

Folk Deities and Great Traditions A Study of a Coastal Village in Andhra Pradesh

D.V. Prasad¹

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Abstract

Cultural diversity and cultural pluralism are the hallmarks of Indian civilisation. Pluralism reflects in co-existence, but not in existence of exclusive cultural category. For example, despite 'urban' influence, tribal and rural communities maintain their distinct folk identity in the form of local dialects, worship of folk deities, folklore, rites and rituals, festivals and fairs, customary practices, i.e. in following many aspects of the tradition. Such a situation of co-existence, conceptualised as 'folk-urban continuum', reflects a convergence of little i.e. folk and great i.e. urban traditions. The co-existence of folk and urban traditions among rural and tribal communities results from continuous interaction of folk or little traditions with nearby great traditions which are synonymous of urban centres in this study. This influence is visible in folk people's life style across social, economic, political, and religious domains. Scholars like McKim Marriott, M.N.Srinivas have tried to explain this process of co-existence using concepts of little traditions, great traditions, universalisation, parochialisation to understand the exchange between little and great traditions. In India's pluralism this co-existence is universal and evident in universalization of all folk cultures. Folk culture of coastal Andhra Pradesh is not exception to this process. The incorporation of temple architecture, recitation of chanting, written sacred texts, and lore at the temples of *Gramadevata* (chief village deity) and *Devara* (caste deities) are testimony to this fact. By doing this, the *Sudra* castes try to elevate their status and project their inter-sectional identity in the changing power structure at the village level. Under these circumstances, an attempt is made to comprehend the process of universalization through which less dominant *Sudra* groups assert their identity to share the liminal space with powerful dominant castes through emulation of great tradition.

Keywords: Universalisation, Parochialisation, Great and Little Tradition, Rites and Rituals, Folk Deities, Fairs and Festivals.

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, Delhi-110007
Email: dvprasada@gmail.com; Mob: 6260486855

1.0 Introduction

India is a country of representation of diverse cultures as independent and interconnected; thereby building up a mega superstructure of transcendental space. This space is alternatively known as cultural pluralism, a holistic perception of constituents. Independence and interconnectedness point to a consciousness of individual identity and process of sharing between different cultural traditions. The two forces, identity pride and interconnectedness between cultures, co-exist in an amalgamated space of interactive cultures. This phenomenon of cultural pluralism appears at social and territorial community level: village, region and nation. At the core, there exists the process of transformation which is conceptualised in terms of Sanskritisation (Srinivas 1952 & 1965), Parochialisation, Universalisation with reference to Little and Great Traditions (Marriot 1955, Redfield 1941, 1955 & 1965 and Sinha 1959), Rajputisation (Sinha 1962), Tribe-Peasant- Caste continua (Bailey 1961 and Sinha 1965) and so on by scholars drawing on empirical data.

Keeping in view these empirical and conceptual postulates, the present study tries to test McKim Marriott's hypothesis of a continuous interaction of universalisation and parochialisation in a heterogeneous village of Andhra Pradesh, Vallabhapuram using field data. Further, the study also tries to answer the questions: why village deities got universalised and the reasons behind it, and what the personnel or group identities related to this universalisation process is. The main objective is to understand the fabric of coexistence of Little and Great Traditions in a village.

It is to be noted that the transformation does not take place in one in one area. When deities of folk (Little) tradition are equated with the ones in Great Tradition, the deities alone do not experience the process of transformation; it happens in other areas like status, performance, social structure, etc.

2.0 Brief Socio-Cultural Profile of Study Area

The villages in the coastal areas of Guntur district have a rich treasure of folk culture through the worship of folk deities such as *Poleramma*, *Ganganamma*, *Poturaju*, *Ankalamma*, *Tirupatamma*, *Kanaka Putlamma*, *Mahankalamma* etc. Vallabhapuram village is famous for the worship of chief village deity *Perantalamma*. Over 400 years back, a Brahmin *Pundit* known as Pillutla Vallabha Josyulu of Palnadu *Taluk* came over here and settled here along with some Reddy¹ caste communities. Thus, the village was named after him Vallabhapuram (Census of India 1961). It is a coastal village situated on the bank of river Krishna just 25 kilometres away from Vijayawada; 22 kilometres distance from Tenali town and 39 kilometres from its district headquarters i.e., Guntur. The total population of the village comes to 6,753 representing 3,317 males and 3,436 females. The literacy rate of the village is 66.13%. Reddy is the dominant agricultural caste that possesses the majority of land holdings. They are followed by Yadav, Gowdas, Mala, Madiga, Rajaka, *Pallekarlu* (fisherfolk), Yanadi, Chenchu, Erukala, Sale, Lambadi, Brahmin, and Komati castes inhabiting the village along with a few *Sayibulu* (Muslim) households. Reddys were recognised as one of the higher castes and the remaining *Sudra* castes were rendering services to them in different ways. Though Brahmin households are very less, the presence of Hindu temples along with folk

deities testifies the popularisation of great traditions to the hinterlands. Patriarchy is the rule of law wherein authority in the family is vested in the hands of the head of the family who is generally an elderly male. Since descent is reckoned patrilineally, residence after marriage is usually patrilocal.

In the study village, each caste households are clustered in one place known as *Bazar*. If it is the Reddy caste, it is known as *Reddla Bazar* or in case of Gowdas it is *Gowdla Bazar*. Whereas some hamlets consist of mixed castes too. However, two Scheduled Caste hamlets are located at fag ends of the main village wherein *Mala* hamlets are known as *Palle* and *Madiga* hamlet is referred to as *Gudem*. They do not have folk deities of their own but visit Christian churches located in their hamlets. Though Hindu gods and goddesses are present in the area, all the villagers are closely related to *Gramadevata* (chief village deity) who is believed to provide immediate help in troubles and is more intimately connected with happiness and prosperity of the villagers.

