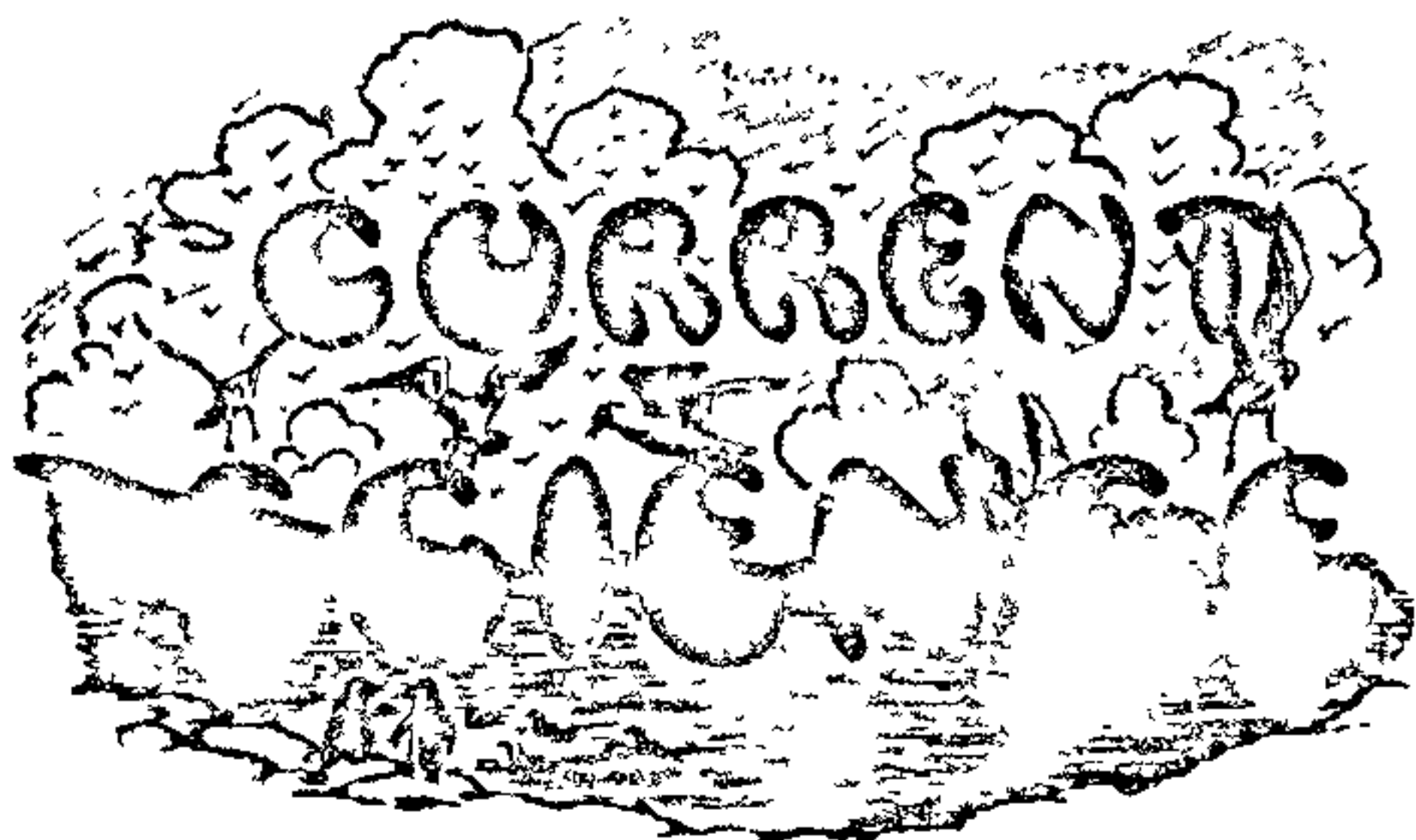


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p. 124

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**The Agricultural Basis of  
Religion in India\***

THE religious beliefs and practices in India have received greater attention than any other branch of Indian Culture. The studies attempted so far have preceded either on a comparative or a philosophical basis. But in the study of the primitive and other forms of religion in India, it would appear that fruitful results may be obtained by approaching it from a different angle: namely, by a study of the influences of environment. It seems to me that an examination of the predisposing influences is bound to throw light on the religious practices and beliefs and enable us to interpret properly the anthropological data with accuracy.

I have taken for the theme of my paper "The Agricultural Basis of Religion". Lest the title mislead the reader, I should explain that the circumstances under which agriculture is being carried on in India have exerted an influence on the religious practices of the agricultural castes. The fact that they are widespread and are followed by a large proportion of the people will be evident from the fact that India is essentially an agricultural country and this occupation affords employment to more than three-quarters of the population. As satisfaction of material wants is the chief aim of man, primitive or civilised, the influences which contribute to the success in his efforts also react on his mental outlook. Agricultural operations, whether in Northern or Southern India, are largely determined by the monsoon. The outbreak of the

monsoon at the proper time ensures a successful agricultural season, overflowing granaries and provision of sufficient means to the people; whereas a failure of the monsoon spells economic disaster. As the monsoon is the outcome of the uncertain forces of nature, the agricultural castes find themselves absolutely at the mercy of these influences. It is, therefore, not unnatural that this should produce a spirit of fatalism. Again the fact that land is the chief thing that determines the material welfare of the people is the main reason why so much of ritual, magic and religion is associated with "Mother Earth". The extent to which these two have influenced the religious beliefs, practices and attitude of a large proportion of the agricultural castes in India will be clear from a consideration of the agricultural calendar and ceremonies connected with this occupation.

