

## CASTE FROM BELOW: MEMORY AND SUBVERSION OF CASTE IN CHINDU YAKSHAGANAM

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**ABSTRACT** Based on the life of the noted Chindu Yakshagana performer, Yellamma, this article presents the lived experience of caste through the lens of India's Dalits, as narrated by the Chindus, a dependent caste of Madigas of Telangana. This provides a glimpse into the inner world of caste-based relationships through analysis of a satellite caste system that remains inaccessible to the dominant Hindu Brahmanical world and most scholarship on caste. Satellite castes function as preservers of social memory and act as cultural archives, enacting caste histories and origin myths, while critiquing and inverting dominant perceptions and weaving positive stories. The article argues that there may well be much more to this performative protest than merely social subversion.

**KEYWORDS:** *caste, Chindu, Dalits, folk performance, India, Madiga, satellite castes, Telangana, Yakshagana*

### Introduction

The initial premise of this article is that the colonial and post-colonial understanding and analyses of caste, centred on dominant Hindu Brahmanical perspectives, did not grasp the alternative narrative(s) of caste articulated by people at the bottom of the caste ladder, particularly the ex-untouchables or Dalits in India. Notably, as the article demonstrates and argues, the Dalit understanding of caste, in addition to challenging the Brahmanical paradigm, creatively reconstructs the meaning of caste, thereby building a metaphorical buffer zone or protective layer around their communities to fend off centuries of Hindu Brahmanical epistemic violence.

This article focuses on Chindu Yellamma,<sup>1</sup> a noted Yakshagana performer, to analyse the understanding of caste as perceived and voiced by the Chindus, a satellite caste of the Madigas.<sup>2</sup> Among Dalits, the Madigas are a large and prominent community in

Telangana state, until 2014 part of Andhra Pradesh. The socio-economic and cultural milieu of ex-untouchable Dalit communities in this region is uniquely organised into a constellation with binding social and cultural norms, some specified and others unspecified. In this constellation of social organisation, Madigas and Malas act as central castes around which dependent castes, also known as satellite castes, are woven into a cohesive entity. According to custom, the main castes provide food and shelter to the travelling satellite castes. In turn, the dependent castes provide cultural and entertainment services, sometimes only to their main caste, but they may also perform for the rest of society. Historically Chindus, as a dependent satellite caste of Madigas, are minstrels and bards, social performers who acted as guardians of social and caste memory. They narrated legends related to the social and historical origins of Madigas, tracing them to the ancient or prehistoric past. They are mostly found in the Telangana districts of Nizamabad, Karimnagar, Nalgonda, Medak and Adilabad. Numerically, they are a very small community and in the 1931 census reports, their recorded population was only 340 (Census of India, 1931: 195). As special guardians of social memory, Chindus and other satellite castes harnessed the Dalit self and identity against the onslaughts of oppressive caste-Hindu and Brahmanical ideology by weaving and recounting positive historical narratives and legends.

While reconstructing the exemplary life of Chindu Yellamma, this article explores the worldview of untouchables, which inverts the caste-Hindu worldview while engaging with issues of gender and caste. Focusing on aspects of social ethics of the dependent caste system among Dalits, this article further points out the critical role of social memory and caste histories in challenging various caste-Hindu Brahmanical impositions through the creation and narration of alternative visions of a cohesive identity among Dalit communities, claiming a space for Dalits in common humanity.

### **The Backdrop of Caste and Stereotyping**

Caste is a fundamental social reality and the politics of democracy continue to be articulated around it in contemporary India. While it has not been considered an analytical category by social science scholarship in South Asia, which is dominated by caste-Hindus, it has for long been obfuscated under the blanket of class analyses. But like the category of gender, which has redefined the field of social sciences through the intervention of feminist scholarship, caste is now re-emerging as an important analytical tool in South Asia due to the forceful interventions of Dalits in social science scholarship. Earlier, Scot (1986) made a case for gender as a category of analysis, arguing that it signifies a social organisation of relationships between the sexes. Similarly, caste mutated in history in accordance with social, economic, political, cultural and gender relationships, and it is high time that South Asian academia uses the category of caste more intensely.

