

Invocation to Goddess in Tamil Literature

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N. Ashadevi

Assistant Professor of History

E.M.G Yadav Women's College, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

The Mother Goddess occupies a central position in the Hindu religious system and is revered as Sakti, the primordial source of energy without which male deities are considered powerless. This study examines the evolution and significance of Mother Goddess worship in Tamil literary traditions from ancient to modern times. The objective of the paper is to analyse how Goddess worship—particularly in the forms of Kotravai, Kali, Kollipavai, Mariyamman, and Meenakshi—is represented in classical Tamil texts and epics.

Methodologically, the study adopts a historical and textual analysis, drawing upon Sangam literature, Tamil epics such as Silappadikaram and Manimekalai, Bhakti literature, and relevant archaeological and iconographic evidence. The findings reveal that Mother Goddess worship in Tamil literature reflects themes of fertility, war, protection, morality, and community identity, while also demonstrating continuity and transformation across historical periods.

The study contributes to Tamil religious historiography by offering a comprehensive synthesis of literary, cultural, and historical representations of the Sakti cult. This study concludes that understanding Mother Goddess worship is essential for interpreting the broader religious and social foundations of Tamil society, while also indicating the scope for future research on ritual practices, regional variations, and contemporary forms of Goddess worship.

Keywords: Mother Goddess Cult, Sakti Worship in Tamil Tradition, Kotravai, Tamil Literature, Kali, Kollipavai.

Introduction

The Mother Goddess occupies a unique place in the Hindu religious system. She is considered to be the Sakti (energy) and without her the male Gods are supposed to be powerless. Since the time of the Indus Valley Culture (c.1500 B.C.), the worship of the Mother Goddess gained momentum. After the Vedic period, the Mother Goddess tradition became rooted in the religious history of India. Her exploits are elaborated upon at length in puranic works. In ancient Tamil literature, some records mention special worship and puja, especially for Goddesses. In the great Tamil epic Manimegalai and Silappathikaram also some lines show the same. The goddess was portrayed as great mother and virgin from the ancient days. The same was observed in Sumariya, Egypt, Asiriya, and India.¹

Tolkappiam, the earliest Tamil work, refers to a poetic composition called Korravainillai. The reference in this work relates to the worship of Korravai by soldiers. She is said to be a goddess of the warrior class and a warlike deity. Soldiers during military expeditions invoke her.²

Tolkappiyar does not mention any distance deity of Palai as he has done in the case of other four regions. Kotravai (or) Kali was their deity.³ Padirruppattustates that Goddess Kotravai resided at Ayiramalai. It is mentioned that the Goddess belongs to the people of Cheran. This Goddess did not accept any preparation by devotees except the blood of soldiers. Presenting rice balls mixed with the enemy's blood was the only way to worship the Goddess Kotravai.

Although several studies have examined individual Goddess forms or specific literary texts, a comprehensive analysis integrating multiple Goddess traditions across different phases of Tamil literature remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining Mother Goddess worship as a continuous and evolving religious tradition, drawing evidence from Sangam literature, Tamil epics, Bhakti texts, and later historical sources.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the significance of Mother Goddess worship as reflected in Tamil literary traditions.
- To trace the origin, development, and continuity of Goddess worship in Tamil Nadu from the Sangam period to later historical phases.
- To analyse the cultural, religious, and social roles associated with different forms of the Goddess in Tamil texts.

Methodology and Approach

This study follows a historical and textual approach, analysing primary Tamil literary sources such as Sangam works, epics, and Bhakti literature, supported by secondary historical and iconographic studies. Emphasis is placed on interpreting literary references to Goddess worship within their social and cultural contexts.

As this study is based on literary and historical sources, it does not employ empirical or ethnographic methods; however, this limitation is appropriate to the conceptual and textual nature of the research.

