

## **Social Condition of the Shevaroy Hills Tribes at Salem District in Tamilnadu (1947 C.E – 2001 C.E)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of social condition of the Shevaroy hills tribes because of their extreme level of social backwardness and they reside in remote isolated areas away from any other kind of human interaction. Special attention and care are required for them to lead normal live like others. The Yercaud hill area is called Shevaroy hills, it is situated in the Eastern ghats of Salem district in Tamil Nadu state. Shevaroy is the anglicized name for Servarayan, and is a detached hill range, covering an area of 50 sq. m. The total extent of the range is 382.67 sq. kms, including Reserve Forests which includes the sanatorium and several old coffee plantations. The original inhabitants of this picturesque hill station are the Malayalis (Scheduled Tribes) a Tamil speaking Hindus. Their houses are circular, the walls are made of split bamboo, daubed with clay and conical roof is thickly thatched with grass. Nuclear type of family is common among the tribal communities in the Shevaroy hills, they were more comfortable with less family members, Malayali women enjoy equal status with their men. Drinking water is available throughout the year except in the summer months when they are forced to search for alternative water sources which are unclean and contaminated. The tribal households are affected to a great extent by the available hospital facilities, there is only one government hospital in the whole of Shevaroy hills to cater to the needs of the residents and majority of them have to travel to other towns for almost all ailments including maternity needs. The research conducted during the course of the study was unique in bringing out the difficulties of these tribals and it provides an emphasis on their upliftment as citizens of India.

**Keywords:** Yercaud, Vaguppu, Keeth, Kudumi, Chendhu kazhi, Kalpasm,

### **Introduction**

Salem district has the highest proportion of tribes because of the existence of many mountainous regions which are suitable for their inhabitation. The Yercaud hill area is called Shevaroy hills, it is situated in the Eastern ghats of Salem district in Tamil Nadu state. Shevaroy is the anglicized name for Servarayan, and is a detached hill range, covering an area of 50 sq. m. The total extent of the range is 382.67 sq. kms, including Reserve Forests which includes the sanatorium and several old coffee plantations<sup>1</sup>. It is a serene place with a pleasant, healthy and cool climate, provides many beautiful vistas and a panoramic view. The

original inhabitants of this picturesque hill station are the Malayalis (Scheduled Tribes) a Tamil speaking Hindus. They trace their origin to Conjeeveram (present Kanjeeपुरam at Chengalpattu district). The legend runs that three brothers, by name Periyannan (settled on the Shevaroy hills and Kalrayans hills), Naduvannan (settled on the Pachai-malai), and Chinnannan (settled on the Kolli-malai). The Shevaroy, as per the local inhabitants consisted of three Nadus, i.e. Selanadu (area South and East of the Shevaroyan Temple) Muttanadu (land in and around the Shevaroyan Temple) and Moganadu (North of the Temple). There are 67 villages and 27 hamlets with a total population of the Scheduled Tribes is 28,118 (67.16 per cent), of whom 14,159 are males (50.36 per cent) and 13,959 (49.64 per cent) are females during the year 2000-2001 census, forming majority of the population in the Yercaud town, because it became a taluk on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1977. Now, Yercaud has an assembly constituency (Scheduled Tribes), which is part of Salem Lok Sabha constituency<sup>2</sup>. The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of social condition of the Shevaroy hills tribes because of their extreme level of social backwardness and they reside in remote isolated areas away from any other kind of human interaction. They are the first to receive the wrath of nature, in ways like drought, heat stroke, infectious diseases, heavy rainfall etc. Special attention and care are required for them to lead normal live like others.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To analyze the social characteristics of tribal people.
- To examine the factors influencing income and expenditure conditions of the people.
- To identify the crucial factors affecting their standard of living and come at par with the rest of the people.
- To suggest suitable corrective and remedial measures.

### **Methodology**

The research methodology adopted for the study is both analytical and descriptive. There is a vast amount of primary and secondary sources which shed light on the history of this research topic. The data were collected and sorted out and analyzed. The analyzed data is presented under suitable chapter heads with chronological details.

