SANSKRITIZATION IN CLASSIFICATION AND ROLES PLAYED BY PRIESTS IN HINDU TEMPLES IN MALAYSIA*

MANIMARAN SUBRAMANIAM

Department of Indian Studies
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Malaya

M.N. Srinivas, first introduced the concept of *Sanskritization* to describe cultural and social change among the Coorgs of South India. The term was used to explain the integration of Coorgs into Indian society through their adoption of various Sanskrit-based beliefs and practices. It referred to caste mobility, where the Coorgs attempted to raise their caste status by observing various rules of behavior as defined in Sanskritic scriptures and practised by Brahmins. Overall, Sanskritization has provided some insights into changes in contemporary Indian society and limited analytical tools for complex historical material.

Problem raised by Carroll and some other ethnographers has found the concept to be too contrived and cumbersome in their analyses of village Hinduism. Even Sharma has expressed dissatisfaction with the Sanskritic/non-Sanskritic dichotomy since it fragments a villagers religious experiences into rigid categories.

It is necessary to clarify the characteristics of Sanskritic Hinduism as an indication of what the process of Sanskritization entails. Sanskritic Hinduism is characterized by a large body of sacred literature such as the Vedas, Upanisads and Agamas. Sanskritic rituals are normally prescribed and performed by Brahminical priests or those who claim high ritual status.

These working definitions suggest that Sanskritization involves a process of transformation not only in rituals sphere but also in lifestyle and beliefs in the model of All-India Hinduism.

The Sanskritization process applies not only to Indian immigrants in other countries but also to Indians in Peninsular Malaysia.

The most conspicuous aspect of Hindu social life is the devotees participation in daily rituals and of special pujas conducted at shrines and temples throughout Malaysia. Aveling in her case study classified them into four types i.e. cathedrals , community temples, caste temples and crisis shrines. Similar to Aveling s case study, R. Rajoo categorized shrines and temples as two types namely those that are supported by the general Hindu public known as potuk-kovil and those that are supported by a particular social group (Cettiyars and Srilankan Tamils). R. Rajoo mentions that there are shrines/miniature temples maintained by individual devotees or families as one s personal or family god.

Cathedrals are controlled by a particular caste and regional group as some of the temples in the main city in Peninsular Malaysia are managed by Cettiyars, Ceylonese Tamils and committees comprising individuals.

Cettiyars are mainly the business class people and traders in towns and cities. Since British time they have been involved in money lending business. This group of people emphasizes the worship of major deity Lord Subramanya . They are not attached to other deity except Lord Subramanya and this is the community that supports the temple proceedings.

Ceylonese Tamils were originally from Jaffna that came into Malaysia during the British time and worked as administrators and officers at Railway Departments. They lived in major towns. They built temples for their community that only prayed to major deities such as Lord Shiva , Lord Vinayagar and Lord Subramanya .

As more and more people are attracted to shrines, committees are formed to raise money to turn the shrines into community temples, some of which may eventually become cathedral-like in structure. Community temples are then transformed into cathedrals either by the efforts of the local devotees or by government intervention.

Members of the public manage the community temples. This kind of temple can be found in both town areas and estates. Many of the temples were first established as crisis shrines, nestled under large trees thought to be sacred or located strategically on some street corner where miraculous events have allegedly occurred. Some of these temples are dedicated to minor deities such as Maariyamman, Kali, Muniswaran and Muniandy.

As mentioned by Aveling regarding caste temples and crisis shrines and by R. Rajoo about temples owned by individuals and families, some of these temples are still undergoing crisis.

Members of the public take over temples that are undergoing change in administration and crisis and those that are being reconstructed.

Temples in Malaysia are classified into three categories:

    i.   Agamic Worship is held on the Brahminical model, and rituals are conducted according to agamic tradition, and temple structures are built according to Agamas;

    ii.   Semi-agamic Worship is held on partial Brahminical model and rituals are conducted according to agamic tradition and the temple structures are built according to basic Agamas ;

    iii.   Non-agamic Worship is conducted on the basis of village tradition, and the temple is built like shrines. These temples are dedicated to minor deities such as Muniandy, Muniswaran and Maariyamman.

