Berichte und Kommentare

Caste Divisions in the Religious Folklore of Tamil Nadu

Ülo Valk

In memoriam S. Lourdusamy (1947–2007)

Introduction

I visited my anthropologist friend Dr. S. Lourdusamy (SVD) a couple of times in India, when he resided in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, and carried out extensive fieldwork among the Bhils, Bhilalis, and other tribal peoples in the region. Among the numerous results of his work are folklore books in the Bhil language, pioneering publications in the history of this ancient people, first time mentioned in the Mahabharata. Lourdusamy invited me to Tamil Nadu in order to show me his homeland; in February 2006 we met in Chennai and started a long trip through Pondicherry, Tiruvannamalai, Madurai, and other old towns. One of the most memorable parts of the journey was a stay in Lourdusamy's home in Athipakkam near Tirukkovilur and our visits to other neighbouring villages. We saw Catholic churches and Hindu shrines, took long strolls on roads, visited homes, and talked with people. As a folklorist I was fascinated by the temples of local deities, such as Aiyanar, Munieshvaran, Vīranar, Mariamman, and the expressive appearance of their statues. I was thrilled to realise how rich and lively was the oral tradition about these deities, who play an active part in the daily life of villages. My discussions with Lourdusamy led to the project of collecting religious folklore in the local area, in order to analyse and interpret it in the social context of everyday culture. As the semester in my home university in Tartu was beginning, I had to leave and Lourdusamy continued the fieldwork in northern Tamil Nadu, in the borderlands between Viluppuram and Tiruvannamalai districts – in the villages of Agaram, Sadaikatti, Velakulam, Kodukapattu, Athipakkam (near Tirukkovilur), Viruduvilanginan, Kalleri, and Pavithiram. Our discussions continued via e-mail until we met again in October 2006 in Vienna to analyse the corpus of texts that we had accumulated, consisting of in-depth interviews with twenty-five people, translated into English by Lourdusamy. In April 2007, we gave a joint paper at the "Religion on the Borders. New Challenges in the Academic Study of Religion" confer-

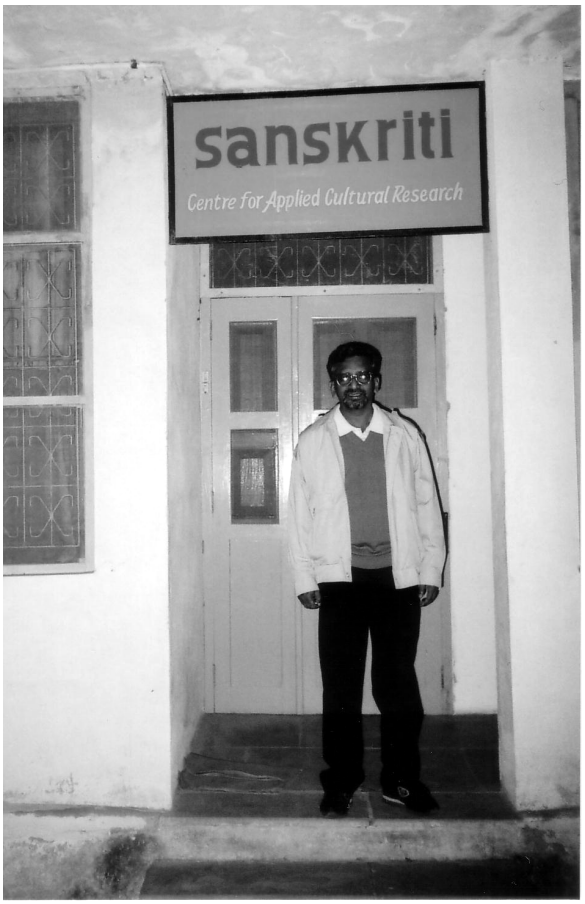

Fig. 1: Dr. S. Lourdusamy in front of his research institute in Indore (February 1998; Photo: Ü. Valk).

ence in Stockholm and were planning to meet again in January 2008 in Varanasi and in Delhi. Most unfortunately, we did not meet. Lourdusamy passed away on Dec. 30, 2007, only a few days before our planned get-together. I dedicate this article to his memory.