While particularly sociologists and anthropologists have tried to unravel the roots of caste, seeking to explain its ideological mechanisms, each passing decade has produced

more complex ideas and arguments about its origin and continuity. At one level British colonialism, while trying to understand caste early on, contributed to strengthening its cultural and ideological roots by recognising Hindu Brahmanical textual knowledge as supreme and enforcing it as the defining ideology of Hinduism, from which caste emanated. On the other hand, during colonial and post-colonial times, scholars have viewed and presented caste from the dominant Hindu Brahmanical perspective as well. For example, Dumont (1981) in his classic *Homo Hierarchicus*, while contrasting caste as an antithesis of Western liberal ideology of individualism and equality, re-roots the operational mechanism of caste to the pre-colonial Brahmanical ideology of purity and pollution, which acts as a unifying force and provides legitimacy for this hierarchical ideology. Dumont was severely contested by post-colonial scholars, such as Cohen (1998), Dirks (2001) and others who argued that the way we understand caste today is the creation of colonialism and its forms of knowledge; for them, caste as a social institution was not static as viewed by the British imperialists and their ideological successors. Rather, caste historically evolved according to the changes in social, economic, political and religious structures in pre-colonial times. But British colonial institutions and ideology tried to freeze that institution into an unchanging and fixed social institution. Despite differences in the approaches and explanations about caste and its origins, colonial and post-colonial scholarship both view caste from the dominant Hindu Brahmanical worldview, in which caste is always seen as imposed by the dominant castes and acquiesced by the lower strata as a given phenomenon. The problem with this colonial and post-colonial scholarship is that it neither seriously explored nor dwelt on whether the oppressed have any other explanations about their downtrodden existence and how far they were and are actually in agreement with the dominant Brahmanical ideology.

An exception to this is T.R. Singh (1969) from the Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society of Uttar Pradesh, who spent nearly a decade in the 1950s and 1960s among Dalits in Medak district of Telangana. This is an important early sociological work centring on the lives of Dalits which views the world from their perspective. It matured while Singh was working for Dube (1955) as an investigator for village studies in Hyderabad state, at the time of the Telangana armed struggle. While Dube (1955) himself is silent on this armed struggle and its social implication, yet throws interesting light on the social structure of village society in Telangana, Singh (1969) subsequently produced his own fascinating sociological study on the Madigas of the Toopran area. Although this study is far better than others in presenting the perspective of caste from the Madigas' viewpoint, it still reproduces some stereotypes about Madigas and other satellite castes. For example, Singh (1969: 35) notes that Chindu women are of great help at the time of staging plays and assist by playing musical instruments and singing in chorus and then states that '[s]ome Sindhu women work as prostitutes'. As a Madiga child, I watched Chindus coming and staying with us all the time, but never felt that their women were into prostitution. Such remarks about Chindu women are typical of caste-Hindus' attitudes towards lower caste women.

### **The Inner World of Chindus and Their Supporting Role**

The following section, while retelling the unique life story of Chindu Yellamma, an untouchable Yakshagana performer,<sup>3</sup> attempts to present the story of caste and its origins through the lens of an oppressed untouchable community and also engages with the issue of gender inequality and its relationship with caste dynamics. Most notably, it explores the way in which Chindu performers invert the Hindu Brahmanical worldview by narrating and performing Puranic stories upside down to present the phenomenon of caste and its origin myths from a Dalit perspective.

The Hindu Brahmanical ideology of caste not only denies the dignity and robs their humanity from untouchables, women and other lower castes but also relegates them thereby to the bottom of the social ladder. By providing cultural and ideological legitimacy for their caste-based oppression, exploitation and inequality, it normalises the structural inequality and its accompanied violence, turning it into a social norm rather than an anomaly.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, through various strict social and religious injunctions, Hindu Brahmanical ideology bars untouchables from material and spiritual comforts. Therefore, oppressed untouchables, through the lens of Brahmanical ideology, are perceived as subhumans, with no agency of their own; their collective identity is an empty shell without any meaning. In other words, caste as a social institution and its ideological articulations presented through the frame of the Hindu Brahmanical point of view persists as the most tortuous memory from the past into the oppressive present for Dalits and other oppressed castes.

