

Telugu Proverbs and Disability

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Abstract

The global community of people with disabilities is a sizable demographic group with different geographical, socioeconomic, and ethnic roots. Despite these differences, their shared experiences of hardship, marginalization, and issues of identity crises help to bring them together. Across societies, they have faced systematic oppression perpetuated by the spread of stereotyped narratives, which is a phenomenon that has received insufficient attention. It is proposed that the origins of such institutional oppression can be traced back to cultural attributions. Mythical narratives are active vehicles of cultural transmission and play a crucial role in spreading these cultural attributions to generations. Hindu mythology wielded significant power over India and its subcontinental environs in determining many cultural attributions. This research tries to explicate the function of Telugu proverbs, which are rich in Hindu mythological imagery, in molding collective memory and maintaining cognitive narratives that contribute to the systemic oppression of people with disabilities. Through a scholarly investigation into this phenomenon, the study hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms by which cultural narratives perpetuate and propagate stereotypes.

Keywords: Systematic Oppression, Telugu Proverbs, Mythology, Disability, Culture

1. Introduction

Proverbs are condensed statements of cultural wisdom that encode collective memories and influence communal attitudes. However, when these linguistic artefacts promote preconceptions about disabled people, social repercussions follow. In society, such proverbs can impact social and economic paradigms, perpetuating biases and impeding the progress of people with disabilities. Beyond this, they have an impact on public discourse and institutional practices, deepening marginalization and limiting disabled people's access to resources

and their social participation. Furthermore, the psychological consequences include internalized ableism and stigma, which damage self-esteem and mental health. Addressing these difficulties requires addressing persistent preconceptions and building inclusive narratives that acknowledge the different skills and experiences of the disabled community. This article deals with such a universal concept by referring to a specific language, i.e. Telugu. In the first part, this article voices how proverbs become cognitively controlled narratives. This is followed by how these cognitively controlled narratives become imprints of systematic oppression. Then, the article explains some Telugu proverbs, followed by the conclusion.

2. Proverbs: Cognitively Controlled Narratives

Proverbs constitute integral elements within the vast reservoir of spiritual and cultural wisdom accumulated over generations, embodying profound insights into human experience, societal values, and linguistic expression. They serve as invaluable conduits for the transmission of knowledge across time and generations, encapsulating the distilled essence of folk wisdom. Ubiquitous across diverse cultures, proverbs and sayings are emblematic of each community's unique heritage and ethos, reflecting the collective consciousness and accumulated experiences of its people. The acquisition and comprehension of proverbs, both within one's own cultural milieu and those of others, facilitate a deeper engagement with the historical narratives and cultural nuances inherent within each community.

Central to the function of proverbs is their capacity to solicit communal perspectives on the objective realities of existence, thereby serving as veritable mirrors reflecting the socio-cultural milieu from which they emerge. These aphorisms serve as linguistic artefacts that encapsulate the collective wisdom and ethos of a particular group, offering insights into their geographical, historical, and

traditional moorings. As noted by Syzdykov (2014), proverbs represent a crystallization of cultural ethos, encapsulating the essence of a community's worldview and modes of expression [1]. Iranian scholar H. Mollanazar characterizes proverbs as "units of meaning within specific contexts through which speakers and listeners converge upon shared understandings." [2] Hence, it is clearly understood that the role of proverbs is a vehicle for communal wisdom and understanding.

Moreover, proverbs possess a dual nature, simultaneously embodying the individual wit of their originators while also manifesting the collective wisdom of the broader community. This duality is eloquently captured in John Russell's assertion that "A proverb is the wit of one and the wisdom of many" [1]. Thus, proverbs serve as linguistic artefacts that transcend individual utterances, becoming repositories of collective knowledge and cultural heritage.

