



The Dependent Communities of the *Vishwakarma: Runjas - A Cultural Study*

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Abstract

This paper examines the cultural traditions and hereditary practices of the Runja community associated with the Vishwakarma community of Telangana. The Runjas have traditionally functioned as an Ashrita or dependent community, preserving Vishwakarma mythology, genealogies, and cultural memory through oral performance. The study explores the traditional origin legends of the Runjas and the mythological significance of the Runja musical instrument. It discusses the nomadic life, occupational practices, craftsmanship, and hereditary transmission of Runja performance traditions. Particular attention is given to the integration of music, narration, poetry, ritual, and dramatic expression in Runja performances. The study also examines the Vishwakarma Purana and other narratives performed by Runja artists to glorify the five traditional Vishwakarma occupations. The research highlights the role of oral transmission and family-based training in preserving the community's knowledge and cultural identity. Field-level oral interviews and recorded performances provide insights into the contemporary practice and social significance of the tradition. The paper argues that Runja performance represents a distinctive synthesis of myth, music, craftsmanship, ritual, and hereditary identity. It concludes that systematic documentation and preservation of the Runja tradition are essential for safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of the Vishwakarma community in Telangana.

Keywords: Runja Community; Vishwakarma; Oral Tradition; Folk Performance; Intangible Cultural Heritage

The *Vishwakarma* community traditionally comprises five occupational groups engaged in distinct artisanal professions, namely blacksmithing, carpentry, brass and metal work, sculpture, and goldsmithing. Collectively, these occupational groups are also referred to as the *Pancanana* or the "Five-Faced" communities. According to their traditional belief system, they are descendants of *Vishwakarma*, regarded as the divine architect and creator of the universe. An oral tradition associated with the community maintains that *Vyasa*, after stealing the four *Vedas*, brought together the *Visva-Brahmanas* and identified them collectively as blacksmiths, carpenters, metalworkers, and sculptors, among other artisan groups. The



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Visva-Brahmanas are accorded a position of respect in accordance with the traditional dictum, “*Viprah Sarvatra Pujyante*” (“*Brahmanas* are revered everywhere”).

Like several other caste communities in Telugu region, the *Vishwakarma* community has traditionally maintained hereditary narrative performers or dependent communities who preserve and disseminate its caste mythology through oral performance. These dependent groups are principally the *Runjas* (*Runjavaru*) and the *Panasa* (*Panasavaru*). Their traditional role is to narrate, interpret, and perform the *Vishwakarma Purana*, thereby transmitting the community’s mythological traditions and collective cultural memory from one generation to another.¹ The present article discusses the *Runjas* Traditional life associated with *Vishwakarma*’s.

The *Runjas*:

According to the oral tradition of the *Runjas*, the origin of the *Runja* musical instrument is associated with the divine wedding of *Parvati* and *Siva*. As music was required for the wedding ceremony, *Vishwabrahma* was approached and requested to provide an appropriate musical instrument. In response, *Vishwabrahma* is said to have slain a demon named *Raunjakasura* and fashioned the *Runja* instrument from his corporeal remains. Since a performer was required to play the newly created instrument, *Vishwakarma* is believed to have created a boy from his own perspiration. He taught the boy the *Gayatri Mantra* and named him *Rudrakumara*. According to the tradition, this boy became the first *Runja* and subsequently lived as an *Arthi Bidda*—a dependent child or ritual dependent—of the five artisan groups, performing the *Runja* instrument and earning his livelihood through this hereditary service.

Thus, the traditional origin narrative of the *Runjas* establishes a mythological connection between *Vishwakarma*, the *Runja* instrument, and the hereditary occupational identity of its performers. The narrative also legitimizes their dependent relationship with the five artisan communities by presenting their service as divinely ordained and historically rooted in the primordial creation of the instrument.²

The Origin Legend of the *Runja* Community:

According to the traditional origin legend of the *Runja* community, there was once a demon named *Raunjakasura*, who belonged to the *Nagarjuna Gotra*. He ruled over *Nagarjuna Pattana*, a city situated to the southern part of the Vindhya Mountains. According to the tradition, *Nagarjuna Pattana* was constructed by Lord *Vishwakarma*, the divine architect and creator. *Raunjakasura* was married to his righteous wife, *Sushila*. *Raunjakasura* was a powerful demonic being, while *Dhruvakeshwara* was a devotee of the gods. Both of them undertook severe penance to propitiate Lord *Shiva*.

