

BELIEF SYSTEMS OF KATTUNAYAKAN TRIBES IN TIRUPUR DISTRICT: UNDERSTANDING RELIGION, ANIMISM AND SPIRITUALITY.

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ABSTRACT

Man is a reasoning, inquisitive being, and cannot live adrift in a sea of random phenomena and purposeless activities. At its most basic level, a belief system is a cognitive system, or a system of perception, shared by the members of a group. It provides the individual with all important explanations and meaning, thus helping him to understand the eternal “whys” of life. Many cultures, for example, provide concrete means for gaining or attempting to gain, specific desired ends. They usually involve appeal to or control of the personal or impersonal forces that have the power to influence outcomes. The types of belief system mostly tribal community’s follow are religion, sorcery an ideology. Religion is belief and behaviour related to the supernatural beings. In tribal society, religion refers to the way people deal with the supernatural i.e., something beyond the natural, visible world of human beings. It is habitually found that the theory of Animism divides into two great dogmas, forming part of one consistent doctrine first, concerning souls of individual creatures, capable of continued existence after death or destruction of the body; second concerning others spirits, upward to the rank of powerful deities Thus Animism, in its full development, includes the belief in souls and in a future state, in controlling deities and subordinate spirits those doctrines practically resulting in some kind of active worship.” The Kattunayakans have their own pattern of belief system and spirit belief oriented to tribal religion.

INTRODUCTION

India has one of the largest concentrations of tribal population in the world. According to the census of 2001, the tribal population in India was 84.51 million, constituting 8.14 percent of the total general population. There are about 449 tribes and sub tribes in different parts of India. The constitution of India does not define Schedule Tribes as such, Article 366 (25) refers to Schedule Tribes as those communities who are scheduled in accordance with Article 342 of the Constitution. This Article says that only those communities who have been declared as such by the President of India through an initial public notification would be considered as scheduled tribes. The list of Schedule Tribes is state specific and a community declared as a Scheduled Tribe in a state need not be so in another state. In Tamilnadu State, there are 36 scheduled Tribes. According to the census of 2001 the Schedule Tribes population in Tamilnadu State is 6,51,321 constitutes 1.02% of the total general population. Among the 36 schedule tribes in Tamilnadu, Kattunayakan is one of the scheduled tribes found throughout Tamilnadu. Kattunayakan is one of the scheduled tribes found throughout Tamilnadu, besides in Nilgiri districts. The present study is on Kattunayakan tribal community, exclusively conducted, only in Tirupur district of Tamilnadu¹.

OBJECTIVES

** To know the religion of Kattunayakan Tribes.*

** To understand the rituals of Kattunayakan Tribes in Tirupur District.*

** To bring out the significance of the cultural and religious life of the Kattunayakan Tribes.*

RELIGIOUS LIFE OF KATTUNAYAKAN TRIBES

In 1871 EB Tylor offered a ‘minimum definition of religion, the belief in spiritual beings. To this deep -laying doctrine, he applied the term animism. He says:

Religion of the tribes is simple. Religious belief and behaviours are not treated as something apart from other kinds of beliefs and behaviours. Religion pervades all aspects of their life. Tribal life and society cannot be fully understood without understanding their religion. Due to cultural contact, tribal religions were affected by the religious belief and practice of other groups. There was the emergence of various socio- religious movements among the tribals. These movements were primarily religious in content and reflected the articulation of collective hopes of the tribals. The cultural aspects of the tribes are very different from the opposite communities. Their beliefs, customs, values are traditional. They belong to family where male members are visit to be headed the family and deciding is in their hands, traditional

property also attends male. They worship all the Hindu deities. *Kulian*, *Kali* and *Karungali* are their tribal deities, and they worship crude stone images of them².

They worship their ancestors too as well as trees and animals. They sacrifice animals to appease their deities. They visit their clan deityshrines and local Hindu temples. Some of them visit *Sabarimala*, *Guruvayur* and *Karamadai* on pilgrimage. They participate in the Mariamma, Lambalakottai and Yermadu temple festivals. The Karnavar officiates as sacred specialist at these festivals, as well as at all socio religious functions³.

