

TRANSMISSION OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: ROLE OF WOMEN FOLK OF THOTTIYANAICKER COMMUNITY IN TAMILNADU

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Introduction

The term 'Traditional Culture and Folklore' is now known as 'Intangible Cultural Heritage'. UNESCO also prefers and uses the term 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' in the identical meaning as the 'Traditional culture and Folklore'. [Annotated Agenda, 1999: 27 – 30]. UNESCO is of the firm view that the role of women in transmission of intangible cultural heritage is of great significance to our world today. Intangible or immaterial cultural heritage concerns aspects of our lives which are essential to the continuity and expression of cultural identity. Women's involvement in various spheres of intangible cultural heritage is both central and vital. They include language, codes of ethic, behavioral patterns, value systems and religious beliefs. They are custodians of intangible cultural heritage, which encompasses, among other forms the performing arts including music, culinary and medicinal knowledge and the know-how for creation of material culture. In maintaining and passing on these forms of intangible cultural heritage, women often integrate new forms and techniques with the traditional, thereby creating culture. Such creativity of women is also essential for the continuity and revitalization of intangible cultural expressions [Ibid].

Thottiyanaicker Community in Tamil Nadu – An Introduction

Social exclusion includes voluntary exclusion also. Communities voluntarily excluding themselves used to live in isolation and seclusion and they will be generally called as secluded communities. Such communities living in isolation and seclusion would be generally minority communities either linguistic or religious and basically tribal in nature following primitive nature of cultural traits. Thottiyanaickers, living as a minority telugu speaking community in Tamilnadu, are also living in isolation and seclusion following their own peculiar and strange cultural traits which are primitive and tribal in nature [Singh K.S, 1996, Vol. VIII : 594]. They generally do not come out of their own cultural border and likewise do not allow other communities also to enter into their cultural arena [Ibid]. They are tending more towards living in seclusion mainly because of their anxiety to protect and continue their own peculiar and strange cultural traits. Such a continuous and voluntary exclusion for centuries together has created a strong vacuum in their over-all progress and development apart from causing high degree of ignorance and illiteracy [Buchanan, 1988, Vol.II : 329]. As a result of it the entire community is now lagging behind in all fronts and stands classified as a most backward class.

Position and Status of Womenfolk of Thottiyanaicker Community

The plight of women of this community is more pathetic. Illiteracy and ignorance rule them for centuries together [Singh K.S, 1996, Vol. VIII: 578]. Their community dictum itself forces them to stop all their pursuits outside once they attain puberty [Ibid]. It encourages child marriages also [Thurston 2013, Vol.7: 184]. Thus any kind of higher education is also denied to them. They are generally lacking in public awareness to its maximum level [Singh K.S, 1996, Vol. VIII: 594]. Such hurdles imposed by community itself has totally and badly affected the women empowerment of this community.

But inspite of all such handicaps the women folk of Thottiyanaicker community appear to be a treasure house of intangible cultural heritage. Generations together they exhibit rare qualities and remarkable talents in preserving and transmitting intangible cultural heritage. In a male dominated community these women folk also play vital roles and excel in preserving and transmitting intangible cultural heritage ofcourse not aware of its significance. This article traces out the multi facet qualities and talents exhibited by women folk of the Thottiyanaickur community in continuing and transmitting intangible cultural heritage, brings out its significance and points out the necessity to enhance their awareness so that they can continue the performance more effectively.

