

Certain Strategies Adopted by the ‘Kuravar’ / ‘Kurru People’ on Claiming the Original Ethnic Identity

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ABSTRACT

The ‘Kuravar’/ ‘Kurru’, being one of the indigenous ethnoses / ethnic group, inhabit the state of Tamil Nadu since time immemorial. In Ancient Thamizhagam, the people of this ethnos / ethnic group had the ‘Kurinji Thinai’ (comprising of hills and the adjoining arenas) as their traditional bio-geographic zone. At present, the ‘Kuravar’ / ‘Kurru People’ try their level best to retain their ethnic identity by claiming themselves as ‘Kuravar’ (the shortened form of ‘Kunravar’ (Lit. “People of hillock”) by their exonym rather than as ‘Kurru’ (which could be traced back to the Proto – Dravidian nominal root * ‘Kunru’ by their endonym. And ‘they’ get displaced from their original habitat of hilly terrains long time ago, by the later settlers from the nearby plains due to certain socio-cultural and socio-political pressures.

Despite these pressures exerted on them, the ‘Naanjil Naattu Kuravar’ (Lit. “Kuravar (people) of Naanjil Naadu”) are found to observe the ritual re-enactment of ‘Kuravar Padukalam’ (Lit. “Martyrdom of Kuravar (People)”) as part of the ‘Valli Kalyaanam’ (Lit. “Marriage (Ceremony) of ‘Valli’ (with ‘Murugan’) held at the temple premises of Kumarakovil (near Thackalay enroute of Nagarcoil to Tiruvanathapuram). On the line of this ritual re-enactment, the ‘Kuravar’/‘Kurru People’ inhabiting the various regions of Tamil Nadu, in recent years, began the ritual observance of re-enacting certain aspects of ‘Valli Kalyaanam’ in and around the temple premises of ‘Murugan’ located in places such as Palani (of Dindigal District,) Swamimalai (of Kumbakonam District), Thiruchendur (of Thoothukudi District), Kunrathur (of Thiruvallur District), and Vada Pudhupatti (of Theni District).

In this paper, an attempt is made to present and highlight certain strategies adopted by the ‘Kuravar’/ ‘Kurru People’ quite recently so as to re-establish the ritual connections of this ethnic community with reference to the cultural observance of ‘Valli Kalyaanam’.

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KEYWORDS: ‘Kuravar’/Kunravar’ – ‘Ethnos’/‘Ethnic Group’ – Exonym – Endonym – ‘Kuravar’ / ‘Kurru People’ – ‘Kurinji Thinai’ – Kuravar Padukalam’ – ‘Valli Kalyaanam’ – Original Ethnic Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

The ‘Kuravar’ / ‘Kurru People’ belong to one of the indigenous ethnos / ethnic group who inhabit the state of Tamil Nadu since time immemorial. In the Ancient Thamizhagam, the people of this ethnic entity had the ‘Kurinji Thinai’¹ as their traditional bio-geographic zone comprising of hills and the adjoining arenas. The indigenous people of this community try their level best to retain their original ethnic identity by claiming themselves by their exonym, ‘Kuravar’ (the shortened form of ‘Kunravar’ [Lit. “People of hillocks”]) rather than by their endonym, Kurru although they get displaced from their original habitat

of hilly terrain long time ago by the later settlers, due to certain socio-cultural and socio-political pressures².

In the domain of ‘Religion’, the ‘Kuravar’ / ‘Kurru People’ reckon that ‘Valli’, the consort of their ancestral deity ‘Saeyan’ alias ‘Murugan’ originally belonged to their community as its adopted daughter. And obviously, the ‘Kuravar’/‘Kurru People’ feel proud of themselves as the ‘affinal Kindreds’ having the marital relationship with ‘Murugan’, by way of his pre-nuptial marriage, ‘Kalavu’ with ‘Valli’, the

adopted daughter of 'Nambiraajan' who himself belongs to the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru Community'.

The 'Kuravar', / 'Kurru People' of 'Naanjil Naadu' (the present day Nagercoil region) legacy observe the ritual re-enactment of 'Kuravar Padukalam' (Lit. Martyrdom of Kuravar") annually at Kumarakovil (a sacred shrine of 'Murugan') located near Thackalay, enroute of Nagercoil to Thiruvananthapuram³. On the line of this ritual observance, in recent years, the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' inhabiting the various regions of Tamil Nadu began to re-enact certain phases of the ritual observance 'Valli Kalyanam' (Lit. "Marriage(Ceremony) of 'Valli' (with 'Murugan')) in and around the temple premises of 'Murugan' situated in places such as Palani (of Dindigul district), Swamimalai (of Kumbakonam District), Thiruchendur (Thoothukudi District), Kunrathur (of Thiruvallur District) and Vada Pudhupatti (of Theni District)

In this paper, an attempt is made to present and highlight certain strategies adopted by the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' quite recently so as to re-establish the ritual connections of their community with the cultural observance of 'Valli Kalyanam'.

