

Extracted from:

The Unesco Courier

A window open on the world

MARCH 1984

Village Gods and Heroes

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This "Mother Goddess", some 3.5 metres in height and dating from about 500 BC, was discovered recently near a group of megalithic dolmens. She is thought to be one of the fore runners of the Srivatsa, or symbols of the goddess of wealth, which began to appear in the 8th century AD. Similar mother goddess fertility figures have been found in many parts of the world.

Potters enjoy a special status in Tamil Nadu. Unlike potters in other parts of India they wear the "sacred thread" of the "twice-born" (see caption page 13), which elsewhere is reserved for higher castes, and they frequently act as unofficial guardians of the smaller village temples. This hereditary task enhances their standing in the community and gives them the material advantage of a share in the offerings made to the gods of meat, fruit and money. Although their main activity is the making of pots and similar domestic utensils, Tamil potters are famed for making the largest terra-cotta statues in the world.

Figures of horses, which can be as much as seven metres in height, are much in demand as offerings, especially to the god Ayanar. They are believed to serve as chargers for his warriors when they make their nocturnal patrols to keep demons away from the villages. Terra-cotta images of popular deities (wise men or heroes) are also sometimes of monumental size, although in recent years these have tended to be made of brick and cement. Traditional methods are still used, however, for small or medium-sized ex voto objects or statues offered to a deity a statue of a child in thanks for its birth or recovery from sickness; models of feet, hands or other limbs or parts of the body, for recovery from injury or illness; even of animals (usually cows and more rarely dogs and cats). The presentation of a statue to a temple often involves the performance of quite complicated rites, but, even for the most humble votive offering, the critical moment is the placing in position by the potter of the eyes, the final, essential, life-giving gesture before installation in the temple.

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ALTHOUGH it is the monumental architecture of India's classical temples which usually overwhelms the visitor, it is the country's folk temples, several times greater in number, that reflect the living faith of the people.

India's village temples owe their origin to a belief in the various manifestations malevolent and benevolent of the spirit of nature, and to a conviction that God dwells in all animate and inanimate phenomena trees, rivers, mountains, water-tanks, the sea, lightning and the wind. They are also connected to the fertility cult so widely prevalent throughout the ancient world. Faith in the Mother Goddess led to the personification of every village settlement in a grama devata, a village Goddess who protects the villagers, decides their fate and guides them like a fond mother.

Another concept that has made an important contribution to the development of village Gods is the worship of heroes who laid down their lives for the sake of their country or community. These heroes were commemorated and worshiped by the erection of Hero Stones or Memorial Stones, thousands of

which are found in Tamil Nadu and other parts of India. The erection of Hero Stones and the adoration of the dead hero as the savior spirit of the community may be considered as an extension of the prehistoric cult of erecting megalithic tombs. The Hero-Stones are in the form of a dolmen with three upright slabs erected in the form of a small chamber and topped by a cap-stone. The figure of the hero is carved on the back slab, facing the front. The representation of the hero on the slab takes various forms. The simplest shows him in the act of fighting with a spear, a sword, or bow and arrow.

In a number of cases the event relating to the death of the hero, the period and the people who erected the stone are recorded in the local language. In Tamil Nadu over 600 inscribed memorials dating from the fourth century A.D. almost until the present day have recently been found.

It is necessary to know something about Hero Stones in order to understand the social background of the village temples. Often the Stones stand beneath shady trees in simple surroundings. Long swords, spears, or tridents are placed in front of them, as well as terra-cotta horses painted in folk style. It was believed that the spirit of a hero resided forever in each monument, bestowing benefactions on the community. The spirit was dreaded, loved, adored and worshipped and was considered the saviour of the community.

Some regional as opposed to village deities found in Tamil Nadu arose from the cult of a hero's death. One of them, Maduraiviran, who is worshipped in central Tamil Nadu, was a seventeenth-century hero who defended the country valiantly and was later put to death by its ruler after a love affair. The romantic element and the hero's tragic end at the hands of the very ruler he had fought for created such an aura around him that soon his spirit was recognized as a most powerful divinity and his temple was found in every village. The most important feature of his temple is the huge figure of a horse placed either in front of him or carrying him. People believe that his spirit ascends the horse after dusk, and goes around the village protecting the people at night.

Another factor in the development of village temples was the veneration of women who died in heroic circumstances. One such death that was popular was that of the chaste wife who committed sati, that is, she died voluntarily on her husband's funeral pyre. Recorded evidence for such customs is available from the beginning of the Christian era. The spirits of women who die in such circumstances are said to be very powerful, protecting the community and also severely punishing wrong doers. Their figures are carved on stones, enshrined and adored as Masati.