Scholarly Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to the existing scholarship by bringing together scattered literary references to Mother Goddess worship across different Tamil texts and historical phases into a single, coherent analytical framework. By synthesising literary, historical, and cultural evidence, this study enhances the understanding of the Sakti cult as a continuous and evolving religious tradition within Tamil society.

Findings

- Tamil literary sources consistently portray Mother Goddess worship as central to religious and social life.

- Goddess forms such as Kotravai, Kali, Kollipavai, Mariyamman, and Meenakshi represent fertility, war, protection, morality, and community identity.
- The Sakti cult demonstrates continuity and transformation from the Sangam period through the epic and Bhakti phases.
- Literary depictions reveal strong links between Goddess worship, kingship, and social order.

Approach

The research gives much more importance to the mother goddess worship and historical approach was followed.

The State of Kotravai

The sculptures in 9th century mentioned that the family Goddess of Vijayanagara Cholan Nidambha Soodhani was Kotravai. The word “Nidamba” means the bootlaces of a lady and the sexual reproductive organ. The sculptures before the period of Maurya also showed the same magnifying size of female sexual reproductive organs and breasts in the sculptures. It was believed that Goddess Kotravai was the origin of all powers and that she only ushered strength and victory to kings. Later, the seated figure of Nisumbha Sudhani broke into two pieces at the waist, including the pedestal. The subject is five feet eight inches tall. Below it a demon is found. The right leg is bent, and the left leg hangs down, pressing on the demon’s face. This devi is having four hands in the fighting mood holding a trident in the act of piercing the demon below. The hair of the Goddess is dressed in Jatabhadra style. A garland of skulls worn a snake serves as Kuchchabanda (breast band). This shows the account of Chola artistic and iconographic interest. In the sculptures of the 7th and 8th centuries, the Goddess of Lauriya had large breasts and large size of sexual reproductive organs. It was compared to western Asian ancient sculptures related to the Goddess. Later in the period of Rajaraja Chola, the Kotravai was called as “Rajarajeswari” the title of Rajaraja was derived from Rajaraja Chola. The people of Banya also worshipped the Goddess Meenakshi. The Goddess Rajarajeswari and Meenakshi are the incarnation of Goddess Kotravai. Chola and Pandiya kings believe this

Goddess are the Goddess of victory like Kotravai. The pictures at the Madurai Meenakshi temple show that King Tirumalai Nayakkar received the power of Goddess Devi for Goddess Meenakshi. Later the people of Nayakkar performed the rituals stressing that the powers and ruling authority only belong to the Goddess Meenakshi. Sangam works refer to the various aspects of Sakti, particularly her ferocious aspects. Tirumurugarruppadai, the first of the ten songs, praises Muruga (Lord Subramanya). In this work Muruga, is extolled as the son of Malaimahal (Haimavati). Here three aspects of Sakti are allowed to. They are (i) Malaimahal, the presiding deity of the forest (ii) Kotravai, the giver of victory in war and (iii) Palayar the most ancient deity.

The learned commentator, Naccinikiniyar gives the meaning of Kalaimahal as Uma, Korravai as Vana Durga and Palayoi as Kadukilal. He also derives the work Kadukal as a corrupt form of Kadukilal. Kadu meaning forest and kilal the ancient Goddess.¹ In the Perumpanarrupadai ¹¹ the minstrels are exhorted by the poets to offer worship and music please the Goddess of the forest. This shows the importance of the temple. It was almost considered to be a Kadan (essential duty). The Perumpanarrupadai refers to Moti (one who has big stomach), who is the mother of Lord Subrahmanya, the destroyer of Surapadman. Here the Dunangayam Selvi is said to be the most beautiful Goddess surrounded by dancing imps.¹² In Devaram Kali was called as Pogmar Moti and Kadarkotiyinmoti.¹³ Sirupanarrupadai is another work among the ten anthologies which speaks of Kari. The kari means one black in complexion and is of great interest. Kali is also black one. So Kari is likely to be an antique name of Kali.¹ Dravidian origin of the etymology of thali, earlier suggested is supported by the present evidence.

