Introduction
Folk religious tradition has a rich past. It is deep rooted from the worship of nature in the form of fertility cult. The ancient society had given preference to mother goddess worship. World Civilisations such as Sumerian, Assyrian, Mesopotamian and Indus Valley reveal the prominence of the worship of mother goddesses. They worshipped food grain, since it is their source of living. They were all deified in different forms such as foodgrains, human and metal images.\(^1\) The immatured crops in the form of *Mulaippari* are prepared a few days before the celebration starts.\(^2\) Different types of stones, which resemble the parts of human body in the form of anthromorphic elements, are also worshipped by the folk people. Agriculture is the main activity of folk people. Hence they have perceived the presence of divine spirit within food grains and its supportive natural elements such as weather, rain, sun and other forces.\(^3\)

In due course they also began to worship the deceased heroes, who lost their lives for the protection of village.\(^4\) Among the world religious traditions the Tamil tradition is an impressive one. For the past two thousand and five hundred years or more, the religion of the

\(^3\) ibid, pp. 41 – 42.
\(^4\) ibid, p. 42.
Tamil society has consisted of two types of worshippers. The first is comprised of about ten percent of the population interested in agamic religion. The content and fashion of their religions have changed from time to time ranging from the spectrum of Jainism, Buddhism, Saivism and Vaishnavism. 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.

Village gods like Aiyanar and Madurai Viran were once human beings were transformed into deities due to their heroic activities. Likewise Mariamman and host of other deities have also transformed into deities. Most of them even now receive sacrifices of cocks and goats. A few decades ago the more ‘powerful’ of the gods and goddesses received the sacrifice of buffaloes. The people considered that the local gods and goddesses are powerful. There is a saying even in the sophisticated and educated circles that: ‘This local god is powerful’: ‘That local goddess is dangerously touchy’.

0.1. Theme of the Research

The trend today is to Sanskritise the deities of folk tradition so as to give way for the practices of the temples of Vedic tradition. Religiously the deities of folk tradition are not a welcome feature to the Vedic tradition. However in a changing economic scenario, the priests of Vedic tradition\(^5\) are ready to render their services to these temples as priest. They have adopted different means and strategies.

\(^5\) They are Brahmin priests. Here after they are referred as Vedic priest.
For the purpose of this study, the process adopted is called Sanskritisation. In this the deities of folk tradition are transformed physically to match the deities of Vedic tradition. New meaning, message and significance are attached to the folk deities. Folk deities are brought to the ambit of Vedic tradition either by establishing new blood relationship or through the silent revolution of the Hindu revivalists.

Folk deities are the outcome of the feelings and thoughts of folk people. These deities are worshipped not only by the folk people but also some of the socially backward people in accordance with their social and cultural settings. But Vedic religion assimilated the elements of folk religious tradition through the ages and made it as a part of the popular Hindu religion. Gradually the deities of folk tradition are being Sanskritised for aiming at total Hindu revivalism. Keeping this in mind the study analyses the various aspects of Sanskritisation resulting in Hindu revivalism in the pluralistic context of India.

0.2. Location of Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu lies on the eastern side of the southern end of the Indian sub-continent. Generally speaking, Tamil Nadu’s three geographic zones, from east to west, are: littoral (seashore), plains (used largely for agriculture), and mountainous region. The Tamil country called Tamil Nadu lies to the south of the Mysore plateau in

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the north and northwest, and the Tirupathi hills in the northeast. It is bounded by the Indian Ocean and on the east by the Bay of Bengal. The small island of Ceylon situated like a footrest to the southeast of peninsular India is a geographical and cultural continuation of Tamil Nadu, though it has been generally politically independent.

0.3. History of Tamils' Religion

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. They were evolved in the social context of the Tamils based upon the five geographical divisions which are popularly known in Tamil literature as ‘Tinai’ (Eco-bio power land stratification). The gods and goddesses were Cheyon of Kurinji, Mayon or Mal of Mullai, Venthan of Marutham, Nediyon (Varanan or Varunan) of Neithal and Kotravai of Palai ever since.

