

## **An Ethnographical Study on a Secluded Community Thottiya Naickers of Tamilnadu**

\* V.Thangaraj,  
*Ph.D. Research Scholar,  
C S S E & I P  
Gandhigram Rural Institute,  
[Deemed to be University]  
Gandhigram*

\* \* Dr.A.MANI  
*Assistant Professor cum Assistant Director  
C S S E & I P  
Gandhigram Rural Institute,  
[Deemed to be University]  
Gandhigram*

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### **ABSTRACT:**

How to fix the ethnic origin and identity of Thottiya Naickers, a linguistic minority community of Tamil Nadu, who live in isolation and seclusion for centuries together without making any attempt to trace out their ethnic origin ? This paper makes an earnest effort to settle ethnic origin and identity of the community or atleast to try to fix it to possible extent. Various methodologies employed and exclusive field visits undertaken. Various modes of comparative study based on caste name, based on ethno-historical accounts of the community, based on the intangible cultural heritage maintained by the community, based on peculiar and strange socio-cultural practices followed by the community, based on key words of 'Doddi' and Doddi villages and based on the Telugu names of hamlets Thottiya Naickers community all carried out extensively. In the result, the present paper is able to fix almost the possible ethnic origin and identity of the community thought not exactly. However, the paper concludes with an optimistic note that this possibility may turn out to be the reality, if further research is carried out on the subject.

**KEY WORDS:-** Linguistic minority community, voluntary social exclusion, ethnic origin, comparative study.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION:**

Social exclusion includes voluntary social exclusion also. Communities voluntarily excluding themselves used to live in isolation and seclusion. Such communities are generally called as secluded communities. Such communities living in isolation and seclusion would be generally minority communities either religious or linguistic and would be basically tribal in nature following primitive cultural traits. Thottiyanaickers, a Telugu minority community living in Tamil Nadu, also following their own peculiar and strange cultural traits which are primitive and tribal in nature. They generally do not come out of their cultural border and likewise do not allow other communities also to enter into their cultural arena [Singh K.S, 1996, Vol. VIII : 594]. They are tending more towards living in voluntary seclusion perhaps to protect and continue their own peculiar and strange cultural traits. This kind of continuous living in voluntary seclusion for centuries together has naturally created a vacuum in the sequence of ethno-historical accounts of the community. People of this community never attempted to trace back their ethnic-origin and to go in search of their kinsmen if any in their alleged original habitats. Other researchers also have not ventured so far on this line. No such research work also comes to our notice. Now it remains to be a challenge for researchers to fix the exact ethnic origin and identity of this community after a lapse of very long period of time going beyond several centuries.

### **ETHNO - HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION OF THE COMMUNITY:-**

When Vijayanagar Empire further expanded towards south a large number of Kannada and Telugu speaking communities migrated to Madura Country under various capacities for various reasons. Many of such communities subsequently settled there itself permanently. Notable among them is the community called Thottiya Nayakas @ Kambalathar [Taylor 1835, Vol.II : 10,18]. Edgar Thurston would refer them as Thottiyar @ Kambalathar [Thurston 2013, Vol.7 :190]. It is generally stated that Thottiyar @ Kambalathar came to Madura Country as Military Chiefs and soldiers of Vijayanagar Army [Thurston 2013, Vol.7 : 186]. They first accompanied kumara Kambana of Vijayanagar Empire and then Nagama Nayaka and his son Viswanatha Nayaka who established Nayak Kingdom at Madura during the year 1529. When Viswantha Nayaka divided the entire Madura country into 72 palayams during the year 1535 he entrusted as many as 60 palayams with the

hands of Poligars of this community called Thottiyar @ Kambalathar [Singh K.S, 1996, Vol. VIII : 591]. Many of subsequently created palayams also were entrusted with the poligars of this community only. When poligar system was abolished they became Zamindars. After abolition of Zamindari system they became agriculturists. These people are presently found numerous in number in many of the Tamil districts such as Madurai, Theni, Dindigul, Karur, Tiruchy, Erode, Namakkal, Salem, Coimbatore, Viruthunagar, Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi.

