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Bachelor-Halls, Sharing and Collective Living of the Muduvan Tribe in the Anamalai Hills of South India

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Bachelor-halls, or youth dormitories, have been found among several tribal communities in India. Among the Oraon of the Chotanagpur region, the boys' dormitory is termed *dhum kuria* and the girls' dormitory is known as *pelarpa*. The Oraon get their basic training in religious and social duties in these facilities. Among the Munda and Ho of the same Chotanagpur region, a similar institution called *giti-ora* is also in existence. The *ghotul* among the Muria tribe of Bastar region in Madhya Pradesh is reported to be a co-educational youth dormitory, where the youth of both sexes spend their evenings and sleep

at night. Among the Maler of Santal Pargana, it is known as *kodada*. In the northeastern parts of India, several tribes are reported to have the institution of dormitories. Among the Naga tribe, the dormitory is termed *morung*. The *morung* formed the centre where lessons of fighting the enemy and of guarding the village were imparted to its members. It is reported that the importance of *morung* has gradually diminished due to the change of attitude brought about by the gradual spread of Christianity, followed by formal education. In South India, youth dormitories are found only in the Muduvan tribal community.

Based on long-term fieldwork, this article attempts to throw some light on the social institutions that had been guiding the Muduvans to subsist cohesively as a group within their forest habitat (Fig. 1). Muduvans are a forest dwelling, scheduled tribe of the Anamalai Hills, which cut across the Tamilnadu and Kerala states in South India. According to the available ethnographic references, they are basically Vellalas, i.e., cultivators from the plains of Madurai, who took refuge in the forests of the Anamalai Hills during the collapse of the Pandyan Kingdom at Madurai. In their jungle habitat, they took up shifting cultivation as the primary mode of subsistence and continued it for generations. Indeed, it was a generalized way of life for the Muduvans. Their most colourful social institutions of dormitory system, festivities, beliefs, and practices are all interwoven with the practice of shifting cultivation. Their dormitory system played a prominent role in the cycle of shifting cultivation, evolving its own mechanisms for effective use of available manpower and resources, in consonance with the climatic conditions and seasons.

The Muduvans say that they had always shared their meal with anybody who visited their settlements, including the neighbouring tribal communities, such as Kadars, Mala Pulayans, and Malasars; they further add that, for this reason, they were also called *Thagappanmargal* meaning "patrons." About four decades ago, a large portion of the habitat of all these groups was declared as a wildlife sanctuary, and as a result, many of them were forced to abandon their traditional subsistence modes of shifting cultivation, hunting, and gathering. A number of Kadar, Mala Pulayan, and Malasar families became wage labourers in farms, plantations, and forestry, as they settled at the outskirts of the forests. The Muduvans who wanted to continue living in their ancestral places, however, negotiated with the Forest Department the permission to take up cardamom cultivation in a forested area of the Anamalai Hills as their primary source of income. Similarly,



Fig. 1: View of a Muduvan tribal settlement in the interior forests of the Anamalai Hills, South India.

in another area, the remaining Muduvans took up distillation of lemon grass oil as the main source of income. Due to the changeover to the cash crop cultivation, alterations have occurred in the vital functions of their dormitory system, which is, in turn, closely associated with their traditional subsistence mode of shifting cultivation. It has been determined that nowadays the dormitory system has substantially lost its economic significance in the Muduvan society. Today, it maintains its relevance mainly as a marker of their cultural identity and as a cultural phenomenon.

Collective Living and the Dormitory System of the Muduvans

Separate dormitories exist for boys and girls in every Muduvan settlement (Fig. 2). Children, both male and female, after attaining the age of nine or ten years, become members of dormitories. Unmarried boys, male divorcees, widowers, lone male members, and male visitors (including kinsmen from other settlements who are on a casual visit) have to sleep only in the boys' dormitory of the settlement during the night. During the daytime, all



Fig. 2: A girls' dormitory.

those who sleep in the dormitories (of both boys' as well as girls') work for the benefit of the household to which they belong to. The boys' dormitory, i.e., *saavadi voodu*, is relatively bigger in size and situated at the entrance of the settlement itself. Unknown persons, traders, etc. who visit the settlement are immediately accommodated in the boys' dormitory and they are, generally, not encouraged to enter into the family dwelling area. The girls' dormitory has two compartments. Unmarried girls and women (widows, divorcees, and guests) – who are, however, free from “pollution” – sleep in the first compartment. In the other compartment, women under pollution, i.e., menstruating women and those under postnatal care, would stay for a certain period of time.