Pleased with their intense penance, Lord *Shiva* appeared before them and asked them to seek whatever boon they desired. *Dhruvakeshwara* requested that *Shiva* should become his

¹Pulikonda Subbachary., *Runja Mroguthune Undi*, Andhra Pradesh Janapada Sahithya Parishad, Hyderabad, 2000, p.12.

²Kallepally Amarnath, Aged 45 years., S/o Laxmaiah, Runja, Village Rudraram, Mandal Sahnakram pet, Dist. Medak, conducted oral interview.



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son-in-law. Lord *Shiva* granted him the boon, stating that his desire would be fulfilled in his next birth.

Raunjakasura, on the other hand, asked for an extraordinary boon. He desired that *Indra*, *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Maheshwara*, the *Yakshas*, *Kinnaras*, *Garudas*, *Gandharvas*, *Siddhas*, animals, birds, beasts, all divine and demonic beings, and all other living beings, together with thirty-two divine weapons, should come under his control and remain with him. He further requested that he should become invincible and should not be killed by any of these beings or weapons. Lord *Shiva* granted *Raunjakasura* the boon he had requested.

Having obtained this powerful boon, *Raunjakasura* conquered all the worlds and began to torment the gods. He established his authority over the three worlds and subjected the divine beings to severe suffering. Unable to withstand his power, all the gods approached Lord *Brahma* and sought his protection. *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, and the other gods then proceeded together to Lord *Shiva*.

Indra addressed Lord *Shiva* and pleaded with him, saying that *Raunjakasura* was tormenting the gods because of the boon granted to him by *Shiva* himself. *Indra* requested *Shiva* to protect them from the demon. Subsequently, the gods declared war against *Raunjakasura*. Each deity employed his respective weapons, powers, and strategies in the battle. However, *Raunjakasura* defeated all of them.

Even the *Brahmastra* of *Brahma*, the *Sudarshana Chakra* of *Vishnu*, and the *Trishula* of *Maheshwara* became ineffective against *Raunjakasura*. The gods were therefore placed in a state of helplessness. At that moment, all the deities concluded that Lord *Vishwakarma* alone was capable of confronting *Raunjakasura* and resolving the crisis. They therefore approached *Vishwakarma* and pleaded with him to protect them from the oppression of *Raunjakasura*.

Lord *Vishwakarma* accepted their request and engaged *Raunjakasura* in battle. A fierce single combat took place between the two. According to the traditional account, *Vishwakarma* employed sacred mantra syllables, together with the *Lolaka Chakra Yantra*, and ultimately severed the head of *Raunjakasura*, thereby killing him.

After *Raunjakasura* was killed, *Vishwakarma* made a musical instrument from his body parts. Its name was *Raunja*. Without leaving out any part of *Raunjakasura*, he used his torso as a hollow vertical body, his nerves as tightly stretched strings, his fingers as the sticks used for playing, his arms as rings, the small nerves as the lower fittings, the hair of his head as tightly fastened ropes, and his skin as the upper and lower coverings. He fixed his face as a *Keerthimukha*. In this manner, *Vishwakarma* created the *Raunja* musical instrument and came towards *Kailasa* while producing a soft sound from it. Hearing that sound, it seemed as though *Kailasa* had turned upside down and the seven oceans had overflowed. The celestial women fainted. Seeing and hearing this sound, Goddess *Parvati* cursed that half of the sound should be subdued. From that time onwards, the *Runja* came to have leather on only one side, while the other side remained open.

Because of the boon requested by *Dhruvakeshwara*, in his next birth, *Shiva* himself was born as *Dhruvakeshwara*, who became *Himavanta*. He grew very rapidly and became a grown man, after which he got married. He also had a daughter. She too grew up with the same rapidity



and came to love Lord *Parameshvara*. She was Goddess *Parvati*. When *Himavanta* was looking for suitable marriage alliances for *Parvati*, *Narada* intervened and informed him about his previous birth. Then *Narada* went to *Kailasa* and reminded *Shiva* about the matter of becoming his son-in-law. *Shiva* disguised himself as an *Erukala Sani* and came to see *Parvati* for the marriage proposal. However, since *Parvati* already loved *Shiva*, she did not agree to marry in the ordinary manner.