The KattuNayaks belong to the Vaishnava tradition from before the reign of Krishnadevaraya in Andhra Pradesh, hence they identify themselves as the Vishnu Gotra. Tribal religion is the most primitive form of religion found in human society. The following are the important characteristics of the Indian tribal religion⁴.

MANA: Defining faith in Mana found in tribal society. R.H. Codrington has pointed out that Mana is "A force altogether distinct from physical power, which acts in all kinds of ways for good and evil, and which is of the greatest advantage to possess or control".

THE CONCEPT OF BONGA: According to the tribes, Bonga is a mysterious and impersonal power at the back of rains, cold, floods, epidemics and the wild animals. Everywhere activity is due to the power of Bonga. Thus Bonga is a form of Mana.

ANIMISM: Another important characteristic of Indian tribal religion is Animism. According to Risley, tribal religion is animism.

NATURALISM: A Universal characteristic of tribal religion is naturalism or nature worship⁵.

FAITH IN THE IMMORTALITY OF SOUL: Among many tribes there is a custom of observing funeral rights 2 times. This is because of their faith in the immortality of soul.

FAITH IN REBIRTH: Most of the Indian tribes believe that after death the soul of a man survives the body and enters into the body of some animal, bird or other living being.

FAITH IN MAGIC: The most important characteristic of tribal religion is faith in magic⁶.

CASTE AND TRIBE

The unequal discrimination of caste and *gotram* (a person's lineage or ancestry) was introduced centuries ago by Brahmins. The varna principles among human beings i.e. Brahmins are the higher ranks. Satrians-Warriors, Vaishas-traders. Shudras were established as inferiors by profession. Later during the Pallava period, various industrialists were converted into caste from the principles of Varna. The sub-divisions of *Gotra* were brought into the background. The main rituals performed in the castes based on profession are marriage, birth and death⁷. Among them, the Brahmins created the clan gotras to identify them and it has become an essential part of today's civilized life.

As far as tribes are concerned they follow *Kulam* (a social group) and sub-divisions, but they do not recognize Gotra. However, the Brahmins have created gotras on the basis of profession among themselves. Examples of ethnic castes are given as the following gotra names. An out-of-towner is a *UKraan* and a *Purkasan* is a rat trapper.

As the wild heroes widely known in Tamil Nadu have led a nomadic life, other communities scattered across the state have seen the customs and made slight changes in their cultures. The reason is that the industry in the respective localities is basically dependent on the people, i.e. if they want to buy a garland for their clan deities, the available flower garlands, ritual items, grains vary according to the place. Even if you put a drum, you will have to accept it as such. Now, according to my culture, it is not possible. One of the changes that took place was the worship of family deities. In the beginning, *Jakamma* and *Pommakka*, who were their family deities, sacrificed their lives to protect the welfare of society, and other deities were *Gangamma*, *Rudramma*, *Malamma*, *Kaliamma*, *Mariyamma* and guardian deities *Madurai Veeran*, *Aiyavaru*, *Periyatsi Amman*, *Rakachi Amman*, *Karupu*⁸.

They worship in temples or in open spaces. In the open spaces, shapeless stones are named after each clan deity, white or yellow cloths are tied around them and garlands are put on them, and on the first day, *poojas* (Explain the term *pooja*) are performed enthusiastically in the presence of the relatives and the village chief leads the festival with seven pots of *pongal*⁹. On the first day, the procession will be vegetarian and on the second day the

procession will be non-sacrificing, and the necessary pujas such as milk-gourd *abhishekam* (a devotee pours a liquid offering on an image or murti of a deity), *timithi* (devotees walk across a pit of fire) etc. will be performed. The clan deities will bless the fasting men and women with mantras. At the end chicken, goat and pig are bathed in yellow water, garlands are worn and *kungumatilak* (a small red dot applied on the forehead, typically made from a powder called "*kumkum*" (vermilion)) is placed on the forehead and sacrificed. Pig is the most important sacrifice¹⁰.

