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The Pattini Cult: A review on the beliefs on a female deity venerated by people in Sri Lanka and the Hindu-Buddhist synergism in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Goddess Pattini is a female deity, worshiped among Buddhists as well as Hindus. Although Goddess Pattini is considered as a Hindu deity, she occupies a supreme position even among Buddhists. While female deities do not occupy major positions in Buddhism, Goddess Pattini is an exception. The origin of Goddess Pattini is South Indian and based on the findings, it is evident that the Pattini cult in Sri Lanka dates back to the 2nd Century A.D. Goddess Pattini is a mesmerizing example of womanhood and the Hindu-Buddhist synergism. There are various mythologies associated with the origin of the Pattini cult and the introduction of the Pattini cult to Sri Lanka. This study is based on qualitative data while books, e-books, newspaper articles, reliable websites, national and international journals have been used as secondary data collection methods in this study. The main aim of this review paper is to focus on the Hindu-Buddhist synergism, to provide a descriptive amount of information gathered about the Pattini cult and the various beliefs on Goddess Pattini spread all over the island and to focus on the common beliefs held by people. Based on this review it is apparent that there are widespread beliefs and mythologies among the Sri Lankan people on the Pattini cult and the Hindu-Buddhist synergism due to the Pattini cult.

Keywords: Goddess Pattini, Hindu-Buddhist synergism, Pattini cult

Introduction

There are various types of Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism is considered the most ancient one among those types. Theravada Buddhism, which is one out of the main types of Buddhism has mainly been propitiated in South-Asian countries including Sri Lanka. This religion is based on the teachings of Lord Buddha, Sri Siddhartha Gauthama that explains the path towards enlightenment and the path to freed oneself from the cycle of samskara and the monastic tradition. Unlike in Hinduism, there is no specific mention about creator deities in Theravada Buddhism. However, some deities are venerated in it. Deities such as *Brahma, Sarasvati, Laksmi, Sakra, Pattini, Saman, and Ganesha* are few such examples. On the other hand, in Hinduism deities occupy a supreme position and are categorized according to their physical appearance and symbolic outfits. Unlike in other religions there is no mention of a creator god in Buddhism. In Hinduism, the creator, the preserver, and the destroyer are considered as deities, and they are visualized as male gods. The female deities are considered as their counterparts or incarnations. Goddess Pattini is considered as an incarnation of Goddess Kaali/Badrakaali in Hinduism. Yet, in Sri Lanka Goddess Pattini is worshiped by many Buddhists seeking good health and peace in life. As per the findings of this study, it is evident that based on the Ceylon genealogy, historical texts, folklores and mainly the viewpoints and opinions of people in Sri Lanka on the Pattini cult vary greatly.

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative data. The data collection methods in order to complete this review were secondary data collection procedures that included books, e-books, journals, research articles, etc. from experienced individuals and erudite professionals.

Literature review

There are three main types of Buddhism. *The term "Buddhism" is derived from the term Buddha, which means intelligence and wisdom in Sanskrit/Paali.* Although female deities do not occupy major positions in Buddhism, Goddess Pattini is an exception. Goddess Pattini who is considered to be the Goddess of motherhood, health, and fertility is honored and worshiped by both men and women. Goddess Pattini occupies a supreme position even among (Sri Lankan) people who follow Buddhism. Goddess Pattini is a dearest deity among the Sinhala – Buddhist and the Tamil – Hindu people. Moreover, Goddess Pattini is also worshiped seeking seasonal rain and good weather⁸.

In the Tamil – Hindu culture, Pattini Devi is known as Kannagi or Kannaki whereas, she is considered as an incarnation of Goddess Parvathi (wife of God Shiva) and as Goddess Durga/Kaali against injustice. Therefore, it is evident that although Goddess Pattini is worshiped by Buddhists all over the island the origin of Goddess Pattini is South Indian.

As stated in *Seelappadikaran* which is one of the main texts mentioning about Kannaki devotion, the very first Pattini devalaya had been built about 2000 years ago by King Senguttuvan (Seravan), of the Kingdom of Kerala. In addition to that, it is also stated that King Gajabahu too participated in this. That devalaya (shrine) is known as the Mangal Devi Pottal at present.

