

A cut above the Rest in history
Reformation of Jogini/Pothuraju System in Nizamabad district

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Pochiayya is a quintessential “Pothuraju”. His frail body is punctuated with these self-inflicted whip lash scars, which seemed to be his fate lines. The blood-shot eyes, rotund and dark red betrays its perceived powers of black magic. They are dark because of the voluminous helpings of local liquor he is addicted to. 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, his hand held a whip 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 locked in these hair locks, like Samson. If it is a dance in the Gavu festival, he has to bite the jugular vein of a 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 Telangana. They are the priests of the scheduled castes and are divinely ordained many duties. They are 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 its harvest. They are required to sacrifice he-buffaloes (Pothu in local language) before its plantation for getting good yield. 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 chillies tied in a string. In short, Pothurajus have a very important and nasty role in the life of the village people in the rural and backward areas of Telangana.

More gruesome is his role in the life of many hapless young girls in his village. Empowered by the divine tresses, he performs the sacred duty of marrying a 5-6 year old girl to a 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. Most of them play the role of sex-workers of the village 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. While the older Joginis get resettled, Pothurajus dutifully convert young girls as Joginis to keep the tradition alive. Thus ensuring a continuous stream of retirements and replacements, making it a sustainable proposition—a win-win situation!

In 2001 a Collector of Nizamabad district ventured to take system head-on. This unusual problem of a tradition going on smoothly for over 700 years warranted an unusual solution. Pothurajus and the Jogini systems were interlinked, as 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. 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.

Collector realized that the Pothurajus' powers were packed in the tuft of hair on their head, which by tradition they are forbidden to cut, since their 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 local ministers were out in other districts, campaigning for the elections. The local leaders were running for their nominations as candidates. The timing was just right for the kill! Overnight, Shamianas with 4 earmarked enclosures were erected in the Collectorate grounds. For the post-haircut ablution, 10 thatched cubicles were made. Collector asked fire service personnel to be present with their water tanks filled to provide necessary logistical support to facilitate it. They would fill the tanks kept in the stadium with water, and replenish it when it gets empty. A philanthrope was roped in to provide towels, shampoo sachets and small soap bars for the ablutions.

The D-day dawned on 21st July, 2001. The media, somehow, came to know that some event is to take place, but did not know what was going to happen. They could not make any guesses, as the Collector was new. By 7 AM, a big contingent of media persons collected outside the Collector's camp office (residence). Some national TV channels had also sent in their reporters anticipating something weird is going to happen. Commotion was building up there. By then, nearly 400 Pothurajus, dressed in their traditional outfits, had assembled in the Collectorate grounds across the road, opposite to the camp office. With their hair let down and dressed in the blood soaked rags, with the trinkets tied around their legs, these Pothurajus provided a colourful spectacle to camera men. The reporters insisted on meeting the Collector. He obliged and when he came out, he was pummeled by a barrage of verbal firing. Who/ which Act gave him the power and under what authority is the Collector tonsuring Pothurajus? Is there any coercion or use of force? Is it a case of atrocity being committed by an upper caste Collector on the scheduled caste Pothurajus?.... etc were some of the volley of staccato questions fired at him by the reporters. Mobile phones were not much in existence in 2001, and there was no live telecast. He calmly answered them and dispelled many wrong ideas they had. It

turned out that one among the Pothurajus, who had cut his hair long back, had good education and was working with a newspaper in Hyderabad, about 150 kms from Nizamabad, came to know the evening before, 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. He called up his media friends to “expose” the atrocity being done by an upper caste Collector on the “priests of Schedule Caste people”.

When 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 and 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 Schedule Castes Welfare 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 on his return. 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 Schedule Castes Act.

By 8'Oclock, about 500 Pothurajus and 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 Pochammagudi- the temple of the deity of Pothurajus. Collector wanted the Pothurajus to pray to their god and take her permission, just in case if anybody wanted *a nod from above!* By 9:30 they returned 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. KV Satyanarayana, the Project Director of the DRDA was the Master of Ceremonies. He explained why Collector had organized the function and stressed the volunteer nature of the event. He called upon volunteers to come up and speak from the dais. 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 to get a livelihood. Collector made notes of their demands and asked Sheik Meira also to keep track of it. Mr Satyanarayan called for volunteers from Joginis to speak. When they spoke of their sufferings they had undergone in life, it brought tears in many eyes. The tipping point of the event came when one Jogini said that she so far had 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 Joginis. She felt 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 Joginis. The press was getting more and more impressed. Some lady reporters who were leading the frowning brigade against the Collector were beginning to smile at him. Some Joginis were so overwhelmed, that they broke-down in less than a minute, and for the next few minutes they were just sobbing on 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, memuswachandagamundukkuvosthunamu" (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 Sarawathi temple at Basar. Since Saraswathy temples are very few in numbers, thousands of students used to come to the Basar Sarawathy, along with their parents. The nearest big city to Basar was Nizamabad. Hence goddess Saraswathy had a special place in the hearts of people of Nizamabad.) 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 dhoti and a khandua or the shawl to be worn around the neck. It was all smiles and laughter allover. Some Joginis were found playing the game of identifying the man who converted them into Joginis! A few of them got it right, but many were stumped by the clean looks and absence of beard/ moustache of the Pothurajus. 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 ending a long, barbaric tradition.

