

Weavers, Weaving and Their Practices: A Cultural Study on Devangas in Kerala

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Abstract

The paper is an ethnographic work which tries to study the cultural aspects of a weaving community seen in Kerala, named Devangas who were said to be migrated from Mysore. This community is mainly resided in the regions of Palakkad and Thrissur District. The paper emphasizes the ritual practices and origins of the community. The paper also examines the legend behind the community and how the community became weavers. The major sources used to complete the work includes primary and secondary sources and also field enquiries.

Keywords: Devangas, Weavers, Kuthampully, Palakkad, Sawdeswari, Kaikollar, Chaliyans

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to give an ethnographic account on the history of Devanga Chettiyars- a community of weavers, residing in mainly Kuthampully weaving village at Thrissur district and regions of Palakkad such as Chittor, Karimpuzha, Velangi, Nenmara etc., who were believed to be brought from Mysore by the Kochi Raja exclusively for weaving clothes to the members of the palace. It is also said that they have left their country during the persecution of Tipu Sultan. (C Achyutha Menon, 1995: 502) They are in a verge of extinction from their traditional job because of various reasons such as the intrusion of power looms, less profit, less earning while working harder etc. The paper mainly focuses on the ritual practices and origins of the community. The paper also examines the legend behind the community and how the community became weavers.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Textiles technology and handloom industry has been a major study theme taken by many academicians and scholars. Most of the writing includes the industrial profit, economic aspects and pros and cons on technological advances. Out of that Vijaya Ramaswamy¹ makes some differences as she traces the historical background and legends of weaving and she emphasis on the study of different communities in India which enriches the ancient tradition. Important authors who concentrate their work on handloom technology are M.Lakshmi Narasaiah and CH Thandava Krishnan,² Umesh Charan Patnaik and Aswini Kumar Mishra,³ Satya Narayan Dash⁴ and et.al.

III. RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is relevant in today's context because no study concentrating on this geographical area has been done earlier and due to the conquering of power loom in weaving sector and lack of profit from handloom weaving many traditional communities specialized in weaving are vanishing. This paper specifically looks at the life of the weavers as a community and their problems and possibilities in weaving by making use of ethnographic technique such as field work which includes participant observation and personal narratives.

IV. WEAVING COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH INDIA

Before going into the cultural aspects of Devanga community a brief mentioning on other weaving communities especially seen in south India should be done. The major communities are the 'Saliya' community of Andra and Tamil region which can be seen in Kerala as the 'Chaliyans' especially at Balaramapuram and Chennamangalam weaving villages, 'Kaikkolar' community- the most important weaving community of Tamil region and in Kerala this community mainly reside in Chittur and Thalappilli Thaluk and is popularly called as 'Kerala Mudali' or 'Mudaliyars', the 'Saurashtra' community mainly concentrated in the Madurai region and other minor communities such as 'Senigar' residing in the Karnataka region concentrating more in Bangalore, Mandya, Hassan and Chittadroog districts, 'Togatas' of Andra region, 'Mashroo' and 'Jamdani' who were Muslim weavers changed their hereditary profession because of losing their patronage from Naizam. Out of these Muslim weavers 'Saburu' and 'Ravuththar' still continue their tradition. The latter community can be seen in some parts of Kerala especially in Palakkad District. During the early times the 'Muhammadans' had concentrated more on weaving coloured clothes and had settled at Cheruthuruthi. (C Achyutha Menon, 1995: 499) 'Moopanmar' another community can only be found in Madurai region. (Vijaya Ramaswamy, 2013: 26-27)

