

Unlocking Tamil Heritage

Ketharan Partheepan



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by Ketharan Partheepan



THENNADU PUBLICATIONS

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Ketharan Partheepan ©

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

When, Siva. Gunaratnam Partheepan (Thennavan) with God's Thiruvarul (intuition), the Founder of Thennadu Tamil Madam (Mutt), tasked me with writing an entire book about Tamil Heritage, it at first seemed like a formidable task. After all, Tamil culture dates back to over 5000 years ago, meaning there was a lot to get through. Upon reflection, writing the book may have even been the easier part, because researching the intricacies of certain areas of Tamil heritage was truly challenging. So why did I do it?

Because Tamil Heritage is not just a monument of the past, but a living testament to who we are and what we stand for. And being given the opportunity to preserve and promote that, I have learned, was a great gift and not so much a “formidable task”. The challenge was never the writing itself, but it was my responsibility to ensure that every piece of our history, every thread of our culture, is showcased with the respect that it deserves.

Tamil Heritage with roots over 5000 years old is a fountain of knowledge, spirituality and culture. Each chapter of this book unveils layers of wisdom from our ancient ancestors that continue to influence the world today. Whether it be the poetic brilliance of Sangam Literature, the architectural marvel of our Temples or the priority Tamils give to the concept of Virunthompal, they all reflect the greatness of our Tamil Heritage.

Reading this book may prove to be a great learning experience for many of you, but writing it has been an incredible learning

experience for me. The success of this book is dependent on how you, as the reader, view our Tamil heritage by the time you read the last word. If by the end of this book, you are able to understand why Tamils love their culture and why they would even give up their lives to protect their heritage, this book can be considered a success.

The initiative and the motive of this book, aligning with the ideals of the Thennadu Sentamil Agama Sivamadam, is to reflect that the duty of us, as individual Tamils, is to carry on the knowledge that has been passed down to us. Tamil heritage has been non-elusive, it hasn't changed nor been tampered with, and it has remained true as a result of its undeniable nature. Now we must ensure that it remains this way and we continue to preserve this remarkable history. For if we lose our history, we lose our identity, we lose ourselves.

The great Thiruvalluvar in his renowned Thirukkural says in Kural 612:

வினைக்கண் வினைகெடல் ஓம்பல் வினைக்குறை
தீர்ந்தாரின் தீர்ந்தன்று உலகு.

Which means "Take care not to give up exertion in the midst of a work; the world will abandon those who abandon their unfinished work." Like I said it is our duty, our work, to protect our heritage. Tamils have been preserving our culture for generations, but this is a never-ending job so we must not give up exertion in continuing to do so. For if we do the world might just abandon us as unfinished work.

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Message from Thennadu Sentamil Agama Sivamadam (Thennadu Saiva Mutt)



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In line with the core objectives of Thennadu Sentamil Agama Sivamadam (Thennadu Mutt), we are presenting a concise summary of Tamil heritage in English. This effort aims to share the profound truths of our heritage with the next generation of the Tamil diaspora and non-Tamil-speaking communities worldwide, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of Tamil culture and traditions.

Tamil heritage stems from a non-delusive and enduring Tamil culture that has thrived for over 5,000 years. According to literary references, the Tamil language evolved through the establishment of Sangams, with the First Sangam believed to have been located in the submerged region known as “Thennadu”.

The non-delusive cultural framework encompasses a vast array of literature, intellectual traditions, technical innovations, religious doctrines, arts, music, dance, architecture, festivals, rituals, food, and systems of politics and governance. Tamil migrations

have been a constant throughout history, from ancient kingdoms to modern times, driven by various factors such as trade routes, territorial expansion, the establishment of new settlements, and forced movements due to severe weather conditions, among others.

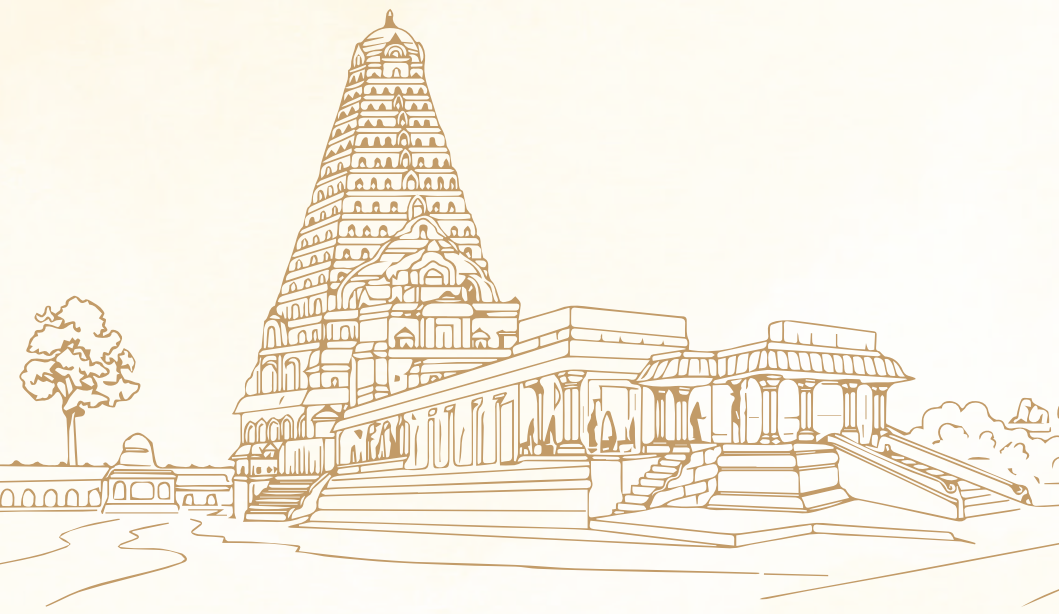
It has been great to see Tamil Heritage months being inaugurated all around the world with great campaigns in the UK and Canada. In addition, recently in Australia, a heritage week was successfully implemented in the council of Cumberland, following the efforts of Clr Sujan Selventhiran. On the National level, Dr Andrew Charlton, Federal minister for Parramatta, successfully advocated for a Tamil Heritage month in January. Following, the Prime Minister of Australia, Anthony Albanese, released a Thai Pongal statement labelling January as Tamil Heritage month. The speciality of January is that it coincides with the Tamil month of Thai which although doesn't have Tamil New Year, it hosts Tamil festivals such as Thai Pongal and Thai Poosam. Further, Thai is a bountiful month as it is the perfect time to harvest after the crops have ripened in Southern India and Sri Lanka.

The goal behind this effort is to convey these historical and cultural facts to the next generation of the Tamil diaspora worldwide, enabling them to appreciate and understand the values and significance of their rich cultural heritage. This will empower them to live in harmony with these cultural attributes and pass them on to future generations.

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History of the Ancient Tamils

Tamil Culture and society have blessed the world we live in for thousands of years, producing advancements that continue to flourish today. For Tamils, our heritage is a source of immense pride and a testament to our resilience and unity. Tamil is more than a language or culture but an identity that thousands of people have died to protect and preserve. When asked about our identity regardless of where we were born or raised, we Tamils will universally respond, “I am Tamil.” This very pride is echoed in the words of Subramania Bharathiar, who famously said, “தமிழனென்று சொல்லடா தலை நிமிர்ந்து நில்லடா” (“Say with pride that you are Tamil; stand tall with your head held high.”). This powerful statement not only emphasises the importance of recognising and embracing one’s Tamil identity but also calls for a sense of dignity and self-respect in every circumstance. It importantly preaches that being Tamil is not just

about a language but about standing firmly in the face of challenges and taking pride in our roots, a philosophy that many leaders throughout our history have embraced. Tamil is a bond that has united us and held strong, fortified by a vibrant history filled with knowledge and innovation. To truly understand why Tamils are so proud of who they are and what they stand for, one must delve into their remarkable history.

Stone Age

The Stone Age in ancient India is immensely old, but unsurprisingly, its oldest traces are found in Tamil Nadu, at Attirampakkam. This site is renowned for the discovery of the oldest stone tools in the country, dating back 1 to 1.7 million years. These extraordinary findings have reshaped existing theories of early human migration out of Africa and suggest that modern-day Tamil Nadu was home to the earliest human activities in South Asia. Stone-made hand axes and cleavers used by our ancestors were found in the region. Approximately 3,000 quartzite artefacts were uncovered in a single trench, indicating that the population actively mined the rock and produced tools near the site. All the tools found were observed to have been crafted with extreme precision highlighting our ancestors' sophistication in analytical thinking.

Iron Age

Like the Stone Age, the Iron Age of Tamil Nadu is also incredibly old with respect to other civilisations with researchers saying it began around 4200 years ago. This has been confirmed by carbon dating at a place called Mayiladumparai, a habitation and burial site. There have been many valuable findings such as a 60cm long full-length iron sword with a handle, emphasising the knowledge and skill of the ancient Tamils. This and the various other findings are significant as they explain the huge agricultural

dominance of the Tamils, with iron being integral to clearing land to support agriculture. All these exceptional findings beg the question, should the history of India start from ancient Tamil land or perhaps even the history of humanity?

Major Historical Excavations from the Sangam Era

Adichanallur

Adichanallur is an ancient city in Tamil Nadu dating back to a proven period between 1000 BCE and 600 BCE but various reports suggest an earlier time period making it one of India's oldest excavation sites. The findings included golden diadems, iron weapons, agricultural tools, and intricately designed bronze artefacts. These items not only reflect the technological and artistic advancements of the period but also provide insights into the societal practice and cultural priorities of the region. Its location is near the ancient Sangam seaport of Korkai and proximity to the Thamirabarani River coupled with some remains found of other cultures suggests that it could have been the centre of an ancient



Adichanallur Excavations

trade link. Adichanallur continues to enrich our understanding of the interconnectedness of ancient civilisations and the enduring legacy of Tamil culture.

Keeladi

Keeladi, located near the Vaigai River in Sivaganga district, Tamil Nadu, about 12 km southeast of Madurai, is an archaeological site reflecting ancient Tamil Nadu culture. The hundreds of samples excavated from this site are dated between the 8th century BCE and the 3rd century BCE, highlighting the significance of understanding ancient Tamil history. Excavations at Keeladi have revealed various structures and artefacts including brick walls, roof tiles, skeletal tools, Tamil inscribed plates and iron Vels. Keeladi's extensive use of fired brick, the size of the building complex and water management systems provide strong reasons to suggest that the settlement was highly advanced and civilised. Some inscriptions even point to a link between ancient Tamil civilisations and the Indus Valley civilisation. Keeladi reinforces the existence of a literate and urbanised Tamil civilisation and is evidence of the extensiveness of Tamil culture.



