

# Documenting Syncretism of Mother Goddess Worship in South India: A Feminist Perspective

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**Abstract –** *The significance of documenting social and religious myths, rituals, customs and traditions has been recognized and responded to, more so in our contemporary times. Within Cultural Studies, a growing multidisciplinary academic discipline, it becomes a very relevant enterprise. Such documentation has greater significance and implications in the multicultural Indian context. It is also much relevant to the precarious state of Indian nationalism which, as Shashi Tharoor posits, is founded on ‘the Idea of India’.*

**Key Words:** *Myths, Multiculturalism, Secularism, Patriarchy*

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## INTRODUCTION

The idea that despite differences in languages, religions, regions, customs, cuisine, costume, Indians own a shared common past forms the basis of national identity. Thus, the idea of India weaves unity out of diversity. Indian nationalism has therefore “always been the nationalism of an idea”. However, this idea could often be (mist)aken as essentialist and homogeneous. Unfortunately, this has caused and continues to pose threats to Indian secularism and multiculturalism.

Historically, one sees that communal violence and disharmony tormented India often. India has a chequered, bloody past extending from Post-Partition to the present. Very often in India, purist, homogeneous and essentialist (mis)conceptions of religion and culture have resulted in communal struggles. Only in the Indian context, perhaps, religion and culture are so intertwined, inseparable and continue to shape each other.

The investigator feels that a better awareness of the anti-essentialist, heterogeneous and syncretic nature of religious worship could broaden one’s worldview thereby contributing to a better and more harmonious society. A change in perspective, using new ideas and values, could foster communal harmony and secularism, in the real sense. In this context it is important to describe syncretism.

Religious syncretism involves the fusion of two or more religious belief systems to form a new system, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions (Britannica Encyclopaedia). Syncretism points at the true character of cultural practices, religious cults, myths and rituals as being

heterogeneous, having derived from varied religions and cultures, especially indigenous and folk traditions.

In the Indian situation, one can spot syncretism everywhere, though we miss identifying and appreciating it. Acknowledging and celebrating syncretism does not tamper with one’s religious identity. It would only help us appreciate and take pride in belonging to India, the vibrant, multicultural and one-of-a-kind nation. Shashi Tharoor regards this multiculturalism as the sumptuousness and richness of ‘the Indian thali’, as against the American melting pot, which cannot retain constituent flavours, but is merely homogenous.

Having stated that syncretism in India is everywhere; the investigator chooses to examine two religio-cultural sites in South India that manifest Mother Goddess worship: the Christian shrine of Velamkanni dedicated to Our Lady of Good Health in the Nagapattanam district of Tamil Nadu and the Hindu shrine of Mondaikadu Bhagavathi in the Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu. Both are highly popular pilgrim centres, flocked by large masses especially from the neighboring state of Kerala. The latter has been growing in rising popularity in the past few years and crowded by women pilgrims especially. The ‘pongala’ is popular and the use of meat for ‘pongala’ is a clear divergence from the dominant common Hindu practice of avoiding meat. Both the shrines stand outside the confines of official, sanctioned religion exhibiting religio-cultural practices divergent from it. A closer analysis reveals assimilation and fusion of local indigenous cults, rituals and practices of other religions. Such syncretism is unique, invaluable and exuberant. It

ought to be identified, documented and celebrated, all the more in the Indian context.

Besides, the question of women cannot be isolated from Mother Goddess worship. Popular religion articulates the anxieties, apprehensions and aspirations of the present generation of women. It can give valuable insights on the position of women and their concerns and issues, within the patriarchal Indian society. The Indian situation, as revealed by feminist writers and the everyday experience of women of all classes, points at a grim state of affairs. One wonders as to how far the advancements in education and women empowerment in the past six decades have translated to better lives for women. Thus, lending a feminist perspective to this proposed project could offer fresh insights on the issues of contemporary women.

The Mondaikadu Bhagavathi temple offers scope for fresh feminist research. It is gaining popularity and fame as the 'Women's Sabarimala'. Women observe 'vrata' and go on pilgrimage with 'irumudikettu' like the swamis, the men pilgrims to Sabarimala. Often there are debates related to denying women access to the Sabarimala temple, the most popular pilgrim centre in South India, located in the Pathanamthitta district of Kerala. Thus in the Mondaikadu Bhagavathi Temple, one could trace the creation /evolution of an alternate space for women. This is definitely worthy of detailed research.

The research problem cannot be isolated from its historical and cultural context. A study of Indian Mother Goddesses draws extensively from historical research. Narendra Nath Bhattacharya's 'The Indian Mother Goddess' and M.C.P. Srivastava's 'Mother Goddess in Indian Art Archaeology & Literature' and renowned religious historian David Kinsley's 'The Goddesses' Mirror' are relevant to this study. Thus the study is rooted in, and could contribute much to, disciplines such as cultural studies, gender studies, history, religion studies and anthropology.

Few scholarly writings are available on the two shrines and consist of research and accounts of foreign scholars. So research by an Indian, as the voice of the native who is part of the multicultural context of India, becomes even more relevant.

## CONCLUSION

The study involves documenting the myths, rituals, cults and practices of Mother Goddess worship at Velankanni shrine and Mondaikadu Bhagavathi Temple. Books, magazines, pamphlets, hymns, oral literature and folk tales, as much as possible, shall also be collected and documented.; identifying syncretism in religious and cultural practices in the two chosen sites as representatives of the Indian multicultural context; locating the religio-cultural ties in the history and the contemporary state of Mother Goddess Worship in South India; addressing the

feminist question in the Indian multicultural, multi-religious context and reading Mother Goddess worship in South India from a feminist perspective.

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