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Oral Tradition and Narrative Performance of the Gurram Malas in Telangana: A Cultural Study

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Abstract

The Gurram Mala community represents a distinctive traditional performing community associated with the Mala caste and historically sustained through a patron–client relationship. This paper examines the cultural life, occupational traditions, narrative practices, rituals, and social organization of the Gurram Malas. It focuses particularly on their hereditary *Mirashi* rights, the system of *Tyagam*, and the performance of caste myths and genealogical narratives through *Patam Katha* and *Yakshagana* traditions. The study discusses the painted scroll as a central medium of visual storytelling and explores the roles of music, dance, costumes, make-up, stage arrangements, and performance techniques. It also examines important ritual practices associated with the performances, including *Mangala Harati*, *Deevenarthy*, *Bali Challatam*, worship of village deities, and sacrificial ceremonies. The paper highlights the oral transmission of narratives across generations and the community's role in preserving the cultural memory and traditional identity of the Mala community. It further demonstrates how the negotiation and distribution of *Tyagam* reinforce the reciprocal relationship between performers and patrons. The study concludes that Gurram Mala performances constitute a complex cultural system integrating folklore, oral literature, ritual, theatre, music, and community participation.



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Keywords: Gurram Malas; Patam Katha; Tyagam; Mirashi Rights; Folk Performance.

The *Gurram Malas* constitute a community traditionally associated with the *Mala* caste. They sustain their livelihood by reciting and singing the clan genealogies, lineages, and ancestral histories of the *Malas*, upon whom they are economically dependent. Within the traditional social hierarchy, they are regarded as an untouchable group even by the *Mala* community. Consequently, they generally reside on the outskirts of villages in huts constructed with palm leaves.

The principal narrative tradition performed by the *Gurram Malas* is the story of *Bhasma Yogam*, also known as the *Mala Chennayya Katha*. *Bhasma Yogam* is further identified with the *Basava Purana* and is also referred to as the *Adi Purana*. In addition to this, they narrate a variety of other traditional stories, including *Shakti Vilasam* or *Shakti Purana*, *Virata Purana*, *Sharla Mahadevi Parinayam*, and the *Bethala Katha*, among others. These narrative performances constitute an important component of their cultural and occupational tradition. This article discusses about the Gurram Malas Cultural life associated with Malas.

Origin of the Gurram Mala Community:

The origin myth of the *Gurram Mala* community is narrated in the *Shivakanthamala Puranam*. According to this tradition, *Shivakanthamala* and *Sharla Mahadevi* met in a forest and were united in marriage through the grace of Srimannarayana. They were blessed with seven sons, namely *Chennamallu*, *Mala*, *Velimala*, *Mala Pambala*, *Mala Mashti*, *Neta Mala*, and *Gauda Mala*. Although *Chennamallu* was the eldest son, the marriage of one of his younger brothers was arranged before his own.

For the marriage of the second son, *Malayya*, it was customary for the bridegroom to be seated on a horse during the wedding procession. Since a



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horse was required for the ceremony, *Chennamallu* was sent to obtain one from Sri Rama, who was reputed to possess horses. *Chennamallu* returned not only with a horse but also with its saddle, golden ornaments, bridle, umbrella, and other accessories. The bridegroom was then ceremonially paraded through the village on the decorated horse.

After the procession, *Chennamallu* set out to return the horse to Sri Rama. At that time, Sri Rama entrusted him with administrative duties, including the collection of taxes and levies. By the time *Chennamallu* completed these responsibilities and returned home, the wedding festivities, the associated ritual observances, and the sixteenth-day celebrations had all concluded. The family had waited for his return, but eventually, unable to bear their hunger, they proceeded with the feast. Nevertheless, they reserved a portion of food for him, along with the customary offerings of betel leaves, areca nuts, and ritual items, placing them separately near the household's sacred post.

When *Chennamallu* finally arrived, one of his younger brothers informed him of the situation and invited him to partake of the food that had been set aside. *Chennamallu*, however, refused. He declared that, as the eldest son, he should have been served together with the rest of the family and that he would not eat food that had been placed aside separately. He further demanded an explanation for the treatment he had received.

His parents and brothers responded that they could not provide an answer and that only the gods could explain the matter. Consequently, *Chennamallu*, along with his parents, siblings, and relatives, went before an assembly of deities that included *Shiva*, *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Ganesha*, *Veerabhadra*, *Munishwara*, *Dandivahana*, *Valmiki*, and *Vasistha*, among others. *Chennamallu* narrated the entire incident and requested an explanation for why his food had been placed separately.

At this point, Narada intervened and asked whether an *Arti-Vadu* (a dependent or client figure) had been born among them. The assembled family



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replied in the negative. *Shiva* then explained that the very act of setting *Chennamallu's* food apart from that of the others had symbolically transformed him into an *Arti-Vadu*. Because he had left in search of a horse, been socially separated from his family, and returned to find himself excluded from the communal meal, he had acquired a distinct social status.

