Chapter 5

THE MUKKUVA CONCEPTION OF THE DIVINE

5.1 THE LONG ROAD OF ASSIMILATION AND SYNTHESIS

The Mukkuvar of Vizhinjam are all christians in the Catholic tradition, and they have been so ever since the mass conversions by the Portuguese missionaries four and a half centuries ago. The catholic identity of the community is well maintained in numerous ways ranging from their very names to their cultic and social life that is centred primarily around the church and the priest. There are two churches and a few shrines that dominate the skyline of Vizhinjam.

To go by these external manifestations of a Christian tradition may be deceptive. One needs to ask whether these really reflect the religious beliefs and practices of the Mukkuvar at the latent level. The analysis in the earlier chapters indicate that there has been a superimposition of Portuguese Catholic belief system over an Indian form of religiosity in which the community had been nurtured for ages. At a formal level one may find that the professed beliefs of the Mukkuvar perfectly coincide with that of the universal Catholic tradition; the present inquiry, however, is at the latent level of the religion of every day life and practice.

The three basic components that go in to constitute religion in the process of institutionalization, as seen earlier, are beliefs, rituals, and organization. Beliefs may be understood as patterns of

See chapter 1, section 4.0, above.
ideas or conceptions that express the religious experience of the community either in a symbolic mode or in the mode of systematic articulation through creeds or doctrines. The Mukkuvar tend to give expression to their beliefs not through systematic articulation, but in the rituals of daily life and the myths they live by. This chapter tries to understand this realm of beliefs with focus on their conception of the divine.

The term *divine* is preferred here to *God* or *the sacred*. The term *God*, which originated as a common name, in course of history, came to be identified with the Abrahamic ‘One, True God’; with the spread of Christianity and Islam the term acquired a hegemonic quality, and began to reduce Gods of other cultures to ‘mere gods’. This connotation prevents this term from being fair in an inter-cultural context. The word *sacred* has been popular among social scientists and phenomenologists, and is broader in conception. The difficulty with this word is its presentation as the opposite of *profane*. The demarcation and apparent opposition between the *sacred* and the *profane* appears quite alien to many cultures including that of the Mukkuvar.

This study prefers the term *divine* as it is neither restricted to a personal god nor confining to a realm that is marked sacred. The polysemic quality of the term helps to make sense of the variable meaning of the divine dimension of reality that manifests uniquely in every culture. For, the *divine* becomes meaningful only within the cultural universe of a particular community.

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5.1.1 The Heritage of Indic Religious Past

The elements of what may be called a neithal religion as characteristic of a coastal people have been discussed earlier. The discussion highlighted, based on Sangam literature, how various Dravidian beliefs and divinities contributed to the shaping of a culture and a religious universe that reflected the specificity of the coastal context. The predominance of the worship of mother goddesses and of Murugan closely links the Mukkuvar with the religion of ancient Tamilakam. Deities like Varuṇa, the god of the ocean, and Kumari, the virgin sea goddess, might have been added by a sea-centred people. Neithal religion tries to express the composite of this total phenomenon. However, this should be placed in the proper perspective of an Indic religious past.

Buddhism seems to have been popular in coastal regions and among the comparatively backward classes. A major Buddhist centre was Srimūlavāsam, now believed to be under the sea. Nagam Aiya, after discussing the remnants of Buddhism in Travancore states that Brahmans have appropriated and adapted many Buddhist/Jain temples to become Hindu temples; he gives the example of many such temples in south Kerala.\(^4\) Buddhism began to decline by the 8th century, and finally disappeared in the 12th century under the aggressive Hindu propaganda, especially under Sankaracarya. The bhakti movement led by the Śaiva Nāyanmārs and Vaiṣṇavite Alwars also had their role in eliminating Buddhism and Jainism, especially from among the masses.