3.0 Methodology

The study is a micro-level study based on the collection of empirical data from a caste dominated rural village. To fulfil the objective of the study, Vallabhapuram village of Kollipara Mandal in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh state was selected and studied intensively from an anthropological perspective. Fieldwork was conducted in 2022-23 at several intervals. In study structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with priests, temple organising committee members, and knowledgeable persons to get views of the people on village fairs and festivals from historical times to present. Anthropological methods such as observation, discussion with key informants, in-depth interviews with temple priests, video recordings, photographs etc., were also used for data collection. The researcher collected data on the dynamics of great as well as little traditions through observation while participating in *Tirunalla*². Transaction walk in the village assisted in the location of folk deities in different homesteads and their process of regular worship. Informal talks with the caste and clan elders immensely contributed in understanding the group identities and aspirations through the adaptation of great traditions.

4.0 Conceptual Foundation in the Study of Transformation

Folk deities are integral part of village life and culture. They are catalytic in building village cooperation despite existing social hierarchies and are having durable connection with local communities. Their worship practices vary across villages and established religion. The worship pattern is simple and more informal with a focus on local customs and traditions. Despite deities' significance in daily life of local people, they are not untouched from the influence of modernisation, westernisation, and universalisation. This influence is attributed to folk tradition's continuous interaction with nearby great traditions, or using Redfield's (1941 & 1955) terminology, with urban centres. Deities of folk traditions are now increasingly becoming parts of urban civilisation through the process of the folk-urban continuum; the process is conceptualised by Robert Redfield in early part of twentieth century. To avail the benefits of urbanisation, rural people quite often visit nearby urban centres and adopt the urban ways of doing things. It is evident from the extensive use of dress patterns, food habits,

transport and communication, formal education, etc. Folk-urban continuum offers one constructive way of conceiving the intermediate stage of society which is designated as a secondary civilisation (Marriot, 1955:199). It is different from indigenous civilisation which is heterogenetic in nature. Opposite to it, Redfield and Singer (1954) viewed indigenous civilisation as a primary civilisation which grows from its own folk culture through an orthogenetic process. The great traditions developed by such primary civilisations carry forward cultural materials of little traditions. Redfield (1956) viewed that great and little traditions can be thought of as two currents of thought and action that exchange cultural traits very often. The contentious interaction of peasant culture with the centres of civilisation reflects the exclusivity as well as the interdependence of each tradition.

Universalisation and Parochialisation are counteractive processes conceived by McKim Marriott in 1955 wherein local traditions are carried forward or made popular to become a part of great traditions and vice-versa. In rural villages, many folk deities are worshipped in the form of natural resources such as trees, stones, water, animals, and snakes. Of which, one chief village deity known as *Grama devata* is identified with village and people who develop special reverence towards it (Whitehead 1921). Apart from this, every caste and clan do possess their *Devarlu* (deities) and *Pitrulu* (ancestors) who were propitiated on ritual and ceremonial occasions. In the context of modernisation, the horizon of worship pattern of these deities got metamorphosed and slowly absorbed in great traditional elements. Subsequently, these deities got wider popularity. But at the same time, they did not lose the identity of their little tradition. Thus, Redfield and Marriott stress constant communication between these two traditions. This theoretical frame contributes in understanding the greater Indian culture and society. Patwardhan (1967-68) in a different tone has proved through empirical study that the cultural and linguistic affinity loosens the structural distance and aloofness between castes. The inter-group communication between lower and higher groups in a particular linguistic region facilitated not only through traditional and secular channels but with the modern and secular modes of contact.

Whereas Pocock (1957) has observed that lower castes imitate those who are higher to them and in close proximity to them. But Burke (1978) postulated that the elite participate in little tradition not the vice versa like Pocock. To some extent, Burke's observation proved to be correct as upper-caste Christians build Churches and avoid visiting the lower-caste ones at village and urban centres. But these sectarian networks are dynamic at village level based on local power structure and dominance of Sudra castes. With the emergence of class structure in villages due to occupational diversification, modern employment opportunities, and affirmative policy, the landless *Sudra* are becoming dominant and competing with existing dominant castes. Some lower castes are voluntarily discarding Sanskritisation with the emerging class structure due to employment, political power, modern education, etc. To overcome the dilemma of fixing the identities, Misra (2006) suggests a three-dimension model of understanding the interaction of great and little traditions, i.e., the flow of cultural elements, material conditions of existence, and bearing of local power structures on social interactions.

Even some studies tried to highlight the universalisation of folk traditions than the parochialisation. Xavier's study on the assimilation of folk deities into Sanskritic tradition

stress on Sanskritisation (Srinivas 1952 & 1956) process in rural set up. Generally, folk people continue this practice not only to revive the great tradition but to render priestly services to these temples for economic gains. In Tamil Nadu, the deities of folk traditions are transformed physically to match the *Sakti* cult of the mother goddess (Xavior 2009). But at the same time, the original identity of local tradition is maintained by protecting their cultural survivals, practices, vows, and lore. It is an ongoing process in the village set up which reveals the complexity of Indian civilisation and marks the continuous communication between great and little traditions.