The Kuruntogai speaks of the practice of taking a vow and wearing ritual threads around the wrists. In this verse there is a mention of a virgin who refused to wear the ritual thread around her wrist and worship Suli (one who has trident), because of the fear that her husband might leave her unmindful of her love. In this song the weapon of Goddess Sula is mentioned.¹ The Paripatal¹ is the first work to attribute the third eye to Korravai. Kalitogai, another poem in eight anthologies, refers to the Goddess as

the presiding deity of the cemetery (Perumkadu) Perumkattukkorri, and she is probably identical to Korravai.¹ The Agananuru, is the collection of eight anthologies, also refers to the Goddess as the presiding deity of the forest. She is called Kan-Amar-Selvi. 'Kan' meaning forest and 'amarselvi' meaning presiding deity.¹ She was known as the virgin Goddess, the term was followed and the Goddess was invoked, the mother who begot all the people did not have any transmission with the male portrayed virgin Mother Goddess.¹ The Thaithiraanyagam belonging to the 6th century B.C. shows the invocation of Kanyakumari Goddess. This shows that this goddess was also portrayed in North India. The Cape Comorin Archeological Report mentioned the invocation of the virgin goddess through caves and stones during the first century. In Agananuru also there was a reference for both men and women cleared their sins by taking bath. The Goddess in this place was called Kadal Kahu Selvi² and might also be called the Goddess of Kanyakumari when the Goddess ocean was in water, and the women danced. This dance was called veriattam to praise the Goddess. In Perumpanatrupadai, Goddess Poodamadha wears tender cotton linen. It is known that the Goddess in the jungle resided particularly at residing place of snakes.²¹ Later it paved the way for the invocation to Nagadevadhari cult. During the Sangam Age, the Tamils worshipped snakes as goddesses.

The scheduled caste people began to follow the rituals, proceedings and invocation to Goddess Durka in their own communal method. They followed the system of dedicating their organ in the branches of tree. It was decorated with deer horns and peacock feathers. The lines in the Perumkadai shows clearly that the people are called pulignar. The decoration of horns of deer creates a great fear among the onlookers. Paavai Nonbu (fasting of women) is a method of worshipping the Goddess. This system is exclusively done by women. The 'paavai' means women or the Goddess. In Agananuru, the worship of the Goddess by dedicating the lives of animals or birds was followed for paavai. She was portrayed as beautiful with highly decorated by pearls and powerful eyes. Later, the chain of pearls was dedicated to Goddess Muttamman. Because the word

pearl means in Tamil muthu. She was later called as Muttamman, Muthalamman.

The Goddess of Kolli Pavai

In the books of the Sangam period, many songs mention the Goddess of KolliPaavai. The figure of the Goddess was drawn or engraved in the Kollimalai region. Later in the Tamil literature the beautiful women were portrayed and compared with Kollipaavai who was also portrayed as the embodiment of the yellowish evening sunlight.²² It is believed that the Goddess of Kollipavai will kill the person who stands before her, and she kills the person by laughing wildly.²³

The Manimekalai contains interesting references to the Sakti cult, particularly its ferocious aspects. In this work various forms of the Goddesses are prominently mentioned such as Champapati, Vindhyavasini, Cinta Devi, Kadamar Selvi, etc.²

In the vicinity of the Kaveripumpattinam, there was a temple to Kad- Amar-Selvi (Kan Amar Selvi). In front of the temple was an open yard filled with fall trees and bālipithas. The trees carried severed heads of the warriors who had sacrificed themselves to propitiate the Goddess.² The head offering is one of the practices of the primitive cult closely associated with the Sakti cult. Such a practice is also noted in the later works like Kalingattuparani. Manimekalai is a well-known epic in Tamil. It narrates the story of a woman, Manimekalai, who became a Buddha Bikshuruni in the epic.