II. The Cultural Survivals of Hereditary Rights of 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' vested in worshipping as gleaned from Their Clan Names :-

Various kinds of hereditary rights have once vested with the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' in deifying their ancestral deity 'Saeyan' alias 'Murugan'. At present, these hereditary rights such as 'Rights to decorate the idol (with draperies, flowers, garlands, costumes)', 'Right to sing the devotional hymns in front of the idol', 'Rights to bear the ritual offerings (of various kinds) to the idol over a bedecked pole', 'Rights to bath the idol with water, milk, tender coconut water, etc.', 'Rights to provide the swing service to the idol', 'Rights to organize the temple car service to the idol' remain only as names of their clans, namely, 'Saaththappaadi', 'Maenappaadi', 'Kaavadi', 'Maelooththan' / 'Maenrukkuththi', 'Vuyaali', 'Bandi' respectively, bringing the nostalgic moments of their yesteryears⁴.

III. Masking Their Own Original Identity by the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' due to certain Socio-cultural & Socio-political Pressures :-

The British Colonial regime in India had enforced a 'draconian Act' by the name 'Criminal Tribes Act' (abbreviated, usually as the 'CT Act' towards the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' in order to snatch away the monopoly of salt trade enjoyed by the 'Uppu Kuravar' (Lit. "Kuravar engaged in salt trade"), an

occupational sub-sect of Kuravar prevailed among the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru people'⁵. And this enactment of CT Act had been carried out by the British Colonial rule with the ulterior motive of branding the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' and thereby belittling them as the 'born criminals', on the one hand and masking their antiquity, pride and glory as the indigenous people of 'Kuringi Thinai' (the bio-graphic zone of hilly terrains), on the other hand.

Despite the repeal of this 'anti-people Act' on the onset of Indian Independence, it gets replaced unfortunately by another 'equi-potential anti-people Act' by the name of 'Habitual Offenders Act'. Consequently, the ethnic people 'Kurru' began to mask their original identity of ethnonym, 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru' and the indigenous speech of their own called variedly as 'Kora Bhaasha', 'Kuluva Paechchu', 'Kurru Vaaththaa' in front of 'outsiders' (i.e., 'People of other ethnic groups')⁶. And this tendency has paved the way for the inclusion of only a section of 'Kurru People' under the 'Category of Scheduled Tribes' (as 'Malekkuravan') and another section of 'Kurru People' under the 'Category of Most Backward Class' and or the 'Denotified Communities' (as 26 sub-sects of 'Koravar')⁷; and the remaining 'Kurru people' are included under the 'Category of Backward Class' (as Yerukala') (Yerukkula'). Thus, it goes without saying that such sort of non-considerate and illogical placements of a single ethnos under all the existing 'State List of (Community) Reservation' (namely. STs, SCs, MBCs, DNCs & BCs) has lead into the emergence of 'Social Injustice'⁸.

In their earnest attempt to get rid of the unwanted naming of their ethnic entity, as the 'DNCs', that too with an unwarranted tag of 'Habitual Offenders', a few sections of the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' have indulged in the 'Fake & Bogus Claim of ST status' by claiming one of the following names of ST category, viz., 'Kurumans' (claiming as the 'shortened form' of 'Kurru Mansulu' (Lit. "Kurru Persons"), 'Kattunayakan' (Claiming as the 'alternate Form' of 'Vettaikkaran'), 'Irular' (Claiming as the Variant form' of 'Paamu Kurru' / 'Paambu Pidaaran' (Lit. "Snake Charmer") in favour of them.

When the Union Government of India has initiated certain steps to constitute of 'Commission' for recognizing the various ethnoses from the existing stock of 'Nomadic Communities' as the 'Nomadic Tribes' (NTs), 'Semi-nomadic Tribes' (SNTs), 'Denotified Tribes (DNTs), under the Chairmanship of Shri. Bikhu Ramji Idate (as the 'Idate Commission'), the people of this ethnos have also

tried to the maximum extent to find a place under this specified commission⁹.