10 Thirumurukattruppadai 206 – 8 (N. C. Kanthaiah, Thamizhakam, Amiltham Pathippagam, Chennai, 2003, p. 105);
Kurunthogai Kadavul Vaaazthu (T. Sundararaj, Social and Cultural aspects of Tamil Nadu, Sundar Publications, Tiruchirappalli, 2006, p. 30);
13 Pattinappalai 86 – 99.
The Vedic priests adopted various means to Sanskritise the deities of folk tradition. Even though there are diversified characteristics between the Vedic and the folk tradition, they want to induct these deities in their spectrum, for they created various *sthalapuranas* which, emphasise the relation between these gods and goddesses with any one of the gods and goddesses of Vedic tradition. For example, a male deity called Kuttandavar is worshipped in many parts of the Tamil country, especially in South Arcot district. The image consists of a head like a big mask with a rubicund face and lion's teeth projecting downwards outside the mouth from the angles of the upper jaw. The legend said about the creation of Kuttandavar the god of Indra is for the crime of murdering a Vedic priest, became incarnated in the form of Kuttandavar, and a curse was laid upon him that his body leaving only the head. These types of stories must be carefully examined, because they are regarded as the *kuladevatas* by the oppressed and downtrodden people. In these circumstances they also altered the structure of these deities into either degraded or cursed form.

Hence these changes have been made only on the popular deities. For example, Mariamman, another deity of subalterns, is highly influenced by the Vedic rituals. Actually she has a terrible exposure and is garlanded with skulls. But recently, the skull garland has replaced by the lemon garland. Her terrible look has been altered into a pleasant one. Sometimes these restructuring processes led to the degradation of the deities. When they stress the holiness of the deities of Vedic tradition at one side, at the same
time, they denied the holiness of the deities of the folk tradition. They have described the gods and goddesses of folk tradition either as watching deities to the deities of Vedic religion or they related these deities with contagious diseases.

The process of Sanskritisation can also be seen in the popular temples dedicated to the deities of folk religion. For example, the increase in the number of devotees to Samayapuram, Punnainallur, Vazhangaiman Mariamman temples boosted the financial condition. It attracts the Vedic priests to switchover their interest to Mariamman on account of the financial benefits. They not only dominate during the time of worship, but also on various other occasions. They have introduced the custom of *Kumbhabhishekam*. In addition to this, they have made Mariamman as a *Suddhadevatas* (non-vegetarian deity).

With regard to the temples of folk tradition Vinayakar, Murugan, Iyyappan and other host of Vedic deities are replaced the deities of folk tradition such as Aiyanar, Madurai Viran and Karuppannasamy. Even the people of the folk tradition have begun to use some customs and habits of higher castes in order to raise their social status.

**0.4. Tinai based deities**

The folk deities were evolved on the base of the five geographical divisions which is popularly known in Tamil literature
as ‘Tinai’. The Paripatal and Tirumurukkatruppadai seem to represent the transition from the worship of tribal folk 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-ninth centuries AD became crystallised as the Puranic Vaishnava and Saiva religions. It was a new regional synthesis of Puranic forms in which the northern Sanskritic elements assumed a dominant position while the local or folk cults and their deities either got completely merged or remained as major components of the Puranic pantheon.

Tolkappiyam in Porul, Ahathinai Sutra five located the climate to environmental zone (Tinai) on the basis of agamic deities worshipped by the early Tamils. Science and religion met in this agnomic religious ground. Mayon (Thirumal – ‘mal’ is cloud, and ‘Thiru’ is sacred as per Tamil context) was the chief worshipping deity of Vedic Aryans was a pre-Vedic and non-Vedic God. Nediyon was the chief deity of Neithal (coastal) belt. As Nediyon is the god of water (Aazhiyon – God of Sea) he is also called Narayana (Nara-water and ayana-sleeping). Venthan was the chief worshipping deity of the riverine agrarian belt. Venthan means one who encompasses and protects. In literature of succeeding ages, Siva is called Venthan. In Manickavasakar’s Thiruvvasagam, Sivapurananam song-one of the lines use the term Venthan for Siva. Likewise in gnomic literature ‘Kontre Venthan’, the title of the book refers to

