



BONALU IN TELANGANA: HISTORICAL CONTINUITY, MOTHER-GODDESS WORSHIP, AND THE RITUAL AUTHORITY OF MATANGI SWARNALATHA

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Abstract:

Bonalu, a major festival of goddess worship in Telangana, embodies the interrelationship between regional religious traditions, agricultural life, collective well-being, and cultural identity. Although popular accounts frequently associate the development of the modern Hyderabad festival with nineteenth-century epidemics, recent discussions of inscriptions, sculptures, and literary traditions suggest a longer history of food offerings to local goddesses. This article examines the historical development and ritual significance of *Bonalu*, with particular attention to the *Rangam* oracle performed by *Matangi Swarnalatha*. Drawing on Telugu-language historical accounts, the Telangana government's Telangana *Bonalu* (2021), recent epigraphic reporting, and a descriptive account of Swarnalatha's performance, the study evaluates different categories of evidence and explores the significance of women's ritual participation. It argues that *Bonalu* should be understood as a historically layered tradition rather than an institution with a single identifiable origin. The *Rangam* ceremony, meanwhile, creates a distinctive form of female sacred authority through which devotees articulate concerns about health, rainfall, education, temple administration, and communal welfare. The article concludes that *Bonalu* constitutes a living expression of Telangana's regional identity, while the historical interpretation of its earliest origins requires careful differentiation between inscriptions, iconography, oral tradition, and contemporary cultural narratives.

Keywords: *Bonalu*; Telangana; *Matangi Swarnalatha*; *Rangam*; Gobbur inscription; Krishnadevaraya; Mother Goddess; *Pothuraju*; folk religion; cultural heritage.

1. Introduction:

The *Bonalu* festival occupies a distinctive position in the religious and cultural life of Telangana, particularly in Hyderabad and Secunderabad. Celebrated during the Telugu month of *Ashada*, it involves offerings of prepared food to regional Mother Goddesses, processions, drumming, ritual dancing, and public acts of devotion. Among its most prominent features are the *Bonam* offering, the performance of *Pothuraju*, the procession of the *Ghatam*, and the *Rangam* ritual, in which a female medium speaks as the goddess is believed to manifest through her.¹

The festival is dedicated to goddesses worshipped under various regional names, including *Mahankali*, *Yellamma*, *Pochamma*, *Maisamma*, *Muthyalamma*, and *Peddamma*. These goddesses are regarded by devotees as protectors of households, agricultural resources, livestock, and the wider community. Their worship connects religious practice with concerns about the environment, disease, fertility, and collective security.

The history of *Bonalu*, however, presents an important scholarly question. One influential narrative associates the festival with nineteenth-century epidemics in Hyderabad and Secunderabad. Other accounts locate its antecedents in prehistoric rock art, medieval literary references, temple sculptures, and a sixteenth-century inscription attributed to the reign of Krishnadevaraya.²

These different explanations invite a critical distinction between the origins of goddess worship, the historical documentation of *Bonam* offerings, and the institutional development of the modern urban *Bonalu* festival.

¹Government of Telangana, Hyderabad District Administration, "*Bonalu*," accessed October 16, 2026, <https://hyderabad.telangana.gov.in/festival/Bonalu/>.

²V. Shivani Reddy, "*Bonalu* Tradition Traced to Centuries of Practice," Deccan Chronicle, July 15, 2026, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/southern-states/telangana/Bonalu-tradition-traced-to-centuries-of-practice-1970977>.



Cover Page



The present study also examines *Matangi* Swarnalatha's role in *Rangam*, her ritual actions and conversations with priests and devotees, providing evidence of how religious authority is enacted through performance.³

This article advances two central arguments. First, *Bonalu* represents a historically layered tradition whose documented antecedents are older than some accounts of its modern urban organization. Second, *Rangam* provides a socially recognized setting in which a woman exercises exceptional ritual authority and addresses matters extending beyond formal religious worship.



Lal Darwaja Mahankali temple entrance



Lal Darwaja Mahankali Goddesses

³Matangi Swarnalatha, (A dedicated girl to Yallamma Diety), Aged 40 Years, oral interview conducted on August 2nd 2021.