In contrast, if we flip the Hindu Brahmanical frame of mind and scratch through the layers of the inner world of Dalits, we encounter a completely different world which remains inaccessible to the Hindu Brahmanical perspectives. This inner world of Dalits is organised as a constellation with the main caste acting as the centre point and around it a network of satellite castes is woven into a cohesive socio-cultural community largely independent of caste-Hindu society. Moreover, it operates on different principles and ideologies to shield their social and cultural milieu from the onslaught of Hindu Brahmanical ideology.

For example, Madigas have six satellite castes, namely Sangari, Baidla, Erpula, Chindu, Mashitla and Dakkali (Singh, 1969: 31). Among them, Chindus are minstrels and bards who narrate the stories of the origin myths of Madigas, tracing it to Jambava. While narrating the story of Jambava, Chindus invert the Hindu Brahmanical worldview by positing opposite meanings and coalescing the Dalit existence on the basis of positive cultural and social narratives. Dakkali as another satellite caste of Madigas are keepers of caste and family genealogies. Similarly, Gurrapu is a satellite caste of the Malas and also serves as narrators of caste and family genealogies. Thus, satellite castes act as preservers of caste myths and genealogies of Madiga and Mala castes alike and they narrate their myths locating them in ancient historical traditions. To some extent, the caste system among untouchable communities does replicate the dominant Hindu Brahmanical ideology in terms of purity and pollution, but its operational mechanism is based on the egalitarian principle of responsibility of

supporting the dependent castes. Even though they do not intermarry, inter-dining is normal between the dependent castes.

Therefore, the caste system among untouchables is not primarily based on exploitative relationships. Rather, the network of castes acts as a cohesive community, which preserves the inner strength and hierarchical order of all communities involved through their respective functions, in this case performing and narrating caste histories and acting as vanguards of cultural and social myths or memory. The Chindu caste from which Yellamma comes is a dependent caste of Madigas, and it relies on them for their economic and social survival. As a nomadic performing caste, Chindus constantly travel to different villages and live with Madigas. During their stay, they perform first for Madigas and then for the rest of the village, while Madigas take the responsibility of supporting them by providing food and other basic necessities of life.

### **Gendering the Performance: Chindu Yellamma's Unique Life**

Similar to her illiterate fellow Dalits, Yellamma did not have any record about her birth. She said that she was told by her parents that she was born during the construction of the Nizam Sagar Project in Banjepally (Muthyam, 2006: 16),<sup>5</sup> hence some time during the 1920s. Since her caste people moved around the villages to perform Chindu theatre, she was born on one of those trips at Basara and was given the name of Saraswati after the famous temple Goddess.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile her father, Nabaiah, lost his eyesight and the traditional diagnosis revealed that Goddess Yellamma is the reason and she needs a daughter to be dedicated to her as *Jogini*.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Saraswati was renamed as Yellamma and her family thought of dedicating her to the Goddess Yellamma. Incidentally, her father got his eyesight back a few months later and Yellamma's name remained. Under the training of her grandfather, Yellamma then started appearing on stage at the age of 4 along with her family elders. By the age of 8, she performed as Bala Krishna, Lord Krishna as a child, an important figure in the Hindu pantheon. Yellamma started acting as other important characters from the age of 11 onwards, performing notably both male and female roles. Generations of Chindus formed their families into performing troupes and every member in the family had some role either on the stage as a performer or behind the stage playing instruments or singing songs.

