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Echoes of Folk Arts in the Globalised Era: Tamil Cinema as a Critical Mediator of
South Indian Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Film and media act as powerful tools in preserving, popularizing, reinterpreting, and sometimes commercializing these traditions. Through cinema, television and folk arts reach audiences far beyond their original local settings. It can be stated that Film and Media has been the main pillars for the layman people to get knowledge about the beauty of folk arts. The beauty of South Indian folk arts lies in their vibrant simplicity, deep cultural roots, and powerful connection to everyday life.

These art forms—expressed through music, dance, theatre, and visual crafts—capture the rhythm of villages, the harmony between nature and people, and the emotions of ordinary human experience. From the energetic beats of Parai and Thappattam to the graceful movements of Karagattam and the expressive storytelling of Therukoothu, each form reflects centuries of tradition passed down through generations. Rich colors, earthy costumes, handmade instruments, and soulful melodies give South Indian folk arts an authentic charm that is both raw and poetic.

More than mere performance, they celebrate faith, harvest, love, struggle, and community, making them a living mirror of the region's cultural soul. The Film Industry need not necessarily show or explain the grammar of the Folk Art but actually serves as an INDICATOR towards visual audio library that has surpassed generations. Tamil cinema did not arise in a cultural vacuum. When sound cinema emerged in Tamil Nadu in the early 1930s, [KALIDAS was the first Talkie Film of the Tamil Cinema in 1931, the Indian Biographical Film on the Sanskrit Poet Kalidas, (not available to watch)], it absorbed existing indigenous performance traditions that had already shaped Tamil collective consciousness for centuries.

When folk arts enter film and media they undergo transformation from community ritual to mass entertainment. This creates both cultural survival and cultural dilution. The shift changes:

- ✓ Performer–audience relationship
- ✓ Sacred to secular function
- ✓ Local aesthetic to global consumption
- ✓ Space for Creativity
- ✓ Cultural enrichment in Visuals
- ✓ Impact of the Cultural flavour in music

Keywords

Thaarai, Thappaattam, Oyilaattam, Villupattu, Themmangu, Oppaari

1.0 Introduction

Tamil film is both a *cultural archive* and a *living tradition* that sustains folk arts while shaping regional identity.

To understand why Tamil cinema can be seen as a “backbone,” we must define:

- ✓ Folk arts — traditional performance practices like *koothu*, *therukoothu*, *oyilattam*, *Mayilaattam*, *Karagaattam*, *Oppaari*, *Silambaattam*, *poikkaal kuthirai attam* etc, — deeply rooted in village ritual, rhythm, sound, and community identity. These forms embody Tamil social life, oral storytelling, music, and movement that predate modern media.
- ✓ Cinema — a mass-mediated art form that has become the dominant cultural discourse in Tamil society since the early 20th century, linking popular audiences with visual and performative tradition.

In Tamil society, cinema functions beyond entertainment: it serialises folk narratives, recontextualizes traditional forms, and amplifies cultural memory.

2.0 Tamil Cinema’s Roots in Folk Narratives:

Tamil cinema repeatedly draws from

- ✓ Mythology and epic stories, as seen in films like *Thiruvilaiyadal*, *Poompuhar*, *Thiruvarutchelvar*, *Thirumal Magimai*, *Thiruvalluvar*, which adapts devotional folk myths, Shaivite, Vaishnavite, Sangam Literature, Periyapuram lore into cinematic form.
- ✓ Rural performance traditions, where music and narratives resemble village theatre and folk songs. Film narratives frequently incorporate rhythms, instruments, and performance styles reminiscent of folk practice.

Thus, cinema becomes a transport medium, moving village traditions into screens in urban and global contexts.

Cinema as Preservation & Adaptation: Tamil cinema preserves folk arts in two major ways. They are:

Visual and narrative preservation: Films document traditional dance, music, and ritual performance for posterity. Through mainstream reach, they bring *folk aesthetics* to mass audiences who may otherwise never encounter these forms. For example, classical music/dance and traditional instruments featured in films reflect and archive cultural practices.

Cultural reimagining: Cinema adapts folk elements into new narrative frameworks while retaining cognitive heritage. Even as folk rituals evolve, cinematic representations influence how folk identity is understood and performed by youth today. Therefore, Tamil cinema functions as a living repository — not merely copying tradition, but revitalizing it.

