

Research Article**“Religious Traditions of a Marginalized Community in South India: Priesthood, Ritual Practices, and Sacred Spaces in Matangi Worship – A Study”****Etikala Vasantha**

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Corresponding Author: Etikala Vasantha.**Abstract**

The present article examines the historical evolution, religious significance, and cultural assimilation of the Matangi tradition among the Madiga community of South India, with particular reference to Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Matangi, worshipped as a tutelary deity and Mother Goddess, occupies a distinctive position within the religious traditions of historically marginalized communities. The study explores the relationship between Matangi worship, the veneration of the female reproductive principle, the dedication of girls to local deities, and the incorporation of regional mother-goddess traditions into mainstream Hinduism. It also critically examines the diverse interpretations of Matangi found in Sanskrit and Telugu lexicons, ethnographic accounts, historical writings, and regional religious narratives. Particular attention is given to the association of Matangi with Renuka Yellamma, Ekavira, Lajja Gauri, and Jogulamba, illustrating the complex processes through which local and community-specific deities acquired broader religious identities. The study further analyses the Sthalapuranas of Surabhesvara Kona, Mogilicherla near Warangal, and Alampur to understand the relationship between oral traditions, archaeological remains, literary references, and established forms of goddess worship. These regional traditions provide insights into the historical interaction between caste, gender, ritual practices, and religious authority. The article argues that the assimilation of Matangi into the wider Hindu religious framework was neither uniform nor instantaneous but involved the reinterpretation of local myths, the transformation of ritual identities, and the incorporation of community deities into established temple traditions. At the same time, the persistence of practices such as the dedication of girls reveals the continuing influence of caste hierarchies and gender-based inequalities. By situating the Matangi tradition within the broader history of South Indian religious culture, the study highlights the importance of examining marginalized communities and their religious practices in reconstructing the complex history of regional Hinduism.

Keywords: *Matangi, Madiga community, Mother Goddess, Renuka Yellamma, Jogulamba, Ekavira, Lajja Gauri, religious assimilation, caste, gender, Telangana, South India.*

Introduction:

In India, which has different religious traditions, there is a tradition of offering prayers to the gods who fulfil their wishes according to other religious traditions. Starting from coconuts, gold and silver ornaments, cash gifts, and animal wealth such as chickens, goats, etc. are sacrificed in this ritual. Going further back, some devotees who offered their body parts are also seen in history. It is in this verse that the devotee Kannappa is seen offering his eyes to Lord Shiva. In this order, the ritual of offering not only cash, gold, and silver ornaments but also their children to their favourite deities are essential for the devotees to fulfil their desires or protect them from hardships.

In this order, much research has been revealed in history about non-committal sex acts, sexual activities in the name of God, sacred adultery in the name of God, and the tradition of offering girls to gods and goddesses only for sexual activities.

In the most primitive times without castes, men and women used to search for food in small groups and were united by nature's natural lust, and women were not permanently committed to one man.¹

In this way, in the name of various rituals, one can observe sacred adultery in the name of God or promiscuous sex acts in the name of God all over the world. Sacred adultery was a part of the worship of the mother goddess *Ishtar* in places like Sumer and Babylon.² From the nude dancing girl and male idols found in the excavations of the Indus Civilization, *Pushkarini* at Muhanjodaro was built for a special creative purpose, suggesting the romantic life of the time.³ In Babylon, in honour of the goddess *Mylitta*, women of all classes committed adultery. In Cyprus, before marriage, there was a rule that all women had to commit adultery with unknown men in the temple of the goddess *Aphrodite*.⁴ Apart from that, it can be said in the words of Tapi Dharmarao that there is a custom of donating the money some women earned from adultery in temples to the temple itself.⁵

Herodotus in his writing's states that before marriage all the women committed adultery with others in the presence of the gods, while some dedicated themselves to the same profession in the temple, while others married.⁶ It is also known through some research that these are the *Devadasis* who became *Devadasis*.⁷

The book *Gudilo Sex* by Arudra talks about the custom of dedicating a girl child to God and leaving her for the profession of '*Basavi*' or '*Basvi*' among castes like Boyas, Bedars, etc. in Bellary, Dharwar, Mysore, and Kurnool regions. "Those in male childless families do the dedication. A dedicated woman can't get married. she stays at her father's home. she inherits his father's property. If he dies, she will perform the last rites to be performed by the son. she does not commit adultery with lower castes. Commonly she makes adultery done regularly by the one who keeps her. But once a year she can declare her independence and break with him. If she has a male child, he becomes the heir of the maternal grandmother. If a girl was born, those daughters will also be dedicated. *Basivi* is not *Gudisani*. A woman who does not marry to keep his father's clan, the gotra"⁸

If we look at the South Indian tradition, the worship of village deities is predominant. Especially the practice of worshipping female deities has existed since ancient times. In village deity worship, female deities such as *Pochamma*, *Maisamma*, *Mutyalamma*, *Gangamma*, *Yellamma* are seen dedicating the women who have attained puberty to them. We see a dedicated woman living in the name of that god and committing adultery with those castes without marriage. Following these are *Devadasi* in Vaishnavism,⁹ *Basivini* in Shaivism,¹⁰ *Jogini* and *Matangi* in the name of the village deity *Yellamma*.