Thereafter, *Chennamallu* came to be known as *Gurrapu Mallanna* ("Mallanna of the Horse"). According to the myth, from that time onward he became dependent upon the *Mala* community for his livelihood. The *Malas*, also referred to as *Mannepollu*, assumed the role of his symbolic parents by providing him with food, while he became their ritual son and dependent. *Shiva* formally bestowed upon him the name *Gurrapu Mallanna*, and from then onward he lived under the patronage of the *Mala* community.¹

Thus, the narrative explains the origin of *Gurrapu Mallanna* and, by extension, the *Gurram Mala* community. It establishes their traditional relationship of dependence upon the *Malas* and provides a mythological justification for their occupation as hereditary storytellers and performers who narrate sacred and traditional tales for the *Mala* community.

Mirashi Rights:

The *Gurram Malas* possess hereditary rights over specific territorial jurisdictions known as *Mirashi* villages. These villages constitute areas in which particular families or individuals hold customary and hereditary privileges. According to these rights, only those *Gurram Malas* who possess legitimate hereditary claims are entitled to visit a particular village and receive *Tyagam* (customary patronage or remuneration). No other individual has the authority to seek such patronage within that village. If anyone violates these customary regulations by entering a village that falls under another person's hereditary jurisdiction, a caste council (*Kula Panchayat*) is convened to

¹Gaddam Venkanna., Patam Kathalu- Kathakulu, Bhagath Prachuranalu, Warangal, 2011.p.87.



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adjudicate the matter, and penalties or fines are imposed upon the parties concerned.

The *Gurram Malas* traditionally perform narrative recitations of caste myths and genealogical traditions through the medium of painted scrolls (*Patam*). They are also known by the names *Gurram Mallannas* or *Gurrapuvallu*. Their principal patron community is the *Mala* caste, whose members provide them with *Tyagam* and thereby sustain their livelihood. This patron-client relationship forms an important aspect of the social and cultural organization of the community.

Visiting the *Mala* Community:

The *Gurram Malas* visit their *Mala* patrons periodically, usually once every two or three years, to receive *Tyagam*. Prior to undertaking these visits, they prepare the musical instruments and other materials required for their narrative performances. On the day preceding their departure to a *Mirashi* village, all members of the troupe gather together, slaughter a pig for a communal feast, consume liquor, and make preparations for the journey.

Upon entering a village, the *Gurram Malas* first visit the residence of the *Mala* caste headman in their hereditary *Mirashi* village. There they formally announce their arrival by stating that they have come to receive their customary *Tyagam*. The *Mala* headman then arranges food and accommodation for them on that day. This hospitality is traditionally referred to as *Digudu Bhatyam*, a customary provision extended to visiting performers and dependents.

On the following day, or sometimes on the third day, the caste headman convenes a gathering of the *Mala* community. In the presence of all caste members, discussions are held regarding the amount and nature of the *Tyagam* to be offered to the *Gurram Malas*. This collective deliberation marks the formal commencement of the patronage process and the associated ritual and performance activities.



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Negotiation of Tyagam:

The process of determining the remuneration given to the *Gurram Malas* for performing narrative traditions and for providing food and hospitality to the artists who visit under the patronage system is known as *Tyagam Matladatam* (negotiation of *Tyagam*). On the appointed day, all members of the *Gurram Mala* troupe visit every household in the *Mala* settlement and invite the community members to assemble at the residence of the caste headman for the negotiation of *Tyagam*.

After all the *Mala* community members gather at the headman's residence, the senior *Mala* elder is seated first, followed by the junior *Mala* elder and then the remaining members of the community. Facing them, the *Gurram Mala* performers spread a mat and take their seats. Accompanying themselves with the *Maddela* (drum) and harmonium, they melodiously render verses and songs. Thereafter, the troupe leader humbly addresses the assembled patrons, saying:

O, respected elders! We are *Gurrapu Mallayya*, the dependents of yours. After a long interval of three years, we have come to your village. We shall narrate stories for your benefit. Kindly grant us *Tyagam*, O great patrons."

Following this appeal, the senior member of the *Gurram Mala* troupe spreads a towel before the *Mala* headman and pours out the cowrie shells contained in his bag, requesting the patrons to declare the *Tyagam*. The *Mala* elders and community members then deliberate collectively and decide upon the amount to be granted.

The declaration of *Tyagam* is not made verbally but symbolically through the presentation of cowrie shells and other objects. This practice is known as *Gavvala Darshanam* (the presentation of shells). The shells used I



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this process are classified into two categories: *Tyagam Gavvalu*² (patronage shells) and *Ata Gavvalu*³ (performance shells).

During the negotiation process, the representative of *Gurrapu Mallanna* sits with a towel spread before him while the *Mala* caste headman places the shells upon it according to the collective decision of the community. If the performers consider the contribution inadequate, the representative respectfully appeals for an increase, stating that their livelihood depends entirely upon the patronage provided by the *Mala* community. The headman then consults the community once again and may add additional shells.

