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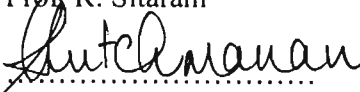
**ORAL TRANSMISSION OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE  
POPULAR FOLK DEITIES AND THEIR WORSHIP AMONGST  
TAMILS IN DURBAN**

**JAYALUTCHMEE LUTCHMANAN**

Submitted in part fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree Magister Artium in  
the School of Languages and Literature in the Faculty of Humanities at the University  
of Durban-Westville.

SUPERVISOR : Prof. R. Sitaram

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT

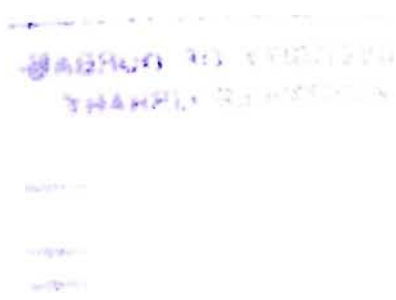
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DATE SUBMITTED

: September 2001



This dissertation is dedicated to my late dad, Mr. Lutchmanan Arian and  
my mum, Mrs. Poongavanaum Lutchmanan in gratitude  
for their love and devotion over the years.



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### **EXPLANATORY NOTES**

1. " Respondents " refers to those Tamils who responded to the questionnaires.
2. " Interviewees " refers to those Tamils who were interviewed personally.

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Relevance of the Study**

South Africa is a land of diverse cultures, with each culture having its own religious practices, language, habits, customs, traditions and so forth, which are unique to that culture. Yet in this rainbow nation of ours where there is daily interaction between people from the various cultures, meaningful interaction between these cultures is lacking on account of ignorance of the factors that define individuals, communities and cultural groups.

Folk Deity worship forms an integral part of the religious culture of the Tamil speaking community of South Africa. Yet of all the religious practices that were brought to South Africa by the Indian forefathers since 1860, the concept of Folk Deity worship is most misunderstood, misrepresented and misconstrued. South African Tamils, most of whom are followers of Folk Deity worship, have very little or no understanding of the Folk Deities that they worship. Furthermore the rituals and practices of this worship is viewed by other cultures with disbelief. It is therefore hoped that this study will cast some light towards an insightful understanding of Folk Deity worship amongst Tamils for the global South African community.

One hundred and forty years ago our forefathers brought with them, amongst other things, their various religious practices. Subsequent generations have been over the years slavishly following these practices without examining their importance and relevance to their lives in present times.

The worship of Folk Deities has its roots in the village culture of South India. These days a miniscule few lead lives similar to those of the village inhabitants of South India, yet the majority of South African Tamils follow the worship of Folk Deities. Although the religious practices pertaining to Folk Deity worship is followed by some without understanding, many follow the worship for a number of valid reasons.

Some South African Tamils believe that the survival and propagation of their religious beliefs, be it the Mainstream Religious Traditions or the worship of Folk Deities, are closely linked with the question of cultural identity. The most interesting response elicited during fieldwork was that people followed the worship because they saw it as a means of preserving their religious beliefs in a Christian country. They felt that as a minority they had to preserve every fibre of their culture from extinction.

It has to be noted that this research was further inspired by the researcher's quest for knowledge regarding this subject. Research conducted in South Africa did not prove entirely fruitful, hence research on the subject was extended to Tamil Nadu, India. Therefore this research was stimulated by the researcher's personal involvement in the most misunderstood realm of religious practices of South African Tamils, that of Folk Deity worship. The researcher also faced many limitations due to lack of research in this field. For the exception of Gounder (1994 ) no other published material on Folk Deity worship amongst South African is available. The lack of source material ( written ) proved to be a great hindrance and the writer had to depend on fieldwork, orally transmitted information and personal observances.

## **1.2 Aims and Objectives.**

This proposed project aims at recording and appraising the oral transmission of knowledge regarding the popular Folk Deities amongst the Tamil -speaking Hindus in Durban and surrounding areas. The minority Indian community in South Africa, of whom the Tamils are the majority, exhibits a wealth of religio-cultural knowledge and practices, much of which is orally transmitted, and hence requires scientific analysis and recording.

Oral literature is a common term used to describe information transmitted by word of mouth and is a very important tool used by those who can read and write and by those who cannot. Oral transmission of knowledge has been the chief vehicle for the perpetuation of beliefs, customs and practices amongst Indians, including the Tamils.

Orality has retained its important role in this respect, even with the advancement of literacy.

Observance of the worship of popular Deities amongst the Tamils was brought by the pioneer indentured labourers in 1860 ; and a considerable degree of continuity is seen in this aspect. The recording of the orally transmitted knowledge of the religious traditions and rituals of the Tamils, all of which (may) have written sources, acquires greater significance because of what the practice gains in oral transmission; how it is propagated, and how it maintains traditions in communities far removed from the source of the traditions. In this respect the study of the oral transmission of the knowledge pertaining to the worship of Mariamman, Kaateri, etc. amongst the Tamils of Durban would be a significant contribution to the body of knowledge of diaspora of Indians, especially when viewed with mainstream religious traditions ( eg. Saivism, Vaishnavism, etc.) in the background.

The research project will be carried out within the theoretical framework of orality and literacy (Ong, WJ, 1982 - Orality and Literacy). Ong describes primary and secondary oral cultures: the primary culture being one where writing has never played a part. The secondary oral culture is one in which writing and orality exist side by side. Literacy as well as orality exist amongst the Tamils in South Africa.

This dissertation aims to examine the importance that South African Tamils accord the worship of Folk Deities and the hypothesis of the researcher is that although the Tamil speaking community of South Africa is to a large extent westernized, they retain their identity through their religious practices, including that of Folk Deity worship.

This research further attempts to trace the source of Folk Deity worship and analyse its relevance to the lives of contemporary South African Tamils.

### **1.3 Methodology.**

The primary source of information for this dissertation was elicited through questionnaires and fieldwork. This constituted interviews with people within the Tamil community in South Africa and Tamils living in Tamil Nadu, India. Personal interviews with religious and cultural leaders within the South African Tamil community further led to procuring first hand information on the subject. The researcher's personal involvement in various religious and cultural activities of the South African Tamil community and her attendance, as an observer, at many of the prayers in honour of Folk Deities also contributed to the writer's data-base towards this study.

The secondary source of information for this dissertation was from the analysis of material published thus far, including various brochures and articles from the media.

A total of one hundred questionnaires were distributed evenly to a representative sample of members of the South African Tamil community. Care was taken to ensure that the interviewees represented a broad spectrum of the South African Tamil community with regard to age, religious affiliation, marital status, profession, social and economic status, etc. The sample also included those who specifically observe the worship of Folk Deities.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE ARRIVAL OF INDIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

#### **AND THEIR CULTURAL HERITAGE.**

##### **2.1 Introduction.**

The contents of chapter two focuses on the historical background of Indians in South Africa. It examines the reasons for their arrival and the reasons for their leaving India. This chapter also examines the contribution of the Indians, in particular that of the Tamil speaking Hindus, towards the propagation and perpetuation of the Tamil language and culture. In addition to personal interviews much of the information for this chapter was extracted from literature written on Indians in South Africa.

##### **2.2 The Arrival of Indians in South Africa**

Henning,(1993: 6) cites the 9 September 1834 to be the beginning of the earliest emigration of Indians from India to various parts of the world, starting with Mauritius and the West Indian colonies. During this period another great phenomenon was taking place in world history : that of the abolition of slavery. With the abolition of slavery, the British sought other ways to substitute slavery in the British colonies. The indenture system provided this substitute. As a direct result of this migration to South Africa intensified.

###### **2.2.1 Historical Background**

Hence large numbers of Indians went as indenture labourers to the sugar producing colonies of Mauritius, the West Indies, Burma, Sri Lanka, Madagascar, etc. And when the need for a workforce impelled the British in Natal to request for labourers, after lengthy negotiations their request was heeded in 1859. Indians then began arriving in South Africa as part of this indenture labour scheme by the colonial British Government, who were then

the ruling power in India, to work as labourers in the sugar cane fields here.

### **2.2.2 Arrival of Indenture Labourers**

The Indians initially arrived on contracts for a period of five years. After this initial period the labourers became ' free' and this status entitled them to either remain in Natal or return to India on a free passage or they could indenture for a further period of five years after which they had an option of a free return trip to India or a piece of land in lieu of the return airfare.

The first batch of Indians arrived on board the paddle steamer the S.S. Truro which docked in Durban on 16 November 1860, a memorable day that was to earmark and shape the history of a dynamic people that contributed significantly to the shaping of this country. Since the port of embarkation was Madras, approximately 90% of the passengers on board the S.S. Truro were Tamil and Telegu speaking Hindus. Ten days later when the S.S. Belvedere arrived from Calcutta, the passengers consisted mostly of Hindi - speaking immigrants mainly from the North Indian States of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

About ten years later Indians who held British travel documents also began arriving. In this group there were mainly Muslims and a small number of Gujarati speaking merchants from the city of Bombay and the State of Gujarat ( Diesel, A and Maxwell, P :1993, 5 ). This saw the arrival of the first batch of Indians to South Africa.

### **2.2.3 Arrival of Passenger Indians**

Apart from the indenture labourers there was a second group of immigrants who were described as ' passenger Indians' who entered the country under ordinary immigration laws and at their own expense. These 'passenger Indians' came with the sole purpose of

trading and setting up businesses.

Thereafter approximately 150 000 indenture Indians came to Natal in the 50 year period between and 1911 when Indian immigration came to an end. The Indians initially came to labour in the sugarcane plantations but soon their services extended to the railways, the municipality, the dockyards, the coalmines and the domestic services.

### **2.3 Home Districts of Passengers on board the SS. Umtata**

Kuper (1960 : 275) lists the names and home districts of the passengers on board the SS.

UMTATA sailing from Madras to South Africa on 28 June 1891. The author lists the following areas as the main ports of embarkation : Madras, Coimbatore, Chengalput, North Arcot, South Arcot, Thanjavur, Salem, Nilgiri and Nellore. However it should be noted here that the Tamils who emigrated to South Africa did not come from the above mentioned areas only. For this study a survey of the Folk Deities worshipped in some of the above mentioned districts and their surrounding villages provided invaluable information in understanding the concept of Folk Deity worship in the South African context.

### **2.4 Reasons for leaving India**

It is also important to mention at this stage that the indenture labourers' decision to come to South Africa was motivated by a number of reasons:

**“The import of British manufactured goods had the immediate impact of undermining all India’s indigenous industries, such as textiles ( cotton, weaving, spinning), tanning, smelting and handicrafts of various types. These craftsmen now found themselves displaced and joined the swelling ranks of the unemployed. The condition was further aggravated by the introduction of English factories in India.**

**The system of land tenure and land revenue resulted in the displacement of thousands of agricultural workers, while small peasant farmers faced increasing debts. The British Agricultural Policy encouraged the growth of commercial crops (eg. cotton, tea, etc.) rather than food crops. As all surplus food was generally exported, this meant that during times of famine, food was unobtainable and millions died of starvation. "( Henning , 1993: 8 )**

Other reasons included abject poverty, a desire to taste life abroad, the prospect of a better life, the need to escape an epidemic or other misfortunes, the ever expanding birth rate, etc.

**" In 1860 when emigration to Natal commenced, there was famine in the North West Province and 17 899 persons emigrated from Calcutta to various destinations. Interestingly, between 1874 and 1878, when emigration to Natal resumed, a record number of 428,929 emigrants left from Madras on account of severe famine in South India." ( Henning, 1993 : 16)**

These famines encouraged people to emigrate. Further to this the Bubonic plague reached India from Hong Kong in 1896. As a direct result of this many more lost their lives and the prospect of working in a country free from the dreaded disease impelled the indenture labourers to seek refuge abroad.

After being subjected to the world free trade, during 1870 and 1891, India experienced a rapid fall in its currency level. The high cost of living resulted in its currency competing amongst other powerful currencies in the world markets. This resulted in high inflation rates and prompted many Indian Nationals to seek fresher pastures abroad. The British decided in 1844 that all public jobs would be taken up by individuals fluent in English.

This effectively excluded the disadvantaged local Indian people. This prompted them to seek employment elsewhere ( Nair, 2000: 17).

It was in this state of uncertainty and with steely resolve that the indenture labourers came to South Africa. Some of them hoped to return after acquiring some wealth and others had no hope at all of ever returning. Whatever their reasons for coming to South Africa, the Indians upon setting foot here firmly entrenched for themselves a place in the history of South Africa. They came from different parts of India but the common thread among all of them was that they brought with them the rich tapestry of their glorious cultural and religious heritage to seek a better life.

## **2.5 Earliest Evidences of Temple Construction In Kwa-Zulu Natal**

It is apparent that some of the indenture labourers brought with them idols of the Deities whom they worshipped in India. Upon taking up residence here they housed these idols in makeshift temples. A case in point is the donation of a number of idols in 1868 to the Magazine Shree Vishnu Temple by Mr. Marimuthu Pillai (Subramaniyan, 1998: 187).

Upon settling here the emigrants due to their financial constraints were unable to construct huge temples. But as time progressed they were able to build achitectural marvels to house their Deities.

One of the forerunners with regard to temple building was Kistappa Reddy ( 1863- 1941).

Some examples of temples built by him follows:

1. Shree Ganesha Temple of Mount Egdecombe in 1898
2. First Umbilo Temple in 1903
3. Shree Mariamman Temple of Pietermaritzburg in 1909

4. Empangeni Temple in 1914
5. Shree Vishnu Temple of the Esperanza Sugar Estate in 1930

To illustrate this point further, there is an ancient Tamil proverb by the celebrated Sungam poetess, Avayaar, who says no one should take up residence in a place that does not have a temple. It is also evident from the type and number of temples they built that the indenture labourers viewed their religious practices seriously. In addition to their daily prayers, people joined prayer groups and observed weekly worship at temples. At these services devotional hymns were sung. These devotional hymns like the Thevaram , Thiru Arutpa and the Mariamman Thaalaatu were brought to the country by the immigrants. The later generations who were not well versed in the Tamil language learnt these hymns off by repeatedly listening to them.

## **2.6 Social, Cultural and Religious Background of the Magazine**

### **Barracks and Railway Barracks communities of Kwa-Zulu Natal**

While collecting information for this dissertation from the former residents of the Magazine and Railway barracks, ( areas that housed those who were employed by the Municipal and Railway Services) it emerged that the contribution of the original residents in propagating the Tamil language and culture was overwhelming. Special precautions were taken to make sure that Tamil was spoken in homes and the children attended private Tamil schools, outside of school hours, to familiarize themselves with their language. All religious practices were also observed amidst much piety and gaiety. In this community, which was a stronghold of the Tamil language and culture, Tamil dramas like Kattabomman and Nallathanga were often staged. These dramas highlighted social themes like caste, untouchability, patriotism, etc.

Tamil films were also screened and these films besides providing entertainment were also vehicles for propagating the Tamil language and culture. In this close knit community even those whose mother tongue was not Tamil spoke in Tamil to those whose mother tongue was Tamil and they participated in all the Tamil religious functions like the Mariamman Festival, Puratassi, etc.

Such was the respect accorded to one's mother tongue language. Amongst all the Indian languages Tamil was dominant as Tamils were more in number. Hence the Tamil religious observances, including that of the Folk Deities were widely recognized and observed.

## **2.7 Tamil Language and Culture in South Africa**

The Tamil language and culture also flourished rapidly elsewhere in South Africa as is evident by the establishment of the following religious and cultural societies :

1. The Young Men's Vedic Society was established in 1905
2. The establishment of the Hindu Tamil Institute in 1914

Both these above societies amalgamated in 1951 to form the Natal Tamil Vedic Society which is to this day very active in the propagation of the Tamil language and culture.

3. The Pretoria Tamil League was established in 1905
4. The Newcastle Tamil Association was established in 1910
5. The Tamil Protective Association in Pietermaritzburg was established in 1916 ( Henning, 1993 : 151). All these societies observed the various religious practices including those of Folk Deities.

Let us further examine the status of the Tamil language as language is the vehicle of one's culture, including one's religious practices. The arrival of Srinivasa Sastri, Dr. Sarojini Naidu and other freedom fighters impelled the Indians to learn English in order to interact

with the white rulers.

Furthermore the Indians were divided into several linguistic groups with no common language of communication between them. The English language provided this link language. Slowly, English began to gain importance over the mother tongue languages as it was imperative to study English if one had to forge ahead in the broader social, economic and political arena.

By the end of the 19th century the children of the immigrants attended English medium Government aided schools. By private arrangement, at many of these schools, Tamil was taught in the afternoons as a discipline outside the school curriculum. This attracted a favourable response despite the language not being part of the academic mainstream curriculum.

#### **2.7.1. Decline of the Tamil Language and Culture in South Africa**

Gradually in subsequent generations the desire to continue learning Tamil faded as the culture of western education became more attractive and Tamil was not functional in the work place. These children were attracted to the western mode of dressing, the western diet, western music, etc. and they wanted to ape their western colleagues. This resulted in their viewing Tamil as inferior. This contributed to the decline of Tamil and the dominance of English and the use of Tamil was restricted to certain specific domains. ( prayer services, funerals, temple festivals, etc.)

It must be pointed out that the decline of the Tamil language did not impact negatively on the religious practices of the Tamil people. In spite of this people carried out their religious practices as they felt that this was part of their heritage and they were afraid of the

consequences if they stopped.

However attempts to accord Tamil its rightful place continues. After much deliberation mother tongue languages were finally introduced in the academic school curriculum. By 1994 there were approximately 18 000 pupils in state schools learning Tamil at primary school level ( Murugan, 1994 : 165). This was a major breakthrough.

However after democracy the survival of Tamil in State schools and at university level has been threatened for a variety of reasons and its total extinction is now an imminent reality. Some of these reasons include the poor number of students enrolling to study Tamil and the fact that Tamil is not necessary in the workplace as compared to Zulu. Hence when presented with a choice between studying Zulu or Tamil, most students' natural choice is Zulu.

Inspite of these setbacks the Tamil language and culture flourish unabated throughout South Africa through the undying efforts of interested individuals, community organizations and temple societies. One has to go no further than to look at any one of the popular Tamil festivals to see proof of this.

## **2.8 Religious Observances of Tamils of Kwa-Zulu Natal**

With regard to their religious observances the Tamils, since their arrival in South Africa have been observing the worship of Lord Sivan, Lord Vishnu, Goddess Sakthi, Lord Murugan and Lord Ganesha. Interestingly, they included in their worship also the worship of Folk/Village Deities.

**" A number of non - Brahminic deities, some probably of village origin, have been brought into the orbit of the Puranic pantheon in Durban. These are labelled as devta, munis, paris. The devta include the Seven Sisters, who are worshipped collectively and individually and have become identified with the Sakti and may be called Amma. The munis were once powerful rishis, but some used their knowledge for destructive purposes and became evil spirits able to possess people and make them ill. These include Jeva muni, Tani muni and Munisvaran. Deities which were restricted to villages in India extend their influence through contact with new groups in South Africa." ( Kuper, 1960 :192)**

### **2.8.1 Stages of Worship in Hinduism**

The Tamil religious texts teach us that in Hinduism, there are four stages of worship :

1. The highest stage is that of the natural realization of God's presence.
2. The second stage is meditation and contemplation on God.
3. The third is the worship of the symbols which are reminders of the Supreme, and
4. The fourth stage is the performances of rituals in honour of the Supreme and pilgrimages to sacred places.

The above stages are not mutually exclusive. They complement each other. And stages three and four are particularly applicable to the worship of Folk Deities as Folk Deity worship is evidently based on ritual and symbolism. ( Kuper,1960 :192)

This dissertation will therefore attempt to provide the evidence and insights into the worship of Folk Deities amongst Tamils in Durban.

## 2.9 Summary

An historical account of the arrival of Indians in South Africa is given in this chapter. The different areas from which the Indians arrived is listed as research was confined to these areas in Tamil Nadu. Fieldwork was conducted in these areas to provide a better understanding of the Folk Deities worshipped by South African Tamils. Further, the social and economic conditions of the Indians which led to their leaving India is also examined.

The earliest development of the Tamil language and culture through to its decline, reasons for its decline and its attempts at survival are discussed. A marked increase in the use of English and the decline of Tamil is noted. The religious observances of the Tamils in Kwa-Zulu Natal and the general stages of the worship of Hindus in Kwa-Zulu Natal are mentioned.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **MAINSTREAM RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In addition to their worship of Folk Deities, the South African Tamil follows many forms of other religious observances within the broad framework of Hinduism. This chapter examines these various forms. This chapter discusses the worship of Saivism, Vaishnavism, Saktham, Ganapatyam and the worship of Lord Murugan and describes in detail the significance and the symbolism of each these forms. To provide more insight into these forms, some of the important literary texts of each form is discussed. The most important festivals and temples associated with each of these forms of worship are also listed.

#### **3.2 Definition of Mainstream Religious Traditions**

A significant trend in the religious practices of the majority of South African Tamils is their observance of all the mainstream religious traditions. In other words their religious observances are not confined to either Saivism (the worship of Lord Sivan), or Vaishnavism ( the worship of Lord Vishnu), or Saktham ( the worship of Goddess Sakthi), or Ganapatyam ( the worship of Lord Ganesha ), or the worship of Lord Murugan, or the worship of Folk Deities.

The worship of the above mentioned Deities is not exclusively mutual but the norm is rather to offer worship to all the Deities or to some of them. The determining factor as to which Deity to worship is influenced by a variety of reasons. Some of these include the continuation of family tradition, a special preference for a certain Deity, etc.

### **3.3 Concept of Kula Deivam**

This is significant as the trend amongst Tamils living in India is to confine their worship exclusively to a particular Deity who is referred to as their “ Kula Deivam” (The family Deity). The choice of one’s Kula Deivam is determined by the Deity worshipped by preceding generations of the family. However in some instances, although the Kula Deivam is primarily worshipped, at times worship is also offered to some of the other Deities. The following are the mainstream religious traditions in the South African Tamil community.

### **3.4 Saivism**

#### **3.4.1 Definition of Saivism**

Saivism is the worship of Lord Sivan as the Almighty. The word Sivam means that which confers happiness and Sivan is the One who embodies this happiness. Sivam signifies a state of perfect goodness and happiness towards which everyone strives by following the tenets of Saivism. This perfect state is personified as Lord Sivan and the people who strive to attain this state are called Saivites ( Arunachalam, 1982 : 26). The basic underlying philosophy of Saivism is to educate man to free himself from worldly, material bonds and to consciously strive for the liberation of the soul from the cycle of rebirth. The ultimate goal of all Saivites therefore is the attainment of moksha (eternal bliss) which according to Saivism can be reached through purity of action and thought. There is no doubt that Saivism dates back to many centuries. The Mohenjadarо excavations supports the claim that lingam worship prevailed during this period dating back to 3500 years.

### **3.4.2 Concept of Anbe Sivam**

Saivism emphasizes that Lord Sivan is love (Anbe Sivam- Sivame Anbu) and that He dwells in all living beings. Here, another important lesson of Saivism is reflected and that is, that Saivism shows reverence to all life, not only to human life. This approach of Saivism is affirmed throughout the length and breadth of India by people of different linguistic groups. Amongst all these people the underlying Saiva philosophy remains while the mode of worship varies from State to State.

### **3.4.3 Saivism in South Africa**

In South Africa the following linguistic groups subscribe to Saivism. Grouped under Hinduism the various linguistic groups are the speakers of Tamil, Telegu, Hindi and Gujerati. The mode of worship of each of these linguistic groups varies. The philosophy behind the Saiva worship in Tamil Nadu called Saiva Siddhandam is the philosophy followed by South African Tamils. Saiva Siddhandam is based on thousands of available divine songs of Saints Sambandar, Appar, Sundarar, Manikkavasagar, Karaikal Ammayar, Thirumoolar and others who lived between the 7th and the 9th centuries AD.