¹Arudra., *Gudilo Sex*, Vishalandhra Publishing house, Vijayawada, 2008, p.38.

²*Ibid*, p.22.

³*Ibid*, pp.20-21.

⁴*Ibid*, p.27.

⁵*Ibid*, p.38.

⁶Thapi Dharma Rao., *Devalayala meeda Boothu Bommalenduku*, thapee vaari prachuranalu, Vijayawada, 1962, pp. 40-41.

⁷*Ibid*, pp.41. & Arudra., *Gudilo Sex*, *Op. Cit*, p.6.

⁸Arudra., *Gudilo Sex*, *Op. Cit*, p.43.

⁹In Vaishnava tradition, a girl is married to a god before her menstruation. She consorts with King, Pujari who is the head of the temple. These *Devadasis* are belonging to Sudra community.

¹⁰In Veerashaivism, left unmarried women in the name of *Basivi* and made them adulterers. They can mate with Veera Shaiva males.

It can be said that the Matangi system is different from all these. It is mostly found in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in South India. It continues to be a *Matangi* custom of giving birth to a girl child out of wedlock to *Matamma* or *Renuka Ellamma* known as *mata*.

The family deity of the *Madigas*, known as *Ilavelpu*, is revered as *Matangi*. She is also referred to as *Yellamma*, *Renuka Yellamma*, *Raja Matangi*, and *Rajashyamala*, and is worshipped not only by *Madigas* but also by other castes in society. This *Matangi* goddess is believed to be a counterpart of the *Matangi*, one of the untouchable castes of South India, akin to the mother goddesses that emerged in matriarchal systems worldwide. Even today, some *Madiga* families continue the tradition of dedicating their daughters to the family deity *Matangi*, marrying them to the *Matangi* deity, thus maintaining a unique cultural practice where they are devoted only to *Madigas*.

The *Madigas*, also known as "*Matangi Makkalu*" or "*Children of Matangi*,"¹¹ in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka, have a tradition that persists to this day, where some families dedicate their daughters to the female deity *Matangi*. This tradition involves inquiring about the dedication of a female child to *Matangi* and potentially obligating her to have relationships with *Madiga* men. D. D. Kosambi, in his research on ancient civilizations, observed similar practices among women in Mesopotamia (under the goddess *Ishtar*) and the Indus civilization (under *Ammatalli*), where women engaged in relationships with partners of their choosing.¹² It appears that ancient *Madiga* women followed a similar practice, exercising autonomy through the *Matangi* tradition, which involved consensual relationships with partners they desired.

The word "*Matangi*" carries various meanings across different sources. According to the Sanskrit-English dictionary, *Matangi* is described as the mythical mother of the elephant tribe, a *Chandala* or Kirata woman, one form of Durga, one of the Ten *Maha-Vidyas*, and the mother of Vasistha.¹³ C.P. Brown's Telugu-English Dictionary adds further interpretations, including the goddess Parvati, Vasistha's wife, a siren, a fairy nymph, a she-ghost, a pariah woman, and a woman who sells or serves wine, as well as a goddess of boatmen.¹⁴ Thurston and Rangachari equate *Matangi* with the goddess Durga, while Syed Siraj-ul-Hasan suggests she was the daughter of *Jambawan*. Nanjundaya and Ananthakrishna Iyer claim that *Matamma* or *Matangi* is the goddess (tutelary deity) of the *Madiga* community.

Referring to Sanskrit lexicons, Emma Clough identifies *Arundhati* and *Matangi* as 'Vasishta's wife', and her *Madiga* informant suggests that a *Matangi* is a *Madiga* woman possessed by the goddess *Yellamma*.¹⁵ In a recent book, Chilumuri Srinivasa Rao states that *Matamma* and *Yellamma* are one and the same deity representing Goddess *Kali*. Additionally, a *Matangi* priest or worshiper is referred to as *Matamma*. Elmore, after extensive fieldwork in the Nellore district in the early decades of the twentieth century, describes *Matamma* as the special deity of the *Madigas*, represented by a small stone image in a very humble shrine.¹⁶

The *Madigas*, who adhere to the *Matangi* system, worship *Matangi* in the form of the female genitalia, known as the "*Yoni*."¹⁷ *Yoni* worship seems to have originated in primitive societies, where the organ responsible for birth (creation) was considered sacred by ancient, barbaric races.

¹¹Thurston, Edgar & K. Rangachari., *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Volume-IV, Government Press, Madras, 1909, p.317.

¹²D. D. Kosambi., *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Popular Book Depot, Bombay, 1956, p.60.

¹³Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1960 (First Published in 1899), p.806.

¹⁴Charles Philip Brown, *Telugu- English Nighantuvu*, Marwah Publications, Delhi, 1982, (Second Edition Published in 1903), p.977.

¹⁵Emma Raushenbusch Clough, *While Sewing Sandals or Tales of a Telugu Pariah Tribe*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1899, p.56.

¹⁶He states that Ellamma temples are more in Telangana and those of Matamma are more in Rayalaseema. Chilumuri Srinivasa Rao, *Madigala Charitra- Samskruthi*, (Telugu), Jyothi Grandhamala, Tirupathi, 2010, p.130. At some places he equates Matamma with Matangi and vice versa. See pp. 129 and 171.