Naturally, the *Mala* patrons seek to minimize the number of shells offered, whereas the *Gurram Mala* performers attempt to secure a higher contribution. Through discussion and negotiation, a mutually acceptable

²Tyagam Gavvalu (Patronage Shells): Tyagam Gavvalu are the shells used to determine the hereditary patronage contribution independently of any performance. Three types of symbolic objects are employed in this process: Gavvalu (cowrie shells), Gurijalu, Kanchikayalu. Gavvalu (Cowrie Shells): Cowrie shells are used to represent smaller monetary values. They are of three types: Small shells, Ordinary shells, large shells. Small shells traditionally signify one rupee, although performers currently assign them a value of approximately five rupees each. Ordinary shells represent amounts greater than one rupee and are generally valued between five and ten rupees. Large shells signify grain rather than cash; one large shell is considered equivalent to two sacks of grain. Gurijalu: Gurijalu are also used to indicate grain contributions. They are available in two varieties, namely white Gurijalu and black Gurijalu. At present, one Gurija is conventionally calculated as equivalent to one kilogram of grain. Kanchikayalu: Kanchikayalu symbolize larger monetary amounts. One Kanchikayalu is generally reckoned as equivalent to one thousand rupees. After the *Mala* community decides upon the amount of Tyagam, the required number of Kanchikayalu, cowrie shells, and Gurijalu are collected and placed into the cloth pouch held by the *Gurram Mala* representative.

³Ata Gavvalu (Performance Shells): The remuneration paid specifically for the narration of stories and performances is known as *Ata Tyagam* (performance patronage). This is distinct from hereditary Tyagam and is granted only when the *Mala* community collectively requests the troupe to perform stories in the village. Five varieties of shells are employed in this context: Gangapuri shell, large shell, long shell, Ura shell, Tyagam shell. Each of these shells represents a monetary value and is conventionally equated with five thousand rupees. The total amount is calculated according to the number of shells presented.



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amount is eventually reached. Once satisfied, the troupe leader gathers the shells into his bag, thereby signifying acceptance of the agreement.

Following the conclusion of the negotiations, ritual honours are exchanged. The performers apply sacred marks (*Bottu*) first to the *Mala* headman, then to the junior elder, and subsequently to all members of the community. Thereafter, they pronounce ritual blessings (*Deevenarthy*) upon the assembled patrons.

“Pattindi Bangaaramai, Muttindi Muthyamai, Paadi Pantalu, Pandanti Aadabidda, Adibidda Deevena Kaligi Subhojayamai, Koduku, Biddalu, Koti Sampada Kaligi, Okkintiki Naalugindlayi, Naalugindlaku Veyindli, Pathi Santanam Sallagundaale Raja Mahaprabho”; “Vachina Kashtam Vaidolagipovaale, Padipanta Sallagundani, Goddoo Goda Sallagundani, Muttaiduva Thanam Sallagundani, Jayibhavaa! Vijayibhavaa!”

These blessings invoke prosperity, wealth, agricultural abundance, fertility, progeny, expansion of family lineage, domestic well-being, and social prosperity. They also express wishes for the removal of hardships, successful harvests, healthy livestock, marital auspiciousness, and continued good fortune.⁴

Collection of Tyagam:

After the amount of *Tyagam* has been finalized, the *Mala* caste headman calculates the total number of *Mala* households in the village and distributes the responsibility for payment equally among them. He informs each household of the amount of money and grain that must be contributed. The *Gurram Malas* then collect these contributions by visiting households, generally on alternate days. Throughout the period of collection, the *Mala* headman provides food and accommodation for the entire troupe. If any household attempts to evade payment, all members of the troupe gather at that

⁴Valasa Paidi., Telangana Ioni Mala Upa Kulala Samajika Samskruthika Jeevitham – Sahithya Parisheelana, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Department of Folklore and Tribal Lore, Potti Sree Ramulu Telugug Univeristy, Orugallu Campus, 2024, pp.65-68.



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residence and remain there until the contribution is made. Since it becomes difficult for the household to provide food and hospitality for the entire troupe, the required *Tyagam* is usually paid without delay.

Only after the complete collection of both hereditary *Tyagam* and *Ata Tyagam* do the *Gurram Malas* commence their narrative performances. Thus, the negotiation and collection of *Tyagam* constitute an essential preliminary stage that reaffirms the traditional patron–client relationship between the *Mala* community and the *Gurram Mala* performers before the actual storytelling performances begin.

Performance of the *Gurram Malas*:

The performance of the *Gurram Malas* is carried out through two principal modes. The first is the *Patam Katha* (scroll narrative), in which the performers recite and explain the *Mala* caste myth while displaying a painted scroll. The second is the *Yakshagana* or *Bhagavata* mode of performance, in which the artists enact the *Mala* caste myth or the *Mala Chennayya Purana* through dramatic representation, assuming various character roles and employing costumes, gestures, songs, dialogue, and dance. Depending upon the wishes of the *Mala* patrons who have provided *Tyagam*, the performers may present either the scroll narrative, the dramatic performance, or both forms.

The Painted Scroll (*Patam*):

The painted scroll used by the *Gurram Malas* for their narrative performances is generally about one yard in width and approximately thirty yards in length. It is prepared from coarse white cloth upon which the characters and episodes associated with the story are illustrated. The entire scroll is rolled around a wooden pole for storage and transportation.

At the commencement of a performance, two Y-shaped wooden poles are fixed into the ground, and the rolled scroll is mounted upon them. As the narration progresses, the scroll is gradually unrolled, much like a film reel,



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revealing successive illustrations. The performers explain the story in accordance with the images displayed on the scroll.

The principal storyteller of the troupe plays a central role in the performance. While narrating the stories to the patron community, he carries a pointer stick known as a *Ponnu Karra*. This stick, usually measuring between half a yard and one yard in length and fitted with a silver knob at one end, is used to indicate the figures and scenes depicted on the scroll. By pointing to the images, the storyteller explains the narrative in a vivid and engaging manner.⁵

The narration itself consists of a combination of verse, prose, and songs. The principal narrator is assisted by two supporting singers, commonly referred to as *Vantalu*, who provide vocal accompaniment and play musical instruments. Together, they create a performance that combines visual representation, oral narration, music, and dramatic expression.