The boys' dormitory is a rectangular shaped, single compartment shed, constructed by unmarried boys of the settlement. Sometimes other men of the settlement help them to construct it. There is a fire pit called *theepodi* at the centre of the dormitory, in which fire is kept burning throughout the night to give them warmth as well as to keep the wild animals away. Every day, before sunset, the junior members of the dormitory collect firewood from all the households of the settlement for the use of it in their dormitory. They are also supposed to clean up the dormitory and keep drinking water in a vessel before the senior members of the dormitory arrive. All these activities are regularly performed in both boys' as well as girls' dormitories.

In every Muduvan settlement, when a family starts the clearing activity, it is customary for the members of the boys' dormitory to collect a fixed number of firewood (a few more than the regular collection) from that family on the first day of that family's involvement in it. The number of firewood to be collected from that household, i.e., *thandal therattaradu*, is determined by the *veli ilandhari* – that is, the eldest unmarried male member of the boys' dormitory in the settlement. Usually the junior members of the boys' dormitory would go and collect the firewood from that household. The act of collecting firewood is considered as the privilege of the members of the boys' dormitory. On other days, the junior members of the boys' dormitory collect one or two firewood per household from all the households of the settlement just before sunset. It is also the duty of the younger members of the dormitory to come a little earlier in the evening to clean it and light the fire pit inside. They also have to arrange water in a small vessel inside the dormitory for all the members to drink during the night.

Members of both dormitories in a settlement, including widows, widowers, male and female di-

vocees who sleep in their respective dormitories, function under the leadership of the *veli ilandhari*. Members of the dormitories play a vital economic role in the settlement by performing certain difficult tasks in the process of shifting cultivation. Similarly, the duties pertaining to the celebration of their annual religious festivity called “Thai Nombi,” held in the month of January–February, are also attended to by members of both the dormitories under the leadership of the *veli ilandhari*. On that occasion, members of the boys' dormitory make necessary purchases to prepare the feast, cook food, and serve it to the kinsmen and guests. They also arrange shelter for all visitors, assist the priest in sacrifices of fowls, and entertain the entire gathering by dance and music during the whole week of celebration.

A significant feature of the Muduvan society is the practice of “collective eating and sharing of food” known as *koodi thinnuthu* (Fig. 3). This practice is followed by all dormitory dwellers in a given settlement. Both in the morning and in the evening (which are the only times when the Muduvan eat during the day), bachelors of the same sex and age group combine for that purpose into small groups. They visit in groups individual households of the settlement and eat a little in each household by sharing the food kept in a plate. It is customary among the Muduvans to cook always some extra food to offer to those bachelors. Even if there are only three households in a settlement, the custom of collective eating and/or sharing food is always observed. In this way, the unmarried boys and girls are being treated as members of the community (or settlement), which is understood as a whole rather than a conglomerate of individual families. If there are guests from other settlements on account of a festivity or ceremony, or even on a casual visit, the food is also shared with them, as they join the local groups of respective age-grades. In other words, the dormitory also serves as a “rest house” or a “visitors' hut” for any outsider. To the visitors, the Muduvans first offer *theyila* (tea without milk and sugar) and boiled maize, tapioca, or sweet potato. Later on, during the meal, nontribal visitors, men and women alike, are offered food and receive accommodation in the respective dormitory. Even today one can observe that a number of nontribals who live in the area – particularly those of limited resources – as well as those who work as coolies at Muduvan settlements or doing some petty trade with them, always stay in their dormitories and enjoy free food from them.

Every day, almost all the men of the settlement assemble informally in front of the boys' dormitory or inside it. It is a regular habit of the Muduvan men that, after having their evening meal around seven



Fig. 3: Collective eating by members of a Muduvan female dormitory.

o'clock, they come to the boys' dormitory with their transistor radios. Sometimes they even bring their younger sons with them. Sitting around the fire pit inside the dormitory, they talk about what they did in their fields on that day, comment on interesting events, etc. They listen to news, music, or the announcements concerning the price of commodities, especially cardamom, lemon grass oil, etc, or simply exchange their views on different issues. Oftentimes, elderly men narrate their past experiences related to hunting expeditions; they also make the young ones aware of their myths, legends, stories related to deities, etc. Similar activities take place in the girls' dormitory as well.

