

Socio-Religious and Cultural Perspectives of the Sacred Place in Bastar, Chhattisgarh

Digbijoy Giri

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Abstract

A cursory observation of the religious traditions of the tribes of Chhattisgarh, particularly in the Bastar region of the state would draw attention to the presence of a combination of traditional and Hindu features. Such an intermixture has been taking place from historical times in response to tribes' close contact with the Hindus. Traditionally, in this region, tribes believe in Gods and goddesses and the practice of witchcraft. They have their places of worship, considered very sacred, and they worship these Gods and Goddesses in various forms and places. One of the sacred places in the villages of the tribes is called Devgudi and in some regions as Matagudi and Gaondevi. In Devgudi the presiding deity of the village is enshrined. Other associate deities like Higanlajan Mata, Pardeshi Mata, Guje Dokri, Dongri Mata, Bhandarin Mata, Jalni Mata, Jharandpurin Mata, Aanga Devbelonging to their belief system are also worshiped in the shrine. In most of the Devgudi Iconographies represent Deities / Gods and Goddesses; any rough stone, wood, iron, a piece of any other metal, or any object like conch, cowry or bell are worshipped in these shrines.

Traditional faith, beliefs and practices have responded to several forces of change over the years. Nevertheless, Devgudi in each village shows continuity of its religious significance in the belief system of the tribes even in the present time. In view of this, the paper is designed to study structural and functional elements of village Devgudi with reference to Bastar region of Chhattisgarh and delineate its place in changing situation.

Keywords: Faith and beliefs; Devgudi; Structural and functional elements; Presiding and associate deities; Sacred shrines/groves; Bastar region.

Author's Affiliation: Joint Director, Department of Anthropology, Office of the Registrar General India New Delhi Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi 110066, India.

Corresponding Author: Digbijoy Giri, Joint Director, Department of Anthropology, Office of the Registrar General India New Delhi Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi 110066, India.

E-mail: dr.dgiri69@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Religion is a set of beliefs and practices generally held by individuals and communities that involves various rituals as a form of prayers, songs, dances, offerings and sacrifices; and it tries to manage supernatural power for the benefit of its followers. Individual faith and practices normally reflect in the community context in which one is a



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member, for the community's belief system is what an individual professes. That religion has a social or community dimension is a truism. Understandably, there are community ways of displaying its people's religious life. One of such ways goes through village shrines, particularly in non-propaganda types of religions like those of the tribes. Of course, other types of religions also have their respective village shrines but differ from the former in the sense that these are formally organised.

As shrines reflect the belief system of tribes, it is quite logical to understand the religious life of a tribe by studying its shrines. Moreover, as the socio-cultural life of tribes changes, shrines offer an opportunity to study the nature and extent of influence these changes exert on the belief system.

It is, therefore, not a surprise to find scholars studying shrines of tribes in India, particularly of village sacred shrines which exist in different forms, such as altars, menhirs, sacred groves, etc. Villages in Bastar have three kinds of Sacred Shrines, namely *Matagudi*, *Devgudi* and *Gaondevi*. Different tribes have their own Mata or *Gaondevi* (village goddess) in the *Devgudi*. Studies are mainly descriptive of the themes of socio-religious significance conservation ethics or political dimensions of sacred village shrines. They have been rallying points of rights assertion.

Two important studies have been cited here on socio-religious themes. V. Elwin (1943) has presented the shrines of Maria Gonds in a wider context. He mentions that the religion of the Maria Tribe of Bastar around the earth, the state and the clan. He talks about the shrine of the village mother on the outskirts of the village and in a groove nearby where the temple of one of the clan god is present. About 60 years ago in 1963, P K Bhowmik had studied sacred shrines of the Lodhas of West Bengal. Though he has highlighted its structure, rituals, etc. what is important in his study is the sense of common property resource attributed to these shrines by the Lodhas. In the same year (1963) the joint study of A.K. Das and M.K. Raha also describes the shrine of the *Oraons* of Sundarbans in West Bengal and its presiding deity called '*Devi Mai*' or '*Mother Goddess*'. The shrine is a sacred grove amidst Sal trees and therefore, the authors named such shrines as Sal Shrines. The study of D.N. (1990) has pointed out the changes in shrine culture in a discussion of Women and forest. He has noted the construction of temples in the spot of shrines or the replacement of local deities by the idol of *Mahavir Hanuman*. He argues it is a mark of subjugation and marginalisation of the tribal communities by "the

mainstream Hindu civilization".

On political dimensions studies by J.J. Roy Burman (1992, 1995, 1996) are significant. In a series of articles, he has articulated the political dimension of sacred shrines in the local and regional context. He informs that sacred shrines have often been supported by the local rulers. Sahu Chhatrapati, the king of Kolhapur, for example, used to support a sacred grove dedicated to *Amba Devi*. Similarly, J. Troisi (1978) has pointed to the traditional political aspect of the shrine of the Santals. He has noted that among the Santhals, the sacred shrines serve as an important criterion to ascertain village membership and geographical boundaries.