In essence, the study and appreciation of proverbs constitute a vital aspect of intercultural competence and linguistic proficiency, enabling individuals to navigate and comprehend the rich tapestry of human experience and cultural diversity. Individuals can cultivate a deeper appreciation for the multifaceted dimensions of human expression and societal values by delving into the nuanced meanings and contextual nuances embedded within these linguistic gems. As conduits of cultural transmission, proverbs serve as bridges connecting past, present, and future generations, ensuring the continuity of collective wisdom and cultural heritage across temporal and spatial boundaries.

Proverbs constitute elements within the social fabric, reflective of the cultural milieu in which they are embedded. The social environment, encompassing cultural, sociocultural, psychocultural, and environmental dimensions, shapes the linguistic expressions of a community [3]. According to Jaan Valsiner, culture constitutes a framework of meaningful actions and semiotic mediators, underscoring its central role in human psychology [4]. Proverbs serve as linguistic artefacts that encapsulate cultural values and collective memory, functioning as tools for the transmission of societal norms and beliefs. As repositories of collective wisdom, proverbs perpetuate archetypes inherited from preceding generations. However, when these archetypes reinforce stereotypes, they contribute to systemic oppression within society.

3. Proverbs as Collective Memory

The concept of "collective memory" has garnered significant attention within the realms of Humanities and Social Sciences, with roots dating back to seminal works by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1887–1945) in the 1920s. This interdisciplinary theme attracts scholars from various

fields, including Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, History, Literary Analysis, and Medical Studies. Its multifaceted nature and broad relevance appeal to many academic disciplines. The collectively accepted definition of collective memory denotes shared information, knowledge, and attributions within a particular community [5].

Proverbs, ubiquitous across diverse cultures worldwide, encapsulate rich background narratives that leave lasting imprints on their users. For example, the proverb "It's raining cats and dogs" boasts a lineage of attributions, from Norse mythological tales depicting storms carrying away dead animals to medieval Britain's superstitious beliefs. Despite its centuries-old origin, this proverb remains ingrained within societies, conveying the idea of intense rainfall akin to a tempest or deluge. Similarly, many cultures harbor proverbs steeped in intriguing background narratives. Some of which may carry derogatory or offensive connotations. These linguistic expressions wield significant influence over beliefs, cognition, perceptions, and, notably, identity formation.

Due to their historical lineage, proverbs serve as conduits for the transmission of cultural knowledge and values, perpetuating cognitive narratives that shape collective consciousness. Each proverb encapsulates either an informative narrative or a stereotype-laden, discriminatory discourse, thereby contributing to what can be termed as 'cognitively controlled narratives.' The repetition and dissemination of proverbs with informative narratives facilitate healthy knowledge-sharing practices within communities, fostering cultural cohesion and understanding. Conversely, proverbs embedded with discriminatory narratives perpetuate what is referred to as 'systematic oppression,' exerting deleterious effects on marginalized groups within society.

The interplay between proverbs and collective memory emphasizes the intricate dynamics of cultural transmission and identity formation. Proverbs serve as linguistic artefacts that not only reflect cultural norms and values but also actively shape individual and collective identities. Through their incorporation into everyday discourse, proverbs become a means for the perpetuation of cultural heritage, reinforcing societal norms and beliefs. However, the presence of derogatory or discriminatory narratives within certain proverbs highlights the potential for these linguistic expressions to perpetuate inequalities and injustices within society.

In supposition, the study of proverbs within the framework of collective memory illuminates the complex interconnections between language, culture, and societal dynamics. Proverbs serve as potent tools for the transmission of cultural knowledge and values, shaping individual and collective identities in profound ways. However, the presence of

discriminatory narratives within certain proverbs accentuates the need for critical engagement and analysis, as these linguistic expressions can perpetuate harmful ideologies and contribute to systemic oppression. Scholars can gain deeper insights into the mechanisms underlying cultural transmission and identity formation within diverse societies by examining the intricate relationship between proverbs and collective memory.

