

**STRATEGIC ACTIONS TO ESCAPE FROM STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE:
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY ON CASTE-BASED MARGINALIZATION IN
SELECTED TOM-TOM BEATER COMMUNITIES IN BATTICALOA**

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Abstract

This study is aimed to describe the strategic actions taken by members of Tom-tom beater caste communities so as to escape from identity-based marginalization and to illustrate consequential barriers for them to successfully perform their strategic actions. This descriptive study is based on qualitative and ethnographical research methods. The study is confined to the selected Tom-tom beater caste communities of Batticaloa district. The study found that demarcated territory and traditional occupation are major factors that make members of Tom-tom beater caste communities more susceptible to subtle forms of marginalization. They pursue two strategies to escape from marginalization on territorial base. Firstly, they try to migrate from their territory and to settle down in places situated very far from their native niches. Secondly, they attempt to get their marital partners from higher caste groups living in remote places by concealing their caste identity. Educated youths have affianced in a radical strategy to annihilate their caste obligation and to prevent their caste men to serve high castes on traditional caste service basis. The study also found barriers for these strategic actions of members of Tom-tom beater caste and evaluates the strategic actions from the perspectives of Tom-tom beater caste members and other high caste members. And it recommends ways to support these strategies of Tom-tom beater caste to promote their social security.

Key words: Structural violence, Caste-based marginalization, Outcaste group and Community and Cultural security.

1. Introduction

Though the explicit, traditional caste-based discriminatory practices are almost absent in Sri Lanka, most of the lower castes have been engaging in deliberate attempts for strategic actions in order to escape from the subtle forms of marginalization that rooted in their traditionally attached lowest identity. Unlike Dalit caste groups in India, lower caste groups in Sri Lanka don't want to make their caste-based identity visible to others. Identity-based group solidarity is entertained by higher castes of India and Sri Lanka for political and social welfare purposes. Such tendency is observed among Indian Dalit communities, since they too consolidate their group solidarity on identity basis to achieve their political, social and economic gains. However in Sri Lanka, tendencies for identity-based group solidarity are

almost missing among the depressed caste people. In Eastern part of Sri Lanka like some other parts in the country, as identified in recent studies, there has been a strong tendency among Tamil lower castes to escape from their group identity. (Silva, Kalinga Tudor, Sivapragasam, P.P. and Thanges, Paramsothy, (Eds), 2009, p. 124). Members of these caste groups try to refrain from serving traditional caste occupation and from maintaining communal relationship with their same caste men living in other villages. This paper is based on the ethnographical study on Tom-tom beater caste groups in Batticaloa. Traditional caste obligation of Tom-tom beaters is drum-beating in temples and funerals and dancing. But they also attached to some sort of menial works. The study is very much taken with their actions of escaping lower caste identity.

1. Human Security and Structural Violence

The military and state-centered concept of human security shifted its principal notion toward people centered one.¹ Rethinking the meaning of security during the 1990s created a new security agenda which includes wide range of issues of people including inequality. (Sabur, 2003, p. 37) In this way, the concept became more relevant with the idea of positive peace, which is more than the absence of war. Positive peace includes the obliteration of structural violence that is deeply embedded in the discriminatory or marginalized practices prevailing in the socio-economic and cultural arenas of a society.(Galtung, 1996, p. 02) Such practices are directed towards any kinds of vulnerable categories of human being that their marginalized identity can make them more susceptible to violence. Consequential threats to human security stated in the UNDP’s human development report 1999 can be confined to a certain extent within the circle of structural violence. Among seven major threats to human security, community and cultural insecurity² has its prominent relevance with some forms of caste-based marginalization.

2. Statement of the Problem

It is apparent that lower caste groups in South Asian region have been engaging in the struggle of escaping from marginalization, even though there have been substantial legal provisions for equality and protection from communal violence in the constitutions. In case of Sri Lanka, over varieties of caste-based violence are explicitly absent, but there are definite forms of subtle marginalization in practice that very much impervious to their class-wise status amelioration. Tamil outcaste communities in Eastern Sri Lanka have been entangled in the process of annihilation of their caste-based identity to refrain from subtle marginalization. They are undertaking several strategic actions to eradicate their identity-based structural violence while facing severe barriers to do so. This study focuses on the existing marginalization patterns and its impacts on Tom-tom beater

castecommunes and on the impetuses for annihilating caste-based identity.

