The Role of Village Deities Among The Rural Society
(A Case Study Ralayaseema Region of Andhra Pradesh)

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ABSTRACT In this paper an attempt is made to highlight the importance of the village deities and related rituals in the context of rural society of Rayalaseema region, the southern region of Andhra Pradesh, is a rich store house of folk deities continued from the times immemorial. The region consists of masses mostly residing in villages and maintaining the rural character since agriculture and other related occupations form the major means of the subsistence. The people are all of god fearing and polytheism form the most basis of their worship and devotion. Each and every village is adorned with some deity or other with a believe that it will protect the rustics from the external forces like spirits and witches etc. Though some of these deities have temples many of them find their place under the shade of Margosa and Ravi trees with some epic background of their own. The female deities are more in numerical strength in the area under report. Generally once in a year are whenever there is drought or outbreak of epidemics, a ritual is celebrated by the villages to appease the village deity along with the near and dear. In the social stratification, the working caste and the untouchables associate with the ritual more enthusiastically than that of others. The peculiar feature of these rituals in an admixture of little and great traditions. The rural masses mostly rely on these village deities for all their practical purposes, since they will inject a sort of self confidence and inspiration among them. A detailed study of the village deities project some of the hidden social-economic and religious aspects of semiarid Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh.

The pantheon of village deities consists of a number of major and minor gods and goddesses. The village deity has a special place among the villager’s belief system and is propitiated on all important religious and ritual occasions and distress situations. They also worship other local deities and observe local deities and observe local Hindu fairs and festivals. Besides the Hindu gods they occasionally offer worship and take vows to Muhammadan saints (pirs) and also participate in Muharram festival.

Rayalaseema, the southern region of Andhra Pradesh is a rich treasure house of village deities continued from the times immemorial. This part of the state comprises the four revenue districts, namely chittoor, cuddapah, anantapur and Kurnool. The region consists of masses mostly residing in villages and maintaining rural character since agriculture and other allied occupations forms the nature means of subsistence. The people are all of god fearing and polytheism form the most basis of their worship and devotion.

Village Deities

Worship of the village deity is the most ancient form of the Indian religion. Before Aryan invasion which probably took place in the second millennium before Christ (B.C.), the inhabitants of India were Dravidians, a dark skinned race, with religion beliefs and customs much different from them. They believed the world to be peopled by multitude of spirits, good and bad, which caused all unusual events, and especially diseases and disasters. The object of their religion was to propitiate these innumerable spirits. At the same time each village was under the protection of one spirit, a guardian are patron deity. Probably these village deities came into being at the period when people began to settle down in agricultural communities (Cf. Whitehead, 1976:11).

The worship of the village deity (Grama Devatha) forms an important part of the conglomeration of religious beliefs, customs and ceremonies which are generally classed together under the term folk version of Hinduism. In almost every village and town of this region a shine or symbol of the village deity is seen and periodically worshiped and propitiated (Ibid.,16).

Arbitrarily, the deities can be conceived under two categories-deities belonging two (1) Greek tradition and (2) Local or Little tradition.

The village deities are mostly females and their and their names are suffixed with the term Amma, which literally means mother. Most of these deities either have no temples or if they
have one they are in a depauperate condition. The village deities are symbolized in the ideals of rough stones and housed under a Neem or Ravi tree, under a stone structure-three stone slabs placed together. Animal sacrifice is a must to propitiate them. There are no designated priests as such for these deities in the way the Sanskritic deities have. The people belonging to service caste of the village such as though dhobi, potter, kuruba etc., often act as priests to these deities. Since these deities belong to non Sanskritic tradition the upper caste priests belonging to Brahmin caste do not go near them. So no definite pattern or practice of worship and ritual rules are followed.

The images of the deities belonging to the little tradition are either anthropomorphic of zoomorphic in shape. Representation of the deities in the form of stone balls or slabs, wooden planks, mounds (putta) is common. Goode's (1951) description of the deities as anthropologically implying that personified super natural powers are intellectually aware of the values of the society and as anthropo-psychic assigning them many traits of human mentality applies here in the context. Regarding the function or origin of the local deities, there is only scanty information and no written evidence are available (Reddy, 1989: 158).

There are a few persons in the village who are customarily designated to conduct the rituals and worship associated with the local deities. They look after the upkeep of the shrine and perform day to day and special worship and are also entitled to receive payments from the devotees. The following are some of the local deities found in the village. However, this is not an exhaustive list.

**Sathyamma**

Sathyamma represented by a stone slab, is not noticed on the Western side of the village and housed in a temple of Her own. She protects the villagers from the evil spirits, by preventing them from entering the living areas after village. On the day of worship, the stone idol is ritually cleaned and decorated with turmeric and vermilion powders. A plantain leaf is spread in front of the deity and cooked food in offered. Coconuts are broken and fowls or Goats are also sacrificed.

