

MINOR DEITY WORSHIP AND FOLK TRADITIONS IN ANCIENT TAMIL SOCIETY

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Abstract

Minor deity worship forms an important part of the religious, social, and cultural traditions of Tamil society. The origins of these traditions can be traced to the early relationship between human beings and nature, as well as to ancestral, hero, and community-based forms of worship. Ancient Tamil literary sources such as the Tolkappiyam, Akananuru, Purananuru, Ainkurunuru, Kuruntokai, and Silappathikaram provide valuable evidence for understanding these practices. The worship of natural forces such as rain, sun, mountains, and other elements was closely connected with the livelihood and survival of early communities. Similarly, the practice of erecting and worshipping Nadukal (Hero Stones) for warriors who sacrificed their lives for the protection of their people reflects the development of hero and ancestral worship. Over time, such traditions contributed to the development of clan and local deity worship. The study also examines the worship of Korravai, guardian deities, Kannagi, Durga, Aiyai, and Kali, highlighting their association with warfare, protection, fertility, community welfare, and religious beliefs. Clan deity worship further demonstrates the relationship between ancestral memory, family identity, social relationships, and cultural heritage. Folk customs associated with minor deities were preserved through stories, songs, proverbs, rituals, festivals, and oral traditions. These practices were transmitted across generations and adapted according to changing social conditions. The study argues that minor deity worship should be understood not merely as a religious practice but also as an important source for reconstructing the social and cultural history of Tamil communities. Thus, minor deities and their associated folk traditions provide valuable insights into the continuity of ancestral memory, community identity, and Tamil cultural heritage.

Keywords / திறவுச் சொற்கள்: Minor Deities; Folk Worship; Nadukal; Ancestral Worship; Korravai; Clan Deity; Guardian Deities; Tamil Culture.

How to cite / மேற்கோள் காட்டும் முறை: P, M. A., & S, D. (2026). MINOR DEITY WORSHIP AND FOLK TRADITIONS IN ANCIENT TAMIL SOCIETY. Tamilmanam International Research Journal of Tamil Studies, 20(01), Volume 1, –.

Foreword

During the Stone Age, human beings lived a nomadic life and moved from one place to another in search of the three basic necessities of life: food, clothing, and shelter. While fulfilling these needs, they encountered various challenges from nature, wild animals, and changing climatic conditions. Gradually, human beings learned to produce their own food and adapt themselves to their natural surroundings.

Nature played an important role in the development of early religious beliefs. Rain and sunlight were essential for agricultural production, and therefore they came to be regarded as sacred forces. The moon, which provided light during the night, thunder and lightning, which created fear, and fire, which was discovered and used by early human beings, were also associated with supernatural powers. Thus, the worship of natural forces became one of the earliest forms of religious practice.

As human beings gradually moved from individual life to community life, they also began to honour individuals who sacrificed their lives for the protection of their community. Warriors and other heroic figures who died while protecting their people were commemorated through Nadukal (Hero Stone) worship. Over a period of time, such practices became associated with ancestral and local deity worship. These traditions contributed to the development of minor deity worship in Tamil society.

Worship

The practice of worship became prominent with the development of beliefs in supernatural and natural forces. Worship may be understood as an expression of reverence, respect, devotion, and obedience towards a deity or sacred power. Through worship, people expressed their respect for the forces that they believed influenced their lives.

Worship also served as a means through which communities expressed their values, beliefs, gratitude, and cultural identity. Thus, religious worship was not merely an individual practice but also formed an important part of the social and cultural life of early communities.

Origin of Worship

People across different societies have followed various forms of rituals and religious practices from ancient times. In the early period, natural elements such as the sun, moon, stars, rivers, seas, mountains, animals, snakes, plants, and other natural forces were worshipped. The emergence of deity worship can be associated with several factors, including fear, struggle, dependence on nature, and gratitude. Human beings were dependent on natural forces for their survival but had limited control over them. As a result, they developed beliefs and rituals through which they sought protection, prosperity, rainfall, fertility, and relief from natural difficulties.

Thus, fear, struggle, dependence, and gratitude played an important role in the development of early forms of worship.

Religious and Natural Elements in Tamil Worship

In ancient Tamil society, there was no strict distinction between major and minor deities in the early stages of religious development. Deities such as Shiva, Thirumal, Murugan, Indra, and Varuna were worshipped along with various local and nature-related deities.

At the same time, traditional forms of worship such as nature worship, Korravai worship, Nadukal or hero worship, ancestral worship, and guardian-deity worship were also practised. These traditions demonstrate the close relationship between religious beliefs, nature, warfare, community life, and social customs in ancient Tamil society.

Hinduism as a Banyan Tree

Hinduism may be compared to a banyan tree with several branches representing different religious traditions. Six major traditions are traditionally identified:

1. Saivism – The worship of Shiva as the supreme deity.
2. Vaishnavism – The worship of Vishnu or Thirumal as the supreme deity.
3. Saktam – The worship of Sakthi or the Goddess as the supreme divine power.
4. Ganapathyam – The worship of Ganesha as the supreme deity.
5. Kaumaram – The worship of Murugan as the supreme deity.
6. Sauram – The worship of the Sun as the supreme deity.

