



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

MEDARAM JATRA: A REVIEW OF THE NARRATIVES

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Abstract: Lack of documentation of history, discontinuity in oral tradition, and fragmentation of tribal communities make study of traditions problematic in India. Further, there is a general tendency to study a tribe in isolation and prepare their ethnographies. Such studies deliberately abstain from critical analysis of multi-community affairs, cultural adaptation, and assimilation. Medaram Jatra of Telangana is traditionally a tribal fest in which a large number of non-tribal, caste Hindu visitors also participate making it what Redfield termed 'Great Tradition'. Identifying the reasons of evolution of this sans-elite carnival is an anthropological challenge. This paper attempts to review the narratives involved in making the Jatra a grand fest. It is a part of a larger PhD project that tried to decode the Jatra in terms of cultural space, myths, rituals, symbols and divinity. Of these variables, only the myth part is being presented here. The methodology applied is narrative analysis of documented texts and oral traditions. It was found that myths have hidden meanings which can be understood only with the help of rituals and symbols. It was found that Medaram Jatra narrative primarily represents a fertility cult.

Index Terms – Medaram Jatra, Sammakka, Koya, Carnival, Narrative, Myth, Great Tradition

1. Introduction

In classical anthropology, there is a tendency to treat culture as *a priori* and primitive cultures *sui generis*. These approaches are problematic in Indian context as they fail to describe the processes of cultural diffusion, assimilation, and negotiation. Another narrower approach is describe culture in terms of identity politics and power. While cultural conflicts can be described with the help of this approach, it fails squarely to describe the evolution of cultural consent, which is a unique feature of the Indian society. A more conducive framework for exploring carnivals in India needs to be historical and reconstructive and it should take into consideration cultural variables like space, myths, rituals, symbols and divinity.

Religious Melas and Jatras are events that have the characteristics of both—festivals and pilgrimages. They are celebrated at specific locations and are time-bound events lasting between one day to one month. They are usually held every year and have a folk character. They have a sense of hope, change and renewal. They are held within a structure and order but the intention is to transcend those structures and orders, at least for the moment. They certainly take out an individual, even collectives, of their immediate space and create a ceremonial space away from their habitation. They also create a cultural boundary which is very different from the political boundary.

Medaram Jatara, popularly known as *Sammakka-Saralamma Jatara* was originally an event of *Koya* tribe of *Warangal* district in *Andhra Pradesh*. It is based on a story of the past which had no written or material historical evidence. Oral narratives of the *Koya* Tribe, also known as *Koya Puranam* has preserved the myth associated with this festive conglomeration. The bard community that has preserved the narrative is known as the *Doli*. This satellite community has the formal official (*Mirasi*) rights granted by its patrons to sing the relevant section of *Puranam* on all festive occasions.

It is not known, with any degree of certainty, as to when did Medaram Jatra become a multi-community affair. *Koyas*, after descending from the Bastar Hills, took to *Podu* (Shifting) cultivation in forest areas of Godavari basin along with their traditional hunting-gathering and pastoral subsistence. In the process, they established harmonious relations with other forest-dwelling communities. Dependence on forest established new social order within *Koya* community. They learned languages, customs and rituals of other communities, including the caste-Hindus on one hand and maintained their cultural identity on the other. The process of adaptation was not entirely peaceful. They had to face violence as well. *Medaram Jatra*, in a way represents the historical violence that the community faced.

This grand *Koya* carnival is held once in every two years. The location is a small village, *Medaram*, in *Tadvai* Mandal of *Eturnagaram* forest Division of Telangana State. The date for the festival is full moon day of January-February months (*Magha Purnima*). On this day *Sarakka* is brought from forest near *Kannebounapalle* village in a procession. The next day, procession of *Sammakka* takes place and a wooden representation of the Goddess is brought to Medaram from *Chilkalgutta* hill (now a village of the same name atop the hill). The festivity continues for three days.