### **3.4.4 Some Important Saivite Literature.**

#### **3.4.4.1. The Saiva Agamas.**

The Saiva Agamas are some of the earliest books on the Saiva religion and philosophy. This body of work was written by saints who had inward experiences and enlightenment from the supreme Lord Sivan. Because the Agamas emanated from God it is called A-Gama 'that which came from God'. Further, the three components of this word, AA-GA-MA, respectively denote pati, pasu, and paasam (the self, the soul, and the bonds). AA- signifies knowledge, GA- liberation of the soul, and MA- removal of the bonds. A study of the Agamas, therefore provides one with knowledge that helps to liberate the soul by

removing the bonds that are attached to it. This facilitates God realization and ultimately produces moksha.( Arunachalam, 1982 : 22)

#### **3.4.4.2. The Periya Puranam ( The Great Epic)**

This book documents the life history of the 63 Saiva saints who made considerable contributions to the course of Saivism from the 7th to the 9th centuries. Amongst those included in this book are Thirugnanasambandar, Thirunaavakarasar, Sundaramoorthy, Karraikkal Ammaiyaar, Kannayaa, etc. During the 10th century the great Chola king, Raja Raja Cholan realizing the value of the contribution of these saints for future generations, commissioned his court poet, Sekkilar to document the life histories of the saints. As its name suggests the greatness of this epic lies in that it documents the life histories and the contributions of the great Saiva saints.

#### **3.4.4.3 Thevaram**

Thevaram literally means a garland of divine hymns. Hence is a book consisting of a collection of divine songs in praise of Lord Sivan sung by three of the 63 saints, namely, Thirugnanasambandar, Thirunaavakarasar and Sundaramoorthy. During the 6th century Tamil Nadu was ruled by Jain kings. As a result Saivism was confronted by much hostility. The Jain kings favoured those people of the kingdom who adopted Jainism. In order to promote Jainism people who followed the Jain faith were given certain privileges like exemption from taxes. Followers of other faiths were burdened with heavy taxes and some even tortured. Against this backdrop the Saiva saints emerged in order to create an awareness of and to promote Saivism. The compositions of saints such as Thirugnanasambandar aimed at strengthening faith in Saivism and promoting the Tamil language in the face of Jain and Buddhist onslaught and the patronage of Sanskrit. The hymns contained in the Thevaram are unique in that they were composed spontaneously in

Tamil and set to a particular ragam ( melody). These hymns usually describe a miraculous event at a specific temple. Like the hymn, " Thunivalar Thingal", sung at Thiru Pachillashramam where Lord Sivan cures a damsel of her disease.

#### **3.4.4.4 Thiruvaasagam**

This is a collection of the works of the Saivite saint Manikkavasagar. Manikkavasagar, too, worshipped his Lord with complete love and devotion and his songs are a sure indication of this. His works were so profound that G.U.Pope, an English missionary, found great delight and experienced a great sense of achievement in translating the Thiruvaasagam into English.

#### **3.4.4.5 Thirumandiram**

This book contains the mantras, tantras and yantras pertaining to Saivism. This book is a collection of 3000 verses written by saint Thirumoolar who lived in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu in the 5th century ( Arunachalam : 1982, 136).

### **3.4.5 Festivals in honour of Lord Sivan.**

#### **3.4.5.1 Sivaraathri**

This Saivite festival is observed in the Tamil month of Maasi ( February / March ). Lord Sivan is said to have manifested Himself in the form of an effulgent light in a Sivalingam on this particular night, the 14th night of the Tamil month of Maasi. He is also believed to manifest Himself in all the Sivalingams throughout the world on this night. Hence this night is of great importance to the worshippers of Lord Sivan. There are also numerous puranic stories centered on this festival. Prayer on this night is observed in four quarters, with each quarter lasting three hours. Each of these quarters is referred to as a 'jamum'. The offerings for Lord Sivan differ during each jamum. For the first jamum the

lotus flower and pulse cooked with sugar, ghee and milk called 'paruppu pongal' are offered. For the second jamum, thulasi leaves( basil leaves) and payasam (sweetened rice pudding) are offered. Vilva leaves and yellu ( sesame seeds ) are offered in the third jamum and in the final jamum the blue or red nelumbium flower and sweetened white rice ( ven pongal )are offered. Each of these offerings is of special significance (Arunachalam, 1982 : 92). However in the South African context due to the unavailability of some of these ingredients any flower or thulasi leaves are used and available naivedyam ( food offerings ) are offered. In addition to this, elaborate abhishegams ( a ceremonial bathing of the lingam with auspicious ingredients like oil, ghee, milk, curd, rosewater, sandal paste, etc.) are conducted at the commencement of each jamum.

#### **3.4.5.2 Karthigai Deepam**

This Saivite festival is observed in the Tamil month of Karthigai (November /December). During this festival Lord Sivan is worshipped in the form of the effulgent Light. Since the dawn of civilization light has played a significant role in the propagation of Hindu religious beliefs. Darkness represents ignorance signifying the non realization of God which is due to evil thoughts and bad qualities that plague mankind - such as selfishness, greed for material possessions, negative thoughts, jealousy, hatred, bitterness, etc. Just as light helps to remove darkness God realization is the light to help remove all the evil within us which is synonymous with the physical darkness. A further explanation of the significance of the Light follows :

'Once Lord Vishnu and Lord Brahman were arguing as to who was the greater of them. Lord Vishnu claimed that since He was in charge of preservation, He was in fact the greater. Lord Brahman counter argued that since He held the portfolio of creation, He was the greater for if there was no creation what would Lord Vishnu preserve? This train of

argument continued for a while. Then Lord Sivan appeared as a huge ball of fire before Them and seeing Them bickering asked Them what was being discussed. Both, Lord Vishnu and Lord Brahman explained to Lord Sivan what the problem was and further asked Lord Sivan to help solve the problem by stating who He thought was the greater. Lord Sivan knowing very well that He (Lord Sivan) is the Almighty and that He is the greatest decides to teach both Lord Vishnu and Lord Brahman a lesson. He asks Lord Vishnu to go in search of the bottommost end of the ball of fire and Lord Brahman in search of the top of this huge ball of fire. He then said that whoever returns first after achieving what was expected of Them would be the greater. Immediately both set off, Lord Vishnu takes the form of a boar and digs into the earth to find the end of this ball of fire, while Lord Brahman takes the form of a swan and flies upward in search of the top of the fire. Many centuries go by and neither Lord Vishnu nor Lord Brahman could achieve what They had set out to do. Eventually Lord Vishnu realised the plot set out by Lord Sivan and understood that in fact Lord Sivan is the greatest. So He returns to earth, apologises to Lord Sivan for His egotistical behaviour and acknowledges the greatness of Lord Sivan. Lord Brahman on His way up to find the top most end of the ball of fire meets a flower on the way. Lord Brahman asks the flower where it was coming from and the flower replied that it was coming from the tip of the ball of fire that represented Lord Sivan. Lord Brahman asks the flower to lie and be His witness when He tells Lord Sivan that He reached the tip of the ball of fire. The flower agreed. They both then come down to earth to meet Lord Sivan. Being the Almighty, Lord Sivan knew all about the lie. Lord Brahman approached Lord Sivan with His story and produced the flower as the pathetic witness. Lord Sivan confronted Lord Brahman, told Him what a pathetic liar He was, reprimanded the flower and as a form of punishment told Lord Brahman that henceforth there would be no temple for the exclusive worship of Lord Brahman. As punishment for the flower Lord Sivan told the flower that for its part in the conspiracy no one would use

this type of flower in any form of worship. Hence Lord Sivan is venerated in all His glory at Thiruvanaamalai during the month of Karthigai as Arunachalaesvarar (Lord Sivan in the form of Light).

In addition to these festivals, in the South African context Mondays are set aside for the worship of Lord Sivan. The services held in temples on this day centre around the worship of Lord Sivan, where prayers are offered to Him and songs sung in His honour. Another striking feature of Saivism is the concept that Lord Sivan is considered to dwell in 8 important places: in the 5 elements of nature ( wind, water, space, earth and fire, through which He sustains the universe), in the sun, the moon and in individual souls. Scattered throughout the Indian sub continent we find a temple to represent each of these natural elements. The famous temple at Chidambaram, in South India, represents the element of space. Thousands of people from all over the world who have been to this temple believe that the importance of this temple lies in the form of Lord Sivan as Nadaraja, who is seen as the presiding Deity at Chidambaram. Unfortunately this is not the case.

The fame of this temple lies in the fact that behind the main mandabam (hall) there is a small unimposing structure that houses a statue of Lord Sivan and above this statue in the ceiling lies what is known as the Chidambaram ragasiyam. Thousands of people from all over the world came to Chidambaram just to find out what this ragasiyam (secret) is. Inside the ceiling there is an empty space and this is the secret, popularly known as the Chidambaram ragasiyam. The curious mind will obviously ask why all this mystery regarding this secret. After all it is but an empty space - that's all. But this empty space is of much more significance than meets the eye. This shows us how transient and temporary our lives really are and that we like the empty space are nothing and should therefore be simple and cultivate no ego. This concept of eliminating one's ego comes to the fore once

more. Even in the universal dance of Nadaraja, Lord Sivan tramples upon the dwarf like figure called muyalakan. This muyalakan represents ego that exists in each and every one of us. By trampling on this ego Lord Sivan shows us that in order to realize God we must rid ourselves of this ego. Further this empty space is also symbolic since this temple represents the aspect of “space”, signifying the omnipresent nature of Lord Sivan.

From Chidambaram we now go to Kaalahasthi, a town in the Indian State of Andhra Pradesh. Here the expression of Lord Sivan as representing the natural element of wind can be found. Amongst the temples that represent the five natural elements this is the only temple situated outside of Tamil Nadu.

In the town of Kanjipuram we find the famous temple of Lord Sivan representing the Earth. Here, there is a lingam in the moolastanam ( sanctum sanctorum) to represent Lord Sivan.

In a town called Thiruvaavanai Kaaval we find a very interesting temple of Lord Sivan. This temple represents the natural element of water. It is interesting because in the moolastanam of this temple there is a lingam, under which there is an eternal spring. As a result of this, this lingam is always half submerged in water. Lord Sivan is referred to here as Jabu Eesvarar (The Lord in water).

And now we come to the final element and that is fire. Lord Sivan is celebrated in all His glory as the aspect of fire as Arunachalaesvarar at Thiruvanaamalai. At this temple situated on a hill Lord Sivan is venerated as fire. The famous puranic story behind the significance of the festival of Karthigai Deepam finds its source at this temple. This temple is also famous for another reason. Arunagirinaathar who wrote the Thirupugazh (a

selection of songs in praise of Lord Murugan sung in a particular fashion designed to invoke devotion towards Lord Murugan), lived in this town of Thiruvanaamalai. At one stage in his life Arunagirinaathar was continuously experiencing many setbacks. His problems continued and he felt that he was falling into a bottomless pit and there was simply no solution to his problems. Overcome by all of this he decided to end his life. He chose a novel way to do this. He climbed atop the gopuram (the temple tower) and was just about to jump from it when he heard a voice asking him not to do this. This was of course the divine voice of his Kula Deivam, Lord Murugan. Overwhelmed by this divine intervention Arunagirinaathar decided against ending his life, accepted God into his life and started singing the Thirupugazh.

In Saivism, Sivan is formless but He is given a form so that man's senses can grasp these forms and through them contemplate Lord Sivan. Examples of these manifest forms are the Sivalingam, Nadaraja, Dakshinamurthy, Arthanarisvarar, Arunachallam, etc.

A closer look at a few of these manifest forms will be informative.

### **3.4.6 Forms of Lord Sivan**

#### **3.4.6.1 The Sivalingam**

The Sivalingam is the universal symbol of Lord Sivan worshipped throughout the world. In all Sivan temples there is at least one representation of Lord Sivan in the form of the Lingam.

**“ The Lingam along with the Yoni are geometrical or visual representations of the fundamental Siva Tatvas of Natham and Bindu. They are universal and present everywhere manifesting themselves at various levels- the physical, biological, psychological, and so forth. They are also known as Sivam and Sakti and always operate in union at all levels. Only at the biological level they manifest**

**themselves as the sexual organs of the male and the female. But they exist also at the psychological and spiritual levels.” (Loganathan, 1996 : 26)**

#### **3.4.6.2 Nadaraja**

The Nadaraja, as the word implies presents Lord Sivan as the King of Dance or the image of Lord Sivan in a dance pose. This image occupies great importance at the Sivan temple in Chidambaram. Nadaraja here has four arms, a common feature in most iconography of Indian Deities. This of course is to implant the idea of super human power. Of the four arms the left back arm holds a pot filled with fire; the right back arm holds a drum to signify the first sound of the earth ; the right forward arm is held in the pose of abaiyam (benediction), bestowing grace on the devotees; and the left forward arm is held in a sweep. The right foot is pressed firmly on a demon that symbolizes ego, showing that in order to reach moksha one has to rid oneself of one's ego. The left foot is lifted and held across the right one in a dance pose to show motion. At the back of the form of Nadaraja there is an arch and on it are fifty one little flames.

The arch signifies the entire cosmos, the stage on which Lord Sivan performs His unceasing dance. When Lord Sivan dances to the Uddukai ( a drum) sounds and produces the primordial sound OM. The sound emanating from this Uddukai is not without meaning, in fact it symbolizes the first sounds of the Tamil language. Hence from sound, speech emanated and from speech knowledge. In other words the drum is symbolic of creation.

The right forward arm with the palm facing front is symbolic of Lord Sivan's grace and the protection extended to His devotees. It also stands for the orderly preservation and sustenance of the universe. The fire in the left backward arm is symbolic of destruction or

release of the soul from the cycle of rebirth. Saivism subscribes to the theory of Karma, which means that during innumerable births one commits certain deeds, reaps the fruits of those actions, and when the body dies the soul is reborn; it again commits deeds and the cycle goes on endlessly. During this time the soul advances according to the accumulation of all the good deeds it has done over the various births. When God finds that respite is earned for the soul from this cycle of rebirth, He releases the soul from this cycle and allows it to attain moksha.

The left forward arm points to the dwarf (muyalakan) signifying that if one rids oneself of one's ego one can have God's grace. The right foot stands firmly on the dwarf called muyalakan. This demon is symbolic of man's ego and ignorance. If man can rid himself of his ego he can surrender himself totally to God and realize eternal bliss and peace. The ego obstructs such a surrender. The ego is personified here as the demon called muyalakan. Lord Sivan tramples firmly on the ego showing us the futility of ego and reaffirming the belief that once the ego is subjugated the soul is free to attain moksha.

Finally we have the raised left foot. This is held in a free pose of poise and ease and is symbolic of the Lord's grace. The culmination of spiritual effort according to Saivism is to rest under the feet of the Lord and to languish in His grace and mercy.

Nadaraja is also seen to have a smiling countenance. This is symbolic of His acceptance even of errant souls. Discussed above are the five functions of Lord Nadaraja, which are Creation, Preservation, Dissolution, Obscuration and the Conferment of grace. The dance of Lord Nadaraja is the performance of these five- fold functions.

### **3.5 Vaishnavism**

#### **3.5.1 Definition of Vaishnavism**

Lord Vishnu is considered to be one of the Thrimoorthy, the other Two being Lord Sivan and Lord Brahman. While Lord Sivan's task is destruction, (of rebirths) and Lord Brahman's task that of creation, as part of this Thrimoorthy, Lord Vishnu is in charge of preservation.

However, in Vaishnava philosophy Lord Vishnu is seen as the Supreme Being who governs all the functions. The word Vishnu defines as the "Indweller" in all beings ( Arunachalam, 1982 : 28). Lord Vishnu is also referred to as Thirumal ( the holy great One).

#### **3.5.2 The Temple at Thirupathi**

Although there are countless temples of Lord Vishnu throughout India, His abode in the town of Thirupathi in the southern State of Andhra Pradesh is considered to be most auspicious. Thousands of visitors from all over the world flock to this temple daily. Incidentally next to the Vatican this temple is considered to be the wealthiest in the world. Many South Africans make a trip to India with the sole purpose of undertaking a pilgrimage to Thirupathi. Such is the glorious history of this magnificent temple.

#### **3.5.3 The Temple at Shri Rangam**

Another famous temple of Lord Vishnu's is Shri Rangam situated in Thiruchy. Here Lord Vishnu is venerated as Ranganathan. A unique feature of this temple is the unusual statue of Lord Vishnu in the sanctum sanctorum. Here there is a massive statue of the Lord in a sleeping position. The origin of this temple is very interesting. Ravana the king of Sri Lanka had a brother by the name of Vibhishana. Vibhishana did not

approve of his brother's abduction of Sita and sympathized with Lord Raman. After defeating Ravana Raman blesses Vibhishana with a statue of Mahavishnu, telling him that the statue shall remain at whichever place it is left to rest. Vibhishana, as a gesture of goodwill joins Raman as far as Ramesvaram to see Raman off. On his return to Sri Lanka Vibhishana stops at the town of Shri Rangam on the banks of the Cavery river to answer the call of nature. He sees a shepherd ( Lord Ganesha in disguise) and asks him to hold the statue for him. Ganesha in His earnest quest to have this statue remain in Tamil Nadu tells Vibhishana that He would hold the statue only until the count of three and then He would place the statue on the ground. Vibhishana agrees and quickly goes off towards the river. The witty Ganesha quickly counts 1,2,3, and places the statue on the ground remembering the condition under which Lord Raman gave Vibhishana the statue. Consequently, the statue became rooted in this town of Shri Rangam.

Hence Lord Vishnu is revered as Ranganathan here and His consort is revered as Ranganayagee (the heroine of Ranganathan). For His contribution Lord Ganesha is revered at a hilltop temple at the base of which is located the Shri Rangam temple. The name of Lord Ganesha's temple is 'Uhicchi Pillayaar Kovil' and is one of the famous shrines of Lord Ganesha. In addition to these two famous temples there are many others throughout Tamil Nadu for the exclusive worship of Lord Vishnu.

#### **3.5.4 Temples for Lord Vishnu in South Africa**

In the South African context, although there are temples which bear the names of Lord Vishnu like the "Magazine Shri Vishnu Alayam" and the "Shri Ranganathan Alayam" these temples do not confine their worship exclusively to Lord Vishnu.

### **3.5.5 Vaishnavite Alwars**

Just as the Saivite saints who sang in praise of Lord Sivan are called Nayanmaars, the saints who sang hymns in praise of Lord Vishnu are called Alwars. They are twelve in number and their period ranges from the 6th century to the 9th century AD. A collection of all the divine songs sung by the Alwars are called “ Naalayira Divya Prabandham”. Let us now look at the life history of some of the more popular Vaishnavite saints, called Alwars ( Arunachalam :1982 ,124 ).

#### **3.5.5.1 Periya Alwar**

He was a brahman who lived in a town called Shree Villiputtur and his given name was Vishnu Chittan. As one who grew up in a brahman household he was immersed in the scriptures pertaining to Lord Vishnu. His occupation was to tend the flower gardens and to daily provide the temple with threaded garlands, made from flowers plucked from his garden, to adorn the statues of Lord Vishnu. Nothing gave Vishnu Chittan more joy than to serve his Lord in this way. Once when the procession of Lord Vishnu took to the streets, afraid that someone might caste an evil eye on the Lord, Vishnu Chittan sang a poem to ward off the evil eye. Because of this protective act and because most of his songs on Lord Krishna, who was the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, were sung by him placing himself in the position of Lord Krishna’s mother, Yasodha, he has been hailed by the Vaishnavite community as the Periya Alwar (the elder Alwar). Periya Alwar has sung 473 verses and these are called the Periyalwar Thirumoli. Most of the songs sung by him are devoted to the Krishna Avatar of Lord Vishnu. In his songs he was able to enter the mind of Yasodha and relive Lord Krishna’s childhood in Gokulam. Periya Alwar’s songs are recognised as some of the greatest pieces of poetry not only in the Vaishnavite community but in Tamil literature as a whole because of its emotive content.

### **3.5.5.2 Andal**

Andal was the only female poet amongst the Alvars and she was the adopted daughter of Periya Alvar. Like her father she too found profound joy in picking flowers to make garlands for the statue of Lord Vishnu in the temple in which she and her father lived. As time went by Andal began to develop a special, close relationship with the Lord, seeing the Lord as someone she would like to be married to. As a result at nightfall when the temple was quiet and everyone had gone off to sleep she used to enact this make believe relationship with the Lord by teasing and playing with Him. She was also in the habit of wearing the garland that was around the Lord's neck. One morning as always Andal's father went into the temple to perform the daily prayer when he spotted a strand of hair on the garland around Lord Vishnu's neck. He was horrified, to say the least, as he felt that the garland was now polluted. He was further troubled as the garland was fine when he had placed it around the Lord's neck the night before. He was also aware that between then and now no one had entered the temple as the temple was locked. He was totally puzzled. That night he watched in hiding hoping to find a solution to this puzzle. In the dead of night to his surprise, he saw Andal enacting her love scene with the Lord. The furious father reprimanded his daughter and forbade her from entering the temple and picking the flowers and making the garland for the Lord. That night the Lord appeared in the father's dream and told him that only the garland worn by Andal pleased Him. Andal's yearning for the Lord ends with marriage and a blissful union with Him at Shri Rangam.

### **3.5.5.3 Thirupaavai**

Andal has sung 173 verses altogether and a collection of some of these verses is called the Thirupaavai. Very early in the morning the young girls of the village used to go in groups to the tank or river to bathe. Andal, too, as a little girl used to join them and used to call out to her companions to join her to the tank or river. Andal in calling out to her friends

used to do so by means of singing songs in praise of Lord Krishna. These songs had as their content the procuring of boons like the grace of Lord Krishna, food, healthy cows and good husbands. This was also the central theme of the Thirupaavai. A unique feature of the Thirupaavai is that it is a marvellous combination of devotion and love poetry. The Thirupaavai is a household name in the Vaishnavite community and is recited daily in the Tamil month of Margazhi (December). Some of Andal's other verses are contained in a literary work called the Thirumoli. Andal's Thirumoli opens with an invocation to Manmathan, the God of Love. From all the verses in the Thirumoli, Andal's narration of her fantasy dream wedding with Lord Vishnu is most arresting as it is packed with poetic brilliance. The verses are so graphically illustrative that one can easily believe that one is witnessing an actual wedding.

### **3.5.6 The concept of Lord Vishnu as the Preserver**

**"Lord Vishnu as the preserver is based on two assumptions. The first assumption teaches us that man is born many times over and each life represents a punishment or reward for his previous life according to how well he has followed his predetermined path of duty. If he has performed well, he progresses to become a saint or even God. If not he retrogresses downwards towards a life as a demon. In the second assumption Gods and Demons represent the two poles ( good and evil) of existence. Both poles are active in the world and a continuous struggle is being waged between these two forces. In normal times good and evil are evenly balanced. Sometimes, however, this balance is destroyed and evil gains the upper hand and at such times Vishnu, the Preserver descends on earth in human form to restore balance. There are generally ten accepted incarnations of Lord Vishnu corresponding with the various stages of evolution of life on earth. He appears on earth whenever Dharma( the path of duty) declines and Adharma flourishes to**

restore peace and order in the universe." ( Subramoney, 2000 : 22)

### **3.5.7 Lord Vishnu's Avatharams**

Lord Vishnu is said to have ten avatharams (incarnate in physical form). Subramoney explains each avatharam :

#### **3.5.7.1 The Matsya (the fish)**

At the end of the Kalpa Yuga a great deluge destroyed the earth. Lord Vishnu took the form of a golden fish and manifested on earth. With a rope attached to His horn he dragged the boat which contained the sages and every sample of animal, bird, plant and seed. One of those rescued was Manu, the progenitor of the human race. Matsya is represented with the upper torso of a man and the lower torso of a fish and was responsible for saving the universe.

