

Grama Devata Worship, a panacea to everyday troubles and foibles of village life--fact and fiction

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Abstract:

The worship of the village goddesses is the most ancient form of Indian religion. Before the Aryan invasion, and even before the year 2000 B.C. the Dravidians believed that the world was peopled by a multitude of spirits – good or bad who were the cause of all unusual events, diseases and disasters. The object of their religion was to propitiate those innumerable spirits. At the same time, each village seems to have been under the protection of some spirit, who was its guardian deity. These deities enabled them to seek explanations of the facts and troubles of village life (Whitehead: 3). For the most part, the same people in towns and villages worship the village deities and Brahman gods. There are a few aboriginal tribes in some of the hill tracts who are still unaffected by the Brahman ideas or customs but in the vast majority of the districts, the worship of the village deities and the worship of Shiva or Vishnu go on side by side. The worship of village gods and goddesses, in fact is spread all over South India and the variety of customs and practices are many-faceted.

It is believed that worshipping grama devatas can cure society of many ills. From pandemics to childhood diseases, the grama devatas are believed to cure all kinds of illness which is why their worship is so popular.

Key Words: Village Goddesses, Religion, Deities, Grama Devatas

The worship of the village goddess or Grama-Devata as it is called in Sanskrit and Telugu forms an important part of the conglomerate of religious beliefs, customs and ceremonies which are generously classed together under the term Hinduism. In almost



every village and town of South India may be seen a shrine or symbol of the grama devata. These grama devatas are periodically worshipped and propitiated. As a rule the shrines are far less imposing than those of the Brahmanical temples.

Sometimes they are nothing more than small brick buildings which are three or four feet high or are small enclosures with a few stones in the centre. Sometimes they are given no shrine or shelter. Yet it is to them that the whole village turns to in case of calamity or pestilence. This is because the grama -devatas are regarded as a more powerful help in trouble, and are more intimately concerned with the happiness and prosperity of the villagers. The normal function of a Grama – Devata is guardianship of the village, but they are also believed to ward off disease and calamity.

While the Brahmanical gods are believed to have universal powers of destruction and preservation, the grama devatas symbolize only the facts of village life. They are related to simple aspects of ordinary and simple problems such as the prevalence of small-pox and cattle diseases. The grama devatas are with few exceptions mostly female. In Tamilnadu they have male attendants who are believed to guard the shrine and carry out the commands of the goddess. A male god – Iyenar is an exception as he is represented as an independent village god with a shrine built crowded with clay figures of horses. In Andhra Pradesh “Potu Raju” a village god exists not as an independent God but usually as the husband or brother of the 101 Grama Devatas.

All village goddess are usually worshipped with animal sacrifice of buffaloes, sheep, goat, fowl, or pigs etc. Consumption of toddy and smoking of cheroots are sometimes practised. The pujaris who perform the Puja are usually non Brahmins but are drawn from all other castes. Sometimes, however, Brahmins continue to be priests of the shrine. The pujaris conduct ceremonies such as the animal sacrifices which are even carried out by the outcasts who have no entry in the shrines or temples.

In addition to grama devatas, spirits are worshipped by the villagers. The worship of departed ancestors, men and women who died untimely deaths are worshipped. It is believed that small shrines are built on the dead bodies of murdered beings (Near Vijayawada and another one near Eluru) These shrines have gained



popularity as people claim that their wishes were fulfilled. Shrines have been built for the “Plague Amma” as a result of the prevalence of plague. Special reverence is also paid to persons who meet their untimely end, for example to the spirits of girls who die before marriage. Sometimes their beliefs confined to smaller groups expands into regular local cults. There is also the spirit of the boundary stones, the spirits of the hills, rivers and trees, worshipped by certain classes of people. The worship of serpents is also common in South India. In many shrines of grama devatas large stones or figures of the cobra are worshipped especially by women who want children (Whitehead:12).

