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DIVINE IDENTITY IN TAMIL NADU.
SAMPLES FOR RECOGNITION AND ANALYSIS

The concept of humanity presupposes what may be called human identity. The basic uniformity implied in the term is, however, qualified by a variety of life-experiences which necessitates a definition we call cultural identity. A special dimension applicable to human identity as well as to various cultural manifestations is recognisable as 'divine identity'. It has a limiting effect on the power of man and qualifies his behaviour with a restricting and guiding authority. Rather than attempt to make this definition more exact, it is our aim to present and register phenomena in Tamil Nadu which respond to what is recognisable as divine identity in the definition of the 'actor'. For the implications of this term I refer to the elaborate discussion by Svein Bjerke.¹

Categorical aspects and definitions should result from the material collected rather than predict the selection of data. Grouping these phenomena together under certain general headings will not exclude interrelationship and overlapping. Varieties of divine identity can be related to natural phenomena, man, animals, events, time and then to man-correlated creations such as idols, temples, holy water tanks and to words, narratives, hymns and scriptures, but perhaps no single phenomenon will be entirely exclusive of some relationship with other registrable examples.

Among natural phenomena the sun is prominent in demanding divine recognition. The Sun is approached in the following manner according to the teaching of the Sāma-Veda: "I meditate on the whiterobed Viṣṇu, the mooncoloured with four arms and bright face, for the welfare and prosperity of the family and myself, for generating power, life, health and increase of wealth, for the increase of the life indicated in the Veda, for avoiding premature and untimely death, for auspicious peace always, for the fulfilment of all desires, for a strong and healthy body, for the forgiveness of all my sins. For this

I give reverential salutations to the *navagraha* and to the Sun."

This is the ingress to *Sūryanamaskārasāmāpāṭhaḥ*, published in 1941 at Kumbakonam, the important temple city and one of the two places in Tamil Nadu where there is a separate temple to the Sun. The image of the Sun riding on a carriage drawn by four horses is, however, found in many temples as for example in the main hall before the Somasundara temple in Madurai. More often the Sun is met with in the group of *navagrahaḥ* consisting of the sun, the moon, the five planets and Ketu and Rāhu, the descending and ascending node respectively, imagined as dragons causing eclipses of the sun and moon. The *navagrahaḥ* form the most frequented place of worship in most temples but they are also found as separate shrines.

Most obvious is the divine identity of the Sun recognised in his rule over time, the parts of the days as well as the seasons of the year. *Sandhyāvandana*, performed thrice daily, is the propitiatory rite to secure his benevolence. Vedic mantras are used by the learned for *sūryanamaskāra*, especially the *gāyatrī*. In the life of common people the divinity of the Sun is recognised in the rule and power of solar seasonal events. In its northward progress from the winter to the summer solstice the Sun exercises beneficent power. The beginning of this auspicious time is celebrated as a festival of joy, family reunion and enjoyment of the new harvest. All people enjoy the *poṅkal* feast. It is the indisputable power of sunlight at various times of the day and the year that creates a divine identity, and not so much the image of the Sun. Worshippers of the Sun are nevertheless ranged among the *Ṣaṣmata*, the six religious sects, as *Sauram*.²

The obvious realisation of divine identity is the holy place. The criteria for qualifying as a holy place are many, and result in manifestations of different kinds. The first to meet the eye is the temple. Huge enclosures, high towers, awe-inspiring images and structures enforce a mysterious sense of respect on the people allaround. They stop in front of the entrance and bow or salute and do not enter even the small open space in front of a shrine without removing their shoes. The place is identified as divine presence.

Temples are, however, not located at random. Before any building or structure appeared there was divine identity, either incidental or arranged through

ritual performances. There is a vast literature going into the elaborate details of Hindu temple building. The *Bṛhatsamhitā* by Varāhamihira of the sixth century A.D. is an authority, and so is *Kāmikāgama* for South India in particular. Although the presence of divinity is assured through ritual performances, the place to be chosen for the temple is not irrelevant. To quote from the *Bṛhatsamhitā*: "The gods always play where groves, rivers, mountains are near, and in towns with pleasure gardens." According to *Kāmikāgama*, the site of the building (*vastu*) is specified in twelve ways: *caiva*, *pramma*, *vaiṣṇava*, *aintira*, *pacu*, *pūta*, *acura*, *paicāca*, *rākṣata*, *vāyu*, *varuṇa* and *āknēya*. The different grounds are qualified by their growth of trees and presence of water, or what animals frequent the area, and their beneficial or damaging effects accordingly indicated. The *caiva* ground for example is recognised by the presence of Pipal and Asoka trees. Pigeons, parrots and swans frequent the place, and so on. The ground gives felicity and prosperity.