Keeladi Excavation Site



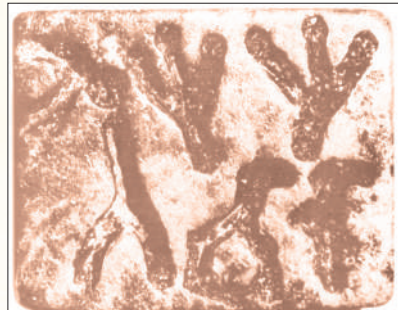
*Keeladi Photos By: Mr. K.Amarnath Ramakrishna,
Director - Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi.*

Poompuhar

Another very ancient and important settlement in Tamil history is Poompuhar, a prominent port city that flourished around 2500 years ago. It served as a vital hub for maritime trade, connecting the Tamil region with distant lands. At Poompuhar, excavations have found ancient wharves and docks dating back to the 3rd century BCE, these structures, constructed with brick walls and wooden poles, indicate advanced maritime infrastructure facilitating trade and commerce. This coincides with the Chola empire's great naval expertise which when coupled with this established port city, facilitated trade worldwide predominance to the gulf nations, the Roman empire and South East Asia. This made Poompuhar a hub of ancient trade. Recent marine explorations have concluded that this once great city is now extensively submerged, possibly due to natural disasters like tsunamis.

Anaikoddai

Anaikoddai is a town located in Jaffna in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Excavations here have also revealed the advanced life of ancient Tamil people. Vast amounts of engraved pottery were found in the region based on Lakshmi coins and Roman pottery suggests that there were Tamil people living there at least



Anaikoddai Symbols

2300 years ago. Furthermore, a bronze seal was found with huge historical significance, dating back to the 3rd Century BCE. There were multiple symbols along the seal. These symbols are believed to be similar to ones in the Indus Valley meaning there is a possible link between the two civilisations.

Cholas

The Chola dynasty is one of the most illustrious and enduring Tamil dynasties in human history, tracing its origins to the Sangam era and flourishing well into the 13th Century CE. They are well known for their military, navy, architecture, and their undying love for the Tami language and culture, with their efforts still observable today. The Cholas are first mentioned in Sangam literature, which dates back to the early centuries CE. They were one of the three crowned monarchs of Tamilakam, along with the Cheras and the Pandyas. The early Chola kingdom was centred around the fertile Kaveri River delta, with Uraiyur as its capital and Kaveripattinam (Poompuhar) as a prominent port. One of the earliest and greatest Chola kings was Karikala Cholan who is credited with many industrial projects that revolutionised the region. His most notable construction has to be the Kallanai which is the oldest functioning dam in the world. After the decline of the early Cholas, the dynasty went into obscurity for several centuries. During this period, Tamilakam saw the Kalabhras and the Pallavas rise.



Thanjavur Periya Koyil built by Raja Raja Cholan

However, around the 9th Century CE, the Cholas re-emerged as a major power under Vijayalaya Chola. Vijayalaya captured Thanjavur and established it as the Chola capital. Aditya Chola I, the son of Vijayalaya then maintained the Chola kingdom by fending off the Pallavas and Pandyas. Soon after, the Chola dynasty peaked with the reigns of the famous Raja Raja Chola I and Rajendra Chola I, expanding their territory and influence far beyond South India.

Raja Raja Cholan

Raja Raja Cholan is an astounding figure whose identity has stood the test of time and is still known to millions of people close to a thousand years after his passing. He was a great leader of the Chola Dynasty and ruled the majority of southern India and pockets of Southeast Asia during the 10th and 11th centuries. Raja Raja Cholan's most notable achievement and crowning glory was undoubtedly the Thanjavur Periya Koyil, a masterpiece of Tamil architecture that stands as a testament to human ingenuity and devotion. The mammoth structure constructed in the 11th century is a marvel that has withstood the complexities of time and still has the capacity to resonate with millions of people. Further Raja Raja Cholan's impact on this world can be further highlighted through his role in obtaining the Thirumurais. During his rule, only a few sacred verses of the Thirumurais had been known. But Raja Raja Cholan's passion and love for these sacred hymns motivated him to find all these literary masterpieces to spread the wealth of knowledge that had been written in them. Nambi Andar Nambi and the king himself recollected around 10% of all the Thirumurais from



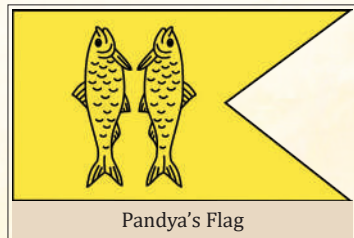
Chiddambaram Temple as the rest had been damaged by termites. Raja Raja Cholan's strong motivation to rediscover these Thirumurais has left a lasting impact on the lives of millions throughout history

and even until this day. We will continue to acknowledge Raja Raja Cholan's legacy for many millennia to come, however, we should strive to think beyond and truly reflect on his accomplishments. Only then must we ask ourselves: What are we building today that will withstand the passage of time whilst maintaining Tamil culture? In a world marked with rapid and ever-occurring changes, the legacy of this king challenges us to extend our vision beyond the present, and strive for contributions that last hundreds of lifetimes.

After the deaths of Raja Raja Cholan and Rajendra Chola 1, the Chola dynasty soon faced a decline and around the 13th century was absorbed by the Pandyan kingdom, ultimately ending one of the greatest rulers the world has ever seen. A dynasty that created a legacy that is still felt today.

Pandyas

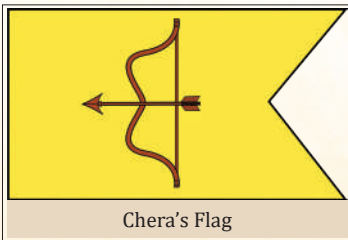
The Pandya dynasty was one of the most illustrious and ancient dynasties of ancient Tamil history. Emerging as early as the Sangam period (circa 500 BCE to 300 CE), the Pandyas were known for their contribution to Tamil culture, literature, temple architecture and huge global trade links. They ruled from their capitals at Madurai and later Korkai, and fostered a huge legacy that has shaped Tamil heritage enormously. The Pandyas were first mentioned in Sangam literature, where they were described as great and just leaders who served to protect and grow Tamil culture. Early Pandya rulers like Nedunjeliyan, celebrated in Sangam poetry, were lauded for their valiant military exploits and just rule. Their kingdom was famous for its flourishing pearl trade, centred around Korkai near the Gulf of Mannar, which linked Tamil Nadu to Mediterranean and Roman markets. During the Sangam age, the Pandyas were integral to the shaping of Tamil culture. The



Pandyas promoted Tamil as the language of administration, literature, and religion, contributing significantly to the early Tamil identity. However, between the 4th and 6th Centuries, the Pandya kingdom's power was reduced temporarily with other smaller dynasties taking control. However, they resurged during the 6th century CE under kings like Kadungon who restored Pandyan supremacy. This marked the beginning of the medieval Pandya period which was characterised by their military prowess, temple construction and their great emphasis on Saivism. The 13th century CE marked the height of Pandya power under rulers like Jatavarman Sundara Pandyan I and Maravarman Kulasekara Pandyan I. During this time The Pandyas thrived economically through extensive trade with Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and China. They were renowned for their contributions to temple architecture, notably the Meenaksi Amman Temple in Madurai, and for their tremendous efforts in preserving and promoting Tamil arts, philosophy and literature. The Pandya empire faced significant challenges in the 14th century due to internal strife and invasions by the Delhi Sultanate which ultimately failed them. Yet their legacy lives on until this day and are still renowned for their efforts in effectively creating Tamil Heritage itself.

Cheras

The third main dynasty of the Sangam age was the Chera dynasty, which ruled over the southwestern region of India, primarily in what is now Kerala, and parts of modern-day Tamil Nadu. They were known also for their maritime intelligence and their vast contributions to Tamil culture. The Cheras' power base lay



in the port city of Vanchi, which became an important centre for maritime trade. The Cheras played an important role in maintaining a maritime network that stretched across the Indian Ocean. They

maintained trade relations with distant regions such as Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula, Southeast Asia, and China. The Cheras had huge support for Sangam age poets with several kings also mentioned as having created pieces as part of Sangam literature. Like all the other kingdoms the Cheras met their end around the 12th century CE, leaving a valuable legacy having formed one of the greatest eras of Tamil history.

Marathu Pandiyars and Velu Nachiyar

Later on, the British invaded the Indian subcontinent around the 17th Century CE and took control of large parts of the region. We may all know the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi to restore freedom but the efforts of Tamil legends such as the Marathu Pandiyars and Velu Nachiyar were equally as powerful. The Marathu Pandiyars were prominent freedom fighters who led the resistance against British colonial rule during the late 18th century, particularly in the Sivaganga region. Velu Nachiyar was a queen of the Sivagangai estate and was the first Indian queen to lead war campaigns against the East India Company. She was a very skilled woman and was exceptionally talented in Tamil martial arts such as Silambam. In 1772, the British East India Company assassinated Muthuvaduganatha Thevar, the ruler of Sivaganga. His wife, Velu Nachiyar and the Marathu Pandiyar escaped the area and regrouped with various allies to stage a rebellion against the British. After



several tactical attacks which led to the British suffering huge losses, the Sivagangai district came back into control of Velu Nachiyar who then went on to rule the region for 10 years before she handed it over to her daughter. Unfortunately for the Marathu Pandiyars, they were caught and hung in 1801, but their and Velu Nachiyar's legacy still lives on, as an important part of Tamil history. They will be remembered for their great efforts.

Sri Lankan Civil War

Hundreds of years later, in the nation of Sri Lanka, there was a major conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which lasted from 1983 to 2009. Many innocent lives were lost during the war, making it a dark period of modern Tamil history. Large parts of Tamil history



were also erased with the burning of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981. This was a major loss to Tamil heritage and culture as literature is essentially the life of our Tamil civilisation, and many texts with only one copy were destroyed. The damages of this war are still being felt today and will, unfortunately, continue for some time to come.

Tamil Philosophy: Our Way of Life

As a culture of many millennia our way of thinking and moreover our way of life is represented by our philosophy. It is no surprise that a culture of over 5000 years would boast such a sophisticated and meaningful way of life. Tamil culture is not only rich in history but also in the wisdom embedded within its customs and practices. Every aspect of life, from language to daily rituals, is shaped by a deep philosophical understanding that has been passed down through generations. It's no surprise that such an ancient culture has developed a way of life where even the smallest custom holds significant meaning, reflecting a thoughtful and deliberate approach to life that has endured for millennia. Specifically, the Thirukkural and Thirumurai are both ancient texts that provide a wealth of knowledge on Tamil philosophy and spirituality. Especially in our modern world filled with stress and problems, taking a step back in time

and reliving what our ancestors preached on how to live a peaceful life, will for sure improve our day-to-day lives.

Remarkably, our philosophy is embedded within our language itself with the uyir ezhuthu and mei ezhuthu, encapsulating the basics of Tamil philosophy of how humans and all beings in this world have both a uyir (soul or life) and mei (their physical form). The uyir symbolises the spiritual essence, while the mei represents the tangible, material existence. This duality mirrors the Tamil understanding of life, where the soul and body coexist, each with its own significance, reflecting the interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical realms. Similarly, just as how all life in our world is structured Tamil words also encompass the same philosophy. Life in our world balances both the soul and the body, likewise, Tamil words strive to do the same. The vowels (uyir) give breath and life to the sound, while the consonants (mei) provide the structure and form. This linguistic combination mirrors the interconnectedness of the spiritual and material realms in Tamil philosophy, where both aspects are essential to the creation and meaning of life, expression, and existence. It is truly amazing to be a part of a culture where the language itself is likened to life, and from this is it very evident as to why Tamil people praise our language as life itself.

