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IMPACT OF SANSKRITIZATION ON TAMIL SOCIETY

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Indian society has been divided into various classes and the caste system is very prevalent in India since starting of the society till date. Sanskritization is a process by which "a low or middle Hindu caste, or tribal or other groups, changes its customs, ritual ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently twice-born caste". Generally, such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant class by the local community, and according to him, Sanskritization is not just the adoption of new customs and habits, but also includes exposure to new ideas and values appearing in Sanskrit literature.

Sanskritization

The caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. The movement has always been possible, especially in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. This process has been called 'Sanskritization' or 'Brahminization' or Aryanization.¹

Tamil Nadu had a glorious past. In the early days, Tamil Civilization developed independently without any outside influence, till the advent of Aryans. The Aryans reached India from Central Asia with their cattle, goods and Gods. Since then, the Aryanization process also started. Aryans began to

move south because of deteriorating political conditions that existed in North India,² and due to a series of foreign invasions from the days of Darius to Alexander. The Buddhist activities of Asoka too compelled them to migrate towards the South. They settled gradually not all of a sudden. The cultural elements of the Aryans slowly penetrated the society of Dravidians. This cultural assimilation and integration were known as Aryanization. It was started in 1000 B.C.³ and the impact was obvious in the social, religious and political setup of South India. Sanskritization had a strong impact on Tamil Language, Tamil Religion and radical changes in the society.

Impact on Traditional Worship

Tamil people worshipped food grain since it is their source of living. They were all identified in different forms such as food grains, human and metal images. The immature crops in the form of Mulaippari are prepared a few days before the celebration starts.⁴ Different types of stones, which resemble the parts of the human body in the form of andromorphic elements, are also worshipped by the folk people. Agriculture is the main activity of folk people. Hence, they have perceived the presence of a divine spirit within food grains and its supportive natural elements such as weather, rain, sun and other forces.⁵ In due course, they also began to worship the deceased heroes, who lost their lives for the protection of the village.⁶ Among the world's religious traditions, the Tamil tradition is an impressive one. For the past two thousand and five hundred years or more, the religion of Tamil society has consisted of two types of worshippers. The first is comprised of about ten per cent of the population interested in agamic religion. The content and fashion of their religions have changed from time to time ranging from the spectrum of Jainism, Buddhism, Saivism and Vaishnavism. The religious beliefs and practices of the remaining ninety per cent of the population had never been subjected to rapid changes as

in the case of the first category since they worshipped mother goddesses in various forms and names.

Village gods like Aiyanar and Madurai Viran were once human beings transformed into deities due to their heroic activities. Likewise, Mariamman and a host of other deities have also transformed into deities. Most of them even now receive sacrifices of cocks and goats. A few decades ago, the more 'powerful' of the gods and goddesses received the sacrifice of buffaloes. The people considered that the local gods and goddesses are powerful. There is a saying even in the sophisticated and educated circles that: 'This local god is powerful': 'That local goddess is dangerously touchy'.

The trend today is to Sanskritise the deities of folk tradition to give way to the practices of the temples of Vedic tradition. Religiously the deities of folk tradition are not a welcome feature of the Vedic tradition. However, in a changing economic scenario, the priests of Vedic tradition are ready to render their services to these temples as priests. They have adopted different means and strategies. The process adopted is called Sanskritisation. In this, the deities of folk tradition are transformed physically to match the deities of Vedic tradition. New meanings, messages and significance are attached to the folk deities. Folk deities are brought to the ambit of Vedic tradition either by establishing new blood relationships or through the silent revolution of the Hindu revivalists.

Folk deities are the outcome of the feelings and thoughts of folk people. These deities are worshipped not only by the folk people but also by some of the socially backward people following their social and cultural settings. But Vedic religion assimilated the elements of folk religious tradition through the ages and made it a part of the popular Hindu religion. Gradually the deities of folk tradition are being Sanskritized for aiming at total Hindu revivalism.⁷