

Material Belongings In Symbolic Reflection Of Social And Gender Identities Of Narikurava

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ABSTRACT

Lane-Fox (1906) rightly says that material culture is the outward sign and symbols of particular ideas in the mind and symbols according to Geertz obtain meaning from the role which they play in the patterned behavior of social life. The material culture is not only concerned with what uses people put objects to and that objects do for people (Woodward, 2007) but they also play a symbolic role to signify the specific sphere of cultural context and users intention by allowing them to assign meaning within their culture frame. Furthermore, objects became incorporated into and represent; wider discourses related to extensively held norms and values enshrined in social institution.

Key words: Material culture, patterned behavior, symbolic role

INTRODUCTION

Culture makes all the difference between human beings and other forms of life, while material culture classifies human societies into different categories mostly based upon the tools and technological achievements made by them when we accept Deetz's (1996) version that "*material culture is not a culture but its product*". In that sense material culture refers to the whole gamut of objects whether made of stone, wood, animal and plant parts, metals etc; designed into various usable forms to meet the human needs. Objects also carry personal and emotional meanings, facilitate interpersonal interactions and assist a person to act upon him or herself. Thus the objects can be used as markers of value, as markers of identity and encapsulation of networks of cultural and political power (Gilroy and Miller 2009:6).

Woodward (2007) says that the theory of classification have salience because they allow the individual to make categorizations and demarcation which are an important element of individual psychology and sorting, to tie individual to group. These classifications constitute fundamental cultural practices that allow things in the natural and social world to be classified within a system that is essentially symbolic. When the material objects attain symbolic stature, emotions surround them and any deviation from the expected norms results in conflict as in the case of religious sphere. Symbols became important not for the plurality of meanings but giving voice to localized truths (Geertz, 1973). These objects usually outside their cultural

context lose their significance, value and gender indicating symbols and signs may rarely have the same meanings (Oy, 2006).

BACKGROUND OF NARIKURAVA

The Narikurava are thought to have migrated around 400 years ago from the north India to the south. The *vagriboli* dialect they speak indicates a Gujarati origin. Until a few decades ago, they were vagrant groups of a few families would wander on more or less fixed routes, living through hunting, fortune telling, and selling medicines or other items. They called themselves as a *vagrivala* (Srinivasa Varma, 1970 and Chatty, 2002) which means children of Tiger. The reason for calling them *vagri* or *vagrivala* is when they were in the Sivaji's battalion, they have attacked the enemies with the help of tiger nails, in Marathi *vack* means tiger, *vagri* means tigers family or cousin (Pathmabharathi, 2004) . But in Tamilnadu and Pondicherry others call them as Narikurava, The word "narikurava" in Tamil originates from "Nari" + "Kurava" meaning "jackal people" or the "fox people". This appellation has been bestowed upon them due to their adeptness in hunting and trapping jackals. However, they are also indentified by other names like Kuravan, Kurathi, Kuruvikaran etc (Bharathi 2010)

After independence, they were given small plots and houses in newly constructed settlements called colonies due to the revision of Indian settlement policies. Today, there are around 900 so called Narikuravar colonies in Tamil Nadu, ranging from 20 to 400 houses in size (Alex, 2009). The Narikurava are broadly sub-divided into two moieties - *Jambalavala* and *Nandevala*. The former sacrifice buffalo and they are further divided into *Gujarathi* and *Jhongan*. The *Nandevala* sacrifice goat, and are classified as *Mevado*, *Sheleio* and *Dhabbi*. The present study is conducted among the semi-nomadic Narikurava who are at a transient state of becoming permanent settlers in Lawspet of Puducherry at the behest of NGOs. Material culture refers to the technology and material artifacts of a human group. This was particularly true in symbolic anthropology as it is governed by two major premises namely beliefs and actions, the former being comprehensible within a cultural system and the latter is guided by interpretation of symbols that often provide the blue print for actions(Des Chene:1996).

DRESS PATTERN

The adolescent boys wear *lungi* which is very common among the Narikuravan, that too they prefer or choose the multi color and flower designed ones. The recent generation adults are wearing the short trousers as they are very convenient for them to carry on their work without any hindrance. The aged men appear with loincloth, as they feel more comfortable in this during their work. The aged Narikurava male always wear turban over the head or put on cap and they prefer green, black, orange and navy blue color for the head gear. Skirt (*Thagree*) and blouse (*Kaatlee*) are the usual dress of Narikurava females. From the age of attaining the

puberty, the girl started stitch their skirts on their own from the pieces of old sarees, they wear the skirt of 3/4th height to the leg, which means just below to the knee, and this skirt is of vertical folds which allow them to walk freely and sit on the ground without any discomfort, generally the concern grandma of young children use to stitch dress for them. The Narikurava women carry their babies along with them in the shoulder pouch that passes over shoulder encompassing breast. They breast feed their babies in the pouch irrespective of situation and while continuing their work like selling beads and balloons.

