

THE HISTORICAL EVENT OF ARAVAN FESTIVAL (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO VANNIYARS)

M. Vijayalakshmi

*Ph.D. Research Scholar (Part -Time), Department of History,
Government Arts College [Men], Krishnagiri - 635 001*

Abstract

Fair and Festivals of the particular district, town and village usually express their entire life style. People from all walks of life are longing to celebrate their fair and festivals. The Hindus, Christians, Muslims and other religious sects also mingled with their own fair and festivals. The Vanniyars also very much involed and observed their fair and festivals in a grand manner. The annual festivities of the Vanniyars were celebrated in a befitting manner. They worshiped Draupathi head of the Vanniya gods and goddesses. Also, in dramatic plays, the king was always taken by a Kshatriya, who is generally a Vanniya.

Keywords: *Vanniyars, Kshatriya, Draupathi, Aravan, Kuttandavar, Sudras, Kauravas, Pandavas*

Mahabharata War

Kuvakkam is known for its festival of Aravan or Kuttandavar which is one of the most popular feasts celebrated by the Vanniyars and the Sudras in the whole district. Aravan was the son of Arjuna, one of the five Pandava brothers. Local tradition says that, when the Great War which was described in the 'Mahabharata' was about to end, the Kauravas, the opponents of the Pandavas, sacrificed a white elephant for their success. The Pandavas were in despair of being able to find any such uncommon object, until Arjuna suggested that they should offer his son, Aravan. Aravan agreed to yield his life for the good cause, and eventually the Pandavas were victorious. He was defied for the self abnegation which had thus brought his side success. Since he died in his youth, before he had married, it is held to please him if men, even though grown up and already wedded, come now and offer to espouse him, and men who are afflicted with serious diseases take a bow to marry him at his annual festival in the hope of thereby being cured. The festival will be conducted during the month of May and for eighteen nights the 'Mahabharata' is recited by a Palli and a large number of people, especially to the caste, assembled. On the eighteenth night, a wooden image of Kuttandavar is taken to a hill top and placed there¹. Such sacrifices are most uncommon in South Arcot, During this occasion those who have taken bow to be married the deity appear before his image dressed like women, make obeisance, offer to the priest a few annas, and give into his hands the 'talis' which they have brought with them. These priest, representing the God, ties round their necks these thalis. The God is brought back to his shrine that night, and hidden by a cloth being held before him². This symbolizes the sacrifice of Aravan, and the man who has just been married to him sets up a loud lamentation at the death of their husband.

Aravan Death

Iravan is a minor character in the Hindu epic the Mahabharata³. The son of Pandava, Prince Arjuna [one of the main heroes of the Mahabharata] and the Naga princess Ulupi, Iravan is the central god of the cult of Kuttantavar which is also the name commonly given to him in that cult and plays a major role in the cult of Draupadi. Both these cults are of south Indian origin⁴ from region of the country where he is worshipped as a village deity and is known as Aravan.

The Mahabharata portrays Iravan as dying a heroic death the 18-day of the Kurukshetra War which is [Mahabharata War], the epic's main subject. However, the south Indian cults have a supplementary tradition of honouring Aravan's self sacrifice to the goddess Kali to ensure her favour and the victory of the Pandavas in the war. The Kuttantavar cult focuses on one of the three boons granted to Aravan by God Krishna in honour of this self-sacrifice. Aravan requested that he be married before his death. Krishna satisfied this boon in his female form, Mohini⁵. In Koovagam, Tamil Nadu, this incident is re-enacted in an 18-day festival, first by a ceremonial marriage of Aravan and Aravan's sacrifice.

The Draupadi cult emphasizes another boon: Krishna allows Aravan to witness the entire duration of the Mahabharata war through the eyes of his severed head. In another 18-day festival, the ceremonial head of Aravan is hoisted on a post to witness the ritual re-enactment of the Mahabharata war. The head of Aravan is a common motif in Draupadi temples. Often it is a portable wooden head sometimes it is put up in its own shrine in the temple complex or is placed on the corners of temple roofs as a guardian against spirits. Aravan is worshipped in the form of his severed head and is believed to cure disease and induce pregnancy in childless women⁶.