Rights issue is at the core of several studies. In this regard, J.J. Roy Burman (1995) has highlighted self-assertion among the Gonds of the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. He states that The Gonds revived the *Danteswari* sacred grove to assert their identity and right of self-determination. Before him, P. C. Hembram (1983) informs that by the Sarna Dharma (religion of the sacred grove), discrete ethnic groups in Chottanagpur, i.e. in present Jharkhand, were brought to a common platform for asserting their rights to self-determination. The Sarna Dharma, in fact, helped them in consolidating their common identity and solidarity between the Christian and non-Christian tribes of the region. V. Bhasin (1999) deals with the religious and cultural aspects of the sacred shrines of the Sahariya Tribes. She has noted that the shrine serves as a rallying point of Sahariya rights movement. She has also noticed the decline trend experienced by shrines due to pressure from humans and cattle. The study of D. Dev & K.C. Malhotra (1997) has focused on the conservation dimension of sacred shrines. They have highlighted the interface between biodiversity and tribal cultural heritage and found the use of forest products for different socio-religious purposes. In the face of the severe economic hardships of the tribes in the region, the persistence of much of the socio-religious ethos of protecting the bio-resources reveals the strength of the conservationist tradition of indigenous culture. Deshmukh, Gogate and Gupta (1998) describe the conservation ethos attached to the sacred shrines of Maharashtra (of the region or tribe) and have studied the age of sacred shrines, the changing proportion of species, the occurrence of exotic species, the decrease in plant cover, regeneration status and extraction of wood from forest and shrines and impact of human activities.

Studies on sacred shrines of tribes as mentioned here are merely suggestive. One important point

needs to be mentioned. L.P. Vidyarthi (1961) was apioneer in conceptualising sacred shrines. In his study on the Sacred Complex of Hindu Gaya, he has conceptualised sacred geography, sacred centres, sacred specialists, etc. Shrines were discussed under sacred centres. He has also applied these concepts to study the religious practices of tribal villages (Vidyarthi and Rai 1985:254-265) of central India.

A unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred shrines which unites into one single 'moral community' (Durkheim: 1912:62) is observed in the villages of the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh. The sacred centre/shrine is popularly known as *Devgudi* (in some areas such as *Matagudi* and *Gaondevi*) in the villages of the region. The shrine unites the tribal community and reflects elementary forms of the religious life of people. The village religious life of the tribes of undivided Bastar, now in habitants in the areas of Dantewada, Narayanpur, Kondagaon, Bastar and Kanker, moves round *Devgudi*. In religious studies on this region, however, anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists have not given due importance to studying the sacred village shrines. The present paper is a preliminary inquiry in this regard and aims to fill up the gap in the study of village shrines of tribes in the Bastar region in the present context. Its thrust area is the structure, function and importance of *Devgudi* in the Bastar region in contemporary times. So, the study aims to highlight changes introduced in the shrine culture and focus on its importance in the people's belief system.

METHODOLOGY

The state of Chhattisgarh, with 16 districts was bifurcated from Madhya Pradesh on 1st November 2000. Later in 2011 number of districts increased to 18; and at present there are 28 districts with 5 regions; the regions are: Bastar, Raipur, Bilaspur, Durg and Surguja. The study area falls in Bastar region consisting of 07 districts, namely Dakshin Bastar Dantewada, Uttar Bastar Kanker, Sukma, Bijapur, Narayanpur, Kondagaon and Bastar. In Bastar region *Devgudi*, the village shrines, are observed in every village. In this region about 3983 villages have been recorded having *Devgudis*. But out of 34 Tahsils in this region, Narayanpur, Dakshin Bastar Dantewada and Bastar have large concentration of *Devgudis*. It was reported that 14 Nagar Panchayat and 08 Municipalities were rural villages with their *Devgudis*; but these *Devgudis* do not exist at present probably due to growth of

urban centres by clearing forests. An interesting fact that came to the notice was that Jagdalpur, a municipality since 1951, became the Municipal Corporation, just before 2011 (Census, 1951 & 2011), but its *Devgudi* was converted to the temple of Maa Danteswari long back in 1890 by the then king. There is no iota of doubt to state that *Devgudis* are a part of village culture. Data were collected from field studies conducted during several visits to the area from April – November, 2021. Particularly, for study of the village shrines data were collected from tribal dominated areas of Bastar, Dakshin Bastar Dantewada and Narayanpur districts. However, key informants were selected purposely from among those involved in *Devgudi* activities. Interviews and observations were main tools during field study.

