

SPIRITUALITY OF THE SUBALTERNS¹

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Introduction

If the proposition that “Dialogical communion with the other is possible only when I recognise the partner as a possible source for my truth... or at least of my understanding of my truth...”² makes any sense, this article attempts to discourse with the subalterns as partners and sources towards a better understanding of the term “spirituality”. This article grounds this effort on theoretical underpinnings and methodological leads drawn from various disciplines such sociology, anthropology and ethnography and foregrounds a inter-disciplinary approach towards the various components of religion such rituals, sacrifice and shamanism.

1. Spirituality or Ritality of the Subalterns?

Spirituality is commonly understood to be essentially immaterial, non-historical, non-political, world-negating, its realm being the interior recesses of the heart and its concerns other-worldly.³ Sometimes, spirituality is also described in value-neutral terms, as “the way one lives

¹ “Subaltern” refers to those marginalised people found in a position of social subordination and characterised by contradictory consciousness on the one hand and critical consciousness on the other, according to Gramsci, Subaltern spirituality has to do with “religious experience and its expression deriving from a condition of being marginalized” or “being subjugated, dominated”. See Felix Wilfred. “Subaltern Religious Experience”, *Journal of Dharma*. XXVII - I, 1998. 58. For distinction between popular, Folk and subaltern See. G. Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency* (Chennai: Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 2003), 7-14.

² Harris J Elisabeth, “The Beginning of Something being Broken”, *Spirituality Across Borders*, The Way Supplement, 104 (Nov. 2002), 6.

³ Ses. Fabella Virginia et al, eds. *Asian Christian spirituality* (Mary knoll: Orbis” 1992),76.

one's life; or the way one orders one's loves".⁴ These orientations either involve dualistic understanding of reality or does not take seriously life of the subalterns and all that it involves; food, dignity, equality and struggles of the subalterns. It looks down upon people's struggle to survive and their innate drive to promote, enhance, and attain wholeness of life in all aspects-economic, political, and cultural, in spite of growing odds against it. It devalues common man's cultural tradition, along with its beliefs, myths, and legends that have been transmitted orally in epics and other cultural forms as well as in worship rituals. It reduces their religious quest to "mere rituality" based on superstition, and fails to see the different components of subaltern religious universe as indigenous means of expressing their social self, asserting their identity, negotiating power and tapping ritual power to overcome the predicaments of life. From subaltern point of view, I would like to understand spirituality as the inner quest for fullness of life, involving strategies, ritual and non-ritual, performative and non-perfonnative, to retrieve the deprivation of 'life' generated by physical sickness, social oppression and psychological traumas, the effects of which encompass the economic, social, political and cultural dimensions of life.

Subaltern spirituality, unlike classical spirituality,⁵ is not founded on and manifested through dogmas and doctrines nor explained through theology. It is primarily action-oriented, not thought-laden. It is people-(de)-centred, not hierarchy centred as found in classical spirituality and their spirituality is manifested through myths in oral traditions, rituals and symbols. Since classical spirituality is defined, interpreted by the hierarchy of religious tradition, it is guided and controlled by it. It is consciously located within a limited horizon and a set-boundary while

⁴Ibid.

⁵Classical spirituality refers to the spiritual experiences and expressions advocated by the major religions or great tradition, which are commonly considered to be meaningful, disciplined, refined and stylized, as opposed to subaltern spirituality (spiritual experiences) which is generally considered by the elites as meaningless superstitious, non-disciplined and crude. This article inquires into and critiques such a proposition of prejudice against the subalterns. .

perhaps accommodating a leeway and stretchability of religious experiences for its adherents but within its limits and boundaries. Any spiritual experience that goes contrary to it is no more a true god-experience or religious experience. For instance a Christian cannot experience the supreme being only as a female entity. A true Hindu cannot experience the highest god as fully human and fully divine, and crucified on the cross. It is so because such experiences contradict the age-old accepted categories, symbols and metaphors that are sanctioned by the hierarchy and upheld by its theologians. All these point to the fact that there is a closure of meaning in the great traditions/major religions even with regard to the spiritual experience. On the contrary, one experiences everwidening horizons of 'spirituality' and 'god-experience' in the subaltern religious milieu. The subalterns make use of rituals, symbols, myths and metaphors drawn from various religious traditions to experience and express religious sentiments.⁶ Their religious universe rightly acknowledges the evocative powers of symbols and metaphors and their autonomy in effecting god-experience. Their preference for symbols and rituals to dogmas and doctrines points to subaltern wisdom to recognise the efficacy of symbols in religious experience on the one hand and to derecognise the primacy of dogmas and doctrines, and their makers on the other. What privileges symbols and metaphors over dogmas and doctrines is their capacity to evoke meaning and to create different horizons of meaning in different people. The folk/subaltern wisdom seem to unconsciously recognise the autonomy of symbols and give it a pride of place in their religious universe while major religions have subordinated symbols to dogmas, divested

⁶ P. T. Mathew in his case study names such types of religious practices as 'latent religion' among the Christian Mukkuvars of Vizhinjam. Cf. P. T. Mathew, *We Dare the Waters* (Chennai: Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 2001). The followers of Ayya Vali believe that their founder, Muttukutti became Vaikuntacami, through his rebirth as a son of visnu having emerged from the sea at Thirucendur, one of six savite pilgrim centres in Tamilnadu. This vindicates the claim that one of the holy places of Saivism can become a source for the spiritual experience of rebirth of "son of visnu" in the case of the subalterns. See. G. Patrick, *Ibid.*, 78.

them of their autonomy and submerged their realm of meaningfulness. As G. Patrick notes in his article *Adi Thattu Makkal Samayankal*, the symbol centred religion and spirituality of the subalterns re-reads, re-interprets and re-creates the dominant symbols. It inverts, subverts the dominant meaning systems and makes religion a site of contestation. In its quest for spiritual experience it appropriates the dominant symbols, redefines its meaning and widens its horizons.⁷

