Chapter – IV

Folk Centres of Worship and Composite Culture
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FOLK CENTRES OF WORSHIP AND
COMPOSITE CULTURE

India today is primarily a village culture. The majority of people live in villages and there is little doubt that this has always been the case in the Indian subcontinent. In the context of village life one of the most significant and powerful divine presences is the gramadevatas, a deity who is especially identified with the villages and toward whom the villagers often have a special affection.¹ It is not uncommon, in fact, for there are several gramadevatas in a village, each of whom may have a specialized function.² These village deities, more numerous than Indian villages themselves are naturally diverse in character. Their names alone suggest diverse characteristics and functions.³ Some of these deities have a regional reputation or at least the name of a certain gramadevatas will be well known or popular through out an entire region. The goddesses of Mariamman in Tamil Nadu are examples of this regional popularity. Other village deities may be known to one small village.

The Gramadevata concept is prevalent all over India. Tamil Nadu has more temples for Gramadevata than any other province as it is in the case of other temples also. Gramadevata is a chosen deity

for the entire village safeguarding the interests of the villagers. Hence every family in the village would have an emotional attachment to this deity and the temple. Many times the Gramadevata may not be housed in well-built temple structures in many villages. These deities are being worshipped by the villagers with all devotion and reverence though the deity is in the form of just a stone pillar or mound of earth.

Gramadevatas are nothing but the manifold manifestations of the supreme reality described as ‘Brahman’ in Upanishads as described by H. Krishna Sastri. These manifestations have been nurturing the faith of the illiterate masses. These manifestations alone appeal to the mindset of the masses that are in the lower rung of the ladder of spiritual progress. Mass congregational prayers are offered in these temples by the villagers for seeking the grace of Gramadevata for rains, to control epidemics, for health and wealth of the villagers, for good harvest etc. These temples have been functioning as community centres, as theatres for folk arts and centres of folk literatures from times immemorial.

Often the village deity will share the names of epithets of deities from the Sanskrit pantheon and will be identified with these deities in the minds of villagers. But this does not necessarily mean that the village deity will bear many similarities to the ‘Vedic’ god in question. It may indicate little more than a conscious attempt to

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5 Ibid., p. 225.
6 Ibid., p. 225.
relate the village deity to a wider religious universe or to make the local deity recognizable to curious outsiders. In most cases where such identification exists the *gramadevatas* differs markedly from the Vedic deity with whom it shares a name.\(^7\)

Despite the number and variety of *gramadevatas*, several typical characteristics of these local deities have been noted. First, they usually are female. Speaking of South India, Henry Whitehead says that “village deities, with very few exceptions, are female..... All over Southern India... the village deities are almost exclusively female. In the Tamil country, it is true, most of them have male attendants, who are supposed to guard the shrines and carry out the commands of the goddesses; but their place is distinctly subordinate and almost servile”.

Second, these deities are usually not represented by anthropomorphic images. They are usually represented by uncovered stones, trees, or small shrines that do not contain an anthropomorphic image. Sometimes no shrine is present at all except during special festivals, when temporary structures will be built to house or represent the deity.

Third, these deities, goddesses for the most part capture the primary interest of the villagers and tend to be worshipped with more intensity than the great gods of the Hindu pantheon. Although the Vedic gods are acknowledged to be in charge of distant, cosmic rhythms, they are only of limited interest to most villagers, many of

\(^7\) Henry Whitehead, *op. cit.*, p. 198.
whom traditionally were not allowed within the precincts of the temples of these deities in the first place. The village goddess, in contrast, engages the villagers directly by being associated with their local, existential concerns. She is perceived to be their deity and to be concerned especially with their well-being and that of their village.

Finally, these village deities are often directly associated with disease, sudden death, and catastrophe. When the village is threatened by disaster, particularly epidemics, the local goddess is usually said to be manifesting herself. She erupts onto the village scene along with disasters that threaten the stability, and even the survival, of the village. Furthermore, her role vis-à-vis such epidemics or disasters is ambivalent. She is perceived both as inflicting these diseases and as protecting the village from them.\footnote{Ibid.}

Local deities may begin to attract the attention of worshippers from a wide geographical area, which may include many villages or neighbourhoods, or from a large percentage of the members of particular castes, who come to the deity seeking protection or boons. These deities have their own shrines, which may be simple, independent enclosures with pillared halls or may stand as separate establishments attached to temples of Shiva, Vishnu, or any other Vedic god. Deities at this level attract expressive and ecstatic forms of worship and tend to possess special devotees on a regular basis or enter into their believers during festivals. People who are blessed by
the god may speak to their families and friends concerning important personal or social problems, predicting the future or clarifying mysteries. These local gods often expect offerings of animals, usually goats or chickens, which are killed in the vicinity of the shrines and then consumed in communal meals by families and friends.⁹

Village Gods and deities are worshipped to protect the respective villages from epidemics and natural calamities. As Whitehead said the sole object of the worship of the village deities is not to express gratitude for any moral or spiritual blessings but to get rid of scourges like Cholera and small-pox. Hence the worship is occasional. In most of the villages, the guardian deity may be a female one in the name of Amman like Mariamman or Uramman or Iasaki Amman. Most of the village deities were of human origin. For example, ‘Pechi’ of Pachipparai is considered as the Goddess of the hill tribe called Kani. Similarly ‘Kadal Amman’ (in Malayalam Kadal Amma) is the deity of the fisher-folk of the Arabian coast.¹⁰

The village deities have temples of primitive style and whose priests are seldom Brahmins. Usually they are worshipped by offering few flowers or fruits. Special offerings are taking place in fulfillment of vows. In some temples special festivals are held annually and in most of the temples they are at large intervals. During these festivals large number of animals like goat and

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buffaloes are sacrificed. In addition to this, the devotees have to undergo ordeals like passing a metal rod at the middle of one's tongue to fulfill their vows, hook swinging, fire walking, piercing both cheeks and jaws and passing a metal rod and offer one's tongue to the deity are some of the peculiar form of the worship of the village deities.\textsuperscript{11}

**Vedic Tradition and Folk Tradition**

Hinduism with its customs, rituals and habits formed and practised from time immemorial, can be said to have great tradition and little tradition.\textsuperscript{12} But in this research instead of terms like great and little tradition it is mentioned Vedic and Folk tradition respectively. The names of popular deities most of us are not familiar will belong to folk tradition. Aiyanar, Karuppasamy, Kaliammman, Bagavathamman, Kannimars etc. can be cited as deities of folk tradition. The above examples are given merely for general understanding. The following classifications have been made to identify deities and temples of Vedic and Folk traditions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Vedic Tradition</strong></th>
<th><strong>Folk Tradition</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i) Worship system and religious practices are Vedic and agama based.</td>
<td>Worship and religious systems are neither Vedic nor Agama based.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Pujas in the temples are performed at prescribed intervals</td>
<td>Pujas are performed as and when a family or a community wishes</td>
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\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 22.

(iii) Festivals are celebrated at prescribed dates annually as given in the Hindu Panchangams.

Annual festivals are conducted, but not on fixed dates.

(iv) Structure of the temple is constructed in a uniform way, and idols are made as per the Vedic scriptures.

Temple structures are not systematic. Idols are made sometimes with wood, mud and of edible wet flours. Sometimes trees and stones are also worshipped.

(v) Only Brahmins are the priests

Non-Brahmin pujaris and on many occasions women conducted pujas and ceremonies.

(vi) Offerings of the Non-vegetarian food items are never used.

Non-vegetarian food items are offered to most of the deities.

(vii) Worshippers widely spread beyond a particular region.

Worshippers constitute mainly of a particular area.

Though the temples were socio-religious centres, a common forum of getting together to a large extent, it was a reserved place only for the high castes. The outcastes were not allowed to enter into the temples. So they began to worship the minor deities like Mariamman, Ayyanar and demons in their own residing places. The rigidity of the caste system and the taboos existed in it forced the outcastes to settle themselves in slums. When some of the expelled
occupational groups like Pallas and Paraiyas went out of the main village with the purpose of cultivation, they began to worship deities which were traditionally believed to be their protectors. These deities had been in existence when the people began to settle in agricultural communities. The mode, form and nature of worship of these deities are completely in dissonance with the Brahminical traditions as in the case of the major gods like Siva and Vishnu.

Agricultural occupation is mainly connected with the concept of fertility and progress. It needs so much of care and protection. If rain fails or diseases attack the crops, the harvest fails; the marginalised community and the agricultural tribes in general, attribute these diseases and disasters to the wrath of the village deities. So the main object in the worship of these deities is to propitiate them, not to cause diseases and disasters to the crops and to the labourers and to pacify them through offerings and sacrifices. Moreover these deities are believed to be more present, help in trouble and more intimately concerned with happiness and prosperity of their adorers. As elsewhere in Musiri region, the mass of the people pay less reverence to the Brahminical deities. The lesser deities and devils are legion, and include the more or less benevolent village goddesses; the cruel goddesses of cholera and small-pox; the minor devils are generally subordinate to the village deities.

