

Introduction

This book has evolved over many years; sometimes it advanced rapidly, sometimes it lay dormant. The original idea of this study had been to learn about the guardian deities of Tamilnadu, an idea that had surfaced in my discussions with Alf Hildebeitel in connection with his book on 'Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees'. My fieldwork from 1989 to 1991 had brought forth much interesting material, but it also had shown me that the original concept for a book on guardian deities had to be narrowed. Practically every deity is a guardian of something or someone, and the richness with which every village and area of Tamilnadu gives expression to its forms and practices of religion would have made such a study encyclopedic. A first attempt to bring the fieldwork material gathered at approximately three hundred temples into a written form resulted in detailed information on the various types of guardian deities in Tamilnadu and their relationship to each other. This first draft received both praise and criticism. Due to circumstances beyond my control, this draft had to remain shelved for a few years, enough time for many new studies in folk religion to appear and for me to rethink how best to present my own material and, as far as possible, integrate those new insights.

What makes folk Hinduism so fascinating is its diversity. The names of deities change from state to state, they change even within a state from district to district. Festival practices vary from village to village, myths are transformed each time they are told, and yet there are underlying patterns that help us to understand folk Hinduism. They provide the 'unity' within the 'diversity'. There are thousands of patterns, some work only within a limited geographical and theoretical area, others encompass larger stretches. One theoretical model may not fit the data from another area, while yet the data of two areas can show great similarity. Evolving all-encompassing and easily graspable theories for Hindu folk religion is difficult because folk religion itself (spanning a range from the religion of 'tribes' to brahmanical/Vedic Hinduism) defies a clear definition, and because folk religion subsumes many different aspects or fields of study: ritual, drama, oral tradition, possession, social practices and so on. Often concepts evolved from European or North American data do not quite fit the thinking patterns of the East. This has led to constant redefinitions of certain technical terms until they have become so overcharged with

meaning that it is almost impossible to make use of them without another clear definition running into pages (e. g., ‘ritual’).

In this present study I have tried to present folk Hinduism – with examples from Tamilnadu – in terms of ‘Hindu’ categories or patterns. The idea is not new of course – Marriott dedicated an entire book to it,¹ and some of the essays in it were rewarding reading for me. Some of my ideas came out of Marriott's book, other ideas coincided with the ideas of the book's contributors, the rest of the ‘Hindu’ patterns presented here I owe to other scholars and to my own inspiration. Important criteria for the categories or patterns I chose were simplicity and usefulness in building bridges between folk Hinduism and brahmanical Hinduism. They are very broad categories that allow to schematize much data and thereby help to evolve a very rough frame within which folk Hinduism becomes understandable – hopefully also to non-experts.

Based on my fieldwork done on guardian deities, sometimes ‘enriched’ by material collected in connection with some of my other studies (*Aṅkāḷamman*, *Kāttavarāyaṇ*, *Durgā*) and with written material from other sources, this book offers much new data on Tamil folk religion, and it presents the data in frames that can easily be extended into other areas of India and similarly can form the basis for yet more complex frames. Many of the examples offered within the text are representative of a greater number of examples collected in the field, all of which could not be accommodated. For instance, the hierarchic pattern of the deities within a temple as presented in chapter III is based on data from over three hundred temples. While, on the one hand, this study hopes to show patterns and easy ways of understanding folk Hinduism, it, on the other hand, attempts to bring into focus some of the complexities and difficulties in dealing with folk Hinduism.

The first chapter presents portraits of some of the gods who appear frequently and throughout the book. In the second chapter Tamil folk deities are shown in their environment and in their guardian functions. Space is grouped into ‘ordered’ and ‘wild’, and we see which deities belong to which space. Chapter three concentrates on the temple and the hierarchy within the temple. The gods and goddesses are not randomly placed in a temple, they follow a pattern or patterns. The following chapter, four, looks at how the local and regional folk deities become part of the greater pan-Hindu network. Even the smallest or obscurest deity is part of a greater group of gods and goddesses. Some deities cannot be moved, and this immobility has greater philosophical implications. The center, the vertical flow of energy, needs to be balanced by the periphery, the horizontal flow of energy, expressed by the deity's mobility. This is

¹ Marriott 1990.

discussed in the fifth chapter. The last chapter, perhaps the largest and most complex, deals with worship in its various forms. Which form of the deity does a devotee worship, how does he or she worship, what does worship 'mean' to the devotee and priest, are some of the questions looked at. This chapter also deals with some other scholars' theories of ritual and worship. In the appendices the reader will find, among other things, references to other areas of India, a short description of the Tamil folk deities mentioned in the text and a list of the temples visited for this study.