Yellamma was brought up in this atmosphere of learning and performance as part of the family or caste tradition. As the years passed, her performances were not only applauded by the Madiga caste population across the villages, even the caste-Hindus were impressed by her scintillating performances. Her troupe's visits to villages were eagerly awaited and people from various castes would even leave their agricultural work to watch her perform. By the age of 15, Yellamma had established herself as a leading performer and started commanding respect within the family, including her father. Her passion to perform and excel in her field became her ultimate purpose of life. Most rural folk in those days married off their daughters at an early age, but Yellamma's father did not want to give away a 'celebrity' daughter who became a main

performer in the family to someone else's house. Instead, her father wanted to bring a groom to his house. Thus, Yellamma's success facilitated the defiance of an important societal gender norm, the bride's ceremonial departure from her father's house after marriage. Instead, in her case, her husband was brought home to live with her family. Patriarchal norms reiterating gender inequality are rigorously practised in the villages and it is significant that Yellamma's family, belonging to the lowest caste in society, went against the norm, a daring step in her life. Challenging the social norms of gender continued in other aspects as well. For example, Yellamma's complete immersion in her performances did not leave her much time for domestic life in terms of looking after her husband and the household. Yellamma took the unusual but daring step of arranging a marriage between her younger sister Ramavva to Saidulu, her husband. Yellamma refers in her autobiography to the reaction of her father to this proposal: 'When I told my father about my intention of marrying my younger sister to my husband, my father was shell-shocked but respected my decision and agreed for the marriage' (Muthyam, 2006: 60). According to Yellamma, after this marriage the relationship between her and Saidulu (her husband) became more like brother and sister and he called her *Amma* (mother) (Muthyam, 2006: 60). She, however, also said that henceforth all decisions related to the family and the troupe were to be taken collectively between her and Saidulu. Thus, Yellamma not only bent the norms of caste patriarchy, she in fact assumed the unusual role of a family patriarch herself.<sup>8</sup>

It is significant that, even on stage, Yellamma defied gender roles as she regularly played male roles, thereby inverting the gender dynamics in both the family and also the larger society. In normal circumstances, Chindu women played only female characters on the stage, and also acted backstage as chorus singers and played instruments. Yellamma did not perform conventional roles and refused to accept the traditional status as a low-caste woman. Dalit women, particularly Chindu females, were abused and treated degradingly not only by the rest of society but also by their own men. In those circumstances, Yellamma playing the role of aggressive male mythological characters symbolised a revolt against established gender roles. Satish Chander, a prominent Dalit critic, who contributed to Venkanna and Muthyam (2006: 12), highlighted that even though Yellamma as an individual proved herself as a great actor, in caste society nobody could be below her status. She endured not only untouchability and poverty but also the humiliation of being a woman of the lowest caste, meant to be abused by everyone. By playing male characters, she might have forgotten those humiliating experiences during those moments on the stage.

Yellamma herself told many times that she enjoyed playing fearful male characters, but she performed equally well in female roles. While commenting on the versatility of her roles, Nataraja Ramakrishna, the legendary theatre artist who introduced Yellamma to the world, said:<sup>9</sup>

My first encounter with Yellamma's performance still lingers in front of my eyes afresh. Yellamma's troupe gave two performances in Armoor for me in Sarangadhara play.

Yellamma played the role of Chitrangi (female lead) and did a stunning performance. It was getting too late in the night and I advised her to stop the performance. She said 'Ramakrishna guru! Wait a minute!', went behind the curtain and appeared two minutes later in the costume of Narasimhaswamy (a fearsome male god). In male character Yellamma's performance was very dignified and chivalrous, and while playing as Chenchulaxmi (female role) her beauty is unbeatable.

By performing male and female characters, Yellamma not only proved her talent but also overcame various social and gender obstacles in life. Her talent acted as a shield against the gender and caste oppression which was not her choosing, but she rose above this and did succeed.

