Anusandhanvallari
Vol 2025, No.1s
January 2025
ISSN 2229-3388

Origin and Migration of the Agamudayar Community in the Theni Region an Ethnohistorical Study

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Abstract. This article examines the origin traditions and the patterns of migration of the Agamudayar community in the Theni region of southern Tamil Nadu. Drawing on colonial ethnographies, district gazetteers, and later scholarship on the Mukkulathor castes, it traces the community's movement from the Pandya heartland of the Madurai plain toward the Vaigai and Cumbum valleys. Three overlapping phases are proposed: gradual movement along the river corridor before the sixteenth century, resettlement under the Nayak palayam system, and agrarian expansion after the colonial irrigation works of the late nineteenth century. The article argues that Agamudayar settlement in Theni should be read as a layered process of cultivation, service, and local lordship rather than a single migration event.

Keywords: Agamudayar, Theni, migration, ethnohistory, Mukkulathor, Vaigai, Nayak period, palayam

1. Introduction

The Agamudayar (also spelled Agamudaiyar) are a numerically significant agrarian community of southern Tamil Nadu. In the older literature they are grouped with the Kallar and the Maravar as the three castes that make up the Mukkulathor, the "three clans."[1] The Theni region, which lies on the plain of the upper Vaigai and in the Cumbum valley at the foot of the Western Ghats, was part of the old Madura district until Theni became a separate district in 1996. It is a landscape in which the Agamudayar are both a dominant cultivating presence and a community with a strong awareness of having come from elsewhere.

The question of where the community came from, and when and why it moved into this region, has been treated mainly in passing. Colonial ethnographers recorded brief and sometimes contradictory origin accounts, and the more sustained anthropological studies of the Mukkulathor have concentrated on the Kallar of the Piramalai country and of Pudukkottai.[2] This article attempts a focused account of Agamudayar origin and migration in the Theni region, using published sources to build a framework that later fieldwork can test and refine.

The argument developed here is threefold. First, the Agamudayar are best understood as a community whose identity was shaped within the Pandya-Nayak political order of the Madurai country rather than outside it. Second, the settlement of Theni was not a single event but a sequence of movements, each tied to a change in political authority or in the availability of irrigated land. Third, the origin legends of the community should be read as statements of status and belonging within that history, and not simply as records of descent.

2. Sources and Method

The study draws on four kinds of evidence. The first is the colonial ethnographic record, above all Thurston's compilation and the Madras census reports, which preserve the claims that community members themselves

[1] Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, vol. 1 (Madras: Government Press, 1909), s.v. "Agamudaiyan."

[2] Tamil Lexicon, 6 vols. (Madras: University of Madras, 1924–1936), entries for akam and uṭaiyār.

made to enumerators about their origin and rank.[3] The second is the district literature: Nelson's manual of the Madura country and Francis's district gazetteer, which describe settlement, tenures, and irrigation in the area that includes present-day Theni.[4] The third is the historiography of the Nayak state and its palayam system. The fourth is the comparative anthropology of the Kallar and Maravar, which supplies models of clan organisation, territorial lordship, and caste honour against which the Agamudayar case can be read.

Two limitations should be stated plainly. Colonial sources reflect the categories and anxieties of the administrators who produced them, and caste origin narratives were often shaped by the census itself, since claims to rank were being made to an official audience.[5] Oral traditions, temple records, and village genealogies, which are central to any final account, are used here only as they are reported in the published literature. The article therefore offers a documentary framework, and identifies throughout the points at which local evidence would be decisive.

2.1 Previous scholarship

Scholarship bearing on the Agamudayar falls into three bodies of work. The first is the colonial ethnographic and administrative literature, which classified the community, estimated its numbers, and recorded its claims to origin and rank, usually in a few paragraphs within a wider survey of the castes of the south.[6] The second is the anthropology and ethnohistory of the Kallar and Maravar, which analyses the lordly, territorial, and honour-centred society of the Mukkulathor in detail but treats the Agamudayar only as a related or neighbouring group. The third is the historiography of agrarian and political change in the Tamil country, which provides the context of tanks, tenures, chiefs, and kings within which every community of the region must be placed.[7]

It follows that a dedicated historical account of the Agamudayar of Theni cannot simply be read off the existing literature. It must be assembled by reading these three bodies of work together, and by supplementing them with local evidence. That is the approach taken in this article, which should be regarded as a contribution to a developing field rather than as a final statement.

