

Legacy of Panchagrama Brahmins

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the cultural legacy of the Panchagrama Brahmins, a distinct subgroup within the broader Brahmin community. Historically, this Brahmin sect was concentrated in five villages within Karnataka's Udupi district. Over time, due to various factors, they migrated to other regions, where they established new settlements while diligently preserving their ancestral heritage and traditions. The Panchagrama Brahmins are an integral part of the Pancha Dravida Brahmins in Karnataka. Although they primarily speak Kannada. The Panchagrama Brahmins are strongly associated with the Thirthamuttur Shri Matha, situated in Thirthamuttur, Thirthahalli taluk of Shimoga district. The whole community is Rigvedi and follows the Ashwalayana sutra. They belong to five gotras only. Their family deity is the God Shankaranarayanaswami of Shankaranarayana.

Keywords: Panchagrama, Shankaranarayana, Thirthamuttur, Kundagannada, Panchagramadavaru

INTRODUCTION

The Panchagram Brahmins are a distinct Brahmin community adhering to the Smarta Sampradaya tradition. Geographically, they are concentrated in Karnataka, primarily residing near the five villages of Shankaranarayana, which are now in the Kundapur taluk of Udupi district, then some families migrated from five villages for various reasons and settled in Shivamogga, Chikmagalur districts, as well as Bengaluru and other urban centres. This community has maintained its unique cultural identity and traditions, contributing significantly to Karnataka's rich social fabric. Their history, customs, and practices are an integral part of Karnataka's cultural heritage, reflecting the state's diverse and vibrant Brahminical traditions.

Etymology

"Panchagrama Brahmins" originates from Sanskrit, literally translating to "Brahmins from five villages." This etymology reflects the community's historical roots in a network of five villages, underscoring their distinct

geographical and cultural identity.

According to the oral history, The Barakur Kings invited the priests of five Brahmin families from Kerala to perform the pooja to God Shankaranarayana and the kings donated five villages near the temple as 'Umbali' or 'Datti' for their livelihood. When these families started performing pooja to God Shankaranarayana, they adopted God as their Kuladevatha (family deity). Now the God Shankaranarayana is their family deity.

The Panchagrama Brahmins are an integral part of the Pancha Dravida Brahmins in Karnataka. Although they primarily speak Kannada.

"The Tulu-speaking Brahmins are, in their manners and customs, closely allied to the Carnatakas. Their subdivisions are :

1. Shivalli.
2. Kota.
3. Kandavara.
4. Havlk or Haiga
5. Panchagrami.
6. Koteswar¹"

This classification is due to the historical dominance of Tulu in the erstwhile South Canara district, which comprised the present-day Udupi district. The community's linguistic and cultural ties to Tulu are a result

of this geographical connection. The significant of Panchagrama Brahmins reside in the Udupi district, with the majority population found in other parts of Karnataka. Their unique cultural identity reflects the state's rich linguistic and cultural diversity.

According to the 'Arthashastra' of Kautilya, Panchagrama was a very small administrative unit and the 'Panchagrami' was an administrative official, who was the head of that Panchagrama. Here, Panchagrama is not an administrative unit and it is not Panchagrami. Field studies do not say that they are panchagrami, but they say 'Panchagramadavaru'. The term "Panchagrama" is derived from the Sanskrit words "Pancha" meaning "five" and "Grama" meaning "village". Therefore, Panchagramadavaru translates to "people from five villages".

The Five Villages

According to the legend, the donated five villages of Udupi district near the Shankaranarayana are Ulluru, Kupparu, Yellare/ Yelare, Karebailu and Rattadi which were primarily inhabited by Panchagrama Brahmins. "Thiratomutturu Charitrika Dakhalegalu"² and scholarly studies confirm this significant endowment, highlighting the enduring bond between the Panchagrama community and their revered deity, Shankaranarayana. This patronage facilitated the community's spiritual growth and cultural heritage. The aforementioned villages are now located near the temple, except for Yellare/Yelare. Some community members claim that Yellare/Yelare is currently referred to as 'Thalare', or 'Yellujeddu' situated near the temple. However, no place by the name Yellare exists near the temple. According to the "Kaifiyat"³, Yelare was a Magani adjacent to the temple, suggesting that one of the villages within that Magani might have been granted to them as Umbali or Datti.

Language and Communication

The Panchagrama Brahmins predominantly speak Kannada as their native language. The community exhibits regional variations in dialect, with the standard Kannada dialect being spoken by those residing in Shivamogga and Chikmagalur. In contrast, the Kundapura taluk of Udupi district is characterized by the use of Kundagannada, a distinct dialect of Kannada. More than 99% of the community does not speak Tulu, which is not their native language. They should speak Malayalam according to their origin, even, if they do not

speak Malayalam. But it is very interesting that the 'Tulu' and 'Nagari' scripts are mentioned in a "catalogue of the University of Toronto Library"⁴.

