



# GENDER EQUALITY AND IN EQUALITY IN ANCIENT TAMILAKAM - A REASSESSMENT

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## **Abstract :**

*In ancient Tamilakam, women enjoyed a prominent position within the social structure, holding equality with men across various aspects of life. The Sangam literature provides ample references to support this elevated status. This equitable standing persisted until the dominance of Brahmanical supremacy, backed by their Sastras and Samhitas. A historical examination reveals that during the initial stages of the Sangam society, both men and women experienced equal rights, with women receiving high social status, unrestricted movement, and the right to a complete education. However, as society transitioned from tribal to kinship structures, women's status declined, and their social mobility became restricted. In the medieval period, women started withdrawing from public life, and the caste-based hierarchical society confined them to a secluded existence without political rights. The once-respected status of women underwent significant changes over the centuries due to external influences such as the Aryans and Europeans. This analysis is primarily grounded in inscriptional evidence and Sangam literature.*

**Key Words:** Ancient Tamilakam, Sangam period, Manimekhalai, Silappadikaram, Kundalakesi, Marava women, Panar women, Kurava women, Aryan immigration.

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The Sangam period mentions several educated women, including Auvaiyar, Adimandiyar, Vellividiyar, Kakkaiappadiyar, Nachchellaiyar, Kuramakal, Haveyini, VeripadiyaKamakkanniyar, OkkurMassitiyar, Kavarendu, Ponmudiyar, Nakkanniyar, Bhudappandiyar, and Pari Makalir, who significantly enriched Sangam literature with their valuable contributions. Female education was widely embraced across all societal classes. Early epics such as Manimekhalai,

Silappadikaram, and Kundalakesi shed light on the status of women during that era, and this situation persisted under the influence of Jains and Buddhists without evident changes.<sup>1</sup> Inscriptions provide insights into Jain female teachers and students, emphasizing the importance given to subjects like reading, writing, arithmetic, music, and dance.<sup>2</sup>

Women took pleasure in studying and enjoying music and dance, and the melodious voices of girls often had a captivating effect,



causing people to lose themselves in its charm.<sup>3</sup> Throughout history, women have sung songs to soothe infants in cradles and during various occasions like marriages and deaths.<sup>4</sup> Notably, Kurava women sang songs to alleviate the suffering of their husbands in pain,<sup>5</sup> and wives of wounded soldiers in battlefields sang songs accompanied by musical instruments to protect their husbands from demons.<sup>6</sup>

In Manimekhalai, there is a reference to the meticulous and careful spinning of cotton yarn and weaving by women.<sup>7</sup> Purananuru notes that women would patiently spin cotton, even during nighttime, illuminated by the faint light of a lamp.<sup>8</sup> The resulting cotton cloth, adorned with delicate floral designs, was as thin as a snake's slough. Its intricate weaving was so refined that it challenged the observer's ability to trace the yarn's path.<sup>9</sup> Women involved in this spinning process were known as Paruthippendu or Paruthippendir.<sup>10</sup> During that era, Brahmin women, in particular, spent their leisure time spinning thread under the shade of trees along tank banks and occasionally practiced agriculture.<sup>11</sup> This indicates that women in those times participated in various professions regardless of their social status.

During the Sangam Age, women had the autonomy to choose their life partners, and they were familiar with both legal and illegal marriages, known as kalavu and karupu. The practice included both arranged marriages and love marriages, with elopement being considered acceptable as long as the couple returned home to formalize their marriage. Various types of marriages occurred, such as regular arranged marriages, inter-regional unions, and instances where chieftains and noblemen, like Cherpanand KunruKizhavan, expressed love and married women from lower classes.<sup>12</sup>

Sangam poets generally appreciated and endorsed love marriages, although occasionally, women in the village would criticize a girl in love. Society, however, did not condemn couples who eloped due to mutual love.<sup>13</sup> Kalithokai recounts a story of a foster mother seeking a couple in love, where learned

Brahmins advised her that the young man and girl were doing the right thing, comparing it to a pearl being useful only when strung and worn as an ornament, emphasizing that an adolescent daughter is not permanently useful to her mother but to the young man with whom she chooses to live.<sup>14</sup> In arranged marriages, it was customary for the bridegroom to provide a certain amount to the bride's relatives as part of the arrangement.

In those times, women interacted closely with men, and there were no strict regulations governing their interactions. Purananuru mentions a young man bathing with women from the village, even holding the hand of a lady during the bath. They freely bathed in the sea, rivers, and tanks, and without restrictions, visited temples to make offerings and prayed for their well-being.