Time of Performance:

The stories narrated by the *Gurram Malas* are performed exclusively during the daytime. Since the illustrations on the painted scroll cannot be viewed clearly at night, performances are organized during daylight hours for the convenience and enjoyment of the audience. Furthermore, because these narratives are caste myths and genealogical traditions, they are presented at times that are suitable for the members of the patron community.

Generally, *Patam Katha* performances are conducted between 11:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m., as this period provides optimal visibility for viewing the scroll and allows audiences to appreciate both the visual and narrative dimensions of the performance. These performances are most commonly held during the summer and winter seasons.

The period following the festival of Sankranti is particularly favorable for performances because major agricultural activities are usually completed

⁵P. Sadanandam, *Art and Culture of Marginalised Nomadic tribes in Andhra Pradesh*, New Delhi, 2008, p.91.



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by that time. The *Gurram Malas* therefore choose occasions when members of their patron community are relatively free from occupational responsibilities and can participate in the performances. Before commencing a performance, they also take into consideration auspicious lunar dates (*Tithi*) and weekdays.⁶ This practice demonstrates the importance attached by the *Gurram Malas* to ritual propriety and traditional customs in the organization of their performances.

Performance Stage:

For their performances, the *Gurram Malas* select a location within the *Mala* settlement that is suitable for accommodating an audience. If the courtyard of the caste headman's house is spacious and permission is granted, the performance is conducted there. Otherwise, an open area within the *Mala* settlement or a spacious site at the junction of four streets is chosen. With the approval of the caste headman, the selected area is cleaned and prepared for the performance.

The construction of the stage generally requires four or six wooden posts (*Gunjalu*), which are procured with the assistance of the caste headman. When four posts are used, a square-shaped stage is erected; when six posts are employed, the stage assumes a rectangular form. The vertical posts are firmly fixed into the ground and connected by horizontal beams at a height above that of a person, thereby ensuring the stability of the structure. Additional crossbeams are placed at the top.

To provide shade, the framework is covered with colourful saris or cloth sheets. Branches of neem leaves are tied to the posts at the four corners of the stage, imparting both decorative and ritual significance. The stage is preferably oriented towards the east; however, if spatial constraints prevent this arrangement, it is positioned facing north.

⁶Valasa Paidi., *Telangana Loni Mala Upakulala Samajika Samskruthika Jeevitham-Sahithya Parisheelana*, Op.Cit., p.38.



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For the performance itself, four benches are arranged in a straight line to serve as the main acting area. Behind these, additional space is left, where two more benches are placed for the accompanying musicians and singers. A colourful cloth curtain is erected at the rear of the stage. In front of this curtain, the painted scroll corresponding to the story being narrated on that particular day is suspended. In some instances, a thick white cloth is also used as a backdrop.

Performance Troupe (*Melam*):

The collective group of artists required for a *Gurram Mala* scroll-narrative performance is known as a *Melam* (performance troupe). Before embarking on their tour of patron villages, the *Gurram Malas* select the artists who will participate in the troupe. Traditionally, all members of the *Melam* are male.

A typical troupe consists of six to ten performers. Among them, one artist assumes the role of the principal narrator or protagonist, another performs female roles, and a third portrays comic characters. The remaining members function as supporting performers, chorus singers, or assistants. Even female characters are enacted by male performers.

Depending upon the requirements of the narrative, a single artist may portray multiple roles. For example, if the story includes two or three royal characters, one performer may assume more than one role, or the roles may be distributed among different artists. The large number of villages to be visited under the *Mirashi* system also necessitates flexibility in role allocation.

Selection of troupe members is based primarily upon artistic competence and performance skills. The responsibility for this selection rests chiefly with the *Melam* leader. On an auspicious day, the troupe leader sends messages to prospective performers, inviting artists possessing the required skills to join the troupe. Under his supervision, discussions are held regarding the number of villages to be visited and the stories to be performed during the tour.



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The performance troupe is ultimately constituted by the principal narrator, supporting narrators, chorus singers, accompanists, and the owner of the painted scroll. Together, they form a cohesive artistic unit responsible for preserving and transmitting the narrative traditions of the *Gurram Mala* community through performance.⁷

Costume and Make-up of the *Gurram Malas*:

For their performances, the *Gurram Malas* construct a temporary dressing enclosure behind the stage by erecting wooden poles and surrounding them with cloth screens. Within this enclosed space, all performers prepare themselves according to the requirements of their respective roles. Since female characters are also portrayed by male artists, considerable care is taken to ensure that each character appears realistic and convincing. The colours and materials required for make-up are generally prepared by the performers themselves.

In recent times, the *Gurram Malas* have increasingly adopted the *Yakshagana* style of presentation for their narrative performances. Consequently, each performer assumes a distinct costume appropriate to the role being enacted. Typically, two artists portray kings or other male characters, while two others perform female roles such as queens. Another performer assumes the role of the comic character. Additional costumes are prepared according to the requirements of the narrative. Those performers who are not engaged in acting generally provide musical accompaniment.

