

An Evolving Trend In Religious Practices Amongst Malaysian Hindus: A Case Study of Shrines Within The Residence Compound of Hindus, A New Phenomenon?¹

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Abstract

Hindus possess their own unique religious beliefs and practices and they have been inherited from one generation to another for centuries. Yet the religious beliefs and practices of Hindus living in India differs from that of Hindus living elsewhere or outside India. The best exemplification of the differences is the religious practice of Malaysian Hindus as they have introduced a new trend in the Hindu religious practice by building shrines for deities within their residence compound. It is a new phenomenon amongst the Malaysian Hindu community and also it is envisaged as a problem in the nation as most shrines built illegally without the consent of the local authorities. This article aims at looking at the new phenomenon prevalent amongst present day Malaysian Hindus and how the phenomenon emerged in the society.

Keywords: Hindus, Malaysian Hindus, shrines, religious practices, beliefs, local authorities, Hinduism.

Introduction

We can largely envisage the religious practice of Malaysian Indians through their worship or house worship, festivals and temple festivals (Arasaratnam S., 1970). These types of worship are passed down from one generation to another and duly and thoroughly practised until now in their houses as well as temples. The Hindu Sangam renders countless contributions to these kinds of religious practices of Malaysian Indians or Malaysian Hindus particularly. Amongst the religious practices of Malaysian Indians, the domestic prayers performed by Malaysian Indians have undergone numerous changes with time and amongst the religious practices undergoing changes is building shrines within the residence compound.

A number of Malaysian Indians, construct shrines within their residence compound according to their belief perform prayers for God or their family deities. These shrines usually built in rural areas make their way to urban areas where

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Indians reside (Rajantharan M. & Manimaran S., 2006, pg 43). This phenomenon of building shrines within the residence compound is regarded as a completely new phenomenon amongst Malaysian Indians. Therefore this articles aims at giving some insight into the new religious practice of instituting shrines within the residence compound among Malaysian Indians.

Temple Worship Amongst Malaysian Indians

Indians in Malaysia migrated to Malaysia as labourers during the British rule in the 19th and 20th century. Coming as labourers to Malaysia, Indians practised their own religious beliefs according to their sects and inherited religious beliefs (Rajakrishnan R., 1988). Furthermore, they established temples here by using the soil they brought from their homeland in the towns and estates where they resided. Temples built this way led to the formation of the temples built according to the Saiva *Agamic* rules later on.

Being inherited the popular religious background, Malaysian Indians worshiped *muthanmai deviam* (major deities) such as Lord Ganesha, Lord Murugan, Lord Krishna, Lord Rama and Goddess Mariamman. Whereas the rest prayed to *kaval deviam* (guardian deities) such as Muneeswarar, Muniyandy, Kaliasman and Madurai Veeran and established small shrines for them according to their convenience in places like their residence compound, the border of estates, workplace (L.S.S. O' Malley, 1970). These guardian deities are considered to be their family deities. Besides the above-mentioned *muthanmai deviam* (major deities), Indians also practised their religion in urban areas by worshipping their family deities. They managed these temples individually as well as with their families.

Moreover the Indians then practised their guardian deity worship to protect themselves from evil spirits, unseen forces, witchcrafts and magic spells. In their worship, the statues (*silai* or *vigraha*) of deities play a crucial role. They practised their religious beliefs by praying to the God through many types of statues such as *karunggal silai* (granite statues), *suthai silai* (cement statues), *mara silai* (wooden statues), *aimpon silai* (statues made of 5 metals), *seppu silai* (copper statues) (Rajoo R., 1984). Besides statues, they also used multifarious religious symbols like tridents, spears, swords and bricks and the religious symbols were found in places such as trees, t-junctions, road sides and jungle areas and they also practised their beliefs by putting red or yellow colour clothes over the tree. Understanding this, the British who were the owners and managers of estates gave full freedom to the the estate workers to practise their religion and worship their family deities. By using this opportunity, Indians conducted their prayers and practised their traditional religion (popular religion) without any obstacles (O'Malley, 1970). According to Rajoo (1984), in this type of worship, the practice of sacrificing animals is prevalent. Moreover, they also conducted the prayer by offering the deities liquor, cigars (*curuttu*), dried fish, cooked meat and by playing musical instruments like pambai, udukai, urumi and other types of drums.

In estates, a small number of Malayaless and Telugus also lived along with the Tamils. In certain estates, Telugus dominated the number of Indian workers working in estates. In these estates, they conducted their prayers by building temples for Lord Rama, Lord Krishna and Lord Anjaneya (Arasaratnam, 1970).