Three villages, namely Garaw and Kalan, Madpal and Balikanta of Bhatra tribe from Bastar district; three villages namely Gamawada, Chitalanka and Samlur of the Halba tribe from the district of Dakshin Bastar Dantewada (DBD) and three villages, namely Gadhbengal, Kukdajhor (Mawalibhatha) and Naumunmeta of the Muria tribe from Narayanpur district were purposely selected for in-depth study. The villages in Bastar and DBD districts are near to the district head quarters, namely, Jagdalpur and Dantewada; but in Narayanpur district the study villages are quite interior and situated in the area of Abujmad (Narayanpur has two Tahasils-Narayanpur and Abhujmad (Orchha). Abhujmad is an inaccessible area. *Abhuj* means fool and *Mad* means Hill. The tribes of Abhujmad are known as *Abhujmadia*.

In each village of three districts, *Devgudi* priests, also called *pujari*¹ or *gayata*, belonging to Bhatra, Halba and Muria tribes were interviewed. The selection of districts was done on the basis of traditionality and change observed during informal field visits. The change was noted during these informal visits due to financial assistance (an amount of Rs.7.51 lakh) of the government for the development of *Devgudis*. However, during study focus was given to change beyond this financial assistance, particularly in the outlook of the people.

The sample villages for study have been taken close to the urban setting in Bastar district and in Dakshin Bastar Dantewada (DBD) quite interior as well as traditional *Devgudi*. (The sample villages for the study have been taken closer to the urban set in Bastar district and in South Bastar Dantewada (DBD) this fairly interior and traditional *Devgudi*). In Narayanpur district one village was fully traditional and two *Devgudis* were followed

modernity. The above-mentioned villages have been studied to know the tribal belief system a part of their religion. All the above villages have been taken as sample village under the study to know the importance of *Devgudi* in the district of Bastar closed to urban centre Jagdalpur and the Madpal and Balikanta the Bhatra dominated villages. Three villages each from three district have been taken closed to District Headquarters and far from District Headquarters. Garawand Kalan, Chitalanka and

Gadhbengal are the closed to District of Bastar, Dakshin Bastar Dantewada and Narayanpur respectively. Madpal, Samlur and Kukdajhor are far from District Headquarters. Bastar, Dakshin Bastar Dantewada and Narayanpur respectively. The rest of three villages Balikanta, Gamawada and Naumunjmeta from three District Bastar, Dakshin Bastar Dantewada and Narayanpur are taken as Sample Village for comparing the data and to know the diversity of village deity.

Table 1: Villages under study

S. No.	Name of Village	District	District Headquarters	Distance from Dist. Headquarters (km)	Population			
					Male	Female	Total	Total ST
1	Garawand Kalan	Bastar	Jagdalpur	4	414	452	866	524
2	Madpal	Bastar	Jagdalpur	16	1405	1533	2938	1228
3	Balikonta	Bastar	Jagdalpur	7.6	554	545	1099	804
4	Gamawada	Dakshin Bastar	Dantewada	14	732	842	1574	1520
5	Chitalanka	Dakshin Bastar	Dantewada	4	1133	1157	2290	1135
6	Samalpur	Dakshin Bastar	Dantewada	17.5	815	785	1600	638
7	Gadhbengal	Narayanpur	Narayanpur	4.1	839	886	1725	990
8	Kukdajhor	Narayanpur	Narayanpur	11	535	494	1029	862
9	Naumunjmeta	Narayanpur	Narayanpur	8.2	225	225	450	380

Source: Census of India 2011

Structure of Devgudi

The sacred shrines are very small patches of woodland where the place is in the controlled of their own community which is the size of less than one acre. Sizes of the shrines depend mostly upon the land control regime under which it is located. In community controlled or private land, the size of shrines/devgudis is very small, which in some cases is as small as 10 x 10 meter with one or two large mature trees as the abode of the presiding deity. The ruling deity of the grove is worshipped by the community in such shrines. Socio-religious and magi-oreligious rituals are performed by the *pujari* or *gayata* or *sirha*, who is considered to be specialist in establishing connection with the presiding deity. Mature trees are normally found around the seat of the deity.

Sacred shrines which are found in the revenue land and in the *chotejhadka* jungle (small bush forest) and bade *jhadka jungle* (big bush forest) are slightly larger in size but the shrines which are found in land under the control of the forest department are larger in size, and even the entire locale is sometime called locally as sacred grove/shrine which may be

of few hundred hectares in area. But mostly the size of sacred place is less than 1 (one) hectare and has very sparse population of trees.

