

Evolution Of Village Deities In Tamilnadu

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Introduction

Village life is significant one, because of its various elements. Indian villages are deep rooted with various customs, manners and lifestyles. Religion is an important aspect of human society. Village religious tradition has a rich past. It is deep rooted from the worship of nature in the form of fertility cult. The outlook of the villages made up of confluence of features such as rural economy, rural religion, rural life styles, beliefs and practices, in which rural religion plays a vital role. One can see the totality of the village culture centred around on temple. Basically being the centre of rural religion, belief and practices play a multi-dimensional role¹. The religious beliefs and practices of the remaining ninety percent of the population had never been subjected to rapid changes as in the case of first category since they worshipped mother goddesses in various forms and names.

Origin and Evolution of Religion:

The origin and evolution of Village religion goes back to the prehistoric times. When man learnt the civilised life he gave preference and admitted the various beliefs. In fact, early men were afraid of natural calamities and developed fear towards various natural elements such as rain, thunder, storm, lightening and flood. Even he was afraid of wild animals. Initially they started to worship all the elements as a sign of threat and danger². In due course, by experience, he had understood the benefits from all the natural elements. In the beginning

there was no idols to worship, but worshipped the symbols and totems. The origin and evolution of Village deities can be seen in different perspectives³. Village people worship gods and goddesses as symbols and totems. Where ever they worship they give preference to the nature. Besides, the forces of nature, the imaginary gods, the heroes, men, animals and inanimate beings they worshipped for some reason or other. The pre-eminent characteristic of man throughout his entire history has been his religion. He is convinced that he stands on certain superhuman relations, and is satisfied that he has received the needed super human help. So his life is always centered on god. Religion gives to a person what he can obtain from no other source and confidence in the outcome of life struggles through a personal relationship with the superior power or powers in the world. Every religion in general has so many things for its individuals and also usually for the society⁴.

Religious Faith:

Religion played a predominant role in the ancient society. It influenced every individual's social thinking and belief. Religion of ancient days also played a major role in maintaining harmony in the society. The religious beliefs and practices of Tamil people centred on the nature and the features of their living. Originally, they started to worship nature and other elements, which were shifted to give some iconographic status to all the mode of natural elements. Almost, every human society, however primitive, has some form of religious beliefs and practices. Religion is basically the belief that the world is inspired and directed by some super human power and intelligence⁵. This power, whether an abstract spirit or a personal god, is seen as having the will to provide a law for man, to live by and as requiring man to live in harmony with its will. Religious feelings are expressed through the ritual and ceremonies, architectures, paintings and sculptures. These are the outward expression of an inner experience of human beings. The ancient Tamils believed in the

sacramental character of life: anything associated with the production or ending of life was felt to contain a potentially dangerous power. These powers were thought to be capricious and dangerous: it was thought that they needed to be controlled and bounded. One important characteristic of indigenous south Indian religion is that it was not concerned with otherworldly places or figures. The deep involvement of the people in religion had its reflections on their life also. People understood the essence of religion and utilise it to maintain a close relationship with god. Religion is the chief differentiating characteristic of man from the animals. In the history of mankind there never has been a tribe of men without some form of religion. Religion has been one of the most powerful factors in human history⁶.

Concept of God:

The concept of God in ancient Tamilagam is centred on the worship of the mother goddess generally. The mother goddess is known by various names such as Kotravai, Palaiyol, Kanamar Selvi, Kadu Kizhal and Kadal Kelu Selvi. As a centre of attraction, a particular village temple plays an active role in village *panchayat*, village economy, and source of living and symbolic representation of village culture. In fact it reflects a complete picture of the socio, economic, political and cultural life of village people. When Village people worship their deities, one can see the social amalgamation. At the time of festival season the village masses join together and shared their goods and labour for common purpose and well being of villages. Likewise one can see the village economy through festival market and sharing of their goods. The culture of the village is explicated at the time of festival through Village dance, music and other related entertainments. Village gods like Aiyandar and Madurai Viran were once human beings were transformed into deities due to their heroic activities⁷. Likewise Mariamman and host of other deities have also transformed into deities. Most of them even now receive sacrifices of cocks and goats.