Concurrently, those living in the urban areas also performed their prayers by establishing shrines of *muthanmai deviam* (major deities) Goddess Mariamman, Lord Muruga, Lord Shiva, Lord Krishna, Lord Rama and Lord Vinayaga in their places. Also in these temples, the worship of guardian deities is practised. The Chettiyar community predominantly builds Saiva *agamis* temples for their primary deity Lord Muruga in the towns they reside. Likewise the Ceylonese or Sri Lankan Tamils also established temples for deities such as Lord Shiva, Lord Muruga. Before the independence of Malaya, the religious practice of the Tamils was as such in Malaysia (Rajakrishnan. R., 1988)

After Malaysian independence, this religious practice continued. On the long run, the temples in estates and urban areas were reconstructed and revitalised. Most of these temples were rebuilt according to the rules of Saivism, gradually the Saiva *agamis* Poojas were introduced. In these temples, Brahmin *gurukkals* and non-Brahmin *gurukkals* who had sufficient training in Saivism were appointed as priests. To guardian and family deities, small shrines were dedicated according to one's financial capability in some places (Rajoo R., 1984).

In the 1980's, there were significant changes in the lifestyle of the people due to the economic growth. Due to land fragmentation, many estate workers had to leave the estates. Since their wages are low, they could not afford to buy houses in town areas. Hence they built their settlement in suburban areas (Arasaratnam, 1970). These workers who left the estates possessed no other skills than their labour skills. So it was formidable for them to work in other sectors. Among those who left the estates, most of them migrated to the suburban areas nearby. Whereas some migrated to areas owned by the government which was announced illegal land to occupy (Bella, 2008b).

Concurrently, the urban areas of the country also progressed along with the progress of the nation. Where the change occurred, many estates near the main towns were transformed into small towns (Janakey Raman, 2009). The lives of the Hindus living in such places were also progressive. This progress also reflected on their religious belief. Indians accustomed to living among the same community people and practising their religion. When they happened to live in such a progressive cycle, the progress also reflected on their religious beliefs. The Indians accustomed to living in a place in a large quantity, happened to live elsewhere in places like towns and other settlements after they moved out of their estates. Wherever they went, they brought along their religious belief, thus they established shrines of their family or guardian deities and performed their worship there. Also when living in different places, the Indians adapted themselves to live together with other races (Manimaran S., 2006).

When these temples were built in urban areas, they were rebuilt according to the *Agamic* rules of Hinduism and Poojas were duly conducted according to *Agamic* rules. When the prayers are conducted in such a manner in temples built in accordance with the *Agamic* rules, those temples which failed to adhere to the laws and regulations of the authorities, those temples built in private or illegal lands came under the danger of demolition and they were labelled as temples built unlawfully. In fact, as Indians moved out of the estates, it was the responsibility of the government to build temples for the workers. But the government failed to do so. If the government had built temples for them in the places where they settled down,

they would have encountered no problems with legality and the authorities. As a matter of fact the demolition of temples occurred in certain places. This phenomenon created dissatisfaction amongst the Indian community after the year of 2000. Despite this phenomenon occurred in certain places, we can envisage that many temples all over Malaysia which were built according to the *Agamic* rules or with partial *Agamic* rules and registered lawfully.

Domestic Prayers/Home Poojas Amongst Malaysian Hindus

Besides temple prayer, Hindus back then also stuck to domestic prayers conducted in their own houses. It is norm to conduct prayers by establishing an altar in one's own house (Rajoo R., 1982). It is noteworthy that Indians, ever since the day they have migrated to Malaysia also focused mainly on domestic prayers besides temple prayers. Back then Indians conducted domestic prayers in many parts of their house such as inside the house, living room, the front of the house. Whereas certain quarters also performed their prayers by allocating a particular room which is only meant for prayer purposes according to their convenience. Since the proportion of the house is not ample and the rooms are small, they had to place their altar or the statue or portrayal of deities in other parts of their houses (Jomo, 1989).

In this prayers they use Hindu divine symbols such as the picture of deities and the symbols of Hinduism such as spears, tridents, lamp. They also worship small status of deities in their house (Rajoo R., 1982). As part of their main responsibility in their prayers, they apply holy ash on their forehead, light a lamp before their deities pictures and light up incense sticks and *Sambirani*. Moreover, they also offer flowers and food stuff to the deities and recite devotional songs they know.

Some Hindus also perform their prayer before the holy pictures of the deities. Whereas some conduct their prayer by hanging the pictures of guardian deities above the entrance of their houses emulating the manner their ancestors conducted their prayers. In the festive seasons and on Tuesdays and Fridays they conduct communal prayer or special prayer in their houses (M.Rajantheran, K.Sillalee & R.Viknarasa, 2012).

