

# A tribal solidarity in Vanapuri Bheema Raju Agnigundem Festival at Chinna Patnapur in Kerameri, Ashifabad District of Telangana State, India

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Vanapuri Bheema Raju is a male deity worshiped by certain segment of people from Kolam and Gond tribes who derive their origin from Bheema one of the brothers among the *Pancha Pandavas* in Mahabharatha epic.

Dr. M.G. Selvin Raj a Jesuit anthropologist working among the Gond and Kolam tribes in Kerameri, made his presence at the Vanapuri Bheemudu tribal festival on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2025. In his interview with Mr. Atram Pedda Bheemu an 83-year-old man of Kolam tribe, Dr. Selvin introspects the tinges of this tribal festival which draws hundreds and thousands of people to this small tribal hamlet Chinna Patnapur in Kerameri, Ashifabad District of Telangana State in India.

Dr. Selvin: How often this Vanapuri Bheema Raju festival is celebrated here?

Mr. Atram Pedda Bheemu: Vanapuri Bheema Raju festival is celebrated once in three years here in the month of January. The festival lasts for almost three weeks.

Dr. Selvin: How long you have been attending to this festival?

A.P. Bheemu: From my childhood onwards, I am attending to this festival. I remember in 1950s our school text books had the story of this festival. But now we don't find such stories written in the school text books. Hence the younger generation may not know the origin and importance of this festival.

Dr. Selvin: Can you tell me about the temple site?

A.P. Bheemudu: This plot of land belonged to me. Some 30 years back I donated these three acres of land for the temple site. Hence, I stopped cultivating this land and started taking care of the temple site.

Dr. Selvin: What are those images or idols kept in the temple?

A.P. Bheemudu: They are our Gods and Goddesses. They represent the cosmic universe. The image made of peacock feathers is known as *Nemali Gaddu*. All those other idols are various deities brought to the temple by people of various villages. The wooden horse represents the sun and the moon on its face. We call it Vanapuri Bheema Raju.

Dr. Selvin: Is *Nemali Gaddu* associated with anything with the life and religious practices of Gond and Kolam Tribes?

A.P. Bheemudu: Yes. *Nemali* (Pea-cock) is a common bird we see in our fields and forest. In most of our paintings and art forms we use the image of *Nemali*. We very much use this *Nemali Gaddu* (peacock's feathers) to prepare crown when we participate in our tribal dance "*Gussadi*". Mostly Gonds perform this *Gussadi* dance during the Dandari festival which begins after Deepavali. The dancers wear the crown made of 1,500 peacock feathers. This also known as *mal boora*.

Dr. Selvin: I find so many images/ idols there. What are they?

A.P. Bheemudu: The main one is Vanapuri Bheema Raju. The others are various deities (both male and female) worshiped by people in different villages. Each deity is associated with their tribal clan.

Dr. Selvin: What are they? Can you name them?

A.P. Bheemudu: I don't know the names of all (with hesitation), but I know a few of them. Pothuraju, Sirisigam, Danthunpalli, Babijeri Bheemanna, Golletti are some of the deities I know. We just worship all these deities because our forefathers worshiped them. We have strong emotional attachment to our way of worship.

Dr. Selvin: Is there any female deity worshiped by you?

A.P. Bheemudu: Posimma is a female deity worshiped commonly in many places. Possima represents courage and valour among women.

Dr. Selvin: Who performs the rituals in the temple?

A.P. Bheemudu: The village priest known as *Devari* performs all rituals. At times he is invited to houses where the family celebrations are conducted. He carries the statue of the deities to their houses. They offer grains or sometimes money as offerings.

Dr. Selvin: Are these deities kept in the temple for worship?

A.P. Bheemudu: Yes for some time. After the festival we take these deities to our villages in procession. The devout families invite the deities into their houses and receive blessings. We don't have temples of permanent structure. We can not keep the idols under a tree or in a make shift temporary structure we have made during the festival. Hence, we keep them in our villages under the custody of the village priest *Devari*.

