



A STUDY ON FAIRS AND FESTIVALS IN TELANGANA - NAGOBHA & MEDARAM JATARA

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Abstract

Telanganites not only celebrate the main festivals, but also celebrate certain regional festivals like Bonalu, Batukamma all over Telangana districts, Yedupayala Jatara in Medak, Sammakka Saralamma in Warangal district. Telangana is hosting the largest tribal festival in Asia, the 'Medaram Jathara', from February 21 to 24. Nagoba Jatara is Gond tribal festival held in a Keslapur village, Inderavelly Mandal Adilabad district, Telangana, India. It is the second biggest tribal carnival and celebrated by Mesaram clan of Gond&Pardhan tribes for 10 days. The article presents the rituals, celebrations, significance of the medaram and nagobbha jatara.

Keywords: medaram, nagobha, jatara.

Introduction

Nagoba Jatara: Worshipping an ancient serpent at Keslapur

Keslapur Nagoba Jatara, a popular tribal festival which kicked off in Telangana's Adilabad district, stands as a testimony to how the tribes folks of Mesaram clans preserve their roots, customs and traditions regardless of the influence of modern day lifestyles. Thousands of tribals arrive from different parts of the country on bullock carts, a special feature of Nagoba Fair, which is next only to Sammakka-Saralamma tribal festival in fame and name. Nagoba Jatara, one of the biggest tribal festivals in the world, began with a bang at Keslapur village in Adilabad District's Indravelli Mandal. Amidst the drum beats in the thick of midnight, the huge tribal festival marked the beginning of the traditional worship by Mesaram clan. The five-day Mahakratu began with the anointing of the deity with Ganga water placed on a banyan tree brought on foot from Kalamadugu in the Jannaram mandal of Manchiryala district.

As per the tribesmen, the Mesaram clansfolks from different parts of the country rested under the shade of the banyan tree. It became a custom for the daughters-in-law of the Mesaram clan to get dressed in white clothes and pay obeisance to the goddess and also take the blessings of the elders. District Collector Rahul Raj, MLC Dande Vitthal, MLAs Vedma Bojju, Aniljadav, and Utnoor ITDA PO performed special pooja to Goddess Kashbhu as representatives of the government.

All the rituals of the tribals in India are closely related. The worship of the Panchabhuthas (elements of nature) continues to be their custom. No matter how many changes have come in modern times, the tribals continue their traditions coming down from many generations even today. Nagoba Jatara stands as a testimony to that.

The Adivasi rituals that take place at every step of the fair reflect tribal way of life. The Nagoba Jatara held by Mesaram Vamsi is special not only for the Adivasis but also for the non-Adivasis. Less than 400 tribals live in Keslapur. But during the fair, lakhs of tribals from other states



including Mesaram clans arrive here for the festival. The government has also recognized this fair as a national festival, which is next only to the famous Sammakka-Saralammala tribal fair in Telangana.

The rules and regulations followed a week before the Nagoba fair show tribal unity. Many modern trends are changing tribal lifestyle but they continue to preserve their roots. For example, all the people of Mesaram living anywhere in the state and the country come to the fair on bullock carts. Nagoba Jatara has many such special features.

A week before the start of the fair, all the people of Mesaram take initiation. Dressed in white clothes, they gather at the village temple in Keslapur, carry the pooja kalash and set out on foot for 150 kilometers to fetch the waters of the Godavari river. During this journey, they will stay only in the outskirts of the village. They reach the Godavari in the suburbs of Kalamadugu village of Manchiryal district and collect the holy water. Before reaching Keslapur with this water, one day worship is done to Goddess Indrai in Indravelli.

After reaching Keslapur with the Godavari water in a brass vessel, all the Mesaram clans together put it on a banyan tree. There everyone rests under the shade of the banyan tree for 3 days. On the day when the crescent moon of the month of Pushyami appears, the Mesaram clansmen anoint the Nagoba deity with water brought from the Godavari. The temple is also purified. The Pooja program is performed with the traditional instruments of tribals. Also, clay pots made by the potters of Sirikonda are used in these rituals.

Soil anthill is made with the water brought in the pots. During the special pooja, sprouts and milk in a copper cup are placed on a mound covered with white cloth. It is still believed that the snake-god would come and drink the milk.

According to a popular story related to Nagoba Jatara, seven brothers from the Mesaram family came to their uncle's house in Keslapur. His daughter Indra Devi thinks that they are all coming to kill her father because she did not help them when they were in trouble. With that anger, she turned into a tiger and killed 6 of the 7 brothers. The last one, Nagendra, begged Indradevi to let him live and become the Nagoba of Keslapur. The Mesaram family strongly believes that Nagendra (snake god) saved the last of their family. Thus Nagoba became a part of the daily lives of the Mesaram clans.

