



Caste, Culture, Continuity, and Change: a study of Dalit Priests of Telangana

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Abstract: India is currently going through a period of marked transition. It is experiencing tremendous changes in the socio-cultural and institutional structures. These changes have been well confirmed and rapid during the last few decades. Particularly in recent times, the shift in the ideologies at the national level, on the one hand, and the expansion of the global market, on the other hand, created a crisis in all the developing countries in the world. In India, the shift is much more rapid and profound. This 'new normal' is not only influencing the local economies but also the innate cultures and traditions. The impact is at two levels, the new narrative of nationalism is overshadowing the regional identities, and the windows opened by the market economy created access to the western lifestyle, including food, fashions, and culture as a whole. It is not to say that such social change in India is a sudden and recent phenomenon; it is a continuous process. However, the current phase is the most power full and strategic because it substantially alters the social structure and culture.

Pambala, a Dalit priestly community representing the local tradition of Hinduism in Telangana State of South India, is one of such communities pushed into a crisis. This paper examines the status of a small community representing the local tradition in the modern nationalist and global discourse. The report primarily attempts to locate the Pambala community in Telangana society, culture, and their historical importance in the village ritual life. The second part examines the continuity and change in the caste, culture, and tradition; the paper is based on a focused study of a traditional community in Modern Hinduism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Dalits and Priests cannot go together because they represent two independent cultural segments and different traditions. The word 'Dalits' is a Marathi translation of the British category of 'Depressed classes.' It refers to a single largest cultural block of India, historically considered untouchables, and the constitution of India recognized them as Scheduled Castes (SC). According to Zelliott (1992), the current usage of the term Dalit goes back to the nineteenth century when a Marathi social reformer and revolutionary Mahatma Jotirao Phule used it to describe the untouchables, which derived from the Sanskrit root 'Dal,' which means to crack open split and so on. When used as a noun or adjective, it means to burst, split, broken, or form asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed, and destroyed. Historically Dalits were confined to the lowest rung of the Hindu caste hierarchy. Contrary to this, 'Priests' occupy the top rank of the order and are given a highly respectable position in Hindu society. According to the Hindu Varna scheme, Brahmins are the priests, and Brahma created them from his mouth to perform religious rituals and prayers.

Several writers expressed views that Aryans came from outside India, and the Brahmins were one of the subgroups or Varnas among the Aryan invaders. They settled in the Indus valley between 1500-1000 BC (Basham A.L.1951). At the same time, Dasas (part of them Dalits) were sons of the soil of Indus valley, Where the Mohenjodaro and Harappa civilization was founded much before (about 1500 years) the Rigveda. The Brahmins emerged as priests only during the Rigveda period, and their priesthood was confined to only Aryan communities and groups. These Brahmin priests were authorized to perform Yagnas and Yagas for Aryans but not for most aboriginals and Dasyus. Dasyus, on the other hand, continued their worship of their mother goddess and deities. There is ample

evidence to prove that the people of Indus Valley were the worshippers of the mother goddess. Several historians tried to establish that the present tradition of deity worship is an extension of the Indus valley culture. In contrast, the worship of Vedic gods is an expansion of Brahminical religious practice. The aboriginal groups and people continued their religious and cultural practices even during Hinduism's Vedic and Brahmanic periods. The same persists to date as a parallel stream to Brahminical Hinduism. The co-existence and interpenetration of the two modes of social organization, 'Brahminical' and 'Aboriginal' or 'Local' continued as one is led by 'Brahmin Priest' and another is by local caste groups such as Dalits.

These two religious orders differ from each other in every aspect. The gods of Brahmin religion from Vedas to date are mythological heroes, and this spiritual stream is highly personified. From Indra, Soma, and Varuna of the Vedic period to Rama, Krishna of present-day supremacy of male deities reflects the patriarchal order. Contrary to this, the local religious order, which was predominantly followed by Dalits and was mentioned as the Dalit religious order in the study, represents matriarchic order. All these deities are female deities. Not only gods but sacrificial offerings also are contrasting. Among the Brahmanic Hindu religion, the sacrificial offerings are mostly bloodless. Cow's milk, butter, and honey were offered to the gods. At the same time, non-Brahmin and Dalit orders believed in blood sacrifice. Offerings in the form of sacrificing animals like Goat, Sheep, Buffalo, and fowls are compulsory to satisfy the deities. Making sacrifices was regarded as feeding the god.

