

REGIONAL DISTRIBUTIONS OF JATRAS IN ANDHRA PRADESH:
AN ANALYSIS OF WORSHIP PATTERNS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL
SOUTH INDIAN DEITIES

Paul G. Hiebert
University of Washington

As anthropologists turn from studying relatively bounded tribes to peasant and urban societies like those in South Asia, the last remains of the early anthropological equation, "race = "society" = "culture", are called into question. Earlier "race" had been dropped. Now, as Barth points out (1969), the assumption that society and culture are coterminous is no longer useful, at least for analysing complex civilizations. In South Asia, for example, societies, however defined, show a great deal of internal variation on the one hand, and share many cultural traits with other societies in the region on the other. Social boundaries are maintained by specific cultural items which are symbols of the group's identity.

In the absence of relatively autonomous, culturally homogeneous societies, anthropologists in South Asia are being forced to develop open or partial models to describe social and cultural patterns. On one level this has led to intensive village studies. At another it is necessary to develop methods and concepts for analysing regional patterns. This paper is an attempt to explore one approach to the study of regional social infrastructures and to touch on some of the conceptual problems raised by regional studies. The case in point is the study of jatras in Andhra Pradesh.

I. ON THE NATURE OF JATRAS

Jatras are religious fairs widespread throughout South India. The word has a Dravidian root meaning "a tumult" or "noisy disturbance." It must be differentiated from the term yatra, the private pilgrimage of a devotee.

In a general sense jatra refers to any religious fair, whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian or local village deity. Specifically it is used for fairs in honor of Hindu or local village deities. The term durga is used for Muslim religious fairs, and perantalu for fairs commemorating female Hindu saints. Each of these types of religious fairs has its own characteristics.

A. Hindu Jatras:

Hindu jatras are generally annual affairs, attracting, in the case of small village temples, a few hundred local worshippers, and in the largest religious centers, a half million or more from all over India. Festivities generally last several days. The rites are generally in

Sanskrit and follow Brahmanical traditions. The sacrifices are vegetarian and the reenactments from the Epics or Puranas.

Priests at varna caste Hindu jattras are usually Brahmins, and although the Madiga drummers are used to lead the processions and Malas to prepare the grounds, the worshippers belong to the clean castes. The untouchables have their own jattras in honor of the Hindu deities associated with their castes; the Malas led by their priests, the Mala Dasari, in the worship of Chenakesava, and the Madigas by the Baine in the worship of Mahadeva.

The primary focus of Hindu jattras is the marriage of the deities. The ceremonies follow the orthodox marriage rites. For example, in the Rama jatra at Konduru, the first evening Rama is prepared for his wedding with a bath, new clothes and a bottu accompanied by the appropriate mantras chanted by the Brahmin temple priest. The following evening rites are performed at a cobra hole and earth is brought back to construct the homam pit. Rama, Sita and Lakshmana are taken on a platform through the village the next morning to receive family offerings (mangalaharati) at clean caste homes. The same afternoon Rama, now dressed in a woman's garb (as mohini) is carried through the village reenacting Rama's secret investigation of Sita's beauty and worthiness. This is followed at night by homam rites and the edurukolu ceremony in which Rama and his kinsmen, represented by half of the worshippers, is introduced with a great deal of pomp and celebration to Sita and her kinsmen, represented by the others.

The marriage takes place in the temple on the morning of the fourth day. That evening the newlyweds are taken in procession on Garuda through the village. Processions on the small chariot and the large chariot take place on successive nights. Nagaveli is celebrated on the seventh evening and the jatra comes to a close on the eighth night with the dõpu ceremonies in which the theft of Sita's jewels is enacted.

Regional shrines such as Uma Maheshwaram and all India temples such as Sri Salam involve more elaborate rites and a great many priests, and the proceedings may be broadcast on the radio. But the climax of their jattras remain the marriage and processions of the deities.

Larger jattras are not only religious rites. Temporary markets spring up over night in the fields as traveling merchants and local entrepreneurs set up stalls. Days are generally free for individual activities. People buy food for their stay, cocoanuts and powders for private offerings to the gods, and religious pictures and images to take home. They stop to gamble, to drink a cup of tea, to see a sideshow, to give their children rides on a large wooden ferris wheel, to have a purification bath at a nearby spring, and to stop before one of the many shrines for a few moments of private worship. There is time to visit kinsmen and friends from neighboring villages and to relax before the evening activities.

