

# Tamil Villages

## The Ancient Heart of South India

By Richard Clarke



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Published by Infinite Pie Publications  
Lake Chapala, Mexico  
2017

# Tamil Villages – The Ancient Spiritual Heart of South India

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## Introduction

This paper was written for presentation at the recent **International Conference on Sacred Geographies, Religious Cultures and Popular Practices** held at the Government Arts College, Tiruvannamalai in 2014

The basis for the paper was this blog. I started this blog after my wife Carol and I moved to Tiruvannamalai, writing about our experiences of life in India. We made friends with villagers nearby Tiruvannamalai, and because they knew we were interested, they started inviting us to village ceremonies and functions. I have a life-long interest in Anthropology, and I knew right away that I was seeing things about village culture that were special. Carol and I took many photos to document what we were seeing, and I starting writing about it.

As I wrote, I researched -- searching the Internet-- and discovered that some of what I was seeing was very ancient, predating Hinduism itself.

There are four sections to this paper:

- Tamil Village Life is Ancient
- The Ancient Traditions are Still Alive in Tamil Villages
- The Ancient Tamil Family
- Can Tamil Villages be protected?

This first part is based on the research I have done, and is my own conclusions based on this. Parts 2 and 3 are mainly from things that Carol and I have seen, photographed, and written about. Part 4 are my ideas about what needs to be done now to protect the heritage of the Tamil villages.

## Tamil Village life is ancient

### Overview of migration to India

The Indian subcontinent has been populated in successive waves of migration from the earliest pre-history.

The contemporary method of **Genetic Anthropology**, through analysis of human DNA, can determine the genetic makeup and migration of various cultural groups among the world's population. This powerful new tool helps understand human prehistory and history.

One such current attempt to understand the genetic and migration history of humans is the National Geographic's Geographic Project. This is a multi-year effort to gather and analyze worldwide genetic data in collaboration with indigenous and traditional peoples around the world. As of 2013, some 600,000 people have contributed their DNA for analysis. The graphic below, generated from the National Geographic project data, shows and overview of the probable migration routes of early humans, starting about 60,000 years ago.



### Current Findings of Indian Genetic Anthropology and History

#### **50,000 years ago**

The first population in India of modern humans was from a group that left Africa about 60,000 years ago, traveling on the coast from Africa to Australia. They arrived in Tamil Nadu about 50,000 years ago. This was in the Paleolithic Era, long before the introduction of agriculture. Some researchers now call the descendants of this group “Austro-Asiatic.” This is the oldest genetic population in India.

#### **40,000 years ago**

North India was populated originally from a later radiation out of Africa, about 40,000 years ago, entering through the Khyber Pass on the northwestern frontiers of the subcontinent.

#### **9,000 years ago**

Farming was started in North India (in what is now Pakistan). This was possibly by the precursors to the Dravidians. I do not think their origins are certain. Some scholars think they migrated from the Middle East about 9000 years ago. They think this group brought their agricultural methods, growing wheat and raising cattle. I suspect they may have been the descendants of the people who originally occupied North India 40,000 years ago. They spread through all of India, and developed a high ancient Bronze Age culture, the Indus Valley Civilization, with its two famous cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. The peak of the Indus Valley Civilization was 5000 – 4000 years ago.

The earliest trace of the Indus Valley Civilization was at Mehrgarh in the Kacchi Plains of Baluchistan in what is now Pakistan. This farming village is 9000 years old, the oldest known Indian farming site. The inhabitants herded cattle and grew emmer wheat, the same kind of wheat grown in the Fertile Crescent, where agriculture and cultivation of wheat first started. The origin of these people is not known. Given their growing of emmer wheat, they may have migrated from the Middle East and brought farming with them. It is also possible that Dravidians are the descendants of the original population that migrated to North India

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40,000 years ago and developed farming practices independently. This was at the end of the last Pleistocene Ice Age (about 11,700 years ago). At that time temperatures warmed, glaciers melted, sea levels rose, and ecosystems throughout the world reorganized. Agriculture was both exported from this original area, and was independently developed in many places in the world. Emmer Wheat was among the first plants to be domesticated in the Fertile Crescent.

