

DAPPU¹: THE SYMBOL OF AESTHETIC AND MUSIC LIFE LINE OF MADIGA*

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ABSTRACT

Dappu or Tappeta has been used in rural areas from very ancient times. It used to spread any information to public at large. Dappu is the life line for Dalits, mainly leatherworking community named Madiga of Telugu land. They produce footwear and other necessary leather implements required for the agriculture. In Indian society, this productive caste has seen inferior and untouchable in the name of pollution and caste system. Dappu is common accompanying implement for folk performances of states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The dappu is carried with the process of political awareness of folklore. Dappu symbolizes the political assertion of the Madigas. It's changed the political and cultural discourses of Telugu society. The condemned life-styles and various cultural forms of untouchable communities are transformed into the symbol of pride and protest. The beat of the dappu has not only performed for customary rites of traditional Hindu society but also set against the dominance of the upper caste hegemony.

KEYWORDS

Dappu, Dalit, Madiga, Untouchable, Leather working, Hegemony.

I. INTRODUCTION

*Mana thaathalu antha sachipoyinlu! Yaadiki botharu? Mattloki poyina thappetu kottalsindey,
cheppulu guttalsindey! Aakasam loki boyina, mabbulameena nilabadi, dappulu gottalsindey!*

(All our ancestors are dead, but what difference does make whether they are alive or dead? Even after being buried in the ground, they will still have to play the *Dappu* and they will still have to sew shoes and chappal! Even if they soar to the skies, they will have to stand on the clouds and play the *Dappu*)

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—From '*Mallemoggala Godugu*' by Yendluri Sudhakar, a prominent Dalit Telugu writer and poet².

Dappu performers play a prominent part in *jataras*, *festivals*, processions and political announcements. Every celebration in a Madiga house starts with the family playing the instrument and dancing to it. Even today, announcement in a village are made by a Madiga who walks in village around playing the drum. Only the people of Madiga play the instrument and the men of the community have, through the generations, have been patrons of it despite having other occupation and sources of livelihood.

Dappu is the life line for Dalits, mainly leatherworking community named madiga of Telugu land. They produce footwear and other necessary leather implements required for the agriculture. In Indian society, this productive caste has seen inferior and untouchable in the name of pollution and caste system. Today's association of leather working with shoes, the characteristic Indian form of leather footwear, often obscures the former importance of leather items in farming, cattle husbandry, irrigation, transport and many manufacturing processes.

Dappu represents the rhythm of life of communities of untouchable. The culture and struggles of Dalits are associated with Dappu. Customarily, it is often played at festivals of village deities, *jataras*, procession of gods, death ceremonies and, procession of marriages, mostly by the Madiga. The beat of the drum resonates in all the ceremonies and processions of rural society. Dappu is not only marked with the identity of Madigas but also plays the main role in performances of folklore. Music of Dappu is very distinctive from classical forms of arts of socially elite in the traditional society. Dappu emerged as the symbol of assertion with raising struggles of Madiga. The struggles of Madigas centered on the beating of drum. Dappu is the celebration of the culture of the marginalized against the dominant culture of main society. In other words, it is the performance of folklore against the dominant art forms of 'classical' culture³.

Dappu is common accompanying implement for folk performances of states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The dappu is carried with the process of political awareness of folklore. It is evolved from traditional ceremonies to political performance. In propagating culture of people and reaching the mass, dappu played an important role. Dappu has a significant change from the customary practices to politics of contemporary Dalits. The cultural associations like Jana Natya Mandali have not only politicized the folklore, but also appropriate musical instruments such as dappu and dholak, in propagating the culture of the people. The struggles of

contemporary Dalits are translating the condemned life styles, symbols and cultural practices into a symbol of protest with a lot of pride. Dalit movement, especially Madiga Dandora movement (MRPS Movement) ⁴ has brought immense respect to the Dappu. It has projected it as a symbol of protest of Madiga against the upper social order. It signifies the upholding the knowledge systems of the productive castes. It is analogous to the Madiga presence in public. It is the creative energy of Dalits to liberate from the suppressive and inhuman social structure. Dappu is the aesthetic expression of Madiga's life. Dappu is the political declaration of self respect of Madiga in public against the dominant upper communities hegemony. It is a Chandala Chatimpu!⁵ However, Dappu has to be read and understood in the changing socio, economic and political context of Dalits in general and Madiga community in particular.

