

The Forgotten Tribes: Hindu ‘Marathas’ of Tamilnadu: the ‘Jogis’, ‘Vasudevs’ and others

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A tribe is a social division in a traditional society consisting of linked families or communities with a common culture and dialect. The term ‘forgotten tribe’ in this paper denotes the tribes which migrated from one region to another in search of a better life style and economic opportunities, falling into bad times long time after migration and further dissipating into miniscule groups, till the government of Tamilnadu found them through the reservation policy, giving them new hope and direction in life.

The paper is all about their journey through history, though tracing the history of such communities is difficult, the information being very sketchy, written records including outsiders’ observations of such communities being scanty. Their own collective memory is chiefly oral and it does not archive all the information a social historian would be interested in. Also, being pitted against very structured communities increases the social pressure of these communities to maintain an ‘acceptable history’ and this tendency makes them in general to avoid certain valuable inputs which are lost to society forever.

Being a miniscule and a marginalized community, they refuse to talk freely about day to day experiences with more structured communities in their surroundings and also with the Marathi speaking brethren of Tamilnadu. They prefer being silent on such issues and focus more on their efforts to get into the mainstream, some of their past cultural practices including their food habits are glossed over to present an acceptable narrative. As Carole McGranahan explains how history is truth, fear and some lies in diasporas of Tibetan community living in exile (Carole McGranahan)¹, this community too prefers giving truth, ‘acceptable truth’ and being silent in certain instances while discussing their history.

Tracing these communities was part of the bigger project of tracing the entire Marathi community that migrated to Tamilnadu during the time of Shivaji and his younger half brother Ekoji in the late seventeenth century (Sardesai H.S. 2003)². The soldiers and others who migrated looking for better opportunities are now spread in both urban and rural areas of Northern, Central and Western Tamilnadu. The most marginalized amongst these groups moved to Southern Tamilnadu and are living in remote areas including Tamilnadu-Kerala border beyond the district of Madurai.

Edgar Thurston in his “Castes and Tribes of Southern India” has covered one of the chief groups of these communities in just two lines (Edgar Thurston Rev.2007)³. It is baffling considering that otherwise it is a voluminous and most dependable work on the communities of South India. Even otherwise documentation of these communities is almost negligible. This paper attempts to begin the process, though documentation in its entirety was not possible, as

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it is a miniscule community spread very thinly over many parts of Tamilnadu. The focus area here has been Palani Chetti Patti or P.C. Patti, a panchayat town in Theni district which is about 459 kilometers from Chennai, where about 20 families have been living for over hundred years. 'Kudukudupai' as such means a small drum which is shaped like an hour glass and which is held by the person who comes to make predictions at the doorstep. Typically, a 'Kudukudupai Karan' is dressed in dhoti and shirt and over which he normally wore an old coat or in a peculiar way tied a black and red bed sheet around his shoulder, and covered his head with a long colorful turban. The middle of the drum is also tied with a colorful kerchief, mostly the color being red. His forehead is smeared with sacred ash or long tikka and he sports a thick mustache and used to line his eyes with khol giving a slightly frightful appearance.

'Kudukudupai Karan' always came shouting in a loud voice "Good times are here to arrive..." many times over. Invariably, the women of the house never completely turned him out; they believed that whatever he predicted came true. Hence, at least a small change was passed on before he moved to the next house. According to K.S. Venkataramani, an English essayist in his book '*PaperBoats*':

"The gypsy beggar is the lay extempore astrologer of Hindu society. He believes more in his own cleverness than in the possibility of distant planets exerting any influence over our destinies. So, all his glib predictions are cunningly coined phrases of certain universal currency, got out of a memory which is a rich storehouse of such jeweled wampum. He is a very clever and amiable student of human nature, remarkable for his intuitive powers. He can feel your thought pulses ten beats in advance. He is a keen observer of men and things. He is all sagacity when he is charting, in rotund phrases of mellow felicity, the immediate future of a "pumpkin-bellied" landlord in whose house he has generously posted himself. He is a sweet talker, a consummate master of honeyed words, so long as there is a chance for alms. If he be repulsed, hard fighter as he is, he reverses all his rosy predictions, and curses with all the solemnity of an injured sage; for this he is sometimes well paid in ringing knocks and blows. Still in adversity, the advertising energy of his little drum which beats the eternal 'kudu, kudu', which means in Tamil "give, give," is immense. ... (Venkataramani, 1921)⁴.