4. Cognitively Controlled Narratives and Systematic Oppression of People with Disabilities in Telugu Proverbs

India is renowned for its diverse array of cultures and traditions, each characterized by its distinct narratives and beliefs. Given the pervasive influence of Hinduism, one of the major religions in India, many cultural practices and traditions across the country bear the imprint of Hindu mythology. With a history dating back millennia, Hinduism stands as one of the oldest and most elaborate religious systems in the world. The significance of Hindu mythology within the Indian cultural landscape is underlined by the fact that approximately 1.09 billion Indians adhere to Hinduism [6]. This religious tradition holds particular sway in the Telugu-speaking states of southern India, where Telugu, a Dravidian language, is spoken. Notably, Telugu is classified as one of the classical languages in India, with its roots tracing back to the ancient Sanskrit language. Sanskrit, revered as a divine language within Hindu cosmology, serves as the medium for the foundational religious texts of Hinduism. Consequently, the confluence of language and religion results in the pervasive influence of Hinduism on the cultural practices and traditions of Telugu-speaking communities. This intersectionality shapes various aspects of daily life, including rituals, festivals, and social norms. Thus, illustrating the intricate interplay between language, religion, and cultural identity within the context of proverbs about people with disabilities unveils interesting perspectives.

4.1. Eyes Are the Most Important in All Five Sensory Organs

(సర్వేంద్రియాణాం నయనం ప్రధానమ్-)

The proverb is purportedly derived from the Mahabharata, an ancient Indian epic renowned for its vast scope and intricate narrative. Comprising one lakh verses divided into 18 sections known as Parvas, the Mahabharata stands as the longest epic poem in the world. Within this epic, a significant character named Dhritarashtra, depicted as a blind king of the Kuru dynasty, holds prominence. Dhritarashtra's visual impairment initially precluded him from assuming the throne, with his younger brother Pandu

ascending to kingship instead. However, following Pandu's demise, Dhritarashtra reluctantly assumed the mantle of kingship by default. Despite possessing strength comparable to that of a thousand elephants, Dhritarashtra's blindness rendered him ineligible for the throne in the eyes of many. Thus, the proverb encapsulates the notion of individuals being overlooked or marginalized due to perceived shortcomings, drawing upon the narrative of Dhritarashtra's struggle for recognition within the Mahabharata (Katupalli and Kaparwan, 2024).

4.2. Limping Person's Pleasure Is Mischievous to Home

(కుంటి కులాసం ఇంటికి మోసం-)

The proverb professedly finds its origins in the Mahabharata, a seminal ancient Indian epic. Within the narrative of the Mahabharata, Shakuni emerges as a pivotal character, serving as the primary catalyst for the onset of the Kurukshetra war. As the maternal uncle of the Kauravas, he harbored a deep-seated desire for vengeance against the Kuru clan. Employing his cunning intellect, Shakuni orchestrated a series of manipulative schemes, poisoning the mind of Dhuryodhana (the eldest son of Dhritarashtra) and sowing the seeds of discord that ultimately culminated in the devastating conflict of Kurukshetra. Shakuni's Machiavellian nature is often attributed to both his physical disability and his fervent desire for retribution. Consequently, the proverb in question likely draws upon the character of Shakuni, symbolizing the conniving nature associated with physical impairment, as exemplified by Shakuni's role in the epic (Katupalli and Kaparwan, 2024).

4.3. Married A Blind Girl as Less to Be Paid Off to Her Parents

(వోలి తక్కువ అని గుడ్డి అమ్మయిని పెళ్లాడినట్లు-)

In ancient Telugu society, the custom of "Voli" (వోలి) prevailed as a matrimonial practice. Voli was about prospective grooms being obligated to remit a certain sum to the parents of the bride in exchange for marriage. Notably, Voli stands in stark contrast to the dowry system, wherein the bride's parents are responsible for providing financial or material contributions to the groom. It was observed that parents of blind daughters often consented to marriage arrangements involving reduced Voli payments. This practice stemmed from the perception that the marriageability of blind girls was diminished, thus necessitating concessions in the form of reduced payments from grooms.