However, as to be expected, many elements of Buddhism and Jainism got absorbed into the popular form of Hinduism that flourished. Various forms of present-day worship, images, processions, utsavams, etc., both in the Hindu as well as the Christian festivals, point to this

\(^4\) See Chapter 2, sections 2.2 and 2.3, above.

legacy. Many Dravidian deities were transformed and assimilated into the Hindu pantheon under the influence of Vedic Hinduism. "Thus the Dravidian goddess Koṟṟavai became Durgā, Kāli and Bhagavathī. The popular non-Aryan deity Śāstha came to be looked upon as Hariharaputra, the son of Vishnu (Hari) and Śiva (Hara), in order to make him acceptable not only to the Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite sections of the Hindu population, but also to the converts to Hinduism from within the Buddhist fold."6

The above discussion leads to the conclusion that the religion of the Mukkuvar at the time of their conversion to Christianity was externally that of popular Hinduism, but one that resulted from a complex process of assimilation and synthesis between various strands of Indic religiosity. It was into this mould of Indic religiosity that Portuguese Catholicism got implanted in the 16th century, thus initiating a new process of assimilation and synthesis. The themes discussed below are the outcome of this process.

5.2 THE CULT OF CINTĀTHIRA MĀṬA

A frequently used word in the daily life of a Mukkuvan, whether in a religious context or not, is that of Amma or Māṭa. The word Amma in the Tamil context is a very rich and evocative term, and may be translated as 'mother', 'mistress' or 'lady'. This is a term of respect that can be used for any person of the female sex, whether human or divine. Traditional mother goddesses are called Amma or Amman. The sea also is reverentially called Amma or Kadalamma. But the Amma for the Mukkuvar of Vizhinjam is Cintāthira Māṭa, the patroness of the community and of the church.

The prime position accorded to Cintāthira Mātā in the social and cultic life of the village will be clear from a casual visit to the village. Cintāthira Mātā is understood as the colloquial form of Sindhu-yātra-māta, the patroness of Vizhinjam church. The term sindhu has the following meanings, in order of priority, 1. the sea, the ocean; 2. water; 3. river in general; 4. the river Indus. As used here, sindhu means the ocean, and yātra means journey; she is considered the Lady of Good Voyage, the protectress of sea-farers. Her statue adorns the main altar in both the churches, as well as the imposing gopuram (tower) of the new church.

The present statue looks very similar to that of Our Lady of Velankanni, except that she holds a ship in her right hand in place of a scepter. She is described as the heavenly mother, "wearing the sun as her apparel, the moon as her footstool, and twelve stars as her crown, and holding the child in her left arm and a ship in her right arm, looking up with her right eye towards heaven and focussing her left eye down on the earth". The original statue, made of wood, depicting her as seated in a chair, was much smaller in size and is now lost. The legend has it that the statue got landed at Vizhinjam in a wooden box; it had a note in it asking those who find the box to contact the sender for putting up a church at the landing spot. Some say other villages had tried to catch the box earlier, but seeing the statue turning its back to them they let it go; only at Vizhinjam the statue stayed in position. A new church, accordingly, was built in place of the old thatched shed and the statue was installed there.

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8 There is also reference to Cintādevi in Maṇimekalai, the well-known Tamil epic of Buddhist origin; Cintādevi is one of the four forms of the goddess, according to the Śakti cult prevalent in Tamilakam. But this is not proof enough to show any vital link between Cintādevi and Cintāthira Mātā. See R. Nagaswami, Tantric Cult of South India, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1982, p.19.

9 A.I. Antony, "Vizhinjam parish through history", unpublished write up in Malayalam.

10 The cult of Cintāthira Mātā does not seem to be confined to Vizhinjam. In Sri Lanka there is a 120 years old church dedicated to Cintāthira Mātā, situated at Amrutakazhy, in Betticaloa on the East
The cult of Cintāthira Māta reaches its climax on the day of the parish feast which usually falls in the month of January. It is a ten day long village festival both young and old look forward to participate. The sapram procession held in the evening of the ninth day takes the statue of the Māta, richly decorated and illuminated on a car, around the village; it will be accompanied by saprams of various saints. The route is the same - ie., from the old church on the seashore to the new church. Recently the route has been shortened due to the existing situation of inter-communal tension.

