



POPULAR RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN MEDIEVAL ANDHRA (12TH - 14TH CENTURIES): A HISTORICAL STUDY

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Abstract:

This paper examines the religious practices of medieval Andhra between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, with particular reference to the Kakatiya and Reddi periods. It explores the interaction between elite religious traditions and popular devotional practices within the broader framework of social and political transformation. The study analyses the growth of Virasaivism and Vaishnavism, their relationship with the feudal order, and their influence on social organization. It further investigates popular religious practices associated with the worship of Bhairava, Mailara, and local deities, including fire-walking, hook-swinging, self-humiliation, self-immolation, and hero-stone worship. Literary works such as Kridabhiramam, inscriptions, and travellers' accounts are critically examined to understand the historical significance of these practices. The paper argues that devotional movements not only reinforced political authority and feudal loyalty but also shaped the religious and cultural life of marginalized communities. By integrating literary, epigraphic, and historical evidence, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between religion, society, and polity in medieval Andhra.

Keywords: Feudal Society- Hero-Stone Worship -Mailara Worship --Popular Religious Practices Virasaivism - Vaishnavism.

Introduction :

History tells us that the Andhra region was ruled by a number of dynasties – Mauryas, Satavahanas, Ikshvakas, Vishnukundins, Chalukyas of Badami, Kalyani and Vengi, Rastrakutas, Pallavas, Cholas, Kakatiyas, Gajapathis, Vijayanagar kings, and Asaf Jahis – since the post-Mahavira and Gautama Buddha period in the history of India. All this tells us that the history of Andhra dates back to the pre-Christian era. For better understanding, it is better to go deep into the specific area of region in a particular period of history. This requires division of history into ancient, mediaeval and modern. Then a question may arise, what is the criteria to periodise history. At the broad level, there is a general concern among the historians about the periodization of history while dividing history into Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern. The historians have taken into consideration the changes that took place in the particular period of human lives of the region. The developments in a particular period can be distinguished from the others on the basis of some scientific principles, and these principles are helpful for periodization of history. If accept this argument as criteria for periodization in history, then a question may arise: when does mediaeval Andhra begin?

Criteria of Medieval Andhra:

There is no uniform time for periodisation in history. It differs from region to region. The periodisation that was followed in case of Indian history is not applicable to the history of Andhra. The periodisation of mediaeval Andhra is generally considered a difficult task. Periodisation in history is done by taking into considering the changes that occurred in the particular period of human lives in a region. The mediaeval Andhra is characterized by the socio-economic changes coupled with the dominance of men belonging to the so-called lower castes in political affairs. The idea of the Kshatriya as the sole protector of the soil receded back. The shifting of power from higher castes to the lower castes, from solar and lunar dynasties to the Sudras like the Musunuri Nayakas, the Reddies, Velamas, Korukonda Reddies, Koppula Nayakas, etc., was a revolutionary phenomenon. There was widespread patriotism in a limited sense, uniting the native rulers to oppose Muslim invaders and their faith. This happened especially in the later part of the mediaeval period. Though there was the sway of the various minor dynasties during the early mediaeval period, the unification of greater parts of Telugu-speaking people under the Chalukyas, Cholas, and Kakatiya rulers and the growth of Telugu literature, art, and architecture, etc., under these



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rulers demonstrate a change from the past. Apart from it, the most important feature of mediaeval Andhra is the development of indigenous feudalism of a fiscal and military nature, not of the European type, which varies in many respects from the so-called feudalism of Andhra.ⁱ From these changes in Andhra, it is clearly seen and marks the beginning of the mediaeval period in Andhra.

