

## **The role of “Panchakammalar” in the Jaffna society: a social and linguistic perspective**

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The main focus of this study is to identify the role of “Panchakammalar” from a social and linguistic perspective. “Panchakammalar” is an umbrella term which includes the five artisan castes of the Sri Lankan Tamil community, namely the Thatcher (carpenters), Thattar (goldsmiths), Kollar (iron workers), Kannar (metal craftsmen using metals other than gold, silver and iron) and Kalthatcher (craftsmen working with stone) castes. These castes occupy the middle strata of the caste hierarchy in the Tamil society. These artisan castes are usually endogamous, and marriage within these castes is rarely practiced. They comprise approximately 1.5% of the Jaffna population. According to the information obtained from social service officers and through individual interviews, a majority of the families from these castes belong to the middle income level, but there are a few who belong to the high income group since they have special skills such as chariot building or making statues for temples. Those who belong to the low income groups, especially of the Kannar and Thattar castes migrated to India during the three decades of war since they had connections with Indian artisan communities. However, those who had special skills remained here since they relied mostly on temples for their income and that was not much affected. These castes have their own myths which claim that they are descendants of Vishvakarma, or the architect of the gods, and call themselves “Visvakarma kulam”. The men from these castes wear a cord across their chests similar to Brahmins, but it consists of a single strand of thread whereas the cord worn by Brahmins contains three strands of thread, explanations to which practices are found in Hindu scriptures. All these castes are ardent Saivites and live mostly around Hindu temples as they are dependent on them for their incomes. The artisan castes maintain close connections with South Indian artisan communities for business reasons. Some of the families still have marital ties with Indian communities. These castes still maintain a distinct vocabulary and usage patterns. Their spoken language was recorded or noted down during participatory sessions with their consent and then analyzed and certain features such as special vocabulary, sentence structures and usage patterns which distinguish from others were identified. They also have special ritual practices and religious practices which are not practiced by others. The methodology adopted was largely participatory. Direct participation, interviews, and observation were the main methods of data collection. Social service officers and Grama Niladaris were also interviewed to obtain background information.

Key words:-

Panchakammalar, Thatcher, Thattar, Kollar, Kannar, Kalthatcher, Vishvakarma, Saivites.