



Amman Worship and Ecological Beliefs in Rural Tamil Nadu- A Historical Study

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Open Access

Manuscript ID: BIJ-2025-OCT-006

Subject: History

Received : 23.08.2025

Accepted : 19.09.2025

Published : 31.10.2025

DOI:10.64938/bijri.v10n1.25.Oct006

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Abstract

The earliest human existence was in forests and hilly areas. Regardless of where they reside, they adjust their living spaces based on their comfort and preserve these practices across generations. Consequently, traditions, cultures, and beliefs emerge. Culture serves as a benchmark that shapes human character. It provides a sense of individuality and belonging that contributes to the cultural and personal lives of people. Honoring traditions is crucial for developing a strong personal identity and embracing the cultures that influence an individual's character. The worship of Amman stems from the customs of Dravidian folk religion. She is the primary Tamil mother goddess, mainly honored in the countryside of South India, and is a Hindu goddess associated with weather. Her devotion largely centers around invoking rain and healing ailments such as cholera, smallpox, and chickenpox. In rituals dedicated to Mother Goddesses, individuals engage in ceremonies to seek peace, wealth, and prosperity. In turning to the mother, the worshippers believe that they receive protection and support. It fosters a sense of holiness within us.

Keywords: Mariamman, Goddess, festivals, rituals, devotees

Introduction

Hindu culture is a composite of many different cultures, including Aryan, Dravidian, Negroid, and others. Of these, the Dravidian and Aryan components predominate over the others. The local deities that the people worship are the only place where this kind of cultural synthesis is more evident. The form and characteristics of the minor gods and goddesses worshipped in Tamil Nadu and throughout South India are examined. Devotees have been accustomed to seeing both female and male deities since the early days of Hinduism. In rural India, especially in the southern Dravidian regions

of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, the village or folk tradition is prevalent, involving the worship of primarily female deities.

Before the Indo-Aryans came, the Grama Deiva tradition—a set of practices pertaining to village deities—probably existed. In the Indus Valley Civilization, where the mother goddess tradition persisted as Grama Devita, the earliest evidence points to mother goddesses associated with pregnancy and fertility. Long before the rise of Buddhism, Jainism, and the Historical Vedic religion, this tradition flourished in South India. The mother



goddesses were portrayed as tiny terracotta figurines, while the male deities—Ayyanar, Karuppasamy, Muniswara, and Pothuraju—were represented by stones and horse totems. The male deities are revered as village guardians and are thought to be warriors who died before the Indo-Aryan period. The worship of Amman stems from the customs of Dravidian folk religion.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to bring to light the Amman worship and ecological beliefs in rural Tamil Nadu.

- The study aims to trace systematically the historical background of Amman Worship.
- The study also attempts to trace the worship of the Amman goddess.
- Finally, the study intends to analyze the rituals and celebrations of the Amman temple.

Methodology and Source Materials

The current research aims to provide a detailed analysis of the Amman worship and ecological beliefs in rural Tamil Nadu. Information obtained from fieldwork and existing literary materials was thoroughly examined to explore various aspects of the subject. The researcher employed a narrative and descriptive methodology for the study. Available sources for this research can be broadly categorized into primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include inscriptions and interviews with local individuals, while secondary sources encompass published works, magazines, website data, and similar materials.

Historical Background of Amman Worship

Human beings began their existence in forests and mountainous regions. Regardless of where they reside, they adjust their living spaces based on their comfort and preserve these practices across generations. Consequently, traditions, cultures, and beliefs emerge. Culture serves as a benchmark that shapes human character. It provides a sense of individuality and belonging that contributes to the cultural and personal lives of people. Honoring traditions is crucial for developing a strong personal identity and embracing the cultures that influence an individual's character.

A fertility goddess is a part of the customs of many villages. The village's land is intrinsically linked to this goddess, who is believed to arise from the natural world. She is more than just a protective figure; she represents the village itself. In some instances, the remainder of the settlement is considered to be her body, while a carving located in the middle of the village depicts her likeness. Since the monsoon rains are the primary source of water for farming in South India, especially east of the Western Ghats, she is also frequently entrusted with monitoring rainfall. She is the village's main protector, particularly from common illnesses like plague and smallpox. Other goddesses are associated with particular household objects or act as guardians of children or animals. Many of these deities are only worshipped by members of a specific community, and the majority are unique to their villages and have their own origin stories.

As the all-pervading feminine energy, the Divine Mother Devi stands for the nurturing and creative side of divinity. She is the epitome of strength and kindness. Different facets of Devi's divinity are reflected in her representations as Durga, Kali, Saraswati, and Lakshmi. Saraswati stands for wisdom and knowledge, Lakshmi for wealth and prosperity, Kali for transformation and unwavering resolve, and Durga for strength and protection.

The goddesses '*Mariamman*', '*Karumariamman*', '*Angala Parameshwari*', '*Pachaiamman*', '*Muthumariamman*', '*Pachaiamman*', '*Muthumariamman*', '*Ponniyayi or Ponnu thayi*', '*Renuka Parameshwari*', '*Bhagavathiamman*', '*Kaliyamman*', '*Karumariamman*', are quite popular in rural Tamil Nadu.

