

SUBMISSION OF SELF: EXAMINATION OF FOUNDATION OF THE CULTS OF JOGATA AND POTRAJ

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Abstract: The structure of our society, and the influence of religious institutions on it, is a very complex phenomenon to understand as it is not a creation of one particular community. Being a part of such a complex structure the cults of *jogata* and *potraj* have strengthened their roots over centuries, with the heterogeneous ideas, practices and belief systems around. *Jogata* and *potraj* both are dedicated devotees, to complete the vow taken by parents, to the goddesses *Yellamma* and *Laxmiaai*, respectively. After their dedication they enter an entirely different world altogether, especially a *jogata*. Both the devotees have different attributes than the so called “normal” man. In order to be a *jogata* or *potraj*, one has to go through different physical as well as mental havoc. This paper attempts to examine some of the core factors that create foundations for these cults of *jogata* and *potraj*. Moreover, this paper tries to examine how goddess becomes the centre of these cults and how ‘personal self’ of *jogata* and *potraj* submit itself completely to the feet of goddesses.

Keywords: Cults, *Jogata*, *Potraj*, Self, Submission.

Introduction: Prabhakar Mande, in his book *Lo-kagayakanchi Parampara*, mentions that the ‘vedic’ people used to worship their deities by performing ‘*Yagnya*’, and ‘offering’ was an important part of this ritual. At the same time, the ‘non-vedic’ people practiced ‘human/animal-sacrifice’ as a part of their own rituals, which was a common practice then. Over a period of time the practice of human-sacrifice came to an end, instead the tradition of animal-sacrifice became prominent. Later, this tradition also was replaced by different things like offering a coconut, a few hair, etc. Based on this he infers that there is a possibility that offering boys (and girls) to respective deities, e.g. in order to bear a child, could be a substitution to the same tradition. Further, he claims that there was an exchange of customs/rituals between *vedic*’s and *non-vedic*’s practices of worshipping their deities. As a result, Hindu culture evolved with mixed ways of worshipping with incorporation of different cultural practices, and it continued as a tradition with different forms of it [1].

Though there is no definite answer to the origin of this tradition of offering human beings to deities, it is certainly not a new system to Indian society, especially to folk-deities where people used to offer children to complete the vow taken to fulfil their wishes. For example, people used to offer children to the deities like *Khandoba*, *Jyotiba*, *Ambabai*, *Ravalnath*, *Bhut-nath*, *Mahavaleshwar*, *Yellamma*, *Durgavva*, *Dyamavva* and *Maruti*. And two of the devotees of such tradition are *jogata* and *potraj* who are offered to the goddesses *Yellamma* and *Laxmiaai*, respectively.

Mande believes that it was this tradition of ‘offering’ because of which many sections (*jatis*) of *bhagat*³ emerged or got created. And it does make sense as the existence of *potraj* and *jogata* is always seen in relation to the goddesses *Laxmiaai* and *Yellamma*, respectively. The fear that these people have for the

goddesses is the strongest reason among all behind their faith or dedication. For example, the image of *Laxmiaai* – as the goddess of different diseases/death/fortune-misfortune, makes people worship her more. Moreover, offering a child to the goddess, to complete their oath, is in itself an example of their fear that makes them follow the path of their goddesses in order to stay away from any harm.

Becoming a *jogata* or *potraj* is such a complex process as the process has evolved over centuries. It follows numerous odd norms and rituals. Moreover, after becoming a representative of their respective goddesses, *jogata* and *potraj* are supposed to have unquestionable faith on or belief in the rituals that they practice in their cults. Hence, their strong association with the goddesses cannot be neglected as it is related to all the aspects of their lives – religious, economic, social existence, and even personal problems. So growing up in a very specific and limited atmosphere *jogata* and *potraj* consider their deities the ultimate, and that is where the process of submission of ‘self’ starts.

Another factor in the foundation of such cults, according to Rajan Gavas, is rooted in castes, economy and classical beliefs. However, he also clarifies that one simply cannot hold *Manusmuti* responsible for the systematic division/creation of castes and emergence of the cults of *jogata* and *potraj*. He says, for example, that the possibility cannot be neglected that *potraj* could be a result of a helpless man who adopted certain uncommon things, e.g. his unique attire, to look different in order to survive and fulfil his stomach. Later he might have found that people still did not offer him anything. Then, perhaps, he might have started performing mortification of his body by connecting it to the goddess. As a result, people took him seriously as he successfully touched their religious sentiments for the goddess. After a particular point of

time, when *Manusmruti* came into existence, it might have continued as a tradition. Hence, the roots are there in the past; where someone was unable to make living and in order to survive he emerged as a *potraj* (or *jogati*). Consequently, we see *potraj* surviving on the same skills that he had adopted in the past [2].

