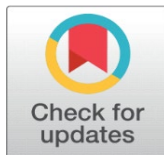
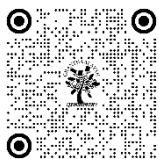


## THE RHYTHM OF RITUALS OF TAMIL NADU – A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

A ritual is a set of actions performed in a particular order with religious, cultural, or socially significant meaning. Religious ceremonies are usually followed as prescribed in religious scriptures as a long-standing practice. Music and dance have always had their place among humans that can be traced back to as early as the ancient civilisations of the world. Even to date, some of the most common factors that can be seen as a part of rituals, irrespective of cultural differences, might be music, dance, and food. Rhythm is ever prevailing in all nature and even in manmade things. The music and dance are mere extensions of the rhythm of an individual or a community that is expressed outward. Hence, they are inevitable in the rituals too. India, with a rich tradition of religion and arts, influences the community to a greater extent.

This study uses a descriptive research methodology to analyse the Rituals of Tamil Nādu involving music and dance. The mythological background of rituals and music, rituals regarding the temple, kingdom, folk rituals, and commoners involving music or dance have been discussed. These rituals are slowly fading with the increase in the modernisation of the world. With technologies replacing several artists, it can also be considered the last resort to record and archive arts and rituals on the verge of extinction. Some ritualistic arts might not be saved even with help as they follow a rigorous customary tradition that can only be carried on by the family line. Rituals involving superficial beliefs that affect or hurt the physical aspects of humans or animals might be avoided. However, the arts related to it must be encouraged to document to be passed on to the future generation.

**Keywords:** Rituals, Music, Dance, Tamilnadu, Culture

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tamil Nadu is one of the prominent states of India. The geographical aspects of Tamil Nadu until the British colonisation were constantly changing depending on the ruler of the kingdom. For example, during the Chola dynasty, the Tamil region spread to the Himalayas and Southeast Asian countries. The vast area of interactions between various regions also brings cultural exchange. Apart from the Tamil dynasties conquering other places, the Tamil parts were captured and conquered by different rulers, like Vijayanagara (1336 AD to 1565 AD), Nayakas (1529 AD to 1671 AD), Marathas (between 17th and 19th century AD) and later by the British, Portugal and France, enabling cultural influence on daily living, food, music, dance, fashion, etc., which was inevitable.

A ritual is a set of actions performed in a specific order line. It might have a religious, cultural, social, or individual meaning. A religious ritual usually follows a sacred scripture. A social or cultural ceremony might be a collective belief held by a group to achieve a common goal. Such practices, religious or social, unify the people in the process. Thus, rituals are considered essential and meaningful. Music and dance have always been a part of humans that can be traced back to the earliest human civilisations. They shall be described as the outward expression of the inner rhythm or emotion of the individual or community. Invariably, they have an essential part in the rituals, too. The most common factors that can be noted during most ceremonies across the globe are Food, Music, and Dance.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study is qualitative research using a descriptive methodology. Data are analytically obtained to describe the phenomenon of Rituals, Music or Dance's influence on it and its current situation.

## **3. NEED FOR STUDY**

This study aims to understand the prevalence of music and dance related to rituals of various walks of life in Tamil Nadu and the psychological impact, fading of many traditions due to modernisation and lack of monetary benefits to artists, and Methods to prevent them from being extinct from practice.

## **4. THE MYTHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

In Hinduism, Vedas, the oldest scriptures, consist of music in Sama Veda, while Shiva is considered the cosmic dancer. This shows that the music or dance shall be of divine origin. Lord Krishna is seen with a Flute, Goddess Saraswathi with Veena, Saint Narada with a Karthal and a Veena called Mahati, Nataraja with a Damaru, Vishu with his conch and Nandi with Mridangam. Apart from the apparent association of the deities with musical instruments, scriptures mark more deities connected to music and dance. Music compositions describing Kalinga narthana of Lord Krishna, Narthana Ganapathi, Ras of Krishna and gopis, etc., are also seen. The shrine of Thillai Kali of Chidambaram is believed to be the result of the story of the dance battle between Shiva and Shakti. In a Thirupugzhal “Adala Sēda Nārāda”, Arunagirinathar enlists several deities, including Adisheshan, Shiva, Kāli, Shivaganas, Saraswathi, Brahma, Lakshmi, Vishnu, Chandran and other devas as dancing.

