

The Making of a Caste Group: A Case Study of the Kuravans in Tamil Nadu and Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Caste and the categories of caste play a vital role in the Indian socio-cultural system. Though the identity of caste is 'ascribed' in nature, the administrative categories are 'political', 'flexible' and 'achieved'. A caste which has multiple nomenclatures, and domiciled in different regions may be placed under different administrative categories. These categories also change based on the religious affiliations of individual members. Therefore the issue of identity and social status within the same caste group occurs and creates disputes from time to time. This paper is an attempt to study these issues with special reference to the Kuravans domiciled in Kerala and Tamil Nadu and tries to understand the relationship among the Kuravans domiciled in different regions.

INTRODUCTION

Caste, the innermost nerve of the multifaceted Indian social milieu, plays a vital role in the socio-cultural-political-administrative context. Thousands of castes and sub-castes exist in India and all these castes are categorized into Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Backward, Most Backward, Nomads, De-notified, general etc. In the Indian context, particularly in post-colonial era, these administrative categories play a vital role in terms of reservations in education, employment, empowerment and other developmental activities. Though caste is 'ascribed' in nature, these administrative categories are 'political', 'flexible' and 'achieved' in nature. A caste that falls under backward category in a particular time and place may be fixed under most backward or scheduled caste category in another time and place; and a caste that falls under most backward or de-notified category at one point of time may be placed under scheduled caste or scheduled tribe in another time. For instance, Narikuravar community in Tamil Nadu which was earlier under Most Backward category recently obtained the status of Scheduled Tribe. Again, Christians who belong to a caste which actually falls in scheduled caste category are not considered as Scheduled Caste but as Backward Caste. These

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examples clearly shows that administrative categories are purely political and under the discretionary power of the administrators and Government.

The nomenclature of castes plays a crucial role in the determination of these administrative categories. Castes are placed under these administrative categories based on certain approved list of nomenclatures of castes and tribes. Therefore even a small change/mistake in the spellings of a caste nomenclature may lead to fixing the person in a different category from the actual category he belongs to. In reality, different nomenclatures are used by the members of a particular caste to refer to themselves. The names of clans, and the spoken language - the pronunciation, honorific and gender terms, also influence the nomenclature. For instance, the Pallan caste of Tamil Nadu is also known by other names. It is known as Pallar, which is actually an honorable term of address and also known as Devendra Kula Vellalar, Mallar, Kaladi, and as Kudumban. In rural regions, out of ignorance some people register their clan name while applying for the community certificate and these clan names may not appear in the list of castes approved under the administrative categories which leads them to struggle in obtaining the community certificate. Another important issue is the regional difference in determination of these administrative categories. A caste which is domiciled in different regions may be placed under different administrative categories. This paper is an attempt to study these issues with special reference to the Kuravans of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

What is Caste?

It is important to understand caste before we enter into our subject matter. A caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community. The name generally denotes or is associated with a specific occupation. A caste is almost invariably endogamous in the sense that a member of the large circle denoted by the common name may not marry outside that circle, but within the circle there are usually a number of smaller circles each of which is also endogamous. Senart describes caste as a close corporation, in theory at any rate rigorously hereditary; equipped with certain traditional and independent organization, including a chief and a council; meeting on occasion in assemblies of more or less plenary authority, and joining in the celebration of certain festivals; bound together by common occupation; observing certain common usages which relate more particularly to marriage, to food and question of ceremonial pollution; and ruling its members by the exercise of a jurisdiction the extent of which varies, but which succeeds, by the sanction of certain penalties and above all by the power of final or revocable exclusion from the group, in making the authority of the community effectively felt (c.f. Risley, 1915).

