

# Tamil Villages

## The Ancient Heart of South India

By Richard Clarke



**Tamil Villages  
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# Tamil Villages – The Ancient Spiritual Heart of South India

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## Introduction

This paper was written for presentation at the recent **International Conference on Sacred Geographies, Religious Cultures and Popular Practices** held at the Government Arts College, Tiruvannamalai in 2014

The basis for the paper was this blog. I started this blog after my wife Carol and I moved to Tiruvannamalai, writing about our experiences of life in India. We made friends with villagers nearby Tiruvannamalai, and because they knew we were interested, they started inviting us to village ceremonies and functions. I have a life-long interest in Anthropology, and I knew right away that I was seeing things about village culture that were special. Carol and I took many photos to document what we were seeing, and I starting writing about it.

As I wrote, I researched -- searching the Internet-- and discovered that some of what I was seeing was very ancient, predating Hinduism itself.

There are four sections to this paper:

- Tamil Village Life is Ancient
- The Ancient Traditions are Still Alive in Tamil Villages
- The Ancient Tamil Family
- Can Tamil Villages be protected?

This first part is based on the research I have done, and is my own conclusions based on this. Parts 2 and 3 are mainly from things that Carol and I have seen, photographed, and written about. Part 4 are my ideas about what needs to be done now to protect the heritage of the Tamil villages.

## Tamil Village life is ancient

### Overview of migration to India

The Indian subcontinent has been populated in successive waves of migration from the earliest pre-history.

The contemporary method of **Genetic Anthropology**, through analysis of human DNA, can determine the genetic makeup and migration of various cultural groups among the world's population. This powerful new tool helps understand human prehistory and history.

One such current attempt to understand the genetic and migration history of humans is the National Geographic's Geographic Project. This is a multi-year effort to gather and analyze worldwide genetic data in collaboration with indigenous and traditional peoples around the world. As of 2013, some 600,000 people have contributed their DNA for analysis. The graphic below, generated from the National Geographic project data, shows and overview of the probable migration routes of early humans, starting about 60,000 years ago.



### Current Findings of Indian Genetic Anthropology and History

#### **50,000 years ago**

The first population in India of modern humans was from a group that left Africa about 60,000 years ago, traveling on the coast from Africa to Australia. They arrived in Tamil Nadu about 50,000 years ago. This was in the Paleolithic Era, long before the introduction of agriculture. Some researchers now call the descendants of this group “Austro-Asiatic.” This is the oldest genetic population in India.

#### **40,000 years ago**

North India was populated originally from a later radiation out of Africa, about 40,000 years ago, entering through the Khyber Pass on the northwestern frontiers of the subcontinent.

#### **9,000 years ago**

Farming was started in North India (in what is now Pakistan). This was possibly by the precursors to the Dravidians. I do not think their origins are certain. Some scholars think they migrated from the Middle East about 9000 years ago. They think this group brought their agricultural methods, growing wheat and raising cattle. I suspect they may have been the descendants of the people who originally occupied North India 40,000 years ago. They spread through all of India, and developed a high ancient Bronze Age culture, the Indus Valley Civilization, with its two famous cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. The peak of the Indus Valley Civilization was 5000 – 4000 years ago.

The earliest trace of the Indus Valley Civilization was at Mehrgarh in the Kacchi Plains of Baluchistan in what is now Pakistan. This farming village is 9000 years old, the oldest known Indian farming site. The inhabitants herded cattle and grew emmer wheat, the same kind of wheat grown in the Fertile Crescent, where agriculture and cultivation of wheat first started. The origin of these people is not known. Given their growing of emmer wheat, they may have migrated from the Middle East and brought farming with them. It is also possible that Dravidians are the descendants of the original population that migrated to North India

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40,000 years ago and developed farming practices independently. This was at the end of the last Pleistocene Ice Age (about 11,700 years ago). At that time temperatures warmed, glaciers melted, sea levels rose, and ecosystems throughout the world reorganized. Agriculture was both exported from this original area, and was independently developed in many places in the world. Emmer Wheat was among the first plants to be domesticated in the Fertile Crescent.

### **3,500 years ago**

About 100 years ago Max Mueller theorized that there was a wave of migrations from Central Asia about 3500 years ago that saw the entry of Indo-Europeans, called Aryans, who brought with them horses and the basis of Vedic Hinduism into northwest India and Pakistan. This theory is now put to rest by recent genetic studies of South Asia, by Metspalu, Gyaneshwer Chaubey et al and published in 2011 in the American Journal of Human Genetics, Dec. 2011. They say, “Genetic study finds no evidence for Aryan Migration Theory—On the contrary, South Indians migrated to north and South Asians migrated into Eurasia.”

The Aryan culture became dominant in North India. The Dravidians were displaced to South India. These Dravidians are the basis for the present Tamil village population, based on archeological evidence. Of all the claims I make in this article, the ancient history of the Dravidians is the least certain. The ideas I express here are supported strongly by some scholars, while others are unsure. Some Indians vigorously deny any source outside of India for Aryan or Dravidian origins, citing good evidence. I think finally the work in Genetic Anthropology will resolve this once and for all. I base claims of Indo-European genetic material in the Indian genome on articles from the journal, “Genetic Research” in which they specifically identify Indo-European haplotypes (combinations of gene sequences inherited together) in the Indian population. Let us all wait for conclusive research results on this.

There is not really an “Indian race.” Rather, the human genetic elements in India contain materials that are mainly a mix of four genetic types: Austro-Asiatic (AA), Dravidian (DR), Tibeto-Burman (TB), and Indo-European (IE).

### **Tribals, the Austro-Asiatics**

The various Tribal peoples, about 8% of the present Indian population, are the descendants of the original Austro-Asiatic population. There are ~450 tribal communities in India ([Singh 1992](#)), who speak ~750 dialects. This population was marginalized by first the Dravidians and then the Aryans, both of whom had more advanced cultures.

### **Tamils, Dravidians**

The Tamil village population is most closely related to the Dravidians, who retreated to southern India to avoid dominance by the Indo-European-speaking nomads.

Probably the Dravidians brought millet with them to South India. Millet was grown in the Indus Valley Civilization, and was the most important crop in ancient Tamil Nadu, until rice arrived in South India, again probably brought by the Dravidians from the Indus Valley Civilization.

### **Aryans, Indo-Europeans**

What is called the Indo-Europeans were South Asians and became what is called the Aryan Sanskrit Vedic population, and perhaps were the originators of the caste system. They occupied Northwest India and Pakistan. Their genetic traces are found today mainly in the higher castes and in North India. Their origins may be have in the Sarasvatī River basin in

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North India, which dried out about 3500 years ago, the same time the Aryans were said to have “appeared.”

### **Tibeto-Burman**

The Tibeto-Burman population is thought to have come from the Northeast, and to have brought rice agriculture into the north of India. The dates are not clear, perhaps 4000-3500 years ago.

### **Mixing of North and South**

Genetic evidence shows a mixing of North and South Indian genetic types in the period 4000 years to 2000 years ago, and less in the last 2000 years. This supports the idea that the Indo-Europeans displaced the Dravidians from North India to the south, starting about 3500 years ago.

### **Genetic Variation**

There is significant genetic difference between South Indian Tribals, and the various Caste populations. Tribals have much higher proportions of Austro-Asiatic genetic material. High castes have much more Indo-European makeup. The proportion of Indo-European genetic material decreases in each lower caste.

## **Where did the Tamils come from?**

India grew from its villages, which began as India developed and acquired agriculture, starting about 9000 years ago. Village life is part of everyone’s history and of most family histories. Tamil villages were probably Dravidian farming villages, starting about 3500 years ago, this date is not clear to me. When the Iron Age came, about 3000 years ago, it increased the dominance of these Tamils over the Tribal peoples. The ancient roots of South Indian Dravidian culture can be seen even now in the villages. Tamil Village life has remained much the same, even as different rulers came and went.

