Chapter - 3

THEATRE OF THE MARGINALISED:
A CONCEPTUAL FRAME
Theatre of the marginalised is a perception within the epistemology of theatre that seeks an explanation for certain kinds of theatricalities, sprang up during the recent times. It is an ideological perceptive that not only critiques the theatre practices but also adopts such criticism as a part of experimentation in theatre practices. Therefore, it is both an ideological standpoint and an invention of practice in theatre applications. The poststructuralist and the postmodernist perspectives are looked for power relations in the practices of arts of the living traditions. It innately connects to the issues of representation such as who represents whom, how and by what means.

The concept of **marginality** being the core element in the construction of the theatre of the marginalised, it is imperative to look into what that forms marginality in theatre. The group of theatre practitioners
view marginality as far as the theatre is concerned is some thing that is practiced outside. In such case, marginality always is used as a relative term. For instance, the realistic theatre viewed the theatre practices of idealists as marginal, for they are of no social relevance. Similarly the so-called modern theatre practitioners viewed pre-modern theatres as marginal theatres. Likewise the folk theatre is also conceived as marginal theatre by the modernists. Hence, both the performers of folk theatre and their audiences are considered as 'under developed' or 'illiterate'. This understanding brings closer to the sociological concept of marginality.

Marginality is a sociological term, used to describe the situation of groups of people who are excluded or persecuted by the dominant culture or power in a community. To study marginality, a historian observes the formation of the outsider status of these groups and how they come to define themselves and become defined by the others. It is also a philosophical debate over whom and what defines a marginalised community, and from what authority does that power relations come? What is acceptable within a society and how effective is this process? These questions generate a never-ending string of methodological issues.

Literature abounds in Sociology that examines social stigma and deviance as social constructions, which support the established social order. Members of the low-status groups do not make rules that define them. Social groups create deviance by making rules whose infringement constitutes deviance and by applying these rules to a particular group
people and labeling them as outsiders. Those who have the power to
define the acceptable qualities of others benefit from their ability to label.

Emile Durkheim presented a view on how marginality is
constructed by society. According to him, the purpose of defining
individuals or groups as deviant is by excluding some to reinforce the unity
of the rest. The idea of deviance embracing both crimes as formally
delineated by law and other kind of behaviour generally held to violate
social norms and values. The exercise is particularly necessary in time of
rapid social change and increasing differentiation. Durkheim conception is
based on social groups of medieval times such as prostitution, sorcerers,
witch doctors etc., who were considered as deviants and hence
marginalised and persecuted. R.I.Moore\textsuperscript{1} departs from this Durkheimian
view of medieval construction of marginality because it is premised on the
idea that the people who carried out the persecution embodied the
collective beliefs and sentiments of society as a whole. Thus, these
marginal groups and mainstream authorities clashed over the power to
define the domain of order and community, with many members of
marginal groups taking an active role in resisting the dominance. Marginal
status was not simply a construction of the ruling classes, but a
manifestation of power relations. The idea of power relations is part of
Michel Foucault's work on issues of power and history\textsuperscript{2}. Foucault was
interested in movements of transition, the changes in the way society
deals with internal problems and deviance of one form or another. His
work is interdisciplinary but his main thesis is that social crisis is resolved by change, not only in the dominant institution that are society's most visible symbols, but also in the ways people talk and think (what he calls discourse). Foucault studies how old ways of thinking fail and the process by which people are forced to find new modes of discourse.

