

Conceptual Article

Ancient Tamil Games that Empowered Women

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Abstract

In ancient Tamil culture, traditional games were not merely recreational activities but served as vehicles for cultural transmission, physical fitness, emotional strength, and social cohesion. Among these, many games played by women both indoors and outdoors nurtured bravery, quick thinking, leadership, and emotional resilience. This paper explores a variety of indigenous Tamil games such as *Pandy Attam* (hopscotch), *Paramapatham* (snakes and ladders), *Kannamuchi* (hide and seek), *Pallanguzhi* (strategy board game), *Dhayam* (dice game), *Thatangal* (Pebble game), *Pachai Kuthirai* (leap game), *Kummi* (folk dance circle), and *Kollattam* (stick dance). These games were often played in temples, homes, courtyards, and community gatherings, providing a platform for girls and women to express themselves, build self-esteem, and experience camaraderie. Games like *Pallanguzhi* sharpened strategic thinking and mathematical skill, while *Thatangal* and *Pachai Kuthirai* promoted agility, fearlessness, and readiness to act under pressure. Folk games like *Kummi* and *Kollattam* fostered group coordination, leadership, and rhythm, empowering women to claim their presence in the public and ritual spaces of society. This paper examines how these games influenced the social, mental, and emotional development of women, enabling them to face patriarchal societal norms with greater courage and assertiveness. Drawing from oral traditions, literature, and cultural studies, this study aims to reclaim these ancestral tools of empowerment and highlight their relevance in the 21st-century context of women's agency and social equity.

Keywords: Ancient Tamil games; Women empowerment; Folk traditions; Indigenous sports; Tamil culture

Introduction

In the deeply rooted traditions of Tamil culture, play was more than a source of entertainment. It was a powerful medium for learning, self-expression, and cultural continuity. Embedded in everyday life, festivals, and family rituals, traditional games formed an essential part of Tamil heritage. Far from being trivial diversions, these games embodied the philosophical, moral, physical, and emotional training that prepared individuals particularly women to face life's challenges with courage and conviction. Tamil girls and women actively engaged in a variety of ancient games that demanded not only physical energy but also strategic thinking, emotional control, and social cooperation. Whether played in temple courtyards, village grounds, or the shaded verandahs of ancestral homes, these games provided safe and joyful spaces for girls to assert themselves, collaborate, compete, and lead. In an era when women were often confined to domestic roles and denied formal avenues of power or education, games offered a hidden curriculum of empowerment. Games like **Pallanguzhi**, with its focus on strategy and counting, cultivated cognitive sharpness and decision-making abilities. **Dhayam** and **Paramapatham** taught risk management and philosophical acceptance of life's ups and downs. Physical games like **Pandy Attam**, **Thatangal**, and **Pachai Kuthirai** promoted physical fitness, spatial awareness, and a fearless spirit. **Kannamuchi** taught observation and memory, while dance-based games like **Kummi** and **Kollattam** fostered rhythm, voice, body coordination, and social bonding. Moreover, the performative aspects of games like *Kummi* and *Kollattam* enabled women to contribute to the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of their communities. Their participation in such rituals and festivities was not passive it was active, assertive, and symbolic of their agency. These dances and games were often composed with songs of social relevance, protest, or devotion, giving women a voice in shaping communal narratives. This paper presents a cultural and analytical exploration of these ancient Tamil games and how they empowered women across various dimensions—physical, emotional, intellectual, and social. By reclaiming and revisiting these indigenous practices, we gain insight into the tools of silent resistance and self-realization used by Tamil women throughout history. In doing so, we also reflect on how these practices can inform contemporary movements for gender equality, cultural preservation, and holistic education. Let us see in detail about the games.

Pandy Attam (Hopscotch): Leaping Beyond Limits

Girls in traditional attire jumping across a chalk-drawn hopscotch grid on an earthen courtyard. *Pandy Attam*, known in English as hopscotch, is one of the oldest and most beloved traditional games played by girls in rural and semi-urban Tamil communities. This simple yet skillful game involves hopping across numbered squares drawn on the ground using chalk, coal, or lime powder. Though its format may appear straightforward, the game is layered with cultural meaning, physical discipline, and symbolic value especially for young girls who were often confined within domestic spaces. Traditionally played barefoot on sun-baked earth, *Pandy Attam* demanded not only balance and coordination but also acute spatial awareness, rhythm, and timing. A small object, often a stone or shell, is thrown into a designated square, and the player must retrieve it while hopping through the grid on one foot, avoiding lines and other marked areas. The rules train players in accuracy, focus, and body control. Beyond its physicality, *Pandy Attam* carried deeper metaphorical resonance. Each jump over a square could be seen as a symbolic leap over life's challenges poverty, gender bias, fear, and restriction. For girls growing up in patriarchal environments, participating in *Pandy Attam* was an act of claiming space—both literally and metaphorically.

Impact on Women and Society

Physical Empowerment

- Developed agility, coordination, and lower-body strength.
- Encouraged healthy outdoor activity and mobility
- Built endurance and resilience through repeated efforts and play.

