

FESTIVALS OF IRULA TRIBES IN VILLUPURAM DISTRICT OF TAMIL NADU

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Abstract of the study

Festivals are considered as a special gathering regarding particular events which are related to social activities, cultural traits or religious fervor. Festivals are more significant for cultural preservation, community building and personal well being. These are foster parent of social harmony, family bonding and provide also economic opportunities. These are also a break from the daily routine and tire some works allowing for joy, reflection and a sense of collective identity. There are many festivals in India as national festivals. Many are common in the state level festivals. Some other festivals are applicable only to particular group of people and particular topographical area. For example, river festivals are being celebrated only at the surrounding of the river bed areas. Festival like Kanniyamman festival or Kannimar festival is being celebrated by Irulas. Kanniyamman is the Hindu terrestrial and family goddess of particular group of people. Irula tribe is one of the primitive tribal groups in Tamil Nadu. Irula tribe is considered as hill tribe as they are living in Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu. Apart from that they are also living in northern districts of Tamil Nadu such as Thiruvallur, Chengalpattu, Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram districts. Though they are living in some districts of Tamil Nadu, this article concentrated only the festivals celebrated by the Irula tribes in Villupuram **district of Tamil Nadu.**

Key Words : traits, fervor, harmony, primitive, topographical area, terrestrial, Kanniyamman Kannimar, concentrated and celebration.

Irula tribes in Villupuram district

The tribes in Villupuram district particularly Irula tribe are celebrating many festivals with much efforts, Kanniyamman festival and Masi Magam are the most significant festivals of the Irula tribes. The sample survey had been taken in many villages such as Avadaiyarpattu, Anichampalayam, Koththamangalam, Venganthur, Kanchanur, Athanur, Anangur, Vikravandi, Pappanapattu, Orathur, Thumbur, Pombur and Kandamanadi. Some villages which are more tribal concentrated villages in 13 blocks in the district are chosen for analysis. Variations are found in celebrating the other festivals like Pongal, Deepavali, Thai poosam, etc. But Irula tribes are found with similarity in celebrating Masi Magam and Kanniyamman festival. ¹

Mariyamman is a well known terrestrial Hindu goddess which is worshipped as Clan deity or family deity or Kula Dheivam for the particular group of the people. This Goddess is also known as goddess of small pox as the people have made worship for curing a disease small pox. This is also worshipped by Irulas by the name special festival as Kannimar festival or Kanniyamman festival. During the time of ceremony a sheep is sacrificed and flesh is distributed to the Irula presents including the pujari who is the person performing rituals on the occasion. Their cry is taken up with wild enthusiasm by all those present and the whole crowd, while the Irula priest invokes the deities by blowing his conch and beating his drum and pours oblations over, and decorates with flowers, the two stones which represent them. The ceremonies close with prayer for seasonal rain pouring and fruitfulness among flocks and herds, a wild dance by Irulas and the boiling of much rice in milk.²

Masi Magam festival

It is the festival celebrated by the Irula tribes as well as other people of the society. It is being celebrated during the Tamil month of Masi (from February to March). The Irula tribal council has taken efforts to celebrate the Masi Magam festival at Mahabalipuram which is located in east coast road in Kanchipuram district of Tamil Nadu. All the Irula tribes have to be assembled from various districts of Tamil Nadu including Villupuram district. There is a stage made by the senior Irula people and *Sapta kanni* (seven virgins) idol was prepared and erected near by the stage. During this festival, Naming ceremony, Earring function, Marriage function, etc are being celebrated in their traditional ways with songs and dances. During their ancestors' period, Worshipping *Sapta Kanni* had been famous in Mahabalipuram during Pallava rule in Tamil Nadu. Hence they had chosen this place and Masi Magam festival is being celebrated year by year. When the festival is going on, the tribes those who are assembled there used to cook fish and they are serving among themselves. It is commonly seen that many tribal wizards came from Kerala and involved magical activities in Mahabalipuram.³ The Irula tribes not only in Tamil Nadu but also in Kerala had also strong belief in chanting and sorcery. This festival offers enthusiasm, joy, reunion of Irulas and cultural preservation and Masi Magam festival is one of the important festivals of the Irula tribes of Villupuram district.

