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The Lost Culture Of The Kurinji Mountain People: The Kuravar Tribe Of Tamil Nadu

The Kuravars are an ethnic Tamil community, who are said to originally belong to the Kurinji mountain region of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Kuruvar originates from the Tamil word *Kuruvan*, which means a 'Leader'. These indigenous people, over the years have lost various aspects of their culture, language, religious practices and more due to the attempts of assimilation, incorporation and "civilization", by the dominant mainstream. ***Adivasi Awaaz creator Kavi Priya, writes about the unique and interesting lives of the Kuravars, through historical texts and inscriptions.***



The Kurinji Mountains famous for its unique flowers; Source:<http://thestyrofoam.blogspot.com/2006/09/kurinji-blooms-just-once-every-12-years.html>

While examining multiple records in order to understand the cultural background of the Kuravars, I came across the texts of Dr. K. Balaji, Assistant Professor of Tamil at Coimbatore. His research work consisted of data, historical accounts, cultural practices and the way of living, on the population of the Kuravar tribe. This data was not only found in the classical works, but also in the archaeological records. Eight entries can be found in the classic works of the Aatrupadai texts (Thiru. 101,242, Poru. 219, Malai.183,203,275,320,333), that depict the life and culture of the Kuravars. These records and the Tamil inscriptions (Tamil Brahmi

Script) of the Kuravars found on a silver seal at the banks of the Karur Amaravathi River are of interest here, as they provide valuable insight into the lives of the Kuravars.

In the following paragraphs, I have cited some of the entries from the Aatrupadai texts, which reveal the daily lives of the Kuravars and their unique cultural and religious practices.

Record - 1:

*Tamarind fruits with light covered shells and stems,
fine buttermilk, and seeds growing on bamboo added to
the boiling liquid along with white rice, cooked by
a mountain woman with flowers on her huge hair knot*
(Malai.178-183).

Kuramagal is shown as a woman preparing a delicious dish made with bamboo rice by using tamarind mixed with buttermilk.

Record - 2:

Mountain farmers, in fields where millet has matured
(Malai. 203).

Kuravars are portrayed as belonging to the agrarian society in protecting the millet fields of the Kurinji land.

Record - 3:

*Dwellers who roam with strong bows to hunt animals are
confused about direction, sit together on a wide boulder*
(Malai. 275).

Kuravars are depicted as people from the hunting community who have taken up strong unbreakable bows in their hands. They select and hunt animals.

Record - 4:

*The men drink liquor and celebrate with
kuravai dances in the sky-high mountain,
with their women, to the accompaniment
of small, loud deer hide parai drums.*
(Malai. 320-322).

It is shown that the Kuravars drink palm wine and then perform the dance Kuravaikoothu, with women.

Record - 5:

*Fishermen sing Kurinji tune
Mountain dwellers wear fragrant waterlily garlands*
(Poru. 219).

In these songs, the Bharathas are portrayed as the singers Kurinjippan and the Kuravars as wearing waterlily garlands. However, Kuravars are known as singers of Kurinjippan.

Record - 6:

*Spread fear-causing
Blood with red millet, and played instruments to*

*please him, that caused fear in non-believers in
the fierce, huge temple of Murukan*

(Thiru, 242-244).

In these songs, Kuramagal is shown as protecting millets and bamboo rice as someone from the ethnic agrarian society.

