

The Indigenous Concept of Development As Analyzed in Artisans' Oral Tradition in Karnataka

Jan Brouwer

Centre for Advanced Research on Indigenous Knowledge Systems P.O.Box 1, Saraswathipuram
Mysore 570 009, Karnataka, India Fax phone: 0821-542459

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ABSTRACT During the past five decades, many scholars have studied Indian society through only their own discipline. The isolated approach applied in the social sciences and humanities have indeed increased our knowledge, but rarely our understanding. To overcome this problem I propose to begin with an integration of folklore studies and social sciences. In this paper I will demonstrate the usefulness of such an approach with an analysis of a single narrative from the vantage point of a topic, namely, development. The analysis considers relevant aspects of the Indigenous Knowledge System such as conceptualizations of money and the perception of society in terms of intertwined domains. With the help of the concept of Indigenous Knowledge, the analysis of the story reveals the indigenous concept of Development. Finally, I argue that the Indigenous Knowledge approach is not only providing insights leading to understanding, but is also relevant for the modern state and other change agents.

INTRODUCTION

In the first issue of the *Journal of Indian Folkloristics* (Vol.1 No.1,1978), Suzanne Hanchett concluded on "Recent Trends in the Study of Folk Hinduism and India's Folklore" that "by considering various domains of cultural life in conjunction with each other ... can elucidate the ways in which symbolic actions interact with social norms and values" (1978:49).¹

It is unfortunate that not many scholars have followed Hanchett's hint. Instead, many continue to work on folklore as a separate academic discipline. However useful in themselves, such studies did not place the analyses of narratives in a wider holistic perspective thereby reducing the usefulness of the meanings and messages of the stories.

Another disadvantage of the isolated approach, irrespective of the focus, is the use of the terms folklore and folk narratives themselves. The use of these terms imply a distinction

between folk and their narratives and the others, usually the sophisticated and learned urban world. The distinction, and hence the isolation of the discipline, is probably one of the off-shoots of Orientalism.²

The recent awareness among social scientists and development specialists that *people's participation* is essential for their development efforts is laudable. It is then, of course, necessary to define who the people are, to record what they have to say, to illicit their perceptions and views and to deduct the concepts on which these are based.³

The people's oral tradition is one of the main resources of their conceptualisations and perceptions. Indigenous concepts which relate to the economical, social, ritual, cultural and other domains of society are often hidden in settlement stories, myths, sthalapuranas of temples and other narratives. The oral tradition is thus a key to the understanding of the Indigenous Knowledge System, which delineates a cognitive structure in which theories and perceptions of the world are conceptualized. It thus includes definition, classification, and concepts of the social, economical, political, and ideational domains.

The analysis of the settlement story of the Goddess Kali of Channapatna (Karnataka) shows the differential conceptualization of money; the intertwining of domains which are separated in the modern state, and leads to the formulation of the Indigenous concept of development.

THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE SETTING

The Visvakarma caste of Karnataka comprises blacksmiths, carpenters, coppersmiths, sculptors and goldsmiths. In southern Karnataka, these artisans are distributed over four sub-castes, so that no caste has the monopoly over one craft.

In the participants' view, the caste consists of four sub-castes, namely, the Kulachar, Sivachar, Matachar, and Uttaradi.

Local hierarchical thinking is not unanimous about the ranking of the sub-castes. The Kulachars rank themselves after the Uttaradis who are, according to them, the purest. By contrast, the Sivachars consider themselves purest, followed by the Uttaradis and the Kulachars and Matachars. The Uttaradis rank themselves highest, because they think they are the purest. They do not see difference in purity between themselves and the Sivachars, while they classify both Kulachars and Matachars below. The Matachars rank themselves equal to the Kulachars but below the Uttaradis, while they do not acknowledge the Sivachars.