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14 Ibid, p. 11.
The village goddesses of Musiri region are often vaguely referred to be the generic name of gramadevadas; but each has own name, and those most commonly met with are perhaps Achiyamman, Ponniyayi, Sellayi, Ellamma, etc. They are generally of a benevolent nature and if properly appealed to confer health on the sick, grant children to the childless, and give relief from all kinds of human sufferings. People believed that if neglected, however, they become very terrible in their wrath. The jurisdiction of some of them is very local, not extending beyond the boundary stones of the village, but others wield wider powers.¹⁷

Annual festivals are celebrated at the shrines of all the village goddesses. The ceremonial sacrifices of animals influence making itself felt, and in some places these sacrifices are declared to be less for the delectation of the deity than other attendant devils; and a curtain is hung before her while they are proceeding, so that she may not see them. These devils are often represented by colossal human figures of brick and chunam erected in front of the temple. Some times they are called Munnadiyans (Servants or attendant deities) and the commonest of this Madurai Viran, a deified popular hero and Karuppan, the favourite object of the worship of the Kallar caste of Musiri region.¹⁸ They are represented by small stone slabs, and besides Karuppan’s slab a spear, his especial weapon, are struck upright in the ground. Karuppan has often and more independent attributes. Sometimes he guards the boundaries of the village and hence he is known as Sandi Karuppan or Ellai Karuppan. The private

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 89.
¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 89-90.
chapels are very common. The Dayadis have their own family priest (Maniyadi or Pattakaran) and the deity is worshipped in the form of a new pot when the worship is concluded, the building is locked up and left till it is wanted again.¹⁹

Particular castes have their own gods and goddesses in Musiri region. The Uppiliyars, for example, worship a deity known as Karuvandaraya-Bommadeva of Reddis, Yellamma, goddess of Kaikkolars, of course a god named Saha-nayanan and the Tottiyyars a goddesses known as Bommakka. These are worshipped once a year by all the members of the caste resident in the village.²⁰

According to Hemingway’s book The Goddesses of Cholera and Small-pox are Bhagavatiamman and Mariamman respectively. Generally speaking, these are purely malevolent deities and are only worshipped in order to appease their love of doing harm. Both deities come in for special worship when cholera or small-pox arrives. The temples of Mariamman are said to be recognizable by the altars (Balipeetam) with figures of men round. Bhagavati is seldom represented by any image. Both goddesses expect animal sacrifices.²¹ The people of Musiri region not only worship the minor deities, but also the nameless devils at the jungles. They are supposed to be kept outside the boundaries of the village by the care of the village goddesses and her attendants, but beyond these limits they are capable of doing much harm. They are called ‘peys’ or

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¹⁹ Ibid.
²⁰ Ibid., p. 90.
²¹ Ibid., p. 91.
'pisachus', and are often represented to be the spirits of those who have died violent deaths.\(^\text{22}\)

In Musiri region the Karuppan, Adakkayi, Ondayi etc. are worshipped as a Kuladevatha. Their common god may be one of the ordinary village goddess (generally one belonging to some other village) or (more rarely) one of the many Karuppanas or other lesser deities such as Adakkayi, Ondayi, and the Sapta Kannimar etc. These are worshipped once in a fixed term of years. Deities connected with watery places and water is claiming staunch reverence among the agricultural tribes. They may be either the protectors of watery places like dams, tank, river and canals from breach, leak and flood or those who bring good shower to prosper the cultivation. Lord Aiyanar belongs to the first category and Selli or Mariamman is venerated for a good rainfall and relief from drought. Of the entire folk pantheon, Aiyanar, Karuppan and Mariamman command much respect and their cult have been very popular in the villages of Musiri region.

**Madurai Kaliyamman Temple, Thottiyam**

Thottiam is one of the important religious centres in Tiruchirappalli district owing to the fame of its folk goddess, Madurai Kaliyamman. She is supposed to have come originally from Madurai, attracted by the music of the drums which the Paraiyas beat in Thottiyam. Once arrived, she imprisoned the former village goddess one Tangachi Amman and established herself in her temple. The temple is

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
supposed to have been built by a Polegar called 'Ejanga Rayan' about 400 years ago.\textsuperscript{23}

A story reveals about the origin of the Madurai Kalianman temple that about 500 years back, King Esanakarayar ruled the Thottiym and adjoining areas. Chinnan, a Paraiya servant who worked in his stable, wanted to go to Kali festival at Madurai. He got permission from the King and he went to Madurai with his 'Parai' a musical drum and stayed at his brother-in-law's house. Next day, he went to Kali temple and began to play 'Parai' rhythmically. Goddess Kali admired the music of Chinnan and followed him back to Thottiym and Goddess Kali seated under the 'Vanni' tree. Later a temple was constructed by Pujankarayar at this place.\textsuperscript{24}

Madurai Kalianman temple is surrounded by bush green fields. There is a three tier tower, 27 Pillared Mandapa and a five pillar Arthamandapa - gives notorious look to this temple. Many beautiful sculptures are carved inside the temple. Thirumanchanam, Navaratri, Sivarathiri are a few important festivals are celebrated in the month of Aani, Purattasi and Masi.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{Aiyyanar}

Aiyyanar and Karuppan are the popular gods in the villages of Musiri region and probably in rural South India.\textsuperscript{26} They are also familiar

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Lewis Moore, \textit{Trichinopoly Gazetteer,} Vol. I, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 2000, p. 141.
\textsuperscript{25} ARE No. 249 of 1932-1933.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 91.
with the names such as Karuppan or Karuppasamy. Karai adi Sasta and Anai adi Karuppan are the names of Aiyanar sitting at the banks of the tanks and dams. The Aiyanar is regarded as the guardian-deity of the village, protecting it and warding off evil spirits. His shrine generally found in a grove on the outskirts of the village is surrounded by burnt clay figures of horses on which he and his attendants are supposed to ride during their nocturnal vigils. Installed at the entrance of the villages to ward off the external dangers and evil spirits, is commonly known as Karuppasamy. Aiyanar who brings rainfall is known as Atatamalaik Aiyanar. Veyilukukanta Aiyanar saves the crops from being water logged and decaying, through hot sunshine. These different names denote the different places and also the purpose with which they are seated in these particular places and their duty to protect the people as well as crops.

Stephen Inglis has pointed out that the names Sastha and Aiyanar connect this deity with a Brahminical origin. Aiyappan or Sabarimalai Sasta is said to have deified by the outcaste villagers with the same names as Aiyan or Sasta. The myth says that Lord Vishnu when incarnated as Mohini to fascinate and destroy a giant (asuran) is seen carved or sculptured or in idol form on the sides of the massive mounted Aiyanar statues. In many images Aiyanar is seen with Saivite or Vaishnavite marks in his forehead to show that

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28 *Mukkudal Pallu*, v. 32.
29 *Vaiyapuri Pallu*, vv. 36, 38.
31 *Tirumalai Murgan Pallu*, v. 76.
he is Saivite or Vaishnavite in his origin. Except this myth with some similar name background and side figures in the Aiyalar shrines, no other facts link this village deity to be of Brahminical in his origin. Despite the obscure origin, the religious traditions connected with Ayyanar can be traced from the past. His name in those times was Arappeyarccattan or Sattan. During the Chola period a separate committee called Sattakkanattar was appointed to look after the daily services and annual festivals connected with Aiyalar. The Sastha shrine is often identified by an installed rude stone or a crude image in clay on the banks of tanks. The shrine of Karuppasamy is found with a soldier sitting on a horse. Granite sculptures are also made on an altar which is three or four feet in height. With the goggle eyes and fierce look this deity is often idolized.

Offerings to Aiyalar of Musiri Region have been made in kind as well as money. Kankukacchai, a blue uniform and 'arival', a big crude knife to cut hard things are among the common offerings in kind. These unique offerings like uniform and cutting weapons relate this deity to a soldier, who is always vigilant. Moreover, the vehicular offering to this deity strengthen the above assumption. Clay horses are installed before his shrine, and this is believed to

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32 Kannudaiyamman Pallu, v. 53.
33 Tirumalai Murgan Pallu, v. 76.
34 T. Palamalai, Niridangalum Pen Teiva Valipadum (Tamil), Unpublished M Phil Dissertation, Tamil Department, Madurai Kamaraj University, 1979, p. 60.
35 T. V. Sadasiva Pandarathar, Pirkala Colar Varalaru, Part II, (Tamil), Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, 1971, p. 47.
36 Vaiyapuri Pallu, v. 28.
be hero worship of cavalry. These clay horses are the mounts which Karuppasamy rides while protecting the village. Scholars attribute the origin of the warrior concept in the offerings of Karuppasamy to the Pandya period. The horse was an important animal imported from Arabia and employed by the warriors in protecting the country from the attack of the enemies. These horses were unsound and their hooves wore down. As a result of the improper maintenance, these horses died in severe warfare along with the warriors.

Finally the protectors of the people along with their helping vehicle were deified. This tradition is still kept by the villagers. It is common that Aiyanar shrines in Musiri region are often seen with the figures and idols of bulls, cobra and elephant. These animals are either the vehicles or associates of the Brahminical Gods like Siva, Vishnu and Indra. By a process of adoption called desanskritization these animals with a high Brahminical background might have been adopted and imitated in the desanskritized cult of Aiyanar who in his turn has also a Brahminical background in the context of his origin from Shiva and Vishnu. The Bull (Nandhi) is the vehicle of Shiva and the cobra is associated with him as well as Vishnu. So Aiyanar, the son of Siva and Vishnu has the bull and cobra associated with him. On the basis of the similarity in the functional beliefs over both Brahminical and non-Brahminical Gods, the animals are desanskritized and then associated. The elephant, which is the vehicle

37 Kannudaiyamman Pallu, v. 53.
38 S. M. L. Lakshmanan Chettiyar, Folklore of Tamil Nadu, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 1980, p. 47.
39 Stephen Inglis, op. cit., p. 53.
40 Ibid., p. 54.
of Lord Indra, a Lord of Rain in the Brahminical Hinduism, is associated with Aiyanar, the God of Rain and agriculture in the non-Brahminical tradition.\[^{41}\]

In the Aiyanar cult, there has been existing Brahminical type of offerings especially in the culinary taste of the deity in some exceptional forms of worship. Karuppan or Karuppannasamy popular in Musiri region has its shrine at every village. In the worship of the deity vegetarian food-offerings like boiled rice (pongal), banana, coconut and sugarcane are offered.\[^{42}\] He is still the deity of rainfall venerated by the Pallars and other agrarian communities in and around the Musiri region. Among the non-Brahminical offerings, animal sacrifice is worth mentioning here. For Karuppasamy, Aiyanar, pure black goats are beheaded and this colour emphasis may be due to the name of the deity.\[^{43}\] The goat should be beheaded with one stroke otherwise it will be taken that the deity is unwilling to grant the desires of the devotee. Moreover, money offerings are also made to Aiyanar. If any article is lost people offer small coin to him in a piece of cloth, pray for the recovery of the lost articles. Anybody steals away the properties of Aiyanar would suffer from all

\[^{41}\] The worship of minor village deities and demigods is known as non-Brahminical or De-Sanskritized or the Little Tradition. Where as the Big Tradition, popularly known as Brahminical Hinduism having major gods like Shiva, Vishnu, Indra and so on, is the Sanskritized religion, having Sanskrit as the holy language in it. De-Sanskritization is nothing but the complete or partial changing or transfer of Brahminical Hindu religious gods, rituals and ceremonies connected with them into non-Brahminical form and mode of worship with the change of place, essentially to a low caste quarter.

\[^{42}\] Stephen Inglis, op. cit., p. 54.

\[^{43}\] Kannudaiyammam Pallu, v. 53.
sorts of misfortunes. This belief makes Aiyanar very prestigious among the various deities constituting the folk pantheon.

