



# The Intersection of Gender and Divinity: A Study on Ottathi Worship and Tamil Folk Practices

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**Citation:** Dr. K. Paul Duraichi, (2024), The Intersection of Gender and Divinity: A Study on Ottathi Worship and Tamil Folk Practices, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(8), 670-673

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i8.9424

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Minor deity worship refers to the practice of worshipping local deities. There are many types of minor deity worship, such as household deity worship, clan deity worship, ethnic deity worship, village deity worship, and mass deity worship. There is no universally accepted definition of this system of worshipping deities. Palayamkottai taluk is one of the eight taluks in Tirunelveli district, and it contains 41 villages. One of these villages is Thiruvannanathapuram Pottal. "Pottal" is the colloquial name, but in government records, the town is referred to as Thiruvannanathapuram. The Ottanayakkars, a group that migrated from Salem district to the north of Palayamkottai, have been living in this area for around 600 years. The Ottathi is a woman from the Ottanayakkar dynasty. This paper provides a detailed description of the identity of the Ottathi and the worship associated with her.

**Keywords:** Ottathi, Thiruvannanathapuram, minor deity and worship.

The unique worship of deities and rituals that continue beyond the Vedic systems of worship is known as minor deity worship. This system of worship predates the establishment of formal religions. Tamils practice what is considered "minor worship." Minor deity worship involves the veneration of local deities, with many different forms, including household deity worship, clan deity worship, ethnic deity worship, village deity worship, and mass deity worship. However, there are no common definitions for this system of worshipping deities.

The dualistic belief in God is expressed through the actions of people in the six lakh villages of India. In these villages, God is seen as the foundation and source of hope for every action. Villagers pray to God to fulfill their hopes, plans, dreams, and desires. Even today, one can find boys and girls who have grown their hair as if in penance for seven years, and women who have shaved their heads. They perform various rituals, such as offering a pot of water to cure measles, purchasing salt to treat skin diseases like warts, ticks, and dog bites, performing rounds of circumambulation, and lifting a hot pot. It is rare for folk worship practices, which are based on individual needs, to completely exclude worldly concerns. However, it cannot be denied that folk beliefs are often driven by a general, shared purpose. Based on this concept, this article is titled "Ottathi Worship."

One significant element of cultural anthropology is ethnography. Ethnography involves the thorough understanding and documentation of the culture, lifestyle, beliefs, knowledge, customs, and practices of a particular community. It is the comprehensive presentation of this information. Berreman Gerald defines ethnography as the study of information gathered during fieldwork concerning a specific community or culture. Anthropologist Malinowski analyzed elements such as family structures, anatomy, social relationships, meanings, rituals, and practices to understand the ethnography of these communities.

Ethnography records detailed information about specific communities or castes. The divisions based on occupation later evolved into caste divisions with the arrival of the Aryans. Over time, caste distinctions became more pronounced, leading to the growth of contradictions, differences, and variations. As the need to define social boundaries arose, caste identities were created. These identities gave rise to branches, symbols of development and tradition. The term "caste" denotes these divisions within races.

If an individual uses force for personal desires, it is considered attempted rape or sexual assault. When someone in a position of authority orders such acts, it becomes sexual violence of the ruling class. Numerous examples of this have appeared in stories, songs, and ancient legends throughout history, some of which remain unrecorded. Evidence of such sexual violence can be found in texts dating back to Tolkappiyar's time, who referred to it as *Magadbar Kanchi*.

Ilampuranar writes about a Vandan who, after differences arose, offered his daughter from his ancestral clan to another. Tolkappiyar mentions the custom in which a king would lead an army against a man who refused to give his daughter upon request and would forcibly take her. This custom later became part of the Kalampagam tradition, referred to as 'Maram.' In these accounts, the king sent messengers to the people of the village to discuss the marriage proposal. In other stories and poems, they complete their shortcomings through murders, suicides, or escape.

