CHAPTER VI

SUGALI RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Religion is a term generally used to describe man's relation to the supernatural powers and the various organised systems of belief and worship in which these relations have been studied by scholars from various disciplines. Philosophers have studied its meaning and have tried to relate it to human nature and the ultimate cause of everything. Psychologists have tried to find why man is religious. Anthropologists and biologists have been particularly interested in the study of religion, realizing the inter-relation between religion and society, and the Historians have studied its origin, growth and change.

Religion encompasses the wide variety of religious beliefs and practices that are found in society. It exists in one form or another in all known human cultures. In almost all cultures, religious
beliefs and practices play a major role in integrating the life ways. Every religion is a product of human evolution and has been conditioned by social environment. Religious organizations point out the way people order their relations on the basis of their world view.

It is somewhat difficult to speak about the nomadic religion of Sugalis and their customs and belief-systems due to lack of historical records and sufficient published evidence. However, certain observations about the Sugali tribe of those who made and had a contact with them, viz., British ethnographers, historians, are quite helpful in reconstructing the magico-religious systems of the Sugali tribe during their nomadic-mercantile days. Their present religious ideas and rituals are compared with those in the past in order to trace the process of constant adjustment to changing mode of life.

This chapter presents the process of adoption of Hindu religion and beliefs and customs as well as agricultural rituals by the newly peasanting but erstwhile animistic Sugali tribe. For this, an examination of their earlier as well as present religious life and beliefs become necessary.

RELIGION OF THE NOMADIC SUGALI

In the last few centuries, the traditional "World Views" of the Sugali tribe have been conditioned by the limitations of their physical environment, their technology and economy, their turbulent
history, their subjugation under colonial rule for nearly two centuries and the nature of social change introduced by the national and state governments and urban contacts.

During their nomadic days, the Sugalis were animists. Since they were strongly organised in patrilineal clans, they held strong belief in ancestral spirits of the male-line which were often worshipped. The relative isolation of the Sugali religion and belief-systems from those of the other Hindus is discernible from the writings of ethnographers and travellers of the period. Abbe Dubois says¹ that the nomadic Sugali had different customs and manners, a different religion and language from all the other caste Hindus. The attitude of the early Sugali was characterised by a strong fear of natural forces like lightning, torrential rain, tornado, and a deep anxiety about the approaching misfortune, disaster, disease and death. Their world was full of hostile forces such as famines, epidemics and malevolent spirits. Hence they developed tremendous faith in magic and ritual and resorted to them frequently.

**HUMAN SACRIFICE**: The Sugalis being nomadic in character, every time they shifted their settlement, they had not only to appease the deities of the settlement they were deserting but also to seek their blessings for their prosperity and well-being in the next settlement. This induced them to the practice of human sacrifice.² For the purposes they used to kidnap a child of other communities and buried it alive, up to its neck, in the pathway leading out of
the settlement. Having made all arrangements for leaving, the wheels of the first bullock-cart were run over the head of the child, crushing and scattering its blood. All other caravans followed close behind. It was forbidden that any of them looked back. They believed that in proportion to the thoroughness of their trampling the child to death, the chances of a successful journey would be ensured. While the sacrificial victim was still alive they made a sort of lamp of dough, made of flour, which they lit and placed on his head, men and women of the settlement joining hands, forming a circle danced round the victim, singing, dancing and making a great noise until he expired. They also had a strong belief in the cause of the desease by the spells of their magicians. They used to sacrifice a goat or a chicken in case of a shift of residence from one part of the jungle to another. They hoped to escape death by leaving one camping ground for another.

Another belief required them not to drink water which was not drawn from springs or wells. As water from rivers and tanks was forbidden, they were sometimes compelled to dig a hole by the side of a tank or river and made a tiny spring of the water that filtered through. The reason for this practice is not known but may be guessed to be the result of the Sugali fear of spirits residing in large water sources like a river or a tank.

Moore observed that he passed by a tree on which there were several hundreds of bells hanging. This was due to a
superstitious belief among Sugalis, who, while passing by that tree, left a hanging bell or bells upon it, taking off from the necks of their sick cattle, believing that they were leaving behind them to sickness of the cattle too. This practice may be considered an instance of contagious magic. It was believed that those who touched these bells could be exposed to the wrath of the deity to whom the offerings were made, the deity would inflict the same disease on the bullock of the bell-carrier.