Epic Period

The five great epics reflect the social and religious condition of those periods.² Among these five epics, Silappadikaram and Manimekalai are considered as twin epics.² According to K.K. Pillai Silappadikaram and Manimekalai are dated to the 5th century A.D. whereas the earlier works are dated to the 1st three centuries of the Christian era. The Silappadikaram is a Tamil work composed by Ilankovadikal, a Chera prince. It is an ocean of information on the social and religious conditions of that time. In Silappadikaram, the name and various aspects of the epithets of the Goddess are mentioned. The Goddess Kali is said to have witnessed the furious dance of Siva (Urdhuvatantava).² This story is not elaborated in the

Silappadikaram. But the reference is a pointer to the fact that the knowledge of this aspect was present in the days of the epic.

In the same work Goddess's destruction of Darukasura is mentioned. She is fond of the forest which is the residence of ghosts and goblins.² Another aspect of the Goddess is her association with Lord Vishnu. She is referred to as youngest of the six virgin Mothers (the Saptamata) and younger sister of Vishnu.³ In Another place the names Korraivai, Amari, Kumari, Guari, Samari, Suli and Nili as the various other names of Goddess are mentioned.³¹ A very interesting chapter of the Silappadikaram entitled Vettuvavari describes the cult of Sakti in various epithets and forms worshipped by the Kadavar (foresters), Vettuvavar (Hunters). Eyinar and Maravars (warriors).

Bhakti Literature

The Bhakti movement was initiated by the Saiva Nayanmars and Vaishnava Alwars in the early 6th century AD. Thus devotionism was encouraged and bhakti movement became very strong. The Devaram hymns of the Saint Sambandar, Appar and Sundarar and the Tiruvacakam of Manickavasakar glorify the Gods of the Hind pantheon. They have sung several thousand verses on Siva, enshrined in various temples in Tamil Nadu. They throw incidental light of Goddess. In Kirti Tiruvahaval the cosmic cleaner of Chidambaram is said to have bestowed grace on bath Uma and Kali.³² Tirusalal states that if Siva had not performed his dance, the entire earth would have been devolved Kali.³³ Silappadikaram also refers to women priests. They were called as Saalinkal. The same literature mentions that the lady princes Venmal, wife of Chera Senguttuvan.³ She makes Kannaki's friend Vedandhi as Thevaratti (priest) to conduct festival in Kannaki temple. This reference was in Silappadikaram. The Chekkilarpuranam contains a reference to Thevaratti, who worshipped Lord Muruga to gain his blessings. Even today in many temples women were considered as priests and they give Arulvakku (Holywords) about child and Rani.³ These women were called temporary gods and incarnate human gods.

Goddess of Thevangan Community

The people of the Thevangan community worship Adiparasakthi in the Jame of Sowadambika because she incarnated to save the priest Devalan from Asura. He belonged to the Vanniyar community. So the priest ask Goddess to stay in his home and to occupy the position of his Elder daughter. To praise Goddess Sowdambika, this community still gives importance to their elder daughters in family functions. Sowdambika means "A woman who possess powerful crown". The Sanskrit work VivekaSindhutalk about Sowdambika and Agatheyar also give reference about Sowdambika in his work Devi Sthothiram.³

Goddess of Vaishnavism

Srivilliputhur Andal temple is important one among the Vaishnava Temple in Tamil Nadu. Andal is the main Goddess of this temple. She is Also called as Sudikodurtha Sudar kodi.³ According to legend, Andal was adopted daughter of Periyalvar and She married Lord Vishnu. She produced the literary work Thiruppaavai. Thiruppaavai is a call to share the delights of god's expressions. She is also Called as Pavai.

