

Democratizing Spiritual Sphere: Radical Bhakti Traditions in the Telugu-speaking Region in India

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Abstract

The modern anti-caste consciousness has deep roots in medieval bhakti traditions in India. The Bhakti saints like Basavanna, Kabir, Ravidas, Vemana, and Pothuluri Veerabrahmam have contributed towards democratizing the spiritual sphere. The radical bhakti traditions shaped new value systems, cultural practices, language, and other art forms and proposed a new egalitarian society. The tendency of locating subaltern saints within the spiritual domain does not capture the radical visions of an egalitarian society which are articulated in their songs, poems, thoughts, and practice. This article is an attempt to document and analyze the radical visions of Vemana and Pothuluri Veerabrahmam and other thinkers in the Telugu-speaking region. The article draws on both published works and fieldwork work which was conducted in the year 2022.

Keywords

Anti-caste assertion, B.R Ambedkar, Bhakti radicals, Dunna Iddasu, Nasaraiah, spiritual democracy, Vemana, Veerabrahmam, Yeeraguntla Peraiah

Understanding the Egalitarian Visions of Radical Bhakti Traditions

The modern anti-caste movements can be traced to the historical roots of Buddhism and other radical bhakti saints. The Charuvaka, Lokayuta, and Buddhism were the first philosophical and humanitarian movements against caste hierarchy and brahmanical hegemony. Brahmanism¹ created an unequal spiritual world in which inequalities and

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¹B.R. Ambedkar defined Brahmanism as *the negation of the spirit of liberty, equality, and fraternity*.

discrimination were legitimized through scriptures. This social order or caste structure hierarchized human beings. Against this inhuman system, there were many struggles which are led by anti-caste thinkers like Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Savitri Bai Phule (Maharashtra), Narayana Guru (Kerala), Periyar (Tamil Nadu), Sahu Maharaj, etc. B.R. Ambedkar argues that caste is not only a division of labor, it is a division of laborers. The sudras² and ati-sudra³ communities are denied basic human dignity and the right to attain knowledge. However, the emergence of bhakti movements by subaltern⁴ saints throughout India created a new phase in the socio-cultural history of India. This is more evident in the case of Buddhism, which initiated a sense of democracy, equality, and fraternity into the lives of the people.⁵ As Ambedkar stated: “Indian history is the history of conflict between revolution and counter-revolution of Buddhism and Brahmanism”.⁶ Satish Chandra observed that:

After the rise and growth of Buddhism in the country between the 6th century BC and 2nd century AD, the medieval Bhakti movement was undoubtedly the most widespread, far-reaching, and many a faceted movement that appeared in India. The Bhakti movement influenced almost the whole country, at different times, and had a definite impact not only on religious doctrines, rituals, values, and popular beliefs but on art and culture as well. In turn, these had an impact on the value structures of the medieval state and the ruling classes. At a certain stage of its development, the Bhakti movement sought to be used as a platform by the forces opposing the centralizing tendencies of the Mughal state. In the cultural field, the growth of regional languages, devotional music, dance, painting, sculptures, etc., became closely related to the Bhakti movement.⁷

Thus, the Bhakti Movement was an important phase in the history of Indian reformist traditions. Roughly this period spanned from the seventh to seventeenth centuries AD.⁸ Between these periods, multiple Bhakti movements, both in south and north India emerged. The two streams of reform traditions, that are Veerashaivism, led by Nayanars, and Vaishnavism, led by Alwars in South India, became prominent in the

²Shudra is also spelled sudra. Shudra castes are fourth or lowest within the varna hierarchy. Traditionally they are artisans and labor classes.

³Ati-sudra are also known as untouchables. Untouchables are outside the varna hierarchy. However, they are the worst victims of the caste system.

⁴Subalterns are considered to be the lowest rank people in Antonio Gramsci's sense. In India, the sudra and ati-sudra communities are the lowest in the social hierarchy and are discriminated by upper caste communities. Hence the concept is used to refer to the anti-caste thinkers who came from subaltern communities.

⁵Omvedt, Gail. (2005). *Buddhism in India-Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 1–22.

⁶Ambedkar, B.R. (1987). *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*. In Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches. Volume 3, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, p. 275.

⁷Chandra, Satish. (1996). *Historiography, Religion, and State in Medieval India*. Delhi: Har Anand Publications.

⁸Govinda Pillai. P. (2013). *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism*, New Delhi: Aakar Books.

lives of the people. During this period, one could also see various bhakti movements across India. Bhakti radical saints like Basavanna, Madara Chennaiah, Haralayya, Akka Mahadevi in Karnataka, Namdev, and Chokamela, Savata Mali of Maharashtra were among many untouchable saints.⁹ Andal and Karaikkal Ammayar in Tamil Nadu, Mirabai in Rajasthan, and Lal Deb in Kashmir, were among the most famous Bhakti poets and mystics of that period.¹⁰ Sects like Kabir Panth and Ravidas sects also flourished in North India.

