

RESEARCH NOTES

Assimilation and Appropriation of Local Deity Peddamma into Sanskritic Hindu Religion in South India

Mala Ravikumar *

Post-Doctoral Fellow- ICSSR, Department of Anthropology, University of Hyderabad

*Corresponding Author Email : malaravikumar21@gmail.com

Abstract: *In South India, each village has shrines of local deities known as the mother goddess, considered supervisor of that village. Belief in these deities fosters a sense of unity and cohesion among the people. South India has a long history of cultural interactions and migrations, resulting in the blending of various religious traditions. Over time, many of these deities have been assimilated into mainstream Hinduism. Local rulers and patronage played a significant role in promoting the assimilation process. In the process of assimilation and appropriation, the local religious traditions change and merge into the major organized religion. Under the new ideological orientation of Brahmins, Brahmins and other upper castes who previously did not worship the local goddess began to worship her. The local deity tradition is never prone to lose its association with the Hindu people, but it is rejuvenated and renewed with the influence of Brahmanical religious rituals.*

Keywords: Hinduism; tradition; ritual; local deities; Hyderabad.

INTRODUCTION

South India is known for its rich mythology and religious traditions, with various forms of the Goddess being worshipped and referred to as 'Amma' (mother). Eminent scholars, to mention a few, Whitehead (1921), Elmore (1984), Srinivas (1965), and many more, explained the South Indian religion from an anthropological and historical perspective. They have argued that the Dravidian and Aryan religions are independent with non-similar ritual practices, ritual purity and impurity, caste Hindu hierarchy, and the power and religious hegemony of Brahmins. Scholars also examined the interaction of local traditions with non-local traditions, politics and religious movements, and rational and traditional religious systems. The above research on religious aspects produced new terminologies to define the transition of people and their ritual practices, such as Sanskritisation, Aryanisation, great tradition, and or any other. However, as Champakalakshmi (2011) says, scholars have had less research and academic interest in the interaction of Sanskritic traditions and local or regional cultic practices and the process of assimilation by the mainstream. This study is based on the anthropological fieldwork observations made in 2016. Along with the observation method, both the emic and etic approaches have been used to comprehend rituals, myths, and local religious practices. Under the emic view, the ritual practices and participation of the believers, the local cosmologies, and their narratives documented. The etic view aimed to examine and understand these practices in relation to broader anthropological and historical contexts. The combination of these two perspectives opens up a dialogue between local and Sanskritic religious traditions. Thus, this paper exemplifies the process of assimilation and appropriation of a local deity goddess, Peddamma of Hyderabad city in the Telangana State.

NARRATIVES ON THE ORIGIN OF THE GODDESS

Myths of the local deities have many moral lessons and social relations. These myths do relate to the everyday activities of the people, but the characters in narration possess special powers, due to which they have been given special importance and are being worshipped. Without myths, there may not be specific worship actions such as the sacrifice of an animal or any other. The local deity myths, however, varied based on geographical differences; similarities can be seen in many aspects. South India Brahmins began to recreate myths of the local deities that have gained popularity and huge wealth. They began to restructure the worship patterns with the help of administrators and political representatives. For example, the mythical narration of local deity Peddamma of Jubilee

