

Religious Hegemony and the Role of Neo-rich and Priests in Contemporary South India

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Abstract- The caste, religion, and economic and political domains have a vital space in Indian society. There are extensive studies on these; however, given less significance to read about the religious hegemony of the neo-rich through changing religious sentiments and raising the ritual status of the deity and themselves. The neo-rich and other religious forces cumulatively act to produce a religious identity and elevate the status. They understand the dynamics of these aspects presented through two religious' traditions, local and mainstream. The first is dominant ritually within closed geographical boundaries; the latter is a dominant mainstream religion representing large population membership of practice in India. Religion with a dynamic character is contested in multiple ways in which the representatives of its spread are political leaders, priests, and neo-rich. Such instances in city space have given scope for the identity crisis. The local deity traditions have given a new opportunity for the neo-rich and priests to change the sacred structure and rituals of practice that aimed at creating self-identities in the reflexive religious modernity. The neo-rich and Brahmin priests have become manipulative and monopolizing forces of society's religious and social structures. These expose the power relationships in the society and constitute religious hegemony. This kind of differentiated worship can structure and restructure social relations without hindering other social aspects intertwined with religion, particularly in South India.

I. INTRODUCTION

Culture and economic development are considered important among the visible characteristics of a society. These two elements have dynamic features that contribute in multiple ways to the development of the society, in which ideologies of politics, religion, and hegemony are predominantly looked upon.

Politics has hidden roots in religion, which drives it to have hegemony. The political field primarily aims to have political dominance by utilizing numerous elements of society. India experienced political dominance, strategies of survival, and continuous hegemony, either by outsiders or insiders, in which first economic and later religion acted as significant factors. Further religious movements and religious propagators influenced multiple religious communities. Two kinds of division in Indian society can be observed, regional and religious. However, the present study gives a new dimension to such divisions while understanding the religious ritual structures and practices that define the religious hegemony as the dominant religious practice in India. Most people practice the Hindu religion, in which the local and regional religious practices have been included. Though there exist other religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and Sikh, their prominence spread across local, regional, and sometimes across nations. However, Hinduism became a dominant religion representing large population membership in India. In these religious contestations, representatives of their spread are religious gurus, political leaders, priests, and the neo-rich. Migration is another approach to establishing a religious practice in new geographical boundaries and its spread. These acted as a medium to develop social relationships with a specific social structure. This structure is supervised by religious, political, legal, and many other social forces. These social forces cumulatively produce a religious identity and spread out to elevate its status. While appealing to many, it gains strength and power, thus contesting other religious traditions, which have the characteristics of easy assimilation and appropriation characteristics. This process of contestation can be observed in Indian historical epochs, in which foreign invaders such as Muslims and Christians and at the local Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Kings, with the help of religious preachers, and now through elites, politically

influenced, and other dominant castes of Hinduism, have administered the Propagation of these religions. These people, as practitioners of Hinduism, have become the leading agents in molding religious sentiments by embracing or countering them. Many scholars^[1] Elucidated that India had Dravidian religion as dominant before the Aryan invasion; subsequently, the Dravidians were conquered by the Aryans. In contemporary India, particularly in South India, even today, there appears appropriation and assimilation of local deity rituals that are neither part of Dravidian nor Hindu but believed as local into the dominant Hindu religion by the Brahmins. Adding to this, Ramachandran^[2] Commented that ruling dynasties of the medieval period explain the Aryan influence on South India, dominance over the temples, and religiopolitical elites. These indicate the process of homogeneity to heterogeneity to the homogeneity of Hindu religion without hindering its caste Hindu hierarchy of orthodoxy. Thus, religion is the best space medium to express power and knowledge dynamics aptly^[3]. The present study of Hyderabad local deities *Peddamma* and *Yellamma* would build and explain the above arguments.

II. NEO-RICH AND RELIGION

Many societies worldwide have experienced the influence of a particular population group that redefined the system of exploitation, exploitation, and differentiation on the grounds of economic and ritual status. These groups enjoy social, economic, political, religious, and intellectual status and develop a connection between these elements. Their wealth and capital accumulated would give a shift in the hierarchy of status, thus forming a separate socioeconomic group called elites and neo-rich. They are not the representatives of the public or elected; indeed hold power and influence the people, being in the minority. The earliest societies uttered superiority such as Kings, chiefs, elders, priests, and others, occupying special status to perform specific social functions, thus forming a distinct group of individuals who resemble as elite. As societies advanced scientifically and expanded geographically, social functions also expanded and diversified. In this process, the people who enjoyed their elite status in the ruling, law-making, worship, and community organization had a breakpoint, some disappeared, and others continued.

The presence of these elites and neo-rich in a community or social geography would monopolize various resources and become a manipulative force in the political, socioeconomic, and religious spheres.

In a State like India, the elite has peculiar characteristics based on socio-religious and economic aspects. Economically, the status could be ascribed and achieved, but religiously the status has unique observation elements. Indian social system is characterized by caste Hindu hierarchy, which defines the status of both aspects. That hierarchy is four-fold, Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaisyas (merchants), and Shudras (agriculture and servants), in their superiority from upper to lower, respectively, but, finally, added the Untouchables. The hierarchical status of these castes is immobile and prescribed duties to perform, which ought to follow. However, in the current scenario, there is a shift in the prescribed duties; neither these obligations prohibit to opt something outside the restricted nor encouraging but experiencing liberty. To most people themselves, due to the influence of external forces, moving across the boundaries, breaking and redefining particular sentiments of the social system. The occupations, the habitats have been changing, the laws of religion are being redefined, and excluded are included based on economic status, political status, and education. These circumstances lead to changes in the socio-religious-economic system of the country.

