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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CULTURE AND TRADITIONS OF KANIKKARS IN KERALA- AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

A tribe is defined as a group of people who live in inaccessible forest areas in hilly and remote areas, are members of the oldest racial group, speak a common dialect, practise primitive religions, work in primitive occupations, have nomadic lifestyles, a love of drinking and dancing, and have endogenous professional social organisations that are distinct from those of the surrounding population. Additionally, they go by the name Adivasi. Adi means original and Vasi means "inhabitant," thus original inhabitant is what is meant. Kerala is a homeland of numerous tribal communities. They have their own unique customs in every aspect of life. Kanis or Kanikkars are a prominent group among the tribals in Kerala mostly found in western parts of Trivandrum and Kollam districts. Kanikkars are wild but inoffensive hill tribes. They are the owners of land and their knowledge about nature became valuable. This paper tried to find out the features of culture and traditions of Kanikkars. They evolved a unique culture and life style, tradition and practices, which could be quite often referred to as backward and irrational by outsiders. Kanikkar have rituals and ceremonies of their own The tribal group who were identified as more isolated from wider community and who maintain distinctive cultural identity. They have a marginal degree of contact with other cultures.

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Introduction:-

The progress and all round development of a country or any place depend upon harnessing the skills and abilities of all sections of society regardless of caste, creed, religion and sex. Most Indians consider the tribal communities, which live in isolated and self-contained communities as wholly distinct from them culturally and ethnically. Tribe is a social group of simple kinds, the members of which speak a common dialect, have single authority, act together for common purposes and have a common name, a contiguous territory, a relatively uniform culture or way of life and a tradition of common descent. The Oxford Dictionary defines the term tribe as a racial group that is specifically linguistically united and has the custom of living as a community under one or more chiefs. It forms a small but important factor in the population of India. India then has the largest population They can be found in most parts of the country. Kerala is a homeland of a number of tribal communities. A large number of tribal people live in the forest and mountain regions of Western Ghat.¹ They have their own customs in every aspect of life. Kanikar is a prominent tribal group in Kerala, mainly found in the western part of Trivandrum and Kollam districts. No tribe has as rich a tradition of origin as the Kanikar² Kanikkar are characterized by a high standard of character, honesty and truthfulness. No tribe has such a wealth of traditions of origin as the kanikkars.

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Objectives of the Study:-

The present study is an attempt to unravel the Cultural peculiarity of Kanikkars with the following objectives:

1. To analyse the historical antiquity of the traditions and practices of Kanikkars.
2. To assess the importance of the cultural homogeneity of Kanikkars
3. To appraise the medicinal practices of Kaanikkars

Methodology:-

The study is largely based on the primary and secondary sources collected from various centres. A critical and analytical historical research methodology is used to explore the cultural traditions of kaanikkars. The collected sources endure a thorough system of external as well as internal criticism. The reliability of the sources were analyzed in a most detached and objective style.

The Kanikkars are evidently aborigines of the land who retreated to the hills in the face of the Dravidians first and then the most powerful Aryan colonists brought by Parasurama.³ They were called kanikkars by the sage Agasthya, signifying hereditary proprietors of land. Their spoken language exhibits features both of Malayalam and Tamil. The kanikkars have an allegiance to Travancore kingdom and they visit raja annually to present hill produce and in turn receive gift from the raja. The Kanikkar are a wild but inoffensive hill tribe found in south Travancore. Scheduled tribes differ from one another in racial traits, language, social organization, economy, religion, beliefs, culture, population etc.⁴ As per the Report on the Socio economic Status Scheduled Tribes Development Department, Government of Kerala (2013), there are 5872 Kanikkar families spread over 48 local bodies in 7 districts. As their population is 19455 the family size of kanikkar community is 3.31. The population consists of 9212 males and 10243 females. Therefore the sex ratio is 1000:1112 which is higher than the state average. Kanikkars community is mainly distributed in 8 Grama panchayaths in Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam districts.