When the temples are reconstructed, semi-agamic and non-agamic temples are transformed into agamic temples. Hindu devotees anticipate a trained priest to conduct rituals based on Agamas. Since the agamic text is all based on Sanskrit language, the major process of Sanskritization duly takes place.

Priest is an important person in Hindu rituals. He plays the role of mediator between devotees and God in respect of all Hindu religious rituals in temples. Priests are also known as *arccakar* or *puusaari* amongst Hindus in Malaysia. These priests have been classified into three different categories based on their caste, qualification and commitment and are known as *Gurukkal, Pandaaram* and *Puusaari*. Sanskritization process has taken place amongst priests in respect of temple rituals and prayers.

Gurukkal

A qualified priest is known as Gurukkal. Gurukkal is a skillful person in conducting rituals based on religion in temples as well as at home. The term Gurukkal can only be used by a qualified priest who has received his qualification from an institute known as **Veda Agama Paadasaalai**. The title Gurukkal is inherited by

a Brahmin family, although they have no qualification from any institution. The priest who is known as Gurukkal is categorized into two groups i.e. Brahmin Gurukkal and non-brahmin Gurukkal.

Brahmin Gurukkal

Brahmin groups are divided into two main categories, i.e. *pancha-gauda* and *pancha-dravida* . In Malaysia the priests are from panca-dravida groups. They are from Tamil Nadu, India. The pancha-dravida priest is better known as Aiyar and Gurukkal.

Brahmin priests who belong to groups with beliefs that differ from those generally accepted are known by different names such as:

1)   Civaacaariyar Brahmin priests who follow Saivism

2)   Pattaaccaariyar Brahmin priests who follow Vaishnavism

Brahmin Gurukkal in Malaysia are from Saivism group and of Dravida origin. A brahmin priest who is an expert and skillful in Vaishnava agamam is known as Vaishnava Agamaacaariyar whereas a brahmin priest who is an expert and skillful in Saiva Agamam is known as Saiva Agamaacaariyar . They have been trained by and are qualified from Veda/Agama Paadasaalai (an institute that provides education on Agamas and Vedas).

Rituals that are conducted in temples and at home are based on Saiva-Agamam, Yajur Vedam and Sama-Vedam. A Saivite priest who concentrates more on temple rituals and astrology is known as Purokitar.

Due to the shortage of qualified local priests, priests are hired on contract from South India. Hindus believe that when a brahmin priest conducts rituals in temples, the rituals bring them good effect and that their prayers are answered. They strongly believe that the priest is able to perform temple rituals based on Agama texts.
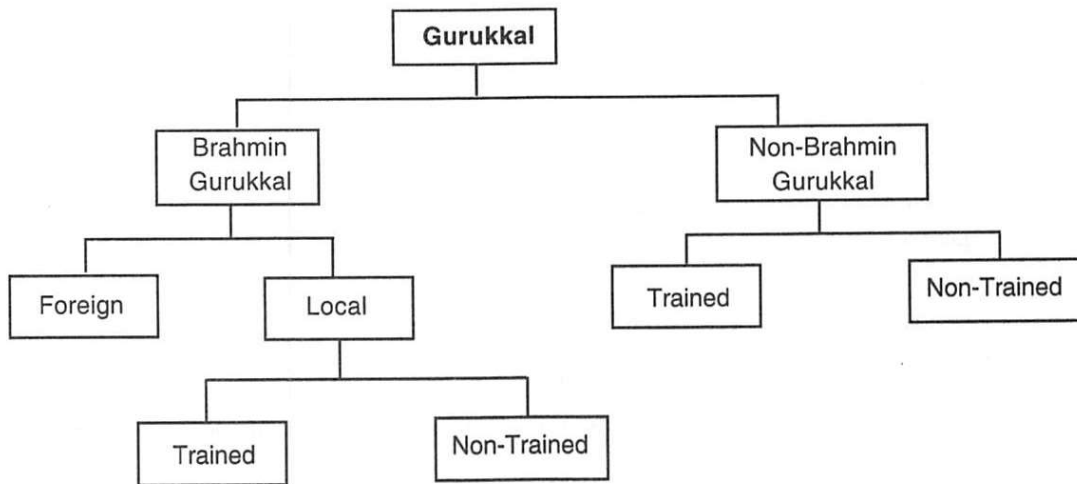
Non-Brahmin Gurukkal

Some of the priests are known as Gurukkal although they are not from the Brahminical caste. They are categorized into two groups i.e. trained and non-trained.