### **3,500 years ago**

About 100 years ago Max Mueller theorized that there was a wave of migrations from Central Asia about 3500 years ago that saw the entry of Indo-Europeans, called Aryans, who brought with them horses and the basis of Vedic Hinduism into northwest India and Pakistan. This theory is now put to rest by recent genetic studies of South Asia, by Metspalu, Gyaneshwer Chaubey et al and published in 2011 in the American Journal of Human Genetics, Dec. 2011. They say, “Genetic study finds no evidence for Aryan Migration Theory—On the contrary, South Indians migrated to north and South Asians migrated into Eurasia.”

The Aryan culture became dominant in North India. The Dravidians were displaced to South India. These Dravidians are the basis for the present Tamil village population, based on archeological evidence. Of all the claims I make in this article, the ancient history of the Dravidians is the least certain. The ideas I express here are supported strongly by some scholars, while others are unsure. Some Indians vigorously deny any source outside of India for Aryan or Dravidian origins, citing good evidence. I think finally the work in Genetic Anthropology will resolve this once and for all. I base claims of Indo-European genetic material in the Indian genome on articles from the journal, “Genetic Research” in which they specifically identify Indo-European haplotypes (combinations of gene sequences inherited together) in the Indian population. Let us all wait for conclusive research results on this.

There is not really an “Indian race.” Rather, the human genetic elements in India contain materials that are mainly a mix of four genetic types: Austro-Asiatic (AA), Dravidian (DR), Tibeto-Burman (TB), and Indo-European (IE).

### **Tribals, the Austro-Asiatics**

The various Tribal peoples, about 8% of the present Indian population, are the descendants of the original Austro-Asiatic population. There are ~450 tribal communities in India ([Singh 1992](#)), who speak ~750 dialects. This population was marginalized by first the Dravidians and then the Aryans, both of whom had more advanced cultures.

### **Tamils, Dravidians**

The Tamil village population is most closely related to the Dravidians, who retreated to southern India to avoid dominance by the Indo-European-speaking nomads.

Probably the Dravidians brought millet with them to South India. Millet was grown in the Indus Valley Civilization, and was the most important crop in ancient Tamil Nadu, until rice arrived in South India, again probably brought by the Dravidians from the Indus Valley Civilization.

### **Aryans, Indo-Europeans**

What is called the Indo-Europeans were South Asians and became what is called the Aryan Sanskrit Vedic population, and perhaps were the originators of the caste system. They occupied Northwest India and Pakistan. Their genetic traces are found today mainly in the higher castes and in North India. Their origins may be have in the Sarasvatī River basin in

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North India, which dried out about 3500 years ago, the same time the Aryans were said to have “appeared.”

### **Tibeto-Burman**

The Tibeto-Burman population is thought to have come from the Northeast, and to have brought rice agriculture into the north of India. The dates are not clear, perhaps 4000-3500 years ago.

### **Mixing of North and South**

Genetic evidence shows a mixing of North and South Indian genetic types in the period 4000 years to 2000 years ago, and less in the last 2000 years. This supports the idea that the Indo-Europeans displaced the Dravidians from North India to the south, starting about 3500 years ago.

### **Genetic Variation**

There is significant genetic difference between South Indian Tribals, and the various Caste populations. Tribals have much higher proportions of Austro-Asiatic genetic material. High castes have much more Indo-European makeup. The proportion of Indo-European genetic material decreases in each lower caste.

## **Where did the Tamils come from?**

India grew from its villages, which began as India developed and acquired agriculture, starting about 9000 years ago. Village life is part of everyone’s history and of most family histories. Tamil villages were probably Dravidian farming villages, starting about 3500 years ago, this date is not clear to me. When the Iron Age came, about 3000 years ago, it increased the dominance of these Tamils over the Tribal peoples. The ancient roots of South Indian Dravidian culture can be seen even now in the villages. Tamil Village life has remained much the same, even as different rulers came and went.

### **Dravidians were early farmers in South India**

Tamil culture has largely developed on its own from its ancient roots, with its own language, culture and religion.

Farming in South India probably started about 5000 years ago, when climate changes brought a retreat of the forests in the south. First cultivated were indigenous crops, probably by the indigenous people. Later, animal husbandry, a Dravidian practice, was introduced. This must have been brought from outside of South India, because the ancestors to these domesticated animals do not exist in South India. The Dravidians were also early farmers in South India, first growing millet, and then rice, which they had cultivated in the Indus Valley, and apparently brought to the South. Varieties of North Indian crops first appeared in South India about 3800 years ago. Maybe this marks the beginning of the Dravidian influences in South India.

