



A STUDY ON BLACKSMITHS OF NORTHERN TELANGANA AND THEIR ANNUAL FESTIVAL: 'MAMMAYEE'

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to record the presence, lives and working practices of rural blacksmiths and descendants of iron smelters; and to study and document the Mammayee festival, which is the traditional annual rejuvenation festival of the blacksmith community of the region dedicated to their goddess, Mammayee. The data gathered during the field survey represents a valuable ethno-archaeological tool to study the effect of social organization, culture and tradition of the rural blacksmiths of the Telangana region and understand their approach to metals.

Collecting ethnographic data in the field involved interviewing blacksmiths in their residences or work-spaces; Non-blacksmiths, including village elders, toddy tappers, owners of land containing slag or crucible heaps were also interviewed to gather knowledge or memory of past smelting as well as smithing.

Topics asked include the blacksmithing tradition of his family and the village; memory about past smelting and smithing; kinds of tools produced or repaired; target market and clients of the manufactured products; remuneration system; source of raw materials; apprenticeship process and the future of traditional blacksmithing from their perspective.

The detailed study of the annual festival of the blacksmiths was conducted by visiting the temples of their goddess Mammayee on the first day of the festival and interviewing blacksmiths about the preparation and ritual performances. The rituals were observed in four villages (Kalvala, Uploor, Ibrahimpatnam and Konasamudram).

1. INTRODUCTION

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2. METHODS

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The final ethnographic archive consists of five principal datasets—interview transcripts, video records, a manufactured iron tool, festival records and image archive.

3. THE VISWABRAHMIN IDENTITY AND THE GENEALOGIES

Consistent with most of South India (Ramaswamy, 2004, Brouwer, 1995a, 1995b Srinivasan, 1993), the iron-working communities in northern Telangana are grouped under the Viswabrahmin/Viswakarma caste, along with four other traditional groups of craft specialists—the carpenter, gold- and silversmith, bronze-smith and the sculptor. Superficially the Viswabrahmin caste identity appears to be homogenous and universally accepted throughout peninsular India. However, the research revealed that underneath this apparent homogeneity exists highly hierarchized groups of craft specialists, locked in a power struggle with other for symbolic dominance within the Viswakarma/Viswabrahmin fold.



Many of the Kammari interlocutors stated the ideological understanding that all the five craft communities were equal, like brothers. However, as our acquaintance grew, many of them made a slight, but significant alteration in the origin myth. This altered narrative suggested that Mano(Kammari) was the firstborn of the union between Viswakarma and Gayathri Maata. It was only after Mano was given the knowledge of iron-working by his divine father that he could prepare the tools for the wadla to cut down the trees and work with wood. The Maya (wadla), was then given

the skill of carpentry to make the plough for the ploughshare prepared by Mano. Finally, Mano and Maya together could combine their skills to manufacture all the tools in the world, including those needed by their brothers Twashtha, Shilpi and Vishwajnya, the first bronze-smith, sculptor and gold-/silversmith. All kammari, born from the progeny of Mano, the first born of Viswakarma, should therefore be considered the senior craftsmen among the five.