The cult of the mother goddess has acquired great importance among the Indian Aryan and Dravidian peoples. In later Hindu cults the Mother Goddess took the name of Bhumi or Dharani, “she who bears or carries” – the upholder of the human, animal and vegetable creations which rests on her surface. As a Grama devata or village goddess she is generally aniconic, being supposed to dwell in a pile of rough stones or potsherds collected under the sacred tree of the community. Her cult is of primitive simplicity, she is chiefly worshipped by women and if she has a priest he is usually not a Brahmin, but drawn from the menials or outcasts. In south Indian Brahmins object to serve the mother goddesses because they cannot join in their animal sacrifices (Frazer: 128). In North India her offerings usually consists of grain or fruit laid on her stones or of milk poured over them. “O Mother Earth! May we have plenty of rain and bumper crop! Here is a drink offering for thee”- a farmer in Oraon may plead. The forest dweller may pray “O Mother Earth, keep in prosperity and protect the ploughman and his oxen”. In Punjab the prayer may run “Keep our rulers and bankers contented! Grant us a plentiful yield so we can pay our revenue and satisfy our banker!” The cult of the mother goddess at its most primitive stage as represented in the Vedas pictures the Mother Goddess as a shelter for corpses as they lay in their graves. The Rauls of Roonawho bury their dead, say “O mother Earth! We make this body over to thee in the presence of Gods Brahma and Vishnu who are our witness” (Harrison: 213).



India today is primarily a village culture. The majority of Hindus live in villages of under a hundred thousand people. In the context of village life, the most significant and powerful divine presence is the Grama devata, a deity who is especially identified with the village and towards whom the villages often have a special affection. It is not uncommon for a village to have several Grama devatas, each of whom has a specialized function. These village deities are more numerous than Indian villages themselves and are naturally diverse in character. Some of these deities have a regional reputation. The goddess Mariyamma in South India and Manasa in North India are examples of this regional popularity. Other deities may be known only to one village. The goddess Periyalayattamman is unknown outside this village near Madras. Often village goddesses share the names or epithets from the Sanskrit pantheon and are identified with these deities in the minds of villagers. This is only an attempt to make the local deity recognizable to curious outsiders.

In fact the village goddesses play a large role in providing emotional support to a largely rural population. Some of the village deities are patronized by tribals such as Chenchus, Koyas, Adivasis and Girijans but even people of higher castes can be seen to pray to them. Superstition and blind faith is largely prevalent in these practices. People of Dalit groups patronize these goddesses with devotion and fear. They put their whole faith on these goddesses to help them financially or in their day to day existence. Every village has a village goddess located at the outskirts of the village. Festivals are conducted annually for the village gods or are specially arranged either to ward off natural calamities, epidemics or threats to the community which are of human origin. They are celebrated with great pomp and show. The presence of the deity is felt so powerfully that to utter a lie in its presence, it is believed, brings calamity to the teller. Many disputes, such as proof of adultery, repudiation of loans received and other such matters are settled even to this day in the village temples. In many villages in the interior areas there is no need for civil or criminal courts to decide the nature of punishments.

In order for the healing and empowering potential of the female village goddesses to be understood, some knowledge of their mythology needs to be recovered at a popular level, these stories of all the villages goddess reveals how they



have suffered at some level, some violations and terrors endured by ordinary women. Their anger at injustice and the ultimate victory can motivate all women to continue to fight against the tyranny and demons of patriarchy. The stories of the village goddess and the belief women and men have in them illustrated the strength of women in India. Women are gifted with energy (Shakti) which is latent in each of them and is waiting to be unleashed and used by all who wish to triumph over the circumstances of their lives.

Conclusion:

There are always numerous advantages found behind every tradition and religious practice if one looks deep enough. Same way, the customs involved in worshipping village deities brings along quite a number of practical benefits.

The flags of village deities then installed marks the boundary of the village and avoid any territory fights with neighboring villages. During festivals, the activities like animal sacrifices, drumbeats and processions are done towards the outskirts of the village. The festival time provides the much needed break to the villagers. In some places, dietary restrictions followed like refraining from meat and alcohol consumption for certain period has an obvious positive impact in the health and moral discipline on the followers.

Festival celebrations make the village presence felt across neighbouring villages too and open new avenues for community and business growth. Also, in the process of making the festival a grand success, the villagers get to bond and function in unity. Such occasions also provide a meeting place for discussing the current affairs and the scope for further development of the village as a whole. Individual participation in these events gives a sense of recognition and being acknowledged as a belonged member of the village. Also in the cases where village has been split, the original residents still come together for the festivals thereby retaining the older connections and remaining united in spirit.

Also, rigorous worship is done in times of epidemics or some calamity, seeking the deity's grace with intense devotion and faith. This helps keep up the



villagers' morale by turning to God in times of need instead of lamenting their troubles and sinking into depression or inaction. And such immense faith tends to bring forth miracles in some way or the other.



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