#### **3.5.7.2 The Kurma (the tortoise)**

During the great deluge of the Kalpa Yuga many valuable things were lost, the most important of which was the precious ambrosia ( the nectar of immortality). The loss of ambrosia threatened the continuity of life on earth. Both the Gods and the demons fought to find this ambrosia. When the Gods enlisted the help of Lord Vishnu to find the ambrosia, He asked Them to churn the ocean using Mount Mandara to bring up the ambrosia. However, during this churning the mountain began to slide due to its weight. Lord Vishnu took the form of a tortoise ( Kurma) and lent His curved back as a pivot to support Mount Mandara. During the churning the ambrosia rose from the ocean and Kurma gave the ambrosia to only the Gods to make them immortal and in so doing established dharma.

### **3.5.7.3 The Varaha ( the boar)**

The demon Hiranyaksha acquired a boon of invulnerability from Lord Brahman. This resulted in him being haughty and he began to persecute the mortals and Gods. Intoxicated by this power he stole the Vedas from Lord Brahman and dragged Goddess Bhuma Devi into the depths of the ocean. When the Gods enlisted the help of Lord Vishnu, He manifested on earth as a boar ( Varaha) . He killed the demon Hiranyaksha with His sharp horns. He recovered the Vedas so that once more dharma can be restored on earth and He released the earth so that it once more floated on the surface of the ocean.

### **3.5.7.4 Narasimha ( the man-lion)**

Hiranyaksha's brother, Hiranyakasipu, also acquired a boon of immunity against humans, beasts and Gods. Driven by this new found power he forbade the worship of Gods and instead substituted worship to himself. His son, Prahalada, a staunch devotee of Lord Vishnu, refused to follow his father's commands. This only infuriated Hiranyakasipu who tortured his son to the point of trying to kill him. To help His ardent devotee, Lord Vishnu incarnated as Narasimha ( man-lion) and came to earth as half man and half beast ( since Hiranyaksha's boon did not include immunity from such a form) and destroyed the demon. Narasimha is therefore the embodiment of valour and strength.

### **3.5.7.5 The Vamana (the dwarf)**

This fifth incarnation took place in the Treta Yuga. Bali, the grandson of Prahalada, became rich and powerful. This drove him to conquer the three worlds within a short span of time, even robbing Lord Indran of His heavenly kingdom. When Lord Indran's mother enlisted the help of the Gods, They sent Lord Vishnu to restore dharma. Lord Vishnu manifested on earth as Vamana (a dwarf). Vamana in the guise of a rishi approached Bali and asked him for a gift of land that could be covered by three steps. As soon as Bali

granted the gift, Vamana grew into a giant and in just two steps crossed the two worlds of heaven and earth and pushed Bali into the netherworld.

#### **3.5.7.6 Parasuraman**

This incarnation also took place during the Treta Yuga when the Ksatriya caste were trying to rule supreme over the others, especially the Brahmins. Lord Vishnu incarnated as Parasuraman the son of a Brahman couple, Jamadagni and Renuka, destroyed the Ksatriya caste and restored the power to the Brahmins.

#### **3.5.7.7 Raman (the Hero of the Ramayanam)**

This incarnation occurred whilst Parasuraman was still on earth. Raman met Parasuraman and absorbed His power unto Himself. The story of Raman is encapsulated in the Ramayanam, the moral of which is the lessons of dharma and virtue.

#### **3.5.7.8 Lord Krishna**

Lord Krishna who is regarded as the full manifestation of Lord Vishnu has His message delivered in the Bhagavad Gita. Kamsa after usurping the throne from his father abused his power and created mayhem. In order to restore dharma, the Gods sought the help of Lord Vishnu. Vishnu descended on earth as Krishna to destroy Kamsa and restore the throne to Ugrasena, Kamsa's father. Lord Krishna was born to Vasudeva and Devaki but was brought up by Nanda and Yashoda to be saved from death at the hands of his evil uncle Kamsa. Later Krishna became Arjuna's charioteer in the war of Kurushetra between the Pandavas and Kauravas. The story of this war and Krishna's vital role in the war make up the Mahabharatam.

### **3.5.7.9 Buddha**

Buddha is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu who appeared at the beginning of the present Kali Yuga to get rid of the evil forces opposing God. He advised the demons to renounce the Vedas, thereby causing them to lose their powers. Buddha through His teachings showed the people how to attain salvation by seeking God. He asked people to show reverence to all life by denouncing animal sacrifices and all rituals. He led a disciplined lifestyle free from all desires and told His followers to look within oneself for all the answers of the world.

### **3.5.7.10 Kalki ( an avatharam yet to be born )**

Lord Vishnu as Kalki will appear at the end of the present age, the Kali Yuga to restore world order. It is believed that Kalki will be responsible for the final destruction of all that is wicked and that He will prepare for the renewal of creation and the resurgence of virtue (Subramoney, 2000 : 22-25).

All these avatharams are connected with some puranic story and an evolutionary order may be noticed in them. They are all forms of Lord Vishnu and command equal veneration as Lord Vishnu Himself. The iconography of Lord Vishnu varies according to which avatharam is portrayed.

### **3.5.8 Symbols associated with Lord Vishnu**

Normally the statue of Lord Vishnu, in human form is seen with four arms. Here again this is to reinforce the idea of super human powers. In one hand He holds a conch (sangu). The conch is symbolic of creation. When held close to the ears one can hear the OM sound which as we have discussed earlier is the primordial sound of creation. Further, the conch is closely associated with Lord Vishnu because He is considered as the Lord of the waters. The other hand holds the wheel (chakkaram). This represents the balance of the

universe and also displays equilibrium. The third hand holds a lotus flower (padma). The lotus is always closely associated with divinity because of its unparalleled and infinite beauty. Further the lotus is the only flower that grows in mud yet remains pure and beautiful signifying that there is hope for even errant souls to reach moksha. Finally in the fourth hand He holds a mace (gada) proving Lord Vishnu's supremacy as the Lord of the Universe.

### **3.5.9 Some Important Vaishnavite Festivals.**

#### **3.5.9.1 Vaikuntha Ekadasa**

This annual festival is celebrated in the Tamil month of Margazhi (November/December). Like Sivaraathri it is principally a night for fasting, keeping vigil and singing praises in honour of Lord Vishnu. It is believed that a person who does this is certain to gain admission to Vaikuntha which is the eternal abode of Lord Vishnu. In the South Indian context this festival is considered to be the most important among the annual festivals celebrated in honour of Lord Vishnu.

#### **3.5.9.2 Puratassi Viratham**

Amongst South African Tamils this festival is the most important one dedicated to Lord Vishnu. It is observed in the Tamil month of Puratassi (September/October). During this month devotees observe a very strict month long fast (viratham) and offer special prayers to Lord Vishnu on a Saturday which is considered auspicious to Lord Vishnu. Temples take out the statue of Lord Vishnu on a procession during these Saturdays. When preparing food items for the prayer the strictest of precautions are taken to ensure cleanliness and piety. A very noteworthy feature of this festival is the public reading of the "Shree Veerabogha Vasantharaayir Sarithiram" an important Vaishnavite literature that documents the prediction of events to occur in this world. The book also informs us of the

birth of the Kalki avatharam of Lord Vishnu, to restore virtue and world peace.

### **3.6 Saktham**

#### **3.6.1 Definition of Saktham**

Saktham is the philosophy and the religion of the people who worship God as Sakthi or as the Divine Mother, exclusively. According to the Saivite philosophy, Goddess Sakthi is said to be the energy of Lord Sivan and hence is seen as inseparable from Him. This is evident in the sculpture of Arthanarisvarar which is a visual representation of the concept of oneness or inseparability of Sivan and Sakthi. Here Sakthi occupies the left half of Lord Sivan.

#### **3.6.2 Earliest evidences of Sakthi Worship**

Evidences of Sakthi worship can be traced to the earliest available Tamil literature the Tholkappiyam. Here Sakthi is referred to as Kottravai. She is also mentioned in the Sangam works (300 BC - 300 AD) as Kottravai.

#### **3.6.3 Forms of Sakthi**

Goddess Sakthi, according to Her followers, is the supreme Mother who is the benevolent creator and sustainer. As the bestower of prosperity (both material and spiritual wealth), She is revered as Lutchmee. As the one who gives knowledge and wisdom She is revered as Sarasvathy, and as Paravathy She is the giver of strength. ( Arunachalam, 1982 : 42 ) Sakthi is given a distinct name in each temple based on local legends. Some examples of these follow: In the town of Madurai, Sakthi is known as Meenakshi, the daughter of the ruling Pandiya king who married Sivan as Lord Sunderasan. In the town of Kanchipuram She is revered as Kamaachi, the consort of Lord Sivan as Ekambaranathan. In the North Indian town of Varanasi She is referred to as Visalaatchi, the consort of Visvanathan. As

Rajarajesvari, she is the presiding Deity at Shri Chakra. In Kanyakumari She is known as Bagavathy Ammal. And in Thirukadavur She is known as Abirami. All these are placid, calm and benevolent aspects of Sakthi.

In Her fierce form She is known as Durga and Kali. These forms were assumed for the destruction of the asuras (demonic kings). In addition to these forms Sakthi also manifests Herself in the form of a number of Village/Folk Deities which will be discussed in later chapters.

### **3.6.4 Some Important Saktham Literature**

#### **3.6.4.1 Lalitha Sahasranama**

This work documents the greatness of Sakthi.

#### **3.6.4.2 Mariamman Thaalatu** ( Gita Series : 1988 )

This piece of literature depicts the life history and the greatness of Goddess Mariamman.

#### **3.6.4.3 Abirami Anthathi**

This is a collection of poems in praise of Goddess Sakthi by Abirami Pattar.

#### **3.6.5.1 Kuuzh Uutral**

( commonly referred to as the Porridge Prayer and will be discussed in the chapter on " Popular Folk Deities worshipped by South African Tamils").

#### **3.6.5.2 Draupadiamman Festival** ( the fire walking festival)

Devotees walk barefoot on embers to show their devotion to the Goddess.

#### **3.6.5.3 Sarasvathy Poojay**

This is a prayer in honour of Sarasvathy. As Sarasvathy, Sakthi is the personification of all types of knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is the antithesis of the darkness of ignorance. Therefore She is wears a white sari and is seated on a white lotus.

#### **3.6.5.4 Lutchmee Poojay**

This prayer honours Goddess Lutchmee who is the Goddess of both material and spiritual wealth. She wears a red sari and is seated on a red lotus - red representing the colour of prosperity.

#### **3.6.5.5 Aadi Velli**

Special prayers that are reserved for Goddess Sakthi on the first Friday of the Tamil month of Aadi.

#### **3.6.5.6 Navaraathree**

Nine nights set aside in the month of Puratassi for the exclusive worship of the three aspects of Goddess Sakthi ( the first three nights for Goddess Durgha, the next three nights for Goddess Lutchmee and the final three nights for Goddess Sarasvathy).

#### **3.6.6 Iconography**

Most images of Sakthi whether carved out of stone or metal or formed with mud have four or more hands ( to denote supernatural powers) and a distinct skin colour and embodies the epitome of female beauty. Let us examine what Sakthi holds in Her four hands and the significance of those items. In one hand She holds the noose, indicating Her control over errant and wayward souls. The axe in the second hand symbolises the removal of desires, attachments and impediments. The hand in the abayam pose denotes the granting of grace and boons to Her devotees. The flame that is usually found behind the statue shows the Goddess's power to destroy ignorance through the divine light of illumination. Sakthi's vehicle is the lion, which signifies Her supremacy over the other deities. It should also be noted that there are different iconographical representations for the variants of Sakthi.

### **3.7 Ganapatyam**

Ganesha worship is the most prevalent and he is the most popular of the Hindu Deities worshipped throughout the world. His worship extends to the Jains and Buddhists as well.

He is always worshipped at the beginning of any occasion or function since He is considered to be the remover of obstacles.

### **3.7.1 Iconography**

In Hindu mythological literature Lord Ganesha is portrayed as having a human form with an elephant head. One of his tusks is broken. He has four arms and a conspicuously large stomach. In spite of all of this He is a picture of boundless beauty and bliss exuding warmth and tranquility. This form is also highly symbolic and is one of the best examples of reconciliation of opposites

( the size of the rat to that of the elephant) and unity in diversity. The shape and form of Lord Ganesha to the ignorant mind may appear to be ridiculous and far fetched, but this form is highly suggestive of perfect harmony, equanimity and peace. The elephant represents supreme wisdom as elephants are considered to be wise. Further the elephant head itself when watched closely gives the vision of the formation of the symbol OM (the Sanskrit OM ). This is an auspicious and holy symbol of the Hindus. OM is always uttered at the beginning and at the end of a lesson, for it is believed that unless the syllable OM precedes a lesson , learning will slip away and unless it follows a lesson nothing will be retained. Thus the OM is the introductory word and Lord Ganesha, who represents the Om is the primary Deity and it is for this reason that Lord Ganesha is worshipped first at the commencement of any prayer or function.

The large ears signify that like an elephant He too listens to EVERYTHING and can pick up the minutest of sounds within a wide radius. The large ears also reaffirm the fact that God is omniscient. The trunk represents the sensitive receptor of stimuli. It also shows great strength. The elephant uses the trunk to transport large pieces of logs and at the same time it is sensitive enough to pick up even a needle from the floor. The trunk also

represents intellect. This intellect is a discerning faculty of man which promotes wisdom. The trunk is forever moving, implying that man too should always be active in his quest for the ultimate truth. Lord Ganesha's single tusk is symbolic in that it shows that Ganesha is unswayed by challenges and that He is singleminded in action and in the pursuit of the highest knowledge. In the Puranic stories it is said that Lord Ganesha broke off His tusk and used it as a scribe to write the Mahabaratham, showing that no sacrifice is too great for a noble cause. The Lord's large stomach signifies the space within the Lord which contains all the objects and beings of the world. His large belly represents the cosmos in its entirety. It conveys the message that a perfected man can consume and digest whatever experiences and challenges he encounters. Lord Ganesha sits with one leg folded up and the other resting on the ground. The leg on the ground indicates that while a part of the Lord is dealing with worldly matters, the other part of Him is forever rooted in deep meditation. The four arms represents the mind, the intellect, the ego and the consciousness. In His right backward hand He holds an axe which symbolises the destruction of all desires and attachments. It also shows that Lord Ganesha is the supreme ruler of the universe. In His right forward hand, Lord Ganesha holds a lotus flower. The lotus flower represents the supreme goal of human evolution. The Lord attracts all His followers to aspire to that exalted state through proper spiritual guidance. Further to this the lotus is a flower of amazing beauty yet it grows and emerges from mud. Like the lotus man too can rise above the evil and vices of this manifested world. The left backward hand holds a noose which is meant to pull His followers from worldly attachments and to direct them on the correct path to reach God. In the left forward hand He holds a sweetened rice ball (mothagam) which represents the joyous rewards of spiritual seeking.

A follower of Lord Ganesha gains the joy of satisfaction and contentment as he progresses on the path of spiritual evolution. Lord Ganesha has as His vahanam (vehicle) the rat. Just

like the rat man is confronted by desires that gnaw at him all the time. One should suppress these desires in order to evolve spiritually. ( Subramoney, 1998 :16).

### **3.7.2 Some important literature on Lord Ganesha**

#### **3.7.2.1 Ganesha Upanishad**

#### **3.7.2.2 Ganesha Puranam**

#### **3.7.2.3 Vinayaka Puranam**

This work was written by Kachiyappa Munivar and like the other two contains thousands of verses extolling the greatness of Lord Ganesha.

### **3.7.3 Important festivals in honour of Lord Ganesha**

At this point it should be reaffirmed that since Lord Ganesha is seen as the Lord of beginnings at all functions, festivals, and occasions prayers are first offered to Lord Ganesha to invoke His blessings for success. In addition to this the festival of Vinayaka Sathurthi is observed world wide in honour of the Lord Ganesha in the Tamil month of Aavani (September/ October). On this day sweetmeats, fruit, coconut and other auspicious offerings are made to Lord Ganesha. Images of Lord Ganesha are given a ceremonial bath and adorned for the special prayers.

### **3.8 Murugan Worship**

#### **3.8.1 The origin of Lord Murugan**

According to Hindu mythology , the Devas were unable to combat the sustained attacks by the forces of evil. They went to Lord Sivan to implore His help. Moved by their requests and their plight, Lord Sivan opened His third eye which was concealed in the middle of His forehead. As soon as Lord Sivan did this six sparks of fire sprang out of the eye and from them was born Lord Murugan.

The vel (a spear) and the peacock are very important symbols of Lord Murugan and are synonymous with Lord Murugan. Naidu in the booklet, " The Kavady Festival", gives the following explanation for the vel and the peacock (Naidu,1987 : 6). He says that the vel represents the human mind which is the seat of knowledge. Lord Murugan holds the vel in His hands to remind us that the mind has to be controlled at all times. The uppermost tip of the vel is sharp and pointed denoting that our mind too should be sharp, probing and incisive- penetrating the surface, unearthing the truth and discriminating right from wrong. The vel is broad. Our minds too should have a great capacity for love , compassion, tolerance, understanding and forgiveness. Naidu further describes the significance of the height and depth of the vel by stating that our minds should scale the bounds of limitations, reaching great heights that seem never possible. At the same time our thoughts must be deep and wise, penetrating the veil of ignorance. The peacock is the vahanam of Lord Murugan. Naidu says that the peacock is a rare and beautiful creation that represents music and dance- the rhythm and harmony essential in our lives. The peacock is the slayer of serpents and is alert and swift like Lord Murugan himself. The peacock is also full of pride and vanity. Lord Murugan perched on the peacock the most regal mount, illustrates that He has conquered ego, vanity and pride and that we too should do like wise.

It is also important to note that Lord Murugan is the most popular Deity worshipped by South Africans in general. One has to only look at the number of people who take part in the Kavady Festival to see why this view is true.

The word "Muruga" conjures up the following meanings : youth, devotion, beauty, fragrance and prince. Lord Murugan encapsulates all these qualities. Lord Murugan is also seen as the God of Love and is considered to be the Deity presiding over the hilly regions. It is for this very reason that most of Lord Murugan's shrines are to be found on a

mountain or hillock.

### **3.8.2 The Six Abodes of Lord Murugan**

There are six temples scattered throughout Tamil Nadu that are considered to be of special significance to Lord Murugan. As one would understand all temples are special places but these six temples are repeatedly mentioned in literature as “Aarupaday Veedugal” ( the six abodes ) because in the course of history some miraculous events took place there, hence its special significance.

These six temples are as follows:

#### **3.8.2.1 Thiruparankunram**

The significance of this temple lies in the fact that Lord Murugan after having married Devayani appeared in all his wedding regalia to His devotees at this temple. The most important festival celebrated at this temple is the Thai Poesam Kavady festival.

#### **3.8.2.2 Thiruchendur**

Lord Murugan after declaring war on the asuran Surapadman, redeemed the Devas, who were captured by Surapadman, from slavery and rested his army at this temple. This temple also provides the source for the “Kanthar Kali Venpar”, a compilation of devotional songs on Lord Murugan sung by Kumaragurubara, who until then was dumb and began to sing after receiving the grace of Lord Murugan.

#### **3.8.2.3 Thiruvaavinankudi**

This temple is popularly known as Pazhani. In ancient times this temple was known as Aavinankudi because the area in which the temple is located was inhabited by the people whose primary occupation was hunting. The Tamil word for people belonging to this

occupation is Aavinankudi. Later the name changed to Pazhani according to the famous legend about the fruit of wisdom that was given to Lord Sivan by Narada. Undecided as to which son He should give the fruit to, Lord Sivan devised a plan and told both His sons, Lord Ganesha and Lord Murugan, that whichever of them goes around the world and returns first shall claim the fruit. Immediately Lord Murugan mounted His peacock and dashed off around the world. Lord Ganesha on the other hand went around His parents, Lord Sivan and Goddess Sakthi, claiming Them to be His world and He claimed the fruit. Lord Murugan felt that He was cheated, sulked and returned to earth to the spot that is today called Pazhani. Both His parents also descended upon earth to console Their son. They tell him, " pazham nee than appa. Unnukku veru pazham yetharku". This translates as, " When You are the fruit why do you need another fruit". This is how the name of this temple was transformed to Pazhani ( You are the fruit).

#### **3.8.2.4 Swamimalai**

The fame of this temple lies in the imprisonment of Lord Brahman by the young Lord Murugan for not knowing the meaning of the pranava, Om ( the mystic mantra). The statue in this temple is an interesting one . It shows Lord Murugan as a little boy sitting on His father's lap explaining the meaning of the OM to Him.

#### **3.8.2.5 Pazha Muthir Solay**

This temple owes its fame to the leela ( divine play) that was enacted between Lord Murugan and the Sangam poetess, Avayaar. One day Avayaar came across a fruit tree and yearned for the fruit from the tree but the branches were too high. As a result of which Avayaar was unable to pluck the fruit. Lord Murugan watched this and decided to play a joke on Avayaar. He came to her and offered to climb the tree and shake the branches and told Avayaar that she can then pick the fruit that fall. But before that He asked her, "Paati

unnukku sutta pazham venduma, sudaatha pazham venduma? ", ( Granny, do you want a hot fruit or a fruit that is not hot?). Avayaar was totally confused. What is a hot fruit, she pondered. When Lord Murugan shook the branches a whole lot of fruit fell to the ground. Avayaar picked up a ripened fruit and blew the sand off the fruit. To which Lord Murugan replied, " Granny is the fruit hot as I see you blowing it? " Avayaar then realized that this little Boy had had a joke at her expense. Lord Murugan then revealed His identity to Avayaar. This temple is famed for this story.

### **3.8.2.6 Thanigay Malai**

The last of the famed six abodes of Lord Murugan is Thanigay Malai. Lord Murugan married Valli and appeared to His devotees together with His consort at this temple. Murugan has two consorts: Valli represents "ichasakthi" (volition) and Devayani represents "kriyasakthi" (action).

### **3.8.3 Some important Literature on Lord Murugan**

#### **3.8.3.1 Thiru Murugaatruppadai**

#### **3.8.3.2 Paripaadal**

#### **3.8.3.3 Skandapuramam**

#### **3.8.3.4 Thirupugazh**

### **3.8.4 Important Festivals in honour of Lord Murugan**

#### **3.8.4.1 The Kavady Festival**

In the South African context three important Kavady Festivals are widely observed. The first and most popular one is called the "Thai Poosam Kavady" which is observed in the Tamil month of Thai (January). The second one is observed in the Tamil month of Panguni (March/April) and is called the "Panguni Uthiram Kavady". The third Kavady festival,

observed in the Tamil month of Chitirai (April) is referred to as the “Chitirai Paruvam Kavady”. Each of these kavadies is observed in the above mentioned months for specific reasons. In ancient times, when man used to travel great distances to worship at a temple of his choice he used to carry with him food for the road and his offerings to the Deity in little bundles. As time progressed he realised that it was easier to carry these bundles if he balanced them on a pole ( a porlangium) and carried the pole across his shoulder. From this stemmed the term “Kavady”. Nowadays people have elaborated on this idea and have modified the original structure to define the kavady now as an arch like structure beautifully decorated with peacock feathers, flowers, etc. On either side of the Kavady devotees carry containers of milk which is used in the ceremonial bathing of the statue of Lord Murugan. The Kavady is carried by devotees as a token of thanksgiving for the Deity’s grace, for securing boons from the Deity and as penance. Whatever the reasons, the prayer is observed with utmost piety and steadfast devotion.

#### **3.8.4.1 Skanda Shasthi Viratham**

This festival marks the six day battle between the asura Surapadman and Lord Murugan and is observed over six days during the Tamil month of Aypasi (October). During this period people observe strict fasts by abstaining from meat, alcohol, sexual contact, etc. Lord Murugan received the vel (spear) from Goddess Parvathy at the temple in the town of Sikkal. With this vel Lord Murugan destroyed Surapadman at the temple at Thiruchendur. Hence this auspicious festival is celebrated with much pomp and piety at these two temples.

