

# Muruga Worship of Ancient Tamils Gleaned from the Tamil Literature

Dr.P.Ganesan

Assistant Professor, Department of Ancient History, School of Historical Studies, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai-625021, Tamil Nadu. India.

**Abstract:** Right from early pre – historic times, Vel worship was prevalent in ancient Tamil society and the ancient Tamils had great fascination for the worship of god Muruga. *Tolkappiam* is the first written record available to us to assess the views of the ancient Tamils regarding *Muruga* worship. It refers to *Muruga* as Ceyon in Sankam literature god *Muruga* has been denoted as cutarpuncey, Vel porcey and priympuncey.<sup>5</sup> The ancient Tamils held the view that radiant light shining from the body at *Murugan* is reddish in colour<sup>6</sup>, *Muruga's* cloths, ornaments and garlands are all red in colour and they even considered Vel (spear) he hold in his hand to be red. In *Tirumurugarrupadai* also, it is stated that god *Muruga's* colour his red and he wears red cloths. It may be well assumed that the ancient Tamils considered the red colour as symbolic of lord *Muruga's* rigor and anger in suppressing the enemies and evil forces for the benefit of mankind. The ancient Tamils viewed god *Muruga* as the greatest of war gods with indomitable valour and heroic deeds.<sup>7</sup> god *Muruga* has been denoted as auntiralka tavul the god of extra ordinary valour and heroic deeds. It is also noted that the ancient Tamils worshipped the goddess of war by name Korravai, Korravai in Tamil means victory in war. In *Tolkappiam*, the worship of Korravai is mentioned as Korravai. Nilai and god *Murugan* was considered as flue son of the war goddess, Korravai by the ancient Tamils. *Tolkappiam* gives conclusive proof of the association of *Muruga* with Valour of a high ethical nature. It is in the context of referring to Karantai that *Muruga* worship occurs in the grammatical treatise. Karantai refers to the theme of retrieval of cattle which war is waged, it is not a war of acquisition or aggression, and it is a just war of self – defence and protection. *Tolkappiyar* mentions religious subjects, heroic themes and worship of hero – stones only in this connection.

## Introduction

The socio– cultural and religious life of the ancient Tamils was intimately connected with *Muruga* worship. It is to be noted that iron representation of Vel and rooster have been found in Adtichanallur graves, an extensive and important pre historic burial place in Tamilnadu<sup>1</sup>. Prof. P.T. *Srinivasa Iyengar*, an authority on the history of the ancient Tamils, has established that ‘Adtichanallur’ excavation dates back roughly 7000 years, and the learned author serves that “here in no evidence of creation at the place, this is assumes greater antiquity of the remains, for the custom of burning corpses spread in south India along with the Aryan cult in north India”<sup>2</sup> Right from early pre – historic times, Vel worship was prevalent in ancient Tamil society and the ancient Tamils had great fascination for the worship of god

Muruga.<sup>3</sup> There are concrete evidence in Tolkappiam, Pattupattu and Ettuthokai to establish that *Muruga* cult was the pivot on which the social, cultural and religious life of the ancient Tamils was revolving round.<sup>4</sup>

*Tolkappiam* is the first written record available to us to assess the views of the ancient Tamils regarding *Muruga* worship. It refers to *Muruga* as Ceyon in Sangam literature god *Muruga* has been denoted as cutarpuncey, Vel porceey and priympuncey.<sup>5</sup> The ancient Tamils held the view that radiant light shining from the body at *Muruga* is reddish in colour<sup>6</sup>, *Muruga*'s cloths ornaments and garlands are all red in colour and they even considered Vel (spear) he hold in his hand to be red. In *Tirumurugarrupadai* also, it is stated that god *Muruga*'s colour his red and he wears red cloths. It may be well assumed that the ancient Tamils considered the red colour as symbolic of lord *Muruga*'s rigor and anger in suppressing the enemies and evil forces for the benefit of mankind. The ancient Tamils viewed god *Muruga* as the greatest of war gods with indomitable valour and heroic deeds.<sup>7</sup> God *Muruga* has been denoted as auntiralka tavul the god of extra ordinary valour and heroic deeds.

It is also noted that the ancient Tamils worshipped the goddess of war by name Korravai, Korravai in Tamil means victory in war. In Tolkappiam, the worship of Korravai is mentioned as Korravai. Nilai and god *Muruga* was considered as flue son of the war goddess, Korravai by the ancient Tamils. There is a reference in *Perumpanarrupadai* that god *Muruga* is the son of Korravai.<sup>8</sup> *Tirumurugarrupadai* also refers to *Muruga* as the son of *Korravai* to quote Tamil zvelebil,<sup>9</sup> The original Tamil *Muruga* was the son of *Korravai*, The mother goddess of war and victory. Indeed he has to father. It is also to be noted that according to Sanskrit sources, *Skanda* was not born to any mother. *Akananuru* refers to god *Muruga* as an in dubitable war god with extra ordinary fame who annihilated the enemies who did not surrender to him.