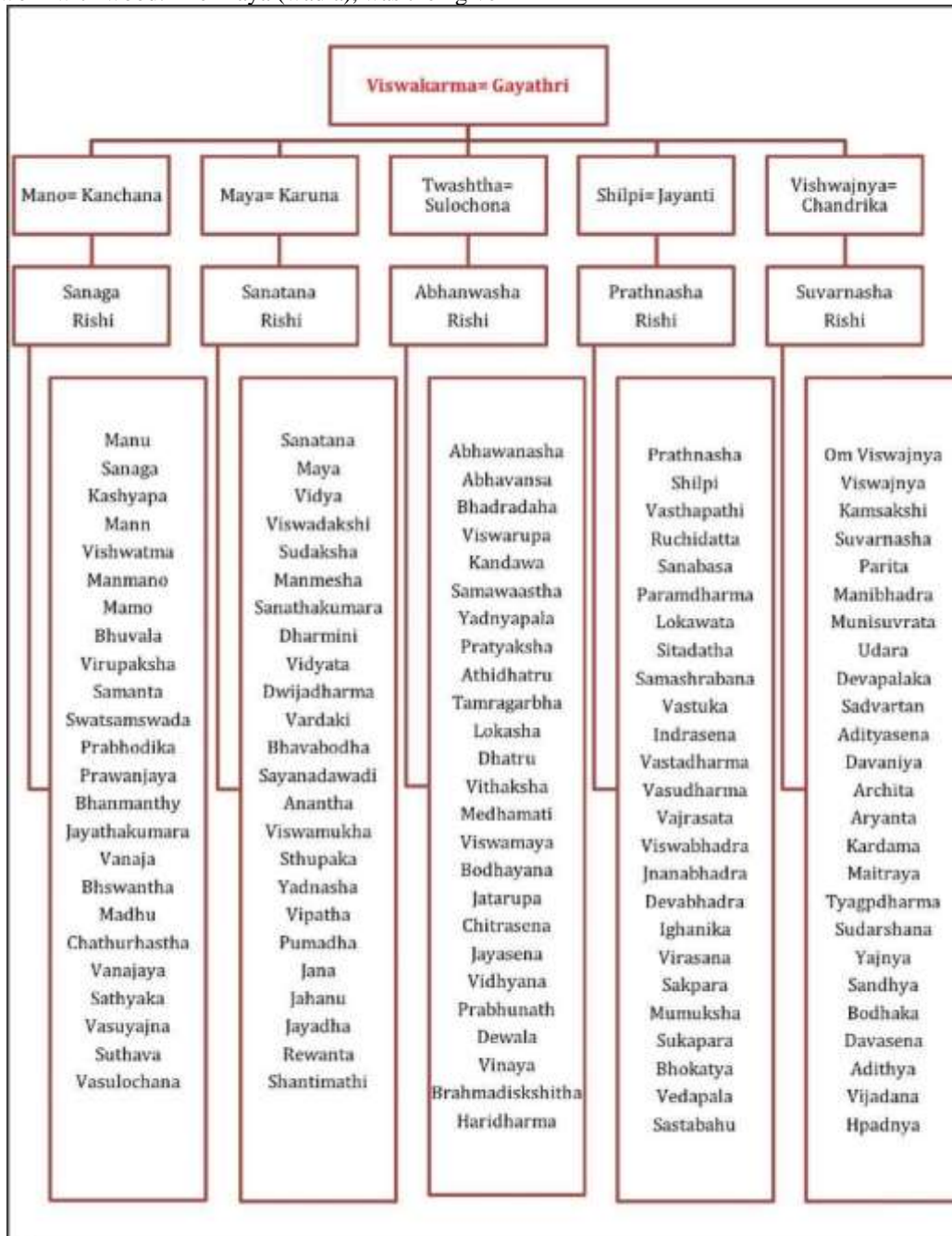


Figure 6.2 Genealogy of the Viswabrahmins of South India (prepared by T.Neogi based on a format in telugu supplied by Viswabrahmin Sangham of Jagitial)



In terms of performing the Viswabrahmin identity through ritual behaviours, a high level of adherence among the members of these five groups [Panchakulasi] was noticed. The male members of all five craft groups wear the sacred thread, a symbol of ritual purity and a challenge towards the sacerdotal authority of the Brahmins. The members also worship the cult of Veera Brahmendra Swamy, a 17th century saint who is considered to be an embodiment of the God Viswakarma.

Collecting the genealogies of iron-smelter families constituted a major part of ethnographic fieldwork. Iron-smelters were considered to belong to a low caste on the fringes of the rural hierarchy of Telangana. With the decline in smelting, the iron-smelters and their descendants have become regular village blacksmiths (Kammari), shedding their smelter identity and with it their identity term (Mudda Kammari). Therefore, family genealogies were the only entry point through which more Mudda Kammari families could be identified in the region. A total of 15 family genealogies were collected.

