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## Social and Cultural Life of Tribal in Kanyakumari District

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### Abstract

*Kanyakumari is the southern – most district of the peninsular India, the seventh largest country in the world. In Kanyakumari, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian sea and the Bay of Bengal embrace one another. Kanyakumari district comprises of four taluks of the erstwhile Travancore – Cochin State. As per the recommendations of the state re-organizing commission, the regions of Agasteeswaram, Thovalai, Kalkulam and Vilavancode were grouped to form the “Kanyakumari district”. On November 1, 1956, Kanyakumari district of TamilNadu state came into existence with Nagercoil as its Head quarters, which crowned the struggle for separation from Kerala and merger with Tamilnadu. Kanyakumari district is named after the goddess, “Kanyakumari”. The life of the tribal people of Kanyakumari District is unique. They follow different customs and ceremonies that are suitable to their environment. The status of women is strange. They are a strong and well-built race fitted for the wilds they inhabit and their active habits. Their value systems, spirituality, capabilities and cultures have a huge untapped potential for sustainable development. They have developed a remarkable power of scenting the different kinds of wild animals at a great distance and can elude them successfully in the thickest forest. Broadly speaking the tribal communities when compared with castes are far too underdeveloped and backward in economical, educational and cultural matters but however they are not subjected castes. The tribes have a fierce desire to be self sufficient in the social and cultural life.*

**Keywords:** Tribes, customs, ceremonies, environment, education, unique

### 1. Introduction

*Kanyakumari is the southern – most district of the peninsular India, the seventh largest country in the world. In Kanyakumari, the Indian Ocean, the*



Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal embrace one another. Kanyakumari district comprises of four taluks of the erstwhile Travancore – Cochin State. As per the recommendations of the state re-organizing commission, the regions of Agasteeswaram, Thovalai, Kalkulam and Vilavancode were grouped to form the "Kanyakumari district".<sup>1</sup> On November 1, 1956, Kanyakumari district of TamilNadu state came into existence with Nagercoil as its Head quarters, which crowned the struggle for separation from Kerala and merger with Tamilnadu. Kanyakumari district is named after the goddess, "Kanyakumari". Although the tribe, caste, sect, racial group and class are the various types of social groups found in India, it is the tribe and the caste which dominated the former among the primitive communities and the latter in Hindu Society. Much confusion has arisen in the past due to the indiscriminate use of these two words, they have been used by synonyms and therefore many tribes have been described as castes while a number of castes have received tribal designation.<sup>2</sup>

The life of the tribal people of Kanyakumari District is unique. They follow different customs and ceremonies that are suitable to their environment. The status of women is strange. They are a strong and well-built race fitted for the wilds they inhabit and their active habits. Their value systems, spirituality, capabilities and cultures have a huge untapped potential for sustainable development. The traditional 'hunter gatherer instinct' still existed in the tribal people and they collected nuts, fruits, tubers, greens and mushrooms in forests. They play a crucial role in the stewardship of natural resources and biodiversity and provide environmental services at local, regional and international levels. Indigenous people have rich, varied and locally rooted knowledge systems and their immense culture diversity is extremely valuable in a world threatened by the homogenizing trend of globalization. They have developed a remarkable power of scenting the different kinds of wild animals at a great distance and can elude them successfully in the thickest forest. Broadly speaking the tribal communities when compared with castes are far too underdeveloped and backward in economical, educational and cultural matters, but however they are



not subjected castes. The tribes have a fierce desire to self sufficient in the social and cultural life.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Appearance of the People

Tribals of Kanyakumari District are very attractive to look at with black body, circular head and curled hair and broad nose. The tribal women are generally dwarf and small in size. They are dark-skinned and platyrhined type. Tribal women are highly moral. Men show much respect to women. They are straight forward, truthful and open-hearted. They are good trackers and fond of sport, and in clearing forest paths they have hardly any equals. Their help and guidance are sought by, and willingly given to any person who may have to travel through the forests.<sup>4</sup>

## 3. Language

They speak Malaipashai, which is a South Dravidian language of the Malayalam-Tamil sub-group. They use Tamil script.

