

## **Nomadism During Sangam Period: Ethnographic Perspectives**

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A wide variety of social systems exist in human societies and these are known to have developed at various points of cultural evolution. Nomadism is one among them. And, this system is characteristically “pre-industrial” and more specifically originated during neolithic period. In earlier days, nomadism was synonymously referred to as pastoralism. Now, in contemporary ethnography, the distinction is made unambiguously between pastoral nomadism and non-pastoral nomadism as both forms co-exist simultaneously (Casimir & Aparna Rao 2003).

At one time pastoralism was regarded as a separate stage in evolutionary development. Archaeological evidence now indicates that the earliest farmers took up the domestication of animals. Pastoralism, hence, may have originated during neolithic period as a specialized outgrowth of the early farming (Allchin & Allchin 1997). Neolithic sites located at Bargur, Mulavi, Shevaroy hills (Salem district) and other places in Tamilnadu indicate residential vestiges and implements.

The findings of chalcolithic/neolithic sites in India clearly suggest the existence of “mixed economy” combining farming and domestication of animals, where nomadism played a major part in their subsistence activities (Allchin 1963). Symbiotic relationships with nomadic population remained important in the Harappa civilization (ca. 2500 BC to 1800 BC). For a long time this kind of mixed economy of farming-herding-foraging continued without many changes (Allchin 1963; Clason 1977; Possehl and Kennedy 1979). It was during the “mature Harappa” period the economy got diversified as ‘agro-pastoral’. When the urban structures collapsed during post-mature Harappa period, the economy seemed to have depended largely on pastoralism (Allchin and Allchin 1997). Viewing this empirical case, as happened elsewhere around the world, it can be understood that unilineal development from nomadism towards sedentism was not the general rule.

Now let us look into the two earliest literary sources of this subcontinent. The Vedic society was essentially pastoral and largely nomadic. However, the Sangam society was a complex one having unequally stratified classes starting from foragers to agriculturists including pastoral and non-pastoral nomads (Champakalakshmi 2003).

Pastoralism has been studied and reported about for centuries. However, in the last couple of decades, substantial advances have been made in our understanding of its history and prehistory. Unfortunately, much of the debate over non-pastoralism and its development in the Tamil region, and that too during the Sangam period, not yielded much understanding. In ancient Tamil land non-pastoral nomadism evolved as a specialized kind of adaptation subsequent to pastorals. During Sangam period we find five different economic organizations reflecting five different ecosystems (*tinai*). These uneven economic developments coupled with demographic dynamics and other factors such as population growth, migration, war, famine, and other natural calamities acted as “push factor” making people move out of the villages in search of new places for subsistence activities. From ethnographic point of view, now it can be argued that the “push factor” may have allowed some sections of the pre-Sangam society to take up nomadic way of life or economic choices might have allowed the formation of specialized classes (Bharathi 1992, 1994, 2003, 2012).

## Peripatetic of the Sangam period

A closer look at the vast corpus of Sangam poetry enables us to distinguish highly diversified social divisions: huntsmen, herdsman, fisherfolk, farmers, artisans, service and menial classes, traders, warriors, bards, and other classes. A small section of the Sangam society comprised a variety of itinerants as well.

Tolkappiyam, the most ancient Tamil grammar, refers to the following four itinerant groups that were integral to the then social system: Ku:thar, Pa:nar, Porunar, and Virali. However, if we go through the entire *pa:ttu* and *tokai* literature, we find nine itinerant communities. They are:

1. **Pa:nar** - musicians (vocal and instrumental) played a string instrument called *ya:l*.
2. **Porunar** - imitating performers on the battle-field and farm-field with a drum called *kinai*.
3. **Ku:thar** - the dancers and dramatists.
4. **Virali** - songstresses and dancers.
5. **Thutiyar** - drummers beating *tuti* drums.
6. **Akavunar** - invocators of native gods.
7. **Ko:tiyar** - dramatic performers who used a wind instrument made of horns.
8. **Vayiriyar** - a kind of musicians who used a bamboo trumpet called *vayir*.
9. **Kattuvicci** and **Kurathi** - fortune-tellers.

From these social divisions, it is apparent that the non-pastoral nomads were much prevalent in Sangam period. All the nine itinerant communities played certain definite roles in their respective regions of operation. Indeed, they were part of the social, economic, and ritual network of the larger Sangam society.

## Nomadism in Sangam Cultural Setting

The Tamil poetical works, known as Sangam literature, produced roughly between 500 BCE and 100 CE, describe in some details the non-pastoral nomads. Here, in this section, I am going to narrate briefly the salient ethnographic features of each non-pastoral nomadic community, elucidated from the Sangam classics. These ethnographic features will be central to, based on ethnonym, economic specialization, and expressive traditions. And hence, this account will not give you the exhaustive descriptions available in Sangam literature on the lifestyles of these nomads. Based on these selective ethnographic features, I will try to discuss the nature of non-pastoral nomadism during the Sangam period.

Among a number of itinerant communities inhabited the land during Sangam period, Pa:nars (musicians) occupied an important position. They were widely referred to in Sangam poems and they might have been the largest nomadic community at that time as they had three major subdivisions. Tolkappiyam (Porul. 91) states three kinds of Pa:nars: Icaip Pa:nar, Ya:lp Pa:nar and Mandaip Pa:nar, of whom, Icaip Pa:nars were vocal musicians, while others instrumental musicians. The Ya:lp Pa:nars were further divided into two classes, namely Ciru Pa:nar and Perum Pa:nar, whose divisions were based on the usage of lesser and higher number of musical strings in their instruments. Mandaip Pa:nars got their ethnonym through a bowl they carried in their hands called '*mantai*' for collecting food, grains and other kinds.

