

History of Koravars in Tamilnadu

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Abstract

Tamil Nadu is part of South India, with an ancient civilisation. It located in the extreme south-eastern part of the Indian peninsula. Tamil Nadu regarded as the birthplace of Dravidian languages and culture. The Tamil language is supposed to be the mother of all Dravidian languages. Kuravar is a community of non-pastoral hunter-gatherers who lead a life of nomadic gypsies. Kuravar is the hunter, gatherer tribe that is native to the mountainscape of Tamil region. They were driven out of forests and underwent atrocities such as Criminal Tribes Act. Even now they live as nomads, selling handmade jewellery. Kuravars belong to the nomadic tribe commonly known as Gypsies. It is hard to disregard them as they seem decorated with colourful beads, carrying trays filled with small essentials like hairpins, clips, bands and bangles that firmly catch the eye of any woman even during the rush hours in a local train in Tamil Nadu. The Kuravars belong to one of the indigenous tribes who hail from the Kuranji Hills. So, this research is intended to explore the historical background of Koravars in Tamilnadu and customs, culture and rituals of Kuravar society to

reveal the social and economic condition of the Narikoravar Community. This paper attempts to offer suggestions in this regard. The Koravars make mats, snow, sieves, cradles, and baskets of all kinds and sizes. The woman of the Koracha caste does tattooing. Tattooing was a standard feature of the people of Tamil Nadu as it was with any other ancient tribes. They eat squirrels, tortoise, rabbits, porcupines, bat, mangoose, udumbu, wild pig, sheep, goat, pig, and fish of all kinds. Vegetables like brinjal, lady's finger, cucumber, tomato, ehavalikai, harave, onion, green chillies as well as seasonally available roots and tubers used. What the researcher concludes from the study is that the kuravar people's cultures and tradition changed, but their way of dress, talk, occupation shows they are a nomad. Certain social evils and superstitions in the name of religion are also continuing in one form or the other suffocating the progress of tribes. The government of India is determined to help the kuravar people to grow according to their genius and tradition. The following areas recommended for further research: Studies

on tribes and kuravar in the nearby areas and social welfare programmes to kuravar development, etc., could be taken up.

Key words: communities, kuravars, gipsies, dravidian, nomadic, tattooing

Introduction

Caste is the development of thousands of years of association of many different racial and other groups in a single cultural system¹. Race and colour seem to be the bases of Indian caste in the calculation to the division of labour and occupation. The various communities living in the Sangam age were called Vettuvar, Irular, Villigal and Pallar².

People of Korava / Kurava community called by different names³ in different parts of South India. They are called Kuravan or Kuruvar in Tamil Nadu. Korama or Koracha in Karnataka, Kaikadi in Maharashtra, Oddanar in Kerala and KattuNaicker in Puducherry. In essence, these communities form a great big community from South India. Before the British Colonial Rule, all these communities were part of that great big community since there were no real boundaries in India at that time.

There are about 28 sub-sects⁴ among them. They contain Narikkuravas⁵ who move from place to place, marketing honey, herbal drugs and needles and others, whose occupations range from

agricultural labour to conservancy work, from vending vegetables and curryleave to government service, from fortunetelling to teaching. Whenever a crime stated, the Kuravas in the area became the main suspects of the police. The police take photographs and fingerprints of every Kurava suspect they confront. Almost every police station has a register of local Kuravas, with their photographs and fingerprints. So, this research is intended to explore the historical background of Koravars in Tamilnadu and customs, culture and rituals of Kuravar society to reveal the social and economic condition of the Narikoravar Community. This paper attempts to offer suggestions in this regard.

Historical Background of Koravars in Tamilnadu

The term kuravar is often used instead loosely by people in Tamil Nadu, South India, today. It often used as a nontechnical term (something like the English word “gipsy” or “tribal”) which covers some demi-tribal and tribal communities—groups which often ethnically linguistically have little or nothing in common. To consider the actual people referred to in detail more specifics are necessary to be clear about their on-the-ground ethnic identities and activities, beyond the confusing generalities.

The kuravars, who are often called "gipsies" by people in Chennai and other parts of Tamil Nadu, and who are also called narikuravars and kuruvikkarans and vagrivalas, speak Vagriboli, a language similar to Gujarati. Some of the kuravars are classified by the government of India as members of a "depressed class," living in poverty on the city streets, scavenging, and living from hand to mouth without even the necessary amenities.

The Narikuravar (Nomads) is an indigenous community from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu⁶. The primary occupation of the people who originally belong to the native tribes is hunting. However, as they were prohibited entry into the forests to follow this livelihood, they were forced to take up other replacements such as selling decorated beads to survive. Hence, they travel from place to place to find a marketplace for their beads. Children attend the adults wherever they go, which means they never get to attend school. During British rule in India, they were placed under Criminal Tribes Act 1871, hence slurred for a long time, after Independence. However, they were denotified in 1952, though the dishonour continues⁷. The Narikuravar not itemised as a Scheduled Tribe.

