



The Nature of *Paraiyar* Dalit Devotion in Tamil Nadu: Possession and Embodiment of Deity

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Abstract

The emotions ‘loyalty’, ‘love’ and ‘care’ which are attached to devotion are shifted to a metaphysical stance by Religion. It is always an aspiration to something which is beyond human boundaries. Although, it is a connect between human, earthly to gods, divine, there are modes to attach oneself to the divine through devotion. One of these modes of devotion is the nature of possession in worshipping Dalit deities in Tamil Nadu. Dalit deities are gods which are not recognized by Hindu pantheon but worshipped by Dalits. Possessions are states when a devotee is embodied by the deity, he/she is devoted to. It is a state when human and divine coincide a single flesh. Many forms of possessions are institutionalized with an inherited status of the devotee who is claimed to be the bearer of a deity, purity of heart with sexual purity are the primary criteria along the devotion to be possessed. Although suspicion to this mode is evident, communal belief and faith of their own deities have helped them form a unique identity for Dalits. Whether the devotion is true or not or what is nature of this devotion is the primary focus of this paper.

Keywords: Dalit Devotion, Possession, Embodiment, Host to Deity, Identity

Introduction

The first meaning, after searching the word ‘devotion,’ comes in Cambridge dictionary is “loyalty and love or care for someone or something”. Now, the different forms of the word



‘devotion’ can bring different connotations in mind when we encounter it. The noun ‘devotion’ works as a signifier to bring the associations of religion and worship in mind, where the verb ‘devotes,’ or more prominent ‘devoted’, can bring an emotion which is applicable for another living and material being or idea as well as for a metaphysical being or idea. This association with metaphysical being or idea has been hyper compartmentalized within the fold of religion of any kind by continuous association of supernatural and its inaccessibility to everyone. The term ‘religion’ has again been hyper normalized with certain modes or methods in the practice of devotion and these modes are tried to fit into religious categories like Hinduism, Islamism or Christianity, to mention few. These compartmentalized ideas of religion come with a set of attributes to follow and maintain to normalize the idea of it. When devotion has become quite synonymous with worship in an institutional sense, a set of methods, and in many religion idols impersonated the likeness of a metaphysical form, are used to keep the mind to a prescribed devotion. Even practicing devotion to a metaphysical being or idea in solitude often cannot bypass the signifier of an idol imagery which is supposed to be helpful in concentration rather than worshipping or praying to formless entity(ies). If we consider this presence of form to worship the formless, the possessed human body, the presence of a form in presence of formless can be analysed as an alternative to idolatry. The main thrust of this paper is to analyse the role and usage of the notion of devotion of the marginalized Dalit identities, Paraiyar here, in the form of possessed devotees.

Possession as Expression of Devotion

Paraiyar is a Dalit community in Tamil Nadu. Although some scattered populations of this community are in Kerala, Puducherry, and Sri Lanka, by ethnicity, they are all Tamil and most of the community members are residents of the state. Although “at a conceptual level, the Paraiyar believe in one supreme, omnipresent Spiritual Being, or *Sakti* (Divine power)” (Clarke, 1998, p. 71), there is no rigid compartmentalization among the goddess traditions in South Indian Dalit communities. To use Paul younger’s words, it is “playing host to the deity” that is the primary and prestigious form of Dalit devotion in Tamil Nadu and South India at large. Playing host as a devotee is another name of getting possessed by the divine. When



divine possession has various categories of spontaneous, institutional and others, what is “perhaps more essential for divine possessions is the devotion (Bhakti) of the devotees” (Joshua, 2020, p.113). Even though devotion is not absent to Brahminism, Kapadia sees their devotion in a controlled, ritualistic manner which puts much importance to the ritualistic purity which counters Dalit purity. For her,

Much credit rebounds to the possessed person (Dalit/Lower-caste), for she (or he) is seen to pure enough for the deity to “enter”. This state of “purity” is synonymous with “purity of heart” or spiritual virtue, and it carries status. (Kapadia, 1995, p. 125)

Irrespective of gender, ‘*Sami*’ is the common name used for all deities who possess their devotees. And ‘*Pey*’ for all the devil or evil spirits who also take chances to possess devotees bypassing their devotion to deities. Whenever there is an intense possession by a deity, this powerful possession is considered a good sign and the devotion and purity of the devotee are praised (Appavoo, 1994, p. 117). ‘Purity of heart’ navigates their sexual purities also. When menstruation and frivolities are sexually impure to a female devotee, monogamous sexual relationship is considered sexually pure for male devotees in their devotion.

