‘Making of the Deity’: The City and its Visual Culture

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The present essay attempts to trace the vicissitudes in the modes of image making and worship of local goddesses during the last three decades in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad in the newly formed state of Telangana, India. When one thinks of the ‘visual culture’ of a city what largely comes to mind is advertising, film banners and enamel paintings on the walls of the roadside shrines. The focus of this essay however, is the idol and images of the goddess, the rituals and paraphernalia around the temple as a visual space. The visibility of the deities provides an inevitable *‘Darshan’*[i] to public, not necessarily belonging to one faith. The sacred spaces burgeon in the middle of the roads (Pic.1), at street corners as well as inside the compound walls of private houses. Small shrines enlarge into more wider and spacious

Pic. 1 A small roadside shrine.

ones by encroaching into public spaces. Is it possible to look at this phenomenon as merely religious and social practice or does it serve in understanding the city and its visuality as a discursive space? The study becomes relevant at this juncture as there was a massive cultural and political struggle that went into the Telangana state’s bifurcation from its earlier dominant geographical and cultural existence. Through a framework of intermediality, this essay shall try to map the visuality and its refractions which shape into a socio-cultural and political identity unique to the region.

Since the past few decades, especially during the Telangana Movement[ii], the worship of local deities at shrines and celebration of festivals in the honor of goddesses have gained importance not only in securing a significant sacred space for these goddesses among the Hindu pantheon but also a socio-political space for her marginalized disciples. The small shrines, dedicated to numerous local deities, who remained ignored earlier, were now noticed as developing into larger temples of importance with the support of local political leaders, committees and organized devotees.

Images of Goddesses: Vibrant images of Hindu goddesses like *Durga* and *Kali* iconography form the major visual vocabulary that caters to the visuality of sacred or religious art which spreads across every nook and corner of the city. Although these images are religious and ritualistic in nature, they may as well qualify as 'popular visual culture'. This is because they are highly consumed by the masses and also because they are painted by so-called untrained commercial artists in cheap enamel colors as commissioned by patrons, usually, temple priests, committees or donors annually. The images add to the spectacle and visibility of the subaltern communities in urban spaces. Ironically, even though the shrines actually belong to local goddesses such as *Pochamma, Yelamma, Maisamma* etc, the images of upper caste Hindu pantheon of goddesses adorn the temple premises instead (Pic.2).

Pic.2 Popular Durga form overtaking most of the subaltern shrines

While numerous scholars (Whitehead 1920, Pinney 2004, Jain 2007) have discussed the apparent influences of brahmanization, hybridization and modernization processes that led to changing visuality of the goddess images, my attempt here, would be to study how images become central in restoration of a regional and cultural identity. This essay would

attempt to foreground how these images eventually, support in the reclamation of a position in the political sphere.

The study proceeds from observations made during a preliminary survey conducted over a period of one year in localities identified with high concentrations of shrines belonging to local deities and communities who worship them such as Sitaphalmandi, Warasiguda, Chilkalguda, Lower Tankbund, Secunderabad etc. Interestingly these areas fall in the trajectory where annual '*Bonalu*'[iii] festival processions are held. This is a thanksgiving festival held in fulfillment of vows and is dedicated to the worship of local goddesses, also referred to as *grama devatas*[iv]. Although no factual evidences are found to support this claim, the *Bonalu* festival is believed to have begun roughly in the early nineteenth century during the reign of the Asaf Jahis. According to local legends, a plague broke out in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad, claiming thousands of lives. A military battalion of Hyderabad was deployed to Ujjain during that time. Hearing about the outbreak, a devotee soldier prayed to the mother goddess in *Mahankaal* temple at Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh and took a vow that if people were saved from the epidemic he would install the idol of *Mahankali* back in his city. It is believed that soon *Mahankali* impeded her wrath and kept pestilence at arm's length. As promised, the soldier came back to the city and installed a wooden idol at the temple, now popularly known as *'Ujjaini Mahankali'* temple which has become a landmark as well as religious centre for the *'Bonalu'* processions held at Secunderabad. Since then, the festival has marked the communal harmony among communities and has stood as a symbol of the city and its cultural heritage.

During the survey, it was also noticed that the images of the goddesses undergo major transformations in the period starting roughly in the 1990s, and that they are influenced by simultaneously varying social and political dynamics.The earlier 'formless or minimal natural forms of goddesses'[v] were seen gradually replaced with popular visual iconic idols and images of *Mahankali* and *Durga* (Pic.3).

