



TRIBALISM: A STUDY ON THE SUBALTERN VALUES, CULTURE AND PRACTICES OF ATTAPADY

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Tribalism is the state of being organized in, or advocating for, a tribe or tribes. In terms of conformity, Tribalism may also refer in popular cultural terms to thinking or behaving in which people are more loyal to their tribe than to their friends, their country, or any other social group. According to Tribalists, the term Tribalism refers to what they see as the defining characteristics of tribal life: namely, an open, egalitarian, classless and cooperative community

Attapady – An Overview

Attapady is an extension mountain valley of about 731 sq.km in area, lying at the Western Ghat ranges. It is located in the mid-eastern part of Kerala on the north-east of Palakkad district, adjoining Coimbatore and Nilgiri districts of Tamil Nadu. The population of Attapady consists of tribesfolk and non-tribesfolk. Attapady got its name from *atta*, the blood leach and *pad*, the habitation. The three major tribal communities of the region, namely, Irulas, Mudugas and Kurumbas, belong to the broad group of Dravidians. Tribal settlements in Attapady are known as *Ooru* (hamlet). Each *Ooru* contains, on an average of 50 houses, densely constructed in rows. Tribesfolk of Attapady are the most backward among the vulnerable groups of Kerala. Their economy is traditional in nature, depending mainly on land and forest.

Objectives of the Study

- To study the culture and folklore of Tribal community
- To propose alternative forms of eco-friendly, sustainable, and indigenous development programmes
- To investigate the backwardness of Scheduled Tribes of Attapady

Methodology

A pilot study is conducted using Participatory Social Action Research Method (PSARM) to identify the cultural perceptions and priorities of tribesfolk. The investigators conducted in-depth interviews and observed the daily-life activities of tribesfolk. A visit has been made to the Mudugar-Kudumbar Research Centre, established in Attapady with the funding of World Oral Literature Project of The University of Cambridge. It is the space of the tribal people to interact, express, refresh memories, experience the joy of ethnicity, enjoy the power of tradition, learn indigenous culture and to promote ecological life. The primary data is gathered through a field-level investigation.

Tribesfolk in Attapady

There are three different Tribesfolk in Attapady : Irulars, Mudugars and Kurumbas.

Kurumbas who constitute less than five percent of the total population lies in the interior of the northern area of Attapady. They were the first group of *Adivasis* to settle in the place.

Mudugas are believed to have immigrated from the Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu. They had lived in the northeastern part of Attapady under the leadership of *Kovai* (Coimbatore) Moopen.

Irula is a Dravidian tribe spread over the three state of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala, whom are also known as *Eruvalla*, *Iruliga*, *Illiga*, *Kasova*, *Urali*, *Kadupujari* and *Velliga*. The term Irular is derived from the word *Irul* meaning darkness. Irulas are rigid in their customs and manners.

The dialect of tribesfolk is known as *Aadivasibasha*. It remains only in its spoken form without a written script. For the tribal people, the transmission of oral literature from one generation to another lies at the heart of cultural practice. The local language acts as a vehicle for the transmission of unique cultural knowledge.

Tribal Values, Culture & Practices

Culture

Eco values are integrated as feminine values. Tribesfolk are the custodians of a culture, rooted in integrated values of a perspective that women and nature are one. The wisdom of tribesfolk tells that the earth meets the needs of not only humans but also the whole creation. According to them, forest and nature are as their mother. Unlike non-tribes, a distinct characteristic of tribes is that they have an *ethic of enough*. Nothing is taken from nature, other than what is essential. The



bare-foot folk dance is a life celebration of their oneness with nature. The Divine is perceived in the trees, mountains, streams, animals and in all creation. Earth is mother God and God is not to be bought or sold. They approached the land with great respect. For tribes, joining with nature is a celebration which all of them celebrate together as *Kootake* and *Kampla*. The Mannakkaran, who before sowing the seed leads the worshipping of the earth and sowing, planting, weeding, and harvesting are done in a festive mood.

They are the originators and contributors of unique system of nature and indigeneous medicine. The entire hybrid in food crops, medicinal plants and animals all over the world are those developed from the rich variety of life species preserved from ancient times by tribesfolk. It is an irony that our modern society perceives tribes as *uncivilized and uncultured*. For centuries, Kadu (forest) and its fertile land were owned by the tribesfolk. They never privatised them, nor did they destroy them in the name of development. Their life is *need-based* and not *greed-based*. They have not become money-minded. They go for work for two or three days a week and spend the rest of the days in total relaxation. When the money gets exhausted, they start working again.

