

Village deities and Bhootha worship: Village culture and interesting facts

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Some of the statues of Village deities: Sudalai, Karuppaswamy, Kuthirai Veeran, Madurai Veeran, Iyyanar

The worship of the village gods, evils, and ghosts (which one considers as the souls released by the dead) is not only the most ancient form of Indian religion but also practiced in villages around the world for centuries in one form or the other. People believe that multitude of good and bad spirits visit their village and those were the cause of all unusual events, especially diseases and disasters. Further belief is that each village have been under the protection of one spirit or the other, called the guardian deity and the souls if ignored may cause disturbances in their families. Though not scientifically proved, the general belief is that the souls released by the dead, wander in the atmosphere till they get rebirth and some of the souls become bhootha Ghana and wander in an unexplainable form. This slowly brought in the concept of worship of them as village gods, evils, and

ghosts. Probably village deities came into being at the period when people began to settle down in agricultural communities.

There is general belief that some of the wandering souls may be from their family who are dead, and respecting them would auger well for the family. The fear of displeasing dead ancestors haunts especially the tribal in the far away villages. They believe that hostile spirits, the ghosts of the dead, or breach of some taboo causes disease and malady. Therefore appeasing ancestral spirits is vital to the family. Coupled with this belief, the villagers were afraid with the acts of the tantrics and black magicians who they believe, controlled wandering souls and spirits to use them against those opposed to them. Invoking the evils by them may cause mental agony, physical and other hardships to ones' family, they believe.

Fewer amongst them however believe that the souls are Bhootha ganas sent by the gods, in difference to the prayers of the people to protect them and to guard the villages. These spirits and the guardian angels have certain fixed spheres of influence. The villager tries to live in harmony with these spirits associated with his family or village or region and he offers them periodic oblation. They in turn, the villagers believe, guard them and if need be talks to them and fore warn them on impending dangers to them. The worship of the souls or spirits differs from place to place.

During festivals, community bhajans and other mass ceremonies held, one can see strange scenes happening. Supposedly possessed by spirits and devils, some one from the crowd suddenly go into trance, talk loudly or laugh noisily and dance in ecstasy claiming himself to be so and so deity or soul. In trance they continue to dance giving guidance, exposing the misdeeds of individuals, warning about the

impending dangers etc, etc. The people on spot respect those who go into trance as they were able to expose the secret things of the persons whom they have never met, neither known to nor talked to. The basis for their belief is the fact that unless controlled by some super natural power, how those in trances could derive such energy and vast information of those they have never met before. The dance in trance continues for hours at one stretch loudly calling names, acts, impending peril etc without showing any signs of tiredness or weakness and the affected person gets back to their original form in minutes after performing the act. Such incidents are quite common in the village festivals when the beating of drums and other instruments intensifies to create a sense of fear in the minds of those assembled. The night long ceremonies conducted in a well-organized manner with all pomp and festivity in a well decorated arena that gives the appearance of a ritualistic stage. While the image of the deity and other objects of worship are on one side, the disciplined devotees sit on the other side. In parts of the three states like Karnataka, Tamilnadu, Madhya Pradesh, rituals to the worship of the village deities, souls and spirits were performed in awesome spectacle and strange fashion to safeguard the families and self.

In Karnataka a tribal sect called Gange matha, cover their faces with special masks, carry large bunch of neem leaves and dance to please the village deities like Rakthakateswari and Mariamma (not Mari Amman). The make-up of the dancers differs according to the sex of the spirit. The ritual dance is very artistic. Different colors of masks to symbolically display the characteristic features of the good and bad spirits are used. Sometimes the ritual begins by performing animal sacrifices and offering blood to appease the Bhoothas called the deity. The performer will then dance to a special music which will be spine chilling. Such practices are more prevalent in the region of

Thulu, which is predominantly tribal based. Since the place is near Kerala Coast, their art resembles with the Keralian art and folk dance Yakshagana. Kerala appears to have more tantric rituals. In the city of Mangalore too the performance of Bhootha Aradhane (worship of bhootha ganas) is prevalent. Generally such festivals are held in Jan-Dec every year.

In the ninth century, in the states of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, the interior parts of many areas being tribal, the worship of Mohinis and Yoginis, known for mysticism were highly prevalent. Others believe that the spirits, Ghosts, or demons are guardian deities for Goddess Parvathi. The Mohinis reflected sixty four moods of ones life. Some of the faces of the Mohinis were like that of the animals. The temples built in the 9th and 10th centuries for Mohinis stand testimony to the art. Even now the tantrics visit the temple in belief that the Mohinis and Yoginis stroll in the skies above the temple during mid night in invisible form and to appease them to gain tantric powers they perform certain rituals. A majority however believe that Mohinis and the Yoginis were angels and spirits sent to protect their villages. Such belief exists in some interior parts of Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka and Andhra too.