The *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* describes caste as any of the ranked, hereditary, endogamous occupational groups that constitute traditional societies in certain regions of the world, particularly among Hindus in India. There caste is rooted in antiquity and specifies the rules and restrictions governing social intercourse and activity. Each caste has its own customs that restrict the occupations and dietary habits of its members and their social contact with other castes. There are about 3,000 castes or *jatis* (broadly, “form of existence fixed by birth”), and more than 25,000 subcastes in India. They are traditionally grouped into four major classes, or *varnas* (colours). At the top are the Brahmans, followed by the Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Those with the most defiling jobs (such as those who dispose of body emissions and dead animals) are ranked beneath the Shudras. Considered untouchable, they were simply dubbed as “the fifth” (*panchama*) category. Although a great many spheres of life in modern India are little influenced by caste, most marriages are nevertheless arranged within the caste. This is in part because most people live in rural communities and because the arrangement of marriages is a family activity carried out through existing networks of kinship and caste.

K.S. Singh (1992) describes that a community, like an individual, sees its identity as multiple levels in time and space. Thus at the local level it may identify itself in its ambience in one way. At the regional or national level it may discover its affinity with larger community and may describe itself as a part of it. It may also perceive itself as part of a transitional identity. The insiders look more at commonalities; the outsiders tend to take note of the differences. Outsiders identify a person as belonging to a particular community, but he identifies himself with the segment to which he belongs within his community. A community is a dynamic category, continually redefining itself, its relationship with other communities and its relationships with its social and physical environment.

The above conceptions of caste or community reflects that common descent from a mythical ancestor, common hereditary calling, specific traditional occupation, being endogamous, participation in certain traditional celebrations, and common life cycle rituals, are all some of the important characteristics of caste or community. It also reflects that a community may have multiple identities in time and space.

OBJECTIVE

The basic objective of this paper is to understand different nomenclatures associated with Kuravan community, such as Kuravans, Kuravar, Kuravas, Vettuvan, Kuravan Sidhanar, Nanchi Kuravan, Pandi Kuravan, Veduvar Pillai and Veduvar domiciled in Kerala and Tamil Nadu; and it tries to ascertain whether all these nomenclatures refer to one community or not. It also tries to discuss the constitutional status provided to

Kuravans during different time and regions. Primary data was collected through fieldwork among these communities through interviews and observation and secondary literatures were collected through library consultation in order to understand the ethnographic details of these communities during early days.

THE KURAVANS

The 1911 census of Travancore (pp. 286) mentions that the Kuravas form a large community in Travancore and are chiefly engaged in agricultural labour. It has been supposed that they are one with the Kurumbas of the Tamil speaking districts and are closely allied with Vetas. About three centuries ago, a line of Kurava kings known as Nanchi Kuravas governed Nanjinad in Travancore. They are divided into several classes, the chief of which are the Kunta Kuravas, the Kakka Kuravas, and the Pandi Kuravas. Of these, the Kakka Kuravas are but a variety of Kakkalans and the Pandi Kuravas are immigrants from Tamil districts. The Kunta Kuravas constitute the most important division.

According to L. A. K. Iyer in the book *Travancore Tribes and Castes* (1937: 81), the Kuravans in Kerala consists of two sections, one living in the jungles, and the other, in the plains. The former is distinguished from the latter by addition of the prefix 'Mala' to the tribal name, but the Malakuravan, when he settles down in the plains, becomes the ordinary Kuravan. From the very early times, there has been a constant migration of the Malakuravan from the jungles to the plains. The Kuravans of Kerala were formerly divided into Kunta Kuravan, Kakka Kuravan and Pandi Kuravan. Most of the Kuravans in Kerala belong to the first of these sections i.e Kunta Kuravan. The Kakka Kuravans have crystallized into a distinct caste called Kakkalan. The Pandi Kuravans speaking the Tamil language are chiefly found in Nanchinad; and there, they are referred to as Nanchi Kuravars after the name of the place. The Kunta Kuravars attribute the origin of their name to the appearance of their first ancestor from a sacrificial altar (*homa kuntam*). They are known in some places, such as Nedumangad, by the name of Muli Kuravans, probably because they emit a drawling noise when they are called.

The above descriptions reflect that there are three categories of Kuravar in Kerala. They are Kunta Kuravar, Kakka Kuravar and Pandi Kuravar. The Kunta Kuravar is the present Kuravar of Kerala, which is also known as Kuravan Sidhanar. The Kakka Kuravar have crystallized in to a distinct caste called Kakkalan; and Pandi Kuravar are chiefly found in Nanchi Nadu and they are also known as Nanchi Kuravan.

