The Lambadas: A Community Destroyed

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Subjugated Nomads: The Lambadas under the Rule of the Nizams by Bhangya Bhukya *(Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan), 2010; pp xxii + 296, Rs 550.*

In this sharp ethno-history of the Lambadas of Hyderabad state, an entire community's transformation is unfurled with skill and passion. The author effectively applies the innovative subaltern school methodology for analysing a vibrant oral tradition to study the history and culture of the Lambadas of Hyderabad state, whom the British colonisers had denounced as barbaric savages lacking any history. This school of history has made use of oral traditions and myths to penetrate subaltern consciousness. This does not mean a rejection of written, archive-based history. Instead, such a history is made to "share a place with the oral account" (p 23). Hence, the prevailing oral culture becomes a powerful tool to study the history of subaltern communities. This book claims to do precisely that by focusing on one such community in the Deccan, the Lambadas. (The Lambada community has a strong oral tradition that has been passed on from generation to generation in the form of *sakies* (stories), *shaval* (proverbs), and *geeths* (songs).)

Long History

The oral tradition tells us that the Lambadas had a long history going back to the time of the Delhi Sultanate (13th and 14th centuries) and Vijayanagara empire (14th and 15th centuries), the Mughals (16th and 17th centuries), and the Nizam and British (18th century) when they were the chief transporters of goods and services throughout the Indian subcontinent. How a highly independent and mobile community based on a well-developed network of caravan trade survived despite being reduced to virtual slavery under the British colonial rule is the underlying theme of this book.

Known as the Banjaras of former times, the Lambadas had been major caravan traders and merchants since the 11th century. The state armies throughout the Indian subcontinent sought their services as baggage carriers and foodgrain transporters. Traditionally, they played a crucial role in long-distance trade and also carried foodgrains from surplus to deficit areas during famines. Merchants in their own right, they acted as carriers for other merchants and dealers as well. But the establishment of the British colonial raj in India enforced new economic relations through legal control and the railways ruined and marginalised this community. The innumerable fairs and *jataras* (pilgrimages) that had created a vibrant network of trade and commerce throughout the Indian subcontinent were declared by the British as backward and irrational, and were discouraged and suppressed.

The reason for such drastic action against the colonised peoples and their culture can be found in the European intellectual culture during the second half of the 19th century. In Europe, the mental attitude was dominated by pseudo-scientific theories of social Darwinism, scientific racism and eugenics, which looked at the conquered non-Europeans in racial terms as biologically inferior. The same mindset was transmitted to the colonies whereby the subject people were categorised by their racial features. Accordingly, permanent characteristics were accorded to them based on their physical appearance.

The Lambadas had always traded and provided their commissariat services freely to all parties including the State armies. But once they entered into contract with the British colonisers they lost their independence. Their trading activities came under strict regulation. They were not allowed to trade with anyone other than the British. Any breach of contract was deemed criminal and severely punished. The British destroyed the unity of the Lambada *thandas* (camps) by setting up one *naik* (thanda chief) against another, thus reducing the entire community to desperation and want.

Cotton and salt, the two prized items, which the Lambadas traded throughout the subcontinent became an East India Company monopoly whose production, distribution and price were strictly regulated. Whatever little internal trade that was left became subject to heavy custom duties and outright plunder by the colonial officials. Colonial custom and tax policies therefore benefited the British at the expense of the local people.

Structured and rigid colonial towns replaced the fluid mobile markets of the pre-colonial times. Under colonial patronage, these towns came to be dominated by the Parsis, Jains, Baniyas, Marwaris and Christians who marginalised the Lambada caravan trade. The final damage to their livelihood was done when the colonial state introduced the railways and built roads to connect them. The Lambadas were forced to abandon their traditional occupation and take to cattle raising and agrarian labour.

Criminalisation

The second half of the 19th century witnessed a major transformation in the life of the Lambada community. It was during this period that the colonial state declared the Lambadas as vagabonds, classified them as criminals and began systematic persecution of the entire community. Besides designating them under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, various other laws were passed to incarcerate them in enclosed spaces where they could be put under state surveillance.

The Cattle Trespass Act of 1857 and the Forest Acts of the late 19th century declared grazing cattle in forests and pasturelands as illegal. A custom duty of 5% was levied on the value of every cattle traded in the traditional fairs and bazaars. This basically divorced the link between agriculture and forestry. The remaining cattle were subject to the *bancharai* or permit pass system forced on cattle keepers to restrict their mobility further. Under the guise of "scientific forestry", the State took control of all forest and pasturelands. This action alienated the long-established customary rights of people over these natural resources. Grazing was declared a criminal offence. The Lambada community was forced to abandon its nomadic lifestyle.

While denying the customary rights of people, the State embarked on full-scale commercial exploitation of forests for the railways, coalmines, match factories, tea plantations, cotton gins and presses, etc. Denial of fodder weakened the prized cattle of Telangana and their physical health deteriorated, making them vulnerable to diseases.

