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Decoding the Tamil Dalit cultural practice of deifying female victims of caste-based sexual brutalisation through Cho Dharmaan's *Koogai: The Owl* and Imayam's "The Binding Vow"

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Abstract:

The article aims to study the cultural practices of Tamil Dalits surrounding female victims of their community who died due to caste-based sexual brutalisation as reflected in Cho Dharman's novel *Koogai: The Owl* (2015) and more significantly in Imayam's short story "The Binding Vow" (2012). As females of Dalit community in the caste-based Indian society their bodies are the primary sites for assertion of caste superiority and punishment of their community through regular sexual exploitation, brutal rape and murder. Though the condition of Dalit females has been variously studied across disciplines yet the community's practices of deifying those females who died due to such atrocities are yet to be studied. The paper aims to study the various myths surrounding such deities, the origin of the practice, its implication for the Tamil Dalits as well as the caste people and the impact of this practice on the caste-based Indian society.

Key Words:

Dalit females, sexual brutalisation, myths, deities, cultural practice, Mother Goddess culture.

"But Udayar took no notice of me. He raped me when I was working in his sugarcane field. I remained silent, after all, he is my paymaster. He measures my rice" (Sivakami 2009:7). Is it just a case of the landlord taking advantage of the woman working in his field or an instance of sexual exploitation at work place? What makes this woman's complaint different from other women reporting of the same? The above quotation from Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* (2009) finds its echo, with slight variations, in almost all Dalit novels and autobiographies. Placed in the Dalit context the complaint acquires new dimensions. Caste, which forms the basis of oppression of this community becomes coupled with gender when it comes to Dalit women, making them more vulnerable. As women from the Dalit community these women face discrimination and are exploited in every sphere of life: from home to work. Vulnerably positioned at the bottom of India's caste, class and gender hierarchies, almost all Dalit women also experience sexual exploitation.

Sexual exploitation generally defined is abuse through sexual exchange or acts for some favours. The perpetrator is almost always the person in authority who exercises some control over the victim. It is because of this dependence that most victims remain silent. For the Dalit women it is work and their meagre earning that makes them vulnerable to their landlords, always the upper castes. But work forms only a part of the reason. These women are also subject to mass rape, lynching and parading naked as punishment to their men or community besides forms of sexual exploitation that are

culture specific. All in all, it is the Dalit woman's body that is the focus of any caste based atrocities. The National Commission for Women notes, "in the commission of offences against... scheduled caste [Dalit] women the offenders try to establish their authority and humiliate the community by subjecting their women to indecent and inhuman treatment, including sexual assault, parading naked, using filthy language, etc." What is this authority? How are women's bodies the only sites in this assertion of authority?

The root of this authority and its assertion lie in the clash of cultures that followed after the Aryans invasion of India. The Aryan culture was patriarchal in nature and had a pantheon of predominantly male deities. For them women are a part of man's property just like cattle and fields with no individuality of their own. The indigenous population on the other hand were mainly agricultural communities. Like almost every agricultural community they believed god to be female "representing life in the form of the Earth Mother."² As such they worshipped the "Earth Mother" in various female forms as Mother Goddess and fertility goddesses. There was a pantheon of predominantly independent female deities. Besides worshipping these communities acknowledged the powers of female as "life givers" and as "sources of activating energy" of the society. These beliefs were supported by and reflected in the equality that existed between men and women in every sphere of life. Women were individual beings and not properties of men and vice versa. All these contributed to the "matriarchal nature" of Mother Goddess culture.

Faced with a contradictory culture, the Aryans introduced the caste system to dominate the indigenous population. This hierarchical system is based on the concept of ritualistic purity in which control of women's sexuality is an important condition for maintenance of caste purity. It was the apprehension of decrease of property if women are given property rights, and which the indigenous community practiced, that formed the core. The actual reason was cleverly manipulated and hidden under their concept of women.

Women for the Aryans are inherently lustful and will go to any extent to satiate their lust. Their lustful nature along with their reproductive capability posed the threat of introducing impure blood into the community. The Code of Manu, was used here to support and sanctify their concept of women as well as the restrictions that came to be imposed subsequently. "Manu (the creator) allotted to women a love of bed, seat and ornament, impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct" (Cho 9). Manu also says, "Women even when they are of a good family, beautiful and married, do not hesitate to transgress morals ...At the first opportunity they leave wealthy and good looking husbands to share an adulterous bed with other men." So "Women must particularly be guarded against evil inclinations, however trifling (they may appear); for, if they are not guarded, they will bring sorrow on two families" (Cho 9).

