CHAPTER - III

Characteristics of the Deities of Vedic and Folk Tradition
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CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DEITIES OF VEDIC AND FOLK TRADITION

This is to analyse the characteristics of the deities of Vedic and folk traditions. The Vedic and folk deities are similar in certain aspects and differed in many aspects.

3.1. Unified

The common aspect which can be seen in the both deities is mutual war between them. Both folk and Vedic deities are rivals in nature. They have some territorial limits, in which they never allow other deities. There are many instances to know about the aspect of gods at war. The Vedic puranas are mentioning nothing but the wars waged by one god over another. In many occasions Lord Siva waged war with Lord Vishnu and vice versa. The Hindu triads wage war over Indra, Varuna and other lesser deities of Vedic religion.

The same can be seen within the deities of folk tradition. They are also martial in character. They have some territorial limit, in which they never allow other deities to enter. The minor difference between folk deities and Vedic deities is on the expression. The conflicting nature of Vedic deities is expressed outwardly and one can assess through the Vedic literature, whereas the conflict between folk deities are not directly mentioned in literature but by pujaris and saamiyadis.
3.1.1. Pivot of human life

Both the deities are looking at the objects essential for human life and its development. The lower deities of Vedic religion are commonly associated with nature. Even the popular deities are also associated with the controlling factors such as rain, climate, thunder, storm and other natural calamities. When they are propitiated with rituals and ceremonies, they blessed the people with the prosperities. People strongly believe the presence of natural forces within these deities.

The same thing can be noticed in the worship of folk deities. The Vedic deities are represented with having greater control over the cosmic elements, where as the folk deities play a multi-level role such as a watching deity, god of prosperity, god of harvest and restoration from contagious diseases. Hence the deities of folk and Vedic tradition can be looked as pivot of human life.

3.1.2. Propitiated with sacrifices and rituals

Both the deities are propitiated with sacrifices and rituals. But, the sacrifices and rituals to the deities of Vedic tradition are highly expensive and complex, whereas the sacrifices and rituals to the deities of folk tradition are less and simple expensive. In Vedic

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3 ‘Festivals, Offerings and Ceremonies to the Deities of Folk Tradition with Special Reference to Mariamman’, Research article presented by S. Xavier, in the National Seminar on Role of Temples in Promoting Spiritualism and Materialism in Tamil Nadu at Annamalai University on 11th and 12th November 2005, p. 14.
tradition devotees are prescribed to offer materials. But in Folk tradition people will decide what they like to give based on their economic condition.

3.1.3. The importance of the priestly class

Another noticeable feature can be seen in both the traditions is there due importance to the priestly class. But, the role of priests or pujaris in the worship of folk deities is participative nature. 4 Both the people and pujaris joined together and perform the rituals. 5 A democratic nature can be sensitised at the time of worship of folk deities, whereas, the role of Vedic priests in the worship of Vedic tradition is complex, and much importance to priest.

3.2. Diversified

The nature and method of worship of the deities of folk tradition are contrary to the deities of Vedic tradition. In order to worship these deities non-vegetarian items are offered. Majority of the deities of folk tradition are female deities. The structure of the temples and deities are in rude and rough form. There is no regularity in conducting pujas. Most of the deities are associated with any one of the contagious diseases like small – pox and cholera. 6 It is necessary to note that the deities of folk tradition highly degraded by the Vedic puranas. Sometimes, they made these deities as subsidiary deities, watching deities or as an attendant. The

4 ibid, p. 15.
5 idem.
character of Vedic religion is assimilation of every aspect. With this assimilation Hinduism included the deities of subaltern as divine beings. In the temples dedicated to the deities of subaltern Vedic priests rarely officiate. Animal sacrifices are generally offered to the folk deities, especially when the village is threatened with epidemic or with serious scarcity or famine.

**Chart No. 8**

**Differences between the Folk and Vedic Deities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Ferocious - Mild look</th>
<th>Simple - Elaborate rituals</th>
<th>Simple - Strong literary support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above bar chart No. 8 represents the differences which are found between the deities of Folk and Vedic tradition. Nearly 65 percent of the respondents pointed out the main difference on the basis of simple and elaborate rituals to the Folk and Vedic deities respectively. Some people expressed their opinion on ferocious and mild look, simple and strong literary support to the deities of Folk and Vedic tradition.\(^7\)

\(^7\) Based on questionnaire detail and field study.
The popularity and growing strength of devotees towards the deities of subaltern attracted the Vedic people. These temples receive more offerings from the devotees. The devotees genuinely offered their offerings and it increased the financial conditions of these temples. That is one of the reasons for why they are pulled towards Sanskritisation.

