



GENERAL BACKGROUND PALMYRA CLIMBERS IN SATHANKULAM NOW AND THEN

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Introduction

Tamilnadu is the pioneer state in the Palmyra industry and in the matter of employment. It is next to agriculture and handloom weaving in the state. The Palmyra tree is the state tree of Tamilnadu. An estimate shows that out of 88.59 crores of Palmyra trees in India, 5.01 crores were found in Tamilnadu in March 1986. The tree was once the sole source of income for the toddy tappers of southern Tamilnadu. But when the toddy (the fermented drink) as a primary product was banned in 1987 by the state government, demand was reduced. Nevertheless the other products from the tree have potentialities for the benefit of humankind, and each part of the Palmyra trees has its own variety. This chapter particularly deals with the traditional Palmyra climber's socio economic religious and political information in the Sathankulam Taluk now and then.

1.1. Geographical Set up

1.1.1 Location

The Sathankulam is a taluk of Thoothukudi District, one of the Southern extreme places of Tamilnadu occupying a predominant place in the history of Tamilnadu. It has also Tiruchendur Taluk, the western part limits with Tirunelveli District.

1.1.2. Demographics

According to the 2011 census, the taluk of Sathankulam had a population of 98,583 with 47,444 males and 51,139 females. There were 1078 women for every 1000 men.

1.1.3. Etymology

Sathankulam was created as a substantial block of Tiruchendur in 1911 during the time of British rule in India in 1983 it became a separate Taluk prior to the bifurcation of Thoothukudi from Tirunelveli. There were a few Dalit families living in the place around 1810, among whom one family had five brothers, one of them had the name of Sathan who lived a long period as a farmer. Later that particular place was called Sathankulam by adopting his name.

1.2. Understanding of Palmyra

The tree's variety has these biological terms: Plant branch is "Calycinare", Family of the plant is "Palmare" Root word is 'Borassus' and plant group is 'Flabecifer'.

1.2.1. Special Features of the Tree

Palmyra trees the mother of the versatile industry, that is the Palmyra and its product industry. This is the only source and supplier of raw material for the various activities related to the Palmyra industry. This wish-fulfilling tree 'Kalpavriksha' is as useful as it is miraculous. Every part of the tree is useful in one way or other. These trees help retain ground water. The trunk retains moisture in its tissues under the hard outer coat. The fruits are highly fibrous and retain water too, and palm trees act as a wind break, that's why these trees were grown along tank bunds, the peripheries of paddy fields and on the outskirts of towns and villages. They would reduce the damage caused by robust winds. In the olden days, rows of palm trees would also mark the boundaries of fields, village and panchayat jurisdiction. People used them like fences. Palm trees have the capacity to turn land fertile, since they need very minimal nutrients and water. Though this is a long process, it can be taken up to increase tree cover. Every part of palm tree, from the trunk and leaves for flower and fruits, is used. That is the reason which finds mention in folk literature and proverbs. It has played a vital role in the livelihood of ancient Tamils and was hence compared to the mythical 'Karpaga Vriksham' the tree revered at the 'sthalavriksha,' in many village shrines.

1.2.3. Medicinal and Nutritive Value

It is known from the practice that the sugar content from the Palmyra juice/Pathanir (Unfermented toddy-lime powder coated) has a health giving property. It is a well-known fact that diabetic patients are allowed by doctors to use the sugar produced from the Palmyra juice. The palm juice is a regular food for both men and women for our area. They eat little, yet the stamina of the men who have to climb about forty to sixty trees, twice a day, is given the required energy and stamina for this strenuous work. They do this day in and day out, seven days a week for six months a year. Yet they remain healthy. It is because of the palm juice they drink twice a day in the place of their breakfast and Tiffin.



It has been noticed that the women folk from the Palmyra tapper families hardly ever go for caesarean childbirth. The palm juice they drink twice a day gives them a healthy and strong body, which helps them very much during the difficult period of childbirth. When a child is born, even before the child is breastfed by the mother, the child is given a solution of the sugar candy, which strengthens them against diseases of childhood.

The young plant is said to relieve biliousness, dysentery, and gonorrhoea. Young roots are diuretic and anthelmintic, and a decoction is given a certain respiratory diseases. The ash of the spadix is taken to relieve heartburn and enlarged spleen and liver. Sap from the flower stalk is prized as a tonic, diuretic, stimulant, laxative and anti-phlegmatic and amebicide. This is all explored and found in the journal of Economic Botany.

1.2.4. Nature of Palmyra Industry

It is one of the traditional cottage industries which gives more variety of products in its nature. It is the time to realize the human value and individual dignity in solidarity with Palmyra climbers. The Palmyra, sugar yielding palm is grown in Tamilnadu. Andhra Pradesh, west Bengal, Kerala and Mysore. The Palmyra industry is categorized as an important industry by the Khadi and village industries commission as it provides employment to 45,000 to 50000 workers in the district.

