

The Tribes of Kollimalai – An Historical View

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Abstract

Kollimalai is a beautiful Hill station situated in the southern part of the Saturagiri ranges in the eastern ghats of Namakkal District. Kollimalai is a serene place with a pleasant, healthy and cool climate. It provides many beautiful vistas and a panoramic view. This is the second biggest herbal centre of Asia. The original inhabitants of this picturesque hill station are the Malayalis, a Tamil speaking Hindus. They are called as Malayala Kavundar. Ur-Kavundan is a chief. Large number of exogamous clans which they call vaguppus. A curious feature in connection with these vaguppus is that certain groups of them (called *dayadivaguppus*) are inter se exogamous also. The members of these dayadi clans call one another brothers (*annantambigal*), and marriage between them is, for some unknown reason, regarded as incestuous. Their huts are circular, the walls are made of split bamboo, daubed with clay and conical roof is thickly thatched with grass. Their traditional dress is a turban and a brown kambli which serves the purpose of an overcoat, a rain coat and an umbrella. They possess a bag to carry betel and tobacco, a bill-hook, ground water vessel and a walking stick. Malayali women enjoy equal status with their men. Most of the childbirths take place at home with the help of an experienced elder women, in the taniyagudise, a separate hut constructed near her house by her brother. There are vaishnavites and Saivaites among the Malayali. They consider the deity Karuppan as their community God. The Malayali tribes in Kollimalai are known for their ethical code. It is a well known fact that the tribals are socially, economically, educationally and culturally backward, yet they contribute more to nation by giving importance to their culture.

Keywords : *Vaguppu, Ur-Kavundan, Purohiths, Mantras.*

Introduction

In India there are more than three thousand castes, each a culturally distinct, endogamous community sharing traditionally a common occupation and a particular position in the localized caste hierarchy. Each caste shares a culture that distinguishes it from other castes in the village or locality by its manner of behaviour and speech, the style of dress and ornamentation, the food habits and the general pattern of life. The word caste is a Portuguese one to describe the social division among the people of Hinduism. Caste is also tacitly and so completely accepted by all, including those who condemned it, that it is everywhere the unit of social action. Caste as a primordial tie persists in the midst of change, retaining its traditional endogamy as the basic primary unit beyond the family. In the Indian languages, the major caste division is called Varna and sub-division called Jati which in Tamil is termed as Kulam¹.

During the past centuries, castes and sub-castes had been growing in endless numbers both in towns and villages, practicing varying degrees of exclusiveness. Inter-caste marriages were not totally absent while inter-dining and social inter-courses outside one's own caste became restricted. Distinction and inequalities based on a caste were openly or tacitly recognized. Caste violations were dealt with generally by the communities themselves except in serious cases of breach of peace. Despite the political changes at the top, the social life at the bottom continued along the traditional lines described above and Tamil Nadu was no exception.

India has the second largest tribal population of the world. Different regions have different administrative history due to different administrative structures. Pre-independence tribals were living in forests and hills. The status of tribals was unsatisfactory during princely and colonial regime, as a policy of neglect and saga of exploitation. Due to this, their land and forests were slowly

and gradually grabbed by the rich people like landlords and money lenders. They were turned into bonded labourers, leading a life of extreme poverty and misery. The excessive encroachment on their rights in land and forest led to be an expression of anger in the form of risings. Thus, independent India inherited from the British colonial system 'a complex tribal problem' in view of the objectives of justice, socio, economic and political equality of status and opportunities as enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution.²

Tamil Nadu has a large majority of Scheduled tribes in the hills like Jawadhu and Yelagiri hills of Thiruvannamalai, the Kalrayan hills of Vellore district, the Pachamalai, Kollimalai and Kolli Hills of Salem District, Anaimalai of Coimbatore District, Sitteri hills of Dharmapuri and Palani of Madurai District. Salem has the highest proportion of tribes because of the existence of many mountainous regions which are suitable for their inhabitation.