Pic. 3 Previous folk idol replaced by latest traditional Durga idol

The ritualistic practices also undergo transformation, as the local goddesses get reformed and hybridised, during the process of institutionalising and standardizing them. Based on hypothetical analysis, it is suggested that changes like expansion of shrines and icon replacements occur due to shifting dynamics of caste and communities. The relevance of such changes, due to shifts in perspective in social, economic and political spheres, prompts further examination. The temple spaces, even prior to the state formation, were not mere cultural signifiers but became sites of political and economic interests as local and political leaders visited, popularized and used these spaces for addressing and mobilizing masses for political action (Pic.4).

Pic .4 Local leaders and ministers participate in 'Bonalu' festival.

Huge vinyl banners with pictures of members of temple and youth associations in the streets, welcoming the devotees become common sights adding to an already vibrant visual space. Not only the religion but also cultural aspects such as local dialect of language, legends of local heroes, folk songs, art forms etc. went through a process of revivalism in an attempt to bring forth a distinct regional identity in the last couple of decades. With the formation of 'Telangana' recently in the year 2014, the goddess festivals get state patronization as they have been declared as official festivals. More and more capital flows in the form of offerings and sponsorships facilitating the formation of newer temple committees as eventually some of the most popular temples come under Temple Endowment Board.

Vicissitudes in Visuality: Before unraveling the evolution in the visuality, we need to understand who these local/village deities are and why and how do religious images, spaces or rituals revolving around these deities undergo transformation. Generally the village deities are venerated by under--privileged castes. They have a rudimentary or an indefinite form with no specific image or iconography. A slab of stone, mud or a block of wood 5-6 inches in size or stones put in a row or in conical shape were used as symbolic form of the goddess or were regarded as her dwelling places. Sometimes a symbolic 'clay figure' was made by the potter or goldsmith of the village during the annual festivals, which was later cast away beyond the

boundaries of the village (Whitehead, 1920). It is also important to understand the difference between upper caste goddesses and local deities. Village/local deities are independent virgins with no male consort, except *Potharaju* sometimes, and are referred to as *'Amma'* (Mother) or *'Akka'* (Sister) in contrast to *'Devi'* (Wife or consort) of higher deities. Unlike upper caste goddesses they do not have their birth origins in genealogies of Hindu Gods. The rituals performed in the worship of the goddess included animal sacrifices and offerings of *kallu* (local palm toddy). Specific communities were assigned roles of making the idol, leading the procession, conducting the sacrificial rite etc. Even the priests who performed rituals belonged to the Dalit castes.

As mentioned earlier, over the past few decades, the local deities and her worshippers who form a majority in the social and political demography of the region have gained significance by exhibiting and reviving certain unique religious and cultural traits as true representation of the city. The festivals of *'Bonalu', 'Bathukamma'*[vi] have been popularised, with both people and state patronisation. The goddess icon extends itself even in contemporary representation of state icon, *'Telangana Thalli'*[vii]. Paradoxically, though the traditions of the once marginalised have now been accepted as 'cultural identity', a gradual replacement and dissemination of dominant religious practices seem to be fast overtaking, bringing the very identity and authenticity of the cultural practices under jeopardy. The makeover of the goddesses from ferocious formless beings to calm and caring mother is one example of the transformation of the visual art forms to standardisation and institutionalisation. Recently some shrines holding figures such as 'lady holding the *bonam*' and '*Potharaju* with his whip' remain as markers of the local deity but the main idol is that of '*Eight-armed Durga*'. The wall paintings, which used to be crude, two dimensional or individualistic in style, are largely becoming stereotypical in nature. More recently printed images of standardized *Durga, Kali* or *Renuka Yelamma* on tiles are used on walls instead of hand painted images. Even the names of the shrines are changed. For example, '*Katta Maisamma gudi'* (local dialect for temple in Telugu) becomes *'Shri Mahankali Devalayam'* (Sanskritised Telugu) as Brahmin priests take over the priesthood, administration and performance of daily *pujas* and elaborate rituals. While the cultural and religious dynamics surely affect the visual culture of the city, a glance into the visuality of the goddess image may shed light on the aspects of social and political structures in this case.

In South Asian culture, 'visual' plays a major role due to its centrality in art, religion and culture. Hence images whether static or moving, are objects of knowledge production

(Morgan, 2005). Although Visual Culture is still fairly an untapped area of research in the Indian context, a few theorists have engaged with its concerns in scrutinising popular imageries, largely of women, Hindu gods and goddesses that were mass produced during colonial times or nationalist movement and immediately thereafter. Several scholars like Thakurtha (1995), Pinney (2004), Jain (2007) have invested in understanding the imagination of the nation as a female figure, which has its origin in Hindu goddesses.