### **Tamil Villages develop their present form**

Village life took most of its present form with the advent of rice farming, which was done as an extended family activity. This was about 3000 years ago in South India, about the time of the early Iron Age in the south. Also at this time, many hilltop settlement sites were abandoned, indicating a dramatic alteration in the settlement pattern. It seems likely that

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agricultural production also intensified, drawing populations to the plains, where crops and groves could be more effectively managed.

It may be that this period really marks the ascendancy of the Dravidians in South India. Iron really set the village into the form that has now lasted more than 2000 years. The introduction of the iron *Aruval* (sickle-axe) and plow were the key. The effect of the Iron Age was that some clans and castes (i.e. the Dravidian farmers) were more productive as farmers, prospered and became dominant; their villages grew in size and became more numerous. The cities supported by these farms and villages also grew and became more prosperous. Certainly the big improvement in farm productivity would have brought about much growth and change in the cities. It sure seems like this could bring about a flourishing of a culture, like that experienced at this time in South India.

The original Austro-Asiatic hunter-gathers became further marginalized and moved into the hills, where they still are today.

### Vedic Hinduism comes to South India

One historical research tool is the literature of the Tamil Sangam period, starting around 2300 years ago, 300 BC. The Sangam period is regarded as an early high point of Tamil culture, and the time when the Dravidian culture met with Vedic Hinduism. The Sangam literature detailed, among other things, current practices and ideas.

The impact of Vedic religion was mainly felt in the cities, not in villages. Vedic gods and scripture started coming into South India from the North, and affected primarily the upper castes. The lower castes (and villagers) continued living their life as they had before. The first reference to a Vedic God in Sangam writing is at about 100 BC. By 400 CE, these Hindu references were extensive.

Genetic studies have shown that the Western European genetic content depends on caste, where high caste Brahmins are much more closely related to the Western Europeans than are lower castes. Villagers are primarily lower caste so are less related. This shows the genetic and cultural separation and relative genetic isolation of Tamil villages from the Vedic cultural and genetic impact.

### Iron made a big difference

The Aruval

The use of the **Aruval** (sword or sickle) to clear farm land was critical to the expansion of the farm. Otherwise it was very difficult to clear trees and brush to make good farm land. It was also an important weapon.



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The longer one, pictured below, was used as an axe to clear trees, vital for farming, and as a weapon. The extra weight at the tip of the Aruval moves its center of gravity away from the handle and makes of a powerful stroke, important both for axes and swords.



Here a village guardian god holds an Aruval.



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### The Iron Plow

Here is a typical long plow. It would have been pulled by a bullock, maybe a team of two.



It is mostly made of wood, but with a strip of iron running down the front side of the plow blade. This was all that is needed. Only a small bit of iron was used for this plow.



### **Tamil village spirituality predates Hinduism in South India**

Tamil village spirituality predates the introduction of Vedic Hinduism to South India. Hinduism includes the Agamas, Sanskrit scriptures that define forms of worship other than the Vedic Fire sacrifice, particularly poojas to idols of the gods. Their roots are not clear. Tamil village spiritual practices were non-agamic. They did not use Brahmin priests, Vedic scriptures or rituals, and instead only used local gods, priests and rituals.

The traditions shown in this paper are the current versions of the ancient South Indian ones.

Each village had its own set of gods, protectors, celebrations and practices. I think that, in fact, each clan had its own gods, and built shrines to worship those gods in the villages in which they lived. The dominant clan probably built the main village shrine.

Some Tamil Village spirituality has been adopted within Hinduism. A common practice was to place the ancient village god within the existing set of Hindu gods. For example Murugan came to be identified with Subramanian and as a son of Siva. This is called “Sanskritization.”

### **Conclusion**

Tamils are descendants of the ancient Dravidians. They took ascendancy in Tamil Nadu about 3000 years ago. They had their own gods and traditions, which still live today in Tamil Villages

### **The Ancient Traditions are still alive in Tamil Villages**

Ancient traditions are still alive in Tamil villages today, with traditions that may date back as much as 8,000 years, to the dawn of the agricultural age. Certainly, Tamil traditions seem to date back to the Indus Valley Civilization of about 4,000 years ago, which seems to have been an early major Dravidian civilization, that later migrated to South India, moving away from the Aryans in North India. I discussed this more in the [first post in this series](#).