Conferring to the Ceylon genealogy and the widespread belief among Buddhists in Sri Lanka, the Pattini cult in Sri Lanka dates back to the 2nd Century A.D.⁷ The Gajabahu prawurthiya written somewhere around the 11th century and the historical record of monarchy, *The Rajavaliya* which has been written around the 17th century states that, King Gajabahu, (Son of King Vankanathissa) rescued 12,000 Lankan captives and took an additional 12,000 Cholas as prisoners from the Chola Kingdom (present-day Tamil Nadu) against the Chola King. Moreover, it had been mentioned that when he returned to Sri Lanka he brought the jeweled anklets of the goddess Pattini, the insignia of the gods of the four devala (Vishnu, Natha, Kataragama, Pattini), and also the bowl-relic which had been stolen in the time of king Valagama. Some devotees merge this event with those mentioned in the *Silappadikaram* by claiming that Gajabahu then built a *devala* (temple) in his capital where he deposited the anklet. In some folklores, it is mentioned that the original anklets of Goddess Pattini, which was brought to Sri Lanka by King Gajabahu have been deposited at the Navagamuwa Pattini Devalaya, and that is considered as the initiation point in which worshipping of Goddess Pattini has originated in Sri Lanka. But the most valid and acceptable event as mentioned in the translation of the epic *Sillappadikaran* is that King Gajabahu's return to Lanka along with the treasures of Chola and the capture of prisoners occurred when he attended the dedication of the first shrine to Goddess Pattini in the Chera (Present-day Kerala) Kingdom of King Senguttuvan (Serawan).

In addition to these, it is a common belief that the next era in which Goddess Pattini was greatly honored was during the reign of King Parakramabhahu the 6th. As stated in the 17th Stanza of the *Kokila Sandeshaya*, a massive palace of three stories dedicated to Goddess Pattini has been built with the patronage of King Parakramabhahu the 6th.

Conferring to many historical texts, even though the first Pattini devalaya has been built during the reign of King Gajabahu, the origin of the systematic worshipping of Goddess Pattini has started during the reign of King Parakramabhahu the 6th. It has also been specified that the Pattini cult has been stabilized in our country during the reign of King Parakramabhahu the 6th. In addition to those, folks mention that there is evidence about the Pattini cult in Sri Lanka during the reign of King Seethawa Rajasinghe too. Moreover, legends state that King Mayadunne too paid royal patronage to spread the Pattini cult in Sri Lanka. A statue of Goddess Pattini had been first found in coastal areas of Trincomalee-Batticalo regions⁷.

There are many mythologies associated with the birth of Goddess Pattini. Goddess Pattini is referred to as Sath (Seven) Pattini and Dolos (Twelve) Pattini considering the belief that she was born seven and twelve times respectively, according to the folklores. (Malagoda, 2020). The most common belief is that Goddess Pattini has seven origins. The myths associated with the devala kapumathwarun about the birth of Goddess Pattini vary greatly. They mention that the origin of Goddess Pattini is from a mango, a demata (*Gmelina asiatica*) flower, from a volcano, from the tears of a cobra, from a rain droplet, from water, etc⁶. (Obeysekere, 2008)

Based on the *Mahawamsa*, the Pattini cult has been introduced to Sri Lanka sometime after the 5th century. Therefore, a more plausible implication is that the Pattini cult was introduced to Sri Lanka, sometime after the 10th century, by King Serawan of Kerala. As mentioned in the *Mahawamsa*, there is no indication about a Pattini cult in Lanka, whereas it suggests that it was only introduced sometime after the 5th century. The historical texts such as the *Rajaratnakara* and *Rajavaliya* which have been written in the 16th and 17th centuries respectively stating about a Pattini cult can be shown as the reason behind this. Therefore, a more plausible implication is that the Pattini cult was introduced to Sri Lanka, sometime after the 10th century, by colonials from Kerala.