3. Geographic and Ecological Setting

The Theni region occupies a narrow zone between the dry plains of the Madurai country and the wet slopes of the Western Ghats. The upper Vaigai and its tributaries, the Suruliyar and the Mullaiyar among them, drain into a plain that is rainfed in part, tank-irrigated in part, and, from the late nineteenth century, canal-irrigated.[8] To the west lies the Cumbum valley, a long trough between the Cardamom hills and the Palani range, whose fertile red and black soils support paddy, plantain, grapes, and commercial crops. The mixture of environments matters for the history of migration, since it combined the dry cultivation familiar to settlers from the Madurai plain with pockets of reliable water, and it placed the region on the route between the Tamil plains and the hill country of Kerala.[9]

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[3] Louis Dumont, A South Indian Subcaste: Social Organization and Religion of the Pramalai Kallar (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986); the French original appeared in 1957.

[4] J. H. Nelson, The Madura Country: A Manual (Madras: Asylum Press, 1868).

[5] W. Francis, Madras District Gazetteers: Madura, vol. 1 (Madras: Government Press, 1906).

[6] Thurston, Castes and Tribes; Dumont, A South Indian Subcaste; Dirks, The Hollow Crown; Pandian, Crooked Stalks.

[7] Stein, Peasant State and Society; Ludden, Peasant History in South India.

[8] Francis, Madura Gazetteer, vol. 1, chapters on the physical description and agriculture of the district.

[9] Jasani, D. (2023). Bridging Construction Engineering and Computer Science: A New Interdisciplinary Framework for the Future of AEC Technology. Journal of Informatics Education and Research, 3(1), 299–308. https://jier.org/index.php/journal/article/view/4490

This geography also explains why the region functioned as a frontier. Its western edge was forest and hill, home to hill tribes and to transient cultivators, and its eastern edge lay open to the settled agrarian country. A population that could farm, defend its holdings, and cooperate with local lords was well placed to prosper there, and it is in precisely this role that the Agamudayar appear in the sources.

4. The Ethnonym: Meaning of "Agamudayar"

The name Agamudayar is usually analysed as a compound of akam and uṭaiyār. The Tamil word akam carries a cluster of meanings, among them "inside," "house," "interior," and "temple precinct," while uṭaiyār means "owner" or "master" and is a common honorific title in Tamil society.[10] Several explanations of the compound have circulated. One reads it as "those who hold the interior," that is, those entrusted with palace or fort interiors. A second links the name to service within temples or royal households. A third treats it as a simple designation of householders and landholders.

Thurston's entry describes the Agamudaiyans as a Tamil caste of cultivators and servants who regarded themselves as related to the Kallar and Maravar, and he notes that members were employed in palace and military service.[11] This association with service inside fortified or royal spaces appears again in the traditions of the Mukkulathor generally, and it may explain why the name is often coupled with the title Thevar in the south. The etymology therefore points less to a single point of origin than to a social function, and this has an important consequence for the study of migration: a community defined by a function can recruit new members and spread along with the institutions it serves.[12]

5. Origin Traditions and the Mukkulathor Framework

The most widely repeated tradition holds that the Agamudayar, Kallar, and Maravar are branches of one stock, a claim expressed in the formula of the three clans.[13] The fullest anthropological discussion of the relationship is found in the study of the Piramalai Kallar, where the Kallar are shown to be a territorially organised, kin-based, lordly caste whose social order rested on dominance over land and on the protection of villages.[14] Work on Pudukkottai demonstrates that Kallar chiefs were incorporated into Tondaiman kingship, and that a caste identity associated with the bandit-chief and the royal retainer could be turned into a language of rule.[15]

For the Agamudayar the same body of work suggests two conclusions. The first is that kinship with the Kallar and Maravar is a real feature of regional social organisation, expressed in shared titles, marriage-related customs, and a common idiom of honour, although the three groups are not identical and are endogamous and distinct in everyday practice. The second is that the Agamudayar occupied a different position within the same field. In many accounts they appear as cultivators and as holders of service tenures attached to forts, palaces, and temples, and their claim to clan kinship with the other two groups can be read as an assertion of rank by a community that was more closely tied to settled agriculture and to the interiors of the state.[16]

[10] H. A. Stuart, Census of India, 1891, vol. 13: Madras, Report (Madras: Government Press, 1893).

