

ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES ON INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS IN TAMIL SOCIETY

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Abstract

This study examines indigenous knowledge systems in Tamil society through an ethnographic framework, with attention to the lived practices of region-specific and occupation-based communities. It analyses the transmission of knowledge embedded in oral traditions, ritual practices, ecological management, and artisanal production. Particular focus is given to domains such as ethnomedicine, agricultural cycles, water management, and sacred landscapes, where empirical observation and inherited wisdom converge. The study situates these knowledge systems within caste-based and kinship-structured social organization, demonstrating that knowledge is not abstract but socially embedded and functionally adaptive. It also considers the pressures exerted by modernization, state policy, and market integration, which have altered the modes of transmission and authority of traditional knowledge holders. By integrating field-based observations with historical and anthropological analysis, the study argues that indigenous knowledge in Tamil society constitutes a dynamic and context-sensitive intellectual tradition rather than a static residue of the past.

Keywords: *Indigenous knowledge systems; Tamil society; ethnography; oral traditions; ethnomedicine; ecological practices; caste and occupation; traditional agriculture;*

Introduction

In an era of accelerating globalization and ecological uncertainty, indigenous knowledge systems have emerged as vital resources for sustainable development, biodiversity conservation, and cultural resilience. Ethnographic inquiry within anthropology and cultural studies offers a methodological lens to examine the interplay between oral traditions, embodied practices, and lived ontologies in non-Western societies. This study adopts such a perspective to investigate indigenous knowledge systems in Tamil society, with particular emphasis on folklore as a dynamic repository of ancestral wisdom. Tamil oral traditions including narratives, proverbs, songs, and myths have preserved empirical insights across ethnobotany, agroecology, medicinal praxis, and socio-ethical governance for over two millennia.

The influence of folk songs within early Tamil literary traditions is extensive and clearly identifiable. Scholarly analysis indicates that many Tamil musical compositions originated from folk traditions. Classical anthologies such as Kalithogai and Paripadal reflect features resembling refined folk compositions. Numerous references to folk song traditions appear across Sangam literature, and several sections of Silappadikaram demonstrate structural parallels with folk forms. The benedictory hymn beginning with “*Ñāyiru pōrrutum*” follows a folk compositional pattern. Likewise, forms such as Kānalvari, Vēṭṭuvavari, Ammanai vari, Kantukavari, Ūsalvari, and Vaḷḷaipāṭṭu derive from folk traditions.

The devotional works of the Nāyanmārs and Ālvārs incorporate stylistic elements drawn from folk traditions. A wide range of minor literary genres including Kuravañci, Cindu, Ammanai, Ūsal, Paḷḷu, Tālattu, Ēcal, Ēṙram, and Tēmmānku emerged from these forms. In periods when literary expression aimed at reaching broader sections of society, folk forms were adapted into written literature to communicate ethical and devotional ideas effectively. However, systematic efforts to collect and preserve folk songs as independent materials began only with European scholarly involvement. From the seventeenth century onward, multiple regions across the world began documenting and preserving folk traditions. This led to the establishment of folklore archives and scholarly societies, including those in Finland (1831), London (1878), and the United States (1888). These institutions undertook systematic

collection and publication of folk materials, influencing similar developments in Tamil regions. In 1871, Charles E. Gover published *Folk Songs of South India*, presenting Tamil folk songs in English translation. The work aimed to provide European readers with insight into indigenous cultural expressions. However, it also included classical literary compositions such as *Tirukkural* and *Kapilar Akaval*, which were incorrectly classified as folk songs. Later, Indian scholars undertook more rigorous collection and publication efforts. Since 1939, nearly one hundred compilations of Tamil folk songs have been published across Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. Numerous academic theses at postgraduate and doctoral levels have also documented extensive folk material, though many remain unpublished.

Tamilannal's *Tālattu* (1956) categorized lullabies by region and included an analytical introduction. Ki. Va. Jagannathan produced accessible editions with explanatory notes, though some editorial interpretations were present. The *Malaiyaruvi* collection, edited from Percy Macqueen's materials, remains a valuable compilation despite textual modifications. Se. Annakāmu's *Eṭṭil Eḷutākkavitaḥaḷ* (1959) is based on fieldwork and includes experiential observations. Na. Vāṇamāmalai's *Tamil Nāṭṭup Pāṭalkaḷ* (1964) stands out for its analytical depth, lexical explanations, and documentation. Later works by Ka. Kṛṣṇasāmi and Ko. Pe. Na. further expanded the corpus. The ten-volume *Nāṭṭupura Pāṭal Kaḷaṅciyam* (2001), edited under Āru. Rāmanāthan, is notable for its methodological clarity and inclusion of performer perspectives. Na. Vāṇamāmalai's essays and introductions represent early analytical contributions, characterized by interdisciplinary methods. Academic research later expanded through university-based studies, particularly at postgraduate and doctoral levels. Early research was predominantly undertaken by scholars trained in Tamil literature, resulting in a primary focus on folk songs. Key studies include those by Āru. Aḷagappan, Pā. Rā. Subramanian (1969) on caste-based lullabies and lament songs, Su. Śaṅmugasundaram on Tirunelveli district songs, Āru. Rāmanāthan on South Arcot, Sa. Nasir Ali on Tiruchirappalli, I. Bālasundaram on Eelam traditions, Ka. Kṛṣṇasāmi on Kongu region songs, and Ta. Kanakasabai on Thanjavur. These studies, now published, provide insights into structural features of folk songs and the socio-cultural realities they represent. Folks present direct representations of everyday life, unlike classical literature which often conveys prescriptive ideals. A full understanding of Tamil society requires integrating folk materials alongside written literary sources.

