

## **MOTHER GODDESS BETTATHAMMA: AMBIVALENCE AND DUALITY REVISITED IN INDIGENOUS-CLASSICAL CONTINUUM OF HINDUISM IN THE TAMIL REGION**

Uma Senthilkumaran

---

This paper analyses the interaction between two divergent religions in the worship of a mother goddess, Bettamma, situated in the precincts of Coimbatore district, Tamilnadu, South India. In this study, in presenting related but two different myths of the goddess, explicated in both Indigenous or Little and Classical or Greater Hindu traditions, the ambivalent personification of revolt and compliance in the goddess figure, contrarily visualized in a symbolic carnival is delineated to bring out the assertions of a society that is shaped by patriarchal religious values.

Specifically, this paper outlines the assimilations and rejections of belief systems in the worship of the mother goddess when parallel religious spaces influenced by 'mother principle' on one hand, and 'father principle' on the other, negotiates. The processes of 'universalization' and 'parochialization' that converges on the worship of Bettamma, who moves between the spaces of indigenous and classical Hinduism during the annual festival in which she is centrally placed, is outlined to perceive the cultural exchanges of conflicting conviction systems and the assertions each creates for itself in their adulation of the mother goddess.

The extent of prevailing 'goddess tradition' in the Tamil region pertaining to both native and classical Hinduism has been a question pondered for centuries in the milieu of Indian religious traditions. It is in this context that this study on particular goddess worship in the region of Coimbatore district, situated in the state of Tamilnadu, South India, is attempted and analyzed. Even though it is an all-encompassing theory in Indian folk religion to have worships of goddesses in incredible numbers rather than worships of gods, still the enveloping concept of connecting female component of 'little tradition' with the male component of the 'greater tradition'<sup>1</sup> has been a custom adopted whenever both traditions had the probability to interact. This interaction is, often, induced by the element of 'survival' or in instances where there arises 'competitiveness'. Nevertheless, these fundamentals have a longstanding and intertwining influence on both these religious traditions, which forms the focus of this study.

For centuries, Bettamma, who has emerged in the Kattaaaji Hills of Bettathapuram<sup>2</sup> in the region of Coimbatore, is believed to be a folk goddess of an indigenous community, Badagas, the largest social group belonging to the nearby Nilgiri Hills, a part of a mountain chain called as Western Ghats in Tamilnadu. According to Paul Hockings, the Badagas derive their name from the phrase, 'northerner' referring to their migration from the northern direction of Nilgiris

---

*Address for communication:* **Uma Senthilkumaran**, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Pondicherry Institute of Linguistics and Culture (PILC), Lauspet, Puducherry -605 008, E-mail: [umadskpilc@gmail.com](mailto:umadskpilc@gmail.com)

during the break-up of the Vijayanagar empire in the year 1565 (2001: vii). The community, whose origin is traced to the State of Mysore, the neighboring province of Tamilnadu, after their migration into Nilgiris claimed tribal status in par with other aboriginal communities (Bharathi 2007: 57). Even though the population holds a non-tribal ranking as perceived in the Census of India (1971), still the Badagas embrace many of the characteristics of the aboriginal communities of Nilgiri Mountains due to their long association with the tribes of the region.

In recent decades, the Badagas, due to various reasons, in stages, and in groups, moved from the boundaries of Nilgiri Hills to the populous and urban Coimbatore district which is situated in the plains. While the community adopted many of the ways and customs of the local inhabitants, they also tried to retain their religious associations and beliefs in a more conventional manner as any closed clan societies which has a recent origin of migration. The willing participation of a vast number of Badaga settlers from Coimbatore in the annual festival conducted to the community's prime mother goddess, Hethe<sup>3</sup>, in Nilgiris, every year, whose worship highly centers on the community's core religious customs and values, exhibits the religious associations of the people even after their migratory process towards the plains.

