

## HILL-WORSHIP AS A RAIN MAKING CEREMONY: A CASE STUDY IN AKEPADU VILLAGE OF ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Many human societies across the globe perceive natural phenomena, as the will of the supernatural beings. The floods, epidemics, droughts, etc., are believed to be unleashed by the ancestral spirits or other celestial beings, as negative responses for inappropriate human activities towards those celestial beings. Human beings have developed religious rituals to propitiate those supernatural beings, in order to fulfil human needs. There are many societies across world, which perform rain making rituals to pacify and implore the supernatural beings for getting rain. The present paper describes the hill worshipping process by rural communities in Akepadu village of Kadapa district in Andhra Pradesh, India, as a rain making ceremony during severe drought period. Qualitative approach is employed for collection and analysis of data. The data are analysed by following symbolic and interpretative approach. This paper focuses on describing the whole process of hill worshipping ceremony and to elicit the meanings attributed by the participant community to the ritual activities. The hill worshipping ceremony encompasses the series of activities associated with different actors, and each minute activity has symbolic meaning. The community strongly believes that hill worship brings rain.*

**Key Words:** ancestral spirits, communal rituals, drought, hill worship, rainmaking, symbolic interaction.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Almost all human societies, irrespective of their status on evolutionary stage, believe that there are other beings (other than human) and forces like human beings with kinds, will, personalities, etc., and they will control the human activities. ‘Those beings’ and relations of human beings with them became the central part of the human socio-cultural systems. The relationship between human beings and ‘those beings’ has been referred to as religion (Eller, 2007). Guthrie (as cited in Eller, *ibid*) argues that humans attribute the human properties to the natural phenomena. He says people tend to attribute human feelings and motives to the living and non-living, non-human

things. For instance people treat the thunder as voice of gods; clouds are the spirits of ancestors, etc., across various cultures.

The ancient human societies perceived every natural phenomenon like floods, droughts, epidemics as the manifestations of the will of the super natural beings. Preuss and Muller (as cited in Majumdar&Madan, 2003,p.134) developed the concept of animatism, according to which the primitive societies believed that special mystical forces exist in every non-human inanimate object and these forces influence the humans, therefore they must be worshipped. Muller argues human mind invests life and power in lifeless things.

Many human societies believed that these beings or forces must be propitiated lest they should penalise the human beings by bringing droughts, floods, and other hazards. The form of religion as defined by Majumdar and Madan (2003) is “the human response to the apprehensions of something, or power, which is supernatural and suprasensory. It is the expression of the manner, and type, of adjustment effected by a people with their conception of the supernatural”(p.130).

Many cultural groups across the globe still treat the natural phenomena as the will of the God or gods or ancestral spirits. Many ethnographic studies show how different societies give meanings to the natural phenomena. According to Reddy (2010) the Chenchu (a hunting and gathering tribe in South India) perceives the drought as the result of the human impertinent behaviour. Sacrilegging the sacred places, adultery, despising the elders are treated as causes of drought among the Chenchus. Haruna (n.d.) stated that Gurunta and Bubbure people of Alkaleri local Government Area, Bauchi state of Nigeria, believe that rain comes from Providence and he gives it at will. If rain fails, it is sign of God’s angry. The chief priest of Gurunta of Nigeria ask the community members to purge their sin committed against one another, environment and God since drought is considered as the result of sin. Since droughts and floods are considered as manifestations of the gods or ancestral spirits, the rituals to please those beings are also natural in many human societies. There are many ethnographic studies and general reports about rainmaking rituals (Parkman, 1993; Haland, 2001; Jarus, 2013; Ryukyu, 2014; Haruna, n.d.; Native net, 2017). The rain-making rituals have been in practice since, long back. Haland (2001)

drew similarities in rain-making rituals between the ancient and modern times in Greece. Native net (2017) reported that rain dance is most common among the Native Americans in South west of America during long drought in summer. WATTS (1983) observed that “rain rituals, rites and prayers, were common among Muslims (Hausa). Among Islamic communities (Hausa) a preferred rite was a “water chase” *farautaruwa*, exclusively effected by married women and seen as an act of ritual purification in which drought was clearly endowed with a moral etymology” (as cited in Haruna, n.d.,p. 236). Jarus (2013) reported the significance of rain making ceremony to the agricultural communities of South Africa inhabiting in areas near Botswana and Zimbabwe. Evidences of Practicing Rainmaking rituals are found in Japan also. Ryukyu (2014) reported that rain making ritual was held on 18<sup>th</sup> Novemeber, 2014 on Kohoma island in which thunder stone worshipped by *Kantsukas* (women priests) in the form of singing to invoke rain. It is reported that *Gandourastones* are used in rain-making ritual since early times on the island. The sound made by these stones resembles the thunder and it brings rain.