The Jatra problematizes the *Great Tradition Theory* of Robert Redfield. In his structural model of culture, Redfield presented social organization of traditions in complex cultures like India and China, which have a long history of stability and survival. He identified these complex cultures as *Great Traditions* having intertwined urban and folk structures. The folk tradition is further differentiated into village or peasant cultures, and tribal cultures, or the *Little Traditions*. [1] The little or folk traditions of the tribes are relatively autonomous, self-sufficient, homogenous, without any specialization of knowledge or technology and are based on familial relations, while there is a balance between *Gesselschaft* and *Gemienschaft* in the village or peasant traditions besides commercial and cultural dependence on urban society [2]. The *elite-abstracted* urban traditions, in turn, influence or even

transform the smaller village traditions falling within their networks, but they influence tribal traditions only partially and selectively. Because of their dependence on urban centers, the peasant societies of villages are termed as *half cultures*. Tribal cultures may have their own specialists and *Shamans*, but otherwise, they are homogenous in structure having very little occupational difference among the community individuals on the basis of descent, gender or age.

Medaram Jatra, on the other hands, has already become a great tradition. It is attended by people belonging to the non-tribal communities also and it now enjoys the status of the state festival of Telangana. This change deserves a critical review of both—our theoretical understanding of religious carnivals and the cultural processes involved in production of cultural consent among the tribal and non-tribal communities.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on narrative analysis of oral traditions collected through field surveys and secondary sources. It is a result of a PhD thesis titled Tribal Community in Medaram Jatra and Kumbha Mela: An exploratory study, submitted to the Allahabad University. Multiple stakeholders have been interviewed with the help of open-ended questionnaire for the study.

3. The Narrative of Medaram Jatra

There is no comprehensive study available on *Medaram Jatra* in any language. What we get instead is brief ethnographies of the *Koya* tribe which holds the *Jatra*. Some of the important documents include those of Thurston [3], Aiyappan [4], Haimendorf [5], Dash [6], Patra [7] and Satyanarayana [8]. Thurston's study is the administrative caste-and-tribe handbook covering areas south of Godavari River. It does not cover Koyas of *Malkangiri-Koraput* region at all and has only passing reference to the *Bastar-Dantewada* region. Aiyappan's study is based on the report of Aboriginal Tribe Welfare Enquiry Committee (1946). The document is similar in content to the other official handbooks although it has better cultural inputs. Haimendorf conducted studies in the Nizamshahi state of Hyderabad. He focused mainly on the economic status of the resident tribes. Papers of Dash, Patra and Satyanarayana have been written for periodicals and they have only sketchy reference of *Medaram Jatra*. None of these studies are comprehensive as they cover only one or two of the five states in which Koyas are present. Further, the reports are based on study of only a few villages in select districts. There is significant differences in the reports in terms of social organization, occupation, and religious behavior of the tribe under study. Even their 'origin' stories vary. All these ethnographies are based on local oral narratives and no efforts have been made to collect physical (epigraphic) evidences. The tribal perspective on *Medaram Jatra* has been recorded by only one scholar, Arunkumar [9]. This study is in Telugu language and it matches with the oral traditions of the bard community of the *Koya* tribe. It marks several anomalies in the *chartered myth* propagated by media on the identity of *Sammakka*, the tribal deity on whose memory the *Jatra* is held. The chartered myth prompted by the media is given below.

Medaraju, a Koya tribe chief was once returning from an expedition when he found a new born girl child playing with tigers. He brought the child home and groomed her up into a beautiful maiden. Young Sammakka was married to tribal chief of Medaram, Pagdida Raju. The couple were blessed with three children—Jampanna (son), Saralamma and Nagulamma (daughters). Saralamma, the eldest of the three was married to another Koya feudatory Govinda Raju. Sammakka was blessed with the power of healing. She also had immense knowledge of medicinal plants. She was acknowledged as the daughter of the forest by the Koya tribesmen.

