
Caste, Occupation and Identity: An Ethnographic Study of *Rajaka* caste in Telangana State.

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ABSTRACT:

This paper is a documentation of ethnographic field work on Rajaka caste in Telangana region. It is a service community in villages and practices traditional hereditary occupation. The field work is purely documenting their social and cultural responsibilities being as a Rajaka caste in the village. It is the only community maintains monopoly over washing clothes in villages. This paper also investigates the socio-cultural relations of this caste with other castes in the villages. Caste is occupational unit of specific function but this caste's operations are extended from the limits of washing clothes to participate in Asami's. It explores the internal hierarchies and patron and dependent caste relations in the larger social arena.

Key words: Caste, occupational functions, Rajaka, Telangana,

CULTURAL PROFILE OF RAJAKA CASTE IN TELANGANA REGION

In Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, the washer man group has been identified through two names *Rajaka* and *Chakali*. These names *Rajaka* and *Chakali* are officially documented in the Andhra Pradesh government Backward Castes list No. 5 since 1993. The state and society is recognized these two names for their occupational practice. This occupational practice group has other names too, such as *Vannan* or *Vannar* in Chittur and Nellore districts of Andhra Pradesh. *Chakali* is popular term to address this community in both states¹. In the Andhra Pradesh and Telangana state of India, the *Rajaka's* are estimated by the caste organizations to be about 12% of the total population and they are considered to be a backward caste. In other parts of the country it is known as Dhobi caste and in 18 Indian states it is listed among the Schedule Castes.

In Telangana region, *Madel* is the traditional title of the *Rajaka* caste to address the washer man in the village. The *Kulapedda* (head of the caste) is addressed as a *Madel* in order to invite him for village level meetings of all the castes. The word *Madel* represents the first person of the caste. Every member of the washer man community is a *Madel* but this word is frequently used to address the elders of the community. *Rajaka* caste is colloquially addressed as *Chakali* in the Telangana and of Andhra Pradesh. However, the caste is identified with the *Chakali* name rather than with the *Rajaka* name. The government is using the name *Rajaka* for official activities related to the washer people's caste but in many places it is confused to identify with the *Rajaka* name. People recognize this group with Dhobi or *Chakali* names.

We see the *Rajaka* caste as existing from the Ramayana period. Lord Rama was honored with the throne after the Vanavasam and was ruling the kingdom happily. One *Rajaka* caste person cast aspersions on Sita's and Ravana's relation when the couple returned from Lanka and ruled Ayodhya. The reference is to merely state that the caste has its existence from the late Vedic

period to date in contemporary society. They are practicing their caste occupation since the Ramayana period and are entitled to practice this occupation. We see the *Rajaka* caste existence in an Indian epic but not their caste and cultural history. In the 12th century Basavanna social reform movement in Karnataka and Palkuriki Somanatha's documentation of his life in *Basavapuranam*, shows the cultural history and origins of the *Rajaka* caste.

According to G.N Reddy's *Telugu paryayapada Nigantuvu* the word "Chakali" represents Karmakeelakudu (rites performer), Ksharakudu (cleaner), Chakala, Chakivadu (washer man) Chaila Dhavudu, Javadi, Deshnuvu, Dhvakudu, Nirjekudu, Marjudu, Madivelu, Medavaulu, Rajakudu, Revadu, Saucheyudu. The term "*Chakali*" is a combination of many skills. These names represent the functions of this community. One community but many functions as part of their occupational practice, such as rites performer, cleaner, washer man and so on. According to Andhra Pradesh Sahitya academy *Tribasha Andhra-Tamila-Kannada dictionary* the word "*Rajakudu*" means in Telugu language "*Chakali*" (washer man), Kannada language "*Agasa*" and "*Madival*", and *Vannan* or *Vannar* in Tamil language.

Andhra Pradesh has five neighboring states, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are two among them. Thus, the same occupational groups are addressed with different names in the borders of Andhra Pradesh because of cultural influences of nearby states. The well known and authenticated C.P Brown's *Telugu-English dictionary* says "*Rajakudu*" means Washer man.