Ornaments

The aged males wear ear rings (*Thodou*) with semiprecious or artificial gems mostly of red color. The males punch their earlobes at the bottom to wear earrings and the use of nose ring. Generally they used to prepare the ornaments like copper bracelets (*Chudi*), rings (*Angoti*), bangles etc by themselves. They wear the bead necklaces (*Chiediya*) and homemade lockets, some families make lockets to look like clubbed fox nail, and animal faces etc, which have totemic significance. Irrespective of age all the males are wearing bracelets, and rings. Black and red threads are also tied in the hand and neck in the name of faith. These things are indicating the art of decorating themselves through locally available materials. The adult men are wearing the colorful bead chains over the neck for attracting the women.

However they still wear a variety of ornaments on different parts of their body irrespective of age and the association of a woman with ornaments begins from childhood. A series of holes are made on the pinna of the ears and a variety of rings are worn by them, like *thodu*, *ernathodu*, *uppanathodu* and *nathiyathodu*, made mostly of gold covering, silver and copper. The nose ring (*Airgo*) is worn by the aged women on both sides of the nose but the adolescent girls prefer single side that too on right side of nose, with as they expose their right side while interacting with others rather than left because it is stigmatized to handle with left hand and focus left side to other. The young girls wear colorful plastic, aluminum and glass bangles (*Chudi*) on their wrists while the aged women prefer colorless and old bangles. In the recent years they are using the bracelets with the pictures of hindu gods and coins with god's face tied in threads. Finger rings (*Angoti*) of aluminum and copper are found on all fingers except the thumb on both hands. The married women wear a toe ring called as *Virutha*, which is the only symbolic object to be removed after divorce or husband's death.

Tattoo symbols

Narikurava are known for tattooing themselves and outsiders also. During the Moghal period they have been treated as slaves, so that they were branded on the foreheads (Srinivasa Varama, 1978). Later on they adopted the practice of making tattoo bindi on their forehead, in continuation of that in course of time they started tattooing their body with pictures of animals, birds, flowers, symbols, flags, politicians, heroes etc. which have gender reference. The males have tattoo marks on chest, forearm, forehead and biceps. Likewise the females also tattoo on forearm, fingers and forehead their passionate flowers like rose and jasmine, birds like parrot,

dove, gods, shells, and lover or husband name etc. Tattooing is increasingly done by modern machine where sterilization of needles is followed and the traditional method however is still seen.

Economy, tools and gender

In Tamilnadu, they undertake hunting while in movement and beads selling on return to the camp site. In Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh they are engaged in selling beads and plastic items, in Maharashtra they resort to vegetable vending while stationary and in Mumbai they buy and resell the old clothes. Selling feathers of peacocks, honey collection, capture of birds, rodents, cats and reptiles and piggery and garbage collection invariably attached to their subsistence activities in general. Wherever possible Tattooing is another important activity undertaken by the males and females apart from selling the beads, chains, balloons, small bags, catapults, and plastic items, that brings them incomes.

The Narikurava use two kinds of snares, the first called *magiri*, used to catch cats and the second called *kandhaaru* used for catching partridges. Cat snare or *magiri* is also called the *modaavalai* (Siromoney, 1977). It is made up of four nets on rectangular bamboo frames and a conical net made of circular frames. The partridge snare is foldable into a narrow rectangular packet which is about 36 inches long and 8 inches high. Apart from that they use to catch the parrot and small birds directly from the nest. With the help of catapult they used to hunt the squirrels and reptiles with the help of rat catcher (*Bindr*). They rear country pigs not only to consume their meat but also to sell pigs for outsiders. A big pig cost around eight thousand to ten thousand rupees. They feed the pigs with vegetable wastes and food refuse collected from public garbage points. Narikurava can even trap a jackal, which is considered to be more alert animal. With the implementation of the Wild Life Protection Act, the Narikurava had to change their livelihood and they have consequently switched over to making beads and selling knick-knacks (Swagat, 1989).

