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Rappadippattu - An Extinct Folk Song of Kerala

Dr. Sandhya J Nair

Assistant Professor and Head

Department of History

Government Arts College, Attingal

Kerala

Abstract

Folklore is an expressive body of culture shared by a specific group. It encompasses the traditions shared by a particular culture, subculture, or group. Folklore includes oral traditions, artefacts, fine arts and is closely related to ethnography and anthropology. It is also closely related to the rules, customs, and belief system, impacting social, cultural, and even economic life. Moreover, the livelihood, routine, and other activities were all heavily reliant on the folklore of its land. There are variant forms of folklore, particularly in song, that play an essential role in the reconstruction of the history of an area.

Keywords: Folklore, Ballads, Rappadippattu, Cultural Chronicles

Introduction

Songs are one of the most basic forms of human art and are sung rhythmically with various instruments to make them appealing. Instead of lengthy sentences, single words and rhythms compose a song. Songs are constantly attempting to reflect social conditions. Under the rulers, ordinary people used art forms, particularly folk songs, dramas, and dances, to reflect on society. It is easy to get an idea about a particular community.

Folk songs are essential components that contain the very valuable cultural chronicles of a specific folk. It is far from modernity and exudes a kind of radiance among the village folks. The village community creates and sings folk songs for themselves in their gatherings. It results from the interaction of social groups. Their words, movements, and rhythms have contributed to creating folk songs.

Long before the spread of written language, the folk had shaped their feelings, imaginations, and thoughts through songs and other oral forms. Folk songs have simple words and expressions that an ordinary man quickly understands. It is also full of humour, love, vengeance, and protests. Folk songs reflect social psychology, human desires, and the lives of oppressed and subjugated people. Various songs include northern ballads, southern ballads, Pulluvar Pattu, Panarpattu, Bhadrakalippattu, Thirayattam, Mannarpattu *Ulayakudayerumal Pattu*, *Purushadeviyamma Paattu*, *Anchuthampuran Pattu*, *Iravikkuttippillapporu* and so on.

Southern ballads played a significant role in reconstructing Kerala's social, cultural, economic, and even political life and one among them is the famous and extinct song *Rakkilippattu* or *Rappadippattu* or *Rappaattu*.

Methodology of the study

For completing the research in this area, the methods used were narration and critical analysis. Primary sources include interviews with members of the community. The theory of Max Weber of both structural and action approaches are necessary for developing the complete understanding of society and social changes, which is the theory for this research. In his theory, Weber used;

- i. The traditional social action: actions controlled by the traditions
- ii. Affective social action: actions determined by one's specific affections and emotional state
- iii. Value rational social action: actions determined by a conscious belief in the inherent value of a type of behaviour
- iv. Instrumental rational social action: actions are carried out to achieve a specific goal.

These theories are very much applicable to attain specific results in this research. The psychological theories on fear and devotion are also essential to complete the research. Psychologically it is said the guilty consciousness of every society determines the fear and devotion in the minds of the society. Those elements determine the practice of folk art. Here, the fear of sins and bad omens or diseases forced the others -who were affected- to follow or continue the custom continuously.

Review of Literature

As the study mainly focussed on an extinct form of art, it is impossible to touch with several sources. The primary sources used are interviews and archival sources, including the Travancore Archaeological series. Secondary sources used are *Kerala Sahithya Charitram* (Mal) of Ulloor S. Parameswara Aiyar, *Branches of Folklore* (Mal) by Dr. M. V. Vishnu Namboothiri, *Kerala Samskara Darshanam* (Mal) of Kilimanoor Viswambharan and *Tekken Paattukal* (Mal) by Dr. N. Ajithkumar.

Etymology

The meaning of the term of *Rappadippattu* is the songs sung during the night. Etymologically the term *Raavu* means night, and *Paattu* means song. *Rakkilippattu* or *Rappadippattu* refers to a bird that is well-known in Kerala society. Thus, *Raappattu* means the song singing during the night. *Rakkili* or

Rappadi refers to the birds that appear and sing at night and are known as nightingales. However, in this case, the term *Rappadi* or *Rakkili* does not refer to a specific bird but rather to a community or sub-community that existed here until the twentieth century. They used to sing the songs during the nights of January (*Makaram*) concerning the harvesting season. Historians have reached various conclusions about the *Rappadi* community. Some historians and sociologists argued that they belonged to the *Vannans* or the washerman community in Kerala, whereas others included them in Kerala's *Pulaya*, *Pana*, or *Kanikkar* communities. They were the tribal or downtrodden communities of the land.

Hypothesis

The present study focused on an extinct art form with time, which happened because of the disappearance of the agricultural way of life and landlordism. Both vanished as a result of the land revision acts of Kerala in connection with the new socio-religious reform movements.

Rappadippattu, Rakkilippattu or Rappaattu

As etymology described, the song was sung by a group or community as specified earlier and was practised mainly during nighttime in Travancore, middle Kerala and parts of northern Kerala. It took place during the harvesting season in January or the Malayalam month of *Makaram*. Mythically, to prevent smallpox or other summer diseases by satisfying the mother goddess, *Rappadippattu* is sung. The *Rappadis* sang in the second half of the night while others slept. They sing in front of chiefs or lords houses. While hearing the songs, the lords or chief of the house come out and give them some presentations from the harvest products such as paddy or rice. The *Vannans* or other tribes lived away from the leading society and were used to wash clothes, scavenge, or do such jobs. The income or wages may be minimal, and they sing during midnight. While hearing the songs, the lords give them a surplus of their production. If they were not ready to give the presentations, the *Rappadis* scolded the persons inside the houses. The season they selected was exceptional as compared to the other seasons. When the harvesting was over, the lord's houses would fill with a large quantity of paddy or rice, coconut or areca nut. When we closely analyse the lines of the songs, we have to agree that the practice is associated with harvesting season.