Village Deity:

The worship of village deity or *gramadevatas* forms an important part of the conglomerate of religious beliefs, customs and ceremonies, which are generally classed together under the term Hinduism. In almost every village and town of south India there can be seen a shrine or symbol of the *gramadevata*, and in every village the *gramadevata* is periodically worshipped and propitiated. The village deities and their worship are widely different from the popular Vedic deities, Siva and Vishnu and the worship that centres in the great Vedic temples. There are some special features in the worship of the village deities. There is no priestly caste; the outcastes always take the leading parts in the animal sacrifices. Thus, the importance of religion and the existence' of dissimilarities between the little and great Hindu tradition can be understood. As usual amongst all nations ancient or modern, the philosophic doctrines of the Tamils were far apart from the popular beliefs and ceremonies. Curiosity has in all ages led intelligent men to explore the records of the past, to speculate on the future, or to dive into the mysteries of mind and matter⁸.

Whilst the learned few with an earnest mind and deep research attempted to obtain correct notions of the causes and consequences of existence, the masses whose untutored minds could not conceive nature as a whole, took allow and sensual view of life, and worshipped a multitude of gods, who were supposed to bring about all the changes in nature, and all the misfortunes which happened to the people. Communities which were a little more civilised, and had cultivated the art of the peace, worshipped milder gods, who were content with offerings of fruits, flowers and incense⁹. More advanced societies whose cultured mind could realise abstract ideas such as, the reign of law (dharma) and the unity of nature, endeavoured to conform their lives to moral laws and addressed their prayers to the supreme intelligence which rules the universe.

Deities of Tamil Village Tradition:

The deities of Tamil village religious tradition itself are a significant one, because of their unique features. Majority of the deities of Tamil village tradition contain the following characteristics, which make them unique and identical one. The deities of Tamil Village tradition are in various forms such as animism, symbol worship, nature worship, hero worship, totemism and spirit worship. They are all not in statue forms. Hence one can notice various conceptions in the design of statues. Sometimes, they are worshipped in the form of tree, plants and immaterial objects such as stone, water and mountains. The Village deities are divided into five major divisions such as female, male, animistic, natural forces and diabolical beings. In which, female deities constitute an important place among all other deities. Next to them are male deities. These two groups of deities constitute an important element of Village religious tradition¹⁰. The spectrum of Village deities also comprises of animistic beings, natural forces and diabolical beings.

Evolution of Mother Goddess:

Female divinities outnumber the male divinities in the Tamil Village religious tradition. The worship of female deities suggests the source of life and procreation. These deities are more numerous than the Indian villages; they are naturally diverse in character. The mother goddess worship is also an ancient form of worship. It is as old as when men learnt the settled life. When they got the knowledge of civilisation and settlement, they came to know about the significance of life. The precursor for the mother goddess worship is the fertility cult. They respect all mediums which give birth to new ones. Paddy, tree, animal and others are respected as the source of living. In this line, they begin to show respect to women, since they are the progenitors of the world. They are respected as a medium of procreation, which evolved the concept of mother goddess worship. Sometimes the same goddess bears

various names such as Ellamman, Kaateri, Seven Kanniyamars, Kaliyamman, Angalamma, Selliyamma, Ulagattal, Gangamma, Mallamma, Vekkaliamma, Mariamma and Pechiyamma¹¹.

Male Divinities:

These are deemed to be the guardian deities who protected the people of the villages from evil spirits, contagious diseases like small pox and cholera. They are all regarded as the watching deities of female divinities such as Madurai Viran, Aiyanar, Karuppanna Swamy, Kuttandavar, Kattan, Potturaja, Uyirhundikkarer, Sukkumattadikkarer, Petta Naachi Periyasami and Kombai Karuppan¹².

Nature of the Village Deities

The deities of Village tradition reveal various significant themes and concepts, which can be pointed out here as its nature. It is believed that they can bring drought, infertility and disease, but if they are ritually praised bring rain, fertility and good health. In majority of villages, they are deemed to be the guardian deities that protected the people of the respective villages from evil spirits and contagious diseases like small pox and cholera. But one can notice the nature of Village deities as close to the culture, customs and manners, and life style of the village people¹³.

