

Emancipation of Pothurajus

-Asok Kumar
Ex Collector and DM,
Nizamabad, AP
asokji@yahoo.com

Pochiayya is a quintessential Pothuraju. His frail body structure punctuated with the self inflicted whip lash scars, which seem to be his fate lines. The blood-shot eyes, rotund and dark red betrays cruelty and its perceived powers of black magic. They are dark because of the voluminous helpings of local liquor he is addicted to - An addiction brought by the cross of tradition he carries. No man in his normal senses would be able to perform some of the rites he has to do as a part of his customary duties to the village. He has to dance around the corpse, when anybody dies in the village. The dance is no ordinary one. His forehead and body is smeared with ashes, his legs adorned with cheap anklets, a whip in his hand for self-flagellation. The cuts it makes and the blood that oozes out and smears his dirty ruddy clothes, which once was white adds to the frenzy associated with the dance. The long tresses on his head sway to the violent jerking of his head, which bobs up and down to the rhythm of drums. These tresses are so precious, that he had been bearing them since his birth. He and his fellow Pothurajus cannot cut their hair, for their divine powers are in locked in these hair locks like that of Samson. If it is a dance in the Gavu festival he has to bite the jugular vein of the lamb and bleed it to death.

This is a story of the 21st century, when mankind claims to have scaled lofty heights of civilization. Pothurajus are a set of people who belong to the scheduled castes in Andhra Pradesh. They are the priests of the scheduled castes. They are divinely ordained many duties. They are required to dance around the dead bodies. They are required to be present for every auspicious function at the home. They do pujas before the planting of paddy and before harvest. They are required to sacrifice he-buffaloes (Pothu in local language) before the start of the paddy plantation to get good crops. They are also associated with black-magic and wizardry. He can cast a spell on you and your crops. He can decimate your enemies, with a lemon and few chilies tied in a string. In short, the Pothurajus have a very important role to play in the life of the village people in the rural and backward areas of Andhra Pradesh.

More important is his role in the life of many hapless young girls in the village. He, empowered by the divine tresses, does the sacred duty of marrying a girl at the age of 5 or so to the local deity. The young bride dedicated to the local deity becomes a "Jogini", who is the epitome of ultimate human exploitation. She matures in the hands of the village elders and land lords to become a "common property resource" of the rich and powerful. The Joginis, act as village prostitutes until they grow past their

“serviceable age” and then fade into oblivion, or get resettled by NGOs, many of them getting international funding for their Jogini rehabilitation programs. The older Jogins get resettled, and to keep the tradition alive, Pothurajus dutifully converts many more young girls as Jogins. Thus there is a continuous stream of retirements and replacements making it a sustainable proposition. There is win-win situation- the NGOs get continuous set of elderly Jogins to be resettled and ensure its funds flow; the village elders get fresh young girls to satisfy their lust and the Pothurajus their share of flesh and copious flow of liquor to satisfy their thirst.

Into the scene came a young Collector, who accidentally happen to know of the plight of these men and women, when he was invited to attend a marriage function of three joginis, which by itself is a very rare event. Normally the Joigins do not marry; at most they enter into a live-in relationship, bear the children of their partner, with no legal strings attached. However, the Pothurajus are permitted to marry and their sons grow up as Pothurajus, with their hair never cut, since birth. They tie it up on the top of their head and make a tuft like the Sikhs in the north India. The Pothuraju children often get teased and their long hair pulled in schools and they make this a convenient excuse to excuse themselves from studies. Many of the children of Pothurajus do not attend schools and are left with no option but to pursue their father’s vocation. The elder Pothurajus also, with the tuft on their head are easily identifiable in a village crowd and are often discriminated. Because of the power of black magic they seem to possess, people tend to avoid them and hence they do not get sufficient employment opportunities. Nobody calls them to work in their farms or fields. Hence, their income is the bag of paddy received during the harvest festivals or ooru panduga- the village festivals- or the paltry amount they get performing the rituals. Thus they were in a very bad condition.