Deities, Castes, and Folklore: From Etic to Emic Perspectives

Western research on Indian society has claimed the pervasiveness of the caste system since the beginning of the colonial period. It has been shown that hierarchical relations, based on the dichotomy of purity and pollution, have divided people into endogamous groups, determined by birth and prescribing civil and religious privileges and restrictions to its members (Guneratne 2003: 97). Lawrence A. Babb's study on popular Hinduism in the Chhattisgarh region depicts a religious life in a rural society that is divided into multiple castes, ranking from the lowest, such as cobblers, to the low middle, high middle, high, and the highest, such as businessmen, rulers, and warriors. As no Brahmans live in the region of his fieldwork in Sitapur, the Rajputs form the highest caste there (Babb 1975: 15–18). Babb notes the omnipresence of the conceptual opposition of purity and pollution in Hindu life and the strong restrictions on low caste people approaching high caste deities, in order to avoid pollution (Babb 1975: 47–50). In his study of the Chhattisgarhi pantheon Babb shows how, "divine and worldly hierarchy reflect and complement one another" (1975: 50f.). Christopher Fuller has presented similar arguments in his discussion about the worship of the "'great" and "little" deities of Tamil Nadu, where he sees a clear connection between hierarchical social relationships of caste and rituals. He shows that animals are sacrificed by low caste men to deities with lower rank, while higher deities receive only vegetarian food, offered by high-ranking priests. Some deities, such as the goddess Mariamman, may receive both kinds of offerings, but during such ritual practices the goddess is "split" into high and low forms, worshipped by a priest inside the temple and by men of lower rank outside the temple premises (Fuller 1992: 89–92). Fuller concludes that the "little village deities, who are mainly served by non-Brahman priests, are linked to each other – and, it is claimed, to the great deities as well – by complementary hierarchical relationships like those on which the caste system is founded" (Fuller 1992: 99).

Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, who has studied the relationship between folklore and tradition communities in Chhattisgarh, has noted that gender is the primary social division in the folklore community, followed by caste, which marks certain folklore genres and their performances (1996: 181f.). Flueckiger notes that "women of different caste levels rarely perform together in genres belonging to the Chhattisgarhi repertoire" (1996: 183). Thus, discourse about caste divisions and

Fig. 2: Pujari Vadivel worshipping Mariamman in Pavithiram village temple (Summer 2006; Photo: S. Lourdusamy).

hierarchies form an integral part of anthropological and folkloristic research about India. Scholars have argued that forms of worship and relations between the deities in the pantheon symbolically express the caste relationships in a hierarchically organised society. Research has also confirmed that different castes may have religious and folkloric traditions of their own, not shared by other social groups in the area.

The aim of the fieldwork in Athipakkam and the adjacent villages was not to collect data about social stratification and the caste system in Tamil Nadu, but to study the vernacular tradition of religious narratives in the context of everyday life. The plan was to collect beliefs and stories about deities, spirits, ghosts, witchcraft, divine and demonic possession, rituals, and festivals. However, the topic of caste divisions emerged in most of the interviews, without any guiding questions or inquiries about the social structure of the village. All twenty-five informants could easily identify their caste belonging, ranging from Brahman to Vellalar, Mudaliar (agricultural landlord), Udaiyar, Vanniyar, Reddiar (all farmers), Shettiar (well digger), Konar (shepherd), Saklier (leather worker), and Dalit (untouchable and agricultural labourer). It became apparent from several interviews that villages do not form homogeneous tradition communities; rather, there are essential differences between the religious traditions of these social groups.

Myth is a popular genre in Tamil folklore relating the birth and ventures of gods during the ancient times, when the world was created and its present order and hierarchies established. Myths appear in many plots and in multiple variations. In contrast to legends, which describe brief encounters between men and the supernatural world in everyday life, many myths excel in length and complexities of plot. There are a few myths among the recorded narratives that project the social system of villages into the primordial age, explaining the particular connection that some deities have with certain castes.

The first example tells of the birth of the goddess Mariamman and her special relationship with women of the Dhobi (washermen) caste. It introduces us to the complex world of different classes of deities, some of them deriving from Brahmanic tradition, such as Ishavaran (Shiva) and Parashurama (avatar of Vishnu); others, such as Jabardaka Muni or Mariamman, belong to the vernacular world of village religion. The following story was told by Sugumar Udaiyar, leader of the Udaiyar community in Athipakkam village. He was 52 years old when the interview was conducted.