#### **3.9 Summary**

This chapter has focused attention on the various forms of worship, excluding Folk Deity worship, of South African Tamils. Its various aspects like its definition, symbolism,

important literature and important festivals were discussed at length. An explanation of the different forms of worship is vital for it provides a better understanding of the religious practices of South African Tamils in general, and when viewed against this backdrop the worship of Folk Deity worship amongst South African Tamils becomes more meaningful.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE CONCEPT OF FOLK DEITY WORSHIP.**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines the concept of Folk Deity worship. In order to provide a definition of Folk Deity, we first need to establish the concept of folk religion. This chapter defines folk religion and gives us an overview of the village life in India. This chapter further looks at ways in which aspects of this culture is orally transmitted and examines the importance of a Folk Deity to the villager. The functions and distinguishing features of Folk Deities are also analysed. The reasons for Folk Deity worship in South Africa are listed. The differences between Mainstream Religious Traditions and Folk Deity worship are also listed. Finally this chapter focuses on the probable origins and stages of development of Folk Deity worship.

#### **4.2 Definition of a Folk Deity.**

The concept of Folk Deities forms an integral part of folk religion with its primary source in Hindu mythology (Whitehead, 1976 :139) .Whitehead further opines that folk religion is the most ancient form of Indian religion with about 80 % of the people of India addressing their worship exclusively to Folk/ Village Deities or a Grama Deivam. Firstly what do we understand by folk religion?

#### **4.3 Folk Culture of Tamil Nadu**

An understanding of folk religion of the Tamils requires firstly an understanding of the village /folk culture of Tamil Nadu. Generally village life in Tamil Nadu is considered as folk life. Hence, for the sake of clarity and uniformity the term Folk Deity will be used to refer to a Village Deity. Tamil Nadu is made up of countless pockets of villages which

function as self supporting entities. Each village has its own demarcated area within which village life is contained. The village is the focal point around which the villagers' lives revolve and the degree of cultural continuity is the most outstanding feature of a village. The essence of Indian culture can only be found in the villages. The villagers live unpretentious, simple lifestyles free from the beguiling influence of western culture.

Further the simple village folk live each day as it comes, worrying only about their immediate existential needs and their world view does not contain highly evolved philosophical teachings like those of the mainstream religious traditions. Life in a Tamil village is full of guarded gaiety , social mirth and unbelievable affection among the members of the village. However, according to my observation in villages in Tamil Nadu, at the same time there are limitations too. Strict codes of moral conduct are meted out by the elders of the village and these have to be religiously adhered to.

Each village has amongst other things its own courts of law (panchayats), fairs and festivals, its own peculiar language dialect, its own traditions and practices and most importantly the powerful divine presence of its very own Folk (Village) Deity or Grama Deivam. The visible existence of a Folk Deity is to the villager a profound reality of the importance and the existence of their spiritual world. The Folk Deity plays an integral part in the lives of the villagers and their lives cannot be divorced from their Folk Deity. Basically the underlying theme of folk religion is the worship of the Folk Deities in return for a bountiful harvest, timely rains, fertility, protection from natural calamities and pestilence, protection from evil forces and protection from diseases and untimely deaths - their basic everyday needs ( Kinsley, 1987 : 200). Almost every village in Tamil Nadu, however insignificant, has a shrine or structure erected to house its Folk Deity. These simple shrines or structures (be it a tree, or a simple mud structure) are scattered all over

the countryside, but are generally found occupying strategic positions on the borders or the entrance of a village.

#### **4.4 Symbols of Folk Deities**

Further, when one drives through the villages of Tamil Nadu, one sees the symbols of the Folk Deities, be it a vel (spear), a sulam (trident), or an image of the Folk Deity made of mud, copper, stone, etc. It is also common to see at the entrances of villages or at the borders a vel or sulam stuck in the ground under a tree to represent a particular Folk Deity. Kinsley is further of the opinion that the deity is represented by its weapons. Brubakers research (cited in Kinsley, 1987 : 199) states that in some cases at the entrance of a village a monumental statue of only the head of the Folk Deity is visible above the ground. Here, it seems that the body of the Folk Deity is the village itself and that the Deity is rooted in the village. The villagers are understood to be living within or upon the body of the Deity.

#### **4.5 Oral Tradition of Folk Religion**

One of the significant features of folk religion is that it is handed down orally from generation to generation. As a result of this there is a tendency to add or delete facts according to one's perception and understanding of folk religion. Therefore the facts are not always consistent. As the years go by this oral tradition is obviously altered and modified to suit individual needs or present, existing trends. This oral tradition is based on innumerable myths that form an important part of this tradition.

##### **4.5.1 Myths Surrounding Folk Deities**

The outsider views this folk religion as a religion based on fear and superstition. But on closer examination one finds that the countless myths surrounding the Folk Deities help

one understand the meaningful worship of Folk Deities through these practices.

Each of these myths tells a special story of great significance. The philosophy behind each myth, however wild and unbelievable it may appear to be is to propagate an ethical code of conduct. This should always be remembered when trying to understand the concept of Folk Deity worship.

#### **4.6 The Role of Folk Deity Worship in Village Life.**

As was stated earlier Folk Deities were worshipped for specific reasons according to the basic existential needs of the villagers. As a result the functions of the Folk Deities were to fulfill these basic needs.

#### **4.7 The Goals of Folk Deity Worship are as follows:**

- 4.7.1 To protect the village and guard it from foreign, invading evil forces and spirits. Hence in most instances statues of the Folk Deities or symbols representing Them are enshrined at the entrances of the village or at its borders.
- 4.7.2 To ward off epidemic diseases like cholera, malaria, smallpox, etc.
- 4.7.3 To keep the cattle healthy and free from diseases. Since the villagers are basically agriculturists cattle are an integral part of their lives.
- 4.7.4 To ward off natural calamities like floods, droughts, pestilence etc.
- 4.7.5 To ensure good timely rains and a bountiful harvest. Since the villagers are basically agriculturists and farming is their livelihood, they depend wholly on their Folk Deities for the fertility of the land, good rains and a bounty harvest. For this reason their dedication towards their Folk Deity is unwavering.
- 4.7.6 For Their blessings in the past and Their mercy in the present.
- 4.7.7 To preside over the village at all times , thereby guaranteeing the villagers a happy,

trouble - free life.

**4.7.8** To protect the villagers from untimely deaths.

The villagers believe that the area in which they live is surrounded by evil spirits who inflict diseases and bring about ill- luck to unprotected victims. They pass through life in constant dread of these invisible enemies. They hence turn to the Folk Deities for help and this conviction propels their firm obedience to their Folk Deities.

#### **4.8 Reasons for the Momentum of Folk Deity Worship in Tamil Nadu**

In return for all these boons the villagers who have a reverential fear towards their Deity appease them with regular worship. The worship of Folk Deities gained momentum for the following reasons:

##### **4.8.1 Caste Structure of Tamil Nadu**

Firstly, the worship of the “Traditional Gods” ( like Sivan, Vishnu, etc.) was reserved for certain castes, usually the higher ones. Here a brief description of the Tamil caste structure is necessary to illustrate this point. In ancient Tamil Nadu people belonged to one of the following four major caste structures. These structures were originally determined by one’s occupation.

###### **4.8.1.1 Brahmins.**

The Brahmins were assigned the duty of maintaining the temples by conducting all the prayers, chanting the Vedas, learning and practising the Agamas and the Sastras, etc. Their whole lives evolved around serving God in this way and their privileged education in the Vedas, Agamas and the Sastras equipped them for this task. Knowledge of the Vedas, Agamas and the Sastras was reserved exclusively for the Brahmins. This spiritual

knowledge was not shared with people belonging to the other castes. The elders in the community passed this education down to future generations. The occupation of the Brahmins was thus to serve God in this way and to guide the community at large in all religious activities.

#### **4.8.1.2 Kshatriyas**

The Kshatriyas belonged to the warrior clan and at one stage dominated the ranks of political authority. Their purpose was to serve their King in war. For these people it was a great honour to die while fighting for their country. The ancient Tamil dynasties of the Sera, Chola and the Pandiyans belonged to the Kshatriya clan.

#### **4.8.1.3 Vaishyas**

This group consisted of the merchants, herdsman, land proprietors etc.

#### **4.8.1.4 Sudras**

This group consisted of the majority of people and included blacksmiths, carpenters, washermen, and generally people involved in manual labour. This group constituted the majority of the Tamil people. The above mentioned castes form the major divisions. There are further thousands of subdivisions within these four major castes.

Generally people who belonged to the lower castes were forbidden to be anywhere near the precincts of the abodes of the "Traditional Gods" ( Lord Sivan, Lord Vishnu, Goddess Sakthi, Lord Ganesha and Lord Murugan). Here we can quote the example of the Saivite saint , Nandanar to illustrate the point. Nandanar who lived in the South Indian town of Tiruppungur, belonged to the harijan caste ( a low caste) and was therefore excluded from worshipping in the Sivan temple. His occupation was to supply the temple with skins for the drums and strings for the music instruments. He was a great devotee of Lord Sivan.

One day he went to the temple, stood outside and tried to pray to Lord Sivan, who was represented in the form of the lingam in the sanctum sanctorum. However his view was obscured by the Nanthi (the bull made out of stone which is considered to be the vehicle of Lord Sivan). Nonetheless, Nandanar stood there with longing to receive the blessing of Lord Sivan. Then, miraculously the Nanthi moved just enough to afford Nandanar a view of Lord Sivan. Even today at the Sivan temple at Tiruppungur, the Nanthi can be seen to have moved slightly and is not aligned with the image in the sanctum sanctorum as is the case in all other Sivan temples. This point illustrates how in ancient times people who belonged to the lower castes were forbidden to worship at temples of traditional Gods by people of the higher castes.

In contrast the worship of Folk Deities, who are deities of the whole village, was open to all persons irrespective of which caste they belonged to. All castes mix freely at festivals in honour of their Folk Deities. Duties regarding the performing of rites, etc during the worship of Folk Deities were not determined by one's caste, although in some instances particular castes may play more important ritual roles than the others. For example in the village of Turayur near Thiruchy, during the festival the buffalo is sacrificed by a man belonging to the Kallar caste ( Whitehead, 1976: 106). Also in the same district of Thiruchy in the village of Pullambadi the pujari (officiating priest) presides over the festival but the sacrifice of the sheep is done by a member of the Pariah caste (Whitehead, 1976 : 102). In other words Folk Deity worship was a community effort.

#### **4.8.2 Role of "Tradition Gods"**

Secondly, the villagers felt that the "Traditional Gods" ' are acknowledged to be in charge of distant cosmic rhythms' ( Kinsley, 1987 : 198 ). As a result of this their grace was difficult to receive, so thought the simple villagers. Further the problems of the universe

did not interest the simple village folk who led very simple lives, concerning themselves with only their day to day existential needs. The villagers therefore believed that the folk Deities, rather than the ‘ Traditional Gods, would fulfil their needs.

There is however a connection between the “ Traditional Gods” and the folk Deities as some of the folk Deities are seen as manifestations of the “Traditional Gods”. This is especially true regarding the myths surrounding Goddess Sakthi. ( see chapter five)

#### **4.9 Reasons for the Worship of Folk Deities in South Africa**

Today the South African Indian community is no longer predominantly a farming community. Neither do we follow a village culture. Nevertheless the worship of Folk Deities is widespread and fervently adhered to, primarily for the following basic reasons:

**4.9.1** The inherent fear of what ill may befall the family should they cease to worship the Deity.

**4.9.2** Many people regard the festivities surrounding the worship of the deities as giving thanks to God for the spiritual, physical, psychological , emotional, and financial well being of their families.

**4.9.3** The worship was started by their forefathers and handed down the generations. Some feel that it is their duty to maintain this line of continuity.

**4.9.4** Some believe that this form of worship forms part of their cultural heritage and should they cease this form of worship, in years to come they will not have a cultural identity.

**4.9.5** To secure a boon from the Deity.

**4.9.6** In appreciation for a boon secured from the Deity.

#### **4.10 Distinguishing Features of Folk Deities.**

**4.10.1** The most striking feature of Tamil Folk Deities is that they are mostly female. All over Tamil Nadu the female Deities are affectionately referred to as Amman (mother) suggesting that She is the mother of the village. Furthermore all over the world the presiding deities of agriculture are mainly female because the idea of fertility and reproduction are closely related to motherhood (Whitehead, 1976 : 17). Whitehead opines that this phenomenon can be traced to the fact that in primitive societies going to war was the duty of men and the cultivation of the fields was the duty of the women. Since Folk Deities are the deities of an agricultural community there is that tendency for them to be identified as female. It should also be noted here that in primitive societies women were revered and held in very high esteem hence the propitiation of the female aspect.

**4.10.2** The female Folk Deities usually have male attendants who are totally subordinate and submissive to them. The male attendants of the Deities are appointed specifically to guard the shrines of the female Deities and to execute duties enumerated by Them (Whitehead, 1976 : 18). As an example, there is always a statue of Maduraiveeran at the entrance of every Mariamman temple. This dominance and subordination of the Female Deity over the Male Deity is fully understood when one studies the various myths underlying the concept of Folk Deities. Some of these myths clearly state the gross injustices that women suffered at the hands of men. ( see chapter five)

**4.10.3** One of the most striking features concerning the myths surrounding Folk Deities is the gross injustice done to women by men. Paradoxically, according to Folk tradition, a wife's virtue and faithfulness ensures her husband's longevity and general welfare whereas her unfaithfulness will cause her husband harm. In other words if a wife is chaste, virtuous and faithful her husband will be immune to any harm. Yet when one examines the underlying themes concerning the origins of Folk Deities it emerges that men in return treated women with disregard and apathy. We can draw other examples from literature to support this view. The example of Kannagi in the epic the Silapathigaaram is a case in point. In this epic Kannagi is portrayed as faultlessly faithful to her husband Kovalan despite Kovalan's adulterous behaviour. In spite of all of this when Kovalan is wrongfully accused and sentenced to death by the King of Maduray for allegedly having stolen the Queen's anklet, Kannagi the dutiful wife proves her husband's innocence sets fire to the city of Maduray and subsequently becomes a Goddess. Here again we see the theme of women being treated unjustly and being deified upon death. One can also quote the example of the Ramayana character Sita. In Kambar's Ramayanam, Sita is the ultimate embodiment of virtue. Even when Ravana captures Sita and takes her away to Sri Lanka, Sita is relentless in refusing to give in to Ravana's desires. While in captivity she remained steadfast and loyal to her husband Raman. Yet when she is finally rescued Raman doubts her virtue and asks her to step onto the blazing fire to prove her innocence. Later Rama, justifies his action by saying that he did what he did to quell the suspicions of the people of his kingdom and that he in his mind had no doubts whatsoever about Sita's virtue. Sita steps onto the fire, proves her purity and is deified upon her death.

**4.10.4** The male attendants are in most instances offered worship only in conjunction with the female Deities.

**4.10.5** Folk Deities are not specially connected to a particular caste or occupation.

**4.10.6** The worship of Folk Deities is confined to a special locality. “The local rootedness of Folk Deities, their special and narrow association with particular villages, is also suggested in the tendency during festivals in their honour to exclude outsiders.” (Kinsley, 1987 : 199) This exclusion makes certain that the outsiders ( people from other villages) do not benefit from the grace of the Deity whose esteemed grace is reserved for the locals only.

**4.10.7** They are mostly independent and do not necessarily have consorts.

**4.10.8** The names of Folk Deities are vast and varied. In most instances the Folk Deity derives a name from the duty She performs. For example as Mariamman She is the giver of rain and /or the curer and giver of smallpox etc. Sometimes the Deities take on the name of the village in which they reside. For example Periyapaalayattamman refers to the presiding Deity of the South Indian village of Periyapaalayam. Some popular names of Folk Deities are: Mariamman, Kalamman, Karumariamman, Kanniammal, Pechiamman, Mutyalamman, Gangayamman. There are many more.

**4.10.9** The Folk Deities vary from village to village and very rarely would two or more villages worship the same Deity.

**4.10.10** The images and symbols of the Folk Deities are as varied as Their names. They are worshipped in the form of a vel, a sulam, a spear, a sickle or statues made of copper, metal, or stone. The idea here is that the Deity is represented by their weapons and in some instances by small conical stones or a slab of stone placed at strategic positions in

the village. The images of the Deities are sometimes flanked by imposing images of elephants, horses, tigers, etc. which are seen as the vehicles of the Deities. As guardians of the villages the Deities ride these “vehicles” every night driving away evil forces.

**4.10.11** Folk Deities are mostly appeased with animal sacrifices. They are also offered vegetarian meals , fruit, milk, coconut,etc. An interesting observation here is that the villagers offered to their Folk Deities food items they were particularly fond of. This could probably explain the offering of meat dishes, alcohol and marijuana.

**4.10.12** The Folk Deities express their desires through the medium of a shaman who while in a state of trance expresses the desires of the Deity, predicts the future of the devotees, and also partakes of the offerings made to the Deity.

**4.10.13** Folk Deities are generally portrayed as fierce and powerful, with huge protruding eyes, with four to eight arms, holding dangerous looking objects, (tridents, shields, skulls, knives, fire, etc.) a protruding tongue, and a sturdy build. This picture portrays an image of ostensible terror. As guardians and protectors of the village the Deity has to look fierce and powerful enough to frighten off even the most formidable of evil forces. However some Deities are also portrayed as placid and amiable.

**4.10.14** In addition to the worship of Folk Deities it is also common practice for the villagers to worship a large number of spirits. Worship of ancestral spirits, spirits of the hills and the rivers and spirits of the forests and trees were observed. As time progressed some of these spirits were deified and took on the role of Folk Deities. One such spirit is Kaateri who was elevated to the status of a Folk Deity and is discussed in more detail in chapters five and six.

**4.10.15** It is also possible to find more than one Folk Deity in each village, each of whom has different functions. For example in a village where one finds Mariamman and Maduraiveeran - Mariamman may be seen as a Goddess of rain and Maduraiveeran as a guardian of the village.

**4.10.16** Another distinguishing feature of female Folk deities is their ambivalent nature. Some are calm and benign, and these Deities are offered vegetarian offerings, while the others are ferocious and command non vegetarian offerings. The myths underlying the origin of these Deities helps us to understand the ferocious nature of the female Deity who manifests herself in outbursts of rage and her desire to ride supreme over the Male Deities. The Female Deity's rage continues to be expressed during worship where "a male animal, identified as a "husband" is usually sacrificed. (Kinsley, 1987: 202 ) This explains why only roosters, rams etc. ( male animals) are sacrificed at festivals for Folk Deities. It is important to note here that this male animal which usually represents the Deity's husband is ridiculed and humiliated before being sacrificed. This is in retribution for the humiliation that the Deity suffered at the hands of Her husband. Kinsley is further of the opinion that these Deities are angry and need appeasing. Yet by behaving in the way that They do, They do not provide a traditional model for women in their relationships with men as laid down by Indian culture. This can perhaps explain why only roosters, cocks, rams, etc. are sacrificed at festivals for Folk Deities. One can also see at these festivals the ambivalent nature of the Deities. She can be amiable, docile and placid on one hand and yet be fierce, frenzied and cruel on the other. This ambivalent nature is best described by Brubaker ( Kinsley, 1987: 208) who states,

**“Thus the Goddess is the one who manifests herself in epidemic diseases, who guards against it and keeps it at bay, who inflicts it upon her people in wrath, who joins her people in fighting and conquering it, who suffers it herself; she it is who**

**invites its appearance and then struggles against it; she enters people's bodies by means of it, but sometimes heals them by taking it upon herself; she uses it as a means to enhance her own worship; she is enflamed by its heat and needs to be cooled. And may be cooled by the fanning of the disease- heated humans, while the latter may also be cooled by pouring water on her image; she is both the scourge and the mistress of disease demons, and perhaps even their mistress in both senses of the term; she mercilessly chastizes her people with the disease, but holds its victim especially dear; she delights in the disease, is aroused by it, goes mad with it; she kills with it and uses it to give new life”.**

**4.10.17** With regards to Munisveran, He has no particular form of his own. He is always represented by some bricks generally placed under a tree, notably a margosa tree . In some cases a soolam (trident) is fixed in the ground under the tree to indicate the presence of the Deity.

**4.10.18** Some of the Folk Deities have a regional reputation and are not confined to any village. In other words They can belong to a number of villages in a certain spiritual jurisdiction.

**4.10.19** With the exception of Mariamman, Kali and perhaps a few others, Folk Deity worship is not conducted annually. The Deities are worshipped when some sort of danger presents itself. This may be in the form of a sickness, an epidemic, a natural calamity etc.

**4.10.20** “Blood” sacrifice is yet another distinguishing feature of Folk Deity worship. According to Kinsley, this blood sacrifice can be understood from two points of view. Firstly, the sacrifice can be an offering from the villagers to the Deity to appease Her and

suppress Her wrath which expresses itself in the form of a disease or calamity, or as an offering to invigorate Her in Her victory over the demons who invade the village. Secondly the blood sacrifice may be understood as representing the defeat of the invading demons.( Kinsley, 1987 : 205)

**4.10.21** Some of the events that take place during the festivals of Folk Deities are fire walking, (the devotees walk barefoot on a bed of hot embers to prove their dedication to the Deity, or to secure a boon ) the carrying of garagams, (an earthen or brass pot filled with milk and adorned with margosa leaves and flowers which is carried on the head of the devotees and which represents the crown of the Deity) etc. These are done to fulfill vows or to implore the Deity's mercy. An important point to note here about these festivals is that they allow for people to step out of the confines of everyday life, to break away from their social roles, to mix freely and enjoy themselves. This also aids in the social bonding process.

#### 4.11 Differences between Mainstream Religious Traditions and Folk Deity

##### Worship.

( Shanthi, 1991: lecture notes)

<b>Folk Deity Worship</b>	<b>Mainstream Religious Traditions</b>
1. Created by man for his existential needs.	1. Exists as a result of man's cultural needs.
2. Has the notion of birth and death. (Has a definite beginning and end)	2. No notion of birth and death. (No beginning no end)
3. Has limited influence within a certain jurisdiction.	3. Has unlimited influence
4. Mostly worshipped by the villagers.	4. Worshipped by villagers and people from the city.
5. Primary task to ward off evil.	5. Primary task to bestow grace.
6. Handed down by oral tradition.	6. Find its source in scriptural and puranic stories.
7. Mostly take on a female form.	7. Consists mainly of male Deities.
8. Does not contain daily worship.	8. Contains daily worship.
9. No daily offerings.	9. Contains daily offerings.
10. Temples are not always built according to the Agamas.	10. Temples built according to the rules of the Agamus.
11. Usually the female Deities do not have consorts.	11. Female Deities always have consorts.
12. Portray a fierce image.	12. Always have a benign and placid image.
13. Some Deities lived in this manifested world and upon death become deified.	13. Deities did not live in this manifested world. But at times incarnate on earth.

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|--|--|
| 14. Symbols representing the Deities are worshipped in place of the Deities. | 14. Only images of the Deities are worshipped.   |
| 15. Flesh and alcohol are also offered.                                      | 15. No offering whatsoever of flesh and alcohol. |
| 16. Some of the female Deities have male attendants.                         | 16. Females Deities do not have male attendants. |
| 17. Blood sacrifice offered.   | 17. No blood sacrifice.                          |

#### **4.12 Probable Origins and Stages of Development of Folk Deities.**

##### **4.12.1 Introduction**

Stories regarding the origins of Folk Deities are fantastic and extraordinary, at times bordering on the ludicrous. These stories seem to have been invented by the villagers to account for their worship, the origins of which are most definitely lost in antiquity. The reasons for the worship too are long forgotten. This can be attributed to the fact that the villagers were ordinary, simple, mostly illiterate folk who did not document their traditions, philosophies, cultural and religious practices etc. but handed it down the generations through word of mouth. In other words through oral tradition. This probably explains how the origin of a single Folk Deity has so many variants and why it is difficult to point to the exact origin of the Folk Deities. It is a medley of different ideas and practices of a primitive group of people. As mentioned earlier the villagers created the folk deities for their day to day existential needs. They believed that their lives were governed by the Folk Deities and if they propitiated these Deities regularly their needs will be fulfilled.