The Collector, who had taken charge of the district just three days back, was taken to the marriage of three jogins by Mr Sheik Meira, the Chief Planning Officer of the district who was also holding charge of Executive Director, District Scheduled Castes Development Corporation. In this function the Collector first met a few of the Pothurajus who had come to the marriage of their “wards”. Out of sheer curiosity aroused by the slight of these "out-of-place looking" people, Collector got into a conversation with the Pothurajus and invited them to come to his residence for detailed discussion after the marriage ceremony. They obliged. Pothirajus were pleasantly surprised to see a very inquisitive but receptive Collector and felt confident to pour their heart to him. They narrated their plight and the sufferings they undergo in the name of tradition. One of their kin had died two weeks back while performing the Gaav ceremony, in which they bite the neck of a sacrificial lamb and bleed it to death. The blood and some flesh of the lamb had choked him to death. Many of them had their front teeth missing or worn out due to these barbaric acts. Sayanna, the leader of the

group confessed that many of them are fed up with the barbaric life they are forced to live and expressed desire to join the mainstream. They could not say No to perform the rituals, fearing back lash from the society. They feared that the villagers will blame them for any bad things like a crop failure or drought or untimely death of a cattle or a person that may happen in the village. They were afraid that the little income they get would dry also up. They were clearly in a dilemma.

The Collector knew that this unusual problem warranted an unusual solution. He had to take on a tradition which was going on smoothly for over 700 years! Pothurajus and the jogini systems were interlinked, for only Pothurajus were ordained to convert girls to Jogins and ensure perpetuity to the system of Jogins. Reforming Pothurajus would mean, indirectly taking on the Jogini system, hitting at the lustily indulgences of the village elders. This means that he had to take on the big and powerful. To be fair, some of his predecessors had attempted rehabilitation of Joginis. Some of them provided houses to old Jogins and resettled them with the help of NGOs working in the field. But not much steps were taken to prevent young girls getting trapped/ transformed as Joginis, though there was an Act of the state Government banning the Jogini system.

After a series of consultations with some like minded citizens of the town, he was convinced that if he has to fight out an entrenched tradition, he has to have numbers by his side. He called the elders of Pothurajus and told them that he would help them to overthrow their burden of this barbaric tradition, if they can mobilize a critical number of at least 100 -200 people. He sent the Sheik Meira along with representatives of some NGOs working to inculcate scientific temperament among masses to support them. Many rounds of discussions were held, covertly and overtly. The team would brief Collector regularly about the apprehensions and fears of the community. He assured them of all legal protection and reasonable financial support. The self-confidence of the Pothurajus was at such low ebb that they were afraid of taking any step against the system. When the word started getting around that something is brewing among the Pothurajus, some of the NGOs who were in the rehabilitation of the Jogins dissuaded the pothuraju elders telling that the Collectors come and go, but they have to be in the village for years and incurring the wrath of village elders do not auger well for them. This whispering campaign had very debilitating effect at the beginning. But with more and more rounds of personal discussions with the Collector, the confidence of the elders started rising. In a month's time, the number of Pothurajus who were willing to come out of these barbaric tradition started swelling from 20 to 100 to 200. Luckily for the Collector, by then the elections to local bodies were announced by the government. The village elders got busy with the Zilla Parishad elections and they did not have time or inclination to take the silent revolution brewing in their backyard seriously. Moreover the new Collector was an unknown entity to them and as the "honey-moon" period of the new administrator was not yet over, they did not expect anything path breaking from a

new person who had just taken over the reins of the district. The ministers in the district were busy with the finalization of the candidates as the political cauldron in the district was boiling over with the emergence of a new party -TRS- pitching in for a new separate state, whipping up local sentiments. The established parties like TDP, Congress, CPM etc were trying to keep their flock together from pouncing by the new party. The code of conduct due to the elections was in place. The conditions were getting more and more congenial.

During the hectic parleys, the Collector realized that the Pothurajus' powers were packed in the tuft of hair on their head, which they are forbidden to cut, since birth. The hair on their head was the key to their emancipation. To cut their divine power, he found out to his amusement, he had to get their hair cut! Thankfully, any re-grown hair does not have the sanctity of the congenial-hair and cannot restore the lost power! So he asked Meira to organize a function to have a mass haircutting of the Pothurajus. The date was fixed. The hair-(g)razing event had to be a hush-hush affair. Sayanna and the elders from Pothurajus fraternity were taken into confidence. They promised that at least 200 Pothurajus to turn up. Forty barbers were identified and were briefed about their noble deed to be performed. The timing was just right for the kill! The local ministers were out in other districts, campaigning for the elections. The local leaders were running for their nominations as candidates. Overnight a shamiana was erected in the Collectorate grounds. In it four separate enclosures were earmarked. For the taking bath after the haircut, 10 thatched cubicles were made. Collector asked fire service personnel to be present with their water tanks filled to provide the necessary logistical support to facilitate their post hair cut ablution. They would fill the tanks kept in the stadium with water, and replenish it as soon as it gets empty. A philanthrope was roped in to provide a towel, shampoo sachets and small soap bars for the ablutions.