Children are given names on the seventh day after birth and are usually named in accordance with family tradition. Tribes bury the dead in areas set apart as burial ground. Dance and songs accompany funeral ceremonies. The people have strong belief in the spirits of ancestors. In the hamlet, there is a special house for worshipping the *Kara Deivam*. Whenever, there is some incidence of disease, they perform Pooja. On *Shivaratry day*, they observe abstinence and take food only after seeing the light on *Malleswaram* mount.

Agricultural Practices

The tribesfolk lived in their traditional way for centuries in Attappady forest; in isolation from the mainstream population. There were no separate plots in agriculture. They cultivated and made use of whatever part of the forest they chose to cultivate. In the early periods they had used bamboo chips for raking land. On the sowing day all the people in the village clean their houses and take bath. Mannukkaran sleeps in the Kula Daiva Veedu (room or house set apart for the dwelling of God) on that night. Early morning a man from Karatti kulam makes Ragi and takes it to show Mannukkaran. It is known as Kanikanal. Before 5 o'clock in the morning the Mannookkaran goes to sow seeds, with prayer. Nobody was allowed to see Mannookkaran sowing the seeds. It was only after Mannookkaran goes out from the village that the others come out of their houses. Ragi, Chama, Thina, Varak, Pichama, Cholam, and Maize were the important crops cultivated.

A society with little gender and class discrimination

The traditional tribal system allows equal rights and participation for both men and women. There is no other human group in the world in which womens freedom is upheld to this extent, avoiding all discrimination in work. The women are given freedom to find and choose their own life partners. Divorce and re-marriage are accepted by tribal society. There is no dowry system among them. Men and women enjoyed equal rights to property. Female infanticide is unheard in this society.

The whole traditional society is built on the solid foundation of equality among all life forms including the plant kingdom, water and earth. It is based on the symbiotic relationship of all beings with nature. People are given respect and status according to their contribution to society, but only when they are performing the particular item assigned to them. (The Hindu, Adivasi Folio, 2000)

Tribal songs and dances

The tribes folk play a vital role in transmitting the history, cultural traditions, and the way of living to new generations. Tribal songs and dances are the main media by which transmission is done.

One of the tribal songs has the following as its theme. It is sung by a woman while her husband is about to sleep. She sings:
Let us cut the ragi plant at its seed bunch; let us collect the torn sheafs in the upper fold of the *chela*, (The *chela* is the female dress worn with two folds in front). For both of us to play, let us tie the double-seated swing on the branch of Dhani tree. If you were a basket swing it to the settler. A basket with two pockets is better for our use. Let us go to our lord (Malleswaram) and pray for the gift of a child. If we get a baby boy, we will give him your name, *Thampaso*, if it is a baby girl, let us give her my name. If we unite, we would be able to please the Goddess, *Thotere* (the goddess of prosperity) and offer her *pongal* (Cereals specially cooked with jaggery in a new pot).

The woman is using her leisure time to advise her husband about her knowledge and practices. While harvesting, she collects the sheafs that fall away in her own *chela*-fold. She cannot afford to allow any grain to go waste. If husband and wife are



united in will and work, they can enjoy life and perform useful duties. If they are not united, the benefit will go to the settlers. The intuition of the tribal woman is well depicted here. Unity and co-operation are considered as the base of prosperity.

Another song gives graphic details of plant growth. It speaks of how to prepare the ground, how to prepare the seedlings, how to plant them in the furrows, how to watch their growth, how to harvest and how to prepare the food out of the harvest. The details of how to remove stones and thorns from the furrows are also given.

Red Thina and black Thina seeds should be mixed and sown; birds that come must be chased away. You have to look after the cultivation by watching from a small hut built on the top of the tree. The hut should be 12 feet high from the ground. Take the trips to drive the birds and say, Aha Aha.. and throw stones at them..

Their customs and traditions are handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. The elders play a vital role in this process. They hand down to successors their songs and stories.

Conclusion

In an ethnographic research, to study about a community, it is vital to analyze their problems in various perspectives. The study of the cultural priorities of tribes folk has enabled the researchers to look at the problems, beyond the extent to which, an outsider can perceive. Being the possessors of a wealthy culture, tribal would have hesitancy to adapt and tune to the prospects of a foreign language as English. Certainly, initiatives have to be taken to evolve culturally specific syllabus and curriculum for the tribal. A learning environment has to be created in the classroom that nurtures the curiosity and path to knowing. The skills of language are important for the balanced participation in tribal community as well as, larger world community. Practice and preparation in the cultural traditions interwoven with language experiences reflecting all education domains help the learners to understand and participate in rightful place in the universe. Tribal history is World history. Tribal culture has several elements that mainstream people have to emulate. The noble values and attitudes can be contributed to the present-day world at large

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