

A STUDY OF GYPSIES OF SRI LANKA (1)

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0. 1 Introduction

This paper describes and analyses the cultural and economic changes of Telugu speaking Gypsies of Aligambai village in Sri Lanka. In this country Ethnological Survey was started in 1937. Before this, in 1835, the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch) was inaugurated, which was the pioneer of the Ethnological Studies in Sri Lanka. This country has been very fortunate as far as ethnology is concerned. This has been due to the preservation of Veddas, who are one of the oldest ethnic groups in the world. Well known scholars have been paying attention to studies relating to the Veddas. But it is very unfortunate that no serious attention has been paid to the study of Gypsies of Sri Lanka. ²

1. 1 The Origin of Sri Lankan Gypsies

The term 'Gypsy' used in this paper refers to a group of seminomadic people living in Sri Lanka. These people are referred to as *Kuravar* by the Tamils, and '*Ahikuntigaya*' ³ by the Sinhalese. The word *Kuravar*, is of Dravidian origin; it means hill country people. *Kurinchy*⁴ a classical Tamil word means hill country. The word *Kuravar* is derived from *Kurinchy*. There is no doubt that they are of Indian origin; their language clearly indicates it; They are a Telugu speaking gypsy community. An appreciable section of the population speaks Tamil as a second language.

Their physical appearances prove their identities, that they belong to Dravidian origin. But they are very particular in maintaining the Telugu identity. The gypsies who move with Tamils speak Tamil, and the gypsies who move with Sinhalese try to speak Sinhala.

Gypsies are known by many names, but none of them reveals their country of origin. The English word 'Gypsy' is derived from "Egyptian"..... In fact their history and spoken language can be traced back to India, where in all probability, they originated. When or why they left India is unknown, but it is probable that they left on several occasions and for different reasons. ⁵

The advent of the Indian gypsies in various parts of Europe is said to have synchronised with the time at when 'Timur' the great 'Tattar' chieftain invaded Hindustan and offered the conquered the option between the Koran and death. It has been concluded therefore that the gypsies in Europe consisted

originally of Hindustanee tribes who fled from the persecution of their Muslim conquerors and took up a wandering life. ⁶

It is not definitely known when the gypsies first crossed over to Sri Lanka, there being hardly any reference to them in the literature of this country. However the traditional lore of the gypsies points back to the second century A. D. as the time of the earliest band of gypsies to Sri Lanka. ⁷ The theory that the Sri Lankan gypsies migrated to Sri Lanka during the British rule continues to remain as a mere supposition unsupported by proof. ⁸ I leave this problem to Ethnologists and Anthropologists to establish the period of their arrival in this country.

2. 1 Description of Aligambai Village:

The Aligambai village is located in Akkaraipattu ⁹. Assistant Government Agent's Division in the Amparai District of the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. It is about 20 k.m. from Akkaraipattu town. On the western side of the village meadows, paddy lands, canals and shrubby lands are found scattered. The village name Aligambai seems to be of Sinhalese origin. Ali — elephant; Gambai — a place where it is tied. In the neighbouring villages there are Sinhalese settlements.

Fifty years ago Aligambai was a jungle where the wild animals freely moved. The nomadic Gypsies — the *Kuravar*, who wander about without any fixed abode, prefer to camp in this jungle, and they subsisted on hunting and food gathering. While they were hunting the animals, they also engaged in cattle farming. Then they found enough pasture and water facilities, and permanently settled in this place. Gradually they cleaned the jungle and started *chena* cultivation (shifting cultivation).

2. 2 Their huts and houses

Nearly fifty years ago their encampments were widely scattered with squat structures. Their huts were made of strips of talipot palm leaf or Ilukku grass (*Imperata cylindrica* var). These materials were sewn together and stretched over an arched stick framework. Inside the huts one can see a medley of things, such as rolls of old talipot leaves, snake baskets piled one above the other, long low bed made of sticks, mats, cooking vessels, bottles and tins with things kerosene lamp and bundles of old cloths. By the side of their huts they kept their cattle and dogs. Cleanliness and health care were not known to them. Two or three decades later they started to build their huts using coconut coajans which they bought from the neighbouring villages on barter basis. Their herbal commodities and other things like honey and dried meat were exchanged.