### **Social Memory and Subversion of Caste**

According to Ries (1969: 22), '[m]usic in both its aspect of performance and appreciation may be considered a form of social action, and as much, it involves a particular cultural context as well as elements of social organization'. While analysing Indian musical traditions, it is important to understand the social, cultural and historical context of the people who produce and perform a particular musical tradition and the patrons who support them. Generally, Indian musical traditions are divided into classical and folk genres. The classical traditions are based on Hindu classical texts such as the *Sama Veda* and other religious texts and are patronised by kings and their courts for the benefit of elite caste-Hindu social groups. For example, the classical Kuchipudi dance form is renowned in Andhra, but is only performed by people belonging to the exclusively Brahman hamlet (*agraham*) of Kuchipudi, which untouchables were not allowed to enter. This dance form was solely reserved for Brahmin caste performers (Banerji, 1985: 103). Untouchables and other lower castes do not have any connection with those traditions and if they tried to learn or listen to these classical forms, they were severely punished for an act of transgression by the upholders of the caste traditions, such as kings and caste-Hindu men.<sup>10</sup> The folk traditions based on oral transmissions intended for the illiterate untouchables and other lower caste groups are based on lived social experiences, myths and legends drawn from both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical traditions. Therefore, the lower caste oral musical traditions are a product of the communal social experience of performing castes, such as Chindus and their patrons like Madigas and other lower caste groups. Most importantly, the lower caste musical traditions along with entertainment also have a social function in terms of helping patrons to overcome the stigma of untouchability, loathsome social existence and poverty. Since lower caste musical traditions are not based on texts, they require highly specialised social groups, such as Chindus, Dakkalis and Masitlas, to keep those traditions alive in the form of social memory, through caste genealogies, legends, origin myths and Puranic stories. In return for keeping and functioning as the social and cultural archive of the community, in which patron and client castes trace their origin to a common ancestor, Jambava Muni, they are looked after by the

patron castes across the villages that provide food, cash and clothing during their visits. Because of the social and cultural bonds between the performing castes and their patrons, the first performance in the village is always intended for their patron caste and only then comes the rest of the village.

As custodians of social and cultural tales of the Madigas, Chindus performed the *Jambava Purana* in the villages. Even though in normal circumstances Dalits were not allowed into the centre space of the village, it is noteworthy that the Chindu performances always took place at the centre of the village, where people from all castes would be able to watch. Spatial pollution is a serious issue in practising purity and pollution in caste society, but caste-Hindus tolerate and sometimes even worship the performers when they are performing divine characters, antithetical to caste-Hindus' beliefs and doctrines. Though this regard and respect for the performer is transient, lasting only for the duration of the act, it nonetheless overturns, albeit momentarily, the social and cultural structure of the village society.

One of the most significant aspects of the performance is, however, the narrative itself, the story of Jambava Muni or the Saint Jambava, which Chindus narrate and perform for all caste audiences (Jamba Puranam, 1997). According to this legend, Jambava is believed to be the ancestor of all untouchable castes and he was the earliest being in the universe. He is supposed to be 6 months older than earth and sky and the Trinity of the Hindu pantheon (Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara). All other Hindu gods were born in front of his eyes and he helped them in times of crisis and calamities. While helping and saving Hindu gods from various devils and calamities, Jambava and his successors fell in social status and were gradually pushed down as untouchables (Charsley, 2004). In the play as enacted in the village centre, Jambava Muni will have arguments with the Brahman priest and other caste-Hindus about his degraded social status and would discount and dismiss, notably through logical reasoning, the higher social status of upper castes and would thus defeat them in argument. Through this enactment, the Chindus thus display 'double consciousness' (DuBois, 1994), a notion which I deploy here in a different way, because Chindu performers have dual audiences, caste-Hindus and untouchables, and dual intentions, to provide positive self-esteem for untouchables and also to engage the rest of the village within the Brahmanical paradigm. The first element is intended to counter the social and cultural onslaught of Hindu Brahmanical consciousness and its stereotypes. Second, the performers rebuild the robbed and emptied self of untouchables with positive cultural and social narratives. At one level, they use the cultural narrative tools of Brahmanical gods to see themselves through the eyes of caste-Hindus. But they simultaneously overturn those negative self-images into a positive self-narrative by using Jambava as a figurehead to challenge and destroy the stereotypes of Dalits as unholy people outside the Hindu social and cultural sphere. At one level, Chindus manoeuvre and manipulate the social and cultural knowledge to help their primary patrons, Madigas, by providing the cultural and social satisfaction of being more than equals to the rest of society within the spiritual realm. It is significant, in the



