

Evolution of Malikapurathamma Belief System in Sabarimala: Frompattini To Bhagavati-Kali Cult

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Abstract

This article traces the history of Sastha and Malikapurathamma worship in Sabarimala as a by-product of the interactions between various religions by examining the Pattini cult, animistic nature of Malayarayan's Sastha worship, Buddhist influence and Brahmanical tantric values. The core focus of this paper is to locate the social and customary position of women and its gendered nature of restrictions. Interconnections between the first two sessions may help to evaluate how Dravidian, Buddhist and Hindu cultural aspects like tradition, customs and taboos restrict woman's right to pray and worship on the basis of biological features and menstruation. A careful attempt has been made in this paper to discern heterodox religions in determining the present day Hindu code of worship and its adverse impacts on women within the Sabarimala belief system.

Keywords: Sastha; Pattini; Malayarayan; Dravidian; Buddhism; Hinduism

Introduction

The worship of Ayyapan in Sabarimala is incomplete without the reverence of female Goddess *Malikapurathamma*, while scrutinizing the genesis of the female deity shows complex corresponding similarities to Devi cult and their historical transformations. Presumably onto 8th century, whether heterodox religions were or not the major ones to have penetrated to whole of Southern India, nevertheless it is at least clear that they had significance. The cult of *Pattini* was one of the chiefly celebrated and worshipped deities during these periods and is rooted in Jain and Buddhist ethos, and if these religions were

popular in these periods, then it is almost inevitable that the *Pattini* cult was a Jain and Buddhist one. *Pattini* as depicted in the *Silappatikaram* and *Manimekalai* is not a Hindu deity but a deity of the heterodox religions that have associations with Buddhism, Jainism and Ajivakism (Obeyesekere 1984: 512). The evidence of the *Silappatikaram* suggests that the *Pattini* cult was strongest in Kerala among urban merchants, since it was here in Vanchi, the seat of the ancient Chera kings, that the cult was given state legislation.

Many scholars consider the goddess *Pattini* as a Jain-Buddhist deity. As observed by a prominent historian 'This does not imply that she could not also have been a Hindu deity, though there is little evidence for this in the classic Tamil epics' (Obeyesekere 1987: 530). But the core ritual associated with the death and resurrection of Palanga revolves around the *Pattini* cult that was unique in South Asian ritual traditions and was probably confined to the heterodox religions of Southern India rather than to Brahmanism, Hinduism and Dravidian religion. In addition, the story of death and resurrection is alien to Hinduism but central to the religions of West Asia. Such parallelism may occur due to a number of socio-cultural factors, interactions and psychological conditions of the then period, alternative to this could be mere co-incidental phenomena.

Another significant aspect of popular narrative emerges in the *Kali* temple of Kodungallur, accordingly many South Indian scholars have argued that it is the ancient seat of *Pattini*. The view that this temple was originally built by Chenkuttuvan and the South Indian scholarly tradition of viewing the *Pattini* episodes as natural events. It is also clear that and undeniable that by the 14th century it was a *Kali* temple since *Kokasandesha*, a 14th century Malayalam poem, refers to it as such.

Induchudan has also exemplified some relevant sociological evidence in this regard. First, the crucial piece of sociological information is that pilgrims who visit Kodungallur refer to the goddess popularly as *Ottamulachi*, ‘the single breasted one’. Now the main Kali statuette in the inner sanctum lacks this iconographic feature. The single breasted goddess in all of Indian mythology is *Pattini*. Second, the priests in charge of the temple are called *Atikals*. *Atikals* as mentioned in an official document in the post-independent period defines them as ‘*Brahmins originally who underwent social degradation by having officiated as priests in temples dedicated to Bhadrakali and other goddesses that receive offerings of liquor*’ (Travancore State Manual 1969: 118). But in the *Silappatikaram* the term *Atikal* refers to a Buddhist or Jain saint. Different connotations on priesthood emerge from different historical periods. There is no doubt that during the heyday of the *Pattini* cult, the *Atikals* were priests and they were also Buddhist-Jain saints. But with the decay of the *Pattini* cult, the rise of Brahmanical and Hindu influence after the 8th century and the extreme rigidity of the caste system that developed concomitantly with Brahmanism, these *Atikals* were incorporated as a separate caste.