16 Champakalakshmi, Journal of Tamil Studies (JTS), 2004, p. 4
17 M. Sunder Raj, JTS, 1972, p. 34.
Siva. Therefore Tolkappiyar's Venthan$^{18}$ the chief deity of Marutham, of the riverine and agrarian belt is Siva and not Indra. Under the wand of Sanskritisation of early middle ages in Tamil Nadu, the medieval commentators who lived after 10$^{th}$ century AD missed the key-note themes of Tinai social structure and agamic religion of non-Vedic religious base of early Tamils. They inadvertently inducted Indra, the chief Rig-Vedic deity of Aryans$^{19}$ in Tolkappiyam in place of Siva. This in turn, with mesmeric impact had brainwashed the Tamil scholar ever since. Hence they miss Siva in Tolkappiyam. 'Varuna' is Nediyon, i.e. God of Waters. Venthan (Siva) is God of Space who is encompassing and protecting the cosmos. Siva is also called Veliyan (Space) in the context of Sangam literature.

Vishnu, in Tamil context is not only the God of Sky, is also called Mayon or Thirumal. He is related to rain. Vishnu, Siva, Muruga, Sakthi, Lakshmi, Krishna, Balarama are non-Vedic and pre-Vedic gods opposed by the Indo Aryans. These deities had a later admission in Vedic religion.$^{20}$ Evidences can be had in Vedic literature.$^{21}$

P.L. Swamy$^{22}$ has pointed out that in the worship of north Indian goddesses like Lajjagowri, one can see the synchronisation of the cult of the Kotravai, the Dravidian mother goddess (which also

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18 Porul Ahathinai, Sutra 5, Line 3.
19 Indra was invoked in numerous contexts for help by Rig-Vedic Aryans to destroy the fort cities of native non-Aryans.
20 K. Nedunchezhiyan & R. Sakkubai, op. cit, p. 28.
seems to be the Harappan mother goddess), the cult of the forest goddess in the Vanavasi Kotarimata at Lothal (which is the ‘Kanamar Selvi’ of Sangam poems), the cult of the Paleolithic mother (Palaiyol) and the latter Aryan – Dravidian fused cult of Renuka (the Sanskritised form of Ellamman or Mariamman).

In India, when Dravidians excelled in civilisation it attracted the eyes of Aryans, when they began to penetrate towards south. Slowly they influenced the whole society. Socially, politically, culturally and economically Vedic people became stronger and influential. In order to dominate people, they Sanskritised all walks of life and through which they tried to attain the formation of Hindu revivalism. In Tamil Nadu it also occurs in the form of Sanskritisation of the deities of folk tradition. It is clearly visible when a closer look on the puranic story and temples of the popular deities of folk tradition is made. The Vedic people admitted folk deities in their scriptures and puranic stories in due course which gave a way to the conversion of the deities of folk tradition into Vedic group.

0.5. Need for the Study

Both foreign and indigenous scholars have done research on the deities of folk tradition. They have done in various centres such as Folklore Resource and Research Centre (FRRC), St Xavier’s College, Palayamkottai; Department of Sociology, Tamil University, Thanjavur have focused their attention on major folk deities. But the
present study makes an attempt to bring out the various facets of Sanskritisation and Hindu revivalism.

0.6. Hypotheses

1. The growth of Hinduism in modern days is due to the absorption of various local folk religious elements.
2. Differences are noticed between Vedic and folk deities.
3. Sanskritisation of the deities of folk tradition is well-planned.
4. Sanskritisation of folk deities is the result of Hindu revivalism.

0.7. Objectives of the Study

- To study the origin and history of the deities of folk tradition in Tamil Nadu
- To analyse the process of Sanskritisation of the deities of folk tradition
- To evaluate the popularity of the deities of folk tradition
- To study the philosophy behind the methods of sacrifices of the deities of folk tradition, and
- To assess the multi-religious features of India

0.8. Methodology

Sources obtained from field study are apart from primary and secondary sources. Findings are given proper place in the form of charts, tables and statistical diagrams in order to make the study more quantitatively. Interviews, questionnaire methods are also used to realise the objectives mentioned. A questionnaire was administered to find out the importance of Folk deities in relation to
Vedic religion. It had been applied to the public in every districts of Tamil Nadu. From their response, a great deal of information is collected. SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) is used to analyse their responses.