### **Dravidians were early farmers in South India**

Tamil culture has largely developed on its own from its ancient roots, with its own language, culture and religion.

Farming in South India probably started about 5000 years ago, when climate changes brought a retreat of the forests in the south. First cultivated were indigenous crops, probably by the indigenous people. Later, animal husbandry, a Dravidian practice, was introduced. This must have been brought from outside of South India, because the ancestors to these domesticated animals do not exist in South India. The Dravidians were also early farmers in South India, first growing millet, and then rice, which they had cultivated in the Indus Valley, and apparently brought to the South. Varieties of North Indian crops first appeared in South India about 3800 years ago. Maybe this marks the beginning of the Dravidian influences in South India.

### **Tamil Villages develop their present form**

Village life took most of its present form with the advent of rice farming, which was done as an extended family activity. This was about 3000 years ago in South India, about the time of the early Iron Age in the south. Also at this time, many hilltop settlement sites were abandoned, indicating a dramatic alteration in the settlement pattern. It seems likely that

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agricultural production also intensified, drawing populations to the plains, where crops and groves could be more effectively managed.

It may be that this period really marks the ascendancy of the Dravidians in South India. Iron really set the village into the form that has now lasted more than 2000 years. The introduction of the iron *Aruval* (sickle-axe) and plow were the key. The effect of the Iron Age was that some clans and castes (i.e. the Dravidian farmers) were more productive as farmers, prospered and became dominant; their villages grew in size and became more numerous. The cities supported by these farms and villages also grew and became more prosperous. Certainly the big improvement in farm productivity would have brought about much growth and change in the cities. It sure seems like this could bring about a flourishing of a culture, like that experienced at this time in South India.

The original Austro-Asiatic hunter-gathers became further marginalized and moved into the hills, where they still are today.

### Vedic Hinduism comes to South India

One historical research tool is the literature of the Tamil Sangam period, starting around 2300 years ago, 300 BC. The Sangam period is regarded as an early high point of Tamil culture, and the time when the Dravidian culture met with Vedic Hinduism. The Sangam literature detailed, among other things, current practices and ideas.

The impact of Vedic religion was mainly felt in the cities, not in villages. Vedic gods and scripture started coming into South India from the North, and affected primarily the upper castes. The lower castes (and villagers) continued living their life as they had before. The first reference to a Vedic God in Sangam writing is at about 100 BC. By 400 CE, these Hindu references were extensive.

Genetic studies have shown that the Western European genetic content depends on caste, where high caste Brahmins are much more closely related to the Western Europeans than are lower castes. Villagers are primarily lower caste so are less related. This shows the genetic and cultural separation and relative genetic isolation of Tamil villages from the Vedic cultural and genetic impact.

### Iron made a big difference

The Aruval

The use of the **Aruval** (sword or sickle) to clear farm land was critical to the expansion of the farm. Otherwise it was very difficult to clear trees and brush to make good farm land. It was also an important weapon.





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The longer one, pictured below, was used as an axe to clear trees, vital for farming, and as a weapon. The extra weight at the tip of the Aruval moves its center of gravity away from the handle and makes of a powerful stroke, important both for axes and swords.



Here a village guardian god holds an Aruval.



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### The Iron Plow

Here is a typical long plow. It would have been pulled by a bullock, maybe a team of two.



It is mostly made of wood, but with a strip of iron running down the front side of the plow blade. This was all that is needed. Only a small bit of iron was used for this plow.



### **Tamil village spirituality predates Hinduism in South India**

Tamil village spirituality predates the introduction of Vedic Hinduism to South India. Hinduism includes the Agamas, Sanskrit scriptures that define forms of worship other than the Vedic Fire sacrifice, particularly poojas to idols of the gods. Their roots are not clear. Tamil village spiritual practices were non-agamic. They did not use Brahmin priests, Vedic scriptures or rituals, and instead only used local gods, priests and rituals.

The traditions shown in this paper are the current versions of the ancient South Indian ones.

Each village had its own set of gods, protectors, celebrations and practices. I think that, in fact, each clan had its own gods, and built shrines to worship those gods in the villages in which they lived. The dominant clan probably built the main village shrine.

Some Tamil Village spirituality has been adopted within Hinduism. A common practice was to place the ancient village god within the existing set of Hindu gods. For example Murugan came to be identified with Subramanian and as a son of Siva. This is called “Sanskritization.”

### **Conclusion**

Tamils are descendants of the ancient Dravidians. They took ascendancy in Tamil Nadu about 3000 years ago. They had their own gods and traditions, which still live today in Tamil Villages

### **The Ancient Traditions are still alive in Tamil Villages**

Ancient traditions are still alive in Tamil villages today, with traditions that may date back as much as 8,000 years, to the dawn of the agricultural age. Certainly, Tamil traditions seem to date back to the Indus Valley Civilization of about 4,000 years ago, which seems to have been an early major Dravidian civilization, that later migrated to South India, moving away from the Aryans in North India. I discussed this more in the [first post in this series](#).

This post shows some current Tamil village spirituality: Village Gods, Goddesses, Guardians, and Sacred Groves. There are many photos, most from the Tiruvannamalai area. Most were taken by my wife and me, and some are downloaded from the Internet.

### **Tamil Village Guardians, Gods and Goddesses**

Tamil guardian spirits are known as *Kaval deviam*. These are *non-Agamic* gods: established before the introduction of Hinduism, not found in sacred Hindu texts, nor performed by Hindu priests.

Some of the guardians are gods. Peaceful gods, like *Mariamman*, will be in the center of the village. The Warrior gods, like *Ayyannar* or *Karuppaswamy* will be placed on the outskirts, to better protect from outside dangers. Some are warriors elevated to hero status and called upon now to bring protection, like *Madurai Veeran*, a Tamil hero, now elevated to Guardian. Some are guardians for *Siva* or *Parvati* (*sages turned into warriors*).

Painted terracotta (clay) figures are often used to represent these gods and protectors.

## Important village deities

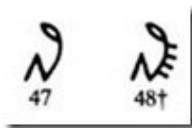
### Murugan

(From Wikipedia)



It is likely that Murugan was brought to South India by the Dravidians, long before the introduction of Vedic Hinduism.

In 2006 a Neolithic hand-held stone axe inscribed with Indus Valley script was discovered in Tamil Nadu, establishing a clear link between the two civilizations. The stone was of local origin, so the Indus script had to have been inscribed locally in Tamil Nadu. In this script, from both the north and south, is a figure thought to represent *Murukan*, then a powerful spirit warrior. They are very similar:



“47” is the Tamil character. “48” is the Indus Valley script. While the megalithic/Iron Age pottery in Tamil Nadu is datable between 800 B.C. and 3 A.D., the Indus script belongs to a much earlier period, 2,600 BCE to 1,900 BCE, of the mature Harappan period.

These findings establish two things:

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- The Neolithic people of South India had interactions with Indus Valley people.
- They either shared the same language or both the languages were from the same language tree, Dravidian.

Murugan is the archetypal Tamil male—attractive, masculine, a great warrior; the ideal male. Murugan's long history with the Tamils is recorded in the Sangam writings more than 2,000 years ago (The Sangam was an ancient academy or assembly of Tamil scholars and poets in Madurai starting about 2,300 years ago). However, it looks like Murugan goes back much longer, to the Dravidians in the Indus Valley. It is said that the history of Murugan is the history of the Tamil people. Prominent among the Tamils, he was incorporated into the Hindu set of gods as Hinduism moved into South India.

