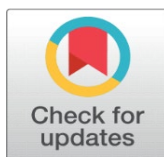
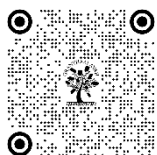


# SHRINE PAINTINGS OF THE POTRAJA COMMUNITY: DEPICTING AGRARIAN CULTURE AND RITUALS

Dr. Vikram Kulkarni  

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Department of Drawing & Painting, SNDT Women's University, Pune, India



**Received** 01 October 2023  
**Accepted** 02 February 2024  
**Published** 10 February 2024

## Corresponding Author

Dr. Vikram Kulkarni,  
[kulkarnivikram72@gmail.com](mailto:kulkarnivikram72@gmail.com)

## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.714](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.714)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

The Indian society comprises of various castes and sub-castes that in the olden days had been organised into a neat system. At its centre was the farmer who supplied food and thereby took care of the sustenance of all the people. But outside its periphery lay many wandering tribes and communities whose subsistence was not quite the concern of the rural economy. One such community is that of the nomadic Potraja devotees of Maharashtra, who originally hailed from Andhra Pradesh. The Potrajas possess wooden mobile shrines decorated with paintings on various themes, including some based on agriculture. These shrine paintings draw inspiration from the scroll paintings of Andhra Pradesh. The present research paper attempts to interpret the social relevance of agriculture as manifested in the iconography on Potraja shrines.

**Keywords:** Farmer-Centred Rural System, Potraja, Mendicant Devotee Community

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the present research paper, a survey was conducted and information was gathered from the interviews of Potrajas from Cheriyal in Telangana and from Kedgaon, Pune and Aland in Maharashtra as also the traditional artists who decorate the shrines. A visual documentation of the paintings on the Potraja shrines has been prepared. The paintings were interpreted on the basis of a comparative study of their customs, festivals and practice of worship. The conclusion has been based on a complementary study of ancient theory of economics and social science. Grounded research methodology has been employed. Various schools of folk literature and

methodology have been incorporated into this study. The present research has employed contextual method which deals with not merely the text but its context as well. The findings of this research are directly related to the social setup for which the paintings form an important tool.

## 2. ANCIENT RURAL SYSTEM IN INDIA

India is a country of villages, with farming as its primary occupation. It follows therefore that the farmer occupies focal position in this system. The ancient Indian village had a unique system for the division of labour. A village comprised of three classes of people viz. the farmer, the skilled and the unskilled labourers. Farming being the main occupation in the villages, the farmer was the backbone of the rural economy. The skilled labourers are called *karu-naru* or *balutedar-alutedar* and the farmer depended on all these skilled workers for various activities. Hence the first share of the agricultural produce was gifted to the *balutedars*. The *alutedars* or *narus* ranked lower in terms of need and hence received a lesser share. This share was further divided into three categories. The first category comprised of the carpenter, ironsmith, cobbler and the *mahar*. The next category comprised of the potter, *maang*, washerman and the barber. The third category was made up of the astrologer, priest, *gurav* (the temple-keeper) and the fisherman. [Mande \(1999\)](#), 14-17.

Unlike today, the ancient rural system rarely shows instances of contract labour. It is often said that the ancient Indian economy was based on barter system. But that is only gross truth since the agricultural produce was distributed on the basis of castes. It would be more appropriate to say that it was a caste-based barter system which brought about a homogenization of caste system.

