

The Tamilian's Dharma as stated in Kudavolai

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Introduction

From the day humans appeared on earth, they have gradually evolved and adapted to the changing times, reaching the current modern era. The primary factor contributing to this transformation is the governance system they adopted and the leader's moral principles that guided them. The governance system and the leader's moral principles have been the foundation for human progress. There are various governance systems, which can be categorized based on the type of governance. They are monarchy, where a king or queen rules; democracy, which prioritizes people's rights and interests; autocracy, where an individual imposes their personal goals and authority on the people.

Apart from these, there is a need to consider a governance system that combines monarchy with republicanism. This raises the question that what is this monarchy-republicanism governance system? To find the answer, we need to look at the political history (Dharma + Iyal) of the ancient Tamil people, who are one of the oldest civilizations in the world."

Monarchy and Republicanism

Regardless of how we analyze the origin of monarchy, it must have emerged to establish republican principles. In ancient times, people lived in small groups, and they chose a strong and capable leader from among themselves to protect their tribe from enemies, distribute resources fairly, and guide them. This leader was their guardian who was later crowned as the king of their tribe. This system is based on the republican principle of prioritizing the well-being of the people.¹

The leaders who started as tribal chiefs and became kings of their lands are mentioned in Tamil literature, such as "**Murugan**, the leader of the Kurinji land", "**Thirumal**, the leader of the Mullai land", "**Indiran**, the leader of the Marutham land", "**Varunan**, the leader of the Neithal land", and "**Korravai**, the leader of the Palai land"². The ancient Tamil text "**Tolkappiyam**" mentions these leaders as follows:

மாயோன் மேய காடுறை உலகமும்
சேயோன் மேய மைவறை உலகமும்
வேந்தன் மேய தீம்புனல் உலகமும்
வருணன் மேய பெருமணல் உலகமும்
முல்லைக் குறிஞ்சி மருதம் நெய்தல் எனச்
சொல்லிய முறையான் சொல்லவும் படுமே³...

:- Tholkappiyam

முல்லையும் குறிஞ்சியும்
முறைமையில் திரிந்து நல்லியல்பு
இழந்து நடுங்குதுயர் உறுத்துப் பாலை

¹ [Daniel Monk](#), *The Role of the Monarchy in Modern Democracy: European Monarchies Compared*, Published online by Cambridge University Press: 17 December 2020

² PILLAI. K.K., south Indian History Part-1, Palaniyappa brothers publications, Chennai-2011-page - 54

³ Nachchinarkiniyar urai , Tholkappiyam – Akaththinai iyal – Song 5

என்பதோர் படிமம் கொள்ளும்⁴

:- Silappathikaram

In this way, in the great Tamil community, the republican principle was the foundation for the monarchical system.

The Tamilian's Dharma in Selecting a Leader

In the world, civilized humans have followed various methods to select their leaders, adapting to the changing times and societal developments. Tamils have also used various methods, initially selecting leaders based on their ability and strength.⁵ Later, they introduced changes to this selection process, with their growing civilization. The primary method of selection used by Tamils is the "Kudavolai" system, which is based on their intellectual and knowledgeable approach. It is unnecessary to argue about which Tamil dynasty, Chola, Pandya, or Chera who was the first to adopt this method. The fact that Tamils had a democratic election process as part of their way of life and governance is a significant achievement⁶.

The Kudavolai Election System and Its Significance

The Kudavolai election system is the foundation of democratic principles. This system was practiced by Tamils in ancient Tamil Nadu, and it is a testament to the fact that Tamil Nadu is the birthplace of world democracy.⁷ Before we are going to study the Kudavolai system, let us briefly understand its significance. In ancient Tamil Nadu, the monarchs of the Chera, Chola, and Pandya dynasties ruled, but they also adopted the Kudavolai system for local governance. Because the monarchs were busy with national defense, conquests, and territorial expansion. They couldn't focus on local administration.⁸ Moreover, they didn't want to appoint someone from outside the village to manage its affairs. Instead, they wanted to entrust the village administration to a capable and trustworthy person from within the village.

This thought process led to the development of the Kudavolai system, where villagers would elect their representatives through a democratic process. The system involved writing the names of eligible candidates on palm leaves, putting them in a clay pot then having a young girl or a neutral person draw out a leaf.⁹ The person whose name was on the drawn leaf would be elected as the village administrator for a specified number of years. The Kudavolai system was a pioneering effort in democratic governance, and it ensured that power was vested in the hands of the people. The system was transparent, fair, and free from external influences. The monarchs of ancient Tamil Nadu recognized the importance of local self-governance and empowered the villagers to manage their own affairs.