3.2.1. Distinction between Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic Hinduism

Yet it is equally mistaken to overstate the unity of Hinduism. Impatient dismissal of the concepts of Vedic religion and folk traditions as uselessly distortive, as well as their uncritical adoption, have both contributed to misunderstanding popular Hinduism and its relationship with Indian society. It is crucial to note relationship that is frequently reflected social inequality, expressed and constructed in the religious domain by asserting that their beliefs and practices, and their group’s are superior to others. Hence there are significant social factors that generate and sustain a measure of institutional separation between different bodies of religious belief and practice. The temples of Vedic deities like Vishnu and Siva, for example, tend to attract more high-caste worshippers, and they are mainly served by Vedic priests, who make only vegetarian offerings and use Sanskrit as the ritual language. By contrast, the temples of

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8 Personal observation.
9 Interview with Vasudevan on 20th September 2005 at Samayapuram.
many other deities tend to be patronised by the low castes, and they generally have non-Brahmin priests, who make both vegetarian and non-vegetarian offerings and use vernacular languages in ritual.\textsuperscript{11}

There are complex historical reasons for such institutional separation, but the relevant sociological point is that the separation is reinforced by the higher-status groups'\textsuperscript{11}. The need to differentiate themselves from their inferiors by patronising institutions, like the Vedic temples, which are considered as superior. Moreover, the existence of institutional separation is often taken as proof of the validity of an evaluative distinction between Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic religion.

Institutional separation, however, is always incomplete, precisely because the beliefs and practices of popular Hinduism are always interconnected and rested on common structures of relationships.\textsuperscript{12} Hence the measure of separation that does exist cannot sustain the claim that the religion comprises two (or more) separate strata.

3.2.2. Kinds of offerings

The materials offered to the folk and Vedic deities are differed. Expensive offerings are made to propitiate the deities of Vedic tradition. The worshippers of Vedic tradition are great enough to offer materials such gold, silver, sandalwood, ghee and other costly materials. Whereas the folk people offer two types of

\textsuperscript{11} C. J. Fuller, \textit{The Camphor Flame – Popular Hinduism and Society in India}, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1992, p. 28. (FRRC)

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{ibid}, p. 28.
offerings, to the folk deities such as less expensive materials and ordinary materials. Less expensive materials such as goat and cock offerings, offerings of harvest materials and other edible materials forms folk type of worship. Sometimes, ordinary materials like flowers, *karpuram* and other things are offered. This is the difference can be noticed throughout Tamil Nadu.

**Chart No. 9**

**Offerings to the deities of Folk tradition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>West</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>East</th>
<th>North</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vegetarian Food</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Vegetarian Food</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above bar chart No. 9 vividly explains the type of offerings to the deities of folk tradition. Small number of respondents expresses their concern over vegetarian food offerings; whereas a good number of people supported the non-vegetarian and also both types of food materials to the deities.\(^{13}\)

**3.2.3. Blood sacrifice**

Folk deities are almost universally worshipped with animal sacrifices. Buffaloes, sheep, goats, pigs and fowls are freely offered to her, sometimes in thousands. These animal sacrifices are

\(^{13}\) Based on questionnaire detail and field study.
symbolising the defeat of enemy such as demons. But this custom is curiously modified by the influence of Vedic religion by a marginal level. The villages developed an idea that the shedding of blood is low and irreligious.\textsuperscript{14}

Government efforts became vain in spite of various orders prohibiting people from practicing cruel ordeals. No such order should, however, be issued on any occasion unless it is practicable for the District Superintendent of Police or other responsible officer of the police to reach the spot in time with a sufficient force to secure the enforcement of the order without undue risk of a breach of the peace.

The Government Order No. 1092 prescribes the practices to be prohibited and discouraged as following in the Annexure I & II refer the practices\textsuperscript{15} which are likely to prove dangerous to human life, health or safety.

