



Oral epics of Male Mahadeshwara: Women and society

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Introduction

Women that inhabit the world of kannada oral epics are at the very centre of ambiguities and contrary pulls that give these epics their distinctive form. On the one hand, these women in these oral narratives are proud of their womanhood and are more assertive than their counterparts in the written tradition; on the other hand, they also hold the classical Sita as their role-model. Consequently, they constantly oscillate between fierce assertion of their womanhood and 'pativratiya', fidelity to their husbands in mind and body.

The use of epic narration within regional cults is clearly a very widespread Indian phenomenon: the ritual of performance is pleasing to the deity, and the story impresses the human audience of that deity's greatness. In many aspects, Male Mahadeshwara is typical of Indian oral epics. It is performed in a ritual manner: it is performed in a particular regional cult; it tells the story of a human being who is also a deity; its performers are of relatively low social status.

Kannada, the state language of Karnataka, belongs to the Dravidian family of languages. Various forms of folklore exist in Kannada since ancient times. A reference of folk-performers from Karnataka is mentioned in the famous Tamil work 'Silappadikaram' of the second century AD.

Unfortunately, the various folk-forms or folk-performances of the past were not known to us since the scholars and poets considered them 'vulgar', fit for the entertainment of only the ignorant masses. They concentrated only on the written and sophisticated forms of expression.

In the oral epic of Male Mahadeshwara, the lord Sri Mahadeshwara is believed to be the incarnation of Lord Shiva. Historical evidences suggest that the saint Mahadeshwara must have lived during the 15th century. About 600 years ago, he came to this pilgrim place in Male Mahadeshwara hills located in the Kollegal taluk of Chamarajanagar district of southern Karnataka. He performed penance and it is believed that he is still performing penance in the form of 'linga' in the temple's garbha gudi, the 'sanctum sanctorum' of the temple. The 'linga' worshipped now in the temple is a self-manifested (swayambhu) one. Male Mahadeshwara swamy was moving on a tiger and performed many miracles around the hills to save the people and saints living there. The lord's miracles are beautifully sung by the village folk in 'Janapada' style. According to legends, Male Mahadeshwara was in the 'kaliyuga' to a fair coloured virgin woman Uttarajamma. This clearly depicts the common belief in all religions and faiths where virgin woman giving birth to godly



persons and saviours. In his boyhood, the lord was spiritually guided by the then pontif of Suttur Mutt and Kunthur Mutt. The young saint was supposed to have come from Srishaiam in Andhra Pradesh to this part of the state. It was a dense forest area surrounded by seventy seven hills in seven circles. It was not a safe place for human habitation. The young saint saved the saints who were performing penance and were taken captive by an evil king Shravana who possessed abundant black magic. Apart from this, there were tribes living here who were devoid of any rays of civilization. It is said that the lord Mahadeswara destroyed the black magic of Shravana and got released saints who were in his prison. The place where they were held captive is also a holy place, and is famous as Thavasere and the place where Shravana lived is known as Shravana Boli.

The Folk Singers of the Oral Epic Male Mahadeswara

The professional singers of this oral epic are called 'Devara Guddas' and 'Kamsaleyavaru' whose job is to accompany the 'kamsale'-bronzes cymbals. The artistes are drawn from the Halumatha 'Kuruba gowda' community and are initiated into this profession very early in their lives and after initiation, they are required to lead a disciplined life, as prescribed by tradition. Only those who vowed to live a life of devotion to lord Mahadeswara are supposed to play 'kamsale'. These kamsale artists are illiterates and have no printed literature. They learn these songs orally. They participate in fairs, which are held in Mahadeswara hills during the festivals of 'Diwali', 'Shravana' and 'Ugadi'. Hence, lord Mahadeswara is also popularly known as 'Badavara Devaru Madappa'.

The Outline Story of the oral Epic

The epic story Male Mahadeswara describes the life and miracles of the saint. The outer structure of the oral epic resembles the pan-Indian epic, The Ramayana; Shiva incarnates himself on earth as Mahadeswara to destroy the evil king Shravanasura. This is the common 'The Hero as the Saviour' motif. The epic has seven parts and normally sung by some pilgrims on their way to the annual fair on the Mahadeswara hills. This may last for seven consecutive nights.