Until then, the forms of marriage known were *Rakshasa* marriage and *Gandharva* marriage. *Parvati* wished to have a *Mangalyam* marriage in the manner of the gods and wondered who would be capable of conducting such a marriage. She therefore prayed to *Vishwakarma*, who lived in the town of *Pendota*. Immediately, *Vishwakarma* came from *Pendota* to *Kailasa* and asked *Parvati*, “Mother, what is your wish?”

Parvati replied, “Grandfather, all the marriages of the gods that have taken place until now were conducted silently and without any sound. I want my marriage to take place with 32 musical instruments being played.”

Vishwakarma thought about it and immediately consulted the *Panchangam* and fixed the auspicious time for the marriage. At that very time, the killing of *Raunjakasura* took place. *Vishwakarma* created this musical instrument with the intention that it should be played during the wedding of *Shiva* and *Parvati*.

However, no one came forward to play this instrument during the marriage of *Shiva* and *Parvati*. Since it had been made from the body parts of a demon, all the gods were afraid. They thought, “What if he swallows us? Its sound itself seems as though it will swallow us,” and therefore none of them came forward to play it.

Then *Parvati* prayed to *Vishwakarma*. *Vishwakarma* took a drop of sweat from his forehead and threw it down. Immediately, a young boy was born, producing a great sound. *Vishwakarma Bhagavan* said, “He is the one who will play this musical instrument.”

Since the boy was born on the occasion of the marriage of *Rudra*, he became known as *Rudramaheshwara* and *Rudranga*. All the people belonging to his lineage came to be known as the *Rudranga* community. Thus, after the marriage of *Parvati*, the boy asked his father *Vishwakarma* about his future.

Vishwakarma blessed him, saying, “You shall live from generation to generation by seeking the patronage of our five *Brahmins*, the *Vishwabrahmins*, and by narrating their genealogical histories.”

From that time onwards, the *Rudrangas* came into existence. Since they were the ones who played the *Runja*, they came to be known as *Runjas*.

Vishwakarma created the *Runja* musical instrument in such a way that each individual body part of *Raunjakasura* would produce a particular sound. Thus, the *Runja* instrument was capable of producing 32 different sounds.

Vishwakarma explained that this boy, together with *Raunjakasura*’s wife *Sushila*, would play the *Runja*, which had been made from the body parts of *Raunjakasura*, and would



propagate the story of the slaying of *Raunjakasura*. In this manner, he would narrate the story of the *Raunjakasura* episode and proclaim the greatness and glory of the *Vishwakarma* community to the world.³

The Nomadic Life of the *Runja* Community:

According to the field-level interview conducted with Kallepalli Amarnath, it is understood that *Runjas* lived as nomadic people. They travelled from village to village, sought the support of the local *Vishwakarma* people, performed their caste mythology (*Kula Purana*), and lived by receiving the customary gifts and offerings given to them by the *Vishwakarma* families.

The *Runja* community has traditionally lived as an Ashrita (dependent or affiliated) community of the *Vishwabrahmins*, maintaining close ritual, religious, cultural, and occupational relationships with them. The members of the *Runja* community traditionally perform the *Runja* musical instrument during *Vishwabrahmin* marriages, auspicious ceremonies, religious worship, and other important social and cultural occasions.⁴

Making of the *Runja*:

The *Runja* is a large membranophone or skin-covered musical instrument. It generally has a height of approximately three and a half to four feet, with a cylindrical body whose upper portion measures approximately eighteen inches to two feet in diameter. The instrument is therefore considerably larger than many of the other traditional folk instruments used in Telangana.

The upper portion of the instrument is covered with animal hide, traditionally obtained from deer or goat. The lower portion is left open. Various decorative and functional components are attached to the instrument, including *Nagavasulu*, brass or bronze fittings, bells, *Chikkam*, and a sculptural representation or image associated with the face of *Raunjakasura*. These components contribute to both the visual appearance and symbolic significance of the instrument.

One of the distinctive occupational features of the *Runjas* is their traditional practice of constructing the *Runja* themselves. Rather than obtaining a finished instrument from external craftsmen, *Runja* performers traditionally acquire certain raw materials and implements from the *Visva-Brahmanas* and transform them into the finished instrument using their inherited technical knowledge and craftsmanship. This practice demonstrates that the *Runjas* possess not only specialized performance skills but also indigenous knowledge relating to the construction, maintenance, and repair of their principal musical instrument.

