



MEDARAM SAMMAKKA–SARALAMMA JATHARA THE GREAT TRIBAL FESTIVAL OF TELANGANA

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ABSTRACT The Medaram Sammakka–Saralamma Jathara, celebrated biennially in the forests of Telangana, is the largest tribal festival in India and a living symbol of tribal faith, identity, and resistance. Rooted in the legends of the Koya tribe, the festival commemorates the bravery and sacrifice of Sammakka and her daughter Saralamma, who fought against the Kakatiya rulers in the 12th century to defend the autonomy of their people. The rituals of the Jathara—centered around offerings of jaggery, turmeric, and vermilion—reflect the tribal community's deep ecological and spiritual connection with nature. Beyond its religious importance, the festival has evolved into a major socio-cultural and economic event, promoting tribal unity, heritage preservation, and women's empowerment. Today, Medaram Jathara stands as a testimony to India's diverse cultural fabric and the enduring spirit of indigenous traditions.

KEYWORDS : Medaram Jathara; Sammakka; Saralamma; Koya tribe; Telangana; tribal culture; indigenous traditions; women's empowerment; cultural heritage; folk religion; tribal festivals; socio-economic significance; ecological spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

The Medaram Sammakka–Saralamma Jathara, popularly known as the Medaram Jathara, is one of the largest tribal festivals in India, celebrated biennially by the Koya tribe and other tribal communities of Central India. The fair is held at Medaram village in Tadwai Mandal of Mulugu district, Telangana, situated about 110 kilometres from Warangal, deep within the Eturunagaram Wildlife Sanctuary near the banks of the Godavari River.

This grand tribal congregation is often called the “**Kumbh Mela of the tribals**,” attracting millions of devotees from Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh. The festival celebrates the valour and sacrifice of two tribal women warriors—**Sammakka and her daughter Saralamma (Sarakka)**—who fought against the unjust rule of the Kakatiya dynasty in the 12th century to defend the rights and dignity of the Koya people.

Historical Background And Legends

The history of Sammakka and Saralamma is deeply rooted in the oral traditions of the Koya tribe. According to legend, Sammakka was a divine child found by the Koya tribal people in the dense forest of Medaram around the 10th century. The story narrates that when a group of Koya hunters ventured into the forest, they discovered a baby girl surrounded and guarded by tigers. Astonished by this miraculous sight, they carried the infant to their village and raised her as a divine gift of the forest goddess. They named her **Sammakka**, and soon she became known for her mystical powers and compassion toward the poor and suffering.

As she grew, Sammakka married **Pagididda Raju**, a Koya tribal chieftain and nephew of Meda Raju, the ruler of Karimnagar. The couple had two daughters, **Saralamma** and **Nagulamma**, and a son named **Jampanna**. The Koya region was under the suzerainty of the Kakatiya kings, and during the reign of King Rudradeva or Pratapa Rudra (1150–1197 AD), a severe drought struck the region. The Koyas, unable to pay the taxes (known as kappam), faced repression from the Kakatiya army.

Pagididda Raju refused to submit to the exploitative demands of the rulers, leading to an armed rebellion. The Koya warriors, under the leadership of Pagididda Raju, fought bravely but were ultimately overpowered. In the fierce battle that ensued at **Sampenga Vagu**, many tribal warriors including Pagididda Raju, Saralamma, and Jampanna lost their lives. Jampanna, the son of Sammakka, is said to have fallen into the river during the battle, and hence the stream came to be known as **Jampanna Vagu**—a tributary of the Godavari.

Despite losing her family, Sammakka entered the battlefield with unmatched courage and fought fiercely like the goddess Kali herself. She inflicted heavy losses on the Kakatiya forces. Finally, she was wounded by a spear from behind and retreated toward **Chilakala Gutta**, where she disappeared mysteriously. Later, the Koya people found a vermilion container (Kumkuma Bharina) near an anthill and

believed it to be the divine manifestation of their goddess.