“Hook swinging, Hook dragging i.e. dragging ears by hooks inserted into the body other than toy cars, carrying of kavadies by means of hooks inserted into the body other than toy kavadies, and piercing the muscles of the body with metal rods” are followed.

“Piercing any part of the body with ‘Vels’ i.e. pieces of metal wire, Piercing any part of the body with needles or small hooks and

\textsuperscript{14} Henry Whitehead, The Village Deities of South India, Madras, 1907, p. 18.

\textsuperscript{15} G. O. No. 1092, 27\textsuperscript{th} October 1934, Public (General) Department, Government of Madras, Hook – Swinging, hook – dragging, etc Prohibition – Further instructions – Issued. (State Archives, Chennai)
attaching small articles thereto, and walking or lying on nails”\textsuperscript{16} are also followed.

The District Superintendent of Police, Thanjavur (N.H. Jagadisha Aiyyar) reports that there are some important festivals shortly to take place at which hook-swinging and allied practices have been taking place for some years. For example the Subramanyaswami festival at Ettukudi village, Nagapattinam taluk, was to take place from 25\textsuperscript{th} to 29\textsuperscript{th} April 1934. He reported that at the Nellukkadai Mariamman festival at Nagapattinam which was due to take place on 6\textsuperscript{th} May 1934 the pilgrim drag temple cars by passing hooks through the muscles of their bodies pass through their tongues, drive small needles into the body and walk on sandals in which a number of sharply pointed iron nails were fixed.\textsuperscript{17} One man named Rajagopala Iyer died belonging to the Sowrashtra community while carrying \textit{kavadi} with a metal \textit{alagu} stuck in his tongue.\textsuperscript{18}

They are likely to take place only at Anbil and Samayapuram in Lalgudi taluk, Andimadam in Udaiyarpalayam taluk and Karur in Karur taluk.\textsuperscript{19} Hook-swinging and hook-dragging are practically non-existent in these districts and if at any time they do occur only one or two men at the most take part in them.

\textsuperscript{16} ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Camp Confl. No. 51 / 34 dated 15\textsuperscript{th} April 1934, Ref. My Camp Confdl. No. 49 / 34 dated 5\textsuperscript{th} April 1934 ER Wood Esq. MC, ICS, District Magistrate, Thanjavur. (State Archives, Chennai)
\textsuperscript{18} ‘Died while carrying Kavadi – Tragic end of a devotee’ in the Indian Express, Madras edition on 27\textsuperscript{th} April 1934.
\textsuperscript{19} Magisterial Department, RC D2, No. 697 / M – 34, Station: Trichinopoly dated the 27\textsuperscript{th} June 1934. (State Archives, Chennai)
3.2.4. Dreadful appearance

The folk deities give a dreadful appearance. In most occasions, they are symbolised with rubicund face, horrible eyes, unfitted hands and possession of dangerous weapons and on the whole they give fearful appearance to the worshippers. Though few deities of Vedic tradition gave the same look, is not a consideration by the worshippers. In this aspect, the folk deities diversified with the Vedic deities.

3.2.5. Regional popularity

Few exceptions i.e. except Hinduised folk deities all are having regional popularity. Deities such as Mariamman, Ellamman, and male deities such as Aiyanar, Murugan are worshipped by the people all over Tamil Nadu with its local elements. These deities also represented local elements of their respective villages. Each is a local divinity, attached to the village and revered for that reason.²⁰

Folk deities are related with regional culture and societal background,²¹ whereas, the Vedic deities are not associated with a particular place. Though the names of folk deities are commonly addressed by the people with names of particular region, they are prefixed or suffixed with the names of village or a place.

Folk deities have no relation to the universe. They symbolise only the facts of village life. They are related not to great world forces, but with ordinary diseases like cholera, smallpox and other

cattle diseases. They are related not with the cosmic deities such as Indra, Varuna and Devas, but to ordinary asuras, demons and evil forces connected with particular villages. Their nature is differed only in great temples dedicated, where they are associated with the natural forces such as rain and natural disorders.

The domestic nature of folk deity is revealed at the time of worship. The date of worship and the method of worship differ from one place to other. There are fixed time to worship the great tradition, whereas the worship of folk deities is not like that. Their conception and the method of worship are in domestic nature.

The much diversified aspect can be seen between folk and Vedic deities in puranas and mythology. They are referred as cursed being by the deities of Vedic tradition for their disobedience, misconduct and other reasons. When they are integrated with Vedic tradition, the folk deities would become obedient deities.