Brief Survey of Political History :

When examining the geographical distribution of mediaeval Andhra, it is observed that it is quite different from modern Andhra Pradesh, which was formed on the linguistic basis in 1952. It becomes very important to study the geographical regions existing in the period of study. Historians denote the regions, which are immutable and may cease to be meaningful in another period. For example, Vengi, once a very prominent region comprising part of coastal Andhra, it is not well-known. The regions are therefore products of history and are always changing.ⁱⁱ

The Kakatiyas are one of the major dynasties that ruled over the mediaeval Andhra. They were feudatories of the Eastern Chalukyas but later shifted their allegiance to the Western Chalukyas of Kalyani. Prataparudra I was the first independent ruler. The entire period of the Kakatiyas may be divided into two periods. The first period extended from 1000 to 1157 C.E. During this period, Kakatiyas established and consolidated their position in the Eastern Telangana region. The second period, which extended from 1158 to 1323 C.E, saw their rise and fall. The territory under the Kakatiyas comprised almost all of Andhra. Its frontiers reached Kanchi in the south. On the west, its boundaries touched Raichur and Gulbarga. It inclined towards Kalyani in the northeast, and in the east, it touched the Bay of Bengal, near the Ganjam district of the present Orissa state.ⁱⁱⁱ

The fall of the Kakatiya empire resulted in anarchy. The tyranny of the Muslim rule under Muhammadbin-Tuglaq led to the various Hindu Nayakas of Kakatiyas closing their ranks to throw off the Muslim yoke. All these chiefs took the leading role in organizing a war of independence against Muslim rule and elected Prolaya Nayaka as their leader, a Kamma chief of Musunuri in Nuzvidu taluka of Krishna district.^{iv} All the other 76 Nayakas rendered assistance to Prolaya Nayaka. Prolaya Nayaka expelled the Muslims from Rajahmundry and occupied the region between the rivers Godavari and Krishna. The rule of Masunuri Nayaka extended from 1325 to 1368.

After the death of Kapaya Nayaka, Eastern Telangana came under the control of Recharla Padma Nayaka, who hailed from the Velama Community. The Recharla chiefs ruled from 1325 to 1474. During this period the Velama kingdom split into two. The northern portion was retained by Anapotha Nayaka, who ruled from Rachakonda as his capital. The southern portion was given to his brother Madhava Nayaka, who ruled this region from Devarakonda as the capital. The rule of the Velama chiefs came to an end in the late 15th century.

Among the families that ruled Andhra during the early mediaeval period was the Reddies of Kondavidu. Prolaya Vema Reddy was the founder of the Reddy kingdom. He ruled the present districts of Guntur, Prakasam, Nellore and parts of Kurnool. Prolaya Vema Reddy made Addanki, near Ongole, as his capital. During the reign of Anapotha Reddy, the capital was shifted from Addanki to Kondavidu, near Narasaraopet in Guntur district. The Kondavidu Reddies ruled from 1325 to 1424. The Reddy kingdom extended from the hills of Srisailem in the west to the Bay of Bengal in the east and from the river Krishna in the north to Nellore in the south.^v Another branch of Reddies of Kondavidu, named Reddies of Rajahmundry, came into existence in 1403.

One of the major dynasties that ruled Andhra after the Reddies was Vijayanagara, which was the last Hindu empire in South India. The Vijayanagara empire was ruled by the Sangama, Saluva, Tuluva and Aravidu dynasties consecutively. They ruled the southern part of the country from 1336 to 1678. The Sangama dynasty was established by Harihara and Bukkarayalu in 1336. The Sangama dynasty ruled southern India from 1336 to 1485. The outlying areas of the empire were



divided into six provinces. Out of six provinces, the first two, Udayagiri Rajya and Penukonda Rajya, were part of mediaeval Andhra, which was ruled by the Sangama Dynasty.