The first part narrates the immaculate birth, childhood and spiritual quest of Mahadeswara. This gives the status of women in general and virgin mother Uttarajamma, mother of lord Mahadeswara in particular. Like all other faiths and traditions of the world, saviours and Gods themselves are born to virgin mothers. This definitely glorifies divine mother and also differentiates Godly mothers from other lesser mothers who were not virgins. The second part narrates the ways through which Mahadeswara gets a wealthy farmer, Junje gowda (Kuruba Gowda), as his devotee to build him a temple on the seven hills. The third part is devoted to the destruction of the evil king Shravanasura. In the fourth part, we have the longest and most moving episode of a woman named 'Sankamma kathe'. This episode dramatises the suffering of a proud woman Sankamma and the ordeals that she successfully undergoes in order to retain her dignity as a virtuous wife. The fifth episode is slightly comic in tone and depicts the rise and fall of a vainglorious and miserly woman named 'Bevinatti Kamma'. The sixth episode narrates how lord Mahadeswara gets two simple, god-fearing people, Moogayya and his wife, as



his devotees. The concluding part besides traditional ending with benediction, gives a brief summary of the entire epic.

The Society as Depicted in the Epic

The 'Soliga' community that lived in the seventy seven hills become the devotees of lord Mahadeswara. The Sankamma episode throws light on the food gathering methods of the tribal community. Soliga Neelegowda had seven sons. The youngest Neelaiah was engaged in cattle and sheep rearing and all his siblings were engaged in agriculture. This shows that the originally hunting and gathering tribe, the soligas took to farming and settled cultivation. The society depicted in this oral epic is predominantly patriarchal and speaks of male domination. The most important aspect of any tribal society is its intricate tradition of cults, the magic, the belief in sorcery and the supernatural power with which man could exercise control over others and nature. This knowledge for supremacy through black magic is the undercurrent that depicts the whole epic.

Contrary to the patriarchal family and male domination, there is the episode of 'Bevinatti Kamma' where we see only matriarchal set up and man is given no importance and completely sidelined. Kamma becomes the most prominent because she grows til from which oil was made as it was needed to light lamps. She was a miserly woman and never would part with her oil which was needed at the temple to light the lamps.

This oral epic can also be called as the 'tribal epic' because the tribals perform this. This also consists of all the tribal culture.

Women in the Epic

The story of Sankamma in the epic typifies all self contradictions the women had during the period. Neelaiah

was an angry man typical of his times and was very proud of his handsomeness. He wanted to marry a very beautiful woman, searched many lands on his own because his parents could not see a right match for him and finally got married to Sankamma. Sankamma did not give birth even after a year to a child and was not allowed to bring water home as the other female members in the house thought that her barrenness will pass on to their children and themselves. Owing to differences he had with his brothers, Neelaiah had to leave for the forest along with his young and beautiful wife Sankamma. They live in a lonely hut in the midst of a dense forest. Neelaiah as was the custom of his tribe had to leave for nine months annual hunting expedition. He became anxious because he had to leave his beautiful and young wife to stay alone in the lonely hut in the forest for nine long months. He becomes anxious about her fidelity. He also felt that he was the reason for her barrenness and doubts that her desire for the child may push her to get into extra marital affair during his absence. He had faith in her but demanded an 'oath of fidelity' from her. She refused to swear such an oath despite unimaginable physical torture she would be subjected to. She rebelled against the male domination and she was just faithful to her husband and was only reluctant to make such an oath. She never imagined that she would be unfaithful to her husband. Neelaiah represents male dominated society being highly possessive of his wife. She strongly opposes the doubts of Neelaiah over her fidelity and at one point asked him to leave her by repaying the doery he got at marriage. She was ready to leave this freedomless relationship of marriage. She becomes the representative of the tribal society which believed that marriage is an



agreement and nothing more sacred than that. She was modern enough to break from a doubting husband and believed that marriage is mutual trust and ability to live together. She rejected the man's domination over woman and treating and owning her as a commodity. However, when her husband returns from the hunting expedition and challenges her to prove her chastity, she meekly obeys him and undergoes nine ordeals one more awful than the other. Lord Mahadeswara saves Sankamma from her husband Neelaiah and bestows her children on her promise that her children would be his devotees. The lord wants more devotees and gets them through this act.