In pure Tamil, Mari means Rain and Amman refers to the Mother Goddess. Therefore, the earliest and most revered deity of the villagers was the Mother Goddess of Rain. Over time, people started to expect more from their deity. The Goddess of Rain's ability to bless with fertility also extended to human fertility. Pregnant women still present glass bangles to Mariamman in hopes of a safe delivery. The spread of diseases was another issue that ancient people frequently worried about. Villagers feared contracting highly contagious diseases such as measles (called ammai in Tamil), chickenpox, and smallpox. As a result, people prayed to Mariamman to protect them from these diseases.



The dual elevation of female divinity through goddess worship and the maintenance of gender inequality through social norms constitute the paradox of patriarchy in Hindu society. Goddesses are revered in Hinduism as symbols of utmost strength, knowledge, and kindness. The widespread worship of goddesses like Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Parvati reflects a cultural respect for feminine divinity. Given their connection to these strong deities, this celebration ostensibly positions women as deserving of honor and respect. Women are symbolically empowered by goddess worship. Festivals such as Navaratri, for example, commemorate the goddess Durga's victory over evil, signifying the triumph of good over evil forces. These kinds of festivities can encourage women to believe in their own strength and ability to overcome obstacles.

Worship of the Amman Goddesses

Kali, the Fierce Warrior, is a strong and formidable goddess who defies accepted ideas of what it means to be a woman. Her intimidating appearance and dark complexion stand for the dismantling of illusions and ego. Kali's worship is seen as empowering by some feminists, but others express concerns about the reinforcement of violent and aggressive stereotypes.

Demons are slain by the warrior goddess Durga, also known as the Invincible Goddess. Her conflict with Mahishasura, the buffalo demon, represents the victory of right over wrong. Women who want to be empowered and see injustice eradicated find resonance in Durga's worship. Feminist criticism, however, highlights the contradiction of worshipping a goddess who supports patriarchal power structures.

The Goddess of Arts and Knowledge Saraswati is regarded as the goddess of knowledge, creativity, and wisdom. Her calm and thoughtful portrayal questions the traditional idea of femininity as only caring. For women who want to pursue education and artistic expression, Saraswati's worship is viewed as empowering. The Goddess of Prosperity and Wealth Lakshmi is a symbol of wealth, success, and material prosperity.

Whether this reinforces the notion that women are valued primarily for their domestic and economic contributions is questioned by feminist viewpoints.

According to regional traditions like Pidari or the Gramadevatai, Mariamman is revered. She is

considered a guardian deity (kaval deivam) by many South Indian villagers. Village deities serve as the community's guardians, keeping them safe from harm and removing obstacles from their lives. When people pray for health, protection from negative influences, long-lasting relationships, children, or a happy marriage, this guardian spirit is known to answer quickly and grant their earnest wishes. Since their crop yield was largely dependent on adequate precipitation, Amman was revered in ancient Tamil culture as the goddess who brought rainfall and, thus, prosperity.

Mariamman, an ancient Goddess, displays a sense of equality as her temples do not always require a Brahmin priest for rituals. Despite some larger Mariamman temples now having Brahmin priests, many also feature priestesses leading worship. Over time, Mariamman began to be revered in various forms such as Pidari, Katteri Amman, Draupadi Amman, and others. Primarily, the Goddess was adored for protection against diseases, particularly the pox ('Ammal') variety. Mariamman became deeply embedded throughout Tamil Nadu as the Gramadevata (village goddess) or Kaaval Deivam (protecting deity).

Bhadrakali is also known as Kali Mata, Mahakali, and Kalika. She is associated with destruction, change, and ultimate power. She is considered the ferocious form of the goddess Adi Shakti. Maha Maya, also known as Rudra Kali, is the daughter of Shiva and Shiva Nandini. Bhadrakali is an important Hindu goddess, a form of Kali. She is considered to be the auspicious and fortunate form of Adi Shakti or Durga, the supreme mother who protects the good, known as Bhadra or Bhadra Bhagavathy.

Badra Kaliyamman is a revered deity in certain parts of India, particularly in Tamil Nadu and southern India. She is considered an incarnation or form of the Hindu goddess Kali, who embodies power, destruction, and transformation. Kali is typically associated with annihilation, the removal of evil forces, and the protection of righteousness. It is a renowned and mighty goddess, known for granting wishes and protecting against evil spirits. Among the local temples, hers is regarded as one of the most important Kaliyamman shrines.

Muthalamman, also known as "Muthalamma" or "Muthalamma Mariamman," is a revered goddess in Tamil Nadu and other parts of southern India. Her



worship is prevalent in several villages, especially in the southern Tamil Nadu region. The history of Muthalamman is deeply rooted in local traditions and folklore, and she is considered an important deity for agricultural prosperity, health, and protection.