The hilly goddess, Bettathamma (though the precise period of her genesis could not be ascertained), similar to Hethe, also demonstrates an emotive association of the lives and beliefs of the Badaga community who are the chief worshippers of the goddess. In recent decades, the movement of the goddess from the pantheon of little tradition towards the greater tradition and the subsequent popularity of the goddess has a deeper significance to both belief systems as well the geographical platform in which she is believed to have emerged. Despite her origin and her belonging having too many narratives involving more than one caste, the exposition in this study is to concentrate on two contradictory religious pantheons that are popularly holding the 'mother goddess' as their own. On one hand, the ritualistic tradition of worship of the Badaga population dominates the goddess worship in the hill for most of the time in a year. On the other hand, once in a year, the routine worship pattern attributed to the goddess is intercepted by the annual festival held for the classical Hindu Vaishnava god, whose shrine is situated in the region of Karamadai (erstwhile known as *Kaaraivanam* (forest of *kaarai*<sup>4</sup> trees)), Coimbatore, which claims and emphasizes goddess Bettathamma as a spouse to Lord Renganathar. It is in this sequence, the 'origin myths' recognized around the goddess by both traditions needs to be conceived to understand the interweaving of both belief systems in one geographical space.

### **Myths of Goddess Bettathamma in Little and Greater Tradition**

#### ***Myth I***

In one of the mythical beliefs prevailing among the Badagas, it is claimed that around thousand years back, Bettathamma as a young girl lived with her father in

a place called Ulikkal in *Vadugu Desam* (in literal Badagu language, refers to 'Northern Country'; presently known as Nilgiris). The girl had seven-foot long hair (*yezhu adi neela koonthal*) and looked very beautiful (*mikka alaghu*). One day, seeing a young Badaga boy, Rengappan (fondly called as Renga) coming to their house hungry, the father feeds him well and asks the boy to rear their buffaloes, which was their community's prime occupation. Few days later, leaving Bettamma in the care of Rengappan and instructing him to take care of her from other luring tribal (*adivasi*) boys of the neighborhood, leaves for a pilgrimage. On his return, satisfied about Renga's caring attitude, the father gives his daughter (who attends puberty age) in marriage to the then twenty-year old boy and settles them in *Kaaraivanam* below the hills where *kaarai marangal* are ample. The couple lives a happy life.

One day, on a hunting trip, Rengappan sees a beautiful tribal girl (*kaatuvaasi penn*), Tulasiamma, who was isolated from her friends, loitering alone. Fascinated by her beauty, he seizes (*kavandhu*) her, keeps her hidden under his tiara (*magudam*) and brings her home. Bettamma sees his tousled tiara, his unkempt clothes and blood flowing on his forehead (Tulasiamma's puberty blood) and realizes that he has brought another woman to their house. Bettamma serves food in three plantain leaves (traditionally used as serving plates), instead of two, and to her surprised husband, tells that the third is for the guest (*virundaali*) hidden under his tiara. Shamed, Rengappan reveals Tulasiamma and eats with her, while angry Bettamma refuses to eat with them. When both Rengappan and Tulasiamma retire for sleep together, the lone Bettamma leaves the house in the early morning towards the nearby Kattaanji Hills. On the way, seeing two cowherd boys rearing cattle, warns that their heads will break if they tell about her whereabouts to anyone who comes for her.

Meanwhile, Rengappan, realizing that his wife has left, comes in search of her to the hill. He sees the cowherds and threatens to make them stone if they do not tell about his wife. Fearing his wrath and apprehending less chances of living from both sides, they tell him the truth. Their heads break and they die. Rengappan chases her to the hill and hits an arrow (*baanam*) at Bettamma who was fleeing from him. The arrow, instead of his wife, hits a rock and a cave appears. The furious Bettamma, scolds him and his setting up of a concubine, and asks him to leave immediately, refusing to accompany him because he had not only cheated her but also because he had aimed to kill her. She removes the yellow colored turmeric (*manjal*) that she has applied on her face and rubs it on a rock as a sign of severing marital ties with her husband (in the conventional classical Hindu thought, the removal is attributed to widowhood). Then she proceeds into the cave, believed to be leading to her parental home in Nilgiris, and nobody sees her thereafter. From then on, she is assumed to have become a goddess in the cave in Kattaanji Hills.

When Rengappan's relatives plead as a form of repentance and request her to visit *Kaaraivanam* at least once in a year, the goddess agrees. It is said that the goddess, after her disappearance into the cave, is sighted in the form of a snake by ardent devotees. At present, however, a stone female figurine denoting Bettathamma is placed in front of the cave and worshipped. A related myth also narrates that Rengappan was a forgotten Badaga child who turned into a serpent in a cloth cradle tied under a *kaarai* tree in *Kaaraivanam*, for which until recent times, the milk officiated to the goddess Hethe of Nilgiris was offered every year. It is also said that as a reminder of the event and as a form of repentance, Badaga people never tie cradle for babies thereafter.