The primary sources have been collected from literature, epigraphy, folk lore, proverbs, legends, oral stories, government orders and interviews. Besides, the information has also been secured through conversation with the priests of folk tradition, laymen and some Vedic priests about the features of worship.

Books like Henry Whitehead’s ‘The Village Gods of South India’, Ziegenbalg’s ‘Genealogy of the South Indian Gods’, David Dean Shulman’s ‘Tamil Temple Myths – Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition’, H. Krishna Sasthri’s ‘South Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses’, Kinsley David’s ‘Hindu Goddesses’, Eveline Meyer’s Ankalaparamecuvvari – A Goddess of Tamil Nadu Her myths and cult, S. Shanmughasundaram’s Sudalaimadan Vazhipadu – Samuga Maanidaviyai Aaivu and Naattuppura Theivangal, S. Sakthivel’s Nattupuraviyal – Oar Arimugam, T. Lourdhu’s Sanangalin Saamigal, V. Arasu, & K. Parthibaraja, Nattar Saamigal (Information on Folk deities collected from different parts of Tamil Nadu through field work), and Abbe. J. A. Dubois’s ‘Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies’ contain a great amount of materials, which are necessary to understand the subject, especially in its relation to other forms of Hinduism. Information from the secondary sources
like newspapers, journals, published and non-published theses, e-sources and other materials are taken into account for the research.

All the previous studies are consulted to consolidate the beliefs and practices of folk people. They have used various primary and secondary sources, based on that they have done the works meticulously. But, these are only on major deities. While the present study aims at two different angles. One is to analyse the evolution, customs, ceremonies of the folk deities and second is to analyse the Sanskritisation process by which Hindu revivalism is taking place. The study wants to highlight the above mentioned aspects.

0.9. Design of the Study

The study is a thematic one. The methodology adopted is analytical and critical in character based on the sources collected.

The first chapter entitled 'Evolution of Folk Religious Tradition' examines the origin and evolution of folk religious tradition. The concept of folk deities is not a new phenomenon but is as old as human beings. The evolution of Tamil folk tradition can be related to other civilisations. The elementary conception such as animism, ancestral worship, nature worship, hero worship, snake worship and symbol worship were common in various civilisation of the world. Normally the folk religious systems originated from the lifestyles of rural masses. The Tamil folk tradition is very much similar to the features of other civilisations. The study also gives a historical narration of the deities of folk tradition and their recent resurgence.
The second chapter sketches the folk deities and their determining features in relation to traditional Hinduism. The following are the determining features of the deities of Tamil folk tradition such as domestic nature, anthromorphic elements and cruel nature. Folk deities are identified with a particular region. On many occasions they are personified with regional attire and identity. For instance, majority of folk deities are linked with the names of particular villages such as Hosuramma, Huskaramma, Ellamma, Sellandiamma, Neruramma. These names suggest the bond between deities and the names of the villages. The folk deities represent more anthromorphic elements such as big stomach and possession of dangerous weapons. Big stomach symbolises them as mother of all living being and possession of dangerous weapons represents as the protector of village from ghostly dangers. Majority of folk deities do not give a pleasant look. They are not decorated with rich ornaments. In order to reveal the day to day hard turmoil of the folk people, the facial expressions of the deities are carved. There is no proper time table and agamas to carryout pujas and rituals. In traditional Hinduism, there are five pujas with elaborate mantras. Whereas in the worship of folk deities there is no such time scale and people worship as and when they like to do so. Simple materials like Karpuram and ordinary prayer are enough to worship folk deities. Preponderance is given to the worship of female divinities. When people worship these folk deities one can see the blood sacrifices and various kinds of self tortures.
The third chapter is attempting to pinpoint the unified and diversified characteristics of the deities of Vedic and folk tradition. Very few characteristics are similar to both traditions. The intra-rivalry character and methods of propitiation with sacrifices and rituals are a few similar characteristics. The study also analyses more diversified characteristics. Some of them are the differences found in regional popularity and the employment of non-Brahmin priests for the ritual of consecration. Folk deities are unique in the concept of regional identity. The Vedic deities are normally personified as the creator, destroyer and protector of the universe. Whereas, the folk deities are the symbolic representation of particular village’s life and culture. Every folk deity is assigned with a duty to a particular region. When folk deities are worshipped, one can sensitise the active involvement of the non-Brahmin pujaris. They belong to socially backward castes such as Paraiyar, Pallar, Arunthathiyars, Nadars, Vannars, Kallars. They think the worship of folk deities as their traditional right.