¹⁷Thallapally Manohar (Ed.), Akulapelly Kumaraswamy et al., *Cultural History of Madigas - A Brief Study*, Pragma Publications, Hyderabad, 2016, pp.7-8.

Historical evidence suggests that yoni worship was widespread. Excavations of the Indus civilization, the earliest civilization in our country, reveal seals depicting the worship of 'Mother goddesses' or 'Ammathalli' in the form of a *Yoni*.

Societies and castes that engaged in yoni worship often held women in high regard, as the yoni symbolized the source of creation and life. Thus, it can be inferred that the *Madigas* worshipped *Matangi* in the form of a *Yoni*, emphasizing the reverence for the mother goddess in their worship practices.

Matangi is intricately linked with the forest and the natural world. Many scholars assert that *Matangi* is revered as the deity of the untouchable or lower-caste hunters.¹⁸ Devotees are instructed to worship *Matangi* while in a state of impurity, using only impure offerings. This impurity entails that worshippers need not have bathed before their devotions, nor are they bound by fasting or vows. Remarkably, even menstruating women are encouraged to worship *Matangi* and offer her clothing stained with menstrual blood.¹⁹ Such unconventional worship practices stand in stark contrast to traditional Hindu rituals, suggesting that the veneration of *Matangi* diverges significantly from mainstream Hindu religious traditions.

Throughout history, women have often been equated with the fertility of the earth, leading to the elevation of femininity to a divine status and its worship in numerous civilizations worldwide, including India. This association possibly contributed to the prevalence of matriarchal cultures globally, with remnants still observable in contemporary India. Among these remnants is the *Matangi* system practiced by the *Madigas*, where *Matangi* is worshipped in the form of the *Yoni*, representing the female reproductive tract.

The worship of the *Yoni* traces back to ancient times, attributing sacredness to the organ responsible for birth. Historical evidence suggests that *Yoni* worship was widespread across various cultures, including the Indus Civilization, as indicated by artifacts discovered during archaeological excavations. In this context, the people of the Indus are believed to have revered the Mother Goddess in the form of the *Yoni*.

Societies and communities that have honored the *Yoni* have often demonstrated a corresponding respect for women. Therefore, the worship of *Matangi* in the form of the *Yoni* by the *Madigas* reflects a reverence for the Mother Goddess, aligning with a broader tradition of honoring femininity and its role in creation.

An examination of ancient matriarchal systems reveals a notable aspect of women's autonomy: the freedom to choose their sexual partners. D. D. Kosambi suggests that certain figures from ancient civilizations, such as the Mesopotamian Goddess Ishtar and the Mother Goddess of the Indus Civilization, engaged in consensual relationships with men of their choosing.²⁰ This tradition finds resonance in the *Matangi* system prevalent among the *Madigas*, where *Matangi* represents the goddess in the physical realm.

In line with this tradition, some *Madiga* families practice a custom known as *Jannekiduchuta* in Telangana, wherein they dedicate their daughters to the deity *Matangi*, effectively engaging in ritualized prostitution.²¹ Numerous stories abound regarding the dedication of *Madiga* girls to *Matangi*, with one prominent folklore being the tale of *Renuka Yellamma*²² narrated by *Baindlas*. This

¹⁸White David G., *Tantra in Practice*, Mothilal Banarasidas Publishers, Delhi, p.469.

¹⁹Kinsley, David., *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, University of California Press, Delhi, 1998, p.216.

²⁰D. D. Kosambi., *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Popular Book Depot, Bombay, 1956, p.60.

²¹Manohar Thallapally & Veeranna Guguloth., *Social Evils among Madigas – Matangi System – A Perspective*, Proceeding of the International Conference on Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities (TSSH-2016) at Istanbul, Turkey, 4th June, 2016 to 5th June, 2016, pp.50-56.

²²In *Kritayuga* Goddess *Adi-Sakti* took the reincarnation of *Renuka*. One day when she went to bathe in a well leaving all her clothes on the rim, the *Madigas* who came there in search of the bark of *Tangedu* tree (Tanner's Cassia – the bark of this tree is used to clean the animal hide) saw her and started passing lewd comments about her body. An irate *Renuka Ellamma* curses them thus: "Blind with lust you have not recognised me the *Adi-Sakti*. Henceforth, the first girl-child born in your families shall be dedicated to the society and shall be lasciviously laughed at as *Matangi* by one

practice of dedicating the first-born girl to *Matangi* serves not only as an act of atonement for perceived offenses but also as a means of seeking divine aid and protection.

Despite being officially abolished by law, the *Matangi* system persists among certain *Madiga* communities, indicating its deep-rooted cultural significance. This enduring practice suggests that the *Madigas* may have originally adhered to matriarchal principles, with the *Matangi* system serving as a remnant of this ancient tradition.