### ***Myth II***

In the Vaishnava faith of the appearance of god Renganathar of Karamadai, it is claimed that a cowherd who realizes that one of his cows he herds is disappearing for sometime and its udders are empty when it comes back every day, follows and sees the cow shedding milk under a *kaarai* bush. Angered, he hits the place where the milk is shed and to his astonishment, he sees blood coming from a stone hidden under the *kaarai* bush.<sup>5</sup> The cowherd loses his eyesight. However, the god appears in the shepherd's dream, restores the lost eyesight, reveals that the stone, self-created (*suyambu*), is none other than him, Lord Renganathar, and demands worship thereafter. From then on, Renganathar and his spouse, Tulasiamma, lived as deities from heaven (*avatars*) on earth in *Kaaraivanam*, which is now consecrated as a temple site.

One day, when god Renganathar came back from hunting, Tulasiamma, seeing his tousled tiara and clothes, suspected his chastity and lays three plantain leaves to eat, instead of two, as a form of sarcasm. In spite of god's clarifications, she leaves home in the morning but the god angrily chases her to the hill in a white horse with an arrow (*baanam*) in hand. The cowherd boys reveal the truth about the goddess and their heads break as the curse of Tulasiamma comes true. When the god chases after his wife, his horse kneels before the rock behind which Tulasiamma has hid herself. When Renganathar aims and hits the *baanam* on the rock, it parts way and a cleavage appears. Tulasiamma, dreading his fury that would kill her if she does not disclose herself, pleads him not to harm her. She agrees to come back to her husband's place every year. From that time, she is worshipped also as goddess Bettathamma, as a derivative of her stay in the hill.

### ***The Annual Festival***

As a symbolic reminder of the event, in the festival that is held in the Tamil month of *maaci* (the days between February 16<sup>th</sup> and March 15<sup>th</sup>) every year, Bettathamma is brought from her hill abode to the Karamadai temple as an unwilling bride. The ritual starts with the male god, Renganathar, who descends in the form of possession

(*arul*) on a chosen Vaishnava priest (priests are normally considered to be possessing 'semi-divine' status in Hindu belief), proceeding to the cave abode of his spouse, swinging forcibly the *baanam* in his hand. The priest who ascends the hill as Renganathar comes back pretending (*baavanai*) as goddess Bettathamma in a state of trance (*aavecam*<sup>6</sup>) to Karamadai. The angry goddess moves back and forth on her way towards her spouse's home, wishing to run back to her hill abode, but her devotees continually placate her, especially by the bridegroom's relatives who break hundreds of coconuts<sup>7</sup> before the deity.

On the way, the goddess eats and gives 'sweet mixed crushed plantains' from her mouth to the devotees, especially to women who are barren since a view is held that women who receive the 'plantain offering' from the goddess at one end of their attire (*sari*) would conceive a child. However, this ritual functions simply as a metaphor in recent times since the plantains are replaced by the offering of flowers (*poo*) and red paste (*kumkum*) by the goddess, reasons attributed to the unpalatable nature of the 'plantain offering' on one hand and the takeover of the 'goddess' during the festival by the Vaishnava priests, on the other. The goddess protests to enter her spouse's dwelling, but after much pleading, she proceeds for a marriage that is arranged for her with Lord Renganathar. However, the wedding between Lord Renganathar and the goddess is not accomplished by an inauspicious act of a cat crossing (symbolically replicated at present with a vessel (*sombu*) of milk rolled over and spilled) when the Sanskritized sacred thread (*taali*) was about to be tied (a replacement of the native ritual of 'virgin tying' (*kanni kattaradu*)).

After the incomplete wedding ceremony; the nuptial night of Renganathar and Tulasiamma; and the cart travel (*teer bavani*) of the next day around the village; the goddess is thrashed with plantain stem (*vaalapattai*) and chased away. In the symbolic ritual, the believed relatives of the bridegroom, the Vaishnava priests, participate in the thrashing and the coconuts offered to Lord Renganathar by the people of Bettathapuram, who signify the bride's relatives, are given back though the offering of other devotees are retained.

The ritual ends with the goddess leaving her marital home in the dawn towards Kattaanji hills, letting know only the Village Head (*Talayaari*). It is believed that the water below the hill in the Temple Pond (*Teppakulam*) turns yellow, the color of the turmeric applied on the body of the goddess, when she reaches the hill and takes bath in the pool of water (*sunai*) in front of the cave, signifying the goddess's communion with her devotees on her departure to the hill.