Dancing played a crucial role in the lives of individuals from various social strata and was associated with all joyous occasions.<sup>15</sup> Women of all classes actively participated in dancing. Starting from the fifth age, young girls underwent thorough training for five years, directly supervised by a dance instructor, a music teacher, a song composer, and individuals skilled in flute, yazh, drum, and other instruments. The dance apprentices became proficient in performing vettiya, a dance meant for royal courts, and poduviyal, a dance intended for public spaces.<sup>16</sup>

Women engaged in the study of sixty-four arts, encompassing skills such as creating garlands, floor decoration, reading, writing, painting, composing poems, planting, and food preparation. They received systematic instruction in various body movements, limb actions, hand poses, gestures, synchronization with beats, manipulation of vocal chords, and other elements associated with the art. Silappadikaram specifically mentions around thirty-three hand pose patterns.<sup>17</sup> Bharata, in his Natyasastra, highlights the advanced nature of South Indian music and dance.<sup>18</sup> During the Sangam age, girls received comprehensive training in literature, music, and drama. The Sangam literature abundantly attests to the fact

that many women distinguished themselves in the art of music.

During the Sangam age, women had a penchant for using oil, aromatic scents, colored powders, and paints, with a heavy application of sandal paste on their chests. According to Silappadikaram, women adorned their bodies with colored patterns and applied black pigment to their eyelids. Both men and women wore ornaments around their necks and on their arms and legs. Chiefs and nobles donned substantial armlets and anklets, while ordinary women wore various types of jewelry. The affluent used valuable gold and precious stone ornaments, whereas the less privileged adorned themselves with conch-shell bracelets and necklaces made of colored beads.

Silappadikaram also describes a ceremonial hot bath in water infused with five kinds of seeds, ten kinds of astringents, and thirty-two kinds of scented plants. It details the practice of drying hair over akhil smoke and parting it into five sections for styling. Men, too, grew long hair, tying their tufts together with a knot, sometimes encircled by a string of beads. The Tamils had a particular fondness for flowers, with women adorning their hair, especially with water lilies, as mentioned in Kuruntogai.<sup>19</sup>

Women in the Sangam age actively participated in various social activities such as dancing with men, engaging in public sports, and taking part in games and cultural events. Their preferred game, kazhangadudal, involved tossing a specified number of pebbles and wooden spheres, including gold-covered wooden pebbles for the wealthy, into the air and skillfully catching them by hand. They also developed Ammanai, a game involving colored balls similar in size to badminton balls, where women would sing and throw the balls simultaneously.<sup>20</sup>

Another pastime for women was swinging on a pole suspended by ropes, known as unjal.<sup>21</sup> Poetry, music, and dance were highly popular during the Sangam age, with kings, chieftains, and nobles generously supporting poets through liberal donations. The royal courts were frequented by singing bards called Panar and

Viraliyar, who excelled in folk songs and dances. The arts of music and dance reached a high level of development, with Sangam literature referencing various Yazhs and drums. Kanigaiyar performed dancing, while Kuthu emerged as the most favored form of entertainment for the people.

The realm of performing arts during the Sangam age encompassed the art of drama, with productions primarily leaning towards religious themes, although occasionally, they were staged to commemorate significant events or individuals. Bardism and the practice of itinerant minstrels, moving from one place to another with their musical instruments while singing the praises of noteworthy individuals or events, gained immense popularity during this era.

Initially, the bard, known as Porunar, started as an individual whose role involved boosting the martial spirit of soldiers in wartime and celebrating their victories once battles were won. However, their activities extended beyond inspiring soldiers on the battlefield; they also conveyed messages from the battlefield to the people back home. Porunars held high respect in society and were even honored by kings. In addition to Porunars, there were Panars who performed for the general populace.

It was believed that the Kurava women, particularly those killed in the Kuravai dance, surpassed Valli, the wife of God Muruga, who was highly esteemed in the region at that time. Tolkappiyar referred to this dance as vadavalli, emphasizing its enduring nature compared to other vallis (creepers).<sup>22</sup> Kurava women performed this dance during the burial ceremonies of their fallen warriors, accompanied by the beat of war drums. The Idaya women dedicated a dance form called Kuravaikkottu to their deity Mayon, an early form of Vishnu, and the Ulavar women also engaged in a similar dance. Marava women worshipped Kottavai or Kali, the goddess of victory, through vettuvavari, a dance performed at road intersections.<sup>23</sup> During these

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performances, a woman in ecstasy would predict impending evils on the village and suggest remedies.