Alongside these major religious traditions, various forms of minor deity and folk-deity worship continued to exist within local communities. These traditions were closely connected with village life, ancestral beliefs, nature, agriculture, protection, and local customs.

Minor Deity Worship

The belief that a village should not exist without a temple reflects the important place occupied by religious institutions in Tamil society. Folk and minor deities have traditionally held a significant position in the religious and cultural life of Tamil communities. They can also be viewed as important expressions of local traditions and Tamil folk culture.

Early human beings first worshipped natural forces and later developed beliefs associated with spirits and ancestors. Spirit worship was connected with the belief in deceased ancestors and their continuing relationship with the living community. Animals that were considered important or helpful to particular communities were sometimes adopted as clan symbols and subsequently associated with religious worship.

The worship of deceased heroes through Nadukal also became an important tradition. Over time, ancestor worship developed into forms of clan-deity worship and local deity worship. Clan-deity worship therefore became one of the important components of minor deity worship, and many communities continued to worship their ancestral deities as part of their traditional religious practices.

Minor deities are generally associated with particular villages, communities, families, or localities. Their worship is closely connected with the protection and welfare of the community. In many traditional temples dedicated to minor deities, worship practices differ from those followed in major temple traditions. In several places, non-Brahmin priests traditionally perform the rituals, reflecting the community-based nature of these forms of worship.

The rituals associated with minor deities may include offerings, festivals, vows, possession rituals, and, in some traditions, animal sacrifice. The practices vary according to the particular deity and local custom. There is also no strict division between Saiva and Vaishnava traditions in many forms of minor deity worship.

The images of minor deities may be made from stone, wood, clay, or other locally available materials. Some deities are represented in distinctive or powerful forms and are believed to possess particular supernatural powers. Unlike the highly institutionalised worship associated with major temple traditions, minor deity worship is often closely connected with everyday village life.

Minor deity traditions are therefore strongly associated with the Little Tradition, in which religious beliefs and practices are transmitted through local customs, oral traditions, festivals, rituals, and community participation. These traditions provide valuable evidence for understanding the social, cultural, and religious history of Tamil villages.

Thus, minor deity worship represents an important dimension of Tamil religious culture. It reflects the interaction of nature worship, ancestor worship, hero worship, clan traditions, village customs, and community beliefs and has continued to evolve through different historical periods.

Minor Deity Worship in Ancient Tamil Society

The worship of minor deities in ancient Tamil society was closely associated with ancestral worship, hero worship, nature worship, and the protection of the community. Among these traditions, Nadukal (Hero Stone) worship occupies an important place. Hero stones were erected in memory of warriors who lost their lives while protecting their people, cattle, or territory. The Tolkappiyam provides evidence for the practices associated with the erection and worship of hero stones.

«Kaatchi Kaalkol Neerppadai Nadukal
Seerthagu Marapin Perumpadai Vaazhthalenru
Iru Moonru Marapin Kallodu Punara”
— Puraththinaiyiyal, 5»

This evidence indicates that the hero stone was not merely a memorial stone but also became an object of reverence. Warriors who died while protecting cattle and the community were remembered through such stones, and rituals were performed in their honour.

The Akananuru also provides evidence for the worship of hero stones. It describes how the hero who protected the cattle herds was commemorated, and how offerings were made before the hero stone:

«Nuzhainuthi Ned uvel Kurumpadai Mazhava
Munai Aathandhu Murampin Veezhtha
Villo Vaazhkai Vizhuthodai Marava
Vallaan Pathukkaik Kadavul Penmaar
Nadukal Peeli Sootti Thudipaduthu
Thoppik Koododu Thuruu Uppili Kodukkum...”
— Akananuru, 35:4–10»

Similarly, the Ainkurunuru refers to hero stones bearing inscriptions that recorded the names and achievements of the warriors:

«Vizhuthodai Marava Villidath Tholainthor
Ezhuthudai Nadukallenna”
— Ainkurunuru, 352»

The Tolkappiyam also mentions the practice of engraving the name and honour of the hero on the stone:

«Peedum Peyarum Poriththu Athaa Thorum
Peeli Soottiya Pirangu Nilai Nadukal”
— Tolkappiyam, 67»

These literary references show that hero-stone worship gradually acquired elements of ancestral worship. Warriors who died for the protection of their community were initially honoured through memorial stones. Over time, the memory of such deceased persons became connected with the belief that they could continue to protect their descendants and community. This tradition can therefore be considered one of the historical foundations of later clan-deity and ancestral-deity worship.