Certain habitats of 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru Peole' located nearby the hilly terrains in some parts of Tamil Nadu (say, for instance, 'Shencottah' at the Thirunelveli district, 'Kumarakovil' at the Kanyakumari district, Thiruvannamalai at the Thiruvannamalai District) vouch for their forced eviction from their original habitats of nearby hilly terrains by the later settlers who came from the plains¹⁰.

IV. Reclaiming the Original Identity Strategies Adopted by the 'Kuravas' / 'Kurru People':-

On the line of observance of ritual re-enactment of 'Kuravar Padukalam' by the 'Naanjil Naattu Kuravar' (Lit. "Kuravar (people) of 'Naanjil Naadu'") at Kumarakovil of Kanyakumari District, the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' inhabiting some parts of Tamil Nadu have begun adopting the strategy of ritual re-enactment of certain phases of 'Valli Kalyanam' in the recent years. For instance, the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' residing in and around Palani (of Dindigul District) include in the ritual observance of 'Seer Koduththal' (Lit. "Gifting the Utilitarian Materials from maternal household [to 'Valli']") as 'Thaay Veettu Seer' (Lit. "Oblation of utilitarian materials from maternal household"). During this specific ritual observance a troupe of Kuravar engaged in communal dancing by wearing the traditional attire such as 'leaf apron', 'feather', 'cowrie shells' as to mimic the Sangam Age, 'Kunrak Kuravar'.

For the Past 8 years, the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' inhabiting in and around Thiruvallur observe 'Perumuka Vizhaa' annually during the Tamil Month Chiththirai at the Murugan temple of Kunrathur located near Thiruvallur. During this ritual observance a set of utilitarian materials were given as 'Thaay Veettu Seer' by undertaking a procession from the temple premises of 'Thirunageswarar' to the Murugan temple at Kunrathur.

At the famous temple of Murugan of Swamimalai (of Kumbakonam District), a similar ritual observance of gifting the utilitarian materials as 'Thaay Veettu Seer' is observed for the last 4 years during the Tamil month of Panguni by the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People', as part of the ritual re-enactment of 'Valli Kalyanam'. Interestingly, in the 'Flex Board' erected with reference to this religious festival, the clan names 'Valli' (as 'Maelappaadi')¹¹ and 'Murugan' (as 'Kaavadi') are also mentioned. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that in this 'Flex Board' 'Murugan' is referred to as 'Kura vaedar' (Lit. "Hunter of Kuravar Community") And the

particular ritual re-enactment was observed in this year on 28th March, 2024.

On 24th March, 2024 the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' have organized the observance of 'Pre-nuptial Marriage Ceremony', 'Kalavu' between 'Valli' and 'Murugan' as 'Thaol Maalai Maatrum Nigazhvu' (Lit. "The Event of exchange of garlands"), by duely contacting, negotiating, and convincing the temple authorities of Thiruchendur. Later, the gifting of 'Thaay Veettu Seer' was also observed inside the temple premises wherein both the bridegroom and bride's sides were represented by two temple priests, along with the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People'. And this was followed by the 'Solomnizing of Formal Marriage between 'Valli' and 'Murugan'. In order to showcase to the devotees thronging the temple that these ritual re-enactments were observed by the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru Peole', a troupe of this community people fashioned themselves as 'Murugan', 'Valli', 'Vinayaka', Siva', 'Parvati, and other associated characters by due make-up and requisite props.

A noteworthy point, in this juncture, is that only in this current year (i.e., 5th year) the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' could organize the observance of this ritual re-enactment with the consent of temple authorities concernment (of course, by remitting a due amount to this effect)¹².

Quite recently, the Government of Tamil Nadu has constructed a hamlet by the name 'Kuravan Colony' near Vada Pudhupatti, adjacent to Ammapatti of Theni district so as to provide households to the 'Kuravar People' (along with another indigenous community)¹³. In the vicinity of this hamlet, the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' have erected a new shrine for the divine consorts, 'Valli' and 'Murugan' atop a huge boulder noted locally as 'Thaen Paarai' (Lit. "Rock with honey comb") by the local people. On 11th April, 2024, 'Kudamuzhukku' (Lit. "[Ritual] Bathing"), the consecration ceremony was conducted at this temple, along with ceremonial offering of 'honey', 'balls of sweetend millet flour', 'baked sweet potato', 'fruits', etc. The inmates of this 'Kuravan Colony' have also cooked and offered the 'Pongal', the sweet rice in front of their main deities, namely, 'Valli' and 'Murugan'.

