



Are we Hindus?

Religion in contemporary Tamil Dalit discourse

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ABSTRACT

Based primarily on original sources in Tamil as well as interviews, the article seeks to portray the attitude of Tamil Dalit intellectuals and political leaders towards the question of religion. It seeks to discover the role of religion in their discourse and how they utilise religious matters to mobilise their fellow caste members. It maps their efforts to distance themselves from Hinduism and to propagate the particularity of Dalit deities and Dalit religion as a part of their newly constructed identity. Their opinions on the possibility of conversion are also briefly noted. These attitudes are examined from the viewpoint of the differing emancipation strategies of the three major Tamil Dalit castes. The Paraiyar as well as the Arunthaiyar leaders try to reject the Hindu identity, though the common folk consider themselves to be Hindus. The Devendrars on the contrary associate themselves with the Hindu gods and Hindu temples, they claim direct connection with some of them. Even they, however, tend to emphasise particularity of their deities as a part of their identity building.

KEYWORDS

Dalits; Hinduism; Hindu identity; Indian culture; religion

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INTRODUCTION¹

The Dalit struggle for emancipation began in the second half of the nineteenth century with demands for the removal of various forms of oppression. Later, they were substituted by demands for full citizenship and equal rights. At the beginning of the struggle, great emphasis was laid on religion, as witnessed by numerous temple entry movements. One of the largest was organised in 1930 at the Kala Ram Temple in Nasik by the most prominent Dalit leader, Bhimrao Ambedkar, but it was not successful. These unsuccessful satyagrahas and movements gradually resulted in “a rejection of Hinduism and a strengthening of the separatist political stance then developing among Untouchables” (Zelliot, 2005: 165). Subsequently, questions about identity became very important, not only as a means of imparting self-esteem and pride but also for understanding and penetrating the power relationship.

Perhaps the first Dalit leader to disclaim Aryan and Hindu identity was Iyothee Thass (1845–1914). He argued that Paraiyars were the original Tamils and Buddhists. Their religion and culture were, however, destroyed by Aryan invaders from the north, who “practised a fine art of deception and cunning on the natives” and who Hinduised Buddhist texts by “falsifying ... and re-writing them” (Geetha & Rajadurai, 2008: 93–94). In this way they gradually managed to acquire power and subjugate most of the inhabitants; those who did not submit were marginalised and downgraded — they became untouchables. With reference to caste, Iyothee Thass distinguished between birth and conduct. Those who attain high qualities in relation to their conduct he referred to as “real” Brahmins (*yatārta*), while those who claim to be noble by birth he called “false” Brahmins (*veṣa*). He claimed that numerous Hindu festivals and rituals were originally Buddhist and sought to “de-Aryanise” them. For him, the right approach, therefore, was not to abandon them but “to restore them to their pre-Aryan, Buddhist purity” (Aloysius, 1998: 161).

After Iyothee Thass various other movements appeared, each claiming that Dalits were the original inhabitants of India. They sought to challenge the mainstream interpretation of history, rediscover their glorious past and write their caste histories². This trend culminated in Dalit demands for the official recognition of their identity as distinct from Hindus, and for separate electorates. These demands were voiced at the second Round Table Conference by Rettamalai Srinivasan and B. R. Ambedkar.

¹ This paper was written as part of the project “Disadvantaged Communities of South India. Their Emancipation and the Building of New Identities” 16–02363S, financed by the Czech Science Foundation (GAČR).

² For a re/interpretation of the history by the marginalised in the colonial period, see Basu, 2018.

In his works, Ambedkar further elaborated the idea that Dalits were originally Buddhists. However, more important and influential were his thoughts on caste and untouchability. According to Ambedkar, the *chaturvarnya* was “the most vicious system”. He deplored the caste system as it “has killed public spirit”, made all virtues caste-ridden and morality “caste-bound”³. The caste system stands behind the exploitation of low castes, keeping them in ignorance. In other words, the caste system is at the root of the problems experienced by untouchables and must therefore be annihilated.