3.2.6. Role of the non-Brahmin priests

At the time of worship of folk deities, the role of non-Brahmin priests are worth to be mentioned. Priests are selected from Pallar, Paraiyar, Arunthathiyars, Naavithar, Vannar, Nadar communities. They perform all ceremonies and rituals. They offer materials directly to the deities. They are not traditional priests, but normally persons of well behaviour and acceptable personality are appointed as priests. They have commanded folk deities to do favour in many

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22 Henry Whitehead, op. cit, p. 17.
23 T. Paramasivan, op. cit, p. 148.
occasions. One may frighten the role of *pujaris* at the time of worship of folk deities.\(^24\)

The following bar chart No. 10 gives a detail on the determining factors of the worship of folk tradition. When the respondents interrogated about the determining factor of the worship of folk tradition 50, 44, 45, 32 were identified as caste based worship in western, southern, eastern and northern districts respectively. Maximum number of respondents shows economic background as the determinant. The environmental aspect also plays a vital role as the determining factor.\(^25\) Thus, caste based worship and economic background of a particular village determine the worship of folk tradition.

**Chart No. 10**

**Determining factor of the worship of Folk tradition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Caste Based Worship</th>
<th>Economic Background</th>
<th>Environmental Aspect</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A landmark difference between the folk tradition and Vedic tradition is about the Vedic priests. Only the Vedic people are the priest’s in the Vedic tradition. But in the folk tradition non-

\(^{24}\) Personal observation.

\(^{25}\) Based on questionnaire detail and field study.
Brahmins are the priests. Deities of both traditions termed as Hindu gods yet, the Vedic people show their partial treatment to the deities of folk tradition. They are worshipping popular Hindu triads and other divine beings, but they do not care about the deities of folk tradition such as Mariamman, Kaliyamman, Madurai Viran, Aiyannar because, these are worshipped by the low caste and untouchables. The low caste reason is not prime reason but there are various reasons for the isolation of Vedic priests in the worship.

3.2.7. Priority to Gender

This is the vital diversified characteristics, which can be seen widely. Majority of the deities are male in Vedic tradition, but it is contrary in folk tradition. Even, female are given place in Vedic tradition they are not revered much honour. In the folk tradition female deities are popular and in fact they are outnumbered too. They are not represented as humble wives or dependent or subordinate or watching deities; but as independent deities. Sometimes, they are represented without any male consort. In most occasions they are deified without male consort and symbolised as the possession of unimaginable power.

Comparing the Vedic goddesses and the Puranic goddesses, as an interpreter of history, what he finds as the point of striking contrast is that the worship of Vedic goddesses was worship by courtesy. They were worshipped only because they were the wives of

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27 Interview with Vasudevan on 20th September 2005 at Samayapuram.
28 T. Paramasivan, *op. cit*, p. 147.
The worship of the Puranic goddesses stands on a different footing. They claim worship in their own right and not because they are wives of gods. This difference arises because the Vedic goddesses never went to the battle-field and never performed any heroic deed. The Puranic goddesses on the other hand went to the battlefield and performed great heroic deeds. Their worship was not by courtesy.  

Ambedkar raises here another question: Puranic goddesses are five totally out of which Sarasvathi and Lakshmi have not participated in any battle and have not killed any of the Asuras, in fact have not done any deed of valour. Parvathi, the wife of Siva, too, is represented as ordinary woman.

The great majority of these deities are goddesses. K. Nedunchezhiyan has given reason for the worship of mother goddesses as an outcome of fertility cult. Subsequently, the fertility cult became the Kotravai cult. They also associated these things with Amman, another goddess of fertility. The folk people considered the whole earth as mother and glorified as the deity of

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33 ibid, p. 27.  
agriculture. They are related to the lushness and also known for their reproductive nature.\footnote{S. Sakthivel, \textit{Naattupuraviyal – Oar Arimugam}, Tamil University, Thanjavur, 1998, pp. 177 - 178.}

Most of the divinities of Vedic tradition are in male attire. If some deities are deified in the form of female (such as Lakshmi, Saraswathi) but do not have independence. They are represented either wives or subordinate deities.