The original inhabitants of this picturesque hill station are the Malayalis, a Tamil speaking Hindus. Their huts are circular, the walls are made of split bamboo, daubed with clay and conical roof is thickly thatched with grass. The thatching material is mostly on kambu straw, paddy straw, cholam stalks, palmyra leaves and coconut keeths. Most of the Malayali tribes live in nuclear family.³

The Kolli-Malayalis, boys and girls wear the forelock (*mun-kudumi*) which is such a becoming and universal feature of the West Coast Hindus, the rest of the head being shaved. Boys retain this forelock till they are about 12 years of age, and girls till they attain puberty; boys then have this forelock shaed off, and grow a kudumi at the back of the head in accordance with the fashion universal in the East Coast Districts, and girls allow all their hair to grow.⁴ The women of the Kollimalais wear cloths of white cotton, tied across the breast and under armpits, never passed over the shoulder, and falling a

little below the knees. The other two sub-castes, however, follow the fashion of the plains.

The women of the Kollimalais wear beneath their ordinary cloth a short loin-cloth of white cotton about a yard and a half long and three-fourths of a yard wide, which serves no apparent useful purpose, but bears a striking resemblance to that worn by the girls of Malabar. Similar cloths are worn by the women of the other two sub-castes beneath their colored pudavais.

The Malayali are non-vegetarian, who eat pork but not beef or buffalo meat. Their staple food is millets like colam, kambu and samai. Occasionally they consume rice and ragi. Their delicacy is chendhukazhi, which they prepare on festive occasions by mixing colam and rice flour and boiling it with jaggery.⁵ They habitually take alcoholic drinks, such as sarayam and kallu. The women also drink liquor on festive occasions. The men are fond of smoking beedis and loose tobacco and use snuff, while the women chew betel.

The art of tattooing is practice among the Malayali tribes. Though tattooing started as a personal adornment, in course of time, it seems to have acquired social and religious significance. The tattoo experts are well rewarded usually in kind with rice and meat.

The marriage customs of the Malayalis differ from those of the plains. The betrothal contract is settled in the presence of *Ur-Kavundan* and if contracting parties belong to different villages, the *Ur-Kavundans* of both villages should be present, and the *Pattakkaran's* consent should be obtained. The bride-price varies, and is often paid in kind. The preliminary *nalangu* is performed on Sundays. The *Pandals* erected at the house of both bride and bridegroom on Wednesday and the *Muhurtham* takes place at the bride's house on Thursday.⁶ At the house of each party a *kalasam* is prepared of three new vessels placed one above the other, and is taken to the *Vignesvara* temple on

the Wednesday night. The order in which pan-supari is distributed is governed by rigid etiquette. The Periya-Dorai receives five shares, the other Dorais four each, the Mandiris three each, the Kutta-Kavundan two and the Muppan one. The bridegroom then presents the bride with the kurai. a white or red cloth with a black border, measuring from 12 to 17 cubits in length and from 2 to 3 cubits wide.

On the Kollimalais the ceremonies take place at the bridegroom's house, whither the bride is taken between daybreak and 7 A.M. on the wedding morning. The bridegroom places the tali on the girl's neck, and the Ur-Kavundan, standing behind her, ties it. It is the Ur-Kavundan. too, who places the hand of the boy in that of the girl, and who pours water over their clasped hands. Divorce is permitted with the consent of the Kula panchayat at a public ceremony. Divorce proceedings among the PachaiMalaiyalis are of the simplest description the husband declares in the presence of the Guru, that he has abandoned his wife, and he tenders her a bit of straw or a splinter of wood in token of repudiation. She is not however, to marry a second husband till her first husband dies. It is possible that a pollution period of thirty days on attainment of maturity was at one time observed throughout the caste, and that the period has subsequently been shortened in imitation of lowland practice. Some Kollimalaiyalis observe thirty days pollution, some only fifteen. Among the Periya-Malaiyalis the period varies from seven to eleven days. For the purification ceremony it is the fashion for the few who can afford it to employ *Brahmnpurohits*. Purification after childbirth is said to take place on the 12th, 15th or 16th day.⁷

Malayali women enjoy equal status with their men. Though they do riot have any rights over ancestral property, they participate in all the social, ritual and religious activities along with the men. They have decision-making powers and participate actively in economic activities. Malayali women are taken to

their natal home for the first and second deliveries, during the seventh month. Most of the childbirths takes place at home with the help of an experienced elder woman, in the taniyagudise, a separate hut constructed near her house by her brother. The pollution period ends on the seventh day after birth. On that day, the mother and the child are brought home after a bath and the delivery hut is dismantled. The naming ceremony takes place on the seventh day at the child's father's house. On the same day, they celebrate the aranakayaru ceremony in which a thread is tied around the child's waist.

