

SOCIAL CUSTOMS OF PALIYAN TRIBAL WOMEN IN DINDIGUL DISTRICT

A.Muniyandi

*Research Scholar (Part Time), Department of History,
Madurai Kamarajar University, Madurai*

Abstract

Dindigul is a city in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It is the administrative headquarters of the Dindigul district. Dindigul is located 420 Km (260 mi) southwest of the state capital, Chennai and 100 Km (62 mi) away from Tiruchirappalli.

The social structure of the majority of the tribes in Madras state is founded on the concept of exogamy. Every tribe or sub-sect of a tribe is deemed to constitute a unit called an endogamous sect. within the unit, a number of sub-divisions are found and a person belonging to any sub-division is prohibited from marrying the same Sub-division. These sub-divisions are called exogamous sects and are more popularly known as Kulams, Koottams, Veedus or Gothrams. The idea underlying this division is that members of any one sect are the descendants of the same ancestor and, therefore, belong to one paternal group. There are a few tribes in Madras state who do not follow this pattern of division into exogamous sects. The prominent of them are the Palliyans, the Pulayans and the Kadars. These three tribes are believed to be very primitive and belong to the pre-Dravidian era.

The palliyans are a Tamil - speaking tribe found largely in the Palani hills, they are also found in the Srimalai hills, in Varushanad valley of Madurai district, in Kulithalai taluk of Tiruchirappalli district, and on the borders of the Western Ghats in Ramanathapuram and Tirunelveli districts, The Palliyans are generally short in stature, lean and appear famished. The women have oval faces. In this paper we are described about the social customs of paliyan tribal women such as marriage, birth customs, puberty customs and death customs in detail manner.

Keywords: Kulams, Koottams, Veedus, Gothrams, paliyan, Kadars

Introduction

Dindigul is a city in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It is the administrative headquarters of the Dindigul district. Dindigul is located 420 Km (260 mi) southwest of the state capital, Chennai and 100 Km (62 mi) away from Tiruchirappalli.

Dindigul is believed to be an ancient settlement, it has been ruled at different times by the Early Pandyan Kingdom, the Medieval Cholas, and the Pallava dynasty, the later Pandyas, the Madurai Sultanate, the Dindigul Sultanates, the Vijayanagara Empire, the Madurai Nayak Dynasty, Chanda Sahib, the Carnatic Kingdom and the British. Dindigul has a number of historical monuments, the Rock Fort being the most prominent.

Industries in Dindigul include lock making, leather, administrative services, agricultural trading, banking, agricultural machinery and educational services. Dindigul is upgraded to a municipal corporation. The city covers an area of 14.01 Km (5.41 sq mi) and had a population of 207,327 in 2011. Dindigul is well-connected by road and rail with the rest of Tamil Nadu. It is the 11th largest urban agglomeration in the state and has a population of 292,132 according to Tamil Nadu's 2011 census. Dindigul has 200,000 hectares of cultivable land, and agriculture continues to be the main occupation of its inhabitants.

Located between the Palani and Srimalai Hills, Dindigul has a reserved forest area of 85 hectares.

The social structure of the majority of the tribes in Madras state is founded on the concept of exogamy. Every tribe or sub-sect of a tribe is deemed to constitute a unit called an endogamous sect. Within the unit, a number of sub-divisions are found and a person belonging to any sub-division is prohibited from marrying the same. These sub-divisions are called exogamous septs and are more popularly known as Kulams, Koottams, Veedus or Gothrams. The idea underlying this division is that members of any one sept are the descendants of the same ancestor and, therefore, belong to one paternal group. There are a few tribes in Madras state who do not follow this pattern of division into exogamous septs. The prominent of them are the Palliyans, the Pulayans and the Kadars. These three tribes are believed to be very primitive and belong to the pre-Dravidian era.

The palliyans are a Tamil - speaking tribe found largely in the Palani hills of Madurai district. It is believed that they are the original inhabitants of the Palani hills. It is even said that the name Palliyan was derived from Palniyan which in Tamil means man from Palani. The name of the tribe is known locally as Paliyan and not as Palliyan or Palleyar as indicated in the list of Scheduled Tribes notified by the President of India.

Though Palliyans originally belonged to the Palani hills, they are also found in the Srimalai hills, in Varushanad valley of Madurai district, in Kulithalai taluk of Tiruchirapalli district, and on the borders of the western Ghats in Ramanathapuram and Tirunelveli districts. In the Palani hills they are found both in the Upper Palani at an altitude of 5,000 feet, and in the Lower Palani at an altitude of 3,000 to 5,000 feet. In Srimalai hills, they live at an altitude ranging from 2,500 to 4,000 feet. In other places, they live at the foot of the hills. Since the tribe had formerly nomadic tendencies. It is believed that the Palliyans, who originally lived as food-gatherers in higher altitudes, have moved to the foot of the hills in search of employment as agricultural labourers.

