

**INTER-CASTE VALUE CONSENSUS AND SOCIAL HARMONY
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELD STUDY ON RUSTIC RITUALS OF MĀRI
AMMAN WORSHIP IN KALUTHAVALAI VILLAGE**

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ABSTRACT: *Social boundaries of groups in the Hindu caste system are rigidly defined in a manner in which members of depressed caste groups have restricted ways of interaction with high caste members in public sphere. Rigidity of such restriction on relationship between Hindu caste groups is mostly associated with Agamic religious practices of Hinduism. The Agamic religious practices still play vital role in discriminating depressed caste groups and cause for caste-based conflicts between the high caste members and the depressed caste members. But this study finds the non-agamic religious practices, which is mostly followed by the rural people of Hindu communities in Eastern Sri Lanka, as having the potential for interaction of members of caste groups, which are in diametrically opposed positions in the caste status ladder. This study is mainly based on the analysis of non-agamic rituals of Mari Amman worship of Tom-tom beater in Kaluthavalai of Batticaloa. The main objective of this study is to analyze how the non-agamic Hindu worship works as a mean for making relaxation on the rigidity of restrictions of interaction between high and lower caste members. The study is a descriptive research and is based on qualitative and ethnographical research methods. The study further analyzes that how this non-agamic religious rituals, unlike agamic rituals, bring high caste members to the depressed caste members' places so as to make harmonious public conduct and cooperative participation in religious worship.*

KEY WORDS: Untouchable castes, ritual pollution, non-agamic Hindu religious rituals and communal relationships.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social boundaries of groups in the Hindu caste system are rigidly defined in a manner in which members of a particular caste group have limited interaction in the public sphere. Each and every group is affiliated with religious duties, as the caste system originated in India, and the demarcation of their social boundaries is maintained by reassuring purity of higher castes through rituals and by distancing from lower castes in the status ladder. Therefore castes claiming lower status in the status hierarchy are belligerently ignored from higher castes of hierarchical order by labeling them as untouchables through Hindu religious rituals.

Rigidity of relationship among Hindu caste groups is mostly associated with orthodox religious practice of Hinduism. As Indian caste system exists through mainstream religious practices, Hindu caste system which mostly prevails among Hindu people of Tamil ethnic group in Sri Lanka is characterized by hierarchical order of Tamil Hindu caste system of south India. Such kind of caste practice exists mainly in north and eastern Sri Lanka. This anthropological study focuses on religious rituals of petty god worship in a rustic Hindu tradition of Eastern Sri Lanka that brings about consensus in values between two caste groups that had been diametrically opposed in hierarchical status of the area caste order.

2. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Orthodox religious practices of Hinduism have been a mechanism of looking after the social boundaries of caste groups. Despite of rapid social change through the impacts of the colonial legacy, globalization and modernization, conventional ritual duties of caste is seen as obsolete. Such a change encouraged the castes claiming lower status in hitherto existed conventional hierarchy so as to access equal opportunities in public sphere

and to achieve equal economic status in society. This leads conflict between higher and lower castes in the conventional status hierarchy. Thus the orthodox religious practices still play role as discriminating means between caste groups and is considered as root cause for communal conflict. Protracted communal conflicts exist because of lack of inter-links in practice among groups.

But this study find another kind of religious practice that is mostly carried out by rural people of Hindu community in Eastern Sri Lanka as having potential for integrating caste groups that are in diametrically opposed position in status ladder. This rustic religious ceremony is conducted towards a Hindu deity called “Māri Amman”. This ceremony is different from orthodox practices. But it doesn’t mean that such rustic rituals are completely apart from maintaining caste categorization, because such kinds of rural worship are also owned by some castes as exclusive one for them in that region. Nevertheless, in the present context in which caste rigidity is supple, rustic rituals of Māri Amman is as integrative means of all castes of Hindu people. The main focus of this study is to analyze rustic rituals of Māri Amman Worship as an integrative mean between two conflicting caste groups namely; Mukkuvar, claiming top status in the area caste order and Tom-Tom Beaters, claiming lowest rank in the same caste order. In this way, the study tries to see the religion not as a cause for conflict, but as the mean of conflict resolution among caste groups.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Overall objective of the study is to analyze that how do rustic religious rituals of Māri Amman Worship bring about inter-caste value-consensus between two caste groups namely; Mukkuvar caste and Tom-Tom Beaters. Specific objectives of the study are;

1. to describe orthodox religious practice in the research area and its impacts on inter-caste rigidity;

2. to evaluate the factors of change which allowed high caste Mukkuvar members to make cultural contact with untouchable members.
3. to analyze rustic rituals of Māri Amman worship in making value-consensus between Tom-Tom Beaters and Mukkuvar so as to make harmony.

