

RELIGION OF SANGAM PEOPLE

A. Seeniraj¹ & Dr. G. Paranthaman²

¹Ph.D Research Scholar (Full Time), Reg. No. R 20161900,
Department of History, Alagappa University, Karaikudi – 630003, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Assistant Professor,
Department of History, Alagappa University, Karaikudi – 630003, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

The religion of the Sangam age was not uniform as their rituals were akin to animism and other forms of anthropomorphic deity related worship. The philosophies of rebirth, nadukal worship, Sati were related to death and after life. Apart from that Sangam people worshipped natural elements. Tree spirit was in vogue during Sangam age. The hill tract people worshipped Murugan as chief god, followed by Indra – god of marutham or agricultural land. There was a festival offered to Indra in puhar to honour him. The fishermen and the people of the coastal regions worshipped the rain god Indra, subsequently Korravai or Kottavai was the goddess of victory akin to modern kali. It is quite clear from the verses of Silappadikaram that gods were worshipped on the basis of their caste.

Keywords

Sangam age, religious system, primary gods and goddess, natural worship, belief in animism.

Introduction

The Sangam age falls in between 500 BCE to 300 CE, consisted of many religions such as Saivism, Vaishnavism, Buddhism and Jainism along with the folk religion of the Tamil people. Ancient Tamil works like Tholkappiyam, Pathupattu, Ettuthokai throws light on early religion of Tamil Country. The Sangam landscape was classified into five categories, thinais based on the seasons and land. Murugan was assigned to Kurinji the hills, Varuna in Neithal the coastal areas, Indra in Marutham and Vishnu in Mullai the forested areas

Belief in spirits

Veriyattam refers to spirit possession of women, who took part in religious functions. They sang songs, danced, predicted the future and gave suggestions to cure diseases.

Herostone or Nadukal

The Practice of erecting hero stones or nadukal was prevalent during the Sangam age. It was a customary for common people, to worship these herostones and sought their blessings.

Theyyam Dance Ritual

Theyyam is a dance ritual popular in Kerala, parts of Tamilnadu and in Karnataka. It is a ritual based on spirit possession that migrates into the artist, who assumed the spirit and it is a

common belief that the god or goddesses penetrate in the midst of possessed dancer. The artist throws rice on the audience and distributes turmeric powder as symbols of blessings. Theyyam consists of dance and music and enshrines the beliefs carried by the ancient tribal cultures which attached great importance to the worship of heroes and the spirits of ancestors is an ancient socio-religious ceremony dated back to megalithic period. There are over 400 types of theyyam like raktha chamundi, bhagavathi seva and gulikan are some of the important dance rituals.

Guardian Village Deities

Normally in all villages of Tamilnadu, an amman or mother goddess is at the centre of the village, while a male guardian deity, or in Tamil “Kaval Kadavul” has a shrine at the village borders.

Vedic Sacrifices and Rituals

The Brahmins of the Tamil country attached great importance to the performance of Vedic sacrifices.

Temple of Sangam age

Temples were built out of perishable materials such as plaster, timber and brick. Several types of temples such as Netunilaikotam or tall temple, Palkumrakotam or hill temple, Illavantikaipalli or garden temple, Elumilaimatam or seven storied temple, Katavutkatinar or temple which was located inside the city complex.

Jainism

Silapatikaram the Tamil classic written during the Sangam age describes in detail about the popularity of Jainism in eastern part of Tamilnadu. Jainism is one of the ancient religions of India dated back to 6th century BCE. Tamilnadu has 0.12% of Jain population now. During the Sangam age a contingent of monks was sent to Madurai to spread Jain philosophical tenets around about 66-90 CE. They stayed in natural cave heads which surrounded the present Madurai region. Hence Jain monks preached the following five doctrines to its followers around Madurai region. The doctrines such as Ahimsa (non violence), Satya (truth), Asteya (not to steal), Brahmacharya (chastity for lay people and celibacy for Jain monks and nuns and finally Aparigraha (non possessiveness). Further they preached the three jewels of Jainism such as Triratna which includes right knowledge, right faith and right action. Tamil classics such as Silappadikaram refers to Sallekhana ritual, fasting by the Jain monks during the Sangam age especially Kaundi Adigal. The Jain nun Kaundi Adigal provided companionship to Kovalan and his wife Kannagi in their arduous journey from Puhar to the fateful city of Madurai. Hence Sallekhana or deaths by starvation are referred as “Vadakerutthal” (literally facing northern direction) was quite prevalent during the Sangam age, probably copied from the Jain culture. Sangam anthologies such as Puranaanoru are replete with such verses. It is to be noted that during the Vedic age, the priest demanded animal sacrifice. So the Sangam age people feared that the rampant mass killing of livestock would lead to severe reduction in their numbers leading to serious problems in continuing agricultural and animal husbandry which was the

backbone of their economy. Hence it can be inferred that the Sangam age people promoted vegetarianism.