A similar attitude was espoused by many Dalit leaders across India. These leaders perceived the caste system as inseparable from Hinduism. As its annihilation proved to be very difficult, there basically remained only two other ways out: the propagation of the Dalit religion as being distinct from Hinduism, or conversion to another religion.

After Independence, there were two relatively calm decades as Dalit leaders were satisfied with the guarantees contained in the Constitution and expected the promises to be fulfilled. Contrary to expectations, however, integration into the wider society stalled. In the 1970s, there was a sharp increase in atrocities directed at Dalits, which prompted the emergence of new movements and organizations. The question of the distinct identity of Dalits was resurrected with fresh vigour in the 1980s. New re/interpretations of history appeared and there were also attempts to define and propagate distinct Dalit culture⁴.

This trend continues until today and the further developments are definitely worth our attention. Dalits form 16% of the Indian society and their votes during elections can be very important if not decisive. Recently we have been witnessing increased “fight” for Dalit votes between the Congress and BJP. The Hindutva forces have been trying to co-opt the Dalit leaders and include Dalit heroes and deities more firmly into the Hindu fold⁵. Partly it was a reaction to the electoral success of the Dalit party BSP, which they tried to curb. The mobilisation of Dalits by the Hindu right was further facilitated by the disillusionment in Dalit politics but there were other factors as well (e.g., material; see Teltumbde & Subhash, 2005: 275–299). As Ajay Gudavarthy says: “Dalits seem to have come a full circle from the agenda of ‘annihilation of caste’ to ‘secularisation of caste’, and conversion from Hinduism to actively claiming the Hindu identity” (Gudavarthy, 2014). There are, however, also movements and leaders who try to resist this tendency.

³ Quotations are taken from Ambedkar, 2014: 259, 271.

⁴ For the question of Dalit culture in Tamil Nadu, see Hons, 2018; for caste histories and caste heroes, see Hons, 2019, for the same in the North, see Narayanan, 2004; Narayanan, 2006.

⁵ See especially Narayanan, 2009.

THE DALIT RELIGION

Dalits (formerly also called Harijans or untouchables) are a heterogeneous community, comprising numerous castes. With reference to their religion, the available information is rather scanty. Of course, the fundamental question is to what extent the Dalit religion differs from Hinduism. It is, however, dangerous to generalise in this respect, not only because of the lack of sufficient ethnographic data, but also because of the variation that exists between regions and various Dalit castes. Several studies have tried to emphasise the distinction between the pre-Aryan, or little tradition, and the Aryan, or great tradition. They all assumed that ethnically distinct pre-Aryan groups of people were marginalised and cut off from the knowledge and rituals of the higher castes. For this reason, they have not only preserved a lot of their original religious beliefs and rituals, but also their different social values⁶. It seems to be safe to say that, primarily, they worship goddesses who, in their character and function, are different from the higher gods of the Hindu pantheon. Dalit goddesses and gods usually rule over a particular territory, their powers are often connected with health and illnesses, they can be maleficent and possess a person. Many of them are non-vegetarian and accept blood sacrifices. On the other hand, there seem to be only a small number of gods that are worshipped exclusively by Dalits. On the whole, Dalit belief is more pragmatic in its orientation and is penetrated with elements of shamanism⁷. They usually do not believe in the doctrine of karma.

Rupa Viswanath (Viswanath, 2015: 143–144) says that historically Dalits were spatially segregated, enslaved, regarded as inferior and excluded from temples. Most importantly they were not considered Hindus. They were incorporated into the Hindu fold in the first half of the twentieth century for political reasons, i.e., the politics of numbers.

Based on his research among Dalits in Endavur village in Tamil Nadu, however, Michael Moffatt argues, that in their religion he found “very little that is distinctive and much that is pervasively and deeply shared with those higher in the system”. Furthermore, he argues that there are only a “few variations”, which “are generally nondisjunctive in their social significance” (Moffatt, 1979a: 245). It is thus evident that the question of the non/distinctiveness of the Dalit religion is closely connected with the question of Dalit identity and their position within the caste system⁸.

