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Distorting The Histories Of Tribes In South India: The Case Of Kuravars And Narikuravars

Kuravar is an ancient tribe inhabiting the Kurunji mountain region of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. One can find it mentioned in the Sangam literature, along with the Kallars and Maravars. The Kuravars were primarily hunters and gatherers. Adivasi Awaz creator Kavipriya talks about the Kuravars and how they have been clubbed with another tribe, which is socio-culturally very different from the former. This has had implications and the author touches upon them in the following work.

Kuravar comes from the Tamil word 'Kuravan', which means the 'leader'. The Kuravars are known by different names in different parts of India. "They are called as Yerukula in Andhra Pradesh (derived from the tradition of fortune-telling by the women), Korama, Korachas in Karnataka, Kaikadi in Maharashtra, and Sidanar in Kerala." (Kumar Sen et al.2005). During the British rule they were placed under the Criminal Tribes Act 1871 and were denotified in 1952. Nonetheless, they still remain stigmatized. Narikuravars on the other hand are Marathi speaking nomads who entered Tamil Nadu as wanderers. They too are known as Kuravars. However, these two tribes are totally different and do not share any common origin, history, culture or language.



Talking about the tribes in a function.

Professor Guna in his "Tamizhina Meetchi" (saving the Tamil race) points out that Kandharvakottai Kuravar, Thabi Kuravar, Sarkaraithammaadai Kuravar, Thappai Kuravar, Sanghayamboothi Kuravar, Saarangapalli Kuravar, Chettipalli Kuravar, Thogaimalai Kuravar, Ponnai Kuravar, Mondai Kuravar, Varaganari Kuravar,

Aathur Melnaatu Kuravar, Aathur Keelnattu Kuravar and Uppu Kuravar are Telugu speaking tribes. He pointed out that only "Arya Vaishyar" are Telugu speakers and listed out Inji Kuravar, Kala Kuravar, Salem Melnaatu Kuravar, Kuravar, Kuravar Sithanaar as the only Tamil speakers. Hence, it is important to discuss how Telugu-speaking tribes came to be known as 'Kuravasr', and if they truly are of Tamil origin.

The following is a discussion on the idea, origin and history of the Kuravars, depicting the contemporary understanding about Kuravars and Narikuravars :

Vijay Vel: Kuravars are true Tamils. They are the hunters from the Kurinji lands. They are the descendants of goddess Valli. Yes, Kuravars and Narikuravars are different people. Even now Kuravars have been denied their rights to a 'Mandagapadi' at the Pazhani temple.

Asha Sundar: Vijay Vel, are some Kurvars that Professor Guna has classified as Telugu, actually Tamil?

Vijay Vel: According to me, all Kuravars are Tamils.

Tamizhan R. P. Ari: I believed that Kuravars (except Narikuravars) were the descendants of ancient Tamils but after reading Professor Guna, it is a bit confusing. We have to explore his findings. I inquired about this with some people I know from the Hunting Gouders of the Kongu region. They show the example of the Pazhani temple Mandagapadi and claim that they all belong to the same clan. There might be some minor differences based on the area that they are from. They also asserted that Narikuravars are not at all Kuravars.

Rajesh Antony: Narikuravars are an unfortunate clan in poverty. Even if we criticize them, do not show them hatred.

Asha Sundar: Many Tamil communities are economically in an even worse position.

Kelir Piriyan: In Valliyur (Tirunelveli district) there are so many families squatting on Puramboke lands.

Asha Sundar: They are Nari 'Kuravars'. They are not Tamils.

Tenkasi Subramanian: In the classification of Tamil Kuravars, there are only four kinds.

Another group is the Kuravan Sithanaar group who belong to the SC category. There are two other south Indian Kuravars called "Koracha" and "Erukala".

From the above discussion it becomes clear that there is a distinct difference between Kuravars and Narikuravars. While most of the discussants were unanimous on the Tamil origin of Kuravars, there were confusions regarding the categories, divisions and groups of Kuravars. In my opinion, other tribes are being clubbed with Tamil tribes which is distorting our histories. Moreover, it has been noted that for a long time, movies have misconstrued the history and origin of Tamils in general, while at the same time strengthened the caste system. While this is the case on one hand, the clubbing of tribes on the other is resulting in the

blurring of differences and hence a sense of losing the identity among different tribes, especially because historically different tribes have had different professions. The Narikuravars sell beads and chains for their livelihood. However, the ancient Kuravar clan, since the Sangam era, have been employed in basket weaving, honey extraction and tuber farming. It is important to recognize that every tribe is unique and has a separate sense of identity. Clubbing them together is not merely an injustice to them but is unjust to the entire history of these tribes. Clubbing and grouping tribes together often leads to a loss of culture, practices and way of living of different tribes.

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