A Dalit acting as a priest is not a new phenomenon in India. Historically in almost all parts of India, it is a regular practice. Particularly for the local Deities and village goddesses, the worshippers will be Dalits and lower caste people 'while all the upper castes have acknowledged the' right' of the non-Aryan to act as a priest in the worship of the deity. (Bose, 1975:99).

The Non-Brahmin priesthood is a very ancient phenomenon. Brahmin entered into priesthood very lately in the civilization process. As Kosambi (1992) observes, 'When the village becomes richer through agriculture, the Brahmin priest enters' into the social life of a village. In this study, the term 'Dalit priest' refers to Dalits who practice priesthood and perform religious ritual activities. Several such caste groups in India are by birth 'Dalits,' but by occupation are priests. The present study portrays one such Dalit priest caste called 'Pambala.' The study will discuss the Pambala caste, its cultural tradition, and its role in village religious rituals. Furthermore, it deals with the continuity and change in the Pambala tradition in contemporary socio-economic change.

The uniqueness of Indian society and its culture, especially the fundamental elements like caste, religion, and ritual, have captivated many scholars for generations. The studies on Indian society have begun with an investigation into the Indian past by the orientalist and Indologists in the nineteenth century. These European scholars made India their arena of study, particularly Indian languages, and culture.

Apart from these attempts by ancient historians and Indologists, serious studies on caste and religion in India got momentum during the middle of the twentieth century. Since then, studying the changing dynamics of Indian society, caste and religion, particularly, has become a fascinating area for scholars. More than anything else, the study of caste became the central concern of both sociologists and anthropologists. (Dube:1965;Srinivas:1955;Marriot:1955;Bailey:1958;Mayer:1960;and a few others)

The scholars at first mainly focused their studies on describing the caste structures and hierarchy. Secondly, they have given importance to understanding the relationship between caste and other specific institutions such as economy, policy, family, and kinship. Very few of them focused on the ritual and religious aspects of the caste. Some scholars like Srinivas and Dumont seriously considered spiritual practices a central point for the caste and caste-based stratification. But surprisingly, very few have made an in-depth analysis of Dalit communities and their religious aspects. Dalit cultural identities and spiritual and ritual elements are underrepresented in mainstream sociology. This type of omission in recognizing the uniqueness of Dalits, and lack of focus on them, lead to Subalternity or a search for counter models, and their cultural perceptions suffer a semiotic break.

It is a fact that studies on Dalit communities are significantly less compared to general caste studies. A recent phenomenon is investigating the structural and functional aspects of Dalits and Dalit culture. Earlier sociologists discussed this aspect as a part of their village and caste studies. In a society like

India, a comparative study of institutions is a prerequisite for analyzing social change, which is impossible through a culturological approach to sociology as it over-emphasizes the uniqueness of social phenomena. Because of the problem, Louis Dumont (1986) developed the 'Ideo-structural approach' to Indian sociology. He arrived at the functional equivalent of the western idea of the 'individual' in the Indian institution caste. Dumont compared the caste order of Hindu society with an 'individual' of modern western society.

Dumont (1970) attempted a very elaborate discussion on the religious dichotomy among the Hindus of South India. In his research on the Pramalai Kallar community of Tamilnadu, he seriously tried to explore the spiritual and ritual streams existing in South India's Peasant Society". . As a whole, he observes two different streams of worship and two different temples, i.e., Village temple and another is the lineage or caste temple. He says these two differ in many ways. The lineage temples are more prosperous and more elaborate than the village temple. Researchers like Cohn (1955), Mann (1979), Vidyarthi (1979), and Tekkamalai (1983) also have reported the dichotomous and parallel religious ritual practices by the Dalits and the existence of Dalit priests in different parts of India. All the studies mentioned above give an idea about village India's caste and religious structures. These scholars identified the plurality of Indian tradition and religious dichotomy. Among the priesthood also, two different types existed in India. As the religious streams classified, the priest groups also can be classified into two, one is Brahmin priests, and another is non-Brahmin priests.