Aided by these codes which were sanctified by the fact that these were codified by Manu, the first of Lord Brahma's sons, the women came to be depicted as a danger and threat not only to the community but also to themselves and thus needed to be controlled. So it fell on the men to ensure they do not bring harm upon themselves or the community.

Series of measures to control women and their sexuality was introduced and made mandatory for all castes. Child marriage was made mandatory to ensure they are in control by the time they reach puberty. Widow remarriage on the other hand was prohibited while their physical movement was limited to the four walls of the house.

According to the rules, decrease in the number of prohibition on women indicated the decreasing level of purity amongst castes. With myths and restrictions justifying women's lustful and unbalanced nature the Aryans took the opportunity to deprive women of property rights.

Aryanisation of the Mother Goddess culture and its followers

But for the caste system with the clause of controlling women to impact the indigenous population, legitimising the system and its norms was necessary. Mere codes and myth creation was not going to work since it did not destroy the source of indigenous community's culture. This could be done only by appropriating those sources in a way that would annihilate the matriarchal nature of the actual Mother Goddess myths. The "Mother Goddesses" were thus incorporated by the Aryans in their Brahmanical Hindu myths and married off to "brahminical" husbands. This act showed them as acknowledging the power of women while "the contradiction was resolved culturally by defining it as dangerous unless controlled by men" (Liddle and Joshi 1986:68).

Lakshmi is benevolent because her controlled sexuality bestows legitimate heirs for the maintenance of caste wealth and retains family property within the caste. Kali is malevolent because her uncontrolled passion is liable to introduce impure blood into the caste and to dissipate caste wealth, ... and thereby destroying the caste system itself. Unconstrained mortal women are as much to be feared as potential destroyers and robbers of the patriarchal heritage – cultural and material – as are members of the lower orders (68).

For the appropriated myths to work it was equally necessary to play those out in actuality since pre-Aryan Mother Goddess was also very much a part of the indigenous people's everyday life. As agricultural labourers they worked at par with men and had no such restriction on physical movement. The need was to imbed in them through real life experience the Aryan – Brahmanical concept of women and their sexuality. So they embarked on sexual exploitation of these women to support it and like always used myths, specifically the Code of Manu, to blame these women for the acts. Manu says, "Women remain chaste only as long as they are not in a deserted place and do not get the chance to be acquainted with any man" (63). This particular quote seems to have been tailor made to prevent women from working. And as agricultural labourers it is quite possible for women to be in a deserted place, in the fields giving the myth makers the perfect opportunity to actualise their claims.

Sexual exploitation along with other punitive measures where focus was always the female body became a routine and the norm. As a result, the bodies of these women became the site of assertion of caste superiority. The subjugation of the indigenous community came to be done through the bodies of women and continues to be so even in contemporary times. It was the bodies of only Dalit women that were brutalised or exploited as compared to the women of caste communities. Hitherto unknown concept of purity came to be attached to women's bodies amongst the indigenous population. Their bodies came to be seen as the source through which impurity entered their community.

Anupama Rao elaborating on the psychological impact on the community in her *The Caste Question* (2010) identifies two ideologies; the ideology of accumulation and the ideology of purity. According to the first the appropriation of Dalit women's body reflects a sexual dispossession. This deprivation of right to one's own sexuality in turn becomes a "generic form of deprivation" transporting the feeling from the woman to her family. With this transference the woman loses her individuality and becomes a mere property.

The other ideology represents and asserts the Dalit woman's body as amenable to sexual violation due to the freedom they enjoy as labourers. Because of their freedom their inherently lustful nature gives them the opportunity to satiate their lust and bring impurity to the family and community. These ideologies show how these women have been methodically and systematically stripped of their individuality over the years and converted into a thing collectively owned by family and the community. As a consequence, the sense of shame resulting out of these do not remain confined to the woman but spread out and engulfs the family and the Dalit community. It is on the bodies of women that the purity and honour of the family and community are seen to depend.