Assimilation of Matangi:

According to Sanskrit-English dictionaries, the term "*Matangi*" holds various meanings. It is associated with mythological references such as belonging to the race of elephants, representing a *Chandala* or Kirata woman, being identified as Goddess Durga among the ten incarnations, and being recognized as the mother of Sage Vasishtha. Similarly, the Telugu-English dictionary by C P Brown offers a range of interpretations, including Goddess Parvati, the wife of Sage Vasishtha,²³ a siren, a nymph of wonder, a ghost, an untouchable woman, the guardian deity of sailors in Madras, and a vendor of alcoholic beverages.²⁴

Notably, Thurston and Rangachari have identified *Matangi* as Goddess Durga, aligning with traditional Hindu mythology. Conversely, Syed Siraj-ul-Hasan suggests she was *Jambavan's* daughter, while Emma Clough, akin to the Sanskrit dictionary, identifies her as one of the wives of Sage Vasishtha, asserting her connection with the *Madiga* community and veneration as Mother Goddess *Yellamma*.²⁵

Furthermore, Chilumuri Srinivasa Rao, based on extensive field studies in the Nellore district during the early 20th century, concluded that *Matangi* serves as the protective deity of the *Madigas*.²⁶ He also proposed that Goddesses *Kali*, *Matamma*, and *Yellamma* are alternate forms of *Matangi*. These diverse interpretations highlight the assimilation of *Matangi* into the broader Hindu tradition, particularly in association with figures like Durga and Parvathi.

Worship of Matangi as Renuka Yellamma or Lajja Gouri:

In his book "*Religion in Andhra*," B S L Hanumantha Rao posits that the Mother Goddess was initially venerated in the form of shapeless stones and later in vessels adorned with flowers. This tradition led to the worship of the Goddess in the form of the *Yoni*,²⁷ known as *Garigamma*, represented by a small earthen bowl called *Gurigi* which represents the *Yoni*.

In light of this, the worship of *Matangi*, the tutelary deity of the *Madigas*, by the upper castes as a primary deity, can be understood as the veneration of a naked goddess embodied in symbolic forms such as *Gurigi* (earthen bowl), *Gavvalu* (cowrie shells), *Nagapadige Chekola* (baton with a cobra-shaped head), and *Veeratradu* (coir rope). Despite changing times, the practice of worshipping *Matangi* in the form of the *Yoni* or *Nagnakabandham*, representing the female reproductive tract, persists as efforts to give her a tangible form continue.

Idols resembling the *Nagnakabandham* form are discovered in temples across various locations such as Aihole, Badami, Mahakuta, Siddanakota, Jalahaal, Panchalingala, Kudavelli, and Alampur. These temples also perform worship of *Matangi* or *Yellamma*.²⁸

and all". Cited from Thallapally Manohar (Ed)., Akulapelly Kumaraswamy at all, Cultural History of Madigas - A Brief Study, *Op. Cit*, pp.46-47.)

²³Monier Monier-Williams., *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1960 (First Published in 1899), p.806.

²⁴Charles Philip Brown., *Telugu- English Nighantuvu*, Marwah Publications, Delhi, 1982, (Second Edition Published in 1903), p.977.

²⁵Clough, Emma Rauschenbusch., *While Sewing Sandals: Tales of Telugu Pariah Tribe*, *Op. Cit*, pp. 56, 63.

²⁶Chilumuri Srinivasa Rao., *Madigala Charitra-Samskruthi*, (Telugu), Jyothi Grandhamala, Tirupathi, 2010, pp.129, 130, 171.

²⁷Hanumantha Rao, BSL., *Religion in Andhra: A Survey of Religious Developments in Andhra from Early Times Up to A.D. 1325*, Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of A.P, 1993, p.33.

²⁸Manohar, Thallapally., *Mother Goddess Jogulamba- Renuka-Ellamma at Alampur- A Study*, K.Krishna Naik & E. Shivanagi Reddy (Eds), *Cultural Contours of History and Archaeology- in Honor Prof. P. Chennareddy*, Volume -5, Art, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 2015, pp.85-95.

The sight of these idols often evokes a mixture of emotions in visitors, leaving them both inspired and awestruck. These statues typically depict a figure with a head symbolically replaced by a large lotus flower, prominent breasts, and legs folded at the knees in a splayed position, with a fissure between them resembling the *Yoni*.

The clear depiction of these idols, with their seemingly erotic postures, has led scholars to label them as representations of a "Shameless female deity" or a "Tutelary deity of reproduction." Additionally, the goddess is known by various names including "*Lajja Gowri*," "*Yellamma*," and "*Nagnakabandham*."²⁹

After conducting thorough field studies in Nellore and its surroundings during the early 20th century, Chilumuri Srinivasa Rao concluded that *Matamma* and *Yellamma* are alternative forms of *Matangi*.³⁰ According to this analysis, *Matamma* essentially transformed into *Yellamma* over time. In other words, as the *Madigas* worshipped *Matangi* as *Jagadambika* (the Mother of the Universe), they gradually began venerating her as *Yellamma*.

Numerous renowned shrines across South India also worship *Yellamma* in various iconic forms such as stones or baskets, adorned with offerings of turmeric and vermilion. The *Sundatti Yellamma* shrine in Karnataka is particularly notable in this regard. Additionally, the *Matangi Devi* shrines at Surabheswara Kona and Mogilicharla, where the Kakatiya rulers once paid homage, are famous as *Yellamma* shrines. Similarly, the *Yellamma Rangapuram*³¹ temple in Mahabubnagar district features prominent *Yellamma* shrines. Interestingly, idols of *Matangi* were discovered in the front yards of these *Yellamma* shrines at Surabheswara Kona, Mogilicharla, and *Yellamma Rangapuram*.

