

Folk Religion

Discuss the following questions in your class :

1. Which goddesses are worshipped in your area?
2. Which gods are worshipped in your area?
3. Which saints, pirs and babas have you seen your family pay their respects to?
4. Which animals and trees have you seen people worship?
5. Do you know how people worship?
6. How are the deities worshipped and who conducts the worship?
7. In which languages are the deities addressed by the worshippers?

You may have listened to conversations like the following:

Lakshmi: In recent months, my children have been falling ill repeatedly.

Sammakka: My husband also had been unwell for the last one month.

Yellamma: I think our goddess Muthyalamma is angry with us. We should offer her a special worship to appease her. Let us take Bonalu and sacrifice a cock to the Goddess.

Ramaraju: My daughter is very weak and does not eat properly.

Suresh: Why don't you go to the Pir Baba's dargah and ask the Maulvi to tie a tawiz ? She will become all right.

Many people in our country worship and pay reverence to gods in large temples, churches or mosques. On the other hand people also worship many village deities. Who are these popular deities and how and when and by whom are they worshipped?

There are a large number of village deities – some of them belong to particular castes, or particular villages or even particular families. Some of the more common goddesses are as follows:

Pochamma: Pochamma is the most popular folk goddess of Andhra Pradesh. In every village, there is a small shrine dedicated to her. This is distinct from temples to Gods like Rama or Shiva. A very simple temple under a neem tree with goddess in the form of a stone inside, is built. In modern towns and cities these temples are built with some architecture and with a stone idol inside.



Fig 22.1 & 22.2 Here are two idols of Pochamma.

In the villages on special occasions people of all castes go to the shrine with *bonalu*. They wash the deity and clean the shrine area. There are no priests and people pray according to their customs and traditions with flowers, etc. in their own language: “Mother, we have seeded the fields, now you must ensure good crop.” “My daughter is sick, you must cure her.” “Mother, keep away all infectious diseases and evils from our family.” They offer a part of the *bonam* and sometimes also offer a chicken or sheep.

Maisamma: She is believed to protect the cattle. Among the cattle sheds, a niche is whitewashed and decorated with “*Kumkuma*” and called as ‘Maisamma Goodu’. In many places Katta-Maisamma is also worshipped as a goddess of water and is worshipped in the form of a small stone on the tank bund. People believe that she will ensure that the tank will be filled. Thus, due to her blessings the crops flourish.



Fig 22.3 Maisamma

Gangamma: She is a water goddess who protects fishermen who go out into the sea. It is believed that the poor and the orphans are protected by the goddess Gangamma.

Yellamma: Yellamma is also called as Polimeramma, ‘Maritemma’, ‘Renuka’ Mahankali, Jogamma, Somamma and by



Fig 22.4 Yellamma



Fig 22.5 Potharaju

other names. It is believed that she guards the boundaries of the village and will not allow any disease or evil to enter the village. People mainly pray to her to prevent epidemics like cholera.

Potharaju: The farmers of Andhra Pradesh believe that Potharaju looks after their agricultural lands and crops and protects the crops from dreadful diseases, thieves and animals. The farmers keep a small stone painted white in a corner of their fields. The worship of Potharaju is very simple. Prayers are offered to the deity when the crop is harvested. He has sisters who are called by various names like Peddamma.

Beerappa and Katama Raju: They are worshipped by cowherd and shepherd communities. They are considered protectors of cattle and sheep. Have you heard of the story of Beerappa and Akkamankali – how Beerappa a poor shepherd worked and fought to marry Kamarathi and how his sister helped him? Have you heard of the story of Katama Raju who fought against the kings of Nellore for the grazing rights of the animal herders?

- ♦ You may have participated in the worship of many of these village and community deities and may also have been to some of the temples of Shiva or Vishnu. Can you compare how the worship is conducted in these places? What are the similarities and differences? Discuss in the class.

