

IDENTITIES OF NARIKKURAVARS IN TAMIL NADU

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Abstract

Narikkuravar is the community that hunts foxes and makes a living on their skin, teeth and nails. Narikkuravars are an offshoot of Vagri Family who are known under different names in various regions they live. The Narikkuravars in Tamil Nadu have become very popular thanks to the mass media presentation of Narikkuravars in cinemas, news papers etc. Since the life styles of Narikkuravars are very different from the mainstream of Tamil Nadu, they have become very miserable and noted by the people of Tamil Nadu. Imitating their life style in popular movies, in the name of Kuravan-Kurathi song and dance, has become very popular. In this modernized world, the Narikkuravars struggling in keeping their identities in a traditional way. The present article is going to highlight the common identities of Narikkuravars in Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Narikkuravar, Vagri, Tribe, Nomads, Efficacy Dimension, Self-Esteem

Introduction

The term identity is used in various ways. In one of its more common usages it's refers to the unique characteristics of an individual that distinguish his/her from others in a social context. The essence of the term lies in the fact that identity is the self-definition of an individual in the context of a group. And it is in this context that makes the concept interesting to understand, because both the individual and group forces are at work in crafting the identity of the individual. Identity is a complex concept. It involves a descriptive dimension, an evaluative dimension and a resulting efficacy dimension.

The descriptive dimension helps us to

develop a self-concept and the evaluative dimension affects the self-esteem of the person. Greater the positive valence associated with the characteristic one possesses, higher is the self-esteem of the individual and vice versa. Lastly, the efficacy dimension is the basis of the confidence that an individual displays in any work situation.¹ It is commonly known in Tamil Nadu that the Kuravas formed a nomadic tribe. In a landscape littered with a large number of castes, there are about 70 types of Kuravas like Pannikuravas, Uppukkuravas, Malaikkuravas etc., Narikkuravar is the community that hunts foxes and makes a living on their skin, teeth and nails. Narikkuravars are an offshoot of Vagri Family who are known under different

names in various regions they live. The present article is going to highlight the common identities of Narikkuravars in Tamil Nadu.

Etymology of Narikkuravar

Nari+Kuravar = Narikkuravar. Nari is the Tamil name for fox which is known for its cunningness. Kuravar stands for people living on a hill top. Since Narikkuravars hunt these foxes for meat and, sell their teeth, skin etc., for their living, they are called Narikkuravars.²

Name Identity of Narikkuravars in India

In Tamil Nadu, they are known as 'Kuruvikkarar' or 'Narikkuravar'.³ They are known by various names. For example, in Pudukkottai, they are known as 'Perisu' or 'Adi', in Tirunelveli as 'Nariyakar', in Nagapattinam as 'Narithompan', in Kanniyakumari as 'Muratiyan', in Tiruchirappalli, Salem and Villupuram Districts as Narikkuravar and in Chengleput and Vellore Districts as 'Kuruvikkarans'.⁴

In Puducherry, they are called Narikkuravars; in Andhra Pradesh as Nakla or Naklavandlu, Pillaikuttu Ammu; in Kolkata as Singalan; in Rajasthan as Vagri, Pakdi, Singa; in Kerala as Kuruvikkarar; in Karnataka as Akipikki; in Maharashtra as Patha Parthilowar; in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh as Vagri; in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Orissa as Akipikki. Since their roots link them to Gujarat, they are called as Vagrivel Jath. Vagri in Gujarati means Kurivikkarar and Vagrivel Jath means Tribe of Kuruvikkarans.⁵ Other names used are Kuttiraja/Katturaja and Sikkari, the former signifying their affinity to forested stretches and their lordship over them. Their distinctive different cultures and habits make them easily identifiable.

