

Maritime Heritage And Cultural Continuity Of The Paravas In The Tiruchendur Taluk Of Tamil Nadu

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Citation: M. THANGARAJA, et.al (2024). Maritime Heritage And Cultural Continuity Of The Paravas In The Tiruchendur Taluk Of Tamil Nadu, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(6) 5683 - 5686

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i6.11597

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Maritime Heritage and Cultural background of the fishing communities of the Tiruchendur Taluk of this Indian subcontinent and more specifically of the Paravas who are one of the oldest sea communities. The paper discusses the theories of origin of the Paravas, their history of a maritime economy, religious practices, social organizations, the cultural continuity and changes studied as a result of Portuguese contact and Catholic conversion during the 16th century. The paper uses historical documents, missionary literature, oral history and ethnographic reports to demonstrate how the Paravas managed to maintain their identity throughout the centuries in response to the pressure of the political system, changes in the economy and religion. Their connection to the sea, pearl-diving economy, native worship, leadership by the community, family system, festivals, and their marriage rituals bring out a complicated cultural system, which has been influenced by geography, mythology and their colonial history. The discussion illustrates that the Paravas of Tiruchendur are one of the few Indian maritime cultures that have carried on with a continuous maritime practice since the Sangam era up to the current times. The article ends by stating that interdisciplinary studies on the topic of coastal heritage, maritime traditions, and socio-cultural development of indigenous Parava communities in South India remain necessary.

Key Words: Maritime Heritage, Paravas communities, Paravas, Tiruchendur Taluk, Portuguese, Tradition.

Introduction

The ancient maritime communities in South India are uniquely represented in the Tiruchendur Taluk which is located in the Gulf of Mannar, Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu, India. One of them is the Paravas who were one of the earliest seafaring communities, and they were historically specialized in fishing, pearl diving, salt-making, and coastal trade. Their uninterrupted settlement on the banks and shores of Tiruchendur, Manapad, Alanthalai, Kayalpattinam, and Veerapandianpattinam indicate strong attachment between the geography and the culture. Their cuisine, housing structure, rituals, social structure organisation and shared identity were all shaped by the sea and their faith, and religious beliefs. Tiruchendur was a coastal strip that was traditionally abundant in the sea resources, most especially pearls, once a global hub of sea trade, which attracted Arab merchants, Pandyan kings, colonialists, and missionaries. The Paravas who were in this crossroads formed their own cultural tradition to incorporate the Tamil tradition and the native worship and finally the Catholic Christian religion. This paper explores their Maritime Heritage and Cultural history chronologically and thematically focusing on continuity, adaptation, and identity.

Methodology

This work is based on a qualitative historical approach that involves the combination of literary, archival, ethnographic, and oral sources. The earlier sources of Tamil literature like the Sangam literature, medieval inscriptions, temple records and classical poems are explored to track the ancient mentions of the Paravas

and their maritime culture. The documents of the colonial times writings of Edgar Thurston, Portuguese missionary reports, travel reports, and reports on census of Madras Presidency at the beginning of the sixteenth century give evidence of the transformation of the community in the sixteenth century. The fieldwork visits to Tiruchendur, Manapad, Alanthalai and Veerapandianpattinam allowed seeing the current rituals, fishing techniques, and social life. Traditional beliefs, family traditions and cultural memory were documented through oral histories gathered on elders, fishers and church leaders. In the study, continuity and change in the Paravas community of Tiruchendur Taluk are combined with historical analysis and cultural anthropology to explain the continuity and change in the Paravas community.

History and Genesis of the Paravas

The origin of the Paravas They are mentioned in Sangam literature by the name "Parathavar" or "Paravar" or people of the sea. They are referred to in these literary works as expert sailors and pearl divers who worked in the employ of the ancient kings of the Pandya kingdom. Historians think that the Paravas were the early Dravidian maritime tribes, the homeland of which was along the Coromandel coast and the Gulf of Mannar. In his work on the ethnography, Edgar Thurston, proposed an interesting idea that the Paravas were the same as the biblical Parvaim, and the maritime tribes of King Solomon. Patrick A. and Rochu also stated that the Paravas were descendants of the lost tribes of Israel and that Ophir in the Bible referred to the area of Uvari and Kayalpattinam. Such theories are speculative, but show how old the reputation of the Paravas at sea was. They are linked by oral history of the community to the river Yamuna and the ancient kingdom of Oudh and their lineage to the Bharata dynasty, thus making them Kshatriyas. Other traditions locate the ancestral homeland in Uttarakosamangai of Ramanathapuram, a major early centre of the Pandyan. Their royal associations have been used by the adoption of symbolic emblems as embodied by the fish flag and the goddess Meenakshi symbol. Despite the difference in the origin theories, every piece of evidence acknowledges the Paravas as an ancient maritime community that has had a non-interrupted cultural presence in the Tiruchendur region.