The religion during 12th century to 14th century was predominantly Hinduism. There were two important religious sects prevalent in medieval Andhra. They were shaivism and vaishnavism prevalent in Andhra. Even though they patronized Hinduism, the ruling class followed religious tolerance towards Jainism and Buddhism. Virasaiva movement was popular in Karnataka, also left its ripples upon Andhra. Shiva was worshiped in the form of Bhairava, Mailara during the Kakatiya period. Srisailem, Tripurantakam, Umamaheswaram, Sangameswaram, Yelleswaram, Somashila, and Draksharamam were important Saiva centres during 12th century to 14th century. Srikurmam, Ahobhilam, Simhachalam, Tirupathi, Sarpavaram and Bapatla were important vaishnava kshetras during Kakatiyas and Reddies. Brahmins and a section of vaishyas were monopolized educational knowledge and enjoyed social status, economic and political power throughout history. Brahmanical cultural practices were elite culture. The temples and mathas(monasteries) were used to spread elite culture. The elite culture consists of rites, rituals, yagnas, penance, and classical dance. This culture was patronized by the ruling class. In contrast to literary groups, groups such as Sudras, Untouchables, Boyas, Pulinda's and Chenchus where majority belongs to non-literary groups denied access to theoretical education and marginalized in history. The non-literary groups depend much on the oral tradition to transmit their cultural forms. Their beliefs, customs, folk dances, rites like fire Walking, jumping on iron spikes, hook-swinging: self-immolation were popular. Therefore, the religious practices of non-literary groups can be referred as popular religious practices.

II

There were two important religious sects prevalent in medieval Andhra. They were Vaishnavism and Vira Saivism. The form of Vaishnavism championed by Brahma Naidu in the Palanadu region is Viravaishnavism. Brahmanna tried to rally around his banner the Panchamas and other lower classes by introducing radical social reforms in the name of Vira Vaishnavism in medieval Andhra. His Vira Vaishnavism directed its attack mainly on caste barriers. Brahmanna arranged inter-dining (*chapakudu*), allowed inter-caste marriages and admitted the Panchamas into the Chennakesava temple at Macherla.^{vi} After the battle of Karempudi, Brahmanna admitted the defeat by appointing Brahmins as priests in the newly built temple on the bank of Naguleru.^{vii} Therefore, it is understood that these radical social reforms were manoeuvres of Brahmanna and were only a part of his political strategy of weaning away the lower castes from Nayakuralu Nagammma, who had the solid support of the princely community. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Brahmanna's radicalism was mostly prompted by ambitious political considerations, and his radical social reforms did not survive long, and Viravaishnavism remained away for lower and unprivileged castes.

The Virasaiva movement took birth in the northwestern parts of the Karnataka region in the mid-12th century. The movement was very popular in Karnataka and also left ripples upon Andhra. Vira Saivism was propagated by Sripathi Pandita, Shivalenka Manchana Pandita and Mallikarjuna Panditaradya. According to this tradition, the supreme being is Siva, who is omnipotent over the Lord's universe. Virasaivism did not consider the Vedas or Brahminical order. Anyone can be Visnavite irrespective of caste, creed and birth. Vira Saivism completely opposed the Brahmanical rituals and Brahmins as a priestly class. Brahmins were replaced by Jangamas as the priestly class. Mallikarjuna Panditaradya, who revived the *Aradya tradition*, accepted the Vedas as valid scriptures and introduced Vedic rituals into Virasaivism, which originally decried, where there are no caste distinctions and Vedic rituals.^{viii} As a result of it, many Brahmins joined the reformed Vira Saivism and enjoyed a significant and powerful status in society. Remarking on this development by R.N. Nandi, the development of social exclusiveness based on the privileges of birth and cleanliness of profession is much on the lines of the Brahminical caste system, which the sect had originally decried.^{ix} However, Virasaivism and Vaisnavism had only limited impact on Brahmins. The institutionalism of temple rituals and services only provides the delusion of equality. These two religious sects, i.e., Virasaivism and Vaisnavism, remained beyond the access of a large mass of people. Therefore, the large number of Panchamas and unprivileged classes were forcefully going back to the worship of Siva in his terrible forms and local deities.



