

Religious Beliefs, Practices, and Changes Among Mannan Tribes in Kerala.

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Abstract

The religious life of tribes differ from community to community, people to people based on the various cultures and ecological conditions. They seek the help of these mysterious powers to overcome the hazards in the process of life movements; and tried to establish a relationship with these supernatural powers. This study focuses on the religious beliefs, practices, and changes among Mannan tribes in Kerala. Mannan tribes follow Hinduism and also practice their traditional belief system. This study reveals that, the impact and influence of Hinduism and modernization on tribal religion.

Keywords: Mannan tribes, belief system, supernatural powers, worships, religion.

Introduction

The belief system is created through the rites and rituals like offerings, prayers, esoteric practices, and sacrifices to the powers. Gradually it developed as an institutionalized belief system; it includes systematic practices and procedures. The belief system is one of the essential parts of tribal life. They are following give and take the approach with their god and goddesses. They keep a close relationship with these unseen powers by worshipping and offerings. The unhappiness of the mysterious forces leads to bad happenings in their life so they created their belief system or religion for their well-being. According to Radcliff- Brown “religion has originated just as a means for social survival i.e., out of a sense of dependence on it. It is the fear of supernatural control and punishment that brings about the difference to a norm of behavior which is essential in forms of social survival”. Major sociologists and social anthropologists such as Malinowski (1974), Durkheim (1976), and weber (1904), etc. defined religion as a process of beliefs, morals, and issues and is based on human culture and society.

The tribal people maintain a strong relationship with nature including animals, materials, and supernatural forces. They depend on magico- religious activities. The tribal pantheon consists of God, goddesses, village deities, ancestral spirits, household deities, jungle goddesses, evil spirits, etc. The Travancore hill tribe’s religion is discussed by many researchers like Thurston (1909), Krishna Iyer (1941), Thomas (1958), Luiz (1962), etc. They found the tribal religion is concerned with animism, totemism, and polytheism. In the case of the Mannan community, they have a developed belief system based on the animistic approach.

Aim and Objectives

This study is trying to understand the religious beliefs and practices of Mannan tribes in Kerala and the main objective of the study is to find out the impact of Hinduism and motorization in the Mannan tribal religion.

Location of the area

The study area is located in the Idukki, high range area of Kerala and it lies between the Western Ghats and the forest. So that this district is a major dwelling place of Kerala tribes. Mannan tribes are one of the major tribes in Idukki and are scattered in different hill areas of this district.

Methodology

The data is collected based on ethnographical fieldwork in Mannan settlements in the Idukki district, Kerala. The researcher has applied different research methods such as the interview method, observation method, group discussion method, etc. for the collection of data. The data was collected mainly from the community shaman (vichakkaran/poojari), community doctor (vaidiyan), community head man (kani), elder people, and others related to the religious activities of the Mannan community.

Mannan tribe and belief system.

Mannan tribes believe in jungle gods, household deities, agricultural gods, ancestral spirits, evil spirits, and hunting spirits. Most of the deities abode in caves or rocks in the interior areas of the forest. Household deities are kept in a special place within the house.

Gods

The chief gods of Mannans are Mariamma (Kannaki), Kanchiyar Muthy (Madura Meenakshi), and Periyar Ayyappan (Lord Ayyappa). Also, Mannan has a list of forty-two traditional deities based on the locality of the Mannan community. Each deity has his or her specific area of jurisdiction. Each god has a servant from the Mannan community known as 'adiyan'. The primary duty of adiyans is to keep a good relationship with deities through offerings and prayers. 'Anamala Devi', 'Mala Devi', 'Nayaanachi', 'Karuman Perumal', 'Vazhar Andavan', 'Kanchiyar muthy', 'Ooralymuthan', 'Manmuthy' etc. are some of the major traditional gods of the Mannan community.

Among them, Manmuthy and Ooralymuthan are agricultural gods. Before they started the new agriculture work, they used to sacrifice a cock to these goddesses for their worship to get good yields and protection from wild animals and natural calamities. If they face any difficulties, they believe that it's due to the punishments of the goddesses for mistakes they have committed. As part of the solution, they will offer 16 yards of long cloth-like sari, a sickle, and a silver coin to these agriculture goddesses.

Ancestral Spirits.

Mannans believe that each individual will become an ancestral spirit after his/her death. The ancestral spirit is known as '*chavar*' in the Mannan dialect. Nedumpura chavar, Kattu chavar, Kula chavar, Uraly chavar, Sherkila karanar, Muthuvan chavar etc. are the important ancestral spirits. The Mannans pray to the ancestral spirits for the protection of family members, for a good harvest, and to protect themselves from wild animals and diseases.