Mariyamman Worship

Mariyamman is an important Goddess among the Tamil people. In Tamil, Mari means rain. She is the Goddess of Rain. She also cured people of the disease. To cure the disease people sing a special song Mariyamman Thalattu.³ Samayapuram Mariyamman, Irukkankudi Mariyamman, Pannari Mariyamman, Thiruverkadu Karumariyamman, Punnai Nallur Mariyamman, Kottai Mariyamman and Veerapandi Gowmariyamman are important Mariyamman temples in Tamilnadu.³

Tiruverkadu Karumariyamman

Mariyamman occupies an important place in the hearts of the people of Chennai. The specialty of this temple is Naga worship, and there is a semi-goddess called Marachelai Amman. People worship her with money, making garlands with money and placing it on Marachelai Amman. People believe that the Goddess can help them solve money problems, and this is one of the important temples which gives

more income to the Government of Tamil Nadu. People believe that Goddess is living in the form of snake in this temple.

Kottai Mariyamman

Dindigul people worship Mariyamman in the name of KottaiMariyamman. 'Kottai means palace. This Mariyamman has 300 years story with her. It was believed that this temple was created by Thippu Sultan's Soldiers. This temple possessed mines in Palani. Thippu Sultan used this mines to reach Palani. These are all the importance of this temple.¹

Veerapandi Gow Mariyamman

It is situated in Theni district. According to legend Mariyamman gave sight to king Veerapandyan. He created this temple to praise the Goddess. People worship Gowmariyamman to get child, to get relief from disease, to get sight and to get good men or women in marriage, etc.

Irukkankudi Mariyamman

Irukkankudi Mariyamman possess 300 years story with her. Three hundred years ago, a lady gave Arulvaku (Holy word). She asked people to dig a particular place in the ground. The people found an Idol of Goddess. The Lady asked the people to worship Idol in the name of Irukkankudi Mariyamman. Irukkank means two eyes. The people believe that Mariyamman live in two eyes, 'Kudi' means living.² The people believed that they could get sight and they never lost their Sight. After worshipping Goddess Mariyamman, the people also believed that she could cure all diseases.

Goddess of Thali

Thali (Thali is a symbol of marriage in Hindu religion) is a gift of Madurai Meenakshi. The people of Tamil Nadu firmly believed that the Madurai Meenakshi Amman temple was one of the most important and oldest temples in India. In most of the thali we can find the figures of Meenakshi and Chokkar (Lord Siva) and the village people said Meenakshimalai Eduthukoduppal. Here malai means marriage. People worship Meenakshi to have children and get married. She has devotees worldwide.³

Existing scholarship largely focuses on textual interpretation or iconographic analysis in isolation. While earlier studies provide valuable descriptive insights into Goddess worship, comparative and integrative analyses across literary periods remain limited. By synthesising classical texts, epics, and devotional literature, the present study strengthens earlier research and offers a broader interpretative framework for understanding the Sakti cult within Tamil religious history.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies may undertake comparative analysis of ritual practices such as paavainonbu, animal sacrifice, and village-level Goddess worship.

Ethnographic research on contemporary Goddess cults may help trace continuity between ancient literary traditions and present-day practices.

Interdisciplinary approaches that combine archaeology, anthropology, and gender studies could further enhance our understanding of the social dimensions of Sakti worship.

Conclusion

This study makes a scholarly contribution by systematically analysing Mother Goddess worship across multiple Tamil literary traditions and historical phases within a single interpretative framework. The supreme Goddess in her undivided form is known as Adiparasakthi who primarily separated herself into three important manifestations called Parvati, Lakshmi and Saraswathi, who are the consorts of Siva, Vishnu and Brahma, the three great Gods of the Hindu pantheon respectively. Of them, it is the Siva-Sakthi who is venerated by the Indian community and has become a very popular Goddess for all sections of society. Therefore, to Understand India and its religious system, knowledge of the Shakti cult and its system is essential.

This research paper provides a glimpse of mother goddess worship in Tamil literature and suggests further research on types of worship such as pooja, sacrifices, community goddess worship, and mother goddess worship in modern days.

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Author Details

N. Ashadevi, *Assistant Professor of History, E.M.G Yadav Women's College, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India,*
Email ID: *ashakarathi2007@gmail.com*