

A Study on the Status of Malaiyali Tribal Women in the Kalrayan Hills of Composite South Arcot District, Tamil Nadu State

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to highlight the Status of Tribal Women of the Kalrayan Hills of composite South Arcot District because of their ignorance. The Hills was situated in the Western side of the composite South Arcot District in Tamil Nadu State, the Malaiyali Tribes were more prominent and familiar tribes than others like Kattunayakan, Irulas, Kurichan and Palliyan. The Malaiyali Tribal women were not enjoyed equal status with their men, they were considering as morally, intellectually, culturally inferior to men and many restriction in social behavior and mobility inheritance were improved upon them because of their norms and traditions. Status wise, they were backward, yet are contributing more to nation by giving importance to their culture.

Key words: Menarikam, Nalangu, Pattakkaran, Ravikkai, Taniya gudise, Thandam,

Introduction

The Government of Tamil Nadu has so far identified 36 communities as tribal people in the State, among the 36, the Malaiyali tribes of Kalrayan Hills in composite South Arcot district was comes under the 25 number in the list of Scheduled Tribes and accounting for 15 per cent of the total tribal population in the State of Tamil Nadu¹. The Kalrayan hills was situated in the Western side of the district in Tamil Nadu State and the Malaiyalis (Scheduled Tribes) tribes were habituating in Kalrayan Hills and some adjoining villages on the slopes of the hills. They were Tamil speaking Hindus with a total population of the Scheduled Tribes was 1,59,426, of whom 76,959 (49.64 per cent) are females during the year 1990-1991 Census².

Social Status of Malaiyali Tribal Women in Kalrayan Hills

As far as the tribes were concerned women were not equal status with their men and they were considered as morally, intellectually and culturally inferior to men and many restriction in social behavior and mobility inheritance were improved upon them and they were using an economic asset both as a daughter and a housewife, they significantly play the roles of wife, daughter, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law and grandmother etc.

Nuclear type of family was common among the tribal communities in the hills, once the children got married, they were asked to live separately, even if they reside in the same village. Malaiyali elderly women never wear the *ravikkai* (blouse)³ while at home or in the field, they leave bare the shoulders, arms and upper part of the body; before strangers, however, and when going to market “the upper end of the cloth was loosed from over the breast or waist and carried across the left shoulder, and thrown loosely over the back, shoulders, and arms”. Now, the younger women of the hills 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.

A girl’s puberty ceremony was called *theraty or sadangu*⁴, the girl became an important member of the community and special customs were observed at the time she attained puberty. This was also mentioned by W. Frances and Edgar Thurston, when a girl attains puberty (*periyamanuchi*)⁵ immediately a message was sent to maternal uncle. The female members of the family of the maternal uncle bring jasmine flower, bananas, apples, and five *karuppatti* cakes. Then the maternal uncle builds a hut with fresh coconut thatches in the backyard of the house, this is called *kudichai kattal*. The Malaiyali considered seven to eleven days as a period of pollution after the attainment of puberty. The house was considered to be under minor pollution for thirty days and other villagers were not allowed to enter the house on those days. Throughout this period, the girl was bathed daily and the house was cleaned once a week and the services of the elderly women and pujari of their own community for purification ceremony.⁶

The marriage customs of the Kalrayan Hills Malaiyalis were differ but little from those of the plains, they use the word *kannalam* which means marriage. The tribes observed the rule of *menarikam*⁷ (a boy is considered to be his maternal uncle’s daughter, his paternal aunt’s daughter is next in favour) with unusual rigor, and with curious results. An

inconvenience inherent in the *menarikam* system was that sometimes the *urimai-girl* was a good deal older than the husband allotted to her by fate and custom. They do not invite a Brahmin priest to solemnize the marriage, all the rituals were connected with the marriage were performed by the elder of the caste. The betrothal contract was 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 *Nattan's* consent should be obtained. The preliminary *nalangu* was performed, the pandals erected at the house of both bride and bridegroom, at the house of each party a *kalasam* was prepared of three new vessels placed one above the other, and was taken to the Vinayagar temple on the Wedding day night.

The ceremonies take place at the bridegroom's house, either the bride was taken between day break and 7 a.m. on the wedding morning. The bridegroom take places the *tali* on the girl's neck and tied it, 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, whose function seems analogous to that of the *Manavalan* in a *tali-kettukalyanam* in Malabar. After end of the marriage feast was cooked by the women of the village, all the necessary items for the dinner like rice, vegetables and cereals were supplied by the bride-groom's family. The custom was to slaughter one or two pigs for every wedding since pork was the main dish of the festive meal⁸.

In the Malaiyalis, child marriages were practiced, this type of marriage called *sella kannalam*⁹ ('pet marriage' or favourite marriage'), marriage by elopement and marriage by exchange was also fairly common, with two men marrying each other's sisters. Polygamy, divorce and remarriage were quite common among the Malaiyalis. The young boys aged 16 years and girls aged 14 years old would be married.¹⁰ The widow remarriage was not allowed but allowed to have irregular alliance.¹¹ Divorce was very common among the Malaiyalis, even for flimsy reasons, it was referred to as *vevakkaruthu*¹²

Malaiyali women were taken to their natal home for the first and second deliveries, during the seventh month. Most of the childbirths take place at home with the help of an experienced elder woman, in the *taniya gudise*,¹³ a separate hut constructed near her house by her brother. The pollution period ends on the 15th or 16th day after birth, on that day, the mother and the child were brought home after a bath and the delivery hut was dismantled. The formal child-naming ceremony was performed on third or fifth day after the child birth and a fixed rule appears to exist as to when a child should be named. It was common to consult the local *pujari* as to what name should be selected, the priest, after ceremonies, announcing the name under divine inspiration, on the same day, they celebrate the *arana kayaru* ceremony in which a thread was tied around the child's waist. Children were often named after popular deities, e.g., Karuppan, Malaiyan, Kongam (Kongay, if a girl).