Social Life

Appearance, Dress and Ornaments

The Palliyans are generally short in stature, lean and appear famished. Thurston in his book on "Castes and Tribes of Southern India" had described them as follows

"Like other primitive tribes, the Palliyans are short in stature and dolichocephalic and the archaic type of nose persists in some individuals. Average height 150.9 c.m. Nasal index 83' (Maximum 100). They are generally black or dark brown in complexion. Some have flat noses and thick lips. The women have oval faces. Men have scanty beards. They have very little hair on their chests and on their bodies. A few have curly hair on the head but it cannot be said that they are frizzly as in the case of Kadars".

Women part their hair in the middle and tie it into a knot at the back. Women wear coloured sarees and loose-fittingsares. Women wear a few strings of glass-beads corals. They pierce the nose and ear-lobes and wear cheap stone-studded ornaments. A few wear Kupu in the upper part of the ears. In the wrists, bangles are worn. All women in Shenbagathope

wear silver, anklets. Generally, the Palliyans women are distinguished more by the absence of jewels by any peculiar characteristic of the jewels, worn by them.

The small population of the Palliyans is dispersed over a vast area. They live in groups in isolated area. In course of time, the groups have lost contact of each other. Marriage alliances take place within the settlement itself. Only if this is not possible, they seek alliances in other settlements. The Palliyans never goes more than 10 miles in seeking a spouse. In a way the shrinkage of the social circle is made possible by the absence of the practice of exogamy. No Kulam or Gothram is observed. All that he wishes is that the spouse belongs to the tribe. There are castes where if previous relationship is traced one's wife may turn out to be his own paternal cousin of the second or third degree. If exogamy is practice, such marital, relationship will not be possible. In one sense, this can lead to biological degeneration of the tribe. But this is, to some extent, counteracted by the tendency of Palliyans women choosing to live with men outside the tribe.

Another tendency which is harmful to the community is that boys are married to very young, girls. As such in a Palliyans settlement, sex life starts as soon as the girl attains puberty. No girl is allowed to remarry for more than one year after attaining, puberty. There is neither rigid surveillance by the caste hierarchy nor is there any paternal vigil over the girl to prevent premarital relationships. There are instances in which are elopements have taken place at young age which are later regularised by marriage.

In Shenbagathope we were shown a young girl of barely thirteen years. She is still studying in the Residential school. She has recently attained puberty and in the normal course she must wait for at least three years to attain physical maturity. But already four boys, out of whom one is already married, are after her. There is keen rivalry for her. She would have by now yielded to one of the four boys, but for the opposition of the teacher of the local school. In this tribe, a tendency has been noticed among young persons to get freed from the paternal control at the earliest moment. The tendency in a sense is encouraged by the parent themselves so that they may not have the responsibility of maintaining them. There is less cohesion between parent and children than in other tribes. Though exogamy is not practiced in the tribe, consanguineous marriages are frequent. Cross cousin marriages are widely prevalent. In Sirumalai village, out of 26 marriages of males, 18 have married the paternal aunts' daughters, one his maternal uncle's daughter and six their sisters' daughters. Such marriages are not, however, quite stable.

It has to be conceded that in many other tribes of south India, women enjoy an equal, if not a superior status, with men. Perhaps the only tribe in which such freedom does not exist is among Kanis living in Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli districts. In other tribes, the women have the freedom to choose their husbands, and even in cases where betrothal has taken place in their young age, they break it and marry whomsoever they like. They also have freedom of divorce and remarriage. In some tribes, women also enjoy a certain amount of freedom in sex life even after marriage. Perhaps the palliyans will fall in this category. A girl is not bound to marry the boy to whom she is betrothed by her parents. If she wishes, she can elope with some other boy and live like husband, and wife. If she is

dissatisfied with her husband, she can leave him and live with some other man. No bride-price exists so that there is no economic limitation on the freedom to change the husband.

Marriage Customs

Betrothal usually takes place, when the girl is young and before she attains puberty. In Sirumalai, a bride price amounting to Rs.10-50 is given. But the groom presents the girl with a nose-screw, one pair of ear-rings and a saree. The marriage takes place soon after the girl attains puberty. The marriage takes place in the groom's house. It is simple but a feast is given to all relatives. In Sirumalai, Tali which are small-sized and "W" shaped are tied by the bridegroom round the neck of the bride. Immediately after the marriage, it is usual to have a group dance in which both males and females take part separately.