### ***Re-engaging the 'Myths' of Goddess Bettathamma***

The reigning goddess and the reigning god are the control units in their own spaces. They are seen as power holders, who are able to control the lives of their people by their exceptional power. The extraordinary power is invested in the deities by the tradition that produces and believes them. Sometimes, the exceptional powers gain

astounding significance in the psyche of the devotees who worships a deity. In the belief of the natives, the cosmos gets amplified in the metaphors applied to Bettathamma when she returns from Kattaanji Hills. A view is held that until recent times, thunder and lightning used to hover all over the hill when the goddess returns. This belief could be also connected with the belief that people who ventured into the cave disappear and were not seen thereafter. Both are attributed to the gargantuan power of the goddess. It appears as if the 'single mother goddess' of the indigenous people, Bettathamma, who has the capacity to protect her folk by herself (in addition to the will to heed the wishes of her devotees and subsequent visit to their land as per the Myth I), who reigns supreme in her space, could not be confounded within a space which demands her subordination.

In instances when both power holders interact, however, there emerges a narrative or in theological terms, a 'myth' that establishes the need and the sequence of the interaction. This may also happen within a single tradition where a unique myth related to the deity establishes the origin of the god or goddess and how they came to be revered. But, where the deities believed to be belonging to more than one cultural tradition, the 'myth' revolves around the association between such traditions, whether it is governed by unilateral or manifold themes. The established myth, consequently, determines the concept of 'relationships' between deities and, in turn, prolongs the contact in the psyche of the followers. In other words, when the acquaintance between two or more traditions is realized, it acquires repeated or dramatic exhibit to comprehend the power of such interactions. In such a rationale, the actions produce a process of carryover of a 'past existed' or a 'believed to have existed' happening/an experience, to the present world.

In the pattern of myths associated with the goddess, Bettathamma, at a broader level, two different belief patterns could be conceived. In the former cultural belief (in Myth I), the goddess reigns supreme and in the latter (Myth II), the goddess is complemented with a powerful male god. The gender focus is neutral in the former in the sense that there exists less competitiveness from the other sex after the goddess acquires her hill abode while, in the latter faith, the gender is split between two components, male and the female, and each intercedes with the other powerfully until one overcomes the other. In the latter, the goddess becomes the focus of concentration whereby she acquires the status of a disobedient spouse, who has to be tamed to make her realize her position in an upper caste familial complex. However, in both but different mythical instances, she remains the female protagonist who has to be accosted for the success of both traditions in the invocation of her as a mother goddess, which makes her worship significant.

In common, the indigenous goddesses recurrently have a human past whereby a goddess would have lived as a human being among her folks. Bettathamma, accordingly, is also established as a human form until she is treated as a goddess in Myth I which espouses native belief, whereas in Myth II, she titivates the divine

image, with negligible sharing of a mortal life, similar to her spouse. In the psyche of the native worshippers, the ideology gets mystified often with a goddess's shift from her human to a divine form and then in reversal. Thus, the feminine component comprises a mixture of human and divine emotions amplified in the goddess figure because of which the female element could not be brought within a certain dictum as it is normally done in greater tradition.

At another level, the influence is brought together with customs and rituals belonging to a single tradition of belief whereby the dominant greater tradition supersedes the other. The placement of the goddess in such a situation is hierarchical. In a fleeting interlude, the goddess belonging to the little tradition is shifted to the greater tradition, where she acts within the norms of the absorbing tradition in a subjugated position of a domesticated spouse to a male god. When the demands of her presence are fulfilled, she is retraced back to the ethnic tradition where she belongs, by which act she regains her independent status. However, in the belief of the native tradition, the rituals and customs adopted and followed are unilateral with negligible influence of one over the other, except during the annual festival. It appears that each is dissociated from the other with each tradition bearing its own unique origin and systems of culture.

The trajectory of performance in the worshipping sites belonging to both pantheons, accordingly, part ways on other occasions and closes together during a certain period of time. In a way, the voyage of the goddess between the little and the greater traditions and vice versa, opens the space of movement from a caste to the village and later, to a universal array on one hand and the turn of action from the universal to the village and then the caste spectrum, on the other. It more or less reflects, at present, the location of the goddess in both of what Robert Redfield observes as urban (great tradition) and rural centers' (little tradition) (1956: 67-104). The goddess Bettathamma, thus, emits a belonging to all the social orders existing in present day societies.