There are only few trained priests from the non Brahminical caste. They take the initiative to attend courses held at the Veda Paadasaalai. This priest will be known as Sivaacaariyar if they complete the full course. Some of them serve as full-time priests whereas some priests are only able to help out during auspicious rituals that are conducted in temples and homes.

The non-trained priest has attended some basic courses conducted by Hindu organizations in Malaysia or by a trained priest. This group of priests can only conduct basic rituals at temples and homes. Most of them introduce themselves as Gurukkal. This is done in order to gain status and respect among Hindus in Malaysia.

Majority of the Hindus in Malaysia do not know the different classes of priest as for them those who wear puunuul (sacred string) is known as Gurukkal. Puunuul is known as sacred string worn permanently on the body diagonally by Brahmins and non-Brahmins after receiving initiation by a trained Eremitical priest.

Diagram below shows the classes of Gurukkal.

```
                           ┌──────────┐
                           │ Gurukkal │
                           └────┬─────┘
              ┌─────────────────┴─────────────────┐
       ┌──────────────┐                    ┌──────────────┐
       │   Brahmin    │                    │ Non-Brahmin  │
       │   Gurukkal   │                    │   Gurukkal   │
       └──────┬───────┘                    └──────┬───────┘
        ┌─────┴─────┐                      ┌──────┴──────┐
   ┌─────────┐ ┌─────────┐            ┌─────────┐  ┌──────────────┐
   │ Foreign │ │  Local  │            │ Trained │  │ Non-Trained  │
   └─────────┘ └────┬────┘            └─────────┘  └──────────────┘
              ┌─────┴──────┐
         ┌─────────┐  ┌──────────────┐
         │ Trained │  │ Non-Trained  │
         └─────────┘  └──────────────┘
```
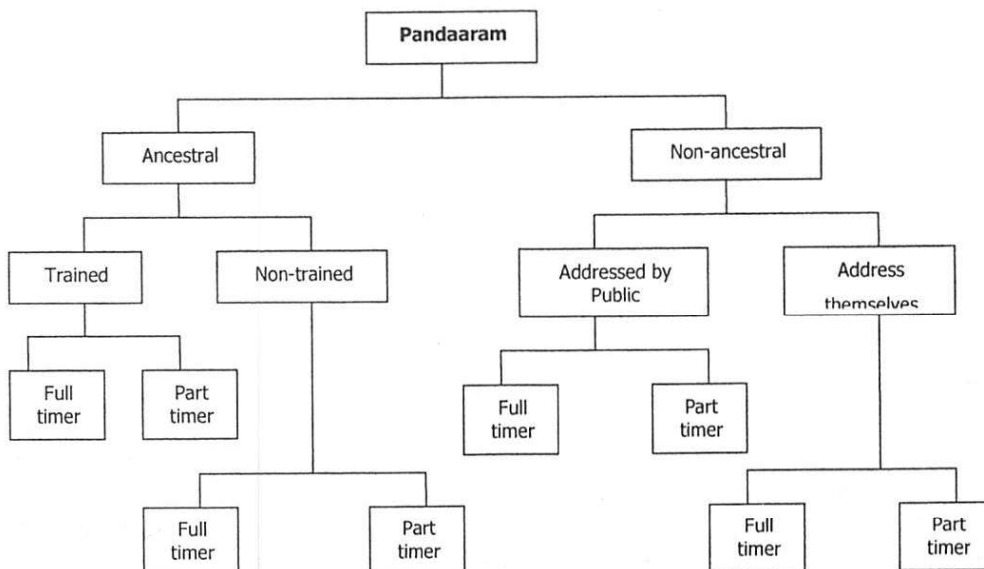
Pandaaram

Pandaarams are the priests that are not from the Brahmin caste, but are popular among the Hindus in Malaysia as they conduct rituals in temples and homes. They do not have knowledge of Saiva Agamam and Veda but are able to conduct daily rituals in temples especially for kiraama theyvam (village deities). This Pandaarams are known as Apiceka Pandaaram .