1.2.5 Origin of Palmyra Climbers

Palmyra climbers (PANAYERI) are a traditional occupation. The term 'traditional occupation' however, as used here those occupations that have been followed by successive generation of indigenous, their communalities and are rooted in customs and practices that were established prior to the colonization of the region in the end of eighteenth century. This includes traditional occupational practices, which were largely subsistence-oriented before, but now are wholly or partly market-oriented. As Marx said that it is like a rudimentary economy in which things are shared. Non-traditional occupations, as used here, will refer to those occupations that are not based upon customs and practices that pre-date the colonization of the region.

Robert Caldwell tried to establish the Nadars as emigrants from northern coast of Ceylon' he found there a caste bearing a grammatical form of the same name, Shandrar, of which he said 'Shanars' is etymologically a corruption. He felt certain, as well, that the Ezhavas and Tiyars, cultivators of the coconut and palm in Travancore, were descendants of Shandrar colonists for Ceylon. These are traces of a common origin amongst them all, he asserted pointing out that for instance, Shanar was used as a title of honour among Ezhavas. The Tinnevely shanars, Caldwell argued, originally came from the neighborhood of Jaffna in Ceylon. One group, those known as Nadans, entered Tinnevely by way of Ramnad, bringing with them the seed nuts of the Jaffna Palmyra, regarded as 'the best in the East'. The Pandiyan rulers gave them title over the sandy wastelands of Manadu in the south eastern portion of the district, the region most suitable for the cultivation of the Palmyra.

1.2.6. Traditional Status of Panayeri (Climbers)

Ancient Tamil literature makes no reference to the inhabitants of this region. In the nineteenth century, as revealed in the first missionary description of the community, the Nadar appear to have occupied a social limbo somewhere between the sudhras and the outcaste untouchables. Caldwell described the Nadars "as belonging to the highest division of the lowest classes or the lowest of the middle classes; poor, but not Paupers; rude and unlettered, but by many degrees removed from a savage state".

1.2.7. The Work of Panayeri (Climbers):

The climber begins his work before daybreak, and in the course of the day, working until Noon and then again from late afternoon until late evening, he will ascend thirty to fifty trees, climbing each twice sometimes three times to extract the juice. During the season in which the sap flows, from March through the hottest months of the year until September, the tapper can never leave the trees unattended, even for a day. As a dairy cow must not be left un milked, so from the Palmyra, proverbially the Shanar's cow Myra is drawn from the flower stalk at the top of the trees, which when bruised or sliced yields, drop by drop about one pint of juice each day. The flow is received in small earthen pots attached each day by the climber, who with each climb trims the stalk to allow free flow of the juice.

Types of Palmyra worker

Sathankulam Taluk has 49700 trees as per the date SEDCO in which the 340 Palmyra families are working at different levels. The following three different types of Palmyra workers are involved in the occupation.

- a. Trees – owning entrepreneurs,
- b. Tapper-producers.
- c. Varamdars (Share Croppers)



And their operational efficiency problem of organization finance indebtedness and productivity differ from each other. The total number of trees was the largest for the lease holders, closely followed by the tree owning entrepreneurs. Tapper-producers and Varamdars were using about the same number of trees. The first two types of entrepreneurs made use of a large number of trees, as they could hire more tappers. As the tapper-producers and Varamdars are mostly singly operators, they could tap only relatively few trees but produce a larger quantity of Neera than leaseholders and tree owning entrepreneurs because they tapped for subsistence and tapping is their primary occupation. Hence, they will tap for more days like 150 days to get the maximum amount of Neera. But then their economic status remained as poor. Because naturally their job description is to hire the tree and share nearly 50% of the production to the owners of the tree and another reason is the cost of producing jiggery and other confectionery items is greater.

1.3.1. Social Condition

Generally the social condition of Palmyra workers in Sathankulam is very peculiar. It is composed of many villages with lots of castes and sub castes like, shanars, Kallars, udras, Paraiars, Pallars, Chakkilis and several other castes are found in this district. They follow very distinctive customs and manners.

In detail, the legends of the origin of the Nadars tell of the birth of seven sons, with the death of two, the remaining five father the separate division of the community. Five is the most generally accepted enumeration of sub-castes, as in Pate's Tirunelveli Gazette and Thurston's Castes and Tribes of Southern India. Thurston lists the following:

1.3.1.1. Karukku-Pattayar

This class is supposed to have originally inhabited the country around Manadu, 'the great province' four miles from Tiruchendur. Their alternative title following Pate, Karukkumattaiyan (Karukku, 'sharp edge' mattai 'the leaf stalk of the Palmyra) is suggestive of their association with tree-climbing. Because of its derogatory connotation and unpopularity, it was changed to the form generally given Karukkupattaiyan (pattaiyam, sword).

