Beyond Parshurama's Mother: Place of Renuka in Coastal Maharashtra

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Abstract: The familiar Puranic deity, Renuka occupies an important place in the modern religious sphere as one of the popular deities and epitome of righteousness. Various forms of the deity are described in the religious texts and Mahatmya. The paper attempts a step further in delineating numerous forms of the deity which are on the brink of non-literary tradition, but are very much a part of the religious sphere. The case of Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra is discussed based on the prevalent belief system, often attested by some references from medieval literary tradition. The diverse forms of the deity, ritual and body practices are accounted, to create a complete picture of the Renuka of the Puranas with some local traditions. The paper throws light on the other aspects of Renuka besides being the mother of Parsurama and 'Jagadmab', the mother of the world.

Keywords: Renuka, Sateri, Jagadamba, Cultural Anthropology, Shaktism, Ratnagiri, Maharashtra

Introduction
The religious sphere in general follows a hierarchical structure (see, Chawla 2002, Whitehead 1921) in which the village protector deities occupy the highest position at least in the village setting. These deities of the villages or gramadevata are generally the embodiments of the earth deities. A celebrated deity, Renuka is seen to have her various forms as gramadevata specifically in Maharashtra. The famous centres of worship of Renuka are at Mahur and Karle wherein she is said to be a mountain dweller and embodiment of earth herself (Mahur Mahatmya VII.5). The lore talks of a fallen part of Sati's body while being carried by Shiva (Devi Bhagwat II.5.2) worshipped as Renuka at Mahurgad. Ekvira (a form of Renuka) at Karle, however, is a Yakshi, centered on Buddhist worship (Kapoor 2002). In addition, Renuka is worshipped at Gadag, Chandragutti and Badami in Karnataka, Tiruvannamalai and Tiruchampalli in Tamil Nadu and Nalagonda in Telengana. In case of the coastal district of Ratnagiri in Maharashtra, the cultic practices of Renuka and her forms adds to the existing corpus of belief-system and body practices associated with the deity.
Renuka of the Puranas

Puranas mention Renuka as the daughter of king Renuka himself, born from a ritual sacrifice which was performed for health and peace. She was married to Jamadagni and was a pious wife. The purity of her mind and body was testified by her ability to make water pots from fine sand to draw water from the river. The story further talks of an incident of a Gandharva king engaged in jalakrida (water sports) with his nymphs; seeing which the thought of worldly-life crossed Renuka’s mind, resulting in cracking of the water pot of fine sand, in her hand (or on her head, as in some versions). Her husband, Jamadagni ordered his sons to slay her owing to the turbid thoughts in her mind for a worldly life of pleasures (Joshi 1986). The story of Renuka reaches its epitome with her contracting leukoderma as a result of Jamadagni’s curse (Artal 1907), before being ordered to be killed by him. The later resurrection of Renuka by Jamadagni himself on request of their son Parshurama takes the story to the origin of the two divinities. The slain head of Renuka, according to the story, is mistakenly placed on the body of a female servant from lower social strata; whilst her head is placed back on Renuka’s body during the resurrection. This woman is considered to be another deity Matangi of the Mang people (Dhere 1978). According to the story, Renuka continued to lead a happy life until Jamadagni was slain by King Sahastrarjuna following the Kamadhenu episode (Vishnupurana, c.f. Joshi 1968). According to the story, she is said to have immolated herself after the death of Jamadagni (Sahyadrikand: 261), while one version supports her leading a life of widowhood. The Puranic mention of Renuka probably follows the theology of a molecule (renu) as a result of the combination of atoms (kana); thus forming the epithet of all encompassing goddess as Renuka (Artal 1907). Renuka is considered to be the earth goddess herself, and Jamadagni is considered to be a corruption of Jimutagni, where Jimuta means cloud and Agni in the context becomes lightening (Artal 1907); thus representing the ancient pair of Prithvi and Dyaus. The epithet ‘Dyamavva’ (see, Artal 1907) as the partner of Dyaus and ‘Yellamma’ comes in connection with Renuka in Karnataka.

Renuka is highly regarded in the deity pantheon in Konkan, lying on the west coast of India (Fig.1). The land was reclaimed from the modern day Arabian Sea and Parshurama provided place of residence to numerous families which were migrants or outcastes (Bapat 2003). And Renuka features as ‘the Mother of the creator of Konkan’, being the Puranic mother of Parshurama. This reverence is met with through the diverse forms of Renuka in Ratnagiri, in Maharashtra. A female divinity is often considered as some form of Renuka or Renuka herself in this area. The numerous forms- both iconographic and anionic- are based on various stages from the Puranic story of Renuka. And most of the gramadevata themselves are forms of Renuka, based on her ‘earth-goddess’ theology or owing to her supreme nature amongst the female deities in the area.