**Karuppannasamy**

Karuppannasamy is a god worshipped by the Kallar and Pallar of the Musiri region. Chains, clubs, spears and bill-hooks are his symbols; and these are presented by devotees at his shrines as votive offerings. They are generally found either hung on the trees or struck into the ground of much inferior character to Aiyanar, who is sometimes worshipped separately. As a rule, he is simply one of the subordinate male attendants of the host of the village goddess, but in some places Karuppannasamy is met with separate shrines, where he presides as the chief deity. At one of these shrines worship was offered exclusively by the Pariahs. At another place the evil spirit residing in the boundary stone was called Ellai-Karuppanan.

**Munisamy**

A similar god much dreaded by the people of Musiri region is Munisamy whose name is quite popular. He is represented by a black stone, a bush or sometimes a tree. Men and women called Muniyappa, Muniyandi, Munisamy, Muni, Muniyamma, etc., are so named because they were evidently born as the result of propitiating Munisvara Samy.

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44 *Tirumalai Murgan Pallu*, v. 113.
45 A Pantheon means generally a group of Mythical gods.
**Madurai Veeran**

There are many people who have given up their lives under romantic circumstances in the cause of their native village, are also honored as village deities and festivals are celebrated to propitiate them. Madurai Veeran mentioned above was one of these kinds. Madurai-Veeran is a folk deity popularly worshipped in the Madurai region, is also worshipped in the Musiri region.

The following story is concerned about Madurai Veeran in the folklore of South India. He was a soldier in the service of an unknown Nayak king of Madurai, some centuries ago. The daughter of the king fell in love with him. Madurai Veeran gave up his position and all his prospects of promotion and went off with the king’s daughter. After their death, both Madurai Veeran and the king’s daughter were deified and worshipped. Madurai Veeran is also known as Pathinettampadi Karuppan, or the guard of the eighteen steps, because, in the country and of the Alagirisamy temple, which is one of the richest shrines in India, there is a plight of 18 steps, nine of which lead to a platform on one side while nine lead down from it on the other. On the platform there is a huge image of Karuppan, twenty feet high, with big eyes as big as umbrellas. The image is carved with spears, guns, and arms. People, who have made vows, come and offer their worship to Karuppan.

Almost every village in South India, however insignificant it may be, has a shrine for one or more goddesses of this nature.

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Generally they are situated outside the village in groves of trees much dreaded by the people and are considered to be gramadevatas, the guardian deities of the village. Often these are not in temple properly, and where there are structures, they are crude and simple and within them rough unknown stones represent the Amma or ‘mother’ sacred of the village. Sometimes there is only a spear or a trident fixed up straight in the ground in place of the goddess-stones. The goddesses bear different names. The popular names among the village deities are Kaliyamman, Mariamman, Seven Kannimars, Muttalamman, Ponnamma, Ellamma, Ankalamma, Selliyamma, Pattalamma, Pidari. Petchi, Gangamma, Sellandiyamman etc.\(^1\)

**Mariamman cult**

Among the female deities of the folk pantheon, Mariamman commands superiority and grand reverence. She is considered as symbol of fertility and the goddess of rain as the word ‘mari’ means rain (Mazhai).\(^2\) So it is quite natural that an agricultural community worship female as the symbol of fertility, to worship a goddess who symbolizes the rainfall, Selli or Selvi is the other name with which also Mariamman is popularly known, has her shrine on the banks of watery places. If there is no natural water resource situating nearby the shrine, small ponds to store rain water are dug. These are called thirtham or thadaham.\(^3\) The shrines of Mariamman are either facing east or north. The Amman facing northern direction is famous with

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\(^2\) T. Palamalai, *op. cit.*, pp. 27 & 63.

\(^3\) *Kannudalyamman Pallu*, v. 29.
the name Vadakkuvai Selli or Vadakkatti Amman.\textsuperscript{54} The offerings to Amman are mostly non-Brahminical in nature. Palmyra toddy and arrack is the favourite liquors to Selli, offered in earthen pots, according to Mukkudal Pallu.\textsuperscript{55} The bloods of the sheep are offered to Amman to appease her. There is a belief that not a single drop of blood should be shed on the floor when the sheeps are beheaded\textsuperscript{56} so the possessor sucks all the blood of the sheeps and then in a frenzy mood used to utter the future happenings and the wishes of the deity. The possessor need not be always from a single community and he belongs to backward communities like Nadar, Maravar, Pallar, and so on with the change in places. The people worship her for good health, protection from fever, cholera and natural calamities like flood, drought and famine.\textsuperscript{57}

In the village the infection of small pox is said to be the visitation of Mariamman and so efforts to soothe her are taken at once. As she is a wrathful and ferocious deity, the rituals and ceremonies observed to pacify her are also terrific and awful in nature. Fire walking familiarly known as 'Pookkulithal', is an important ceremony widely observed all over Tamil Nadu. This literally means walking on the bed of flowers, in which the devotee remains unaffected though walking on the hot embers, due to overwhelming devotion and inherent faith by forgetting himself. While performing this ceremony, the devotee with the sacred ash

\textsuperscript{54} Mukkudal Pallu, v. 32.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., v. 33.
\textsuperscript{56} Kannudaiyamman Pallu, v. 52.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., v. 90.
smeared over his body, run on hot embers spread over a distance of three or four metres for a stipulated odd number of times. Finally he is prostrating before the shrine.

Carrying fire pot on heads and palms is another ceremonious ritual as arduous as the above mentioned one. For twenty one days prior to the observation of the ritual, the devotee eats just a single meal a day, sleeps on the ground and avoids sexual pleasure. Among the offerings during the ritual, the most important one is the flour lamp.\(^{58}\) It is a small pan like container for oil and wick, equal to the breadth of the palm of a grown up man. This is made of raw rice flour mixed with jaggery fluid with small wick. The women light it in front of the deity and ultimately it is eaten as a gift of the goddess.\(^{59}\)

Small pox is a disease and if unattended properly, it would affect the eye sight. Mariamman is believed to have been restoring the lost eye sight due to small pox and so popularly known as Aayiram Kannudaiyal or Kannulla Mahamayi.\(^{60}\) The Mariamman is worshipped with the name Rajalakshmi Kannudaiyal. Devotees affected by eye diseases offer silver eyes and earthen posts with lot of small perforations deeming them as thousand eyes, to her to get back the eye sights properly. Coconuts, pieces of silverware cattle\(^{61}\) and money are also invariably offered to Amman.

\(^{58}\) Vaiyapuri Pallu, vv. 28 & 30.
\(^{59}\) S. M. L. Lakshmanan Chettiar, op. cit., p. 51.
\(^{60}\) Kannudaiyamman Pallu, v. 7.
\(^{61}\) Stephen Inglis, op. cit., p. 51.
Even though Aiyánar shrines are umpteen in Tamil Nadu with his various forms, the Mariamman cult has its own glamour and appealing spell in the society. Pallu says even the high castes despite their superior status attended the Amman festivals with ardent faith.\textsuperscript{62} While the help of Aiyánar is earnestly sought to tackle water problem, warding of evil spirits and curing diseases, the power of the Amman in curing the diseases and saving the people from pestilences is considered to be comparatively more strategic and making the devotees more impelled towards her. If most of the things could be realised successfully in life only with sound health, then it is no wonder that the deity to get popularity and more reverence who gives that sound health to achieve a lot in this materialistic world.

\textbf{Kannimars}

Kannimars is a group of female deities commanding good reverence in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu. In Musiri region also they are famous. Kannimars are frequently appeared by special worship when any unforeseen and sudden illness takes hold of a man. The local fortune teller, being consulted, says that the patient is possessed by the sister while walking alone in untimely hours of the day near tanks, gardens, or groves. At once the goddesses are propitiated. A temporary shrine is constructed. Seven small stones are planted in a row, near a tank, almost touching the edge of the waters and a small shed erected over them with leaves and flowers. Coconuts, plantains, fried rice and pulses are then offered to the stones and not

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
infrequently also a fowl. Even Brahmins worship, the seven sisters in this way, but when a fowl is to be sacrificed they get a Shudra to do it. The worship is enjoined to be performed in wet cloth after bathing claiming a secondary respect when comparing with Mariamman.

They are not found in a separate temple but among the host of ‘attendant’ deities to the main deity. The figures of these deities are usually installed at one side or the back of a village temple and often replaced with other secondary deities at the time of a major festival of the temple. They are honourable virgins as the name ‘Kanni’ means ‘virgin’ and ‘mar’ means ‘honorable’. They are also the symbols of Tamil concept of chastity.