Baby Murugan is beloved by Tamils. (From [this site](#))



Murugan was originally a formless Dravidian god of the hills, and worshiped as a spirit to begin with, then later in the form of a tree and stone, and finally as a Hindu god represented by a *murti* (a living god in the form of a stone idol). From the evidence just presented, we can conclude that Murugan was a Dravidian god, probably worshiped by the Dravidians in ancient Indus Valley Civilization cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro 5,000 years ago.

Murugan was an ancient Tamil protector of villages. According to the Tamil devotional work, Thiruppugazh, "Murugan never hesitates to come to the aid of a devotee when called upon in piety or distress".

As settlements grew and states formed, Murugan also became a model Warlord-King. So whenever a king won a battle he was compared to the god Murugan. Gradually Murugan gained human attributes and accumulated more myths. By the late Sangam period (from about 300 BCE to 400 CE) the myth of Murugan the warlord-and-lover was popular all over Tamil Nadu.

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Pictured below, a village temple dedicated to Murugan.



In front of the temple is an array of *Vel*, Murugan's spear.



## Thai Pusam Festival

### Body piercing

Body piercing is also done for Murugan, at his annual Thai Pusam festival, to express gratitude and to ask the god for something special. This piercing seems to be a Tamil specialty, and is done for other Tamil Gods and festivals.

Photo from [ynaija.com](http://ynaija.com)



Photo from [indiatvnews.com](http://indiatvnews.com)



## Mariamman

Mariamman is a Tamil goddess that protects the people within the village.

(from [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org))



Mariamman is an ancient goddess, whose worship probably originated from a pre-Vedic mother goddess cult of Dravidian people before the arrival of the Aryans with their Brahmanic religion. She is the main South Indian mother goddess, predominant in the villages of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra.

Mariamman later became closely associated with the Hindu goddesses [Parvati](#) and [Durga](#) during the Hindu expansion into South India.

In Tamil, the word *maari* would mean rain and *amma* would mean mother, but here it is more like "mother nature." She was believed in and worshipped by the ancient Dravidian people to bring prosperity. This includes bringing rain and fertility, and curing disease. She is still a very important village goddess.

(from [chennaionline.com](http://chennaionline.com))





The village “belongs to” the goddess. She is thought to be there before the village and to have created it. Sometimes she is represented only by a head, indicating that her body *is* the village and she is rooted in the soil there. The villagers live inside or upon the body of the goddess. She protects the village and is the guardian of the village boundaries. Outside the village there is no protection from Mariamman.

### Mariamman Shrines

Mariamman shrines are common in the center of villages. They often include an anthill that could be the resting place of a cobra. Milk and eggs are offered regularly to propitiate the snake. The anthill is thought to be a manifestation of *shakti*, the divine feminine creative power of the universe. Mariamman is a fertility goddess, full of this *shakti*. Devotees pray to Mariamman for things such as fertility, healthy progeny, or a good spouse. The most favored offering is *ponqal*, a common Tamil rice dish.

### Mariamman as Family Deity - Kula-theivam

Mariamman is the family deity for many families in Tamil Nadu, their *Kula-theivam*. For any family occasion, such as a wedding, it is usually a family custom to first worship the family deity. Many families invoke the family deity as the first step for all occasions in the family. This family worship of the Kula-theivam is considered more important than any Hindu festival. The worship of the family deity runs through many generations of the family, passed from generation to generation.

### Mariamman Festivals

Nearly all members of a village participate in the goddess's festival, now even Brahmins and Muslims. Blood offerings of animals are commonly sacrificed at festivals of Mariamman. For these festivals, the different castes can mix freely. I think this is because the festival predates the caste system. My guess is that the Aryans brought the caste system about 3500 years ago (with them sitting on top of it as Brahmins and Kshatriyas – the high castes). The Indian castes are first found in the Vedas, which are Aryan scriptures.

March and April are epidemic months of small pox, chicken pox, and measles in South India. Mariamman cures these so-called "heat-based" diseases. During the summer months in South India (March to June), people perform a ceremonial walk carrying pots of water mixed with turmeric and neem leaves for miles to ward off illnesses.

### Mariamman Festival for Rain

Late summer festivals are held during the Tamil month *Aadi* to ask for rain. We attended several of these rituals and witnessed some of the ancient activities still practiced today. Here are some photos from one of these celebrations:

#### Trance dancing

Trance dancing - *Sami Aduthal* - is often part of a Mariamman celebration. Men and women work themselves up into a trance state, to where they feel the god has “taken over” them. The reason for the “dance” is to ask something of the gods that they have been unable to get by any other form of prayer or pooja. The dance is wild and uncontrolled. It is done in a circle, so the people gathered can prevent the dancer from hurting him or herself. This ancient form of dancing was documented in Sangam writings over 2,000 years ago.

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Here is a man dancing in a trance.



A woman trance dancing.



Here is another woman in a trance. We were told that her village neighbors consider her to be crazy, mentally unbalanced. She holds out her hands to be whipped by the (non-Hindu) priest. This will remove the craziness from her.



#### Karagams (or Garakams)

Before the trance dancing begins, *Karagams* are made on a structure built over a *purna kumba*, a holy pot filled with water and turmeric with a coconut on it that is a temporary ceremonial god. It is then covered with neem leaves and flowers. The photo below shows one being constructed.



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After the trance dancing, the karagams are carried through the village, to bring the gods to each family's house for a blessing.

Below, a photo of the house-to-house procession with the karagams.



A short pooja is given to the gods at each house.



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For more on this Mariamman festival, see this post: [Special Celebration for the Rain Goddess Mariamman](#)

### Firewalking

Some Mariamman festivals also have firewalking as one of the rituals, to help the participants find a balanced life and to see the good in everything. We have not seen this, so downloaded a photo for you to see.

Photo from [inspiredtraveler.ca](#)



### Other Guardians

In addition to the main village god in the center of the village, often Mariamman, there are a number of different guardian gods, usually placed on the village outskirts. Most are male, some female. I will give the most details on a male guardian, Karuppaswamy, to give you an idea of all of what is involved with these guardians. Other than this, most descriptions will be brief.

In addition to these Tamil gods and goddesses, there is a class of male warrior figures, *munis*, that are always associated with Siva or Paravati. Because of their association with Hindu gods and goddesses, they may be Hindu, not purely Tamil, I really do not know. If anyone knows anything more definitive about this, please let me know.

### Guardian Gods

There are a number of folk deities who perform Tamil village protective roles, of whom Karuppaswamy and Ayyannar are archetypes.

#### Karuppaswamy

Karuppaswamy is the God of Justice. He has no tolerance of evil.

*Karuppu* means “black” in Tamil and is associated with darkness, night, etc. This refers to the legends of the origins of Karuppaswamy, as (almost) a son of Rama, black due to the test Rama gave him to verify his paternity. He is both a protective warrior, and one who can grant the requests of the village people.



The Karuppanar *Kovil* ("shrine") is always found in the outskirts of the village. The maintenance of the temple is done by the whole of the village. His shrine is usually in the open space and will not have traditional *gopurams*, "towers," like Hindu temples. There will be big statues with weapons. Karuppaswamy is usually depicted as black, wearing a turban and a *dhoti* with flowers and garlands. He wields an *Aruval*-- a long machete resembling a scimitar, or sometimes a lance, a trident, or a smaller knife. The *Aruval* is a very significant weapon in Tamil Nadu and is considered a symbol of Karuppaswamy. Some *Aruvals* may reach the height of 5 feet.

There may also be statues of other goddesses ([Kannimaar](#) -- the 7 Virgins, called *Saptha Kannimar*), in his shrines. Animals, Karuppaswamy's companions, like a hunting dog (*Vettai Naai*), or a lion, and his mount -- a white horse-- are usually also found at the shrine.