This caste group popularly known as Dhobi in Hindi language and it derived from the word "dhona" which means to wash. The Dhobi's go by many different names, such as Vannar, Madivala, Agsar, Parit, Rajaka, Chakali, Rajakula, Veluthadar, Nirmal, Sethy, Panicker, Mannan, Diwakar, Baitha, Pardeshi. etc

RELIGION FESTIVALS AND RITUALS OF THE RAJAKA CASTE

In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana most of the *Rajaka* caste people are following Hindu religion and a less proportion of people converted into Christianity but practicing the same occupation. In Muslim community also has separate section of the people assigned the washing job. *Rajaka* caste observes all the Hindu festivals along with the other communities. They participate in their local deity festivals such as Pochamma, Mysamma, Pothuraju, Mallanna, Rajanna, Sammakka, Saralamma. They celebrate Pan Indian festivals, such as Diwali, Dasara Sankranti and Ugadi. *Rajaka* community celebrates the other common festival along with the *Asami* castes such as Holi, Raksha Bandhan, Nagula Chaviti, Mukkoti Ekadasi, Karthika Purnima, Guru Purnima, Sri Rama Navami, Hanumajjayanti, Raakhi Pournami, Ratha Saptami, Krishnashtami, Vinayaka Chavithi. *Rajaka* community also participates in Muslim festivals such as *Eid-ul-Fitr*, *Milad un Nabi* and *Moharram* (Peerila Panduga)

THE OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY OF THE RAJAKA CASTE

The *Rajaka* caste has to perform specific functions in the village. This caste plays a considerable role in sustaining the socio-cultural and ritual traditions in the villages. It has a significant right to participate in the village rituals and *Asami* house rituals. Over the centuries this caste has maintained a monopoly on the ritual participation. Whatever the village festival, it would be the *Rajaka* caste festival. Their main job is washing the clothes and dealing with the cleanliness of

the *Asami*. The Head of the community re-distributes the rights over the *Asami* houses for every three to five years. Each individual family has rights over the *Asami* houses to perform the job and rituals. This is a rotation based activity and they have to perform collective activities during the common village festivals; sometimes it would be other religious festivals. The whitewashing of the temples before starting the celebrations is a main activity that should be done by the *Rajaka* community and they do not have restriction when it comes to entering temples. Every year they have to clean and paint the place where the *peerla panduga* (Muharram) is celebrated.

There are village deity *Jataras* such as *Peddamma*, *Pochamma* and *Durgamma* and it is a common celebration to everyone in the village. Every caste has their own deity celebration in the village, so the festival can be lead to a *jatara* many times but sometimes they are just celebrated as a simple festival. During this time the *Rajaka* community plays a vital role in performing the *Jatara* from the beginning to the conclusion of the festival of the *Asami* caste.

Bathukamma is a famous festival in Telangana state and every caste of this region celebrates it as a tradition of this land. This festival is land mark of Telangan region and not visible in Andhra Pradesh. *Rajaka* caste also celebrates this festival. The 9th day of the festival is called *Pedda Bathukamma*. On this day every family of the village decorate the big size *Bathukamma*. On the evening of the festival *Rajaka* caste male members carry the upper caste's *asami Bathukamma* on their head to leave in the village pond instead of their own *Bathukamma*. This is not part of the tradition but *Rajaka* caste has to perform this job to their upper caste *asamis*.

Upper caste woman do not carry the *Bathukamma* but they celebrate the festival along with other communities.

Dasara is a common festival in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana but it is followed by *Bathukamma* festival in Telangana state. During the *Dsara* festival animal sacrifice ritual is obligatory in this region. Telangana *Dasara* festival is celebrated in the evening with *Jammi chettu* (*Prosopis cineraria*) puja . There is a village procession from the common gathering place to specified place for celebrations in the village. Either single caste or all the upper castes of the village offer a goat, which has to be sacrificed in front of the temporarily planted branch of a *Prosopis cineraria* during the puja. There are established places to sacrifice the animals during the procession and this rite has to be performed by the *Rajaka* caste. Its representation is compulsory in all village celebrations and festivals. It is traditional mandatory to attend functions and rituals of the village and individual households.