4. KAMMARI

Kammari is a generic term for blacksmith in Telugu and many other Indian languages. However, to the Telangana blacksmiths, the term Kammari has a far deeper social meaning attached to it. As a stand-alone term, Kammari connotes the families of rural blacksmiths who traditionally forged agricultural implements for the peasant families of their village. The farmer families that they served for generations pay them a share of their harvest, the amount of which is fixed by age-old cultural conventions for each village. It is crucial for the Kammari to function efficiently in this traditional prostration system of exchange. The Kammari are required to abstain from producing for the village or urban markets. Cash transactions are perceived as unclean and are avoided when possible.

5. MUDDA KAMMARI

Various terms are prefixed with Kammari to distinguish between groups of iron-workers involved in other kinds of specialized production and economic networks. Hence, the iron-smelters are known as Mudda Kammari. The prefix Mudda literally means lump, and possibly indicated the iron-bloom obtained after smelting the iron ore. Their work is perceived as unclean by the Kammari, since they worked in the heat to smelt iron from "dirt" and sold the bloom for money to the Sahukar or middle-men. A similar account coming from north Karnataka (then in Hyderabad State) can be identified in Thurston and Rangachari's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1975[1907]:Vol III). In this ethnographic encyclopedia of South Indian communities, Thurston and Rangachari recorded a group of iron-smelters in the Bellary region of northern Karnataka, who were known as Baita Kammari. Baita literally means "outsider", and in this account Thurston and Rangachari noted:

"The term Baita Kammara, meaning outside blacksmiths, is applied to Kamsala [the group of five crafts] blacksmiths who

occupy a lowly position and work in the open air outside the village.

Apart from the proximity to the archaeological evidence of iron-smelting, the Mudda Kammari communities' association with the craft and their distinct identity as a community separate from the Kammari can be traced by studying their genealogies.

6. SHISHA KAMMARI

The Shisha Kammari are a group of itinerant tribal blacksmiths who forge implements on a piecework basis and work within the primarily urban cash economy. They are abhorred by the Kammari for this reason. The Shisha Kammari are not considered to be a part of the Viswabrahmin community.

7. OTHER IRON-WORKING GROUPS

The Colonial census data from the early 20th century suggests that there were other groups of specialist iron-workers who were closely involved with the cash-market economy—very distinct from the domain of the Kammari. Apart from the Kammaris, who are recorded as "plough and other agricultural implements maker", the Hyderabad State Census of 1901 records other specialist groups of blacksmiths including knife makers, knife grinders, gunsmiths, sword-smiths and iron hardware manufacturers (Khan, 1903). These terms, which might well have existed, has vanished with the decline in these specialized branches of blacksmithing. Use of the term Kammari is therefore loaded with meanings; social, cultural and economic. Different terms prefixed with Kammari identify a specialized branch of the craft and the nature of the economic network in which the specialist operates. The Kammari use these terms to create categories and to define hierarchical power-relations among different iron-working groups.

8. RITUAL PURITY OF THE KAMMARI.

The members of the Kanchari and Ausala communities tend to challenge the Kammari claim to superiority and prestige within the Viswabrahmin caste by pointing out that the Kammari's consumption of meat and alcohol, which compromise their ritual purity.

A majority of the priests and Viswabrahmin ritual specialists come from the Kanchari and Ausala communities, where their ritual purity and access to prestige and power within the caste is reinforced by a strictly vegetarian diet and abstinence from alcohol. The Kammari counter this claim by narrating a story in which they were the victims of some deceitful Brahmins.

THE STORY TAKES PLACE IN THE 12TH CENTURY, DURING THE CHALUKYA PERIOD IN COASTAL ANDHRA.