Kunta Kuravan

Almost all the Kuravans in Kerala belong to the Kunta Kuravan category. They are also known as Kuravan Sidhanar. K. S. Singh (2002) mentions that the term Sidhanar is a

later addition. The Kuravan Sidhanar is locally known as Kuravan. There are no major social divisions among Kuravan Sidhanar however several clans namely Pallichal, Venn, Kani, Thachira, Menadi, Kanjanadi etc regulate marriage alliances of Kunta Kuravan in Kerala. The Kuravan seem to be one of the early south Indian tribes. Present day distribution as perceived by the community is in Kollam, Trivandrum, Alappuzha, Pathinamthita, Palakkad, Thrissur and Ernakulam districts. Their population in Kerala is 2,18,048 according to 1981 census. Malayalam is the language spoken and written, within the kin group and with others. Constitutionally they are a Scheduled Caste.

Kakka Kuravan /Kakkalan

The Kakkalan are also known as Kakka Kuravan, Kakkan, Kuravan or Koravan, Kakkala Panikan and Kuluvar. The Kakkalan are identified at regional level and distributed mainly in Trivandrum, Kollam, Alappuzha, Ernakulam, Thrissur, Kozhikodu and Palakkad districts. There are two endogamous divisions among Kakkalan. They are Kavitiyan and Manniparayan. In Thrissur district, they are known as Meluthon and Chatta Parayan. The Kavitiyan are further divided into Kollam Kavitiyan, Malayalam Kavitiyan and Pandi Kavitiyan, the last being old immigrants from Pandiyan's country. Regarding their origin, Iyer (1912) writes that the Kakkalans have a legend concerning their origin to the effect that Siva was once going about begging as a Kapala Dharin and arrived at a Brahman street, from which the inhabitants drove him away. The offended God reduced the village to ashes and the guilty villagers begged his pardon, but were reduced to the position of the Kakkalans, and made to earn their livelihood by begging.

The Kakkalan are mainly landless. Soothsaying, palmistry, *kathukuthu* (boring of ear lobes), *kathuvaippu* (operation of the ear in which heavy pendants and ear ornaments are worn), *kompuvaippu* (placing the twigs of a plant on any swelling of the body and dissipating it by blowing on it), *taiyyal* (tailoring), and *pampattam* (snake charming) are the traditional occupations of the Kakkalan.

Pandi Kuravan/ Nanchi Kuravan

The Kuravans in Travancore State were formerly divided into Kunta Kuravan, Kakka Kuravan and Pandi Kuravan. The Pandi Kuravans speak Tamil and are chiefly found in Nanchinad, and being there they are known as Nanchi Kuravars (Iyer, 1937:81). The 1911 census of Travancore (pp. 286) mentions that that Pandi Kuravas or Nanchi Kuravars are merely immigrants from Tamil districts.

The seven eco-cultural zones of Tamil Nadu interestingly correspond to earliest ecological and historical divisions mentioned in the ancient Sangam Literature. Nanjil Nadu and Pandi Nadu are among them. Nanjil Nadu includes the district of Kanyakumari (Part of Early Travancore state), Pandia Nadu consists of the districts of Tirunelveli,

Tuticorin, Madurai, Ramanathapuram and Dindigul. The terms Nanjil Nadu, Nanji Nadu, Nanja Nadu, Nanchi Nadu, Nanchil Nadu are synonymous and are used to refer to the same region. Thovala and Agasthiswaram, the southern most *taluks* of the Travancore state, together go by the popular name of Nanjanad. The name is derived from the extensive paddy fields that are found in the part of the region. There is also a tradition that the name is derived from Nanji Kuravan who once ruled over the country. Tradition goes that during the 13th and 14th centuries Nanjanadu was governed by Nanji Kuravan and his descendants (Velupillai, 1940).

