Agricultural Culture of Tulu Nadu: The Chennemane Game

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In Tulu Nadu, **agriculture holds a prime place in culture**. Since it's the main economic activity, it naturally shaped many agricultural traditions and beliefs. Practices like **placing tène** (seed sowing rituals), celebrating **Aṭi Amavasya**(new moon day), and observing **Diwali** are widespread. The methodical cultivation of naturally occurring grains also became part of their cultural fabric. **Agriculture transformed into a human-made cultural system**, fashioned to meet basic human needs, and thus endowed with symbolic form through land preparation, seed sowing, transplanting, rituals, and so on. Because agriculture was the economic backbone, it required cultural patterns and rites—and that's how ceremonial practices and **games like Chennemane** emerged as tools to immerse individuals in this cultural world.

Farmers' Game Traditions: Chennemane, Perg, Joḍu-perg

Activities like **Chennemane**, **Perg**, and **Joḍu-Perg** (paired Perg) directly reflect agricultural procedures. Even royal court games such as **Arasāṭa** and **Mantriyāṭa** incorporate farming elements.

These games use specific agricultural terms:

- *Unpini* ("eating") means harvesting
- *Vanasi koypini* ("cutting vanasi") signifies reaping
- *Pandāpini* means fruiting
- *Kañji pāḍuni* means sowing seeds, etc.

These are **technical agricultural terms** embedded in game rules—demonstrating how Chennemane is explicitly a form of agricultural culture.

Agricultural Significance in Terminology and Gameplay

In Tulu, the word **"Perg"** means "to increase" or "to grow bigger." When the game is called **"Bule Perg,"** it translates to **"gaining a bountiful harvest."** This directly associates the game with farming. In **Chennemane**, the rectangular area where the collected seeds (or counters) are stored is called **"ade"** (in some places, *pudayi*). In everyday Tulu, *ade* refers to a storage room for paddy. The use of such **agricultural terminology** within the game shows that it is a cultural expression of agrarian life.

The **Chennemane board** represents land. Its compartments resemble paddy fields. The **act of playing the game symbolizes various stages of farming**, from preparing the fields to sowing, transplanting, harvesting,

and storing. Initially, all compartments start with an equal number of seeds (counters). As the game progresses, this balance shifts. The player's movements simulate agricultural work—tilling, seeding, building bunds, watering, etc. These human-devised activities, when tied to ritual and structure, **become a form of cultural expression**. Chennemane mirrors these processes and gives them form through structured play.

When crops **wither due to lack of water**, in Tulu it is referred to as **"kaṇḍa pottusu."** Similarly, in the game, when a player cannot refill all the compartments with counters in the second round, the empty spaces are called **"pottu."** This directly reflects **parched fields** in real-life agriculture. Winning the game depends on **clever strategy and skill**, just like success in farming depends on wisdom and technique. Thus, the game becomes a subtle training ground for these qualities.

Seasonal Timing of the Game

It is important to note **when** the Chennemane game is played. It's typically played **after the first phase of agricultural work is complete**, and **before the main harvest begins**. Once harvesting starts, the game is **put away**—often stored in the attic. Playing it outside this window is considered inappropriate. This **timing is symbolic**: the period after early farm labor ends is a rest phase (*Aati* season), ideal for learning and transmitting agricultural values and training.

In the game, **losing is called "gaṭṭamitṛuni"** (literally: "to climb the hill"), referring to **those who suffered losses in farming and had to leave the village**—something elders in Tulu Nadu often reference from past real-life occurrences. This highlights the **critical importance of success in agriculture**, a fact echoed in gameplay. Games like **Bule Perg**, **Joḍu Perg**, and **Chennemane** thus represent the **economic production process** of farming. Chennemane, in this sense, is **a cultural metaphor for the systematized rituals of agricultural life**.

Tulu Nadu's Political System and the Chennemane Game

While games like **Bule Perg** help teach and mentally prepare individuals for agrarian life, **games like Arasaat (King's Game), Mantriyaat (Minister's Game), and Matha Aat (Monastery Game)** serve as **tools to socialize individuals into Tulu Nadu's traditional political culture**. Analyzing their structure and terminology reveals these underlying meanings.