Nights center around group activities. Dances, street dramas, bards and other forms of entertainment help people to pass the time until the ceremonies begin. The large drums (tapeta) of the Madigas and the Barber bands call the people to the main religious events; the enactment of various stories, the homam celebration and the processions. The climax is reached when the deities are drawn through the streets on the great chariot accompanied by bands, torches, incense and offerings.

B. Jatras for Village Devatas:

Jatras are held for village deities to promote the strength and well-being of the village. In contrast to the stress on marriage found in Hindu jatras, these stress the propitiation of local deities who generally demand blood sacrifices. Most of them are female devatas, or village goddesses. The officiating priests come from the low Śudra and untouchable castes, and the shrines are often no more than small shelters with simple images or markers of the devatas.

Jatras for village deities are often associated with specific crises; with plagues of disease, fire, drought or flood. Others are observed annually, although their celebration will be greater if the threat of danger is near. The rites and the duration of the jatras varies greatly according to the village and deity, but in all the stress is more on the here and now than on cosmic time and space.

C. Muslim durgas:

In the broadest sense of the term, jatra is sometimes used in reference to Muslim durgas. These are religious fairs commemorating the death of Muslim saints. Rituals center around processions to the tombs in honor of the saint buried locally, or, more often, in other parts of India or the Near East. Foods, cloth coverings, incense and flowers are offered at the shrine followed by prayers led by the officiating priest and a night of singing. Prayer flags are raised over the shrine and left there during the following months.

The ceremonies are organized by the disciples of the saint and leadership is passed down through a spiritual succession that is sometimes based on lineal descent along kinship lines. Disciple groups often cut across lines of religion and caste and may carry out religious activities at other times of the year. In addition a great many general worshippers, both Muslim and Hindu, attend durgas to bring offerings and fulfill vows.

D. Perantalu:

The term perantalu is used of a woman whose husband is still alive. It also refers to a woman who has attained merit or divinity. Frequently these are women who have committed sati at the death of

their husbands and have come to be recognized as lesser goddesses. For example, some generations ago Buchamma committed sati in Gannavar Taluq, Krishna District, and is now revered by the Yadava caste to which she belonged as a giver of children and healer of diseases.

Ankamma lived across the Godavari River from her husband, a Kama. Each night he visited her, floating across the river using a large earthen pot. One night he used an unfired pot and drowned. In grief the wife committed suicide and became a devata, now worshipped particularly by the Kamas.

Buchi Rajavva was an only daughter of a Washerman near Karimnagar. At the age of twelve she was given in adoptive marriage (illitum) and at thirteen she and her son died at childbirth. Sixteen days later the parents had a vision and built a shrine to house her body. Others thought this was due to their mental anguish, but when the mother opened the tomb to move the body to the shrine it was unspoiled and shining, and they too accepted her supernatural state.

The annual jatras mark not so much the death of these women, but their meritorious acts as ideal women and their transition into a supernatural state. It is not, however, always easy to distinguish between them and the local village goddesses. Generally there are offerings of clothes, food, cocoanuts, incense and flowers but occasionally there are also blood sacrifices. Some local village devatas may, in fact, have had their origins in these local saints.

E. Christian jatras:

There are few Christian jatras. The notable exceptions are those initiated by the Catholics and the Methodists. These often occur at Easter and commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Other Christian groups have annual gatherings and conventions but these seem to lack the combination of religion, entertainment, and marketing that characterizes most jatras.

II. A REGIONAL ANALYSIS OF JATRAS IN ANDHRA PRADESH

Data from the 1961 Census volumes on Religious Fairs and Festivals (1964 - 1967) was used in a search for regional patterns of jatras. Information available in these volumes includes lists of jatras for each taluq (except the districts of Chittor, Srikakulam and Visakapatnam), the name of the deity or saint worshipped, the approximate number of worshippers, and the duration and time of the fair.

A check on the accuracy of the data by comparing census figures with anthropological field data gathered in Amrabad Taluq

(Mahbubnagar District) showed a high degree of agreement in terms of larger jatras (with attendance over 1000) but some discrepancies in the smaller ones. One jatra and two durgas observed in the field were not included in the census reports, but these attracted mostly local worshippers numbering less than a thousand. Omission of what seems to be a significant number of smaller jatras and the general nature of the estimates for larger ones means findings based on the census figures will only be rough approximations of what takes place. It would appear that if anything the findings underestimate the importance of jatras in the region.