#### **SIGNIFICANCE OF POLIGAR SYSTEM:-**

Administering a country through poligar system is an advent of Kakatiya kingdom later adopted by Vijayanagar Empire. As a true representative of Vijayanagar Empire, Viswanatha Nayaka well devised and executed this poligar system for effective administration of Madura Country. The role played by these poligars and the power exercised by them cannot be under estimated. They were exercising the power of Military, Administration and collection of Revenue. Each poligar was considered as a king within his territorial jurisdiction [Rajayyan K, 1974]. While so, entrusting as many as 60 palayams out of 72 with the poligars of this Thottiyar @ Kambalathar community would definitely assume more significance. This would virtually amount to entrusting of almost the entire erstwhile Madura country with the poligars of this particular community for the purpose of effective administration. Undoubtedly Viswanatha Nayaka could not have ventured to do so unless and until the paramount Vijaya Nagar Emperors directed or advised him to do so.

#### **PEOPLE OF THOTTIYAR @ KAMBALATHAR COMMUNITY:-**

They are having a well organized social structure from village level up to Poligars. The village head will be called as "Ooru pedda" and a zonal head will be variously called as "Dinna pedda" or "Mandha Pedda". Above them there will be poligar called 'Nagiri pedda'. All the disputes including caste disputes will be settled by their own caste elders above stated assisted by "Kodangi Nayakkan" and "Mettu Nayakkan" [Thurston 2013, Vol.7 : 189]. To conduct purifying ceremonies and functions and to perform rites there will be a spiritual head called "Kambli Nayakkan [Ibid]. They do not accept the supremacy of Brahmin community and never allow them to perform any function, ceremony or rites. Even marriages are conducted by their own caste elders called "Sali Pedda" and not by Brahmins [Nelson J.H, 2019, part.II : 81]. They don't have any marital relationship outside their community. Any deviation is viewed very seriously resulting in social exclusion or excommunication [Nelson J.H, 2019, part.II: 82].

#### **STRANGE AND PECULIAR CULTURAL TRAITS FOLLOWED BY THE COMMUNITY:-**

These people have been maintaining their own peculiar cultural traits which are primitive and tribal in nature. Irrespective of their social and economical status marriages are conducted in common open places called Mandhai by putting up temporary pandals using fresh green leaves of prescribed trees fetched from hillocks and forest [Thurston 2013, Vol.7 : 192]. Even erstwhile zamindars are not exempted. Their marriage dress, ceremonies etc., will resemble their primitive and tribal way of life revealing the facts that they were originally "hunters" turned "Cattle rearers" and then "agriculturists" turned "military chiefs". Very peculiar and strange practices are followed when a girl attains puberty and house wife undergoes her menstrual period. The girl who attains puberty is kept in the outskirts of the village in a temporarily erected hut for about 14 days. On completion of 14<sup>th</sup> day only, she will be brought home after performing certain purifying ceremonies [Ibid : 191]. Ladies undergoing menstrual period will be kept away in a separate hut for about 5 or 7 days. They use only one musical instrument called "Urumi" or "Deva Dundumi" for all occasions either auspicious or inauspicious. They worship "Jakkamma" and "Bommakka" as their common female deities. Their own caste folk dances called "Devarattam" [Muthiah.O.2003] and "Sevaiyattam" [Muthiah.O.2002] are unique in nature. They consider "kambili" as their universal dictum to which they obey without any demur.

#### **HOW CAME THE CASTE NAME:**

##### **(i) Term "Kambalathar"**

As already pointed out these people are called in dual term as Thottiyar and Kambalathar [Thurston 2013, Vol.7 : 196]. Many authors of the view that these people were originally guarding the Kampli fort and on its destruction they migrated to Tamil country. People came from Kampli country were called as Kambalathar [Panndiyanar J.V, 2010, Vol.1 : 22]. But this view appears to be only an assumption. Another explanation offered is that these people are using kambili as a sacred thing on all occasions and hence came to be known as Kambalathar [Ibid]. This explanation appears to be reasonable. Thottiyar or Kambalathar community is basically a pastoral community. It is usual practice of all the pastoral communities to use this Kambili as a sacred thing on all occasions. So, these people would have derived the name of "Kambalathar" for reason second stated.

**(ii) The terms “Thottiyar” or “Thottiya Nayakas”**

In fact no explanation has been offered so far by anybody as to why these people are called as Thottiyar or Thottiya Nayakas. Tamil Nadu Government caste list mentions this community as Thottiya Naickers including Raja Kambalam, Gollavar, Sillavar, Thokalavar, and Tholuva Nayakas. Nobody is able to give explanation as to why all the above castes happen to be grouped together and what could be the relationship among them.

