A Symbolic Anthropological Study on Selected Non-Agamic Amman Temples in Batticaloa District, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study sets its background in which depressed caste groups and high caste groups who maintain non-Agamic temples in their communities have been engaging in the process of Sanskritization. Overall objective of the study is to describe the tendencies of the process of Sanskritization followed by high and depressed caste communities and its implications on the religious situations. This descriptive study is based on ethnographic details collected from four non-Agamic Amman temples in Batticaloa district. Depressed caste community people did not want to change the non-Agamic rites in their temples though they changed the architecture of the shrines because other caste people came to their temples without considering untouchability and this tendency is seen by them as a reputation for their community people. The high caste communities wanted to emulate the agamic rituals than changing the architecture. Sanskritization of architecture in non-Agamic temples is intended to make meaningful changes in the perceptions of people and therefore, functions of the symbols are not depended on the whole system of the temple ritual; symbols can be understood separately from the entire temple system. Symbols in rituals bear certain meanings and it could be understood in relation to religious needs and the interpretation of the religious experience of the people. As the religious situations are formed and determined by the devotees, the symbolic meaning of their experiences is interpreted by them.

Keywords: Sanskritization, Rituals, Castes, Symbols and Meaning

1. Background of the Study

The nexus between religion and the communities had been a prominent thematic area in the field of Anthropology. Religion as an institution of a social structure contributes to social solidarity by reinforcing a value consensus (Malinowski, 1954). 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). 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). In Hindu religious communities, the grouping is based on traditional mechanism of social differentiation known as caste system; "a hereditary, endogamous group associated with a traditional occupation and ranked accordingly on a scale of ritual purity" (Outhwaite & Bottomore, 1995). 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 (Dumont, 2004). Though it is theoretically impossible to change the status position in caste hierarchy, depressed caste groups in India tended to ameliorate their status position by emulating religious practices of high castes. The process is

called Sanskritization. Srinivas (1952) defined the term Sanskritization as "the process by which a low Hindu or tribal or other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of high, and frequently, the twice-born caste". However, later, the process is not limited to low caste groups of Hindu communities and it was identified that there are many tendencies of Sanskritization undertaken by Hindu caste groups for generating social changes in their communities. "Briefly stated, Sanskritization is a specific type of Hindu reference-group behavior where the values, beliefs, and rituals of orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism, often embodied in Sanskrit texts, are adopted by lower ranking castes in status emulation of those higher-ranking castes who already display them" (McGilvray, 1988). This study sets its background in which not only low/depressed caste groups, but also high caste groups who maintain non-agamic temples for their caste communities have been engaging in the process of Sanskritization into their *Paththathi* (non-Agamic text) ritual tradition.

2. Statement of the research problem

Sanskritization is often viewed as the process of emulating the Brahmanical ritual practices by the low caste Hindu communities for making change in social status. However, as Sanskritization include Brahmanization, high caste Hindu communities which remained maintaining non-Brahmanical practices in their temples have now geared to follow this process. Emulating Brahmanical practices through Sanskritization is also the process of ameliorating the social status not only for low castes, but it is also the process that seemed to be essential to ensure their social status for the high caste. Therefore, Sanskritization is a mode of dealing with the social status through making changes in the religious situations. Nonetheless ritual traditions promulgate various material symbolic aspects meaningful to people in religious situations. Material cultural symbols, more importantly religious oriented, are essentially meaningful to their social life as they reflect the core values of the community (Turner, 1968). Therefore, changing ritual traditions will also cause changes in symbols associated with the rituals. And thus, it may cause implications of understanding the meanings of the symbols. Moreover, making partial changes in the temple, whether architecture or ritual ceremonies, while keeping non-Brahmanical Hindu tradition, will make more complex the religious situations. This study is the analysis of symbolic changes of ritual traditions and the meaningful interpretations of Sanskrit symbols in the non-Sanskrit religious situation.

3. Research Objectives

Overall objective of the study is to describe the tendencies of the process of Sanskritization handled by high and depressed caste communities and its implications on the religious situations. Specific objectives of the study are;

- To illustrate the ways and the extents in which Sanskritization is admitted to the selected non-agamic temples.
- To describe the effects of caste status variations on Sanskritization tendencies of selected non-agamic temples.
- To identify the reasons for the different trends of Sanskritization process in line with caste status and inter caste relations.
- To analyze the relationship between understanding the religious situations and interpreting the meanings of the symbolic aspects of the temples by the temple community members.