The image of marginal groups as powerless or oppressed stems from an over riding concept, 'sovereignty as power'. If power is handed down from some authoritative leadership, and can only be claimed by another group through revolution or reoccupation of the same position by an opposing party, it becomes virtually impossible to understand the origins of power except as the sole possession of a ruling class. This is a monolithic approach to power relationships, which emphasises the other's role in the exercise of power and undermines the role of subject. After all, for a ruler to be successful in a power relationship, an acceptable number of subjects must follow his or her decrees. How can one study the exercise of power in medieval Europe while still recognising marginal groups as active members of a power relationship? Power is the moving substrate of force relations, which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable. Power in so far as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the overall effect that emerges from all these motilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement. Thus power is omnipresent and never-ending. But, it is always
fluid and changing. Hence, to view power as sovereignty is dangerous. It makes the power possessed by the ruling class virtually static. If power is not possessed, exchanged or taken, but rather a manifestation of relationships, minority groups must be viewed as an essential part of the system by which power functions. State authorities remain integral to the function of power relationships but they do not dominate marginal groups. Rather, they contend and interact with them in an unequal and unstable relationship. It is tempting to claim that ecclesiastical and secular rulers increased or concentrated their power in centralised bureaucracies throughout the Middle Ages in order to define their own community. To say so, though, implies that they somehow claimed it or other volunteered it to them by submitting to their decrees, which only leads back to the idea that the sovereign exercises his power upon the body politic. It also implies that those under their jurisdiction followed their decrees, which is an erroneous assumption. More accurately, one might say that church, state, and popular forces attempted to increase the domain of their power into the beliefs, behaviour, and sometimes identity of others within their geographical boundaries.  

Max Weber’s distinction between power and domination, according to Rober van Krieken, confirms the assertion that though many marginal groups might have been disadvantaged, they were not dominated. Van Krieken writes that power refers simply to the diverse range of situations where one person or group imposes their will on the behaviour of another,
whereas domination refers to the stabilisation and routinisation of power relations. Foucault's concept of a fluid and unstable series of power relations governing human interaction renders that their 'routinisation' is very difficult. Had the majority dominated the medieval culture, the balance in the compelled relationships between the majority and minority interests would have been tipped much more thoroughly. Minority groups, however, played a much more important and dynamic role in the construction of medieval European society. While mainstream forces always sought conformity from them, each of the marginal groups saw some form of toleration from their counterparts in power relationships. As majority leaderships persecuted and criticised these groups, some sovereign powers also made efforts to preserve them within a particular intellectual and often geographical domain, thus, imposing an identity on them from the outside. Yet, one must question how this identity functioned. Did it contribute to the self-identity of these groups, or did it function more as stereotype or stigma, used for the sake of clarifying acceptable behaviour in the mainstream?

The application of poststructuralism is a positive approach to study marginality. The general aim of poststructuralism is to generate criticism of most doctrines that are unquestioningly accepted. It was a response to structuralism, which is founded based on the stability of linguistic structures and their ability to emulate the movement of the mind. Poststructuralism is a radical critique of these notions of language and of
any philosophy built upon them. The structuralists attempted to synthesise all humanistic knowledge by using the tools of linguistics. The work of Jacques Derrida used linguistics and philosophy to assert that there is no overall system or answer. This approach makes one to question the assumptions upon which the understanding of how society is constructed\textsuperscript{6}. The difficulty of reading Derrida and Foucault is that they resist anything that would lead to setting up deconstruction as a system of thought. There is no general rule, no set of defining principles. Rather it is a complex web of ideas and observations that create more questions than answers. To generalise Derrida’s method, he believes that all thought is necessarily inscribed in language, and that language itself is fraught with intractable paradoxes. This theory of language is not pointing just to literary ambiguity but claims that all human sciences rely on the idea of dominant entity, which Derrida calls ‘presence’. This ‘presence’ demands a corresponding absence as inferior and marginal. The distinguishing qualities of the marginal entity are in fact the defining qualities of the dominant. Its marginal counterpart thus defines the dominant entity. The result is that the rigid hierarchy of the dichotomy dissolves. It is no longer clear which is dominant and which is marginal. The definitions, functions and identities of marginal groups are not static. Both majority and minority cultures changed throughout the middle ages, and their relations and views of each other and themselves changed significantly as power relations continued to define and redefine marginality.
Another way of defining the modes of marginality considers the concepts of 'identity' and 'participation' (or even loosely comprehensible notion of the norm of participation) as frames of reference, which would facilitate the general classification of the definitions and approaches to 'marginality'. In the latter case of the definition of marginality, 'identity-making' could be regarded as participation; this approach to the study of marginality is sooner 'actionist' one and corresponds to the subject matter for the study of marginality. It can be complemented by and compared to the study of marginal's functions or uses in social and cultural relationship and to the study of the form of marginality under the processes of desocialization and re-socialisation.