II. MAKING OF THE *DAPPU*

Dappu or Tappeta has been used in rural areas from very ancient times. It used to spread any information to public at large. Though it may be like simplistic, the process of making percussion instrument is time-intensive and requires a lot of patience.

A fresh skin that is removed from a dead calf is applied with lime and dried up under the sunlight, then dry ash is applied and hair is removed by knife, where some wooden nails are pierced into the leather so that there would not be any wrinkles. After drying it for a couple of days, the Madiga worker enjoins the leather onto a round wooden frame made by Mastini. The round frame of the *Dappu* is made out of wood, usually of the tree of Tamarind or *neem*. It is refers as *gundu* in Telangana and *palaka* in the society of Andhra Pradesh. The frame is tightly covered by skin which processed with chalk and wood. The skin is then stuck to frame of wood with an adhesive composed of tamarind seeds, and then tied to the frame with a thin string, to make it firm. The instrument is then exposed to fire, to tighten the edges where the skin may have hung loose from frame⁶.

Now the drum is dried up again for a couple of days. Meanwhile, the Madiga worker often tests the drum until it produces a perfect sound. Once he satisfied that the drum is ready for utility, he removes the stitches as well as the supporting iron ring and carefully cuts the extra leather on the margins that will be prop up after though drying⁷.

To be played the *Dappu* is pressed to the chest tightly with left hand, so that it doesn't move with the strikes of beating sticks. The *Dappu* is played with two sticks like the shorter and thicker *sirra* held in the right hand, is used to mainly strike the bottom of the drum and the thinner and longer *sittikenna pulla* (*small fingered stick*), held in the left hand, is used on the upper left side of the drum. While the *sirra* creates rhythm, the *sittikenna pulla* controls the pace of the rhythm.

III. MYTHOLOGICAL STORY OF DAPPU

The folk lore of 'monkey and the drum' was widely narrated in Madiga community of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. According to it, there was once a man who had gone to the forest to hunt. He observed a male and female monkey sitting on a tree; male monkey was playing a flat, one-sided drum and both primates were dancing and swinging to its beats⁸.

The man wanted to catch the monkey, and since killing of female monkeys was forbidden, so he set his target on the male. He missed the target and accidentally wounded the female. Then the male rushed to his partner and applied a mix of crushed herbs.

He began playing the drum, in the hope that it would wake her, but this was not to happen. Heartbroken, the male monkey mourned near her body, leaving behind the drum. The man, who had been watching this all along, picked up the drum and took it back to his village.

He narrated the same what he had witnessed to his other fellow villagers and tried playing the drum. Fascinated by the power the beats of the instrument held – the villagers had begun to dance, just like the monkey on the tree and they all learnt to play the instrument and make it. Even after the demise of their own man who had found it, others continued to play it and passed on the knowledge of its music to future generations, who would go on to play it with sticks⁹.

The origin of *Dappu* is believed to be in this lore. Everyone knows, it is a story, but the folklore is an integral part of our culture and a dance form known as *Chindu* has evolved alongside the *Dappu*. It involves steps set to the rhythm of the drum¹⁰.

IV. DAPPU: MUSICAL LIFE OF MADIGA

Dappu is the life line of Dalits, especially Madiga of Telugu society. They produce shoes and chappals and other necessary leather items required for the agriculture. In Indian society, the productive caste has been seen inferior and untouchable in the name of pollution and caste system. Today's association of Madiga with chappals, the characteristic Indian form of leather footwear, often obscures the former importance of leather items in irrigation, farming, cattle husbandry, transport and many manufacturing processes. In a world where technological substitutes had yet to be developed, leather goods were of immensely greater significance. The tanning of animal skin to produce leather transforms a messy, smelly and rapidly decaying substance into one that can be experienced as sweet and clean and of great utility. It is one of humanity's major historic technological contributions, along with the smelting of metal. In India, complex values related to a main source of the skin and cattle, generated a problem but did not prevent the development of a major industry, carried on in almost every village and town across the land¹¹.