Possession deals with the idea of personal versus communal devotion which includes the question of rituals and performances involved in cases of non-personal institutional possessions. Parallely, “it can be said that there can be no possessions without a/the community” (Kapadia, 1995, p. 139) and not all the devotees are get possessed and not altogether. So, there is a binary of devotees between divine possessed devotees and devotees who are taking part of the rituals but not possessed. When devotees, being possessed, become an entity with the divine, their Being or the formation of the united Being takes the community as a mean in the totality of its involvement in devotion (Heidegger, 1962, p. 107). Personal possession is considered as means of communal involvement of divine experience.

There were hardly any instances recorded or noted down where the devotee is possessed personally and get rid of it also in personal fair, outside the glances of community devotees. It is mostly of an “institutionalized possession” which happens along community prayers or



worship programs. It does happen to men primarily with certain preparations, if not spontaneously always, and it is an inherited tradition transferred from father to son. It associates itself with strength and prestige. ““*Sami-adi*” is the term used for a man who has inherited the ability to be possessed by a deity” (Kapadia, 1995, p.130). And one of the interesting things is that several wealthy and social status bearing men are hereditary *Sami-adi*. Institutionalized possession involves varies power politics within the community. Economic wealth and divine possession appear to go together.

All the possessed devotees “acknowledged that they were often approached by devotees to give their opinions or help them in the form of healing or exorcism” (Joshua, 2020, p. 117). But these divine possessions in festivals (institutional) are orchestrated in a greater sense. Everything, person, situation, and the atmosphere is prepared. One of the crucial elements in Dalit non-Christian festival is drum. Dalit drum or *Parai (or dappu)* is key for divine possession. Kapadia emphasizes the importance of the crowd and a *pusari* (the priest, not a brahmin always) who induces the devotee to get into the state of divine possession. But, “if the crowd was not present, possession would not probably occur” (Joshua 115). This presence of crowd is a phenomenon that deals the possession as an objective truth. When the notion of belief is out of the purview of objectivity and claims the realm of emotion and non-conscious participation, the phenomenon of objective explanation may give rise to a sense of justification, scientific if not natural, and cherishes an iota of doubt to not believe everything in its face value also. One of the major comparisons of this state of possession is to a state of trance. The classic example of discussing trance is the devotional festival in the name of god Dionysius in Greek mythologies. To explain the states of non-conscious dwelling or flowing in a trance and perform in sanity, Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, has uses the associations of Apollonian and Dionysiac states of human psyche. When Dalit drum and the insane behaviors of the audiences, to help getting possessed, has much similarity to the Dionysiac festival where, Nietzsche mentions, the Dionysiac music is presented by the image of Satyrs. He has associated Satyrs with modern day shepherds who both “were born of a longing for what is original and natural” (Nietzsche, 1993, p. 41). In Nietzsche’s comparison, Greek man aspires to satyr as



a perfect form of man. This perfection is present in Dionysiac festival where a trance like state allows man to feel ecstasy, without the burden of affectation. This natural form treats with “highest and most intense emotions” (Nietzsche, 1993, p. 41). These “Dionysiac man” can place stay in Dionysiac world without taking account of the world of appearances, i.e., Apollonian in his sense, the “primal relationship between things.” But the world of Shepherd, the modern world, does not aspire to a state of “authentic, natural truth” and ecstasy and consoles himself with the appearances or affectations. They are the cultured man who generally thinks of himself as the only reality” (Nietzsche, 1993, p. 41). Now, the question is the experience of possession. Is it similar to the state of Trance, that Nietzsche is speaking or something else? If it is a form of devotion to a deity, the devote should remove himself from any kind of affectations and be naked in front of god. But both being in a Dionysiac man state and being naked in association of god, are ideal forms devotion with any political attributes. These political attributes will be taken into discussion again when this paper will deal with the suspicion in devotion and suspicion in possession as mere showcase events for material profits.

To being possessed is not only a way of devotion here. It is like dwelling in an identity, an inherited identity. Beyond mere existence, it is becoming familiar to a living. It is an involvement. It can be partially understood with *Bewandtnis*, which Martin Heidegger (1962) had mentioned to worlding the world. Where hammer has an involvement in hammering the world, it is involved to further involvement also. Even the involvements are not in proper structure. This involvement starts with possession (a with-which), in the festival of Dalit deities (an in-which), to show their devotion and purity (an in-order-to) to the deity who trust them as their earthly carriers (a towards-this), for the sake of (a for-the-sake-of-which) what (p. 107)? This is the final dis-integration which is troubling to be figured out. What is the purpose of this possession? sole devotion or materiality or anything else?