The proverb under scrutiny finds its usage in scenarios where a parsimonious individual opts to marry a blind girl primarily due to the prospect of paying a diminished Voli. Subsequently, the

narrative unfolds to depict the perceived consequences of such a union, wherein the blind wife supposedly wreaks havoc upon the household due to her visual impairment. This narrative motif serves as a cautionary tale, cautioning against the repercussions of prioritizing financial considerations over genuine compatibility in matrimonial arrangements. Furthermore, it reflects broader societal attitudes towards disability, wherein blindness is portrayed as a potential source of discord or disruption within marital relationships. Overall, the proverb encapsulates complex intersections of gender, disability, and socio-economic dynamics within traditional Telugu society, highlighting the nuanced nuances of matrimonial customs and their ramifications on individuals' lives.

4.4. If A Mad Man Goes to A Fair, He Does Nothing but Wander Around (తిక్కలీడు తిరనాల పోతే ఎక్కా దిగా సరిపోయింది-)

This proverb illustrates the tendency of individuals with cognitive disabilities to wander aimlessly, particularly when attending public events such as fairs. Historically, individuals with cognitive impairments were conspicuously absent from public spaces within ancient and medieval societies. This absence stemmed from prevailing societal attitudes that stigmatized and marginalized individuals with cognitive disabilities, often relegating them to the confines of their homes. Parents, influenced by prevalent superstitions and societal norms, frequently concealed their children with cognitive impairments from public view, further perpetuating their social isolation. When individuals with cognitive disabilities did find themselves in public settings, such as fairs, they were often overwhelmed by the sensory stimuli and unfamiliar surroundings, having been confined to the familiarity of their houses. Consequently, they would meander aimlessly, captivated by the novelty of their surroundings but lacking clear direction or purpose. This behavior reflected their limited exposure to the outside world and their innate curiosity about the broader environment beyond their domestic confines.

In contemporary usage, the same proverb serves as a metaphor for aimlessness or lack of purposeful action exhibited by individuals in various contexts. Whether in social settings, professional environments, or personal endeavors, the phrase evokes the notion of wandering without a specific objective or goal in mind. It features the idea of being present physically but not actively engaged or productive, akin to the meandering behavior of individuals with cognitive disabilities at fairs.

Thus, the proverb encapsulates broader themes of social inclusion, marginalization, and societal perceptions of disability across different historical and cultural contexts. It serves as a poignant reminder

of the enduring challenges faced by individuals with cognitive disabilities in accessing and participating fully in public life while also highlighting the importance of fostering greater understanding, acceptance, and inclusion within society.

4.5. Though The Horse Is Blind, It Eats a Lot (గుర్రం గుడ్డిది అయినా దానకి తక్కువలేదు-)

The proverb applies in a variety of circumstances, reflecting behavioral or ethical positions. For starters, it describes situations in which people put on a brave face despite having a natural tendency to be frightened, resulting in misleading bravado. Second, it refers to situations in which expenditures are incurred for the care or assistance of people or animals with physical impairments or disabilities. In both cases, the proverb serves as a rhetorical technique to clarify the intricacies of human behavior and societal dynamics. Its invocation emphasizes the contradiction between external image and underlying reality, as well as the ethical implications of resource allocation in times of need and fragility. Thus, this proverb emerges as a cultural artefact rich with layers of meaning, providing insights into the complexities of human interactions, moral quandaries, and societal standards. Its continual use underlines its ongoing relevance in molding speech and ideas across varied cultural milieus.