During their nomadic days, and even some time after settling down, Sugali believed in witch-craft. The business of magic and witch-craft was in the hands of "Bhagats", who correspond to the European black and white magic practitioners. The Bhagat was a powerful everter of evil spirits. He was a total abstainer from meat and liquor and feasted once in a week on the day sacred to the deity.

The Sugalis traced the witch or the sorcerer and tied him up in the jungle and killed for any misfortune or trouble, like a child falling sick or a wife becoming inconstant. Quite in keeping with their nomadic ways of life, a substantial or a permanent dwelling was considered a taboo. They had also a custom of moving out after death, and nobody would enter the hut through the door through which the spirit was supposed to have entered the house and killed the deceased. A peacock screaming on one's right and a jackal howling on the left when one set out on a journey were
considered ill omens. These beliefs, customs and practices are instances of both contagious and sympathetic magic. There were attempts of the Sugali to overcome or to feel a sense of supremacy over the forces of nature. Such beliefs and magical activities underlying them could relieve the tensions caused by the anxieties and feelings of inadequacy, thereby making the Sugali once more be in harmony with the life to which he was destined.

The nomadic Sugalis look upon Guru Nanak as the propagandist of their religion, but have nothing in common with a Sikh and as they worship Hindu Gods. It is very doubtful whether the class now reccollects any of the tenets of the religion professed by the Sikhs. In fact they choose their Gurus from the Nandair shrine, who dress like a Sikh, conform to their customs and profess the Sikh religion.

All Sugalis worship Balaji, Morai (or) Mahakali, Toolja Devi, Seval Bhaya, Mithu Bhukia and Sattimata. They have lesser Gods also, and the Barthias (Vidtya) add Sevadass to the list. Seval Bhaya was the first and only holyman of their own class whose temple at 'Pohra' (Karnataka State) is visited by thousands of Sugali during the Dassera festival, whilst Mittu Bhukia was a notorious free-booter. The oath they least like to take is by Seval Bhaya, but the most binding would be found in adding superstitious awe thereto in the following manner, the man to be sworn, places his right hand on the bare head of his son and heir, in his left he grasps a cow's tail, and then, swearing him by Seval Bhaya there
is a chance he will not keep faith in anything.

Being animists, Sugalis did not have any organised or higher religion similar to that of the long-settled multi-caste Hindus of neighbourhood. Hence, magic occupied a predominant place in the early Sugali relationship with the supernatural powers. By their very nature, magical practices involved either personal or small local community issues, in contrast to religion which involved both personal and social integration of a higher order. The nomadic life and the forest habitation governed the conception of their supernatural world.

RELIGION AND BELIEF AFTER SEDENTARIZATION

The breakdown of the traditional occupation of Sugalis as transporters forced them to contact the advanced neighbouring agricultural communities. Beginning with this adoption, the Sugali religion and belief-systems were increasingly modelled after the agricultural Hindu caste groups.

Even today, Sugalis have a strong belief that they had originally descended from the stock of Rajputs, and adopted nomadic life after Chittoor was conquered by the Mohammadan rulers. They claim that their Chief Deity is Lord Krishna, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. They also call Him the divine-child and cowhered which is significant in view of their early tradition as a cattle-tending people. Cows and bullocks are revered by Sugalis because Lord Krishna himself had tended cattle, and cattle have been the means of livelihood for them.
The earlier beliefs such as ancestor worship, omens, spiritual world persisted but are modified in line with transitional pattern of life. Many of the earlier magical practices like human sacrifice, taboo on drinking stream water and witchcraft have disappeared from their belief system following changes in their occupations and discontinuance from their wandering life. At the same time, new ideas, beliefs and practices have been incorporated into the Sugali way of life due to a multitude of cultural contact with the neighbouring Hindus. For example, a person on re-admission into the tribe following expulsion or returning from a new place or jail has to arrange a non-vegetarian feast to the entire Sugalis of the settlement and the Naik of settlement will burn his tongue with a red-hot gold piece, called Bhuriya symbolising purification.

Like all other tribal communities of India, Sugalis also believe in transmigration of the soul and the existence of hell and heaven. They also believe in astrology and palmistry and consult a Brahmin priest for an auspicious day for performing ceremonies and beginning new ventures. Thus, the change from the earlier animism to sharing of the pantheon and ideology of the higher Hindu religion must have been a gradual process after settling down by sanskritizing their behaviour after the fashion of the reference group behaviour in the region of their settlement.