We come across a number of poems depicting the history, identity and profession of Pa:nars. Perum Pa:nars enjoyed teaching *ya:l* music to elite families from whom they earned their living. Unlike Perum Pa:nars, Ciru Pa:nars were itinerant bards, singing in praise of kings, chieftains, lords, and others. While they sung in front of kings they praised them most explosively and quiet eloquently their virtues, martial achievements, meticulous administration, wealth of their nations, and other significant features. In return for their

panegyric performance, they received prestations (gifts) from them. Sometimes, these bardic praise-singers spoke critically of kings/ kingship through deep-rooted satires if the noble patron did not respond generously.

Since Ciru Pa:nars were not elite bards, like Pulavars, they sojourned from place to place to meet feudal lords, local chiefs, and even a common man in search of gifts, cash and kinds for their livelihood.

Even though Ciru Pa:nars were panegyric performers, they involved themselves in other socio-economic activities of the settled people. They went to battlefield and sung war songs to raise the morale of soldiers by beating *tannumai* drum (AN. 106: 12-13). They also took part in religious ceremonies in front of fierce gods for the welfare of the village/kingdom. Besides these diversified activities, they played certain specific social roles with motive of enhancing love and family relationships of the villagers (AN. 86). Here in these situations, they acted as messengers and conveyed messages between the lovers who were separated temporarily and appeased them for an early reunion (AN. 10- 11, 244, 314:13-14; Ain. 478: 3-4). Some Pa:nars served as messengers carrying eventful messages from a sorrowful girl-lover to her beloved hero (*talaivan*) who was separated for a long time while he was on the war-field (Ain. 474). On the other hand, on some occasions Pa:nars carried messages from the hero to his beloved (*talaivi*) (Ain. 140). Besides such services of reciprocity, Pa:nars were also engaged in less dignified activities. Some Sangam poems mention their close contact with prostitutes. They acted as agents taking householders to the houses of prostitutes making intra-familial confrontation between the spouses (Nar. 30; AN. 56; Kurun. 127).

Viewing these narrations, we could discern that the Pa:nars were perceived with ambivalent qualities. In *maruthath tinai* Pa:nars were not appreciated much, while in *mullaith tinai* they were praised for their symbiotic services. By and large, Pa:nars had dual roles. Through poems on *puram*, we could learn that Pa:nars glorified the warriors by singing war songs and praised lavishly their kings for their victories in the battlefield. Some Pa:nars were actively engaged as warriors (AN. 226, 386). However, majority of them were itinerant performers. Through *akam* poems, we understand that Pa:nars sojourned to various places and entertained villages through their performing arts. They also served as messengers between lovers/families in domestic front and acted as go-between among householders and prostitutes in extra-familial front.

During Sangam period Kattuvicci and Kurathi were the important fortune-tellers. They engaged in fortune-telling and playing oracles. Their sayings were normally referred to as *virucci o:tutal* or *mutuva:y* (wise, prophetic or sacral sayings). Besides fortune-telling, they glorified kings and chieftains by praising them (MK. 223-224) in anticipation of donations. There was another itinerant group called Akavunars. They always used a specialized musical drum called *kinai*, made of a thin bamboo rod as an aid to make their singing praiseworthy. Some lucky Akavunars received costly gifts like elephants, horses, valuable jewels, and other kinds, for glorifying the victorious battles (AN. 208: 1-3), or for singing in praise of lofty hills or the fragrant qualities of the jasmine species (*mullai*) in his country (Por. 220). Apart from these activities the Akavunars also were involved in village fertility rites.

We come across yet another itinerant performers, namely, Porunars, who were subsisting on different activities like chanting of morning hymns to glorify the patron kings in front of their palace gates. Kings woke up from their beds on hearing the hymns and the accompanying music of *kinai* drums and roaring conches. Purana:nu:ru (379: 1-11) vividly narrates their *tiruppalli elucci* more elaborately.

Besides chanting morning hymns at the palace gates, Porunars did engage in making guises and imitating others while enacting various performances. They chanted war songs on the battlefield for inspiring soldiers and their noble deeds. These bardic performers were also engaged in chanting fertility songs when farmers begun ploughing their fields for the first

time. That is why they were referred to in double connotations, imitators on the ‘battle field’ (*po:rkkalam*) and imitators on the ‘farm field’ (*ye:rkkalam*). *Akam* and *puram* poems have numerous references on this itinerant group. In *Purana:nu:ru* alone we have as many as 30 poems on Kinaip Porunars.

Like Pa:nars, Porunars too had internal sub-divisions. Among themselves they were divided into three classes: ‘singers on the battlefield’ (*po:rkkalap Porunar*), ‘singers on the farm field’ (*ye:rkkalp Porunar*) and ‘parani pa:tunar’ (praising their king who killed 1000 elephants). However, they were also identified collectively as ‘Po:rp Porunar’ (PN. 386). Compared to Pa:nars, Porunars were not dealt with in detail in Sangam literature. In the anthology of ‘Ten Songs’, Porunar A:rruppatai exclusively describes the lifestyles of Porunars. They were expert musicians and singers using *thata:rip parai*, *kinai* and *ya:l* instruments (Porunar. 54-57). This anthology portrays Porunar’s miserable life without adequate sources of livelihood (PN. 371, 375). Some Porunars decided to associate themselves to the patronage of one particular king, instead of making itinerant sojourns to meet many kings/chieftains/patrons (PN. 379, 382, 384). There are around 30 poems in *Purana:nu:ru*, which clearly state that some sections of Porunars found patronage from farmers and villagers when they were in extreme poverty. In the ‘Ten Songs’ (Pattuppa:ttu) we also find some Porunars sojourning to neighbour kingdoms to earn their livelihood.