Moving on, one of the foundational principles of Tamil philosophy and spirituality is the concept that our lives exist in a cycle of rebirth, one in which we are stuck until we prove to God that we are deserving of eternal bliss, through good deeds. Our existence is created out of 3 things Pathi (Sivan), Pasu (Us souls) and Pasam (Ego). Essentially, Pasam is what holds souls back from being able to achieve eternal bliss or escape this painful cycle of rebirth to be with Sivan. Pasam is the attachment that we individual souls have to the material world we live in driven by desires, ignorance, and ego. We should not give attention to material wealth

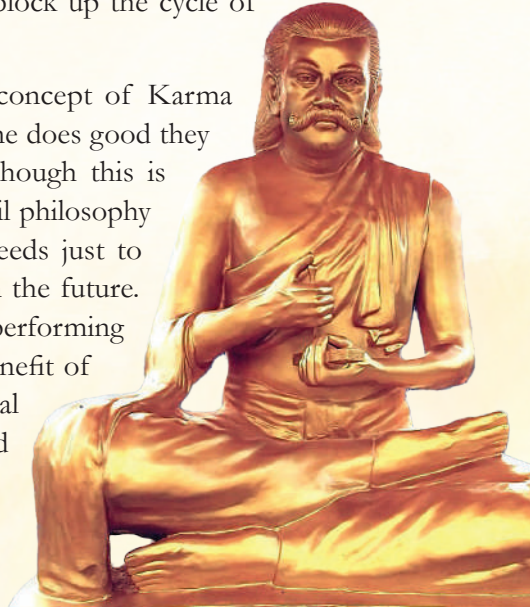
or objects we should rather prioritise other non-materialistic objects such as other souls and God himself. The ultimate goal in many Tamil philosophical teachings is to break this bond (*Pasam*) through devotion, knowledge, and spiritual practice, thereby liberating the soul and uniting it with the divine, Pathi. Ultimately learn yourself, and question who you are. Note you cannot do that by looking in the mirror as that is a representation of your worldly materialistic features, look beyond that into your soul and realise who you are. Only after that can you be able to figure out your true self, only then can you be able to do good in this world and ultimately diminish your ego and end your cycle of rebirths to unite with Sivan.

Karma is another major part of Tamil philosophy and is fundamental to all individual actions. Karma is the law of cause and effect, meaning that if one does an act of good they will experience positive outcomes and negative acts will have negative outcomes. This is an idea embedded with many Saiva texts such as Sivagnanabhodam and the Thirukkural. As the *Kural* (38) states:

“வீழ்நாள் படாஅமை நன்றாற்றின் அஃதொருவன்
வாழ்நாள் வழியடைக்கும் கல்”

“If one allows no day to pass without some good being done, his conduct will be a stone to block up the cycle of births and deaths.”

This couplet outlines the concept of Karma clearly, and emphasises that if one does good they can expect good in return. Although this is true, another key aspect of Tamil philosophy is to not participate in good deeds just to experience positive outcomes in the future. The true spirit of karma lies in performing good deeds selflessly, for the benefit of society, rather than for personal gain, meaning individuals should



not only commit good in this world for the sole reason of experiencing the same in the future. Hence, remember the laws of Karma whenever you make a decision in life no matter how big or small, and moreover be a good person to create a positive impact on society and not for your own benefit.

Moreover, in life, we all encounter instances of wrongdoing by others and may experience hurt in various ways, but how we choose to respond is what truly matters. Initially, you may choose to respond by fighting fire with fire and hurting another person as revenge, although this may seem like the most just option at the time, Tamil philosophy teaches that this is never the case. Instead, as strong and moral individuals, we should attempt to put our wrongdoers to shame by returning their misconduct with acts of kindness.

This is poetically emphasised in the Thirukkural with Kural 314:

“இன்னாசெய் தாரை ஒறுத்தல் அவர்நாண
நன்னயஞ் செய்து விடல்.”

“The best way to punish those who have done you harm is to put them to shame by returning good for their evil.”

This approach not only helps in maintaining our own virtue but also acts as a method to reform a wrongdoer through the power of setting a positive example. Additionally, it advises us to forget both the harm done to us and the good we do in response, which ultimately enforces a state of mental cleanliness free from any grudges and pride.

Tamil Literature: The Soul of Our Culture

Tamil culture is incredibly rich, and its literature is a priceless treasure that reflects our profound heritage and intellectual depth. Tamil literature is vast and carries thousands of years worth of knowledge and values that we still employ today. Our literature can be seen as the blood that pumps through our body, carrying the essence of our identity, history and values to sustain our life and the soul of our culture. Throughout history, our very talented writers and poets have crafted several texts that have shaped our culture and philosophy. Let's go through some of the most influential texts of Tamil history.

Tholkaapiyam

Tamil literature's oldest text that we have uncovered and studied properly is the Tholkappiyam written by Tholkappiyar which dates back to around 700BC. It is important to note that there are older

texts. Tholkappiyar references them in the Tholkappiyam but we have been unable to recover them. The Tholkappiyam incorporates a systematic analysis of the structure and rules of the Tamil language covering a range of areas such as phonetics (ezhuthu), morphology, syntax, and semantics (sol). The Tholkappiyam is a testament to the ancient depth of Tamil, with its extensive knowledge and representation of sophisticated grammar and structure, ultimately indicating that our language was spoken and used long before its formal documentation. The Tholkappiyam is divided into three main books or Athikaarams. The Ezhuththadhikaaram focuses on the phonology of Tamil, including a scientific description of its sounds, particularly in the chapter Pirappiyal, which articulates Tamil's letters. Further Solladhikaaram deals with Tamil's morphology, classifying words into four categories: Peyar (Noun), Vinai (Verb), Idai (Particles), and Uri (Adverbs/Adjectives). Finally, it also contains the Poruladhikaaram, which is unique to Tamil, this book addresses literary content, categorising themes into Agam (love and relationships) and Puram (war, valour, and heroism). The Tholkaapiyam is indeed an extraordinary piece of literature and for Tamil heritage to have a text so complex and intricate in the language emphasises its greatness.

With the dawn of the great Sangam age, Tamil literature flourished and gave rise to a collection of eighteen intricate texts, known as the Pathinenmelkanakku (பதினெண்மேல்கணக்கு) which is made up of Eight Anthologies (Ettuthokai) and the Ten Idylls (Pathitrupathu). These texts, regarded as the oldest surviving Tamil poetry, are considered a cornerstone of Sangam Literature, which was composed between approximately 100 BCE and 200 CE. The most notable of these texts are the Tirumurukatrappatai and Paripadal.

Thirumurukaatrappadai

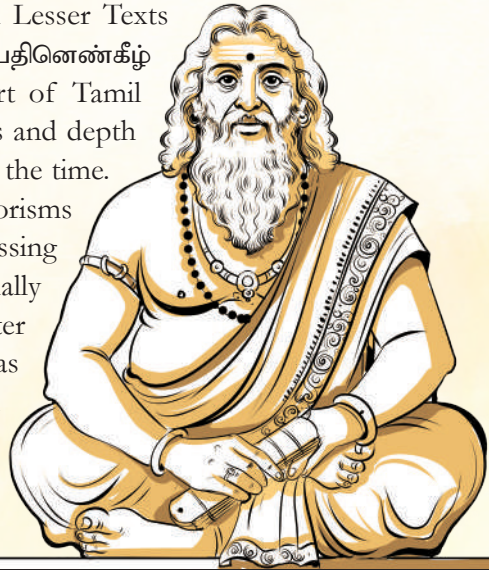
The Thirumurukaatrappadai (Tamil: திருமுருகாற்றுப்படை) is an important work in Tamil literature, attributed to the poet

Nakkiranar, one of the most celebrated poets of the Sangam era and he is believed to have composed this around 2nd to 4th century CE. This text is entirely dedicated to praising the Murugan, a core deity in Saiva Tamil beliefs. It describes the beauty and the warrior nature of Murugan, his six sacred shrine regions whilst also going into depth about his characteristics.

Paripaadal

The Paripadal (Tamil: பரிபாடல்), meaning the anthology of poems in the paripadal metre, is a classical Tamil literary work. It is traditionally regarded as the fifth of the Eight Anthologies (Ettuthokai) in Sangam literature. The Paripadal is a key anthology of Tamil devotional poetry, originally containing 70 poems, of which 24 have survived. These poems, compiled by 13 poets, are primarily dedicated to three deities: Thirumal, Murugan, and the river goddess Vaikai. It is important to note that the Paripadal mentions various temples and shrines that emphasise an established religious infrastructure dedicated to deities like Thirumal and Murugan, which suggests the Ancient Temple Culture of the Tamils. The collection is considered to be from the late Sangam period (approximately 3rd century CE).

As the Great Sangam age progressed and came to its culmination, The Eighteen Lesser Texts or “Pathinenkilkanakku” (Tamil: பதினெண்கீழ்க் கணக்கு) formed an essential part of Tamil literature, showcasing the richness and depth of ethics and practical wisdom of the time. These texts focus on concise aphorisms and teachings, often addressing everyday life and morality, essentially teaching individuals how to be better people. Comprising works such as Naladiyar, Inna Narpathu, Iniyavai

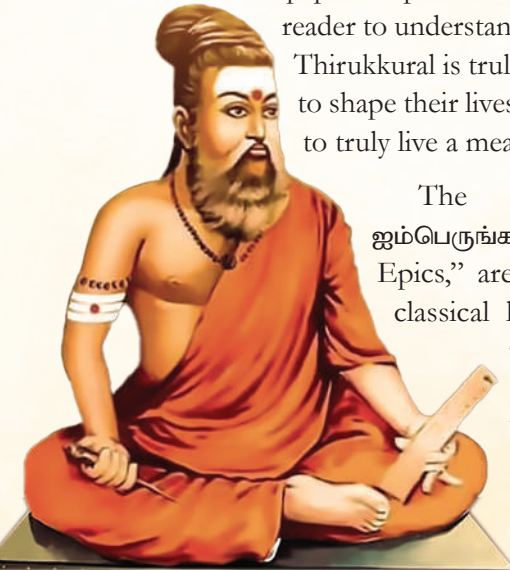


Narpathu, and others, these texts reflect Tamil society's values and the importance they gave to virtues such as discipline, hospitality and virtuous living. The most notable of these texts is the Great Thirukkural.

Thirukkural

The Thirrukural by Thiruvalluvar, has to be one of the greatest pieces of literary works ever created in all of Tamil history, if not in the entirety of human history. Consisting of 1,330 couplets, it is a universal guide to ethics, morality, and the art of living. The Thirukkural has been dated to various periods, ranging from 300 BCE to the 5th century CE. The text is divided into three main sections, Aram (Virtue), Porul (Wealth), and Inbam (Pleasure), covering a vast spectrum of human life, from individual ethics and governance to interpersonal relationships. The couplets in Aram emphasise righteousness, compassion, and the importance of a virtuous life. Porul discusses statecraft, economics, and leadership, offering practical wisdom for managing societal and personal affairs. Inbam, the third section, explores love and relationships with poetic beauty and depth. Thiruvalluvar's exceptional talent is clearly visible through this text as he was able to convey more than 1000 deep philosophical concepts into just couplets for the reader to understand. The wealth of knowledge in the Thirukkural is truly amazing and everyone should try to shape their lives on the teachings of Thiruvalluvar, to truly live a meaningful and righteous life.