Kannimar/ Kanniyamman festival

Process of worshipping Kula Dheivam is not a modern phenomenon and it has been inherited from the past. It was found in the joint society which is combination of various Kulas. In course of time, separate Kula was formed with their ancestral leader. The society including tribal community used to worship Kula Dheivam to fulfill their needs. In course of time each Kula had their Kula Dheivam. In such a way the Irula tribes had their own Kula Dheivam as *Kannimar* or *Kanniyamman* which is otherwise known as *Sapta Kannis* (Seven virgins). The Irula people had faith that the dead ancestors' souls are surviving if they were dead in accident or in early stage or in unmarried stage. For satisfying the unquenched soul, they used to sacrifice the lives of animals. Even today it has been continuing without any modification. There was one male deity name called Pavadairayan which was considered as guardian to *Sapta Kannis*. It was believed that the seven *Kannis* were the incarnation forms of Goddess Parvathi who was being punished by Lord Siva and had taken avatar as seven *Kannis*. Very few villages in tribal areas of Villupuram district have separate temple for *Kanniyamman*.⁴ In many tribal villages have the *Kanniyamman* temple near by the lake or river in their villages. There is temple for *Kanniyamman* at Avadayarpattu village in Vikravandi block of Villupuram district. The *Kanniyamman* temple is situated in the western direction of Irula habitation at Avadayarpattu and it is facing towards the

east. A monolithic idol of Seven Kannis was erected in the sanctum and sanctorum of this temple. During the month of April, Kannimar festival is being celebrated in every year. It was being celebrated in every year during the Tamil month of Chithirai in wanning season. It was also happened (to researcher) to present before the festival on 09.04.2022.⁵

a) Flag binding

Before commencement of the festival, the tribal elder council assembled and made pre arrangements for celebrating the festival. For meeting expenses, each and every tribal family had to pay some amount according to fixation of the council. Flag binding is initial process for the festival. There are two groups of relatives in the tribal community such as *Pangali* (Patrilineal) and *Sambandhi* (matrilineal) which mean father related genealogy and mother (father in law) related genealogy respectively.

The former groups involved in preparing bamboo shoot and the latter involved in making procession with sorting objects like fruits and sweets from Kathavarayan deity at the village and both were marching with drums towards the place where Nelakaliyamman goddess is located. After that a white cotton cloth which was dipped in yellow water and three things such as natural charcoal, raft and one rupee coin as surviving amount have been put in the yellow watered cloth and tied in the tip of the bamboo shoot. When father- in – law related people are approaching to the place where another group is straightening bamboo shoot and planted near by the Nelakaliyamman goddess' location.⁶

b) Kappu Kattuthal (or) Tie Protection

Kappu Kattuthal (Tie Protection) is a traditional custom of Tamil people and it is also practiced in many holy festivals. Likewise this practice has also followed by the tribal groups like Irulas. For celebrating Kanniyamman festival, tie protection is being practiced in proper manner. Before a week of the Kanniyamman festival, there was a mass tribal gathering at the temple, a white thread is dipped into yellow water (water with turmeric powder) and it is tied into seven females and seven male members who are strongly adhere with abstinence such as they should avoid out stay at night, meat eating, consumption of alcohol etc. From the day of tie protection, a tiny level function is being held each day and it has been progressing for 6 days. On the seventh day, Kanniyamman festival was properly celebrated by Irula tribes.⁷

c) Kanniyamman festival celebration

There was a hail among the Irula tribes those who are assembled there. Drums and other musicians are playing their instruments the tribal groups are involved in dancing with enthusiasm. Through their songs, they are praying rain pouring, free from diseases and nurture of nature, etc. These are the songs inherited from the past and their ancestors. The songs which was sung focused on eulogy of Kanniyamman which is main deity of prosperous of the Irula tribes. The Kanniyamman idol was adorned with flowers brought for procession in tribal and non tribal areas. Some non tribal people donated some grains like paddy, ragi, millet, etc. A group of tribal women took the paddy and made raw rice and cooked it and distributed others as Prasatham. After that, there is an offering to Kanniyamman with cooked rice, sambar, dry fish chauce, etc. This type of offering to Kanniyamman is known as *Kumbam Kottuthal* which might have been Heap of the food.⁸

The names of seven Kannis are Agayakanni, Thamaraiakanni, Elumichaikanni, Saravedikanni, Neerodaikanni, Megakanni and Sapta kanni.⁹ As social structure of the tribes is matriarchal one, worshipping the female deities is a reasonable one. It is also stated that the seven Kannis are incarnation forms of the various Ammans like Mariyamman, Thukkuyammal, Kutlaiyammal, Meenatchiyammal, Kamatchiyammal,

Muthumariyamman and seventh deity is Kanniyamman.¹⁰ Various kinds of music apparatus have been used in the festivals. There was tribal drums artist in Kanniyamman festival and it was sometimes voluntarily involved in the musical activities. The members of music band group are as follows.