Earth-goddess

Renuka is considered as the earth goddess as discussed; and the representation is often
in the form of a termite-hill, as at Ratnagiri. These termite hills in Konkan and Gomantak are considered to be the establishments of Parshurama himself (Dhere 1978:69). At Nagareshwar temple and in Dapoli area, the deity is worshipped as Sateri, in the form of a termite-hill (Figs. 2 and 3). The termite-hill is considered to be a symbol for earth’s vulva. Sateri here is worshipped for child protection and for fertility. A sandal-wood and a sahan (platform for making the sandalwood paste) are placed by the deity, and the deity is said to be worshipped to cure skin rashes and insect bites. Renuka at Asud, also in Ratnagiri district, was worshipped as Jholai, in termite-hill form. The present temple has a Mahishasuramardini worshipped as Jholai (Fig. 4). Jholai is the gramadevata of Asud, and her termite-hill form is reconstructed during the annual fair. As a common norm, offering of bells is made, so that the goddess ‘hears’ the plea. A set of Jholai’s footprints is installed in the mandapa (previously, kept outside the temple complex; as reported by the priest) of the temple at Asud where the lepers worshipped. They were denied entry in the shrine for the disease is considered contagious. The modern priest of the temple belongs to the Matang community and the position of priesthood is hereditary. The priest in the temple is for upkeep and for kaul (a rite of projections) in times of distress. Practice of sacrifice is not followed in the temple, but occasionally meat is offered to the deity. A festival takes place every three years around the time of Holi. Generally, the festivals of all the shrines in various areas of Konkan dedicated to Jholai coincide with each other. A palanquin procession takes place, where a small effigy of the deity is ornamented and carried around the village.
Sateri is sometimes represented as four-armed deity slaying the buffalo-demon (Chapekar 1966). Sateri is associated with curing properties in case of snake bites. The nhavan (water collected from the idol after bathing it) of the deity is considered to have properties which eliminate the effect of venom in the body. Similar practices are seen in the said temple of Jholai at Asud. The nhavan of Jholai is also used as a tirtha to cure dermal problems. The connection becomes strong with this particular deity for its cure association with leukoderma. Could this belief be traced back to the story of Renuka contracting leukoderma before being be-headed by Parshurama from the story? The mention of Renuka as one of the sisters in the skin disease alleviating pantheon (Elmore 1914) is noteworthy in this respect. Elmore furnishes the list of the sisters as: Poleramma, Ankamma, Muthyalamma, Dilli Polasi, Bangaramma, Mathamma and Renuka. Mathamma is Matangi who features in the Puranic lore of Renuka. However, the account shows Renuka as a subordinate to the six deities of this group. Matangi

Figure 2: Sateri in Dapoli, identified as Renuka. The termite hill form is worshipped as Renuka; signifying the representation of earth and fertility.
rituals include the selection of new lady-deity annually which is performed by a rite of digging the termite hill in which prospective candidates possessed by Matangi would be seated. The woman who sits through the possession in the termite-hill is elected as the next lady-deity, Matangi. Then the ritual killing of a buffalo is performed, and the entire village part-takes in the feast. It could be said that the ritual of sacrificial offering of buffalo as encountered, might be the basis of Mahishasuramardini representation of the deity. The representation of Jholai from Rasalgad in Khed taluka follows this representation.

![Figure 3: Sateri at Nageshwar Temple. The association with serpents and kshetrapala is strong at the site. The termite hill is adjoining a Shiva shrine, and the association of Jamadagni-Renuka is strong at the site.](image1)

![Figure 4: Jholai at Asud. The Mahishasuramardini representation at the site is a recent modification. The site attracts elaborate sacrifices and offerings in the honour of Renuka. The offering of rakt-pushpa (red flower) is a requisite for the worship of the deity.](image2)