It is believed that all the major gods and most of the minor gods are aspirants to the future Buddha-hood, thereby they are known as Boddhisattva. Therefore, Goddess Pattini too is known as a Bodhisattva. The reason behind this belief in Buddhists is due to her kind, actions towards God Shakra, the good Samaritan as stated in many Buddhist stories¹¹. The gods and goddesses considered as Boddhisattvas is also a great example that shows the synergism in between Hindu and (Theravada) Buddhism.

As Goddess Pattini is considered and worshiped by the devotees as the guardian goddess of health and fertility, many people seek blessings from Goddess Pattini to conceive children and to protect the children from diseases. (especially diseases such as smallpox which is referred to as *deiyange lede* - the divine affliction).

Discussion

There are three main types of Buddhism. They are Theravada (*Theravāda*), Mahayana (*Mahāyāna*) and Vajrayana (*Vajrayāna*)⁹. *Mahayana and Vajrayana had been established few centuries after Theravada Buddhism.* Although, Goddess Pattini is worshiped by Buddhists all over the island the origin of Goddess Pattini is South Indian. Devotion towards Goddess Pattini is a great

example of Hindu-Buddhist synergism in Sri Lanka. The rituals and practices followed by the devotees vary between the two religions, and regionally.

Pattini-Kannaki is also a mesmerizing and multifaceted example of womanhood. The word Pattini itself means chaste woman, in Sanskrit. The main historical Tamil literature that includes many details about Kannaki - Pattini is the *Seelappadikaran*, written by the great author Ilango Adigaal during the period of 500 -800 AD. The word *Seelappadikaran*, itself means the tale of the anklet. As stated in that text, Kannaki was the wife of the wealthy merchant, Kovalan. This text emphasizes on how a woman can be venerated in society due to her chastity and undying devotion towards her husband.

Conferring to the *Manimekhela* which is another important text similar to the *Seelappadikaran*, Kannaki is worshiped as Goddess Pattini in the Sri Lankan culture. Furthermore, according to this text, Kannaki was a Buddhist female.

Although, many folklores including the Silappadikaran bear similar ideas regarding the Pattini cult, some information mentioned in the historical texts such as *Mahawamsa* and *Deepawamsa* are quite contradictory. According to the texts *Mahawamsa* and *Deepawamsa*, there is no reference based on King Gajagabhu visiting South India⁷.

A shrine dedicated to a deity is known as a devalaya while Priests known as kapuralas, who is similar to an Indian *poosari* are responsible to carry out the rituals at the devala. They are assigned to make offerings to the Devalaya, for they act as a messenger between the devotee seeking the blessings and the relevant god¹¹. The concept of devala-worship has been originated in the Polonnaruwa era while at present it has become a vital part of Buddhist observances.⁷

Almsgiving for mothers, also known as *Kiri Ammavarunge Danaya*, *Gammadu* (A traditional postharvest dance item performed anticipating peace and prosperity), *Gini pegeema* (Trampling of fire, representing the control of the element fire) Traditional games such as *An keli*, *Pora keli*, *Olinda keli*, *Onchili keli*, *Lee keli* are few ritualistic activities associated with Goddess Pattini^{7,8}.

Navagamuva Pattini devalaya, Kaduwela Sri Rankadu Pattini devalaya, Pattini devalaya at Korathota Rjamaha Viharaya, and Pattini devalaya within Dalada Maligawa premises are a few popular shrines dedicated to Goddess Pattini found in Sri Lanka².

During this study, it was evident that there are diverse misconceptions among people based on the Pattini cult and the Hindu-Buddhist synergism based on that. However, the study focuses on the most plausible beliefs on the Pattini cult and how the Pattini cult builds a synergism between Hinduism and Buddhism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that the origin of Goddess Pattini is South Indian, yet she is venerated by Buddhists and Hindus all over the island. Upon studying the Ceylon genealogy, folklores, etc. it is clear that The Pattini cult which had been originated in South India had now crossed borders and had been established in other countries including Sri Lanka and it occupies a supreme position in Sinhalese and their folk rituals

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