

Study on the Peculiar Customs and Rituals of Fishermen Community with Special Reference to Ramanathapuram District

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Abstract

Tamil Nadu is very popular for rich culture, tradition and customs accordingly the land is majorly classified into three divisions pertinent to the specific geographical condition as; Kurunji, Mullai, and Neithal and also two more lands on people's professions; Maruthamand Palai. These five kinds of land were specified as Thina in Tamil classical literature. Sea and seashore territories were called Neithal, where fishing and maritime trade were the main professions of the people. Sunthara Pandian Pattinam, Pasipattinam, Thondi, Devipattinam, Alakankulam, Aatraankarai, Pamban, Kunthukal, Dhanushkodi, Kilakarai, Periyapattinam are notable port cities in Ramanathapuram district from the ancient period. The district coastline covers 273 km, has one fourth of the total population of the district. Kadayas, Mutharayas, Paravas, Parvathakula Rajakals and Vanniyas are identified as important caste and tribes of the fisherman community in the district. These people follow a lot of customs and rituals which all resemble to the people who live in other part of the district. However, some customs and rituals are entirely peculiar, thus paper is attempted study all these cultural practices.

Keywords: Fishermen Community, Rituals, Customs, Kolu, Pirahamari

Introduction

The land of Tamil traditionally classified into three divisions on the basis of specific geographical condition as: Kurunji (hills), Mullai (forest), and Neithal (seashore). The people who involved in deforestation to produce their food products that land was classified as Marutham¹. Besides, wherever the rate of rainfall failed, the land would become as draught land which was called Palai². These five kinds of land were specified as Thina in Tamil classical literature. It was genuine from the beginning of the Sangam age. Sea and seashore territories were called Neithal, where fishing and maritime trade were the main professions of the people. Sunthara Pandian Pattinam, Pasipattinam, Thondi, Devipattinam, Alakankulam, Aatraankarai, Pamban, Kunthukal, Dhanushkodi, Kilakarai, Periyapattinam are notable port towns in Ramanathapuram district from the ancient period³. Horses were imported and spices

1 Subramaniyan.N., The Sangam Polity,(pub)

2 Pattinapaalai, maduraikaanji

3 Rajaguru article,s.m.kamal book

of Western Ghats were exported to Arabian and Mediterranean countries through the above said port towns. The district coastline covers 273 kilometers, which is one fourth of the total population of Ramanathapuram district. Kadayas, Mutharayas, Paravas, Parvathakula Rajakals and Vanniyas are identified as important caste and tribes of the fisherman community in Ramanathapuram district. They completely depend upon the fishing and related business, and even Maravas, Nadars, Yadavas and the Muslims also involved in the same profession⁴.

These people follow a lot of customs and rituals which all resemble to the people who live in other part of the district. However, some customs and rituals are entirely peculiar like; the Kolu, Etchil elumppu pitithal of Paravas, Pirahamari of Maravas, Manappen thangam of Yadavas, Papparakolam of Muslims and also some religious customs and rituals like the sapthakannimar poojas conducted by the Kadayas at Morepannai, Katal Theppam for St. Antony, conducted by all religious fishermen in Rameswaram island and economy-based customs and rituals like Neerattu ceremony and funeral ceremony for boat⁵.

Kolu

Kolu is one of the notable rituals of fishermen community. Among the Paravas the ritual is very popular, and especially during their marriage ceremony it is part and parcel. When a bride gets married to the bridegroom in a church, the couple would go to the house of bride at first, and then the couple goes to bridegroom's home. The bridegroom's home will be decorated due to the marriage function. They set a stage on it only one chair will be there, when the couple reach the bridegroom's home, all other people stand in front of the stage, only the bride is asked to sit on the chair and only the brother-in-law of bride is allowed to sit closer to the bride and they make fun and tell different kinds of jokes to the bride⁶. Everybody will criticize the bride and stimulate her to laugh, yet the bride does not laugh. If she laughs, she will be considered as not having a good character, the relatives of bridegroom may suspect her virginity and her chastity. The Paravas community strictly believes that if a bride responds towards other's fun and jokes, she will laugh and she will consequently lose her character. So mostly the brides should not laugh during the time of the kolu ceremony⁷.