Except the Matachar, all the Visvakarma sub-castes are represented in the town of Channapatna on the Mysore-Bangalore Road. An important Kulachar sanctuary lies in this town which consists of two parts: in the west, the fort (*kote*), and in the east the bazaar (*pete*). The fort was built around 1580 by Jagadevaraya, who made it the capital of the territory bestowed upon him (for his gallant defence of Penukonda) by the fallen Vijayanagara prince, to whom his daughter was married. His possessions included Mulbagal, Periyapatna, Nagamangala, Kankanhalli and Beudihal. According to Buchanan, the ruler's family was of the Telugu Banajiga caste and rose to power in the fourteenth century. "The fort stood a long siege in 1630, when it was captured by Chamaraja Wodeyar of Mysore. In 1759 it was surprised by the Maratta army under Gopal Hari, but was speedily released by Haidar Ali. It was repaired by the Dewan Purnaiya and contains portions of a palace erected for a relative of the then Maharaja. Tippu Sultan thought proper to dismantle the fort in 1790" (Rao, 1930:152). After 1750 a glass industry developed, mainly due to the efforts of Tippu Sultan of Mysore.

In Channapatna, there are three interesting shrines. In the fort area, there is a large Kali temple facing east. In the elevated area of the bazaar, we find a small Kali temple, also facing east with, on its left (thus facing south), a shrine devoted to Sujnanamurti. The Kali temple in the fort area is maintained by the Kulachar and the

Uttaradi have the priestly rights. The other Kali temple also belongs to the Kulachar and its priestly rights rest with Kulachar blacksmiths. The third shrine is a tomb of Sujnanamurti and belongs to the Sivachars.⁴

The local Visvakarmas claim that the upper Kali temple is situated inside the fort. This would be a most unusual location. However, I have not been able to verify this from the archaeological information available.

This Kali temple houses more than one deity. First, the image of the *linga* called Kamatesvara is seen with, in front of it but standing inside the hall, Siva's vehicle Nandi. Behind the *linga* is an impressive Kali idol five feet in height. Its pedestal is much higher than that of the *linga*. The Goddess is in the *padmasana* position and is holding in her upper right hand, a conch, in her upper left hand, a discus. The lower right hand is in the *abhaya* position with a *rudrakshi* chain and the lower left hand, pointed downward, is holding a lemon. An artistically interesting and mythologically important feature is the loose stone bracelet on the lower left arm, which is made of the same stone as the idol and which can thus not be removed. The goddess wears silver *kavaca* including a crown. Behind her, to the left, stands a big sword which, it is said, is used to cut the grey-pumpkin on the seventh night (*kalaratri*) of the Dasara festival. To the right of the shrine's entrance, but inside the hall, is a carving of Satyanarayana guarded on his right by a Naga and on his left by Ganesa. On the opposite side, i.e. to the left of this entrance, the procession idol of Nandi is placed. In the northern wall of the hall a room is used to shelter the various other procession idols of the temple. In addition to the main entrance, which faces east, there is one entrance in the southern wall facing the room with the procession idols. This well-maintained temple is owned by the Kulachar sub-caste, while the priest belongs to the Hampi lineage (*vamsha*) of the Uttaradi sub-caste.

The other Kali temple is located in the Iron Club Street (*tandibidi*) beside the workshop of the Kulachar blacksmiths-cum-priests. It is said to be the original home of the Kali described above, but is now used as a store room by the priest. The small but delicate building faces east, while to its left side, but facing south, stands the

little shrine devoted to Sujnanamurti. It is here that the present priest has installed a small idol of Kali which, like the tomb, faces south, and thus faces the Nandi which guards the tomb. He told me that this Kali was originally placed in the Kali temple, which he now uses as store room. He shifted the idol himself. This complex is fast losing its importance, but it must have been a fine complex at the height of the steel wire industry, which was located in this street. The little Kali icon depicts the deity with a conch in the upper right hand, a discus in the upper left hand, a sword in the lower right hand and a drinking bowl in the lower left hand.

THE KALI TEMPLE MYTH OF CHANNA-PATNA

The connection of the two Kali temples of the town is explained in a story which is widely known by all Visvakarmas from this region. It is presented here in a Kulachar version:

"Once a Balegara Setti from this place was going to a village to sell bangles. On the way he heard a voice coming out of the ground saying "Put bangles on ..." He was puzzled and looked round. Then he saw two arms coming out of the soil. The voice asked him to put bangles on them. He was even more puzzled when the voice said: "I am Kalikamba, the kuladevati of the Visvakarmas. You need not be afraid of me, put bangles on my arms. Hearing this with fear he put bangles on those arms. Again two more arms came out of the ground. He was still more afraid. "You need not be afraid, put the bangles on", he heard again. And once again he put bangles on those arms.