The Kudavolai system is a testament to the democratic traditions of ancient Tamil Nadu and a reminder that democracy is not a new concept in India¹⁰. It is a legacy that has been passed down through generations and continues to inspire democratic movements around the world.

The Kudavolai Election System: A Timeless Tradition

⁴ <https://www.tamilvu.org/courses/degree/p104/p1043/html/p1043236.htm>

⁵ Y. Subbarayalu ,Studies in Tamil Administration" by (1982) – page 22

⁶ A. Appadorai , "Tamil Polity" by (1936) -Page 12

⁷Bavani.c , Uththirameroor : Kudavolai system, Amazon ebooks - 14 January 2022-page 03

⁸ <https://www.vikatan.com/government-and-politics/uthiramerur-inscription-and-kudavolai-system> Published:03 Jun 2024 5 AM

⁹ Constitution 1,000 years ago. The Hindu Chennai 11 July 2008

¹⁰ Status of Panchayati Raj in the States of India, 1994
<http://books.google.co.in/books?isbn=8170225531>

When exploring the Kudavolai election system, many researchers focus on the later Chola period. However, Sangam literature mentions this system, allowing us to infer its existence from the early days of Tamil political activity¹¹. Through Sangam literature, we can understand that the Kudavolai election system was an integral part of ancient Tamil political culture, dating back to the early days of Tamil civilization. The **Akananūru**, a collection of poems from the **Eṭṭuttokai** anthology, was written by various poets across different time periods. **Marudhan Ilanakanar**, one of the poets, mentions the Kudavolai election system, drawing a comparison between it and the poverty of a woman who has lost her husband.

This reference highlights the ancient roots of the Kudavolai system, indicating that it was a well-established tradition in Tamil society. Further research can uncover more insights into this fascinating aspect of Tamil history and its continued influence on modern democracy.

நன்னுதல் பசப்பவும், ஆள்வினை தரீஇயர்
துன்னுருங் கானத் துன்னுதல் நன்றெனப்
பின்னின்று சூழ்ந்தனை யாயினன் நின்னாச்
சூழ்ந்திசின் வாழிய நெஞ்சே வெய்துற

இடியுமிழ் வானம் நீங்கி யாங்கனும்
குடிபதிப் பெயர்ந்த சட்டுடை முதுபாழக்
கயிறுபிணி குழிசி ஓலை கொண்மார்
பொறி கண்டழிக்கும் ஆவண மாக்களின்

உயிர்நிறம் பெயர நல்லமர்க் கடந்த
தருக ணாளர் குடர்தரீ இத் தெறுவரச்
செஞ் செவி எருவை யஞ்சுவர இருக்குங்
கல்லதர்க் கவலை போக்கின் சிறார்ப்
புல்லரை யிந்திப் புகிர்படு நீழ்
எல்வளி யலைக்கும் இருள்கூர் மாலை
வானவன் மறவன் வணங்குவிற் றடக்கை
ஆனா நறவின் வண்மகிழ்ப் பிட்டன்
திருந்திலை யெஃகம் போல
அருந்துயர் தருமிவள் பணிவார் கண்ணே¹².

: - **Maruthanilanaganar** (Agananooru-77)

In this poem, the heroine laments that she has lost her lover and is forced to travel on a treacherous desert path to earn a living. The desert is devoid of rain, shade, and human habitation. The poem describes how vultures with red ears feed on the entrails of dead warriors, tearing them out one by one, just like the Kudavolai election system, where eligible leaders are selected by drawing out palm leaves from a pot. The poem uses the Kudavolai system as a metaphor to describe the harsh conditions of the desert and the desperation of the heroine. The poet, **Marudhan Ilanakanar**, employs this metaphor to convey the severity of the situation, drawing a parallel between the selection of leaders and the vultures feeding on the dead.¹³

The poem explores various themes, including the harshness of the desert environment, poverty, and the struggle for survival. By using the Kudavolai system as a metaphor, the poet highlights the desperation and bleakness of the heroine's situation, emphasizing the need for leadership and guidance in times of crisis.

Can we accept what literature says?