The history of the village system shows that the initial collective farming was replaced by individual ownership. This gave rise to various castes based on different occupations and the rural culture was born. The Indian village was self-sufficient and met all its requirements within itself. The Indian society in fact managed to withstand all the innumerable invasions from time to time simply because of its stronghold of a strong and sustainable economy. It guaranteed the sustenance of most of the social strata. It had laid down how every grain that grew in the field was to be disbursed. The farmer produced grain and fed the carpenter, the potter, the ironsmith and others while they reciprocated by catering to his needs. The exchange of goods and services continued for years together. Some examples might help clarify this system. Consider for example the working of a sugar cane crushing factory. The carpenter would supply the crusher; the ironsmith would provide two scythes. The cobbler would provide eight leather straps for the bullocks and also the beater to rotate the cane crusher while the potter would make the pots and the *mahar* had to bring firewood for the furnace. The sugarcane crusher could be started only then. On the first day the carpenter and the potter would be given 25 sugarcanes each, 5 sugarcanes for every following day, 1 slab of jaggery every week and 2 seers of jaggery for sherni (Sweet prasad [offering] made by combining sugarcane molasses with crushed bhakri.). The cobbler would be given 2 1/2 sugarcanes daily, sherni and 2 seers of jaggery every week and 1 slab of jaggery every fortnight. The ironsmith had to be given 1 sherni every week and a slab of jaggery at the end. The *mahar* would be given two slabs of jaggery and the last remnant of the molasses; the priest etc. would be given half a seer of jaggery and sugarcane juice every week. Besides, every individual who came to the sugarcane factory would have to be given sugarcane, sugarcane juice, molasses and jaggery. [Aatre \(2015\)](#), 217.

In the same way, marriage ceremonies were carried out with the participation of every individual in the society. Womenfolk from family and neighbourhood came over to clean the grains, to prepare sevai, papad, kurda is etc. for the feast. Grinding turmeric is a special ceremony of womenfolk. The Mahar and Maang were requested to bring firewood. The marriage party was taken in the bullock-cart which was duly prepared and renovated by the carpenter. The cobblers provided a tasselled whip for the bullocks. The Maang provided brand new reins for the bullocks. New clothes were supplied by the cloth merchant. The Mahar labourer was employed on wages to paint the house with lime and gravel. [Yadav \(2000\)](#), 54 The chef who cooked food for the marriage or festivals was gifted with a kamarband and dhoti. All those who contributed towards the marriage ceremony in some way or the other were treated to a feast on the last day. [Yadav \(2000\)](#), 34 In this way the rural community worked and helped each other without any consideration of remuneration.

### 3. WANDERERS AND MENDICANTS

On the periphery of the rural social system lived a community that lived a nomadic life. It lived on the outskirts of the village that called for their services and would move to the next village once the needs were fulfilled. Such was the nature of the wandering tribes. Maharashtra had 13 denotified and 24 nomadic tribes as per the list published by the Maharashtra Government in 1961. The number of denotified tribes today has risen up to 50. On the national basis there are 198 denotified tribes and 147 nomadic tribes. They have a population of 10 crores which of course is only an approximate figure since they are always on the move and do not settle down in any place even today. [Garge \(1989\)](#), Volume III, 393

The nomadic tribes and communities of Maharashtra can be classified into eight categories on the basis of occupation. In his book "Bhatkya Vimuktanche Antarang" (The essence of the nomadic and denotified tribes" [Chavan \(2003\)](#), a researcher of the nomadic tribes and communities has furnished the following classification in the Annex:

- 1) **Worshippers:** *Gondhali, Vaghya Murali, Rawal, Aradhi, Jogti, Mari Aaiwale, Bhope, Gosavi*
- 2) **Herdsmen:** *Gopal, Dangat, Mairal, Golla, Davri Gosavi, Nandibailwala, Darweshi, Rayandar*
- 3) **Artists:** *Kolhati, Madari, Sappgarudi, Chitrakathi, Bahurupi, Rayandar, Kathputliwala, Marwadi Bhati, Dombari*
- 4) **Astrologers:** *Mendhagi, Tirmali, Kudmude Jyotishi, Thoke Joshi, Vasudev, Mankavde, Damruwale Joshi, Sarode*
- 5) **Hunters:** *Pardhi, Bhillal Pardhi, Fase Pardhi, Chitra Pardhi, Vaidu, Bhillal (Tribals)*
- 6) **Professionals:** *Sikkalgar, Kaikadi, Wadari, Kunchikorva, Vaghre, Ghyare, Kanjar, Ghisadi, Kashi Kapdi, Otari, Ramayya, Vaidu, Gadi-Lohar, Rajgond (Tribals)*
- 7) **Mendicants:** *Gosavi, Bairagi, Vaidu, Smashanjogi, Mari Aaiwala*
- 8) **Labourers:** *Wadari, Laman, Beldar, Gadi Wadar, Mati Wadar*