Nevertheless, of experiencing a change in these, caste hierarchy did not change, but it is in the continuum, either in the city or rural. People have been practicing different cultural and religious practices unique to their caste group, the difference in deity worship, marriage, dressing, fests, or any other practice. However, standard fests and everyday god or goddess worship are also practiced, but the caste hierarchy developed a wide gap between worshippers and worshipped.

The elite group may include many individuals and families with special categories, such as industrialists, cinema stars, politicians, landlords, business magnates, and many more. Among them, the study would read the role of such elites, who are part of the Hindu caste hierarchy and achieved economic status through various means such as political and

occupational and have been influential in religious sentiments of a community or the society. Upper castes such as Reddys and lower castes such as Shudras and Untouchables (Dalits) have acquired and occupied prominent roles in political, economic, and religious life. They are said to be neo-rich in this context. In Telangana, all the caste groups, including their sub-castes, have changed their socioeconomic life. People can occupy jobs in private and public sectors, and many are also self-employed. In and fringe of Hyderabad, whoever had land, either cultivable or barren, acquired huge capital due to increased land rates, which led to achieved status and, in turn, entry into multiple profit motive activities irrespective of their caste occupations. Goudas, traditionally toddy tappers, and Yadavs, traditionally milk sellers, gained huge profits through their traditional occupations and other occupations, which improved their economic status and became dominant caste groups in Hyderabad city.

Both the upper castes and Shudras are contenders in numerous aspects. Both have political entry and occupy reputed positions in political life. Eventually, they emerged as neo-rich, without any change in their caste hierarchy, which in turn discovered new resources and collective activities to control the community and its resources. In this process, the neo-rich keep working on the cultural and religious aspects of the community as a whole and contribute to coordinating, maintaining unity, and developing and continuing social institutions affiliated with the patterns of religious beliefs and cultural values. It is presumable that being in the elite and neo-rich category, their tendency is exploitation, but it is marked and reflected in their manifestation in various contexts. They act as agents of change and influence. Indian society exhibits such instances where elites and the neo-rich contribute toward religious faith and belief. For instance, participation of well-known athletes, political leaders, and industrialists in the religious activities of a religious institution, such as taking blessings of a religious guru, offering prayers, and any other ritual performance. Such instances impact the larger population and thus lead to an increase in people's participation. Indirectly, it leads to exploitation through religious beliefs on the one hand, and on the other, people are motivated mentally. Hence, the neo-rich contributed to the upgradation of

religious sentiments, influencing the community, creating new livelihoods, and constituting hegemony.

This neo-rich, controlling the religious sphere, can be differentiated from the other elites. This is not on the economic status, popularity, authority, and power, but on their relationship with the community and contribution towards the upgradation of certain elements that are commonly followed and practiced. It is neither their duty nor compulsion of the community but motivated by vested interests. The contribution of the neo-rich in the religious sphere would build a space to honor one another. This gives rise to a differentiated hierarchy based on their contribution to the socio-religious institutions of a society. Again, between elite and neo-rich groups, not all have equal prestige, but those who possess power more than others and contribute to the sacred. The neo-rich are mainly formed from the sub-castes of Shudras, such as Goudas and Yadavs, and Sudra upper castes, such as Reddys (in minor, because most of them are already in the elite category). The following cases would introduce the neo-rich's contribution to Hyderabad's religious sphere concerning the local deity worship.

P Janardhan Reddy (PJR) was a labor union leader, and a political leader commonly referred to as a labor leader. He believed in the blessings of the mother goddess. Through his political networks, he noticed that the lands of the temple were under encroachment by some elite groups. This created a chance to construct a temple rather than leaving temple lands in the hands of the elite and other political leaders, and crossing all the hurdles paved the way to complete the temple construction. PJR's dream was to build the temple on the hilltop so that it would get a panoramic glance, but it did not succeed. According to religious doctrines, they boiled the milk till it stood out; whichever side milk flowed and stopped, the new temple was constructed—at the same time, constructing 300 workers in one shift and another 300 in another shift rendered labor. Within nine months, they completed the temple construction and brought the sculptured idol of the goddess in a procession. In the early morning, the goddess idol was erected in the sanctum while the sun rose. The old idol of the goddess submerged into the waters of the river Godavari. All these activities are performed by Brahmin priests based on *Agamas*. To keep the statue

of the goddess in the right place in the sanctum and to open the temple for public worship, PJR invited religious guru Sri Sri Sri Hampi Virupakshaswamy (Head of the monastery), who performed *Kumbhabhishekam*. From 1994 onwards, the goddess has been worshipped in new forms (a civilized form of worship as said by Brahmin priests) throughout the year.

PJR passed away in 2007; though he is not alive, his followers still follow his rules and regulations and move according to his family members' guidelines. PJR family members initiate all the unique functions and festivals. The other thing to notice is that there are two aspects of the temple, the construction of the temple and its publicity. PJR handled these two very carefully; on the one hand, he built it and did publicity through his friends and family members by visiting the temple regularly and celebrating functions by sacrificing animals.