Koyas were feudatories of Kakatiya sovereign. They were obliged to pay Koppam (tribute) to the Kakatiya rulers which they paid regularly. They also provided military services to the ruler. Once, Medaram faced drought for three successive years and Pagdidaraju failed to deposit Koppam in the treasury of Pratap Rudra Dev, the Kakatiya ruler. The cruel monarch got furious and came with his decorated army to plunder Medaram. Pagdidaraju along with his son Jampanna and father-in-law Medaraju resisted Pratap Rudra Dev but all the three were killed in the battle. Jampanna, in fact, ran away from the battlefield when Koya army was reduced significantly, and he jumped into a nearby stream Sampenga Vagu and committed suicide. When the news of massacre reached Sammakka, she herself came out to lead the army and she was accompanied by Saralamma, her daughter. She fought fiercely till she was deceitfully attacked from the back. It is said that Sammakka's fighting skills threatened the Kakatiya soldiers and Pratap Rudra Dev offered to marry her, which she declined. Wounded, she left the battlefield and moved towards the same forest from which she was brought as a newborn. Koya soldiers tried to follow her but she got transformed into a tiger and disappeared at a forest hillock living behind a vermilion cascade. Ever since, she is worshipped as a Goddess and Koyas believe that she will protect them at the time of distress.

This narrative underlines the relation that little tribal communities had with larger states during the medieval period. Further, it highlights the aspirations and struggle of the tribal communities to get rid of unjust rule. Besides, the myth reflects the family ethos of the Koyas in which mother plays an anchoring role and she can also take arms, if needed to avenge the killing of his son or husband. Although most of the tribes in India treat earth as the Goddess of fertility and worship her as supreme mother, *Sammakka* is treated as mother personified.

In the *chartered myth* associated with *Medaram Jatra*, *Sammakka* is the daughter of *Medaraju*, not a biological one though. *Medaraju* found the deserted newborn *Sammakka* in the forest. One does not know the exact source of this description, which is a part of *Doli* narrative. However, according to descendants of *Sammakka*, she was daughter of *Rayibandini Raju* of *Chanda* family. Her mother was a princess of Nagvanshi dynasty of Bastar. The tribal identity of Nagvanshi is not clear. It is assumed that like Gonds, they might have assumed *Rajput* identity. The divine birth story of *Sammakka* thus stands resolved. She was daughter of a tribal chief and could be related to *Gonds* of central India or even the *Nagvanshi* rulers of *Chhotanagpur*.

4. Contesting Narratives

Medaraju, according to the chartered myth was a *Koya* chief of *Medaram*. However, the inscriptions of that period suggest otherwise. *Medaraja*, or *Medaraja-I* was a *Polvasa* dynasty vassal (*Mahamandaleshwar*) of the *Chalukyas* of *Kalyani*. He belonged to a non-tribal low caste community like *Kakatiyas* and *Velmas*. *Polvasa* falls in the modern *Karimnagar* district and it is close to *Warangal* and almost double its size in area. It is said that both *Kakatiyas* and *Polvasas* had the same gotra and both followed Jainism. *Kakatiyas* became *Shaivaites* or *Vir-shaivas* later on.

In the *Koya* narrative of *Sammakka*, *Medaraja-I* does not find place nor does *Polvasa*. The name of *Sammakka's* father is *Chandam Boira* and he is known to be *Pedda dorasani* (meaning the chief of a *Gatta*). He is one of the two sons of *Raja* or *Rao* (meaning *King*) of *Bandini* (estate), *Karthika*. The narrative of *Sammakka's* birth that follows is given below:

Despite many prayers and rituals, Chandam did not have any child for long. One day, elder wife of the Pedda went to forest along with some other women to collect tubers. There, in the forest, while digging out tubers she found a box. She felt as if a baby was crying inside the box. She dug out the box completely and opened it to find a girl child lying in it. She assumed it to be the gift of the god and brought her home. There was festivity all around in the village. Afterwards, the same wife of Chandam gave birth to two sons—Manyudua and Gandragoddali. Also by the grace of the Naga Devi the younger wife of Chandam gave birth to a girlchild Nagulamma and three sons.[10]

In the *chartered myth*, it is claimed that there was a war between *Prataprudra Deva* and *Medaraju* on the issues of *Koppum* (land revenue) during a famine. Some narratives have claimed that the issue of contention was not *koppum* but tax on a tank water which *Kakatis* had built and *Koyas* were using. Another narrative is that there was no war at all between the two, the legendary war is a myth instead created to legitimize the divinity of *Sammakka*. Yet another narrative is that *Prataprudra Deva* wanted to marry *Sammakka* but *Medaraju* declined and he got his daughter married to a tribal (*Koya*) chief *Pagdida Raju* (tribal wearing *Raju*) of *Medaram*.