According to their nature they have been named as Talakkuttu Kannimar, Pelaik Kannimar, Minparsi Kannimar and so on. Their origin is obscure. Some scholars connect the origin of the Kannimar to the period of Muslim invasion in Tamil Nadu and opine that these deities are the deified virgins who died for the cause of saving their chastity from the enemies. According to the Hindu mythology, the origin of the Kannimar has a Brahminical background that they are said to be the women attendant (Kartthai Pengal) of Lord Murugan at Saravana Poigai, his birth place. Although there were only six of these women can be worshipped with Murugan as the seven stars in

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63 Ibid.
64 Vaiyapuri Pallu, vv. 29, 33, 34, 46.
66 Stephen Inglis, op. cit., p. 51.
67 Henry Whitehead, op. cit., p. 22.
the constellation. Different scholars describe them as Kanniamman, Seven Mothers, Seven Virgins\(^{68}\) and Seven Sisters.\(^{69}\) Henry Whitehead associates Kanniamman a member of the Seven Virgin group with Mariamman in connection with her power to protect the people from the infection of small pox.\(^{70}\) He also strengthened this association that Kanniamman like Mariamman is able to guard the village from the evils like famine, diseases, droughts and enemies.\(^{71}\)

The virgins have power over life and death, ability to intercede in cases of child birth and illness of the children. The votive offerings to these deities are both in cash and kind. The agricultural community like the Pallas worshipped these deities for a good rainfall by offering palmyra toddy, sugarcane, boiled rice and bananas. The favourite ornaments to these deities are heavy earrings (Kaatholai) and golden bangle or Kariya Manivolai.\(^{72}\) In their statues and idols, their ears are elongated for wearing heavy ear ornaments and jewels. This is praised as the symbol of royalty and powerful nature of the Kannimar.\(^{73}\) Sirraadai a short clothe made by silk offered to them represents the obsolete styles of dressing of the ancient Tamils.\(^{74}\)

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\(^{70}\) W. T. Elmore, *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism*, Lincoln University of Nebraska, Nebraska, 1915, p. 64.

\(^{71}\) Henry Whitehead, op. cit., p. 29.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., p. 32.

\(^{73}\) Vaiyapuri Pallu, v. 33.

\(^{74}\) Stephen Inglis, op. cit., p. 52.
Kali

Kali is said to be the only one of the village deities whose name is found in the Vedas. She is an avatar, or incarnation of the eight power of universe. The story told about her is that a demon named Mahishasura (a buffalo headed) gave great offence to Siva, and was condemned to death. But, owing to a privilege bestowed on him by Siva himself, he could not be slain by the Trimurti or by any male deity. So that task was given to Kali, who successfully accomplished it, and so won a place among the village deities.

The word Kali comes from the well-known word ‘Kala’, means ‘time’. She is the power of time. Time is all-destroying, all-devouring. The Kali images are normally found in the scriptures, pictures and icons. The background is a cremation ground or a burial ground or a war field, showing the dead bodies including the mutilated ones. She herself is standing in a challenging posture, on a dead body, which is her own spouse. Kali is completely naked, except for an apron of human hands. She is wearing a garland of fifty human heads or skulls. Her luxuriant hair is completely disheveled. She has three eyes and four hands. In her upper hands she is holding a bleeding human head, as also the sword used in the carnage. The two lower hands are in the Abhaya and Varadhamudras. Her face is red and the tongue is protruding.

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75 Ibid., p. 9.
**Ellamman**

Ellamman is identified with the Hindu gods, that is to say wife of the Rishi Jamadagny and the mother of Parasurama. The principal images found in her temple besides that of herself, are those of her husband and son mentioned above. The priest in her pagodas is a Siva devotee.

**Devil worship**

Devil worship is one of the characteristic features in the religious life of the middle and lower classes. The illiterate masses worshipped many ghosts and devils with great zeal and zest. These demons are worshipped as spirits of men and women who met with unhappy deaths. It is believed that the deceased after death bear hatred against human race and love mischief and blood. The malice of the demons may destroy the crops or smite the children with diseases and death. To appease the anger of the devils goat or cock must be sacrificed to them.

**Snake worship**

Snake worship is also equally popular among the rural masses. In Musiri region the site out portion of the traditional houses are called 'puttru' that means the place where the snakes have to stay. Snake shrines consisting of earthen platform around a papal tree and a stone image of cobra (Nagakkal) are very common in the region. Childless women to get childbirth and people suffering from skin
diseases to recover from the ailments worship serpents with milk and egg as well as installing Nagakkal in the shrine.\textsuperscript{78}

**Tree worship**

Tree worship is also quite common in the country. Trees like pipal, margosa, vembu and banyan trees are the object of greater veneration and worship. The high castes like the Brahmins worship Tulasi plant grown in the country and in their houses. People have the belief that some trees are the abodes of gods and a source of their strength and shelter and destruction to them may invite the wrath of those gods in the form of death or disease.

The ecological heritage of the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu has two living traditions, the veneration of the sthalavriksha or the sacred tree, to be found in every temple, and the Kovil Kaadugal or sacred groves, to be found in every village. The sthalavriksha involves the worship of a single tree which represents a species which has or once had an important economic status locally, thereby ensuring its linkage to the local deity, while the sacred grove is a protected area in the village. Sanskrit and Tamil literature are full of references to these groves where wise and holy men lived. But the tradition probably goes further back in time, to food gathering societies who venerated nature and the natural resources on which they depended for their existence. The sacred groves of Musiri region are a part of the local folklore and religion. Every village in this region with a grove is a protected area associated with local folk

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., p. 24.
deities of obscure origin. In the middle of the grove there is generally a shrine of Amman or the Mother Goddess in one of her many forms - Kali, Mari, Pidari, Ellai, etc. In front of the shrine there is a pond, either natural or artificial one. Surrounding the shrine and the body of water are the male consorts of Amman, generally regarded as spirits or deities.

They are Karuppasamy, Muniyaandi, Muneeswaran, Madurai Veeran and their bodyguards or warriors. The people of the village make votive offerings of terracotta horses, bulls or elephants to Aiyanar, the mythical watchman of the village whose statue is also consecrated in the grove, in fulfillment of prayers for a good harvest or good health. The priest at the village shrine is the potter, who represents the cyclic powers of mother earth. The sacred grove, in Tamil Nadu, is an essential part of the village. Every village has at least an acre of land dedicated to the grove, the shrine of the mother goddess and Aiyanar, where people make their offerings of terracotta horses.

The horses range from 12 inches to 20 or more feet in height, depending on the district, local practice and financial situation of the devotees. The gods of the grove do not conform to the classical Hindu pantheon, although they are equally revered by all. The sacred groves are the home of the local flora and fauna and represent a mini biosphere reserve, making them as an essential part of the conservation process. The rich plant life helps to retain subsoil water and, during the hot summer months, the pond in the grove is often the only source of drinking water. The groves are a unique
form of biodiversity conservation, and are living examples of the Indian tradition of conserving the ecology as a natural heritage. In Tamil Nadu, certain trees are planted and worshipped as a continuation of the old tradition. Some of the trees and plants are sacred to particular gods and goddesses and as such by worshipping those gods and goddesses. According to Hewitt, Mariamman, the great mother goddesses of Tamil Nadu was a tree goddess in the beginning.

In Musiri region, neem trees are worshipped as a symbol of goddess Mariamman. In the same way particular trees are planted in and around each shrine which ultimately, make a grove where folk-gods and goddesses are worshipped. Some iron lamps are also fixed on the trees which are lighted by the devotees. In house holds and common places in the villages of the Musiri region, the public meeting are generally performed under the pipal or banyan trees. Thus the tree-worship and tree symbol worship, both are still maintained as the relics of the old past. The Thulasi plant is sacred to all Hindus. Many old tribes in this region revere their hut trees and village trees as divine. Thus tree worship involves both elements of primitivism and civilization. The worship of neem tree is a good example for tree-symbol worship in Musiri region as well as in Tamil Nadu. Some granite is heaped together at the roots of such trees to show their significance as worshipping trees. By

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80 Mukkudal Pallu, vv. 33, 34.
81 Ibid., vv. 32-34.
worshipping Neem trees, the villagers worship the folk god Mariamman, who resides on the tree.\textsuperscript{82}

In Tamil Nadu as well as in Musiri region the Neem trees have amazing purifying properties. Mariamman, Kaliyamm are two goddesses who wards off diseases and they are represented by a round pot carrying neem twigs. In South India, the tree is planted near all temples of the goddesses. Devotees who dance for goddesses Mari, Kali etc. carry neem branches in their hands.\textsuperscript{83} It is also worshipped as a symbol of goddesses Mari, Kali of the tribal. At Mariamman goddess festival, a neem tree branch is buried on a raised platform.\textsuperscript{84} The village women water it every day; some people cover their entire body within neem leaves when going for a worship of the village deities in the Musiri region.\textsuperscript{85}

\textbf{Evil Gods}

In the Musiri region people worshipped some devils (Pey or Sataan) in separate shrines called ‘Peykkoil’. The principal temple appears to be a four-sided pyramid rising to a height at about two metres. It keeps off doing evil to the people when appeased with goats, sheep and cock. Peykkodai is observed for ten day as a thanksgiving ceremony to this deity for its help in not doing any harm to villages during the cultivation. Because of its harmful nature it claims equal reverence along with other village deities. Belief in ghosts and

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{82} V. Yesudhas & Isaac Jeyadhas, op. cit., p. 22.
\bibitem{83} Henry Whitehead, op. cit., p. 233.
\end{thebibliography}
demons was common. Numerous references are found in the Sangam works to the death of the people by the evil spirits.\textsuperscript{86}

\section*{Worship}

The worship in the shrines of village goddesses is generally performed by non-Brahmins. In the Musiri region there is a class of priests known as pujari, who are exclusively devoted to service to village deities. During the time of festivals, the animal sacrifices are performed more or less in all temples. Some of the ceremonies peculiar to the temples of the village goddesses, besides animal sacrifices are, fire-walking, lashing oneself with a whip, piercing a metallic wire right through the tongue or through the sides of the mouth, slashing at the breast and forehead with swords until the blood spurts out, carrying on head the Karagam, lamps of ghee, or earthen pots with blazing fire in them. Annual festivals called Thiruvizha or Kodai are generally held in honour of the village deities.

