

TRIBES OF KERALA: A CASE STUDY OF KURICHYAS OF KANNAVAM

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Abstract

The term tribe emerged as a category during this period. Tribal society in India have a very ancient and alive history and heritage of their own. They have their own cultural religious, social, economic and political structures handed on generations for centuries. Thus tribe is a group of families especially of ancient or indigenous people, claiming descent from common ancestor, sharing a common culture, religion dialect etc., and usually occupying a specific geographical area and having a recognised leader. The tribes are integral part of Indian population whose life, economy, society religion etc. are substantially affected by their contact with the 'Hindu neighbours'. The region of Kerala is occupied different varieties of tribal groups among the Kurichyas occupied a prominent position they were the most civilized tribal communities in Kerala, modernisation and other development in the realm created a congenial atmosphere to this. In the present study different aspect related to the Kurichya communities are described.

Keywords: Tribe, Kurichya, Way of life, Acculturation

Introduction

The Modern usage of the word 'Tribe' is started by the early European explores who found primitive communities in the areas they newly explored. These communities were different from the European in their manner, customs, and practices (Thurston, 1987:11). The primitive communities of the modern age variously or successively were described in the census reports and ethnographic profile as 'hill tribes', 'primitive tribes', 'forest tribes' back ward communities etc. (Panoor, 1963: 23). It was under the Government of India Act of 1935 and the Constitution of India that nomenclature of the scheduled tribe fully emerged. The constitution of India article 366(25) defines scheduled tribe as "such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under article 342 to the scheduled tribes (STs) for the purpose of this constitution". In the article 342, procedure to be followed for specification of scheduled tribe is prescribed. However it does not contain the criterion for the specification of any community as scheduled tribe (Uma Charan, 1998:71).

There is no term of 'tribe' in ancient literature. The word forest dwellers are used to denote them. The forest dwellers are variously described as volatile, hospitable in Sanskrit literature. The accepted synonym for the scheduled tribe in Hindi is '*Anuschi Janjati*'. The other words like *Adhivasi*, *Vanavasi*, *Adhimjathi* are also used as synonyms for the tribe and tribal (Kumar, 2007: 5). In Malayalam the word tribe denoted as *Adivasi*. India is a heaven of tribal population and is the second largest in the world in terms of population. Tribal people are considered to be original inhabitants of this subcontinent having a simple way of life (Cheriyann, 1999: 22-23).

Tribes in India

The population of tribes in India has been classified also on the basis of their economic and cultural manner. This distinctive feature has been brought in to eight type. that is, forest hunting type, hill cultivation type, settled agricultural type, simple artisan type, cattle -header type, agricultural and industrial type, folk artist type, and white scholar jobs etc. (Thurston, 1987, 81-82). They followed social customs like matrilineal, polyandry, polygamy etc. The process of cultural dynamics such as sanskritization is the results of social integration between tribal and non-tribal communities. Their technological knowledge is quite unrefined and economic system is simple and backward and based on exchange of goods, these people can be identified on the basis of geographical separation. (Saksena, 2006: 15-16). Tribal have an important place in the society, they were the first humans to inhabit the country. The tribal people in India can be grouped into three major categories according to their physical features. 1. The Proto Austroloid, 2. The Mangoloids, 3. The Negrito. All these different groups except Mangaloid found in Kerala especially in North Malabar (Menon, 1972:52).

Tribes of Kerala

Kerala has a composite variety of tribes, most of them inhabiting the hilly region of Western Ghats. KIRTADS in its studies has identified thirty six tribal communities in Kerala (Vayaleri, 1996:15-16). The areas of concentration of tribal communities in Western Ghats are scattered from Kasargod to Thiruvananthapuram. The Malabar area consisting of Palaghat, Waynad, Kozhikode, and Kannur consist of more than eighteen varieties of tribal communities. Each tribe is distinguished from others by their pattern of life, occupation, language, and ancestor worshipping ceremonies (Panoor, 1963:3). The tribes of

Kerala as a subject of study has been neglected by historians. Most of the existing works on this area done by Anthropologists. It is only recent times that historians have started disclosing the mystery around the tribal communities.