Kanikkars are a prominent group among the tribal's in Kerala mostly found in the hills of southern part of Kerala. They are the largest number of tribal people in Kerala.⁵ They are honest and truthful and really the sons of the jungle. Kanikkars have the capacity to survive the challenges in the high terrains of deep forests and of the dangerous wild animals.⁶ Kanikkars are good trackers and fond of sports and other cultural activities. The word Kanikkar means hereditary proprietor of land.⁷ According to anthropologists and historians kanikkars are included in the category of Negritos. They are dark skinned, short and playrhine type. Due to outside contacts and the resulting metamorphosis many leptorhine or mesorhine individuals of above middle height also can be seen. In the earlier times the jungle kanikkars had no permanent abode.⁸ The settlements of Kanikkars were composed of low huts built of bamboo and reed. The settlements are generally situated away from the track of elephants on steep hill slopes, which are terraced and planted with useful trees. The villages of Kanikkars were known as Oorus. Each Ooru is headed by a muttukani (headman).⁹ Though the families are living in separate huts; the *Ooru* is an important unit in all matters and there is no room for play of individualistic tendencies. The villagers work jointly in clearing the jungle, burning debris, and in all the magico-religious ceremonies for securing a bountiful harvest. The headman wields more influence in the past and enjoys more perquisites than he does today. The office is hereditary and the oldest of the sons of the headman succeeds the uncle. The headman settles all the disputes and is the final authority in all matters, social, religious and agricultural. He presides over the council of elders. The headman has an executive officer called Vilikani. He is also known as Muthalper. There is also a medicine man (plathi) to remove evil influences and cure illness and diseases.¹⁰

According to the observations of the anthropologists of the Indian subcontinent, these tribes of Kerala state have developed ardent faith on spiritualism and religion. Almost all the tribes of Kerala follow religion, which is centered round Animism. They appease devils for calamities and sickness. Apart from this, there is a plethora of local gods and goddesses, whom majority of these tribes of Kerala revere and show immense respect and veneration. Worship of Amman or Goddess Kali and Ayyan or Ayyappan is quite common.¹¹ Kanikkars are usually worshippers of nature. The gods of Kanikkars are legion. The kanikkars presume that all about him are benevolent spirit that causes misery. The most important deities of Kanikkars are Padacha *Tampuran*, *Ellakallu Swami*, *Tamprankutty Amma (Bhadrakali)*, *Thiruvathupara Ayyan*, *150 Ayyanar (Sastas)*, *Kottur Tampuran*, etc. The name of *padacha tampuran* and others are muttered by them every morning as soon as this gets up towards off evil spirits. They also believed in Sun and moon and make offerings to them.¹² The Kanikkar talk a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam. At the different places the Kanikkars talk almost Malayalam.

A Kanikkaran can be distinguished with a peculiar accent. But now days due to modern education and acquaintance with the outside world the spoken language and accent of Kanikkar are also getting generalized.¹³ Traditional names of male members are the following. *Mallan, Mathan, Ayyappan, Vettiyan, Chitangan, Adichan, Pavan, Niliyan, Malan, etc.* the female members among the Kanikkar were usually given the following names. *Kanni, Echamma, Parappi, Milampi, Kali, Kaliamma, Pechi, etc.* At present new born are given names that are usually followed on the outside Hindu community. In the traditional set up a wife enjoys almost equal status with his husband inside a family. Due to the peculiarity of their daily life, they are compelled to live in a participating way. Both the male and female members work together in their agricultural fields and enjoy the gains and loss almost equally. But the senior male member in a family has some kind of a moral superiority and an unwritten code of responsibility to supervise the well being of his family.¹⁴ Polygamy is seldom seen among the Kanikkar. They have special customs related to marriage, puberty, child birth, pregnancy, funerals, etc.

The kanikkars celebrated traditional festivals twice in a year in the months of Minam and Kanni. On the morning of the celebration, every family takes rice and plantains to the dwelling of the head man. The kanikkars have wet land cultivation and raise double crops. They manure the land with leaves. They harvest their first crop in Chingam and their second crop in Makaram (Jan-Feb). They loosen the soil with traditional weapons in Minam and Kanni. Each man owns ten to fifteen cents of land. The paddy land lies in one block. They had taken to this method of cultivation cheerfully but are not contented with what they get by it stakes are driven along the margin of paddy flats. They are intended to scare away the wild animals which damage the crop. Besides paddy, the Kanikkars cultivate tapioca, thina, sesame, etc. The agricultural implements of the kanikkars are very crude and simple. The bill hook is used for clearing the jungle. The hoe is a primitive wooden implement with a hooked appearance. The axe and the bill hook are brought from the people of the plains. For carrying grain, they make baskets of reeds which they sling on their backs.