The newspapers, next day came with very positive coverage. (One wrote that the Collector a Kerala native, would have been inspired by Sri Narayana Guru, the great social reformer of Kerala. The ministers on their return to the district towed the politically correct line and said that they were happy to see the end of such a bad traditions, though they apprehended backlash from 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 issued a statement asking the people to report to the police stations, if any such incidents. These steps ensured no untoward incidents.

One week later Collector called a meeting of these "reformed" 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 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 a few 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 asked for bullock carts and bullocks! He directed the ED to see that within one month all their requests are fulfilled. It was indeed done. It boosted the credibility of the Collector, which helped him to take up more reform drives in the district, This trusted- bonding also prompted more and more Pothurajus to meet Collector and requesting for another function.

The event on 21st July, 2001 was shown on many national TV news channels. Mrs Rajalekshmi Rangarajan, wife of Mr Rangarajan, then Governor of AP was one of the people who saw this on TV and was moved. She has seen the plight of Joginis 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 the Governor, congratulating the Collector for his this bold initiative. He was told to continue the efforts till all Pothurajus are brought into the mainstream.

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 week-long festival to show case the tradition and arts of Nizamabad. (earlier known as Indur till its name was changed in 1905, following a night halt by the Nizam of Hyderabad on his way to Nanded). The Governor was the chief guest of the closing ceremony. So in the morning of 28th October, 2001 another function was organised to liberate more Pothurajus from the traditional shackles. Since Governor happens to be the chief Registrar of the state marriages of 10 Joginis 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 Joginis attended by their grown up children. Till then the marriages of these Joginis 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 (NHRC) 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 Joginis for half a day, he went back appreciating the efforts of the Collector. (Justice Ramaswamy also visited "Veilpur" mandal in Nizamabad, where another social revolution was being brewed then by the Collector. This was to end the "child labor" rampant in the mandal due a flourishing beedi-rolling business. Emboldened by the success and the goodwill earned with the drive to reform Poturajus and Joginis, the Collector had embarked on a drive to enroll all children in the 5-15 year age group in schools, with the active involvement of the community. Veilpur was declared a "Child labor free "mandal on 2nd October, 2001. (It was so successful and sustained that even after 23 years, when an event was organized as a part of Azadi Ka Amrut Mahotsav by VVGiri National Institute of Labor, Ministry of Labor and Employment, Government of India on 8 October 2021, to commemorate the declaration of Veilpur as the first "mandal with all children in school and no child labor", there were no school-drop out kids in the mandal. The open challenge given to press and media to show "atleast one child out of school" had no takers. More details can be seen at <https://asokji.in/node/877>))

In his report submitted to the National Human Rights Commission on 12-11-2001, Justice Ramaswamy commented that "The NHRC actively associates itself with all these humanitarian and humane programmes 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 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 virtually ended in the district.

For this bold initiative, the Collector, G. AsokKumar, a 1991 batch IAS officer of erstwhile AP cadre (now Telangana), was given the "11th Red and White award for act of social courage".

More details and supporting documents can be seen at:

<https://asokji.in/node/875> or <https://asokji.in>

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. The drive against “Child labor” in Veilpur with community participation was so successful, that it is sustained even after 24 years and acknowledged by ILO; Ministry of Labor and Employment, Gol; and is a part of all training programs on child labor at the VVGiri National Institute of Labor, Noida till this date in 2024! With community participation, construction of 1.4 lakh individual toilets and toilets for girls in 1000 schools was done in 2002; (ahead of “Swatch Bharat Abhiyan”); Habitation drinking water committees set-up in 1168 habitations. These resulted in a drastic reduction of the GE & diarrhea cases in the district. “Indur Utsav”- a pioneering concept of 5 day district tourism festival conducted in 2001 and 2002 by raising funds from local people was replicated in other districts. All these efforts, collectively resulted in a perceptible betterment in the quality of life of the people, a goal which the Collector had mentioned as “*his priority*”, while taking charge as the Collector and District Magistrate, Nizamabad district in May 2001..

As a mark of their appreciation, the loving people of Nizamabad district were magnanimous to rename a historical 200 acres lake near Nizamabad city as “Asok Sagar” after the Collector, after its transformation as a major leisure spot!

The transformational effect, revisited after Twenty years:

As part of the Azadi ka Amruth Mahotsav , Asok Kumar the then Collector, came for an event on 8 October 2021, organized in Nizamabad by VV Giri National Labor Institute, Noida under Ministry of Labor and Employment, Gol, to celebrate 20 years of successful, sustained intervention ‘to eliminate child labor and declaration of Veilpur Mandal, as Child labor free’. In this event the then Sarpanchs, Caste elders, Zilla Parishad members and people involved in that campaign were honored for their role in sustaining it. Coming to know of ex-Collector’s presence, many ex-Pothurajus and ex-Joginis came to the venue to meet him. It was a proud moment for him when they narrated how their life has been transformed to a life of very high dignity and quality in the last 20 years. Some were elected as Sarpanchs/ Upa-Sarpanchs of their villages, increasing their respectability. One of them said “Even Reddies now come to our houses to solve their local issues”. Many ex- Joginis proudly said that their children have got educated, and working in private and government institutions, some even in USA/Canada. Some had their daughters, who otherwise would have had to follow a condemned life, are now working as ANWs or ASHA Workers or as nurses in Gandhi Hospital, Hyderabad, living with dignity. They were overwhelmed with emotion narrating these to the Collector who had made this transformational difference to their life, two decades back. They hugged him, touched his feet, put shawls, showered flowers and garlands etc, much to his visible embarrassment! Pothurajus, now well groomed, watched it standing tall and smiling, nearby.

It all started with a cut that made history.