Gollas are mainly cow-herds. In Telugu cows especially sacred cows are called “Govulu”. Those who were rearing “Govulu” came to be called as “Govulavar” or “Govalavar”. This word is in synonym with the word “Gopalar” of Yadava clan. “Gopalar” became “Govalavar” which again became “Gollavar” and in short “Golla” [Thurston 2013, Vol.7 : 284]. This Golla Community has a sub-division called “Doddi Golla” [John Mitchell.R, 2006 : Abstract]. Even now these Doddi Gollas are found in Andhra and their counter parts in Karnataka are called as “Kadu Gollas”. From the inception of Vijayanagar Empire “Gollavar” were entrusted mainly with sacred cows but the people of “Doddi Golla” were entrusted not only with sacred cows but also with bull-calves, bulls and Oxen. The reason was that these “Doddi Gollas” were experts in rearing bull-calves and to train them to become mighty bulls and oxen fit enough to fight in warfare. These “Doddi Gollas” were called as “Doddi kambalam” by their own people by tradition.

Vijayanagar army was consisting of a separate wing of such trained bulls and oxen and they were effectively and successfully employed in fighting against the enemies. Famous Nagama Nayaka was the General of this wing who effectively and successfully employed these trained bulls and oxen in many of the warfares [Seletore B.A, 1934, Vol.1 : 429]. It was Nagama Nayaka who originally drafted thousands of “Doddi Golla” youth first as soldiers and then elevated them as Military Chiefs and Generals of this wing. Since majority of Doddi gollas or Doddi Kambalam became Generals and Military chiefs in Vijayanagar army the suffix words “Golla” and “Kambalam” automatically gone out and they came to be invariably called as “Doddi Nayaks”. Telugu word “Doddi” would mean and include cattle shed, cow-shed, bull-pen etc usually in the form of a big and round shaped encampus specially made up of a particular variety of thorny bushes Telegu word ‘Doddi’ can be written and pronounced in Tamil as “Thotti” only as there is no pronouncition of ‘Dho’ or ‘Do’ available in Tamil. So, ‘Doddi’ became Thotti and likewise ‘Doddiyar’ became ‘Thottiyar’ in Tamil. In this way ‘Doddi Nayakas’ became ‘Thotti Nayakas’ and ultimately “Thottiya Nayakas” in Tamil. That is why Thurston referred them as Kambalathar @ Thottiyar. Both the terms would mean one and the same community.

**ETHNIC ORIGIN OF THE COMMUNITY:**

**[i] Review of Literature:**

There are sufficient historical references in many of the books speaking about South Indian history that the original abode of these people was Kampili country. After destruction of Kampili country these people actively associated with foundation of Vijayanagar empire. Mackenzie manuscripts and ‘Palayapattu vamsavali varaluru’ would indicate that the ancestral places of these people would be Gooty, Bellari, Anegundi, Ahohilam, Penukonda, Bedasima, Royala Seema, Chandragiri etc [Kulandaivelan, Dr.Nagasamy.R, 1981,Vol.1]. All these places are found to be located in Andhra, Telengana and Karnataka. Many of the authors including Thurston are of the view that these people were originally occupying the tracts on the northern side of Tungabatra river around erstwhile Kampili country and they happened to cross over Tungabatra river to reach Vijayanagar empire due to Mohamaden invasion demanding a bride from this unwilling community [Thurston, 2013, Vol.7:186]. If this version is to be believed to be true, their original places of abode should be found to be situated both in the northern and southern banks of Tungabathira river and also in the region far south of Tungabathira river upto Tamilnadu. Moreover their kinsmen if any, following more or less the same cultural traits, should be available in the erstwhile Kampili country comprising the districts of Raichur, Bidar, Bellari, chitradurga, Anantapur, Cuddapah and Kurnool. Quite surprisingly the researcher’s preliminary research on these aspects and his constant field visits to the areas under focus have proved positive of both the requirements pointed out above. This positive result has further prompted the researcher to go further in search of the ethnic origin of the community.

**[ii] Intangible cultural heritage maintained and transmitted by the community:-**

The term ‘Traditional culture and Folk lore’ is now known as “Intangible cultural heritage” [Annotated Agenda [UNESCO] 1999 : 27 – 30 ]. The oral tradition maintained by Thottiyanaickers, their folk songs, ballads and epithets all in Telugu would give a definite clue as to their original ancestral places of abode. The following intangible cultural heritage in the form of Telugu songs and verses commonly and uniformly recited by the entire community on all auspicious occasions appear to be pregnant with meaning.