Dr. Selvin: Is it true that the Gonds also participate in this festival.?

A.P. Bheemudu: We do not differentiate them. They also equally participate in this festival along with Kolam tribe. They also invite the deities into their houses when we take them in procession.

Dr. Selvin: I find a huge number of people flocking to the temple. From where do they all come?

A.P. Bheemudu: They all come to Chinna Patnapur from various neighbouring villages like Pedda patnapur, Jodenghat Kolam guda & Gond guda, Kallegam, Pittaguda, Goyagam, Sourkela, Kesalagudam, Devapur Kolamguda etc. Many come from Kummarigunta near Utnoor also.

Dr. Selvin: Can you explain why these women and children flock around the idols in the temple site?

A.P. Bheemudu: They offer grains, paddy, pulses, puffed rice, turmeric powder, Kumkum and sweets made in their houses as a sign of gratitude for the blessings they received or for various prayer intentions. Mostly barren women ask for offspring.

Dr. Selvin: What is *Agnigundem*?

A.P. Bheemudu: *Agnigundem* is a platform made of burning fire-wood. After putting off the flame the glowing ember is spread as a platform. The devotees

walk on this hot glowing ember three times passing over the platform from one end to the other.

Dr. Selvin: Who are these men and women walk on it?

A.P. Bheemudu: These are the people voluntarily make vow to get into *Agnigundem*. They fast 40 days and undergo rigorous penance and mortification. Both men and women voluntarily take this vow. During the period of 40 days apart from fasting, the men keep themselves away from consuming alcohol and other country liquor. They avoid eating meat and having intimacy with women. The women also observe the same who vowed to get into *Agnigundem*. During the 40 days maintaining purity, observance of morality and village customs are given utmost importance.

Dr. Selvin: How is this *Agnigundem* created?

A.P. Bheemudu: A 20 ft long pit of 5 ft width is dug. The pit is filled with fire wood collected from the forest or carried from the neighbouring villages by those who come for this festival. The wood is set fire through a natural process of rubbing bamboo sticks or striking stones to create fire. To create flame, they go on blowing the spark adding some cotton or dry leaves. Once the flame is created, the entire bed of wood is completely burnt and the glowing ember is spread across the pit making a platform to be walked over by the devotees who made their vow.

Dr. Selvin: How do you initiate *Agnigundem* ceremony?

A.P. Bheemudu: All the people surround the fire when the drums are beaten accompanied by pipes so loudly. The devotees who underwent the rigorous penance during the last forty days are made to stand in a line. Prior to this assembly, they purify themselves by taking bath in cold water. The devotees each one goes and picks up an idol made of wood and clay placed there at the site of worship. As the sound of the musical instruments raised some of them get into trance and start dancing to the tune. The village priest *Devari* start beating them with a whip. Then one by one in a row walk on the bed of glowing ember three times as they go round the temple.

Dr. Selvin: What is the role of *Devari* here at this moment?

Before the devotees walk on the fire, the *Devari* lets a small chick into the fire. If the chick walks across

the ember unhurt, then the devotees are allowed to walk on it. In case the chick is burnt in the fire, the entire *Agnigundem* ceremony will be stopped. If the Gods and Goddesses are propitious to them, then the chick will come out of the fire unhurt. Hence the devotees are expected of maintaining purity and un-defilement during the 40 days of their preparation.

As I conclude this interview with Mr. Atram Pedda Bheemu, I feel a sense of unity and solidarity among the Kolam and Gond tribe gathered here. It is a celebration of their life at the end of their harvest and expression of their gratitude to God and Goddesses of their clan. There is no specific reason behind why they do the way what they do. An indigenous religious tradition kept up for so many years followed by generation after generation. What is more surprising is their symbiotic relationship maintained with the nature and their ways of worship in this month long *jatra* give more meaning to their existence amidst abject poverty, deprivation and uncertainties in life. For the Jesuits of Andhra Province, this mission keeps before us a great challenge to walk with the marginalised and the excluded in the years to come.