With a view to fulfilling the needs of common people, there was a militant form of Saivism, generally known by the term 'Virasaivism', which swept over South India during the 11th and 13th centuries. Mallikarjuna Panditaradhy of Andhra was the chief exponent of Virasaivism. From literature and inscriptions, it is learnt that the worship of Siva in his terrible form, Bhairava, Mailara, was popular in the Kakatiya period. This form of worship seems to have inspired the people's fervid devotion and undaunted heroism.^x

The rise of special classes of Saiva bhaktas known as Virabhadras, Mahilarabhatts and Viramustis is attributed to Virasaivism. These devotees indulged in cruel practices like offering heads, walking on fire, self-humiliation and self-immolation with the object of gaining immediate *Siva-sayujya* (union with Shiva after death). All these cruel practices we found in *Kridabhiramam*. It is a dialogue between Manchana Sharma and Tittiba Setti. They started their early morning walk in Warangal, which was the capital of the Kakatiyas. They had a dialogue between them about what they had seen on their walk. On their way, they found a procession. Then, Manchana enquired what the procession was. Tittibha started explaining to Manchana about the procession. The heroic devotees (Mailarabhatts) of Mailara are coming towards the temple by upholding the lion flag, which symbolises their sect. The entire street was filled with neem garlands. The streets were filled with women from infancy to old women, and all of them were holding *Purnakumbham* (the pots containing holy water) in their cupped hands, welcoming the heroic devotees. And also everyone in the procession was drunk with the liquor prepared from fermented sugar juice and shouting "Yayaakaroo", "Yammakaro", "Yammakaro", "Adiyettetta", etc. and musical sounds like "Jukajum jum jukajummju jummam" by the blowing trumpets, cymbals and horns. They stepped on the premises of the temple.^{xi}

Fire Walking:

Tittiba also explains some of the heroic feats performed on the temple premises of God Mailara by devotees called Mailara-virabhatts. One important heroic deed practised by the devotees of Mailara was fire-walking. This is a common practice even now today. In case of illness or other troubles, people make a vow to walk on fire. Vallabharaya's work *Kridabhiramam* mentioned the performance of firewalking by the servants of God, Mailara.^{xii} Usually a trench is dug in front of the shrine and washed with a solution of cow dung to purify it. A cartload of firewood is then spread over the trench and set alight and left to burn till the wood becomes a mass of red-hot embers. When all this is ready, the people assemble at the spot. The devotee of Mailara walks on fire amid the sound of trumpets, cymbals and clapping of hands, on bare feet slowly and deliberately for the whole length of the trench towards the shrine of god Mailara.

Jumping on iron spikes:

Another important heroic deed practised by the servants of Mailara used to be jumping down from a considerable height into the pit of sharp iron spikes (the 'pit of sharp iron spikes') and cutting off the cord of the fibrous network swinging in the air, or 'utti', as it is called in Telugu.^{xiii} The heroic deed of the Mailarabhatts is in the model of Utti Kottuta, which is celebrated on the birthday celebration of Lord Srikrishna every year in the month of Ashadha. The only difference is there is no pit of sharp iron spikes below.

Hook-swinging:

During the medieval age, the practice of hook-swinging was common. The devotees were practising hook-swinging in order to fulfil their desire to free themselves from troubles. According to G.A. Oddie, the earliest reference to the practice of hook-swinging has come to light in European accounts dating from the 16th century. This includes a description by the Portuguese traveller Duarte Barbosa, which took place in the interior of the Malabar Coast in the early sixteenth century.^{xiv}

But we can trace back the earliest practice of hook-swinging as early as the 14th century. The Vallabharaya's work *Kridabhiramam* mentioned the practice and custom of hook-swinging by the servants of God Mailara.^{xv} Usually, hook-



swinging was performed from the cross-piece of a pole which was mounted on a four-wheeled platform or car. This was dragged before the temple. It had a long cross-piece which had a sharp hook at its edge. There were many people who wanted to swing because they were free from troubles and misery. Firstly, they loosen the cord and let down the hook; then, they fasten the shoulders of devotees of Mailara, piercing an iron hook of a long spike to pass through the skin covering the breastbone. Then the pole would be hoisted to keep him aloft, making him turn his face to the pagoda and salute three times; after that, they used to swing a pole in mid-air. This practice is called hook-swinging. The common people and servants of Mailara performed hook-swinging because they wanted to become free from misery, trouble and sudden risks.