Hills of Hyderabad finds inclusion of the deity in relation to the Sanskrit deities. They related the Peddamma as the supernatural power existed in the form of *sthree* (woman) who gave birth to Kali and Vishnu; Saraswati and Shiva; and Lakshmi and Brahma. The portrayal of the divine as having distinct characteristics, including their colour complexion. The idea that marriages were arranged based on the similarity of complexion is an interesting facet of these narratives. According to these, Vishnu, the preserver, got married to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, due to their similar complexion. Similarly, Brahma, the creator, wedded Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, and Shiva, the destroyer, married Kali, the fierce goddess of time and change. By personifying them with particular traits and appearances, people found it easier to connect with and understand the complexities of the divine realm. Hence, she is defined as *Mula Prakruthi* (Core of the nature), which means the divine feminine energy, often represented as the creative force behind the universe, is seen as the essence of existence. She is believed to be the core of nature itself, embodying the fundamental elements that make up the cosmos. This can be understood in an instance, in a society where Demons wreaked havoc, terrorising innocent lives, and shrouding the land in darkness. Witnessing the plight of humanity, Brahma and the pantheon of gods implored a powerful goddess to intercede on their behalf. Their request reached the ears of the formidable goddess, who was known for her strength and fearlessness in confronting evil. Armed with her indomitable spirit and divine prowess, she confronted the demons and waged a fierce battle against the darkness that threatened the lives of society and rests at the Jubilee Hills forest. Looking at her giant posture, the local shepherds and cattle herders called her Peddamma and requested her to stay with them to protect her from evil attacks. The subsequent events culminated in Peddamma accepting the request and becoming a revered idol in the heart of Jubilee Hills, symbolizing hope and protection from evil attacks.

Whereas non-Brahman narration contrasts with the above. In a world where caste divisions have long been a prevalent issue, a heart-warming story emerged, demonstrating the transformative power of unity and cooperation. The tale revolves around a Mudiraj caste family facing substantial fruit crop losses and the unlikely aid they sought from a Pambala caste priest, a Dalit priest, to alleviate their woes. This narrative highlights the essence of transcending social barriers and embracing inclusivity for collective well-being.

Peddiraju, a humble member of the Tenugu caste, offers custard apple fruits to his wife to sell in the neighbouring villages while also presenting some as an offering to Lord Siva. This act of devotion sets the premise for the celestial response from Lord Siva, who, in his benevolence, grants blessings in the form of fruits. However, an inadvertent mistake leads to the spilling of these sacred offerings, inviting Lord Siva's anger and a curse decreeing that his earnings would suffice only for sustenance, leaving no room for savings. Peddiraju humbly seeks forgiveness from Lord Siva. Lord Siva, acknowledging his sincerity, bestows Peddiraju with a mango fruit garden, symbolising the power of redemption and divine grace, blessed with seven sons. However, an unexpected event occurred as Peddiraju's wife faced an unjust encounter with a goldsmith who refused

to pay for the mango fruits he had purchased. In a fit of anger, the goldsmith resorted to dark magic, conjuring a malevolent crow with an iron beak to wreak havoc on the mango fruit garden. Helpless and distraught, Peddiraju and his family sought refuge in Lord Siva once again. Empathetic to their plight, Lord Siva advised them to perform a ritual through which a divine Sakti, a powerful female energy, would manifest to protect them. Following Lord Siva's instructions, Peddiraju's family enlisted the assistance of a Pambala priest, a revered Dalit priest known for his mystical abilities. Together, they performed an elaborate ritual, drawing a sacred design with turmeric powder and vermilion, encompassing 12 acres of land. Offerings of lemons, pumpkins, coconuts, and neem tree leaves accompanied the ritual, followed by the chanting of sacred mantras and the sacrifice of several he-goats. Responding to their fervent prayers, a radiant Sakti in the form of a female emerged, her presence breathing life into the once withered trees, transforming the garden into a verdant oasis. Grateful for her protection, the Sakti bestowed the family with her blessings and entrusted them with the annual worship, assuring them of her continued safeguarding. This divine protector, lovingly referred to as Peddamma, became a cherished deity for the Mudiraj caste and the surrounding villagers. A shrine was erected in her honour, where she was venerated with animal sacrifices and heartfelt prayers every year.

The narration of myths varies between Brahmin priests and non-Brahmins, with differences in the existence of goddesses. The stories of the goddesses mentioned earlier do not share similarities in their existence, but they all ultimately serve as saviours of society and crops. As a superpower of nature, depicted in female form, she embodies both creative and destructive aspects within society. Traditional myths hold greater relevance to everyday life and the welfare of people compared to Brahmanical myths. Notably, the role of the Pambala priest, a Shudra seeking help to combat evil, demonstrates that lower-caste priests possess the ability to harness the powers of the superpower, as witnessed in the above myth.

