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# Village Deities - An Interview with Siddalingaiah

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# Village deities

**Siddalingaiah**, a major Kannada poet and activist, was a founder of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti, which launched a powerful Dalit movement in Karnataka in the mid-1970s. He obtained a doctoral degree from Bangalore University for his research on village deities. His publications include *Gramadevathegalu*, a study of village deities in Karnataka, *Ooru-Keri*, an influential autobiography, and collections of poetry, essays and speeches. Twice member of the Karnataka Legislative Council, he is presently Professor at the Centre for Kannada Studies, Bangalore University and Chairperson, Kannada Book Authority.

The following conversation took place with Chandan Gowda in Kannada and has been translated by him into English.

**Chandan Gowda:** *How did you become interested in village deities?*

**Siddalingaiah:** I was always curious about gods. I often went to fairs and festivals with my grandmother and used to participate in the festivals of village deities as an onlooker. I was also interested in the 'possession' by gods. A relative of mine would often get possessed by a god, and I would sit next to him on such occasions. Since he was closely related, we felt safe that no problems would befall us. Also, there was tremendous intimacy between the devotees and the gods. The devotees spoke to them as if they were their brother, father, mother, grandmother or friend. I particularly liked how they questioned and challenged the gods. The gods too did not mind and spoke back as if they were indeed their friends and relatives.

I realized when I was young that the god-human relation is intimate and humane among the lower castes, villagers and farmers. Among the upper-castes, purohits and poojaris mediate relations between the god and devotees. In fact, only the priests can enter the temple's inner sanctum; the devotees offer their

respects from a distance. A big distance exists between the god and the devotees. In folk (*janapada*) religion, the distance is much less, if not non-existent. There is freedom to scold, condemn and even criticize god. An elderly person once asked a deity on behalf of the people: 'Where were you all these days? Have you forgotten us?' The god answered calmly: 'Is yours the only village? I need to look after the seven worlds. Do you know how difficult my task is?' The elderly person hit back: 'We work so hard – don't you see that!' The god replied: 'Am I working any less? Even I'm working hard.' The relation where the god and humans share their hardships with each other is an intimate one. The distance between them is erased. The context that allows for this interested me.

*Referring to your book, Avataragalu (Incarnations), you once told me that it was a crude rational approach to understanding folk religion. How would you understand village deities now?*

Mockery was central to *Avataragalu*. Because of my rationalist background, I used to make fun of gods for a few years. That's when *Avataragalu* was published, which appealed to rationalist youth. But, I don't think like that any more. For example, people suddenly start lashing themselves with a whip. I probably would have made fun of this earlier. I would like to look at it differently now. This person is inflicting self-violence (*sva-himse*). Why is he doing this? What are its origins? I would ask such questions now.

Some devotees took me to a forest to show their deity who was supposed to have great powers. They showed me a round stone with turmeric and *kumkuma*. I asked, 'She is such a powerful deity. Why haven't you built a shrine for her?' They replied: 'We tried to do it. But she asked us not to.' Some of them strongly felt that she had to have a shrine and tried to build one. She asked them to stop building it. They demanded to know

why. She asked, 'Do each of you have a house?' One of them replied that he didn't have one. She then said: 'See, he doesn't have a house, and you're asking me to have one. No, I cannot have a house; don't build one for me.'

Many deities in and around Bangalore don't have shrines. And, the shrines of many deities have no roof. A deity called Bisilamma said: 'I want to burn under the sun, shiver in the cold and get drenched in the rain.' Her demand might mean that she wants to be part of nature or, that she wants to face hardships. Braving nature goes against the history of civilization itself which has tried to conquer and escape nature's hardships. Unusual conceptions lurk behind village deities. Freedom is very dear to village deities – 'I want to be free to roam the plains'. If 'refined' deities like to be in a well-built shrine, village deities wish to freely roam the plains. A doorless shrine exists near Bangalore. The deity had protested against having a shrine, but the devotees forcibly built one for her. The deity begged them later, 'You've already built a shrine, but please don't build the door.' They asked why, to which she replied: 'I would like to go and come as I please.'

