

Bhuta Worship in the village of Belma: An Exploration in an Indian Folk Belief

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1. The region of Dakshina (Southern) Kannada

Dakshina Kannada is located on the coast of the Arabian Sea in the state of Karnataka in Southern India.¹ Geographically, parts of the region are flat and well suited to agricultural cultivation while in other parts there are hills, on slopes of which one of the largest tea- and coffee plantations of India is situated. The most important urban centers in the area are Mangalore (the capital), the population of which is about 500 000, and Udupi.

The cultural and linguistic climates of Dakshina Kannada are distinctively Dravidian. The language of administration is Kannada, which is also the official language of Karnataka. However, the majority of the people living in the area speak Tulu. It is spoken by 2 million people and therefore the area is sometimes referred to as Tulunadu, the land of Tulu. And Tulu, too, is a Dravidian language. As Tulu is not a written language, the language of education and written communication in the area is Kannada (and English). Despite this, Tulu is by no means a dying language, and its position can even be said to have strengthened recently; e.g. for some years ago the Tulu Academy was founded in Mangalore to take care of the Tulu language and culture. Even some written material has now been published in Tulu using the Kannada (or Roman) script. Although the culture of Dakshina Kannada has its roots in the ancient Dravidian tradition, it has since long ago been influenced by the cultural and religious invasion of the Aryans. This cultural influence is called Sanskritization or Aryanization. Such well known Hindu philosophers as Ramanuja and Madhva, who have founded two out of the six classical schools of Hindu philosophy, have been active in the area of Dakshina Kannada. Furthermore, there have been and still are some Buddhist and numerous Jainist centers in the area. Also Shivaism and Vaishnaism have since hundreds

¹ This article is based on fieldwork done in several periods during 1989–1998.

of years had great influence there. For example one of the most famous temples dedicated to Krishna, is situated in Udupi. Because of the vicinity of the sea, also Islam, which was brought into the area mainly by seafarers and traders, has left its imprint in the culture of the Dakshina Kannada. Also some Christian elements can be recognized as a result of the colonial, in particular the Portuguese, influence in the area. Religiously speaking the area of Dakshina Kannada could be described as a melting pot of different traditions and religions. Yet it seems that the most distinctive features in the culture and religion of the area are Dravidian. The Dravidian elements seem to be especially dominant in the tradition of the villages in the countryside. In the coastal regions of Kannada the worship of serpent (in Sanskrit Naga) has been a very old religious custom. From prehistoric times, this region has been one of hills and forests and a abode of serpents, which has attracted fear and propitiation. It has even been said that the serpent was the original deity and totem of the local tribes, and that gods and goddesses of the refined Great Tradition entered it as an overlay on the earlier base. Even today there are a lot of serpent temples in the area, and Naga is worshiped as identical with the serpent god Supramanya overall the coastal Karnataka. The serpent worship is also connected with the Bhuta worship, the most typical belief system of Tulunadu.

2. The Bhuta Worship

The bhuta rituals² are annual religious ceremonies, which in Tulunadu are performed around from November-December to May-June. The bhuta festival is like the Day of the False King, as on that particular day the members of the lowest caste(s) impersonate the bhuta spirits. These spirits come back annually to observe the village life: they give advice on how people should run their lives, and they also give out warnings and impose punishments in order to keep order in the society. The bhuta rituals are multidimensional, and they can be viewed from the social, cultural, political, judicial, and health perspectives. The rituals can be studied in terms of their internal aspect. This includes the study of paaddanas³ (epic songs), the masks and makeup, the dances, the dresses, the dialogue between the impersonator and the participants, the ceremonial meal and the setting up of the context of the performance. The external aspect includes changes in the internal aspect for example changes in the duration of the act, in the dresses, the choice of songs, and the organization of the whole ritual.

² Gowda 1991; about bhuta rituals see also Upadhyaya & Upadhyaya 1984; Shetty 1986; Claus 1986; Padmanabha 1971; Brückner 1995;

³ About baaddanas see Upadhyaya & Upadhyaya 1986; Claus 1991; Brückner 1995.

