

Folk Deities as Social Borderlands: Caste, Culture, and Historical Negotiations in Northern Tamil Nadu

M. Kaliyaperumal

Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi, India

manikaliyaperumal@yahoo.in

Introduction

The Hindu society in India is built on layers of mythology, ritual, and belief that have shaped its social and cultural consciousness for a long time. The caste system is a big part of this structure. It is not just a social hierarchy; it is also a cultural framework that tells people how to live, worship, and interact with the holy. Each caste and sub-caste has its own gods, rituals, and holy places, all of which show its historical status and social identity. In this larger context, folk deities play an important role in Tamil Nadu's religious life. These local gods, who are often not part of the Brahmanical temple system, represent the lively traditions, memories, and problems of rural communities. They are not distant gods, but nearby beings that protect, restore, and embody the essence of those who worship them.

In Northern Tamil Nadu, the worship of folk deities serves as a social structure that maintains and defines caste divisions. The positioning of shrines, the ritual duties assigned to particular families, and the inherited roles of priests all demonstrate that worship reflects social hierarchy. These rituals bring people together to celebrate as a group, but they also subtly reinforce differences in purity, pollution, and privilege. In this context, worship serves both as a unifying tradition and as a mechanism of exclusion, perpetuating inequality within the discourse of devotion.

This study employs frameworks from folklore and subaltern studies to analyze the interrelation of caste, culture, and history in the reverence of these deities. Folklore is viewed not solely as a compilation of archaic narratives but as a dynamic discourse of power—a mechanism through which groups interpret their surroundings and construct their identity within them. The myths and rituals associated with folk deities exemplify how, historically, dominant groups have sanctified authority, whereas oppressed castes have reinterpreted these traditions as manifestations of assertion and resistance. This study views folk deities as sociocultural constructs that reflect and sustain the caste hierarchy of Tamil society, rather than merely as religious figures. They are ever-changing symbols that connect faith to power, belief to hierarchy, and

history to identity. By looking at them, I can see how everyday devotion keeps up (and sometimes challenges) the cultural lines that define Tamil life.

Review of literature

Folklore is something akin to a “meme”. It is both universal and regional: stories, traditions, beliefs, morals, love, family, work ethic, etc., are passed down orally or in writing from generation to generation by every known culture but differ only in manner and presentation. Without “story,” humanity would be absent. Narrative is an instructive method of spinning (perhaps unconsciously), man’s hopes, dreams, spirit, imagination, and ways of survival into appreciable cultural or collective memory, integrating these concepts into an understanding of our experience and general sense of self. Folk deity is based on local traditions and cults of local deities and is the oldest, non-literate system. Folk deities are deities not found in Hindu scriptures. It involves worship of village deities (*Grama devata*), clan deity (*Kula devata*) and local deities. It is a folk or tribal religion, polytheistic, sometimes animistic, based on locality, community, and forms of worship, with countless local texts in the local language.

In most cases, these religions have their own priests, and most worship only regional deities (in villages or among a sub-caste —*Kula devata*, *Grama devata*), whose myth of origin is linked to the place of worship or to their own pantheon, which also includes spirits or deified heroes. Humans can be possessed by these gods or spirits. Often, a Folk is any group that shares at least one common factor. Colonial ethnography study and modern study findings. How the cultural roots of certain tribal groups in India have roots toward such traditions.

1. Indian context

India is a country of cultural inspiration and amusement. It is the land of folklore, folktales, temples and tourism. Again, it is the beautiful fabrication of inter-culture and intra- culture, belief systems and people that paves ways towards research explorations and opportunities. The belief system vested in powerful divine presences of the folk deity, a deity who is chiefly identified with the villages and the villagers. It is not uncommon to witness several village deities in a village, each of whom has been attributed with a specialized function. The western Himalayan region is full of village deities, and the local people have their firm faith in them. Here discusses religious narratives about the village deity Nar Singh Veer of Mandi region of Indian state of Himachal Pradesh that can be found in the form of myths, legends, and folklore. These narratives are a proof of the power of Nar Singh Veer which provides relief to people from their hardships and warns them in a supernatural form. Village priests (*pujaris*) and Gurus are the religious authorities who control both the deity and oral tradition on Him. There is a widespread belief in this region that the deity

roams around his territory at night to protect it from evils. People talk about their experiences and encounters with the deity, and these are also narrated both in legend and oral tradition. Religious folklore genres thus merge the social world of humans and the mythical realm of deity (Raghav & Singh, 2014).

