

LOCAL HISTORY OF PANIYAS IN NILAMBUR AREAS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MARRIAGE FESTIVAL AND FUNERAL CUSTOM FROM 1800 A.D. TO 1947 A.D.

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Paniyas are the largest single Scheduled Tribe in Kerala. They settled in groups. "Paniyas are inhabitants of Palghat, Calicut and Canannore Districts. They are aboriginal slaves of the soil and live where there are plantations and rice cultivation. Greater numbers have their homes in the Manantavady and Vythiri Taluks. They are also settled in Madras and Mysore States. The name is the modified form of the Malayalam word Panikkar (labourer)."

Keywords: Paniyas, Acharam kettal.



A photo of Paniya from Caste and Tribes of Southern India

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Paniyas are the largest single Scheduled Tribe in Kerala. They settled in groups. Paniyas are settled in Puvathipoyil (Vazhikkadavu Panchayath), Kallumpadam (Chungathara Panchayath), Putharippadam (Edakkara Panchayath), Modavanna and Akampadam (Chaliyar Panchayath) in Old Ernad Taluk. They are aboriginal slaves of the soil and live at high elevations where there are plantations and rice cultivation. They are settled in Manantavady and Vythiri Taluks. They are also seen the Madras and Mysore States. The name is the modified form word Panikkar (labourers). They worshipped trees, stones, animals and ancestors. Paniyas are still animists and the temples that they construct consist of layers and stones. Marriage was celebrated by them by offering feast according to their caste rule. Sister or mother of bridegroom tied a chain or thread on the neck of girl before marriage day called 'acharam kettal'. Monogamy was the rule of marriage practice. There is no obstacle to marry more than one wife if a man wish to marry. Marriage ceremonies were held by Mooppan. They buried dead body of their relatives according to their caste rules and funeral rites. There are stray cases of cremation but that is done more to satisfy their landlords. On the seventh day of death they performed folk dance and songs at the grave. They performed funeral songs called adiyanthrampattu. In the month of Makaram they performed interesting ceremonies for the repose of the souls of the deceased. Pollution connected with death lasts for 15 days during which period most of them bathe twice a day, refrain from work and avoid eating fish and meat.

Origin

The work or 'pani' of forest was done by Paniyas. The name Paniyas derived to them from

the word 'pani'. Edgar Thurston stated that "the word Paniyan means labourer, and they believe their original occupation was agriculture as it is, for the most part, at the present day."² They settled in Nilambur areas of Old Ernad Taluk. They worked in paddy fields, forests of Nilambur areas. Some of them worked in the lands and houses of local landlords like., Nairs and higher castes of Hindu Religion. "The Paniyas are the most numerous of the jungle tribes. They are found in the Wynad, where they are agricultural coolies and the food-hills throughout the district except in the Palghat taluk."³ Some of them look like Negros with dark and curly hair. Lieutenants Ward and Corner puts forth that "in physiognomy they are of an almost negroid type with black skin, curly hair and broad noses. In the Wynad they wear, when working in the fields, a big basket work hat made of split reeds and shaded like an inverted coal scoop, called a kontai."⁴ They settled in some places on the availability of occupations. A.A.D. Luiz opined that "Paniyas have very poor huts near farms and plantations where they are employed. Such of them engaged in rice and cash crops cultivation are obliged to move from place to place with their families in search of employment. When employed they put up temporary structure with bamboo and other material available locally."⁵ They worked in the lands of local landlords like., Thirumulpad of Nilambur Kovilakams. Lieutenants Ward and Corner opined that "the whole of the timber forest, as well as several kuttam or farms scattered around, each having a stripe of paddy cultivation, belongs to him. The Paniyars, a low class, reside and cultivate small tracts in the forest – they are all slaves to the Tirupad, they assist in the cultivation of all his forms, during the fair season, but are principally employed in cutting timber, which the Tirupad disposes off to individuals who contract for it."⁶

Paniyas are the aborigines and have Negretic elements in their physical appearance. Actually they are driven out to forests by the new settlers like local landlords. Edgar Thurston opined that "Kapiri (Africa or the cape) is also sometimes suggested as their original habitat, who have had the remarks of Europeans communicated to them. The Paniyans himself, though he occasionally puts forward one or

other of the places as the home of his forefathers, has no fixed traditions bearing on their arrival in Malabar, beyond one to the effect that they brought from a far country where they were found living by a Raja, who captured them, and carried them off in such a miserable conditions that a man and his wife only possessed one cloth between them and were so timid that it was only by means of hunting nets that they were captured."⁷ Even now they are very interest to hunting. Aged people have more Negretic elements in their physical appearances. That we can see from the following photo taken by me during my field study.

