

Research paper on the nayars of india and their subsistence

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



Nayar is a caste in the Kerala region of southern India and is remarkably different from other tribes and sects in the region. The Nayars were a matrilineal sect that also practised polyandry. The sect in ancient times till the 13th century was chiefly a warrior clan that served the local feudal lords and kings. In the 14th century the community slowly turned matrilineal from partilineal. The chief subsistence of the Nayars was militaristic activities that slowly became emerging agricultural in nature. The impact of the ways of subsistence among the Nayars is not apparent and the real reasons for the change in social and hierarchical customs can be put down to the physical association of Nayar women with Namboothiri Brahmins men, whose motives were driven around preserving their land and not losing it through inheritance to sons and daughters Brahmins had with the Nayars. The impact of the subsistence activities on the kinship, gender relationships, religion and beliefs and social organisation is also studied. The decline in the matrilineal society and the Nayars reverting back to patrilineal ways since the 19th century can be put down to the western education and globalisation and the incompatibility the setting has with the modern ways.

The Nayars of India and Their Subsistence

The Nayar are a group of castes in the South Indian State of Kerala.

Historically, the Nayars were a warrior clan and served as militia to the small feudal kingdoms in the region. Apart from most men being away for the wars for large part of the year, the primary activity of those left behind was farming and the caste is classified as being emerging agriculturalist. The staple diet of the Nayars is rice, and was supplemented by vegetables, fish, chicken and buffalo meat. The Nayars are a complex clan and have

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remarkably different social structure and are a matrilinear and polyandrous society. In this essay, an attempt would be made to study the cultural setting of the Nayars and the relationship between the subsistence and the cultural aspects like beliefs and values, economic setting and kinship shall be made.

Before a study of the subsistence of Nayars and their cultural setting is observed, it is important to know the origins of the Nayars, as their history is rather complex and contrastingly different from other castes and customs, in terms of marital practices and powers of women in the society. The study of the lineage and history of Nayars, either ethnographical or ethnological, shall also help us to reach the conclusion to the question that has been posed in the essay: The relation between the subsistence and various cultural aspects in the society of Nayars.

History and Origin of Nayars

The origin of Nayars is not certain and there exist many theories about from where they come. A few sociologists believe that the Nayars are not indigenous to Kerala and have descended from the Newars of Nepal. They came to Kerala following the Munda exodus. This argument gains strength through the similarities in architecture style of Nayar Temples and Tharavaadus (Joint Family) and the Kulus of Nepal valley. Both the architectural styles consisted of pagoda like structures. Their marital and social system is also similar as both matrilinear societies, which the Nayars called Marumakkathaayam (Fuller, 1976). Other similarities of the Kathakali dance of the Nayars and the Tibetan dances have also been highlighted (Cett, 1985).

Another argument about their origins of Nayars pertains to their affinity towards serpent worship. It is believed that the Nayars were Nagas who were Kshatriyas of the serpent dynasty. This point of view emerges from the Nayars being involved in serpent worship and being masters in martial arts.

A third line of thinking adds a mythological perspective to the ethnological study. It suggests that the Nayars were people who accompanied the Naboothiri Brahmins after the legendary hero Parasurama reclaimed Kerala from the seas and gave ownership to the Namboothiris. Nayars were called Sudras and served the Naboothiris as bodyguards, protectors and servants (Pillai, 1984).

Whatever the origin be, the Nayar caste was established after the Namboothiri Brahmins from Northern Kerala gained in strength and instilled a caste system. The Nayars were categorized as being sat Sudras, and were positioned below the Brahmins and above other lower castes. It was under the wings of the Namboothiris that the Nayars transformed slowly from being a warrior clan into an emerging agriculturist society. Till the beginning of the 19th century, the Nayars were a dominant community and along with the Namboothiris exerted considerable influence as owners of large estates and feudal lords.

Until the 13th century, Nayars were warrior clan and sustained themselves through militaristic activities and conquest. It was through such activities that Nayar land lords became owners of large pieces of land. The subsistence of Nayars from 14th century onwards was chiefly through rice

cultivation. The Nayars Tharavads owned large pieces of land that were given away to tenants of lower caste for cultivation. This was since a large number of

males were usually away for wars for extended periods of the year. The subsistence food of rice was supplemented by vegetables, eggs, fish, poultry, beef and goat meat. However the higher ranked Nayars were completely vegetarians as like the Namboothiris.

In addition to the agriculture, trade was also a major activity among all castes in Kerala including the Nayars. It was due to the fact that the region was not self-sufficient with the amount of rice produced. The traders came from far off places like China, Middle East and Europe with Vasco da Gama finding the route to India from Calicut in the 15th century, the trade activities only grew. Rice was traded along with black pepper, teak, mahogany, elephant tusk and precious stones. This gave opportunity for Nayar men to meet foreigners and with their history of being warriors and staying away from the house for extended periods, they could travel long distances on voyages too. This characteristic later sped up the decline in the Marumakkathaayam Thaaravad as the western educated men compelled for the matrilineal society into patrilinear one after realising the drawbacks in the system.

