THE COLONIAL STATE AND POPULAR RELIGION

(With special reference to the Hook-swinging Ceremony in 19th Century South India)

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CERTIFICATE

Certified that dissertation entitled "**THE COLONIAL STATE AND POPULAR RELIGION** (With special reference to the Hook-swinging Ceremony in 19th century South India)" submitted by **Mr. R.S. KRISHNA** is in partial fulfilment of **Master of Philosophy** Course of this University. This dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree to any other University and is his own work.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

(PROF. K.N. PANIKKAR)
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To My Parents

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The nearly two hundred years of colonial rule constitutes an important epoch in the history of India. So much so that colonialism forms the dominant theme in the study of the modern period of Indian history. In the same breath, one should not forget to mention the national movement, its different phases, programmes, etc. These two themes account for the bulk of the literature available on this period. These two have been approached and studied by scholars from different levels and perspectives, to apprehend its political, economic and social dimensions. Generally, as far as studies on the social and cultural aspects of these is concerned, scholars have had the socio-religious reform movement, stretching for more than a century, as the main area of focus, probing into the factors responsible for the social and cultural changes. Earlier, studies, beginning with those made by J.N. Farquhar, LSS O Malley and later with some changes, by scholars of the likes of R. C. Mazumdar and David Kopf sought to understand these changes in terms of westernisation or challenge-response, largely overemphasising the role of English education, the thoughts and ideas which emerged thereof, and other institutions of learning and study established by the British i.e. the Fort William's College, the Asiatic Society etc. Such studies and even the earlier Marxist perspectives of A.R. Desai and Sushobhan Sarkar, failed to locate

these changes within the colonial context.[1] But over the years studies made by scholars like Sumit Sarkar, Ashok Sen and K.N. Panikkar, et.al. have after an intense study and debate, brought to relief the contours and limitations of the ideas of many of these reformers and the changes they attempted to bring in. They have also attempted to highlight the manner and process by which colonialism impinged on the consciousness of these people.

But today frameworks have emerged, which seeks to highlight the latter aspect in much precise and clearer terms. Basically such an understanding derives its framework from the studies made by Michael Foucault but more directly from Edward Said's 'Orientalism'. These works have added new dimensions to cultural studies. What we are now concerned with is the colonial production of new forms of knowledge and history about the Indian society, new arrangements and classification of their languages and of new text based uniformities in previously fluid and heterogeneous legal and religious traditions. These fields of discourse together with the religious, administrative and legal institutions in which they were embodied have been regarded as

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1 In part this was largely due to the fact that earlier scholars understanding of colonialism was imprecise. Scholars such as A.R. Desai, instead of seeing colonialism as a structure, a complete whole, saw and understood it as performing both a progressive as well as regressive role. The falsity of such an approach and the need to see colonialism as a complete structure and which should form the constant backdrop for all studies - economic, political, social or cultural has rightly been emphasised by Prof. Bipin Chandra. For details see his 'Colonialism and Modernisation' in Nationalism and Colonalism in Modern India, New Delhi, 1987

sites both for the exercise of colonial power and importantly for resistance to it[2] which may be as important as political struggle and economic expropriation more conventionally the focus of scholarly concern.

But one can still see a sphere within this area, where not enough attention has been paid. In most of these studies, scholars have had their attention largely focused on certain fixed segments of the Indian society - the intelligensia, the middle classes, their ideas and efforts, ignoring the culture of the lower and subordinate members of the society, who formed the bulk of the population. Refering to this aspect, Prof. Sumit Sarkar has rightly remarked, "....(there) remains a vast and virtually unexplained terrain of forms of popular consciousness and culture as distinct from ideological currents within the intelligentsia on which there has been considerable work of a rather old fashioned 'intellectual history'".[3] This work specifically concerns itself with examining one such aspect of popular culture in 19th century South India. Though narrow in its scope, this work still attempts to show that how the terrain of popular culture was also subject to the exercise of colonial power and hegemony.

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2 Rosalind O' Hanlon, 'Culture of Rule, Communities of Resistance' in Social Analysis, 25, 1989.

3 Sumit Sarkar, 'Social History : Predicaments and Possibilities' in Economic and Political Weekly, June, 1985.

Here we are going to focus our attention on one ceremony, hook-swinging, and the colonial effort to outlaw it. This ritual of hook-swinging (referred to as *Cheddle* in Tamil and *Soodalo* in Telugu) involved the self-mortification of the body, performed in fulfillment of vows to propitiate certain popular gods and goddesses. This practice was perceived by the British as being very 'revolting' and 'barbarous' and one which was seen as assaulting the sensibilities of any 'civilised' human being. This ceremony was also obtained in parts of Maharashtra and southern Bengal. Beginning with Bengal in the second quarter of the last century, the Britishers took upon themselves the task of abolishing this practice, ostensibly for the purpose of 'human goodness' and to put an end to a practice from which 'humanity recoils'. What is being sought to be studied here is the nature and character of this colonial intervention to prohibit this custom.

Research in this area is not new. Geoff Oddie has already made extensive studies on hook-swinging [4] But the perspective and framework with which he has approached it, can be questioned. Firstly, Oddie fails to see and delineate the various processes and steps involved, in the performance of this ritual. There is no attempt to probe into the nature of relation between

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4 See his 'Hook-swinging and Popular religions in South India during the Nineteenth Century' in IESHR, 23, 1, 1986, pp-93-106, and 'The Western Educated Elites and Popular Religion : The Debate Over the Hook-swinging issue in Bengal and Madras C1830-1894' in Peter Robb (ed.) Society and Ideology, Delhi 1993 pp-177-196.

the ritual and the community and how each group of people within a community, could employ and use it in diverse ways. Most importantly Oddie is particularly found wanting in placing the British efforts within a colonial context. What exactly needs to be established is that the colonial efforts to outlaw this practice, did not as such emanate from any concern for the individuals involved. Their efforts were essentially discursive in nature, to be located within the colonial context of production of knowledge, in which the whole ritual is reduced to being a mere 'superstitious' and 'ignorant' act, the swinger only being marginal to their concerns. Thus, what was being tacitly endeavoured, was to portray this act as being totally the preserve of the subordinate classes and the local elites, having nothing to do with such beliefs and customs. Therefore, what is being attempted in this work is to show how the colonialists through such discursive formations, institute their dominance and hegemony in the cultural sphere of the Indian society. This would be the focus of the second chapter here.

But this culture of the subordinate classes or popular culture, is a problematic concept which raises number of questions, needed to be addressed and clarified separately in some detail. Given that it is only of late that certain studies on popular culture have begun to emerge in India, we will be drawing our insights on the debate over the concept of popular culture from Europe.

Each group, social group or classes in the society was seen to have certain set of beliefs, ideas, customs and products. And the relationship between the culture and social group was seen to be fixed. Hence 'popular' was distinguished from the 'elite' culture. In Europe, for example, the popular culture was seen to be the set of ideas and beliefs of the peasants and craftsmen, as being different and even opposed to the elite culture of the ruling class, comprising of the nobility, the clergy and men of letters. Anthropologist Robert Redfield distinguished such a cultural stratification by employing the term 'great' and 'little' tradition. The great tradition was the one cultivated in schools and temples and the little tradition was the one of the unlettered people in village on peasant communities. On such a basis historians in Europe have sought to identify, characteristics that determine both 'great' and 'little' traditions.[5] The classical tradition of erudition, handed down in schools and universities, medieval scholastic philosophy and theology, and movements such as the Renaissance, the scientific revolution and enlightenment which affected only the educated minority were seen to be representing the great/ dominant tradition. This, when subtracted from the culture of early modern Europe, left us with popular culture i.e. the folksongs, folktales, broadsides and chap-books, the carnivals and festivals.[6]

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5 See Peter Burke, Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, London, 1978, pp.24-28

But such a categorisation is obviously flawed. As Peter Burke has pointed out, such a narrow conceptualisation, ignores the upper class participation, in popular culture, which was an important fact of European life, most visibly seen at festivals. Carnival, for example was for everyone. It was not only at such times of ritualised collective rejoicing that the upper classes on the educated took part in popular culture.[7]

Burke gives the instance of the rich and poor, nobles and commoners who attended the same sermons, at least in towns. The nobility also patronised ballad singing. Among the lovers of ballads were kings and queens like Isabella of Spain, Ivan the terrible of Russia and Sophia of Denmark. It was not only the nobility who participated in popular culture. So did the clergy. It was not at all uncommon for the priests to be seen singing, dancing or wearing masks in church on festive occasions. But what Peter Burke suggests could have separated the elite from the popular, was perhaps the nature of participation of the nobility and the clergy in popular rituals and festivals. Their reading of chapbooks, and listening of the folksongs, their understanding of it, can be seen as being different from that of the peasants and craftsmen.[8]

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6 Peter Burke, Popular Culture in early Modern Europe, London, 1978, p.24.

7 Ibid, p.25

8 Ibid, pp 26-27

Roger Chartier, in his studies on the social history of publishing and reading in early modern France, has also questioned whether chapbooks or *bibliotheque bleue*, a set of beliefs and rituals, among the subordinate groups in the society, can strictly be seen as attributes of popular culture.[9] Talking about popular religion he argues that it cannot be seen on established as one being practiced by peasants, as opposed to the dominating elite and the clergy. He points out that historians in their definition of popular religion have accepted the definition the clergy themselves made. The latter identified certain practices and beliefs as opposed to legitimate Christianity which were to be condemned and seen as unlawful. Moreover, Chartier, argues that popular beliefs and behaviours of groups for the clergy were conceived more in geographical than in social sense. The clergy attempted not so much to describe the religion of the lower classes as to define particular communities (those of cities, parishes or women) that fail to respect clerical jurisdiction. Likewise texts such as *Bibliotheque bleue* cannot be seen as an cultural artifact of the subordinate classes. The fact that these texts were sold by the pedlars should not necessarily mean that this literature was intended for the common people. In small towns and cities, given the absence of book-shops, the pedlars substituted them for

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9 Roger Chartier, 'Culture as appropriation : Popular Cultural uses in Early Modern France in Steven L. Kaplan (ed.) Understanding Popular Culture, New York, 1984, pp 229-254.

potential readers. Also even members of the middle and lower bourgeoisie classes, went in for such texts.[10] Chartier points out that texts such as *livrets bleu* did not have a specific public but constituted reading matter for different social groups, each approaching it in ways ranging from a basic deciphering of signs to fluent reading.

Hence Chartier argues that it is pointless to try to identify popular culture by some supposedly specific distribution of cultural objects. What is important and of more significance is how certain texts and beliefs are appropriated and used by different classes.[11] What the historian needs to do is not to identify and differentiate a set of beliefs and practices as being popular, but rather how given ideas and beliefs are appropriated by different groups.

The first chapter of this dissertation, will be addressing itself to this aspect. Peter Burke's main contention was how by the end of eighteenth century, with the advance of industrial capitalism, changes occurred in the values and lifestyle of the people, which then lead to distancing of the new elites from culture of the subordinate classes. "By 1800, in most parts of

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10 Ibid p 231

11 Here one can give the example of Carlo Ginzburg's The Cheese and the Worms, New York, 1982, where he has very brilliantly reconstructed the world view of one 16th Century Italian miller, Menocchio, during the Inquisition trials.

Europe, the clergy, the nobility, the merchants, the professional men and their wives had abandoned popular culture to the lower classes, from whom they were now separated, as even before, by profound differences in world view".[12] Sumanta Banerjee's study on Elite and popular culture in 19th century Calcutta, applies a similar framework. He demonstrates how the newly emerging elite, shaped by the British colonial powers, not only disowned a common culture which it once shared with the populace but also sought to muzzle it.[13]

There is yet another perspective through which one can approach the study of popular culture. The concept of 'community' is more often invoked by the anthropologists, in trying to understand many of the cultural practices, the manner in which they reinforce a sense of community. Here we can cite the example of E.P. Thompson and Natalie Davis, who in their works, have tried to establish, how certain popular practices and rituals, maintain and perpetuate certain values of the community. In their study of crowd behaviour, they have argued that to merely see the motives and behaviour of violent mobs during rioting, as committing violence without rational goals and motivation, would be wrong and incorrect. Crowd behaviour, they argued was a type

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12 Peter Burke, op. cit, p.270

13 Sumanta Banerjee, The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in 19th century Calcutta, Calcutta 1984.

of ritualised and theatrical performance, which expressed a sense and feeling of community, giving them the meaning and motivation to act, with legitimacy.[14] Sandria Freitags edited volume, on culture in Banaras seeks to analyse the same from such a perspective. But from certain essays in the volume, it is clear that the 'community' cannot be seen as a one, unchanging whole.[15] Neighbourhood, work and leisure - community can be explored in such multiple and non-linear ways. What is central to the changes and processes here is power. As we have attempted to establish this aspect in chapter one and three, ritual and community can be used and appropriated in different ways and methods, but these are contingent upon the relations and conditions of power.

In the course of this work, we will be addressing ourselves to these problems and issues, but more importantly our focus will be on the colonial intervention in the hook-swinging ceremony, examining its nature and character and assessing the people's response to it.

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14 For a critique of their view point see Suzanne Desan's 'Crowds, Community and Ritual in the work of E.P. Thompson and Natalie Davis' in Lynn Hunt (ed.) The New Cultural History, California, 1989, pp.47-71.

15 Sandria Freitag (ed.) Culture and Power in Banaras, Delhi, 1989.

CHAPTER 1

POPULAR RELIGION IN SOUTH INDIA

In this chapter we are concerned with the different aspects of popular religion as obtained in nineteenth century South India with special reference to Tamil Nadu. The chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section in a general outline, the chief features of popular religious beliefs and rituals are presented. The perspective from which we approach this will be basically diachronic, leaving aside the synchronic aspect, for a later chapter, where we would be looking into the nature of native response to colonial intervention. In the second section, it will be our contention that it is the institution of caste that provides the basis and context for these rituals and practices, and hence, why at one level they can be seen as standing opposed to the dominant religious and social arrangement.