In the past, we saw people moving to Kerala for education. These Brahmins likely travelled to Kerala for educational purposes and returned after a prolonged period. Over time, they may have forgotten their roots here and instead recalled their experiences in Kerala, ultimately adopting it as their ancestral homeland. Furthermore, Sanskrit holds significant importance in the community, as it is employed for religious rituals and ceremonies. The linguistic diversity within the Panchagrama Brahmin community reflects the rich cultural heritage of Karnataka, underscoring the state's reputation as a hub of linguistic and cultural diversity.

Kroda Shankaranarayana Temple

The Shankaranarayana Temple, situated in Shankaranarayana village, Kundapur taluk, Udupi district, holds great significance for the Panchagrama Brahmin community. The temple's deity, a unique confluence of Shankara (Shiva) and Narayana (Vishnu), is revered as the family deity by the Panchagrama Brahmins. The temple's main deity is the Udbhava Linga, a naturally formed lingam of Lord Shankara and Lord Narayana, which is situated a foot below ground level within the Garbhagudi.

Shankaranarayana is considered one of the seven sacred Punya Kshetras of Parshurama Kshetra, along with Gokarna, Kollur, Koteswara, Kumbasi, Udupi, and Kukke Subramanya, collectively forming the revered Parashurama land, also known as Tulunadu. According to legend, the Shankaranarayana temple was founded by Maharishi Parashurama.

The first inscription dated "A.D. 1357"⁵ mentions God Shankaranarayana as 'Kodangiya Shankaranarayana' and another inscription dated "A.D. 1562"⁶ mentions as 'Tulunadina Punyakshetra' (sacred place of Tulunadu). According to scholarly research, the Shankaranarayana cult is believed to have emerged in Tulunadu around the 11th century. Some more inscriptions mentioned this place as 'Kodagi' or 'Kodangi.' It seems that it was the original name of this town, and it started to be called Shankaranarayana after the Shankaranarayana temple gained great prominence. There is another name for Shankaranarayana is Golikatte. According to the myth this place is called Kroda Shankaranarayana. Notably, there are five

Shankaranarayana temples within a 15-kilometer radius. There is a myth for establishing these temples of Shankaranarayana.

- Kroda Shankaranarayana (generally called as Shankaranarayana)
- Mandavi Shankaranarayana
- Belve Shankaranarayana
- Hole Shankaranarayana
- Avarse Shankaranarayana

The Shankaranarayana temple hosts a grand annual fair on January 16, drawing large crowds from neighbouring villages. Some Panchagrama families are involved in the fair and do seva. Every Panchagrama family adheres to their family deity Shankaranarayana, and they visit once a year and some families give a small portion of the areca nut or what they grow or do seva. It is possible to say that the land may have been acquired as an Umbali or Datti. It is noticed that they are not the priests at these temples now.

Village deity of the Panchagrama Brahmins

Their Grama Devatha (village deity) is Sri Brahmi Durgaparameshwari, located in Kamalashile, Byndoor taluk of Udupi district. The majority of this community reveres and offers seva (service) to Sri Brahmi Durgaparameshwari. For generations, the Panchagrama Brahmins have been the traditional custodians and managers of the Sri Brahmi Durgaparameshwari temple, overseeing its daily operations, rituals, and maintenance.

“Interestingly, a majority population of the Panchagrama Brahmin community residing in Shivamogga and Chikmagalur districts also worship Lord Venkateshwara of Tirumala as their family deity”⁷. This highlights the community’s diverse spiritual affiliations and traditions. But the Shankaranarayana Temple remains a sacred site for them, symbolizing their deep-rooted cultural and spiritual heritage. This community is the head of the temples of more than 30 in their area of habitation.

Thirthamuttur Mutt

The Panchagrama Brahmins are strongly associated with the Thirthamuttur Shri Matha, situated in Thirthamuttur, Thirthahalli taluk of Shivamogga district. This revered Matha was established during the Vijayanagar Empire’s reign by Sri Sringeri Mutt. Nestled on the banks of the Tunga River, the Matha is

accompanied by an ancient Yoga Narasimha Swamy temple, which holds significant cultural and spiritual importance. This Mutt was under the direction of Sringeri Mutt like other Smarta Mutts of Karnataka in the period of Vijayanagar and Keladi administrations, but now the Mutt always consults Sringeri Mutt only for religious matters.

‘Kela Mutt’, which is by the side of the Shankaranarayana temple, was the second Mutt for this community established by Sringeri, the reason it was shifted to ‘Hangarabailu’, Thirthahalli taluk, Shivamogga district. Then the Thirthamuttur Mutt was established before “A.D. 1385”⁸.

