

# VEDIC RITUAL TRADITION OF TAMILNADU

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## **Literary sources**

Many sources are available to collect useful information about the Vedic ritual tradition in Tamil Nadu. The most important of all of them is literary source. Tamil literature developed with various stages through ages. They can be listed as –

- Sangam texts – Sangam is an ancient academy which enabled Tamil poets and authors to gather together periodically to publish their works and to get their works authorized. It was under the patronage of Pandya kings of 100 B.C to 300 A.D. Much of the literature belonging to Sangam period is lost.
- Early epics and moral literature (2<sup>nd</sup> century to 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) - Silappathikaaram and Manimekalai, the two great Tamil-epics belong to this age (later than Sangam age).
- Devotional literature – Alvars and Nayanmars, the holy saints of Tamilnadu preched devotion through their literature. They were of 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.
- Minor works of later medieval period – Later cholas of 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century and Nayak kings of 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century patronized Tamil poets and helped in growth of Tamil literature. Nayaks are governors of the great Vijaynagar kingdom and they were such as Madurai Nayaks, Tanjavur Nayaks and Chingee Nayaks.
- Modern Tamil literature (18<sup>th</sup> century onwards) has no much record on vedic rituals as the tradition has declined.

## **Royal patronage recorded in Sangam literature**

Here is some information that stands to say that Vedic ritual acts were present in ancient days. We find that royal patronage for vedic rituals is recoded in Sangam literature.

- Palai Gautamanar patronized by the king Palyanai Sel Kelukuttavan performed 10 sacrifices. (His name ‘Gautamanar’ is the Tamil form of the famous name of Sanskrit sages ‘Gautama’)
- ‘Palyaakasalai muthukudumi peruvazhuthi’ was the name of a king. The name itself suggests that he was a performer of so many sacrifices as ‘Palyagasalai’ means several sacrificial halls. He is also said to have equal number of battles fought.
- Pattinappalai, written by Uruthirankannanar records the Vedic rituals present in Karikal chola kingdom.
- Peruncheral Irumporai, a Chera king wanted to be blessed with a son and performed Putrekameshti for that purpose, as recorded in Pathirrupattu, a work of Sangam age.
- Purananooru mentions that Karikal Cholan performed vedic sacrifices.
- ‘Rajasuyam vetta perunarkilli’ was the name of a king and that means one who performed Rajasuya sacrifice.

Here, it is clear that Brahmins have not only performed vedic sacrifices with royal patronage, but they conducted rituals for the kings in their names also. Vedic sacrifices are considered only for those who are authorized Kshatriyas of pure lineage. The Tamil kings were obviously elevated in caste by conferring on them genealogies. Pandyas were praised as descendents from the lunar dynasty and Cholas from the solar. Brahmins were prepared to recognize Tamil kings in Kshatriya category and connected them with the kings of Mahabharata. The kings also handed gifts and tax-free lands to Brahmins.

### **Scholars’ views**

Here are some quotes from Tamil scholars –

- “Literature of Sangam age refers more to Vedic sacrifices than to temples is a pointer to the popularity of vedic cults among the Sangam Tamils”.

(R.Nagaswamy, Art and Culture of Tamilnadu)

- References to Vedic fire rituals are in more than one place in Tolkappiyam.

(V.Ramachandra Dikshidar, Silappathikaram )

Tolkappiyam (1<sup>st</sup> century A.D), the great grammar work in Tamil not only deals with words and sentences, but it also includes classification of habitats,

animals, plant, human beings, the discussion of human emotions and interactions. Influence of Sanskrit grammar in Tolkappiyam is a matter of argument though it is clear that Tolkappiyam adopts Rasa theory of Bharata's Natya Sastra in Sanskrit and eight forms of marriage.

### **Early epics**

Some terms such as 'Aruthozhilon', 'Mutthee' and 'Aimperumvelvi' seen in early epics confirm that Vedic rituals were present at that time.

- 'Aruthozhilon' (Tirukkural 5-3) means Brahmin who performs six duties and performing sacrifices is one among them.
- 'Mutthee' means three-fold sacrificial fire.
- 'Aimperumvelvi' (Silappathikaram 23-70, 25-12) means five great sacrifices to be performed daily.