Devgudi or the village shrine, as is mentioned, is a place of deities in a tribal village of Bastar region. It is rarely found in the urban area only in tribal villages not in the non-tribal villages. The name however varies from region to region. It is a simple hut/enclosure made of wood, mud walls in three sides and open in the front. This is a common practice in Bhatra villages only both in interiors and semi-urban villages. Some of the *gudis* are made of pucca structure. Most of the puccagudis of Bastar district have been built from village fund without any government assistance. In these villages the deities have been shifted from old to new buildings. In Dantewada villages the tribal people are observed preserving their traditional shrines. Though they have been provided with financial assistance to develop *Devgudi*, the village deities are kept in traditional way (traditional way means the *gudis* are situated in place of in with traditional hut, thatched with wild grass and mud walls but the boundary/area of the *Devgudi* has been developed. Anthropomorphic and Zoo-Morphic curving is

found on the poles of most of the *Devgudis*, which is a symbol of respect for nature and their ancestors. In Dantewada 143 villages have been given the financial assistance to develop *Devgudi*. (Source: Collectorate, DBD, Dantewada)

Tribal dominated village is different from a tribal village. In tribal dominated village, non-tribes may live. The non-tribal like Raut Caste people are engaged for cleaning and supplying water as and when necessary, in the *Devgudi*. Other non-tribal people are also residing very less households with the tribal people.

Devgudi is a symbolic representation of faith, beliefs and practices followed by the tribes only. It brings village people together on different occasions and acts as binding chord, and maintains social unity. In the tribal society, the Goddess is mainly established in *Devgudi* and the faith that Goddess will protect the people from bad evil or spirit, diseases and from wild animals. Actually, it is the holy spirit of their ancestors which they started worshipping for their noble deeds. This is the reason that tribal societies worship their holy souls who are in the formless form, mere apparitions. The chief priests of *Devgudi* are their descendants and therefore, the worship practice continues as hereditary basis.

The chief priest is a descendant of the ancestor whose spirit is worshipped in *Devagudi*. His descents, but ancestors of contemporary priest

are worshipped in a different mode at individual houses. After death, it is a custom to bring the soul of the deceased home and keep it in a pot. It is called *Aana Kudma* (Aana - Soul, Kudma - Pot). *Aana Kudma* is set up in the room of the eldest brother of the house. Only people of Muria and Gond tribes worship *Aana Kudma*. People of other tribes celebrate *Pitri Paksha* (annual fortnight of the ancestors) according to Hindu religion.

The tribals consider their deities in *Devgudias* living entity. They share their joys and sorrows with them. In times of sorrow, they ask their presiding deity to solve the problem. The God/Goddess interacts with the villagers and the work of establishing this contact is done by a person from the village who is called '*Sirha*' (person possessed by god/goddess). This is a person whom the Goddess herself chooses.

There are priests to perform the *puja/ritual* in *Devgudi*. These priests are assisted by *Gayaita/Perma*, the assistants take care of the cleaning, maintenance, etc. of the *Devgudi* site. On the occasion of special festivals the people of Raut caste of the village also help in cleaning and maintenance.

There is a presiding deity along with associate deity/deities in *Devgudi*. The number of associate deities can be more or less. A list of presiding deities and associate deities is presented in the following table:

Table 2: Name of village deities

S. No.	Name of Village	Name of Presiding Deity	Name of Associate Deities
1	Garawand Kalan	Pardeshin Mata	Mahamai Mata, Mawali Mata, Dwarmundiya
2	Madpal	Patan-Patni	No associate deities.
3	Balikanta	Mauli Mata	Pardeshin Bawadi, Telginmata, Dand Pat
4	Gamawada	Angadev	Satbahini Devi, Shitla Mata, Ana-Manda Devi, Lele Devi
5	Chitalanka	Gaondei	Dharamraj, Bavandei, Potraj, Girel Bhimsen, Gaja Bhimsen, Mungaraj, Bhumuttel, Parraja
6	Samlur	Kolakamini Devi	BavadaDev, Hiramraj, Mera-aama Telgin, Katakolin Mata
7	Gadhbengal	Sonkunwar	Pikri Budhin Matwari Dokri
8	Kukdajhor	Mawali Mata	No Asso.
9	Nau Munjmeta	Bhandarin Mata	No Asso.

Source: Field study

It is evident from the above table that there may be one or more associate deities of a presiding deity. Even in some shrines, the presiding deity has no associate at all as is the case with Mawali Mata of Kukdajhor village or Bhandarin Mata of Nau Munjmeta village.

Further, it is observed that an associate deity can be male such as *Dharamraj, Bavandei, Potraj, Girel Bhimsen, Gaja Bhimsen, Mungaraj, Bhumuttel* and *Parraja* as associates of *Gaondevi* of Chitalanka. But mostly, associates are female deities.