In her honour, the Koya tribe decided to commemorate her sacrifice by performing rituals every two years on the **Magha Suddha Pournami** (full moon day of the Magha month). Over time, this ritual evolved into the grand **Sammakka–Saralamma Jathara**, symbolizing tribal pride, resistance, and faith.

Review Of Literature

Tourism is an important industry that contributes to a country's economic growth and is closely linked to other sectors. Factors such as promoting tourism, medicine, industrial development, globalisation, and trade liberalisation have made the health industry competitive. Tourism is an activity with robust backward and forward linkages. Travellers spend money to enjoy a variety of goods, services, and experiences, Naik(2013a). Spirituality has been a strong motivation for travel and is the case even now. People from developed and affluent countries are moving from their own countries to other destinations, seeking solitude, natural and holistic remedies, including health purposes, and eco-friendly experiences, Lal (2024). Narratives help in the construction of divinity, along with rituals and symbols. Religious narratives have an element of miracle that allows for constructing divinity. However, faith, subject to experience, has a semiotic-based epistemology, whereas narratives are based on semantics. Therefore, narratives alone cannot decipher the meaning of a great tradition. One has to look closely at the rituals and symbols as well. Nevertheless, narratives offer the entry point to a cultural space and understanding them is essential for a critical understanding of tribal culture and its networks, Pandey (2021).

Celebration And Rituals

The Medaram Jathara is celebrated once every two years and lasts for four days, drawing lakhs of devotees who gather to pay homage to the tribal goddesses. The event begins with the arrival of **Saralamma** from Kothagudem village to Medaram on the first day, followed by the arrival of **Sammakka** from Chilakalagutta on the second day. The arrival of the deities, symbolized by their sacred caskets (bamboo sticks covered with turmeric and vermilion), marks the beginning of the sacred rituals.

The devotees offer “**Bangaram**” (jaggery) equal to their body weight, **coconuts, turmeric, and vermilion** as offerings to the goddesses. The ritual signifies purity, prosperity, and fulfilment of vows. It is believed that the offerings symbolize gratitude for the blessings received and prayers for future well-being. The festival is unique in that it has **no permanent temples or idols**; the worship revolves around natural symbols such as bamboo poles, ant hills, and sacred trees, reflecting the deep ecological and spiritual connection of the tribal communities with nature.

During the Jathara, the entire forest region turns into a sea of humanity. Devotees—mostly tribals—arrive in traditional attire, carrying the sacred bamboo poles decorated with neem leaves, turmeric, and flowers. The air reverberates with drum beats, folk songs, and the chants of “**Sammakka Sarakka ki Jai!**” (Victory to Sammakka and

Sarakka). The rituals are mainly performed by **Koya priests (Pujaris)**, maintaining the traditional customs that have continued for centuries without Brahminical influence.

Cultural And Social Significance

The Medaram Jathara is not merely a religious event but a cultural expression of tribal unity, identity, and resistance. It symbolizes the **spirit of womanhood, valor, and sacrifice**, as represented by the mother-daughter duo Sammakka and Saralamma. The festival has become a symbol of empowerment, portraying how two tribal women stood up against feudal oppression to protect their people.

The Jathara also plays a vital role in preserving **tribal art, dance, and oral traditions**. Tribal communities display their handicrafts, medicinal herbs, and forest produce, promoting cultural exchange and economic activity. The gathering provides a platform for tribal people from various regions to reconnect with their heritage and strengthen inter-community bonds.

From a socio-economic perspective, the festival significantly contributes to the **local economy**. Temporary markets are set up around Medaram village where artisans, traders, and government departments establish stalls. The Telangana government, recognizing its cultural and touristic value, has declared the Medaram Jathara as a **State Festival** and provides extensive arrangements such as transportation, drinking water, sanitation, medical camps, and security.