Etchil Elumpu Pidithal

Etchil Elumpu Pidithal is a three companied Tamil word "Etchil" it means saliva, "Elumpu" means bone and "pidithal" means catch, this phrase is defined as one who tasted mutton with bones which received by another person on a towel this is a peculiar customs and rituals. It is also found among the Paravas, the hereditary fishermen, mostly they are converted Christians, their marriage ceremony will be held in church only. Once the marriage ceremony is over in the church, the bride and bridegroom move to the bride's home where a feast is granted on behalf of bride to the bridegroom and to his relatives. Mostly, non-vegetarian food items are served in the feast especially bone less mutton must be served by the relatives of bride to the bridegroom and to his relatives⁸.

If they find pieces of bones is while eating suddenly, they create a trumpeting noise, convey their

4 Field visit observation in the coastal villages of Ramanathapuram District from January 2020 to December 2024.

5 Ibid

6 Interview with Mtrs. Packiya Seeli, fisher women, member in Parava fisherman welfare association, Thonithurai near Ervadi, dated 5-3-2022.

7 Velayutham. R., History of Rameswaram island through the ages, an unpublished M.Phil, thesis, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, 1992, P.84.

8 Interview with Mr. Wilson. The Principal, Mohamad Sathak Dastagir Matriculation Higher Secondary School, Ramanathapuram. & Member in Parava fisherman welfare association, Mookaiyoor, Ramanathapuram district, dated 18-6-2022.

oppose through shouting with their relatives and unexpectedly the relatives of bridegroom will stop eating⁹. Consequently, a problem will be raised between the relatives of bride and bridegroom relatives. At that time, the old men of Paravas community call the father or elder brother of bride to sit near the person who got the bone with a towel in his hands, and receive the piece of bone on the towel when the person spit the bone. This is a punishment for bride family and their relatives. So, the bride's family has to take very care on food preparation especially they have to serve the mutton dish without bones to the bridegroom and his relatives¹⁰.

Pirahamari

Fishing is not a major business for Maravas community people; however a part of them migrated from Muthukulathur and Appanur region to Rameswaram island, Morepannai and Thiruppaalaikudi where they involve in fishing. A peculiar ceremony is found among the Maravas that when a girl is ready for marriage she should be married to the son of her maternal uncle, like wise when a man gets ready for marriage he must marry the daughter of his paternal aunty. If a girl refuses to marry the son of maternal uncle, her family must pay a lump sum amount to her maternal uncle's family and also if a man refused to marry to the daughter of his paternal aunty, he must pay a lump sum of money to his paternal aunt's family. This is called "Maapillai Kaasu" that means money of bridegroom. If they would not accept the money and compel to create matrimonial relationship, under these circumstances, a claim will be raised between two families and their relatives¹¹.

As a result, they go to community association, the elders of the association order both brother and sister family to write Pirakamari documents and submit the documents to the association of their caste, "Pirakamari" means, not born with you i.e. for example when a own brother and sister has bride and bridegroom, they can marry but unfortunately, when the brother doesn't want his son to get married to the daughter of his own sister, under this circumstance, the bridegroom is ready to pay "bridegroom money" to his paternal aunt's family. However, the paternal aunt's family does not accept the money by the raised claim. So, the elders of their caste association compelled to submit the "Pirakamari" documents¹². As per the written documents both of them i.e. bride's mother and bridegroom's father are not sister and brother and they are not the born for same parent. After that the family members won't participate in other family's auspicious and inauspicious ceremonies¹³.

Manappon Thangam

The Yadavas observe a peculiar custom in performing their marriages. It is said that when a bride enters the marriage hall, her followers have to pay to the sister of the bridegroom, the money is called the "bridegroom's gold"¹⁴. Similarly, when the bridegroom goes to the house of his mother-in-law his young companions arrest him on the way and do not release him, until he pays a piece of gold (thangam) the piece of gold is called the "bride's gold"¹⁵.

9 Interview with Mtrs. Dholarasi, teacher, R.C. Middle School. & member in Parava fisherman welfare association, Mookaiyur 17-6-2022.

