

THE OVERVIEW OF TRADITIONAL LIFE OF NAGARATHARS – THE HISTORICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Tradition has it that when the Chettiars migrated from Chola Nadu, they settled in and around a village called Ilayanthakudi in Pandya Nadu. And here the Pandya king granted to their care the village temple. Over the near decade or so, groups of Chettiars moved on from here to settle in other villages not far from their first settlement and, in time, eight other clusters of villages with Chettiar settlement had been established. To each of them the Pandya king granted a temple in perpetuity. The nine temples, thus, became the 'family' temples of the clusters and each cluster evolved as a subdivision of the Chettiars of what might be described as a fraternal clan. These fraternal members and their families are called *pangalis*. Once, when everyone knew each other, the *pangalis* bond was one of the strongest factors in keeping the Community cohesive. Over the years, *pangalis* have spread further and further and today, few know any but the *pangalis* in villages immediately neighboring theirs and more often only those *pangalis* with whom they share a common ancestor.

Keywords: The contribution of Tamil country of the Nagarathar people of traditions.

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Introduction

The growth of the community has also resulted in the three bigger temples forming subgroups within themselves, the sub-groups themselves taking the characteristics of separate fraternal clans. Changing times and the changed values of a world that is no longer what their forefathers knew has loosened the bonds further, but few Communities have held firmer to tradition than the Nagarathar have to some aspects of the *pangali* tradition. Perhaps the two most commonly respected traditions are that marriage partners must be from different temples or different subgroups (with one exception, mentioned later), while adoption of a male heir must be from within the same temple, or the subgroup if these adopting the boy belong to a subgroup.

Thali (Mangalasutra)

The most impressive and the most sacred or lamentation worn amen the Nagarathar is the kaluthooru. Worn by the bride on her wedding day, it is the tying of this around her neck by the bridegroom before the secured fire that proclaims the couple maenad wife. The kaluthooru comprises 34 gold pieces strung on two twists of 21 stings twined together with a binder and sanctified with turmeric. Fifteen pieces are strung together on the 'top' twist and 14 on the 'lower' with two links to join the two twists. Three more pieces - the kuchchi, thumbu and thoovalai – are added to theses 31 by the bridegroom's family on an auspicious day, usually after the wedding night or after conception and are a signal of the consummation of the marriage.

The entire kuluthooru and the stringing together of the pieces is done by a local asari (Gold smith) who has long been associated with the bride's family. His equipment (facing page, far left) may be primitive, but the craftsmanship produces exquisite – results. The gold for all the pieces except the central one – mangalasutra or thali – is given by the bride's family; the gold for the thali alone is provided by the bridegroom's family in a ritual we have already seen. The 15 pieces on the 'top' twist comprise the following; The thali in the shape so shrine topped by a Gopuram with Mahalakshmi, the goddess of wreath and prosperity in the sanctuary (see detail, above right); on either side of her are the paws of a protective tiger (called ethanam or enathi), two designs of which are shown here, and the rest of the pieces; ten tubular ones called urn-s two of them more ornate than the rest, and two 'beads'. The lower twist comprises three ethanam-s, the more ornate centerpiece featuring goddess Mahalakshmi again; nine uru-s and two 'beads' or

two more ornate tubular pieces. The two twists are linked together by what look like the embellished halves of two tops. All these pieces signify fame, education, strength, success, children wealth, food, good luck, knowledge, beauty, patience, youthfulness, courage, health and cognovits. The 16th fold blessing is the representation of the deity.

The kaluthooru being in two parts has its own significance. The main pieces of the 'lower' twist with a few uru and beads are tied around a girl's neck when she celebrates her Thiruvathirai Pudhumai, that celebration already seen on an earlier page and which in now dying out. This announcement to the public of a girl child who will soon become eligible for marriage reaches a climax with the tying of a symbolic portion of the kaluthooru, an ethanam of which is seen bottom row, centre Marriage brings the kaluthooru full circle. In bottom row, right is a move works day thali representation and a bead that links the two twists.