Modern Relevance

Though the festival retains its ancient tribal essence, it has evolved into a major pilgrimage drawing over **ten million (one crore) visitors** in recent years. The government and various NGOs actively participate in organizing and managing the event, ensuring environmental protection and cultural preservation.

Medaram Jathara stands as a living example of **tribal resilience and spiritual harmony with nature**. It reminds the modern world of the importance of protecting indigenous traditions, respecting women's leadership, and maintaining ecological balance.

The story of Sammakka and Saralamma continues to inspire generations as a tale of bravery, justice, and devotion—a reminder that true divinity lies in courage and sacrifice for the community.

Framework Of Economic Activities And Services In The Medaram Pilgrimage

The Medaram Sammakka-Saralamma Jathara (Fair) is not only a grand spiritual gathering but also a vibrant hub of economic, social, and cultural activities. The event reflects how the tourism and pilgrimage industry in tribal regions like Medaram caters to the diverse needs of pilgrims, promotes peace and spirituality, and stimulates local economic development. The framework below outlines the various components and services that contribute to this holistic ecosystem:

1. Pilgrims' Ritual And Spiritual Services

At the core of the Medaram fair are ritual and religious activities dedicated to goddesses **Sammakka and Saralamma**. Priests, traditional healers, and tribal elders facilitate offerings, prayers, and sacred rituals. The ritual services not only reinforce cultural identity and spiritual unity but also generate employment for local priests, drummers, and helpers who assist pilgrims in performing their religious duties.

2. Accommodation Services

Temporary and semi-permanent accommodation facilities arise during the fair to host millions of visitors. These range from **tented shelters, lodges, and tribal huts to private room rentals** by local households. The hospitality sector witnesses a surge in income as villagers rent out homes, courtyards, and even open land for pilgrims' temporary stays, creating inclusive economic opportunities.

3. Parking And Transport Services

Efficient transport and parking arrangements are essential for managing the massive influx of vehicles. Local youth and private operators offer **jeep, auto-rickshaw, and tractor services** to shuttle pilgrims between Medaram and nearby towns. Organized parking zones are managed by local committees, providing income to attendants and volunteers. The movement of people and goods also boosts the demand for **fuel, repair shops, and vehicle services**.

4. Sales Of Herbal And Forest Products

Medaram's rich forest environment supports a thriving trade in **herbal medicines, honey, gums, roots, barks, and forest produce**. Local Koya and Gond tribal communities bring these items to sell during the fair. These activities highlight the sustainable use of forest resources and provide direct income to tribal households, blending economic gain with ecological balance.

5. Guiding And Information Services

Guides and volunteers assist pilgrims in navigating ritual sites, sacred groves, and queues for darshan (holy viewing). These services enhance the visitor experience and ensure the **orderly conduct** of the pilgrimage. Many local youths and educated tribal members take up these temporary roles, contributing to employment generation.

6. Sales Of Essential Goods And Services

The fair gives rise to a **temporary marketplace** offering a variety of daily-use items—food grains, groceries, clothing, utensils, medicines, and water supplies. Vendors, both tribal and non-tribal, set up stalls to meet the pilgrims' needs, creating a seasonal economy that benefits the entire region.

7. Sales Of Puja Items, Flowers, And Fruits

Religious offerings form an integral part of the pilgrimage economy. The sale of **flowers, coconuts, turmeric, vermilion, lamps, and puja kits** supports numerous small vendors. Additionally, the **fruit trade** flourishes as pilgrims buy fruits for rituals and consumption, enhancing local agricultural marketing networks.

8. Small Businesses And Petty Trade

The Medaram fair transforms into a massive **temporary urban market**. Families and small traders engage in diverse economic activities such as tea stalls, eateries, snack vendors, toy sellers, and entertainment stalls. These micro-businesses provide crucial income to thousands of rural and tribal families.