The construction of the *Runja* is consequently an important aspect of the community's occupational heritage. Knowledge concerning the selection of materials, preparation of the

³Kuricheti Shivakumaracharya., *Rudrangula Charithramu Rounjakasura Vadha*, Chinthapatla Murahari Acharyulu & Sons, Nagarkurnool, 1988, pp.11-22; Jillella Veera Brahma Charyulu., *Skanda Purana-Vishwakarma Pakhyanam and "Rounjakasura Vadha*, Sri Saraswati Printers, Kadapa, 1960; Kallepalli Amarnath, Op. Cit., conducted oral interview.

⁴Kallepalli Amarnath, Op. Cit., conducted oral interview on 07-05-2025.



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hide, construction of the cylindrical body, attachment of the various components, and tuning of the instrument is traditionally transmitted within the community. The instrument thus represents both a musical object and a material expression of the *Runjas*' hereditary cultural knowledge.⁵

Nature of *Runja* Narrative Performance:

A distinctive feature of *Runja* performance is that the performer generally plays the instrument while simultaneously narrating the story. The performer must therefore coordinate instrumental rhythm, vocal delivery, narrative exposition, poetic passages, and devotional expression within a single performance. The *Runja* functions not merely as an accompanying musical instrument but as an integral component of the narrative structure.

The performance consequently combines oral tradition, music, poetry, rhythm, devotion, and theatrical expression. Through this integrated form, the *Runjas* transmit mythological narratives, genealogical traditions, religious beliefs, and cultural memories associated with the *Vishwakarma* community.

Narratives Performed by the *Runjas*:

Runjas primarily perform stories that recount the origins and customs of the *Vishwakarma* and *Panchadayi* communities. These include the history of *Vishwakarma*, the *Vishwakarma Purana*, the marriage of *Siva* and *Parvati* (*Parvati Kalyanam*), the history of *Brahmangaru*, and the episode of *Daksa's* sacrifice (*Daksayajna*). On occasions associated with the worship and commemorative observances of *Veerabrahmendra Swamy*, the *Runjas* also perform narratives relating to *Kalajnana*, or prophetic knowledge concerning the future. Their repertoire thus combines caste mythology, *Hindu* religious narratives, devotional traditions, and prophetic literature.⁶

Runja Performance:

Oral tradition forms the primary foundation of the *Runja* knowledge system. Their narratives, songs, poetic compositions, musical instruments, and the conventions governing their performances are traditionally transmitted orally through guru-disciple relationships and family lineages. Although some families have documented parts of their narratives in prose or verse, oral transmission remains the primary means by which this tradition is sustained and perpetuated.

Training System in *Runjas*:

Training in the *Runjas* generally begins during childhood. According to information provided by *Amarnath*, formal instruction in narrative singing and instrumental performance begins after the *Upanayana* ceremony, which is traditionally performed for male children at approximately nine or eleven years of age. Following this initiation, the child begins to receive systematic instruction in both storytelling and the playing of the *Runja* instrument.

⁵Pulikonda Subbachary., *Runja Mroguthune Undi*, Op. Cit., pp.23-24.

⁶Kallepally Amarnath, Aged 45years., S/o Laxmaiah, *Runja*, Op. Cit.



By approximately the age of fourteen, the trainee is gradually trained to narrate the stories independently and to perform the associated instrumental passages. The transmission of knowledge traditionally follows a patrilineal pattern: the father teaches his son, who in turn teaches his own son. In this manner, the artistic tradition, technical knowledge, narrative repertoire, and performance practices are transmitted from one generation to the next.

Such a system of hereditary training reflects the traditional structure of occupational specialization among hereditary performing communities. Rather than being acquired through formal institutional education, proficiency in *Runja* performance is traditionally developed through prolonged observation, imitation, repetition, practice, and participation under the guidance of senior members of the family.

Training and the practice of the *Runja* caste-based profession have traditionally been largely restricted to men. The hereditary transmission of performance skills among men has helped preserve the professional identity of the *Runja*, but it has simultaneously limited women's participation in the core performance tradition.⁷

Social Norms and Professional Ethics of the *Runjas*:

The *Runjas* traditionally observe a number of strict customary norms governing their profession. One of the most significant rules concerns the occasions on which the *Runja* instrument may be performed. According to the information provided by Amarnath, the instrument is traditionally played primarily during *Vishvabrahmana* marriages, auspicious ceremonies, and occasions associated with the worship of *Brahmangaru*.

