



## **Religious and Social Life in Medieval Andhra and Karnataka The Kakatiya and Vijayanagara Periods. (C.E. 1100-1600)**

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### **Introduction**

The medieval era in the Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka region (C.E. 1100-1600) was a pivotal phase in South Indian history. This period witnessed the ascendancy and decline of several influential regional powers. Key among these ruling houses were the Kakatiyas of Warangal, the Reddy Kings and Velama Chiefs in the Andhra region, and the powerful, expansive Vijayanagara Kings.

A comprehensive study of the historical records, inscriptions, and contemporary literature of this five-century span provides rich insight. These sources are invaluable for uncovering the intricate religious and social customs and practices that governed the lives of the populace. They reveal a society deeply rooted in devotional practices and structured hierarchies under the respective royal administrations.

Critically, the social and religious dynamics established under the patronage of these dynasties formed the very foundation of modern Telugu culture. The essence and nature of numerous religious rites, social ceremonies, and community traditions that remain prevalent in the Telugu region today are not recent phenomena. Instead, they demonstrably took deep root in the society during this medieval period. Many of these practices are visible to us in their current form, a testament to the enduring legacy of the Kakatiyas, Reddys, Velamas, and Vijayanagara rulers. Their collective rule institutionalized traditions, making this era indispensable for understanding the modern cultural fabric of the region.

### **Religious Conditions**

**History suggests that religion forms the basis for every custom and belief in society.**

- The Kakatiyas, who ruled Andhra Pradesh, initially favored Jainism.



- During the Kakatiya period, Buddhism almost declined, while Shaivism gained both royal and popular patronage. Pashupata Shaivism and Veera Shaivism significantly developed during this time.
- Evidence suggests that Shaiva sub-sects like Kalamukha and Kapalika were also present in certain parts of Andhra Pradesh.
- Veera Shaivism, which emphasized devotion over rituals, spread widely. Poets like Palakuriki Somanatha wrote Dvipada Kavyas (couplets) to popularize Veera Shaivism, leading to the decline of Jainism. However, the extreme form of Veera Shaivism resulted in extremely cruel religious and social malpractices.
- Due to the efforts of Vaishnavites like Palanati Brahmanna, Vaishnavism also took root during this period.
- During the reign of the Reddy Chiefs, Velama Chiefs, and Vijayanagara Kings, both Shaivism and Vaishnavism continued to receive royal and popular support.
- Some repugnant practices from Vajrayana, a sect of Buddhism, found their way into the Shaivism of the Kakatiya period.
- ‘Shakti’ worship increased in Shaivism, and in addition to Vedic deities, minor deities (like Kakitamma, Ekaveera, Mahuramma) were also worshipped frequently.
- During the Vijayanagara period, there was worship of Village Deities (Gramadevathalu). Superstitions and malpractices were rampant among the people. Cruel customs like hooking the back (Sigamekki Adatam) and offering pieces of flesh (Kandalu Kosi Ivvatam) were practiced during Jatara (temple festivals).
- Scholars suggest there were instances of Human Sacrifice (Narbali) to deities during the medieval period.
- The Malakapuram inscription of Kakati Rudrama Devi mentions Pashupata Shaivism and the orthodox Shaiva ‘Golaki Matha’. Scholars believe that Golaki Matha might have even encouraged human sacrifices.



## Peculiar Religious and Social Customs

As a result of the religious practices of Pashupata Shaivism, Tantricism, and Veera Shaivism, several peculiar ritualistic customs became prevalent in medieval society. This article aims to illustrate the general nature and characteristics of these practices.

- Bhairavi Chakram
- Head Sacrifice (Thalabali)
- Ashtanga Rudhirarchanam (Worship with the Blood of Eight Limbs)
- Champudu Gudi (Temple of Sacrifice)
- Devotee Hanging from the Sidi-Maanu - Jumping into Fire
- Offering Vows by Falling under Chariot Wheels
- Veera Kallu (Hero Stone) and Installation
- Veera Puja (Hero Worship) - Palanati Heroes
- Embossing/Engraving the Image on Thamma Padiga (Betel Spittoon)
- Embossing the Image on Ganda Pendera (Anklet/Bracelet of Honor)
- Ranankudupu (War-related Ritual)
- Omens (Shakunalu)
- Anjanam (Magical Collyrium)
- Animal Sacrifices
- Alchemy (Rasavada Vidya - Philosopher's Stone/Touchstone & Fuming Method)
- Mantras and Chants
- Punishments
- Severe Ordeals like Trial by Fire (Agnipariksha)
- Maddhu Pattatam (Taking an Oath/Pledge)
- Courtesans (Varakanthalu)
- Devadasis - Basivirandru (Temple Servants)

### Detailed Descriptions Some of Key Customs

#### 1. Bhairavi Chakram

Bhairavi Chakram is also known as 'Bhairava Tantra' or 'Chakra Puja'. This form of Shakti worship is primarily centered around circles (muggulu). It is understood that within the circle's perimeter, the Kula-Acharyas (those who perform Shakti worship) engage in extremely repulsive acts according to the



Tantric religious custom involving the 'Panchamakaras' (five 'M's: Wine/Madyam, Meat/Mamsam, Fish/Matsyalu, Copulation/Maithunam, Mudras/Parched Grain).