Considering the actionist interpretation of marginality, wherein the core operational concept is participation, one cannot but notice that marginality is usually defined as lack of participation in social institutions (in Economics, in political decision making, in symbolic resources' distribution etc) or deprivation and exclusion from the social structures. Such point of view provides a 'negative' aspect of marginality definition. The deviation from the participation norm to the opposite extreme - surplus of participation - locates a marginal between the different kinds of social borders that shape and cement their social relationships and social hierarchy. This is that positive aspect of marginality definition, which has been already stressed by R. Park. It describes the position of the marginal
in between the worlds, cultures, social orders, not identifying completely with either.

Both aspects of the definition - positive and negative - entail the functional meaning. A marginal has a universal social distance enabling him to perform as an observer and providing him with criterion for observation (the norms of social/cultural/political orders ‘beyond the border’ may serve as such a criterion). It gives an opportunity for the instrumental interpretation of the stranger; Richard Rorty quite frankly suggests this pragmatist ‘inevitable and unobjectionable ethnocentrism’ for the Western culture.

The correlation of the concepts ‘frontier’, ‘institutional border’, and ‘social conflict as a form of social border’ ,‘ spatial dimension of marginality is a special point of reference. The definition marginal and the very process of marginalisation presuppose the notion of boundary, edge, and limit. Marginals’ static uncertainty acquires also dynamics when the established institutional borderlines and clear cuts start to shift and to transform under the social change and become ‘frontiers’. Thus the marginalised become the main agents of these frontier lines. The study of process of marginality depends upon the interpretation of the very notion of ‘margin’ as clear-cut, division, edge, limit, frame, periphery, or frontier.

The concept of marginality is concerned with ‘position’ and its implications. That is to say, it is intended to pick out phenomena that
occupy a particular position and to identify what characteristics of these phenomena etc., can properly be associated with that position, rather than being particular to the given phenomenon. One can initially characterise 'being marginal' as the situation of the edge of something, which is in some sense bigger, more coherent, and/or more influential, etc that that which is marginal. A theory of marginality picks out positions 'on the margin' of some other entity or of the field of effects created around it. The first supposition is that being 'on the margin' is something rather than nothing. That is to say, that being on the margin underwrites quite distinct features, realised or potential (i.e. capacities). These features, that is to say, are to be found out with those that follow from other features of the entity's nature.

In preference to other possible terms - edge, boundary, front, frontier, periphery - the term 'margin' is used in this context to highlight the 'possibility' that which is on the margin has effects beyond the margin itself. In this way, "marginality" can be distinguished from 'peripherality' and any other theory of that. What is 'peripheral' merely exhibits features arising from being on the edge of dependence or perhaps feelings of inferiority). In the case of the marginal, such features can have an impact beyond the marginal entity itself. This occurs where, for example, the margin stages and uprising to break free of its dependence or aggressively denies inferiority in the wider world beyond the given center\(^8\).
Being ‘on the margin’ is ‘something’, possessing some identifiable features, rather than a mere nullity. The 'marginal' features or capacities of phenomena, and / or actors may be important - though they do not have to be. ‘Central’ entities with marginal positions occupied by others may be affected by developments that take place in the entities, the processes and / or the actions of actors on their margins. Marginal has a degree of freedom - be it ever so small - about being within and / or attached to the central. Just the possibility that the marginal might exist outside the center's geometry is a card in the marginal's hand. It may, for example, persuade the centre to pay something to the marginal, though it may also provoke the centre to use its strength of economic muscle, mechanisms of law and order against the margin\(^9\).

