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FROM ANIMISM TO SYNCRETISM: THE STONE DEITY AS PROTECTOR OF THE PANCHAYAT, AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF BOUNDARY DEITIES AND PANCHAYAT LEGITIMACY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the worship of stone as the guardian deity (Kaval Deivam or Gramadevata) in South Indian village traditions, situating it within the broader framework of aniconic worship and community governance. Unlike anthropomorphic idols, these stones are often raw, uncarved, or minimally marked, symbolising primal permanence and protective energy. Positioned at village boundaries, crossroads, or near the panchayat space, the stone deity embodies both spiritual guardianship and social cohesion. Rituals — ranging from offerings of turmeric and vermilion to collective festivals — reinforce the stone's role as protector against disease, famine, and external threats. Anthropologically, stone worship reflects animistic roots, where natural objects are imbued with spirit, and socially, it legitimises communal decision-making by linking governance with divine sanction. By examining ethnographic accounts, oral traditions, and cultural syncretism with deities such as Ayyanar, Mariamman, and Karuppasamy, the paper argues that stone worship is not merely religious but socio-political: it anchors identity, continuity, and collective belonging. Today, despite urbanisation, the worship of stone as guardian lord persists in rural panchayats, affirming the enduring bond between spirituality and community defence.

KEYWORDS: *Stone Worship; Kaval Deivam; Gramadevata; Village Guardian; Panchayat; Aniconic Tradition; Animism; Tamil Folk Religion; Boundary Rituals; Social Cohesion; Syncretism; Ayyanar; Mariamman; Karuppasamy; Rural Anthropology.*