The Kalikadevi sent the bangle seller to the Iron Club Street. "Go to that street. There is a house belonging to one of my devotees. They have kept some money aside for me to give as an offering (kanike). You go and get that money for your bangles." She directed him to the house and gave the name of the eldest person of the household. In fear, the bangle seller returned home. The next day he went to the house that had been pointed out to him and told everything to the eldest person of this house. He said:

"Kali-kadevi has told me like this". The elderly person did not believe him and made fun of the Goddess after which he sent him away. That night the goddess Kalikamba appeared in the eldest person's dream and said: "You have made a mistake. You did not pay the price for the bangles I am wearing. You have insulted him: you must pay. I am still in the place where I got the bangles. Take me out of the soil, bring me to the town and build a temple for me. Worship me inside the temple". The following morning, therefore, he gave the money which was set aside for the deity to the bangle seller.

He took the money and got a small pond of drinking water built. Thereafter, the Visvakarma elders took him to find the place where he had heard the voice. They loosened the soil, by means of tender coconut milk, and removed it with their fingers. The idol of Kalikadevi appeared. They brought it to our place, built the temple in their own street (Iron Club Street) and installed the idol there.

The spot where the Goddess was taken out of the soil was marked by a small platform on three stones (called balegarana-katte) which can be seen even today. It was the bangle seller who built it. Why did he build it? Look! The three coins, which our ancestor had given him, he had in turn given to his mother to keep for him. At that time she was winnowing Bengal gram. When she stored the gram in a vessel, she accidentally mixed the coins with it. Later she forgot about them. Two days later her son asked her for the money and she said: "I do not have any money". Then her son reminded her: "I gave you three coins two days ago. Give them to me now". Then she said: "Yes, you gave them to me, but I do not remember where I put them". The son reminded her, "I gave you the coins when you were winnowing the gram". She now remembered and thought that she must have put them in the vessel in which she had stored the gram. She went to look for them. The whole vessel was now filled with coins. With this money the bangle seller built the pond and platform.

At that time, Channapatna was ruled by a Poligar called Jagadevaraya. His wife was blind. So the Poligar prayed to the Goddess (Kali) to grace his wife with sight. If she did so, he would build a temple for Kali inside the fort itself.

About the same time Kali appeared in a dream to one of the Visvakarmas and said: "I have granted sight to Jagadevaraya's wife and he is going to build a temple for me inside the fort. So, keep me in that temple, for it will be calmer and without the noise and disturbance of the Iron Club Street". The Poligar also appeared and said: "My wife has been cured and I am going to build a temple inside the fort for Kali. Will you please install the idol of the Goddess in that temple." And our people followed the instructions".

DISCUSSION

Using the motif of the bangles in an elaborate pattern of exchange, the story develops a social, economical, and historical argument. The developments are each time initiated by the female figures (the Goddess, the smith's wife, and the queen). The male figures (the bangle seller, the smith and the king) only act as a result of female initiative.

The syntagmatic chain of the myth is formed by three transactions with the bangle seller, the soil, and the king. Each transaction covers paradigmatically the economical, social, and historical domains.

The first transaction is concerned with the control of the unaccompanied deity by the male principle through the bangles, which the bangle seller puts on the arms of the Goddess. This is not a simple transaction, for the bangle seller (*setti*) has to be paid.

The Goddess orders the *Setti* to collect the money due from the eldest person of a Kulachar Visvakarma's household. This suggests that he is the leader or representative of the Visvakarmas. Although they had money, the Visvakarmas paid the bangles only after an order of the Goddess (first dream sequence). They can give the money to the Goddess, but not to the *Setti*. For, in the Visvakarma view, society (to which the *Setties* also belong), is classified in terms of Death.

The first transaction also marks the beginning of the journey of the Goddess. This journey is the result of a mutual attraction of the Goddess and the king. She herself asked for bangles and he prayed for her help.

The various meanings of the first transaction relate to the three domains. Through the action of the Goddess, the Kulachars were forced into a monetary relationship with Society. Otherwise they would not have done so and their money would have been given only to the deity.