It is evident from the earlier times that rulers assigned huge lands to temples and built temples^[4]. To protect these endowments State put efforts into utilizing the resources for religious purposes. Without the supervision of these resources, most of the lands would have been encroached on and converted into residential and commercial built spaces in Hyderabad. In the 1990s, the surrounding land of Peddamma temple was encroached on by a group of elites and other political leaders. As narrated by two older men 'with the gentrification of Hyderabad city, the then ruling government planned to hand over these lands to the film industry, converting them into residential spaces. The hills have good vegetation, and the lands are not registered lands of any individual; nevertheless, most of the hills were already occupied, and the only land left to occupy was temple land'. PJR followers stated that till the time of initiation to construct a new temple, no one claimed the ownership of the land, and the temple, even no restrictions on the public worship of the goddess. However, in the year 1989, a petition was filed claiming that the petitioner was the owner of 2.30 acres of land attached to the temple and also claimed that the goddess is their family goddess and it is not a public space of worship; hence it cannot be notified as a religious institution under endowment department. In 1991, the high court of Andhra Pradesh (undivided State) passed a

judgment in favor of the endowment department. Thus, today it stands as a space of religious ritual performance and an identity mark of PJR.

III. RELIGIOUS PRIESTS

'A caste system is one whereby society is divided into several self-contained and thoroughly segregated units (castes), the mutual relations between which are ritually determined on a graded scale.^[5] Adding to this, Sinha^[6] Writes, a segmented social and cultural system, 'arranged in a social hierarchy defined in terms of the cultural value of the purity and impurity of these occupations and styles of life. According to the Hindu caste hierarchy, Brahmins had the upper hand, followed by all others. Each of these castes has many numbers of sub-castes again with differentiated hierarchy, which 'reveals the fact that the bases of distinction leading to the exclusive marking off of those groups were: first territorial or jurisdictional separateness; second, mixed origin; third, occupational distinction; forth, some peculiarity in the technique of the same occupation; fifth, sectarian differences; sixth, dissimilarity of custom; and last adventitious circumstances, suggesting certain nicknames'^[7]. 'Thus, the whole caste system is a very intricate structure which places social groups on innumerable and minute steps indicating their status and function.'^[8].

Of all the occupationally differentiated groups, only those cases that fall under the priesthood of either Sanskritised or non-Sanskritised religions have been discussed. Brahmins' occupation was the priesthood. They are said to be first among the hierarchy, availed formal education, and occupied positions other than the priesthood, such as accountants, ministers, and many other positions with high ranks when the Indian sub-continent was divided into multiple princely states. In the later period, they occupied multiple workplaces, including low-rank positions. However, the change in occupation did not affect the caste hierarchy defined on the line of occupation. Occupational restrictions shifting to up or below is no more a religious restriction.

Nevertheless, the caste system continues with its immovable elements within the boundaries of Brahmanical religious dominance, associating with

other upper castes. Among the Brahmins, several sects and sub-sects are varied based on the geographical regions, such as South India, North India, and North-East India. They also differ in their cultural practices; for instance, Bihar and West Bengal Brahmins eat meat and fish, whereas the South Indian Brahmins do not and are vegetarians.

To become a priest, one has to undergo training in the schools meant explicitly for teaching religious texts and hymns called Veda Pathshala. Brahmins were this school's only attendants and learners and were awarded the priesthood. There is a second kind of priest that exists from the lower strata. According to the Indian constitution, OBCs (approximately 110 sub-castes) and SCs (approximately 59) occupy the lower strata at the lower level. The other castes (OCs) include Reddys, Vaishyas, and Brahmins. The OBCs include sub-castes of Shudra such as Golla, Tenugu, Gouda, Kummari, Chakali, Mangali, and others. All the sub-castes have occupations based on the Brahmanical Hindu religion, and no sub-caste has been allotted to act as a priest in any form. However, some people act as priests, called Shudra priests, who worship the local deities. The Shudra priests emerge from OBCs. They worship, Yellamma, Maisamma, Poshamma, Idamma, Durgamma, and many more, through animal sacrifices.

The third kind of priest is from Dalits. The main sub-castes are Mala, who worked as laborers, servants, and village watermen, and Madiga, whose occupation was associated with leather works, shoe making, and remover of animal carcasses. Of these two sub-castes, there are two kinds of priests: Pambala priest from Mala and Baindla priest from Madiga. Dalit priests perform Pooja to worship the village goddess. However, these people are untouchables; the village as a whole seeks their needs on a festival day to propitiate the village deity. It is believed that they are well versed with mantras and supernatural powers. These people are following their age-old tradition, balladeers in singing and storytelling.

The priests from Shudra and Dalits did not attend any school to learn any syllabus to become a priest and were awarded no degree of the priesthood. However, they are accepted by the larger population. These priests differ in vast when compared with the Brahmin

priests. Brahmin priests are daily performers at the temple, who use numerous items in worship, such as milk, ghee, honey, curd, flowers, water, saffron color, and many more items, and are half naked. In contrast, the Shudra and Dalits worship their deities twice a year or on need-based with limited items, wearing a casual dress covering the whole body and no sacred thread. Another aspect that differentiates both priests is the presence of a woman priest (older woman) among the Shudras and Dalits, but not in Brahmins. Nowhere in India among the Brahmins, a woman is (or was) a priest, even in the reviewed literature did not give any evidence in support. However, the women acted as propagators of religion. Another visual element is that there are people who get possessed by the goddess or god and have extra supernatural powers, among the Shudras and Dalits.