A. Mapping the jatras of specific deities and saints.

A compilation of deities from the census reports shows more than six hundred deities and saints for whom jatras are held. In order to visualize the regional distribution of the worship (as measured by jatra attendance) of each of these, taluq-wise figures for each of the major deities and saints was entered into the computer SYMAP program and a map produced. A topographical approach was used in computing the area from which worshippers were attracted. In other words, when the computer came across a taluq with a high level of worship of a specific deity, it searched the adjacent taluqs and tapered off levels of worship intensity on the basis of what was occurring in these taluqs. This approach was chosen on the assumption that taluq boundaries were no hindrance to attracting worshippers and that the more worshippers at a jatra, the greater the region of their origins.

The results, so far, are maps showing the distribution and intensity of worship of more than sixty deities and saints. Most of the remaining five hundred plus are highly localized. That is, they are worshipped in only four or five taluqs at most. Tabulation figures are sufficient to show the location of their worship and there is little to be gained by additional mapping except in the study of specific deities.

The results show that worship of major Hindu deities such as Śiva, Rama, Hanuman and Narasimha is high and quite evenly distributed throughout the state. Special forms of these, however, are often localized. For instance, Amareshwara ("Lord of Immortals") as one of the twelve great Śiva lingas is worshipped only in jatras near Guntur. Another example is Rajeswara, a form of Śiva, who is worshipped primarily in the Nizamabad, Karimnagar, Medak and Adilabad districts, with an occasional jatra in Khammam, and East and West Godavari. In Karimnagar the local myth is that King Narendra mistakenly shot a rishi and was guilty of Brahmahatya Dosha. Wandering through the land he came to Vemulawada in Karimnagar District where he stopped to drink three handfuls of tank water. The water was sacred and purified him of sin, and Śiva appeared to him that night and told him to erect a temple for the lingam that he would find in the tank. Taken in all their forms, Śiva, Vishnu and their associates account for the largest portion of jatra worshippers.

As expected, the worship of caste deities follows the distribution of the castes. Thus, for example, Kanyakaparameshwari, heroine of the Śri Vāsavi Kanyaka Puraṇa and patron goddess of the Yegina Komati (merchants) is confined largely to the southern districts where the Komati are concentrated.

Worship of local goddesses shows considerable variation. By far the greatest number are worshipped in only one small area. An example of this is Garagalamma. Others, such as Akkamma, Anakamma and Ankamma are more widespread. These pose a common problem, that of regional variations in names of what is essentially the same deity. In literature Anakamma and Ankamma are considered the same (Elmore 1925: 19 fn), but Akkamma, devata of the Fishermen caste is not. Some of the "seven sisters" are widely worshipped throughout much of the state.

Perintalu, such as the living saint Amma, and most durgas are highly localized.

B. Deity sets.

It is clear that religious beings fall into several broad categories (Hindu Gods and Goddesses, village devatas, Hindu and Muslim saints, the Christian God and tribal deities) even though the nature of some specific beings is not always clear. Moreover, within each category there are sets. Within Hinduism there are Śivite and Vaishnavite jatras and some that are eclectic. In village deities the picture is not so clear although the "seven sisters" appear to be widespread in their various forms.

In order to explore possible associative and complimentary sets of deities correlations were run between each pair of beings and dendograms are being calculated which should provide us with a general taxonomy of similarities and differences based on worship distributions.

C. Composite maps.

If we compare Hindu deities, village devatas and Muslim saints, the latter are found largely in Telengana and Rayalsema and are notably absent along the coast with the exception of southern Nellore District. The greatest concentrations are in the Hyderabad region and the districts to the south.

The picture between Hindu and village deities is more complex. Village deities (figured either in percent of total worship, or in the adjusted per capita attendance at jatras) are strongest in Srikakulam and Warangal and inland in the coastal districts. The coast line itself is more strongly Hindu in orientation, and Hindu deities are strongest inland, particularly East of Hyderabad, and in the Khammam, Adilabad and Kurnool districts.