Kuravans domiciled in the southern region of Tamil Nadu i.e in the early Pandian Kingdom are known as Pandi Kuravan and those Pandi Kuravan domiciled in Nanchi Nadu i.e Kanyakumari region are known as Nanchi Kuravan. Thus, 'Pandi' and 'Nanchi' refer to the place or geographical region and are suffixed with the caste name to identify themselves; while Kuravan is the original caste name. They are sparsely distributed elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, and are known by different names such as Vedar, Vettuvar, Veduvar, and Vetaikaran.

Etymologically the word Kuravar is derived from the Tamil word *Kuram*, meaning 'palmistry' (Mullaly, 1892; Subramanian, 1981). The word Kuravar may also be derived from the term *Kunravar* meaning 'hill-men', as they were inhabitants of the hills and hunters and food gatherers. Regarding their origin, they consider themselves the descendents of the hill king Nambirajan who got his daughter married to Lord Murugan. They are described in the Kanda Puranam as hunters, whose women folk are fortunetellers and tattoo markers.

The Pandi Kuravar or Nanchi Kuravar are an endogamous group. They were originally divided in to six occupational sub-groups. They are *Kavalkara Kuravar* (Watchmen), *Uppu Kuravar* (Saltmongers), *Thappai Kuravar* (Bamboo splitters), *Karuveppilai Kuravar* (Sellers of curry leaves), *Paccaikuthi Kuravar* (Tattoo markers) and *Koodai Katti Kuravar* (basket makers). The *Uppu Kuravar* (Saltmongers), *Thappai Kuravar* (Bamboo splitters), *Karuveppilai Kuravar* (Sellers of curry leaves), *Paccaikuthi Kuravar* (Tattoo markers) and *koodai katti kuravar* (basket makers) are considered low ranking as they are nomads. Earlier some of them used to indulge in robberies and other criminal activities. The Kuravar of the southern districts of Tamil Nadu does not accept the criminal profile of the community. They recognize only three sub-groups among them, such as the Kannappar kulam (name of the Saiva saint), Veduvar kulam and Kuravar kulam, of which the first one claims to be superior than the other two (Mullaly, 1892; Subramanian, 1981).

The following folklore explains why Kuravans are living like nomads and why they occupy a low social status.

One day, Goddess Parvathi was begging at the street of the Kuravars. The Kuravar people were rich, but they refused to offer anything to her. Parvathi complained to her consort, Lord Shiva that the Kuravars were rich people but they did not offer her anything. Hearing this, Shiva went to the same place with a begging bowl. Instead of offering alms, the Kuravar people let their dogs to chase him away and to bite him. This enraged Lord Shiva, and he cursed the Kuravar people that wherever they go, dogs will chase them and bite them. It is due to this curse, that Kuravars believe they have attained a low position in society and came to be known as Kuravan and Kurathi, but actually their real name is Veduvar (Translated from Paneerselvam, 2006).

In the census report of 1931 (pp. 383), it was mentioned that the Kuravars were once a powerful and influential community. At the beginning of the twelfth century, one of their chiefs Nanchi Kuravan took possession of Nanjinad (the southern part of Travancore) and established himself as the ruler. The King of Travancore ultimately subjugated him and this territory was annexed to this state of Travancore. The Kuravars subsequently lost their influence and were reduced to the position of a backward community of "untouchables". The *Travancore State Manual, 1906* (Vol. 1, pp. 296-301) describes the following Kuravan episode at Nanjinad in the thirteenth century.

The country of Nanjinad comprised twelve *pidagais* or small divisions belonging to the two taluqs of Tovala and Agastisvaram. After the downfall of the government of Chera, Chola and Pandya kings, there were many petty states, each independent itself, ruled by petty chiefs. At that time there was one Konangi Koravan leading the life of a hunter. He made his livelihood by making baskets etc. from the fiber of the date and other palms. He had two wives, the elder of whom had a son about eighteen years of age. He was wandering with his son and wives in the woods in search of date palms for making baskets and one day he came near Butapandi and saw a large bush of palm on what is called Tadaga Malai, a little hill to the east of it. While he was tearing the stem of the date leaves with his scythe, all at once the scythe was turned to a golden hue. He was very much surprised and called his wives and son to his side and they all began to examine the place. A well was seen there. All the weapons they had were dipped into it and they at once turned gold. They then concealed the well from view. Konangi Koravan soon became very rich. He built a house and a small hamlet around it and the inhabitants were all brought under his control.