Decades of years ago, there were Shudra and Dalit priests in Hyderabad's various local deity temples. However, in contemporary Hyderabad, almost all the local deity temples have been officiated by Brahmin priests. Notwithstanding, very few temples are officiated with Shudra and Dalit priests and Brahmin priests. On the other, most of the goddess temples have been officiated by Brahmin priests appointed by the endowment department. In not recognized temples of the State endowment department, at some places, they officiated either with the help of local leaders or themselves. In the Yellamma temple, the Shudra people have been acting as priests for many decades, but after the undertaking of the temple by the State, Brahmin priests were appointed. In the later period, their number increased to ten, but not the Shudra priests. Only two Shudra priests were working in this temple, whose priesthood is still hereditary. Otherwise, it could have been replaced with Brahmin priests. Of these two, the younger is a learned priest with Sanskritic ritual knowledge, whereas the senior priest does not know any chants and mantras, except two chants. People who prayed and worshiped the goddess with the help of these priests in earlier times fulfilled their wishes without the help of the Brahmin priest. It was a Shudra priest who mediated between the worshippers and worshipped.

At the Peddamma temple, before the 1990s, a Tenugu sub-caste woman was working. This priesthood is neither hereditary nor appointed by any other. Until

then, the frequent worshippers were the Golla community and nearby Lambadas (Scheduled Tribe). An increase in the number of devotees developed an innate urge (for Golla women) to be at the temple and keep clean surroundings. She helped the devotees to worship the deity, but she did not have any specific role to perform concerning the goddess worship, either as a priest or any other. No mantras and hymns were chanted but developed a relationship between the worshippers and worshipped. It was not a matter of question and debate then, but today it is a debatable space, if there is no Brahmin priest, their wish is not fulfilled, and the pattern of worship is not guided. The worship is predefined under non-Brahmanical religious practices. Whoever visits this temple themselves organizes the worship process and moves ahead. The Shudra and Dalit priest communities accepted the mother goddess as their caste goddess, who safeguards their well-being. Thus they respect her and worship them. It is considered their duty to act as priests and propitiate her. According to information provided by various community people, Tenugu community people are best practitioners and worshippers of goddess Peddamma; Madigas worship goddess Yellamma; Gouda worships Goddess Yellamma; Golla worship Peddamma; and Chakali worship Poshamma, as their caste goddesses. These are varied based on geographical differences and practices.

The Brahmins are divided into six main subgroups based on the worship patterns of god or goddess. Of these Saivites- who believe and worship Siva; Vaishnavites- believe in Vishnu and worship Vishnu incarnations only; Vishwa Brahmans- believe in Vishnu incarnations and also Siva incarnation; and Smarthas- believe in both Siva, Vishnu, and their incarnations. These are well-known and popular sects, but the other two, Sakteya- believe in and worship the mother goddess; and Ganapatha- which only worships Ganesh, is not widespread, according to the priest's narrations. People of all these groups work as priests in most of the temples of south India, with varied worship patterns and some similarities based on the agamas. According to an older Brahmin priest, 'Agamas are not read outside south India, the rest depended on Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and Itihasas, which may be written in Devanagari or Sanskrit language and also differs in their philosophical

explanations. In the historical background of Hyderabad as a princely state, the Brahmins of Hyderabad are divided into three classes^[9] Based on their locality, one Maratha, two Kannadi, and three Telugu. However, there is not much literature available on the entry of Brahmins and their influence in the Telangana State. However, under the Kakatiya and Vijayanagara sovereign, the influence of the Brahmins was noticed. It was believed that the fall of these dynasties led to the decline of the Brahmanical influence. The Brahmins always sought the help of the State or the Kings to spread their religious practices. Even in the Nizam dynasty, Brahmins had space, not with their priesthood but in administrative aspects. The Telugu Brahmins were considered self-restraint for ages, again divided into various classes based on their religious beliefs.

In Hyderabad, worship concerning local deities is practiced in Smarthagamam and Shakteyagamam. The Smarthas are associated traditionally with Sankaracharya (Head of a monastery). Smarthas, though not a sect in themselves, derive collective identity through their adherence to and teaching of these precepts and the heads of the Kanchipuram monastery in the past and present^[10]. The Smarthas in Telangana are divided into Vaidikas and Niyogis. The Vaidikas are the priests officiated in the temples to perform Pooja, whereas the Niyogis are the bureaucrats or the accountants and revenue collectors. The Vaidikas are considered high in their ritual hierarchy, and Niyogis are lower. The Vaidikas do not officiate in most of the temples in Telangana, where the god or goddess is worshipped through the sacrifice of an animal. They perform all life cycle rituals, are non-indulgent, adhere to Vedic rites, and live according to Sastras. They recite and teach the Vedas and have a vital role in law and religion. They do not intermarry with the Niyogis. In Telangana, the Niyogis are referred to as 'Karanam'. Today, the Niyogis and Vaidikas are working as priests and officiating in many other occupations, emphasizing the need for higher education and ritual status.

IV. TEMPLE AND ITS ECONOMICS

In every society, the economic element has its relation to all other elements, including religion and culture. Though the subject deal with production, distribution,

and consumption in terms of capital or wealth, it would also contribute to the religious sentiments of the society, which satisfy the desires and meet the people's consumption levels by those religious sentiments which act as opium. These can be viewed in ritual production, distribution, and consumption. The earliest societies exhibited reciprocal exchange of goods and services, but the developed and developing societies dominated the market system, where money was the only form of exchange. Thus, religious institutions such as temples express such exchange forms in contemporary India.