In some places a pig is sacrificed by cutting off the head or stabbing the stomach with a long sharp sword. A pig is slaughtered for the temple on behalf of the village. Pigs brought by the local community for prayers and relatives are sacrificed in the temple and one part is cooked for the temple public and the other part is cooked for the visitors at their home. The heads of the slaughtered pigs are placed with their right forearms cut off and placed before the deities. The bodies of the slaughtered goats and pigs are taken three times around the family deities and then taken to cook the curry. The outsiders and local people are also given a variety of liquor and food¹¹.

At present, the methods of worshipping Kattunayakan are the wedding traditions and cultures that may be present in their habitats and the worship processes are slightly different in Tamil Nadu due to learning and adopting the cultures from other communities. Due to the migrations across the state, they have accepted the local guardian deities found there in their nomadic life, although there are no major changes in their nomadic life, regardless of which deity they are, they are still following the traditional methods of sacrificing animals such as pigs, goats, chickens, for their benefit. There have been no changes in this¹². Kattunayakan have the meaning of religion as the belief in spiritual beings there faith is tribal religion with elements of spirit worship, sorcery magic and priesthood prediction of survival. They are animists and totemists. They still worship rocks, hills, snakes, wild animals and even claim solution for life problems from them. They have implicit faith in charms and sorcery. Recently they started constructing their own temples and identifying natural deities¹³. Gradually they are imbibing more and more of Hindu religious cults. Their oral tradition flows through music and dance with the songs and tales. Music plays an important role in the Kattunayakan annual oral tradition celebrations. They store a few sacred items in a sacred Box with a variety of inanimate objects that are displayed by a priest only during the festival nights¹⁴.

A.A.D. Luiz (1962:88-89) narrated in his book, "Tribes of Kerala", about the religion of the Kattunayakans. He stated that, "Kattunayakans in close contact with the advanced rural groups claim to be Hindus, and use popular Hindu names. They worship trees, rocks, hills, snakes animals and even claim origin from them¹⁵. They have implicit faith in charms, sorcery, black magic and *mantrams* (chants). Worship of the sun, moon and Shiva under the name of Bairava is common."

The Encyclopaedia of Dravidian Tribes (1996:192-193) described the religion of the Kattunayakans as

"They still worship rocks, hills, snakes, animals even claiming origin from them. Other deities are *Mari*, (the mother goddess of smallpox) *Mastideivam* (male), *Hethappan*, etc., Since they were nomadic, they do not have their own temples and idols. Hollow spherical gourds represented their gods and goddesses with a hole in the side, filled with seeds. After the seeds are put in, the hole is covered tightly with wax. These representations are hung on the roof of the house. They cannot be put on the ground, as that would annoy the gods. The male god is *Odiyan* and goddess, *Oditti*. They also worship spirits. Each settlement has a temple 'mantage', a small hut on wooden poles near the *Jenmadeva's* hut. Its roof is thatched with grass and walls of bamboo wattle. *Odiyan* and *Oditti* (mythical figures) are represented by black stones"¹⁶.

M Sasikumar (1999: 44) observed the worship pattern and the role of chieftain of the Kattunayakans and stated that, "Kattunayakans today are gradually imbibing more and more of Hindu percepts because of their contact with plains people. In the past they were semi-nomads they did not have temples as such, but they kept and worshipped some stones at sacred place at the foot of Big trees in the forest."

The deities are worshipped in the settlement level. It is the duty

of the headman to ensure that the worship is offered in proper form during annual ceremony. Now they have begun to worship the deities at the family level also, besides worshipping the deity at the settlement level. The head man of the settlement keeps the sacred basket which comprises a few metal images, metal lamps, bell, *Pattu* (red cloth), a sword and a few pieces of tobacco, in a corner of his house.