The contexts of history and society are involved in the whole process. In this sense the bhuta ceremony reflects the social and political systems of Tulunadu. The social system of bhuta is based on the caste system and operates according to the life cycles and annual cycles of the castes. The basic rules of the cultural order are inclusion and exclusion. What is considered suitable and proper for one community is a forbidden taboo for the other. The criteria for the ranking of different groups include the distinctions of purity and pollution, superiority and inferiority, cultured and uncultured the first being pure and the second polluted and impure. These rankings determine and maintain the group identities. The epic songs, paaddanas, reflect the anguish and sorrowful sighs of the lower castes. In fact the main motif of the paaddanas is social conflict and the injustice, that once prevailed and still does. It is interesting that the (village) communities that still practice the bhuta worship, have often been subordinated by the more powerful cultures. The organization of the bhuta ceremonies is the responsibility of the higher castes, but practically all social classes take part in them, and the impersonators are usually members of the lower castes. During the ceremony the world of illusion and paradox takes over: the impure become pure, the lowcaste impersonator becomes a deity, the oppressed become respected. When the ceremony takes place at night, it symbolizes the thirst and hunger of daylight. The ceremony is an uprising and a protest that will fade back to the world of illusion the very next day.

Territorially the bhuta ceremonies can be divided into main bhuta festivals, regional bhutas, and local bhutas. In terms of hierarchy at least six different levels of bhuta ceremonies can be distinguished ranging from royal bhutas to family bhutas. The most of the bhuta deities and spirits are ancient or historic forefathers or kings. Traditionally the performance of the bhuta ritual has been considered as an important remedy against illnesses. Besides this, all sorts of activities such as cockfights, betting, ritual football and hunting and different kinds of market activities have risen around the basic ritual. Also the Muslims can take part in these activities. The performance and position of the bhuta worship has during the hundreds (or probably thousands) of years changed a lot and adapted to external influences. However, it has proven to be an enduring and accommodating system and therefore its future seems secured for the moment. It appears, that the people living in the Dakshina Kannada area want to see spirit world incarnate annually in the form of an impersonator. When the spiritual and the material worlds meet in the dark of the night, the balance between the human and the divine worlds is maintained.

3. The village of Belma

With a population of about 4000, Belma is, by the Indian standards a fairly small village. It is located within an hour's drive from Mangalore City. Muslims form a small majority in the village. Occupationally the Muslims are mainly shopkeepers and craftsmen, and in general they work in professions considered to be inferior. Although the Hindus form a minority in the village, they dominate the economic, social, and cultural life of the village. As of old the Hindus (mainly bunts, the highest caste after brahmins) have been big landholders and despite the land reform in the 1960's they still own most of the land. The traditional caste system is still strong among the Hindus in the village. The hierarchical rules of caste system uphold the traditional lifestyle against the pressures of change. Another important and interesting factor that helps to maintain the integrity of the country way of life is the matrilineal order of succession (among the bunts). Although the old cultural and belief systems have been preserved fairly intact in the village, the vicinity of the nearby town and the road leading to the village have facilitated the spread of modern technology and cultural innovations. The wealthier households are equipped with telephones and televisions and most households own a radio. In other words the villagers can at the same time follow an ancient religious ceremony that is taking place in the village and watch American TV shows via satellite. Because of the new influences the village is already hampered with many social problems. During my visits I have personally noticed, that more and more often the (Hindu) men, who were employed outside their family used a considerable part of their income in alcohol, which was relatively cheap and easy to obtain when compared to other commodities. The village of Belma is part of an administrative unit comprising three villages (mandala panchayat). In addition to local government officials some voluntary organizations also operate in the village. They aim to support the self-asserting development of the village and improve the possibilities of education so that also the poorest and the most deprived (the Muslims, the women, and the girls) would be able to improve their position.

4. The belief system of the village

As the Hindus and the Muslims adhere to different religions, also their ritual systems differ from each other. There are five mosques in the village for the Muslims to visit. Especially the main mosque is impressive. In connection with the mosques there are kindergartens and (Koran) schools that aim to ensure that also

the poorest Muslims get a basic education. Especially the neglect of the education of the Muslim girls is a problem in this village as well as in the rest of India. This is one of the problems that the voluntary organizations have paid special attention to. The belief system of the Belma village is, nevertheless, founded on the Hindu belief system. The core of this seems to be an ancient Dravidian tradition, the bhuta worship. In addition to bhuta worship, several other religious rituals are also performed in the village. There are for example five places of serpent worship, where Naga rituals, for example fertility rites, are performed usually once a year. The serpent rituals are in principle independent cults but there are connections to the bhuta rituals and the places of serpent worship are always situated by or near the bhuta temples or places of worship. Another important figure in the belief system of the village is the goddess Mari, who protects the villagers against epidemics and illnesses. The village of Belma is also under the influence of the Someshwara temple and therefore under the influence of Vishnu and Shiva and many other gods of the Great Tradition of Hinduism. The most popular pan-Hindu god in the region is Ganapathi (Ganesha).