The role of the king is usually performed by the principal narrator, who simultaneously directs the narration by displaying the painted scroll and explaining its contents with the aid of a pointer stick. Traditionally, *Gurram Mala* storytellers maintained long hair extending to their shoulders, which they would leave loose while performing. Some performers also prepare wigs made from long hair for use in male roles.

⁷Ibid., pp.69-70.



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The costumes required for different characters are generally arranged by the performers themselves. Male characters often wear brightly coloured garments, including draped cloths resembling the traditional *Dhoti*. The comic character is provided with distinctive and often exaggerated costumes suited to the humorous nature of the role. For female roles, however, saris are frequently borrowed from women belonging to the patron community and returned after the completion of the performance.

In addition, the performers prepare crowns, bows, arrows, swords, maces, shoulder ornaments, and other accessories required for various characters appearing in the narrative. Crowns are often crafted attractively from cardboard and decorative metallic paper. Thus, most of the materials and accessories required for the performance are produced and maintained by the *Gurram Mala* artists themselves.

Performance Materials:

The materials used in *Gurram Mala* scroll-narrative performances may be broadly classified into two categories: Decorative and costume materials, Musical instruments.

Decorative and Costume Materials:

Significant changes have occurred in *Patam Katha* performances over time. Contemporary performances are increasingly influenced by the *Yakshagana* tradition, resulting in greater emphasis on costumes and stage properties. Accordingly, performers require wigs, crowns, bows, arrows, swords, shoulder ornaments, weapons, costumes, wristbands, and other accessories appropriate to the characters represented in the story.

Most of these items are either prepared by the artists themselves or purchased from local markets. For facial make-up, performers typically use zinc powder mixed with coconut oil and coloured pigments to obtain the desired shades. Black pigment or *kohl* is applied to create moustaches, accentuate eyebrows, and enhance the eyes, thereby making the characters more expressive and visually striking.



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Musical Instruments:

The principal musical instruments employed by *Gurram Mala* performers include the *Maddela* (drum), harmonium, cymbals (*Thalalu*), and ankle bells (*Gajjelu*). Among these, the *Maddela* serves as the primary instrument. It is constructed by covering both ends of a cylindrical wooden body with goat skin, often with the assistance of skilled craftsmen.

The harmonium has become an indispensable instrument in the contemporary *Yakshagana*-style presentation of scroll narratives. It is used extensively during the rendering of songs and dialogues. Cymbals made of bell metal provide rhythmic accompaniment and enhance the musical tempo of the performance. These are played by striking the cymbal held in one hand against the cymbal held in the other, thereby maintaining a steady rhythmic pattern.

Another important implement in scroll-narrative performances is the *Ponnu Karra* (pointer stick). This object is long, slender, and smooth, and is held in the right hand of the principal narrator. Its primary function is to indicate the figures and scenes depicted on the painted scroll in accordance with the progress of the narrative. However, it also serves multiple symbolic purposes during the performance. During scenes of combat, it may be used as a sword, while in dance sequences it is held with both hands as a performative prop. Thus, the *Ponnu Karra* functions not only as a visual aid for narration but also as an important theatrical accessory within the performance tradition of the *Gurram Malas*.

Performance Narratives:

The *Gurram Malas* receive *Tyagam* from the *Mala* community and, in return, present a series of traditional narratives. These stories are closely associated with the caste mythology and ritual traditions of their patrons. The principal caste myth narrated by the *Gurram Malas* is known as the *Mala Chennayya Purana*. This narrative cycle is performed over a period of five days.



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On the first day, the performers narrate the *Shakti Purana*; on the second day, the *Basava Purana*; on the third day, the *Virata Purana*; on the fourth day, the *Sharla Mahadevi Parinayam*; and on the fifth day, the *Bethala Katha*. Together, these narratives constitute the complete cycle of the *Mala Chennayya Purana*. At the conclusion of the final day's performance, a ritual sacrifice is performed in the evening, during which a sacrificial goat is offered and sprinkle *Bali*.

Performance Technique of the Gurram Malas:

Traditionally, the *Gurram Malas* narrated their scroll stories without the accompaniment of musical instruments. Similar to the recitation of mythological narratives, the performance was conducted by only two individuals. One performer narrated the story through verses and songs, while the other provided explanations and interpretations of the narrative. Some artists delivered the narration while standing, whereas others performed in a seated position.

Over time, significant transformations occurred in their performance tradition. The artists began illustrating the characters and episodes of their narratives on painted scrolls and subsequently used these visual representations as aids during storytelling. In order to make the performances more engaging and entertaining, they incorporated melodic patterns, rhythmic structures, and musical accompaniment into the narration.

The method of storytelling itself also underwent considerable change. Elements of *Yakshagana* and folk theatre were integrated into the performances, resulting in a more dramatic and visually appealing presentation. Musical instruments such as the *Maddela* (drum), harmonium, and *Gajjelu* (ankle bells) came to be employed extensively. Through the incorporation of music, dance, dramatic dialogue, and visual representation, the *Gurram Malas* transformed the traditional scroll narrative into a multifaceted performance capable of attracting and entertaining audiences from diverse social backgrounds.



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Gathering the Audience:

Before commencing a performance, all members of the troupe prepare their musical instruments and make the necessary arrangements for the event. Once the stage and performance area have been fully prepared, the performers begin attracting the audience even before the formal invocation or prayer.