## 4. Costume and Ornaments

The men wear dhoti and towel and women have a long cloth wound round their waist and wear a small cloth over their body. The women also use coloured saris and blouses. The women wear a long cloth, called charm, around their waists and wear a loose blouse called raveeka. They say that their ancestors wore a garment made of jungle-fibre. The women are not used to wear too many jewels in their ears and nose but they use a number of brass rings on the fingers. Women wear chains made up to beads and shells around their necks. Many women have tattoo marks. They are not very clean in their dress. But nowadays women are also developed and they wear modern dress and modern jewels. Both men and women grow alike their hair and have it tied round in a knot at the back of the head.<sup>5</sup>

## 5. Foods

Large number of plants and animals that were used by this Kani were not widely known as food resources, which have medicinal values. Of the less known



food resources. They are non-vegetarian but abstain from eating beef. Their staple foods are rice and millets. They consume pulses, vegetables and fruits. They use groundnut and coconut oils for cooking. They consume milk and milk products. They drink coffee and tea. They know how to prepare many delicious and nutritious dishes out of tapioca. The women relish tapioca with dry or fresh fish. Both men and women consume liquor, especially on festival and ceremonial days. Men smoke beedis, cigarettes and cheroot. They chew betel with tobacco.<sup>6</sup> Mushroom occupied a vital role. The tribal people collected the edible mushrooms in the wild after the monsoons. They collected the mushrooms early in the morning in bamboo or reed baskets. Thus collected mushrooms were cleaned in fresh water twice or thrice and slightly pounded in wooden mortar with an equal amount of rice. Then both were boiled with little water added with spices, salt and wild green chillies. Then it was served with cooked rice or cooked tapioca.<sup>7</sup>

#### 6. Occupation and Entertainment

The chief occupations of the tribals are honey collection, agricultural works, hunting and fishing. Card playing, cock fighting, making of several noises and forest raiding are certain important Entertainments of tribals.

#### 7. House

They live in small huts. The huts are constructed with the help of wood, mud, and grass. But, now- a- days the government provided with many facilities for the tribal people.<sup>8</sup>

#### 8. Tribal's Education

Education is the most important element in the development of any community. The role of education as an investment in human resources has been increasingly recognized all over the underdeveloped and developed countries. Education has special significance for the weaker sections of the society which are facing a new situation in the development process to adjust themselves properly to the changing circumstances. For them, education is an input not only for their economic development, but also for promoting in them self confidence and inner strength to face the new challenges. The Scheduled Tribes have fallen



victims to the exploitation of the middlemen, merchants and moneylenders on account of their illiteracy and ignorance. The need for their educational development, therefore, assumes prime importance to save them from economic exploitation and to help them in their all-round development.

### 9. Educational Development

The Department of Elementary Education and Literacy and of Higher Education in States have provided special incentives to ST students which include text-books, uniform, tuition fee, and so on. Special focus is also accorded to ST students under the District Primary Education Programme, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya. Midday Meals Programme, Navodaya Vidyalaya National Talent Search Scheme, and the like. The Post Metric Scholarship Scheme open to all ST students whose parent's annual income is up to Rs1 lakh to facilitate students to pursue professional courses. An amount of Rs 589 crore was utilized to benefit seven lakh ST students in the tenth plan.

### 10. Schools

At first the tribals have only two schools at Pechipparai and Pathukani. Now the government takes steps to improve the education of tribes in Kanyakumari District. Now there are eight tribal schools in Kanyakumari District. Among them 2 High Secondary Schools and 1 High School, 2 Middle Schools and 3 Primary Schools for the Kanyakumari District. In all these schools 70% of the students are tribals. They are getting all benefits through the school in the education system. Except High School all other schools have hostel facilities. The students are provided with free boarding and lodging, woolen blankets, text books, writing materials and uniforms. Tribal boys go to school, but not the girls. They give more importance to education and nowadays women are also going to Schools and Colleges. Government gives educational facilities to their communities.