The way of life of the Mesaram clansmen involves a rule that no one should be a burden to others. The necessary fodder for the bulls should also be procured by whoever owns it. Even though Mesaram clans come in thousands for the fair, they all cook on 22 stoves in Keslapur. Even those stoves cannot be placed anywhere. There is a rule that cooking should be done inside the compound set up in the temple premises.

Daughters-in-law of Mesaram clans have special recognition in the Nagoba fair. The newly married brides of these clans are brought to Nagoba in Keslapur and met under the patronage of the Patels of the Mesaram clan. They enter the temple dressed in white and take the blessings of elders. That's when they are called the daughters-in-law of the Mesaram family. In addition, before Nagoba Pujas, the Mesaram clan fill the mound in the temple premises with mud. If the

soil is trodden with the feet of the squirrels and made soft, the daughters will make a mound with this soil and prepare the rice. Then gifts are given to the grooms. They believe that family's health as the birth rate will increase.

In Keslapur Jatara, special offerings to Nagoba are cooked together under the shade of the banyan tree. They have a rule that an offering should be made to the goddess with the crops grown in the rice field. After the fair, while going to their hometowns, it continues to be a custom to buy cooking utensils and agricultural implements for the whole year at the fair. The durbar held on the occasion of the Nagoba fair has a special feature. Less than 8 decades ago, remote villages did not have any facilities. In such a time, Prof. Hyman Dorf went to Adilabad district to study the conditions of the area under Nizam's rule. Then his attention fell on the Keslapur fair. After that, the rulers decided to find out the problems there. So in 1946, the first Praja Durbar was held. After the independence of the country, the Durbar was held under the chairmanship of the District Collector when the tribals pour out their problems.

Nagoba Jatara is one of the most important Jataras of the Gond and Pardhan tribes of erstwhile Adilabad. The Jatara receives devotees from across Telangana and the adjoining States.

The chief deity of the Jatara – Nagoba (Sri Shek – Cobra) – is the supreme deity (Persa Pen) of the Gonds and Pardhans. The Buigota Khandan of Mesram Clan in particular celebrates the Jatara.

The Nagoba Jatara is an annual fair held at Keslapur of Indervelly Mandal, in Adilabad District. Keslapur is 20 km from the ITDA headquarters Utnoor and from Gudihathnoor on the National Highway No 44. The Jatara is held on Pushya Amavasya (new moon day in February).

The Jatara

Few elder members of the Mesram clan go barefoot to the river Godavari few days before the Jatara, bring holy water and keep it near the Banyan Tree in front of the Nagoba Temple.

Women folk of the Buigota Khandan of Mesram Clan prepare an earthen 'lingam' and later make mud balls out of it and arrange them in seven concentric circles one above the other. The mud balls are used to plaster the floor of the Sati shrine on the premises of the Nagoba Temple. The clan priest and village headman prepare seven lumps of mud and decorate them with vermilion paste to make the Sati.





Bheting

New brides of the clan in white saris come in a procession and enter the Sati shrine and worship the seven miniature stones representing their seven divine ancestors. They are then led by older women to worship the Nagoba, after which they are recognised as full-fledged members of the clan entitled to participate in all socio-religious rituals and rites.

Then the Katoda – clan priest – washes the deity Nagoba with the holy waters of Godavari and worships with seven coconuts and other offerings. Thereafter, all tribals and non-tribals are allowed to have darshan of the deity. Some devotees also sacrifice fowls, goats, etc. at some distant place.

The procession of decorated carts from far-off places to Keslapur is a sight to behold during the Jatara. Hawkers sell many interesting local and exotic items.

Durbar

Professor Haimendorf, Advisor to the erstwhile Government of the Nizam's Dominions, introduced in 1940s a tradition of Durbar in the afternoon after the darshan of the deity. The local tribal leaders by sitting on one side will put the local problems before the Ministers, MLAs, the District Collector, Project Officer, ITDA Utnoor and other officials sitting on the other side to address them then and there itself.

The Legend

Nagoba has a lengthy legend recited by Pardhan tribal bards in accompaniment of musical instruments for several days. The narration includes many adventures of tribal heroic men and women including long travels to bring rare things, carrying a 'kalash' of sacred water of Ganga, observing penance under banyan trees surrounded with anthills, etc. The heirs and predecessors of one Jejkal Dev are said to have passed on the sacred Kalash to their next generations. The Gonds and Pardhans still symbolically observe the legendary practice of worshipping the sacred Kalash kept on the branches of a banyan tree, travelling barefoot for several days to the river Ganga (i.e. Godavari) to fetch sacred water and so on.