NATURE AS GOD

The Kattunayakans were in the practice of worshipping natural objects like animals, birds, sun and moon and they were in the habit of worshipping these things in open air places without shelter or shade. Slowly they started identifying a place as sacred and erected untouched stones and started relating these stones with the dead Kattunayakan people names. They started referring these places as Deivamane or Deivagudi. The priest is called as *Deiva pujari*¹⁷.

Gradually, they started constructing four walls around devamane and covering roof with grass and established a temple and state calling it as *deivabhadragudi*. They felt that nothing is inside the temple and asked the *deivapujari* to keep sacred things inside the temple. The *pujari* collected sacred items like bell, bangles, pottery images, turmeric powder, red beads, kumkum, swords, combs, new cotton clothes, etc., and put them in a new basket, carried the basket, referring as 'deivakoode' to the temple, kept the basket inside the temple and allowed the Kattunayakan devotees to worship the basket¹⁸. Some names of the established spirits are existing on the hollows of the trees, stone caves and even on the top of huge trees. Thus gods and goddesses pantheon developed as Kattunayakan deities. A few of the names of these gods and goddesses are *guligan*, *kuttichatan*, *bommedeva*, *kuttan*, *kuttathi*, *muthappan*, *maridan*, *bejjalibada*, *manjaloda* etc.. The tribal council head of respective sacred places decides the worship pattern of these gods and goddesses¹⁹.

The headman will also act as a medicine man and middle man between deity and devotees. He will pray for the deity for to cure the diseases. The headman takes the holy seed filled gourd shakes it and sings to the God for an early cure. While he sings, his wife and children join the chorus. They repeat this and if he not cured, they promise an offering of a hen or cock to sacrifice at the annual festival. Besides headman and a priest, a few Kattunayagans have become experts in performing black magic by using peacock eggs, dry nuts, porcupine stings and the blood of black rabbit. Some black magic practitioners of the Kattunayagans are also learned to use 'mantras' voice pollution words to invite spirits to do effective sorcery. The women of Kattunayakan who were learned the skill of black magic use camphor, paddy, dry fruits, menstrual blood and milk of the black goat²⁰. The neighbouring Paniyans and Kurumbas approach the Kattunayakan magicians for good results of smooth childbirth, abortions, love success, employment, ripening of fruits etc.,

CONCLUSION

The Kattunayakans celebrate festivals like Onam, Vishu, Kannada Sankranti etc., but they like to celebrate annual festival referred by them as 'Adiyantiramjatre' which reflects their oral tradition. They celebrate this fair in the month of March/April. They celebrate this fair on particular Tuesday, fixed by their community head after consulting with community elders of all settlements in Tirupur district. On the fixed day, amidst Kattunayakan devotees, in front of the Deivagudi, the priest gets possessed shivers, cries and carries a big sword and beats his chest utters gods' words for the welfare of the community with minor demands. He sprinkles paddy and salt as blessings on the devotees. Everybody dance to the tune of drum and pipe music. Then the youth, mostly men along with the headman and priest goes to interior forest identify the traditional deity, covered under mud and pray there and bring 'sacred soil' to the *Deivagudi* and distribute to everybody as '*Prasadam*'. Then at the last, the ritual of sacrificing cocks and sucking blood takes place. One another serve the heads of the cocks and the priest sucks the blood putting its neck into its mouth. The body of the sacrificed cock goes to those who offered it and the head of the head to the priest. By night everybody return to their settlements with '*Deivaprasadam*'.

Thus, the oral tradition of the Kattunayakans may not allow them to adapt any alien rituals because their religious belief system is

embedded with a cultural reasoning upon cognitive thinking and their perception is shared by the members of Kattunayakan group in a given small territory²¹. Infact, tribal religion is the most primitive form of human religion. Thus it exhibits that unrefined purity characteristic of the primitive form. It is the beginning of religious evolution. Hence in it one finds magic, religion and ritualism all in one. In it there is no distinction of unity in religious sanctity. Mostly, then latter depend on the former. The tribal religion is not merely a particular part of the tribal life, but enters in life every where. The religious and social activities of the tribal people are closely interconnected.

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