Methodology

The study is both descriptive and analytical, and two sets of data's are mainly used for the preparation of this research paper they are: Interview with the members of the *Kurichya* community of Kannavam region in Kannur district of Kerala. Consulting secondary sources like books, articles written by social scientist, archaeologist, Anthropologist, Historians etc.

Kurichyas: A Historical Overview

Kurichyas are a group of tribal people living in the high land areas of Wyanad. Dr. Herman Gundert says that, the word *Kurichyas* is derived from the word *Kurici* means high land, village etc., (Madhava, 2002:67-68). There is different opinion about the origin of *Kurichyas*. One view says that they are the people who assembled at a specific place as per the written instruction of Pazhassi Raja, the ruler of Kottayam dynasty, a regional kingdom in Kerala. Another view is that the people who wore a mark */Kuri* in their forehead is known as *Kurichya* (Panoor, 1963:1).

The *kurichyas* are a scheduled tribe found in Wyanad and neighbouring areas are considered to have been the first agricultural tribe to have settled down in these high lands probably between the first and third centuries AD. They represented the unsanskritised undifferentiated stock of proto-historic Dravidian speakers of Kerala (Thurston, 1987:110). The *Kurichyas* claims to be the higher group among these tribes, they assumed and were accorded social superiority by the other tribes inhabiting the area. Occupationally the *Kurichyas* acted themselves as soldiers, administrators of forest villages, they are also functioned as carpenters and toddy tappers (Vayaleri, 1996:63-64). According to a myth associated with *kurichyas* 'they were the soldiers of lord Rama, when lord Rama went to vanavasa Bharatasheltered them by providing area to reside them'. The *Kuriachyas* are described in the Malabar Gazetteers as following; They are jungle tribe of slash and burn cultivation, found in Wyanad and the slopes of the Ghats, and north of Calicut. They considered themselves polluted by the approaches of other hill tribes, and by the touch of other outside communities. They perform *talikkettu** ceremony before puberty. They followed *Marumakkathayamor* matrilineal family system. (Velappan, 1999:15-17).

Kurichayas are one of the Scheduled tribe of kerala and stand fourth position regarding in their number. *Kurichyas* are divided in to four.

1. Jati *Kurichyan* /Wyanad*Kurichyan*
2. *Kannavam Kurichyan*
3. *Anchilla Kurichyan* or *Thirunnelli Kurichyan*
4. *PathiriKurichyan* /*Christian Kurichyan* (Personal communication with Punneri Kunkana, *Kurichya* tribe in Kannavam village, at 21/05/2017)

Resistance movement among the *Kurichyas*

Kurichyas played a seminal role in the anti-colonial struggle in North Malabar. *Kurichyas* fought for their freedom and identity and were noted for their loyalty to those who reposed their trust in them. *Kurichyas* supported Pazhassi Raja in the anti -colonial resistance movement against the British(vayaleri,1996:67-68).The ruthless exploitation of the English East India Company in the Malabar region resulted a popular discontent in 1792. Formely Pazhassi Raja was a strong supporter of the company against Tipu Sultan, but later he stood against the British. The Malabar commission appointed by the company made a temporary revenue agreement with Kottayam Raja for a payment of Rs-20000.he protested against it along with the grievances of the peasantry culminated in an open revolt against the company. The anti-colonial sentiments of the various strata of caste hierarchical society helped Pazahassi Raja to mobilize to them to mobilize them against British. Different groups of people including the *Kurichyas* were affected the new revenue policy of the British in Malabar. Hence it was easy for Pazhassi Raja to mobilize his army from various groups of people. Thalakkal Chandu was the head of the *Kurichya* tribe that supported Pazhassi raja He was highly honoured by the Raja, and made himself as the head of the Gorillaforces. The *Kurichya* tribes were faithful allies of the Pazhassi Raja till the end. The Rebellion of the Pazhassi Raja was suppressed by the British brutally by using their forces (Panoor, 1963:87-88).