The lord Nataraja is known as the dancing form of Shiva. The term Nataraja directly means the king of Dance. There are several Philosophies (Thathuvam) concerning the type of dance, timing of dance, place of dance, the reason for dance, objects held during the Thandavam, etc., which is a vast topic on its own. Specific to Tamil Nadu, five Sabhas are located at Chidambaram, Madurai, Tiruvalangadu, Kutralam and Thirunelveli, respectively. He is believed to dance different Thandavas in these abodes specific to the place, reason, and timing. These might be considered rituals. For example, it is believed that Shiva Dance Ānanda Thāndavam for the sound of Damaru to perform his five duties, namely Padaithal, Kāthal, Azhithal, Mariathal and Arulal. This might be considered one of the very first rituals by the lord himself through music and Dance.

According to Natya Shastra, after the construction of Ranga or Theater by the celestial architect Vishwakarma, different deities were assigned to various parts of

the theatre as protection. The artist was also advised to play the drums at the beginning of a performance to ward off any evil spirits or to pacify them, along with the pooja for Jarjara staff presented by Indira to actors as protection. These mythological stories can be seen in the second and Third chapters of Natya Shastra.

The king of Lanka, Ravana, a great devotee of Shiva, is known for his Rudhra Veena. He even played the Veena to please Lord Shiva when stuck under the Himalayas.

Karaikal Ammayar is one of the 63 nayanmārs. She requested the lord to bless her with a ghost form. Once she reached Mount Kailash, Shiva welcomed her by calling her “oh mother”, and he asked her to sing at Thiruvālangadu Sabha when he performed Urdhva Thandavam. Her statue is seen with cymbals in her hands. She has contributed many songs as a part of the 11th Thirumurai. This can also be understood as Her music, and cymbal playing was part of the Urdhuvathandava ritual of Lord Shiva of Thiruvālangadu. Many other nayanmars have sung the praise of Shiva and saved lives. For example, Thirunyana Sambandar sang Poompavai Thirupathigam to bring back the life of the girl Poompavai from the ashes.

Similarly, Thirunavukarasar helped the son of Apputhiadigal to come back to life after dying from a snake bite. Sundarar sang hymns to bring back a boy who died seven years ago because of being swallowed by a crocodile. [Power of Hymns. \(2016\)](#)

## 5. ROYAL RITUALS

Kings and kingdoms were the political forces that ruled people for several centuries. Art forms of any culture were primarily supported by Royal patronage. Art forms like Literature, Music, Dance, Sculpture, etc., are historical evidence to date. Tamil Nadu has had many glorious dynasties like Pallavas, Pandyas, and Chozhas, during which all the art forms flourished. They also constructed many temple complexes that stand tall to date. They were designated poets, musicians, and dancers for each court. They were appointed not just as mere entertainers but also as essential scholars. They recorded the history of the kingdom they were part of through their art.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Murasu / Berigai [Hma. \(2022\)](#)

Kingdoms had many rituals carried out regularly or during a specific occasion. For example, an everyday practice would involve an official court assembly. The announcement of the arrival of the king and other royal members, announcements done to the public, may be regarding tax or about an occasion, procession, marriage announcement, etc., usually uses a drum called Berigai/ Murasu ([Figure 1](#)) is a type of drum that is also predominantly used to call soldiers to war, inform people to be safe as a war is about to begin, and announce the result of the war. Claiming the war

drum of the defeated king is considered a part of celebrating victory. [Leather/skin Instruments - Tamil Heritage. \(2021\)](#) In the Silapathikararam, Karikala Chola's expedition to the Himalayas is described in chapter 5. In this, there is a mention of Murasu as "Mayirkan Murasum", which the Karikalan is said to have carried along with his white Umbrella. These instruments, Berigai and Murasu, have been mentioned in Mahākavi Subramniya Barathiyar's poems. "Jaya Berigai Kottada" [Bharathiyar & Govindarajan \(2018\)](#) & "Vetri yettu thikkum yetta Kottu Murase" [Bharathiyar et al. \(1947\)](#)

Pattabishekam is another crucial ceremony for any kingdom. It is either the beginning of a new kingdom established or a successor carrying the legacy forward. This joyous occasion may include music and dance to celebrate the same. Kamar, in his Ramayanam, describes the Maha Pattabishekam or the crowning ceremony of Lord Rama, in the last chapter. He says Rama was crowned as the auspicious music played, four Vedas chanted, the conch blew, Mridangam played, many pure instruments played, and all the celestial beings showered flowers in happiness. [TVU \(n.d.\)](#)