There are two categories of Pandaarams in Malaysia. The first category of Pandaaram has been serving from generation to generation, and the second category of Pandaaram is not from the Pandaaram caste. Pandaarams from the first category can be classified into trained and non-trained. Most of the Pandaarams from this category have been serving as full time and part-time priests in temples. There are Pandaarams who gain knowledge from ancestral practices and they serve as either a full-time or part-time priests. There are Pandaarams in Malaysia, who serve in temples in urban areas and community temples in rural areas owned by Cettiyars.

Priests from the second category are not from the Pandaaram caste. They are addressed as Pandaaram by public. Some of them introduce themselves as Pandaaram. This is done in order to gain status and respect. There are some Pandaarams who serve as full-timers and part-timers.

Diagram below shows the category of Pandaaram.

```
                              ┌────────────┐
                              │ Pandaaram  │
                              └─────┬──────┘
               ┌────────────────────┴────────────────────┐
         ┌────────────┐                          ┌───────────────┐
         │ Ancestral  │                          │ Non-ancestral │
         └─────┬──────┘                          └───────┬───────┘
        ┌──────┴───────┐                         ┌───────┴────────┐
   ┌─────────┐  ┌──────────────┐         ┌──────────────┐  ┌─────────────┐
   │ Trained │  │ Non-trained  │         │ Addressed by │  │   Address   │
   └────┬────┘  └──────┬───────┘         │   Public     │  │ themselves  │
        │              │                 └──────┬───────┘  └──────┬──────┘
   ┌────┴────┐    ┌────┴────┐            ┌───────┴──────┐   ┌──────┴──────┐
┌──────┐ ┌──────┐ ...              ┌──────┐ ┌──────┐  ┌──────┐ ┌──────┐
│ Full │ │ Part │                  │ Full │ │ Part │  │ Full │ │ Part │
│timer │ │timer │                  │timer │ │timer │  │timer │ │timer │
└──────┘ └──────┘                  └──────┘ └──────┘  └──────┘ └──────┘
        ┌──────┐ ┌──────┐
        │ Full │ │ Part │
        │timer │ │timer │
        └──────┘ └──────┘
```

Puusaari

A priest who is neither from Brahmin nor Pandaaram generation is known as Puusaari . The majority of them do not wear puunuul and they serve in temples such as Dewi Maariyamman and conduct special rituals in temples. There are Puusaari s who serve as assistants to either a Gurukkal or Pandaaram in main temples.

Most of the Puusaari do not have knowledge of Agamam and Veda. Rituals conducted by them are based on knowledge gained from a Brahmin Gurukkal and Pandaaram. In Malaysia, Puusaari can be categorized into three groups:

a) Priest who works as Puusaari from generation to generation.

b) Puusaari who has attended few courses

c) Priest who became a Puusaari due to situation and circumstances or his own desire.

In these three categories there are full timers, part timers and assistant Puusaari .

The third category Puusaari are those who work as part-timers. In this category there are female Pusari known as Puusaari ammaa who do not know how to conduct rituals based on Agamam. Rituals conducted by them include lighting an oil lamp, camphor and ringing the bell. Puusaari who play the role of a mediator are known as saamiyaati (male) and saamiyaati ammaa (female).

Malaysian youths who are interested to conduct rituals in temples should attend courses conducted for priest organized by Hindu Dharma organization and Malaysian Hindu organizations. Majority of Hindu followers in Malaysia do not know how to differentiate the classes of Puusaari All priests other than Brahmin Gurukkal or qualified Gurukkal are known as Puusaari .