2. Spirituality: A non-dichotomous experience of life

For the subalterns, the different dimensions of life like the cultural, the social and the religious etc... are closely intertwined to make a whole. Religion is inseparable from real life. Not only "the cultural and religious horizons interpenetrate deeply in the realm of rituals"⁸ but also the economic activity constitutes and is constituted by religious realm. P. T. Mathew in his study of the world and world-view of Mukkuvars at Vizhinjam in Kerala, insightfully shows how ritual performances such as eilamidal and cheluparachil are at once economic and religious. His finding is that fishing for fishermen constitutes the most central human activity that expresses their basic beliefs and concerns, their very identity and life-orientations. Jose Maliekal in his study of "Religion and Political Economy"⁹ among the Madigas of Konaseema in Andhra Pradesh argues more emphatically that religion and political economy operate as two sides of the same coin for the subalterns. Subalterns do not experience dichotomy between the economic and religious, social and cultural, like the modern elites. Fishing for fisherman is a sacred activity. "In and through this, they make and remake their world, which encompasses every aspect including what is called religious".¹⁰

⁷G. Patrick. "Adi Thattu Makkal Samayankal", *Marai Aruvi*, 27/4 (2003) 17-47.

⁸P. T. Mathew, *Ibid.*, 82.

⁹Unpublished Phd. Thesis (Chennai: The Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 2003).

¹⁰P. T. Mathew, *Ibid.*, 83.

3. Subaltern Religious Universe:

A lived inter-religious Spirituality

While the non-subalterns make distinction, inflict dichotomy between 'we' and 'they', between my religion and their religion, the subalterns move through a sense of synthesis of different religious orientations and alternate between them. Even after conversion to major religions such as Christianity, P. T. Mathew observes that "the Mukkuvar retain many beliefs and rituals that had existed in their pre-Christian past, and are still prevalent in the present day Hindu milieu".¹¹ For example in the cult of Cintathira Matha one perceives a continuity with the Indian tradition of mother Goddess by the fact that, unlike the catholic image of mother Mary with its only benign features, the Cintathira Matha, for Mukuvas, becomes the embodiment of both the features-that of a bounteous mother and that of a terrible protectress. This stands in sharp contrast to "the innate tendency in the catholic tradition to suppress whatever appeared terrible or prophetic in Mary... The meaning system and ritual practices of the people are still embedded in the Indic religious tradition, while a socio-religious identity is built very much on the Catholic affiliation".¹² My own research on Cudalai Madan cult in a small town called Kayatar indicates that the ritual interaction of the subalterns from different faiths transcend their religious boundaries.¹³ On the contrary James Thomas through his scientific survey on the topic of "Dialogue of Life among Christians"¹⁴ in Kerala concludes that the more people frequent churches for sacraments, the less they are open towards other religions.

¹¹ Ibid., 105.

¹² Ibid., 122.

¹³ Some of my informants during kodai were Christians. The last day of kodai was sponsored by a group of Muslims, while some of the Hindus performed their own native rituals and poojas to Mother Mary in the car procession, a phenomenon often seen all over Tamilnadu..

¹⁴ Unpublished M. Phil thesis in the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, Cheruuri, 2003,

4. Spirituality for the earthy concerns of life

While major religion's understanding of spirituality is lop-sided because "it seems to exclude a priori all material reality and activities bound up with matter and its processes it suggests the immaterial, the interior, the other-worldly",¹⁵ Subaltern religious experiences and their expressions are not concerned about "life after death" in as much as they have concerns for "life here on earth". Neither do they make people accept the suffering and pain of this world by instilling hope and promising reward of "pie in the sky". Nor do they call upon people to submit themselves passively to the fate of karma or the will of God. What hold attraction for the folk in subaltern religion is its sui generis concerns that proclaim that their fate can be rewritten, their predicaments can be reversed and their hopelessness is alterable. It tells people that the battle of life is not over in spite of the growing odds and evidences against such a hope. Through its ritual performances and myths, it builds people, instils hope in them and rejuvenates them to face the hardship of life.

Further, as Isabelle Nabokov insightfully observes of Tamil folk rituals, what characterises the subaltern religious centres and distinguishes them from 'great tradition's temples is that they "yield a more intimate, face to face 'congregation of suffering,' as strangers from different social, economic and territorial backgrounds talked for days about their emergencies, traumas and dreams".¹⁶ Being afflicted by events of death, sickness, abandonment and ruptures in relationship, many are at the lowest points in their lives, and their common experience and the consequent sharing of misfortune create a sort of bonding phenomenon, what Victor Turner would name as "temporary communitas".¹⁷

While in the past the rituals and other practices of the subaltern folk were perceived as mere superstitions and abominations by both the

¹⁵ Fabella et al, eds., *Ibid.*, 20,

¹⁶ Nabokov., *Religion against self An ethnography a/Tamil rituals* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2000), 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

Indian elite and by the colonial rulers, in the recent times the disciplines of anthropology and sociology have come *out* with better understanding of psychological, social and cultural function of the subaltern and folk ritual practices.¹⁸ Being placed' in a predicament of "wounded-world", the folk are in need of healing and they are in search for ritual power.

5. A spirituality in search of ritual power.

While the dominant classical spirituality-models such as meditation, yoga etc.. gravitate the elite by its assurances of inner power, in the subaltern religious terrain people throng for tapping power through rituals. For subalterns "Subaltern/Folk ritual is a network of power wherein different set (families) of symbolic acts interact in performance with each other in relation to a locus/source of power through the mediation of ritual specialists. The object of folk ritual network is to unveil power, to make the latent, evident; to facilitate the inaccessible, accessible; and to cause the dormant, torrential".¹⁹ Sequentially, subaltern/folk ritual is a movement from less powerful place to a more powerful place,²⁰ from a less powerful event to a more powerful event, from a less manifest source of power to a more manifest source of power, or conversely from the more unmanifest source to the less unmanifest source of power. Folk/subaltern ritual also functions to control the evil and unwanted powers, but in its functionality of control of evil powers, it moves in the manifestation of such control from a more powerful evil source to less powerful evil source. More about the dynamics of ritual power will be dealt later.