2. Tamil Nadu Context

Cultural Practices and Traditions, A Historical Overview and its Evolution:

Hinduism in India has dominated the entire field of cultural and religious practice through the influence of texts in Sanskrit which were mediated and controlled by Brahmins (Valk & Lourdusamy, 2007). The religious narratives of Tamil Nadu have also been dominated by such texts in Hinduism. It has been understood that the temple priests are the main authorities who control and mediate the traditional beliefs in the villages which belong to different genres (Valk & Lourdusamy, 2007). Tamil Nadu is a southern state of India which is supremely rich in culture and heritage. Known to be one of the oldest civilizations in the world, the people of Tamil Nadu belong to the prestigious Dravidian Family. Tamilians also, like other South Indians, take much pride in their rooted culture and make great efforts to protect their two thousand years old history. The state has been ruled by the Cholas, Pandya's and the Pallavas and has been flourishing since. The art and architecture have been their creations which are used and maintained even today. A great amount of relevance is given to a person's religion when it comes to personal identity. Their rituals include deity worship and animisms like tree worship, animal worship and stars and planets worship.

Gaps in Literature

In this research area, most researchers have focused primarily on Tamil culture, rituals, and people's beliefs, but none have analyzed the role of caste in folk deity worship practices. Some other researchers have examined certain aspects of caste issues in rural people's practices.

Research Questions

The following research questions have been formulated based on the topic under study.

- How and from where did the concept of folk deities emerge?
- How were the folk deities chosen by a family?
- Why the worship of the folk deities?
- Are there any specific rituals by which one can change over to newer folk deities?
- How could there be so many tutelaries and folk deities and newer deities?
- when they emerge as a folk deity, from where do they derive divine powers?
- What is the relationship between hero stone worship and folk deities?
- What are the rights of women to have a lady priest in the temple of the female folk deities?

Research Objectives

Drawing from above questions, the objectives formulated in this research includes the following,

- To trace the emergence and understand the concept of folk lore.
- To study how caste plays a prominent role in the emergence of folk deities in the rural area of Tamil Nadu.
- To know how the emergence of clan deities has internalized and normalized caste-based conflicts and injustice.
- To trace the distinction between the marriage system and folk deity worship.

Research Methodology

Through a qualitative research method with an exploratory and narrative approach, this research collects data through interviews, journals, autobiographies, oral recordings, written narratives, and field notes, and analyses the observations. In particular, in-depth interviews are employed along with content analysis. Sample selection follows the ethical norms in this research. Ethnographic fieldwork adds value to the study.

Sampling

The sample design the researcher selected for this study was a combination of convenience and purposive sampling, clearly indicating that the sample design used in this research is non-probability sampling. The rationale for selecting convenience sampling is that the researcher's accessibility to the participants is taken into consideration. Given that the study is primarily based on caste, a sensitive issue, the researcher approached participants based on their accessibility and willingness to participate. Purposive sampling was chosen because the participants were essential in providing the information required for this study. The sample size was 15.

Are of the study

Initially, the proposed study area was *Thalaivasal Taluk* in *Salem* district of Tamil Nadu. Prior to data collection, the researcher had conducted a pilot survey to understand the folklore in their native language.