The rainmaking rituals are deep rooted cultural practices in India. The Hindu sacred scriptures also have some evidences of some great kings conducting *yagna* (altar with sacred fire with oblation of ghee). Jayaram (2017) states that Vedic people considered rain as gift of gods. Humans offer sacrifice to the gods by performing *yagna* and in reciprocity, gods give rain to people as blessings. Rain descends from sky to impregnate the earth and facilitate renewal of life, cultivation of lands, etc.

There are many folkrituals that are practiced in rural areas in India for seeking rain. Each of these traditions is specific to the given local areas. Singh (2008) reported about the ritual performed by people in Adilabad district of Andhra Pradesh (present Telangana) state, to appease *varuna* (rain god). The statues of *Gramadevathas* (village deities) like Pochavva, Yallavva, and Hanuman were given bath symbolising that gods are satisfied and ask the rain god to shower on people. He described another ritual known as “*Kappa talli*” in which the toad is tied to the long wooden pole covered by *neem* leaves. Two men shoulder the pole and visit every household in the village. The housemates pour water on kappa (toad) and give uncooked rice to them. At the end, the frog is decorated and left free in the water. The rice is cooked and consumed communally. Robinson

(2014) depicted the ritual of frog wedding performed by women folk in Assam, imploring the rain god during drought.

The present study describes the hill worship ceremony that has been performed annually by rural community in Akepadu village in Kadapa district of Andhra Pradesh state, to seek rain. The emphasis has been placed on the symbolic meanings attached to every miniscule activity in the ritual, by the participant community in the ritual.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1. Research Design**

The study employed descriptive approach, as the objective of the study is to understand the entire process of hill worshipping ceremony, the meanings attributed by the participating community to the various cultural traits associated with the ritual. Symbolic and interpretative approaches are used in drawing interpretations from emic perspectives.

### **2.2. Area of the Study**

The current study has been conducted in Akepadu village of Kadapa district of Rayalaseema region in Andhra Pradesh state in India. Akepadu is the major village consisting of fourteen small hamlets. This village has been selected since this is the only place in the district, where the sacred hill is worshipped in seeking the rain.

### **2.3. Data Collection**

Data were collected in August 2015. The source of data were members of the participant community. The key informants were purposively selected from the active participants (actors) and spectators based on their experiences, knowledge about the ritual and their willingness to give information.

The participant observation and narrative interview were the principal techniques of data collection. The researcher participated in the ritual like procession around the hill, worshipping small stone slabs during procession, breaking coconuts, following the sacred lamp carrier to the

peak of the hill, etc. The in-depth interviews were conducted with the key informants. Interview was instrumental to understand the feelings, perceptions of the subject community and the meanings attributed by the community to the various rituals in the whole programme.

#### **2.4. Data Analysis**

The data were analysed qualitatively. Narrative analysis has taken place by using symbolic and interpretative approach. “This orientation allows researchers to treat social action and human activity as *text*. In other words, human action can be seen as a collection of symbols expressing layers of meaning” (Berg, 1989, p. 239). Comparisons are made between some of the rituals of current study with rainmaking rituals from other parts of the world.

### **3. THE RITUAL PROCESS AND SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION**

The hill worshipping ritual in the study area, is known as *Rajulaiah Pongupalu*, the literal meaning of this term is boiling the milk up to the point of overflowing and offering to the spirit of *Rajulaiah*- a deified king - as an oblation and seeking his blessings which manifest as rain. The hill worship takes place in the month of *Sravanam* (a month in Telugu calendar year equivalent to August of Gregorian calendar). Generally Rayalaseema<sup>1</sup> region in which study area is located receives very less rainfall and frequently experiences shortage of water during the month of August.

The ritual involves all castes<sup>2</sup> in the village. There are various activities in the ceremony carried out by different actors based on their traditional occupation of the caste. The following table will give details about the activities, actors and the respective caste associated with the activities.

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<sup>1</sup>It is a chronic drought prone region consisting of four districts including Kadapa, Chittore, Anantapur and Kurnool of Andhra Pradesh state.

<sup>2</sup>It is an endogamous, occupational group in Indian social system.

