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 Jatra, 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 Etunagaram 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 Kannebouinapalle village in a procession. The next day, procession of Sammakka takes place and a wooden representation of the Goddess is brought to Medaram from Chikalgutta 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. 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 Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft in the village or peasant traditions besides commercial and cultural dependence on urban society. 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 newborn 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 spiritual leader 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 deceptively 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 vermillion 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 her 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 descendents 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 Nagvansh 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

Medaraaju, according to the chartered myth was a Koya chief of Medaram. However, the inscriptions of that period suggest otherwise. Medaraaja, or Medaraja-I was a Polvasa dynasty vassal (Mahamandaleshvar) of the Chalukyas of Kalyani. He belonged to a non-trival 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 Polvases had the same gotra and both followed Jainism. Kakatiyas became Shaivaites or Vir-shaivas later on.

In the Koya narrative of Sammakka, Medaraaja-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), Kotharika. 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 Medaraaju on the issues of Koppum (land revenue) during a famine. Some narratatives 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 Medaraaju declined and he got his daughter married to a tribal (Koya) chief Pagdida Raju (turban 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 Pagdiradara[11].

Epigraphs of the period confirm that there was a feud between Prola-II and Medaraaja-I in which Medaraaja was defeated[12]. Further, Pratap Rudradeva-I also waged a war on Medaraaja-I[13]. It is not clear whether Medaraaja-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 Mahamandaleshwar were both Sat-shudras and Jains initially and they built Jain Basadis in their respective fiefdoms (Mahamandals). 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 Prata-II claimed soverenity 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 Prata-II which he applied forcefully.

Whatever be the cause of struggle, there is no doubt now that Kakatis invaded Polvasa and Medaraaja 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 Chikalgutta. 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 Brahmmin minister and military leader (Dandanyak Amatya) of Rudra-I, who was leading the army of Kakatis (He was also governor of Sabbhi Sahsra Mandala headquartered at Naruguru. This Vishaya was of tremendous importance for Kakatiyas as it marked the beginning of their expasiona under Chalukyas and there was a bloody contest for this Vishaya during the reign of Prata-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 Kshatriyas 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 Mahamandaleshvaras adopted another Jain Yakshini Yellamma to legitimize their authority to rule.

Sammakka narrative emerged at a time when Vir-shaiva movement initiated by Basaveswara had established itself in north Karnataka, the epicenter of politics on the north-eastern banks of Godavari, and was gaining momentum in Andhredesh, 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 Ashuddash Mahaprajya system alone as there were geographical structures present in erstwhile Vengidhesa. For example, Brahmins were divided into kammnati, Kasalinti, Velanati, and Aruelanati 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 Brahmim 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 thrown 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 Pathkhand 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 Austo-asiatic tribe that is often classified with Pororja 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], Pathkhand 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 Jagadeka 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 tribes 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 Gramdevi. After the emperial 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.
Reference

[13] ibid
[14] ibid