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MYTH AND FOLKLORE IN THE VILLAGE GODDESS CULT PRACTISED IN
ANDHRA PRADESH - A PATH TO WOMAN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract:

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. The origin of these village- gods and goddesses is lost in antiquity. It seems to represent Pre-Aryan beliefs which are modified by the Brahmanical influence. Some ceremonies and practices seem to point back to a totally mystic stage of religion. The normal function of a Grama – Devatas is guardianship of the village, but they are also believed to ward off disease and calamity. Some of the myths and folklore consisting of narratives or stories associated with the grama devata cult play a fundamental role in a society, such as

strengthening beliefs in superstition and ritual while at the same time empowering women . The main characters in myths are chiefly goddesses who save people from a number of evils and ills, thereby portraying the strength of woman-kind in addressing mundane problems of everyday life.

Keywords: Grama Devata, Empowerment of Women, Mythology, Cult, Superstition.

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

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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. Agricultural deities round the world are usually held to be mainly female. It has been observed that many of the rites and ceremonies connected with the worship of Grama Devatas are usually related to harvest. Thus, it can be believed that Grama Devatas are female as well as agricultural deities.

Sometimes the abode of these grama-devatas is nothing more than small brick buildings which are about 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 grama-devatas are considered by the innocent village-folk to be forces that eradicate a

number of ills and evils that hover around their habitats, A number of myths and folk stories are associated with these village deities which are passed down orally from century to century, habitation to habitation so effectively that they become part and parcel of the everyday lives of the villagers.

While the Brahminical gods are believed to have universal powers of destruction and preservation, the grama devatas symbolize only the facets of village life. They are related to simple aspects of ordinary and simple problems such as the prevalence of small-pox and cattle diseases. As the existence of village goddesses and gods are steeped in hearsay and folk tales, the belief in them is usually accidental rather than incidental. 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 practiced. The

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pujaris who perform the rituals related to worship 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. A number of rituals and rites such as worshipping the goddesses with fasting, mounds of curd rice, red sarees, turmeric, lemons and glass bangles , processions, feasts and social gatherings in large numbers are an important aspect of this kind of worship.

The cult of the mother goddess had its roots and great significance among the Indian Aryan and Dravidian peoples whose origins are lost in history. 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 an iconic, 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).

Myths are often endorsed by rulers and priests or priestesses, and are closely linked to religion or spirituality. In fact, many societies group their myths, legends and history together, considering myths and legends to be true accounts of their remote past. In particular, creation myths take place in a primordial age when the world had not achieved its later form. Other myths explain how a society’s customs, institutions and taboos were established and sanctified. There is a complex relationship between recital of myths and enactment of rituals most especially witnessed in the

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grama devata cult practiced in North and South India.

While, the study of myth continues in a wide variety of academic fields, including folklore-studies, philology, psychology, and anthropology today, it is interesting to analyse the beliefs existing in the cult of grama-devatas to have a deeper understanding of its impact, practice and prevalence in especially rural India. Since the term *myth* is widely used to imply that a story is not objectively true, the identification of a narrative as a myth can be highly political: many adherents of religions view their religion's stories as true and therefore object to the stories being characterized as myths. Nevertheless, scholars now routinely speak of Christian mythology, Jewish mythology, Islamic mythology, Hindu mythology, and so forth. Traditionally, Western scholarship, with its Judaeo-Christian heritage, has viewed narratives in the Abrahamic religions as being the province of theology rather than mythology; meanwhile, identifying religious stories of colonised cultures, such as stories in Hinduism, as myths enabled Western scholars to imply that they were of lower truth-value than the stories of Christianity. Labelling all religious narratives as *myths* can be thought of as treating different traditions with parity.

The village Goddess cult encourages superstitious practices arising

from the mythical belief that these goddesses are supernatural entities who would cause destruction if their wishes are not granted. Some of which are dangerous to the health of people. Some of these practices include body piercing, walking on live coals, consuming meat which is cut unhygienically and cooked in the open air and fasting for long periods of time. People also resort to neglecting health by not seeking timely advices from doctors and instead seek refuge in wearing amulets and holy threads from the pujaris of village goddess shrines. This can be seen in remote villages, hamlets and forests where backward communities of tribes and adivasis reside.

It is also believed by lore that Supernatural entities visit people in dreams and trances and once appeased by sacrifices reward the people with boons. They are believed to miraculously cure villagers of mysterious ailments both pandemics and endemics. 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

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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.

The violence shown to women by men in a patriarchal society and the suppression accorded to them by patriarchal attitudes is the heart of the mother or village goddess cult. A woman-oriented explanation is offered for the cause and alleviation, of the evil and suffering that is specific to their experience. The village goddess is a wounded healer figure. She shares and understands the situation of her children – the people of the village goddess is a wounded healer figure. She shares and understands the situation of her children – the people of the village she guards, especially the women. She is a guardian of the broken, manipulated, discarded, and those women hurt by the patriarchal constrains and demands. She stands by women who lack autonomy and who are powerless to take control of their own destinies. Suffering women identify themselves with the goddesses and feel that they too can overcome their predicament and experience healing. Out of the affliction and agony comes hope followed by spiritual and psychological wholeness and triumph, a central theme in religion.

The strangest message that one learns from the deities is to preserve awareness of the necessity for women to become the initiators in the resolution of the sexual conflict and injustice of patriarchal controlled society, something that is impossible for men. The village goddesses call their daughters to join in her continued battle against male violence to convert their anger into the healing and transformation of society.

In the past, the stories of the village goddesses have been dismissed as being too mythical, violent and filled with destruction as observed by Whitehead (1988:45). However paradox and conflict are much a part of the sacred as are light, reconciliation and deliverance. The belief in the goddess folk religion is ancient and accords a pre-patriarchal power to women. Now, one can understand that this village Goddess cult can contribute to a more egalitarian gender relationships resulting in the overcoming of the negative light in which women are being treated. In this, the cult has a positive impact on society as it projects women in a positive light. They are worshipped as Shakti and all powerful village deities thereby proving that people from this district upholds women kind and worthy of respect.

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