Ishvaran is known to descend on his devotees as Jabardaka Muni. In the categories of divine personalities such as Rishis, Samiars, and Munivars, the last form the first grade cadres, even higher than the Samiars. They can marry and have children. Jabardaka Muni had a wife whose name was Renuka Devi and they had four children. Muni takes bath and worships Ishvaran every day in the morning. Renuka Devi used to assist him in his morning rituals: she used to go to the river nearby without any utensils in her hand and bring water for worship. When she goes to the river, first she takes a bath and after bath gathers river sand and makes a pot out of it, and brings water in that pot and gives it to Muni for his worship.

One day, when she went to bring water, the Gandar Devargal [the Gandharva deities] were passing by above in the sky and their shadow, fell on the river water. When Renuka saw the shadow in the water, she looked up to see what it was. She had no impure thoughts in her mind in looking up. But looking at the Devargal the only thought that came to her mind was that there are some handsome men in the country. As the Devargal went further on their course, Renuka tried to make the pot to collect water, but the sand would not gather together to form a pot. She tried again and again to make the pot, but it did not form into one. It had never happened since the days of her marriage with the Muni. She got frightened and wondered if her chastity was lost. Then she came home running. The Muni waited for the water and found it late for his worship.

Since the Muni was a wise man, he knew what had happened to Renuka and why she came without the usual water pot. He then said to her, "the moment when you saw another man and thought to yourself that he is handsome, you lost your purity." So, he told her that she was no more worthy to be his wife or to live together with him. Saying this he called his eldest son and told him to cut off her head. But the boy refused to do it because she bore him. He tried to explain to his father that thaipavam polladadu [the sin against the mother] would destroy him. Then the Muni cursed his son and turned him into a stone. It happened in the same way with the two other sons and they too became stones.

Finally, the Muni called the youngest son, Parashuraman, who is one of the ten avatars of Mahavishnu, and told him to cut off the head of his mother. This boy was willing to do it and took the sword to cut his mother's head. Seeing this the mother ran away and the son ran after her. While the son kept chasing her, the mother thought to herself that it would be a curse on this boy if he would kill his own mother (thaipavam polladadu), and so she tried to escape at all cost. She ran and ran and finally entered the house of a Dhobi [Egali, washerman's caste]. Seeing the son chasing the mother and wanting to kill her, the Dhobi woman tried to protect Renuka, and in the tussle to save her she came between the sword and the mother. Then the sword of Parashuraman cut off the head of the Dhobi and then he cut off his mother's head as well.

Then he ran back to his father to tell him that he had

cut off his mother's head. The Muni was happy that at least one son listened to the father's word. Out of happiness, the Muni told Parashuraman to ask for anything he wants. Parashuraman said that he does not want anything but the mother and so she should come alive. Muni was happy to hear that. So he gave him some water in a container and tells him to put the head of the mother together with the body, sprinkle the water, and then the mother would come alive.

Parashuraman went back in haste to the place where the mother had been killed. On reaching the spot, he saw two heads and two bodies lying separately. In a hurry, he put the head of the mother with the body of the Dhobi and the head of the Dhobi with the body of the mother and sprinkled water on them. Then both became alive. As a result, the Dhobi woman had her head but the body of Renuka, and Renuka had her head but the body of the Dhobi woman. Due to this exchange (Mari) of heads, Renuka became Mariamman.