In *Koya* narrative, however, *Pagdida Raju* is the son of *Pedda* of *Kotapalli village*, (now in *Bijapur Taluka*, *Bastar* district) who belonged to *Sanapagani* clan. There was a feud during his marriage but that was related to conflict between the two step sisters—*Nagulamma* and *Sammakka* and it was resolved by marrying both to *Pagdidaraja* [11].

Epigraphs of the period confirm that there was a feud between *Prola-II* and *Medaraja-I* in which *Medaraja* was defeated [12]. Further, *Pratap Rudradeva-I* also waged a war on *Medaraja-I* [13]. It is not clear whether *Medaraja-I* married his daughter to *Pratap Rudradeva-I* or not. *Gangadhara* inscription of *Anumkonda* claims that after a lot of resistance, *Meda Raja-I* married his daughter to *Pratap Rudra-I* [14].

There is another narrative that deserves attention. It is said that *Kakatis* of *Omtikonda* (later *Oramgallu/Orrugallu* and now *Warangal*) and *Polvasa Mahamandaleshwara* were both *Sat-shudras* and *Jains* initially and they built Jain *Basadis* in their respective fiefdoms (*Mahamandalams*). However, *Betaraja* of *Omtikonda* (*Kakatiya* feudatory of *Chalukyas*) turned *Kalmukha* under supervision of *Srisailam Matha*. He became, thereafter, hostile of *Jain* ascetics and followers. The cause of feud between the *Polvasa* and *Omtikonda* was religious and not political.

There is yet another narrative that deserves attention. When *Prola-II* claimed sovereignty in 1163 AD, the polity of south India was already in a state of flux. Western *Chalukyas*, the overlords of *Kakatiyas*, were on a decline and *Hosysalas* were emerging as new force in *Kalyani* while *Yadavas* were consolidating in *Devagiri*—both very close to *Orrugallu*. *Cholas* were already present in the south. *Kakatis* were having troubled relations with *Velmas* in their own region. Therefore, expansion and consolidation was the natural option left with *Prola-II* which he applied forcefully.

Whatever be the cause of struggle, there is no doubt now that *Kakatis* invaded *Polvasa* and *Medaraja* was killed in the battle, and so was *Pagdida Raju*, as the chartered myth claims. Following this, *Sammakka*, accompanied by *Koya* women attacked the *Kakatis* and fought gallantly. When she got wounded, she retreated to the nearby forest of *Chilkaigutta*. *Koya* soldiers followed her. She got converted into a lioness and disappeared in the deep forest.

The alternative narrative is that the *Kakatis* killed *Sammakka* treacherously. When they could not defeat the lady in the battle, they surrounded her from all the sides and shot at her from the back. She died immediately. *Kakatis* deliberately suppressed the news of her death to avoid political humiliation. They had not foreseen this situation as this was the first occasion in the history of the region when an all women formation was fighting a professional army. It is also claimed that the myth of her disappearance was created by non other than the *Velakki Gangadhara*, the Brahmin minister and military leader (*Dandanayak Amatya*) of *Rudra-I*, who was leading the army of *Kakatis* (He was also governor of *Sabbi Sahsa Mandala* headquartered at *Naruguru*. This *Vishaya* was of tremendous importance for *Kakatiyas* as it marked the beginning of their expansion under *Chalukyas* and there was a bloody contest for this *Vishaya* during the reign of *Prola-II*). The motive was avoiding humiliation. He was supposed to capture *Sammakka* not kill her (if at all the motive was to get her married to *Kakatiya* sovereign).