## **2. Head Sacrifice (Thalabali)**

Head sacrifice, or 'Ganda Thala' or 'Midi Thala', is the act of a devotee forcefully cutting off their own head to offer it to the deity they believe in. The devotee would foolishly believe that if the deity they worshipped assumed a terrifying form, became a Mahamari (Plague Deity), and threatened destruction, they should sever their own head. Stone slabs depicting these 'Thalabali' scenes are found in the Mallam region (Nellore district) of Andhra Pradesh. There was also a custom where the devotee would insert their neck into a round, wide, and sharp iron scissor called a 'Ganda Kaththera' and cut off their head with their own hands.

## **3. Ashtanga Rudhirarchanam (Worship with the Blood of Eight Limbs)**

This is the method of worshipping the deity with blood drawn from eight body parts (Ashtangas): two legs, two hands, two shoulders, the chest, and the forehead (Lalatom). The belief was: "The eight Bhairavas grant all desires of those who worship them with the blood of the eight limbs and offer the sacrifice drenched in the blood of the neck." Shaiva devotees such as Veerabhadralu, Veera Mushtiwaru, and Mailara Bhatulu performed this blood-worship ritual as a religious custom.

## **4. Champudu Gudi (Temple of Sacrifice)**

In medieval times, a 'Champudu Gudi' was specifically designated for devotees to offer themselves as sacrifices. These temples, specially built for Veerabhadraswami, Bhairava, and Bhadrakali, were locally referred to in Telugu as 'Champudu Gullu' (Temples of Killing). Some devotees would seek out these 'Champudu Gullu' with the belief that the faster they sacrificed themselves, the faster they would reach Kailasa (Heaven). Anavemareddy (Dharmavemana), the Reddy Chief of Kondaveedu, had a stone pavilion called 'Veera Shiromantapam' built within the premises of the Mallikarjunaswamy Temple in Srisailem.

## **5. Devotee Hanging from the Sidi-Maanu - Jumping into Fire**

The 'Sidi-Maanu' (a type of wooden pole) procession would take place during temple Jatara (festivals). Iron hooks, resembling fishhooks, were attached to the 'Sidi-Maanu'. Devotees would pierce the skin of their backs with these hooks and hang terrifyingly in the air. The skin of a goat meant for sacrifice was



also pierced and hung. Mailara Bhatulu would walk on fire during the Jatara of Shaiva and Village deities.

## **6. Offering Vows by Falling under Chariot Wheels**

The practice of falling under the wheels of a chariot and being crushed to fulfill a vow was mainly prevalent in the ancient Chola and Karnataka regions. The Italian traveler Niccolò de' Conti, who visited the Vijayanagara Kingdom around C.E. 1442, witnessed and described this custom. Young women, in a state of religious ecstasy, would fall under the moving chariot wheels, firmly believing that God would accept their vow with utmost pleasure upon their death.

## **7. Veera Kallu Installation (Hero Stone)**

A 'Veera Kallu' is a stone installed in memory of a hero. These stones were erected as memorials to commemorate the sacrificed heroes for generations to come. People believed that attaining Kailasa was possible if one committed self-sacrifice (Atma Balidanam) to save cattle during a plague, to protect a Brahmin, for the benefit of the ruler, or to sustain a Vrata (vow/observance). Veera Kallus in human form are seen in various postures in the courtyard of the 'Tripurasundaridevi' temple in Tripurantakam; some of these stone figures appear to be piercing their throat or abdomen with a sword.

## **8. Veera Puja (Hero Worship) - Palanati Heroes**

After the installation of the 'Veera Kallu', there was a tradition of worshipping the heroes as equals to the Gods. Historical evidence suggests that temples were built and heroes were worshipped in the Palanati region of Guntur district. According to the Macherla inscription, 'three Veera Gullu' (Hero Temples) were built for the Veerakoti (group of heroes). A grand festival (Tirunaalla) is held annually at the 'Veerulagudi' (Hero's Temple) in Karempudi. Local storytellers known as Pichchukuntluvaru passionately enact the Veeragathas (heroic ballads) with rhythm, melody, and dance. This method of hero worship is also known as 'Veeracharam' (Heroic Custom).

## **9. Embossing the Image on Thamma Padiga and Ganda Pendera**

'Thamma Padiga' is a vessel for spitting chewed betel (Tambulam), also known as 'Thamma Thotti'. 'Bomma Pettatam' or 'Bomma Kattatam' (Embossing/Engraving the Image) is the practice by victorious kings to express their triumph by engraving or embedding the images of slain enemy kings onto a metal Thamma Padiga or onto the Ganda Pendera (Anklet/Bracelet of Honor) worn on their leg.

**Conclusion:**

The study of history and literature from C.E. 1100 to 1600 unequivocally demonstrates that this era served as the foundational period for the cultural identity of contemporary Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. The political stability and royal patronage provided by these powerful dynasties—culminating in the expansive rule of the Kakatiyas Vijayanagara rulers —allowed for the institutionalization of numerous socio-religious practices.

The customs observed today, from the structure of caste relations and specific marriage rites to the prominence of Bhakti traditions and the function of temple festivals, are direct inheritances from this period. The essence of this medieval society was not lost; rather, it was preserved, codified, and transmitted effectively across generations. Therefore, the contemporary cultural fabric of the Telugu region is a living testament to the enduring influence of the Kakatiyas, Reddys, Velamas, and Vijayanagara rulers, whose legacies are visibly embedded in the social and religious life of the people.

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