Ajay Sinha in his essay, *"Visual Culture and Politics of Locality"* (2007) discusses the centrality of image and its studies as carried out by scholars like Pinney and Thakurtha. Pinney through his conceptual frame of 'image-based history' talks about the making, circulation, distribution of god images and how they shape the hidden desires and aspirations of the mass in relation to dominant religion and politics. According to him, there has been a divide between religion and politics or high and low art. While literary discourse was allocated to the educated elite, the visual catered to the marginalized (2007, 193). Nevertheless, most of these studies focus on 'Print Capitalism'[viii] (Anderson, 1983) by interpreting mechanically reproduced prints such as calendar art, posters, chromolithographs etc. in late nineteenth century. The above mentioned studies seem to be restricted to the colonial times and the immediate post- independence years. Whereas, the course that these images take in the modern Indian nation state, post-independence is a domain yet to be unearthed. For that matter, hand painted images on walls of shrines, which is also a popular visual medium, is often neglected in such studies. Moreover, there is a re-emergence of these images in the regional context that appears to have taken shape over the last couple of decades in a gradual process of standardisation of the female goddess over the subaltern deity.

Intermediality in Art and Cinema: Apart from the nature of visuality of the goddess images, another important dimension one needs to consider while looking at these images is the cinematic effect on them. A particular genre of Telugu devotional cinema, similar to Tamil 'Amman' films, appears to have a remarkable influence for the kind of goddess images produced on some of the shrines in the city. For instance, a *Pochamma* temple near Secunderabad station flaunts a wall painting emulating the cinematic poster of the film, *'Ammoru'* (1990) depicting actress Ramya Krishna as the local goddess in the guise of *Kali* (Pic.5).

Pic.5 Actress Ramya Krishna as 'Ammoru' on Pochamma shrine, Secunderabad.

At a different locality in the city, another shrine dons actress Vijaya Shanti as *Durga* in *'Bannari Amman'* (2002). The intermedial exchange between different mediums, such as art and cinema, has been expounded by various scholars like Geeta Kapur (1993), Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1993) etc. The aspects of frontality and tableau representation in early cinema have been widely discussed as traits passed on from traditional art forms like painting and theatre (Kapur, 1993). However, in the case of goddess images, there seems to be a reverse conferring of elements from Cinema to Art. Therefore, using the framework of intermediality, there is a possibility of observing the nuances of image making, particularly of the goddess, within an intersectionality of religion, art and cinema. Vasudevan in his analysis of Bombay Cinema elaborates on this experience of modernity in the visual medium. For him, these audio visual aspects of cultural practices are representative of social perceptions and identity. He further discusses how the image of Hindu nationhood becomes dominant over minority socio- religious structures in Cinema (Vasudevan, 1995). It is evident that most of the early cinema dealt with the mythological and devotional themes. By the 1960s the genre of the 'social' or fictional took over and the genre of traditional subject was thought to have ended. Nevertheless, the genre of mythic continued to make appearance in regional cinemas like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada etc.

A curious subgenre of women oriented devotional cinema reemerged that began to be called as 'Amman films' in the 1990 in Tamil. Similarly, in Telugu Cinema too, there was a similar trend, which popularized local goddesses belonging to the subaltern castes. Uma Bhrugubanda in her thesis makes a chronological study of the intersection between cinema, religion and politics in Telugu Cinema by examining it as a cultural institution. Examining the formation of a female 'Citizen- Devotee' (Bhrugubanda, 2011, 115), she brings under scrutiny this sub-genre of devotional films on subaltern goddesses. Here she observes that lower caste women as well as goddesses are put to reformation by identifying them as incarnations or subordinates of higher goddesses belonging to the Hindu pantheon. She argues that the nationalist construction of the 'ideal type' upper caste woman was made in

resistance to the western woman or the lower caste woman who was considered as wrathful, angry or sexually immoral.

In a similar fashion the local deities in Hyderabad are seen as turning into more feminine or motherly figures from their past images of crude and powerful ones by clothing and bejeweling them. Rituals of animal and fowl sacrifices and offering of toddy (local palm wine) which were an essential part of the worship have faced strict ban. Female priestesses and devotees who were associated very intimately with the goddess in small shrines in their neighborhoods, now only partake as distant devotees in temples governed by male dominant committees. As bigger temples are established through illegal means like land grabbing or encroachments, upper castes and classes begin to lay claim over ownership and other operations of the temples.

As part of investigating the pictures of the deities, a detailed analysis of the iconography could give interesting insights into the representation of the goddess herself. The feminine form is accentuated with colourful sarees and jewellery as she holds in her several hands, weapons and objects signifying her power. On a careful observation, the paintings reveal caste affiliations and appropriations from various other deities. For instance, a wall painting of '*Muthyalamma'* which was sponsored by Kummari Sankarraya, belonging to Kummari or potter caste depicts the goddess as seated on a contemporary table while a snake creeps out of the clay mound or anthill beside her, which is here symbolic of the potters' community and their identity, in a scenic landscape reminiscent of popular photographic prints of Himalayas. Another example shows an image of *'Renuka Yellamma'* (Pic.6) in her fairly unusual depiction as a full bodied female figure. This is unusual because *'Renuka Yellamma'* is generally recognised by only the head embellished with cloth. Here she still holds traditional iconography of an axe in one of her hands but sits on a lotus as the goddess *Lakshmi* while two flimsy tigers adorn beside her.

