



Kannagi worship in Kerala

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Abstract

The epic is a crucial source of information on the culture, society, and geography of the three great ancient Tamil kingdoms (Chola, Pandya, and Chera). Its heroine, Kannagi, is widely worshipped as the Mother Goddess or the Goddess of Chastity, particularly in Kerala and Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Kannagi- worship - kodungallur- meena bharani- fertility cult- ritual arts

Introduction

Myths are the fundamental traditional knowledge base of a culture. They hold a special significance in every culture. The public reverently worships myths by connecting them with their beliefs and rituals. Artists use them as a reservoir of ideas for their creations. In India, the concept of the Mother Goddess has been deeply rooted since ancient times. Evidence for this has been found even in the Harappan civilization. The myth of Kannagi emerged from this tradition of the Mother Goddess.

Kannagi Temples in Kerala

Kannagi still holds a special place in the South Indian cultural landscape. Indians worship the female as a goddess, symbolizing Shakti (power), fertility, and nature. Every aspect of nature—village, city, forest, and mountain—is worshipped as a deity. This is globally known as the Fertility Cult. This fertility worship is strongly prevalent in Kerala culture as well. Sexual rituals, public gatherings, obscene songs, and dances are common features of agricultural festivals associated with the Mother Goddess (e.g., Kodungallur Bharani songs, Chettikulangara Pooram songs). The Dravidians deified Kannagi, the Patthini Devi (Chaste Goddess) who burned down Madurai. The remnants of the Mother Goddess culture (matrilineal social tradition) are reflected in Kannagi worship. This culture is integrated into art, literature, and devotion and is expressed in various forms. Many such forms of Kannagi can be seen in the temples of Kerala.

Kodungallur

Information about the Kodungallur Temple in Thrissur district is provided here. This temple was initially a place that strictly followed the rituals and beliefs of the Dravidians. It was later transformed into a Kshetram (Hindu temple) due to the Aryan invasion/influence. Some unique rituals not found in other Kerala temples are still practiced here. The statue of Kannagi, installed by the Chera King Senguttuvan, became an object of worship for the Brahmins after the 7th century. They hid the Kannagi statue installed by Senguttuvan inside a secret chamber. Near that chamber, in another room, they installed a Bhadrakali statue made of the Jackfruit tree, according to Tantric rituals. This Bhadrakali, installed by the Aryans, is the Kodungallur Amma worshipped today. It is said that the Dravidian deity (Kannagi) is still hidden inside the secret chamber.

Meena Bharani Festival

The Kodungallur Utsavam (festival) signifies a journey back from Aryanisation to the Dravidians' own culture and rituals. The Meena Bharani festival is considered an event where people gather to have a darshan (sacred viewing) and worship the Dravidian deity, Kannagi. The rituals performed during this festival, such as Bharanipaattu (obscene songs), Kaavu Theendal (entering the temple premises), Kozhikkallu Moodal (sacrificing chickens), and Santhaattam (applying sandalwood paste), reveal the close connection between Kannagi and the Dravidian tradition.

Fertility Cult

Ancient people compared the earth to a woman and practiced agriculture. They thus believed that menstruation (aarthavam) and conception were common to both the earth and women. Rituals such as farming during the earth's menstrual period or closing the temple during the goddess's menstrual period and celebrating a festival afterward (e.g., Chengannur Temple) still exist in Kerala. Red color (the symbol of menstruation) is also considered a sign of fertility. Kumkum, red sandalwood, red flowers, and red silk are used with great importance in goddess temples. Even stones smeared with sindooram or red dye are considered Mother Goddesses. The continuation of this Dravidian concept is reflected in Kodungallur rituals like Kozhikkallu Moodal and Santhaattam: covering the sacrifice stone with a red silk cloth; offering a sword and an anklet (silambu); offering a silk garment and thaali (nuptial necklace) for a long married life; the dance of Komarams (oracles/dancers possessed by the deity) adorned with swords, silambu, and garlands; and applying red paste. All these rituals are believed to be performed to appease Kannagi's anger.