During ancient period, shreds of evidence of the interaction of great traditions with local traditions for various economic and social reasons are traced from the historical records of Andhra by the scholars from time to time. Murthy (1985) provided archaeological evidence from the upper Paleolithic period about the continuous interaction of hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, and agricultural communities from South India. The practice of mock hunting before the *Birappa* (folk deity of *Kuruva*) festival at Balapalapalle located on Andhra Karnataka border reveals the induction of hunter-gatherers into pastoralism and then to agriculture through diffusion process. Similarly, the oral traditions testify through archaeological evidence in the elevation of the Chenchu tribal girl through the marriage of the man-lion god Narasimha to the great tradition of Vaishnavism of Lord Vishnu and his wife goddess Lakshmi. As such, worship of Narasimha and Chenchu Lakshmi is a universalisation process that draws the forest dwellers into the ambit of the village economy (Murthy 1985:201).

During the medieval period, the Brahmins were increasingly drawn into rural areas by their *Agrahara*³ lands where actual cultivation was done by *Sudras*. Hence, Brahmins depended on latter's service to cultivate their *Agrahara* fields to get income from it. Total segregation and strict hierarchy are impossible and hence attitudinal changes have taken place towards local people and their traditions. Hence, Brahmins relax strict rules of purity and pollution and encourage the integration of local traditions through the creation of popular myths. Victor (2014) attempted to study four such popular myths and analysed the integration of folk deities into great tradition through Sanskritisation. During Medieval periods, some kings patronised folk deities and declared them as state deities. The myths of *Maladasari*⁴, *Ellamma*⁵, *Kannappa*⁶, and *Narasimha*⁷ facilitate the cultural assimilation of folk deities into the Brahminical fold. The masculine gods often incorporate in Brahminical religion through incarnations such as Lord Shiva or Vishnu and the female deities were integrated with mother goddess cult such as goddess Durga or *Shakti*. This acculturation was also facilitated by the concept of *Bhakti* which transcends caste, creed and other barriers. Thus, Victor viewed caste status and perceptions are not as textual or rigid but as fluid, dynamic and changing as a result of changing socio-economic conditions of medieval Andhra (Victor 2014).

5.0 Cultural Space in the Village: Deities, Performances, Priests, Faith and Beliefs

The cultural space cannot be understood under distinct headings like deities, performances, etc. They are interconnected. A deity without related performance or the performer remains incomplete; simply it suggests a name, not the space it embodies. The discussion in distinct headings should be understood in that perspective.

5.1 Deities

Perantalamma, the *Gramadevata* is the chief village deity situated at the centre of the village. A *pucca* structure has been constructed anthropomorphic images of *Perantalamma*, *Sarvireddy*, and *Bolli Aavu* installed in it. *Ganganamma*, *Tirupatamma*, *Poturaju*, and *Nagendrudu* are other village deities commonly worshipped by villagers. Among them, *Perantalamma* is the most revered one by all the villagers irrespective of caste, creed, and religion. A festival is celebrated on *Chaitra Sudha Purnima* which falls in the month of March-April to appease *Perantalamma* (Census of India 1961). The main aim of this festival is that the deity is invoked and appeased so that it protects the villagers from the ensuing seasonal diseases after monsoon and blesses them with good agricultural yield. A big fair, called *Tirunalla*, takes place on this auspicious occasion. The deity is known for her sanctity and propitiated with sacrifice and tribute to protect the villagers from dangers and shower prosperity. Well in advance of the event, a *Harijan* drummer frequents each ward and announces the ensuing date of the festival in the village. Before the event, *Perantalamma* visits Tumuluru, her parental village, for one night as per custom. The villagers bid her farewell by decorating her palanquin, painting wooden idols, etc. Interestingly, the parental village of the deity, i.e. Tumuluru is called *puttillu* or *puttinillu*, (mother's village) by the people of Vallabhapuram. On festive occasions *pasupu* (turmeric) and *kumkuma* (vermilion) are sent to the deity and her female descendants from Tumuluru.

On her way back to Vallabhapuram, *Perantalamma* stays at Kollipara (the name of the *mandal* in which Tumuluru village is located) for *Niddara* (night sleep) since it is considered the birth place of the deity. From Vallabhapuram she is taken to Krishna River for a ceremonial bath which marks the formal beginning of the festival. The focus on the two-day celebrations is the ceremonial drums-led procession with palanquin carrying the replica (wooden image) of *Perantalamma*, *Sarvireddy*, and *Bolli Aavu* throughout the village covering all households.

Tirupatamma is another village deity located on the bank of Krishna River and having the anthropomorphic images of *Tirupatamma*, *Gopaiah*, and a sacred cow. Villagers do offer regular worship at the temple and annual *Tirunalla* once a year like Penuganchiprolu⁸ *Tirunalla*. The worship of *Nagendrudu* (serpent god) is very common to all castes in the village which is located in front of *Tirupatamma* temple. One single and two intertwined cobras are carved on stone platform under a large peepal tree and worshipped by the woman who desire children. This place is frequented by villagers to offer milk on Sundays to those who are undergoing *Vrat* (vow). On the auspicious occasion of *Nagula Chavati* (usually comes after five days of *Deepavali*), devotees frequent this place and offer worship. The anthill located in Yadavapalem is considered original place but it was universalised by constructing of a *pucca* structure known as *Nagendraswami* temple. The Hanuman's stone image is also worshipped beside the *Tirupatamma* in a thatched roof structure. It is looked after by a male member from Yadav family who officiates regular *Puja*, *Harati*, and *Nivedyam*. But during *Tirunalla*, a Brahmin priest is invited to *Kalyanam* (marriage ceremony) to conduct the marriage between *Gopaiah* and *Tirupatamma* with traditional fervour.