SECTION : I

Chief Characteristics of Popular Religious Beliefs and Practices

As has been already alluded to in the introduction, we see popular religion as those beliefs and practices which attracted widespread popular support and which was largely, though not exclusively, associated with the subordinate classes of the society.

Their worship and rituals of certain gods and goddesses pertained more with the day to day concerns like ill-health, good harvests, cattle etc. They were, to use the term which Antonio Gramsci used to refer popular Catholicism, 'crassly materialistic'.[1] These gods and goddesses were not seen as saviours taking their worshippers to a desired goal, but more as protecting them from the evil spirits, which could harm and torment them. It was the general belief of the people that the world was inhabited by innumerable spirits, both good and bad, which were the ones responsible for all the unusual events in particular of diseases and other calamities. And for this purpose the spirits had to be properly propitiated. These spirits were revered as Gramadevtas, the term used to refer to these village deities. If properly appeased they conferred health on the sick, granted children to the childless and likewise gave relief from all kinds of human suffering. But if neglected they become terrible in their wrath, inflicting all kinds of disasters.

To fathom the reasons and the context, for such beliefs and ideas, it was perhaps the fear and anxieties arising out of short life span, on account of the rampance of epidemics such as small pox and cholera and also the vagaries of nature on which production and harvests of crops depended. These broad factors

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1 Antonio Gramsci, 'Selections from the Prison note books', New York, 1971, p.396. cited in Partha Chatterjee's 'Caste and Subaltern Consciousness' in Ranajit Guha (ed.) Subaltern Studies, Vol. VI, Delhi, 1989, pp.170-174.

were similar to the ones prevalent in medieval Europe which led people to popular form of worship, outside organised Christianity, as K.V. Thomas has shown in his work.[2]

For the layman and peasants of South India, religion was and is an integral and essential part of their everyday life. It was through religion that these people were able to explain and rationalise all those forces and factors that appeared to be beyond their control. David Arnold in his pioneering study on the famines and medicines while highlighting its social and cultural impact, focussed on the people's response to such situations.[3]

Drought, famine and other calamities like cholera and small pox, were perceived by people as a result of the failure on their part to perform the normal rites and rituals properly or on account of certain lapses of few individuals or whole villages.[4] It was in the nature and character of these deities to cause havoc and distress among the people. It was their wrath and anger which lead to the spread of diseases and other afflictions. But at the same time these dieties, were seen capable of being influenced and controlled by the people. Through their prayers and rituals these deities were sought to be appeased and propitiated, assuage their malevolence

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2 K.V. Thomas - Religion and the Decline of Magic, London, 1971. p.53

3 David Arnold, 'Famine in peasant consciousness and peasant action : Madras 1876-78', in Ranajit Guha (ed.) Subaltern Studies 111, Delhi, 1984, pp-70-74.

4 Ibid

and move them to relent. To quote Arnold "Interpreting the ultimate cause of draught and famine in religious terms, not only enabled them to give the disaster a meaning intelligible to themselves, but also provided them the appropriate cultural responses through which they could seek to end their afflictions."[5]

Another aspect of popular religion was its collective nature. As such misfortunes of the kinds mentioned above affected the whole village and hence the response to it was collective regardless of caste and economic status. In such instances, all the dominant castes including the Brahmins and the other dominant non-Brahmin castes, down upto the untouchables would participate in rituals conducted to propitiate them.

Of course these deities were also revered in individual capacities. There were, what one would refer as the Kuladevtas, family deities, revered by each family or lineage. Vows were made, for the fulfillment of certain desires or wishes. These vows were generally in the nature of making certain sacrifices of animals, such as buffaloes, sheep, fowls etc or of sometimes erecting an image of the revered deity. A word about these sacrifices. Often, elaborate affairs, they many times, were conducted on a large scale, involving the slaughter of hundreds if

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5 Ibid. p.71

not thousands. One Rev. F.N. Alexander of Christian Mission Society, described, one such instance in Ellore (now in present Andhra Pradesh) To quote, "In both these places (referring to two streets in the town) sacrifices were offered. In the last mentioned 900 sheep and 20 head of buffaloes and in the east street perhaps 500 sheep and 30 or 40 buffaloes were slaughtered..... Before the shed there was a huge pile of heads severed from the sheep that had just been slaughtered, this pile was about 5 feet high and 20 feet round, upon it was a single burning lamp...."[6]

Other ways and methods through which vows were fulfilled, took the form of hook-swinging and fire walking. Both these rituals were detailed occasions, involving preparations on a large scale. Here we should also mention that such rituals were performed in honour of any of the deities. With few exceptions like that of the fire walking ritual which is generally performed by the members of the Pallis castes, in honour of Draupadi Amman,[7] it is very difficult to attribute any one fixed ceremony to one particular deity. Thus hook-swinging was held in honour of different deities, varying from place to place.

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6 Madras Government Records, Judicial, 1700,. 21st December 1859

7 See Alf Hiltebeital's 'Sexuality and Sacrifice' in Fred Clothey (ed.) Images of Man Madras, 1981.

To perform this ceremony, first the blessings of the goddess in whose honour this is to be performed is sought.[8] The Goddess's consent is understood to be the lizards voice, from her right hand side. As soon as the consent was known elaborate preparations were made for conducting this performance. Houses in the vicinity were whitewashed. Decorations were made with mango and margosa festoons. In a fully decorated wooden car, with plantain leaves and bananas, the image of the Goddess is placed. Again the goddess is invoked for choosing the person to perform the actual swinging. And all available evidence, with few exceptions, suggest that the swingers were from the lower castes.[9] But often, from among the dominant caste groups, i.e. Kallars in Madurai, there were certain professional swingers. The candidate is chosen among them by the chief or the pusari to whom the goddess appears the previous night of the ceremony and announces the name of the person chosen by her.[10] The chosen person then performs the swinging. The hook-swinging apparatus comprises of an erect perpendicular post, measuring around thirty to forty feet. On the pivot of the post is placed a horizontal pole. From the one end of the pole is tied a rope with the hooks fastened and from the

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8 All references to hook-swinging here are from Bishop Whiteheads - Village Gods of South India, London, 1921, Rpt. New Delhi 1981. Gustav Oppert - Original Inhabitants of India, Madras 1893. Rpt Delhi 1971 p. 463 and Madras Govt. records, in particular Judicial Nos. 613, 21st March 1894.

9 See Edgar Thuston, Ethnographic Notes in Southern India, Madras 1906, p.493

10 Further details of the ceremony is given in Chapter III

other end also a long rope is tied which is pulled by one person, as a result of which the person hooked on the other end of the pole, was left suspended in the air, some thirty to forty feet above the ground. Very often this apparatus was placed on a wooden chariot, drawn by the hundreds of devotees, who came to witness this ritual.

Although most of the rituals addressed to these deities were marked by its sanguine nature not all rites were such. For instance the rain making ceremonies were markedly different. Idols are washed and the water was made to run off into the fields in emulating of the deities customary watering of the fields. Certain acquatic creatures such as frogs featured prominently in such rituals. They were given a wash, fanned, covered with margosa leaves and were carried in procession inducing the rain goddesses to relent.[11]

As far as the nature of social participation is concerned, these religious beliefs drew their sustenance basically from the lower caste, in particular the untouchable castes such as the Pariahs and Pallars. But other dominant castes, such as the Vellalars and Nairs of Kerala and other middle of the rung castes such as the Pallis (also known as the Vanniyars), the Kallars etc

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11 David Arnold, op.cit. p. 72

seemed to share much of the beliefs and practices of the subordinate classes. The Brahmins too reposed their faith and belief in such worship and rituals. Whitehead cites instances of Brahmins officiating as priests in few such shrines.[12] But then their participation was qualified. The priests in such shrines had nothing to do with the animal sacrifices and the other devotees participation in such rites (i.e. animal sacrifices) was mostly by proxy. All the same, such stratification notwithstanding all appeared to have shared a common cultural milieu.

We now give an account of some of the important deities, whose significance and popularity, was as such not confined to Tamil Nadu alone,but extends throughout South India. These deities, Gramadevtas number in hundreds and it becomes quite impossible to give a list of all of them. Most of these deities with a few and certain exceptions, differ mostly in names and qualifications, but are similar in their functions. Majority of them were females and were seen to be different manifestations of Sakti. Like for instance Mariamman is generally the goddess for rain and small pox, perceived and revered as such by folks in Tamil Nadu. But this did not mean that Mariamman alone would be revered as a deity, to so to say to discharge this function. There were innumerable other deities, we find which

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12 Whitehead op.cit. p.19

were invoked for similar purpose, i.e. to ward off epidemics such as pox or for bountiful rains. Such as Aneeyammah and Nimmalummah in the North Arcot district of Tamil Nadu.[13] The fact that majority of the deities, with certain notable exceptions, like Aiyannar or Madurai Vieran, were females can be explained if we bear in mind that rural society was essentially an agricultural society, where the idea of fertility is naturally connected with the female. Often, in certain ceremonies, like for instance, on rain, women were actively involved in the rituals, expressing symbolically the association of human fertility with nature and to Sakti, the principle of female energy that gave the village goddess, their potency.[14]

The most important and popular of such deities is Mariamman. As per one legend, she is considered to be the sister of Krishna. But she having incurred the wrath of other gods and goddesses in heaven, on account of her arrogant behaviour she is expelled. Mariamman is feared for her anger, which manifests in the form of epidemics and other calamities. But yet she is also seen to be very benevolent, though to seek her favour she has to be remembered and propitiated at times of distresses and calamity.[15]

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13 Report on the swinging festival and the ceremony of walking through fire, Madras, 1854.

14 David Arnold op.cit.

15 Gustav Oppert. op.cit. p. 475

Ellamma is another such deity whose supremacy is acknowledged in many parts of the state. According to one legend she was Renuka the mother of Parasuram, himself an incarnation of Vishnu.Once his father Jamadagni suspects her fidelity and in anger asks Parasurama to kill her. Parasurama does so, beheads her, but in return for a boon, is able to revive back Renuka. However, while putting her head back on her slain body, he by mistake places it on the torso of a Pariah woman. It is this woman who is today revered by folks as Ellamma.[16] She is generally invoked to protect people from snakes. Fishermen pray to her when they cannot catch any fish. Every year a festival is celebrated in her honour, which goes on for about eight days. Vows undertaken in the name of this deity are fulfilled on such days. In consequence some act of self-mortification like piercing one's tongue with a needle on certain part of the body with a pointed shaft is undertaken. One such is the hook-swinging ceremony. Vows are also in the nature of undertakings to put up images of heroes, cattle etc, in front of the shrine housing the deity.

Other goddesses one can cite are the seven virgins (the tutelary deities of tanks) Kanaka Durgamma, Pidari et al.

16 Ibid. p.468

Among the male deities the most important of them is Aiyannar. He is also referred to as Sasta. As per one legend, he is the son of Vishnu and Siva, when the former once took the form of women. He is generally seen as the guardian deity of the village. It is for his use, to help him in his task of driving out diseases and evil spirits, that the innumerable figures of dogs, horses and elephants are provided for by devotees.

Another important deity here is one Madurai Vieran. There is an interesting ballad, telling us the manner in which he came to the deified. He and one more Muthupattan, who were basically some local heroes, the context in which their deification emerged makes for an engaging study, which we will deal in the next section, by which we would also be able to put the other gods and goddesses discussed in the right perspective.

Thus the whole of Tamil Nadu or for that matter the whole of South India abounds in shrines dedicated to such deities. These were far less imposing compared to the ones of Siva and Vishnu. Very often they were no more than certain stones, alters or tree trunks carrying red pigment marks to symbolise it as a shrine. Shrines housed in[illegible] nothing more than a small brick building there or four feet in height. A small enclosure which would consist of frightful looking image of the concerned goddess made of stone or at times one may find only few rough stones

passing off as the deity. Henry Whitehead gives a description of a shrine of one Kuttandavar at a village by name Devanampatnam.[17] This shrine was built of brick, with a rough pandal of bamboos, thatched with coconut leaves, in front of it. The image consisted of a head, like a big mask, about three feet high, with a rubicund face, strong features, moustaches turning up at the end, lion's teeth projecting downwards outside the mouth from the angles of the upper jaw and a tall conical head dress called in Tamil Krittam. In yet another instance, he sees a conical heap of sand three inches high, with camphor and incense in a small earthenware, which represented one goddess Kanniamma,[18] the gramadevata of the fishing village. But although such shrines were uninspiring, there were such shrines, for instance, the Aiyannar shrines. They with their huge images of the horses, elephants, tigers and other animals made out of clay painted, present an awesome sight.

Another interesting feature which needs to be highlighted here. Most of these deities are undoubtedly being revered by people for centuries. There have been instances where gods and goddesses have emerged only in the recent past. Whitehead mentions one such instance in Bezavada (Vijayawada) in Andhra. A boy of well to do parents was killed. The latter then

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17 Henry Whitehead - Village Gods of South India, London, 1921. Rpt. New Delhi, 1981, p. 26

18 Ibid p.28

erected a shrine to horse the spirit of their son. Someone declared that a vow made by him at the shrine led to the fruition of his desire. At one this shrine became famous, the boy now came to be deified and hundreds came up to his shrine to offer their prayers and vows.[19] This latter aspect, shrines a possible light on the former, explaining the manner in which many of the deities being worshipped for ages could have probably evolved.

SECTION II

'Popular' Religion in the Context of Caste

Popular Hinduism in Tamil Nadu as well as in South India then can be seen standing in marked contrast to institutionalised Hinduism which drew its basis from the religious texts such as the Vedas and Puranas, which involved the worship of Siva and Vishnu with their consorts and their different incarnations. The latter is seen to be the outcome of intense and deep philosophical reflection, which sought to comprehend and explain the relationship between an individual and the whole universe.