Bevinatti kamma or Honnunase kamma was the head of the kuruba community. Her episode is the most important of the prevailing matriarchal family among the tribes. The domination of man is completely absent here. Ever glowing lamps at mahadeswara shrine needed oil. Oil was made from til as the tribes began more of farming and less dependant on hunting. Kamma grew til and got all the impotence because her til was needed for the oil lamps at the shrine. Lord Mahadeswara wanted to include farmers like Kamma among his devotees so that the requirement of the oil for the lamps at the shrine would be easily met but Kamma did not want to become his devotee and was too miserly enough to part with her til. She was very protective of her crops and her wealth. She did not wish to succumb to the highness of lord Mahadeswara.

Lord Mahadeswara becomes the embodiment of kindness when it comes to his treatment to Sankamma but becomes all merciless in defeating Kamma and thus makes her community his devotees that ensured constant supply of oil to the temple lamps. The lord Mahadeswara

exhibits his dual role here and appears to be selfish.

A reference of other women characters can be made to show the status of women during the time. In the extracts from Kenchavva of Madaga and Kumara Rama, we come across two women who as the victims of male superstition and cunning. They suffer very badly and end their lives tragically. As Kenchavva of Madaga and other similar narratives and documents show that it was a common practice in medieval period to sacrifice a woman. Often, a pregnant woman was sacrificed to get a tank filled with water or to see a fort stand.

What is heart rending to see in such instances is that the victim would invariably be a daughter-in-law of the family and not the wife or daughter of the person concerned. Almost always, the victim knew what was in store for them and would accept it, either because there was no other recourse or because tradition would have made them believe that self-sacrifice for the good of the community was an ideal. However, the narrative makes it clear when the singer's sympathies lie when he shows with what affection and regret the woman bids goodbye to the cattle in her house, plants and flowers in her garden. There are many other long poems on the unfortunate women who would commit sati, after the death of their husbands.

Such narratives document the various steps and measures that would be undertaken by the local chieftain on such occasions: shutting the portals of the village or town with huge rods, sending her gifts if he approved of her intended action and arranged a procession of her on the streets. In this context, the collector of these narratives, Krishnamurthy Hanuru makes this sad



comment: “ ironically, in Hindu society, death would often come to women in the form of water or in the form of fire, the two most essentials for life”(1983). The short lavani (similar to a ballad) “ water for the tank” that follows this long narrative affords us a good instance of the way different cultures deal with the same theme differently. In the climatic moment of this lavani (called a Riwayat), the irony of the whole situation is exploded (“My parents themselves stand here holding me;and if I think of beseeching the king, King himself is standing here, ready to sever my head”).

Ratnaji, the victim of Kumara Rama, brings to mind Phaedra in ‘Hyppolytus’ by Euripides and in Phaedra in Phaedra by Rycine. She is tricked in broad daylight into a marriage with an old man;and till the very end she remembers it and justifies her action. Even at the moment of her death, she declares that the man she fell in love with was Kumara Rama and that she will continue to love him in her next birth also. This work also establishes how a ‘woman’s text’ differs from a ‘man’s text’. There is a long written work on the same subject, in the tradition of traditional epics, called ‘Hosa Kumararabha Sangatya’. Though, both are on the same subject, the literary epic focuses on wars and the hero’s brave exploits and barely pays attention to the suffering of Rathnaji. The oral epic sung by a woman, constantly focuses on Ratnaji and the ways in which she was deceived.

The extract from ‘Mailaralinga’ exemplifies the degree of humanization of Gods and Goddesses in oral narratives. Shiva in this work, in the guise of an old ‘goravayya’ (a name of an nomadic tribe), falls in love with Komali, a shepherd girl; and, in order to win her, he goes even to ridiculous extent of awaiting her near

water wells, spending the whole night in a dusty and dark shrine expecting her, and rolling on a dung-heap to impress her. In the oral epics Gods are no better or worse than the human beings; they have the same flesh and blood, and they are subjected to similar emotions of love, anger and jealousy.

The plight of women in the oral epic is pathetic and depicts cruel attitude of the male dominated society.

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