It is not my intention to prove or disprove the above given contention, nor to conduct any research on Dalit religion itself and thus to contribute to our

⁶ For a short overview of the discussion and further references, see Moffatt, 1979a: 244–245.

⁷ As for shamanism see Moffatt’s article (Moffatt, 1979a: 244) which provides references to other sources, as for pragmatism, see Jeremiah, 2013; Deliège, 1997: 283.

⁸ The academic discussion in this respect is neatly summed up in Deliège, 1999: 27–70.

better knowledge of it. Instead, my aim is to investigate the role that religion plays in contemporary Dalit discourse in Tamil Nadu, the significance Dalit leaders attach to it, and how it is used to mobilise their fellow caste members. I seek to compare the attitude of the leaders of the three major Tamil Dalit castes, i.e., the Paraiyars, Devendrars (also called Pallars), and Arundhatiyars (also called Chakkiliyars). In my research I focus on about last thirty years only. Since the 1980s, there has been an increase in books, magazines and articles published by Dalit leaders, activists and scholars. In the 1980s we witness another wave of Dalit resurgence connected with the hundredth anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar and wide dissemination of his ideas through translations of his books into Indian languages. It was this time when many new Dalit organizations and movements came into existence, a bit later two Tamil Dalit political parties were established⁹.

For my research, I have used various books, brochures and articles, published mostly in Tamil. I simply tried to get and read everything which was published by Dalit intellectuals, activists and politicians in the past 30 years. It is already quite a large corpus of texts containing almost two hundred items focusing on a number of topics, religion being one of them. The information obtained from the texts I tried to further specify through semi-structured interviews with many Dalit leaders and intellectuals during my research trips in February 2016 and February 2017. I conducted more than 20 qualitative interviews with selected representatives of all three castes. They all were influential persons including Members of Legislative Assembly, editors of Dalit journals, writers, university-based researchers, and intellectuals with rich publishing activity.

The starting proposition of this article is that the attitude of the three castes towards religion differs in accordance with their contrasting emancipation strategies¹⁰. The Paraiyars are followers of Ambedkar and fight for the eradication of the caste system. They aim at a casteless society and (at least on the ideological level) try to avoid topics which would cause indignation of other Dalit castes, such as, for example, “exclusivistic” caste histories. Instead, they propose a kind of common background for all backward communities with little internal differentiation in the past.

The Devendrars also fight against oppression and discrimination, but their ideologists dismiss the vision of a casteless society as impossible. The Devendrar intellectuals try to reconstruct their caste history as a history of once proud and prestigious, if not ruling community. In this way they try to appeal to their caste members and mobilize them. As a consequence, they are much

⁹ The Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) of the Paraiyars and Puthiya Thamilagam (PT) of the Devendrars.

¹⁰ The article deals with castes as discrete units each having its own caste ideology as proposed by Dipankar Gupta (Gupta, 2000).

more active in strengthening their caste's identity vis-à-vis other non-Dalit, as well as Dalit, castes.

The Arunthathiyars stand somewhere in between. Ideologically they are closer to the Paraiyars. However, due to their backwardness and weaker political organization, their interests are largely neglected by the two Dalit political parties, i.e., VCK and PT. They are considered to be inferior to the Paraiyars as well as Devendrars. This is one of the reasons why, to some extent, they perpetuate their caste identity despite their Ambedkarite outlook. They also try to reconstruct their caste history and celebrate their caste heroes, though they lag behind a lot behind the Devendrars in this respect. They are afraid that otherwise they will simply be swallowed up by the bigger castes and very little will be left for them¹¹. It is thus clear that if one wishes to mobilise Dalits, issues of identity cannot be avoided. This is valid not only for Tamil Nadu, but for other parts of India as well. Describing the situation in Andhra Pradesh, Satyanarayana even argues for a shift in the discussion, “from annihilation of caste to equality of castes, and from the equality of individuals to equality of castes” (Satyanarayana, 2014: 57). The above outlined outlooks should be understood as prevailing tendencies. Of course, there are continuing discussions within each caste and numerous movements and dissenting voices do exist. Secondly, even caste ideologies are not static — they develop and change.

ARE WE HINDUS?