¹⁸ See Partick. G. (2003). Galdwell Sarah, *Oh Terrifying Mother* (New DeJhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), and Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession* (London: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁹ James ponnai, "Understanding of rituals in Kodai", A paper presented at study circle meet of Research scholars, ponnamalle, Chennai, Aug. 29-30, 2003. 1.

²⁰ Folk spirituality shows a strong sense of sensitivity to the numinous in the natural world and believes that "the numinous is an immediate and inseparable presence in materiality" (*The Way Supplement*, Ibid., 59) This is presupposed in all folk rituals and ceremonies especially in Vettai in Tamil region. It does not draw any sharp boundary between the 'secular' and the 'spiritual' and calls into question such assumptions in most of the major religions as Christianity.

6. Primacy of Body²¹ and Spirituality of performance

Though the dominant negative platonian view of body in Christian tradition is changed, of late, into a positive use of body learnt, in inter-religious interaction, through the age old tradition of Yoga, Vipasana and Zen methods, yet all eventually lead to stilling the human body in order to pray. It aims at deep silence through heightened awareness that enables one to experience and enter into communion with God. "As the body and mind become still, what is in our innermost depths begins to shine forth without any disturbance".²² Such an outlook of classical spirituality juxtaposes the putative spiritual/god experience with the embodiment of human beings and views 'spirituality' essentially as 'anti-corporality' in the final analysis. But the subaltern religious realm grants primacy to body as evidenced in its involvement in the various religious rituals. The subaltern/folk religions define themselves by its 'celebration of body'. It functions on a logic that spiritual/god-experience is not 'anti-body' but 'in-body'; spiritual experience is not anti-corporeality but trans-corporeality. The horizon of god-experience/spiritual experience as trans-corporeality is demonstrated in subaltern ritual performances such as wire-walking and various acts of divine possession wherein the ritualists experience the divine, express it in overcoming and transcending the limitations of the human body and acquire the extraordinary power of the

²¹ Body is an inescapable symbol. We can't do without it. It is simultaneously experienced Subjectively and Objectively. As Needham says "Human Body is one thing in nature that is internally experienced, the only object of which we have necessary subjective knowledge" See. Needham, Rodney, (1972) *Belief, language and Experience*, (Oxford: Blackwell. 1972), 139. Yet, it belongs both to the individual and the wider society. Body because of its natural resemblance among humans permits effective comparison across the divides of culture and language.

The human body carries a particularly heavy symbolic load because of its ubiquity (everywhere ness) and malleability (adaptability, changeability). In fact wherever symbols are made and understood, there body is involved in one way or another. See, James Ponniah, *Introduction to Folk Religiosity in India*, unpublished class notes, JDV, Pune, 2003. 34.

²² Jose Kuttianimattathil, "Bemending the Body for Prayer", *Vid.yajyoli*. 65/10 (2001), 744.

body. Further in this celebration of body, the accompaniment of musical instruments (take from thesis), sine qua non for divine possession, and its loud noise reverses the logic of classical spirituality in that noise not silence can be a medium of god experience. It transcends "typically created and maintained through complex systems of verbal interaction, access to and control of supernatural power, varieties of intelligence and insight, and degrees of 'animacy' and 'agentivity'"²³ Music allows people to communicate across the formidable barriers they create, the barriers, as Zuckerkandl observes "separating self from things, subject from object, agent from action,... it is transcending of this separation, its transformation into a togetherness".²⁴ In divination music is helpful "where the self-abandon is intended or required - where self goes beyond itself where subject and object come together"²⁵

While classical spirituality deems spirituality as a site of non-performance of body and withdrawal of senses, it privileges the quietening of sense-organs and cessation of sense-perceptions over the involvement of senses in the performance of religious rituals, thereby, pre-supposing and deepening a dualism between spirit and body, spirituality and corporeality. In doing so it introduces 'hierarchy' not only among the corpus of religious practices, making a set of religious practices higher over others (meditation/yoga are regarded higher than pooja and other rituals) but also among the practitioners of such religious practices. Those who perform yoga/mediation are put higher than those who perform poojas and attend to rituals.

If classical spirituality expresses its concern for the individual by focusing on discovery of the true nature of one's self through interiorisation techniques of different sorts, subaltern religiosity embodies the discovery and rediscovery of the self through the creative construction of self through

²³ Basso's commentary on Robbins "Ritual Communication and Linguistic Ideology", *Current Anthropology*. 42/5., (Dec. 2001), 161.

²⁴ As quoted by Boss. Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.,

narratives and rituals. No doubt these two spirituality models function on two different planes. While classical model focuses on the truncated self from society, consciously pulling the individual to the "ideal" realm, the subaltern model does its functions on "real" realm, locating her/him in social life and constructs him or her in that locus, the exercise of which is often done more unconsciously than consciously.

