

Trees in the Religion and Folklore of the Konda Reddi of South India

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the continuity between man and nature in tribal thought contrary to the Western dualism between nature and culture. As a case study, it probes into the cosmology, world view, religion and ritual, and folksongs of the Konda Reddi of Andhra Pradesh to establish the deep interconnectedness between men and trees, as the components of the same ecocosmology. It shows the mythical links between men and trees that bind them together in moral terms, thus ensuring the protection of selected species.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnographic literature on most of the forest-based groups all over the world reveals a close material, moral and emotional nexus between man and trees. This has resulted in a dominant folk perception, where human and natural worlds form one single social universe and are bound together in mutual respect, complementarity and symbiosis (Bruun and Kalland, 1995). Although this kind of perception is not a strange phenomenon for the people of the East, it appears as an inevitable paradox in the more conventional Western thought, where man and nature form an ontological opposition. The new ecological anthropology strives to crumble this dualism in its extreme form and reestablish the interface between man and nature in their regular interactive processes (see, Croll and Parkin, 1992; Bird-David, 1992a, b; Bruun and Kalland, 1995; Ellen and Fukui, 1996; Descola and Palsson, 1996 etc. for details). Recent attempts to understand different kinds of social metaphorizations of nature in different cultural complexes otherwise reinforce the plausibility of human conceptualization of a singular symbolic world with human and non-human components together (Bird-David, 1993). This perception of deep interconnections between tribes and nature ensures the protection of many species of trees as a religious prescription and helps

to maintain a steady social and ritual relationship between them (Gadgil and Vartak, 1976). Since the phenomenon of unification of species can be noticed in different provinces of native cultures, I contemplate in this paper on the nexus between Konda Reddis and the trees around their habitat, as perceived by them and manifested in their cosmology, religion and folksongs, contrary to the Western notion of dualism between culture and nature.

KONDA REDDI ECOLOGY AND CULTURE

The Konda Reddi is one of the Scheduled Tribes inhabiting the southern state of Andhra Pradesh in India. Its major concentration could be found in the agency areas of East Godavari District dispersed groups of this tribe still inhabit the neighbouring Districts of Khammam, West Godavari and Visakhapatnam. The whole of the agency tract in East Godavari is an extension of the Eastern Ghat chain of ranges, and is popularly known as Rampa agency. The area of forest cover in the District is about 30.70 per cent of the total land area with a reserve forest of 3232 sq km. About 70 per cent of the forest in the District is of southern tropical secondary dry deciduous type, although southern tropical moist mixed deciduous forest could be seen in the interior of the agency with high rainfall.

The Konda Reddi is the numerically dominant tribal group in the District with a population of 145,133 according to the last Census enumeration of 1991. The tribe finds an early mention in the Gazetteer of Godavari District by Hemingway during the British administration. A small passage about it is quoted from the Gazetteer in Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Vol. 3), first published in 1909. Hemingway observes that Konda reddis speak a corrupt form of Telugu and call themselves Pandava Reddis,

Raja Reddis etc. They live by shifting cultivation. Beef eating is a taboo, while pork eating is very common among them. They worship the spirit of hills, are superstitious, and believe firmly in sorcery and call wizards at the time of illness (Thurston, 1987). In 1940s, Fürer-Haimendorf studied them, eventually throwing some light on their beliefs concerning human sacrifice, and publishing a monograph, *The Reddis of the Bison Hills: A Study in Acculturation* (1945). Haimendorf is of the firm opinion that they are very primitive autochthonous ethnic stock of the region, despite their name being associated with the clean Hindu landed aristocratic caste of 'Reddi' of Andhra Pradesh. Arnold, however, contends on the ethnographic strength of Thurston that the Reddis of Rampa and Gudem are the Bagatas or Bhaktas, a caste of Telugu-speaking freshwater fishermen and cultivators, distantly related to the Kapu and Telaga peasant castes (Arnold, 1982). Any way, the comparison between earlier studies and the present state of Konda Reddi culture does not account for much significant changes in their beliefs and practices in the last hundred years or so.

As we look at them in their natural habitat today in the midst of the Rampa agency, their sprawling swidden (*podu*) fields on the hills could be easily seen from a distance of a few miles. Irrigated paddy cultivation is almost non-existing, and peripheral, if it exists in some isolated pockets. Supplementary subsistence support is derived from the bounty of nature in the form of seasonal edible fruits, roots, tubers, insects, honey, caryota juice (*jeelugu*) etc. Their village social organization revolves round many exogamous steps or *intiperulu*. So far as the subsistence is concerned, steps are not hierarchical, as the resources under the jurisdiction of the political boundary of the village are communally owned, and the concept of private property is extremely limited, although it is not altogether absent. Patriarchy and patriliney are the basic rules of family organization among the Konda Reddi and hence, the status of women is relatively lower, despite their higher contribution to the family economy. Konda Reddis are animists, although they worship some of the Hindu pantheon. *Gangamma* is the chief protector deity of the Konda Reddi. Most of their rituals are connected with the har-

vest of different crops - cultivated and wild. Belief in magic, sorcery and witchcraft is very common, and ancestral spirits are remembered and worshipped because of their benevolence.