- ✓ Vengalarasan - Cutting off the head of his daughter
- ✓ Cholanattu Chettigal - Burying the daughter in a dungeon
- ✓ Ettaiyapura Porkollar - Burying by digging a hole
- ✓ Kavasankulamtu Thachar - Burying by digging a hole
- ✓ Seethaara Kulakaundar - Killing by cutting off

All the above 5 people are killed by cutting off or burying. These are murders. In the story of Tulasiyamman, the fact that she disappeared from the earth should also mean that she was buried in the earth. Among these, people like Palammal are killed without wanting the murder to be committed by force; people like Tirumukathalazhi are killed off their own free will.

There are many minor deities in Tamil Nadu, some of which are more prominent than others. These deities are slightly larger in significance than typical minor deities. In Pottal, for example, there are temples dedicated to deities such as Mupadathi Amman, Sudalaimadan, and Deeppaichi Amman. There are also household deities and village deities, with Ottathi being one such deity that originated in this context.

Palayamkottai taluk is one of the eight taluks in Tirunelveli district, consisting of 41 villages. One of these villages is Thiruvannanathapuram Pottal. "Pottal" is the colloquial name, but in government records, it is listed as Thiruvannanathapuram. The village has more than 580 houses, and people from various castes, such as Asari, Brahmin, Maravar, and Devendra Kula Vellalar, reside here. Agriculture is their primary occupation, but the villagers are also well-educated and hold government jobs, working in various high-level positions. Pottal has a primary school and an Anganwadi center. The village is home to the Muppudathi Amman temple, where the Kovilis festival is celebrated with great enthusiasm every year in the month of Panguni. In addition to worshipping Muppudathi Amman, the villagers also venerate many other minor deities.

### Who is Ottathi?

Around 600 years ago, a group of Ottanayakkars migrated from Salem district to Thiruvannanathapuram Pottal, located north of Palayamkottai, in search of work. The Mandaleswarar and Palaiyakkars, who were appointed by the Vijayanagara kings to oversee the provinces under the empire, were called Nayakkars. These people lived under various names such as Naidu, Nayakkar, Reddy, Rao, Rayar, Chetty, Wodeyar, and Rayudu. They resided in areas of Tamil Nadu such as Namakkal, Tiruppur, Coimbatore, Salem, Erode, Karur, as well as in the southern regions of Virudhunagar, Madurai, Dindigul, Theni, Ramanathapuram, and Thoothukudi. They also lived in Senji, Thanjavur, Chennai, Tiruvallur, Kanchipuram, Vellore, Krishnagiri, Vedaranyam, and Periyakuttagai.

The Ottathi minor deity has been worshipped for almost 600 years. The deity is represented by a statue placed on a 3-foot-high pedestal, located in a secluded spot outside the village. It is believed that items used for the Ottathi Puja, including leftover food, should not be taken home from the temple.

The Ottanayakkars found work in activities such as stone breaking, well drilling, and rock breaking. In Pottal village, Thiruvannanathapuram, the descendants of a family worship a female deity named Ottathi. This family traces its lineage to Sami Thevar, Subbu Thevar, Sudalaimuthu Thevar, Subbaiya Thevar, Raja Thevar, and Thangapandi Thevar, all of whom worship this woman. The identity of Ottathi, the woman worshipped as a deity, is the subject of this study.

While the Ottanayakkars were living and working in Pottal, the woman named Ottathi became pregnant with a male heir. She refused to reveal the identity of the man responsible for her pregnancy. Her brother, angry and suspicious, devised a plan to kill her. He dug a hole on the riverbank and the next day took his sister to bathe in the river. After rubbing oil on his body and holding a bowl of Soapnut Acacia, he reached the hole, placed the bowl inside, and told Ottathi that he had accidentally dropped it in the hole. He asked her to retrieve it, claiming that if he tried, he would get oil all over himself. When Ottathi bent down to get the bowl, her brother pushed her into the hole and buried her alive. This spot where she was buried is said to belong to Sami Thevar. Some people claim that Ottathi's pregnancy was the result of an affair with a member of Sami Thevar's family, though this claim remains unclear. Over time, stories spread about Ottathi, who was buried while heavily pregnant, and she came to be regarded both as a goddess and a ghost.