Aravan Festival in Indonesia

Iravan is also known in Indonesia [where his name is spelled Irawan]. An independent set of traditions have developed around Iravan on the main island of Java where, for example, he loses his association with the Naga. Separate Javanese traditions present a dramatic marriage of Iravan to Titisari, daughter of Krishna and a death resulting from a case of mistaken identity. These stories are told through the medium of traditional Javanese theatre [Wayang], especially in shadow-puppet plays known as Wayang Kulit.

Other Names of Aravan

According to the Monier Williams Sanskrit, English Dictionary [1899], the name Iravan is also spelt Irawan which is formed from the root Iravat, also spelt Irawat. In turn, the root Iravat is derived from Ira closely linked with Ida meaning "possessing food", "endowed with provisions" or by extension, "comfortable" [as used in the 'mahabharata' and the 'Rig' and 'Atharva' vedic scriptures].

Aravan is generally known as Aravan, also spelt as Aravaan in south Indian⁷. He is revered as a deity in two southern Indian Hindu cults: the Kuttantavar cult [dedicated solely to Aravan] and the cult of Draupadi [Aravan's stepmother and Arjuna's wife]⁸. In his own cult, Aravan is also known as Kuttantavar, originating from the legend of Kuttantavar killing the demon Kuttacuran. This name is sometimes spelled as Kuttandavar, Khoothandavar or Koothandavar.

He is usually depicted with a moustache, protruding eyes and large ears. Typically, he also wears a conical crown, a Vaishnavatilak mark on his forehead and ear rings⁹. Aravan is often depicted with a cobra hood over his crown, cobra heads sprouting through the crown, or a snake emerging behind the crown. Even the chief Koovagam icon features a serpent on Aravan's crown.

Aravan's Icon

Another distinctive feature of Aravan's iconography is the presence of demonic canine teeth. Although the central Koovagam icon does not feature such demonic teeth, they are a regular feature of the most Draupadi cult images, where Aravan's demonic features are emphasized.

Aravan-head icons are either painted or unpainted portable ones for processions and are housed together in the temples of his shrines. Koovagam, Kothadai, Kothattai and Pillaiyarkuppam where the icons are painted with a red face and multi-coloured ornamentation. Unpainted black stone images of the Aravan-head are seen in Kothattai, Madhukarai and Pillaiyarkuppam¹⁰.

Some paintings depict the sacrifice of Aravan. In these scenes, he is often depicted bowing to Kali, while his head is about to be severed; or as in one Sowcarpet painting, a self-decapitated Aravan holds both a sword and his own severed head, offering the latter to the goddess.

History of Aravan

Aravan first appears as a minor character in the 'Mahabharata' as the son of Arjuna, the chief hero of the epic. The background to the 'Mahabharata' infers a date that is "after the very early Vedic period" and before "the first Indian 'empire' was to rise in the third century B.C.", or "somewhere in the eighth or ninth century." It is generally agreed, however, that "unlike the Vedas which has to be preserved and letter - perfect has to be protected, the epic was a popular work whose reciters would inevitably conform to changes in language and style¹¹. The earliest surviving components of this dynamic text are believed to be no older than the earliest external references to the epic, which may include an allusion in Panini's 4th-century grammar manual *Ashtadhyayi* [4:2:56]. "It is estimated that the Sanskrit text probably reached something of a "final form" by the early Gupta period [about the 4th century BC]. The editor of the first great critical edition of the 'Mahabharata' commented: "It is useless to think of

reconstructing a fluid text in a literally original shape, on the basis of an archetype and a stemma codicum¹². What then is possible? Our objective can only be to reconstruct the oldest form of the text which it is possible to reach on the basis of the manuscript material available.”

Iravan is also mentioned, as the son of Arjuna and Ulupi, in passing references in the two Puranas[“sacred texts”] known as the Vishnu Purana [4:20:12] also with a text history from the late Vedic through the Gupta periods and the BhagavataPurana [9:22:32] traditionally dated to the Vedic period but dated by modern scholars to the 9th or 10th century.