***Matangi* as per the *Sthalapurana* of Surabheswara Kona:**

Surabheswara Kona, situated near Turimella village in the Prakasam District of Andhra Pradesh, holds significant cultural and religious importance as the focal point of *Matangi* worship in the Telugu region. The temple's mythological narrative, known as *Sthalapurana*, diverges from conventional retellings of the *Matangi* legend. According to the prevalent lore at Surabheswara Kona, *Jamadagni*, deeply engrossed in worshipping Lord Surabheswara, undertook rigorous penance in this sacred place. *Renuka*, his virtuous and faithful wife, possessed the extraordinary ability to carry water in a vessel-like shape without any container and bring it home. One fateful day, while she went to the Gundlakamma river for her daily ritual of bathing and water-fetching, she was accompanied by a woman from the leatherworking community as her attendant. During her bath, she caught sight of the divine image of Karthavirarjuna, with a thousand arms, soaring through the sky reflected in the water, which pleased her immensely. However, this sight led to her losing her chastity, rendering her incapable of performing her usual water-fetching feat. Learning of this transgression, *Jamadagni* instructed his son *Parasurama* to execute his mother. *Parasurama* obediently obeyed his father's command and unleashed an arrow that severed both *Renuka's* and her attendant's heads. Impressed by *Parasurama's* loyalty, *Jamadagni* offered him a boon, which he used to request the restoration of his mother's life. The sage provided him with holy water and instructed him to sprinkle it after reattaching the heads to their respective bodies. In his haste and the darkness of the moment, *Parasurama* mistakenly affixed *Renuka's* head to the body of the leatherworking woman and vice versa, then revived them with the holy water. Recognizing his error, he presented both women before his father, seeking forgiveness. *Jamadagni* accepted the woman with *Renuka's* head as his consort and relegated the other woman to the status of a subordinate deity. According to local

²⁹Manohar, Thallapally., Mother Goddess Jogulamba- Renuka-Ellamma at Alampur- A Study, K.Krishna Naik & E. Shivanagi Reddy (Eds), *Cultural Contours of History and Archaeology- in Honor Prof. P. Chennareddy*, Volume -5, Art, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 2015, p.87.

³⁰Srinivasa Rao, Chilumuri., *Madigala Charitra- Samskruthi*, Op. Cit, pp.130, 171.

³¹Yadagiri, G., *Ellamma Rangapuram Grama Charitra*, Swechha Publications, Hyderabad, 2011, p.36.

oracles,³² this incident marked the inception of *Matangi*. Additionally, a 16th-century inscription from Kona also identifies it as the hermitage of *Jamadagni* (*Jamadagni Ashrama Sthanamu*).³³

Matangi / Ekavira at Warangal:

During a hymn sung by *Bavaneedu* or *Baineedu* in the presence of Madhaviah, extolling the virtues of the goddess *Matangi*, there was a mention of "the mother went to Oruganti town, the mother went away."³⁴ This traditional hymn, likely dating back to the Kakatiya period or even earlier, was sung by a storyteller. The reference to the mother possibly going to *Oruganti* or *Orugallu* (Warangal) suggests a shift in the significant place of worship for the goddess to Warangal.

In the fifteenth century text "*Kridabhiramamu*" authored by Vinukonda Vallabharaya, references are made to a goddess named *Ekavira*, described as a companion of *Kakatamma*,³⁵ the family deity of the Kakatiya rulers who reigned from Warangal from the 11th to the first quarter of the 14th century. *Kakatamma*, depicted holding a *Damaru*, a sword, a trisula, and a dish of blood, with a fox as her vehicle, was the name attributed by the Kakatiyas to Goddess *Chamundi*, blending attributes from both goddesses.³⁶

The *Ekavira* temple from the Kakatiya period is situated in Mogilicherla village,³⁷ approximately fifteen kilometers from Warangal. Legend has it that this deity was highly favored by Kakatiya Rudrama Devi, who frequented the temple to pay homage to the goddess.³⁸ "*Kridabhiramamu*" provides details and attributes of *Ekavira* that closely resemble those of *Matangi*. The text identifies *Ekavira* with *Renuka*, daughter of the mountain king, wife of sage *Jamadagni*, and mother of *Parasurama*, the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. She was revered as *Adisakthi*, the essence of Veda and Vedanta, and hailed as the mother of all (*Akhilajanani*). Descriptions depict her adorned with snakes, with Moon, Sun, and fire as her three eyes, possessing a radiant face akin to a full Moon and hair dark as bees. She wore a necklace made from the teeth of the Haihaya king and is associated with the act of giving birth to people in a basket or sieve.

The narrative also mentions how *Ekavira* was praised and worshipped by individuals from marginalized communities, such as the storyteller *Bavaneedu* and an outcaste woman, likely from the *Madiga* community. They sang praises to *Ekavira*, with *Bavaneedu* recounting her tales while playing the musical instrument *Javanika*, and the outcaste woman offering her devotions before the goddess's temple, accompanied by the music of a drum adorned with bells.³⁹

³²A. Madhaviah., Mathangi (A Curious Religious Institution), The Madras Christian College Magazine (Volume XXIII, New Series Volume V, July 1905- June 1906, p.304.