4. METHODOLOGY

This anthropological study is mostly based on qualitative method and to a lesser extent quantitative method. This study relied both on primary and secondary sources. As this study concerned with village communities, ethnographic data was collected primarily by field work in order to get firsthand information. There is no single method used to collect data in this field work, it varied according to the field background. Primary data was collected by using unstructured and focused interviews, focused group discussions and observation. Secondary data was collected from official documents of divisional secretariat and of temple administrative units. Previous studies on these castes and cultural systems and published materials regarding caste system and petty god worship of Batticaloa were taken as sources for secondary data collection.

5. RELIGION, SOCIETY AND CASTE

Reciprocal and integrated function of elements of a social structure brings about order within a society, which is essential for harmony between members and groups as well, since cohesion comes to existence within the system. Social order is prominently based on the consensus among the members of the society. Factionalists emphasize that “society is seen as resulting from agreement (consensus) about what is important (values), and how we should behave (norms) in a particular situations (roles)”. (Kirby et al., 1997:736). Cultural institutions promote order in a society by reinforcing value

consensus. "Social order is based on some minimal consensus on values. If men are committed to the same values they recognize a common identity as against others. The commitment to values enables men to devise means for reconciling or adjusting conflicting interests". (Cohen, 1979:28). Common standards on values are socially constructed by social and cultural institutions in a social order.

Religion as an institution of a social structure contributes to social solidarity by reinforcing a value consensus. (Malinowski, 1954:23). Members of a religious community are directed towards a supernatural means which are not open to observation. Therefore they commonly have beliefs and practices which unite them as "one single moral community". (Durkheim, 1912:62). In this sense, religion causes identity-based group formation. Religious identity emerges from beliefs and values. "Religion is only one identity factor that contributes to a sense of self and helps define individuals and groups in society". (Miox, 2006:593). As creating group identity, religion is considered as a cause for conflict between groups within a society. Contradiction between religious interests can lead conflict in a society. Not is religious identity creating conflicting nature, but some religious doctrines, like Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity were accused to have encouragement to war. (Barash and Webel, 2002:410-413). Fortes implied that rituals play a significant role in defining and maintaining boundaries of each group of a community, "while at the same time uniting them in common responsibility for the welfare of the country".(Mair, 1972:236). Though basically religious rituals creates differentiation between members by arranging them as identity-based groups, which can lead conflict in a society, these rituals also pave the way for cooperation among groups which are dispatched along with different identities. To Fortes, distribution of ritual tasks among divisions of society operates to make interdependence of those divisions in small scale societies. (Ibid: 237).

In Hindu religious societies, grouping is based on traditional mechanism of social differentiation, in which a member's birth status is determined by

religious rituals; what is known as caste system. A caste is “a hereditary, endogamous group associated with a traditional occupation and ranked accordingly on a scale of ritual purity”. (Outhwaite & Bottomore, 1995:35). In traditional village society, each and every caste is attached with a service which has to be done for other castes in a reciprocal basis. Status in caste system is scaled by service orientation of each caste and the religious rituals. Caste system is intrinsically set out a interdependency among the members of a community, which can be comparable of what Malinowski mentioned as functional interdependency among the traits of a society. Caste system as a model of stratification constitutes ranking groups accordingly on ritual purity. Based on this purity, interactions among these caste groups is restricted in a manner of physical contact. Prominent feature of the rules of interaction in the caste system is “untouchability”; lower castes on the scale of purity are restricted in contact with higher castes on the scale of purity. The restriction in contact is reckoned in marriage, food and drink. Louis Dumont brought Stevenson’s distinction between external and internal pollution in explaining untouchability of the Indian caste system. By external pollution, he means the physical contacts such as bathing and cleaning. By internal pollution, he means contacts like foodstuff and sexual relations. “The scale of contacts prohibited or avoided as impure, relative to a given family or household, represents, in general term, the fact of the graded interaction between castes, as experienced in rural life”. (Dumont, 2004:133). Even if the rigidity of the caste system has been the analytical point for many anthropological studies, the twentieth-century anthropologists shifted their concentration in conceptualizing the changing nature of its rigidity. “Structural changes take place, to be sure, but slowly and usually imperceptibly from the view point of the members of such a static system”. (Maclver and Page, 1950:354).

