

VALLI: A VENERATED FOLK DEITY**Dr. B. Kathiresan***Associate Professor of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore - 632115***Abstract**

Existence of myths from time immemorial assures people's belief and respect towards God. Attitude towards spirituality on the basis of the mystical experiences that myths provide is often viewed incredulously. On the other hand those that carry certain conviction do have its impact on people in positive sense. These differential perspectives build the need to analyse myths that hold metaphysical intentions to be envisioned pragmatically. Extending this logical exploration to the myth of Valli, the goddess and the wife of Lord Murugan discloses the facts and motives in the pretext of their marriage. Valli, as a tribal lady elevated to a position of celestial being is an interesting mystery to probe.

Keywords: *Subrahmanya, Velayudha, Muruga, Kumaresa, Karttikeya, Shanmukha*

Lord Subrahmanya, the symbolic representation of the power of Knowledge is the energy of Lord Siva and is indeed believed to be the incarnation of Lord Shiva. The purpose of his incarnation is to illumine the intelligence of human beings and liberate them from ignorance of various kinds which hides the truth from them.

Valli and Deivayanai being His two consorts represent the Ichcha Sakti and the Kriya Sakti of the Lord respectively. He bestows on His devotees material and spiritual prosperity and success in all their undertakings even at the slightest devotion shown to Him. Guha, Muruga, Kumaresa, Karttikeya, Shanmukha (He who has six faces), Subrahmanya, Velayudha (He who wears the spear) are synonymous names. Lord Murugan is known in various forms in various regions all revealing the motto of providing some information and true knowledge of liberation. There come myths all over the world in varied significances which always teaches the way that humans should lead their life and attain the oneness with Almighty. Though Lord Skanda is known in various avatars, his marriage with his two consorts remains esoteric and raised a sceptical outlook that falls in the list of pragmatic analysis.

The worship of Lord Skanda is most prevalent in South India and Srilanka. Almost every town in Tamilnadu has a temple dedicated to Lord Shanmukha. According to the ancient Tamil Literature Tolkappiyam, the ancient Tamil land is divided into five types: Kurinci - mountainous regions, associated with the union; Mullai - forests, associated with waiting; Marutam - cropland, associated with quarreling; Neytal - seashore, associated with pining; and Pālai - desert, associated with separation. Lord Murugan, popularly known as Skantha or Karthikeya or Kathirvela, is the synonym for beauty and He is believed to be the God of Kurinci. He is known as the Mountain God among the autochthonous tribes. Devasena and Valli, the consorts of Murugan, do not have independent temples dedicated

to them. Their images are installed in shrines of Murugan, where they flank their Lord on either side. They are worshipped with Murugan and receive offerings as part of his worship. But in certain places, Lord Murugan with Valli alone without Deivaanai can also be noticed.

Valli is the foster daughter of Nambirajan, the tribal chieftain of Vallimalai and marries Lord Murugan due to the intense devotion and passionate love for Him. Valli's birth place in Tamilnadu is known to be Vallimalai where as in Srilanka, it is known as Katragama or Kathirgamam. The south-Indian manuscripts of the Sanskrit scripture Skanda Purana mentions Devasena and Valli as daughters of the god Vishnu in a previous life who on meditating Lord Murugan for the boon of marrying Him were granted of the same in their next births. Valli is named after her birth place Vallimalai and her name signifies the place (where certain tubers called Valli grow) where she was found as a new born baby by the tribes. In Katragama, near Jaffna in Srilanka, the Alladi ammas certain vedda (hunter) tribes still follow the age old tradition of celebrating Valli's wedding who claim their natives to be the birth place of Valli. The secret in the birth of Valli involves the philosophy of union of Jiva (Valli) with Paramatma (Lord Murugan). The fact that she is the daughter of Vishnu in her previous birth justifies her marriage with Lord Subramanya who marries Valli only after testing her height of devotion in various disguises.

Valli Devi venerated as a deity is more common and has greater importance among her followers than Deivaanai. There are many prominent places and legendary temples associated with Valli each conveying different mythical stories. Some of them can be considered.

An interpolation in the southern recensions of the scripture as well as the *Kanda Purana* (the Tamil version of the Sanskrit *Skanda Purana*) narrate the story of the marriage of the two maidens to Kartikeya. The two maidens are fated to be married to the god. The elder sister Devasena is born as Amritavalli. She follows the path of traditional Hindu rituals and practices to gain her husband. Appeased by her penance, Indra adopts her as his daughter and marries her to Kartikeya in an arranged marriage, following custom, after Kartikeya triumphs over the demon Soorapadmanaban. The *Kanda Purana* describes Devayanai (Devasena) as the daughter of Indra, without any mention of adoption. Another version describes the couple as residing in heaven, the abode of the gods.