The lines,

"... *kizhakkathe puthupoyla varitha mathave*

pallile noorpini theeruka

paakayalum pathu varitha mathave

papavum thozhavum theeruka

nirayathe korayathe varitha mathave

makkalu kunjungal vazuka

makkalu thanthathi vazhumallo thaye

marumakkal thanthathi vazhuka

aalumudamayum vazhumallo thaye

arthapurayidam vazhumallo thaye

janmappurayidam vazhuka.....”

These lines strongly suggest that the song is sung during harvesting seasons. Here the singer wants some benefits or presentations from the householder. Here the lady owner of the house is called *thaye*, which means "mother, please give paddy or rice or coconut for my family, which your house is splendid with the harvest. Please share something with us. After giving our share, the family will be blessed by god. God will bless you for getting more results from harvest. They again sing the lines.

"ee veetil padyapporallo mathave

iniyum pala veetil padanam

njangaloru vazhi padivarumbo

pekaloru vazhi neengippom...”

This line clarifies that we have to sing in the other houses and do not have any time to wait. If willing, please present it, and the house will be away from the bad omens or sins, and god will protect from all types of sins. These lines indicate varied types of diseases that affected the people during that time.

The lines,

“kochiyilum vilakkere vaykka

Kochiyilum velikondallo mathave

Kopuravum velikondu nikka

Kopuramana pathalileyamma

Kondyumenthi ppurappeduka

Ettudikkum veli kondallo mathave

Edatharayum velikondu nikka”

It refers to the names of the lands like Kochi and Edathara, which shows that it was also prevalent in middle Kerala.

The other version of the origin and practice of the art was that it had connections with the social evils of *Pulappedi* and *Mannappedi*, which practised in southern Kerala till the 18th century. The practice was done during the harvesting seasons, as specified earlier. From 28 to 31 of the Malayalam month *Makaram*, (January/February), men from communities like the *Pulayas*, *Mannans* and *Vannans*, who were

the untouchables, were permitted to touch or throw something to the higher caste ladies of Kerala and were outcasted and forced to go along with those they were touched. The ladies feared the situation and were a revenge activity by the lower caste men against the so-called high caste. The persons who had the right to perform the *Pulappedi* or *Mannappedi* were the members of the same community who performed the *Rappadippattu*. During the reign of Umayammarani, the first women ruler of Travancore, stopped the practice by law in 1696.

During the reign of Marthandavarma, the practice was continued in certain places even though stopped by law. Some members of the above communities continued the practice and, the king was in trouble to stop this. Two members from the *Kanikkars* misguided those who were used to performing it. In return for stopping the practice, the king accepted their chivalry and gave them the right to perform *Rappadippattu*.

Instruments used for *Rappadippattu*

Different communities used different types of instruments to sing the songs. The tribal *Kanikkars* used *Kokkara* and native *Kanikkar* used *Para* as instruments. *Panan* used *Murasu*, and *Vannans* used a type of native *Mridangum*

The Costume

The *Rappadis* wore the lengthiest and a pointed hat. It had a large number of layers. Their dress was stitched with varied, colourful clothes and had many layers. It is very long from top to bottom. They used to wear a long mark or bindi in red colour on their forehead.

Causes for the extinction

While applying the theory of Max Weber in this context, it is easy to understand the importance of performance. Weber always says that no individual cannot make or shape society, but societies encourage certain motives for action. Here, the song is tightened to the motive for getting food items for their livelihood in times of plenty. Persons from specific communities performed the art to get presentations from the landlords. In return, they acted as the messengers of blessings from the god for their landlords. Otherwise, they cursed the landlords and warned them to be ready to receive the worst results in the future. The people were ready to treat the singers with gifts afraid of these. While applying the psychological theories, people are always afraid of bad results in their lives.

The socio-religious reform movements, the introduction of new educational systems and the new land reforms act of Kerala weakened the existed land settlements. The disappearance of the existed systems directly affected several folk arts and festivals, which were based entirely on the social and economic conditions of the land. The disappearance of single ownership of a large area and the custodian of surplus production created another economic stratification. The alienated or the downtrodden people got enough freedom in search of their livelihood. It is unnecessary to perform anything they had performed earlier to meet the two ends of their life. Politically, economically, and socially, a group's upliftment was

much better than their practised life. Nevertheless, it indirectly stopped another folk art, ie. *Rappadippaattu*. However, we can conclude with the idea of Weber that if a group does not require any action, there is no necessity to perform it. Twentieth-century Kerala need not be in a hurry to perform the activities as the new social stratification helped them solve poverty, scarcity of food grains, and social inequalities with the introduction of new opportunities of employment and social equalities.

Conclusion

The introduction of new methods affected every branch of life during the 20th century. The new Marxian views of land for all engaged in agriculture were the primary factor that affected the customs and traditions of the realm of folklore. Folklore always needs its group and ethnicity for its continuation. Folklore arts focus on the identity of particular groups and people. Here the art form of *Rappadippaattu* is also extinct due to the introduction of new social and economic changes in society.

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