

SOCIAL FOLK CUSTOMS OF THE ZAMINDARS IN THE MADRAS PRESIDENCY

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Social folk custom is another important genre of folklore and folk life. It is very close to material culture and lies in between oral literature and material culture,

***Here the emphasis is on group interaction rather than
on individual skills and performance.***

(UNESCO-WIPO/FOLK/PKT97, 20)

The social folk customs have always been an integral part of any society for they have held society in cohesive bond of togetherness, although superstitions have a lot to do with their evolution. A social custom is a kind of social necessity. It is one of the important fields of folklore. It is also one of the quite well known methods of social control. Social custom is based on traditional beliefs. Customs which contain magical and sacred potency may be termed as rituals (Philip 1986, 102-106). Customs enlighten man in his social life. From his very childhood man forms the habit of obeying them and he follows them without raising any hue or cry. He comes into possession of these customs when they come down to him in the form of his social heritage or inheritance and it is these very customs which he bequeaths to his successors.

The Zamindar occupied the highest position in the society. All the communities living in the zamin area accorded him a place of honour. In all the social functions he was consulted and his ruling was preferred. Before any domestic function was celebrated people belonging to the *zamin* area visited the Zamindar and received his blessings (Revathy 2005, 87). This was called *Kantukolluthal*. This ceremony varies from community to community. Marriage rituals marked a significant event in their socio-cultural life. The style of celebration and the rituals made them an influential class in the locality.

Zamindar celebrated the marriage of their sons and daughters by observing traditional customs and practices. Marriage, customs, rituals and ceremonies differed from caste to caste and community to community in the Zamindaries of Tiruchirappalli. They also observed certain marriage taboos. The ceremony presented an integral compound of Vedic rituals tribal customs, rites and formalities. They were not given the liberty to select their partners even among their own caste. Inter-caste

marriage was never accepted and if any person resorted to it either man or woman was expelled from the community.

TRADITIONS:

Rajakambalanayaks, a section of Zamindars consult their caste matters only with their *Guru* (leader). They settled by Kodangi Nayakar or Priest. Mettu Nayakar or Headman. Marriage of the peoples of this community with other caste are strictly prohibited and it is the serious punishable offence and the offenders are killed by Madiga but now-a-days rigid Excommunication is penalty. So for these strict rules among community they never mingle with any other castes and live lonely in separate villages (Balasubramanian 1984, 15).

When a Girl attains maturity she is kept in a separate hut which is watched by Chakkiliyan (servant from lower community). Marriage is either infant or adult. During weddings, the last three days involve numerous ceremonies. They take place in a special *pandal* erected in the village on either side of which are smaller *pandals* for the bride and bridegroom. The Bride price is only *cambu*, a grain. Kambalatars never get dowry and it is offence in this community (Ludden 1985, 23-25). *Pottu* or *Thali* (sacred thread) is tied to represent marriages.

The Kambalatars do not recognize the superiority of Brahmins, nor employ them as priests for marriages or funerals, nor worship either the Brahmanical gods or the lesser deities with any belief. Kambalatars do not allow any stranger to enter their villages with shoes on, or on horseback, or holding up an umbrella, as their god would be offended, and it is generally believed that if any one breaks this rule he will suffer from illness or some other problem. They follow strict rules among their community.

In North Arcot, however, they are not so particular, though some refuse to have their head shaved, because they scruple to bow down before a barber. Besides Vishnu the Kammas worship Ganga, because they say that long ago they fled from Northern India, to avoid the anger of a certain Raja, who had been refused a bride from among them (Vadivelu 1903, 11). They were pursued, but their women, on reaching the

the Mahanadi, prayed for a passage to Ganga, who opened a dry path for them through the river. Crossing, they all hid themselves in a *dholl* (Cajanusindicus) field, and thus escaped from their pursuers. For this reason, at their marriages,



they tie a bunch of *dhol* leaves to the north-eastern post of the wedding mandapam, and worship Ganga before tying the *taali*. (Dorsan 1972, 82)

Prior to the betrothal ceremony, female ancestors, Vigneswara, and the Grama Devata (village deities) are worshipped. A near relation of the future bridegroom proceeds, with a party, to the home of the future bride. On their way, they look for omens, such as the crossing of birds in an auspicious direction. Immediately on the occurrence of a favourable omen, they burn camphor, and break a cocoanut, which must split in to two equal halves. One half is sent to the would-be bridegroom, and the other taken to the bride's house. If the first coconut does not split properly, others are broken till the wished result is obtained. When the girl's house is reached, she demands the *sagunam* (omen) coconut. Her lap is filled with flowers, coconuts, turmeric, plantains, betel leaves and areca nuts, comb, sandal paste, and *kunkumam*. The wedding day is then fixed.

Marriage is generally celebrated at the house of the bridegroom, but, if it is a case of *kannikadhanam* (presenting the girl without claiming the bride's price), at the house of the bride. The bride-price is highest in the Gampa section. On the first day of the marriage rites, the *pettamugadasangyam*, or box-lid ceremony is performed (Vadivelu 1915, 56-58).