5. The Bhuta Worship at Barike House

The information describing the Bhuta worship above concerns more or less the whole Dakshina Kannada region. There is, however, a big variation of the bhuta rituals in different parts (= villages) of the region. Therefore I shall next describe in more detail one local bhuta worship system in Belma village as I have observed it from the viewpoint of one important Manor House, Barike House. My knowledge is based on four shorter field study periods in the village in 1994-98. The field materials consist of videotapes, audiotapes, slides, and note books collected by participant observation and personal interviews. Barike House is the most important house of the nine Bunt houses which maintain the bhuta system in one part of the village, because it is traditionally responsible for the arrangements of the four days long annual bhuta rituals, Nema. Besides these nine families there are about one hundred Hindu families connected to this particular bhuta system. Almost all the rituals are concentrated on Barike House and the vicinities. From the viewpoint of Barike House this local bhuta system is an independent belief system, which has a sphere of influence of about one thousand people altogether. Barike House has two bhuta spirits of its own, Panjustnaya and Posa Bhuta. The landlord says that the former is a kinglike bhuta and the latter like his minister. Both of them are living in the house. Panjustanaya is living in his own shrine

(gudi) and Posa Bhuta in the attic of the House, where he has a big cradle. The third important bhuta spirit of Barike House is called Bermeru (one of the most powerful bhuta spirits in the region), who has also a shrine at a distance of a half mile from the house. An other important ritual place close to Barike House is the bhuta field, pelattadi, where the big annual bhuta festival (Nema) is organized at the end of January.

The bhuta ceremony is a ritual and divine drama that needs all the castes of the part of the village as participants and as audience. The casting of the drama consists of many important "roles" to organize it and to keep it going. The person that connects the local belief system to the great Hindu tradition is called tantri. He is a Brahmin priest who lives outside the village, but he attends to every single bhuta ritual of Barike House. Without him any ritual cannot be performed. He is the person who controls and supervises all the religious life of people connected to this particular bhuta system. Only tantri can go inside to the holiest space of the bhuta shrine. Under his leadership all the puja ceremonies during the bhuta rituals are performed. (As a salary for his duties tantri receives eight mudis (mudi = 40 kg) of rice per year.) In the beginning of any possession ritual it is him that reads the prayers to the panHindu gods and to the bhuta(s), for example like this:

"From time to time, according to the customs, followed at Barike place...Now this is the worship done on account of mahanavami (nine-day-ritual), in this puja some errors might have occurred by us. Today is the forth day festival, considering the petal which we have offered as one fulflower, please accept this worship, this is the service offered by the people of this village, please accept this with happiness, please bless those, the organizers, the villagers, the devotees, the families and it is your virtue to see that all the difficulties and defects are solved by you in the maya world. And it comes under the prestige of you, gods and deities like Mahaganapati (great Ganesha), Somanateshvara (Vishnu), Arasu (king) Panjustnaaya, Posa Bhuta, Banta to bring prosperity for the villagers in the days to come, oh lord, oh god."

The organizer and the leader of this bhuta system is the landlord of Barike House is called madyasta. He says that it has been his duty to follow this system since he came to the house in 1972 by marridge. Except for arrangements he is also the organizing leader of every single Barike House bhuta ceremony. Maybe his most important role during the ritual is, however, to call the bhuta spirits to enter the patri, the impersonator. He says to the spirits:

"Give good advise to the whole family (= village); that's why we sacrifice to you all these prasadans (gifts)."

At the same time the patri starts shivering (= darshana), he gets the possession of the spirits (bhutas) and begins to impersonate them. The patri comes from acary caste (carpenters), the next caste in hierarchical order in the village. Although there is only one family belonging to this caste, it is very important from the viewpoint of the bhuta system, because the patri is the impersonator of both bhuta spirits of Barike House. The role of patri in the ritual is essential, because it is only him that has the capacity and the power to get the spirit possession. The patri's life is controlled in many ways. He is, for example, expected to adhere to a long list of ritual proscriptions in his daily life and specially on the days prior to the bhuta ritual. He:

- may not touch an untouchable
- may not talk to a woman during her menstrual period
- may not carry manure
- may not drink alcoholic beverages
- may not attend funerals
- should take a bath before the noon meal
- should eat only one rice meal per day
- should wear gold and silver bangles (given by the bhuta)
- should wear two gold chains given by the bhuta
- should wear hair in a tuft
- may not eat meat during the period of the village ritual
- may not have intercourse with women during the period of the village ritual

During the possession the bhuta spirits start to speak through him for example like this:

“All are present, all are present, yes. One is present, one is not present, such a dispute should not appear, oh priest. I have come from (a place called) Malar, according to the practice. Including both rich and poor people, my devotees, amidst these people, with all my paraphernalia. I am the deity made my presence in this festival (ritual), I have made my presence through the manmedium, at this nectar moment, in the cocktied pelattadi (field) now, I have arrived, this is my order, on the day of sankranti, on the border of a field, arrived.... oh baraga (cultivator)....having erected the elephanttree (gajamara) which was kept below by your hands. The first chance to serve I have given to the original house, such a deity I am. Now, since there is no king in the village, thinking that there should be a king chief for the village and hence created this so. Until yesterday we have made you to do this practice. Will there be any encounters, such big doubts, my

villagers, by the good wishes of Panjustnaya and Bermeru, I have solved their encounters. And to my family members and to the villagers, I have distributed the nectar. I see that this practice shall continue by your hands beautifully until there is sun and moon. You can believe that Panjustnaya and Posa Bhuta are there. Any more to be discussed? Oh priest, oh all villagers, oh all villagers, oh people assembled here, something fallen from this sky? I will convert it into victorious gem, for the prosperity of the village. I will see that the service is rendered to the village till the sun and moon is there in the earth. This will be carried out by Panjustanaya and Posa Bhuta, you do believe. Oh priest this is the nectar moment, there may be number of disputes, moments of justice, you all come under my family, I am there to look after you. Listen to me, come forward, this is the paraphernalia which has been erected in the auspicious moment, let me bring down this in the auspicious moment, oh priest listen, this is auspicious moment.”

In addition to the functions *tantri*, *madyasta* and *patri* there are several other duties and functions in connection with the *bhuta* ceremonies. Actually there is very complicated division of labor during the preparations of the ritual and during the ritual; each caste has to take care of its own, very exactly classified piece of the whole. There are the lamp carriers, the torch carriers, the musicians, the ox-keepers etc.

6. Tulu calendar

In Tulu region, there are two parallel calendars in function. The Western calendar is official, but the religious life always follows the traditional lunar calendar. One of the most important things in the traditional calendar from the religious point of view is the categorizing of time as auspicious or as inauspicious. This division determines the exact moment of any ritual in Hindu calendar, and also in *Bhuta* ritual calendar. There are months that are very auspicious for religious rituals (*Jaarde-Beesya*, November-December to May-June), but for example *Aati* month (July-August) is so inauspicious that any religious ritual that takes place then is impure. In Tulu land it is said the gods and the *bhuta* spirits are sleeping in *Aati*. The turn of month, when the new moon is born, is called *shankramana* night, and it is a very auspicious moment. Therefore most of the *bhuta* rituals take place during nights. From the viewpoint of *Barike House* *bhuta* rituals *Ponni* month (the end of January) is the most auspicious and important, because the annual *bhuta Nema* (festival) is arranged then.

7. Bhuta worship as social integration system

The basic concept of the bhuta system is family. In the widest sense of the term, from the viewpoints of the bhuta spirits, the family consists of the whole village community that is in their sphere of influence. The madyasta, the head of Barike House, is a mediator between the spirit world (the world of the bhuta) and the material world (maya world). He was called to that position when he married the heiress of the house, and it is his duty to follow the system as long as he is the landlord. If we regard the bhuta worship as a social integration system, it seem to be a very functional system with all the numerous details. It is like a net or network where every single part has its own particular function to keep the net whole. The bhuta spirits come regularly among the community to remind of the tradition (“according to the practice”, “according to the customs”), to remind of the duties of every single villager both in the ritual and outside the ritual. From the viewpoint of the landowners that means that as long as the bhuta system is going on, they are superior to all other village people, all other castes in village. They have got the divine authority for that. It is clear that it is their interest to continue the system as long as possible, because the rest of the villagers can remain as their laborers with very low wages. From the viewpoint of the lower castes this means that as long as the system is living, their part will not become worse, the bhuta spirits have promised that.

Sources – field material

- about 12 hours video recordings of bhuta rituals
- about 20 hours sound recordings of rituals and interviews
- about 300 slides and photos

Literature

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