4.6. Squint Eye Is Better Than Blind Eye (గుడ్డి కన్న మెల్ల మేలు-)

The proverb is used in situations where partial disability is viewed as favorable to complete disability. It also finds resonance in instances when reaching a partial or imperfect solution is considered preferable than having no resolution or treatment at all. This nuanced viewpoint emphasizes a pragmatic approach that prioritizes incremental growth over stagnation, acknowledging the intrinsic significance of little gains or alleviating negative situations. In such cases, the proverb serves as a heuristic tool, directing decision-making processes and providing strategies for optimizing results despite constraints or uncertainty. Its use indicates a nuanced awareness of the relative benefits of incremental changes, as well as an appreciation for the possible efficacy of minor interventions in negotiating obstacles or improving unpleasant conditions.

4.7. Holding a Mirror Before a Blind Man (అంధునికీ అద్దం పట్టినట్లు-)

The proverbial statement "Holding a mirror before a blind man" is a metaphorical depiction in the cultural lexicon, referring to the giving of resources, information, or opportunities to people who are unable or unwilling to profit from them. It describes a circumstance in which valuable or relevant

offerings are provided to recipients who lack the ability or desire to appreciate or use them effectively. Within this context, the proverb invokes ideas of futility, inefficacy, or misplaced efforts, emphasizing the disparity between the provision of resources and the recipient's ability to benefit from them. Its use emphasizes the limitations inherent in attempting to provide assistance or impart knowledge to people who are unprepared or unwilling to take advantage of such offerings, reflecting broader concerns about the efficacy of interventions and the dynamics of reciprocity within social interactions.

4.8. A Lame Man Helping a Blind Man

(గుడ్డికి కుంటడి సాయం-)

The traditional term "A lame man helping a blind man" refers to a situation in which people facing their own limitations or obstacles try to help others despite their own shortcomings. It embodies the concept of mutual reliance and solidarity in the face of hardship, depicting a situation in which individuals offer support within the limits of their own talents despite potential shortcomings. This proverb emphasizes the difficulties of altruistic endeavors, underlining the importance of empathy, cooperation, and collective support networks in managing common sufferings or limits within societal contexts.

4.9. Blowing a Conch in a Deaf Man's Ear

(చెవిట్టి చెవిలో శంఖం ఊదినట్లు-)

The saying "Blowing a conch in a deaf man's ear" exemplifies the futility of trying to convey information or interact with someone who is either unwilling or unable to understand what is being said. The picture of blowing a conch, a traditional symbol of communication or proclamation, into a deaf person's ear emphasizes the ridiculousness and ineffectiveness of the action. It represents circumstances in which communication efforts fail because of a significant gap between the sender's intentions and the recipient's ability to perceive or grasp the message.

The proverb emphasizes the significance of understanding the audience's receptivity and cognitive capacities in effective communication. It emphasizes the need to use proper channels, tactics, and modes of expression to ensure that messages are understood and meaningful by their intended receivers. Furthermore, it serves as a warning tale about investing time and energy in endeavors that are unlikely to generate positive results, encouraging people to use discernment and pragmatism in their communicative interactions.

Finally, the proverb emphasizes the fundamental notion that effective communication requires not only the articulation of messages but also their receipt and comprehension.

5. Discussion

The proverbs under discussion exhibit a derogatory and demeaning nature, often targeting individuals with impairments by directly commenting on their condition or utilizing impairment as a means to characterize one's personality or behavior. As products of oral tradition, these proverbs are transmitted across generations, thereby perpetuating stereotypical attributions and discriminatory attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. This transmission occurs within the broader socio-cultural context, wherein language plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and evaluations [7]. When a language contains proverbs that reinforce stereotypes, it has the potential to significantly influence the psychology of its speakers, shaping their attitudes and behaviors towards individuals with disabilities.