### 11. Cultural Setting and Problems of the Tribals in General

The people in general derive directly substantial amount of their livelihood from the forest. They subsist on edible leaves and root, honey, and fish. They build their homes with the help of local raw materials. They use herbs



and medicinal plants to cure their diseases and their religion and folk-lore are woven round the spirits of the forests commercial transactions are predominantly by barter, trade being left mostly to the outsiders who controlled the money economy. In Tamil Nadu there are 36 tribal communities. The total population is 2.50 lakhs representing 1.07% of the total population of the State. The percentage compared to the percentage composition found all over India. There has been an increase of 67% in the ST population from 1971 to 1981. This remarkable increase has been attributed to the removal of area restrictions in 1981 in the case of tribes.<sup>9</sup>

### 12. Economic Condition

The development in economy is largely depended on the climate, availability of natural resources, development of infrastructural facilities, entrepreneurial skill, attitude towards investments and the availability of skilled labour. Forest is the main resources of income to these people. Their economic system is almost self sufficient and confined to their village.<sup>10</sup>

### 13. Knowledge of Medicine

Almost all the tribal men and women, at Pechipparai settlement possess a good knowledge of medicinal plants and their use. The Muttukani in the settlement has thorough knowledge about the herbs. He used the give medicines to ordinary diseases like stomachpain, fever, and common cold. Certain Kanis use medicinal plants independently. If it is not cured they go to the Muttukani for better treatment.<sup>11</sup>

### 14. Tribal Festival

Hindu Kanikkars celebrate festivals such as Onam, Deepavali and Karthigai. The Christian Kanikkars are converts to the Roman Catholic faith. They celebrate Christmas and good Friday.

### 15. Puberty Ceremony

Puberty rites are observed when a girl attains maturity. The girl is kept in seclusion (Gudisai Kuthirudu-siting in her hut) for about one month. The maternal uncle erects the hut and presents gifts to the girl.



## 16. Marriage and Dowry

The tribes follow different kinds of marriage system. They are Monogamy, Polygamy, Adult and Child Marriage. Among them, Monogamy is mostly acceptable one and common among the tribes. Polygamy is rarely accepted. In certain families the first wife directs her husband to bring one more wife. But, now it is not in practice. The age of marriage varies from 16 to 20 years for girls and 20 to 25 years for boys. A gold thali and toe-rings are the marriage symbols. Cash and clothes are given as dowry. A kind of dowry is given by the bride's father, in the form of a bill-hook, chopper and two brass vessels full of grain and pulses, to the father of the bridegroom. But nowadays they give jewels and money, brass vessel, choppers, grain and pulses, then property of land and house.

## 17. Pregnancy Ceremony

The tribal women do not observe any pre-delivery rituals. Pre-delivery restrictions, however, are observed. Delivery is conducted at home with the help of an experienced woman or midwife. Post-delivery pollution is observed for three to five days. There is no special naming ceremony. They name their children after deities or ancestors. Children are tonsured during their first or third year, at the clan deity's shrine. Girl children have their ears pierced and wear palm-leaf ear-studs.

## 18. Funeral Rites

Most of them cremate their dead; only a few bury them. When a person dies, the entire community turns out to help. The corpse is bathed in hot water and dressed in new clothes. This is followed by vaikkarisi poduthal in which wet raw rice is put in the mouth of the corpse. The corpse is then put on a bier and carried to the cremation ground. The eldest son lights the pyre. Then he goes around the corpse three times, with a pot of water on his head. On completion of the third round the pot is smashed. On the fifth day, the ashes of the dead are collected in an earthen pot which is hung on a jack tree for 15 days. On the 16th day, the pot is immersed in a stream or lake. The near relatives take an oil-bath and have a vegetarian feast (pulakuzhi). For death ceremonies, the tribals



receive the services of the barber and washer man. They worship their ancestors and offerings are made to them annually.<sup>12</sup>

### 19. Conclusion

The government of Tamil Nadu is taking so many welfare measures to look after the well-being of the tribal people. Even though the government is coming forward to enlighten them, but the benefits of the government schemes are not yet to reach the people. The economy of tribal is limited and not self-sufficient one. In the long run the life of the tribes will be in progress.

### End Notes

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