context of the anti-colonial nationalist movement from 1910 onwards, how Dalits across India used these origin myths as an important concept to claim their rightful share in the nation and its space (see Gundimeda, 2016). On the other hand, while entertaining caste-Hindus by using Puranic stories and other religious myths, Chindus are conscious about their own degraded social status and that of their fellow Dalits. Therefore, they invoke the memory of oppression to attack caste discrimination and vent their anger for the deplorable conditions under which they suffer. In a similar way as African American performers like the legendary Bert Williams (Forbes, 2004) had to negotiate racial boundaries while keeping their feet firmly among their community, Chindus also had to navigate a difficult social space to entertain caste-Hindus through performance while also seeking to uplift and upkeep the spiritual and cultural self of the oppressed brethren through their positive narratives. As philosopher Adorno (1985: 299) has noted, 'in music ... only individuals are capable of consciously representing the aims of the collectivity'. Here, we find that Chindus like Yellamma articulate the social anxiety and the catastrophic reality of Dalits through their performances and thus help them retain their self and identity.

In this way, social memory acts like a fertiliser for the community to nurture its roots and strengthen its base to withstand the social and cultural onslaughts by caste-Hindus in terms of demeaning appellations and humiliating treatment. Also interestingly, the social memory acts as a narrative for a better future. The ancestral bond between the Chindus and their patrons further strengthens through their creative use of memory for the collective self of the community.

### **Social Satire and Subversion of Caste**

The other most important aspect of Chindu performances in the villages is the use of satire, particularly illuminations on social relations and hypocrisy and narrow-minded behaviour of caste-Hindus. Though the primary purpose of satire is to make everyone laugh, the subtlety of this art lies in its ability to make fun of caste-Hindus through making jokes about their hypocritical attitudes. While weaving positive myths about the marginalised, Chindus deliberately degrade the status of high-caste Hindus through short stories and jokes from past and present experiences. Even though this achieves the intended purpose of making everyone laugh, they also often provoke anger in the caste-Hindus who complain when they encounter the Chindus the next day on the village streets. According to Yellamma, there were many occasions where Chindus were not allowed to perform in villages because they were accused of denigrating high-caste people and praising low-caste people. For example, while talking about different castes in villages, Yellamma refers to the oppressive landlord caste of Velamas as '*Velamalu Unna Uru Padu. Enupalu Unna Kottam Padu* (A village with Velama caste and the shed with he-buffalo will be ruined)' (Muthyam, 2006: 21). Casteist attitudes and hypocrisy are always pointed out by appropriately weaving them into the storyline. Satire is thus used very creatively not only to expose social hypocrisy and unethical and

immoral behaviour but also to comfort the oppressed masses. Therefore, Chindus as a performing community acts as both social critics and conscience keepers. The satire, as elsewhere, reflects reality but the depiction is often unpalatable to the perpetrators of discrimination and injustice.

As Michel de Certeau (1984) demonstrates in everyday life, ordinary people work out alternative means to escape dominant impositions. Through their alternative narratives, Chindus inverted caste hierarchy and articulated multiple strategies to evade and escape everyday oppression. These strategies are very similar to the ones Scott (1987) showed in his seminal work in the context of Malaysia.

## Conclusions

Living for generations in suffocating and oppressive social surroundings, Dalits have become acclimatised to the humiliations and their accompanied material and spiritual deprivations. As their souls soak in the stink of Hindu Brahmanical oppression, their self-image appears tarnished and their identity seems relegated as empty. Understandably, the Dalits need solace outside the purview of dominant ideology. Therefore, the inner world of Dalits based on the satellite caste system operates as a cohesive socio-cultural domain, which appears to be outside the Hindu Brahmanical worldview, but is actually connected through oppressed claims and reminders of common humanity, thus reflecting an interconnectedness that caste-based distinctions cannot simply erase. This necessarily subversive system and ideology reconstitute the self-image and identity of Dalits with positive historical and mythological narratives. Moreover, very significantly the layers of this inner world, organised around the self-sustaining satellite caste system, remain inaccessible (and thus unassailable) to non-Dalit dominant castes, helping Dalits to preserve their socio-cultural milieu organised as an independent entity. Therefore, the satellite caste system creatively pierces the dominant Hindu Brahmanical narratives to assist in teasing out positive images and history for Dalit communities.