If the village is in the grip of epidemic diseases such as cholera, small-pox, and measles, it is believed that the deity will protect them against them.

**Gangamma**

Temples built in honour of Gangamma are quiet common throughout this part of Andhra Pradesh. Gangamma is worshipped by all the people (both men and women) belonging to all the communities of this region. In the village, the temple of Gangamma, the goddess of water, is situated on the Western side of the settlement. The idol, in the form of a stone, is based in a small and low roofed stone structure. Gangamma is customarily worshipped by the folk once in a year in the month of July. On the day of the worship the deity and the temple are ritually cleaned and the deity is anointed with turmeric paste, vermilion and worshipped with flowers. Goats, Rams and fowl are sacrificed in good number. Offering of rice cooked with jaggery (pongal) to the deity, is also made. People believed that Gangamma protects them from small-pox, measles etc. Ganga, literally means water and the second wife of Lord Shiva. The folk have a number of songs in praise of Gangamma in their folklore.

**Nagalamma**

The women folk, worship another deity by name Nagalamma, also known as Naga Devatha, on the fourth day after the celebration of Deepavali festival. She is represented by a mound under a neem tree (A sacred thread is also tied around the mound) and decorated with vermilion and turmeric powders and worshipped with eggs and milk. Camphor is also burnt and coconut are broken. The belief is that Nagalamma protects them from snake bite. Another belief is that by worshipping the deity for a specific period of time as a vow, a barren couple will be blessed with children.

**Akkadevathalu**

Akkadevathalu are Kannikalu are believed to be seven sisters, represented zoomorphically in the form of horse, elephant etc. They are considered eternal virgins and also referred as Kannikalu (virgins). The folk believe that Kannikalu protect them while in work. A person
who fails to respect them is punished by them to
worn them they first appear in their dreams in the
form of a women approaching them riding a
horse. Such as appearance is known as spirit
attack (Sokadam) and an indication of his going
near death. If a vow to worship to appease them
is not taken soon they may even kill him as a
punishment. When a person is attacked by a spirit
he becomes weak and also lose weight. When
these symptoms are noticed the victim is taken
to a shaman who tells why the deities have be-
come angry and also the way to appease them.
Offering of turmeric paste, vermillion and flow-
ers, and a he-goat are the items usually sug-
gested to please them the folk also believe that
Kannikalu protect them from epidemic/major dis-
eases.

Maremma

Maremma is another deity belonging to little
tradition, who is believed to protect the domes-
tic animals, especially from a deadly disease lo-
ically known as ‘Gali’. The deity is believed to
reside in a neem tree and a plot form is built to a
tree in the village. At times of crisis she is wor-
shiped in the form of a small earthen village
(Kudki) into which water is filled and twigs of
neem tree are placed. After the worship, the pop
is taken in a procession and placed under the
holly tree which is on the eastern side of the vil-
lage at a distance from the settlement. At the
shrine a worship is performed to the deity, food
and coconuts are offered.

Muniswarudu

Muniswarudu, another local deity, is rep-
resented by three small lumps of stones. He has no
temple of his own but the shrine is situated un-
der a piple tree (Ravi). It is believed that the deity
blesses the childless with children. Such a child
is named after the deity by prefixing the term
Muni to the name proposed to be given to the
child. In addition, women who are pregnant wor-
ship the deity in the fifth month of their preg-
nancy, on a Sunday, requesting the deity to pro-
tect their child in the womb. This worship is
known as Pataa Puja. After the birth of the child,
in the fifth or the ninth month, tonsure ceremony
of the child is performed in the shrine of the de-
ity. On this occasion he-goat, a fowl and a pig are
sacrificed to the deity. The pig is instantly first
stabbed on the right side of its lung. The goat
and the fowl are sacrificed by chopping of their
at the neck.

On special occasions stones which repre-
tsents the deity are decorated with sacred ash
and flowers. A mixture of cooked rice and jaggery
(pongali) are offered to the deity. The maternal
uncle of the child cuts a tuft of hair in three
patches from the head of the child and places
them before the deity. After that the customarily
fixed barber cuts the remaining hair from the
child’s head. On this occasion a grand feast is
given, which includes non-vegetarian items also.
The folk also offer a worship to the deity on the
occasion of marriage ceremony, praying for the
fruitfulness of the marriage and continuation of
the lineage.

Gurappa

Gurappa is based in His shrine and is repre-
sented in the form of a lump of stones, under a
neem tree, situated by the side of a stream, on
the eastern side of the village. The people offer
Him coconuts and pongali. Special sacrificial rites
are associated with this deity particularly during
the tonsure ceremony of the children. They sac-
ifice he-goats to the deity and the sacrificial meat
is served in a feast, which is attended by friends
and relatives. A few families also celebrate the
tonsure ceremony of the children at the Gurappa
temple since it is believed that the deity blesses
the sterile couple with children.