Findings

Throughout this research, we have observed that there are no stories that exist independently of the three major deities of Hinduism—Shiva, Vishnu, and Parvati. Historically, folk deity worship has undergone several transformations and has increasingly merged with great traditions. Clan deity worship reinforces the system of endogamy by enabling the identification of a person's caste through their clan deity. Moreover, there are no deities whose narratives do not justify patriarchy; consequently, they strengthen the caste system. By doing so, these gods and the ritual practices

surrounding them become oppressive to Dalits, who bear the weight of the caste structure as those placed at its lowest level. Furthermore, there are multiple spaces and instances in which Folk deity worship is used against Dalits. In lieu of a conclusion, this paper highlights such instances and affirms that these practices represent clear forms of caste operation and exploitation.

1. Spaces and Caste:

The primary space where Dalits are exploited and reinforced to be inferior to the rest of the caste Hindus is the setting of village temple festivals. Their lower ritual status prevents them from performing festival-related labour that is associated with ritual purity. Two clear evidence of the operation of caste and its exploitative nature in village temple festivals are:

- i) The *Parai Melam*
- ii) The caste-based disputes

Parai Melam is an important component of any Tamil event—auspicious or inauspicious. No ceremony is complete without it. However, the individuals who play the *parai*—the *Paraiyar*'s—are subjected to exclusion and stigma. During festivals, although the *Parai Melam* is indispensable, it is often performed outside the temple premises, thereby reinforcing caste boundaries.

Discussions with several research participants also revealed that during many village festivals, Dalits face humiliation, and there have been instances of violence arising from disputes between Dalits and caste Hindus. Navalur, the field site of this research, has also witnessed such incidents. Thus, festival practices that are ostensibly meant to celebrate the Folk deities are deployed in Casteist ways that further marginalise and exploit Dalits.

2. Ancestral Worship:

Not all the dead are worshipped as gods. Only those who have died violent deaths are elevated to the status of deities. The death of a person becomes an object of worship, and this can be observed in the folk deity traditions, where an individual is later transformed into a god. In particular, the worship of women who are victims of honour killings sends two disturbing messages: first, that if a woman loves a man from a lower caste, she will be killed; and second, that such worship is used to instill fear and reinforce caste control.

3. Caste Dynamics:

There is no Folk deity worship that excludes the Brahmins. There are no deities outside Brahmin domination. These forms of worship operate as domains that reinforce the caste system as stated in the Manu smriti and the Vedas. Each village folk deity

temple serves as a center of power in that village. In some villages, backward caste groups function as the heads of this center of power instead of the Brahmins. However, only the caste identity of the leadership has changed; the character of power remains the same.

An interesting point to note here is that although the land is owned by the caste Hindus, and although caste Hindus are the members of the temple board, they are ultimately not allowed to perform the rituals associated with the temple. Hence, the temples—which are centers of power in the village—are used against those who hold economic power, by those who claim higher ritual status through Brahminism.

4. Temples:

The structure of caste temples is furthermore fragmented. In Folk deity's temples, the Shudra and the Dalit do not have the same rights or the same level of respect. Dalits are not allowed to enter many of the village temples. Dalits have the status of a separate temple and a separate festival. The Clan Deity temples separate each caste. This further divides every caste into distinct groups and separates people into thousands of sections.

Conclusion

Hence, we can conclude that the Folk deities are symbols of caste, they uphold and facilitate the operation of caste. In order to fight their exclusion from this, the Dalits have also slowly adopted the traditions of the Hindu fold through imitation. This practice upholds an argument that Ambedkar makes in his iconic work, *Caste in India*. The argument that reviews Dr Senarte's definition reads as the "idea of pollution" has been attached to the institution of Caste, only because the Caste that enjoys the highest rank is the priestly Caste: While we know that priest and purity are old associates. We may therefore conclude that the "*idea of pollution*" is a characteristic of Caste only insofar as Caste has a religious flavour." Furthermore, the caste-Hindus by doing so have facilitated the process of keeping the Dalits away from their rich anti-caste legacy and Buddhist Roots. It is a sad situation to see this happen in Tamil Nadu, the land of Iyothee Dhass, the forerunner of Buddhist revival movement in South India long before Babasaheb Ambedkar.

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