Fieldwork

On the 16. of September 1989 we (my assistant and I) set out to visit the Karupparāyar temple of 'Vadavalli' (the village indicated by the Census of India). On the way we stopped at a goddess temple where we met a friendly family that offered us a ride back to the village on their bullock cart. Once there, they insisted we have lunch at their house. Lunch delayed us, and the bus that was supposed to carry us to Vadavalli did not go further than the next village. By the time the next bus arrived, we realized that we had to postpone our plan. Instead we decided that evening to visit the famous Murukaṅ temple at Marutamalai. As luck would have it, the bus passed 'Vadavalli', which turned out to be Vaṭavaḷi, a village close to Liṅkaṅūr where, as we found out, the Karupparāyar temple was actually located. Two days later then, days we spent seeing other temples in the Poḷḷācci area, we visited the temple at Liṅkaṅūr.

We arrived in Liṅkaṅūr early in the morning. Mr. Ponnucāmi, the priest of Karupparāyar, knew much about the temple and, whenever he found some time between performing the pūjā for the devotees who visited the temple, he answered our questions, told a story, among others, how the power of the god had been tamed by means of a yantra from the Murukaṅ temple of Marutamalai. A woman devotee, who had listened to our conversations, told us about another Karupparāyar, a famous one, she said, who was in Mūlavaḷaiyam, via Pūḷuvappaṭṭi. As the priest seemed to have told us all he knew and was getting more absorbed in his work, and as we still had the entire afternoon before us, we decided to make a trip to Mūlavaḷaiyam. We were in the northwest of Kōyamuttūr (Coimbatore) and the village we wanted to visit was southwest of the city, but since there was no direct bus connection between the two places, we had to return to the bus stand of Kōyamuttūr. It took some time to find out which bus would leave when and where, and not wanting to miss the bus (it ran every two hours) we lunched on some 'snacks' available at the bus

stand. By the time we reached the village, it was about two o'clock. We were hungry. It was a very small village and we could detect no sign of a restaurant, but a villager pointed to a hut. There, a lady fried some spicy 'Pōṅṭā' – the best I have ever eaten. She also made some excellent tea, and strengthened we began our long walk to the temple. Villagers then showed us the general direction we had to take and set us on the right path. It took us across fields and presented us with a wonderful view of the green hills. In a lonely hut on the way we received some water. About an hour later we reached the banyan tree, the first landmark indicated by the villagers. A few men sat in the shade of the tree, and when we asked them about the god, they pointed to the top of a hill behind them. The priest was in the temple but would soon return, they said, and added that it would take about an hour to reach the top of the hill. Knowing that an hour in an Indian village did not necessarily consist of sixty minutes, I decided to risk the climb. The path soon disappeared in thick underbrush. Another path appeared, then disappeared. After a short distance we saw a temple. It was the Viṣṇu temple which, according to the men under the banyan tree, we would have to pass on our way to Karupparāyar.

The temple was shady, I was tired and thirsty. We had brought no water with us from the city, not anticipating a long walk through fields, and in the villages, of course, one could not buy bottled water. On the rocky slope beside the temple building, in a hollow, some water had collected, probably from the previous day's rain. To our thirsty eyes it looked clean and we scooped it up with our hands and drank some of it. Perhaps Viṣṇu had blessed it, it did us no harm. By this time it was almost four o'clock. We did not know which path would lead us to the top of the hill. A few attempts ended in a wall of thick bushes. Nor did we know if the priest would still be at the temple by the time we would reach it. In about two hours the sun would set. We had no flashlight with us and dark monsoon clouds at the horizon threatened to cover the moon – should there be one. Though the adventure of finding a way to the temple beckoned us, we decided to return to the village. We had hardly sat down at the one and only bus stop in the village, when the bus arrived. As we drove off, small girls waved to us. Their colorful skirts reflected the orange light of the setting sun. As far as fieldwork was concerned, the afternoon had been a waste, but the beauty of the landscape and our enjoyment of the trip had made it a worthwhile experience. Later that night, after a shower and supper, we took a walk and chanced upon a Muniyappan temple that offered us yet an opportunity to do a bit of research.

The above example is not necessarily typical of a fieldwork day – and I don't really know what I would call a 'typical' fieldwork day – but it illustrates some of the problems and difficulties in the field. How does one locate a temple, even when one is equipped with the Census of India

1961 lists?² These lists, though they do not contain all the temples in a village, give one a rough idea of the deities one is likely to meet in a particular area, and they are a good start for fieldwork. There are two problems with the Census lists: 1. they are old and some of the temples do not exist anymore and 2. the anglicized spelling of village names leaves one to guess vowel lengths and retroflexes so that it can happen that the rickshaw driver drops you at the silkworm center because its name sounds so very similar to the village you actually want to go to. Neither the Census nor the usual tourist maps are detailed enough to show all the villages. Copies of the 1:250'000 maps prepared by the Army Map Service, Washington, that I had already used for my first research project, were of tremendous help. But some villages escaped even their notice! Many times a priest or devotee would mention one or the other temple in the area that could be of interest to the researcher. Following these tips, I found some very remarkable temples. Sometimes my assistants or friends would tell me of temples they had seen while traveling somewhere; many temples we 'discovered' looking out the window of busses.