Cultural Milieu of Kannavam*kurichyas*

Kannavamor Kannothe is a village in Kannur district Kerala which lies eight miles east of kuthuparamba, and fourteen miles east of Thalasserry on the Periya Ghats road leading to Mananthawaddy (MadhavaMenon, 2002:196).The kannavam forest inhabited by the *Kurichyas*. Harijan welfare development society in Kerala established a *kurichya* colony in kannavam forest, about seventy *Kurichya* family are resided in this colony(Personal communication with Kumaran Vayaleri, Academician and

visiting professor at Kuthuparamaba on 23/05/2017).The social organisation of the *Kurichyas* are based on clan. They are monogamous in nature and polyandry is forbidden among them but polygamy is found. They practice pollution against all castes except Namboothiri Brahmins. The *kurichyas* of kannavam are divided in to a number of exogamous *kulam* clans. According to them there are hundreds *kulam*, but only seventy five *kulam* were traced out. They are matrilineal and their children's naturally belongs to the *kulam* of their mother. Each *kulam* has its own deity represented (Menon, 1972:154-156).

Pattern of Houses

Their house is multi roomed, the wall is thickly covered with mud and cow dung and roof is thatched with palm /coconut leaves, but now a day's thatched roof is replaced by tiles. There is no window to their houses, but there are large doors on the four sides of their houses. There is an *agnikuntam* /fire altar in front of the each houses. There is also an *aithapura* in the back side of each house (personal communication with (Chennappoyil Manikyam, aKurichya women at Kannavam on 21/05/2017). The traditional house pattern of the *Kurichyas* is tremendously changed due to their contact with the outside world. The educated younger generation of the *kurichya* tribes preferred modern ways of life. Modern tribal houses are mostly situated near the non -tribal belts or borders.

Tribal Council of Kurichyas

The *Kurichyas* of kannavam had tribal council and this was headed by *Mooppan* /*Karnon*. Each *kulam* has its own tribal council. The office of the *Mooppan* is hereditary, this tribal council had much power over the people and their territory and also this council has the ultimate authority in the matter concerned to in social, political, religious and political matters, disputes and petty cases are settled by the council (Personal communication with Kumaran Vayaleri). Adultery violation of tribal norms and marriage within the clan or outside the community are viewed as serious offences. Excommunication is the usual punishment. *Mooppan* would advise the individual in such an occasion and try to correct him. Marriage is considered as a sacred ceremony to them, if the bride had any illicit affairs with anybody, she would confess in front of the whole *kulam*. If she not ready to confess they believe that the god will punish the entire *kulam*. So that in such an occasion the girl would be expelled from the *kulam* (personal communication with Narikkodan Chandu, a

Kurichya man, now working as a government employ at Kannavam on 27/05/2017).

Social structure

Family

Kurichya community followed a kinship relation, the eldest male member of the family known as *karnon*, he has the authority in all matters, and look after the family and affairs of the family. *Theyyadi* and *Panikkar* are titles enjoyed by the person who are just below the rank of *karnon*. These two have the power to control all religious matters at the absent of *karnon*. The duties and responsibilities are divided according to the convenience of the concerned person. *Pooppathi* or the *Karnon's* wife supervises the activities of female members in the family. The elders in the family are obeyed and respected. Now the situation was changed the youngstersenjoyed full freedom in their own family (personal communication with Poovathi Uppadi, Kurichya women at kannavam village on 22/05/2017).

Property Rights

Kurichyas followed a matrilineal system of inheritance and their succession is through nephews (Vayaleri, 1996:35). The property is inherited through female line. The abolition of matrilineal system changed the traditional system of inheriting properties. Now a days it was changed from *Marumakkathayam* to *Makkathayam*.Property is transformed only through the family members (Panoor, 1963:74-76).