The Pambala are the Dalit priests in Telangana State. The Pambala is a numerically small caste group among 'Dalits' Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh in South India. Pambalas are spread all over the ten districts of Telangana. They are known by several names like Baindla, Kolupula, Potharajula, Dyavathula, etc.

The name Pambala is derived from the musical instrument called 'Pamba,' which is exclusively used by them. The Pambalas also played an instrument called Bavanika or Jamidika at the time of Akkamma worship. The name Baindla a synonym to Pambala, is derived from Bavanika. In Tamilnadu, they are known as Pambaikkaran, and Pambakaran is a sub-group among the Parayars. In some parts of Southern Tamilnadu, they are also called Kodangis. (Players of small drum). In Kerala, a caste called Parisaivam acts as priests for village deities. They are Shaivas and priests in the `Grama Devathas` temples in Malayalam country. Kannadigas call them Bendalers. They are also known as Garu and Bane in some parts of Karnataka. Andhra Pradesh also they have different names in different regions. In the Coastal Andhra, they are known as Baineendlu. In the Rayalaseema, a community called Pambanda or Pambada participates in village deity worship. Some districts of the same region are also known as Pambalas. In the Telangana region, too, they have different names. Apart from Pambala, Baindla is known as Kolupula, Dyavathula, and Pothurajula. The terms Kolupula and Dyavathula derive from their occupation, i.e., worship of a deity. Pothuraju is, in fact, a mythological hero in a story narrated by Pambalas.

The roots of the Pambala caste can be located in Dalit Communities. They emerged from untouchable communities and evolved methods for worshiping their deities as an alternative to Brahmins. Thurston (1909) reported that the Pambala and Baindla are the priests, musicians, and barbers for Malas and Madigas, the Scheduled castes. He further observes that the Pambalas also "take part in the recitation of the story of Akkamma and make a muggu (design on the floor) attend the Peddadinam (death ceremony) of Goundlas."

Syed Siraj-ul-Hussan (1989) states that the Pambalas are priests of the Mala caste. He further says Mala Dasari, and Jangamas are the Gurus for Malas. They attend the death rites, and the Pambala person or Baindlavadu attends the marriage ceremonies. On the other, the same author says the Baindla is a sub-caste of Madigas. Whitehead (1921) supports these views and locates the roots of the Pambalas in the Mala caste. He says they are the hereditary priests for Malas. In Telangana, such groups were formed among Padmasali, Golla, Kummari, Tenugu, Mutharasi, etc. However, most of these groups are confined to the rituals within the family. But at the village level ceremonies, a Pambala act as the priest. Due to this advantage, the Pambalas claim themselves as `Siddulu,' the first priests on the earth.

2. PAMBALA: THE PRIEST AND PERFORMER

The primary occupation of the Pambala caste is the priesthood, the chief worshippers of village deities. The priesthood is hereditary but is not a regular activity like the Brahman priesthood. Apart from this, the Pambala person does other works for his livelihood. Whenever the village community decides to worship the deity, the Pambala will take the lead in the whole ceremony. For this priesthood, they are paid with some paddy or other grains at harvest time. Traditionally, Pambalas are deity worshippers. The Main vocation of Pambalas is to invoke and appease the village deities and protect the people and cattle from evil spirits. On certain occasions like feasts and festivals organized for village deities, Pambalas act as priests and perform the rituals and Poojas.

Among the village deities, Ankammas, the seven sisters, is the most prominent deities. These deities existed everywhere, not only in Telangana but all over South India, with different names. The rites connected with the seven sisters will be performed by their younger brother Pothuraju, a Pambala. Among the seven sisters, the deity Pochamma is mighty. Pochamma, in Telangana, is known as the goddess of smallpox. She is also considered responsible to some extent for all other troubles in the village. When smallpox, sickness, or cattle diseases break out in a town, the people say Pochamma has come to the village. She is supposed to be angry and express her anger about the condition. Then they invite the Pambala person and ask him to organize a Jathara on behalf of the village and appease the angered goddess. In Telangana, the Pambalas call it `Yellanampadam` in their professional terms. They send the deity to the village's boundaries, where she has to stay. Generally, this festival is organized only at the time of the cholera attack on a mass scale.