Even in contemporary Indian society, post Dalit uprising, sexual exploitation of Dalit females continues to be a reality. It does not imply that women from other sections of society are not exploited sexually. They are also sexually exploited but relatively less when compared to Dalit women. With modernisation sexual exploitation has become more brutal for Dalit women with enforcers of justice too participating in it. As such sexual exploitation of Dalit women have garnered some attention, though not as much as it should. However, in all these what escapes notice is how the Dalits deal with this most brutal reality that has become a part of their daily life or how they cope with the loss of lives to sexual violence.

The Dalits has a cultural practice of deifying those victims who died due to sexual brutalisation. This deification too is a remnant of the pre-Aryan Mother Goddess culture. As a remnant, the practice presents the exact opposite of what the upper castes has been asserting all along. Through deification they are completely inverting the position of these women from impure to the purest and most venerated. It is one of those pre-Aryan Mother Goddess cultural practice that has defied annihilation and is practiced even today. An example is the Gothialen deity worshipped by Dalits in contemporary Odisha. Imayam and Dharman through the deities of Ponnuruvi and Oomachi upholds the various aspects that the process of deification entails.

Ponnuruvi and Oomachi: Their brutalisation

Both Ponnuruvi and Oomachi are victims but the nature of their sexual brutalisation differs. Oomachi is the daughter of the bondsman of Oomachikulam. She grazed goats. She is brutally raped and murdered while grazing goats and being dumb her cry for help was heard by none. "She had been dragged through the thorns.... Her throat was badly bitten, as though she has wailed till her throat was parched, and had bitten them out of thirst. Who knew how many had quenched their thirst in her? Her body was riven with marks left by fingernails; her breasts bore the sunken tracks of teeth.... The entrance to her womb was bruised and inflamed" (Dharman 258).

Ponnuruvi on the other hand is impregnated due to a “relationship” between her and the landlord’s grandson while working at his house. Pregnant, Ponnuruvi becomes a source for her community to unitedly dissent against the upper caste for various atrocities. When they demand Ponnuruvi’s marriage to the grandson the upper caste secretly lures her off with false promises and kills her. “In the morning came the news that Ponnuruvi’s corpse was found floating in the Pottai Tank” (Imayam 62).

According to the Brahmanical Hindu myths both fit the description of the “lustful” type since they are working girls. Oomachi was in the field where apart from the sheep there was no one. Ponnuruvi worked in the house of the landlord where too there is no dearth of secluded places. Deserted-ness or secluded-ness seems to follow the Dalit females everywhere they go. Irrespective of the places they work in they are both subjected to sexual brutality because of the scope provided by the deserted-ness of such places. There appears to be a deliberateness in the deserted nature of such places for it always goes against the Dalit women like everything else. These incidents also reflect the extent to which the upper castes would go to ensure the Code of Manu is realised while simultaneously raising questions about their “freedom to work.” A close study of the caste rules regarding the movement of Dalits is thus required.

The irony in the “freedom” of Dalit women

Dalits, as the impure ones are not only consigned to live in the margins of the society but also have designated streets to walk upon. These streets are side alleys, usually over sewers and avoided by upper castes. Even if they need to access the streets which are used by upper castes they are required to follow specific rules in that as well. That is why Seeni in *Koogai: The Owl* has to untie the vesti from his head and put it over his hands, and walk barefoot in a gesture of humility and reverence whenever he walked on the streets used by upper castes.

As women of the same community Dalit females are also required to follow the same restrictions. Even as helpers in upper caste houses they are required to enter through a back door specially made for them. They are employed only for cleaning the toilets, the stables and garbage dumps. They have no access to the inner space of the houses. In rural India if the structure of the houses is considered it will be seen that the toilets and garbage dumps are always situated at a distance from the main house. Situated at the backyard these places are always secluded.

Further caste purity ensures that even upper caste women stay away from the shadows of Dalits working in their home. If and when needed they communicate with Dalit women from a distance. They do not work alongside the upper caste women as their helpers in the real sense of the term. Even in upper caste homes they are isolated and work in seclusion. That is why Ponnuruvi’s pregnancy is not a result of a one-time sexual exploitation. It is a result of a “relationship” that developed between Ponnuruvi and the grandson of her landlord.