Along with the work of leather, they also perform other functions in villages. They prepare the dappu and perform all the public functions in the village. The cultural form of dappu is exclusively part and parcel of madiga community. For the Madigas of the Telugu lands, drum is the heartbeat, their voice and their lifeline. It's as much a part of their body as the hand that wallops it. Occasion or festival, delight or mourning, morning or evening, the `dappu' is must. He could be an untouchable to the society, yet life is all-important moments are incomplete for the Madiga without his dappu. Dappu is the most important instrument used in Telugu speaking lands for making people aware of or publicising any event. From selling of pulses to the calling of the village Panchayat, all secular or religious events are announced to the public by the local player of dappu. Similarly, all occasions and festivals will invariably have the dappu throughout, both while the rituals are taking place and in the procession. In some communities marriages and deaths are also signified by the dappu. It is also an accompanying instrument for folk performing arts, specially the dance. It is a part and parcel of many folkforms of performing arts and folk dances.

Mainly two small sticks are used to play the dappu. This produces in various types of sounds. The stick that is held in the right hand is a round one and it is about nine inches in length. It's

called with the name of 'sirra', and is the main hitting device. 'Sitikena - chitikena pulla' is the other stick and is thin. It is a little longer than the other one. The expert drummer produces various sounds by putting his left palm on the upper rim of the frame. The stick in the left hand is used to control the rhythm. The different kind of drumming styles is known as "*debba*"¹².

A unique dance form has developed inspired by the Dappu. The dance is to be as Dappu dance. The different steps of dance or the leg movements are called 'adugu'(step by foot). Each step has different names like '*ata dappu*', '*okka sira dappu*', '*samidika dappu*', '*madil dappu*', '*gundam dappu*' etc. The performance begins with a '*pradhana dappu*' during which the artists move slowly in circles. Acrobatic postures of the performers while playing the dappu is also a common phenomenon. Watching the Dappu dance along with the beatings of dappu is a thrilling experience for the audience. Dappu dance derives its name from the same instrument. The songs followed in the Dappu dance are choric and sometimes erotic. The different steps like *Tiger steps*, *Bird steps* and *Horse steps* are some of the movements related to the dance. In the Dappu dance, music is often titillating and the footsteps of the dancers are very vital to keep the rhythm of the dance. Dappu dance is accompanied with drum beats, which gives your rhythm and tone to it. Dappu dance, a lively form that invigorates the artists as well as the audience. The Dappu dancers would wear ankle bells that provide the rhythm. They generally perform in front of a huge procession and in Jatras or feasts are often commenced by a performance by the Dappu dancers¹³.

A group consisting of ten to twenty artistes presents Dappu dance during marriage processions, chariot processions, festivals of deities and village fairs and festivals. *Tiger steps*, *bird steps* and *horse steps* are some of the styles of dance presented in the Dappu dance. The beat of the Dappu and the foot movement of the dancers synchronise with each other so perfectly that from a slow moving and low-beating rhythm, reaches its climax with frantic drums keeping pace with the dazzling foot work by the dancers. They play various kinds of rhythms like *Trisra*, *Chaturasa*, *Mirsa*, *Khandagati*, *Sankeerna* and *jatis*, comprising seven types of beats. They follow various kinds of dance, leaping from one side to another with complicated foot movement. The costumes worn by dappu dancers constitute of a '*Talapaga*' (a head turban), '*dhoti*', a '*datti*' and *ankle bells*. The performance starts with an invocation called with the name "*Pradhana Dappu*", when the dancers move slowly in a circular way. The dancers usually move in a round way while at a standing position and in a linear way of two rows while in procession. Their steps include steps with side-long moves, two steps, one forward and one backward i.e, *okka sira*

dappu, moving sideways with right leap i.e, *samiḍika dappu*, two leaps upwards i.e, *madil dappu*, moving with one leg side-way and the other in a circular way i.e, *gundam dappu* etc. Each dance performance starts with a '*pradhana dappu*' during which the artists move slowly in a round way¹⁴.