To announce the impending performance, they play the *Maddela* and harmonium, strike the cymbals rhythmically, and render verses and songs in melodious tunes. The sound of these instruments serves as a signal to the *Mala* community that the performance is about to begin. Upon hearing the music, community members complete their ongoing tasks and gradually assemble at the performance venue.

Audience members usually bring sacks, mats, blankets, or cloth sheets to sit upon during the performance. Elderly people and children generally occupy places close to the stage. The elderly prefer to sit near the performers so that they can hear the narrative clearly, while children eagerly gather near the stage out of curiosity and enjoyment. As the audience assembles, the performance space gradually transforms into a vibrant communal setting in which storytelling, music, and ritual come together as a shared cultural experience.

Ritual Practices at the Beginning of the Performance:

Among the rituals performed before the commencement of the narrative performance, the ceremonial bringing of the painted scroll (*Patam*) occupies a place of primary importance. The scroll constitutes the central and indispensable element of the performance and is therefore treated with great reverence and sanctity.

The wife of the *Mala* caste headman leads the procession carrying a ceremonial *Mangala Harati* (auspicious lamp), while the members of the troupe, the *Mala* elders, and other members of the community accompany the scroll to the performance venue. Upon reaching the stage, the scroll is suspended in front of the curtain erected at the rear of the performance area. It



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is specifically arranged in such a manner that the image of *Bethala* remains visible to the audience.

To protect the performance from evil influences and the effects of the evil eye (*Drishti*), the performers invoke their clan deity. Turmeric and vermilion marks are applied to areca nuts and lemons, which are then tied at the front of the stage as protective ritual objects. The *Mala* headman first applies a sacred mark (*Bottu*) to his forehead and subsequently distributes the mark to all members of the community assembled at the venue. Sacred wristbands (*Kankanalu*) are tied to the participants, and similar ritual marks and wristbands are also bestowed upon the members of the performing troupe. Incense sticks are lit before the scroll, prayers are offered to *Bethala*, and coconuts are ceremonially broken. Thereafter, the senior *Mala* elder formally instructs the performers to begin the narrative. Following this command, the principal storyteller reverentially touches the ankle bells (*Gajjelu*) to his eyes and then fastens them to his ankles. He ties a colourful scarf or shawl around his waist and takes the pointer stick into his hand. The principal narrator stands on the right side of the scroll, while the supporting narrator occupies the left side. Behind them, the accompanying artists take their places with the *Maddela*, harmonium, and cymbals. With these ritual observances and invocations, the performance commences amidst the applause of the audience.

Ritual Practices During the Performance:

Throughout the performance, ritual observances continue to play a significant role. Before the entrance of every character, from the first to the last, a devotional hymn is sung. These hymns generally invoke the deity worshipped by the particular character being represented. Following the hymn, the character introduces himself or herself through a song or verse before entering the stage.

The comic character serves an important function in maintaining audience engagement. He often appears on the stage before other characters enter and engages in humorous conversations that draw the attention of the



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audience towards the performance. Through witty dialogue and interaction with newly arriving characters, he helps advance the narrative while sustaining audience interest.

Thus, each character enters the stage only after offering a devotional invocation and introducing himself or herself through a song or poetic recitation. This practice lends a ritual and theatrical dimension to the performance.

In the narratives performed by the *Gurram Malas*, such as the *Adi Shakti Purana*, *Basava Purana*, and *Bethala Katha*, certain episodes are regarded as especially sacred and significant. During these scenes, specific ritual acts are performed. These include breaking coconuts, sacrificing a chick, rotating lemons to ward off evil influences, and offering a goat sacrifice.

Particularly important are the episodes depicting the marriage of *Shiva* and *Parvati*. During this scene, coconuts are ceremonially broken and *Mangala Harati* is offered. Similarly, coconuts are broken during the episode depicting the birth of *Veerabhadra*, while a chicken is sacrificed during the narration of *Bethala's* birth. In the episode concerning the marriage of *Sharla Maha Devi*, coconuts are again broken as part of the ritual proceedings.

The marriage episode of *Shiva* and *Parvati* assumes special significance for the *Mala* community. On this occasion, members of the *Mala* caste present a new sari, blouse, *Dhoti*, and traditional garments as ritual gifts, and the customary marriage offerings (*Katnal*) are publicly announced. Five married women (*Muttayiduvulu*) sing traditional wedding songs, including *Polu Patalu* and *Laggam Patalu*. Other women of the community join together in singing *Mangala Harati* songs while offering ceremonial lamps. Finally, the audience showers sacred rice grains (*Akshintalu*) upon the painted images of *Shiva* and *Parvati* depicted on the scroll and offers prayers before them.

These rituals demonstrate that the *Gurram Mala* performance tradition is not merely a form of entertainment but also a deeply sacred and communal activity that integrates storytelling, ritual worship, and collective participation.



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Performance Text:

No written manuscripts or textual records relating to the performance repertoire of the *Gurram Mala* artists were found in the possession of the performers. Even today, they continue to narrate and perform stories that have been transmitted orally through successive generations as part of their hereditary tradition. Although access to education has become increasingly widespread in contemporary society, the performers have not yet shown significant interest in documenting their caste myths and narrative traditions in written form through the assistance of educated members of their own community.