This classification is based chiefly on the findings of the past 50 to 60 years. It cannot be ascertained whether these tribes and communities existed in the same form earlier. For example, in the rural economy the *Lamanis* were a tribe of salt traders. In addition, these people worked as goods transporters and always moved in a clan. The traditional occupation of the *Lamanis* lost its relevance during the

British regime with the introduction of modern means of transportation and these people resorted to labour. In fact, in the modern times the occupations of all the clans and tribes seem to have undergone change with the changes in the modern economy. The ancient rural economy of the villages did not shoulder the responsibility of the sustenance of the nomadic tribes and clans who fulfilled seasonal requirements of the village. Every community seemed to follow a specific annual calendar of wandering. Their regions of wandering also were more or less pre-determined.

Among these tribes and clans is the clan of *Mari Aais*, a clan of devotees or mendicants. This clan hails from Andhra Pradesh where it is known as Peddammalollu or Peddammavadalu. In Maharashtra however they are referred to as Kadak Laxmiwale, Deulwale or Mari Aaiwale who wander from village to village, carrying shrines on their heads. They are in fact the Potrajas of the goddess.

#### 4. CLASSES OF POTRAJAS

The term Potraja is an adulterated form of '*Potturaju*' of the Dravidian language. The word '*Pottu*' refers to a bull or a ram. The worship of village deities in the South predominantly comprised of sacrificing a bull on the altar and hence the devotee who carried out the sacrificial ritual naturally came to be known as Potraja [Dhere \(1964\)](#), 97.

The lower classes followed the custom of offering a Potraja to the goddess. If a family had history of still-births the survived child would be offered to the goddess with the conviction that since it was given over to the goddess she would surely protect him. He would then be named after that goddess. For example, the child offered to Laxmi Aai would be called Laxman, or the one handed over to Mari Aai would be called Mariba. In this way, the name of Potraja would invariably be coined after the name of the goddess to whom he had been given over [Kadam \(1995\)](#), 75.

In Maharashtra, the Potrajas come from either of the three castes viz. the mahar, maang and the deulwale. Local Potrajas belong to the mahar or maang community. In the modern times the mahars have given up the practice of Potraja and hence their number has depleted. The community of maangs however has many Potrajas even today. The Potrajas of both these communities are devotees of Laxmi Aai and Mari Aai. The local Potraja wears a shirt and attaches a string of colourful swatches around his waist. This is known as abharan or abhran. Dressed in this costume, he goes about, hollering "Mari aai Laxmi Aaicha Madan!" asking for alms, every Tuesday and Friday. Some Potrajas sing songs to the accompaniment of flute and tambourine. Though they sing various songs they primarily sing ovis. [Babar \(1964\)](#) , 48. These songs are also known as dhuparati.

The third type of Potrajas is the deulwales. They speak Telugu. In Maharashtra they are known as Mari Aaiwale. Traditionally, wearing bells in their feet from childhood they wander about in the name of the goddess. They are bare-chested with only a loin cloth around their waist. This cloth is like abhran which they call kasha pattalu ijar or kase battal. When the deulwale Potraja goes on his stint, the female plays musical instrument called irnamma, irnam or hirnam which locally is known as gubugubu. She carries on her head a shrine with paintings on all its four sites. The shrine houses the wooden idol of goddess Peddamma. In Maharashtra this goddess is known as Mari Aai, Kadak Laxmi or Maha Laxmi. This clan supports itself on the alms received in the name of the goddess. Every male member of this community becomes a Potraja and spends a nomadic life. This situation however is changing gradually. The community seems to be turning now to labour, giving up

their practice of seeking alms. These people seem to settle down in a place only during the four months of the rainy season. Settlements of this community can be seen at Kamshet, Hadapsar, Ramvadi, Saswad and Nira in Pune district, Kotala near Jejuri, at Morgaon Supe, Kedgaon, Boripadri, Pargaon and Dapodi near Daund, Indiranagar slums in old Akhuj, Pennur and Madrup near Mohol in Solapur district and at Mahud and Mangalvedha near Pandharpur.