The government of Madras announced that the ceremony of hook-swinging was prohibited by order under section 144 of the criminal procedure code in 1894.^{xvi} This was a consequence of an incident in which a man had died from the effect of hook-swinging in the Tiruchunapally district. It was also partly due to the fact that the government was coming under increasing pressure from educated Hindus, notably the Hindu newspaper, missionaries and others. W.S. Caine, M.P., a well-known crusader on behalf of reformers in India, raised the issue in the House of Commons in February 1893.

Self-Humiliation:

Another important feat practised by servants of Mailara was the swallowing of an iron tube (*yonnalambu*), applying 'shears of destiny' to the neck without any fear or hesitation. They also performed certain heroic deeds, which were self-torching out of devotion such as piercing (narasa) sharp iron spikes into their body, on their chest, lips, tongue, etc. They also used to light *aratulu* in their naked palm hands and wave them before the deity.^{xvii}

Self-Immolation:

Apart from these, the most important Tantric rite was, of course, self-immolation by offering one's own head either to a god or goddess. In order to propitiate a deity, whose wrath was believed to have been manifested either in the form of pestilence or calamity, or in order to fulfil a vow taken by him to get his cherished desire. This rite was called '*midi-tala*' in Telugu and '*tala-bali*' in Tamil. This rite of *talabali* is referred in the early Tamil classic *Silappadikaram*. The tantric cult of the early medieval period and *Pashupata Saivism*, which had been an active dominating force during the Kakatiya period, gave fresh impetus to rites of self-immolation.

The self-immolation by a devotee was out of devotion to his tutelary deity and was the best offering he could make on the earth. This was the spirit that dominated in the later parts of Kakatiya and Reddies. This spirit was cultivated greatly during the period of Muslim invasion and served as a powerful antidote to the religious fanaticism of the Muslims in their aim to destroy the fabric of Hindu religion and culture.

The worship of Bairava and Virabhadra, the fearful and terrific aspects of god Siva, was prevalent in Andhra during the Reddi period. Anyone who voluntarily gave up his life for the sake of a noble cause or performed heroic deeds in the interest of either his own community or the entire Hindu society was dubbed a hero, and his family was duly rewarded. Self-immolation developed into an institution altogether, and there were special temples of Bhairava, Virabhadra and Kali, which went by the name of '*Champurugullu*' in Telugu, where the devotees immolated themselves in fulfilment of a vow. During the Reddy period, the rites of self-immolation grew in popularity, and the number of persons who killed themselves by offering their heads to Siva was greater than in the previous period.^{xviii}

The *midi-tala*, or offering of a head, was also known as *the Ganda-tala*. Any kind of hindrance to the normal observance of worship in any way, by the loss of any one of the materials daily used in ceremonial worship or by not getting the required *pujadravyalu* essential for worship according to the vow taken, was the cause of self-immolation by offering one's head.



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The devotees believed that the god was testing their sincerity towards him. Therefore, the devotee clipped off his head unflinchingly with the shears of destiny called '*ganda-kattera*' in Telugu.