M.G. Ranade argued that like the Protestant Reformation in Western countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in India, the protest erupted from the lower order of the people. The nature of the protest was against Brahmanical hegemony over spiritual life, temples, priesthood, etc. The saints from subaltern communities asserted spiritual equality and freedom from suffering and negated the division between a pure and impure human life.¹¹ The radical bhakti saints and their traditions imagined an alternative egalitarian society in which every human being was treated with dignity and equal status. Gail Omvedt pointed out that the alternative visions of bhakti radicals,

In imagining utopias, they drew (Bhakti radicals) on nonbrahmanic traditions, including Buddhism and certain versions of Shaivism, rejecting the ritualism and the inequalities of traditional, elite thinking. In the early modern period, for the radical bhakti saints, this utopia was not so fully worked out; however, Ravidas envisaged ‘Begampura’, the city without sorrow, without taxes or toil, where he could wander freely with his friends—something a Dalit could never do in the actual Banaras. Tukaram talked of Pandharpur as the city where even the headman was made to toil, where time and death ‘had no entry’, and where people went dancing to mingle with each other. Kabir sang of Amarpur, the city of immortality, or of Premnagar, the city of love. These were foreseeings; during the early modern period these subaltern intellectuals had no access to a language of reason and analysis, to a study of history; they were forced to work within and subvert the basically Brahmanic religious framework that was hegemonic. Their ‘ecstasy’ of utopia was envisaged in some timeless place.¹²

Gail Omvedt rightly pointed out that the subaltern intellectuals’ utopias historically negated both Gandhi’s Ram Raj and the idea of Hindu majoritarian Hindutva Raj. Bhakti radicals’ life and struggles were organically connected with subaltern masses. Scholars like Braj Ranjan Mani (2007), Gail Omvedt (2008) and Govinda Pillai (2013) presented varied arguments on the question of whether the bhakti movement is a revival or renaissance. Revivalism generally does not indicate the new value

⁹Mani, B.R. (2007). *Debrahmanising history: Dominance and resistance in Indian society*. Delhi: Manohar, p. 136.

¹⁰Govinda Pillai, P. (2013). *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or revivalism*. New Delhi: Aakar Books Publication, p. 7.

¹¹See Zelliott (1996). pp. 8–9.

¹²Omvedt, G. (2008). *Seeking Begumpura: The social vision of Anti-caste Intellectuals*. Delhi: Navayana, p. 18.

framework that radical Bhakti saints proposed and worked on. Rather, it indicates the reviving of brahmanical spiritual culture through various forms. The subaltern saints like Kabir, Ravidas, Basavanna ushered in new imaginations, in the cultural and ethical domains. Hence Brajranjan Mani (2007), G. Aloysius (1998), and Gail Omvedt (2008) interpreted them as Mukti or renaissance traditions.¹³ The ideas of Kabir and Ravidas continue to influence people. Zelliott and Mokashi-Punekar (2005) in their book *Untouchable Saints* observed that:

The differences in the poetry of the Untouchable saints are in some ways more apparent than the similarity in the legends about them. While Tiruppan Alvar has left a long paean to Vishnu, we have no song at all from Nandanar: Tiruppan Alvar does not mention his caste in that song, but the legends about both make it clear that they are from the Untouchable strata of society. Chokhamela and his family, on the other hand, frequently use the caste name Mahar and mourn their low-caste status. An enormous volume of Marathi songs is attributed to this family: one hundred and ninety-two to Chokhamela, sixty-two to his wife, twenty-four to Chokhamela's sister, thirty-nine to his brother-in-law, and twenty-seven to his often-angry son. These songs have survived in the canon of Marathi saint literature, together with a hundred and fifty-seven added to a later collection.¹⁴

Similarly, saints who are part of Basava's Veerashaiva movement, like Madara Chennaiah and Haralayya still continue to influence Dalits. There are separate mattas¹⁵ for them. The Ravidas tradition strongly helped the Chamar¹⁶ community in north India in their socio-cultural mobility. There are separate Ravidas temples. Wherever the community has migrated like the USA, UK, Canada, etc., they also propagate the message of Ravidas. The popular belief is that Ravidas was inspired by Buddhist tradition, which also explains his popularity amongst the Navayana Buddhists in North India.¹⁷

Bhakti Radicals and Socio-cultural Assertion in Telugu Region

Buddhism, as a humanistic philosophy and anti-caste movement, had a profound influence on the socio-cultural traditions in the then-Andhra (coastal Andhra) region.

¹³Braj Ranjan Mani (2019). *Bhakti Radicalism*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

¹⁴Zelliott, E., & Mokashi-Punekar, R. (2005). *Untouchable saints*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, pp. 11–12.

¹⁵A place of religious monastery.

¹⁶Chamar is the largest numerical Scheduled Caste (SC) in North India. In the caste hierarchy, Chamar is treated as untouchables and traditionally dealt with leather working occupations. Ravidas was a sixteenth-century saint born in the Chamar caste. Many Chamars were inspired by Ravidas's ideas and practices as the Ravidasia sect.

¹⁷Maren Bellwinkel-Schempp (2007). From Bhakti to Buddhism: Ravidas and Ambedkar, *EPW*, June 9, pp 2177–2183.