During Sangam period there were specialized women bards namely Virali, whose itinerant activities were virtually more or less similar to that of Pa:nars. But, unlike panegyric Pa:nars, Viralis were not only songstresses, but also good dancers. There are explicit references to their dancing. Porunar A:rruppatai (109-110) mentions fair-browed Viralis who danced in front of the king with the accompaniment of small drums and a variety of musical instruments like *ya:l*, *patalai*, *tumbu* and *mulavu* (PN. 64: 1, 103: 1). Like Pa:nars, Viralis, too, visited royal courts to recite panegyrics (Pat. 54: 6) and received gifts from their patron kings.

Apart from this patron-client role, Viralis did also engage in certain specific socio-economic roles that were essential for the existence of the larger settled society. They participated in village fertility rites by singing and dancing and prayed for the torrential rains for the agricultural activities. We could also notice the courageous participation of Viralis in military ceremonies. *Purana:nu:ru* mentions about a woman bard (Pa:tini) who recited *vanci* songs, a chanting rhyme that marked the beginning of a military campaign. In the social front, like Pa:nars, the Virali poetess also played some gender centered roles whenever necessary as “intermediary” or “messenger”, carrying the news between the lovers who were separated temporarily, or resolving the stand-off between the families of lovers or arranging their marriages (Nar. 170, 310). Some Viralis were renowned poets, like Avvaiyar and Ka:kkaip Pa:tini Nachchallaiya:r.

Among the nomadic performers Ku:thars occupy an important place in Sangam literature. They were expert dancers singing ballads. They sojourned widely across several villages spread over various eco-zones (*tinai*-s) Ku:thars never missed village festivals, where they made wide variety of performing arts, and in turn they fulfilled their needs as much as they wanted (Nar. 212). As they were itinerant performers they moved regularly from place to place and region to region during non-festival seasons as well (Nar. 212). Whenever they visited villages, they first assembled on a village ground (*mandram*) and made performances that marked their arrival. Then they visited individual houses and collected gifts and kinds. Ku:thars always enjoyed royal patronage. Ku:thars were the main performers during the celebrations that marked the victory in the war front. Kings/chieftains gave away gifts lavishly to these performers, offered rice beer and danced along with them. Pathirruppathu (42) speaks about Cenkuttuvan who generously gifted many horses to Ku:thars. In the

anthology of 'Ten Songs', Malaipatakada:m exclusively narrates the lifestyles of Ku:thars vividly, which is often referred to as 'Ku:thar A:ruppatai'.

Kurunthokai (7), one of the 'eight anthologies', mentions the presence of Aryan acrobats in the Tamil region. Paripata:al (7: 79-80) states as interesting phenomenon that happened in the Madurai city, where Ku:thars and Manmahalirs (alien dancers) performed together in the celebrations of the annual 'new flood'. Maduraik Ka:nji (523-26) also mentions other aspects of Ku:thar lifestyles.

During Sangam period we find a few more itinerant groups. Ko:tiyars were travelling performers enacting various dramatic performances on the streets of the village (PN. 29: 22-23; AN. 352: 4-5). From Sangam texts we could learn about yet another performer called Kannular. Purana:nu:ru (153) mentions they are singers and dancers playing various instruments. In MPK, Kannular were referred to as a group of performers similar to Pa:nars and Viralis.

Having learned about so many itinerant groups, we find yet another group called Tutiya. They were specialist drummers, beating *tuti* drums on the occasions such as erecting markers at battlefields, singing and guarding wounded warriors lying on the battlefield, and announcing inauspicious and dangerous occasions like cattle theft, announcement of war, etc. The personal services by these groups go beyond the level of village to that of higher political authorities.

From the aforementioned Sangam data we could infer some of the salient ethnographic features of the nine non-pastoral nomadic communities.

## Discussion

At the outset, I would like to draw the nature of social organization of nomads and their affiliation with the settled people during Sangam period. In an ethnographic sense, most of the non-pastoral nomads were marginal communities, both economically and ecologically. From large corpus of Sangam poems, we could infer various strategies of adaptations of these nomads.

In ancient Tamil cultural milieu, a large number of non-pastoral itinerants existed in almost all regions and they apparently had a wider form of network with the symbiotic people (settled people) of their respective regions in which they operated. They did wide variety of occupations like praise-singing, fortune-telling, playing oracle, conducting sacred performances on the battlefields, singing war songs, ritual dancing for invoking rains and general fertility, served as messengers and performed other related activities.

All the itinerants played certain definite roles in their respective areas of expertise. Indeed, they were part of the social, economic, and ritual network of the larger Sangam society. Dubiansky (2000: 57) views all these activities under three spheres: the *community sphere* (fertility rites, festivals and god cults), the *household sphere* (domestic rites and the function of a go-between in family matters), and the *courtly sphere* (courtly milieu, the military camp or battlefield). He further pointed out that the royal court played a major role in the upliftment of the poetic tradition, in which the relations between bards and poets and their patrons were crucial. It is true in the case of panegyric poetry (Kailasapathy 1968).