In Tamil Nadu, the village deities like Iyyanar, Kuthirai Veeran, Karuppaswamy, Kateri Amman, Pachaiyamman, Ellaiamman ,Agni Veera Badrar, Karuppayee Amman, Sangili Karuppu, Meyyandi Amman, Nagappasamy, Sannasi, Pechiamman, Sappani, Sonai, Lada Sannasi, Chappani Karuppan , Sangili Karuppan. Sinna karuppan, Idumban, Veerabadhran, Bairavan and Sudalai Madan are worshipped in different Villages as guardian deities. Based on the caste and tradition to which one belonged the deity in the villages has assumed such names. In some of the village entrances one can see big statues, some carrying

Swords, Sickle and Sparrow etc. People believe that they would guard the villages like the Kadamban who stand guard to Lord Murugan, and Muneeswaran for Amman (Female deity). It is widely believed that the Village deities, which stand guard at the entrance of the villages or in some temples in isolated places, ensures that no evils enter into the village and if and when they attempt to enter they are driven back. The pujas performed for the village deities are quite different from agamas and the one performed in the regular temples. Usually the village deities are made of simple stone platforms with stone pillars and in formless structures. They are located at the outskirts of the villages. At some places the images of the deities painted on the pillar or represented in sculpture form could be seen. The deities represented ichnographically are in threatening position and carrying weapons (club, sword, cleaver, and whip) in both hands.

In the north Indian States, the concept of village deities are mostly unknown except in parts of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa where the tribal are concentrated. Otherwise in general, Lord Shiva's Ganas and snakes, Mohinis, Yoginis, Kali, and Lord Bhairava were kept in the village entrances or in the first reachable temples in half body, only the face or simple stone that were worshipped as so and so. They believe that the said deities stand guard to their area. Apart from it they also believe that Lord Anjaneya is the guardian deity. May be this belief has been the reason to find temple for Anjaneya even as a simple stone painted in orange colour in each and every village.

In a very interesting lecture series one of the speakers spoke thus on the worship of Village deities, spirits and Bhootha Ganas:

The general belief is that a soul released from the dead, wander in different places till they get rebirth. The souls called as spirits and

ghosts wander mostly in the isolated areas and stay over the tamarind trees (reason or the preference for the tamarind tree by the ghost is not known), many of which are found at the entrances to the villages. They temporarily occupy the senses of some one who pass through the area and the spirit possessed person behaves erratically expressing the features of the spirits. When such instances increased due to many reasons borne out of fear, the villagers began to treat such places as that of the guardian deities, erected their statues based on those narrated by the possessed persons and offered periodic oblation with the belief that in turn they may protect the villages. In fact neither puranas nor archeological evidences suggest the origin of the village deities. Every bit of stories that we hear on the Ghosts, spirits and Village deities are from the folk tales orally carried over by generations. The village deities in the form of a huge, fierce statue or as a simple stone mostly represented the images some one or the other saw in their dreams.

In the early periods of civilization, whenever the natural disasters like famine, drought, and epidemics occurred, it was quite common that some one or the others in the villages had helped the people in one way, stood for justice, valiantly fought for justice, or lost their life for the cause of justice. They may have become heroes. Later the people considered all the places visited by those heroes, the culverts on which they had rested etc to be sacred places and started worshipping them at those places. In the festivals held in the villages, the heroic acts dominated the folk songs sung tales told there. The villagers sang the ballad that narrated the birth of that hero, his descent into the land, heroic deeds, his travels and sphere of influence etc. The narrated the events saying 'so and so rode the horse thus', 'swung the sword thus' and 'jumped to drive away and kill the enemy thus' etc by appropriate gestures. In olden days, when

people traveled from one village to another, and those who relaxed near those culverts prayed to the culverts of heroes for safe journey. As the time passed those heroes became semi god and slowly these milestones attained the position of village gods and goddesses.

One of the reasons for the emergence of semi gods was also due to the restrictions imposed to the non Brahmins in entering the temples. The divisions in the society like lower and outcaste started surfacing. Only Brahmins performed rituals and certain non Brahmin upper caste allowed entry into the temples. The acts of invoking evil spirits to disturb the families in the form of invoking black magic were prevalent on large scale to scare the lower caste and untouchables and outbreaks of epidemics attributed to the entry of outcaste in certain areas in the villages. All such acts left deep resentment into the minds of people, which slowly pushed them to seek alternative places worship. Thus the village heroes became to be viewed semi gods, else where will the oppressed go and vent their feelings? Slowly the village deities like Kathavarayan, Sooli, Rakthakateri, Mariamma, Peyandi, Kuthirai veeran etc to replace the temple devis surfaced. Their statues in the form of clay dolls, terracotta, and plain stones with some kinds of engraved images were erected and worshipped.

Why most of the Village deities were that of female gender is another interesting point to note. It may be because that a female can only conceive and deliver babies and likewise the seeds, which produced food grains, were viewed as female. Since female feel shy to deliver baby before male, the land where the process of food grain production took place was similar to delivering a child and bringing them up and needed to be guarded by a female. Therefore the deities that guarded the fields' were female in gender. Then how did the deities guarding the lands became Bhoothas? Simple! The clay dolls, mud idols, or the

one made with bamboos gave awesome and fearsome look to drive away the birds and animals, and hence called Bhoothas.

As per a orally carried folk tale through generations, there lived a local hero called Madurai Veeran, in the seventeenth century. He was very compassionate and helpful to people and a soldier in the army of the King. The King who doubted his integrity on account of false news killed him. Though a King killed him in deceptive manner, his soul continued to wander in his home town, sitting on a horse and protected the village. Madurai Veeran drove away the evils that tried to enter the place. Therefore people believed that worshipping him will help the villages remain free from evils. "



Some of the Village Gods, angels and spirits

End note: The contents of this article are the expressed views of villagers, guides and lectures in seminars. Photos gathered from different sources. In case some one gets further information I shall be glad and thankful if they mail me the content to nri1945@gmail.com to enable me update the article.