*"Mangala Geetham Pāda, Marai Oli Muzhanga, Valvāi  
Sangu Inam Kumura, Pāndil Thannummai Olippa thā il  
Pongu Palliyangal Ārppa Poo Mazhai Pozhiya"*

## 6. TEMPLE RITUALS

Temples are places of worship. Besides being used for religious activities, they have also had many important social and political purposes. These architectural marvels also serve as a historical record of various happenings when the temple was constructed. Temples usually follow Āgamas of the primary deities. Āgamas are a collection of religious scriptures, with the rules and regulations to conduct various rituals and to govern the temple in general. Apart from the priests, musicians and dancers were also officially appointed in temples to carry out traditions to be performed as a part of regular worship. Raja Raja Chozhan constructed the great Brihadeeshwarar temple of Tanjavur. It has one of the longest inscriptions in history. It contains details of the 400 Devadasi dancers donated to the temple, a list of musicians, their allotted house addresses, and their salaries. The inscription placed on the outer wall of the main sanctum sanatorium shows the importance of the dancers and musicians concerning the temples and rituals. Periyamelam ([Figure 2](#)) and Chinnamelam are the most common artists involved in temple rituals. ([Figure 3](#))

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Periyamelam [Jayakumar \(2021\)](#)

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** Chinnamelam [Basu \(2022\)](#)

- **Periyamelam**

The Periyamela consists of one or two Nadaswaram and one or two Thavil, along with a person to play the cymbals. They perform primarily during the six-time pooja conducted for the deity, from the morning pooja (Thiru palli yezhuchi) to the night pooja (Palliyarai). They play specific songs in specific ragas for the respective pooja. For example, according to the Periyamela repertoire of the Chidambaram Natarajar Temple, Ter Mallari in raga Gamera Natai is played when shiva is carried from his main shrine to the palanquin. During the procession, a Muthuthandavar Krithi in raga Karaharapriya is played from the flagstaff to the bed chamber. A traditional Palliyarai Pātu in raga Neelambari is played during the final offering and closing of the Bed Chamber.

Similarly, each temple might follow similar rituals with some variations among the Shivite temples. However, there may be a considerable difference in the ritual practices between Shivite and Vishnavite temples. They also perform during the processions, flag hoisting before the annual temple festival and during the flag-lowering ceremony during the annual festival of the temple.

- **Chinnamelam**

Chinnamelam consists of Dancer, Mridangam and a nattuvanar. Bharathanatyam was formally known as Chinnamelam or Sadir. Devadasis were the dancers who could officially perform for the god. They were considered the concerts of the main deity of the temple. There were Devadasis offered to the temple, even from the royal families. They were given a high position in society and oversaw many essential temple rituals. They performed as a part of the Shodasha Upacharas (Sixteen) offered to the deity. They performed Shudha Nritham [Nrithyalaya \(2019\)](#), where only the dancer and the mridangist were involved. Kumbha Ārathi was also waived by the dancer called Kudamurai Dasi. Such a dancer is a person who is already initiated into the path of spirituality through Deeksha. They also handled all the materials and vessels involved in shodasha upachara, from cleaning to arranging. Apart from the direct offering through dance, they usually imitate the offering done by the priest inside the sanctum by standing outside using hasta abhinaya at the same time. During the Brahmotsava festival times, dancers with the title Alankāra Dasi would perform along with the procession. Generally, Thodayamangalam [Sundaram \(2021\)](#) and Ārathi music specific to that temple will also be performed. A specific group of 9 dances called Navasandhi Kowthuvam [Geethanjali - Indian Classical Music. \(2016\)](#) are performed on the first day of the temple's Annual festival, soon after the flag hoisting. This is performed in each

direction in a specific pan, tala, Raga, and vadhya prescribed to that sandhi or direction. This is done to invoke the energy of the go of that direction and seek his protection during the upcoming festival. All these rituals are only history now as they are out of vogue due to the abolition of the Devadasis by the Tamil Nadu Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act 1947.