The fourth chapter explains the methods of Sanskritisation of the folk deities. The installation of Vedic deities in the temples of folk tradition, restructuring of sthalapuranas are some of the methods. Influence of Agamas in constructing temples of folk tradition and the agamic forms of worship in folk temples are also taking place. The process of Sanskritisation is made by even changing the stories of Vedic deities with folk deities. Majority of the Dravidian female deities are related to Lord Siva. For instance once 101 demons made penance to Siva and got his grace that no one
should destroy them. After that they waged wars frequently and killed the people without mercy. Lord Siva interfered but he could not devastate them. With the advice given by Lord Vishnu, Siva entered into sexual union with the wives of 101 Asuras. They gave birth to 101 daughters caused the death of 101 Asuras. All the above 101 daughters were sent to earth and worshipped as goddesses by folk people.

Mariamman, a popular folk deity, had her origin by the curse of Jamadagni Ma Rishi. Another name given to Mariamman is Renukadevi, venerated as one of the avatars of Parvathi Devi. Sudalaimadan, another deity was made as the son of Lord Siva. These stories have cultural and symbolic significance also. Women folk from the lower castes were subjected to the sexual exploitation by the Vedic priests in the name of gods and rituals. Same as the Vedic gods entering into sexual relation with Asura woman. Sanskritisation began during Vedic times, when non-Aryan chieftains accepted the rituals of Vedic people and thus achieved social status for themselves and their subjects. It was a practice in different stages of History of India. Thus Hinduism spread to different areas with a Vedic mode of thoughts and practices. In this way cultural transfiguration could be seen not only on the day to day life of the people but also on social norms, political institutions and media.

The fifth chapter analyses the dominant features of Sanskritisation on the rituals and social life of the Tamils. Vedic people consider the right to worship as their exclusive right. The
Vedic temples became the centres of political hegemony under the aegis of Brahmanism. Vedic people throughout the history have controlled culture, society, economy and politics. In order to exercise their control over vast majority they resorted various measures, such as transfiguration of the deities of folk tradition. It is a silent revolution brought forth under the guise of revival of Hinduism.

The sixth chapter explains the emergence of Hindu revivalism. The silent revolution as noted in the previous chapter made the people to realise the need for religious identity. As a result the revivalists are giving more popularity to the worship of folk deities and to accommodate such deities in the spectrum of Hinduism. But it led to two types of thinking. The revivalists are satisfied with the Sanskritisation process as their own. Whereas conservatives of folk tradition conceived this as the ritualistic domination of the upper class and willfully made to loose the identity of the folk culture and rituals associated with them. In various places, they started movements to de-Sanskritise their deities and religious tradition. Under the leadership of Vaikundaswamigal, Ayothidasar, Bharathidasan, EV Ramasamy, Vanamamalai and the conservatives registered their protest. In these circumstances, the Sanskritisation of folk deities is to be carefully perceived.

Finally the conclusion gives the process of Hindu revivalism. The non-Brahmins in the name of Hindu revivalism are brought in to the fold of Vedic ideology. Though Hindu revivalism has already happened in different spheres, now it enters into the revival of the
folk deities. The insular characteristics of folk deities are subjected to the cultural ideological invasion. Accordingly, one has to find dualism in the characteristics of folk deities. Positively constructed, they present a pluralistic character. This pluralistic character is considered as revivalism. Hence, the revivalism is not a willfully accepted norm of the folk tradition.