While joining in the procession most villagers choose to dress up in the prescribed uniform of the sabha each one belongs to.\textsuperscript{11} There are certain conventions that regulate the order and position of each sabha at the procession; the compiri sabhakal are always given prominence, and are to stay close to the sapram. All along the route devotees throng to make their offerings at the statue. The prasadam distributed consists of salt and pepper.\textsuperscript{12} Usually the procession will be followed by elaborate cultural programmes like drama or gānamejā arranged on the beach. The statue of the Māta will be placed in the new church for a few more days, until it is taken back to the old church.

cost; it is a sub-station of Pulliadikuda parish. The statue of the Madonna is placed in a ship, and is locally called Kappalēri Māta (the Māta who has boarded the ship). The legend has it that a Portuguese ship, caught in a storm in the sea, was brought ashore by Virgin Mary miraculously. A similar legend is associated with the statue of Our Lady of Health at Velankanni in Tamilnadu. Here too a storm-tossed Portuguese ship was saved on invoking the help of Mary. The church was built to fulfil the vow made by the sailors.

\textsuperscript{11} Sabha is a devotional association of people in a parish. There are fourteen sabhakal existing at Vizhinjam. For a more detailed discussion on the topic see chapter 6, below.

\textsuperscript{12} Both pepper and salt are counted among the `eight poisons' (aśta viṣam), according to Hindu mantric texts. Offering of these substances in mantravādam is closely associated with rituals aimed at destruction of one's enemy (śatrusamhāra).
Cintāthira Māta has come to be the protectress and refuge of the Mukkuvar of Vizhinjam. "It is through her power that the Christians here survive", says the kaṇakkapiḷḷa (catechist).\(^{13}\) It is she who protects them in calamity - whether at sea or in the market or in a communal clash. Referring to the communal riots of 1995 in which four Christians and two Muslims got killed, Tharsilamma is convinced that it was Amma who was fighting for the Mukkuvar standing in between the two camps and blocking the bombs thrown at the Christians from the other camp; otherwise the casualty would have been more.\(^{14}\) 'Amma is fighting for us' is a refrain often heard. When someone is missing in the sea, or when some calamity occurs in the village, women and children rush to the statue in the old church and cry aloud in frenzy, "You come down, Amma! You come with your son and save us!" Fear does not prevent the menfolks from going to the deep seas, for they know Amma will protect them. Women call upon Amma and pray for the protection of their husbands and sons; "Amma, kappakkari (ship-bearer), who lifted up the sinking ship, please protect our children!".

5.2.1 Linkage with a Mother Goddess Tradition

Thurston writes that the caste deity of the Mukkuvar was goddess Bhadrakāli, represented by a log of wood placed in a hut called the temple, and to whom cock-sacrifice and fruit offerings were made four times a year.\(^{15}\) Studies show that the cult of Devi was an ancient Dravidian cult prevalent along the Kerala coast. According to Kerajolpathi, Paraśurāma reclaimed the land of Kerala from the sea and established sixty four grāmams; the goddess Durga was set to guard the sea shore on the west, and the god Śāstha the ghats on the east. Paraśurāma also established 108

\(^{13}\) Personal Interview with the Kanakkapiḷḷa of the parish.

\(^{14}\) Personal Interview with woman informant.

\(^{15}\) Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes*, p.106
images of the Durga Devī on the sea shore, and also erected shrines for snakes and petty devatas. The multitude of Bhagavathy temples all along the coastal villages is a phenomenon one cannot miss.