### **Other sources in medieval period**

Number of references on vedic sacrifices can be seen in Alvars' and Nayanmars' devotional works. Some other texts such as Kambaramayanam and Periya puranam are also to be considered.

Apart from literary sources, some other sources on Yagas in medieval period are also available. They are –

- Inscriptions in Tanjavur, Kodungalur, Jayangondam etc -  
Kapila, a Sangam poet offered himself in a sacrifice of that kind is mentioned in a rock inscription. Another inscription mentions about how one person was bought for 5 panam (rupees) for sacrificial purpose. Sanskrit verses in praise of kings in an inscription in Kodungalur mention that kings performed yagas. (They are in Grantha script)
- Monuments in villages -  
In many villages we can see even now huge pillars that are erected in memory of sacrifices performed.
- Names of villages such as 'Powndarikapuram' (near Tanjavur) –  
The village is said to have been formed as a poorta of the 'Powndarika' sacrifice. 'Purta' means public service done in connection with Vedic sacrifices.
- Traditional messages of vedic families –  
Information gathered through family-stories in vedic families serve a lot for understanding this. They attach sur-names such as Vajapayee, and

Dikshita, to themselves in memory of their ancestors who had performed sacrifices.

- Tax-free-villages – Shrotriyam, Brahmadeyam, Agraharam are some terms for few villages. These types of villages were exempted from tax considering the social service of the people there performing vedic sacrifices.

### **Later period**

Here are the names of some famous scholars, who were staunch performers of so many yagas -

- Appayya dikshita in Chidambaram is a well-known scholar and author of so many books.
- Venkatadhvari kavi of Arasanipalai near Kanchi is famous for his poetic skill.
- Kumara Tatadesika of Tanjavur performed hundreds of yagas and hence conferred with the title 'Satakratu'
- Kупpa dikshita, Sadasiva Kesava Dikshita and so many scholars

They all could perform yagas with the support and patronage from the kings. King Saraboji arranged for white umbrella for Vajapeya-performer. These are all recorded by sri venkata Duraisamy in his book on Marathy kings of Tanjavur in Tamil.

### **Influence of Vedic sacrifice in Folk tradition of Tamilnadu**

Scholars have maintained that process of hinduisation can be seen in temples dedicated to the deities of folk religion. During the worship, singers would recite historical stories about warrior-; the names of deities would be such as Kali, Karuppasami, Muniswaran etc. and at the end of worship, disciples would sacrifice a goat. This custom which is common in hundreds of temples in villages even now is a clear evidence of influence of vedic ritual in folk tradition.

Navakhanda, a kind of self-sacrifice was in practice among the Tamils. It is a form of ritualistic suicide, where a person sacrifices his own self with his own hands. He would pray for his country's victory in battlefield and perform self-sacrifice out of patriotism. It was believed that he could attain Veera-Svarga, a world of heaven for brave warriors. It takes place in a temple in presence of all

public. People would honour him for his sacrifice for the sake of the country. They bear his name or install statues in his memory. This custom was mentioned in ancient Tamil texts of Madurai-kanchi, Silappadikaram and Kalingatu-parani. A rock inscription in Jayankondam also stands as a record. Marco Polo was an eyewitness of such an incident.

### **Against rituals**

While there was a kind of awareness against these rituals, there does not seem to have been any racial animosity between the Tamils and incoming Aryans. Aryans were prepared to recognize Tamil kings and they supported them. Moral discipline was stressed as more important than rituals. Tirukkural, which is considered as Tamil-veda mentions that it is better to lead a life of non-violence than to perform thousand yagas (5-9).

### **Present situation**

At present vedic rituals are performed by few families of vedic tradition. It is restricted to few villages and patronized by religious organizations. Pishtapasu system is being followed to maintain non-injury. That is, instead of flesh goat, they offer flour in goat form. Their families are well settled and honoured in the society. Intelligence, hard work and training are necessary to keep up this tradition.

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### **Bibliography**

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