

The village deity of Tamil Nadu: a case study of mariyamman's myth

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Abstract: Everyone knows about the Village deities very much, actually what does it mean. It literary means Grama Devata of village, these are found in every village in India. Particularly in Tamil Nadu lots of village goddess and believes are existed even at the present. These are known as Kaval daivam or Kula Daivam or the Local Gods. All these are on the bases of mother worships. The mother worship and its ritual practices are very important in every culture. The specialities of this mother goddess worship are that they originate in different forms. However, these are worshiped in a single dimension is called 'Mother', the worships of mother goddess.

Here in the case of Mariyamman worships they can also shows as the same. There are many common facts, but this paper proposes to analyse the Mariyamman's myth, through tracing the origin and the social influences in it. In a point of fact what is myth? In real it is an attempt to explain certain custom and ritual practice of a cultural society. Otherwise we can call it is a traditional story, especially about the non living legend's history. But these are not a final form or final version of the past. So through the existing myth of Mariyamman we can find the real facts or the real theme behind this worship. It is really a tremendous hint to find out the history, as every myth carries a true story. So with the help of this story we can reconstruct what is myth saying about the real worshipping practices. Here through Mariyamman myth this paper is trying trace out, what is village deity? Their role in the making of history and its social relevance influences in the society. Moreover this study is going check out the real myth behind the Mariyamman worships in Tamil Nadu.

Key Words: Village Deity – Tamil cult - Fertility- worships – Myth – Goddess of small pox – Goddess of medicine -Dravidian and Brahminisation.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The mother goddess or village deities appear to us as a powerful or active character in nature. Along with this nature the other major form of the mother goddess emphasizes her maternity. She is the protector and nurture of a divine child, by extension of all humanityⁱ. So by their multiple duties these deities are known by different names like Bhadrakali, Kaliyamma, Mariyamma, Mutyalamma, Ponnamma, Ellamma, Ankamma, Kolumamma, Selliyamma, Pattamma, Vandi-Kaliyamma, Alagiyanchchiyamma, Ulagattal, Pidari, Pechi, Katteri, Poleramma. Gangammaⁱⁱ. In fact when we start to study about Mariyamma we can dig up the worship of the village deity which is the most ancient form of Indian religion. Before the Aryan invasion it probably took place in the second millennium B.Cⁱⁱⁱ and also the old inhabitants of Indians worshiped the village deities. Their religious beliefs, customs and ritual practices are not different from the primitive races. They believed that the world is occupied by a huge number of spirits, that may be good or bad, who were the reason for the cause of all unusual events, and especially of diseases and disasters^{iv}. So the purpose of their religion is to please these immeasurable spirits by some offerings. Besides, they treated them as a saviour of their village so each village have been under the protection of some local deity. Finally these village deities were began to be placed in agricultural communities where the people settled down^v. And these worshipping shrines of village goddesses are generally performed or established by the non-Brahmans who are the indigenous inhabitants of that village. So we can be called it as *Kaval Daivam* or *Kula Daivam* or the Local Gods. Here the word *Kaval Daivam* or *Kula Daivam* or the Local Gods. Actually what it means? Or what is their status, duties and their role in the village folk?

2. THE MYTHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF A VILLAGE DEITY: MARIYAMMA

Here the introductory paragraph already gave a description about the kinds of village deities and their name etc. But here the main focus is given to Mariyamma and her mythological background to reconstruct the past. Because she is the enormous village deity, mother goddess in Tamil Nadu. When we check out the literary origin of Mariyamma it means the rain god, the word Mariyamma derived from the two words *Mari* and *Amman*. *Mari* in a sense rain and the *Amman* which means mother so the name literary means rain god, the name has some relations with nature. In the post-Vedic period, *Mari* was associated to Hindu goddesses like Parvati, Kali and Durga^{vi}.

More over the deity is also related with different cult such as, goddess of fertility, goddess of medicine etc. And the worshipping practices were also had some close link with ecology like giving some offering by using mud pots, and offering pongal to the deity. All this shows the fertile believes and fertile cult. Because the mother and earth share common impression the worship of mariyamma equal to worshipping mother of village. So as part of the worship the above said offerings are made during the worshipping season and also some daily poojas were done to impress the mother of their village. More than that, some folk performances like ritual dances are also conducted during the time of festivals. While the comprehensive study we get some references about the deity that she is the goddess of medicine, and fertility how she become so? To analyse these myth of Mariyamman, worship must be enquired.

