CHAPTER 9

SANSKRITIZATION IN TEYYAM CULT OF KALAKAMS
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SANSKRITIZATION AMONG THE TIYAS OF
NORTH KERALA

9.1 Introduction

The study of any society cannot be taken in isolation. Several communities inhabit North Kerala which was a part of the erstwhile Malabar region of Madras Presidency. Namputiri and other Brahmins were at the top of social hierarchy. Next to them were Nayars, the warrior caste of Kerala. Nayar women had hypergamous relationship with Namputiri men in the past. This custom almost disappeared sometime in the 19th century. Tiyas occupied a very low status in the caste hierarchy. Next to them in the lower order of caste hierarchy were Vannan, Pulayan and other ‘untouchable’ castes. Although untouchability is banned by law, the practice continues even to day, especially in the rural parts of Kerala.

Historisms and folklorists claim that the indigenous population of Kerala consisted of various ‘untouchable’ and tribal communities and other Dravidian (all non-Brahmanical) castes such as Tiya and Vannan (Kurup 1997).

Kurup is of the opinion that Aryan and Dravidian cultural complexes constituted the cultural tradition of Kerala. He uses these terms for two distinct socio-linguistic groups. He also states that Aryan stands for Brahmanical culture and Dravidian denotes the tribal and indigenous groups (Ibid, P.I.). However, I prefer to use the terms Brahminization and Sanskritization
interchangeably as the term Aryan is more controversial and vague in the present context. The cultural tradition of Hindus of Kerala is a mixture of ‘great’ and ‘little’ traditions of Hinduism.

A case study of Kalakams, one of the socio-religious organizations of the Tiya community in Malabar, where the popular cult of Teyyam or Teyyattam is maintained will help us to understand the above phenomenon. Although the Kalakams or socio-religious units are the centers of worship for Tiyas it is not a temple as prescribed under the Brahminical religious concepts. It is a Dravidian institution which has its own folk – deities and rituals. However, under the process of Sanskritization this institution maintains some prominent Brahminical gods and goddesses among its innumerable folk – deities. The Kuruvanthatta Kalakam in Ramanthali, the Ramavilyam Kalakam in Trikaripur, Nilamangalam Kalakam in Thuruthi near Cheruvathur and Palakunnu Kalakam in Kottikulam are the centers of Tiya socio-religious life. Kuruvanthatta Kalakam and Ramavilyam Kalakam are situated just 5 kilometres west and 5 kilometers north of Payyanur, one of the northernmost, and therefore the earliest, Brahmin settlement in Kerala. (Logan, 1993; 236). The northern region of Kannur district was the earliest region of Kerala to be affected by the wave of Brahmin immigration and colonization. According to legend, Parasurama brought Brahmins from Aryapuram (i.e. North India) and helped them to settle in 32 different villages of Kerala. These villages were grouped under four Kalakams or administrative units. William Logan described the old system of administration in his Manual (1887) as the social
organization of Bhramin community which was based on clustering of villages. Teras were the basic unit of Nayars and the Cheri was the basic unit of Tiyas (Ibid, p. 122).

Following the Brahmin practice of organizing the settlements into Kalakams, Tiyas of North Kerala between the rivers Chandragiri and Perumba had also organized their society into four Kalakams.

The influence of Brahminic tradition on Tiyas can be seen in the organization of their shrines. Earlier, the Tiya shrines under the control of a Kalakam was known as Mundya or Arai. Tiyas of the locality were controlled by the community leaders from these centers. Later, such shrines also came to be known as stanam following the Brahminic tradition. The Tiyas started imitating the Brahminic cultural traditions in many ways. However, the priests in Kalakam shrines continued to be Tiyas.

Barbosa had described in his Manual that Tiyas worshipped separate idols kept in their shrines. Probably, the idols referred by Barbosa are the Teyyam deities of Tiyas. The shrines of Tiyas consist of deities which may be classified into three categories: indigenous (non-sanskritic), sanskritized indigenous deities like Vishnumurhti and Sanskritic.

The legend of Ramavilliam is further related to Parasaruma tradition. It is believed that on the occasion of erecting the image of god Vishnu at Chakrapani temple at Trikkarippur, Parasuma was obstructed by a local Asura or demon. This Asura was defeated and killed by a Goddess of battle, called Patakkatti Bhagavati who is now propitiated in the northern shrine of Arai of
Ramavilliam. Another legend is that Parasurama himself had placed his bow at the place of the present shrine. Thus this Kalakam, a Dravidian institution, claims superiority by linking its legends with the popular Aryan tradition and mythology of Parasurama” (Kurup, 1977).