Another prominent reason that concretizes these foundations of the cults of *potraj* and *jogata* is lack of education and awareness. Though education along with science and technology has been a revolution in various sectors of human affairs, certain communities do not seem to abandon their superstitious activities and stick to supernatural beliefs. And the cults of *jogata* and *potraj* are one of them. For example, a Master (a teacher) tries to spread awareness about the superstitious practices that devadasi follow. He reminds them the terrible consequences of being devadasi and suffering that they go through. He also tries to bring them together in order to get some help from the government for their own good. But at the end he is thrown out of the village by saying,

"We will not be able to give up [being devadasi] as long as we are alive... ..Yelluaai [Yellamma] who is situated atop the mountain is the protector of the cult." [3]

The other factor behind their negligence towards education is lack of money or poverty. It is a matter of bread-and-butter for them. If they don't work for a day they will have to remain hungry. As a result sending a child to school means waste of two helping hands for a family. A similar incident is narrated by Eknath Avad in his autobiography *Jag Badal Ghaluni Ghaav* when Patil asks Eknath's father and uncle, "[Anyway] your children do nothing, then why don't you send them to school?" to which his father and uncle reply,

"Patil, education is not for our children, isn't it?" ... [for them] Sending us to school is an unnecessary waste of two working hands. [Author's voice] Moreover, he might have thought that how was it possible to eat [survive] when our stomach was on our hands? They believed that education was not our cup of tea." [4]

Such conditions and belief system affect their involvement in education. As a result, they are detached from progressive thoughts and remain with whatever their ancestors have left for them. So, the myths and superstitious elements in their devotion remain unquestioned and finally they assume it as truth.

According to Prof. Satish Badave, the act of dedication mostly happens because of the wrong notions of religious beliefs, economic instability, and the problems of the downtrodden people such as poverty, illiteracy, social discrimination, etc. Moreover, there is no proper source for these children to get education or knowledge. Because, whatever they learn they learn through their surroundings. If their age is con-

sidered (while dedicating) then it can be realized that these children are, in a way, trained to look at the things in a particular way, their seniors teach them the same – if he puts on sari then I should also, what he feels I should feel the same, and what I do I do it for goddess. Therefore, goddess is at the centre and they are connected to her [5].

Rajan Gavas, in his interview, makes a point about how religious fear is manipulated by some of the senior representatives of the cults. He says that there were no proper facilities available in villages due to poverty. Poor (low class) people could not afford (clean) water, soap, or oil to take care of their hair. As a result girls used to grow *jata*. And a senior *devadasi* would come to your door for her own stomach and used to (mis) guide parents to dedicate the girl/boy to the goddess. Tanaji Patil, a forty-two years old *jogata*, affirms the same adding that gradually people started to take a vow to get a (male) child – and the same child used to be dedicated to the goddess who would be living a life of *jogata*. Later, it became a norm/tradition [6].

This is how many factors came together and created a solid foundation for the cults of *potraj* and *jogata*. Now let us look at different changes that they have to go through after their submission to the goddesses. It is mostly done to fulfil certain norms of the cults that, generally, strengthen and maintain their individual identity as *jogata/potraj*.

Appearance of *jogata* and *potraj* is one of the key factors in their individual identity. Balawant Kamble, in his book, says that *potraj* is supposed to have long hair, and his forehead daubed with *kumkum*, and a piece of sari or '*khana*' (a piece of blouse) is wrapped around his waist, which makes him look like a woman [7]. However, Shahu Patole, a scholar, considers this as one of the rules that *potraj*, being a *potraj*, has to follow. According to him *potraj* is a man (male) who is accepted by our society and is a part of mainstream community. They are not a separate community as such [8].

Though his appearance is so identical to his deity - goddess Laxmiaai, he cannot be considered feminine. Through his get-up (as well as his performance) he tries to create a suitable atmosphere where he represents the image of the goddess who is known for her anger and destructive nature. And it is done as a part of his duty (or profession). In any case he cannot lose the connection between him and the devotees of the goddess.