Children are often named after popular deities, e.g., Kongam (Kongay, if a girl), Vadaman (Vadami) Sirangam (Sirangi), Pidavan (Pidari), Kali, Arppali, etc., in fact boys are more frequently named after a God than after their grandfather.⁸ Popular nicknames are Kariyan (Black), Vellaiyan (Fair), Kuttaiyan (Short), Sadaiyan (Curly), PeriyaPayal (Big boy), ChinnaPayal (Little boy) etc.,

The Malayalis are mainly a land-owning community. Earlier, they practised shifting cultivation, but now they have become settled agriculturists. They grow samai, kambu, varagu, cholam, paddy, ragi, groundnut and pulses. They have also started to grow sugarcane and mulberry together with fruit trees and vegetables. They grew tamarind, jack, guava, pomegranate, mango, lemon, coconut and plantain trees.

The Malayalis worship both Siva and Vishnu impartially and they wear both namam and vibhuti. They still consider the deity Kariraman as their community God. They also worship village gods and goddess such as Dharmaraja, Ayyanar, Karuppan.⁹ The Kolli-Malayalis worship a god they call Arangattappan or Aranga-Sivan. Whom they regard as the tribal god of the three eponymous ancestors of the caste and who appears to be a counterpart of Kari-Raman. In KunduniNad he is served by a Brahman Gurukkal, and the ritual observed is hardly distinguishable from that of an ordinary Siva temple;

abhishekam consists of bathing the idol first with water, then with milk, and thirdly with gingerly oil; it is then dresses in a new cloth and marked with sandal and *kunkumam*; *dhupamis* then offered; lamps are lighted, a plantain leaf full of cooked food is placed before the idol, the usual *mantras* are repeated, and camphor is burnt; blood-sacrifices are altogether avoided, and the only offerings made are boiled grain, milk, sugar, fruit and other items appropriate to Siva worship. His attendant ArangaSevagan receives worship as a distinct deity, but his priest is a Malaiyali and not a Brahman.¹⁰

The cult of, Vignesvara is as ubiquitous among the Malaiyalis as elsewhere, and he is often workshpepd in the form of Neolithic implements placed upright or heaped promiscuously in a little dolmen or in a shrineless walled enclosure. Monday is the proper day for the worship of Vigneswara. There is a temple of Subrahmanya under, the familiar name of Kandaswami in PirakaraiNad; with a three days' festival in Panguni (March – April), but otherwise his cult is rare. Kamakshi is also honoured with a few shrines and there are a few Dharmaraja temples devoted to the Pandava cult.

The list of minor deities worshipped by the Malaiyalis is a long one. Their favouriteSaktis are Kali, Pidari and Mari; Ayyanar, too, is worshipped. Kali has an annual car-festival in EdappuliNad in Chittrai or Vaiyasi. Saturday is in some parts her special day of worship. Pidari has many epithets, such as Periya, Chinna, Soka, Pudu, Karum, Karakkattu, Malunguttu, etc., Her favorite week-day and her annual festivals vary in different Nads. The chief festival of Mari-amman, or Mariyayi as she is often called, occurs in the spring months, Tai, Masi, or Panguni, about the time of full noon. Her special week-day are Tuesday and Friday other important “Mother Goddesses” are Nachi-amma, PongalayiKongalayi and Ponnayi.¹¹

Many of these minor deities have no shrines, and are worshipped in the open air or in a roofless walled enclosure, especially in the case of Karuppan.

They are served by pujaris of Malaiyali caste, who are known as Tathans or Andis, and whose office is often hereditary. It is usual for one and the same *Pujari* to serve several deities, and he is sometimes distinguished from his fellow Malaiyali by his turban, by growing his hair long, and sometimes by abstaining from animal food for a period or throughout his life. The chief general festivals observed by Malaiyais are Pongal, Dipavali and the 18th Adi. The second day of Pongal (Mattu-Pongal) is celebrated by a great hunting excursion, and by bull-dances.¹²

Conclusion

The Malayali tribes of Kollimalai in Saturagiri Hills are known for their ethical code. It is a well known fact that the tribals are socially, economically, educationally and culturally backward, yet they contribute more to nation by giving importance to their culture. The government has introduced many welfare schemes and facilities for the upliftment of the tribals but still gave the top most priority to their old traditions, culture and rituals.

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