Although the original Sanskrit version of the Mahabharata records Iravan’s [Sanskrit name] death during on the 18-day of the Mahabharatawar, the Tamil versions discuss Aravan’s [Tamil name] ritual self-sacrifice to Kali before the war¹³. Hildebeitel relates this to the south Indian glorification of “Theoric” self-mutilation and self-decapitation before a goddess. He takes particular note of a scene towards the end of a puranic text, Devi Mahatmyam, in interpreting old Tamil sculptures depicting a warrior king spilling his blood, as in the Purana, in adoration of a goddess of victory¹⁴. In the Tamil sculptures, the goddess is Korraivai, who became associated with Durga and hence Kali. He also finds parallels in the Telugu legend of the sacrifice of Barbarika another Mahabharata character and its variants in Rajasthan [see also: Khatuashyamji, Himachal Pradesh, Garhwal, Kurukshetra, Bundelkhand and Orissa. Most notable among the similarities between Aravan and Barbarika is the boon to witness the entire duration of the Mahabharata war through the eyes of the severed head, despite the sacrifice¹⁵.

The first account of Aravan’s sacrifice is found in ParataVenpa, the earliest surviving Tamil version of the Mahabharata by Peruntevanar [9th century]. The tale is later retold by Villiputuralvar in his 14th-century Makaparatham and by Nallapillai in the 18th century¹⁶.

Aravan Kalabali

Another source of Aravan traditions is the folk-theatre of Tamil Nadu, called Koothu. AravanKalappali [or AravanKalabali], “Aravan’s Battlefield Sacrifice:”, is a popular theme of the traditional Terukuttu [“street theatre”]. AravanKalappali tells the story of Aravan’s pre-battle self-sacrifice to the goddess Kali to win her support, guaranteeing victory for the Pandavas [Arjuna and his brothers] in the Mahabharata war¹⁷. AravanKalappali is staged annually in the villages of Melattur, Kodukizhi and Yervadi, according to various forms of the koothu folk-theatre. In Karambai, AravanKalappali is performed as part of the cult of Draupadi, on the 18th day of an annual festival [April-May] to please the goddess.

In modern interpretations, Aravan’s head symbolizes not only self-sacrifice but also regeneration and continuity, because of his ability to see the war after his sacrifice¹⁸. For example, Iramacampulavar’s MerkolvilakkaKatai. Akaravaricai [1963] which narrates the tale of Aravan ends with the conclusion that Aravan continues to live on as a folk hero in Tamil Nadu, because he embodies “the ideal of self-sacrifice.” Aravan is considered to be a representation of the cost of war; he evokes the “countless innocent” reluctantly sent by their mothers “to

be consumed by the insatiable Goddess of War.” Indologist David Shulman, on the other hand, considers Aravan’s sacrifice to be a reworking of the serpent sacrifice in the Tamil epic tradition¹⁹.

Aravan the Role of Mahabharata

While the marriage of Iravan’s parents is mentioned in the first book of the Mahabharata. AdiParva [the Book of Beginnings], both the birth and death of Iravan are mentioned later, in the sixth book, BhishmaParva [the Book of Bhishma]. In this sixth book of the epi. Arjuna, the third Pandava brother is exiled from Indraprastha [the capital city of the Pandava kingdom] to go on a one-year pilgrimage as a penance for violating the terms of his marriage to Draupadi, the Pandava brothers common wife²⁰. Arjuna reaches the north-east region of present-day India and falls in love with Ulupi, a widowed Naga princess. The two get married and have a son named Iravan; later, Arjunaproceeds with his pilgrimage, leaving Iravan and Ulupi behind in Nagaloka, the abode of the Nagas. Iravan is described as being born Parakshetre, literally “in a region belonging to another person”, interpreted by Hildebeitel as “upon the wife of another”. Iravan grew up in Nagaloka, protected by his mother, but was rejected by his maternal uncle because of the latter’s hatred of Arjuna²¹. After reaching maturity Iravan hoping to be reunited with his father, departs for Indraloka, the abode of the god Indra, who is also Arjuna’s father. On meeting his adult son, Arjuna requests his assistance in the Kurukshetra War²².