2.1 Tamil Cinema and Social Identity

Cinema's role includes shaping collective identity via cultural symbolism: Narratives carry folk music, dance, and cultural values that underpin community life.

- Through cinema's broad public space, these elements become part of the *modern Tamil cultural consciousness*.

Scholars note cinema's role in *cultural hegemony* and identity formation, demonstrating that film shapes values and cultural memory far beyond aesthetic experience.

Thus, Tamil cinema doesn't just reflect folk art; it scaffolds the survival of folk sensibilities within a rapidly modernizing society.

Synthetic Cultural Dialogues:

Tamil film also creates dialogue among art forms:

- By including classical and folk dance forms on screen, cinema encourages interdisciplinary appreciation.
- Film songs integrate folk motifs that spark renewed interest in regional music traditions among youth.

This mechanism bridges traditional performance and popular culture — ensuring continuity rather than relegation to niche practice.

Without the mediation of cinema, many South Indian folk arts would have remained confined to localized performance spaces and risked gradual cultural invisibility in the face of rapid social transformation. Cinema has functioned as a powerful visual and auditory archive, offering enduring representations of folk music, dance, ritual practices, and village cultural environments. While film does not transmit the precise grammar, performative discipline, technical requisites, or ritual protocols essential to the authentic practice of these folk traditions, it nonetheless captures their aesthetic presence, social context, and cultural significance.

Cinematic representations foreground folk arts as lived cultural expressions embedded within rural life, rather than as formalized instructional systems. Importantly, cinema has never claimed to replace traditional modes of transmission; instead, it provides a referential framework through which later generations can recognize how these art forms appear, sound, and function within communal settings. In the absence of cinema, contemporary society would lack a vast visual database that documents the general performance structures, spatial arrangements, and expressive qualities of folk arts. Thus, cinema operates not as a complete pedagogical medium but as a cultural protector—preserving perceptual memory and sustaining public awareness of folk traditions within modern cultural discourse.

Analytical Framework: Tamil Cinema As A Critical Mediator Of South Indian Folk Arts

The preceding discussion establishes that Tamil cinema has preserved numerous South Indian folk traditions. However, preservation alone does not explain its wider cultural role. A closer examination of selected films and songs demonstrates that Tamil cinema functions as a critical mediator, continuously interpreting, adapting and transmitting folk traditions across changing social, technological and cultural contexts.

Table 1. Evolution of Folk Representation in Tamil Cinema

Period	Representative Films	Nature of Folk Representation	Cultural Function
1930–1965	Kannagi, Nandanar, Thiruvilaiyadal, Thirumal Perumai, Thiruvavurchelvar	Folk traditions closely linked with mythology, devotion and stage performance	Cultural preservation and religious (Siva Puranam, Azhwar saritthiram) continuity
1965–1985	Thillana Mohanambal, 16 Vayathinile	Village life becomes the narrative centre; folk arts integrated into daily social life	Regional identity and rural realism, festivals, rituals,
1985–2005	Karagattakkaran, Pudhu Nello Pudhu Naathu, Dharmadurai	Folk music, dance and dialect become major narrative components	Popularisation of folk traditions through mainstream cinema
2005–Present	Paruthiveeran, Aadukalam, Sarpatta Parambarai, Thangaalaan	Greater ethnographic realism with emphasis on memory, identity, labour and indigenous traditions	Cultural mediation in a global digital environment

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Selected Films and Songs

Film / Song	Folk Art	Technique Used	Cultural Observation
<i>Maankuyile</i> <i>Poonkuyile</i> (<i>Karagattakkaran</i>)	Karagattam	Folk percussion, costume, choreography	Folk dance becomes a mainstream cultural symbol rather than a local performance.
<i>Ucchi</i> <i>Vagundheduthu</i> (<i>Rosappoo Ravikkaikari</i>)	Rural folk melody	Minimal orchestration, deep human emotions of love, betrayal, pain	Simplicity enhances emotional authenticity and reflects village life.
Film / Song	Folk Art	Technique Used	Cultural Observation

<i>Sandhaikku Vandha</i> (<i>Dharmadurai</i>)	Festival music	Crowd movement, rhythmic editing	Demonstrates community participation and collective celebration.
<i>Paccha Mala Poovu</i> (<i>Kizhakku Vaasal</i>)	folk lullaby	Landscape cinematography, lyrical imagery	Connects environment, livelihood and cultural identity.
<i>Oppari Sequence</i> (<i>Paruthiveeran</i>)	Funeral lament	Diegetic sound, extended performance	Preserves ritual authenticity and collective expressions of grief.
<i>Aarivaro Aarivaro</i> (<i>Thangaalaan</i>)	Indigenous musical traditions	Earth-tone visuals, layered sound design	Reintroduces indigenous heritage within contemporary cinema for global audiences.