Peculiar Socio - Cultural Traits Followed by the Community

As already pointed out people of Thottiyanaicker community are still maintaining their own peculiar socio-cultural traits which are primitive and tribal in nature which are morefully described hereunder and continued in the next para also. None of the other communities living in Tamilnadu is following these peculiar cultural practices. Even today, irrespective of their social and economical status, they are conducting marriages in a common open place called 'Mandhai' by putting up temporary pandals using fresh green leaves of prescribed trees usually fetched from hillocks and forests [Thurston 2013, Vol.7 : 192]. When a girl attains puberty, she is kept away in the outskirts of the village in a specially erected temporary hut for about 14 days [Ibid: 191]. After completing these 14 days only she is brought back to her home after performing certain purifying ceremonies and rituals. Thottiyanaicker community consists of several clans. But all of them would consider Jakkamma and Bommakka as their common ancestors [Ibid: 184]. They were once cattle-rearers and perished by committing 'sati'. Thottiyanaickers worship their ancestors by organizing 'Malai' festivals performing peculiar religious ceremonies and rituals [Ibid: 194]. As a concluding ceremony "Eruthottam" is conducted in which sacred bulls and oxen are allowed to run freely upto a point. The bull or oxen which crosses the winning mark first is honoured as the king bull. Much reverence is shown to such sacred king bulls [Ibid: 195].

Apart from worshiping their common ancestors Jakkamma and Bommakka, each clan used to worship their own family deities separately [Ibid: 185]. These family deities were also once cattle-rearers who perished committing Sati. Distinct religious ceremonies and rituals are conducted recalling the story of ethno-historical accounts of each clan and the story of family deity of each clan. People of Thottiyanaicker community used to take part also in the worship of village deities such as Mariamma, Muthalamma, Kaliamma etc but of

course following their own religious practices and performing their own cultural activities. Thottiyanaickers of Tamilnadu celebrate 'Mattu Pongal' festival in a peculiar way showing reverence and honour to bulls, oxen and sacred cows. On the previous day itself elders of this community used to go into hillocks and forests and collect the medicinal shrubs throughout night. On return in the morning they used to prepare the medicine with the help of female children and then administer the same separately to bull-calf and cow-calf kept in the cattle shed always chanting mantras. Whenever rain fails and drought is set in women folk of Thottiyanaicker community used to organize prayers for Rain-God. Forming a circle, they used to perform Kummi and sing prayer songs in Telugu called 'Gebbiyyala' songs. 'Gebbi' means dark clouds pregnant with rain drops and 'Iyyala' means to be given. Meaning of the prayer is people to be gifted with rain. Whenever death occurs people who gather are allowed to pay homage till body is lifted for the purpose of performing rituals. Once the body is lifted for the purpose of performing rituals, blood relations alone take charge of the body till all parts of rituals are completed. On 16th day also the near relatives only gather again and create a sand image of the dead person to which rituals paying homage are performed.

Role of Womenfolk of Thottiyanaicker Community in Continuing and Transmitting Intangible Cultural Heritage

During all the occasions above narrated it may appear that men alone are playing dominant role in performing the ceremonies and religious rituals. But the women folk of the community also would play a significant role by way of singing songs continuously and tirelessly throughout the performance of such ceremonies and rituals always explaining their meaning, purpose and significance. These songs, if closely followed, would reveal the fact that they are actually treasure house of intangible cultural heritage. Let us explain each and every occasion so that the significance of such songs may be felt and realised.

(i) Marriage Songs

Marriage ceremonies of this community start with the arrival of brides' party in the outskirts of the village of bridegroom whose party will thereafter go in a mass to greet them. There will be veteran women in both the parties who are well versed in singing marriage songs. Standing face to face they will start enquiries by way of songs in Telugu as to their respective clans, sub-divisions and other particulars. They will ask for their respective ethno-historical accounts, place of origin, king or chieftain under whom they served etc. Astonishingly these songs will bring back the historical background of Vijayanagar empire, its army, role of Nayak kings and Poligars of this community. One has to wonder to see such remarkable remembrance of historical events in the minds of illiterate women folk of this community. On satisfaction of identify and suitability both the parties in unison will lead the bride in bullock saddle to her marriage pandal for further ceremonies [Nelson J.H, 2019, Pt-11: 82].

Next important item of marriage ceremony is near relatives of both the parties affixing fresh cow-milk on the forehead of bride and bridegroom separately. Standing behind bride and bridegroom these ladies start singing songs in praise of them and in praise

of the cows which gave the milk. They will trace out the history as to how sacred cows were born and gifted to ancestors of bride and bridegroom. Through songs they will invite the community people gathered there and the community elders who remain in their respective cow-sheds called "Doddies" to come and administer milk on the couples. These songs usually equate the couple to that of puranic Rama and Sita to whom also it is believed that this ceremony was performed.