Meanwhile, Valli born as Sundaravalli, is adopted by a tribal chieftain and grows up as a huntress. Murugan wins Valli's hand and takes her to Thiruttani. The couple is described as taking their abode in the hills of Thiruttani, where one of Murugan's chief temples, Thiruthani Murugan Temple, stands.

The god is worshipped at the Thiruthani Murugan Temple, flanked by Devasena on his left and Valli on his right. In the end, the trio settles in the abode of the gods and lives in harmony thereafter. An alternate ending found in Sri Lankan lore describes Murugan as

staying on in the forest with Valli after their wedding at Kataragama, where his temple stands. Devayanai tries in vain to compel the god to return to the abode of the gods, but finally joins Kartikeya and Valli to reside in Kataragama. Unlike the *Skanda Purana* which talks about harmony between Devasena and Valli, the *Paripatal* - part of Tamil Sangam literature - speaks about conflict, resulting in a battle between Devayanai's royal soldiers and Valli's hunter clan, which the latter win. Folk *ecal* (a folk poem, presented as a dialogue of two persons) tradition also talks about the mistrust and quarrel between the co-wives. In one version - where Devayanai is the elder sister of Valli, Valli tries to woo Murugan, before Devayanai's marriage. As per tradition, the elder sister has to be married off first. Infuriated, Devayanai curses Valli to be born in the forest in her next life, and the curse is then fulfilled when Valli is born as a huntress. In the *Jayantipura Mahatmya*, the details of which correspond to most of those found in the *Skanda Purana* tale, Devasena and Valli are married to Kartikeya from primal times. However in this version, the god condemns Valli to be born on earth as punishment for mocking her sister Devayanai. The *Thirumurugatrupadai* from Sangam literature describes Murugan being accompanied by his chaste wife Devayanai and honoured by a procession of gods and rishis (sages).

A 400 year old temple for Kaththayee Amman (Valli) exists in a place called Bilavadi, (earlier known as Chittadi) a small helmet in the outskirts of Kumbakonam in Tiruvarur district of Tamilnadu. In Chittadi, Valli came as Kaththayee to alleviate people's sufferings. From the inscriptions and documents available in the Tanjore Saraswathi Mahal Library a land to the temple was reportedly donated in the year 1577, to a saint by Sevvappa Naicker erstwhile King of Tanjore. The place has been recorded as Avanam Chittadi.

The interesting story of Kaththayee goes as thus. Once upon a time, in the midst of a gathering in Devaloga (Heaven), two drops of tears which fell from the eyes of Lord Vishnu who was in ecstasy turned into two girls named Amudavalli and Sundaravalli. Born twins grew together, both wished to marry Lord Muruga and remain together for ever. Seeking such a boon from lord Muruga they went to the bank of Saravana Poigai and meditated. Pleased with their prayers, lord Muruga appeared before them and explained that it would be difficult for him to marry them immediately since they were born as Kriya and Icha sakthis, but would certainly marry them after vanquishing demon Suran. However, until his mission was accomplished the elder of them should live in Devaloka (Heaven) and the younger in Bhooloka (Earth). While Sundaravalli went to earth, Amudavalli in the form of a motherless child went to Indira and sought asylum. He initiated her as his daughter and directed Elephant Iravada his palace guard to bring her up. She came to be known as

Devayanai. Deva as she was brought up in Devaloga i.e. Heaven and Yanai meaning Elephant.

In Bhooloka, Lord Tirumal, born as a Rishi out of a curse from Lord Indira, was meditating in a lonely place. Tirumal's wife Lakshmi came as a Deer, and stood before the Rishi who when opened his eyes stared at her in lust for a moment. She became pregnant out of that act. Taking cue of it Sundaravalli immediately entered into the womb of Lakshmi who soon gave birth to a female child. As soon as Vishnu was relieved of the curse of Indira, they abandoned the child in a bush near a pond called Vallikulam and proceeded to Vaikunta. By chance Nambirajan, a hunter saw the abandoned baby and took her home out of pity.