Much evidence corroborates the existence of intense symbiosis between various nomads and sedentary people. The four clearly marked ecological zones, *Kurunji*, *Mullai*, *Neithal* and *Marutham* never constituted rigid frontiers as far as non-pastoral nomads were concerned. However, each group of families had their own territories of wandering which cut across these ecological zones.

Almost all the itinerant communities of Sangam period subsisted by means of mixed occupations, of which panegyric performance was one among them. For Pa:nars, Porunars and Viralis it was their primary activity. They were also involved in many activities other than

praise-singing as there were different types of bards, each “tied” or “attached” to particular patrons depending on their skills and statuses. The elite bards were undeniably political actors. They praised, or even at times advised the kings and in turn established authority and legitimacy over the kings. But the lower-class bards did not acquire such privileges. However, by and large, both classes of bards had high traditions of narrative and poetic composition skills in their respective traditions, literary and folk.

Thus Sangam nomads continued to wander from region to region for meeting new patrons, who made them ‘cultural communicants’ across the regions. Their journey was routine, repetitive and cyclical in nature throughout the year. There was a cultural continuity in Sangam period between villages and towns and the symbiotic nomads provided this continuity. Their areas of operation cut across villages and towns, little and complex societies and centres of little and great traditions. This kind of interaction was not only viable for cultural communication and diffusion of cultural elements, but functioned as necessary adjuncts to different sedentary/larger societies as well. Viewing these aspects, one may understand that these non-pastoral nomads functioned as “travelling specialists”, or “transregionals”- always transgressing the so-called socio-cultural borders rather than operating strictly within specific localities.

Viewing these features, the nomads like Pa:nar, Porunar, Ku:thar, Viraliyar, Akavunar, etc. can be considered as perpetuators of “part cultures” or “part societies”. They cannot exist without the settled people. With this complimentary situation neither the settled people nor the nomads are studied in isolation. There exists a deep-rooted symbiosis among them. In modern India, Singer (1955: 31) refers to symbiotic nomads as ‘travelling specialists’. While referring to their symbiosis, Oscar Lewis (1955: 171) says that in Indian countryside there is a “rural cosmopolitanism”, which is partly built up by the network of caste and kin ties and partly by the travelling specialists. On the other hand, Singer refers to this concept in a reverse form. He observes that there is a “cosmopolitan folk culture” in cities and towns of India. The bards in Sangam period traveled far and wide across the country. Through their expressive traditions they integrated the cultural features of one region to another, which caught the imagination of the local people. Thus, they served as effective communicants of culture, providing popular and ritual performances, propagating items of regional traditions and served as necessary adjuncts to the settled people (Bharathi 2003: 13).

In Sangam society, it would, however, be incorrect to consider all the nomad-sedentist relations as conflict free. For Sangam kings and Pulavars, a civilized society was the one which primarily was engaged in agriculture. There existed an uneasy balance between civilized *marutam* and primitive *kurinji* (Sivathamby 1966, 1981). But itinerants sojourned across different regions serving as communicants of cultures. They were the essential adjuncts to different communities. Therefore, they cannot be considered fully as marginal societies. Considering their affiliation with the settled people, economically, culturally and demographically, it is incorrect to consider them as “fringe groups”. For the settled people, the social and ritual roles played by the nomads were essentially obligatory, not optional. They were involved in the life-cycle rituals, went to battlefields to encourage the warriors, performed at erection of hero-stone ceremony, served as intermediaries for lovers and in many other capacities. These service groups having some kind of itinerant lifestyle had to perform specific social roles, which later developed into *kudimai* organization (a kind of *jajmani* relationship).

Even though Sangam itinerants associated themselves with the settled people, the indigenous Sangam civilization primarily had two traditions: “great tradition” and “little tradition”. The former was nourished and maintained by a relatively small literate group, while the latter was maintained by the folk masses. Geographically, the former were centered on urban centers, and the latter around rural areas. However, there was continuity between the

two and this continuity was provided by a number of Sangam itinerants (Misra and Misra 1982).

Among the Sangam non-pastoral nomads, Pa:nars occupied an important place. Their three major social divisions and internal diversifications such as Ciru Pa:nar, Perum Pa:nar and Mandaip Pa:nar indicate the significance of their occupational choices. Each section of Pa:nar fulfilled certain specific functions for the settled people. Although the vast corpus of Sangam poems frequently describes many ethnographic features of each itinerant group, on many instances, the description is inadequate from the ethnographic point of view. It is needless to say that poetic corpus did not reflect all the ethnographic realities as they were only literary creations. However, from Sangam classics, it is possible to elucidate some concrete and core ethnographic aspects within the specter of poetic aesthetics.

It is certain that during Sangam period at least nine itinerant groups with specific ethnonyms and socio-cultural roles had symbiotic relationship with the larger society. But we could infer that the elite Pulavars, who were the architects of forming the Sangam classics, generalized these ethnonymes ignoring or marginalizing their identities.

We find generalized terms such as Pa:nmakan, Pa:nmakal and Pa:tunar and Pa:tini denoting the gender difference of singers. These titles were certainly not “homogenous” one, essentially depicting either ethnicity or other specific identities. The elite poets of Sangam classics treated these ethnoses as a homogenous entity instead of identifying them with their original ethnicity.