7. The Role of Narratives in Subaltern Religious Experience:

As Parish in his work *Hierarchy and its Discontents* has shown these narratives engage in the social construction of self and morality of social life. This gives rise to "narrative uprisings" in moral thought (to borrow Nietzsche's phrase), when "resentment and hope become creative, bringing forth stories that explore the problems of meaning and identity, of powerlessness and practice posed by caste life".²⁶ They are uprisings in ethics and in self-concept that bring forth its own values. These narratives engender different shades of play of construction and counter-construction of the morality of social life. The constructions are at the same time:

Constructions and counter-constructions of the social actor, who experiences and interprets these constructions in terms of self. What is contested is the moral grounds on which actors have value, and for low caste actors and untouchables this is very much a question of self-identity, of who they are and what meaning they have, for others and for themselves. The narratives here are thus subversions of constructions of morality that imply and legitimate stigmatizing constructions of the low caste order²⁷

These narrative constructions coalesce the individual self into social self. Identifying with others, an untouchable "can constitute a self-identity

²⁶ Steven M Parish. *Hierarchy and Its Discontents* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997). 139.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

by constituting a implied community of suffering and solidarity... thus rejects the constructions of the dominant ideology, opening up affirmative possibilities for self despite the social reality of caste"²⁸

In the absence of power to act, such narratives keep alive alternative possibilities; they stand as moral fantasies and utopian thought to social reality and keep actors "flexible, preparing them to seek and to accept, to promote and impel change should conditions allow it"²⁹

However the narrative world of the subalterns does not progress unilaterally and unilineally but bumps back and forth ambiguously and ambivalently between the poles of hierarchical and anti hierarchical values. This shifts our discourse to a discussion on the role of ambivalence in subaltern spirituality.

8. Ambivalence in Subaltern Religious Experience:

The subalterns caught up in the caste hierarchy find themselves in a world where they must live a life they reject, where he must labour with an identity he would reject, if he could. They experience hierarchy as threat to self, the fate that condemns them to suffer, forcing them to surrender hopes and desires.³⁰ Hence when possible they reject hierarchy. But though they speak of equality in counterpoint to hierarchy, they do so ambivalently. Sometimes they rule out hierarchical differences and assert the fundamental truth of equality, but other times they subscribe to hierarchy, making it real and equality illusory. They want to have it both the ways: On the one hand they wish to avoid the stigmatising implications of being lower. But at the same time they may want to assert and enjoy their relative pre-eminence over others. This contradictory set of desires reflects the essential ambivalence of caste life.³¹

²⁸ Ibid.,

²⁹ Ibid., 141

³⁰ See Parish, Ibid., and G. Patrick, Ibid.

³¹ Seteven Parish, Ibid.

The subaltern religious universe encompasses both these stances. These ambivalences are imagined through the conceptualisations of narrative myths and acted out through the concretizations of ritual performances (like Camiyattam). At one time the values of equality are extolled, the values of hierarchy are subverted and inverted,³² but at other times the symbols of exploitation and metaphors of hierarchical difference are appropriated.³³

The subaltern play on the arena of ambivalence by subscribing to a 'psychocultural dynamic' called **Political unconscious** as named by Parish borrowing it from Jameson used it in another context. Parish uses it to refer to a dynamic by which people keep "knowledge, ideas, and insights out of awareness, and not using them as the basis for actions. This unconscious is not an agency or place but a metaphor for a process of activating and suppressing knowledge".³⁴ It takes note of the ways cultural knowledge can be cycled in and out of awareness and practice in ways that may in part reflect the politics of everyday life. An actor's choice is not always politically neutral. "In any encounter with others, awareness and behaviour may be diverted into safe channels, yet the grounds for critical consciousness preserved in a potential cultural repertoire. This alternative repertoire can be drawn on in critique and resistance".³⁵

My field work on the cult of Cudalai Madan among dalits in multi-caste village Naduvakurichi at Tirunelveli district shows that the datit subalterns take refuge in the political unconscious during their day-to-day socio-economic activity on the one hand but draw on critique and resistance of hierarchy in the realm of subaltern religiosity on the other. When the critique and resistance percolate into social arena, the caste

³² The stories of kattavaryan.... point to that. During my fieldwork, I found a dalit Camiyadie during kuri (divination) treating the Brahmins, thevars, pallars and paraiyars all alike, and not sparing them for their faults.

³³ These myths contain also incidents of submission to hierarchy. The regalia of kings and other metaphors used by Camiyadies (such as ejaman) etc... have the traces of feudalism and casteism.

³⁴ Parish, *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.,

hierarchy tries to suppress it at some occasions in some places, and overlooks it at other times by reverting to the same psycho cultural dynamic of political unconscious. The proposition that “what is suppressed and what enters into awareness, what is denied and what is animated, shift in context-sensitive ways, along with the experience, goals and needs of actors”³⁶ is applicable to all actors in the spectrum of caste-hierarchy at varying degrees at varying time. To sum up the ambivalences of hierarchy in the caste-ridden Indian society is operative both within and outside the subaltern religious realm and played upon by all social actors. But in this process, the subaltern religiosity becomes an occasion and expression of discontents of hierarchy whose voice is heard more within the realm of religious universe than without.

9. A Bloody Spirituality?

In the subaltern religious universe, blood-sacrifice is the characteristic means by which devotees transact with their local gods, be it village gods, lineage gods or family gods. The ritual-complex of the subalterns often climaxes in sacrifice. Now what has this sacrifice, an external ritual performance to do with “spirituality”, purely an inner transformation?

While the earliest anthropological understanding of sacrifice as propitiation of angry/malevolent gods in subaltern religions is changed by later scholars like Fuller,³⁷ the various anthropological theories of sacrifice based on studies both within and outside India can throw light on the underlying meanings of sacrifice, which play the functions of a good spirituality in a great, tradition. Hubert and Mass’ view of sacrifice as a deeply transformative experience in that it “modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it”,³⁸ Rene Girard’s understanding of

³⁶ Ibid., 136.,

³⁷ Fuller holds that both pooja and bali (blood sacrifice when made into a prasada i.e. when the flesh of the sacrificial animal cooked and consumed by the devotees) is a positive ritual that brings about communion between the deity and the worshippers.

³⁸ Ibid., 164.

sacrifice as that which purges the innate aggressiveness in humans, Maurice Bloch's understanding that sacrifice serves to secure permanent vitality and recently Bruce Kapferer's interpretation that sacrifice is a creative power by its basis in cosmogonic and ontogenetic dynamic that makes it "the total which condenses.... the generative processes constitutive of human beings and their life worlds"³⁹ etc foreground different hermeneutic horizons of sacrifice leading, in varying degrees, the performative participants of subaltern religiosity to a deep experiences of life affirmations, variously called as "spiritual experiences" in major religions. The semiotic and non-discursive capabilities of sacrifice — to touch the moral dimension of human beings (Hubert and Mauss), to cleanse the human beings off negative dimensions in life (Girard), to be a source of strength and vitality (Bloch) and to create representations of life that affirm rather than negate everyday understandings—all stand to affirm the holistic dimensionalities of sacrifice and its centrality in subaltern religions.

