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Aspects of Telugu Culture

D. Vijayalakshmi, Ph.D.



Abstract

Understanding culture is multifarious in nature while at the same time extremely indispensable to our basic comprehension of life. Do we understand culture in its true sense or are we interpreting only from the colours of certain sects and creeds? Where do we need to start our beginnings of understanding culture - at individual or family or group or regional level? This paper is an articulation of my thought process on what should we focus when researching Telugu Culture so as to understand native Telugu culture in the midst of whirling myriad global changes.

The Word *Culture*

The word *culture* encompasses the common lifestyle of a given group of people. We find cultural differences among every linguistic group. For instance, we can distinguish the differences quite clearly among the Telugu speaking population. Caste, profession, region, economic status, educational background, life style, etc., form the basis for the formation of, or appearance of differences. In spite of all these variations, it is the language and culture that help group the various divisions or categories of people under one banner called the Telugu Culture.

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What Is Telugu Culture?

How do we interpret “this” as Telugu culture and what does it stand for? What we hear, read and see being followed may not be representing the / true indication of what Telugu culture is. The next question that now arises is “What then is Telugu Culture?”

“The life style, civilization, culture, art, passions and professions... of the majority of the people of a given society or a group should be brought to light. Regional culture and history of a place or people should be studied with “this” objective in mind” said Prof. Betavolu Ramabrahmam, delivering the Presidential address at the seminar of Andhra Pradesh Historians in the year 2002, held at Anantapur. This exceptional suggestion has stirred a deep desire in my mind. For quite some time I have been wondering whether focusing on the rituals followed by families, both by region and by caste traditions, may help unearth the intricately woven common Telugu culture.

Wider Scope

The word *culture* has a wide scope. It may be compared to the swan that drinks water that is not clear, but its body keeps the good stuff needed, and gets rid of that which is unwanted. May be, the unwanted and unutilized too have something to say about the culture of the people. That’s the reason why it’s said that it’s difficult to define culture.

Where do we have to start the study of culture from? – Should it begin at the individual level? Or is it at the family level? Or is from a group of people belonging to a particular caste? Or at the village or regional level? Or at the language level?

A Reflection of the Lifestyles

The various studies done so far, on the aspect of culture, are only a reflection of the lifestyles of the rulers and that of the people who have occupied higher positions in those places. These facts have been written and well preserved. In the process, the life style of the ordinary common man has been forgotten, neglected and thus has remained un-reflected.

Right from the beginning of the 21st century, there has been lot of unrest and uncertainty in the society. This uncertainty has ushered in vitality. Again this uncertainty in the areas of caste, tradition, region and religion by itself forms part of culture. The entire renaissance is happening around this field/area called culture. Hence the need for a comprehensive study and research on Culture.

Family Domain

In every family, there are a number of rituals that are followed right from the time of conception to death and at every stage of growth and development of the human being. Some of these could be beliefs restricted to a particular family, clan, caste etc. Some could have local or regional flavor. Some could be adaptations to geographical variations or climatic conditions. A few of them could be related to religion. And a few others could have popped

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up because of the suggestions from a priest or a learned person. A detailed inquisition into the details of the rituals at every stage of life needs to be thoroughly studied and documented.

Traditions

For instance, let's take the tradition that is followed to celebrate the first pregnancy of a woman called "Seemantam". It is said that, "*Seemantam*" is performed, to ensure the safety of the child in the womb all along its journey from its conception to its landing on the earth. Now the questions before us are: Does every Telugu family follow this tradition called "Seemantam"? The answer could be yes or no.

If YES

- a) Is it being performed alike across the various cross sections of the society? We know that the answer is No. If so,
- b) Why do these differences arise among the people of the same linguistic group?
- c) In the midst of these variations, what are the rituals that are common for all the people or families?

If NO

- a) Why are the rituals not being performed?
- b) What could be the reason?
- c) What is coming in the way?

If "Seemantam" is believed to be performed to turn away uterus related or pregnancy related disorders, then, by not performing "Seemantam," do they invite trouble? Or do these families have some other ritual(s) that is / are completely different from "Seemantam"?

If YES

- a) Do these rituals have any thing in common? Are they part of Hindu traditions?
- b) Or are these adaptations of other neighboring linguistic groups belonging to the same language family.