Nayars and Kinship

The Nayar Tharavads is remarkable for its matrilineal setup. It is to be noted that till the 14th century, none of the visitors travelling to Travancore had noticed the presence of the matrilineal system, which is corroborated by the

absence of any such peculiarity in their literature and observations. The presence of such a system of matrilineal family and inheritance was first noted by Frair Jordanm and subsequently by Ibn Batuta (1342) and Nicol Conti in 1444. The matrilineal family of Nayars called the marumakkathayam refers to a system where the brothers and sisters from a same mother lived under the same roof. The nominated head of the family was the eldest male member called the Karanavan (uncle), usually the brother of the eldest female. There was no active role of husbands in a household and the women continued to live in the same house after getting married, with her brothers and sisters post her marriage. The children she had also lived with her and it was the Tharavad of the mother that was entirely responsible for their children's upbringing. The husbands had no legal obligation towards the children, apart from claiming them to his sons and daughters. The matrilineal system of Nayars was different from that of other systems in a sense that it was polyandrous in nature, i. e. the Nayar women could have more than one husbands. Such a system of marumakkathayam was forced upon methodically by the Namboothiris on the Nayars.

The start of the 14th century was a growth in landlordism throughout India (Logan, 1951). It was also the time when the agriculture became the predominant source of occupation. The Namboothiris possessed large pieces of land and the Nayars were their tenants or Jenmies. The Namboothiri Brahmins were patrilinear society, but the younger male members of the caste were forced to live a life of celibacy as they were prohibited to marry another woman of the same or lower caste. This was done because of the skewed sex ratio that prevailed in the Brahmin community. The younger

Namboothiris thus sought the Nayar women to fulfil their sexual desires and entered into loose conjugal unions called sambandhams. However, a formal marriage with a Nayar woman was unacceptable as she belonged to a lower caste. Due to this the matrilineal system was forced on the Nayars. In this system the Nayar women could exercise a lot of control in choosing as many lovers as she wishes and gave them considerable sexual freedom (Gough, 1959). The Nayar woman was however prohibited from choosing a lover belonging to a lower caste than theirs.

The primary motive of bringing such a system was for the Namboothiri Brahmin males to be completely free from the parental responsibilities and inheritance. This system avoided for the Brahmins to have to divide their pieces of land to the children with Nayar mothers. Also the property descended along the female line and prevented the families from disintegrating. The whole system was designed to preserve the ownership of land with the tharavads, as the rice was the subsistence food. Also the system of kinship emerged due the history of Nayar men being warriors and being away for prolonged periods from home.

The trade activities bear a mark in decline towards the tharavad structure and the matrilineal hierarchy. It was due to the exposure of the Nayar men with the outside world and the English education that brought about the quicker end to the Marumakkathaayam custom. Also the rising Christian influence in the region and the conversion of lower caste into Christians and

freeing them from forced labour helped in controlling Nayar and Brahmin dominance (Brett-Crowther, 1987).

Nayars and the Values and Beliefs

The beliefs of Nayars were very much similar to that of the Hindus and they practically followed each and every custom of that of the Brahmins, like deity worship of Shiva, Krishna and other gods. However, their beliefs can be seen as a mix of Dravidian culture as elements serpent worship, belief in spirits and black magic were essential parts of their culture (Panikkar, 1918). Every tharavad had a serpent garden located in the south-east corner of the house (Moore, 1985). It was present as the Nayars believed themselves to be descendants of Nagas.

Similar to such pagan beliefs, the Nayar society was also highly superstitious. These superstitions were also often adopted from other cultures. The agrarian societies are often superstitious and religious as good rains are essential for healthy crop and such societies often prayed to respective gods for the rains.

Social Organization

The caste system was imposed by the Brahmins on the Nayars and that is how their social hierarchy was decided. The castes were determined the occupation of karanav, or the head of the tharavad (Moore, 1985). Castes held a significant importance in Nayar culture and considerable effort was devoted towards preventing the pollution of castes. There were predominantly five sub-caste of Nayars: Kiryathil

Nayars, who were the highest among all the Nayars and were the warrior clan who came from the north. The next is Illathu Nayar, who came with Parasuram and served the Namboothiri Brahmins. Then there were Swaroopathil Nayars, Padamangalam Nayars and Padamangalam Nayars. Important positions in the society were held by men and the daughters and wives benefited from him in that position (Gough and Schnieder, 1974). The property and possessions were inherited by women and passed on to the future generation along the female line.

The impact of the subsistence activity on the caste system is reflected after the society turned agrarian. It was under the control of the Namboothiri Brahmins that the caste system of Nayars was instilled and the subsequent laws of control of land were established, which set forth further laws of hierarchy and social status.

Conclusion

The agrarian culture of the Nayars lasted till the fall of the matrilineal system collapsed in the 19th century. Post the collapse of their traditional ways, the society has turned patrilineal and monoandrous. The impact of the subsistence ways on the society have been indirect and are motivated by other causes. One can sum up the Nayar society by the amount of influence the Namboothiri Brahmins had on them. It was due to the sexual pleasure of the young Brahmins that transformed the Nayars into a matrilineal lineage as land and inheritance of Brahmins were to be protected. It was due to them too that the largely warrior clan slowly transformed into agrarian. However western influences of globalisation have brought this system to a

grinding halt and it may not be long before the Tharvads and Marumakkathaayam are found only in the history books.

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