The relative intensity of all jatra worship (measured per capita) varies a great deal regionally. The highest levels are reached in the Mahbubnagar District where the number of people attending jatras reaches 81% of the total population. In some taluqs the figure reaches 270% which would mean an average of 2.7 jatras for each person if most of the worshippers came from within the taluq. High levels of participation extend South through Kurnool, Anantapur and Cuddapah. A second region of high attendance is in East Godavari. The lowest regions are in the upper third of the state, particularly in Adilabad District where the per capita attendance figure drops to .15%.

III. SOME OBSERVATIONS

Although the study is not yet complete, several observations can be made.

A. The importance of jatras in the religious lives of the people has been underestimated. Estimated attendance for the state was more than eleven million is close to 40% of the state population (adjusting for the districts on which no jatra figures are available), and the estimate is probably low since many local jatras are probably unreported. This corroborates field observations in which it was observed that people take a great deal of interest in jatras, particularly during the period from January to June when there is little work in the fields.

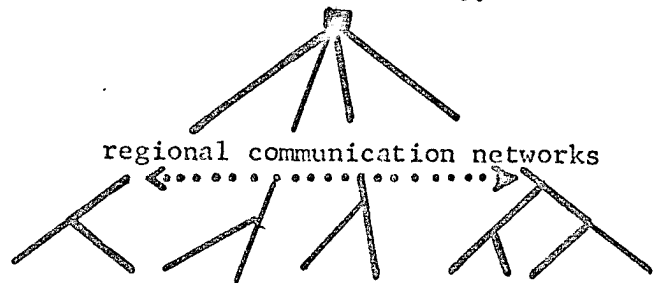
Jatras are important not only in the religious sense, although this should not be underestimated. They are also entertainment highlights for the year for many people in ways similar to Mardi gras celebrations. Young men boast of trying meat and philandering. It is difficult for the elders to police their behavior in the festivities. Wealthy people take chartered bus tours to a half dozen important jatras and shrines in the region. People visit relatives long unseen and the faithful go to pay their vows.

Large jatras have economic significance since they are the centers of large markets bringing in items that may not be available in local shops. Religious pictures and images are bought for use in the homes and children's toys are common commodities in addition to foodstuffs.

B. Jatras are significant in regional cultural communications. Using the model of great and little traditions, it is clear that jatras like traveling bards and dramatists provide a regional communication network below the level of the great tradition. Only a few of the major jatras are held in shrines of national significance and many operate outside the Brahmanical tradition. Even local jatras attract disciples who have moved away or scattered converts of a traveling saint. At two Konduru durgas with less than 500 worshippers some of

Great Tradition

Little Tradition

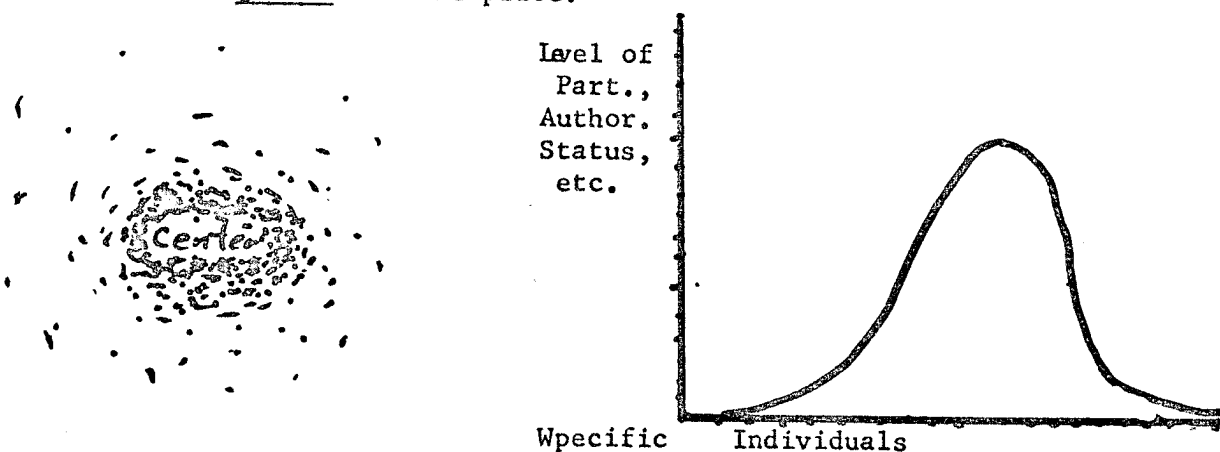


the officiating leaders and disciples came from as far as Hyderabad, 120 miles away. Any description of the regional flow of ideas must include an analysis of jatras.