Nature Worship

Nature worship was another important element of ancient Tamil religious practices. Rain, mountains, forests, rivers, and other natural forces were regarded as having a direct influence on human life. The people prayed to the rain deity for favourable rainfall and relief from excessive rain. The Purananuru records such a practice:

«Malaivaan Kolkena Uyirppali Thooy
Maari Aanru Mazhai Mekku Uyaga Enak
Kadavul Peniya Kurava Makkal
Peyal Kan Maariya Uvagaiya”
— Purananuru, 143:1–4»

This passage indicates the close relationship between the people, nature, and religious belief. Rain was essential for agriculture and livelihood, and therefore prayers and ritual practices were performed to seek favourable climatic conditions.

Worship of Korravai

Korravai was another important deity associated with ancient Tamil society. She was particularly connected with warfare, victory, and the martial traditions of the Palai landscape.

Warriors worshipped Korravai before and after battles and celebrated their victories through ritual performances. The Tolkappiyam refers to the place of Korravai worship in the martial tradition:

«Marang Kadai Koottiya Thudinilai Sirandha
Kotravai Nilaiyum Aththinai Purname”
— Tolkappiyam, Puram, 62»

The worship of Korravai involved rituals associated with victory and warfare. The Vettuva Vari section of Silappathikaram provides a detailed description of the worship of Korravai and the ritual practices associated with her. This shows that deity worship was closely connected with the social and military life of ancient Tamil communities.

Guardian Deities and Community Worship

The worship of guardian deities was also an important feature of ancient Tamil religious life. Silappathikaram provides evidence for the worship of the Kaaval Bootham at Puhar during the Indra festival. Various food items, flowers, incense, and offerings were presented to the deity. People also performed dances and ritual activities and prayed for the prosperity and welfare of the kingdom.

«Kaaval Boothathuk Kadaikezhu Peedikai
Puzhukkalum Nolaiyum Vizhukkudai Madaiyum
Poovum Pugaiyum Pongalum Sorindhu
Thunaingaiya Kuravaiya Anang Ezhunthaadip
Perunila Mannan Irunilam Adangalam
Pasiyum Piniyum Pagaiyum Neengi
Vasiyum Valanum Surakkena Vaazhthi”
— Silappathikaram, Indra Vizha»

This passage demonstrates that guardian-deity worship was not limited to individual religious devotion. It was also connected with the collective welfare of society. People prayed for the removal of hunger, disease, and enmity and sought prosperity and abundance.

Worship of Kannagi

The story of Kannagi in Silappathikaram also illustrates the transformation of a human figure into a deity. After the destruction of Madurai, Kannagi was believed to have attained divine status. The Kuravar people witnessed her ascent and worshipped her as a divine being. This episode indicates how an individual remembered for extraordinary qualities or actions could gradually become an object of worship.

Ancient Tamil literature also refers to the presence of deities in public spaces such as streets, squares, junctions, and common places. These places were associated with community-based religious practices and indicate that worship was integrated into everyday social life.

Worship of Durga, Aiyai and Kali

The worship of female deities such as Durga, Aiyai, and Kali can also be identified in ancient Tamil literature. Offerings and ritual practices were performed as part of their worship. The Kuruntokai refers to a ritual in which a yellow thread was tied around the arm of the person participating in the ceremony:

«Vidaa Mugai Adukkathu Viralkezhu Soolikkuk
Kadanum Poon aam Kain Nool Yaavam”
— Kuruntokai, 218:1–2»

Such ritual practices demonstrate the importance of vows, offerings, and ritual protection in ancient Tamil religious traditions. Some of these practices continued in later village-deity festivals in different forms.

SIGNIFICANCE OF IDOL WORSHIP

Minor deity worship is often associated with the installation of stones or images and the offering of flowers and garlands. These practices represent important elements of the cultural heritage of Tamil communities. Through such forms of worship, the memories, values, and traditions of ancestors have been preserved and transmitted from one generation to another.

The worship of minor deities also reflects the importance given to human relationships and community bonds by earlier generations. Various traditional customs, rituals, and practices were developed in connection with the worship of these deities. These practices helped strengthen family and community relationships and preserved the cultural identity of the people.

CLAN DEITY WORSHIP

Clan deity worship has played an important role in maintaining family traditions and relationships. Our ancestors worshipped their clan deities and considered them protectors of their families and communities. Through these traditions, they preserved family honour, identity, social status, and the cultural heritage of their lineage.

Clan-deity worship is closely associated with ancestral traditions. Many families traditionally maintain a connection with a particular clan deity and visit the deity's temple during important occasions and festivals. In some cases, these temples are located in remote areas such as forests, mountains, fields, or other places associated with the ancestral settlement of the community.

Such traditions demonstrate the close relationship between ancestral memory, family identity, religious belief, and community life. Clan-deity worship therefore forms an important component of minor deity worship and folk religious traditions in Tamil society.

CONCLUSION

Folk deities and their worship preserve the stories, beliefs, rituals, and cultural traditions of Tamil communities. These practices reflect the experiences, values, and social life of earlier generations. Therefore, minor deity worship remains an important part of the religious, social, and cultural heritage of Tamil society.

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