### **People of the Shevaroy hills:**

The Shevaroy tribes are living in 67 villages and 27 hamlets from 9 panchayats namely Maramangalam, Nagalur, Vellakadai, Thalaisalai, Valavanthi, Semmanatham, Vellur, Yercaud and Manjakuttai with a total population of the Scheduled Tribes is 28,118 (67.16 per cent), of whom 14,159 are males (50.36 per cent) and 13,959 (49.64 per cent) are females during the year 2000-2001 census. They call themselves Karalans, a name for Malabar, being divided into three Nads, (1) Selanadu (2) Muttanadu (3) Moganadu each under its own Pattakkaran, and each containing nine pattis under Muppans, who are elected as a rule, each from a vaguppu prescribed by custom. A curious feature in connection with these vaguppus is that certain groups of them (called dayadi vaguppus) are inter se exogamous also<sup>3</sup>. The members of these dayadi clans call one another brothers (annan tambigal), and marriage between them is, for some unknown reason, regarded as incestuous. The Pattakkarans are

assisted by Maniyakkarans, who give notice of marriages to the villages of the Nadu concerned, and summon the villagers to attend; the Muppans are assisted by Kanganis.<sup>4</sup> The village of Chitteri is the residence of a Guru, who appears to be revered by all three sub-castes of Malaiyalis.

#### **Tribal Household with no infrastructural facilities:**

The Shevaroy tribes live in nuclear family, 11.11 per cent of the houses are thatched, 61.91 per cent houses are tiled and the remaining 26.98 per cent houses are terraced. The thatched houses are circular, the walls are made of split bamboo, daubed with clay and conical roof is thickly thatched with grass. The thatching material is mostly on kambu straw, paddy straw, cholam stalks, palmyra leaves and coconut kiths. Among the total houses, about only 36 percent of the houses have got electricity facility<sup>5</sup>. The tiled houses were built by the IRDP scheme in which some of them were totally damaged and few houses were repaired by some of the non-governmental organization, the terraced roofs are partly damaged. Since these people live in thick forest, they should be given proper housing facilities which enable them to be away from acute problems which crop up from their surroundings. Moreover, their entire housing structure consists of a single room which serves as a kitchen, hall, and bathroom all in one. Also, they utilize firewood as a chief source of fuel for cooking, this result in huge quantities of smoke to be released leading to various breathing disorder which always goes unnoticed and untreated. Regarding water facilities which have been worsted, even though it is a hill station with frequent rainfall, people living here face severe water problem.<sup>6</sup> They have to travel miles together to fetch water. During rainy season, there are fresh water streams but during the other seasons these streams remain dry. There is a well in every village which caters to all the needs of the entire village. As the same well water is also used for drinking purposes, most of the tribal people in the villages are affected with several water borne diseases. Most of the water sources are illegally tapped by the commercial undertaking in almost all the panchayats, leaving very little or no water at all for the tribal households. As there is no watershed, during the rainy season, the rain water goes unutilized as it flows down the hills and reaches Kamalapuram lake. 57.1 per cent are highly dissatisfied with the available water facilities. It was also reported that the common well in a village called Jerinakadu in the Yercaud panchayat, which provides drinking water to the neighbouring villages, is contaminated with sewage water, so much so that even the colour of the water has turned black and there is the fear of the spread of water borne diseases among the people using the well water<sup>7</sup>. One important observation during the field investigation is that no family lives in the traditional typical 'Malayali Huts' and 75.40 per cent households live in their own houses which are thatched, tiled or terraced houses<sup>8</sup>.