PRESENT ATTITUDE TOWARDS RELIGION AND BELIEF

With the sedentarization of the Sugalis of the Settlements,
under study either as pastoralists or agriculturists, different circumstances such as the degree of exposure to the outside world, occupational mobility, level of educational, and relative standard of living have created a situation which made pastoral as well as the peasant Sugalis to have both unity and diversity with regard to the various aspects of their religious organisation. On their march from tribalism to peasantry, they have acquired several additions to their traditional religion under the influence of different agencies of social change such as Hinduism, economic development, and diffusion. However, some of their earlier beliefs and practices such as ancestor-worship, worship of seval Bhaya, Mittu Bhukya and mother goddess, belief in spiritual world, dependences on religious Bhagats (Shamans) magico-religious practices, celebration of the Holi and Diwali festivals etc., continue to persist even today. But they have been modified in accordance with the changing mode of life.

ANCESTRAL-WORSHIP: Ancestor-worship forms an important feature of the Sugali religion. It is evident the ancestors are the most dreaded persons in the tribal pantheon. To appease them to gain their favour and good will, they do not fail to offer their due worship and sacrifices on different important occasions of their life and culture.

To the Sugali tribe the spirits of the dead do not simply sit in some Elysium but constantly watch with interest the doings of their descendants, render them advice, and even revisit their
people through some human or in other form.

It is believed that the dead ancestors are the real benefactors of the families or the group to which they belonged and that they are easily approachable by their living kinsmen. Hence, at all important occasions of their life, their dead ancestors are remembered by them, whether it is birth, marriage, death, offerings and sacrifices are made to them. They believe that their ancestors who were with them till yesterday may be able to help them. And for this, they remember their ancestors from birth to death. Hence an idea of ancestor-worship has grown fully in their minds. On all occasions, as birth, marriage, death a hosts of spirits along with the ancestors are worshipped. Regarding the choice of the person to conduct the ancestral worship in the family, the family head is considered the family's sacred specialist or high priest of the family and hence he is deemed competent to conduct the ancestral worship. In the absence of the head of the family a senior living member, for example, if father is treated as head of the family, the eldest son, is treated as the sacred priest of the family in the absence of his father, to conduct the ancestral worship. They perform this special activity of offering the memorial services to the dead on the day of the Diwali festival. On this festival day, the communication between the worshipper and their ancestors is generally established through elaborate prayers. The worshipper keeps the objects, menu for special offering such as sacred food which includes cooked rice with other sweet meats, betel leaves and nuts, and ghee is used on
this occasion. But the use of ghee in homa (Sacred fire) has got a good prominence in the ancestors' worship. At the close of the worship, all of them go out keeping the door of the house closed with the expectations that the ancestors visit the place and accept the offerings. But prior to this offering, the Sugalis of the settlements under study pay homage to their ancestors by keeping sweet rice made with jaggery in the sacred fire by pouring ghee and oodh on it. Here all the family members keep sweet rice in this fire and ghee is poured on it. For this occasion, they preserve ghee from the festival of Holi, for the utilisation in the ancestral offerings. It is said that this worship is an important event in the life of the Sugalis.

WORSHIP OF SEVALA BHAYA: Sugalis have a great reverence for their patron saints, who are treated as intermediaries between God and man and do everything to gain their favour. Every settlement has a shrine built for Sevala Bhaya. It is believed that the goddess Maramma fell in love with this pious saint, Sevala Bhaya and through her malignant power, he grew extremely rich and influential among his people. Further, in due course, he also became endowed with supernatural powers. As they were childless, the goddess wished that he marry a young girl in order to beget a child. As he refused to carry out her wish, she killed him. Because of his powers and his strong will, a shrine has been erected to propitiate him. The Sugalis believe that faith in him can work miracles and even liquidate the major hurdles in their lives.
Saint, Sevala Bhaya is represented by an iron sword and a silver coin at the settlements respectively. He is worshipped at the 'thanda' level when epidemics like cholera and small-pox break out in the native settlements or in the surrounding villages. Since he is supposed to have led a life of a Brahmachari the worship is performed by an unmarried person. Both men and women of the 'thanda' sing songs from dusk to dawn praising Sevala Bhaya.

WORSHIP OF MITTU BHUKYA: The other important patron saint of Sugalis is Mittu Bhukya. He is supposed to have been a very daring robber who even succeeded in looting the treasures of the Government. On the way back to his 'thanda', it is believed that he stumbled and fell down. Taking it to be an ill-omen, a premonition of approaching death, all the booty was distributed among his people so that they regard him as their patron saint. Sugalis have a strong belief that, after he was buried, he arose from his grave, and turned into image of stone. The shrine, an improvised hut, dedicated to him is distinguished by the white flag erected over it. He is worshipped whenever hunting expeditions and excursions are to begin, with the expectation that he ensures the success of expeditions.