*You've said that village deities have their main following from the lower castes. How do the upper castes in villages relate to them?*

By lower castes, I refer broadly to meat eating castes, not just dalits, but artisans, Vokkaligas: their perspective is the village deity's perspective. The upper castes usually fear them. Earlier they also considered these deities frivolous, but this is changing especially due to the lower castes' tendency to mimic the upper castes. For example, a village deity called Maramma becomes Mari Maheshwara, Kali becomes Kalikaamba, Durgamma becomes Durgaparameshwari. The changes visible in the lower castes are reflected in the changes in the practices surrounding village deities. The meat offerings make way for vegetarian ones, the Kannada *mantras* start being replaced by Sanskrit ones. When the earnings of the village deities increase, the upper castes also tend to get involved and change things like mantras.

*This has been happening for a long time.*

Yes. It has become more rapid in the last thirty years. Even the Dalits have changed. After the Dalit movement picked up in the '70s, the village deities were disparaged and held in contempt by Dalit youth. Many Ambedkar Youth Organizations had been formed in Dalit areas. The Dalit movement's influence was

strong. So the influence of the village deities had somewhat declined. A person came to the goddess week after week to seek help in overcoming his problem. The goddess got fed up: 'I'm unable to help you. There is only one other option. It's better that you join a Dalit organization. Go, fight!' But, this is changing again.

*Why?*

Probably because of the weakening of progressive ideologies. Near Nagarbhavi, I remember seeing a building with a large board with 'Ambedkar Sangha' written on it. The building has now become a temple; the previously large board has become small and next to it is a big board, 'Maaramma's Temple'. With all the economic changes around us, I think the village deities could become even more popular. I mean, if medicines become unaffordable, people will turn to these deities out of helplessness for dealing with their health problems.

*Are you saying that people will go to these deities when they don't have money and not otherwise?*

We seem to think that the time of the village deities is over. When people feel helpless, when they get caught in problems, the village deities might well spring back to prominence.

*Are the people's relation to the village deities in rural society changing as a result of their economic hardship?*

The festivals around the village deities could actually regenerate enthusiasm in our villages, enliven them. Unfortunately, electoral politics has had negative effects. The presence of two rival factions can come in the way of organizing festivals of the village deities.

*What about male village deities?*

They are around: Anjanyeya, Ranganatha, for example. But, in South Indian rural societies, the female village deities reign supreme. Their existence goes back centuries. They haven't been written about. Temples haven't been built for them. If you look at the fairs and festivals, you'll see how far back they go.

*What kinds of changes do you observe when the lower caste deities become village deities, i.e. when the more powerful castes also accept them and get involved in celebrating the festival?*

The ritual language and food practices can change. For instance, when Lingayats are in charge of

organizing the village deity's festival, the deities become vegetarian. The sacrifice is performed at a distance from the temple, and is usually done behind a curtain of sorts. They call it *mare-bali* (concealed sacrifice). Sometimes, they cover the deity's idol itself. They handle this with finesse; there isn't much confusion.

*How do Muslims relate to the village deities?*

They extend support. When the procession passes a mosque, they show respect.

*They don't participate in other ways?*

No, they come as spectators.

*The goddess who wished to be exposed to the sun, cold and rain suggests a critique of civilization itself. Does the imagination of society embedded in village goddesses offer other critiques for our times?*

We are in a situation where one individual does not show concern, whether social or interpersonal, for another. People are becoming more self-centred, and not community-centred, in their thinking and conduct. There is a need for people to think about society, and about other individuals in community-centred ways. Similar aspirations and motives are present in the imagination of village deities: we should all live together; we should act as if everyone's well-being matters.

*Don't these motivations exist in mainstream goddesses like Saraswathi and Lakshmi?*

All communities do not come together in celebrating the festivals of these deities. They can celebrate Lakshmi pujas in homes or in *mathas* – but that's not the same as festivals of village deities where different castes come together to celebrate it as a community festival. This is not the festival of any one caste. And the myths and beliefs hidden there are about protecting everyone's welfare.

*What are these beliefs?*

As I mentioned earlier, the belief that everyone ought to have a house is one such belief. The value of suffering is another. The central thought (*chintane*) of these festivals is the well-being of all. Then, there is celebration. Celebrating life, the grandness of life, through a festival is a great thing – this is only possible in the festivals of village deities. Where is the celebration in other festivals? People from a matha or a community might celebrate it by themselves. A few

others might join in, but that isn't the same as the festivals of village deities.

