

# THE ROLE OF NON-AGAMIC RITUALS IN CASTE RECONCILIATION

## An Anthropological Study on Rustic Rituals of Māri Amman Worship

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### Abstract

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

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

### Introduction

Religion as an institution of a social structure possesses a vital function to reinforce solidarity and conformity in a society. (Turner, 1991) Collective religious ceremonies and public rituals operate to create cohesion by strengthening collective values in a group. (Hamilton, 1995). However, religion as one of the means of identity creating process brought about conflict between groups since differentiation of religious institutions within a social structure generates contradictive values. Thus, different religious institutions cause to form different identity-based groups with a

social order. It is religion that is often considered as causing conformity on the one hand within a same group and contradiction on the other hand among groups in a social structure.

However, if different identity-based groups are under the same religious institution as having same ceremonies and rituals, then, religion is a platform of social harmony that based on the value consensus among conflicting communal groups in a society. This anthropological study focuses on religious rituals of petty god worship in a rustic Hindu tradition of Eastern Sri Lanka that brings about consensus in values between two caste groups that had been diametrically opposed in hierarchical status of the area caste order.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Social boundaries of groups in the Hindu caste system are rigidly defined in a manner in which members of a particular caste group have limited interaction in the public sphere. Each and every group is affiliated with religious duties, as the caste system originated in India, and the demarcation of their social boundaries is maintained by reassuring purity of higher castes through rituals and by distancing from lower castes in the status ladder. (Srinivas, 1956: 547). Therefore, castes claiming lower status in the status hierarchy are belligerently ignored from higher castes of hierarchical order by labeling them as untouchables through Hindu religious rituals. (Sharma, 2005:36)

Rigidity of relationship among Hindu caste groups is mostly associated with orthodox religious practice of Hinduism. As Indian caste system exists through mainstream religious practices, Hindu caste system which mostly prevails among Hindu people of Tamil ethnic group in Sri Lanka is characterized by hierarchical order of Tamil Hindu caste system of South India. Such kind of caste practice exists mainly in north and eastern Sri Lanka. (Silva and Thanges, 2009:12-13)

Orthodox religious practices of Hinduism have been a mechanism of looking after the social boundaries of caste groups. Despite of rapid social change through the impacts of the colonial legacy, globalization and modernization, conventional ritual duties of caste is seen as obsolete. Such a change encouraged the castes claiming lower status in hitherto existed conventional hierarchy so as to access equal opportunities in public sphere and to achieve equal economic status in society. This leads conflict between higher and lower castes in the conventional status hierarchy. Thus, the orthodox religious practices still play a role as discriminating means between caste groups and is considered as root cause for communal conflict. Protracted communal conflicts exist because of lack of inter-links in practice among groups. (McGilvray, 2011, Silva and Thanges, 2009).

However, this study finds another kind of religious practice that is mostly carried out by rural people of Hindu community in Eastern Sri Lanka as having

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

### **Aims of the Study**

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

1. to describe orthodox religious practices prevailing in the research area and its impacts on inter-caste interaction;
2. to evaluate the factors of change which allowed high caste Mukkuvar members to make cultural contact with untouchable members.
3. to analyze non-agamic rituals of Māri Amman worship in making value-consensus between Tom-Tom Beaters and Mukkuvar so as to make harmony.

### **Methodology**

This anthropological study is mostly based on qualitative method and to a lesser extent quantitative method. This study relied both on primary and secondary sources. As this study is concerned with village communities, ethnographic data was collected primarily by field work in order to get first-hand information. There is no single method used to collect data in this field work, it varied according to the field background. Primary data was collected by using unstructured and focused interviews, focused group discussions and observation. This combination of methods helped to obtain data from different perspectives. This also helped out to re-examine data; for instance, data once collected from interview could be re-checked in observation.

Much of the data was collected using observation method directly from the field. Though this field study was conducted with the time span of three weeks, researcher has been living in the research area for 29 years. This living-in-experience made possible for the researcher to gain many useful information regarding caste system and its change. Other specific information was collected through interviews and focused group discussions. Priest and administrative members of Māri Amman

temple and ex-members of temple administration were involved in interviews. Young and aged members of community were engaged in focused group discussion.

Secondary data was collected from official documents of divisional secretariat and of temple administrative units. Previous studies on these castes and cultural systems and published materials regarding caste system and petty god worship of Batticaloa were taken as sources for secondary data collection.