SAKTI WORKSHIP: Sugalis have their own caste deities to whom they show respect and reverence. Sugalis belonging to the Chowhan clan worship three Sakthis called Humasakti, Kosa sakti and Mani Sakti. It is stated that in the past these three Sakthis were worshipped very frequently but at present they worship these three
Saktis very rarely. They worship Balaji the lord of seven hills, and also two Sakthis called Kosa Sakthi and Mani Sakti. Some three hundred years ago, there was a feud between the Rathod clan and Chowhan clan of the Sugalis, and in a combat many were killed on both the sides, but the widows of only two of the men who died were willing to perform Sati, in consequence of which the devoted widows are now worshipped as Saktis by all the divisions of Sugalis.

BELIEF IN SPIRITS: The Sugali tribe worship different spirits. This sacred belief in spirits has led them to animism. The Sugali life in the natural environment, the hills and forests, has cast an indelible impression in their minds the hosts of malevolent and benevolent spirits. They believe in the existence of the soul which is supposed to be present in all human beings. Soul is the principle of life which can exist in any form. Dissatisfied souls, especially of those people who die of drowning in water, falling from the top of the tree, and commit suicides in general become ghosts. They believe that a soul, after its departure from the body, wanders round the house of the departed for a few days and then goes to the world of ancestors. After the completion of the required obsequies, the soul goes either to heaven or hell, depending upon its sin or good deeds. The concept of sin, quality, merit, hell and heaven held by Sugalis are much similar to those of the surrounding Hindu castes.
They cherish a belief in several non-human spirits which are associated with particular geographical locations such as thick groves, places where unnatural deaths occurred, huge trees, abandoned places, ruined walls, and burial grounds. These non-human spirits are known by various forms and features of non-human spirits, Sugalis stated that they are very frightful, show themselves in the disguise of animals such as dog, cat, goat and buffalo, human and semi-human objects; they are believed to possess flat feet, eyes looking upward and straight, long hair, and long nails and are capable of assuming either monstrous and grotesque shapes. The Sugali believed that the spirits walk at midnights and harm if some one is seen on the way, though they walk on the ground, their backs cannot be identified. Some people like magicians and those who are possessed by spirits acquire the power of seeing such spirits. Some of the metals such as iron, copper, and anulets and talismans are spirit repellants. Fire acts as a safeguard against the evil spirits who try to throttle human beings during their sleep. Even dreadful dreams and diseases such as barrenness, excess of menstrual bleeding, intermittent fever, etc., are attributed to the evil spirits.

SETTLEMENT PRIEST (NAIK) : The Naik, who is head of the settlement and whose word is law in the Thanda is also considered as 'thanda' priest. He controls both the sacred and secular power of the settlement. He is incharge of all the major sacrifices and religious responsibilities of the 'thanda.' It is the primary duty
of the Naik to maintain healthy relationship between the Sugalis and the deities by making timely sacrifices on behalf of the fellow Sugali. He decides the dates for various sacrifices and festivals with the help of other elders of the Thanda. It is also the responsibility of the Naik to raise subscription for the purchase of sacrificial animals and to see that all the traditions and rituals regarding the sacrifices are properly observed by the Sugali of the settlement. He had no training for his office. The only requirement is familiarity and knowledge with the rites and rituals. He is entitled to a share of the sacrifices while offering sacrifices to the gods and goddesses.

THE RELIGIOUS SPECIALIST (BHAGAT): The Bhagat plays an important role in the day-to-day religious life of Sugalis. During their nomadic days these people were very much influenced by them in their traditional celebrations as the Bhagats claimed an elaborate communion with the traditional deities through divination. Each Bhagat acts as a mouthpiece of the deity who takes possession of him. Two types of Bhagats, good and bad can be distinguished in the community. They are the common Bhagat (Nimbu Katna) who helps only his own relatives in the settlement and the professional Bhagat, (Janatha) who helps any one who requires his service. The Sugalis of both the groups take the help of these Bhagats to overcome all serious crises. Though their acts are similar in the religious and spiritual matters of the Sugali settlements, there is a lot of difference between these two
categories. The common Bhagat never accepts any remuneration, he is service-minded, but the professional Bhagat demands his fee in cash or in kind depending upon the magnitude of the problem. The common and professional Bhagats of the Sugali tribe perform certain similar tasks for both men and supernatural beings, but they differ in their degree of specialisation. The common Bhagat is not merely a diviner, he also acts as a simple doctor and uses herbal remedies to help himself and his family members; but the professional Bhagat is a diviner, sooth-sayer, expert doctor and magician helping not only his kith and kin, but also any one else who approaches him.