- **Arayar Sevai**

Arayar Sevai is a ritual performed in certain important Vaishnavite temples of Tamil Nadu, also called Kondattam, as it celebrates the greatness of Vishnu. This is a unique offering performed by Persists called Arayar as a part of the worship. In Tamil Nadu, this ritual is performed only in Srirangam, Srivilliputhur and Azhwar Tirunagar. They Perform the Nalayira Dhivyaprabandam, written by the twelve Azhwars, in front of the Utsavar by singing and enacting hand gestures. It was believed to have started when Thirumangai Azhwar performed it for the lord, which was recorded in the “Kovil Ozhugu” temple record of Srirangam. They adorn themselves with a special headgear that covers their ears, garland and cloth worn by the deity while performing. They use cymbals during the same. (Figure 4) The uniqueness of this art is that the performer should be well-versed in Tamil, Sanskrit, singing, Dancing, understanding and the ability to explain the literal and philosophical meanings of the hymns. This is performed by a particular clan of people of the Thenkalai sub-sect of Vaishnavism, who consider it their hereditary right. This Art is currently known to 5 families in total. There are inscriptions showing the practice of Arayar sevai in Kanchi, Tirupathi, Triplicane, Thirumalirunda Solai, Thiruvananthapuram, Thirukanapuram, and Thirukurunkudi. However, they are not seen anymore. [Sahapedia. \(n.d.\)](#)

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** Arayar Sevai. [Ariyar Sevai. \(n.d.\)](#)

Apart from the above famous rituals, a few temples of Tamil Nadu have musical offerings to the deity as a part of their ritual. Khandaswamy temple of Cheyyur performs a ritual called Sarva Vādhyā during their annual festival, where the performance lasts four hours, using seventy-two musical instruments. An eighteen-instrument tradition is part of the offerings to the Brihadambal temple of Pudhukottai. [Surabhi & Manjunath \(2021\)](#)

## 7. FOLK RITUAL

There are worship places with deities outside the usual temple structure. They might not follow the elaborate Agama system. Some temples can be as simple as a

thatched roof made of leaves, while others might not even have that. Similarly, the deity might be a giant statue or a small stone without any specific form. These gods are considered as the Deity that protects a particular landscape called “Kāval Deivam” in Tamil, while other names are “Yellai Amman” or “Grāma Devadai”. They are usually in the form of Amman, situated at the entrance of the village or city. Some of these deities might even be a female who once lived in human form and were later worshipped by the people of that area. A Male god that protects the place is Sudalai Mada Sami, seen at the burial grounds. These places have many rituals and beliefs attached to them and are celebrated well by the villagers elaborately. Such deities can be seen even in cities. However, they might not have all the traditional rituals due to time, space, and money constraints.

- **Amman Kovil Vizha**

The Amman temples conduct a few day festivals during the Tamil month called Ādi. They usually announce the festival date by drumming the Parai and collecting money from the villagers to run it. Then, they play the drums while the villagers carry Garagam with Amman's face on it, held by a male on the first day at the temple. The Parai is played during the processions, day, and night, during these festival days. They are also said to be playing the drums to ward off any evil spirits that might hinder the smooth happening of the festival. [Arun \(2007\)](#) Some temples also have Theemidi vizha, where devotees walk through the bed of fire; Kāvadi, where they travel to the temple by carrying offerings to the deity; and Alagu Kuthal, where the devotees pierce themselves with a trident or spear because of fulfilling vows. During all these rituals, Parai ([Figure 5](#)) is played along with other instruments like Udukkai ([Figure 6](#)), Pampai ([Figure 7](#)), Kombu, ([Figure 8](#)) etc. All these are played with full vigour that might help the devotees take their minds off the pain induced during these physically challenging rituals.

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5** Parai [Hma. \(2022\)](#)

**Figure 6**



**Figure 6** Udukkai [Hma. \(2022\)](#)

**Figure 7**



**Figure 7** Pampai [Admin. \(2022\)](#)

**Figure 8**



**Figure 8** Kombu [Hma. \(2022\)](#)

A ritual to Gangai Amman conducted by the fishermen of Tamil Nadu also involves Parai during the important ritual moments, during the procession and while dissolving the deity into the sea the day after the festival. [Bavinck \(2015\)](#)

- **Sudalai Worship**

The worship of Sudalai is done all over Tamil Nadu, but it is celebrated explicitly by a tribe called Kaniyan of Tirunelveli district. The mythological origin says that when two bells fell off Parvathi's anklet, Vishnu named them Kaniyan and Kamar. Kaniyan's blood was sacrificed to relieve Shiva of his Brahmahathi Dosam. Vishnu then took that skull and made a drum and bell. He handed them over to Kaniyan and Kamar, respectively. They were asked to do pooja using Makudam and Mani to perform the ceremony for Sudalai.