4. Research Questions

Based on the objectives of the study, the following research questions are set up to be answered so as to guide the study and to achieve the objectives;

1. What are the changes that embraced the Sanskritization made in the selected non-agamic temples?
2. what are the differences in the processes of Sanskritization in line with caste status differences?
3. Why the caste communities of selected non-agamic temples decided to adopt agamic tradition in their temple?
4. How do the communities that adopted Agamic traditions in their temple perceive the symbolic changes of the temples?

5. Methodology

This anthropological study is a descriptive research based on the ethnographic details collected more than 05 years of field observation from four non-agamic Amman temples in Batticaloa district; two of them belong to two different high caste groups in the region and the other two of them falls into depressed caste categories of the same hierarchical order of the region. Selection of the temples for the field work was based on purposive sampling intended to deal with the objectives of the study. The study is based on qualitative information and the primary data collection was made by using the qualitative data collection tools; key informant interviews, personal and focus group interviews, case historie. The study is based on Symbolic anthropological perspective in its theoretical orientation.

6. Study Area

All four Amman temples selected for this study are situated in Batticaloa district of Sri Lanka. There are two depressed caste temples among the selected study locations; Eravur Karumari Amman Kovil and Punnaicholai Paththirakali Amman kovil. Eravur Karumari Amman Kovil is located in Eravur Pattu Divisional Secretariat and the temple is maintained by Sanitary labor community (*Chakkiliyar* Caste). Punnaicholai Paththirakali Amman Kovil is located in the suburban area of Batticaloa Municipality and the temple belongs to washerman caste (*Vannar*). Two out of the four selected temples are maintained by high caste groups in the regional caste hierarchy; Kothukulam Mari Amman temple and Urani Kali Temple. Kothukulam Mari Amman temple is also situated in Batticaloa Municipal area and is also under the administration of Vellalar caste. Urani Kali Temple too located in Batticaloa municipal area and belongs to Mukkuvar caste.

7. Results and Discussions

7.1 Sanskritization of architecture in depressed caste Amman temples.

Temple administrations of depressed caste communities, Eravur Karumari Amman Kovil and Punnaicholai Paththirakali Amman Kovil, have already began the construction of shrines and main entrance of the temple (*Kopuram*) so as to explicitly emulate the Agamic temples of south Indian Hindu tradition. Temple administration of Eravur Karumari Amman Kovil have laid the foundation stone with the notorious ceremony inviting local politicians and devotees and now almost in the decisive stage of construction of the main shrine for the deity, Karumari Amman. The newly constructed shrine is

accurately built based on the temple design and measurements depicted by the Agamic texts. In reshaping the main shrine into Agamic tradition, temple administration removed few non-agamic satellite shrines which were located around the main shrine and also, by construction, prioritized Pillaiyar shrine separately among the satellite shrines. Pillaiyar is an Agamic deity and in all Hindu Agamic temples, the shrine of the deity is an inevitable component of the Agamic architectural design of a Hindu temple. Building a comparatively larger shrine for Pillaiyar among other deities located around the main shrine of Karumari Amman temple is one of the initiatives of the temple administration to reflect Sanskrit nature in the temple structure. In case of Punnaicholai Paththirakali Amman Kovil, there are many changes made in the architectures of the shrine; the main shrine has already been constructed based on Agamic structure and there was a quite big Pillaiyar temple among the satellite shrines allocated to non-agamic deities. These architectural changes have been made few years ago as the temple administration decided to partly change the buildings of the shrines. In addition to that, a huge *Kopuram,* a temple entrance structure of Agamic architecture of South Indian Hindu Tradition, is under construction. In Agamic tradition, *Kopuram* is symbolically indicating the supreme divinity of Agamic deities, but, in the sense of construction, it also reflects the wealth of the temple trust nowadays.

