

RITUAL MARGINALISATION?: THROUGH A VARIED TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE MUKKUVA COMMUNITY IN KERALA

By

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Abstract

Marginalized communities' suppressed past is just as essential as their beliefs and rituals. Wherever a group feels excluded, it may create a ritual structure that is distinct from the way of thinking in that community. In various faiths, members of the upper caste have claimed that the outcaste shouldn't witness and participated in their rites. Mukkuvar is a maritime ethnic group found in the Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. They are mostly found on the Malabar Coast, South Travancore Coast, and Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu, and have traditionally been involved in fishing, shipment, navy, and trade (J. S. Grewal, 2005). We can comprehend the marginalization imposed on these people by society if we look at their history in Kerala or conduct a case study of the current circumstances.

Keywords: *marginalisation, mukkuva, pandal kizhikkal, puli kudi, chera dynasty*

Introduction

Mukkuva communities are underrepresented in Kerala society. Mukkuva is also known as Kukankulam, Murkukan, and Mukkiyar by the locals. Their names, Kukankulam (Kukan clan) and Murkukan (foremost Kukan) are literary allusions to Kukan, the mariner who brought Hindu hero Rama across

the Ganges from Ayodhya and is claimed to be their ancestor. The Mukkuvar are split into exogamous tribes called illam, which means "home." Northern Malabar's Mukkuvar is known as Nalillakkar (meaning "of the four illams") and is made up of the clans Ponillam (from pon meaning "gold"), Chembillam (from chembu meaning "copper"), Karillam, and Kachillam. With the absence of

Ponillam, the Mukkuvar of Southern Malabar have only three clans and are thus known as Munillakar (literally "of the three illams") (Virendra Prakash, 1992). The Mukkuvar were historically inhabitants of the ancient Tamilakam Neither (coastal) lands, which are recorded in several ancient Tamil literary works. They were most likely interested in pearl and conch diving, as implied by their name. They were marine dwellers of the littoral Sangam region known as Neithal, engaged in pearl gathering, boat construction, and fishing, among other nautical occupations (Mc Gilvray, 1982).

Tamil Literature Akananuru describes the ship-building capabilities of Neithal inhabitants in the ancient Tamilakam in chapter [26:1-2]. Mukkuvar had trade relations with Sri Lanka since the 12th century, and a few settled there since then. According to the legend of the Mukkuvar from Kerala, they emigrated to and from Sri Lanka. The Mattakallappu Manmiyam text and other local palm-leaf manuscripts in Sri Lanka attribute the emigration of the Sri Lankan Mukkuvar from South India under the rule of Kalinga Magha in the 12th century AD, who delegated power to local petty kings whose successors

are identified as belonging to Kukankulam. The Mukkuvar in the Kanyakumari district still has the Sri Lankan dialect of Tamil, which shows they emigrated to and from the southern part of ancient Tamilakam and Sri Lanka.

In the 8th century made mercantile Arabs appeared in Kerala, where they among other married natives such as those from the Mukkuvar community, formed social groups such as the Mappila. The Mukkuvar were in addition to fishing and seafaring, involved in warfare. Native rulers such as the Zamorin of Calicut promoted Mukkuvar in conversion to Islam to man their navies. Up to 1000 AD was the Mukkuvar recruited to the naval fleets of the Chera dynasty, South Indian communities were often invited to Sri Lanka as mercenaries. The Sinhala text known as Dambadeni Asna refers to Mukkuvar warriors serving in the army of Parakramabahu II of Dambadeniya. They also served in the army of the invader Kalinga Magha, who seized control of northern and eastern Sri Lanka in the 13th century, as stated in Mattakallappu Manmiyam. Under Kalinga Magha, the Kerala-derived Mukkuvars were made

chieftains known as Vanniar in the Batticaloa region, where they also formed matrilinear landlords known as Podiyar and demonstrated great political dominance. In a campaign conducted by Parakramabahu VI of Kotte, Mukkuvar in collaboration with Arabs encamped in the Puttalam region were battled and forced away by Karaiyar mercenaries, as stated in Mukkara Hatana (meaning Mukkuvar war) (S. Pathmanathan, 1978). Mukkuvar women intermarried with their associated Arabs, and their descendants are known as Sri Lankan Moors.