The new cloths for the bridal couple, five plantains, nuts, and pieces of turmeric, one or two combs, four rupees, and the bride-price in money or jewels, are placed in a box, which is placed near the parents of the marriage couple. The contents of the box are then laid out on the lid, and examined by the *sammandhis* (new relations by marriage). The bride's father gives betel leaves and areca nuts to the father of the bride groom, saying, "The girl is yours, and the money mine." The bridegroom's father hands them back, saying, "The girl is mine, and the money yours." This is repeated three times.

The officiating purohit (priest) then announces that the man's daughter is to be given in marriage to so-and-so, and the promise is made before the assembled Deva Brahmanas, and in the presence of light, Agni, and the Devatas. This ceremony is binding, and, if the bridegroom by any chance die before the *bottu* (marriage badge) is tied, then the bride-to-be becomes, and remains a widow for the rest of her life. The milk-post is next set up, the marriage pots are arranged, and the *nalangu* ceremony is performed (Maclean 1885, 45). This consists of the embrocating of the bridal couple with oil, and smearing the shoulders with turmeric flour. A barber pares the nails of the bridegroom, and simply touches those of the bride with a mango leaf dipped in milk.

After the return of the bridal couple from bathing, the bridegroom is decorated, and taken to a specially prepared place within or outside the house, to perform *Vira-gudi-mokkadam*, or worship of heroes in their temple. At the spot selected, a *pandal* would be erected, and beneath it three or five bricks, representing the heroes (*viralu*), are set up. The bricks are smeared with turmeric paste, and painted with red dots. In front of the bricks an equal number of pots are placed, and they are worshipped by breaking a cocoanut, and burning camphor and incense.

The bridegroom then prostrates himself before the bricks, and, taking up a

sword, cuts some lime fruits, and touches the pots three times. In former days, a goat or sheep was sacrificed. The hero worship, as performed by the Goda section, differs from the above rite as practiced by the Gampa section. Instead of erecting a pandal, the Godas go to a pipal tree, near which one or more daggers are placed.

A yellow cotton thread is wound three or five times round the tree, which is worshipped. As a substitute for animal sacrifice, lime fruits are cut. The hero worship concluded when the wrist- threads



of cotton and wool (*kankanam*) are tied on the bride and bridegroom, who are taken to the temple after he has bathed and dressed himself in new clothes. On his return to the mandapam, the purohit light the sacred fire, and the contracting marriage sit side by side on a wooden plank. They then stand, with a screen spread between them, and the bridegroom, with his right big toe on that of the bride, ties the bottu round her neck. They then go three times round the podium, with the ends of their cloths knotted together.



On the third day, *pongal* is offered to the pots, and the wrist- threads are removed. Like the Palli bridegroom, the Kamma bridegroom performs a mimic ploughing ceremony, but at the house instead of at a tank (pond). He goes to a basket filled with earth, carrying the iron bar of a ploughshare, an ox-goad, and rope, accompanied by the bride carrying seeds or seedlings in her lap. While he pretends to be ploughing, his sister stops him, and will not let him continue till he has promised to give his first born daughter to her son in marriage. The marriage pots are presented to the sisters of the bridegroom. During the marriage celebration, meat must not be cooked.

The dead are usually cremated. As the moment of death approaches, a cocoanut is broken, and camphor burnt. The thumbs and great toes of the corpse are tied together. A woman, who is left a widow, exchanges betel with her dead husband, and the women put rice into his mouth. The corpse is carried to the burning-ground on a bier, with the head towards the house. When the corpse has been laid on the pyre, the relations throw rice over it, and the chief mourner goes three times round the pyre, carrying on his shoulder a pot of water, in which a barber makes holes. During the third turn the lights the pyre, and throw down the pot, goes off to bathe. On the following day, a stone is placed on the spot where the deceased breathed his last, and

his clothes are put close to it. The women pour milk over the stone, and offer milk, cocoanuts, cooked rice, betel, etc., to it. These are taken by the males to the burning-ground (Jeyaraj 1993, 113).

At the burning-ground, the fire is extinguished, and the charred bones are collected, and placed on a plantain leaf. Out of the ashes they make an effigy on the ground, to which food is offered on four leaves, one of which is placed on the abdomen of the figure, and the other three are set by the side of it. The first of these is taken by the Paraiyan, and the others are given to a barber, washerman, and Panisavan (a mendicant caste) (Thurston 1909, 21). The final death ceremonies (*karmandhiram*) are performed on the sixteenth day. They commence with the *punyaham* or purificatory ceremony, and the giving of presents to Brahmans.

Inside the house, the dead person's clothes are worshipped by the women. The widow is taken to a tank or well, where her *nagavalibottu* is removed. This usually wears out in a very short time, so a new one is worn for the purpose of the death ceremony. The males proceed to a tank, and make an effigy on the ground, near which three small stones are set up. On these libations of water are poured, and cooked rice, vegetables, etc., are offered. The chief mourner then goes into the water, carrying the effigy, which is thrown in, and dives as many times as there have been days between the funeral and the *karmandhiram*. The ceremony closes with the making of presents to the Brahmans and agnates. Towards evening, the widow sits on a small quantity of rice on the ground, and her marriage bottu is removed.

Customs and traditions play a vital role in recognising the identity of a particular community (Sharma 1968, 56). Thus these were the traditions and customs followed by the zamindars of Madras Presidency.

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