delhi: Vikas.

Pfaffenberger, B. 1980. 'Social Communication in Dravidian Ritual', *Journal of Anthropological Research* 36: 196-219.

———. 1982. *Caste in Tamil Culture: The Religious Foundations of Sudra Dominance in Tamil Sri Lanka*. Syracuse: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University.

Raheja, Goodwin. 1988. *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual, Prestation and the Dominant Caste in A North Indian Village*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Raj, A.P.M.J. 1987. 'The Social Bases of Obedience of the Untouchables in India'. Ph.D. dissertation. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Ramanujam, A.K. 1986. 'Two Realms of Kannada Folklore'. In Stuart H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujam, (eds.) *Another Harmony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rao, N.S. 1998. *Organised Power and Unorganised Resistance*. New Delhi: Aravali Books International.

———. 1996a. 'Transformative Rituals Among Hindu Women in the Telugu Region'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology (n.s)* 30.1: 69-88)

———. 1996b. 'Ideology, Power and Resistance in a South Indian Village'. *Sociological Bulletin*. 45.2: 207-232.

Reddy, N.S. 1952. 'Transition in Caste Structure in Andhra Desh with Particular Reference to Depressed Castes', Ph.D. dissertation. Lucknow: Lucknow University.

Reynolds, Holly. 1980. 'The Auspicious Married Woman'. In Susan S. Wadley (ed.) *The Powers of Tamil Women*. Syracuse: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University. pp 35-60.

Srinivas, M.N. 1965. *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.

Tapper, B.E. 1979. 'Widows and Goddess: Female Roles in Deity Symbolism in A South. Indian Village', *Contributions to Indian Sociology n.s.* 13.1: 1-31.

Thurston, E 1909 *Castes and Tribes of South India*. Vol.IV. Delhi: Cosmos Publications.

Turner, V. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co.

Wadley, Susan. 1977. 'Women and the Hindu Tradition'. In S. Wadley and Doranne, J. (eds.) *Women in India: Two Perspectives*. New Delhi: Manohar. pp 113-139.

———. 1980. *The Powers of Tamil Women*. Syracuse: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

Whitehead, Henry. 1921. *The Village Gods of South India*. Calcutta: Association Press.