



Research Paper

Subdivisions of Community and the Family System of Vaniya Community in Kerala

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ABSTRACT: Kerala is one of the most fortunate and richest states in its tradition and culture. In Kerala the elaboration of caste and the community is based on varna system that is the caste based divisions. The paper is an attempt to showcase there are considerable regional subdivisions in the communities of Kerala. It is an attempt to understand the family system and subdivisions of community of Vaniya community in North Malabar region Kerala in a detailed manner too.

KEY WORDS: Caste, Illam, Tharavadu, Theyyam, Vaniya Community

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The caste system in Kerala is unique with its rituals and caste hierarchies and is very different from the rest of India. In Kerala, in the olden times except the Namboothiri caste who were the priestly caste, other casts were considered to be *shudras* or untouchables. A different kind of *varna* model that is caste system is persisting in Kerala then and today. Among those many castes not much has been said and written about the origins of Vaniyars, one of the other backward communities in North Malabar region of Kerala. Some of the vague observations are available associated with the North Indian Community called Baniya with that of Vaniya. In the olden times, their practices such as *theyyam* (dance ritual form) celebrations, marriage tradition and trade of oil made them unique among other backward castes of Malabar.

The castes of North Malabar region of Kerala still follow the subdivisions among the castes. According to Hardgrave “among the Hindus, there are approximately 420 castes (*jati*) in Kerala, and the average village contains 17 caste groups. Despite the dispersed spatial pattern of settlement, there is a definite social nucleus and the castes are elaborately ranked in the ritual hierarchy, each separated not only by endogamy, commensality, dialectual variation, and ritual pollution, but by spatial distance as well.” (2) The British used their colonial power to control the locals of Malabar by taking advantage of the caste hierarchy. The relationship between the caste and job is one of the atrocities faced by the Malabarians. The people were unyielding to do the work apart from their hierarchical traditional job in the olden times. The castes like Kurichyar, Mannan, Pulayan, Thattan, Asaari, Moosari, Kollan and Chetti are some of them which do not come under the mainstream of caste are really became ‘silent communities.’ This paper is an attempt to analyse the Vaniya community in a detailed manner with a firsthand data collection.

Vaniyars are a community whose traditional occupation is oil extraction. In the olden times they extract oil with the use of a *chakku* a machine with a large bowl shaped structure and a pestle which is run by bullocks. The pestles are tied with bulls and when they walk around the *chakku*, the oil seeds got crushed. Thus they extract oil and collect it in vessel. They sell the oil to other communities thus they are traders also. Nowadays the system underwent changes and all the communities started doing all the jobs apart from their traditional jobs. Like other backward castes Vaniya castes also have *theyyams* (ritualistic dance form) and *kavus* (shrines for worship) of their own. It is important to analyse the never touched portions like systems of *tharavadu* (joint family system) and *illam* (subdivisions of caste) of Vaniya community which still persist in Malabar region of Kerala.

The term *tharavadu* has multiple connotations. One such is that there are traditional vernacular houses in Kerala which are named as *tharavadu*. The building is not only structurally arranged but symbolises an emotional bonding between the people belong to it. The basic social units or the *tharavadus* are the joint families in Malabar. Each village has at least one *tharavadu* to provide the services that a particular caste can offer. These families are addressed differently based on the castes of the dwellers. The term *tharavadu* turned out to be very famous during the colonial rule, when the disputes related to land came into being.

People of Kerala either belong to their mother's *tharavadu* or father's *tharavadu*. There is a power hierarchy visible in the joint family system of *tharavadu* (joint family system which can be matrilineal and patrilineal). In *tharavadu*, the oldest members, both males and females were considered to be the heads of the family; any decision on family-related matters taken up by the common agreement of the heads. The Malayalam term '*Karanavar*' can also refer honorific title to an elderly male or the head of a lineage. The author Vishnu Namboothiri recorded in his book *Uthara Keralathile Thottam Pattukal* (Trans. *The Thottam Songs of North Malabar Region of Kerala*), the conversation with Babu Karnamoorthi a veteran *theyyam* artist that most of the *thottams* (songs of *theyyams*) were scripted on palm leaves and hoarded by *karanavar* of *tharavadu* (the head of the family). And in one or other way the rituals in *kavus* or shrines related to the concerned *tharavadus* of the place.

The sub-lineages or *tharavadu* create the main lineages or *illams* which constitute the caste of a region, combined with other lineages of the same caste and different castes together and they make villages. Caste membership determines the services that a person has to provide in the village. Both *makkathayees* (inheritance by sons and daughters matrilineally) and *marumakkathayees* (inheritance by nephews and nieces) have *illams* (subdivisions in the same community). Different anthropologists have approached *tharavadu* in different dimensions. It is the researcher Kathleen Gough argued that *tharavadu* is a matrilineal social organization or matrilineage descended from a common ancestress (Mencher 325). The members of *tharavadu* have responsibilities regarding the management of celebrations, calendar rituals, and day-to-day activities.

Apart from the caste system, the communities in North Malabar region of Kerala are again divided into *illams* (subdivisions). That is in different communities again people are classified. The persons belong to the same *illams* seem to be siblings. The exogamous system helps to avoid the marriage alliances with the same community. The other backward communities include Vaniya, Thiyya, Mukkuva, Nair, Valluvan and Vannan have *illams*. Among this Vaniya community is having nine *illams*, Thiyya and Vannan community is having eight *illams* and the Mukkuva community is having about four *illams* respectively. The word meaning of *illam* translates as the basis of the community. From an *illam*, the family tree starts, where the *tharavadus* or ancestral houses can be located. The *tharavadus* are based on both the father's and mother's ancestry. They still retain large ancestral houses where the member's join together at least once in a year. In Malabar region of Kerala the *tharavadu*'s are having their own shrines and deities' where they perform *theyyams* with the help of the performing community members.