But when infectious diseases among men and cattle prevail, special worship is arranged for, to appease the deities by sacrificing animals, offering heaps of cooked rice or by carrying Karagam. The nature and variety of offerings have been controlled by (Chathiram) the tradition bound rules and regulations which nobody should violate.\textsuperscript{87} Each and every deity gets either vegetarian or non-vegetarian offerings according to the established traditions in the


\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 115.
culinary tastes of it. Pallu refers fish, dry fish, goat, sheep and egg as common non-Brahminical offerings. The Brahminical offerings have been boiled rice, boiled rice flour with water, bread and plant products like sugarcane and banana. Intoxicants like toddy and arrack are also offered. The nature of these offerings might suit the habits of the devotees and their economic position. The nature and function and origin of the deities themselves are finally the larger local availability of a particular offering itself.

The Role of Kodangi

The reason why people decide to donate votive offerings is usually that they have a problem. Then they consult a Kodangi, a man who is able to get possessed by the village gods. He beats an hour with glass shaped drum, sings, and when the god has descended on him he can be consulted as oracle about what to do to gain the help of the gods to solve the problem.

The Kodangi then suggests offerings to make, and to which god, and it is then ordered from the potter and offered at the next festival. However, it is never Aiyannar himself, who is consulted thus, because people who are possessed by him are unable to speak; they stand stock-still while tears run from their eyes. Aiyannar is thus too powerful for possession, so, for divine guidance lesser gods like Karuppasamy, a god always found in Aiyannar temples, are invited to descend on the possessed.89

Diagram No. 4.1

Aiyunar is the protector of the village against flood and evil spirits, and Karuppasamy is the next-in-command in Aiyunar’s army in eternal combat against evil forces. The two gods are often seen as statues of gigantic figures on horseback in front of Aiyunar temples. There are also people who take vows to go to an Aiyunar temple once a year and become possessed by Karuppasamy. They are called Samiyadis. They have to prepare for this for weeks, abstaining from meat, liquor and sex. On the appointed day, they dress up in a peculiar dress and hat supposedly worn by Karuppasamy and start
walking from their homes to the temple preceded by a band with nagaswaram and drums. Sometimes they also carry the big chopping knife, which Karuppasamy holds in his right hand. As they approach the temple, they get more and more possessed.

People on the route come out and stop the Samiyadi and ask questions about their problems and how to solve them. When the Samiyadi reaches the temple and faces the god, who has possessed him, overpowered and passes out, and the possession is over. Someone in the family may also get possessed by Karuppasamy or any other village deity and in oracle fashion tells the family, which offering to make to solve a particular problem.

Hence, One may briefly sketch the Aiyar worship as a closed religious-economic village system largely devoted to solving mental, health and economic problems of the villagers. This system involves seldom Vedic deities and Vedic priests. Only through Aiyar it is formally connected with Sanskritic Hinduism, since he is associated the son of Siva and Vishnu.\(^90\)

**Family Gods**

In many parts of India, a family may worship a deity known only by this particular family, or a group of families. Often such deities are connected with deceased family members. It happens that a family member dreams about the deceased, who declares that he or she is now ‘one with the family deity’ and those they must worship this deity once a year at a festival, where all family members are present.

\(^90\) Ibid.
It often happens that the eldest family members, particularly the women become ‘possessed’ by the family deity and they then function as medium of communication for the family deity. There may be a close link between the members of a family and its family deity. Some family members may have dreams in which the deity is addressing them and giving them important messages, which they then report to the other family members. Such kind of worship systems have been followed throughout Musiri region.\(^\text{91}\)

**Pidari or Pidari Amman**

Pidari or Pidari Amman is a non-Vedic goddess - popular amongst relatively non-Sanskritized social groups of rural Tamil Nadu. She is also known as Pitali and Kali Pidari. She was referred as the snake catcher, and in the Brahminic literature equated with one of the consorts of Siva, as benevolent goddess.

The cult of Pidari evolved as a synthesis of native mother goddess with an aspect of the goddess Kali and is invoked in many villages to ward off evil and demons. The cult is noticed by elite literature by seventh century AD and was primarily centred in Tamil Nadu. Her cult moved on and reached a climax in Eastern India between the eighth and twelfth centuries AD.\(^\text{92}\)

These deities are always found in the outskirts of any village. The maintenance of the temple of these deities is taken care by the whole of the village. It is believed that this god shoot away all evils

and devils from entering the village. These temples are usually in the open space and will not have traditional gopurams like any other temples. One can see big statues of deities with weapons like bow and arrow, swords, knives and other protective weapons. There will be statues of goddesses, and animals in these temples.\footnote{Ibid.}

This Village Goddess possesses most of the attributes of Kali. Her attributes are the cup, fire, noose, and trident. She may also have snakes coiled around her breasts. Like most village Goddesses, she may be represented by a stone. Still many Amman temples in Tamil Nadu have the suffix ‘Pidari’. Such a kind of Pidari village deities is mostly found throughout Musiri region.\footnote{Michael Jordan, \textit{Encyclopedia of Gods, Facts on File, Inscriptions}, New York, 1993, p. 205.}

Village deities of Tamil Nadu that do not belong to the agamic pantheon of Hinduism are found in almost all villages throughout India and Tamil Nadu in particular. They are also known as \textit{Kavaltheivam} or guardian spirits. They are associated to a main deity who is generally ascribed as Kulatheivam by various sects of community and clan groups as part of the tracing their generation through centuries.

Most of the village deities have their shrines on the periphery of the village as a representation of their position as village guardian. Hence they are referred as ‘Peripheral Folk Deity’. These village deities are either represented in the form of a huge, fierce statue or as a simple stone. Most of these temples are not closed
premises but are simple and small worship areas. Weapons such as a trident or a lance or sickles are also associated with these shrines.\footnote{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pidari accessed on 17th January 2008.}

There are also see lot of terracotta horses, elephants, clay dolls, birds and bells in her temple premises. Most officiating priests are non-Brahmins or any local community people or Velars and derive from the local ancestral lineages that had initiated the cult centres generations ago. The worship pattern is non-Vedic and through Folk belief, Folk songs and Folk arts (Villuppattu, Karagam, Koothhu, etc). The local priest might offer flowers or Vibuthi (Sacred Ash) or flowers to the worshippers.\footnote{Ibid.}

This category includes people who lived and lost their lives for their community and hence their community members still remembered them and worship them. This group also includes persons who were killed by injustice and hence were worshipped in order to save the village from their wrath. The worship for the fallen brave warriors is one of the popular forms of worship. The early Tamil poetry ‘Tolkappiyam’ gives an elaborate description in six stages in the planting of such a stone, beginning with looking for a suitable stone, until the institution of formal worship.\footnote{Ibid., p. 3.}

During the Tamil Months of Karthikai (Sokka Panai during Karthigai Dheepam); Thai (Thai Poosam, Makara Jyothi of Ayyappan); Masi (Masi Kalari - Shivarathiri); Panguni (Panguni Uthiram is considered as the auspicious birthday of Aiyanar); Aadi
(Aadi Perukku) and Vaigasi (Vaigasi Visakam), festivals will be conducted in these temples. Generally, a mass convention assembly of large number of related family members gathering is organized during the spring season for a period of two to three days. For the annual mass convention festival, the tradition is that the commencement of the festival will be with that of a hoisting of the flag and tying ‘Kappu’. After this, villagers neither can go out of the village to other village nor come into the village.\(^{98}\)

During this annual gathering, a large number of goats and chicken are sacrificed to Pidari. She is also offered Beedis (country made cigarettes) or cigars and Naravam (toddy = locally instilled alcohol) or some form of modern alcohol. One interesting fact of special mention is the belief of the village people that the Pidari is being disguised in the form of the priest who is asked to predict the future. This belief system about Pidari Samy is called the Arul Vaakku or Saamiyaaduthal in several parts of Tamil Nadu. The social issues will be discussed through these temple fore-tellers (also called as Kodangi) whom the people usually consider as the voice of the Pidari deity. When Pidari addresses the people in different villages through Kodangi, different issues and dimensions on the social, cultural and psychological aspects of the village and the society are reviewed for possible solutions.\(^{99}\)

\(^{98}\) Ibid., p. 4
Ancestral Worship

Primitive people worshipped the spirit of the deceased relatives is known as ancestral worship. This particular method of worship is spread throughout the world. All the present day temples are intimately connected with the graveyard or with the cremation ground. Associated with the phenomenon of death, certain deities are worshipped by the Tamils, or to be more accurate, by the lower sections among them. Sudalaimadan, one of the cremation ground deities later rose to the status to that of Lord Siva, the god of destruction as well as the deity controlling death. Another goddess, connected with burial ground is Ankalamman. She assumes one of the several forms of Kotravai or Kali of later days.

In many cultures rulers and other prominent or holy persons may be thought to become deities upon death. Worshipping the ancestors of the family is called ancestral worship. Ancestor worship is the practice of the continuance of animism. It is known to have flourished from early times and it was in prevalence during Sangam period.