3.2.8. Appeasement

An important characteristic which diversifies the Vedic and folk deities is appeasement. The Vedic people worship their deities by offering various materials which are not affordable to get the blessings, whereas the folk people worship to appease the deities offer their worship. They do not enact prayers, yagams and so on but just offer with some ordinary materials. When the folk people worship their deities one cannot see the god and man relationship, but it is in a variety manner. Some people may command, some may request and some may curse their deities. When people affected with a problem, such as drought or out breaking of contagious diseases they will show their unity in promising to conduct worship in an elaborate manner. In such a way the folk deities are differed.

3.2.9. Iconographic forms

The structures of folk deities as well as their temple are simple. The shrines of these divinities are of the redress description,
often only a small piece of land marked off by lines of stones. These village goddesses invariably had a temple, but it was usually of small in dimension rudely built, without any ornamentation of any kind. Symbols at the centre and source of the village are navel stone and snakestones with which the gods and goddesses are associated. These symbols are usually simple, rough, unhewn stones blackened with anointing oil, or there may be a stone pillar. These symbols also reveal the poor economic status of the folk people.

The structure of the folk deities are represented with anthromorphic elements and directly connected with the aspects of day to day life of the folk people. They are giving meaning to the human life that is man should strive hard to life in facing daily life. They are revealing the simple life of the village people. And also the structure of the temples of folk people is not massive and artistic one. The temples are sometimes roofless and sometimes without ornamental. Whereas the structure of the deities of Vedic tradition and temples are structurally well designed and elaborate in manner. The temples

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36 Chitrasan Pasayat, *op cit*, p. 219
38 S. Thamizh Selvan, *op cit*, p 9
39 T. Paramasivan, *op cit*, p. 111.
of Vedic tradition are constructed with various temple complexes, gopurams and with mantapams.\textsuperscript{40}

The temple of a popular deity Aiyanar mostly decorated with the horse miniature is made up of brick, stone and chunnam. Those who were taken vow to offer horses for the fulfillment of vow.\textsuperscript{41} In Tamil, it is known as \textit{Kudhirai Eduppu}.

The practice of making miniatures dates back to Sangam period. Manimekalai, a popular Sangam literature gives the reference about the making miniatures.\textsuperscript{42} During the tenure of Aditta Cholan (AD 871 – 907), there were temples in Alambakkam and Ukkal in honour of Aiyanar. Aiyanar is also one of the \textit{ishtadevatas} of Kollimalai tribe. In the later days, Aiyanar was incorporated as a Hindu deity as Buddha was incorporated into the Hindu fold. It is to be noted here that, there is another name for Buddha as ‘Sattan’.\textsuperscript{43}

3.2.10. Time frame

The popularity and the nature of devotion depend upon the well being of the villages.\textsuperscript{44} The village goddess is worshipped regularly or periodically once a year, or once in twelve years, or when she shows signs of anger by repeated failure of the rains, or by pestilence.\textsuperscript{45} As Henry Whitehead rightly observed, “the sole object

\textsuperscript{40} Personal observation.
\textsuperscript{41} A. Rajendran, \textit{Salem Maavatta Koilgal}, Field Study Report, FRRC, Palayamkottai, p. 25.
\textsuperscript{43} A. Rajendran, \textit{op. cit}, p. 26.
\textsuperscript{44} Chitrasan Pasayat, \textit{op. cit}, p. 219.
\textsuperscript{45} Gilbert Slater, \textit{The Dravidian Elements in Indian Culture}, New Delhi, 1982, p. 92.
of the worship of these village deities is to propitiate them and avert their wrath”.

There are standard procedures for the offering and worship in Vishnu or Siva temples. Daily worship is held four times of the Siva and Vishnu temple. But here, there is no standard procedure to worship the deities of folk tradition as revealed by R. Balasubramanian.

Vedic incantations are not uttered in these temples. In the folk culture, there is no separate pujaris. There are no specific mantras or slogans. They offer karpuram, coconut, betel nut, plantains and other food materials. The devotees share these after the completion of these offerings without any distinction or discrimination.

3.2.11. Occasional worship

Another peculiar characteristic of worship of folk deity is with the offerings such as beheading of animals and birds. In another place they are worshipped with offerings of food, eatables and flowers. In some place is worshipped with cruel self-tortures and in some places, worshipped simply with prayers. The enchantment of prayers by temple priest is an uncommon one. In many places,
people who are not aware of the prayers. The orders of performing rituals are also not in a regular or proper way as in Vedic tradition.