The Kammari were living as good Brahmins who were well versed in all the five Vedas. Their skill as workers of iron was also thriving. Their material and intellectual prosperity had



incurred the jealousy of the Go-Brahmins (cow worshipping Brahmins) of the region. To get rid of the Kammari, the Go-Brahmins invited them to a feast where they were fed non-vegetarian food under the guise of a vegetarian meal. They were also served alcohol instead of water and finally, when they were drunk, they seduced the Kammari with beautiful prostitutes. The God Viswakarma was extremely unhappy with the conduct of the Kammari, and cursed them by taking away all of their wisdom and wealth. When the Kammari begged for forgiveness from Viswakarma, they were instructed to go to the Kakatiya kingdom (in Telangana) and forge the tools required by the farmers and other craftsmen in recompense for their crime. This was how the once illustrious Brahmins became the poor and lowly Kammari of today, addicted to alcohol and a non-vegetarian diet.

9. Tensions between Kammari and Kanchari & Ausala Communities

This ideological tension between the Kammari and the Kanchari and Ausala communities is reinforced by two interconnected factors—the location of these communities on the physical space of northern Telangana; and their involvement in discrete economic networks.

The farmers of rural Telangana are the primary clients of the Kammari and the Wadla communities. The blacksmiths and carpenters forge and repair agricultural tools for the farmers in each village. After each harvest, the farmers pay for these services with a traditionally determined amount of grain. The Kammari and Wadla generally work within this prostration arrangement and despise the cash economy. This traditional prostration arrangement ensures the presence of Kammari and Wadla families in almost every village of the study area, well distributed in the landscape.

Although the Kammari and Wadla were considered important members of the village community in northern Telangana with significant access to power and agrarian resources, the recent introduction of tractors and other agricultural machines has caused massive displacement in the community, rendering a majority of them poor and out of work. On the other hand, the Ausala and the Kanchari families work in the cash economy, producing ornaments, idols and ritual utensils for a comparatively affluent clientele.

Growing urbanization in the study area provided new opportunities for the gold-/silversmiths and bronze-smiths. Their traditional clients, the rural affluent families have moved to the urban areas. Urban economy also meant the presence of an affluent urban middle class, capable of affording the services of these craft specialists. A majority of the Ausala and Kanchari families therefore, presently reside in the urban areas of northern Telangana. Only a few families remain in some big villages, where there is a possibility to serve affluent farmer families. These new opportunities have ultimately strengthened the financial condition of these communities, enabling them to

fund the establishment of Viswabrahmin temples in the area, take up priestly duties, and project themselves as the prime philanthropists and leaders of the Viswabrahmin community.

10. THE RURAL BLACKSMITHS OF TELANGANA

The blacksmiths of the Telangana region, like most of the blacksmith communities of south India, fall within the Viswakarma (the Hindu god of arts and crafts) caste group. The Viswakarma caste in the Telangana region consists of five distinct craft communities; blacksmiths, gold-smiths, bronze-smiths, carpenters and stonemasons or sculptors.

Although intermarriage is often practiced among the three metal craft communities, it is not altogether clear whether the matrimonial relations are encouraged with the non-metal craft groups (carpenters and stonemasons). Marriage outside the caste is not encouraged. The Viswakarma caste of the region, including the blacksmith community, wear sacred threads like the Brahmins and a sense of strong inter-caste competition with the Brahmins could be observed in the traditions and taboos of the blacksmith community.

The blacksmith communities frequently occur as close clusters within larger rural settlements, often not very far from the location of a slag or crucible heap. Spatially, their residences and workspaces are situated closer to the residential cluster of the agricultural community, who are their primary clients. The community is stratified according to seniority and is headed, in each village, by a body of elder blacksmiths (consisting generally of three or four senior smiths) who preside over communal meetings, which are generally held on every new moon evening and in the premises of the temple of their goddess, Mammayee.