³³D. Suryakumar, "Inscription of Achyutharayalu at Surabheshwarakona, AD 1540" Paper presented in the National Seminar on *Early and Medieval History of Prakasam District, Andhra Pradesh* organized by Acharya Nagarjuna University Ongole Campus, Ongole on 15-16 November, 2011.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p.304.

³⁵*Kakatammaku saidoda Ekavira*. See Vinukonda Vallabharaya, *Kridabhiramamu*, (Telugu), Vavilla Ramasamisasthulu and Sons, Chennapuri, 1960, p.23; Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, Tr., *A Lover's Guide to Warangal: The Kridabhiramam by Vinukonda Vallabharaya*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2002, p.53.

³⁶Sri Sripada Gopalakrishna Murthy, "Kakathisakti Evaru?" (Telugu) *Bharathi, Sahitya Masa Patrika*, Vol. 36, No.12, December, 1959, pp. 56-58; Sri Sripada Gopalakrishna Murthy, "Ekavira: Kakatamma", (Telugu) *Bharathi, Sahitya Masa Patrika*, Vol. 37, No.11, December, 1960, pp.56-58; S. Gopalakrishna Murthy, *The Sculpture of the Kakatiyas*, Government of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, 1964, pp.2-5.

³⁷The temple was constructed as per a Fourteenth century Telugu Text by Rudradeva the Kakatiya ruler who ruled between 1158 to 1196 AD. See Khandavalli Lakshmiranjanam, Ed., Kase Sarvappa, *Sri Siddeswara Charitra Kakatiya Rajula Charitra- Pratapa Charitra*, (Telugu), Andhra Rachayutala Sangham, Hyderabad, 1960, p. 105. As per the text Rudra constructed a temple of Mahasakti near Mogalicherla which is none other than Ekavira temple. See also S. Gopalakrishna Murthy, *Op.Cit.*, p.10.

³⁸Khandavalli Lakshmiranjanam, Ed., Kase Sarvappa, *Sri Siddeswara Charitra Kakatiya Rajula Charitra- Pratapa Charitra*, (Telugu), *Op. Cit.*, pp. 131-132 and T. Rajeswara Rao, "Ekavira- Kakatamma" (Telugu) in *Bharathi, Sahitya Masa Patrika*, Vol 39, No. 1, January, 1962, pp.89-90.

³⁹Khandavalli Lakshmiranjanam, Ed., Kase Sarvappa, *op.cit.*, pp. 131-132 and T. Rajeswara Rao, "Ekavira- Kakatamma" (Telugu) in *Bharathi, Sahitya Masa Patrika*, Vol 39, No. 1, January, 1962, pp.89-90.

Sculptural representations discovered near the *Ekavira* temple at Mogilicherla depict attributes reminiscent of *Matangi* as described in "*Kridabhiramamu*," suggesting that the Kakatiyas worshipped *Matangi* under the guise of *Ekavira*, much like they revered *Chamundi* as *Kakati* or *Kakatamma*.

The finely carved details of the image suggest its origin from the Kakatiya period. The goddess depicted bears distinct characteristics: her hair is styled in a chignon, adorned with long earrings and a three-row necklace. She wears bangles and armlets on both arms, and though her upper body is bare, she dons a short skirt with pleats below the navel, revealing her feet. In her right hand, she holds a hooded serpent, while in her left hand, she grasps a sieve or basket. Three hooded snake images adorn the slab, with one on the right side and two on the left.

These attributes closely align with those described in the "*Kridabhiramamu*" text, associating the image with the goddess *Ekavira*. It is plausible to infer that *Matangi* was worshipped under the name of *Ekavira* during the Kakatiya period, particularly by marginalized communities, such as the Dalits, a practice that may have persisted beyond this era.

Kinsley's work also sheds light on the connection between *Matangi* of the tantric tradition and a goddess known as *Savaresvari*, often referred to as the mistress of the *Savaras*. The *Savaras*, mentioned in Sanskrit literature, symbolize a tribal culture, residing beyond the confines of civilized society.⁴⁰ According to the fifteenth-century Telugu text "*Kridabhiramamu*" and information provided by Clough, *Yellamma* was revered as *Adimata*, the primordial mother.⁴¹ Nanjundayya and Anantakrishna Iyer noted that *Matangi* was worshipped as the tribal goddess of the *Madigas*, also known as *Mahalakshmi* or *Adi Sakti*.⁴² It appears that *Matangi* held the status of a clan deity within the *Madiga* community.

Over time, popular traditions and *Sthalapuranas* merged *Matangi* with the *Yellamma* cult, attempting to integrate her with the lore of *Renuka* and Hindu sacred traditions. It appears that *Matangi* later became known as *Matamma*, *Yellamma*, or *Renuka Yellamma*, while the name *Matangi* was attributed to a specific woman, perhaps due to the objectionable practice of ritual prostitution associated with her worship.

This phenomenon suggests that, by being worshipped as *Yellamma*, *Matangi* has essentially lost her distinct identity. Hindu scholars and historians have contributed to popularizing *Yellamma* as a form of *Matangi* through their writings, effectively transforming *Matangi* into *Yellamma* in the collective consciousness.