1.3.1.2. Mel-Natar

The Mel – natars (Menattans in Pate) derive their name from include the western Tirunelveli District. It is claimed that the fall of the Chera dynasty, the descendants of the Chera kings, mel-natars of the Kudanadarasas they were called, came into Pandya country and settled along the western Ghats. Today their numbers, estimated at 25,000 are concentrated in Ambasamuthiram Taluk, with a few in Tenkasi, Sankarankovil and Nanguneri.

1.3.1.3. Nattati

Concentrated around the village of Nattati near Sayerpuram and Panakudi, Sampavarvadakarai. Legendary accounts claim Nattati descent from union of the Panyas and the Cholas. Today the community is predominately Christian and alone of the subdivision of the nadars remains a district endogamous unit.

1.3.1.4. Kodikkal

Scholar Pate identified the kodikkal subcaste with the nattattis. All other source, however, distinguish between the two groups. The name sometimes associates them with the cultivation of betel-nut, sometimes with the standard-bears of the fighting man. Concentrated in Ambasamuthram and Tenkasi Taluks, they are occupationally climbers by tradition.

1.3.1.5. Kalla

The Kallashanarars, also called pulukka (cow dung) from the lowest division of the Nadar community. Their identity with the larger community, which would not accept food from their hands, was marginal, and the name Kalla denotes "spurious" or "false". The name by which the kallashanars are most commonly known is servai. Servai however, also seems to be an honours title, implying "chieftain" but as it is ordinarily used, the term is synonymous with the low kallashanars.

1.3.2. Shanars' Elevation

Shanars were toddy tappers, an occupation considered polluting by the canons of Hindu orthodoxy. During the six month Palmyra palm season, most climbed and tapped the trees of the abundant Palmyra forest and groves, converting the sap into Jaggery (unrefined sugar) or distilling it into sweet unfermented and hard (fermented) toddy. During the rest of the year they worked if they could as agricultural labourers. Over the past century, the caste has transformed itself by creating new units of consciousness, organization, and action. The shanar spring from a humble origin outside caste, but having raised their social position by their industry naturally seek the recognition due to their changed condition.



1.3.3. Changing Status

According to Hardgrave, who studied the Nadars of Tamil Nadu in general, through they were not ranked as quite untouchable, nonetheless they were considered by the upper caste as defiling class. The Nadars struggled in the temple entry movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. Whatever may be the origin and the avocation of the Nadars in the hoary past, their involvement of Palmyra climbing and consuming toddy was considered a Panchamapathaka (one who five cruel acts became a sinner). The Nadars original name was Shanars as they climbed the Palmyra trees with a span of rope (Shan+Nar=Shanar). This name was in vogue till 1921 when the Shanars were referred to in the Census for the first time as the nadars. Before these protest movements began among the Nadars, a section of their community, some of whom were Palmyra tappers, embraced Christianity and improved their social condition. For them the Gospel provided hope for socio-economic transformation.

1.4.1. Education Status

The latter period of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century expressed the importance of education in progress. During 1856, there were 272 schools aided by Government with 7,088 pupils within the Tirunelveli District alone. In order to make a change in the people's lives in this region, educational institutions were started by the early protestant missionaries.

1.4.2. Economic Condition

Economic status was categorized by the people's caste and their career. Brahmins were known as priestly class and high caste, and obviously they were very rich. Vellalals, mudalais, chetti were the business class people known as middle class and some of them were very rich, because few Vellalals or Pillai were Zamindars, i.e. the people who were the Mittas (landlords) with enough money with them. The poor class consisted of low caste people such as shanars, maravars, yadavars, paraiyars, pallars, Chakili, etc. According to the caste hierarchy setup their career was made up to be poor middle, and rich.

1.4.2.1. Agricultural Products:

Some of the agricultural products cultivated in the districts of Tirunelveli are rice, Cholam, Ragi, cotton, sugar, and dyes. These are important irrigated crops. Some seasonal crops are also cultivated which helps them to survive their life smoothly. Tirunelveli and Tenkasi function as the agricultural stations. Crops including Palmyra flourished near the river Tamirabarani belt. These palm trees are mostly found in the red soil forest (Teri) in eastern Tirunelveli.