He further stated that even when members of other communities invite *Runja* performers to play the instrument at their auspicious ceremonies, they generally decline such requests because of their customary occupational restrictions. According to his account, this principle is maintained even when the performers are offered higher remuneration. Such a practice demonstrates that the performance of the *Runja* is understood not simply as a commercial artistic activity but as a ritually regulated hereditary service associated with the traditional patron community.⁸

Performance:

The traditional communities associated with the *Vishwakarmas* include the *Runjas*, *Adi Panasas*, and *Komati Panasas*. Among the *Adi Panasas* and *Komati Panasas*, the *Vishwakarma Purana* is generally recited or expounded in front of the household, particularly in association with genealogical recitation and ritual observances. Their traditional role primarily consists of *Purana* exposition and *Gotra* recitation rather than dramatic narrative performance.

The *Runjas*, in contrast, are regarded primarily as narrative performers. In addition to the *Vishwakarma Purana*, they perform a variety of other traditional narratives.

Opening of the *Runja* Performance:

⁷Pulikonda Subbachary., *Runja Mroguthune Undi*, Op. Cit., pp.50-51.

⁸Kallepally Harinath., Aged 22 years., S/o Amarnath, Runja, Village Rudraram, Mandal Sahnakrampet, Dist. Medak, conducted oral interview on 07/05/2025.



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A traditional *Runja* performance generally begins with an invocation to *Ganapati*, followed by the recitation of a *Vishwakarma* hymn. One of the traditional invocatory passages identifies the *Vishwakarma* lineage and invokes the five artisan traditions in the following manner:

“*Srimat-Para-Vishwakarma Pancanana-Udbhava, Sanaga, Sanatana, Bhavana, Satpravarna, Suvarnasa-Gotrotbhavula, Manaveya, Tattvasilpi, Visvajna-Vamsodbhavula, Tribhuvana-Nirmitodbhavula, Ananta-Veda-Sabda-Sastra-Udbhava, Purana-Para-Paravara Dhira-Gambhira, Dhirodhara, Vesina-Hanumanta-Birudankita, Srimat Kalikadevi Varaprasada, Sanmata-Sthapanacarya, Mahameru-Dhira, Sri Vira Brahmendra Swamula Guruputru, Ayidu Dayila Vari Pancana, Pancanana Vari Guruprasada Vinnapamulu.*”

This invocation is followed by a traditional praise of the five *Vishwakarma* lineages:

“Listen to the glory of the one who presides over creation, the five-faced ones; *Manu, Maya, Tvastr, Silpi* and *Visvajna*; these five forms protect the universe. Possessing the wisdom to sustain the worlds through the five cosmic functions, these five preserve and nourish the universe.”

The performers may begin the principal narrative with the birth of *Parvati* (*Parvati-suti*). Depending upon the occasion and the performer, the narrative may also begin with invocations to *Sarasvati, Ganapati, Brahmangaru*, or *Bharatamata*.⁹

Narrative Technique and Performing Style:

More than half of the *Runja* narrative is generally presented in prose (*Vachana*), although songs, poems, hymns, and rhythmic passages are interspersed throughout the performance. The performer narrates the story in prose while simultaneously employing gestures, facial expressions, changes in vocal modulation, and instrumental rhythm to enact different characters and situations.

During the prose sections, the *Runja* instrument is positioned slightly away from the performer. At intervals, generally approximately once a minute, the performer strikes the instrument lightly with the four fingers of the right hand, producing a rhythmic accent similar to the function of a metrical marker. At the same time, he employs gestures and facial expressions to represent different characters and emotional states.

When a significant episode or dramatic scene is reached, the performer moves closer to the *Runja*, presses the lower portion of the instrument with his foot, rests his knee against it, and plays the instrument while simultaneously singing and narrating the story. In certain passages, he recites the rhythmic sequences associated with songs and subsequently returns to prose narration. At other moments, depending upon the context, he sings verses in a style resembling a stage dramatic performance.

