

Gypsy culture and society in the changing world: a sociological analysis of Gypsies in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Gypsies are an ethnic group distributed in many parts of the world, adjusted to living conditions of different living environments, but having a common identity. They are basically described as a group of nomads. This paper demonstrates the change of their centuries old culture in the modern world, including the inclination to setup permanent settlements. Those subject to study are the members of a Gypsy village in North Central Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Gypsies are a small tribal community which has been spread along the globe. In Sri Lanka, they are mostly populated in North Central and Eastern provinces (See Appendix 1).

Basically they are a group of nomads; people wandering from one place to another (The Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol 5, 1989, 593). Within Sri Lankan context, they are a small community with an independent culture. However, within the global community they also have been subject to change. Most of the members of this community still depend on traditional occupations and nomadic behavior but are moving towards stable habitats. This paper is a comparative study on their past and present social behaviours. In addition, some of their problems and challenges also have been uncovered. This is based on a study done in a small gypsy hamlet in Anuradhapura district, North Central Province of Sri Lanka.

This is a comparative study on the past and present life styles of the particular group. The research method was life histories method. Data was collected using informal interviews and observations. Also, secondary sources were used such as records of midwives, banks, divisional secretariat, and the school of the area.

Nomenclature

In Sri Lanka, gypsies are commonly called as *Kuthandi* or *Ahi Guntika*. In Pali language, *Ahi* is for serpents. *Guntika* is for fascinator. Therefore *Ahi Guntika* is termed as the person who catches serpents or the person who makes them dance (Buddadatta, 1950,). Gypsies are also termed as "Romas" (Singular: Rom). There are many other terms in various parts of the world.

Origin and Distribution

There are some stories about gypsies in Buddhist *jathataka katha* including *Champeyya* and *Bhuridaththa* jathakas.

Presently they are dispersed in all the continents of the world. Sri Lanka, India, Persia, Africa, Hungaria, Australia, Spain, and Romania are famous as destinations of the gypsy communities. The world Roma population is estimated to be 5-10 million, and 6-8 million of them live in Europe. The country with the largest population of Roma is Romania with 0.6-1.5 million (Explanation guide).

They have their own language called Romany. This language is related to Hindi, Panjabi, and Bengali and closely related to the modern Indo-European languages of northern India.

In Europe Romany language is mixed with other languages such as Spanish (Explanation guide).

Basham (1959) states that their origin should be in India. Gypsies have Austroloid human features and they are more close to people from "Telugu" than Tamils (Basham, 1959).

Historians have mentioned that there are enough facts to prove the origin of the gypsy communities. Before the period of Emperor Ashoka, (3rd century B.C) they shifted to North Western India along the banks of river *Ganga*. According to some analyses gypsies migrated from Northern India to Persia in 11th century AD. Also in 14th and 15th centuries they migrated to South Eastern Europe and Western Europe respectively (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1989). Genetic Studies strengthen anthropological and linguistic theories stating that founding members of the Roma migrated from India to Eastern Europe in about A.D. 1000 (Brownie, 2004).

However, the origin of the gypsies draws back to a long history which has faded their true origin. Therefore European gypsies falsely believe that they are descending from Egyptians. Northern Asian gypsies believe they are descending from Jews (Basham, 1959). The community subjected to this study strongly believes they are descending from a group of 24000 gypsies who came here from Waduga country during King Wasabha period. They even give out evidences such as the proficiency of Telugu language. Lanka's tail end of *rajawali* has several Waduga nationals as country's headsman including the last King- Sri Wickrama Rajasingha.

They are proud of being attached to Bodhisatwa stories and majestic blood (Field data, 2005).

Previous sociological studies

Many studies can be found on gypsies in other countries and regions, including France, America, Hungary, Africa, and Czech Republic. Many of these texts explain the present change of communities in their respective regions. In some European gypsy groups, gender specific leadership is evident. The male leader is called “voivode” and the female leader is “phuridai” (Encyclopedia Britannica 1989).

Devendra (2005) has an account of a gypsy village in Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka. It is an account of day-to-day experiences of a government administrative officer. In 2001, Sri Lanka Interactive Media Group published a report on difficulties faced by the Kudagama Gypsy Community (KGC). Ranasinghe (2003) provides a general account on gypsy communities in Sri Lanka. He also confirms that there is a cultural change.

Place of study

Gypsies can be found in 3 major areas of the country. These are Ampara (Eastern Province), Batticola (Eastern Province) and Kalawewa (North Central Province) In Kalawewa, it is mainly in Kudagama and Galgamuwa which have separate gypsy groups. Among these, a particular segment was selected as the sample. All the members of the gypsy hamlet called ‘Kudagama’ were included in the study. It is situated 2 kilometers westwards from Bendi wewa junction along the Anuradhapura-Kurunegala main road.