3. Objectives of the Research

Overall objective of this study is to describe the situation in which Tom-tom beater caste communities have been engaging in a tactical way of life to refrain from identity-based structural violence. Specific objectives of the study are;

1. To describe strategic actions taken by elite mass of Tom-tom beater caste communities to escape from identity-based marginalization
2. To illustrate consequential barriers for the elite mass to successfully complete their strategic actions
3. To evaluate the discourse on maintaining the traditional occupation of Tom-tom beater caste group.

5. Research Questions

- a. How the educated and economically ameliorated mass of Tom-tom beater caste works to escape from caste-based marginalization?
- b. What are the obstacles prevailing in processing the strategic actions to escape from their caste-based identity?
- c. What sort of perceptions held by the rest of the same caste members and by the other caste groups towards these strategic actions?

6. Methodology

This field study is mostly based on qualitative method and to a lesser extent quantitative method. This study is prominently relied on ethnographical data sources. Primary data was collected by taking up the tools of;

1. In-depth interviews
2. Focus group discussions
3. Observation
4. Case histories.

Secondary data was collected from official documents of relevant authorities, departments and previous studies of published materials in various books, magazines and newspapers. Several community-based organizations and

¹Human Development Report 1994, p. 24

²Human Development Report 1999, p.04

institutions were also visited to gather further secondary information. Research area is confined to four villages of Batticaloa district; Kaluthavalai, Arayampathy, Punnaikulam and Pilalivembhu. Selection of these villages was made through random, purposive and snow-ball sampling methods. Two focus group discussions were conducted in each location and men and women inhabitants of the villages were taken as separate categories. They were randomly selected for the group interviews. For the personal interviews, informants were purposively selected and the numbers of the interviews varied according to the issues in the villages (10 interviews in Kaluthavalai, 7 interviews in Arayampathy, 05 interviews in Punnaikulam and 05 interviews in Pilalivembhu). Informants for the case studies were selected through snow-ball sampling and 05 cases from each village were taken for the primary data collection.

7. Caste Situations of Study Communities

In case of dominant caste ranking, there is a considerable distinction in Tamil caste hierarchy of Northern region and Eastern region. In Northern Sri Lanka, Brahman (temple priest) and Saiva Kurukkal (non-Brahman temple priest) occupied the dominant rank and Vellalar (Land holder and farmer) claims the rank next to them in the hierarchical ladder. In this ranking, Tom-tom beater caste was placed in lowest among all other castes. (David, 1974, p. 47). In Eastern part of the country, three upper castes, namely, Mukkuvar, Vellalar and Saivakurukkal are claiming the top position in the ranking. Among the twelve castes of Eastern region, Tom-tom beater caste was given last rank in the hierarchical ladder. (McGilvray, 2011, pp. 40-41). Some famous Tom-tom beater caste Settlements in Batticaloa of Eastern Sri Lanka are taken as focal points for this study.

Kaluthavalai is situated in Manmunai North Eruvil Pattu D.S. division and it comprises of two major castes; Mukkuvar and Tom-tom beaters. Comparatively, Kaluthavalai Tom-tom

beater caste members are not only numerically but in the level of education and economy also higher than other three village Tom-tom beater

caste members. There are 618 members of 110 families concentrated in a particular GN division; Kaluthavalai-04.

Arayampathy is in Manmunai Pattu D.S. division which is comprised of several castes, but majority is Karaiyar. Interesting case is that there is a place called “Paraiyar Vaddai” (circle of Tom-tom beater caste members). This place was separately allocated for Tom-tom beater caste, but only two families of particular caste are dwelling at present. Other members of Tom-tom beater caste sold their land to other caste members and migrated to sub-urban areas. However the Hindu temple of the area is still under the administrative control and maintenance of the Tom-tom beater caste.

Punnaikulam and Pilalivembhu are two villages confined within Vellaveli GN division of Porativu Pattu D.S. division. Punnaikulam is predominantly occupied by Tom-tom beater caste members. 12 out of 67 families are from other castes, rest of the families is of Tom-tom beater caste. Pilalivembhu is inhabited by very few Tom-tom beater caste members; Only 07 out of 42 households. Some traditional forms of marginalization are still apparent in Pilalivembhu.