Another peculiarity of the tribal life is their holistic herbal medicine. Having lived in harmony with nature for centuries, the tribes have identified various herbs which can heal a variety of diseases.¹⁵ They have no side effects. This indigenous stream of herbal medicine gets increased attention now a days and more and more people, not only belonging to tribal community, but those from the outside civilized world, approach the tribal medical experts to take the medicine. Their approach to curing the disease not only includes taking the medicine, but also following some diets along with it. They may also suggest some changes in the lifestyle also depending on the type of diseases.¹⁶ The kanikkars followed the traditional practices of herbal medicine. The plathi (medicinemanager) is the repository of all medicinal knowledge. Snake bites are cured both by medicine and mantras. The poison stone is placed on the wound and it is believed that it sucks away the poison. It is also believed that the bite of the cobra can be cured only by the mantras. The plathi does not receive any remuneration. If he does, he cannot effectively cure the patient, it is believed.¹⁷

Traditionally a tribal community as an isolated group confined mostly to forests or to other remote areas away from the main stream populations.¹⁸ Forests remained their chief source of livelihood but at later stages of their development they switched over to settled agriculture and to other manual jobs. As their requirements were limited and the resources including land were abundant they evolved a system of property relation and ownership pattern different from that of non-tribal population.¹⁹ They also evolved a unique culture and life style, tradition and practices, which could be quite often referred to as backward and irrational by outsiders. The tribals on the socio-economic or quality of life indicators, it is true that tribal groups from Kerala will appear to be far better than many other states. But the tribals are compared with the rest of the Kerala society it is interesting that they left as the least developed within the state.

The socio economic position of most of the tribals residing in the scheduled area of the state is miserable; socially they are at the lowest rank of the society. Agriculture is predominant in the pattern of tribal economy. Most of them are depending mainly up on cheap daily wages, these all show the tribal population of Kerala is side lined than anybody else. Like other tribal communities kanikkars were one of the socially and educationally marginalised sections in Kerala. Most of the tribals above fifty years ago are illiterates. But in the younger generation have some progress in education though they are still backward compared to the general public. The tribal parents are sending their siblings to schools. But various hardships both social and economic pull them backward. The ratio of drop outs among tribals are still high. The settlements of kanikkars are in remote and thick forest areas. The pupil from these settlements has to walk three to ten kilo meters to reach the nearest school. In addition to that the threat from the wild animals and the lack of proper transportation facilities are the difficulties they face. For the promotion of

education among tribals number of special tribal schools was started by the Government. Apart from the schools, hostels for tribal students are also started by the government. But these institutions have drawbacks. Medical facilities are not available in to most of the tribal settlements. But kanikkars are known for their hereditary health preservation practices. They usually keep their houses and premises clean and lead a healthy life. But new food and life practices have brought them into clutches of diseases. On the whole their condition is not better in the modern world also.

Conclusion:-

Tribes are one of the dissimilar groups among the population of India. Since ancient times they remain deprived and generally they are considered as the lowest section of Indian society. The tribes remain disadvantaged due to various factors like geographical and cultural isolation, lack of proper health facilities, etc. Kanikkars are the one of the largest tribal community in Kerala. They are honest and truthful and really the sons of jungle. Kanikkars are capable of surviving the challenges of high altitudes with dense forests and dangerous wildlife. Kanikkars have a respectable cultural tradition and way of life. They have unique customs and traditions in every aspect and event of their lives. These customs vary slightly from region to region. The medical genetics practiced by the Kanikkars is gaining more importance today. Kanikkars manufactures medicines mainly from extracts of medicinal plants and other plants. Tribal communities in general and Kanikkars in particular, sought to protect our nature and natural resources. They have made countless contributions to the cultural traditions and cultural history of Kerala. The unique characters of tribal identity can be found and preserve properly. The preservation of the rich culture of the tribals would be the most important responsibility of the remaining social group.

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