The new generation is attracted by modern developments. Their origin is shrouded in mystery. A.A.D. opined that "there are numerous speculations regarding the origin of the tribe. Some are the opinion that they are an African tribe that came into India after a ship wreck on the west coast. Their cephalic and nasal indices indicate of resemblance to the long armed Negros and Kapiries. When excited they utter the word Ippi and that leads to the presumption that they had their early origin in the but unfortunately these hills remain un located. Paniyas claim that they were brought to Wynad by a Raja of Malabar several centuries ago, but information is available regarding their early home. "⁸ They believed that they are the original inhabitants of our country. They are very poor. People believed that some of them were thieves and plundered the wealth and ornaments of those who passed through the forests.

Physical appearances

Paniyas are settled in Ambalakkunnu, Puvathipoyil (Vazhikkadavu), Kallumpadam, Pallikkuth, Kotteppadam, Kunnath (Chungathara), Putharippadam (Edakkara), Modavanna and Akampadam (Chaliyar) in Old Ernad Taluk. A.A.D. Luiz opined that "they are a daring t r i b e s f a m o u s



A Paniya sitting near his hut

panthers with spears and nets, and in these operations they rival the Hamron lion hunters of Africa. They resemble African tribes in hair and thick lips. They are short and their complexion varies from dark to darker shade of brown. Both sexes wear ear rings and rings use nose rings, bangles, chains, coloured beads and rolled palm leaves in their dialect ear lobes. Men are semi naked and paniyathies (female) short dhoties and a cloth to cover their breast."⁹

Paniyas have vital role in pattu festival of Nilambur. In order to inaugurate Nilambur pattu Paniyas carried wild bamboos from forest and placed it in front of the Vettakkorumakan temple. They stayed in the festival ground at Kovilakathmuri Nilambur for 1 month. They observed fast and avoided non vegetarian food. The landlord offered feast to them called sarvanisadya. Paniyas are treated this feast as sacred and believed it have medicinal effect to protect from diseases. Nettur P. Damodran stated that "They were agricultural



Paniyas of Cherupuzha colony

labourers. They settled in the places like., fields, forests and p a s t o r a l agricultural lands. Their huts were c a l l e d kudumbukal. They were nomadic and rarely settled in one particular place. On and work they settled from one place to another."¹⁰ They are dark in complexion with curly hair. According to Edgar Thurston, "the Paniyans are dark skinned tribe short in stature, with broad noses, and curly or wavy hair, inhabiting the wynad, and those portions of the Ernad Calicut Kurumbranad and Kottayam taluks of Malabar." ¹¹. He mentions that they are settled in Mudanad, Cherangod, and Namblakod amshams district. Lietenants Ward and Corner puts forth that "in physiognomy they are of an almost negroid type with black skin, curly hair and In the Wynad they wear, when working in the fields, a big basket work hat made of split reeds and shaded like an inverted coal kontai."¹² They settled in some places on the

availability of occupations. A.A.D. Luiz opined that "Paniyas have very poor huts near farms plantations where they are employed. Such of them engaged in rice and cash crops cultivation are obliged to move from place to place families in search of employment. When employed they put up temporary structure with bomboo and other material available locally."¹³ They worked the lands of local landlords like., Thirumulpad of Nilambur Kovilakams. Lieutenants Ward and Corner opined that "the whole of the timber forest, and farms scattered around, each having a stripe of paddy cultivation, belongs to him. The Paniyas, a low class, reside cultivate small tracts in the forest - they are all slaves to the Tirupad, they assist in the cultivation of all his forms, during the fair but are principally employed in cutting timber, which the Tirupad disposes off to individuals who contract for it."¹⁴