Imayam makes strategic use of the term “relationship” to indicate the regularity with which Ponnuruvi is sexually exploited. That the sexual exploitation gets the opportunity to take on the colour of a “relationship” implies that there is no dearth of secluded spots in the home. But when Ponnuruvi is murdered because she became pregnant from the “relationship” it exposes the façade of the relationship. It is as if their

work environments are deliberately created to ensure that they are almost always alone. Even the rules to keep away upper caste women from Dalit helpers at home seems a deliberate creation to provide perfect opportunities for regular sexual exploitation. The risk increases manifold in the case of Dalit women who are agricultural labourers. As agricultural labourers they have to undertake long routes that are secluded and work in fields which due to caste rules are almost always empty.

With clear cut boundaries dictating every move the much lauded “freedom” in their physical movement and to work is absent. The word “freedom” is full of positivity and is supposed to infuse these women with satisfaction and happiness through their work. But when it is laid in the context of “labouring Dalit women” the irony is apparent. The very freedom which is supposed to empower them instead gives the upper caste males the freedom to sexually exploit and use the bodies to punish the Dalit community as and when required.

“These public spaces are seized upon as opportune places for exercising power and authority over Dalit women as individuals and as a collective through violence.”³ More than anything the secluded nature of these places give the upper caste males the perfect cover to satiate their lust and hide their crime. Lack of witnesses do not imply lack of awareness. The Dalit community is aware but the “deserted”-ness of places always tilt the balance in favour of the upper castes.

Code of Manu: Who are actually full of lust?

Irrespective of the secluded-ness of the places these females are always working. It is while they are working that they are sexually exploited. “Seeni’s wife Chinna Kaali was pruning the branches. With his hands stuffed with beetle leaf, ‘Angu Vilas’ areca nut, and a wad of scented tobacco, Gengaiya Naayakar stood facing her. Throwing aside her pruning knife Chinna Kaali would go down into the big canal and sit there with her legs outstretched...” (Dharman 24).

The caste based Indian society do not give much scope for leisure to the Dalits and particularly the Dalit females. These women are even deprived of the option to quit to avoid sexual exploitation. As mostly wage labourers they are paid inhuman wages which decreases further when it comes to the women. This forces them to look for other miscellaneous works besides their regular work as wage labourers to provide for themselves and their children. That is why Chinna Kaali despite being a wage labourer and bondswoman is seen pruning branches. Often they are found to go to the woods or send their daughters for firewood. “From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in the homes and in the fields.... When they come home in the evening there is no time even to draw breath.... Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom and satisfaction, because of all this” (Bama 59).

Working without even time for a breather these women fail to seek out men to “sate their lust.” However, contradicting Manu’s code, it is the upper caste males who are seen seeking these labouring women out instead. Gengaiya Naayakar seeks out Chinna Kaali with extreme leisure. He comes with prepared beetle leaves to satiate his lust. Every posture and attitude of Gengaiya shows the ample time he has to pleasure himself and it is Chinna Kaali who has to stop working by “throwing away her pruning knife” to please him.

Every posture of Chinna Kaali contrasting Gengaiya Naayakar's leisureliness shrieks of resignation. Seeing him she just throws away the knife and goes and "stretches out her legs." His sight is enough to make her know the purpose for his visit. "The upper caste landlord always constructs the labouring Dalit woman's body as an object of lust" (Guru 57). Going down to the big canal and stretching out her leg without any chit chat or flirtatious gestures speaks of not only the regularity but also the lack of time. She shows every sign of wanting to get over with it as quickly as possible so as to continue with her work.

Helplessness and resignation that is evident from Chenna Kaali's body reflect the psychological trauma born out of the regularity of sexual exploitation. The overview report "Dalit Women Speaks Out" notes that most of these women suffer from depression and low self-esteem. It also notes how suicides or even attempt to commit suicide to escape their suffering is not uncommon. But the need to provide food for themselves and their children pushes them to work ignoring their sufferings.

It is because of economic dependency that Nagammal is worried about her daughter's pregnancy rather than with the revelation of Ponnuruvi's sexual exploitation. She is not at all worried about what her daughter might be suffering mentally. Her only worry is not to earn the wrath of Padayachi or his family. "Nagammal tried to take care of the business secretly, wanting to cleanse her daughter's womb, without, at the same time, antagonizing Padayachi's family" (Imayam 61). They are helpless since it is their exploiters who give them work and their wages. In the same overview report it is observed that in almost all such cases of sexual exploitation the perpetrators are found to have some economic hold on these women.