Emotional and Psychological Growth

- Nurtured a sense of self-worth through mastery and progression.
- Helped girls deal with failure constructively when they stepped outside the lines or missed a turn.
- Strengthened decision-making under pressure and improved focus,

Social and Cultural Relevance

- Promoted outdoor visibility for girls in conservative rural areas, where mobility was limited.
- Created a supportive peer environment where girls played, competed, and learned cooperation.
- Reinforced social bonds among friends, siblings, and community members across age groups.

Educational Value

- Introduced early concepts of numeracy, counting, and pattern recognition
- Improved memory and planning as players remembered rules and devised strategies
- Functioned as an informal preparatory ground for physical education and emotional discipline

In today's world, reviving *Pandy Attam* in schools, women's circles, and cultural festivals could serve as a powerful medium to reconnect with this ancestral source of confidence, balance, and courage.

Thatangal (Pebble Game): Nurturing Bravery through Play

Illustration Suggestion: Village girls crouched in a circle, intensely focused on flicking or collecting pebbles in a dirt courtyard. *Thatangal* is an ancient Tamil traditional game played primarily with small stones or pebbles. Though variations exist depending on region, the core objective remains consistent: to skillfully manage and manipulate a set of pebbles using agility, quick reflexes, and strategic timing. While often categorized under the broader umbrella of pebble or stone games, *Thatangal* held a unique place in fostering bravery, strategic thinking, and social cohesion—especially among young girls and women in rural Tamil society. Unlike board games that focused on mental calculations or chance, *Thatangal* was a more **tactile, action-oriented** game. It required players to gather pebbles from the ground swiftly while tossing and catching one or more pebbles mid-air without dropping them. Some versions involved flicking pebbles into designated zones, defending one's collected pieces, or

intercepting the opponent's turn all of which demanded intense hand-eye coordination, speed, and focused attention.

Rules and Play Style

- Typically played in groups, with players taking turns.
- Pebbles are arranged in patterns or collected in a pile.
- One pebble is thrown into the air while the player picks up others before catching the airborne one.
- Some versions include striking opponents' pebbles to “capture” or defend one's territory.

Impact on Girls and Women

Physical and Reflex Development

- Enhanced fine motor skills, finger agility, and reaction time.
- Fostered spatial judgment and coordination through rapid movements.
- Encouraged alertness and physical readiness—qualities essential for real-life confrontations.

Cultivating Courage and Assertiveness

- Developed risk-taking behavior in a controlled, safe environment.
- Reinforced confidence in self-judgment and hand precision.
- Helped reduce fear of physical errors or public performance, teaching emotional control under pressure.

Leadership and Defensive Strategy

- Involved team dynamics and turn-based strategies, often placing players in positions of decision-making.
- Girls learned how to read the body language and timing of opponents, cultivating leadership traits.
- Taught proactive defense—anticipating challenges and preparing quick responses.

Emotional and Social Development

- Created space for friendly competition, mutual encouragement, and skill recognition.
- Increased peer respect for capable players, boosting social esteem.
- Encouraged bonding and team loyalty, especially in multi-round versions requiring partnerships.

Cultural and Gender Significance

- One of the few games where girls actively engaged in hand-based "combat" styles.
- Subverted the stereotype of passive femininity by promoting physical mastery and self-assertion.
- Played as part of seasonal festivities or daily routines, subtly integrating empowerment into tradition.

Pachai Kuthirai (Green Horse Jump)

Pachai Kuthirai, also known as the Green Horse Jump, is a traditional hopping game popular among young girls in Tamil Nadu. The game involves a series of chalk-drawn squares or grids on the ground. Players take turns hopping on one leg across these squares, following a particular sequence. Sometimes, a stone or marker is thrown into a square, and the player must avoid that square while hopping. Losing balance or stepping on the lines results in elimination.

This game is usually played barefoot, encouraging body awareness and foot strength. It is often accompanied by songs or rhythmic claps, creating a joyful, energetic atmosphere. The movements require excellent balance, leg strength, and coordination. Players must also remember the patterns and follow specific sequences, making it a mentally engaging game.

Impact on Women

- **Physical Empowerment:** This game builds strength, balance, and stamina in young girls, encouraging physical confidence.
- **Risk-taking and Confidence:** Learning to jump with precision instills courage and trust in one's own abilities.

- **Breaking Stereotypes:** Girls playing physically demanding games in public spaces challenges traditional ideas of femininity and passivity.
- **Play as Empowerment:** Public play teaches girls to claim space, be visible, and be heard in society.

Pallanguzhi

Pallanguzhi is a traditional indoor mancala-style board game predominantly played by women in Tamil households. It consists of a wooden board with 14 small pits and is played using tamarind seeds, cowrie shells, or small pebbles. Two players sit opposite each other and distribute the seeds evenly into the pits. The gameplay involves strategic movement and capturing of seeds based on counting and memory.

Pallanguzhi is not just a game but a symbol of cultural heritage, usually passed down from older women to younger girls. It was often played in the evenings or during family gatherings. The game is simple to learn but requires deep concentration, planning, and memory recall.

