

Ethnographic Notes on the Kattunaickens A Food Gathering Tribe of Wayanad, Kerala

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ABSTRACT Kattunaickens are a food gathering tribe of Wayanad district of Kerala state. At present their traditional occupation has changed to many other subsistence activities. They now live in a plural society which has great influence on their traditional life. Deforestation and other forest regulations has created a change in their economic structure which inversely affect the social set up of this community. The developmental programmes imparted by Government, the settlers influx are also responsible for the change in Kattunaicken style of life.

INTRODUCTION

Kattunaickens are one of the primitive food gathering communities of Kerala distributed mainly in the Wayanad district. According to 1981 Census their population is numbered as 8803. They subsist mainly on food gathering, minor forest produce collection and labour activities. Their language is a crude form of Kannada. The very name Kattunaicken in Malayalam denotes, 'The lords of the forest'. They have also been referred to as 'Thenukurumbas' particularly by other neighbouring tribal communities, since they are experts in the collection of honey. Most of the traditional Kattunaicken settlements are found distributed in the reserve forest.

SETTLEMENT PATTERN

In a Kattunaicken settlement the hutments are found clustered. Settlement is called '*Padi*' and a single hut in a settlement is called '*manai*'. Each *manai* is a single cottage rectangular in plan and its roof is thatched. A specific raised basement is absent for the huts. The floor inside the hut is mud plastered. Walls are made of bamboo splits and plastering is done rarely on these walls. Usually mud is used for

plastering. The height of these walls are about 2 metres but some of them are not more than 1.3 metres. Doors are also made of split bamboo.

Thatching is done on the split bamboo frame criss-cross in structure, laid on the ridge pole which is supported by the poles fixed in the centre of the hut. Thatching is done with a kind of grass collected from the forest. The space inside the hut is generally partitioned by erecting small screens made of bamboo splits. The outer room which is usually bigger is used for sleeping and the inner room which is smaller is used for cooking and storing. There is a separate hut for religious purpose called '*daivamani*' which is situated in the centre of the settlement.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Nuclear family is the minimum social and economic unit among Kattunaickens and it is composed of husband, wife and their unmarried children. As soon as the son marries he sets up a separate household in the settlement. They are patrilineal and patrilocal. Each son as he established his own family gradually acquires the necessary equipments for food gathering and other household articles. Therefore the question of inheriting the father's implements becomes redundant.

Kattunaickens do not have a clan system and kinship is reckoned through a minimal lineage division known as '*Jamma*'. They are unaware of the name and total number of these *jamma*. They use this term sometimes for the members of one cluster of hamlets.

The cluster of houses in a settlement is composed of a number of independent families

which are tied to each other through bonds of kinship and marital relations. The ties of kinship between the members of different families in a settlement is often more than one. The membership to a settlement is relatively fluid as the individuals or nuclear families are frequently migrating from a settlement to other.

The bonds of kinship and affinity among the families of the cluster are relatively closer as compared to other families living in the settlement. Whenever any migrant family comes to live in a settlement they tend to camp near such a cluster with whose members they have closer kinship ties.

Each Kattunaicken settlement have a headman who exercise control over the members of the settlements. This headman is known by the name '*modale*'. He is the supreme authority of that settlement. The position of *modale* is hereditary. After a *modale's* death his role will pass on to his eldest son or failing that to a younger brother. It is his duty to see that the festivals are celebrated annually and he has to collect and supply the resources required. The *modale* also plays the role of medicine man and when in trance, that of an oracle.

ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

The economic activities of Kattunaickens is a true reflection of the relationship of their culture with the eco-system. They are engaged in a variety of activities such as gathering for consumption, collection of minor forest products for trade, honey collection, plantation labour, day labour in the fields of landlords, plantation watchmen and as a mahouts under the forest departments.

Food gathering is one of the oldest means of their livelihood. They gather wild natural produce like edible fruits, leaves and roots which varies with season. There are several kinds of edible leaves and greens which are collected and cooked at home. During their wandering various kinds of berries from the forest are also consumed. Small animals and birds are trapped

and consumed. Bow and arrow are also used for hunting small animals.

'*Sappu*' is the local term used for leaves and '*hannu*' for fruits. The digging stick and the collecting basket are the main equipments used by them in gathering forest produces. These equipments are made of bamboo only.

Fishing is one of the oldest means of subsistence of the Kattunaickens. Those who are living on the banks of the rivers and valleys spend considerable time for fishing. Fishing by the method of poisoning and bailing out are the common techniques used. They also used hook and line for fishing.

Kattunaickens are also engaged in the collection of minor forest products like dammar, wax, soap nuts, turmeric and honey. In the past cardomom was collected and it was given to the local land lord. They are experts in the collection of honey. The products are collected and given to the co-operative societies or directly sold in the market.

DIVISION OF LABOUR

The division of labour in a Kattunaicken family is based on age and sex. The males usually do the hard work *viz.*, cutting of heavy logs, collection of minor forest produces and honey, while women do the household chores such as fetching water from the streams, cooking, collecting firewood, roots, fruits, rearing children and like that. Age is an important factor in the division of labour. Aged persons and small children are not required to do heavy work.

RELIGIOUS BELIEVES

Kattunaickens worship trees, rocks, hills, snakes and animals and even claimed origin from them. The most popular deities of them are '*masti*' and '*mala deivam*', the god of the hills. In addition they also worship '*thampuratti*', '*gulikan*', '*mariamma*', '*karimala thampuran*' and ancestral spirits. Kattunaickens attributes

to their gods the power to protect them from certain mortal diseases.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGES

Kattunaickens have a close interaction with ecology as, major part of their life activities revolve around the ecosystem they live in. The ecological equilibrium place a vital role in the socio-cultural stability of a food gathering-hunting group like Kattunaicken.

Now they live in the plural society of Wayanad which have a considerable change of cultural pattern in terms of the complexity of societies, basic subsistence activities and material culture. At present like most other tribal communities of Wayanad district, Kattunaickens are also exposed to the exogenous socio-economic influence of the region.

Now the landless Kattunaickens ekeout their livelihood by combining the traditional occupation of gathering with agricultural labour and other daily wage works. The destruction of forest has made their gathering activity difficult. Hence people are trying to participate in the agricultural system and other such labours as much as possible. Young boys below the age group of fifteen are hired by landlords such as Christians and high caste Hindus, as cowherds or domestic labourers at a low rate of wage.

Some of them have also engaged as mahouts under the forest department. Introduction of roads and public works in the tribal areas has given wage labour to some of them which results a change in their social setup.

The Kattunaickens as a community has become bilingual and they are found totally at ease in conversing freely in Malayalam, the language of the settlers. Certain political parties also could make sympathisers for their party and change among them is sudden and is affecting the very core of the cultural fabric of the society.

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