It is a general practice to offer animal sacrifice in most of the folk festivals. This results in the killing of thousands of such animals. Keeping this in mind the sacrifice of any animal or bird in any religious worship is banned in our State.

Community Worship of Folk Deities

Many of the folk gods and goddesses were actually local heroes who either died fighting in defence of their people or were themselves wronged by the powerful people of their times. Common people believed that such persons attained special powers to help people or cause problems if not worshipped. Two such folk heroines who laid down their lives in defence of the tribal people were Sarakka and Sammakka in whose honour a *Jatara* is conducted.

Sammakka, Sarakka (Medaram) Jatara:

It's a celebration by the tribal people of Taadwai mandal in Warangal District at Medaram village. People from Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand assemble to celebrate the *jatara*. Nearly one crore people attend it.

The Story: 'Medaraju', was a tribal chief who was under the Kakatiya kings. His wife was Sammakka and their daughter was Sarakka and his son was Jampanna. He had a son-in-law named 'Pagididda Raju'. Once, due to drought Medaraju could not pay the tribute to the Kakatiya King who sent his army. Medaraju's entire family led the men and women of the tribe in the fierce battle. All of them got killed in the battle. Jampanna also fought bravely till his last breath and died in '*Sampenga Vaagu*' to



Fig 22.7 Scenes from Medaram Jatara

prevent the Kakatiya army from crossing the stream. Hence it is called '*Jampanna Vaagu*'. Sammakka and Sarakka fought against the army and sacrificed their lives for the sake of their tribe.

The tribal people of the entire region venerated them for their courage and sacrifice and to this day celebrate the Medaram *Jatara* in their honour.



Fig 22.6 Installation of goddess Sammakka on the platform

The Medaram *Jatara* is organised every two years. This is a three day fair. Sammakka and Sarakka are the formless goddesses. Caskets representing them are brought from the forests in an elaborate procession, gaily decorated and placed on the platform under a tree. At that time devotees feel the spirits or goddess has taken possession of them. The people offer '*Bangaram*', jaggery, to the goddess.

Moharram (Peerila) and Urs

The Muslims too pay respects to heroes who fought against evil. One such festival is Moharram which commemorates the battle of Karbala in Iraq in which the grandson of Prophet Mohammad was killed. Processions (*Peeri*) with decorated Tazias are taken out in which people of all



Fig 22.8 Ajmeer Dargah



Fig 22.9 Ameenpeer Dargah

communities participate. A *peeri* is prepared with bamboo strips in a dome shape. It is covered with glittering clothes. A bamboo pole is fixed in the dome to handle the *peeri* and at the top metallic crescent or palm shape is attached to it. Finally, it is garlanded with flowers and coconuts.

Similarly, Urs or anniversaries of Muslim saints who lie buried in various parts of the state are celebrated. People visit the *dargahs* in large number, offer flowers and *chadar* or sheets on the grave, and listen to the singing of Qawwalis. They believe that in this way they will receive the '*barkat*' or blessings of the *pir* or saint. People who seek some specific blessings like children or job, etc. come to the dargahs and pray there.

Dargah is built on the tombs of Sufi saints who propagated Sufism. The tomb or dargah of a sufi saint becomes a place of pilgrimage to which thousands of people of all faiths throng. Often people attribute sufi masters with miraculous powers

(*Karamaths*) that could relieve others of their illnesses and troubles.

Ameenpeer Dargah – A symbol of Religious Tolerance

Ameenpeer Dargah in Y.S.R Kadapa District, which is Khajapeerullah Hussaini's tomb was founded around 400 years ago. In memory of his great grandson, Syed Shah Arifullah Hussainy, Urs is celebrated for seven days in which both Hindus and Muslims participate. Offerings of sandal wood paste (*Gandhapu Chandanam*) on the first day, '*Chadar*' offer on the second day and '*Mushaira*' on the third day take place in this seven day Urs in a grand manner. Qawwali programme is held during the nights.