The Body's Complaint

Chinna Kaali just has to wield the pruning knife instead of throwing it aside to put a stop to the atrocity but she doesn't. These are not testimonies rather fiction. And as such these narratives are not beset with the negativities of testimonies such as dependence on witness and hard-core facts, that leads to the implication of Chandra's sister in Chandra's death. A closer analysis of these texts reveals that not only the context but every attitude and postures of the female characters is a double edged sword. And the sword is not only aimed at the upper castes but also towards Dalit males.

For Chinna Kaali to even use the pruning knife to put a stop to her ravishment a strong and determined mind is necessary. But the resignation and helplessness that her body speaks of indicate her fragile psychological condition. The fragile state is not only a result of regular sexual exploitation but also the lack of understanding or support from Dalit men.

Seeni is the revered leader of the Pallar community in his village. In his position making his community males support the act of his wife would have not been difficult. But he doesn't. His inaction is not due to lack of awareness of what was going on with his wife. He is aware just like every Dalit male, for it is an everyday reality for every Dalit woman. His refusal to react or even to do something to stop it is reflective of the passive attitude that years of sexual exploitation without any recourse to the contrary has developed amongst Dalit men. Instead they have totally incorporated the Brahmanical Hindu concept of women. Perceiving them as

nothing but sexual objects the Dalit males have even become oblivious to their sufferings. Thus Seeni urges his wife to wear the sari that she had got in lieu of carrying the grinding pestle when Gengaiyya Naayakar died.

Carrying the pestle on the death of an upper caste male is another way of gendering Dalit women. It is culture specific and representative of all the extra culture specific forms of sexual exploitation these women has to suffer additionally. Carrying it is a way of publicly declaring herself to have been the concubine of the deceased. In lieu of carrying the pestle, the woman is given a sari. Even the deceased wife is given a sari after the funeral rites but, for both women the sari has different connotations. For the wife it is a sign of her widowhood which has its own negativities while for the Dalit woman it is a sign of her public humiliation. It is again a way of reiterating the “lustful” nature of these women. By carrying it she is acknowledging and making others acknowledge her identity of a concubine publicly. The sari is nothing but a constant reminder of what she had to go through just like parading naked or lynching. The upper caste male ensures that even the death of the perpetrators do not free them through the psychological trauma that this tradition produces.

That is why when Seeni asks her to wear it it does not only reflect obliviousness but his perception of her. She is not a human being rather a mere body of whom he is apparently the owner. Chinna Kaali’s body with its resigned attitude is shrieking out the debasement of Dalit women into a mere body even by Dalit men. The body is always a matter of possession now and not something to be supported or seen as their equals rather one that needs to be controlled.

Thus Dalit males frequently collude with the upper caste males when it comes to punishing Dalit females of “loose character.” Mariamma in Bama’s *Sangati: Events* is a victim of such collusion. Her only fault is that she resisted rape and ran away from the upper caste male. But when the punitive measures were given out the elders (read male) of the Dalit community accepts the upper caste male’s version and promptly levies penalties and punitive measures on Mariamma. Her side of the story is never even heard. “...Dalits often collude in violence when it comes to specific allegations against women of being “witches”, or “loose women” ...” (Report 8). This collusion signifies the loss of ethos of Mother Goddess culture from amongst the Dalit community. It is a proof of the acceptance of the Brahmanical Hindu concept of women.

Chinna Kaali’s body, Nagamma’s silence and Mariamma’s punishment all lament the loss of “males” and the gradual annihilation of the ethos of the Mother Goddess culture. Though this seeking the support of “males” runs the risk of being termed as another patriarchal construct aimed at ensuring dependence of females, yet both Imayam and Dharman shows that this support is not as much about dependence as about awakening the males up from the stupor they have gone into as a result of the dominance of Brahmanical Hindu culture.

Mother Goddess Culture and its Saviours

Mother Goddess culture as discussed above revolved round the concept of god as female where life was represented in the form of Earth mother. It was the religion of the Indus Valley civilization before the Aryan invasion disrupted it. The religion was based on fertility and the people worshipped fertility symbols along with the Mother

Goddess. “The Mother Goddess was associated with magic, sexual orgies and blood sacrifice, representing the miracle of birth, the creation of life through sexuality, and menstruation as a symbol of fertility” (Liddle and Joshi 68). Worship of female deities constituted a heritage where not only females but also males acknowledged women’s power and their equal status in the society.