He increased his influence and power gradually and made himself king of the Koravas. The probable date of his rule may be taken to be after 1280 AD. The villages of Cape Comorin, Suchindram etc came gradually under his sway.

He ruled over his subjects very kindly, the tribute paid to him by his subjects being only iron implements; they were thus left in the undisturbed enjoyment of the whole produce of their lands. The Korava chief collected all iron implements from his subjects and converted them all into gold by immersing them in the well. This Konangi Koravan is said to have ruled over the two taluqs for about thirty-five years. His son, Bommayya Koravan, also followed his father's example in ruling over his subjects kindly and considerately. He amassed immense wealth by turning all iron vessels and implements into gold. He had under his command an army of 10,000 foot and 100 elephants. He also gave all the produce of the fields to his subjects and looked after their welfare. He is said to have ruled for about thirty-two years. Nanji Koravan was the son of Bommayya Koravan. He was a very intelligent and capable ruler. He equipped himself with all the necessary weapons and acquired influence over the neighboring Poligars. He looked after the welfare of his subjects and gained their respect and good will. While thus ruling, the want of a son to succeed him made him miserable. He married seven wives and at last had a son by the seventh wife. He was very much gratified, invited all his subjects to his place, gave them liberal charities and entertained them sumptuously. He caused sandal and betel to be distributed among those present enquiring of each to what caste he belonged.

He came to know that there were several castes of people under his sway, of whom the Vellalas occupied the highest social position. The ceremony of Annaprasanam or the first giving rice to the child was performed with great mirth and festivity. All the subjects of the kingdom were invited and sumptuously fed according to their respective ranks and social position. The Vellalas he treated with special respect and after dismissing all the other caste people he addressed the Vellalas as follows:- 'you have already promised to cooperate with me in satisfying my eager longing at the time of the birth of my child. I now ask you to give one of your daughters in marriage to my son'. The Vellalas were horrified at this strange request and remained speechless being unable to express their opinion boldly. At that juncture one of them by name Periaveetu Mudali said that he had a female child of three months and that he would willingly give that child in marriage to the son of the ruler. All the Vellalas were then sent away with suitable presents and the Periaveetu Mudali was made his minister. The Vellalas joined together and concerted a plan to get rid of the odious Korava chief and his family. The Mudaliar as minister told the chief that the marriage of his child should not be performed like that of ordinary persons in a thatched *pandal*, but a huge *mantapam* of stone should be constructed for the marriage. Accordingly the

stone *mantapam* work was begun in earnest on a huge scale and it is said that the Periaveetu Mudali contrived a mechanism by which the stone fabric might tumble down any moment he wanted. Preparations for the marriage went on a grand scale as soon as the boy completed his fifth year. All the inhabitants of the country were invited and everything was ready for the marriage. Certain ceremonies were gone through inside the *mantapam* with the bride and the bridegroom seated on a raised dais. Then the Koravas were informed that it was the custom among the Vellalas that the bridegroom and his relations should be seated inside the *pandal*, while the bride and her mother followed by all the relations of the bride with music and the beating of tom toms etc., should go round the *pandal* three times and then enter it when the *Tali* tying ceremony should be gone through.

This was of course agreed to and while all the Koravas were seated inside the *mantapam* the Vellalas went round it with the bride taken by the mother. At that nick of time the stone roof collapsed and crushed to death all the Koravas seated inside it. So ended, it is said, the Korava dynasty of Nanjanad. After the Koravas, the Vellalas belonging to the family of Periaveetu Mudali for a very long time ruled the land.