3.2.12. Significance of the religious symbols

The role of symbols in both traditions is common but they differed in veneration. For example in Vedic tradition the symbols such as vel, stones, and pillars are related with the deities whereas in folk tradition they are not related with deities in large extent but they are worshipped in a unique manner. Symbols in folk tradition are looked with uniqueness and are given much respect.

3.2.13. Irregular structure of the temples

The structure of the temples of folk tradition is not regular but irregular. There is no agamic feature when they construct temples. They are irregular and without having any uniformities, whereas the construction of temples in Vedic tradition is on the basis of agamic sastras.

The term, the Dravidian Temple is often met with in the histories of Indian art. It is applied to temple in order to distinguish
it from that of northern India and southern India. The need for such a distinction is obvious. Dravidian temples differ from those of the north in certain important respects; and it is not reasonable to include both of them in the same class. However, when once this distinction is made, it gives rise to certain new problems which demand solution. The most important of them is the one concerning the origin of the difference between the temples of the north and the south. What are the causes that have given birth to this difference? The question is more easily asked than answered. Answers more or less satisfactory have been given from time to time. However, it cannot be said that the problem has been completely solved. It is too complex to admit of a simple solution.

It is generally supposed that there is a single type of temple in south India called the Dravidian temple. But, there are, in fact, two kinds of temples, which are generally seen all over southern India: the temples dedicated to the higher gods of the Hindu pantheon, and those built in honour of the village deities. The latter again fall into
two classes: some are built in the shape of a dolmen, whereas the others are modeled upon the hut-urn.  

The folk temple in most villages is the Amman temple or the goddess temple. If it is a temple dedicated to Parvathi, the temple is usually looked after by Nagarathar. If it is a Mariamman temple, it is usually managed by the Nattar, the non-Chettiars and non-Brahmins of the village.  

Just outside most Chettiar village are the temples to the guardians of the village. These temples dedicated to the respective guardian deities of the villages are marked by enormous terracotta statuary of demon-like giants, the village guardians, and their rearing steeds towering over them. The deity within is usually Aiyanar, a warrior god who protects the village, and the Nattar, particularly those of castes with a warrior background, generally manage these shrines. Animal sacrifice nowadays is more symbolic than in the past, practised during the temple festivals. This shrine, like most of the other temples in the village, receives support from the Nagarathar of the village, but it is the main village temple and its festivals that receive virtually unanimous support from them.  

3.2.14. Worship with emotional intensity  

The folk deities are worshipped with utmost emotional intensity. When people worship the deities of folk tradition, they

54 *ibid*, p. 30.
express sufferings and happiness with variety of mood. They reflect the character and behaviour of folk deities especially the pujaris and a group of people express these characteristics at the time of worship. They are not static what is like in the Vedic tradition. They wholeheartedly participated in all the activities.

The worship of folk deities are in violent form. This is done not only by the temple priest but also by the worshippers and spectators of feast. For instance during the festival of Mariamman, some of them possessed by the goddess, will dance and use obscene language. These will make consternation and fascination of worshippers.

3.2.15. Contagious diseases

In a large extent the folk deities are related with contagious diseases. This can be signified because when people wanted to find an alternative to escape from the pains of contagious diseases, they just related the diseases with the folk deities, which resulted the easy acceptance of diseases and they make a prayer to get rid of contagious diseases. The outbreak of these diseases considered as the anger of folk deities.

55 Interview with Mariappan on 12th January 2006 at Chennai.
The following bar chart No. 11 gives a picture on the twin role of folk deities. The Folk masses regard their deities as a powerful one, particularly they believe in inflicting and curing of contagious diseases. When, the respondents were interrogated about this specific nature more than 90 percent of them accepted it.\textsuperscript{56} To them, Folk deities are the main reason for both inflicting and curing of contagious diseases. Only 10 percent of them disproved this concept.