The economic aspects of the religious sentiments are observed as the neo-rich and priests are the producers; State, neo-rich, and priests are distributors, and the people are consumers. The Brahmin priests are the primary agents to give rise to most of the religious elements in society. However, there are neo-rich who act in parallel to Brahmins in terms of religious practices. Even in the medieval period, kings and Brahmins acted as producers and distributors. Brahmins raised the idea of constructing a temple; the King constructed it again. Brahmin became the leading distributor of religious practices within and outside the religious structure. King became a secondary distributor and ordered the people to follow the defined principles of practice. Finally, King and people became the consumers who ought to practice and follow the guidelines of a Brahmin. This could be well understood concerning the temples of Yellamma and Peddamma. The tradition is age-old but redefined by Brahmins and neo-rich. Neo-rich constructed these temples with no good economic activity but religious importance. By constructing a temple, neo-rich laid a new pattern of worship structure in which the people and the staff (both secular and religious) should follow the new pattern. This process is oriented toward establishing an economic activity through which the temple gains wealth and other endowments. As discussed above, priests and trustees introduce new rituals or Pooja, and to become a part of this Pooja, an individual (consumer) has to pay in terms of money. Thus the devotee exchanges the service of wish fulfillment with the deity where a priest acts as a mediator. It is the price value of that service through which individual gains contentment believing that his/her wish would be fulfilled. The price value of religious belief would add to the wealth of the temple

and helps in the development of the temple and religious practices, and keep consumers in regular contact. The increase in wealth would increase the role of the State, neo-rich, and priests. Hence, the temple acts as a center for producing wealth and religious sentiments and an employment producer. These temples once were zero wealth accumulators; today became the wealth accumulators of more than one crore rupees per annum.

The religious beliefs produced and distributed in the temple are consumed by the devotees, the neo-rich, the elites, and the State. The produced practice has to be marketed, which is done through wall posters, processions, and any other means that attract the people to consume it by being a part of it. To illustrate, marriage celebrations at Yellamma temple, earlier restricted to a group of people, are now open to all, and many participate. However, to participate in certain specific activities, such as *Laksha Pushparchana* (Pooja with one lakh flowers), one has to pay Rs.10,116. The people publicize the same temple administration, producing new practices or continuing the old with modifications. Thus, the religious sentiments embraced the profit motive business approaches with delicate refinement. The establishment of a small market within the premises of the temple would take place. Indian Hindu religious people are the worshipers of a deity with coconut, flowers, sugar, milk, incense sticks, vermilion, turmeric, and much more. To make these readily available to devotees, little shops would exist, who have to pay rent to the temple to utilize the space. Another activity is to auction the sarees offered to the goddess.

V. RELIGIOUS HEGEMONY

The concept of hegemony is not used to describe a revolutionary perspective or the dominance of the elites in the capitalistic perspective. However, it is used to describe the hegemony of the religion, religious upper castes, and the neo-rich, over the local religious traditions and their struggle to continue their hegemony and power over the religious sentiments that produce enormous influence over the believers and actioners of that religion, in its historical perspective to the contemporary. As quoted by Sallach^[1] Referring to Gramsci, hegemony is a sure

way of life and thought is dominant in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations' and 'a dominant class, which controls the economic and political institutions of society, also possess privileged access to the primary ideological institutions of the society (Religion, culture, education, communications media)'. On the other, Lears^[12] Gramsci's cultural hegemony refers to 'the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group'. With the above definitions, based on the limitations of the study, of many elements such as ideology, political, economic, and cultural, it would refer to the dominance and superiority of a religious or social group; how the State is producing a space for dominance and in turn becoming submissive; and how the new religious tradition is perceived by those strata, who followed the age-old local religious tradition to worship the local deity in Hyderabad particularly and in South India.

Indian sub-continent has a dynamic element of unity in diversity, but it has a peculiar character, caste Hindu hierarchy. Perhaps, Indian educated and foreigners would be under an illusion that the role of religion and its influence is mitigating due to scientific education and prevailing reason with science. However, in south India, particularly in Hyderabad, religion carried out new dimensions, which would remind the Aryan's invasion over the religious practices of south India with added supportive dimension of neo-rich and State. The local religious tradition of deity worship has been assimilated and appropriated into Hinduism, arbitrated by the neo-rich State and Brahmins. It is erroneous to assume that, during the Muslim reign, religious practices other than Muslim are not encouraged. People had freedom of religious practice, and the State endowed lands to temples. Subsequently, less Brahmanical influence does not mean that the religion is dead if Brahmins are not there. However, the Brahmanical influence over the local deity tradition had less importance, continuing the caste Hindu hierarchy and domination of upper castes over the lower caste in all spheres.