Bonalu

Bonalu is one of the folk festivals popular in the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh. The Goddesses are worshipped by offering food, which is later shared among the family members.

Women folk participate in the procession carrying 'Ghatams' or ornamented pots filled with flowers on their heads. The women devotees also carry brass vessels or clay pots filled with cooked rice and decorated with neem leaves. The male dancers who accompany them are known as Pothurajus, who lead the procession by lashing whips and holding neem leaves.

- ♦ If you have participated in any of these *jataras* or *urs* or *bonalu*, describe them in your class room and discuss their important features.
- ♦ How are these different from the worship of village deities or worship in large temples or mosques?

The antiquity of Folk Traditions

Many historical books tell us that such folk gods were worshipped in very old times also. We learn about the worship of *nagas* (snakes), trees, *yakshas* and *yakshinis* even some 2500 years ago. The *Palnati Virula Katha* written by Srinatha around 1450s mentions the worship of Potharaju. In turn Vallabharaya's *Kridabhiramamu* written around the same time describes in detail the worship of the *Palnati Veeras*, *Mailara* and many mother goddesses in Warangal.

You would have noticed by now that the folk deities are worshipped quite differently from the Gods in large temples, mosques or churches.

Most of these deities are worshipped by people irrespective of their caste or religion or economic status. For example,

even Muslim farmers participate in many of the rituals of village gods. Similarly people of all religions throng to the dargahs to seek the blessing of the *peers*. They tie strings on a tree or on the walls of the dargah making a vow in return for the wishes granted. They request the *pirzadas* to prepare *tawiz* for them to drive away evil spirits, etc.

The intermixing of Village deities and High Religious traditions

In India, there has been a constant process of interaction between different kinds of people and their religions leading to intermixture of traditions. Thus religious beliefs which originate in folk worship and folk wisdom are adopted by higher religions and the folk religious beliefs adopt a lot from the higher religions.

Thus high religious traditions too worship *peepul* tree, snakes and the mother goddess. This is how the integration of snakes, trees animals, and birds in the present Puranic religion took place. Gradually the village deities became part of the worship of deities like the Buddha, Shiva or Vishnu or Durga. You can see snakes, lions, nandi, and trees being worshipped as part of their worship too.

In the case of Islam this took a different form. The high religion of Islam believes in strict monotheism or worship of one and only God – Allah. However, the folk followers of Islam began to rever Sufi saints and believed that worshipping at the dargahs will solve their problems. So a very strong tradition of pilgrimages to dargahs and urs developed in which people of all faiths participate.

Folk Wisdom and Higher Religion

Many saints like Kabir, Yogi Vemana and many sufi saints who came from the common people expressed their deeper religious ideas. They also combined the ideas preached by the higher religions with that of the common people. Read the following lines of Yogi Vemana who lived about 300 years ago and composed poems of great wisdom in Telugu.

“Without personal experience, the mere repetition of scriptures will not remove fears. Just as darkness is never dispelled by a mere painted flame.”

“The six tastes are diverse, but taste is one; various are the creeds regarding the truth, but truth is one; and saints differ among themselves, while he on whom they meditate is one.”

“Bald heads, matted hair, daubing ashes, recitations, religious dress! No man is a saint who is not pure in heart.”

Such ideas and wise sayings became part of ordinary people’s thinking.

Key words :

1. Folk Deities
2. *Jatara*
3. Urs
4. *Peeri*
5. *Bonamu*

Project work :

1. Get detailed information from your grand parents about any *Jatara* of your area. Prepare a report.
2. Collect stories about any of the folk deities of your area and prepare a small booklet about it.

Improve your learning

1. What elements do you think are common in the worshipping of most of the village deities?
2. When people from the villages go to towns and settle down there do they continue to worship their old village deities? How do they do it?
3. Why do you think people use different languages while worshipping different kinds of deities?
4. Do you think the way people worship the village deities is changing now? What kind of changes do you see?
5. Point out the Main places of important jataras and urs in Andhra Pradesh Map?