Apart from the above deities the Bastar region is also abode of several other deities. These deities are invited to the *Bastar Dussehra* (the longest festival of 75 days) by the Dussehara Committee which is held in Jagadalpur district of Bastar during September and October. The Dussehara Committee has been formed under the Chairmanship of a renowned person or a Member of Parliament and members being the local M.L.A., District Collector

and District Magistrate, Municipal Commissioner, Local Superintendent of Police and other old experienced persons. Special invitation is made personally by the head of the royal family to Mawli Mata (goddess) residing in Dantewada Temple, Dantewada district of Danteshin Bastar Dantewada. The deities invited by the Dussehara Committee are as follows:

1. Bade Mawali	2. Bethbudi Mata	3. GadhdalaMawali
4. Bhagdei Mata	5. BhangaramDev	6. GoupariMatabahigaon
7. Bhudhi Mata	8. BidaDhurwa (Odisha)	9. HathkariMawali
10. Budhai Mai (Odisha)	11. ChandelinBudhi Mata	12. Hinglajin Mata
13. Chaurasi Mata	14. Chhedoli Mata	15. HirindiMawali
16. Chikhla Mata	17. Chikhlahin Mata	18. Jakrin Mata
19. Dal Mawali	20. ChingdoMawali	21. Jamidarni Mata
22. Danteshwari Mai	23. Dhawandavir	24. Jarhi Mata (Odisha)
25. Dulardei	26. Durpata Mata	27. KamleshwariMawali
28. Fulmati	29. PilaBabu	30. Kankalin
31. Ganga Dei (Odisha)	32. Ratai Mata	33. Karibudin
34. HameshwariMawali	35. Semarmudin	36. KenwaraBudin
37. Hatiyarin Mata	38. Tapesi Mata	39. KhandiMawali
40. Hira Kunwar	41. UtraanMawali Mata	42. KunwariMawali (Odisha)
43. Jadibudin	44. PahadinMawali Mata	45. Limdarin
46. Jalni Mata	47. Ranbir	48. Lohjarin Mata
49. Janmigudi Mata	50. Rewagadin Mata	51. Mata Maay
52. Kala Kunwar	53. Suraj Kunwar (Odisha)	54. MurkaMawali
55. Kana Hurra	56. TengahuMawalihiri (Odisha)	57. Naik Mata
58. Kari Kankalin	59. Langoor Mata	60. Pahadbani
61. Karnakotin	62. Lingo Mawali	63. MundaraMawali (Odisha)
64. KhandaKankalin	65. MandraMawali	66. MurkiMawali
67. KhokhlinDokri Mata	68. NawaparinMawali	

Along with the physical and social dimensions of the *Devogudis* of the area, the religious sphere bears greater significance. The worship systems in the shrines of the region is very similar to one another. In some places, coconut, *agarbatti*, bangles, *chunari* etc. are offered to the deities, but in most of them domestic fowls, goats and even buffaloes are sacrificed in the name of deities. Naveen Kashyap (age-39) of Garaw and Kalan village, of Bastar district reported that once a year in the month of *Baisakh* (April-May) 3 goats, 1 duck, 1 rooster (black colour), 9 eggs, bangles, *chunri* (scarf) are offered to the village deity *Pardeshin Mata*. Rituals are performed every Tuesday and offered coconut, and bananas, based on availability otherwise only fired the *Agarbati*. A goat is sacrificed on the last day of *Navratri* (nine nights before Dussehra observed by the Hindus).

Devgudi also have annual/monthly festivals which are celebrated in the form of *jatra*, *mandai*, and *mela*. *Mandai* is the native term synonymous with *jatra* and *mela mandai* or *jatra* is a group worship performed under a *pargana*. However, people use these terms interchangeably. On behalf of the deity of the village where the *jatra* is organized, the deities of nearby villages are invited and group worship is performed. This is also called *Mela*. There are three types of *jatra* organized by the tribes of Bastar.

1. **HesangJatra:** The *jatra* is celebrated after the harvesting of paddy. When the paddy is ripe, the people of the village wrap some paddy in leaves and hang it in the *saja* (*Terminalia tomentosa*) tree down a rope and a oath is taken to the effect of harvesting paddy properly. After a few days, another *jatra*,

called Hasang *jatra* is organized to take the wrapped paddy down.

2. **Kakasadjatra:** It is *ajatra* organized for clan deity. The *jatra* of *gotra*/clan deity is celebrated in the month of Paush (December-January).
3. **Devi jatra:** This is a *jatra* celebrated after Kakasadjatra to conduct mass worship.

During these occasions, devotees sacrifice goats/chickens, etc. to fulfil their wishes. In *Devgudi* of Chitalankadevoties from different *Parganas* there 8-10 times in a year thereby giving the place a festive look. Following are the festivals celebrated in all the nine villages under study:

Amus (Hariyali): This is the first festival of the year which is celebrated in the *Amawasya* (new moon day) in the month of *Shravan* (July-August). On this day, farmers worship all the agricultural tools and implements at home and in *Devagudi* as well. Cows and oxen are also worshipped. The people here perform 'Gendi' dance which looks very attractive to see. On this day, neem branches are kept at the entrance of the house with the belief that no disease enters the house.