History should be constructed based on evidence. Can we consider what is said in literature and

¹¹ NCERT Text book , NEW KINGS AND KINGDOMS, page 13

¹² Puliyurkesikannar , Aganaanooru Moolamum Uraiyum- sri Shenbaha publication – Song-77

¹³ “The Evolution of Local Self-government in India – Historical Perspectives” in http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/84422/7/07_chapter%202.pdf , 2013

mythology as historical evidence? This question may arise. Just because the poet Marudhan Ilanakanar mentions it in his poem, we cannot accept that the Kudavolai system existed in ancient Tamil Nadu. However, from a psychological perspective, a poet or writer may exaggerate or add imaginative elements to emphasize the bravery, love, or morality of an individual in their work. But it is not acceptable to use something that does not exist as a metaphor. The Kudavolai system may have been mentioned by the poet as an example only because it was a prevalent practice at that time.¹⁴

What is the significance of the Kudavolai system?

In a civilized society, a mature community selects its leader through a thoughtful process. Moreover, if we say that people conduct elections and choose their leader with wisdom and integrity, it would be impossible for the nomadic Tamils to implement it. In the Kurinji terrain, people wandered and migrated, settling in various places. Initially, they moved from the Kurinji and Mullai terrains and established settlements on the riverbanks. They brought seeds from the forests and cultivated them in the plains, meeting their food needs. As more people settled, they formed multiple families and eventually, villages emerged¹⁵.

These villages developed their unique way of life and social norms. When people decided to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and settle permanently, they adopted a new approach to selecting their leader. In this context, it is clear that the Kudavolai system is closely related to the Marudam terrain. Marudhan Ilanakanar, who mentioned the Kudavolai system in the Akanaṇṇūru poem, belonged to the Marudam terrain¹⁶. He was praised as "Marudhan" for writing numerous poems about the Marudam terrain in Sangam literature. Therefore, he is the first to mention the Kudavolai system in Sangam literature, closely tied to the way of life of the Marudam people.

The vessel of Kulizhi

The Kuzhisi pot is a type of earthenware vessel. References to this can also be found in the Sangam literature, Akanaṇṇūru. In this poem, it is described how the Idaiyar people pound white rice with a mortar and pestle, load it into a Kuzhisi pot, and make rice porridge, showcasing the lifestyle of the Idai people. From this poem, it can be understood that the Kuzhisi pot was used for filtering rice, churning curd, and boiling milk. After boiling the milk, they added Vilam pazham (a type of fruit) to remove the odor¹⁷. The Kuzhisi pot has a narrow mouth and a wide base. The same pot was used by the Tamils for the Kudavolai election system.

In the later Pandya and Chola periods

This system was followed by the Pandyas and Cholas conducted elections in the villages and rural areas under their empire, as mentioned in the Sangam literature, through the Kudavolai system. The inscription cut by **Maran Sadaiyan**, a Pandya king, in the 8th century CE in Manur, Tirunelveli district, serves as evidence for this¹⁸. It mentions that the village assembly election was held in that village and that the Kudavolai system was followed. Further, the **Uttiramerur inscription** of the 10th century CE, during the reign of **Parantaka Chola I**, clearly mentions the Kudavolai system of the Chola period. The Uttiramerur inscription is the first epigraphic

¹⁴ PILLAI. K.K., south Indian History Part-1, Palaniyappa brothers publications, Chennai-2011-page - 12

¹⁵ [vijiravindran, History-Culture, Kudavolai \(Kuda Olai\) : the oldest Democratic Process of Chola's Tamil Nadu, Posted on 4 Jul 2017](#)

¹⁶ Na. Deveneyap Pavanar, Pandaiya Tamil Nagarikamum Panbaadum (Ancient Tamil Civilization and Culture), Naam Tamilar Publishing House, 2017.

¹⁷ Puliur Kesikan, Agananuru Moolamum Uraiyum (Agananuru: Text and Commentary), Sarada Publishing House, 2010.

¹⁸ The inscription of Maran Sadaiyan, the first, at Manur, Tirunelveli district

evidence to clearly mention the functioning of the Kudavolai system, the method of electing members, their duties, qualifications, and disqualifications.¹⁹ This village was converted into a Brahmadeya village during the Pallava period. The members of the village assembly were elected through this election for administrative purposes, including agriculture, education, construction, temple services, and trade. To be a member of the assembly, one had to possess the following qualifications which defines in the Uttiramerur inscription.

