

## A NOTE ON POTHARAJU SYSTEM

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The system of “**Potharaju**” is one of the striking social features in the Telangana area of Andhra Pradesh. Basically they are non-brahmanical priests. They will perform the village festivals and tantrick rituals. The Potharajus have to perform different duties like giving amulates (Thayathu), dancing around the dead body and converting young girls to **Jogins** etc.

### ROLE OF POTHARAJU IN OORA PANDUGA :

During this festival the total formalities are divided among the three persons 1.Bindla, 2.Potharaju, 3.Kolupula. The Bindla and Potharaju belong to SC community and Kolupula who is a Jogin belongs to SC or BC community. The Bindla person will do the priestly duties at Oora pandaga. He will be assigned villages based on the number of villages and availability of Bindla persons. The Bindla person will chant the manthras and oversees the proceedings. The Kolpula (Jogin) will perform the “Rangam” (telling forecast of the village on behalf of God or Goddess). Based on her predictions sacrifices would be made.

Potharajus play a key role during the Oora Panduga. One Potharaju will be identified by a group of (18) prominent persons in the village like Patwari, Patel, Land Lord, representatives from different village level artisan communities like Potter, Goldsmith, Blacksmith, Carpenter, Fisherman, Neeradi, Medari etc. Oora Panduga is celebrated during the monsoon season, which is a season of epidemics and diseases and is also the starting of sowing season. The villagers will pray the village God or Goddesses (namely Mysamma, Mahalaxamma, Pochamma, Pothanna, Yellamma etc.) to make their villages free from the epidemics and to give good crops.

### CEREMONY OF OORA PANDUGA OR VILLAGE FESTIVAL:

The villagers will fix the date of Oora Panduga. One day before the festival, 20 Kgs of Jowar will be soaked in the water. Next day, the Potharaju and his wife will be invited to the festival. One buffalo will be kept ready to be offered to the God. The soaked Jowar will be spread at a central place of the village. The buffalo is made to walk over on the sprouted Jowar. After completion of three rounds of walk, the villagers will measure the entire grain. After measurement the village head-man will declare that a entire grain has become double. The villagers will take it as a sign that the God would give good crops in the season. The holy buffalo is to be sacrificed now.

Before the sacrifice of the buffalo, the Potharaju’s wife is dressed up as a widow. She would have to pray to God to return her husband after the completion of the ceremony. The buffalo is killed in one cut. The intestines of the sacked buffalo is taken out and put on the neck of the Potharaju. Potharaju will be offered with lot of toddy. The grain basket will be put on his head and the Potharaju will be made to move around the villages to bless the fields. After two days of this ceremony the villagers celebrate the festival called Oora Panduga. During this festival the villagers will offer a Goat or Sheep to God, through Potharaju. Admist beat of drums and noise the Potharaju will perform the sacrifice by the biting at the neck of the lamb with his teeth, till it bleeds to death. The blood will be offered to God. This process is called as “GAVU”.

## ROLE OF POTHARAJU IN JOGIN SYSTEM:

The Jogin System was prevailing in rural areas. The main causes for converting young girls to jogins are recurring death of children in a family, regular occurrences of diseases in the house or village, out break of disease in the village or pure lust of land lords.

The Potharajus are the only set of people who can convert a girl to a jogin. This is because of the divine power he has in his tuft of hair, which is not cut since his birth. If any family desires to offer their daughter as Jogin, they will approach the Potharaju. Village elders may sometimes advise a household to offer a Jogin to the village for the betterment of the village as a whole. The Potharaju will perform marriage of the young girl to the local diety. He will do the Yellow Thread Ceremony [Mangala Suthram] and adorning of leather token having the holy foot prints of Yellamma [Yellamma Paadalu] in her neck. The entire Villagers will celebrate this moment as a festival. The Jogin will made in three stages, at the first instance the Jogin girl age will be three to six years, at that time she will be married to the God. At the second instance, the Jogin will be offered to the Village head-man i.e., Patel, Patwari or Land-Lord, after attaining the age of puberty. Then onwards, at third stage the Jogin will be treated as the Village asset. The Potharaju is treated as her Guru.