When further marriage ceremonies are conducted as if the bridegroom is going for a hunting, these songs will trace out the art of hunting and valour of the bridegroom shown in hunting. When ceremonies are conducted as if the bridegroom is engaged in cattle rearing these songs will trace out the history and origin of different kinds of cattles, distinct qualities of each type of cattle, art of cattle rearing and the techniques adopted by the bridegroom in cattle rearing. When ceremonies are conducted as if the bridegroom is engaged in agriculture, these songs will trace out the origin and art of agriculture, types of agriculture and the skills of bridegroom shown in doing agriculture. Finally when ceremonies are done as if the bridegroom is going for warfare, these songs will trace out the art of organizing warfare, techniques adopted in battlefields and the valour shown by the bridegroom in the battle field.

After completing all other ceremonies the main ceremony of bridegroom adorning bride with "Thali" [mangala sutra]. will be conducted. At that time these songs will invoke Gods to shower blessings on the couple narrating the art of living together, adjusting with members of both the families, continuing progeny by begetting children, up and downs to be faced in life, charity to be shown in life, ways and means of leading a successful life etc. Here also the couples are imagined as Rama and Sita.

Once this important ceremony of tying 'Thali' is over, the sisters and paternal aunts of bridegroom will bring marriage 'Sheer' [prized articles]. The event of paternal aunts bringing marriage sheer will be an affair of comedy. Pretending to be coming with more valuable articles they will bring only betel leaves and nuts that too performing a peculiar dance in tune with the music of Urumi. This dance is called 'Athalu Aatlu' in Telugu meaning paternal aunts dance. This item of ceremony is an example to show that the women folk of Thottiyanaicker community is well versed not only in singing but also in performing folk dance suiting to the occasion.

After conclusion of all the ceremonies and rituals the newly married couple will be led to their own home with all gale and geity. Men will perform Devarattam while the ladies used to sing "Suba Mangala" songs. These songs will invoke God and ancestors to shower blessings on the newly married couple. The songs will pray for a peaceful and fruitful life to the couple. These songs will be concluded wishing mangalam to all who participated in the marriage function.

(ii) Puberty Ceremony Songs

After completing 14 days residing in a temporary hut, the girl who attained puberty will be lead first to Mandhai, a common place, accompanied by elderly women who used to sing ceremonial songs praying God to purify the girl. On reaching Mandahi, she will be

bathed and adorned with new cloths. Ladies themselves will perform certain purifying ceremonies always singing songs explaining the meaning, purpose and significance of those ceremonies. Then they will bring the girl to her home singing songs seeking blessings for a happy and prosperous life to the girl and her family.

(iii) Worshipping Ancestors – Malai Festival Songs

Malai Festival is nothing but worship of ancestral Gods of the community, Jakkamma and Bommakka. From the moment religious ceremonies and rituals start the women folk of this community will start singing songs in Telugu explaining each and every ceremony and ritual, their meaning, purpose and significance. Through these songs they will trace out the history and origin of their ancestral Gods and their virtuous qualities. These songs will narrate how Jakkamma and Bommakka reared sacred cattles, how they preached tenets during their life time and finally how they perished committing Sati. When 'Eruthottam' is conducted as a concluding ceremony, these women folk used to greet each and every head of mandhais singing songs praising their origin and meritorious qualities and also of their bulls and oxen. They will conclude the songs showering honours on king bull that is the winning bull or oxen and this will conclude the festival also.

(iv) Songs on Family Deities

As already said each clan of this community will have its own family deity. During the worship of such family deities the ladies used to sing songs explaining the origin and glory of particular clan. In this way they will bring out the story and ethno-historical accounts of each clan. Then they will trace out the history and origin of family deity of each clan always praising their virtuous life and tenets preached. They will glorify the death of such family deities who perished committing Sati.