The elder blacksmiths are responsible for making all important decisions regarding community disputes, auspicious and inauspicious days and festivals. In most cases, their decisions are deemed as final and unassailable. This intra-community hierarchy and other inter- or intra-community and caste relations are guided and attested by a distinct ritualistic behavior as well as obligation reciprocation mechanism (Mauss 2009). These could be observed in detail during their annual rejuvenation festival. **Women are strictly prohibited from participating in any aspect of blacksmithing and the cult of their goddess.**

As mentioned, the farmers form the immediate clientele for the blacksmiths. The business relationship between these two communities is regulated through a long-standing tradition of oral contract, where the individual farmer agrees to pay a certain amount of grain (normally rice or pulses) to the blacksmith, who in turn has to make or mend as much agricultural equipment as the farmer asks from him. The payment comes in two instalments i.e., after two harvest seasons. This seemed to be a very well established tradition in most of the villages of the region. Apart from some villages which are closer to urban centers or highways, monetary transaction is not preferred. The system of two



instalments is strictly followed even during a cash transaction with the farmers.

The blacksmiths manufacture tools exclusively to fulfil the needs of the immediate rural community. It appeared that mass production of the iron implements is not practiced and manufacture or repair is done only on request, probably due to the declining market of indigenously produced items in competition with industrialized products. Consequently, all of them are primarily engaged in repair work rather than manufacture of new tools. Raw materials are generally procured from the market by the farmers, rather than the blacksmiths themselves, in the form of scrap industrial iron, commonly as lorry springs. Charcoal can be purchased from local markets but sometimes the blacksmiths prefer to make charcoal themselves from locally abundant teak wood.

Although the region is rich in ore, smelting is no longer practiced and it appears that the knowledge of smelting technology is significantly lost.

Traditional iron-smelting in the study area was in steady decline throughout the early 20th century, and finally came to an end in the late 1940s. Therefore, this surviving group of Mudra Kammari remain the only direct link to discern the social, technological and the economic networks in which pre-industrial iron-smelting functioned in northern Telangana, albeit in the final days of its decline. Their narratives also provide a unique emic perspective of how the smelters adopted strategies to sustain themselves and their craft through a period of steady decline. However, overall the number of working smithies is rapidly declining since younger generations are opting for more lucrative trade or placement in the Middle East.

11. MAMMAYEE FESTIVAL

Mamayee is considered to be the goddess of metal work with mamma or amma meaning mother and ayee, aya or aye meaning iron in Prakrit and Sanskrit languages (Jaikishan 2009, 62; 2015, 244; Jaikishan and Balasubramaniam 2007b, 485).

Mamayee is still worshipped in a handful of villages in northern Telangana as the goddess of the local metalworking communities—the kammari (blacksmiths), the kanchari (bronze-smith) and the ausala (gold and silver smiths).

Jakishan (2007, 2009) in his pioneering study of the social aspects of Wootz steel production, suggests that the cult of Mammayee was thriving among the iron-smelters and blacksmith communities of Telangana from the early medieval period till the decline of pre-industrial crucible steel production in the early 20th century. He further suggested that the cult of Mammayee was central to the identity of the metalworking communities in general, the blacksmiths and iron-smelters in particular, and many northern Telangana villages had a temple of the goddess within

its boundaries. Presently, only a very few of these temples survive.

Regular meetings take place in these temples, presided over by elder blacksmiths, where community problems are resolved and important decisions taken (Jaikishan 2015, 245). Jaikishan (2009, 62-4; 2015, 245-6) and Jaikishan and Balasubramaniam (2007b, 485) also describe the annual Mammayee festival that takes place during the Telegu New Year (late March to early April) in some of the villages. The festival lasts 11 days and starts with the lighting of the sacred oil lamps in the temple. All community members bring the tools of their trade (one or two implements) and place them on a stand next to the goddess idol where they stay for the remainder of the festival. The festival involves several feasts and processions of the idol through the village and ends with the tying of the sacred thread on participant wrists and on the tools. It is interesting that as well as blacksmiths, bronze and goldsmiths also took part.