The agricultural year in South India, especially in Malabar, Cochin and Travancore, begins with *Vishu* or Chaitra Sankranti, which is the astronomical New Year's Day on which the hot weather is supposed to terminate. The sight of the food-stuffs and silver or gold arranged in a bell-metal tray on the morning of the auspicious day is calculated to bring on prosperity during the ensuing year. It is also a day for ancestor worship and worship of the deities in the village temples for the blessings of prosperity. The village astrologer by his calculations announces the agricultural prospects of the year and forecasts the amount of rainfall at regular intervals, the names of the crops that are likely to thrive well, and the famines or epidemics that are likely to break out. Each member of the village consults the astrologer who by the examination of his horoscope predicts his good luck or otherwise during the ensuing year. The same prosperity or ill-luck is determined by the omens arising from the breaking of cocoanuts, and the direction of its rolling on the floor on the morning of the first day of the agricultural year.

The village astrologer next chooses a special day for ploughing and sowing. The seeds are taken in leafy cups, and placed in a basket, and are consecrated. The plough and other agricultural instruments and the oxen are worshipped. They are next taken out in procession to the field. The headman leads by starting to plough and the others follow. Sowing is regarded as a general crisis, a "Rite de passage", and the chief assumes the risk of performing an act full of mystical danger and uncertain outcome. It is thus a solemn act

and is done with prayers to ancestors who are invoked for the prosperity of the crop. When the crops are grown up, the Siddi-Devaru is worshipped with offerings to avert insect pests. The fields and crops are placed under the protection of the village deity, after the offerings to the deities and after Hasta Pongalu during the Hasta rains.

When the crops are fully ripe, there is a special ceremony for bringing them to the family. The house is white-washed and decorated with drawings of rice flour mixed in water. The ground in front of the house is purified with cow-dung mixed with water, and decorated with seven kinds of leaves. The God Ganesa is propitiated and adored. The ears of corn are stuck to the wall with cow-dung. This is followed by a formal cooking of rice obtained from the newly cropped paddy, which is a survival of the Vedic ceremony of Agrāyana

The ceremony next in importance is the worship of the agricultural implements on the Vijayadasami day, during the Dasara of South India. This corresponds to the Viswakarma day in Bengal. There are also special forms of worship before harvest. At the time of reaping the sickle God is worshipped. A handful of the crop is then cut and placed in the central part of the field, and near it five stones are placed. The sickles of all the reapers are collected and deposited in a row in front of these stones. They are all worshipped with the breaking of cocoanuts and the burning of incense. The ears of

the corn are safely preserved at home and the grain obtained from them is mixed with the seed grain during the ensuing year. Before the grain is removed in carts or head-loads from the fields to the threshing floor, a cocoanut is broken and incense burned. When the threshing is done and the grain heaped together a similar offering is made to the *pillari*. It is also the universal custom that, before measuring, a small portion of grain is set apart for distribution to the poor villagers who may chance to go there.

There is also a similar ceremony at the end of Magh or Makaram, when the crops have been harvested, the agricultural operations have come to an end, and Mother Earth is supposed to take some rest or remain in a state of incubation. At the beginning of this period, the agricultural castes of Malabar observe a festival in honour of Mother Earth which is like the Roman Februria supposed to take place at the same time. It is believed that on the last day of the festival all agricultural leases connected with the land are supposed to expire. In some of the villages of the Walluvanad Taluk of Malabar, special festivals are celebrated with straw models taken out in procession to the Bhagawati Temples.

After the harvest the farmers and others in the villages find their granaries full. It is during this part of the year that all the village festivals are celebrated in honour of the Gods as thanks offerings with prayers for similar harvests in the following year.

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## ANNOUNCEMENT

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### SECOND INFOTERM SYMPOSIUM 'NETWORKING IN TERMINOLOGY'

The Second Infoterm Symposium 'Networking in Terminology' will be held in Vienna from 15 to 17 April 1985, under the auspices of UNESCO with the Technical University of Vienna and the Terminology and Documentation Branch of the Canadian Secretary of State functioning as co-organizers. The following topics will be discussed.

Important topics of the symposium: (1) Fundamentals and tools for networking in terminology, (2) Networking in energy terminology—practical aspects and applications, (3) Terminology as a prerequisite of

knowledge/technology transfer—networking in terminology facilitating, (4) Computer-aids for networking in terminology—Computer-assisted terminology work, (5) International networking in terminology—future perspectives and priorities, (6) Scientific foundation of terminology work—Terminology science and related fields contributing to networking in terminology.

For details please contact: Osterreichisches Normungsinstitut (ON) Infoterm, Postfach 130, A-1021 Wien, Austria.

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