When the right ground has been selected the actual divine presence of sanctity and protection is achieved through the fundamental ritual of the sacrifice of *vastu*, the *vastutēvapali* as the *Kāmikāgama* describes it with detailed rules. *Vastupuruṣa* as the divine presence in earth goes back to the Rgvedic hymn X,90 and the building of the temple is a recapitulation of the creation. *Puruṣa* is the universe and in the local reenactment of the creation he is sacrificed as *vastupuruṣa*, and thereby the ground represents divine presence and is further thus identified in the ritually bound erection of the temple, rules for every detail of material and structure being laid down in the *Kāmikāgama*. The temple, identified as divine presence, must in no way be defiled. A funeral procession is not permitted to pass by the entrance of a temple, and if in the case of smaller sanctuaries it cannot be avoided, the doors are closed while the procession goes on.

Places are identified as divine habitations when ritual requirements are fulfilled, but divine identity by incident is also recognisable, both negatively and positively. An incident par preference is the appearance of an object recognised straight away as divine. The technical term is *svayambhū*. At *Mēlmaruvattūr*, a small village 90 km south of Madras on the road to *Tiruchchirappalli*, there stood an old *Margosa* tree, and at its foot an anthill. In 1966 a heavy storm felled the tree and the anthill

melted away. "Then suddenly Śakti appeared of her own and is now worshipped in the shrine that has been erected" says the pamphlet which has been published and is available to all the people who, in growing numbers, stop their vehicles and pay honour to the Deity. As an incidental recognition of divine identity this is quite a contemporary case.

Looking at the details we find two natural objects representing divine identity, the Margosa tree and the anthill. In addition the incident of the storm and its detrimental effect awakes the feeling of superior power being present. The sacred tree has a long history in India, as the Sacred Fig Tree (the *bodhi* tree) reminds us. To a certain extent the felling of any tree has always been considered a sacrilege, as can still be noticed in the way schools arrange tree-planting festivals. More obviously attributed to divinity is the *sthalavṛkṣa*, 'the sacred tree of the shrine'. In a book on the temples at Madurai it is said: "In the Sthala purana or history of every temple mention is made of the Sthala Viruksa or temple tree, the significance being that the deity around which that temple was built was originally found under the tree mentioned as 'temple tree'. The temple tree at Madurai is the Kadamba tree"³ (*Anthocephalus cadamba*). Another tree with divine connection is the Nīm tree (*Melia azadirachta*). It has a place inside the great Bṛhadīśvara temple at Tanjore. The leaves of the Nīm tree are used in connection with curing diseases and with rites for protection. The Margosa tree at Mēlmaruvattūr will, if worship around the tree is taking place at the right time, very quickly fulfill the desires of people worried because no marriage or births are forthcoming.

The name *Teyvīka vēmpu*, 'the divine Margosa', raises questions about the meaning and implications of divine identity. A recent discussion on these points dates from 1979.

Dealing at length with the symbol concept of the Vedic ritualists Asko Parpola brings the word *rūpa* (Tamil *uruvam*) fairly close to our 'symbol', but points out that its meaning comes very close to "the identifications"⁴. Dealing with symbolism and magical acts, Svein Bjerke emphasises that "the symbol object, the signans, is quite concretely a stand-in for its significatum"⁵. Arguments of this kind have their own value, but in all cases one must look at the phenomena from the point of view of the actor, and qualifying his reaction as a recognition of divine identity may be

of help. In a direct approach the question is this: Is the Margosa tree a divinity in itself or is it a substitute for something? It is to be noted that in order to prove to be of special importance the tree has to be connected to a temple or a shrine, so any example of the tree may not convey the divine identity by itself, although an incident, sometimes an accident or a choice on account of beneficial usage, can make it stand out for such recognition and cause a temple or a shrine to be built around it.

Applying divine identity as recognisable characteristics of places is justified as a common denominator for the innumerable small shrines all over the country. Along the New Jail Road in Madurai on a stretch of about 800 meters, 22 different shrines can be found on both sides of the road. Their individual features would provide a vast area of studies. The material that presents itself is contained in the so-called *Sthala-purāṇa*, the story of how the place came to be noted for its divine presence. In exalting the divinity or sanctity of a particular temple the Sthala purāṇa makes good use of common purāṇic material and magnifies its own identity by applying 'great tradition' to local conditions.