### **Theoretical Background**

Reciprocal and integrated function of elements of a social structure brings about order within a society, which is essential for harmony between members and groups as well, since cohesion comes to existence within the system. Social order is prominently based on the consensus among the members of the society. Factionalists emphasize that "society is seen as resulting from agreement (consensus) about what is important (values), and how we should behave (norms) in a particular situations (roles)". (Kirby et al., 1997:736). Cultural institutions promote order in a society by reinforcing value consensus. "Social order is based on some minimal consensus on values. If men are committed to the same values they recognize a common identity as against others. The commitment to values enables men to devise means for reconciling or adjusting conflicting interests". (Cohen, 1979:28). Common standards on values are socially constructed by social and cultural institutions in a social order.

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

In Hindu religious societies, grouping is based on traditional mechanism of social differentiation, in which a member's birth status is determined by religious rituals; what is known as caste system. A caste is "a hereditary, endogamous group associated with a traditional occupation and ranked accordingly on a scale of ritual purity". (Outhwaite & Bottomore, 1995:35). In traditional village society, each and every caste is attached with a service which has to be done for other castes in a reciprocal basis. Status in caste system is scaled by service orientation of each caste and the religious rituals. Caste system is intrinsically set out interdependency among the members of a community, which can be comparable of what Malinowski (1954) mentioned as functional interdependency among the traits of a society. Caste system as a model of stratification constitutes ranking groups accordingly on ritual purity. Based on this purity, interactions among these caste groups is restricted in a manner of physical contact. Prominent feature of the rules of interaction in the caste system is "untouchability"; lower castes on the scale of purity are restricted in contact with higher castes on the scale of purity. The restriction in contact is reckoned in marriage, food and drink. Louis Dumont brought Stevenson's distinction between external and internal pollution in explaining untouchability of the Indian caste system. By external pollution, he means the physical contacts such as bathing and cleaning. By internal pollution, he means contacts like foodstuff and sexual relations. "The scale of contacts prohibited or avoided as impure, relative to a given family or household, represents, in general term, the fact of the graded interaction between castes, as experienced in rural life" (Dumont, 2004:133).

Even if the rigidity of relationship in Hindu caste system has been an analytical point in many anthropological studies earlier, the twentieth-century anthropologists shifted their concentration in conceptualizing the changing nature of its rigidity. "Structural changes take place, to be sure, but slowly and usually imperceptibly from the view point of the members of such a static system" (MacIver and Page, 1950:354).

### **Restrictions on caste relationship**

Like all other Hindu traditional societies, in this village, tom-tom beaters were considered as one of the untouchable castes since they are traditionally scaled as lowest rank in status in the regional caste system. Mukkuvars claims highest rank of status in the caste hierarchy of the eastern region. Kaluthavalai village is predominantly occupied by Mukkuvar caste members and from antiquity, this village Mukkuvars are well-known in the district for their economic prosperity and religiosity; most of this village people are educated and economically well-off through agrarian endeavors and therefore being recognized as dominant caste members not only by their ascribed superiority of traditional caste status, but also by their achieved economic and educational status in the vicinity. Tom-tom beaters in the village are minority in number and until 1990, they were mostly uneducated and menial workers in this village. According to this oral history of this village, tom-tom beaters were settled by Mukkuvars to carry out traditional occupation which is obliged to tom-tom beater caste in this village. But, because of their lower status not

only in traditional rankings but also in economy, tom-tom beaters were necessitated to carry out menial obligations to Mukkuvar caste.

Members of Mukkuvar caste mostly relied in agriculture until 1960s and they spent much of their time in cultivation and harvesting, as they possessed lands. Most of them were engaged in cultivation of food crops. Unlike other agricultural activities, crop cultivation and harvesting require more labors to be involved. While possessing a crop field, looking after the minor works in the field was seen as further burden. Moreover some maintenance and harvesting activities in crop fields were inevitably required the involvement of wage labors. Consequently, tom-tom beaters were preferred to work as wage labors in crop fields of Mukkuvars. As the owners of the fields had to be in field from morning to evening, there had been a lack of man power in maintaining temples and other public places. That's why tom-tom beaters, apart from their traditional occupations, have been deployed to clean premises of temples and public places.