The chieftain Jejkal Dev is said to have found the barren town Bowurmachua (present Keslapur) and converted it into a fertile land by constructing tanks for irrigation. The Archaeology Department has recorded a barren town near Keslapur. Even today, remains of the town and several temples can be found in a village located in between Utnoor and Keslapur.

Yadavas of Devagiri (Maharashtra) ruled the region for some time during the 12th century. The Gond chieftains took over and the Jathara has been celebrated uninterruptedly.

The temple seems to have been reconstructed during the Qutb Shahi period and renovated during the Asaf Jahi period. However, except ruins, no concrete structure was in existence some five decades ago, as per the account of Dr Kancharla Mohanrao, a Tribal Welfare Department officer. There was only a thatched hut as a shelter to the deity. Half-a-century ago a brick-cement temple was built.



Government Support

Now the temple is being renovated. The State Endowment Department is providing funds in addition to contributions from clans. The Government is arranging public utilities for devotees.

The State Tribal Welfare Department has been supporting the Nagoba Jatara with a budget. This year, though the annual fair is not being held in view of the pandemic, traditional worship will be continued by the clans for four days from February 11 to 14.

Medaram Jatara (February, Biennially):

- Location: Medaram Village
- Significance: Honoring the tribal goddesses Sammakka and Saralamma.
- Highlights: A massive gathering of devotees, making it one of the largest tribal festivals in India.
- Duration: 4 days

Medaram Jatara is a tribal extravaganza celebrated with zeal in the village of Medaram in Telangana. Occurring biennially in February, it's a time when the locals honor the tribal goddesses Sammakka and Saralamma. The festival is steeped in legends of these deities and their blessings.

A massive congregation of devotees gathers, making it one of the largest tribal celebrations in India. With rituals, dances, and offerings, Medaram Jatara stands as a testament to Telangana's rich tribal heritage. This event is a testament to the devotion of the Koya tribe, who are joined by people from all walks of life, to commemorate a revolt led by Sammakka and Saralamma, a mother-daughter duo, against the levy of taxes on the tribal populace during a period of drought by the Kakatiya rulers in the 12th century. Though it has started as a small gathering of the Koya tribals, it earned State festival status in 1998.

Scheduled to be held from February 21 to 24 this year, this festival pays homage to the revered goddesses Sammakka and Saralamma, and is observed biennially in the month of Magha (February) on the full moon day. Beyond its religious fervour, the jatara serves as a platform for fostering understanding and harmony between visitors and tribal communities, promoting the preservation of their unique traditions, culture, and heritage on a global scale.

Months before the official commencement on February 21, devotees began streaming into Medaram, a quaint village nestled within the Eturnagaram wildlife sanctuary in Mulugu district of Telangana. With an estimated daily footfall of around two lakh, officials anticipate a higher turnout compared to previous years and say it could touch nearly 2 crore. Visitors from Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha converge at the shrine, creating a vibrant tapestry of cultural exchange. Medaram Jatara in Mulugu district. | Photo Credit: RAMAKRISHNA G.

The Medaram Jatara, spanning four days, stands at the pinnacle of spiritual significance for devotees who eagerly await this occasion every two years.



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In tandem with these preparations, the State government facilitates online offerings of jaggery, locally known as bangaram, for devotees wishing to contribute to the rituals. "The State government is making arrangements for the smooth conduct of the fair with a total of ₹110 crore," District Collector Ila Tripathi, who is also the nodal officer for the jatara, said. The historic and revered Kratu Medaram Maha Jatara, known as Asia's largest tribal Kumbh Mela, is set to commence today in Telangana. The sacred festival is a vibrant celebration that sees the revered deities Sammakka and Saralamma emerge from the forest to partake in ceremonial dances on mats at Janaranyam. The Maha Jatara festivities are scheduled to kick off on Wednesday at Medaram in the Tadwai mandal of Mulugu district, drawing pilgrims and devotees from far and wide to witness the spiritual spectacle. The Kratu Medaram Maha Jatara is a biennial event that takes place every two years on Maghasuddha Poornami, also known as Sammakka-Saralamma Purnam. The first phase of the Maha Jatara commenced last Wednesday with a grand inauguration of the Mandamelige festival by the priestly representatives of Goddess Sammakka in Medaram and Saralamma in Kannepally. This year, the Medaram Maha Jatara is scheduled to be held from February 21 to 24. The ceremonial rituals began yesterday with the traditional procession to Jampanna Gadde. Led by priests Satyam and Gondi Sambasiva Rao, the procession set off from Kannepally on Tuesday evening, adhering to the age-old Adivasi traditions. The arrival of Jampanna at the designated spot was met with joyous celebrations, as villagers and devotees welcomed the deity with auspicious aartis and offerings. The upcoming events include the measuring of Sammakka's daughter Saralamma this evening, accompanied by the ascent of Pagiddaraju and Govindaraju to the throne. Adivasi and tribal priests play a pivotal role in the ceremonial proceedings, guiding the revered deities through the sacred rituals. On subsequent days, the festivities will witness the arrival of Sammakka deity at Gadde from Chilakalagutta and the visitation of the two divine mothers to the devotees. The Maha Jatara culminates on Saturday evening as the



deities retreat back into the forest, concluding the grand fair with fervent devotion and cultural revelry.