Table 3. Cinematic Techniques that Mediate Folk Arts

Cinematic Element	Contribution to Folk Representation
Folk Instruments (<i>Parai, Thappu, Urumi, Nadaswaram</i>)	Establish regional sound identity and reinforce cultural memory.
Costume & Make-up	Reflect local customs, occupations and ritual traditions.
Village Landscape	Functions as a cultural space rather than a mere background.
Local Dialect	Preserves oral traditions and linguistic authenticity.
Editing Rhythm	Synchronises visual movement with folk musical structures.
Choreography	Retains traditional movement vocabulary while adapting it for cinematic presentation.
Sound Design	Creates immersive cultural experience through environmental sounds and live performance.

Table 4. Theoretical Interpretation

Theory	Application to Tamil Cinema
Representation Theory (Hall)	Cinema constructs meanings of folk culture rather than merely recording it.
Performance Theory (Schechner)	Folk performances acquire renewed significance when adapted into cinema.
Cultural Memory (Assmann)	Films preserve visual and musical memories that strengthen collective identity across generations.
Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO)	Cinema promotes documentation, visibility and public awareness of traditional performing arts.

3.0 Key Analytical Findings and Conclusion

- ✓ Folk arts are not inserted as decorative sequences; they function as narrative devices that shape character, place and social identity.
- ✓ Early Tamil cinema emphasised religious and mythological preservation, whereas later films integrated folk arts into everyday rural life.
- ✓ Contemporary cinema increasingly presents folk traditions within discussions of history, caste, labour, gender, ecology and indigenous identity.
- ✓ Emotional engagement is generated through the interaction of:
 - Folk rhythm
 - Indigenous instruments
 - Costume
 - Cinematography
 - Editing
 - Landscape
 - Dialect
 - Collective performance
- ✓ Cinema transforms oral traditions into audio-visual memory, allowing folk arts to reach audiences beyond their original geographical boundaries.
- ✓ Television, YouTube and OTT platforms have further expanded this mediation, enabling folk traditions to circulate globally without completely losing their regional identity.

Tamil cinema therefore performs four complementary functions:

1. Documentation
2. Preservation
3. Transformation
4. Transmission

These functions collectively justify describing Tamil cinema as a critical mediator rather than merely an entertainment medium.

4.0 Conclusion

Tamil cinema has evolved from documenting folk traditions to actively mediating their continuity within modern society. The comparative analysis presented in this study demonstrates that South Indian folk arts are preserved not merely through visual representation but through narrative integration, musical adaptation, performative aesthetics, and cinematic interpretation. Across successive decades, Tamil films have transformed village traditions into accessible cultural experiences while retaining their historical, social, ritual, and aesthetic significance.

Rather than replacing traditional performances, cinema extends their visibility and contemporary relevance by connecting oral traditions with modern visual media, regional identity with national and global audiences, and collective memory with evolving cultural discourse. The analytical framework further establishes that folk arts function not as decorative cinematic elements but as integral components of storytelling, emotional expression, and cultural identity. Through the creative use of folk music, indigenous instruments, choreography, costume, dialect, landscape, and visual composition, Tamil cinema continuously reinterprets traditional knowledge for changing generations while preserving its cultural essence.

Consequently, Tamil cinema should be understood not merely as an entertainment industry but as a dynamic cultural institution and a critical mediator that bridges tradition and modernity. Its contribution extends beyond preservation to the revitalisation, reinterpretation, and transmission of South Indian folk arts, thereby supporting the safeguarding of India's intangible cultural heritage in an increasingly globalised and digital world.

Finally, the films and songs discussed in this study are presented not as an exhaustive catalogue but as representative cultural texts that invite further academic inquiry and experiential engagement. Their artistic, social, and ritual dimensions are best appreciated through attentive viewing and listening, allowing audiences to recognise how cinema communicates the cultural values, collective memory, and lived experiences embedded within South Indian folk traditions. Thus, Tamil cinema emerges not only as a repository of cultural memory but also as an evolving force that ensures the continued relevance of folk arts for future generations.

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