THE HIERARCHY AND SANSKRITISATION

In India, the caste Hindu category redefined people's status in their hierarchy of ritual as well as a socio-economic sphere. Consequently, the division in the pantheon indicates their hierarchical status as vegetarians and meat eaters. Fuller (1988, 19) points out that 'the village deities at the lower levels of the pantheon symbolise the hierarchical relations of the caste system, whereas the Sanskritic deities at the upper levels do not'. Thus, the village deities symbolise only the facts of village life (Whitehead, 1921, 7). But in the process of assimilation, many changes have taken place, and many religious myths of the deities have been redefined. Brahmin priests firmly assert that without their rituals, the deity or the sun will not rise (Pals 2006). They claim that their performance of Yagna brought forth a Shakti, a divine energy, to protect people from demons. This benevolent Shakti is said to have bestowed vegetables and various food items on living beings, all produced from her own body. She provides nectar to gods and goddesses, and bloody offerings to demons, while offering vegetables and crops to human beings, and grass and animals to various animals. Consequently, the Brahmins advocate worshipping her in a

vegetarian form. However, the tradition of local deities presents a contrasting view, as they are often worshipped with offerings of blood. These two forms of worship are diametrically opposed. The Sanskrit religion upholds its practices as pure, dismissing other practices as impure. On the other hand, the practitioners of the local deity tradition view their age-old form of worship as inherently pure. In the process, goddess Peddamma is renamed as Durga by a monastery head. Likewise, many of the local deities have been renamed mostly with 'Maisamma' as 'Mahankali' or any other prefixed Mahankali temples (Rao and Ravikumar 2017, 240-247). For instance, Ujjaini Mahankali, and Simhavahini Mahankali. Such renaming exemplifies the change of character of the deity. The same is observed in goddess Kamakshi of Kaveri, who was bloodthirsty, but as Sri Sri Sri Sankaracharya propitiated, her character was also changed (Bhattacharyya 1977:67). Though Dravidian gods are renamed and their worship patterns are of Hindu names, their nature and ideas did not change (Elmore 1984). Similarly, in Hyderabad, though they are marked with the incarnation of Durga or any other, the old names such as Yellamma, Peddamma and Maisamma are in continuation because people are familiarly associated with these names.

The process of assimilation and appropriation merged the native religious traditions with the major organised religion. Under the new ideological orientation of Brahmins, people who practised the age-old tradition started adopting new worship patterns. Brahmins amended the ritual processes without hindering the belief and practice of the majority of people who worship local deities. The processes mentioned, the transformation of religious practices and the popularisation of temples, were not exclusively driven by Brahmins (Srinivas, 1956, 481). While Brahmins might have played a significant role, other individuals and entities, such as temple trustees, representatives of the state, and the newly affluent members of society, also contributed to these changes. But, 'It is the popularity of the deity that determines her next manifestation, whether or not she can manifest in different myths along with the deities of different families' (Sthaneshwar 2006, 60). During the pre-Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara periods, the local folk goddesses are Sanskritised, for example, goddess Pampa Sanskritised by a marriage with Virupaksha (a form of Siva), which resulted in the fall of goddess importance (Vergheze 2004).

In the case of goddess Peddamma, till the 1990s, the goddess Peddamma shrine was located in the jungle near Durgam Cheruvu (lake). She was worshipped offering Bonam prepared with the new harvest, refined rice, and animal sacrifices on the following day of a Telugu festival, Sankranti. The villagers firmly believed that their bountiful harvest was a result of the goddess's blessings, and expected the same in the following year as well. It was like a festival specifically organised in honour of the goddess Peddamma. As it was located far from the villages, believers along with their relatives and friends with all the paraphernalia, animals like goat, lamb, or cock on bullock carts which were the only means of transport visited and celebrated. The sacrificed animal is cooked and eaten by all, and leaves the place by evening. Exclusion of the Goddess worship during Ashadam was a voluntary act, as it was mandatory to offer Bonalu to their village goddesses. But after the 1990s, the Sanskritisation of the goddess began with the construction of a new temple