Reflections of Political Hierarchy in Gameplay

The **ancient political systems of Tulu Nadu** are embedded in these games. The **structure of the game board itself** reflects this. The terminology and actions within the game mirror the hierarchy and power dynamics of the era.

Characters like **Arasa (King), Mantri (Minister), Pradhani (Chief Minister), and Paiku (Soldier)** represent real political figures from pre-modern Tulu Nadu. In **Matha Aat**, **religious institutions like monasteries** are also portrayed as political powers. The board design, character roles, and rules echo the **political and feudal framework** of the region.

Privileges of the King in the Game

In the game, the **King (Arasa)** is granted **the most privileges**:

- He controls **more compartments** on the board.
- He has **greater access to resources** (more game seeds).
- He is allowed to **make more moves** or has more opportunities to play.
- After every round, the **Minister and Soldier are required to pay tribute (geni)** to the King.

These reflect the **zamindari (feudal landlord) system** of Tulu Nadu, where the King and his vassals held significant **economic and political power**. To understand these privileges in the game, one must understand the **hierarchical structures** of land ownership in historical Tulu society.

Landed Aristocracy and Revenue System

In pre-modern Tulu Nadu, there existed multiple layers of political entities like:

- **Guttu (clan estates)**
- **Magane (regional units)**
- **Arasu (kingdom or palace authority)**

These represented **land-based hierarchies**. Those in power controlled **land, wealth, and legal authority**. The **zamindari system before Indian independence** ensured that **commoners (praja)** paid **land tax or tribute (kappa)** to the local lords.

One such form of payment was the **"Geni system"**, where the tenant (genidar) had to offer produce or money to the landlord (jameendar). The **landlord was called "Dhani" or "Odeya"** (master or owner). These relationships between landlords and tenants mirror the **power dynamics encoded in the Chennemane game**.

Symbolic Punishment and Power Enforcement

In the game, the King is almost always expected to win. If he loses—a rare, symbolic event—he faces **a form of public humiliation**:

- He must **carry the Chennemane board on his head and parade around**.
- He is symbolically shown as **incapable of crying**, highlighting his failure as a ruler.

This **ritual punishment** reflects how power was both **enforced and ritualized** in feudal society. The **King's defeat is not anticipated**, but if it happens, it **reaffirms social expectations and power structures**.

Even though **others (Minister or Soldier)** *can* win, the game is **less about victory** and more about **reinforcing political culture**. Whether the King wins or loses, the game ultimately **acculturates players into accepting the zamindari system** and the **authority of feudal powers**. The King, by accumulating wealth, also gains **social and political dominance**.

The Symbolism of the Matha Game in Tulu Nadu's Power Structures

The **central idea of the Matha Aat** is no different from the other political games. In historical Tulu Nadu, **monasteries and temples** held privileges almost equal to those of kings. These privileges were fundamentally **land-based**.

Just as kings held land and power, **monasteries too received land grants (umbali lands)** and used these for **agricultural production**. They would, in turn, **lease these lands to tenants (genidars)**, similar to how landlords functioned. The **relationship between monasteries and their tenants** was nearly identical to that between **landlords and tenant farmers**.

Because of these landholdings, **monasteries also acquired economic, social, and political status**. Therefore, the **Matha Aat**, like the Arasaat (King's Game), serves as a **symbolic representation** of the **hierarchical authority system** of Tulu Nadu.

Conclusion: Games as Cultural Representations

To conclude:

- **Bule Perg**, **Jodu Perg**, and **Chenne Aata** reflect the **agrarian economy** and **farming culture** of Tulu Nadu. They depict agriculture not merely as economic activity but as a **deeply ritualized cultural process**.
- **Arasaat**, **Mantriyaat**, and **Matha Aat** reflect the **feudal and political structure**, introducing players to the **social logic** of land-based authority.
- These games are **not just leisure activities**, but **educational tools** that condition individuals to **understand, accept, and internalize** the socio-economic and political **order** of their environment.

Thus, **Chennemane Aata and similar games** are best understood as **cultural metaphors**—tools through which **production systems** (agriculture) and **power structures** (feudal hierarchy) are **symbolized, reinforced, and transmitted**to the next generation.