

# COMMUNAL IDENTITY OF THE THONDAIMANS IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT

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## ABSTRACT

The Thondaiman community is one of the human resources of the Kanyakumari district. The Thondaimans are called 'Sunnambukkaran', a Tamil caste of lime burners. They are also said to be a branch of the Kallan's. Sunnambukaran is an occupational name of certain classes, who are employed as lime (chunam) burners. The Thondaimans are chieftains who ruled the region in and around Pudukottai from the 17th to the 20th century. The Thondaimans are the original inhabitants of Pudukottai or the Thondaiman's country. They are said to have migrated from there to the southern regions of Tamil Nadu, i.e., Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts. They are also found in the Ramanathapuram and Madurai districts. They consider that they are the descendants of the Kings of Pudukottai, whose family is Thondaiman. Like any other Hindus, Thondaimans also celebrated various ceremonies. They have temples in their villages. The important religious ceremonies of the Thondaiman take place under canopies made of leaves and branches of trees which are erected with much pomp and care in the courtyard or front of the principal entrance door of the house. Before the performance of any ceremony, the place where it is to take place must be purified. This is usually the duty of the woman, and the principal ingredients required are cow-dung and darbha grass. The Thondaimans are very simple in their dress. Their food is also very simple. The most important food item is rice. A very majority of people are poor, they live in mud-huts. All houses have Varandhas, Storeroom, Kitchen and Pooja room. Generally, idols and Portraits of Gods and Goddesses adorned the room. As regards the family life of Thondaiman, the head of the Thondaiman family is the "Father". A family seems to have been fairly large. However, the joint family system seems to have been the order of the day. Family ties between different branches seem to have been faintly strong.

## KEY WORDS

Thondaiman - Community – Inhabitants – Ramanathapuram – Pudukottai - Temples – Villages-  
Religious ceremonies – Performance – Ingredients – Family - Gods and Goddesses – Pooja – Acharya -  
Purohita

## Introduction

The Thondaiman community is one of the human resources of the Kanyakumari district. The Thondaimans are called 'Sunnambukkaran', a Tamil caste of lime burners. They are also said to be a branch of the Kallan's. Sunnambukaran is an occupational name of certain classes, who are employed as lime (chunam) burners. 'Sunnampu', a Tamil word means shell or lime. The Thondaimans are chieftains who ruled the region in and around Pudukottai from the 17th to the 20th century. The Pudukkottai Thondaiman dynasty was founded by Raghunatha Thondaiman, the brother-in-law of the then Raja of Ramnad, Raghunatha Kilavan Sethupathi. The Pudukkottai Samasthanam was under the Thondaiman dynasty for one year even after Indian Independence. The Thondaiman dynasty had a special Valari regiment.

## Historical Background:

The Thondaimans are the original inhabitants of Pudukkottai or the Thondaiman's country. They are said to have migrated from there to the southern regions of Tamil Nadu, i.e., Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts. They are also found in the Ramanathapuram and Madurai districts. They consider that they are the descendants of the Kings of Pudukkottai, whose family is Thondaiman. They are the natives of Tamil Nadu. The Dictionary defines 'ceremony' as a formal act or series of formal acts performed on a religious or public occasion. Of all the religions, the Hindus celebrate a lot of ceremonies. The number and kind of ceremonies in one's life from cradle to the concrete tomb are varied and many. They have become the part and parcel of one's life. Right from the child's birth, naming, feeding, schooling, attaining puberty in case of the girl child, wedding and the final funeral are a few to mention. The Thondaimans are Hindus and Lord Sastha is considered as their main deity. Like any other Hindus, Thondaimans also celebrated various ceremonies. They have temples in their villages. They also worship deities such as Madasamy, Karuppasamy, Sudalaimadan, Kaliammal, Mariammal, Isakkiammal and Hindu deities such as Murugan, Iyyappan, Ganesh, Siva and Vishnu. A few of the Thondaiman have adopted Christianity. Around the beginning of the 20th century, the cultivators, of many communities, near Madurai staged an anti-Kallar movement against the

community's authority. The reasons for the movement are complex: partly the abuse of authority shown by Kallar watchmen, partly agrarian distress, and part-personal feud. The agitations took the form of violence against the Kallars, including arson, and forcing them out of the villages. In 1918, the community was placed on the list of Criminal Tribes.