Experience to be a Chosen one

This claim of true faith on God which promotes their devotion to such a level like possession, the claim is not universally put or maintained by all the members anonymously. But, the arena of suspicion to find rationality in devotion runs parallelly. First, audience (non-possessed



devotees) has only a visual experience in sensory experiences, alongside the second-hand knowledge of the events. Some, who are pure enough to be an audience can justify their second-hand knowledge by visual experiences. Others can only witness the temporary possessions and the possessed states in institutional cases when there are processions going on along the village. They have a second-hand knowledge from cognitive authorities who circulate the tales of possessions to the menstruating women. Cognitive authority is someone whom we invest our faith and common sense to believe his words as knowledge to me (Wilson, 1983, p. 14). Here, the knowledge of possession is flowing two ways. One is hereditary, i.e., father is teaching his son the knowledge of devotion. On the other hand, among other devotees who are not possessed, the knowledge is coming to the men from the audiences and the chosen one, and the menstruating women, who are one of the ardent devotees of the possessed embodiment, by the women who are in post menopause stage and from the men. When this knowledge has an upper-hand to experiences and how to react in an experience. Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai in *The Cracked Mirror* (2018), build up a beautiful connection between knowledge and experiences. The annotation they have used is of a drinking alcohol. Suppose a person is drinking alcohol for the first time, and he/she has no knowledge or previous experience of drinking or drunken state. How that person is going to react after getting drunk? The answer is that is mentioned in the book is that he/she is unable to react because he/she does not know how to react when get drunken (p. 130). So, knowledge may mold experiences to experience correctly. The common scene in possession is that it a state where devotees lose control over their bodies and controlled by deities.

Coming to the second, i.e., the experiences of the possessed person, it is difficult for them to narrate their exact experiences. Most of them are unable to remember the time when they were possessed. And whoever can, their statements are quite vague to come to a uniform conclusion. A devotee, Kondaivilai, from Madurai, Tamil Nadu, who had experiences of being possessed stated his experiences like,

Possession experience is similar to begin in a 'high' state one is when smoking *kanja* (cannabis). Interestingly, he described this experience "like being hit on the head with



a log”. Kondavilai recalled that a possessed person feels “high” (like a lord) and “looks down on others like a *poochi* (an insect)”. The experience is so intense that when the cloths of the possessed person come off, as it often happens, the devotee is completely unaware causing embarrassment later. (Joshua, 2020, p. 118)

It is clearly discerned from his words that it is not at all a pleasant experience. In many cases, the physical pain of bearings become much prominent to the audiences. Even if their pains are real, an altruistic motive to perform in the festivals, reinforcing that by getting possessed, completes a totality of involvements. Now this experience can be associated with the Trance Dionysiac state previously discussed. But, irrespective of much similarities, one of the fundamental problems in this association is its nature of dis-integrity. I am not mentioning the devotion as not integral to devotees or questioning their psychic acceptance of the nature of devotion that they perform as a higher form in itself. But I am using the term dis-integrity in the parlance of their process of manifestation of these devotions. I am carefully negating to use the term performance till here in association with the festive possessions. It is the discontinuity of a flow. In most festive and ritualistic devotions, a flow, both musical and psychic, is present underneath as a guiding baton. Even if the institutional possession begins with a crescendo of cries in association of Dalit Drums beating, once possessed, cries are shut down leaving the drums to play only. And the prominent evidence of physical pains negates to float seamlessly in any kind of flow. Counter argument to this dis-integrative analysis can be done based on the first-person experiences of the devotees of divine possession. The “high” state, like smoking cannabis, which claims to make the boundaries of psychic awareness lose to uplift the bearer upon a light state, is unable to justify itself due to the following experience which states “like being hit on the head with a log”. This experience has similarity with dizziness more than in Trance. It starts with a pain which is kind of blank out everything for the time being. This blank out state can also be interpreted as personal or collective unconscious. When possession is a power to oppose caste oppression or not is a question, this blank out may indicate the suppressed desires, to oppose caste, kept aside in their unconscious and this possession gives them the space to deal with them openly under the veneer of devotion. It is cracking jokes in



Freudian sense which opens up our inner most, repressed thoughts and emotions. But possession in Dalit festival is much more than that.