In that way, they were prohibited to have direct relations in participating in family gatherings and enjoy food, drink and family life. They were also prohibited to enter into the houses of Mukkuvars, though they were allowed to enter into their land or house premises. They were rejected to sit together with members of Mukkuvars. The above mentioned restrictions were followed on the basis of traditional practices of Tamil caste system which was prevailing in South Indian and Northern Sri Lankan regions. Moreover such prohibitions in interaction between these two castes were justified by Hindu religious rituals. (McGilvray, 2011: 154-157). Members of Mukkuvar caste traditionally set up rules for regulating caste practices based on the orthodox rituals and ceremonies in this village as well.

### **Non-agamic rituals and Cultural interaction between Mukkuvars and Tom-tom Beaters.**

Even though there were some factors which brought out change in social condition of this village and caused the flexibility in rigid interaction between these two castes prejudice and ignorance seemed to prevail through some traditional practices. Prominent feature of these traditional practices was the orthodox religious worship. Mukkuvars continued to be substantial in that matter. While social condition underwent change were in a stand to accommodate tom-tom beaters so as to involve them in the public sphere of this village, some hard liners, mostly aged members of Mukkuvar caste and members of temple administration, had been emphasizing the traditional values and customs of this village since they wanted to exclude tom-tom beaters from having close relationship with Mukkuvars. The ultimate purpose of their emphasis was to more or less enslave tom-tom beaters by keeping them apart from having direct interaction. Therefore, the split between the two castes remained, because other members of Mukkuvar caste were scared to bypass the sanctions of these elder members. It is probable that whether those sanctions compelled Mukkuvars to prevent tom-tom beaters enter their places, but as an outcome

Mukkuvars kept away from the premises of the tom-tom beaters. It is almost true that “globalization has not entirely removed the identities and specificities of local culture but it reconstitutes a sense of locality. (De Silva, 2000; 104)

However, in the long run, traditional barriers for the direct interaction were no longer to remain intact. There had been changes occurred as to let Mukkuvar caste members into the places of tom-tom beaters. Interesting thing is that of the non-agamic ritual ceremony of Māri Amman worship; it has played a significant role in bringing Mukkuvar to tom-tom beaters’ shrine. While the orthodox agamic tradition of the Mukkuvar temples remains to maintain rigid barriers in the relationship between these two castes, rituals of non-agamic worship created a platform to mingle these two castes in a specific cultural sphere. One must understand that what made the course of cultural interaction, ritual ceremony of Māri Amman non-agamic worship, is not exclusively followed by tom-tom beaters. This Māri Amman non-agamic worship is also followed by other Hindu castes living in the Eastern province. However, in this village, particular non-agamic rituals is being maintained by tom-tom beaters. Tom-tom beaters of this village believe that their ancestors began to worship Māri Amman based on non-agamic rituals merely 150 years ago. It is known that, in 1925, a group of tom-tom beaters commenced one day ritual ceremony for this Māri Amman and then onwards continued to conduct it once a year. In 1935, they established a temple trustee at this shrine to conduct this ritual ceremony and also formed five groups within the trustee and to carry out ritual tasks. In 1977, each of these five groups claimed to have a day of rituals to be conducted by specifically themselves. Therefore, the days of rituals was extended for five days.

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

caste began to worship Māri Amman and had to enter into tom-tom beaters' shrine and take part in rituals since this is the closest shrine for them and believed that as it is situated in this village this is in-charge for carrying out the divine obligation.

Specificity of this shrine has been religiously attractive for devotees of petty gods. Main deity of this shrine is Māri Amman, but there have been other petty gods sub-shrines situated around this main shrine. Petty gods like Pechchi Amman, Kali Amman, Narasingar, Vairavar and Veerapathrar are being worshiped as colleague deities of Māri Amman. Rituals are being specifically performed for these petty gods during the ceremony as well. There is no doubt that this facilitates any one of the devotees who wants to carry out his several prayers so as to solve his problems as each of these petty gods has religious importance in curing curse and particular troubles. In this way, members of Mukkuvars began to dedicate their prayers which they wanted dedicate in many petty god temples to this shrine since it is obviously easy for them carry out their rituals.

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

## **Conclusion**

Value-consensus among members is inevitable for any society to maintain order. Smooth and integrated functions of social traits are based on the consensus between members in choosing ways as to act commonly. Simply looking, members have to



be bound in a certain track in which they commonly act. Cultural traits can play a catalyst role to bind members' concern in a common manner. Different concerns and contradicting interests of members are inimical to harmony and order of a society. Religion helps a lot to keep members in an integrated manner with in society. But religion is also criticized for serving as a mean for conflict as it demarcates social boundaries and play crucial role in identity creating process.

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

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