8. Strategies to escaping caste-based marginalization

Specifically demarcated territory and traditionally determined occupation are two major factors that make Tom-tom beater caste members more susceptible to subtle forms of marginalization. Therefore members of this caste group pursue two strategies to escape from the marginalization on territorial basis. Firstly, they try to migrate from their territories specifically allocated for them to the places situated very far from their native niches, particularly in urban and sub-urban areas where their caste identity is hardly recognized. Secondly, they attempt to marry higher caste women living in remote places by concealing their real caste information.

Tom-tom beater caste members have also been engaging in an attempt to escape from their lower caste identity based on caste-based

obligation. Educated youths of this caste have affianced in a radical strategy to annihilate their caste obligation. In 1995, there was a radical youth movement among Kaluthavalai Tom-tom beater caste community to completely ban their traditional drum beating and to prevent their caste men to serve other high castes on traditional caste service basis. They destroyed drums in their temples and strictly ordered to those who playing drum in funerals to give-up the occupation. Same trend was followed by Arayampathy Tom-tom beater caste youths. Punnaikulam Tom-tom beater caste members were compelled by Kaluthavalai Tom-tom beater caste youths to refrain from drum beating in their own temples and in temples of high castes.

Tendency for eradicating drum beating was also inadvertently exacerbated by the participation of high caste *Mukkuvars* in Tom-tom beater caste temples. Increased popularity on Hindu non-agamic worship pattern, which is not exclusively, but specifically practiced by the depressed caste people, among Tamil people in Eastern Sri Lanka induced the participation of *Mukkuvars* in the non-agamic temples of depressed castes. Involvement of higher caste *Mukkuvars* in the ritual practices of non-agamic temples owned and managed by Tom-tom beater caste people is perceived by Tom-tom beater caste members as an apt mean to get equal recognition in status from high caste people and to get rid of being socially marginalized. This perception led Tom-tom beaters to exterminate drum beating in ritual processes of their temples and to change the worship pattern as Agamic one. It was also the case in India that elites of depressed caste groups pursued the process of *Sanskritisation* to make status amelioration via religion. (Roberts, 1995, p. 180) This is observable in all three villages; Kaluthavalai, Punnaikulam, and Arayampathy. In Arayampathy, almost all members evacuated the territory specially allocated for them, but there are not willing to hand over the authority of the temple trustee to any others, since they consider that the participation of other caste members in their temple rituals will reduce the social marginalization directed towards them.

9. Barriers for Strategic Actions

Escaping from the territory is not an easy task for most of the Tom-tom beater caste members. For several reasons, they encounter barriers in successfully furnishing this strategic action. Firstly, most of this caste people are economically poor and are unable to purchase the land in outside. Secondly, some members have sensitive attachment to the territory. Therefore they are not betrothed to leave their traditional land. Thirdly, some of them are willing to lose their caste identity, but they are not in a position to remove their village identity. In case of Kaluthavalai, considerable number of Tom-tom beater caste is willing to be recognized them as a resident of Kaluthavalai, since the village is somehow popular in the division. Strategic marriage is a severe attempt among youth of particular caste and there is a strong tendency for marrying high caste women among the caste youths. But it is not successful either, because they were identified as a member of lower caste by their bride's relatives few months after the marriage. Therefore these men have been found guilty of cheating their life partners. Few cases ended up with divorce and in few cases, the caste men along with their high caste wives returned to their previous habitats.

The strategic attempts further found two major disturbances in annihilating the caste based obligations; drum beating. Firstly, some Tom-tom beater caste members wish to keep drum beating for their economical gains and for the sake of its traditional value. They are confronting with the radical youth who compel them to give up drum beating. This brings about intra-caste conflict. Secondly, other caste members in this area pressurize Tom-tom beater caste members to engage in drum beating and dancing since it is considered as a part of Tamil national culture.