Somewhat surprisingly, the question of religion has attracted less attention on the part of contemporary Dalit leaders than one might have expected. Even the leaders and intellectuals who defend distinct Dalit identity rather frantically are often not very eloquent in relation to this topic. It is in this sphere, perhaps, that the greatest difference between ideology and everyday practice can be found. The rejection of *sanathana dharma* (orthodox Hinduism), as well as higher caste supremacy, is evident in most of the writings¹². As far as I know Dalits do not give many thoughts to Hindu pluralism and its internal differences as conceptualized within the postcolonial studies¹³. They mostly perceive

¹¹ I have dealt with the contrasting emancipation strategies of the three castes in another article, which is currently in the review process (Hons, 2019).

¹² The Paraiyars, in particular, vehemently criticise Hinduism and especially its radical form, Hindutva. Allow me to quote just one example from the collection of speeches by the VCK leader Thirumaavalavan: “Hindutva and casteism entered into our arts, into our culture — and our arts and culture assumed different forms. They changed the instruments. They changed the forms. They changed the methods of worship. The mother of all this is the culture of the cheri people, the arts of the cheri people” (Thirumaavalavan, 2004: 7).

¹³ One of the latest publications dealing with this topic is the book by Elaine M. Fisher (Fisher, 2017) which contains further references.

Hinduism in the “traditional” light as a socio-religious system centred around Brahmins. Indeed, Brahmanism is often synonymous with Hinduism in their writings.

Only rarely, however, is the space filled with more tangible content. When I questioned him about religion, Athiyaman, the leader of the Aathi Thamilar Peravai, resolutely rejected Hinduism: “Arunthathiyars are not Hindus”. When I subsequently asked him about Arunthathiyar religious beliefs, he felt somewhat embarrassed and switched to another question¹⁴. Similarly, many Dalit leaders have tried to distance themselves from Hinduism during the course of my interviews with them. At the same time, however, they concede that most of the common folk consider themselves to be Hindus and that more work needs to be done among them. They acknowledge the importance people attach to religion, as well as the difficulties associated with changing religious attitudes. The possibility of conversion has been considered by several of them, but in the end most of them have decided to postpone the question of religion and give more prominence to other tasks¹⁵.

All three castes emphasise the distinct character of their religion, at least to a certain extent. The most elaborate attempt has been made by the Paraiyars. The particularity of the Paraiyar religion is emphasised mainly through reference to the worship of caste deities, the difference in nature and appearance of these deities, specific rituals, festivals, etc.¹⁶ One such example is the goddess *Ellaiyamman*, a guardian deity who often marks the boundaries of Paraiyar dwellings¹⁷. Sathiyathan Clarke in his analysis of this deity argues that *Ellaiyamman* “symbolises the distinctiveness and particularity of the Paraiyars’ religion in its resistance against invading and co-opting tendencies of caste Hinduism” (Clarke, 1998: 3).

Besides numerous small deities, the Paraiyars sometimes claim even much more commonly worshipped gods and goddesses as their caste deities, for example, *Māriyamman* (the goddess of small-pox, who is worshipped even by non-Dalits). They argue that many gods have been “stolen” from them by caste Hindus and that their characteristics, sometimes even names, have been gradually changed. And not only that:

¹⁴ Aathi Thamilar Peravai is currently the most visible movement among the Arunthathiyars with ambitions to turn it into a full-fledged political party. Interview with Athiyaman, Coimbatore, 11 February, 2016.

¹⁵ For example, I can here refer to my interview with the Paraiyar writer, poet, activist and the former Member of the Legislative Assembly (VCK), Ravikkumar (Pondicherry 18 February, 2016). For him, religion is not very important. He was considering conversion but eventually left that question open. In his works he focuses on other aspects of the contemporary Dalit struggle.

¹⁶ For a further description of the Paraiyars’ religion, see Clarke, 1998: 71–79; Moffatt, 1979b: 219–289; Deliège, 1997: 251–296.

¹⁷ Her name itself is perhaps derived from the Tamil word *ellai*, meaning “boundary”.