This post shows some current Tamil village spirituality: Village Gods, Goddesses, Guardians, and Sacred Groves. There are many photos, most from the Tiruvannamalai area. Most were taken by my wife and me, and some are downloaded from the Internet.

### **Tamil Village Guardians, Gods and Goddesses**

Tamil guardian spirits are known as *Kaval deviam*. These are *non-Agamic* gods: established before the introduction of Hinduism, not found in sacred Hindu texts, nor performed by Hindu priests.

Some of the guardians are gods. Peaceful gods, like *Mariamman*, will be in the center of the village. The Warrior gods, like *Ayyannar* or *Karuppaswamy* will be placed on the outskirts, to better protect from outside dangers. Some are warriors elevated to hero status and called upon now to bring protection, like *Madurai Veeran*, a Tamil hero, now elevated to Guardian. Some are guardians for *Siva* or *Parvati* (*sages turned into warriors*).

Painted terracotta (clay) figures are often used to represent these gods and protectors.

## Important village deities

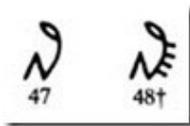
### Murugan

(From Wikipedia)



It is likely that Murugan was brought to South India by the Dravidians, long before the introduction of Vedic Hinduism.

In 2006 a Neolithic hand-held stone axe inscribed with Indus Valley script was discovered in Tamil Nadu, establishing a clear link between the two civilizations. The stone was of local origin, so the Indus script had to have been inscribed locally in Tamil Nadu. In this script, from both the north and south, is a figure thought to represent *Murukan*, then a powerful spirit warrior. They are very similar:



“47” is the Tamil character. “48” is the Indus Valley script, While the megalithic/Iron Age pottery in Tamil Nadu is datable between 800 B.C. and 3 A.D., the Indus script belongs to a much earlier period, 2,600 BCE to 1,900 BCE, of the mature Harappan period.

These findings establish two things:

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- The Neolithic people of South India had interactions with Indus Valley people.
- They either shared the same language or both the languages were from the same language tree, Dravidian.

Murugan is the archetypal Tamil male—attractive, masculine, a great warrior; the ideal male. Murugan's long history with the Tamils is recorded in the Sangam writings more than 2,000 years ago (The Sangam was an ancient academy or assembly of Tamil scholars and poets in Madurai starting about 2,300 years ago). However, it looks like Murugan goes back much longer, to the Dravidians in the Indus Valley. It is said that the history of Murugan is the history of the Tamil people. Prominent among the Tamils, he was incorporated into the Hindu set of gods as Hinduism moved into South India.

Baby Murugan is beloved by Tamils. (From [this site](#))



Murugan was originally a formless Dravidian god of the hills, and worshiped as a spirit to begin with, then later in the form of a tree and stone, and finally as a Hindu god represented by a *murti* (a living god in the form of a stone idol). From the evidence just presented, we can conclude that Murugan was a Dravidian god, probably worshiped by the Dravidians in ancient Indus Valley Civilization cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro 5,000 years ago.

Murugan was an ancient Tamil protector of villages. According to the Tamil devotional work, Thiruppugazh, "Murugan never hesitates to come to the aid of a devotee when called upon in piety or distress".

As settlements grew and states formed, Murugan also became a model Warlord-King. So whenever a king won a battle he was compared to the god Murugan. Gradually Murugan gained human attributes and accumulated more myths. By the late Sangam period (from about 300 BCE to 400 CE) the myth of Murugan the warlord-and-lover was popular all over Tamil Nadu.

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Pictured below, a village temple dedicated to Murugan.



In front of the temple is an array of *Vel*, Murugan's spear.



## Thai Pusam Festival

### Body piercing

Body piercing is also done for Murugan, at his annual Thai Pusam festival, to express gratitude and to ask the god for something special. This piercing seems to be a Tamil specialty, and is done for other Tamil Gods and festivals.