\textbf{Chart No. 11}

\textbf{Folk deities in inflicting and curing of contagious diseases}

Their role is ambivalent for both, inflect the diseases and protect the village from them. An account of the religious conditions of the people will be incomplete without a reference to the village deities which were deemed to be the guardian deities that protect people of their respective villages from evil spirits and contagious

\textsuperscript{56} Based on questionnaire detail and field study.
diseases like small pox and cholera. They were propitiated to save the folk people from such calamities.⁵⁷

Almost every village in Tamil Nadu has a temple or a shrine for the guardian god or the Kavaltheivam (the protector deity). The entire village may be devoted to the village deity, usually a goddess and often associated with the natural feature of the village environment.⁵⁸ Before entering the village, one should go and worship kavaltheivams in their temples. The sacred place is normally situated outside the inhabited region of the village, and always near a water-source river, lake, or in the absence of both of these – a larger well.

These Kavaltheivams include Iyenarappan, Madurai Veeran, Sangilli Karuppan, etc. It is believed that they protect the village. These deities are of different types those that protect the village from malignant spirits, and those that grant abundance in harvest and general prosperity to the village.

Most probably, these Kavaltheivams symbolise the warriors of a bygone era – warriors who gave their lives protecting their people. These would look fearsome, wearing huge moustaches, with big bulging eyes with a sword in their hands. The villagers in order to propitiate them, present them with offerings whenever a villager passes by these shrines, he makes an involuntary obeisance.

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⁵⁷ P. Subramanian, op. cit, p. 272.
⁵⁸ T. Paramasivan, op. cit, p. 143.
3.2.16. Guardians of villages

The local deities are most active on the boundary of the village. They repel intruders, fight evil forces, and live in constant contact with darkness and pain. They also straddle the boundary between life and death; they are masters of the ambivalent power over the creative cycle.\(^5\)

The folk deities are normally placed at the outermost part of villages. They are all accepted as the guardians of villages from various diseases, evils and from natural calamities.\(^6\) Since village people placed their abundant faith on them considered they may command over nature. And also, these folk deities were once upon a time might have lost their lives when they struggled against natural calamities.\(^7\) For example, in most villages, gods were installed on the banks of lake, pond and river. At the time of natural calamities they might have lost their lives in revamping the walls and sluices. Folk people do not forget easily the memories of such a person; hence they are deified as gods and goddesses.

One fierce goddess Chellattamman resides without a husband in a small temple in north Madurai which was located just within the northern city walls before those were dismantled in the 19\(^{th}\) century AD. From the viewpoints of purity, the goddess Chellattamman seems rather ambivalent, because blood sacrifices

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\(^6\) T. Paramasivan, *op. cit*, p. 112.
\(^7\) S. Thamizh Selvan, *op. cit*, p. 13.
take place in her temple. At the same time, she is said to defend the northern gate, and thus safeguarding Madurai against danger and disease.  

3.2.17. Active involvement of female in worship

In the folk tradition, the involvement of female can be seen as an important feature. As a pujaris, saamiyadis and major role in performing rituals and ceremonies woman constitutes an important role, whereas in the Vedic tradition female members are not allowed to do such things. In majority of the temples of Vedic tradition females are not allowed to enter the sanctum sanctorum and in some temples even they are not allowed to enter the temple premises.

3.2.18. Represented without any male consort

The deities of folk tradition are represented normally without male consorts. In most occasions they show rivalry with their husbands. They can perform their duties without the assistance of their husbands. The classical idea that a lone god is passive and not systematically extended to them, so that all folk gods tend to share the qualities of fierce Bhairava, as well as the village goddesses. However, little village gods hardly ever control human epidemic diseases, the goddesses’ most devastating demonstration of their power.  

The most important category of localised forms, however, comprises the village goddesses, female gramadevata, many of

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63 C. J. Fuller, *op. cit*, p. 48.
whom also serve as clan deities. The Tamil village goddess Angalamman, for example, is normally represented as an auspicious married woman with sons, but she is also a virgin without a husband.\textsuperscript{64} Angalamman’s ambiguous status is quite typical and the critical feature is not so much that the goddess is unmarried, but that any male consort is absent.\textsuperscript{65}

3.2.19. Tutelary deities of specific social units

The folk deities are assigned with specific purpose in the society. Sometimes, each work is assigned with a deity or more. They are tutelary in nature. They are not linked with cosmos but with agriculture, rain, flood and other ordinary things which are must for their prosperity.