Thus, the *Runja* performance constantly moves between prose narration, song, poetry, rhythmic recitation, instrumental performance, and dramatic enactment. Since the traditional

⁹*Runja* Performance recorded on 07/05/2025 at Veerabrahmendra Swamy Temple, Vidyanagar, Hyderabad. *Runja* Story Performers Kallepally Amarnath and Kallepally Harinath



Runja performer generally performs without a supporting chorus or accompanying instrumentalists, the entire performance including narration, singing, instrumental rhythm, character representation, and audience engagement is carried out by a single performer.¹⁰

Flexibility and Improvisation in Narrative Performance:

The length and structure of the narrative vary according to the context of the performance. The performer may expand or condense particular episodes depending upon the occasion, audience, available time, and ritual context. Individual episodes are elaborated in prose, and when a story is narrated in greater detail, the number of songs and poetic passages may also increase.

The performer employs different vocal registers to represent various emotional states or rasas, simultaneously striking the *Runja* and using gestures and dramatic movements. Through this combination of narration, sound, rhythm, and enactment, the performer creates the impression that the events described in the story are actually unfolding before the eyes of the audience.

A particularly distinctive feature of the *Runja* narrative style is its question-and-answer format. For example:

Question: "What curse did *Vishwabrahma* pronounce upon *Siva*?"

Answer: "May you become a grinding stone (*Rubburu Rolu*)."

The performer himself assumes both sides of the dialogue. The question is posed and answered by the same narrator because there are traditionally no accompanying performers or *Vantas* to undertake the supporting roles. This technique enables a single performer to create the effect of a dialogue among several characters.

The *Runja* narrative repertoire contains a considerable number of poems, songs, hymns, and slokas. Like other forms of oral literature, the *Runja* narrative does not possess a completely fixed textual form. Each performance may acquire a somewhat different structure through improvisation, expansion, condensation, omission, or incorporation of additional episodes. The tradition can therefore be understood as a dynamic oral performance genre rather than a fixed literary text.¹¹

The Creation of *Vishwakarma*: The Opening Cosmological Narrative:

At the beginning of the *Vishwakarma* narrative, the performers generally describe the creation of *Vishwakarma* and the mystery of his birth.

One traditional cosmological account explains the emergence of the sacred syllable *Om* through five forms: "*Pradhamam Tharakakaram Dvitiyam Dandamruttikam Trutiyam Kundalaakaram Chathurdham Ardhachandrakaram Panchamam Bindu Samyuktam*"¹²

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*



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“First, the form of the star; second, the form of the staff; third, the form of the pot; fourth, the form of the crescent moon; and fifth, the form accompanied by the dot. From these emerges the form of Om.”

The *Vishwakarma* resides within this primordial *Om* without distinction between male and female principles and is present in all things. His primordial nature is further described through the following traditional verse:

“*Nabhumi Nachalanchaiva! Natejo Nachamarutah Nachaa Kasanaam Chittancha! Nabuddhyaaghranagocharaah Nachabrama Navishnuscha! Nacharudrascha Tharakah Sarvashoonya Niralambo! Swayambhu Vishwakarma:*”

Regarding the origin of *Vishvakarma*, it is described thus: "There was neither earth nor mountain, neither fire nor wind, neither ether nor mind, nor objects perceptible to the intellect or senses; there was neither *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, nor *Rudra*—only the self-existent (*Swayambhu*) *Vishvakarma*, existing in a state of absolute void and independent of any support."¹³

Through such verses, the performers establish *Vishwakarma* as a primordial, self-existent and cosmic principle, preceding the conventional categories of creation and the *Hindu* divine triad.

Major Narrative Themes:

The *Runja* performers narrate a wide range of episodes relating to the birth of *Vishwakarma*, his appearance in the world, his history and significance, the Chola tradition, *Nagara-khanda*, *Amara Purana*, *Mulastambha*, *Daksayajna*, and *Parvati Kalyanam*. These narratives, although diverse in their subject matter, are presented primarily to emphasize the greatness, creative power, and cultural importance of *Vishwakarma*.

In addition to these narratives, the performers also incorporate stories concerning *Brahmangaru* that circulate within oral tradition. These stories may be added, modified, or omitted according to the context of the performance. Such flexibility is characteristic of oral narrative traditions, in which the performer exercises considerable creative agency in shaping the story for a particular audience and occasion.