The community

The KGC has earlier been settled in Kumbuk Wewa, a village which is also in the same administration region. However in 1984, the government resettled them in

the present location due to the Mahaweli development project. Table 1 shows details of the selected population.

Number of families	240
Total population in the area	1182
Males	520
Females	662

Table 1. Population in Kudagama Gypsy Community

Comparative study of the early and present cultures of KGC

Language

All members of Kudagama speak *Telugu* language But they cannot write Telugu characters. Presently, in addition to Telugu they can speak Sinhala and only a few can manage English. The trend is to teach other languages than Telugu, for children.

Administration and Court System

The court system of KGC has its own administrative hierarchy. The leader of a community living in one place is called an *Arachchila*. He is normally over thirty years old. He is selected upon considering his skills and un-biasness. No female leadership is evident in Sri Lankan context. There are special tasks either overlooked or managed by the leader. He has the right to take decisions on behalf of his group on matters such as wandering (*salang* – as they call it), marriages, and family conflicts. In addition, they handle community loans too.

Arachchila is also the court leader in a group. If there is a problem that he cannot solve, it is forwarded to *Koralamawa*. He is superior to Arachchila. He is the leader to several gypsy groups in different parts of the country.

According to field data, previously the court fee must be paid by both parties. A special treatment must be given by the complainer to the court leader which includes alcohol and meat. Informal communications revealed some ancient predefined punishments inside the group for some common faults.

1. Burgling: put fingers into boiled water, or touch hot iron. If hand is burnt, the defendant is judged as the burglar.
2. Immoral sexual behavior: the defendant should bring water in fresh pot. If water is leaked from the pot, the judgment is in favor of the plaintiff.

Since 1981 to 1994, Muddiyandi Muththusamy was the leader in Kudagama group. Then it was Nadaraja who took the leadership. He was awarded with a post of justice of peace in 1989 by the government. There is a significant difference of the ruling system between then and now. Nadaraja is still giving leadership to the group, but his role has become nominal. Kudagama community has developed its ruling system into a more corporative system. Now they have a welfare organization called *Maranadhara* (facilitating families with money and manpower after a death of a member) and *Tharuna* (Youth) society. This organization has monthly meetings. The chairman is elected by the membership. For example, a youth from the community, E. Bandula (28) is the present leader of this association. They have plans to improve the livelihood of the community. They pay a great attention on children. Therefore they directly interfere to problems such as schooling, controlling of the number of members in a family, child marriages and sanitary conditions. They also decide on dates of wandering.

Religion

God Shiva, ancestors and *Naga* (serpant) were the traditional idiomatic symbols of worship. Ancestral worship is performed by making clay statues and offering them food and alcohol. However, it has not been publicly practiced after 1988 in Kudagama. Now there are 48 Buddhist families (20% of population). There is a temple in the village established in 1982. The monk residing there is a Sinhalese. 192 families (80%) belong to a Christian mission called "Assembly of God". The closest church is around 10 kms away from the village.

Dwellings

The traditional house of this community is prepared from palm leaves. Inside floor area is 7x9 feet while the height is 5 feet (see fig 1.). The utensils of every household were knife, winnowing fan (*kulla*), pitcher, pot, grinding stone, coconut scraper, snake horn, and snake box.

Transformation from these to present housing systems started during the period they obtained permanent places to live. In the latter part of 1980s, they started building brick houses. However, still the conversion is taking place. Traditional houses also exist as well as houses built using modern building materials. Some have used asbestos, corrugated iron sheets, or clay tiles for roof. Clay, bricks, wood, and cement blocks have been used to build walls. Size of houses ranges from small to medium. Most houses possess TV sets, radios, fans, and refrigerators, in addition to daily necessities. However, a few households lack even daily necessities.

Transport

Early transport method of the community was donkey. Now it is unseen. Most of the houses now have bicycles, and motorcycles. Some agricultural families use the tractor as a transport mode. Use of public transport is also common.

Pets and animal husbandry

Traditionally they had donkey, snake, dog and monkey in each household. Donkey was for transport while the snake and monkey were generating income through performances. Dog was used as the guard of the house while they were away from temporary residence. Now, donkey has lost its place while the number of dogs in a household has increased. Snakes and monkeys have retained their status. In addition, pythons also perform. Some families have got used to animal husbandry. They have poultry, goats, and cows.

Food habits

Gypsies in Sri Lanka were hunters who chased after small mammals in nearby forests where they resided. Now they use common food. However, they prefer bread with *wadei* (a hot, starchy Indian food) for breakfast. Lunch is prepared with rice, vegetables, and fish or meat. Use coconut milk, but prefer foods cooked with coconut oil. Some members accepted that they still prefer wild meat.