Classification of Folks

Lullaby songs are performed to soothe infants and induce sleep, while also accompanying various stages of early childhood such as feeding, crawling, and playful interaction. Play songs are associated with recreational settings and include both physically engaging games and orally transmitted forms of amusement. Occupational songs are rendered during work and encompass both agricultural and non-agricultural labour contexts, reflecting rhythms of daily livelihood. Worship songs are embedded within devotional practices and ritual performances, articulating religious sentiments and communal faith. Celebratory songs are performed during festivals, social gatherings, leisure occasions, and family ceremonies, expressing collective joy and shared cultural values. Begging songs, in contrast, are sung by itinerant individuals who move across settlements seeking alms, often combining performance with subsistence practices.

Tamil Subaltern Communities through Folk Performance Traditions

The indigenous knowledge systems of Tamil society, particularly those sustained by subaltern and occupation-based communities, are embedded within a dense network of oral traditions, ritual practices, and performative expressions. These systems do not exist as abstract bodies of codified knowledge; rather, they are socially embedded, experientially grounded, and transmitted through collective memory. Tamil folk traditions—comprising narrative forms, performative arts, and musical expressions—function as repositories through which medical, technological, ecological, and social knowledge are preserved and communicated across generations.

Medical Knowledge and Ritual Healing Practices

Indigenous medical practices among Tamil subaltern groups reveal a synthesis of empirical observation and ritual invocation. Knowledge of herbs, roots, and ecological indicators is encoded within performative traditions such as *Udukkai Pāṭṭu*, where rhythmic incantations accompany healing rituals. These performances often invoke local deities, indicating that therapeutic practice is not limited to physiological treatment but extends to psychological and spiritual domains. The ritual practice of *Pūsāri Kaiccilampu* demonstrates the integration of healing with ceremonial performance, where the body becomes a site of both affliction and restoration. Similarly, the dance traditions of the *Irular* community—*Irular Ina Makkalin Āṭṭam*—reflect a deep familiarity with forest ecology, including knowledge of venomous species and plant-based antidotes. These practices indicate a form of medical epistemology grounded in environmental interaction rather than textual authority.

Technological Knowledge and Performative Craft Traditions

Technological knowledge within Tamil folk society is articulated through craft practices and performative forms that reveal an understanding of material properties, acoustics, and bodily coordination. Instruments such as the *Urumi* and *Ekkālam*, central to performances like *Urumi Kōmāliyāṭṭam* and *Ekkālak Kūttu*, demonstrate indigenous expertise in metallurgy, sound production, and rhythmic structuring. Performative traditions such as *Sakkaiyāṭṭam* and *Piṇṇal Kōlāṭṭam* embody principles of synchronized movement and spatial organization, suggesting an implicit knowledge of biomechanics and group coordination. Narrative theatre forms, including *Iraniya Nāṭakam* and *Oṭṭa Nāṭakam*, exhibit sophisticated techniques of stagecraft, costume design, and dialogic construction, thereby indicating a layered understanding of dramaturgy and audience engagement within non-literate contexts.

Agrarian Knowledge and Ecological Adaptation

Agricultural knowledge among Tamil subaltern communities is closely aligned with seasonal rhythms, soil conditions, and water management practices. Folk performances such as *Oyil Kummi* encode agrarian cycles, marking phases of sowing, cultivation, and harvest through collective song and dance. These traditions serve not merely as celebratory expressions but as mnemonic devices that structure agricultural labor and ecological awareness. Work songs, including *Kaṭci Pāṭṭu* and *Gāṇā Pāṭal*, facilitate coordinated labor while simultaneously transmitting knowledge related to irrigation, crop patterns, and climatic variation. Communities such as the *Pazhaiyar* and pastoral groups represented in narratives like the *Idaiyan Idaicci Kathai* demonstrate expertise in livestock management, migratory grazing, and resource optimization within fluctuating environmental conditions.