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Often, as part of his worship, a cigar will be lit and placed in the Karuppaswamy's mouth. He is also offered *Naravam* ("toddy," a locally distilled alcohol) or some form of modern alcohol. The local village priest might offer flowers or *vibhuti* (holy ash) to the gods, and may play the role of an oracle. Various members of the family or clan are identified to play to the role of oracle, taking their turn for one year. They undertake *vratham* (a vow to produce a spiritual benefit, needed for the function) and maintain chastity and purity, before Karuppaswamy festivals. Community members will approach the oracle with problems such as family troubles, financial issues and local community and social issues. This message from the oracle is believed to be directly from Karuppaswamy, "pure and without human bias." Whenever the wishes of the people are granted, they give their offerings to him based on what they vowed to offer.

### Ayyannar

*Ayyannar* is another guardian deity who protects the village. Just about every village in Tamil Nadu has an Ayyannar shrine. Terracotta horses are usually found outside the temple. These are given to the god as mounts for his nighttime patrols. He will patrol each night to keep the village safe from harm, patrolling its outskirts.

Ayyannar with his mounts, white horses.



A small Ayyannar shrine in the forest near Arunachala, with horses. This was built by village people in this spot because they "hear the footsteps of God" here.



### Muniyappan

Muniyappan is the protector of the innocent and the valiant. He also may have horses as mounts.



### Sudalai Maadan

Maadan, or [Sudalai Maadan](#) swamy (*Sudalai* means burial ground/pyre and *Sudalai Maadan* means “guardian of burial ground”). He is now considered to be the son of Shiva and Parvati (as he has been Sanskritized). He seems to have originated as an ancestral guardian spirit of villages.

He is the god of the dispossessed.





## Guardian Goddesses

Most names are a form of *Amman*, mother.

### Kateri Amman

*Kateri* means “vampire.”



Kateri is worshiped also as a *Kaval Deivam* – a guardian spirit. She accepts all alcoholic beverages, now mostly with white and brown rum. Followed with cigars or cigarettes.

Kateri Amman uses the white rum for healing. She would ask for a female to offer her white rum, white meaning “pure,” so when it flows through the body of the female it can cure and cleanse from the inside. One doesn’t drink the alcohol, but only offers it to Kateri Amman. The white rum will stream through the body and burn out the problems. Her power and *Shakti* can cure you when she “drinks” the alcohol. The main issue that Kateri Amman takes care of is belly problems and women with menstrual cycle problems.

### Angala Parameshwa

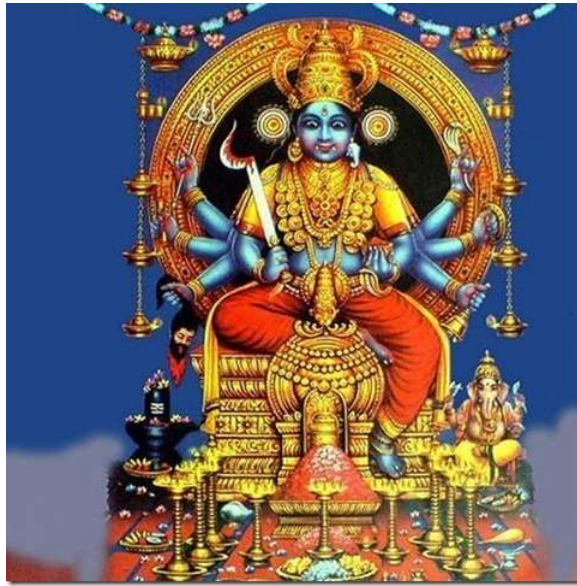
*Ankamma* is a name given to the Tamil village deity *Angala Parameshwa*. Ankamma is another non-Vedic deity who originated as a fierce guardian figure. In the rituals dedicated to her, she is appeased with blood.

Ankamma's shrines are usually located outside of the village in groves of trees. They are usually not proper temples, but very simple stone structures.

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She is considered one of the fiercest forms of the mother goddess Amman.



Her primary festival is *Mayana Kollai*, celebrated for her the day after *Maha Sivaratri*. During this festival in Tiruvannamalai, men and boys will dress up as the goddess, and perform body piercing, to wear “shirts” made of lemons on strings sewn through their skin. All celebrants will do *pradakshina* (“circumambulation”) around the Arunachaleswara, the big temple in Tiruvannamalai.

Here is a man dressed as Ankalamma.



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Another man wears a “shirt” of lemons. This is extreme tapas (austerities) for a big boon asked from the goddess.



You can see these lemons are sewn onto the skin. As he walks around the temple, he will grab a handful of lemons and throw them to the people watching him.



More of this celebration can be seen in this post: [Mayana Kollai Celebration in Tiruvannamalai](#)

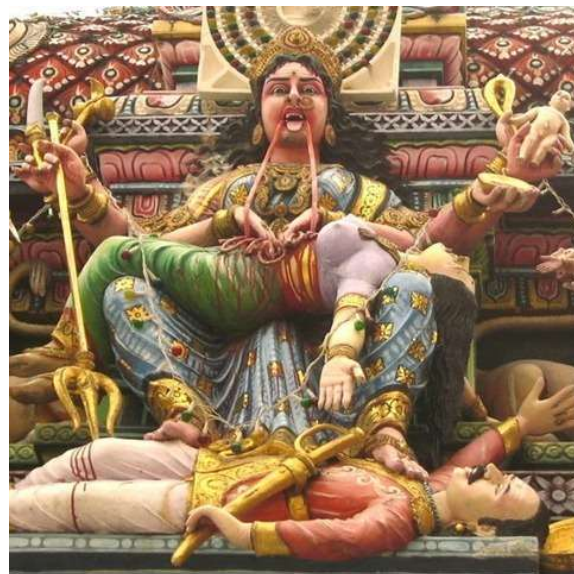
**Kali Amman**

*Kali* or *Kali Amman* was considered as the cause for cholera. She guards against the disease and is sometimes a village guardian.



**Periyachi**

*Periyachi* Amman. The fierce guardian of children and mothers. Don't mess with her!



## Hero Protectors

### The Muniandis

*Muniandi* refers to the *Munis* worshipped by the Tamils. The Munis are a group of male guardians which are classified as Siva Gana, attendants of Siva (and Parvati). The Munis could refer to former warriors, kings or sages who achieved the status of a Muni after their human death.

Whether these are Hindu or Tamil is not clear. There are ancient associations with what appears to be Siva in the Indus Valley Culture, which is thought by many to be the precursor to the Tamil culture. Because of this, I include them in this post the ancient guardians.

Here is a row of seven Munis at Pachaimann Koil, in Tiruvannamalai.



### Madurai Veeran

*Madurai Veeran*, a legendary hero and warrior, often protecting Mariamman shrines.

Here is a Madurai Veeran shrine in Tiruvannamalai, on the eastern slopes of Arunachala.



More of these shrines can be seen in this post: [Shrines along the way: Between Tiruvannamalai and Tirukkoyilur.](#)

### Sacred Groves

Called *Kovil Kadu*, or *Swami shola*, the establishment of the Sacred Grove is another ancient tradition, probably from before the Iron Age. Sacred Groves are also non-Agamic, pre-Vedic Hindu. These too are written of in ancient Sangam literature.

The grove will be consecrated to the local village god, generally *Amman*, the mother goddess of fertility and health, or Ayyannar, the protector. Snake gods, *Nagas*, are also common. (For more on Nagas, see this post: [Naga Shrine near the Inner Path](#))

There are about 500 Sacred Groves remaining in Tamil Nadu. This is reduced from about 750 groves 50 years ago.