“ Kampilalu Kani Boomi Kambili Nadu,  
Gooty Bellary Desam, Gurujinjakotta,  
Thungapathiri, Beda seema,

Anegonda seema, Penukonda Duragam,  
Govalakonda, Godugu Marri,  
Mobbu Seema, Mohilikonda,  
Gobbedu Nuthulu, Goranta Vanalu,  
Chikitikonda, Mapittineeda,  
Verala Chintha, Beenala Marri,  
Erra Cheruvu, Edu Natham,  
Bellapa Konda, Allapa Chippa,  
Sinadamarluru, peddamaluru,  
Kavetti Desam, Kanchu Kadaboomi”

In the above songs and verses we are able to identify easily the places like erstwhile Kambili Nadu, Gooty, Bellary Desam, Anegonda, penukonda, Bedasima, Tungabathira etc.,. Govalakonda may be Gollakonda now called as Golkonda. Mohilikonda may be hillock above Tirupathi hills. Gurujinja Kota may be the fort situated near Gurujinjakona of Jammala Madugu Taluk, Kadappa District, now called as Gandikota [Brackbury C.F, 2000 : 194]. Bellapa Konda may be Bellam Konda in Andhra. “Kanchu Kadaboomi” may be either Kadaganchi village in Gulbarga District or Kadakanchi village near Hyderabad. We are not able to identify and locate the other places mentioned in the above Telugu songs and verses. Unless and until we have a thorough knowledge of geographical divisions and locations of places in medieval Deccan and also a thorough knowledge of medieval Telugu, we may not be able to identify and locate the other places effectively. However, the fact remains that all the places mentioned in the above songs and verses whether known or unknown remain only on the northern and southern tracts of Tungabathira river in and around Hampi the capital of Vijayanagar empire and thus confirming the ethnic origin of the community as propounded in the available texts and literature.

**[iii] Identification on the basis of key word “Doddi”:-**

As already stated the people of Thottiyanaicker community is called in Telugu as “Doddi Kambalam”. Doddi means cattle-shed and Kambalam means group or clan. Many of the hamlets of Thottiyanaickers in Tamilnadu are having names prefixing or suffixing “Doddi”. A Thottiyar hamlet in Theni District in Tamil Nadu is called in Telugu as “Malla Doddi”. There are other villages also called in Telugu as “Avala Doddi, Marrimangula Doddi and Mysalavula Doddi etc. Likewise there are so many villages in various districts of Tamil Nadu inhabited by Thottiyanaickers having the common name of ‘Doddipalli’. ‘Doddi kota’ (Thottiyar Kottai) is another famous village in Dindigul District of Tamil Nadu which was once ruled by powerful poligars of the Thottiyanaicker Caste.

Surprisingly the researcher, on his field visits to the focused areas both on the northern and southern tracts of Tungabathira river around Hampi, has found so many villages having the name ‘Doddi’ either as a prefix or suffix. The following Doddi villages can be cited as examples. Pai Doddi and Thoppala Doddi in Raichur District, Karnataka. Balasala Doddi, Bapala Doddi, Gurrala Doddi, Gothala Doddi, Ralla Doddi, Mugula Doddi, Thippala Doddi, Paramana Doddi, Chirumana Doddi in Bellari District, Karnataka. Gumala Doddi, Doddi Gunta, Mamilla Doddi, Doddi Vaga in east Godavari District, Andhra, Kappala Doddi and Alli Doddi in Kistna District, Andhra, Ped(dha) Doddi, Erra Doddi, Enamala Doddi, Nakkana Doddi, Somana Doddi and Nadimi Doddi in Anantapur District, Andhra, Edhula Doddi, Puram Doddi, Palakku Doddi and Lingneni Doddi in Kurnool District, Andhra, Bandla Doddi, Deva Doddi, Doddi palle, Mankala Doddi, Kanamala Doddi and Bommana Doddi in Chittoor District, Andhra [Anon, 1933].

When the Researcher further verified on field work he found that many of these ‘Doddi’ villages were mainly inhabited by ‘Doddi Gollas’ in Telugu Districts and ‘Kadu Gollas’ in Kannada tracts. Both the communities are considered to be the exact counter-parts having similar cultural traits and engaged in Cattle-rearing only. The other communities inhabiting these Doddi villages are Kurubas and Beda Nayakas who are also pastoral communities engaged in Cattle-rearing [Krishnamurthy Hanur, 2000]. They also call their Cattle-sheds as ‘Doddi’. Hence these Doddi villages spread over the focused area also throw more light in tracing out the ethnic origin of Thottiyanaickers, who derive their name from the keyword ‘Doddi’.

