



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

History

GENESIS AND GROWTH OF VAISHNAVISM IN EARLY TAMIL COUNTRY

KEY WORDS: Vaishnavism, Tirumal, Sangam Age**P. ARUMUGA NAINAR**

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to highlight the Origin and growth of Vaishnavism in early Tamil country. Religion is a technique for the establishment of relationship between the man, the known and the natural and God the unknown and supernatural. In the Tamil country, the sangam literature contains numerous references to Vishnu worship in the beginning of the Christian era.¹ Tholkappiam mentions Mayon, as the God of Mullai region.² Iconographical features about Vishnu are referred to in the Mullaipattu³, Paripadal⁴ and Perumpanatruppadi⁵. Vishnu worship seems to have appeared earlier than Siva cult in the Tamil country Paripadal mentions. Tirumal (Vishnu) as a separate deity⁶. The earliest reference of the term Vaishnavadi Vishnu temples occurs in Manimekalai⁷. The worship of Tirumal in three postures of standing sitting and reclining⁸ had commenced only in post Sangam period. During the period of the Pallavas, Vaishnavism emerged as religious movement protesting against Buddhism and Jainism and formed as an essential component of Bhakthimovment⁹.

Introduction :

The Tamils of the Sangam Age "Seem to have fashioned for themselves a society where religion did play a dominant role and considerably influenced individual and social thinking and beliefs but was not allowed to seriously tamper with the very practical and worldly life which they chose to live."¹⁰

Much of the sangam literature is secular. Indeed no specialist religious treatise appeared during the Sangam period. Nevertheless, a study of that literature in its entirety reveals the belief of the ancient Tamils in God and the contemporaneous religious milieu. The indispensability of that literature as the main, if not the only, source for the religious history of the ancient Tamil country is no exaggeration. Examination of the entire corpus of that literature is indispensable to get the clear and true picture of Vaishnavism in the Sangam Age.

The antiquity of the worship of Tirumal (Vishnu)¹¹ in the Tamil land is traceable at least to the Sangam period although the terms Vishnu Vaishnavism¹² as such were not in Tamil literary use then. Sharp differences persist among the scholars in determining the origin of Vaishnavism. According to B.Y.Ramanujam. Vaishnavism must be traced to the Vedas since the measuring of the universe is mentioned in the Rig Veda.¹³ Gopika Mohan Bhattacharya is of the view that Vasudeva cult arose in Mathura in the pre-Christian centuries as a reaction against Jainism and Buddhism and that Vasudeva was gradually identified with Vishnu and Narayana.¹⁴ The Vasudeva cult of North India must have spread to the Tamil country via the Maratha land, says R.C.Bhandarkar. The view that the cult of Vishnu Tirumaliyam was Tamil in its origin is also posited.¹⁵ This is diametrically opposite to the Vedic, northern and Sanskrit origin of the cult of Vishnu. It is said that the Sanskrit word Vishnu was derived from Tamil Vindu. Mayilai Sceni Venkatasami is convinced that the Aryans assimilated the Tamil Tirumal (Mayon) with their own Vishnu.¹⁶ The sports of Kannan and Nappinnai lend support to the view that the Tamils had their own tradition which possibly led to the Tamil influence upon the Sanskrit works like the Harivamsa and the Bhagavata same time, the entry of anecdotes connected with Vishnu's incarnations into the Sangam works indicates the northern influence over the South. The position is aptly presented by N. Subrahmanian thus : "An analysis of the Indian gods makes one thing clear. There seem to be parallel names in Tamil and in Sanskrit for the same gods. Murugan and Subrahmanya, Tirumal and Vishnu, Siva and Rudra, this seems to resemble the Venus-Aphrodite, Hercules-Heracles, Ulysses - Odysseus, Jupiter-Zeus Parallel names in Latin and Greek. Much accommodation between indigenous religious practices and exotic Aryan beliefs and rituals seems to have taken place.

The terminology Kadal Vanan Puranam truly indicates the antiquity of Tirumal. Other than Tirumal, gods like Siva (the three-eyed god), Murugan, Valiyon (Balarama) and Indra seem to have

been important and worshipped ritualistically Tirumal and Baladeva (Balarama) were the two great gods. So also Tirumal and Siva, whose combination being the mixture of blue and red. The Muvar were the three popular gods, namely Ayan, Ari and Aran. Then Tirumal, Baladeva, Siva and Murugan were the four. However, Balarama, Parudi, Kaman, Saman and Siva were the Five.