2. Research Objectives and Methodology:

The study pursues four objectives: to investigate the historical evidence associated with *Bonalu*; to examine the religious symbolism of its principal rituals; to analyze the role of *Matangi* Swarnalatha in *Rangam*; and to evaluate *Bonalu*'s significance for women's ritual authority and Telangana's cultural identity.

It employs a qualitative historical and interpretive methodology.

3. The Meaning and Religious Significance of *Bonam*

The term *Bonam* is commonly explained as deriving from *Bhojanam*, meaning food or a meal. The offering usually consists of cooked rice prepared with milk or jaggery, placed in a decorated earthen or metal vessel. Turmeric, vermilion, neem leaves, and a lit lamp are important elements of its presentation.⁴

The preparation and carrying of the *Bonam* are closely associated with women. After preparing the offering, women proceed toward the temple, often accompanied by drums and other traditional instruments, and present the food to the goddess in fulfillment of a vow or as an expression of gratitude.

The ritual brings together domestic and public religious life. Food is prepared within the household but offered in a communal sacred setting. The vessel itself becomes a symbolic representation of nourishment, devotion, and the goddess's protective presence.

offerings of coconuts, bangles, garments, turmeric, and other ritual materials. the goddess visits her natal home during *Ashada*, a symbolism that connects divine motherhood with familial relationships and hospitality.⁵

The timing of *Bonalu* at the beginning of the monsoon is equally important. Devotees traditionally seek protection against seasonal illness and pray for favorable rainfall, agricultural prosperity, and the welfare of livestock.

These associations establish a relationship between religion and ecological uncertainty. However, historical beliefs concerning the protective properties of ritual materials should not be confused with experimentally established medical effects.

4. Historical Origins: Tradition, Archaeology, and Written Evidence:

4.1 Prehistoric interpretations and their limitations:

Some Telangana historians and cultural researchers trace the antecedents of *Bonalu* to prehistoric goddess worship and food-offering traditions.

Historian Dyavanpalli Satyanarayana has drawn attention to rock-art locations including Matthamralla Thanda in Kamareddy district, Dasarlapalli near Hyderabad, and Aksharala Loddi in the Kothagudem region. According to published accounts of his research, certain images have been interpreted as depicting food offerings or ritual vessels.⁶

⁴Government of Telangana, "Bonalu," Telangana Tourism, accessed October 16, 2026, <https://www.tourism.telangana.gov.in/page/festivals-and-fairs>.

⁵Matangi Swarnalatha, (A dedicated girl to *Yallamma* Diety), Aged 40 Years, oral interview conducted on August 2nd 2021.

⁶V. Shivani Reddy, "Bonalu Tradition Traced to Centuries of Practice," Deccan Chronicle, July 15, 2026, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/southern-states/telangana/Bonalu-tradition-traced-to-centuries-of-practice-1970977>.; Dyavanpalli Satyanarayana, "Vela Ella Mundu Nunche Bonalu" [*Bonalu* Since Three Thousand Years Ago], Andhra Jyothy, August 9, 2026.



Bonalu with early agricultural societies, fertility symbolism, and the worship of female divinities. It refers to Mother Goddess interpretations of Indus civilization imagery and to older regional practices involving ritual vessels.

4.2 Kakatiya-period literary traditions

Dyavanpalli Satyanarayan's medieval references in *Pratapa Charitra* and *Siddheshwara Charitra*. Queen Rudramadevi with an offering to *Ekaveera Devi* at Mogilicherla, reportedly made in connection with a wish for a male descendant through her daughter *Mummadamma*.⁷

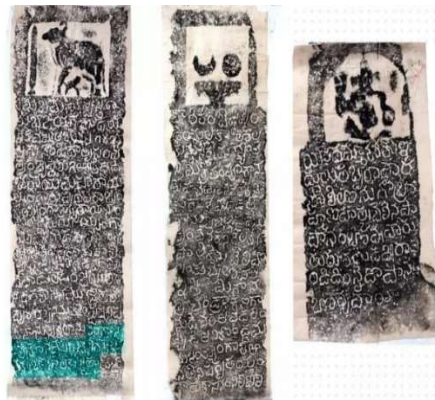
4.3 The Gobbur inscription of 1516 CE:

The most significant source is an inscription associated with the reign of the Vijayanagara ruler Krishnadevaraya.

