

# Origins and Historical Background of the Nagarathar Community

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90800006>

Received: 19 July 2025; Accepted: 25 July 2025; Published: 26 August 2025

## ABSTRACT

The Nagarathar community, also known as Nattukottai Chettiars, holds a rich and fascinating historical background that traces its roots to ancient Tamil Nadu in South India. The Nagarathars are a prosperous merchant and banking community renowned for their philanthropy, social practices, and distinctive cultural traditions. The origins of the Nagarathar community can be traced back over a thousand years. Initially, they were traders and moneylenders, engaging in extensive business activities that contributed significantly to the economic landscape of medieval South India. The community's rise to prominence can be attributed to their shrewd business acumen, enabling them to establish trade networks not only within India but also across Southeast Asia, including countries like Burma, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia. One defining feature of the Nagarathar community is their philanthropic spirit. Historically, they contributed to religious activities, building temples, wells, and ponds. Their commitment to temple renovations and consecrations has been exemplary, with meticulous records of their substantial financial contributions. Moreover, their charitable endeavours extended beyond their religious beliefs, evident in their donations to diverse causes, such as the restoration of mausoleums in Vietnam, showcasing their respect for various faiths. The Nagarathar community's social structure is intricately woven around clan temples, marriage alliances, and occupation-based groupings. Their adherence to traditions, including marriage rituals, reflects their cultural rigidity and deep-rooted customs. Despite the evolving societal landscape, the Nagarathars have maintained their unique identity, balancing tradition with adaptation. Chettinad cuisine, an integral part of Nagarathar culture, embodies their culinary traditions. Known for its diverse and flavourful dishes, Chettinad cuisine has become renowned globally, representing the community's rich gastronomic heritage. Their culinary practices, especially during weddings, reflect their emphasis on community collaboration and hospitality. The Nagarathars' legacy is characterized by their resilience in the face of changing times. While they preserve their customs and values, the community has adeptly embraced modern influences, ensuring the continuity of their unique identity. Their ability to adapt without losing their cultural essence has allowed the Nagarathars to thrive in contemporary society, making them a vibrant and enduring community with a rich historical legacy.

**Keywords;** Nagarathar community, Nattukottai Chettiars, South India, Trade networks religious contributions, Cultural traditions.

## INTRODUCTION

The Nagarathars, also referred to as the Nattukottai Chettiars, have long been recognized as a wealthy mercantile caste whose legacy intertwines commerce, caste mobility, philanthropy, and diaspora identity. Predominantly situated in the Chettinad region of Tamil Nadu, their reputation as shrewd financiers and philanthropists made them an influential force across colonial South and Southeast Asia. Despite this historical prominence, scholarly analysis often blurs distinctions between mythic origin narratives and empirically verifiable data. This paper seeks to unpack these entanglements by integrating interdisciplinary frameworks and drawing attention to both continuity and change in Nagarathar community structures.

The existing literature is rich in genealogical, cultural, and anecdotal history, yet under-theorized. Through the lenses of caste theory (Dirks, 2001), diaspora studies (Clifford, 1994), and economic anthropology (Hart, 1986), the paper critically re-evaluates community evolution, using a mixed-methods approach that combines

historical documents, inscriptions, and interviews with present-day Nagarathars. The aim is not merely to reconstruct a linear history but to map how identity, tradition, and adaptation operate across centuries and borders.

### Geographical Origin

The Nagarathars trace their ancestral origins to various regions across the Indian subcontinent, with oral traditions citing mythical Naganadu and historically contested movements through Andhra Pradesh, Kanchipuram, and into the Pandya kingdom. While some of these narratives are preserved in temple lore and community memory, archival records and inscriptions indicate that the community's consolidation as a mercantile caste occurred in the Tamil region during the Chola and Pandya periods (Karashima, 1984). These migrations were shaped by political alliances and economic opportunities, not merely cultural displacement.