The situation has deteriorated to such an extent, that Dalits themselves have forgotten the bold history of their ancestors and equated the history of their deities with the Purana myths even though there is no connection between them at all (Muttu, 2004: 20).

This is why Dalit activists often call for further and more extensive ethnographic research in this respect. They believe that better knowledge of their religious traditions would help them in their emancipation struggle and the struggle against the caste system and the dominance of the higher castes:

When Dalits realise that Sanatana Hindu gods are opposed to their life and liberation, they will understand that they are not Hindus. The seed of their liberation rests in completely leaving Hindu religion and forming their own religion. [...] For this Dalits should identify and promote their religious and cultural roots (Muttu, 2004: 59).

A very similar opinion can be found in the writings of the greatest authority on Dalit folklore, Dr K. A. Gunasekharan. He believes that Dalit deities are of a different nature and that they inherently carry the element of defiance and opposition to higher castes. He illustrates this aspect of Dalit gods by the “disrespect talk” (*vātā, pōtā*) used by a possessed Dalit person towards members of higher castes (Kuṇacēkaraṇ, 2010: 60). Subsequently, he also calls for further research on Dalit folklore. S. K. Muttu goes even further. In his description of the god Muttaiyā, he emphasises his fierce character and tendency to fight. Then, he urges Dalits to adopt this boldness and power to challenge the domination and liberate themselves (Muttu, 2004: 57).

This courage and ability to fight back is explained through reference to the origins of Dalit deities. Most of them originated as Dalit persons who were killed at the hands of higher caste people because of their “misconduct” — by breaching the caste rules or falling in love outside their caste. After their death they were deified and worshipped by their family and their fellow caste members.

It is, however, not only the fierce character which distinguishes Dalit deities from the “higher” gods. Dalit authors often point to their greater attachment to the people and the more pronounced this-worldly character. Dalit gods often accept spicy non-vegetarian food, they drink blood and even country liquor. Here, instead of repeating the relatively known data, I prefer to give the floor to the Dalit poet N. D. Rajkumar, who has beautifully and aptly captured the distinct character of Dalit gods in his poem:

Our folk gods do not hide in the Brahman
Nor do they mask themselves by telling stories
In the language known to the few.
They enter the body of Thangasamy

Who roams with dishevelled hair
 And chews betel in his mouth
 They possess him, make him dance,
 Tell signs in the language everybody knows,
 Eat pig flesh, drink liquor and smoke cigars
 In slums, next to sewer ditches
 Of no man's lands (Rāj Kumār, 2007: 103)¹⁸.

Dalit deities are sometimes linked to the black colour, which is contrasted with the predominantly yellow, red or saffron colours used in Hindu temples. Some of the deities are described as being extremely black in colour. During my field trip in Tamil Nadu in 2016, I visited two bigger Dalit temples in Coimbatore. The only conspicuous difference between them and an ordinary Hindu temple that I noticed was that the Dalit priests were dressed in black veshtis. When I asked my guide, N. Murugan, why this was so, he simply replied that “black colour is the colour of the Dalit people”¹⁹. S. K. Muttu tells us more:

Here, the colour of the god Muttaiyā is black. The colour of the people who worship him is black. When the festival is organised for him, the sacrificed goat must be pitch-black, that is Muttaiyā's order. There is an inseparable connection between black colour and Dalits' lives. It can be felt from the Dalit people's point of view, that the principle of truth and labour is “black” (Muttu, 2004: 58).

We can see that the black colour that was assigned to shudras by ancient Hindu texts, perhaps as a symbol of their cultural inferiority²⁰, has been turned into a proud symbol of the Dalits. It is quite remarkable if we consider that not long time ago the untouchable was required to wear a black thread “as a sign or a mark to prevent the Hindus from getting themselves polluted by his touch by mistake” (Ambedkar, 2014: 214).