In all these instances of the worship of the dead as the village gods, the offering consists of all types of food and other things that had pleased the dead person while he was alive.

Offerings of animal flesh and liquor are quite common modes of worship. Animal sacrifice is often misunderstood and blown up out of proportion. It arises out of the eating habits of the people. The simple concept behind this offering is that whatever one eats is first ceremoniously offered to the deity. The cock, chicken and goat are offered in the presence of the deity, cooked and then consumed by the worshiper. There are some temples where even specially prepared cigars are offered.

Festivals are conducted annually for the village gods or are specially arranged either to ward off natural calamities, epidemics or threats to the community which are of human origin. They are celebrated with great pomp and show. The presence of the deity is felt so powerfully that to utter a lie in its presence, it is believed, brings calamity to the teller. Many disputes, such as proof of adultery, repudiation of loans received and other such matters are settled even to this day in the village temple. In many villages in the interior there is no need for civil or criminal courts to decide the nature of punishments. The temple of the village god, the impersonal spirit that permeates and rules the society is sufficient to take care of evil doers.

The village deity wards off all diseases. If a person is affected in any part of his body, or the whole, he prays to the deity for a cure and offers a replica of the afflicted member made of terra-cotta, wood or metal. Or a full terra-cotta figurine representing a human form is made and placed with devotion in front of the deity. For happy child birth, a terra-cotta figure of a child in a cradle is offered. To ward off cattle diseases, large or small clay figures are likewise placed in the temple. Several hundred such terra-cotta figurines can be seen in front of many village temples. And on all such occasions the folk artist (mainly the village potter) is honoured with new cloth, garlands of flowers, special food and money. In fact the cult of the village god was mainly responsible for sustaining and fostering folk arts.

The cult of the village gods has also been a fount of inspiration for folk music and dance. Several hundred folk ballads and songs are connected with the adoration of village heroes, and during festivals they are sung by village minstrels for hours sometimes throughout the night. So spirited are these folk songs that even people who are in their houses rush towards the sound of the music in a trance and sometimes thousands of people can be seen on these occasions, marching, singing and dancing.

This expression of devotion often takes the form of walking barefoot over fire, piercing one's body with decorated needles or lances, or carrying firepots in one's arms. Both men and women take part in such devotions.

The conservatism of the village folk is revealed in their forms of dress, ornamentation and mode of singing, which can be traced back several centuries. For example, in the Alagar festival held in Madurai during March and April, several thousand villagers dress themselves in colorful costumes, and wear dresses and ornaments similar to those that can be seen in sixteenth-century paintings and sculptures. Another festival in Farur attracts several thousand men, who dress as women and move through the streets singing and dancing. In another interesting festival, held in a suburb of Madras, several men and women clad in neem leaves circumambulate the temple of the village goddess several times. The fact that such customs referred to in literature at the beginning of the Christian era have survived to this day, very near the capital of the State, shows the powerful hold these faiths have over the people. Sometimes such folk beliefs and customs are superimposed on the classical temple. There is a celebrated temple at Alagar Koil near Madurai where worship is performed by orthodox Vishnavite Brahmins according to classical rites. In the entrance tower of the temple is the figure of a folk god, "Karuppan of the steps". The Karuppan, the spirit of the hero who guarded the temple and lost his life when defending it from robbers, is held in greater veneration by the village people than the main classical deity, Vishnu. When the annual festival for Vishnu is celebrated, several million people assemble to adore both Vishnu and the Karuppan. Such a superimposition of folk customs, music and dance on classical temples can be observed in many places and seems, at least for the casual spectator, to abolish the dividing line between the folk temple and the classical temple.

However, there is one essential difference between the classical temple and the folk temple. In the former there is a trained family of worshippers, the priests, who perform the daily acts of worship and the rites of periodical festivals as prescribed. In other words, there is an intermediary between the devotee and the divine. The priest's presence is accepted as a necessity; he can perform acts of worship while the rest of the community pursues its daily tasks and goes to the temple only when in need.

In the village temples communication between the devotee and the deity is direct and so the feeling of attachment is more intimate. The divine spirit is always present in the village temple and anyone can go and worship directly. Whatever the offering, or whatever the form in which it is made, the village god is pleased. This is why the village temples remain so popular.

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Erected in 625 AD during the reign of the Pallava ruler Mahendra I, this hero stone immortalizes a hero who fell, his faithful dog at his side, defending his cow shed against robbers.

The details of this incident and the name of the hero and the dog are inscribed at the top of the stone in ancient Tamil script.