¹ Carole McGranahan "Truth, Fear and Lies: Exiled Politics and Arrested Histories of the Tibetan Resistance" <http://www.colorado.edu/Anthropology/people/bios/documents/TruthFearandLiesPDF.pdf> Referred on 30/10/2011

² Sardesai H.S.(2003) "*Shivaji: The Great Maratha*", Shivaji in Tamilnadu, Cosmo Vol:IV 1151-613

³ Thurston Edgar, (Republished 2007), "*Castes And Tribes of Southern India*" Vol: IV, Kudukudukaran 106

⁴ K.S. Venkataramani,(1921), Republished: 2007, "Paper Boats", Kessinger publication,

⁵ Kumar Suresh Singh... (2004), People of India: Maharashtra", Anthropological Survey of India, Vol:I, 16-17 Here the cultural similarities between Jogi of Maharashtra and the Kudukudpai Karan of Tamilnadu are striking. "Jogis believe in Nath cult. They pierce ears wearing a cylindering ear ring called kundala. The Bharadis adopted Jogi practices and have inherited their mystic poetry and talk in riddles. Their main occupation till recently was begging and practicing magical rites and exorcism, their orthodox rite for the dead and their begging put them outside the pale of orthodox Hindu society. They use damaru & trishul.

⁶ The Hindu, Jan 17, 2010, "Vazhnthu Kattuvom Thittam launched in Jawadu hills" <http://www.hindu.com/2010/01/17/stories/2010011754040300.html>, Referred on 30/10/2011

The quoted paragraph aptly sums up the description of the 'Kudukudupai Karan,' who in general combined astrology with begging. His predictions were always in riddles, the intelligible part of the soothsaying made one curious to get hooked to the mystery he was willing to unravel for more money. If the listener believed what he said, he would persuasively suggest a talisman or even a midnight ritual which might bring in bounties. If they were skeptical he would skilfully negotiate for an old dhoti before he moved to the next house (Kumar Singh et al, 2004)⁵.

The scenario changed some years back, the Tamilnadu government took a keen interest in weaning many such groups from their traditional occupation by starting a number of self-help schemes, giving them soft loans as well as building a hostel for their children, so that they could pursue their studies (The Hindu, 2010)⁶. All these have not completely changed their lifestyle but definitely these programs have given them a new hope and direction.

Karuppusami Rao is the leading member of the 'Kudukudpai Karan' Community in P.C. Patti. He practices astrology, palmistry and also occult and gives his service to anyone who seeks his help. He lives in a one bedroom housing board apartment and he is the only one to be doing so. There are about 20 families in the town and all live near the local bus stand practicing similar crafts.

According to the group members, the community shifted here at least a hundred years before, though they have no idea of the precise date. They say that they migrated from Thanjavur and moved first to Bodi, a city, which is short distance from P.C. Patti and from there, moved to this place. Karuppusami Rao says his great grandfather was in the employ of Thanjavur Maratha king Sarfoji and after him, their clan moved out looking for better opportunities. They used to initially stay under trees and about twenty five years back he bought this house and he was the first in the community to do.

In 1855 Lord Dalhousie annexed the Maratha kingdom of Thanjavur to the British Empire and since the last ruler Shivaji II died without a male heir and as per the provisions of Doctrine of Lapse, the claims of the female heir and the adopted son were rejected and within a day (Tara Chand, 2005),⁷ the Ranis of the late king were forced out of the palace and their assets were frozen. This led to all seventeen queens filing litigation against the British government which after a period of about ninety years gave a ruling favoring the royal family. In the meanwhile, the people, who were in the employ of the royal family as well as the people who had migrated to and had settled down in Thanjavur went through enormous hardships before they migrated to various parts of Tamilnadu looking for livelihood. The 'Jogis', 'Vasudevs' (Venkataramaya K.M, 1984)⁸ and other smaller groups which were living in Thanjavur were a few such groups which had moved south from Maharashtra looking for better opportunities and they had no

⁶ The Hindu, Jan 17, 2010, "Vazhnthu Kattuvom Thittam launched in Jawadu hills" <http://www.hindu.com/2010/01/17/stories/2010011754040300.html>, Referred on 30/10/2011

⁷ Tara Chand, (rev:2005), "History of the Freedom Movement in India" New Delhi: Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, GOI, Vol-I: 32-42

⁸ Exhibit Number A-288, 10th August 1856, High Court of Madras.

⁹ Venkataramaya K.M, 1984, "Administration and Social Life under the Maratha Rulers of Thanjavur", (Tamil), 67

¹⁰ Interview with Shri. Karupusami Rao and others in November 2003, They showed the open space where their ancestors used to stay when they first moved to this town.

hope of livelihood in that city. So they branched out to many places in Tamilnadu including Madras (Chennai), Coimbatore, Madurai, Bodi, Mannargudi and Ramnad near Rameshwaram (Karupusami Rao 2003)⁹. In Chennai, they are into many professions, especially into selling old paper. In Ramnad and Madurai they sell old clothes to Drama companies and others and some sell stainless steel vessels in exchange of old clothes and In Theni everyone is into astrology. They have five different surnames: 'Bangut', 'Madiga' (they were Telugu speaking leather working class) (Edgar Thurston)¹⁰ 'Vaster' ('Vasudev'), 'Chavan' and 'Dhargar' ('Dhangar'? Marathi cattle-breeders).¹¹ Their 'kuldevta' is Kaliswari (Kali) and none else worships the deity. They have their temple in the town. In recent times they have contracted alliances with the 'Gondhalis' of Thanjavur. Two of P.C. Patti girls were married into Nadi Rao's family, the famous Marathi speaking folk dancer of Thanjavur (Nadi Rao 2002)¹². But other than this, the community has so far not found acceptance within the Marathi speaking community in Thanjavur and other places of Tamilnadu as the Kshatriya Marathas are still not receptive about accepting this community into their fold. Also, being a miniscule community they are reluctant to talk about their status and acceptance in their surroundings and social exclusion was a subject they would rather avoid discussing.