### **Ceremonies under Canopies**

The important religious ceremonies of the Thondaiman take place under canopies made of leaves and branches of trees which are erected with much pomp and care in the courtyard or front of the principal entrance door of the house. The pandal is usually supported by twelve wooden posts or pillars which are covered with foliage and branches of trees. The top or ceiling is ornamented with paintings or costly stuff. While the whole campier is hung with garlands of flowers, foliage and many other decorations, the pillars are painted in alternate bands of red and white. The pandals of rich people are often exquisitely decorated. Then the relatives and friends all assemble to set up the center pillar which is called Muhurta-Kal and to which they, offer puja to the accompaniment of music. Under this canopy, all the ceremonies connected with the fete take place and the guests remain underneath it till the end of the performance.

### **Purification Ceremony:**

Before the performance of any ceremony, the place where it is to take place must be purified. This is usually the duty of the woman, and the principal ingredients required are cow-dung and darbha grass. They dilute the cow-dung with water and make a sort of plaster with it, which they spread over the floor with their hands, making zigzags and other patterns with lime or chalk as they go on. They then draw wide lines of alternate red and white over this and sprinkle the whole with darbha grass, after which the place is pure. This is how Hindus purify their houses day by day to protect themselves from the defilements caused by promiscuous givers and comers. It is the rule of this caste to have their houses rubbed over once a day with cow-dung, but in any class, it would be considered an unpardonable and gross breach of good manners to omit this ceremony when they expected friends to call, or were going to receive company. This custom appears odd at first sight, but it brings this inestimable benefit in its train, that it cleanses the house where it is in use from all the insects and vermin which would otherwise infest them.

The due worship of images and their consecration require deep insight and perfect knowledge of the art and practice of yoga and mantra. But this is not all. To this, the purity of body, speech and mind are a sine qanon. Strong willpower and undaunted courage are also the necessary conditions of success. The first duty

enjoyed on the Acharya is that of personal purification which consists of bath and change of dress. The dress to be worn is a pair of new clothes one round the loins and the other over the shoulders. He should then go through forty-six ceremonials. Deha Suddhy, ie., the purification of the body and purification of the organs of action and perception including the internal faculty, the manas (mind) are of prominent importance. Internal purity is secured by Pranava Pranayanam, ie., by the inspiration, retention, and expiration of the breath. After being thus personally purified the rites for puja to the Deity in the temple are commenced. It may be added that in offering water, sandal, flowers, incense, etc., the Archaka has to picture to himself mentally the elements and organs which these articles represent and their absorption into Divinity.

### **Jatakarma**

Jatagam or the Horoscope plays a vital role in a Hindu's life who believes in God and other celestial bodies. The position of the Moon at the time of birth of a child is taken into account to calculate its Jatagam. If the time, date, day, month and year of birth of a child are given correctly, the Horoscope can be accurately written for future reference. A person's Horoscope is studied carefully by the Jothishas whenever he wants to start any good thing or whenever he encounters any misfortune and wants to carry out some parihas. When a woman begins to feel the pangs of childbirth, her husband should be near her, so that he may carefully note the date of the month, the day, the star of the day, the yoga, the hour and the movement when the child is born.

The woman who gave birth and the other people in the house observe "Theetu" for ten days. On the eleventh day, all the clothes that have been used during this period are given to the washer-man and the house is purified. Then they call in a purohita. The woman and her husband are then seated on a sort of earthen platform, which is set up in the centre of the house and covered with a cloth. The purohita then performs the 'Sam Kalpa', offers puja to God and goes through the ceremony of the 'Puniaha Vachana' or consecration of the sacred works. He pours a small quantity of water into the hands of the father and mother and the child, who drink a portion of it sprinkle the rest over their heads. He also sprinkles this water all over the house and the inmates of it and pours the remaining water into the well. Then they present some small gift of offering after which the purohita departs. This ceremony, which is called 'Jatakarma' removes all uncleanness, but the woman who has been confined does not become perfectly pure before the end of a month.

### **Birth Ceremony:**

Birth is always looked upon as a wonderful thing. Conceiving a child, carrying it for months and months and giving birth to it, is considered as a rebirth to a woman. No wonder, the arrival of a newborn,

especially the first child is a cause of celebration in any family. Naturally, the husband and the in-laws of the girl would like to keep her happy and contented. Hence they celebrate many small functions. One such function is *Valaikappu* ie. wearing many colourful bangles on both hands. Scientifically also people say that the sound of the bangles would make the fetus lively. The Thondaimans observed the valaikappu, in the fifth or seventh month of a woman's first pregnancy. The mother of the pregnant woman, along with other relatives, comes to her daughter's house and puts some valayals on her both hands, offers her new clothes and gives her sweets.