The word "Narikurava" is a mixture of the Tamil words "Nari" and "Kurava" meaning "jackal people"⁸ or the "fox people"⁹. This appellation has conferred upon them due to their adeptness in hunting and trapping jackals¹⁰. As per a theory propounded by Werth in 1966 and Fraser, authorities on the gipsies of Europe believe that the Domar are the ancestors of the Romani people and therefore, the Narikuravas are related to the Romani, while Edgar Thurston feels that they connected to the Khonds of Orissa¹¹.

The Narikuravas speak an Indo-Aryan language called Vagriboli¹². SIL Ethnologue categorises it as a dialect of the Domari language. Due to this reason, they also are known as Vagris or Vagrivalas¹³. Almost all Narikuravas are well-versed in Tamil. However, most of the Narikurava liturgical hymns and folk songs are in Vagriboli. Although all Kuravars come under one roof based on their collective tribe name kuravars they were approximately sub-divided into two sub-divisions: the buffalo-sacrificers and Nandevala¹⁴ or goat-sacrificers.

Living condition of kuravar society in Tamilnadu districts

Kuravan is mainly engaged in making bamboo baskets, using palm leaves, and coir products, rearing pigs and conducting other menial work. In search of

livelihood, they also migrate from one place to another. As an outcome, there was a shift in their occupation pattern. They hunt birds and raise country pigs (black pigs) both for their consumption and sale. Some of them work as fortunetellers since they use the trained Kili (parrot) to predict fortunes; hence they are also known as KiliJosiyars.

In earlier days, the primary source of income for these people was hunting. They lost their livelihood after the Forest Department introduced strict regulations and levied a hefty fine for hunting. Currently, the economic status of Narikuravar in palamalaiNagar is such that they cannot satisfy even their basic needs through the family occupation of selling beaded ornaments.

They purchase the raw materials such as beads from Madurai, prepare ornaments and go to public places like temples, bus stand, festival areas etc. to find a market. Unaware of their poor economic condition, they spend a lot of rituals and ceremonies. As their earnings cannot full-fill their needs, they are borrowing money from money lenders, and repayment becomes a significant burden for these people. They remain in persistent debt-bondage for the more extended period and are unable to pay off their loans for generations. It adversely

affects their social, cultural, economic and educational status. In palamalaiNagar, many intelligent children are not able to continue their education due to poverty.

As nomadic tribe Narikoravar community shift from place to place in groups, advantages to the occupation. They love to eat non-vegetarian food especially birds and animals of the forest. They further earn their livelihood by hawking needles and glass beads. They sell fox horns and teeth known as “Narikombu” and “Naripallu” which would fetch good luck to the buyers. The men go for hunting and with licensed guns.

They catch pries and cook served on a large wooden plate from which all the members of the joint family eat. The dress habits, food habits, a way of life of Narikoravar community in Tamil Nadu are different from the mainstream communities, distinguishing and even discriminating. Narikuravar in Tamil Nadu has their ritual of worshipping God. Usually, they have ceremonies in August each year and mainly worship Goddess Kali, Marimmal, Meenakshi Amman and God Madurai Veeran. They appease these Gods through different types of sacrifices such as Buffaloes, Goats and Pigs. Each Narikuravar clan has a bundle of cloths called sami-mootai, meaning God’s

bundle. It filled with the blood of animals they sacrificed, and cloth dipped in their (sacrificial animal) blood.

The kuravar live in the villages surrounded by hills, forest, sea, islands, rivers etc. In these areas, they lack communication facilities. Due to lack of communication facilities, they are not able to attain the benefits of the programmes related to general health, family welfare, communicable diseases, sex-linked diseases etc. Kuravar live in such an area where one has to face some difficulties in going and coming. Due to these difficulties, government doctors, nurses, health servants etc., posted at health centres, health sub-centres or referral hospitals do not want to live in kuravar area.

Kuravar have their medicine men for the treatment of diseases. The medicine men know of medicinal plants. They also prepare medicine from the medicinal plants and bones, teeth, tails, skin, horns, oil of wild animals and birds. They also perform magic to curb the illness. Their treatment causes death to some kuravar each year in the absence of proper knowledge of diagnosis and medicine. The kuravar do not have pumps for drinking water. They have to depend on groundwater or well. Still, the majority of kuravar have to use the water of ponds for

cooking, eating and drinking purposes. They rinse clothes on the banks of the same pond.

Animals also washed in the pond. Such activities make the water contaminated. It affects the health of kuravar adversely by causing diseases like jaundice, diarrhoea, pox, typhoid, gastric asthma, skin diseases etc. Narikuravars primarily hail from a traditional hunting culture, and they hunt fox, tiny wild animals and birds for their survival¹⁵. This community has unique customs and practices like dress habits, food habits and way of life of Narikuravar community in Tamil Nadu are different from other communities.

Customs, Culture and Rituals of Kuravar

The kuravar men and women have their lifestyle. The kuravar men follow the Kerala style of dressing. Usually, they wear dhoti and shirt. However, the kuravar women follow their traditional lifestyle. The Paniya women wear a dhoti tying its one end just above their breast. The Kuriechia woman covers their breasts with a piece of cloth, the upper corner of which fastened to the shoulders¹⁶.

