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# **A STUDY ON WOMEN STATUS IN INDIAN SOCIETY: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS ON ISSUES AND CHALLENGES TO WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN FOLK RELIGION OF MADURAI DISTRICT, TAMIL NADU.**

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**Abstract:** Males partake stood vital as receivers, translators and whisperers of heavenly messages, while females have largely continued as submissive receivers of knowledges and ardent practitioners of spiritual rituals. In India, where politics uses religion as a tool to operate the masses, women bear the brunt of the costs of cultural attitudes and the impact of religion and politics in their specific milieu. Through Hindu religious beliefs, powerlessness was embedded in the minds of Indian women. The status of women showcases contrasting facets shrouded in ambiguity. Women have been exalted as Goddess, and being identified with nature. The other, is the sub –subservient role of a domestic maiden trailing behind men for meeting all chores. This is reflected in both mainstream and folk stream of Hinduism. The present paper highlights women both as deity and devotee with religion and belief system encompassing the village community. The study was conducted in Usilampatti Taluk of Madurai District in Tamil Nadu. Among the Kula deities (more 200) three popular female folk deities are presented in the case study. The primary data and key informants include the Priests, aged Villagers, and the Village Heads. The collected information portrayed that patriarchal structure was institutionalized through village beliefs and exhibited in the rituals. The data also enlightens on the various forms of religious discrimination and violence that are been witness on the women.

**Keywords:** Disability, Discrimination, Violence, Representation, Folk Religion, and Folk Deities.

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**Introduction:** Hinduism in India is marked by the plurality of traditions and syncretism of its culture. Hinduism is federation of faith having a vertical and horizontal distribution. Religious Beliefs and practices of Hindus vary from one cultural region to another as well as from one caste or community to another across the country. Religious ideas, thoughts and practices differs among the communities/groups, in the course of time there is a transformations and development with them. Religion in India was never inert in character. An integral dynamic forte was there certainly at the root of innumerable religious movements that manifest the country's history and culture. Religion plays a significant part in the lives of the Hindus since the most primitive times (Basharat, 2009). Folk religion is an open non-exclusive combination of different beliefs practices and customs, characterized by pragmatic attitude towards powerful beings for the satisfaction of the worldly needs. The basis of the folk religion is uncomplicatedness; it is not concerned about the creation of an immaterial theological system though it identifies the basic concept of causality. Deities are treated like human beings and supposed to behave in mature manner (Stuart, 1985). Folk religion includes many of nature worship and ancestor worship without recognizing any contradictions in beliefs and practices associated with different deities. The structure of folk religion is open and unifying, a particular deity may show a unique combination of elements of different religious traditions (V.Sakunthala, 1997).

On the other hand, there are many queries about in what way folk traditions are performed, particularized and perpetuated that be studied in great India. One of the such questions is the status of

women in the folk religion, every religious conviction promotes somewhat different norms, creates different institutions, and builds on different cultural and historical foundations. The influence instigates to question to what extent do religion determine the social status of women and the level of gender inequality in the religious practices. India being a typical example of the gap between position and role accorded to them by constitution and the restrictions imposed on them by social traditions (Gabrielle, 1992). The position of women in the social order is a consequence of the interpretation of religious manuscripts and the ethnic and institutional set-up of religious communities. The social status and role of women represents the standard of culture of any age. However, to draw a conclusion about the position of women is difficult and is complicated problem. The difficulty lies in the fact that the recorded evidence found in the same period and in the same province have expressed opposite views about the worth, nature and importance of women (A.S.Altekar, 1983). To determine the status of women in Indian society, one need to study their position under different circumstances, like in peace time(normal) and abnormal time (in war time). Because during wars, the attitude of the society towards women was very unsympathetic, particularly if the women had the misfortune to falling into the hands of the enemies. They found it impossible to get re-admitted into their family and society (HAVLÍČEK, 2015). A study of ancient literature reveals that during peace time the position of women was not very satisfactory. The status of women was considered to be equal to that of the Sudras and killing of women was also not considered as a disgraceful act (Pandharinath.H.Prabhu, 1991).

The elementary rule of women's conduct as articulated in the Laws of Manu insist that women must always worship her husband as a god, she is meant to be dependent on her husband because by nature they are passionate and disloyal. The ideal women are those who do not strive to break the bond of control (Mitter, 1991). Additionally, it is acknowledged in the 'Law of Manu', Day and Night, women must be kept in dependency by the male of their(families), and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control. Through their passion for men, fluctuating temper and their natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully they are guarded in this world (Allen, 1982). This Study attempts to contribute to the issues and challenges on the status of women in Indian folk religion in selected four taluks of Madurai district, Tamil Nadu. The study is qualitatively analyzed adapting narratives for understanding the influence of folk religiosity on the women's representation in the folk temples as a deity and a devotee.

