



Raising and selling children in the game of Pallankuzhi

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Abstract: Folk games serve as vital cultural media for transmitting a community's lifestyle and cultural experiences from one generation to the next. Among the traditional games of Tamil Nadu Pallanguzhi is closely intertwined with the lives of women. This study aims to examine specific socio-cultural elements manifested through the game namely, child-rearing and 'selling' of children. In Pasumpandi a variant of Pallanguzhi the game element known as Pasu (cow) is symbolically equated with children. Activities such as child-rearing and feeding are enacted through the mechanics of the game. Conversely, losing these pieces to the opponent when unable to sustain them is referred to as selling the children. This study utilizes data gathered through fieldwork and Pasupandi game songs as primary sources. It demonstrates that Pallanguzhi is not merely a recreational pastime but also reflects women's social roles, child-rearing practices, food security, economic conditions, historical social experiences, and cultural memory.

Keywords: Pallanguzhi – Women in Pallanguzhi – Puberty rituals – Cultural elements in Pallanguzhi – Child-rearing – Selling of children – Slavery systems in Tamil Nadu.

Introduction:

The games that are popular in a society are aimed at teaching the rules and values of that society to children born into that society from childhood. These are of great help to children in functioning as members of that society. In this regard, it would be best to give the opinion of cultural researcher T. Paramasivan on games. "Have you paid close attention to the word game? Does the meaning of entertainment resonate somewhere in this word? We are now using that word in the sense of entertainment, meaninglessness, and shallowness. But the history of mankind does not tell us that. He says that a society expresses an ideology that it creates or accumulates on itself through games (2007: p.73). According to T. Paramasivan, it can be understood that the folk games that are popular among the people emphasize social values, social problems, social practices, and norms to children from there youngster.

These folk games are divided into two categories: indoor games and outdoor games. Indoor games are mostly played by women, while outdoor games are played by men. Chauhan (2025: p. 49–61) Among indoor games, the game of Pallankuzhi is a game for women. The aim of this study is to examine the socio-cultural elements taught to girl children through the game of Pallankuzhi.

Pallankuzhi Game - Description:

The word pallankuzhi in Tamil Nadu is a variation of the word Thinaanku kuzhi. Only the fourteen- pit game is played in Tamil Nadu to this day. Thus, the name is appropriate. "Palankuzhi is also played in countries around the world such as Africa, America, Egypt, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Vietnam. In many places, the name of the game is formed by the names of the playing Book.

Rules of the Game of Pallankuzhi:

A pallankuzhi board is used to play the game of pallankuzhi. It is rectangular in shape with fourteen small holes. People use pallankuzhi made of materials such as wood, bronze, and silver, depending on their economic status.



Various Seeds of the fruits for the game of Pallankuzhi. Small fruits and seeds that are easily available in nature are used, such as tamarind seeds, drumstick seeds, kunrimani, sovimuthu, kalipaku, kotamuthu, seeds, and neem seeds.

Some of the pits in the Pallankuzhi have unique names. They are interesting to look at. Vitale (2025: p. 8–16) People identify some of the pits according to the game format, such as Pillai, Arasu, Valkuzhi, Poikuzhi, Nadkuzhi, Mooikuzhi, Kaikuzhi, Kasikuzhi, Rajakuzhi, and Kaasukuzhi.

Players of Pallankuzhi divide the pits equally among themselves. They have to take the pieces from any of their pits and put them in the other pit one by one (clockwise). In doing so, if any pit is empty without any pieces, all the pieces in the next pit belong to the player. This is a game that requires correct calculation and play. This game teaches girls numbers, counting skills, and addition.

Types of Pallankuzhi:

In Tamil Nadu, the game of Pallankuzhi is given many names. It is called by many names such as Pallankuzhi Play, Pandiattam, Kuzhi attam, Balavaranai, Pandi, Pandiyankuzhi. Generally, the word Pallankuzhi is rarely used when referring to the types of similar games. Instead, the word Pandi is used in conjunction with the types of games. Researchers classify the game of Pallankuzhi into five, six, and seven. The rules and their cultural elements differ according to each game.

In this study, the following types of games are taken up for study: Rasapandi, Kasipandi, Tallaupandi, Kalyanapandi, Seethapandi, Kattupandi and pasumpandi each game form is unique.

Rajapandi:

Rajapandi is a game played by three people. One person is considered the king. He is allotted a total of six pits, three in the middle and three on either side. Sattar (2025: p. 96–102) The remaining two ministers are entitled to the remaining four pits each. In this, the king must start the game first.

Kasipandi:

Kasipandi Play by leaving one pits to the side empty and filling only the other six pits. A cavity left unfilled is called a 'Kasikuzhi'.