According to many historical evidences, Andhra had been a separate region and state under the first dynasty, the Satavahanas around the third century BC.¹⁸ Andhra was a strong base for Buddhism. Emperor Ashoka of the third century BC, who gravitated to Buddhism, noted his connection with Andhra in his rock edict near Gooty. Numerous ancient Buddhist inscriptions throughout Andhradesha at Battiprolu, Gantasala, Guntupalli, Amravati, and Nagarjunakonda reveal a well-known Buddhist culture with popular appeal. Because of the deep roots of Buddhism in Andhradesha, a distinctive version of Buddhism singular to the region, called Nagarjuna Buddhism, emerged in due course.¹⁹ The Buddhist roots in Telangana are found in Badankurthi (Adilabad), Kotilingalu, Thambalapally, Pashigam, Munugulagutta (Kareem Nagar), Kondapur (Medak), Geeskonda (Warangal), Panigiri, Thirumalagiri, Vardhamankota (Nalgonda), etc.²⁰ Both Veerashaivism and Vaishnavism were influenced by the reform tradition whose impact on Andhradesha was great. Basava²¹ founded Veerashaivism. His teachings called Vachanas are all in people's language which anybody can easily understand. In a way, the very choice of the local language was in itself a negation of the Sanskrit hegemony. According to Atluri Murali (1994):

The Virasaivism of Basavesvara was monistic in philosophy and monotheistic in religion. It militates the preceding cultural and religious traditions, especially the ritualized, institutionalised hierarchies' of Hinduism and Jainism, during the tenth and twelfth centuries temples and mathas have become very important religious centers around which revolved the life of people. With increasing land-grants to the temples and with the ideological hegemony of Varna dharma (caste system) the priestly class came to dominate the agrarian and artisanal production and social life. The popular classes resented the revivification and social hierarchy and restrictions on social mobility at a time when material activity was expanding. This was the social religious and material context of the Deccan²² ideology. As an ideology, Virasaivism sought to change all that was negative in Hindu culture.²³

¹⁸Padma and A.W. Barer (Eds.) (2008). *Buddhism-in the Krishna River Valley of Andhra*. United States of America: State University of New York Press, pp. 1–10.

¹⁹Ratnam, K.Y. (1997). p. 25.

²⁰Eemani Shivanagi Reddy (2012). *Telangana Boudham-(Buddhism in Telangana)*, 18th Mallepally Rajam Memorial Lecture, published by Mallepally Rajam Memorial Trust, Godavarikhani, pp. 11–14

²¹Basava was born in a Brahman family at Ingaleshwar Bagevadi in the district of Bijapur. During his childhood itself, he rejected the Brahmanical orthodox life and left his home. His followers included: Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadeva, and Siddharama.

²²Deccan is a historical and socio-political region of the Indian subcontinent.

²³Murali, A. (1994). *Cultural-ideological traditions and legitimization process in Andhra: Twelfth to Eighteenth Centuries*. Dr. Garigipati Rudrayya Chowdari Endowment Lecture-2, December 15, 1994, Ramachandrapuram, East Godavari district, AP. pp. 6–7.

Further argues:

Virasaivism propounds that each human should realise Shiva through his /her Kayaka (dedicated labour). Work is worship (Kayakave Kailasa was the sacred dictum for Virasaiva saints. Since Shiva created this world through His inner power, no work is demeaning. Even the meanest labour is ‘worship’.²⁴

By bringing work to the level of Shiva, Basava undermined the hegemony of priestly castes and challenged the distinction between purity and polluted work. This elevation is also an indication of nothing but making ‘dignity of labour’ a primary value of production relations thereby recognizing the value of the contribution of sudra and ati-sudra labour. Further, Basava denounced the caste system, the rites of animal sacrifice and the subjugation of women to men. In the social sphere, he encouraged widow remarriage, opposed child marriages, and promoted inter-caste marriages and inter-dining.²⁵ Many Sudras and untouchables, like Malas and Madigas converted to Veerasaivism. Prominent among them were Katakota (who was a shepherd), Mechayya (a washerman), Gundaiah (a potter). Guddav was a well-known untouchable women devotee.²⁶ The Palkuriki Somanadha’s *Basava Purana* and *Panditaradhya Charitra* are the two major literary works in Telugu which vividly portray the conflict between Brahmanism and Veerasaivism.²⁷ Veerasaivism and Vaishnavism developed simultaneously in the Deccan region. The teachings and preaching of Ramanuja favoured social equality, while caste becomes an issue in the Andhra region. Velanati Chodas of Vengi and the Haihayas of Palnad patronised Vaishnavism. Brahmanayudu, who was a ruler of Nalagama (1170 AD) of Palnad (Guntur District), was influenced by Vaishnavism. According to V. Ramakrishna:

Brahmanayudu of Palnad (of the Recharla family of the Velama caste) was a Vaishnavite by faith and introduced certain reforms in social spheres. According to the ballad, Palanati Veeracharitra, Brahmanayudu appears to have discarded caste and custom and encouraged the heterodox practice of inter-dining among people belonging to different castes. Among his followers, Kannama Dasu, an untouchable was made the commander-in-chief of his armies and was looked upon as his favourite. By a fusion of castes, Brahmanayudu created a new ‘caste’ ‘Padma nayaka kula’ - the caste of heroes.²⁸

Brahmanayudu encouraged inter-dining, called “Chapakoodu,” among all lower castes, and caste Hindus were asked to sit and eat together. Brahmanayudu attempted

²⁴Ibid., pp. 6–7.

²⁵Ramakrishna, V. (1983). *Social reform in Andhra*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, pp. 39–41.

²⁶Padma Rao, Katti. (1998). *Caste and alternative culture*. Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, p. 112.

²⁷Murali, A. (1994). p. 3.