The various tribes that have migrated to Maharashtra from the South also follow the custom of Potraja. The Wadar community has its Potrajas whom they call devrishi. All the Potrajas are essentially worshippers of the village deities and folk deities. All the tribes and clans have their own Potrajas with minor variations. But the Potrajas who spend their entire life as mendicants in the name of the goddess are deulwale Potrajas.

## 5. BEGGING FOR ALMS

Figure 1



Figure 1 Female Holding Wooden Shrine (Maharashtra)

Figure 2



Figure 2 Potaraj Dress (Telangana)

When the nomadic Potraj starts on his round of begging known as *tirginik*, he is accompanied by his wife who carries the shrine on the head. [Figure 1]. The Potraj wears his special costume which includes an *abhran*, *gajjla* (*Goongaru*), *irnam* (*Drum*), *irgal* (*Whip*), knife and a belt. [Figure 2]

*Abhran* refers to a piece of apparel made by attaching pieces of cloth. The word originates from *avaran*. Similar words such as *avran*, *abhran*, *abharan*, *abhrang* are also in use. The beginning that the patriarchal system in later times downsized the participation of the female in the worship of the goddess under matriarchal culture. The men began to perform the rites performed earlier by women though some practices continued as earlier. The *abhran* which is made from cloth pieces is a relic of the worship in the matriarchal culture. If it is interpreted as a covering it might relate to the fact that the worship of some of the goddesses in South required women to go naked. The women used *neem* tree leaves to cover their private parts. The British abolished this custom in 1855. The custom of attaching a branch of the *neem* tree at the waist is seen even today for certain rituals. This piece of cloth is known as *Kashapattaluijar* or *Kasbattal* by the Potrajas. In Telangana, blouse pieces are attached to the belt at the waist. The practical justification for tying such pieces of cloth is that they can avail of plenty of the blouse pieces offered by the devotee women to the goddesses. It can even be maintained that this was precisely why the costume came to be made. When Edgar Thurston described the term *Peddammavandlu* as a fancy name taken by some Telugu beggars [Thurston (1909), 189] The Potrajas resort to various gimmicks to procure alms and the costume is one among them.

## 6. PAINTED SHRINE

The painted shrine of the Potraj is normally carried on head by the female and hence the shrine is made from light wood. It is 28 inches tall and 16 inches in length and breadth [Figure 3]. Earlier, it used to be 36 inches in height, length and breadth. The shrine has got reduced in size since the last 4 to 5 decades.

**Manufacture:** The shrines have detachable doors that are interlocked into grooves. This could be due to the fact that the soft texture of the wood will not probably be able to bear the weight of the hinges as also that the hinges are not readily available. The artists who make these shrines are experts in making wooden idols and scrolls but perhaps not that adept at carpentry.

**Painting:** The wooden shrine would be covered with fabric painted with water colours. It would then be coated with a varnish called *mirgu*. The technique now has undergone change and has been replaced by oil paint and acrylic colours.

**Artists:** The shrines of Telugu region are made by the *nakkash* artists who have been living till today at Cherial near Hyderabad. Though they live scattered over the entire Telugu region the traditional painting art is more or less extinguishing. The traditional artists at Kinnal near Hampi in Karnataka are known as *chitragars*. The Potrajas assign them the job of painting and manufacturing shrines. Since Maharashtra has no traditional artist community, the local signboard painters paint these shrines for them. The painters at Tikota (near Vijayapura), Vairag, Pune, Jat, Pachchapur (near Gokak) paint the shrines. The custom of getting the paintings shrines painted from the traditional artists has more or less become outdated.