Occupation Identity

The Narikkuravas are distributed throughout Tamil Nadu. They live in rural areas, towns, cities and pilgrim centres. They are known as Oosi Kuravar because they sell

needles (*Oosi*) and beads, and Kuruvikkarar as they trap birds (*Kuruvi*). Nari in Tamil means fox. They trap small animals such as fox and mongoose and sell their teeth as charms. Some of them use the title *Singha*. They have apparently lived in Tamil Country for several generations.⁶

Physical Identity-Narikkuravar

In the early days, the Narikkuravars were mostly found half clad. He had around his waist a loins-cloth which had several pouches. He had a turban red in colour, on his head. Traditionally, they had a piece of cloth thrown on the shoulder which was mostly saffron in colour and dirty. This piece of cloth on his shoulder served several purposes. When it was doubled, it could be used as a bag. It could be used as a cradle for carrying the child. It could also be used for covering himself during the stay. Some Narikkuravars also used half trousers. They used to wear garland of artificial pearls around the waist and around the neck. They used earrings made of tin and rings on the fingers, made of silver or brass or tin. They also used to wear necklaces, with tooth of a fox as a pendant. During the childhood, their head would be shaven three times. After the shave in the childhood, they do not normally cut their hair in later years. They normally sported long hair which was knotted into a tuft. The reason why they did not trim their hair was that it was considered to be sacrilegious and this would prevent them from participating in religious gatherings.⁷ This taboo on trimming of hair resulted in the hair being dirty, riddled with ticks and their appearance being savage.⁸ However the present day Narikkuravars have adopted the modern ways of trimming the hair.⁹

Traditionally, male Narikkuravars tied and trimmed their hair into a knot, with the help of hairpins. They sported moustaches in order to exhibit their masculinity. Except for the priests, normally male Narikkuravars did not sport beards. However, one could find many Narikkuravars in the present day to go without

moustaches and sporting beards. Male Narikkuravars used to tattoo in various parts of the body and this practice continues even to this day.¹⁰ The present day Narikkuravars prefer jeans, pants and T-shirts and look almost like everybody else in the modern society.¹¹ Since they normally eat the flesh of animals like fox, rabbit, grey quill, grey partridge (Kavudari), they are normally physically very strong.¹²

Narikkuravar Women

Narikkuravar women had the habit of buying a Sari¹³ and tearing it into two or three pieces and use them as petticoats. Normally Narikkuravar women dressed in such a way that their navel was exposed. Some Narikkuravar women used petticoat, with a piece of cloth thrown around the shoulders (*Dhavani*).¹⁴ Mostly this piece of cloth on the shoulder could also be converted into a cradle for the baby. Even while they were feeding the young ones, they were engaged in the traditional occupation of making necklaces with artificial beads. Mostly the dresses worn by women were just as the dresses worn by the men and they were normally found dirty.¹⁵

They used to wear necklaces made of artificial beads and old coins. These necklaces of colourful beads were known by different names - *Motto, Haldo, Hariyu, Lalsidiya, Dhanda, Rupaner* and *Neelam*. In the early period, the number of necklaces owned by a woman could indicate her high status in society. Narikkuravar women, wearing many necklaces, would be considered affluent and considered to have attained a high social status.¹⁶ However, the present day Narikkuravars have changed a lot and they do wear artificial beads but beads mixed with gold.¹⁷ They wear bangles made of tin or lead and glass. They used earrings made of tin. They also used hairpins. They also used nose rings made of gold and silver. Married women wear a special ornament called *Metti** in their toe. They always carry a cloth bag on the shoulder. In the early period, they used to carry a pail made of tin. They used their pail

for carrying water and food. This habit of carrying a tiny pail is no longer popular with the Narikkuravar women. Normally, in her shoulder bag, she would carry all the materials necessary for making necklace of artificial beads. Narikkuravar girls, when they attained puberty, would beautify their eyebrows with a concoction made from some herbs. Married women had the habit of blackening their teeth with the use of some herbs. On account of this blackening of teeth, they were sometimes called 'Mai Kurathi' (Narikkuravar women with blackened teeth).¹⁸ There is a Tamil saying that the eye of Kurathi (Narikkuravar women) is the index of her beauty and this is amply proved by the fact that Narikkuravar women take pains to beautify their eyes.