#### **4.12.2 Fear of the Natural Elements**

Man in the earliest stages of development was totally fascinated and mesmerized by the different aspects of nature such as like lightning, thunder, fire, rain, etc. At that stage in his development man found no reasonable and scientific explanations for these natural elements and he felt that the natural forces when angered would cause calamities. This total fascination and profound fear led man to start worshipping these natural elements for he believed that if he appeased the natural elements with worship the natural elements would not affect him negatively. As a result of which sincere prayers were offered to the natural elements.

#### **4.12.3 Spirits of the ancestors**

As man gradually evolved in his development he felt that the spirits of his ancestors were responsible for his misfortunes so he began worshipping the spirits of his ancestors as well.

#### **4.12.4 Tools of the ancestors**

As time progressed this led to the worship of the tools (hunting, etc.) of his ancestors. These tools provided man with visible symbols towards which he could channel his worship. The physical presence of these symbols were also a constant reminder to man of his spiritual world. At this stage the idea of food offerings could have emanated. To appease the spirits of his ancestors man offered them the food items that they enjoyed when they were alive.

(see Maduraiveeran)

#### **4.12.5 Worship of Tombstones**

In early times the burying of the dead was the accepted norm as opposed to cremating the dead. On the grave people placed a large stone to mark the area of the grave. In doing so they also felt that the heavy stone would arrest the soul of the deceased and keep it in check and prevent it from wandering around and affecting the people of the village. This eventually led man to develop from the worship of his ancestral tools to the worship of the stone used to arrest the spirit of the dead.

#### **4.12.6 Folk Deity Worship**

As man progressed from a nomadic to a pastoral and later agricultural community this idea of the stone being used to symbolize the ancestors gradually gave way to the worship / invention of Village/ Folk Deities - Deities of the village who supplied the villagers with their existential needs. Gradually anthropomorphic images were carved onto the stones to represent the Folk Deity and these became the focus of worship.

( Appendix 1 - p.147 )

( Shanthi : 1991- lecture notes )

#### **4.13 Summary**

In this chapter we looked at what was understood by Folk Deities and the definition of a Folk deity was given. The distinguishing characteristics, functions and the importance of a Folk Deity in the lives of a villager were discussed. To facilitate a better understanding of Folk Deity worship, differences between Mainstream Religious Traditions and Folk Deity worship were enumerated. Finally an analysis was presented on the probable origins of the concept of Folk Deity worship and its stages of development.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **POPULAR FOLK DEITIES WORSHIPPED BY SOUTH AFRICAN TAMILS.**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter forms the central part of this dissertation where the popular Deities, namely ; Mariamman, Kaateri and Maduraiveeran are discussed in detail. The origin of each of these Deities and the myths surrounding their origin is also examined in detail. Brief histories of some famous Amman temples in Tamil Nadu and in Durban are provided and iconographical representations of the Deities are discussed.

#### **5.2 Mariamman**

##### **5.2.1 Introduction**

Amman worship is very prevalent amongst South African Tamils and Amman has numerous variants that are worshipped throughout the year under different names. It should be stressed however that Amman known by these various names is the manifestation of the supreme Parasakthi. The variants of Amman emerged with the rise of the Tamil Bakthi movement after the 7th century. The practice of Amman worship dates back to thousands of years. In Sangam literature ( 300 BC - 300 AD) mention is made in the Purananooru of the worship of Kottiravai who later was referred to as Kali Amman.

##### **5.2.2 Definition of Mariamman**

Mariamman, one of the forms of Amman, is the most popular of the Folk Deities worshipped by South African Tamils. Folk etymology defines Mari as rain which cools the heat of the land and soothes the people of tropical countries like India from the unbearable heat of the sun. Consequently, from this point of view Mariamman is seen as the Goddess of rain. It is believed that just as rain gives fertility to the world so too does Mariamman

give fertility to her followers. Inarguably rain is vital for the sustenance of life. Without rain there is no life. Totally in awe of the natural elements like rain, and realizing it's vitality for growth and survival, primitive man observed and performed certain rites for rain. ( Appendix 2 - p.148 ) This concept of rain worship is not peculiar to Indian culture. It extends to other world cultures as well.

There are evidences of rain worship in ancient Tamil literature as well. One such example can be found in the epic the Silapathigaaram, where the Indra festival was celebrated for rain. The importance of rain is further emphasized in the Thirukkural where the author, Thiruvalluvar devotes an entire chapter to the glory of rain.

**“ Vaan Ninru Ulagam Vazhangi Varuvathaal**

**Thaan Amizhtham Yenru Unara Paatru”**

“ the world ever lives , putting trust in the rains; as the rains enliven and sustain the world, people consider it as veritable nectar”. ( Thirukural : 2, 1)

Thiruvalluvar further draws a parallel between virtue and rain by stating that should a chaste woman request rain, the heavens will open and rain will pour aplenty.

**“ Deivam Thozhaal Kozhunan Thozhutherzhuvaal**

**Payyenna Payyum Mazhai”.** ( Thirukural : 6, 5)

Even Avvaiyaar, the great Sangam poetess sings in praise of rain. Mariamman is further linked to rain because the pockmarks she leaves behind after an attack of smallpox looks like craters left by raindrops in the dust. As the Goddess of rain Mariamman is given a female form because the idea of fertility is closely associated with rain. The villagers whose livelihood is farming depend on the rains for the fertility of the lands and the productivity of the fields.

There is a school of thought that is of the opinion that Goddess Mariamman causes smallpox to appear on people in retaliation for not being appeased with worship, etc. Here She is venerated as the Goddess of Smallpox. In this instance rain is believed to cool the wrath of the Goddess which manifests itself as smallpox. Her ambivalent nature emerges here where She is seen as the cause and the curer of the disease.

### **5.2.3 Mariamman as the Goddess of Smallpox**

Why was Goddess Mariamman venerated as the Goddess of smallpox when there were many more life threatening diseases than smallpox ? ( Madras Government Bulletin, vol. 3, p.17)

There is evidences that ‘ variola major’ the most virulent form of smallpox , entered India in the 7th C but only became widely associated with a Goddess in the 16th century in primitive Indian society. Of all the fatal diseases ( malaria, cholera, typhoid, polio , leprosy, etc. ) smallpox was the most virulent and feared disease. It reached epidemic proportions and wiped out entire villages. As recently as 1958, there occurred a smallpox epidemic in the city of Chennai in which 4869 cases and 1260 deaths related to smallpox were reported by Dr. A. Ramachandra Rao who was the medical superintendent at the infectious diseases hospital in Chennai from the 1950's to the 1970's.

### **5.2.4 The Threat of Smallpox**

This report further expresses the seriousness of smallpox by documenting some important facts. It states that smallpox is transmitted from human host to human host and that it relies upon large numbers for its survival, thereby preying on communities of several thousand or more. The villages of India with their close knit communal type of living

provided an ideal breeding ground for the spread of such a disease. The report also states that diseases like smallpox are primarily childhood diseases. In the city of Chennai, alone, 59% of the 3500 cases studied, smallpox occurred in children between the ages of 0- 4 years, and 20% occurred in children between the ages of 5-9. Another interesting fact: of children born alive to mothers who had contracted smallpox during their pregnancy, 55% died within 2 weeks. These alarming statistics show the seriousness of the disease.

It is therefore clearly evident why smallpox was given prominence over the other diseases, and why divine intervention was necessary in combating the disease especially in light of the death of children , and in the light of it being so highly contagious.

( Madras Government bulletin, vol. 3, p.17)

This fear complex helps one to understand the worship of Goddess Mariamman as the Goddess of smallpox. In present times there are vaccines and other forms of immunization against smallpox to help combat the disease.

#### **5.2.5 Eradication of Measles in Kwa-Zulu Natal**

Although people have evolved and have been educated on preventative and control measures with regards to eradicating the disease as recently as May 2000 a nationwide campaign was initiated, by the Kwazulu Natal Department of Health, to eradicate measles ( similar to smallpox). ( Daily News, 29 May 2000, appendix 3 - p. 149 and appendix 4 - p. 150) This proves yet again that the threat of the disease is even today imminent. Although the fear of the spread of smallpox as an epidemic disease is not as great a threat as it used to be, this has not impacted negatively on the worship of Mariamman as the smallpox Goddess. Most people firmly believe that it is only because of their continuous worship of the Goddess that the real threat of an epidemic no longer exists. Although the

likelihood of smallpox now reaching epidemic proportions are minimal most people continue with the worship, for fear of incurring the wrath of the Goddess should the worship cease. No one is willing to risk the lives of their loved ones, especially those of their children, by abstaining from the worship. In other words the fear complex of what may happen should they cease the worship propels them to continue. During fieldwork a recurring reply to the question asking reasons for the worship was that since our forefathers have done it we are continuing. There are also some who observe this worship as a token of thanksgiving for the physical, physiological, emotional and mental well being of their families.

#### **5.2.6 Mariamman Thalaatu**

When a person is afflicted by smallpox older women are called in to sing the Mariamman Thalaatu, a collection of songs ( in lullaby fashion) in praise of Goddess Mariamman. These songs are said to have a cooling effect on the Goddess. Soothed by these songs She in turn relieves the afflicted persons from their agony. These songs showcase the people's response to the disease and their respect for the Goddesses power. The verses of the song also sheds light on the life history of Mariamman.

**" Sivanudan Vaathaadum Sithaantha Marimutheh  
Brahmanudan Vaathaadum Aasthaana Marimutheh  
Vishnuvudan Vaathaadum Petravaleh Marimutheh  
Yemanudan Vaathaadum Yekaala Deviyareh."**

( Santhirasagaren, 1988 : 12)

" The glorious Mariamman who argued with Lord Sivan, Lord Brahman, Lord Vishnu and Yeman on various issues that affected Her devotees."

A person afflicted with smallpox is treated with syringa leaves. These are considered

effacious against smallpox because of its antiseptic qualities. From a spiritual point of view as well syringa leaves are closely associated with Mariamman as they are considered to combat the ill-effects of invading spirits. The following line from a famous song in praise of Goddess Mariamman sums up the auspicious association of Mariamman with the syringa leaves.

**" Veppa Maram Wun Vaasal Amma"**

" The entrance to Your abode is the syringa tree.

### **5.2.7 Etymologically Mari - Amman**

Etymologically as Mari - Amman , She is seen as the 'changed mother'. This is obviously in keeping with her ambivalent nature, as the benign and calm Goddess as opposed to the fear invoking and ferocious One. This ambivalent nature helps us understand why vegetarian as well as non- vegetarian offerings are made to the Goddess. Mariamman is worshipped primarily in the Tamil month of AADI (July - Aug) for two important reasons. Firstly as the Goddess of rain, the month of AADI is a prelude to the rainy season which begins in South India in the Tamil months of AAVANI (Aug - Sept), and PURATASI (Sept - Oct). After the dry hot summer, it is during the month of AADI that the fields are prepared for ploughing. It is therefore during this month of AADI ( a prelude to the rainy season ) that the people invoke the Goddess's blessing for good rains by offering worship to Her.

### **5.2.8 Mariamman as the Goddess of Rain**

Secondly, smallpox is a heat generated disease which used to mostly break out in the summer months of AANI and AADI. Hence the worship of Goddess Mariamman as the smallpox Goddess during these months. The worship here is aimed at soothing the wrath of the Goddess, to cool her, and invoking Her blessing.

### **5.2.9 The wrath of the Goddess**

Regarding the wrath of the Goddess when one looks at all the myths surrounding Her origin, it is apparent that this wrath is the direct result of the injustices and humiliation She suffered at the hands of the male in Her manifested life. The Goddess represents all females who have been subjected to injustices by their males or partners. Henry Whitehead is of the opinion that these injustices suffered at the hands of the male actually forms the underlying theme in the study of Mariamman. He expresses the viewpoint that this silent bearing of the injustice by the chaste, virtuous and passive female changes her upon her death to a Deity. To the enlightened mind this may be a difficult fact to digest but references can be drawn from other sources of Tamil literature to support this view. In the epic the Silapathigaram, Kannagi after proving her husband's innocence (in spite of his shabby treatment of her), becomes deified upon her death.

### **5.2.10 The Myths Surrounding the Origin of the Goddess**

The myths surrounding the origin and worship of Goddess Mariamman are wide and varied and fantastic to the point of sometimes bordering on ludicrous and hence difficult to accept. One has to also bear in mind when evaluating these stories that since these stories were transmitted orally the variations, bias and inconsistencies are only to be expected. A study of the worship of Mariamman as the most popular Folk Deity worshipped by South African Tamils will be incomplete without examining some of these myths.

#### **5.2.10.1 Myth 1**

Once in a village in South India there was a severe drought. Due to the extreme heat people were plagued with heat generated diseases such as smallpox, mumps, measles, etc. At this point in time the intense heat and lack of rain brought no relief to the

sufferers. Out of desperation the people sought the help of the Divine Mother. The Mother heeding the call of her children, manifested Herself in the form of a woman draped in a yellow sari, carrying a pot of fermented porridge and syringa leaves. The Divine Mother descended upon earth in the South Indian town of Samayapuram in the district of Thiruchy.

Here, she fed the inflicted persons with fermented porridge to cool off their digestive systems since the physical heat resulted in the heat of the body. She also nursed them with a mixture of the syringa leaves and turmeric paste (these products besides acting as antiseptics also have a cooling effect). The Divine Mother continued with the healing of the inflicted persons and once Her work was completed She retired to the forest.

The people of the village totally taken aback by their quick recovery sought out the mysterious woman dressed in yellow. In the forest they found Her seated under a syringa tree. They asked Her to reveal Her identity and wanted to know how they could thank Her for saving the lives of so many. She disclosed Herself as the Mother of the Universe. After that every year in the period in which She appeared (which is the Tamil month of Aadi) Her devotees gather in great numbers, worship Her and distribute holy porridge to everyone. She assured them that She would always be their guiding and protecting force. She then disappeared, leaving torrents of rain to bathe and cleanse the earth. The Divine Mother then became known as Samayapuram Mariaatha, because of Her manifestation at the town of Samayapuram and Her holy scripture was know as the Marriamman Thalaatu. It is therefore in this month of Aadi (July/August) that Mother Mariamman is venerated as the protector and curer of all miseries. The garagam symbolizes her crown, honouring her as the Queen of the universe.

( Nagalingam : 1995 ) ( Appendix 5 - p.151 )

### 5.2.10.2 Myth 2

#### The tale behind the Deity at Ozhukai Mangalam.

In ancient times the town of Ozhukai Mangalam in Tamil Nadu was ruled by Danish kings. The king who was ruling at that time was in the habit of drinking milk drawn from his own cows and nobody dared deny him this privilege. Suddenly, one day his servants were unable to get milk from the king's cows. Not knowing what to do they presented the king with milk from the neighbour's cow. When the king learnt of this he was furious to say the least and he demanded an explanation from his servants.

Upon investigation they, the servants discovered that the king's cows were discharging their milk at a particular spot and were therefore unable to give milk to the servants. The servants conveyed this news to the king. The infuriated king came and witnessed this sight for himself. He ordered his servants to dig up the spot at which the cows were discharging their milk. While digging the servants unearthed a statue of Mariamman. To the foreign king (not a follower of Hinduism) this was not a statue of a Goddess but a mere slab of stone. The king was full of cynicism and despite warnings from his servants to the contrary, ordered his servants to destroy the statue. No sooner had the king issued the order, than he broke out into reddened spots throughout his body. These spots resembled the pox pearls one has when inflicted by smallpox. The king found the pain unbearable. He was humbly asked by the villagers to pray to Goddess Mariamman and ask for Her forgiveness. The king eager to be relieved of his excruciating pain did as he was advised and three days later he was completely cured. The king overcome by this miraculous feat built a temple for Goddess Mariamman at this spot at Ozhukai Mangalam.

( Kalayvani : 1993 - interviewee 1 )

### 5.2.10.3 Myth 3

Lord Sivan took the manifested form of Nilakander, a sage, and Goddess Parvathy that of his humble, docile, virtuous wife, Renuka . Daily Renuka would go down to the lake and fetch water to be used for her husband's prayer. Because Renuka was so virtuous and chaste both in thought and deed she was able to construct a vessel for carrying the water, solely from mud gathered from the banks of the lake. As usual one day Renuka went down to the lake to collect water for her husbands' prayer. On this particular day the skies were clear and it was a beautiful day. While Renuka bent down to scoop the water from the lake she could not help herself admiring the fishes in the clear blue lake. So immersed was she in admiring this profound beauty that she did not realize Lord Indran riding his chariot in the sky. His reflection fell on the water. Renuka caught sight of this reflection. She marvelled at His beauty, and wondered how it was possible for such a beautiful person to be created. Soon after this Renuka discovered that she was unable to create the vessel to hold the water. She was petrified to say the least. Because of her impure sexual thought Renuka loses the power to create the water vessel. That evening she goes home very disillusioned with no water for her husband's prayer. Even worse was her inability to fathom what was going on. On the other hand her husband being a saint and armed with the power of foresight knew what had transpired and was furious. He called up his 3 sons, Kattavarayan, Karuppanacam and Parusuraman.

First Kattavarayan and Karuppanacam arrived.

"How should one punish a woman who lost her chastity?" he asked.

"Her head should be cut off," replied the sons

"It is your mother who has lost her chastity so go and cut off her head and bring it back to me" ordered the saint.

"Father how can you ask us to cut off the head of our mother. We cannot do this," said

the sons.

“ You say that you cannot carry out this task? So be it. You shall both be transformed into jungle men,” thus cursed the saint.

Later the third son Parusuraman arrived and his father asked him the same questions, viz. “ How should one punish a woman who lost her chastity?”

“Her head should be cut off,” replied Parusuraman.

“It is your mother, “ said the saint.

“ My mother, alright then give me a big knife and I will cut off her head.”

As Parusuraman took the knife from his father he asked his father for 3 boons which his father readily conferred.

Renuka upon seeing her son approaching her with a knife knew his intentions and ran into the forest. Parusuraman gave chase. Renuka in her frenzy to escape her son ran into the house of a Chakkili (a person belonging to the shoemaker caste). Renuka narrated the events that led to her fleeing and embraced the lady of the house. Parusuraman, entered the house and in his haste lashed out his knife severing both ladies' heads. Parusuraman then carried his mother's head and placed it before his father.

Now the saint asked his son what were the 3 boons he had asked for.

“ The first one is to bring my brothers back to their original form. Secondly, I want to bring my mother back to life, and thirdly if you claim that my mother lost her chastity by merely looking at Lord Indran, then give me the boon that she in fact did not lose her chastity.

The saint granted all 3 boons to his son. The brothers returned to their original form. The

saint gave Parasuraman some sacred water and asked Parasuraman to place the severed head over the body and to sprinkle this water and recite a certain manthra and then his mother would become alive again. Parasuraman then ran to the shoemaker's house and did as he was told by his father. However, unknowing he transposed his mother's head with the Chakkili woman's body and vice versa, and recited the manthra. Both women came back to life.

When Renuka got up she was shocked to discover that her body was not actually her's. She laments to her husband that she cannot go back to live with him because of this misfortune. She is thereafter known as Mari - Amman - the changed Mother. She lives her last days in the forest and becomes deified upon her death.

( Shanthi : 1991 - interviewee 2 )

An informant from Manaarkudi (Thanjavur district- interviewee 3 ) related the same story to me but concluded by saying that both women (the Chakkili and the Brahmin women) became deities with extraordinary powers. This could also possibly explain the vegetarian offerings. The Brahmin woman was the saint's wife and hence vegetarian and the Chakkili caste were fond of non - vegetarian foods hence non vegetarian offerings to the Deity as well. This myth once again shows us the gross injustice meted out to women. Only because of an impure thought, Renuka's punishment is death, inspite of her dutifully serving her husband for all those years. And yet it is this very woman who sees it fit not to go back to her husband because her body has been transposed and she now has the body of another woman. This is the most popular myth surrounding the origin of Mariamman and because it was handed down the generations orally there are variations to this myth.

#### 5.2.10.4 Myth 4

In a village there once lived a blind Brahmin who was well versed in the Vedas. He had only one daughter. The Brahmin and his daughter lived their lives merrily, the father providing for his daughter and the daughter in turn serving her father with joy. A young boy belonging to a lower caste came from a neighbouring village in search of work and soon decided to live in that village. Soon the young boy fell in love with the Brahmin's daughter. In order to woo her the young boy passed himself off as a Brahmin and went to the blind Brahmin to learn the Vedas. In due course the villagers taken in by the youngster, influenced the Brahmin to give his daughter's hand in marriage to him. The marriage was solemnized according to Brahmin rites and the couple began to live happily.

After some time a native from the young lad's village arrived at this village. He at once recognized the lad and soon discovered the deception. He said nothing to the elders of the village. Instead he returned to his own village and informed the lad's mother about her son's whereabouts. The old woman, desperate to see her long lost son comes to this village in search of him. Tired after a long trip the old woman sat by the well to rest a little. At that time her son happened to go past. He recognized his mother at once. The shameless lad showed no remorse for his actions but was more interested in how he was going to present his mother to his Brahmin wife and father-in-law. He took his mother to the barber and got her head shaven off and passed her off as a Brahmin widow to help conceal his deceptive plan. He introduced his mother to his wife telling her that his mother was dumb, afraid that his mother might blurt out something that may give his true identity away. The mother fitted into the household amiably arousing no suspicions.

However one day the daughter-in-law prepared a vegetarian dish called Savighai (wheat flour baked with sugar and made into long strips). During the meal the mother-in-

- law forgetting her vow of silence asked what the Savighai was. To compound matters she further stated to her son that it looked like the entrails of an animal forgetting her disguise as a vegetarian Brahmin widow. The daughter - in - law overhead this remark and was astounded for how could a Brahmin woman not recognize a common Brahmin dish like Savighai and secondly that her dumb mother -in -law could suddenly speak. Thereafter the daughter - in - law watched her husband and his mother closely. Slowly but surely by their conduct her suspicions (that they were not Brahmins) were confirmed. When she confronted her husband he admitted to his low status and his consequent deception.

Unable to stand this humiliation the wife one day sends her mother - in - law out on some pretext after the children had left for school and her husband for work and she then set fire to the house and killed herself. In so doing she felt that she was expiating the sin she involuntarily and unwittingly committed by marrying someone from a different caste, and a low one at that. Hereafter she appeared in a divine form in the middle of the village and swore to take revenge on the villagers who influenced her father into marrying her off to her husband. The petrified villagers implored her mercy in abject fear. She was appeased by the villagers with regular worship and in due course became their Village/Folk Deity.

For the great injustice done to her by her husband she commanded that her husband be brought before her and he beheaded. The villagers did likewise. The divine form of the wife disappeared and the husband was born again as a buffalo.

( Whitehead, 1976 : 117)

This could be one of the reasons for blood sacrifices during a Mariamman festival. It is also easy to understand from this tale why only a male animal is sacrificed during a

Mariamman festival and why the animal is ridiculed before being sacrificed. Here again we see how unfairly the woman was treated and the total disregard for the lives of animals. This myth also entrenches the caste system.