There is abundant literature that elucidates on the Brahmins and other upper castes' hegemony over the lower strata, where the lower castes are not allowed to

enter the temple under Brahmanical religious restrictions, upper strata never participated in lower strata rituals, and nowhere a Brahmin performed Pooja to the local deity. Purity and pollution had a chief character in defining the group identity. From the last three decades onwards, the local religious tradition experiencing change with the dominance of the Brahmanical Hindu religious practices. Till the 1950s, almost all the mother goddess temples of Hyderabad were officiated either by Shudras or Dalits. The later period brought many changes due to the influence of Arya Samaj. The first change occurred in the old city of Hyderabad, where in place of the Shudra priest, a Brahmin priest was appointed, the name of the goddess changed to Mahankali, the sacrifice of animals was banned, the period of festivals changed, and the goddess was worshiped throughout the year; earlier she was worshipped once or twice in a year; the neo-rich, Yadav and Gouda became dominant.^[13] There is another piece of evidence with reference to the old city of Hyderabad, the Niyogi Brahmins, who worked with the Nizam, constructed a mother goddess temple.^[14] Even today, the temple's name continues with its name as *akkanna-madonna* Mahakali temple. The later period evidenced an increase in the Sanskritic mother goddesses' temples officiated by Brahmins and shrines of local mother goddesses officiated by Shudra or Dalit priests. Ever since the Brahmins and the neo-rich intersected and continued hegemony over the temple rituals and the community. The neo-rich reconstructed (old) and constructed (new) temples and appointed a Brahmin priest to carry out the worship. The State is also an added form to protect their hegemony. Brahmins have the dominant character in the ritual change process and propose introducing new practices. The neo-rich and Brahmins neither practiced complete Brahmanical rituals prohibiting the old nor allowed to continue its age-old, but practicing both, and the dominant is Brahmanical ritual practice through which the original forms of deity worship were excluded eventually.

The logic of the neo-rich is, 'without goddess how did we bear, she has given birth, we believe in her and worship. She is protecting our crops and families. This worship is in continuation of our forefathers; by worshipping her, they lived happily. Now the question is, when she is giving everything, in turn, what we are doing, except animal sacrifice, which is restricted to

family and can donate some amount, which may be misused, hence intended to do something more significant than these, that should help the community as well as other ordinary people, so expansion of the temple structure took place. Further, they added 'our forefathers must have felt that shortly they might construct the good temple, but due to financial instability that could not have happened. Today, we inherit, continue our practices, and become financially stable. So, initiation has been taken to construct the temple for public utility, indeed our vested interest. No one asked us to construct a good structure; to create a healthy environment, such as allotting separate places for animal sacrifice, fest celebrations, and a separate place for ritual performances, a temple has been constructed to keep them organized. Constructing a temple is not a big deed, but the foremost necessary factor is the administration of the temple through which people should feel happy; continuation of the age-old traditions is another factor. Otherwise, it negatively impacts the constructed and the deity worship. The past is crucial to make it alive in the present. An individual's birth is directly related to the deity, science occupies minute space in the thought process, and religious sentiments are dominant. The organized religious rituals of the past were given new forms and reorganized within a well-structured sacred space. In this process of reconstruction of religious sentiments, age-old tradition is considered significant but subordinated to Brahmanical religious traditions because the neo-rich are in the clutches of Sanskrit rites and Brahmanical religious hegemony.

It also elucidates that the State is neglecting particular religious sentiments and making a significant contribution towards the other (economic and political). Thus, it is necessary to have a local body and other administrative bodies to update and upgrade particular religious sentiments. When it comes to giving action to organized religious rites, both have mutual understanding, and priests are given more powers. Though the Brahmin has a dominant role in the ritual performance, he could not change anything prior notice and acceptance of the trustee and Executive Officer of the Endowment Department. In the Yellamma temple Shudra priest has a dominant role.

Nevertheless, Brahmin priests exert their status. Brahmin priests do have the intention of dominance because of the increased number of working priests (numerical dominance and ritual dominance), but the hereditary priesthood of Shudra suppresses it. Shudra priest said, 'Brahmin priests are given more importance in all the aspects, but till now nothing has happened in such a way, where they can dominate us, except in one or two-minute instances. They know that the temple belongs to my forefathers, but later the endowment department has taken over. Shudras do not show interest in this kind of profession because if the Shudras are employed in the temples, their attendance will decrease whenever the devotees come to know of it. Though we had training, caste always has its limitations. Brahmin priests have a dominant role in other temples, and rituals are redefined according to them'. This shows that, whatever may be your profession and excellence, your excellence is sometimes not valued because the caste Hindu hierarchy stands as a barricade. Hence, people of the existing structure invite and include external forces by excluding internal forces and fall under the hegemony of those included. It is presumable that, in Hindu religious practices, the lower strata, rather elevating their unique priesthood identity and significance, opt for upper caste priests. All the castes together take responsibility for elevating the status of a Brahmin priest and his need in life cycle rituals and everyday life.

Brahmins expressed that, 'indeed since ages Brahmins are powerful beings. They know the sutras, mantras, worship timings, process of salvation, fate, rebirth rules, and many more. The neo-rich and State are the body of administration, but they have to bow and take the blessing of a Brahmin priest because we are superior. Why do they visit the temple, perform Pooja, and construct a temple if not? An individual may be influential in society, but not at the place where he is being blessed. Brahmins perform Pooja for the welfare of the family and society. If we neglect to perform Pooja in these temples, deities lose powers; demons gain energy, and evil attacks increase. Brahmin is a protagonist; he is like a brain; whatever brain directs, based on that body, has to function. Added to this, they said, 'we do agree that when the deity has no form, people are not divided, but the later they are divided. Those who question this division should think that to

