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Transition from Caste to Tribe: The Political Transformation of Piramalai Kallars Constructed through the Memories of the Perungamanallur Massacre

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Abstract

Piramalaikkallar community is living predominantly in the Southern part of Tamil Nadu. Now Piramalaikkallars are identified as one of the castes under the community of 'Mukkulathor' which is also referred as 'Thevar' community. But Piramalaikkallars are culturally different from the Kallar community of other parts of Tamil Nadu. In Piramalaikkallars, the marriage relationships are decided based on their clan deities. Munusaamy temple in Karumaathoor and Ochaandamman temple in Paapaapatti are the clan deities of the people of Piramalaikkallar. This community has been dominating the political landscapes of Tamil Nadu. In the year 1911, Criminal Tribes Act came to action in Tamil Nadu. Piramalaikkallar community was identified as 'Criminal Tribes' under this act. On 3rd April 1920 in the village named Perungaamanallur near Usilampatti in Madurai District, Piramalaikkallar community people protested against the British government for listing their community under Criminal Tribes Act. 16 people shot dead at this protest including women.

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In 2020, hundredth anniversary of this protest has been conducted. In this event, two strong political proposals were made i.e. Kallar naadugal (States of Kallars) and DNT certification. Though Piramalaikkallars are politically dominant, their representation in education, economy and job opportunities are scarce. As they are in the OBC category of national list and MBC/DNC category in State list, they are asking to certify them as DNT for their emancipation. This article talks about this political changes in the community of Piramalaikkallars and also the changes in the political landscapes regarding the proposals of 'States of Kallars' and 'DNT Certification' by Piramalaikkallars.

Keywords: Piramalaikkallar, DNT, Criminal Tribes Act, Province of Kallar, Memory.

Introduction

Piramalaikkallar caste are majorly living in the southern part of Tamil Nadu like Madurai, Theni, Dindigul and Virudhunagar. They are considered as the various sects of the PiramalaiKallar community. But the majority of sub-castes of the Kallar community is categorized as backward class, but these Piramalaikkallars are included in the category of DNC. Even though they are mobilized under the identity of "Mukkulathor" at the political level, Piramalaikkallar community is a culturally independent caste compared to the other three communities such as Kallar, Agamudayar and Maravar castes.^[1] Thus far, this community has maintained its culture realm on the basis of its tribal characteristics. For instance, Louis Dumont has done pioneering work on Piramalaikkallars regarding their kinship pattern and marriage system.^[2] The unique identity of Piramalaikkallar society is the concept of Kallar's States and the worship of clan deities. This article attempts to the evolution of these identity through the prism of current socio-political Contexts.

States of Kallars

When the British first entered the present Indian Union, this large area was ruled by various principalities and empires. The whites fought and deceived those kingdoms and conquered them and united all those territories to establish their colonialism. When he conquered kingdoms and established his kingdom, there were many independent tribes in those countries. They were, for the most part, autonomous autonomous guilds, administering themselves and not beholden to the existing states.

In 15th century AD in Tamil Nadu and during the reign of Thirumalai Nayakar, the borders surrounding Madurai were divided into Palayams and Zamins. Among which Piramalaikallas lived in large numbers and those places were called Kallar countries (Province of Kallars). They were divided into eight states namely Thidiyan, Valandur, Puttur, Karumathur, Pappapatti, Kokkulam, Veppanoothu and Tummakundu. These eight provinces became self-governing states.^[3] The British could not bring these independent tribes under their complete control. While trying to control them, they clashed ferociously with the British. Although the British subdued them through military force, they could not permanently impose their administrative laws on them. They felt that some stringent laws were needed to do so. Its ultimate form is the Criminal Tribes Act. Nomadic tribes, some hill tribes and some plain tribes were brought under it. Since India was a mixture of many different national languages, even surveillance was confusing for them. From the 17th century, the nomadic population started living in the jungle, distancing themselves from the majority due to the severe exploitation caused by the economic and political policies of the British colonial government. The British Government enacted the Indian Police Act in 1861, establishing a European-style police system throughout British India. This new system effectively abolished the traditional police practices that were already in place. As a result, in South Tamil Nadu, castes such as the Kallar and Maravar, who traditionally served as the Thisai Kavalars and Sthala Kavalars, lost their occupations.^[4] The land previously allotted to them as custodial grants was confiscated, and the police wages they had been receiving were rendered illegal. Consequently, these communities were plunged into poverty. In response to this situation, protests erupted. The British authorities categorized these communities as criminal tribes due to the circumstances that led some members to resort to theft out of desperation. Instead of addressing the root causes of theft, the British government opted to persecute the entire communities as criminals.

The Criminal Tribes Act in Madurai District

The dictionary defines the word history as 'knowledge gained through research, information about past events, memories, collections, institutions, gifts, events'. We will take it to mean 'the road that has passed'. We remember history not only

to shed tears over past sacrifices and to boast about what happened. That sacrifice and valour should guide the next generation. On April 3, 1920, a massive mass protest was held in Perungamanallur village near Usilampatti against the oppressive law of the British. To suppress the protest, 17 people were shot dead, including a woman named Mayakkal. This year marks 104 years since the painful scar of the Tamil struggle against imperialism.

