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Traditional medicine in Hindu worship of Tamil's perspectives: A review

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Abstract--The paper deals on the facts related to the traditional medicine in Hindu Worship of Tamil people. It is common to see among the people of Tamil Nadu certain religious beliefs and practices that they universally share. Beliefs have a spiritual meaning based on sentiments, emotions, philosophy or related cultural traditions. Traditional medicine such as Siddha and Ayurveda reflect herbal plant and food as medicine. The main slogan of this traditional medicine is preventions of disease, rather than its cure. Practice of traditional medicine very importantly from country to country, and from region to region, as they are influenced by factors like culture, history, personal attitude and philosophy. In various cases, their philosophies and submissions are quiet, different from those of conventional medicine. Including knowledge passed on from generation to generation, has demonstrated the safely and efficacy of traditional medicine.

Keywords--symbols, beliefs, evil, spirits, ritual, margosa leaf, auspicious, traditional.

Introduction

Propitious symbols or auspicious symbols are symbols of good fortune. In Hinduism, much importance has been given to these symbols whose significance lays not only in the aesthetic value but also in the philosophy of life them display¹. Each has a hidden meaning and is ageless, surviving from age to age, through generation. An auspicious moment is always marked first with the

manjal (turmeric powder) and *Kumkum* (vermillion powder of bright red color). Traditionally *Kumkum* worn on the forehead shows the marital status of women. The *Kumkum* between the eyebrows is said to retain energy in the human body and control the various levels of concentration². It is also the central point of the base of the creation itself-symbolizing auspiciousness and good fortune. The Indian bride steps over the threshold of her husband's home, bedecked in glittering apparels and ornaments, with a dazzling red *bindi* on her forehead that is believed to usher in prosperity and grants her a place as the guardian of the family's welfare and progeny. These days, *Kumkum* is available in different colors³.

Method

This study deals about the Tamilnadu beliefs and customs. Symbols, Beliefs, Evil, Spirits, Ritual, and Auspicious by using the descriptive method.

Discussion

Manja

In North India, turmeric is commonly called '*haldi*', a word derived from the Sanskrit word *haridara*, and in the Tamil Nadu it is called '*Manjal*'. The name turmeric derives from the Latin word *terra merita* (meritorious earth) referring to the color of ground turmeric, which resembles a minerals pigment. Turmeric is associated with fertility and prosperity and brings good luck. It is smeared on the corners of an invitation for a wedding or any auspicious ceremony in the bride and bridegroom before the wedding as part of ritual purification before the wedding. Turmeric powder is also sprinkled on special occasions, such as a visit to a pregnant woman.⁴ Turmeric powder is also sprinkled on sacred images. The practice of turmeric is prohibited in a house of mourning. Turmeric has been put to use as a foodstuff, cosmetic and medicine. Turmeric is used as an herbal medicine or traditional medicine for rheumatoid arthritis, chronic anterior verities, conjunctivitis, skin cancer, small pox, and chicken pox, wound healing and liver ailment. Sometimes, turmeric mixed with milk or water is taken to treat intestinal disorders as well as colds and sore throats. Turmeric presently used in preparation of several sunscreens. Several multinational companies are involved in making face creams based on turmeric.

Betel leaves and betel nuts (Thamboolam)

Its usages for auspicious occasions continue to this day through the ages. Normally betel is chewed after meals for digestion and as a matter of pleasure⁵. *Thamboolam* is exchanged whenever marriages are finalized, when guests leave after their stay, while inviting for the wedding and while offerings are made to the deities. To the visitors it is offered as a mark of courtesy. According to the universal classification of food, the betel leaf complements each other and is, therefore, in harmony. Since the betel leaf 'cool', act together to keep the human body in balance. The betel leaf, as a 'cool' food, is believed to relieve 'hot' illnesses such as headaches and fever.

Kuthuvilakku

(lamp with five sides) – Light symbolizes knowledge which dispels ignorance and darkness. *Kuthuvilakku* is lit on auspicious occasions and it has religious significance too. During religious, auspicious functions, the *panchamuga vilakku* or the lamp with five sides is lit using ghee and is considered sacred⁶. *Kolam*– is created every day in a ceremonial gesture of beauty, gratitude and sacrifice. The daily practice of clearing the space by washing the sidewalk and creating splendor for all to see is a *sadhana* (spiritual practice) in which we all can find divinity. Whenever we create beauty, we are asking goddess Lakshmi to bestow her blessings. The *kolam* represents man's concern for all living creatures. The *kolam* and the bright red border or *kaavi* enclosing (usually used on Fridays and auspicious days) is also believed to prevent evil and undesirable elements from entering the houses⁷.