The Panar women, known as Viraliyar, excelled in music and dance. They not only sang praises of kings and chieftains but also entertained the public with their performances.<sup>24</sup> Although N. Subramanian regarded them as individuals from the lower rungs of society, during those times, there seemed to be limited emphasis on such hierarchical distinctions.<sup>25</sup>

Typically, a girl of marriageable age would consider a man as her lord and worship him like a god. For example, Kannagi tolerated her husband Kovalan's extramarital relationship with Madhavi. Nalaimudi Nettayar, a Sangam poet from Akananuru, likened the relationship between husband and wife to that of body and soul, emphasizing their interconnectedness.<sup>26</sup> Chaste women were highly honored and respected, with dutiful housewives being those who fulfilled domestic responsibilities with dedication. While the practice of sati was absent, widows faced challenging circumstances. However, noble women endured the pain of separation with courage, anticipating a reunion after death in the other world.<sup>27</sup>

Women enjoyed the freedom to dress according to their preferences during this time. They often left their shoulders, arms, and the area down to the waist uncovered, embellishing it with sandalwood and other fragrant materials.<sup>28</sup> Women from hill tribes opted for green leaves tied around their waist.<sup>29</sup> The wives of Panar, who were wandering minstrels, typically remained naked when accompanying their husbands during travels.<sup>30</sup> In the upper echelons of society, people wore fine muslin and silk garments. With the exception of nobles and kings, men usually wore two pieces of cloth—one below the waist and another as a turban on the head. Women primarily used cloth to cover the lower part of their bodies, while tribal women, in particular, resorted to leaves and barks for covering.

During special occasions, especially festivals and romantic encounters, girls would wear a distinctive dress known as tazhai.<sup>31</sup> This garment, which covered only the waist and hips, sometimes consisted of little more than flower petals.<sup>32</sup> Courtesans during this period typically wore a piece of muslin that covered their bodies from the waist to the middle of the thigh. Although it was a fine texture, it barely concealed their figures.<sup>33</sup>

During this era, women had the liberty to choose their attire based on personal preferences. It was common for them to leave their shoulders, arms, and the area down to the waist uncovered, often adorning it with sandalwood and other fragrant materials. Women belonging to hill tribes often chose to wear green leaves tied around their waist. The wives of Panar, who were wandering minstrels, commonly traveled naked alongside their husbands.

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In the higher social strata, people donned elegant muslin and silk garments. Except for nobles and kings, men typically wore two pieces of cloth—one below the waist and another as a turban on their heads. Women typically used cloth to cover the lower part of their bodies, while tribal women, in particular, relied on leaves and barks for coverage.

In some instances, men went to the extent of marrying such women and keeping them as second wives. The protests from lawfully wedded wives further aggravated family tensions in certain cases.<sup>34</sup> Akananuru mentions the righteous indignation of a devoted wife who, in response to her husband's association with a woman of ill repute, refused to touch him and reproached him. Consequently, women during that era enjoyed rights equal to those of men in all respects.<sup>35</sup> Married women adorned themselves with a tali, a pendant around their neck symbolizing chastity and fidelity. This trinket, attached to a string, was not to be removed during the husband's lifetime.

Women from all societal strata, regardless of economic status, wore various ornaments, with those around the neck, arms, and waist being the most elaborate part of their attire.

Women from lower economic classes adorned themselves with conch shell bracelets, necklaces made of white and blue beads, and other affordable trinkets. Middle-class women primarily wore gold ornaments, while wealthy women showcased very expensive jewels and pearls. Both affluent and middle-class women wore chest ornaments made of gold, some embellished with gems and precious stones, while others featured diamonds. Some women even used bracelets to cover their bosoms.<sup>36</sup> Popular actresses and courtesans wore the most magnificent ornaments, as described in *Silappadikaram*, which highlighted the luxury and display of jewels.<sup>37</sup> Women had a penchant for flowers, adorning their breasts with tender leaves and blooms. At times, they wore garlands of vengai flowers around their waist. Beautiful flowers such as roses, water lilies, jasmine, and even margosa were used to embellish and adorn their hair.<sup>38</sup>

By the eighth century A.D., women began to witness a decline in their once-prominent status, initiating a process of degradation.<sup>39</sup> The rise of Brahmin supremacy likely brought about changes in the social landscape, leading some to align themselves with the victorious Brahmins and potentially gain privileges, positions, and advantages as concessions or compromises. Meanwhile, others may have been subjugated, excluded, and rigorously kept under control. The former group seems to represent caste Hindus, while the latter includes non-caste Hindus and the depressed classes. Those who staunchly opposed the Brahminical supremacy were deemed untouchables and subjected to various social disabilities.

The Aryan immigration introduced distinctions based on upper and lower status into the societal framework of South Indian society. This likely generated doubts among various professional groups, resulting in ongoing confrontations. Despite being a microscopic minority, Brahmins emerged as powerful arbitrators and peacemakers, even influencing reigning kings with their counsel due to their spiritual authority.<sup>40</sup> With the

establishment of Brahminical ascendancy, the indigenous population lost its freedom.