Though seeing a *potraj* half-naked, roaming in a village/city, dancing and performing self-flagellation is a common view, the original idea of *potraj* in Maharashtra is different. For example, Shinde *potraj* who has been a devotee of goddess *Laxmiaai* for more than 40 years said that he neither went topless nor performed self-mortification as a part of his religious

duty [9]. Moreover, he puts on his *aabharan* (over his *kurta-pajama*) only when he goes to collect alms in the village. The one who is seen practicing self-flagellation is called *bhatake potraj* or *kadak-lakshmi*. Such *potrajs* seem adopting the *Dravidian* (from the state of Karnataka) concept of *potraj* in terms of their practices and devotion.

Jogata's existence is very much similar to that of a *potraj* in terms of his relation to his deity. He is dedicated to goddess *Yellamma*, and follows the path of *bhandara* – the sacred turmeric powder used in worship. Moreover, he, after becoming a member of the cult, lives like a woman due to his enforced emasculation. Consequently, he is prevented from marrying as he does not fit in the category of an 'ordinary' man. For example, Rajam Gavas's protagonist Tayappa, a *jogata*, is seen dedicated to the goddess and worshipping her throughout his life. Though in the beginning his (masculine) self tries to fight back, he gives up his original identity at the end and submits himself completely to the cult and goddess [10].

The HoD of Lokkala Academy, Mumbai, Ganesh Chandanshive said that *jogata* has a *Guru-parampara*; to become a *jogata* one goes through proper *vidhis* (or rituals) from a senior *jogatin* or *jogata*. And once he becomes a part of the same cult it's a human nature to imitate his surroundings, and when *jogata* lives in devadasi community he does the same; imitation of women (*jogatin*). Moreover, for a *jogata* his *guru* is everything; his mother, father, god. Therefore, he exactly becomes like him; in terms of behaviour, body language, talking, getting *diksha* etc. *Jogata* also gets attracted to whatever his *guru* has (jewellery, sari etc). Then he starts thinking that he is an incarnation of *Yellamma*. As a result, he forgets his manliness and becomes a *jogata*. So, such beliefs and practices keeps maintaining their separate identity [11].

Tanaji also says that we may neglect such cases where people believe in superstitions and offer their children to goddess just because of a *jata* or *navas*. However, in case of an impotent child/man who looks like a man, who grows beard, who has everything that a normal man could have but he is not (or cannot be) a man as his feelings are that of a woman. In the past, illiterate society ignored them (and now literate one). That is why they are struggling to find their place in the mainstream society. Therefore, being a third gender person, it is one of the strongest reasons to become a *jogata*. The family as well as society seem very reluctant to accept them as a part of the mainstream society. Moreover, a *jogata* cannot live like a common man because of his womanly feelings – getting ready like a woman, doing make-up, dressing, jewellery etc. He likes everything like a woman. So he adopts this feminine identity and tries to fulfil his desires.

Another strongest point is their **beliefs and practices**. It is their beliefs that the goddess is the one who

decides and makes someone *devadasi* or *jogata*. There are certain established signs to identify such persons; mainly getting *jata* in hair, being impotent, or taking a vow to offer a child to the goddess. For example, Jhanaba Kudale (Aralgundi village, Bhudargad district, Maharashtra) was dedicated to goddess *Yellamma* by his family. Though he was not a third gender person, he was forced to become a *jogata* as he had got *jata* in his hair. So, such beliefs are very strong that people tend to follow them in order to avoid any misfortune from the goddess.

Once someone is dedicated to the goddess his/her body does not belongs to the person but the deity. As a result, goddess becomes the owner of it and the practices like *limba nesane*, *badhan*, *kansharvani*, *jogwa magane*, *rand punav*, etc. are considered to be done with the permission and blessings of the goddess. In a way, the goddess along with her rigid practices becomes the major cause for the foundation and maintenance of the cults of *potraj* and *jogata* as all the beliefs are centred on her.

Social relation of *potraj* and *jogata* is another factor that keeps these cults engaged in their activities. *Potraj* and *jogata* are considered, by themselves as well as people, the select representatives of their respective deities. For example, Aaba (*potraj*), protagonist in the autobiography *Aabhran* by Parth Polke, is looked as the mediator between the deity and her devotees who invokes goddess *Laxmiaai* and answers the problems of the devotees. Aaba, being a *potraj*, carries extra religious responsibility of expelling epidemic diseases from villages, and asking the goddess for help to get rid of it [12].

