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Amma n Movies: An Introduction

Abstract

Although Amma n movies, a special genre of Tamil cinema (Amma n means mother and is a term which addresses village Goddesses all over Tamil Nadu) have originated in the 70's until nowadays they have not been recognised outside Tamil Nadu. These movies use a special language. It is a necessity to know the vocabulary as in the case of every language. A basic vocabulary is essential to understand the religious symbolism inherent in these films. The following article shall provide the reader a short introduction to the main religious themes of the movie and shall enable her/him to understand the basic meanings of the rituals and symbols presented in the movie.

A special type of movie, which is very popular in Tamil Nadu, is called Amma n movie. This special genre of Tamil cinema originated in the 70's. Amma n movies of today combine calendar art, scenes of village Goddess festivals (Tamil: Amma n thiruvizha), mythology and digital effects. Mostly, the films are shot in various Goddess temples of Tamil Nadu. The movie plays within the months of Panguni to Adi (names of months according to Tamil calendar, corresponding to middle of March to middle of September). Especially village women like to watch these movies.¹

Main themes of the movie Background plot–village festival for the Goddess

During the whole movie, one is reminded that a village festival takes place. One can observe many rituals, mostly women's rituals, which are performed during these festivities:

Angapradaksinam is rolling around the sanctum sanctorum for one, three or even nine times.² Sometimes the devotee holds some leaves of the neem tree³ in her hand. The woman is often accompanied by mostly one or two persons who go behind her. They can be described as a supervisor and caretaker of the ritual.

Mavilakku (lamp made of rice flour) is placed on a banana leave. Many women who put this lamp on their bodies (mostly in the stomach region) can be watched.

This ritual is executed to attain cure of an illness by the help of the Goddess. It is

carried out in front of the sanctum sanctorum (garbha griham, tamil version of the word garbha griha) of the particular temple.

Ponkal-cooking (rice meal) takes place in front of the temple. After the fire is lighted, women place a pot on a hand-made "stone-stove" (sometimes ready-made terracotta-stoves) and start to cook their Ponkal. When it is ready, it is offered to the Goddess and afterwards like Mavilakku distributed to other devotees (Ponkal pataiyal –Ponkal distribution, the Ponkal is mostly sweet Ponkal).

Amman Arul⁴ (grace of Goddess) descends to some women. They get possessed by the Goddess. In the movie, they are shown wearing dresses made of neem leaves. The women who accompany them have similar functions as the attendants concerning the Angapradakisnam ritual.

Mulaipari-processions are also shown. Mulaipari is a very important ritual which takes place at almost every village Goddess celebration. In its most original form, it is an exclusively women's ritual and is of great importance for the whole village. The participants of the processions carry earthen pots with grown grains (nine different types of grains) inside on their heads and walk towards a river where the content is dissolved. In the movie, one can only watch the procession. It is accompanied by Amman. In reality, the ritual is more elaborate. Before the procession starts, a special song and dance (Kummi Pattu, Kummi) are performed.

The original meaning of the ritual performance is a request to the village Goddess for rain in order to secure a rich harvest.

Akkini-catti or tii-catti (fire mud pot): Neem twigs are given into a mud pot and lighted afterwards. In festivals, people carrying Akkini-catti form often huge processions. The film slightly changes the original way of performing this ritual. Mostly, a group of women in red/yellow saris perform a dance while carrying Akkini-catti. Amman is among the women and acts as lead dancer. Karakattam (a special kind of dance) is also performed by Amma n as lead dancer and a group of other women. A shakti karakam⁵ is placed on the head of the dancers. The sound of different types of South Indian music instruments accompanies the dance. The Akkini-catti- and Karakattam dance scenes appear in some movies. Amma n sings specific songs describing herself and her presence, e.g. "Goddess with snake hood" (Mariyamma n's iconographical representation) or "the Goddess is in the house", which means the Goddess, her spiritual energy, is in the temple.⁶ It is clearly indicated that Amma n is present at Her festival. As accompanying sound of many rituals, one can often listen to Kulavai (a chorus sound through mouth, arisen by women).

Mythological story

A mythological story is interwoven with the background plot. The basic plot is the fight of the Goddess against a demon.⁷ Before the final battle, the Goddess and the demon meet at several occasions and She always demonstrates her superiority and ridicules him. Finally, it is an easy task to put an end to the demon's existence. The scene of the final battle is also utilised to demonstrate digital effects, e.g. the Goddess with many arms and weapons, oversized skeletons as attendants of the demon, etc.

Devotional story

The third theme found in every Amma n movie, is the story of a female Goddess devotee. She is either a young girl or sometimes an unmarried woman. The asuran (demon) and his followers try to harm her and/or to turn her against Amma n. But Amma n succeeds in protecting her devotee from the evil forces. In this context, it is interesting to observe that women are represented completely contrary to Amma n. Mostly, they continue the stereotypes of weak femaleness while Amma n is shown as almighty and invincible.⁸ In some movies, a low-caste man is represented as faithful worshipper of Amma n. She is his only support and help against the oppression by upper-caste society.