This is further corroborated by the existence of a number of ancient Bhagavathy (popular name for Bhadrakāśī or Kāśī) temples, some dilapidated and discarded, in the village of Vizhinjam. Tradition has it that there existed seven temples in this tiny village from ancient times; some of these do not exist any more. The Bhagavathiyanman temple at Pulloorkonam is a protected monument under the Archeology Department. It is built fully of granite slabs in the Choja style, and dated back to A.D. 9th or 10th century. This is dedicated to sapta mātṛka (seven mother goddesses), linking Vizhinjam strongly with the Mother-goddess tradition of ancient Tamilakam. The dilapidated temple at Ganapathy Vilakam too was a Devī temple. The Christian neighbours still speak of the midnight route of Devī to the well at Kuṭijuved, which used to be the temple tank. The Thāppātheru Mariyamman kovil belongs to the goldsmith (Viśwakarma) community that migrated to Vizhinjam from Tamilnadu (Kancheepuram) centuries ago. They brought with them their goddess Mariyamman and her consort Sri Vairavan, both typical Dravidian deities.

Bhadra Kāśī, or Kāśī is usually depicted as a grotesque female figure with terrifying features.

"She is always black or dark, is usually naked, and has long, disheveled hair. She is adorned with severed arms as a girdle, freshly cut heads as a necklace, children’s corpses as earrings, and serpents as bracelets. She has long, sharp fangs, is often depicted as having claw-like hands with long nails, and is often said to have blood smeared on her lips.... She is usually shown on the battlefield, where she is a furious combatant who gets drunk on the hot blood of her victims, or in

a cremation ground, where she sits on a corpse surrounded by jackals and goblins."\(^{17}\)

Scholars say Kāṭī is associated with the periphery of the Hindu society as she is worshipped by tribal or low caste peoples. "Indian mother-goddess temples are a direct growth from primitive tribal cults, each of local origin, later brahminized", states Kosambi.\(^{18}\) Thus she came to be one of the manifestations of the Mahādevī, the Great Goddess in the Indian tradition.

The wide-spread cult of mother goddesses has been subject of much study. Svelebil reconstructs the archetype of these as Üramma, the protective mother goddess of the ār, the village settlement.

Üramma was the archetype of all the ammas in the Dravidian speaking South, connected with agricultural operations, rain and fertility rites on the one hand, and with epidemic diseases on the other hand.... Üramma was most probably the neolithic prototype of the ubiquitous Goddess or Devi in her many various multiforms....\(^{19}\)

It is probable that the group of goddesses known as sapta māṭkaj (seven mothers) represent the many village goddesses worshipped by the common people as their protective deity.\(^{20}\) In the Tamil tradition they are not really mothers but virgins or maidens (seven kannimar). The dualistic opposition between motherhood and virginity does not seem to be a major concern to the Dravidian mind. The link between cross-roads and mother goddesses are well documented. "The

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\(^{19}\) Zvelebil, Tiru Murugan, p.6.

\(^{20}\) The number and names of the māṭkaj vary according to each tradition. Devī Māhātmyam, a work of the medieval period refers to seven śaktis, closely resembling the male gods: Brahmagī, Māheśvārī, Kaumārī, Vaiṣṇavī, Varāhī, Narasimha, Aindrī. But this depiction is arbitrary, and betray a pure Brahmanical portrayal. See Kinsley, Hindu Goddesses, p.156.
cross-ways are logically the original sites for the mother goddess cults”, argues Kosambi, supported by field data.\textsuperscript{21} The use of cross-roads in \textit{kanyapedal rituals} also support the deep influence of the mother-goddess tradition on the Mukkuvar community.

5.2.2 Ambivalence of the Amma Image

Belief in a mother goddess appears to be a universal phenomenon seen among all peoples irrespective of colour or continent. However, studies show that “no civilization in the world developed goddess worship so elaborately as did India”.\textsuperscript{22} What would distinguish the goddess or Devi image in India is the aspect of ambivalence; both auspicious and inauspicious (benign and terrific) dimensions (\textit{sānta bhāvam} and \textit{rudra bhāvam}) coexist within the very same image.