Impact on Women

- **Intellectual Development:** Encourages logical thinking, arithmetic, memory, and planning.
- **Cultural Transmission:** Older women teach the game to younger generations, fostering intergenerational bonds.
- **Domestic Leisure:** Played within homes, it gave women a mental escape and social engagement in otherwise restrictive domestic environments.
- **Empowerment through Wisdom:** Recognized women's intellectual contributions and skills in strategic thinking.

Dhayam (Dice Game)

Dhayam, the ancient version of modern-day Ludo, is a dice-based board game played on a cross-shaped board using pawns. The game requires players to move their pawns based on the dice rolls (traditionally using cowrie shells). The aim is to complete a full circle of the

board and bring all pawns home safely, avoiding other players' pawns which can knock them back to the start.

This game was often played during leisure time by women, especially during festive occasions or family gatherings. The strategic planning involved in choosing which pawn to move and when to enter the safe zone made it intellectually engaging.

Impact on Women

- **Mathematical Thinking:** Enhances probability estimation, numerical skills, and logic.
- **Leadership and Decision-making:** Offers women opportunities to strategize, plan, and compete.
- **Confidence in Uncertainty:** Teaches managing luck and setbacks—relevant for navigating real-life challenges.
- **Social Role:** Served as a tool for forming social circles and community among women in conservative settings.

Paramapatham (Snakes and Ladders)

Paramapatham, known as Snakes and Ladders in modern times, has its roots in ancient Indian philosophy. The board typically features 100 numbered squares with ladders symbolizing virtues and snakes symbolizing vices. Players roll dice to advance their token to the final square (100), climbing ladders and avoiding snakes along the way.

Traditionally, this game was more than just entertainment — it served as a moral lesson embedded in fun. Women and children played it together, making it a valuable educational and social tool in the household.

Impact on Women

- **Moral Education:** Served as a gentle way to discuss ethics, right and wrong, especially with children.
- **Teaching Role:** Women, as moral guides in families, used this game to educate younger generations.
- **Resilience Training:** Helped women cope with setbacks and cultivate perseverance.

- **Spiritual Agency:** Reinforced women's role as nurturers of cultural and moral values in society.

Kummi (Circle Dance)

Kummi is a vibrant, rhythm-based folk dance traditionally performed by women in rural Tamil Nadu. It is done in a circular formation with rhythmic clapping, singing folk songs, and synchronized steps. Kummi is performed during festivals like Pongal, Navaratri, and harvest celebrations, often without any musical instruments, relying solely on claps and voices. Women of all ages participate, fostering a deep sense of community and celebration. The movements are repetitive and inclusive, making it accessible to everyone regardless of age or skill level.

Impact on Women

- **Social Unity:** Brought women together in joyful and equal participation, breaking barriers of age, caste, or background.
- **Cultural Expression:** Gave women a voice to express local stories, emotions, and shared experiences through songs.
- **Physical Wellness:** Provided movement and exercise in times when structured physical activity for women was rare.
- **Community Leadership:** Older women often led the songs and steps, reinforcing their respected roles.

Kollattam (Stick Dance)

Kollattam is a folk stick dance performed in pairs or groups where women strike short sticks together rhythmically while dancing in circles or rows. It requires coordination, rhythm, agility, and timing. Dancers often sing while performing, making it a multi-sensory experience. It is performed during temple festivals and social gatherings, often accompanied by folk music.

This dance involves active physical participation, with energetic footwork and sharp hand movements, helping improve fitness levels.

Impact on Women

- **Body Awareness and Empowerment:** Increases agility, coordination, and rhythmic control, empowering women through movement.
- **Breaking Inhibitions:** Encouraged freedom of expression in a socially accepted form.
- **Group Identity and Empowerment:** Reinforced a sense of unity, support, and strength among women dancers.
- **Visibility in Public Life:** Allowed women to take center stage during festivals, symbolizing strength and celebration.

Conclusion

The ancient Tamil games of *Pachai Kuthirai*, *Pallanguzhi*, *Dhayam*, *Paramapatham*, *Kummi*, and *Kollattam* were not merely pastimes but culturally embedded tools of learning, empowerment, and well-being for women. Each game, rooted in physical agility, mental sharpness, and emotional expressiveness, contributed to the holistic development of women from a young age. Through structured play, these activities enhanced problem-solving skills, emotional regulation, coordination, and social engagement. They offered spaces for communal support, intergenerational learning, and the preservation of cultural identity.

In times when women's roles were largely domestic, these games allowed for self-expression, decision-making, and leadership in informal yet impactful settings. For example, *Pallanguzhi* nurtured cognitive development, while *Kollattam* encouraged synchronization and teamwork. The inclusive nature of *Kummi* and *Paramapatham* helped instill moral values and unity. Moreover, physical games like *Pachai Kuthirai* promoted health and resilience. Today, revisiting these traditional games offers a valuable lens to empower women through cultural heritage, making learning joyful, organic, and rooted in identity. Reintegrating these practices into modern settings can contribute to women's empowerment through creative, educational, and fitness-oriented initiatives. These games embody a legacy of strength, wisdom, and resilience — timeless tools for holistic female development.

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