10 Interview with Mr. I. Vithus, member in Paravas fisherman welfare association, Thangachimadam, dated 15-3-2022.

11 Velayutham.R., Socio-cultural of History of Rameswaram island-Since Independence, an unpublished thesis, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, 2010, PP.73-74.

12 Interview with Mr. Arjunan, member in Maravas welfare association, Sundaramudayan, dated 11-6-2023.

13 Information collected from Maravas welfare association, Muthukulathur, Ramanathapuram district, dated 6-8-2021.

14 Ramaswamy.A., Ramanathapuram District Gazetteer, Chennai, reprint 2012, p. 143.

15 Field visit observation in the coastal villages of Ramanathapuram District from January 2020 to December 2024.

Paparakolam

The Marakayars are native Muslims who observe a peculiar custom that on the third or fourth day a ceremony called 'paparakolam' is performed during their marriage. The bride is dressed like a Brahmin woman and holds a brass vessel on her one hand and a stick on the other. Approaching the bridegroom¹⁶, she strikes him gently and says, "Did not I give you butter milk and curds? Pay me for them?" The bridegroom then places a few tamarind seeds in the brass vessels, but the bride objects his and demands money, accompanying the demand with strokes of the stick. The man then places copper, silver and gold coins in the vessels and the bride retires in triumph to her chamber¹⁷.

Sapthakannimaarpoojas

Kadayas is one of the major and indigenous caste and tribes of fishermen community of Ramanathapuram district. They are residing all over coastline of the district. A good number of kadayas was converted into Christianity from the beginning of sixteenth century¹⁸. However, most of the people of kadayas are still following Hinduism. Majority of kadayas both from Christianity and Hindus involved in fishery business. Only the Hindu kadayas celebrate "Pongal" festival at Sri Ranapathrakali Amman temple, Morepannai, during the Tamil month of "Thai"(January-February)¹⁹. They celebrate the Pongal festival for seven days. Before, the Pongal festival commences, the kadayas observe a peculiar custom and ritual that is called "Saptha Kannimaar Poojas" as a part of this festival, Saptha Kannimaar is a two combine words of Sanskrit, Saptha means seven and Kannimaars means virgin girls. Under the elders of Kadayas all the village people together in Sri Ranapathrakali Amman temple, they select only seven female children from the kadayas caste, age between 7 to maximum 9 years old girls. Moreover, they have to be pre pubertal girls²⁰.

They are asked to observe fasting for 10 days during the fasting time the selected girls and their family members should not eat non-vegetarian food and they maintain their body and home very neat. Besides, the seven girls and their family members should not attend any one's puberty festivals, funeral ceremonies and they should not go to new baby born house or hospital of labor ward and mortuary as well²¹. If any one of the seven girls, attain puberty or any one elder sister or sister-in-law or mother or any one family woman attained the menses that girl would be disqualified to take part in the ritual. Moreover, another one girl will be selected and be replaced²².

Among saptha kannimaars, every one prepares pongal in each pot, those will be offered to the goddess Sri Ranapathra Kaali Amman and they design a toy with the boat shape which is given to the hands of chief of kadayas village. He takes the toy boat along with the saptha kannimaars and the village people go to the Sri Ranapathra Kali Amman temple, they lay the toy boat and the pongal at the feet of Sri Ranapathra Kaali Amman (a goddess) and perform pooja²³. Thereafter, the people take the toy boat along with the saptha kannimaars and the village people go to the sea and lay the toy boat in the sea water. This peculiar custom and ritual are followed by the Kadayas for the development of

16 Ramaswamy.A., Op.Cit, Chennai, reprint 2012,p. 143.

17 Interview with Mr.Raja Mohamad and Mr.Sathik Patcha, members in fisherman welfare association, Pasipattinam, Ramanathapuram district, dated 21-5-2022.

18 Lopez.A.,Annual Letters of 1644,Madurai Mission Archives ,Sacred Heart College, Kodaikanal.

19 Interview with Mr.Kalidoss, Joint Secretary of Tamilnadu Pattamkattiyar (Kadayas) welfare association, Morepannai, Ramanathapuram district,dated 3-5-2022.