They consume fruits which are available in home gardens, but there is no habit of buying from the market.

There is no concept of balanced diet and there is no special consideration of baby food. However, now they take advice from the midwife of the area. Also they feed babies with formulas.

Occupation

Their major occupations were palm reading and performing snakes before crowds. Males demonstrate snake and monkey performances, and show magic or tricks. Female partners are fortune tellers and some times even beg for money. Meanwhile they are collecting some home appliances and dry foods. The present setting is somewhat different from this picture. Now some of them are engaged in different economical sectors such as paddy cultivating, farming, laboring, and driving.

Salan yema, or wandering is a specific feature in gypsies' life. They earn money practicing their occupations during these trips. Normally separate groups select separate places to visit. These places and dates are the decisions of the leader. They spend more than three weeks for a trip. Initially, it was the snake who was the main performer, but now the monkey has over taken the snake.

Marriage

They have their own marriage customs. They give first priority for marriages between blood relatives. Because they know each other from childhood, they

think that type of marriages will last longer. Youngsters of the group have to seek for their partners from the members of the same group. However, if there is no suitable partner within the group, they have to look in other groups. Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday are considered the auspicious days for wedding ceremonies. Bride wears a white saree and a white jacket while the groom wears a yellow shirt and white sarong. In addition, he wears a *jatah*. Bride's ornaments include a lot of glass and silver bangles, and necklaces. Catholics held marriage ceremonies in Church while Hindus go to Kovil. Buddhists have the ceremony in their own homes. *Poosari*, a clergy sings shlokas (rhythmic preaching) and the groom ties a necklace on bride's neck. He also wears a bangle on her hand. This completes the marriage. Bride's relatives present a dog, a donkey and a snake to the groom as the dowry. Food and dancing add color to the ceremony. At one stage of the function, the groom goes under a white cloth canopy (*wiyana*) while men play snake horn and women hit bronze pots filled with water (Punchihewa, 1989).

The present system has changed a little, and marriages between blood relations are now rare. Both love marriages and proposed marriages are common. The boy visits girl's home with his relatives. They take enough food items with them to treat his group. If both parties agree they fix dates for the ceremony. Presently they have mixed with other ethnic groups as well. However, only two ethnically mixed couples live within the community. There are other such couples who are living out side the village. Along with the traditional marriage, now they arrange the legal registration too. A mass registration project was conducted by the government in 1999 to register those who had not adhered to this policy.

Education

Earlier, knowledge was transferred from parent to child; from mother to daughter, and father to son. However, a government school was constructed in the village in 1984, and now, there are 195 boys and 179 girls studying. The filed data reveals that many children leave the school at the ages 8-12. By 2004, there were 3 students who sat the GCE Ordinary Level exam and one got through. She started studying at a nearby high school but later gave up studies. There is one nursery

school inside the village and the teacher is also from the same community. Also there is a Sunday school of the Buddhist temple. Around twenty students study here. The attendance is not regular.

A non-government organization; *Sri Lanka Interactive Media Group, Colombo*, holds non-formal education programs for the children.

Attainment

The girl who got attained adolescence is kept inside a separate palm leave hut for seven days, along with a cousin sister. After seven days, an aunt of the girl bathes her. The custom is completed with the killing of a rooster by an uncle. This tradition is seen also at present times.

Banking

In the past gypsies earned their day-today livelihood by wandering but never saved for the future. They were heavily addicted alcoholics. Present-day-men also are addicted to alcohol. However, women tend to save. They maintain bank accounts, mainly in state banks. In the *Thambuttegama Branch of the Bank of Ceylon*, there are about 75 – 100 active accounts (Savings, NRFC, Childrens’) maintained by the community. Most families have substantial amounts of savings. They do not apply for bank loans.

Method	Type of medication	Number of females
LRT	Surgery	56
Depropevera	Intra venous	85
Contraceptive pills	Oral	05

table 2. Use of contraceptive methods by females of the selected group 1982 to December 2004’.

Family planning

In the past, family planning was forbidden within the KGC and there were about seven or eight children in a family. Still males do not agree to use contraception. However midwives were able to pursue the females. Table 2 shows the use of different contraceptive methods by females.

Dress

Traditionally males cover the bottom with a piece of cloth. Top was either covered with a shirt or exposed. Traditional female dress is a type of saree. Females tie-up hair into a bun on top of the head. They wear glass necklaces and bangles. Now only the people who earn their living by traditional methods wear this costume. Kudagama youths wear costumes worn by the Sinhalese and the Muslims. The young men there wear trousers and shirts

Naming system.