When she grew up she was sent to the millet field to guard the crops against the hunting birds and other animals which was the custom of the tribes to engage marriageable girls for such duty. Valli stood as guard at the field, sitting in an elevated platform called *paran (High Platform)*. She was called Kaththa Aayee i.e Kaththayee (Kaththa in tamil meaning guarded and Aayee meaning a tribal lady). Once accidentally Murugan met Valli in the millet field, befriended her and their friendship blossomed into love which grew deeper with time. Murugan decided to marry her and went to Vallimalai to meet her accompanied by a trusted guard. Sensing Murugan's plan his brother Vinayaga accompanied by his parents, sage Narada, other Rishies and saints also followed them discreetly. Events transpired fast and finally with the blessings of everyone, Murugan married Valli. Lord Shiva who was present there requested Sage of Kanchamalai to built a temple in honour of Valli at the same spot. Sage of Kanchamalai and others regretted that though they were Siddas (GreatMuni/Rishies) none respected or cared for them and therefore felt that it could be achieved only by some others, but would certainly carry out the orders of Siva.

Sage of Kanchamalai immediately took invisible form and called a Brahmin walking at a distance away "My son comes here". Hearing the voice of an unknown the Brahmin went from where the sound came, but could not find anyone. Astonished he started walking back when again the invisible asked him not to go back as she had come there to alleviate their sufferings. Soon dump struck Brahmin immediately saw heap of vermilion lying on the ground at a distance from where the voice came. He realized that the voice belonged to some deity which indeed remained there. From next day onwards he started worshipping the heap of vermilion, but the nagging concern was evident. How to conduct prayers to the heap of vermilion and protect it from the severe heat during summer? Therefore he offered only flowers to the vermilion. During day time he used to keep his hand over the heap like an umbrella to prevent sunrays falling on it. Days passed. Mysterious female voice came again asking how he was going to protect her from the rains? Sensible question he thought, but could not find an answer readily. The puzzled Brahmin considered several

options and finally he made a clay mould and placed it above the vermilion heap and continued the prayers. When he realized that the clay mould like human body would also perish and can not protect it permanently he sat in meditation seeking solution to the vexed problem. Slowly he realized that inner vision over shadowed his thought process. Some feeble image appeared in his vision followed by several squares which merged together finally to display forty three triangles in seven structures i.e $4+3=7$. Next came Kaththayee. He was amazed to see her beauty and fainted. Kaththayee woke him up saying that she was the same god who governed the universe and repeated that she had come there only to alleviate their sufferings. She also indicated that she would emerge from the river displaying three head gears which should be taken out and consecrated at some place for worship. Scenes that followed slowly melted away. Next morning the Brahmin went to the river bed, sat there in the bank starrng the river all through the day. Suddenly he saw one bunch of three head gears floating and disappearing into the water. He jumped into the river brought out an idol lay buried inside the sand. Elated at its beauty, he kept it over his shoulder and jumped, rejoiced and wept in happiness. Anticipating such a find he had earlier constructed a small platform on the western side of the river to consecrate the find. He walked back dancing in ecstasy all way to the spot, collected the heap of vermilion, spread over the platform and placed the idol over it and started worshipping it. In the same haste without realizing the consequences, he threw away the clay mould into the river which went down. Sometimes everyone indulges in such foolish acts, no wonder fate played its role to make the brahmin commit such folly.

Next morning when the Brahmin concluded prayers and as usual waited for the invisible to indicate something only an eerie silence remained. He shouted aloud mother, mother but for some time nothing happened. When he repeated the shout the invisible asked him not to search her as she had already left that place along with the clay mould thrown into the river. He realized his foolish act, which of course was not intentional. He was unaware of the consequences; he committed a sin not reversible. How to retrieve back the clay mould from the water? Crying aloud like a motherless child, he pleaded for pardon as it was borne out of ignorance. In spite of it if she refused return back. He would jump into the river and commit suicide carrying the idol. He went on telling how he painstakingly plucked the flowers and showered on her till both hands pained. He blamed his two legs which were real culprits that took him to the river side to help throw away the clay mould and therefore would punish them by doing 'sit and stand' exercise till the tissues in the legs broke leading to oozing of blood. A mother cannot remain spectator to the suffering of her kin and kith. After all, the priest had worshipped her with utmost sincerity?