Approaching this topic from one level, it would not be totally incorrect to see the relationship between these two strands

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19 Ibid p.21

to be based not on opposition, but one of concurrence and assent. To refer to K.V. Thomas again, he has argued that medieval church and early Christianity assimilated elements of the old paganism into their own religions practices, rather than pose too direct a conflict of loyalties in the minds of the new converts. To quote, "The ancient worship of wells, trees and stones was not so much abolished as modified by turning pagan sites into Christian ones and associating them with a saint rather than a heathen divinity."[20] Similarly we can find a parallel process here of what we would term as acculturation. None have examined this aspect better than D.D. Kosambi.[21] He mentions how the worship and reverence of many of the village gods, accompanied by blood sacrifices transforms over a period of time. When the society grows richer and once the Brahmin priest enters, these forms of worship rise in the scale to loose their sanguine character.[22] Kosambi sees the emergence of these pantheons for i.e. the monkey God Hanuman or the elephant headed Ganesa, as a historical phenomenon marking the emergence of a unified society out of tribal elements which were formerly not united.[23] The Puranas which seek to justify such a combination through myths and fables, are again to be seen as the work of the Brahmins.[24] As one would have noticed

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20 K.V. Thomas, op.cit. p. 53

21 See D.D. Kosambi, The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline, New Delhi, 1989.

22 Ibid p.47.

23 Ibid p.49

in the earlier section, most of the legends and myths connected with these deities were linked to the parables of the dominant and institutionalised Hinduism. Likewise the fact that in number of instances, animal sacrifices have given way to breaking of coconuts and offering of flowers as for example in number of shrines in the south Arcot district, are seen as changes arising out of the influence of *gurukkals*, the Brahmin priests.[25]

However as some scholars have recognised, looking at these popular religious beliefs and practices of the subordinate caste groups from another level, such acqueiscence notwithstanding are often based on principles that are contradicting to those of Brahminical religion.[26] Here to substantiate our contention, we are basically drawing upon the writings of Antonio Gramsci, who has studied the question of religion in subaltern consciousness with great insight. Gramsci has shown that religions, as such, which succeeds in establishing a dominant and universalist moral code for society as a whole is basically fragmented. What at the surface level appears 'common-sense', is the unity of two opposed elements : one, is the subaltern classes own understanding of the world through their

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24 Ibid, p.51

25 South Arcot District Gazetteer, 1906

26 See for instance Pauline Kolenda's Caste, Cult and Hierarchy, New Delhi 1981 and see R.S. Khare's 'The Untouchable's Version : Evaluating an Ideal Ascetic' in Dipankar Gupta (ed.) Social Stratification, Delhi, 1992.

own labour, and the other is the one borrowed from the dominant classes. To quote Gramsci - "It signifies that the social group ....(a subaltern group of great mass) may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic, a conception which manifests itself in action but occasionally and in flashes .... But this same group has for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is honoured from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it because this is the conception which it follows in 'normal times' - that is when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate".[27]

Thus religion which succeeds in establishing a dominant order can then be seen from two perspectives. For the dominant classes it offers the necessary ideological justification for the existing social divisions, makes these cleavages to appear non-antagonistic to form one whole. But for the subaltern classes, religion entails them an access to a more powerful cultural order which co-exists selectively with the common sense.[28] Thus religion in a class divided society is the ideological unity of two oppose tendencies. On one hand there is the assertion of an

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27 Antonio Gramsci, op.cit. p. 327

28 Partha Chatterjee, 'Caste and Subaltern consciousness' in Ranajit Guha (ed.) Subaltern studies, vol VI, Delhi, 1989, 172.

universal moral code for a society as a whole, and on the other the rejection of this dominant code by the subordinated.[29]

But in the Indian context looking at these popular religious practices purely in an empirical fashion, may as such not reveal the inherent principle/ element which stands in opposition to the dominant religious order. It is possible to do so only when we see these in the context of caste - the general basis on which the Indian society is stratified. Caste is the central element in the constitution of the subaltern classes consciousness. Their beliefs and rituals can be seen as undermining and negating, however unsuccessfully, the Brahminical social and religious order. Here in the process of our elucidation, we are not going into all the debates and theorization concerning caste, but would concern ourselves with briefly critiquing Louis Dumont whose work on caste, poses certain questions to our assumptions and argument which we feel needs to be dealt with separately.

The fundamental problem with Dumont arises with his endeavour to construct a model of caste system, of an ideal type. While caste as a system comprised of hereditary groups hierarchically arranged, separated on the basis of endogamy, inter-dining restrictions and physical contact, but being

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29 Ibid

interdependent to one another on the basis of division of labour. Dumont's emphasis here is that these principles of caste are themselves based on one true principle, that is the opposition between the pure and impure.[30] Hierarchy then is basically determined by the superiority of the pure over the impure. It is this principle that indeed forms the basis of the division of labour since pure and impure occupations must be kept separate. Thus the caste hierarchy is based on such a principle wherein all the castes go on to constitute a whole and are ranked in relation to this whole. But this whole as per Dumont, is determined purely by religion and hence all rankings of caste will thus be religious in nature. He therefore sees a disjunction between the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. In other words he sees disjunction between status and power with the latter being subordinated to former.[31] Power has no role and place in Dumonts framework. It is ideology then which unites all the separate *jatis* into one whole. The ideology being referred to here is the Hindu 'Dharma'. He goes on to accord greater superiority to 'Dharma' over power (both economic and political), the latter playing only a residual role.

Dipankar Gupta in an effective and proper critique of Dumont, has sought to highlight that both the concept of purity/

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30 See Louis Dumont's, Homo Hierarchicus, Chicago, 1970 and T.N. Madan's review, 'Dumont on the nature of caste in India' in Dipankar Gupta (ed.) Social stratification, Delhi, 1992. pp.74-83.

31 Ibid p.76

pollution and one single ideology is misplaced and -erroneous.[32] He firstly points out that hierarchy is not determined by the criteria of purity/ pollution alone. Secondly Gupta points out that there is no one caste ideology (Dharma) but many ideologies which are not only at variance but often in opposition to one another. What is implied here is that the universality of dharma as ideality of caste is not generally acknowledged by every part of the system of castes.

Therefore what is being suggested here is that, it is possible to see in popular religious practices and rituals, an implicit critique of the dominant dharma with its effort to unite all the castes into one harmonious whole. But in essence, it is a question and matter which is basically contingent upon power. As the effectiveness of one Dharma is contingent upon the conditions of power, contrary claims are also determined by relations of power.

Partha Chatterjee, in his study of the different heterodox sects of eighteenth and early nineteenth century Bengal has been able to demonstrate and highlight this aspect, the various strategies of survival and of self-assertion, adopted by these minor sects.[33]

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32 Dipankar Gupta, Continuous hierarchies and Discrete castes in Dipankar Gupta (ed.), Social Stratification, Delhi, 1992, pp 115-125.

In the case of South India, with our attention particularly focussed on Tamil Nadu, it is possible to see in the religious beliefs and rituals of the subordinate classes the ways in which they sought to assert their identity. But to illustrate this point and affirm this aspect properly, we need to go in for a much detailed study of the religious ideology of the subaltern classes, for which we don't exactly have the right sources and evidence at the moment. Nevertheless, on the basis of a certain folk ballads around two local heros, who are now deified by the masses more importantly that of one Muthupattan and Madurai Vieran to an extent, an attempt is being made to locate them in the context of caste, as see in their worship an attempt to negate the dominant social and religious order.

For this we are depending upon the study made by N. Vanamamalai of Tamil folklore.[34]

The temple of Muthupattan near Vickramasingapuram in the Ambasamudram Taluk of Tirunelvelli district there is this ballad which is sung narrating the various exploits and deeds of this local hero. Briefly the ballad goes like this. Muthupattan was a Brahmin youth who rose to high rank in the service of the king of Kottarakkara. He eventually falls in love with two Chakkli

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33 Partha Chatterjee, op.cit.

34 N. Vanamamalai - Interpretation of Tamil folk creations, Trivandrum, 1981.

girls, and much against the wishes of his family and community, decides to marry them - Bomma and Thimma. But the girls father insists that he should in such a case, give up his caste, the holy thread and all his marks. He should tend cattle, skin the carcasses and sell the hide, eat cow's flesh and drink liquor and all. Muthupattan firm in his resolve to marry them, accepts all the conditions put by their father and marries them. Eventually he ends up becoming the chief of the Chakkli tribe.[35]The Naick Kings of the region, entrusts him with safeguarding the passes through the mountain slopes of Papanasam (in Tirunelvelli district) against the local bandits, who used to waylay the caravans and rob them. But these bandits were supported and protected by some of the zamindars around, who used to receive a share in the loot. Muthupattan and the chakklis now foiled all the attempts of the bandits to rob the caravans. Incurring the wrath of these bandits and the zamindars, the latter decide to get rid off him. This they do through treachery wherein he gets stabbed in the back and gets killed. His wives too in grief fall upon his pyre and die.

Thus here we have an instance of a person who inspite of his high caste status gives it up and all the privileges accruing with it. He joins the rank of untouchables and dedicates himself to their upliftment. He does not marry those two untouchable females

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35 Ibid. pp 155-158.

for any personal advantage but just for love. He emancipates himself from the social ethics of the Brahmin superiority and merges himself in an untouchable community, claiming no privilege for himself but serving it with his talents and strengths.[36] Such a legend stands in marked contrast to Vedic and Puranic myths where the characters are always accorded divine origins.

Likewise we have the story of Madurai Vieran, who is generally revered by people, who himself is seen as the guardian of the other gods and goddesses. Madurai Vieran is also born in a chakkli caste. He raise in ranks and becomes the chief in Thirumala Nayakas army and helps in suppressing the Kallars (the castes of thiefs in Tamil Nadu). But in the process, Madurai Vieran becomes quite arrogant and starts taking liberties with the woman of royal household. This infuriates the king of Madurai and has him killed. But the king repents later and seeks the grace of Goddess Meenakshi to restore him back to life. But Veeran declares that he is destined to die because of his sins in the previous birth. He desires the king to propitiate his soul and build a temple for his worship after his death. He is deified and his cult is supported by the king himself.[37]

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36 Ibid

37 N. Vanamamalai, op.cit. p. 183.

Both Muthupattan and Vieran present example of trangressing the sex-caste barriers imposed by the dominant. But yet one can see some differences. Muthupattan's environ is basically confined to the *Cheri*, (place where the low caste people reside) and the untouchables. His life moves downwards in the caste hierarchic ladder. But Veerans career moves upward in the social and caste hierarchy. Veerans material being is transferred from *cheri* environment to the courtly environment in Trichy and Madurai Kingdom. He serves the ruling class, unlike Muthupattan who dedicates himself to the lower untouchable castes. But yet Veeran could never shed his untouchable caste abomination. When he tries to assume the privilege of the ruling class, forgetting that they are forbidden to him, he is put to death.[38]

Thus in both the myths, there is this tendency to weaken and subvert the dominant religious and social dictates. Caste is crucial to both these myths and the cult that emerged thereof.

But Vanmamalai also points out that how and when these cults start spreading outside the region and becomes popular, how certain accretions are made into these ballads. Vieran is said to have been born of Brahmin parents or some say royal parents,

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38 Ibid, p. 185

who leave him in the woods, because of an omen that he would bring ruin to the kingdom. Then, it is believed he was found and raised by chakkli family.[39] In Muthupattan's case similarly the two Chakkli girls he marries were seen to be born to a Brahmin woman who begot two babies when Siva grants her a boon. But she conceives when her husband is away. So in order to save face and be accused of illicit relationship she abandons these two babies in the forest and who are then raised up in a Chakkli family were given the names of Bomma and Thimma.[40]

Vanamamalai cites an evidence, when he personally sought to find out how these variations could have occurred. The singer of this ballad himself admitted that how the local dominant castes, Brahmins and Vellalars, compelled him to introduce the changes.[41]The older manuscript of the ballad, which were records of the version the father and the grandfather of this singer used to recite had no such interpolations and accretions.

Thus it is obvious that this extraneous addition as Vanamamalai points out was to eliminate social protest and challenge to caste sex rules, to attribute social revolt to preordained fate.[42]

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39 Ibid, p. 187

40 Ibid, p. 187

41 Ibid. Till 1969 this ballad appears to have been sung without any changes as Vanamamalai Notes

As he points out, such notions of fate and attributing supernatural divine powers to the lead characters are classic examples of the legends and myths connected essentially with the Brahmanical texts i.e. the puranas and the Epics.[43]

Thus, on the basis of these two folk legends whose heroes are venerated by the great majority of the rural folks in Tamil Nadu till today, it becomes clear that assailing the prevalent social order (i.e. caste system) was one of its major features. It exposed the blatant injustice, the parochial and the exploitative nature of the existing order. But it was also seen how the religious and the social elite sought to blunt the radical edge of their beliefs.

In this work we are as such concerned with studying only one ritual, hook-swinging, with some reference to others such as fire-walking and the rites involved in performing the animal sacrifices. The Brahmins, involvement in such rituals and festivities can be said to be marginal. Given their fear of pollution they could not possibly be involved in such practices and as we saw, these practices and beliefs emanated from a different social and cultural basis.

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42 Ibid, p. 188

43 W.T. Elmore point out that it was the Brahminic gods which have some kind of divine history - legendary birth in the abode of Gods and appear on earth in various *avatars*. See his Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism, Madras, 1925.

A ritual such as hook-swinging, where the process and manner in which the ceremony was conducted was seen as a 'barbarous' and 'revolting' custom. But it can also be argued that the swinger who mostly happened to come from the untouchable castes, was this way quite ironically, by inflicting 'pain' upon himself be able to assert his own individuality. The dominant 'dharma' and the concept of purity and pollution formed the basis, by which these untouchables were to toil and labour, in order to maintain the purity of the Brahmins and other dominant castes. Therefore, caste attached itself to the body.

Seen in the context of the popular religious beliefs discussed above, when the swinger decides to perform the 'feat' it can be seen as a revolt, not in practical terms of direct insubordination, but in terms of the rebelling of the spirit. Here although the swinger has the hooks pierced through his body, yet his body becomes 'free' during the ritual. The people thronging to witness the ritual are struck with awe and wonder at the performance. He, in other words in such a state is able to draw their respect and admiration. This is when the performer is able to claim full control and right over his body.