Sacred Groves are cared for either by the nearby community or specific families within the community, as a part of the village's beliefs. Traditional rituals have been performed in the groves through the generations. Sometimes the potter who makes the terracotta statues acts as the priest.

Often, special plant species are cultivated and preserved in sacred groves. As part of the specific local traditions about these groves, plants and trees within the groves usually cannot be removed. As a consequence these groves are an important source of traditional Ayurvedic medicinal plants and function as genetic reservoirs of wild species.

Many threats to these sacred groves exist today.

- Urbanization.
- Today the traditional belief systems which were fundamental to the concept of sacred grove conservation are considered mere superstitions. The rituals are now known to very few people, mostly belonging to the older generation.
- Many groves are suffering due to 'Sanskritization' or the transformation of the primitive forms of nature worship into formal temple worship.
- Invasion of weeds such as *Eupatorium odoratum*, *Lantana camara*, *Prosopis juliflora* and *Hyptis suaveolens*.
- Human activities that were previously taboo, such as dead wood collection, biomass gathering, lopping of tender branches and green leaves for goats, creation of footpaths, cattle grazing, mining of sand and clay, brick-making and collection of wild fruits, vegetables, medicinal plants, fruit-eating bats and fireflies, are affecting the ecology of the sacred groves.

### Sacred Grove near Tiruvannamalai

Entrance to a Sacred Grove about 15 km south of Tiruvannamalai, near Tirukkoyilur.



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Guardians at the front of the grove.



Old terracotta horses near the entrance.



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An altar with stone gods and tridents. These are very old gods.



A swing for the gods.





Crude terracotta figures.



More stone gods. I have seen them being used as the primary gods of the sacred grove, the ones to whom poojas are offered. Traces of a recent pooja remain.



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There is also a row of terracotta gods in the back of the grove. These are well kept up with flowers and fresh clean clothes.



In the back of the grove are many discarded gods. I think they are replaced each year by new ones. This must be a big festival.



More about this sacred grove can be seen in this post: [Sacred Grove near Tirukkoyilur](#)

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In our explorations of the villages around Tiruvannamalai, we have discovered a set of Tamil gods and guardians, as well as practices, like those involved with the sacred groves that were a part of their daily life long before Hinduism ever arrived in South India. These are things you can see for yourself; you just need to get outside the cities and look.

### The Ancient Tamil Family

The Tamil family is integral to Tamil villages. The basis of the village for more than 2000 years has been the small family farm, limited by the number of family members to work it. For Tamils the family is the extended family, with many generations, often living in the same household. The main crop is rice, and at times of planting it requires many workers, usually provided by the women of the family. The primary set of relationships are within the husband's family. Tamils are patrilocal (married couples live with the husband's family or village) and patrilineal (descendency is determined through the father's line).

In the Tamil family, relatives of both the wife and the husband form an important social network that supports the nuclear family and encompasses the majority of its important social relations. Below is a long list of relationships that the Tamil recognize. Note that in English, the terms "Aunt" and "Uncle" cover a variety of relationships, whereas in Tamil there are many degrees of relationship that are named. These include for the father's or mother's family, and older/younger brothers and sisters. So one's place within the family depends on whether they are related through the male line or female line, and the place within the birth order.

<u>English</u>	<u>Relation</u>	<u>Tamil</u>
Mother	Female Parent	Amma /Thai
Father	Male Parent	Appa / Tandhai
Husband	Male spouse	Kanavan / Purushan
Wife	Female spouse	Manaivi / Pondaatti (Pensaadhi) / Samsaaram
Son	Male offspring	Magan / Paiyyan
Daughter	Female offspring	MagaL / PoNNu (PeN)
Grandmother	Maternal Grandmother / Mother's Mother	Paati / Ammamma / Ammaachi
Grandmother	Paternal Grandmother / Father's Mother	Paati / Appaayee / Appatha
Grandfather	Maternal Grandfather / Mother's Father	Thaatha
Grandfather	Paternal Grandfather / Father's Father	Paatan
Great Grandmother	Grandmother's Mother / Grand Father's Mother	Kollu Patti
Great Grandfather	Grandmother's Father/ Grand Father's Father	Kollu Paatan / Kollu Thatha
Elder Sister	Elder Sister	Akka
Younger Sister	Younger Sister	Thangai
Elder Brother	Elder Brother	Annan / Anna
Younger Brother	Younger Brother	Thambi

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Uncle	Mother's elder brother	Thaai Maaman
Aunt	Mother's elder brother's Wife	Athai
Uncle	Mother's younger brother	Thaai Maaman
Aunt	Mother's younger brother's Wife	Athai
Aunt	Mother's elder sister	Peri Amma
Uncle	Mother's elder sister's husband	Peri Appa
Aunt	Mother's younger sister	Chitti
Uncle	Mother's younger sister's husband	Chittappa
Aunt	Elder Brother's Wife	Anni
Uncle	Father's elders brother	Periyappa
Aunt	Father's elder brother's Wife	Periyamma
Uncle	Father's younger brother	Chithappa
Aunt	Father's younger brother's Wife	Chitthi
Aunt	Father's elder sister	Athhai
Uncle	Father's elder sister's husband	Mamaa
Aunt	Father's younger sister	Athhai
Uncle	Father's younger sister's husband	Maama

A person is born into a family and into a village. Sometimes the family *is* the village: everyone in the village is related. "Clan" is a word used to describe these kinds of families, that extend beyond an individual household.

The rites of the family reinforce the identity within the family. Rites of the village support identity with the village. There are roles in most of these rites for the father's and mother's relatives.

A child growing up in this system knows well his or her place in society. On one hand this brings a deep security. On the other it can bring resistance to new experiences and ideas.

Family = clan = caste. Clans, which are ancient social groupings, certainly came earlier than caste.

### Family Temples and Functions

Each family has a temple and performs regular rites to it and at it.

One example is an annual pooja to it. Several years ago we were invited to participate in such a function. In this family, they have an annual family function at their family Mariamman temple. It is a Mariamman function, with a blood offering to the goddess. Animal sacrifice, such as a goat, as a part of Mariamman rites is common.

We gather, sitting under a pandal in front of the house of a family member.



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We walk through the village to the family shrine. This old large tree is at the center of the village.



The first part of the function is a special pooja for the goat.



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The goat is worshiped before the sacrifice. Here is the goat with a beautiful flower mala.



This is the family Mariamman shrine, erected and maintained by this family.



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On one side is an old idol for the Snake-God, the Nagas. These are among the oldest gods in South India.



A pooja is offered to the gods in the shrine.



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Family members gather for the sacrifice. The goat is at the center of a circle of family members, (difficult to see in the photo below)



After the sacrifice there will be a shared meal, like mutton biryani. These villagers would not throw away good food. These shared meals are a common element of all family functions.

The whole family lends a hand in meal preparation. Here are women cutting vegetables...





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...while the men butcher the goat.



Briyani is cooked in a big pot on a wood fire.



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Men stir the pot. The weight of the food is too heavy for the women.



After the vegetables and meat are mostly cooked, then women add rice.



When it is cooked, family and friends sit and eat together, enjoying the meal.



For more on this see [Family Feast in Gondapatai Village, Tamil Nadu](#).

These celebrations mark each year, and are an important element in the family's set of annual celebrations. Ancient Tamil celebrations include Deepam, Pongal, and [Thaipusam](#).

### Rites of passage – Ceremonies of Family

These Tamil rites of passage are a different set than the standard set of Hindu samskara rites of passage. This is another case where elements of the ancient culture are still in place. Some, such as "name-giving" and "first haircut" are shared by both cultures. Some, such as the bangle ceremony, are unique to Tamils (as far as I know).