It is interesting to examine how the Dravidian institution of worship differs in rituals and customs from that of a Brahminical temple. The priests and officials of the Kalakams are the members of Tiya community. Due to the influence of the Brahmins, a hierarchical caste structure was formulated and the natives were given a subordinate position. According to the legendary Keralolpatti, Parasurama sanctioned the festivals like Kaliyattam, Puravela and Daivattam or Teyyattam to the people of Kerala. The native communities like Panan, Velan and Vannan were allotted the profession of Teyyam dance. He installed the goddesses like Chamundi for the prosperity of the Keralities. He also established the goddess Durga on the sea coast. These traditions explain how indigenous cults were tolerated and metamorphosed under the religious supremacy of the Brahmins (Kurup, 1977:4). Thus the Dravidian shrines owed their allegiance to the Brahminical temples. Simultaneously as a process of Brahminization, a few Brahminic gods and goddesses were incorporated among the folk gods and goddesses of the indigenous people.

Thus we find an assimilation of both Brahminic and non-Brahminic cultural complexes, the process described by MacKim Marriott as universalization and parchochialization. Redfield had called, these cultural complexes as great and ‘little’ traditions. Srinivas had called the process of
interaction between great and little tradition as Sanskritization. This process is very much prevalent and is described in relation to different aspects of social life of Tiyas in North Malabar. In this respect, the institutions of Kalakam and Teyyam are highlighted.

9.2 Kalakam and the cult of Teyyam

The study of Kalakam among the Tiyas shows that several Brahmin and non-Brahminic elements are integrated in making the present culture of Kerala. Teyyattam is the main method of worship among the Tiyas and several other communities in North Kerala.

Several gods and goddesses are propitiated as a significant form of worship in Kalakams. The Teyyam dance or Teyyattam is a popular cult in north Kerala. It is a living cult with old tradition, ritual and customs. It embraces almost all castes, classes and divisions of Hindu community in this region. The term Teyyattam means ‘dance of god’. Teyyam is a corrupt from of Daivam or god. The ritual aspects and artistic forms of this folk-dance fulfills the religious aspirations and aesthetic needs of the common people.

This cult has a very old tradition. It has incorporated different forms of worship which existed in the early societies. Kurup has noted that the cult incorporates several religious practices of worshipping mother goddess, heroes, ancestors, spirits, serpents animals etc (1977:5). The migration of Brahmins into this region brought several new practices which also got integrated into the local customs. For example, deities like Vishnu, Shiva, Kamadeva etc were
borrowed from the Sanskritic traditions. Different branches or sects of Brahminic traditions such as Saktism and Vaishnavism dominated the process of integration of diverse cultural elements.

Teyyam, is an old dance ritual and a form of worship practiced by the people of North Kerala residing between Chandragiri river in the north (in Kasaragod district) and Korapuzha (in Kozikod district) in the south. This region was called Kolattunadu as it was ruled by the king Kolattiri.

Teyyam ceremonies take place either in the precincts of a shrine or in the yard of an ancestral house in front of a temporary shrine called Pati. Dance is a common mode of worship among the simple societies. The dancer achieves identification with the deity during Teyyam performance. Teyyam is not performed in Brahminical temples, but in small shrines which are called stanam or kavu (sacred grove). The teyyam shrines may be owned and managed by individual families, particular castes or the village community. Brahminism had its own influence on this local custom as can be seen in its integration of many cultural elements from Brahminic traditions.

There are both male and female Teyyam deities. But female Teyyams outnumber male Teyyams. This shows the influence of matriliney in Kerala. Most of the female Teyyams are called Bhagavathis or Chamundis which are interpreted as the incarnations of deities like Parvathi of great tradition. Another important factor is that Teyyam is also related to Shiva (of great tradition) and they outnumber the Tiyyams related to Vishnu. This shows the
dominance of Shaivism and Shakitism in North Kerala. The Brahminic traditions of the region is also dominated by Shaivism.

Teyyam cult is also having the effect of integrating the society. Teyyam may be celebrated by people of any Hindu community. But, the participants in it belong to various communities who occupy different positions in the caste hierarchy. Participation of the members of castes like Tiya, Maniyani, Vannan, Kollan, Asari, Thattam, Pulayan, etc are absolutely necessary for the performance of Teyyam. The authorities of the Kalakam have to observe many formalities before the commencement of a Teyyam. We find the influence of feudalism and Brahminism in such practices. Before the commencement of Perumkaliyattam, Tiya leaders approach the local Landlords for seeking their permission.