With regard to the change in the attitude towards the efficacy of shamanistic practices. The Sugali younger generation of both the groups very rarely approach either professional or common Bhagat for curing their ailments. However, people belonging to the older generation have still strong belief in Shamanistic practices.

MAGIC AND MEDICINE: The tribal folk have their own medicine and methods for curing different ailments of the body and mind. Magical powers are often attributed to tribal physicians, some of whom are adepts in ayurvedic or the indigenous system of medicine. Though they are illiterate they acquire this knowledge of medicine through tradition. They are more acquainted with its practice than its theory. Almost all the older Sugali know the cures for ordinary ailments of children, like cough, cold, dysentery and eyesore,
Serious diseases like epilepsy too come under the purview of the locally available prescriptions. They also known the cures for snake-bits and scorpion sting.

Every settlement has one person who knows the cures for the different afflictions to which cattle are subject to. They use medicine as well as magic and find cures for all these purposes knowledge of herbal and magical being closely near secrets, is imparted towards the end of the physician's life to only one person, who is either his son or his disciple. Belief in supernatural forces plays an important role in the daily life of the Sugali. Series of persistent difficulties, uncommon diseases and frequent deaths have forced the Sugali towards magic. Most of the common ailments are treated mostly with herbal medicines. And events are interpreted in terms of supernatural interferences and are sought to be remedied by magic-religious practices.

Diseases such as persistent head-aches, intermittent fevers, continued stomach disorders, repeated abortions, menstrual troubles, evil-eyes, small-pox, children's green-diarrhoea, etc., are attributed to supernatural forces. In all such cases, medicinal cures as well as acts of propitiation of the 'unseen powers' are simultaneously attempted. Similarly, failure of crops, total blindness, repeated failures in undertakings, deaths of children or cattle in quick succession, and too many deaths in the family within a short period are attributed to misfortune and the hand-work of evil or malevolent supernatural forces. The Sugalis strongly believe
tha divination can cure ailments which are not curable by medicines. The settlement priests divinete the cause of mysterious diseases and suggest the magical remedies. They classify the diseases attributed to supernatural causes into those caused by some occult powers, those ascribed to the attack of evil-spirits and those due to the wrath of the deities.

With the passage of time, Sugalis have changed their beliefs and practices related to magic and medicine. Now-a-days they do not resort to magic as often as they used to. This may be due to better exposure to the outside world and frequent use of modern medicine. Sugalis at present do not consider divination as a universal remedy to their ailments. Now, they think that modern medicine is far more effective than the traditional one. The limited number of patients who utilize the services of the Bhagat indicates the waning influence of magicoreligious practices.

IMPACT OF HINDU FAITH ON SUGALI RELIGION

The gods, goddesses worshipped by the tribal folk are countless. They vary with locality, family, customs and times. Each festival is associated with some deity or the other. Every settlement has a guardian god or goddess. The marvels worked by the gods and the remembrance of these, strengthen the faith of the people. The cult of magic is also associated with these supernatural beings. Belief in these gods gives rise to certain taboos. The worship of these, however, is always a must for every householder.
The nomadic Sugalis, after break down of their traditional occupation of trading have been living in close contact with the Hindu-neighbours. They are subjected to Hindu influence through different sources such as their affinity with Hindu mythology, the influence of Hindu shrines and the consultation of the Brahmin priests in their important functions. All these influenced to bring about a change in the religious life and culture of Sugalis. Almost all the little traditional deities of Sugali have been borrowed from the neighbouring agriculture communities.

Every Sugali settlement had its local goddesses; often a rude image or fetish set up under a sacred tree. These goddesses more often were vaguely identified with Durga, but were rarely, thoroughly incorporated into the mythological scene, and they maintained an autonomous existence on the fringes of the orthodox pantheon. A brief account of the process of propitiation of these borrowed goddesses of Sugalis is given below.

