

Religious Practices and Beliefs of Bedakampana Lingayats Residing in the Thalakkurai Hamlet of the Burgur Hills in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

India, the world's largest democratic nation, boasts a diverse and rich cultural heritage, with a population of approximately 1,417,681,535 as of April 15, 2023. The country comprises 28 states and 8 union territories, housing a citizenry that represents various religions, origins, dialects, and beliefs. Within this diverse population, certain communities reside in remote suburbs or forested areas, such as the Bedakampana Lingayats of Thalakkurai village live in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu. Despite limited attention from social scientists, these Lingayats embrace their traditions as a means of navigating modernity. They demonstrate a remarkable balance between preserving their distinct identity and actively contributing to India's rich cultural and religious diversity. This paper aims to explore the religious practices and beliefs of the Bedakampana Lingayats of Thalakkurai, focusing on their worship rituals, religious ceremonies, and festivals. The Lingayats, also known as Lingawants, Lingangis, Lingadhari, Shivabhaktas, and Virasaivas, are devout followers of Lord Shiva. As strict vegetarians, they prefer to be addressed as Virasaivas. Their name derives from the Sanskrit word "Linga", symbolizing their profound devotion to Lord Shiva. By delving into their religious lives and examining the authenticity of their practices, this study sheds light on the contributions of the Bedakampana Lingayats to India's cultural and religious tapestry.

Keywords: Communities, Culture, Ishtalinga, People, Religion, Virasaivas, Worship

1. Introduction

India, the world's second-largest democratic nation, is renowned for its diverse cultural heritage, encompassing a population of 1,417,681,535 individuals as of April 15, 2023. The country consists of 29 states and 8 union territories, each representing a myriad of creeds, castes, languages, and religions¹. Within this mosaic, numerous communities inhabit remote and secluded regions, often overlooked in academic discussions about development in such isolated areas. Fortunately, the Bedakampana Lingayats of Thalakkurai village have garnered attention as they reside in the vast forests of the Western Ghats, now under the administration of the Forest Department of Bargur.

This paper aims to delve into the lives, cultures, customs, rituals, and unique beliefs of the Bedakampana Lingayat community, dwelling in the depths of the Western Ghats. Thalakkurai, a small settlement situated within the greenery of the Western Ghats, falls under the Bargur block in Anthiyur Taluk, Erode District of Tamil Nadu. Designated as a separate taluk on November 22, 2012, Thalakkurai is approximately 70 kilometers away from the district headquarters of Erode. It comprises four blocks, namely Anthiyur, Athani, Bargur, and Ammapet, bordering North Karnataka in the south, Anthiyur in the north, Erode in the west, and Gobi in the east².

Thalakkurai village, situated within Bargur 'B' block, has a population of 975 individuals, predominantly

composed of Lingayats³. This hilly region boasts a rich floral diversity, abundant in timber, teak, rose, sandalwood, and bamboo. The bamboo forests attract a significant population of elephants, while the area is also known for the prevalence of Athi trees (*Ficus racemosa*). The village exports gooseberries, jayamangalam, and red pulp tamarinds to foreign countries, while jackfruit serves as a prominent forest product. The fauna in this area is diverse, including reptiles, amphibians, birds, and insects. Prey animals such as langurs, Indian spotted deer, and gaurs inhabit the region, along with carnivorous species like leopards, bears, tigers, wild boars, and wild cats. Surrounded by evergreen forests and abundant wildlife, this settlement provides a unique backdrop for the Bedakampana Lingayat community⁴.

This paper aims to shed light on the Bedakampana Lingayat community, specifically focusing on their people, lifestyle, culture, and customs, unraveling the intricacies of their existence in this distinctive natural setting.

2. Objectives

The primary objective of this paper is to examine the religious practices of the Bedakampana Lingayats in Thalakarai village, focusing on their unique worship methods and celebration of festivals, which contribute to the development of the religion and the community as a whole.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a descriptive and analytical approach, supplemented by personal interviews and data collected from the local community, foresters, and government offices such as the Panchayat and Village Administrative Office.

4. Bargur “B” Villages

Among the 33 villages in Bargur, Thalakarai covers an area of 4046.90 beets (area of coverage)⁵ and is home to 215 families, of which 187 belong to the Lingayat sect. However, these 187 families are not under the control of the Forest Department. Instead, there are 5 families from the Scheduled Community (with a population of 20) and 23 families from the Scheduled Tribes (with a population of 105), including Sholaga tribes and Scheduled Castes.