(v) Songs in Praise of Village Deities

While participating in the worship of village deities Mariamma, Muthalamma, Kaliamma etc., the women folk of this community used to organise a form of dance called 'Kummi' and sing songs called 'Kummi pattu'. Moving in a circle they will clap hands and dance elegantly according to the musical sound created by Kummi Songs which will be a feast to see, hear and enjoy. The songs will be devotional in nature invoking blessings of those village deities for healthy and infection free life for all.

(vi) Songs During Celebration of Mattu Pongal

After bringing rare medicinal shrubs, the elders of this community will prepare the medicine with the help of female children to be administered to bull and cow-calfs. During such preparation of medicine also ladies of this community will sing songs tracing out the origin and rare qualities of those medicinal shrubs and their curing effects. Through songs they will invoke blessings of 'Ambothi Krishna' for healthy cattles multiplying into several cattle-sheds called Doddies. After administering medicine holy water will be sprinkled on entire cattle and they will be allowed to go for a free running called 'Jalli' in Telugu.

(vii) Gebbiyyala [Rain-God] Songs

Ladies of Thottiyanaicker community will assemble during nights and forming a circle, they will perform 'Kummi' dance by clapping hands and reciting Gebbiyyala songs praying for copious rain. In a melodious voice they will persuade rain-god to show mercy. These songs and performance of Kummi dance will be continued throughout night until rain starts showering on them.

(viii) Death and Funeral Songs

Once the dead body is lifted for performing rituals, the women folk of this community will start reciting funeral songs explaining the rituals performed until the body is finally lifted for cremation. During 16th day funeral ceremonies also they will recite funeral songs recalling the meritorious life of that person and wishing his 'Atma' to remain in peace in the abode of heaven.

(ix) Devarattam - A Rare Performing Art of the Community

In all the occasions of festivals, celebrations, functions, ceremonies and rituals the entire community uses only the musical instrument called 'Urumi' [Muthiah.O.2003]. In fact the music produced by urumi is their universal music. To the tune of this music usually the gents of this community will nicely perform a dance called Devarattam. This Devarattam is performed in all auspicious occasions except in case of death or funeral ceremonies [Ibid]. Now a days the ladies of this community also perform this Devaratam exhibiting their elegance in dancing. Realising that such changes are inevitable, the community is hesitantly accepting Devaratam performed by womenfolk also 'Devarattam' performed by women folk of this community will be really a treat to watch.

Problems of Translation and Documentation

Since the family language of Thottiyanaicker community is Telugu, their songs of festivals, celebrations, ceremonies and rituals all remain in Telugu. They can only speak or sing in Telugu but cannot read or write in Telugu. A thorough knowledge of Telugu especially medieval Telugu seems to be a must to have a full grasp of the songs, Except active help of experts in Telugu language and medieval history of Deccan it may not be possible for an effective translation or documentation either in Tamil or in English. Most backwardness of the community in all the fronts and its tendency to live in voluntary seclusion are proving further hurdles to have any fruitful translation or documentation. Ignorance and illiteracy prevailing among this community especially among the women folk proves to be major hurdles. Centuries ago Buchanan also lamented that due to total ignorance exhibited by this community he was not able to bring out any documentation about them [Buchanan, 1988, Vol.2 : 329]. As a result, it appears that most part of a valuable intangible cultural heritage exhibited by the womenfolk of this community remains untapped and not yet adapted to any kind of translation and documentation. Where there is no way for translation or documentation there is no way for effective preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

Conclusion

Apparently the women folk of Thottiyanaicker community have an inadequate awareness of the significance of their intangible cultural knowledge, skills and practices. Hence there is a need to promote appreciation of their principal role in the transmission, renewal or recreation of intangible cultural heritage among communities in which they live. Any research on this aspect should highlight the state's role in developing future measures aimed to heighten awareness among women of their contribution to the continuity and enriching cultural heritage. Particular attention should be given to ways and means to integrate women transmitting intangible cultural heritage in all aspects of any future measures such as research and training. The implementation of such projects and networks within local community environment should be central focus, so as to achieve desired results.

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