As the pictures show, the heavy, orate kaluthooru can never be a part of everyday wear. It usually comes out of a sate only in the cast of sister's or brother's marriage or a lifecycle ritual celebration like a 60th or 80th birthday. Brides are therefore given other thali-chains-often an all-diamond one, a shorter version of the same, both for formal occasions, and an all-gold chain and thali for everyday use. The thali-chain, the silver to e-rings and the vermilion puttee on the forehead are the symbols of a *sumangali*, a married woman.

***Thiruvathirai* celebration**

Thiruvathirai celebration, the girls is dressed as a bride and participates in what is sometimes called a 'half wedding' (*araikalyanam*) with her maternal uncle tying a smaller version of the marriage neck-ornament (the mangalasutra or what the Nagarathar call the kaluthooru) and garlanding her (right and above). The maternal uncle, among the Nagarathar, is the first choice as bridegroom for a girl if he is unmarried and plays a key role in all family functions enduing her. As part of the celebration the girl and her friends go round the village singing tor vegetables to be put in their silver containers, the girl's eligibility thus lowing widely informed. The girl is also served special sweetmeats prepared by her maternal family as part of the rituals.

Pongal festival

Temple festivals, village festivals, lifecycle rituals are all part of the Cherriar calendar. In the past, when Chettinad still maintained a large yearends Chettiar population, these celebrations and commemorations would keep families occupied the whole year, except during the inauspicious months of *margali* (December-January) and *Aadi* (July-August). Nowadays, with family's scathe red round the world, attendance has become more occasional, much of it based on 'Leave permitting'. But the festivals go on and a surprisingly large number gather for important festival, particularly a village's anal temple festival or a wedding.

Two festivals, however, are celebrated by Chettiars wherever they are and may be described as household festivals. One is the Harvest festival celebrated by all Hinduy Tamils everywhere and the other is a uniquely Nagarathar festival, again celebrated wherever there the Chettiars are setteted. The Harvest Fesitval, Pongal, is observed by the Chettiars over a two or three day period in Januyary and ther festival that Chettiars alone observe, Pillaiyar Nombu, is celebrated in early December, on the 21st day after the deepam (sacred fire) is lit in the month of *karthigai* on the sacred will Thiruvannamalai.

Moi Eluthuthal

As the festival occasion draws to an end, attendance of relatives is marked by a monetary gift that is recorded. This is known as *Moi Eluthuthal* (relatives recording attendance in writing). Traditionally, a silver uses would be put on a three legged stool (*mukkali*), some milk and a betel leaf put in it and a conch blown to signal that the olai-s (dried palm leaves) have been readied for the record to be written (left). Today a notebook is rested on the cash box). The grandfather's of the couple start the lists, followed by other relatives and then the male *pangali*'s. The amounts vary from Rs: 1001,501,101 down to even a symbolic 25paise. The record not only enables the family celebrating an event to keep count of its relations and kin, but also reflects a bonding of the kin and family groups' family or kin who have married non-Chettiars cannot contribute moi; they are deemed as not belonging to the Chettiar community any more, according to tradition. It is a tradition now breaking down with changing times.

Palani *paathayatra*

It is a long way to the Murugan temple on the top of Palani Hill, in the foothills of the Nilgiris range. The Annual *paathayatra* is made by many Nagarathar, man, woman or child, charring with them all they need to sustain themselves on a journey made barefooted. In an area where worship plays a major role, every Chettiar village has at least one temple. In fact, many have four or five and some even more and some even more and each temple has its Annual festival, called *thiruvila*, which is attended not only by its congregation but by the village and his wife as well in an act of collective worship. The *thiruvila* lasts several days, but the highlight is the climactic day when the dew rated temple chariot with the deity installed in it is hauled by the congregation around the temple square once or twice, clockwise always, before being returned to the temple. Crowds enliven the procession and, as traditional music plays all night long, the streets around the temple throb with all the fun of the fair.

The most significant vehicle in the *thiruvila* is the temple's giant chariot, the *ratham* or *ther*. Pulling the chariot heaps the blessings of the ditsy of the tailor. Others jostle by the side of the chariot, a mere glimpse of the deity best wing on them benediction. The giant the wooden masterpieces with four giant wheels each are embellished with some of the most magnificent wood carving to be seen anywhere. Row after row of friezes feature the pantheon of gods and goddesses, scenes from legends associated with them, and sequences from the epics.