Marriage and Status of women

Marriage was celebrated by them by offering feast. Sister or mother of bridegroom tied a chain or thread on the neck of bride called `acharam kettal'. Edgar Thurston opined that "monogamy appears to be the general rule among the Paniyans, but there is no obstacleman taking unto himself as many wives as he can afford to support." ¹⁵ They had no strict marriage rules. They divorced only on serious issues. Widow marriage was practised by them. Edgar Thurston admits that "remarriage of widows is permitted adultery and other forms of are adjudicated on by a Panchayath (or council) of headmen, who settle disputes and decide on the fine or punishment to be inflicted on the guilty"¹⁶They paid rice, money (panam) and a dress to bride. This ceremony was celebrated at the house of bride. They celebrated their marriages for 2 or 3 days. Bride groom and party were permitted to stay at bride house. On third day after bath bride and bridegroom wore new dresses. After bridegroom and party returned with bride to the house of the bridegroom. Marriage ceremonies were held under the supervision of Mooppan. On the 7th day of marriage bridegroom and bride visited the house of bride with his relatives and taken food called `virunnu salkkaram,'. Polygamy

and polyandry were rare among them. A.A.D. Luiz opined that "marriages are held after puberty.

Negotiations are initiated by the parents of the bridegroom after obtaining a formal approval of the headman. When negotiations have been concluded and the amount of bride price been settled, the bridegroom has the option to serve the parents of the bride in case his parents or he is unable to pay the agreed bride price. There are money instances when both service and her mother is imperative. These presents include coloured beads and a new cloth. Their customs conventions permit the presumption that their society permitted marriage by capture, service, purchase and elopement. There are clans that it essential that regular annual contributions are made to the parents of the wife. There are numerous instances when, on failure to pay, the has been called back by her parents. A primitive custom of the bride groom being bathed by the head man has been discontinued. Eating an essential part of the marriage ceremony." 17 Tali tying was not practised by them. New generation started to practise it. Widow marriage was practised by them. A.A.D. Luiz admits that "the pattern of family life is satisfactory; divorce and desertion are extremely rare. A widow and divorce are free to marry anyone they like. Levirate is permitted, but sororite is objectionable. Paniyans proudly claim that at one time to punish adultery very severely. Husbands are strict with wives and daughters. Most of the Paniyathis refrain from work after child birth after the children till they are able to help themselves."¹⁸ Thirandukalyanam was widely celebrated by them. The rigorous customs of Kattunaickans on first puberty was not followed by them. If a men happened to see a menses girl was compelled to take bath. A.A.D. Luiz puts forth that " a girl on attaining puberty and a woman is menses are not segregated in a strict manner is the case with other primitive tribes. They ceremonies and celebrations during pregnancy pollution connected with birth lasts for 10 days, during which period an orthodox father avoids fish and meat. The naming of the child is by the father or a senior member of the family and the boring of the ears of both sexes are done

a month of birth." ¹⁹ Marriage custom was based on caste rules and it was supervised by their head called 'kalladi' in Old Ernad Taluk. C.A. Innes and F.B. Ivans opined that "the marriage customs of the paniyas are typical of those of the jungle tribes in general. The consent of the headman (kuttan) has first to be obtained and for thirty days the bridegroom has to bring rice and firewood to the bride's house. On the date of the wedding a sum of money, a cloth with four annas tied up in one corner and a string of beads are presented to the bride's father."²⁰ The head called Kuttan was poured water on the bridegroom's feet, and bride and bridegroom eat together in the bride's house. The bridegroom has also to make an annual present of rice to wife's parents. If the husband failed to observe his duties parents can demand their daughter back. They had their own caste rules relating to marriage and observe other customs and rituals. Nettur P. Damodaran stated that "the marriage custom of Paniyas was primitive. The custom of paying money by the bridegroom to bride's relatives was practised. If any failure to do so bride's relatives can demand their daughter back to bride's house. If there is no money he permitted to work for bride's relatives. The relatives who did not satisfy with the payment of money they compelled to do work. Bridegroom must give some presentations like., piece of clothes and chains of beads . They practised different types of marriages eg;- money , run away without the consent of parents called 'olichottam' and doing work for bride and bride's relatives. The custom of giving money bride's parents was practised by them. If the money is not remitted periodically the custom of divorcing was practised by them."²¹ They offered feast during marriage days. During the early days marriages were held for 2 or 3 days. They paid much importance to purity in life. Family problems were rare among them. Nettur P. Damodaran admits that "the family life of Paniyas was satisfactory. The divorce from couples was also rare among them. Remarriage to widows was permitted by them. They observed 10 days pollution for birth of a child. Father of child avoided non vegetarian food like., fishes and meat". ²² The life of the new generation is not satisfactory. Ordinary people influenced them b