A great Cola king by name *Illavantikaitunciya Nanmaram* has been compared with *Muruga* as the greatest hero who could accomplish everything successfully as he desired and planned. There is also another valid reference in *Maduraikkanci* a famous Sangam poem singing the valour and glory of the greatest Pandiya king by name *Talaiyalankanattu Ceruventra Pandiyan Nedunceliyan*. The poet compares this greatest Pandiyan king of Sangam age to god *Muruga* in waging a war upon his enemies, suppressing them, capturing their forts, destroying their supporters and causing injury to their name and fame. In *Maliapadukatam* (sound issuing from mountains) another famous idly of Sangam age; the hero is compared to god *Muruga* in valour and heroic deeds. In *Kuruncipattu*, *Kapilar* speaks highly of god *Muruga's Vel*, comparing its brightness to the lighting of the cloud and its power to destroy the enemies.

During the Sangam age, not only kings and warriors, but also head of the family is compared to god *Muruga* for his valour and anger.<sup>11</sup>

### Suppression of Evil Forces

Sangam poets highlight the indomitable valour of lord *Muruga* when they speak about his heroic deals in suppressing the evil forces of sur or Surapadman and his associates.<sup>10</sup> There are number references in Sangam literature in this regard. It may be assumed that the ancient Tamils considered sur and associates as the personification of evil forces and that their annihilation by *Muruga*, the supreme god, is essential for the survival of humanity at large. Just as the farmer removes and destroys weeds from his fields, similarly a hero of the first order has the same essential duty to society. It may justly be cited here the salient advice of the poet *Tiruvalluvar* to a king. "When the king imposes the severest penalty on a cruel murderer, it is like weeding the field to protect the crops".

### Beauty of Muruga

Even though there are many words and phrases in Tamil to denote god *Muruga*, the ancient Tamils have specially chosen two Pure Tamil words *Murugu*<sup>12</sup> and *Muruga*. The word *Murugu* has various shades of meaning such as tenderness, youth, beauty, young man, god *Muruga*, ornament with helix of

the ear, fragrance; the priest of god *Murugan* (*Velan*) *Sentan Tivakaram*, a famous Tamil *Nikantu* has given twenty – seven<sup>13</sup> different names for the god. The words *Murugu* and *Muruga* were current in use in Sangam classics. The words *Murugu* and *Muruga* are of special significance in so far as they clearly reveal the ancient Tamils holds a simple living in tune with the nature and had high thinking relating to god *Muruga*. They viewed god *Muruga* as the personification of natural beauty with youthful radiance, energy and virility. They thought *Muruga* is par excellence a god of dazzling beauty, of splendid fragrance and of extra ordinary grace. The great Tamil scholar V. Kalyanasundaranar observes that “this natural beauty with youthfulness, fragrance and qualities of god head was denoted and appreciated as *Muruga*.”

The word *Murugu* is pregnant with meaning. He who possesses all the qualities of the word *Murugu* is called *Murugan*. It is to be noted here that the god *Muruga* is being compared to a rising sun in *Tirumurugarrupadai* where Nakkirars describes the radiance emerges from the body of the god *Muruga* as being like the sparkling brightness of the sun rising on the sea. This also confirms the view of the ancient Tamils that god *Muruga* is the personification of natural beauty with youthful radiance and extraordinary virility.

### **Velan Veriyatal**

Velan Veriyatal,<sup>14</sup> the ritual dancing and offerings associated with the worship of god *Muruga*, is of great social and cultural significance to the ancient Tamils. Veriyatal is found performed by the priest *Velan* both in Agam and Puram. As Prof. P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar writes, “Love and war respectively called *agam* and *puram*, the inner life of action which other man can appreciate and admire” both in the inner life (*agam*) and in the other life (*puram*) of the ancient Tamils, god *Muruga* played a vital part. According to them god *Muruga* is essentially and finally responsible for the psychological and physiological problems which caused anxiety and stress to adolescent girls in pre martial union of lover.