structure as per the agama shastras. Late P. Janardhan Reddy, who was a political representative from the Indian National Congress, has constructed a new temple. A huge *Rajagopuram*, *Prakaram*, sanctum, sculpted idol of the goddess on the lion, has been newly placed. The new structure created vacancies and the needs of the workers, including priests. Thus, change began by appointing a Brahmin priest who added new Sanskrit rituals, excluding offering Bonalu at the sanctum and animal sacrifices in front of the temple. Officiated Brahmin priests chant mantras and perform Yagnas. Every day, from early morning to late evening, the priests perform Sanskrit rites in which the deity is awakened, given a bath, dressed, given breakfast, lunch, dinner and put to sleep. Along the line, they perform many other rites for the individuals and families, such as archana. The devotees feel blessed by the goddess, and they do take the blessings of the priest by touching his feet. Many of the devotees reciprocated such blessings, paying in cash to the priest and dropping money in the HUNDI against the blessings of the goddess. The temple began to keep open throughout the year for worship, but the priest decided to hold worship every day. On Friday and Sunday, it is open at 3:00 am in the early morning, and on the remaining days at 6:00 am. It is closed at 8 o'clock in the evening and also during noon from 1:00 pm -3:00 pm on all days except Friday and Sunday. The closing time is considered the rest time of the goddess.

NEW SANSKRITIC RITUALS

Varshika Mahotsavalu (Annual fest) celebrations are being held every year in the month of February, based on the Telugu calendar, from Panchami to *Rathasapthami*. *Rathotsavam* (Chariot procession) is one of the key rituals celebrated grandly. *Shakambari utsavalu* (Worship in vegetarian form) is another festival day added to the ritual calendar of Peddamma. During these days, the goddess and the temple are decorated with different kinds of vegetables. *Dassarra Sarannavaratri Mahotsavalu* (Dassara festival)- the goddess Peddamma is worshipped in nine forms for nine days. *Baliprdanam* (Sacrifice) involves a symbolic sacrifice where a pumpkin is severed into two pieces.

Shakambari Utsavalu (Worship in vegetarian form): This is another festival day added to the ritual calendar of Peddamma. These are held in the month of July when all the temples of the mother goddesses of Hyderabad and Secunderabad get ready for the Bonalu festival. This is to indicate that the goddess is vegetarian, and celebrated as a festival of three days from *Ashada Shuddha Saptami* to *Ashada Shuddha Navami* (According to the Telugu calendar). During these days, the temple is decorated with all kinds of vegetables (where hundreds of kilograms of vegetables are used), and the goddess is also decorated with vegetables. On the third day, these vegetables are distributed to the devotees as sacred food.

Dassarra Sarannavaratri Mahotsavalu (Dassara festival): It begins on *Ashwayuja Shuddha Padyami* to *Ashwayuja Shuddha Dashami* (in the month of October). During this festival, the goddess Peddamma is worshipped in nine forms for nine days. These nine forms are 1) Sri Bala Tripura Sundari Devi; 2) Sri Gayatri Devi; 3) Sri Annapurna Devi; 4) Sri Gajalakshmi Devi; 5) Sri Lalita Devi; 6) Sri Raja Rajeswari Devi; 7) Sri Saraswati; 8) Sri Durga Devi; and 9) Sri Peddamma Talli. On all these nine days, she is worshipped

with some of the above-mentioned *poojas*, but on the last day of the festival, Bali *pradanam* (symbolic sacrifice of an animal, but no animal sacrifice takes place) and *poornahuti* are performed. She is decorated with various kinds of vegetables, leaves, flowers, fruits, money, and many more. Each day she is represented with a different name for nine days. But on the ninth day, she is worshipped as Peddamma.