Nava Khai (Naya Khana): This festival is celebrated in the month of *Bhado* (August-September) after the new paddy is harvested. The first crop is offered to the presiding deity along with associate deities; only then it is prepared for own consumption in the house.

Diyari: This is the Halbi version of the Deepavali festival. But Muria tribe calls this festival *Diwad*. The festival is celebrated for three days. It begins on the second day of *Dhanteras*; and this first day of *Diwad* is called *Roop Chaudas* or *Narak Chaudas*. Since it is the first day, it is also called *Suroti*, meaning to start. On this day *Devagudi* and other sacred places are cleaned and *diyas* (earthen lamps) are lighted. The sacred places other than *Devgudi* are *Aana Kudma* (clan deity) *Jagarani* (the deity with many children), *Charubeda*, *Nukang Lon* (sacred room for keeping rice urns), barn and cow shed. Normally, *gayata* enjoys the right to light lamps at *Aana Kudma* and *Jagarani* while *Dand*, head of the farmers in the village (generally a rich farmer) lights the lamp at *Charubeda* in the names of *Rav Baba* and *Kaudo*.² At domestic sphere, the elderly woman of the family performs the task of lighting lamps in *Nukang Lon*, barn and cow shed.

On the second day of *Dewed* households offer new vegetables, rice and tapioca, (the offering is called *Jogani*) to deities and then consume them as *Prasad* (sacred food). On this day the women of a household in *vok* clan deity, and presiding deity

of the cow shed and of land by offering rice flour. Then these deities are duly worshipped with betel nut, coconut, incense sticks and alcohol. Domestic animals are also worshipped on this day. A dish, known as *kichidi* (food prepared with rice, lentils and sometimes vegetables) is prepared for self-consumption and feeding of pet animals like cattle.

The third day is known as *Kolang Endna*; on this day, in the afternoon, villagers visit the *gayata's* house for *johar bhenth* (to greet the *gayata* with lentils and rice on the plate). This is also the day of merry-making and the village girls perform dance (known as *Diwad endna*); lamps are lit at all places like the day of *Suroti*.

Charu/Choru: This ritual is performed in the month of *Kartik* (October-November), just before the paddy is harvested, in a certain corner of the village; this site is called *Charubeda*. It is believed to be the place in the village where their god *Rav Baba* who visits a *Devgudi* in every three years, had rested. The place is marked and *Charu* is celebrated at the same place. The way of marking the place among the tribes also differs. If a person of the village sees strange incidents in the village like snakes coming out of the same place again and again, wild animals coming and sitting at the same place, etc., then it is considered to be the resting place of *Rav Baba*. Then that place is confirmed through *Sirha*, and marked as *Charubeda*. Before the ritual of *Charu*, a meeting is held in the village and the time is fixed. Coconut, incense sticks and a rooster are offered as part of the worship in the *Devgudi* for starting cut the paddy. The villagers pray to the village deity located in *Devgudi* that till the end of the paddy harvesting, there should not be any kind of trouble while cutting the paddy.

Semi Pandum - When *semi* (beans) start fruiting in early December, the tribes here first offer it to the goddess, only after that the vegetable of beans is cooked in someone's house. It shows the gratitude of the tribes towards nature and their adored Goddess.

Mahashivratri - Here on the day of *Mahashivratri* Lord Shiva is worshipped in their respective homes, after that a fair is held in *Devgudi* on the second day. Only a one-day fair is held in the first year; 2nd year is observed like first year. After that a 12-day fair is held in the third year, which is called '*Jagar*'. This may happen due to visit of *Rav Baba*, the Celibate God who is a nomadic in nature come to every *Devgudi* once in three years, hence, fair is organised in a three-year cycle. After third year the first year of the next cycle begins.

Amapandum – Like *Semipandum*, *Amapandum* is also celebrated in which the first fruit of mango is offered by the villagers to their presiding deity.

As it has been mentioned, rituals are performed every Tuesday in *Devgudi* in which people sacrifice cocks and goats. In earlier days, the people of the area used to sacrifice human also. Through '*Sirha*', the Goddess used to demand human sacrifice (*Narbali*) and remove the calamity in the village. But not every god/goddess was offered human sacrifice because some gods/goddesses do not like human sacrifice. A myth is prevalent about it. Balram Bhaskar (age 58), the priest of Gamawada village in the district of Dakshin Bastar Dantewada, tells about his village goddess called *Satbahini*.³ *Satbahini* (seven sisters) had come from Warangal, present Telangana to Dilmili, district of Dakshin Bastar Dantewada; but after some time, they settled in Gamawada. Gamawada village is/was adjoining to Dilmili and people started sacrificing cock and goat in honour of seven sisters and for the fulfilment of their wishes. Gradually the goddesses started demanding '*Narbali*' too. Sister Danteshwari, one of the seven sisters, did not like this at all and left that place and came to Dantewada and settled there since then. She is enshrined in the name of '*Danteshwari*' in Dantewada. The rest of the sisters are in Gamawada itself, though idols of the seven sisters are installed in the sacred shrine of Gamawada.