Thallupandi:

Thallupandi involves playing by pushing all the seeds from one pit into the next Researcher Mr.R. Rathinapugazhendhi has documented these variations of the pallankuzhi game in his book (Gramadhu vilaiyattugal) Village Games (2016: p. 110).

Seetha Pandi:

Seethapandi plays by placing seven pieces in the first pit, then six, then five, and then filling the last pit with just one piece.

It is said that Seethapandi Play was performed when Seetha was in the forest. Stories are told that Rama and Sita played it to pass the time in the forest. The Telugu-speaking Reddy, Nayak and Naidu communities believe in these stories about the Pallankuzhi Play. One of the Telugu folk songs says “Vaman Kunda Aaduthama Vanitha”. Vamana - short, Kunda - pit, Filed date says the informant Appammal about Seethapandi.

Kalyana pandi:

Professor Thayammal Aravanan has mentioned another type of wedding ceremony in her book Pallankuzhi. They are as follows: “Pallankuzhi plays an important role in the game played during the wedding ceremony. This is



called Kalyanapandi. This is a type of game that ends quickly. Everyone wants the bride to win in the Kalyanapandi. Whether the bride wins in this game or not, the people present at the wedding make the bride win at least in some way. The success of the bride is associated with the fertility and success of life. It is believed that just as she wins in Pallankuzhi, she will win in life and help the family prosper by gaining people. She also says that the game of Kalyanapandi is found among African people. Thayammal Aravanan states as follows, "Not only in Tamil Nadu but also in African countries, people of the tribe called Thuglar mention that they play Pallankuzhi style games called Oli on their wedding day." From this, we can see that Pallankuzhi is played in African countries during weddings.

Kattupandi:

There is a type of game called Thalikkatti in Pallankuzhi. This is called Kattupandi in the Madurai region. During this game, if only three seeds are placed in the four corners of the Pallankuzhi board, it is said to be a match. While playing by placing seeds in the pits, if the seeds end up in the corner hole, they make that pit their own as a hole to collect seeds. There is also a rule that one should build only two pits in this game," says A. Pappa, referring to the Kattupandi game, a type of Pallankuzhi game played in the Madurai region (2023: p. 116). Thus, there are many varieties of the game of Pallankuzhi. It is evident that each of these variations is linked to cultural events such as weddings and the tying of the "thali" (sacred wedding pendant) as well as to figures from history and epics. The king, minister, Rama and Seetha. The relationship between women and Pasumpandi, another form of the Pallankuzhi game, can be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Pallankuzhi game and women:

Pallankuzhi is a game that girls play after they grow up, and that too, a game that only girls play together.

Puberty ceremonies and the game of Pallankuzhi:

When a girl attains puberty, her parents inform their relatives—particularly the girl's maternal uncle. When these relatives visit the girl, they bring gifts such as snacks (especially sweets), fruits, and the Pallankuzhi game board. Notably, the Pallankuzhi board is one of the customary gifts presented to the girl by her maternal uncle.

When a girl reached puberty, her friends would visit and converse with her, singing and dancing to entertain her. While games played during early childhood serve to exercise the body, once a girl attained puberty, she was permitted to play only while seated indoors and exclusively with other women. During this period, Pallankuzhi was a particularly popular game.

Pasupandi: A Variation of the Game Involving 'Raising' and 'Selling' Pieces:

We previously mentioned that there are several varieties of the Pallankuzhi game, such as Kattupandi, Kasippandi, and Pasupandi. However, women predominantly play Pasupandi. The game derives its name Pasupandi from the practice of designating four specific pieces as 'Pasu' (meaning 'cow') and treating them as winning pieces. This version of the game is widely played in districts such as Madurai, Tirunelveli, Virudhunagar, and Kanyakumari in Tamilnadu.

How to play Pasupandi: Five pieces must be placed in each of the fourteen pits. A player begins by emptying any one of their seven pits and distributing the pieces one by one into the subsequent pits. If a piece lands in an empty pit, the turn ends, and play passes to the next person. During the game, if four pieces accumulate in any pit on a player's side, they collect them as a "cow" (pasu). Play continues by emptying the pit immediately following the one where the last piece was placed. Alternatively, if the pit following the one where the last piece landed is empty but the pit after *that* contains pieces, the player may capture those pieces. The player who collects the most pieces is declared the winner, while the player left with no pieces is considered the loser.

**Pasu (The 'Child' Piece):**

In the game of Pasu Paandi, the term Pasu (literally 'cow') refers to a 'child' piece. This game is played by two people. During play, if a specific pit contains exactly four seeds, they are collectively referred to as the Pasu, these seeds cannot be separated or moved individually during the turn. The player on whose side this Pasu (set of four seeds) is located claims ownership of all the seeds in that pit. This set of four seeds is also known as Kunju (chick/offspring) or Pillai (child).