Attukal Bhagavathy Temple

It is believed that the form of Kannagi present in the Kodungallur Bhagavathy Temple is the same deity residing at Attukal. The belief is that Kannagi, on her way to Kodungallur, stayed at Attukal and settled there in the form of a maiden (kannikai). However, there is no evidence for this in the Silapathikaram. Nevertheless, it is still believed today that Kannagi herself is Attukal Amma.

Attukal Pongala Festival

The festival at Attukal is celebrated in the month of Kumbham (mid-February to mid-March), from the day of

the Karthika star to the Pooram star. The celebrations begin only after the goddess of Kodungallur is welcomed and seated there by singing the Thottam Paattu. It is believed that the power of the Kodungallur Devi resides there for the next ten days. The festival is celebrated by reciting the story of Kannagi over ten days through the Thottam Paattu. The entire story, starting from Kannagi's marriage, is sung. On the sixth day, accepting the grief of Kovalan's death, the temple doors open late on the seventh day (Kovalan's story and the observance of mourning). On the ninth day, the world-famous Pongala is offered. The Pongala is considered a victory celebration (the end of the Pandya king) of the Goddess, who, in her fierce form (ugra roopini), vanquished the Pandya king. The festival concludes on the tenth day with the return of Kodungallur Bhagavathy.

Other Kannagi Temples in Kerala

Several other temples in Kerala are dedicated to the worship of Kannagi

1. Chittoor Cheermaakaavu (Palakkad)
2. Thrippurakkal Bhagavathy Temple
3. Kaachanamkulam Thrippurakkal Kannagi Bhagavathy Temple
4. Puthucherrykaavu, Vadavannur Koyilandi Pisharikaavu
5. Muthandara Kannagi Amman Temple (Palakkad)

Nellikulangara Temple

Mangaladevi Temple (Idukki) - It is believed that the King of Madurai, Chera Senguttuvan, built the Mangaladevi Temple 2300 years ago in Kannagi's name. There is also an argument that Kannagi was installed in Chengannur.

Thus, Kannagi resides in various forms in Kerala temples even today. Furthermore, Kannagi's impact is evident in Kerala's ritual art forms and literature.

Kannagi in Ritual Arts and Literature

Ritual Arts

In ancient society, every art form was a collective art. The path of devotion was their support to escape life's problems. Ancestors tried to overcome problems by understanding and worshipping nature and the feminine. In those days, arts were an expression of the community. In modern times, arts are the creations of individuals. In ancient times, the individual was only a part of the community. No one was separate from the society. They gave a divine/religious color to all their emotional expressions and art forms. That is why elements of rituals are found in all ancient art forms.

Kanyarkali

Kanyarkali is a ritual drama performed in Bhagavathy temples in the Palakkad district to appease the Goddess. In this, praise and congratulatory songs are sung in honor of Bhagavathy, an aspect of Kannagi. To appease Kannagi's anger after she burned Madurai and arrived in the Chera country, and to pacify the Goddess, all the villagers gathered to sing, dance, and offer praises (sthothram). Kanyarkali is still performed every year in the same style they sang then. This ritual takes place in all the major kaavus (temple groves) in the Palakkad district.

Mannaan Paattu and Thottam Paattu

The Mannaan are a Scheduled Caste Hindu community in Kerala. In some places, they are also called Velan. Their traditional professions include sorcery and medicine. They

perform many ritualistic activities that involve singing (paattu). Building walls for houses by mixing and rolling mud was also their occupation. They used to travel from house to house, playing the veena (a stringed instrument) and singing the Bhadrakali Charitham (story of Bhadrakali).