But we of course are aware that this was a ritual, a festival, which are momentary and periodic. These took the form of an 'anti-structure', or 'communitias' which were so to say

licensed affairs. But yet it is our contention that it is still possible to see elements of resistance and opposition in this ritual, to the dominant religious and social order. (See chapter three for further details).

CHAPTER - 2

COLONIAL INTERVENTION IN POPULAR RELIGION

In this chapter we are going to be concerned with examining the manner in which the colonial British sought to prohibit and abolish the practice of hook-swinging. Our endeavour will be to locate this intervention within the larger context of the British effort to discipline and subjectify the natives, through a colonial discourse, based on the production of knowledge.

This chapter will comprise of two sections. In the first section, we will see the context in which the whole controversy over hook-swinging emerged. Here in particular we will be dealing with the role of the Christian missionaries, whose influence was one of the major factors on the British, in having this practice interdicted. The second section, we will be concentrating on the process of British intervention proper i.e. the debates among the officials on the nature of steps to be taken to prohibit this ritual.

SECTION - 1

The Context in which this Ceremony Emerges in the Colonial Discourse

Hook-swinging seems to have had fairly archaic origins. D.D. Kosambi saw it as an iron age custom, and even as

a substitute for human sacrifices.[1] We have certain medieval accounts, which makes reference to the prevalence and practice of this custom. The first person to have given a detailed description of this practice, was the 16th century Portugese traveller Duarte Barbosa.[2] He seems to have witnessed it performed in the kingdom of Bisnagua (i.e. Vijainagar, as it was referred to in the medieval times.) somewhere at a place coinciding with present day Karnataka. Interestingly in his account, it is a woman who happens to be the swinger. As it was the practice, it was performed in fulfillment of an vow. But the contraption used for swinging seems to have varied at that time "... appointing a certain day for the ceremony they take a great ox cart and set up therein a tall water lift like those used in Castille for drawing water from wells, at the end of which hang two way sharp iron hooks ... they let down (the long arm of) the lift and push the hooks into her loins through skin and flesh. Then they put a small dagger into her left hand and from the other end, cause the (arm of the) lift to raise, with much outcry and shouting from the people. She remains hanging from the lift with blood running down her legs, but shows no sign of pain, nay, she moves her dagger, most joyfully. Throwing limes at the husband ... " Yet another account of this practice, is to be found

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1 D.D. Kosambi, Culture and Civilization of Ancient Indian in Historical Outline, New Delhi, 1989, p. 49.

2 The Book of Duarte Barbosa - An account of the countries bordering Indian Ocean and their inhabitants, Hakluyt Society, Vol II pp. 226-222.

in the writings of Cespero Balbi a sixteenth century Venetian merchant traveller.[3] He appears to have been a witness to one such ceremony at St. Thomas, near Madras, in 1582. "... in the month of September I saw one (feast). The people planted a tree in the ground like the mast of a ship, with the main yard across, upon which were two hooks fastened, and there are many which desire to free themselves from trouble or misery who make a vow to pagod, to look or ganch themselves, and for this there are some appointed who stand there, who seeing anyone that will gänch themselves for devotion, they first make an offering and then they loosen a cord and let down the hooks ... hook himself and then they hoist him up aloft, making him turn his face to the pagod and salute it three times with his hands in a supplicant manner ... and make him play with a weapon which he carrieth in his hands while he is drawing up ..." As such very few of the medieval travellers and traders, seemed to have noticed this custom. Tavernier aludes to this practice as being prevalent in Bengal.

The point that one is trying to make is that the British could not have been oblivious to the prevalence of this custom. But the British effort to ban this practice, begins only with the increasing influence of the missionaries by the second quarter of the 19th century in Bengal, and from the 1850's in Madras. In other

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3 Cited in G.A. Oddie's, Hook Swinging and Popular religion in South India during the 19th Century, in IESHR, 23, 11, 1986, p.94.

words the British intervention came in at the juncture of increasing colonial expansion which can be seen as coinciding with the activities of the Christian missionaries, their observations and accounts, which contributed to the colonial production of knowledge about the Indian society, which in turn led to increasing hegemonisation of the Indian society. This aspect will be made clearer as we go further.

A brief historiographical survey is in order here, highlighting the basis on which British social and cultural policies were sought to be understood.

Earlier the reforms and measures, ushered in the social and cultural domains of the Indian society, were seen as emerging from certain ideals prevalent among the British in the period i.e. the utilitarian ideology in the early nineteenth century was seen as informing much of the measures adopted by the British. This can in fact be seen as a period wherein both utilitarian and evangelical ideal coalesced.[4]India was seen as presenting an opportunity, wherein both the utilitarians and the evangelicals could realise all the hopes and aspirations which were frustrated at home in England.[5] For utilitarians James and John Mill, India presentd a

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4 Here the works being refered to are Eric Stokes The English Utilitarians and India, Oxford, 1959, Francis Hutchins, Illusion of permanance, Princeton 1967, Thomas Metcalf, Aftermath of the Revolt, Princeton, 1964.

5 Francis Hutchins, op.cit, pp.110-12.

prospect of dictating outright Indian social arrangements and forming Indian society on the basis of utilitarian principles of social equality and private ownership of property through the making of land settlement directly with the tiller of the soil. Along with the utilitarianism, evangelical belief had also influenced the thinking of quite a few of British officials and administrators who openly called for the proselytization of the Indian masses. The Evangelical position was best summarised by Bishop Heber. To quote "... seem to arise from the hateful superstitions to which they are subject and the unfavourable state of society in which they are placed. But if it should please God to make any considerable portion of them Christians, they would I can well believe put the best of European Christians to shame."[6]

Indian society was seen as being totally stagnant and debased, sunk in the quagmire of superstitious beliefs and rituals. But it was not that the Indians were incapable of changing or reforming themselves. Nothing intrinsic as such, was seen in the Indian society that made it incapable of taking up the road to 'development' and 'enlightenment'. The currently debased state of the society was seen to be more the outcome of its immaturity rather than degeneracy. The present conditions in India was explained in terms of similar conditions found everywhere among

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6 Ibid

'rude nations', whether they be the Red Indians or even primitive Anglo Saxons.[7] Thus both the utilitarians as well as the evangelicals had similar goals, but they differed over the manner and method by which it was to be achieved. While the utilitarians hoped to improve morals by reforming society, the Evangelicals hoped to improve society by reforming morals.[8]

The promulgation making 'Sati' illegal, the sterness with which Bentick as well as Hardinge sought to enforce the prohibition on female infanticide, the lex-loci act, the Hindu widow remarriage act, etc were some of the ways by which the colonical British intervened in the social and cultural spheres. In the realm of education too, the British by inaugurating number of schools and colleges sought to develop and spread modern education.

However, following the 1857 revolt, one of the important factors for its outbreak was seen to be the British interference in matters relating to the religious and cultural life of the people of India. As a result of this, as the work of Metcalf suggests,[9] the British now became wary of ushering and introducing any further measures to deal with issues emerging in

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7 Ibid
8 Ibid
9 Thomas Metcalf, op.cit.

the socio-religious domain. For example Lord Dalhousie, the last Governor General prior to the revolt, the reforms introduced by him were subjected to heavy criticism in particular his Widow Remarriage Act, which in Disraeli's words, "disquieted the religious feelings of the Hindus".[10]

The British now began to tread the path of reforms and measures with great deal of caution and hesitancy. Even earlier, religious neutrality had been the avowed basis of British policy[11] but before the mutiny it had been little more than an irritating impediment in the way of reform. Indian religious belief and social customs after the revolt, were to be left strictly alone.[12] At another level, this change has also been tried to be explained on the basis of declining enthusiasm for reform at home. By the middle of the 19th century both Benthamism and evangelicalism was no longer able to carry the same level of influence as before. On the other hand, the post revolt scenario, led to the creation of an ideology of an autocratic paternalism. The Britishers now asserted that Indians could never change or improve, or even rule themselves and therefore their interests were best secured under the 'benevolent' regime of the British. Thus whatever little measures

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10 Ibid, p. 93

11 Section 1 of Regulation III 1793, decreed by Cornwallis guaranteed people of India, the free exercise of their religion. For details See Nancy Gardener Cassels, Religion and Pilgrim Tax, under the Company Raj, New Delhi, 1987, p. IX

12 Thomas Metcalf, op.cit, p. 107

the British did initiate, were of such nature, which did not pose any direct challenge to the 'structure of Hinduism'. Direct assault on Hinduism was so to say abandoned.[13] Hook-swinging was seen to be such and hence, also with the native elites and intelligensia throwing their weight behind the colonial efforts, the British went ahead with its plan to prohibit this custom.[14]

Such studies, have undoubtedly led to better understanding of the British policies, particularly their social and cultural efforts. But recent studies that have emerged have shown that the revolt of 1857 notwithstanding the British no way abandoned their effort at intervention. The British are shown as taking recourse to other measures by which they could continue to order and control the lives of their Indian subjects.[15] The British administration in India was strengthened to create a more 'efficient' government that could more effectively control and monitor the whole country. The beginnings of the census, publication of manuals and gazettters, the linguistic and ethnological surveys, etc., the new classification and categorisation (employed through such studies) led to a greater exercise of colonial power and increasing peneteration of the

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13 Ibid

14 Ibid. In 1865, hook-swinging came to be prohibited in Bengal, p. 114.

15 For example see Veena Talwar Oldenburg's The Making of Colonial Lucknow, Princeton, 1984

Indian Society. British intervention / policies are now studied from different perspective. Such studies have been greatly influenced by the writings of Michael Foucault and more importantly of Edward Said's 'Orientalism'. On the one hand, the colonial state could take recourse to direct suppression of the masses but on the other hand, yet another way they could control their subjects, was through the production of knowledge about its people, history, religion etc. This production of knowledge, as scholars now emphasise, was one of the important component of 19th century British colonialism.[16]

This knowledge was determined and derived through a discourse, which privileged certain 'areas' in which what was counted as or seen as true knowledge was found. In the beginning, what constituted the privileged 'area' from which knowledge was derived were the Hindu texts and scriptures (of which copious translations and studies were made by individuals like William Jones, and institutions such as the Asiatic Society and Fort Williams College in Calcutta). These Sanskrit religious texts were seen as embodying the true essence of Hinduism.[17] A study of

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16 For details see Gyan Prakash, 'Post Orientalist Third World Histories', in CSSH, April 1990, pp-383-388. In this context one can also cite Lata Mani's contention, in her work on Sati, that the practice of sati was outlawed through a colonial discourse which privileged the brahminic scriptures to the extent that women herself became marginal to the debate. For further details see her, 'Contentions Traditions : 'The debate on Sati in colonial India' in K. Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (ed.) in Recasting Women New Delhi 1989.

17 Ibid.

these texts, it was assumed would lead them in evolving suitable policies, leading to better governance of the people. Though not an immediate fallout, but over a period of time the study and translation of these texts led to discoveries of affinities between Sanskrit and European languages and formulate theories on common origin of Europeans and Brahmins. (i.e. common Aryan ancestory). But by this very process the British were able to essentialise and distance India. Firstly, the texts and the language (Sanskrit) with which the European concerned themselves on whose basis they contended a belief of an Aryan race, India was seen as embodying Europe's childhood, India was now separate and different from Europe's present. Thus India was now removed from time, which could be studied to understand their own past. Secondly as a consequence, India was seen to be unchanging and passive.India emerged as Europe's 'other'.[18]

Later, neither these texts, or the utilitarian and evangelical ideal, could any further assist the colonialist in this specific purpose i.e. creation of knowledge. Sanskrit texts and Brahmins were no longer attractive. It were these, that were seen as responsible for the debased state of the Indian society. The 'real' or 'true' India for the British was now one of the peasants, tribes, their customs, caste, etc. The various surveys and studies

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18 Gyan Prakash, op.cit.

through which they arrived at these categories, i.e. the census, ethnographic, linguistic and archaelogical constituted the basis for their newly formed knowledge, on the basis of which they could again exercise their power and domination.[19]

Apart from these, it can also be argued that the Christian missionaries too contributed to the colonial production of knowledge. With the increasing expansion and penetration of the British empire into the interiors of the country, and the increasing proselytizing activities of the missionaries, ever since 1813, the latter became an important source of knowledge to the colonial state.[20] Here what one is trying to suggest is that in the course of their proselytizing work, the missionaries came in contact with different segments of the native population, especialy the members of the subordinate classes in the remote interiors of the country. Their works give accounts of everyday practices and rituals of the people, which came to be employed by the British to subjectify the natives.

In the case of hook-swinging the British governments intervention to abolish this practice, emerges in the specific

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19 Gyan Prakash, op.cit. Also see Ronald Inden, 'Orientalist Construction of India', in Modern Asian Studies, 20:3 (1986), pp-401-46

20 The basic argument here is very similar to the one made by David Scott who in his work details the link between colonialism and Christian Missions in Sri Lanka. For details see his 'Conversion' and Demonism : Colonial Christian Discourse and religion in Sri Lanka in CSSH, 34, No. 2, April 1992. pp 331-345.

context of the proselytizing work of the missionaries and their contribution to the creation of colonial knowledge.[21]

What is sought to be highlighted here is how the missionaries were able to draw the attention of the colonial authorities to some of the popular religious practices with which the latter laboured to undermine and establish their dominance on.[22]

As the colonial records reveal, very often missionaries appealed to the authorities, giving them all the description of some of the customs, practised by this segment of the society, seeking their immediate intervention and calling a halt to these practices. In one such letter by Rev. Theodore T. Ford, Secretary of the Church Mission Society, enclosing a detailed description of a ritual, involving slaughter of animals in thousands, he wrote, "In bringing before you the occasion of this large and needless destruction of animal life would wish to draw the attention of government to the implied sanction given on its part to these cruel and inhuman proceedings with their attendant impalement of

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21 Ibid

22 Another aspect needs to be mentioned here. Though Biblical teachings are at variance with colonialism, the protestant missionaries of the beginning in the 19th century entered into a relationship with it. Dick Kooiman makes few references to this aspect in his work (For details see his Conversion and social equality in India: The London Missionary Society in South Travancore in the 19th century, New Delhi, 1989). P. Chandramohan makes this point more emphatically. For further details see his 'Colonial connections of protestant missionaries in Travancore' (unpublished)

lambs, pigs, etc by permitting their occurance on the public highway under the eye and indeed the protection and guidance of its local police.[23] Likewise one Rev. G.E. Morris, Chaplain expressed his concern "over the swinging festival held (of all the days) on the lord's day (Sunday) that make it all the more revolting". He goes to the extent of seeking the magistrates authorisation to permit him to suppress this exhibition, "from which humanity recoils".[24]

Abbe Dubois and Elijah Hoole, were among the earliest to draw the attention of the authorities towards this custom. But more importantly, we should contextualize the basis in which these missionaries used to operate and proceed with their work. As such, both the forms of worship, the veneration of spirits involving such rituals and that of what was seen as Brahmanical deities, were seen as features of heathenism, the gloom and darkness under which the people in this land lived. But yet there were observations, such as Abbe Dubois remarking, "the Brahmins are never so silly as to impose on themselves vows of self torture. They leave these pious past times to the stupid sudras. And even the Sudras who practice such penance are far the most part over of low births".[25] And similarly Rev. Rhenius, "The worship of

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23 Madras Government Records, Judicial, 1700, 21st December 1859.