Konda Reddis' acquaintance with the forest flora and fauna is spontaneous and natural. When a child is about 4 years old, he/she starts accompanying the parents to the *podu* fields. This is a process of early socialization of identifying the species and getting to know their uses. During adolescence, this knowledge further gets consolidated, when the child moves into the deep forest with the peers and gets the opportunity to examine the reliability of the knowledge passed on to him with mutual discussion and experimentation with other age-mates. When the child grows up to adulthood, there is further acquisition of innovative and elaborate floral and faunal knowledge for the survival of self and other members of the family.

The recent survey among the Konda Reddi of the village Okkuluru in East Godavari district indicates that the adult members of the tribe are able to easily recognize about 255 species of plants, their availability, growing conditions and possible uses. They recognize 112 species of trees or *chettulu*, 67 species of climbers or *teegalalu*, 25 species of bamboos or *vedurulu*, 11 species of grasses or *gaddi*, 9 species of mushrooms or *kokkulu*, and 31 species of parasites or *antulu*. Konda Reddi culture explicitly draws the continuity between human and plant species in such a way that both of them are considered to be the members of the same cosmic universe, and most interestingly, trees are also subjected to the same trials and tribulations as their human counterparts in this life and in other lives.

TREES IN KONDA REDDI COSMOLOGY AND WORLD VIEW

The Konda Reddi perception of 'self' as the product of a single divine source like 'others' provides the basic metaphysical foundation to their understanding of man-tree relationships. This conceptualization ensures the totalization of phenomena or the sense of encompassing cosmic oneness, where man is integrated with nature in a single, mutually shared universe, and yet different from it. This metaphysical orientation is legitimized by the Konda Reddi myth of origin,

notwithstanding the assertion of Haimendorf that no definite mythical tradition exists among them (Haimendorf, 1945). Konda Reddis believe that the supreme creator of the universe, Gangamma, first created man and asked him to live in the village (guda), a cleared and neat landscape. She then created trees (*chettulu*) and forest (*adavi*) as the abode of the wondering wild spirits or *adavi rajulu*. Since then, the relationship between man and trees has become intense because of this cosmic fraternity. But as the spirits living on the forest trees could be malevolent, Konda Reddis seek their permission before entering into the deep forest, as trespassing eventually invites their wrath. Konda Reddis maintain silence while moving in the deep forest with an intention of not disturbing the spirits living there. Similarly, the spirits intruding into the village are most often chased away with the help and expertise of the local *vejju*, the medicineman-cum-magician.

The relationship between man and trees in Konda Reddi world view can be best explained by their belief in rebirth and transmigration of the soul. Plant and human lives are considered to be mere transient existences in the circumambulatory movement of souls. The cosmic oneness of men and trees is further reinforced by the Konda Reddi belief that men are reborn as trees, and the trees are the living justifications of the deeds of a person in his past life. Konda Reddis, in fact, make a neat hierarchy of trees on the basis of their human uses. Most honoured among the trees are the *pa'la* (*Mimusops hexandra*), *burugu* (*Bombax cieba*) and similar species, which are associated with various rituals, and are the abodes of different Gods and spirits. *Pa'la* (*Mimusops hexandra*), for example, is at the apex of the floral hierarchy, as the tree and its flowers are the favourites of the supreme Konda Reddi Goddess, *Gangamma*. Virtuous persons with adorable qualities of generosity, cordiality, cooperation and kindness in this life are often believed to be reborn as ritual trees in the next life, when they remain in constant proximity with the Gods. The next most desirable life for a Konda Reddi would be to be reborn as a medicinal tree or herb, followed serially by trees providing edible parts, and timbers used for construction. No body, for sure, has any intention of being born either as a species like *chinduga* (*Allbizia odoratissima*) without any significant

use or as wild bushes (*kayyu or tutti*) that grow besides the foot tracks. Konda Reddis believe that if *chinduga* is used for construction of either house or animal-shed, there is a subsequent fear of tiger attack. Similarly, the bushes besides the track are cut all the time by the passers-by without any provocation whatsoever, for which they look grim and trimmed all round the year. This is mostly attributed to the cruelty and intolerance of a person in the last life to be compensated in the form of a bush in this life. It is also believed that after the accrued sins are duly compensated, trees regain their human life. Different species of trees are, therefore, the sources of constant inspiration to Konda Reddis for leading an ideal life of love and compassion.