They sought the help of *Muruga's Velan* priests for solution of personal problems. Usually the *Velan* priest was a man of ripe experience. The ancient Tamils firmly believed that the *Velan* would be able to diagnose the cause as well as the solution for emotional and psychological problems. In indeed the *velan's* word were considered as none other than the voice of *god Muruga*. There is a specific reference to *Velan Veriyatal*<sup>15</sup> in *Tolkappiam*, the most ancient and authoritative grammar in Tamil. Though *Velan Veriyatal* is applicable to both *Agam* and *Puram*, in *korinic* (*premanital* union) he usually wears the garlands made of *kurinji* flowers. The ritual dance takes place in a specially decorated stage called *adukalam* full of flowers and garlands. Offerings of May colore cooked rice and meat are made during *Veriyatal*. The *Velan* holds the same *Vel* supposed to have been possessed by the greatest war god *Muruga*. The priest was respected and adored by the ancient Tamils as if he was the incarnation of *god Muruga* himself. There are number of references in *Ettuthokai* and *Pattupattu* relating to this ritual dance or *Veriyatal*. In *Puram* theme, *Veriyatal* is performed by the *Velan* to predict the outcome in the proposed battle field (vetch).

Here the difference is the priest wears the garlands of *kandal*<sup>16</sup> flowers instead of *Kurinchi* garlands. Warriors worship *god Muruga* and willingly accept the *velan's* predictions. It is to be carefully noted that *Velan* in *Agam* has a special significance in so far as the *Velan* pronounces the causes and solutions of the psychological and physiological problems concerning the adolescent girls in pre – marital union of love. The foster – mothers are much worried and speaking the guidance and help of them *Velan* for the solution of their personal problems. The ancient Tamils thought that a grace of *god Muruga* will solve the emotional and personal problems of the inner life (*agam*) of the individuals.

### Concept Justice

The concept of justice had evolved in Tamilnadu from tribal times and found its expression in the ideal of valour. The theme of valour is central to the subject of *Puram* and enjoyed universal acceptance in the period in which *Sangam* literature was composed. There are several poems in *Purananuru* that

show valour as connected with protect (puram 6, 12, 17, 18, 20, 27, 29, 31, 33, 35, 40, 42). In Puram:4 for instance, the enemy country devastated by the king. Is likened to a mother less infant crying in hunger. The country has lost the motherly protection of its king. Pura 5 makes this point explicit. In it the poet advises the ruler to protect his country the way can infant is protected and nourished. The duty of the king to use force (danda) in order to protect is emphasized in ancient Sanskrit texts also. The king's duty is to uphold dharma. The latter meant the Varna order and caste hierarchy.<sup>17</sup> But, in the ancient Tamilnadu with Varna dharma concept carried on weight. A.L. Basham refers to the absence of evidence in early Tamil literature about the existence of caste.

There is a poem Purananuru 6 which refers to the king as the eater of the enemy's earth and the holder of the *scepter* of justice. This poem refers to Vedas, Brahmin Sages and sacrifices in a reverential tone. But the justice it speaks of is the opposite of what the brahminical texts *Muthukutumipperu Valuti*, the performer of May (Vedic) sacrifices, should be impartial like a balance used in weighing. The poem ends by comparing the king to the sun with its hot rays that punish and also to the moon with its soft, cool light. These are telling comparisons that go against the *Sanskrit Brahminical* ideal of justice since the sun and the moon treat all people alike. These comparisons reinforce the poet's earlier exhortation to the king to be impartial. Another poem in *Purananuru*<sup>18</sup> (shows a valiant youth us indebted to his mother, his father, the village black smith and his king for his possession of the quality of valour. The poem says that it is the thing who teaches good conduct to the young hero. The intermingling of ethical and war like qualities in this poem is characteristic of the Tamil way of thinking in the period concerned. Yet another poem<sup>19</sup> says that, country is good where the men of valour are evident. (Pura 187).

## Concept of Valour

The concept of valour found its expression not only in early Tamil literature but also in the religion of the period. An examination of Sangam literature shows that temple worship was not pre valiant then. The word Kottam which meant a temple occurs only three times in the whole of the Sangam literature.<sup>20</sup> Though Vedic sacrifices are mentioned, they belonged to the exclusive form of corporate worship and did not constitute popular religion. Since north Indian gods like Siva and Vishnu are not worshipped widely then and since Brahminical sacrifices were not meant for the common people. The question arises about the identity of the gods who belonged to small local communities and there were several associated with divinity. But, the most important were ananku and cur apart from Muruga. Ananku is 'anonymous, impersonal power' this power<sup>22</sup> could take any shape it liked and move about several things are mentioned as possessed of ananku. Curis 'a malicious, terror-provoking force which was always destructive'.<sup>23</sup> This cur representing impersonal fear and general terror later came to be regarded as personified.