**MARIAMMA:** Among the all 'Little Traditional' Deities Goddess Mariamma is regarded as the most powerful deity in the region. Goddess Mariamma is the chief Goddess of the Sugali settlement. Every settlement has a small temple in which an idol of Mariamma is located. Goddess Mariamma is considered all-powerful and malevolent and is supposed to have powers over epidemics like cholera and small-pox. Sugalis worship her with fear as well as devotion. It is commonly believed that there will be adverse reaction when people commit mistakes. In order to appease the
goddess, Sugalis offer bali or sacrifice of animal to the goddess. She is also worshipped with fruits, flowers, coconuts and sacredly prepared food on ordinary days. On festive and other important occasion, blood is offered by sacrificing birds and animals like hen-cocks, he-goats, he-sheeps (rams) and he-buffaloes. After sacrifice the blood of the sacrificed animal is sprinkled all over the temple boundaries and the head of the sacrificed kept near the altar, later the flesh is cooked and distributed as 'prasadam' (holy food) to all.

The Sugali elders stated that Goddess Mariamma has come to this region from the village Kadambari. It is said that one Bhiladada of the region visited Kadambari where he married a woman by name Manglidadi. When the newly married couple were returning to their native settlement from Kadambari. It is said that Manglidadi was influenced by some supernatural power believed to be of Mariamma, and when the couple reached the settlement, again Mariamma entered Bhiladada. The couple, influenced by Goddess Mariamma, started to perform strange and miraculous things. It is said that when Manglidadi whistled, cows from different places came and gathered round her. Similarly Bhiladada used to foretell things that would happen. Since then all the Sugalis consider Mariamma their chief goddess and Bhiladada as their Pujari.

In addition to Goddess Mariamma there are other 'Little Traditional' deities. Goddess Thulaja Bhavani is represented by a silver image. She is a vegetarian-deity worshipped by the
Sugalis. During tonsure ceremonies of children the hair is offered to the goddess. Bhavani is a very important goddess whom Sugali alone worship. It is stated that their dances are performed only to please Goddess Bhavani. They believe that if they stop their traditional dancing, the deity may be angry and they may be afflicted by natural calamities and epidemics. They appeal to the Goddess in times of difficulties and dangers. On the worship, they smear the stone with lime and put vermillion marks on it.

Goddess Mathralamma is represented either by silver or wooden or seven stones. She is a household deity of the Sugalis belonging to the Bhukya (Rathod) clans, Bhilavath, and Thanavath. They also offer the hair of their children by arranging a tonsure-ceremony in the name of the Goddess. Goddess Mallelamma is a very important deity to the peasant-Sugali. She is associated with different phases of agriculture, and is represented by stones either at the corner of an agricultural field or under a tree. Goddess Chetalamma is represented by an image made out of clay as and when the situation arises. She is propitiated when an individual suffers from any common ailment such as cold, head-ache, stomach-ache and indigestion. A male deity Lingala Swamy is also worshipped by the Sugalis under study. He has his seat on a hilltop and is represented by sixty stones. It has been a belief that this deity is worshipped in order to invoke the rain-god, Varuna, for sufficient rain, for the thriving of the cattle and for the protection of the cattle from wild animals. The Sugalis take all their cattle to this God.
Apart from borrowing a few 'Little Traditional' deities from the neighbouring agricultural communities, the Sugalis of both the 'thandas' have borrowed a few Great Traditional deities of Hinduism. At different festivals, along with their tribal pantheon, they also utter the name of Lord Balaji (Lord of Seven Hills), Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Siva, Goddess Saraswathy, Lakshmi, and other deities of Hindu pantheon, especially those of the agricultural castes in the Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh.

Thus, the Gods and Goddesses that Sugalis worship are conceptualized in different ways. Each deity controls a particular human activity such as health, cattle tending, farming, prosperity and so on. They believe that each deity controls all the activities of individuals.

Every Sugali settlement has got a religious flag, either red or white in colour and triangular in shape. This flag sometimes is fixed in the centre of the 'thanda' or at the outskirts of the thanda tucked in a tree. It is believed and this religious flag was created by Mola, the progenitor of the tribe.

RITES OF PASSAGE

Sugalis observe rites and observances like caste Hindus concerning the major crises of life with a view to leading the appropriate way of life so that they can enjoy property and well-being of the family as well as have a desirable future for the individual after death. They believe that the stoppage of
menstruation of a married woman is an indication of pregnancy. With regard to daily routine, they do not make such difference between a pregnant and an ordinary woman. When a woman starts experiencing labour pains, she is immediately confined to the front portion or one of the corners of the house. The traditional midwife attends on the woman in labour. Immediately after delivery, the midwife separates the umbilical cord of the baby with a knife. The umbilical cord along with the placenta is buried somewhere outside the thanda. From the time of her delivery, the woman is regarded as under pollution for five days, and she is confined to the place where the delivery took place. During the pollution period, she is not allowed to touch anything in the house. Her food is brought near the mat or cot. The woman is also given a special food-stuff containing pepper, ginger and jaggery boiled in ghee for about three times on every alternate day. Immediately after the pollution period, the mother is given a purificatory bath followed by the distribution of a special vegetarian food to the relatives and fellow tribal people.