20 Ibid.

21 Interview with Mr.Thangarasu,member in Communist Party of India & member in fisherman welfare association, Thiruppalaikudi, Ramanathapuram district, dated 2-5-2022.

22 Interview with Mtrs.Lakshmi, Member in Pattamkattiyar (Kadayas) welfare association, Morepannai, Ramanathapuram district, dated 3-5-2022.

23 Ibid.

their fishery industries. Followed by this ceremony, they start the boat race competition in honour of Sri Ranapathra kali Amman temple pongal festival, who wins the first top three places they are honoured with prizes which are given by the chief of the kadayas community²⁴.

Theppa Thiruvila at Sea for St.Antony

“Theppa Thiruvila” means floating pond festival, and it is a part and parcel of Hindu religious customs and rituals. However, this kind of festival is celebrated only in water bonds of Hindu temple. But Theppathiruvila for St.Antony is celebrated at sea near St. Antony church at Karaiyur in Rameswaram²⁵.

St. Antony one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. In memory of St. Antony, a church was built at Katchadeevu, was granted to Sri Lanka by Indian government and the fishermen were prohibited to go for fishing and worship at St. Antony, Katchadeevu from 1976. In memory of St. Antony, the fishermen of Rameswaram, they built a church at Karaiyur near Rameswaram. In every year the Christians celebrate a function at St.Antony church at Kariyur²⁶.

During this festival time, the Christians decorate the statue of St.Antony they select a boat by following certain procedures those who use boat for fishing and landing their boats at Karaiyur port, only their names are written on the lot. Among them, one lot is selected whose name got selected, his boat will also be decorated and the St.Antony statue is laid in the boat. That boat is taken through sea of Karaiyur near Rameswaram, during this festival, it is not only Christian people and their boats participated but also all the religious people and their boats will participate, sometime the Hindus’ or the Muslims’ boat is selected by the lot system. Then St. Antony statue is laid on their boat and the floating festival takes place²⁷. When the St. Antony statue is laid in a boat and used for floating (Theppam) in the sea that boat is surrounded by other boats and a boat rally takes place at night time, all boats emit lights that scenery is very enjoyable, at that time the boat which is selected for keeping St. Antony statue, that boat is considered as a very lucky boat, all people touch the boat at least one time during the journey²⁸

Conclusion

The customs and rituals of different fishermen community in Ramanathapuram district mostly reflect their beliefs. The ceremony of kolu seems fun and entertainment of marriage ceremony. But the fishermen community has a strong belief that when a husband goes to the sea his wife should maintain her chastity. If one who loses her chastity then that is defined as a sin. Consequently, her husband will lose his life at sea, Therefore the fishermen give high priority to maintain the virginity and chastity of women in their community.

Etchil Elumpu Pitithal ceremony is followed not for punishing the bride’s family but a bride has to go and live in the bridegroom’s house where she lives with bridegroom and their family members for long time, the bride and their family members and their relatives take care of the bridegroom and their relatives. So, the Etchi Elumpu Pitithal and Pirakamari ceremonies show that the fishermen community gives high priority to maintain the love and affection and care among the relatives, generation after generation.

24 Interview with Mtrs. Devi, Member in Pattamkattiyar (Kadayas) welfare association, Morepannai, Ramanathapuram district, dated 3-5-2022.

25 An inscription is found in front of the st.Antony church, Karaiyur, Rameswaram.

26 Raju.S., Katchadeevu (Tamil), Thanjavur, 1997, P.11.

27 Information collected from st.Antony church, office of the Rameswaram Parish, Verkottu, dated 2-12-2021.

28 Ibid.

Saptha Kannimaar ceremony exposes the fishermen's devotional belief towards goddess Kali Amman and they believe that the worship with virginity and pure love will lead to growth of their fishing industry. The floating festivals at sea celebrated not only by Hindus but also among Christians as well and this ceremony is conducted not in pond or river instead in sea by the boat. Besides, Hindu, Muslims and Christians fishermen and their boats participated in this festival. Thus it is identified a verity of peculiar customs among fisherman community in Ramanathapuram district.