Economic Status

The Malaiyali Tribal women played an important role in maintaining the livelihood of the family by catering to the domestic needs of the households and also by making a significant contribution to the family's income by working in the plantations and doing sundry jobs. It was also found that the tribal in these hills considered the birth of a girl child to be auspicious and as a sign of wealth and prosperity to the family and therefore female infanticide was not prevalent in the tribal households which proves the insignificant

difference in the sex ratios. Malaiyali Tribal women though confined earlier to only looking after the domestic needs of the family, after few years taking part in all economic activities on par with men in order to meet the growing needs of the household. Majority of the women earn their living by working in Agricultural collies in the land lords and jahirs.¹⁴ They also work as domestic helpers in the plantation owner's house and also in hotels and resorts.

Educational Status:

As far as the literacy level of the female members in the sample households is concerned, it is alarming to find that of the total 490 female members in the sample households (47.99 per cent), 177 female members are illiterate (36.12 per cent), 162 females have only primary education (33.06 per cent), 85 female members have secondary level education (17.35 per cent), 41 female members have completed higher secondary level (8.37 per cent) and only 25 female have college level education (5.10 per cent)¹⁵. The above data proves that education takes a back seat as far as the interest of the women in the household is concerned. Those who have pursued higher education have said that the main reason for them to pursue higher education is to provide financial support and to improve the status of the family. The other reasons pointed out by them are, to get white collared jobs and a better life partner. It is evident that they are ambitious and are willing to overcome their handicaps in order to improve their living status. Even though a sizable number of respondents were aware of the special reservation of seats for the Scheduled Tribes, some are still not aware of the privileges given to them regarding (a) education (b) concessions and (c) reservations in Government undertakings¹⁶. Most children belonging to the Scheduled Tribes tend to be first generation learners whose education is not reinforced or supported in their home environments.

Cultural Status

Many of the hilly region occupied by the tribal community and they have possess their own culture and tradition. The Kalrayan Hills region was also a hilly region and the inhabitants of the areas was mostly tribal communities but most of the settlements were situated in the interior forest and geographically isolated. The village settlement was called as 'Ur', and the plain settlement were spoken of as 'Kombais'. A group of village constituted as *Nads*, the chief of a *Nad* was called *Pattakaran or Nattan*, who were elected as a rule, each from *vaguppu* prescribed by custom. *Pattakkarans* had an assistant by name was *Maniyakkarans*, who gave notice of marriage to the villages of the *Nad* concerned, and summon the villagers to attend; the *Muppans* had assistant as by *Ur-kavundan*, *Ur-kavundan* had one assistant by *Kangani*. The village of Chitteri was the residence of *Pattakaran*, who appears to be revered by all people of Malaiyalis¹⁷. The Malaiyali tribes had their own customary laws based on their social customs, it has to jurisdiction over all the settlement in the divisions of the hills. They discuss important function, panchayat and festivals, the head man of the tribal council was referred to as *Pattakaran* and he was superior authority of all villages.

In social matters, like polygamy, remarriage, divorce are brought before the panchayat. The *Kumbal* (meeting) was held under the tree or amman temple. Usually punishments were given in the form of *Kutham* (fine) which were generally utilized in giving a common feast or

for an offering to the super natural powers. Oath and ordeal methods served a means of voluntary laws, it was obeyed because of the fear of the anger of the supper being, the *Kumbal* (meeting) be discussed matters concerning theft, murder, rape and a fine called *Kutham* (fine) Rs 100 to 1000 was levied¹⁸.

In the tribal villages, the behaviour of each and every member was a matter of public importance. A man or a woman can learn the effect of his or her behaviour by watching the reactions of the whole village sitting in front. Strictly they obey the orders of the panchayat because of fear, faith and loyalty towards the tribal leaders. In the interior settlements, elders do not wish to refer their cases to tribal council unless it was a serious breach of their custom. Instead they try to settle their cases within themselves or through the mediation of other settlements. As per as the Malaiyalis were concerned, the tribal council was considered to be very powerful.

Political Status:

The younger women contest the elections, become President and other supreme post, they were not actively served as a liaison between their constituency and the governments because of their family males members involved and dominated in all issues. Despite that, the tribal people follow own mode of management to control their groups or society and customary laws, which were unwritten but were strictly bogeyed, as well as of their extreme level of traditional beliefs and they reside in remote isolated areas away from any other kind of human interaction¹⁹.

Conclusion

The tribal community was settled in the Kalrayan Hills region because of the topographical nature but the status of tribal women were unchanged because of their socio-religious belief, poverty, illiteracy and heredity customs. The government has introduced many welfare schemes and facilities for upliftment of the tribal women but still they gave top most priority to their old traditions, culture and rituals²⁰. Now, the tribal women life pattern underwent radical changes as a result of their interaction with the people of the plains.

End Notes

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