Kaththayee appeared before him to assure that his mistake had been condoned and she would return back and remain there as Gnanambika (mother of Wisdom), Odyana

roopini (Ottiyana meaning remain struck in heart) and Karunamayee (One who is kind) to remove their distress. Symbolizing the above three aspects in three head gears, she merged in to the idol. First she appeared in the form of heap of vermillion, stayed in the clay mould and finally in the idol. Like Nambiraj who brought her up (Nambi in Tamil means believed) she assured to remain there for ever alleviating the sufferings of those who surrendered themselves into her feet, drive away evils like how she drew the birds and animals from millet fields. She became Katha + Aayee = Kathaayee , because she guarded the fields. Town became to be known as Chittadi since many Siddas meditated there (Chitta meaning Siddas and Aadi means danced) and river named Mudikondan conveying her appearance with three headgears in that river.

The mystic acts of Kathathayee who called up a stranger to construct a temple 400years ago is not difficult to believe. Many had strange personal experiences and enjoyed the gratitude of mother in several ways, out of which only few can be told.

In the midst of a night a holy Brahmin was walking through the temple area. It was 20.00 hrs at night. Tired and fearing to continue the journey in night with huge cash in hand he searched for a rest house .The temple appeared like an isolated house and as he reached there seeking shelter a lady came out. He told her that he was proceeding to the next village with lot of cash to buy bullocks and therefore sought her help to find a place to stay that night. Without uttering a word she took him inside, served some food and asked him to leave the cash bag there and proceed to another house along with her son to take rest. He advised him to come back in the morning to collect the money. After handing over the bag containing the cash the Brahmin followed her son who walked through the bushy areas carrying a lantern, and showed a sleep yard outside the house in an Agrahara (Place where the Brahmins reside as a community) in village Chttthadi to take rest . Next day morning the owner of the house came out and awakened the stranger to enquire the purpose of his visit. When the Brahmin narrated the entire story, the owner scotched at him and refused to believe the story stating that no such house existed in the near vicinity and blamed that he was bluffing. 'What will be the fate of my money?' Brahmin was panicky. 'Okay let us go and see' said the owner and accompanied him to the house where he had deposited the money the previous night. Tracking back the same route he walked the previous night the brahmin took him near the temple site where he said the house was seen. The temple priest who opened the temple said 'Don't worry, let us pray to the deity' and took them inside. Alas! They were shocked to find the same bag as described by the brahmin lying at her feet and entire amount remaining intact. Unable to control his emotion the tourist cried aloud ' mother not only you saved the money, my prestige has also been saved, lest I would have remained a liar in front of all' wept the brahmin who then spent the entire money to built the temple.

This relates to an incident that happened 300 years ago. On an occasion two family members of Kaththayee group traveled to the temple to offer prayers in two bullock carts. After offering prayers and other rituals they returned home. One of the female children who were playing in the temple complex was unknowingly left behind. Everyone thought that she was travelling in the other bullock cart. Back home they found the child missing and searched all over. Finding no trace of the child the agonized family rushed back to the temple in search of her. As they were all crying in the sanctum sanctorum, an invisible voice said ' calm down and do not search the child anymore. Years back when she fell ill it was promised that the child would be given to me. Since you failed to honour the promise I have taken her. She is my child now'. The family remembered that indeed such a promise was made years back when the child was seriously ill. It is believed that the statue of a small child seen at the feet of the deity is the same child.

Forty years ago Janaki Ammal wife of Krishnamurthy was returning to her native place Thirunilankudi a nearby small village from Chittadi in a bullock cart. The river on the way suddenly swelled and the cart began to submerge. 'Kaththayee save us shouted the lady' What a miracle? Some one came in a bicycle, pulled up the cart and the bullocks and safe landed them. He also accompanied them in his bicycle till the border of the village and disappeared. Every one forgot the incident. In the next few days when once Krishnamurthy and his family went to the temple again to attend a function, the temple priest Duraiappa Gurukkal in trance started dancing and went near Krishnamurthy uttering' It is me who helped your family from the swollen river'. They now realized that the person who came in a bicycle and saved their lives was none than Kaththayee.

In the year 1939 same Krishnamurthy's mother who carried a pot full of milk entered into the burning Yagna Kund (Holy pyre). To everyone's astonishment she stood in the midst of the burning fire for full ten minutes and not even her silk saree burnt. Only after the request of the temple priest Sri Sundaresa Gurukkal and Sri Duraiappa Gurukkal did she come out without even a scratch on her body.