We have seen historical narratives of common people fighting for justice in literature. This horrific incident in Perungamanallur of Madurai district, which is called the 'Jallianwala Bagh of the South' is an important part of the history of such people in the last century.^[5] A history of sacrifice lies behind the deaths of 17 individuals who lost their lives to bullet wounds while fighting for their rights. This struggle was against one of the most repressive criminal laws in history. The concept, which originated in Europe, aimed to label certain individuals as criminals by birth and to categorize entire groups as dangerous, leading to the surveillance of their activities.

The Criminal Tribes Act, which was first enacted in Bengal in 1871, had been enforced on 89 castes in Tamil Nadu since 1916.^[6] After the implementation of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1911, which included several amendments, additional castes and tribes were classified as criminal tribes and began to be registered under the Act. As a result, a total of 1.4 million people were affected by this legislation throughout the Madras Presidency.^[7] The British government specifically used this law against individuals they feared, particularly those who opposed them. This Act was gradually applied throughout India. The British government included 213 castes in the list of criminal tribes. While the Criminal Tribes Act of 1911 was applied to the Madras Presidency, the final terms for its implementation were published only in May 1913. In Tamil Nadu, 89 castes were listed.^[8]

According to this law, all persons above 16 years of age from the mentioned communities must register their name, address and fingerprints at the police station. At night, all men, including the elders, must sleep in the public yard of the residential place or in police station under the observation of guards.^[9] If people want to go outside during the day, they need to buy a "Radhari Pass". (This ticket will contain S.No., Name, Crime Registration number, reason for going out,

route, time, time of return, fingerprint registration). To implement this law, all adult men in the relevant communities must visit the police station to provide their consent and register their fingerprints, indicating their agreement to follow the law.^[10] Hence this Act was called as “Regai sattam” (C.T. Act G.O No:1023, judicial dt: 04.05.1914). This repression led to the ruination of agricultural work, growth of poverty, and the loss of meagre land by going to the courts due to false cases.

It was on 4.5.1914 at Keelakuyilkudi in Madurai that the British Police introduced this Act for the first time in Tamil Nadu.^[11] The District Munsif of Madurai initiated the registration of Kallars in the list. In the first phase, 70 out of 320 men were convicted under this law. On the recommendation of the judge, they were declared a criminal property and remanded in police custody. Therefore, everyone over the age of 16 must register themselves. The registered persons are required to inform the Government of their residence and movement to the Government under Section 10 of the Criminal Tribes Act.

Perungamanallur Massacre:

Madurai District Superintendent of Police HG Clinch recommended implementation of this Act on 04.05.1914. All adult males were classified under the K.D (K.D – Known dacoits) list. In 1915, District Law Judge, Pattison issued an order enumerating Piramalaikallars under this Act. (G.O.No:2233, judicial 16th September 1915).

While the authorities were implementing the Act at a fast pace in the Piramalai Kallar dominated area of Madurai district, they finally reached Perungamanallur village. The villagers refused to obey the law. They categorically stated that they would abide by laws that were conducive to truth and justice and that they could not abide by laws that were against social justice. The Collector of Madurai was keen that the law should be enforced there. Thinking that the people would revolt against the government, the British government came there with cavalry and artillery and threatened them. The white government refused to listen to the fact that it was wrong to prosecute the entire society, regardless of the guilt and the innocent. They had several arguments with the officers.

On 2 March 1920, police started camping near villages with registration officers. Before going to the villages, the big men and influential people of the village approached the police and said, 'This is a big injustice; Thieves are farmers; Not barbarians. So, if you come to our village and take the line, we will not accept it.' They said, 'We will go to Madurai and talk to the Collector.' The authorities then postponed their action. Then the elders went to Madurai and submitted a petition to the Collector.

Meanwhile, the District Munsif, Madurai on 29 March 1920 ordered the members of the Kallar caste above the age of seven years residing in Perungamanallur to appear before the Special Deputy Collector for registration on 2nd and 3rd April 1920 at 11 a.m. On 1 April 1920, people from Perungamanallur and other villages assembled at the temple.^[12] "The British government wants to subjugate us with arms. It is a great shame for us to portray innocent people as criminals and ask them to get their fingerprints registered in the police station. Dignity is greater than life. Let's not succumb to this and fight all the people together."

A protest was held against this act in Perungamanallur village of Madurai district. None of the men in the village refused to register their fingerprints. On 03.04.1920 at 6 am, more than 100 police personnel had surrounded Perungamanallur village.^[13] Still, the villagers refused to register their fingerprints which resulted a clash between police and villagers. Consequently, police started open fire in the crowd. In this brutal act of shooting people, C. Mayandithevar, C. Periya Karupappathevar, Su. Virumanthithevar, P. Sivankalaithavar, A. Periyandithevar, S. Muthukarupappathevar, P. Chinnathevar, Su. Mayantithevar, P. Udaiyathevar, Su. Mayantithevar, U. Chinnamayatheva, Ma. Periya Karupappathevar, N. Veeranthavar, U. Muthaiyadevar, P. Veerathevar and P. Mayakkal died. And the police had arrested 200 villagers and took them to Tirumangalam Court by walking and remanded them.^[14] Advocate George Joseph represented the imprisoned people in the court of remand court. Due to his contribution, these fighters were liberated.^[15] He served these fighters without taking any money for his litigation.