Avoiding Misfortune by Collective Work

As stated above, for several generations the Muduvans subsisted primarily on shifting cultivation. Their dormitory system played a prominent role in that economic system, evolving its own mechanisms for effective use of the available manpower and resources, in consonance with the climate and changing seasons. In what follows, I provide a brief description of these mechanisms.

To begin, let us consider the first phase of the shifting cultivation cycle – namely, the clearing operations. During the process of clearing bushes and small vegetation, two significant events take place, which markedly express the “collectivism” underlying the Muduvan community life. These events are (1) *Veli Ilandhari Pattam Vilikkaradu* (“bestowing *veli ilandhari* title to the most senior or eldest

unmarried male in the settlement”) and (2) *Koi Velli Potradu* (“feasting the members of *saavadi voodoo*, i.e., boys' dormitory, in reciprocation of labour or services received from them”).

(1) *Veli Ilandhari Pattam Vilikkaradu* (Bestowing *veli ilandhari* Title to the Eldest Unmarried Male)

As already mentioned, the eldest unmarried male of a settlement (*veli ilandhari*) functions also as the leader of members of boys' dormitory in that settlement. His role is essential during the annual festivity of *Thai Nombi* as well as at the time of clearing the patches for the cultivation (called *kaadu vettu*). The widowers in a settlement, who generally sleep in the boys' dormitory, also assist the *veli ilandhari* on these two occasions, even though they are elders to him. To symbolise his status as the leader, the *veli ilandhari* wears a golden ring, i.e., *patta modiram* (*pattam* means “title” and *modiram* means “ring”) as long as he remains bachelor. When he gets married, the title of *veli ilandhari* passes onto the next eldest unmarried male member of the boys' dormitory by way of offering the *patta modiram* to him. This event takes place one or two days before the clearing operations in the settlement. On that occasion, all members of the boys' dormitory and men of the settlement assemble in the dormitory. The *kaanikkaaran*, i.e., the headman of the settlement, collects the *patta modiram* from the outgoing *veli ilandhari* and hands it over to the new *veli ilandhari* in front of all the present men. This event emphasizes

the significant role played by the *veli ilandhari* and his company in the cultivation cycle.

(2) *Koi Velli Potradu* (Feasting the Members of the Boys' Dormitory)

The expression *koi velli potradu* literally means "feasting the members of the boys' dormitory in reciprocity of services or labour rendered by them during clearing operations." The institution of dormitory, particularly the boys' dormitory, is perceived by the Muduvans as vital to the functioning and sustenance of their communities. A lot of hardship and danger are involved in performing any activity in the forested area. By undertaking it collectively, the danger is diminished. The unmarried boys constitute a very important component of the community's workforce employed for that purpose.

In the past, when shifting cultivation was the key mode of subsistence of the Muduvans, they cultivated comparatively large patches. Therefore, even small families required more working hands. During the clearing and burning activities, when a family was unable to accomplish these jobs before the first rainfall, it always sought the help of the *ilandharis*, i.e., unmarried boys of that settlement. All the *ilandharis* under the leadership of *veli ilandhari* would jointly perform the clearing out the underbrush. After the drying and burning of the vegetation, they would be also involved in the process of levelling the ground for the future garden. In return, the family that received the help of the *ilandharis* would offer them rice, a fowl (*koi*), tea leave, and some jaggery after the harvest. After receiving this, the members of the boys' dormitory would make a feast (*Koi Velli Potradu*) on the riverbank, under the leadership of the *veli ilandhari*. This mechanism helps smaller individual families to accomplish cultivation-related task on time. In this way, no family in the settlement is left to its own devices or devoid of opportunities. Even today, due to illness or other reasons, when some families are unable to perform the clearing, burning, and levelling of their patches before the first rainfall (which usually occurs during the last week of March or first week of April), the help of unmarried men is requested.

Collectivism in Other Agricultural Operations

Collectivism in the Muduvan society manifests itself also during tilling operations. Tilling the fields (*kilaikkaradu*) with the hoe is the hardest task in the cycle of shifting cultivation, as it takes place when

temperatures are extremely very high – that is, on the peak of summer, in March. Again, if a family is unable to accomplishing this task with its own resources, it requests all the *ilandharis* of the settlement to work for it for during one day. Sometimes other members of the settlement also join with them for that purpose. In this way, when all these people get involved in sowing and tilling in a family's patch from morning until evening, the task is usually completed in one day's time. In reciprocation, the head of that family offers a simple feast (sometimes a chicken, otherwise an ordinary rice meal) to all of them on the same day in the evening. This meal is termed *selavu poduradu*. In the past, as the Muduvans had larger gardens and the shifting cultivation was the main source of subsistence, this form of reciprocity was a frequent occurrence with them. It is not the case nowadays because only small and limited patches of land are available and brought under cultivation. In fact, at present the *selavu poduradu* is resorted to only if someone is unable to complete the tilling on time due to illness or other chance events.