KURAVAR PADUKAZHAM: A MYTHICAL ENACTMENT

The Kuravar belongs to the Hindu religion, and traditionally they are strong devotees of Murugan, and also worship Shiva, Parvathi, Perumal and others. A number of folk deities are also worshipped by the Kuravar people, such as Mariamman, Madan, Karupasamy, Amman etc. To some extent, ancestral worship is also practiced. The Murugan temple at Kumarakovil in Kanyakumari district is a popular temple frequented by the Kuravars, together with people of other communities too. However, the Kuravars have a special role in performing certain rituals like *Kuravar Padukazham* and *Thirukalyanam* during the annual ceremony. It is believed that God Murugan married Valli who belongs to the Kuravar community. This is the reason behind the special role of the Kuravars in ritual performances. The following mythical account explains the origin of Valli and the Valli-Murugan marriage.

Nambirasana, a Veduvar king had seven sons. One day, while going for hunting they have found a female child born to a deer under a tapioca plant. He lifted the child and named her Valli, after the Tamil name of tapioca which is *valli*. This was because the child was found under the tapioca plant and had grown there.

One day, Narathar came upon Valli and was mesmerized by her beauty, and narrated this to the Tamil God Murugan. Murugan transformed himself into

the form of an old man and visited the forest to see Valli. He too was mesmerized by her beauty and fell in love with her. As he was talking to her, Valli's brothers. Seeing them, Murugan changed himself into a tree. Valli's brothers noticed the new tree in their farm, and decided to cut off the tree. This enraged Murugan, and he cursed them to turn into stones. Valli entreated Murugan to save their brothers. Thus Murugan resurrected Valli's brothers, and in return married her.

The place Kumarakovil is also known as Velvimalai. It is believed by the people that the Tamil God Murugan met and married Valli, who belongs to the Kuravar community, at this place. People also believe that the caves and rock shelters such as Thinaipunam, Valli Solai, Vatta Soali, Kizhavan Solai, and Vana Soali, which are situated near to the Murugan temple are the places where Murugan met Valli.

Kuravar Padukazham is an enactment of a myth that is still performed at the Murugan temple situated at Kumarakovil in Kanyakumari district. It is performed every year in the Tamil month of Panguni. This ritual is also known as *Thiru Kalyana Thiruvizha*. During this ritual, God Murugan and his wife Valli are kept in a sacred cart and taken to a nearby place Velvimalai which is decorated with garlands and colorful cloths. During this ritual, some Kuravars especially those belonging to Nanchil Nadu costume themselves as Nambirasam, brothers and friends of Valli, and as friends and relatives of Murugan.

The decorated Murugan and Valli come by cart from Velvimalai to the temple. Those who had costumed as Murugan's relatives arrive before the sacred cart. While those who have costumed themselves as Nambirasam, Valli's relatives and friends, stop the cart and act as if fighting with Murugan's relatives. This enactment is performed all along the way from Velvimalai to Kumarakovil. This cart is stopped at several residential places and *abishkam* is performed. Finally, the Kuravars who had costumed themselves as Valli's relatives fall down at the bottom of the cart. It indicates that the Kuravars lost their fight with Murugan. Then, the priest sprinkles some water on them in order to wake them up. It represents Murugan resurrecting the Kuravars at the request of Valli. On this day, the Kuravars offer a special food to the devotees known as *kanji darmam*.

After the completion of *Kuravar padukazham* the temple administration honours the elders of the Kuravar community by giving new clothes, coconuts, betel leaves and fruits. After the completion of this *padukazham* they perform the ritual of Valli-Murugan marriage. The *thali*, akin to the *mangalsutra*, that is used in this marriage ritual is similar to the *thali* that is used by Kuravar women. This *thali* is known as *pottu thali*. Kuravars from different parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu take part in this ritual enactment. Most of the members of Kuravar community in Nanji Nadu and those who migrated from

Nanji Nadu to Kerala during early period, donate money to meet the expenses of this ritual performances. However, due to the poor economic status of Kuravars, nowadays the Kumarakovil temple administrators also pay money to the Kuravars to perform the rituals.