Suppose smallpox attacks on a mass scale in the village, and a joint ceremony in the town is organized. Locally such a ceremony is called Kolupulu. First, the announcement of the Kolupulu is made, and offerings are solicited. In the Kolupu, various rituals are generally performed. Among them, the Bonalu is a special one, and the Bonalu is the beginning stage for the whole function. The second part of the worship is the sacrifice of a living animal. Generally, the Pambalas scarify lambs and goats, but in some parts of Nalgonda and Southern Telangana, the Baidla sacrifice the buffaloes. In this ceremony, Pambala priests participate in large numbers. In the primary function, at least eight priests should be there. One of them acts as the main storyteller. Another type of sacrifice is called Gavu. It is a cruel and terrific activity, and people believe that the goddess would satisfy only by this. During the process of Gavu, the Pambala, disguised as Pothuraju, drinks the blood of a sheep severing the Jugular vein with his teeth. The Pothuraju dances in front of the pot rally (Banalu), which leads towards the Pochamma shrine.

The people in Telangana villages believe that the Pambalas have certain divine powers. They think that Pambalas are highly spiritual people because they can appease the deities at the same time; they also can control the evil spirits like Bhootha, Pretha, and Pishach. Pambalas are also known as medicine men. Pambala vaidya (healing of pambalas) is a combination of both witchery and herbs and shrubs. Apart from Manthra, thanthraspambalas use herbs, shrubs, leaves of medicinal plants, and their juices in the treatment. The people voluntarily encouraged the local cultural group, and the rulers, especially zamindars, jagirdars, and doras, patronized them to emerge as an independent community. They allocated some villages and hereditary rights (Vathan) over them. The Pambala was also one such community that originated from Dalit castes and emerged as a priestly community.

Even the Nizam rulers officially recognized the Pambalas as village priests and raja vaidyas, and Nizam rulers appointed them as Rajavaidhyas (official healers) in the villages. The rulers assigned certain towns to them as Vathandari (Duty) villages. To that extent, they have issued certain furmanas. One such furmana embossed on a copper sheet assigning 60 villages of Peddapallytalug to Pambalas of the Deva family in Dhoolikatta is preserved in the Devidi of PeddapallyJagirdarNarsinga Reddy. According to that order, the primary duties of Pambalas are: to look after the health of the people; to protect the cattle from deceases; and to protect the village from massive epidemics. Whenever summoned, they have to report to the call of Jamindar or Jagirdar and explain the situation in the villages. In turn, the landlord offers some paddy, grain, and other commodities and goods that the Pambalas need. The jajmani payment system prevailed, where all the exchanges would be in the form of either services or goods. Generally, they pay for each fasal (a crop season), known as inam (honorarium), for their service. There was no alternative health care system till the middle of the 19th century. Nizam created the state medical department in the dominions in 1844 AD.

The Pambala person who got hereditary rights over a village is called Kashipidar. The Kashipidar and his family or descendants only got the right to visit the villages. Whenever the villagers call him, he duly sees them. At the same time, no villagers, even in an emergency without knowing their Kashipidar, invite other Pambala people to the village.

During this period, Pambalas acquired lands as inams and gifts. They were highly rewarded for their services. Pambalas, in the process of their professional performance, used to interact with all the communities physically and socially. In this process, they became "touchable" and allowed to mix up with other communities. Due to this economic and socio-cultural advancement, the Pambalas' Sanskritized' and de-linked and restricted their relations with their fellow sub-caste groups. The Sanskritization process is not only in their connections with caste people but also in their way of life and culture. The Pambalas thus occupied the almost top position in the Dalit social hierarchy. However, this improved social status and upward mobility have not been sustained for long.

On the social ladder of Telangana, the Pambala caste is a step higher than the Malas and Madigas, the fellow Scheduled Castes. Their interaction with other communities, especially those who worship the village deities (except Brahmins), helped them escape the untouchability and humiliation based on caste. A kind of fear among the people is also one of the reasons for upward mobility in their status. The professional diversity as a priest, shaman, and folk medicine doctor, helped them to develop contact with other castes. In the religious ceremonies, the Pambala visited the upper castes' houses and touched them to apply kumkum and prasadam (food prepared for god). In the same way, at the time of demon exorcism, the Pambala person must touch the patient's body and wash the patient's face. The whole process is inter-linked with the belief structure so that the people generally do not dare enough to refuse or ill-treat Pambalas.