**Significance of the Folk Religion:** Folk religion plays a very important role in the society, because every individual is connected and recognized on the folk deity that his/her family worship. One of the major significance of all these religious practices is the way it functions within terms of the region, caste and individuals. In ever temple of the folk religion there is a clear defined hierarchical structure having different level. This hierarchy is based on the function and the duties with in the temple. This hierarchy is common in all the temple of the study are. There mainly four layers in the temple firstly Priest, second Maniyar, third Manigramam, lastly Patti; that are coordinately work together in functioning of the temple. Another major significance of the temples in the region is that all the temple is based on Kinship relationship. This kinship-based system was mainly stated to ensure caste identity and also caste purity, till date the community in this region practice Endogamous marriage system in order to ensure that the members are within the social setting.



Ochand Amman

**Status and Role of Women:** In this study three Folk goddesses were studied firstly Karmathur Peechi Amman, secondly Valandor Angalaparneswari and last Pappavati Ochand Amman. As goddesses they have their own importance and priority among the people who are worshiping the deities. But the status of the women as a devotee is a question that needs to be answered, because the status and role of female devotees is very minimal when compared to the male devotees of the temple (Kaluvanathan, 2015). Though temple such as Karmathur Peechi Amman, and Pappavati Ochand Amman temple were established by women, named Peechi and Andae, even then there is a certain amount of subjugation that are present in the temple. According to the priest in the Karmathur Peechi Amman there is only one female representative in the temple and this is done to represent Peechi during the time of festival and not for any other purpose. It was evident that men held and controlled the powers in the temple structure and especially even in the goddess's temple (Palchammi, 2015).



**Karmathur Peechi**

**Issues and Challenges of Women Representation:** Gender Discrimination is one of the unchanged factors that were found in the region. This discrimination was not based on biological factors but was imposed on kinship relationship that she hails from her family or community. Women were more seen as an outsider in the family orientation. This is because women are seen as temporary member of the family, as she loses her importance once she is married. This factor is considered to be one of the major reason as to why the women do not hold any representation within the temple. Pappavati Ochand Amman temple was established by Andae (Woman) in her husband village by her own efforts but she does not place herself or her daughter as temple priest, rather she follows the same patrilineal system by positioning her brothers as the temple priest. Though she being women could have been a source of change by establishing the matriarchal system but she fails to do rather she goes on establishing the same patriarchal structure that she had been influenced and witnessed from her father and also insists her sons to follow the same pattern. She completely fails to assign or teach her daughters about the importance of the temple. According to some respondents it was evident in some temple of male deities that women are not supposed to go to temple in which male gods are situated and also women are not supposed to consume the food that is been offered for these male deities. This is mainly done because all the male deities located here are bachelors who have not even touched women, hence women are not allowed to enter or consume the food. It is evident from the above information that patriarchal structure is seen irrespective of whatever strata the community people belong to. Among the three temples two temple women role and participation was minimum, but in one temple it was respectively nil. This fact further needs to be researched for the reason, women in the mainstream religion have some specific purpose and role to play but why do women folk religion do not have.

**Conclusion:** Among the basic social structure religion is one of the significant institution for the reason it plays a role in socializing the individuals in the society. Though they are several studies conducted on the mainstream religion, but there is relatively less studies been conducted on folk religion. The present

study is an attempt made to study the folk religion with special reference to women status and role in Kula Deities temple. Even till today there is no written document on the exact document justifying the exact number of Kula Deities in study area. Each Kula Deity is unique in its own ways and completely contrast with other Kula Deity. Though there is no clear definition about the status of the women in terms of religion in the folk religion. There is no significant role status of the women. Marriage decides most of the thing in the women's life, her status in terms of religion is determined through her marital status. Another aspect that would be seen in the study is that though when there is an opportunity to bring about changes in the temple structure, women would prefer to stick to the patriarchal system rather breaking the system and establishing the new form of structure in the society. Women in the myths and to certain extent in reality have accepted the dominance of male and find comfortability in the patriarchal structure. Though women are given a lot of respect within the society. But their participation in the temple activities are peripheral and marginal, this aspect leads to further research with regard to the status of women in mainstream and compare this relevance with the folk religion.



**Male Deity in Karmathur village**

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