The conclusion chant:

The singing of the *Mangalam* (conclusion chant) at the conclusion of each day's performance constitutes an important custom in the *Gurram Mala* tradition. At the end of the narrative session, usually in the evening, a *Mangalam* song is performed to mark the successful completion of the day's proceedings.

The song may be sung either by a member of the troupe or by women participating in the event. A large metal plate is prepared containing sacred rice grains (*Akshintalu*) mixed with turmeric and oil, vermilion powder (*Kumkuma*), and a ceremonial lamp. As the women collectively hold the *Harati* plate, they sing the *Mangalam* song and offer auspicious blessings. During this ritual, the *Gurram Malas* receive the customary gifts and offerings (*Katnal*)⁸ presented by the *Mala* community as part of the *Mangala Harati*. In return, they pronounce blessings upon the patrons and their descendants, invoking prosperity, fertility, and well-being for future generations.

Benediction (*Deevenarthy*) of the *Gurram Malas*:

At the conclusion of the performance, the *Gurram Malas* offer a formal benediction to their patrons. The blessing may be translated as follows:

⁸*Osukulu* = ceremonial offerings/gifts (the offerings placed during the *Mangala Harati* ritual).



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“Subhojayamai, Muttindi Muthyamai, Pattindi Bangaaramai, Allullu Aadabiddalu, Manumallu Manumarandlu, Sampadalu Galigi, Edduyavasayam, Pantapairu Sallagundi, Dhanam Dhanyam, Pasu Putra Labham, Shatha Samvatsaramu Niumbinchi, Nityapantalu Galigi, Okkinti Patnana, Veyyindlu Galigi, Sakala Samrajyam Galigi, Subhojayamu, Digvijayibhava”

“May auspicious victory be yours. May all that you touch become pearls and all that you possess turn into gold. May you be blessed with sons-in-law, daughters, grandsons, and granddaughters. May prosperity abound in your household. May your cattle thrive, your agriculture flourish, and your crops yield abundantly. May you be blessed with wealth, grain, livestock, and worthy offspring. May you live a full hundred years. May your fields remain ever fertile and productive. May one household multiply into a thousand households. May you enjoy complete prosperity and sovereignty. May auspiciousness and success be yours. May you attain victory in all directions.”⁹

These benedictory verses reflect the agrarian values and social aspirations of the patron community. The blessings emphasize fertility, lineage continuity, agricultural abundance, material prosperity, livestock wealth, longevity, and collective well-being. The recitation of such blessings marks the formal conclusion of the performance and reaffirms the reciprocal relationship between the *Gurram Mala* performers and the *Mala* community that sustains them.

Ritual Practices Performed After the Narrative Performance:

The Ritual of *Bali Challatam* (Sprinkling of Sacrificial Offering):

On the final day of their narrative performances, the *Gurram Malas* conduct important concluding rituals known as *Gavu Pattadam* and *Bali Challatam* (the offering and distribution of sacrificial oblations). The *Mala*

⁹Valasa Paidi., *Telangana Loni Mala Upakulala Samajika Samskruthika Jeevitham-Sahithya Parisheelana*, Op. Cit., pp.70-83.



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community believes that the sprinkling of the sacrificial offering upon their houses ensures the health and well-being of all family members, promotes the prosperity of livestock, contributes to abundant agricultural yields, and brings overall prosperity (*Barkat*)¹⁰ to the household. The ritual is performed exclusively within the *Mala* settlement and upon the houses of *Mala* families.

Worship of Village Deities:

On the day of the ritual, all *Mala* households thoroughly clean and decorate their homes with ritual floor designs (*Muggulu*). Community members bathe and wear freshly washed clothes. Following ceremonial preparations led by the wife of the *Mala* headman, the headman and other members of the community assemble with ritual items such as *Mangala Harati*, sacred wristbands (*Kankanalu*), turmeric, vermilion, coconuts, incense sticks, three vessels of water, neem branches, and lemons. They proceed to the shrine of the village goddess *Pochamma* and perform rituals similar to those conducted during the month of *Sravana*, offering all ritual materials to the deity.

Worship to *Bodrai*:

Subsequently, accompanied by the sound of drums, they proceed to the shrine of the village guardian deity (*Bodrai*). The deity is ceremonially bathed with water, anointed with turmeric and vermilion, decorated with sacred marks and wristbands, and worshipped with incense and coconuts. Similar rituals are then performed at the shrines of other village deities, including *Gadi Maisamma* and *Kantha Maheshwara*.

Bringing the *Ghatam Kunda* (Toddy Pot):

According to local belief, *Kantha Maheshwara* and *Shivakanthamala* are siblings born to the same mother. Therefore, whenever a sacrificial ritual is performed, members of the Goud community are required to provide a ritual

¹⁰Gaining a benefit.



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vessel known as the *Ghatam Kunda*. This constitutes an established customary obligation.

The *Ghatam Kunda* is prepared from either a new earthen pot or a thoroughly cleansed old pot. It is decorated with turmeric and vermilion marks, adorned with a garland of neem leaves, and filled with freshly tapped palm toddy. The vessel is used to offer toddy to the deity during the sacrificial ceremony.