Women’s involvement in religious and social activities was a fact of life for these indigenous communities since they were mostly agricultural communities. Women enjoyed the right to divorce and polygyny was also not a rarity. These features constituted the matriarchal nature of the culture of these communities. Matriarchal nature does not imply “the obverse of patriarchy” rather a heritage where women enjoyed freedom and where the idea of female power was not limited to the deities but extended to actual women. “The implications [of worshipping Mother Goddess] for women are that they see themselves as powerful and strong, an image upon which they can act upon” (96). This “matriarchal heritage” is nothing but a history of struggle where religion and family structure always reasserted female power, their right to equality and freedom in face of opposition from patriarchal or male dominated systems.

One such religious form was the image which is now known as Shakti. The Shakti cult though relatively a recent conception has its origin in the pre-Aryan Mother Goddess cultural practices of the indigenous communities. It is based on the belief that female are the saviours when communities are threatened with the inactivity or passivity of males. It depicts the female god as “the source of all energy and action, and only she can activate the male god. Shakti is [thus] the active, practical, violent goddess, compared with passive, contemplative, non-violent god” (67).

Even here, in these texts, the women are the activating energy. They are needed as in this activating form to wake up Dalit men who has gone into a stupor and become oblivious to the destruction that the gradual incorporation of Brahmanical Hindu concept of women was causing to their community and culture. The Mother Goddess culture is thought to have survived in the Southern part of India which unlike North India was relatively safe from invasions and if the Dalit men there too become colonised by the Brahmanical Hindu myths then the women have to become the saviour again.

But the process is not as easy. For, the Brahmanical Hindu concepts continue to hold sway over the mind with its other weapon, folklore. Folklore here continue to function to scare the few brave voices of resistant into submission through tales of violent death of people who dared to resist. So if the women are to be saviours then their activating push needs to be like that powerful single kick of Hanuman which instantly dislodged “the mountain peak, on which the life giving herb grew.” It should be powerful enough to reawaken or rather give the men a fresh lease of life by making them even discard everything that was and is tainting the pre-Aryan Mother Goddess culture in one jolt.

Thus it is the violent death of Karuppi that jolts Shanmugam out of his stupor. Shanmugam like fellow Chakkiliyars used to suffer the regular rape of his wife. Not even the sight of his wife being ravaged repeatedly could push him to resist. Instead he used to go and sleep the night off, like his fellow Dalits men, in the shed while his wife was being devoured by Muthaiya Pandian. Karuppi might have been helpless in finding a way out of her suffering but when the same is about to happen to her daughter she rushes to protect her and is killed becoming the activating force in the process.

One kick and Karuppi lay shattered. And from her broken limbs and her spattered blood arose a myriad Karuppis, bearing flaming torches and roaring incantations like rishis of old with matted locks outspread. Rushing on swift feet at Shanmugam Pagadai they hurled their torches upon his head. As he burnt to ash in that red-hot fire, Shanmugam seemed to merge with the wind. To be filled once again with life. To awaken, and arise (Dharman 66).

Awoken, it does not take even a moment for Shanmugam to put an end to the source of suffering. He takes the extreme step and kills Muthaiya Pandian and along with him rejects the non-Mother Goddess cultural aspects that he had incorporated. Likewise, for Seeni it is the disappearance of Chinna Kaali that becomes the activating force. But being too late to do anything for his wife Seeni adopts methods that subtly and gradually subverts the very basis of sexualising Dalit women. It is because of Seeni that the tradition of carrying the grinding pestle becomes a long forgotten thing for the Dalits of Chitirampathi.

But to completely subvert the Brahmanical Hindu cultural practice of asserting caste hierarchy through the bodies of Dalit women awakening of the whole community, both male and female, is required. It is only when the Dalit community wakes up from the Brahmanical Hindu culture induced stupor can they resist continual and modified means of asserting caste supremacy. For modified and modernised sexual exploitation was becoming more brutal with the “Khaki shirts” raping the village on the pretext of ensuring justice.

