



Sacred Complexes as Centers of National Integration: A Case Study of the Kaveri Basin Area of Karnataka

Dr. Mahadeva Siddaiah

Research Assistant, Department of Studies in Anthropology, University of Mysore, Mysuru, Karnataka, India; e-mail: madhutibbi@gmail.com

KEYWORDS

Kaveri River, Sacred river complex, pilgrimage, sociocultural integration, South India.

ABSTRACT

Though there were a few anthropological studies on sacred complexes in India after the pioneering study of Gaya by L. P. Vidyarthi there was no such study on any sacred river complex. The studies so far conducted focused only on the interactions between pilgrims and religious specialists. The present study was conducted covering nine pilgrimage centers on the sacred river complex of the Kaveri river spread over at last three linguistic areas. This study focuses on the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the pilgrims and the local people and the sectarian diversities of the specialists. This study shows that these pilgrimage centres on the sacred river complexes act as centres of integration for the diverse linguistic, cultural and religious groups of the Hindus.

Introduction

Places of pilgrimage in Hindu tradition have been the subject of study by social scientists for a long time. Anthropologists, geographers and indologists have studied pilgrim centers from different theoretical perspectives (Bhardwaj, 1973; Mosinis, 1984; Bharati, 1963). Some anthropologists have analyzed the functional significance of pilgrimage and described it as a source of 'great traditional' knowledge and a force of socio-cultural integration (Opler, 1956, Cohn and Merriott, 1958; Vidyarthi, 1961; Srinivas, 1967; Karve 1962; Jaer, 1994). The earlier authors have selected only a few pilgrim centers, especially from the Gangetic belt. They focused on the interaction between pilgrims and religious specialists and treated it as the meeting of the great and little traditions of Indian civilization. The interactions occurring between pilgrims and between pilgrims and local people in the pilgrim centers were not highlighted in the previous studies. The linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the pilgrims and the common people living around the sacred centers had also to be looked into in order to understand the role of pilgrimage in bringing unity in India's diverse cultural traditions.

Kashi, Gaya, Prayag, Ayodhya, Badrinath, Hardwar and Mathura in North India; Nasik in Central India; Ujjain in Western India; Kamakhya in Eastern India; and Talakaveri, Bhagamandala, T. Narasipur, Tanjore and Sri Rangam in Southern India are a number of famous pilgrim centers located on the banks of sacred rivers.

L. P. Vidyarthi was the pioneer Indian anthropologist who initiated the study of sacred complexes in India (1961). He started the work in the early fifties first under the guidance

of D. N. Majumdar and later under the guidance of Robert Redfield. Vidyarthi's study on Gaya is a classic work in Indian anthropology. Initially he used the approach of functional analysis and later expanded the theoretical framework using the civilizational approach of the Chicago School. Concepts such as great and little traditions, network, universalization and parochialization are used by Vidyarthi and other anthropologists to describe the sacred centers as parts of Indian civilization. Some outstanding contributions were made by Indian anthropologists in the latter half of the 20th Century to the study of places like Kashi (Vidyarthi, 1979; Simha and Saraswathi, 1978), Persi (Patnaik, 1977), Jamalepur (Jha, 1971).

Sacred complexes in the Kaveri basin area

In the present study an attempt is made to describe the role of some of the pilgrimage centers in the basin area of the sacred river complex of the Kaveri River and its tributaries in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

Karnataka

Talakaveri and Bhagamandala (Kodagu District): People in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala consider the Kaveri as the mother of all people and a symbol of prosperity. The river originates in the Brahmagiri Hills at a height of 4440 feet above sea level. The place is known as Tala Kaveri (i.e. the base of the Kaveri). The place is associated with Agasthya, a great sage of Hindu mythology. The sage is believed to be of Tamil origin and his wife Kaveri is of local origin. Thus, we find that even the mythology associated with the Kaveri illustrates inter-community marital ties. After flowing for about 8 kms the Kaveri is joined by the Kannika and the Sujyothi (which is not visible) forming a Triveni Sangama (a popular concept in India which indicates the meeting place of three rivers). The place is known as Bhagamandala. The place is also known as the Prayag of South India (Dakshina Prayag). It is also the first Sangam place in the Kaveri basin area. Similarities are drawn between Prayag and Bhagamandala as both these places are popular for performing death rituals. Kaveri is the family deity of all the Kodavas as the river goddess had blessed them with progeny and prosperity. The Kodavas believe that they were the first to welcome the river goddess when she was born and flowed as a river in Kodagu.

Tula Sankramana, which falls in mid October every year marking the Southward movement of the Sun, is the biggest festival of Tala Kaveri. It attracts pilgrims from all the three southern states of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. About five hundred thousand people gather on that day to take a holy dip in the river.

Shivalli Brahmans of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi Districts are the priests in the temples located in Talakaveri and Bhagamandala Their mother tongue is Tulu, a Dravidian language. The main organizers of the festival are the Kodavas and the Okkaligas. Members of several castes of the region also participate in the organization of fairs in the temples.

Ramanathapura (Hassan District): It is situated in the Hassan district of Karnataka and is a Shaiva and Vaishnava centre. The temples of Shri Rama, Shiva, Subrahmanya and Agasthya are located here. Sanketi Brahmans from Madurai in Tamil Nadu migrated to this place about one thousand years ago and became the priests of the temples here. Hoysala Karnataka Brahmans of the Smartha sect are also involved in priestly work in these temples.