The criminal stigma attached to the community automatically invited surveillance, arrests, and detentions irrespective of who committed the crime. The European pseudo-science of race and criminality was used to stereotype groups of colonised people as born-criminals. New methods were devised to create a body of knowledge to show the physical and biological inferiority of non-white people as fit only to be ruled by the superior white race. Lambada heroes like Meetu Bhukya (whom the community revered) were declared criminal and the community was persecuted for promoting the cult of crime and dacoity. However, the author suggests that Meetu Bhukya never participated in any dacoity as such.

When dacoities, grain robberies and looting occurred during famines, the Lambadas were automatic suspects. Poor and innocent people were arrested and harassed just for belonging to the community. The British also used bribes and threats to coerce people in their own communities to help round up other members by inciting animosities. Often times the wrong persons were arrested and falsely implicated. The Lambada community was also subjected to harsh punishments, i e, arrest without warrants, detention without any access to defence or their family members. Village officials were rewarded for arrests (which became an incentive for wrongful arrests) and the convicted Lambadas were transported for life to the Andaman Islands where nobody survived after the first year.

Christian missionaries fully supported the British colonial "civilising mission" project. Lambada children were forcibly separated from their parents and raised in segregated colonial settlements to save their souls and make them learn a trade. This was in fact a part of the colonial criminal settlement project under which separate settlements of designated criminal castes and tribes were created to monitor them in order to prevent them from committing crimes. Not only were these settlements under police surveillance, but roll calls were also taken every morning, and evening and night curfews were imposed. Thus, the general mobility of the members of the Lambada community was restricted even though a majority of its members had no criminal record.

Oppressive Land Relations

Lambadas from these settlements were made to work as indentured labourers on colonial roads and railway construction projects under police escort. The coalmines of Kothagudem in Karimnagar district were also worked with criminal labour. Many of these labourers died, unable to withstand the harsh conditions. Those Lambadas who took to agriculture lost all their lands to feudal *jagirdars*, moneylenders (Komatis and Marwaris), Mahratta Deshmukhs, Deshapandyas, brahmans, Kunbis, Kapus, Reddys, Velamas, etc. They became tenants-at-will on the lands which they themselves had cleared. The *kowldari* system that prevailed in Telangana was the most oppressive system of exploitation in British India. The Lambada peasants who took out *kowls* (leases) for cultivation found themselves in the debt trap of the sahukars who cheated them by cooking up false accounts which reduced them to the status of *bhagela* or *jeethagadu* (bonded labour). This bondage known as *vetti chakiri* extended to their women and children who had to provide free labour services to the *doras* (landlord) household. It is no surprise that a large number of Lambadas participated in the Telangana armed struggle (1946-1951), which campaigned against the abolition of vetti and bhagela exploitation and undertook land distribution to the landless. Lambada women activists like Hamu and Lachakka in Nalgonda district became legends in this struggle.

But generations before, in the early 19th century, a charismatic reformer by the name of Seva Bhaya had socially and culturally united the community by advocating moral and spiritual uplift through the practice of vegetarianism, non-violence, abstention from liquour, cleanliness, etc. This movement took deep roots in the community's consciousness that led to the revival of thanda panchayats and self-assertion whereby the community provided an alternative to colonial courts and also protected its members from ruthless oppression of the colonial police, moneylenders, contractors, Christian missionaries, forest officials, etc. It imbued the Lambada community with new values and social bonds that in fact helped them survive the brutal annihilating force of the colonial state. Further strength to the community was provided by Baliram Patel in the early 20th century who dedicated his life to modernising the community by providing opportunities for education and employment by opening schools, hospitals, libraries, etc. Consequently, the Lambada community with great struggle came unto its own in postcolonial India.

In this book the author systematically develops the main argument. The book is complete with a glossary, maps and pictures to guide the reader. The kind and gentle countenance of Sant Shree Sevalal Maharaj (picture on p 35), the legendry patron saint of the community, is not only a delight to see, but is supplemented by poems celebrating his life and times.

This is a major contribution to a systematic study of one particular community and rightly places the experience of Lambadas under colonial oppression on par with the British oppression of similar such communities and tribes all across the Indian subcontinent. Yet ethno-history or caste-history is a product of the colonial ethnography project of the 19th century that presented caste and tribe as the central defining characteristic of Indian society, even though no caste or tribe had ever been so rigid as it became under British colonial rule. But in the strong tradition of history writing that developed in postcolonial India, this type of approach has become passé. Nonetheless, it is being kept alive in the Euro-American colonialist tradition of historiography represented by the Cambridge school of south Asian history. This is not to suggest any intent to this work nor does this in anyway undermine the importance of the book as a strong critique of European imperialism, colonialism, and racism.

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