The D day dawned on 21st June, 2001. Somehow the media came to know about the event to take place, but did not know what was going to happen. They could not make any guesses, as the Collector was new to them. So, in the morning at about 7 AM, a large contingent of media persons collected at the Collector's camp office (residence). Some of the national TV channels had also sent in their reporters in anticipation of something weird going to happen. There was commotion in front of the camp office. By then nearly 400 Pothurajus had assembled in the Collectorate grounds, which was on the other side of the road, opposite to the camp office. They were dressed in their traditional outfits. With their hair let down and dressed in the blood soaked rags, with the trinkets tied around their legs, pothurajus provided colourful a spectacle to the camera men. The reporters insisted on meeting the Collector. He obliged and when he came out, he was pummelled by a barrage of verbal firing. Who came him power and under what authority is the Collector tonsuring Pothurajus?, Which act gave him power? Is there any coercion and use of force? Is it a case of atrocity being committed by an

upper caste Collector on the scheduled caste Pothurajus?.... These were some of the volley of staccato questions fired at him by the reporters. The mobile phones were not much in existence then, so there were no live questions on the TV. He calmly answered them and dispelled many wrong ideas they had. It turned out that one of the Pothurajus, who had cut his hair long back and had good education was working with a newspaper in Hyderabad, which was about 150 kms away from Nizamabad. The evening before, he came that something dramatic was going to happen to Pothurajus at the Collectorate grounds this day. He was aghast that his tradition is getting assaulted, though he himself was settled happily in Hyderabad and his children were studying there in English medium school. He was under the notion that Collector was going to tonsure the Pothurajus and called up his media friends to cover the atrocity being done by an upper caste Collector on Pothurajus.

When the Collector explained the proposed course of action, the media personnel calmed down. He made it clear that there is neither a tonsure nor any coercion. It's open only to those who are coming forward on their own to cut their hair. He told them to see the event and form their opinion. He requested them not to be prejudiced. By then phones started coming to the Collector's camp office to find out what was going on. The Minister of the state for the welfare of scheduled castes wanted the Collector to talk to her and stop the event. Luckily in 2001, there was very little penetration of the mobile phones and she could not get to speak to the Collector. Collector avoided her calls and told his staff in the camp office to tell the office of the Minister that he is in the field and would talk to her when he returns. She threatened the camp office staff to tell Collector to stop the event or else she would have him booked under the provisions of the Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes Act.

By 8 o'clock, about 500 Pothurajus and about 400 Jogins had collected in the ground. Collector made Sheik Meira announce repeatedly over the mike that this is a voluntary event and only those who voluntarily wanted to remove their hair need to come forward. The group was taken in a procession to the local Pochamma gudi- the local temple of the deity of Pothurajus. Collector wanted the Pothurajus to pray to their god and take her permission, if at all anybody wanted a nod from above! By 9 30 they came back from their temple. By then the crowd in the grounds had swelled to over 2000. Pothurajus were seated in a separate enclosure and Jogins in another. Local public and press and media men intermingled. The meeting started. Mr KV Satyanarayana, the Project Director of the DRDA was the master of ceremonies. He explained why the Collector had organized the function and stressed the volunteer nature of the event. He called upon volunteers to come up and speak on the Dias. Sayanna spoke first. When he started narrating the plight of Pothurajus, the press and media men started understanding the importance of the function. Their hostile attitude started mellowing down. One by one, five Pothurajus spoke and they hoped that with this they

