

Mariyamman

Mariyamman is a goddess that is primarily worshiped in Southern India among the Tamil speaking people. She used to be associated with the disease smallpox, but since its elimination she has become associated with other diseases. [For more information on smallpox and its effect on India see Egnor (1984)]. In Tamil Nadu folk etymology, Mariyamman's name can be taken from *maru* 'she with a changed body' or 'she in her many manifestations' (Voorthuizen 254). *Mari* can also mean "rain" as well as "changed", which are why she is also referred to as "the changed mother" or "the rain mother" (Egnor 31). It is believed that she possess a power that is able to cure people even if they seem too ill, as well as to help people overcome other adversities that they may face. The majority of people that turn to her belong to the lower castes but she does assist all classes (Egnor 25). She also deals more with women and problems of fertility but she is also available to men when they need it. Many people continue to worship Mariyamman in order to stay on her good side so that she won't turn against them and their loved ones. She has often even been described as "bloodthirsty" and is still to this day described as a "wild" goddess (Younger 493). Mariyamman shares many characteristics with Sitala, the north Indian smallpox goddess. [See Dasa (1995) for more on Sitala]. Mariyamman is on par with the other major deities in the area, in terms of her popularity, status, wealth and authority (Egnor 25).

Mariyamman was once thought to have inhabited villages or small towns in Tamil Nadu and to have lived among poor rural migrants in urban areas. At one point it was only low-caste priests that worshiped her, but since then her popularity has grown among the middle-class. To the villagers of Tamil Nadu, Mariyamman is their local deity who protects them against disease and misfortune. Statues of her stand guard at the borders of the villages and protect the people against unwelcome visitors (Voorthuizen 250). Sometimes Mariyamman can be represented as a

black figure protected by a cobra; other times she has the head of a Brahman, but the body of an untouchable (Voorthuizen 250).

There are many stories that are tied to Mariyamman and how she is associated with smallpox. She can be both the cause and the cure of the disease. When she is the cause, it is believed to be an act of anger or revenge for improper worship. The disease can also be seen as demons that Mariyamman protects the village from (Voorthuizen 251). Some people believe that Mariyamman manifests herself in the symptoms of smallpox. It is believed that being infected with the disease means being possessed by the goddess. The pocks on the skin are said to be visible signs of her presence and are considered to be her eyes (Voorthuizen 251). The pocks can also be considered to be “pearls”, bestowed by Mariyamman, or “kisses” (Egnor 26). It is thought that her looks can burn her worshipper’s skin and form deep pockmarks. In some stories Mariyamman herself suffers from smallpox, she walks among the villagers as an old woman with a face covered with many pock-like sores (Voorthuizen 251). Some people also believe that Mariyamman is the disease itself and any attempt to remove that disease will only anger her and make it worse (Egnor 25).

Mariyamman has many temples in which worshippers can come to. The temple in Samayapuram has one of the largest incomes and attendances. It is already one of the wealthiest in Tamil Nadu. It even surpasses its ancient and famous neighbor, the Vaisnava temple in Srirangam (Waghorne 232). Temple officials even claim that Mariyamman is the third wealthiest temple deity in India. The complex consists of the main temple, which is dedicated to Mariyamman, and six other smaller temples that are dedicated to other deities. This complex is constantly under renovation in order to hold the large amount of worshippers that visit it daily (Younger 494). Most of the worshippers that come to Samayapuram come from the neighboring

city of Tirucirapalli. Worshippers come to this temple to ask Mariyamman to help with problems of fertility, sickness, marital and job problems. The reason that people come from Tirucirapalli is because they “see her as a deity who, like themselves, did not enjoy the respect of learned Brahmanas or kings of old, and does not win the approval of missionaries or the support of westernized civil servants today” (Younger 501). Mariyamman is believed to have stood up to their disrespect and because of that “ they feel that she alone can understand their individual problems, can provide a sense of unity and identity by tying together the jumble of lower castes which make up their society, can give them a sense of continuity with the village roots they still carry with them, and through those roots can tie them to the larger order of the cosmos” (Younger 501).