Defection of ethical bravery started prior to the period of Sangam literature. Before, Valour was conceptualized and treated in literature it was apprehended in the tribal context as a symbol. There are several allusions to hero – stones in *Akananuru* and *Purananuru*. These hero stones were erected in memory of men who fought valiantly in the interests of the tribal community and fell in battle. These dead heroes became objects of regular worship by their community.<sup>24</sup> The description of a hero – stones in these poems contain references to the installation of a spear and shield in front of the stone. The stone was often inscribed with the name of the fallen hero and the spear was obviously the symbol of Valour. The creation of countless such stones all over Tamilnadu is this attested from a very early period.

The quality of protective Valour was closely associated with any one hero – stone but with the spear found everywhere. Since a quality could not be conceived as an subtraction in those days it was attributed to a great man – god, the warrior – protector of all tribes, belonging equally to all of them and

treating all equally. The measure of justice was the source for all peoples in the eyes of this god<sup>25</sup>. Valour consisted this measure of justice and *Muruga* was the god who represented it. The development of Tamil society from the tribal state. Required the development of such a god of a unifying nature, a god of justice for all. In *Muruga* the Tamils expressed what according to some sociologists consists the religious need of man. To bring some order (cosmos) into the universal experience of disorder (chaos). It can also be said that through religious man has often tried to discover an order that really exists in the Universe. The above statement is true of early man's attempt in the political domain also. "In some societies religious and political structures are co - terminus. The gods of the group guarantee of represent its values.

The appeal of *Muruga* was also due to his accessibility to all. His priests, the Velan were ubiquitous and his presence is mentioned even in great urban centers like *Kaviripattinam* and *Madurai* as well as in every village or spot in the Tamilnadu. This meant *Murugan* could be experienced by anyone anywhere. Perhaps this was the reason for the absence of reference to temples dedicated to him in the early period.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

Tolkappiam gives conclusive proof of the association of *Murugan* with Valour of a high ethical nature. It is in the context of referring to *Karantai* that *Murugan* worship occurs in the grammatical treatise. *Karantai* refers to the theme of retrieval of cattle which war is waged, it is not a war of acquisition or aggression, and it is a just war of self – defence and protection. Tolkappiyar mentions religious subjects, heroic themes and worship of hero – stones only in this connection. The first to be mentioned here in resounding terms is the Velan and his worshipping of *Muruga* who is emerges as the great god of ethical Valour. The armed might of the great kingdoms of the Cheran, Cholan, and Pandiyan is mentioned here. This reference in Tolkappiam to the righteous Valour of the divine king *Muruga* is followed in the right order by reference to the righteous Valour of the earthly king of Tamilnadu.

## References

1. N.Subramaian, *History of Tamil Nadu upto 1336 C.E.* Madurai,1973, p.20.
2. P.T Srinivasa Iyenagar, *Pre Aryan Tamil Culture, Delhi, 1985*, p.10.
3. A. Devanesan, *History of Tamilnadu upto 2000 C.E* Marthandam, 2001,p.16.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.15-16.
5. R.K. Das.*Temples of Tamil Nadu.* Bombay. 1964. P.60.
6. V.Kandasaway,*TamilnattinthalaVaralarum,PanpattuChinnangalum.* Madurai.1982, p.40.
7. A. Devanesan , *op.cit.*, p.20.
8. T.A. Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, New Delhi, 1985, p.50.
9. S.S. Rana, *A- Study of Skanda cult, New Delhi, 1989*, p.40. p.40.
10. *Ibid.*, p.3.
11. P.T. Srinivasan, *op.cit.*, p.15.
12. N. Subramanian, *op.cit.*, p.73.
13. Pandiarajan, K. *TiruMurugarruppadai – A Historical Analysis, Thesis*, Madurai Kamaraj University, p.96,
14. *Ibid.*, p.43.
15. Raju Kalidas, *The Iconography of Marugan*, Chennai 1989, p.40.
16. B.V. Ramanujam, *History of Vaishnavism in South India upto Ramanuja*, Madras. 1973. p.25.
17. A.L Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, Delhi, 1992, p.151.
18. *Purananuru*, verse 312.
19. *Ibid.*, verse 187.
20. *Sankam Ilakkiyap Porul Kalnciyam*, Vol.II.
21. M. Radhakrishnan, *Pirkala Vaisnavism, Madras.1987*, p.26.
22. R. Partha Sarthy, *Ramanujacharya, New Delhi,1969*, p.76
23. *Ibid.*, p.16.
24. *Purananuru*, Verse 329, 335.
25. *Akananuru*, verse 35, 131, 289.
26. A. Vellupillai, *Vainavamum Tamilum – Tamilar Samaya Varalaru*, Madras. 1980. p.40.