

An Empirical Study on the Status of the Narikuravar, the Peripatetic Nomads in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, South India

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Abstract: *The nomadic communities in India can be broadly separated into three categories namely the hunter gatherers, pastoralists and the peripatetic. The peripatetic nomads are the non-food producing groups. The Narikuravar community in Tamil Nadu is listed under this category. They are skilled in hunting and trapping animals especially jackals. However, the restrictions on hunting and sale of forest products forced the Narikuravar to take up other means of livelihood such as selling beaded ornaments and indigenous medicine. Women are expert and further earn their living by making ornaments with glass beads. They migrate from place to place to find market for their selling business. This article deals exclusively about the nomadic tribal Narikuravar who live in Tirunelveli, one of the southern most districts of Tamil Nadu.*

Key Words: *Narikuravar, nomadic life, peripatetic nomads, tribal culture.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Narikuravar were the nomadic group of people believed to have migrated from the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra around 400 years ago to South India. They were the non-food producing group, listed in the category of economic specialization as peripatetic nomads associated with nature and its by-products, settled all over South India. In Tamil Nadu they preferred to live in the hilly regions. When the British government passed the Forest Protection Act, they were naturally pushed towards the plains and developed contact with the settled communities. In the beginning the Narikuravar community did not find any place to reside after a day's toil in Tirunelveli city. They made tents as dwelling places on the road sides and lived on pavements. The whole theme of this article deals about the demographic distribution of Narikuravar community in Tirunelveli as well as their social, economic and political conditions.

1.1. AREA OF RESEARCH:

The Narikuravar community in Tirunelveli district falls under the area of research. Though they are leading a nomadic life, they come and settle in Narikuravar colony, Pettai, Tirunelveli.

1.2. OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of this study are to

- to trace the origin of Narikuravar
- to describe their demographic distribution in Tirunelveli and
- to analyze their characteristics and living conditions.

2. METHODOLOGY:

It is an inductive study based on interview schedule and observation.

3. DATA COLLECTION:

Personal observation and interviews form the basis of this study. Extensive field survey has been undertaken to study their living condition. Field study by means of questionnaires, interviews, interactions, discussion and case studies have developed the study on right perspective. The information from the local news papers, journals and

television news has been added. The published articles and books related to this topic have been verified.

4. DEMOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION:

The Social Change And Development (SCAD), the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) at Cheranmahadevi identified the problems of this community and began to work for them. The authorities of the government in Tirunelveli purchased lands from the private parties and allotted it as a colony for this community at Pettai. This colony was created in 2004, with the combined effort of SCAD as well as the government.

Details about the Pettai – Narikuravars

Total family	292
Total population	1300
Male	623
Female	677

Out of 292 families and 1300 total population identified in 2021 only 250 families and 1011 people of this community are staying here as on 31 December, 2021. Other families migrated permanently to places of their choice like Vallioor and to other places nearby.

4.1. LIVING CONDITION:

Government has provided legal documents “Pattas” to own land to 148 families. Others are yet to be provided with. Officials in the SCAD construct new houses with the financial support of the government as well as contribution made by the SCAD group and the persons concerned. Each house is constructed in an area of 250 square feet. SCAD group is rendering all sort of assistance to get financial support from the government. A new house is constructed by the contribution of Rs. 72,000 from the central government, Rs.17, 500 from the SCAD organization and Rs 17,500 from the family concerned. For the extension of their houses they are getting Rs.25, 000 from the government. Hence each new house is constructed at the cost of Rs.1, 32,000. SCAD group has planned to construct 86 houses in the first slot. 50 houses have been completed so far. And 50% of the works are to be completed for the remaining 36 houses. Seventy five families apply for new houses in the second phase. The government has installed water pumps. The government has constructed two public toilets for the whole community in this area. Syntax is kept on the top of a newly constructed pillar with water pipes.