They also obtain permission from the chief priest of the Brahmin community, Tarananellur Nambudirippad, who has supreme authority over all rituals of temples as derived from Parashurama, after making a customary present of betel leaves and 16 fanams (coins). Further they make the traditional present of betel leaves along with 2 fanams each at Chakrapani temple at Trikkaripur, Subrahmanya temple at Payyannur and Shiva temple at Nileshwar. The sacred fire for lighting the lamps at the Kalakam is brought from the Brahmanical temple of Cakrapani at Trikkarippur and the temple of Udinur Kulom. These formalities reveal the supremacy of the Brahminic deities over the local deities.
The Koyma (supervisor) and Matambi (Chief authority) of the Kalakam belong to the higher caste of Nairs. Caste hierarchy is strictly observed in the organization of worshipping centers in Malabar. The Kalakam belonging to the lower caste of Tiyas is under the supervision of higher castes. The traditional presents of betel leaves along with cash are usually made by tenants to their landlords in Kerala during ceremonies. The Kalakam recognizes the supremacy of Tarananellur Nambudirippad in ritual matters and also gives respect to the Brahminical temples in the locality. The ‘purifying’ ceremony of Punyaha of the shrines at the Kalakam is done by the chief Brahmin priest, ie. Tarananellur Nambudirippad. By these formalities the supremacy of the Brahminic gods and goddesses and Brahmins is established over this religious institution.

Celebration of Perumkaliyattam, the great festival of Teyyam described in chapter 8, illustrates several aspects of the evolution of the present cultural traditions of North Kerala, including the cultural traditions of Tiyas. Evolution of deities like Bhagavathi can be traced to local traditions like the cult of mother goddess and matrilineal descent system of several communities in North Kerala. Ramavilyam kalakam is in the forefront in the organization of Teyyams and hence contributed to the development of a vibrant cultural tradition in this region. The dominance of Ramavilyan Kalakam over other Kalakam is also due to the fact that this Kalakam is directly relates itself to Lord Parashurama (a brahmin).
Bhagavathi and Chamundi cults are related to the cult of Kali or Durga according to eminent scholars who have written on the cultural traditions of Kerala (Kurup, 1977). Regarding the popularity of the mother goddess cult, Menon has stated that “there is hardly a Hindu community or a village in Malabar that does not worship Kali in one form or another, or own a shrine dedicated to the Mother Goddess” (1943). Kuladevata (family deity) of many royal families in Kerala is a mother goddess in the name of Bhagavathi, Chandi, Chamundi or some other form of Kali or Durga. A Bhagavathi of a particular locality is known after the place name. Generally, the goddess is situated in a Kavu (sacred grove) which may be located by the side of a village settlement or a few kilometers away in the adjoining forest. Kavu is a term used for the shrines of Bhagavathi, serpent god, Aiyappa, and Kurumba. There are no idols in these shrines which indicates its indigenous origin. The deity is generally represented by a weapon like trident (trishul) or a spear which is associated with the deity. The weapons may be made of wood or some metal like brass or iron. These shrines differ from the stanams or temples constructed according to Vastushastra by expert masons under the guidance of Brahmins and astrologers.

Sanskritization of the indigenous deities like mother goddesses may be explained by referring to some processes. First of all, these indigenous deities are linked to Brahminic deities, and the deities are linked to some Hindu religious texts in Sanskrit like Devi Mahatma, Markandaya Purana, Bhagavatha or Mahabharata. Third, the deities are linked to certain mythological characters
like Parasurama. The people of Malabar strongly believe that Parasurama had granted them several shrines and the festivals associated with them.

Members of Tiya community and the cult of Teyyam have played an important role in the Sanskritization of Hindu cultural traditions in North Kerala. Kalakam is a territorial structure of Tiya community. Most of the rituals and festivals of Tiyas and other communities are conducted under the patronage of and management of Kalakam officials. Kalakam keeps a record of all the activities of the community.

Kalakam also plays an important role in bringing members of various Hindu communities in organizing the religious events.

Sanskritization is a process which is very much present in the contemporary society in Kerala. Although the Brahmin communities are insignificant in political and economic life of Kerala, they still wield enormous influence of the religious sphere. High level of political awareness among the people of Kerala did not affect the religious traditions. However, parallel democratic structures like committee, club, trust, registered society etc have come into existence in the recent past. This change is due to the spread of modern education and the strengthening of education and the strengthening of democratic institutions from in village to the state level. This change may be called modernization following Srinivas (1952). People do not find any contradiction in Sanskritization and modernization. In fact, these two processes are reinforcing each other. Tradition and modernize may be
considered as the two faces of the general social processes which has made the society in Kerala very vibrant.