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** Potraj Painted Wooden Shrine (Gangavathi)

## **7. SOCIAL STATUS OF POTRAJAS**

Though looked upon as beggars by the society today, the nomadic Potrajas had a specific role to play in the society prior to the advent of science and technology. Before the development of modern medicine, the villages often fell prey to epidemics of fatal diseases. The book “Gavrahati” carries a description of the havoc brought about by an epidemic to a village. “The rains have swept a lot of filth into the village. Many of the villagers, especially the senior citizens and children are sick. Malaria and diarrhoea are rampant. There is no doctor in the village. It has been learned that the villages nearby have been afflicted with cholera. At least four families in every settlement seem to have lost their family heads. The illness of cholera was the result of the wrath of the goddess Mari Aai. The goddess will have to be pacified and sent out of the village. When the village was attacked by cholera earlier, she had been appropriately given a farewell. The village had not faced any wrath since then.”

A chariot is prepared for the goddess for her farewell ceremony. It is the Potraja who determines the direction in which the chariot is to be driven. Prior to that, a coconut, eggs and a wooden pole are installed on the roads on all sides of the village implying that the goddess should not enter into the village from any of the roads again. The chariot first goes in a full circle around the village and then is parked on the outskirts in the predetermined direction. All the people spiritedly shout “Mari Aaicha Changbhale!” (Hail to the Goddess!). The prowess of the goddess is such that she can take the life of even the fittest in the society. The very scent of her arrival sends shudders down the spine and the people start cooking ‘ambil’ (millet porridge) as offering for her. Womenfolk start preparing for her farewell. It is the Potraja again who has the honour of carrying the chariot on his head. It is believed that any break in this tradition spells calamity for the village. There is also a strong belief that anyone who settles and works in one and the same place or indulges in farming abandoning the duty of carrying the chariot of the goddess is afflicted with a skin rash, vomiting and diarrhoea. Hence the Potrajas continue to wander perpetually, carrying the shrine of the goddess on their heads.

The Potraja is the most trusted divine messenger for the womenfolk of the villages. Threatened by ghosts, domestic disputes, black magic, children's illnesses or problems in the business or occupation etc. the women flock around him, asking him to foretell the verdict of the goddess and find solace. Patil (1990), 2-5) Women battling infertility beseech the goddess and offer a silver cradle. Such silver cradles can be seen hanging all over the shrine of the Potraja. [Figure 4] Similarly, the shrine has a painting of womenfolk going to the temple along with their children to worship God. [Figure 5]

Figure 4



Figure 4 Silver Cradles

Figure 5



Figure 5 Womenfolk Going to the Temple

The Potraja forecasts the rainfall for the new year. He also predicts the colour of the sari worn by the goddess Sankranti. This is a warning for the women not to wear any sari, blouse or bangles of that colour. Kadam (1995), 78. The Potraja resorts to self-incrimination to please the goddess. Dancing before the goddess the Potraja whips his own body with a lash. Tying a rope tightly to his arm, piercing a needle in his arm, biting his own wrist etc. he brings physical pain to himself as an expression of his devotion towards the goddess. The society believes that the goddess Mari Aai being pleased answers their questions through the medium of the Potraja. Patil (1990), 3)

In this way it seems that the society in the olden days was besieged by superstitions regarding the rainfall, epidemics or infertility and it looked for solace



from all such questions in their life through various sources and the Potraja was one such source. The ferocious goddess held a severe sway over the social psyche and hence the Potraja was always a welcome entity as a shield. Today most of these problems have been solved by science and modern systems and hence superstition is on the wane. The sway of the ferocious goddess has also has diminished. The Potraja as a result now has come to be reduced to a beggar. Yet the fact remains that this Potraja did enjoy a unique status in the society once upon a time as seen from the paintings on their shrines.