One widely circulated oral account speaks of the sacrificial mass suicide of 8,000 Nagarathar families, whose male children were adopted by a religious guru and eventually married into the Vellala community under royal patronage. While compelling in its narrative drama, such myths serve more as symbolic articulations of caste regeneration and purity rather than verifiable history. Instead, inscriptional evidence from Ilayatrakudi and related temples points to systematic land grants, religious donations, and royal charters confirming the early presence of Nagarathar settlements in the region.. (MR M KR M, Somasundaram, 2003).

### Chettinad Region

The Chettinad region, located in Tamil Nadu, South India, is where the Nattukkottai Chettiars or Nagarathars settled upon their migration in the 13th century. The exact origin of the Chettiars is a subject of speculation, with legends suggesting migration from Naganadu, which is often debated to be in Sri Lanka or Nagaland. However, a widely accepted legend traces their migration from Andhra Pradesh to Kanchipuram and Kaveripoompattinam, finally settling in the Pandya Kingdom in the 13th century. The Chettinad region initially included 96 villages but has since reduced to 75 due to population movements. The traditional boundaries of the Chettinad region are defined by the Eastern Sea, the Southern Vaigai River, the Western Piranmalai peak, and the Northern Vellar River. This region does not correspond to a public administrative division but is interspersed with other villages and towns, where the Chettiars coexist with other communities. (Nagarathar Kalai kalanjiam 1998) The term "Chettinad Region" typically refers to a broader area that includes not only the 75 Nagarathar villages and towns but also other adjacent settlements.

## METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative ethnography, textual analysis, and archival research. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with Nagarathar community members from Karaikudi, Devakottai, and diaspora locations in Malaysia and Singapore between 2023 and 2025. These oral testimonies were cross-referenced with epigraphic records, colonial administrative archives, and publications by Nagarathar cultural institutions.

Secondary sources included caste ethnographies, economic histories, and diaspora theory. Key among them are Bernard Cohn's work on colonial knowledge production, Nicholas Dirks on caste invention, and Claude Markovits' studies on Indian merchant diasporas. Ritual practices were interpreted using Turner's theory of social drama, while Chettinad architectural and culinary heritage was analyzed through material culture studies.

The paper distinguishes oral traditions (such as the myth of the 8,000 sacrificial families) from historically verifiable events (such as British-era banking expansion), highlighting the role of narrative in community cohesion. Comparative insights from Sindhi, Jewish, and Gujarati merchant diasporas further contextualize the Nagarathar experience within a global commercial framework.

## Trade and Commerce

The Chettiars, known for their success in maritime trading, transitioned to moneylending and merchant banking, excelling in rice trading. Their money lending firms provided loans against expected harvests and agricultural land as security. They also offered merchant banking services like hundis, deposits, cheques, and money exchange. The Chettiars had a network of money lending firms with uniform interest rate practices. They later diversified their ventures with big firms leading the way and played a crucial role in the formation of the Indian Bank. A select group of influential Chettiars controlled major banks, overseeing a significant portion of total bank deposits in southern India. The Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar group owned Indian Bank and Indian Overseas Bank, contributing to their wealth and expansion. The Chettiars' involvement in textiles and spices began as they took control of numerous mills, constituting a significant portion of spindlage in the southern Indian states. The Karumuthu Thiagarajan Chettiar group led in cotton textile ownership. They also ventured into banking and other industries, accumulating significant wealth. The Nagarathar community, a subgroup of the Chettiars, established a global business presence, particularly in Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Malaysia. They played a pivotal role in the rice industry, money lending, textiles, and banking, contributing to the economic development of their host countries. Their philanthropic efforts extended globally, emphasizing cultural preservation and education. Nagarathar trade practices are marked by professionalism and ethics, strict adherence to lending security, and uniform interest rates across communities. They offer a range of financial services and maintain meticulous record-keeping. Their philanthropy includes temple renovations and educational contributions, reflecting their commitment to culture, education, and community development.