There was in vogue a conventional classification of the landscape of the Tamil country into five regions each being presided over by its special deity. Accordingly, Mayon, the bucolic deity, was the main god of the Mullai (Pastoral) region. To the ancient Tamils Vishnu (Tirumal) was Mayon. Ma, in Tamil, means black (dark) colour. It denotes both Tirumal and the bee. Mayon is usually compared with anything that is dark, dark-blue, blue or black such as the Kaya flower (Meecylon edule or Malabarica), blue gem (sapphire), sea, water-borne cloud, darkness, lotus leaf, hill, blue lily and so on. For instance, the Tholkappiyam mentions Mayon's complexion as dark-blue like that of the Kaya (Puvai) flower. Mayon is Mayan Mayavan (Tirumal) is yet another derivation from Ma, but not from Mayam (magic). Mayavan is Kannan (Krishna) also. Mal means both black and great. So, it is a natural name for Vishnu. Tirumal is the sacred and black or great god. He is dark and his name represents both stature and intoxication.

He is the same as Mayon and is identified with Vishnu, especially Krishna. "Perhaps the Mullai being pastoral land and Krishna being a cowherd were the starting point of the identification". Tirumal is praised in the Paripadal and in the Aichchiyar Kuravai. His stature is exemplified by the term Nedumal. He is also Devia Mal (divine Mal.). Further, Tirumal is spoken of when the black bull (kari) is mentioned. The black bull with a white patch on its face is likened to Tirumal blowing the white conch. Tirumal's black complexion is explicit in the name Kariyavan (the dusky). The name Anchana Vannan (Krishna) confirms this. Tirumal is Maya Vannan, meaning he of the dark complexion.

Nediyon (Tirumal) means the tall god. Nediyon is of blue complexion. Parasurama, who destroyed the royal families, is also Nediyon. He wields the Malu (axe). Kaman is the son of Nediyon (Tirumal). The expression Nilam Taru Tiruvil Nediyon means Tirumal, Who embodies all the worlds in himself. Nedumudi Annal and Neduval refer to Him. Uyarndon (Nediyon) is Tirumal at the Alagarmalai. Tirumal's complexion is blue too. So, he is Niniravannan. He appears like the blue gem. Hence his name Manivannan. His complexion resembles the colour of the peacock's nape. He is Kadal Vannan, Kadal Vannan and Munnir Vannan because His colour is that of the sea. In the Ahananuru, the complexion of Tirumal is distinguished from that of Siva, the former's like the sea and the latter's like the ruddy sky. The Puvai (Kaya), a blue flower, is an object of common comparison with Tirumal's complexion. In the Puram situation known as Vetchittinai, the practice of equating the protecting king with the tutelary god, Tirumal of the Puvai complexion is called Puvai Nilai.

Kannan (Krishna), the son of Asodai (Yasoda), is denoted Puvai Vannan, Since His complexion is like the Puvai flower.

Since Tirumal is imminent all places are his sacred centres and it futile to particularize the places of his presence. However, for the benefit of his devotees he is assigned temples in certain places. The Sri Vaishnava tradition counts 108 sacred centres for him. The Sangam literature does not enumerate all of them. The Alagarmalai, Srirangam, Puhar, Venkatam, Vehka and Adagam adam are some prominent places mentioned in this regard. The conception of the three postures of Tirumal appears to the quite ancient. They are his Kidanda Vannam (the reclined state), Irunda Vannam (the seated state) and Ninra Vannam (the standing state).

The Sangam works often refer to his reclined state. The Aravanai (the serpent couch) and Arituyil (Yoga Nitra) are associated with this state. At Venkatam he stands. He is addressed as Malaimisai Ninran at the Alagarmalai. Irundaiyur represents his sitting posture. Moreover, the Sangam Tamil worshipped Krishna and Balarama in the temples assigned to them.

Srirangam the temple par excellence of the Sri Vaishnavas, is called Arangam, Nadu and Turutti. These are geographical names of places formed as islands in the middle of the flowing rivers. In such islands Tirumal is stationed. In Srirangam, the reclined state of Tirumal on Adishesha is likened to blue cloud lying on a golden mountain. Since Srirangam is mentioned in the context of Uraiyur the proximity of the two places is known. The Silappadikaram relates Kovalan's reaching of Uraiyur after crossing the Kaviri. So, Uraiyur's location on the southern bank of the Kaviri is gathered. Uraiyur, now one of the 108 Sri Vaisnava sacred centres, is not explicitly named as Tirumal's place in the Sangam works.

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