This revered mutt boasts a rich legacy spanning 16 illustrious Gurus, whose collective wisdom, spiritual guidance, and selfless devotion have shaped the institution’s history and traditions. Sri Gyanendra Tirtha Bharathi was the last Guru of the Mutt (1985). Thirthamuttur Matha’s rich history is marked by generous patronage from illustrious dynasties. The institution received significant “land grants through donations from the illustrious Vijayanagar kings and the Keladi rulers”⁹. These benevolent endowments not only underscore Matha’s esteemed reputation but also facilitated its growth and sustenance over the centuries. The legacy of these royal patrons continues to inspire reverence and gratitude, reflecting the Matha’s profound impact on the region’s cultural and spiritual heritage.

Now-a-days, Thirthamuttur Mutt is called Thirthamukthapur Mutt. Shri Matha serves as a vital centre for the Panchagrama Brahmin community, fostering spiritual growth, education, and cultural heritage. The Matha’s historical significance, coupled with its picturesque location, makes it a revered destination for the community. The association with this Matha underscores the Panchagrama Brahmins’ deep-rooted connection to their cultural and spiritual traditions. Thirthamuttur Mutt has a rich legacy of attracting scholars from distant lands, who would travel great distances to immerse themselves in Vedic studies, seeking wisdom and spiritual growth within this revered institution’s hallowed walls. The latest example of this is, “My Vedic studies took place in this mutt. My previous guru, Gyanendra Tirtha Bharati, had blessed me”¹⁰ remarked Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Gururji, founder of the Art of Living, during his visit to the Thirthamuttur Mutt on September 10, 2018.

Gotras, Surnames and Population

They are Rigvedi, follow the Ashwalayana sutra and belong to Angirasa, Bharadwaja, Kashyapa, Vishwamitra and Vasishta Gotras.

Surnames:

Bhat, Chatra, Keriya, Kodgi, Hebbar, Hegde/Heggade, Yadiyal, Vaidya, Mahapaleya, Kannantha, Rao.

It is interesting to note that most people living below the Ghat section have retained their traditional surnames, with only a few adopting “Rao” in place of their original surnames. In contrast, those residing above the Ghat section have largely appended ‘Rao’ or ‘initials’ instead of their surnames, even if their ancestors had the surname ‘Hebbar.’ We witness significant cultural and social transformations.

The Panchagrama Brahmin community has a population of around seven to eight thousand with significant concentrations in Kundapur and Byndoor taluks of Udupi district, Thirthahalli and Hosanagara taluks of Shivamogga district Narasimharajapura and Koppa taluk of Chikmagalur district.

Historically, intermarriage between other Brahmin communities and this community was uncommon, as they were perceived as outsiders. However, in recent times, other Brahmin groups have increasingly begun to intermarry with this community.

Geographically, the community can be divided into two groups: those living below the Ghat section, who follow the Souramana Sampradaya (tradition), and those living above the Ghat section, who are split between Souramana and Chandramana traditions. The majority of the community follows the Chandramana tradition.

The customs and traditions of the Panchagrama Brahmins are similar to those of other Shivalli Smarta Brahmins, including the prohibition on marriages between individuals sharing the same gotra and sutra.

Conclusion

Historically, the Panchagrama Brahmin community originated from five specific villages, which were likely their ancestral settlements. Over time, the community expanded and spread to other regions, but their name and identity remained tied to their origins in these five villages. Thirty percent of the community remains in their ancestral settlements and surrounding areas. Notably, the taluk housing the Thirthamuttur Mutt now boasts a larger population than the taluk where the original settlements

were established, indicating a significant shift in demographic dynamics over time. As populations grow, migration to new areas in search of livelihood opportunities becomes increasingly common. It appears that some families migrated for land leases or Geni. After the establishment of the Math at Thirthamuthur, there seems to have been a significant and rapid migration from the original area. Historical records from Thirthamuthur reveal that the community migrated from outside the region. The villages were donated by a king of Barakur, but the specifics of this transaction require further investigation.

Each gotra appears to have been assigned the stewardship of one Shankaranarayan temple and one corresponding village. The Panchagrama Brahmin community’s rich traditions and cultures were nurtured.

The Guru’s legacy was significantly enriched by land grants and other generous gifts bestowed upon the Mutt by monarchs, fostering a profound spiritual heritage that continues to thrive. Literary works confirm that the Thirthamuttur Mutt has a lineage of 16 Guru Parampara. Furthermore, the presence of 13 “Vrindavan” within the Mutt premises substantiates its historical significance and spiritual heritage. Uncovering the details of this event will provide valuable insights into the community’s history and the kingdom’s administrative practices during that era. Clarifying this aspect of their past will enrich our understanding of the community’s heritage.

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