1.4.2.2. Local Merchants

Agricultural products and other products like sugar, jiggery, cotton, paddy, grams and palmyra products etc., are handled by the local merchants; here goods are exchanged by barter and then transported by bullock cart, which was the main transport vehicle that carried the goods from place to place. Local markets were in Tirunelveli Tenkasi etc.,

1.4.2.3. Business to Other Counties (Foreign Trade)

There is much evidence which proves that there was trade between Tamil Nadu and Rome and European nations. The traveler Marco Polo wrote in the diary about the place Kayalpattinam, which is situated in the eastern part of Tirunelveli. It goes like this: "Kayalpattinam which is near Poompukar was the ancient Fort through which trade was very effectively made. Pearls, elephants, peacocks and fragrance items were exported to Rome and Other European nations". Tamil names of commodities are traced in the Hebrew and Greek language, and this fact is said to indicate the early maritime commerce of the Tamils with Babylonia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome etc. Thoothukudi and Poombukar were the only ports of importance for the foreign trade of the southern districts of Tamil Nadu.

1.4.3. Religious Condition

1.4.3.1. Multi Faith People

Hindus constitute the greater part of the population. There were different sects of Hindus, Saivites who worshipped Siva and Vaisnavites are the worshippers of Vishnu and other gods and goddesses. Hindus are 84%, Christians 10% and Muslims 6% of the total population of the area.

1.4.3.2. Roman Catholic Christians

Christian religion started with Roman mission in 1532 AD in the eastern coastal areas of southern Tamil Nadu. Missionaries like Francis Xavier (1542), Father John De Britto (1683) and Robert de Nobile (1606), Father Immanuel Martin (1638) were the people who contributed to spread the good news of Jesus Christ among the fisherman community in the coastal area of Tirunelveli District and other districts. Now more than 1.5 lakhs Catholic Christians are in the Nadar community alone.



1.4.3.3. Protestantism

The first Protestant Missionaries Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Pluetschau came to Tamil Nadu in 1706. They landed in Tranquebar(Tarangampadi) and worked among the Parava community, so there were some protestant Christians. Then Rev.Schwartz in 1771 came to see the Tirunelveli Distirct Mission and went to Tanjore, and again he came to Tirunelveli where Glorinda a Brahmin widow who came from Tanjore took baptism by Rev.Schwartz in Tirunelveli.Tirunelveli church records started in 1780, and her name is the first name among the 40 people who took haptism. She was the one who constructed the first church in Tirunelveli that is known as Glorinda church which is located in Palayamkottai Military lines road and opposite to St.Johns college.

1.4.3.4. Village Gods and Goddesses

The worship of Amman, the female deity is an interesting blend of brahmanical and Dravidian rituals. The most important for this deity is to do daily Pooja in morning and evening in front of Amman's temple, an array of minor deities of the demon will invariably be found; Patrakali is the prototype of these goddesses.

1.4.3.5. Grama Devadasi (Village Deities)

It is however believed that gramadevadasi are general guardians of the village. Names like uchinimakali, ,Muttara, Ulaga, Mupidathi Muthumalai of korunganni are common among the innumerable names. This temple has a special practice-if a woman does not have a child she will promise to give bangles or cradles to goddesses and just tie them on the tree which is near the temple, and if the woman delivers a child safety the mother will take the child to the temple and fulfill what she promised to do and call the child by the goddess's own name. The festival called 'Amman kodai' is very famous where meat-offering and animal sacrifices are made.

1.4.3.6. Demon Gods

No visitor to the district can fail to notice the numberless truncated often shapeless,obelisks of brick or plastered mud, which are seen almost everywhere. These are called 'Pudam' by their size, the characteristic common to these entire godly per, that is demon or spirit. So every peikoil (that is a cluster of peis) is the property of some particular caste, and their names are such as Sudalaimada swami, Munda swami, Karuppaswami and Irulappan etc.

1.4.3.7. Mavali Ammavasai

There was an inscription and copper plate which was found in the village of Kulkanper and Thiruvallaki near Vellore region that tells about the Mavali Amavasai festival. There was a king namely Maabali Chakaravarthi who governed throughout southern India around 1200 years ago, he was a profound follower of Lord Buddha and was inspired by his teaching about the three Rathnas of moral values. He travelled tirelessly and took the initiative to spread these values in his region along with charity work. One day suddenly he died while he was on the way to spreading the Buddha's moral teaching; it was on the day of Dark Moon in the month of Puratasi. All the people showed sympathy on his passing, and the people of the southern country were started to remember him every year of that particular day by helping the poor and doing some charity work as he did.

Conclusion

The first chapter has brought out the general background of the Palmyra climbers in terms of their Socio economic and Religion condition. With this information about the target people group and their occupation we will have an inspiration to investigate their lives more deeply. Though the Plamyra climbing occupation is visible in different parts of Tamilnadu, but then this research has mainly concentrated only in the limits of Sathankulam Taluk of Thoothukudi Distirct areas. Though the people followed their here ditary occupation as their own, the social status given to them was very denigrated, due to the so called social hierarchical ladder. The Christian missionaries who came from foreign lands brought 5 Christianity to evangelization that made an impact to come up socially and economically.

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