Though the Palliyans do not observe any elaborate rituals during marriage or death ceremonies, they generally observe pollution. Each settlement has a separate pollution shed called Muttu Kudisai in which women have to live for 5 to 7 days during their periods. When a woman gives birth to a child, she removed to this shed and made to live for a month. A long period of pollution is observed when a girl attains puberty.

Birth Customs

During pregnancy, no restriction of diet is observed. In the 7th or 9th month, a good feast is given to the pregnant mother. The first delivery takes place in her mother's place and the others in the husband's place. Wherever she is the delivery takes place in the pollution shed. An experienced old woman in the community assists the mother during labour for which she is paid one rupee and a measure of rice. In difficult cases, Valukkappattai, a bark of a medicinal plant is powdered and given with Margosa oil to the women. Pollution is observed for 30 days after delivery, and the mother and child taken to the house, after a bath. At the time of delivery, a bill-hook and fishing net are placed by the side of the pollution shed to keep away the ghosts. The umbilical cord and the placentas are usually put in a pot and buried in a spot close-by. For three days, the mother is not given any food but she is given a sweetened decoction of ginger, pepper and Tippili. This preparation is called "Kayam marunthu".

Puberty Customs

As soon as a girl attains puberty, she is taken to the separate shed called Muttu Kudisai. In Sirmalai area, a new shed is constructed specially for this purpose by the prospective bridegroom, if there is any, or by the maternal uncle. The girl has to remain for 30 days in this shed and during this period, no male is permitted to see her. Before entering the hut, the girl has to take along with her a bow called "Arjunan vill" made of palm-stick. On the 30th day, the hut is pulled out and thrown into a stream. The girl is seated and seven pots of water are poured on her quickly and continuously so that all pollution may get washed. While this is being done, her brothers-in-law and prospective grooms throw on her balls of cow-dung and pods of Erukkan (*Calatropis gigantea*). She is then made to walk over a turmeric-smeared thread of about 10 feet length, put on the ground. The ends of the thread will be held in position by asking two prospective suitors to stand over it at either end. As the girl walks across and nears the end of the thread, the groom at that end should run away before the girl could touch him. If she touches him, the boy gets polluted and will

have to be administered bath with seven pots of water. He in turn will be pelted with cow-dung balls and pods of Erukkan. By this ceremony, a lot of fun is created. The girl dips herself in seven streams before she is admitted into the house. It is usual for the maternal uncle to present her with new clothes.

Death Customs

The Palliyans always bury the dead. They do not have any fixed place as burial grounds. They bury wherever there is a convenient spot. In Sirumalai a pit is dug north and the head is placed towards the south with face upwards, but slightly tilted towards the east. Before the body is carried to the burial ground, the corpse is given a cold water bath and sandal paste applied. The practice among Palliyans is not revisit the place of burial. But in Sirumalai, the Palliyans revisit it on the third day and pour milk and ghee near the place of burial. In all places Karumadi (final day obsequies) is performed on the 16th day by giving a feast to close relatives. In Sirumalai, a fowl is sacrificed on this day. When once the Karumadi is celebrated, the departed soul is never remembered by celebrating any anniversaries. Generally, the Palliyans spend little on death ceremony.

Conclusion

By appearance, by customs and manners, Palliyans appear to belong to a primitive tribe probably of pre-Dravidian origin. Their present population is approximately 1,500 and they live scattered in groups from Palani Taluk to Kanyakumari district. In view of their scattered condition, these groups have lost contact with each other. They have a weak tribal hierarchy. Each group has developed its own characteristics. Though socially they are not considered un-touchable, they are educationally and economically very backward. They are a quiet and inoffensive people but their economic conditions need considerable improvement.

Reference Books

1. Kattunayakans of Nilgiri District Tamil Nadu, Tribal Research Centre, Hill Area Development Programme, Government of Tamil Nadu, Udhamandalam, 2005, PP.32-40.
2. Shenbaham, Mrs K. "Culture and lifestyle of Paliyan tribes at Palani hill, Dindigul district." Culture 2.3 (2016).
3. Samuel, J. Karunyal, and B. Andrews. "Traditional medicinal plant wealth of Pachalur and Periyur hamlets Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu." (2010).
4. Kumari, S. Vanaja. "The Problems of Elderly tribal Women in Kodaikanal Hills: A Sociological Study."
5. Ignacimuthu, S., and M. Ayyanar. "Ethnobotanical investigations among tribes in Madurai district of Tamil Nadu (India)." *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 2.1 (2006): 25.