In a similar way to the Paraiyars, the Arunthathiyars also seek to distance themselves from Hinduism. Their efforts in this respect are, however, somewhat limited. Their main tenets are briefly summarised by S. T. Kalyanasundaram, the leader of the Democratic front of the Arunthathiyars of Tamil Nadu and the editor of the monthly magazine *Seruppu* (Sandal):

The culture of the Arunthathiyar people opposes Hinduism. The gods, which we worship — Maduraiveeran and Ondiveeran are not Hindu gods. We offer liquor to our

¹⁸ Translation mine. Rāj Kumār comes from the tiny community of *kaṇṇiyāns*, whose traditional occupation is sorcery and medicine.

¹⁹ Interview with N. Murugan, the district secretary of the Aathi Thamilar Peravai. Coimbatore 12 February, 2016.

²⁰ For a brief discussion, see Klass, 1993: 38–52. Hildebeitel, 2011: 530, considers the association of the four varnas, with four colours as a later ideological supplement.

deities. We kill goats, cows and pigs and offer them. It is in absolute opposition to the Hindu culture. The way we live, our wedding and other rituals differ from Hinduism. That is why we are not Hindus (Puṇitaṅ, 2006: 152).

The main ideologist of the Athi Thamilar Peravai, Eḷil Iḷaṅkōvaṅ (Iḷaṅkōvaṅ, 2002: 75–85) provides only a little more information. According to him, the Arunthaiyars pay very little attention to the “big Gods” (*perunteyvam*). They, however, worship memorial stones, in the same ways as other Tamilians do. Their main deities are the above mentioned Maduraiveeran and Ondiveeran, which he refers to specifically as “Arunthathiyar Gods” (*Arunthathiyar kulateyvam*). Besides them Arunthathiyars also worship some “general gods” (*potukula teyvam*) such as Māṭacāmi, Muṇiyāṅṅi, Iṭumpaṅ and Cērvāraṅ. He is of the opinion that despite their being worshipped nowadays primarily by other castes, such as the Naidus or Nadars, they must have originated among the Arunthathiyars, if judged by their names. He also accuses the Hindu scripts of the denigration of their culture and their gods and calls for change. It is thus clear that the Arunthathiyars lay great emphasis on Maduraiveeran and Ondiveeran as gods, as well as historical persons and freedom fighters. The Arunthathiyar leaders try to mobilise their caste members especially around these two figures.

In the case of the Devendrars, the situation is somewhat less transparent. The more radical part of the community has the tendency to remain within Hinduism and to sanskritise. In the beginning of his book about the Pallar community and their history, Pe. Taṅkarāj (Taṅkarāj, 1975: 32) says that today Pallars worship village gods, but in the olden days they all allegedly worshipped the god Siva. Nowadays, because of their claimed identification with the Pandyas, the Cheras and the Cholas (see Hons, 2019), they also claim the legacy in relation to the history of numerous Hindu temples and assert their rights to worship there, organise pujas and arrange temple car festivals. Of course, we come across similar activities within the Paraiyar and Arunthathiyar communities as well, but they appear to be more spontaneous and locality-bound. This means that they arise out of the discontent of the people in a given locality whenever the possibility of worship in a particular temple or taking part in a particular festival is denied them. For Devendrars, they are a more integral part of their caste outlook and a deliberate object of their “research” and caste history narratives. In other words, they are the purposeful products of the ideological leadership of the caste.

As examples, I suggest two chapters from Ṇāṅacēkaraṅ’s book *History of the Mallar community*. The first chapter sets out to elucidate the connection between the Mallar people and the Murugan temple in Palani (Ṇāṅacēkaraṅ, 2001: 39–47). It refers to inscriptions on a copper plate found at Palani, as well as to *Pallu* literature, which, according to the author, both evidence the close

relationship between the Mallars and the god Murugan, and also support their right to worship at Paḷaṇi temple. The same goes for the famous Pateeswara Mallar (*sic!*) temple²¹ at Perur, where the close relationship between Murugan and the Mallars is evidenced, among other things, by the annual festival of planting seedlings (*nārru naṭavut tiruvilā*). This is a celebration of agriculture in remembrance of the time when Shiva became a Mallar and began growing paddy²². In the same breath, he adds that the Mallars often worship Murugan as their family (*kula teyvam*) and also personal deity (*iṣṭa teyvam*; Nāṇacēkaṇ, 2001: 45).