see the proper functioning of a society, god assigned some tasks dividing the people into different groups called four varnas. Each group has to perform its duties perfectly; society will function properly. There is an interrelationship between the Brahmins and the neo-rich, where Brahmins dominate ritually and authoritatively the neo-rich. Both continue their hegemony over one another and, in turn, both over the public religiously. The religious ideology of the Brahmins motivates and influences the people through the practices of worship. Belief in religious practice, fate, and fear always protect and help unconsciously sustain the priests' hegemony. There are two ways to interpret this consciousness: an ethnocentric and an achronic perspective; both are contradictory. To continue the religious hegemony, the dominant used a conscious ideology of appropriation and changing the cultural landscape of local deity tradition. This made the larger population accept it, assuming that age-old local religious practices and beliefs are false, under the pressure of an unconscious state of false conscious ideological explanations. To sustain further, the religious ideology of the local deity worship and its practice continuously adjusted, reconstructed, and articulated with the subjects of a society, which developed stronger religious beliefs and produced a common interest. 'But since they (Brahmins) were consciously working towards a popular audience, they readily accepted some of the diffused tendencies, general ideas and mental images which were widely spread in lower cultural levels, the intension was to harness these tendencies, so that the propaganda, couched in familiar terms, could more easily reach the masses^[15]. Brahmins are not compelling the people to give up their old tradition because it would threaten the survival of the new Brahmanical practice by disturbing its association with the deity and developing association with the other pantheon.

Temples became a space of identity and glory for both the deity and the builder. Their (those who constructed the temple) service and hard work were appreciated and spread the news by word of mouth, which led to a widely discussed topic among the believers. PJR left his imprints both as a labor leader and by constructing a religious temple. Various posters in the surrounding area of Peddamma temple displayed by the PJR youth association represent him as *Peda Jananiki Raju* (King of Poor People). The statue of PJR (made up of wax)

in the Peddamma temple attracts devotees. Looking at the statue, devotees try to know his contributions. One instance which supports this is three older women who hail from the remote village of Medak district who visited the hall of the PJR statue. They made assumed conclusions as, 'he may be a guru,' after a while, others explained, 'Sir was a great man, he constructed this temple, and he is no more alive. This exhibit that the devotees do not pose any questions to the priest or try to know about the goddess but show much interest in knowing other symbols that are not common and their relation to the temple, one such symbol is the statue of PJR that symbolizes his power and hegemony. Inscriptions from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries in the Saiva and the Vaisnava temples follow a particular format in which the donors (except the Brahmins and royalty) are mentioned by their names, pre-fixed by the place name, family name, and personal name, with hardly any indication of their caste and ritual status.^[16] In the Yellamma temple, inscription plates have been placed, but not in the Peddamma temple.

The neo-rich Gouda at Yellamma temple and the PJR family at Peddamma temple worked towards creating a religious belief and worship space. Gouda caste fellow bestowed approximately one acre of land as a gift to construct the temple and became the facilitator to continue the worship patterns and tradition. The founder trustee is responsible for increasing the temple's glory and attracting huge crowds. There are advantages and disadvantages of being a trustee. If the development happens, the temple becomes famous, and the founder trustee becomes the most discussant family among the public, with a favorable opinion. Suppose they do not handle a case that causes inconvenience to devotees that produce a negative shade. PJR's activities give different insights, he was a political leader elected by the people; second, he had a vast influence on the masses; third, he had a religious belief in the mother goddess; fourth, huge land available around the shrine that was encroached by elites; and fifth, mother goddess shrine became the site of power and representation. The power may include the economic and political and their sway in that geographical area, which determines the hegemony over one another. The position of power is to attract the people and keep them connected with the temple's religious practices. The political leaders and religion

are always in convergence with the temples, priests, and trustees, since the temple is a central point of the cultural practices of the Hindu religion; otherwise, it distant people and all other groups.

It is also widely believed that the South Indians worshipped Rudra (Siva), who used to live in the graveyard and live life with the dead. As the Brahmanical religious traditions began to diffuse, the people's lives were redefined with limitations and fear of religious belief and practice. Change is inevitable in religious practices, law, and order of a kingdom or society, whenever conquered by an outsider or a ruler. Religion had a particular focus during the reign of Pallavas, Pandyas, Cholas, and Vijayanagara. They expressed their religious practice and belief by constructing temples and endowed lands^[17]. In the Royal court, herbal medicine practitioners, people with magical powers, and shamans were employed to look after the well-being, but the entry of Brahmin with the knowledge of literature.^[18] Moreover, hymns replaced the positions of traditional healers and later dominated religiously and politically, stratifying the society hierarchically. Brahmins eventually dominated the royal court, as well as in social, religious, and economic spheres. Thapar^[19] Argues that 'the ritual superiority of the Brahmin over the Kshatriya was initially established by associating the King with the Gods'. Brahmin introduced religious ideology and spread across the State introducing new rituals and new sacred spaces with sacred performances. Brahmins introduced specific rituals associated with the King and his success in exploiting the King and continuing Brahmanical hegemony. For example, Ashwamedha^[20] (sacrifice of a horse), honored in the religious carnivals, elevated kings' status, and resplendence because 'King is only the highest human expression of service to the deity.'^[21] The paradigm of royal authority was 'being the most excellent servant of the sovereign deity, the human King sustains and displays his rule over men'^[22]. Thus, the King dictated to the public what to practice and what not to practice religiously, socially, and economically, as guided by the Brahmin priest. 'As legitimizers of political authority, the Brahmanas in the first millennium AD were given grants of land which enabled them to become major landowners. The institutions which emerged out of these grants, such as the agraharas, became centers of control over rural

resources and Brahmanical learning and practice.'^[23] This process led the Brahmins to include as many communities as possible into their religious realm and reconstructed the religious texts such as Vedas, Puranas, agamas, and others, and also redefined the rituals of the local pantheon through appropriation.