Pillai Valarthai (Nurturing the Child):

The game involves a specific activity known as Pillai Valarthai (nurturing the child). In the Pallanguzhi board, each pit is typically filled with five seeds. Here, a Pillai (child) refers to a set of seeds numbering fewer than five specifically two, three, or four. These sets are called Pillaigal (children). The 'children' must be 'fed' (replenished). During each turn, if the first pit designated as the Pillai-kuzhi (child-pit) contains fewer than five seeds (i.e., one, two, three, or four), a corresponding number of seeds must be placed into it. This phenomenon is known as blowing the baby's porridge. She should also feed the fruits saved in the game to her children, from the first to the last of each game of the polygamous game, she should feed all the children born odd or even. Professor Rosalind Miles' historical explanation of female infant feeding may be relevant here. They are as follows, "Food gathering undoubtedly topped the list of women's duties. This work kept their clan alive and women regularly constituted up to 80 percent of the clan's total food consumption on a daily basis.

In her book *Women's History of the World* (2000: p. 25), Rosalind Miles notes that a woman's task of gathering food becomes far more complex and urgent when she has children to feed in addition to herself. Based on Miles's perspective, it is evident that gathering food and feeding children have long been primary responsibilities for women. This social activity women feeding children's enshrined in the game of Pallanguzhi and continues to be practiced to this day. Furthermore, Pallanguzhi is not merely a pastime; it can be understood as a game that captures and preserves the significance of women's roles in child-rearing and food gathering. It is essential to view the act of placing and collecting the seeds (or shells) in the game of Pallanguzhi in the context of food gathering; furthermore, in this game played exclusively by women, the act of feeding children is embedded as an integral part of the gameplay itself.

Child Sale:

Pasupandi game also has the game of feeding the child and selling the child. In this game there is also the phenomenon of buying and selling children, when the child cannot be fed, losing the game to the person playing in her opposite side and selling her children and thereby collecting the pieces is called child selling.

There is a need to historically understand child selling in multilingualism. In Tamil Nadu, people sold their children when there was an economic crisis. Professor A. Sivasubramanian has written about this situation in detail in his book *Slavery in Tamil Nadu*.

A woman named Silambayi from Pudukkottai brought her nine-year-old daughter, Rengayi, to the home of a dasi (courtesan) named Visalakshi in Thanjavur. Visalakshi purchased a sari worth three and a half rupees for Silambayi and stated that the child could be taken back only upon the repayment of that amount; subsequently, Silambayi left Rengayi at Visalakshi's house. A. Sivasubramanian (2005: 61) reports that the dasi Visalakshi sold the girl to the government for four hundred rupees.

Furthermore, in his book *Tamilzhathil Adimai Murai* (The System of Slavery in Tamil Nadu), he documents based on historical evidence—instances where children, adults, and men were sold as slaves during the eras of the Later Cholas, the Vijayanagara Empire, and the Thanjavur Maratha rule, as well as in the Nanjil Nadu region.

This event from Tamil society is reflected in Pallanguzhi that is a traditional folk game.

**The song is as follows:**

Pasumpandi game describes this scenario.

"Let the mother of ten children scoop up the pandi (game pieces)

Let the mother of four children lick them up.

Let the mother of two children show off her moves.

Let the mother who sold her child go to Kasi."

This song was collected during fieldwork from an elderly woman named Ramakkal from Vadakkunatham village. Thus, we can see how a folk game song has preserved a historical event within its lyrics.

Conclusion:

Folk games generally involve physical, cognitive, and mental exercise. The game of Pallanguzhi incorporates the theme of child-rearing specifically the act of feeding a child. Since ancient times, women have played the role of food gatherers and providers, a responsibility to which they remain deeply committed to this day; the game of Pallanguzhi reflects this through its inclusion of child-rearing elements. Furthermore, the concept of "selling the child" within the game can be linked to historical practices of child slavery. Thus, this study highlights how the traditional folk game of Pallanguzhi documents both the nurturing and the selling of children.

Informant list

Number	Name	Age	Place	Occlifcation
1	K.Appammal	78	Vadakkunatham Virudhunagar District	Agriculture, Flower shop
2	A. Aramugatha	64	Vadakkuntham Virudhunagar District	Agriculture
3	S.Cellammal	65	Vadapalanji Madurai District	Wood business
4	R.Dhanalakshmi	45	Linganayakkanpatti, Thoothukudi District	Agriculture
5	M.Janaki	52	Vadakkunatham Virudhunagar District	Flower shop, Milk business
6	R.Jyothiyammal	53	Usilampatti Madurai District	Hotel accountant
7	J.Sathiyavanni	55	Duraisamipuram Theni District	Wood business
8	T. Ramakal	80	North Virudhunagar District	Agriculture

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