24 Madras Government Records, Public, 1583, 21st December 1858.

25 Abbe Dubois, Hindus Customs, Manners, and Ceremonies (translated by H.K. Beauchamp) Oxford 1905, p. 600. Elijah Hoole, Madras, Mysore and the south of

these demons is principally confined to the pariahs and some sudras. No intelligent persons, say the rest of the natives will worship them.[26] What one is trying to suggest here is that these missionaries ironically were able to relate better to such popular form of worship, since this could be assimilated with their Christian notion of paganism, including the worship of Satan, than the worship and reveration of the so called Brahmanical Gods of Siva and Vishnu which appeared to have a doctrinal and philosophic basis which too however was misplaced and erroneous. It is our argument that it was with such writings and accounts of these missioneries on the customs, practices, and beliefs of the people in South India, that caste and more specifically, the Brahmin-non-Brahmin, dichotomy appeared in essentialist terms as attributes of south Indian society. This they sought to exemplify by highlighting the varied cultural practices among the people here. Rev. Samuel Mateer, LMS Missionary based in Travancore, mentions thus, "the origin of caste is doubtless connected with the early history of India and the conquest of aboriginal inhabitants by the brahminical race".[27] There were identified two categories of people, the Brahmins who had migrated from north and the 'original' inhabitants, the

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India from 1820 to 1828 (Second Edition, London 1844.

26 Memoir of the Rev. CTE Rhenius (Extracts from his journal and correspondence, with details of missionary proceedings in South India, p. 238, n.d.

27 Samuel Mateer, The Land of Charity - a descriptive account of Travancore and its people, London, 1871, p.27

Dravidians, who were the demon or devil worshipers.[28] Rev. J.A. Sharrock, another missionary who was also once the principal of the SPG College at Trichy, remarked "the high caste natives of the towns and Brahmin *agraharam*, in the large villages are orthodox worshipers of Shiv and Vishnu, while the lower caste inhabitants of the suburbs and of the villages are Dravidians whose religion is a mixture in varying degrees of Hinduism and pre-historic cults... (the old Dravidians) life was and still is often thousands of years, one long red of what curses the spirits may bring upon them their families, their cattle and their fields".[29] As mentioned this reveration and veneration of the spirits to appease and propitiate them "appeared to underlie many of the more elaborate and complex system of paganism".[30] Samueel Mateer remarked, "the great resemblance which may be traced between the general aspects and many particulars of the superstitions connected with the demon worship and those of our own forefathrs in Britain in respect to fairies, pixies, ... ghosts ... fiends, witchcraft and magic ... has struck me and is very remarkable indeed".

Such was the nature of the missionary enterprise. whose efforts ended up in securing the colonial interest which overlapped and coincided with their latter's own effort of

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28 Ibid.

29 J.A. Sharrock, South Indian Missions, Westminister, 1910, p.76

30 Samuel Mateer, op.cit., p.57

peneteration of the Indian society on the basis of reports and surveys, through new classification and categorization in the last quarter of the 19th century.

As we discussed in chapter I whrein the Dumontian position on caste was critiqued, the origins of this kind of structural perspective of caste, can be found in such colonial sociology.[31] As one scholar has rightly pointed out the major motive behind the ethnographic surveys and studies (for example Edgar Thurstom's 'Caste and Tribes of South India'), undertaken by the colonial state was basically an outcome of administrative exigencies.[32] To exert greater social control, it was imperative that they required a clear knowledge of the composition of the subject society and its belief systems. The point we are trying to make is how in the process of their studies of caste, they emphasised only the structural aspects of castes. The caste system was seen and given a purely religious character, in which the Brahmins were positioned on the top and other castes derived their identity in relation to them. Hence, by according this privileged status to the Brahmins in the caste hierarchy, quite naturally the religious texts such as the Vedas, and Puranas alone were seen as

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31 As Nicholas Dirks has rightly pointed out the works of Dumont and J.C. Heesterman has unwittingly furthered a colonial project. For details see Nicholas Dirks, 'Invention of Caste : Civil Society in Colonial India' in Social Analysis, 25, 1989

32 Shekar Bandopadhyay 'Caste, Politics and the Raj : Bengal 1872-1937', Calcutta, 1990. See in particular Chapter I.

determining Hinduism. This streamlined version which emphasised only the structural aspect of caste, sought to replace the more complex indigenous discourse in which caste appeared as a multi-dimensional social institution, with functional, behavioural as well as structural implications.[33]

SECTION - II

The Nature of Colonial Intervention

The hook-swinging ceremony was often a large scale affair, with hundreds and over thousands congregating to witness it. It was also made an occasion for a general fair in villages, where people used to gather to make purchases and to amuse and entertain themselves through other means. In short it became a social occasion. One comes across hundreds of festivals, which were celebrated around the innumerable temples and shrines that abounds in south India, Tamil Nadu in particular. Even the smallest shrines let it be those of Siva and Vishnu or any of the other popular deities, had their own festivals. In 1868 an estimated fifty thousand pilgrims thronged Srirangapatnam near Trichy on the day of Vaikunta Ekadesi. Likewise the Mariamma shrine at Samyapuram in Trichy attracted a crowd of anywhere around sixty to forty thousand people.[34] So in effect with almost every temple

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33 Shekar Bandopadhayay, op.cit. p.43

and shrine having their festivals, celebrated accordingly at different times of the year, they became a continuous and constant motif in the socio-religious life of the people in Tamil Nadu.

Two important factors emerge from the colonial records on fairs and festivals. One was the state's concern with the sanitation aspect at the venue of these festivals. Second was their concern for the maintenance of law and order during such occasions.

Often it appears that due to improper sanitation facilities at these venues, outbreak of epidemics such as chlora were very frequent. At this point, it would be appropriate to refer to the pioneering work of David Arnold in the field of colonial medicine. He has pointed out that all this talk of sanitary science and medical objectivity was nothing more than betrayal of their social and cultural prejudices. To quote, ".... cholera in India was more than a dreaded disease. It was associated with much that European medical officers and administrators found outlandish and repugnant in Hindu pilgrimage and ritual, so much so that the attack on cholera concealed a barely disguised assault on Hindusim itself."[35] Thus the sanitation measures undertaken by the colonial authorities and the presence of western medical practioners on

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34 G.A. Oddie, Hindus and Christians in South East India, London, 1991

35 David Arnold (ed.), Imperial Medicine and Indigeneous Societies, Delhi, 1983, p.7

these occasions, became a very ingenious method of reaching out to the people, wherein such fairs and festivals became 'subjectified' to colonial intervention. Similarly, the presence of the police and other officials of the state bureaucratic machinery at these festivals in the name of maintaining law and order can be seen as being directed towards maintaining the colonial state's presence and hold over the people, at the collective level. Thus colonial efforts and actions were not separated from the exercise and implication of power.

The British effort to prohibit the practice of hook-swinging should be placed within such a perspective. More specifically, the ostensible reason for the British intervention in hook-swinging was its very 'revolting' and 'barbarous' nature what with the hooks being pierced to the back of an individual and then being left aloft in the mid-air. This 'disgusting spectacle', the Britishers urged, needed to be prohibited. The then Chief Secretary, H.C. Montgomery remarked, "there can be no doubt that the government would be fully justified in authorititatively putting down a practice so revolting in its nature and so injurious in its effects on those who witness it."[36]

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36 Report on the Swinging Festival and the Ceremony of Walking through Fire, 1854. Henceforth referred to as Rep.

But in our opinion a careful reading of the colonial records suggests, that the nature of these festivities and rituals notwithstanding the swinger or 'victim' as he was seen, was never really central to their debates and discussion. The colonial efforts were discursive wherein more than the 'victim', other factors are seen to be operating in their endeavour.

As mentioned hook-swinging first came to be prohibited in Bengal in 1865, but the Britishers sought for its prohibition right from the 1830's. But since we are here concerned with hook-swinging as obtained in 19th century Tamil Nadu, one is not too sure as to the extent to which tradition was debated, which in their term determined and became the deciding factors in the British decision to prohibit this custom.[37] Oddie, in his study of hook-swinging, does mention the fact that this ceremony had no scriptual or textual basis, was often cited by the colonial authorities and also the other protoganists supporting the British moves, to outlaw this practice.[38]

In Madras, the government appears to be very clear in this regard. The fact that the ceremony has no sanction or approval of the texts is repeatedly emphasised from the very first report

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37 For details see Lata Mani, op.cit.

38 Geoff Oddie, The Western Educated Elites and Popular Religion. The debate even the hook-swinging issue in Bengal and Madras 1830-1894 in Peter Robb (ed.) Society and Ideology Delhi, 1993, p. 193.

made by the Madras Government on hook-swinging and fire-walking. For example, H.C. Montgomery, remarked, "it does not seem to be in any way connected with the religion of the observers, but to be performed in fulfilment of vows". Likewise the Chief Magistrate, E.F. Elliot,"it was not religious ceremony for the Hindoos"[39]

Here before we go any further, the factors responsible for the publication of this report and its basic contents, needs to be discussed. In 1853, the Madras government received a dispatch from British Guiana in South America containing the details on the methods adopted and the steps taken by the local authorities there to outlaw this custom, practised among the Indian plantation workers.[40] In Guiana hook-swinging ceremony not having any scriptual sanction was as such not brought up. But this ceremony was seen as exceeding "the fair bounds prescribed by the spirit of toleration prevalent in British possessions" and as "outraging the feelings of the remainder of the population". Hence, the efforts of the authorities was to persuade and discourage the workers from resorting to this practice. If unsuccessful, the police were given the authority to enforce its prohibition, in the strictest possible manner.[41]

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39 In Rep.

40 Madras Public Consultation, 24-25, 13th September, 1853.

41 Ibid

On the basis of this report from British Guiana the government in Madras were enthused to work out ways and means by whch this ceremony could be restricted. It was immediately resolved to compile a report on hook-swinging (fire walking was included later) on the basis of the accounts of the magistrates of all the districts in Madras presidency. The Chief facors with which the government was concerned was the frequency with which the ceremony was conducted and whether any measures were adopted by the police to prevent or discourge people from celebrating this festival.

This report was published in 1854. Among others, apart from the fact that these ceremony had nothing to do with Hindu religion, the important of its findings were i) that this ceremony was now less frequently practised than before ii) it was practised by the members belonging to the lower untouchable castes iii) the intelligent and well to do members (though it could not be generalised) did not countenance or support this festival.

The manner in which the authorities arrived at the first of their findings, would make an interesting study. This ritual was seen by the British, to be an annual affair, celebrated year after year, usually at the time of the temple festival. But the fact is that this festival and other such rituals need not be celebrated by the people on a regular basis. Hence, the fact that such a ceremony

was not celebrated for few years (Sometimes in certain villages, this ritual had not been performed for nearly 10 years) need not necessarily be seen as an indication of its decline. But yet the authorities, to quote the then chief secretary M.C. Montgomery decided that "the introduction of the practice in any place where it does not now obtain might with propriety be prohibited".[42]

It was finally decided that rather than directly intervene to prohibit this custom, the magistrate of all the districts should exercise all possible methods of persuasion to discourage the people from resorting to this practice. Their intention was "not to interfere with any religious observance of its subjects but to abolish a cruel and revolting practice". The government was particularly encouraged by the report of the district magistrate of Tanjore who claimed to have secured undertakings from the managers of 78 pagodas where this practice had prevailed, wherein they had promised to discontinue the practice.[43] Other district magistrates were urged to adopt similar measure, seeking the approval and assistance of the native elites and include them in their efforts to ban this custom. This was one aspect which repeatedly features in the debates among the officials.

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42 Ibid. For details see appendix showing the frequency chart of the hookswinging ceremony in North Arcot district.

43 Ibid

But this was a very ambiguous and broad direction given by the authorities which created doubts and confusion among many officials and the magistrates. For example one Mr. Binning, the magistrate of North Arcot district, had urged the Tahsildars to use "all possible exertion to prevent the festival from being performed." and subject all those to punishment who go ahead with the performance ignoring the warnings issued by the magistrate.[44] This was seen by the higher up in the authorities, as exceeding the limits set by the government. The intention of the government, it was stressed was only to discourage the practice of this custom, and this the British as it appears sought to achieve it in a gradual fashion. In this instance, the government approved the action of J.D. Bourdillon, the successor to Mr. Binning, wherein the former orderd the moonsifs not to take any penal action but report the matter to the Tahsildar who would then report with all the details of the ceremony to him.[45]

Inspite of these efforts number of instances occured, wherein hook-swinging was performed with all planning and preparation. In Royapooram and Choolay Cosapett (Suburbs of Madras) this ceremony seems to have been a regular affair. This was inspite of the presence of the police.[46] Further inquiries made

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44 Madras government records, public, 1476, 20th October 1857.