Pollution Concept

Kurichyas had a high pollution concept. They purify themselves by a deep bath in a stream. When they go out they fol lowed strict food taboos. Traditionally they do not eat food from an outcaste, the only exception being the Nair's. Those who violated the pollution rules are strictly debarred from the community (Thurston, 1987:83).

Puberty Ceremony

The ceremony is conducted when the girls attains puberty, she has to live in a seclusion hut known as *Daivapura** for seven days. A woman is assisting her in *Daivapura* for seven days. On the seventh day she goes to the stream for bath (communication, PoovathyManikkyam).

Marriage Ceremony

Among the marriage is called *Pennukonduvaral*, meaning bringing the woman. Before marriage the girl has to promise that she had not courtship with any man.

Usually the marriage is fixed after attaining puberty. After that the elders look auspicious time for marriage. The bride price is given by groom's *kamon* to brides *Karnon*. The amount of the bride price decreased if the marriage of the girls second (personal communication, PunneriChandhu Swami, belongs to Kurichya tribe at kuthuparaba on 29/06/2017). The marriage outside the tribe and within the clan is strictly forbidden. The age difference between the bride and groom is not concerned, and sometimes the bride may be older than the groom. Divorce is permitted for adequate reason with the permission of the tribal council. The remarriage is permitted and common. In the case of women, the new husband is responsible for looking after the children of her previous marriage. Now a day's intermarriage related to *Kurichyas* are reported. Now a days marriage become simple and considerable changes have been occurred in the marriage ceremony (Communication, Kumaran Vayaleri). Love marriages with other communities are not rare. One of the major reason for this changes is the process of acculturation and the activities of social workers among them. In brief they have become part of the modern way of living. Some elders members in the community are not willing to accept these changes and they prefer to live in archaic lifestyle. But the new generation preferred modern way of life (personal communication with Narikkoden Janaki, *Kurichya* women, working in a private sector at Kuthuparamba on 29/06/2017).

Economic Structure

Occupation

The main occupation of the *kurichyas* of *kannavam* is agriculture. The economies of the *Kurichyas* are mainly agro based one. Traditionally they are shifting cultivators and hunters. Paddy is grown in wet land. Cash crops like coffee, bean, ginger, pepper, arcanut, turmeric, tapioca, plantain, and coconut are grown in dry land (Cheriyam, 1999:119), but now some of the youngsters are taken white collar jobs and plantation jobs. In addition to this they were also engaged in fishing, hunting, and collecting forest goods etc., but the educated new generation are not ready to accept their traditional way of living (communication, Chennapoyil Manikkyam).

Education

The government had started Harijan Welfare school in 1955 at Velumbram near kannavam colony. But it has not been continued for long, it was destroyed by elephants. They say that this destruction has been the expression of gods anger. In 1962 this school has shifted to Kannavam

colony. But the participation of the student is very less because of pollution concept. The government gave various incentives to the children. (communication Kumaran Vayaleri)

Conclusion

Among the tribal groups in Kerala *Kurichyas* are most developed one. They are live in Waynad and Kannur areas of Kerala state. They are the first agricultural tribe settled in Wayanad district of Kerala. They were one of the martial tribe but in the dicisicive battle they were defeated by Britishers. The *kurichyas* were expert in archery and Gorilla warfare, Pazhassi Raja completely used this skill of the *kurichays*. The *Kurichya* tribe always maintained caste hierarchy. They always maintained untouchability with other community *Kurichyas* believed in Hinduism and they worship Hindu god and goddesses. *Kurichyas* were expert herbal medical practitioners. In the case of *Kurichyas* they preferred cross cousin marriage and marriage take place only the girl attains puberty. Due to the modernisation and other circumstances the lifestyle of the *kurichyas* changed tremendously due to the acculturation process and other developmental changes the *kurichyas* are also actively engaged in the rest of the world, it resulted modernisation of these tribal groups.

Notes

- Aithapura – The polluted women's area.
- Kulam – kinship group
- Mooppan – head man
- Nizhal – ancestor spirit
- Pulakkuli – ritual bath
- Talikettu – wearing sacred thread in neck as a symbol of marriage.

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