According to P. Laxma Reddy's report published on December 23, 2025, an inscription discovered at Gobbur, near the Telangana–Karnataka border, is preserved in the State Archaeology Museum in Hyderabad. The report attributes to K. Munirathnam Reddy, Director of Epigraphy at the Archaeological Survey of India, the assessment that this inscription provides the earliest known epigraphic reference to *Bonalu* in present-day Telangana.⁸

A second Telugu report, dated August 9, 2026, identifies May 4, 1516, as the inscription's date and associates it with Parvatayya and the administrative context of Krishnadevaraya's reign. It further reports references to *Bonalu*-related practices, including *Rangam*, ritual designs, and exemptions from certain taxes.⁹

These reports suggest that food-offering ceremonies associated with the *Bonalu* tradition were sufficiently established in the early sixteenth century to receive recognition in an inscription.



Source: deccanchronicle.com

4.4 Sculpture and iconographic evidence:

⁷Dyavanpalli Satyanarayana, “*Vela Ella Mundu Nunche Bonalu*” [*Bonalu Since Three Thousand Years Ago*], Andhra Jyothy, August 9, 2026.

⁸P. Laxma Reddy, “Krishnadevaraya-Era Inscription Offers Earliest Epigraphical Evidence of *Bonalu* Festival in Telangana,” *The Hindu*, December 23, 2025, see also U. Sudhakar Reddy, “*Bonalu* Predates Early-1800s Plague Tale,” *The Times of India*, December 23, 2025.

⁹Dyavanpalli Satyanarayana, “*Vela Ella Mundu Nunche Bonalu*” [*Bonalu Since Three Thousand Years Ago*], Andhra Jyothy, August 9, 2026. U. Sudhakar Reddy, “*Bonalu* Celebrated during Reign of Vijayanagara Empire,” *The Times of India*, July 17, 2026.



Additional evidence has been proposed from sculptures at Velpugonda in Medak district and Potlapalli in Siddipet district.

Researchers have identified representations of women carrying pots on their heads, along with related vessel imagery in regional religious sculpture. S. Haragopal, associated with *Kotha Telangana Charithra Brundam*, has discussed these images as possible evidence of longstanding ritual traditions.¹⁰

4.5 The nineteenth-century epidemic narrative:

Popular accounts associate the development of modern *Bonalu* celebrations in Hyderabad and Secunderabad with an epidemic and prayers to *Mahankali*.

This tradition helps explain why disease prevention and divine protection occupy prominent places in festival narratives. It also suggests that particular temple festivals may have undergone reorganization or expansion during the nineteenth century.

5. The Ritual Structure of *Bonalu*:

Bonalu is not a single ceremonial act but a sequence of religious performances that unite households, temples, performers, and local communities.

5.1 The offering procession:

Women carrying decorated *Bonam* vessels form a central feature of the festival. Their procession from the household to the temple symbolizes the movement of domestic devotion into public religious space.

The festival commonly begins with celebrations at Golconda and proceeds through important temple centers, including the Ujjaini *Mahankali* Temple in Secunderabad and temples in Hyderabad's Old City.¹¹



Bonam

5.2 *Pothuraju* and protective performance:

¹⁰ V. Shivani Reddy, "Bonalu Tradition Traced to Centuries of Practice," Deccan Chronicle, July 15, 2026, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/southern-states/tehangana/Bonalu-tradition-traced-to-centuries-of-practice-1970977>; Matangi Swarnalatha, (A dedicated girl to Yallamma Diety), Aged 40 Years, oral interview conducted on August 2nd 2021.

¹¹ Government of Telangana, Hyderabad District Administration, "Bonalu," accessed October 16, 2026, <https://hyderabad.telangana.gov.in/festival/Bonalu/>.



Pothuraju is represented in popular belief as the brother and protector of the goddess. His performance includes energetic dancing, rhythmic movement, and the use of distinctive costume and body decoration.

Pothuraju and other ritual performers as integral to the ceremonial procession. Their actions create an atmosphere of sacred intensity and protection.