*In these times of heavy rural migration to cities, what happens to the rural migrants' relations to the village deity after they move into cities?*

They don't lose their relation with their village deities even after moving into cities. This is important. They attend their festivals in their villages. Those who have made some money help buy a chariot or a cupola, help build a shrine. Also, when a group of families from a village live in the same neighbourhood in Bangalore, like Guttahalli, Srirampura or Chamarajpete, they arrange for the deity to come to their area. The deity comes in full splendour. There is great feasting and fun the whole time she is there.

*No misgivings about getting the deity to come here?*

No. They just think that it's convenient if all of them don't have to make a trip to see her. They arrange for the deity to come a week or so after the village festival finishes. Sometimes, she shifts to the city permanently. Many shrines have been built for village deities in Bangalore.

*And the priests?*

Priests will be found.

*From their own community?*

Yes. A police sub-inspector turned a priest after his retirement. I met him recently, and he said his earnings were good (*smiles*).

*Have you seen new deities emerge?*

Yes, but they are usually passing fancies. There is a shrine for AIDSamma somewhere in Mandya district. This deity might not stay long if a cure for AIDS is found.

*How do village deities vary across Karnataka?*

Malnad and Dakshina Kannada have *bhoothas* (spirits), not village deities. This is due to Kerala's influence. The extremism seen in North Karnataka isn't seen in South Karnataka. About a thousand buffaloes, and ten thousand sheep are sacrificed during Durgamma's festival in Davanagere.

*How do you explain this extremism?*

The education levels, and the influence of modern society is lower in North Karnataka as compared with the southern parts.

*Isn't this view too rational?*

No, it's true. The belief in these deities can become weak, even disappear, with education. Sometimes, the devotees of deities like Maramma, Durgamma, Kamma switch deities. They become devotees of Thirupati Venkataramana, Ayyappa Swamy, Raghavendra Swamy, and ISKCON and start visiting places like Mantralaya and Thirupati.

*It is common to see the worlds of the village and classical Hindu deities as being separate. D.R. Nagaraj would say that they have evolved jointly, and influenced each other. How do you view this issue?*

That is true. They have influenced each other, and also fought with each other. Both conflict and reconciliation are seen in their evolution. The devotees of Shiva or Vishnu are observed seeking the blessings of village deities.

*You noted earlier that village deities are rooted in a community-centred consciousness.*

Yes, that sentiment (*bhavane*) is in the imagination of village deities. For example, if a Vokkaliga, Beda, Uppara or even a Lingayat carries the goddess, someone from another caste gets the firewood, someone else gets oil, someone spreads the cloth, someone holds the torch, someone will sacrifice the animal – every caste plays a role. What people call inclusive policy (*laughs*) is clearly seen in the festivals of village deities. No community will be left out; each one will have some responsibility.

*Including the Brahmins?*

Usually not. Even they can come forward to do a *homa*. And, if the deity has an elevated status, they could join in as priests.

*A caste-based distribution of tasks.*

Yes, but the features of inequality aren't there. Except for the dalits, who are now refusing to play the *tamate* (a drum), I haven't come across anyone else refusing their tasks.

*Not all villages are multi-caste villages.*

They could bring people from other villages to perform these tasks. Or, a group of villages can come together to jointly organize a festival.

*How do women participate?*

In the past, women used to be the priests for village deities. They were gradually replaced by men.

Women used to be priests in the Karaga festival in Bangalore. It used to be called the Draupadi Karaga; it has now become Dharmaraya Karaga. Village deities possess the bodies of women more frequently than those of men. Women from all castes do the *arathi*, which is the most attractive part of the festival. Dalit women bring the *arathi* separately in places where untouchability is strong.

*How have new technologies influenced the devotees' experience of village deities?*

People now use music players to play songs; at times they even play cinema songs. Tubelights have replaced the wooden torches. In Sirsi, where Brahmins dominate, the buffalo sacrifice has been stopped at the Marikamba festival. But as blood has to be ritually sprinkled (*abhisheka*) on the deity, they use a syringe to draw out blood from the animals.

*How does the village deity relate to the other deities in the village?*

They will be related to each other as siblings or some other kin. Sometimes, the sister deities will not be on speaking terms due to a past episode. For example, if the younger of the two sister deities had borne children but not the elder sister, the latter would have killed her sister's children out of jealousy. The devotees of the two sisters are generally not on good terms. If the village deity is one of the sisters, the devotees of the other sister do not celebrate the festival. Sometimes, if a negative memory is associated with the village deity. For example, if someone had died or absconded during her festival, his or her family might withdraw from the celebrations.