A new era of the Aligambai gypsies was dawn in the late 1960's with the establishment of a Roman Catholic Church at this village. When Rev. Father Cook was a priest of the Roman Catholic at Akkaraipattu, he was eager to uplift the gypsies by establishing a permanent settlement at Aligambai. The Father made frequent visits to the settlement and gave valuable advice to them for their development. At the beginning there were about 25-30 families. The author was told that, the nomadic gypsies from other places, who knew of this settlement, also came there and permanently settled. Now there are 150 families (about 600 people) living there. Rev. Father, Cook, succeeded in converting them to Roman Catholic Religion. By his effort, a Church has been built at Aligambai and the Church services are conducted in Tamil.

The Catholic Mission tried its best and approached the Government authorities and got plots of land for them. The land was distributed among the families. Then under the Government housing scheme, houses were built with basic amenities and given to them¹⁰. These houses consist of two rooms with a kitchen and verandha. A lavatory unit and a well were also provided. More than 100 families live in the Government housing scheme. The Gypsy families who came to the village late from other areas could not get these houses; therefore they still live in huts.

3. 1 Leader of the Gypsies

The social structure of the Gypsies is a self-contained community, conforming to a patriarchal system of social behaviour. They select themselves a leader who is the elderly person with the controlling ability. The leader is called as "Vithanai" (Village Headman) or "Thalaivar" (leader). At present the leader's name is Mr. Rangam (50 years) and his wife is Erramma. The leadership is not hereditary. He is elected by common consent and can hold office only as long as his conduct merits it. If he is found guilty of an offence against the tribes or shows partiality towards anyone in his judgements brought to him, he will be replaced by another person.

The establishment and maintenance of law and order and the settlement of disputes between individuals are the main functions of the leader. Further he functions as the physician, the marriage registrar and priest of the whole community. The word of the leader is law and whenever laws are violated the leader after consultation with his "council" can inflict a fine on the delinquent.

3. 2 Judicial system

The Gypsies of Sri Lanka, never go to the judicial court; infact, legislation is unknown to them. The Gypsies very often quarrel among themselves and

it is a Gypsies tradition that they settle their disputes among themselves. They have their own leader, Court and Council to administer justice. They maintain the tribal integrity by a code of stern discipline and rigorous judicial system.

Vithanai (Village Head man) is the judge for their court. When he receives a complaint, immediately he fixes the date for the inquiry and informs the council and all the heads of the families, to gather at a particular place and time. All members of the council respect his order and assemble in time at the particular place. In front of the Judicial Council the Vithanai inquires into the case. The inquiry takes one or two days. The council members who were present there can voice their own opinion. Judgements of the majority will be considered as the final verdict. The fine may be in the form of money or things like arrack or slappings. Generally this type of judicial inquiry is termed as "Keelk Koodu" (Primary Court).

If Vithanai finds it difficult to conduct the inquiry and deliver the verdict he refers the case to the 'Melk Koodu' (High Court). For this high court inquiry, Vithanai invites other leaders of the gypsies who live in other gypsy villages. At a common place the particular case will be inquired and verdict will be given. If the high court fails to give proper judgement, nowadays the affected party seeks Justice from the Sri Lankan judicial system. Fine will be collected from the offender and they buy arrack for the money and all members of the community drink and enjoy. If an offender is unable to pay the fine immediately, sufficient time is allowed for him to settle it. After the case they forget their enmity and ill will and become friendly. It shows their inclination towards collective life.

3. 2. 1 Judicial Council

The council generally consists of the aged and the influential section of the community. The chief is expected to possess talents, knowledge, discipline, pious good manners and experience in giving judgement and acceptable to all members of the community. The chief man is Vithanai. The following three categories of personal generally comprise the tribunal council: Vithanai (Judge) Vedikaran (Leader of the hunters), Sevakan (Fiscal). The Sevakan's duty is to collect fine from the offenders.