#### **5.2.10.5 Myth 5**

There was once a saint by the name of Jamadigini who had a wife named Renuka Devi. Upon the saint's death Renuka Devi performs Sati (she enters the funeral pyre of her husband to die with him). At that moment Lord Indran realizing the virtue of Renuka Devi causes heavy rains to fall. As a result, the heavy rains extinguish the fire and Renuka Devi is left with blisters throughout her body. Renuka Devi covers her naked body with syringa leaves and takes refuge in a place inhabited by the Harijan community (a low caste community). Unable to quench her thirst and satisfy her hunger she begged from the Harijan people. They gave her gruel (made from rice flour, coconut, jaggery, etc.) to eat and clothed her in a saree given by the washerwoman. She then went and sat beside her husband's funeral pyre. The Devas then appeared before her, spared her life and disappeared. Lord Sivan then appeared before her and told her that she is one of the Sakthis of Goddess Parvathy. He further told her to stay in the village and protect the village. He ordered that the blisters on Renuka Devi's body should appear on the villagers' bodies (those who did not worship the Deity) as the smallpox disease and the syringa leaves should be used as a medication to cure the smallpox. He also stated that She should confer boons on people who believed in Her and bring sorrow to those who do not, thereby converting them into believing in Her.

( Shanthi : 1991 )

In the context of the above myth we see the correlation between the blisters resulting from the fire (heat) and the smallpox resulting from the heat of the body, or the anger of the

Goddess. Another important observation is this recurring issue of caste. These myths must be viewed against the backdrop of ancient Indian society where caste controlled every facet of man's life.

#### **5.2.10.6 Myth 6**

There is yet another story that reads thus,

“ It would appear that there was a Mariamman who was canonized for her humanitarian services. A long time ago so the story goes , there was a terrible epidemic of smallpox. A gracious lady went around nursing the afflicted ones, advising them to eat only hygienically prepared food by showing them how to prepare such food. They were advised further to partake further of liquid porridge mixed with onions and some syringa leaves. It is believed that through her assistance thousands of sufferers were saved. This happened in the Tamil month of Aadi.” (Kuppusamy, 1993 : 76)

Some of these myths are a variation of a popular myth. It should also be mentioned that since these myths were orally handed down the generations additions and inconsistencies with the original stories are only to be expected.

#### **5.2.10.7 Myth 7**

In ancient times there lived nine Rishis. One of them named Piruhu, had a beautiful wife named Nagavali who was famed for her beauty and virtue. One day while she was alone at home, the Trimurti ( the representation of Brahma, Vishnu and Sivan as a triple manifestation of divine nature) came to visit her to see whether she was as beautiful and virtuous as claimed by others. Nagavali not knowing who the Trimurti really were and disapproving of Their intrusion into her privacy changed Them into little children. Needless to say the Trimurti became furious and They cursed Nagavali so that her beauty faded and spots like pearls appeared on her face, disfiguring her face and making her look

unattractive.

When Piruhu returned and saw his wife disfigured, he cursed her to go away and, to cause the spread of a disease which would make people look like her, in the next world. In memory of the change in which Piruhu found her, she was referred to as Mari -changed, in the next birth.

( Whitehead, 1976 : 115)

### **5.2.11 Mode Of Worship.**

#### **5.2.11.1 Introduction**

The mode and extent of worship of all the Folk Deities be it Mariamman, Maduraiveeran or Kaateri varies according to the needs of the people and depends in certain instances on their economic and social status.

#### **5.2.11.2 The Month of Aadi**

The worship of Mariamman takes place predominantly in the Tamil month of Aadi. In Tamil Nadu during this period it is extremely, unbearably hot. During the month of Aadi the temperatures are highest and rain non existent. Hence people do not go out to work in the fields. Since people have free time on their hands this is the most appropriate time for collective family/village activities and generally a time to get together.

This is one of the reasons for holding festivals during this period. As mentioned earlier in this dissertation the month of Aadi is the prelude to the rainy season in Tamil Nadu which begins in the Tamil months of Aavani and Puratassi ( August, September, October). After the dry hot summer, it is during this month of Aadi ( a prelude to the rainy season) that

the people invoke the Goddess's blessings for good rains by offering worship to Her. Hence, as the Goddess of rain Mariamman is venerated during the month of Aadi for good rains. Furthermore the month of Aadi in Tamil Nadu (the Northern Hemisphere) is the height of summer. It is during this period that heat originated diseases like smallpox, cholera, chicken pox, etc. are more likely to reach epidemic proportions and cause havoc. Hence the worship of the Goddess for these reasons during this period. In the South African context the month of Aadi is still considered auspicious even though it does not represent our summer nor is it a prelude to our rainy season. This ostensibly proves that the worship has been directly inherited from our ancestors from India without reasoning.

#### **5.2.11.3 The tying of the Kaapu**

The Mariamman festival usually commences on the first Friday of the month of Aadi and starts with the tying of the kaapu ( a talisman) and the hoisting of the temple flag. The tying of the kaapu is seen as the protection against evil spirits that may want to invade the precincts of the temple. It also protects those involved in the festival by acting as a deterrent against evil forces. It also keeps in check the Sakthi (spiritual energy) invoked in particular persons during the festival and contains this Sakthi within the circle of the devotees and the temple.

#### **5.2.11.4 The hoisting of the Flag**

The hoisting of the flag too is an indication that the festival has now begun and that people should observe the rules and regulations that the festival commands. The observance of the worship at the temple by the community collectively also gives those who cannot observe the worship for the current year for some reason or other ( a death in the family, lack of funds, etc.) an opportunity to participate in the worship.

#### **5.2.11.5 Abhishegam**

The image of the Deity is washed with plain water, rose water, water mixed with turmeric powder, honey, milk, curd, and sweet oil. This ceremonial washing is called an Abhishegam. After this ceremonial washing the image is dried properly and clothed with a saree and beautifully adorned with turmeric, kungumum and sandalwood (ingredients auspicious to Mariamman). The image is then carried on a palanquin throughout the streets for worship by those who cannot come to the temple ( the sick, the elderly, the physically challenged, etc.). Devotees offer fruit, coconut, etc. along the way. The offerings are made to the image and returned to the devotees with some sacred ashes. Some devotees offer turmeric water at the foot of the palanquin. This supposedly has a cooling effect on the Goddess. The image is then returned to the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. On the actual day of the main worship the image of the Deity is once again given a ceremonial bath and adorned with a beautiful saree, bought especially for the occasion, jewellery and flowers. Specially prepared food items are offered to the Goddess. Let us now look at some of these offerings.

#### **5.2.11.6 Offerings to Mariamman**

In keeping with the Goddess's ambivalent nature vegetarian as well as non-vegetarian offerings are made to the Goddess. With regards to non- vegetarian offerings blood sacrifice plays an integral part. Blood represents life and fertility and hence the offering of blood is believed to have a propitiating and revitalizing effect on the Goddess.

#### **5.2.11.7 The offering of Blood Sacrifice**

Herr Warneck when describing the animism of the Battaks of Sumatra in his book, " The Living Forces of the Gospel", points out that the soul stuff has special vigour in the blood. The offering of blood is also significant as it is seen as the food of the malignant spirits.

This is related to the animistic theory of religious worship where it is believed that not only living creatures but lifeless things also share in a universal soul that pervades the world. (Whitehead, 1976 : 145) According to this theory the drinking of the blood and the eating of the flesh is seen as the absorbing of the soul stuff of the animal sacrificed.

Jevons in his book "Introduction to the History of Religion" ( Whitehead, 1976 : 146) cites many examples of this form of sacrifice from different parts of the world. Thus in ancient times blood was drunk and flesh eaten to promote communion with the spirit worshipped. The wearing of the entrails of the animals also reinforces this idea as they are the life line of the animal. It is interesting to note that only male animals are sacrificed. An explanation for this can be traced to the myths surrounding the Goddess where as retribution for her humiliation suffered at the hands of a male the Goddess upon being deified asks for the sacrifice of a male animal during Her festivals.

( Appendix 6 - p. 152 )

**David Kinsley is of the opinion that sacrifice has two important purposes.**

**" The sacrifice may be seen as a gift from the villagers with which they hope to appease the Goddess so that She will withdraw Her anger, which expresses itself in the form of the heat of the disease. Or the sacrifice may be understood as representing the defeat of the invading demon who is also associated with the deities' consort or husband who had afflicted her or abused her in the myths. In either case it is clear that the Goddess demands the blood of a victim, that She needs the blood - either to appease her wrath or to invigorate Her in Her contest with the demons." ( Kinsley, 1987 : 205)**

Whitehead is further of the opinion that the drinking of the animal's blood (mainstream of life) would seem to be an intense desire to attain as close a communion as possible with the object of worship. Draping the entrails of the sacrificed animal around one's neck would seem to serve the same purpose.

#### **5.2.11.8 Nine types of Seeds**

In Tamil Nadu it is a common practice to soak nine kinds of seeds or grains and keep them immersed in water for the duration of the festival ( ten days). If the seeds sprout and grows well then it is believed that the villagers can expect a bountiful harvest and if the growth of the seedlings is stunted then the reverse can be expected. In some temples, like the Kalavu Amman Koil in the village of Kalavu, Chennai, devotees carry this tray of sprouted seedlings from their homes to the temple on the main day of the festival. The festival in Tamil Nadu usually lasts for ten days. During this period the life history of Mariamman and other related topics are enacted.

#### **5.2.11.9 Observance of the Mariamman prayer in Tamil Nadu**

In the North Arcot district of Tamil Nadu, in the village of Aathuvambadi this prayer is observed as follows:

The prayer is collectively observed at the local Amman temple. On the appointed day the temple is abuzz with activity. At midday, the prayer commences at the border of the village and proceeds to the temple. The villagers, mostly women drape themselves in yellow sarees and carry garagams (earthen vessels colourfully decorated, adorned with flowers and filled with gruel) on their heads. This gruel is prepared at their homes. They make their way to the temple in the harsh, scorching summer sun. Along the way villagers pour water on these devotees to bring some relief from the unbearable sun. When they reach the temple, they circumambulate the temple and empty the gruel from the garagams

into huge vessels that are already placed in front of the sanctum sanctorum.

Those in a trance terminate their trance at the conclusion of the formalities. The formalities include the abhishegam, the adorning of the statue with a beautiful sari and jewellery, and the serenading of the Goddess with the sweet music from the nathesvaram ( a flute like musical instrument). The gruel is then distributed to everyone. There is no prayer in the afternoon.

### **5.2.12 Other Festivals in Honour of Mariamman.**

#### **5.2.12.1 The Firewalking Festival**

A shallow pit is filled with burning embers. The devotees walk barefoot on the embers across this pit to demonstrate their steadfast devotion to the Goddess. Further discussions in chapter six.

( Appendix 7 - p.153 )

#### **5.2.12.2 The carrying of Garagam**

A garagam is an earthen pot decorated beautifully with flowers and filled with milk which the devotee carries on her/his head and walks a great distance to the temple, amidst much strain, to prove yet again her/his devotion. Upon reaching the temple the milk is used to perform the abhishegam for the statue of the Goddess. ( Appendix 8 - p. 154 )

It is also believed that by putting the body through hardships like firewalking, the carrying of garagams and so forth, the Goddess will show mercy on the devotees and fulfill their desires.

### **5.2.13 Some famous Amman Temples in Tamil Nadu.**

#### **5.2.13.1 Naloor Mariamman Temple.**

Situated approximately ten kilometers east of the southern town of Thanjavur, this simple-structured Mariamman temple has a very interesting history. During the British reign the Deity at the temple was housed in a very small tin structure alongside the busy highway that linked the towns of Thanjavur and Kumbakonam. The British who showed blatant disregard and religious intolerance ordered that this tin structure be demolished to allow the widening of the highway. The Indian labourers who were given the order refused to carry it out for fear of incurring the wrath of the Goddess. The British officer then accused them of being superstitious and took the axe and struck the first blow at the statue of the Deity. As soon as he had done this he noticed that a drop of water appeared on the Deity's face. The officer went forward and wiped out the drop of water. As soon as he did this, pox pearls like huge painful blisters appeared on his face. With unbearable pain the officer screamed for help. His labourers asked him to ask the Deity for forgiveness and implore Her mercy. With no other alternative the officer did as he was told and miraculously the pox pearls disappeared. The officer then believed in the greatness of Mariamman and went on to become Her ardent devotee. Later he contributed to building a better structure to house the Deity at this village called Naloor. The easy access to this temple makes it a very popular destination for Mariamman devotees. At this temple daily worship is offered, with Tuesdays and Fridays considered to be particularly auspicious for the worship of Mariamman.

#### **5.2.13.2 Samayapuram Mariamman Temple.**

This temple is situated on the banks of the Kavery River near the town of Thiruchy. At one stage this part of Tamil Nadu was ruled by the Vijayanagar empire. The King on one

of his travels with his men found the statue of Mariamman as they were returning to the palace. He ordered his men to carry the statue and take it back to the kingdom where he had planned to house the statue. The group stopped at the town of Samayapuram to have a rest. They laid down the statue, took their meals and had a short nap. When they were ready to continue with their journey, they could not pick up the statue as the statue had rooted itself to the ground. No amount of effort was able to lift the statue from the ground. The Deity took up residence here and is therefore referred to as 'Samayapuram Mariamman'. ( Appendix 9 - p. 155 ) Much later the Vijayanagar King, Vijaya Ranga Chokkanathar ( 1706 - 1732) built an elaborate temple to house the Deity. The miracle of this temple attracts millions of devotees each year.

During the Tamil month of Thai ( January / February), the priests of the temple take the statue of Mariamman to the banks of the Kavery for a bathing ceremony called 'theertha valam'. On that day a new sari, a garland and jewellery are sent from the famous Sri Rangam temple, ( which is the abode of Lord Vishnu who is considered to be the brother of Amman) as gifts to Mariamman from Her brother. At this temple, too, there is daily worship with special worship on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Close to the temple there is a tree. Devotees of Mariamman make a wish and according to that wish tie onto the branches of the tree items related to their wishes. For example if a baby is desired a toy cot is tied to the branch and the wish made. It is therefore not an uncommon sight to see cots, dolls, images of various body parts, and so forth weighing the tree down.

The above two temples are examples of the more popular temples in honour of Mariamman. These temples are built according to agamic rules and do not participate in

the slaughtering of animals and the offering of non - vegetarian food items.

( information from the inscriptions at this temple)

#### **5.2.14 Iconography**

The images of Mariamman are many and varied and are made out of a variety of materials which include stone, marble, copper, gold, silver, clay, etc. In some instances the image is made of black stone. The blackness of the Goddess is representative of not only her anger but her fertility as well. In other instances She has a green complexion. Here Her greenness is complementary to Lord Sivan's redness. In Tamil literature light skinned persons are described as Sevappu (having a reddish hue) and the greenness of the Goddess is thus representative of her dark complexion. In keeping with myth number three there are images of Mariamman that have a red coloured face and a black or green coloured body and vice versa. This represents the transposed forms of Mariamman. Sometimes an image of the Goddess may contain only the head of the Goddess, implying that Her body is the place upon which the people reside. In other words the whole village itself is Her body. It is also not uncommon to see the symbol by which the Goddess is represented (soolam, vel) being worshipped in place of the Goddess. It is common throughout Tamil Nadu to see these symbols stuck in the ground under a tree or a temporary structure.

### **5.3 Maduraiveeran**

#### **5.3.1 Introduction**

( Pugashenthi : 1991)

Maduraiveeran is a Folk Deity who is always worshipped together with Mariamman and who does not receive worship singly.

### **5.3.2 The Origin of Maduraiveeran**

The story behind the origin of Maduraiveeran as a Folk Deity goes thus:

Long ago there lived a king by the name of Kaasirajan in a place called Kaasimapurapatnam. The king did penance to invoke Lord Sivan's blessings to beget children as he had none and was concerned about the royal lineage. After many years through the blessing of Lord Sivan a son was born to the king.

As was customary in those days astrologers were called in to map out the prince's horoscope as soon as he was born. This was a compulsory practice of those days and was viewed very seriously by all. Because of the importance of this practice the astrologers of the time held esteemed positions within the kingdom and enjoyed all privileges.

The horoscope was mapped out and handed to the king. The king upon learning of the details of his little son's horoscope was alarmed. For the horoscope revealed that should the prince live ill would befall the king and the kingdom at large. They advised the king that it is in the best interest of all therefore to have the prince killed. This was a deception on the part of the astrologers.

What the horoscope truly revealed was that should the prince continue to live the social and economic status of the astrologers would be adversely affected. Used to living in the lap of luxury and at the expense of the king, the astrologers could not imagine a life otherwise and decided to lie to the king in order to save their own positions.

Because the king was powerfully influenced by astrology (and so was everyone else) he had no reason not to believe the astrologers and hence regretfully accepted the astrologers' command. The king took the painful decision of ordering his men to get rid of

the little prince. The king being a very compassionate man asked his men to abandon the little prince in the forest rather than kill him. The servants did as they were told. The little prince was left in the forest all alone. This irrevocable decision soon left the king bereft of any spirit to continue living. In the forest there lived a couple who belonged to the chakkili caste( the shoe - maker caste). One day the woman found the abandoned prince and took him under her wing. She nurtured him as if he were her very own and as the prince grew up a very strong and special bond began to develop between mother and son.

King Kasirajan soon learnt that his son was living with the chakkili family and ordered that the prince be brought back to him. Afraid that they were going to lose their son the chakkili couple fled to a neighbouring town ruled by king Pommana Nayakkan. The chakkili man joined the ranks of King Pommana Nayakkan's servant guards while the prince grew up to be a strong and fearless lad who roamed the forest hunting bears, tigers, lions, elephants and other wild animals.

King Pommana Nayakkan had a daughter whose name was Bommiammal. The princess attained puberty and was ordered to live away from the palace in a hut that was specially constructed for her. It was customary in ancient times for people to physically distance a menstruating woman because she was regarded as impure. Hence Bommiammal was placed in a hut far away from the palace but was at the same time not denied any comforts. The prince's father, the servant guard of King Pommana Nayakkan was asked to guard the hut that Bommiammal was temporarily housed in.

One night there was a fierce storm and the compassionate prince, sparing his father the onerous task of going out in the storm to guard Bommiammal, offered to go himself. The prince falls in love with the beautiful princess and calms her fears by revealing his original

royal birth. Bommiammal accepts the prince as her husband and for a while thereafter the prince remained as her bodyguard with no one in the court learning of their relationship.

The prince weds Bommiammal secretly in the presence of God. Soon the period of isolation ended and the King sent a grand procession to welcome his daughter back to the palace. The king's guards burnt down the hut to symbolise the end of the period of impurity, and welcomed Bommiammal back to the palace amidst the blowing of horns and the beating of drums. The king gave a grand and lavish feast in celebration of this joyous occasion.

In the meantime the prince, separated from Bommiammal pined for her. Unable to endure this pain he entered the palace in disguise and abducted Bommiammal and they both fled into the night. The following morning when the king discovered that the princess was missing, he summoned his army to go out in search of his daughter. Soon the king and his army came upon the young lovers encamped on the dry river bed of the Kaveri River. In his haste to get his daughter back the king waged war against the prince. In the ensuing battle the prince not only killed the king but he also annihilated the entire army. He then became known as Maduraiveeran ( the brave one from the town of Madurai).

Maduraiveeran and Bommiammal moved to a neighbouring district called Thiruchirapalli. The king of Thiruchirapalli, Vijayaranka Chokkalingam, having heard of Maduraiveeran's brave exploits welcomed Maduraiveeran and his wife with open arms. The king employed Maduraiveeran as a gatekeeper. Maduraiveeran and his wife lived here happily.

Some time later there were reports that pilgrims to Thiruchirapalli were continuously

attacked by bandits, called the Kallar. The king sent Maduraiveeran with an army of men to subdue the bandits. With his army of men Maduraiveeran patrolled the affected area and he received praise from various kings along the way. Maduraiveeran then arrived on the banks of the Vaigai River in the district of Madurai, which was ruled by king Thirumalai Nayakkar. This king having heard of the might of Maduraiveeran summoned Maduraiveeran to his court. Maduraiveeran , after having explained his reason for being in Madurai, was allowed to stay as a special guest at the King's palace.

One day there was news that the bandits had attacked people at the market place. Maduraiveeran and his men vanquished the bandits. King Thirumalai Nayakkar was so pleased with Maduraiveeran's achievement that he treated him to a grand feast at the palace.

Amongst the pomp and celebration the king also ordered 1000 dancing girls to entertain the special guest. Maduraiveeran intoxicated by all the celebration fell in love with one of the dancing girls called Velliammal.

That night Maduraiveeran disguised as a bandit tried to steal Velliammal away. Unfortunately he is mistaken for a bandit and has his limbs diagonally opposite each other chopped as punishment. When the king realised what had happened he begged Goddess Minakshi, ( Mariamman is considered to be a form of Minakshi) the presiding Deity at the Madurai temple to take pity and restore Maduraiveeran. Goddess Minakshi heeded the prayer of the king and restored him to his former self.

But Maduraiveeran said that if it was his fate to die in this way his fate should not be altered. He then stood at the feet of the Goddess and beheaded himself, his head falling at

the feet of the Goddess. In so doing Maduraiveeran expiates for the wrong that he had done. At this point a brief look at this type of religious suicide is required here.

Entering a fire pit (sati), immersing oneself in the confluence of sacred rivers, beheading oneself, etc. were just some examples of religious suicide that were in vogue in earlier days. People who subscribed to these acts had noble motivations and did so to fulfill vows taken or as a result of expiation for sins. Westermarch, (1906 : 472 - 476) opines that sati was widely prevalent among ancient Greeks, Germans and Egyptians among families of kings and nobles. Although suicide is an abhorrent act, the fact that the people who committed suicide were honoured and revered by the masses with monuments which to this day continue to be objects of veneration, influenced even unwilling people to take this line of action. Evidences of religious suicide are found in stone inscriptions of Kampavarma Pallava in the panels of the Ranganatha Cave near Gingee and at the Adivaraha Cave in Mahabalipuram.

(“ Religious suicide in Tamil Society as revealed in Sculpture” by R. Venkatraman).

Thereafter both Maduraiveeran's wives entered the fire pit thereby performing sati. Goddess Minakshi granted a boon that he will always be Her guard. Hence a statue of Maduraiveeran will always be found at the entrance of every Mariamman temple.

A few days passed by and Maduraiveeran became very annoyed that no one had offered any worship to him. In anger, that night he roamed the city causing great havoc. The following night he appeared in a dream to king Thirumalai Nayakkar and made his displeasure at not being offered any worship known. The next morning the perturbed king related his dream to Goddess Minakshi. The Goddess asked the king to start worshipping Maduraiveeran. The king built a large hall for this worship and also donated a large sum

of gold coins for the daily worship of Maduraiveeran.

However, Maduraiveeran was still displeased and dissatisfied and he took possession of one of the king's men and then announced his satisfaction. Hence the offering of animal sacrifices to Maduraiveeran finds its origin here. This firmly established the worship of Maduraiveeran in Tamil Nadu. Even to this day Maduraiveeran is seen as the embodiment of a Tamil hero in all his glory.

From the foregoing it is evident that Maduraiveeran is only a guardian Folk Deity, whose existence came about as recently as the 17th century. Maduraiveeran's sole duty is to protect the shrine of Mariamman and secondly to protect the village.

### **5.3.3 Iconography**

Statues of Maduraiveeran often depict him saddled on a horse. When one examines his life history, the aspect of his being a brave soldier is highlighted with horses being his natural choice for a mount. As a protector of the village the horses also represent the steeds on which he rides on his nightly rounds. Images of Maduraiveeran are portrayed as ferocious with huge protruding eyes, many hands etc. This is obvious for as the protector of the village he has to look fierce enough to frighten away invaders or invading spirits. Images of Maduraiveeran also show him flanked by both his wives, Bommiammal and Velliammal. ( Appendix 10 - p. 156 ) Often he is seen brandishing a sword, a knife or other such weapons. Maduraiveeran does not have the distinction of having a temple of his own. He has a statue in some of the Mariamman temples where worship is offered to him. Vegetarian as well as non vegetarian offerings are made to him. Blood sacrifices are also offered to him. He is always worshipped in conjunction with Mariamman.

