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# Impact of Sanskritization on The Folk Rituals in Ancient Tamil Nadu

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## Abstract

Sanskritization is a particular form of social change found in India. It denotes the process by which castes placed lower in the caste hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes. It is a process similar to passing in anthropological terms. This term was made popular by Indian sociologist M. N. Srinivas in the 1950s. The cultural elements of the Aryans slowly penetrated into the society of Dravidians. This cultural assimilation and integration were known as Aryanization or Sanskritization. It had a strong impact on Tamil Language, Tamil Religion and radical changes in the society. Tamil people worshipped food grain, since it is their source of living. They were all deified in different forms such as foodgrains, human and metal images. In ancient Tamilagam, the Kalabhras adopted Anti-Brahmanical attitude and suppressed the domination of Sanskrit. During the Pallava period, the earlier folk-worship disappeared and the new form of Brahmanical worship gradually started. Throughout the history of Tamil Nadu Sanskrit Hinduism had absorbed local and folk elements. The patronisation of the rulers of Pallavas, Cholas, and Pandyas and the construction of grand structural temples made the Sanskritization of worship to be very strong. It was not helped to the subalterns to move up in the social hierarchy. Further it degraded the position of subalterns. Hence, it receives various types of opposition in later period. But the Hindu revivalism was possible in ancient Tamil Nadu during the period of Pallavas and Imperial Cholas because of adapting Sanskritization form of worship.

**Keywords:** Sanskritization, Anthropological, Assimilation, Aryanization, Subalterns, Folk Deities.

Tamil Nadu had a glorious past. In early days Tamil Civilization developed independently without any outside influence, till the advent of Aryans. The Aryans reached India from Central Asia with their cattle, goods and Gods. Since then, the Aryanization process also started. Aryans began to move south because of deteriorating political conditions that existed in North India, due to a series of foreign invasions from the days Darius to Alexander. The Buddhist activities of Asoka too compelled them to migrate toward South. They settled gradually not all of a sudden. The cultural elements of the Aryans slowly penetrated into the society of Dravidians. This cultural assimilation and integration were known as Aryanization. They introduced Sanskritization. It was started 1000B.C. and the impact was obvious in social, religious and political setup of South India. Sanskritization had a strong impact on Tamil Language, Tamil Religion and radical changes in the society.

## Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the multi-culture features of Tamil society.
2. To analyze the process of Sanskritization in the tradition of Folk Deities.

Sanskritization is a particular form of social change found in India. It denotes the process by which castes placed lower in the caste hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes. It is a process similar to passing in anthropological terms.

This term was made popular by Indian sociologist M. N. Srinivas in the 1950s. The movement has always been possible, and especially in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and adoption of the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. This process has been called 'Sanskritization' or 'Brahminization' or Aryanization.

### **Ancient form of Folk Worship in Tamil Nadu**

Tamil people worshipped food grain, since it is their source of living. They were all deified in different forms such as food grains, human and metal images. The immature crops in the form of Mulaipari are prepared a few days before the celebration starts. Different types of stones, which resemble the parts of human body in the form of andomorphic elements, are also worshipped by the folk people. Agriculture is the main activity of folk people. Hence, they have perceived the presence of divine spirit within food grains and its supportive natural elements such as weather, rain, sun and other forces. In due course they also began to worship the deceased heroes, who lost their lives for the protection of village. Among the world religious traditions the Tamil tradition is an impressive one. For the past two thousand and five hundred years or more, the religion of the Tamil society has consisted of two types of worshippers. The first is comprised of about ten percent of the population interested in agamic religion. The content and fashion of their religions have changed from time to time ranging from the spectrum of Jainism, Buddhism, Saivism and Vaishnavism. The religious beliefs and practices of the remaining ninety percent of the population had never been subjected to rapid changes as in the case of first category since, they worshipped mother goddesses in various forms and names.

A common symbol of the village deities is simply a stick or a spear. It is very common in the Tamil country to see one or more iron spears struck in the ground under a tree, to represent some village deity.

The idea seems to be that the deity is represented by his weapons. Another symbol akin to these stakes and spears is the Nattan Kal (Nadukkal) in the Tamil country. The Nattan Kal is the first post of a nuptial booth, set up at an auspicious moment, painted red and white adorned with various decorations, and worshipped with offerings of coconuts and flowers. The symbolism is obscure. The name is also applied to a small stone set up at the entrance to a village.