Broadly visualizing the espousal of gods and goddesses of the Brahminical tradition by non-Sanskritized societies, in general, it could be understood that the adoption involves less apparent disagreement whereas, in the instance of the Brahminical tradition's adoption of the deities belonging to the other pantheon, conflict is almost stimulated. When two gender components are involved, the conflict becomes further vibrant, especially when the 'femaleness' of the non-Sanskritized tradition interacts with the 'maleness' of the other. May be, this course of sequence is the result of the ideological need of the greater tradition to situate gender component within a certain dictum, which in the same sense acts as an alien theory in the other conviction space. For instance, two belief systems revolve around polarized concepts pertaining to their ideology, though the reference is to the same content. According to the believers of Myth I, the 'hill/earth', where the mother goddess delves, is suggested to be in *taamarai* (lotus) shape and form, an equation

commonly applied and overlapped with female *yoni* (sexual organ) (Paramasivan 2006: 23; Vaanamamalai 2007: 76). Accordingly, the hill is equated to a woman's womb and is perceived as containing entire humankind. Maybe, because of this influence of thought, the ritual of 'offering plantains' to barren women and the result of progeny is rested on the goddess and her feminine vaginal power.

As a contrast, one of the belief systems revolving around Myth II extends the entry of Renganathar into the Bettathamma hill to a man and a woman's sexual intercourse that result in conception and related childbirth. In another figurative sense, the arrow of a man (as Renganathar) making a cleavage in the rock (as Bettathamma) is seen as a sexual control of masculinity over biological femininity, which in parallel reflects the feminine and masculine elements in the worshipping *linga*, where the female sex symbol *yoni* is seen engaged and withheld by the male sexual organ (Harman 1992: 10). In other words, as the ideology of the masculine over the feminine is continuously desisted by the feminine of the little tradition, the other tradition aspires to locate the femininity below/within the masculinity.

While the aggressive feminine component of little tradition always tries to reject a male superior in the form of a patriarchal spouse, the masculine component of the greater tradition engages the rebellious feminine and draws a universal compassionate womanhood from her through the idiom of non-revolting spousehood. Renganathar and Tulasamma conceived in Vaishnava tradition espouses values that can be likened to god Siva (who belongs to another classical Hindu thought, Saivism) and his interlude with his spouse goddess, Parvathi. In one of a duel, Parvati leaves to her father's house despite her husband restraining her from doing so. In anger, Siva burns the goddess when she returns. Even while he accepts to revive his wife when other *devas* (gods) plead, the acceptance is only after the goddess realizes her subordination to masculinity, solicits forgiveness and promises never to engage in actions that agitates the male principle.

In a correlated vein of thought, it could be observed that since the adoption of the classical deities by those belonging to the non-Brahminical thought is a result of the inspired direct or indirect 'aura', the aura created because of various reasons, or because of lesser need on the part of the tradition to usurp the other, the issue of 'quarrel' is comparatively less. In such a sense too, the veneration of Bettathamma could be seen. The conflict gains realization when the interaction between the two traditions arises. For example, the Badaga tradition represented by the mother goddess fails to assimilate itself within the Vaishnava tradition smoothly, the integration prodded by a prolonged process of bringing the goddess from her native/preferred home to the marital home. The goddess protests throughout the process of negotiation initiated through a protracted act of coercion by her spouse god, his relatives and her people while she is brought from her hilly home to the home of her spouse in the plains, often attempting to retreat herself to the hills. The act

involves grandeur form of coercion, as a form of celebration, to make her happy and accept the wedlock.

The revolt of the goddess never ends even during the wedding ceremony, as the goddess is believed to turn away from her husband when the ritual of tying *taali* takes place. The goddess is a mass of confrontation in the belief of the ethnic tradition, which is seen in her refusal to eat with her spouse when he brings home a concubine, leaves her marital home without the knowledge of her spouse (an act unacceptable in Brahminical homes), after spending the night in a separate room (a conventional woman generally does not possess the right to decide her conjugal relationships either). In this tradition of belief, the conflict remains 'natural' as refusing to live a conjugal life with an infidel spouse, which maybe considered in other words, as Bettathamma's refusal to live within the 'other' tradition.

