

Caste politics, developmentalist state and transnational giving: A study of Guntur NRI philanthropic circuit

Guntur district in the state of Andhra Pradesh has a strong pattern of 'high skilled' transnational migration to the US from among the 'dominant' caste groups, particularly the Kammas. This significant outward migration of doctors, scientists and engineers, often from rural hinterlands, to the US started in the 1960s and peaked after the Y2K boom. Two macro-structural ways to understand why a 'culture of migration' emerged in the region linking Guntur to the US through strong caste based migration patterns need to be situated within a) the history of the region to get a fuller picture of why particular groups have been rendered more upwardly and transnationally mobile than others, and b) globalisation processes.

Globalisation cannot be taken as a point of departure in world history, but nonetheless it has certain attributes specific to itself. The time-space compression that Harvey talks of or the time-space distanciation that Giddens attribute to being a consequence of modernity, has coupled with the increasing demand for flexible labour for specific kinds of work especially after the 1970's oil crisis and global economic restructuring, to fuel post Fordist economies in the West (Kearney 1995). These developments have made some scholars of migration to call for a renewed understanding of the transnational phenomenon of migration that is increasingly seeing a collapse of spatial differentiation between the centre and the periphery or the rural and the urban, and where production, consumption, ideas of community, politics, identities have become deterritorialised (Kearney 1995) and reterritorialised, and have simultaneously produced embedded cosmopolitan subjectivities, which some scholars have also referred to as vernacular cosmopolitanism (Bhaba 1996, Werbner 2006).

Transnational migration and by extension globalization opened up possibilities for minimally exposed rural youths from dominant castes in coastal Andhra region and facilitated their movement into the 'highly volatile global arena of information technology through a complex globally dispersed labour chain' (Biao 2007), particularly the US (one of the fieldsites where I conducted my study, other important sites being Guntur district and Hyderabad). Understanding the region specific developments in the past few decades help us uncover the role caste played in facilitating this outward migration. Post independence, in districts like Guntur members of the dominant landholding caste-class groups benefitted from the green revolution technologies and could enjoy the benefits of higher education, which though public, was accessible to only those who had the choice of not investing their labour in farming – a chief occupation the Kammas associate with themselves. It was observed that as a strategy to mitigate risk, families would send one son for higher education while another would look after the fields (Upadhyaya 1987). Unlike other regions in India where green revolution technologies were introduced simultaneously, what set central coastal Andhra apart was a strong collective social imperative placed on higher education. This was economically supported by caste notables who came together to build caste hostels, provide scholarships, and later build private colleges as well) which made Kamma youths more suitable to become high-skilled

professionals and cater to the demand of cheap and flexible labour in western countries like the US where demands for doctors arose after the Vietnam war. Guntur Medical College became an epicentre in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s which generated this pool of MBBS doctors who migrated to the US after clearing the ECFMG exams to do residencies in the US, thus setting a precedence of a culture of transnational migration (Connell 2008) that continues till date.

Perhaps as materialisation of the abstractness of the dual but congruent feeling of belonging and uprootedness with their place of origin, these transnational migrants started sending back various forms of reverse flows to their home regions. One such reverse flow is diaspora philanthropy. In my research, I have attempted to build a conceptual framework to understand how and in what ways caste connections and regional specificities shape philanthropy, and how philanthropy in turn further shape the structure of a caste group that has become transnational. Unpacking how and why diaspora philanthropy gained traction in Guntur in the last two decades and what particular shape it took provides key insights into the inner workings of state in post colonial India and highlight the nexus that caste networks and the state are enmeshed in. What I argue in this paper, is that in order to understand the nuance of this transnational philanthropic circuit, we have to emphasise on the dual process of transnationalism that is structurally defined (making certain groups more mobile than others) but where human agency not just interprets but also negotiates socio-political spaces such transnationality offers, informed as well as limited by the economic logic of capitalism.