*Establishing kin relations between deities of different castes allows for caste relations to be transcended.*

People transcend castes in relation to god. For example, Kamma is a deity of the Acharis,<sup>1</sup> Banashankariamma of the Devangas (weavers), Hattimamma of the Dalits: they are all sisters. Anjaneya is their brother in some places. Brahmins consider him their deity in some villages. During festivals, deities weep that their brothers or sisters haven't come yet. During Haleooramma's fair, Beechnallamma, a deity from a neighbouring village, comes dancing and singing to meet her. Till she arrives,

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1. Acharis: Sometimes called Visvakarmas, this caste consists of several sub-castes identified with occupations like carpentry, ironsmithy, goldsmithy, and stone sculpting.

Haleooramma does not take a step. *Beti Habbas* (Meeting Festivals) are organized for sister deities to meet. Affection, love, and large-heartedness are the primary qualities of village deities. Once, a family repeatedly asked a deity to cure their sick child; the deity asked them to take the child to the big hospital, i.e., the Victoria Hospital, in Bangalore. The child was saved.

*Our milieu is fast changing. Do you fear for the well-being of village deities?*

The deities can suddenly spring back into prominence. The new changes often generate a sense of uncertainty and so people seek out the deities to increase their confidence. Remember, the maternal instinct is still seen as important for protection. They could also take a political expression. For example, Indira Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Mayawati, and Mamata Banerjee are modern village deities (*smiles*).

*Have you noticed attempts by Hindutva forces to hijack these village deities?*

I haven't noticed any serious attempts. I have not seen any gatherings or speech-making to propagate Hindutva at these fairs. The world of village deities cannot be easily shaken.

*Animals – buffaloes, in many cases – are usually sacrificed for the village deities. What are the possible consequences of the imminent state ban on cow slaughter?*

It will stay on paper and these practices will continue. The state is not likely to interfere with religious practices. We will see what happens. In any case, buffalo sacrifice is on the decline. Dalits are the ones who slaughter buffaloes. Under the influence of Gandhi and Ambedkar, some of them have now refused to do this. The upper castes and the Dalits have also fought over this issue. In any case, it is wrong to impose restrictions on others' food.

*What aesthetic qualities do you like in the worship of village deities?*

The celebration itself is great. The village deities are not without art. Take, for example, dancing. It is seen as a *seva* (service) to the goddess; so it is an important part of the festival. Second, the colours used in the festivities. A variety of colours are used – red, white. Some deities ban the use of certain flowers and colours. For example, jasmine is banned in a few festivals. And, the sounds give joy and deepen the *bhakti* sentiments. The sound is important at the time the

deity possesses a human body. Art, colour and sound are very important.

*How are the new technologies affecting aesthetics – the relation between new sounds and bhakti, for example?*

We have to see what they will do. It doesn't look like the new technologies have done much harm. The new lights have deepened enthusiasm and *bhakti*. But traditional singing has declined. The sound and colours have not been affected, but singing is losing its importance due to audio cassettes.

*These deities aren't seen among tribals?*

Tribal deities are usually male folk heroes: Junjappa, Mylaralinga. Tribal settlements aren't village settlements; they don't have the features of a village. The village deities are missing here. Their heroes are male figures who have saved life and property.

*Do village deities cross over with their devotees after the latter convert to different religions?*

They do. I visited a Buddhist temple in Bangkok. Tamils had moved here long back and the images of Buddha and Mariamma were placed together at this temple. The village deities can stay on even after conversion.

*Have you noticed similar tendencies among the Muslim and Christian converts from lower castes?*

Even after converting to Christianity, lower caste converts can be seen giving importance to Mother Mary. The influence of the village deities is probably behind it. The Muslim converts might also find a way of keeping the village deities with them – perhaps by giving importance to Prophet Mohammed's mother. The female deities in Buddhism like Tara and Mangala might appeal more to new converts from the lower castes. I am interested in Buddhism, and have greater interest in these female deities.

*Have you felt that our language and intellectualism come in the way of understanding village deities?*

Since it's a human situation, language is secondary. The gestures, the sentiments, the idiom, and the emotional world (*bhavaloka*) around the village deities are different. A non-believer has no entry.

*What did you find in the bhavaloka of the village deities?*

Pure humaneness. And solace for a distraught mankind.