In her benign form the Devi “represents the world as unceasingly fruitful, full of awesome energy that pervades and nourishes all creatures”.\textsuperscript{23} As mother she showers on her children all the bounties at her disposal. Fertility, material abundance, food and nourishment, embodiment of female beauty, wisdom, etc., are associated with the benign form. \textit{Laksmī, Pārvatī, and Pṛthvī} are manifestations of this form. The other side of her nature refers to her fierce or terrible forms associated with war, blood, destruction, death, etc. In her protective role she often assumes the form of a fierce warrior. Her weapons are mainly the protruding teeth and the sharp nails. Her taste for blood is the reason why she is often worshipped with blood sacrifices. References to


\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Encyclopedia of Religion}, “Goddess Worship - An Overview” by James Preston.

\textsuperscript{23} Kinsley, \textit{Hindu Goddesses}, p.149.
such sacrifices are present in the Tamil epics Maṇimekalai and Śilapathikāram. Kāḷi, Cāmunda, and Mariamman are usually the terrible forms of the goddess.²⁴

Kāḷi is the embodiment of rudra bhāvam (terrific aspect), but not apart from her sānta bhāvam (benign aspect). The two are clearly interrelated; each bhāvam demands the existence of the other. In some texts like Karṇaradi stotra, Kāḷi is portrayed as young and beautiful, having a smiling face and making gestures that dispel fear and offer boons.²⁵ The benign dimension is emphasized by the devotional tradition while the terrible aspect is the focus in the Tantric tradition.²⁶

What can be inferred from this analysis is that the notion of the divine feminine, the Devī, is at the core of the Mukkuvar conception of the divine. Other studies too support this inference.²⁷ The long tradition of the worship of a mother goddess, a feminine Śakti, has left very strong marks on the religious consciousness of the Mukkuvar, difficult to erase even with the best missionary efforts. These not only survive, but also continue to influence deeply the Christian heritage in ways difficult to grasp through mere rationality.

²⁴ For a historical sketch on the evolution of the benign and the fierce features of the Devī in the Indian tradition, see V. Subramanian, "Stages and Paradoxes in the Evolution of the Supreme Hindu Mother Goddess", in Mother Goddess and Other Goddesses, ed. by V. Subramanian, Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1993, pp. 5-16. He refers to Devī Māhāyām, one of the purāṇas, which depicts Parvati splitting herself into the fierce Kāḷi and the bewitching Ambikā, in order to kill the demon Mahiṣasura who threatened the devas. She is fierce to the demons, but benign to the devas. A comparable tradition is present in Southern India in the story of Kovalan and Kannaki as narrated in the Tamil epic Śilapathikāram.

²⁵ Kinsley, Hindu Goddesses, p. 125.

²⁶ In the evolution of the Devī cult the two paradoxical features too underwent changes. The long interaction between Buddhist and Hindu Tantric schools led to its culmination in the concept of Devī in ten different forms or aspects, including the benign and the terrific. But the devotees never experience the distinctions as paradoxes. See V. Subramanian, "Stages and Paradoxes…", p.11.

²⁷ Kalpana Ram, Mukkuvar Women, chapters 3 and 4.
Much of the Indic traditions of the Mukkuvar is either deliberately destroyed or lies submerged in mystery. History and tradition substantiate the Nuḷaya antiquity of the Mukkuvar before the mass conversions in the 16th century. The Hindu Nuḷayas staying at Panathura and Kovalam areas testify that they are the remnants of the non-converted Nuḷayas at Vizhinjam; they were forced to leave after being squeezed out by those converted to Islam and Christianity. That there were systematic demolition of pagan temples and images of gods and goddesses is evident from missionary documents themselves.²⁸ It is part of the missionary history every where to force the neophytes to a total break with their pagan gods and customs, and to submit totally to the new faith.

