



CASTE AND WORSHIP- A STUDY OF FOLK GODS OF TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

The present study is based on understanding the folk gods worshipped by people in Southern Districts of Tamil Nadu. Through secondary sources the present paper tries to show how the emergence of folk god is interconnected with that of conflicts based on Caste injustice in the Tamil world. Through the example of folk gods like Madan (name of a folk god meaning protector in Tamil) the study reveals the nature of the problem of the society. It shows how in the present time the injustice has been reframed and worshipped to suit one's needs out of fear.

INTRODUCTIUON

Caste has been one of the most important system which has been creating stratification in the society since a long time. The nature of caste is more often visible in the interaction of day to day life of an individual. It is also well known that due to the nature of Indian villages caste system is stronger in the villages than in the cities. These layers of caste is depicted with not only with men but with the gods one worships too. Caste and religion has always gone hand in hand. It is also observed that studies on folk gods reveals this discrimination of caste complexity.

It is estimated that 80% of the people of South India address their worship almost exclusively to minor deities and yet these deities receive little attention in studies of Hinduism (Elmore, 1915). Meyer (1986) notes that more studies dealing with folk tradition are needed before the older patterns of worship have totally disappeared and before the minor local deities have all become absorbed by the great gods of Hinduism and material based on present day fieldwork ought to be made available especially since in the past 50 years these local cults have undergone many changes. This shows the necessity to observe folk gods in the present times. One of the prominently worshipped gods in the Southern District of Tamil Nadu is the

guardian gods. These gods are called with different names like *Sudalai Madan*, *Nodi Madan*, *Irralapan*, *Karuppan*. These gods are believed to be protecting fields and crops and the villages at night. In the following section we would see how the origin myths have shaped today in different form. Secondary sources are being used to explain this point.

Individual temple myths of Sudalai Madan and other Madan –

Shanmugasundaram (2007) writes several stories of emergence of *Sudalai Madan and Madan* temples –

1. ***Nondi Madan*¹** - In a village called *Kari Solla Magalaam Pathi*, a temple called *Nondi Madan* temple exists. The history of the temple is such that a weaver who was in love with an upper caste woman and was chased down around nine village and killed by the upper caste people when they came to know of the affair. However, after his death the villagers encountered many sufferings and the people thought that it was because of the weaver's death and they started praying him. As he was lame the temple name was called as *Nodi Madan*). **The *Nondi Madan* shows how the caste based killing led to the emergence of temple.**
2. ***Idaikarai Pulai madasamy*²**- In *Thiruvananthapuram*, a priest of Padmanabhaswamy temple fell in love with a young girl during the process of his religious duties and he also proposed her. However, the girl denied his proposal and complained to her father. Her father a lower caste man was worried but put a condition that for marrying his daughter the priest should shun his sacred thread (symbol of being Brahmin) and wear leather sandal. However, the girl's father feared the consequences viz. earning the wrath of the king, being isolated from the community and hence decided to kill the priest and summoned him to his house. There the priest was pushed into a well and was killed. Later, a group of villagers from *kulasekara pattinam* (a village) who came to visit Padmanabhaswamy temple. One among the group members who was Magician felt that they were being followed by the ghost of the priest. He claimed to tie the ghost in a well. The people of *Iraviputhur*³ started worshiping in that place as *Idaikarai Sudalai Madan* and the God's idol is upside down. **This story also shows how the caste based love affair was denied in the village and the worship of folk god started.**
3. ***Madhusudhanaperumal Madan***- In the taluka called *Agastheswaran*, a young man named *Madu Sudhana Nadar* lived he was considered a nuisance for the people. Once he raped a poor lady from *Vellar* (caste name) and the villagers chased him and he ran and hid inside a hut and the villagers burnt the hut. After this incident, there was lot of crisis happening in the village. People believed that the crisis caused in the village was because of his death and they started praying him.

¹nodi meaning lame and Madan meaning protector.

² Idaikarai is a name of a place , Pulai Madasamy is a name of folk god.

³ Name of a place.

This story also continues in the same lines where the caste based violence led to the death of the individual and worship started.

Secondary Literature to support my argument –

In the article ‘The Folk Hero and Class Interests in Tamil Heroic Ballads, Blackburn (1978) tries to show how the folk heroes who were killed due to several reasons represent a class. The examples he gives is of *Madurai Veeran*, *Kathaavararayan*⁴. He has used a folklore methodology through which he has studied the bow song called as *Villu Pattu*⁵ in Tamil, which helps in celebrating the dead heroes. He through his documentation of several heroes show the differences that a high-class hero/Puranic hero has and a folk hero/ local hero has, he states that the local hero protects the interest of the local poor lower caste groups while the Puranic ones are usually *Brahminical*.

In the book on *Tanjore* village (Gabriele Dietrich, 1977), the writer shows the case where the lower castes people prefer their own temples of worship specially the Village goddesses as it gives them a sense of closeness.

In the book, *Dalits and Religion*, the writer (Manohar, 2009) notes that on the grounds of purity and pollution, the lower castes were not allowed into the precincts of the temple of Brahmanism deities. Since ancient times, many anti-caste movements revolted against the socio-cultural domination of Brahmins. Thus, many parallel religions came into existence. To express their identity and self-respect, the marginal communities opted for these parallel religions.

In the *Gazetteer of Tirunelveli*, (Pate, 1917) notes that when calamities come, first worship is made to the village deity who is approached by all castes. He states this kind of worship are old Dravidian deities whose power, despite of invasion of Brahmanism has remained undiminished.

They are, it is said, the spirits of men who have met with violent deaths; they haunt the burning grounds and all desolate places. He also notes that a ‘rationalistic’ explanation commonly given of the origin of these demons is that, like the *bhuthams* and *pisaschas* (spirits) they are the troubled spirits of men and women who died by violence or were terrible in their lives.

Thus, in the above paper one could observe how caste plays an important role in the emergence of folk gods in Tamil Nadu. Through the different sources the paper shows how worship emerges in the Tamil world through a particular situation which is different from Vedic Hinduism.

⁴ Folk gods names

⁵ Bow song sung with traditional instruments like pots, bells, bows sung at the night of the festival. Villu pattu is called as bow song in English.

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