From the above discussion one can surmise two broad categories as marginal as for as the theatre practices in India are concerned. One category points out to 'outsider status' of the groups, which are practicing the theatre to create their own cultural identities. These groups are considered as ‘outcaste’ during pre-independent days and are referred as ‘panchama varna’ during early historic times. They are the fifth varna because they are considered as ritually impure and therefore assigned to perform scavenging duties that are essential to up-keep the village environments. The cleaning duties such as disposal of the dead, scavenging works etc., made them to be considered by the dominant varnas as polluting and hence given the lowest status. They
were made to live outside the village in separate hamlets. Having given the status of ‘outcaste’ the groups belonging to panchama varna develops their own aesthetics and art practices. Theatre is one such art, which reflected their identity. The castes known as Mala and Madiga were forced to reckon with the reality of ‘outsider hood’ and demonstrated their identities through the performances of the caste myths. Each caste supported several sub-castes as bards to perform the caste myths. The following table shows the sub-caste of the Madigas and their performing traditions.

Table: Two

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Madiga Sect</th>
<th>Ritual Profession</th>
<th>Native Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Koya Madiga</td>
<td>Priestly Chantings</td>
<td>Mntralu japenchevadu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sangari Madiga</td>
<td>Ritual drawings (Kolams)</td>
<td>Pat am Vesevadu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Velpula Madiga</td>
<td>Camphor Litting</td>
<td>Sambrani Vesevadu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avuua Madiga</td>
<td>Ritual Possessing, Organising Groups in rituals</td>
<td>Mangala Harathi echevadu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kinnera/Byndla/Asadi/Jamukula Madiga</td>
<td>Players of Kinnera (or) Zamidika (string) instrument.</td>
<td>RangamEkke Vallu, Uthchavala Gumpunu</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kramabadhikarinche vallu</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kinnera (or) Zamidika</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Vayedyalu Vaainche Vallu</td>
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The bards as has been shown in the above table practice theatrical performances, which are quite different from that of the modern theatre. Their theatre can be considered as marginalised, for it represents a deviance from the mainstream. In this thesis, the theatre of the outcaste is taken as one of the marginalised theatre and this theatre further imitative to the yet another marginalised community that is being represented as the theatre of the marginalised, which forms the second category of the definition of marginality.

The second category points at ‘outlaws’ as the group. Some of the political organisations, which practiced egalitarianism as an ideology, took to violence and annihilation as a method to achieve their goals of social equality. In Andhra, some of the communist groups questioning the
dominant power as the forces of exploitation took to arms. They are considered by the State as 'outlaws'. The groups namely C.P.I (M.L) People's War, C.P.I (M.L) Janasakthi, are some of the examples for claiming outlaws status by themselves and resorted to geo-marginal spaces like forests, hills and hillocks. By being in this position, they also try to persuade the masses to adopt their ideology and to fight against the exploiters. In the process they evolved certain art practices that would attract the masses. Initially, they used song and dance to spread their ideology. But in due course, they came up with plays, which are akin to the theatre of the outcaste, as well as folk art forms of the marginalised caste groups. The plays like Maa Bhoomi, Bhoomi Bhagatham, Simla Bhagotham, and Indravelli are the best examples of the theatre of the outlaws.

With this conceptual premise the theatre of the marginalised is examined in this thesis. However to cognate one self what constitute the theatre of the marginalised, one has to probe into the history of theatre practice of this region. In the region of Telugu speaking people, several scholars enumerate the theatre practices as Sanskrit drama and modern Telugu theatre. The whole history of Telugu theatre is thus seen into two broad categories as Sanskrit and modern drama. The Sanskrit theatre is the theatre, which represents the language dominance and therefore was considered as the theatre of the literate. The modern theatre on the other hand represents the technique dominance and sprouted out from the
west, therefore was considered as the theatre of the elite. In both the cases theatre of the marginalised is undermined.

This brings forth another dimension to theatre that is the 'politics of representation'. When one considers who represents what in theatre, it invariably leads to the structure of theatre itself. In order to understand the nuances of Telugu theatre, one has to probe into its history In the next chapter, a critical analysis is made on the history of Telugu theatre and the politics of representation.

References:


9. *Ibid*