CONSTITUTIONAL STATUS OF THE KURAVANS

The *Census of India* (1961), in the list of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Madras state issued by the superintendent of census operations, Madras, the community Kuravan Sidhanar is mentioned as a scheduled caste throughout the state. It is also mentioned that the names Kakkakan and Veduvar are synonyms of Kuravan Sidhanar. It is also mentioned that the Vettuvan is a scheduled caste in Kanyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu, and Veduvar is a synonym of the Vettuvan.

In 1991 (*Census of India*), the Kuravan Sidhanar in Tamil Nadu is placed under Scheduled Caste category and the Kakkalan (in Kanyakumari district and Shenkotai taluk) in Tamil Nadu is placed under Scheduled Caste category. In Kerala, both these communities are placed under the scheduled caste category. It is further mentioned by the government circular on Backward Classes, Most Backward Classes and Minorities Welfare Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, vide G.O.Ms.No. 28 BC&MBCW Department, dated 19.7.94 and G.O.Ms.No.100 BC & MBCW (BCC) Department, Dated 24.11.97, that the Veduvar and Vedar in Kanniyakumari District and Shencottah Taluk of Tirunelveli District are Scheduled Castes. Generally those who have claimed themselves as Nanchi Kuravan, Pandi Kuravan, Veduvar, Veduvar Pillai, Vettuvan (long pronunciation Ve:ttuvan) are all registered as Kuravan or Kuravan Sidhanar for official purposes.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The field investigation and the earlier records reveal that there are three divisions among Kuravars in Kerala - Kunta Kuravan, Kaka Kuravan and Pandi Kuravan. The majority of Kuravar in Kerala belongs to the category of Kunta Kuravan, also known as Kuravan Sidhanar. The Kaka Kuravan, a sub-group of Kuravan of Kerala, later became a distinct caste known as Kakkalan. Pandi Kuravan is the third category of Kuravans in Kerala. It is a general practice in Kerala to identify persons belonging to southern Tamil Nadu as "Pandi", referring to the Pandian Kingdom, which represents the southern region of Tamil Nadu. Those Kuravans domiciled at Pandi Nadu are known as Pandi Kuravans and similarly those Pandi Kuravans domiciled at Nanchi Nadu are known as Nanchi Kuravans. Therefore the Pandi Kuravans and the Nanchi Kuravan are

synonymous with each other.

The Pandi Kuravans or Nanchi Kuravans are Tamil speakers. The Pandi Kuravan in Kerala are early migrants from Nanchi Nadu, which was a part of the former Travancore state and presently under the territory of Tamil Nadu. This migration took place centuries ago due to various socio-economic reasons. These Tamil speaking Nanchi Kuravans initially migrated to Trivandrum. The place where they were domiciled in those days at Trivandrum is known as Kuravankonam, which still exists. From there, due to various socio-economic reasons they migrated to various other regions of Kerala. In due course of time they became well-adapted to the Malayalam language and in the present context Malayalam has become their lingua franca. However, they originated from the Kanyakumari region (Nanchi Nadu) which was a part of early Travancore state. The Nanchi Kuravans have three clans - the Kannappar kulam (after the name of the Saiva saint), the Veduvar kulam, and the Kuravar kulam. Kuravans who belong to Veduvar Kulam use the surname "Veduvar". Valli, the consort of Lord Murugan, is believed to be their legendary ancestress. Therefore, it is clear that the Nanchi Kuravan and Veduvar are synonymous.

The field investigation revealed that in exceptional cases, some Veduvars use a suffix "Pillai", and called themselves "Veduvar Pillai" in order to elevate their social status due to various socio-cultural-economic reasons. According to Thurston (1975: 376-377), 'Pillai' is a title, which is generally used by the Vellala community - an upper caste in Tamil Nadu. However several backward and scheduled caste communities have also used the 'Pillai' title in order to elevate themselves and hide the original social status. Thurston further states that a certain sect of the Vellala caste in Tamil Nadu originally used the 'Pillai' title. However in addition to all the divisions and sub-divisions of the original Vellala caste, there are nowadays many groups which belong to quite distinct castes, who use the Vellala title or the Pillai title. Instances of members of other castes who have assumed the name and position of Vellalas are the Vettuva Vellalas, who are really Vettuvans; the Puluva Vellalas who are only Puluvars; the Illam Vellalas, who are Panikkans; and the Karukamattai Vellallas, who are Shanans. The children of dancing-girls also often call themselves Mudali, and claim in time to be Vellalas; and even Paraiyans assume the title Pillai, and trust to its eventually enabling them to pass themselves off as members of the caste. Some thieving Koravas style themselves Aghambadiar Vellala or Pillai, and have to some extent adopted the dress and manners of the Vellalas.