On the other hand, the conflict between the female and the male god is considered 'abnormal' in the viewpoint of the Brahminical tradition as it is seen as posing danger to marital life and needs to be quashed. The squabbles, if at all there exists, is normally solved by a patriarchal head, who involves himself in controlling a quarrelsome spouse. Bettathamma is chastised for her disbelief of her husband's fidelity, and in consequence for her leaving the husband's home, and disciplined. Significantly, the 'ritual of *vaalapattai*' which is symbolically applied as a 'punishing tool' on the goddess by her husband and his relatives may relieve the mythical event, explicated in both the myths elucidated above, of the laying of three plantain leaves by Bettathamma when her husband arrives from his hunting trip. She is remonstrated for her action of 'sarcasm' by the same artifact. The theme or the motive is also explicated by a metaphor attached to the myth that reiterates this necessity of conquest. For instance, as was seen earlier, the male god searching for his spouse aims a *baanam* towards the cave where the goddess had hidden herself. The god is feared by the goddess as he was in anger, ready to even slay her for her disobedience, her fault being so grave. Thus, the ritual gains significance and can be viewed as an extension of the common man's psyche since the thrashing event on the goddess is performed by the people attending the worships also. It remains in this belief that Bettathamma is to be subjected to subordinated wifely status within a patriarchal family structure. But in both traditions, the presence of a woman who adorns the 'other-than-spouse' role and causes friction between 'couple deities' is certainly seen as an impediment in spite of the general rule prevailing thus, "the idea that the deity must have a second, local bride is very widespread in the south" (Shulman 1980: 5).

By being a 'spouse goddess' in classical thought, a mother goddess normally acquires a status of 'multiplicity compromised in one'. She becomes the reincarnated form (*avatar*) of a universal mother goddess, born to serve a husband who is an *avatar* on earth himself. This perception is applied even to folk goddesses when they are influenced by the classical Hindu thought, which is widely present as A.

K. Ramanujan observes “A favorite way of integrating the village goddesses into a Hindu system has been to see them as *avatars* of Kali or relatives of Siva, as the village folk themselves often do:...” (1986: 56). Even though, Bettathamma, here, is seen as a relative of another classical god, Vishnu, and is not viewed as an incarnation of a fiercer classical goddess Kali (Kinsley 1998: 77-86), it could be observed that in general, this process of ‘Epic Spousification’ (Virakanath n.d.) that Lynn Gatwood suggests, occurs more effectively as a theme when the link between two diametrically dissimilar religions is attempted in a particular geographical space. In such an intonation, the character of a goddess is almost defined, with fewer variations especially when it comes to her relationship with a male counterpart. In all similar circumstances, “...local village goddesses and a non-Brahminical Devi cult are absorbed and to some extent tamed by male Brahminical orthodoxy” (Ibid). The result is there is less likelihood of a spouse goddess, demonstrated as in the instance of Bettathamma (in Myth II), who could remain detached from conjugal life, especially prodded by an act of willingness.

In the execution of this synthesis between two traditions, as seen earlier, each illuminates the need to retain their own power systems produced by the ideology in which they are built. Through the ritual of wedding conducted annually, the ideological standing of both traditions lock together and a compromise is, willingly or unwillingly, brought about temporarily. In Hinduism centered religious system, where compromise is to be attempted between a male and a female who belong to different traditions, the aspect of ‘wedlock’ is normally used as a powerful and successful medium. This might be so because unlike European and other Asian cultures, Hindu religious thought within the Indian subcontinent, at present times, connote to a larger variations of cultures that are portrayed as co-existing together.<sup>8</sup> In such a sense, where one ideology endorses the ‘patriarchal’ and the other, ‘matriarchal’ values, to be reflected in a synthesis form, the festival attempts to create some sort of mediation/compromise.

The reconciliation emerges in two different metaphors applied in a single festival that is presented and visualized. On one instance, as understood powerfully from Myth I, the relatives of the spouse repenting and pleading the deity for her kindness (*karunai*) and on the other instance, as demonstrated by Myth II, the battering and chasing of the goddess by the *vaalapattai* ritual. When the purpose of interjection is completed, each tradition reasserts itself based on its own ideological standing, prodded by the metaphorical aborted wedding ceremony, and the goddess remains in her domain until the succeeding annual festival that will be conducted in the future. This is best elucidated in the placement of the ‘goddess’ in both native and classical traditions. From the belief of the Badaga people, when the goddess shirks her status of a subjugated spouse that she adorns during her interlude with the god, she regains her sovereignty. But from the belief of the Vaishnava sect, the goddess Bettathamma/Tulasamma ever remains as a spouse goddess, placed and revered

in the precincts of the worshipping site of the god, Renganathar, in Karamadai. Thus, marriage in religious discourse brings in a broader spectrum of social relationships, extending its pantheon beyond what William P. Harman suggests as containment of weddings, "Marriage involves possession, responsibility, obligation, self-interest, and structure" (Harman 1982: 11).