5. Historical Context

The literary historical accounts, however fail to identify *Koyas* as a caste or tribe. All the tribes south of *Mahanadi* were initially clubbed together in one generic group—*Atavis*. Further, there were two types of *Sudras* in the *Rashtrakuta* and *Chalukya* society—*Sat Sudra* and *Sudra*. The *Sat Sudras* were considered equivalent to *Khsatriyas* of northern India. A majority of them were *Jains* and they claimed to have received boons from *Jain Yakshinis* to rule. *Kakatiyas*, for example, had their power legitimized by *Padmavati* (also known as *Kakati*) narrative while *Polvasa Mahamandaleshwaras* adopted another *Jain Yakshini Yellamma* to legitimize their authority to rule.

Sammakka narrative emerged at a time when *Vir-shaiva* movement initiated by *Basavesvara* had established itself in north *Karnataka*, the epicenter of politics on the north-eastern banks of *Godavri*, and was gaining momentum in *Andhradesha*, divided into a number of *Vishayas* (administrative divisions). The society at that time could neither be defined in the old *Chaturvarna* system or the medieval *Ashtadash Mahapraja* system alone as there were geographical structures present in erstwhile *Vengidesha*. For example, Brahmins were divided into *kammanati*, *Kasalnati*, *Velanati*, and *Aruvelanati* sects depending on the geographical region they were located in. State was under control of the *Sat Sudras* who were *Jain* by faith but had Brahmins as their ministers, *senani*, and *priests*. A cultural change was taking place under which *Jains* were being oppressed and persecuted. *Jain Basadis* were being converted into *Shiva* and *Narayana* temples. *Sammakka* narrative gave a distinct identity, to a local group of *Atavi-Sudras* who had become cultivators and revenue generators. The community under question did not have the right to rule or ownership of the land. It only had the rights to cultivate the land, under temple or Brahmin over-lordship, which was being

recognized. It was a very localized narrative which grew over a period of time and became the leading discourse of tribal solidarity.

6. The Underlying Trend of Tribal Discourse

We come across a matrix of narratives when we try to study tribe-caste interaction. Within the structural-functional domain itself we come across concepts like Sanskritization [15], Universalization and parochialization [16], cultural metabolism [17], tribalisation, Rajputization, State formation [18] and market-relations [19]. However, when we take a look at state-tribe interaction, we find a dominant trend. Many times a caste Hindu king lost his throne to his rivals within his court or family, he approached tribes living in nearby forest, mobilized them to form an army, and tried to regain his lost territory. Many a time he succeeded as well. Such victories often took the form of carnivals. In our study area we came across a fest called *Patkhand Jatra*. The story of this *Jatra* is related to the *Bonda* tribe. Mudulipada village of Malkangiri district in Odisha is a small village 59 kilometers away from Jeypore town. It has a population of less than 1000 and 94 percent of its population belongs to *Bonda* tribe. *Bonda* is an Austro-asiatic tribe that is often classified with *Poroja* and *Koya* in Odisha. It is a primitive community found on Bonda Hills (at the border of Telangana, Chattisgarh and Odisha on the southern tip of Malkangiri district). It has its own language and a total population of about 17000.

As per oral traditions [20], *Patkhand Jatra* is said to be associated with two mythical narratives. The first narrative deals with King of Nandapur while the second one is associated with the King of Chakrakote. According to the first legend, the crown prince of Nandapur once agitated against his father and left the kingdom to reach the Bonoda hills. With the help of *Bonda* people, he prepared an army. Meanwhile, the king became ill and his chief-minister brought the message of his ailment to the prince and requested the prince to return to Nandapur. The prince agreed and while parting with his tribal army, he presented his dagger to his followers. Since then, *Bondas* have been worshipping the *Khanda* (dagger) of their leader.

Another oral tradition links the fest with King *Jagdeka Bhushan* and his son *Someshwara* of *Chakrakote*. According to this legend, the army chief of the king conspired against to ascend the throne. He sought help of the neighbouring *Vengi* and *Khilani* rulers and killed the king. He tried to kill the queen *Banda Mahadei* and the prince *Someshwara* as well but did not succeed. The queen took shelter in the forest where *Bonda* tribe gave her shelter for several years. The queen and his son *Someshwara* installed a *Bonda* army and with its help regained their lost kingdom. After their victory, the queen and her son gifted the dagger of *Jagadega Singh* to the *Bondas* who have since then holding the fest.