Worship of Renuka Yellamma as Jogulamba at Alampur:

The efforts to popularize and integrate the worship of Mother Goddess *Yellamma* of the *Madigas* into mainstream Hinduism are evident in various literary works and *Puranas*. These endeavors aim to transform *Yellamma* from a regional deity into a revered female divinity within the broader Hindu pantheon. As part of this process, researchers engage in extensive field studies to explore the cult and worship practices surrounding *Jogulamba* of Alampur in Telangana, one of the eighteen *Saktipithas*.⁴³

Through these studies, researchers seek to provide insights into the significance of *Jogulamba's* worship and its cultural, social, and religious implications. By examining the rituals, myths, and symbolism associated with *Jogulamba*, researchers aim to shed light on the interconnectedness between regional traditions and broader Hindu religious practices.

The exploration of *Jogulamba's* cult and worship offers an opportunity for introspection and deeper understanding of the complexities of religious syncretism and cultural assimilation. It

⁴⁰David Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, Op. Cit., p.219.

⁴¹Emma Raushenbusch Clough, *While Sewing Sandals: Tales of Telugu Pariah Tribe*, Op. Cit., p.63.

⁴²H. V. Nanjundayya and L. Anantakrishna Iyer, *The Mysore Castes and Tribes*, Volume-IV, The Mysore University, Mysore, 1931, p.156.

⁴³David Kinsley., *Hindu Goddesses, Vision of the Devine feminine in Hindu Religious Tradition*, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1987, pp.36-41.

provides a platform for examining the dynamic nature of religious beliefs and practices, as well as the ways in which local deities are integrated into the larger religious landscape.

Ultimately, the research on *Jogulamba* and similar deities serves to enrich our understanding of the diverse tapestry of Hinduism, highlighting the multifaceted nature of devotion and spirituality across different regions and communities.

According to the *Sthalapurana* of Alampur, *Daksha Prajapati*, one of the *Navabrahmas*, offered his daughter *Sati Devi* in marriage to Lord Shiva. However, when *Daksha* decided to perform a *Yajna* and invite all the *Devas* except Shiva, *Sati Devi*, out of love for her parents, sought permission from Shiva to attend. Shiva denied her request, but she went to the *Yajna* regardless. There, she was insulted by *Daksha* and, feeling unable to return to Shiva, immolated herself.

Upon hearing of *Sati Devi's* fate, Shiva became enraged and created *Virabhadra* from a lock of his hair. *Virabhadra*, following Shiva's command, killed *Daksha* and disrupted the *Yajna*. Shiva then carried *Sati Devi's* body on his shoulders and performed the *Pralaya Tandava*, a dance of destruction that shook the three worlds. At the plea of the *Devas*, *Vishnu* intervened and used his *Sudarshana Chakra* to dismember *Sati Devi's* body into eighteen pieces.

These eighteen pieces of *Sati Devi's* body fell at various locations across the country, each becoming a revered *Saktipitha*. The shrine at Alampur, known as *Jogulamba*, is one such *Saktipitha*, commemorating the place where *Sati Devi's* upper teeth are believed to have fallen.

According to local legend, the original name of Alampuram was *Yellammapuram*. It is said that in ancient times, the sage *Jamadagni* had his *Ashram* at Alampur, and his wife *Renuka Devi* would visit the river *Tungabhadra* every day to fetch water. One day, she witnessed a king enjoying a luxurious bath with his wife, which made her feel envious and depressed. As a result, she was unable to make the pot with sand upon her return to the *Ashram*.

When *Jamadagni* learned of this through his supernatural abilities, he became infuriated and ordered his sons to kill her. *Parasurama* obeyed his father's command and severed *Renuka Devi's* head. However, when *Jamadagni* wished to bestow a boon upon *Parasurama*, he requested his father to bring his mother back to life.

Unfortunately, when *Renuka Devi's* head was severed, it flew and fell in the front yard of a *Chandala* family. *Jamadagni* declared that the head had become impure and could not be rejoined with the body. He proclaimed that henceforth, the head would be venerated as *Yellamma*, the village deity of the *Chandalas*. The body without the head remained in the shrine of *Bala Brahmeswara*, while the headless body was worshipped as *Bhudevi* in Alampur, primarily by women. This legend explains the origin of the veneration of *Yellamma* in the region.⁴⁴

According to tradition, in the *Madiga* hamlet of Undavelli village near Alampur, a head is worshipped as *Bhudevi*.⁴⁵ Similarly, the headless body is situated beside the *Bala Brahmeswara* shrine, one of the *Navabrahma* shrines, on the southern side, accompanied by a *Nagnakabandham* in a room. The idol depicts the body in a position suggestive of copulation, with both thighs raised high and splayed apart, clearly showing the *Yoni*. Two mango fruits are held in both hands of the idol, while the head is replaced with a flower. This idol stands out for its robustness compared to others in the vicinity.

Renowned archaeologist *Madho Sarup Vats*, known for his excavations at Harappa, remarked that this idol resembles the Mother Goddess idol found at Harappa.⁴⁶ The local belief attributes the idol as *Renuka Yellamma* and considers her as a bestower of children. Barren women worship her in hopes of conceiving. They cleanse the idol with water or milk, adorn it with turmeric and vermilion powders, and apply honey or ghee on the *Yoni*, believing that doing so will bless them with children.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Manohar, Thallapally., Mother Goddess Jogulamba- Renuka-Ellamma at Alampur- A Study, *Op. Cit*, p.86.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid, p.87.