10. Confrontational reflections on Strategic actions

Obstacles to successfully escape from their territorial base by settling down or marrying an upper caste woman in remote places lead to the radical mass of Tom-tom beater caste to annihilate the material base of their group

identity which embeds in their caste obligation; drum beating. At this juncture, it is necessary to evaluate the confrontational reflections on strategic action of preventing Tom-tom beater caste men to engaging in their traditional occupation. Generally, performing arts like music, dance and acting were often seen as socially degraded in Tamil regions since these arts were preoccupied by low level people in Tamil stratified social system.(Thiruchandran, 1997, p. 148). Traditional caste occupation of Tom-tom beater caste, drum beating and dancing in certain public occasions is one of the performing arts. It could not be the one and only reason for Tom-tom beaters for their lowest status that they performs drumming at funeral homes, because they also do drumming in temple ceremonies and rituals and even in marriages and puberty ceremonies. though they performed their traditional art in ceremonial, ritual and funeral occasions, they were given last position in caste hierarchy of Tamil Society.

It is argued that Caste system and its traditional occupational patterns can be considered as obsolete for several reasons. Main reason is that the relevance of caste occupations with their traditionally determined stakeholder position of those occupations is hardly found.(Quigley, 1994, p. 31) . It is not only the scenario in which some castes have relinquished their traditional occupations, but there are some castes performing other castes' occupations. Income generation (economy) and nationalistic significance (Political) are two major imperatives which were motivated castes to take over other castes' duties after independence in South Asia. In case of performing arts, both imperatives have played a critical role in drawing other castes to involve into a particular caste occupation. Specifically in drumming, in Sinhala society of Sri Lanka, upper castes have taken over the duty of drumming which was the occupation of one of the lower caste; Berawa, in Kandy Pehara, since “Bera” was seen as having nationalistic importance in Sinhala tradition. (Reed, 2009)

But the case is vice-versa in Tamil Society in Sri Lanka. When nationalistic significance had been

attached to the duty of drumming, no one upper caste is ready to take over the “Parai”. Even the particular part of the drummer caste is showing resistance to perform drumming anymore, few of Tom-tom beater caste members wish to follow drumming for their income. Very little of the caste members advocate the notion of traditional value attached to the drumming. Elites of Tom-tom beater caste who have already been in radical action to destroy drums are contrary with those who have attached the nationalistic value and traditional value to “Parai”. Attachment of traditional value to “Parai” and the aspiration for keep on performing drumming based on the notion of traditional value caused not only the resentment of radical mass of Tom-tom beater caste, but also turned out the strategic actions of radical elites into violent ones and directed towards their own caste men who wish to perform drumming.

When Tamil nationalism became “defensive nationalism”, upper caste political elites had to come to the position to eradicate marginalized practices directed towards lower caste groups.(Pfaffenberger, 1990) Such nationalistic tendency had also included the performing arts of lower caste people as a part of the general Tamil national culture. However Tamil upper caste groups unlike Sinhala society, while reiterating the notion that “Parai” as a performing art should be kept from vanishing, impose the whole responsibility to protect the “Parai” drumming to the Tom-tom beater caste. Tom-tom beater caste elites of these four villages have launched a literary war against those who have been literarily emphasizing the protection of “Parai” drumming and the responsibility of Tom-tom beater caste in safeguarding it, by releasing leaflets. Their major argument revolves around the question that “Are any arts belongings of any particular caste?”

11. Conclusion

As far as the caste system is concerned, marginalization of lower status categories of people is continued to be existed in post-conflict society whatever the radical changes occurred.

When “Bera” was become highest nationalistic valuable one, higher castes tried to occupy the performing duties by marginalizing Berawa caste in Sinhala Kandyan caste system. There were no arrangements to ameliorate Berawa caste status, even though their caste obligation was given highest status. In Eastern Tamil regions, higher caste wants “Parai” not to be extinguished, but they don’t want to get involved into practice drumming so as to protect the Tamil national art. Instead of that they urged Tom-tom beater caste to continue to practice through emphasizing relevance of Tom-tom beater caste with their traditional caste occupation. It means that there can be no place for ameliorating their status.

When there is no change in status of lower caste, then there can be no change in marginalization based on caste-based identity. Nevertheless, explicit practices of marginalization are not apparent in Sri Lanka; there are many subtle forms of it. Therefore educated and economically improved members of Tom-tom beater caste have been engaging in several strategic actions to escape from their caste identity. They are the victims of structural violence as they are susceptible to caste-based marginalization. And they are also struggling to succeed in strategic actions due to impediments arising from intra-caste relationship and inter-caste social network. Subtle forms of marginalization and obstacles for escaping from the fundamental basis of the marginalization are obvious threats to their community and cultural security.

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