The Aimperumkapiyangaḷ (Tamil: ஐம்பெருங்காப்பியங்கள்), or the "Five Great Epics," are another major aspect of Tamil classical literature and are celebrated for their clever culmination of artistic excellence and profound themes. These epics all teach disciplines



from Aram, Porul and Inbam but do it artistically through storytelling, offering a sense of excitement to readers. These five epics are the Silappatikaram, Manimekalai, Civaka Cintamani, Valaypathi, and Kundalakesi.

Silappatikaram

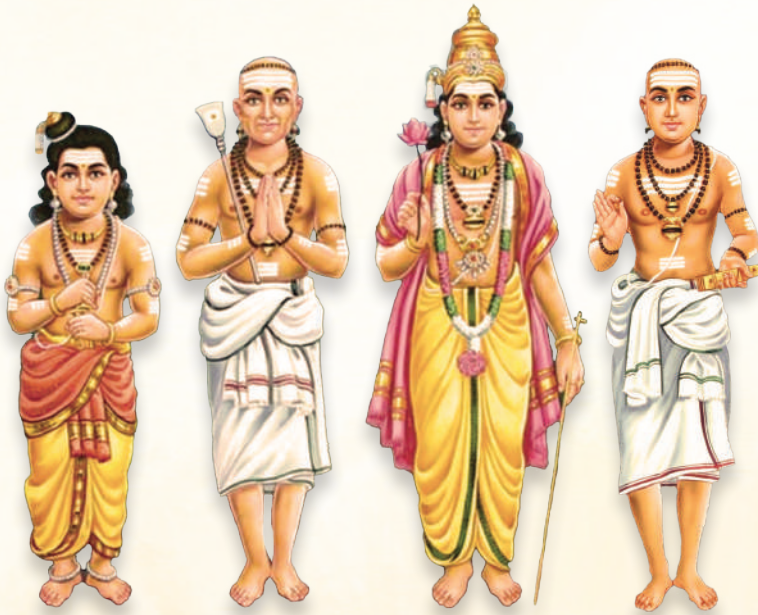
The Silappatikaram (Tamil: சிலப்பதிகாரம்), written by the Chera prince Ilango Adigal, is one of the greatest epics of Tamil literature. The Silappatikaram is believed to have been written around the 5th or 6th century CE. The text revolves around Kannagi's unwavering pursuit of justice, with her defiance of authority and her demand for truth highlighting themes of accountability and righteousness. Silappatikaram is not just a literary masterpiece but also a historical document offering glimpses of Tamil society during the Sangam age. The text's vivid description of ancient Tamil cities and customs is valuable knowledge in this day and age and reading this text is a great way to see how our ancestors used to live.

Bhakti literature, or Bhakti Ilakkiyam, emerged as a powerful literary and spiritual movement during the early medieval period in Tamil Nadu, approximately between the 6th and 9th centuries CE. This genre of devotional poetry was driven by a profound yearning for a personal and emotional connection with god. It is an important part of Tamil literature and history as it made religion accessible to everyone through songs written entirely in Tamil. The Saiva Bhakti pieces of literature are predominantly the Thirumurai a 12-volume anthology of hymns by the 63 Nayanmars, all written in dedication to Lord Siva. The Vainava Bhakti piece of literature is the Naalayira Divya Prabandham composed by the 12 Alvars dedicated to Perumal.

Thirumurai

The hymns of the Thirumurai were composed between the 6th and 12th centuries CE by saints known as the Nayanmars. These saints hailed from diverse social backgrounds, emphasising

that there is no boundary in seeking the blessings of god. The Thirumurai is a compilation of many songs structured within 12 volumes with each section reflecting distinct aspects of devotion and spirituality. The first 1-7 Volumes are the widely renowned Thevarams. They were composed by three of the greatest poets of Tamil history namely Sampanthar, Appar, and Nampi Arurar (Suntharar). These hymns are melodious praises of Lord Siva and express their sincere devotion whilst highlighting the connection between god and the devotee. The 8th volume is the Thiruvagasam and Tirukovaiyar by another great saint Manikkavacakar, renowned for his emotional intensity and poetic beauty. The 9th Volume is Thiruvisaippa and Thirupallandu which was sung by multiple authors. The 10th Volume is Thirumanthiram written by Thirumular, a profound text that ties the realms of devotion, philosophy, yoga, and spirituality, offering guidance for devotees on their path of



self-realisation and seeking Sivan. The 11th Volume is called the Prabantham and includes the works of many saints including the songs of Karaikal Ammaiyar who was the first of the 63 nayanmars and one of the three female nayanmars. The 12th and final Volume is called the Periya Puranam written by Sekkizhar and it is essentially an account of the lives of the 63 Nayanmars, celebrating their devotion and miraculous deeds. The Thirumurai is an integral part of Tamil heritage and culture and their importance is still revered today with them being sung at temples and festivals. All these songs are crafted with true dedication and respect for Lord Siva, with every word sung worth thousands of praises to God.

Naalayira Divya Prabandham

The Naalayira Divya Prabandham which means the “Four Thousand Divine Hymns,” is an important collection of 4,000 Tamil verses composed by the twelve Alvars, dedicated to the Perumal. These verses are a key part of Tami Vainavam and are still sung today. The Naalayira Divya Prabandham is categorised into many sections, each attributed to different Alvars. They all praise Perumals great qualities, describe his avatars and elaborate on the 108 Divya Desams (holy temples) of Perumal. The greatness of these verses is their use of Tamil allowing everyone to be able to sing these songs with no barriers. These verses are sung at Vainava temples around the world, especially during festival times.



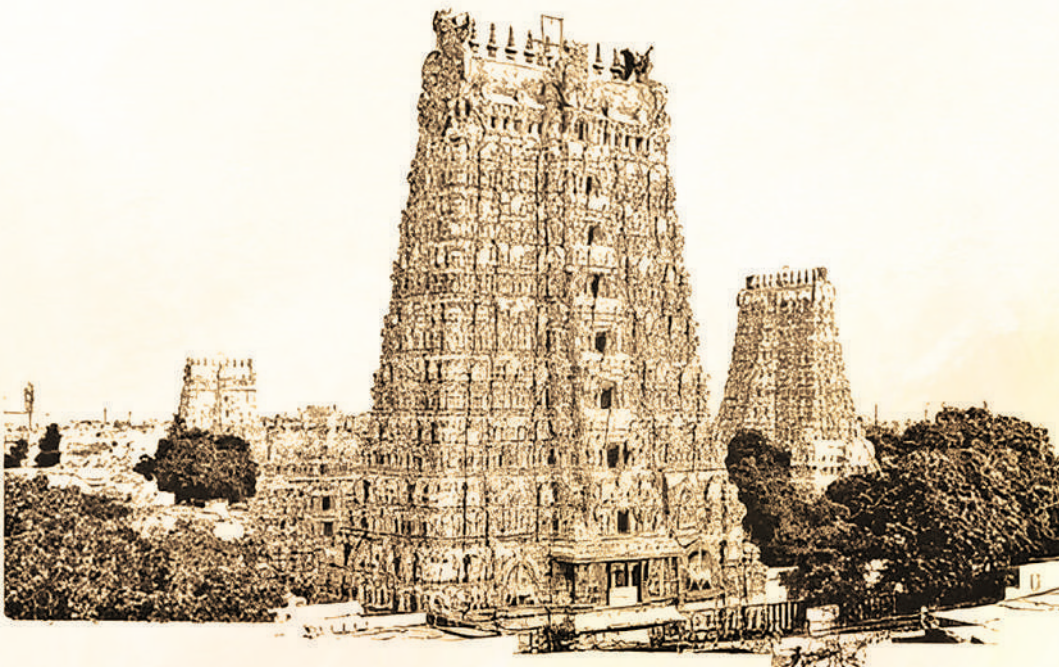
Tamil Architecture: The Beauty of Our Civilisation

If you were to ask me to describe Tamil architecture in one word, I'd be completely stumped. Beautiful. Complex. Supernatural. There are just too many words to choose from and yet they are all correct in their own ways. Tamil architecture is just simply breathtaking, and more than that the great scientific knowledge that would have been implemented by our ancestors to build these structures is way ahead of their time. The great temples of India and Sri Lanka, although built thousands of years ago still stand tall today as grand places of worship and in addition to that, architectural and scientific marvels.

Temples

Tamil Temple architecture stands as a remarkable testament to our ancestor's engineering and architectural prowess whilst also

highlighting their immense devotion to god. Emerging from the Sangam periods, various kingdoms built extravagant temples as methods of devotion, predominantly the Cholan and Pandyan kingdoms. It is also important to note that these temples have been constantly upgraded and expanded over thousands of years with newer dynasties and rulers adding to the works of past leaders. These beautiful temples that add flair to modern-day Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka were more than just places of worship but also incorporated facilities to harness and promote cultural and social activities. Most temples have structures called Gopurams which are tall intricately carved towers that dominate skylines and are at the entrances to the temples. They also have Vimanas which are pyramid-shaped structures that tower over the sanctum. In addition to all these most temples also have Mandapams which are spacious halls that are primarily used for a variety of different functions. They can be used for weddings or even cultural programs such as traditional dancing such as Bharatanatyam and singing religious hymns such as the Thevaram. Most Tamil temples are made out of granite or sandstone which are both chosen for their stability. What



makes these temples even more amazing is the intricate carvings of mini sculptures of gods and other celestial beings that encompass the tall structures.

For example, the Madurai Meenaksi Amman temple initially built by the Pandyan empire around the 4th Century CE boasts structures filled with beautiful carvings of colourful mythological figures. These towers are visible from great distances and serve as reminders of the powerful architectural minds of our ancestors. The temple also has the Aayiram Kaal Mandapam (1000-pillar hall) which has 985 intricately carved columns, making it a stunning architectural feat. However the hall is not merely an architectural marvel but it also serves as somewhat of a museum showcasing ancient artefacts, sculptures, and Tamil inscriptions.

Another great example is the Ramanathaswamy Temple in the southern Tamil Nadu city of Rameshwaram. It is an intricately built Sivan temple, with construction beginning around the 12 century CE by Pandyan kings. What is truly beautiful about this temple is its magnificent corridor, being the longest in any Hindu temple. This corridor consists of over 1200 pillars, with a total length of over a kilometre. It is truly amazing how our ancient ancestors not only had the skill and resources but also the dedication to build such monumental places.

Sculptures

It is easy to get lost in the magnificence of our ancient temples but there's even more within, the sculptures that fill the halls of these religious sites. These sculptures are usually made out of granite, copper and brass and are usually of significant Tamil figures and God. Sculptures and statues are a major part of Tamil culture and religion as all religious rituals use statues of god to conduct our prayers. In addition, our ancient ancestors also created statues of important individuals such as the 63 Nayanmars who spread Saivism. Very famous and common types of statues are the



Nadesar (Natarajan) statues. These were usually bronze sculptured representations of a form of Sivan in the process of his cosmic dance. The movements of Siva's dance symbolise the dynamic nature of energy, always in motion, transforming but never ceasing. This aligns with the law of conservation of energy and highlights ancient Tamil knowledge of science and the world around us. The most iconic dwelling of the Natarajan Statue is at the Chidambaram Natarajan temple where there is a large silver statue which is the main deity at the temple.

