

Sakta Cult Through Art and Literature in Tamil Country

Dr. A. Mahalingam¹, Dr. C. Deepa²

¹Assistant Professor and Head, Department of Medieval History, School of Historical Studies, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai - 625 021.

²Assistant Professor, Department of History, V.V.V College, Virudhunagar.

Abstract

In the Sakta conception, the Mother Goddess is represented as Adisakti, the primordial energy, and the Supreme Being to whom even the great gods like Brahma, Vishnu and Siva owe their origin, survival and destruction. This cosmic conception of the Mother Goddess is nothing but a development of the idea of a Mother deity who is supposed to represent the forces that stimulate the generative powers of nature. And again, the conception of a mother deity as the source of universal fecundity is also a development of an empiric notion which personifies the Mother Earth, the upholder of the human, animal and vegetable life which rests on her surface, into a benign goddess who is supposed to look over everything of this phenomenal world with motherly care and affection. Tamil society in the pre-modern period reveals interesting insights into the cult of Sakta and its historical information through an interrogation of the rich literary, inscriptional, art and architectural evidences.

Keywords: Adichanallur, Devimahatmya, Kadalkelu Selvi, Perunkatrakkotri, Silapathikaram, Jyeshthadevi.

Introduction

In primitive society, the clan centered in the women on whose responsibility rested the essentially important function of rearing up the young and of imparting to them whatever could be characterised as the human heritage at the pre-hunting stage. All cultural traits including the habits, norms of behaviours, inherited traditions, etc. were formed by and transmitted through the females. The woman was not only the symbol of generation, but the actual producer of life. Her organs and attributes were thought to be endowed with generative power, and so they had been the life giving symbols. In the earliest phases of social evolution, it was this maternity that held the field, the life producing mother being the central figure of religion. This has been proved by the plentiful discovery of palaeolithic female figurines in bone, ivory and stone with the maternal organs grossly exaggerated.¹ The identification of earth with women implies that the functions of the earth and those of women are alike. The same preconditions which fertilize women are also thought to fertilize mother earth.² Referring to the Mother Goddess cult of Mohenjodaro, Marshall, rightly observes that, in the later sakta phase of the primitive mother goddess cult, the devi is transformed into the eternally existing all powerful female principle, the prakrti or sakti. A 3000 years old metal image, unearthed at Adichanallur in Tamil Nadu, shows, on the obverse, a female figure, had very small in size and 2 inches feet. This is regarded as the protohistoric bronze figurine of a mother goddess.³ The Hindu

tradition affirms *vedic* literature as the foundation, the sacred source, of Hinduism. It is centered around the fire cult.⁴

In the *puranic* period, the mother goddesses were associated with the male gods. According to Kalidhasa's drama namely *Raguvamsa* and *Kumarasambava* which is indicated parvati, the consort of Siva and Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu. The Sakta Devi in her developed form absorbed within herself innumerable goddesses representing different streams. The invocation, quoted above, mentions a few goddesses, who stand by themselves as independent deities, though the poet knew them only as forms of the great goddess unto whom they were absorbed. In the concluding portion of the *Devimahatmya* of the Markandeya purana, the Devi assures the gods by granting them the boon that she will always become incarnate and deliver the whole world whenever it is oppressed by the demons.⁵

A considerable number of local goddesses are found in the *puranas*. These goddesses were originally local deities, but later identified with the supreme being of the saktas. Such a process of identification is to be found in the *Devi Bhagavata* in which the innumerable local goddesses of India were brought in close relation with the Sakta concept of female principle.

Mother goddess worship was an important cult during the ancient Tamil country. There were three types of mother goddess worship prevailed i.e, Kottravai, Kalai, Indo –Aryan, pre-Dravidian tribal goddess. The rivers are also considered as mother goddesses. Kaveri, Gngai Saraswati, Yamunai are worshipped which is one of the cultural traditions of India. Peripules describes cave and ports on the cape of Comerin and he also mentions about virgin mother goddess cult existed in the Comerin during the 1st century C.E. It is a water goddess known as *Kadalkelu Selvi*. Mother goddess also worshipped in Kaveri Poompattinam a *Sampapathi* which was known later as *Kadalkelu Selvi* in *Manimekalai*.⁶

One of the most impressive and formidable goddesses of the Hindu pantheon- and one of the most popular- is the goddess Durga. The concept of Durga as the dweller in the hilly areas is first indicated in her original role as *Kottravai* or *Vettrimadatai* with her abode in the *Vagai* tree in *Paditrupattu* and by *Kuruntogai*, where she is called *suli* the winder of Sula to whom vows are made. *Agananuru*, *Purananuru*, *Kalittogai* and *Manimegalai* mentioned durga as *Ongupugal Kanamar Selvi*, *Kadurai Kadavul*, *Perunkatrakkotri* and *Kadamar Selvi*. The Kottravai temple is known as *Pidigai Ongiya Perumpali Munrir Kadamar Selvi* Kaliperunkottam occurs in *Manimegalai*.