4. 1 Occupations Agriculture:

The economy of Amparai and Batticaloa districts is predominantly agricultural. The chief crop cultivated is rice and this is cropped twice a year. Aligambal Kuravar (gypsies) are employed as agricultural labourers by Moor cultivators of the Amparai district. Weeding, repairing the field boundary, keeping watch over

the field against wild animals and encroachers and threshing paddy are the types of work for which their services are needed by the Moor farmers. 11

This was the situation which prevailed in the early Seventies. But agricultural activities of the gypsies are now far developed. The Government and Catholic Mission volunteered to help the gypsies in their development. The Government has given to each gypsy family one or two acre of paddy lands. Twice a year (according to the monsoon) they cultivate their paddy lands. These two seasons are called as 'Perum Pogam' and 'Ciru Pogam'. 12

The neighbouring paddy fields belong to Tamils and Muslims, Whatever agricultural technology these communities use, the gypsies also adopt in their agricultural process. The Government and the Mission are very helpful to them. Gypsies were given tractors for their agricultural purposes. The way of preparing the land for cultivation before sowing, application of the VI and NPK fertilizers to the land, selecting good variety of seeds (nowadays they are sowing No. 94.1 variety of paddy), Application of Uriya and TD fertilizer for the crops in time are in practice. In these agricultural processes the gypsies now adopt new methods of agricultural technology. These prove that their economy and the way of life have changed and it is in a developing process.

4. 2 Hunting

Hunting was one of the main occupations of the Aligambai gypsies in the early years of their settlements. They were using large javelins with which they spear wild animals like deer, wild boar or porcupine, brought to the hunting place by their mongrels in the course of an exciting chase. Sometimes the gypsies go to hunt iguana carrying axes and spears. But at present they give more attention to agriculture and very rarely go for hunting. With the progress, in civilization and increase in the population a good portion of the forest area has been cut down and cleared for the cultivation of crops and habitation. So the area for hunting is nowadays very much restricted. The Government forest officials and the society for the preservation of wild life often checked their advances in certain licensed and prohibited jungle areas. 13

Though these types of restrictions are in force the gypsies go hunting in keeping with their tribal customs. The weapons they carry are spear, battle-knife, and a type of axe called "manda". Each Gypsy takes with him three or four wild dogs. The wild dogs give chase to a quarry, and encircle it so that it may not escape. The Gypsy aims and throw the spear at the animal. They kill the animals for flesh, the excess flesh is distributed among the neighbouring huts. During the hunting expedition if they catch animals alive they keep them in their huts or houses as their pet.

4. 3 Snake Charming:

Snake - charming is one of the occupations of the Sri Lankan Gypsies. The snake charmers profess to be able to catch cobras in the jungle when they please, and to tame them in a few days through their knowledge of cobra language. ¹⁴ Mostly they achieve this by playing "Makudy" the instrument made of 'Nadankai' (gourd), bambo, and paste made from certain herbal roots. They use the root of "Nagathali" (Martynia diandra) and 'erukku' (Calotropis gigantea) as antidotes for snake poison. Erukku is said to be a deadly poison, but forms an ingredient in several folk medicines. It is believed that when these two herbs are carried on the person, no cobra will attack their possessor.

But, every male gypsy is not capable of piping a cobra out of its lair; the feat requires special skill and great patience. The snake charmers indulge in their jobs for their livelihood. When they go to a village, they carry their cloth bag which contain their baskets with the cobra within and his pipe-gourd.

One decade ago the snake charmers were very frequently seen in the villages. They go to each and every house and exhibit the snake playing. Some people like to see it, some do not want it. Whether people like it or not they give them cloths, rice or money as a present and give them something having regard to their abject poverty. At present most of the snake charmers have given up snake charming as one of their occupations and are engaged in occupations which give them steady income throughout the year.

4. 4 Activities of Gypsy Women

Gypsy women go to the neighbouring villages with their children carrying them in the cloth tied on their backs. They sell their goods like honey, herbs and other items which were collected in forest. They used to read palms, but their ability to read the palm is merely a pretension to earn money. But nowadays very rarely the womenfolk go to the neighbouring villages; because they have work at home and agricultural activities where menfolk are engaged.

4. 5 Gypsies and their Remedies

Tribal and village people believe in folk medicine because it fits in with their culture and way of thinking. Folk medicines are basically prepared from fauna and flora. Siddhars and Yogies lived in forests and experimented with natural products and found folk remedies for various ailments. Gypsies who lived in forest, also by experience, found remedies for various illness and evil spirits.