Due to these professional advantages, Pambalas claim they are not untouchables or `Harijans`. Further, they argue that they are Pujaris (priests), brothers of all deities, husbands of all Shaktis and demons and Pothurajus, and they also got the goodwill of the rulers. All these aspects helped them to raise their status from untouchable Dalit to a touchable Dalit priest. The self-proclamation of Pambalas as an independent social group has developed a gap between them and their root community. Pambalas practice untouchability towards Madigas, and there is no interdining and intermarriages exist with them. The relations with the Malas are also in similar lines; they accept Kacha food (uncooked food) from Malas but do not marry the Mala groom for their daughters. Some places are taking Mala brides for their grooms. Except for this, there is no commensality between these two communities. In Telangana villages, Pambalas have separate wells, as the water from the wells of Mala and Madiga is not acceptable for them.

Though the other communities in the villages have good relations with Pambalas, it does not include interdining or marital alliances with them. Interestingly, Backward castes of the region do not accept Pambalas as equals to them. They consider Pambalas inferior to them, but they respect them as priests of their village deities.

The physical distance between Dalits and their satellite castes and from upper caste and other backward castes is the best indicator of social and cultural space among the different castes in village India. In villages, the Pambala is placed between the other backward castes and the Dalit community. Generally, the settlements of Pambalas are located near the different backward castes cluster in the village and close to Dalit residential areas. In a way, the Pambalawadas will divide the town between left and right-hand communities. It is symbolic that Pambala settlements on the border of the main village and Dalitwada look like an integrating force between the communities. It also acts as mediating section between Dalit rituals and village deity worship. In a sense, Pambala becomes the fulcrum for the interaction and interdependencies between the two extremes of the community spectrum.

The Pambalas enjoyed very good treatment from the villagers, especially the rulers' landlords of Telangana. The region was under the control of Muslim rulers for centuries. Telangana remained a backward and orthodox society during this period. Telangana's Princely rulers (Nijams) discouraged modernization and western culture and never allowed the new religious movements that organized the people. For this reason, the region's heterogeneity among the people and their cultures and faith toward ancient and primitive religious believers existed. In recent years Telangana region sustained its

significance. The primarily cultural heritage of folk and the characteristics of little tradition remained because of the socio-political systems. The little tradition is predominant in Telangana culture, visible in its un-sophisticated and diverse local and regional rituals and spiritual practices. The primary cultural significance of little tradition featured in Telangana culture is "made up of its indigenous role incumbents such as folk artists, priests, medicine men, proverbs, stories, poets, dancers, etc." Since Hinduism denied ritual freedom to Dalits and did not allow them into Hindu temples, Dalits moved closer to village deities. They worshiped the local goddesses for whom there was no need for monumental structures. Since Hindu priests refused to serve the Dalits and refused to preach to them, they developed their gurus and priests.

Hassan (1989) asserts that these priests of village deities are picked up from Dalit castes because of the Brahmin's attitude towards Dalits and their religious beliefs. Moreover, Hinduism denies the cultural rights of Dalits and never allows them to public performances of dances and dramas, which generally take place in temples and charades. Since they did not have the chance to enjoy the entertainment activities of various cultural forms, Dalits developed their teams and troupes to entertain themselves, and they also developed their traditional cultural forms and folklore. In this process, some families dedicated themselves to propagating the art forms. They became a sub-caste within the caste. These sub-caste groups within the Dalits have their own identity and status to find a place in the hierarchy, hereditary occupations, and endogamy.

3. CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

The data of three generations of Pambalas drawn from the Karimnagar district reveals the gradual improvement in the education levels. Illiteracy among the present generation of Pambalas is reduced to 15.6 percent from 40.8 percent of grandfathers' generation. One hundred forty respondents are in the age group of 60 years and above, the 35 percent are illiterate.

In the present generation, 12.5 percent are studied up to secondary level, 14.4 percent intermediate, and 5 percent are studied up to graduation and above. The trend shows the positive impact of education on the Pambalas of Karimnagar, and modern education led them to new occupations and places.