Ganganamma is another folk deity located on the outskirts of the village in the form of *Ganganamma Sila* in the *Pucca* structure. *Poturaju*, the male folk deity, is located in front of the temple in the form of an uncarved stone. A *Rajaka*⁹, caretaker/priest looks after the temple. In the month of *Sravanam*, the villagers offer *Chaddi Nivedyam* made with boiled rice and curd in the early hours of the morning. From around 11 am to 12 pm, they also prepare *Pongallu*¹⁰ and offer to the deity every Sunday. All castes worship the deity on different days on an allotted quota basis.

Hindu temples such as Shivalayam, Ramalayam, Saibaba Temple, Vinayak Temple, Janardhan Swami (Lord Venkateswara) temple, and Anjaneya Swami Temple also exist in the main centre of the village. Every temple has its priest who performs the daily worship following Sanskritic prescriptions. Altogether four Churches are operational in the village in each hamlet of Mala, Madiga, Reddy, and *Pallekarlu* caste clusters. The folk and caste deities are very popular in the study village where people offer worship on the onset of sowing, weeding, harvesting, new house construction, life cycle and annual rituals.

5.1.1 Devarlu (Caste or Clan Deities)

Apart from the above common village deities, inhabiting castes also possess their own deities known as *Devarlu*. Most of the deities reside in the concerned locality in separate homesteads or open places such as *Reda Ankamma Devara*, *Renukamma Devara*, *Gandu Devara*, *Konda Devara*, etc. Some of the caste *Devara* inhabit in nearby villages where the majority of their population reside. Even the place of worship also changes in time and space. Long back, the present village was located on the bank of the Krishna River where all *Devara* reside on its embankment and got affected by floods very frequently. The British made *Karakatta* (river embankment) along the Krishna River bank and asked the villagers to shift the village to an interior place. Of deities, *Rajaka Devara Reda Ankamma* is an important one since the village name is derived from it. The chief deity is in the form of a carved female image on stone which is accompanied by two brass pots about two feet high with the figure of cobra springing from below the neck and rising over the mouth of the pot are worshipped as symbols of *Reda Ankamma*. The brass pots consist of play items of the deity known as tiny *Guruvulu* (Figure 1), *Kattulu*, and *Sulalu*. Earlier *Reda Ankamma* was installed at a private place which is also belonged to the same lineage group. But in due course, the place got disputed as a private land; the owner shifted to Guntur by selling his ancestral property. Then the *Devara* was shifted to the present *Rajaka* settlement and installed in a small *Paaka* (thatched structure). Since then, the neighbouring families who happen to be of the same surname take care of it.



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5.2 Performances

Performance marks the beginning of an event. It is not always ritualistic; entertaining events are associated with it.

Taking *Perantamma* to Krishna River for a sacred dip is officially declared as the occasion of the onset of the festival. The procession is officiated as per great tradition in the presence of a Brahmin priest by the recitation of Sanskritic chantings. Before this, the temple priest (of Yadava caste) of *Perantamma* visits another folk deity preferably the *Devara* of Reddy community with *Melam* (musical band) and invites her as *Todipellikuturu* (co-bride). In the case of *Maila* (pollution) due to death in the concerned clan, they invite another clan *Devaras* of the village.

Before the day of *Tirunalla*, *Perantamma* is taken in procession in a men-carried palanquin through the principal streets of the village except *Palle* and *Gudem*. On this occasion, people offer *Harati*¹¹ to the deity along with new cloth, turmeric, vermilion, bangles, and coconut as a part of tradition. *Saare*¹² are placed for auction by the managing committee later and thus money collected is spent on honorarium to the caretakers and maintenance of the temple. After the end of the procession, a Brahman performs a symbolic wedding of *Perantamma* with Sarvireddy; this declares the end of the Tirunalla fair.

Every night, cultural programmes like *Kolatam* (stick dance), *Tappetlu* (rhythmic drum beats), *Natikal* (street plays), *Burrakatha* (storytelling), *Edlapandelu* (bull competitions), an orchestra with modern songs, and exhibitions for entertainment, toy shops, eatery stalls, etc. are organised by the temple managing committee. In this fair, *Perantamma* is appeased with the sacrifice of hens, roosters, and goats by putting a cut mark on the body of the animal and letting blood drops fall in front of the temple.

Earlier, *Perntamma Tirumala* was celebrated with the sacrifice of rams, roosters, and hens in large numbers in front of the temple only. But now, they have stopped open sacrifices at temple precincts. Earlier one who took *Mokku* (vow) used to circumambulate the temple with the sacrificial goat and cut its ear to let the blood drop. Then the animal is taken to the house and sacrificed in the name of *Perntamma*. Its meat is consumed by the concerned family members as *Prasadam* of the deity. The folk artists like *Pambalollu*, *Kommulollu*, *Tappetlollu*, *Sannayivallu*, and *Gangireddulollu* used to frequent the temple in *Tirunalla* and perform their arts.

But now only a few of them are invited symbolically to perform in front of the deity to mark the traditional launching of the festival. In the inaugural event, the beating of drums by lower castes, the offering of *Sambrani* (Benzoin resin) by a barber, and holding of torch by a washerman can be seen along with practices like *Harati*, coconut offerings, and the distribution of *Prasadam* which belonged to great tradition. People with vows also offer new clothes while to *Perantamma*.