In a genuine attempt of reclaiming their original ethnic identity, the people belonging to one of the political outfits of 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' (viz., 'Vanavaengaikal Katchi') have mentioned the traditional name of their deity, 'Murugan' as 'Kurinji Saeyaon' (Lit. "Cult figure of 'Kurinji Thinai'") in the invitation card concerned (as 'Kurinji Saeyaon' Kaovil Kudamuzhukku Vizhaa').

The noteworthy aspect of this religious observance is the conduct of '*Kuravai Kooththu Performance*', the traditional dance performed usually by the '*Kuravar People*' at their original habitat of hilly terrains during the Sangam Period. A troupe of Kuravar artistes from the Kerala State performed this indigenous art form in its original fair and fervour. The interesting part of this cultural event is that the troupe concerned performed this dance sequence in mimetic movements depicting the various phases of their daily chores such as hunting-gathering, deification of herostone/hillock¹⁴. It is worth mentioning here that before the onset of '*Kuravai Kooththu*' the priest spills the paddy grains from a winnow over the cut plantain stem erected.

V. Conclusion:-

The '*Kuravar*'/'*Kurru People*' till date try their level best to retain their original ethnic identity as the '*Ancient People of Kurinji Thinai*' despite the fact that they have been pushed away from their original abode of hilly terrain since time immemorial by certain socio-cultural and socio-political pressures. The Stigma of 'erstwhile CT Act' and the 'current Habitual Offenders Act' persuades them from non-claiming of their endonym '*Kurru*'/'*Kudru*'/'*Kunru*' (which is traceable to the Proto-Dravidian nominal root * *Kunru* "hillock"); On the contrary, they wish to identify themselves as the 'Autochthonous people of Ancient Thamizhagam' by the way of re-claiming their exonym '*Kuravar*', the shortened form of '*Kunravar*' (Lit. "People of Hillock"). At present, although they are in need of proper cultural identity so as to claim and prove their antiquity, copious litterary evidences of Sangam Period are available in favour of them as and when they stick to their exonym '*Kuravar*'/'*Kunravar*'.

By relying on the dual ecological components, namely, '*Karupporul*' and '*Uripporul*' of *Kurinji Thinai*, the '*Kuravar*'/'*Kurru People*' try to recapitulate their antiquarian status. In this way, this ethnic people began to adopt the strategy of re-enacting certain phases of ritual observance of '*Valli Kalyanam*' (say, 'conduct of *Kalavu*, the 'Pre-nuptial Marriage', 'Oblation of *Thaay Veettu Seer*', 'Solemnizing of Formal Marriage') in and around the temple premises of '*Murugan*' located at Palani (of Dindigul district), Swamimalai (of Kumbakonam district), Kunrathur (of Thiruvallur district), Thiruchendur (of Thoothukudi District), VadaPudupatti (of Theni District), on the line of observance of ritual re-enactment of '*Kuravar Padukalam*' and other associated 'pre-events' (say, 'conduct of pre-nuptial Marriage') post - events (say, 'Solemnizing of Formal Marriage') held at

Kumarakovil (of Kanyakumari district) since the Late Medieval Period.

Such adopted strategies help the '*Kuravar*'/'*Kurru People*' in re-claiming their original ethnic identity as the indigenous people of ancient bio-graphic zone of '*Kurinji Thinai*'. By the way of establishing their original antiquarian status, the '*Kuravar*'/'*Kurru People*' try to evade from the stigma attached to them as the 'Habitual Offenders', on the one hand and re-claim their prestigious indigenous status as '*Malai Kuravan*', on the other hand.

Foot Notes

1. Apart from this traditional bio-geographic zone, the Ancient Tamils of Sangam Period also refer to other traditional bio-geographic zones of Ancient Tamizhagam, namely, '*Mullai Thinai*' (comprising of forest and the adjoining areas), '*Marudha Thinai*' (constituting of cultivable lands and the adjoining areas), '*Neidhal Thinai*' (consisting of oceans and the adjoining coastal areas), '*Palai Thinai*' (comprising of arid zones).
2. The ethnonym of this particular ethnic group constitutes of two facets, viz., '*Kuravar*'/'*Kunravar*', the exonym and '*Kurru*', the endonym. Unlike the usual practice of treating the 'endonym' as the prestigious label the '*Kurru People*' prefer to claim their 'exonym' as the favourable tag, as they have realize that this exonym gets recorded in the Sangam Literatures as the indigenous ethnos of '*Kurinji Thinai*'.
3. For further details of the ritual re-enactment of '*Kuravar Padukalam*' and the associated observances Cf. Maheswaran, C. 2023.
4. At present, out of these six clans of erstwhile social structure of '*Kuravar*'/'*Kurru People*', the clan '*Vuyaali*' gets merged with the clan '*Maenappaadi*' while the clan '*Bandi*' gets integrated with the clan '*Kaavadi*', resulting into a four-fold clan system to this ethnos.
5. During 1871, the then Police Official in-charge of the Madras Presidency had declined to enforce the 'CT Act' upon the "*Kuravar*'/'*Kurru People*', citing judiciously on the occurrence of low incidence of crime rate in the '*Kuravar belt*' than in other parts of the then Madras Presidency. And thus, the British Colonial rule could impose that Anti-People in the Madras Presidency only in 1911 with the inclusion of '*Kuravar*'/'*Kurru People*' in its fold.
6. "At the Community Status Meet of '*Kurru People*' " organized at Coimbatore on the 9th & 10th September, 2023, One Shri. S.