**Table 1 Activities and the associated traditional castes**

No	Activity	Associated caste
1	Collection of money	Golla /Yadav(shepherd)
2	Horn blowing	Madiga
3	Drum beating (music)	Madiga
4	Water carrying for cleaning deities	Yanadi
5	Instrumental music	Mangali (barber and traditional folk musicians)
6	Coconut breaking at slabs	Reddy, Raju, Baliya, etc. (farming castes )
7	Priestly activities (cleaning and decorating main idols, breaking coconuts, offering sacred rice, etc.	Tammela(priests in Lord Shiva temples)
8	Oil providers to sacred light	Gandla ( traditional oil millers)
9	Light carriers to peak of the hill	Tammella
10	Distributing coconuts	Reddy and Raju
11	Overseeing all the ritual activities	Reddy

### 3.1. Decision Making for Conducting Ritual

The study area generally experiences erratic rainfall in early June. The *rabi* season gets started with the onset of southwest monsoon and farmers engage themselves in land preparation activities such as tilling, levelling, etc. Farmers wait for rainfall till August. If rainfall is not witnessed, farmers sense the forthcoming of drought and exhibit apprehensions.

The study area experienced severe drought during June, July and August, 2015. People and livestock in the study area experienced an acute shortage of drinking water due to lack of rainfall. Most of the existing bore-wells dried up and many farmers went for new bore wells depth up to even 1000 feet. Some individuals were so desperate. For instance, Chenchaiyah, one of the respondents said *eaasamvatssaramrenduekaraluthotapurthigaendipoyindi. 50 jeevaaluthakkuvadarakuammivesanu, etlabrathakalotheliyadamledu* (the literal meaning of this sentence is, this year two acres of banana crop dried up, and I sold 50 sheep at throwaway price, I don't know how to live). Another farmer Janardhana Reddy expressed "two of my bore wells

dried up and I got another two new bore wells dug up to 700 and 800 feet respectively, but both were unsuccessful. I lost Rs12000/- for bore wells. My whole effort and money went in vain. And I gave up 5 acres of banana crop. No way to survive”.

Since human beings perceive the natural phenomena as the dictates of the spirits/gods, they suspect the will of the ancestral spirits / god(s) for droughts and floods. Haland (2001) revealed that Greeks had beliefs that humans had to serve the gods for the sake of produce of the earth, their horses and sheep. The Greeks try to influence supernatural powers to ensure the rain, so that their crops may flourish.

Worshipping hill gods is not uncommon across the communities in different parts of the world. Jisheng (2001) writes that worshipping the mountain gods was one the most important form of nature worshipping among ancient Tibetans and they deify mountains that are believed to act as benefactors of human kind.

In this way, the people of the study area perceived *Rajukonda* as the sacred hill with specific sacred places. In Akepadu, the community sensed that the ancestral god *Rajulaiah* is unhappy and his wrath is manifested as drought, and they decide to perform the hill worship ritual.

The places, generally, where the religious rituals are celebrated should be associated with sacredness that is associated due to some specific features of the place. For instance, Haruna(n.d.) illustrated that Guruntam people perform the prayers for rain under the *baobab* tree because they believe it is sacred since the spirits of ancestors abode in *baobab* tree and it is one of the trees which can stand all kinds of harsh weather conditions.

For Akepadu people *Rajukonda* is sacred because it has two specific natural features. There is one small perennial spring which never dries up even in severe droughts and there is one big cave which is believed to be the abode of *akkadevatalu* (seven-sister deities) who protect the believers and worshippers of them.

In the month of August the village elders after having discussed among themselves have decided to perform hill worshipping ritual and assigned the traditional facilitator to collect contributions from the villagers to meet all the expenditures for conducting ritual.

### **3.2. Public Announcement**

The village elder-men ordered the customary harbinger to announce the date of ritual, in all the 14 hamlets of the village. The announcer use *kommu* (a long and curved brass horn) in each hamlet to attract the public attention and announce the decision of village elders to conduct ritual, and the date of celebration. Generally the announcement takes place on Sunday and the ritual will be conducted on the next Sunday with a seven day gap between.

### **3.3. Calling People to the Hill**

On the day of ritual, calling alarm is given to the community by the band of traditional magicians playing *dappu* (traditional drums made of animal hide) and *kommuat* at 12.00 p.m., starting from Naramrajupalli (one of the hamlets) and proceeds through other hamlets finally reaching to Kattakindapallihamlet where the hill is located, at 4.00p.m. People begin reaching the hill by 4.30 p.m. with their *pongupalu*.

### **3.4. Preparation for Sacred *Pongupalu***

*Pongupalu* is a complex term which encompasses multiple things such as sacred rice, turmeric, saffron, camphor, resin, coconut, incense sticks, etc., and multiple activities like sacrificing the items, preparation of sacred food, offering oblation to deity, distribution of food to other individuals, etc. The sacred food is prepared exclusively by women.