5.2.1 Sidimanu Utsav

Generally, when an expectant mother reaches delivery date, women, married couple, and parents of the female and her husband take a vow in front of the deity for safe delivery and good health of mother and child. Besides, women also take vow to swing on *Sidimanu* if sickness is cured. On 3rd day after *Tirunalla*, devotees who have vows assemble in the evening in front of *Perantalamma Gudi* to pay their respects by swinging in *Tatta* (bamboo basket) which is tied to elongated wooden pole known as *Sidimanu*. On this auspicious day, children and women offer their vow by sitting in *Sidimanu* and sprinkling turmeric powder while swinging. In case of infants, their respective mothers hold the baby in the lap and swing on *Sidimanu*. By doing this, devotees compete to receive deity's blessings by participating in the event in large number.

5.2.2 Reverence towards *Veerulu*

Every caste worships its ancestor on former's death anniversary or Mahashivratri day by offering dead person's favourite food and drink. It is believed that in case an unmarried male dies while helping someone in the family or dies for the cause of justice, they became heroes of that caste, clan, or family. Such dead souls are known as *Veerulu* (heroes) and started worshipping them on important occasions. Miniature tridents are kept as symbols of their memory and taken to the Krishna River while worshipping them. Later they may become the lineage or family deity.

In case of death of lineage or clan member, *Chedu Kunda Tiyyadam*¹³ is observed at *Devara* within a month or after the completion of funeral rites. On such occasion, the concerned family cleans the *Devara Gudi* along with miniature sacred objects i.e., *Guruvulu* (cowry shells), *Kattulu* (sword), *Sulalu* (tridents), etc. The concerned family prepare *Pongali* (a sweet dish) and distribute to its neighbouring same surname households. They also sacrifice a rooster which is consumed by the individual family. The people also offer annual worship to the departed souls in their houses or at *Devara Gudi* by sacrificing a rooster. The worship is meant to appease them or else they turn hostile; it is believed that they bring misfortunes to the family. Now-a-days, Brahmins are invited to offer food to their *Veerulu* on every Maha Shivaratri after having a sacred bath in the Krishna River. They observe *Sudakam* (taboo or pollution) as prescribed by Brahmin for 42 days for *Gotrikulu* (lineage, families having same surname) and one year for concerned family or till the completion of *Samvatsarikam* (death anniversary). Usually, they consult a Brahmin for the performance of festivals, rites, rituals, or any auspicious activity like marriage, puberty rituals in the family and so on.

5.3 Faith and beliefs

According to oral tradition, Renuka *Devara* installed the *Kanaka Putlamma* deity in nearby Konduru village and assigned the task of worship to two cobras. While coming back along the river bank, Renuka stopped at Lord Shiva's temple and glanced the Rajaka caste people who were holding *Kagadas* (traditional handmade torch). At that moment, *Renuka* told them

that two sister deities i.e., *Renuka Renanka* and *Reda Ankamma* were laying in the Krishna River and instructed them to fetch and worship them to protect their lineage in the long run. Accordingly, Rajaka clan descendants collected the *Reda Ankamma* deity from an earthen pot and installed it at their homestead, and since then, performing *Kolupulu* (temple festival) from time to time.

During initiation of any auspicious event, people with same surname in *Vallabhapuram* surname first visit their *Devara* for her blessings i.e., keeping the first wedding card, appointment letter, new cloths, etc., in front of the deity. During marriage in the group of surname (clan/lineage), the concerned household offer a *saree*, blouse, and cash/kind to the deity to get blessings for the success. Soon after marriage, the newly-wed couple visits *Devara* in wedding clothes and offer worship. Those who had taken a vow, prepare *Pongali*¹⁴ with turmeric mixed rice which is used in a marriage known as *Vadikanti Biyyam*. It is done on the 16th day after marriage known as *Padahaaru Rojula Panduga*. This practice is still followed by the residents of the village and those who reside at distant places keep a vow of visiting *Devara* on some other day. Daughters of the same lineage groups in *Vallabhapuram* offer contributions to *Devara* in the form of kind i.e., utensils, clothes, furniture after marriage. *Devara* is considered very powerful and hence for initiation of any productive work at individual or family level people visit the *Devara Gudi* (temple). It is a common scenario during elections that politicians often visit the temple first and offer *Puja* to garner the caste people's support. The present temple was renovated by a local Legislative Assembly Member (MLA) under the constituency development fund.

5.3.1 Miracles of Devara

Villagers believe in the powers of the deity by attributing real-time natural events to the miracles of the deity. Once a major fire broke out in the village and a portion of the village got engulfed except (having *Vallabhapuram* as surname) households around *Devara Gudi*. Further during floods of the Krishna River, the deity protected the village from inundating floods. The flood did not come to the village and diverted via *Ungaram Katta* to the agricultural fields and low laying area. In case of any serious illness or crisis, people take *Mokku* (vow) in front of the *Devara* and reciprocate the benevolence such as overcoming the problems. Similarly, unmarried girls, unemployed youths, farmers, auto drivers, and traditional occupation practitioners also take vow in front of the deity and propitiate her with the sacrifice of roosters and goats. It is common practice of taking *Mokku* by its clan members for having children, education, employment, marriage, protection from disease, etc.

5.0 Discussion and Analysis

Generally, folk deities represent stone idols that are in anthropomorphic form and their personal belongings (**Figure 2**). They are rarely found inside the temples; rather they are seen under the open sky below the trees, on the embankments or even in the paddy fields (Murthy and Jogarao 1989). Most of the time, a piece of stone, or a small-brick building, three or four feet high, or a small enclosure with a few rough stones at the centre represents deities.