V. DAPPU: THE POLITICAL RESONANCE

The symbol is reinvented with intensified movements of Dalits from late eighties. Dappu symbolizes the political assertion of the Madigas. It's changed the political and cultural discourses of Telugu society. The condemned life-styles and various cultural forms of untouchable communities are transformed into the symbol of pride and protest. The Madiga Dandora (MRPS) movement, which is demanding for the rationalization of reservation policy for Scheduled Castes in Telugu lands, altogether gave a new meaning to Dappu.

The Dandora, which means proclamation and is traditionally identified with the public announcement carried by the Dalit with alerting public through dappu beat. As it is reported in prominent Telugu dailies, 'as the clock struck two on Sunday, a group of Madiga youth wearing the anklets of dancers and beating drums started the walk, announcing the 'waging war against the Government's indifference to the Madigas' problems'. This proclamation is the 'Dandora', the traditional form of announcement in the villages and the movement has come to be called the 'Madiga Dandora' in Telugu speaking lands. The group holds wayside meetings at the Madiga hamlets situated on the outskirts of every village early in the day.

Despite the *Dappu* holding such great importance in Madiga households, it has been played only by men. Women only participate in the celebratory dancing and singing that takes place alongside the playing of the instrument. Recently, several women from Dalit communities have broken these barriers and taken to the drum. Still, the act of women playing the drum has not yet been common. This, however, won't stop Madiga womenfolk from wanting to learn the art of their ancestors.

VI. LITERATURE SURVEY

To have better understanding about past and present of the Madigas and about the Dappu and to cover all the areas left by the earlier scholars, to give special attention to those aspects, I referred the books available to me. The first information about the South Indian Tribes was

brought to light in the descriptive notes on the tribes published by British Administrators and census officers stationed in different parts of south India. Among the earlier administrator, the name of Thurston figures prominently, who published work called '*The Ethnographic Notes on South India*'¹⁵.

T. R. Singh in a full study '*The Madigas: A Study of social structure and change A. P*'¹⁶ provided that Madigas have sanskritizing their ways in the current scenario. They no longer eat carrion or tan hides. They are not refused admission to schools, nor are they prohibited from drawing water from the public wells. Laban Babu, who wrote the history of Madigas of United Andhra Pradesh in his book '*Madigavari Charitra*'¹⁷ (Telugu) and clearly explained how the Madigas became untouchables. He also mentioned about the occupation of Madigas and how they made leather goods by cleaning the dead animal's skin.

Baddela Ramachandra Reddy's work '*Traditional Economy and Religious life of Leather working Madigas*'¹⁸ gives a vivid description on traditional occupation of Madigas and their mobility among Madigas and their religious beliefs and rituals. The book also provides the occupations of tanning and leather work was specialized and recognized as a significant craft which only confined the madiga community.

VII. OUT COME AND CONCLUSION

The struggles of the Madigas have created the consciousness among the people to construct or reproduce their own culture to fight against oppressive social relationships. In recent times Dalit movement is one such struggle in upholding their culture, history and politics of lower castes. Dalit movement provided spectacle through which they could look at their own culture. There is a serious attempt of Dalit intelligentsia to construct their culture from the past in response to the cultural hegemony of dominant castes.

Finally, this is to conclude that struggle, life and culture are not separate in the case of Madiga community. The beat of Dappu symbolizes the rhythmic of life of Madigas. It represents the Madiga aesthetic and cultural energy of Madigas. The beat of the dappu has not only performed for customary rites of traditional Hindu society but also set against the dominance of the upper caste hegemony.

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