These families are not only under the control of the Forest Department but also fall under the purview of the Tribal Village Forest Council (TVFC)⁶.

5. Origin of Lingayats in Bargur Block

Historical evidence suggests that the Bedakampana Lingayats were migrants from the Karnataka region and had been residing there since the twelfth century A.D.⁷. The movement advocating a distinct form of worship dedicated to Lord Shiva was initiated by the revered saint Basava during the latter half of the twelfth century A.D. The teachings and philosophies of Basava and his nephew are documented in two puranas, namely Basavapurana (Poona Edition, 1905) and Channabasavapurana (Mangalore Edition, 1851). Basava, meaning “bull” in Kannada, represents the sacred animal of Lord Shiva⁸. Subsequently, they migrated from Karnataka through the hilly region of Kollegal and settled in the Bargur hills, a significant part of the Western Ghats, approximately two hundred years ago⁹. Following the state reorganization in November 1956, Kollegal taluk, which was originally part of Coimbatore District, became part of the Mysore State¹⁰. As Lingayats hail from Karnataka, their mother tongue is Kannada. The community is also referred to as Lingawants, Lingangis, Lingadharis, Shivabhaktas, and Virasaivas. They adhere to a vegetarian lifestyle and prefer to be called Virasaivas¹¹.

6. The Origin and Historical Development of the Community

The Lingayat community comprises various castes united by their shared religious beliefs, and they commonly refer to themselves as “Virasaivas.” The term “Lingayat” is derived from the Sanskrit word “Linga”, which represents the phallic emblem, combined with the suffix “Ayta”¹². A true Lingayat carries a silver box containing a stone phallus, which serves as a symbol of their faith. Losing this emblem is considered a loss of spiritual faith. The Lingayat sect is believed to have been established in the twelfth century. According to Mr. Karibasava Sastri’s writings, there is a departure from the four-fold caste system that applies to Hindus within the Lingayat community, as they

profess a non-caste system. Two inscriptions mention the reformers “Basava” and Ekantada Ramayya, who played significant roles in the development of Lingayat doctrines¹³.

7. Religious Life

The Lingayats follow a specific sub-sect known as “Lingothpawar”, which is characterized by its orthodox practices. A true Lingayat is someone who worships their Ishtalinga (sacred phallus) in their hand, focusing their mind on it and detaching themselves from the external world¹⁴. When they wake up in the morning, even before bathing, they apply sacred ashes on their foreheads before leaving their homes. They have various names for their deity, including Pasuveswaran, Manjumalai, Matheshwaran, Urikkonbu Pasuveshwaran, Vadakal Madeshwaran, Pandeshwaran, MudavelaIswaran, Maalingseshwarar, and more¹⁵. They also hold Lord Shiva’s Vahana, the Nandi (bull), in high reverence¹⁶.

Lingayats are divided according to PanchaPeeda (five divisions) in different localities. The people belonging to the first peeda worship Harimaduvaleshwara in Karnataka. The people belonging to second peeda worship Madeshwaran in Madeshwaranmalai. The people of third peeda worships Burmeshwara in Sulavadi, Karnataka. The people belonging to the fourth Peeda worship Thambeshwara in Dhevarmalai. The people of the fifth peeda worship Badrakaliamman in MaakkanPalayam on the way to Kadampoor. People of each peeda are again divided into four groups according to the allocation of duties and responsibilities. The groups are as follows:

- Periyapal Ejamaanar
- Siriyapal Ejamaanar
- Gundripal Ejamaanar
- Thingalmanai Thambadi¹⁷

The people of Periyapal Ejamaanar will do poojas to God like going with the chariot of God at the time of *Urchavamanai*, pull *Periyapalli Vaganam*, (god’s vehicle) uplifting the chariot, bell ringing, and move with the statues of God. The second category of people Siriyapal Ejamaanar perform their duties like washing the clothes that are adorned to God and washing the utensils that are being used, cleaning the *Pragaram* (pooja area), and do the decoration work. The last two categories of people Gundripal and Thingalmanai Thambadi continue with all left out work for pooja¹⁸.

The most important function of Lingayat is ‘*ther Thiruvila*’ (Temple car/chariot). The temple car is called ‘*ther*’ (chariots) where the statue of their God Thambeshwaran is placed. This *Ther Thiruvila* is being celebrated in the month of April at the time of *Chittirai Ugadhi*. This celebration goes on for four days. First, their celebration starts on Sunday in their Thambeshwarar temple at Devar Malai, as these people belong to the fourth Peeda. This festival starts with the Gingely oil Abhisheha (oil prepared by them with gingelly) in the night. The gingelly oil abishekam is being done on Monday, they go for Girimala three km from Devarmalai to the interior forest which is under the control of the Forest Revenue Department, and perform poojas to the God. On Tuesday around ten to ten thirty at night, the devotees perform Gundam Iranguthal (pathway with fire blocks for a short distance) which will be performed with complete devotion offering prayers to God¹⁹.