In order to protect themselves from the wrath of the forefathers, the spirit of the ancestors is worshipped. On a particular day in a year the people prepare eatables and other food items liked

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100 Ibid., p. 131.
by the departed ancestors and offer them with other offerings in front of the stones which are placed in memory of them.\textsuperscript{101}

The worship of the fallen brave warriors is one of the popular forms of worship in the early Tamil society.\textsuperscript{102} 'Tolkappiyam' gives an elaborate description in six stages. The portrait of the hero is often decorated with peacock feathers. Some poems refer to spears and shields erected around the planted stones. Offering of Naravam (toddy = natural sap from trees) to the spirit of the fallen hero are, represented in the planted stone, is mentioned in some verses.\textsuperscript{103}

From the practice of nadukal worship, Kulatheivam concept arose. The souls of those who died for the sake of the family are worshipped as family deities by installing nadukal for them. An individual family may revere family deity, who is associated with the family’s ancestral place. Later when the family gets enlarged and spreads far and wide the family deity becomes the clan deity or Kulatheivam.\textsuperscript{104} It is interesting indeed that many different families belonging to different castes share a certain Kulatheivam. That is the result of social change due to inter caste marriages. Kulatheivams, most probably, are part of the genuine Dravidian tradition. Such a

\begin{footnotes}
\item[103] http://www.tamilnation.org/religiuoustraditions-of-tamils-ProfessorA_Velupillai.htm accessed on 19\textsuperscript{th} November 2006.
\item[104] T. Paramasivan, \textit{op. cit}, p. 6.
\end{footnotes}
concept does not exist in northern India. Kulatheivam worship existed from the Sangam age. Kovalan desired to name his daughter as Manimekalai by the name of his family goddess Manimekala Theivam. Among the early Tamils the practice of erecting memorial stones (Nadukal) and Hero-stones (Virakkal) have appeared and it continued for quite a long time after the Sangam age, down to about 11th century AD.

Evidences give clear reference that these stones were installed on the grave-yards of the fallen heroes who died for common cause. The Sangam literature throws some light on Nadukal. Tolkappiyam (porul-63) Pattinappalai (line 78 & 79), Malaipadukadam (line 394 - 396), Ahananooru (line - 35), Purananooru speak about Nadukal. Thirukkural also speaks the worship of fallen martyrs. Silappathikaram has a separate division (Nadukal Kaathai) to talk about Nadukal. Later these stones were worshipped as deities.
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 as gold, silver, sandalwood, ghee and other costly materials. Whereas the folk people offer two types of 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, karpuvram and other things are offered. This is the formal difference can be noticed throughout Tamil Nadu.

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 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.  

Government efforts became vain in spite of various orders prohibiting people from practicing cruel ordeals. No such order  

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111 Henry Whitehead, The Village Deities of South India, Madras, 1907, p. 18.
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\(^{112}\) 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 attaching small articles thereto, and walking or lying on nails"\(^{113}\) 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 Subramanyaswamy festival at Ettukudi village, Nagapattinam taluk,

\(^{112}\) G. O. No. 1092, 27\(^{th}\) October 1934, Public (General) Department, Government of Madras, Hook – Swinging, hook – dragging, etc Prohibition – Further instructions – Issued. (State Archives, Chennai)

\(^{113}\) Ibid.
was to take place from 25th to 29th April 1934. He reported that at
the Nellukkadai Mariamman festival at Nagapattinam which was due
to take place on 6th 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.114 One man
named Rajagopala Iyer died belonging to the Sowrashtra community
while carrying kavadi with a metal alagu stuck in his tongue.115

They are likely to take place only at Anbil and Samayapuram
in Lalgudi taluk, Andimadam in Udaiyarpalayam taluk and Karur in
Karur taluk.116 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.

Dreadful appearance
The folk deities give a dreadful appearance. In most occasion, 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

114 Camp Confl. No. 51 / 34 dated 15th April 1934, Ref. My Camp Confdl. No. 49 / 34 dated 5th
April 1934 ER Wood Esq. MC, ICS, District Magistrate, Tanjore. (State Archives, Chennai)
115 'Died while carrying Kavadi – Tragic end of a devotee’ in the Indian Express, Madras
edition on 27th April 1934.
116 Magisterial Department, RC D2, No. 697 / M – 34, Station: Trichinopoly dated the 27th
June 1934. (State Archives, Chennai)
gave the same look, is not a consideration by the worshippers. In this aspect, the folk deities diversified with the Vedic deities.

**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 Aiyar, 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.\(^1\)

Folk deities are related with regional culture and societal background,\(^2\) 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.\(^3\) 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

\(^{3}\) Henry Whitehead, *op. cit*, p. 17.
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.

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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120 T. Paramasivan, op. cit, p. 148.
occasions. One may frighten the role of pujaris at the time of worship of folk deities.

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-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, Aiyananar 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.

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.

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121 S. Thamizh Selvan, *op. cit*, p. 9.
122 *Interview* with Vasudevan (Age 46) on 20th September 2005 at Samayapuram.
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.\footnote{T. Paramasivan, \textit{op. cit}, p. 147.}

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 gods.\footnote{Vasanth Moon (Ed.), \textit{Ambedkar Writings and Speeches}, Vol. VIII, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, New Delhi, 1987, p. 132.} 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.\footnote{Shukla, \textit{B. R. Ambedkar on Hinduism}, New Delhi, 1993, p. 323.}

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 Kottravai 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 agriculture. They are related to the lushness and also known for their reproductive nature.

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.

**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

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126 Chitrasan Pasayat, op. cit, p. 218.
128 Ibid., p. 27.
129 Shanmugasundaram, Naattupura Theivangal, Thannanane Pathippagam, Bangalore, 1999, pp. 43 – 44.
131 Chitrasan Pasayat, op. cit, p. 219.
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 of Vedic tradition are constructed with various temple complexes, gopurams and with mantapams.

The temple of a popular deity Aiyanar mostly decorated with the horse miniature is made up of brick, stone and chunnam. Those

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133 S. Thamizh Selvan, op. cit, p. 9.
134 T. Paramasivan, op. cit, p. 111.
who were taken vow to offer horses for the fulfillment of vow.\textsuperscript{135} 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{136} During the tenure of Aditta Cholan (871-907 AD), there were temples in Alambakkam and Ukkal in honour of Aiyaran. Aiyaran is also one of the \textit{ishtadevatas} of Kollimalai tribe. In the later days, Aiyaran 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{137}

\textbf{Time frame}

The popularity and the nature of devotion depend upon the well being of the villages.\textsuperscript{138} 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{139} As Henry Whitehead rightly observed, “the sole object of the worship of these village deities is to propitiate them and avert their wrath”.\textsuperscript{140}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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\item A. Rajendran, \textit{Salem Maavatta Koilgal, Field Study Report}, FRRC, Palayamkottai, p. 25.
\item G. Aloysius, \textit{Ayothidasar Sinthanaigal - II}, FRRC, Palayamkottai, 1999, pp. 51-52.
\item Chitrasan Pasayat, \textit{op. cit}, p. 219.
\item Gilbert Slater, \textit{The Dravidian Elements in Indian Culture}, New Delhi, 1982, p. 92.
\item Henry Whitehead, \textit{op. cit}, p. 46.
\end{thebibliography}
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.

**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

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142 Kalasandhi, Ucchikalam, Sayaratchai and Ardhajamam are the principal puja timings.
145 Shanmugasundaram, *op. cit*, p. 94.
are not aware of the prayers. The orders of performing rituals are also not in a regular or proper way as in Vedic tradition.

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.

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.\(^\text{146}\)

**Worship with emotional intensity**

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

**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.

Their role is ambivalent for both, inflict 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 diseases.

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\[147\] **Interview** with Mariappan on 12th January 2006 at Chennai.
diseases like small pox and cholera. They were propitiated to save
the folk people from such calamities.\footnote{P. Subramanian, \textit{op. cit}, p. 272.}

Almost every village in Tamil Nadu has a temple or a shrine
for the guardian god or the \textit{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.\footnote{T. Paramasivan, \textit{op. cit}, p. 143.} Before entering the village, one should go and
worship \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{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.

**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.\(^{150}\)

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.\(^{151}\) 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.\(^{152}\) 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.


\(^{151}\) T. Paramasivan, *op. cit*, p. 112.

\(^{152}\) S. Thamizh Selvan, *op. cit*, p. 13.
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.

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.153

The most important category of localised forms, however, comprises the village goddesses, female gramadevata, many of whom also serve as clan deities. The Tamil village goddess Angalamman, for example, is normally represented as an auspicious

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153 C. J. Fuller, op. cit, p. 48.
married woman with sons, but she is also a virgin without a husband. 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.

**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

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155 C. J. Fuller, op. cit, pp. 42-43.
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.}

**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 isdevastatingly portrayed in her iconography.\(^{157}\)

**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.\(^{158}\)

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.\(^{159}\)

To recapitulate this chapter analyses the characteristics of the deities of Vedic and folk traditions. In many aspects they are united.

\(^{157}\) Ibid., p. 45.
\(^{158}\) T. Paramasivan, *op. cit*, pp. 146-147.
\(^{159}\) Ibid., p. 48.
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.

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.

**Determining Features of the deities of Folk tradition**

The followings are the determining features of the deities of folk tradition. One cannot find much difference between the deities and the ceremonies, methods of worship. These are all intertwined.

**Relevance to Village life**

The folk deities are purely domestic in character. They are not alien or irrelevant to the villages. They are all linked with the day to day living conditions of the people. They reflect the socio, economic background of the actual society. In fact, the domestic nature makes folk deities as unique and significant one.

For instance Mariamman has no relation to the universe. She symbolises only the facts of village life. She is related not to great world forces, but to such happenings such as cholera, smallpox and cattle diseases. She is not connected to great forces such as Indhira, Varuna and Devas, but to ordinary asuras, demons and evil of the villagers. Her nature is differed only in Samayapuram Mariamman with the natural forces such as rain and natural disorders. Her domestic nature is also revealed during the worship

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of Mariamman. The date of worship and the method of worship differ from one place to other.