Thus Iravan finally reaches the battlefield of Kurukshetra to assist his father and the Pandavas against their cousins and opponents, the Kauravas. On the first day of war, Iravan fights a duel with Srutayush, a Kshatriya king who had been a daitya [demon] called Krodhavasa in a prior incarnation. Srutayush is later killed by Arjuna. On the seventh day of war, Iravan also defeats Vinda and Anuvinda, the princes of Avanti, who are later killed by Arjuna.

On the eighth day of the war Iravan combats the princes of Gandhara, sons of king Suvala and the younger brothers of Shakuni, the treacherous maternal uncle of the Kauravas. The brothers Gaya, Gavaksha, Vrishava, Charmavat, Arjava, and Suka attack Iravan, supported by the whole Kaurava army, but Iravan’s Army of Nagas slays all but one of their opponents. Iravan, the “chastiser of foes” versed in maya [illusion] slays five of the Gandhara princes in a sword fight; Vrishava alone escapes death²³.

Agitated by this reversal, the eldest Kaurava, Duryodhana, orders the rakshasa [giant] Alamvusha [or Alambusha], son of Rishyasringa, to kill Iravan. This time Alambusha, as well as Iravan, use illusion in combat. Alambusha attacks Iravan with a bow, but Iravan counters. breaking Alambusha’s bow and slicing the giant into several pieces²⁴. Alambusha’s body, however, reconstitutes itself. Then Iravan assumes the form of the serpent Shesha [Ananta], and his serpent army surrounds him to protect him. Alambusha counters this by assuming the form of Garuda [the eagle-man], the eternal foe of the serpents, and devours the serpent

army. Ultimately, Alambusha kills Iravan by cutting off his head, though Iravan is later avenged when Ghatotkacha, his cousin, finally kills Alambusha²⁵.

Either advises Alambusha to assume the form of Garuda via a heavenly voice or he sends the true Garuda to assist Alambusha. At the sight of Garuda his perennial 'eagle' adversary Shesha uncoils in fear, leaving Aravan unprotected and leading ultimately to Alambusha and beheading the weakened Aravan.

Aravan Developed to Kuttandavar

A traditional story local to Koovagam describes how Aravan came to be known as Kuttantavar. After the war, while the Pandavas are boast about vanquishing the Kauravas, Krishna asks Aravante sole witness of the entire war, "who was truly responsible for winning this war?" Aravan replies that he saw two things: Krishna's discus decapitating the enemy and his conch shell collecting their blood. This reply is understood to give all the credit for the victory to Krishna²⁶.

Aravan's opinion enrages the proud and quick-tempered Bhima, whose influence in deciding the outcome of the battle is covered at a great length in the Mahabharata. However, before Bhima can wound Aravan, Krishna orders Aravan's head to be dropped into the river Caraparika, where he assumes the form of a child and is eventually found by the king of Chandragiri, a city on the river bank. The child cries "KuvaKuva", when picked up by the king, who therefore names the location Kuvakkam [Koovagam]²⁷. The king also names the child Carapalan ["reed-child"].

The tradition goes on to relate that Carapalan grew up, growing on to kill the demon Kuttacuran, who had wounded his adopted father in battle. Draupadi is identified in this tradition with the Supreme Goddess, blesses Carapalan with the new name Kuttantavar, the slayer of Kuttacuran and grants him a temple in Koovagam.

There are variants within this tradition. Some versions give the credit for finding the child to Queen Kirupanci of Chandragiri. Others omit the mention of the king of Chandragiri altogether, and omit reference to the Koovagam temple also. Instead they focus on the demon Kuttacuran and an apparently impossible boon granted to him is that he will be killed by a person having only a head and who shall be born from water. Vishnu, incarnated as Krishna informs the gods that Aravan will kill this demon. With this in mind, the head of Aravan is consigned to the river and is transformed into a child called Kuttan. ["born from water"], who kills the demon.