The Medaram Sammakka Saralamma Maha Jatara, renowned as the largest tribal festival in Asia and popularly known as the Telangana Kumbh Mela, commenced on Wednesday with fervent devotion and a throng of devotees flocking to pay homage to the revered nymphs. As the festival enters its second day, anticipation is high for the unveiling of the pivotal event that marks a significant moment in the sacred proceedings.

Medaram has transformed into a vibrant public fair, with devotees immersing themselves in sacred rituals and traditions. The recent solemn events, including the passing of Saralamma, Padigidda Raju, and Govinda Raju, have added a somber tone to the proceedings, underscoring the spiritual depth and significance of the festival. Devotees are participating in purifying rituals, such as taking a holy bath in Jampannavagu, to offer prayers and seek blessings from the divine goddesses. The culmination of the Medaram Sammakka Saralamma Maha Jatara is set for the 24th of this month, culminating in the symbolic return of Samakka and Saralamma to the forest, marking the completion of this revered and spiritually enriching festival.

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The population of the little forest village at Medaram in normal times never exceeds 300. Suddenly, Last year nearly 1 crore pilgrims participated in the Jathara and during this year the expected pilgrims is 1.20 crore devotees come from all over Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and neighbouring states like Orissa, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh.

Sammakka Saralamma Jathara or Medaram Jathara is a tribal festival of honouring the goddesses celebrated in the state of Telangana, India. The Jathara begins at Medaram in Tadvai Mandal in Mulugu district. It commemorates the fight of a mother and daughter, Sammakka and Saralamma, with the reigning rulers against an unjust law. It is believed that after Kumbha Mela, the Medaram Jathara attracts the largest number of devotees in the country. An estimated 10 million people gathered in 2012. It is celebrated in Medaram during the time the goddesses of the tribals is believed to visit them. Medaram is a remote place in the Eturnagaram Wildlife Sanctuary, a part of Dandakaranya, the largest surviving forest belt in the Mulugu.

There are many legends about the miraculous powers of sammakka. According to a tribal story, about 6-7 centuries ago, that is in the 13th century, some tribal leaders who went for a hunting found a new born girl (Sammakka) emitting enormous light playing amidst tigers. She was taken to their habitation . The head of the tribe adopted her and brought up as a chief tain (She later became the saviour of the tribals of the region) she was married to Pagididda Raju a feudatory tribal chief of Kakatiyas(who ruled the country of Andhra from Warangal City between 1000 AD and 1380 AD).She was blessed with 2 daughters and one son namely Sarakka, Nagulamma and Jampanna respectively.

Ritual

Sammakka Saralamma Jathara is the time for the largest tribal religious congregation in the world, held every two years (biennially), with approximately ten million people converging on the place, over a period of four days, which is 90km from Warangal city. The Sammakka Saralamma Jathara is a State Festival of Govt. of Telangana. Many tribal Devotees from different states of India (M.P, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Maharashtra, Karnataka and parts of Jharkhand)reach to the festive place to celebrate the Jathara. People offer bangaram/gold (jaggery) of a quantity equal to their weight to the goddesses and take holy bath in Jampanna Vagu (stream). It is a festival with no vedic or brahmanic influence.

Until 1998, the only way to reach Medaram was by a bullock cart. In 1998 the state government declared the 1000-yr old festival as official and laid down a motorable road. In 2008, nearly 8 million people were estimated to have attended the festival. And in recent times the gatherings in the Jathara are roughly near 10 million. This fair is said to be the largest repeating congregation of tribal communities in the world. The traffic jam during the festival sometimes goes as far as 60 km on the Warangal highway. In 2012, approximately 1 crore people would attend the world's largest tribal festival.



Jampanna Vagu

Jampanna vagu is a tributary to River Godavari. According to the history, Jampanna is the tribal warrior and the son of Tribal Goddess Sammakka. The Jampanna vagu took his name as he died in a battle fighting against Kakatiyan Army in that stream .The Jampanna vagu is still red in colour marked with the blood of Jampanna (Scientifically the red colour of the water is attributed to the soil composition). Tribal's believe that taking a holy dip in the red water of

Jampanna Vagu reminds them the sacrifice of their gods who save them and also induces courage into their souls. There is a bridge constructed on top of Jampanna Vagu, known as Jampanna Vagu bridge.



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