In these rites there are roles for people of both the mother's and father's family. They serve to keep the extended family of the child intact and functional. As an example, in the first haircut and the ear-piercing ceremonies, the child is to be held by a brother of the mother, a maternal uncle.

Following are some Tamil rites of passage that we have been privileged to witness.

#### **Bangle Ceremony**

This is done for a woman late in pregnancy. The basic idea is that glass bangles are given to the pregnant women to wear. These are thought to stimulate the baby while still in the womb.

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Here is the pregnant woman being dressed for the ceremony. Jewelry is being arranged by a family member.



A pooja altar is being set up by the mother of the husband of the pregnant women.



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Like for a wedding, the woman wears an elaborate headdress.



Relatives are setting out fruit and gift items. These are mainly women, since this is mainly a women's ceremony.



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The pregnant woman is being seated onto a small stool. This late in pregnancy it is not easy for her to sit down like this. Notice all the jewelry she wears.



Now women are offering her bangles. They put them on her arms. It is hard to do this, since her hands are swollen from the pregnancy.



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Every woman here today, relatives and friends, puts bangles on her.



Along with the bangle, each woman dots her forehead with kum kum, sprinkles her with holy water, and rubs her face and arms with turmeric.



Here she is after the ceremony, great with child.



For more on this see: Valaikappu: [Bangle Ceremony for an Expectant Mother](#).

### **Baby naming ceremony**

This ceremony is done a few days after the birth. People have gatherings to give the baby its name.

Everyone leans close to the baby and whispers the baby's name to it three times.







For more on this see: [Tamil Baby Naming–The Thottil Ceremony.](#)

### **First Haircut**

The first haircut will be given to a boy at about 2 years of age.

This family does this rite at the shrine of the paternal grandfather, which is in a grove near to the village where his farm was. A relative is carrying the boy through a field to the old family altar.



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First they must clear a path to the family altar. It is not used regularly, only for special occasions.



Here is the family altar before clearing out the area in front of it.



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They have cleared out the space and now are offering pooja to the altar.



More people walk through the fields to come to the ceremony.



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For the haircut, the boy is held by mother's oldest brother. A barber from Tiruvannamalai does the "haircutting," which is actually shaving of the head.



Shaving is almost complete.



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After the haircut, the mother puts new clothes on the boy, and his head is rubbed with turmeric.



Back to the altar. It is decorated with kum kum for the ceremony.



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The gods have been given food and flowers placed on them. Now they are ready.



The intention of the ceremony is to declare that the boy is now at a new stage in life, no longer an infant or a toddler. He can now participate as a son in family rituals. Here the boy has first bell ringing during the pooja.



Here is boy's first pooja at the family altar.



For more on this see: [Mottai Addithal – A Tamil Boy's First Haircut.](#)

### **Coming of age for a woman**

For a Tamil family, it is a big event when the girl child first menstruates. This marks her transition from a girl into a woman. For the girl, she is now like an adult and she can wear the clothes (sarees) of a woman. For the women of the family, it is one more woman joining them.

I think now it also means that she is marriageable, (or nearly so). This may not have been as much so in the past, due the arranged marriages, sometimes when the girl was very young. These have been outlawed in India now, and I think that average age for marriage has increased a lot in the last 50 years. For example the average age for women to marry, per the Indian census data, was about 16 years in 1961 and 19 in 1991. The age of marriage also goes up as the girl gets more education. In 2000, the age of marriage for illiterates was about 14 (even though marriage under 18 is illegal), and about 20 if the girl graduates from high school.

One thing that an unmarried woman can wear is the "half-saree" which cannot be worn by other women. I think this half-saree advertises a woman available for marriage. There are examples of the girl in this article wearing half-sarees, below. I will point them out. Before I came to India I had seen these in Indian movies I watched. They showed that the girlfriend of the hero was a maiden, an available woman.

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When the girl first has her menstrual period, she is considered unclean. It is part of the ritual to put her into seclusion space. If the family can afford it, they will make a small hut from bamboo and thatch for her. This family could not afford this, so they made a symbolic seclusion area, behind a palm frond. For the next few days she lives and eats and sleeps in this space. Since she is considered unclean, she cannot touch the family's cooking area or materials, nor can she worship at the family altar. She is removed from school for this time, too. She can leave to go out to go to the toilet. That's all.

When we first saw her, she was in her space, already dressed up in a fancy dress, with a kind of head-jewelry common in India, a Tikka, which looks like a pendant on a short chain and is worn down the hair parting.



We went back the next day. She is wearing a half-saree, again with a Tikka on her forehead.

Her aunties are with her much of the days, and they play dress up with the girl all during this period of seclusion.





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Here is one of the aunties.



Here she is on the next day. She again is wearing the yellow half-saree. Today she is dressed in jewelry to the max. I am pretty sure that these are jewelry items from marriages of her aunties. During this time her aunties bring their finest clothes to put on girl.



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On the last day of seclusion, her mother does her flowers. It has been aunties all the other days. Today mother cares for her daughter.



The main event on the final day is a pooja and fire sacrifice with a Hindu priest. Here he is setting up. He has made a small pit on the floor for the fire sacrifice. This pooja will be the act which officially transforms her from a girl to a woman.



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She sits by the fire pit, wearing her half-saree. An auntie is putting kum kum on the girl.



The priest is chanting. I don't think she has ever been the main participant in any of these rituals before.



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She adds offerings to the sacred fire.



After the pooja, the girl – now a woman – offers camphor flame to the family and, again able to worship at the family altar, to the altar itself.



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Now the new woman has changed into a woman's saree and stands before her family.



The family women offer pooja to the new woman.



Her grandmother prepares her hair.



She wears a bride's headdress.



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Next, we see a small but important step. This ceremony is called the “Turmeric washing ceremony.” During the time of her seclusion she has had to wear turmeric rubbed onto her face. This is for purification. Now that the ceremony is over, she is pure again, and can wash it off.



Now they dress her up with woman’s decorations and jewelry and makeup.



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Here is the presentation of the new woman.



Afterward, gifts are offered to the girl, and food is offered to all who have come today.





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For more on this see: [Age Attained Ceremony: a Girl becomes a Woman, Tiruvannamalai](#), and [Tamil Coming of Age – Manjal Neerattu Vizha](#).

### Death, cremation, and afterward

At the end of life there are several ceremonies. See [South Indian Funeral](#) for a typical funeral, [Sarasvati's Mahasamadhi and Cremation](#) for a cremation, and [Taking Sarasvati's Ashes to the River](#) for the disposal of the ashes.

The last ceremony after the cremation is called a *shraddha* in Sanskrit, or *keriyam* in Tamil. This is done more than a week after the cremation (the exact time depends on caste and the deceased's age at death). This gives time for everyone to be notified and for relatives who live further away to come to the ceremony.

The ceremony shown in this post is for a man, about 65 years old when he died. A big part of this rite for this man is the removal of the signs of marriage for the wife, now a widow.

The man was a farmer, so the place for the ceremony is in his fields. Here is a path to walk through the fields to the keriyam site.



The man's four sons offer pooja. They are all freshly shaved by a barber for this day. Other male relatives and friends are gathered here with them.



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One part of the ritual is a ceremonial cremation. A small wooden effigy is made and placed in dry straw and burned.



The ashes from this are dispersed in tank by the four brothers.



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*Pindals*, rice balls, are prepared.



There is a procession with the rice mixture from the broken-up pindals.



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The brothers offer rice to the crows, to take to the deceased. It is important, for an auspicious send off, that crows come and take the rice.



Crows take the rice. All is well.



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Then the women come in procession to the site.



At the head of the procession is the wife of the dead man, the widow, surrounded by relatives and friends and women from her village.



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They bathe the widow.



Then they remove all jewelry that a wife would wear. She is never to wear such jewelry again.



