

# Plurality of Deities and Maritime Religion: The Marine Fishers of North Coastal Andhra Pradesh

P. VIJAYA PRAKASH

## Abstract

*Majority of fishermen of coastal Andhra Pradesh, the Jalari and Vadabaliya endogamous communities, have been artisanal fishers. Belief system in the fold of religion is crucial to these communities as their occupation is hazardous, vulnerable and uncertain. Anthropological investigations of the present study have resulted in delineation of traditional as well as changed patterns of religious institutions such as little and great traditions, as well as other religions. The study focuses on the characteristic features of 'maritime religion' of fishing communities. Plurality of shrines, both at beachfront and habitations, the former presided by several deities of feminine goddesses denote little traditions, while the latter sivitic and vaishnavitic sects of great traditions of masculine gods of Hindu religious order. Several types of ceremonies related to lifecycle and fishing economy are performed at these shrines under the leadership and advice of community functionaries (kulapedda, pillagadu, dasudu, bhaktudu), who are integral of regulating maritime cultural cohesiveness, in the context of religious transitions induced by education, skills and mechanization of marine fishing.*

**Keywords:** Beachfront, fishermen habitations, shrines and deities, village functionaries

## Introduction

The study of religion has been central to anthropology ever since inception as a branch of science, and has been documenting, classifying and explaining religious beliefs and practices among varied cultures, past or present. Religion had been viewed as part of culture rather than a sphere of activity (Lambek, 2008). Ethnographic and comparative methods are used to analyse the qualitative and quantitative aspects of religion at the backdrop of universal categories. Delineating sensory richness, philosophical depth, emotional range and moral complexity of a culture have been critical in understanding the religion. Evolutionary theorists like Herbert Spencer, E.B. Tylor and J.G. Frazer shared three common assumptions (i) the idea of progress, (ii) faith in the efficacy of comparative method and (iii) the notion of psychic unity of mankind, with a

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P. VIJAYA PRAKASH, Senior Fellow - ICSSR, Department of Anthropology, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam - 530003. Email: prakash.peethala@yahoo.com