Fisherfolks' Traditions, Perceptions, and Habits

Despite the variations in the religious foundation, all fish workers follow a similar lifestyle pattern. The seasons for fishing, the fish they capture, and the equipment they utilize are crucial to the lives of the fishermen. Deeply devout people, fishermen are reliant on nature and the powers that govern it. To appease the forces of nature, the fishermen practice several rites. The forces of nature that govern the life of fishermen, according to Houtart and Nayak (1988), are represented in

different ways by them. They humanize all kinds of nature with which they come into contact and believe that all forms of nature are living, having an impact on their lives both positively and negatively. Although each of the three religious' communities among the fishermen practices their respective religions, it is vitally important to highlight that all three have many shared values, customs, and rituals. They both share shared Hindu ancestry, which has been cited as a reason for this similarity in their lifestyles. When it comes to rituals, beliefs, and practices, for instance, Mathur (1985), who worked with Muslim fish workers in Kerala, and Ram (1991), who worked with Mukkuva Christian fisher folk in Kerala, both argue that despite their respective communities' differing religious beliefs and practices. As a result, the sea is constantly referred to as the Kadamma, with Kadal referring to the sea and Amma referring to "mother," signifying a woman's fecundity. All fisherman sees the sea as sacred. The cause of death at sea is supposed to be the mother's wrath, which is attributed to disobeying any tradition. Because

seawater is viewed as holy and sacred, it is used in many rites. It is used to ward off the evil eye and is used at birth, funeral, and sickness rites. For example, Christian Mukkuvas from southern Kerala asks the parish priest to pour water over the sea during lean seasons when fish are sparse in the hope of increasing the catch.

Ponkala in Honour of the Sea: - According to Mathur (1995), Hindu fishermen from Trivandrum, Quilon, and southern Ernakulum celebrate Ponkala, an annual festival, in honor of Kadalamma, or the sea. The daily honored Goddess of the sea receives Ponkala, a rice pudding. Other offerings include flattened rice, puffed rice, jaggery, navadhanyam (nine pulses), ghee, camphor, benzoin, sugarcane, and coconuts. A mandapam is built and embellished with delicate coconuts and mango leaves. Fisherwomen, gather together on the 41st day at the sea coast with pots full of rice, jaggery, coconut, and firewood. Ponkala (a rice pudding) is made in earthen pots on a fire. Two types of Ponkala are prepared, one with jaggery, rice, coconut shavings, and plantain and the other without jaggery. All the women prepare this Ponkala

and then offer it to the sea. In earlier times, such pots were sealed and thrown into the sea. However, this practice has been discontinued in recent times. In a study of the Mukkuva Christians of Kerala, Ram (1991) writes of how fishing assumes the form of a highly ritualized productive activity with attempts to control the environment by using ritual rather than technology. Thus, all the tools used for fishing such as the fishing craft and the gear are blessed by the parish priests for future luck and the safety of the craft. In some instances, Hindu mantravadis are also invited to use their magical Mantrams or chants to attract fish as well as deflect fish out of the nets of rivals into their nets for a share in the fishing catch.

The wind also plays a very important part in the lives of the fisher folk. For example, Samuel (1998) writes of the Mukkuva community of the South where the wind is considered an allotropic form of God. The calm sea is compared to the sleeping God, while the rough sea symbolizes that God is awake. Gales and storms are equated to the fierce breath of God. The sky is also very important for the Mukkuvans and is considered the abode of God

who lives in the form of clouds in the shape of human beings and other living beings, mountains, rivers, etc.

Fire is also perceived by the Mukkuvans as the expression of the anger of God and in cases of fires in the sea, they do not sail out into the sea for a few days. Light is considered divine and is known to ward off evil spirits, ghosts, or natural calamities. Candles are lit in Churches and shrines by the Mukkuvans as prayers or for the fulfillment of their vows. Samuel (1998) also informs us, of the perception of the Mukkuvans regarding cholera and typhoid being caused by spirits, ghosts, and demons. Thus, a campfire is lit on the outskirts of the village to prevent evil from entering the village. Magical rites are also performed before sunrise or sunset to ward off the effects of evil shadows on new nets (Samuel, John, 1998). The fish also has a special significance for the fishermen. For example, Samuel (1998) in his study of the fishing communities of Kanyakumari writes of a fish called Cavalli having a white mild on its head, which is believed to be because of the wrath of God, as it did not obey him. There is also another belief concerning

the cross-shaped structures found on the back of a few crabs. St Xavier walking along the shore found a crab saluting him. The saint made a cross on the back of the crab as a blessing. Some fish are said to have magical potency and some are also considered holy.