It is certain that the above description would leave a question of why assimilation with the local mother goddesses? These goddesses are commonly referred to as Shakti, which means fierce and powerful. Local deities do not have any fixed temple or image (Elmore 1984, 35). These are the deities 'worshipped by the low castes, not the Brahmins and high castes' (Fuller 1988, 20). This is said to be the religion of the masses, or agricultural people, or Shudras. But, the revival of religious traditions made it a part of the Brahmanical Hindu religion by elevating her status, where gods have subordinated positions. As explained by Narendranath (1977, 222)

'the mass strength behind the female principle placed goddesses by the side of the gods of all religions, but by doing so, the entire emotion centering around the female principle could not be channelized. So need was felt for a new religion, entirely female dominated, a religion in which even the great gods like Vishnu or Siva would remain subordinate to the goddess.'

Srinivas (1965, 214) argues that the 'presence of completely Sanskritised worship of rivers, trees and mountains in Hinduism and their incorporation in the vast mythology of Hinduism, makes easier the assimilation of the ritual and beliefs of the lower castes and of communities remaining outside Hinduism'. Thus, the Brahmins had easy access to reinterpret and develop a nexus between the local deity and the Sanskrit Hindu pantheon. The economic prosperity of the Shudras is another reason that led to rebuilding a shrine into a medium-sized or huge structure, which in turn, paved the way to Sanskritisation by officiating a Brahmin as a priest. A significant factor has been observed that the presence of Brahmin priests in a temple increases the reverence, richness, faith, and privilege of the believers. Local inhabitants feel the pleasure of Brahmin priesthood because the individual is already absorbed into the clutches of Brahmanical religious thoughts in multiple forms.

CONCLUSION

In the current scenario, the believers of these deities are influenced by Brahmin priestly actions in the form of rituals and interpretations of goddess powers. The original traditional myths have no scope in either way to reach the people and influence the believers. Traditional ritual processes were engaged only for one or two days to worship the deities. Whereas the Sanskritised ritual engages throughout the year, networking relations between the deities and the Hindu calendrical festivals, which makes the Brahman priest exclude traditional processes. Hence, the oral narrations of these deities are disappearing. No individual from the lower rung has an interest in propagating the same. It signifies that traditional aspects move downward and the only goddess moves up in the hierarchical ladder without changing the caste association, status and structure. M.N. Srinivas is true on the one hand that the goddess has been Sanskritised, appropriated and assimilated into Sanskrit

Hinduism, whereas on the other, it has distanced the caste relations with the temple and the goddess as Elmore and others have enunciated.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the Centre for Economic and Social Studies, ICSSR, UGC and the respondents of the fieldwork.

REFERENCES

1. Champakalakshmi, R. (2011). *Religion, Tradition and Ideology: precolonial South India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
2. Elmore, W.T. (1984). *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Service.
3. Fuller, C.J. (1988). The Hindu Pantheon and the Legitimation of Hierarchy. *Man, New Series* 23 (1): 19-39.
4. Pals, Daniel L. (2006). *Eight Theories of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
5. Rao, N Sudhakar, and M Ravikumar. 2017. The Ritual of Power and Power of the Ritual: An Interface between Religion and Politics. In *Religion and Modernity in India*, edited by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Aloka Parasher Sen, 238-264. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
6. Singer, Milton. (1971). Beyond Tradition and Modernity in Madras. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13 (2): 160-195.
7. Srinivas, M.N. (1956). A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization. *Far Eastern Quarterly* 15 (4): 481-496.
8. Srinivas, M.N. (1965). *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*. London: Asia Publishing.
9. Sthaneswar, T. (2006). Terrifying Beauty: Interplay of the Sanskrit and Vernacular Rituals of Siddilaksmi. *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10 (1): 59-73
10. Verghese, Anila. (2004). Deities, Cults and Kings at Vijayanagara. *World Archaeology* 36 (3): 416-431.
11. Whitehead, H. (1921). *Village Gods of South India*. Calcutta: Oxford University Press.