Their Fishing and Pearl Diving Heritage

Livelihood of the Paravas had been living at the sea since centuries. Their essence was made out of fishing, pearl diving, and coastal navigation. The Gulf of Mannar which had once been renowned as the only area in the Indian subcontinent where pearls of high quality were produced offered viable economic prospects. History records that Paravas divers used to gather pearls as a form of paying royalty to Pandyan. They had an unparalleled understanding of tides and ocean ecology; winds and the movement of fish with the changing of seasons. Diving into the pearl was a risky yet glamorous task that demanded extremely high level of skills and boldness. Divers would go into the ocean using nose clips and weighted stones and collect oysters and then come out of the water. The Paravas possessed deep knowledge of tides, winds, and marine life, which helped them succeed in their maritime activities.. The maritime skills of the Paravas also drew them trade connections with the Arab traders, Sri Lanka ports and subsequent European traders. Their dominance in the pearling fields enabled them to be economically mighty in the area until they were affected externally by other forces that changed the business environment.

The Religious Life of the Paravas in Early Years

Prior to the coming of Christianity, the Paravas had an interesting culture of native worship which has a strong connection to the sea. They had Varuna, the deity of ocean as the main god. They also conducted rituals by burying the shark teeth in the sand since they thought that they had protection. Mariamman shrines were constructed by women at the borders of villages in order to protect the community against epidemics such as smallpox and cholera. Full moon and new moon days were regarded as holy days where fishing was halted and all the families spent time in feast, palm toddy, bathing in the sea and community building. There were sacred trees like the Punnai which were supposed to be the tree that harbored godly spirits. The rituals that aim at ensuring a good catch were to place shark horns or fish eggs outside the houses and pray. Women also adorned with Neithal flowers and Thazhampoo and attended to the boat ceremonies and net-throwing dances with men. The early Paravas were religious and their strongly rooted reliance in nature as well as their faith in supernatural forces that controlled the bounty of the sea was depicted in their religious life.

The Portuguese and Catholic Conversion

The 16th century was a revolutionary period in the Paravar history. As the Pandayan kingdom began to fall, the pearl trade was slowly taken over by the Arab traders and the Muslim rulers of Kayalpattinam, who levied heavy taxes on Paravas. The Paravas were oppressed both economically and politically and they needed the support of the Portuguese who had just set up trading posts by the coast. The Paravas were to become Catholic Christians in exchange of Portuguese military protection. In 1536, the South-Asia witnessed one of the most massive mass conversions in the history of South Asia in Manapadu, Alanthalai and villages around. Thousands of people converted to the new religion in the influence of the charisma of the missionaries like St. Francis Xavier, who came to these coastal villages to consolidate the new Christian communities. These changes came with conversion of very many things as new church institutions, European models of worship,

baptismal practices, Christian names, and new forms of community leadership came up. The Paravar fishery coast (now called Fishery Coast) was a major Catholic centre whose culture had close associations with Portugal and subsequently with Rome. However, even with these changes, a great number of native traditions remained that led to the special Indo-European religious mixture.

Religion and Ritual Life Among Modern Paravas

Despite the conversion, the Paravas did not give up all their maritime practices and made them flow perfectly well with the Catholic practices. Liturgical centres like Chinnapalli and Periyapalli became centres of activities of liturgies, novenas, processions along the coast and communal feasts at Manapadu, Azhantalai and Veerapandianpattinam. Prior to their voyage to the sea, fishermen would have their nets and boats blessed by sprinkling them with holy water. Saints like St. Anthony, Mother Mary and St. Sebastian had their feast days with processions along the coast with statues being paraded through the village to the shore. Rain prayers, good fish, or storm shelter were done at Gurusaveli where the worship symbols were integrated with the ancestral sea ceremonies. The current religious activities of the Paravas are still a living manifestation of syncretism, as it demonstrates that Christianity accommodated native cultural patterns instead of destroying them.

Paravas Culture and Social Life

The socio-cultural world of Paravas is a peaceful combination of the Tamil maritime culture of the past and the influence of centuries-old Catholicism. Their settlements, Manapadu, Alanthalai, Veerapandianpattinam, and Tiruchendur represent a coast culture topography based on wind, waves, and fishing seasons. The houses of paravas are normally situated along the sea and they have open verandas or semi open courtyards to facilitate the boat repair, net drying and community interactions. Traditionally, the building materials used like timber and decoration elements imported to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia show that they had maritime links. Food traditions testify to their reliance on the sea, and seafood is an indispensable element. However, rice, lentils and coconut based traditional Tamil dishes are a part of festivals and weddings. The Paravas society has been relatively egalitarian in terms of gender roles because women are economically engaged in net-making, fish processing and performing rituals in the community. In recent times, women from the Paravas community have made significant progress in education, and many of them have government jobs. Religious and social gatherings are crucial in women; hence, they ensure that tradition is passed. The European influence of the community is evident in the dress, music, and some architectural elements but their Tamil identity remains root based.