Reviewing Potrajas as a nomadic tribe, it can be said that the community had its social relevance though the chief reason was superstition. Hence it would be unfair to label the community as beggars. The community in fact is deeply immersed in the devotion for the goddess and the customs and rituals associated with her. It would therefore be more appropriate to term it as a devotee community. The village does not bear the responsibility of its sustenance just as in the case of the other nomadic tribes. The inevitability of the dependence on the village for its sustenance pervades all over the themes of the paintings on the shrines. The epidemics generally spread in the months of monsoon viz. shravana and bhadrapada and it is in this season that the village experiences the wrath of the goddess. It follows that it is in these months that the Potraja becomes a welcome personality. The biggest festival of the Potrajas is known as Ashadha Yatra (Fair in the month of Ashadha) which is celebrated on a Tuesday or Friday, eight days after the full moon day of Ashadha. This comprises of the worship of a pitcher filled with water. All the shrines and the drums are arranged in a line and worshipped. This worship is performed every three years. Every Potraja family sacrifices a sheep or a hen. The goddess is offered the heart of the animal. It is believed that the spirit of the goddess enters an elderly woman during worship.

## **8. AGRICULTURE AND POTRAJA**

As discussed at the very beginning the nature of rural economy in India which can be summarized as follows:

The agricultural produce in India was distributed on the basis of caste system. Hence it can be said that the rural economy in India was structured on caste-based beneficence. This helped in the homogenization of the various castes and sub-castes in India. But beyond this system lived several communities that led a nomadic life. The village did not support or shoulder the responsibility of their sustenance. These tribes fulfilled the seasonal needs of the village and were accorded appropriate remuneration.

India is a country of villages and agriculture with the farmer at its focal point. It is the farmer who provides food for the entire society. He bears the responsibility of feeding all the different castes and communities but a tribe like the Potraja has to beg before the farmer for food.

The society however seems to have evolved certain customs to attenuate for this feeling of subservience. For example, it is the Potraja who is bestowed the honour of carrying the palanquin of the goddess on the farm during the fair as a guarantee of plentiful yield in the farm. Patil (1990), 5. It wouldn't therefore be wrong to say that the farmer is indebted to the Potraja. Though the farmer is not bound to provide for the livelihood of Potraja it looks like various customs prompt him to do so. Though there is no fixed share assigned in his name the Potraja receives it is in the nature of a gift given by the farmer with complete willingness.

## 9. PAINTINGS ON SOWING ACTIVITY

The Potraja shrines carry paintings of sowing activity. It shows a farmer engaged in sowing. The male and the female accompanying him seem to be singing which makes it evident that they belong to the *maang* community. This community plays a significant role in the farmer's life. They are incorporated in the various farming activities right from sowing to harvesting. They are offered a beetle nut and leaf as a mark of an auspicious beginning for farming. The *maang* woman is honoured with coconut. The ritual of '*vaf dhavani*' is performed at this time to propitiate the reproductive power of the earth. The farmer begins sowing only after that. The *maangs* sing songs that are known as '*Mogdyachi bani*' or '*bhadali*'. Mande (1999). 67.

Pictures of the sowing and the singing are painted on the shrine of Potraja. When the Potraja enters the village for his routine trip he first goes to the settlement of *maangs* whom he considers most eminent. Though the Potrajas believe that a visit to a *maang* is a guarantee of receiving a bounty of alms they do not accept even water from them. The sight of the *maang* in the morning is considered auspicious in the villages. There is a popular saying with the meaning that if you meet a *maang*, you will be freed of all your debts! The belief that the *maangs* bring success has given rise to many customs in the villages. Any mendicant who comes to a village must ask for alms first from a *maang*. The painting of sowing activity as depicted on the shrine makes it evident that the community enjoys a place of honour in the village. [Figure 6]

The Potraja from the *Mari Aaiwale* or *Deulwale* community in Maharashtra is known as *Madagi* or *Madgud* in Andhra Pradesh. This nomadic tribe in the course of time eventually settled in Maharashtra Patil (1990) , 1. *Maang*, *matang* and *madiga* refer to one and the same community. Hence it is natural that the nomadic Potraja community is a slice of these communities. According to a folk lore however, the *Mari Aaiwale* were fishermen in earlier times. Researchers like Mande have deduced that "The Potraja community probably arrived on the scene after the division of entire labour was finalized among the various castes of the village". In due course, the nomadic Potraja also became a dependent on the village. And hence in the painting on the sowing activity it seems most appropriate to find that the *maang* is depicted singing songs.