The narratives mentioned above are regarded within the community as caste narratives. The opening sections of the *Vishwakarma Purana* describe the creation of the universe, the self-manifestation of *Vishwakarma*, and the emergence of the five *Brahmas*, together with their respective *Gotras* and occupations. The tradition attributes the establishment of their occupational practices, ritual customs, and professional excellence to *Vishwakarma* himself.¹⁴

Glorification of the Five *Vishwakarma* Occupations:

A major theme of the *Runja* narrative is the celebration of the five traditional occupations associated with the *Vishwakarma* community. The performers emphasize that human beings remain dependent upon these five occupational groups from birth until death.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*



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They therefore instruct their audiences to respect and honour the artisans who perform these essential services.

The narrative explains, among other things, the origin of the plough and emphasizes the importance of the carpenter and other artisan groups in sustaining agrarian society. A traditional saying employed by the *Runjas* states that if the agricultural yoke (*Kadi*) does not function properly, the entire social order of the *Kali* age will be endangered. Consequently, the carpenter who makes the yoke and other agricultural implements is worthy of respect and reverence.

The performers further praise the five occupational groups through a traditional poetic passage: "*Indlu Kattedetlo, Pendli Cheyuta Yetlo, Kuupa Khananam Betlo, Gorasarjana Metlo, Devatarchana Metlo, Devalayamu Letlo, Darpanapatra Luddharanambletlo, Pandamanchamu Letlo, Bharyaku Nagaletlo, Mangalasutralu Matteletlo, Nijamu Aachethi Pannulannitini Less Ivaramuga Lekka Pettaga Nevaritaramu Telivigali gi Krutagnulai Teliyavalayu Saswita Padabhilesa Sreeviswaprakasha*"¹⁵

“Who builds the house?
Who performs the marriage?
Who digs the well?
Who fashions the instruments of cultivation?
Who prepares the objects for the worship of the gods?
Who constructs the temple?
Who makes the mirror and ritual vessels?
Who prepares the bed?
Who fashions ornaments for the wife?
Who makes the marriage pendants and toe rings?
Consider carefully all the works performed by these skilled hands;
Who else, possessing such wisdom, skill and gratitude, can enumerate them all?”

Through such verses, the *Runjas* emphasize the indispensability of the five *Vishwakarma* occupations to everyday human life. The narrative thus transforms occupational knowledge into a moral discourse on the dignity of artisanal labour.

The performers also state that the *Vishwakarma*s consider themselves superior even to Brahmins in certain respects and therefore traditionally do not accept the *Sathagopa* in temples. This belief is connected with their assertion that they themselves manufacture the images and material objects used in religious worship. Such statements reveal a strong sense of occupational pride and collective self-confidence among the *Vishwakarma* community.

The narrative further explains that the five occupational groups experienced economic and social decline as a consequence of the curse of *Agastya*. The curse provides a mythological explanation for their subsequent hardships and reduced prosperity.

The *Vishwakarma Purana*:

¹⁵Jillella Veerabrahmacharyulu (Ed)., *Rounjakasura Vadha Anu Rounja Shabdothpathi, Mariyu Vishwakarmaku Hanumadwaja prapathi*, Arunodaya Grandhamala, Duvvuru, Kadapa, 1960, pp.14-15.



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The *Vishwakarma Purana* occupies a central position in the narrative repertoire of the *Runja* performers. According to the traditional narrative, sixteen demons, including *Tarakasura*, subject the gods and human beings to various forms of oppression and torture. Among these demons, *Tarakasura* and *Raunjakasura* are considered the most powerful and sinful. Unable to bear the consequences of their destructive activities, the Earth and the gods seek a solution. The gods conclude that *Vishwakarma* alone possesses the ability to destroy these demons, create the musical instrument required for the divine wedding, and facilitate the remarriage of *Siva*. They therefore approach *Vishwakarma* and narrate their predicament.

Vishwabrahma, after considering the situation, is said to have instructed *Brahma* to conduct a *Satrayaga*. During this episode, a conflict develops between *Daksa* and *Siva*. As a consequence of their estrangement, *Daksa* organizes the famous *Daksayajna* without inviting *Sati*, the consort of *Siva*. *Sati* subsequently immolates herself in the sacrificial fire. This episode is followed by the birth of *Virabhadra*, and subsequently by the birth of *Parvati* to *Himavanta*.

