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Menstruating Women/Menstruating Goddesses: Sites of Sacred Power in Kerala, South India, Sangam Era (100-500 CE) to the Present

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Poetry written two millennia ago in the geographical areas now known as Tamil Nadu and Kerala, South India described women as filled with *ananku* [1], a sacred power associated with their sexuality that was considered particularly potent during menarche and menstruation. The Sangam era description of *ananku* is a precursor of the later concept of *shakti* (divine vivifying female power). The connection, between divinity and menstruation, is shown both in fieldwork and through an ethnographic analysis of literature in Kerala, India; where the pan-Kerala goddess *Bhagavati*'s rituals appear patterned on those of menstrual maidens. Indeed in some communities [2], during menarche rituals, the menstruant is understood to *be* the goddess.

Sangam Concepts

Sangam literature, written between 100 and 500 CE, reflects the worldview of an indigenous culture prior to the large-scale incursion of patriarchal Brahmanic culture, which, based on Sanskrit texts, became the religion of the ruling class in Kerala during the eighth century CE. In the pre-Brahman worldview, often referred to as Dravidian, the divine is experienced as imminent, within earthly reality. Ritual practices in which 'the divine is felt to be present' are sensual and ecstatic and 'the psychology of religious awareness is female' (Ram 64).

Ananku is a word used to describe the powers associated with women's sexuality and women's blood which were consistent with, and equivalent to, the divine power in gods, goddesses, forces of nature, animals, warriors and kings. The bodies of women in ancient Tamil Nadu/Kerala were considered particularly potent and full of *ananku* at menarche, during menstruation and after childbirth. *Ananku* is a term also used for a goddess who manifests in many aspects. In two different poems, the female deity, *Ananku*, is said to be immanent in a woman's breasts (Hart, "Woman and the Sacred in Ancient Tamil Nadu"). Women and their bodies were also understood to have generative, healing, and protective powers.

The term *ananku* is often used to describe a woman's sexuality. Women whose identity and occupation centered on their sexuality were known as *parattai*, some of whom were beautiful and accomplished dancers and musicians who had a select clientele among the ruling class (Parthasarathy 288). They appear to have had a ritual function, lived in a separate section of the city, and became associated with temples (Hart, "Ancient Tamil Literature" 47). Historically, a variety of ritual specialists arose each of whom had the task of attempting to devise a means 'to control this danger from *within*' some of which were female ritual specialists (*devadasi*) attached to major temples 'whose individual female powers (*sakti*) were ritually merged with those of the great goddess (*Sakti*)' (Kersenboom 204).

It is clear that a woman's body and sexuality, celebrated in the poetry, was a site of sacred power that can be harnessed for auspiciousness. 'The force of *ananku* is potentially malevolent but can be controlled and turned into benevolent use. Similarly, the natural urge of sexual ripeness is potentially vexing and dangerous but at the same time it brings together males and females and forms the basis of all further procreation, sustenance of life, stability and happiness if properly controlled' (Ibid. 8). *Ananku* was the goddess's power and women were the vehicle through which it was expressed. When a woman's *ananku* was especially potent, as in menstruation and after birth, self-restraint and separation was appropriate.

This distinction is very important because of the later ideas about menstrual pollution and impurity brought in by the Brahmins. 'Pollution itself, which is one of the most important factors in the working of sanskritization [3], appears to be a development of the ancient Dravidians' notion of being infected with immanent sacred power' (Hart, "Ancient Tamil Literature" 59). After the Brahmins rose to power and influence in the 7th century the 'religious elements not identified with the Brahmins kept their dangerous properties while elements which the Brahmins espoused (many of which were indigenous), were set up opposite to them and were considered to be pure. Extreme measures were taken to insulate these elements from the dangerous powers and so pollution, in its modern sense came into being' (Ibid., 43). As we will see later in ethnographic material from Kerala, menstrual blood is sacred and powerful and was avoided because it was so potent.