In the religious interaction of two traditions, especially the classical and the folk Hindu pantheon, it functions more as a symbolic extension of linking what could be best understood in the words of Brubaker, "male lust and female wrath" (Ramanujan 1986: 56). If an attempt is made to situate Sheryl B. Daniel's three alternative models (Tambs-Lyche 2004: 11) of male-female relationships exemplified with Siva-Parvati model, the wedding between god Rengappan/Renganathar and the goddess, Bettathamma, however, falls slightly short to assume the overall consideration. For instance, though his first and second model that categorizes 'male controlling a female' and a 'female controlling a male' exists in the narrated myths of Bettathamma (in terms of power), the third, an 'equal sharing of male and female power' ceases to exist.

Both the female and the male paradigm are at all times placed in a conflicting zone where the power of one constantly competes with the power of the other. This arrangement might be so because of one major factor that binds the male and the female deities here. The deities of the above-said model belong to one single tradition (at least, after the ancient Tamil tribal goddess, Kotravai was transported and absorbed as Parvati in the classical pantheon), and are easily made to share power. In the myths of Bettathamma, in purpose, the inter-link between two dissimilar traditions/cultures is attempted through the wedding ritual of the god and the goddess. Further, where the power is unilateral (before and after the wedding ritual), there arises no necessity to exhibit intense power conflicts. The wedlock, thus, remains an interlude in the instance of the wedding of Bettathamma and has obscure picture of an attempt to subjugate the other forever.

The masculine and the feminine, thus, though co-exists together in a customary way of living, it becomes unavoidable to perceive such relationships without understanding the often re-surfacing conflicting zone of gender concepts of patriarchy and matriarchy. Often, one single plane of thought to the other is facilitated by some compromise on the part of the slightly devalued religious pantheon. This situation, to a great extent, results from the 'universalization process' that had begun to emerge as a dominant concept during the interaction of two diametrically opposite religious systems, the little tradition and the greater tradition, in one geographical space. However, the complete subjugation is rarely seen when the wedlock involves a 'matriarchal goddess'. It appears that the 'protest' or rather the 'revolt' continues to exist against the system that usurps the 'sovereignty' at large. On the other hand, there is continuous attempt to influence revolts and make them conducive to the present day societies that has long assimilated patriarchal

values. In such a sense, it could be seen that the worship of Bettathamma carries within it not only the factor of 'horizontal spread' of particular forms of Hinduism (Srinivas 1952: 214-15), but ideally, the 'spread' that operates from both parochial and universal spaces. By and large, it seems the functioning of elements of 'parochialization' or 'univerzalization' and at sometimes 'both' acknowledge the indigenous-classical continuum in Hindu religious spaces whenever the co-existence of contrary belief systems occur.

### NOTES

1. In general and in theories, there is major emphasis of Sanskritic Hinduism/Brahminical belief systems being called the 'greater tradition' and Folk Hinduism/Non-Brahminical systems of belief as the 'little tradition' in the Indian religious context (MasakazuTanaka 1997: 3-5) and are often not treated in the literal sense of 'one over the other' in terms of status. In this study too, the terms are applied as 'synonyms' used in the context of viewing both as different plethora of belief systems. In this paper, one of the two classical Hindu religions, Vaishnavism, is focused and treated against folk religion of Hinduism.
2. Name of the village, Bettathapuram ('*Betta*' in Badagu language means 'hill' and '*puram*' in Tamil language means 'outer' or in colloquial usage, 'village'), is drawn after the hill gained association with the goddess, Bettathamma. The village has a traditional name, *Bajaarioor* ('*Bajaari*' means 'querulous woman' and '*oor*' refers to 'village' in Tamil).
3. There are numerous Hethes in Badaga worship in Nilgiris, each having origin myths of their own. The periodical festivals of all Hethes fall at almost the same period in a year (R. K. Haldorai 2004: 4).
4. Botanically termed 'diospyros melanoxylon', *kaarai* refers to a kind of ebony trees ('Agro Forestry Tree Database' in *World Agro Forestry Centre*). The bushes were ample in the region of Karamadai at one time and draws particularity not only to the name of the place but also to the name of the cow (*kaarai pasu*), which is mandatorily used during rituals in Karamadai temple.
5. See, the usage of this common motif in identifying a deity in David Shulman, 'Milk, Blood and Seed', p. 107; On the emotive connection between blood, milk, and deity in native worships, see *Ibid*, pp.93-110; in particular, Badaga worship, see *Ibid*, p. 95.
6. *Aavecam* is one of the prominent emotive dispelling features evident in the worship of mother goddesses belonging to little tradition, a contrast to *arul* applied to deities of greater tradition. See the exposition of the terms, *aavecam/avecam* and *arul* in M. D. Muthukumaraswamy, p. 3.
7. See the application of similar rituals to 'contain the energy of the goddess' during festivals in Bruce Elliot Tapper, p. 13. Also in relevance is the 'decapitation' converted to 'coconut offering' in Kathleen M. Erndl, p. 160.
8. In general parlance and recent philosophical discourses, the term 'Hinduism' is often interpreted as a religion, especially after the Mohammedans named the belief systems of a group of people as 'Hinduism'. However, many arguments demystify the term as a religious element, and among various interpretations, posit it as "a socio-cultural unit or civilization which contains a plurality of distinct religions" (Heinrich von Stietencron 1989: 11).

