

"The Family Tradition of the Tuluvas"

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The Tuluvas (with only a few exceptions) traditionally followed a **matrilineal family system**. In this system, movable and immovable property rights and household administration were passed down from the mother to the daughter. In such joint families (undivided family system), women—especially daughters—held significant authority in matters like family news and domestic activities.

In the traditions of old Tulu Nadu, **child marriages** were common for girls. A girl would stay at her maternal home until puberty and only after that move to her husband's home. She would typically stay there only until bearing one or two children. A woman's presence in her maternal home was an **unwritten right** among Tuluvas.

A joint family was akin to a small school. In large households, even with 70–80 members under one roof, there was no shortage of resources. Looking back now, such a family system seems unimaginable. Yet at the time, it was a **simple and efficient administrative setup**, even recognized by the rulers of the day.

In a joint family, all the men and women born to women of a particular lineage (or division of the family) would live under the same roof, and the lineage would grow there. This way of life fostered an **unspoken emotional bond**, woven like an unbroken chain. Weddings and sacred ceremonies for the younger generations were conducted under the same roof, and unless unavoidable, the family remained undivided, **growing like a vast banyan tree**.

Each member of the family—men and women alike—carried **moral and social responsibilities** to uphold the family structure. Family honor was never taken lightly in the eyes of society. An individual was duty-bound to sacrifice personal pleasures for the dignity of the family. Consequently, **freedom, especially sexual freedom, was restricted**. There was no concept of romantic marriage or individual sexual choices; all marriages were arranged and carried out with the elders' approval. Despite the apparent strictness, **life was peaceful**, and over time, these rules became a part of life itself. People of Tulu Nadu were often **recognized by their family identity**.

At the time, Tulu Nadu was not economically well off. The primary food source was rice grown in paddy fields. Other crops were supplementary, and fish was a dietary staple in the coastal belt. Before the advent of urbanization, **subsistence depended on agricultural yield**. If the crops failed due to natural calamities, families would suffer without food. It wasn't uncommon for large families to go hungry, and agricultural laborers faced even greater hardships.

In such crises, **women from families without resources** had no choice but to live in their husband's house, even if it lacked comfort. Life for a woman in her marital home was rarely joyful. Generally **deprived of freedom**, she toiled continuously in a laborious life, often **melting into tears**. The Tuluva woman became a **symbol of sacrifice**, a historical reality today.

Life in those days was far from ideal. Child marriages were common, and girls were married before they were ready for household responsibilities. Sometimes, conflicts would arise between families, resulting in broken marriages. With **no alternatives to find happiness**, many resorted to physical intimacy as their only emotional outlet. Hence, women bearing 18 children were not uncommon. Despite being a **matrilineal system**, in youth, women lacked the courage or right to confront their husbands. They were **silently oppressed**, unable to express their pain.

In each family, the **eldest male of the maternal line** oversaw external affairs and was known as the *Gurikara*. In Tulu Nadu, this role was often held by members of the **Billava community**, and the name “Gurikara” became a symbolic title. He would oversee farming activities, coconut and banana plantations, and all related work based on seniority. All members—men and women—would be involved in household labor, working constantly with **no sense of personal ownership**. The Gurikara also represented the family in village councils (*Patterikoota*), and all family members participated in ceremonies, rituals, and festivals to uphold their family’s name and honor.

Inside the home, the **eldest woman was the head**. All property was in her name. This system was known as “**Kutumbartha**”, recorded officially in land records. As a result, **men had no right** to sell or mortgage this land. Family finances were also managed under her supervision, and any decisions were made only with her approval.

In Tulu Nadu, vast estates surrounded the paddy fields—banana, coconut, and areca plantations. On raised and flat lands, homes were built strong enough to withstand the **heavy monsoons**. Roofs were made from **local thatch**, and the entire family lived together. Wealthy landowners constructed **upper-story homes** with thick wooden roofs. Walls were often made of well-mixed mud.

The **grand homes of the affluent** (called *Guthu* or *Barke* houses) were majestic, with elephant gates symbolizing status. The front of the house typically faced north. These **elephant gates were a marker** of wealth and prestige.

Middle-class homes had broad frontages, with a large side room (*Padsale*), a bedroom (*Ade*), and a wide kitchen that also served as a pantry. There were **large courtyards**, and many rooms built in an orderly fashion. A massive hall (*Chavadi*) could host 100 guests. Near the eastern corner of the entrance was the **Tulasi altar**, dedicated to **Tirupati Venkateshwara**, the clan deity of all Tuluvas. A clay pot kept there was always filled with water. Not far away stood a large **well**, with stone or wooden handles for drawing water.

Around the house, there was a square courtyard with long cattle sheds. The cattle shed (*Hatti*) had space for oxen, cows, and other livestock. Farmers took special care of their prized **Kambala race buffaloes**, housing them in special enclosures. These were treated with **royal hospitality**.

Beside the cattle shed were clay pots **half-buried** for storing cattle feed. Behind the house stood the **granaries**(*Jodusirituppe*), towering like temples, symbolizing the family's stature. Near the Tulasi altar was a large **platform for separating rice**. At the back, **huge drying yards** were used to sun-dry rice.

Cooking large meals for dozens of people was normal. Families would mix ragi or horse gram with rice to make nutritious gruel (*Berekeganje*). The household head wore a white wrap and headcloth and sat in the courtyard, chewing betel leaves, **free from manual labor**. In aristocratic families, the authority would pass **formally** from uncle to nephew. The *Gurikara* had to maintain dignity, avoid mingling too casually, and uphold the family’s honor.

Births happened throughout the year. In religious households, there were **strict rules for menstruating or postpartum women**, who stayed in separate rooms outside the main home (*Kottige*) during that time.

The **grandmothers** were custodians of homemade remedies. A special box (*Pitari*) stored all herbs and roots for treating children’s sudden illnesses. In short, **life in Tulu Nadu was unique and deeply structured**.