Maavilaithoranam

(festoons with mango leaves) – The Mango tree plays a sacred role in India. It is a symbol of love and some believe that the mango tree can grant wishes. In the Hindu culture hanging fresh mango leaves outside the front door during festivals and ceremonies is considered a blessing to the house. Mango leaves are also in Indian prayers (*pooja*) to propitiate the Gods⁸.

Banana Tree

The banana tree has been considered to be an evergreen tree for generations. In most Hindu weddings, there is a pre-wedding ceremony, which depicts the significance of the family. On an auspicious day, the married women of the bride's family perform a *pooja* to a full-grown plantain tree before tying it to one of the gateposts of the marriage canopy. Festoons of mango leaves are also tied. In Tamil Nadu weddings and any functions, the wedding food is served on banana leaves⁹.

Tulasi

is a plant worshipped by the followers of Vishnu and is carefully tended to as his representative. *Tulasi* symbolizes Goddess Lakshmi, Lord Vishnu's consort and is regarded as self-purifying. No ceremonial gifts to God or man are complete unless accompanied by a *tulasi* leaf. Even a daughter given away in marriage must be given a *tulasi* leaf to signify the permanence of the gift¹⁰. *Tulasi* has got the great medicinal value. *Tulasi* have been used for the treatment of diseases throughout the world since the beginning civilization. *Tulasi* is cultivated and medicinal purpose. It is widely known in Tamil Nadu as a medicinal plant and an herbal purpose.

Cow

In Hinduism, the cow is considered sacred and its protection is a recurrent theme in which she is symbolic of abundance, of the sanctity of all life and of the earth that gives much while asking nothing in return. Most Hindu respect the cow as a

matriarchal figure for her gentle qualities and providing nurturing milk and its products for a largely vegetarian diet¹¹.

Naga (serpent)

In Tamil Nadu is a symbol of fertility and is worshipped for progeny¹².

Navadhanya

(nine variety of grains) – are used to invoke the blessings of the Gods of the nine planets according to *hindu* mythology viz., wheat – Lord Surya (sun), millet – Lord Chandran (moon), *thur dhal* – Lord *Angarakan* (mar), moong dhal – *Budhan* (mercury), Chick pea – Guru (Jupiter), white peas – *Sukran* (Venus), sesame – *Sani* (Saturn), Black gram – *Rahu* and *Kulittha -ketu*. Each grain is combined with a different colored cloth when the prayers are being offered. These *Navadhanya* play a vital role in meeting the special needs of pregnant and lactating women and patients recovering from illness. *Navadhanya* are foods that provide essential nutrients the human body. Traditionally, these were consumed as whole grains. *Navadhanya* contains the majority of the health beneficial components. These components have been shown to reduce the risk of major chronic disease of humans.

Purnakumbham– Purna Kumbham

Is a pot (*kudam*) filled with water and the pot's mouth is covered by a coconut and with bunches of green mango leaves. A *Kalagam* (vessel) made of copper or *panchaloha* (five prescribed metals) is ritually placed on rice or cloth¹³. A full raw coconut is then placed on the mouth of the vessel and decorated with *pusu Kumkum* (turmeric powder and powder of the flower, crocus sativus), sandalwood paste and a cotton cord dipped in turmeric paste. This is known as a *Dharma Kumbham* or a *Purna Kumbham*. This *kumbham* should be donated, along with new clothes and a *dakshina* to either a guru, a purohit or to *Vishnumurti (yagnapurush)* in a temple. The blessings in return for such a donation are said to fulfil all wishes.

Durba Grass

Traditional tropical grass, Durba has been identified as a food preservative. This plant is the same as *kusha* or *munja* also called panic grass and it is used for purifying different objects by touching or sprinkling liquids, making ropes which are used to encircle objects like deities or *brahmacharins*, making mats to sit on during poojas or meditation and laying around and lighting the sacrificial fire (*yaga*)¹⁴. Durba is considered a sacred material in Vedic scriptures, and is said to purify the offerings during such rituals. Durba could be used as a natural food preservative in place of harmful chemical preservatives and the artificial surfaces mimicking the hierarchical nano patterns on the surface of Durba grass could find applications in health care where sterile conditions were required.

Archadai

Rice colored with turmeric powder is used along flowers by the elders to bless the young. It is thrown away toward the evil eye. This is done a number of times during the entire wedding ceremony and other functions and at the end of the ceremonies¹⁵. Further, traditional symbols of auspiciousness recorded as such are as follows; flywhisk (*chamara*), mirror (*darpan*), umbrella (*chattra*), srivasta (symbol on Vishnu's chest representing Goddess Lakshmi), conch (*Sankha*) and flag (*dwaja*) etc.,

Pumpkin

The ancient people believed life to be guided by faith. When houses are being built, a kind of melon called *Sambal Poosanikai* (white pumpkin) is kept suspended in front of the house to scare away undesirable spirits who might otherwise enter the premises and cause harm to the owners of the building and at times to the builders themselves. It might be asked as to why these evil spirits did not enter there before. The reason perhaps is that they do not like orderly and inhabited places and prefer only ruined or uninhabited places¹⁶. When a house is being demolished, the evil spirits hasten thither. But the melon resembling a big egg full of water or juice has the power to frighten them away. Perhaps this vegetable has the same power, which the karakams have with this difference that in the former case evil spirits are prevented from entering the house under construction while in the latter case the streets are rid of their presence.