**[iv] Identification on the basis of Telugu names of Thottiyanaicker hamlets:-**

Exclusive field visits throughout Tamil Nadu has enabled the researcher to note down the fact that majority of the villages and hamlets inhabited by Thottiyanaickers in Tamil Nadu are having invariably the following typical Telugu names: Amma palli, Badineni palli, Chillavari palli, Bommana palli, Bodaya palli, Bandla palli, Peddula palli, Gudi palli, Gundla palli, Jalli palli, Doddi palli, Doddi kota, Kotha kota, Uppu kota, Kotha palli, Uppara palli, Ralla palli, Regitti palli, Mitta palli, Dinna palli, Enda palli, Thammineni palli, Zangala palli, Godugala palli, Linganeni palli, Nela kota, Thotta palli, Kamala thotta, Kambala palli, Pullakka palli, Marri gunta, Marri magula palli, Gettu palli, Gutta palli, Eddulanayani palli, Bodi palli, Kodiya palli etc.

On cross verification made by the researcher on his field visits, it is found that almost all the above village names are found to be available in the focused area also comprising Andhra, Telugana and Karnataka States [Anon 1933]. Why the people of Thottiyanaickers in Tamil Nadu should name majority of their villages and hamlets using Telugu names of the very same villages and hamlets as originally available in Andhra, Telengana and Karanataka?. The reason is obvious. A community which is known for its continuity cannot easily forget or shed away memory as to its original places of origin and habitation.

**[v] Identification based on peculiar Socio-Cultural traits followed by the community:-**

The peculiar Socio-Cultural traits followed by the community called Thottiyanaickers have already been sufficiently narrated. For a comparative study of these peculiar socio-culture traits the researcher has chosen four focused groups living in the focused area as they have shown some connection and resemblance with Thottiyanaicker community in one or the other way. The focused groups chosen are 1. Doddi Gollas of Andhra and Teleugana, 2. Kadu Gollas of Karnataka, 3. Ekili Gollas of Andhra and 4. Beda Nayakas of Karnataka. Doddi Golla community posses the word 'Doddi' from which the word 'Thottiyar' derived. Kadu Gollas are the exact counter parts of Doddi Gollas following the very same socio cultural practices. Ekili Golla group has been chosen because one of the sub-division of Thottiyanaicker is called Vekili. Beda Nayaka community has the word "Nayaka" which forms part of Thottiyanaicker community also.

Adopting the methodology of participating observation and after meticulous comparison the researcher has found that out of above focused groups Doddi Gollas of Andhra and Teleugana and their counter parts Kadu Gollas of Karnataka are following 80% of the peculiar socio-cultural traits which are followed by Thottiyanaicker community. Their marriage and puberty ceremonies, ancestral worship, Doddi based ceremonies and rituals, celebrating festivals, performing death and funeral ceremonies and rites all appear to be almost same. Social hierarchy adopted by the community, treating Kambili as the supreme dictum, devotion shown in cattle rearing all resemble that of Thottiyanaicker community [Encyclopedia of Folk Culture of Karnataka, 1991, Vol.1 : 98]. Some variations are there which require further explanation. In this way Beda Nayakas of Karnataka (Veda kabalam in Tamil) are following 65% and Ekili Gollas of Andhra are following 50% of the above cultural traits [Ibid]. This comparative study shows that the actual counter parts and Kinsmen of Thottiyanaickers in the focused area could be Doddi Gollas or Doddi Kambalam and Kadu Gollas and this finding again goes to confirm and fix the ethnic origin of Thottiyanaicker community to be that of the above focused area.

## **II. CONCLUSION:**

Of course it is very difficult to trace out and fix the exact ethnic origin of a secluded community living in voluntary exclusion for centuries together. In spite of such difficulties and handicaps some glimpses have been shown here in the case of tracing out the ethnic origin of Thottiyanaickers of Tamilnadu. The question whether migration of this community to Tamilnadu was in toto and upto 100% or not still remains to be a debatable issue. Only in case of 100% migration it may not be possible to trace out and fix the exact ethnic origin of a community. Here, the possibility of existence of counter parts and kinsmen of Thottiyanaicker community in the focused area has been established. In such a case the mysteries shrouding over their ethnic origin can be satisfactorily cleared by carrying not further comparative study of peculiar socio-cultural traits followed by both the groups under focus. Such a comparative study has been carried out here to considerable extent which paved way for fixing the possible ethnic origin of Thottiyanaickers of Tamilnadu though not the exact ethnic origin. Establishing their exact ethnic origin may be subject matter of another paper.

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