Studies on conversion show that change of faith is not such a simple affair. It may be easy to replace temples and idols with churches and statues, but to replace the meaning structures of a culture and the mental images of a people is not easy. They persist even after conversion in various forms, usually outside the official controls of the new religion. In the case of the Mukkuvar, Amma remained ever alive in the collective religious psyche of the community; Kenkadeviamma could never fully vanish from their life, nor would Bhadrakāśī. Our Lady of the Assumption (Paralāka māta) was superimposed. But four and a half centuries of religio-cultural osmosis has given birth to Cintāthira Māta as the new symbol of their religious consciousness and identity. She appears to synthesize harmoniously the diverse forms and bhāvas of the image of Amma, in a manner quite acceptable within the structures of the Catholic religious tradition.

²⁸ This is discussed in detail in chapter 2, under section 3.4., above.
"Our life is a life-long fight with the ocean", these words of Markos are indicative of the community's view of life and its mysteries. *Fight* and *war* are words that appear frequently in Mukkuva discourse. It would appear that there is an irresistible urge for religious symbols and expressions more attuned to warrior divinities. One may be able to find a link with the neithal culture in general and the hunting ethos of the Mukkuvar in particular.

The cult of warrior gods has deep roots in the culture of ancient Tamilakam, which includes also the neithal. One can not miss the influence of *Murugan* or of Vairavan (Bhairavan), two ancient Dravidian warrior gods, on the Mukkuva community. A little attention to the ritual of *eilamidal* will reveal the residual religious beliefs related to *Vēlmurugan*. There is frequent utterance of *Ovale* during *eilamidal*, usually as part of the chorus; "*Ovale* is a corrupt form of "*O Vēla!*", which is a calling upon *Vēlan*, that is *Vēlmurugan*, according to the wisdom in the fishing fraternity. The data gathered from Panathura, a nearby fishing village inhabited by *Nūlaya* (Hindu) fisherpeople, come to support this viewpoint; in their version of *eilamidal*, the song is addressed explicitly to *Vēlmurugan* mentioning also his features like 'the one holding a *vēl* (spear) in his palm'. A sample of their version is as follows:

...  
*Ucciyyile Muthirikka, Ullamkayyil Velirikka*  
*Vēluruka Vēl Muruga, Vēlavanār Thānuruka*  
*Kāyuruka Pinchuruka, Kañjirathin Thanduruka...*  

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29 For a description of *eilamidal*, see chapter 4, section 1.1, above.  
30 Personal interview with Alexander, 60, a fisherman.  
31 Discussion with a group of Nūlaya fishermen at Panathura coastal village.
That Vēlan is invoked within the occupational ritual even by Catholic Mukkuvar indicates that they still retain remnants of Murugan worship, the heritage of their Nalaya past.

*Murugan* (Velan) is a Dravidian god, popular all over Tamilnadu, Southern Kerala and Sri Lanka. The Sangam literature presents him as the protective god of the mountainous region; references to him and to possessions by him are frequent in the *akam* poems. He is referred to as 'the Radiant/Red one' or *Ceyon or Cevvel* (red Vel). In all probability he might have been a tribal-hunter god, who later evolved into a warrior god in the later Sangam works. Under Sansritic influence he gradually got transformed into the complex deity of *Skanda-Subramanya-Murugan*, as he is known today. The original Dravidian *Murugan* was the son of *Korravai*, the Mother goddess of war and victory. In later myths he came to be the son of Śiva. He is the symbol of heroism, and so is depicted as a blazing warrior adorned with a shiny spear, and riding a peacock.

### 5.3.1 Transition to Christian Warrior Saints

In the Catholic tradition it is easy to see many of these warrior qualities transferred to many Christian saints. In spite of the ambivalent nature, the *Māta* is predominantly a benevolent mother; this is partly because saints like St. Michael, St. James and St. Antony take upon themselves much of the warrior qualities of Indic divinities, thus freeing the *Māta* to be more a mother.