45 Ibid

46 Madras government records, public, 1105, 10th August 1857.

by the authorities revealed that *Inams* for this ceremony existed in number of districts, such as Chingleput, North Arcot and Madura.[47] The government in its efforts to restrict this custom, now made the extension of these grants to the individuals concerned, conditional i.e. the latter had to give up sponsoring of the festival. Otherwise the board of revenue was authorised to take over the land. Hence another related aspect needs to be discussed, relating to the manner in which the swingers were construed as 'victims'. For example in 1867, the then acting magistrate of Madras, referring to the prevalence of this practice in Pariapalayam, remarks "the *Durmkurtah* I understand, realises large profits from the crowds who attend the festivl and is therefore likely to appeal to the government from my prohibition"[48]. In Valambagudi, (a village in Tanjore district) the priest, one Swamy Iyen was seen to profit to certain extent from this ceremony from the alms that were given by the people who came to witness the ceremony.[49] E. Turner, the district magistrate of Madura also remarked "it is a source of gain to the festival managers and as such will be encouraged (by them)".[50] Thus by this ceremony, the village priests, temple managers and some landlords were seen to be raking profits either through the money collected

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47 Madras Public Consultation, Nos. 16, 8th May 1855.

48 Madras Public Proceedings, No. 874, 20 July 1867"

49 Madras Judicial Proceedings, No. 738, 2nd August, 1890.

50 Madras Judicial Proceedings No. 1321, 22nd July, 1892.

from the swinger themselves or through the alms 'collected' from those who came to witness the ceremony. Hence this ceremony was 'exploitative'.

Yet another aspect that is gleaned from the records on hook-swinging is the colonial perception of it as a 'public nuisance'. The ceremony performed in the full view of the public was seen more than anything else as causing painful sensation in the minds of the people witnessing it. This seems to have been the most deciding factor, in the British attempt to prohibit it. For example the officer commanding St. Thomas mount had issued an order prohibiting the celeberation of the ceremony within the contonment area.[51] Therefore it seems hook-swinging which were particularly performed in public thoroughfares and other places where people had common access, in particular the Europeans, needed to be abolished. The implication appears to be that those ceremonies which were performed away from the public thoroughfares did not matter much for the authorities.

In the 1890s, there seems to have been a resurgence of this ceremony. This led to a very wide ranging debate among the officials regarding the measures to be adopted for prohibiting the custom. The debate basically centered around the question,

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51 Madras Government records, Public, 1583, 21st December 1858.

whether legislation banning hook-swinging would be the most appropriate and effective step or would the promulgation of section 144, empowering the district magistrates to take disciplinary and penal action suffice, to achieve the purpose.

In these debates, the observations and assessment made by the British on this practice were reviewed all over again. Again the fact that it was not seen as a part of the Hindu religion but only a form of penance mostly practiced by the lower castes, was emphasised. Bourdillon, the magistrate of North Arcot, "(hook-swinging) ... is performed only in fulfilment of vows and has no connection with the religion of the Hindoos"[52] And J.C. Bounderson, the Commissioner of Police, "From the enquiries instituted at the time, it was evident that the *cheddle* was not a feast prescribed by religion of the Hindoos".[53] The enlightened members of the native population both in Bengal as well as in Madras, whose opinion and approval the Britishers always sought, also supported the British initiative, and in the process they constantly sought to assert that this practice had no sanction of the Hindu texts and scriptures. (See chapter III)

In Bengal this act was officially prohibited in 1865, by the promulgation of section 62. Under this, the magistrates of

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52 Madras Public Proceedings, NO. 1476, 16 October, 1857.

53 Madras Public Proceedings, No. 1105, 10th August, 1857.

the different districts in Bengal were authorised to take the necessary steps to prohibit the ceremony from being performed. In Madras, as we saw the Britishers were more cautious where all the measures and steps taken by them were short of legal enactment. By the 1860's this custom does appear to have been very rarely practised. But again in the 1890s there was a spurt in the performances of this ceremony. Beginning with the one at Valambagudi in Tanjore district in 1890, was followed by many more. Twice at Sholavandan in Madurai district, in 1891, and 92, one at Akhisekhapuram in Trichy district in 1892 and one more the same year at Veerapandi in Madurai.[54]

There were many higher officials, the then chief secretary to the Government of India, C.J. Lyall for instance, who vehmently argued for enacting a legislation to seek its complete prohibition.[55] Their argument was that ever since the practice was resumed at Valambagudi in Tanjore in 1890 instances of its performance was again on the increase. The fact that yet one more performance was proposed to be held in Tirunelvelly in 1893 was cited to bolster their contention. Hence the present method of persuasion and discouragement had failed in halting the performances of this ritual and therefore other measures had to be

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54 Home Department Proceedings, Nos. 293, to 327, June 1893.

55 Ibid. (All further reference are from home department proceedings unless mentioned otherwise)

adopted to seek its total prohibition. And legislation was seen to be the best and only alternative. The legislation was to be such that any performance of the ceremony in open view of the public such as public thoroughfare was to be declared a public nuisance (this the performance held only in full view of the public was included and agreed upon by the proponents of legislation only when those who were as such opposed to this legislation, insisted on this clause). And in consequence the swinger as well as those responsible for aiding and abeting the swinger and organising the ceremony were to be punished with a fine upto Rs. 200 or imprisonment upto three months or both.[56]It was also argued that the prohibition of the ceremony in Bengal by section 62 would no longer be valid or legal. Secton 62 was part of the code of criminal procedure of Act XXV of 1861. The terms of Section 62 of that code were so wide and general that under it magistrates were lawfully empowered to promulgate the order required and the disobedience of such order was an offence punishable under section 188 of the Indan Penal Code then in force. But the present Cr. P.C. was part of Act X of 1882. As the then advocate general pointed out, the "general powers conferred by section 62 of Act XXV of 1861 was not regranted by the later codes of criminal procedure". It was chapter X of the present act which determined certain number of practices as public nuisances. And it was on that

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56 Ibid. These were the provisions of the proposed bill.

basis, chapter XI listed out various measures that could be taken to deal with all those practices that were regarded as public nuisance. However as the Advocate General pointed out, "neither chapter X or XI relate to practices which may present a demoralising public spectacle and tend to keep alive among the people a feeling of indifference to the sufferings of their fellow creatures and to the value of human life or to those which may endanger the life of the performer alone." Therefore, proponents of legislation pointed out that under section 144, prohibiting the celebration of hook-swinging as such festival will not be seen as a 'nuisance' and hence will be ultra wires. Consequently disobedience thereof will not be an offence punishable under section 188 of the IPC.

On the other hand, there were those officials who insisted that the British should continue with their (anounced) policy of religious neutrality. Any legislation, they argued, would be an interference with religious usage. Secondly it was argued that save this instance, the custom was as such on its decline and in fact one official argued that legislation would if anything, "give a spurt to a practice which is apparently dying out (and) it would be elevating it into the dignity of martrydom" Thirdly and quite paradoxically, they felt that there was not anything really dangerous in this ceremony. To quote the district magistrte of Madura, "it is no more dangerous if as much so, as taking part in

a polo match or an ascent in the balloon or walking on a tight rope." It were these officials who suggested that if at all legislation is made, the prohibition should be confined to exhibitions openly conducted in public places.

But in the end, the Madras government decides to prohibit the ceremony under Section 144, giving increased power to magistrates to prevent a recurrence of the practice. It is difficult to say exactly as to why the government in the final instance, after nearly deciding on legislation to prohibit the practice, decided to stick to promulgation of section 144. But still certain conjectures can be made.

One reason could be that at the fag end of the 19th century the social and political scenario had changed a great deal. Nationalist sentiments were on the ascendant. Although the western educated elites, had thrown their weight and gave their aproval to the government, the British were wary of introducing any changes in the social and cultural domains of the people. There is also a possibility of looking at this ritual from another angle. It was as such immaterial for the British if the practice was prohibited either through legislation or any other means. What the British seemed to be concerned about was the exercise of their power and authority over the ritual. Their purpose was to establish their hegemony over the cultural and social sphere of the

subordinate groups. As mentioned, the colonial state's effort to ban this custom did not stem from any concern for the swinger. Characterised in superlative adjectives, i.e. revolting, barbarous, disgusting, owing to the pain that such a process would have caused and also endangering the life of the swinger, the swinger was still marginal to their debates. If at all he emerged, it is as an 'victim' of ignorance and exploitation. Thus the colonial authorities saw the ritual as merely an indulgence and as an abuse in its whole totality. The 'subjecthood' of the swinger was consistently denied in the enquiries made by the British. The presence of the western medical practitioner along with other officials and police, with the ostensible purpose for the well being of the swinger, as their remarks suggest, makes for an interesting reading. One F. Van Allen, a doctor witness to the swinging ceremony held in Sholavandan Madurai, remarked, while the act was being performed, ".... but as a physician I must say that I fully expect that he might faint at any time. There can be no doubt but he had strong stimulants."[57] Again when once the 'victim" was brought down the latter is subjected to a close examination and scrutiny - his physical condition, the point of incision of the hooks etc. "As a physician I am surprised that ill effects on the man were so small. No ordinary man could pass through such an ordeal with out serious danger to his life."[58] When the swinger went around

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57 Madras Government records, Judicial, 856, 5th May 1892.

collecting alms for the performance from few devout spectators no signs of incapicitation were seen. This did appear to have stumped the authorities present.

Thus by so to say, 'constructing' the various aspects of the swinging ceremony, first by emphasising that it had nothing to do with Hindu religion since it was not sanctioned by the religious texts and scriptures, then by projecting the swinger as an 'victim' of ignorance and exploitation and finally by subjecting him to a physical scrutiny, the very individuality and the subjecthood of the swinger is denied. And when the manner in which the prohibition of the custom is being discussed intensively, the swinger seems to be the last thing in the minds of the British. What really seem to concern them is what and how the performance of the ceremony causes irritation and discomfort to the public. Thus what was at stake here was the ways in which power could be exercised by the colonial British, by which the ceremony could be undermined.

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58 Ibid

CHAPTER - 3

THE NATIVE RESPONSE

In this chapter, we propose to examine the nature of native response to the British initiatives to curb and eventually prohibit the custom of hook-swinging. As we saw, festivities such as these and others such as fire walking, were as such predominant among the subordinate classes/castes, but were not exclusive to them. The upper classes including the Brahmins, one way or the other, also associated themselves with such beliefs and rituals. But by the end of 19th century, we find the elites and the emerging middle classes being very indifferent to such rituals and beliefs and largely welcoming the colonial efforts to abolish the custom. But at the same time the members of the subordinate classes/castes and also those actively associated with such rituals were very obviously ired by the British intervention. As far as gauging the reaction of the latter is concerned, while at one level, their sense of ire, is made obvious from their invocations to the authorities, at other level, their resistance and efforts made to contest the colonial attempts at securing its restriction, is to be located within the structure of the ritual itself.

SECTION I

Response of the Native Elites

First, the response of the elites in South India towards the British mediation to prohibit this ritual. It was only in the 1890s, with the increasing debates among the officials seeking its prohibition became intense owing to a 'spurt' in the performance of such ceremonies, that we find newspapers and periodicals in south, opining their views and position. But in Bengal the 1830s and 40s itself there was an intense debate going among the elites over government's proposal to prohibit the custom. In Bengal Hook-swinging was part of one *Charak* puja, a festival held to propitiate *Siva* which was not only patronized by the local landlords but also by the western educated elite.[1] The patronage of hook-swinging was, as Geoff A. Oddie has pointed out, "one way (they) could maintain or even improve their social status".[2] So we find that a raging debate ensued between the reformers, who advocated suppression of hook-swinging, welcoming government intervention and those who were for giving up the practice without any interference from the colonial authorities. Papers such as *Hindoo Patriot* urged for active measure to be taken by the

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1 See G.A. Oddies, 'The western educated elites and popular religion: the debate over the hook-swinging issue in Bengal and Madras c.1830-1894' in Peter Robb (ed.) Society and Ideology, Delhi, 1993.

2 G.A.Oddie, op.cit, p 178.

government to prohibit this custom. Weeklies like *Jananeshan*, while agreeing on the need to put an end to this practice, questioned the wisdom of government's interference. Organisations like *Dharma Sabha*, though initially was opposed to any intervention by the Government, later changed their stand with a similar reservation - "if the reformers still wanted change, they should consult 'us' and not the government".[3] Babu Joteendro Mohun Tagore, who then happened to be the secretary of British Indian Association, while recommending the suppression of hook-swinging by the government hoped that their interference would be confined only to the ceremony per se, but not the festival, which is "made the occasion of a general mela in the villages, where thousands of people congregate, make purchases of edibles, playthings, articles of dress and interchange social reciprocities".[4]

Coming back to the South, the government's decision to prohibit the custom, as such elicited a very muted response. What little response that came up was one of approval and approbation of the government's proposal. '*The Hindu*', foremost among the English dailies, being in the forefront of propagating nationalist ideology in the South, in fact encouraged and

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3 Ibid

4 Home Department Proceedings/ judicial / June 1893. Nos. 293 to 327. Also K.N. Panikkar's argument that the apprehension in the Indian mind of the cultural and intellectual engineering by the colonial state could be one reason for such a resistance. For further details see his 'Culture and Ideology' in Economic and Political Weekly, December 5th 1987.

pressurised the government to take stringent action against those organising and patronising this festival and leave no stone unturned to prohibit it. The editorial of 30th May 1893, clearly expressed its stand on the British initiative to prohibit this ritual. To quote, "we certainly think that the British authorities can act with greater confidence in the strength and righteousness of their conviction and without taking an absurdly exaggerated and often erroneous view of the obligation of neutrality in so called religious matters, can suppress the play of instincts which have survived old barbarous times".[5] Even from small towns of interior Tamil Nadu, the newly emerging elites, held a similar view. '*Madura Mail*' a local publication from Madura, whose editor one V.V. Subramanya Iyer, took a keen interest in the whole affair, and sought to build a public opinion against this practice and urge the government to end it through legislation. [6] Such a view was also shared by the vernacular press, which equally sought an early promulgation of law prohibiting this custom for ever. '*Nagai Nilalochini*', a weekly in Tamil, published from Nagapattinam, opined, to quote, "... that this monstrous festival, which involves human torture, should be done away with and that the enlightened and the leading men of southern India should spare no pains to hold public meetings and make the masses feel deeply the

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5 Quoted from G.A.Oddie's op.cit. p.