Representation of Amma n

Amma n means Mother Goddess, a common term by which every village Goddess in Tamil Nadu is addressed. Every village has at least one Amma n koyil (village Goddess temple). The Goddess is the mother of the village. She is often believed to have been there before the village came into existence and the whole village and its inhabitants come into existence through her. The Village Goddesses have different names, some names are only found in a particular village, others are regional in character like Mariamma n, Kaliyamma n, Raja Rajeswari. The movies are often named after famous regional Goddesses.

It is easy to recognise Amman in these movies if one is familiar with the Goddess' iconographical depiction, both in village temples and in calendar art pictures and with Her attributes and symbols. Mostly, the actress wears a red-golden sari and a crown. Her red pottu⁹ is extremely big. She also wears viputi (sacred ash) on her forehead. She is adorned with jewelry like nosering, necklaces and earrings. She holds a triculam.¹⁰ When Amma n turns on the screen, a triculam surrounded by lightning appears, accompanied by a special music sequence. In this way, the spiritual power and energy of the Goddess¹¹ is made visible. The lightning also underlines the connection of village Goddesses like Mariamma n with rain.¹² Sometimes the Goddess is also shown surrounded by shining light which symbolises her energy and aura. Her spiritual power emanates from her third eye (situated at the forehead and symbolised by the pottu) and from her eyes as white

lightning. The sacred immanence of the Goddess is made clear through an explicit symbolism, e.g. the Goddess emerges out of water and her body is the water. She dances on the whole Earth, on mountains, on fields... She is shown as being one with the world. She is the world. But her sacred immanence also ascends to the universe. Her eyes appear in the night sky.

Representation of the demon

While the Goddess is mostly represented in a traditional way like the almighty and omnipotent village Goddesses in small hamlets of whole Tamil Nadu, the demon often wears designer clothes with demon emblem, uses modern technology to communicate with his inferiors and also talks a few words in English. He wears a moustache and has a similar hairstyle according to iconographical depiction. In certain movie scenes, his appearance is also accompanied by a special music sequence.

Amma n movies use a special language. Everyday's religious life, scenes of village Goddess festivals, the omnipresence of Amman get intertwined with the Goddess' fight against the demon and a fictional story about a female devotee.

While on the one hand, Amma n, almighty, all-powerful, demonstrating strong femaleness, is celebrated, on the other hand, women are represented according to stereotypical role models. Recognising these facts, can Amman

movies be empowerment for especially village women, who form the main audience? If certain patterns are ignored and women start to identify with the strength and power of Amman, they can play an important part in the struggle for women's empowerment. It is a further task to continue the analysis of these unique movies and how they can be freed from stereotypes in order to be a helping tool for the spiritual growth and empowerment for (village) women.

¹ Concerning village women and what role these movies play for them I presented a paper at a National Seminar at Madurai Kamaraj University, January 2005 entitled "Amman movies-empowering women or serving the male gaze?" I discuss if these movies can be a tool for women's spiritual empowerment. The publishing of the papers by the University is in progress.

² Always clockwise, three and nine are holy numbers of the Goddess. The number three stands for the three forms of the Goddess, creation, life, death and resurrection.

³ Tamil veepumaram. This tree is a holy tree of the Goddess, especially connected with Mariyamma n, but it can be also found in other Goddess temples. During this ritual, many women wear saris in yellow or red (colour of the Goddess) with neem leaves printed on it.

⁴ Amman arul is mostly described as possession by the Goddess. It is a complex phenomena and takes different forms. I could observe it in many village Goddess temples. At present, I am preparing an article concerning Amman arul.

⁵ A brass pot is filled with turmeric water, afterwards a coconut is placed inside the pot and smeared with vermilion and turmeric. It is a symbol of the Goddess.

⁶ During the Goddess festivals, some of these songs resound from the loudspeakers placed near the temple or shrine.

⁷ The most famous myth of the Goddess' fight against demons is written down in the Devi-Mahatmya. The Devi-Mahatmya is a Shakta -scripture, written about 600. It is part of the Markandeya Purana and describes the fight of the Goddess against the demon. The most famous myth is the fight of Mahisasuramardini against the buffalo demon. For details on this scripture, read Thomas B. Coburn, *Devi-Mahatmya: the Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984.

⁸ have also mentioned in my seminar paper that the movie fails to realise that all women are incarnations of the Goddess as it is written down in Shakta Tantric scriptures, see also DasGupta Sherma,R., *Sa Ham-I Am She: Woman as Goddess, in: Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, ed. by Hildebeitel, A. & Erndl, K.M. Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, p. 24-51. But it is acceptable for the film directors to portray small girls as incarnations of the Goddess because it is socially accepted. Worship of small girls before menstruation takes place, e.g. during the Durga Puja in West Bengal (Kumari Puja)

⁹ A round dot worn on the forehead, red in colour, symbol of Shakti, of the circle of life.

¹⁰ Trident, a common symbol of the Goddess in Tamil Nadu. In some small village shrines, the Goddess is represented by a triculam.

¹¹ Shakti, for details on the Concept of Shakti read Mariska Ondrich, Concept of Shakti, in : *Manushi*, issue 146, p. 43-44....

¹² In Tamil Nadu, rain is often accompanied by lightning and thunder. In this way, the power of Mariyamman(Mari means rain) to send rain to the village, is symbolised.