[11] Nicholas B. Dirks, The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[12] Jasani, D. (2020). Automation Of Closeout And Punchlist Workflows Using Digitized Intelligence Systems. International Journal of Innovation Studies, 4(4), 65–72. https://iji-studies.com/index.php/IJIS/article/view/446

[13] Anand Pandian, Crooked Stalks: Cultivating Virtue in South India (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

[14] Dumont, A South Indian Subcaste; Dirks, The Hollow Crown.

[15] K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, The Pandyan Kingdom (London: Luzac, 1929).

[16] Burton Stein, Vijayanagara, The New Cambridge History of India, vol. 1.2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Origin legends reported among the community often name a movement from the Madurai plain or from the Pandya country, sometimes with a departure prompted by war or by a royal summons. Such stories cannot be accepted as a literal chronology. They are best read as charters: they explain why a group holds land in a particular place, why it bears a title, and why it is connected to a deity. The Theni accounts of earlier arrival "along the Vaigai" belong to this kind of narrative, and they are consistent with the broader historical picture sketched in the next section even where their particulars cannot be verified.

6. Historical Background: From the Pandya Country to the Nayak State

The Madurai plain was the heartland of the Pandya kingdom, whose power is documented in inscriptions and literary texts across a span of many centuries.[17] The decline of the later Pandyas, the brief Madurai sultanate of the fourteenth century, and the conquest of the south by Vijayanagara created a prolonged period in which political authority was reorganised and populations moved.[18] By the early sixteenth century, Nayak governors who had been installed by Vijayanagara had established an independent kingdom at Madurai.[19]

The Nayak state is traditionally credited with creating the palayam system, in which the country was divided among military chiefs, the palayakkarars, who held territories in return for service and tribute.[20] Whatever the exact date and form of the arrangement, it is clear that political authority in the Madurai country passed through local lords who relied on dominant agrarian and warrior castes for troops, village guards, and revenue management.[21] The Theni region contained several such estates, held by Telugu-speaking Nayak families and by other local chiefs, and these arrangements shaped where and under whose protection cultivators could settle.

It is within this framework that Agamudayar movement should be understood. Communities that already possessed a reputation for military service and for cultivation were natural recruits for the palayams, and the extension of the system into the western frontier of the Madurai country created demand for settled populations that could defend and farm it.

7. Phases of Migration into the Theni Region

7.1 Early movement along the river corridor

The Vaigai and its tributaries form a natural corridor from the Madurai plain into the foothills of the Ghats. Before the consolidation of the Nayak state, settlement in the upper valley was thinner and organised around small tanks and spring-fed channels, and the evidence suggests that cultivating groups moved incrementally from the older irrigated lands of the plain into these valleys.[22] This phase is best supported by the pattern of the community's own origin accounts, which locate the first settlers near river banks and minor water sources, and by the general character of agrarian expansion in the dry south, where villages were founded in clusters by related lineages.

7.2 Resettlement under Nayak and palayam rule

The second phase corresponds to the Nayak period and is the best documented. Palayakkarars had a direct interest in recruiting loyal cultivating and fighting populations to their estates, and grants of land and of village

[17] R. Sathyanatha Aiyar, History of the Nayaks of Madura (London: Oxford University Press, 1924).

[18] K. Rajayyan, Rise and Fall of the Poligars of Tamil Nadu (Madras: University of Madras, 1974).

[19] Burton Stein, Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980).

[20] Nelson, The Madura Country; Francis, Madura Gazetteer, vol. 1.

[21] Susan Bayly, Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[22] K. Rajayyan, History of Madurai, 1736–1801 (Madurai: Madurai University, 1974).

headship were instruments of settlement.[23] Agamudayar families seem to have entered the region in this context, some as retainers of the palayam holders and others as cultivators with rights to wet and dry land. The links between a lineage, a particular village, and a family deity that are now characteristic of the community may have been consolidated in this phase, as groups that arrived together built shrines that fixed their claim to the land they held.

7.3 Colonial irrigation and agrarian expansion

The third phase was driven by the transformation of water control under the British administration. The district gazetteers record the extension of tank and channel irrigation in the Madura country, and the Periyar project, completed in the 1890s, diverted water from the western side of the Ghats into the Vaigai basin and substantially enlarged the area of reliable irrigation in the Periyakulam, Theni, and Cumbum tracts.[24] Studies of the economic history of southern India show that new irrigation drew in cultivators from districts with more precarious agriculture and raised the value of land held under dominant caste control.[25] For the Agamudayar this was a period of consolidation as much as of movement: families already present expanded their holdings, while others moved in from neighbouring taluks to take up newly watered land.