One family was in trauma as their daughter's marriage did not realize for many years. One of their family friends advised them that instead of going to several other temples to pray for it, it would be proper to go and offer prayers first to the family deity to find a solution. Taking his advice they went to Kaththayee temple and prayed there. In the next one month their daughter got married. Some more miracles occurred in the same family. On the advice of the Kaththayee trust secretary they prayed for a grand son and got the wish fulfilled. Once their son could not return back to India from U.S due to several obstacles and when they prayed at Kaththayee by keeping a coin tied in a yellow cloth, his transfer orders came forth with. Whoever went to her and prayed with utmost devotion, trust and sincerity were never betrayed.

Valli as a goddess is treated with utmost devotion in areas like Billadi and Vallimalai. People in Vallimalai region celebrate her as the wife of Lord Murugan. Beyond the fact that she is His wife, Valli seems to be believed as a local deity of Vallimalai who governs the life of local people and showers her blessings in solving the problems of her devotees. Valli koil in Vallimalai has a great importance according to the tribes and peoples who live there. The priests in Valli temple enlisting various miracles happening to her ardent followers seem to be quite fascinating.

Though Valli is a tribal lady, She occupies the honourable position of being Murugan's wife. She is worshipped as Goddess because of two reasons. She is Kartikeya's wife as mentioned and she alleviates the sufferings of her devotees. Since her fostered birth is associated with the nomadic tribes, people belonging to her community still celebrate festivals of Valli marriage out of a tradition that does not vanish even after long time. They beheld Valli as the person belonging to their ancestry and wish in continuing the relationship with her.

This fact is overlooked by an observation that the patriarchal identification in her birth is confusing. Though the chance that her own father Lord Vishnu cursed by Indra came in disguise of the saint Silamugi impregnated the deer who came as his wife Goddess Lakshmi has its probability of understanding and justification to the peaks, certain scriptures lacked reliability in revealing the true father of Valli in her birth in earth in forest near the mountain. This can be viewed in philosophical stance in a different way. As Valli is considered as Jiva with the aim of uniting with God, Jiva has to be the atman or the soul that represents human beings in general which means human beings have innumerable births and that births are confined to the material bodies and not to the immortal soul. In this process, the soul finds neither patriarchal nor maternal identification or in other words can be said that both kinds of identification is associated only with God. This is the reason why Valli seems to be lacking patriarchal identity.

The presence of two consorts denotes the dual nature of Murugan. He is the God of Heaven and the God of Earth. This implies that he is omnipotent and is capable of possessing both the power of action which Devasena represents and power of aspiration which Valli represents. The consorts also represent a syncretism between Shaiva and Vaishnava sects. Valli symbolically representing the lower class and Murugan, the higher class convey that unity is to be observed which is devoid of class discrimination. The reason for Murugan choosing the lower caste tribal girl Valli to be his wife is purely due to the devotion that she has. This further clarifies that God is never partial to his devotees. Who ever pays God the devotion sincerely, He awards them their wishes. Through the marriage of Valli and Murugan, Shaiva and Vaishnava sects are unified into one thus leading to unity in diversity.

Valli, the aspiration force represents the kind of devotion that exhibits passion for God where the soul yearns and is considered to be one with Him, strives for liberation through the union with supreme. Deivaanai, the action force that represents the kind of devotion that exhibits Victory won over God where the soul is detached strives for liberation by following rituals and Vedic scriptures.

Some scriptures extol that Lord Murugan emerged out of the third eye of Lord Shiva and that He is therefore the depiction of Power of Knowledge. The philosophy that humans can either be the power of aspiration or the power of action to choose their way of liberation is exposed in his marriage. When one chooses the way of liberation as that of Valli, it is understood that God responses quickly and the choice of other would gain less significance than the former. In order to illustrate this, Lord Murugan chooses bigamy. It also expounds that one needs to possess both the powers of action and aspiration to succeed in understanding the truth. By the observation of the fact that the trio exists in unified peace at the end, it can be concluded that none of the two (power of aspiration and power of action) exists without the power of knowledge. But the later can resume even in the absence of former powers.

Thus the myth of Valliamma's marriage to Lord Murugan and its significance in Vallimalai is understood in a much deeper sense. It not only provides information but also provokes the readers to transcend the true essence of religion and spirituality through the attempt to analyse the truths that are often misconstrued. This paper clarifies the practical realities that myths impart on humans by teaching the hidden philosophies born out of diverse classes. Valli Devi treated as Goddess being a tribe and the one lacking patriarchal identity is essentially examined to treat the literary trauma of intentional and affective fallacies that myths create.

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