Located at Aravan Temples in Tamil Nadu

The Kuttantavar cult might represent the original Tamil tradition regarding Aravan, however it is no longer the only tradition that venerates Aravan. The Draupadi cult has developed traditions and rituals of its own.

Most Kuttantavar devotees reside in the Tamil Nadu districts of Cuddalore, Thiruvannamalai, Vellore and Villupuram. Draupadi's devotees have also spread across these districts, as well as into the Kanchipuram [former Chingleput] district. Her temples can also be seen in the Thanjavur district and beyond the southern districts of the states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. The temples of Kuttantavar are fewer than the Draupadi temples and are restricted to a belt running from the Cuddalore and Villupuram districts through to Coimbatore. Thirty-two of these temples are particularly prominent Koovagam is the foremost. The 32 temples are

Coimbatore District, Cinkanallur [Singanallur-Neelikonampalayam], Kancappalli, Kumaramankalam, Kuricci, Kattampati [annur], Tutiyalur [Thudiyalur]²⁸.

Cuddalore District, Kotthattai, Puvanakiri, Tevanampattanam, Tiruvetkalam. Erode District, Kalarikiyam.

Salem District, Palaiyacuramankalam, Panaimatal, Pelur, Tetavur. Thiruvannamalai District, Cerppapattu, Kilvanampati, Tevanur, Vetantavati, Viranantal, Vellore District, Colavaram, Otukkattur, Putimetu, Putur, Vellayampatti-29.

Villupuram District, Konalur, Koovagam [Kuvakkam], Pennaivalam, Tailapuram, Puducherry Union Territory, Madukarai, Pillaiyarkuppam-30.

The severed head of Aravan is a common motif in Draupadi's temples. Often it is a portable wooden head. Sometimes this even has its own shrine in the temple complex. Icons of Aravan's head are also often placed on the corners and edges of Draupadi temple roofs. As a pey or bhuta [spirit], Aravan acts as a guardian against other spirits, for the temple itself, and also for the Patukalam ceremony. Patukalam in the Draupadicult, is the symbolic ground on which the Mahabharata war is ritually re-enacted. In the taluks of Thajavur, Kumbhakonam and Pattukkotai, Aravan's head is enshrined permanently in a Mandapa or within a temple niche. The largest known Aravan head is found at the HajiyarTeru temple in Kumbhakonam.

Brahmans, Some of them are well versed in the temple ritual, and their youths are being taught the Sandyavandhana and Vedas by a Brahman priest. Ordinary Palli girls are taken by them in marriage, but their own girls are not allowed to marry ordinary Pallis and as a result of this practice of hypergamy, the Kumalam men sometimes have to take to themselves more than one wife, in other that their young women may be provided with husbands. These KumalamPallis are regarded as priests of the Pallis, and style themselves Kovilar, or temple people.

Writing nearly a century ago concerning the VanaPallis settled at Kolar in Mysore, they are much addicted to the worship of the Saktis, or destructive powers, and endeavour to avert their wrath by bloody sacrifices. These are performed by cutting off the animal's head before the door of the temple, and invoking the deity to partake of the sacrifice. There is no alter, nor is the blood sprinkled on the image and the body serves the votaries for a feast. The Pallivanlu

have temples dedicated to a female spirit of this kind named Muttalamma and served by Pujaris of their own caste. They also offer sacrifices to Mariamma, whose Pujaris are Kurubaru.

Conclusion

The Vanniyar community worship out of love and trust the Vanniyar community worshiped their god out of fear. They participated in festivals, offered sacrifices and offerings and created family religious practices in the home. The Pallis are Saivites or Vaishnavites, but are also demonolaters, and worship Vaithyanathaswami, ThaiyalNayagi, Muthukumara Swami, Muttalamma, Mariamma, Ayanar, Muneswara, Ankalamma, and other minor deities³¹. Also the Vanniyar community had more than 20 types of gods goddesses and spirits in which they believed would watch over and take care of them if they were worshiped properly.

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