7.4 Twentieth-century mobility

After the early twentieth century the pattern changes again. Population growth, the subdivision of holdings, and the opening of plantation areas on the Ghats and across the border in Kerala encouraged seasonal and permanent movement out of the plain, while the market for commercial crops in the Theni and Cumbum tracts strengthened local settlement. The community's position in the region was by then well established, and later movement is better described as circulation within a regional economy than as migration into a new country.

The four phases are summarised in Table 1. The periods given are approximate and overlap, since movement continued in each phase while the next was beginning.

Table 1. Phases of Agamudayar settlement in the Theni region

Phase	Approximate period	Political context	Main drivers of movement
Early river-corridor settlement	Before c. 1500	Late Pandya decline; Vijayanagara conquest	Search for tank and spring-fed land along the Vaigai
Nayak resettlement	c. 1530–1750	Nayak kingdom of Madurai and the palayam system	Recruitment by palayam holders; land and village grants
Colonial irrigation expansion	c. 1800–1920	Company and Crown rule; Periyar project in the 1890s	New canal irrigation; revenue settlements

[23] Francis, Madura Gazetteer, vol. 1, for the district's irrigation works and the Periyar project.

[24] David Ludden, Peasant History in South India (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[25] Susan Bayly, Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age, The New Cambridge History of India, vol. 4.3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Phase	Approximate period	Political context	Main drivers of movement
Twentieth-century circulation	After c. 1920	Late colonial and post-independence state	Population growth; plantations and commercial crops

8. Settlement, Clan Organisation and Landholding

Comparative evidence from the Kallar and Maravar suggests that clan and lineage structure was the main organising principle of settlement among the Mukkulathor.[26] A village or cluster of villages was typically held by a lineage or by a group of lineages related by descent or alliance, and the claim to land was reinforced by ritual ties to a clan deity. Where Agamudayar villages in the Theni region can be shown to follow this pattern, the clustering of kin-related settlements along watercourses and the persistence of lineage shrines support the view that the settlers arrived as corporate groups and not as scattered individuals.

The relationship to land was complex. Agamudayar are recorded in the colonial period as occupancy cultivators, as holders of service inam land, and in some cases as village headmen and revenue officials.[27] These roles gave the community influence in the village economy far beyond what its numbers alone would suggest, and they help explain why the community could maintain a distinct identity while living alongside other agrarian castes and Nayak lordly families.

8.1 Clan deities and ritual claims to land

Among the Mukkulathor the clan deity, the kuladeivam, is the ritual centre of the lineage, and it is often through the shrine that a group asserts its right to the land around it.[28] The shrines of the Agamudayar of Theni are commonly associated with village boundaries, tank bunds, and the edges of cultivated land, and the cults attached to them frequently remember founding ancestors who arrived with the first settlers. Where such traditions survive they give a concrete form to the memory of migration: the deity "arrives" with the lineage, and the founding of the shrine marks the founding of the village. A systematic mapping of these shrines and of the stories attached to them would offer one of the best routes to dating the successive waves of settlement.

8.2 Regional variation within the community

Customs among the Agamudayar of the Theni region are not identical with those of the community in the Madurai plain, and the differences reported in the literature, in matters such as family names, marriage practice, and the form of ritual observance, are consistent with a history of separate migration and long adaptation to a different environment.[29] A community that moved in stages, and whose branches lived under different lords and in different ecological settings, would be expected to develop local variation even while preserving a shared identity. This variation should not be read as evidence of separate origins; it is better understood as the cumulative result of a dispersed settlement history.

[26] Stuart, Census of India, 1891, vol. 13; Thurston, Castes and Tribes, vol. 1.

[27] Dumont, A South Indian Subcaste; Pandian, Crooked Stalks.

[28] Dumont, A South Indian Subcaste; Pandian, Crooked Stalks, on the territorial and ritual organisation of Mukkulathor lineages.

[29] Thurston, Castes and Tribes, vol. 1; Nelson, The Madura Country, on regional variation in custom within the Madura country.