6 Madras Government proceedings, judicial, 1286, 28th September, 1894.

unholiness of the said festival."[7] Another weekly published from Mysore, titled '*Verittanta Patrika*' had this to say, "if the government thinks that such a dangerous ceremonies are to be tolerated, we are obliged to think that it will countenance many other similarly murderous custom. We hope government of Madras ... would prevent a recurrence of similar acts in the future".[8]

Another striking feature in their response, approving the government's initiative both in Bengal as well as in Madras was their emphasis that this ceremony had nothing to do with Hinduism and was not sanctioned or enjoined by the Hindu texts and scriptures. Hence, the elites of Madras, uniformly welcomed the government's initiative and proposal to ban the practice. There was not any discordance among them over the fact that British intervention was being sought and welcomed to remove a social custom. We find that this shift and change in attitudes was much more in evidence in Bengal than in Madras. But nevertheless, this eventual change of attitude both in Bengal as well as in Madras can be understood, as Oddie has pointed out, if seen in the context of the elites endeavour to develop their own identity. This lead them todistance themselves from many aspects of popular culture. In this, while on the one hand the newly emerging western

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7 Native newspaper reports fortnight ending 30th September 1893.

8 Native newspaper reports fortnight ending 31 October, 1891.

educated elites did seek to retain their roots from certain part of the cultural tradition, on the other, rituals such as hook-swinging, since it was generally obtained among the lower orders of the society, were seen as excesses of Hinduism, needed to be left behind. In their effort to create a distinct culture of their own and seek a new identity, in the context of the growing nationalist ideology and the growth of Hindu revivalism in the south, they began to distance themselves from popular practices such as hook-swinging. Hence the British intervention to suppress the practice was largely welcomed.

SECTION II

The Response of the Patrons and Organisers

The response from the people who were actively involved in the patronage and organisation of this festival, at one level can be gauged from the innumerable petitions and memorials addressed to the British colonial authorities. As we have seen the governments policy of dissuasion and discouragement of this ceremony was well known. Any attempt to conduct the ceremony without the prior notice to them , were warned of dire consequences leading to penal action against both those who organised the ceremony and those who did the swinging proper. From the prayers addressed to the government, seeking their approval and revoking off the prohibition, their indigination and

feeling of their religious sensibilities being offended was quite apparent.

In one such memorial addressed by hundreds of concerned persons from nearly three dozen villages from the Madurai district of Tamil Nadu, expressing their ire at the banning of this ceremony through the promulgation of section 144 of Criminal procedure code (Cr.PC) remarked "There is no justification whatever for the unwarranted acts of the district magistrate in prohibiting the said ceremony altogether by a single stroke of his pen, publishing a notice under section 144 Cr.P.C. ... without moving the legislature for the purpose, thereby giving an opportunity to ventilate the opinion of the masses on the subject.[9] The governments decision to intervene in hook-swinging festival was perceived to be very selective and biased. As argued in the same memorial, there were other acts, which equally, if not more, caused fear, disgust and annoyance to people which were patronised by "men of eminence, (acts) such as balloon ascent, parachute descent, ... not to speak of the fire treading festival, the sacred custom of circumcision, the compulsory shaving of young Hindu widow's head which would in other circumstances would amount to grievous hurt, being a permanent disfiguration of the face..."[10] In their effort to defend this ceremony they argued that

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9 Madras Government proceedings, judicial, 2409, 5th October, 1894.

this ceremony was to be seen as one which displayed values and principles of all dominant religion. They firstly argued how in the performance of this ceremony the whole community profited and benefited from it. "Till 1875 or there about when this festival had been taking place your memorialists and their ancestors had been enjoying great prosperity". [11] Secondly they argued how through this ceremony they were able to, "inculcate in the minds of the ignorant masses in a practical manner the firm faith in God and ... bring home to the believer the greatest amount of happiness and prosperity (which) relieves him (the swinger) from difficulty whatever be the position in which the selected man is placed, swinging as he is amidst the hooks and it is this simple truth that is underlying in this practical deed which is taught in eloquent words on the pulpits and upon the platforms by leaders of every religion but with less force". from the pulpits and upon the platforms by leaders of every religion but with less force".[12] Hence we find that even the protoganists of this ceremony not being really concerned with the swinger proper.

But, these people, did not merely confine their protests to petitioning and memorialising. They took recourse to certain practical measures. The presence of officials and the police

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10 ibid
11 Ibid
12 Ibid.

at the venue of the festival with the ostensible purpose of maintaining peace and order made these people very uncomfortable. Hence, attempts were constantly made to undermine their presence and impress that the official presence lead to the failure of the ceremony. In other words, the table was effectively turned against the authorities, where the latter themselves were made to feel responsible for any untoward incident (injury for instance) that might happen in the course of the ceremony. For instance, one can here mention of one such incident, in a village in Trichy district.[13] The authorities in order to prohibit one such scheduled ceremony, make use of a very flimsy pretext i.e. the District Magistrate objects to the using of the Tamarind post for the ceremony, and directs that the ceremony could be held if only a granite pillar is used. But the granite pillar arranged for by the organisers, breaks. This is interpreted as a bad omen, an indication of God's displeasure against the officials for their interference and insistence on using a granite pillar, instead of the Tamarind post.

Thus while, at one level, the response from the subordinate classes, concerned with this festival, to colonial intervention, does reveal their sense of petulance and affront, but to fully grasp and study and comprehend their response, we need

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13 Madras Government proceedings, judicial, 2184, 25th November, 1892.

to go beyond these and attempt locating them within the structure of the ritual itself.

SECTION III

The Structure of the Ritual

For this purpose a synchronic interpretation applying Turnerian anthropology needs to be given. For hook-swinging can be seen as a calenderical ritual of status inversion, wherein protest and dissent if any, has to be seen within the context of the ritual itself.[14]

So far our analysis of hook-swinging and other rituals and practices has been more from a diachronic perspective, seeing it as those methods and practices resorted to by the rustic folks in Tamil Nadu, to come to terms with nature in its various manifestation. Here a bit of anthropology needs to be invoked, since societies throughout both pre-industrial and modern, display certain basic functions and structures. However, as we know history studies situations in a contextual form, wherein meaning is a meaning in context. Structures change wherein old forms may express new functions or old functions may find expression in new

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14 Victor Turner, The Ritual Process, Chicago, 1969. Here we are also drawing our ideas from James Scott's Weapons of the Weak, New Haven, 1985.

forms. But yet, as E.P. Thompson has pointed out, to see and understand constant functions, universal deep structures and to discover the inwardness of a particular context we need to have such synchronic models.[15]

Clifford Geertz has pointed out ritual sanctifies and marks off a space and time of special significance. Therefore hook-swinging if seen from a synchronic perspective can be seen as a ritual in which meaning is crystalized wherein social experience is distilled and displayed. As Geertz has put it. "ritual reinforces the traditional social ties between individuals ..... the social structure of a group is strengthened and perpetuated through the ritualistic or mythic symbolization of the underlying social values upon which it rests.[16]

But it is Victor Turner, whose framework is more oftenly invoked than Geertz when it comes to studying and understanding the ritual. Historians have increasingly begun to apply the framework of Turner (in itself an elaboration of the earlier work of Arnold Van Gennep) in trying to understand rituals such as carnival, charivari etc. giving us fruitful insights into the dynamics of numerous western and non-western societies.[17]

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15 E.P. Thompson, 'Folklore, Anthropology and Social History' in Indian Historical Review, Vol. 3, 1976-77.

16 Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, New York, 1973, p.142.

17 See Victor Turner's, The Ritual Process, structure and anti-structure, Chicago, 1969 and Process, Performance and Pilgrimage, New Delhi, 1979.

It is through Turners 'rites of passage' that this ritual of hook-swinging would be attempted to be understood. First let us explain and try to understand what this concept of 'rites of passage' signifies. 'Rites of passage' are involved in rituals accompanying changes of place, state, social position and age in a culture.[18] They essentially comprise of three phases : separation, margin or liminality and reaggregation. In the first phase the ritual subjects detaches itself from their old places in society and the last instals them inwardly transformed. The second state referred to as the liminal is the state and process of mid-transition. During the liminal state, the ritual subjects characteristics are ambiguous where its attributes are neither of the past or the coming state.[19] Here during the liminal phase, as Turner repeatedly emphasises, structure becomes peripheral.[20] Here by structure Turner is referring to the social structure which he sees has been "constituted by specialised mutually dependent institutions and the institutional organisation of positions and/ or of actors which they imply".[21] The liminal state has frequently been likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, darkness, bisexuality and the wilderness. During the liminal phase the ritual subjects are stripped of status and authority and removed from the social

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18 Victor Turner, op. cit., p.149.
19 ibid
20 ibid
21 Victor Turner, The Ritual Process, Chicago, 1969, pp.166-167.

structure maintained and sanctioned by power and force and leveled to a homogeneous social state through discipline and ordeal. Turner goes further and distinguishes between two types of liminality - one is liminality which is involved in the rituals of status elevation. Here the ritual subject is conveyed irreversibly from a lower to a higher position, in an institutionalized system of such positions. Turner, in his study of tribal societies in Africa, gives the example of the installation rituals wherein the incumbents to high political office, i.e. King have to face the abuses and insults from the structural inferiors.[22] Second is the liminality found in cyclical and calendrical ritual in which, at certain culturally defined points in the seasonal cycle, groups or categories of persons who habitually occupy low status positions in the social structure are enjoined to exercise ritual authority over their superiors. Such rites are described as rituals of status reversal.[23] In effect, as Turner clarifies, quite some rituals, contains aspects of both status elevation and status reversal.

The hook-swinging ceremony can be seen as an example of a calenderical ritual as normally, the rites of status reversal are. Calendrical rituals are, closely connected with the annual productive cycle performed during times of scarcity to

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22 Victor Turner, op.cit., pp.170-171.

23 ibid, p.167.

plenty or plenty to scarcity. In hook-swinging too, it is possible to delineate the three phases discussed above.

We have already seen and are familiar with the process and steps involved in this ceremony. What needs to be done is to classify the process into the three phases, which would be illustrative of 'rites of passage'.

But we do recognise the problems in such a methodology. Scholars though recognising that rites of inversion and status reversal involved in the ritual are useful categories in its understanding have pointed out that not much can be made of these rituals since they are basically intended to preserve and strengthen the established order. They can at the most be seen as safety valves for conflicts within the system, as they do not question the basic order of the society itself. But yet it is our contention that any protest / conflict in the society can still be reflected in the ritual or a festival. As Nicholas Dirks has pointed out, "... it is in fact striking how frequently violent social clashes apparently coincided with (the) carnival. While carnival was always licensed not all that happened in carnival was similarly licensed. Carnival was socially dangerous, semiotically demystifying and culturally disrespectful, even though it often confirmed authority renewed social relations and was rarely either politicised or progressive.[24] Recent studies made by scholars most

notably of James Scott, have argued that organised struggle and protest may not be the only form of resistance resorted to by the subalterns. He has instead in his work,[25] tried to emphasise everydayness of resistance present in the behaviour, traditions and consciousness of the subordinate classes.

The problem of resistance and protest has to a great extent been compounded by the existing kind of historiography which have focused only on those areas of protest as manifested in riots, rebellions, revolutions and organised political movements. Hence in this context the kind of scholarship ushered in by the scholars of the likes of James Scott,[26] has to be welcomed as providing a major corrective to the studies made on struggle and resistance. Thus our own study of the responses of the people concerned with this custom of hook-swinging to colonial intervention is analysed in such a perspective.

Here the ritual subject, were the hook-swingers. As seen they were generally drawn from the Pariah, Pallar castes etc., the lowest denominations of the society. There were also members drawn from certain castes, dominant locally in a region, for i.e.

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24 Nicholas Dirks, 'Ritual and Resistance': subversion as a social fact, in Gyan Prakash and Douglas Haynes (ed.) Contesting Power, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 216-217.

25 See James Scott, op.cit.

26 James Scott and Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, (ed.) "Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South East Asia" special issue in Journal of peasant studies, xii 1986.

the Kallars in Madurai but among their castes, they were seen as the professional swingers. So, the first phase, the process of separation, begins a full fortnight in advance from the day when the operation is to be performed. All the expected incumbents for the ceremony have to fast for the whole fortnight i.e. they have to abstain from meat, intoxicating liquors, and associating themselves with women. He needs to have bath in the early hours of the morning, massage his body with oil and perform certain exercises.[27] The actual candidate is chosen on the penultimate day, either by the local Pusari or the headman of the community, to whom it is believed the local goddess appears on the night of the previous day and announces the name of the person chosen by her.[28]

The second, liminal stage, can be seen commencing with the actual swinging feast. When about to be swung their ears, neck, and waist are adorned with golden ornaments, and the silver belt or chain. The person is raised in the air, swinging from the pole, fixed on to the temple car, on which musicians, dancing girls and the Pujaris are placed around the idol. Normally a sword and a shield is given to this swinger, which with he would wave and make swishes in the air. They (i.e. the Swingers) would laugh and

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27 Edgar Thurston, Ethnographic notes in Southern India, Madras, 1906. p.494.

28 Gustav Oppert, The Original Inhabitants, of Bharatvarsha, or India, Westminister, 1893, p.481.

gesticulate at the crowd, singing songs or blowing a trumpet, or throwing flowers on the crowd.

This liminal phase can be seen ending with the swinger being lowered and the hooks being removed from his back. Now the swinger reenters into the social structure.