**Figure 6**



**Figure 6** Sowing Activity and Maang's Baani

## 10. PAINTINGS ON FARMING ACTIVITY

The shrines of Potrajas of Telangana carry paintings of rice sowing activity. Similarly, paintings of the farmer supplying water with the leather bucket can also be seen. [Figure 7] Some shrines carry the painting of the farmer as the reincarnation of King Bali along with his bullocks. [Figure 8]

Figure 7



Figure 7 Farmer Supplying Water

Figure 8



Figure 8 Farmer Along with His Bullock

## 11. HARVEST AND POTRAJA

The festival of Sankranti marks the harvesting season. The farms are fully laden with crop. The farmer is busy giving the *alutedars* and the *balutedars* their share of agricultural produce. Although not bound to give any share to the Potraja the farmer still gives him a gift. Since the rains have been favourable as per the verdict of the goddess the farmer doesn't mind sparing a few kilograms of grain for the Potraja. The farmer has implicit faith in the goddess. The goddess in fact is addressed as Malabai (The Goddess of the Orchards) in Parner region. During this season Potraja makes frequent visits to the village. After collecting grain from different farms, all the wandering Potrajas come to their settlement around this time. They have been honoured with plenty of grain. From the festival of Sankranti to Shimga or Padwa they stay in their locality for a couple of months. Engagements, marriages and community courts are held during this season. A large community court is held at Kedgaon in Daund taluka in Pune district. Chavan (2006), 137. Potraja in this way is closely associated with harvesting. Potraja shrines of Telangana are decorated with paintings on the theme of harvesting activity. [Figure 9]

**Figure 9**



**Figure 9** Harvesting Activity

## 12. RURAL CULTURE AND POTRAJA

The village deities are worshipped with great devotion in the villages. Fairs are held in their honour every year. These fairs are organized once the farmers are free from the harvesting activities. These fairs are generally organized between March and May. Since the Potraja is a devotee of the goddess he occupies a special role in the festivity during these fairs. Various religious and entertainment activities such as *mahapuja*, weddings, chariot processions, *sumbaran* (Reminiscing on the glories of God through music), wrestling matches, *tamasha*, *jalabhishek* etc. are conducted. The entire village comes together and celebrates them. [Bhosale \(2001\)](#), 94.

**Figure 10**



**Figure 10** Bagaad

The fairs in the honour of Bhairoba are held on seventh or eighth day of *chaitra* month. These fairs include the custom of *bagad* (a chariot for God). It is an attempt of the nomadic tribes to please the mainstream society. The *bagad* is a wooden chariot constructed by interlocking the wooden parts into each other, completely doing away with iron nails or bars. It has a base like a bullock cart with a pole fixed at the centre. At the top is attached a cradle from which hangs a long wooden staff in the shape of a trident, measuring approximately 32 to 35 feet in length. The chariot is taken in a procession around the village. It is considered an honour for men to be hung up on this chariot. Paintings of *bagad* as well can be seen on the Potraja shrines. [[Figure 10](#)]

Having settled for a couple of months from the festival of Sankranti the Potraja once again embarks on his tours to participate in such fairs. Fairs play an important role in the village life. All the villagers are in a festive and cheerful mood and the Potraja is hopeful of getting much donation. Like *bagad*, wrestling too is an

important sport in rural life and shrines are decorated with paintings on that theme. [Figure 11] The Potraja in this way is intricately linked with rural culture as reflected in the themes of paintings on his shrines.