Then Ishvaran came there and gave to Mariamman the blessings to be a Kaval Deivam [guardian deity] for people and gave her the boon to do good to people. To the Dhobi Mariamman said, "since I died in your house, hereafter the Karagam [ritual vessel] that will be carried on my feast day will be taken in procession only from your house and only by you." That is why Egali gets the respect (mudal mariadai) when the Mariamman festival is celebrated. She also gives the boon to the Dhobi that if anyone suffers from chickenpox, the person will be healed of the sickness if she or he eats and drinks kuzhu and the pudimau from the hands of the Dhobi (Egali).[1]

The transfiguration of the goddess Renuka into Mariamman – a goddess with a body of a low caste woman – is meaningful. This explains the split forms of her worship, consisting of blood sacrifices and more symbolic, i.e., vegetarian, offerings, as noted by Christopher Fuller above. Eveline Masilamani-Meyer has also interpreted the peculiar anatomy of Mariamman, whose head "connects the goddess with the world of Śiva, whereas the rest of her body links her with the devotees on earth" (1989: 91). She notes that this "double aspect makes the god a perfect mediator between the devotee, caught in the world of conflict, on the one hand, and the transcendent on the other" (1989: 90f.). Caste divisions are not absolute, as both high and low forms of existence can meet and overlap in society and the supernatural sphere.

Another myth illustrates the well-known truth that caste barriers may be obstacles for certain marriages. In real life it would be a serious transgression of the rules if a husband and a wife represented opposite social ranks, but these taboos can be broken in folklore. Many folktales depict impossible marriages between royal family members and grooms and brides who come from the lowest ranks of society. A good example is the international Cinderella tale type, known in the Tamil tradition as well (Blackburn 2001: 85f.). In the following myth the efforts of the divine groom and the low bride lead the plot to a happy ending. This story was told by the 32-year-old temple priest (*pujari*) Maheshvaran in the village of Aragandanallur. According to the family tradition he forms the seventh generation of *pujaris* in the temple of Pachaiyamman. Therefore, it is no wonder that he knows the mythical background of the statues in his temple well.

To the side of Amman is the statue of Kathayi, who is the daughter-in-law and the wife of Murugan. Kathayi is a Vedu girl belonging to the Koravar caste, low in esteem. She is known as Valli Kathayi. Murugan asks his mother's consent to marry Kathayi. The mother refuses to permit marriage because of the low status of Kathayi. Kathayi goes to Amman and asks to marry her son. Then she says that she will ask her brother, Bhagvan, and approaches him. Bhagvan also refuses the alliance. Then Amman tells this to her son but the son does not accept his mother's refusal. However, because of her love for the son she allows him to marry Kathayi under condition that the girl has to pass three tests. Then he talks to Kathayi and convinces her to take up the tests. She also agrees.

The first test is as follows. Kathayi has to fry millet with oil and sow the seed in the field. The next day that seed should grow and the field should be green. Then Murugan questions his mother whether any seed will grow after being fried. The mother says that this is *pathini sabam*. Then they plough the field, throw the seed, and the seed grows into greenery.

The second test follows. Amman goes to the other side of the river, and the river is flooded and even Bhagvan cannot help her to cross the river. Then Amman says that Kathayi should bring her back to this side of the river. Since Kathayi is from the Koravar caste, she knows about birds. She changes herself into a sparrow (*kuruvi*), takes Amman under her wings, and brings her to this side of the river.

Then comes the third test, *theemithi* [fire-walking]. Valli has to come walking through fire, come over to Amman, and then she will accept her as daughter-in-law. She does it successfully. However, Amman says that people may not accept her since she belongs to the Koravar caste; instead, since she was born of Kanathathal, she names her Kathayi and gets her married.

Amman keeps her near since she is alone, and gives a boon to Kathayi. Girls who are not married should get married, those who have no children should get children, and if the mothers can't give milk to the newborn babies, she should give to such mothers the ability to give milk to the child.

1 For another version of this myth see Whitehead (1999: 116f.).

These myths about Mariamman and Kathayi explain how particular deities acquired their special powers to assist people in critical situations and why they have a special connection with certain castes. Mariamman has blessed the Dhobi women with the miraculous ability to treat those who are ill with chickenpox; Kathayi helps maidens to get married and blesses wives with fertility. Although both deities have a strong connection with one particular caste, their generosity and helpfulness transcends social boundaries.

Deities, Social Mobility, and Caste Barriers

Thus, myths link deities with caste divisions, but this does not mean that villages form static, rigidly arranged communities with very limited social mobility. Informants gave narrative examples of the success stories of their fellow villagers, whose prayers and devotion had guaranteed them divine support, help from above. The following story was told by Masilamani, a 40-year-old *pujari* of the Aiyanar Temple in Sadaikatti village. The deity, whose power is confirmed by the following example, is known as Muniyappan or Munieshvaran.