Material culture in diverse social activities

The primary role of male is to safeguard and maintain the family. The Narikurava were running the nomadic life; they used to stay at the road side and Grassland, so their residency seems to be full of hunting equipments like nets and cages with trained monkeys and small birds. The adult male wearing the hip belt which is known as *Kaachcho*, beads around neck, aluminum ear rings, copper finger rings, and fox teeth in neck are the general decorative ornaments worn by them. Some years ago these Narikurava males are always with gun and leather bag which contains the gun powder and a tin container at shoulder carrying food and water is a unique identification of these men. But now-a-days they are identified by the hand bags made by them. Birds, dogs and cats giggle sound by seeing them on the road. The females contribute much for economic activities in daily life apart from their primary role of reproduction. Generally the women are not dominated by males, but in the division of labor in

the family, females are engaged in cooking, fire wood collection and fetching water. Husbands willingly accept the fore said tasks of women during the period of pregnancy.

Prestige material

Narikurava worship their goddesses (*Kaali & Durga*) in their own places like Marakanam (Near Pondicherry) which is a sacred place for the Narikurava of Villupuram, Thindivanam and Pondicherry. The idols of the goddesses are kept in a bundle of clothes called '*samy moottai*' meaning "God's bundle". Every family have a *samy moottai* of their own which is reverently and carefully looked after by the head of the family. Four silver idols of their goddesses are kept in triangular shaped cushion bags. Each idol is represented with a long skirt-like lower garment, a tall head-dress, bangles, arm-band and necklace. There is also a blood soaked *paavaadai* (skirt) called '*samy-paavadai*'. When a son marries, a part of the father's *samy moottai* is given to him. The oldest piece of cloth is transferred to his *samy moottai* for some time and then returned to the father's *samy moottai*.

Materials used for sacred purposes

It is believed that *Kaali* prefers toddy or arrack and two bottles of that are to be offered while, *Durga* does not like this and hence two bottles of Ginger beer are offered along with a lot of flowers. There are the usual dances, drinking and singing during *pooja*. The priests don the blood-stained skirt with tiny globular bells, behead the sacrificial animal and drink the blood after offering it to the goddess.

House type

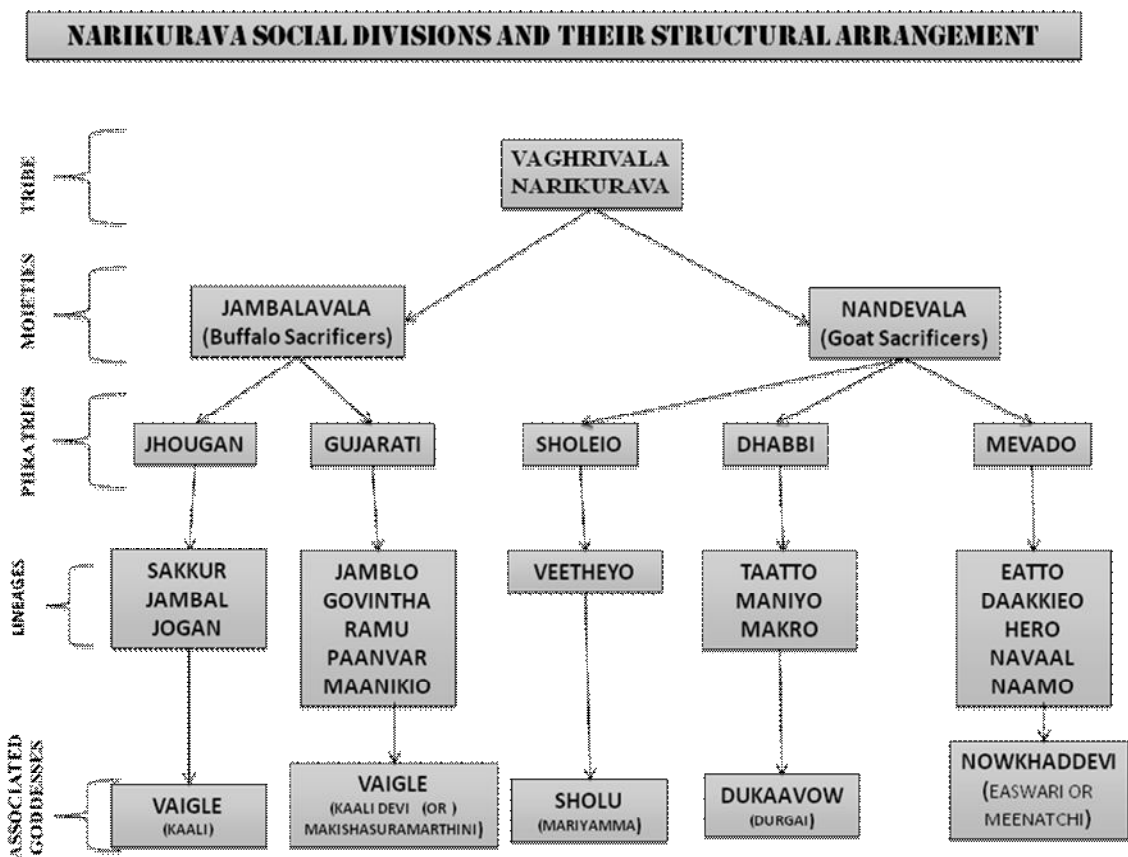
Narikurava live under the trees and on the platforms or under the flyover bridges. During the rainy season they make the tent house in the triangle shape which they carried along with them. Weightless bamboos, tom clothes and plastic sheets or coconut leaf mats are the essential material for the construction of the temporary and traditional huts. Government and other non-governmental organization construct the permanent concrete houses for them but they prefer to live under the trees and use those houses as stockroom.