Whenever the snake charmers pay a visit to the neighbouring villages they bring various remedies especially for snake bite and other ailments. They sell these remedies for money or exchange for consumer goods. In a field study undertaken by the author in this area, he was informed by people belonging to various walks of life that the gypsies' remedies were efficacious and they were still using some of those remedies. It is worthy to list some of their remedies here.

Remedies:

Ailments & Results

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Root of <i>Martynia diandra</i>
(Nagatali ver) | (a) An antidote for the snake bite

(b) Helps the pregnant woman in healthy child delivery |
| 2. Seed of <i>Martynia diandra</i>
(Nagatali vital) | (a) Prevents the snake from biting |
| 3. Venom - stone
(Visak kal) | (a) It sucks out the snake venom from the body. |
| 4. Species of <i>calotropis</i>
(Vellerukku) | (a) When a person possesses it, no snake will harm him. |
| 5. Tail of wild cat
(Pulukunavi val) | (a) It prevents bad dream and devil attacks |
| 6. Indian Screw Tree - <i>Helesteresisora</i>
(Valampuri Palam) | (a) It is an antidote against the Evil Eye.

(b) It cures stomach - ache of the children |
| 7. Leopard tooth & Bear claw
(Pulip pal + Karadi Nagam) | (a) Prevent them aevolent effect of the Evil Eye. |

5. 1 Education

With the arrival of the Catholic Mission in the Gypsy village Aligambai, a small school was built in 1964. Now classes are conducted from Grade I to Grade VIII by two teachers. There are one hundred students studying in this School. Scholarships are awarded to six students by the Mission to study at Ramakrishna Mission Maha Vidyalaya in Akkaraipattu town Younger generation of the gypsies is now literate.

6. 1 Rituals and ceremonies / Puberty Rituals

Female puberty ceremonies appear ubiquitous in South Asia where they are found in a variety of social context. 15 In Sri Lanka the ceremonies that are

held when a girl menstruates for the first time are almost similar among Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims. But these rites differ according to the socio-cultural patterns and the economic conditions. In the recent past scholars like Nur-Yalman (1963, Leach (1970), and Winslow (1980) have given more scholarly attention to study the puberty rites of Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese. But the author has noticed that rituals and beliefs connected with puberty ceremony of Gypsy girls are very peculiar, curious, novel and structured.

Van Genep, in his book 'The Rites of Passage' has divided the human life process into three stages as separation, transition, and reintegration. The Gypsy girls' puberty rites fall under the separation category. Leach (1970 : 825) defines this structure as 'maturation through separation'.

When a gypsy girl menstruates for the first time, as it is considered taboo, her parents build a small hut with coconut cadjans and keep the girl in seclusion in that hut for seven days. During these days she will be given cooked rice, with greengrain, potatoes, dhall and brinjal curries. Day and night protection is given by parents. On the fifth day there will be a small bathing ceremony. Her female relatives bring water in earthen pots from their homes and pour it on her head. After bath, saffron paste will be applied on the girl's body. Then the girl wears new cloth, and she will be allowed to enter the main house for that moment alone. At that time the ceremony of waving lighted camphor and lighted wick will take place. Her relatives give her presents according to their financial position. Then the common feast follows. Liquor is also served to all guests. The guests get together and sing and dance and enjoy the day. On the same day evening, the old hut will be removed, and a new hut erected. The girl has to stay for two more days in this hut. On the seventh day the girl will take the ceremonial bath and she will enter the main home. After cleaning the pollution of the hut and the house, the puberty ceremony is concluded.

6. 2 Marriage ceremonies

Generally gypsy weddings are arranged by the parents. According to the old custom their marriages were arranged when the children were quite young. The promise of betrothal is uttered loudly before the members of the tribes; after which the bridegroom's father in token thereof distributes arrack to those present, who are regarded as witnesses. If the marriage does not take place, the party at fault is fined. At present proposed and love marriages take place: But parental negotiation is needed in both.

