

**A KŌVIL-CENTERED COMMUNITY: A SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF
THE SHIREE PARARĀJASEKARA PILLAIYĀR KŌVIL IN JAFFNA**

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“*Kōvil illā ūril kudi irrukka vēndām*” (do not live in a place where there are no temples)

- Moodurai

“*Thirukōvil illātha thiruviloorum adavi kādē*” (where a *ūr* has no temple the *ūr* is like a forest area)

- Appar Thevāram

INTRODUCTION

Above quotes and proverbs indicate the essential of *kōvil* to an *ūr* (village).[†] This study focuses on the rural communities in Northern Sri Lanka in which community formation is based on *kōvil* (temple). Since the ancient times, the *kōvil* in Jaffna was symbolic of the religious, cultural, social, and political life of Tamil Hindu communities in both Tamil Nadu in India and Jaffna in Sri Lanka. Therefore, *kōvil* is considered to be the most important social unit in rural villages of Jaffna. Even though such explanations are related to the essentiality of *kōvil* in a village, it has to be viewed beyond the notions of religious, fine arts, sculpture, Hindu philosophy and *bhakti*[‡] aspects. Viewing a Hindu temple merely as a place of worship the case would appear to be queer as temples possess symbolic as well as material resources; they are a source of privilege and deprivation. Apart from these factors, an increasing number of *kōvils* establishment, are based on socio, economic, cultural and political factors such as caste, kinship, lineage, *kurichchi*, *vaddāram* and *pakuthi*.[§] This study focuses on the Jaffna Tamil Hindu community as a ‘*kōvil*-centered’ community. The operationalization of the term ‘*kōvil*-centered’ starts with the identification of the various kinds of *kōvils* that the Jaffna Tamil Hindus are involved with. It also involves a deep rooted relationship between the people and the temples. An increasing number of temples within the caste and among the castes in the same village forms a kind of immediacy based on kinship, lineage, *kurichchi*, *vaddāram*, and family. Emotional attachment with regard to *kōvil* ownership and land ownership open a new space for discussion on social transformation, social dynamics, social identity, caste identity, social attachment and status quo. Lack of social anthropological studies on rural villages in Jaffna urges me to do an explorative research on ‘*kōvil*-centered’ communities in Jaffna which will be analyzed in the contexts of Tamil Diaspora and the development of the Tamil village in a context of globalization. In the present day context, cyberspace also plays a significant role in facilitating the linkages between ‘*kōvil* centered’ communities in Jaffna and Tamil Diasporic communities. However, this study explores the relations between the temple and the society from social, cultural, religious, economic and political dimensions. Therefore, a broader arena is given to research a ‘*kōvil* e-centered’

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[†] In the context of Jaffna, the concept of *ūr* is more applicable rather than the concept of village. Because the concept of village always denotes the physical territory than soil attachment, see also E. Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*, (California: 1987), p. 63.

[‡] The term is often translated as devotion.

[§] *Kkurichchi* refers to a contiguous area of land giving it distinctiveness. It may be named after the flora of the area. *vaddāram* which means circuit which does not come under land measurement but it denotes an area where people live, *pakuthi* this is not referred a land unit, but it refers to lineage of people.

community from a holistic and multi-disciplinary perspective. For this anthropological investigation, I have chosen Inuvil *Shree Pararājasekara Pillaiyār kōvil* to study the inter relationship between *kōvil* and society.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are as follows: to reveal the Jaffna Hindu Tamil community as a 'kōvil -centered' community through the study of *Shree Pararājasekara Pillaiyār kōvil* and to examine the increasing number of temples within the caste and among the castes in the same villages that form the kind of immediacy based on kinship, lineage, *kurichchi*, *vaddāram* and *pakuthi*.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of research is based on the classical anthropological research methods. Interestingly, I have designed the research to be an ethnographic study which used ethnographic research methods. In this aspect, the research adopted to collect data by key-informant interviewing. It has been carried out through field research based on informants in different years, i.e. 2008, 2009 and 2010

The Inuvil village of the Jaffna Peninsula is the study area chosen for this study. The reason was for selecting this village is that it is a traditional village which contains different caste groups and their temple establishment based on the caste differences. The village largely consists of Vellālar people and their temples. There are twelve *ākama kōvilkal*** (*ākama* temples) and small temples in the village. Among them, one is selected in a purposive sample. Methodologically, though one temple seems to be that it is not enough to have generalization towards *kōvil* -centered community, the proposed thesis is Jaffna Tamil Hindu community is a temple-centred community which is analyzed and justified based on a body of literature review. However, all temple-centred communities in Jaffna have to be studied anthropologically.

In addition, this study incorporates the informal discussions arranged within the same village (Inuvil village) where people live as Diasporic communities in India, France, London and Switzerland. The discussion took place in different periods in 2008, 2009 and 2010. Apart from key informant interviews, the study the used case study method and focus group discussions as well. Use of secondary sources is another aspect of the research technique adopted in this study. The documents examined so far range from the scholarly, objective materials like books (in English and Tamil), literary epics, journals, magazines and more personal materials like souvenir books published during festive or religious events like temple *kumbabishekam* or other relevant materials.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study of *kōvil*-centered' community

Inuvil is a village in the Vali South (Uduvil AGA Division) of Jaffna District of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. It is a Tamil-speaking village inhabited by members of Brahmin, Vellālar, Panndāram (Vērasaivar), Isai Vellālar (nattuvar), Nalavar (Tody Tappers), Pallar (agriculture labours) Paraiyar (drum beaters) castes. Caste is often seen as a cornerstone of Tamil Hindu society of Jaffna Peninsula. The caste system continued to hold sway over the economic, social