SCAD supporting Schemes at Pettai

House Construction work	86
House repair work	20
public toilet	2
bore well	2
Gypsy special groups	4
Men group	1
Women group	3
Gypsy elders	29
Male elders	13
Female elders	16

4.2. EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES:

The SCAD is administering a school at Pettai exclusively for Narikuravar children. There is no legal land ownership “patta” for this school. Hence the government is not providing recognition to this school. Therefore the SCAD group has converted this institution into a school for child labourers and named it as *Non Formal Educational Centre for Gypsy Community*. Government provides them free noon meals, note books, uniforms and Rs 100 per month to each child. One hundred and forty six Narikuravar students are studying in this school. The handicapped children also get support from this school. SCAD is running a boarding school at Cheranmahadevi called “Anbu Illam” especially for the physically challenged. Boys and girls of Narikuravar community are encouraged to stay in this hostel. They are shifted from Pettai to Cheranmahadevi after the completion of fifth standard.

Very few children are continuing their secondary education in the nearby schools at Pettai. They come across language problem while studying in other schools because they converse only in Vagriboli language with their community people. Tamil is the second language to them. Children accompany the adults wherever they go, which means they never get to attend school. Very few children are able to complete tenth standard in school. Most of them are dropouts in the earlier classes itself. In Pettai colony only one girl reached tenth standard. Anyhow she did not complete that course. Parents are unhappy to allow their daughters staying in hostel at Cheranmahadevi. SCAD institution guarantees their safety and welfare and separates their children from their parents. But the parents unwillingly allow their children to stay in hostel.

4.3. SOCIAL CONDITION:

The streets are broad and the road facilities are good. In few houses they have bore well facilities. They get corporation drinking water for their daily use. But they use very little amount of water every day. Their colony is completely a secluded area. Others may not feel comfortable while entering in this area. They go for hunting and selling beads ornaments in the morning. The streets are very busy in the evening because they sit in front of their houses as members of family to cook their food. They chat and eat what they bring. They listen to the radio songs. Children are playing in the street wearing dirty clothes or without dress. They roast the hunted animals and birds like squirrel, fox, dog, cat, "kaddai," "kathuvalli," sparrow, crane, peacock, "kanakkoli," crow, rat, tortoise, etc. in the fire. They collect fish from the river and cook them. Some of them collect waste items like heads, legs and intestine of the chicken from the shops while they are not going for hunting. They sit in front of their houses and eat them with brandy and other intoxicating liquor. Occasionally they cook food in the morning. Food sellers belonging to other communities enter into their area to sell the food items. Some of them cook food once in a day and use it for the whole day. They rarely cook vegetarian food. Those who are doing business in Tirunelveli junction purchase and eat the available food items from the nearby ordinary hotels in the morning. They also buy lunch packs at cheaper rate from the person who supplies it. They buy and eat all sorts of unhygienic food items. They do not wash their hands after eating food. They like to have the smell of the food after eating. After their settlement in Pettai some of them purchased modern kitchen items like stove, gas, cooker etc. They keep them in their houses whether they use it or not.

They speak Vagriboli, a unique language which has no script. Other community people cannot understand their language. They converse only in their own language with their fellow men. They speak loudly. They have stated that, their language is a combination of Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi. They talk in Tamil language very well with the Tamil speaking people. They have a traditional way of clothing. Ladies wear a small cloth as upper garment besides skirt and blouse. Men wear "dhoti" and "lungis". Very few children wear clothes.

They adhere to Hindu religious beliefs and customs because their occupation of making ornaments out of beads is associated with the Hindu temples and festivals. They have one Kali temple in their colony. They fix some tridents of that goddess in front of their colony. There are two divisions in the Narikuravar blood line namely, the buffalo-sacrificer, the worshippers of "kali" and goat sacrificers, those who worship "Meenakshi." They have strong beliefs and fear of their goddess. For instance one of the Narikuravars objected to take a photo of the crabs he has collected for food. He says that if we take a photo of this crab, we won't get rain and it will become a sin in the sight of god. There is a small church in this colony but very few children attend the programmes on Sundays. Though they are living in the midst of other religious groups, they never convert to other religions. In the Tamil month of "Chithirai" they celebrate "Chithirai festival." Their relatives from other places come over here to celebrate that festival. They sacrifice buffalos. They prepare Pongal in seven pots at the same time. They take hot rice in empty hand. They also prepare hot chappathis in plain hands.