If the bride's parents agree to the proposal, the bridegroom party give bottle of arrack as gift. Sunday is chosen and on this day both the bride's

and bridegroom's parties pool their resources and entertain relatives and well-wishers at a liquor party. The betrothal is thus made public.¹⁶ For the marriage ceremony a small "pandal" (tent) will be erected with green decoration. Before they were converted to Catholic religion, the wedding ceremonies were conducted by their Hindu priest, who was the old and wise man among them. He recites the verses invoking blessing on the newly married couple. In the early days Lord Muruga's idol was placed in front of the bridegroom, he worshipped the Lord Muruga and proceeds to bride's home. Now all these practices are abandoned. It is noted that as the Aligambai gypsies are Catholics their weddings take place at the church.

6. 2. 1 Wedding entertainments.

They prepare nuptial feast with fresh meat of the wild animals. Prior to attending the happy nuptial event, the gypsies take arrack. At the wedding also they enjoy by partaking of alcohol. They sing and dance. They beat the "Tappu" a kind of drum made of monkey skin and play with sticks held with the fingers of both hands. Women sing love songs in Telugu language. In front of the wedding house gypsies dance with drum beat. The groom too joins in the dance. The orchestra of the Tappu and gourd pipe will make music. Gypsy women also are served liquor at the wedding and they also sing and dance with their male friends.

6. 2. 2 Dowry System

In the early days dowry was given to the bridegroom by bride's father. Ratten basket with a performing cobra in it, a gourd pipe to charm it, a javelin for him to hunt with and a country mongrel were given as dowry by the bride's father. Bride's mother gave her daughter kitchen utensils. But this old tradition has been abandoned. Now the groom has to give dowry (the Bride price).¹⁷ to the bride's parents. The groom has to give nominal dowry of Rs. 7-50 in recognition of bride's mother's duties towards her daughter for giving birth, feeding in her childhood days and bringing her up. In addition the father of the bride is also given dowry of Rs. 40/ for the obligations fulfilled by him for his daughter. Then a new saree will be given to the bride by the groom.

6. 3 Child Birth

There are birth rituals and taboos observed by the gypsies. The old women who attend to the delivery of the child, known "Maruttuvicchi" (Midwife) does all the help to the pregnant mother. The midwife calculates the delivery day. They believe that if the juice of the green herbs is smeared on the head of the

pregnant woman normal delivery take place without any danger. If the midwife finds any abnormal condition in delivery, the pregnant woman is taken to the Akkaraipattu Town hospital.

For eight days, the midwife looks after the mother and the child. On the eighth day there will be a bathing ceremony. Mother and the child will be given hot water bath. On the same day the midwife also takes ceremonial bath and goes off from her duties. That day she will be given presents and arrack also. As it is taboo 31 days, mother and father will not go to the church. On the 30th day the baby's head will be shaven. Sometimes to fulfil a vow they take the child to the church and get the head shaved there.

7. 1 Funeral Rites

Funeral rites are conducted according to the Catholic traditions. The mode of disposal of dead bodies of gypsies is by burial at the common burial ground. The corpse is carried on a stretcher turned out of wooden branches. Women do not accompany the corpse to the burial ground. On the twelfth day the final death rites will be held and cooked foods will be offered as oblation food to the departed soul.

8. 1 Worship

In Aligambai there are one hundred and fifty gypsy families and six hundred inhabitants. Most of them were converted to the Catholic religion. There is a church for them. Every Sunday all Catholic gypsies go to the church. There will be a special service for them. Among the gypsies the old generation still have faith in Hindu Gods. Because of this situation they have been allowed to celebrate nine days of the year for their Hindu Gods. The gypsy folks have their tutelary deities like Lord Muruga, Valli and Theivanai. For these deities, they have small statues made of wood, stone or copper. For these nine days they offer special oblation to their Gods and adore them. They cook milk rice and sing and dance. There are two Hindu families with eight members in this village. As they do not have a Hindu temple they worship their Gods at their own homes.