On the one hand, we could notice specific ethnonyms like Pa:nar, Akavunar, Kattuviccis, Kurathis, Viraliyar, Thutiyar, Porunar, Vayiriyar, Kannular, Ku:thar and Ko:tiyar, and on the other hand the elite poets (Pulavars) brought under one label: “*pa:tunar*” (singers)/ “*a:tunar*” (dancers). In the same way they had glossed various praise-singers under one label “*iravalar*” or “*paricilar*”. Despite Sangam society being already structured around unequal stratification, labeling various ethnoses under one category is clearly a view of “looking through top-down-bottom” approach. Certainly, the elite Pulavars who got royal patronage made such unwarranted unifications, marginalizing the identities of these itinerant communities. That is why scholars like Dubiansky (2000: 52) emphasized that the Sangam texts frequently ignore the differences and treat the performers in general, undifferentiated terms. Viewing on these lines we could infer that the elite formation of Pulavar tradition obviously addressed the mainstream conception marginalizing others and sustained the overall stratification through their poems. This was the explicative principle in their discourse.

The kings of the Sangam period were war leaders whose authority rested as much on their ability to embody virile and redistributive qualities (Heitzman 1997: 217). There are numerous references in the classical anthology about more than one hundred kings are chieftains who belonged to the three major dynasties namely Chera, Chola and Pandya. Many of them were glorified for their liberality. The Sangam anthology fondly mentions the “seven great donors” (*e:lu vallals*): Pa:ri, O:ri, Nalli, Elini, A:y, Pe:kan and Malaiyan. Even though they were referred to as “minor kings” (*kurunila mannar*) they were the donors *par excellence* in early Tamil society. Pa:ri, the chieftain of Parambu hill, gifted a chariot to the creeper. There were many such instances of their liberality. Kurunji chieftains were liberal and showed high degree of hospitality.

The political ideologies of the kingdoms under the Pandyas and the more powerful Pallavas differed from those of the Sangam Tamil kings (Gurukkal 1993). In ancient times, the kings, chieftains and numerous petty chiefs had legitimized their power through personal acts of magnanimity and heroism. Some celebrated poets such as Kapilar, Parantar, Aricil Kila:r and Perunkunru:r Kila:r visited the chieftain Pe:kan not for monetary gain but for continuing a meaningful relationship (PN. 143-47). The Sangam poets always expected high

degree of decorum and warm treatment from their donors. If the treatment failed below the expectation, the poets did not even hesitate to refuse the gifts.

Sangam anthology profusely makes several references that both god and king are equal. They were the greatest exemplars of compassion (*arul*) and giving (*kotai*). Both god and king were referred to as *talaivan* (chief), whose compassion was to make unilateral giving. The classical anthology refers it as *kotaik katan* (duty or responsibility of giving). Meaning of hero's life fulfills when he unilaterally gives away gifts unlimitedly.

There was a conventional means of approaching the patrons. The bards who received gifts earlier guided fellow-bards in search of munificent patrons. Their songs can be labeled as "guidance songs". In Sangam anthology, we find overwhelming songs, about fifty-eight in *Purana:nu:ru* alone, hailing the qualities (virtuous) of a hero. There was a separate theme (*turai*), namely *pa:ta:n tinai*, for the poetic situation of praise in Sangam anthology, which is meant for glorification of the liberality of the hero. Ganapathy Subbiah (1991: 145) mentions the following general themes of the "guidance songs":

1. *Paricilkata:nilai* - Appeal for gifts. PN. 11, 101, 136, 139, 158-60, 164, 169, 196-99, 209-211, 266.
2. *Paricilvitai* - Utterances of the poets before taking leave of a donor - king. PN. 140, 152, 162, 165, 397, 399.
3. *Paricirrurai* - Bards presenting their needs before a patron. PN. 126, 135, 137, 148, 154, 161, 163, 168, 200-208, 379.
4. *Paricirruraippa:ta:npa:ttu* - Praising the virtues of a hero and appealing for gifts. PrP. 19, 65.
5. *Pa:na:rruppatai* - Directing a fellow-bard to a munificent patron.
6. *Pulavara:rruppatai* - Directing a fellow-poet to a patron. PN. 48, 49, 141.
7. *Viraliya:rruppatai* - Directing a female dancer to a patron. PN. 64, 103, 105, 133.

Sometimes bards returned empty handed. There are some poems in Sangam literature stating that some kings reduced the bards as beggars without giving gifts. In these situations bards pleaded the kings with the voices of sorrow and grief explaining their poor conditions. Some bards attempted continuous efforts in search of munificent lords. On such occasions their trips were long and arduous, and the bards became tired and hungry on their journey. During such occasions the bards enquired about the generous kings from other bards who visited earlier.

## Epilogue

A variety of questions naturally arise from the aforesaid ethnographic description. First, given that there is any connection or continuity between Sangam and present day non-pastorals. Second, the socio-economic organization that was predominant in Sangam period continued or transformed into a new form of symbiosis in this modern period.

The bardic tradition of the by-gone days of the Indian subcontinent continues even today (Bharathi 1992, 1998, 2007; Misra & Malhotra 1982; Snodgrass 2006; and others). Viewing the Tamil cultural continuity ethnographically, in the Tamil region too, the praise-singing bardic tradition of the Sangam period continues till date. About fifteen nomadic communities in Tamilnadu have their own patron castes, from whom they eke out their living. They are expert genealogists. In general, they are referred to as *Jathi Pillai* (lit.: 'children of the caste'), but each community has a specific name (for details see: Bharathi 2003). They tell their patron's history, genealogy, migration, and other historical memories. In return, they are fed well, given clothing to wear, paid cash and kinds and treated with utmost respect by their patrons.