Another popular temple devoted to Mariyamman is located in a city called Camiyaporam. This temple also attracts a large amount of worshippers. The temple used to conduct blood sacrifices but since the Brahmin’s took control of the temple, it is no longer allowed. The images that are strewn about the temples make Mariyamman look more like a high deity. She is depicted with a white face in a sitting position, holding a cup of blood, which symbolizes the skull, as well as a dagger (Voorthuizen 250). These objects are meant to symbolize her fierceness.

There are many different festivals that are held each year in honor of Mariyamman. The month of *Adi*, the dry period of July-August, is when the festivals meant to honor Mariyamman generally occur. [See Egnor (1984) for more on *Adi*]. One of them is a flower festival, held in Pudukkottai. During this festival men and women dress in bright yellow saris and walk for miles carrying pots while families give offerings on bamboo poles. Some even shave off all their hair, while others dance ecstatically and fling themselves around (Waghorne 232). These are just a few of the things you would see during the flower festival. In another Mariyamman festival, in

Narttamalai, the managers of a motorcycle plant, along with other businesses, have transformed the old festival into something new. Floats now carry proper *utsava murti* (portable bronze images) of goddesses on lotus buds (Waghorne 232). These floats and the people who come to see them, crowd along the old road that leads to the ancient Mariyamman temple-complex. One of the biggest festivals in honor of Mariyamman is held in Samayapuram. Approximately one hundred thousand worshippers attend this annual festival (Younger 494). During the second week of April, the road leading up to the temple is packed with people camping on the side of the road (Younger 495). Huge offering boxes become stuffed so full so quickly that a temple official has to stand nearby with a rake, pushing the money and jewelry into the box (Younger 495). This festival starts about a mile or two away from the temple and the trek consists of a hurried walk or dance that the people perform. They continue up the road towards the temple while other worshippers stand on the side of the road and watch. The intensity of the dancing builds up gradually until the worshippers reach the temple (Younger 496). From there they make offerings and gradually move onto the main shrine to worship the goddess (Younger 496). Each person performs their own kind of worship that is different from the others. Some people put themselves through a special ordeal and have a sacred weapon inserted through their cheeks or tongue. [For more information on this practice see Younger (1980)]. Some go even farther and build an elaborate shrine structure around them and anchor it to their skin by thirty or forty wires (Younger 496). Others come suspended by wires from a great boom mounted on a bullock cart and swing far above the crowd (Younger 496). To have your child touched or carried by one of these people is an important blessing. One person usually plays the role of the leader by dancing ahead and leading the party up the road toward the temple. In behind that person comes drummers that set a constant beat, two other people hold the Vowkeeper. [For more on the Vowkeeper and his position see

Younger (1980)]. Others follow carrying water that they constantly throw over the head of the Vowkeeper (Younger 496). The movements of the worshippers are always sporadic. Worshippers cluster around women who have gone into a trance and claim to be “possessed” by Mariyamman (Younger 497). Once at the temple these women stand inside and out, telling fortunes to people that are walking past. The point of the festival is to reaffirm village and caste roots, as well as to associate Mariyamman of past heritage with present problems of the city (Younger 504). While the festival is considered to be old, it is the new temple renovations and the “new” power of the goddess that the audience talks about (Younger 504).

Clearly it is hard to label Mariyamman as just a goddess of smallpox when she is associated with so many other things. Her popularity has grown over the past from lower class worshippers to higher class Brahmins. Mariyamman’s popularity, the amount of her devotees and the amount of wealth spent in her worship does not seem to be dependent on the prevalence or even the existence of the smallpox disease (Egnor 27). Although there has been an increase in her popularity there is still very little literature that is connected with her. It is very clear that she is and always will be an important aspect of the Tamil speaking people’s daily lives and that she helps to bring a sense of identity to all her worshippers (Younger 495).

Bibliography and Further Recommended Readings

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<http://www.experiencefestival.com/mariyamman>

<http://www.themystica.com/mythical-folk/~articles/m/mariyamman.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariyamman>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samayapuram_Mariamman_Temple

http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/woman_in_india/47978

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