V. DEVANGA CHETTIARS

It is believed that Devangas had migrated either from Andhra or Karnataka region. Inscriptions relating to them have been found in both these regions. They speak either Telugu or Kannada. Some of the residents of this community have been migrated to Tamil region and speak Tamil. (Ramaswamy, 2006: 13) It is speculated that this migration would have happened during the period of expansion under the Vijayanagar Empire. This migration was caused by pull factor where the Telugu ruling class offered enormous opportunities and their desire for economic advancement. The Devangas had spread across the places like Kollamgodu, Karimpuzha, Chittoor, Kuthampully etc. Out of all these places the most popular and populous Devanga community can be seen in Kerala is only at Kuthampully. The actual community name is Devanga Daiva Brahmins and the village they reside is mentioned as 'Theruvu'. Entering into Kuthampully Street at present, a sudden change in the attitude of people in the area is visible. Business is written all over the place. Almost all houses have modified porches that sell clothes which they weave. The whole village is separated by narrow alleys with neatly maintained small, medium and big houses on both sides. A transition as a result of the changes of time can be seen in the structures of houses itself. The entire village is a network of houses that are just the same as the 'agraharams' found in the Thrissur or Palakkad districts. The village itself has been sustaining for more than 400 years or more. During the initial times, there were only thatched huts and gradually it became tile houses, then became concrete one storey houses and now there are two storey houses with much decoration and pose. Such a change in the constructional pattern is not visible when we enter into the different settlement areas of Palakkad region as they still prefer weaving and have not adopted the power loom to sustain their life. These villages in Thrissur and Palakkad which was established about 400-500 years ago is allotted to the Devanga community by the king of Kochi.

The geographical significance of the village is much connected with the profession of the community. Out of many reasons the most important one is the availability of natural light which helps the weavers to weave clothes completing every microscopic detailing without any flaws. Second reason is the availability of water which the weaving process demands most. During the initial periods weavers used to prepare raw materials within the street. The dying process need much quantity of water and this was available from the Bharathapuzha River. Another reason is again connected with water availability. This time it is not for commercial purposes but for domestic purpose. There were more than 1000 families residing in Kuthampully *theruvu* which needs huge amount of fresh water for drinking and other purposes which was fulfilled by the river. The river could also be used for transportation of goods by the villagers. The weavers may have used river for importing raw materials from different places and also for exporting the woven fabrics to different regions.

VI. DEVANGAS – A GENERAL PROFILE

The people of this community believe that they are Brahmins but are non-vegetarian Brahmins who wear the sacred thread. This practice of non-vegetarianism has started from early periods onwards. The reason for consuming non-vegetarian food even though being Brahmins is that their profession demands it. During the initial times, all the raw materials are made in the street by themselves by hand. This process needs keen eyesight and for this, they started to include non-vegetarian foods in their culinary practice. Still, there are people who follow strict vegetarianism within the street. They used to give up non-vegetarian food on Monday, Saturday and on the days of *Amavasya* and festive days. (K S Singh, 2002: 366) Nowadays these practices have been loosening up and the people consume meat all days of the week except during festive times or during funeral rites. The people of Devanga community are religious and they consider temple as the most respected institution. The temples function under a Trust which has four or five members commonly known as 'Bharavahikal'. Kuthampully *theruvu* has two such temples and both temples have about four or five executive members. The deity of the two temples is a Goddess Shawdeshwari, who is said to be the incarnation of Goddess Durga or Kali. (K S Singh, 2002: 369) At Valangi near Nenmara, Devangapuram at Chittoor of Palakkad district has temples in the *theruvu* which is the same as of Kuthampully with the main deity as the Goddess Shawdeshwari, i.e. the Nellikulangara temple and Sri Ramalinga Shawdeshwari temple respectively. In Devangapuram we can also see a temple with Lord Ganesha as the main deity.

