

The Role of Village Deities Among The Rural Society (A Case Study Rayalaseema 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 consist 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 duties 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 Dieties

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 (Gramadevatha) 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 delapidated condition. The village deities are symbolized in the ideals or rough stones and housed under a Neem or Ravi tree, under a stone structure-three stone slabs place together. Animal sacrifice is a must to propitiate them. There are no designated priests as such for these deities in the way the Sanskrit 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 Sanskrit 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 or 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 anthropological 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 worships 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 is 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 may. 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 (pongali) 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.

Nagamma

The women folk, worship another deity by name Nagamma, 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 Nagamma 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 whom they first appear in their dreams in the form of a woman approaching them riding a horse. Such an 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 loses weight. When these symptoms are noticed the victim is taken to a shaman who tells why the deities have become angry and also the way to appease them. Offering of turmeric paste, vermilion and flowers, and a he-goat are the items usually suggested to please them. The folk also believe that *Kannikalu* protect them from epidemic/major diseases.

Maremma

Maremma is another deity belonging to little tradition, who is believed to protect the domestic animals, especially from a deadly disease locally known as '*Gali*'. The deity is believed to reside in a neem tree and a plot of land is built to a tree in the village. At times of crisis she is worshipped 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 holy tree which is on the eastern side of the village 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 represented by three small lumps of stones. He has no temple of his own but the shrine is situated under a pipal 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 worship the deity in the fifth month of their pregnancy, on a Sunday, requesting the deity to protect their child in the womb. This worship is known as *Pala 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 deity. 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 represent 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 represented 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 sacrifice 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 Sanskrit 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 Vinayachaviti day during the month of August-September a festival is celebrated it is be-

lieved 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 worshipped 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 celebrated and this attract the entire village population. 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 regularly 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, sacred 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 consort Alivelu Mangamma, in their house and worship 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 pleasures man establishes a few types of relationships with the deities in their faith. On a few occasions 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 primary 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, coconuts and pumpkins. For example, Gangamma deity is offered with animal sacrifice besides vegetarian 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 belongs to Sanskritic tradition, is strictly offered the vegetarian dishes.

The religious rituals related to a deity are offered 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 contribution 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 elsewhere. The local deity Tirupati Gangamma has her main shrine situated at Tirupati. Desamma, has her shrine at Nagri. The main shrines become 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.

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