Third, in the western ward of the temple is a small hut built of laterite that houses a deity known as *Vasurimala*. This deity apparently not found anywhere else in Kerala, the priestesses of the cult are Nayar caste women and they offer her a red mixture of lime and turmeric (*Kuruti*) that represents blood. People come from all over to offer pujas so she will ward off infectious diseases. Elsewhere in Kerala it is *Bhagavati* who is the smallpox deity but at Kodungallur *Vasurimala* has that role. A comparison with the Sinhala mythic tradition will help us to understand this deity in its other embodiment. In the myth of the killing and resurrection, *Pattini* quells the demon of disease *Vadurumala*, which is the exact equivalent of *Vasurimala*, *Vaduru* meaning pestilence, especially smallpox. One has to assume that the

deity is a survival of the ancient form of *Pattini* cult as it prevailed in Kerala before its diffusion to Sri Lanka and its incorporation into the Kali cult.

Number of similar myths found in the central and southern Kerala. In this case, deity remains similar although the methodology of ritualistic traditions as well as literary interpretations differs in varying geographical spaces either witnessed from folklore or in the genealogy of musical traditions prevalent then. Several Kerala writers have referred to texts that are still closer to the content of the *Pattini* myths. Sri Ulloor S. ParameswaraIyer, the author of the well-known *History of Kerala Literature* (1957-65) gives an account of *Manimanka* (gem virgin) and *Palakar* sung by lower caste *Mannans* (washermen) and *Marars*, a caste that beats drums for the *Nayar* community. As per one scholar, (Chandera1973) says there are texts known as *Kannakitorrams* that are sung in Southern Kerala. As the title implies, these texts explicitly identify the protagonist deity as *Kannaki(Pattini)*. Chandera further adds that almost identical versions of the myths are found in *Nallamahtorrams* sung in central Kerala in the Palaghat district (Chandera 1973: 3845). He mentions myths of *Kannaki* and *Palakar* embodied in texts known as *Muttipuraipattu* and sung by low caste groups during annual post-harvest festivals in the Travancore district.

With the decline of Jainism and Buddhism in India from the 8th to the 13th century, three consequences followed with regards to *Pattini* cult. First, Buddhists were pushed out of South India and settled in Sri Lanka's west coast. They brought with them the *Pattini* cult and they translated the texts and adapted the cult to suit the new culture. Second, in South India itself the original *Pattini* cult was absorbed into the popular Hindu cult of *Kali*, *Durga*, or *Bhagavati*. Third, another group of Kerala immigrants settled on the east coast of Sri Lanka and were adapted to Hinduism.

The Transformation of Goddess *Pattini* into *Bhagavati*, *Durga* and *Malikapurathamma*

Several scholars have noted contemporary survivals of the *Pattini* myth in South India. There are many scholars have documented the transformation of *Pattini* into *Durga*, *Kali* and *Draupadi* and in Sabarimala, she is known as *Malikapurathamma*. However, most scholars see the *Silappatikaram* as the source of the myth and later versions as derivatives, rather than viewing *Silappatikaram* itself as part of a long and continuing ritual tradition. One of the most interesting studies is Brenda Beck's paper in which she compares several versions of the *Silappatikaram* in order to highlight and explicate stylistic variations of the prototypic myth of *Kannaki-Kovalan* have deeply permeated South Indian culture, often to be transformed into something totally different (Beck 1972).

It is not only in Tamil Nadu but in Kerala that the greatest number and variety of survivals of the *Pattini* cult exist, in ritual practice, in myth and in bard traditions. The transformation of the *Pattini* cult into the *Bhagavati* and *Malikapurathamma* cult is very likely due to the assimilation of Jain-Buddhist cult into its fold. In general this transformation has resulted in the conversion of the ethical and rational deity *Pattini* into the amoral, irrationally destructive *Bhagavati*, the dominant mother goddess of Kerala. Concomitantly with this transformation, the dolorosa aspects of the goddess fades away and the theme of the resurrection of Kovalan are either minimized or absent. This stage is totally dominated by *Bhagavati – Kali*.

The peculiar offerings like *kumkumampodi* (saffron powder), *manjalpodi* (turmeric powder), *kadalipazham* (Plantain), *sharkara* (jaggery), red silk and honey etc. to *Malikapurathamma* deity reveals its interconnections with the *Pattini* cult. The turmeric powder in the *Irumudikettu*, the double-headed baggage in which pilgrims carry their offering to the deity, is offered to the *Malikapurathamma* and that was also one of the core offerings to *Pattini*.

Thengaiurutt (rolling of Coconut) is another major ritual related to *Pattini* which is also visible and performed in the *Malikapurathamma* temple and coconuts are offered only after rolling them on the ground. With the advent of Brahmanism Hinduism, the *Pattini* cult through Sanskritisation had been transformed into different worshipping forms. Within no time, Sankritisation has instigated a process of deification of characters in the Hindu epics. Similarly, it has injected a new social change, a move from matrilineal to patrilineal system and favours a patriarchal ideology.

