

Heritage matters

# MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE



After years of neglect, jataras and festivals have been revitalised in the past two years underlining the social, economic, cultural, historical and pilgrimage value of Balusulamma. On 7th November 2017 over 9,600 people were fed village heritage fare for lunch sponsored by local farmers. It is a significant community gathering place for people from the surrounding thirty or more villages



The historical cultural landscape of Balusulamma has become a site for revitalising and safeguarding folk theatre and music that is highly endangered because of the globalising and homogenising impacts of Tollywood and various forms of digital media



Farmers used to bring bullocks and oxcarts for blessings from Balusulamma. Farmers also say that making offerings to the goddess brought rains during droughts and prolonged summer months. Now people from the villages bring their motorbikes to be blessed by the village Gramadevata for safety and prosperity. Kummari Sambayya to the right carries out the rituals

Visually imposing sites often catch the imagination of the public. But there is often more than the monumental that informs visitor's experiences. Few realize the importance of local civic spaces that demonstrate community benefits from heritage conservation. UN World Tourism Organisation has emphasised the engagement with the local primary stakeholders and their spaces as critical in the long term sustainable development of visited sites for pilgrimage, tourism, education and recreation. It further highlighted the importance of benefit analysis and integrated local area planning through a bottom up praxis for sustainability.

A promising development in Amaravathi Heritage Town is the beginning of conserving valuable Andhra heritage that is not necessarily monumental. It is a significant step that Mr. Mukhesh Kumar Meena, I.A.S., Secretary of Tourism and Culture (Heritage) has given a Government Order for the Balusulamma Thalli Gudi or temple as a protected monument for its Archaeological and Historical importance. This temple is the village patron goddess of Dharanikota, one of the twin panchayats of Amaravathi Heritage Town. It dates to the Kakatiya times. So far, all the protected monuments in the Town are under the Archaeological Survey of India. Balusulamma Thalli Gudi is the first monument protected by the A.P. Government in Amaravathi.

Covering an area of 0.52 acres. It is on major archaeological deposits with pottery showing continuous cultures from 2900 years ago. Two hundred years ago, Zamindar Raja Vasi Reddy Venkatadri Naidu used to dismount his elephant on his journeys back from other villages and make offerings to Balusulamma. This week Raja Babu Vasi Reddy Swarup Bahadur, a direct descendant of the Zamindar conducted Kumkuma Puja for Balusulamma and commended the AP Government's initiative to protect village heritage. He studied the Vastu of the place, accordingly he is sponsoring a Chuttuillu or traditional pan tiled round house that would be non-intrusive near the protected site and landscape. It will be used as an onsite educational room in partnership with the Mandal Educational Office by the Amaravathi Heritage Centre and Museum.

During Amaravathi Sankranthi Jeevana Varasathva Sambaralu, the Zamindar's family members Srimathi Yarlagadda Sucharita, her son Prashant and his wife Nischita visited the site and paid respects to Balusulamma. They encouraged the pujari, potter Sambayya, to continue his valuable services. He is looking forward to reviving the famous pottery traditions of Dharanikota. Moreover, the local farmers are assisting with documentation of the intangible heritage of the place. Mr. Kanna Babu, former local curator of Archaeological Survey of India has identified the sculptures while Dr. Potturu Ranganayakulu from Tirupathi TTD Museums studied the Kakatiya temple. Scaled drawings of the place were prepared by the School of Planning and Architecture, Vijayawada, based on the MoU between the School and A.P. Government and the International Institute for the Inclusive Museum.

Balusulamma Thalli Gudi and its heritage landscape have been enhanced through the PRASAD Scheme of the Government of India by APTDC. The landscape has been carefully fenced. Five solar lamps, a water tank and boring pump have been installed. A gateway has been constructed and landscaping is preventing soil erosion. The Rachhabanda under the large banyan tree has been renovated with smooth granite and a slate area created all around at a lower

level. This is already being used by the local Panchayat, school groups and families. Access road to the temple along with drainage has been completed. Festivities that have revived the intangible heritage of the place are once again bringing back people from the surrounding villages in the Amaravathi Mandal.

The Village Vathavaranam or village atmosphere is revitalised. Tourists are beginning to enjoy the place watching sunsets across the River Krishna and listening to the large congregation of birds in the large banyan tree.

On Saturday 17th February 2018, the Dharanikota Panchayat conducted a Swachh programme at the Temple site with high school students from the local S.R.R Hindu High School and the Kerala School. Mandal Education Officer Mr. Rami Reddy spoke about the importance of heritage education. Staff from the Amaravathi Heritage Centre and Museum coordinated the program. Students love the ambience of the place.

Balusulamma Thalli Gudi is a valuable demonstration project for Andhra. Its historical cultural landscape is an illustration of locating culture in development, a priority for UNESCO. It demonstrates the conservation and wise use of heritage in sustainable development. The coming years will provide in this regard a unique window of opportunity to make and justify such cases. They will require a strong and consolidated set of experiences and evidence-based arguments. There are about 14,000 villages in the state. There are an estimated one lakh shrines to villages goddesses and gods across the 13 districts. They are the bedrock of Andhra culture and heritage. They provide the essence of what it is to experience Andhra village atmosphere in the face rapid urbanisation and globalisation.

Cultural and natural heritage is certainly a major consideration when it comes to defining the constitutive elements of well-being, dignity and sustainable human development. UNESCO has been promoting for decades the role of culture as a driver and enabler of development. Two recent landmark resolutions adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, N. 65/166 and N. 66/208, emphasize the crucial importance of culture as 'an essential component of human development, a source of identity, innovation and creativity for the individual and the community'. UNESCO emphasises that many people, especially the poor, depend directly on ecosystems for their livelihoods, their economic, social and physical well-being, and their cultural heritage.

Balusulamma Gudi is also good example of the UNESCO 2011 Recommendation on historic landscapes. If heritage is to be part of the economic future of communities then it needs to be part of their future identity, distinctiveness and points of difference in the global competition to attract people and investment. One must be conscious that many sites continue to face significant limitations of expertise and resources. Capacity building is needed for strategic partners and site managers to develop appropriate qualitative and quantitative measures for evidence-based claims in development. The conventional cost benefit analysis could be furthered with benefit sharing paradigms. Contingency valuation and choice modelling have long been used for valuing the environment. Another recurring point is the value and role of responsible tourism in the conservation and promotion of heritage sites. Measuring benefits from tourism could catalyse further investment in conservation.



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Kakatiya Devi, significant for her unique depiction with eight arms, is worshipped locally as Gollabhama. This family deity of the Kakatiya rulers is over 700 years old. She is part of the monuments protected by the AP government right next to Balusulamma



Dr (Smt) G Vani Mohan, IAS, Commissioner for Archaeology and Museums visited Balusulamma Thalli Gudi. She underlined the value of village heritage in understanding the sense of place and identity of Andhra people in the face of rapid urbanisation

Next week: Heritage Matters will focus on entrepreneurial engagement and heritage conservation