TREES IN KONDA REDDI RELIGION AND RITUAL

Konda Reddi religious beliefs and ritual practices are replete with instances of tree worship and ensuring respectful place to many species. Some of the species are mythically connected with various Gods and Goddesses to secure a formal religious status for themselves. The exposition of Konda Reddi myths reveals the association of *raavi* (*Urostigma religiosum*) tree with Lord Shrirama. Konda Reddis believe that while Lord Shrirama was on his way to marry the Holy Mother, Sita Devi, night befell on the way. The Lord was in the midst of a deep forest, and hence, there was no possibility of getting suitable shelter. At this moment of need, *raavi* tree in its human form volunteered and requested the Lord to take shelter under its sprawling branches for the night. The Lord eventually obliged *raavi* and while resuming his journey the next morning had blessed the tree to assume divine power. Even today, Konda Reddis believe that the most sacred necklace of a married woman, *mangala sutram*, resembles the shape of a *raavi* leaf because of its sacred association with Lord Shrirama. Similarly, the species *usirika* (*Emblia officinalis*) is being worshipped because it is believed to be the favourite resting place of Lord Vishnu.

Neredu (*Syzygium cumini*) is of particular religious significance for Konda Reddis at the time of their marriage. The leaves of *neredu* are considered to be auspicious, and symbolize prosperity, fertility and productivity. During marriage,

the Konda Reddi bride and bridegroom are made to sit on an elevated platform made up of *neredu* log, which is locally named as *pol balla*. The married couple is made to plant a *neredu* branch at a corner of the house as a mark of seeking good life. Konda Reddis also sprinkle a mixture of *neredu* leaves and barks on water at the place of death and at the burial place to make them free from pollution. In the event of death, some relatives set out in advance to prepare a grave on the clean burial ground at the outskirts of the village. Till the dead body is carried to the burial ground, the path leading to the grave is blocked with a branch of *neredu*. Konda Reddis believe that without a *neredu* separator between the empty grave and the village, the former might invite any other person than the dead. On the third or the twenty first day of death, marking the end of the mourning period, the relatives of the deceased offer grains on a *neredu* leaf in honour of the departed soul. *Neredu* gets elaborate worship from Konda Reddis, if anybody in the community is suspected to be attacked by the evil spirits. In order to get rid of the diseases and the evil spirits, they take the help and advice of the *vejjugadu*, who worships *neredu* tree with turmeric and vermillion, and sacrifices either a chicken or a goat. *Neredu* thus protects the Konda Reddy from the attack of evil spirits. *Neredu*, therefore, symbolizes sacredness and has immense religious and magical power, for which it is worshipped and barely cut by Konda Reddis.

The leaves of *mamidi* (*Mangifera indica*) also stand for purity, sanctity and prosperity to the Konda Reddi. During all festive occasions and all life-cycle rituals except death, these leaves are used to decorate the main entrances of the huts. *mamidi* barks and raw turmeric (*pasupu*) are made into a paste, mixed with water, and sprinkled on the bride and the bridegroom at the time of marriage, to get rid of all misfortunes and evil eyes. Before the burial, the corpse is given the last bath in water mixed with the barks of *mamidi*, *neredu*, *pampen* and a little turmeric paste. This water is also sprinkled at the entrance of the house and on the grave, after the burial. On the last day of the mourning period, Konda Reddis sprinkle this water all around the house for purification. *Mamidi* is worshipped on the occasion of *mamidi panduga* or the festival of the first eating of mango.

Usually it is celebrated during April, when mango trees are full with unripened fruits. The priest decides an auspicious day for the ritual, which preferably falls on a Monday. In the early morning of the day of the celebration, Konda Reddis collect at least 5 raw mangoes. 3 of them are tied at the entrance of the house, while the rest 2 are offered to ancestors at the north-west corner of the hut or *gondi*. Some slices of the raw fruit are carried to the mango tree later in the day for the worship of the tree.

Turmeric or *pasupu* (*Curcuma longa*) is of very high religious value for the Konda Reddi. The bride and the bridegroom are applied turmeric paste during marriage. Rice and turmeric powder are mixed together (*talabralu*) and sprinkled on the newly-wed couple by the elder members of the family as a kind of blessing to get rid of any future misfortune.