Festivals and Maritime Ceremonies

The cultural rhythm that links the religious devotion with the maritime life in the Paravas society is created by the festivals. An example is the Marymatha festival whereby it is characterized by grand processions, regional feasts, and offering to the sea. The Peruvizha which is celebrated every year has sea protection, thanksgiving on good catches, and prayers on safe journeys. Apart from the village of Paravas, the St. Sebastian festival is particularly significant in the villages of Paravas since he is believed to be the savior against the diseases and natural disasters. There are also other rituals such as blessing of boats, introducing new canoes to use and the first catch of the season. The rituals reinforce communal identity of the community, reinforce kinship bonds and focus on providing thanks to the sea which is a place of livelihood, and a spirit. The older indigenous features that have survived in festivals include floral displays, traditional drumming and coastal dances that are not influenced by the Europeans.

Family Traditions and Marriage Customs

The marriage between Paravas portrays Catholic sacrament and the traditional Tamil kinship format. Despite the centrality that church weddings have today, there are a few pre-Christian traditions that are still in place. The most unique one is the Vasapadi Marial ceremony, which is done when the bride marries another who is not part of the preferred kinship alliance structure which involves the brother of the father of the son. During this ceremony, the classic groom who is the symbolical rightful husband will block the real groom at the door to the bride home humorously. Using humorous conversation and ditties, he claims his alleged right to the bride and backs off in appreciation of a gold ring. The ceremony is a display of social humour, kinship, and the importance of the community in ensuring that there are symbolic links between families. It also shows the way in which Paravas did not lose their ancient Tamil identity despite their conversion to Christianity. Couple traditions, marriage feasts, community participation as well as dowry customs are also a reflection of Tamil and Catholic blend.

Community Structure, Social Organisation and Leadership

In ancient times the head of the Paravas was called Thalaivan, and the position was one of great respect and power. The Thalaivan organized the pearl diving activities, negotiated on the community issues with kings or colonialists, and resolved conflicts. Today also, the community still enjoys good intra-community leadership in terms of church committees, fishermen unions, panchayats in the villages and youth groups. Kinship ties, work ties and shared religious commitments all help in the preservation of social cohesion. Caste

stratifications are also not very strict in the Paravar community as in the inland Tamil castes mainly because of their professional reliance on group labour, like boating and net-making. The focus on social discipline is made under the form of collective decision-making and by complying with common practices.

Findings

- The paper establishes that the Paravas of Tiruchendur Taluk are among the oldest sea communities in South India. Their historical existence since the Sangam period to the current demonstrates the continuity of their interest in fishing, pearl diving, and coastal navigation.
- The study indicates that the Portuguese experience of encounter in the 16th century introduced significant socio-political and religious transformations. Although mass conversion to Catholicism changed the sense of community, a lot of the indigenous maritime traditions and culture still remained producing unique syncretic tradition.
- Though faced by external factors, the Paravas still uphold their ancient cultural practices like sea-related rituals, moon-day rituals and symbolic offerings. They have become part of the Christian practices and reflect cultural sustainability and flexibility.
- The results indicate that the Paravas are highly organized in terms of social organisation, which is grounded on cooperation. Traditional leadership positions such as the Thalaivan developed into modern day church committees and fishermen unions which strengthened unity, discipline and shared decision making.
- The research concludes that Paravas gender roles are more participatory as compared to most inland Tamil communities. Women are also involved in fish processing, net making, festival and oral tradition. Growing Tamil kinship values are maintained in a Christian context through marriage practices, such as Vasapadi Marial.

Conclusion

The socio-cultural history of the fishing community in Tiruchendur Taluk and specially of the Paravas exhibits an unparalleled continuity of maritime history since the ancient times up to the present day. This defined their worldview, economy, religion, and social practices as they were seafarers, pearl divers, and coastal settlers. The fusion of the native traditions and the incoming catholic influences led to the peculiarity of the cultural synthesis that is reflected in the way they worship, architecture, festivals, and the way they organize marriage. Even in the presence of political oppression, colonial invasions, economic hardships and environmental shifts, the Paravas retained their culture with amazing power. They are today one of the most colorful coastal communities in India which symbolizes centuries of maritime wisdom, spiritual richness and cultural harmony. Further study of their legacy is essential to document the history of the coastal Tamil Nadu as well as to comprehend the intricate cultural dynamics of maritime societies in South Asia.

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