7.2 Resistance for Sanskritization of Rituals in Depressed Caste Amman temples

Though the both temple administrations intentionally made architectural changes to admit Sanskritization, they are quite resistant to adopt Sanskrit ritual practices in their temples. Therefore, both temples still follow rituals of *Paththathi* tradition. Since the temple administrations perceived that conducting ritual ceremonies and pujas in the non-agamic textual tradition is essential for catering the religious needs of the devotees who actually approach these temples for participating in the rituals, trustees denied allowing Agamic rituals in their temples. What is motivated them to allow Sanskritization only in the temple architectures is the enormous participation of other caste people including high caste people from neighboring villages in their temple rituals. Non-Agamic Amman cult became quite popular among Hindu and non-Hindu people in Eastern Sri Lanka; there was a rise in Amman worship, the mother goddess, in Eastern province during the war time, since the Amman cult was quite popular in healing the psychological sufferings of the people brought about by the armed violence. (Lawrence, 1999). Indeed, the perception of Hindu and Buddhist people about the power of "non-Agamic Kali" in healing psychological wounds perpetuated the cult even in Agamic Munneswaram Temple. (Bastin, 2002). The popular trend compelled high caste people to break their traditional barrier of caste associated with the notion of untouchability in entering into temples of the so-called low caste people.

7.3 Reasons for the tendencies of Sanskritization of Architecture from the perspective of temple administration of depressed caste Amman temples

Involvement of other caste people in their temple rituals prompted temple administration of depressed caste Amman temples to think about adopting Agamic aspects in their temple for two reasons; firstly, they wanted to generate a commonness in symbolic aspects like other Agamic Hindu temples so that other caste people find no specific differences in their temples. There is a general perception from the Sanskrit perspective that non-Brahminic worships are followed by illiterate folk communities. Therefore, depressed caste temple administration wanted to change overt symbolic aspects of the temple and thus they decided to change the architecture of their temple. Secondly, by changing the built structure of the temple, they envisaged to eradicate the material aspects of their caste identity and to emulate the religious status with other caste people. The non-agamic deities are not necessarily enshrined in permanent

buildings and temporary huts are often set up for yearly ritual ceremonies. These huts are made meaningful to community people with specific material symbols of deities and the symbols reflect the community aspects too. It makes a community identity for them and thus their caste status is easily identifiable for them. From the perception of temple administrations of both temples, symbolic aspects of their community are formidable to outside community members who eagerly take part in non-agamic rituals in their temples. In that case, they thought that building Agamic shrines for non-Agamic deities will resolve all these identity-related issues for the depressed caste communities who willingly admit the high caste people's participation in their community temples.

7.4. Sanskritization of rituals rather than architecture in high caste Amman Temples.

High caste people in the study have shown severe tendencies towards Sanskritization and the temple administrations of those two high caste Amman temples have been in a strong position to sanskritize their temples. What is notable in both high caste Amman temples is that there is a strong and rapid tendency to transfer the non-Agamic rituals into Agamic one. Koththukulam Mari Amman temple has now entirely changed the rituals into Agamic tradition and the necessary modifications for the Agamic rituals like establishing Koti Kambam and Palli Arai have already been accomplished with the slight constructional adjustments inside the shrine. However, temple administrations of those temples are not much hastening to modify the architecture of the temple towards Sanskritization. Very recently, a foundation was paved for Kopuram in Kothukulam Mari Amman temple. In Urani Kali Temple, Agamic rituals are practiced with non-agamic rituals. According to this temple, based on non-agamic *Paththathi* tradition, main shrine of the temple was earlier opened once in a year for the annual feast *(Chadangu)*. However, later, the temple administration began to open the shrine to conduct regularly the Friday pooja based on Agamic tradition. And they started to pursue other agamic ceremonies and fasting like *Thai Poosam, Sivarathiri, Vinayagar Sathurthi and Kantha Sasti*. Two years ago, Temple administration of Urani Kali Temple admitted few Agamic rituals in annual feast in addition to existing non-Agamic rituals. While hastening actions to sanskritize rituals, they have not initiated changes in architecture to reflect Agamic tradition yet.

7.5. Reasons for rapid change towards Sanskritization of rituals than in the architecture from the perspective of temple administrations of high caste Amman Temples.