A significant proportion of village goddesses, although by no means all are the tutelary deities of specific social units – villages or other local settlements – whose boundaries define the spatial extent of their powers. Throughout the southern peninsula of India, but not so uniformly in the rest of the country, virtually every local settlement has its own tutelary goddesses. In any one region the same goddess – in the sense that she has the same name and characteristics – commonly serves as the tutelary goddess of many different goddesses in each village; in much of Tamil Nadu, for instance, this goddess is usually Mariamman. At another level, though Mariamman is normally regarded as a different goddess in

\begin{flushend}
\textsuperscript{64} Eveline Meyer, \textit{Angalaparamecuvari — A Goddess of Tamil Nadu Her Myths and Cult}, Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH, Stuttgart, Germany, 1986, pp. 50 – 51, 54 – 58. (FRRC)
\textsuperscript{65} C. J. Fuller, \textit{op. cit}, pp. 42 – 43.
\end{flushend}
each village: Mariamman of this place as opposed to prevent people identifying all village Mariammans as localised forms of the one goddess. Moreover, a village goddess sometimes transcends her own boundaries and comes to be worshipped by people from farther afield. Nonetheless, tutelary village goddesses are preeminently represented in both ritual and mythical contexts as distinct deities who belong to different places and are jealous of their power in relation to neighbouring settlements' goddesses.\footnote{ibid, p. 43.}

3.2.20. Terrific iconography

The icons of folk deities are basically terrific in nature. There is no usage of polished stone; instead they are made in a rough and unstructured stones. The hands and legs are not properly fitted and facial expressions of these deities are also terrific. There is no fixed methodology to design statues of folk deities. The particular caste people (Kuyavar community) allotted with the work of making statues. There is no guiding manual, but they created as they like. In order to represent the power over all the evil spirits, these deities are symbolically represented in expressing cruelty and terrific nature.

Goddesses can stand alone because they actually embody power as Sakthi and can therefore act by themselves. But when they do they are dangerous. Unmarried goddesses in particular, unlike wifely goddesses, are ferocious and quickly angered. Durga and Kali, who are especially popular in Bengal, are the most famous
goddesses of this kind. Durga is, above all, the fearsome killer of the buffalo-demon; she rides into battle on a lion wielding a score of weapons. Kali likes to dwell in the cremation ground, and her horrific appearance as a murderous, had garlanded in skulls is devastatingly portrayed in her iconography.\textsuperscript{67}

3.2.21. Powerful presence

The deities of folk tradition can be identified with its powerful presence and intimate contact with the village life. They are deep rooted with village life and culture. In most villages these deities reveal their presence suddenly. One of the members of the village possessed by the spirit and asks them to worship. By this aspect one can find throughout creation of the village gods and goddesses.\textsuperscript{68}

Many other folk deities are rather shadowy figures in the sense that their distinctive characteristics are ill defined; they are still vitally important, powerful presences for millions. People worship these deities at their shrines and petty temples, where they are often represented only by uncarved stones or other simple emblems.\textsuperscript{69}

To recapitulate this chapter analyses the characteristics of the deities of Vedic and folk traditions. In many aspects they are united. For example both the deities rival with their counterpart and they are personified as pivot of human life. Both the deities are propitiated with sacrifices and rituals and priestly class reign supreme at the time of worship of both deities.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{ibid}, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{68} T. Paramasivan, \textit{op. cit}, pp. 146 – 147.
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{ibid}, p. 48.
But at the same time, they are diversified in minimum level. In the name itself, they are differentiated having given the names such as little and greater tradition. Folk deities are propitiated with inexpensive offerings and less incantations, whereas Vedic deities with expensive offerings and Sanskrit mantras. Blood sacrifices play a popular role in folk tradition. The folk deities attire with regional reputation and on many occasion they give dreadful appearance. They are also given and worshipped in the form of mother goddess. The iconographic structure is so simple and not decorated with expensive jewels, facial beauty and what not similar to Vedic deities. The time frame and nature of worship of folk tradition are entirely different and has close association with the well being of the villages. The religious symbols such as vel, tree, animic objects and other inanimate objects reign supreme in the folk worship. The temples of folk tradition are in irregular shape. Folk deities are also worshipped with emotional intensity and the involvement of females can be seen throughout the nation. The folk deities are most active on the boundary of the village. But the Vedic deities are quite contrary to all above-mentioned aspects. They are neither popular nor active among the majority rural masses.