Figure 4: Poturaju Deity Located in Open Air (Photo: Author)



Often there was no shrine at all. *Poturaju* is one such open-air sacred space worshipped by the villagers in the study village. Shrines are traditionally irregular and constructed with locally available organic material i.e., thatch grass, bamboo, and mud. But now, *Pucca* temple structures are constructed in place of temporary structures (Figure 3). The stone statue of *Reda Ankamma* is adorned with brass metal laced arches, tridents, and lamps (Figure 4). *Vastu* rules are observed in construction of the temple. The newly constructed temple of *Reda Ankamma* is testimony to this as it was inaugurated following Sanskritic rituals like *Homam* (fire ritual) in the presence of a local Brahmin priest. The followers of folk tradition are now taking *Deeksha* (initiation in the name of deity) like *Ayyappa Deeksha*, *Bhavani Deeksha*, *Anjaneya Deeksha*, and *Siva Deeksha*. They put *Mala* (rosary) for ritual identity and purity in the village.

Figure 3: Pucca Structures of Folk Deities in Study Area (Photo: Author)



Figure 2: Sanskritisation of Reda Ankamma Deity (Photo: Author)



They are voluntarily renouncing the consumption of alcohol, non-vegetarian food, and the practice of sacrifices during the *Deeksha* period. Some *Sudra* individuals becoming *Guruswami* by taking *Deeksha* for seven continuous years and then become eligible to guide the young and adolescents by officiating in those great tradition oriented *Deeksha*.

During festive occasions, strict adherence to great tradition is observed by local priests such as the offering of regular *Harati* in the morning and evening, the reading and chanting Sanskrit texts in loudspeakers, and distribution of *Prasadam*. Apart from this ritual imitation, *Sudras* go a step forward in changing their caste nomenclatures with reference to identicals in Sanskrit texts. For example, *Golla* caste nomenclature is replaced by the surname *Yadav*; *Chakali* by *Rajaka*, and *Mangali* by *Viswakarma*.

The Brahmin priests created even Sanskrit text about the *Sthalapurana* (origin tales) and *Mahatyam* (power of the godling) of the village deity *Perantamma* and other folk deities. But generally, these folk deities are not placed in higher order or at par with Hindu gods and goddesses; their place is distinctly subordinate and almost servile. They were described as village-protecting deities or deities associated with diseases (Kinsley 1987: 198). It is evident from the existing oral tradition about the chief village deity. *Perantamma* is the wife of Sarvireddy an inhabitant of nearby Kollipara village in the same district. Every day, he used to go to *Lanka*¹⁵ for grazing the cows. While grazing, once a tiger attacked Sarvireddy and killed him on the spot. After knowing the truth, *Perantamma* started

behaving peculiarly in the village and asking everyone for *Homagundam*¹⁶. But the Kollipara villagers did not taken her words seriously and as a result, she left the village and moved from village to village requesting for *Homagundam*. One day, while walking on *Karakatta* (embankment), she confronted a Brahmin who was travelling on this route to join as *Tehsildar* in Repalle. *Perantalamma* stopped him and demanded *Homagundam*, failing which he would face dire consequences. Then the Brahmin promised her to build *Homagundam* on his return journey. After accomplishing the official formalities, the Brahmin arranged a fire altar at Vallabhapuram and built a temple after the self-immolation of *Perantalamma*. Thereafter, *Perantalamma* got divinity and people started propitiating in the form of a chief village deity. The deity is so powerful that in case one does not fulfil the vow, the person immediately draws the wrath of the deity in the form of the burning of the house, severe illness, death, accident, etc. Thus, local non-Brahmin women are projected as respectful Sati, a cultural process of intruding great traditional elements in local beliefs and practices.

Apart from villagers' contributions, the Reddy caste people donated eight acres of cultivable land to *Perantalamma* to meet the expenses of regular worship. During harvest time, they keep a considerable share of the produce that is required for the preparation of *Nivedyam* for the deity. Every day villagers visit the temple and offer *Kanukalu* (cash donations) to the deity. Thus, paddy and cash so collected/ from offerings are used for the maintenance and development of the temple. Though the goddess is linked with the origin of Reddy caste, it is worshipped by all the villagers due to her pious life, sacrifice, and miracles.

Table 1. Sacred Services Offered by Castes in *Perantalamma Tirunalla*

Caste Names	Sacred Service Provided
Reddy	Custodian of Perantalamma deity
Brahmin	Sacred dip or bath (Purification of the deity with Krishna River water)
Kummari	Offer <i>Sambrani</i> throughout the procession
Rajaka	Carry the palanquin with images of village deities throughout the procession and holding <i>Kagadas</i>
Yadavas	Care takers who carry the <i>Bolli Aavu</i> (image of the sacred cow) throughout the procession during <i>Tirunalla</i>
Mangali	Offer vocal music which is popular as <i>Sannayi</i>
Mala	Erect <i>Pandiri</i> (Pandal) before <i>Tirunalla</i> day in front of the main temple
Madiga	Beating drums, i.e. <i>Tappetlu</i> in front of the temple and the procession

Source: Fieldwork, 2022

Though village and caste deities are worshipped as per local tradition, they also slowly witness the Sanskritisation process with the influence of surrounding great tradition-oriented temples. The *Devara* of the *Rajaka* caste, located in a small *Paaka* (thatched house) amidst households whose members have Vallabhapuram surname, got a facelift with financial assistance from the generous contributions, funds received from *Panchayat* or *Mandal Parishad* and offerings by devotees. In 2020, a *Pucca* building was constructed and the image of *Reda Ankamma* (*Vigraha Pratista*) installed by local Brahmin. *Homagundam* was performed by local Brahmin during the shifting of *Sila* (stone image of deity) to the present place. The original *Sila* got a facelift which resemble the mother goddess. The villagers perceive the mother goddess as a form of Kanakadurga which is located at Vijayawada. On

that auspicious occasion, only vegetarian food and *Prasadam* were distributed to the gathering. After one year, the performance of *Kolupulu* following Sanskritic tradition took place wherein *Devara* was taken on a procession to the village and underwent a sacred dip in the Krishna River. No animal sacrifice was made on that occasion. As a part of the tradition, folk artists such as *Pambalollu*, *Kommulollu*, and *Dappulollu* were invited and performed in front of the deity. The ritual continues.