Yet another instance of collective existence of this society constitute the harvest operations. Sometimes the quantity of *tenay* (*Panicum italicum*) harvested happens to be good for some households, while other get only a poor yield due to the damage caused by pests, birds, or monkeys. In such cases, those who have got a good yield invite the ones with a poor yield to help them during the harvest. In return, the family that benefited from the service offers a basketful of *tenay* to those who rendered it. Generally, no one, not even those who have got poor yields, volunteers to render his labour for grains. It is usually only by invitation that such services are performed. Still, those who suffered poor harvest can always count on such invitations. As viewed by members of the community, utilising the labour of the unlucky among them is a dignified way of helping their kinsmen. They also believed that those who receive this form of assistance do not have to feel guilty for having been paid in specie. In short, the cooperation in harvest functions as a survival mechanism in a small, horticultural society.

Conclusion

Today, as a consequence of moving from subsistence to cash crop cultivation, the key role played by members of the dormitories in traditional economic activities, and the associated traditional ethos of cooperation and collectivism, has almost disappeared among the Muduvans. Similarly, the com-

mon festivities associated with the slash-and-burn, through which they cemented their social bonds, are also slowly disappearing. The core functions of the dormitory system – namely, its role as a source of the readily available labour force for various stages of the cultivation cycle, has also receded due to the official ban imposed on the traditional cultivation. Nonetheless, the dormitory system still exists and continues to perform its routine peripheral functions in the day-to-day life of the Muduvans in the spheres of recreation, festivity, socialization, and accommodation of visitors – both kin and nonkin. Even in the context of monetary economy of today, the values of sharing, collectivism, and cohesion, which have been fundamental to the Muduvan life, are still manifested in the form of such practices as sharing the food and hardships of life in general. In almost all Muduvan settlements, irrespective of their size and location (whether situated in forests or outside the forests), one can still find dormitories for both boys and girls. Today, however, they exist largely as a cultural phenomenon and serve as a marker of cultural identity and cohesion.

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Folksongs of North India

A Review Article

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The voices and lifeworlds of the marginalized remain underresearched topics in South Asian Studies. Subaltern scholars, especially, and others have sought to address and redress this lacuna; so it is with Smitha Tewari Jassal's "Unearthing Gender. Folksongs of North India."¹ Erudite and original, this book makes a signal contribution to scholarship on gender, class, caste, sexualities, identities, and labor by bringing attention to the lives and practices of low-caste peasants in the rural North Indian countryside. Engaging and expertly written – Jassal's prose enacts a most pleasing poetics to this reader's ear – the genius behind "Unearthing Gender" lies in its use of women's folk song genres, like those concerned with women's work, as source materials with which to comprehend and appreciate women's expressive traditions as vehicles for transmitting gender ideologies, caste/purity codes, and kinship systems. Jassal demonstrates through compelling analyses of the songs' texts and contexts, their formal structures, that the songs that mostly peasant women sing in the private/female spaces of the courtyard, in the open fields, and in ritual spaces of momentous life-cycle ceremonies such as marriage not only provide important cultural commentaries into the intimate psychological worlds of women, but also remain situated in the highly complex political, social, and gendered economies in which they emerge. At the forefront of Jassal's deft examination are the songs themselves, as, in her language, "discourses of emotion," embedded/negotiated cultural forms and social practices that shape, and are shaped by, women's social-cultural lifeworlds. What stands out to me as the dominant motif in Jassal's work, which I would characterize as a "performative ethnography," concerns the polyvocality and plurality of interpretations the songs provide by virtue of their contextual variations. Enriching the pathbreaking insights, voiced in particular by Kirin Narayan (1986, 1993, 1995) in her work on women's songs in the Kangra region, Himachal Pradesh, and by Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold (1994) in their work on women's song/story cultures in Uttar Pradesh and Raj-

1 Jassal, Smita Tewari: *Unearthing Gender. Folksongs of North India*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. 297 pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-5130-6. Price: £ 16.99