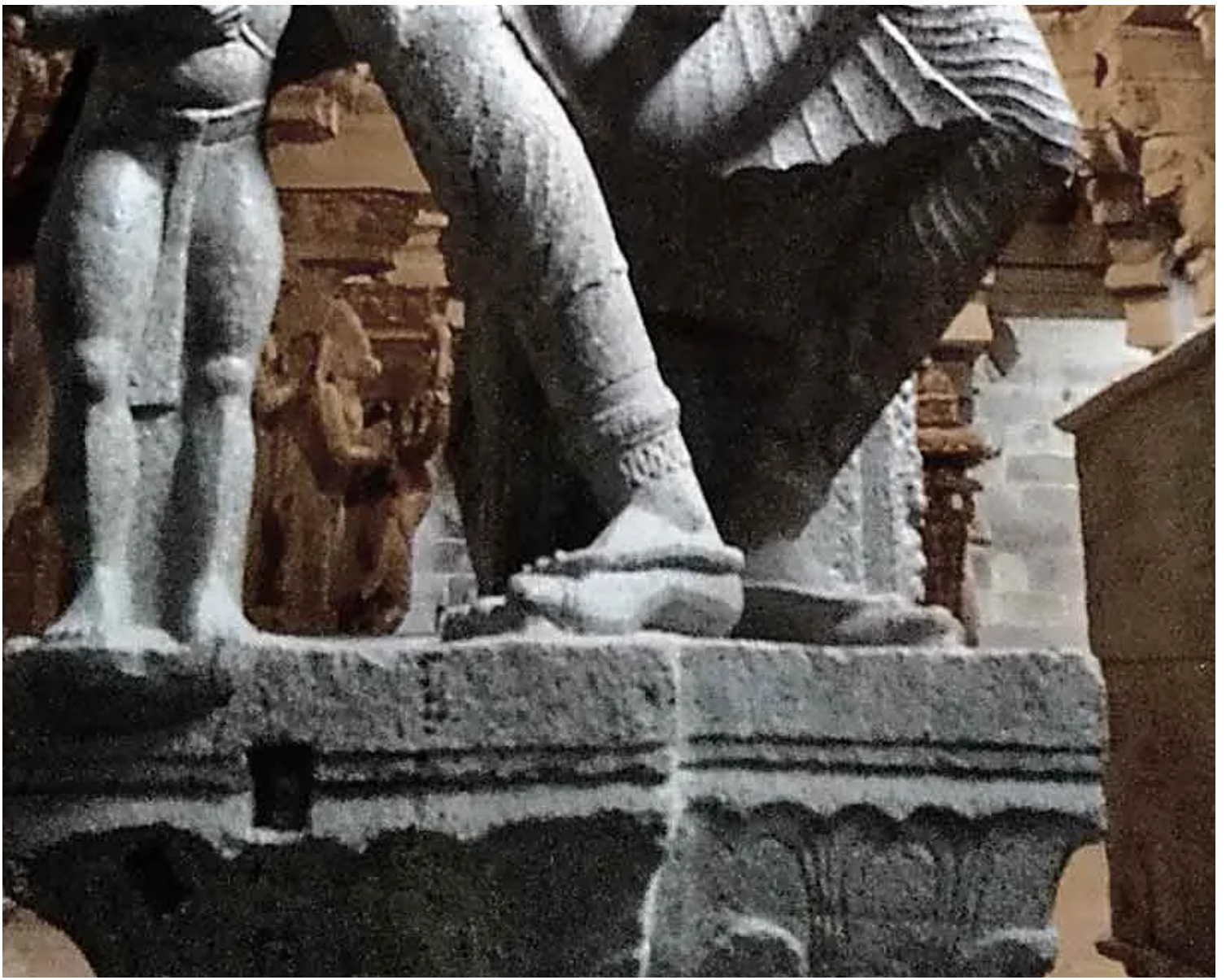
Record - 7:

*One face is blissful in the company of the daughter
of a mountain dweller, Valli with a vine-like waist.*

(Thiru. 101-102).

In these lines, Murugan is shown sitting with Valli, the daughter of the Kuravars





Kuravar Sculpture; Source:<https://www.sahapedia.org/kuravar-sculptures-mandapas>

The life, tradition, culture and way of living of the ethnic Kuravars can be summarized as follows on the basis of the sources cited above.

- 1) They were initially a hunter-gatherer community.
- 2) They then adopted settlement and agriculture, making them an agrarian society. They cultivated millets, bamboo, rice, mountain paddy, etc.
- 3) They collaborated with the Kovalars belonging to the Mullai region, which was evident as they indulged into celebrations together. Over time, this led to economic and cultural socializations and exchanges, eventually resulting in trade and barter exchanges.
- 4) Kuravars had unique food culture. One of their most relished food items was mountain paddy rice mixed with tamarind and cooked in buttermilk.
- 5) Initially, they worshiped the ethnic Muruga (Velan). This was then replaced with the worship of Skandan-

Karthikeyan Muruga, that had its origin in the later Aryan culture. Some classics like Aatrupadai, also mention the worship of Murugan.

6) The later worship of Lord Shiva, the northern Vedic mythological deity Karthikeyan (god of war), and the subsequent religious integration of Skanda into the worship of Siva was a phenomenon imposed by the Aryans



Statue of Kuruvan & Kuruthi, important historical characters of the Kuravar community; Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/>

History is proof to how different indigenous cultures, have been influenced, integrated and incorporated into the dominant and mainstream cultures of different eras. During the British rule in India they were placed under Criminal Tribes Act 1871 and were hence stigmatized for a long time. In 1952, after independence they were denotified, however, the stigma still continues. Even after India gained independence, these communities faced constant threats to their way of living and were being assimilated into the mainstream through various mechanisms. Such practices have resulted in the the loss of indigenous cultures, languages and way of life. Diversity has been attacked. The reminiscence of these indigenous cultures and communities portray not only unique and diverse aspects of human civilization but also their unison with nature and bring forth a multitude of practices, food culture and way of life, that is worth learning from and adopting for a sustainable tomorrow.