Flag hoisting, tying of Kankanam or Kappu

The flag hoisting ceremony marks the beginning of a festival. The flag is first fastened to the top of a bamboo pole and then curled around the length of the pole. The flag itself is white and has a symbol of such as tiger, the bull or the goddess drawn on it. Often it is soaked in turmeric water that is dyed yellow. The flag will be tied to the permanent flag post, if there is one. Some temples mark the flag hoisting by raising a bundle of darbha grass tied together with mango leaves.163

On the same day, the Kankanam or Kappu (a piece of string soaked in turmeric) will be tied on the wrist of the pujari and other people who participate in the festival and who have to observe certain restrictions during that period.164 Those who take part only at particular rituals, e.g. the Kuntam irankutal, have their kappu tied later. The goddess and the other gods in the temple receive a kappu as well. The Kappu is not only a safeguard against pollution (tittu), but also: when one put on the kankanam, "they call the gods and ask them to be present during the festival, to protect them and to watch over them that they do not have fights among themselves. After the

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163 Interview with Vasudevan on 20th September 2005 at Samayapuram.  
164 Usually dietary restrictions and abstinence from sex.
festival, when they take off the *kankanam*, they send the gods back (teli)."^{165}

**The Pot (Karakam)**

The topic of the *Karakam* is vast and complex. Different names are given by respondents to the *Karakam*, e.g. *punkarakam*, *Sakthikarakam*, instead of *karakam*, the term *kumpam* or *kalasam* is used; furthermore, *karakam* can also be a fire pot, and then called *akkinikkarakam*, which in turn is called *ticcatti*.^{166} The significance of the fire pot is much adorable among the devotees as gleaned from the ballad.^{167} Folk people normally call this as Amman and revered the same. The pot is generally considered to represent the womb, i.e. the goddess; however, although this may be true in most cases, it is not always so, since the pot can also stand for a male deity. During the festival for *Ankallamman*, the pot is used for a variety of rituals.^{168}

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^{167} *Mariamman ballad* (Mariamman ballad)

^{168} Eveline Meyer, op. cit, p. 234.
For the walking-over-hot coals ritual the priest, who is the first to walk over the coals, will carry on his head a karakam. This Kalasam contains a maavilakku (lamp made of rice flour) and a coin and it is topped with a coconut; whereas the pot with the flame inside which is deposited at the figure’s head in Valajapet (during the opening-of the eyes ritual) is not covered with a coconut. A pot sometimes represents the faces of the Kapparai – usually this pot is simply called panai.\(^{169}\)

Apart from the instances in which the pot clearly represents the goddess, the exact function of the pot cannot be determined, nor do respondents have adequate explanation about it. In its widest application, the pot is a carrier of life, be it that of a deity or a human. The more specific meaning of the pot depends on what is in the pot, whether it be water (considered cooling), or fire (hot), expressing the goddess’ anger. Here again, however, interpretations may differ.\(^{170}\) Finally, the pot is simply a convenient vessel for carrying things to and from the temple, especially the water for the abhisekam. Such pots as contain the Tirttam are also decorated with coconuts and usually covered with a yellow cloth and they are carried on the heads of devotees or pujari.\(^ {171}\)

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\(^{169}\) Ibid, p. 235.
\(^{170}\) Interview with Mariappan on 12\(^{th}\) January 2006 at Chennai.
Preponderance of female

It is an essential and noticeable character in the worship of folk tradition. The popularity of the worship of female divinities in the folk tradition make it as unique and vibrant one. This characteristic cannot be seen in the Vedic tradition. Most of the divinities of Vedic tradition are in the form of male. If some deities are deified in the form of female (such as Lakshmi, Saraswathi etc,) do not have independence. Neither these are wives nor subordinate deities. An important point is to be noted that almost all temples of Vedic tradition, have no place for their female consort.

Out of these goddesses Mariamman tops among the worship of folk tradition and it is an independent deity. The urban people are related her to the Hindu triads, but the rural people considered her as a primeval force. When people were interrogated about the history of Mariamman, they told that she was not created by any force but by her own desire.\(^{172}\) She is not worshipped by the Vedic people due to her feminine character.

Legionary character of the deities

The common aspects of the folk deities are martial in character. Majority of the folk deities are performing the task as protector of village, through the martial character. Another interesting thing can be noticed here; historically these deities come from ordinary

\(^{172}\) K. Sridharan, op. cit, p. 2.
people. Once these deities were living with the people and they would have lost their lives for certain common or specific purposes. And also they are all the symbolic representation of the day to day turmoil of the folk masses. Hence, the legionary character or aspects of folk deities are unavoidable.

One such deity Mariamman has legionary character and it can be identified with the possession of offensive weapon in her hands. In her right hand, she keeps a trishul, a knife and in her left hand she keeps a bow and a pasam (bundle of robes). These are symbolising the legionary character of Mariamman.

**Terrific posture**

The conception of folk deities is made with terrific look. In some rare cases, except face, the expression of the deities may give terrific look. But folk people look this terrific exposure with parental concern. Even, the folk masses never get trepidation over the folk deities. The terrific look or peaceful expression of the folk deities depends upon who is looking at. If a person looks at folk deities with friendliness, the deity will reciprocate the same. Whereas, if the same look at with sense of apprehension, that will give somewhat fearful or terrific exposure. Only the Samayapuram

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174 Interview with Chellaperumal of FRRC on 7th April 2006 at Palayamkottai.
175 Interview with Sadasivam on 25th December 2006 at Tiruchirappalli.
176 Personal observation.
Mariamman deity gives graceful look and other Mariamman give terrific exposure. Except the facial expression of Mariamman the remaining parts of her gives dreadful look.

The folk deities are represented with offensive weapons such as knife, bow and arrow, long knife (Arival) and Trisul. They are not referred with empty hands, but with dangerous offensive weapons, which are fascinating the village people. These are the main reason for the popularity of folk deities among the rural masses. The folk people considered the possession of offensive weapons by the folk deities are to threat the evil spirits. Mariamman can be considered as a deity of soft (shantha sorubini)\textsuperscript{177} nature. However, originally she had ferocious look. She will give a ferocious look when one observes.

It is said that folk deities possess two facets; they can inflict diseases, but if they are ritually ordered, they cure and bring health. For these characteristics, they earn faithful devotees and frustrated devotees. She can inflict disease and brings health.\textsuperscript{178} The outbreak or spread of contagious diseases is looking at the medium of anger of folk deities over folk people. In order to be cured from these diseases, folk people will go for worship and festivals. She is also called as Sitala Mata, goddesses of smallpox, as well as cholera and

\textsuperscript{177} Abbe J. A. Dubois, Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies, Calcutta, 1992, p. 677.
other epidemic diseases. These diseases are thought to be inflicted by village goddesses, either to announce their presence or anger over the disrespectful communities.¹⁷⁹

There is no uniqueness in the method of worshipping. Sometimes these deities demanded such worship from their devotees. For instance, both Kannakiyamman and Muttumariyamman demand to be treated properly. If either one strikes a man down with a feverish illness, she will say, “Alas! For I wander from place to place homeless, with no perfection. Give me a home”.¹⁸⁰ Thus the people build a temple for the goddess to pacify her. She brings rain and good health to the villagers, and does not again inflict infectious, feverish diseases upon them. She equips herself with a retinue of spirits (Pariyalankal), whom she bends to her will to guard the village from evil.¹⁸¹

For instance, one of the peculiar characteristics of worship of Mariamman is an uncommon way. In one place, she is worshipped with the offerings such as beheading of animals and birds. In another place she is worshipped with offerings of food, eatables and flowers. In some places she is worshipped with cruel self-tortures and in some other places, she is simply worshipped with prayers.¹⁸² During

¹⁷⁹ C. J. Fuller, op. cit, p. 45.
¹⁸⁰ Bryan Pfaffenberger, op. cit, p. 164.
¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 164.
¹⁸² Interview with Saptarishi on 27th May 2005 at Lalgudi.
the worship of Mariamman, prayers enchanted by temple priest are not common one. In many places, people are not aware of the prayers. The performance of rituals is also in an irregular way on many occasions.

To worship the folk deities, one need no proper time frame. They are irregular in character and practice. Even the festivals and celebrations may take place for a day, week or even a month and sometimes to be conducted year together. This depends upon the economic condition and well being of a particular village or a place.

Non-Brahmins Priesthood
Another essential feature of the worship of folk deities are administered by non-Brahmin priests. Sometimes, they are worshipped without any priestly class. To worship the folk deities one need no Vedic priest. Anybody can become priest, and they will be called as pujaris. The pujaris are not by tradition but by his / her virtue allowed to offer pujas and ceremonies on their behalf. They are neither trained people nor well versed in mantras. They will simply offer their worship and perform the ordeals. Even the lower cadre people also offer pujas.

For example at the festival of Mariamman, a Pariah assisted the Vannar during the period of ceremonies, and the Pariahs are even
allowed to wear the sacred thread of the twice-born classes. The same class enjoys privileges even now in many places. The origin of which, cannot be explained except by admitting the existence of substantial reason, which have been forgotten. It is noticeable that a Pariah ties the tali round the neck of Egattal (personification of Mariamman), the tutelary goddess of black town in Madras. The Pariah, acts as the bridegroom arrives at the temple about ten days before the commencement of the feast and he is treated.

During the festival time, a Pariah is kept clothed and fed in the temples as the accepted bridegroom of the goddess Mariamman. Tom-toms are beaten in honour of the Pariah bridegroom, and after he has been fasting and bathing, he gets a new cloth dyed with saffron, and the priest fastens a quarter anna paise to the right hand of the goddess and another to that of the Pariah. This ceremony is called Kaappu tying. Not only are the Pariahs, and all the non-Brahmins, outcastes engaged during the worship of Mariamman.