Similarly, it is considered Tayappa's ethnic responsibility to eulogize the narrative of the goddess *Yellamma* among her devotees. Therefore, he forms a *mela*, or a troupe, so that people invite them to perform *jagar*. So this kind of socio-cultural relationship is established between a *jogata/potraj* and devotees of *Yellamma/Laxmiaai*. So they become the material carriers of their respective goddesses which continuous throughout their lives.

All of the above events, from (self) dedication to self-annihilation, narrate the centrality of goddess in the lives of *potraj* and *jogata*. There seems a very less number of moments when they are considered separate from the goddess; as an individual, especially *jogata*. Otherwise, almost every moment of their lives is offered in the service of the goddess, which makes this religious base stronger. Contrastingly, there seems a lack of proper grounding for *jogata's* enforced emasculation. In relation to this, R. C. Dhere, observes that goddess *Renuka* was known for her character and dedication for her husband, Jamadagni, and that is one of the reasons that she does not have a male devotee [13].

After some time the religious lives of *potraj* and *jogata* become their professional lives. For example, Aaba, in *Aabhran*, goes to villages along with the cart of the goddess and gives solutions to the different problems of people, who believe that he is the only mediator between goddess *Laxmiaai* and them, whereas Tayappa, in *Bhandarbhog*, survives on the alms that he gets from the villagers, and/or through his participation in *mela* where he performs *jagar* along with the other members in the cult. After becoming a well known *jogata*, he is also seen giving solutions to the problems of the innocent followers of the goddess [206]-[210-213]. It seems rather compulsion (or survival need) than a choice as they are not left with any other alternative with them.

Fear of the goddess plays an important part in becoming a *jogata/potraj* as well as sticking to the same identity. The furious nature of their deity is believed the cause behind the stroke of epidemic diseases and other misfortunes. At such times, if medical treatment doesn't work or take a long time to show its result then people run to their deity to deal with the child's health problem – as it happened with Tayappa. This pathological disruption somehow takes them to religious fear. Moreover, it is thought that they will be stricken with diseases or poverty if they don't complete the vow. Therefore, they try to appease the goddess. It is a belief that such matters may be put right by paying visits to the goddess and performing various purificatory rights and acts of humility to the goddess.

It is not always about fear but **self devotion**. Many people devote their lives to the goddess due to their firm belief in the deity. The belief is that she is the creator of this world (*Yellamma* – 'yell' means of all and 'amma' means mother – 'mother of all') and everything is run according to her wish. Therefore, in order to please her and get blessed by her they walk on the path *jogata* or *potraj*. Additionally, in many cases the (elder) son of *potraj* carries forward the tradition of his father by dedicating himself to the goddess so that they can preserve their culture and con-

tinue to worship her. In relation to this, Polke Parth narrates his experience in childhood about how people also expect him, as a son of *potraj*, to continue his father's tradition after him...

Mama tucked *khana* around my waist. [He] rolled up one of the saris over my body, [and] covered my bald head with a green *khana*. After daubing my forehead with *kumkum* and putting a small *jholi* [a bag to collect the alms] on my shoulder, Mama said, "let's go." ...I followed Mama [his father]. Some women said, "*the little potraj is looking so great. He will definitely be your successor* –..."

(own translation: pp. 21)

Many of the cult members are seen, even after knowing the hollowness of their practices, stubbornly clinging to old superstitions to justify their decisions. Thus, Kamble as well as Dr. Gimekar assert that the lack of education, knowledge has kept their intensity alive toward the old customs and traditions [14]. Polke Parth also conveys the similar thought in his introduction, "Education is so powerful [strength to change]." Otherwise he would have been doing the same- living on the stale food begged from others while torturing your own body (self-mortification) [Intro XIII].

The intention of this paper was to explore various factors that create and sustain the foundation of the cults of *potraj* and *jogata*. It also focused on how "self" submits itself to the goddess and their respective cults. Finally, one thing must be understood that *potraj* or *jogata* is not an inanimate object to offer to any goddess. They have self, identity, desires, body like any other ordinary human being, and dedication does not seem to answer suppression of all of these. Unfortunately, their strong belief in the goddess stops them from escaping the norms. And not having access to education makes the situation worse. As a result, many *potraj* and *jogata* turn into the victims of religious beliefs and emotional responses to those beliefs. And if these foundations have to be broken then there is only one solution and that is education.

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