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St. Michael in the Christian tradition is the first of the seven archangels, leader of the Hosts of Heaven who defeated Lucifer when he revolted against God. He is depicted as a winged warrior because he fights against the powers of darkness. In Daniel’s vision he appears as the great prince who defended the people of Israel (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1). The Book of Revelation (12:7-9) presents Michael as leader of the angelic host which defeated the dragon shown at his feet. The sword of St. Michael has clear reference to Gen. 3:2: "At the east of the Garden of Eden he placed the Cherubim and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life." Allusions to this sword is made in the ritual of the Cakram of St. Michael.  

Santiyagappar (Santiago or St. James) is an equally popular warrior saint. It is in fact St. James the Great, the son of Zebedee, a fisherman, and a disciple of Jesus (Mt. 4:21-22); but the Gospel account shows little trace of a warrior figure, except the vague reference to sons of thunder (the name Jesus gave to James and his brother John, as recorded in Mt. 3:17), and of having fiery disposition (Lk. 9:52-55). But in Tamil he is called patai miraṭṭi Santiyagappar (St. James who repelled the army). This may have reference to a Spanish legend (inherited by the Mukkuvar through the Portuguese), according to which the tomb of St. James was located in a place called Compostella in Spain in the 9th century. As a result St. James was declared patron of Spain in the fight to reconquer the land from the Moors. In support of the Christians the saint is believed to have appeared sword in hand on a white horse, on the eve of the battle of Clavijo in 930 in which the Christians won; hence the name, Santiago Matamoro (killer of Moors).

33 All Bible references, unless otherwise mentioned, are from the RSV Catholic edition, London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1966.

34 This is explained above in chapter 4, under 2.1
St. Sebastian, another popular warrior saint, was a soldier-martyr of the Roman empire under Diocletian. His devotion was carried by the Portuguese military for motivating their soldiers to die for the empire, convinced that they were dying for faith as well.\textsuperscript{35}

St. Antony of Padua has no warrior background, being a Franciscan friar who became a renowned preacher. He is usually invoked for restoration of lost property. But for the Mukkuvar, St. Antony exhibits many features of a fiery deity who is invoked in mantras to dispel the enemies or 'to cut them to pieces'. He is referred to as muni in some mantras.\textsuperscript{36}

The predominant place accorded to these warrior figures in the rituals and practices of the community indicates its attempt to discover meaning in the rich Christian tradition itself without losing their grounding in the Indic worldview.

5.4 THE CATHOLIC AND THE INDIC CO-EXISTING

The analysis of Cintāthira Mata and the warrior saints helps to have a glimpse of some key elements in the Mukkuva conception of the divine. This conception portray features of the divine world that belongs to two distinct religious traditions - that of Portuguese Catholicism and that of Indic religiosity.

The two traditions seem to coexist under what is seen as Mukkuva Catholicism. What comes across powerfully is the fact that many beliefs that underlie rituals of daily life often show close resemblance to elements found in the Indic tradition. Official prohibitions and sanctions do not


\textsuperscript{36} See appendix on Christian mantras
prevent them from holding on to them because of the high emotive content these have for the people. Practice of Catholicism as taught by its Creeds and precepts goes on along with these. The coexistence of both in the midst of an apparent conflict between the strong emotive appeal on the one hand and the official disapproval by the church on the other seems to create an inner conflict and at times a feeling of guilt in some. How does the community deal with this problem of incongruity between the religious traditions?

Indications are that in certain areas both the streams integrate well, while in some other both run parallelly, or even come into conflict. While the early stand of the Catholic church was an aggressive suppression of whatever belonged to the Indic tradition, much of it lingered on at the level of latent religion. The various attempts at integration, therefore, was outside the purview of the official church. That the community has survived four and a half centuries of existence in a predominantly non-christian milieu with a strong Catholic identity, is proof enough of the community's relative success in reconciling the two streams. It is also evident that the community is not unduly perturbed even if some elements are not reconciled; ambivalence seems to be part of religion at the latent level.