1. Own at least 1/4 veli of tax-paying land
2. Have a house built in their own name
3. Be between 30 and 60 years old
4. Be knowledgeable in the Vedas, Shastra, and profession
5. Possess good character and a clean soul
6. Not have been a member of any committee in the past three years²⁰

The Kudavolai Aram

While the world was praising the Greeks (Athenians) as the pioneers of global democratic philosophy, the Tamils had already established a system of governance that combined monarchy with democracy, long before that. This is the Tamils' political (aram + iyal) foresight. Although we know that the people of Athens established a democratic system of government, the Greek democracy, which was not properly established in society, later collapsed and monarchy was re-established in Greece²¹. However, the Tamil society, which gained maturity and clarity over time, successfully implemented this democratic system, well-structured with various guidelines and controls. As a result, from the Sangam period to the later Tamil ruling kings, the Kudavolai system was successfully implemented, which is a testament to the Tamils' moral principles. Any society that respects people's opinions and rights and rules accordingly is considered a knowledgeable society in history.²² In this sense, we can proudly say that the Tamils were the first to teach the world democracy and moral principles.

The Impacts of Kudavolai System

Social Impacts:

1. Reinforced social hierarchy: Kudavolai solidified the warrior caste's prominence in ancient Tamil society.
2. Promoted martial values: The tradition glorified bravery, loyalty, and sacrifice, shaping societal norms.
3. Fostered community bonding: Rituals and ceremonies brought families and communities together.
4. Encouraged ancestral worship: Honoring fallen warriors strengthened ancestral ties.²³

Cultural Impacts:

1. Preserved historical memory: Nadukal served as tangible links to the past, preserving historical events.
2. Shaped Tamil identity: Kudavolai contributed to the evolution of Tamil culture, literature, and art.
3. Influenced literary works: Ancient Tamil literature, like Purananuru, extensively referenced Kudavolai.
4. Symbolic significance: Nadukal became powerful symbols of honor, loyalty, and sacrifice.²⁴

Economic Impacts:

1. Supported artisanal communities: Craftsmen benefited from commissioned Nadukal construction.

¹⁹ The inscription of Parantaka Chola I at Uttiramerur, Kanchipuram district

²⁰ Ancient Epigraphical Inscription on elections: Vaikuntha Perumal Temple, Uthiramerur, Kancheepuram District <http://tnsec.tn.nic.in/historical/Epigraphical%20Inscription.html>

²¹ Robert E. Slavin and Kate Conway, ANCIENT GREECE: WHERE DEMOCRACY BEGAN, ISBN: 9780976785064, page-14

²² K. T. Tirunavukkarasu, Mudalaam Raajaraaja Cholan (Rajaraja Chola I), Vikatan Press, 2017."

²³ R. Champakalakshmi, "Tamil Society and Politics" by (1996) – page 18

²⁴ Ibid-22

2. Facilitated trade: Rituals and ceremonies stimulated local commerce.
3. Encouraged philanthropy: Wealthy patrons sponsored Nadukal construction.²⁵

Religious Impacts:

1. Deification of warriors: Kudavolai blurred lines between human and divine.
2. Integration with Hinduism: Nadukal worship merged with Hindu rituals.
3. Sacred geography: Nadukal sites became sacred spaces.

Psychological Impacts:

1. Coping mechanism: Kudavolai helped communities process grief and loss.
2. Inspired patriotism: Honoring fallen warriors fostered national pride.
3. Emotional connection: Nadukal served as emotional links to ancestors.

Legacy:

1. Continued cultural relevance: Kudavolai influences contemporary Tamil culture.
2. Historical significance: Nadukal remain important archaeological artifacts.
3. Symbolic power: The tradition's symbols continue to inspire unity and pride.

Conclusion:

The Kudavolai system, despite its limitations, played a vital role in shaping ancient Tamil culture and society. Its legacy continues to inspire pride and unity among Tamils, cementing its place in the region's rich cultural heritage. The Kudavolai system, an ancient Tamil tradition of honoring fallen warriors through memorial stones (Nadukal), offers valuable insights into the community's socio-cultural and religious practices. This ritualistic tradition, prevalent during the Sangam era (300 BCE - 300 CE), underscores the Tamils' deep reverence for martial valor, loyalty, and ancestral heritage. **Immortalization of heroes:** Kudavolai ensured the perpetual remembrance of warriors' bravery, inspiring future generations. **Community bonding:** The ritual fostered social cohesion, as families and communities came together to honor their fallen kin. **Cultural significance:** Nadukal served as tangible links to the past, preserving historical memories and cultural values. **Limited geographical scope:** Kudavolai was primarily practiced in ancient Tamil Nadu, restricting its impact.

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²⁵ Ibid 23-24

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