CHAPTER – I
TAMIL CULTURAL ELEMENTS

‘Tamil culture’ in this thesis is a connecting thread between the study of ‘cultural themes in Tamil cinema’ and the study of ‘impact on Tamil society’. Hence, a basic understanding about Tamil culture is inevitable. Basically, Tamil culture is a Tamil way of life, a pattern of living that has been formed during the centuries of Tamil history.¹ It has been conditioned by various factors like society, economy, politics and religion. This cultural heritage of Tamils, particularly in Tamil Nadu, evolved through various phases of history including Sangam period, dynasties, foreign invasions and Indian democracy.

As Tamil culture by itself is a vast and separate area for research, only eight Tamil cultural elements are selected for the purpose of in-depth study. These elements are selected for they are popularly and traditionally referred to, and discussed. These cultural elements will present the basics of Tamil culture to some extent and serve as variables to identify cultural themes in Tamil cinema.

The following table presents certain Tamil cultural elements, their meanings and related cultural bases.

Table No. 1. Tamil Cultural Elements and Bases

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Components of this table are explained below.

1.1 **Kaathal**

*Kaathal* broadly means love. The English word "love" can have a variety of related but distinct meanings in different contexts. In Tamil culture, *Kaathal* strictly means love affair or relationship between two lovers. It is one of the internal aspects of Tamil culture, based on gender dynamics. It has been one of the human emotions prominently dealt in Tamil literature. In particular, *Sangam* literature\(^2\) describes various types of *Kaathal*. *Thirukkural* allots one of the three sections for the discussion of this human sentiment\(^3\). Even today, *Kaathal* is one of

\(^2\) 400 hundred *Akam* (Internal) poems in *Sangam* literature deal with the matter of love and separation. Spontaneous coming together of the lovers was called *Kamakootum*; secret love was called *Kalavu Kaathal*; open love was called *Karpu Kaathal*; unequal or unilateral love was called *Kaikkilai Kaathal* and improper love was called *Perunthinai Kaathal*.

\(^3\) Authored by Thiruvalluvar, *Thirukkural* is an ancient masterpiece of Tamil literature containing 1330 couplets, divided into 133 chapters of 10 couplets each. The third section on *Inbam* contains twenty-five chapters. The first seven discusses pre marital love (*Kalavu*) and the next eighteen discusses marital love.
the prominent topics motivating poets for their composition. As the process
involves interpersonal relationship between loving man and woman indicating
gender dynamics, *Kaathal* is treated under gender base.

1.2  **Karpu**

*Karpu* means chastity. It is generally understood as sexual behavior of a
man or woman acceptable to the moral norms and guidelines of a culture. In Tamil
culture, originally, it is wider in its semantic field and the overarching meaning is
not strictly sexual. The ancient cultural history of Tamils describes *Karpu* simply
as one of the methods of marriage. It is an open alliance contracted with the
consent of the parents, as opposed to *Kalavu*, which is a secret marriage. Later, in
Tamil culture, it becomes a core value, building unity of the family. In the other
words, it is a principle on which a Tamil woman leads her life and runs the family
with honour. In addition, it was associated with chastity based on sex and
virginity, and became a moral value reserved more for women than men. As
*Karpu* is placed under *Aham*, the internal aspects of Tamil society focusing family,
it is treated as familial base.

1.3  **Maanam**

*Maanam* means honor. It constitutes a personality, which reflects respect,
integrity and dignity. It is one’s reputation for proper behaviour judged by others.
It is highly revered and attributed as one of the supreme characteristics of Tamil
culture. It is also vulnerable to defamation, suspicion, gossip, libel and slander.

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5 Sethuraman, G. Thamizhnaattu Samathaaya Panpaatu Varalaaru (Tamil), J.J.Publications,
The analogy of **Kavarimaan**\(^6\) (a deer) is popular among Tamils, which defines that **Maanam** is higher than one’s life. The sense of **Maanam** is applicable to both individual and society. It is operative in the dynamics of society and one’s or collective psychology. It has been a crucial aspect of Tamil culture related to socio-psychological sphere. Hence, **Maanam** is treated under psycho-social base of Tamil culture.

### 1.4 Mozhi

*Mozhi* means language. It is a principal tool of communication between one another. It is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties.\(^7\) Hence, the relationship between *Mozhi* and culture is deeply rooted. As far as Tamils are concerned, *Mozhi* is an integral part of their culture. The ethnicity of Tamils is defined in relation to the Tamil *Mozhi*. In other words, the word Tamil means both Tamil *Mozhi* and the ethnic group which uses Tamil language.\(^8\) It has historically been, and to large extent still, is central to Tamil identity. Tamils venerate Tamil language as *"Tamilannai"*, meaning Tamil mother. The history and richness of literatures have substantially contributed to the growth of Tamil *Mozhi*. In fact, the linguistic and literary aspects are inseparable. Thus, *Mozhi* becomes a literary and linguistic base of Tamil culture.

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\(^6\) The ninth couplet in *Thirukkuaral* under the 97\(^{th}\) section of **Maanam** presents the imagery of **Kavarimaan**, a special type of deer, which gives up the life for single strand of its hair falls off.

\(^7\) “Language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways.” Kramsch, Claire. Language and Culture- Oxford Introduction to Language Study, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2003, p. 3.