Nabokov in her study on Tamil folk religion takes us one step further and shows that sacrifice enacts a total, albeit momentary self-negation and abrogation of any and all distinctions between self and others of the same sort. She suggests that sacrifice involves the symbolic or literal enactments of de-capitation and re-capitation. What takes place in sacrifice is either the head of a chicken is "bitten off," a goat is beheaded or a pig is "pierced" just below the head.⁴⁰ This is often followed by ear-piercing ceremony of the children in most of the cases. The puncture in the ear lobes is reminiscent of the manner in which the pig was sacrificed and likewise dedication of the children to their respective gods, indicate the complete surrender of one's identity.⁴¹

The sacrifice invariably results in a dramatic action of peculiar form of trance. Nabokov thinks that this behaviour better fits Rouget's definition of "communal trance" which emphasises a more amorphous

³⁹ As quoted by nabokov, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 160-163.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 161-169

“encounter” and “revelation or an illumination”.⁴² This trance moves through two kinetic phases. First a jolting body spasm and a rigid paralysis, which seems to dramatise the sacrificer’s own death, Next comes the frantic urge to leap up and run. This ceremonial flight is called as “marul otutual”, meaning “running in a state of confusion or frenzy”. This mad dash is much like a proverbial chicken with its head cut off, out of a last desperate surge of physical energy. In the case of a sacrificial trance, it indicates that one has just surrendered his identity, enacted his own symbolic decapitation. This type of sequence in a sacrifice has no implications of a propitiation of a “fearsome” god. It has “to do with a transformed identity, or more accurately, with a loss of identity”,⁴³ effecting deep inner changes, dispossessing participants of their former sense of self and creating more socially appropriate persons. It causes the latter by creating “an irreducible unity of experience and identity with forebears, contemporary selves, and descendants... and creates the feeling of participating in the continuity of an entity that transcends the flux of life”.⁴⁴ To sum it up from our vantage point, sacrifice by transpiring points of intersection between the individual and the communitarian, the psychological and the social, life and death etc. attempts to transform the inner core of human being by generating irreducible unity between the aforesaid elements. In other words, sacrifice is a “profoundly imaginative way to transcend life-its divisions, transitions, and finality”.⁴⁵ Such an understanding of sacrifice squares with what a good spirituality attempts to achieve in a major religion.

10. Shamanism: criss-crossing of boundaries

In the major religions, especially in sanskritic Hinduism, acts of worship such as Taricanam, Arathi (that of Camphor) and prasada understood as a process of assimilation, identification of the divine with

⁴² Ibid., 162.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 177.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 178.

the human and interiorization of the supernatural power respectively, all of them aim at creating powerful ontological transformation in aham, the inner realm.⁴⁶ The subaltern religious rituals both transpires the inner space through the common acts of worship and transcends it at other times. It takes the supernatural and human interaction to another realm, puram, the outer realm through Camiyattam, trans-possession.⁴⁷

The Camiyattam⁴⁸ (a kind of Tamil shamanism) not only becomes the means by which ritual participants assimilate 'supernaturals' into their person but "communicating through the voice of their human mediums, they prove to be "persons" one can know, argue with, and urge to stay or scam."⁴⁹ The encounter, communication and union between the human and the divine is not an internal state of affairs which no one witness as found in 'spirituality-models' of major religions. Here the human-divine encounter attains a public, external and concretised form that takes place in an open external forum for everyone to witness. Since in Tamil culture, as scholars have observed, the 'public' acquires its full meaning only in relation to its opposite 'private',⁵⁰ in the rituals too "the makings and unmakings of cosmological persons also require personal investments by their relations".⁵¹ As the possessed persons infuse their possessing deities with their own personality, not only "the supernaturals wind up acquiring human identities and subjectivities"⁵² but also "the human beings gain the names and identities of their possessing (deities)".⁵³ The net result is

⁴⁶ See Nabokov, *Ibid.*, 8-9, Shulman, *The Hungry God. Hindu Tales of Felicide and Devotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 34-47), and Fuller, *The Camphor Flame. Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992, 73).

⁴⁷ Nabokov, *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ it is a dance by a Camiyadie in a state of possession by a god not by an evil spirit.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 9

⁵⁰ Ramanujan A. K. *The Interior Landscape. Love poems from Classical Tamil Anthology*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967, 104).

⁵¹ Nabokov, *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 10

⁵³ *Ibid.*,

the fusion of the cosmology and psychology, the divine and the human. In the enlargement of supernaturals, the process of subjectification of supernaturals engenders "the objectification of participants, who wind up acquiring fixed or typical, even archetypal, names and identities".⁵⁴

Is the encounter between the divine and the human always the outcome of choreographed and rehearsed age-old ritual theatre? As Nabokov in her study of revelations in Tamil folk world concludes, mostly the human encounters with gods, spirits, demons are rarely announced or anticipated. The folk gods and goddesses recruit initiates when they least expected it. "Even when such encounters planned or initiated by human beings, they may still produce unforeseen consequences. Tamil rituals have a way of shocking participants into new states of being"⁵⁵ and can lead to unintended transformations.

In any case, appropriation of "objective" identities, an interiorization or individuation of the public world is the goal of all these folk rituals.⁵⁶ In other words, the Tamil folk rituals culminate in a "promise" to live up to the newly acquired identities and their concomitant roles and obligations.⁵⁷

11. Divination (Arul Vakku/Kuri Soluthal): A Politicised "Spirit" tuality⁵⁸

All that takes place in Kotai (the folk festival so called in southern districts in Tamil Nadu) is geared towards the "peri-centre"⁵⁹ of divination,

⁵⁴ Ibid.,

⁵⁴ Ibid.,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 177.