BIRTH

In the *Asami's* house, the arrival of a new born baby occasion is called as "*Purudu*" (naming ceremony) and in some other places it's called as "*Barasala*". It celebrates on the day of 21st day of the new born baby and this occasion particularly meant for naming the baby. Popularly this ceremony is known as *Barasala* but *purudu* is a colloquial name in Telangana region. On this occasion *Rajaka* caste woman receives entitled to take *katnam* (gift) for her special work to wash the clothes of the baby's mother. She has the right to take *katnam* on the naming ceremony day. Usually, these birth is considered as pollution in the house, though the arrival of a new baby is happily welcomed by the family members. This pollution period remains till the 9th or 11th day.

People who visits them will take a bath after their visit. So, female of the *Rajaka* caste helps her as part of her duties and she serves more than their family members during these days. She washes the *Muttu* (polluted) clothes. *Asami* practices *Muttu*(pollution) for five to nine or eleven days and these number of days are changes from family to family. Nobody touches their clothes and only the washerwoman can do the job. For this occasion she receives a blouse piece and a sari, saffron, *kumkum* and some money in the form of *katnam* . The amount and value of the *katnam* is depends on the *Asami's* financial status and there is no specific fixed amount for this occasion.

MARRIAGE

Marriage is an important ceremony in everyone's life. In the context of *Rajaka* caste this ceremony is associated with their compulsory presence during the marriage process. Nowadays marriages are happening in the function halls but in the villages still it happens in the houses of the bride's parents. From the beginning of the marriage ceremony *Rajaka* caste's participation is mandatory. Actually their role begins from the day of marriage alliance negotiations. Here male *Rajaka* represents the *Asami's* house in many rituals and during this event he/she acts like member of *Asami's* family though the lower caste status prevails. From the engagement onwards *Rajaka* works for their *asami*. He distributes the wedding cards to the relatives and family members of his *Asami* and he receives some pocket money from them for his traveling expenses. Earlier it was word of mouth to communicate the marriage day information and rarely uses the wedding cards by Backward class communities. An upper caste always uses the wedding cards to invite their relatives. Since, *Rajaka* is service community, they work for everyone but that is decided by the head of their caste.

Then, the second part is decoration of the *Asami's* house with white wash and colors. *Rajaka* people decorate with the mango leaves to the doors. They will make new *Pandal* with toddy tree leaves in front of the house and it would be a sign to others that there is an auspicious function is going on . This *Pandal* is a welcoming invitation to the well wishers of *Asami's* family.

A day before the marriage the bride's family goes to invite and bring the groom for the marriage. It calls kuragaya *gampa pampatam*(sending basket of vegetables). *Rajaka* person accompanied with the bride's family members to carry this basket to deliver at the bridegrooms house. The members should be fixed prime number 5, 7 or 9 and *Rajaka* person is one among them. They will deliver this vegetable basket through a procession with music band. There, he receives special *katnam* from the groom's family for this vegetable offering and invitation for the marriage. This ritual should be done by *Rajaka*.

During the marriage time *Rajaka* has to design and decorate the *Pelli Pandiri*(marriage Panadal) with *pasupubiyyam* (turmeric applied rice). It's called *Polu poyyatam* (decoration with rice on the floor of marriage ceremony). After the marriage *Rajaka* will take all the rice and he has rights on it. Another ceremony is *Talambralu* and this rice also goes to the account of the *Rajaka* caste. The next day of the marriage bride's family and relatives goes to the groom's place for marriage reception. During this day bride's family offers new cot and bed to the newly married couple. This cot and bed is carried by *Rajaka* people through a procession. They will ask for a special *katnam* in the form of cash or clothes to delivery these goods. It is concerned with ritual services.

MENSTRUATION AND UNTOUCHABILITY

Every women is untouchable in every month for three days in every household. From the puberty day onwards every woman is encouraged not to perform any act of household during her menstrual cycle days. She is considered as polluted and do not allow her to touch any auspicious things in the house. There is a restriction for their movement during these three days even in their own house and they have to stay in a particular place. In the colloquial Telugu Language it's called *bayata undatam*. Within the family members do not touch such her menstrual clothes, if at all they touch they will take a bath. The *Rajaka's* perform all kinds of clothes washing, and even when an *Asami* female family member is in her menstrual periods they have to carry those clothes too and wash them. Actually the woman will stay outside during the menstrual period times and the household people call it as *Muttu* (impurity/pollution). *Rajaka* people carry those clothes and wash them. The clothes are considered unhealthy. People believe that while *Rajaka* is carrying the unwashed clothes it is inauspicious and while bringing them back it considered as auspicious.