Stereotypical proverbs frequently promote detrimental attitudes and biases towards people with disabilities, exacerbating their social alienation and marginalization within society. These proverbs, founded on outdated beliefs and assumptions, reinforce negative stereotypes and stigmatize people because of their perceived differences or limitations. By depicting disability as a source of weakness or inferiority, such proverbs foster feelings of pity, disgust, or discomfort towards people with disabilities, limiting their integration into social networks and access to opportunities and resources. Furthermore, these proverbs may reinforce a sense of otherness, effectively excluding people with disabilities from mainstream society and creating challenges to their full involvement and inclusion. Since these proverbs contribute to the absence of people with disabilities participation in society, it is leading to social alienation. Social alienation impacts the lifespan of people [8]. Addressing the frequency and impact of stereotyped proverbs is critical to creating a more inclusive and equitable society that values the dignity and rights of all people, regardless of ability or diversity. These offensive proverbs persist within rural areas, remaining actively utilized within the vernacular discourse. Their prevalence extends beyond the confines of Telugu society, resonating with similar patterns observed across various cultures and languages within India. This widespread dissemination underscores the pervasive nature of discriminatory attitudes towards individuals with disabilities within broader societal frameworks.

The utilization of impairment as a vehicle for characterizing individuals' traits or behaviors reflects deeply entrenched social norms and values, wherein disability is often stigmatized and marginalized. By employing impairment as a metaphorical device within proverbs, individuals with disabilities are further relegated to the periphery of societal discourse, reinforcing their status as "othered"

entities within the social fabric. This perpetuation of discriminatory language not only reflects societal attitudes towards disability but also actively contributes to the marginalization and exclusion of individuals with impairments from mainstream societal participation.

Moreover, the intergenerational transmission of these offensive proverbs serves to cement their position within the cultural lexicon, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and reinforcing discriminatory attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. As individuals absorb these linguistic expressions from a young age, they internalize the associated biases and prejudices, further entrenching discriminatory beliefs within societal consciousness.

Efforts to challenge and dismantle these entrenched patterns of discrimination require a multifaceted approach that addresses both the linguistic and societal dimensions of disability. This necessitates the promotion of inclusive language practices that eschew derogatory and stigmatizing portrayals of individuals with disabilities, while also fostering greater awareness and understanding of the diverse experiences and capabilities of individuals within this demographic group. Additionally, initiatives aimed at fostering greater societal acceptance and inclusion of individuals with disabilities are essential in combating the pervasive effects of discriminatory language and promoting a more equitable and inclusive society for all.

6. Conclusion

Cultures represent intricate tapestries of diverse knowledge, traditions, and practices, each imbued with both positive and negative attributes. As products of human creation, cultures serve as repositories of inherited ideas, identities, and knowledge, leaving indelible imprints on the collective psyche of their adherents. Proverbs, as quintessential expressions of cultural identity, play a pivotal role in perpetuating cultural heritage through their oral transmission. However, alongside their dissemination, proverbs also carry with them the underlying narratives and values of their respective cultures, thus functioning as markers of collective memory.

Regrettably, within the rich tapestry of cultural proverbs, there exist expressions that are laden with offensive connotations, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors. Such proverbs wield significant influence in shaping societal perceptions and norms, often reinforcing discriminatory beliefs and attitudes towards marginalized groups. Consequently, the propagation of these offensive narratives within cultural discourse serves to perpetuate systemic inequalities and marginalization.

In light of these concerns, there arises a pressing need to critically examine and condemn the

propagation of offensive narratives within cultural proverbs. By challenging the perpetuation of discriminatory language and attitudes, societies can work towards fostering greater inclusivity and respect for diverse identities and experiences. This necessitates a concerted effort to promote awareness and understanding of the harmful impacts of offensive language and to advocate for the adoption of more inclusive and respectful linguistic practices.

Furthermore, initiatives aimed at promoting cultural sensitivity and empathy can contribute to the creation of more inclusive cultural spaces, wherein individuals feel valued and respected irrespective of their background or identity. Through education and dialogue, societies can cultivate a greater appreciation for the diversity of human experience and foster a culture of mutual respect and understanding.

Ultimately, the condemnation of offensive narratives within cultural proverbs represents a crucial step towards building more equitable and inclusive societies. By challenging discriminatory language and attitudes, individuals can work towards creating cultural environments that celebrate diversity and promote the dignity and rights of all members of society.

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