Some SC Communities and some BC Communities mainly from Fishermen, Tenugu and Naikpod Castes practise the Jogins System.

As long as Pothurajus exist in the village with their divine powers stored in their hair, the system of Jogins can never be eradicated. For every jogin rehabilitated, more and more young girls would be converted as jogins. So to cut the system of Jogin at the roots, the Pothuraju system has to be eradicated.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF POTHARAJU:

The Potharaju's socio-economic conditions is very poor. They will not get any payments for the above festivals, except toddy. In normal days, they will do begging in their villages or survive on superstitious practices like Thanthrik poojas, banamathi etc. Some of the Potharaju Community persons were killed by villagers bybranding them as sorcerers and Thanthrik persons. Their livelihood depends on annual alms in shape of grains during the harvesting season. They are to beg in their Villages after grains are exhausted along with their family members. Their performance of dancing during Pochamma festivals and before the dead bodies is compulsory in the village, though they get only country liquor in return. If they refuse to perform the villagers will force them to do so by intimidation or beating etc.

Their performance during the Oora Panduga especially the practice of GAVU is barbaric and uncivilized. Most of these people are suffering with Chronic Diseases like T.B., Cancer, Asthama etc., the main cause of which is the drinking of artificial toddy and local made Alcohol called "Gudumba". Their front rows of teeth are badly damaged because of the act performed during "gavu". Some Potharajus will not be allowed to work in fields, due to fear about their superstitious practices, as a result if any body wanted to come out from this profession, they will not get any work in the Village. This is one of the major causes of their backwardness.

Steps taken by the administration:

With the intensive efforts taken by the district administration in 2001-2002, almost all Pothuajus have been rehabilitated and the dreaded system can be said to be totally eliminated in the district.

## EFFORTS TO REFORM POTHARAJUS/JOGIN IN NIZAMABAD, ANDHRA PRADESH

- ❖ 1988 Two Jogin marriages were held in presence of Smt. Kumudben Joshi, the then Governor of AP.
- ❖ 1991 Two Jogin marriages were held in Chelli Nilayam, Varni.
- ❖ 1991 6Potharajus of Borlam Village, Banswada came out of their profession & cut their hair in presence of the then Collector.
- ❖ 1999 Marriage of Bojamma with Anjaiah held at Raj Bhavan, Hyderabad in presence of Lady Governor Smt. Haripriya Ranjgarajan.
- ❖ 2001 June 9th marriage of Rajubai with Mallesh held in the presence of ministers Sri. M. Venkateshwer Rao, Sri P. Srinivas Reddy & Sri Asok Kumar, District Collector.
- ❖ 2001 June, 21st, two hundred (200) Potharajus voluntarily removed their tuft of hair in the presence of Sri Asok Kumar, Collector in a function held at the Collectorate ground.
- ❖ Press described it as a “Historical Social revolution”
- ❖ 2001 October 28th, ten (10) Joginis were got married.
- ❖ 2001 October 28th, thirtyone (31) Potharajus voluntarily removed their tuft of hair in the presence of Dr.C.Rangarajan, Governor of Andhra Pradesh, and Sri G.Asok Kumar, Collector.
- ❖ All these Pothurajus have been rehabilitated under various schemes of AP SC Development Corporation by the district administration.
- ❖ Justice Dr.K.Ramaswamy, Member of the National Human Rights Commission in his report dated: 12.11.2001 to Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission appreciated the steps taken for the rehabilitation of Jogin & Pothurajus. In his report he wrote. “The NHRC activity associates itself with all these humanitarian and humane programme of action under taken by the District Collector, Asok Kumar and I congratulated him for taking such bold measures for their emancipation”.
- ❖ 2002 August 1st, forty one (41) Pothurajus removed their tuft and another 235 relinquished their trinkets, lashes and whips in presence of Sri. Asok Kumar, Collector to join the main stream.

With these steps almost all Pothurajus have been mainstreamed and it is possible to say that Pothuraju system is almost wiped out from the district.