The President and the Secretary of the temple are known by the name 'Shettikaran/Chettikaran', 'Yajman', or 'Kilikaran'. The members of the temples are equally distributed. For instance, the whole *theruvu* has, say, 1000 families, each temple will have members of 500 each. These members are obliged to pay attention to what the temple Shettikaran says, and if not chastisement such as 'Thallivekkal'-one will be sent out from the community- is present. Punishments such as 'thallivekkal' are only seen during the older period. Nowadays the harshness has decreased and compromises are made in most cases. However, even now the members act in accordance with the rules and regulations of the temples which they refer to as 'Temple Chattakootukal'. The daily prayers in the temples are done twice a day i.e. in the morning and evening by the priest. He is a member of the Devanga community and has to follow vegetarianism. But it is said that currently they too consume non-vegetarian food in houses, not publically. The priest-'Poojari'- learns Vedas and mantras either traditionally as a family inheritance or later be taught by someone who knows. More than the mantras the people of the community give importance to the pleasing of their Devi. Once in three years, a Poojari from outside -well versed in Vedas and mantras- are brought to the *theruvu* to check whether the Goddess is pleased by the actions of the community members. If not, the expiation ceremony is conducted for the same. This practice can only be seen in Kuthampully and no other places continue this tradition. Priests perform the duties of a priest during the times of rituals and they are weavers or do some part-time job at the other times.

The Goddess Showdeshwari is worshiped annually at a festival, in which all members of the community take part. During the time of the festival, the community observes strict vegetarianism and suspends all weaving activities. There are three important festivals related to Devi. One is mostly celebrated during Vishu i.e. during the month of April. The next is during Thiruvathira i.e. during the

month of August or September. The third festival is the *pooja* which begins by bringing the Goddess from the sanctum (*ezhunellippu*). In Palakkad side they also celebrate one more festival, i.e. the Mariyamman Pongal and this is celebrated once in two years. After the *ezhunellippu*, the Goddess is then worshipped by pouring 'theertham' (holy water). Once the rituals are finished by pleasing (*prasadhikkuka*) the Goddess, Devi is brought back to the temple's sanctum (*kutiyrithuka*). This whole ceremony is done by the priest brought from outside or within the street and the ceremony is known as 'Daiva Pooja'. The next day after Daiva Pooja, there is the ceremony of sword balancing. The priest tries to balance two swords in his chest and cut the chest. The failure of balancing the sword is believed that the Devi is not pleased by the rituals and expiation is done. The pooja is mostly conducted during *Khumbha Masam* i.e. during the month of February. The pooja will be done on Tuesday which will be either on a full moon day or on the Tuesday nearest to full moon day. The reason to choose a full moon day for the ceremony is none other than for the access of moonlight at night. In the older days, there was no electricity or artificial lights and the 'ezhunellippu' ceremony was during the evening time. This will be continued till night and for the convenience of the believers, the rituals are conducted on full moon day. In present days the whole street is decorated with illuminative lights and decorations but the practice continues as it is. The rituals and ceremonies of the pooja related to the temple are for three days but are followed by cultural programs such as drama, skits, dances, songs, etc for a week. From the day of pooja till next Sunday nobody touches the loom and nobody will weave.

VII. ORIGIN OF THE COMMUNITY

It is believed that Devangas had migrated either from Andhra or Karnataka region. Inscriptions relating to them have been found in both these regions. They speak either Telugu or Kannada. Some of the residents of this community have been migrated to Tamil region and speak Tamil. It is speculated that this migration would have happened during the period of expansion under the Vijayanagar Empire. This migration was caused by pull factor were the Telugu ruling class offered enormous opportunities and their desire for economic advancement. The Devangas are also called as 'Jadaru' or 'Jada'⁷, 'Devara', 'Dera', 'Seniyan' and 'Sedan' At Coimbatore, in Tamil region, they are called 'Settukkarani'. (Edgar Thurston and K Rangachari, 1987: 155)