PUBERTY

This is a women's ceremony and *Rajaka* woman participates in it. In the puberty ceremony she receives *Nanabiyyam* (soaked yellow rice) from the *Asami* house. The washerwoman husband or male member of the *Rajaka* family takes them to the girl's maternal uncle house to inform this news and invite him for the function. On the very day itself the washer woman sings songs for the girl's new age of life. The *Asami* will celebrate a function on the 5th, or 7th, or the 9th day and during these days the girl is treated as a polluted. Actually it depends on the local almanac table and that particular family's convention or belief . That's why the half-sari celebration day changes from family to family. On that day *Rajaka* woman, who works in their house, receives a special *katnam* from the *Asami*.

DEATH

The *Rajaka* caste person has to clean the dead man's place from wherever the death happen in the house on the day of cremation or burial. They have to clean and wash the house after the funeral. Three or five days after the *death* the *Asami's* family member, they celebrates a function to offer the food to the dead soul; on the same day the male members of the dead person's family get their head tonsured. This day called as *Pittaku pettadam*(offering the food for the birds in front of the burial place. On this occasion the washer man again washes the clothes, bed sheets and whatever they have in the home. On the 5th, 7th 9th or 11th day death ceremony called *Dinakarma*, the washer man again washes the clothes of the household. In the Telangana region the *Asamis* offer their tributes to the dead soul through animal sacrifice. This sacrifice has to be performed by the *Rajaka* caste. They will take head, legs and intestines of the goat or sheep whatever they sacrifice in the *Asami's* house.

MARRIAGE, 'GOTHRAS', ENDOGAMY

The *Rajaka* community is a single community by its existence and there are two dependent castes one is *Patam* and other one is *Ganjikuti*. The dependent castes population is very less in number comparing to the *Rajaka* caste. The three communities do not maintain marriage alliances among them. The *Rajaka* caste believes that the two dependent castes do not have equal social, cultural and *Jati* status. So they are not eligible to have marriage alliances with their patron *Rajaka* caste. The other point is worth noting here that the two dependent castes do not have any *Gothras*. In the marriage alliances, the *Gothras* play a vital role when it comes to marrying others from a different family. Every family has its own *Gothra* that claim their social status within the caste; if a family does not hold any *Gothra* that means they do not have any social status within the caste. *Rajaka* caste owns two *Gothras* such as *Jalaneela* Gotharm and *Paidpala*. The interesting point is that if it is a bride marriage in the family their *Gothra* is *Paidipala* and if it is a bridegroom marriage in the family it is *Jalaneela Gothram*. These two *Gothras* can be changed even in the same family, such as in the same family during the bride's marriage it is *Paidipala* and during the bridegroom's marriage it is *Jalaneela gothram*. *Rajaka* caste has two dependent castes called *Patam* and *Ganjikuti*. These two castes holds *Mirasi* rights over villages in their territorial division. They divide the villages according to their existence. Every festival they attend the patron houses to collect the festival food. The *Patam* and *Ganjikuti* castes are dependents on the *Rajaka* caste but they do not enjoy equal status within the dependent caste system. The *Ganjikuti* caste people are holding lower social status in the *Rajaka* caste internal hierarchy.

Rajaka caste is still maintaining a monopoly on their hereditary occupation which involves washing clothes but some of them are changing their occupations due to global economic opportunities. This occupational practice involved with beyond the socio-economic reasons and deeply associated with cultural roots of the other castes. Global opportunities must have influenced their life style and shifted them to pursue other careers. Many members of this community quit their traditional occupations but their parts of rituals in other communities are still unfulfilled by any other community.

(This paper is written based on my filed work conducted in Marupaka Village in Karimnagar District of Telanagana.)

REFERENCE

- i. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rajaka>
- ii. *Madelpuranam* oral performance documented by the Author
- iii. Filed work done in Kodimyala and Marupaka villages of Karimnagar District in Telanagana