Kallanai Dam

The greatness of our ancient temples is hard to look past, but there is just so much more to Tamil architecture to explore, for example, the great Kallanai Dam. This dam was built by the Chola King Karikala Chola around the 2nd century CE and is remarkably still in use today. It showcases the brilliance of Tamil engineers in their understanding of hydrology, water management,

and sustainable agricultural practices. The Kallanai Dam was built directly across the Kaveri River, the largest river in Tamil Nadu, renowned for its seasonal flooding and agricultural importance. The Dam was constructed to divert and regulate the water to aid with agriculture but without completely disrupting the flow of the river. What makes the Kallanai Dam even more marvellous than it already is, is the fact that it was constructed while the river was constantly flowing which would have been a formidable task. This emphasises the great architecture and engineering talent that our ancient ancestors possessed which was way ahead of their time. The Dam was constructed using locally sourced materials, predominantly unhewn stone. This design uses large, irregularly shaped stones that interlock, distributing the pressure of the water across the structure without the need for modern cement or steel reinforcements. The vast amounts of knowledge that was poured into this achievement is extraordinary and it was enough to sustain its purpose. The irrigation system it supported not only helped to feed millions but also contributed to the rise of a thriving, self-sustaining agricultural society, which in turn led to the overall growth of our Tamil civilization.



Ring Wells

Moreover, ancient Tamil societies constructed multi-purpose ring wells which are circular, deep, well-like structures made from concentric rings of bricks or stones. They are found in various parts of ancient Tamil land but especially in Keeladi where it is



believed they were used for domestic water storage and as drainage systems. They were built with terracotta rings showcasing advanced water management and urban planning by the Sangam-era Tamil civilisation. These ring wells would provide a steady supply of water for domestic urban settlements whilst also serving the purpose of acting as a drainage system that manages wastewater efficiently to ultimately maintain hygiene. Clearly, our ancient ancestors thought way ahead of their time and crafted many well-built utilities that enhanced their way of life.

* * *

Tamil Science and Technology: Ahead of their Time

With a culture and history of over 5000 years, it is no surprise that the ancient Tamil Civilisation made many great contributions and advancements in the field of science and technology. A lot of the Temple structures were built with immense precision and calculation, notably, the Thanjavur Periya Koyil boasts many scientific feats that were way ahead of its time. Additionally, our ancient ancestors were masters in health and medicine, especially in Siddha medicine. Furthermore, as ancient Tamils were surrounded by vast oceans and the desire to conquer our contributions to Naval explorations, especially during the Chola reign are incredible and have proven the strength of our technological prowess.

Skull Operations

Operations these days are very complicated procedures that require months of preparation and a whole team of surgeons to complete. Such a daunting task must be a very modern thing, yet it is quite the opposite. Several examples of surgical procedures have been conducted in ancient Tamil civilisations. A very profound discovery is the excavation of a skull, which had been visibly performed surgery in the ancient Adinachhanlnu settlement. Specifically, the operation was a cranial trepanation with skulls showing carefully executed circular and square trepanation marks, suggesting an advanced understanding of cranial anatomy and surgical methods that our genius ancestors possessed. These interventions may have been performed to treat conditions like head trauma or epilepsy, whatever the case this highlights the advanced medical and scientific knowledge of ancient Tamil civilisations.

Siddha Medicine and Yoga

Siddha medicine and yoga are ancient Tamil medicinal practices, and some of the oldest practises in the world, that have successfully healed generations of people. Siddha medicine is built around the holistic understanding of not only the physical human body but also the mind and soul. It emphasises both natural remedies and spiritual practices for maintaining good health and curing diseases. Thirumanthiram by Thirumoolar is one of the greatest books in Tamil history about this space. It is a text with a wealth of knowledge on various aspects of life and spiritual gain.

The verse 568 reads:

ஏறுதல் பூரகம் ஈரெட்டு வாமத்தால்
(*Purakam is to inhale by left nostril matras six and ten*)

ஆறுதல் கும்பம் அறுபத்து நாலதில்
(*Kumbhakam is to retain that breath for matras four and sixty*)

ஊறுதல் முப்பத் திரண்டதி ரேசகம்
(Resakam is to exhale thereafter for matras two and thirty)

மாறுதல் ஒன்றின் கண் வஞ்சக மாமே
(Thus alternate from left to right and right to left With Kumbhakam in between.)

Essentially Thirumoolar is saying a beneficial breathing technique is to inhale through the left nostril for approximately 16 seconds, retain that breath for 64 seconds, and release through the right nostril for 32 seconds. He says that this coupled with meditation is a key to health both physically and spiritually. Maybe you should all try this out. Remarkably, the ancient Tamil people had very specific treatments for health and spiritual well-being all those years ago, maybe if we follow this advice from our ancestors, we can all lead healthy lives.

Chola Navy

As a result of the geographical location of Ancient Tamil civilisations around the coast of Tamil Nadu and the island of Sri Lanka, Tamil's naval expertise was immense. The Tamil kingdoms, predominantly the Chola dynasty, were experts in maritime technology and developed a powerful naval fleet that significantly influenced the trade, exploration and cultural expansion in the Indian Ocean region and even beyond. The Chola kingdom established their dominance in the region with their advanced shipping techniques, strategic naval expeditions, and thriving maritime trade contributed to their economic and political supremacy from the 9th to 13th centuries CE. Many historians have pieced together many literary accounts to conclude that the Cholas crafted ships up to 150 feet long using ropes and wooden pegs to shape well-seasoned timber. They used a variety of wood types including punnai (oil-nut tree), palai (blackboard tree), teak and ayini (wild jackfruit tree). The Tamil word "kattumaram" (catamaran) refers to simple but effective

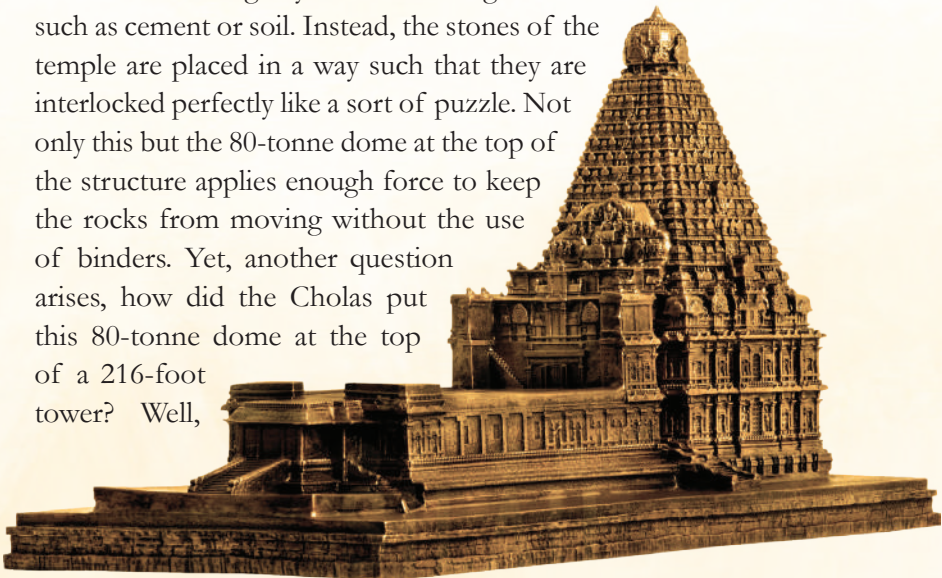
watercraft used for coastal fishing and short voyages. Larger vessels, called “navai,” were equipped with advanced features like watertight compartments, enabling them to transport goods over long distances securely. The Tamil Kingdoms used these and a fleet of several other ship types to conquer the region. The naval campaigns of the great Raja Raja Chola I and his son Rajendra Chola I are legendary. Rajendra Chola’s expedition to Southeast Asia in the 11th century CE targeted the Srivijaya Empire (modern Indonesia and Malaysia). This campaign not only asserted Tamil dominance over critical sea routes but also expanded their cultural and economic influence across Southeast Asia. Ship design and building is one thing, but the navigation of these ships especially in the harsh conditions of the Indian Ocean is another piece of brilliance ancient Tamil scientific knowledge was able to amass. According to many historians, the Chola period relied on stellar navigation techniques. They used their fingers to measure the azimuth angle, a method known as ‘viral kanakku’ (finger calculation), to accurately determine their position. Researchers suggest that ancient Tamils utilized celestial markers like *iranai velli* (twin star), *kutta velli* (crowded constellation), and *otta velli* (single star) to guide their voyages. In addition, it is also believed, but not yet proven, that ships that left the ports



of ancient Tamilakam threw balls of ash into the ocean to identify the currents to aid their travelling. It is clear that Ancient Tamil kingdoms had a great understanding of shipbuilding and naval travel which highlights the extent of their scientific knowledge at the time.

Thanjavur Periya Koyil

Furthermore, another example that showcases the Ancient Tamils' significant understanding of science and technology is the Thanjavur Periya Koyil built by Raja Raja Cholan in around 1010 CE. This temple is an engineering masterpiece and its unconventional building methods are a testament to the advanced knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, and architecture possessed by the Chola dynasty. Interestingly this temple was made entirely out of approximately 130,000 granite stone, which is not found in the region. It would have been transported from Pudukottai, a town with a distance of around 100 km from the temple site, which would have been a remarkable feat without the presence of modern technology. Or was the technology of the Cholas superior to the technology of the present? Additionally, what makes this Temple even more technologically advanced is the fact that it was built without using any sort of binding substances such as cement or soil. Instead, the stones of the temple are placed in a way such that they are interlocked perfectly like a sort of puzzle. Not only this but the 80-tonne dome at the top of the structure applies enough force to keep the rocks from moving without the use of binders. Yet, another question arises, how did the Cholas put this 80-tonne dome at the top of a 216-foot tower? Well,



the answer has still not been confirmed but historians believe the Chola engineers would have built a multi-kilometre-long ramp at an incline and used elephants to push the large dome to the top of the Vimana. Clearly, our Ancient Tamil ancestors would have had a great understanding of science and technology as the structures they built, notably the Thanjavur Periya Koyil, continue to puzzle modern scientists.