6. FINDINGS

6.1. Restrictions On Caste Relationship

Like all the other Hindu traditional societies, in this village, tom-tom beaters were considered as untouchables as they are traditionally scaled as lower rank. From the antiquity, as this village people have been economically good enough, because of their agricultural efforts. This village people are often recognized as vigorous peasants and talent elites by village people in the vicinity. Therefore they built up a strong community which was comprised of educated and employed individuals. But all these credits are deserved by Mukkuvars, because Tom-tom beaters until 1990 were mostly uneducated and menial workers in this village. Nevertheless, this village Mukkuvars has given relevance to their improvements with their orthodox religious worship on god “Ganesh”. Meanwhile they built up a temple administration with the greater treasury and became recognized as dominant in the region. As the district was dominated by Mukkuvar caste, the recognition as dominant commune was easily achievable. The temple administration was requested by other Mukkuvar people of nearby villages to assist to conduct rituals and feast in their temples in the periods in which their villages were ravaged by cyclone and famine. It resulted in domination as “Kaluthavalaiyan” in the region. The ideology of “Kaluthavalaiyan” has been the transmitting one in the socialization process of this village society and this has shaped the attitude and behavior of the people in the contact of adjacent villagers. But it is notable that these dominant trends have increased discrimination and prejudice towards tom-tom beaters.

According to this oral history of this village, tom-tom beaters were settled by Mukkuvars to carry out traditional occupation which is obliged to tom-tom beater caste in this village. However, because of their lower status not only in traditional rankings but also in economy, tom-tom beaters were necessitated to carry out menial obligations to Mukkuvar caste. Members of Mukkuvar caste mostly relied in agriculture until 1960s and they were dedicated much of their time in cultivation and harvesting, as these caste members possessed lands. Most of them had been engaging in crop

cultivation. Unlike other agricultural activities, crop cultivation and harvesting require more labors to be involved. While possessing a crop field, looking after the minor works in the field was seen as further burden. Moreover some maintenance and harvesting activities in crop fields were inevitably required the involvement of wage labors. Consequently, tom-tom beaters were preferred to work as wage labors in crop fields of Mukkuvars. As crop field owners had to be in field from morning to evening, there had been a lack of man power to maintaining temples and other public places. That's why tom-tom beaters, apart from their traditional occupations, have been deployed to clean premises of temples and public places.

In that way they were omitted to have direct relations in food, drink and marriage. They were also prohibited to enter into the houses of Mukkuvars, though they were allowed to enter into their land or house premises. They were rejected to sit together with members of Mukkuvars. The above mentioned restrictions were followed on the basis of traditional practices of Tamil caste system which was prevailing in South Indian and Northern Sri Lankan regions. Moreover such prohibitions in interaction between these two castes were justified by Hindu religious rituals. Members of Mukkuvar caste traditionally set up rules for regulating caste practices based on the orthodox rituals and ceremonies in this village as well.

6.2. Flexibility on Restrictions

There are several factors which have exerted influence in making inter-link between these two castes. Anthropologically analyzing, linkage has been brought up on the basis of culture as it emerged in the line of religion. To this analysis, a kind of religious ritual is the main reason of inter-link that has conked out the rough resistance in the interaction between two castes. But this is not the decisive root, since this accompanied with cultural changes occurred in the society. Therefore it should be scrutinized on the one hand in the

perspective of the rustic ritual which caused for the consensus in values and the other hand in the perspective of social and cultural changes in the society.

Notion of equality was the first initiative in breaking rigorous trends of Mukkuvars in the contact of tom-tom beaters. Revolutionary liberation war of Tamil movements in 1987 laid down ideas to break down the notion of untouchability. Tamil revolutionary liberation movements, such as People Liberation Organization of Tamil Ealam (PLOTE), Ealam People Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and Tamil Ealam Liberation Organization (TELO), adopted more or less communist ideology and were required youths for their movements. Therefore they wanted to destroy these traditional unequal systems with in society. As this village mostly propped up by PLOTE during 1987, propaganda to give up traditional obligations of tom-tom beaters, such like plying traditional musical instruments in funerals and cleaning corpse and funeral homes, were motivated and finally open ban was declared by these movements. Meanwhile, because of the inclination of equality, tom-tom beaters requested Mukkuvars to have a day for their own in Temple feast and the entry into the temple. But their requests were rejected by temple administration which is fully comprised of Mukkuvars. Hence tom-tom beaters declared to give up their traditional service in the Temple of Mukkuvar and began to worship Māri Amman.