#### **Food Habits:**

The Shevaroy tribes are non-vegetarian, the flesh sheep or goat is a general article of diet throughout the hills. The eating of fish both fresh and salted, fowls, and most birds that pick up their food with their bills, is generally permitted. Pork is eaten by a very large proportion of the Shevaroy tribes but not eat beef or buffalo meat. The flesh of the Hanuman or black-faced monkey is highly valued as a medicine, and the Shevaroy tribes cut the carcass into

small pieces, 2" square, and sell these pieces at 200 rupees each or even more, a whole carcass being valued at Rs. 700 to Rs. 1000<sup>9</sup>. Their staple food is millets like ragi, colam, kambu and samai, occasionally they consume rice. Majority of them consume only ragi, it has been considered as inferior food compared to rice, the reason is that they cultivate only ragi and jowar in their field. Because of their insufficient diet these tribals are usually victims of malnutrition, anemia, and are immune compromised which in turn leads to infection of the least pathogenic diseases which has resulted because of poor immune system. Their delicacy is chendhu kazhi, which they prepare on festive occasions by mixing colam and rice flour and boiling it with jaggery.<sup>10</sup> They habitually take alcoholic drinks, such as sarayam and kallu, the women also drink liquor on festive occasions. The men are fond of smoking beedis and loose tobacco and use snuff, while the women chew betel, the art of tattooing is practice among the Shevaroy tribes. Though tattooing started as a personal adornment, in course of time, it seems to have acquired social and religious significance. The tattoo experts are well rewarded usually in kind with rice and meat.

### **Dress and Ornaments:**

The Shevaroy tribes, boys and girls wear the forelock (mun-kudumi) which is such a becoming and universal feature of the West Coast Hindus, the rest of the head being shaved. Boys retain this forelock till they are about 12 years of age, and girls till they attain puberty; boys then have this forelock shaved off, and grow a kudumi at the back of the head in accordance with the fashion universal in the East Coast districts, and girls allow all their hair to grow.<sup>11</sup> The women of the Shevaroy hills wear beneath their ordinary cloth a short loin-cloth of white cotton about a yard and a half long and three-fourths of a yard wide, which serves no apparent useful purpose, but bears a striking resemblance to that worn by the girls of Malabar. Similar cloths are worn by the women of the other two sub-castes beneath their colored pudavais.

### **Occupation:**

Income plays a vital role in improving the standard of living, education and health status of the people. The major source of income is agriculture, with coffee as the major crop. Coffee was the first cultivated in 1820, and the coffee plants were brought from Africa to Shevaroy hills. Jackfruit, Orange, Guava, and spices such as Black pepper and Cardamom are other crops raised on the coffee estates. Sandalwood, Teak and Silver oak are in abundance, as well, most of the tribes has been earned their family income from the estates in daily wages. The gender-based income earners among the tribal households has revealed that, 55.16 per cent are male income earners and 44.84 per cent are women income earners contributing to the family's income. Women played an important role in maintaining the livelihood of the family by catering to the domestic needs of the households and also by making a significant contribution to the family's income by working in the plantations and doing sundry jobs<sup>12</sup>. It was also found that the tribals in these hills considered the birth of a girl child to be auspicious and as a sign of wealth and prosperity to the family and therefore female infanticide is not prevalent in the tribal households which proves the insignificant difference in the sex ratios. Apart from Coffee cultivation of the people includes maize, ragi, jowar,

gingelly and also vegetables to a limited extent. The tribal people also resort to supplementary occupation such as broom making, collecting minor forest products like kalpasm, tamarind, grasses, shikakai, soap nuts, neem seeds and pangram seeds etc., there is no canal irrigation in these area<sup>13</sup>. Earlier, they practiced shifting cultivation, but now they have become settled agriculturists. They have also started to grow sugarcane and mulberry together with fruit trees, vegetables and they grew tamarind, jack, guava, pomegranate, mango, lemon, coconut and plantain trees.

#### **Expenditure particulars of Tribal households:**

The expenditure incurred by the tribal people on various aspects such as expenditure on agriculture crops, expenditure on milch animals, house tax and land tax, social and religious ceremonies, medical and educational expenses etc., social and religious ceremonies are much more than the other expenditures. Almost 25.40 per cent of expenditure goes to only ceremonies and the next important item of expenditure goes to household expenditure i.e., 26.37 per cent and the miscellaneous is 14.41 per cent<sup>14</sup>. It signifies that they believe in old customs and traditions when it comes to curing diseases rather than visiting or taking any doctoral advice.