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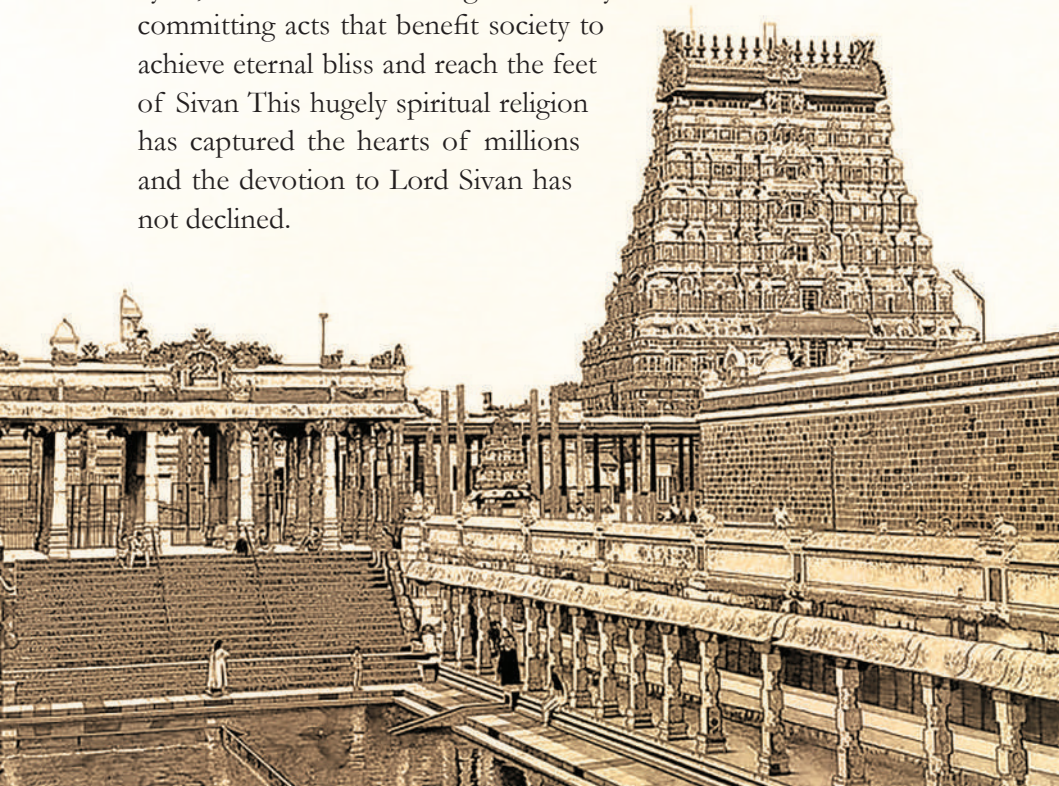
Tamil Religious Beliefs

The ancient Tamil people have deep roots in spirituality and their faith in god was unarguably strong. The major religious belief of ancient Tamils, which is still ever present today, is Saivam. This is where Lord Siva is considered the ultimate god. Other religious beliefs that were prevalent in Tamil communities include Vainavam, Aasevagam and Samanam (Tami Jain).

Saivam

Saivam was the biggest religion in ancient Tamil society with a huge following still today. It is the belief that Lord Siva is the supreme god, with rituals and other forms of worship conducted for him. Saivam's prevalence in ancient Tamil society is very clear through the hundreds of temples dedicated to Lord Siva for example Chidambaram, Thanjavur Periya Koyil and Thirukoneswaram. The religion is filled with many respectable figures including the reveres

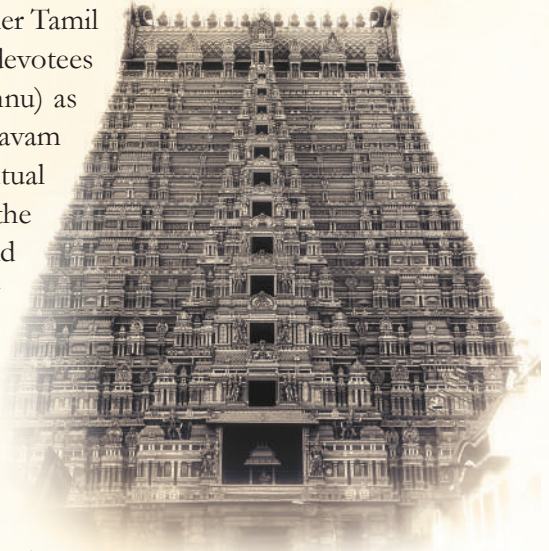
63 Nayanmars who were saints whose collection of divine verses is the Thirumurai. The most popular Thirumurais are the Thevaram and Thiruvagam which are both texts that show their immense gratitude and yearning for Lord Siva. Hymns from these texts are still hugely popular today at Saiva temples around the world and are sung at festivals and even in homes. The main belief of Saivism regarding the afterlife is the idea of reincarnation. This is the concept that all life on this planet has outer bodies but more importantly souls. The soul is the important part and it is who you truly are, the body is just a materialistic form souls have. During their lifetime, souls, no matter if they are human or other types of life such as animals, must carry out good deeds and live a life where they do not have obsessions with materialistic desires such as money or cars. If a soul does these bad acts, it will be affected by negative karma and will be stuck in an endless cycle of rebirth, where it can be reincarnated as other life forms. To escape this cycle, soul should live a good life by committing acts that benefit society to achieve eternal bliss and reach the feet of Sivan This hugely spiritual religion has captured the hearts of millions and the devotion to Lord Sivan has not declined.



Vainavam

Vainavam is also another Tamil religious belief, with devotees worshipping Perumal (Vishnu) as their supreme deity. Vainavam also has similar spiritual beliefs to Saivism, with the beliefs of reincarnation and karma. They have many respected figures such as the 12 Alvars whose compilation of hymns is called the Naalayira Divya Prabandham. These are devotional Tamil hymns towards the Perumal and

are renowned for their beautiful use of Tamil to ensure religion has no boundaries. Vainavam is still practised today with several temples dedicated to Perumal around the world. Sri Ranganatha Swamy Temple in Tiruchi is one of the biggest temples in the world and it is dedicated towards Perumal.



Aaseevagam

Another prominent religion that existed in ancient Tamil times is Aaseevagam. However, it has lost huge popularity and in the modern day, it is pretty much non-existent. It began around at least the 5th Century BCE and is older than Buddhism. A major belief they had was that everything was fate, meaning that everything that happened, currently happening or was bound to happen is already determined and individuals cannot influence it. There are several links between the religious beliefs of Samanam and Aaseevagam. A prominent figure in Aaseevagam is Makkhali Gosala and he is said to have contributed a lot to Aaseevagam.

Samanam (Tamil Jainism)

Samanam, the Tamil Jain religious belief, also existed in Tamil society. It used to be a fairly popular belief around the 3rd to 5th century CE but has now drastically subsided after the huge resurgence of Saivism from the 6th century CE onwards. Reincarnation is also a strong belief in Samanam. Samanam had a fair grip on Tamil society to the extent that Tirunavukkaracar Appar, an influential Saiva Nayanmar, converted to Jain in the early stages of his life but returned back to Saivism after it saved his life, and started praising Saivism from then on. Samana poets have created great pieces of literature that have contributed significantly to Tamil culture such as the Silappatikaram written by Ilango Adigal. Samana people have strong beliefs against eating non-veg similar to Saivism and Vainavam as it involves the taking away of lives.

* * *

Tamil Festivals: Celebrations of Our Heritage

There are countless Tamil festivals throughout the Tamil calendar, but they all have a few things in common. They are all truly meaningful and have important reasons as to why they should be celebrated. More than that, all these Tamil festivals are always celebrated in grand manners to show the extent of our respect towards the various causes. Popular festivals that Tamils celebrate chronologically as per the Tamil calendar are Tamil New Year, Thiruvathirai, Thai Pongal and Thai Poesam.

Tamil New Year

Tamil New Year, known as 'Puthandu', marks the first day of the Tamil Calendar year. It is celebrated on the first day of the Tamil month Chithirai which typically falls around April 14 on the



Gregorian calendar. Puthandu symbolises hope and prosperity for the times ahead for Tamils and is a day when individuals can choose to change to better their lifestyles. This day is the Vernal Equinox and marks the onset of Spring in the modern-day Tamil lands of South India and Sri Lanka, thereby reflecting the Tamil people's ancient knowledge of astronomy and timekeeping. People often greet each other by saying "Puthandu Valthukal" (புத்தாண்டு வாழ்த்துகள்) or "Iniya Puthandu Nalvalthukal" (இனிய புத்தாண்டு நல்வாழ்த்துகள்), which is the Tamil equivalent of Happy New Year. Everyone begins the day by showering with holy water called "Maruthu Neer" which is made using herbal leaves and is usually prepared and available the day before at Temples. As this is a day to celebrate new beginnings, Tamil people celebrate by wearing new clothes, cleaning the house and visiting the Temple. Home entrances are also decorated colourfully with coloured rice powder in various patterns called Kolams. The Tamil New Year embodies the spirit of renewal, unity, and gratitude and is a reflection of the richness

of Tamil heritage. It is a day to celebrate life, honour traditions, and look forward to a prosperous year ahead.

Thiruvathirai

Thiruvathirai is a significant festival in the Tamil calendar, and it is celebrated with great devotion and reverence, predominantly towards Lord Siva. It is celebrated on the day of the Thiruvathirai star in Tamil month of Marghazhi which usually falls around December or January. It is particularly celebrated in respect to Nadesar (Natarajan), which is the dancing form of Lord Siva. Many rituals and customs are observed on this day including, the singing of Thirumurais and particularly the Thiruvasakam. Thiruvathirai is considered one of the oldest Tamil festivals with at least 1500 years of history with many mentions in the Thirumurai, with Appar dedicating a whole pathigam towards it in the fourth Thevaram. It reads:

குணங்கள் பேசிக் கூடிப்
(*speaking about the attributes of Sivan.*)

பாடித் தொண்டர்கள்
(*devotees joining together and singing his praises.*)



பிணங்கித் தம்மிற் பித்தரைப்
(*being at variance with each other.*)

போலப் பிதற்றுவார்
(*will prattle like mad people.*)

வணங்கி நின்று வானவர்
வந்து வைகலும்
(*the celestials will descend to the earth and worship daily
paying obeisance to him.*)

அணங்கன் ஆரூர் ஆதிரை
நாளால் அதுவண்ணம்.
(*that is the beauty of the god in Arur on the festival of
Aathirai day.*)

Clearly, Thiruvathirai is an ancient and much-celebrated occasion in Tamil history and it is amazing to see it still being celebrated until this day, with utmost dedication.

Thai Pongal

Thai Pongal is celebrated on the first day of the 'Thai' month in the Tamil calendar which generally falls around January 14th



or 15th on the Gregorian Calendar, and it is one of the most significant festivals in Tamil Culture. It is a harvest festival and is a time for expressing our gratitude to nature, particularly the Sun, for its life-sustaining energy and to farmers for their hard work. Thai Pongal reinforces the agricultural roots of Tamil culture and our respect towards the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. The main day of celebration begins with preparing the traditional dish Pongal, made from freshly harvested rice, milk, and jaggery. This preparation process is usually a communal affair with families and friends gathering around clay pots as the pot boils over, symbolising abundance. Then this Pongal is placed on a banana leaf and coupled with sugar canes and offered to the Sun to display our greatness. Now, Thai Pongal is more than just a harvest festival but is a festival to showcase our gratitude for nature and it is also a festival of unity as it brings together friends and family.