9. Dolly (Palanquin) Services

Pilgrims, particularly the elderly and disabled, avail **dolly services**—manual palanquins carried by local laborers—to reach the shrine. This service generates temporary employment and symbolizes the traditional spirit of service and devotion associated with the event.

10. Toilet And Sanitation Facilities

Sanitation services, both government-sponsored and privately managed, are essential during the fair. Local workers are employed for maintenance, waste collection, and cleaning operations, contributing to hygiene and environmental management.

11. Promotion Of Local Artisans And Craftsmen

The Medaram fair serves as a vital platform for **tribal artisans, weavers, and craftsmen** to display and sell their handmade items—bamboo products, wooden carvings, bead jewellery, and traditional attire. These sales promote **tribal art and heritage**, offering artisans a significant source of income and cultural recognition.

12. Rental And Livestock Services

Many locals rent out **houses, open plots, and temporary shelters** to visiting traders and pilgrims. Additionally, sales and exhibitions of **poultry, cattle, and other livestock** occur during the fair, linking agricultural and trade activities to the pilgrimage economy.

13. Peace, Spirituality, And Social Harmony

Beyond economic benefits, the Medaram fair fosters **social harmony, communal peace, and spiritual rejuvenation**. The gathering of diverse tribal and non-tribal communities strengthens cultural bonds and promotes inter-state unity. The peaceful conduct of the fair exemplifies the coexistence of faith, tradition, and economic progress.

14. Contribution To Regional Economic Development

Overall, the Medaram pilgrimage acts as a catalyst for **regional development** by:

- Increasing **tourism revenue and local entrepreneurship**
- Enhancing **infrastructure**, such as roads, sanitation, and communication
- Promoting **sustainable tribal livelihoods**
- Encouraging **cultural preservation and eco-tourism**

Grants For The Medaram Jathara

Financial support from both the Telangana State Government and the Central Government to enhance infrastructure and promote tribal heritage. For the upcoming **2026 Jatara**, the **Telangana Government sanctioned ₹150 crore in August 2025** to develop permanent structures, roads, sanitation, drinking water, and electricity facilities. In previous years, the State Government had allocated **₹110 crore for the 2024 Jatara** and **₹75 crore for the 2022 Jatara**, demonstrating a steady increase in investment towards improving the festival's amenities and visitor management.

The **Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs** has also been consistently supporting the event by funding cultural and heritage promotion activities. It sanctioned **₹2.30 crore for the 2024 Jatara**, **₹2.26 crore for the 2022 Jatara**, and **₹2 crore for the 2020 Jatara**. Additionally, beyond these biennial festival-specific allocations, the Ministry has provided special grants for infrastructure development in the Medaram area — including **₹7 crore in 2019–20** and **₹5 crore in 2021–22** — aimed at constructing multi-purpose buildings and improving essential facilities. Together, these grants highlight the combined efforts of both governments in preserving tribal traditions while ensuring better facilities and services for millions of devotees attending the Jatara.

CONCLUSION

The Medaram Sammakka–Saralamma Jathara is not just a festival—it is a **cultural movement** representing the collective consciousness and heritage of India's tribal population. Through this celebration, the Koya tribe and other participating communities reaffirm their faith in their deities and their connection to nature. The event also bridges the ancient and modern worlds, showing how traditional tribal values can coexist with contemporary society. Sammakka and Saralamma are remembered not merely as deities but as **symbols of justice, equality, and courage**. Their story embodies the eternal struggle of the marginalized against oppression. As millions gather at Medaram every two years, the forest comes alive with faith, music, and devotion, echoing the spirit of freedom and unity that continues to define the tribal heart of India. The Medaram Sammakka-Saralamma Jatara embodies the seamless integration of spirituality, culture, and economy. The framework of services—from pilgrims' rituals to trade in local products—illustrates how religious tourism can function as a powerful engine of inclusive growth, promoting peace, identity, and economic empowerment in tribal regions.

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