would be able to join the mainstream. They felt that they are now willing to overthrow a burden of over 700 years, which kept their people away from leading a normal life. They hoped that Collector would help them in get a livelihood. Collector made a noting of this and called Sheik Meira to his side and held discussions. Mr Satyanarayan called for volunteers from Jogins to speak. When they spoke of their sufferings they had undergone in life, it brought tears in many eyes. One of them said that she thought that the best day in her life was the day she got resettled under the aegis of the NGO. She said that it was today the best day in life, as she saw light at the end of the tunnel to the system of Jogins. She was thrilled that at least from now onwards there would be fewer girls who would be converted to Jogins, as many Pothurajus would be shorn of their powers to convert girls to Jogins. The press was getting more and more impressed. Many of the lady reporters who were leading the charging brigade against the Collector were beginning to smile at him. Some of the Jogins started their narration and in less than a minute was so overwhelmed that for the next few minutes they were just crying out in front of the mike, in front of the crowd! Collector spoke in the end. He explained how this event was conceived and reiterated the voluntary nature. He said that there is no pressure on anyone to give up their lifestyle. He said that he assured that whoever comes forward to cut their hair will not be victimized and anybody in the village ill treating them would be severely punished. He said that as the head of the Scheduled Caste Development Corporation in the district, he would see to it that some rehabilitation package to those who come forward to cut their hair would be worked out to ensure their livelihood. He reminded that the strength lies in numbers and that the community should stand united.

Sheik Meira announced over the mike that whoever wanted to voluntarily cut their hair and join the main stream may step forward to another enclosure. In five minutes about 150 "deadly looking" Pothurajus strutted in confidently. Another 50 trickled in, may be induced by the mob psychology. Wielding the mike, Satyanarayana asked them " are you all coming forward on your own to cut your hair and to join the mainstream". " aunnu memu swachandaga mundukku vosthunamu" (yes, we have come forward on our own) they said in chorus loudly. Satyanarayana asked them to stretch their hand forward and take a pledge. It went something like this: "We, Pothurajus have come forward on our own to join the mainstream of life, in presence of the District Collector. We promise that we will give up our uncouth and barbaric life style. We will not perform the barbaric rituals like gavu etc. We will not convert any more girls to Jogins. We will not succumb to the pressure of village elders to force these girls to prostitution. We will send our children to school to study. We will not let our children to follow our life style."

They were led to a table on which photo of the Hindu deity, Saraswathi was kept. (15 kms from Nizamabad was the famous temple of Sarawathi at Basar. Since

Saraswathy temples are very rare, thousands use to come to Basar to the temple, and Nizamabad was the nearest big town to Basar. Hence goddess Saraswathy had a special place in the minds of people of Nizamabad.) The Pothurajus who were willing to go for their hair cut, were asked to close eyes, pray to Pochamma and then leave their blood stained clothes, whips, lashes and their trinkets in front of the photo of goddess Saraswathi. (It was felt during discussions that when pothurajus come out of the old tradition, they should not be left spiritually unanchored, they need another divine power to latch on. The popular choice was goddess Saraswathi, who was the presiding deity of the nearest big temple). From there they were led to the enclosure where 40 chairs were kept, each with an attached barber. It took five to six rounds and about 50 minutes for clipping the long hair and shaving off the beards of 221 Pothurajus. The barbers did a good job, their barber-ic skills putting an end to many barbaric practices forced on the poor pothurajus! The Pothuraju minus their congenial hair was powerless! The disempowered Pothurajus, shorn of his hair since birth and the long dirty beard went to the thatched temporary bath rooms for a quick ablution. Out came cleaner looking men, smiling and relieved of 700 years of tradition and each looking exactly like any other man in the town. They then went to the Collector to thank him. He gave them a clean dhothi and a khandua or the shawl to be worn around the neck. It was all smiles and laughter all over. Some Jogins were found playing the game of identifying the man who converted them into Jogins! A few of them got it right, but many were stumped by the clean looks and absence of beard/ moustache of the Pothurajus. The media went berserk interviewing all the good looking men who have joined the mainstream. Their ire and fire against the Collector had by now changed to paeans for a young Collector who ended a long barbaric tradition.

The newspapers, next day had very positive coverage. (One of the papers said that the Collector was from the state of Sri Narayana Guru and what he did the day before was inspired by the similar social revolution brought about by Sri Guru in Kerala about a century back). The ministers on their return to the district had to tow the politically correct line. They said that they were happy to see the end of such a bad tradition in the district, though in the mind they had apprehension of any backlash from the village elders affecting their votes in the ensuing Zilla Parishad elections. To these elders, they privately blamed it all on the new Collector! Sayanna was to report to Collector any heckling, bad treatment meted to them by the villagers. The Superintendent of Police also issued a statement asking the people to report to the nearest police station, if any such incident was seen. These steps ensured no untoward incidents.