The Goud elder places the decorated pot before the sacred images in his house. Thereafter, accompanied by drumming, the *Mala* community proceeds to his residence carrying ritual offerings that include rice, new towels, a *Dhoti*, a sari, a blouse, and other ceremonial items. These offerings are placed before the *Ghatam Kunda*, after which sacred marks and wristbands are applied to the pot and to all participants present. The Goud elder then carries the *Ghatam Kunda* in procession and places it before the painted scroll at the performance venue.

Offering of Bonam:

On the final day of the performance cycle, all *Mala* families prepare and offer *Bonalu* to their deities. The wife of the *Mala* headman observes a fast and prepares the principal offering. Other households also prepare their own *Bonalu*, decorating the pots with turmeric and vermilion and inviting relatives to participate in the ceremony.

The *Gurram Mala* performers, the *Mala* headman, and other community members proceed in procession from the performance site to the residence of the *Mala* headman, accompanied by drumming. The principal *Bonam* is carried by the headman's wife. Thereafter, the procession visits the house of the junior *Mala* elder, where a sheep, sacrificial materials, clothing, and ritual offerings are assembled. As the procession advances, members of other *Mala* households bring their own *Bonalu* and ritual offerings to the performance site, placing them side by side before the scroll.



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The Sacrificial Ceremony:

The painted scroll is displayed in such a manner that the image of *Bethala* is clearly visible. The sacrificial ceremony is performed before this image. Ritual materials assembled for the occasion include twenty-five coconuts, five dates, five areca nuts, five ritual cups, incense sticks, turmeric, vermilion, and sacrificial rice placed in a large ceremonial tray.

The individual designated to perform the sacrificial rite observes ritual restrictions throughout the day and wears special ceremonial clothing. The *Gurram Malas* collect small portions of rice from each *Bonam* and place them on five leaves before the image of *Bethala*. Incense is lit and coconuts are ceremonially broken.

The *Mala* headman then takes a sword and places its tip against the sword depicted in the image of *Bethala* on the scroll, offering prayers. A portion of toddy from the *Ghatam Kunda* is poured out as a libation. Following the recitation of ritual formulas by the *Gurram Malas*, the *Mala* headman sacrifices a goat before the image of *Bethala*. Care is taken to ensure that the animal's blood falls upon the sacrificial rice prepared for the ritual.

The sacrificial basket is then filled with blood, rice, portions of the sacrificial offering, neem leaves, and lemons. The designated ritual specialist, identified as *Gurrapu Mallanna*, is ceremonially adorned with portions of the sacrificial animal and given the sacrificial basket to carry upon his head. As he proceeds through the settlement, the *Mala* community follows behind him. The sacrificial mixture is first sprinkled upon the house of the *Mala* headman, then upon the house of the junior elder, and subsequently upon every *Mala* household in the settlement. After completing this circuit, the ritual specialist returns to the performance site, where the basket is removed. At this stage, members of the community place monetary offerings into the basket as sacrificial gifts.

To conclude the ritual, toddy from the *Ghatam Kunda* is shared among the participants. Married women then pour five pots of water over the ritual



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specialist, symbolically purifying him after the ceremony. He subsequently changes his clothes.

The sacrificed goat is then butchered, and its meat is distributed equally among all *Mala* households. The head and legs of the animal are traditionally allotted to the *Gurram Mala* performers. If any household inadvertently fails to receive its share of the meat, the matter is considered a serious communal lapse and may be brought before the caste council for adjudication.

After all ritual activities have been completed, the *Gurram Malas* carefully roll up the painted scroll and store it in their residence for future use. The *Mala* families take their respective *Bonalu* back to their homes. On a subsequent day, members of the community organize a communal feast, often referred to as *Vanavasam*, for which relatives and the *Gurram Mala* performers are invited.

During this gathering, participants consume food and traditional beverages such as toddy and other locally available drinks, spending the day in communal celebration and enjoyment. By evening, the participants return to their homes, marking the successful conclusion of the entire cycle of narrative performances, ritual observances, and communal celebrations associated with the *Gurram Mala* tradition.

Thus, the performance tradition of the *Gurram Malas* extends beyond storytelling and entertainment, encompassing a complex sequence of ritual, social, and religious practices that reinforce communal identity, patron–client relationships, and collective cultural memory.

Distribution of Earnings:

After the completion of the narrative performances, the *Tyagam* contributions collected from the *Mala* community are initially received by the artist who possesses the hereditary performance rights (*Mirashi* rights) in that particular village. Subsequently, the earnings are distributed among the members of the performing troupe according to established customary rules.



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In the distribution process, the principal performer or lead narrator, who bears the primary responsibility for the performance, receives two shares, while the remaining artists are allotted one and a half shares each. Separate shares are also calculated for essential performance resources such as the musical instruments and the painted scroll (*Patam*), recognizing their importance in the presentation. In some instances, a different method of distribution is followed. Under this arrangement, the artist holding the hereditary rights to the village receives two shares, the principal narrator receives one and a half shares, and the remaining troupe members are each allotted one and one-quarter shares. The exact division depends upon local custom and prior agreements among the performers.

When performances are conducted in villages where the hereditary rights belong to another artist, the rights-holder of that village is entitled to receive one and a half shares as compensation for the use of his performance rights. The remaining income is then distributed among the participating troupe members according to mutually agreed proportions.¹¹

Thus, the Gurram Malas traditionally sustain their livelihood through their dependence on the Mala community, to whom they narrate traditional stories and songs and in return receive customary offerings and patronage.

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