Reasons for the Worship of Village Deities

The reasons for the worship of Village deities make them unique. They are propitiated to avert their wrath and sometimes, they are cursed by the village people, this can prove that what kind of bond prevails between Village deities and village people. The reasons for the worship of Village deities are differed from person to person and place to place. It is not the intention of Tamil Village people to worship or praise the deities of Village tradition. Sometimes, one cannot find the sense of worship. There are various reasons for the celebration as well as the worship. It differs from person to person. For instance, one may worship for his well being and another for his cattle, and other for agricultural field, and other for the protection of village from contagious diseases. Whenever, a particular village is

threatened by contagious diseases, famines and droughts, immediately the people will seek the divine intervention and decide to go for worship. In fact, one can witness the oneness of whole village people at the time of worship¹⁴. Not necessary that the ceremonies and festivals must be celebrative and elaborative but, they spend according to their well being. Their constant desire is for freedom, equality and dignity: to be human like others. Hence there is a lot of distress in their heart against their oppressors and the oppressive system. This they have symbolised in their angry and frightful gods and goddesses. Mostly their deities are historical men and women who have opposed and subverted the values of the unjust caste-class system. In the process they were also murdered. These brave martyrs like Madurai Viran, Ondi Viran, Veriyan Sami, Irulappan Sami and the victims of caste oppression and male domination like Mariamman, Ellamman. At the time of interrogation, the worshippers of Village deities were asked the reason for not worshipping Vedic deities. Quite majority of the respondents opined their Vedic gods are not their *kuladevatas*. And that the Vedic temples are far away from their habitation. Good number of respondents deferred in the interventions of Vedic priest. Above all good number of Village worshippers referred the reason for not worshipping the deities without citing any reason.

Village Deities and Hinduism

The deities of Village tradition cannot be included in the Hindu fold. There are various diversified features. In addition to that, the deities of Village tradition are not given a proper place in the Hindu puranas and *sthalapuranas*. Even if they are given representation, they are not projected in a proper manner. They may be revealed as slaves or attendant and watching deities or sometimes referred as evil spirits. In majority of puranas and *sthalapuranas*, they are degraded by birth¹⁵. The Nayanmars and Alvars also criticised the worship of Village tradition as degraded one. Thirunavukkarasar, Periyalwar were also

criticised the worship of Village deities as little faith and worship of sinful beings. A popular Tamil scholar Maraimalai Adigal also condemned the worshippers of Village tradition as blind. The *Paripadal*, one among the eight anthologies and *Tirumurukkatrupadai*, one among the ten anthologies seem to represent the transition from the worship of tribal or Village deities of the anthologies to the universalisation of godhead and the evolution of formal religious systems, which under the Pallavas and Pandyas of the seventh and ninth centuries AD became crystallised as the Puranic Vaishnava and Saiva religions¹⁶. It is a new regional synthesis of puranic forms in which the northern Sanskritic elements assume a dominant position while the local or Village cults and their deities either get completely merged or remained as major component of the Indian puranic pantheon. Though Hinduism accommodates various Village deities after some modifications, they cannot be accommodated completely, because, the natures of Village deities are not easily submissive to anyone. However, the process to incorporate the deities of Tamil Village tradition is in vogue¹⁷.

Renaissance of Village Deities:

The powerful presence and deep impact of Tamil Village deities in the minds of Village people is a unique and a significant one. The Village deities are the symbols of Village peoples' resurgence. The Village deities express anger, sense of gratitude, and culture of the people of a village. Even though efforts are taken to absorb the local elements, it cannot be made because of the Village deities' resurgence. They are quite popular in villages and this popularity cannot be hidden. The popularity of Village deities can be witnessed at the time of festivals, ceremonies and worship in native villages. For instance the socio-religious protest is spearheaded by the Nadars of south India against the tyranny of caste system. While some of their brethren escaped the clutches of casteism through conversion to Christianity,

the rests of them stood within the Hindu society and fought for their original status in the realm of society¹⁸. It represents an organised struggle against religious segregation and social discrimination. It marked the beginning of the struggle for socio-religious equality and civil liberties. The temples are closely associated with the institution of the caste system.

Conclusion:

To summarise the origin and evolution of Village deities dates back to the pre - historic times and it comes from their day to day life and has its own reason and significance. The deities contain the characteristics which make them unique and identical one. The deities of Tamil Village tradition are worshipped in various forms such as animism, symbol worship, nature worship, hero worship, totemism and spirit worship. They reveal various significant themes and concepts, which are pointed out its nature. It is believed that they can bring drought, infertility and disease, but if they are ritually praised would bring rain, fertility and good health. The reason for the celebration as well as the worship differs from person to person. One may worship for his well being and another for his cattle, and other for agricultural field and other for the protection of village from contagious diseases. Constant desire for their worship is for freedom, equality and dignity to be human like others. There are lots of distresses in their heart against their oppressors and oppressive system. Mostly their deities are historical men and women who have opposed and subverted the values of the unjust caste system. In the meanwhile, Village people popularly address their worship in the name of Village deities. They are unaware of Vedic deities. Also, the deities of Village tradition cannot be included in the Hindu fold.

END NOTES

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