The annual festival of Mammayee (amma= mother+ayee=iron), local deity of traditional blacksmith community of northern Telangana takes place during the 7 days leading up to the new year of the regional calendar. The goddess is also worshipped in the form of blacksmith's tools, the smith's hearth and a local medieval saint.

The origin of Mammayee cult is shrouded in obscurity. The mention of the cult is not noted in any pre-colonial documents from the region. The colonial and administrative documents under the Nizam are equally silent. Hassan's (1920) detailed eponymous study of castes and tribes of the Nizam's dominion do not mention the cult either. However, Hassan does mention a pre-dominance of worship of the female principle among the Panchals of Telangana.

"The favourite object of worship of the Panchals is the **goddess Kalika**, also called Ambika, to whom **sheep, goats, fowls and wine are offered on the first day of the bright half of Chait and again in the month of Shravana (August-September)**. No priests are employed for the worship of the goddess and the offerings are eaten by the members of the household. **Fridays and Tuesdays are believed to be the most propitious days for this worship**. Offerings of sweetmeats are also made to the goddess Kamakshi of Kanchi, who is held to be one of their patron deities. Most of the Panchals are Shakti worshippers.

12. MAMMAYEE AS GRAMADEVATA

The cult of Mammayee can be better understood in this context. Jaikishan and Balasubramaniam (2007) and Jaikishan (2009) suggested in their work on the cult of Mammayee, an early 10th century origin for the cult. They based their hypothesis on the surviving temples of Mammayee in Peddakalvala, Ibrahimpatnam and Doreguda villages. **These temples are built in Eastern Chalukyan (9th- 11th CE) and Kakatiya (11th-14th CE) architectural styles.**



Mammayee temples are present in Ibraheempatnam, Chinnakalvala and Peddakalvala of Karimnagar district; Balkonda, Uppulooru, Konaapuram and Konasamudram of Nizamabad district. In Konasamudram, which was a famous Iron Industry Center, there are two Mammayee temples namely Chinna Mammayee and Pedda Mammayee.

Of notable importance are the villages of Kalvala and Ibrahimpatnam in Karimnagar district and Konasamudram in Nizamabad district (Jaikishan 2009, 62, 65; 2015, 244-5; Jaikishan and Balasubramaniam 2007b, 485). In Konasamudram, two Mammayee temples are found, one for the blacksmith community and another for the bronzesmiths (Jaikishan and Balasubramaniam 2007b, 486-7).

In old Karimnagar, near Peddapalli, between Kalvala villages, on the bank of Hussain river, there is a 16 pillared Mammayee temple, constructed in Early Chalukyan Temple Architectural style. This temple is famously known as Mahaamaayee Temple. The temple priest is a Kamsali.

In Siddhipeta town, near to market, there is an ancient Mammayee temple. According to the inscription on temple entrance pillar [Dwajasthambham], this temple was constructed in 1617 CE. People are saying that in this temple, the main oil lamp [Akhanda jyothishi] is shining continuously since 400 years.

In Konasamudram, Pedda Mammayee temple is present in Kammarivada. There are two rooms in the temple; one for Mammayee idols and another for Kammarisangham. Chinna Mammayee temple is present in Kancharavada. In this street, there are 30 Viswakarma caste families are living. Here, Temple priests are Kammaris only but, the worshipping method is different when compared to other Mammayee temples. Devotees from all castes and other castes other than Kammaris, women, men, children, elders come to the temple on the early morning of Yugaadi festival. They come with flowers, fruits, coconuts, turmeric, kumkum, jacket pieces in hands and dedicate them to the goddess. Breaking the coconuts and women coming to Mammayee temple is observed only in this temple. Temple festival is celebrated every year.