Ramanavami, the birth day of Shri Rama is celebrated here every year, which attracts pilgrims from several places in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

Sri Rangapatna(Mandya District): This is a famous historical place as it was ruled by several kings in the past such as Hoysala King Udayaditya, the Vijayanagara Kings, the Mysore Kings, Hyder Ali and Tippu and finally by the British. An island is formed here due to the cleavage of the Kaveri Rivers. This is the first of three such islands of the Kaveri basin area.

Ranganatha is the presiding deity of the temple here. Vaikunta Ekadashi is the annual fair of this temple which attracts thousands of people from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. It is also a Vaishnava center. The pilgrims believe that if they visit this temple, they could go to heaven after death. Death rituals are also performed here throughout the year on the banks of the river where it flows to the western side. Madhwas of Karnataka origin and Shri Vaishnavas of Tamil Nadu origin perform the priestly jobs in the temple and the ghat in this sacred center.

The place also attracts a large number of Muslims as Tippu and his father Hyder Ali were buried here after their death.

Tirumakoodalu Narasipura(Mysore District): This sacred center is also known as Dakshina Kashi, that is, the kashi of South India. It is a trijunction (Triveni Sangama), that is a junction of three rivers viz., the Kapila, the Kaveri and the invisible Shpatikatheertha. The pilgrims who visit this place, especially for the Kumbhamela fair, believe that after the sacred bath in the river they will gain punya (Sanskrit: "merit"). A three-day's Kumbhamela was held here in February 2000, when over fifty thousand pilgrims from all the four South Indian states took the holy dip since then it is held once every on four years.

The presiding deity of this place is Shiva popularly known as Agastheshwara as it was established by the great sage Agasthya of Tamil origin. Since it is a Shaiva centre, death rituals are not performed here

Tamilnadu

Bhavani (Erode District): This sacred centre is situated in the Erode District of Tamil Nadu. This is also a trijunction (the fifth one) of three rivers the Bhavani, the Kaveri and the invisible Amrutanava. Hence it is named Mukkudal in Tamil. The presiding deities of the Bhavani are Shiva, Parvathi and their son Subrahmanya. About half of the pilgrims of this place are from Karnataka. The Devangas, the traditional weavers of Karnataka, migrated to this place in large numbers in the past. Later, it became an important textile center of Tamil Nadu. The place is famous for the removal of various types of doshas such as the Nagadosha. The Iyengars are the sacred performers of the sacred centers of the Bhavani.

Sri Rangam (Tirichina Palli District): This is the most important of one hundred eight sacred centers of the Sri Vaishnavas in South India. Ranganathas is the presiding deity of this temple. This is the last island formation in the Kaveri River. Sri Vaishnava pilgrims attend this center in large numbers. They believe that death in this place will take them to Vaikunta, the abode of Sri Ranga in heaven. There are about five thousand Sri Vaishnava families residing in this island permanently, and about four thousand families are Madhwas from Karnataka. On Vaikunta Ekadashi day about fifteen

hundred thousand pilgrims visit this temple. The priests of this temple belong to the Sri Vaishnava sect which was founded by Sri Ramanujacharya.

Tanjore (Tanjore District): A famous Shiva temple is found here which was built by a Chola King who was suffering from leprosy. It is believed that in order to get rid of the dreaded disease he built the temple. The Smartha Iyers are the priests of the temple.

Tanjore is also famous for performing arts such as music and dance. These are usually performed in the temples. Thus the temples have been promoting the five arts for a long time in Tamil Nadu. Such performances also attract people from different places.

Kumbhakonam (Tanjore District): Shiva and Vishnu are the two important presiding deities of this place. A Kumbhamela fair is held here once in 12 years. More than five hundred thousand people took a holy dip in the Kumbhamela held in March 2016. Iyer priests are employed in the Shiva temple whereas Iyengar ones are employed in the Vishnu temple. Migrants from Saurashtra are settled here in large numbers.

Poombuhar (Mayavaram District): The last of the sacred center in the Kaveri basin area is located here. The Kaveri River after traversing 805 kms joins the Bay of Bengal in this place.

Conclusion:

People belonging to all Hindu castes participate in the organization of various rituals, festivals and other sacred performances in the Mudukuthore temple complex. Everybody in the region contributes in cash and kind for the maintenance of the temple. The temple is an integrator of Hindu society. Modernization of the society and globalization of the market has not affected the role of the sacred complexes in Hindu society.

References

- Bharati, A. (1963) "Pilgrimage in the Indian Tradition", *History of Religions*, Vol.3, No.1,
- Bhardwaj, S. M. (1973). *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cohn, B. S. and Mc.Kim M. (1958) "Networks and Centers in the Integration of Indian Civilization", *Journal of Social Research* 1(1):1-9.
- Jaer, O. (1994) "Pilgrimage as a Source of Knowledge: the Kumbh Mela of Prayag Raj". *The Eastern Anthropologist* (47)1:15-38.
- Karve, I. (1961) *Hindu Society: An Interpretation*, Poona: Deccan College.
- Morimis, E. A. (1984) *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Opler, M. E. (1956) "Sacred Centre and Symbolic Networks in South Asia" *The Mankind Quarterly* 20(3-4):259-293.
- Saraswathi, B. N, (1985). "Sociology of Religion". In *Survey of Research in Sociology and Social Anthropology, 1969-1979*, ICSSR, New Delhi.
- Srini, M. N. (1952) *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*. Bombay: Asian Publishing House.
- Vidyarthi, L. P, (1961) *The Sacred Complex in Hindu Gaya*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.