Devanga community also sanctifies their divine origin with the help of legends. Lord Shiva and Parvati Devi envisioned creation and immediately Parasakthi, along with Brahma, Vishnu and Kalarudra appeared before Shiva and he entrusted the duties of creation, protection, and destruction respectively. Brahma created the earth and also created Manu, the saint and told him to weave clothes for Devas and men. Manu continued to weave for some years and reached heaven through his selfless services which left no one to weave clothes. This made the rest of the world to wear clothes made with leaves and barks. They appealed to Lord Shiva through Brahma. Shiva thus created Devala Maharshi or 'man with divine grace' and made him weave clothes for all creation using the yarn from the looms of Vishnu's navel. Devala was created to weave clothes to cover the limbs and bodies of devas and men and thus the descendants are called by the name Devanga which means 'limbs of God' (Deva+angam). After getting the yarn from Vishnu Devala returned home. On the way, he was harassed by evil forces. Vishnu used his chakra to defeat the Asuras but failed as new Asuras appeared out of the blood of dead ones⁸. Devala appealed to Shiva for help and Parvati incarnated herself as Sowdeshwari and wage battle against the demons. To prevent the blood of Asuras to touch the ground Devi's vehicle lion spread out the tongue and drank the blood. In another version, the blood was prevented from touching the ground by Devi herself spreading her tongue and she swallowed all the blood. The blood of these Asuras ran out in five colours- black, red, green, white and yellow- and these colours were given by the goddess to Devala to colour the cloth. This was the first dye ever created. Later it is said that Shiva made Devala the King of Amodanagaram⁹. (Edgar Thurston and K Rangachari, 1987: 155) Reference to Devangas in the Tamil region comes from Chingaleput, Tanjavur, and South Arcot districts along with Salem and Coimbatore where they are numerous (Ramaswamy, 2006: 13) Devangas were an endogamous community in the earlier period but nowadays this trend has been loosened between Kannada and Telugu Devangas due to lack of brides. In Kerala, Devangas are distributed in Chittur, Nemmara, Kallancheri, Kuthampully, Karimpuzha areas of Palakkad and Thrissur Districts. Here they are also known as 'Chedan' and use the titles such as 'Chetty' or 'Chettiyar'. (K S Singh, 2002: 365) Compared to Chaliyan and Kaikkolan community the condition of Devangas was much better. Since the last 20 or 25 years, the well-to-do classes in Cochin began to go in for the clothes made by the Devangas especially of Kuthampully and Chittur. (C Achyutha Menon, 1995: 343) This had a great impact on the local industry and a Chetan weaver earns more than double the wages of a Chaliyan or Kaikkolan. (C Achyutha Menon, 1995: 343)

VIII. RITUALS AND PRACTICES

Extended and nuclear forms of families are found among the Devangas. Succession is passed on to the eldest son. The past practice of male inheritance has given way to equigeniture¹⁰. (Edgar Thurston and K Rangachari, 1987: 367) Women assist their men in spinning, starching, and weaving. There is no gender discrimination in weaving and they engage equally. Formal education is favored for both boys and girls and the community has women working in banks, and as lecturers in colleges. Both girl and boy child are accepted equally by society.

The Devanga community was an endogamous community during the initial time. But now there are inter-community marriages happening because of the decrease in the number of girls. This doesn't mean that they chose the bride or groom from other community. They only give and take bride or groom from within their theruvu or from the Kannada Devangas of Tamil Nadu. Inter-caste and inter-community marriage are also not rare but social sanction are less in those cases. The Kannada Devangas never engage in a marital relation with the Telugu Devangas of Tamil Nadu. Earlier they had such exchanges. Once a girl, who was married to a boy there, was murdered by the groom after a fight. After this incident, the Kannada and Telugu Devangas never had such relations even though they have similar culture and religious beliefs except for the difference in their language. In Devanga, child marriage- 'arumaikalyanam' prevailed during old times but is replaced by adult marriage. Ceremonies related to marriage are held at the bride's residence. The custom of bride-price is giving way to the dowry system in most of the Devanga community. In Kuthampully there

is no compulsory practice of dowry. There are exceptions to this in the Palakkad region. If the bride's family is capable to give away anything, they can give. But buying, exchanging and bargaining are not held in the theruvu. The ceremonies of the marriages are similar to that of Tamil Pattars. Monogamy is in practice. Widow-remarriage is also sanctioned by society.