## **5.4 Kaateri**

### **5.4.1 Introduction**

In addition to the many Folk Deities, ancient primitive man also worshipped a number of spirits because he felt that these spirits were directly responsible for the way his life was fashioned. Primitive man felt that his environment ( the forest, the lakes, the watering holes for the animals, the fields, the sea, etc.) was governed by spirits. He also believed that he had to appease these spirits with regular worship so that they will not adversely affect his life.

### **5.4.2 Probable origin of Kaateri**

(Gounder, 1994 : 18) gives the following explanation for Kaateri worship. In ancient times cattle rearing was the sole occupation of the youth in a clan. They used to take the cattle to the lakes and ponds for watering purposes. The muddy edges of these lakes and ponds provided apt growing conditions for lush green bushes, reeds and other plants which gave a false perception as to where the water's edge really started. Consequently calves, kids and young children used to get caught in the quagmire and get washed away. Man believed that the displeased spirits were responsible for taking away the lives of the animals and children as retribution. As penance he therefore appeased the spirits with animal sacrifice in the hope that the spirits would now be satisfied and leave his animals and children alone. It is for this very reason that the Kaateri prayer is conducted a few months after the birth of a new born baby. The parents believe that by offering prayers as soon as possible they can keep Kaateri at bay.

Man has evolved and progressed since, yet he never fails to slavishly follow these forms of worship. This can safely be attributed to his basic underlying fear complex, for is not the

underlying concept of folk religion based on fear? No parent is willing to risk the lives of their children even in the face of apparent logic.

#### **5.4.3 Definition of Kaateri**

Etymologically Kaateri derives from Kaadu = a forest and Yeri = a lake, hence Gounder opines that Kaateri is a reservoir/lake in a forest. Some are of the opinion that the spirit pervading these lakes and forests is known as Kaateri.

#### **5.5 Summary**

The origins and myths surrounding Mariamman, Kaateri and Maduraiveeran were discussed in detail in this chapter. With regards to Mariamman, the concept of Mariamman as the Goddess of smallpox and as the Goddess of rain was analysed. An attempt was made to list the possible reasons for sacrificial offerings to Mariamman. Iconographical representations of the Deities were also given. Some of the popular temples associated with Amman were also discussed.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CHANGES IN THE PATTERN OF WORSHIP IN THE LOCAL CONTEXT.**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

Over the years many Tamils have been following the worship of Folk Deities as it was handed down by previous generations. Some of the rituals, which had some meaning in earlier days, are now lost in antiquity and totally meaningless, yet devotees slavishly follow these rituals, only because it was handed down by their forefathers. They do not question the significance of these rituals. And if some of them did question them they could not find satisfactory answers. However, it is heartening to note that more and more present generation people are questioning the various rituals surrounding the worship, and are electing to abandon some of them, in particular, that of animal sacrifices.

#### **6.2 Rituals without understanding**

" The performance of rituals without understanding their meaning is being criticised not only by intellectuals, but by many of the lay people. Illustrating the stupidity of people, a Tamil woman with Standard two education in English told us : " A man while praying noticed his cat drinking the milk left for prayer. He immediately tied the cat to a post and resumed his prayers. His son saw the cat, and thought it part of the ritual. After his father's death he had to perform the prayers, and so he bought a cat, tied it to a post and prayed to it. This was carried on from generation to generation ; if necessary, the family bought a cat for the occasion. Likewise, we don't know what really happened before a ceremony was handed down." ( Kuper, 1960 : 215)

The above example aptly describes how rituals are slavishly followed in the name of

tradition. To quote yet another example :

During an Amman prayer in the South African context, at the conclusion of the prayer that is observed in the morning, three elderly women are first served the fermented porridge together with the curries before it is distributed to others. These women receive the porridge and curries with cupped hands. In the earlier days, in Tamil Nadu at the Amman prayers, people from low castes were given the porridge. The higher castes who were distributing the porridge did not want their utensils and ladels to be polluted by coming in contact with the lower castes. Hence the low caste women were expected to receive their food in cupped hands. In South Africa, there are no caste considerations during this prayer, yet this practice of the three women receiving the food in cupped hands is a definite feature at the prayer.

Let us examine the observance of worship to Mariamman., Maduraiveeran and Kaateri in the South African context.

### **6.3 The observance of the Mariamman prayer in a South African context.**

#### **6.3.1 Introduction**

This prayer is observed either on a Friday or a Sunday. The prayer is performed in two sessions, one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

#### **6.3.2 Vegetarian Offerings**

In the prayer area of the house the three vessels that contain the cooked fermented gruel are placed. These vessels are beautifully decorated with turmeric paste and vermilion ( kungumum ). A garland made of syringa leaves is tied around each vessel. Onions, shallots and curd are added to the gruel. This is to enhance the fermented taste. Accompanying the gruel are three varieties of curries. ( pumpkin, cabbage and a curry made of mixed

vegetables). On a plaintain leaf, which is placed on a winnow, rice flour and syringa leaves are sprinkled and pongal ( cooked, sweetened white rice) and a variety of steamed pulses are placed. On a third plaintain leaf offerings of fruit, milk, betel nut, betel leaves, incense, camphor and a coconut are placed. On yet another plaintain leaf undiluted porridge with a combination of the vegetable curries is offered. The theeba aarathanay ( worship by means of waving of the lit camphor around the offerings and the image of the Deity) is performed and a few devotional hymns in praise of the Goddess are sung to invoke Her blessings.

At the entrance of the house a kolam ( a decorative design made with rice flower or a paste of flour and water) is drawn. Once the prayer is completed inside the house all the offerings with the exception of the leaf that contains the undiluted porridge is taken outside the house and placed inside the kolam. Precautions are taken to ensure that the offerings all face eastwards. Once again the theeba aarathanay is performed by family members, friends and relatives. More hymns are sung and the prayer concludes with the distribution of the offerings firstly to three elderly women and then to everyone present including the neighbours. The three elderly women receive the porridge and curries in cupped hands. If animal sacrifice is included in the worship then this is undertaken when the prayer is observed outside the house.

Upon the conclusion of the morning prayer preparations are undertaken for the afternoon prayer. For this prayer the offerings made include cooked rice , a variety of curried vegetables, milk, fruit, coconut, betel nut, betel leaves, incense, camphor, flowers, kozhukattai (steamed rice cakes), vadai ( deep fried pattis made out of pea dhal and seasoning) and urundai (round deep fried sweetened batter). These offerings are not taken outside. In certain households devotional hymns in praise of Mariamman are sung. Some

even recite the Mariamman Thalaatu. With regard to the above mentioned prayer the defining factor is that it is purely vegetarian.

### **6.3.3 Non-Vegetarian Offerings**

There are some who conduct this prayer by offering non- vegetarian offerings as well. These people also offer liquor, marijuana and opium. Nowadays an intoxicating black sweet called marjam is substituted for opium.

### **6.3.4 Animal Sacrifices**

If animal sacrifice is included in the worship then this is undertaken when the prayer is observed outside the house. During the sacrifice, in some instances, a white sheet is used as a screen to block out Deities like Ganesha, so as not to offend Him as He never accepts animal sacrifices. The slaughtered animals are then placed within the kolam as offerings. This type of worship is always accompanied by the worship of Maduraiveeran. This worship also features a shaman who helps herself to the offerings, including the alcohol and marijuana. The shaman also delights in drinking the blood from the slaughtered animals. In the afternoon in addition to the vegetarian offerings made (as mentioned earlier), the roosters/ goats are cooked and offered to the Goddess. Those who include non vegetarian offerings in their worship, include 'dried fish' in the dish that contains a mixture of various vegetables. According to mythology, 'dried fish' is placed under the pillow of the person inflicted with smallpox as it is believed that the awful smell of the 'dried fish' will send the Goddess ( who incidentally is responsible for the infliction) scurrying and consequently the inflicted person will be cured.

### **6.3.5 The Importance of Gruel**

With regard to the cooling of the wrath of the Goddess and the heat of the Goddess which

manifests itself in the form of smallpox (a heat originated disease), most of the offerings made to the Goddess have the properties of cooling the system which in turn will reduce the risk of the appearance of the heat originated diseases. In the South African context as mentioned earlier the fermented gruel forms the most important feature of the worship. The importance of the gruel (porridge) supersedes all other offerings to such an extent that the worship is popularly known as “The Porridge Prayer”. An important precaution is that the gruel is made after the meal is fermented. This use of the gruel as a cooling agent is extended further by adding curd, shallot and onions to the fermented gruel. Furthermore it is compulsory to offer the gruel to the Goddess with curried pumpkin and cabbage - both cooling agents.

#### **6.3.6 Other Offerings**

The offering of coconut is symbolic in that the white kernel which is pure and untouched symbolizes the devotees' pure faith. Turmeric water is poured at the feet of the Goddess- to cool the Goddess. Syringa leaves which are used liberally in the prayer, are cooling and contain germicidal properties. Syringa leaves which are rich in medicinal value is said to be particularly efficacious against smallpox. Oil from the syringa plant (*Malia Azaduachta*) possesses varying degrees of anti - inflammatory properties.

#### **6.3.7 The Importance of Maavilakku**

Maavilakku is a common unbaked cake offered to Mariamman. It is a mixture of rice, flour, sugar, butter and milk. The fact that it is unbaked once again symbolizes coolness. The mixture is moulded into the shape of a small lamp by making a depression in the middle into which oil or ghee is poured. A wick is placed in the oil/ghee and the lamp is then lit. Legend has it that Lord Vishnu appeased the anger of His sister Parasakthi, who in Her fury wanted to throw pox pearls onto the people in the world, by offering Her

this maavilakku. At the famous Samayapuram Mariamman Temple in the district of Thiruchy in South India, a very special ritual concerning the maavilakku finds importance. The devotees who suffered from some disease of the eye, mouth, ears, stomach, hand, leg, etc. make a vow to offer a maavilakku to Mariamman should they be cured. Once cured the devotees fulfill their vow by offering a maavilakku to the Deity.

The cured person lies on his back in front of the sanctum sanctorum and a maavilakku placed on a plaintain leaf is placed on the affected part of the person's body. The maavilakku is lit and after a while it is offered as prasaatham ( blessed offering) to everyone present.

#### **6.3.8 The Offering of Images of Body Parts**

It is a common practice to offer body parts made out of silver sheets or metal to the Goddess for a vow taken for bodily aches and pains. A practice similar to this can be traced to the Etruscans in Italy, where their offerings were made of terracota, portraying affected body parts such as the legs, eyes, the liver, etc. Whenever the Etruscans had a problem with their health, they offered an appropriate body part for a cure just as the devotees of Mariamman do.

(“ Religious Suicide in Tamil society as revealed in Sculpture” by R. Venkatraman.)

In South Africa at the Kaliasman temple in Mount Edgecombe there is an annual prayer in honour of Goddess Kali. At this prayer parts of a sheep ( offals, head, trotters.etc) to represent the affected part of the human body are offered to the Goddess. It is believed that this will alleviate the pain and suffering of the affected person.

### **6.3.9 Definition of Kuuzh Utral**

In the South African context usually the first Sunday of the month of Aadi, is set aside for the worship of Mariamman at temples throughout the country. This prayer is popularly known as “porridge prayer “ or as Kuuzh Utral” among the Tamil community. In India ragi (finger millet) is used to prepare the porridge and in South Africa due to the abundance of maize , maize meal is used to prepare the porridge.

### **6.3.10 Why Gruel?**

This gruel occupies a prominent position in this worship but its importance is mostly functional, ie. cooling. In Tamil Nadu thousands of people participate in the Mariamman festivals and gruel was seen as the most inexpensive, yet filling and nourishing food item to serve to the thousands of people at minimum cost. In South Africa we follow this practice assuming it to be of spiritual significance.

Also important to note is that gruel made of ragi is said to be particularly efficacious against smallpox. It is also seen as a cooling agent. This notion of the offerings having a cooling aspect has important connotations. The Amman prayer in Tamil Nadu is observed in the summer months when temperatures are at the highest and the offerings help cool the system against the unbearable heat. In the Southern Hemisphere it is our winter, yet we offer these cooling food items as offering. This is another example of our slavishly following certain rituals handed down by tradition, mostly orally.

### **6.3.11 The Isipingo Temple and the Mariamman Festival**

In South Africa the Isipingo Mariamman Temple is noted for its observance of the Mariamman festival. The fame of this temple with regard to the Mariamman festival is unparalleled. The fame of this temple lies in this tale as it was told to me by my late

grandmother:

Long ago a couple was experiencing problems in their marriage. The husband had good reason to believe that his wife was unfaithful to him. When confronted with this accusation the wife denied these claims made by her husband. The husband brought his wife to the Isipingo Temple and asked her to prove her innocence in the presence of the Goddess. The wife who was unfaithful to her husband tried to deny the affair she was having in the presence of the Goddess. No sooner had she done this she fell onto the ground writhing in pain. She realised the folly of her ways. She admitted the truth to her husband and apologised to the Goddess and implored Her mercy. Soon this story spread to all parts of the country and the might of the Goddess at this temple was thereafter unquestioned.

Built in 1870 this temple at the time was one of the very few Amman temples in South Africa. In the early days people travelled great distances to such established temples and depended on public transport which incidentally was not easily available. Further, Hindu festivals like the Mariamman Festival were not regarded as important enough to warrant a public holiday or leave from work. Hence the only available period that was seen as convenient ( in terms of travel time and leave from work ) to observe the Mariamman Festival was over the Easter weekend. Even though so much has changed since, people still believe that this is the most auspicious time for the worship of Mariamman at this particular temple.

The festival lasts for ten days and during this period thousands of people visit the temple. A distinguishing feature of this temple is that people of all religious denominations and race groups offer worship at this temple. During the festival it is not an uncommon sight to see devotees wearing neem ( margosa) leaves as a dress carrying a tray of offerings and

circumambulating the temple. Some carry on the tray amongst other offerings, images of body parts ( eyes, nose, ears, hands, legs, a female body, a male body, etc) made out of tin, silver or gold depending on the economic status of the devotee and the intensity of the vow taken. This is a common practice fulfilled by the devotees for either a vow taken or a boon accrued, especially with regard to relief from a bodily ailment.

#### **6.3.11.1 The Fame of the Isipingo Temple**

On 21 March 2001, interviewee No. 4, Mr Kander who is blind for a year now due to a retinal detachment, went to the Isipingo Temple with his wife, his daughter and his son to offer worship to Goddess Mariamman. The Kander family are ardent devotees of Mariamman. This trip to the temple was the result of a vow taken by the wife. At the temple Mr. Kander felt some sensation in his eyes and was able to see hazily the type and colour of clothing that his family were wearing. For those few moments it is believed that Mr. Kander had experienced the grace of the Goddess. However upon his return to his home these visions had disappeared. It is also believed by some members of his family that Mr. Kander had lost his sight due to his wife's refusal to offer the Goddess blood sacrifice. For years the Kander household used to observe the Mariamman worship, religiously, in the Tamil month of Aadi with blood sacrifice and non vegetarian offerings. As his children grew older they abhorred the idea of blood sacrifice and refused to participate in the worship. Interviewee No. 5 , Mrs. Kander felt that the reason for her worship to the Goddess was a token of thanksgiving for the well being of her family and if her children refused to participate in the worship what then was the point of her worship?

As a result she made the decision to continue with the worship but to omit the blood sacrifice and non vegetarian offerings. The children now willingly participate in the prayer but there are some who believe that Mr. Kander's loss of sight is not a medical condition

but due to his wife's decision to omit the blood sacrifice and non vegetarian offerings.

### **6.3.12 Types of Vows**

Some ardent devotees offer Ankapradatchinam ( rolling around the temple). Some even offer Urarupongal ) the cooking of pongal - for the offering to the Deity - under extremely difficult conditions in the precincts of the temple.

( Appendix 11- p.157 ) It is believed that the more effort is applied in appeasing the Goddess, the more merciful and benevolent She will be towards Her devotees. Temples throughout the country observe the prayer as well, albeit, on a smaller scale.

The Arulmigu Devi Sri Krsnamariambal Thirukoil of Chatsworth observes this prayer over a weekend starting on a Friday and concluding on a Tuesday. ( Appendix 12 - p. 158 )

## **6.4 Maduraiveeran Prayer in South Africa**

As mentioned earlier in this dissertation the worship of Maduraiveeran, in the South African context is always conducted in conjunction with that of Mariamman. Prayer is offered in the morning and in the afternoon. For the prayer in the morning roosters are sacrificed and offered to Maduraiveeran exclusively. Hand made bread ( roti ), pongal, nine varieties of beans, fruit, milk, opium, marijuana, cigarettes, alcohol all form part of the offerings. For the prayer conducted in the afternoon, in keeping with the myth surrounding Maduraiveeran, limbs of the rooster diagonally opposite to each other are prepared and offered on roti. In addition to this the vital organs of the sacrificed animal ( liver, heart, head, gizzard, etc. the lifeline of the animal sacrificed.) are offered on a platter of cooked rice. Opium, marijuana, alcohol , cigarettes, a variety of palagaarams (fried and steamed, sweet and savoury delicacies), milk, fruit, coconut , etc. also form part of the offering.

#### **6.4.1 Reasons for Blood Sacrifice and Non - Vegetarian Offerings**

Maduraiveeran was brought up by a couple who belonged to the chakkili caste - a group of people who ate non vegetarian foods and indulged in opium, marijuana and liquor. It is therefore assumed that he too indulged in these types of food. Hence these offerings are made to him.

If a shaman accompanies the worship then the shaman partakes of the offerings and then distributes the remainder to the rest of those who are present.

However there are some who offer worship to Maduraiveeran with purely vegetarian offerings. These people offer only roti, pongal, milk, fruit, coconut, palagaarams, a variety of beans, rice and vegetable curries.

#### **6.5 Kaateri Worship in South Africa**

Whereas worship to Mariamman and Maduraiveeran are annual events in the South African calendar, Kaateri worship, is not an annual event except in very exceptional cases. Worship is mostly conducted a few months after the birth of a baby. Worship of Kaateri is never conducted in the home. A square, shallow sand pit to substitute a makeshift temple is dug out, preferably in the back garden. Inside this sand pit a plaintain leaf is placed. On this plaintain leaf pongal, fruit, milk, coconut, camphor, incense, roti, etc. are placed as offerings. In addition people place black bangles, a piece of black cloth and a string of black beads. After the prayer, the black cloth is used to make a garment for the baby in whose interest the prayer is conducted. The bangles and the string of beads are used to adorn the baby.

##### **6.5.1 Primary Object of Worship**

The primary object of worship is the slaughtering of a black hen. The colour black

symbolizes fertility and its association with the black fertile soil. It is believed that if Kaateri is not appeased she will forcibly satisfy her passion for a sacrificial life by taking the life of the new born baby. To avoid this people offer to Kaateri a black hen as a sacrificial offering, believing that she will now be satisfied and will leave the baby unharmed.

### **6.5.2 Mode of Worship**

The prayer is conducted in two sessions. For the afternoon prayer the slaughtered hen is offered together with all the other auspicious offerings mentioned above. The entrails of the hen, in particular the reproductive organs are considered to be particularly important offerings for the obvious reason that they are the lifeline of the animal and provide the closest communion with the object of the worship which is the baby. During both the prayer sessions the baby is laid down on the ground close to the dug out sandpit for the duration of the prayer. Devotees offer vegetarian as well as non vegetarian offerings to Kaateri. Those who offer vegetarian offerings do not offer blood sacrifice.

### **6.5.3 The Offering of Hair**

People also offer the baby's hair as a sacrifice to Kaateri. It was a common practice in the early days for people to decapitate themselves as a sacrifice to the Deity ( see Maduraiveeran). Later this practice of cutting off the head was replaced by cutting off the hair ( mimic sacrifice of the hair for the head) and was seen as the ultimate sacrifice. During the worship of Kaateri the entrails of the hen, in particular, are offered as these are seen as the lifeline of the animal and by offering this to Kaateri a close communion with Kaateri and the sacrificial animal is obtained.

At the conclusion of the prayer all the offerings are distributed to those present. Special

precautions are taken to make sure that none of the offerings are taken back into the house out of the superstitious belief that the spirit of Kaateri that pervades in the offerings will enter the home.

#### **6.5.4 Why is the Kaateri Prayer restricted to Women only?**

It should also be noted here that a unique feature of a prayer in honour of Kaateri is that it is restricted to women alone. Men and children (except the baby in whose honour the prayer is conducted) are excluded from the worship and are encouraged by the elders to stay as far away as possible from the area of worship.

Since Kaateri is a spirit that attacks children, after they are born or while they are still in the uterus, it is easy to see here the necessity of the exclusion of children. The close communion between mother and child during the pregnancy and subsequent childbirth excludes the presence of the father or men in general at the prayer.

From the foregoing it is obvious that Kaateri is a spirit elevated to the status of a Deity whose worshipped is motivated primarily by the fear principle. Since Kaateri is believed to be a spirit there are no iconographical representations of her. Suffice to say that the colour black is representative of Kaateri.

#### **6.5.5 Belief in Kaateri**

During fieldwork a very interesting story was related to me by a devotee of Kaateri.

' Interviewee No 5, Mrs S. Nair who lives in Isipingo, Durban , used to offer worship to Kaateri annually, a tradition she has inherited from her parents - in - law. The worship also included the offering of a black hen. There came a stage in her life when she decided to stop the worship altogether. Soon after this her teenage son who was a brilliant golfer and

who excelled in school academically got heavily involved in drug-taking and lost all that he had, including his respect for his parents. He refused to play golf anymore and fell out of school.

Needless to say that he gave his parents untold misery. On hindsight Mrs. Nair believed that her neglect of her worship of Kaateri was the cause of the turn of events in her son's life. She immediately resumed the worship and swears that everything in her home is now back to normal. She says that she will never stop the worship for fear of her son resorting to his bad ways.

## **6.6 Summary**

With regards to the worship of Folk Deities by South African Tamils the author has made two important observations. One is that much of the ritual is followed to suit the South African context. The gruel, for example, forms the most important item of offering for the Mariamman prayer. In Tamil Nadu millet is used, but here in South Africa that has been substituted by maize meal because of the abundance of maize here. In South Africa the prayer is mostly observed on a Sunday for convenience. In Tamil Nadu the prayer is observed on Tuesdays and Fridays, days auspicious for the worship of Amman.

On the other hand there are features of the worship that are slavishly continued in spite of their having no significance in present times. The gruel and other offerings which are mostly cooling agents are offered to the Goddess and distributed to the people, for the month of Aadi in Tamil Nadu ( which is in the northern hemisphere) is unbearably hot. Yet here in South Africa ( which is in the southern hemisphere) the month of Aadi signals our winter and we offer and distribute food items that have a cooling effect, proving that this religious practice is directly inherited from Tamil Nadu and does not coincide with our

local conditions.

My observation of the various religious practices with regard to Folk Deity worship, also made me aware of the impact of oral tradition in the preservation of this form of worship. Folk Deity is an integral part of Folk religion which is the religion of the villagers of India. There are no written texts on the mode of worship, the offerings made, the purpose of the worship, etc. Hence it can be safely assumed that all the practices that we follow have been handed down by word of mouth. This can account for the slavish following of certain of the rituals.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **EVALUATION OF THE SYSTEM - EMPIRICAL RESEARCH**

#### **(QUESTIONNAIRES, OBSERVATIONS, ETC.)**

##### **7.1 Introduction**

The information presented in this chapter is based on a survey of a hundred questionnaires directed to a select group of South African Tamil speaking Hindus who reside in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Of this number seventy questionnaires were completed. For this study a representative sample of Tamil speaking South Africans was drawn to cover a wide spectrum of the Tamil speaking Hindu community, taking into account age; profession; social, economic and educational status etc.