The Brahmin legal scholars advocated a caste system model that positioned them at the apex, granting them the privilege of defining the duties of other castes, including kings.<sup>41</sup> To assert their spiritual superiority and temporal authority, they manipulated customs, conventions, administrative and socio-economic systems, subjecting the entire society to the provisions of the *Sastras*. Fundamental principles of the caste system in Hindu society, marked by unchangeable inequality based on birth, vocational profession gradation, and restrictions on inter-caste marriage, were entrenched. One's birth into a specific caste predetermined their roles in all aspects of life.<sup>42</sup> The Brahmins' favored position under local kings and the increasing use of Sanskrit forms paved the way for the hierarchical organization of caste in society.<sup>43</sup>

Brahminical concepts of womanhood gradually gained prominence, leading to the prohibition of women's education. With the advent of *varnashrama dharma*, Brahmins became dominant, asserting that a woman's duty was to serve her husband and confine herself to the kitchen. The dogmas and doctrines that once governed the social fabric of ancient *Tamilakam* were replaced by Brahminical *sastras* and *samhitas*. Consequently, women's social status underwent drastic changes, compromising their freedom and relegating them to subordinate positions. Women, regardless of their higher or lower status, fell victim to such biases. The birth of female children began to be viewed as a curse, confining them almost exclusively to their homes.

During this period, women's societal standing further deteriorated, and they faced subjugation in religious and legal spheres. The prevailing belief propagated that women were unsuitable for freedom and deserved no independence, advocating their subordination to men throughout their lives.<sup>44</sup> The *purdah* system, not previously a rule in Indian society, became prevalent due to uncertain socio-

political reasons.<sup>45</sup> Female infanticide, child marriage, and the inhumane practice of sati became ingrained in the social culture, accompanied by a religious ban on widow remarriage.

#### End Notes and References:

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- <sup>2</sup>*South Indian Inscriptions*, V, 308-325.
- <sup>3</sup>*Akananuru*, 88, 12.
- <sup>4</sup>*Kalithokai*, 131:23-4; *Kurunthokai*, 89:1.
- <sup>5</sup>*Malaipadukadam*, 302-4.
- <sup>6</sup>*Padirrupattu*, 67:6; *Purananuru*, 62.
- <sup>7</sup>*Manimekhalai*, XVII:28.
- <sup>8</sup>*Purananuru*, 362:5.
- <sup>9</sup>*Porunarattupadai*, 11:82-83.  
K.A.NilakantaSastri, *The Colas*, p.88.
- <sup>10</sup>*Purananuru*, 125:1, 326:5.
- <sup>11</sup>Thomas Foulks, 'The Dakkanin the Times of Gautama Buddha', *The Indian Antiquary*, XVI, 1887, pp.52-53.
- <sup>12</sup>*Narrinai*, 45:207.
- <sup>13</sup>V.KanakaSabhai, *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Year Ago*, p.121.
- <sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p.9.
- <sup>15</sup>*Tolkappiyam Porulathikaram*, 60.
- <sup>16</sup>*Silappadikaram*, XIV:148.
- <sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 167.
- <sup>18</sup>*Natyasastra*, V:31-32.
- <sup>19</sup>*Kuruthokai*, 265.
- <sup>20</sup>N.Subramanian, *Sangam Polity*, p.317.

- <sup>21</sup>*Narrinai*, 90.
- <sup>22</sup>*Tolkappiyam Poruladhikaram*, 60.
- <sup>23</sup>Elamkulam P.N.Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History*, pp.16-19.
- <sup>24</sup>K.K.Pillay, *A Social History of the Tamils*, Part I, p.318.
- <sup>25</sup>N.Subramanian, *op.cit.*, p.261.
- <sup>26</sup>*Akananuru*, 339.
- <sup>27</sup>*Tirukural*, 1160.
- <sup>28</sup>*Kalithokai*, 111, 115, 118.
- <sup>29</sup>*Kurichippattu*, 1:102.
- <sup>30</sup>*Porunararrupadai*, 1:39.
- <sup>31</sup>*Kuruthokai*, 295.
- <sup>32</sup>*Purananuru*, 116.2.
- <sup>33</sup>*Silappadikaram*, VI, 1.88.
- <sup>34</sup>*Kalithokai*, 1.71, 72.
- <sup>35</sup>*Purananuru*, 36.
- <sup>36</sup>*Akananuru*, 99:5.
- <sup>37</sup>*Silappadikaram*, VI, 76-108.
- <sup>38</sup>*Padirrupattu*, 21:20; *Kurunthokai*, 281:3-4.
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