

BULLETIN OF THE MADRAS GOVERNMENT MUSEUM

THE TAMIL NADU TRIBES

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Compiled by

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Edited by the

DIRECTOR OF MUSEUM, MADRAS

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(Papers presented at the Seminar on "The Tamil Nadu Tribes" organized by the Government Museum, Chennai on 8th September 1973 in connection with the Silver Jubilee Celebration of Indian Independence)

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EDITORIAL NOTE

It was in 1972 that the subject of Ethnology was included as one of its disciplines in this Museum by Dr. George Bidie. Thereafter the Anthropological collections have grown gradually and steadily through the untiring efforts of the District Collectors, the succeeding Superintendents and the Curators in-charge of the Anthropology Section.

But in the last two decades, the field trips and surveys by the Section were conducted in such a way that almost all the major tribes in Tamilnadu have been covered district wise-i.e.in Madurai, the Pulayan, Paliyan and Muduvan, while in Coimbatore, the Irulas, Pulayan, Iravallar and Malasar; in North Arcot, the Maliyalis, Lambadis (B.C.), and Irulas; in Tiruchirappalli, the Pachai Malaiyalis; in Dharmapuri, the Chitteri Malaiyalis and Lambadis (B.C.); in Salem, the Kolli Malaiyalis; in Erode, the Sholagas; in Tirunelvely and Kanyakumari, the Kanis; and in Ramanasthapuram, the Kattunaickens. Further, during this period only, the largest populated hill tribe of Tamilnadu, the Malaiyalis was studied comparatively at Pachaimalai, Kollimalai, Kalvarayan, Chitteri, Yercaud, Shevaroy, Jawadhi and Yelagiri hills and their agricultural appliances were collected for the Museum.

With this enriched anthropology collection, three new galleries were thus opened during this decade - the Folk Arts, the Puppets and the Physical Anthropology galleries - and we had organised special exhibitions such as the Lambadis of Tamilnadu, the Hill dwellers of Tamilnadu, the Tamilnadu Tribes, etc.

Thus, the Madras Government Museum is the only prime Government Institution in the State, actively involved in projecting the life and culture of these tribals through their permanent displays, special exhibitions and publications.

There are 42 tribals in Tamilnadu with a total population of 5.20 lakhs as per 1981 Census. The papers presented at the seminar on the Tamilnadu tribes held in the Museum in 1973 form a part of the Silver Jubilee celebrations of Indian Independence held in the Museum at that time. I hope, that these papers on Tamilnadu tribes will serve as a useful and purposeful bulletin of this Museum to numerous research students in the field of Anthropology trying to understand the life and patterns of the tribals in Tamilnadu.

MADRAS-600 008,
6th June 1989.

G. KESAVARAM,
Director of Museums,
Government Museum, Madras-8

IV. THE HEALTH PRACTICES OF TAMIL NADU TRIBES

A Paper by

Tmt. Sumathy S. Rao, Health Educator & Training Officer, Directorate of Health Services and Family Planning (Public Health Wing), Madras-6.

INTRODUCTION:

This report is an attempt to study the social, cultural aspects and mainly the health problems among the tribes of Tamilnadu. The report is based upon the visit of the Officer to the Kanyakumari and Madurai districts. The Kanis of Kanyakumari District and the Adivasis of Madurai were visited in order to study their living conditions and the health practices.

The Adivasis of Madurai district originally belong to Pandiyanadu. They were living earlier to Kunnuvars. All the people live in the upper and lower Palani Hills. They live in twenty two places of Kodaikanal and Palani Taluks. The Tribes of these hills consist of Mannadiyars, Kunnuvars and Pulaiyars.

The Kanikars of Kanyakumari district believe that their ancestors should have lived in the same hilly areas where they find themselves now. The existence of these Kanikars come to be known when Maharaja of Moolan-thirunal took shelter in this thick forest of the hills under enemy attack and the secular leader of this tribe Muttakani protected the Maharaja.