As a word of caution, the influence of Buddhism and Jainism in the formation of rituals cannot be overlooked. They also have to be kept in mind before any conclusion is drawn.

Continuing the above argument, there are numerous traditions and customs that are followed like the ones below:

- a) Post-delivery of the child like

the *Punyahavachanam* – purifying ceremony on the 11th or 21st day of delivery, the naming ceremony, cradle ceremony, feeding ceremony, etc.

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- b) As the child grows, there are rituals to celebrate the first in every aspect of growth like crawling, sitting, standing, taking the first steps, attempting to write, etc.
- c) As the child reaches adolescence, there are rituals to celebrate its entry into adulthood.

These should be studied meticulously trying to get the underlying common thread called the culture that binds these variations into one entity.

Every Variation Deserves Study: Wedding Traditions

Similarly, a thorough study and research should also be done on every variation of each aspect that leads to an eight day long or sixteen day long marriages that were celebrated once, and are still being celebrated in some sections of the Society even today.

The traditions that are followed for a wedding are:

- a) *Pelli chupulu* - making arrangements for the would-be bride and groom to see each other for the first time; *Nischithartham* or betrothal; pounding the turmeric, *pandiri veyadam* - laying the pandals; *Nalugu* – smearing the gram and turmeric paste, *PELLI KUTURU CHEYADAM* – getting the girl looking like a bride.
- b) Then come the various customs and traditions that are followed before and after marriage, like: At the respective houses of the bride and the groom - the various pujas that are performed invoking the ista devata, kula devata, vamsavali devata, kutumba devata, perantlandlu, veerulla, village goddess/ town goddess. The variations in each of these should be recorded without any bias.
- c) At the function hall, as part of the tradition, *uregumpu* – taking the groom around the town before reaching the function hall; *eduru kollu* – the bride and the groom’s families welcoming each other and exchanging promises; puja for the pots of Ariveni; planting the *palavelli komma*; smearing oil and sandal wood paste; followed by *mangala snanalu*; getting the bride and the groom ready, *naama teertham*, washing the feet of the groom, *kasi yatra*, *kanya daanam*, *kankana dharana*, *mangala dharana*, *talambralu*, *kongu mudulu*, *naagavalli*, *homam* showing arundhati nakshatram, *vasantha dharana*, *odibaalu*, gifting the sisters of the groom, gifting the newlywed; *disti tiyadam*, *sare* - exhibiting the things the girl would be taking along with her as she leaves for her in-law’s house; *appagintalu* - entrusting the girl to her in-laws.
- d) Now at the in-law’s place, *gadapa tokkinchadam*- entering the in-law’s house, then the rituals that go with the first night like the auspicious time – *nalugu*, *pooja*, *dampati poja*, gifting the bride, *nalugu* again the next day morning, *vasantotsavam*, and then feast with the close family members.

The questions that arise here are:

- 1) Do all the Telugu people follow these rituals?
- 2) Are they really part of Telugu culture?
- 3) Are there some more rituals that are still left unperformed due to various reasons?

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Other Important Items of Culture

On similar lines, there are as many variations as there are rituals to be followed in the event of death happening and post death also.

As these rituals are followed, the role played by or the importance given to other living creatures like animals and plants, the way they are used or prayed needs to be observed and decoded. The eating habits too play a vital role. Each occasion has a specific delicacy to be made and served or offered. The floral or curved patterns called muggulu, drawn in the front yard of the house also have a lot to contribute towards the study of culture. Toram or the festoons - the various materials used and the way they are strung together also have a say in deciding the culture of the people. Thus from the family culture, to the village, town, country and finally to the global culture, every aspect of it, needs to be studied as a separate entity.

Comprehensive Approach and Possibility of Changes

In the process, we also understand the role played by religion, region, country and language in establishing the culture of a particular linguistic group.

With the passage of time, as the Telugu people slowly move towards globalization spreading their wings across the continents, many new trends come up, and can be noticed. And all these eventually become part and parcel of the Telugu culture.

This study on Telugu Culture would help in understanding which of these that are being practiced today originally were part of Telugu culture. It also helps unearth the culture native to the Telugu speaking community.

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