Pic. 6 Wall painting of 'Renuka Yelamma' inside Muthyalamma Shrine at Amberpet, sponsored by Specific communities.

What is interesting here is the depiction of a toddy tapper in the background, as the painting was sponsored by the 'Mudiraj' and 'Goud' (toddy tappers) community in an attempt to localise the deity and connect her to local legend where *Yellamma* is claimed to be given shelter by their community during her flight from her angry husband *Jamadagni*. Both the above mentioned paintings are available at a small roadside shrine in Amberpet area, which the temple owners claim to be more than hundred years old.

Similarly, another wall painting shows more recently popularised goddesses in the region such as *Sammakka* and *Saarakka* (Pic.7).

Pic.7 Wall painting of Upalamma and Samakka-Sarakka deities worshipped by Chakali community.

They belonged to the tribal communities. They appear along with *Uppalamma*, who is the *'kula daivam'* or caste goddess of *'Chaakali*' (washermen) community which hint at the acceptance of new goddesses. Unfortunately with the growing hybridisation, the distinct quality of individual temples is lost, as every temple begins to look alike, bringing them under one standard *Hindutva* identity.

i**NOTES**

The concept of '*Darshan'* refers to an exchange of look or sight between the deity and devotee as explicated by visual culture scholars like Christopher Pinney(2004),Geeta Kapur(1987) and many others, which privileges visual or the sight over other sensory organs as an essential element in accessing of divine power or assimilation of knowledge.

ii The *Telangana Movement* refers to a people's movement for the creation of a new state of Telangana, from its earlier geographical form as Andhra Pradesh in South India. The new state was formed on 2 June 2014 comprising of Telugu speaking portions of the erstwhile princely state of Hyderabad under the Nizams. The movement motivated a socio cultural consciousness which helped in revival of the region's identity, carried forward into a political action for social and economic justice.

iii *'Bonalu'* is a goddess festival celebrated in Hyderabad, Secunderabad and other part of Telangana, India. It falls in the month of *Ashada Masam*, i.e July/August. Special poojas are performed for *Yellamma* on the first and last day of the festival. It is a month long affair celebrated each week in different areas of the city, eg. Akkana Madanna Temple from Golconda, with colorful processions and communal feasts. Women make offerings of *'Bonam'* made of rice and jaggery, carried in a clay pot over their heads as they walk on foot towards the nearest mother goddess temple.

iv'G*rama devatas'*, local/village deities are venerated as the protectors of the village boundaries from evil, disease, disaster and natural calamities. They are particularly worshipped by the lower castes or dalit communities in the region.As suggested by many scholarly sources (Whithead, 1988. Dahejia, 1999. Mishra, 1969) there has been a tradition of worshipping lesser by the marginalised communities in various regions. For eg. *Sithala Devi* in Gujarat, Bengal, *Kandi Devi* in Punjab, (Rose,1926), *Mariai* in Maharashtra, *Mariamman* in Tamilnadu etc.

v On close observation, the old image is a formless or minimal one, shaped out of a mound, piece of stone or log of wood. Turmeric and vermillion is smeared over the form with only readymade eyes made in enamel or metal does not specify either the gender or beautify the feminine power, whereas the replacements are usually well sculpted and embellished with silk fabric, jewellery emphasising her distinct feminine form. The clothing could be seen as an attempt to civilize an otherwise free spirit or the decadent and wrathful goddess. Bhrugubanda, (2011),while examining the formation of a female 'Citizen-Devotee', brings under scrutiny the worship of the subaltern goddesses and their reformation.

vi *Bathukamma Panduga* meaning goddess of life is a floral festival primarily of women. It coincides with the time of Dussehra, the festival of Durga. Women participate in the celebration by making mounds of vibrant seasonal flowers and leaves as symbolic of the goddess and circumambulating around them in a rhythmic dance and special Bathukamma songs. The festival became significant during Telangana movement for cultural renaissance, especially in bringing women together.

vii *Telangana Thalli* literally means Mother Telangana which is an allegoric representation of the region as a Hindu mother goddess, inspired from numerous female images, symbolic of 'Nation' ,eg. Bharat mata or Mother India. She holds a *Bathukamma* in one hand and corn in another, two symbols for culture of the state.

[viii] Benedict Anderson 's concept of 'Imagined Communities' in his book with the same name proposes how 'Nation' is a socially constructed idea and how its people imagine and unify under pretext of 'Print Capitalism' that emerges with common language and discourse produced and spread by print media.

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