**Figure 11**



**Figure 11** Wrestling

### 13. DEGRADATION OF STYLE

The Potraja shrine paintings showcase a myriad of iconographic influences, encompassing diverse styles. These paintings have been shaped by the artistic traditions of Kinnal and Cherial, evident in their form. Initially, the Potraja adorned their shrines with scroll paintings; subsequently, they transitioned to enamel paints executed by local signboard painters. This shift introduced a distinct style and medium that significantly diverged from the original art form, leading to the gradual decline of the traditional painting techniques. Today, remnants of the original style persist solely within the Potraja shrine paintings. Figure 12 and Figure 13 clearly illustrate the contemporary degradation of this style.

**Figure 12**



**Figure 12** These Days, Potraja Shrine Painting is Inspired by the Scroll Painting of Andhra Pradesh.

**Figure 13**



**Figure 13** Scroll Painting of Andhra Pradesh

## 14. CONCLUSION

The Potraja shrine that originally carried designs from the scroll painting of Andhra Pradesh. What remains today is a degraded form of the shrine since the traditional artist who made the paintings has been obliterated with the changing times and what we get to see today is only the last remnants of a vanishing art.

The rural Indian economy was basically an economy of caste-based beneficence. Share from agricultural produce was distributed on the basis of caste. The system had successfully brought about the homogenization of the various castes of the village. But outside this system was a class which had been spending a nomadic life and took care of the seasonal needs of the village. The rural economy however, did not provide for the sustenance of these nomadic castes and tribes.

Society in the olden times was plagued by various superstitions regarding rains, fertility, epidemics etc. It tried to find answers regarding these problems from various sources and Potraja was undisputedly one such source. His crucial position in the society thus rested solely perhaps on the prevalence of superstition. It would therefore be unfair to equate this tribe with beggars. Steeped in implicit devotion to the goddess and the various customs and traditions related to it, the tribe deserves to be called a devotee community. The inevitability of leading a dependent life is writ large in the themes of the paintings on their shrines.

Although this community has to depend on the farmer for procuring food certain honours accorded to him help him ward off its label as beggars. The Potraja's annual routine practices and the paintings on his shrines manifest the agrarian culture. Fairs carry a special significance in the rural culture and the Potraja shrines accordingly are decorated with paintings depicting the *bagad* and wrestling. These paintings are an effort to please the public as also express gratitude towards the farmer and the other factions of the society.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

## REFERENCES

- Aatre, T.N. (2015). *Gavgada: Shatabdi Aavrutti*. (Edt. Punde D.D.) Pune: Rajahans Prakashan.
- Babar, S. (1964). *Potrajaachi Gani. Ek Hota Raja*. Mumbai: Maharashtra Rajya Loksahityamala.
- Bhosale, D.T. (2001). *Sanskrutichya Paulkhuna*. Pune: Padmagandha Prakashan.
- Chavan, R. (2003). *Bhatkya Vimuktanche Antarang*. Mumbai: Manovikas Prakashan.
- Chavan, R. (2006). *Mari Aaiwala. Bhatkya Vimuktanchi Jatpanchayat (Vol III)*. Pune: Deshmukh ani Company Publishers.
- Dhere, R. C. (1964). *Marathi Lokasanskritiche Upasak*. Pune: Dnyanraj Prakashan.
- Garge, S.M. (1989). *Bhatkya Vimukt Jamati. Bharatiya Samaj Vigyan Kosh, Vol-3, 392-395*. Pune: Samaj Vigyan Mandal.
- Kadam, N. (1995). *Maharashtratil Bhatka Samaj: Sanskruti Va Sahitya*. Pune: Pratima Prakashan.
- Mande, P. (1999). *Maang ani Tyanche Magte*. Aurangabad: Godavari Prakashan.

- Patil, P. (1990). Bhatke Bhaiband. Pune: Suresh Agency.
- Thurston, E. (1909). Peddammavandlu. Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Vol-6, 189. Madras: Government Press.
- Yadav, A. (2000). Gramsanskriti. Pune: Mehta Publishing.