Another important feature is that, they never marry the people from other communities. If any of them violates this norm, they are not allowed to join their community. Even at the age of seven they fix the marriage to their children. Then immediately after attaining puberty they get married. They wear black bead mala as their wedlock. Their marriage function is very simple. They spend a maximum of Rs.500/- for the marriage expenses. Boys and girls choose their partners at their own interest and parents arrange their marriages. Parents also select and decide their children's partners. Both the girls and boys roamed together while doing business. But they never have sex before marriage. They give importance to chastity. Parents used to conduct marriage function even at the age of thirteen. In order to prevent inter caste marriage; they marry their daughters at an early age with in their community boys.

There is more number of children in their family. There are nearly 4 to 6 children in each family. In earlier times they never followed any family planning methods, but in recent times they are using contraceptives. They have fear of their goddess "Meenakshi" and "Kali." They have a belief that if anyone has illegal relationship with others, their family members will suffer diseases. Then those who make mistakes should repent and pour two bottles of soda

water before the picture of their goddess. They are leading a simple life. They live in harmony with nature. Narikuravar in Pettai are following some unwritten rules and regulations to control their community. Those who are going for their business to faraway places should reach their colony immediately after completing their business. Those who are doing business in the nearby areas should reach their colony before 6 p.m. Some time they quarrel with each other. While any problem arises in the colony they never complain it to the police station. They solve their problem among themselves. The streets are empty with very few aged people and children, while others go for business. They have immense medical knowledge. But they suffer from some of the seasonal diseases like fever, jaundice etc. Few of them suffer and die due to diseases like cancer. SCAD is providing awareness programmes like environmental awareness by planting the trees, conducting eye camps etc.

4.4. ECONOMIC CONDITION:

Narikuravar keep on migrating from place to place for their livelihood. The original occupation of this people was hunting. But as they were prohibited entry into the forests to pursue hunting, they were forced to take up other alternatives to survive. But they never give up hunting. Selling ornaments made out of beads is their daily business. Hence they migrate from place to place to find a market for their beads. They are trading at the local level as street vendors. They move in groups to the nearby areas and even to states like Kerala during festive occasions in connection with their trade to sell beaded ornaments.

Making strings of “malas” (garlands) out of beads is their art. They make it with beads and metal wire. Men, women and children are engaged in making malas out of beads. They are unique and expert in making and selling their artifacts. Their malas are exceptional than that of others. By telling sentimental words about their holy malas, they are tactfully doing their business. Sometimes they are exaggerating the qualities of their artifacts. There is no competition for their business. Their business activity is completely connected with temples. They purchase beads and other essential materials from the wholesale markets at Madurai near *Meenakshi amman* temple. They bring them to their house to make malas. They make so many varieties of malas. Among them “Tulsi mala” (black and white colour), “Navaratna mala” (multi-colour), “Patika malai” (white colour), “Utaracha malai,” “Patchai mani” (green colour), “Karuppu Padikam” (black colour), “Sivappu Pavalam” (red colour), etc., are very important. They fix 108 colourful beads in Navaratna mala. Every male and female member makes nearly 20 malas per day. Women are expert in preparing these malas. They prepare even in darkness while doing conversation also. Even small children are experts in preparing malas. They sell each of these malas from Rs. 20 to Rs.60. There is no fixed price. They sell black and white holy threads which are used to be tied on the wrists. Pendants with Hindu gods and goddesses pictures like “Murugan,” “Sudalai,” “Mutharamman” and “Vinayakar” are also attached in these malas. They sell these garlands mostly during festival seasons in Mandakkadu – “Devi” Temple, Tiruvandrum – “Attrankarai Amman” Temple, Sabarimala – “Ayyapan” Temple, Kulasekarapatnam – “Mutharamman” Temple, Kanyakumari temple, Tiruchendur – “Murugan temple” etc. All these places are associated with Hindu temples and festivals. They sell their artifacts in the festival at Lady of Snow church, a Roman catholic church at Tuticorin.

Most of the Narikuravars go to Sabarimala Ayyappa Temple in the Kerela state from Tamil Nadu state in the Tamil month of “Karthikai” and do business there for three months. They also go there every month during the opening of the gate festival “Nadai Thirappu.” Narikuravar from Sivagangai, Sathiyamangalam, Pollachi, Theni, Valliyoor etc., join together at Bamba and Nilakkal bring their artifacts to sell. One rich man belonged to Narikuravar community at Pollachi purchase the beads from Banaras and sell them slightly higher rate than that of the purchasing rate at Madurai. During the Tamil month of “Aadi,” they go to Kulasekarapatnam Muththaramman temple festival. They stay there for three months. Narikuravar from Madurai, Valliyoor, Tirunelveli, Aruppukottai, Koilpatti etc., come over here for doing business. They go to Tiruchendur in the month of “Vaikasi” for “Visagam” festival and stay there for 10-15 days. They also stay in Mandakkadu Bagavathy Amman temple for three to four weeks.