There are two main reasons for the ritual change rather than architectural change towards Sanskritization in high caste Amman temples; firstly, temple participation is enormously occupied by their own caste and other high caste people. Though there is no restriction for depressed caste people, temple community wanted to change the ritual tradition into agamic one since following the non-agamic tradition foster a folk and illiterate identity for them. This perception is relatively erupted on a community level following the Sanskritization process of other depressed caste non-agamic temples. The fear of high caste Vellalar of Koththukulam Mari Amman temple community that if the depressed castes ameliorate their status through Sanskritization then keeping the non-agamic tradition will give a non-literate, folk identity for their caste turned into pressure for temple administration to change the rituals into Agamic textual tradition. What is interesting here is that theoretically Sanskritization is viewed as the process for emulating the status by lower caste people, but in this case, it is the upper caste rapidly did the needful to sanskritize their rituals to ensure their higher status. Secondly, the process towards Sanskritization was necessitated, in both Urani Kali Temple and Koththukulam Mari Amman temple, with the emerging needs of devotees for Agamic rituals; both temples are the community-based temples, thus the responsibilities of annual rituals, other ceremonies and positions in the temple administration are shared

by the certain caste communities. Thereby the devotees became the stakeholders of the temples and developed a community ownership over the temples. Meanwhile they realized the needs for Agamic rituals for certain religious satisfactions. However, devotees did not prefer to approach other Agamic temples to take part in Agamic rituals, and instead of this, they wanted to perform those rituals in their temples. At this particular juncture, integrating agamic rituals in addition to existing non-Agamic rituals was made possible in those two high caste temples. This is in fact the case now at Urani Kali temple and was also the case in Koththukulam Mari Amman temple decades ago. Later, in Koththukulam Mari Amman temple, Agamic tradition became dominant and eradicated entirely the non-Agamic tradition. Symbols in non-Agamic rituals are different from Agamic rituals which closely associated with Sanskrit theological ideas. And the people who underwent the process of Sanskritization also use Sanskrit theological ideas in their religious life (Srinivas, 1962). Therefore, it is quite difficult to perpetuate non-Agamic traditions along with the Agamic ritual traditions.

8. Conclusion

"Religious symbol must connect someway with individual psychological needs" (McGilvray, 1988). Meaning of the religious symbols is constructed in the nexus between actors and situations and can be deciphered not necessarily in relation to the system. Symbols are given meanings by the actors according to the situations and the meaningful symbols are kept by the actors in the situations according to their needs. Depressed caste community people did not want to change the non-Agamic rites in their temples, though they changed the architecture of the shrines, because other caste people towards non-Agamic rituals came to their temples without considering untouchability and this tendency is seen by them as a reputation for their community people who were marginalized on the caste basis. For the other caste people, deities and the rituals of the non-Agamic tradition are serving their religious requirements. Here the Agamic architecture and related Sanskrit symbols generate meaning to depressed caste people in the context of their religious interaction at their temple ceremony and also to handle their identity and related status. The religious symbols of two different traditions of Hindu worship are brought together for a purpose to generate intended meanings and amicably integrated into a situation. Sanskritization of architecture in non-Agamic temples is intended to make meaningful changes in the perceptions of people and the functions of the symbols are not depended on the whole system of the temple ritual; symbols can be understood separately from the entire temple system.

Sanskritization is not the process particularly undertaken by lower caste to emulate the rituals. And Sanskritization is not only the process of Brahmanization. It is "the emulation of rituals and social practices of other castes" (Jeyapalan, 2001). The ethnographic details of high caste Amman temples of this study illustrate that it is the high caste communities of the temple who wanted to emulate Agamic rituals and to follow the traditions of Agamic temples of other areas. It is again a symbolic understanding of the devotees in the religious situation. Symbols in rituals bear certain meanings and it could be understood in relation to the religious needs and the interpretation of the religious experience of the people. Devotees of Koththukulam Mari Amman temple are still maintaining the ownership of the temple by sharing the responsibilities of rituals even after the Sanskritization of rituals. So, the devotees are the actors in religious situation and meaning of the symbols are understood based on the individual needs and the shared interests of the people. As the religious situations are formed and determined by the devotees, the symbolic meaning of their experiences of the religious situations are also interpreted by them.

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