The Role of the Supernatural in the Lives of the Fisherfolk

In general, the fisher folk is also strong believers in the supernatural's influence on the body's natural processes. Thus, rituals and Magico-religious means of healing form an important aspect of their culture. These beliefs and practices can be attributed to the constant exposure of the fishing communities to the different forces of nature that are perceived to be uncontrollable. For example, Ram (1991) in her study on the Mukkuvans writes of how the different forces of nature are perceived as affecting the body. The body is also looked upon as a site for divine and supernatural intervention. This intervention is believed to lead to an imbalance in the body at the physical and psychological level leading to illnesses in a person. When the body is believed to be affected by supernatural

intervention, offerings are made to the Gods and Goddesses to please them.

Samuel (1998) informs of how the fishermen perform rituals to get a good catch as well as to ward off the evil eye. Thus, artisans take their new fishing nets to the shore and make offerings of jaggery and coconut, distributed among many children to come on the shore. This form of imitative magic represents the flocking of fish in the same way near the net. (Samuel, 1998). The net is then taken home and kept under the hatchet to ward off the effect of the evil eye. The same ritual is repeated the next day with the remaining offering being thrown into the sea. A portion of the fish caught on the first day is thrown into the air in all directions to be taken by birds (Samuel, 1998).

Pandal Kizhikkal

As among other Malayalam castes, Mukkuva girls must go through a ceremony before they attain puberty. This is called pandal kizhikkal and corresponds to the tāli-kettu kalyānam of the other castes. The consent of the Arayan is necessary for the performance of this ceremony. The girl

is smeared with turmeric paste and oil on the night before thereto. Early on the following morning, she is brought to the pandal (booth), which is erected in front of the house, and supported by four bamboo posts. She is bathed by having water poured over her by girls of septs other than her own. After the bath, she stands at the entrance to the house, and a Kāvuthiyachi (barber woman) sprinkles sea water over her with a tuft of grass (Cynodont Dactylion). A cloth is thrown over her, and she is led into the house. The barber woman receives as her fee a cocoanut, some rice, and condiments. A tāli (marriage badge) is tied to the girl's neck by her prospective husband's sister if a husband has been selected for her, or by a woman of sleep other than her own. The girl must fast until the conclusion of the ceremony and should remain indoors for seven days afterward. At the time of the ceremony, she receives presents of money at the rate of two vellis per family. The Arayan receives two vellis, a bundle of betel leaves, areca nuts, and tobacco.

Puli or Ney-Kudi

A pregnant woman has to go through a ceremony called puli or ney-kudi in the

fifth or seventh month. A ripe coconut, which has lost its water, is selected, and heated over a fire. Oil is then expressed from it, and five or seven women smear the tongue and abdomen of the pregnant woman with it. A barber woman is present throughout the ceremony. The husband lets his hair grow until his wife has been delivered, and is shaved on the third day after the birth of the child. At the place where he sits for the operation, a coconut, betel leaves, and areca nuts are placed. The coconut is broken into pieces by someone belonging to the same sept as the father of the child. Pollution is got rid on this day by a barber woman sprinkling water at the houses of the Mukkuvans. A barber should also sprinkle water at the temple on the same day (Edgar Thurston, 1909).