One Mudaliyar caste man from Nedungampattu, belonging to the Mekraiyar family, a Catholic by religion, was very poor and used to live only on fishing. He prayed to this deity and became well-off. Later one of his sons became sub-inspector and another became a policeman too. This man never went to church but he always came here [to the Muniyappan temple]. He always offered one bag of paddy and pongal [sweet rice] to the deity on the first day of Adi month. He said that he saw Muniyappan going on a white horse every day, accompanied by bearers of lamps. He said that one could see the lamps, smell camphor, flowers, and incense, and hear Bambai [percussion instrument] sound about half a kilometer away.

Narratives, sometimes told as stories about personal experiences, about the night ride of deities on horses around the territories they guard are widely spread in the region. Often such encounters with deities are said to be frightening and have serious consequences, such as illnesses, shock, and even death (see Valk and Lourdusamy 2007: 192–197). In the above story the deity's regular appearance to the faithful man seems to confirm their close relationship which brings positive results. There are many similar narratives in the recorded interviews, offering models of true worship and describing the blessings that follow. They represent a well-established genre, belonging to the repertoire of temple priests (*pujaris*) and other faithful villagers, who illustrate the power of deities with "true" stories, taken from "real" life. Another set of short narratives about Muniyappan (Munieshvaran) follows, told by 51-year-old M. Ganapathi, a Dalit man from Arthrapattu village.

Whoever asks anything in the name of Muniyappan, it is granted. Once it is granted, then the people offer whatever they had promised. If someone receives the blessing but does not fulfill the promise, he will be punished. Such is the power of Munieshvaran.

Once a man lost a gold chain. On reaching Thiruvannamalai, he found out that the chain was missing. He went home and asked his wife and children if they had found it at home. They said they hadn't. Then he prayed to Muniyappan that if he would find the chain, he would offer food to the whole village. The next day the chain was found. Then, as he had promised, he sacrificed a goat and prepared food, offered it to the deity, and fed all his kin in the temple.

Another man in the village stood for the local Panchayat election. There were five other contestants. He won the election. He erected a statue on the side of the road. Today he is very prosperous. He sacrificed a goat and fed the people.

If someone has stolen something, or if someone does magic (*soonyam*), the grace of Muniyappan is so powerful that nothing can work against him. The soonyam will be beaten up (*adipattupodu*).

Someone from Arthrapattu once broke open the lock of the donation box. The man's wife died the next day. The man agreed that he did the stealing. He was not happy to live in the village after that, so he left the village only a week ago and has not yet returned. He left as if he were mad.

Neither people nor deities form homogenous communities. Interviews reveal that Vaishnava and Shaiva deities are regarded as two distinct lineages. People also differentiate between fierce, malevolent deities (Tustadeivam), who need blood sacrifices, on one hand, and peaceful, vegetarian deities on the other hand. Masilamani, a *pujari* from the Udaiyar caste, said of his temple that, "the Brahmans usually do not come here, because Aiyanar is a Tustadeivam. Occasionally some do come and offer fruits and milk, or give money for Abhishekam … Some deities tolerate any mistakes done to them, but Aiyanar will not tolerate mistakes. He also does not like Theettu [polluting and impure elements]. Therefore, he is kept away from the village." Masilamani continued, drawing attention to the different ranks of Aiyanar (also called Munieshvaran) and his guardian deity:

Right at the entrance to the sacred place is Vīran. He prevents people who are not supposed to enter the temple.

Fig. 3: Statue of Aiyappan (form of Aiyanar) in the temple of T. Athipakkam village (February 2006; Photo: Ü. Valk).

He allows only those to enter who are clean and pure. He is the guard for the main deity at the temple, and the one who always goes with the main deity on a ride at night. He receives goat, chicken, pig, liquor, and dry fish curry as offerings. Since Munieshvaran is Shaivam and should not see blood sacrifice, a curtain is placed between him and Vīran when animal sacrifice is offered to Vīran.