The *agama* and *silpa* texts, the *Vaikhasana agama*, for example assign to the Durga figure a place in the devakostha outside the northern wall of the *ardhamandapa* of Saiva temple as *Vindhyavasini*, a feature that becomes common from the close of the 8th century onwards, the corresponding southern niche containing *Gaapathi*. This form of standing Durga, often on the head of buffalo is described in *Silapathikaram*. The general description of Durga given in the *Kasyapa Silpa* represents her as having four arms, two eyes, high hips, high breasts, and all ornaments. She holds the conch and the discus in her upper hand, while her right lower hands presents the *abhaya* posture and the left lower rests on the waist. She stands on a lotus pedestal and has a breast band of serpents.⁷ The illustration shows also a mandapa at Mahabalipuram is a sculpture evidently of the same goddess with the lion and the deer, pairs of demi gods on the sides and devotees at the feet, one of whom is in the act of either cutting off his hair or his neck.⁸ In short, the goddess Durga has not only lion as *vagana* but also deer. Goddess Durga was decorated with horn of deer by Palai people in Tamil Nadu. And also, the *Silapathikaram*, *Tevaram*, *Nalayira Divyaprapandham* describe about deer as vehicle of Durga.⁹ The Sculptures related to the Durga found at Mamallapuram, Kancheepuram and Singhavaram, Trichy lower rock cut cave temple, Tirupparankundram, Tiruthangal and punjai by pallavas, Pandyas and Cholas respectively.¹⁰

Kali is said to be the only one of the village goddesses whose name is found in the Vedas. She is an *avatara*, or incarnation of the eight powers of the universe.¹¹In the Agni and Garuda puranas she is mentioned in invocations that aim at success in war and against one's enemies.¹²She is described as having an awful appearance, she is gaunt, has fangs, laughs loudly, dances madly, wears a garland of corpses, sits on the back of a ghost and lives in the cremation ground. She is asked to crush, trample, break and burn the enemy. Banabhatta's seventh century drama *Kadambari* features a goddess named Candi, an epithet used for both Durga and Kali, who is worshiped by the Sabaras, a tribe of primitive hunters. The worship takes place deep in the forest, and blood offerings are made to the goddess.¹³How and when the Kannaki Cult was assimilated with and finally absorbed in to the Kali or Bhagavati. It cannot be ascertained at our present state of knowledge. In Silapathikaram we have references to the worship of Kali. On their way to Madurai, Kannaki and Kovalan stopped at a kali temple where they witness a wired dance of the priestess of Kali.

Goddesses Lakshmi is one of the most popular goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. In Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa* have a description of Vishnu and Lakshmi. p.69 The two consorts of Vishnu are Lakshmi (Wealth) and Prithvi (Earth). The former is seated or standing on a red lotus pedestal, has our hands holds two lotus flowers in her upper arms, the other two hands being either in the boon giving and protecting postures or holding a vessel and a fruit. She is said to have sprung from the ocean at the time of its being churned for nectar. The latter, Prithvi has only two hands of which the right is raised in the *abhaya* posture and the left holds the fruit of the pomegranate. Her left leg is represented also as stepping upon a pot of treasures.¹⁴*Nandhi Kalambagam* describe about elder sister of Sridevi called Jyesta devi or Mudevi. It also mentions the "*Cheyyakamatiruvukku Munpirantha Thaiyal Uravu Thavirthom*" which means the Jyesta worship was give up. Senthana Tivakara Nikandu mentions the eight names of Jyesta as *Mukadi, Thavvai, Kadhatti, Mudevi, Kakaivartal, Kaldhaivahini, Jyesta, and Kedalananu*.¹⁵ An old sculpture of Jyesta is found in Kanchi Kailasanathar Temple. In Tirupparankundram, the shrine of Jyestadevi were constructed by Nakkana – Korri wife of Satan Ganapati who was minister of Pandya king.¹⁶

The Saptamatrika (the seven virgins), or Akasa Kannigais (the heavenly virgins), are the tutelary deities of tanks, and the figures of the Kannigais seated in a row are often carved on a small stone and placed on tank bunds, especially at places where the tank has been breached.¹⁷ Ilangovaligal mentions about Chamunda as '*Aruvarku Ilaiya Nangai*' in Silappatikaram. The Saptamatrikas are a group of seven goddess viz., Chamundi, Brahmi, Mahesvari, Vaishnavi, Varahi, Kaumari and Indrani. The earliest Saptamatrika panel is in the Mahabalipuram.¹⁸ The Pallava and Chola rulers constructed Saptamatrika shrines in their temples in Tamil Nadu. They are as *astaparivara devatha* in around the big temples. Generally, the Saptamatrika panel would be placed facing north on the platform located to the south of the major Siva's shrine.