The rite of offering the head was also attested by the foreign traveller Nicolo de Conti. He witnessed self-immolation in the city of Combat, which remains not yet identified, and has described the way in which the hero chopped off his head with larger shears. Nicolo de Conti wrote, "*who has determined upon self-immolation, having on his neck a broad circular piece of iron, the fore part of which is round and the hinder part extremely sharp. A chain attached to the forepart, hanging suspended upon the breast, into which the victim, sitting down with their legs drawn up and their neck bent, inserts their feet. Then... suddenly, stretching out their legs at the same time, drawing their necks, they cut off their heads.*"^{xix}

The heroes of the period who laid down their lives for a sacred or noble cause were honoured by a commemoration through a sculptural representation which is called a '*virakal*' or '*hero-stone*' (*hero worship*). These stone representations of heroes were set up either by the public or by their master or by their relatives. Many of the Virakalas are found in some of the Saiva Kshetras, like Tripurantakam in Kurnool district, Mopure in Cuddapah district and Karempudi and Macherla in Guntur district, and these hero stones are also seen in Telangana, particularly at Saiva centres like Warangal, the seat of Pasupatha Saivism of the Kakatiya period in Andhra. It is observed that all the hero stones were set up in temples with a religious motive. Here a question may arise: what is the motive behind setting up hero stones in temples? We can't have a single-sentence answer. The motives behind setting the hero stone were multi-dimensional. It also facilitates the worship of both the deity and the hero at the same time. The visitors to the temple may get inspiration when they see the hero-stone and think of the religious glory and nobility in sanctifying one's own life for a holy cause.^{xx}

The worship of hero-stones with devotion developed into a religious order, *Virachara*, the cult of heroes, which found patronage at the hands of nobles and kings. They granted vritti, or land grants, for conducting puja to *Virakala*. The cult of heroes seems to have come into existence towards the end of Kakatiya rule. A record of Saka 1236 at Macherla, an inscribed stone during the Kakatiya ruler Prataparudra II's reign, registers a grant of wetland as *Sarvamanya* (for conducting worship) by the king's officer Devari Nayani. During the Reddi period, the popularity of hero-cult worship reached a climax. During the end of the Reddi period, a tower (*meda*) called *nayudu-mandapam* was erected by a Jivaraksa Timmana in the middle of Karempudi, the village, in honour of heroes of Palanadu.^{xxi} The dedication of Naidu-mandapam to the hero of Palanadu implies the importance of hero-worship.

Conclusion:

The growth of bhakti ideology took place at the time of rise of the new feudal monarchy in South India. By the 11th and 12th centuries, feudalism reached its peak stage in medieval Andhra. Society in medieval Andhra may thus be represented by the typical feudal pyramid, i.e., the king at the apex; landlords, big tenants, priests, merchants, etc. formed the middle portion; and small tenants, peasants and serfs constituted the base. The governing principle in feudalism was relations of castes, and the cementing force supplied by the spirit of loyalty in service and complete surrender of the individual formed the credo, which had to be followed by the majority of the people.^{xxii} In order to further consolidation of feudal relations by the time of medieval age, a variety of devotional cults in the generic label 'Bhakti' had come to form a major new religious expression. These cults were god-centred. The Bhakti cult and other sects which grew around the religion sought to underline the dependence on salvation through the deity.

The Kakatiyas and Reddies patronised Virasaivism and Vaisnavism, apart from local goddesses. By the 12th century feudalism reached its peak stage. As long as the kingdom expanded, the relation between lord and vassal had to be changed. It required confidence, loyalty and bhakti. These elements were found in Virasaivism and Vaisnavism and were linked with the lord-vessel relation and thereby strengthened the kingdom.^{xxiii} The principle of loyalty in service and complete surrender of the individual in the name of bhakti formed an important part of feudalism. As a part of bhakti, the heroic deeds of servants of Mailara, like self-humiliation, self-immolation, hook-swinging and fire-walking, were perpetuated in the name



of religion. The two schools of Vaishnavism crystallised during the Reddy period into two different sects, the Vadagalai, or the northern school, and the Tungalai, or the southern school. The former championed Brahminical supremacy, while the latter advocated the cosmopolitan outlook of Ramanuja, the founder of Vaisnavism.^{xxiv} The major religions that were prevalent in medieval Andhra were Virasaivism and Vaisnavism. Their emphasis on complete loyalty to the deity in the name of bhakti has been an effective way to salvation and was seen as a parallel to feudal loyalty.^{xxv}

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