Several informants claimed that deities are not equal, that hierarchical relationships divide both human society and the pantheon into different ranks. M. Ganapathi from Arthrapattu village described the ritual practices of the untouchable castes to which he belongs: "Normally we sacrifice chicken and he-goat but no pig, because the Munieshvaran here is a Papara [Brahman] Muniyappan. The Harijans will not go inside the temple but they worship him from far." Thus, although Muniyappan is worshipped by all people in the village, Dalits have no right to enter the premises of the temple of this high caste god.

These restrictions lead us to the concept of purity, generally observed in interaction with deities – a topic raised by several informants. According to a traditional saying from these villages, deities do not like the sound of mortar and pestle – tools that are associated with women's work, which is why some deities prefer that their temples should be erected outside the village. V. Pichchandi, a 76-year-old Dalit who serves as *pujari* of Mariamman and Vīranar temples in Athipakkam village, said: "Vīranar does not like impure conditions, hence girls and women who are pregnant or in monthly period should avoid his sight. Therefore, when public worship is conducted for Vīranar, Aiyanar, Munieshvaran and Kuthandar, women with the first baby and those who are afraid [of the deities], will be recommended to leave the village and stay out." The *pujari* of Aiyanar temple of Agaram village, 45-year-old Sakkara, who belongs to Kaundar caste said: "No one uses footwear on the temple premises, and no Dalits or women during their period of menstruation and pregnancy will enter the temple compound. If someone comes with footwear purposefully, he will have its consequence within two or three days. One can sleep here even the whole year, provided he has no guilt in him." The second statement implies that there is no essential difference between the impurity of women and that of low castes, as both affect deities in a similar way.

Vellai Konar, a 67-year-old man from Viruduvilanginan village, narrated a set of warning legends about the divine sanctions against those who insult deities and pollute temples:

Those who have asked for forgiveness for the sins against Aiyanar, have lived thereafter, but those who did not ask for forgiveness had died. A man from Athipakkam came here grazing the sheep. He went to the spring at the temple, took a bath, washed his clothes, and went home. The next day he had a boil on his back and it became very serious. He understood that it was a curse from the deity for disrespecting the sacred water. It cost him already a lot to get a treatment. However, he could not be healed, and so one day he came here, acknowledged his mistakes, and was ready to offer Mupusai and spend a large amount of money. Once he did this, the boil broke and got healed and now he is healthy. Since then, he never brings his sheep into our village territory.

Three Christian boys from our village came once to the temple and shat in front of the statue of Muni. Those boys died soon.

Another man, called Pusini, from the lower caste, bought a piece of land and he wanted to do Abhishekam to the deity. He brought one Gaunder [high caste man] and almost reached the temple for the worship. I shouted at him and told him not to go to the temple because he belonged to the lower caste whereas Aiyanar belongs to Aiyar [Brahman] caste. But the man entered the temple in spite of the warning. He died within a year.

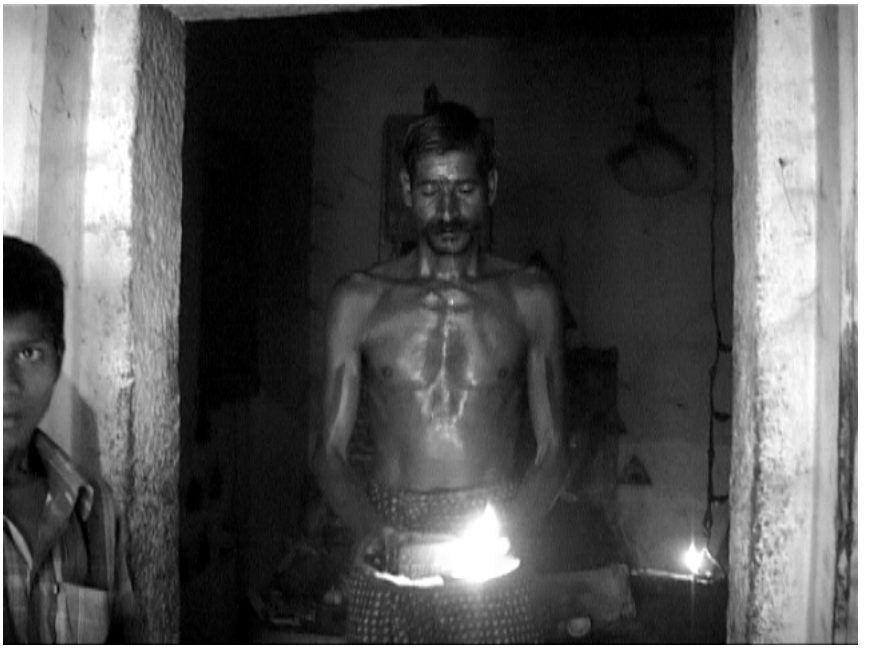

Fig. 4: Pujari Sakkara from Agaram village (Summer 2006; Photo: S. Lourdusamy).