Importance of Devgudis

Devgudi, a symbol of the faith of the tribes, holds an important place in the lives of the community. From birth to death, and on different occasions, rituals and festivals are organised in the village *Devgudi* to worship the village deity housed in it. In fact, from the very beginning of civilization, the tribal society had started believing in both evil and good spirits. While a good spirit would protect them, an evil spirit on the contrary hurts them. Thus, the faith in good spirits grew as they considered them as their protectors. In this way, they choose a place where they can be placed as a symbol. They installed them at an elevated place outside the village to protect the village from evil spirits. In return, animals were sacrificed to make them happy. This practice continues till date. There are also social rules made by the ancestors of the village relating to *Devgudi*, which all the villagers follow. The rules are:

- prohibition of entry in side *Devgudi* except the priest;
- prohibition of felling nearby trees and plants;
- presence of people at least 30 feet away from

the main deity at the time of sacrifice of cocks and goats; and

- prohibition of entry of women in the *Devgudis*,

The importance of *Devgudi* is understandable from the fact that rituals are organised in it whenever an important event is held in the village. *Devgudi* is important in various ways.

A presiding deity is residing in each *Devgudi* is related to the clan of *Pujari* or *Perma* (priest). The presiding deity is installed by an ancestor of the *Pujari*. Hence, *Pujaris* in the village *Devgudi* are hereditary. Apart from the presiding deity, associate deities are also worshiped during *jatra*, *mandai* and *mela*.

Tribes are normally closely related to nature. They consider trees and *Gudi* as part of their culture. The cultural unity from *Devgudi* as well as its diversity in relation to other villages is expressed. No two villages share the same *Devgudi*, thus they act as geographical boundaries and markers of tribal area. The people have full faith and belief in the deities established in *Devgudi*. They believe that if the goddess is pleased with them, then they would live happily. The goddess of *Devgudi* protects them from disease and other calamities keep crops and livestock safe and protect their children from evil spirits.

In *Devgudi*, various types of puja / rituals are performed to please the goddess. Their likes and dislikes are taken care of. The *Pardeshin Mata* is seated in the Garaw and Kalan. The people there believe that by worshipping and pleasing the Mother, their wishes are fulfilled. There the red and black colour sticks belong to *Mawali Mata* and *Mahamai Mata* respectively. It is believed that these sticks are rolled over by women who do not have children. The sticks are also rolled over the body from top to bottom on the patient for diseases like cold, fever, etc. To fulfil the wishes of the people or after the wish is fulfilled; the goddess is appeased by making offerings here. Tribal people believe that the deities protect them and at the same time punish the wrong doers. '*Angadev*' is installed in *Devgudi* of village Gamawada, '*Angadev*' performs the task of punishing the guilty. Troubles like crop failure of the guilty, making someone sick in the house, etc. are their way of punishing them. Various measures are taken by the villagers to avoid this.

Change

The people of the area have their versions of worshipping the deities. The respondents told that in the early days when people depended on hunting and gathering, they found it safe to live in groups;

living in groups got rid of the fear of wild animals, but not the fear of safety during hunting, or the unseen power of nature. Failures were attributed to the unseen power governing the nature. However, they did not settle in one place. Living in one place in the group and learning agriculture subsequently led to the formation of a village. Settled life began. But fear related to failure of crops and disease haunted them. The reasons were attributed to unknown power. So they tried to appease and worship the unknown power of nature and all the living and non-living beings of nature. Still, their sufferings were not over. It dawned upon them that ancestors who looked after them when they were alive would also take care of them during sufferings and bad days. This belief was based on another belief that prosperity or calamity is the result of blessings or curses of ancestors who are present only around them in non-physical form. So they started worshipping the souls of dead ancestors.

The people further believed that there are two types of spirits or souls of ancestors like the supernatural powers in nature; these are malevolent (evil) and benevolent spirit (good). To protect against malevolent power, people worshipped benevolent powers which included both the power of nature and that of the ancestors. Gradually, the power of ancestors was given primacy as it is believed that they can also negotiate with the power of nature to a greater extent. Thus the tradition of animism and ancestor worship combined to characterise the faith and beliefs of tribes, as was reported during the field study. This emerging tradition shows a change from the belief in the power of nature to the belief in the power of ancestors. The people built devgudis for the ancestors to reside, though, as they reported, before it; no specific place was marked for appeasement or worship of the power of nature. It can be further argued that the beginning of ancestor worship led to a shift of the presence of supernatural power from outside to inside, for ancestors also have accommodation in the family as has been discussed earlier.