Buddhism

The Buddhists worshipped the feet of lord Buddha engraved on stone and platforms. Silapatikaram refers that the Buddhist monks worshipped Buddha.

Christianity

Christianity introduced in India by St. Thomas the apostle, who landed at Muziris on Malabar coast in year 52 A.D. Also St. Thomas was killed in St. Thomas mount in Chennai where a church was erected by the British. Chennai falls under the category of Neithal or the coastal region under Sangam landscape.

Uzh and Vinai or Fate &Destiny

Uzh refers to the fate or destiny and Vinai means works of man and he or she has to suffer or prosper due to the law of karma.

Kottavai or Kali

Kali also known as Kalika in Sanskrit or Tara in Buddhism. She is the most powerful form of Shakti and the goddess in tantric form of Saivism. The name kali “Kala” or face of time. Her complexion is black and dark. In Tamilnadu, all the villages does have a temple dedicated to Kottavai or Kali right from the Sangam age. In Tamil tradition of South India and Srilanka she is referred as Aiyai, Amari, Suli and Kavuri. Paripatal refers to the Tamil Sangam landscape. She is also mentioned in Pattupattu the Tamil Sangam classic which is dated around 300 BCE to 300 CE including the Netunalvatai, Maturaikanchi, Pattinapalai. Her name is derived from the Tamil word “Korram” which means victory, success and bravery. The earliest reference to Kotravai is found in the ancient Tamil grammer Tolkappiyam, considered to be the earliest work of the ancient Sangam literary classical works. During the Sangam age she is also seen as a mother goddess, a symbol of fertility and success in agriculture. Traditional rural communities in Tamilnadu offer the first harvest to her. As a war goddess, she is blood thirsty, as referred in Silapathikaram and Ahananuru that the warrior devotees would in frenzy, offer their own head to the goddess. The Sangam classics do state that the black buck (Kalaimaan) is considered to be the vehicle of the Hindu goddess Korravai. But in some text she is shown seated on a lion.

Primary deity of Sangam period

The primary deity of the Sangam period was Seyon or Murugan, the primary god of Tamils even today. He was honoured with six abodes known as Arupadai Veedu. Hence, right from the Sangam age to till today Muruga worship forms the base of Tamil society and culture. It is to be noted that the religion in the Sangam age was associated with rituals and certain amount of meta physical thought. The religious ideology prevailed during the Sangam age was not uniform, it was zig-zag with dotted quasi-religious customs and practices coined with the Tamil

culture. Their rituals were related to animism and other forms of anthropomorphic deity worship. The whole philosophies of reincarnation or nadukal worship, pitru rituals, sati worship were embodied in life after death related ritualistic mode of worship and practices. Animism account for a major part of Tamil Sangam religion and comprised of worshipping stones, water, stars and planets. Tree worship was prevalent during Sangam age as it was attested by the fact that tree spirit can connect and remove the negative impulses in human body. There are three major systems of worship during Sangam age. (a) the ancestry system of worship (b) the exotic Hindu gods derived or borrowed from the Aryan fold to Dravidian belt (c) the non-Hindu religious mode of worship. The Vedic religion had penetrated its root in the south, which is proved by costly sacrifices, performed by the kings of Sangam age. Brahmins devoted to their studies and religious duties, held a high position in society. There was a festival to honour the god of sky, Indra in Puhar. The temples were known as Nagar, Koil, Kottam and Devalayam. The popularity of brahmanical yajana or the shraddha pitru karma or pinda dhan to the dead, fastings are well attested by the Sangam classics innumerable times. The Sangam Tamils are aware of spiritual truths such as concepts of body and soul, superiority of fate and destiny, so the Vedic religion of sacrifice was followed by the Sangam Tamils especially among them where the kings and chieftains. References like Theyupas, those of Pandya king Mudukudumi Peruvaludi being the best example. Individual Brahmins maintained three types of sacred fires in their houses. The worship of the primitive form of Siva was attended by primitive dances known as Velanadal. The reference to the worship of the forest like Kaduraikadavul, associated with Durga in particular.

Guardian Deities

Indra, Yama, Varuna and Soma, Kubera are mentioned as the guardians of four directions, Silapathikaram mentions that Brahma with four faces, thirty three devas and eleven ganas are also referred in it. Another Sangam work Thirumurarupadai refers to Parvathy, Vishnu, Ayirani (Wife of Indra) were some of the goddess worshipped.

Conclusion

An analysis of the Sangam age gods reveals prominent two fold faith system, synthesis of non Aryan fold into Tamil religious system, the original Aryan or Vedic deities had begun in this period. Hence spiritualism during Sangam age is a synthesis of the Tamil and Aryan cultures especially in Tamilnadu.

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