In Tamil country, Amman worship was evolved under various names, but no separate temple was erected. Rajaraja I (1012-1044) initiated a tradition of constructing Amman shrine in Brahadeswara temple complex. The amman shrine was known as Brahatiamman in the name of the main deity. Rituals and ceremonies were regularized in the Amman temples.¹⁹ Before that, Goddesses did not have separate shrines in Siva temples. Subsequently separate Amman temples were gradually constructed in temples of Darasuram and Tribuvanam. But in Pandya country, originally known as *thirukkamakottamudaiya nachiyar*, these were modest structures placed and facing south at the front *mandapa* of a Shiva temple in Pandya country. (i.e., Thiruvegampathu, Iyankudi temples in Sivagangai district). Following that, a separate amman shrine was constructed on the north side of the Siva temple, facing east. (i.e., Idaikkattur

Siva temple in Sivagangai District, Moolanathaswamy temple in Madurai District). In the course of time the temple of the goddess were moved to the south of the sanctum of the Siva temple.²⁰

Inscriptions from the 12th century mention the Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple and the Vikramangalam Amman temple as *Tirukamakottamudaiya Nachiyar*. Following this, in the 13th century, the kings, officials, and others built the Amman temple in several of the Shiva temples in Pandya Nadu. Inscriptions indicate the names *Sivanai Muluthudaiya Nachiyar*, *Sivanesavalli Nachiyar*, *Abayanayaki*, *Aludaiya Nachiyar*, *Ulagudaiya Nachiyar*, *Thanmen Mulaiyar*, *Oppilla Mulaiyar*, *Ankayarkanniyar*, *Periya Nachiyar* for the Thirukamakotta Nachiyar. Among these names, the names of *Thanmenmulaiyar* and *Angayarkani* were taken in *Devara* songs. Nachiyar, like Shiva, has been given *nithya puja*, monthly *puja*, and special *santhi puja*.

During the Vijayanagara Nayaka period, the Amman temples were constructed and transformed the structure parallel to the main deity. The main deities are called in the name of Amman in instance Minakshi Amman, Kamakshi Amman, Gomathi Amman. A Goddess shrine was constructed in the Siva temple complex at Viramanallur. This site is situated some 24 km north of Kanchipuram in the transitional Telugu-Tamil zone. This building is dependent on earlier structure as is clear from the Chola style of the double capitals and angled corbels of the wall pilasters.²¹

The word Sakti means 'energy'. Power or Force is conceived as the active principle in the universe and is personified as a goddess.²² The origin of Saktism was spontaneous which evolved out of the pre-historic Mother Goddess cult symbolizing the facts of primitive life. Saktism is a very important religion among the Hindus of the present day all over India. Sakti is worshipped in various forms and numerous shrines are dedicated to her images in different parts of the Tamil country. The boundaries and extent of the sect are difficult to determine. An organized sect, however, Saktism is linked closely with Saivism and Vaishnavism the goddess is regarded as one of the many forms of the consort of Siva and Vishnu. In short Hindu goddesses are very different from one another. Some have strong maternal natures, whereas others are completely devoid of maternal characteristics. Some have strong, independent natures and are great warriors and others are domestic in nature and closely identified with male deities. Some Hindu goddesses are associated with the wild, untamed fringes of civilization and others are the very embodiment of art and culture.

Reference

1. N.N. Bhattacharyya, *History of the Sakta Religion*, Delhi, 1974, pp. 1-2.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
3. M. Chandramurthi and V. Vedachalam, *Parakkiramapandyapuram*, Chennai, 2002, p. 186.
4. David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses Vision of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, Delhi, 2005, p.55.
5. N.N. Bhattacharyya, *Op.cit.*, p. 74.
6. A. Mahalingam, *Development of Amman Cult and Temples in Tamil Country*, sectional President Address in the Historiography Section on 40th Annual session of South Indian History Congress, Department of History, Annamalai University, Chidambaram, 2020.
7. H. Krishna Sastri, *South Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses*, New Delhi, 2006, p.199.
8. *Idem.*

9. G. Sethuraman, V. Vedachalam, *India Kalai Varalatrill Aruvagai Teiva Valipadu*, Thanjavur, 2020, p.46.
10. *Ibid.*, p.47.
11. D.D. Henry Whitehead, *The Village Gods of South India*, Calcutta, 1921, p.24.
12. David Kinsley. Op.cit., p.117.
13. *Idem.*
14. H. Krishna Sastri, Op.cit., p.187.
15. G. Sethuraman, V. Vedachalam, Op.cit., p. 48.
16. *ARE*, 37 of 1908.
17. D.D. Henry Whitehead , Op.cit.,p.26.
18. S. Theodar Baskaran, *Kal Mel Nadandha Kalam*, Chennai, 2016, p. 56.
19. A. Mahalingam, Op.cit., 2020.
20. M. Chandramurthi and V. Vedachalam, Op.cit., p.75-76.
21. A. Mahalingam, Op.cit., 2020.
22. Ernest A. Pavne, *The Saktas An Introduction and Comparative Study*, New York, 1933p. 9.