9. 1 Language

The gypsies speak Telugu only in their homes. Whenever they communicate with Tamils and Muslims they speak in Tamil. Their children learn to speak Tamil at school. During the field work of the author he has recorded some of

the folk songs of the gypsies, and has also copied down some of their words (Telugu). They may be of interest to Linguists for future research.

abbadu	—	father	pal	—	rupee
a : lu	—	wife	pa : mu	—	snake
a : vu	—	cow	pandi	—	pig
i :	—	give	padda :	—	language
kunda : n	—	pot	po : ta	—	go
katti	—	knife	ra : ja :	—	king
k : ki	—	crow	sa : kku	—	gunny bag
kukka	—	dog	se : stram	—	prediction
kucur	—	sit	ta : ta	—	grand father
ku : du	—	cooked rice	tae : nkay	—	coconut
ley	—	get up	tamuda	—	younger brother
mamma :	—	mother	vaja :	—	herbs
ma : ni	—	tree	vandi	—	bullock cart
nenta	—	come	uppu :	—	salt
ni : lu	—	water	u : ru	—	village
au : ru	—	hundred	u : rpil	—	squirrel

10.0 Conclusion

The Gypsy settlement of Aligambai village now has developed into one of the agricultural villages. The arrival of the Catholic Mission in the village was the turning point in the developing process of the village. Within two decades a rapid cultural transformation took place there. Their hereditary Hindu religious practices and beliefs have been abandoned and they adopted Catholic theological beliefs and practices. Ceremonies from birth to death are changed according to the Catholic tradition. Healing rituals do not take place; in place of these they depend on western medicine which is available at the nearest town free of charge. They have adopted a new style of clothing / dressing and ornaments as used in neighbouring villages.

Their pattern of life has changed to suit the new economic development. The government and various charitable organizations have been helping them in their development activities. School and church are their cultural centres. Now their children are literate. It is remarkable that Aligambai gypsies are one of the developed tribes in the changing world.

FOOT NOTES

- (1) The author expresses his thanks to the University of Colombo for awarding a Research Grant for a research project on "Folk Rituals and Beliefs of the Eastern Sri Lanka", during 1977 - 1979. Most of the material used in this paper were collected during this period. A second field trip was made in April 1987. Messrs. K. Kanapathipillai, teacher Aligambai School and N. Sabapathi, Akkaraipattu are both remembered with gratitude, for the help rendered by them during these field studies. I also thank Professor A. Velupillai, Head, Department of Tamil, University of Jaffna, for his valuable criticism and suggestions.
- (2) See for reference: H. A. I. Goonatilleke, Bibliography of Ceylon
- (3) "The Sinhalese speak of all these gypsies as Ahigunthakayas, which means the snake charmers. The original word from which this term is taken is Ahitundika or Ahigundika. This word occurs in the "Bhuridatta Jataka", where it is said that the Bodhisattuwa in one birth was a cobra with a thousand hoods and an Ahitundikaya caught the cobra and played tricks with it. The God being angry at this; cursed the man; ever since the tribe has been nomadic", Bell, H. C. P. Ceylon Antiquary II, (ii) 1916, p. 113.
- (4) The mountainous and hilly tracts in the Tamil Nadu were classified as the Kurinchyland, after the name of a flower significant in the flora; The primitive hill tribes that inhabited this Kurinchy were called Kuravar.
- (5) Encyclopaedia of Britannica: Micropaedia, Vol, I, p. 819
- (6) S. V. O. Somanader : 1937
- (7) W. S. Karunatilake : 1974 : 420
- (8) S. Thananjeyarajasingham : 1973 : p. 123
- (9) Mac Gilvary's work (1973) gives full details of this village.
- (10) This Government Housing Scheme was ceremonially opened by the Hon. Prime Minister R. Premadasa in 1980.
- (11) Thananjeyarajasingham : 1973 : p. 123.
- (12) The paddy cultivation depending on north - east monsoon rainy season is called as PERUMPOGAM; The south - west monsoon rainy season paddy cultivation is called as CIRUPOGAM.

- (13) Thananjeyarajasingam : 1973 : 124.
- (14) Richard Spittel stated that many ophiologists aver that though snakes are highly sensitive to vibrations through the ground, they are utterly deaf to air - borne vibrations and therefore, to the music of the snake charmers' pipe - ground or pin (1957 : 178).
- (15) D. Winslow : (1980)
- (16) S. Thananjeyarajasingam 1973 . . p. 126
- (17) See Roop Singh 1987 : p. 89.

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