According to the officiating priest/caretaker, three decades ago, *Kolupulu* was organised by inviting *Jogini*¹⁷ from other villages and arranging marriage to *Devara Pujari* (officiating priest). On every event related to marriage, they sacrificed rams, roosters, and hens and grand feasts were arranged. Traditional cultural performers were invited and *Kolupulu* was organised for three days continuously with great pomp and show. Due to the increased costs of sacrificing animals, declining traditional occupations, and prohibition of the *Jogini* system, the traditional way of performance is not observed now-a-days. With the death of elderly knowledgeable persons and the lack of interest in the younger generation, the traditional fervour of celebration disappears. The present generation is attracted to formal education. Most of the educated people have settled in urban centres. They simply observe Sanskritic traditions. Invitations of folk artists like *Pambalollu*, *Kommulollu*, and *Dappulollu* have become expensive and hence their invitation is not encouraged like earlier. Under these changed circumstances and continuous contact with Sanskritic rites, rituals, and festivals, a change in traditional rituals and practices is noticed. They invite Brahmins and perform the rituals following norms of great tradition.

Villagers stated that during Krishna River *Pushkaralu*¹⁸ in 2016, the villagers with same surname came from distant places and took their *Devara* in a grand procession along with the musical band to the river for a sacred dip. After worship, a grand feast was arranged for the clansmen with vegetarian food. Earlier they used to organise *Jatara* by sacrificing he-goats at *Devara*. Now this sacrifice has become a family affair where the families who had *Mokku* only sacrifice a rooster and consume it among themselves or relatives. Arranging feasts to fellow clansmen is not observed nowadays. Clansmen from Nidamanuru, Neerukonda, Ibrahimpatnam in Vijayawada, Silumuru, Undavalli, Royyuru, and Guntur used to visit the *Devara* to terminate their vows in the form of sacrifices and *Pongallu*, etc. Generally, sacrifices are conducted on Sunday, and on other days it is regular worship. Now-a-days, after harvest, *Pongallu* is made at *Devara* which was not present earlier. At present people regularly visit *Devara* during auspicious Telugu months like *Sravana* (July-August) and *Karthika* (October-November) *Masam* and offer worship by lightening lamps, breaking coconut, and offering *Prasadam*. The caretaker or officiating priest lit the lamp regularly at a fixed time like the regular *Harati* held at Hindu temples and play devotional songs, chantings, and verses of Sanskrit texts in the morning and evening.

The empirical data reveals that the little traditions are getting universalised. This process of culture change has been initially conceptualised as Sankritisation by eminent sociologist Prof. M.N. Srinivas during his study on Coorgs of Karnataka in 1952. The Coorgs with their close association with Hindu Raja imitated the former's customs and practices. In his study, Srinivas stated that people of middle and lower-rung of caste hierarchy have the possibility of upward social mobility through adoption of customs, practices, rituals, and the

pantheon of higher caste. The sub-castes compete with other sub-castes to claim superiority in the local caste hierarchy.

But Pocock (1957) viewed that difference between castes exists no longer in a ritual framework except on political field. Since, casteism is a threat to political unity Pocock characterise the change from Hindu castes to Indian castes i.e., change from a religious to a secular political universe. Though no such strong force operates in the study village, change has come possibly through the folk-urban continuum, modernisation process, dynamics of local power structure and economic interests. Inter-caste marriages are strictly prohibited in the village and hence *Sudras* strives to maintain distinct identity and worship of their *devaras* in grandeur manner. As a result, now the people emulate the great traditions to project their identity strongly keeping in view of political consciousness and seeking high order when compared with other sub-castes or low castes. It is evident from the practice of great tradition-oriented *Homas*, *Deekshas*, temple architecture, recitation of sanskritic texts, etc. But at the same time, those who emulate the great tradition have not abjured the cultural significance of their folk deities, consumption of meat and alcohol. Some of the *Sudra* castes are proud of their ancestry and hence worship their ancestors in the form of *Veerulu*.

Earlier, villagers worshipped the folk deities in the form of carved stones, trees, small shrines possessing the natural ingredients such as turmeric and vermilion wrapped in earthen pots or bamboo baskets as a symbol of deity. The natural objects are still present inside the folk temples along with idols and sacred objects great tradition. *Sudra* castes in the study village are observed procuring idols or stone images symbolising mother goddesses and installing in the newly constructed *Pucca* temples along with folk deities with the help of Brahmin priests in *Agamashastra* tradition. The original practice of animal sacrifice as a method of appeasement got replaced with symbolic cut in front of the temple and have adopted Sanskritised way of coconut breaking, *Harati* and distribution of vegetarian *Prasadam*. Presently, *Kolupulu* events are quite different from previous ones where animal sacrifice, consumption of alcohol, or non-vegetarian food are not adhered strictly. It is evident from installation of a Sanskritised stone image of *Reda Ankamma* in the newly constructed temple and *Homagundam Puja* along with *Annaprasadam*. The great tradition oriented initiation of the deity or temple has taken place along with little tradition-oriented performances such as *Pambalollu*, *Kommulollu*, and *Dappulollu*.