by offerings and led illegitimate relations with them. Edgar Thurston stated that "the marriage ceremony (and the marriage knot does not appear to be very binding is of a very simple nature. The ceremony is conducted by a Paniyan Chemmi (a corruption of janmi). A present of sixteen fanams and some new cloth is given by the bridegroom to the Chemmi, who hands them over to the parents of the bride. A feast is prepared of which Paniyan women (Panichi) dance to the music of drum and pipe. The tali (or marriage badge) is tied round the neck of the bride by the relations of the bridegroom, who also invest the bride with such crude jewellery as they may be able to afford. The Chemmi seals the contract pouring watch over the head and feet of the young couple. It is said that a husband has to make an annual present to his wife's parents, and failure to do so entitles them to demand their daughter back. "23 Widow marriage was practised by them. Edgar Thurston opined that "remarriage of permitted adultery and other forms of vice are adjudicated on by a Panchayath (or council) of headmen, who settle disputes and decide on the fine or punishment to be inflicted on the guilty."²⁴

Therandukalyanam

In Old Ernad Taluk first menses of a girl was celebrated by them called therandukalyanam or swarnakalyanam. Girl was permitted to stay in a separate hut and permitted to cook food alone in that hut. She was not permitted to cook non-vegetarian food. Beans and yams (kizhangu) were given to cook. On seventh day they gave oil to grand bath. Only after the grand bath of seventh day permitted the girl to enter hut. At the night of the seventh day they danced and sang puberty songs. They presented chains of beads and to girl on seventh day. Adultery was punished by them. Edgar Thurston opined that "in a case of proved adultery, a fine of sixteen fanams (the amount of the marriage fee), and a sum equal to the expenses of the wedding, including the present to the parents of the bride, is the usual form of punishment."²⁵

Funeral practices

They buried dead body of their relatives

according to their caste rules and funeral rites. A.A.D. Luiz opined that Paniyas bury their dead. There are stray cases of cremation but that is done more to appease or to satisfy a Hindu master. On the seventh day folk dancing and singing at the grave. During the month of January they perform interesting ceremonies for the repose of the souls of the Pollution connected with death lasts for sixteen days during which period most of them bathe twice a day, refrain from work and avoid eating fish and meat. When death occurs during the busy weeks of agricultural operations, when refraining from work would affect their earnings, have a ceremony by which the spirit of the deceased is preserved in a pot and ceremonies are conducted later when they are free. The son is chief mourner and he ties a consecrated thread round his arm, waist and legs so that he may not be harmed by the spirit of the dead. They have interesting funeral orations and in very early years they marked the location of the grave



Paniyas making fire

with stones."²⁶ They have enough knowledge how to make fire. They made fire by friction with two

twigs of a wild bamboo.

They believed in existence of soul. Nettur P. Damodaran opined that "In order to propitiate the soul of the dead some pujas were performed days as pollution. They plunged in water twice on daily. They were not permitted to do any work and to eat fish and meat. On the agricultural seasons they worked and some methods were used by them in order to propitiate the soul of the dead. They were taken a pot and whispering incantations called manthras they believe that the can absorb the soul of the dead in the pot and they observed pollutions and karmas. Only by completing funeral ceremonies they were permitted to release the soul of the dead. They tied black thread in the arms in order to protect from the ghosts. They believed that their failure in observing karmas would forgive by dead because without