If the ceremony is held in the fifth month of pregnancy, five sweet items are gifted to her and if it is held in the seventh month of pregnancy, seven varieties of sweets are offered. A vegetarian feast for the relatives follows the ceremony. After the valaikappu, she is taken to her parent's house for delivery. It is generally felt that some pregnant women will have a passion for eating something different or would like to eat the like most. Some may like to eat dishes that are sour or hot. The elders of the household normally satisfy their wishes. Thondaimans are also no exception to this. They celebrate a ritual namely, '*Pongipoduthal*' which is a pre-delivery ritual. A pre-delivery ritual called "Pongi Poduthal" (to prepare and serve) is observed in the seventh or ninth month of a woman's first pregnancy. The woman's parents visit her and arrange a feast for their relatives. The woman is presented with glass bangles by her mother and other relatives. She is then brought to her natal home for childbirth.

### **Ilai Kattuthal Ceremony**

Birth pollution is observed for 16 days. On the last day, the house is cleaned and the thread-tying kayaru Kattuthal or Ilai Kattuthal ceremony is arranged. The paternal grandmother ties a yellow or black thread around the waist of the child. A small feast is arranged on this occasion. The child's grandparents and relatives give gifts to the child. The child is also named on this day. An elderly woman is asked to keep the child on her lap and to pronounce the name three times in its ears.

### **Namakarna Ceremony**

'Name' is nothing but an individual's identification. It is very important from birth certificate to death certificate. The very first column or the particular to be filled in any kind of form is the 'NAME'. Hence, the Christening or the naming ceremony is given more importance in every religion. After the twelfth day of the birth of the child, they give a name. This is Namakarna Ceremony. The house having been purified, the father of the child invites his relatives and friends to be present at the ceremonies and feast. The guests go all together

to perform their ablutions. On their return, the first of all offer the sacrifice to fire called homam, in honour of the nine planets. Then the father of the child holding the child in his arms seats himself on the little raised platform of earth and performs a puja.

By his side is a copper dish full of rice. With the right index finger adorned with a gold ring, the father of the baby writes on this rice the day of the moon, the name of the day, that of the constellation under which the child was born and finally the name that he wishes to give him. He then calls the child three times by this name in a loud voice. With this, the ceremony comes to an end. The father then gives a present to the presiding 'purohita' and distributes betel, and nut to all the people and then they take their places at the feast which has been prepared. As soon as it is finished the master of the house again offers 'Thamboolam' to the guests and gives them mementos if he is rich enough. The mother of the child won't be present at this ceremony. The naming ceremony is observed on the 16<sup>th</sup> day of the child's birth.

### **Tonsuring Ceremony**

All religious preachers or 'Gurus' insist on the complete, unquestioning - surrender to God for 'Mukthi' or salvation. The worldly charms should not hamper us from thinking of god. People give more importance to outward appearance and are very particular about beautifying us in many ways. Offering our hair to god is a sort of devotion symbolically telling Him that we are prepared to sacrifice anything to attain His feet. On the 41st day after delivery, both the mother and the child are taken to her husband's house. The tonsuring ceremony is performed when the child is a year old irrespective of the sex of the child. The child's earlobes are also pierced on the occasion. It is customary for the maternal uncle to present ear-studs to the child.

### **Anna Prasana**

Food is the source of energy. It is essential for growth and nutritious food keeps us fit and healthy. People work hard to earn their bread. Feeding the child on solid food (other than the mother's milk) for the first time is celebrated in all most all the communities. Thondaimans also do it grandly. As soon as the child is six months old he is weaned. Then the 'Anna Prasana' takes place. The name of this ceremony exposes the idea of feeding the child solid food for the first time. For this auspicious occasion they choose a month, a week, a day and a star which all combine to give favorable circumstances.