The article showed that through theatrical performances, skilful individuals like Yellamma constantly challenge the oppressive memory of Hindu Brahmanical ideology as debilitating social experience and produce powerful alternative perceptions through Puranic characters like Jambava. In this context, Chindus through their performance of *Jambava Purana* and Dakkalis through their accounts of genealogies of Madigas are in constant war with the dominant oppressive memories. They weave alternative liberating memories for Dalit communities by inverting the Brahmanical worldview. Therefore, in envisioning such liberating ideologies, Dalit intellectuals in their political articulations, in addition to demands for modern education and opportunities outside the caste structure, also ingeniously used the pre-modern and pre-colonial oral and cultural narratives articulated by satellite castes to claim their rightful share in the material possessions and spiritual realms. This can be especially discerned in anti-caste ideologies which questioned the practice of untouchability and the contempt of caste

using the idea of Adi-Hindus (original Hindus) as a counter-narrative to argue against their exclusion from the institutions and the imagination of nation (Jangam, 2005). Even though Dalit articulations in post-colonial India are essentially seen as modernist, upon exploration they are clearly much more complex. Their claims for social equality and rights of freedom are always drawn from pre-colonial cultural narratives, preserved and circulated through the network of satellite castes, which have had palliative effects in soothing the suffering souls of Dalits for centuries.

## Notes

1. This article was first presented as a paper at the 'History, Memory and Performance Conference' organised by the Public History Programme at Carleton University and the University of Ottawa's Theatre Department from 19 to 21 April 2012. I thank David Dean, Denis Bachand and Joel Beddows for the opportunity to present this material and thank Pat Gentile for chairing the session. I am grateful to K. Muthyam for long phone conversations about Yellamma's life and his interviews with her. Mayurika Chakravorty as my intellectual interlocutor helped in shaping this article.
2. Chindu is also pronounced as Sindhu.
3. This is a dance-drama art form based on Puranic stories. The uniqueness of Chindu Yakshaganam lies in its social content, particularly focusing on marginal characters whose lives are closer to the oppressed castes such as untouchables.
4. While discussing the difficulties of making sense of caste, Jalki and Pathan (2015: 50) refer to a system of sub-castes in 'a beehive-like structure where the king sits at the centre'. They identify in addition that 'finding a scapegoat caste, i.e., exploitation of a caste, is also important to this arrangement' (Jalki & Pathan, 2015: 50), notably to handle pollution.
5. The Nizam Sagar project was built during 1923–30.
6. Basara village is located on the banks of the river Godavari and is the site of a famous ancient temple for the goddess Saraswati, the goddess of learning or knowledge. There are two major temples in India for Saraswati, one in Jammu/Kashmir and the other in Basara. Because Yellamma was born in this temple village, she was named Saraswati.
7. *Jogini* is a practice of dedicating a girl to the goddess or a deity whenever the girl or family member is afflicted by a serious disease or calamity. *Jogini* girls were married to the goddess in a ceremony, remained unmarried and were sexually abused and exploited by males from the landholding castes.
8. On inversion of gender and roles, see also Roye (2016).
9. Nataraja Ramakrishna was a dance guru and musicologist who revived the classical dance and theatre in Andhra Pradesh. He was given the title of Nataraja (King of Dance) for his dancing skills. He not only identified Yellamma's talent but also introduced her to all of India by arranging her performances on national and international platforms. He also wrote a moving obituary on Yellamma.
10. The 2006 film titled *Vanaja*, by Rajnesh Domalpalli, presents a fascinating story of abuse and exploitation of a young oppressed-caste girl. Vanaja is a maid who was taught Kuchipudi dance by her landlady, whose son then impregnates her. To protect their caste honour and privilege, they ruin the life of Vanaja and her child.

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