

ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF HINDU WORSHIP AND BELIEFS OF TAMIL PEOPLES DURING EARLY PERIOD – A STUDY

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“Live not in a place where there is no temple” is a common dictum of the Tamils. Temple is a material record marking definite stages in the social, economic, religious and cultural activities. The temples are still important institutions that make man’s life meaningful and purposeful. Religion and temples were inseparably connected with the life of the Tamils. Much human activity was centred around the temples. The temples stand as a living representative of the cultural and spiritual life of the societies. It stands as a living representative of the cultural heritage of the Tamils and symbolized what is best in the fields of civilization.

India is a land of holy shrines and sacred rivers and mountains. The people inhabiting this hallowed land are religious by nature. In India the life of a Hindu and its religion are so entirely mixed up that it is difficult to separate them. The temples from ancient days are the places where every Hindu has to do his puja and worship to the divine. The worship of God in temples purifies the heart, controls the passions, and enables the devotees to remember the Lord always¹. India is distinguished from

other parts of the world. A culture is a difficult to describe as a perfume, but is quite easy to recognize².

Religion played a very important role in the life of a man and the human behavior is largely shaped by religious faiths.³ In Indian society religion has always played an important role. Here everything is done in the name of religion. Both in the urban and rural areas the people believe in religion and worship gods and goddesses.

It is this catholicity of spirit that marks the Tamil culture as well. Ilanko Adigal in his great epic, Silapatikaram refers to the existence in his days of the worship of several deities side by side in the city of Poompukar, and also to festivities connected with Siva, Shanmukha, Thirumal and Indra.⁴ Saint Thirugnanasambandar, praises Siva who constitutes in himself Brahma, Vishnu, and Isan. Saint Tirunavukkarasar, a staunch Saiva devotee refers to Hari, the Lord of Vishnavas as 'One who is extolled by the gods in heaven as His Majesty, the Lord'. Islam was iconoclastic but Indian Muslims often displayed veneration for saints and their tombs that remind one of the Hindu worship of relics. Even today in Tamil Nadu, Hindus flocking to the Dargha at Nagore and the Church at Valankanni. All these are pointers to the continuing tradition of synthesis and harmony that prevailed in India down the ages. It may be mentioned here that Hinduism and Buddhism that were introduced in the countries of South-East Asia never came into conflict with the existing native beliefs and culture. On the other hand, an integration of different cultures had taken place in those countries.

Religion played a predominant role in the Sangam society. It influenced every individual's social thinking and beliefs. Religion of the Sangam age also played a

major role in maintaining harmony in society. This people understood the essence of religion and utilized it to maintain a close relationship with god. Sangam literature was useful to know the religious life of the Tamils. During the Sangam age the worship of traditional gods and Brahminical gods flourished in Tamil Nadu. They also accepted and preached the principles of Buddhism and Jainism.⁵

The religious belief and practices of the Tamil people during the ancient times in Tamil Country has incorporated the pre-Dravidian, Dravidian and Aryan religious beliefs and practices. According to Prof.K.K.Pillai this process of different racial practices in the sphere of religion and commenced by the Sangam age itself.⁶

Ancestor-worship of a limited type has flourished in Tamil country from early times. Among the early Tamils the practice of erecting memorial stones (Nadukal) and hero-stones (Virakkal) had appeared and this practice continued even long after the Sangam age till 11th century A.D. The significant fact pertinent here is that hero-stones became objects of worship. The practice of erecting hero-stones had commenced much earlier than the age of Tholkappiyam. It appears that even worthy ancestors were worshipped as deities.⁷ This ancestor-worship had appeared among the early Tamils by the Sangam age at the latest. This is kind of 'animism' which is essentially the cult of spirits which is imagined to exist in the shape of ghosts and souls. The Sangam literature speaks of ghosts with fierce looking eyes haunting the battlefields. The early Tamils had made offerings to appease them.⁸

Belief in ghosts was obviously connected with the belief in the life after death.⁹ This is also reflected in certain funeral rites. The practice of burying the principal belongings of the dead along with them in urns or open sites was a custom among the Tamils for ages. Another practice was the worship of nature, 'Naturism'.

Cosmic forces like winds, rivers, stars, plants, animals etc. were worshipped. Tree worship, animal worship was common in the Sangam age.