According to the myth, Mariyamma was born in a pariah caste. So only she has to faces some caste wise discriminations in society. So as part of this no one helped her when she caught smallpox. But she begged to all for food and treatment. But no one was willing to accept her. She suffered a lot; finally she herself fanned with neem leaves and applied some turmeric treatment as she can. After this kind of self treatment she completely recovered and returned to normal life. The news spread out the village and this was a great shocking incident in village people. So they were also using neem leaves and turmeric powder to recover from the smallpox and they reated Mariyamma as the goddess of smallpox. So if anyone caught any illness like smallpox they prayed Mariyamma to overcome their illness. So, this story was passed from generation to generation and on the basis of this mythological story she was known as the goddess of medicine. This mythical story marked a clear picture about how she becomes the goddess of medicine and why the village folk treated Mariyamma as a village deity.

Moreover she had known as the goddess of fertility. Here one can raise a question about women and fertility. There is no need of such definitions especially for women. Because, all women are same, and also they go through the same so called phenomena of 'the fertility'. But in the case of folk religious tradition, it has a rich past and it is deep rooted from the worship of nature in the form of women and fertility cult.

E.O. James closely associated this concept with that of the fertility cult, " Many feminists, especially during the Second Wave, found the possibility that pre-history had been ruled by a mother goddess very exciting, for it suggested that women had once wielded power, even supremacy, indeed that there may have been a period when humans lived in a matriarchy. The fact that the scholars promoting these concepts were almost all male should have been a warning to us, but the ideas were both timely and seductive. However, it is now clear that these concepts-the Mother Goddess, fertility cults, and indeed matriarchy itself-are patriarchal myths dependent on patriarchal dichotomies such as body/mind. To say so does not deny that many ancient goddesses known to history were mothers and part of what may be called fertility cults. Yet they were also highly complex entities with wide-ranging domains and powers. The goddesses of pre-history were probably similar"^{vii}.

Some time the title 'goddess of fertility' is identified from her name Mariyamma only. Actually it is derived from the two words Mari and Amman it is already discussed in the above paragraph but here in the case, just want to prove whether the name is right or wrong to analyse the fertile concept of goddess. We know what is *mari* it mean rain and also *amman* it is mother. So the name Mariyamman means rain god. But, according to the Hindu Puranas, Indra is the god of rain. Is there any relation with Indra and Mariyamma. The answer from the ages is no. Because, Indra from the Brahminical origin and Mariyamma from the Dravidian origin. Then how it became so? Sometimes this Dravidian cult may Brahminised by the authorities. The very good evidence for this is the theory of Aryan invasion. The original inhabitants of Indians are Dravidians. They have their own culture and religious ceremonies. But later all these are transferred or brahminasied in to the higher class.

Perhaps Mariyamma is the real god of rain and not Indra, and so she is identified as the goddess of fertility. That is the above statement marks these deities are only on bases of Dravidian origin, especially from the indigenous Indian cultural people way of life and religious ceremonies. But all these religious ceremonies are much related to agricultural community. When the people began to settle down in an agricultural community, the Mother Goddess of the primitive food gathering society was envisaged as Earth Mother who is mainly conceived with vegetation and fertility^{viii}.

So she was known under different names, though the spirit was the same. Several rituals and festivals also were performed in relation to the worship of this Mother Goddess. Besides, like these all the folk deities are the product of the folk people's feelings and thoughts only. So in the cultural society these deities are worshipped only through the folk people and the power of the deity, which give impulse to the movements of all nature^{ix}.

But this is an endless worship, which is practised even now. Around millions of village people worship Mariyamman. Whatever myth or legends may behind this, the villagers considered Mariyamman as a god, the saviour of their village. So this worship is continuing and practicing in the contemporary society.

3. CONCLUSION:

I concluded that Mariyamma is one among the important deities in Tamil Nadu. Moreover she plays very important role in socio- cultural activities of every village. Mariyamma, the goddess of every village folk is considered equal to their mother. Thus her role is not only to given blessing to everyone who worships her. But also as a mother she will take care of everyone from illness and save them carefully are the beliefs of every devotees in the village. So

they worshiped her, loved her and at the same time they scared of her simultaneously. This shows how this village goddess becomes the part of the society. In fact the myth helped to reach the divine position of Mariamma. Because the story was passed orally through generations and through this every one even in the contemporary society accept and worship her. So the importance of myth is very remarkable one in every culture to reconstruct the past. Thus so we can argue that the importance of myth is also applicable in the case of Mariyamman worships in Tamil Nadu.

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