Original Article (Special Theme)


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Introduction

This research paper describes how the practice of religious gift-giving facilitates the creation of social relationships in a traditional Hindu temple in contemporary South India. In previous studies, the concept of religious gifts in the Hindu religion was often examined in conjunction with caste studies between the 1980s and the 1990s. These studies focused on gifts for god and noted that the religious terms regarding gifting distinguished the sacred from the secular and reconstructed its asymmetrical structure. Such non-reciprocative gifting is usually ritualized and formalized. However, repeated non-reciprocative gifting without generating debt leads to the construction of an asymmetrical relationship between priests as receivers and devotees as givers. I analyzed the patron-client relationship between temple priests and devotees in the Nataraja
Temple in Tamil Nadu, focusing on the Hindu religious terms bhakti. Although the priests and the management of the temple are economically dependent on donations from the devotees, these religious norms can help prevent a relationship of dependence, enabling the priests to maintain their dignity. These norms are also related to the imagination and creation of a society in which their God participates in social relationships by involving an actor in the process of gift-giving. This paper elucidates the potentiality of these religious terms and examines how they are envisioned and refined in person-to-person gift-giving practices, which vary with economic, political, and social changes as well as the religious ideals of the temple.

Donation System of the Nataraja temple

Chapter 2 outlines the donation system the Nataraja Temple. The history of this temple reveals that its priests entered into a dispute with the Tamil Nadu government over the management of the temple and won autonomy to function as a private entity. This resulted in the original donation system kattalai as well. The priests at the Nataraja Temple do not seem to be a cohesive temple community as it may appear initially. The kattalai is donated through an individual priest as well as a member of the temple trust. The donation system that supports the Nataraja Temple and its religious activities works through a personalized relationship between a devotee and a particular priest, similar to a patron and a client. Accordingly, a group of devotees who had tied up with an individual priest simply connected with God and the temple. This chapter elucidates the two characteristics of this donation system. The kattalaitār (the person who offers the kattalai) supports not only the religious activities and management of the temple, but also the lives of the priests and their
families. It covers their living costs, including their rite of passage and leisure. Contemporaneously, the history of temple survival has been associated with the maintenance of a priest’s livelihood and the way to live as a priest. Second, this way of life created and drove the diversified practice of gift-giving based on the individual relationship between a devotee and a priest, and the original donation system that supported both the sacred and secular spheres of a priest’s life.

Gift-giving Practices in the temple

Chapter 3 considers various gift-giving cases focusing on 1) individuality/collectiveness, 2) anonymity, 3) the time required for the return of the gift, and 4) the contents of return terms. Subsequently, I describe how *kattalai* has been practiced based on polysemous religious terms in a specific field such as a temple, and how the interaction between the priests and the devotees encompasses social relationships.

First, I introduce the endowments called *podu kattalai* and *ubayam* from *Nagarattār cettiyārs*, who belong to the wealthy mercantile community in Tamil Nadu. *Podu kattalaitār* supports public activities in the temple, and *ubayatār* sponsors festivals and rituals in the long term. These rights are handed down to specific family members or organizations. However, the difference between them is the method of returning. The *ubayatār* receives the return from the temple, called *Mariyātai*. It is usually mentioned as the distribution of honor returned for the endowment in the relations among the temple, king, and ruler (Appadurai 1981). However, the recipient of the return is selective and limited to the *ubayatār* here. In contrast, *prasāda* can be distributed to not only the contributor but also the priest and other devotees.

A private offering from individual devotees is called *archana*
Kattalai. It is contrary to Naivettiyam, a public offering of food that is cooked in the temple kitchen. It is performed in face-to-face conditions between a priest and a devotee. It materially supports the livelihood of priests and is an offering based on an annual contract. This practice varies because it is based on personal contexts and relationships for both the priest and the devotee. These kattalai relationships are sometimes handed down to succeeding generations. A priest becomes an irreplaceable “my priest” for a devotee and a devotee can be a “fan of the priest.” Considering this practice of specific and concrete donation as a non-anonymizing gift, I analyze how psychological relationships can be determined between the giver and the receiver.

Social Relationships between the temple priests and devotees
This kind of trustworthy relationship sometimes develops into affection and cooperation of the temple. The devotees connect with the temple through donations and gradually the temple becomes “my temple” for them. Such feelings of affinity toward the temple can sometimes expand beyond the relationship between the priests and devotees or devotees such as pilgrims and researchers as a consequence of their interaction during unexpected encounters in the temple. However, such non-anonymous gifting can cause bondage and conflict between the priests and devotees. Although the kattalai system seems to be a modern and reasonable annual contract, their relationship cannot be considered reciprocal and obligatory like monetary annual payment to compensate for religious rituals and services. The relationship is critically different from a mere contractual one because of the goods exchanged based on the gift-giving logic of religious terms. It works as a logic that cannot be considered as a selfish strategy for the priest’s survival.
As mentioned earlier, successive donations involved a *kattalai* relationship between the priests and devotees, regardless of whether it was for the long or short term. There are cases of temporal donations from newcomers like tourists, pilgrims, and non-Hindu foreigners. These are not considered as *kattalai*. However, even if it was a temporary and impulsive gifting, it cannot be denied that the giver anticipates a long-term relationship with the receiver. It is not that a temporal gift has minimal value in the temple. For example, a bell of two meters in height was gifted in the 1990s by a German who was a non-devotee, who stated that he had dreamed about this temple, but it had become a customary component of this temple during daily rituals, notwithstanding the fact that the bell was used in a Catholic church. Moreover, unexpected implications such as romantic feelings toward priests can occur and result in an impulsive gifting in the temple where the priests and devotees encounter.