Preparations for *pongupalu* begins around 11.00 a.m. in each household. The woman in the house who is expected to carry *pongupalu* should take bath before starting preparations. The rice is soaked and kept aside as sacred. The selected woman from each household carries all the ingredients mentioned above, in a basket, circumscribed by a thread tied with a dried turmeric tuber. Women from “upper caste” households from all settlements carry *pongupalu* to the hill. But the women from *Raju* caste do not bring *pongupalu* by claiming that *Rajulaiah* belongs to

their caste and they are not expected to do so. However members from all castes gather to witness the ritual. Women from each hamlet start cooking sacred food at one place together.

This type of carrying food and other items for conducting ritual can be found in other cultures as well. Haruna (n.d.) described that, in Gurunta and Bubbure communities, the leaders of all clans along with their people visit the priest (rain maker) and carry all sorts of food accompanied by drum beating and blowing horns.

### **3.5. Procession Around Hill**

No sooner than the big crowd gathers by the hill side, generally at 4.30 p.m., the idols of *Rajulaiah* and his mother are washed, smeared with turmeric and saffron, and decorated with new cloths, by the priest. The ritual of circumvolution around hill takes place in clock direction setting on from the statue of *Rajulaiah*. The procession starts from eastern side of the hill. *Gramapeddalu* (village leaders) launch the processing by breaking coconut at the statue. The crowd in the procession is led by musical band.

On this procession, one hundred and one places are selected and at each place one stone slab, representing as deity, is erected and it is cleansed with one potful of water and decorated with turmeric and saffron. The elder individuals offer oblation to the deities by breaking and offering coconuts. This process is continued all through the way. The head of the shepherd community, officiates this procession. At each place different individuals perform the ritual of breaking of coconut to the defied stone slabs. No individual is supposed (not allowed) to repeat it next time at next place.

Stones are not simply treated as stones by the participants in hill worshipping ritual, but they are symbolically representing the deities who are benevolent to the human beings and animals. Satisfying these deities is considered to bring rain. Haland (2001) revealed that the Greeks during their rain making ritual washed muddy *Kalogeros* so that it will rain during summer. Haruna (n.d.) demonstrated that even Guruntum and Bubbure people have strong beliefs that the rock is a source of water and even rain. The rock which is associated with rain/water is also an

item of worship and partyer for rainmaking among the Bura community in Borno state of Nigeria. Stones are symbolised for extra power which bring rain (Haruna, n.d.)

The procession around hill will be treated as completed when the participating members reach the starting point and offer the coconut to the statue of mother of the deified king. The entire procession takes two hours and it will be completed at 6.30 p.m.. Meanwhile all the women folk finish cooking the sacred food.

### **3.6. Oblation Ceremony**

Once the procession around the hill is completed, the facilitator announces it to the public gathering loudly, followed by his questions to the women folk about whether all people have completed the preparation of sacred food or not?. If he is ascertained that food preparation is completed at every hearth, he orders the harbinger to blow the horn loudly. The horn blow is an indication that the ritual of oblation to deities is opened. All women folk proceed to the statues and submit their individual offering comprising sweet sacred food, coconut, flowers, camphor, etc. The priest officiates the offerings in a sequential order. He breaks the coconuts offered by each individual and gives one part of it back and retains the other. He collects some portion of the sacred food from devotees. Having finished offerings, the ritual of lightening the sacred lamp will follow.

### **3.7. Dibbem Ceremony**

*Dibbem* is the colloquial form of *deepam* (sacred lamp). The light is symbol of brightness and purity. This *dibbem* is made of a big new earthen pot filled with dried cow dung cakes, and sesame oil. The wick of the lamp is made of the strands of white cloth intertwined. The pot, oil and the cloth-wick are provided by the members belonging to *kummri* (traditional potter), *gandla* (traditional oil miller) and *chakali* (washer-man) caste respectively. *Dibbem* is placed in front of the statues of the deities. The village traditional head, hailing from Reddy caste (the dominant agricultural caste) lights the lamp and offers the coconut by breaking it in front of the *dibbem*. Lighting lamp is associated with big music and chanting of words like *Govinda - Govinda* (name of Lord Sri Krishna) loudly. The musical sounds and community chants shrill the participants in ceremony.