The 19th century Kerala had witnessed a deep rooted vertical hierarchy based rigorous caste system. The general subordination of women assumed a particularly severe form in Kerala through religious traditions which have shaped social practices. It not only Sankritised the Buddhist and Dravidian values but restricted the religious and social space of women. Due to the overwhelming presence of casteism within the social and religious fabric, numerous social debilities and sanctions affected the lives of the lower castes, particularly the women community. The most degrading of these sprang from notions of untouchability, inapproachability and non-visibility of women belongs to outcastes, which were practiced with fanatical rigour by the upper castes (Ouwerkerk 1945: 3). The belief was that even the proximity of polluted (outcaste) would pollute the higher castes. Hence the members of the lower castes were not permitted to approach members of the upper castes, and were required to stay within degrees of prescribed distance – which, as applied to each caste, was known as *tiyapad*, *cherumapad* etc., (Hutton 1963: 179-80). The lower caste women were not supposed to enter temples, dress neatly, restricted mobility and were not allowed to cover their breasts or use head bands of any sort.

Caste restrictions also prohibited them from keeping mulch cows, and wearing footwear, ornaments or any but coarse cloth (Jeffrey 1974: 40). Women were required to use a

particular style of self-degrading language when addressing the high castes. They had to address a caste Hindu man as *thampuran* (lord) and women as *thampurati* (lady). They could not refer to themselves as I or We (neither first person singular nor plural) but only in the third person as *adiyati* (slave). They had to cover their mouth with one hand when speaking to a member of a high caste even as they kept the prescribed distance. They were denied the privilege of owning names such as *Parvati*, *Sati* and *Lakshmi* (names of Hindu gods), commonly used by the upper castes, except in their corrupted forms (Dharmatheerthan 1958: 23). They were not only denied admittance to the temple of high castes but also not allowed to approach even the periphery of these temples. They were permitted to build their own temples, but under no circumstances they could consecrate deities worshipped by the higher castes. Their deities were mostly worshipped with toddy and the blood of fowls and animals.

At the same time, the Brahmanical Hinduism has validated the pollution practices in the name of *Pula* or *Kuli*. It refers to the pollution attendant on birth, puberty, menstruation and death. This is clearly reflected in the very formal and superficial purification rites practiced by polluted persons. However, one prohibition is strictly observed: polluted persons cannot interact with *devas*. The most widely accepted view regarding the duration of *pula* or *kuli* is as follows: *masa kuli* or *pula* (menstruation) for three days till the woman bathes; *vayasarikuli* (menarche) for fourteen days; *prasavavalaima* (childbirth) for thirty days; *marana pula* (death) for ninety days. During this period those who have been in contact with pollution cannot participate in *deva* rituals. Pollution from menses applies only to members of the immediate family. Still, the appearance of puberty marks a profoundly dangerous situation and is the context for major rituals which indicates the important relationship between female purity and purity of caste. Pollution from menarche or child birth it applies to the wider family circle. Death, however a different scenario, since it affects all who

participate in the funeral rituals. Thus a death occurs any deva related ceremonies cannot be held in the whole family circle till the stipulated period is over. It believes that interaction with *deva* while polluted may result in *dosham*, a condition of ritual danger that renders the individual susceptible to illness, accident and disaster.

Major altercations in the veneration of Female deities in accordance with the exit and entry of new religious belief systems have instrumentalised the ethical position of women in a societal structure, along with a set of prohibitory measures supported by ecclesiastic orders. The Brahmanical order suggests that spiritual domain sustained the balance within a society through the induction of power relations based on patrilineal structures; on the flip side such ideas have purposefully degraded social and economic mobility of woman as an oppressed gender.

Conclusion

It is clear that in terms of gender equality and parity, Kerala presents a contradictory scenario. On the educational, economic and health domains, women of Kerala has been made considerable improvements. But the social and customary positioning of women in the same society is marked with qualitative backwardness. A marked feature of this society is its cultural and religious sanction for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women have been subjected to constant denial of public spaces and entry into temples purely based on biological features. It is understood that the source for such control over women's sexuality is Brahmanical patriarchy. Within that larger structure the sexuality of women is the subject of social concern. Therefore, for Hindu social organization the core intention is to construct a closed structure to preserve land, women and ritual quality within it. The three are structurally linked and it is impossible to maintain all three without stringently organising

female sexuality. Indeed neither land, nor ritual quality, that is, the purity of caste can be ensured without closely guarding women who form the pivot for the entire structure. Therefore, the subjugation and subordination of women gained severe form in Kerala through the powerful instrument of religious traditions which later have reshaped social practices. At the Sabarimala context, no doubt, the pollution theory in Kerala has survived through Dravidian and Buddhist periods and lately had to adapt itself to the rituals of Brahmanical Hinduism.

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