As a temporal but anonymous gifting, I describe the donations to an offertory box called an *undiyal*. However, the donation to these *undiyals*, which are common in many other temples, is not usually practiced at the Nataraja Temple. *Undiyals* were temporarily installed from February 2009 to January 2014, when the executive officers of the state government resided in the temple after the temple authorities had lost a legal case once in the Madras High Court. Dropping money into *undiyals* is deidentifying the givers so that the return for the donation is denied. Here, there is little chance for social ties between priests and devotees, unlike in the *kattalai* system.

Subsequently, I detail the endowments from Brahman organizations and international NGOs as a new wave of organizational gifting. These cases can be characterized as gifts for philanthropy in the modern political, economic, and social context. Philanthropy is a charitable activity to provide systematic aid to resolve social issues
and alleviate people’s suffering in the long term. These are related to the political and economic difficulties faced by the Brahman priest, as a minority in Tamil Nadu caste politics. Although it may not be considered a religious gift in the precise sense, it can be established as a kind of religious endowment.

Chapter 3 analyzes the various interactions between the priests and devotees during the act of gifting. Gifting to support both the sacred and secular life of temple priests has been practiced based on the logic that combines not only religious terms, but also philanthropy and affection. Even if an aspect of this logic appears secular, when it is exchanged as a religious gift, it can be accompanied by religious terms. The gift offered to temples or priests is considered an ascetic training of self-sacrifice or self-renunciation to express one’s devotion or love for god. Therefore, gifting depends on the free will of the devotees as givers, and they sometimes donate indulgent gifting without asking for its return. In the case of anonymous devotees, it may be difficult for the priests to refuse and they have no choice but to accept, as it may not seem appropriate to refuse any gift. Even though the gift is implicated in the political context, if it is done with the following religious gifting norm, it is possible to give/receive it. The religious concept sometimes camouflages such political or other secular meanings. The gifts offered to the temple and priests include a large number of sustained donations and support for the social welfare of the priests. These gifts emanate from pity, compassion, and sympathy for the priests’ vulnerability as a minority community. These religious gifts help the priests maintain their dignity without feeling subservient. This enables asymmetrical gifting in the temple. Moreover, a temple embodies myth and symbolizes sanctity, which is an important factor to drive religious gifting. Priests coexist with the Gods in the Nataraja Temple as do their sacred/secular lives. For the
devotees, temples are considered a kind of utopian space where their ideal sacredness and the social relationship between god and man are imagined/created. The temple-embodied religious ideals and perspectives are related to providing meaning and valuation for micro-interaction between the priests and devotees.

Conclusion

In sum, even if religious gift-giving has been practiced in the Nataraja Temple based on personal relationships between the priests and devotees, their interaction does not remain at the individual level. The gifting is based on religious terms that are idealized with regard to co-existence or forming social relationships. This is related to creating value through interaction. This paper focuses on the practice related to providing value to priests’ lives and considering them as valuable individuals in this society through the act of gifting.

This paper indicates that the gifting practice in the temple is regarded as *bhakti*. It helps to include God in the interaction over the gift and is related to the utopian imagination of the society to position God within a social context. The temple as a symbolic space and the mystic origin of the priests is significant there. Greaver pointed out that the ideal picture of a society almost never corresponds with how that society actually works, and it exists only in imagination. However, the important thing is not just to ask why they lack it but also how they invariable describe one that does not lack it (2001: 87). The Nataraja Temple is the symbolic space where the priests consider their ideal way of life and represent their views of the world or the possibility of its eternity. Therefore, the gifting practice as a face-to-face interaction with the other “to behave as it exits” in the temple as symbolic space where the priests live with gods, is deeply related to the creation of dignity for the priests.
In modern history, the political, economic, and social environment surrounding Hindu temples has changed substantially. Sometimes, it is in contrast with the utopian society as imagined/created, from which the temple and priest embody religious ideals. This paper describes the conflicts between them and elucidates priests’ lives and their social relationships, considered as an immutable value in changing times, like the anchor of a ship, in focusing on the potentiality of religious norms and the interaction of their gift-giving practices.

REFERENCES

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