Arockiyasamy, Arivoli Nagar, Coimbatore has reported that even in a recently held 'Community Meeting' held at his residential area, it was decided unanimously 'Not to speak in 'Kurru Vaaththaa' (their indigenous speech) in front of 'outsiders' in order to ensure that the 'ethnic identity of 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' shall not be disclosed in public sphere.

7. It is to be noted that the 'Sub-sects of Koravar' was enlisted prior as 27, inclusive of the 'Vettaikkarar'.
8. The author of this paper is of firm contention that such sort of social injustice is observed even among the ethnos 'Vedar' (Lit. "Hunters") wherein 'Malai Vedan' is treated as a Scheduled Tribe, 'Vedan', 'Vettuvan' is treated as a Scheduled caste (in just two pockets of Southern Tamil Nadu), 'Vettuva Gounder' is treated under both the Most Backward Class and Denotified Communities (in the Western Tamil Nadu alone), 'Vedar' is treated as a Backward Class (in the rest of Tamil Nadu).
9. It is very disheartening to know that the 'Idate Commission' has reported that 'it' has received only a single representation from the State of Tamil Nadu, with the request to include the 'Kuravar'; under the 'DNTs'; on the contrary, in reality, several representations have been submitted by various social activities belonging to the ethnic group 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru' with the demand to include this ethnos under the SNTs and the DNTs (Personal Communication from Shri. M. Sundarajan, Additional Superintendent of Police [Rtd.], Government of Tamil Nadu), an insider of 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru'.
10. It is a stark naked truth that the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' were usurped from their original habitat of hilly region long time back before the advent of British Colonial regime in the erstwhile Madras Presidency which ventured to study and document the tribal people therein (Cf. ".....*kulava naattaar kulam tagarththu*" (Lit. "Having shattered the legacy of 'Kulava Naadu'") at the Velvikkudi Copper Plate Document of Palyaagasaalai Mudhu Kudumi Peruvazhudhi (Personal Communication from Dr. R. Poongundran, Registration Officer [Rtd.], Department of Archaeology, Government of Tamil Nadu).
11. For the first time, we come across mentioning of the clan name 'Maenappaadi' as 'Maelappaadi' which deserves further study and research.

12. For the past 4 years (i.e., till 2023), the ritual re-enactment of 'Gifting of utilitarian materials from maternal household' alone was observed by the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' at Thiruchendur, that too outside the temple premises alone. But, only in this current year (i.e., 2024), the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' were able to extend it as a 'fullfledged conduct of marriage ceremony of 'Valli' with 'Murugan', having accompanied by a group of 'Kuravar People' dressed in their traditional attire and costume (of 'hill hunters').
13. It is really irony and great pity as well that the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People' who oppose till date the 'Vaagriwaala' who are noted as 'Narikkuravar' (with an appended suffix of 'Kuravar') are also provided with household within this newly constructed hamlet along with the 'Kuravar' / 'Kurru People'.
14. The cut plantain stem (of 3 feet in height approximately) around which the dance performance of 'Kuravai Kooththu' is carried out has been reported to represent the hero-stone by one performer while it is reported to represent the 'hillock' by another performer. However, the associated rite of spilling the paddy grains in a winnow by the priest over the cut plantain stem erected at the centre prior to the onset of 'Kuravai Kooththu', in a way, confirms that the plantain stem here represents the hero-stone only (The author of this paper wishes to thank profusely Dr. R. Poongundran, Registration officer [Rtd.], Department of Archaeology, Government of Tamil Nadu who illuminated this fact, by quoting the relevant citation of Literary evidence fact, by quoting the relevant citation of Literary evidence "..... *Nel Uguththup Paravum Kadavulum Ilamae*" (Puram: 335)).

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