Narikkuravar women use several methods to make their face look attractive. For example, if the Narikkuravar woman has short hair, they use artificial hair (*Savary*) to make it some more beautiful. On account of their interaction with other communities and the influence of cinema, Narikkuravar women have started wearing saris. Girls wear petticoats called '*Kaakri*'.

Both men and women of this community normally wear dirty clothes and this problem is compounded by the fact that they chew betel leaves.¹⁹ The stains on their clothes distinguish their community from the main stream. Since Narikkuravar community is a fringe community, the drama played by school children and even cinema, make fun of the odd behaviour of the Narikkuravar community.²⁰ But recently the Narikkuravar Community has undergone change and the educated elements in the community are trying to mainstream into the majority community.

Clan Identity

According to Edgar Thurston, Narikkuravars speak Marathi language and catch birds for their living. They also beg sometimes. They hunt foxes for flesh and use

their skins for making bags. Hence they are known as Jungle Sathi (Jungle Dwellers). But they call themselves 'Vagri'. They are also known as 'Ethu Marike Vetta Kandalu'. It means that they hunt from behind the buffalos. In order to catch the birds, they hide behind the herd of buffalos and mimic the sound of birds.²¹

Narikkuravars claim to have descended from Sivaji, the King of Marattas. Sivaji is said to have hunted tigers and sported the teeth of tiger while hunting his enemies. Vagri means Tiger in the Marathi language and Vagrivala means those associated with the tribe of tigers. May be this is the reason why Narikkuravars address each others as vagri. In the early period, the king who won the war had the right to plunder the conquered country. Narikkuravars were once a part of the Sivaji army. But when they were defeated, they did not prefer to be taken captives. Hence they discarded the military dress, put on a cloth of leaves and went to hilly places in the forest. Till date they have chosen a life of forest drivellers.

In the face of the invading Mughal Army, they took shelter in the forest. They learnt the art of mimicking the sound of birds for the purpose of capturing them for food. If any Narikkuravar were to be stranded in the forest, they would whistle or mimic a bird sound to signal for help.²² They normally go in groups. But if an individual Narikkuravar were to go into the forest, they would leave behind barks and flowers to facilitate their return. If flowers were strewn on the path, it indicated lone woman Narikkuravar and in case of leaves, it would indicate lone male Narikkuravar.

After the advent of the Europeans, Narikkuravars migrated into towns. Since Narikkuravar were expert hunters of bear, tiger, fox, lion etc., the Europeans gave them guns to replace their bow and arrow. The Europeans employed the Narikkuravars in the battle field because they were considered to be very efficient hunters.²³

Language Identity

Nomads have their own language and Narikkuravars also have a language of their own. Their spoken language is known as Vagriboli Language. Vagri means Narikkuravar and Boli means spoken language. This Vagriboli belongs to the Indo-Aryan language group. In Tamil Nadu, this language is totally unintelligible. The Vagri Language does not have any script. This language can be easily understood by the people who speak Hindi or Urdu or Gujarati. It was Gift Sironmony* of Madras Christian College, along with his students and Srinivasa Varma of Annamalai University who were responsible for the grammar and dictionary of the Vagriboli Language. In view of their wandering nature, the Narikkuravar community pick up the language of the State in which they happen to settle.

Vagriboli is traced to the Gujarati Language. In course of time, due to the distancing from the Gujarati Language and the mixing of Marathi, Rajasthani etc., the Vagriboli has emerged as an independent language.²⁴ It is interesting to note that many Narikkuravars do not know the name of the language they speak. On enquiry, they explained that it is difficult to understand because several languages are mixed into the Vagriboli. Some people refer to Vagriboli as the Pattani Language.

