

Should Dalits Remain Ugly?

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The recent dreadful incident in the Paris of Andhra and pride of upward mobile shudras of our state, Tenali made all of us who love the town, hang our heads in shame. A 45 year old lady was ghastly killed in the presence of her daughter for preventing the felonious animals not to sexually abuse her daughter, a good looking B.Tech student. In the eyes of the beasts, the pretty looking mother and daughter were found without a male companion as hapless dalits. They were coming from shopping when the incident took place just opposite the statue of the father of the nation. Though the media has not revealed the background of the incident, but circumstantial evidence lead us to the specifics that they were easy prey due to their social background. Strangely, a section of the media was busy with the news of a missing film star indicating the blatant discrimination and frivolity. Katti PadmaRao , President of Dalit Maha Sabha informed us that he got the couple married in 1985 and the family is well educated, the fact that the two daughters studying science and engineering courses demonstrates.

The incident in Tenali, Guntur after a gap of around two decades in the neighbourhood of Chundururu amply show that economic growth did not bring any social change, but led to further nasty feudal depths of despair. Now, we have entered a different dimension of caste atrocity. This reminds us why Dr Ambedkar wanted annihilation of castes. In his most famous speech prepared but not delivered at the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal , Lahore in 1936, he cited a press report of 4th January 1928 about the conditions imposed by upper caste Hindus on Balais, a dalit caste in 15 villages in Indore district. Out of 8 conditions, two are related to women that they should not wear gold and silver and fancy gowns etc, perhaps to keep them as their slaves. Is there any change in the mind set of people as far as women, particularly lower caste is concerned?

There are several studies to indicate how the lower castes fought against the so called upper caste/ brahminical values. It is recorded that the lower caste Nadars and Ezhavas of Tamilnadu and also in Travancore presidencies resisted the inhuman condition that the women folk of the community were made not to wear any upper garments, to entertain the lust of the upper castes. The leaders of the Nadars and Ezhvas appealed to the British and defied the upper caste dictates by wearing upper jackets. This has exasperated the ego of the dominant castes leading to a caste battle during 1818-19. Army was called in by the British to abate the situation. Of course, this revolt of the Ezhvas and Nadars made them to unite under Narayana Guru and shifted their traditional occupation to other callings to emerge as one of the most upward mobile community in the post independent India. We just do not have instances of such revolt from lower castes or dalits in Andhra? Does Sunila symbolise this?

In this context, we may reflect here on the notion of beauty and aesthetics in relation to the social composition of our society. It is strange that the younger generation with the so called development oriented mind set think about beauty and glow of women in terms of the standards offered by the Anglo-American or white skin cultures. They consider under the influence of beauty market that all others like the dark skinned African-Americans are slaves meant to serve the rest. Hindi channels (some Telugu) have almost banned dark

people. There seem to be no change in the attitudes and values of people even in an era of globalisation. However, the local people with dark, brown etc, skins have proved the indoctrinated upper castes wrong through their intelligence and charm, if opportunities are democratically thrown open. In fact, Ram Manohar Lohia in his article on "Beauty and Skin Colour" published in March 1960, narrated how the greatest woman of Indian myth, Draupadi was dark and charming. He narrated the beauty of fish eyed Meenakshi of Madurai telling the rest of the World how her beauty bit more to the heart than the eye. The grace of Tambaram Lalita, a Tamil beauty seem to have attracted the attention of Lohia who lamented how the aesthetic judgment of the whit-skinned Europeans dominated the world and distorted our aesthetic sensibilities. In fact, there are historical records to evaluate the Native Indian beauty and wisdom of the women folk. I remember that I had the occasion to officially interact with the most beautiful woman in my life was a dark person and could relate her to the Yakshini kept in the Patna museum (see Basham A L). The Yakshini figure, a first century AD sculpture was a chance discovery of a British officer who found it in a dhobhighat about a century ago and recovered it to Patna. The woman I was referring to was also a Bihari and there are absolute resemblances with the living beauty to the Yakshinini of ancient India. It is appropriate to bring to focus that the Native Indians or the so called lower communities were more attractive than the aliens who came here and enslaved the locals resulting in destitution and physical devastation of people. It is with the advent of democratic government and adequate food; the downtrodden are slowly recovering from the damage and restoring their original charm. You can see this happening to Chenchus of Kurnool.

It is not only in the physical elegance but even in the exposition of their knowledge and wisdom, the women belonging to this community is exemplary. Srimati Panabaka Lakshmi, M.P from Bapatla, Guntur, a Post graduate from Andhra University has been a parliamentarian for two decades and has proved her calibre and competence as a Minister in the central government. The Prime Minister has recognised her skills and efficiency in dealing with whatever subject assigned, is now entrusted with two important portfolios. This shows that the women of the lower communities are as competent as anyone else if chances are given. This trend appears to be the crux of the problem?

The upper caste crooks of Tenali seem to have a crush for the women and were waiting for an opportunity to pounce. Interestingly, there is very little analysis by our Intellectuals who were very critical about the increasing menace of dalit lumpen elements when Chundururu occurred. Is there any parallel in recent period where a mother lost her life defending the honour and chastity of her daughter? Is it not our responsibility to make Sunila's sacrifice a symbol of self-respect and esteem of the new generation of women we should be welcoming!