The first ceremony is the engagement function in which the family of the groom and bride fix the marriage by engaging both. A man can marry his father's sister's daughter or mother's brother's daughter. Maternal uncle-niece marriages are also allowed. On the day of engagement, a date is fixed by tallying the horoscope of the bride and groom. The engagement function is known as '*nishchayam*'. Marriage is a two-day ceremony. The first day evening, a small feast is arranged in both the houses calling the members of the temple trust. The members came will ask the bride/groom whether they are ready to marry the groom/bride and the engagement is sanctioned officially by the temple authorities. The next day is the '*talikettu*' ceremony which starts with a small tea feast. A '*tali*' and '*minchi*' (toe ring) is tied by the groom to the bride on the correct '*muhurtham*' under the supervision of poojari and witness of family members. The bridegroom wears a dhoti and bride wears a saree. All the guests and relatives are feasted where strict vegetarianism is practiced. The bride is taken to the groom's house with a lighted lamp in her hand. The couple comes back to the house of the bride (*muraveedu*) after a day or two. (K S Singh, 2002: 367) The bride accompanies her husband to his house after staying in *muraveedu* for two-three days and is followed by '*manjal neeraattu*' where the bride and groom pour turmeric water to each other's head. The bride after the bath is brought to the kitchen where she is made to put her hand in all the spice containers. Here ends the wedding ceremony.

The pre-delivery ritual is performed by the community in the 7th or 9th month of pregnancy. The girl's family brings saree, fruits, and sweets for the function which is usually conducted in the husband's house. She is taken home for delivery. A ten-day pollution period was observed after delivery but in modern days such pollutions are not observed. It is only after ninety days the mother and child are allowed to go out.

Once a boy or a girl is born the naming ceremony-'*peridal*' and rice giving-'*choruoonu*' are conducted either at the mother's or father's house. In the initial days, it was conducted at the mother's house but it is organized anywhere as per convenience. Grandfather gives the child honey and gold. *Choruoonu* ceremony at present is conducted at famous temples of Kerala such as Pariyaanampetta temple, Chinakkathoor Temple, or even at Guruvayoor Temple. There is another ceremony called '*kaathukuthu kalyanam*' (here for both boy and girl) in which the child's ear is pierced and the earring offered by the mother's house is given to the child. This is done at father's house or rarely in pilgrim places like Pazhani within three years after birth and mostly done during the first year itself. The first hair cut of the child is also used to conduct as a grand ceremony, but gradually it was held according to the convenience of each family. The '*peridal*' was performed on the 28th day after the childbirth. The child was brought to the Temple of Lord Ganesha and the name was given officially. This custom also lost its importance as most of the time delivery occurs in hospitals and the name is given there itself.

Next major ceremony is the '*Upanayanam*' for the boy child. This is carried out at temples in which the sacred thread is worn by the child within his fifth birthday. The temple officials make needed arrangements for the function and strict vegetarianism is observed by the boy and his family during the function and feast after that.

Just as upanayanam is for boys, '*Thirandukalyanam*' is the exclusive function for girls. It is the puberty rite performed by the Devangas and also by all Hindu communities and the pollution lasts for eleven days. The girl is secluded in a hut made of coconut leaves built by girl's uncles. The girl is bathed with turmeric water for eleven days and made her sit in that hut itself. A purification bath is given on the 11th day and gives her sari, fruits, and sweets brought by maternal uncles in a '*thalam*' (flat plate). The girl is then dressed as a bride. A vegetarian feast is served for the relatives and neighbors. These eleven days this house will not take non-vegetarian food and the girl is not allowed to touch such food for one month. The leaves used to make the hut are later taken away to any vacant place and are burnt. During this time the girl is not allowed to enter into kitchen or weaving area. But once the *thirandukalyanam* is finished all her restrictions are taken off. There were restrictions during the monthly menstrual days in older times, but such pollution practices are not followed by the young generation.