As reported, the ancestor, who established a village or was the common ancestor of a clan became the main deity of that village or clan-based village. They were installed in devgudis. Later on, other important persons, relatives of the person installed as the main deity were installed as associate deities. Those who belonged to the in-law's side are called *Tadodev* and his progeny are called *Mandodev*. It is worth mentioning that all the souls of ancestors are not included in the associate deity category, they have got a place in individual families as discussed.

The tradition continues. Even today people have been following the rules made by their ancestors. Shri Maansai Nag (age- 52) Village-Chitalanka, Dantewada says that *Gaon Dei* (village deity) was installed in his village as the main deity followed by *Panch Pandav Dharamraj* as associate deity at the *devgudi* complex of the village. The customs and rules made for traditional *devgudi* are still maintained. Entry of women is strictly prohibited in devgudi; and they cannot partake prasad there. Women's entry is prohibited because women are considered impure during the menstrual cycle. Only priests enter *devgudi*. The tradition of annual thatching of the roof of *devgudi* is still strictly maintained.

In recent years the devgudis of Bastar region have received funds from the Government of Chhattisgarh for infrastructural development. Community maintenance is supported by government grants. Two things have been observed. First, it is observed that *sian* (knowledgeable persons of the village) in some villages have accepted modernisation efforts of the devagudi complex through government funds. Compound walls and new devgudis have been constructed and deities shifted to the new shrines. In some villages, the deities are not shifted but remain in the traditional ones. Due to development-induced displacement, the deities are rehabilitated in new villages with newly created infrastructure.

Shifting of deities either to the newly constructed devgudi in the original village or in the rehabilitated village has created emotional crisis. The traditional people oppose to the shift and so in some villages deities remain in old devgudies within the newly constructed compound. In rehabilitated villages it is reported the deity even objects to the shift. The deity conveys her/his wishes through *sirah*, the person whom the deity possesses. Near Gangrel dam of Dhamtari District goddess Angar moti mata refused to move to the rehabilitated place and so she is worshipped on the bank of the dam only. The deities, it can be argued, refuse to leave their natural surroundings which are absent in rehabilitated villages. The mind that visualised the deity in natural surroundings feels distressed on its shift to an unfamiliar surround. This is evident when the deity is believed to speak through *sirah*, for *sirah* the deity, the natural surroundings, deity's communication through him, etc. represent a reality which is absent in a new place. Nature-man-spirit complex as conceptualised in the context of the Maler (see Vidyarthi, 1963) still captures the imagination of many villagers and religious specialists even in our modern age.

Change and continuity in the study of *devgudis* in Bastar region throws some questions whose answers have not been investigated in this paper. There is no data to prove whether the ancestor who established the village was a male and female. The village deities are observed to be female in many cases. As the tribes follow patriarchal lineage it is obvious that the ancestors were male. But how the ancestors changed to female deities in many villages remains a mystery as the respondents have no clue of it. Was it a possibility that both matrilineal and patrilineal traditions existed in the past? There is no answer, even in the folklore of the people. But whatever, information could be gathered, it can be argued that the tutelary deity of a king became popular as the main deity with local versions. This is not the case always. In western Odisha, it is reported during one field study that the tribal female deities were adopted by the kings which later became Hinduised. Male and female issue of deities in tribal areas in a historical perspective demands in-depth study which is beyond the scope of this paper.

There is another issue that relates to deities with Sanskritised names. There are few folk tales to throw light on it. But it can be safely inferred that this is a result of the Hinduisation process of co-existence in historical times. Moreover, the link of devgudies, deities, etc. has a Telugu dimension, for devgudi is a Telugu word for temple. Tribal religion shows a cross-tribe and cross-community dimension beyond the territorial boundary of a tribe. The study of devgudies places a number questions whose answers can help understand objectively its past and present.

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2. It is believed that Kauda along with his female counterpart Keina, lives in all permanent water sources/bodies located in the village territory or in the forests. If there is not any permanent water source/body in a village, it means Kauda does not exist in that village.
3. The seven sisters are Mawali Devi, Maa Danteswari, Sitala mata, Hinglajin mata, Pardesini mata, Katgudin mata and Kategudin mata. In recent years it is interpreted that Goddess Danteswari has 32 names and is worshipped in different Devgudis in one or the other name. Popular among them are Danteshwari, Kotgudin, Pendrawadin, Kankalin, Pardesin, Mawali, Bijilikarin, Sitala, Jalnibudi, Dayamule, Gangadai, Kesarpalin, Hinglajin, Dabagosin, Dulardeyi, Rewagdin, Hirmadai, Kolakaamini, Ganganadai, Paatakadai, Peeladai, Ghaasbedindai and Semariya
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