Thaipooam

Thaipooam is a major Tamil celebration that is now celebrated worldwide and is dedicated to Lord Murugan. It is celebrated on the day that coincides with the first full moon day of the Tamil month



of Thai (January - February), and the Poosam Nachathiram (star). A very common practice in Thai Poosam is Kavadi Aatungal, which is essentially an act of sacrifice by devotees who sacrifice physical pain as a way to offset negative spiritual 'debt'. This is done by skewing various parts of the body such as the skin or the tongue, with Vel skewers. Thai Poosam clearly has ancient historical roots in Tamil culture as it is mentioned in a Sampanthar thevaram below:

மைப் பூசும் ஒண்கண் மடநல்லார் மாமயிலைக்
*(in the great mayilai where beautiful ladies who coat
 their bright eyes with collyrium gather together.)*

கைப் பூசு நீற்றான் கபாலீச்சுரம் அமர்ந்தான்
*(Sivan who dwells with desire in Kappaliccaram and who
 is in the form of the sacred ash,)*

நெய்ப் பூசும் ஒண் புழுக்கல் நேரிழையார் கொண்டாடும்
*(suitable jewels celebrate the festival with white rice
 soaked in ghee.)*

தைப்பூசும் காணாதே போதியோ பும்பாவாய்.
*(do you go without seeing the festival in poosam in the
 month of thai.)*

* * *

| Tamil Rituals

Tamil culture and rituals have been growing and expanding for thousands of years and many are still practised today. Life is marked by a series of timestamps, from birth through to death there are many occasions individuals will celebrate, each with their own rituals. Some important and common celebrations with specific rituals include Thudakku Kalipu, Eduthodakkuthal, Weddings and Funerals.

Thudakku Kalipu

Life starts when a baby is born, and to celebrate this occasion, Thudakku Kalipu is held 31 days after the birth of a child. It is the day when a baby hears their name for the first time. On this special occasion, preparation starts by cleaning the house. Then a special mix of turmeric water is sprayed around the house, and a Kuthuvilakku (traditional oil lamp) paired with a Kumbam is placed at the entrance to the house. In addition, the newborn child is also given a bath to prepare them for the rituals. The baby is then dressed in new clothes to celebrate new life. Then everyone is seated

and saiva religious rituals in the form of a Poesai are performed with a Kumbam. The spiritual water obtained from this Poesai is then sprayed on the attendees usually family and close friends and around the house. After this an elder of the child usually the uncle on the mother's side whispers the newborn child's name into their ear and this would be the first time the baby hears their own name. This is the end of the rituals, which is then followed by the baby's first visit to the Temple 41 days after the birth.

Eduthodakkuthal

This special occasion is celebrated before the child begins their formal education usually around the age of 3-5. A special day is often chosen to perform this ritual and it is usually either the day of Vijayadasami or Thai Poesam. This occasion can either be celebrated at the temple or at home. When performed at home it is usually conducted with a Poesai dedicated to Pillayar and with Villakus (lamps). The main ritual of this occasion is the child writing



the letter ‘அ’ (Tamil equivalent of A), on a plate filled with raw rice grains, with an important elder of the child holding their hand. This concludes the formal rituals and begins the child’s formal education.

Weddings

One of the most important days of one’s life is their wedding day. Tamil weddings are known to be enormous celebrations filled with lots of celebrations. In addition to that, the rituals of Tamil Weddings are deep in meaning and offer huge insight into Tamil culture and heritage. The ceremony is conducted by the Kurrukkal (religious practitioner) on a decorated stage called the Manavarai. Throughout the wedding rituals, the Bride and the Groom represent Lord Siva and Parvathi. Both the bride and groom will sit in an elevated and sanctified space. The centre of the stage has the “Thee” (Fire), which is one of the most sacred symbols of Tamil heritage and acts as a divine witness to the couple’s union. The wedding begins with the arrival of the groom, accompanied by the Tholan (bride’s brother) and the groom’s family. The tholan then leads the groom to the Manavarai with his close relatives while an auspicious band of Thavils and Nathaswarams play loud ceremonial music. On the Manavarai, Ganapathi prayers are chanted in order to remove any obstacles. Then the consecration of Sivan and Parvathi takes place to invite them to witness and bless the wedding. The Kurrukkal then invites married ladies to perform the Paalikai, a ceremony in which they sow nine varieties of grains mixed with milk in a clay



pot to bless the couple with a healthy life and fertility. This is also referred to as Mulaipalikai Valipadu, an ancient Tamil ritual to get blessings from the divine. After the names of three generations of the bride and groom are cited, to signify the Thenpulahar Valipadu which pays respect to our ancestors, parents and elders to get their blessings. The bride is then accompanied to the Manavarai by the Tholi (Groom's sister), her parents, bridesmaids and the flower girls. The bride then takes her seat at the Manavarai on the right-hand side of the groom. The Koorai (bridal saari) and Thaali (wedding necklace) are blessed by family members and friends. The groom then presents the koorai to the bride, before she returns to her room to change into her wedding saree. The bride then returns to the Manavarai dressed in the Koorai holding a garland for the groom. She will be accompanied by her Tholi, family members and friends to express her consent to the union of marriage. Now the most blissful part of the wedding is the tying of the Thaali around the bride's neck which is accentuated by a loud crescendo of music, chanted manthirams and the showering of flowers by family and friends. The couple are now married and they then make a vow to Lord Siva and ask for a better life together in accordance with Aram, Porul, Inbam and Veedu, with the husband and wife walking around the fire three times. This concludes all the main rituals of the wedding and now the groom and bride have become husband and wife.

Funerals

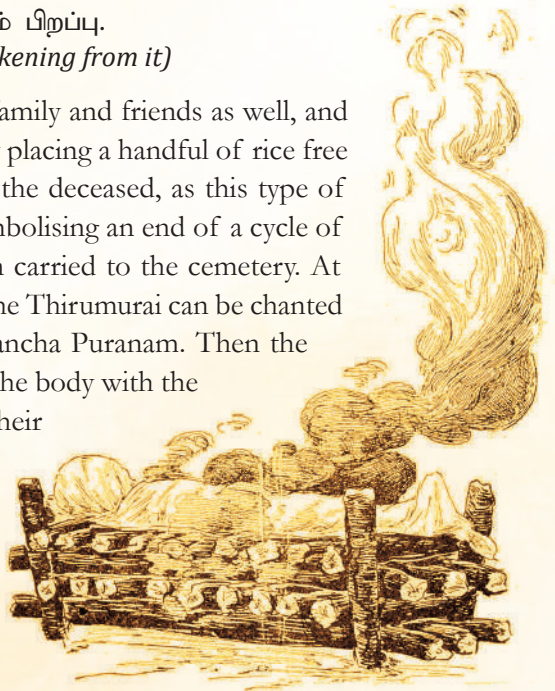
The end of human life is a sad occasion for friends and family but funeral rituals still have to be conducted to ensure that the departed soul can reach eternal bliss with Lord Siva and escape the cycle of rebirths. As soon as an individual dies, relatives must bathe the body and cover it with new clothing. Then we can begin the rituals. A Pillayar deity is installed around the body and is invoked in the hope of a process with no obstacles and a Kuthuvilakku is

placed near the deceased's head. A Siva Kumbam (A pot filled with water coupled with a coconut and mango leaves on top) is also placed to call for Sivan to come and be represented by the Kumbam and a poosi is done with it. In addition, a Kollikudam (earth pot filled with water coupled with a coconut and mango leaves on top) is also placed and a poosai is done with it. This is a sort of sanctuary for the departed soul to be enlightened in order to aid its process of being guided towards Lord Siva. The next of Kin should apply Thiruneeru on the forehead of the deceased and also paste a Pottu with kumkumam and sandalwood paste. During this whole process, sacred songs from the Thirumuraikal and especially verses from the Thiruvagasam should be sung by anyone in attendance in order to help pure the departed soul and lead it towards Lord Siva. Next, it is believed that souls exist in a painful cycle of rebirth and it is best for the departed soul to not be reborn but instead reach eternal bliss. This belief is emphasised in Kural 339:

உறங்கு வதுபோலுஞ் சாக்காடு உறங்கி
(Death is like sleep)

விழிப்பது போலும் பிறப்பு.
(Birth is like awakening from it)

This is a wish by all family and friends as well, and it is symbolically shown by placing a handful of rice free of husk in the mouth of the deceased, as this type of rice cannot germinate, symbolising an end of a cycle of rebirths. The body is then carried to the cemetery. At the cemetery songs from the Thirumurai can be chanted and specifically singing Pancha Puranam. Then the next of kin walks around the body with the Kollikudam placed on their shoulder, and lightened sandalwood sticks in their hand. They circle the body three times





Burial Urn (முதுமக்கள் தாழி)

and poking a hole in the Kollikudam each time and letting the water in the pot sprinkle on the body. This is believed to get rid of the deceased's materialistic desires such as wealth and money and enlighten their spirituality, enabling them to reach lord Siva. Finally, the next of kin places the sandalwood stick on the deceased body, usually covered in a coffin, and walks away, ending the ritual. The ashes can then be collected on a later day and then deposited into a holy place such as a river.

* * *

Tamils Arts, Music & Dance: The Heartbeat of Our Culture

Tamil culture, being over 5000 years old has created various styles of arts, music and dance, that are still widely practised by millions of Tamils worldwide. This has been an integral part of Tamil heritage with huge influences on festivals, cultural programs and religious celebrations. Without arts, music and dance, Tamil culture would be incomplete. Some major forms are Bharatanatyam (Sadiraattam), Tamil music and a variety of instruments such as the Yaazh, Nadaswaram and the Parai.

Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam or originally “Sadiraattam” is an ancient Tamil classical dance form that has lasted till this day and is widely practised amongst modern-day Tamils. Not only is Bharatanatyam



just a dance but it can be considered a method of storytelling, with its dances typically narrating religious stories. The dance form is noted for its fixed upper torso, bent legs, and flexed knees which are combined with footwork, but in addition to this dances must be skilled in the art of storytelling and must learn a vocabulary of sign language by using their hands, eyes and faces to tell a story. Sadiraattam was performed at Temples all around ancient Tamil lands. A Bharatanatyam Arengetram is a solo performance that signifies the completion of the initial formal training of a dancer. It is an opportunity for the student dancer to showcase their hard work and talent after years of professional training. Dancers must build up their concentration and stamina over the years as Arengetrams can last up to three hours which is a very confronting challenge for students.

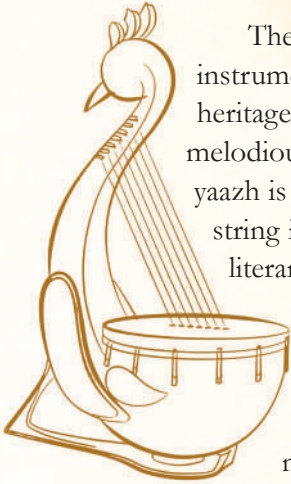
Tamil music

Singing and music are an integral part of Tamil culture and it has traditionally been a major part of our religion as well. Despite being ancient Tamil music continues to thrive as a living tradition that resonates with both spirituality and everyday life. The predominant type of music in Tamil history is Carnatic music which evolved from ancient Tamil music traditions and is closely tied to Sangam literature, temple worship, and devotional hymns. It is believed to have been influenced by Pannisai, which flourished during the Bhakti movement. Carnatic concerts typically include Tamil compositions like the Thevaram (Saiva hymns) and Thiruppugazh (Murugan hymns) which are accompanied by traditional instruments such as the nadaswaram and thavil. The Thevaram are traditional hymns composed for Lord Siva by the Saiva saints Appar, Nampi Arurar (Suntharar), and Thirugnanasampanthar. In addition, hymns from the Thiruvagam by Manickavasagar, express deep spiritual



emotions and are also commonly sung. Tamil singing and music hold a profound significance, serving as a medium for divine connection and meditation whilst also reflecting the rich heritage of Tamil culture through its extensive beauty.