As argued the response to the British intervention has to be seen in the structure of the ritual. And it is here that the framework developed by James Scott will be most appropriate to understand the response which was one of Resistance and struggle. From the records available, the hook-swinging festival conducted at Sholavandan, a village in the Madurai district on 9th June 1892, gives ample evidence of the artifices and antics employed by the organisers to hoodwink the government authorities to keep them off their backs.[29]

The organisers knowing that the authorities would hang around the place during the performance, first try to misinform them about the date of the ceremony. But that attempt fails, with the authorities getting to know the actual date. The District Magistrate, the Tahsildar, the local police, a western

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29 Madras Government proceedings, judicial, 613, 12th March 1894. It contains the report on the hook-swinging festival which took place at Sholavandan on 9th June 1892, republished from the Madura Mail, 11th June 1892. A further account of this festival discussed here is based on this detailed report.

physician and other officials present themselves on the day of the ceremony. Henceforth, the organisers consistently make efforts to postpone the festival, the performance to be more precise. Of course the postponement is in no way able to throw the authorities off their back. But the point is that a contest, a struggle was involved here which is of greater significance to us.

The preparatory ceremony which involved the cooking of the Pongul was deliberately being delayed. But the way the organisers put it was that delay was a bad omen. The reason for the delay was the presence of the authorities which had upset the Goddesses. The when the authorities wanted to know the name of the swingers, the organisers refused to reveal them. In fact, the swingers were not to be seen anywhere around i.e. they disappeared when the officials wanted to make enquiries about them and question them. Next the organisers came up with a very ingenious idea. The Pusari began to suggest that the hooks were to be cleaned. And for that only one particular blacksmith by the name of Velayuthan Asari, who was residing in the neighbouring village of Tiruvengada, had the competence to clean them. This was not because there were no blacksmiths available locally who could do the job. But the organisers idea was to delay the offering and thereby postpone the festival. So they took recourse to such tactics to prolong the preparatory rites.

Along with the Pusari who was heading to the village of Tiruvengada, with the ostensible purpose of getting the hooks cleaned, the officials sensing their game, the Taluq Inspector also accompanies the Pusari. On the way the very blacksmith, i.e. Velayuthan Asari from Tiruvengada shows up. When the inspector urges the Pusari to turn back to the venue now having seen the person, the Pusari immediately changes his position and says that it was Solamalai Asari and not Velayuthan Asari he was looking for. In reality the instrument was very clean and the Pusari did not clean it afterwards at Sholavandan or anywhere else.

Next, when the Taluq Inspector attempts to enter the room in which the local goddess is being worshiped, it enrages them a great deal. One Gopalakrishna Rowth, complains that because of the Taluq Inspectors intrusion into the room, the Pusari who had become inspired and was granting permission to the victim to undergo the operation fearlessly, lost his inspiration.

Thus, this way the operation was delayed till 6.30 pm. And now the people felt that as night was fast approaching, the '*Sircar*' would be held accountable to them for any accident that might occur. Then they also pointed out that only one out of the three men necessary to perform the operation was present at the venue. Thus the ceremony was eventually put off to 3 pm next day.

Therefore, this way the response and reactions of those immediately concerned with the ceremony are brought to relief. It was one of protest and struggle. The response of the swingers proper, we feel, although it really is out of question, given the limited nature of the sources, has to be seen, if we may say textually during the liminal phase.

We would go to the extent of arguing somewhat similar to Nick Dirks contention in his work on an Aiyenar festival in Tamil Nadu, that this was a ritual in which authority was central.[30] It became a site of struggle for establishing authority, since ritual also involves the way in which authority and power is culturally constructed. Thus, in other words, this ritual was perhaps the subordinates classes own way of contesting the British as well as the native elites attempt to hegemonise their cultural domains.

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30 Nicholas Dirks, op. cit. pp. 213-237.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion we would summarise the major findings of this work. In the first chapter we saw that although these rituals and beliefs were more widely practice and adhered to among the members of the lower and untouchable castes, members from the upper castes were also seem to be wedded to such beliefs and rituals and also participated in these in large numbers. Almost all irrespective of their social status and the caste hierarchy, including the Brahmins - however qualified their involvement in such worship might have been - did participate and reposed their faith in these beliefs and customs. Castes as we saw did form an important basis and a crucial determinant in such religious practices. Lest there be any confusion let us repeat here that this aspect needs to be seen from the perspective of power and how power is sought to be contested. That there is in such popular beliefs and practices, a critique of dominant dharma / ideology, as we argued is not in doubt. But here what one must recognise is that this effectiveness of one ideology (which seek to subsume and blunt all contradictions) depends upon the condition and state of power. Hence what is involved here is contestation and struggle for power. But in the colonial period, beginning with the accounts of the missionaries and later the ethnographic studies and surveys conducted by the British, caste came to be totally perceived in religious terms in which the Brahmin was seen to occupy supreme position, and wherein social rank was solely

determined with reference to Brahmins alone. But as Dirks has pointed out, "caste structure, ritual form and political process were all dependent on relations of power".[1] As a consequence of such colonial efforts, it were the so-called Brahminical texts - the Vedas or Puranas which came to determine and formed the basis of Hinduism. Hence, hookswinging came to be debated in relation to such Hindiusm. Hence in the process, the Brahminical tradition was privileged. Therefore, to see such beliefs and activities, as being popular purely on the basis of the lower caste participation would be a simplistic and largely an incorrect observation.

The British intervention, as we saw was thus an outcome of a colonial discourse based on the production of knowledge about the various aspects of the Indian society. In such a scheme of things, caste figured very conspicously. In such an execution the swinger is marginalised and even when he does appear in the debates he does so as a 'victim', thus denying him the agency and subjecthood. Thus the colonial intervention in this ceremony was such that it emptied the latter of all politics and struggle. It was merely one 'barbarous' and 'revolting' spectacle. It was also perceived as being exploitative. The people who were seen as being responsible for perpetuating this custom were the temple priests or the temple manager and also the village officials and

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1 Nicholas Dirks, 'Invention of Castes : Civil Society in Colonial India', in Social Analysis, 25, 1989, pp. 42-52.

headmen. These people were seem to profit monitorily from the ceremony and thus formed a vested interest for its continued performance. Thus by 'establishing' the fact that these temple priests and others were exploiting the ignorance and superstition of the people, the British intervention was seen as being 'natural', 'moral' and 'just'.

Even the native response of both the emerging intelligentsia and middle classes who welcomed the British efforts and those who continued to repose their faith in this ritual and sought to resist the British attempt to prohibit it, the 'victim' was marginal to their concerns. At one level, this can be seen as a part of a process which Peter Burke refers to in his study of popular culture in early modern Europe. With the spread of literacy, the growing modernisation, a distinct gulf emerge between the culture of the elites on the subordinate classes, wherein the former tries to retain the new identity and suppress the culture of the later. Here in India a similar process can be seen at work. This was also the period when nationalist sentiments were on the ascendant and those in the forefront of propagating this ideology sought to evolve a new distinct cultural identity, based on the selective appropriation of the past. As a consequence they started to distance themselves from many of such popular activities and practices. The latter such as hook-swinging, were seen as being grossly vulgar, dangerous and immoral. Hence British efforts to prohibit this custom

was largely welcomed. But the process of this separation and the grounds on which this gulf emerged, was specifically colonial.

By this when seen in the proper colonial context and a careful reading of the debates between those who welcomed the British initiative and those who opposed it, we see that both were debating within the terms of reference set in by the colonial discourse in which religion was central. This aspect as to what constituted Hinduism was determined by the British and in the course of the discussion on hook-swinging between these two parties such a conception got reinforced again and again. Secondly by seeing this ceremony as being exploitative, a view also shared by the native elites, the victim hardly remains the concern of the authorities and people involved in the debate. Hence, on the one hand the tensions inherent within the structure of the community (i.e. in terms of caste and caste struggle) and on the other, how in the colonial context, certain traditions and meanings get privileged, to see 'community'as one constant unchanging category, would largely be false.

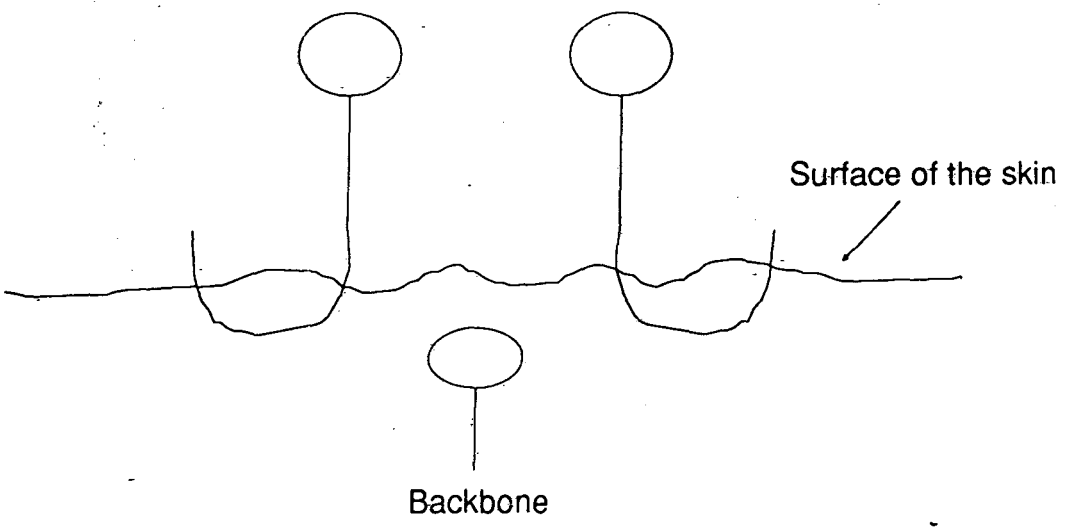
Thus the colonial state was able to secure its hegemony and dominance in the cultural realms of the Indian soceity.

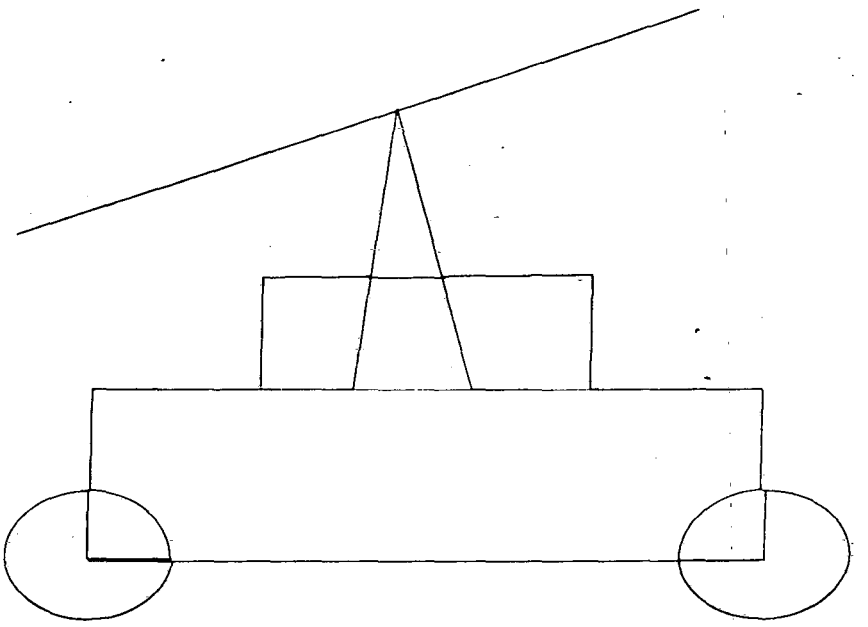
1. Memorandum showing the talooks, or zemindaries and villages in which the swinging feast is celebrated and the intervals at which it is observed

Name of talooks or zemindaries	Villages	Name of the Goddes in honour of whom the festival is celebrated	Nos. of the chedlles	Remarks
Trivullum	Kemparazpoor	Yagavalurmmay	1	The celebration of the festival discontinued from 1838 - plans to revive in current year
	Ponnay	Nimmalummah	1	Festival is celebrated in the month of *Avany* every year
Caverypauk	Chairy	Anneeyammah	1	Once in a year
Vellore	Verinjeepoorum	-do-	Formerly 2	Now discontinued
	Allancoopum	-do-	1	Once a year
	Goodanagarum	-do-	1	Once in ten years
	Carumboor	-do-	1	Once in every year
Arcot	Anamaloor and Keelary	-do-	Formerly 2	Has been discontinued for the last 20 years

Name of talooks or zemindaries	Villages	Name of the Goddes in honour of whom the festival is celebrated	Nos. of the chedlles	Remarks
Canetnuggur	Cooppum	-do-	1	Celebrated every year
Narnavannum	Keelagarum, Thoroor & Kottapettah	Kalagoorummay, Palacheeyummay and Voroogunteeyummay	1 each	Celebrated in the month of *Avany every year*
Calastry Zemindary	Calastry, Thondamanadoo, Poolloor, Cancheraamee, Valapully, Chembaidoo, Elachoor, Varatoor, Akoothee	Anneyammay	1 each = 9	The festival in these villages is celebrated once in the course of three, four or five years.
Arnee Jaghire	Atheemayumputtoo, Uckoor	Varoocundeyemmay, Uckoorummay	1 each formerly	Has been discontinued for thelast ten and twenty years respectively. But plans to revive the festival this year.

Source : Report on the swining festivals and the ceremony of walking through fire, 1854.





(From Madras Judicial Proceedings No. 8, 17 May 1892.
It shows a diagramatic representation of the hook-swinging appratus and car along with the manner of incision of the hooks in the human body. This was done by Dr. F. Van Allen present at Sholavandan during the performance of the ceremony)

GLOSSARY

Agraharam	- The place of residenc of the Brahmins
Cheddle / Soodaloo	- Hook-swinging
Cheri	- Generally referred to the settlement where members from the lower and untouchable castes resided.
Dharmakurtah	- The Temple Manager
Gramadevtas	- Village Gods/ deities
Gurukkal	- A Saivite Brahmin priest
Inams	- Land grants
Kuladevtas	- Family deities
Mela	- Fair
Pusari	- A Priest
Sircar	- Government

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