Material culture from structural and semiotic perspective

Material culture is restricted to tangible phenomena of a human society that are the products of ideas and behavior that are learned, not instinctive. The Narikurava with a long history of nomadic life have a tacit structural organization. The tribe is vertically divided into two moieties Jambalavala, the buffalo sacrificers and Nandevala, the goat sacrificers. The latter enjoy superior ritual position by reason of the sacrificial animal, they chose though the buffalo sacrificers have to spend more money than the goat sacrificers to procure the animal. Jambalavala is having two phratries, Jhougan and Gujarati while Nandevala divided into three phratries, sholieo, Dhabbi and mevado. The Narikurava women carry always with her a bag

Danzhe, which contain tool kit for making bead chains and her cosmetics. Rather they have ponytail and snake tail finished with a ribbon and hair clips, which characterize the personal adorning reflecting the group identity within the plural society around.

Though there is gender difference visible in the articles of body adornment it is very clear that the Narikurava are very conscious by making themselves attractive irrespective of gender. Both men and women always chew betel and nut so to keep their teeth and lips red. The deities they worship are symbolically figured in the female form with the dress pattern and ornaments of female. The Group under Study like many tribes in India has distorted identity as how the people call them Narikuravan or Kuruvikaaran with derogatory sense but they themselves profess a very dignified identity as sons of tiger when they claim as vagrivala. However their very dress patterns personal belongings and tattoo marks clearly differentiates them from the surrounding people. They have a strong social solidarity and there are no incidences of marriages or extra marital relations outside the tribe, as there is no restriction on widow remarriage and divorce and remarriage. Though certain personal ornaments and decorations are similar for both men and women they have within them certain intrinsic variation which in-turn reflect gender identity, economic pursuits, esthetics sensual pleasure and passions.



SEMIOTIC EXPRESSIONS OF TATTO MARKINGS

Sl.No	Tattoo sign	Gender	Signifier	Signified
1.	<i>Bindi</i> tattoo	Male / Female	Black tattoo mark or Scar	Referring to history
2.	Ferocious animal tattoo	Male	Tiger , Lion, Fox	Strength, Masculinity & wit
3.	Birds Sign	Male	Eagle	predatory and shrewd– masculine skill & prowess
4.	Political party symbols	Male	AIADMK – Two leaves, DMK – Raising Sun, Flags	Inclination to political participation
5.	Deity mark	Male Female	<i>Shiva</i> & traditional goddess <i>Lakshmi</i> & <i>kaali</i>	<i>Samy Mootai</i> (sacred Bundle) – Male domain Female domain
6.	Lovers name & Love Symbol	Male / Female	Hand for woman / Chest + biceps for man	Confession of love and commitment to marriage.
7.	Film stars	Male / Female	M.G.R, Rajani, Kamal, Vijay etc	Passion for films – Appreciation & encouragement
8.	Bird	Female	Parrot, dove etc.	Sensual Pleasure - cuteness
9.	Flower	Female	Rose, Jasmine	Aesthetic – Fragrance of amity

CONCLUSION

The symbol theory is of the view that the things around us have a deeper meaning because they are bearers of collective value (Janssen, 1997). By their very appearance they are easily identified from others owing to their personal belongings on the body. These material belongings have the ability to signify things or establish meanings on behalf of people and signify sub-cultural affinity, occupation, participation in a leisure activity or social status (Gilroy and Miller 2009). From the above analysis it could be inferred that the personal belongings of male and female though appear similar but they are distinct to the gender

statuses. However, we cannot find gender discrimination in their day to day life except in the case of religious rituals. Men are not averse to take up the roles of women in times of need. In spite of a long history of semi nomadic life they have rich material culture though simple but give them gender and social identities.

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