In conclusion, the Sangam data on non-pastoralism suggest that long-term non-pastoral responses to socio-economic needs distinct to Sangam age have contributed to the development of equally distinctive kinds of symbiotic nomads over the centuries. In this process, continuity and change sustained non-pastoralism till date.

### Abbreviations

Ain.	-	Ainkurunu:ru
AN.	-	Akana:nu:ru
BCE.	-	Before Common Era
CE.	-	Common Era
Kurun.	-	Kuruntokai
MK.	-	Maturaikka:nji
MPK.	-	Malaipatukata:m
Nar.	-	Narrinai
Pat.	-	Pattuppa:ttu
PN.	-	Purana:nu:ru
Por.	-	Porulatika:ram
Tol.	-	Tolka:ppiyam

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# TAMIL FOOD CULTURE: SOME CONCEPTUAL PARADIGMS

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Many scholars have focussed intensive inquiries on the food culture of various cultures for a long time. Of course wide range of studies are available in the English arena, but there is a dearth of studies on Tamil food culture. Comprehensive multidisciplinary studies on Tamil food system are lamentably rare. This paper attempts to focus the following paradigms related to Tamil food culture.

1. Archaic paradigm
2. Humoral paradigm
3. Cultural paradigm
4. Social paradigm
5. Changing paradigm

Food cannot be strictly defined as a mere bio-chemical process; it also has a deep-rooted cultural paradigm, which has been evolved and continued as an identity for each culture. As such that, food or eating is not a biological act; it is essentially a social act, since mankind is a social animal. Hence, social facts, social acts and social dimensions are over-arched on the very basic element of food (Harris & Ross 1989). In this way, the Tamil food system has its own concepts, norms, values, laws, regulations and continued history which determine its basic paradigms.

## **Archaic Paradigms**

As Tamil society has a long and continued cultural history, its conceptual paradigms are expressed in all its stages: tribal system, peasant system and in the urban system. Moreover, there is a continuum among these three stages in terms of tribe-folk continuum and folk-urban continuum (tribe-folk-urban continuum). Since Tamil culture has diversified its evolution from the substratum of hydraulic civilization and its lifestyle is majoritively characterized in villages, the village civilization of Tamil society needs a careful intervention while studying its archaic paradigms.

Cross-culturally speaking Tamil food culture is one among the age-old systems which replicates some archaic features of elementary forms that mankind have evolved in their cultural evolution. 'Altruism', 'reciprocity' and 'redistribution' are some of the primordial forms that can be gleaned in the everyday life of the Tamil society even today.

Altruism is one of the archaic features that evolved in the Tamil cultural evolution. It is extending very freely the food resources to benefit others. It is done without any reciprocity. It can be seen among hunter-gatherers, sharing their game animals with others that help in managing food-crisis in day-to-day life. In subsistence economy hunting forms an important animal protein that helps hunters to secure food resources from their immediate environment. Further, hunters or members of one band spare their territory to forage by other bands. Such altruistic features also have strengthened the optimal foraging ability among early human societies (Coleman 2011; Brittin 2011). In Tamil culture offering of *ammaan cooru* (food from mother's family) during the death ritual is again a classic example that such archaic traits still continue its presence in village communities even today. However, cultural semantics of such altruistic features have diversified over its period of social / cultural history (c.f. Bhakthavatsala Bharathi 2011:13-33).

Altruism is an exemplary phenomenon that makes mankind a social being with egalitarian nature. *Annadaanam* (gifting of food to others) of different nature is a true and complete example for altruism. Tamil culture has evolved this *annadaanam* long ago in different forms starting from Manimekalai (a Buddhist Tamil literature belonging to the 3-6 century CE) period. *Undi koduppoor uyir koduppoor* (one who gifts food to others are life givers) is a renowned conceptual paradigm during Manimekalai period. This has been practised as an integral part of Tamil culture throughout its history from Manimekalai period to till date. The Tamilnadu Chief Minister, J. Jayalalithaa's present day *annadaanam* scheme in almost all major temples in Tamilnadu is a programme of altruistic nature that replicates what Manimekalai and Vallalar have done at two different points of time. Reciprocal

altruism has also been evolved in Tamil social evolution. Gratitude leads to reciprocity. People benefited through altruism always looking for occasions to reciprocate what they have received earlier.

The mutual exchange of food items is being the hallmark in Tamil culture. On many occasions there is a direct exchange of food items. It is largely based on transactions among kin, kith and neighbours. Among village communities in Tamilnadu the *generalized reciprocity* is a common phenomenon. Food items and cooked foods are simply given away to others with no direct form of repayment. However, in common parlance, it is expected that others will be equally generous. In some cases *balanced reciprocity* is experienced, wherein expectation of immediate return is anticipated. When surplus food is available no immediate return is expected. We have numerous evidences from ancient, medieval and *bhakthi* literatures in Tamil for this.

In Tamil food culture one could notice a strong phenomenon of reciprocity. From Sangam literature we have numerous references. The Tamils have developed reciprocal exchanges not only in subsistence economy of *Kurinj*i (hilly tract), *Mullai* (forest tract), *Neithal* (coastal belt) *thinai*s, but also in the highly developed *Marutham* (delta region) *thinai*. Reciprocity is a stable strategy for food management among Tamils.

In Tamil food culture one could trace both direct reciprocity and indirect reciprocity. From ancient times the Tamil people have developed immediate use-value of the tools, clothing and food items. The itinerant nomadic artists and panegyric bards have received clothes, ornaments and other goods as *paricil* (gifts) from territorial chiefs and villagers for their artistic services and praise songs. Many nomadic communities till date subsist on this reciprocal foundation.