⁵⁶ Nabokov observes that process of individuation is different from and contrasted with third stage of "reincorporation into society" in the Van Gennep's model of ritual process.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁸ This title refers to the fact that the occurrence of, 'spirit' of folk god in a camiyadie can be made to an assertion and negotiation of negated social power.

⁵⁹ The word "peri-centre" is preferred to "epi-centre" to denote central activity in a ritual but that takes place at the peripheral period (end of ritual) at a peripheral time (in the early morning between dawn and midnight) and that takes place due to its connection between the periphery (katu, the forest-uncultivable land) and the centre.

wherein all, the rich and the poor, the high caste and the low caste, each one individualized in their pathological world of angst stand awaiting the connectivity of power network of a subaltern/folk god. Indeed people vie with each other for the link up with folk god's power through the eye of Camiyaide (the shaman so called in Tamilnadu) that would befall them and the touch of his hand that would impart his/her power to them.

The principle of divination is the exercise of power through the relations of the diviner - divinized, master-slave, king-citizen and father-child. The temporality and totality of that power, mediated through Camiyadie and his empowering bodily activities, consists not only in its actual exercising by the Camiyadie, but also in the perceived actualizing capacity of that power by the devotees, and in their individuation and appropriation of the ritually manifested power.

As the body of dalit Camiyadie is a surface inscribed by the oppressive caste-system, in Camiyattam the surface of "Body-without-Organ"⁶⁰ (BwO) becomes a site where resistance to dominant discourse can occur. While dalit body is prescribed and proscribed, disfigured, disguised and disciplined surface in the physical/social world, and his physical movement is restricted in the strict surveillance of caste hierarchy, in Camiyattam it is entitled to any free movement, knows not any limitation what so ever. The power of subaltern/folk god capacitates him to de-territorialize the BwO, not only of dalits but of Brahmins/high caste men too. Subsequently, he prescribes and proscribes the surface of the body of the oppressors, thereby de-territorializing their BwO.⁶¹

⁶⁰ The term invented by Deleuze and Guattari (1984, 1988) to describe a non-anatomical, political body inscribed by power. The body-without-organs (BwO) is a political surface upon which is inscribed the discourses of power." Every human body is body without organ and though BwO is not constrained in space and time, yet it is subject to space and temporal constraint, but this is the outcome of inscription territorialized not only by the expertise discourse of knowledges, such as medicine etc. but by ordinary discourses of day-to-day life carried out by everyday social actors such as parents, spouses, friends and caste men. See Nichelos J. Fax, *Postmodernism, Sociology and Health* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), 161.

⁶¹ It is not a safety valve mechanism for (i). This is not a mere verbal abuse (an expression of suppressed anger but allowed to let go) in the absence of the oppressors. The presence

As the bodily inscription is constituted through the two-fold process of discipline, i.e discipline on the behaviour of the physical body and on the ideal representations of belief, taste and judgment,⁶² it is through the contestation and redefinition of this dual process that the subaltern Camiyadie rewrites bodily inscriptions, not only for himself but also for other high caste men; for himself, by staking the claim of Brahminic purity and by exercising mediatory priestly function for the whole of the village community like a Brahmin, and for Brahmins/other high cast men it is done through the power of his divination that gravitates high caste men to him, alter their rules and disciplines regarding the behaviours in caste system, and reverses the ideal representations of belief.

In vettai (ritual hunting) as well as in Camiyattam he is believed to possess the yogic powers,⁶³ which is acquired by disciplining of the body by the twice-born. He attains it by the power of the folk god. It points to another instance of contestation of inscription of the body. What the Camiyadie engages in is de-territorialisation of BwO "enabling it to become something other than that which it was a consequence of its inscription"⁶⁴ He launches a new play of discourse and a "deferral" of meanings which prevent any discourse from having a single reading".⁶⁵

In divination the Camiyadie constitutes the other. In the act of divination (speaking), through the obligation to produce words that are diagnostic of the problem of the other, the Camiyadie proposes the solution for the other, sometimes faulting her/him for her/his wrong deeds and delivering a judgment on the other as a self-styled king, master and judge.

of high cast people in ritual and the respect shown to dalits by high caste make it a real display of the inversion of power structure at least temporarily. (II) His prescription and proscription meted out to the high castes is binding on the latter not only at one particular occasion but all throughout the year.

⁶² Nicholas J. Fox; *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁶³ The folk believe that he can carry a big implement made up of lead weighing 120 kg and can walk over water etc because he posses extraordinary powers like Siddhars (yogie).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Indeed, the idiom that are employed, the costumes that he wears make him a king all powerful.

In doing this, a subaltern Camiyadie, deconstructs the caste-hierarchy and "peri-constructs" the subjectivity of high caste devotees. "Peri-construction" of subjectivity refers to the reconstituting activity of the oppressed ego and oppressive alter ego of the caste system, an act that takes place on the periphery of the society.

Divination, then, is the diagram of certain form of the "other-construct", an act that at once reconfigures one's identity and disconfigures the false hierarchical identity of the other in which the referent other is a high caste man. When a high caste man (Brahmin/maravar) approaches a dalit Camiyadie for divination, he presents himself to the dictates of a dalit, places himself at the receiving end of a dalit, an act of violation of the dominant hierarchy of varnashrama dharma.

In divination, the devotee comes around "vulnerable", stands helpless, hapless and powerless, seeks the intervention of Camiyadie whom he encounters as very powerful, at least for sometime, and in such an encounter his vulnerability gets compounded by this unevenness. It is this vulnerability compounded by the perceived unevenness of power-relations that prompts her/him to place herself/himself at the receiving end of power in divination. Thus it is vulnerability compounded by unevenness that provides facticity to the operationalisation of power in divination.