The worship of the hollows of trees was also a primitive form of worship. Certain groups of people worshipped the snakes in the hollows of the trees. The well-known Nagas of the Sangam age were snake worshippers. People also worshipped the gods seated under the trees. The Lord Siva used to reside under the shadow of banyan tree. For the convenience of worship, a platform was constructed around the tree. This platform was called Ambalam. Later, this system developed and certain gods were known with certain trees like Kadambu for Murugan, Kayambu for Thirumal, Konrai and Vilvam for Siva etc. Later these ambalams developed into religious institutions or temples. Thus the future temples had a humble beginning from the ambalam. The banyan tree also had political importance. The village assemblies in the early period met under the shadow of these trees and passed resolutions pertaining to the village.¹⁰

The division of the country into Kurinji, Mullai, Marudam, Neidal and Palai based on geographical condition boosted regional worship. The hunters of the Kurinji region worshipped Murugan. He resided on the hills. Thirumugattupadai gave detailed description about the temple of Murugan. He was the favourite god of the Tamils. People affectionately called him as Kumaran. The shepherds worshipped Tirumal. Tirumal was the sacred god. The followers of Murugan also worshipped Tirumal. The people of Marudam worshipped Indran. The agriculturists who depended on rain for cultivation worshipped the thunder, the lightning, the clouds and the rain as gods. The regular festivals of the Chola rulers were called Indra Vila. The

fishermen of the Neithal region worshipped Varuna, the god of the wide Ocean. The Durga or Kottavai was the god of the desert of Palai. She was the symbol of victory.

After Aryan influence, the pattern of worship became different. After a bath, the Brahmins chanted mantras and offered puja to Murugan. This deity became transformed even by the Sangam age into the Aryanised Subramaniya, Sknda, Somaskanda, Kartikeya.¹¹

Vishnu was as prominent as Siva in the Sangam epoch. There is a reference in a poem in the Ahananuru to Mal and Siva as the two great deities. But there was no Vaishnavism or Saivism as such – ‘Vishnu’ as such does not occur in any of the early Tamil works. He was referred to only as ‘Mal’ (meaning great), also as Mayon, Mayan and Mayavan.¹²

Brahma is mentioned as the creator of the Universe and is described as ‘Mudiyavan’ and Mamudu Mudalvan. But prominence given to him was less and temples to him were also few. Vinayaka (god with elephant face) was also there among the early Tamils.

A good number of village gods are there in the Hindu pantheon. Ordinary folks worship such gods even today and there are no Brahmin priests to perform the duties of the priests in the temples constructed for them as in the temples of the great gods like Siva and Vishnu. Gods and goddesses like Ayanar, Sudalai, Ankalaparameswar and Mariamman are some who are prominent among those in the lesser pantheon. During the early period, the lower caste people were not permitted to enter the temples of high castes Saivites and Vaishnavites. This environment led to

the birth, growth and popularity of the village gods among the rural people. According to Henry Whitehead, 'One of the deities worshipped in almost every village in the Tamil country is Mariamman or Mari (The goddess of small pox).¹³ Her function is to inflict small pox while in anger or to ward it off while appeased. Mariamman also means rain goddess (Mari-rain). Therefore Mariamman is also an agricultural deity. In fact all agricultural deities all over South India are exclusively female, because the idea of fertility is connected with the female.¹⁴

There are a number of instances to prove that the Tamils had attained a high standard of culture, morally and spiritually, even before thousands of years. The Tamil word for culture is 'Panaptu', the verb for the word is 'Panpatu'-meaning to cultivate. So the word 'Panpatu' implies the cultivation of the spirit of morality and divinity for higher attainments.¹⁵ The earliest extant Tamil grammatical treatise 'Tholkappiyam' deals with principles of life followed by the Tamils. The work classifies marriage into 'Kalavu and Karpu'. Kalavu denotes the premarital love-life while 'Karpu' the chaste life led by the man and woman after their marriage. Hospitality and entertaining guests was one of the chief domestic virtues.

Another aspect is the spiritualistic temper of the Tamils. The early merchants carried with them their religious beliefs, traditions and practices. In the wake of the traders, a considerable number of Brahmins and Buddhists proceeded to these countries. These people had no ulterior political motive. The dissemination of their sacred knowledge and the securing of more adherents to their faiths was their sole concern.¹⁶

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