Photo from [ynaija.com](http://ynaija.com)



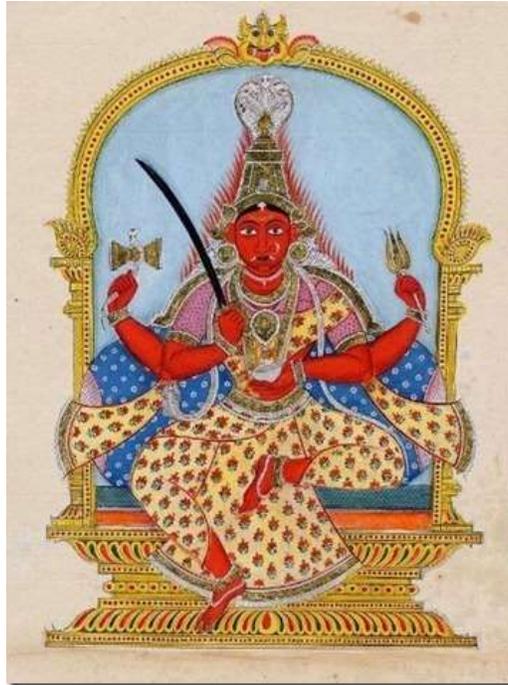
Photo from [indiatvnews.com](http://indiatvnews.com)



## Mariamman

Mariamman is a Tamil goddess that protects the people within the village.

(from [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org))



Mariamman is an ancient goddess, whose worship probably originated from a pre-Vedic mother goddess cult of Dravidian people before the arrival of the Aryans with their Brahmanic religion. She is the main South Indian mother goddess, predominant in the villages of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra.

Mariamman later became closely associated with the Hindu goddesses [Parvati](#) and [Durga](#) during the Hindu expansion into South India.

In Tamil, the word *maari* would mean rain and *amma* would mean mother, but here it is more like "mother nature." She was believed in and worshipped by the ancient Dravidian people to bring prosperity. This includes bringing rain and fertility, and curing disease. She is still a very important village goddess.

(from [chennaionline.com](http://chennaionline.com))



The village “belongs to” the goddess. She is thought to be there before the village and to have created it. Sometimes she is represented only by a head, indicating that her body *is* the village and she is rooted in the soil there. The villagers live inside or upon the body of the goddess. She protects the village and is the guardian of the village boundaries. Outside the village there is no protection from Mariamman.

### Mariamman Shrines

Mariamman shrines are common in the center of villages. They often include an anthill that could be the resting place of a cobra. Milk and eggs are offered regularly to propitiate the snake. The anthill is thought to be a manifestation of *shakti*, the divine feminine creative power of the universe. Mariamman is a fertility goddess, full of this *shakti*. Devotees pray to Mariamman for things such as fertility, healthy progeny, or a good spouse. The most favored offering is *pongal*, a common Tamil rice dish.

### Mariamman as Family Deity - Kula-theivam

Mariamman is the family deity for many families in Tamil Nadu, their *Kula-theivam*. For any family occasion, such as a wedding, it is usually a family custom to first worship the family deity. Many families invoke the family deity as the first step for all occasions in the family. This family worship of the Kula-theivam is considered more important than any Hindu festival. The worship of the family deity runs through many generations of the family, passed from generation to generation.

### Mariamman Festivals

Nearly all members of a village participate in the goddess's festival, now even Brahmins and Muslims. Blood offerings of animals are commonly sacrificed at festivals of Mariamman. For these festivals, the different castes can mix freely. I think this is because the festival predates the caste system. My guess is that the Aryans brought the caste system about 3500 years ago (with them sitting on top of it as Brahmins and Kshatriyas – the high castes). The Indian castes are first found in the Vedas, which are Aryan scriptures.

March and April are epidemic months of small pox, chicken pox, and measles in South India. Mariamman cures these so-called "heat-based" diseases. During the summer months in South India (March to June), people perform a ceremonial walk carrying pots of water mixed with turmeric and neem leaves for miles to ward off illnesses.

### Mariamman Festival for Rain

Late summer festivals are held during the Tamil month *Aadi* to ask for rain. We attended several of these rituals and witnessed some of the ancient activities still practiced today. Here are some photos from one of these celebrations:

#### Trance dancing

Trance dancing - *Sami Aduthal* - is often part of a Mariamman celebration. Men and women work themselves up into a trance state, to where they feel the god has “taken over” them. The reason for the “dance” is to ask something of the gods that they have been unable to get by any other form of prayer or pooja. The dance is wild and uncontrolled. It is done in a circle, so the people gathered can prevent the dancer from hurting him or herself. This ancient form of dancing was documented in Sangam writings over 2,000 years ago.

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