On the social level, the Kulachars and the *Setties* are juxtaposed in relation to the Goddess. As wanderers, the *Setties* built her shrine outside the village, so to speak, in the wilds where the unaccompanied, hot Goddess was wandering without bangles. The Kulachars built a temple for her in the bazaar: she is now enshrined although still dangerous.

With the payment for the bangles, the second transaction is concluded. It is the Visvakarma who dug the soil to move the deity across the boundary of wilds/town. Subsequently he built her temple. Both activities are solutions, and therefore, typical kingly.

Finally, both the Visvakarmas and the *Setties* had a difficulty with the payment for the bangles. But their difficulties are significantly different. The Visvakarmas had the money, but did not want to pay and did pay at last on order of the deity. The Goddess thus mediated between them and Society. From their savings they paid and thus the money in their possession became less.

The *Setties* had kept the money received from the Visvakarmas and when needed it had multiplied. They had not to pay, but immediately decide to spend it on the construction of a pond and platform for the Goddess.

This transaction leads thus to various results. The *Setti* gains a customer, as well as prestige by constructing a shrine. The Kulachars are partly drawn into the money economy. The dual nature of the Goddess gets shape: she has a platform in the wilds and a temple in town.

In the final transaction, the Kulachars move the Goddess once again on her orders (second dream sequence). This time she gets a temple inside the fort. The Goddess is now completely pacified.

For the Kulachars, the movements of their *kuladevati* express a socially upward mobility. But the final result is tragic: although they gain the Goddess, they lose her to the king as she dislikes the noise of their craft. Once again the Settles are the winners, for the royal couple belong to their caste and the queen was cured. On the social level, the story places the Setti below the Visvakarma, because the Setti's shrine is built at the place of the uncontrolled, hence violent manifestation of the Goddess.⁶

The Settles are represented by two female figures (the mother and the queen) and by two male figures (the bangle seller and the king). This choice signifies that the Settles are placed right inside society. By contrast, the Visvakarmas only appear as male actors, while the Goddess appears twice in the smith's dream. In the Visvakarma view, the smith and the Goddess are taken together as the male and female principle of the universe (see: Brouwer, 1995). The Goddess belongs thus as much to the Visvakarmas as to Society. The relationship between the male and female figures of the Settles is only slightly different. The mother of the bangle seller and the queen can be seen as manifestations of the Goddess. For the episodes of the pulses turned coins and the gaining of eye-sight reveal divine capacities. It is in this difference that the difference in caste ranking is expressed. The story places the Visvakarmas higher than the Settles for the former have a direct relationship with her.

Although clearly dated by the name of the late 16th century ruler of the town, it is a dynamic narrative. But the message of the myth is not one of the 16th century alone. It only indicates the beginning of a period of rapid economic change. For the episode of the forgotten coins suggest a time lapse. And of course, one shrine and two temples were built, activities that in the period under consideration could not have taken place overnight.

With the help of the three male and three female actors, the story not only shows the process of encompassing the new economic order in the locale, but also the continuity of the basic relationships of Indian polity.

Considering the end of the narrative, which finds the Goddess at last shifted to the fort near the king, it may be concluded that she has at-

tracted the king and their king also felt attracted to her. Apparently, the king on his own did not have the power to cope with the situation of incipient change. It is the Goddess who initiates the actions that lead to a peaceful new situation. Although the king's power must have been vindicated by the brahmin, like elsewhere (see: Heester-man, 1985:1-25), this is not sufficient to make this recognized power effective. It is here that the Goddess comes in. The political universe is made up of a male (king) and female (Goddess) principle, which only in its completeness is capable of holding the balance. In this case, between the Right and Left Hand castes.

However, the Goddess is not only a political functionary, as the spatial and temporal dimensions of her journey indicate. Both the iconography of the deity and the architecture of her abode are important. At her first appearance the Goddess is incomplete in two ways: she has no bangles and is unaccompanied. Moreover, she is hot (violent, dangerous), for she is dug up with the help of tender coconut and she is located in the wilds. Comparing the two idols in town, it is seen that the Kali of the bazaar holds weapons of attack, while the Kali of the fort has weapons of control.

