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How 'Sitrilakkiyam' Represents The Kuravar Tribe Of Tamil Nadu

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'Sitrilakkiyam' not only depicts the Kuravan way of life in a novel manner, but also centres around the Kuravars, unlike other works that centre around the powerful sections, depicting Draupadi as a 'Kurathi' and presenting a powerful form of alternate narration. Adivasi Awaaz creator Kavipriya, provides an insight into this work belonging to the 17th or 18th century.

Kuravars are indigenous people who live in the hilly areas of Tamil Nadu. The word Kuravar implies 'hill dwellers' or 'hunters'. Historically, they have been considered as 'untouchables'. Their primary occupation includes farming and sheep rearing. Hence, Kuravan literature often depicts the glory of ploughing.





'*Sitrilakkiyam*' was first published in 1937 by the Poomagal Vilasa Printing Press, Chennai Publication. However, it is anticipated that the book belonged to the 17th or 18th century. It has been argued that this book illustrates the lives and way of living of the Kuravars. The book talks about *pallu* and *kuram*. The origin of these words can be traced back to the ethnic groups Pallars and Kuravars. While describing these groups, the book discusses the joys of ploughing, depicting farming as an important occupation. It also illustrates the lives and traits of the Kuravars and the prosperity of their region.

The book details the individual as well as the community lives of the Kuravars. It gives great importance to '*Kurathi*' (soothsaying, astrology, etc usually by a woman) and at the same time focuses on the cultural aspects of the Kuravan community like songs and dances. The book also talks about the Kuravan national wealth. *Sitrilakkiyam*, is considered an important literature by the Kuravars, as the protagonist 'Draupadi' is depicted as a Kurathi. Kurathi has been an important way of life for the Kuravars. This is considered to be the novelty of the book. The book also details other civilizational aspects of the Kuravars. Works like '*Silappathikaram*' have talked about the lives of Kuravars. We also get to know about the Kuravan life through songs of the '*Kurinji Land*'; but none of them discussed the nomadic life of the Kuravars. They all depicted the Kuravars as merely farmers and agriculturalists. While farming has been an important occupation for them, their way of life remains incomplete without Kurathi. The omission of Kurathi, has omitted the nomadic history of the Kuravars. Hence, *Sitrilakkiyam* becomes an important piece of literature for them.

Draupadi in *Sitrilakkiyam*, is depicted as a devotee to Mayavar (Tirumaal), who receives the blessings of the divine in the form of a *kuri* or basket. The book illustrates Draupadi as carrying a basket on her left hip supported by her left hand, an infant on her back and a stick in her right hand. According to *Sitrilakkiyam*, Draupadi not only received the basket as a blessing but also the child. A translated excerpt from the book, which describes Draupadi and her works, is provided below:

*"She (Draupadi) put mountain neem and nuts for medicines in the kuri ;
The tiger's claws and special roots,
Fox teeth and herbs,*

*Drugs, which charmed men and women,
And medicines for youthfulness of old men and women "*





Kuravar Sculpture depicting a woman carrying a basket and a child; Source: Photographed by Aprameya Manthena

The book further mentions that Draupadi specialized in medicines to treat convulsions, abdominal pains, joint pains and the like. She always carried *kilukiluppai* (toy), *kodikayiru* (rope), *thampukayiru* (Tethering rope), *brimanai* (a wisp placed under a pot), *summadu*, *prabangkol* and oil jars with her in the *kuri*.

She is depicted questioning men and kings about the status of her caste, while they are mesmerized by her. She asks, "Isn't our caste the worst caste?" In another passage of the book a Kuravar states, "Our caste is the worst caste. We are the lowest caste among the seven castes." Clearly then, the Kuravars were seen as inferior during those times. Their services as Kurathi, workers and labourers were taken by men of all castes and the kings, however, they did not have dignity in the society. In one of her prophecies Draupadi declares that the war for Bharat was forthcoming and Duryodhana was going to perish. The painter in the palace wept on hearing this. Arjuna disguised as a Kuravan also lamented. The process of Draupadi prophesising is intricately detailed in the book. From mixing raw rice with coconut to lighting incense sticks and lamps, the book carefully



Draupadi; Source:

<https://flickrriver.com/photos/137129299@N07/48050211432/>

status of the Kuravars was poor and inferior, they had their strength in numbers and unity. It is perspectives like these which make *Sitralakkiyam*, a narrative of the lower sections of the society; a narrative of powerful women from marginalized societies and a narrative of alternate histories.



society as they present alternative forms of narrations, placing the marginalized at the centre.

outlines the entire process in the ritual of soothsaying, implying the importance of this culture in the Kuravan life as well as in the lives of others during those times. Furthermore, the book talks about the arrest of Draupadi and other Kuravars present with her due to her prophecy about Duryodhana perishing. But the ministers of the palace reasoned that they would all fall if the Kuravars gather and thereby convince the king for their release. This reveals that while the socio-economic and political

Literature, mythologies folklores and the like to a large extent are storehouses of histories and narrations. While they are based on imaginary characters, their stories are derived from real lived experiences. This makes narrations powerful tools to influence future generations. It also decides the kind of knowledge that would be transferred to them. Usually, it is the powerful who narrate and in their narration there is a distinct dichotomy between the 'good' and the 'evil'. The 'good' is always depicted through 'brahmans', 'kshatriyas', 'beautiful obedient women' and the like who belong to the upper strata of the society, while the 'evil' is always depicted through the 'asurs' and 'rakshasas', who are predominantly derived from the lower castes and class. Hence, literatures like *Sitralakkiyam* hold a lot of importance for the lower sections of the