The veneration of village and caste deities following Sanscritic tradition is testimony to the Universalisation process as Reddy caste woman *Perantamma's* death is linked to the narration of self-immolation in fire-altar like *Sati* practice of great tradition. After the self-immolation, she is immortalised and worshipped as chief village deity. Since Reddy caste is dominant one, all the villagers worship *Perantamm* as chief village deity. Interestingly, Brahmin priests are officiating sacred services at Anjaneya and Janardhan Swami temples whereas the Sivalayam and Ganesh temples are looked after and officiated by a Sanskritised non-Brahmin priest who belongs to *Tammali* caste. This caste is placed on other Backward Class list who worked as village officers in pre-Independence and availed land grants from the Telangana government in lieu of salaries (Bobbili and Manohar 1998). Their traditional occupation was playing of musical instruments, vending of flowers, and rendering sacred services in Hindu temples. Now they look alike Brahmin in physical appearance, i.e., wearing

of sacred thread, *dhoti*, and following their lifestyle. In the temples of Lord Rama, Nagendrudu and Saibaba Rajaka castes offer worship and provide sacred services like sweeping, cleaning, and lightening of lamp, etc. Though *Perantalam* does not visit *Palle* or *Gudem*, it does not prevent Scheduled Caste groups to render services at *Gramadevata* temple and participate through their traditional services, i.e. erecting *Pandiri* (Pandal) and beating of *Dappu*.

Taking village and caste deities to the Krishna River for a sacred dip during *Pushkaralu*, prohibition of animal sacrifice at temple precincts, offering regular *Harati*, distribution of vegetarian *Prasadam*, and sacred performances are some of the examples of Universalisation of local ritual practices into a great tradition. Total absorption or assimilation of folk deities into Sanskritic tradition seems to be not applicable in the case of the present study. Where the original form of deity (*Sila*) is untouched and altered the outer appearance in a great traditional manner. Even the personnel belongings of the local deities like *Guruvulu*, *Kattulu*, and *Sulalu* are kept beside the sanskritised deity or hung on to the roof testifying to their penchant for upholding the little traditional elements in the context of their universalisation. The creation of Sanskrit text about the *Sthalapurana* or *Mahatyam* was also accepted by *Sudras* to extend the popularity of their deity. A symbolic marriage ritual of *Perantamma* and Sarvireddy; Gopaiah and Lakshmi Tirupatamma resembles celebration of marriage ceremony of Lord Rama and Goddess Sita observed during popular Hindu festival Ram Navmi. Addition of Lakshmi title to Tirupatamma and caste titles such as Yadava, Rajaka, Nai Brahmin, and so on also reveal their participation in universalisation process.

6.0 Conclusion

Thus, great tradition did not replace little tradition; it rather accepted little tradition in the process of universalization, thus reflecting a continuum. Not a surprise, worship of *Gramadevata*, *Devarlu*, and *Pitrulu* is still prevalent in rural villages as it is deeply rooted in the beliefs system. The universalization of the deities facilitating village cooperation through assemblage of diverse caste groups who interact freely in *Tirunalla* and *Kolupulu*. *Perantamma* is community worship though certain castes play more important role than other. It is all inclusive in nature where participation of Brahmin, Muslim, and other castes also found. The interaction of little and great traditions seems to be closer to Misra's (2006) three-dimension model wherein political consciousness of existing caste groups, pride in one's caste, competition, economic interests of sacred specialists and the attempts to gain high status in the village are some of the reasons encouraging little communities in extending their traditions to the wider public.

Notes

1. Land owning community having much respect followed by Brahmin
2. Local fair or festival celebrated in the name of the chief village deity

3. Land grant or villages are given to Brahmins especially priest for their services of religion and education in ancient Kingdoms.
4. He is an ex-untouchable man by birth but a devotee of Lord Vishnu who acquire spiritual merit by singing songs in *mangala-kaisiki_raga*
5. Woman with Madiga head and Brahmin body is worshipped as Ellamma. While Parasurama beheads her mother head, a madiga woman embraces her and both heads separated from their bodies. When father grants the request of her mother's life, the heads and bodies are misplaced and become deities such as Ellamma and Renuka.
6. A hunter boy who offers worship of Shiv Linga with roasted meat, mouthful of water and hair laden flowers. In due course of worship, he removes his eye with arrow and puts on Siva Linga to prevent bleeding.
7. Man-lion god who falls in love with a daughter of a Chenchu king and wedding take place
8. The original place of Tirupatamma where the annual fest was celebrated annually
9. He belongs to washermen community having village name as their surname and claims the hereditary rights of care taker of caste deity i.e., *Reda Ankamma*.
10. A sweet dish made of new rice, jaggery, and milk
11. Given regularly to the deity wicks or camphor are lit and offered to the deity first and then to the devotees
12. *Saare* includes an offering of a new saree, blouse piece, dhoti, towel, etc., to *Perantamma*
13. Removal of death-related pollution by cleaning the temple, deities, and other sacred objects
14. A sacred food made with new rice, jaggary, and milk. It is first offered to the deity and later distributed to all as a *prasad*.
15. Fertile lands located in the island region of Krishna River
16. A sacred fire altar for Hindus used for self-immolation by women after the death of their husband
17. A young girl married to the deity
18. River worship held once in twelve years

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