Kallar Reclamation Board

The massacre sparked a debate in the British Parliament. So in 1919, an inquiry committee was formed under the leadership of an officer named Lovlak from

Madras Rajadhani. The Inquiry Commission submitted a report stating that “due to the arid land, the Piramalaikallar community living in this area is leading in a very backward economic condition without adequate living facilities and they are illiterates”. Following the report, the British government established a separate department called the “Kallar Reclamation Board” for the betterment of the Piramalaikallars, loans were given to buy goats and cows through cooperative societies.^[16] To educate the people of this community, “Kallar Schools” were started. With such Kallar Reclamation board, the life and economic condition of Piramalaikallars had been improved.

The Justice Party which came to power after the Perungamanallur protest made some amendments to the Criminal Tribes Act and rescued a majority of the Kallars from the throes of the Act. An I.C.S Commissioner was appointed specifically to oversee the reform of the Kallars under the designation 'Labour Commissioner'. On the basis of his recommendations, the Justice Party implemented the 'Kallar Reform Scheme'^[17] with full force.

- Bank loans were given to the Kallars to help them establish their own permanent businesses.
- Free residential quarters were constructed for the Kallars, which were also managed by government authorities.
- Vocational training was given to youth, who were then placed in various regions of the province.
- Over 100 schools were established for the Kallars in Madurai, Dindukkal, Usilampatti, Chinnaalapatti, Sempatti, Thirumangalam, and Theni.
- Free lands were provided for the Kallars to undertake farming.
- Kallar country regions were also connected to the Periyar Dam Irrigation Project, enabling the Kallars to engage in farming in the Theni, Dindugul, Madurai and Ramanathapuram districts.

Demanding DNT Certification

Demands have arisen among the Piramalaikallars to change their current category as DNC to the earlier category of DNT as a compensation to them who were affected by the Criminal tribal Act during the British's regime. Piramalaikallar community people were in DNT caste category from 1948 to 1979.^[18]

1. De-notified Tribes were changed to De-notified Community by Tamil Nadu Government Ordinance 1310 on 30.07.1979. As a result, the Piramalaikallas could not participate in the employment for Scheduled Tribes
2. Under G.O. 92, this community could not get the education fee concessions for tribal people.
3. As the DNT List was renamed as DNC these people could not get the DNT Special Fund allocated by the Central Government.
4. Since 2014-15, the Piramalaikallars has not been able to receive the Central Government education scholarship for DNT students.
5. In Maharashtra, Andhra and Karnataka states, separate reservation is being given to DNT, Backward Tribes. In Tamil Nadu, the inclusion of DNC in the MBC list has resulted in the loss of separate reservation for DNT people.

Members of this community believe that, due to the absence of a DNT certificate, they are not receiving adequate representation in education and employment from the Central Government, and they assert that obtaining a DNT certificate is their right. Madan Lahore Commission in 1965, R.L Nayak Report in 1980, Ranke Commission in 2008 was formed but these reports were not implemented.^[19]

After the 10.5 percent internal reservation was announced on 26th February 2021 for MBC/DNC listed Vanniyas in education and employment in Tamil Nadu. Consequently, the demand of DNT inclusion arose widely among Piramalaikallar community. These individuals have been continuously fighting to cancel the change from De-notified Tribes to De-notified Community.

Conclusion

The Piramalaikallar community, which had a great influence in the political platform of Tamil Nadu and declared themselves as the representatives of the self-Governing states in terms of caste and declared themselves as the ruling class. Now they claim that they are victims and a marginalized community and the political and social changes of DNT identification are worthy of study. During the reign of the Nayaka kings, the social authority of Piramalaikallars was initially based on land (States of Kallars). Then the shift took place from the land

to the political platform (Mukkulathor) during the rise of Dravidian parties after Indian independence. Piramalaikallar community believes that social power in the present time is only in education and government employment (DNT). Therefore, DNT demands to adapt itself to today's globalized environment and maintain its social power in education and government jobs. This discussion will help the readers to understand the social and political moves of Piramalaikallars in Tamil Nadu. In DNT demand they declare that they are not belongs to a Caste but Tribes. Also, this community believes that marriage relations and worship rituals of Piramalaikallars are proof that their lifestyle is based on clan system. Efforts are being made to restore the ancient Masippachai festival as an ancestral worship event, just as it was originally celebrated. Thus Piramalaikallars are starting to protest against the Vedic tradition by saying that they are not Hindus but ancestor worshipers through Masippachai festival. At the same time, giving up the dominant identity of "Mukulathor" and political arena and advancing the marginal identity of "DNT" is a very important move in the social, political and cultural context of Tamil Nadu.

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