Unorthodox form of worship
The worship of folk deities is not based on any traditional rules. There is no fixed customs, belief and practices as explained by R.

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184 Gustav Oppert, On the Original Inhabitants of Bharatavarsha or India, New Delhi, 1998, p. 52.
185 Ibid., p. 51.
Balasubramanian. Anybody can worship their folk deities as they like. The worship of folk people cannot be equated with the worship of Caste Hindus and Vedic people. When they perform rituals and practices will remember the deeds what they performed in the past.

The worship of Mariamman is in violent form. This is done not only by the temple priest but also by the worshippers and spectators of Mariamman’s feast. During the festival of Mariamman, some of them possessed by the goddess, they will dance widely and use obscene language. These things will definitely make consternation and fascination among the other worshippers.

**Bloody sacrifices**

The folk deities are almost universally worshipped with blood sacrifices. The Vedic religion does not allow the bloodshed in their temple premises, while folk deities are freely offered with blood and animal sacrifices. The red colour of blood mostly accepted as the symbol of victory by the folk deities over demonic elements.

Mariamman, Ankalamman and Pidari are almost universally worshipped with animal sacrifices. Buffaloes, sheep, goats, pigs and

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187 Shanmugha Sundaram, *op. cit*, p. 94.
188 *Interview* with Kailasam on 5th January 2007 at Tiruchirappalli.
189 *Interview* with Shanthi on 10th September 2005 at Tiruchirappalli.
fowls are freely offered to her, sometimes in thousands. These animal sacrifices are symbolising the defeat of enemy such as those demons, which is related to the contagious disease. But this custom is curiously modified by the influence of Vedic tradition, which has tamed the villagers with the idea that the shedding of blood is low and irreligious.

Self tortures

Self-tortures are an important aspect in the worship of folk deities. There are various methods of self-torture. For instance, Chidi-Mari is a torture in which devotees submit themselves in honour of the goddess Mariamman. Now it is totally banned. Fire walking, piercing metal wire, piercing hooks on the whole body etc. are some of self-tortures. Yet they do not feel any pain. Ordinary self-tortures such as taking Kavadi, severe penance, carrying and fire pots also practiced among the devotees. However, worshippers do not rest satisfy with these methods and they are inventing new methods of self-tortures. For example, a fanatic self-torturers makes a vow to cut half of his tongue off, executes it coolly with his own hands and puts the amputated portion in an open coconut shell and offered it on his knees to the divinity. Self-tortures are an important aspect in the

191 Ibid., p. 151.
192 Henry Whitehead, op. cit, p. 18.
193 Shanmugha Sundaram, op. cit, p. 90.
worship of Mariamman. The village people accept all the self tortures to propitiate village gods and goddesses.

**Fire-walking**

Fire walking, called in Tamil *ti-mithi* is one of the popular rituals associated with folk deities such as Mariamman in the whole of Tamil Nadu. It is not possible to enter into the origin of the Mari cult or its association with Renuka and Draupathi. Draupathi according to the *Itihasa* came out of the fire and it is of course appropriate to associate the fire-walking ritual with Draupathi, the fire-walking is also undertaken in her honour to propitiate her and invoke her blessings.

It is no doubt a primitive rite, which does require a considerable amount of devotion, courage and dedication but it is not like *Sati* or like a human sacrifice, said to be prevalent in many parts of India even some decades ago.

Men and women do it, old and young, the educated and the illiterate, the believer and even the scoffer perform the same. For the moment the scoffer does convert himself into a believer, by undergoing all the rigours and disciplines prescribed for the devotee.

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196 Death of a wife on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband.
No one is able to say what makes such different types of people do it and bear the burning heat, but they do it and nobody has complaint of any burning of the sores of the feet. All people walk through the fire with a smiling countenance, and even those who start with some hesitation and fear end up with smiles and peace.

The occasion for a person to walk in the fire is to overcome some calamity in the family. He or she ties up a rupee coin (it was a prestigious silver coin in the past) in a piece of yellow cloth as a sort of contribution to Mari. The amount is taken out and given to the temple on the day of the fire-walking.

The fire-walking ceremony is generally on the last day of the Mariamman temple festival of which culminates on Panguni Uttiram. During all the ten days, the pujari goes round the streets carrying a karagam (brass pot, decorated with flowers, and woven round with thread and filled with scented water into which Mariamman has been invoked with mantras). This where a dipa-aradhana is done to the karagam as to Mariamman. Margosa leaves profusely adorn the pot as well as the pujari.

The arrangement of the fire pit is said to require expert skill. Any one cannot make the fire. It is traditionally men of the carpenter

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198 '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. 297.
199 M. Arunachalam, op. cit, p. 297.
class in the rural parts who are skilled in this through hereditary practice. The pit is about ten feet in length and about three feet wide, with a depth of nine inches. All and sundry wood cannot be used for making the fire. Twigs and leaves should be removed. Good logs of the black babul (acacia) type are brought down in suitable sizes and the pieces are burnt in the pit. This is commenced about two hours earlier than the time fixed for fire-walking. All ash and small cinders are removed. The persons in charge beat down the logs a uniform size, so that the top surface is generally even, without any small fires and is a glow of bright red, without any white or black surface.

The fire-walking takes place generally in the afternoon by about 3'o clock or even a little later. The Karagam goes round the temple itself and all the walkers follow it. They are generally in clothes dyed yellow in turmeric water and hold in their hands bunches of margosa leaves. Some have them even round their necks. Some even have a large mud bowl of fire in their hand, placed over some margosa leaves.

Just at the end of the fire pit there is a pit of water, about three feet wide and two feet long and it is kept with full of water. The first walker, pujari is there with the karagam. He walks gently with measured steps and from by looking at his face one cannot say that

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Interview with Mayan on 26th January 2007 at Karur.
he feels the burning of heat. Others follow many in equally measured steps, some in a gentle hurry; there are some who rush, out of psychological fear and may be even out of a burning feeling at the soles of the feet.\textsuperscript{201}

The day previous to the day of the fire walking, the walkers follow a routine of intense personal discipline. They eat only light-food, non-vegetarian eschews meat on the two days, and married people live separate. Needless to say they worship in the Mariamman temple on as many occasions as they can. Intoxicants are of course taboo; no tobacco in any form. People sleep on a bare floor or bench as a measure of penance. This kind of physical discipline helps them also to evolve some mental discipline, which is able to overcome actually the heat of the burning embers. An armlet \textit{kankanam} or \textit{kappu nul} in yellow is tied on the right arm of the fire-walker with a rhizome of turmeric round in it.\textsuperscript{202} Through the centuries fire has been seen not to scorch those who have undergone this preparatory discipline including the \textit{kappu}. But fire had been seen to burn and blisters the soles of those who enter the fire without undergoing this discipline on the previous day. It is also common knowledge that scoffers and unbelievers have been severely burnt.

On the day of the fire-walking, they have an early morning bath, and fast till the ritual is over. As the karagam goes forward

\textsuperscript{201} M. Arunachalam, \textit{op. cit}, p. 299.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., p. 299.
there is loud drum beating and a sort of frenzy works up among the
dedicated. There is a general fear that any slackness in the discipline
will result in the burning of the feet during the walking.203

Following the pujari the walkers walk in single file spurred
onward by the weird beating of the drum and by the beating of the
udukkai (a kind of drum tapering in the middle) in the hands of the
pujari.204 Of course he chants the names of Mariamman and also
lines from the Mariamman ballad.

Some walk as if in a trance and as they cover the fire pit, they
are taken into the arms of friends waiting on the other side. The only
prasadam for them is the sacred ash and the kumkum distributed by
the temple priests. Fire-walking, ti-mithi is said in some areas to be
poo-mithi, walking on flowers!205 For most of the unmarried women,
who undergo what to others is an ordeal, it is indeed not a fire-
walking or ordeal, but really a poo-mithi or flower-walking206
referred by her devotees.

To summarise, Hinduism was not a homogenous religion with
at least six contending schools of philosophy. Yet, it has become the
most intolerant religion in recent years due to vested interest forces
within it. The attempt is to homogenise Hinduism. In order to

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203 Interview with Mayan on 26th January 2007 at Karur.
204 Arunachalam, op. cit, p. 300.
205 Interview with Shanthi on 10th September 2005 at Tiruchirappalli.
206 Ibid.
homogenise Hinduism, they have concentrated on the vast multitudes of folk deities. They want to bring them under hierarchical line of Vedic deities.

Vedic religion, which is neither a religion, nor an ideology, is able to keep such a large chunk of Indians enslaved, poor and half dead, whereas the folk deities are designed to represent the liberal thoughts of ordinary masses. The relation between folk deities and folk people can be seen at the time of worship.

Now the deities of folk tradition and other Dravidian gods and goddesses are termed as divinities of Hinduism. Yet these are dismissed by Vedic priests, there are many reasons for this neglect of folk religious tradition. There is no systematised teaching connected with these deity and worship. The legends and stories are always recited from memory. The worship is found largely among uneducated people. Finally the ritual domination of Vedic priests is also a reason for the neglect of folk form of religion. In spite of these reasons, folk temples attract huge people, which resulted high income.

The flow of money in a few popular folk temples tends the Vedic people to change and to alter the features of folk deities. But, they cannot enter these temples, since the features of folk religion
and deities are far away from the Vedic religion. The relevance to village life, preponderance to female deities, legionary character, and terrific exposure, uncommon and irregular method of worship, non-Brahmin priesthood and self torture are the popular features of folk religious tradition make it as a unique one.

Village Deities worship unites the people
The village deities’ worship made the rural people united. On the occasion of the annual festival of the village, deities are famous one. The people’s offerings of Pongal and Mulaippary to their ishta deities (family deities) even today are found in the rural system of worship. Even they are living in far off villages for their livelihood, during festival time; they mingle with their family members. It implies the real nature of unity among the rural rustic people.