²⁸Ramakrishna, V. (1983). p. 41.

to create new social relations, by initiating reform in Vaishnavism. However, there are critics who argue that these reforms were under the influence of the Sanskrit version of Brahmanism. It was felt that the attempt to create composite castes called “warrior caste” was under the influence of the Sanskrit version of the Guna hierarchy ranking which worked internally in the selection.²⁹ However, the later phase of Veerasaivism and Vaishnavism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries failed to carry the same spirit. Perhaps the entry of Brahmins diluted the Saivite movement. In fact, new castes like Jangamas, Linga Jangam, Nulaka Chandaiah, and Lingayats emerged out of this process. However, it contributed to some social change against orthodox Brahmanical traditions.³⁰ One of the earliest Hindu saints who spoke against caste prejudice was Annamacharya,³¹ who disapproved of caste in his “Sankirtanas”.³² He was identified as a poet in the tradition of the Alvars, and Vaishnava Bhakti poets. He used the language of the common man to state many things worth remembering:

“The high-level land of the Brahmin and the low flat level of the Chandala (untouchable) are the same”. “There is no high and low; Sri Hari is the soul of all”. “A Mala (untouchable) who worships the Almighty, but eats beef, is a better Brahmin than an ascetic who does not think of Vishnu, though he is a learned Vedanti”. “What does it matter, what caste is a Haridas (devotee of Vishnu)”.³³

The influence of Shaivism had a deep impact on South India, where Vemana and Pothuluri Veerabrahmam were influenced by Shaivite traditions. In the subsequent section, the most influential Bhakti traditions of Vemana and Pothuluri Veerabrahmam, Dunna Iddasu and Yegraguntala Peraiah, among others are discussed.

Vemana: A Rebel against Brahmanical Hegemony and Social Exploitation

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were two important personalities in the Telugu region who became sources for reforms. They were forceful critics of the caste system and oppressive prejudices. Those two rebels were Vemana and Pothuluri Veerabrahmam whose teachings and preachings had a great impact on the common people. Vemana was a rebel poet and philosopher who belonged to the Reddy³⁴ (Shudra)

²⁹Murali, A. (1994). pp. 5–6.

³⁰Ramakrishna, V. (1983). p. 42.

³¹Sri Tallapaka Annamacharya was a mystic Saint composer of the fifteenth century. He was the earliest known musician of South India to compose songs called “Sankeertanas”. Annamacharya was born on May 9, 1408 and lived up to February 23, 1503, in Tallapaka, a remote village in day current-day Cuddapah district of Andhra Pradesh, India. It is told that he composed around 32,000 Samkeertanas on lord Venkateshwara and Alivelumanga.

³²Kirtanas are a kind of devotional songs. Thousands of Kirtanas are available and documented.

³³Padma Rao, Katti. (1998). *Caste and alternative culture*. Madras: The Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, p. 111.

³⁴There is a controversy on the caste of Vemana. However, some argue that he belongs to the Reddy caste. Reddy caste is a Shudra caste within the caste hierarchy, but a landowning and

caste from Rayalseema. He was a wandering, naked poet who critically commented on and exposed the contradictions and hypocrisy of human life. His writings were collected and made available to people by C.P. Brown. According to Kancha Illaiah:

Vemana's literary construction shows that he was strongly rooted in the sudra productive culture. Unlike Molla, he chooses to write in colloquial Telugu. His productive idiom, his anti-Brahmanical ideology, and deep understanding of the sudra culture is an indication of the tension between the Sankritized Brahmanical notion and the sudra productive notions of life.³⁵

Further, adds:

He constructs morality around atheism, agnosticism, rationalism, feminism, and of course, anti-casteism. His poetic text reflects as many plural cultures as the Dalit Bahujan castes, tribes, and sects that exist in the Telugu country. Hinduism for him was an idol-worshipping negative practice. In several subtle forms, he brushes aside Sankaracharya's philosophy of the soul and body being separate entities.³⁶

C.P. Brown documented and engaged with Vemana's writings. Brown's writings on Vemana brought visibility among scholars and activists. Brahmins created many hurdles against C.P. Brown's work. They opposed the discussion and introduction of Vemana's ideas at Madras University in 1827. Brown took the initiative to publish Vemana's verses. University authorities published 500 copies of Vemana verses. 50 copies were given to Brown and the remaining 450 copies were kept stored in a room, only to be dumped in a dustbin later on.³⁷ This reflects the level of opposition against Vemana's legacy. However, as his ideas were part of the common people's memory and everyday usage, the dominant communities could not root it out. The stanzas given below indicate his views against idol worship.

What animals ye are who worship stones
And care not for the God that dwells within
How can a stone excel the living thing?
That praise intones?³⁸

Brahmanism strongly believed in idol worship. That is why Vemana argued that how can there be so many gods and goddesses. Why can't human beings realize their inner potential? Priests for their benefit propagate idol worship, hence they attribute purity and sacredness to trees, stones, etc., when it benefits the religious orthodoxy. On the question of untouchability, he lamented that,

politically influential community throughout the Telugu-speaking region.

³⁵Illaiah, Kancha (2010). *The weapon of the other*. Delhi: Pearson, p. 114.

³⁶Ibid., p. 119.

³⁷Gopi, N. (2017). *Prajakavi Vemana*. Vijayawada: Prajashakti Book House, p. 43.

³⁸Narla, V.R. (1969) *Vemana*. New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, p. 72.

When Pariah touches you,
 You plunge into water
 When you depart to the cremation ground,
 The pariah burns your body
 The filth that touched you then
 Where did it go now?³⁹

Vemana considered untouchability as inhuman. How can some groups of people be treated as untouchables? Through his poems, Vemana exposed the hypocrisy of brahmanical practices.