A Pandal is erected which is ornamented all around with toranams or wreaths of mango leaves, some of which are also hung over the entrance door of the house, the inside of which has been carefully purified by

the woman. The father of the child sallies forth, provided a cup full of Akshatas to invite his relatives and friends for the feast. All the guests having purified themselves by bathing, assemble under the pandal. The mother, holding the child in her arm, and accompanied by her husband, seats herself beside him on the little platform of earth which has been set up in the centre. The purohita performs the 'San Kalpa', offers firstly human in honour of the nine planets then a sacrifice to fire, to which he presents clarified butter and betal for neivedya. When he has finished the women sing verses expressing their good wishes for the future happiness of the child and perform "arathi" over him. The father offers puja to his household gods and a portion of the dishes prepared for the general feast is set apart as Neivedya for them. Then the married women form a procession and sing a song. A new dish of silver-plated copper is given by the maternal uncle of the child. They touch the child with these articles and then pour some rice, sugar and other ingredients into the vessel. They make a profound obeisance all together to this new deity, then addressing it and the rest of the deities, they implore them to make the child grow, to give him strength, health, long life and plenty of this world's good things. Two of the women then make open its mouth, while a third woman pours some of the mixture contained in the dish down their throats. Musical instruments are played and the women sing during the whole ceremony.

The last item of the function in 'arathi' after which all the people offer presents consecrated by mantras. Each one takes a pinch of the coloured rice, part of which is put on the child's head and the rest on his own. Then they sit down to a feast and the ceremony is ended by a distribution of betel and a few presents given by the master of the house to his guests. The Thondaimans were traditionally non-vegetarian people, though a 1970s survey of Tamil Nadu indicated that 30% of Thondaimans surveyed, though non-vegetarian, refrained from eating fish after puberty. Meat, though present in the Thondaimans diet, was not frequently eaten but restricted to Saturday nights and festival days. Even so, this small amount of meat was sufficient to affect perceptions of Thondaimans social status.

### **The Chaula**

Three years after the birth of the child the tonsure or Chaula is made for the first time. The people who are invited assemble under the pandal after having performed their ablutions. The child is brought in by his father and mother, who seat him between them on the little earthen platform. The married woman proceeded to perform his toilette. They begin by anointing him from head to foot with oil, after which they wash him

with warm water. They then colour his forehead and other parts of his body with powdered sandalwood and akshatas; deck him with ornaments, and finally, put a long necklace of coral beads around his neck. The Purohitha then draws near the child thus adorned and performs the Sankalpa and also offered homam to the nine planets. The next traces on the floor in front of the child a square patch with red earth, which they cover with rice that has to husk on. The idol Vigneswara is placed on one side, one to it they perform puja, offering brinjal, raw sugar and betel for neivedya. The child is made to sit near the square patch and the barber after offering worship to his razor, proceeds to shave the child's head. While the barber is performing his part of the ceremony, the women sing, musical instruments are played and all the people present remain standing in perfect silence.

As soon as the barber has finished shaving, they throw him the money due to him. This he picks up, and before retiring, he also carries off the rice that has been scattered over the square path. The child is immediately put into a bath to purify him from the deiling touch of the barber. The women perform the ceremony of arathi and the prohithar for the second time performs homam to the nine planets. The entertainment generally ends with a feast and the distribution of presents to the people. The musicians are then paid and receive besides their money measure of rice each. The ears of children of both sexes are pierced about the same age. This is an occasion for another feast very closely rambling the proceeding ones. The goldsmith operates with a very fine gold wire and the size of the hole is gradually increased from time to time. The hole is generally made larger in the ears of the girls, so that they may wear larger ornaments.

## Conclusion

The Thondaimans are very simple in their dress. Their food is also very simple. The most important food item is rice. A very majority of people are poor, they live in mud-huts. All houses have Varandhas, Storeroom, Kitchen and Pooja room. Generally, idols and Portraits of Gods and Goddesses adorned the room. As regards the family life of Thondaiman, the head of the Thondaiman family is the "Father". A family seems to have been fairly large. However, the joint family system seems to have been the order of the day. Family ties between different branches seem to have been faintly strong. Members are bound together by feelings of affection. An old custom called ulliyam stood in the way of the moral, social and economic progress of the Thondaimans. People belonging to this community are the victims of this social injustice. They are compelled to supply such as palaces, forts and choultries. If they refused, they are summoned before the place of Kariyakkar for inquiry and are punished. As for as the financial position of the Thondaimans is concerned,



most of them are in poverty. Apart from some Thondaimans who are doing some business like selling lime etc., all the others are leading a miserable life.

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