Besides the annual festival, the village temple and many of the other temples have several other festivals every year. These vary from villages to village and even where they have a common descriptive name are celebrated differently according to local custom. Carrying of kavadi's (syblic palanquins), fire walking (striding barefoot on a bad of glowing embers) and acts of mortification, like piercing the flesh with sharp instruments or bearing sanctified objects hooked to the skin, as well as a variety of other acts of penance or sacrifice, in fulfillment of vows or as offerings for boons sought are practiced in many villages during their respective temple festivals. A part from the village temple festivals, the Nagarathar participate in several temple festivals of shrines, the community is closely bound with. Of these other temple festivals none is more important that the Palani temple festival. Indeed, this festival a variable pilgrimage

is the most important pilgrimage undertaken by the Chettiars except for the once-in-a-lifetime visit to kasi (Banaras/Varanasi).

Palani, one of the six abodes of Muruga, is a shrine atop a peak in the Palani Hills that are an eastern spur of the Western Ghats and is just north of Kodaikanal. The annual thhy poosam pilgrimage and festival here is replicated in many a Chettiar temple overseas. But the greatest Thai poosam pilgrimage is the one where Chettiars, their families and, nowadays many from other communities who live in and around Chettinad gather in Karaikudi, and walk all the way to Palani, where the claim is the final steep climb to the peak. Apart from rigorous restrictions on dirtily and social practices followed by all the pilgrims, many carry kavadi's (those symbolic Palani quins) and containers of milk as part of their commitment to the deity.

The Palani pilgrimage is believed to at least 400 years old and is said to have had its beginnings in the religious practices of a komarappa chettiar who came to palani to sell salt and stayed to worship Palani Muruga in his manifestation as valayuda. When the piranmalai sage urged the Pandyan king to sanction an annual pilgrimage by Komarappan from Chettinad to celebrate the wedding of lord velayuda in the Tamil month of Thai (January / February), the collective pilgrimage, worship and celebration got underway and evolved as what is today the major festival of the Nagarathar with tens of thousands participating. The trek takes seven days to reach base camp from Kunrakudi and on the next five days, the pilgrims participate in worship there and make their individual journeys to the peak. On the 13th day the return journey begins and it ends with the Kunrakudi pooja on the 18th day many now take no more than 7-10 days the entire pilgrimage.

Ambu Vizha

The Annual Ambu vizha (spear festival), held on Vijayadasami day every year, is a traditional start to life in the wider world for male children, usually upto five year old, but generally with older boys who missed their opportunity also participating. The festival begins with the priests accompanying the deities on their Vahanam's and spearing or shooting an arrow

at a plantain stem. The boys will follow with their own, some of them of silver, many which have been in families for generation.

Conclusion

The Nagarathars of South India, in a Chettinad village in particular community Cherriars at least for the present. There remains much left undone. I did not explore the impoverishment of the majority of Nagarathars since that time, or the massive investment of their elite in the full range of South Indian industry, from leather to films, and from textiles to engineering. What I have tried to do is to examine aspects of their business practice and social organization in colonial India in order to carry out a critical revision of standard Western conceptions of caste and capitalism. For the Nagarathar do not fit well with these conceptions.

Many students of India will argue that the case of the Nagarathar requires no modification to the standard view since they represent a unique exception to general patterns that the standard view accurately captures. This, it seems to me, is an unfortunate perspective. Every caste in India forms a unique case. The Nagarathar divergence from the Western concept falls well within the range of variation that exists in Indian society. Indeed, the Western conception generally has more to say about Western essentialism and orientalism than it has to say about India. In particular, it is imbued with a normative vision of Western political and economic destiny so powerful that it renders non-Western forms of capitalism invisible and inconceivable, even while depending on those forms for the pursuit of its political and economic dreams. The last few decades have witnessed what may be the beginning of a serious internal deconstruction of Western normative visions. But the outcome of this deconstruction is far from clear. It is still largely restricted to a few small intellectual circles, and it may well prove a passing fashion. No new way of conceiving India has yet emerged. And, as this study demonstrates for study after study, the old ways still prevent an appreciation of even such major players as the Nagarathar of South India. The research on which the present book is based has been possible only because of the Nagarathar themselves, who remain the people most responsible for remembering and transforming both their past and their future.

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