**Renuka and the Kshetrapala**

The termite hill is also associated with Kartikeya as the ‘Khetrapala’ or the protector of the region. The termite hill at Adivare thus is the embodiment of two divinities for different classes of devotees. Sateri is married to Ravalnath annually (as at Vengurle in Konkan), symbolizing the union of Renuka with the Kshetrapala (his identity is in question at this site). The belief of Sateri is observed amongst people as Renuka continues to be ambivalent through Sindhudurg district up to the north of Karnataka.
The termite hill Sateri is associated with fertility and poison drawing in addition to the alleviation of ‘doshas’ for the planetary spirits. The association of these termite hills with Kartikeya and serpents grows strong in Karnataka. Moreover, Jotiba (a kshetrapala and other name for Ravalnath) is also associated with Jamadagni in its snake form; featuring as an important aspect of Sateri worship. The following verse from Ravalnathstrotr-raaj (VIII. 56) illustrates the marriage of Renuka with Kshetrapala:

\[
\text{Deva dakshinakedara ratnachalnivisanam} \\
\text{Jamadagninh vande ravaleshambhishtadam} \\
\text{Ekvirapati saumya jyotirlinga paramtapam} \\
\text{Trishool damaru khadga paatra cha karampankaje} \\
\text{Bibhrana renukanatham vande tam ravaleshvaram}\]

Lord Kedara of the south resides in abode of jewels, (who is) Jamadagi worshipped hundred times as Ravalesh (Ravalnath?). The husband of Ekvira (Renuka) (is himself) pious jyotirlinga form attained after penance (or penancing himself), with trident, drum, staff, leaves and lotuses. (All) worship Renuka’s master (husband) as emblem of Ravaleshvar.

Dhere (1978: 161) states that on a full moon day in Chaitra, Jotiba is married to Yamai and Ravalnath to Pavnai in Ratnagiri. Here, Yamai and Pavnai are considered to be earth goddesses and Pavnai dispenses an additional function, of being the Gramadevata of Ratnagiri. Pavnai is in fact, Renuka herself. Renuka when resurrected by Jamadagni in the Puranic story, demanded a separate abode as the head of a settlement. This form of Renuka is the one who blesses and fulfills all desires; hence Pavnai (Angre, pers.comm.). Ravalnath is worshipped in the coastal villages of Konkan and has an unprecedented position. Ravalnath however, is bound by eka-patni vrata (vow of having a single wife) (Bhanose Guruji, pers.comm) and Pavnai is form of Renuka. In addition, the deity Poleramma who is Renuka’s elder sister is considered as a boundary goddess in Nellore in Andhra-Pradesh and surrounding areas (Elmore 1914). The representation is that of vertical slabs of stone surrounding a field or a bound piece of land. Similar vertical slabs of stone are worshipped as Khetrapala in Ratnagiri. It is possible that the connection of Poleramma has been extended in this case for Renuka and her association with the Kshetrapala.

**Renuka as the 'Widow' Deity**

The regional assimilation and spatial transformation of Renuka continues with reference of Matangi as Mesko-mayarani of Mahanubhava texts (Dhere 1978:76). The worship of Mayarani is said to be performed for a widow for Mayarani is considered as a widow (Prabhudesai 1972). A widow is presented with lugde (sari) and kunku (kumkum) traditionally a taboo for widows. Prabhudesai further mentions the existence of an image of seven figures and a lion with raised tail as the representation of Mayarani. Here, the obvious connection with the seven sisters aforementioned can be highlighted.
Khanderao ase naapeek houn\ tarali jagadamba vahe paani\nDarbar jhadi mesko mayarani\ bhairav gosti karitase\n
(Yogasangram XI.32.21)

Jagadamba (Renuka herself) saved by barren Khanderao draws water, Mesko Mayarani sweeps the court (yard) (and) Bhairav keeps vigil.

The above verse mentions Khanderao, Jagadamba, Mesiko Mayarani and Bhairava with respective functions; pointing at the fraternity of these divinities. In addition, the role of the deities is noteworthy. Renuka in this context is referred as drawing water according to the story; while 'cleaning' of the place is attributed to Mesko Mayarani in the verse, who indeed is Matangi as aforementioned. This verse contests the equation of Renuka being Mesko-Mayarani herself. However, its mention in post 17th century text such as Dharmasindhu, the connection is clear. Furthermore, the function of deity of disease as that of a 'cleaner of malice' has been pointed out in earlier.

The Puranic story of Renuka mentions the ritual performance of Renuka dipping herself in sacred well, called as 'Jogula bhavii' on the suggestion of Eknath and Jognath to get rid of her disease – leukoderma (Artal 1907). The identity of Eknath and Jognath is unclear in this version of the story. The Renuka-Mayarani connection is reinforced further with the ritual of water sprinkling. The Jogula water being rainwater itself, curing the earth goddess Renuka (Elmore 1914: 598):

*Shimga falgun holiche deeni\ nagn houn pujini mayarani\ Ti dole davadi avalakshani\ jo pahu jaye tyache*\n
(Yogasangram XII.49.82)

On the day of Holi (Shimga) in the month of Falgun, Mayarani is worshipped by being naked. She (Mayarani) glances with an inauspicious eye, one who sees (meets her glance) loses (something, or health).