Knowing approximately where a temple is does not mean that one knows how to get there. Most of the guardian deities are wilderness deities and are outside the settled area. Many of the villagers make the trip to the wilderness deity once a year or even less frequently, and when they say the distance to the temple is a 'furlong', it can mean anything between 500 meters and a few kilometers. 'Within walking distance' can be ten kilometers since villagers frequently walk long distances. Many temples are accessible neither by bus, car, nor scooter rickshaw; some temples do not even have a bicycle path leading to them, but one would not want to miss the small wonders along a foot path through fields and forests: butterflies, beetles, flowers, sometimes a snake. Much time is spent in traveling. Hiring a car saves time but deprives one of a certain awareness of the temple's environment, the approach to it and often also a chance to talk to villagers while drinking tea and waiting for a bus. I was able to retain in my memory with much more clarity those fieldtrips that we made by bus, scooter rickshaw, bicycle and on foot – the majority – than those we made by car. Tamilnadu has one of the best bus systems of India; there are not many villages that do not have at least one bus service per day and, although the buses do get crowded, especially on festival days, the crowd does not spill onto their roofs.

² Census of India 1961, vol. IX, Madras, part XI-D, *Temples of Madras State*, P. K. Nambiar, Tiruchirapalli and South Arcot, 1966; P. K. Nambiar and K. C. Narayana Kurup, Madurai and Ramanathapuram, 1969; P. K. Nambiar and K. C. Narayana Kurup, Coimbatore and Salem, 1968.

Without the tremendous help of my assistants this kind of fieldwork would not have been possible. It was not easy to find a person willing to travel to remote areas with a white woman, a person who could cope with the strain of having to cycle or walk long distances, of not always getting regular meals, who could show respect to Brahmans and Dalits alike and who could work sporadically (meaning one, two or three weeks a month or every second month, etc.). At the beginning of my research I needed a person who could translate as well, but with time this was no longer a necessary requirement. This did not mean that I could dispense with an assistant. It was the assistant who established the first contacts with the villagers, who explained who we were and what we wanted. It was the assistant who could allay the fears of the villagers that the white person was not a government officer nor a thief come to steal the god's jewels. It was the assistant who made the contact between the male informants and the female researcher less awkward, and it was the assistant who could inspire enough confidence to be lent a bicycle in a village in which nobody knew us. The villagers tended to feel more at ease speaking to someone they could understand and classify according to village and caste. In rare moments the assistant was also guardian, protector from enthusiastic children or drunken men. The help of the assistant was vital because there was not enough time for me to establish the necessary contacts with the villagers on my own – which I could have done had I limited my research to a few villages. In other words, it is not a problem for a white woman to establish contacts in an Indian village, to stay in a village and to conduct research there on her own, but it requires time, certainly more time than the few hours we normally spent in a village.

For each trip of one, two or three weeks at a time I chose a particular area and made a list of the temples therein that I wanted to visit. We stayed in smaller or larger towns, wherever there was a lodge available. From there we made daily excursions. It was in the nature of the work that we could not have fixed working hours; we left the lodge early in the morning and often returned late at night. (It was the researcher and not the assistant who was exhausted at night.) I only rarely used a tape recorder for the interviews, having found that it was a good tool for recording long stories but a hindrance for the relatively short and intensive interviews because 1. it tended to distract the informants and 2. it decreased my own attention and then made it impossible to clarify points right then or later (there was rarely time to replay the entire tape on the spot or to visit the temple again). Of course I took notes and I re-read them at night to make sure that I was able to decipher my handwriting. I also took many pictures but refrained when asked to do so. This was often the case with regard to the deity in the sanctum and during certain rites at festivals.

Informants were mainly the priests. Sometimes other villagers who were present at the temple contributed to the information. It did happen occasionally that the priest was neither at the temple nor in the village and that nobody else was nearby who knew anything about the temple. I still made a record of such temples and marked the arrangement of the deities. There were priests who knew very little about their temple and who could not even identify all the deities, and there were priests who knew many stories about their temple and the gods; there were priests who were reluctant to part with information, and there were priests who went out of their way to help us (the majority). It happened that a priest was at work in a field and could not be disturbed (which was understandable), and it happened often that a priest undertook the long walk to the temple especially for our sake. Informants other than priests were village elders, singers of folk ballads, villagers who volunteered information on their clan deities, ascetics living in the temple, relatives of the priest and others. Usually we visited a temple only once, 7 % of the temples we visited twice, a few temples three times. When it was necessary to spend a night in a village (for instance during a festival), the villagers were always very accommodating and found us food and a shelter where we could sleep a few hours. We visited temples in all the larger districts, but did not cover the Nilagiri hills nor the very southern part of Tamilnadu, Kanyakumari.