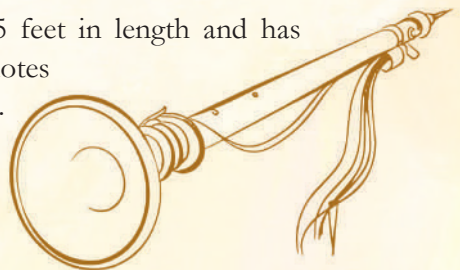
The Yaazh



The Yaazh (pronounced Yaal) is an iconic stringed instrument that symbolises the musical and cultural heritage of the Tamil people. It is renowned for its melodious sound and intricate craftsmanship, the yaazh is often considered the forerunner of modern string instruments like the veena. Its historical and literary presence highlights its importance in Tamil music and culture. This divine instrument is often associated with divine music and Tamil poetry, symbolising harmony and artistry. Its use and significance are mentioned in many ancient Tamil texts from the Sangam era such as the Silappatikaram which lists multiple different types of Yaazhs with the predominant one being Peri Yazh which contains around 21 strings. Interestingly the major Tamil city of Jaffna in Sri Lanka is called Yaazhpaanam named after the instrument.

The Nadaswaram

The Nadaswaram often hailed as the “perfection of sound,” is a classical wind instrument integral to Tamil culture. It is known for its powerful, melodious tones, making it a staple in temple rituals, weddings, and Carnatic music performances. The instrument typically ranges between 2 to 2.5 feet in length and has seven finger holes for playing notes and five for adjusting the pitch. The Nadaswaram has become a significant part of Temple rituals



and festivals emphasising its major spiritual influence. Ultimately it is more than just an instrument, but a symbol of the everlasting spirituality and cultural pride of Tamil heritage. Its vibrant and resonant melodies, ensures to evoke a sense of divinity and cultural connection, ensuring its timeless relevance in Tamil traditions.

The Parai

The Parai is one of the oldest percussion instruments in Tamil culture and holds a profound place in Tamil history, rituals, and traditions. It is known for its astounding beats and cultural significance, the parai is not merely an instrument but also a symbol of Tamil identity. The Tamil word “Parai” translates to “to speak” or “announce,” reflecting its role as a medium of communication. It is essentially a circular drum with a diameter of 1 to 2 feet, played using two sticks (adi-kuchi). It is held by a sling on the shoulder of the player and it is usually played while standing or moving. The Parai is usually played during Temple rituals or festivals, funerals and other celebrations highlighting its deep connection to Tamil Culture. Overall, the Parai is more than just a drum that beats sounds, rather it could be considered as the heartbeat of Tamil culture and hopefully, it continues to inspire and unite Tamil communities around the globe.

* * *



Tamil Food: Our Sustenance

We Tamils love food, and why would we not? With a culinary expertise of over 5000 years the food we have been able to produce as a civilisation has been incredible and has even had a major global impact. Tamil culture flourished in a very hot and tropical environment and that is very much reflected in our food where dishes such as dosai and idli are dependent on fermentation. Coupled with that, modern-day India is widely regarded as the 'land of spices' which has heavily influenced Tamil foods, known for their vibrant tastes from various spices. In addition to that, ancient Tamil civilisations were the first to come out of the hunter-and-gatherer mindset and instead focused on developing agricultural societies that grew various amounts of fruit and vegetables which is heavily reflected in the foods we eat, and the large vegetarian influence. This vegetarian influence is still very much seen today, especially in Temple Foods which follows

a strict vegetarian rule. But food is more than just something we eat for ourselves, rather it can be a symbol of humanity highlighted in our Tamil customs of Virunthompal (Hospitality), where we tend to always cater to guests, typically through food.

Banana Leaf

But before we get into the food, we need plates to eat on. The traditional ‘plate’ that ancient Tamil used to eat their food on was banana leaves (Vaala Illai). It is an eco-friendly and biodegradable method which makes it extremely beneficial to the environment. Not only that, the banana leaf contains many natural antioxidants which would enhance the nutritional value of the foods served on it when they are hot, which they typically are. Banana leaves showcase the respect and interconnectedness we Tamils have with nature and this tradition continues to live on today and is an integral part of festivals, weddings, and special occasions.

Rice and Curry

The main staple in Tamil cuisine is rice and a lot of it. It is usually served hot on a banana leaf and is accompanied by several different varieties of curries. The extensive nature of traditional



Tamil foods means there are dozens of different types of curries that are usually eaten with rice and is a nod to the diversity of Tamil cuisine as a whole. Rice can also be served with Rasam which is a type of soup known for its tangy and spicy taste due to its aromatic spices like cumin, black pepper, and mustard seeds. This meal is also typically served with Vadai which is a popular Tamil snack, a crispy, savoury and deep-fried fritter made from ground lentils, spices, and herbs. The predominantly liquid nature of all these curries is offset by the crispy Papadam which is a thin, crispy snack made from lentil flour or rice flour. Now no meal is done without a sugary treat at the end. Paiyasam is a very popular ancient Tamil dessert that is usually served after a meal of rice, it is usually made out of rice and lentils cooked in milk and sweetened with jaggery or sugar and topped off with cashews and almonds. This completes the typical rice and curry or “Thaali” meal in Tamil culture and it combines a variety of foods to create the perfect blend for not only taste but also individual health.

Idli and Dosai

Further, Dosai and Idli are both major parts of the Tamil cuisine, especially in Tamil Nadu where they are typically eaten for breakfast. Dosai is a crispy and thin sort of pancake and is made from a fermented batter of rice and daal. It is cooked with heat typically in large circular shapes which creates a golden-brown texture. Dosais can be altered to create different variations with the common plain dosai usually eaten with Sambar. However, you can also stuff it with spiced potato filling in the cooking process to create a Masala dosai which provides a blast of flavour with every bite. Similarly, Idlis, which are fluffy steamed rice cakes, are also made from fermented batters of rice and daal. Idli is usually eaten with sambar and chutney. The hot and tropical climate of the Tamil civilisations has directly influenced the fermentation process for both these foods and aids in their digestibility.

Pongal

Another very common and important Tamil dish is Pongal. It is a traditional Tamil dish made from rice and moong dal. Pongal is typically made in 2 forms Ven Pongal which is savory and Sakkarai Pongal which is sweet. Ven Pongal is spiced with ginger, black pepper, cumin, and curry leaves, often served with sambar and coconut chutney. The sweet version is made with jaggery, coconut, and cardamom, offering a rich, aromatic flavour. What is important and unique about Pongal is that it is a symbol of the major Tamil festival, Thai Pongal, a multi-day harvest festival where preparing Pongal is the key ritual associated with it.

Puttu and Idiyappam

More popular Tamil dishes are Puttu and Idiyappam which are very popular in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu. Puttu is made from steamed rice flour mixed with grated coconut, and is often eaten with a variety of curries or can also be eaten with bananas for a sweet touch. On the other hand, Idiyappam (also known as string hoppers) is made from rice flour dough pressed into thin, noodle-like strands, steamed and also served with a variety of curries but predominantly sothy and sambal.

* * *

Virunthompal (Hospitality): Our Virtuous Way of Life

Now, finally, if you asked me to sum up Tamil heritage and culture in one word, it would have to be Virunthompal (விருந்தோம்பல்), which is the Tamil word for hospitality. It is the ancient yet enduring tradition of honouring our guests, it is more than a cultural practice but a profound example of Tamil society's moral and spiritual ethos. Rooted in the principles of Aram (virtue) as laid out in many ancient Tamil texts, this tradition reflects the enduring values of respect and humanity. It emphasises that kindness is not a choice, instead it is perceived as the duty of all of humanity.

The Thirukkural can be considered one of the greatest texts that Tamil history has produced, with Thiruvalluvar placing a great significance on Virunthompal. Importantly Thirukkural 82 is a pristine example of the sacred virtue of hospitality in Tamil culture. The couplet reads:

“விருந்து புறத்ததாத் தானுண்டல் சாவா
மருந்தெனினும் வேண்டற்பாற் றன்று.”

*“It is not fit that one should wish his guests to be outside
(his house) even though he were eating the food of
immortality.”*

This couplet emphasises the moral obligation of hosts to do their best to treat their guests with the utmost respect and dignity. Thiruvalluvar contrasts the concept of personal gain, symbolised by the “food of immortality,” with the moral responsibility of hosting guests. The intention is clear no matter how great the personal benefit, it is unworthy of a person to prioritise their own comfort over their guest’s well-being. The verse greatly represents Tamil culture claiming hospitality as an expression of humanity’s highest virtues,



Photo Courtesy: Deiva Arts

transcending material desires and self-interest. By neglecting a guest, one not only fails in their duty but also diminishes their morality.

Acts of hospitality are very common even in the modern day. When Tamil families welcome guests into their homes, it is almost unheard of for the visitors to leave without being offered a steaming cup of tea or delicious food. This is a result of the persisting nature of Tamil tradition to treat visitors to generous gestures of hospitality, no matter the cost. Moreover, Tamil families commonly extend their hospitality beyond meals, frequently inviting travelling friends and relatives to stay in their homes rather than allowing them to lodge in hotels. This practice not only embodies the cultural value of virunthombal but also fosters a sense of belonging and connection, reinforcing the Tamil belief that guests should be treated as part of the family.

Evidently, Virunthompal is a large part of Tamil culture and can be seen as one of our greatest attributes. However, it is important to also realise that these acts of generosity must not be solely reserved for friends and families but they should be for any individual that seeks help. Being hospitable to the people we know is of course a very virtuous action but this virtue is further elevated by Thirukkural 221, which teaches that true charity lies in giving to those in utmost need.

The couplet reads:

“வறியார்க்கொன்று ஈவதே ஈகைமற் றெல்லாம்
குறியெதிர்ப்பை நீர துடைத்து.”

“To give to the destitute is true charity. All other gifts have the nature of (what is done for) a measured return.”

Thiruvalluvar emphasises that only when we extend our kindness to the destitute can our acts of generosity be considered genuine. All other forms of giving are akin to mere transactions, expecting something in return.

In this light, virunthombal becomes not just an act of hospitality but a profound expression of selflessness, embodying the Tamil tradition of extending compassion and care to all, especially the most vulnerable. Ultimately, Tamil culture and heritage have many customs and traditions that I believe should be preserved for future generations, but Virunthompal is one of few that is much above the rest and should be kept in practice for millennia to come. Long live Tamil Culture.

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Have you ever wondered how to tell if someone is Tamil? Don't worry, they will make sure to tell you. That is an example of the huge amount of self-pride and respect that Tamil people have for their great heritage. Our history is filled with rich culture, architectural marvels and philosophical thoughts that are still applicable today, thousands of years later, emphasising the everlasting bliss of our heritage. This book is a way of spreading information on our glorious heritage to everyone, whether it be to Tamil people or anyone interested in learning more about it.

Written to contain a wealth of knowledge on different areas of Tamil heritage, "Unlocking Tamil Heritage" guarantees that everyone who completes reading it will have learnt something new.