The Goddess and Menstruation

Kerala has a wide stream of *Shakta* (goddess) worship running through most of the caste ritual practices, particularly in the matrilineal communities, each of which had a family goddess. There is a deep connection with the goddess and menstruation. 'Tantric rituals associated with *Shakta* practice include worship of the female menstrual flow, normally considered an extremely polluting substance by mainstream Sanskrit Hinduism. Such *Shakta* notions inform the Kerala legends, in which the goddess's body manifests as the physical earth and menstruates.

Until about forty years ago the menses of *Bhumi Devi* (the earth) was celebrated in a ritual called *uccaral*, which took place at the end of the second harvest in January. At

the beginning of this season, the *uccaral* was observed, representing the menstruation and seclusion of the Goddess. For three days nothing connected with agriculture took place and she was not to be disturbed. Granaries were closed, paddy was not sold and debts were forgiven. On the fourth day the lands were reclaimed by the landlords. ‘‘The red earth in this hot, dry season is the visible womb of the earth goddess in the season of menstruation’ (Caldwell 115). Through this ritual the land was thus rested and revived.

One of the most well known temples in Kerala is the Chengannur temple where the *Bhagavati* menstruates. The goddess’s menstrual cloth is extremely valuable, having a spirit which manifests an auspicious power in the household of the one who owns it. The opportunity to buy the powerful cloth is booked years ahead of time and chief ministers and high officials in India vie for the opportunity (Grah 3-7).

Although menarche rituals have not been documented until the 19th and 20th century, it is probable that they are a continuation from the Sangam era practices. Judy Grah’s work documents in detail the correspondence of the goddess’s menstrual seclusion and other *Bhagavati* rituals to traditional puberty ceremonies (Ibid., 119-213). Menarche rituals have been described in virtually all Hindu castes and communities in Kerala and, for many communities, were the most elaborate, expensive and important celebrations. The Dravidian root verb for menarche has no negative associations but connotes ‘growth, completeness, roundness, abundance and arriving at perfection’ (de Turreil 86).

There are several, seemingly paradoxical views about women during their menstrual periods. Women are considered vulnerable to ‘attaching spirits’ and require secluded protection. Women purify themselves by bleeding and fasting, increasing their sacred powers to the point they are dangerous to others who would come into contact with them (Ibid., 100). Another view of menstruation, according to Saskia Kersenboom, is that women accumulate so much *shakti* in their blood that it has to be drained away regularly. She quotes an Ayurvedic practitioner, ‘If it were not for her monthly period, five men could not hold one woman down’ (Kersenboom 69).

Women at menarche had the kind of auspiciousness Hart a scholar on ancient Tamil culture, described as *ananku*. Savithri de Turreil, a scholar from the matrilineal Nayar community, states ‘The Nayar world view interprets menarche and menstruation as empowerment, as an onrush of sacred power, cyclical like the seasons, elemental and uniquely female’ (de Turreil 252). And menstruation is tied to a woman’s sexuality and generative capacity because it is a well-known ‘rule’ that directly after a woman’s menstruation she has the right to expect an attentive sexual partner and this is the most appropriate time for conceptions (Ibid., 136). If this is so for women, it might also be so for the goddess and the end of her menstrual seclusion would signal her time of powerful creative potential.

The menstruating female is seen as a purveyor of magical if not divine power. She is ritually assimilated to divine females who also menstruate such as the Goddess in the Chengannur temple in Kerala and the Minakshi temple in Madurai, whose menstruation

is an outpouring of fertility, of abundance, prosperity. 'Just as the menses of the Goddess is sacred, life-giving and auspicious, the human menstrual cycle also augurs new life, prosperity and blessings in general . . . The human female is assimilated to the divine in this respect' (Ibid., 139).

From concepts in Dravidian literature two thousand years ago, and from Grahn and de Turreil's recent work, continuing to the present we can see that within this system sacred power (*ananku/shakti*) is contained in, and can be accessed through, women's bodies to benefit themselves, their families and the larger community.

[1] *Ananku* signifies female deity as well as manifestations of her power.

[2] I am following the trend in Kerala, where there has been a move away from caste identity, to speak of 'communities' rather than castes or religions when describing a contemporary situation.

[3] An attempt to raise caste status by dropping indigenous customs, rituals and beliefs and adopting those of the high caste Brahmins.

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