Livelihood pattern of this village commune began to change after 1995. There were people preferred to work in government departments and institutions. Though the most of members of Mukkuvar caste were able to get government employments, they were in a position to have a crop field for further income. It was seen trouble-free to have a beetle garden for government employees. But they recognized that there should be wage labors, otherwise it should be severe to manage the garden or the crop field. In the other side, Mukkuvars working as carpenter or Mason required wage labors for contemptible rates. They had only option to recruit members of tom-tom beaters as wage labors. All these required adjustment in traditional restriction,

because tom-tom beaters had been prohibited to enter into beetle gardens and houses of members of Mukkuvar caste. Thus the inevitability on dependency paved the way to break the restriction in a side.

The Mukkuvar domination has no longer existed as the internal war began to aggravate societies of the region direly and stimulated internal migration. Then, in the post-conflict scenario, the other villages began to take substantial stands to develop their communes by education. Some villages became politically dominant. NGOs focused some other villages nearby to Kaluthavalai as they had been backward very much and assisted them so as to enhance education and livelihood. It appeared to the people of Kaluthavalai as decreasing their ideological domination in the region. They have perceived themselves that their dominance they enjoyed hitherto is challenged by adjacent villagers. This perception postulated them the impending decline of their social development and induced their feeling towards integration. They were convinced themselves to adjust the strict caste boundaries. And let tom-tom beaters to take part in social activities in this village and even to enter inside the temple. But Mukkuars were not in a position to go tom-tom beaters places and the restrictions continued to remain in marriage.

7. Analysis

7.1. Ritual tradition of rustic worship and community changes

Even though there were some factors which brought out change in social condition of this village and caused the flexibility in rigid interaction between these two castes prejudice and ignorance seemed to prevail through some traditional practices. Prominent feature of these traditional practices was the orthodox religious worship. Mukkuvars continued to be substantial in that matter. While social condition underwent change were in a stand to accommodate tom-tom beaters so as to involve them in the public sphere of this village, some hard liners, mostly aged members of Mukkuvar caste and members of temple administration, had been emphasizing the traditional

values and customs of this village since they wanted to exclude tom-tom beaters from having close relationship with Mukkuvars. The ultimate purpose of their emphasis was to more or less enslave tom-tom beaters by keeping them apart from having direct interaction. Therefore the split between two castes had been unchanged, because other members of Mukkuvar caste were scared to trespass the orders of these aged members. It doesn't a matter here that whether those orders compelled Mukkuvars to prevent tom-tom beaters in their places, but the matter is that it was able to block Mukkuvars to enter into places of the tom-tom beaters. It is almost true that "globalization has not entirely removed the identities and specificities of local culture but it reconstitutes a sense of locality. (De Silva, 2000;104)

However, in the long run, traditional barriers for the direct interaction were not able to remain intact. There had been changes occurred as to let Mukkuvars into the places of tom-tom beaters. Interesting thing is that ritual ceremony of Māri Amman rustic worship has played a significant role in bringing Mukkuvar to tom-tom beaters' place. While the orthodox tradition was used to maintain rigid relationship between these two castes, rituals of rustic worship created a platform to mingle these two castes in a specific social sphere. One must understand that what made the course of cultural interaction, ritual ceremony of Māri Amman rustic worship, is not the exclusive one for tom-tom beaters. This ritual tradition is common for all Hindus living in the eastern province. The case in this village is that such rustic ritual worship is being maintained by tom-tom beaters. There could be one reason, ignorance in orthodox religious practices, led tom-tom beaters to follow rustic Hindu religious tradition in which they can conduct rituals by their own, there have been no requirement to deploy orthodox priest, and not much complicated as like in orthodox one. Tom-tom beaters of this village believe that their ancestors began to worship Māri Amman in accordance with rustic pattern of rituals merely 150 years ago. But the shrine was the place under a tree. It is in 1925 a group of tom-tom beaters commenced a day ritual ceremony and

conducted this once a year. They established an administration to maintain this ceremony and formed five groups to carry out ritual tasks in 1935. As the result of experience, from 1977, these five groups began to have a day for them and, then, ceremony takes place for five days.