## Philanthropy

The Chettiars are renowned for their philanthropic spirit, with a long history of contributions to religious and educational causes. They began by donating oil to temple lamps during the Chola era and played a significant role in constructing wells, ponds, and water harvesting channels in the arid Ramnad district. They funded the consecration of temples every twelve years and did not rely on contributions from other communities. The Chettiars fully funded these efforts and preferred to keep it among clan temple members. Their contributions to temple renovations in Tamil Nadu were extensive, with an estimated total of around Rs. 4.5 Crores. They also formed a common fund to collect endowments, which were allocated for temple renovations and choultry construction in North India. The Chettiars' philanthropic endeavours extended beyond their community. In Vietnam, they generously donated funds to restore General Lê Văn Duyệt's mausoleum, showcasing their respect for diverse beliefs. They also contributed to the construction of temples, schools, colleges, and universities. Notably, M.A. Chidambaram, son of Rajah Sir Muthiah Chettiar, built the MA Chidambaram Stadium, recognizing his contributions to sports development.

## Social and Cultural Practices

The Nattukottai Chettiars are deeply committed to their cultural and religious traditions, which have been passed down through generations with only minor adjustments during crisis periods. Their social fabric is built on several key elements, including a lineage of nine clan temples, which are central to their identity. Marriage alliances mainly occur within these clan temples, reinforcing their interconnectedness. The practice of adopting sons among clan temple members further strengthens family bonds. Groupings based on occupation and firms play a vital role in their social structure. Religious affiliations with village temples unite members from various clan temples in the same village. These elements create a network of interdependent circles, with the clan temples forming the outermost ring and families' lineages in the inner ring. Families deviating from the traditional lineage find themselves in an external space. The boundaries of these circles are dynamic, influenced by societal and environmental conditions, and sometimes blur the lines between community and caste. In this intricate network, the concept of caste often takes precedence over the notion of community, reflecting the nuanced interplay of culture, society, and caste within the Chettiar community.

The Nagarathar community observes various festivals and wedding customs:

## **Festivals**

**Thiruvathirai Celebration:** Thiruvathirai includes a "half wedding" ceremony where young girls, dressed as brides, receive symbolic neck ornaments and garlands from their maternal uncles. The ceremony also involves rituals and customs, such as collecting vegetables from households.

**Pongal Festival:** Nagarathars celebrate Pongal over two or three days in January. It is a harvest festival cherished by all Hindu Tamils. The festival includes various rituals and customs, despite the dispersion of the Chettiar community worldwide.

**Moi Eluthuthal:** As festivals conclude, relatives' attendance is recorded in writing, symbolizing family bonding. Monetary gifts are presented by family members, with varying amounts given to record their presence. (Dr.C.Jeyaveeragandhi 2019)

**Palani Paathayatra:** An annual pilgrimage to Palani Hill is undertaken by Nagarathars, involving a long, barefoot journey to the Murugan temple. The pilgrimage holds a central role in the community's religious traditions.

**Ambu Vizha (Spear Festival):** Celebrated on Vijayadasami day, this initiation ritual into the wider world is significant for male children, typically up to five years old. It involves symbolic arrow-shooting and the participation of young boys wielding spears.

## **Wedding and Marriage Customs:**

**Nine Koil Marital Alliances:** Nagarathar marriages follow the "Nine Koil" division, and the bride and groom must originate from different clan temples to marry. Marriages within the same clan temple are prohibited.

**Pulli System Temple-Based Marriage Registration:** The "pulli system" involves registering marriages in the groom's clan temple. A formal book records each marriage, symbolizing the smallest social unit within the community.

**Wedding Celebrations:** Nagarathar weddings are grand affairs spanning a minimum of three days, marked by various traditional rituals, ceremonies, and gift-giving. Even though many Nagarathars have moved away from their native villages, they often prefer to conduct weddings in their places of origin.

**Pre-Marriage Formalities:** Before the wedding, customary rituals include "Pen Paarthal" to approve the bride, "Pesi Mudithu Kolludhal" for finalizing the union, and "Muhurtha Kaal Unrudhal" to signify the wedding date.