Social Knowledge, Identity, and Cultural Representation

Folk performances also function as sites where social identities and occupational roles are articulated and negotiated. The *Kuravan Kurathi Āṭṭam* represents itinerant communities, depicting their economic practices, marital relations, and social positioning within the caste hierarchy. Likewise, *Karadiyāṭṭam* symbolically encodes the relationship between humans and animals, reflecting the experiential knowledge of hunting communities. Narrative forms such as *Pūnturaiyān* articulate localized cosmologies, where village deities are linked to protection, fertility, and territorial identity. The performative rendering of these narratives reinforces communal cohesion while simultaneously transmitting ethical norms and social expectations.

Performative Traditions as Epistemic Systems

Tamil folk performances ranging from *Ekkālak Kūttu* and *Oṭṭa Nāṭakam* to *Sakkaiyāṭṭam* and *Urumi Kōmāliyāṭṭam* operate as epistemic systems in their own right. They integrate instruction, memory, and practice within a unified framework, thereby enabling the circulation of knowledge without reliance on written texts. The performative mode ensures that knowledge remains adaptive, as each iteration allows for modification in response to changing ecological and social conditions. Importantly, these traditions are sustained through collective participation rather than individual authorship. Women, ritual specialists, and occupational groups contribute to the preservation and transmission of knowledge, ensuring that it remains distributed across the social body.

The indigenous knowledge systems of Tamil subaltern communities, as expressed through folk narratives, songs, and performances, constitute a dynamic and context-sensitive intellectual tradition. Forms such as *Udukkai Pāṭṭu*, *Kuravan Kurathi Āṭṭam*, *Irular Āṭṭam*, *Oyil Kummi*, *Sakkaiyāṭṭam*, and *Ekkālak Kūttu* do not merely represent cultural expressions; they encode structured knowledge related to medicine, technology, agriculture, and social organization. These traditions demonstrate that knowledge production within Tamil society has historically been collective, performative, and deeply embedded in everyday life, thereby challenging the privileging of textual and institutional forms of knowledge. The indigenous knowledge systems of Tamil society reveal a historically layered formation extending from the early historic period to the contemporary era. Literary, inscriptional, and archaeological sources collectively indicate that knowledge production was embedded within occupational specialization and ecological adaptation. Sangam texts classified landscapes into *tinai* categories, each associated with distinct subsistence strategies agriculture, pastoralism, fishing, and foraging thereby indicating an early ecological epistemology. Epigraphic records of the Chola and Pandya periods demonstrate structured systems of irrigation management, land categorization, and collective governance. Village assemblies regulated water distribution, maintenance of tanks, and agrarian taxation, suggesting that technical knowledge was institutionalized at the local level. This continuity indicates that indigenous knowledge was neither fragmented nor incidental; it constituted a coherent framework of environmental and social organization. Pre-industrial Tamil society was characterized by a high degree of occupational differentiation, with knowledge systems distributed across caste-based and community-based groups.

Knowledge Domain	Estimated Share of Population	Primary Knowledge Holders
Agriculture & Irrigation	60–70%	Vellalar, Pallar, Paraiyar
Pastoral & Forest-based Systems	10–15%	Idaiyar, Kuravar, Irular
Artisanal & Craft Production	10–20%	Kollar, Kumbhar, Sakkiliar
Ritual & Performative Traditions	5–10%	Pusari, folk performers, women groups

Knowledge was not centralized but distributed across these groups, with each community maintaining domain-specific expertise. Women functioned as key agents of transmission in domestic medicine, food systems, and ritual practices, though their contributions remain underrepresented in textual archives.

Agrarian Systems and Environmental Sustainability

Agrarian knowledge in Tamil society was structured around ecological rhythms and micro-regional adaptation.

- Irrigation infrastructure, including tanks (eri), canals, and sluices, formed the backbone of agricultural production. Historical records suggest the existence of tens of thousands of such water bodies, many sustained through community labour and customary regulation.³
- Crop diversity included millets, pulses, oilseeds, and paddy varieties adapted to specific soil and rainfall conditions, ensuring resilience under fluctuating climatic regimes.
- Folk traditions such as Oyiil Kummi and Kaṭci Pāṭṭu encoded agricultural calendars, labour organization, and seasonal transitions, functioning as mnemonic systems for ecological knowledge.

These practices enabled long-term sustainability with minimal ecological degradation, offering a decentralized model of resource management relevant to contemporary environmental discourse. Ethnomedical practices constituted a primary mode of healthcare in rural Tamil society. Knowledge of medicinal plants, diagnostic techniques, and therapeutic procedures was transmitted orally within communities.

- Indigenous practitioners utilized a wide range of botanical resources, with empirical knowledge of dosage, preparation, and application.
- Communities such as the Irular developed specialized expertise in snakebite treatment and toxin management, reflecting a deep engagement with forest ecosystems.
- Ritual healing practices, including Udukkai Pāṭṭu and Pūsāri Kaiccilampu, integrated physiological treatment with psychological and spiritual dimensions, addressing illness as a multi-layered condition. These systems ensured accessible and cost-effective healthcare, particularly in regions with limited institutional medical infrastructure.