Social Identity of Narikkuravar Community

According to Srinivasa Varma, the Narikkuravar Community can be broadly classified into five groups. Gujarati Group worships *Kali*, known as *vehli*, in the Vagriboli and sacrifices the flesh of buffalo. The Mehvado Group worships Eswari and Madurai Meenakshi, known as *novkod* in the Vagriboli and sacrifices goat. Dabi Group worships Durgai, known as *dukav* in the Vagriboli and sacrifices goat. Seliyo Group worships

Mariamman, known as *selio* in the Vagriboli and sacrifices the flesh of goat to appease the god. The Jogan Group worships Kali, known as *vehli* in the Vagriboli and they sacrifice buffalo.²⁵ The five major groups are hierarchically arranged. The top layer is occupied by Gujarati Group. The next layers are occupied by Mehvado, Dabi, Selio and Jogan in the descending order. The Narikkuravar Community frequently witnesses conflicts between groups over the question of gods they worshipped and the hierarchical position they occupied.

In the Narikkuravar Society, the clan goddesses provide the primary identification of a person. The clans are always headed by a goddess. In the Narikkuravar and similar patrilineal and virile society of India, married girls are removed, both socially and biologically, from their lineage ancestress. Devotion to her own natal goddess, i.e. her father's, will be abandoned once she marries and joins her husband's lineage.²⁶

Cultural Identity

Normally, Narikkuravar Settlements are found on the outskirts of any city. The reason why they are located on the fringes of civilized settlement is because Narikkuravars normally do not enter into any social intercourse with the civilized populations. When the majority community picks quarrel with the Narikkuravars, the latter normally shy away from any direct confrontation. In other words, they are prepared to create a social divide between the civilized community and themselves.²⁷

Narikkuravar Community is a noisy community and probably it is one of the reasons why they stay away from the civilized community. However, they do cultivate trade relationship with other communities. Another reason for the self-imposed exclusion is due to the fear that their contact with other communities might dilute or dissipate their

cultural identity. Narikkuravar Community is very independent and they love the idea of the identity of the community. Since other communities look down upon the Narikkuravars as unclean people, they do not like to come in contact with them.²⁸

Each Narikkuravar clan has a bundle of clothes called *Saami – Moottai* meaning 'God's Bundle'. It is filled with the blood of animals sacrificed by the Narikkuravars and clothes dipped in them. The *Saami-Moottai* of a clan must not be touched by the members of another clan. On the death of the head of the family, his eldest son inherits the *Saami – Moottai*. The prestige of a clan – leader depends on the antiquity of his *Saami – Moottai*.²⁹

Band and Camp Organization

Group life and camp life are the essential components of any nomadic way of life. The Narikkuravars move as bands in different sizes and composition. Only rarely a group sojourned as a unit in a year, continues in the same place the successive year. Each family decides which group is going to be most accommodative and productive. Groups/ bands are constantly rearranged on the basis of kinship, friendship and expediency. Itinerant Narikkuravars perceive, understand and value the nature of camp life. Camp organization is very fluid in nature and agnatic kinsmen and affined relatives organize themselves temporarily and exhibit fission in the process of their journey from one place to another.³⁰

Conclusion

The Narikkuravars in Tamil Nadu have become very popular thanks to the mass media presentation of Narikkuravars in cinemas, news papers etc. Since the life styles of Narikkuravars are very different from the mainstream of Tamil Nadu, they have become very miserable and noted by the people of Tamil Nadu. Imitating their life style in popular movies, in the name of Kuravan-Kurathi song and dance, has become very popular. In this

modernized world, the Narikkuravars struggling in keeping their identities in a traditional way. They struggle to ensure their ST status since from the last four decades. Government acts and policies make serious problems to the society, example - forest act. The Narikkuravars suffered a lot from this act. They slowly lose their occupation sources. In these social-cultural pressures to the Narikkuravars they were pushed to adopt new activity to get their daily bread.

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9. Personal Observation.
10. S. Vijay, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
11. *Interview* with Murali (25), Devarayaneri Narikkuravar Colony, Tiruchirappalli on 14th September 2012.
12. *Interview* with Baby (58), Devarayaneri Narikkuravar Colony, Tiruchirappalli on 9th September 2012.
13. A garment that consists of a long piece of cloth that women, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, wear draped around their bodies.
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