The second chapter speaks of the worship of Devendra (*sic!*) Ganesh²³. The author claims that after the worship of *Vēntaṇ* or *Intiraṇ* as the god of rain had disappeared, his place was assumed by the worship of *Pillaiyār* or *Vināyakar*. In periods of drought people erected his statues on the river banks or threw them into dried-up ponds in order for them to be filled with water again. After that time, the Maḷḷar people developed various rituals associated with the worship of this god.

Both examples clearly show the Devendrars' tendency to be incorporated into mainstream Hinduism. There are also, however, some "dissenting voices". For example, T. Dharmaraj refuses to be Hindu as well as Dalit. In his book *Why I am not a Dalit either* (Tarumarājan, 2016: 23–51) he offers us a remarkable and provocative treatise on the folk deities, through which he criticises the atrocities suffered by Dalits and the negligence of society in relation to these cruelties. He starts his essay with a division of deities into "born" deities (*piranta*) and "dead" deities (*iranta*). Born deities are much milder in terms of their character, but low caste people usually do not have much interaction with them. Dead deities are born as people, but they meet a violent death, most frequently because of their "improper" love. After death, they become demons (*pēy*) and their anger must be mollified through the act of deification. As they are worshipped by both perpetrators and victims, caste relations gradually calm down, and the worship as well as the story of the deity gradually becomes sanctioned by the tradition. Eventually, the deity is included in the Hindu pantheon and its Dalit origins are rejected. Dharmaraj expresses his surprise about the fact that it is considered a part of Tamil religious tradition and is not condemned. According to him, the situation today differs in one respect — new deities no longer appear, even though Dalits still get killed. But, in the same way the tradition remained silent about the killing of the

²¹ The author actually inserts the word Mallar into the name of the temple, i.e., *Paṭṭisvara maḷḷar tirukōyil*.

²² *Civaṇ maḷḷarāka māri nel vēḷāṇmai ceytatai āṇṭutōrum nārru naṭavut tiruvilā*. Nāṇacēkaṇ, 2001: 42.

²³ Nāṇacēkaṇ, 2001: 4856. The author again adds the caste name to the name of the deity, i.e., *Tēvēntira piḷḷaiyār*. Piḷḷaiyār is the Tamil name for the god Ganesha.

Dalit lover, the law today is silent about the tradition. It punishes the single act of killing, the individual person, and not the system behind most of the killings, i.e., the caste system. By taking every killing out of (caste) context, “it has also released forever the casteist society practicing the untouchability from the guilt” (Tarumarājan, 2016: 44).

In his other essay (Tarumarājan, 2011), he sets out to document the history of the Dalit deity Pērācciyammaṅ, which originated within the Devendrar community, but later became Hinduised, with her name being changed to Māhiṣācuramarttīni. He is of the opinion that Dalits should resist cultural oppression in the same way that they resist physical oppression. And the first step towards their cultural liberation is the creation of the counter histories which would challenge the distorted histories spread by the oppressive powers (Tarumarājan, 2011: 189).

THE QUESTION OF CONVERSION

A proportion of all three castes has converted to Christianity. Most of the mass conversions took place at the end of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth century, mostly to Roman Catholicism or mainstream Protestantism. The exact numbers are not known, but estimates say that Dalit converts constitute 60–70% of all Indian Christians (Webster, 2009: xii, 47–92). In addition to the common problems experienced by all Dalits, Dalit Christians point to the indifference on the part of the Church to their specific problems²⁴. This is why they have started to develop a theology that is closer to the Dalit religious outlook and their specific needs. They have somewhat broadened the meaning of the word theology, which is for them a dynamic process of constructing the divine to address the needs of the ever evolving and changing community. Theology is thus not an abstract construction — it seeks to reflect their worldview and respond to their everyday lives. It lays the main emphasis on the compassion of Jesus towards the poor and miserable²⁵. This neglect of the interests of Dalit Christians by the Church is one of the reasons why the number of conversions to Christianity is low. Nowadays, in Tamil Nadu, if Dalits convert, then they convert mostly to Pentecostalism, which claims to be non-casteist and more responsive to the everyday problems experienced by Dalits, as well as their spiritual needs²⁶.