Deities Belonging to Great Tradition

The people of this region worship some of
the deities belonging to the Great Tradition (of
all India level with Sanskritic tradition) such as
Shiva, Sri Rama, Venkateswara, Vinayaka, etc.

Vinayaka

Lord Vinayaka is also known by several other
names such as Ganapathi, Parvati Putra,
Musikavahana, Vighneswara, etc. Hindus believe
that he removes obstacles and so before any
activity-big or small the Lord is worshipped and
offered the food. The deity is represented by a
conical stone slab placed under a pipal tree. On
Vinayakachaviti day during the month of Au-
gust-September a festival is celebrated it is be-
believed that he specifically comes to earth on the
day to bless his devotees. Though a bachelor
god, He is worshipped on occasions of marriage,
before the commencement of the ceremony. For
children he is the deity of wisdom.

**Sri Rama**

According to the tradition, Sri Rama is the
incarnation of Lord Vishnu born on the earth to
kill the demon King, Ravana. The deity is wor-
shipped on a grand scale on Sri Rama Navami
day which is celebrated as a festival. Sri Rama
temples are common on the countryside in
this region. During the festival occasions a picture
photo of the deity is established in the temple of
the village deity under auspicious of the Bhajana
Mandali. Daily singing of songs in honor of Sri
Rama is arranged during Sri Rama Navami for
nine days. On festival days a major ritual is cel-
brated and this attract the entire village popula-
tion. The folk also go to the temple and offer
their prayers and ritual material. On the elders of
the community with devotion mind acts as a
priest. Most of the elders along with some youth
form a Bhajana Mandali and sing devotion songs.

**Lord Venkateswara**

Lord Venkateswara is another form of Sri
Vishnu and there is a major Shrine for the Lord,
the Lord of the seven hills in Tirupati. Since there
is a belief that He fulfills the desires of devotees
almost all the people of the villages of this region
have deep faith in Him. He is worshipped both
on festival and normal days. Taking a vow and
visiting the shrine to perform them are common
and the devotees undertake pilgrimages regu-
larly to Tirumala, to pray and have the holy
view(darshana) of the deity. Saturday is the week
day for the devotees of Lord Venkateswara on
that day devotees offer a special worship, sa-
cred food and break coconuts. Lord
Venkateswara is the most popular deity in the
area and almost all the Vaishnava Hindus have
the images of Lord Venkateswara and his con-
sort Alivelu Mangamma, in their house and wor-
ship them regularly.

**Man-God Relationship**

The people believe that the deities have
strong attributes an great powers to influence
man. Therefore, in order to attain worldly plea-
sures man establishes a few types of relationships
with the deities in their faith. On a few oc-
casions they also pray to the deities not only to
bless them with happiness during their life but
also during the next. In such relationship the folk
always consider the deities superior to them and
so they try to please them in all possible ways.
Since they are in folk level no caste gives pri-
mary importance to a particular deity and instead
worship the deities which belong to both Great
and Little Traditions. The concept of Kula-
Devatha or Kula-Daivam is very much in vogue
among the folk. Our observations reveal that
women are more considered with having their
life made happier than men, who often thin about
the life in their next birth.

**Levels of Worshipping the Deities**

Worshipping of deities falls broadly into two
categories. A few deities are offered with animal
sacrifices and others with vegetarian food, co-
conuts and pumpkins. For example, Gangamma
deity is offered with animal sacrifice besides vege-
tarian dishes and pongal. For ancestors during
their worship, strictly vegetarian dishes are made.
On special week days such as Saturday, the folk
offer only vegetarian dishes to their deities. On
special week days Lord Venkateswara who be-
longs to Sanskritic tradition, is strictly offered
the vegetarian dishes.

The religious rituals related to a deity are of-
erred at three levels. When a person is ill his
kinsmen pray to the family deity to protect him
and also take vows. The fulfillment of the vow
is expressed through a worship and this is done
at the family level. In case of a few deities who
are the family as well as the village deities such
as Gangamma, an yearly festival is arranged in
Her honor in which all the villagers participate.
However, friends and relatives from neighboring
villages are invited the blessings. But contribu-
tion on money and actual ritual participation is
strictly by the group members.

A few deities worshipped at village level in
minor shrines also have their main shrines else-
where. The local deity Tirupati Gangamma has
her main shrine situated at Tirupati. Desamma,
has her shrine at Nagri. The main shrines be-
come only places of pilgrimage for the devotees.
The worships offered at these shrines is explained by us as worships at the third level.

In the social stratification, the working castes and the untouchables associate with the ritual of the village deities more enthusiastically than that of the others. The peculiar features of these rituals is an admixture of little and great traditions. The rural masses mostly rely on these village deities for all their practical purposes, since they will inspect a sort of self confidence and inspiration among them. A detailed study of the village deities project some of the hidden socio-economic and religious aspects of the semiarid Rayalaseema region of Andhra pradesh.

REFERENCES