To compare the essence of flow, I am trying to take two references. First, the nature of devotion in Vaishnavism which is originated and developed majorly in West Bengal after Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Although Vaishnavism had been originated with the agenda of *Bhakti* (devotion) as the sole purpose of devotee only, outside the ritualistic burdens of Hinduism, later it was submerged under Hinduism and Brahminic domination colonized its *Bhakti* to Brahminic Hindu religious *Bhakti*. Sanatan Hindu religion believes of four yugas which are developing in assimilation of time and human development. In kali yuga, the path of salvation to this darkness is *nam*, i.e., taking gods' names or worshipping their names. This name as salvation has added a performative devotional aspect in Vaishnavism and it is called *kirtan*, dancing in praising Lord's name with the rhythm of musical instruments meant for this. To understand the state of *kirtan*, the notion of *bhava* is important to understand. To make it simple, *bhava* is a mental state where devotee associates himself/herself to the deity and make a bond. It is experienced both consciously, through personal devotion and bond to the deity and non-consciously where there is a flow to afloat yourself in a trance like state to dance, sing, cry and pray. This institutionalized devotion, through *kirtan*, maintains flow where the performers and audiences become one to take part and a spontaneous flow of powerful feelings upsurge to give it a divine stance. When there are various *bhava* or moods of devotion, the dominant one in *kirtan* is the *sakhi bhava*. Bengali word *sakhi* means friends, mostly women become one another's *sakhi* or friend. It is becoming friends with the divine. (Vanita, 2021, p. 104-5).

Second, the integrated flow is also visible in Baul tradition, which comes under folklore traditions. It is where also a musical atmosphere is built up to create a trance like performative flow. Here, the ultimate worship does not go to a deity but to human. Baul is overflowing with an everyday philosophy of human life, the significance of human bodies and the place of human being in the universe. In both cases, there is "peak experiences" which finally becomes a "transient moment of self-actualization" to surplus fear, anxiety and even control for momentarily (Maslow 48). Abraham H. Maslow keeps music foregrounded in achieving the



flow of experience. It is an effortless active participation for the devotees (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 52). Alongside the dis-integration of devotees in possession, another prominent reason of this flawlessness is the suspicion on devotees and on the festive possessions as mere performances for material profits. These suspicions are not from outsiders, but from community people only.

Suspicion on Devotion

Community people, majorly community women, use the term “humbugs” for all the possessed participants in the festivals. They have prominent suspicions with the characters and lifestyles of the devotees who are chosen for possession. They doubt of the fake possessions that these devotees perform, who are either drunk, blackguards or arrogant in nature.

Look at Angaras (a chosen devotee), drunk every day! D’you think a *sami* would think *him* fit to possess? Of course not, not a drunken rascal like him. Yet he was ‘possessed’ – and we all had to bow to him! (Kapadia, 1995, p. 156)

Even in the cases of *Sami-adi*, they hardly disbelieve the possession altogether. They kneel before the possessed as *sami* incarnated. They show their devotion and ask for their blessings for their household, children, and earthly properties. They often seek future knowledge. What they are really pissed off about is the inherited form of possession and selection of the chosen one. How can a deity choose his/her carrier from the same family altogether or how can devotion be same to all generations are the questions sceptics come up with. Whenever there is a rival party claiming the inheritance, they often threaten to dismantle the sacred procession or festive rituals, which are supposed to bring harmful consequences to all the entire community. How can they dare to violate the divine? Possessed devotees often become victim of intense sufferings, “in many cases, the possessed devotees are victims of violence, abuse or rape” (Joshua, 2020, p. 121). Even extreme poverty can induce possessions also.



Conclusion

Whoever or whatever is the catalyst of these possessions; whatever “a for-the-sake-of-which” is the possession meant for remains unanswered or answered improperly, it is a form of devotion to Dalit people which continues on common faith and belief. Dalit pantheon of gods is so much accessible to them that they have negotiated the Hindu lower-caste space, assigned to them. This tactility of divine power and embodiment of divinity into human flesh have created a non-normative space to build their identities as something original to their land and community. This non-normative space can be a resilient space or not is a question yet to be resolved. On the one hand, Brahminic Hinduism does not accept their deities, nor they recognize these forms of devotion as true devotion. To them, these are all mere performances without any intrinsic value. On the other hand, Dalits never tried to take these to Hinduism to get their sanction. It has always remained an outside place within Hindu religious space. Although some colonization has happened already. Many Dalit communities are now entertaining Brahmin priests in the festivals. Another form of these possessions is seen outside the Hindu fold, i.e., in Christianity. Dalit Christians follow the possessions of deity, where the earthly life of Christ is considered an evident of divine human fusion in a single body. For them, possession works as a liberation theology as they highlight the divine speaking through a human mouth in glossolalia as liberating. For them, “it is a kind of catharsis... speaking to God, a God who cares for the one who prays” (Thomas, 2008, p. 352). Speaking to other devotees in glossolalia, when possessed, is also seen an occasion of release and relief. But still the space of possessed Dalit devotion can negotiate a space of their own or not remains contested.



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