**REFERENCES**

- 'Agro Forestry Tree Database', *World Agro Forestry Centre*, PROSEA Network (2011.09.13), Retrieved December 3, 2012, from <http://www.worldagroforestry.org/sea/products/afdbases/af/asp/SpeciesInfo.asp?SpD=690>
- Bharathi, Bhaktavatsala. (2007). *Thamizhaga Pazhangudigal* (in Tamil) (Tribes of Tamilnadu), Puducherry: Adayalam.
- Erndl, Kathleen M. (1993). *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest Indian Myth, Ritual, and Symbol*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Haldorai, R. K. (2004). *Hethe Deivam* (in Tamil) (Goddess Hethe), Udthagamandalam: Nelikolu Publishing House.
- Harman, William P. (1992). 'The Sacred Marriage Metaphor in Religious Studies and in Hinduism' in *The Sacred Marriage of a Hindu Goddess*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Hockings, Paul. (2001). 'Introduction', *Mortuary Ritual of the Badagas of Southern India*, (Fieldiana Anthropology, n.s., 32), Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History.
- Kinsley, David R. (1998). 'Kali: Blood and Death Out Of Place' in John Stratton Hawley & Donna Marie Wulff (ed.), *Devi: Goddesses of India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, pp. 77-86.
- Muthukumarasamy, M. D. (2010). 'Trance in Fire Walking Rituals of Goddess Tiraupati Temples in Tamilnadu' in *Emotions in South Asian and European Rituals* (Conference Paper) Chennai: National Folklore Support Centre.
- Paramasivan T. (2006). *Deivam Enbadhor* (in Tamil) (The Meaning of God), Palayamkottai: Yadhmagi Padhipagam.
- Ramanujan, A. K. (1986). 'Two Realms of Kannada Folklore' in Stuart H. Blackburn & A. K. Ramanujan (ed.), *In Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 41-75.
- Redfield, Robert. (1956). *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Stietencron, Heinrich Von. (1989). 'Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term' in Gunther D. Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (ed.), *Hinduism Reconsidered*, New Delhi: Manohar.
- Shulman, David Dean. (1980). *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Tradition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Srinivas, M. N. (1952). *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tambs-Lyche, Harald (2004). *The Feminine Sacred in South Asia* (ed.), New Delhi: Manohar.
- Tanaka, Masakazu. (1997). *Patrons, Devotees and Goddesses: Ritual, and Power among the Tamil Fishermen of Sri Lanka*, New Delhi: Manohar.
- Tapper, Bruce Elliot 'Widows and Goddesses: Female Roles in Deity Symbolism in a South Indian Village', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (NS), 1979: 13 (1): 1-31.
- Vaanamamalai, N. (2007). *Thamizhar Varalaarum Panbaadum* (in Tamil) (The History and Culture of the Tamils), Chennai: New Century Book House.

Virakanath, Nandi. (n.d.), 'The Emergence of Devi as an aspect of the Supreme Deity', philhine.org.uk, Retrieved November 24, 2012, from [http://www.philhine.org.uk/writings/tt\\_emergdevi.html](http://www.philhine.org.uk/writings/tt_emergdevi.html)

*Note:* All native Tamil words are transliterated in the following pattern: The Length Marks are denoted with double letters; Standard Indian words are written in the pattern adopted by Scholars.