It can however be stated that probably at the time of the composition of Yogasangram (AD 1645), the deities Jagadamba and Mesiko Mayrani had independent existence, only later to be fused as Mayarani being Renuka of her later life.

**Local Spirits and Yakshi as Manifestation of Renuka**

The connection of ritual water throwing can also be associated with the incidence of teh Gandharva king engaged in *jalakrida* from the Puranic story. The practice of fulfilling the deity's worldly desires so as she is appeased at all times resurfaces in the general veneration scheme (as attested through personal interviews of the participants in Ratnagiri). The above verses highlight the worship of Mayarani on 'Holi' festival which takes place in the month of Phalgun. The worship of Jakhmata at Phansavane (Fig. 5), co-incidentally falls on same day followed by elaborate ceremonies and fairs. Jakhadevi, Jakha, Jakhmata, Jakhai are considered to the spirits of same nature. Jakhadev on the other hand is considered to be their male counterpart (Chapekar, 1966: 532)
Figure 5: Jakhmata at Phansavane. The deity is considered to be Renuka as Yakshi. The elaborate origin story associates the deity with water-deity and her association with serpents is highlighted in the accompanying iconography.

139). ‘Yaksha’ in prakrit becomes ‘Jakh’; and this obvious connection can be contended with. The connection of Renuka with yakshi is associated with the initial story referred to, wherein Renuka wishes for worldly life. The rite of shimpan is further discussed as the mimicking of the jalakrida of the Gandharvas and Yakshis (Kale, 2014). The deity Jakhmata here is of a peculiar origin. According to the legend, after a prolonged period of no catch at the sea, the fishermen caught abundant fish after placing the idol of Jakhmata as a deity; which was accidentally caught in the nets one evening (Bawa, pers. comm.) After a few years of abundant catch however, water borne diseases plagued the settlement. The people were dying and the fish was bad. According to the
lore, Jakhmata appeared in a vision of a local Shetye (common name for merchant class in Ratnagiri) and she demanded a ‘proper abode’ for herself, and it was believed that she was Renuka’s shadow. A temple was built in a night’s time and the stone initially procured was installed in the temple after application of shendur (vermilion) and other adorations. The placing of the deity stone by the agency of an old man who could barely walk; who was cured by Jakhmata’s blessings was the chamatkaar (miracle) performed by the deity. Malice was averted from the settlement. Since then, offerings have been regularly made to the deity and various celebrations are held in her honour.

In present times, a day prior to Gudhi-padwa, the deity is adorned with various cosmetics and adoration with ‘roopne’ is performed (Roopne lavne = to put form, literally). On the day of utsav or festival called as ‘shimpan’ (sprinkling); which falls on the Holi day. The ritual throw of cold water is performed. Women break off their old glass bangles ritually, marking the momentary widowhood as in case of Renuka. New set of glass bangles is put on as the ‘blessing’ of the deity. Family of Shetye get the animals to be sacrificed to the deity, the Bendke perform the rite of ceremonious sacrifice of the animals using the knives sharpened by the family of Varange. The meat is cooked in a three legged pot. The healthier the sacrificed animal, the longer the health of the village, is the general notion. This community event is interpreted as the congregation of the twelve balutedars (occupational groups constituted during the Maratha period in Maharashtra) (Atre, 1998).

Figure 6: Jakhmata at Parshuram (Lote) and Adivare respectively. The offering of red flowers is common. The deities are worshipped as Parshurama’s mother and as protector deities. The deity at Adivare is worshipped at par with the deity trio of Maha-Kali, Maha-Lakshmi and Maha-Saraswati of Adivare.
The temple of Jakhtata (Jakhmata is the expected nomenclature; but the name board on the shrine reads Jakhtata; and the same has been continued in the narrative) at Parshuram (Fig. 6) gives an impression of being a side-lined and hardly venerated deity in its current state. The deity however attracts robust offerings on Navratri and in times of need. The deity was believed to be the ‘Gramadevata’ until the importance declined with the establishment and worship of Parshurama- now the central deity of the settlement. The iconography of Jakhtata at Parshuram is that of a standing divinity with (four?) hands holding a dagger and another one resting on the head of another figure similarly standing. The deity is depicted with a head-gear and long ear-lobes. Informants mention the presence of this deity as the roop (form) of Renuka; Parshurama’s mother. The deity has been invited into the settlement as the protector by Parshurama himself (Shevanti Angre, pers. comm). It should however be noted, that all the Jakhmata shrines do not follow the Renuka legend. The Jakhmata sphere of deities in Konkan occupies a separate space as being the deities of particular areas, groves and water-bodies amongst others. The possibility of the mentioned deities later being associated with the Renuka story is not improbable.