Kalpana Ram tries to analyze Mukkuva Catholicism on the manichean principle of the opposition of good and evil supernatural beings.\(^{37}\) Mary, the Māta, is posited on the side of good, assisted by the saints, while on the other side, the side of evil, is the Hindu goddess Issakai and her demon companions like Mādan, and various ghosts (āvi) and spirits (peiy). Since the Hindu goddess is viewed as 'evil incarnate', as personification of apanku, the 'destructive and capricious power in the world', the battle between good and evil is conceptualized as a battle between a Christian and a Hindu goddess, leading to a basic antagonism between the two

\(^{37}\) Kalpana Ram, *Mukkuvar Women*, pp.11.
communities. This reading of Ram is not in consonance with the data available at Vizhinjam. To depict the relationship between the Hindu divinities and the Christian Mānu and saints, as one of antagonism between good and evil is too simplistic. The beliefs and attitudes of Mukkuvar, as they come out in rituals and practices, reveal a different conception.

Mukkuvar are seen offering nercha at Thațathēru kovil to get back materials lost; they believe the Hindu goddess is more prompt at times. "Their god pays the wages on the spot; our god will prolong" is the popular saying among the people. "Our God is a god who asks us to forgive seventy times. Their gods (marujāti daivangal = gods of other peoples) will respond to a request promptly. In a sense they are more powerful; for, are they not angels cursed to be devils, and thus possessing the powers of both angels and devils in them?" - these words of a fish-vending woman seem to reveal the Mukkuva perception of divine persons, both good and bad. They also resort to mantric rituals invoking Bhairavan, a Hindu god, to get more fish. Amidst practical concerns of daily bread and fish, they have little time for abstractions on good and evil. What brings goodness, whichever be the religious tradition, is perceived as good.

A community's notions of the divine will be closely associated with its understanding of good and evil. For, understanding evil in everyday life and dealing with it or warding it off is an existential concern in the risk-ridden life context of Mukkuvar. These are also occasions when their true beliefs of the divinity find expression in prayers or rituals. In other words, a comprehensive view of the Mukkuva conception of the divine will be possible only if their demonology also is looked into. However, Mukkuva demonology is a separate topic that needs to be researched on its own; the present study does not aim at that, and has limited itself to making occasional observations wherever relevant.

38 Personal interview with a woman informant.
Even within areas of conflict a silent process of osmosis has been taking place. The discovery of the plate of St. Antony and the wheel of St. Michael are good illustrations of this process, where the religious tools of the neithal past are given specifically a christian form and flavour. All these together has helped the community for centuries to withstand the threat of a subtle assimilation by the dominant Hindu ethos, and to prevent a total marginalization by mainline Catholicism, and thus to affirm their undeniable identity as Catholic Mukkuvar. This aspect of a creative synthesis may be a characteristic feature of the religiosity of any community on the margins.

5.5 CONCLUSION

The tag of a traditionally devout Catholic community for the Mukkuvar can often be misleading. The externals rarely reveal the deep-rooted belief system of a community. Keeping this in mind, this chapter has tried to understand the rough contours of the community's conception of the divine analyzing some selected rituals and symbols.

The cult of Cintāthira Māta is close to the heart of the community, as many rituals and the parish feast testify. Its continuity with the ancient tradition of Indic mother goddesses point to the central place held by the divine feminine in the religious world of the Mukkuva community. At the same time there exists the incongruity of the benign and the terrible features in the Devī image. The Catholic image of Virgin Mary traditionally depicts only the benign features. In a process of ascription Cintāthira Māta becomes, for the Mukkuvar, the embodiment of both the features - that of a bounteous mother and that of a terrible protectress. The terrible aspect, however, is played down for two reasons: first, the male warrior saints display the terrible aspect