In the cultural milieu of Tamil villages food is the strong symbol of reciprocity. Frequent exchange of food items reinforces the individual's willingness to continue recognising reciprocal obligations. Even in Tamil urban culture valued food items are exchanged among the neighbourhood. During the occasions of Deepavali, Rama Navami, Gogulaastami, birthday occasions, etc., people reinforces their strong neighbourhood through reciprocal exchanges of food items. Children are socialized and groomed in such a way that mutual support is encouraged in all possible ways in Tamil society. In almost all peasant villages in Tamilnadu the benefits of cooperation are immediate, that are very effectively expressed in terms of food reciprocity.

In Tamil culture both cooperation and reciprocity are vibrantly practised. In cooperation both parties benefit immediately. In reciprocity the giver can expect the return at a later time. Though it is a delayed return it helps him at the time of distress or need. Food items figure prominently both in cooperation (*uthavi*) and reciprocity (*kond*u – *koduthal*). In ancient days scarcity and starvation were effectively negotiated through these modes of obligatory activities.

In Tamil culture there exists yet another kind of distribution of food items, which may be called as redistribution. It is a kind of distribution that is potentially non-exploitative in nature. Gift giving is a form of redistribution that also serves as a means of redistributing wealth. In temple and communal festivals persons having surplus food items (raw items) throw away in front of the temples, where people requiring such resources take them for their own consumption. *Masaana kollai* (a festival of Angalaparameswari) is one such festival in Tamilnadu where large items of food materials are thrown away in front of the temple and people who are requiring them take away for their consumption. Such kind of gift giving is a kind of redistribution of surpluses which enhances the status of the donors and balances between surplus and scarcity.

### **Humoral Paradigms**

Whatever may be the conceptual elements operate in the system of food in the cultures around the world, the Tamils, surely, have developed humoral concepts in their food system. Though there is a saying in Tamil that *unave marundhu, marunthe unavu* (food is the medicine and medicine is the food), there are some more concepts that are attested in terms of humoral transactions.

The Tamil conception about food not only advocates on the line of bio-medical approaches, but it also defines on the approaches of humoral transactions. The religious conceptions regarding God and food are note-worthy in the Tamil cultural milieu. The worship of Lord Murugan at Palani hills and other temples explicates the humoral paradigm of the Tamils. There are two important festival cycles celebrated each year in Palani. One is *thai puusam*, celebrated in the month of January-

February; the other one is *panguni uthiram*, celebrated in the month of April-May. The former festival falls in winter and the later in summer. A close cultural inquiry into these festivals explicates more meaningful paradigms on the cognitive pattern of the Tamils and their humoral conceptions (Moreno & Marriott 1990).

The *thai puosam* is largely worshiped by the Naattukkottai Chettiyar or Nagarathar (merchants) community from Karaikudi and adjoining regions of the southern Tamilnadu. The other festival, *panguni uthiram*, is celebrated by the *anju caathi* (five castes) of the *Kongu* region (Western Tamilnadu), where Kongu Vellalars (dominant caste of Kongu region) celebrate with deep veneration. These two contrasting aspects are functioning on basis of multiple binary oppositions that are deeply rooted in the humoral transactions with bio-medical and cultural paradigms.

During *thai puusam* dominant merchant communities of southern Tamilnadu bring jaggery as their votive offering to Lord Murugan. During *panguni uthiram* the dominant peasant community of western Tamilnadu bring *Kaveri thiirtham* (holy water from the river Kaveri) as their votive offering and pour it on the Murugan. The bio-chemical conception is that jaggery generates heat in the body of Murugan that helps the Lord to protect from the cold winter prevailed in the month of *thai*. The holy water taken from the river Kavery is carried to Palani hill that brings down the heat of the Murugan's body during the month of *panguni*. The holistic perspective that operates behind the two major festivals of Murugan is directly related to humoral basis of divine body. Thus, the following binary oppositions are mediated in the whole system of celebrations.

Sl. No.	Binary Categories	
1.	Panguni uthiram	Thai puusam
2.	Devotees are Kongu castes	Devotees are Nagarathaar castes
3.	Summer period	Winter period
4.	Holy water is poured on Murugan (hotness is balanced)	Jaggery is the votive offering (cold is balanced)

Though religion is a separate domain in the Tamil cultural milieu, the holistic view of food paradigm is cutting across various domains and replicates its conceptions in a deep rooted manner. The functional interrelatedness within the whole is characterized by some dominant paradigms that operate within the Tamil cultural system. The humoral paradigm of Tamils forms one such dominant theme.

### Cultural Paradigms

Food is always culturalized. It is very interesting to note that how Tamils connect food to rituals, symbols, and belief systems. Food is essentially used to link with religious, social, political and economic ends that are being reenacted always.

Eating in ritual contexts reaffirms or transforms relationship in the social domains (Goody 1982). In the Tamil domain, too, the phenomenon is highly predominant. Rituals and beliefs surrounding food powerfully reinforce caste and ethnic boundaries in Tamil villages. The annual festivals of the goddess Mariamman (goddess of small-pox) reinforce the solidarity of village community. The Mariamman festival falls in the peak summer, which is the period of encountering small-pox, draught, starvation, looking for rain, etc. The village community is experiencing a loosely-knit relationship prior to the Mariamman festival, come together in a tightly-knit community in order to collect money and celebrate the said festival for the well-being of the village. A village feast is arranged in terms of *kuuzh* (porridge) which also reinforces the organic solidarity of the village.