After the independence of Malaysia, the spiritual thoughts of Indians even became stronger. The religious activities conducted by Hindu movements, the speeches of religious leaders and the impacts brought by the speeches played a crucial in bolstering the spiritual thoughts of Malaysian Indians. Owing to the impacts, the Indians realised the importance of conducting domestic prayers according to *Agamic* rules (Rajakrishnan R., 1970). Meanwhile, the practice of establishing altars in their houses also became popular amongst the Malaysian Indian community. Over time, this progress led to a situation where Malaysian Indians set up their altars in their houses in such a way that it creates an image like conducting prayers at the temple. It indicates that the *Agamic* style religious practice has become famous amongst the people. It instills an urge in Malaysian Indians to conduct their religious practices in a proper manner as they live together with the people of distinct faiths and beliefs. This progress is an indication of the advancement of spiritual thoughts amongst Malaysian Indians and growing numbers of educated religious Indians in Malaysia nowadays (Rajoo, 1982).

Shrines Building Within The House Compund Amongst Malaysian Hindus

One of the common religious practices of Malaysian Hindus is praying by having the statues or sketches of Hindu deities in the entrance of the house. Besides the above-mentioned common religious practise, multifarious changes have taken place in the religious practices of Malaysian Hindus and the religious practices also witnessed gradual progress.

When Malaysian Hindus lived in estates, they earmarked their workplace as well as jungle areas near their estates as their place of worship and conducted their prayers there. It is because the estate management did not allow them to establish shrines or temples in their house compound (Rajoo, 1982). As they were private lands, the estate management never permitted such a religious practice. But as the workers moved out of their estates and migrated to towns and urban areas, they began buying their own lands. Some of them bought their own lands and built their house in the land (Jain, 1970). Those people building their houses in their own land establish shrines for their deities and family deities as they wish and perform their prayers. These types of shrines are called house shrines built within one's residence compound. These shrines functioned as a worship place of the family members of whom established the particular shrine as well as the public.

In family shrines, only family members participate in the prayers conducted. These shrines are different in shape according to one's financial background and enthusiasm. Depending upon the family background, special poojas and yearly festivals are carried out besides the usual prayers. In shrines visited by many people, especially outsiders, a number of multifarious rituals are conducted such as dancing in trance, fortune telling, solving one's problems and eradicating evil spirits. Over time, yearly festivals or *Thiruvila* are also conducted and this phenomenon gradually leads to the formation of temple committee (Belle, 2008a). The temple committees consist of family members, family committee or public committee. Festivals, Poojas and special Poojas are conducted by appointing a priest at those shrines or temples. Some of the committess are registered with the registrar of societies whereas some are not lawfully registered (Rajakrishnan R., 1970).

The Problems of Shrines Built Within The Residence Compound

Malaysian Indians transformed from estate workers into a modern community living in towns and urban areas (Rajoo R., 1982). The transformation or change of Malaysian Indians witnessed many changes many impacts due to the change in their lifestyle and building of shrines within their house compound. This is the preliminary outcome of the research conducted on the phenomenon of building shrines within the residence compound and several impacts of the phenomenon are identified.

Generally, the shrines built within the residence compound are being a problem to neighbours and it brings about many problems. The problems are in many forms. The smell emanates from paraphernalia used in Pooja such incence sticks, Sambirani and cigars makes neighbours uncomfortable, especially Muslims. The sound of mantras uttered during pooja is also a problem. It is evident when the people living next door are Christians or Muslims. As the dancing in trance ceremonies take place

at house shrines, the noise made during this ceremony creates uncomfortableness to the public. The sound of drums played during special Poojas and festivals such as Pambai, urumi and melam is also nuisance to neighbours. Not only to the people of other faiths and races, it is also a problem for Hindus especially elderly people and students (Arasaratnam, 1970).

Moreover it is also a problem for all parties when the wastes or leftovers of Pooja materials used such as lemons, flowers and gourds (*Pusanikai*) are scattered everywhere. When special Poojas and festival are celebrated, those coming to attend them usually never park their vehicles properly in such a way that their vehicles obstructs the veranda or pathways. It causes traffic congestion in most cases. The flock of the people, traffic congestions occur during festivals and poojas conducted at house shrines make other people feel as if they have lost their privacy and freedom. These kinds of religious practices enable those of other faiths to belittle Hinduism. When the people of other races and faiths are overly irritated with these religious practices, they also lodge complaints to the police and local municipal councils. Local authorities such as local municipal councils also duly exercise their duty upon receiving complaints such as giving warning and issuing warning letters to the shrines concerned. Moreover the shrine owners are advised to remove the shrines as the building of shrines within their house compounds contravenes the house plan. When the advice of the authorities go unheeded and when the authorities keep receiving complaints, it leads to the demolition of the shrines concerned according to law.

Conclusion

Malaysian Indians have practised their religious beliefs without any obstacles ever since the day they have migrated to Malaysia. The practice of such religious beliefs practised conducted without any obstacles came under fire over time with many challenges and hurdles. The progress of the nation's economy, the development of estates and as a result of which Indians live together with other races are contributing factors to the phenomenon. Although Malaysian Indians live together with many races, they are required to alter their religious practice and beliefs according to the present time. Since there is a need for Indians to change their religious activities playing an important role in their lives according to time, a proper and rigorous research on building of shrines within the house compound is required.

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