The subversive power inherent in this particular form of deification

It is here that the deification of Ponnuruvi and Oomachi acquires more significance. As deities of victims of sexual brutality they represent another aspect of the Mother Goddess culture besides un-silencing the Dalit women. Deification of victims of violence constituted an important aspect of cultural practices of the indigenous people. As one of the pre-Aryan and non-Brahmanical practices it was not annihilated and instead finds expression in most villages of Southern India as community goddesses or family deities. Thus as remnant of Mother Goddess culture the modified practices represent the various atrocities of the patriarchal caste system on women in the pretext of sexual purity. And as such also become the platform or medium to lay the foundation of a new society.

Both Oomachi and Ponnuruvi as victims of sexual brutalisation are deified as revenge goddesses. Raised as revenge deity Oomachi's wrath destroys the village of Oomachikulam completely. Before Oomachikulam was always brimming with water and had the biggest irrigation tank amongst all Jameendar's land. But after Oomanchi's rape and murder it becomes a place of high temperature where water quickly evaporated making it impossible for any living being to survive. As with every deification and cultural practices it is the lore of Oomachi's wrath more than the myth that accords her the status of revenge deity. “They said it Oomachi's curse.... The said it was a pey that had done it! An evil spirit...” (259). This bears striking similarity with the lore regarding Ponnuruvi's revenge. “First there was a rumour that the sound of a woman weeping endlessly, could be heard by the shores of the tank, at midnight. Then there was talk of her wandering about as a ghost” (Imayam 63).

Peys are female evil spirits. As evil spirits they are always found amongst the lower caste according to Karin Kapadia. The upper castes female never become evil

spirits. This othering indicates the creator of these folklores to be the upper caste. The stories might be a result of the fear arising out of their collusion in the crime of murdering these girls or an attempt to keep away everyone from raising these deities to the position of Brahmanical deities. Either way it provides the Dalits with the necessary tools to create the weapon to wake up the whole Dalit community and subvert the Brahmanical Hindu culture simultaneously.

Using the fear of the upper caste against them the Dalits become intermediaries between upper castes and the revenge deities. It is emphasised that since they are the culprits their presence might infuriate the deities more and therefore the need for intermediaries. The increasing number of tragedies and the need to appease these deities drives the upper castes more and more towards the Dalits to supplicate to these deities for them. This accords them power like the Brahmin priests and subverting the power equation places both on the same level. "...the gods are real powers contiguous with humans, powers that make humans into powerful agents with the capacity to potentially restructure the system of conventional rankings that may exist at any given moment" (Mines 144). The fear in the increasing supplication by the upper castes towards these deities is reflected when Chidambaram Pillai exclaims "You've gone and deified a paraichi somehow" (Imayam 64).

Mines in her *Fierce Gods* (2005) shows how this fear and urge to supplicate is utilised by the suppressed community to assert themselves and claim their rights as equals. Her study is based in Yanaimangalam, a village in Tamil Nadu. These agents of fierce gods or revenge deities organises festivals with all the excesses and decorations like the goddess festivals of the upper castes. The area of the festival covers a main thorough fare and everyone passing it has to pay obeisance to the deity. The festival is a way of laying claim to the main thorough fares as theirs where previously even to pass they had to pay obeisance to every upper caste people they came across.

No goddess festival is complete without a procession. So the organisers of this festivals too organise a procession. It is in and through this procession that most of the subversive activities takes place. Instead of taking the route that is marked out by caste people for them, the Dalits take routes that only specifically marked out for caste people. Treading on these paths at some other time is met with punitive measures resulting even in the death of the persons involved. But during the festivals they even go up to the Agraharam, the innermost place of the village where the Brahmins reside. The festival becomes a means for them to redraw the routes and assert their rights on those paths.

They also take upon themselves the distribution of blessings of the goddess. Thus instead of the Brahmin priests holding out cup for the Dalits to take the ash it is these Dalits who are giving the ash. "While some big Ur people hastily grabbed their own ash from the cups ... others reversed expectations and received their ash with public gestures of deference ... they bent their knees, covered their mouths, bowed their heads" (Mines 195).