This description clearly indicates that those Veduvar who have used the title 'Pillai' and called themselves as 'Veduvar Pillai' in order to elevate themselves are none other than Veduvar. As we know that the important character of caste is 'ascribed' and not achieved. Therefore 'Veduvar Pillai' is a synonym to 'Veduvar'. The above descriptions

reflects that Nanchi Kuravan, Pandi Kuravan, Veduvar, Veduvar Pillai are the several nomenclatures used by Kuravans of southern region of Tamil Nadu. Those Kuravan domiciled in Nanchi Nadu are known as Nanchi Kuravan and they claim themselves as Veduvar and Veduvar Pillai. Earlier these Nanchi Kuravans are part of the former Travancore state and later on after the state partition some of these Nanchi Kuravans have migrated to Kerala. KIRTADS (1995: 23-24) has also mentioned in its report that the Veduvar Pillai community is an early immigrant from the southern parts of Tamil Nadu. They had a glorious history. Valli, the consort of Lord Murugan, the presiding deity of Kumara Kovil near Thakalai, Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu, is believed to be their legendary ancestress. They have a royal tradition of being the rulers of Nanchinad, Tamil Nadu. They are mainly settled in Thiruvananthapuram city, Kollam town, Kottayam, Alapuzha town, Trissur and Ernakulam etc.

Those Nanchi Kuravan who have earlier migrated to Kerala are originally Tamil speakers and their occupational groups and clans are similar to Kuravans who are now domiciled in Nanchi Nadu (Kanyakumari region). Those who have earlier migrated to Kerala, are still having marital relationship and religious relationship with the Nanchi Kuravans domiciled in Tamil Nadu. The Nanchi Kuravans both in Kerala and Tamil Nadu believe that they belong to 'Veduvar Kulam' and the Lord Murugan temple situated at Kumarakovil in Kanyakumari district is their legendary ancestor. They have a traditional role in the annual worshipping celebration of that temple. The description of *Kuravar Padukazham* clearly explains the ritual role of Nanchi Kuravan in the annual celebration. In this celebration Nanchi Kuravan of Kerala and Tamil Nadu jointly contribute and participate in the traditional rituals.

Secondary sources and field investigation reveals that several nomenclatures are used to refer to the Kuravar community. They are Kuravan/Kuravar, Kurava/Kuravas/Pandi Kuravan/Nanchi Kuravan/Veduvar/Vettuvan/Veduvar Pillai, and Sidhanar. Some of these nomenclatures are based on spoken language. For instance, Kuravar is an honorific term and Kuravan is non-honorific. In spoken language Kuravan also refers to masculine gender and Kurathi refers to feminine gender. Some nomenclatures are used by Kuravans according to myths. For instance, in the case of the Veduvar, who are called in several ways like Vettuvar, Vettuvan, and Veduvan, based on spoken language referring to honorific, non-honorific, singular and plural terminologies. The terms Veduvar, Vettuvar, and Vettuvan refer to the same meaning i.e. "hunter". It is important to note that there are some difficulties in writing the caste nomenclature in English. For instance "Vettuvan" (short pronunciation, Vettuva:n) refers to a distinct caste in Kerala, which is traditionally engaged in the digging of earth. At the same time, the "Vettuvan" (long pronunciation, Ve:ttuvan) is also used as synonymous to Veduvar. Both "Vettuvan" (long pronunciation) and "Veduvar" refer to "hunter". All the above descriptions explain

the origin and existence of different nomenclatures of the Kuravan community in Tamil Nadu and Kerala and the relationship between them.

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