The funeral ceremony which is also observed with strict vegetarianism. The community at Kuthampully has a cemetery near to the theruvu and in other areas, they use either a public cemetery or bury in their own house compound. Some take the body to 'Ivor madom' as per the last wish of the dead. The body is either buried or cremated which depends on how they died. If a person is died because of say, cancer then his body is cremated. If it is a natural death then the body is buried. The body is buried within 48 hours but in some cases, it will go more than that. A separation from everyone and everything including the non-vegetarian food and other luxury is observed for eleven days by the closest family member of the dead known as '*pela*'. No one from another house will eat from the house until the 11th day. On the 3rd day after the burial, a pooja is conducted under the supervision of temple authorities. On the 11th day, there is '*pelakazhikkal pooja*' where a purification prayer is conducted. All the rituals related to death are completed on this 11th day and no other rituals are observed like the 16th day -'*adiyanthiram*' or 41st day- '*nalpathionnu*' like any other communities. If the 11th day is a Tuesday or Saturday the day will be changed to 9th, 13th, or 15th day. The only condition is that it should be an odd number. Yearly remembrance of the dear one's is rare in this community. Some families remember the '*Naalu*' (birth sign) of the day that person died and give away a small feast to near ones. Some family goes to Kasi and does the '*Prithrutharpanam*' there. Once it is done then it is believed to be done for every year.

IX. CONCLUSION

By analyzing the different aspects of Devangas of Kerala we can identify new trends and prospects within the weaving sector. After the coming of power loom a new trend of loosening the rigidity of the community practices and complexity of their religious beliefs and practices, marriage customs, ceremonies and ways of life can be observed. This change is visible as a gradual process. The whole transition process was gradually taking place and the major reason for this is believed to be the coming of modern notions within the society. After the advent of power loom machines, prayers, customs and others activities which were exclusive to the community, started to lose its hold. The exclusive nature of 'weaving to weaving communities' is no longer visible. Now weaving is not reserved exclusively for the Chaliyans, Devangas or Kaikkolars etc. Anyone who got training can now operate the power loom and weave clothes. These created a drastic decrease in the earnings of the handloom weavers who were forced to find new jobs other than traditional weaving. This might result in the complete disappearance of a community solely brought to Kerala for weaving purposes. This is not a competition to handloom sector but it competes with the poor weavers and their existence because the technical change itself is highly profitable to the large scale industrialists while highly non-profitable to weavers. Another reason for this distress lies in the loss of export markets for dress materials and handloom fabrics. The monopoly of the handloom weavers by the communities specialized in it lost their significance and this has affected their settlements. Many are migrating from their villages to different places. This awful condition of handloom weavers had made the young generation to move away from their roots. Preferences for attaining professional degree is seen among the youngsters and even their parents encourage them for the same. As education level increase a number of beliefs and customs and superstitions also starts to diminish.

There has been a major shift in the fashion trend where cheap power loom products have been replaced by expensive, branded hand woven fabrics and ethnic designs. This revival of handloom sector is backed by some of the passionate designers, new entrepreneurs, government push and also support from Non-Governmental Offices. A 'Fab-India' boom which came in recent years is one such example for this revival. This can be seen as a new emerging possibility on the growth in handloom sector and in the increase of its demand. The major reason for this trend setter is branding of products. Brands are sprouting all over India and apart from Fab-India, online stores of hand woven fabrics mainly from Rajasthan and Bhagalpur, organizations cooperated with weavers of Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh etc, are making their efforts in promoting handloom textile industry. Government also plays some role in this promotion. Recently, Government launched the India Handloom Brand, which has tied up with major online shopping websites such as Flipkart, Amazon and et.al. To promote the handcrafted products and to give a new life to the skilled weavers is the major objective of the new enterprise initiated by the government.

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