Sugalis do not conduct any naming ceremony for the newborn. Children are given traditional names as also the names of the respective family deities, such as Sevya, Rekya, Tuljha, Mangye on the male line and from female line Durgi, Rupli Bai, Hansli Bai, Jhatki Bai, Mangli Bai, etc. But now-a-days, most of the Sugalis have started consulting Brahmin priests in selecting a name for the new-born by noting down the time and date of birth of the child.
So there is a growing tendency to give their children Hindu names such as Venkateswar Naik, Shankar Naik, Rama Naik, Saraswathi Bai, Lakshmi Bai, Syamala Bai etc., without deleting the words Naik and Bai at the end of their names respectively. In addition, it is noted, through an analytical study of names, that there is a lot of change in the thinking process of the people. This change of names of the Sugalis can be classified under three categories: Great Tradition, Little Tradition and Secular. The influence of Little Tradition, which refers to Little Traditional deities or places associated with it, remains more or less the same in the older generation. And the influence of secular or modern names has been increasing for the past one and half decades in both the sexes due to an increasing culture-contact with the neighbouring villages and urban centres.

The tonsure ceremony is performed for both boys and girls usually on a Friday. This ceremony is performed when the child is one year or three years old. The majority of the Sugalis of both the thandas perform this ceremony in their own houses and some time the entire 'thanda' celebrates on a particular day decided by the thanda priest. The whole thanda participate in this tonsure ceremony, every family spends a lot of money on it, of late there is a change among the people and a few go to some pilgrim centres like Tirupathi and Maddileti swamy of Ramapuram for this purpose. In this ceremony, the presence and participation of maternal uncle is inevitable. The maternal uncle of the child first removes a turt of hair from the child's head and then the
barber completes the shaving, and the barber is given some amount as 'Dakshina' (fee) and rice and betel-leaves and nuts.

Generally, the Sugali girls attain their 'menarchi' at the age of 12 or 13. The Sugalis of either 'thanda' formerly did not conduct a separate ceremony to celebrate the menarchi of a girl. Now they perform this ceremony because of the close contacts with the Hindu village communities.

The marriage ceremony of the Sugalis of both the 'thandas' is a very lengthy affair and is very interesting. Minimum days for the marriage function are eight and it may prolong upto a maximum of three months. But it is said that the length of marriage ceremony depends on the financial soundness of the bride's house. The custom of prolonging various functions attached to marriage is slowly dying out in order to minimize the expenditure. Now, they complete the marriage ceremony between three and six days and some of the educated Sugalis complete the marriage within a day like all other Hindus. The marriage ceremony is followed by many elaborate rituals and women sing songs suitable for the occasion. Some elderly women organise all the ceremonies connected with the marriage. They also teach many things to the bride. Among this the system of 'Dhavalo' is very important. The girl learns it and repeats the same in the presence of the thanda people when she leaves the parental house.

DEATH AND BURIAL : With regard to the death ceremonies, both cremation and burial are allowed among both the groups of the
Sugalis. Unmarried persons who die of small-pox cholera etc., and persons who die committing suicide are buried and the married persons who die are cremated. On the death of a member of the community, his relatives and the neighbours in the settlement assemble at the residence of the deceased and console the members of the bereaved family. The corpse is brought out of the house and is given a bath. Jaggery mixed with ghee is put into the mouth of the corpse which is later placed on the bier. Women are not allowed to come near the bier, which is taken to the burial ground by close kith and kin of the deceased. While the corpse is being cremated or buried all those people who have attended the burial consume liquor in order to forget the agony. While returning, they take bath in a nearby tank, canal or well. With this, all those who have attended the burial, except the members of the family of the deceased, remain free from population.