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During this, women gather together grieving.



Now the four brothers make final offerings.



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The offerings are taken into the tank.



The offerings are made by disbursing everything into the water of the tank.





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All the children of the man, both sons and daughters, have to take a bath in these waters now.



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Now new sarees are offered to the widow.



They are piled onto her.





Finally, gifts are offered to the brothers.



Afterwards everybody eats a final meal to honor the departed.



After this, the day of the death is celebrated each year by the family. The family also has a series of restrictions for the first year. For example, they cannot join in any of the normal village celebrations, nor buy or wear new clothes.

To see more, go to [A Keriyam, a Tamil Death Ceremony](#).

The village rites show in this post tie the family together. I think that they are one reason that that Tamil village family has endured so long as a social institution. Because of the strong family, each person knows where they belong in society, and has a network of people who will remain close to them their entire lives. This family structure is under attack now from many of the issues of a modernizing India. In the fourth and last part of this series this will be discussed.

### **Can Tamil Villages be Protected?**

In the first three parts of this series we have shown that the Tamils are an ancient people, called by the BBC, “The oldest living classical civilization.” We have shown village traditions that include gods, goddesses, and guardians that were here before the Brahmanist Vedic Hindu ideas and culture arrived in South India, more than 2000 years ago. We have also looked at some ancient family traditions, including a series of rites of passage over the life of each person in the village that give each person a clear idea of their family and their own place within this family.

This village and family structure are linked to another ancient tradition, that of the Tamil joint family farm, where many generations of the family live under one roof, share food, and together work the farm. All the male members of this joint family are blood relatives, and all the women are either mothers, wives, unmarried daughters, or widowed relatives. They are all together in this joint family. There farms are usually pretty small, and are near to the village.

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You can see people today using the same farming methods. Below is a photo of women planting rice, taken from our home near Tiruvannamalai.



A man is plowing behind a bullock, also taken from our home.



This farm life has not changed much since the introduction of iron, more than 2,000 years ago, though now you will see some farm machines in use: tractors, often small, and rice harvesters. Change has started to come to these villages as India moves into her place in the modern world. I feel that the culture in these villages today is a precious human and cultural resource for the world, and needs to be preserved, recorded, protected and nourished. Lessons learned from this culture need to be shared with other developing countries around the world who have the capability to preserve their own native family farms and farming families.

### **Change is happening now in Tamil Villages**

In the almost 70 years since Indian self-government began with the expulsion of the British, changes have been happening at a significant pace in these villages.

They include:

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- **Public school**, where children are removed from the family for education, and taught about India and the world.
- **Family Planning**, leading to a reduction in the number of children. This change has been rapid, and has decreased the number of children per woman in Tamil Nadu by more than half. So this generation of children is relatively much smaller than the families at the time of Independence.
- **“Green Revolution” agriculture**, with purchased seeds and chemicals. Farming methods, which were unchanged for two millennia, underwent a big change in the 1960s with the “Green Revolution.” The Green Revolution improved farm productivity, but at a dire cost. The cost was for farm chemicals – chemical fertilizers and weed suppressants, and special seeds that did well under this chemical regime. Where before a farmer could start the new season and use seeds he had saved, now each year’s crop has to be financed, borrowing money for the chemicals and seeds that must be purchased. This changes farming, and introduces a financial risk that is ruinous to farmers during bad years, when the debt cannot be repaid. It also has introduced chemicals into the environment that are not healthy for humans and other animals.
- **Electricity and TV** have been brought into most villages now. While having an electric light by which the children can study helps their education, when the children see life beyond the village and are subjected to advertising that makes them want these things, this can pull them away from the village and family.

A common site is this village house with satellite TV antenna.



- **Mobile Phones** are in pretty much every village now. These bring modernity closer to every village.
- **Movement into cities for economic reasons** has been draining the life out of the village as sons (and daughters) move to the city to find work and “make a better life” for themselves. The villages are already facing a smaller generation of children, and many of the next generation leave for the city. Family ties remain when they move to the city, but they are weaker, and the traditional life of the family is limited.
- **Abandonment of elders**, due to children moving to cities and other family problems, such as alcoholism, has become a big issue in villages. The oldest son of the family is supposed to take care of his parents when they get old. But what happens when he

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moves away, or if he is an alcoholic, or they do not have a son (in their smaller family)? We see old people living on the street because of this. This is widespread.

- Two new challenges will add further risks
  - **Smart Phones** are bringing the Internet to the young people of the world. It is particularly hard for them to resist that allure of video and of relationship systems, like FaceBook. The costs for these phones are dropping fast, and as they arrive in the villages, they bring the attention of the young people out of the village, into cities, “where everything is happening.”
  - **Global Warming** brings further risk, with pressure from changing weather and rising oceans. It is not clear to me how this will affect farming in South India. There is already great pressure on water systems, where wells must be dug much deeper due to falling water tables. Agriculture as currently practiced uses about 70% of the available water, with human and manufacturing use comprising the other 30%. What affect Global Warming will have in South India, I have no idea.

### Can the Tamil heritage be protected?

In the USA, the farm houses and villages from my own childhood have vanished. My grandfather was a farmer in Oklahoma. He survived the Oklahoma “Dustbowl” of the 1930s, and when I visited him in the late 1940s he lived in a big farm house, in a situation not unlike the Tamil farmer’s family. He lived there also with some of his children and grandchildren. He had farm workers who lived on his farm, too. I moved from Oklahoma to California as a child in 1953. When I returned to Oklahoma in the 1980s I tried to visit the old farm. When I got to the place there was no house. All the trees had been cleared. There was only farmland from horizon to horizon, cleared of all obstacles that might slow down the farm machines. The farm machines did most of the work, so they did not need all the people to farm the land. Where are all the families now? The families were the life of the country when I was a boy. Now they have vanished in many places in America, This can happen in Tamil Nadu, too. All it takes is for businesses or large land owners to take over farming, and “invest” in “Green Revolution” farming and to invest money in farm machines to replace the farm workers. Then the quality of the food gets worse, and life in the villages becomes even harder, and more children who will become the next generation move away to the city. The family pretty much dies as the functioning unit, and as the families die, so does the village.

Here is a photo of farmland that this typical of that seen in much of the USA now: (from [nicholsonrealtorfarms.com](http://nicholsonrealtorfarms.com))



Where are the people? Where are the families?

## Tamil Villages – The Ancient Spiritual Heart of South India

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I have made the case in these articles that Tamil culture and an ancient way of life is preserved in Tamil villages. This way of life brought with it a culture that has withstood the test of two thousand years, and produced many generations of people who feel good about themselves, and live with a deep kind of personal emotional security, always knowing their place in the world. This kind of personal emotional security is something that has been largely lost in many places in the world. It certainly is no longer there in my homeland in America.

In America, the families are much more fragmented; the result of generations of moving to the new places of opportunity (usually leaving much of their family behind). In the American situation, traditions have died, families are weaker, and there is a kind of personal insecurity faced by many people. This personal insecurity is different from what is felt by the children of Tamil villages. Tamil children face physical insecurity due to deep poverty, but their personal security is enough that you usually see their smiling, happy faces. This is not nearly so much the case with children in the USA.

Again, this could be what is in store of Tamil Nadu. This is a picture of harvesting the wheat crop now in much of the USA (from [heplerphoto.com](http://heplerphoto.com)):



A harvesting team of men and equipment starts working in the spring in the Southern areas of the wheat-growing areas of the USA central plains, like in Oklahoma. The team works its way north, harvesting wheat as it ripens as they go farther and farther north, finally into Canada.