Irula tribes' musical band ¹¹

Sl No	Name of the Person	Native place
1	P. Ramesh	Thensiruvalur
2	Manikandan	Kallakulathur
3	Siva	Tindivanam
4	Krishna	Tindivanam
5	Chinnarasu	Kedar
6	T.J Selvi (Transgender)	Tindivanam
7	Swedha (Transgender)	Seyyur
8	Chinndhurai	Madhurapakkam
9	Karthi	Mailam

Yellow watering

Yellow watering function is final stage of the Kanniyamman festival. On eight day, the idol of Kanniyamman is bathed with yellow water. Then the idol is brought into sanctum of the temple. The bamboo shoot tied with yellow watered white cloth has been brought into river side and thrown into river bed. All the persons those who tie protected rallied into procession on the streets and restored to the temple.¹²

Irula Belief System

The Irulas belief system clearly refers to as a religious behavior relating to supernatural beings having names, have a separate identity and Irulas pray them customarily to get a source of power and to fulfill their belief needs. The supernatural beings worshipped by the Irulas are divided into three categories.

- a. Ancestral spirits – Jatasami, Alumaliya, Boothanatha, Karbandiaya, Navagal, Bandar, Sarana, Ambaliyuraiyan, Karpantaiya
- b. Tribal deities – Ganga Basappa, Bellamma, Allimayaram, Ombatta, Masiniamma, Silingaraya, Bannari, Dandan, Bellamma
- c. Hindu gods and goddesses – Rangasami, Mariayamma, Sivan, Ganesha, Murugan, Ayyappa, Venkatachalapathy, Lakshmi, Chamundeswari, Meenakshi, Kaamakshi, Bhadrakali ¹³

Irulas worship clan and lineage-wise deities and spirits under identified trees and rocks. The ancestral spirits, the Irulas refer them Kali or Kathu (symbolic air) which often joins after worship with the Irula deities. They also believe a king type spirit among the ancestral spirits, called by them as ‘Kadodi’, a forest spirit who is responsible to preserve all the sacred plants and sacred rocks of the Irulas. A symbolic relationship between nature and human beings is maintained by this tribal belief. ¹⁴

As observed by C.P Vinod that an Irula life is totally religious oriented. He observed that, In all affairs, they seek the permission of their clan deities through the peculiar custom by which a signal or word is sought during the puja known respectively as pukekkal and vakkekkal. If a person needs the permission from her/his clan deity for conducting and of the life cycle rituals or for other personal purpose, then she/he goes to the

temple of the deity on the puja day with puja offerings like flowers, banana, coconut oil, sandal sticks etc. After the puja is completed she/he presents the matter before the deity. If the pujari is in a trance they will get a work from him negatively or positively. If they want a signal directly from the god the pujari will place flowers on the top of the idol and burn the camphor with ringing of the bell. If the flowers fall on the right side that will indicate a positive signal and they fall on the central or left side it is presumed to be negative. Thus the importance of the priest is very much among the Irulas.¹⁵

Among the Irula religious belief system, the Irula memorial temples are significant in understanding their animistic behavior of their hill religious beliefs. William Jeadhas and William Noble further added about the Irulas memorial temples as such, memorial temples were the most characteristic structures in the original Irula religious system when unaffected by Hinduism. As an extension of their belief in spirits, the Irulas worshipped the spirit of their departed. An ancestral spirit may be associated with a water – worn stone placed on an altar within a memorial temple.¹⁶ Typically, immediate family members who can afford to do so will bring a stone from a stream bed at one to several years after the death of their relative, once the stone is emplaced, a feast has to be provided for the kin and others in attendance... the memorial temples are constructed amidst the small earthen burial mounds.¹⁷

The festivals are considered as the symbol of cultural activities of not only the common people but also tribes. The customs and conventions followed by the tribes more considerable that of the other people. Through their celebrating festivals, one can easily understand the behavior, customs, conventions, traits and other cultural activities of the Irulas in Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu.

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