One week later Collector called a meeting of these 221 men. They were very happy and relieved, but livelihood issue was staring at their face. Collector circulated a paper asking them to ask "anything under the sun they want" to help them make a

living. It was a surprise when the requests were collated. Many of them had asked for a pair of bullocks for ploughing, some of them wanted bullock carts, a few enterprising fellows wanted submersible motors to pump water from their bore wells and very few wanted an acre of land! Collector was moved at the simplicity of these people. He expected them to ask costly thing like tractors and jeeps, but they were asking for bullock carts and bullocks! He directed the ED to see that within one month all their requests are fulfilled. It was indeed done and gave a credibility boost to the Collector. This solid credibility base helped Collector in taking up successful drive in the district against Child labor and up scaling a drive for better sanitation by constructing of over a lakh toilets in six months and formation of drinking water committees etc later in his term. This trust bonding prompted more and more Pothurajus to meet Collector and requesting for another function.

The event on 21st June,2001 was shown on many national news channels. Mrs Rajaleshkmi Rangarajan, the wife of Mr Rangarajan, the Governor of the state was one of the people who saw this on TV and was moved. She has seen the plight of Jogins in her native village and could appreciate the import of the event. That evening itself she phoned Collector and congratulated him and said that she would bring this to the notice of the Governor. She did and a week later there was a call from office of Governor, congratulating the Collector for taking this bold initiative and asking for more such events till all Pothurajus are brought into the mainstream. Small small functions were organised

In October 2001, Collector started an "Indur Utsav" - which was the starting of the concept of district tourist festivals later taken up all over the state of AP. This was a weeklong festival to show case the tradition and arts of Nizamabad, earlier known as Indur till it's name was changed in 1905. The Governor was the chief guest of the closing ceremony. So in the morning of 28th October, 2001 another function was organised to liberate the Pothurajus from the traditional shackles. 31 Pothurajus removed their tuft. Since Governor happens to be the chief Registrar of the state marriages of 10 Jogins were also organised on that date and they were given certificate of marriage by the Governor himself. It was interesting to see the marriages of Jogins attended by their grown up children. Till then the marriages of these Jogins had no legal status and at best was a live-in relation with the father of their children. They were left high and dry if the man left them for another woman or went back to his legal wife and they had no legal claim on his properties. This was corrected by giving them certificates of marriage, that too by the Chief Registrar of the state.

These events caught the attention of Justice D.K.Ramaswamy, member of National Human Rights Commission as some of the opponents of the event had complained to NHRC about the alleged human rights violation by the Collector. He wanted to assess the facts for himself and made an official visit to Nizamabad in

November 2001. After interacting with the Pothurajus and Jogins for half a day, he went back appreciating the efforts of the Collector. In his report submitted to the National Human Rights Commission on 12-11-2001, he wrote "The NHRC actively associates itself with all these humanitarian and humane programme of action undertaken by the District collector, Asok Kumar and I congratulated him for taking such bold measures for their emancipation".

On 1st August 2002 another batch of 235 pothurajus relinquished their powers in the presence of the Collector. By the end of September,2002 nearly 600 Pothurajus had come forward to cut their hair. By then it could be safely said that the system of Pothurajus had ended in the district.

For the efforts made, the Collector, AsokKumar a 91 batch IAS officer of AP cadre, was given the "11 th Red and White award for act of social courage".

Tail piece:

The success here in carrying community along for taking up successfully socially relevant programs helped the Collector to get closer to the people. For the first time the district stood first in the state in achieving family planning targets for two consecutive years. Their total involvement helped in construction of 1.2 lakh individual toilets and toilets for girls in 1000 schools in just six months in 2002; in formation of 1168 habitation drinking water committees which resulted in a drastic reduction of the GE and diarrhea cases in the district. We conducted "Indur Utsav"- a pioneering concept of 5 day district tourism festival in 2001 and 2002- raising funds from the local people. There was a perceptible betterment in the quality of life of the people.

As a mark of their appreciation, the loving people of Nizamabad district were magnanimous to rename an historical lake near Nizamabad city as "Asok Sagar" after the Collector, after its transformation as a major leisure spot!

For more details pl visit:

<http://www.nizamabad.nic.in/code/pothuraju.htm> and

<http://www.nizamabad.nic.in/code/pothu.pps>