The occupational background shows the enormous shifts. Most of the Pambalas are moving from traditional occupations to modern ones either partially or fully. This shift from traditional occupations to modern is very rapid. Currently, only a few (about 17.5 percent) Pambalas continue the traditional occupation as the only source of livelihood. Modern education motivated Pambalas, and a considerable shift is observed toward current occupations. In the respondents of the present study, 25 percent of respondents wholly settled in modern and non-traditional occupations. Interestingly, the practice of both traditional and contemporary occupations is increasing. It is 22 percent, 30 percent 57 percent in grandfathers, fathers, and respondents, respectively.

The reasons for the shift are apparent. There is a drastic reduction in the vathandari villages. Because of the growth in the size of the population, the heredity villages were divided again and again. It is found that among the respondents, a very marginal (8.7%) have the rights over more than three villages, and the remaining respondents have only two or less than two villages. Many of the Pambalas are displaced from their occupational sources from one generation to another.

The second reason for the shift in the occupations of Pambalas is the insufficient income from traditional work. Eighty-two percent of the respondents stated that the revenue out of the caste occupation was sufficient at the time of their forefathers' generation. The same was further reduced to 63 percent by their father's period. In the present age, a deficient 9.7 percent said the income from their caste occupation is sufficient for survival.

Land holdings are an essential indicator of understanding the status of a person in villages. In the first stage, the grandfathers of the respondents were landless, and most of their fathers acquired the land, but in the present generation, Pambalas again become landless. In earlier days, migrations among the Pambalas were unnoticed. Now among the respondents, the rate of migration is about 15.3 percent. These migrations are mostly from Rural to Urban. The spatial and occupational mobility influenced Pambala's culture and tradition. By migrations, they are exposed to urban life, interacting with the modern value system and adopting a rational outlook. Pambalas acquired several everyday household goods and adapted to new technologies.

The religious beliefs and the ritual organization among the Pambalas are changing rapidly. The educated and the young are different from their fathers and forefathers. The younger generations are showing more faith in the gods, deities, and religious cults of great tradition and the Babas, whereas the elders, most of them, still pay reverence to local deities.

The modern elements seriously altered the traditional activities of Pambalas. Particularly the ritual process and performances were changed drastically. The villagers no longer pay much attention to the village festivals and deities. The annual worships like Kolupu, Yellanampadam, and other activities to appease the village deities have become rare phenomena. Unlike in the past, now people organize such activities occasionally. After the entry of religious cults of great tradition, the villages' deities have become obsolete. In a way, patriarchy has been slowly taking over the matriarchy.

Pambalas view this change due to the decentralization of power in the village social structure. In earlier days, when the land holdings were under a few's control, the village's power and authority remained with the landlords. The landlords used to act as custodians of the town, and every year they conducted religious fairs, Kolupu, and other annual worships for village deities. The land reforms resulted in the decline of the land holdings and feudal power. In addition, the democratic decentralization of political power and authority at the village level has turned the table. Moreover, after democratization and other political processes, it became tough to organize such activities with the consensus of the diversified groups of the village.

In place of regular annual worships, a few people at the caste level or family level perform such activities occasionally and conduct worships on a small scale. In these family and caste group level functions, people engage a few Pambalas and continue the activities for one or two days. Pambalas find these limited functions unviable. Because they do not get sufficient income and small groups do not pay much, Pambalas also engage only two to three professionals and conclude the ceremonies. Pambalas are now facing difficulty finding professionals because most Pambalas have left the tradition and settled in modern occupations.

Not only the worship, the other activities like Folk medicine, bhoothavaidhyam, and exorcism also lost Charm and utility and relevance. The advent of modern medical facilities and scientific knowledge made the people skeptical about Pambala's Vaidya. People suspect the Pambalas as exorcists and blame them for all their misfortunes and ill health. On account of this, the Atrocities on the Pambalas have increased. On the other hand, government agencies, voluntary organizations, educated youth, Doctors, Political Parties, dalams (Naxalite groups), and other opinion leaders also started campaigning against "superstitions" and are propagating "scientific" approaches. PambalaVaidya has not been able to withstand the onslaught of this campaign. Thus, the traditional medical function of Pambalas has become irrelevant and obsolete. People who used to pay Pambalas in kind now switched to cash payments, which are not comparable in real terms. The change in the practice has made the occupation unviable for the community. Keeping the above developments in mind, Pambalas are leaving the tradition, but they could not rehabilitate themselves in the village social structure, as they do not own any land.