Margosa leaf

One of the most common Tamil Nadu customs is perhaps the use of the *margosa* leaves. It has been the popular belief from time immemorial that evil spirits are scared away by the special properties possessed by the *margosa* leaf. When women and children start on a journey, a few *margosa* leaves are given to them placed somewhere on their bodies securely. Evil spirits are generally supposed to possess only women and children and not strong-willed men. But children and weak women, armed with a few *margosa* leaves, are believed to be safe. The reason for this is not far to seek¹⁷. Certain insects like flies gather generally in unclean places and upon rotten things. Fine strong scents are abhorrent to them and they run away from places where strong-smelling *margosa* leaves are kept. Similarly, the spirits, good and evil, are attracted and repelled by magnetism, animal and vegetable. The Indians believe that certain evil spirits are capable of creating death-dealing microbes in the human body and cause epidemics like small-pox, cholera, etc. But the presence of the *margosa* leaves perhaps nullifies their effects in this direction and foils their attempts to cause injury. Whatever may be the properties of the *margosa* leaves, the people do believe that they have the power to shield them from harm from epidemics or at least to lessen their virulence¹⁸. In front of the houses whose inmates are laid up with smallpox, measles, etc., one might invariably see a bunch of *margosa* leaves thrust in the eaves. Quantities of leaves may also be seen scattered near and around the patients. Pregnant women and women in confinement are considered to be susceptible to the influence of bad spirits. Perhaps the magnetism emanating

from them scare away such evil spirits and therefore a bunch of *margosa* leaves are thrust in the eyes of the roof immediately after the confinement of a woman in a house.

The excellent medicinal properties of *margosa* leaves may be established by the following popular story. Once there lived in a village with a husband and a wife. The husband was about to start on a long journey but the wife did not like it and desired, if possible, to stop him from undertaking it. She consulted an old woman, a friend of hers. She advised her to obtain from her husband a promise that he would, on his return journey, under the *margosa* tree. The woman did obtain from her husband they said promise. The husband started on his journey and kept up his promise to his wife to sleep under tamarind trees. A few days' sleep under the tamarind trees made him very sick and so he had to give up his journey and turn homewards. Remembering the promise made to his wife, he began to sleep under *margosa* trees on his return journey. In a few days, he was cured of his illness¹⁹.

The above story is of course intended to show the popular belief in the efficacy of the *margosa* tree in curing diseases and it also shows the belief people had in the tamarind tree. They used to say that tamarind is to a house what the tiger is to a forest. It is considered to be such an injurious thing as to make a sickly man worse. Majority do not believe in super physical beings like the evil spirits referred to above nor do they believe that they could create germs and microbes, the root cause of all epidemics and other diseases. But everyone knows that the germs and microbes cause various diseases in human beings' various diseases and that cholera, plague, smallpox and many other epidemics may be traced to them. Nowadays medical experts are experimenting upon various drugs to discover antidotes. People of ancient days would not have placed so much confidence in the efficiency of *margosa* leaves, etc., if experience had not shown them that they were productive of good and beneficial results. Hence *margosa* leaves deserve to be experimented upon by modern science.

Conclusion

Each society has advanced its own specific beliefs as it grows in an environment. These may be viewed as fallacious; yet they deserve special attention as inseparable cultural elements of the society concerned. Every religion proposes performing certain kinds of rituals, vows, offering to the devotees in order to get rid of their physical illness and purify their body. In traditional societies people believe that the cause of infection is divine and it is believed that the body would be affected if they do anything against the wish of gods and goddesses. In Tamil Culture beliefs like *Kumkum*, *Manjal*, *Betel leaves*, *Kuthuvilakku*, *Kolam*, *Mavilaithoranam*, *Banana tree*, *Tulasi*, *cow*, *Naga Navadhanya*, *PuranaKumbham*, *Durbha Grass*, *Margosa leaves*. The activities of traditional system include antibacterial, antiviral, anti-inflammatory, antitumor, antioxidant, antiseptic, cardioprotective, hepatoprotective, radioprotective, and digestive activities. Finally, 'Prevention is better than cure' as a Hindu rituals and worships backup of India, particularly Tamilnadu. The Hindu worship and ceremonies are often directly connected with the disease, sudden death, and catastrophe. These are all

precaution medical knowledge of the traditional worship of Tamils. It is the responsibility of all of us to transcend this knowledge for the next generations.

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