Technological Knowledge and Material Production

Technological practices in Tamil indigenous systems were embedded in artisanal production and performative traditions.

- Metallurgical knowledge among Kollar communities enabled the production of agricultural tools, weapons, and ritual objects, indicating an understanding of material properties and heat treatment.
- Pottery, weaving, and construction techniques reflected adaptation to local resources, climatic conditions, and functional requirements.
- Musical traditions such as Urumi Kōmāliyāṭṭam and Ekkālak Kūttu reveal expertise in acoustics, instrument design, and rhythmic coordination, demonstrating that technical knowledge extended into aesthetic domains. These decentralized technologies sustained village economies and reduced dependence on external production systems.

Performance Traditions as Knowledge Archives

Tamil folk performances functioned as dynamic repositories of knowledge, integrating narrative, music, and movement.

- Narrative forms such as Iraṇiya Nāṭakam and Oṭṭa Nāṭakam conveyed ethical principles, cosmological ideas, and historical memory.
- Dance traditions including Kuravan Kurathi Āṭṭam, Sakkaiyāṭṭam, and Piṅṅal Kōlāṭṭam encoded social roles, occupational identities, and collective coordination.
- Performances such as Karadiyāṭṭam and Irular Āṭṭam reflected human–animal relationships and forest-based knowledge systems.

These forms operated as mnemonic devices, ensuring the transmission of complex knowledge through repetition, participation, and adaptation. Performance-based transmission enabled continuity without reliance on literacy,

preserving knowledge within socially embedded contexts. The colonial period introduced significant changes to indigenous knowledge systems.

- Land revenue policies and commercialization of agriculture disrupted traditional cropping patterns and communal resource management.⁴
- Colonial ethnography imposed rigid classifications on communities, reducing the fluidity of occupational identities and knowledge systems.
- Industrial production and formal education systems marginalized artisanal and oral knowledge traditions.

These transformations led to the erosion of certain knowledge domains while simultaneously reconfiguring others within new economic frameworks. In the post-independence period, indigenous knowledge systems have undergone selective adaptation.

- Traditional irrigation and water management practices are being revisited in the context of climate variability and water scarcity.
- Indigenous crop varieties are recognized for their resilience and low-input requirements, contributing to sustainable agriculture initiatives.
- Ethnomedical knowledge has gained attention in biodiversity conservation and alternative healthcare research.
- Indigenous knowledge in Tamil society is structurally distributed across occupational groups rather than centralized institutions.
- Oral and performative transmission ensures both continuity and adaptability.
- Ecological knowledge is deeply integrated with social organization and cultural practice.
- Subaltern communities function as primary knowledge holders, despite historical marginalization.

The historical trajectory of Tamil indigenous knowledge systems demonstrates a sustained interplay between ecology, society, and cultural expression. Statistical patterns and functional analysis indicate that these systems were integral to agrarian production, healthcare, technological innovation, and social organization. Rooted in subaltern communities and preserved through performative traditions, they represent adaptive and context-sensitive modes of knowledge production. Their continued relevance lies in their capacity to inform contemporary approaches to sustainability, decentralized governance, and community-based knowledge frameworks.

Conclusion

Ethnographic inquiry into indigenous knowledge systems in Tamil society reveals a historically sustained and socially distributed mode of knowledge production rooted in everyday practice, ecological interaction, and performative transmission. These systems, maintained largely by subaltern and occupation-based communities, demonstrate that knowledge operates through collective validation, experiential learning, and cultural continuity rather than formal institutionalization. Medical practices, agrarian strategies, craft technologies, and ritual performances together constitute an integrated epistemic framework in which utility, symbolism, and social meaning remain inseparable.

The evidence indicates that indigenous knowledge in Tamil contexts is adaptive rather than static, responding to ecological variability, shifting social relations, and external pressures such as colonial restructuring and post-colonial modernization. Despite processes of marginalization and commodification, core elements persist through oral traditions, community participation, and ritual enactment. Performative forms including folk songs, dances, and narrative theatre function not merely as cultural expressions but as structured mechanisms for preserving and transmitting complex bodies of knowledge. From an analytical perspective, these systems challenge the privileging of text-based and centralized knowledge models by demonstrating the viability of decentralized, community-based epistemologies. Their relevance extends beyond historical interest, offering practical insights into sustainable agriculture, localized healthcare, and resource management in contemporary contexts marked by environmental stress and socio-economic inequality. A careful engagement with these traditions grounded in ethnographic sensitivity remains necessary to ensure that their incorporation into modern frameworks does not detach them from the social environments that sustain their meaning and function.

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