Pothuraju

5.3 *Ghatam* and the representation of the goddess:

The *Ghatam* is a decorated vessel that represents the goddess and is carried in ceremonial procession. Its movement through public space extends the symbolic presence of the deity beyond the temple. the *Ghatam* as an important component of the concluding celebrations.¹²

5.4 *Rangam* and the oracle:

Rangam differs from the other festival components because it is a public, interactive form of religious communication.

A woman recognized as a ritual medium stands upon a prepared vessel or platform and speaks in a state understood by devotees as divine possession. The assembled community seeks guidance concerning future events and collective welfare.

The *Rangam* as a prophecy ritual involving a woman standing upon an earthen pot.¹³

6. *Matangi Swarnalatha*: Ritual Presence and Female Sacred Authority:

The *Matangi Swarnalatha* at the center of the *Rangam* ceremony on 1st and 2nd August 2021.

her arrival at the temple, the preparation of the ritual setting, her entry into the ceremonial space, and her interaction with priests, temple authorities, and devotees.

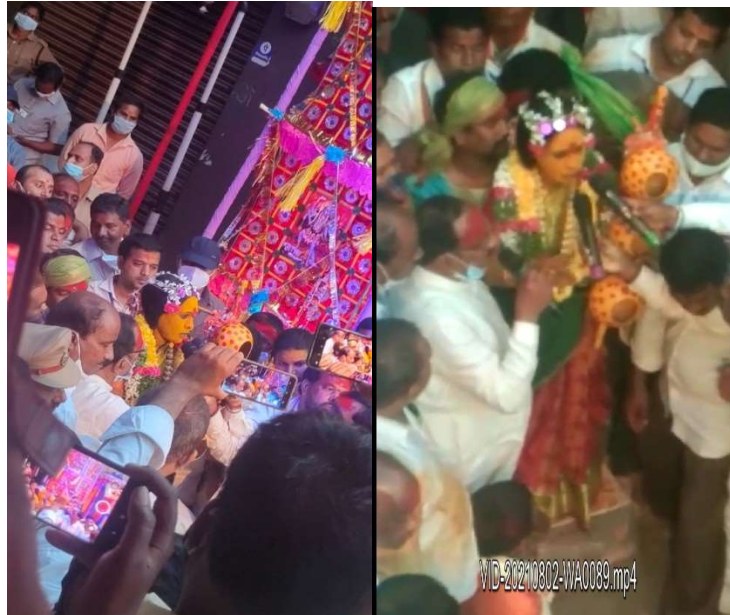
¹²Ibid.

¹³Government of Telangana, "Language and Culture," accessed October 16, 2026, <https://www.telangana.gov.in/about/language-culture/>.



Swarnalatha stands upon a specially prepared earthen pot and begins speaking in a manner understood by participants as the manifestation of the goddess. The emphatic speech, laughter, warnings, assurances, and direct responses to questions.

she holding a bell and a stringed ritual instrument during the performance. At the conclusion, attendants support her and escort her into the temple.¹⁴



Matangi Swarnalatha delivering the 'Rangam' (oracle/prophecy) on August 02 2021

7. Rangam During the COVID-19 Period: An Interpretation of the Reported Dialogue:

The *Rangam* performance took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore, it included questions and answers concerning diseases, disruptions to the education system, agricultural conditions, temple construction, and social disputes.

These dialogues illustrate how contemporary issues are reflected in traditional religious rituals and practices.

7.1 Disease and the search for protection:

The devotees asking for protection against the coronavirus pandemic. The *Matangi* responds with assurances and directions concerning religious observance.

7.2 Education and family welfare:

Another striking element is the concern expressed about children's education during pandemic-related disruption.

This illustrates the adaptability of *Rangam*. The ceremony is not confined to agricultural concerns or conventional religious requests; it also accommodates problems emerging from contemporary social conditions.

¹⁴Matangi Swarnalatha, (A dedicated girl to Yallamma Diety), Aged 40 Years, oral interview conducted on August 2nd 2021.



7.3 Rainfall and agricultural prosperity:

Devotees ask about rainfall and successful harvests, reflecting the historical connection between goddess worship, the monsoon, and agrarian well-being.

8. Mother-Goddess Worship, Gender, and Cultural Continuity:

The *Bonalu* as an expression of ancient Mother-Goddess traditions and associates it with the historical importance of women in religious and social life.