The caryota palm or *jeelugu* (*Caryota urens*) tree is often worshipped by the Konda Reddi and the occasion is commonly known as *chettu panduga*. Caryota juice is considered to be the most favoured drink for these tribesmen. When the tree is about 25 years old and starts flowering, it is ready for secreting juice for not less than 20 years; every year from October to June. Before the actual collection of juice begins, the tree is worshipped with the expectation of abundance of juice for its whole life. Any adult member of the village, who first claims the ownership of a caryota tree is known as its ritually authorized juice-collector or *geetari*. On the occasion of *chettu panduga*, on an auspicious day in October, the *pujari* applies turmeric to the tree and a chicken is sacrificed, after which juice can be collected by the *geetari*. Since it is believed that the tree recognizes its lawful owner, none other than the *geetari* dares to climb up it for juice collection with the fear that either the tree goes dry or the climber gets fatal injury.

Wegisa (*Pterocarpus marsupium*) is also worshipped by the Konda Reddi on the occasions of *pindi* *panduga*, the celebration marking the first ritual eating of ragi and *mamidi panduga*, marking the first eating of mango. As Konda Reddis believe that their Gods and Goddesses live under the *wegisa* tree, it is worshipped during other rituals as well. On all these occasions, the *pujari* or the village priest officiates and conducts the

rituals by offering a chicken and chanting mantras for the welfare of the villagers.

Trees and their parts have definite and well-defined magical properties in the Konda Reddi everyday life. many plant species have been used as preventives for diseases and misfortunes caused by the evil spirits or *keedu*. For example, one can notice bunches of dry *vimanadantulu* or lemons and chillies and tied to the roof of the house at its entrance, which are believed to be chasing the intruding evil spirits into the house.

TREES AS METAPHORS IN KONDA REDDI FOLKSONGS

Trees are not only important in the religious and magical beliefs of the Konda Reddi, they also form a part of their social universe. Like other tribes in the region, Konda Reddi festivals (*ponduga*) are celebrated with singing and dancing. many songs metaphorically establish consanguinous relationship between them and trees to further strengthen the spirit of cosmic oneness between them. During the post-harvest months, when the granaries are nearly full, Konda Reddi villages witness marriage rituals, when the following song is very common to hear.

*"Lacho kodala layyo kodala
Lala chiru bala kodala,
Dibba meedi jeelugu chettu
Puvvu possido ledogani
Varru annadammulata
Mugguru kattina moodemopulu
Kalise meesam veeseranta
Dunna pillanu konnarata
Lacho kodala".*

The song is in the form of an address to the young and pretty bride, who more often comes from a different village and obviously not well-informed about the village of her husband, where *jeelugu* tree is their brother. In fact, the song is reflective of a nexus between the brothers, the trees, shifting cultivation (*podu*) and feasting. Although the above stanza particularly speaks about the *jeelugu* tree, in subsequent stanzas, *jeelugu* is replaced by *neredu*, *mamidi*, *chikkudu* and other trees, which are of immense importance in Konda Reddi life.

Despite leading a very hard life, in every opportune moment, Konda Reddis relax themselves by singing love songs, the primary motiva-

tion for which is derived from trees and other natural objects. In the following song, young and beautiful women are metaphorically presented as the trees bearing fruits and the young lads as parrots, who discuss among themselves about an intention of having some fun :

*"Mamidi vanamulona chilakaalura!
Mamidi pandlaina tinavemo palakaavura".*

The Konda Reddi life, in fact, revolves around the trees and forests. Trees regulate his subsistence, his shelter, his love, his marriage and procreation, his recreation and happiness. Therefore, Konda Reddis perform elaborate rituals that bind them with the trees around them. Their gratitude to the trees like a benevolent and protective elder member of their sept is spontaneously expressed through the songs like the following.

*"Neredu chettu jampare
Jaaya, jaayam jampare.
Mamidi chettu jampare
Jaayam jaayam jampare -".*

Konda Reddis' ecstacy reaches in its peak when they visualize the prospect of a good harvest of mango in the month of April, when the fruit is yet to ripe. During the festival of *mamidi panduga*, they cheerfully sing the following song for a bumper harvest of the fruit :

*"Mamidi puvvu jetaluvese
Jetanna jatako peyyara
Bremanna jatako peyyara....".*

CONCLUSION

Trees ensure Konda Reddi's subsistence, his shelter, inspires, his love, his marriage, his recreation and his happiness. Trees caution his action and motivate his behaviour. Therefore, Konda Reddis have evolved an elaborate system of rituals that bind them with the trees. Their intimacy with the trees is expressed in their folksongs, which they sing for themselves and to remind the coming generations of Konda Reddis. This deep bond is one of continuity between man and trees, rather than an opposition between them, as has been the characteristics of the Western disjunctive thought.

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