C. Jatras are an example of unbounded social groups. In a western penchant for describing social groups largely in terms of boundaries and membership, we have overlooked what appears to be an important form of social organization, namely unbounded social groups.

Jatras have enduring organization. Some can be traced back in inscriptions for more than a thousand years. Moreover there is a clearly defined structure at the center. Many have hereditary leaders traced through blood or spiritual descent. Around these there are generally groups of disciples with varying degrees of loyalty. Finally there are regular worshippers and those who come on one or two occasions or as casual passersby.

Unbounded groups are defined not in terms of boundaries that demarcate membership, but in terms of strong centers. The center may be defined in terms of ritual purity (the caste system), devotion to a particular deity (jatras), control of local power (panchayats) or status (as in village dynamics). Anyone may have the right to participate but those closer to the center have greater prestige and authority. Decisions are not based on votes (which assumes a clearly defined membership) but on consensus in which the word of those at the center carries more weight than those on the margins. Authority lies not so much in coercion to conform to the group norms but in allowing participation in its activities. Participation is not divided into discrete levels but moves from casual participation to deep involvement at the center. In fact, unbounded groups are maintained not so much by a clearly defined structure as by a common activity and an understood way of doing things. It is this that accounts for the seeming paradox that despite lack of structural organization, of highly centralized authority, complex activities such as jatras do take place.



D. Jatras provide us with clues to the religious conceptual domains of the people. Jatras fall more or less into three broad sets which are associated with certain basic assumptions about the world.

1) High religious jatras: Hindu and Christian jatras are alternatives within a single set in which the Muslim peerla jatras provide a possible third. Active worship in these closely follows religious lines.

In Konduru Hindus from the varna castes attend the local Rama jatra in the caste temple and the untouchable Mallas have their own in honor of the Hindu deity Chennakeshava. Christians attend their own convention some distance away. Specific untouchables have duties in the Rama jatra under the old begari system (of yetti service) but they are not among the worshippers. Conversion from one religion to another includes a change in the jatras of these religions.

Jatras associated with high religions take on cosmic and cyclical significance. In Hinduism the event of crucial importance in the life cycle of the deities is that of marriage which marks the transition from brahmacārin to maturity. In the lives of both gods and men this marks entry into responsible action which determines their future karma. It is now that one must chart a life between the poles of life here and now and moksha, between procreation and tapas, between eroticism and asceticism (see O'Flaherty 1973).

In Christianity and Islam, death is the crux, the enigma which must be accounted for in ritual terms, for death is not a stage in a cycle of lives but the point at which options for the future are closed. Hence the stress on ceremonies associated with death, resurrection and heaven and hell.

2) Jatras for village deities: Jatras for village devatas are attended by all, irrespective of their religious commitments. While high caste people, Muslims and Christians may stay in the background and send their sacrifices by the hand of a servant or friend, in times of crisis they often take an active role. In a number of instances Brahmins serve as the officiating priests, although they refrain from making the blood sacrifices.

The focus of jatras for village deities is that of crisis and the placation of the goddesses. There is no cosmic significance. Rather the rites often carry a specific localized association. In jatras associated with plagues or with generating village strength the devata is taken to the village boundary and sent off to the neighboring area. The same devata is often enshrined in many places in the homes and fields of a village, but each form takes on individual characteristics and its "sight" (dzupu) is thought to extend ten to fifteen miles at most. Nor do these devatas have cosmic histories.

3) Perantalu and durgas: Both Hindus and Muslims hold atras in honor of saints, living or dead. It is here that the lines of

religious distinction break down most completely. Hindus become disciples to Muslim saints and vice versa. In both cases it seems that the jatra marks not so much the death of the saints as their transition to a superior position from which they bestow merit.

E. Regional analyses are important in the study of sociocultural infrastructures of complex societies.

Studies confined to the level of the village lose sight of other and important patterns. Of themselves jatras provide some insight into regional patterns of religious worship. In their broader scope they can be linked to other patterns such as caste distributions, economic trade and regional and religious loyalties. For example, many larger jatras have restaurants and shelters supported by specific castes for their members attending the ceremonies. The funds are solicited across broad regions.

But beyond this, the methods developed in studying regional patterns such as jatras may be applied to other types of regional data. In this sense this analysis is very tentative.