The sub-division of Brahmins into Saivites and Vaishnavite led to conflict and the spread of their own beliefs in south India. Both strived to dominate one another with the help of Kings. 'Bitter quarrels between the smarta and Vaisnava Brahmins, most of whom cannot explain the extraordinarily subtle philosophic differences between the teachings of their founders'^[24]. Their power of dominance was also threatened by the spread of other religions against the orthodox Brahmanical Hindu religious tradition, which led to a fight against them. For example, 'from the seventh century onwards, Tamilnadu Saiva sects attacked Jaina establishments and eventually succeeded in driving out the Sramanas. In neighboring Karnataka, at a somewhat later date, the Virasaiva or Lingayatas acquired wealth and status in commerce, persecuted Jaina monks, and destroyed Jaina images'^[25]. This war of sects within the Brahmins did not affect the religious practices of Hyderabad people, who are worshippers of Saiva, Vaishnava deities, and most prominently, so-called Dravidian religious goddesses. At a point in time, Brahmanical religious survival was threatened by the Sramanic religions, such as 'Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivika, and other sects, which denied the fundamentals of Brahmanism such as Vedic Sruti and Smriti. It was also opposed to the sacrificial ritual both on account of the beliefs incorporated in the ritual and the violence involved in killing animals. It was characterized by a doctrine open to all castes, and although social hierarchy was accepted, it did not emphasize separate social observances but cut across caste'^[26]. Nevertheless, it is the religious traditions of Brahmins as a whole that dominated the society, and the same is continued even in contemporary India, where either State or the neo-rich plays the role of King with substantial influence. The State and neo-rich contributed to spreading religious tradition by constructing temples and recruiting Brahmins to recite chants or hymns and perform rituals. They became powerful agents as keepers, propagators, and administrators of religious structures, customs, and rituals associated, which are

crucial^[27]. These are not the rulers and monopolies; they are the servants of the deity, and their authority is to 'allocate the roles, rights, and resources involved in the ongoing maintenance of worship.'^[28] However, the religious ritual monopolies are Brahmins. Unlike monasteries that preached the religious teachings to Brahmins, there were no monasteries or schools for Shudra or Dalit priests. Thus, the spread of their priesthood was limited in numerical, restricted to geographical limits, and in the process of extinction. A Shudra poojari expressed 'we are also called as poojari, we can do all the activities of what a Brahmin does, but those who seek our assistance is less because we are not Brahmins.' A Brahmin priest expressed, 'we are Brahmins who can do many things, which is proved through past experiences, but Baindla and Pambala priests are more significant to arouse and propitiate the fierce mother goddess. 'The co-existence and interpretation of the two modes of social organization, Brahmins and aboriginal or local, have flourished as one is led by Brahman priests and the other by local caste groups.'^[29]

These are the inevitable tendencies that reflect on the hegemonic religious aspects and Brahmins' conscious manipulation of the religious practices of the masses. The hegemony of the Brahmins and neo-rich could be observed as achieving dominance over the masses through establishing new ideas of religious beliefs that are accepted by the masses, not by any political force or economic force, but by religious belief as a force that is part and parcel of the society. Hence, these produce a cultural capital that 'provides the means for a non-economic form of domination and hierarchy, as classes distinguish themselves through taste'^[30] Moreover, it would play a central role in power relations. This change would cause continued inequality through its religious and symbolic representations.

CONCLUSION

The rigid Brahmanical religious traditions prescribing impurity that represent lower castes restricting temple entry are not so rigid today. The illiterate and low caste people relegated to menial jobs have found a place in the worship or service of the deity. This has successfully countered the lower castes to choose some other religions. Such incidents earlier were

conversions into Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and others. The best could be observed concerning Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's initiation of mass conversion into Buddhism. The founders of the Shamanic religions were not concerned about the deities, but the Brahmins related them with the Hindu pantheon incarnations. The heterodox religions questioned such ideology. Therefore, the Brahmanical religion was threatened. Thus, to regain its importance, spread its ideology, and make it dominant, the Brahmins migrated to various places and laid the foundations of Brahmanical religion by appropriating and assimilating local deities and their traditions. In South India, particularly in Hyderabad, Vedic religious impact was far less because of Muslim reign for centuries. The post-independence period had a space to increase Brahmanical religious traditions and practices. These religious practices extended their hand to raise communal conflicts. The local religious practices such as worship of mother goddess in any form did not produce any such instance, except in those conditions where vested interests of a group of Hindu orthodoxy try to contest over space in the old city of Hyderabad. The last decade evidenced an increase in the number of temples, religious functions, and processions of both Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic gods and goddesses.

The neo-rich and priests are the focal representatives of these new religious ritual practices giving an action form as defined. To continue this, the local religious goddess practices have inevitably changed. The religious structures became places of worship, as well as places of wealth accumulation. These processes could be aimed at two aspects majorly; one would be, being a member of the Hindu community with its inevitable character of caste Hindu hierarchy, Propagation, promotion, and practice of religious sentiments have been continued further; the second would be the vested interests of both the neo-rich and priests aimed to continue their hegemony in the religious sphere. Officiated Brahmin priests in the temples create a need for worship by introducing new spaces of worship patterns, where one more priest is appointed to perform that activity. More Brahmin priests in a temple indicate more activities that keep the temple environs and devotees busy with multiple rituals oriented towards Sanskritic Hindu processes. Hence, hegemony is continued though they are

numerically not dominant. However, religious ideology as the opium of the ordinary people always carried through their beliefs and gave rise to dominance.

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