They congregate in thousands
 And shout meaningless vedas
 Like mad dogs
 What fruit but a sore throat?⁴⁰

Vemana was a strong critic of Vedic culture and chanting of Sanskrit slokas. He argued that such meaningless chanting only benefited the brahmins and furthered their hegemony, while the slokas only perpetuate ignorance and exploitation. Therefore, his criticism of religion is based on logic. Even today, many atheist organizations and activists frequently quote Vemana's poems and sayings in public meetings in order to propagate scientific temper.⁴¹ Vemana questioned the caste system:

Why revile the pariah
 Again and again
 Aren't his flesh and blood
 The same as yours?
 What is the caste of him
 Who moves in him?⁴²

The above lines clearly indicate Vemana's critique of the caste system. He argued that since everybody is born a human being, their blood and body are the same and there should not be discrimination in the name of caste. The caste system hierarchized the human body and mind. This division goes against the idea of human equality. Vemana used satire and humor in his poetry, which is why common people could understand them easily. The below lines indicate the universal imagination of Vemana.

Serve food to all
 All the people of the world
 On one plate;
 Make them dine together

³⁹K. Srinivasulu, (2017) Vishwadhathi Rama Vinura Vema: Social and Political Ideas of Vemana, in M.P Singh, Himanshu Roy (ed). *Indian Political Thought*, Delhi: Pearson India, p. 7.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 7.

⁴¹<https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/promote-scientific-temper/article5137695.ece>

⁴²Ibid., p. 7.

Forgetting all their differences:
 And with uplifted hand
 Bless them to live like one.⁴³

He imagined universal love and brotherhood between different castes and religions and propagated the idea of eating and living together for a happy and peaceful life. Today many organizations propagate Vemana writings and preachings throughout the Telugu region through books, audio, and videos for kids and regular activities on Vemana thought, etc. Marxist organizations and groups propagated the thoughts of Vemana because of his critique of religion. However, they failed to project him as an anti-caste thinker. The growing anti-caste and Dalit movements recognized Vemana as a strong radical Bhakti thinker of the subaltern communities. Like Vemana, another saint poet, Pothuluri Veerabrahmam also inspired many people in the Telugu region.

Pottuluri Veerabrahmam: A Social Revolutionary

Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swami was called Veerappa and Veerambhadrayya in his childhood days. As he grew up, he was known by many names like Veerabrahmam, Brahmam Garu, Veerabrahmendra Swami, Veerat Pothuluribrahmendra Swamy, etc. In all these names the prefix 'Veer' is added, indicating his ancestors were followers of the Veerashaiva tradition. Veerappa was born in a Vishwakarma (Shudra) community. He learnt his ancestral craft—sculpture. From his childhood, he was interested in spiritual matters and was fond of meditation. He followed his favorite deity Veerabhadra Swami. Later he went to Banaganapalli (Kurnool District) where he grazed the cattle of Garima Reddy, Atchamamba. Oral stories record that he performed many miracles after which people were attracted to him and began to follow him. The sayings of Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swami are preserved mostly in the oral tradition as he intended them to be intelligible even to the common man. His compositions comprise three categories.

1. Mystic songs and Govinda padas regularly sung by street minstrels and mendicants
2. Kalajnana⁴⁴ Vachanas and padas and some epistles
3. Philosophic preachings

Kancha Illaiah observed that Pothuluri Brahmamgaru created an autonomous movement among subaltern castes in the Telugu region. He says,

Potuluri Veerabrahmam created an autonomous religious spirituality by synthesizing productive linguistic and cultural aspirations of ironsmiths, goldsmiths, carpenters, weavers and tailors by constructing a text of Kalagnanam (knowledge of time) philosophy. Interestingly enough, this philosophy of Potuluri established a socio-religious nexus among the sudras, the Muslims,

⁴³Narla, V.R. (1969). *Vemana*, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, p. 66.

⁴⁴The ability or quality of knowing the happening of events in the future. It is also an act of making predictions; foretelling.

and the mala and madigas. The lifetime friendship of Potuluri, Siddaiah (a Muslim medicant) and Kakaiah (an SC) constructed a Telugu nationalist ideology to set a trend for future multi-religious anti-caste nationalism.⁴⁵

The Jeeva Samadhi of Pothuluri at Kandimallayapalle is very popular. This samadhi is called Brahmgarimattam. On the day of his samadhi entry, i.e. vaisakha Sudha Dasami in the month of May, his Aradhanotsavam (the act of glorifying) is celebrated on a grand scale. The celebrations continue for a week. These celebrations are done throughout the region, wherever his temples and followers are present. The life and spiritual pursuit of Pothuluri Veerabrahmam is linked with social reforms and change. He started to preach and propagate his teachings in the form of 'Kalagyana Thatvalu'. V. Ramakrishna observes:

Veerabrahmam condemned the hierarchical system of caste and believed that Vedic knowledge could be gained by one and all. Accordingly, he had among his disciples men from several castes. He pleaded for the discontinuance of idolatry and strongly criticized superstitions. He advocated reforms in marriages and stated that girls should be married only after they had passed the age of puberty. He admitted women into his order and made them eligible for sainthood. Another significant aspect of his philosophy was his trenchant criticism of untouchability and pollution.⁴⁶

In the context of growing anti-caste consciousness and mobilization of marginalized communities, Pothuluri Veerabrahmam achieved iconic status. Many temples were constructed for Veerabrahmam in which shudra castes officiate as priests. His preachings are propagated through films, songs, plays, videos, etc.