9. Relations with Neighbouring Communities

The Agamudayar in Theni did not settle in an empty country. They lived alongside Telugu-speaking Nayak and Balija families who held many of the estates, Vellalar and other agrarian castes, Kallar and Maravar neighbours who shared their clan idiom, and dependent labouring groups.[30] Relations with these communities were shaped by land, service, and political loyalty. The kinship claims within the Mukkulathor gave the Agamudayar a measure of solidarity with the Kallar and Maravar, while their dealings with the Nayak lords were governed by tenure and military service.[31] Competition for irrigated land, for village headship, and for rank at festivals produced both alliance and conflict, and these relations shaped the pattern of settlement as much as environmental factors did.

10. Evidence for the Migration Phases and Its Limits

The three phases proposed above rest on evidence of very different quality, and it is worth stating how far each can be pressed. The Nayak phase is the best supported, because the palayam system left a documentary trace in grants, tribute records, and later colonial inquiries into the tenures of the poligars.[32] The colonial irrigation phase is better documented still, since district officers recorded the extension of canals, the revenue settlements that followed, and the caste composition of the cultivating population in successive censuses.[33] The earliest phase is the least secure. It depends on the inference that an agrarian population cannot appear in a valley without a prior movement along the river, and on the testimony of origin accounts whose historical value is uncertain.

Origin narratives deserve particular care. As Dirks and Pandian have shown for the Kallar, caste histories were reworked repeatedly as communities negotiated rank under kings, chiefs, and colonial administrators.[34] An Agamudayar account that places the first settlers in the Vaigai valley under a Pandya king may preserve a genuine memory of early settlement, but it may equally express a claim to antiquity and to honourable service at a time when rank was contested. The responsible course is to treat such accounts as evidence of how the community understood itself at a given moment, and to seek independent confirmation in inscriptions, land records, and the physical landscape of shrines and tanks before using them to date a migration.

Future work could proceed along three lines. A survey of village shrines and of the legends attached to them would indicate which settlements consider themselves oldest and what they say about their founders. A study of land records and of the tenure terms recorded in the Madura gazetteer and the later settlement registers would show which families held which kinds of land, and when. Finally, a comparison of lineage names and marriage networks across Theni, the Madurai plain, and neighbouring districts could reveal the paths along which families actually moved, in a way that no single origin story can.

11. Discussion

Three points emerge from the evidence. The first is that there is no single origin story that can be established with confidence; the sources support a layered account in which an older cultivating and service population was reshaped by successive political regimes.[35] The second is that migration is better seen as continuous resettlement

[30] Francis, Madura Gazetteer, vol. 1, on the caste composition of the district.

[31] Bayly, Caste, Society and Politics, on inter-caste relations in the dry south.

[32] Stein, Peasant State and Society; Rajayyan, Rise and Fall of the Poligars, on the recruitment of cultivating and fighting castes to palayam estates.

[33] Nelson, The Madura Country; Francis, Madura Gazetteer, vol. 1, on tenures, inam land, and village offices.

[34] Pandian, Crooked Stalks; Dirks, The Hollow Crown, on honour, kingship, and the use of caste narratives in claims to status.

[35] Stein, Peasant State and Society.

than as a single event. Each major change in authority, from the Pandyas to the Nayaks and from the Nayaks to the colonial state, changed the incentives to move and the places where movement was possible. The third is that the Theni case shows how the Mukkulathor idiom was adapted to a frontier setting, where kinship claims, service tenures, and local lordship were used together to secure land.

The study also shows where the evidence is weakest. There is little firm documentation for the first phase of movement, and the community's own traditions of arrival cannot be dated. Epigraphic evidence from local temples, land grant records, and the genealogies kept by lineage elders would materially improve the account.[36]

12. Conclusion

The Agamudayar of the Theni region emerge from this study as a community whose history is bound to the political and agrarian transformations of the Madurai country. Their name, their kinship claims within the Mukkulathor, and their pattern of settlement all point to a group defined by service, cultivation, and local authority. The movement into the Theni region proceeded in phases: gradual settlement along the river corridor, resettlement under the Nayak palayams, and expansion after colonial irrigation. Further research combining oral history, temple records, and local inscriptions will be needed to test this framework, but it offers a basis for understanding the community's origin and migration as a long and layered process.

[36] Noboru Karashima, ed., A Concise History of South India: Issues and Interpretations (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).