#### **Education:**

Education is one of the important factors in the achieving rapid rural development, it helps in crating a social order founded on the values of freedom, social justice and opportunities. As per the census records, a person is considered literate if he can both read and write with understanding in any language. The literacy level of the Shevaroy tribal almost 55 per cent of the females and 41 per cent of the males are illiterates, it is observed that the people have studied up to primary education almost 74 per cent, whereas 27 per cent of the people have studied up to high school level<sup>15</sup>. No member in all the six hamlets has studied at college; it has been observed that tribal community in the study area, have studied only up to primary education, they are not interested in pursuing higher education. After primary school, they have been advised to look after the domestic work rather sending them to higher studies. It is evident that lack of education leads to ignorance at all levels causing them to still blindly believe in age old customs and traditions. Lack of education also humiliates to them using unsafe medical practices like midwives, fake imposters etc., who have no knowledge in the field of medicine.

#### **Hospital**

The tribal households are affected to a great extent by the available hospital facilities which have been ranked last position by the households. 71.7 per cent of the householders are highly dissatisfied with the available hospital facilities. It should be noted that there is only one government hospital in the whole of Shevaroy hills to cater to the needs of the residents<sup>16</sup>. The local inhabitants opine that, as there is no proper hospital facility available, majority of them have to travel to other cities and towns for almost all ailments including maternity needs.

**Research findings**

1. As we have seen in the case study of tribal population, it is proved that the living conditions of the tribal people is not favorable compared with the plain area people.
2. The existing social condition are not adequate enough to bring them above the poverty line.
3. Governments both state and central have introduced various welfare programmes for the welfare of the tribal community in the study area, but the implementation is very poor due to backwardness of the people and their ignorance.
4. There is a considerable distance between one village to another and there is no transport facility available to them, as a result they keep crossing wild animals even during day time. They have to cross a big stream to go to the Fair price shop in Bejality but there are herds of elephants which are always gathered over there, hence it is difficult for them to cross that area without putting their life at risk.
5. Their customs and traditions are totally different from that of the plain area people; therefore they maintain a distance between the outsiders. The government should take adequate steps to make them friendly with the plain area people by interactions that they can learn other languages making them comfortable in turn helping them to modify their standard of living.
6. The tribal people in the study area are crating problems to the wild animals and nature so wild animals keep coming to the living area and destroy the crops and properties which results in frequent deaths of wild animals in this area.
7. They have been misused by the money lenders an officials easily due to their backwardness and illiteracy. Therefore government should take steps to introduce tribal oriented developmental activities to enhance their ability as individuals and making them comfortable to lead normal lives like that of the plain area people.

**Suggestions**

The Malayali tribes of Shevaroy hills that isolation remains the main cause of social and moral backwardness of this tribal area. The given area of study also exhibits the same causing them to lead lives of disparity and poverty. People's development issues cannot be tackled in isolation, other infrastructure like roads, transport, schools, hospitals etc., need to be strengthened to ensure tribal development, since the area is predominantly agricultural, focus can be made to develop agriculture and allied sectors, like horticulture, plantation and social forestry. As the potential for these activities is high, each of them will create sizeable demand for regular labour force. However, minimal infrastructure has to be developed for the programmes in agriculture and allied activities which includes construction of roads, godsons and other facilities. It is felt that a substantive and sustainable developmental programme in agricultural and allied sectors can strengthen the tribal economy. But above all it is important that official machinery has to be sensitized to deal with tribal development problems not merely as 'paid jobs' but 'service' to community and nation building.

**Conclusion**

Change is the heartbeat of growth, in the past few years there has been a significant growth and change in these rural tribal hamlets resulting in their prosperity to a certain level. The government has introduced many welfare schemes and facilities for the upliftment of the tribals but still gave the top most priority to their old traditions, culture and rituals.

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