Agni Mariamman is a form of the goddess Mariamman, who is worshipped as the goddess of rain, fertility, and healing. Mariamman is a prominent figure in South Indian folk tradition, and she is often associated with diseases, especially smallpox, and her worship is thought to offer protection from such ailments. According to tradition, the deity is believed to have the power to bring both destruction and protection. The term “Agni” refers to fire, and it is believed that Agni Mariamman has a connection to fire-related rituals or the divine power of cleansing through fire. The other Mariamman temples, like Vadakathi Mariamman and the Sri Santhana Mariamman temple, are considered holy sites for followers of Mariamman.

The various weapons depicted on the Amman statue, like Sword (A symbol of divine knowledge that cuts through ignorance), Trident (Represents the three fundamental aspects of creation, preservation, and destruction), Mace (Symbolizes power and strength to subdue enemies), Discus (Represents the cycle of time and the impermanence of existence), Bow and Arrow (Signify precision and accuracy in targeting evil) Noose: Used to capture and bind enemies. Skull and Rosary: Represent detachment from worldly desires and the cyclical nature of life and death.

Pujas and Festivals of the Amman Temple

Every religion has its own set of customs, myths, and symbols. Archana or pooja are the terms used to describe the rituals performed for the idols. Priests, a prestigious group known as archakar or Poosari, perform these rites. Three types of pooja are associated with different occasions: Kamiya puja, which is performed by individuals as a fulfillment of their vows; Naimithiga puja, which is associated with festival days; and Nitya puja, which involves daily rituals. The temple's primary rituals are naivedya, dhupa-dipa, and abhisheka. Three pujas are performed each day: Sayaratsai pooja is at 4:30 PM,

Kalasandhi pooja is at 7:30 AM, and Arthasamna pooja is from 9 PM to 10 PM.

Each small Amman temple celebrated its festival with Uravinmurai Trust members, village elders, and the general public gathering for the flag-hoisting ceremony. Following this, the Amman deity will be taken on a procession through the Ratha Veedhi (chariot street) on this decorated elephant vehicle and Naga Vahanam (snake vehicle), accompanied by Vanavedikkai, traditional drumming, and flower decorations.

Initially, the Purattasi festival was celebrated for five days in this temple. Later, the Purattasi festival was celebrated for seven and nine days and now it is celebrated for 13 days in the Sri Badra Kaliyamman temple. The Chithirai Thiruvizha (festival) is celebrated for two days. Navaratri is an annual Hindu festival observed in honor of the goddess Durga.

Panguni Festival is held at the Parameshwari Amman Temple on the first Sunday of the month of Panguni, followed by a grand food distribution ceremony in the presence of the villagers until 5 pm. Pournami Puja (Full Moon Worship) is conducted every month on the full moon day. Bairavar Puja (Bairavar Worship) is also performed every month, with special worship being offered to Kala Bairavar.

The festival of Akkini Chatti is held the day after Pongal. Before setting their fire pots inside the temple, devotees walk down Mamsapuram's main streets while holding them in their hands. The purpose of this Agni Chatti Eduttal is to ask for her divine blessings for a tranquil and healthy existence. People pledge to bring fire pots to her shrine if their prayers are answered favorably. During the Mariamman festival, devotees light one pot, two pots, twenty-one pots, and even 108 fire pots.

A variety of sacred festivals take place at this temple during the year, such as the Kuthuvilakku Pooja held on the final Friday of each month, pooja during the month of Margazhi, Thai Pongal, and Navaratri. The Pongal festival, which occurs in the month of Chithirai, is particularly significant when celebrated in all the temples in Mamsapuram.

The Amman deity will be taken on a procession through the Ratha Veedhi (chariot street) on a decorated Annam Vahanam (vehicle decorated with lights). The young girls are participating in



the Kolaattam dance and performing a Silambattam during the procession.

Conclusion

The worship of Amman stems from the customs of Dravidian folk religion. She is the primary Tamil mother goddess, mainly honored in the countryside of South India, and is a Hindu goddess associated with weather. Her devotion largely centers around invoking rain and healing ailments such as cholera, smallpox, and chickenpox. There is a very ancient tradition of Mariamman worship. According to scholars, the cult of Mariamman pre-dates the Vedic Gods, which means that it is probably over 4000 years old. In the pre-Vedic times, when Hinduism was not yet the expansive religion it is today, villagers in south India worshipped very localized Gods. These were the Village Gods. Each village had its own non-transferable, “our-very-own” God that understood local concerns and provided them specific relief. Perhaps, this is how Mariamman worship evolved.

At the heart of traditions lies a shared collection of perspectives, ethics, customs, and ceremonies passed down through generations. These civilizations can be traced through family, religion, or even communities. By valuing traditions, society pays tribute to those who came before and acknowledges the challenges they endured to improve our lives. In rituals dedicated to Mother Goddesses, individuals

engage in ceremonies to seek peace, wealth, and prosperity. In turning to the Mother, the worshippers believe that they receive protection and support. It fosters a sense of holiness within us.

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