working in the agricultural seasons became so misery and poverty."²⁷ The sang songs when they observing funeral ceremonies. They made songs in order to propitiate their ancestors. The inmates of Nedunkayam Colony (Suresh and his wife) told me that "there are four stages to their adiyanthram ceremony. The first adiyanthram is called pachakkala adiyanthram second adiyanthram ceremony is called vellappavu adiyanthram, their third adiyanthram ceremony is Pattupula adiyanthram and final adiyanthram ceremony is called adakkapula adiyanthram. On the third day of death they erected pandal and took an earthen pot and put rice in it and made flattened rice called avil. They collected wild bamboos from forest and placed nine bamboos in the pandal. Bamboos were placed in shed by special pujas. They believed that the spirit of the dead is in the ninth bamboos. They took a bowl and poured water on it. They erected pandal and placed wild cane's leaves on pandal. The final adiyanthram celebrated within five years. During pattupula adiyanthram they performed kalams of dead and lighted lamps. Daughters of dead lighted lamps by weeping and wailing. Relatives poured water on the feats of sons and daughters of dead. They wore new dresses and put a mark on forehead. They put rice flour in a bamboo and face. During adakkappula adiyanthram they placed a stool called peedom in the pandal and an Oracle of their caste performed some pujas in order to propitiate the soul of the dead. They believed that they can place the soul observing this karma called kudiyruthal. They whispered manthras and the names of their gods and believed that the soul of the dead join with god." Mooppans were selected by their landlords. Landlord's decisions were obeyed by them. They believed that violating his advice causes to the rage of their gods. They respected his words and the words of oracle and physicians. Mooppans consulted sick. Some medicines were prepared by him in order to cure from deceases. Edgar stated that Chemmi or shemmi a sort of priest or minister. He was appointed in olden days, by the chieftains under whom the Paniyans worked, and each held authority over a group of villages. The office is hereditary, but, should a Chemmi family fail, it can be filled up by

election."²⁸

Customs and Beliefs

If any violation took place in obey the rules and advice of Mooppans they expelled them from their caste. If any failure in observing customs and rituals of their caste they imposed ostracism upon them. They believed in ghost and feared about the miracles and powers. They believed that good persons join with their gods. Bad person would become ghosts and causes to attack others. Alcohol, churut, commonly used by males. Women were shy to use it. According to Edgar Thurston "they have distinct partiality for alcohol, and those who came measured by me were male more than happy by a present of a two anna piece, a cheroot, and a bear allowance of undiluted fiery brandy from the Meppadi bazaar. The women are naturally of a shy disposition, and used formerly to run away and hide at the sight of a European. They were at to come and see me, but confidence was subsequently established, and the women came to visit me, same to go through the ordeal of measurement, othersto laugh at and make derisive comments on those who were undergoing the operation."²⁹

Conclusion

My effort to understand the social and cultural conditions of Paniyas does not answer all the questions that can be asked about the problems of Malabar society. Though there were rare references about them till 18th century. Some customs and practices of this tribe recorded in this research paper existed in Malabar even earlier. The interview techniques are significantly used for this study. Those who authenticated their opinions in regional language (Malayalam) translated into English and recorded in this research paper. Their allergy towards being photography and addiction to liquor have restricted research work. I have taken great pains to extract authentic and relevant information from these people through field work. They are reluctant to reveal many things which are to be recorded. As the audio recording can not be done the information given is authenticated by them and kept in this study. The people of many colonies revealed their information relating to

their ancestral life and that information is a great boon for further studies. This study does not claim to have been completed. Many further studies definitely contribute to the completion of this work.

According to the Census of 1891 total Paniyas of Malabar District was 29,223, males were 15,318 and females were 13,905.³⁰ Most of the children did not attend in Schools. They prefer to go for work. New generation began to attend in Badal Adivasi Schools. A.A.D. Luiz opined that "Paniyas are the largest group of illiterate and primitive tribes in Kerala and are included in the list of Scheduled Tribes maintained by the Union, Madras, Mysore and Kerala Governments. have been enumerated in 1901, 1921 and 1931 as 27,018, 30,012 and 32,410 respectively."³¹ An estimate of Their condition after independence is changed so much. They began to attend in colleges of Nilambur areas. Conversion to Islam was common to Old Ernad Taluk. To escape from the rigorous caste system and untouchability Islam was a source of security to them. Many

women married by the local Mappilas. Ordinary people made illegitimate relations with them and trapped them by offerings. Children of Fair complexioned in the Paniya colonies of Old Ernad were the product of the illegitimate relations with the local people. Many girls of Paniya of Nedunkayam were the victims of local people. Their family life is not satisfactory because of the attitudes of ordinary people. They offered liquors to them. The Ordinary people collected honey and other wild produce from them and exploited them and made illegitimate relations with them. At present there is 35 major tribes in Kerala. They are the largest tribe in Kerala and their population is 71.95% of the total population of the tribal people of Kerala. According Census of 2001 their population is 5,76,735, males 3,03,579 and females 2,73,156. They began to attend in colleges of Nilambur areas. Even now they are suffering negligence. So ensuring justice implementation is needed in government policies.

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