Pottuluri Veerabrahmam's Legacy and his Disciples

Many became followers of Pothuluri Brahmamgaru. After he passed away, some of his disciples, Siddaiah, Eshwaramma, Yadla Ramadasu, and Yagantivaru carried his message and teachings to the common people and spread his teachings through songs.⁴⁷ In the early nineteenth century in Andhradesha, there were also several non-Hindu alternative semi-religious cults, all of which emerged from lower castes. These sects challenged the caste system. Nasaraiah founded the 'Nasaraiah sect', which is popular among Madigas, in particular, and untouchables, in general. Nasaraiah was influenced by the Islamic principles of egalitarianism.⁴⁸ He tried to emulate a model of Islam as an emancipatory doctrine for the untouchables. His main tenets were social equality, good moral conduct, and worship of only one God, discarding idol worship

⁴⁵Kancha Illaiah (2010). *The weapon of the other*. Delhi: Pearson, p. 120.

⁴⁶Ramakrishna, V. (1983). p. 46.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 46.

⁴⁸See Kshirasagar, R.K. (1997). *Dalit movement in India and its leaders*. New Delhi: M.D Publications Pvt Ltd.

and spreading unity among the untouchables. Nasaraiah made disciples and sent them out to preach. He made no distinction of either caste or sex. Women, as well as men, passed through the initiatory rites and then went forth to make converts. One of his earliest converts seems to have been a Madiga, who was made a guru and sent out to convert people to this sect. They realized that theism of Nasaraiah was better than the polytheism of their village cults. Belonging to the Nasaraiah sect raised the social status of Madigas in the region.⁴⁹ The influence of the sect of Nasaraiah is limited to some areas of coastal Andhra region.

Dunna Iddasu and Achala Thatvam: Preaching Non-Brahman Spiritual Thinking

Edaiah is popularly known as Dunna Iddasu. He was born in a poor Madiga (leatherworking) family in 1811. He belonged to Chintapalli village, Peddaura Mandal, Nalgonda district, Telangana state. Iddasu was an illiterate involved in leatherwork and worked as agricultural labour. When he was working in the landlord's fields, he would observe and follow the Shiva yogis during prayer times. One day the Yogis identified Iddasu and his keen interest in Yoga *asanas* (practice) and Achala traditions. They were impressed by Iddasu's philosophical hymns and later Jangama Devara Poodota Basavaiah presented a shiva linga⁵⁰ to Iddasu. Since then, Iddasu took further interest in Rajayoga practice. Rajayoga was preached and practiced by Pothuluri Veerabrahmam and Eshwaramma also. When Iddasu was young, Veerabrahmam and Eshwaramma were popular among the people in the region. Gradually, the people began to believe that Iddasu had superpowers. His preachings and hymns are still popular among people in the region.⁵¹

His followers increased and he visited many villages to preach his ideas. He moved from Nalgonda to Achampet, Kalwakurthi, Nagarkurnool, Kollapur, etc. In the undivided Mahaboobnagar district, his followers are more. Iddasu's grandson, Dunna Vishwanatham started an Ashram in Ayyavaripalli village in Achampet Taluka. After many hurdles, Dunna Vishwanatham published a book *Madiga Maha Yogi* (2014) to document and propagate Iddasu's message. This book carries 32 thatvas⁵² of Iddasu with details of his life and spiritual journey. Iddasu thatvalu continue to inspire many people. His preachings broadly focused on the denial of idol worship and ritual practices. He strongly believed that everyone can attain knowledge through Sadhana/hard work and preached that God/Goddess is within human beings, there is no need to go to the temple and approach the brahman priest to purify oneself. Human beings purify themselves with right thinking/ path that benefits everyone. In one incident,

⁴⁹Rauschenbusch Clough, Emma. (1899). *While sewing sandals*. London: Asian Educational Service, p. 59.

⁵⁰A lingam generally referred to as linga or shiva linga is an abstract or aniconic representation of the god Shiva in Shaivism. It is primarily a devotional image in Shaivism.

⁵¹Dunna Vishwanatham (2018) *Madiga Maha Yogi-Dunna Iddasu*. Hyderabad: Telangana Vikasa Samiti, pp. 66–74.

⁵²Thatva refers to truth, thought, or philosophical sayings.

he lamented that brahmans think that they are pure but only know how to be clean physically but not with their thoughts. His preaching visibly argues for detachment from a worldly luxurious life in order to realize oneself through critical reflection. Realizing one's inner potential is the way to knowledge.⁵³

In Achala Bodha⁵⁴ tradition, the guru/teacher is the source of knowledge, therefore believing and following a guru is important. In return, the belief is that the guru shapes the life of his followers or disciples. In this ideology, everyone can attain the status of a guru, unlike the brahmanical tradition. That is why Iddasu had many disciples though he hailed from an untouchable community. He had followers from brahmans, upper shudra castes like Reddy, Velama, and Shudra communities like barbers, goldsmiths, toddy tapers, and other land-owning communities. For an untouchable person to attain the status of a Guru reflects spiritual democracy, compared to the rigid caste hierarchy.