Sthala-purāṇas are expected to deal with three items, it is sometimes said, namely, the place, the gods and the tree. Turning to an important Śaivite temple, Tiruvaṇṇāmalai, the three elements of divine identity are clear. The temple is situated on and close to a hill which forms a real landmark in the landscape. The gods have their purāṇic tradition with a special feature in a flame of light from the top of the hill, and the tree is old and remarkable for its growth. It is a Makula (*Mimusops elengi*).

Hymns composed by devotees play an important role in establishing the divine identity of temples. Sthalapurāṇas often carry a list of hymn-writers who have visited the temple, and quote hymns by such authors. For Śaivism the hymn collection Tēvāram and the works of Māṇikka Vācakar, and for Vaiṣṇavism the twelve Ālvār, are fundamental in this respect. Sometimes the effect of a recognised divine identity is the curing of diseases and assurance of delivery from all evil as well as from rebirth. The collection of hymns of the Ālvār, Nālāyira-tivviyapirapantam, ends with 35 pages listing their hymns in praise of the 108 recognised

Vaiṣṇava temples in Tamil Nadu. Similarly the hymns of the Śaivite hymn-writers are listed according to the names of sacred places which they are respectively praising in their hymns. The places are recognisable either directly by their names or by the names of the deities and their characteristic beneficial features. Tiruñānacampantar, for example, was born at Cīkāli and has made that place famous. At Ceṅkūrur the local people as well as his own relatives were suffering from malaria. Tiruñānacampantar sang a *patikam*-hymn and cured them.

The rich heritage of devotional hymns in the Tamil language has made many temples famous for sanctity and the reading of these hymns is considered an effective means of achieving the purpose of temple visits, whether it be to obtain salvation or to get help in our human living conditions. This may form an item in the rules for worship with which the Sthala-purāṇas sometimes end. As an illustration of other concrete details, these lines from the Vāyalūr temple may be quoted: "Coming on the path leading to the temple one should bathe in the Carppanātī, the 'Snake River'. Then one must bathe three times in the Śakti-Tīrtta, the 'Pond of Śakti', and then pay homage to 'the Never Failing Gaṇapati' and then to Atinātar and Atināyaki and Cuntaratāṇṭavar, presiding deities or siddhar with the Dancing Śiva. After that you pay homage to Aruṇakirinātar (another famous hymn-writer) and make him your helper. Then you finally join the feet of Muruka and rejoice in his presence." The role of the hymn-writer is to be noted here, and his place in the temple leads on to another aspect of divine identity.

Local divine identity is to be complemented with divinity recognised in human beings. A man or woman can stand out as different from ordinary people and represent divinity for different reasons. In the traditional order of society the Brahmin has a position which keeps him apart and makes him available for a correct and safe approach to the divine powers, as Purohit for 'rites de passage' and for common people more often in the temples. Divine identity recognised in those who perform temple service (*pūjā*) is no less applicable to priests of other castes in smaller temples and shrines, but such qualities are attached to them in a strict sense only when they are officiating. The foundation behind it is that man needs help from divine powers and does not ordinarily believe himself as capable of securing it. Occasionally, through family tradition or special instruction and preparation he can become fit for such

functions. Here is to be found a vast literature for the preservation of Brahminhood, for progressive obtainment of *dīkṣā*, consecration, as well as for preparation applicable to people in special circumstances.

The Śaivites have their own stages on the way to divine identity connected with ritual observances: *cariyai*, *kiriyai*, *yoga* and *ñāna*. Those performing ordinary temple service (*cariyai*), after undergoing 'ordinary consecration' (*camaya dīkṣā*) will become cohabitants with Śiva (*calokam*). Those who perform *pūjā* (*kiriyai*) undergo a special consecration (*vicēta dīkṣā*), and come near him. Through *yoga* you become of equal form with Śiva (*cārūppiyam*), and finally when you pass by *ñāna* the *nirvāṇa dīkṣā*, you reach the state of *cāyucciyam*, that is you are absorbed into the godhead. Some scriptures accordingly make this a condition for performing *pūjā* according to the rule *nādeva devam arcayet*, 'you cannot worship god without being god'.