The Kaniyan men alone were allowed to perform all these rituals, evoking sudalai, wearing the sacred thread, hunting, sacrificing blood and offering food to the deity. They perform Kanniyan Koothu, where two members play the Makudam drum while two men dress up as female tie anklets and dance to that rhythm. They sing and dance the mythological stories related to Sudalai. [John \(2008a\)](#), [John \(2008b\)](#)

- **Healing Rituals**

Sāmiādi or Komarathādi are the priests or shamans involved in ritualistic healing. Generally, offerings in the form of material or kind, music, Dance, rituals, and vows are the standard ways of curing any ailments of body or mind among the believers. The Periyandavar Cult of Kulianoor village, Darmapuri District, follow a strict regime to purify their body during the ritual. Pampai is played near the deity



while the possessed male crowd members start dancing. The people who want to purify themselves usually offer a horse made of terracotta. The Shaman runs towards the people waiting to participate in this ritual. During this, the music is performed forcefully. Shamans also whip them as a process of purification. Many women take part in this in connection to fertility.

Kodāngi is a musical instrument that is commonly used to evoke deities. The Same is also used to chase away evil spirits. The one who performs is called Kodāngi, and the performance is called Kodangi Pātu [Palani \(2022\)](#). When the instrument is played to ward off evil spirits, it is called Peyvirattu Pātu [Nattupurapattu. \(2017\)](#). When the evil power is strong, two to three Kodāngis perform the ritual. [John \(2014\)](#) Tribal healthcare involves medicinal plants to cure along with elaborate rituals using music. [Ignacimuthu et al. \(2006\)](#)

## 8. RITUALS OF COMMONERS

In a culture like Tamil Nadu, several rituals are involved in the people's day-to-day activities. The reason behind most rituals is to make declarations and announcements, act as promises, or celebration. Ceremonies are held at almost every milestone in human life between birth and Death. Apart from the differences in the traditions according to the occasion, most happy or joyous occasions have Thavil, Nadaswaram, (together known as Mangala Vādyams) recitation of religious hymns and other classical instruments as a part of the ritual practice. It is usually the Parai drums and metal Gong called Semakālam ([Figure 9](#)) used for death. Conch is used at religious or happy ceremonies and funeral ceremonies.

**Figure 9**



**Figure 9** Semakalam [Hma. \(2022\)](#)

Parai drums played by the Parayar clan men are the most common death drumming in Tamil Nadu. They play the drums to bid farewell to the soul. It is believed that when the soul leaves the body, it travels to reach the supreme power; hence, this journey is celebrated. Another reason is to pacify or ward off other evil spirits that may have awakened due to a death. [Arun \(2007\)](#)

A tribe in the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, called Kotas, defined music for God, death, and dancing. They also have green and dry funerals, with different drum-playing methods and elaborate rituals. For example, the rhythmical pattern during the green funeral will be more sober and lethargic than during the dry funeral, considered the final sendoff. [Wolf \(2003\)](#)

## 9. CONCLUSION

God to Evil, War to Throne and Birth to Death, Music is involved in all walks of life. Rhythm is in every living aspect of this universe. It can sometimes even be

observed among non-living natural forces. This rhythm keeps changing according to internal and external circumstances. An emotion from within or a Temperature change from outside shall change the rhythm of a being. Hence, music, dance, or other art forms are extensions of that internal rhythm of Facts, feelings, or emotions. Thus, for all occasions, moods or reasons, there are rituals where music or dance is used as a medium of expression. This helps as psychological support to many, especially to a group of people who are generally less privileged, like a member from a lower social status or even women who otherwise might not get an opportunity to convey their thoughts. They act as a catharsis, releasing any physical or mental buildups in general or due to a specific occurrence like death. The music during rituals might serve as an aid to help the individual or the community focus, or it might be a distraction from pain or strong emotions. [Wolf \(2000\)](#)

Many meaningful and artistic rituals are extinct, and some are on the verge of extinction. Such art forms might be tried to be preserved using the present technological advancements. At the same time, some art forms might not even be able to be saved with technology like Arayar Sevai. The same technology that can save is also a reason for extinction. For example, Thavil and Nadaswaram are played on mobile phones during rituals and festivals. People should be educated on the tradition and importance of these rituals and the arts involved in them. Other artists shall come forward to learn more ritualistic art forms. Art connoisseurs shall patronise the livelihood of the existing artists, educate the younger generation on the importance and encourage them to learn and research about such art forms that are fading away.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

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None.

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