The study revealed that both external and internal factors influenced Pambalas tremendously. More particularly, the great tradition's dominant cultural influence is very much on the community. Though the excellent practice and the domination of Vedic cults is less in the region, the modern processes such as elimination of feudalism, the rise of the middle class, modern education, decentralization of power authority, democratic political process, communication network, egalitarian social perspectives have reduced the patronage to the practices of little tradition. Further, these trends led the village deities, women goddesses, and all the parallel cults and rituals into the fold of the great tradition.

More specifically, the following factors have influenced the religious beliefs, ritual observances, and traditional practices of the people in the region, which ultimately resulted in the decline of the Pambala profession and their socio-economic status.

Though Brahminic Hinduism and deity worship co-existed in India as two independent hostile streams, the reform movement 'liberalized' the practices of a great tradition. In the process of liberalization, the Hindu Scholars and reformers attempted to bring Hinduism nearer to the people, notably lower castes. At the first level, they tried to own the little traditions parallel to Hindu cults and assimilate them into the broad spectrum of Hinduism.

The reforms further liberalized the rules of great tradition and allowed the Dalit and lower classes to worship the mainstream gods, which were taboo in the past. On the other hand, the Hindu Brahmin priests extended their priestly services to Dalits and different lower sections of society.

At the second level, the new religious cults and practices like Aiyappa and Shirdi Sai Baba have become popular and resulted in worship patterns. The rise of the middle class, even amongst the lower castes, has lent support and patronage to these practices. Universal adult franchise and democratic decentralization of polity and protective discrimination prompted the emergence of new leadership and avenues and channels for status mobility. Earlier ritual ascendance was the only channel for status mobility. Land reforms and constitutional and legislative measures have ushered changes in the agrarian social structure. This resulted in the decline of power and authority of feudal landlords and the patronage of the rituals ceremonies of little tradition, and thereby the role of the Pambalas and their functional relevance and social importance.

All these factors have contributed to the gradual disappearance of local traditions and decline in the deity worship in Telangana. This is one of the main orthogenetic processes contributing to integrating the practices and dropping Dalit priests.

The impact of globalization is also at two levels, both among the general public and Pambalas. The globalization process, particularly modern education, occupations, science, and technology, altered the people's value system and traditional practices, and modernism promoted democratization, secularization, egalitarianism, and other progressive ideologies. As far as Pambalas is concerned, modern science created alarming waves in the community. In a majority tone, the study's respondents expressed that the downfall of their tradition, particularly the healing methods, were affected by the expansion of modern medicine and health services. With the spread of modern medicine and health care practices, people have become skeptical about the Pambalas and their treatment. Now they are suspected as practitioners of Black Magic. Therefore atrocities and humiliations have increased during this period. Several Pambala professionals were killed during this period. Most Pambalas felt that the new ideologies, particularly the mass movements, also negated their profession. The people's actions and organizations have turned down some activities of Pambalas as a superstition, and some of these organizations promoted a 'progressive' perspective and propagated a modern scientific approach. According to Pambalas, such attitudes have certainly harmed the Pambala tradition.

All these factors influenced the traditional life of Pambalas as well. Some of the Pambala families utilized modern facilities and educated their children. Some of them entered politics, and some in government service.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Pambalas, in the social context of globalization, face a difficult time continuing their tradition. The priestly functions no longer attract community patronage and support, and the healing processes are reckoned obsolete, unscientific, and irrelevant in the modern context. The sub-cultural superiority and privileges are no longer tenable in the context of protective discrimination and egalitarianism, and they are forced to change according to social changes.

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Citation: Dr. Chakrapani Ghanta. “Caste, Culture, Continuity, and Change: a study of Dalit Priests of Telangana” *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies (IJHCS)*. vol 8, no. 1, 2022, pp. 44-52. doi: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2454-7654.0801005>.

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