The questionnaires were divided into the following sections :

- A - Personal Information
- B - Heritage
- C - The interviewee's attitude towards the Tamil Language
- D - Knowledge of Folk Deities

##### **7.2 Personal Information**

Respondents lived in the following areas : Burlington Heights, Durban North, Kenville, Malvern, Morningside, Queensburgh, Reservoir Hills, Stanger, Sunningdale, Silverglen, Umhlatuzana, Woodhaven, Chatsworth and Phoenix.

**Table 7.1 The Age Distribution of the Respondents**

(Questionnaire, Question A 5, p. 1 )

Age Group	Distribution
15 - 20	10%
21 - 30	28.6%
31 - 41	22.9%
41 - 50	18.6%
51 - 60	11.4%
61+	8.6%

To get a balanced and an objective analysis the questionnaires were distributed to people from the age of fifteen years. The major part of the respondents fell in the 21 - 30 year age group with 15 - 20 years forming 10% of the total number of respondents. 22,9% of those who completed the questionnaires were between the ages of 31 and 41. 8.6% were over the age of 61 years and 11.4 % were between 51 and 60 years old. Those interviewed between the ages of 41 and 50 formed 18.6 % of the total amount.

Females made up 60% of the respondents while males made up 40%. 27.1% of the respondents were single, 61.4% were married, 1.4% were divorced and 10% were widowed. All the respondents were born in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Of these 4.3 % belonged to second generation South Africans, 55.1% were third generation citizens, 34.8% were fourth generation and 5.8% belonged to the fifth generation. All those interviewed belonged to the Hindu faith.

**Table 7.2 : Occupation of the Respondents**

**(Questionnaire, Question A 14, p. 3)**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Score</b>
Professional :	
Educational	15.7%
Medical and related	2.9%
Technical	2.9%
Engineer	1.4%
Managerial and Clerical	7.1%
Sales Workers	4.3%
Transport eg. Busdriver	1.4%
Communication	4.3%
Service, Sport and Recreation	1.4%
Artisan	2.9%
Labourer	2.9%
Businessmen/ Businesswomen	4.3%
Home-Executive	22.9%
Student	11.4%
Unemployed	7.1%
Retired	1.4%
Priest	2.9%
Teacher of Tamil in State School	1.4%

An analysis of Table 7.2 indicates that the questionnaires were distributed amongst people

of various occupations in the Tamil speaking Hindu community. Whether students, priests, home-executives or professionals their contribution towards this study was invaluable. It is important to mention here that with regard to receiving a Tamil education 18.6% of first borns had formal education in Tamil, 7.1% of second borns were educated in Tamil, while 10% of third borns were given a Tamil education. But this percentage drops to 8.6 for later born children, showing a drastic decrease in the number of children choosing to learn Tamil.

### 7.3 Heritage

**Table 7.3 Forefather's Occupation**

(Questionnaire, Question B 1.3, p. 4)

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>%</b>
Driver	1.4%
Engineer	1.4%
Farmer	14.3%
Labourer	18.6%
Miner	1.4%
Worked on a Ship	1.4%
Police	2.9%
Priest	1.4%
Railways	4.3%
Sirdar	2.9%
Supervisor	2.9%

The above table gives us an idea as to the occupation of the respondents' forefathers and it is interesting to note that it covers a wide spectrum of occupations with 18.6% working as labourers and 14.3% working as farmers.

**Table 7.4 Districts from which immigrants arrived  
(Questionnaire, Question B 1.5, p. 4)**

Districts	%
Andra Pradesh	1.4%
Bangalore	1.4%
Chengalput	1.4%
Chennai	7.1%
Kerala	1.4%
Madurai	2.9%
North Arcot	5.7%
Thanjavur	4.3%
Vellore	5.7%

From the above we can deduce that most of the interviewees came from Tamil Nadu with a small percentage coming from the neighbouring States of Andra Pradesh and Kerala. The highest percentage of 7.1% came from Chennai ( Madras). North Arcot constituted 5.7%, Vellore 5.7%, Thanjavur 4.3% and Madurai 2.9%.

#### **7.4 Attitudes regarding the Tamil Language**

**Table 7.5 About the Tamil Language**

**( Questionnaire, Question C 1, p. 4)**

<b>Category</b>	<b>%</b>
I am proud of it	84.3%
Positive	12.9%
Negative	0%
I don't care	1.4%

In view of the above statistics it is heartening to note that an overwhelming 84.3% indicated that they were proud of the Tamil language with 12.9% having a positive attitude towards the Tamil language. It is very encouraging to note that no one showed any signs of negativity towards Tamil and a meagre 1.4% said that they don't care about the status of Tamil. 37.1 % of the respondents received formal education in Tamil up to Grade 7, 2.9 % up to Grade 12 and 4.3 % up to B.A. level at the University of Durban-Westville. 1.4% have studied up to the Masters level and 1.4% studied Tamil in their Higher Diploma in education at the University of Durban-Westville.

A disturbing percentage of 51.4 indicated that they received no education in Tamil, while only 1.4% did not respond to this question. 37.1 % of the respondents spoke Tamil very well, 34.3% fairly well and 28,6 % could not speak Tamil at all.15.7% are able to read Tamil very well, 30% fairly well and 52.9% could not read at all. Only 12.9% are able to write in Tamil, 30% fairly well and 55.7% cannot write at all. The percentages in the numbers of the respondents who are unable to speak, read and write Tamil are evidently

due to their lack of formal education in Tamil. This is an issue that needs to be addressed urgently in order to preserve the Tamil Legacy.

However when it came to understanding the language the research provides us with some interesting information. 47.1% understand Tamil very well, 45.7 fairly well and only 5.7% did not understand Tamil at all. This is a refreshing change from the percentages that can read and write and speak Tamil. Those who can speak Tamil learnt the language from various sources : from their grandparents, from their parents, from their relatives, from their friends, through formal education and from other sources like movies, etc.

### **7.5 Knowledge of Folk Deities**

The popular Folk Deities worshipped by South African Tamils are Mariamman, Maduraiveeran, Kaateri, Munisveeran, Angalespari and Kali. 32.9% of the respondents worship Folk Deities because their families have been doing it and they are merely following a family tradition, while 45,7% worship Folk Deities out of their own choice, indicating that more people are doing it out of their own will. 88.6% do the worship with the family, 32.9% observe the worship with the community jointly at a temple, etc. and 8.6 % observe the worship individually.

It should be noted here that the figure of 88.6% reflected includes communal and individual worship by certain respondents, and so too do the figures of 32.9% and 8.6%. This also shows us that there is a trend to either observe the worship communally or jointly with the family rather than individually.

#### **7.5.1 Elements of worship**

An interesting distinguishing feature in this regard is the offering of vegetarian and non-

vegetarian offerings. The following elements prevail in the worship of Folk Deities:

1. The offering of porridge
2. Chicken sacrifice
3. Other animal sacrifice ( goat, etc.)
4. 3 Day beach worship
5. Firewalking
6. The offering of alcohol
7. The offering of cigarettes
8. The offering of various vegetarian or non vegetarian curries
9. The offering of marijuana
10. The offering of pongal ( sweetened white rice)
11. The offering of fruit and milk
12. A piece of black cloth for Kaateri
13. Black bangles for Kaateri
14. The offering of a black hen for Kaateri
15. The offering of Rotis
16. The offering of nine types of pulses
17. The offering of dried fish
18. The offering of baby's hair to Kaateri
19. The use of syringa leaves in the worship of Mariamman
20. The offering of turmeric and vermilion
21. The offering of Maavalikku ( unbaked rice cake)

From my research I discovered that when it came to the Mariamman worship all the respondents offered porridge.

**Table 7.6 Elements of Offering**

( Questionnaire, Question D 5, p. 6)

Category	%
1,14	1.4%
1,2	4.3%
1,8,10,15,16	1.4%
1,11	1.4%
1,14	4.3%
1,11,14	1.4%
1,2,14	1.4%
1,2,3	1.4%
1,2,3,14	1.4%
1,2,6,7,14	1.4%
1,2,4	1.4%
1,8	4.3%
1,8,10,11	2.8%
1,8,11	1.4%
1,8,11,15	1.4%
1,6,7,8,9,15	1.4%
1,8 9,10,11,16,20	1.4%
12,13,14	1.4%
1,8,10,11,13,14,15	1.4%
14,18	1.4%
2,12	1.4%

From the above it is clearly evident that certain items are almost compulsory for certain Deities like the offering of porridge for Mariamman and the offering of a black hen for Kaateri. It is also evident that whenever an offering of porridge is made the offering of curries accompanies it. From the offerings made we can safely deduce that the popular Deities worshipped are Mariamman ( porridge - which is exclusively offered to Her), Kaateri ( black hen, black cloth, black bangles - exclusive offerings to Kaateri) and Maduraiveeran ( liquor, chicken, marijuana - exclusive offerings to Maduraiveeran).

Respondents were aware that the defining feature of Folk Deity worship was the choice between vegetarian and non-vegetarian offerings. Only 1.4% of the respondents thought of discontinuing with this kind of worship because of the lack of family support. The worship itself of Folk Deities involves a lot of preparation and is time consuming and requires many hands hence this percentage who are thinking of discontinuing feel so because of the lack of co-operation. If this number increases then the worship of Folk Deities will soon cease completely for this is a form of Folk Religion that is orally handed down and with a lack of religious observance there will be no need for the oral handing down of this tradition. South African Tamils as mentioned earlier in this dissertation offer their worship, in addition to Folk Deities, to the following Mainstream Religious Traditions :

1. Saivism
2. Vaishnavism
3. Saktham
4. Murugan Worship
5. Ganesha Worship

**Table 7.7 Mainstream Religious Beliefs**

**(Questionnaire, Question D 8, p. 7)**

<b>Religious Beliefs</b>	<b>%</b>
1,2, 3, 4, 5	49.9%
1,2,4,5	2.9%
1,4	2.9%
2,3	2.9%
4,5	15.7

The research proves that almost half of the respondents direct their worship to all the mainstream religious beliefs of Lord Sivan, Lord Vishnu, Goddess Sakthi, Lord Murugan and Lord Ganesha. 2.9% exclude Sakthi worship from their religious observances and 15.7% offer worship only to Lord Murugan and Lord Ganesha.

Regarding the knowledge of Folk Deities 4.3 % of the respondents learnt of Folk Deities from books and 1.4 % from other forms of literature ( pamphlets, brochures, etc.). Most of the respondents ( 41.4% ) learnt about Folk Deities through oral tradition, proving that this form of worship forms an integral part of folk religion which is always orally handed down. 17.1% learnt from other sources like from temple priests which also constitutes more structured type of formal oral tradition since it is handed down by someone who has acquired knowledge on the subject.

When these observances are conducted at temples, etc. where there are officiating priests, 40 % said that the priest explained the significance of the prayer while 50% indicated that

they are not given any explanation regarding the significance of the worship. 21.45 % of the time this information was conveyed in English and 17.1 % of the time in Tamil. It is of grave concern that 50% of the respondents who attend the worship of Folk Deities at temples are not educated on the significance of the worship.

For the 40% who are given some information on Folk Deities, 17.1% of the time this is conveyed in Tamil and we have already seen the low percentage of the understanding of Tamil in our community. Factors such as these further hinder a better understanding of this type of worship. 90 % of the respondents believe that an understanding of Tamil will facilitate their understanding of their religious practices, while only 10% felt that this was not true. This indicates that the oral tradition depends on the knowledge of the mother tongue language. This oral tradition was initially transmitted in earlier days in Tamil only. As the interest and acquisition of Tamil declined, this oral tradition incorporated some English with the Tamil. The research reveals that nowadays 21.45% of the time the rituals are explained in English as opposed to only 17.1% of the time when it is explained in Tamil which clearly indicates that soon English may be the language of this oral tradition. This will definitely lead to a decline of oral tradition in the religio-cultural field.

Because Folk Deity worship is orally handed down the use of various terms are crucial.

A list of these terms follows :

**( Questionnaire, Question D 20, p. 10 )**

1. Vadai - fried patties made out of lentils
2. Thul maavu - ground rice flour
3. Urundai - deep fried sweetened dumplings

4. Bali - sacrifice
5. Kollai - a heap of parts of a sheep/ chicken given as a sacrifice
6. Maavillakku - unbaked, sweetened rice cake
7. Kozhukattai - steamed, sweetened pudding made out of rice flour
8. Pongal - cooked white rice
9. Gaavu - sacrifice
10. Prasadam - blessed offerings
11. Nayvedham - any type of vegetarian offering
12. Thuni - clothing
13. Marjam - an intoxicating black sweet
14. Paal - milk
15. Pazham - fruit
16. Kuuzh - porridge
17. Roti - bread made of flour and toasted on a grill
18. Kanchi - a sweetened drink made with rice, coconut, milk, etc.
19. Potri - a term of reverence to the Deity
20. Sami - God
21. Thiruneer - the Holy Ash.

From the researcher's observations it was clear that because the worship of Folk Deities is part of Folk religion and involved in some instances blood sacrifices, people are often reluctant to admit their worship of Folk Deities. 4.3% of those interviewed said that they admitted their participation and that it did not affect their social status. Of these 98.6% said that they are not afraid to openly admit their involvement in this kind of worship, while 1.4 % would not openly admit to their worship of Folk Deities.

When asked how they would react to suggestions that these practices need not be followed, 28.6% said that they would be angered, 7.1% said that they are in favour of the practices, 40% indicated their disapproval of the suggestion that the practices be discontinued, 11.4% felt that an understanding of the significance of the worship is required and 7.1% felt that the choice to continue or not was an individual one.

Although a greater understanding is required the majority feel that the practices should not be discontinued. Further 94.3% of the respondents indicated that they will encourage their descendants to follow the worship, showing the regard and importance of Folk Deity worship in their lives. 97.1% of the respondents also believe that Folk Deity worship has contributed to religio-cultural continuity amongst South African Tamils.

## **7.6 Summary**

In this chapter the researcher has examined the heritage, attitudes of the community towards Tamil, their knowledge of Folk Deities and their worship of Folk Deities. These findings are the result of the responses from the questionnaires filled out by the respondents. The responses revealed that although South African Tamils had very little or in some instances no knowledge at all of Folk Deities, they nonetheless observe the worship and will continue to do so, encouraging their descendants to do the same.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSION

Many factors were responsible for Indian emigration to South Africa. Whatever the reasons it is obvious from the research that the Indian forefathers since setting foot here worked tirelessly to maintain their cultural, linguistic and religious links with India. This applies equally with regard to their propagation of the worship of Folk Deities. A distinguishing factor in the religious pattern of South African Tamils that emerged from the research is that their religious practices are not confined to Folk Deity worship alone. In all instances in addition to Folk Deity worship South African Tamils also worship one or more aspects of the “ Mainstream Religious Traditions”, like Saivism, Vaishnavism, Saktham, Ganapathyam or the worship of Lord Murugan. Most of the Tamils who worship Folk Deities in South Africa believe that some of the Folk Deities are a form of the “ higher Gods”. Hence Mariamman is considered to be a form of Sakthi and Munisveeran is seen as a form of Lord Sivan. From the fieldwork conducted and experiences of the researcher it emerges that there is not a single incident where Folk Deities are worshipped exclusively.

It is also obvious that many follow the worship of Folk Deities with little or no understanding. The reason for Folk Deity worship was often supplied with the reply that although they do not understand the reasons for worshipping Folk Deities, they do so because their parents and their grandparents have been doing it and they are afraid to stop for fear of incurring the wrath of the Deities. It can be concluded then that Folk Deity worship is based on the principle of fear.

Oral tradition has played a very important role in maintaining the propagation of the worship, for it is clear that the respondents' knowledge of Folk Deities is based on the information handed down to them by the preceding generations. In this regard it was also evident from the research that many followed the worship of Folk Deities slavishly.

Certain aspects of the worship that were pertinent or appropriate at a certain period in time and which has no relevance in present times are still followed.

To illustrate this point I quote the following example :

During the worship of Mariamman, at the conclusion of the prayer held in the morning, the gruel and the curries are first served to three women before being distributed to others. While serving the three women precaution is taken to ensure that the utensils used to serve the women , who receive the gruel and curries in cupped hands, are not touched by their hands. In the early days this precaution was taken because the gruel and curries were given to members of the lower castes. Nowadays we live in a caste-free society yet we slavishly follow this ritual. During the worship of Folk Deities many such examples are noticed.

In this regard the intention of the researcher is to enlighten those who follow the worship of Folk Deities by presenting them with all the factual information and allowing them to evaluate the importance of the worship. It is also hoped that this will add to the body of knowledge concerning South Africans Indians.

## SUMMARY

The following is a brief summary of the study :

**Chapter One** outlines the need for the study in the global South African Community.

The researcher's aims and objectives and methodology are discussed.

**Chapter Two** deals with a brief history of the arrival of Indians in South Africa and it also examines their cultural heritage. Their reasons for their leaving India is discussed. The forefathers' efforts at maintaining and propagating their language, religion and culture are also discussed.

**Chapter Three** looks at the “ Mainstream Religious Traditions” of South African Tamils and examines the important festivals and other salient features associated with each Mainstream Religious Tradition.

**Chapter Four** examines the concept of Folk Deities. An attempt is made to define Folk Deities. Distinguishing features of Folk Deities are listed in this chapter. Probable origins of Folk Deities and the differences between Folk Deities and “ Mainstream religions” are discussed.

**Chapter Five** looks at the worship of Mariamman, Maduraiveeran and Kaateri as Folk Deities and forms the main area of this study. The various myths surrounding the origin of Mariamman, Maduraiveeran and Kaateri are explained. The meaning of Mariamman is given. This chapter also traces the earliest evidences of Amman worship. In addition some important Amman temples are listed. The different types of offerings, including that of blood sacrifice, made to the Deities are examined.

**Chapter Six** looks at the changes in the pattern of worship of Folk Deities amongst South African Tamils. Possible explanations for these changes are also listed.

**Chapter Seven** is an evaluation of the system. The results of the empirical research ( questionnaires, observations, interviews, etc.) is listed.

**Chapter Eight** reflects the conclusions arrived at from this study. This chapter also contains the researcher's recommendations to the South African Tamil community with regards to their worship of Folk Deities.

# QUESTIONNAIRE TO THE TAMIL SPEAKING COMMUNITY OF KWA-ZULU NATAL

N.B. PLACE AN (X) IN THE APPROPRIATE BOX

## A. PERSONAL

1. Surname: .....

2. First Name: .....

3. Address: .....

.....

.....

4. Relationship of the respondent to the head of the household: .....

5. Age Group:

15-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61+

6. Sex:

Male	Female

7. Marital Status:

Single	Married	Divorced	Widowed

8. Number of Children:

Male	Female



13.2 Tamil :

Family Member	Primary Grade 1-7	Secondary Grade 8-12	Tertiary	Other	None
Head					
Spouse					
Child 1					
Child 2					
Child 3					
Child 4					
Child 5					
Child 6					
Other					

14. Occupation :

<b>Professional :</b>	<b>Educational e.g. Teacher, Lecturer, etc</b>	
	<b>Medical and related e.g. Doctor, Nurse, etc</b>	
	<b>Technical e.g. Laboratory, Electronics, etc</b>	
	<b>Legal e.g. Attorney, etc</b>	
	<b>Other e.g. Engineer, Scientist</b>	
	<b>Managerial or clerical worker e.g. Company Director, Clerk, etc</b>	
	<b>Salesman/Saleswoman</b>	
	<b>Transport e.g. Bus Driver</b>	
	<b>Communication e.g. Telephonist</b>	
	<b>Service, sport or recreation e.g. Chef, Waiter, Policeman, etc</b>	
	<b>Mining</b>	
	<b>Artisan or semi-skilled worker e.g. Painter, Plumber, Motor Mechanic, etc</b>	
	<b>Labourer</b>	
	<b>Farmer</b>	
	<b>Social worker</b>	
	<b>Business-man/Business-woman (self employed)</b>	
	<b>Home-executive</b>	
	<b>Student</b>	
	<b>Unemployed</b>	
	<b>Retired</b>	
	<b>Priest</b>	
	<b>Teacher of Tamil in a state school</b>	
	<b>Teacher of Tamil in a private school</b>	
	<b>Other (specify)</b>	

## B. HERITAGE

### 1. First family member to enter South Africa:

- 1.1 Name : .....
- 1.2 Relationship to you: .....
- 1.3 What is/was his or her occupation in South Africa .....
- 1.4 Year of entry into South Africa .....
- 1.5 Place of origin in India .....
- 1.6 Place of origin other than India .....

## C. ABOUT THE TAMIL LANGUAGE

### 1. How do you feel about the Tamil language ?

I am proud of it	Positive	Negative	I don't care

### 2. Qualification in Tamil :

Grade 1-7	Grade 8 - 12	BA Degree	BA (Hons.)	MA Degree	HDE Diploma	None

**3. How proficient are you in the language ?**

	<b>Very well</b>	<b>Fairly well</b>	<b>Not at all</b>
<b>Speak</b>			
<b>Read</b>			
<b>Write</b>			
<b>Understand</b>			

**4. If you can speak the language, how did you learn it ?**

<b>From grandparents</b>	
<b>From parents</b>	
<b>From relatives</b>	
<b>From friends</b>	
<b>Through formal education</b>	
<b>Other - movies, etc.</b>	

**D. KNOWLEDGE OF FOLK DEITIES**

**1. What observances do you carry out in honour of folk deities (Mariamman, Kateri, Muneesvaran and Madurai Veeran) ?**

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

**2. How did you learn of these practices?**

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**3. Why do you observe these practices ?**

<b>Because your family has been doing it and you are following them</b>	
<b>Because you choose to do it</b>	

**4. Do you observe these religious practises as :**

<b>A family</b>	
<b>Communally</b>	
<b>Individually</b>	

**5. List the elements of worship that you follow (e.g. the offering of porridge to Amman, the offering of a black hen to Kateri, etc.,) :**

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

6. Do you know of variations of the worship ? (list them)

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

7. Have you ever thought of discontinuing this form of worship ? (if yes, state why)

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

8. Which of the following mainstream religious beliefs do you practice ?

Saivism	
Vaishnavism	
Saktham	
Murugan worship	
Ganesha worship	

9. Do you belong to any religious organisations ?

Yes	No

10. If the answer to the above question was yes, then are there any conflicting views between the religious beliefs of your organisation and the worship of folk deities like Mariamman, Kateri, Muneesvaran and Madurai Veeran?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

11. How did you find out about the worship of folk deities ?

Books	
Other literature	
Oral transmission	
Other (specify)	

12. When observing the worship of these folk deities, does the person officiating the prayer explain the significance of the various practices ?

Yes	No

13. In which language is this conveyed?

English	
Tamil	
Other	

14. If in Tamil, did you understand fully ?

Yes	No

15. If in English what percentage of Tamil was used ?

0 - 50 %	
50 - 80 %	
80 - 100 %	

16. Do you believe that an understanding of the Tamil language will facilitate the understanding of the religious practices ?

Yes	No

17. Do songs and hymns accompany the worship ?

Yes	No

18. Are the songs or hymns clear and consistent in terms of melody and words ?

Yes	No

19. Does the music induce the trance?

Yes	No

20. List some of the terminology used for the offerings made to the folk deities:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

21. Do you think that participating in the worship of folk deities affects your social status ?

Yes	No

22. Will you openly admit to your practice of folk deity worship ?

Yes	No

23. How would you react to suggestions that these practices need not be followed?

.....

.....

.....

.....

24. Will you encourage your descendents to follow this form of worship ?

Yes	No

25. Do you believe that the worship of folk deities has contributed to religio-cultural continuity amongst South African Tamils ?

Yes	No

THANK YOU.

**23. How would you react to suggestions that these practices need not be followed?**

.....

.....

.....

.....

**24. Will you encourage your descendents to follow this form of worship ?**

Yes	No

**25. Do you believe that the worship of folk deities has contributed to religio-cultural continuity amongst South African Tamils ?**

Yes	No

**THANK YOU.**