This play of power becomes paradoxical when it takes place between the dalit Camiyadie and a high cast man; the former, a socially vulnerable entity, is entitled to compound the vulnerability of the latter - a more powerful social entity- by virtue of unevenness of power.

Repetition of certain formulae and idioms are very conspicuous in divination. The themes of master-slave, king-citizen, father-child⁶⁶ are

⁶⁶The kind of relationship that is transpired between the folk god and the devotee during divination is based upon control and dependency, may be seen as a "form of property relation, by which the empowered party possesses the dependent". The underlying logic is that folk god has the power of control on the lives of the devotees, over the village and over

played in the symbolic representations over and over again. The verbal utterances such as “you are my child, worship me, do not worry, I will set right everything in your life” and “I am the master, I know everything, you do what I say, go now” are often heard.

Though it may sound mechanical, dramatic and artificial for an outsider, yet it is one of the crucial strategies for kindling and reinforcing the social memory of such themes in the past interactions, indicating “an interaction in the here and now is to be seen as a recapitulation of earlier interactions”.⁶⁷ Here divination needs to be understood not only as a manifestation of power of a folk god but also as a strategy for the reinforcement of power among people. This kind of repetitious display of power brought into interaction between the low cast Camiyadie and a higher caste folk has the potentiality of a social play wherein the enhancement of the status of a lower caste over the higher caste by possession of higher form of power over the latter is prolonged more consciously than unconsciously. The wilful neglect of the high caste and other powerful men such as police and local village leaders in such circumstances where they are made to wait by Camiyadie just like any other devotee and treating them as just “one among many”, sometimes totally neglecting them, is a tit-for-tat meted out to them, a sign of social protest.

As one of the Brahmin participant cum poojari at Naduvakurichi remarked, “it is divination that makes a big difference to the folk gods (nattupura theyvam) and folk cults. I cannot divinize in siva temple. That is what makes it more famous than great gods”. Divination is one thing

other evil forces. In other words he has the power of protection over the village, its inhabitants (human and subhuman), its inner space and its outer boundaries. But this protective power would be actualized, concretized and reciprocated only when a devotee honours his power in the form of dependency. Though the folk god was traditionally conceived to reign within the boundaries of a village like a king in his kingdom, at present his devotees having migrated from the village believe that he has also migrated with them as their guardian and protector, thereby believe in the evolving and encompassing sovereign power of their folk god.

⁶⁷ Ibid p.68.

that decisively demarcates folk cults from major religions. In divination, assurances are given definitively, people know for sure that God is concerned with their individual cases, knows the cause of fear/anxiety, it can suggest solutions to their problems and can guarantee a bright future. What happens in the worship of major religions is that the worshippers have to presume the mind of God, believe that God is concerned about their life problems, has to analyze for himself/herself the cause of their existing predicaments, fix for oneself a conditionality for the removal of anxiety/fear/suffering by means of a vow, has to trust that he (god) has "power" to remove the causes, without being not very sure about the efficacy of the process. Very often multiplicity of such vows to different gods in the major religions make it almost impossible to relate the fruitful effect to a particular cause of "power". What is referred here is the ambiguity and dilemma experienced by a devotee to fulfil what vow to which god when one's suffering is removed. One's ambiguity arises there from the fact that one is unable to fix an efficacy to an agency, while in folk cult the chances of such occurrences are much less given the fact that divination emphatically embodies the link, in concrete terms, between agency and efficacy for the future. Besides, what one experiences during divination is not a mere encounter between the supernatural power and the human persons, but a contestation of power too.⁶⁸

12. A Subversive Spirituality

As we have just seen, the whole subaltern religious universe can be turned into a site of contestation and a discourse of alternative (anti-hierarchy) power play. The subalterns, by using the religious and symbolic resources can contest the configuration of closure of meaning in the reified caste-hierarchy, dismantle its facades, unpack its system, define and re-

⁶⁸ During my field work. I have observed the folks challenging god/god's medium during divination. Some of the devotees and folks get possessed by another deity and challenge the ruling of carmyadie.

define its horizons by engaging in symbols of power. Here their spirituality is expressed in a terrain of contestation.

G. Partick in his study of Ayya Vazhi Movement among the Canars of Kanyakumari district shows how religion can become a transforming experience by subverting the hierarchical power relations of the society, by recasting the appropriated symbolic resources and by contributing to the emergence of a emancipatory consciousness leading to the formation of an emancipatory identify of the subalterns.⁶⁹ Mahesh Sharma in his study of "Power of Pollution: Social and Ritual Dimensions of Conflict and Protest" among the Chamars in the Western Himalayan region, demonstrates that the ritually low and untouchable castes, by becoming aware of the power of pollution, can make use of this popular belief system as a catharsis as well as an assertion of their power against social coercion.⁷⁰ He further argues that "the social and ritual protest aimed at diluting, or subverting, the caste hierarchy in a stratified society is a more effective threat to the power of the high castes, and that the hope of social revision becomes an alternative to economic subordination".⁷¹ Thus subaltern religious experience can become a socio-cultural project, born out of an autonomous and creative agency of a subaltern people in their subordinated conditions.⁷²

13. Foregrounding of "Third Space"⁷³ in subaltern religion

While Christian world-view is concerned about historical god and focuses on the hand of God in history, it has neglected the "centrality of

⁶⁹ G. Patrick, Ibid, 184.

⁷⁰ Indian Social Science Review, 3, 2 (2001), 393-42.

⁷¹ Ibid., 393.

⁷² G. Patrick., Ibid.

⁷³ "Space" in recent theoretical discourses have obtained more attention, leading to a better understanding of the concept as a result. It is not a Cartesian abstraction that exists in static, container-like fashion waiting to be a stage or arena for human or physical activity. It is not merely material space, nor only a mental representation. Spatiality is socially produced and therefore can be understood as a set of human relations and even as the embodiment of social life Cf. Soja, Edward W. *Postmodern Geography. The Reassertion of Space in Critical Theory.* (New York: Verso. 1989), 120.

space" in human life, like western-philosophy. In similar vein, the Christian religious rituals and practices revolve around the axis of 'historical memory' of events in history of Israel including that of foundational experience of birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It has obliterated and submerged the place of 'space and spatiality' in human living.