Divine identity is recognised through the words pronounced by inspired devotees. The word "inspired" is not adequate to communicate the idea of possession by the god that is considered to take place. Referring to a line in Tirumurukāruppaṭai, the venerated poem describing the appearance and actions of Murukaṇ, Mr. Murā Cāmi explains: "The dancer having entered into the shape of the 'Spearbearer', Murukaṇ, and invoking him, dances as the god. They all consider him as the god himself when he announces what will remove the wants from people and increase their good."⁶ The presence of a god in man is effected through intensive rhythm or self-torture. Along the road from Tiruchchirappalli to Dindigul a signboard indicates the presence of the "Speaking Paṇi Lord", Murukaṇ. He is to be found in a small temple nearby where at the side of an ordinary small shrine to Murukaṇ a staircase three meters high leads up to a chair. The steps as well as the chair are dressed with nails. After *pūjā* the priest walks slowly up the stairs showing obvious signs of pain and after having seated himself in the chair he is ready to answer questions put to him by anxious people standing in front of the temple. The veneration with which they listen is a sure sign that they have no doubt that the god Murukaṇ is speaking.

The word itself also carries divine identity regardless of the speaker in the concept of mantra. Again we touch upon a vast subject. Suffice it to call attention to the Vedic *om*, the *pañcākṣara*, the five-letter

Śaivite formula *namaḥ śivāya*. The *gāyatrī* also belongs here, indispensable for the daily sandhyāvandana. As an explanation for the meaning of mantra a quotation from a Śaivite catechism may serve: "For the Lord Śiva the true form is the Śakti, who is the meaning of mantra. That Śakti of Śiva gives gain to those who practise Yoga being present in the word-mantra like fire in coal. Therefore through the Śiva-Śakti there is a connection between Śiva and the word-mantra. In reference to that connection the word-mantra becomes the complementary abode of Śiva."⁷

Divine identity in its most direct form is realized in one's own self. In the extreme forms of Bhakti an identification with the deity is the result of a concrete manifestation of the deity, the *mūrtti*. The figure standing in the *garbhagr̥ha*, the innermost sanctuary of the temple, has an awe-inspiring effect on the crowds of people coming for worship. Mere artistic accomplishment is not enough to create the divine identity, which is clear from the many artistic marvels in the temple corridors which are passed by without special attention. When the gods on the other hand pass in the streets in festival processions all people will stand in devotion. Experience of divine presence related to a special divine form, *mūrtti*, will in many cases reach an intensive character through scriptural-purāṇic references. The poets represented in the *Tēvāram* of the Śaivites and in the *Nālāyira-prapantam* of the Vaiṣṇavas have borne witness to it in their hymns.

Two women come in the forefront. *Āṇṭāl*, the Vaiṣṇava poetess of Śrīvilliputtūr, and *Kāraikkālamman*, the Śaivite mystic from *Kāraikkāl*. Their intense devotion is in a sense corporally related to the deity in the temple. Significant for *Āṇṭāl*'s amorous devotion to *Raṅkanātaṅ*, Viṣṇu at Śrīraṅgam, is the reference in her hymns to *maṭalūrtaḷ* as a means for securing the love of the deity. This was a device to win the lover in the traditional Tamil *akam* literature. Her poem *Tiruppāvai* has found its place in practically all temples in Tamil Nadu as a morning hymn in the inauspicious month of *Mārkaḷi*. — *Kāraikkālammai-yār* has created her own image and found a place in temples, easily recognised in her almost totally emaciated condition. In her songs she praises Śiva even in his terrifying appearance. Her figure is found in a few temples, *Ālaṅkāṭu* being the most well-known. *Āṇṭāl* has also got her

own temples, but the real significance of her Bhakti was her reported union with Rañkanātaṅ as his consort.

Another way to reach divine identity for one's self is the yoga system. Passing through the eight stages and finally reaching *samādhi* or *nirvikalpa-samādhi*, the soul loses all consciousness of being different from the universal soul. The identity is there, because *ātman* and *brahman* are one and the same, and the latter comes into the sphere of deities. The identity does not, however, give divine power to the liberated soul; otherwise the identity is complete, a goal which, however, is aimed at by but a few. To common people divine identity remains approachable in awe and fear only, by man in his human identity.

Notes

- 1) Bjerke 1979, p. 173.
- 2) See Raghavan 1969.
- 3) Palaniappan 1963, p. 2.
- 4) Cf. Parpola 1979, p. 143.
- 5) Bjerke 1979, p. 174.
- 6) Murā Cāmi 1966, p. 66.
- 7) *Caiva Vinavitai*, Madras 1924.

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