For the Dalit on the other hand participation in the festival is mandatory as is the contribution to the expenses of the festival. Through participating and witnessing the subversive acts it will not take long for the others to wake up from the stupor. However, following the Brahmanical Hindus' ways in subverting their cultural practices is beset with dangers and destructiveness. Following the upper castes' way requires huge amount of money which is difficult for the economically weak Dalits to provide. And

forcing them to give, like Seeni ordering the Dalit women to “carry a measure of paddy” on their head to the funeral, is nothing but a replacement of one form of exploitation with another.

True that the conditions of the Dalits of Chitirampathi has improved but it still doesn't make them so strong economically that they can compete with the upper castes with the extravaganzas. It will be mere competition then and not challenging and certainly not subverting the basis for sexual exploitation of Dalit females. For, as Ilaiah observes the Dalit deities do not need elaborated rituals or ceremonies to be worshipped. A mere bowing is enough as prayer or for worship. For the subversive power to impact the society worshipping of these deities is required on a large scale but not with the extravaganza which is more destructive than beneficial for the Dalit community.

Also in all these competitions and subversion it is only the fierce or wrathful image of the goddess that is being used. As far as using this image to exploit the fear of the upper castes to assert themselves, stop sexual exploitation of their women and other inhuman practices are concerned its fine. But the aftermath of Oomachikulam's transformation into cremation ground or killing Muthaiya Pandian or beheading the “kahaki shirts raping the village” seems to beg the question now what? For this reflects their adoption of just one aspect of the revenge goddesses not the nurturing and life preserving aspect. To stop destructiveness from reigning and for a successful subversion, the Dalits need to imbibe all the ethos of the Mother Goddess culture.

Revenge Deities and the significance of their Ambivalent Nature

These deities are cruel, violent and vengeful at one moment and benevolent the next. In their ambivalence they reiterate the balancing nature of Mother Goddess culture. The Mother Goddess might be associated with uncontrolled fury and destruction but she is also a nurturer, producer and preserver of life. So if there is destruction then it needs to be followed with creation or recreation.

Using only the fierce aspect of the Goddess is also supporting the Brahmanical Hindu version. Thus no matter how powerful and long lasting their subversive acts might be yet they are still playing to the tunes of the upper castes. To break free from their hold imbibing and practicing every aspect of the Mother Goddess culture is necessary. Failure to incorporate this will render them more vulnerable to the upper castes modified ploys.

It is because Seeni, Ayyanar and Appusubban, and Peichi had imbibed this ethos that they have become such formidable figures for the upper caste. While their sight is enough to make the upper caste people flee, for the lower caste they are saviours. Neither is duping and trapping them easy for the upper castes, they see through even the most cleverly modified ploys of the upper caste.

Seeni's efforts to make his people adopt the non-Aryanised Mother Goddess culture fails. And they drive Seeni away. The disappearance of Seeni makes the rebellious but “yet to be awoken” Dalits of Chitirampathi prey of the Jameendar's modernised ploys. Unable to see through or devise a way out they are carried away to work in the stone quarry.

Similarly, Ponnuruvi's people too fall prey to the upper caste people with promises of TV which never turns up. The lure of TV makes them ignore the cultural festival that had developed around the deity of Ponnuruvi. The festival is very significant as it is held before the start of agricultural season. Dalits from far off villages visit the shrine of Ponnuruvi seeking her blessings for rain, good harvest and various other things. Running after superficial blessings Ponnuruvi's people ignore to observe that which would have contributed to their distinct identity and in the process liberate them from the clutches of Brahmanical Hindus.

Thus it is not just a continuity of cultural practice. As deities they uphold the whole process that leads to deification; becoming the vent through which hitherto silenced voices are clamouring to be heard. As remnants of pre-Aryan Mother Goddess culture these deities are the mirrors reflecting how far the society has regressed while simultaneously offering the solution. It reflects the need to revive the Mother Goddess culture and create a society where both men and women irrespective of castes are able to live as equals.

Endnotes

¹ National Commission for Women, *Women of Weaker Sections: Socio-Economic Development of Schedule Caste Women*, p.33.

² For more on Earth Mother and Mother Goddess culture see Joanna Liddle and Ruth Joshi, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India*

³ "Dalit Women Speak Out: Violence against Dalit Women in India," *Overview Report*, (2006), p.7.

⁴ For further insight on the effect of testimonies see Ranajit Guha, "Chandra's Death," pp.

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