The last narrative confirms the belief that low caste men should not have any direct contact with the high caste deities. Likewise, deities avoid the physical contact that might occur in ritual possession during religious festivals. Informants claim that only one's own clan deity (Kuladeivam) descends on them, not other deities. It seems unthinkable that a Dalit could be possessed by a high caste deity and vice versa.

Darman, a Dalit *pujari* of Vīranan temple, expressed the connection between gods and their respective castes: "We worship Vīranar, the Arundidi [cobblers] worship Madurai Vīran, the Udaiyars worship Aiyanar." Thus, there is multifaceted evidence about social segregation between deities and humans of different ranks. However, there are instances when caste borders disappear and temples are open for everybody. This happens during the great festivals, when the whole village joins the celebration.

Aiyanar's feast is celebrated annually in Sadaikatti village. Pujari Masilamani's grandfather was the head of the village, who had introduced this festival, and since then the first day of Adi month has become the feast day of the temple. Masilamani stressed: "There is no caste or religious discrimination for the celebration in the temple on that day." He gave a thorough description of the celebrations, including ritual possession, sacrifices, and procession. He also said, "when the deity has arrived at the temple all the worshipers break coconuts at the temple entrance. During this time, all those who have come for the feast make *pongal* [sweet rice] for offering. Irrespective of their caste and religion, and as a sign that there is no low or high caste, or rich or poor before the deity, a handful of *pongal* is taken from each one and brought to the Mulasthanam."

Another informant, 68-year-old Kannayiram Naikar, is a street theatre director and belongs to the Mudaliar caste. He gave a detailed description of the religious festival dedicated to Aiyanar in his home village Viruduvilanginan. Men decorate the statues of Aiyanar and his guardian Karuppanar and take them on chariots to "every nook and corner of the village." The procession lasts the whole night, as a stop is made in front of every house, and all families can worship the deities, giving offerings to them and praying for welfare and prosperity of their families. Only women, during their periods, have to stay away from the deities. Thus, all the castes seem to have equal access to the deities during these celebrations.

However, there is also evidence that low caste people and their deities must keep a low profile and that their access to the residential areas of the high caste people remains taboo even during the festival. V. Pichchandi, 76-year-old Dalit *pujari*, described the festival dedicated to the goddess Muthumariamman in the Athipakkam village. This festival lasts for eight days and is organised annually to keep people free from illness and misfortune. V. Pichchandi said,

Fig. 5: Statue of goddess Mariamman in the temple of T. Athipakkam village (February 2006; Photo: Ü. Valk).

On the first day, we observe a ritual called Kappukattudhal in which all the males tie a yellow thread on the right hand wrist, coloured by dipping it in turmeric paste. Since that day people maintain inward and external cleanliness by taking bath everyday, keeping fast, keeping away from sexual behaviour and avoiding eating from impure vessels, abstaining from speaking bad words, bad thoughts and evil practices of all sort. On the eighth day, the Amman is given Abhishekam, dressed with new clothes, offered fruits, coconuts, camphor, and ghee that are cooling. Amman is taken in procession through all the streets excepting those of the high castes.

Obviously, even during festival when deities are processed through the village, special restrictions must be followed; caste divisions and ranks of deities cannot be completely ignored. In spite of all their purification rites, the Dalits and their goddess do not have the right to access the homes of high caste people.