The second narrative is reported to be historically correct (Senapati & Sahu, 1966). *Chakrakote* comprised Baster-Koraput region with *Vengi* in its south and *Khilani* on its north. *Khilani*, comprising *Ganjam* and *Boudh-Khandamal* region was being ruled by *Bhanjas* in eleventh century and *Jagdeka Singh* was their contemporary ruler. He was defeated and killed in 1060 AD by *Yashobhanja*, whereupon his relative *Madhurantaka* usurped the throne. He ruled upto 1065 before being defeated and killed by *Someshwara*. The *Vengi* king *Kulottunga* had helped *Madhurantaka*, hence *Someshwara* waged war against him.

6. Conclusion

Narratives help in construction of divinity along with rituals and symbols. Religious narratives have an element of miracle that helps in constructing divinity. However, faith being a subject of experience has a semiotic based epistemology whereas narratives are based on semantics. Therefore, narratives alone cannot decipher the meaning associated with a great tradition. One has to take a close look on the rituals and symbols as well. Nevertheless, narratives offer the entry point to a cultural space and understanding them is important for critical understanding of tribal culture and its networks.

The fundamental drawback of the Great Tradition theory is that it completely ignores folk inter-relations. It does not take into account the geographical constraints leading to unavoidable tribal contact with little village communities. *Surajit Chandra Sinha* had pointed out that even in the remote tribal villages of present day *Jharkhand* at least four castes—tailor, barber, cobbler and blacksmith—are present. Further, he pointed out that in the market place, villagers frequently come in contact with the tribal communities.

Our study of *Koya* community reveals that villages are not exactly half-cultures. They are not totally dependent on urban elites. In south India, *Gramdevis* or *Ammavaru* reflect that autonomy. There is no standardized iconography for *Ammans*. There are no standardized meanings associated with *Ammans* either. Rituals also vary significantly. Inclusion of tribals in *Amman* tradition reflects a different dynamics of contact where compromise of identity is neither sought nor accepted. This widespread but fragmented tradition has acted as the building block for *Medaram Jatra*. It has oriented the folk culture space in a different manner by sharing rituals, symbols, and divinity. At the next stage—*Medaram Jatra*—influence of urban elite was completely weeded out.

Popular religion in south India is dominated by the *Ammans* or *Gramdevis*. After the imperial *Cholas*, *sudras* were encouraged to form their own religion. This was the beginning of the *Gram Devi* tradition, which integrated the *Sudra* communities in a very different way. Later on, there were attempts to re-Hinduize the *Gram Devi* and make them subordinate to *Shaivism*. Such attempts achieved only partial success and religious autonomy of lower castes remained institutionalized but fragmented. Divinity once evolved does not vanish. It involves deliberate collective misrecognition. Further, divinity is based on miraculous experiences of individuals and collectives. The myths generated by such experiences are not easy to dissolve and washed out of popular memory. They constitute most durable structuring structures because humans have the innate desire to witness miracles and transcend the profane.

The *Sammakka* Narrative diverges from the usual state-tribe interaction trend in which a monarch seeks help of tribes in the hours of distress. It talks of head on confrontation between a monarch and a tribal chief. It also reflects the bonding that a tribal mother has with her husband and children. It underlines the struggle for territory and autonomy. While the chartered narrative fails to explain why non-tribals participate in the *Medaram Jatra*, the tribal narrative clearly presents the case of infertility of the *Koya pedda Chandam Boira*. Arrival of *Sammakka* in her family cures her infertility and she gives birth to two children. The narrative becomes more evident when one looks at the *Bhangaram* ritual of the fest in which jaggery worth weight of the child and mother is offered to the deity as a part of thanksgiving ceremony. *Sammakka* actually represents a fertility cult which has, over time, captured the faith of the non-tribal community.

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