The ornaments that the kuravar wear are different. The kuravar men wear bangles and ring made up of brass or iron whereas the women wear ornaments made

up of coins, seeds and leaves of some plants. They make bangles and rings with iron and brass. Necklaces made of coins and seeds. Their ear robes are of white metal rings or leaves or strings of beads. Thus the kuravar ornaments are made up of their style¹⁷.

Rice is the primary food of the rich and the poor alike in Tamilnadu. Some poorer sections use tapioca as a staple food. During the rainy season, the common of people use 'Vattan Kappa' or desiccated tapioca. Occasionally they eat boiled tapioca with fish curry. The people of Tamilnadu like jackfruit and fish curry during jackfruit season. Among the Hindus, some follow vegetarianism¹⁷ others follow both¹⁸. Beverages like tea and coffee widely used by all the rural and urban people alike. They also eat herbs, fruits, crabs, prawns and snails.

They eat squirrels, tortoise, rabbits, porcupines, bat, mangoose, udumbu, wild pig, sheep, goat, pig, and fish of all kinds. They do not eat beef, (or) kill snakes and monkeys. They indulge somewhat excessively in, the drink. Korachas get themselves Tattooed. Vegetables like brinjal, lady's finger, cucumber, tomato, ehavalikai, harave, onion, green chillies as well as seasonally available roots and tubers used. Fruits like pear, banana etc.

are occasionally consumed, milk and milk products used.

Men consume alcoholic drinks like arrack, toddy etc. available in the market more or less regularly. Some old women also consume alcoholic drinks occasionally. Smoking beedi, cigarette and chewing tobacco are the everyday habits. Some men smoke ganja (Cannabissatira). They are snuff also expect an increase in the use of pulses, no other changes in food habits reported. The huts of the kuravar are made up of bamboo and thatched with leaves, straw and grass. The huts face east and are rectangular.

The huts of the Malapandaram are irregular in shape. The Malayarayangans use bricks to construct their houses. However, they construct the walls with bamboo. They do not have windows. They make holes in the sides¹⁹. Some kuravar used erumadams on the trees as their houses²⁰. The groups named alone are occupational. Uru-korachas used to trade in the earth, salt. Now, they have settled down to agriculture.

The Koravars make mats, snow, sieves, cradles, and baskets of all kinds and sizes. The woman of the Koracha caste does tattooing. Tattooing was a standard feature of the people of Tamil Nadu as it was with any other ancient tribes. In Southern India, permanent

tattoos are called pachakutharathu. They were very common, especially Tamil Nadu, before 1980. Koravawomen who practised it as a profession along with fortune telling were much sought after by women, to whom tattooing was a way to adorn their bodies. The women of the Vellalas, Paraiyas, Pallisand PachamalaiMalayalistattooed on one or both of the cheeks and their chins²¹. Almost every caste tolerated tattooing except the Tottiyans, Maravasand Chettis. Kallarwomen, who seldom used upper garments, tattooed their bodies and upper arms in the form of a bodice²².

Suggestion to improve Kuravar society in Tamilnadu

Despite various welfare schemes given by the government, Narikuravar does not have the awareness to avail this. So the need of the hour is to create easy access to the schemes given by the government. Also, they should be cautious about their health and environment. They must realise the importance of education and culture. They should prevent political exploitation and awareness must be created about their democratic rights. One of the main reasons for the backwardness of these people is their private status.

The children of nomadic people should give a chance to mingle with other community where they would come in

interaction with other people, and get a chance for turning a new leaflet. It would help in their eventual assimilation in the society. There is no organised financial assistance or subsidised Loans for the business of Narikuravar community. If a family invests five lakhs rupees on raw material, it can make hundred percent profits. However, banks do not come forward to give them a loan and support their business.

The Government and Banks must address these issues should be given directly to help in the economic upliftment of the Narikuravar community. If the Government gives properpatta and house bond to the Narikuravar, they can produce them as a guarantee to get a loan from the banks.

NGO and other social organisation can conduct awareness programme about the development of culture, significance of education, a consequence of child marriage. Further, researchers can throw limelight on them by doing related projects. The kuravar are also the citizens of India, and hence the promotion of their welfare is of equal importance. Both the governments, individuals and service organisations must jointly formulate specific plans and programmes to improve the economic conditions of the kuravar and bring them to a state of secured living.

To realise this, the housing, educational, medical, and agricultural, trade, communication and banking facilities can be provided by the said agencies generously. The tasks that can impose on our government and non-government organisations are as follows: The first is to preserve, strengthen and develop all that is best in the kuravar society, culture, art and language.

The tribes like to strengthen themselves from the contaminating influences of modern civilisation and like to protect themselves not only economically, but culturally, from outside exploitation. The second is to protect the kuravar economic rights. The government of India should help the kuravar people to develop according to their own culture and tradition.

Conclusion

What the researcher concludes from the study is that the kuravar people's cultures and tradition changed, but their way of dress, talk, occupation shows they are a nomad. Certain social evils and superstitions in the name of religion are also continuing in one form or the other suffocating the progress of tribes.

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