Every day to sell their artifacts to the passengers, nearly twenty five Narikuravar ladies are sitting in the corridor of the bus stand at Tirunelveli junction. Very few men are accompanying them. Their grown up boys occasionally come here to sell their hunting products. They bring buckets full of honey combs to sell. Narikuravar come to this venue at 8.30 a.m. by train, gathering all their business items in bags and carry their babies in a cradle hanging around their neck. They leave this place by bus before 6 p.m. They sell bead malas, needle, kavittai, plastic cars, combs, “kilukiluppai”, purse, honey, “Punuku”, combs, mirror, ear rings, hair clips etc. They also sell items like nail polish, combs, bangles, mirrors, ribbons, hairpins, key chains, naphthalene balls, safety pins, sandal balls, “bindi”, dolls, black and yellow holy threads etc. Some of them sell oil extracts made out of the fats of peacock and rat – snake. They sell them as pain reliever medicines. They sell egg like stones in black and white colour as ritual items for Hindu gods. Sometimes the Narikuravar girls try to sell these items to passengers who are inside the bus stand.

Tattooing is another important business activity of theirs. They take the smoke sediments from the smoke lets of the vehicles and used it as ink for tattooing. They used three needles to inject the colour. Then they advise the people to apply castor oil mixed with turmeric powder. Only one man is sitting on the path way and doing tattooing business in the bus stand. They return home with a huge amount of money earned through their business. They spend all the money earned in few days. Hunting is mostly organized by men in Narikuravar community. They rear hunting cows in their houses. They go in groups to the deep forest areas near their places like Udangudi, Sathankulam, Alankulam etc. They have instruments like nets and “kavattai” (bow like instrument) to hunt birds and animals. They spread the nets and catch animals and birds. They hunt animals and birds like fox, jackals, tortoise, dogs, rats, “kaddai”, “kathuvali”, sparrow, “kokku”, pea cock, “kanakkkoli”, squirrel etc. They also hunt dogs and cats in the streets. After eating the flesh of the jackal they sell a small horn like bone on its head of that animal for the cost of about Rs.1000/. They sell its nail for the cost of Rs.5000/. The rich people in Kerala buy these products for higher rate. Some people hang the heads of the jackals on their bed room and want to look at its face immediately after they wake up. They consider it as fortune to have these things in their houses. Narikuravar gather honey and sell it in the cities. They hunt peacock, birds, crane etc., with their kavattai. They extract the fat of the peacock and sell it in the market. They sell the fats of other animals as snake oil.

4.5. POLITICAL CONDITION:

Narikuravar are the marginal and minority sections of our society. They have no political power. They have no involvement in politics. They are not interested in knowing about political development in our society. The government authorities like district Collector do come occasionally to this area and promise to accomplish some activities. Tirunelveli corporation officials gave polio drops to the children below five years. As per the governmental schemes, they received free colour television. Governments as well as the NGO's are creating environmental, health as well as educational awareness to this community. Officials from the project of ministry of women and child development organize awareness and empowerment programmes in that colony very often. SCAD is also organizing so many welfare programmes for this community. They exercise their voting rights. They are provided with their identity cards and ration cards. The programmes and welfare schemes announced and implemented by the government are not reaching this community fully. They are in the same status for a long time. The reason stated was they are mobile communities and there are problems in taking survey about them.

5. CONCLUSION:

To conclude, the Narikuravar people living in Pettai are highly backward in terms of their social, economic and educational status. Unless these deprived people are exposed to the importance of education it is impossible to lift them from the miserable situation. Government should take necessary steps to uplift this down trodden community. There are some stigmas prevailing in the society about this Narikuravar community. If we are really concerned about them those stigmas should be removed. We must allow them to live as freely as possible. Since they are below poverty line, extra care should be taken. If they are provided with all the facilities the stigmas and misconceptions may disappear enabling them to join the main stream of society.

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