Castes as Vernacular Practices: On the Social Function of Belief Narratives

Caste differences and identities are frequently expressed and discussed in the religious folklore of Tamil Nadu, such as myths and legends. Legend is a genre that blends the supernatural world of deities with the social sphere of village communities. Legends depict places and people, known to the storytellers and listeners, and are told as accounts of true events. These narratives make statements about right and wrong behaviour and give instructions on how to please the deities and avoid misfortune. It is not surprising that the discourse on caste division often emerges in these narratives, which shape people's perception of social and supernatural realities. In contrast to legends, myths are narratives concerning extraordinary events in primordial times, although they are also told as true stories. The interviews conducted in connection with this article revealed that caste divisions and identities are expressed in rituals, customs, and other religious and social practices.

The caste system is not a static construction with rigid walls that separate human beings from each other and determine their life span from birth until death. An ontological understanding of the caste system would turn it into a reified entity, such as an old, historical building that either has to be preserved without changes or should be demolished to escape from its imprisoning walls. Thinking about the caste system as a set of social practices, draws attention to the human agency in the building process of caste identities and their traditions. In order to exist as a collective social reality, the caste system has to be practiced and acted out regularly. Vernacular forms of religion, such as belief narratives, customs, and rituals, belong to the practices that contribute to the formation and functioning of the caste system and the constant negotiation of its borders.

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Sikhism

An Indian Religion in Addition to Hinduism and Islam

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At the end of August 2008, the media in Austria reported the following: "Austria's Sikhs demand religious freedom."[1] The Austrian Broadcasting (ORF, "Österreichischer Rundfunk") stated: "The Sikhs in Austria, on the occasion of an International Conference of Experts on Human Rights in Vienna, criticized what they considered a 'lack of religious freedom' in Austria."[2] Austria is no exception in this regard in Europe. Similar complaints and accusations have been directed at Germany, France, and England. The same is happening in the United States and Canada. The Sikhs, so went the complaints, were forbidden by the authorities to use their typical particular names or to wear their religious symbols. Who are the Sikhs? What is so characteristic of their religion? What religious rights do they want? When, where, and why are there conflicts? In the following I would like to write about the Sikhs and their religion, then describe some of their religious practices, and finally go into the question of the tensions that can exist between faith and culture.

1 The Sikhs and Their Religion

Male Sikhs are often immediately recognizable by certain obvious marks: they wear a beard, they do not cut their hair, they wear a turban, and have a characteristic surname, namely, Singh ("lion"). On the one hand, this does not hold for all Sikhs; and on the other hand, other religious and ethnic groups wear turbans (e.g., Muslims, Afghans, Iranians, Indians, etc.). These visible signs of being Sikhs were and are often questioned in the United States and Europe and are rejected.

"Today the Sikhs make up the most recent independent religious community of India. Worldwide their number is estimated to be about 29 million. They live primarily in the Indian state of Punjab, but are also scattered over all of India and make up about 2.2 percent of the estimated total population" of India (Gächter 2008: 16). Sikhs emigrate readily, especially to the United States, Canada, South Asia, East Africa, and England. As a result of these waves of emigration over the past 100 years, more than a million Sikhs are dispersed outside of India (Pashaura Singh 2006a: 146; Nesbitt 2003: 71). All of Europe is part of the Sikh diaspora. In the German-speaking part it is estimated that there are more than 23,000 Sikhs. In every country they make up one of the smaller religious communities.

The Sikh tradition reaches back to the social and religious experience of Gurū Nānak in the 15/16th century.[3] He appeared on the scene as a reformer of Hindu and Islamic traditions. He was an intelligent, educated person, who missed very little of what was going on in politics, government, society or religion, or in nature (Grewal 1990: 7). Whoever recognizes him and his nine successors as a Gurū (that is, as a teacher or spiritual master) would be called a Sikh. "Sikh" in Punjabi means "disciple, student"; in our Sikh context: a student who takes seriously the teaching and worldview of his teacher and who follows this way (in Sanskrit *panth*) and belonged originally to the Nānak-*panth*. He was a pupil of Nānak. The name Nānak fell away later and "Panth" refers now to the community of Sikhs.

1 "Austria's Sikhs Demand Religious Freedom," Die Presse, 28 August 2008. <http://diepresse.com/home/panorama/religion/409784/print.do> [26 September 2009].

2 ORF News, 29 August 2008, <http://religion.orf.at/welcome> [28 October 2008].

3 Nānak lived from 1469 to 1539.