Diagram below shows the categories and the different classes of Puusaari .
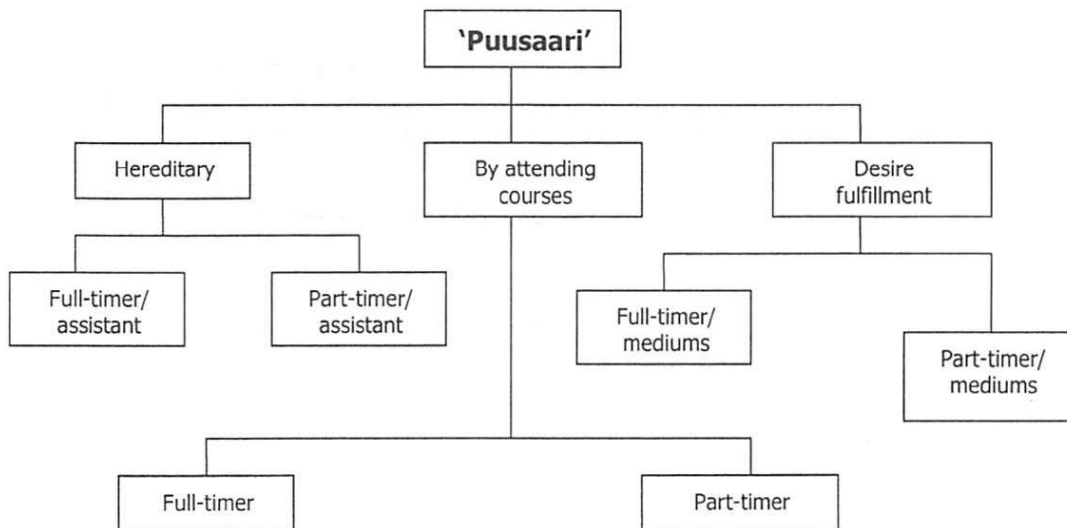
Conclusion

Hindu religious movements and Hindu institutions have created awareness among Hindus. As a consequence, temples in Malaysia are undergoing the process of Sanskritization in rituals, structure, standardization, upgrading of temples and high demand for priest with Sanskritic textual knowledge. The whole analysis and classification of a priest in this paper is based on Sanskritic textual knowledge.

REFERENCES:

1. Arasaratnam, S. Indians in **Malaysia and Singapore**, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1979.

2. Aveling, Marian. Ritual change in the Hindu temples of Penang, Contribution to Indian Sociology 12, no.2 ,pg. 173-193,1970.

3. Babb, Lawrence. A., **The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India**, New York, Colombia University Press, 1975.

4. Clifford Geertz, Religion, Anthropological Study , **International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences,** New York, Macmillan Co. & The Free Press, Vol. 13, 1972.

5. Dubois, Abbe J.A., **Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies**, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 3rd edition, 1953.

6. Durkheim, E., **The elementary forms of religious life**, London, Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1926.

7. Fred D. Clothey, **Tamil Religions, The encyclopedia of Religion**, Macmillan Publishing Company, Vol. 14, 1986.

8. Kondapi, C. **Indians Overseas (1838-1949)**, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1951.

9. O Malley, L.S.S., **Popular Hinduism: The Religion of the Masses**, London, Cambridge University Press, 1935.

10. Radhakrisnan, S., and Moore, Charles A., (ed.,) Indian Philosophy, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 4th edition, 1957.

11. Rajakrishnan, R. dan Rajantheran, **M., Pengantar Tamadun India**, Kuala Lumpur, Fajar Bakti Sdn Bhd, 1994.

12. Rajoo, R., Patterns of Hindu Religious Beliefs and Practices among the People of Tamil Origin in West Malaysia. University of Malaya, M.A. Thesis, 1975.

13. Sandhu, K. S., **Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement** (1780-1957), London, Cambridge University Press, 1969.

14. Scharf, R., **The Sociological Study of Religion**, London, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1970.

15. Sen, K.M., Hinduism, Penguin Books Ltd, reprint, 1963.

16. Srinivas, M. N., **Religion and society among the Coorgs of South India**, Bombay, Asia Publishing House Clarendon Press, 1952.

17. Srinivas, M.N. dan Shah, A.M., Hinduism , **International Encyclopedia** of the Social Sciences, vol. 6, 1972.

18. Subramuniyaswami, Satguru Sivaya, **Dancing with Siva: Hinduism s Contemporary Catechism**, Concord, Himalayan Academy, 4th edition, 1993.

19. Thomas, P. **Hindu Religion, Customs and Manners,** Bombay, D.B. Taraporevala sons & Co., 1956.

20. Walker Benjamin, **Hindu World**. : An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., Vol. 1, 1968.