Vaniyas belongs to the other backward caste among the caste categories in Kerala. The reason why some of the particular communities are placed in a particular place is according to their traditional working skills. In the olden times the *tharavadu* and most of the temples require daily supply of oil which was done by Vaniyas. As we discussed earlier, the oil extraction and supply was the major occupation of Vaniya in the olden times. There are nine subdivisions among Vaniyas. Some of the *illams* of Vaniya community are Muchilottu Vaniyan, Thachilam Vaniyan, Naroor Vaniyan, Kunhothu Vaniyan, Chorula Vanniyan etc. In his article "Onpathillam Nammodu Parayunnath," (Trans. "What the Nine *Illams* Say to us") Dr. Dineshan Vadakkiniyil has confirmed that *Onpathu Illam* is not a community name but a sub-community among Vaniya. The *illams* cannot be seen in any records of the reference under the governmental records but working as a practised system in the oral tradition of the community and also in the system of marriage.

The *illams* are associated with many myths and thus *theyyams* too and an active discourse practice is visible in it. The power hierarchy existed among caste system is similar to the classification of *illams*. Among the classification of *illams*, a glimpse of the power structure existed in the community can be surmised. Muchilottu Vaniyan is said to be the first and foremost of the nine *illams* since they bear the name is associated with Muchilottu. Their ancestral home is at Karivellur of Kannur district known as the first Muchilottu temple where the major oracles belong to Muchilottu Vaniyan *Illam*. *Theyyam* in its utterances address the community members in general as the people of *onpathillam* (nine sub castes). It is clear that the communities and the rituals in *kavus* are parallel to each other.

While considering the family system in the olden period nearly 120 years back, there were some rules followed by the members of Vaniya castes. As there are different spaces allotted in shrines, and the house of the middle class members was also divided according to some notions especially based on gender and position. The *adukkala* (kitchen) was actually the greenroom and the men were not supposed to enter freely. The *padinjatta* (prayer room), where the house wife was not usually allowed to enter; the brother in law who was known as *inangan* was allowed. The *kottilakam* (bed room) was the space for the wife of young men who was known as *inangathi*. The strangers had to stand away from courtyard and only the relatives were allowed to enter the *akathirayam* (courtyard). In the olden days people come with *thondu* (coconut shell) to buy oil in the house of Vaniya and have to keep the shell near the *Ala* (ritual place) and had to stay away. The one who pours the oil made sure that he never touches anything. It was also persisted that *thenga* (coconut) would not be received in the peeled form but as raw. The members of a family did their work jointly and the women never went outside for other jobs.

Almost all the communities including the Brahmin community have to wear a small piece of white cloth named *maatu* during the fourth day's bath of menstruation which literally removes her impurity which should be supplied by the Vannanthan community (community traditionally do laundry). This practice was followed by Vaniya Community also. The small white clothe symbolises purity. This practice is followed as a life style and history says the prohibition of *maatu* is considered as a punishment in the olden times.

Thodal and *theendal* are the two social discriminations that pre-existed as rituals in the olden period, which were temporarily evaded by bathing according to the popular 'Savarna' notion. Those practices are followed by the Vaniya community. These evil practices were retained in the rituals by Vaniya community who considered the *theyyam* performing community as 'avarnas' and the organizing community and the Brahmin community as the 'savarnas'. The notion of purity is a chain process when the *ashudha* or the impure touches the *shudha* or the pure; their purity is also to be under suspicion. The impurity thus washed out with cow dung water which is supposed to be the cleanser of all impurities. The evil practices are still continuing in Kerala except during the performance in *theyyams* where the performer overcomes these notions by acting himself as a demi-god. The *theyyams* addresses the believers as *Paithangale* (oh my children), *Kunhukutti Paraatheenangale* (oh my children and my family), *Nalillakkare* (four *illams*), *Ettillakkare* (eight *illams*), *Onpathillakkare* (nine *illams*) and so on and this is commonly addressing the number of *illams* or division that a particular community belongs to.

There are a lot of oral stories regarding Vaniya community and their subdivisions. According to Jayachandran Keezhoth's observation, the Kottila Vaniyars are the races had its root from the child of Vaniya men with that of Ambalavasi women. Dr. Jayachandran Keezhoth described the story as follows; a Vaniya men, who came to sell coconut oil to Madathil Illam in Kottila and falling in love with a virgin of that home and impregnates her. The woman expelled from the house and later married the Vaniya men by bearing his child. The interesting factor is that in Kerala, in the olden times, people follow their maternal ancestry accordingly their caste and community system. However, as a controversy to this, in the particular story the paternal ancestry named after the child. Another story is that once Kottila Namboothiri, an upper class clan while going to attend a case saw a Vaniya woman as an omen before of him. The case won by Namboothiri and the happy man married the same Vaniya woman by believing that she is the reason for his victory. Both myths are examples of invasion of Brahmin community into Vaniya community. It showcase that other communities are earnestly desire to be elevated. The lower caste's rules and regulations are flexible in nature and it is also evident that exogamous marriages are not rare in community but the ceremonial laws are very strictly followed by the people.

Thus it can be concluded that about hundred years ago in the North Malabar region of Kerala there existed a complex system of community life. In its subdivisions and rituals, the castes conceived a unique system of their own. This system has its negatives including untouchability and unapproachability. But at the same time the castes remained as such without diminishing and extinction by following the strict rules of their own. Vaniya caste is such a community which is still following stern rules and norms of their own which highlight their caste position among other backward castes of North Malabar region of Kerala.

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