

# The Hospitality Depicted in Periyapuranam: A Reflection on Traditions, Human Life, and Religion

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## Abstract

The Periyapuranam, an important text in Tamil literature, not only serves as a biographical account of the Shaivite saints known as the Nayanars but also offers deep insights into the societal norms, values, and traditions of ancient Tamil Nadu. Among these, the theme of hospitality stands out as a significant facet, encapsulating the relationship between individuals, communities, and the divine. This paper explores the various dimensions of hospitality depicted in the Periyapuranam, examining how it interweaves with human life, religious practices, and cultural traditions.

## Introduction

The Periyapuranam, written by the poet Sekkizhar in the 12th century, provides a comprehensive narrative of the Nayanars' lives and their unwavering devotion to Lord Shiva. As a religious and literary masterpiece, it underscores the transformative power of devotion while illustrating the rich tapestry of Tamil culture. Hospitality, a virtue celebrated across many religious and cultural traditions, plays a pivotal role in the narratives presented in the Periyapuranam. This paper aims to analyze the manifestations of hospitality within the text and its broader implications for understanding human relationships and religious values in Tamil society.

## The Concept of Hospitality in Periyapuranam

### 1. Definition and Significance

Hospitality, in its essence, refers to the welcoming and care extended toward guests and strangers. In the context of the Periyapuranam, hospitality transcends mere physical provisions. It embodies the principles of kindness, generosity, and sanctity, reflecting the deep-rooted Tamil tradition of treating guests as embodiments of the divine (Atithi Devo Bhava). This notion is central to the ethos of the Nayanars, whose lives exemplify the practice of selfless giving.

### 2. Examples of Hospitality

The narratives within the Periyapuranam illustrate various instances of hospitality that emphasize both its material and spiritual dimensions:

- **Generosity of the Nayanars:** Many Nayanars, such as Kannappa Nayanar and Tirunavukkarasar, are depicted as exemplars of hospitality. Their interactions with wanderers, devotees, and even rivals reflect a commitment to providing shelter and sustenance, often elevating such acts to spiritual endeavors.

- **Divine Encounters:** Several stories highlight moments when divine beings visit human households, turning routine hospitality into a sacred encounter. These instances reinforce the belief that hospitality can facilitate a connection with the divine, showcasing how the act of receiving guests is enveloped in spiritual significance.
- **Community and Inclusivity:** The narratives emphasize the role of hospitality in fostering community ties, bridging divides among different social strata. The willingness of the Nayanars to welcome all individuals, regardless of caste, status, or background, reflects a profound understanding of humanity, echoing the inclusive nature of the Shaiva tradition.

## Hospitality and Human Life

### 1. Relationships and Social Order

Hospitality serves as a catalyst for building and sustaining relationships within the community. In the Periyapuram, the act of offering hospitality often leads to the establishment of bonds between the Nayanars and other characters, whether fellow devotees or less fortunate souls. These relationships contribute to a social order that values empathy, support, and collective identity.

### 2. Moral and Ethical Dimensions

The ethical implications of hospitality are palpable in the text. The Nayanars demonstrate that acts of kindness and the provision of shelter are not mere obligations but moral imperatives that contribute to one's spiritual growth. The examples set by these saints reinforce the idea that hospitality enriches both the giver and the receiver, paving the way for personal transformation and societal harmony.

## Hospitality and Religion

### 1. Spiritual Significance

In the realm of religion, hospitality transcends hospitality as a social obligation, becoming a sacramental act. The Nayanars' devotion often manifests in their practice of hospitality, which is viewed as a form of worship. By serving others, they cultivate an attitude of humility and gratitude, aligning themselves with the divine will.

### 2. Ritual and Tradition

The text reflects how hospitality is interwoven with religious rituals and celebrations. Festivals often become occasions for communal feasts and gatherings, reinforcing the role of hospitality as a medium for religious expression and collective worship. Such practices foster unity among devotees, creating a shared space where faith, tradition, and community coexist.

## Conclusion

The Periyapuram transcends its literary boundaries to unveil the multifaceted nature of hospitality as conceived in ancient Tamil society. Through the lens of the Nayanars' lives, the text illuminates how acts of kindness and generosity are integral to human existence and spiritual practice. The hospitality depicted in the Periyapuram serves not only as a cultural tradition but as a foundation for moral and ethical living, reinforcing the belief that every act of kindness holds the potential for divine connection. As the world grapples with issues of

separation and alienation, the timeless message of hospitality present in the Periyapuramam remains a beacon, urging humanity to embrace compassion and community.

## References

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