Most important ritual “*Therilluthal*” will be performed on this day. On Wednesday, the disciples clean their own temple and material belongings and invite *Dharmakartha* and Thambadimar to perform poojas. The whole night they will celebrate the festival. This festive celebration ends with a turmeric bath as a sacred ritual for hygienic necessity. Remarkable practice during the festival time by the ladies is to be noted here. That is *Alagukuthal*. (piercing lengthy rod through cheeks or tongue). This has to be performed by the ladies who give birth to their first baby whether it is male or female. The ladies perform this ritual with white cloth wrapped around them with intensely devoted to fasting from the morning. This performance will start at 3:00 pm to 4:00 pm in the evening. In two temples such as Kelithiveerappan Koil (at Devarmalai, 7 km from Thalakarai) and Girivala temple (*Girivala* temple is located 3 km from Devarmalai) people perform *Alagukuthuthal* (which means a small sharp end vel penetrates the tongue) ritual in two temples One at where cheek to cheek rod piercing performance will be done. Another one is where piercing in the tongue is performed. This tradition has to be performed by every woman of the Lingayat family after they deliver their first baby. For the second and other children, it is optional to perform this kind of ritual²⁰.

Another performance is also being performed on Monday by both men and women. Women completely apply ashes to their whole body over the dress itself whereas men apply powders of coal on their body and go

for 'Girivala' as a 'Venduthal' (A private commitment to god to do something specific)²¹.

There is a practice of wearing lingam on the third day of the birth of every baby that is born to them. When they grow up, it is optional to wear lingam. But those who are involved in doing poojas should wear lingam all the time. Otherwise, they will not be allowed to perform poojas. Another noteworthy practice is that if a male has more than one wife then he or his children will not be allowed to perform pooja and they are kept away at the time of any rituals or performances. Only when they have grandchildren, then that grandchildren are permitted to involve themselves in doing poojas. This Bandeshwarar temple is now under the control of Temple Charitable Trust, Anthiyur taluk as there occurred frequent conflicts in selecting a leader²².

'Sholagas' main religion is Hinduism. They are non-vegetarians. They are not conservative and orthodox in their way of life. The majority of the people worship *Muniappan* (Bloodthirsty God). This festival is celebrated once in 3 years. They celebrate their Maariamman festival in the month of April. *Payiru festival* (Crop festival) is celebrated by them in the month of August. At the time of festivals, they make animal sacrifices (Mainly Goat sacrifices) to their deities²¹. Some of them have also been converted to Christianity in the last few years. They also have a church and attend prayers regularly²³.

8. De facto of Lingayats

Lingayats hold Lord Shiva's Vahana, the Nandi, as their favorite deity²³. They are called Lingayats because they wear the lingam, a sacred symbol, on a chain around their necks. The Lingayat Nayakars, who serves as the community leaders, have authority over their people and guide them through both good and bad times. The priest, known as Saamiyar, is responsible for performing the rites and rituals and wears the lingam throughout their life.

Lingayats strictly adhere to rituals to maintain their sanctity, and they do not welcome outsiders into their homes. They refrain from dining outside their village or locality and carry their own food and water while traveling. They worship lord Basuveshwaran and hold the cow as a sacred animal. Their day begins with the worship of cows.

On the other hand, other sects of Lingayat people are less orthodox and conservative. They follow a vegetarian

diet but are more open to accepting food from outside. They do not wear the lingam around their necks regularly but wear it occasionally during festivals and religious functions²⁴.

9. Conclusion

Based on personal interviews with government authorities, teachers, forest department employees, and the people of the Thalakkurai region, it is evident that despite the efforts made by various departments, the Lingayat community and other residents are resistant to change. They prefer to maintain their traditional way of life, relying on forest resources rather than embracing modern education, healthcare, and economic activities. It is crucial for us in the developed world to make concerted efforts to uplift the people living in such hilly regions and bring them into the modern world. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs has the responsibility of looking after tribal communities across the country and has made efforts to integrate these isolated communities. However, the people of Thalakkurai still face challenges such as scarcity of drinking water, the need to walk long distances for water, and lack of adequate transportation, medical facilities, and road access.

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