Kōdi-Udukkal

The dead are, as a rule, buried. Soon after death has taken place, the widow of the deceased purchases twenty-eight cubits of white cloth. A gold ring is put into the hand of the corpse, and given to the widow or her relations, to be returned to the relations of the dead man. The corpse is bathed in fresh

water, decorated, and placed on a bier. The widow then approaches, and, with a cloth over her head, cuts her tāli off, and places it by the side of the corpse. Sometimes the tāli is cut off by a barber woman if the widow has been married according to the kōdi-udukkal rite. In some places, the bier is kept in the custody of the barber, who brings it whenever it is required. In this case, the articles requisite for decorating the corpse, e.g., sandal paste and flowers, are brought by the barber, and given to the son of the deceased. Some four or five women belonging to the Kadavar families are engaged in mourning. The corpse is carried to the burial ground, where a barber tears a piece of cloth from the winding sheet and gives it to the son. The bearers anoint themselves, bathe in the sea, and, with wet cloths, go three times around the corpse, and put a bit of gold, flowers, and rice, in its nose. The relations then pour water over the corpse, which is lowered into the grave. Once more the bearers, and the son, bathe in the sea and go three times around the grave. The son carries a pot of water, and, at the end of the third round, throws it down, so that it is broken. On their return home, the son and bearers are

met by a barber woman, who sprinkles them with rice and water. Death pollution is observed for seven days, during which the son abstains from salt and tamarind. A barber woman sprinkles water over those under pollution. On the eighth, or sometimes the fourteenth day, the final death ceremony is performed. Nine or eleven boys bathe in the sea and offer food near it. They then come to the house of the deceased, and, with lamps on their heads, go around seven or nine small heaps of raw rice or paddy (unhusked rice), and place the lamps on the heaps. The eldest son is expected to abstain from shaving his head for six months or a year. At the end of this time, he is shaved on an auspicious day. The hair, plantains, and rice are placed in a small new pot and thrown into the sea. After a bath, rice is spread on the floor of the house to resemble the figure of a man, over which a green cloth is thrown. At one end of the figure, a light in a measure is placed. Seven or nine heaps of rice or paddy are made, on which lights are put, and the son goes three times round, throwing rice at the north, south, east, and west corners. (Edgar Thurston, 1909).

Cultural Similarities between the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian Fisherfolk

Just as the Hindu fisher folk are worshippers of the Goddess Bhagvati and Kali and also have their own culture of cult worship (Dietrich and Nayak, 2002), among the Christians too, the same Mata is worshipped as Mother Mary to deal with various problems related to their lives such as the daily material needs, in case of the safety of the men out at the sea, in the case of epidemics such as cholera, smallpox (Ram, 1991). Mathur (1978) writes of the Muslim fisher folk called the Mappilas, mostly converts from the Mukkova castes. The Mappilas follow the social rites prescribed by the Koran and the Hadith. However, their lifestyles, economic activities, as well as their rituals connected with diseases and illnesses, are very similar to that of the Hindus.

Thus, all the magico-religious methods used for curing illnesses, and rituals about the sea for good catches, practiced by the Hindus as well as the Christians are also practiced by the Muslim fisher folk. Large sums of money are spent by all the fishing communities on ceremonies such as

births, deaths, and marriages. The fisher folk follows and practice numerous rituals during such ceremonies that form a very important aspect of their social lives. However, these ceremonies are controlled by the richer classes (Dietrich and Nayak, 2002; Houtart and Nayak, 1988).

Conclusion

Kerala's fishing communities have shared the ocean's resources and maintained close social and economic ties despite cultural and religious differences for a very long time. However, Chekutty, N. P (2010) writes that the recent phenomena of globalization and mechanization in fisheries leading to international subsidies, the stringent conditions of global trade, and intense competition for fishing have seen a sharp decline in fish catch and profits leading to poverty, deprivation and consequent anger and discontent amongst the fisher folk. This has led to increasing instances of communalism and violence among the fisher folk in Kerala over the last few years. The

phenomenon of mechanization, which was introduced in the mid-'60s in the Kerala waters, led to the gradual marginalization of the traditional fishermen, whose small vessels were unable to compete with the trawlers and their traditional skills started becoming redundant. This not only affected the livelihoods of the fishing communities but also led to massive losses to the economy, a reduction in the production and catch of fish, and the emergence of a new class of entrepreneurs, the moneylender-cum-boat-owners who took economic control of the beaches. This has led to increasing clashes between the new class of mechanized boat workers and the traditional fish workers, which has become more acute with the area becoming a fertile ground for the spread of social and communal tensions along the Kerala coast. However, he also argues that the changed scenario has created circumstances that have forced the fishing communities to come together, to face the common external economic aggression (Chekutty, N.P., 2010).

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