In the twenty-first century also, Iddasu has followers from different castes. On every shivaratri,⁵⁵ Iddasu's followers gathered at his birthplace and conduct worship to offer homage to him. In Telangana, specially the Madiga community takes inspiration from his teachings for sociocultural mobilization. The Telangana government also recognized his contribution and included his ideas as part of Telugu literature for intermediate students. Basavalingaiah (son) continued Iddasu's legacy and spread the message in villages. A Madiga leader, Puttapaka Mahendranath also encouraged and contributed to Iddasu's legacy. After Basavalingaiah, his son Vishwanatham presided over wearing that Linga and propagating Iddasu's teachings by conducting worship ceremonies at the tombs of his father and grandfather. In the context of the growing Dalit movement and Bahujan politics in the Telugu region, Iddasu became an icon for many people, especially Madigas. Along with these Bhakti traditions, the Dalits' conversion to other religions also created some space for Dalit spiritual life with a sense of equality.

Yerraguntla Peraiah and Christian Missionaries: Dalits Search for Spiritual Equality

During colonial times, many Dalit communities in the region found conversion to Christianity a solace from the caste system. The chief motivation for conversion to Christianity was a search for spiritual equality which was denied to the so-called lower castes in the brahmanical social order. It is essential to trace the historical roots of missionary work in the Telugu region. According to G.A. Oddie, the Church Missionary Society (CMS), one of the earliest Christian missionaries, worked for Christian proselytization in the Telugu region. V. Ramakrishna observes:

The first signs of missionary activity go back to the year 1597 when two Jesuit fathers and a brother were at the court of Venkateswarlu in Chandragiri (now in Chittoor district) where they stayed till 1615. Their efforts were not much

⁵³Dunna Vishwanatham (2014) pp. 143–202.

⁵⁴Bodha refers to knowledge, enlightenment, or wisdom.

⁵⁵Shivaratri is a Hindu festival celebrated annually in honour of the god Shiva.

of a success. Fr. Maudnit was the first to convert among the Telugus, the first converts being a widow and her four children in 1701. Punganur became the cradle of the Telugu Christians, from where Christianity gradually spread to Venkatagiri (Nellore district) which became a Christian settlement, and later to Krishnapuram, Hindupur (in Anantapur district) and China Ballapuram (Bellary district).⁵⁶

He further observed:

After the decline of Jesuism by the 1750s, a new era in Christian endeavour began in the wake of the Evangelical revival which was sweeping the west during the last years of the 18th century... In South India, this new wave of Evangelism was spearheaded by five societies, namely, the Society for the Propagation of Gospel, the London Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society, Wesleyan Mission, and the Free Church Mission of Scotland.⁵⁷

In the utilitarian or liberal field, the British Government brought several reforms:

In the fields of revenue administration and judiciary, abolition of slavery, sati and female infanticide, legalizing widow marriages. They launched educational programmes presumably to improve the 'decadent' Indian society. Both evangelical and utilitarian trends got submerged in their attitudes towards education. Wood's Dispatch in 1854 settled all conflicts regarding educational policies conclusively and the state assumed responsibility for educating the masses of its subjects.⁵⁸

Many Dalit families who are previously influenced by Rajayoga (Pothuluri Veerabrahmam sect) and other local sects like Nasaraiah were attracted to Christian missionaries. One important person who played a key role in the mass conversion to Christianity in Andhra is Yerraguntla Peraiah. Peraiah is known as thataiah (grandfather). His search for spiritual equality made a historical impact on Madigas in particular and Dalits in general for mass conversion. His method of evangelization inspired many Christian missionaries at the local level. Peraiah, born in a Madiga family, traded in cattle and leather. One day he received information that towards West Godavari side, the business of leather is more profitable. While going to this area he took shelter at his relative's home, who had converted to Christianity. Peraiah got influenced by his relative and on his return started meeting Christian pastors in the nearby areas.

The Protestant Christian missionary movement continued the spirit of evangelization at the local level. Under the leadership of Peraiah, preachers went from village to village to proselytize and for baptism. Preachers organized individuals from

⁵⁶Ramakrishna. V. (1983). p. 49.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 50.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 56.

Podili, Kanigiri, Cumbum, and Markapur for mass conversion to a new religion. On 3 July 1878, 2222 people were baptized in Gundlakamma River near Vellampalle village, Ongole. Within three days, 3536 people were baptized. This surprised many missionaries and shocked the Hindu Orthodox people. The baptized people began to experience a new religion which was significantly different from their old Hindu life. This journey from Hindu to Christian is not merely an attempt to democratize the spiritual domain but also a protest against caste order. Around 1860-1900, in the Godavari-Krishna districts of Andhra, the CMS opened several English schools, which welcomed caste Hindus and also untouchables into these schools. The number of baptised untouchables steadily rose from 1650 (in 1869) to 3500 (1882), to 9000 (1885), and 22000 (1905).⁵⁹

In the region of Telangana, Christian missionary works influenced the Dalits and other marginalized people toward spiritual equality. In 1874, the Kambal couple started their missionary work after that they moved to Secunderabad in 1875 and established the Telugu Baptist Sangam (TBS) where they worked among the army personnel. Later, the TBS extended its activities to Nalgonda. American Baptist Mission (ABM) worked and established its Sangams in Hanumakonda, Nalgonda, Jangam, Suryapet, Madira in the Telangana region.⁶⁰ The Church of England Zenana Missionary Society was launched in 1875 in Khammam and other parts of Andhra. The main objective of the mission was to work among lower castes and Muslim women. In 1939, they started the Mary Vikasa Centre to teach and serve orphaned women.⁶¹