They also perform obsequies for the deceased like Hindus. On the third day in the case of cremation, two people go and check whether the corpse is completely cremated or not; milk is poured over the ashes. The members of the deceased family prepare a special food item with flour, jaggery, and ghee which is distributed among the close relatives and the family members of the deceased. A portion of it is also kept at the place of cremation or burial. In the evening of the same day, a non-vegetarian feast is arranged for all the families of the settlement, the expenditure of which is equally shared by all the families.
Then the head of the bereaved family is given liquor and a non-vegetarian food item with a view to warding off the pollution of his family members. Afterwards, no periodical ceremonies are performed to propitiate the departed soul. However, of late, the Sugalis of both the thandas, in order to perpetuate the memory of the departed, have started constructing tombs for departed. The changed cultural phenomenon can be attributed to the process of acculturation.

FESTIVALS: The Sugalis after mixing up with the agricultural communities started celebrating some Hindu festivals such as Sankranthi, Sivarathri, Krishnastamy, Holi, Dewali, Dasara, Ugadi and Nagalachavithi, which reflects the Hindu impact in ample measure.

Despite the adoption of many festivals of Hindus, Sugali men and women take interest in preserving and continuing their traditional religious beliefs and practices. However, now-a-days, the older generation often complain about the lessening religiosity of the young. The expansion of the frontiers of understanding of the younger generation about man, society and nature is dispelling the mystery that surrounded these phenomena in the past and is leading to the shrinking of the supernatural world and the lessening of emotional involvement in the associated magico-religious practices. However, in either of the 'thandas' worship of familiar deities, traditional gods, ancestral spirits, and Great Traditional as well as Little Traditional deities, celebration of different festivals,
participation in the Jatras, visit to the pilgrim centres and dependance on the service of various religious practitioners could be noticed.

From the days of closely directed economic political and religious life in the pre-British period, it is a great change for the nomadic Sugalis to settle down and adopt agriculture and wage labour, which in turn have necessitated contact with Hindu communities and consequent alterations in their religion. As a result, the number of community level celebrations such as Holi is decreasing because of the lessening willingness and spirit of co-operation among the Sugalis today. Thus, there seems to be a relationship between the degree of social integration and the degree in the life of the Sugali, providing ties between the living and the dead, and affines kinsmen together by family rituals, necessitating pilgrimages which provide travel, adventure and new experience and inter-settlement attachments.

It is observed that when the Sugali economy and its associated social practices and values changed, the supporting religions and value systems also underwent some modifications. A close observation of different ceremonies of the Sugalis of Narasampalli and Pedapalli settlements indicates that they have still preserved some of the past ceremonies and beliefs. In this sense, while the Sugali peasantization and the consequent increased impact of Hinduism has been a contributing factor resulting in the transformation of their earlier animistic religion, it is also true that
by allowing the merger of certain rites of the Hindu festival calendar, these very some animistic rites are being perpetuated when a Sugali is faced with the need to decide one way or the other in personal observances, he picks up the traditional and modified version depending upon his degree of acculturation, occupation, economic status, education and the social milieu in which he lives. The borrowing of myth, rituals and ceremonies by an erstwhile animistic groups seems to have been more rapid only in the last fifty years and is itself an indication of gradual breakdown of the reign of Hindu caste hierarchy as a result of overall changes in the expanding economic system of the country. The emulation of high caste behaviour as a mechanism of sanskratization was far more difficult in the past when the norms of caste-hierarchy were more rigid.

In the historical perspective, Sugalis have moved through a full circle. Said to be descendents of the Rajput, a Hindu high caste, which comes second in the caste-hierarchy, they deserted their home, after the fall of Chittoor, to become suppliers to imperial armies in the South and followed animism. After the breakdown to their traditional occupation they have again acquired a caste status. After all, the transformation of Sugalis is towards peasantry. Culturally the peasantry belong to the local traditions or 'Little Traditions' but interact with the Great Traditions.

The Sugali tribe has become a part of the institutional structure of the wider society by participating in the national
culture and incorporating some aspects of the religious traditions of regional Hinduism which include observance of Hindu festivals, worshipping of Gods of Hindu pantheon, greater interaction with civilizational centres such as Tirupati, Sri Sailam, Yaganti etc., some conception about rebirth, heaven, hell, sin and virtue, access to ritual services from such castes of critical importance as the Brahmin and Barber etc., considerable overt concern about the chastity of the female folk, etc. Thus, it is obvious that the transformation of Sugalis is towards peasantization. In spite of the religious admixture of the Sugali with Hindus, they continue to worship their own pantheon of nature gods and goddesses and continue to reveal in their ancient customs and manners.

REFERENCES:


3. Quoted Thurston: Ethnographic notes on Southern India, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, p. 507.


8. Grierson, Ibid.

10. Ibid.


12. Thurston, Ibid., pp. 334-341.