They speak a dialect which is a mix of Marathi and Gujarati with many words being borrowed from Telugu and the tone is definite Tamil. The sentence ending sounds similar to the way Tamil language is spoken.

The people of P.C. Patti go to different cities of Tamilnadu and camp there for a long period; between six months to a year depending on their clientele and go along with their women to spread the word that they predict future. They collect the visiting cards of interested people, fix an appointment with them and go back to meet them again to practice the craft. Apart from astrology and palmistry they also practice occult; they go to the cremation ground in the night and do special 'pooja' and bring talisman to their clients. They keep moving from place to place keeping their home town as the base. The women either follow them or sometimes stay back. Their clients include politicians and government officials. They claim that they have invitations from abroad but so far no one has ventured out of the country, though some in the younger generation want to go. Some of them feel establishing trust in a new place is very tough since, it is the deciding factor in their profession; they have to work hard to earn it.

The people of this community call themselves 'Hindu Marathas' and they say that has earned them the caste certificate though they are unable to say with certainty what certificate it is. 'Hindu Maratha' is not included in either scheduled caste or tribe list, and when they were persuaded they said they were in the scheduled caste list (G.O. of TN)¹³. According to the community members, the local administration in Madurai has joined them in the Kattunayaka (Korava) community and that enables them to be in the scheduled caste list. In Ramnad they are included in the 'Most Backward Class' list. They are different from 'Kshatriya Marathas' found in many parts of Tamilnadu and they do not have marital alliance with them.

¹¹ Thurston Edgar, Vol: IV 292-325

¹² Karupusami Rao & others..

¹³ Nadi Rao, Senior Gondhal & Karagattam Artist, Thanjavur, Interviewed by author, May 10, 2002

¹⁴ G.O. MS No. 1773, Government of Tamilnadu, <http://www.tn.gov.in/gorders/adtw/adtw1773-e.html>, Referred on 30/10/2011

While the community gets government privileges, most do not complete even high school education. The dropout rates are very high; they do not save much for their future. Men, women and children get addicted to alcohol and they are also heavily into gambling. They have an association for themselves called 'The Hindu Maratha Association', headquartered in Chennai but according to Karupusami Rao the leaders indulge heavily in alcohol and are abusive. So, people of the south moved away. For some time Karupusami Rao's son was the treasurer of the local association. He brought in a restriction within the community that people should totally abstain from alcohol. For some time they listened but now they are back at it. This is a major challenge for the community.

Karupusami Rao has taken the initiative and educated his children: the son is pursuing B. Com while the daughter has completed her senior secondary but her concern is that she will be married to another astrologer, who might even be an illiterate. Though she would not go on record, she said that she did not like the idea of getting married to an astrologer since she would be moving around with him her entire life but she had no choice and would have to agree to the bridegroom her parents would choose.

In earlier times marriage was much more a simple process wherein if the boy and the girl liked each other they were married off. If the bridegroom wanted a particular girl, he would entice her parents with gifts including expensive alcohol and got the consent of the parents to marry the girl. With the community now slowly assimilating into the mainstream, the practice of arranged marriages and the girls' family spending more for their daughters and also gifting the groom are becoming the norm. They conduct the betrothal a week before the marriage and marriages are conducted for two days. The first day it starts in the evening with the bride's family inviting everyone with beetle leaves and areca nuts, and then the black bead is tied around the girl's neck. The girl's parents give a feast for everyone for which the boy should gift a goat. In turn, the boy's parents should invite everyone and arrange a feast. According to Karupusami Rao, people with the same surnames are considered siblings, hence, they are not married but they inter-marry within the five surnames. In olden days, the boy was given a new loin cloth at the time of marriage and was made to wear sacred thread and also a turban, due to modernity these practices have stopped.

The main festival of these communities seems to be 'Ugadi' ('Gudi padwa'). In the month of 'Panguni' ('Falguni') they celebrate it. They plant a stick and place a vessel on top of it in the inverted position, their hour-glass like drum and other tools used in their profession are worshipped, they wear new cloths and worship their professional tools. They keep the stick for three days and afterwards it is removed. The other festival that is celebrated is 'Holi' in which they wear new dresses and seek the blessings of the family elders. Though other Hindu festivals are celebrated, they are not as elaborate as these two are.

Many in the community, like the Karupusami Rao's family, feel that they should move away from their hereditary profession and become educated like other communities. Their reasons are: they feel that their profession does not guarantee them a stable income, also, many of them do not like wandering so much like before.