Its discussion of matriarchal societies, fertility symbols, and Dravidian cultural traditions reflects a broader effort to situate *Bonalu* within the longue durée of South Indian religious history.

Women prepare offerings, lead important devotional processions, and may serve as the ritual medium through whom divine communication is understood to occur.

In *Rangam*, this participation reaches a particularly visible form. The female body becomes the recognized site of divine manifestation, while the woman's voice becomes the medium through which communal concerns are addressed.

The festival thus offers a productive case study for examining the relationship between female divine symbolism, embodied ritual performance, and social authority.

9. Bonalu and the Construction of Telangana's Cultural Identity:

Bonalu occupies a significant position in the construction and consolidation of Telangana's cultural identity, representing the region's distinctive religious traditions, historical experiences, collective memory, and indigenous cultural practices. Deeply rooted in the folk religious traditions of Telangana, *Bonalu* is celebrated primarily in honour of Goddess *Mahankali* and other manifestations of the Mother Goddess, symbolizing divine protection, communal well-being, fertility, and the safeguarding of society against epidemics and misfortunes.

The festival reflects the close relationship between religious beliefs, agrarian life, local customs, and community participation, particularly through rituals such as the offering of *Bonam* (cooked rice prepared with milk and jaggery), the *Pothuraju* procession, *Rangam* (ritual prophecy), and the participation of women as principal ritual performers. Historically associated with Hyderabad, Secunderabad, and surrounding Telangana regions, *Bonalu* has gradually evolved from a localized religious observance into a prominent symbol of regional cultural consciousness. During the Telangana statehood movement, indigenous festivals such as *Bonalu* and Bathukamma acquired renewed significance as expressions of Telangana's distinct historical and cultural heritage. Following the formation of Telangana State on 2 June 2014, the recognition of *Bonalu* as a state festival further strengthened its institutional visibility and symbolic importance in articulating regional identity.

The festival also provides a cultural space in which different caste groups, occupational communities, and social sections participate in shared religious activities, although their ritual roles and social experiences may differ. Its distinctive musical traditions, folk performances, processions, traditional costumes, and goddess worship contribute to the preservation and transmission of Telangana's intangible cultural heritage across generations. Moreover, women's central participation in preparing and carrying *Bonam* offerings highlights the gendered dimensions of religious expression and cultural continuity. From a socio-cultural perspective, *Bonalu* illustrates how popular religious traditions can become powerful instruments of collective identification, cultural representation, and regional belonging. Thus, *Bonalu* is not merely an annual religious celebration but also a dynamic cultural institution through which the people of Telangana articulate their



Cover Page



historical memories, reaffirm their regional distinctiveness, negotiate social relationships, and sustain a shared sense of cultural identity amid modernization and social transformation.¹⁵

10. Conclusion:

Bonalu is a living expression of Telangana's religious history, collective memory, and cultural identity. Its central offering, the *Bonam*, links household devotion with public worship, while its processions and performances reinforce the relationship between the community and the protective Mother Goddess.

The available historical material suggests that *Bonalu*-related practices have antecedents extending at least to the early sixteenth century, as reported in connection with the Gobbur inscription of 1516 CE.

The role of *Matangi* Swarnalatha adds a distinctive social dimension to the festival. Through *Rangam*, a female ritual medium is recognized as the voice of divine authority and responds to concerns about health, rainfall, education, religious administration, and communal welfare.

The ceremony therefore illustrates how inherited religious forms can address changing social circumstances.

Bonalu's significance lies not only in the preservation of traditional practices but also in their continuing adaptation. Its historical depth, regional distinctiveness, and prominent roles for women make it an important subject for research in religious studies, anthropology, folklore, gender studies, and South Indian cultural history.

¹⁵Mamidi Harikrishna, ed., *Telangana Bonalu: A Book on the History, Genesis, Practice of Bonalu Festival in Telangana*, Department of Language and Culture, Government of Telangana, Hyderabad, 2021. & Government of India, Ministry of Tourism, "*Bonalu*," Utsav: Events and Festivals in India, accessed October 16, 2026, <https://utsav.gov.in/view-event/Bonalu-2>.