Where she was still alone, albeit enshrined, in the bazaar, she is finally accompanied in the temple in the fort. In her earlier manifestation, the Goddess is not served by a priest, but worshipped by the non-vegetarian Settles and Kulachars. Field reports confirm that the early Goddess accepted non-vegetarian offerings. Once in the bazaar, and later in the fort, the deity is vegetarian and served by a priest of the Uttaradi sub-caste.

In sum, the Goddess undergoes a series of important transformations from unaccompanied to accompanied; from a mobile hot to a static cold; from an incomplete to a complete state; from the wilds to the fort; from lack of a servant to being served by a priest; from non-vegetarian to vegetarian; from a dangerous wanderer to a pacified settler. In the course of her transformation, **the Goddess introduces monetary transactions in society**, and specialization (in terms of priesthood). More specifically, she draws the Visvakarmas into the wider monetary system.

CONCLUSIONS

In the foregoing pages, I have analysed a story told by artisans as a cognitive structure in which perceptions of the world are conceptualized.

The focus of the story, as also that of the analysis, was the Goddess. During her journey, she is subjected to a series of transformations, from a condition of relative impurity to one of purity. Simultaneously, however, she transforms *en route* the social, and economic relationships in society. The concept of purity is thus not only a religious concept with metaphysical overtones, but the indigenous concept of development.

This study thus also shows how relevant the analysis of narratives is for those who are preoccupied with the development of society. The results of the holistic approach to the Indigenous Knowledge Systems, if painted on a broad canvas, can reveal those concepts behind indigenous practices which are relevant for the modern state and other change agents. The next step is logically a comparison of the entire field of indigenous concepts and perceptions with those of the modern state. Such a comparison may then lead to the incorporation of indigenous components in design and implementation of development projects.

The local level peculiarity of sub-caste ranking can now be revisited. In religious or metaphysical idiom, the ranking expresses also the degree of the sub-caste participation in the dynamics of the market economy.

However, the development is not the same for all. For the Settis money connects with and in society. They are the sellers of the symbol of connection. As bangle sellers, they construct a shrine, and as king they construct a temple. They are thus embedded in society and view this as the way to ultimate salvation.

By contrast, the activities of the Visvakarmas are recognised by a series of disconnections (they dig the soil, move the idol). Their view of society in terms of Death, prevent them to use money for a connection with society. For them money terminates the connection with society.

It is in this contrast that I observe the kingly model for the Right Hand castes and the brahminical model for the Left Hand castes, not

withstanding the kingly aspect of the Kulachar as establishers of temples.⁷

Finally the myth shows how the social, economical, and political domains are intertwined. The Goddess is not only a religious expression, but at the same time the dynamic force in the social, economical, and political domains.

NOTES

1. This study is drawn on data collected between 1983 and 1995 in the course of field work for various projects on the artisans of Karnataka.
2. Anthropological critique has suggested that we are "Imagining India" or should work towards an "Indian Sociology". See, in particular, the works of Ralph Inden (1990) and McKim Marriott (1991).
3. The points raised here have been elaborated as the *Five Knowledge Model for Development* which will be published in **Media and Development** being Volume One of "Communication Processes" edited by Bernard Bel, Biswajit Das and Guy Poitevin. (Delhi: Orient Longman, forthcoming)
4. For a detailed description of the Sujnamurti shrines and related narratives, see Brouwer, 1995, particularly pages 276-282. Interestingly, the Sivachars held the priestly rights in a few Kali temples maintained by the Kulachars between the 16th and 19th century. However, they left priesthood voluntary and later the void was filled by the Uttaradis (see: Brouwer, 1992: 433-455).
5. Elsewhere, I have discussed the Visvakarma world-view in conjunction with their crafts lexicon, or "secret language". These data reveal that the Visvakarmas classify themselves in terms of the Five elements (**panchabhuta**), i.e. in terms of Life, while they classify society in terms of Death. (Brouwer, 1995, and forthcoming)
6. The incompleteness of the Goddess is also reference to the ideal of craft. (see: Brouwer, 1995:302).
7. In this connection, Heesterman observes that "in South India left hand groups were involved in the clearing and settlement of previously forested areas and that "warriors" were generally members of the left division." (Heesterman, 1985:19).

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