"All revere the caste goddess Kamakshi Amma, who is represented by each sub-division in a special manner. Thus the Kanchara represents her by the stone on which he beats his metal work, the gold-smith by one of his implements, and the blacksmith by his bellows. On the eighteenth day of the Dasara festival, an annual festival is celebrated in honour of the goddess." (Thurston and Rangachari, 1975 [1907]: III-147)

The festival of the goddess Mammayee traditionally takes place in the last eleven days of the Telugu calendar, which normally falls in early March. However, **due to poverty among the blacksmiths of the region, the festival was reduced to three**

days. A total number of four villages were surveyed in the course of the festival, and the final day ritual, which coincides with Telugu New Year's Day, was observed in the village of Ibrahimpatnam (Karimnagar district), where the cult of the goddess is still the strongest.

On the first day of this festival and during the festival, the smiths cease their work and place their tools in the temple in order to revitalize productivity. The blacksmiths do not take non-vegetarian food and cooking must be done strictly within the temple premises. Women are not allowed in the cult performances and all the activities are carried out by the blacksmiths themselves. Kammari women and members of other communities, including nonkammari Viswabrahmin groups did not have permission to enter the temple. They are allowed at other times of the year but are required to take permission from the kammari elders. Although other craft groups of the caste also cease to work and worship god Viswakarma in their individual residences, the cult of Mammayee seems to be exclusively followed by the blacksmith community. **Along with Mammayee, a local saint, Veera Brahmendra Swami, is also worshipped.** Two senior blacksmiths use grains of wheat to predict the fortunes of each member of the blacksmith community, including the females.

On the final day of the festival, the blacksmiths gather in the temple before sunrise and prepare food offerings consisting of five principal items (in this case) pulses, rice, maize, coconut and jaggery. The final worship is conducted by the senior blacksmiths, with the senior-most of them acting as high priest, reciting mantras. It was observed that in at least three villages the high priests also operate as goldsmiths as well as being practicing blacksmiths. After these rituals, the blacksmiths gather in the temple courtyard and help each other in tying the fresh, turmeric-dipped, sacred thread. Finally, they tie sacred threads on their working implements, which appear to be extensions of a blacksmiths' body and rejuvenated through endowment of divine power and the blessings of the goddess. This is followed by the inauguration of the smithy in individual workspaces. This is done by hitting the anvil in three sets of five, first by the eldest family member followed by others according to age. Then, while the eldest smith is required to light the hearth and manufacture an agricultural implement, the next in line operates the fan bellows (hand-turned). Finally, the junior apprentices of the family carry the newly produced implements to the houses of the farmers, who, in turn, are required to offer rice, pulses, turmeric and garlic in exchange for the implements. Thus the long-standing relationship with the farming community is renewed through a ritual contract.

CONCLUSION

In Northern Telangana, Women are strictly prohibited from participating in any aspect of blacksmithing and the cult of their goddess. Due to poverty among the blacksmiths of the region, the festival was reduced to three days and the number of working smithies is rapidly declining in the study area since younger



generations are opting for more lucrative trade or placement in the Middle East.

The cult of Mammayee performed in Ibrahimpatnam-K is targeted at reinforcing a socio-economic power structure founded on a strong agrarian base, where the kammari and the farmers were unequivocally dependent on each other for sustenance. With the recent decline in traditional prestation relations, a radical shift in the nature of cult performance is observed among the Viswabrahmins. The kammari have responded in two ways in order to prevent the community from decline, save their craft, freshly negotiate their position of power in the village society and reassert their identity—by replacing their old cult of the goddess Mammayee with the new cult of a 17th century saint-turned-

demi-god, Veera Brahmendra Swamy, and by modifying pre-existing rural associations of caste-elders into more organized, politically active and philanthropic Sanghams, or caste-associations, connected with the intra- and inter-regional narratives of Viswakarma/Viswabrahmin caste identity.

As a result, two radically different cult performances by the members of the same community within the same region emerged. The former, Mammayee Pooja, is more closed, strictly regulated and focused on the relationship between only one of the five Viswabrahmin groups and their clients—the kammari and their client farmers. The latter, Veera Brahmendra Swamy Pooja, on the other hand, is more eclectic and brings the entire Viswabrahmin community together.





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