²⁴ For an excellent description of the situation of Dalit Christians in one particular locality in Tamil Nadu, see Jeremiah, 2013.

²⁵ See, for example, Clarke, 1998; Massey, 2006. The literature on this topic is rich in both English and Tamil. Numerous books and booklets have been published by the Dalit Resource Centre in Madurai.

²⁶ For the growing influence of Pentecostalism in South India, see Bergunder, 2008.

The Paraiyars still flirt with the idea of conversion to Buddhism and the possibility of following in Iyothē Thassar's footsteps²⁷. However, the Buddhist community in Tamil Nadu is very small²⁸. Its prominent members meet quite regularly, but the community lacks strong religious guidance and leadership²⁹.

Nevertheless, the idea of Dalits originally being Buddhists, as proposed by Iyothē Thass and later further elaborated and propagated by Dr Ambedkar, has slowly found a degree of acceptance among Dalit intellectuals, even among groups other than Mahars or Paraiyars. One of the most recent contributions to this discussion has come, rather surprisingly, from the Arunthathiyars. In his latest book *Eḷil Iḷaṅkōvaṅ* (Iḷaṅkōvaṅ, 2014) associates Hinayana not only with the authentic Buddha's teaching, but also with the voice of dissent of the original inhabitants of India. Despite many historical distortions found in this book, it clearly shows that there is great potential for further growth in the Buddhist community among Scheduled Castes, which is confirmed by data released by the central government. These data show that Buddhism is the fastest growing religion among the Scheduled Castes in India³⁰.

CONCLUSION

The role that religion currently plays within the Tamil Dalit discourse is relatively small, perhaps because most of the common folk consider themselves Hindus and changing their religious attitudes and feelings might be difficult. There is, however, a clear tendency to include religion more firmly within the discourse and use it as a tool for mobilizing Dalits. One of the reasons for this are activities of the Hindu right among the Dalits. The Arunthathiyar, and especially the Paraiyar, leaders try to distance themselves from Hinduism and challenge mainstream history, which they would argue marginalises and neglects them. They emphasise the distinct character of their deities and contrast them with the higher gods of Hinduism. In short, they speak out for a distinct Dalit identity. They point to the fighting spirit of their deities, which is explained by their origin as human beings killed by the members of higher castes.

²⁷ For an analysis of Iyothē Thassar's ideas on Buddhism and the Buddhist community in Tamil country during the colonial period, see, in particular, Aloyisus, 1998.

²⁸ According to the 2011 Census, the "official" number of Buddhists in Tamil Nadu is 11,186, which is far lower than one percent. See the webpages of the Census of India: <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/C-01.html> (25.06.2016).

²⁹ Interview with the Dalit poet and one of the editors of the journal *Dalit murasu*, Yaḷaṅ Āti, Ambur 6 February, 2016.

³⁰ Shaikh, 2016. The data show that Buddhism is growing at a rate of 38% while the population of Scheduled Castes has grown by 21% (the numbers are valid for the period 2001–2011).

Some of them even call upon their fellow caste members to acquire this boldness for the sake of their liberation. They frequently call for further research on this aspect of Dalit folklore.

The Devendrars also seek to reinterpret their history, though quite often within Hinduism. They do not hesitate to claim a strong connection with the god Siva and some other “big gods”. At the same time, they point to the Devendrar origin of some lesser gods. All this is consciously used to strengthen their caste identity and to mobilise caste members. Many Devendrar leaders and intellectuals propagate noble origin of their community from which the three famous Tamil dynasties emerged (Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas) and call for the exclusion from the SC list (Naig, 2018). They aim at becoming a strong community within Hinduism and majority society.

We can conclude that the differing attitudes of these three Dalit castes towards religion match their contrasting strategies for liberation. With regard to conversion, it is nowadays considered to be an option, even though this option is only rarely chosen. It will be interesting to follow further developments in this respect in the near future.

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