\(^8\) “It should be clear that Tamil linguistic culture is one that, even within the context of Indian linguistic culture, is acutely concerned with language as the defining quality of Tamilness (Tamil *taṇmāi*)” Schiffman, Harlod F. Linguistic Culture and Language Policy, Routledge, London, 1996, p.207.
1.5 **Nilam**

*Nilam* means land. It is quite natural for human beings to design their lifestyle and cultural heritage based on their land. In *Sangam* age, the culture was related to topographical divisions.\(^9\) Hence, Tamil culture has been known as *Thinai* culture.\(^10\) In addition, *Thaai Mann, Thaai Nilam, Thaai Naadu* and *Nila Magal* are popular phrases frequently used to denote the motherly and feminine expressions of land.\(^11\) Tamils refer to Tamil land as *Tamilagam*. It originally stood for the entire Tamil speaking land and now it strictly means Tamil Nadu. In classical economics, land is treated as one of the three factors of productions. The other two are capital and labour. In this context, *Nilam* is dealt as property in general, and is broadly treated as a material base of Tamil culture.

1.6 **Samayam**

*Samayam* means religion. In Tamil it refers to the worldview or ‘wholeness’ of people in their relationship with God, as expressed in Tamil texts and socio-cultural traditions in Tamil Nadu. It is one of the fundamental frameworks for the study of Tamil heritage. Social life has been interconnected with the teachings of *Samayam*. Fertility cult, *Nadukal*\(^12\) worship, ancestor worship,

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\(^9\) The people had different modes of living and occupations owing to the topographical divisions, called *Thinai*. Hunters lived in the *Kurinji* region, shepherds in the *Mullai*, peasants in the *Marudam*, fishermen in the *Neithal* and bunters in the *Palai* region.

\(^10\) The word *Thinai* signifies both land and moral standards.

\(^11\) The words, *Nilam, Mann*, and *Naadu* mean land; *Thaai* means mother, *Magal* means both daughter and woman.

\(^12\) *Nadukal* means a stone erected in memory of a martyr. After death, distinguished warriors and military leaders were honoured in this manner.
Amman\textsuperscript{13} worship etc. have been some of the traditional expressions of Samayam. In \textit{Sangam} age, each topographic region had importance to its special deity.\textsuperscript{14} Historically, Tamil culture has accommodated all popular religions including Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, and Islam. The word ‘\textit{Kadavul}’ has been used to denote both the transcendent being without any gender identity and particular deity. Temples, festivals, worships and philosophy are the related elements of \textit{Samayam}. Thus, \textit{Samayam} is treated under religious base.

1.7 \textit{Veeram}

\textit{Veeram} means bravery indicating the characteristics of fortitude, will, ability to confront and risk taking. In Tamil tradition, it has been one of the qualities of leadership and measured by physical ability, success and power.\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Sangam} literature describes that \textit{Veeram} and war have been life base of Tamils and daily events, and there was no exclusive section of people allotted for war. Wound on the chest was a symbol of \textit{Veeram} and wound on back was symbol of cowardice. Fearlessness and courageous death were highly appreciated. Festivals were organized to honour the death of courageous warriors.\textsuperscript{16} The concept of

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Amman} generally refers to folk mother goddess.

\textsuperscript{14} In the \textit{Sangam} age, worship was confined to the five deities ruling the five natural regions. For the mountains the Lord was \textit{Muruga} ([Subramanya]), for the pastoral areas \textit{Tirumal} ([Vishnu]), for the arid zones the goddess \textit{Durga} ([Kali]), for the riverine tracts \textit{Indra}, and the littoral area \textit{Varuna}. See Lakshmanan, Chettiar S.M.L., \textit{Folklore of Tamil Nadu}, National Book Trust India, New Delhi, 1973, p.32.


Veeram has been very much associated with masculinity. For instance, Sangam literature indicates that it is the duty of the son to ascertain his outstanding valour in war.\textsuperscript{17} It is an element of Puram, the external aspect of Tamil society, involving politics. As Veeram is executed in the context of establishing or displaying one’s power, it treated under political base.

1.8 Virunthompal

Virunthompal means hospitality, referring to relationship between host and guest. It is a kind of reception or entertainment extended to guest, stranger, and whoever is in need. As far as Tamil culture is concerned, it is a sensibility cultivated in the consciousness of the Tamils. It is known as an inbred characteristic of Tamil culture and it is even said that there is no greater sin than to disrespect the guests. Under social base, Sangam literature describes the characteristics and values of Virunthompal.\textsuperscript{18} Thirukkural describes the ethics of Virunthompal\textsuperscript{19} leading to broader worldview and open relationship.\textsuperscript{20} Even today, it is claimed to be a prominent cultural expression of Tamils. As it indicates the process of relationship or interaction with the other, crossing the boundary of a family, it is discussed under social base in Tamil culture.

\textsuperscript{17} Swaminathan, A., op.cit. p. 75.
\textsuperscript{18} “Even it was midnight they would receive the guests happily” Ibid., p. 70.
\textsuperscript{19} In Thirukkral, the second couplet of 9\textsuperscript{th} Chapter, Virunthompal says Virunthu Puratthaa Thaanundal Saava Maruntheninum Vendrapa Nantru” This couplet means that it is wrong to eat even nectar alone leaving your guest outside.
\textsuperscript{20} The poem, “Yaathum Oore Yaavarum Kelir” meaning ‘to us all towns are one; all are our kins’ is popularly quoted by Tamils even today. Kaniyan Poongundranaraar composed this poem and it is part of Puranaanooru, 192.
Conclusion

Thus, *Kaathal, Karpu, Maanam, Mozhi, Nilam, Samayam, Veeram and Virunthompal* are the eight cultural elements identified in Tamil culture based on eight cultural bases. All these cultural elements and related cultural bases have foundation in tradition, history and popularity of Tamil cultural heritage. These cultural elements will serve as eight key factors to study cultural themes of Tamil cinema in the next chapter.