Subbaiya Thevar, an heir of Sami Thevar, was plowing his land when he accidentally damaged the pot that contained Ottathi's remains. Immediately after, he lost his eyesight. He traveled far and wide seeking a cure, and eventually, he was told that if he worshipped the goddess who had carried his lineage, his descendants would be blessed and free from curses. Following this revelation, Ottathi began to be worshipped as a goddess every year on the last Friday of the month of Thai.

The worship of Ottathi is a family tradition for the descendants of Sami Thevar. During the worship, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian offerings are made, such as chicken, rooster, eggs, spinach, appalam, and

vegetables. Hot water is poured into a large earthen pot, and fertility medicine is ground and used in the ritual. Only men participate in this worship, as women are not allowed. The men cook and eat the offerings they bring, leaving the rest behind. They stay overnight, bathing in the river the next morning before returning home. It is said that during the midnight prayers, the image of a woman holding a child can be seen.

A true incident shared by Pandi illustrates the dangers of women participating in the worship. Several years ago, his brother's wife insisted on joining the ritual. When they reached the location, she collapsed, as if struck by someone. She was rushed to the hospital but vomited blood and died on the way. This incident reinforced the belief in the family that women should not participate in the Ottathi worship. Pandi states that their family lives a special life because they continue to worship Ottathi.

### **Items to be carried for worship**

- ❖ Petra Maxlight
- ❖ Torch light
- ❖ Aruval
- ❖ AruvalManai
- ❖ Coconut oil
- ❖ Jug
- ❖ Frog pot
- ❖ Saruva pot
- ❖ Kuttupponi
- ❖ Copper
- ❖ Tumbler-2
- ❖ Vinegar
- ❖ Pot
- ❖ Apachatti
- ❖ UlaaMudi
- ❖ Small pan

### **Pregnancy medicine**

- ❖ Ceivakkai powder
- ❖ Garlic
- ❖ Turmeric
- ❖ Oma
- ❖ Sukku
- ❖ Ginger
- ❖ Mustard

### **Food items**

- ❖ Chicken
- ❖ Rooster
- ❖ Egg
- ❖ Banana
- ❖ Eggplant
- ❖ Drumstick
- ❖ Pumpkin
- ❖ Potato
- ❖ Mango
- ❖ Senna
- ❖ Ballari
- ❖ Small onion
- ❖ Lettuce wrap
- ❖ Spice items
- ❖ Appalam
- ❖ Mituku
- ❖ Raisin
- ❖ Coriander powder
- ❖ Chilli powder
- ❖ Sesame oil
- ❖ Yogurt
  
- ❖ Ghee
- ❖ Mustard
- ❖ Ulundum Dal
- ❖ Leafy greens

- ❖ SirattaiAgapai
- ❖ Salt

In Tamil, the worship of minor deities often involves people singing in the language they know. They present their traditional art forms through dance and song. As a sign of respect, they offer the food they eat during the ritual. People use this time to confess their problems, and sometimes even their 'crimes' and 'punishments.' The rituals evolve into dancing, 'swearing,' and other forms of expression. In these villages, female deities are often revered as protectors of simple life. The most common worship methods, rituals, and fasts are directly linked to minor deities. Studies suggest that the earliest traces of minor deity worship among the Tamils can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization. Tamil culture, in particular, is marked by a civilization that developed with an emphasis on equality.

There is no doubt that the primary objectives underlying worship services, rituals, and customs practiced in village temples are aimed at the welfare of the people. While individual desires and requests may exist at the surface level of folk worship systems, a deeper examination reveals that the practices, which focus on social welfare, have become integral parts of these rituals and traditions. Though the names and languages may differ from village to village and country to country, the focus on social welfare remains the common denominator in all worship systems.

#### End Notes:

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