The tribes live in eighteen hills of four taluks of Kanyakumari district namely Kalkulam, Thovalai, Vilavancode and Andipothai. Since the Kanikars reside mainly in the forest and hilly areas, they rely mainly on agriculture.

Health Factors.- Now, coming to the health factors of these tribes of Tamilnadu, they have very little knowledge regarding health and health practices. Practice of medicine is in the crude form. They get the cases treated through their tribal leader. Local herbs are used for ordinary ailments.

The Tribes do not bathe daily and soap is rarely used. They use dry coconut fibre to rub the skin. For ceremonial occasions dry flower powders are used. Cutting of nails, combing of hair are not done regularly. Brushing of teeth is done with neem stick or with powdered charcoal. Defecation is done in the open space by children as well as by adults. Drinking water is got from the small rivulets which are present in all the villages as natural source. There is no well at all. The stream water is used for all purposes.

It is interesting to state that the tribes who are working for the Harijan Welfare Department and Forest Department seem to have contacted some healthy habits like brushing of teeth, bathing and combing from the Plains people.

Knowledge of health and diseases are fairly poor. Though the tribes are not fully aware of the diseases and the mode of spread etc., they are frightened of certain diseases like cholera and small pox. When these two diseases break out in an area the entire community leave the area and they settle down far away from the infected areas. The diseased are also left all alone uncared and if by chance they survive they rejoin the other tribes later (actually such instances were also witnessed by the author). The tribes name the diseases in their own language and they are mostly related to the usual definitions of the Tamilians.

The tribes have, often, the diseases like cholera, small pox, whooping cough and worm infections. Among children diarrhoea and dysenteries are also very common. There is no problem of skin conditions but majority of the tribes suffer from venereal diseases. The attack is in equal percentage among men and women.

In general, the tribes know very little about the diseases mentioned above. Knowledge about the communicable diseases is very limited. They are not aware of the mode of onset spread, causative agent and treatment, prevention, etc., of such diseases which are not known to them. They believe that these diseases are set on them by the Hill Gods and Goddesses as a curse or as a punishment for any deed or offering not acceptable to these Gods and Goddesses.

Normally, the tribes get treated by their head or leader of the people. They also get treatment by Pachaimalai Vaidyam and Moolkashayam. Practice of Medicine by herbs and leaves are commonly present and there are persons specialized in this field. In cases where the condition becomes serious, then they take such cases to the plains and to the nearest hospitals.

All the Hill Tribes believe that the hill God and Goddesses are giving all kinds of protection to them against diseases and evil spirits. They strongly believe that proper offering to the deities and sincere worship will keep them in good health. They also believe in nature cure method. If they come to know that an individual cannot be cured then they do not pay any attention to that person except they offer prayers to the Hill God.

To conclude, the tribes of Tamilnadu (whom so far the author has seen) generally look healthy. Among children protein deficiency seems to be common and among adults Vitamin A and B2 deficiency are noticed. They rarely suffer from fever, scabies, etc.

Tribes are found with common nutritional problems. Their main staple food is tapioca. Fish and flesh from hunted animals are also eaten. Use of spices and condiments are very little. Vegetables are used very sparingly. No oil is used for cooking purposes. During festivals only they use rice, maize, honey and coconut.

It is interesting to note that the tribes have limited number of family members. An average size of the tribal family is three to four only. The children are born on spacing method but natural. They believe that repeated pregnancies will not occur if a married woman regularly offers offerings to the hill goddess and take regularly a species of herb available in the hills.

Among the Tribes, the birth rate seems to be very low and in another fifty years there may not be of original tribes living in the same traditional ways.

Though the Tribes of Tamilnadu are living in different parts of the State in different districts, from the study it appears that all have similar practices of social, cultural and health factors. The studies undertaken by the author has clearly shown the superstition and primitive beliefs that are still lingering with the tribes whereas their counterparts in the plains have made progress in all aspects in leaps and bounds. They need a good educational publicity programme regarding the various health problems. This is being considered by the author and arrangements are being made in a planned phase to educate the tribes on health practices.