Rev. Jone Wesley had started the South Asia Methodist Mission in England. People like G. Vinklan and J.E. Robertson worked to spread missionary work while they commenced efforts on building the railways in Secunderabad. In 1872, the 'Methodist Sangam' was started. This Sangam opened Stanley Girls' School (1921) and the School for Bible Training (1909). Through various social services, it extensively worked in Vikarabad, Sirvancha, Jaheerabad, Tandur, etc.⁶² (M. Mosses, pp. 40-44). The Veslian Mission also established its missions in Secunderabad, Hyderabad, Karimnagar, Jagital, Siddipeta, Nizamabad, Sangareddy, Aaleru, Medak, etc. The Medak Church was founded by Challes Wakar Pasnet in 1914.⁶³

Deccan Foreign Missionaries came to India in the early 1800s. These were: 1) North-Weslians Sangalu⁶⁴ 2) Western-Methodist Sangalu 3) South-Mennonite Brother Sangalu 4) East Baptist Sangalu. These missions extensively worked among the untouchables. In fact, the education and health conditions of the untouchables

⁵⁹Shantha Kumari Varikoti- Jetty (2015) Christian Missionaries and the birth of new social consciousness among the depressed castes: A case of the Malas and the Madigas in Colonial Coastal Andhra 1850 1950, Ph.D. thesis submitted to Jamia Milia Islamia University. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/491459> accessed on 11 August 2023.

⁶⁰Moses, M. (2004). *Andhra Pradesh Christian Sanga Charitra*. (Christian Church History of Andhra Pradesh), Paddisonpet, Christian Truth Press, p. 34.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 38.

⁶²Ibid., pp. 40-44.

⁶³Ibid., p. 49.

⁶⁴Sangam is a Telugu word that literally means association. Sangalu is a plural term.

improved and they got a sense spiritual freedom by entering into Christianity from feudal relations and caste oppression.⁶⁵

The reform initiatives brought some changes to the social relations of the people in particular regions. The Parthana Samaj in Coastal Andhra and Arya Samaj in Telangana contributed to mobilizing and organizing the untouchables, and in the process, helped in the social mobility of the untouchables. The Parthana Samaj was established in 1878 in Rajahmundry and its leaders worked among untouchables. Veereshalingam established schools with the help of Pittapuram Maharaj. He also fought against sati, child marriage, bride price, caste prejudice, etc. Among others who worked for social reform were Chilkamarthi Laxmi Narasimham, Raghupathi Venkat Ratnam Naidu, Narala Setti Devendruru, Vemula Kurmayya, Guduri Rama Chandra Rao, Vemuri Ramji Rao, Nallapati Hanumantha Rao, and Vellanki Krishna Murthi. Chilkamarthy Narsimham established the Rammohan School for untouchable boys in Rajahmundry in February 1909. Pittapuram Maharaj himself opened many schools and hostels; numerous early untouchable educators and leaders benefited from this initiative. Some of them were Boyee Bhemana, Bojja Appalaswamy, Pamu Rammurthy, and Nadipudi Ganapathi Rao (ex-MLA).⁶⁶ However, these reformist initiatives by upper castes failed to address the legitimacy of Hindu shastras in perpetuating inequalities, the caste system, and untouchability, and women's oppression.⁶⁷ Hence the Bhakti radicals from subaltern communities and their vision of egalitarian society continue to be great sources of inspiration for modern anti-caste movements.

Conclusion

The Telugu region has produced many anti-caste visionaries who challenged brahmanism and caste inequalities. The radical vision of Vemana, Pothuluri Veerabrahmam, Nasaraiah, Dunna Iddasu, and Yerraguntla Peraiah have deeply influenced the common people at the grassroots level. Their preachings become so popular that they become songs of folklore which are used in everyday usage. Vemana and Pothuluri asserted and envisaged the democratic spiritual sphere in which all human beings are treated equally and with dignity. Further, people like Nasaraiah, Dunna Iddasu, and Yerraguntla Peraiah had a deep influence on the succeeding generations. Their influence is still alive at the grassroots in the Telugu region. They worked as reformers to achieve a society that Kabir and Ravidas imagined in the form of Begumpura. These subaltern bhakti radicals emphasized people's labour, culture, and experience as sources of knowledge which negated the brahmanical view of knowledge production. Their songs, hymns, and sayings are all articulated in people's language and they rejected idol worship. In essence, they challenged the hegemony of brahmanical forces in the spiritual sphere. Hence, democratizing the spiritual

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 86–89.

⁶⁶Ramalaxmi, P. (1995). *Reform Movement in Godavari District: (1878-1939) An attempt towards Social Justice*. Dr. Garigipati Rudrayya Chowdari, Endowment Lecture 3, December 15, 1995, pp. 10–12.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 30.

sphere is the common aim of the subaltern bhakti radical traditions. Their critique against Brahmanism, caste discrimination and inequality, and rejection of Vedic and holy scriptures have created a foundation for the modern anti-caste consciousness of subaltern communities in the Telugu region. The article argued that given the praxis of bhakti radicals, they have to be understood as ‘social revolutionaries’ who preached and worked for the democratizing of the spiritual sphere not merely for spiritual equality but also the socio, cultural, and material transformation of society.

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