** The larger of them, the Brahman-staffed ones featuring concrete construction and sculpture, are called *ākama kōvilkal*. The term means "shrines (built according to) the temple scriptures (*ākama-s*)." The scriptures were first composed, evidently, in Sanskrit, but they are of medieval and South Indian provenance. See for more details, Bryan Pfanffenberger, *Caste in Tamil Culture: The Religious Foundations of Sudra Domination in Tamil Sri Lanka*, (New Delhi: 1982), p.61.

and religious life of the people. Generally, it is essential to study the Hindu temple (*ālayam* or *kōvil*^{††}) from a social science perspective which brings many new messages, findings, insights and new dimensions related to *kōvil*-centered communities. Village temple and *kulatheivam* play a significant role in social life as pointed out by the key informants. In Jaffna, a newly married couple going together to their village temple on the very first day of marriage, ear piercing ceremony, new infant's birth hair removing ritual, rice feeding ritual for new babies and weddings are performed in one's village temple. They break coconut or do *pūjas* to their deities (*kulatheivam*) before starting any activity. For example, farmers do it before starting their cultivation and harvesting, and students do it before going for an exam. It indicates how domestic rituals are connected with temples to fulfil their expectations in life without any interruptions.

Essentiality of *kōvil* in Tamil Hindu Community

There is no community without a temple in Jaffna either a Hindu temple or a Church in Jaffna. This statement does not mean that urban communities in Jaffna do not have temples, since there are many temples in the urban sector as well. Every village possesses more than one temple. Here the question might be posed as to what temple is referred to here. Jaffna society has more Hindu temples than Churches

Increasing Hindu Temples in Jaffna

Throughout the Jaffna Peninsula, the landscape is dotted with Hindu shrines, risen anew since the British colonial regime restored freedom of religious choice in the nineteenth century.^{††} What was the reason or logic behind the large number of temples emerging in Jaffna society? There are many reasons behind it such as the existence of different castes, *bhakti*, competition between wards of the village, temple as a compulsory religious unit in a village and different myths connected to temple establishments. For instance, the Inuvil village is not exception for this generalization and generally, Vellāars are the majority and dominant caste group. Each caste establishes a temple for their worship as each caste's *kulatheivam* is varied.

Without doubt, the segmentations play a major role within the village with an emerging number of large temples (*ākamic* temples) and small scale temples (non-*ākamic* temples) that are based on segments such as caste, lineage, *kuruchi*, *pakkuthi* and *vaddāram* differences. They include "*Vannāngkāddu Pillaiyar Kōvil*" and "*Paruthiyadaippu Pillaiyar Kōvil*", here, *Vannāngkāddu* and *Paruthiyadaippu*^{§§} are the names of the segments (*kuruchchi*) within the village structure. Quoting phrases like "our temple", "our festival right", "this *pūjā* belong to our grandmother's period, *pūjā* right", "we are the people to perform this festival", "*pūjā* offering belong to us", "the temple land patron is our grandfather"^{***} demonstrate social interaction, emotional attachment with right between temple and society in Jaffna. Segmentations or divisional variations are not only the fundamental factors resulting in an increasing number of temples but caste is also a main factor that impacts. Each caste has its own deity, making it build separate temples for its own community. Establishment of temples is widely connected to different myths. And worshipping different gods and goddess are also connected to different myths. But Jaffna Tamil mythology connected to religious, social, economic and cultural life of the society has not been studied extensively yet. For instance, the Tamil king Pararājasekaran also paid attention to this temple in the eleventh generation of Āriyachakaravarthi. During the Āriyachakaravarthi regime in Jaffna this temple was connected to the king's lineage (*paramparai/cantati*) and heritage of his lineage

^{††} Both are places of worship for followers of Hinduism.

^{††} Bryan Pfaffenberger, *Caste in Tamil Culture: The Religious Foundations of Sudra Domination in Tamil Sri Lanka*, (New Delhi: 1982), p. 61.

^{§§} See also, S.Pathmanesan, *Sri Pararājasekara Pillaiyār Kōvil: A Social Anthropological Perspective*, Maha Kumbhabisheka Siruppu Malar, (Jaffna: 2009), p.134.

^{***} Filed work at Inuvil in 2009

is maintained by the temple that was found in the song which has been sung in the temple for a long period.^{†††}

CONCLUDING REMARK

The scope of *kōvil*-centered community is a broad area to study social anthropologically which will be a contribution to the field. A temple can be studied from religious, architectural, fine arts, political, economic, social, cultural, social service and psychological, perspectives. But social-cultural anthropology attempts to study these issues from a holistic approach. However, this study attempts to portray '*kōvil* -centered community' which urge us to call it a 'temple village', because big temple and small temples are located everywhere in a village. This paved the way for the conclusion that a temple is an essential unit in a village community of Jaffna. By studying this *kōvil*-centered community, there are many matters revealed such as Vellalār domination, conflict competition between *kurichchis*, *vaddaram* and *pakuthis* with regard to ownership, rights, statuses and power of the temple.

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^{†††} The information was gathered from a key informant who is a devotee of the temple and has more experience with regard to this temple and I have cross checked the information with other informants as well. See also, S.Pathmanesan, *Sri Pararājasekara Pillaiyār Kōvil: A Social Anthropological Perspective*, Maha Kumbhabisheka Siruppu Malar, (Jaffna: 2009), p. 135.