Mannaans' Thottam Paattu

The songs sung by the Mannaan community during the ritual performed for the happiness of Bhadrakali are called Thottam Paattu. Thottam Paattu covers stories from the origin of the earth. It takes forty-one days to complete the singing of the Thottam Paattu. It has a varied and extensive content. Bhagavathy Paattu, Mannaans' Bhagavathy Thottam, Bhadrakali Thottam, Pulayars' Kannagi Thottam, and Sastha Thottam are all rendered through songs. The Pulayars' Kannagi Thottam, performed by singing the mythical story of Kannagi, also belongs to this category.

Kannagi and Kerala Arts

Apart from the ritual arts mentioned above, many other art forms associated with the Kannagi myth are popular in Kerala. The roots of the Theyyam art form, which is special in North Kerala, ultimately lead to the Kannagi myth. Veriyaattu (ritual ecstatic dance) is performed in many kaavus and temples, associated with the incarnation of Kannagi. The Bhagavathy Theyyams with large headgear are considered a reincarnation of Kannagi. Following the belief that Kannagi, grieving over the untimely death of her husband, jumped into the fire, the Kutti Theyyam (a minor Theyyam) that comes to remove the 'evil eye' (kannēru) holding a single silambu in its hand, jumps and dances into a pit of embers.

Psychological Analysis of Rituals

The symbols expressed in each of these rituals can be studied psychologically: The sexual aspects in Bharani Paattu (in the ways of expressing devotion, the presence of red color, the concept of Shakti, and the language of the chants) can be seen as Freud's concept of 'Libido'. Libido is the active expression of sexuality. It is a driving force that begins with birth in every individual and ends only with death. Freud's method of psychoanalysis is the study of how the structure of the Mind suppresses sexual feelings. These specific ritual arts are seen as various expressive forms of such mental feelings.

Kannagi in Literature

The Kannagi myth has spread from the ritual arts of Kerala into literature. The Kannagi Charitham (story) sung by the ancestors has been embraced and sung by modern poets as well. Many poets such as Ayyappa Paniker, Edasseri, O. N. V. Kurup, M. Govindan, Sugathakumari, and Kadammanitta have invoked Kannagi in their epics.

O. N. V. Kurup

O. N. V. Kurup integrated modernism, romanticism, and socialist realism into his poetry. In his short epic 'Kannagi', which is part of his acclaimed poetry collection 'Uppu' (Salt), he portrays a new world Kannagi born to burn and purify the thrones of injustice. He accomplishes this while re-creating the ancient story. The swift and sharp question-arrows that persist from the beginning to the end of the epic stand like spearheads before the corrupt rulers of today. In O. N. V. Kurup's short epic 'Kannagi', he creates a modern

Kannagi who raises her voice against injustice. The questions filled with anger that Kannagi raises after Kovalan's death are included in that epic.

Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan

Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan's epic 'Kurathi' was written in 1975 during the Emergency period to express his opposition to the government of the time. The characteristic of universal appeal keeps this poem alive even today. The Kurathi is the divine concept of the marginalized (low castes). Legends also say that the upper-caste deities practiced untouchability towards the Kurathi. The poet here speaks through the mouth of that Kurathi.

In Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan's 'Kurathi' poem, the Kurathi character tries to remind the ruling class, who have forgotten history, of its past. It is a powerful weapon of struggle that turns its weaknesses into opportunities. In the following lines, the Kurathi issues a stern warning to the rulers: "If you destroy the children who suckle at my breast, I will pluck out my breast and burn this puram (city), I will pluck out my hair and strike it on the ground and destroy this lineage" (Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan, 2010: 198). The tone of a threat, that she will become another Kannagi if they attempt to destroy the next generation that carries her traditions, resonates here. Just like O. N. V. Kurup, who transformed and scorched the corrupt thrones of today as the modern Kannagi, Kadammanitta also attempts purification by fire (agnisuddhi) here.

Whenever injustice and iniquity occur, Kannagi comes to us. The story in Edasseri's 'Bhoothappaattu' and the Kannagi myth underlying the Valluvanadan art form 'Bhoothanum Thriyum' are evidence of how much myths affect human beings.

Conclusion

Thus, the presence of Kannagi is pervasive in the literature, culture, and rituals of Kerala.

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