Naming pattern of gypsies is unique to them. Their children get father's given name as their surname. An example follows. (Please note that 'ge' after the first part of the name denotes the relationship to the parent).

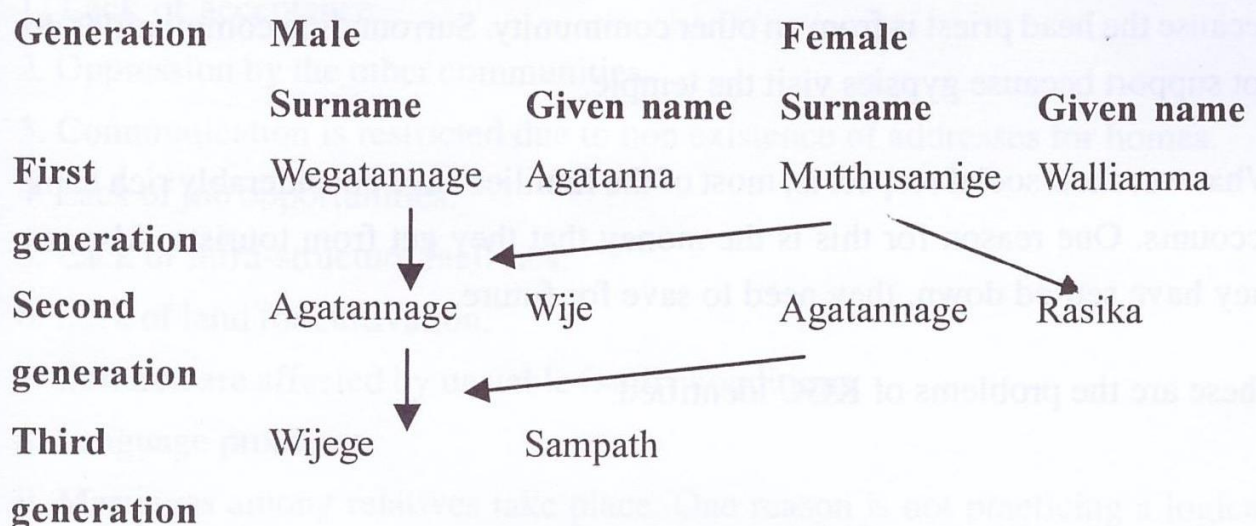


Fig 3. Naming system in the community (hypothetical)

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the analyses of historical records, one can consider Sri Lankan gypsies also came from Northern India. But the Kudagama community believes that their origin is from “Kuravar tribe” in Madurei and Pandya in Southern India (Field data, 2005). Now their Austroloid human features have been changed probably due to mixing with other communities.

Having permanent lands greatly influenced a change in their behavior. It was one reason for some of the members to give-up wandering and start other lifestyles such as farming. Eighty per cent of members have joined the church of “Assembly of god”. According to some observers from the community itself, the reason for that is, because the members can go outside the village. That makes it easy for them to change, and to make relationships with others. Because many people surrounding their own community do not want to make relationships with them. They condemn gypsies as a group with whom they should not mix with. In comparison, other communities in the country have more self respect than this community.

This has affected other institutions also. For example, the head priest of the temple of KGC has faced a difficult situation. KGC doesn't support the temple much because the head priest is from an other community. Surrounding communities do not support because gypsies visit the temple.

Whatever their social respect is, most of the families have considerably rich bank accounts. One reason for this is the money that they get from tourists. Also, as they have settled down, they need to save for future.

These are the problems of KGC identified.

Problems faced by the Children

1. Lack of fluency in Sinhala language.
2. Lack of parental care.

3. Health problems.
4. Children are used by adults to earn a living.
5. Lack of basic necessities.
6. Unhealthy family environment.
7. Parents are heavy drinkers.
8. Cultural alienation.
9. Has to take decisions of their life at an early stage.
10. Lack of sufficient education.

Problems faced by parents

1. Illiteracy
2. Lack of time for parental care due to high mobility.
3. Lack of healthy family environment.
4. Addiction to alcohol.

Problems faced by the community in common

1. Lack of acceptance.
2. Oppression by the other communities.
3. Communication is restricted due to non existence of addresses for homes.
4. Lack of job opportunities.
5. Lack of infra-structure facilities.
6. Lack of land for cultivation.
7. Children are affected by unstable family conditions.
8. Language problems.
9. Marriages among relatives take place. One reason is not practicing a logical naming system.
10. Job satisfaction low (snakes charming and palm reading).
11. Although they like to have access to the modern world they have difficulties in adjusting.

12. Political harassments
13. Many (201) do not have birth certificates.
14. Many (123) do not have the right to vote.
15. No national identity cards.

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