Village gods like Aiyanar and Madurai Viran where once human beings were transformed into deities due to their heroic activities. Likewise, Mariamman and host of other deities have also transformed into deities. Most of them even now receive sacrifices of cocks and goats. A few decades ago, the more 'powerful' of the gods and goddesses received the sacrifice of buffaloes. The people considered that the local gods and goddesses are powerful. There is a saying even in the sophisticated and educated circles that: 'This local god is powerful': 'That local goddess is dangerously touchy'. At the festival of Mariamman and Madurai veeran two special ceremonies are performed quite common among the village people: they sacrificed the goat and fire walking ceremony takes place.

The people in Sangam age followed the special kind of nature worship and they didn't perform with rituals. They offered oil, lime-juice, milk coconut, plantains, sugarcane and aromatic spices. They led a simple form of worship.

### **Sanskritization on Folk Worship**

The trend was to Sanskritise the deities of folk tradition so as to give way to the practices of the temples of Vedic tradition. Religiously the deities of folk tradition are not a welcome feature of the Vedic tradition. However, in a changing economic scenario, the priests of Vedic tradition are ready to render their services to these temples as priest. They have adopted different means and strategies. This adopted process was called as Sanskritization. In this the deities of folk tradition are transformed physically to match the deities of Vedic tradition. New meaning, messages and significance are attached to the folk deities. Folk deities are brought to the ambit of Vedic tradition either by establishing new blood relationships or through the silent revolution of the Hindu revivalists.

One of the most striking features of the worship of the village deities is the absence of anything like a sacerdotal caste in connection with it. Every other department of village work belongs to a special caste, and in the ordinary worship of Vishnu and Siva the priestly caste to the Brahmans is supreme. But in the worship of the lower castes indiscriminately, though in any one village the pujaris of a particular goddess nearly always belong to one particular caste.

Folk deities are the outcome of the feelings and thoughts of folk people. These deities are worshipped not only by the folk people but also some of the socially backward people in accordance with their social and cultural settings. But Vedic religion assimilated the elements of folk religious tradition through the ages and made it a part of the popular Hindu religion. Gradually the deities of folk tradition were being Sanskritized for aiming at total Hindu revivalism. The ceremonies observed in the worship of village deities in the Tamil districts of Tanjore, Trichinopoly, and Cuddalore which seem largely due to the influence of Brahmanical ideas and forms of worship. In the first place the ceremonial washing of the images and the processions during the festivals are much more elaborate in these districts.

In India, when Dravidians excelled in civilisation it attracted the eyes of Aryans, when they began to penetrate towards south. Slowly they influenced the whole of society. Socially, politically, culturally and economically Vedic people became stronger and more influential. In order to dominate people, they Sanskritized all walks of life and through which they tried to attain the formation of Hindu revivalism. In Tamil Nadu, it also occurs in the form of Sanskritization of the deities of folk tradition. It is clearly visible when a closer look at the puranic story and temples of the popular deities of folk tradition is made.

The simple form of traditional worship came to an end, and they made worship very ornamental. They made it attractive by introducing the Nigama system of rituals and worship. Importance was given to sacrifices. North Indian Gods and Vedic principles were introduced into Tamil Nadu. The expansion of various forms of sacrifices brought under the control of the Brahmans. As a result, the traditional geographical divisions and the land system came to

an end. Secularism that existed in Tamil Nadu began to diminish. In later Pallavas, Cholas, Vijayanagar till the present Sanskrit became the priestly language. Brahmans adopted various means to Sanskritize the details of folk tradition. Even though there are diversified characteristics between this Brahminic and folk tradition. They wanted to induct these deities in their scriptures. So, they created various Stalapuranas which emphasize the relation between these Gods and Goddesses with anyone of the Gods and Goddesses of Brahmanical Hinduism. Hence these changes made only on the popular deities. For example, Mariamman, an important deity of subalterns, highly influenced by the Brahmans. Actually, she is in terrible exposure and garlanded with skulls. But after Sanskritization, the skull garland replaced by the lemon garlands. Her terrible exposure altered into pleasant one. The process of Sanskritization was visible when a closer look on the emerging domination of Brahmin priest in the temples dedicated to the deities of subaltern is highly increased because of economic condition. They not only dominant during worship, but also on various occasions. They introduced the custom of Kumbabhisekama made Mariamman as a non-vegetarian deity. With regard to the temples of folk tradition Vinayakar, Murukan, Iyappan and other deities of Brahmanical tradition replace other deities of Folk tradition such as Aiyandar, Maduraiveeran and Karuppannasamy. Even the subaltern class people began to use some habits of Brahmans in order to raise their social status. Karma, Dharma, Maya, and Moksha are the examples of some of the most common Sanskrit theological ideas and when the people became Sanskritized these words occur frequently in their talk.