Concluding Remarks

The overview of the embodiments of Renuka in Ratnagiri highlights certain processes of acculturation. The widely discussed process of identifying local deities with gods/goddesses from the popular practiced religious fold (see, Chawla 2001, Kakar 1982) can be identified in this case. However, the corollary to the same is striking at the same time. The repetitive connections between numerous deities which are essentially local in nature; that is, not with a scriptural background or adhering to literary traditions is a contributory factor in the popularity of this deity. Poleramma and her sisters from Andhra-Pradesh change into Mariamma and Yellamma in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka respectively; fusing into the Yellamma story with the connection of being earth goddesses themselves, further travelling to Maharashtra as a Shakti-Renuka. The Jagadamba and Ekvira in Maharashtra are further worshipped under various names in Maharashtra- some forms reigning supreme than the rest.

The movement of devotees like the Shaivite Gurav from Southern Karnataka to Maharashtra might have carried the idea of Renuka as Sati’s shadow (Bapat 2001) which finds a place at Mahurgad and Saptashring in Maharashtra. The worship in Ratnagiri follows strong Shaivite undercurrent. The association of Renuka with Ravalnath, depiction as Mahishasuramardini in some shrines might point at affinity to Shaivism. Similarly, her connection with Vaishnavite faith as being the mother of Parshurama, an incarnation of Vishnu (Joshi 1987) is discussed at certain sites of worship. Renuka in Ratnagiri features as an ambivalent concept as being the earth, a mother of a hero (Parshuram) and a devoted wife to Jamadagni, who emerges from the ideals of womanhood to the superhuman potential of being the overseer. The question of cultic alliance to either Shivaism or Vaishnavism however is indeterminate for most of the rituals and beliefs are either independent or an overlap of these cultic affiliations. The ritual of water spraying on Shimga for example, or marrying the deity with
khetrapala forms an individual sphere of belief-system. The deities who hold a separate religious sphere elsewhere in Maharashtra are associated at various aforementioned sites in Ratnagiri. Mesko Mayarani for example, does not hold connection with Renuka in eastern and northern Maharashtra, but is associated with Lakshmi. Deities like Jakhai, Jokhai mentioned in Bhakti literature (see, Daasbodh IV: 5 'Archanabhakti') converge to be identified as Jakhmata, and a form of Renuka in Ratnagiri. The various rites for the worship of these deities are seen as justification for the connection with Renuka. Shimga for example is a rite performed in the honour of almost all the village deities, but appears as a justification to Renuka's story in cases where the deities are associated with Renuka. The modification of the existent ritual practices to address specific stories of the deities is remarkable.

The devotee population is varied and almost all-encompassing. The inclusion of the 'widow' form of the deity in worship is noteworthy. The rituals connected with the particular worship point at an attempt of providing religious sanction to the reformist activities for change in the position of widowhood in the society. The worship of the deity takes place on the border-line of sacred and profane (in Durkheimian terms) spheres. The body practices and ritual performances are often supplemented with herbal medicine for addressing health issues. Elaborate rituals and body practices are performed during the annual festivals. Possession and electing the prospective cult heads also takes place as pointed out in case of Yellamma worship. The element of community worship and group feasting is prominent. The congregation and representation of the balutedars is noteworthy in this respect.

The existent deity sphere affiliated with Renuka can largely be correlated through various local origin stories and the corpus of medieval literature, specifically from the 'Bhakti' tradition. The development and interconnections of the deities in Ratnagiri as seen today can be confirmed as a product of the medieval socio-religious traditions. Although most of the forms of worship vary from the so called sanctioned norms of ritual practices from the texts, a connection or mitigation is observed. The role of Renuka as a 'house-hold' deity is thus established in the area. The importance of Renuka however is at par with the trio: Maha-Kali, Maha-Lakshmi and Maha-Saraswati (at Adivare) popularly worshipped in Ratnagiri in modern times.

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