The trend of diaspora philanthropy in the region has political roots and can be traced back to Chandrababu Naidu's Janmabhoomi initiative started in 1997, aimed at tapping private resources for public purposes. Janmabhoomi's mobilisation effort to involve people in rural development, planning and decision making through Panchayati Raj Institutions in Andhra Pradesh (that eventually collapsed due to pressure from people who saw it as inherently anti-democratic) saw a unique twist when the Guntur Zilla Parishad set up an NRI Cell in 2002 to receive philanthropic donations from NRIs for their village infrastructure development. It was a pioneering model of Public Private Partnership in philanthropy where NRIs got involved. Telugu Association of North America or TANA (one of the four national Telugu associations in the US that is dominated by the Kammas) became an important partner in providing institutional support from the US side. TANA has since then partnered with local public and private players for various transnational philanthropic projects within Guntur. Interestingly the trajectory of NRI involvement in Guntur waxed and waned with the fortune of the Telugu Desam party or TDP (which has Kammas at its helm). Kamma NRIs trusted the party and donated to the NRI Cell for their village development when TDP was in power and when the Congress (seen as a bastion of Reddys) took over the Zilla Parishad and the state government, the NRI donations through the Zilla Parishad dried up. However, diaspora philanthropy in the region found other channels, purposes and destinations and has in fact increased over the years with education and health becoming important fields for NRI philanthropic intervention.

Telugu diasporic communities participate in philanthropic activities often in their towns/villages of origin. With a deep bond to their places of origin or *swanthaooru* (villages they come from) the outlook of the Telugu diaspora is very 'provincial', which one informant described as 'umbilical'. What motivates the diaspora to give are not merely issues about prestige, visibility, love for *swanthaooru* and business or political opportunities for these NRIs and their families. Linking this to a post liberalisation scenario where private capital is increasingly targeted for public infrastructure, the nexus need not always be for direct economic gain but for other intangible but equally important gain in social capital (Carruthers 2003). Situating capital accumulation within translocal processes generated by present-day neoliberal policies and financial capitalism, Jean and John Comaroff have presented strong arguments about the emergence of particular forms of translocal economic processes and practices in contemporary postcolonial and post revolutionary societies (Comaroffs1999). In India caste emerges as a particular node of capital accumulation and as I argue, globalisation and migration does not weaken the node but transnationalise it. Diaspora philanthropy in Guntur has a strong caste bias that becomes visible when one uncovers the channels, the destinations and the beneficiaries of these diaspora philanthropic interventions. These interventions then need to be seen as *protectionist* – or as protecting caste-class interests of the Kammas either directly or indirectly as I will explain through different examples in my paper.

Caste has been central to local Indian economy. Studies like those of David Rudner's (who explores the Nattukottai Chettiar bankers in colonial state of Madras), Sharad Chari's (who studied the garment industry in a provincial town of Tiruppur catering to global demands) and Ritu Birla's (whose work is on the Marwaris and how they interacted with the colonial state) have sometimes obliquely and sometimes directly highlighted the role of caste as being vital in capitalist enterprise. Ashwini Deshpande in her book *Grammar of Caste* (Deshpande 2011) has shown through empirical data how contemporary formal urban labour markets reflect a deep caste bias. My research shows that strict rural/urban and formal/informal demarcation in labour market is a misnomer and labour market in general reflect a strong caste prejudice in the guise of meritocracy.

Kammas harp on their merit. Having migrated to the US to achieve upward class mobility, often these migrants took informal routes like body shopping consultancies (often manned by people from their own castes who provided fake work experience certificates if and when the need arose) to insert themselves in the formal yet flexible US job market working as contract labour. Espousing the cause of the upper middle class and working to protect its class interests, philanthropy becomes an important means for the Kamma diaspora to consolidate their class position; yet this diaspora has worked as a caste to achieve this class mobility. Unequal power relations in India due to caste hierarchies and power dynamics in AP and race relations in US perhaps make philanthropy emerge as a balance offsetting the tension between the logic of capitalism that demands greater flexibility and the rootedness to the soil or *Telugu Desa*.. The question then is what role is philanthropy playing here beyond Bourdieuan explanation of cultural and

social capital accrual? I hope the feedback will help me with theoretical insights to fine grain my arguments and further dig down to understand what philanthropy steeped in caste tell us about capital accumulation in post colonial local and translocal economies.

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