7.2. Non-agamic rituals of Mukkuvars and Tom-tom beaters' Mari Amman

As this rustic worship is being followed by eastern Tamils from antique, Mukkuvars of this village could not be an exception. Indeed, they are the devotees worshiping petty gods by performing rustic rituals in this village and adjacent village either. But, in case of Māri Amman, they don't have even single shrine in this village. Ritual prominence of Māri Amman inevitably relates with members of Mukkuvars as most of their profession relied in agric field. Māri Amman is the deity for raining and prosperous harvesting. Among petty gods, Māri Amman is divinely obliged to cure diseases in agric cultivation and curse of peasants. These divine roles are seen as imperative for Mukkuvars of this village. Therefore members of Mukkuvar who had trouble in cultivation began to worship Māri Amman. According to this worship pattern, prayer is based on submission of ritual things for Māri Amman, if one wants Māri Amman to alleviate his trouble, then he will pray as giving Māri Amman ritual things like coconuts, beetle or rice or he will pray to give money to shrine or take part in ritual ceremony. In this way, members of Mukkuvar caste began to worship Māri Amman and had to enter into tom-tom beaters' shrine and take part in rituals since this is the closest shrine for them and believed that as it is situated in this village this is in-charge for carrying out the divine obligation.

Specificity of this shrine has been religiously attractive for devotees of petty gods. Main deity of this shrine is Māri Amman, but there have been other petty gods sub-shrines situated around this main shrine. Petty gods like Pechchi Amman, Kali Amman, Narasingar, Vairavar and Veerapathrar are being worshiped as colleague deities of Māri Amman. Rituals are being specifically performed for these petty gods during the ceremony as well. There

is no doubt that this facilitates any devotees who wants to carry out his several prayers so as to solve his problems as each of these petty gods have religious importance in curing curse and particular troubles. In this way, members of Mukkuvars began to dedicate their prayers which they wanted dedicate in many petty god temples to this shrine since it is obviously easy for them carry out their rituals.

7.3. consensus in Ritual values

Similarity of rituals is also the cause for cultural integration between these two castes. The ritual values are analogous; ritual practices performed and purpose in Mukkuvar petty god temples are regularly performed in Māri Amman shrine of tom-tom beaters. The door of the shrine is opened once in a year and the statue is decorated. First ritual is performed to protect the village, in case of which people are request to prohibit non-vegetarian foods and alcohol. Earlier tom-tom beaters alone followed this custom during the period of ceremony, but, nowadays, it is apparent that it is followed by Mukkuvar as well. Ladies mostly engage in “Nei Villakku Pooja” (ghee lamp worship). And they are expected to perform rituals of rice grinding and begging rice and submitting to main deity. Women mainly perform the ritual of holding fire pots. “Sooth saying” is the foremost ritual along with these rituals. One assumes himself as Māri Amman, asking their predicaments from devotees and telling what the devotee as has to do. There are persons for sooth saying in this village who are acknowledged by village people to perform this ritual. Virgin worship is followed during this ceremony. According to this virgin worship, soothsayer identifies a virgin woman as the woman for worship of that year ceremony and rituals are performed for her in fornt of Māri Amman. “Thirukkulirthil” (cooling ritual) is performed decisively by singing verse of Amman to forgive any unaware errors committed by any devotees during this ceremony. “Poosari”(non-Brahmin priest for petty god worship) is obliged to perform “Pooja” and other main rituals. He should be well-trained in using witchcraft. As ritual performance is parallel, Mukkuvar perceive this petty god

worship compatible with their worship and this mentality brought about consensus in values.

8. Conclusion

Value-consensus among members is inevitable for any society to maintain order. Smooth and integrated functions of social traits are based on the consensus between members in choosing ways as to act commonly. Simply looking, members have to be bound in a certain track in which they commonly act. Cultural traits can play catalyst role to bind members' concern in a common manner. Different concerns and contradicting interests of members are inimical to harmony and order of a society. Religion helps a lot to keep members in an integrated manner with in society. But religion is also criticized for serving as a mean for conflict as it demarcates social boundaries and play crucial role in identity creating process.

This study is based on the analysis of two kinds of rituals of Hind workshop, namely, orthodox and rustic. By this way, this study describes how religion causing conflict and harmony. The study revolved around cases of two caste group of a village. Here the orthodox religious practices play role as discriminating means between caste groups and is considered as root cause for communal conflict. Rustic rituals are apart from maintaining caste categorization since such rituals have containing cultural values which are mostly common for groups of Hindu community living eastern matrilineal belt of the island. Although changes in social condition of this village have caused the flexibility in rigid interaction, it is rustic rituals that have played catalyst role in making harmony through value-consensus between these two caste groups.

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