### **The role of Brahmans in Sanskritization**

The Aryans, the forefathers of Brahmin were the forefathers of the Hinduism. They not only acted as a priestly class but also wanted to be an important people in socio, economic and political matters. As a temple priest, educator, policymakers, administrators, leaders, and other means are in good position. They introduced the institution of slavery, caste system and untouchability wherever they were. Their occupational differences did not affect

their unity. In order to exercise their domination on religious matters of the subalterns, they created various philosophies, rituals, beliefs, gods and goddesses. On the other side the Brahmanical deities revealed racial superiority of Brahmins. The nature and method of worship to the deities of Brahmanic tradition favours the racial superiority of Brahmins. To hold their position, the people who prevented to enter inside the temple to hindrance places by the Brahmins as the temple priest in the temples dedicated to Brahmanical tradition.

### **Differentiation between Folk worship and Brahmanical worship**

The nature and method of worship of the folk deities were totally different to the deities of Brahmanical tradition. In folk tradition, the non-vegetarian items were offered and no sacrifices without blood offering. The expressions were in dreadful nature and most of the folk deities of folk tradition are female deities. The structure of the temple and deities are in a rude and rough form. There was no regularity in conducting poojas. Most of the folk deities associated with any contagious disease small pox or cholera. They made the deities of folk tradition as subsidiary deities, watching deities or as an attendant though the worshippers constitute majority.

### **Impact of Sanskritization during Sangam period**

The arrival of Aryans effected some radical changes in the society. North Indian Gods were introduced into Tamil Nadu. Vedic principles were thrust upon the people. Much importance was given to temples and religious festivals. It affected the society badly in due course. The expansion of various forms of sacrifices took place in religion and society. The land rights of the common people were transferred to the Brahmins and temples. The rulers donated Brahmadeya and Devadhanalands to the Brahmins and temples. These lands possessed all facilities and were exempted from taxation. As the society centered round more on the temples, the gods determined and controlled the life of the society. The temple oriented feudal society developed.

### **Impact of Sanskritization during Kalabhra period**

The Brahmins, who worked in temples imposed the Agama principles of the Aryans in the religious worship. Within a short period, the system of worship was also Aryanised. The rulers patronised the temples and donated lands in their names. The lands were known as 'Devadhana' lands. In these lands they were also acted as landlords and enjoyed all political and religious privileges. Thus, society was divided into two divisions. The Sangam society centered around temples and Brahmins. They determined the welfare of the society. The concession and support rendered to the temples and Brahmins was stopped during the age of Kalabhras.

### **The Pallavas and Sanskritization**

During the Pallava period, the earlier folk-worship disappeared and the new form of Brahmanical worship gradually started. Owing to this country also required more Brahmins to do ritual performances in the temple. They contributed to the development of the Brahmanical religion. Vedic rituals became more prevalent during the time. The earlier folk religious beliefs and practices disappeared and a ritualistic Brahmanical type of worship occupied their place. Agamic temples were constructed by the Pallava Kings and the system of worship also changed.

### **Imperial Cholas and Sanskritization**

During the Chola period both Saivism and Vaishnavism developed. The Vaishnava Acharyas composed numerous devotional poems and philosophical works in Sanskrit Language and insisted the sanskritized forms of worship. They divided into two sects Vadakalai and Thenkalai. Vadakalai sect believed the sanskritized customs and beliefs and the authenticity of Sanskrit Vedas .

### **Sanskritization during Pandya Period**

The Pandya rulers were not supported the sanskritized form of worship. But due to the impact of Bhakthi movement and the construction of Structural temples Sanskritization gradually came into existence in Pandya country. But in villages the folk deity worship traditional methods were followed.

There was a decline of sanskritized worship during Sultanate period in Tamil Nadu. But it was revived under the rule of Vijayanagar and Nayaks.

### Conclusion

The process of Sanskritization is not a recent phenomenon and happened throughout the ages. If the process resulted downward mobility would have caused much appreciation from the downtrodden masses. Instead of it, is resulted only the vertical mobility. Once again, the revivalists and Vedic people wanted to establish the domination over Tamil subalterns. They were ready to sanskritize all walks of life, but they did not ready to lose their status as twice-born. They raised their position through Sanskritization. Throughout the history of Tamil Nadu Sanskrit Hinduism had absorbed local and folk elements. The patronisation of the rulers of Pallavas, Cholas, and Pandyas and the construction of grand structural temples made the Sanskritization of worship to be very strong. It was not helped to the subalterns to move up in the social hierarchy. Further it degraded the position of subalterns. Hence, it receives various types of opposition in later period. But the Hindu revivalism was possible in ancient Tamil Nadu during the period of Pallavas and Imperial Cholas because of adapting Sanskritization form of worship.

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