The lamp carrier is a specified and abled male member selected from Tammala caste. He must have observed fasting for complete day. The sacred lamp is placed on the head of the carrier, and as many hands as possible touch the lamp as blessing the carrier and seeking blessings from *Rajulaiah* and his mother. The *dibbem* carrier climbs the hill fast, followed by the crowd of youth and adolescents. The *dibbem* is placed on the peak of the hill, where a big circular stone platform is built with two metres height and one metre radius. The *debbem* is properly placed on platform and coconut is broken into two halves by the *debbem* carrier and pay obeisance to the deities. Gradually the crowd descends the hill.

The *dibbem* is believed as a sacred lamp which has some inherent mystical power to burn continuously for hours together. It should not be put off immediately after it is placed on peak of the hill. It will burn till midnight. If the light is off while being carried to the peak or before the crowd disperses, it is believed that the ritual process was not properly carried out, and it is considered as a symbol of discontent of *Rajulaiah* and it is an abomination to the entire village community. The informants said that in such cases, the entire ritual has to be performed again by observing every minute event perfectly; otherwise *Rajulaiah* perceives it as a disgrace for him and causes severe hazards.

This *dibbem* ceremony can be seen as animative magic where in the symbolic imitation of an activity is expected to produce the real result. The respondents from participant community believe that the smoke goes up from the peak of the hill and forms into clouds and causes showers. Some other informants explained the smoke is a medium which carries the message to *Rajulaiah* about gloomy life of the people in the form of black clouds. Further some other informants say that the fire keeping on hill is a symbol to burn all the sins committed by the community members and it is a medium between the people and *Rajulaiah*.

Similarities can be drawn between *Dibbem* ceremony and the rainmaking ceremonies in other parts of the world. Parkman (1993) says a number of California rain makers perform the ritual to make clouds, for example, by burning incenses. Dubois (as cited in Parkman, 1993) states that

the Wintu burned the splinters of a tree that had been hit by lightning, and Clifford and Kreober(as cited in Parkman, 1993) explained how Pompo produced clouds by throwing ashes into air,making by burning incenses, or burning the splinters of a tree that had been hit by lightning.

Keeping sacred fire on top of the hill can be witnessed from other cultures as well. Shimon Brunton (as cited in Jarus, 2013) states that, the rainmaking ritual is conducted on the top of the Ratho Kroonkop hill, by the Shamans belonging to San (an indigenous hunting and gathering group). The farmers of these regions utilise the services of shamans to conduct the ritual. The shamans or religious leaders ascend the hill and lit the sacred fire to offer animals to the ancestral spirits to pacify them and seeking rain from them. Brunton claims that this must have originated centuries ago.

### **3.8. Distribution of Sacred Offerings and Dispersion of Gathering**

After clambering down of the light carrier from hill, the village traditional leader orders the facilitator to distribute the collected sacred food to the children and other people. The distributed food is eaten together. The collected coconut halves are distributed to the service providing people like traditional musicians, drum beaters, water carriers, harbingers, fund raisers, priests and *dibbem* carrier. After distribution, the horn is blown loudly to indicate that the ceremony is completed and the gathering can be dispersed.

The women carry the sacred food to their respective homes and eat with other family members. The community believes that the food is blessed by *Rajulaiah* and there will be sufficient food to all the members of the community in the coming year.

The same day the participants witnessed the rainfall. Even the researcher witnessed that there was a light rain soon after finishing the ritual. This is interpreted by the participants as prayers have reached *Rajulaiah* and he had shown compassion and given rains.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Attributing supernatural properties to the natural phenomena is not uncommon across various cultures over time and space. Since human beings inclined to ascribe their own feelings, thoughts, and activities to supernatural beings, which are believed to act upon, and influence the human beings, the ritual like rainmaking, hill worshipping, etc., to appease the supernatural beings, have been in vogue, both in ancient and modern times in many parts of the world. The religious rituals rather than being perceived as colourful, fascinating activities need to be understood in their functional and cognitive values to the respective society. The social scientists particularly anthropologists, have to focus on how the given ritual is meaningful to the community members and how it fulfills their psychological and sociological needs. Eller (2007) expressed the view of the “functionalist” theory of Bronislaw Malinowski that “religious beliefs and institutions exist and function to fill the needs of individual humans, primarily psychological needs”. p.16)

If we critically evaluate the purpose of the ritual of hill worship in Akepaduarea, it is understood that the ritual will provide psychological strength to the community to cope up the hardships that emerge during the time of drought, because they believe that whatever they experience, it is the determination and volition of the supernatural being (*Rajulaiah*), and they can overcome these hardships by performing ritual.

It can be concluded that, though there are some social changes due to various factors like modernization, urbanization, etc., human beings will continue to perform these types of rituals as long as they connote supernatural characteristics to the natural and secular things and try to pacify those supernatural beings for obtaining human benefits.

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