This “agribusiness farming” is a high user of investment capital, petrochemicals (gas and oil), and agricultural chemicals (fertilizers, insecticides and herbicides). In most places it is also the main user of water supplies. In India about half of all water goes to support just rice farming, alone. This kind of farming also is not good for the soil, and over the long time depletes it to where it may no longer be viable for farming – unless even more chemicals are used.

Is this the future we want for Tamil Nadu? Tamil Nadu now has a population of about 75 million, and even though Tamil Nadu is one of the Indian states that is the most industrialized, more than half (56%) of the population lives in villages. So unless we want the Tamil Nadu cities to double in their size, we have to find ways to keep the villages alive, and as a good place for the next generation to live.



### **Need to study and protect Tamil villages**

The need now is to study, document, publish, protect and preserve the ancient culture of the Tamil Villages. Otherwise they might become like farms in the USA.

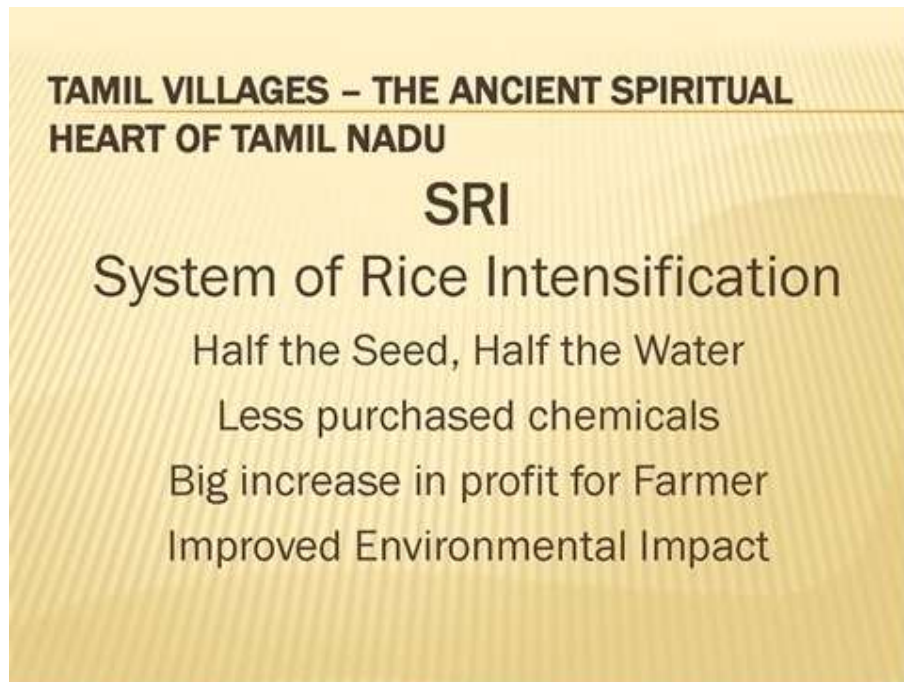
It is important to record and catalogue Tamil village traditions. This is best done by Tamil researchers, since they have a closer ability to understand the language and traditions of the villagers. A central site updated with this research, maybe something like [www.en..tamilwiki.org](http://www.en..tamilwiki.org), could publish this material and provide access to colleagues and the English speaking world.

### **What can be done to nourish and preserve today's villages?**

#### **Agricultural revolution**

Organic agriculture has been shown to improve the soil and to improve the crops. These approaches, such as natural composting, seed saving, and crop rotation, work to build the soil and create the natural environment to control pests. Organic agriculture produces better quality food and lowers the cost to the farmer for seeds, pesticides and fertilizers. This reduces the strain on the farmer by reducing his need to borrow money each year to finance this year's crops.

One example of a specific new technique of rice farming in Tamil Nadu is SRI, System of Rice (or Root), Intensification. SRI is an agro-ecological methodology for increasing the productivity of irrigated rice by changing the management of plants, soil, water and nutrients. It is proven to improve yields and profitability in Tamil farms. Here is a slide from the presentation that summarizes the key points of the now-proven SRI growing techniques:



SRI was developed in 1983 by the French Jesuit Father [Henri de Laulanié](#) in Madagascar. SRI uses less water, about half. It also uses less seed, again about half. Harvests are improved with increased yield by 10 – 100%. SRI uses less chemical fertilizer and weed-control

chemicals. All of this greatly lowers cash investment for the farmer. Lower cash investment and improved yields mean improved profitability for the farmer.

### Help marketing of crops

**Village farmers' co-ops** are used around the world to improve the ability for small producers to join together to market crops. These co-ops share the tasks for storing, transporting and selling the crops. Combining all the village's crop into one marketing organization gives the village much better power and ability to make agreements to sell their agricultural products.

**Better roads** to get fresh crops to market are key in this effort. Slow traffic is the case on roads that are too small and with unrepaired potholes and other road damage. This slow movement of fresh farm produce makes it hard to market and increases the problem with perishable items spoiling. With more than 12,000 villages in Tamil Nadu, having a good road to each village is a big task. Pressure must be applied to the Tamil Nadu state government to get this done. Current Tamil Nadu budget calls for 1364 road improvements per year. At that rate it will be a decade before the road improvement work is finished for the 12, 620 villages.

### Strong laws to protect the villages

Maintain existing strong laws and ensure enforcement of these laws to protect farmland from developers and to encourage family farms in the villages.

There are three legal types of property in Tamil Nadu: Agricultural, Government, and Patta. Agricultural land is limited in use to farming. Patta can be privately owned, and the rest (including most temples, schools and hospitals) is Government land. These land rules are administered by the Tamil Nadu Revenue Department. Tamil Nadu has a strict Agricultural land holding law already, The **Tamil Nadu Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling on Land) Act, 1961**, that fixes that maximum size of a farm own by a family to 60 acres to begin with and later reduced to 30 acres. Industrial uses are restricted to 15 acres. This sounds good, but there are problems, as reported in the [Times of India](#):

However, Section 37-A of the same act empowers the government to issue permission to industrial and commercial undertakings to hold excess land. As per Section 37-B, public trusts can apply to the government for permission to hold or acquire lands for educational or hospital purposes. **It is because of these provisions that educational/medical institutions and industries hold thousands of acres of lands.** (My bolding)

These problems are now in the hands of the High Court. I do not know how confident we can be in their solution. I know of a local land use issue, that of a building for an ashram built upon Government land on Arunachala where the HC ordered that it be removed and the local government was unable to execute the court order.

There is also a problem with misuse of Agricultural land. I have personally seen rental housing built on Agricultural land and rented out. This is illegal, but nothing seems to be done about it. Also there is a big issue with Agricultural land being converted to Patta, and thus to private development. I do not know for myself, but I have heard that real estate developers, with lots of money, are powerful, and can influence members of local governments to convert Agricultural land to Patta.

### Conclusion

We need to realize that Tamil villages are precious. We need to understand them, document their cultural elements, and publicize our findings. We need to preserve them and protect them, and find ways to nourish them for the future. The heart of this, to me, seems like the

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farms. Improved farms means more children will stay in the village as adults. It is easy to choose to stay with something that is successful.

What else can be done? I have made a few recommendations, primarily to improve the agricultural success of Tamil Nadu villages. I know there are other ideas. Some groups have started sourcing crafts items from villages. Others, like the Irula (see [this post](#)), have formed their own organizations to produce and market natural healing herbs and herbal mixtures.

Who is working on these issues? Are there colleges and universities that are providing leadership on these issues? The government is deeply involved. What leadership can be provided by the government? Are there private organizations and NGOs that are involved or that should be involved? I am just a private individual, and a retired foreigner as well. Indian leadership is needed. Who will step up? What can you do? IF you are interested in this, comment to this article. Maybe we can, together, work to effect changes that will insure the survival of Tamil Nadu's ancient traditions.

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