On the contrary, the Indian world-view both classical and non-classical, unlike Christianity does not focus so much on the **historicality of religious beliefs and practices** as it does it with the spatiality of the universe directly or indirectly through vedic, puranic and agamic rituals and through astrology etc.. But in its **cosmology**, the great traditions both Hinduism and Christianity are primarily concerned about the first space⁷⁴ through its idea of God as creator,⁷⁵ and less concerned about the second space,⁷⁶ and least concerned about the third space.

The subaltern religiosity does not seem to be bothered about the link between its gods and first space. It has no cosmological theories of creation. Its basis on historical memory may or may not be present in all cases. But where it is present its symbols and metaphors seem to have more evocative power than it does in Christianity. It is because of the relative immediacy of such a memory in most cases and its boundness to social setting and its emancipatory meaningfulness to a subaltern social

⁷⁴ First space refers to what we commonly call as 'geographical space' It refers to "the absolute and relative locations of things and activities, sites and situations; in patterns of distribution, designs, and the differentiation of a multitude of materialized phenomena across spaces and places" See. Soja, Edward W. Ibid., 74; Second space is totally mental, ideational, the space of artists and architects Ibid., 79 and third space is lived space, It is created by social practice and it is known by experience. Third space, lived space in the case of oral/segmentary societies, is produced through living in the first space. It is constructed through material practices such as hunting, gathering, pasturing, fanning, wandering, and the like.

⁷⁵ It is noted that creator could mean different things in different religions.

⁷⁶ The Sanskritic Hinduism through its temple architecture and sculpture shows its taste for second space, though very often it is closely associated with and meant to express its dominion over first space. In Christianity whatever concerns it has for second space, it would not make sense sans its association with "historical memory". Thus second space per se is not important except for its relevance for the first space in both religions and for its linkage with historical time in Christianity additionally.

group in engagement, both of which are absent in the “historical memory” of Christianity a world-religion, that subaltern historical memory remains more powerful. Indeed the subaltern historical memory is subversive and anti-hierarchical.

The subaltern religious tradition is all about “Third Space”, the lived space. Through shamistic and ritualistic performances it penetrates into the third space (the lived space) of the common folk. It establishes dominion over third space by exercising and exhibiting control over first space of a given territory. It is demonstrated in their myths and rituals such Vettai. The patterns of proliferation of different folk cults show that a folk god first establishes its control and power over a particular first space and through it over the third space of the common folk. Subaltern religious tradition, as we have seen, is all about the politics of Third space. It subverts, reverses and re-inscribes the hierarchical values and social power equations in a given third space through its myths and ritual performances. In my view, subaltern religious universe appeals to people because it has spiritual vitality in that, among other things, it can become and becomes a resource to tamper with the texture of third space in a given social setting.

14. Are Subaltern/Folk rituals oppressive or liberative?

Not all subaltern/folk rituals need to be representation of society as in Durkeimien model. Nor should all rituals comply with Victor Turner’s interpretation that symbols of rituals as “molecules” and basic building blocks necessarily evoke social meaning in participants, formulate the “cause of affliction (be they social, cultural or psychological) and then reframe understandings so that participants could grasp and resolve their problems”.⁷⁷ Some others like Maurice Bloch have contended that rituals do not so much “mean” as “do” things to people. As Nabakov has shown in the study of Tamil rituals, the ritual participants instead of being mute

⁷⁷Nabokov, *Ibid.*, 11.

spectators can infuse into it meanings “drawn from and relevant to their own particular experiences... It is people who infuse these constructs with high specific, felt significances created out of their existential predicaments so as to address or resolve them”.⁷⁸ Folk ritual can be “prescriptive” or “performative”. The former give participants no other option but to comply with stated procedures and aims, and work to make people adopt “public” identities. The latter permit everyone to make their own performative and interpretative choices, leave them free to walk away from social roles and personal relationships. An outsider observer may be able to put a particular ritual into one of these categories, as a ritual can accommodate either one or both of these orientations depending upon the type of personal investments made by the participant. “The Tamil theory of ritual is not entirely deterministic..... Participant investment might be said to constitute the critical glue of Tamil rituals. This is what makes them so dramatically intense. For inner dispositions are variable, never wholly foreseeable, even from the perspectives of the persons most concerned. Anything can happen and may very well happen, in the unpredictable unfolding of these Tamil rituals...”⁷⁹ A folk/subaltern ritual can be oppressive or liberative depending upon the type of personal investment it can accommodate, the process or the result or both of which can liberate people from any form of dehumanisation and marginality, or symbolise such a liberation in its semiotic contents at the least.

Conclusion

“A True crossing over involves immersion in the totality of another tradition, even in what might contradict one’s own. Perhaps the most important thing is that the journey continues”.⁸⁰ An expedition undertaken in this line through this article has attempted to understand the phenomenon

⁷⁸ Ibid. 12.

⁷⁹ Ibid 184.

⁸⁰ The Way Supplement, Ibid. 17.

of subaltern/folk religious universe both from "within" and "without", the latter provided by anthropological and sociological perspectives, not by the frame of reference of dominant / classical religious ideology. In fact it has consciously resisted and defied the dictates of 'subjugated knowledges' to explain the dynamics of subaltern spirituality. In doing that, it has questioned the presuppositions of classical spirituality in new ways that are aimed at opening up the expanding scope and critical sensibility of already established notions of 'spirituality'. Perhaps what this article lacks is a critique from within at deeper level to find out the inherent contradictions and pitfalls of the subaltern religious terrain, leading to "dehumanisation of its subjects".