⁴⁷Ibid, p.88.

Previously, the idol of the presiding deity *Jogulamba* at Alampur, also known as *Renuka Yellamma* and considered to be the consort of *Bala Brahmeswara*, was housed in a shrine located on the south-western side. However, due to the dilapidation of the shrine, a new one was constructed at the same location. Currently, the idol has been relocated and installed on the north-eastern side of the *Bala Brahmeswara* shrine.

In the erstwhile state of Andhra Pradesh, there are three more *Saktipithas* besides Alampur – at Srisailam, Pithapuram, and Draksharama. At these locations, the idols of the Goddess and associated Yantras are situated separately from each other. The shrine dedicated to *Ellamma* or *Yellamma* at Vegayammampeta near Draksharama, considered a pilgrim site, is venerated as the *Grama Devata* and is also known as *Mukti Kshetra*. However, the idol of *Manikyamba* is housed in a separate shrine within the precincts of Bheemeswara Temple at Draksharama. Similarly, at Pithapuram, the *Mukti Kshetra* or *Yatrasthana* is near the *Gali Gangamma* shrine, where the presiding deity is known as *Gali Gangamma* and *Puruhutika*. But, in the Kukkuteswara temple of Pithapuram, a separate shrine has been constructed for the idol of *Puruhutika Devi*. Likewise, at the Srisailam Hill shrine in the Eastern Ghats of Kurnool district, the presiding deity is Srisaila Mallikarjuna or *Chenchu Mallaiiah*. His consort, *Bhramaramba*, has a separate elevated shrine behind the one dedicated to Lord *Mallikarjuna*. Similarly, *Jogulamba* is worshipped in a separate shrine dedicated exclusively to her. Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi noted that although shrines dedicated to male deities are close to those of the Mother Goddesses, the latter retained their identity by being worshipped separately and on par with their respective male consorts. During a field study of the four *Saktipithas* located in the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh, it was observed that while installed in their own shrines known as *Muktikshetras* associated with the shrines dedicated to male consorts, *Jogulamba*, *Bhramaramba*, *Puruhutika*, and *Manikyamba* are all worshipped as Mother Goddesses, signifying their individual importance.⁴⁸

The transformation of Mother Goddess *Yellamma* into *Jogulamba* and her incorporation into the shrine as one of the *Ashtadasa Shakti Peethas* likely took considerable time and effort. It appears that the construction of the nine shrines dedicated to *Navabrahmas* came later, and *Jogulamba* was made the consort of *Bala Brahmeswara* as part of the assimilation process. Various *Puranas* may have been written or used to validate this assimilation process. Through literature, Mother Goddess *Yellamma* underwent transformation into *Jogulamba*, becoming one of the *Ashtadasa Shaktis* and eventually being recognized as the consort of *Bala Brahmeswara*.

Just as India has been the stage for numerous battles, it has also seen many communal clashes. The religious beliefs of tribals and non-peasants, along with their reverence for Mother Goddesses and *Nagadevatas*, have found their place within mainstream Hinduism over time. This assimilation reflects the complex and diverse religious landscape of India, where various traditions and practices coexist and influence one another.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The Matangi tradition represents an important dimension of the religious and cultural history of South India, particularly Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. The worship of Matangi among the Madiga community reflects the complex interaction of caste, gender, fertility symbolism, ritual practices, and regional religious identities. The association of Matangi with Matamma, Renuka Yellamma, Ekavira, Lajja Gauri, and Jogulamba illustrates the gradual assimilation of local Mother Goddess traditions into broader Hindu religious frameworks. Literary references in *Kridabhiramamu*, regional *Sthalapuranas*, inscriptions, archaeological remains, and ethnographic accounts provide valuable evidence for understanding these transformations. The incorporation of regional goddesses into established temple traditions and sacred geographies demonstrates the dynamic nature of religious continuity and cultural change. However, similarities in mythology and

⁴⁸Researcher field trip at Alampur Srisailam, Draksharama and Pithapuram.

⁴⁹Thallapally Manohar., *The Assimilation Process of Matangi of Madigas into Hindu Pantheism*, Prof. Kasturi Misro Memorial Lecture, South Indian History Congress, 40th Session, held at Annamalai University, From 31st January to 2nd February 2020, pp.1193-1203.

iconography should be critically examined, as they do not necessarily establish a common origin for all these deities.

The Matangi tradition also highlights the need to distinguish between the religious veneration of the Mother Goddess and the actual social position of women within caste-based society. Although fertility symbolism and Yoni worship reflect the sacred significance attributed to female generative power, they do not necessarily indicate matriarchal social structures or women's equality. Similarly, the dedication of girls to deities must be examined critically wherever it involves coercion, sexual exploitation, or the denial of women's rights. The study of Matangi therefore offers important insights into the historical experiences of marginalized communities and the relationship between religious assimilation, caste hierarchies, and gender relations. A comprehensive understanding of this tradition requires the combined analysis of oral histories, literary sources, inscriptions, archaeological evidence, and field studies. Such an approach contributes to a more inclusive reconstruction of the social and cultural history of South India while emphasizing the importance of preserving religious heritage without legitimizing practices that undermine human dignity and equality.

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