According to Mannan's theology, ancestral spirits are causal factors for the occurrences of diseases. The children must follow the customary rituals, after the death of their parents. The Mannans believe that if somebody fails to give offerings to the ancestral spirits, the spirit gets angry and causes disease and natural calamities. They will find out whether the ancestor is angry through the magic power of the community shaman. They apologize for their sin and offer liquor, cigarette, dress, ornaments, etc. based on the preference of that ancestor and also conduct the post-funeral ceremonies on the appropriate dates.

Evil Spirits and Healing techniques

The Mannans believe in evil spirits who are considered furious and possess the power to affect people negatively. Evil spirits are believed to bring the hardships like diseases, abortion, attacks from wild animals, floods, crop failure, and other natural calamities. Sometimes benevolent gods of Mannan also are believed to turn into evil spirits, if they are not properly appeased. For example, Bhadrakali, Kannaki, or Mariamma are believed to bring diseases like smallpox, chickenpox, etc. when angry. 'Kalan', 'Karuman', 'Thuthan', 'Thuttan', 'Yaman', 'Muni' etc. are the main evil spirits of the Mannans.

The Mannans believe that 'Muni' attacks pregnant women, sucks the blood of the fetus, and causes abortion. Bad dreams, fatigue, hallucinations, illusions, beating oneself, etc. are considered the symptoms of a 'Muni' attack. Only the Shaman (*vichakkaran*) can rescue the person from the attack of 'Muni'. He uses his magical techniques to control the powers of 'Muni' by sacrificing a cock and offering its blood to 'Muni'.

Normally the *vichakkaran* uses the 'kodanki', a special divination method to find out the cause of diseases and the remedies. Paddy grains are also used in the divination process. The 'vichakkaran' sits on the floor and meditates. Then he takes his divination board (a wooden board drawn with twelve columns) and keeps two pinches of paddy grains in a corner of the board. Then he chants the name of the goddesses, ancestor spirits, and the jungle gods to help him to find a solution. Then he arranges the paddy grains on the board in a particular manner. He takes two grains each time and arranges them in three rows such that they do not touch each other. He then removes two grains from each row, until all the grains are removed. In the end, if only one grain remains, it indicates there is no fault with the patient. If two grains are left then it is assumed that there is something wrong and the 'vichakkaran' tries to solve the problem through his magical techniques.

Some of the evil spirits and diseases cannot be controlled by the 'kodanki' method. In such cases, the 'vichakkaran' applies the method of magical dance known as 'peyattam'. He performs the dance by looking at the sky and invokes all the gods. The dancing steps become very fast, the rhythm of the music changes, and he begins to murmur. It is believed, that the goddesses talk to him about the problems and provide remedies. Then the 'vichakkaran' ties the evil spirit with his magical threads by chanting 'mantram'. Sometimes 'vichakkaran' ties the paddy grains or red seeds or stones (talisman) in a cloth and this is tied to the wrist of the patient to protect him from the evil spirit.

Impact of Hinduism and Modernization

The younger generation among the Mannan tribes is changing towards modernization. Traditionally the Mannans did not build any temples for their gods and goddesses. Instead, they worshipped in the caves or the rocks in the forest. With the advent of modernism, the Mannans have reduced sacrificing animals to their deities. Due to the impact of Hinduism, the mode of worship of Mannan has changed and they have begun to construct temples in their settlements. One of the main temples of Mannan communities is the 'Kanchiyar Muthyamma' temple at the Kovilamala settlement. Stones were used to building the walls of this temple and were plastered with mud or lime. The roof is covered with leaves or wild grass. It has only one door in the front with some pictures of the Gods and Goddesses inside the temple. During special days, they light oil lamps and do pujas. In addition, they visit Hindu temples near their locality. The Mannans have deep faith in some deities of certain temples. They say that 'Madura Meenakshi temple',

‘Mangladevi temple’, and ‘Sabrimala Sastha temple’ are their pilgrimage centers. They believe that visiting these places helps them to overcome hazards and to bring them good luck. Due to financial constraints, only financially sound families can visit these pilgrimages centers.

Also, Hinduism has influenced the religious life of Mannans. They have adopted Hindu names for their children. Marriage and other rituals are performed as per the Hindu culture. They have accepted the Hindu Goddesses as their Goddesses and have begun to worship them. They also partake in the local temple festivals

Conclusion

The tribals used to worship nature, like trees and mother earth and they protected them, but today there are reducing these practices and focusing on temple-based pujas. The attitude of the younger generation toward their tradition is not positive and there is a chance to lose the traditions and tribal uniqueness. So, the authorities should be taken the steps to preserve the art, history, tradition, and awareness of indigenous knowledge of the tribal groups. Also should provide awareness to the younger generation about the importance of their culture and tradition. This study reveals that the religious life of Mannan is based on a combination of animism, Hinduism, and modernism.

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