**Marriage Day:** On the wedding day, the groom's family arrives at the bride's village and is welcomed in a traditional ceremony known as "Mappillai Azhaipu." The bride is presented to the groom during "Pen Edukki Kattuthal," and rituals like "Thirupootuthal" are performed to mark this special occasion. (Dr.C.Jeyaveeragandhi 2019)

Nagarathar wedding customs involve various traditions and rituals:

1. **Vaevu Irakkuthal:** Symbolizes the offering of wealth in the form of food grains and vegetables from the bride's home, received at the groom's home.
2. **Mamiyar Sadangu:** The mother-in-law presents a silver plate with small bowls containing items like betel leaves, cotton, sacred ash, and turmeric. Each item is applied first to herself and then to her daughter-in-law.
3. **Poo Manam Choridaal:** Elder relatives from both sides place flower petals at the feet and shoulders of the seated couple, symbolizing blessings.
4. **Manjal Neeru Aduthal:** The couple's feet are washed with turmeric water by their cousins, a symbolic

cleansing ritual.

5. Saman Parapudhal: Display of dowry and gifts symbolizing the wealth and prosperity of the bride's family. Includes gifts for the groom and mother-in-law.
6. Kumbuttu Kattikolluthal: The bride seeks blessings with a Krishna idol, symbolizing fertility and prosperity.
7. Mana Pen Solli Kolluthal: The bride bids farewell to her birth family, receiving blessings from elders.
8. Kattu Soaru Unnuthal: Packing and consuming food for the journey from the bride's village to the groom's home.
9. Pen Azhaippu: Formal welcome of the bride to the groom's home, including playful role-determining rituals at a temple in the native village.
10. Nathanar Sadangu: Conducted by the bride's sister-in-law(s) during the "Pen Azhaippu," following a pattern similar to the "Mamiyar Sadangu," signifying a warm welcome to the bride.

### Culinary Traditions

Chettinad cuisine is at the heart of Nagarathar traditions, especially during significant life events like weddings. Food is considered not only for enjoyment but also for nourishment and spiritual growth. It is prepared with dedication, often led by experienced women, and has evolved to involve specialized cooks. Community collaboration and efficient management are key aspects of Nagarathar cooking. Their food culture includes regular offerings of free meals to the poor, and even in funeral ceremonies, guests are provided with food as a symbol of sharing in the family's grief. Traditional cooking methods and utensils are giving way to modern equipment, and the cuisine has transitioned from being primarily vegetarian to incorporating non-vegetarian dishes due to cultural influences.

Nagarathar meals, especially at weddings, feature a variety of grains, savory dishes, and sweets, served on banana leaves with silver tumblers and bowls. Guests are seated in rows, separated by gender, and are treated with great hospitality. The Nagarathars take pride in preserving their customs and values, passing them down to future generations while adapting to changing times and influences. Their unique identity remains a source of pride within the community.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Nagarathar community, also known as the Nattukottai Chettiars, is a remarkable and distinct group hailing from South India. Their origins and historical background are deeply intertwined with trade and commerce, dating back several centuries. These enterprising merchants played a significant role in establishing trade networks that extended to Southeast Asia, amassing wealth and influence along the way. Their philanthropic spirit, especially in contributing to religious causes and temple renovations, is a defining characteristic of their community.

The Nagarathars have maintained a steadfast commitment to their cultural and religious traditions, emphasizing the importance of clan temples, marriage alliances, and social structures in preserving their identity. Their customs, rituals, and culinary traditions, particularly during weddings and festive occasions, showcase their cultural richness and the spirit of community collaboration. While the community has adapted to changing times, incorporating modern elements into their way of life, they have managed to safeguard their unique identity and pass down their customs and values to future generations. The Nagarathar community's rich history, marked by trade, philanthropy, and cultural practices, stands as a testament to their enduring legacy and the ability to navigate the challenges of time while holding onto their roots.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author gratefully acknowledges Alagappa University authorities.

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