For animals, eating food is just a bio-chemical process, but among humankind it is more than those encompassing social and cultural values. That is why anthropologists very often define goods in

terms of “goods are not only for using, but also for thinking”. The cognitive pattern and thinking process of the Tamils are embedded in their food culture. Every culture has decreed what is food and what is not food and what kind of food should be taken and on what occasions. The preference, prohibition, avoidance and taboo values make each culture a unique one.

The Tamil cuisine and food system are highly categorized and conceptualized on various themes like hot-cold, non-toxic-toxic, ritual-non-ritual, sacred-profane, raw-cooked, hot-sweet, rich-ordinary, and the like. The Tamil concept of good meal is a holistic meal. There are sub-categories emphasizing a few more binary categories that implicate both nutritious and cultural semantics of a good meal. For example, a rich Tamil meal always contains *vadai* (boiled cake) and *paayaasam* (semi-liquid sweet). Semantically speaking *vadai* is a solid food and a hot one; while *paayaasam* is a liquid and sweet one. The former is prepared by using oil, while the later is prepared by using sugar. Oil and sugar are very precious and costly ingredients in Tamil cuisine. *Varuval* (fried item) and *poriyal* (boiled vegetables) is yet another binary category in the Tamil meal. Such binary conceptions could further be traced from the holistic meal.

### **Social Paradigms**

The Tamils use the act of fasting and sacred eating as a vehicle for ritual activities. Fasting is invoked to support their sacred journey. During this process many rituals and beliefs surrounding each sacred journey (including pilgrimage, sacred journey for fulfilling vows, etc.) are characteristically associated with sacred food items. During this time many profane items become taboo. An elaborate practice is followed on each and every ritual observance. On every occasion invocation of deeply held values and beliefs through ritual foods are experienced, both at individual level and at group / communal level, based on the occasions. Iyyappan pilgrimage, *Arupadai viidu* pilgrimage, Lord Venkateswara pilgrimage are some of the classic examples in the Tamil region, where people observe an elaborate belief system relating to food and eating. The conspicuous consumption of ritual food has always been important as an indicator of ritual status.

Belief system on food and eating among the Tamils prominently makes its cultural identity. Tamil society is essentially a caste based society, though transformation is experienced in the post-independent period. Right now we have 209 endogamous Tamil castes in the Tamil region. Each endogamous caste is entitled for keeping its sub-culture in the totality of Tamil culture. Food and eating are unique in each sub-culture. Like all culturally defined material substances adopted in the making and maintenance of social hierarchy and social relationships, food serves both to solidify caste membership and to set castes / sub-castes apart. The 209 sub-cultures of the Tamils are one way or other have some unique traits in their food culture.

### **Changing Paradigms**

The aspects of societal changes on eating patterns, and vice versa are of growing interest to ethnographers. Ethnographic literature on Tamil dietary patterns in a changing world is very much limited. In-depth food ethnographies informing the fast changing economic and globalization circulation-cum-diaspora process is also understudied. In this changing context, food is going global now. However, cultural globalization was initiated among the Tamils well before the Sangam period (the Tamil classical literature dating from 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE). During the colonial period many number of plants, grains, vegetables, tea, coffee, etc., were brought into India including the Tamil region.

In Tamil context, a great deal of assimilation was happened when the new food items entered into this region. Tamil people, now, move across the globe, so also do foods. The role of current globalization in dietary change of Tamils has already made a great deal of impact. Tamil people travelling to foreign countries make rapid changes in food fashions. The white-collar travellers accustomed to ‘foreign foods’ fascinate themselves after returning to the Tamil region. The privileged rich propagate the food fashion and gradually advocate it and percolate down to middle class, that resulted the introduction of many foreign food items among the common Tamil people.

The western coffee (Nestle) is being assimilated as a famous “Kumbakonam Digri Coffee”, which is a classic example for the ‘innovation sent’ and ‘innovation received’ process. In the same way many English vegetables, ingredients, plants, animals, cooking methods, or some other culinary

borrowing have been gradually detached from its origin nation and reintegrated into the Tamil culinary system. We have many examples for this phenomenon. Cultural borrowings normally never stand in true form anywhere in the world (Tannahill 1988; Coleman 2011). The domestication of foreign goods were well assimilated into the Tamil system of food culture. *Carrot alwaa*, *beetroot pachadi*, *beans poriyal*, *pototo chips*, *tomato chatni*, and the like are a few examples for the aforesaid facts.

McDonald seems to be same everywhere but it assimilated or reinvented the menu or taste of the nation where it started operating. Similarly drinks, burger, pizza like food items are modified to the tastes of the local consumers. Western fast food is tailored to local tastes. Food entered into the Tamil country have been changed and domesticated according to the Tamil culture.

Whatever may be the levels of westernization and globalization processes transforming the Tamil food culture, the Tamil ethnic identity is secured and retained with regional identities, like Chettinad cuisine, Kongu cuisine, Nellai cuisine (Tirunelveli alwaa), etc. These regional brands find good market in the hotel industry as well. These regional brands of cuisine facilitate Tamil intimacy and warmth among their culture bearers. Though western food is slowly becoming an integral part of the urban elites, there is a clear demarcation that these are all becoming active agents in global process. How does the globalization of food and cuisine influence the Tamil food culture remains understudied. Future focus on this will tell us the changing paradigms.

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