As *Parvati* reaches adulthood, her marriage to *Siva* is arranged. However, *Parvati* expresses her desire that her marriage should not take place quietly or without public recognition, as she believes previous divine marriages had done. She therefore wishes her wedding to be celebrated with thirty-two musical instruments. According to the *Runja* narrative, there were previously no established social or ritual markers associated with marriage, such as formally asking the bride's family for consent, the tying of the *Mangala-Sutra*, wearing of toe rings, public musical announcement of the marriage, or the systematic determination of an auspicious time through a *Pancanga*. *Parvati* therefore requests *Vishwakarma* to establish these conventions as part of her marriage ceremony.

Vishwakarma, using his divine vision, discovers that *Raunjakasura* is creating havoc in the town of *Pendota*. He defeats the demon and makes the *Runja* from his body. The instrument is said to be capable of producing thirty-two distinct sounds. At the same time, *Vishwakarma* prepares the *Pancanga*, *Mangala-Sutra*, and toe rings (*Mettelu*) and arranges the marriage of *Siva* and *Parvati* according to a formally sanctioned Brahmanical ritual procedure.

Vishwakarma creates a special individual to play the newly fashioned *Runja*. This individual becomes the progenitor of the *Runja* community. When the *Runja* is played during the wedding, the Trimurti are said to dance to its sound. During this divine performance, additional musical instruments, as well as their associated melodic modes (*Ragas*) and rhythmic patterns (*Talas*), are believed to have originated.

The narrative subsequently incorporates several other episodes. A dispute reportedly arises between *Parvati* and *Paramesvara* concerning beauty, prompting *Vishwabrahma* to create a mirror. Since the mirror is said to have been produced from sunlight, *Sankara* offers *Vishwabrahma* a boon. When *Vishwabrahma* asks for a particular blessing involving his limbs, *Sankara* is said to respond by offering the goddess of poverty associated with him. *Vishwabrahma* consequently curses *Sankara* to become a *Pasana* or stone. When *Parvati* intervenes, *Vishwabrahma* modifies the curse, stating that *Sankara* will appear to ordinary people in the form of the *linga*, while *Parvati* herself will perceive him in his true form as *Sankara*.



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The narrative also includes the arrival of *Agastya* at *Sankara's* wedding and a subsequent episode involving a false statement attributed to *Vishwabrahma*. *Agastya* consequently pronounces a curse that the five occupational groups descended from *Vishwakarma* should suffer from economic hardship and lack sufficient food. Other episodes, including the destruction of the *Ayaskanta* Fort and the betrayal attributed to *Vyasa*, are also incorporated into the narrative tradition. Finally, the birth of *Kumarasvami* to *Parvati* and *Paramesvara* and his subsequent defeat of *Tarakasura* bring the principal narrative to a conclusion.¹⁶

The above constitutes only a condensed version of the narrative. The complete *Runja* performance incorporates numerous subsidiary episodes, genealogical accounts, religious interpretations, occupational traditions, and explanations concerning the cultural significance of the *Vishwakarma* community.

Conclusion:

The *Runja* tradition is an important component of the cultural heritage of the *Vishwakarma* community. The *Runjas* have traditionally functioned as an *Ashrita* or dependent community, preserving and performing *Vishwakarma* mythology, genealogies, religious narratives, and occupational traditions through hereditary oral performance. Their distinctive *Runja* instrument, believed in their tradition to have been created by *Vishwakarma* from *Raunjakasura*, symbolically connects the community with the divine origin of their profession.

The tradition combines music, narration, poetry, ritual, and dramatic expression, while its knowledge is transmitted through family lineages and oral training. *Runja* performers have therefore served not merely as musicians but as custodians of the collective memory and cultural identity of the *Vishwakarma* community. Their traditional patron–client relationship with the *Vishwabrahmins* further demonstrates the importance of dependent communities in sustaining the social and cultural institutions of Telangana.

Thus, the *Runja* tradition represents a unique synthesis of myth, music, craftsmanship, ritual, and hereditary identity. Its documentation and preservation are essential for safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage and historical memory of the *Vishwakarma* community in Telangana.

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2. Thurston, Edgar. *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*. Vol. VI. Government Press, Madras, 1909. See the entry “**Runzu**”, which describes *Runzu/Runza/Runja* as Telugu mendicants associated with the *Runjalu* drum and traditionally dependent upon *Kamsalas*.

¹⁶Pedapati Nageswar Rao., *Sree Vishwakarma Puranam*, Akruthi Printers, Hyderabad, 2016, p.50.