

Festive Etiquettes and Changing Facets of Gypsy Community: A Case Study

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Abstract

Gipsies are among the most relegated communities of all the marginalised communities. The Narikuravar community in Tamil Nadu is labelled as one of the nomadic people. The Narikuravar community experienced a new age as they moved to a settled territory along with the conventional communities. This sets a platform of conversion towards a progressive community by undermining the different social ruptures against them. Festivals are considered the most significant cultural traits to influence the community's way of life but they are now transitioning due to changes in manners, customs, rituals and protocols. A case study with the help of an interview guide was conducted in the hamlet of the Narikuravar community. Three respondents of this hamlet interacted and qualitatively narrated. The study results reveal that the Narikuravar community has witnessed a lot of negotiations and compromises in the past decade. Their festival celebration is undergoing remarkable changes regarding animal sacrifice, ethnic dress code and food pattern, alcoholic beverages, sharing the joy of reciprocity with neighbouring communities and connecting with them.

Keywords

festival etiquette, changes, gypsy community

Introduction

Gipsies are the most relegated community among of all the marginalised communities. Narikuravar community is labelled as one of the itinerant people. In Tamil Nadu everyone knows that the Kuravas formed a nomadic tribe. In a landscape littered with many castes, there are about 70 types of Kuravas like Pannikuravas, Uppukuravas and Malaikkuravas, among others. Narikuravar is a community that hunts foxes and makes a living from their skin, teeth and nails (Vijay, 2018, p. 47). The Narikuravar community experienced a new age as they moved to settled territory along with the conventional communities. That sets a platform of conversion towards the progressive community by undermining the different social ruptures against them. Festivals are considered the most significant cultural traits to influence the community's way of life, but they are now transitioning due to changes in manners, customs, rituals and protocols.

The Historical Setting of the Narikuravar Community

In the early days, Narikuravar' life was spent between the chulha¹ in front of the house. Hence, the houses were mostly half-clad. Today, the Narikuravars have adopted modern hair trimming (Vijay, 2018, p. 48). Their cloth pattern and their outlook have also changed. They sell fox tails and teeth known as "Narivaal" and "Naripallu" which bring good luck to buyers. The men hunt with licensed guns. They catch and cook their prey and serve it on a large wooden plate from which all the family members eat. The Narikuravar community in Tamil Nadu has different clothing, food habits, and way of life from the conventional communities, which distinguishes them (Kirubanith & Rao, 2015, p. 1339).

The people of this hamlet moved from Mornam (a village beside a hill area) near Arcot district. The community has been living in the Narikuravar colony for the last 15 years (Tamil Nadu State government had allotted land). The settlement is popularly called the "Jambu house". The hamlet has 35 families, of which 32 converted to Christianity in 2015 and three are Hindu. Sikku mudi², selling vessels and hunting are this community's main sources of employment. They have started to value the education of the children who now get schooling from a nearby village. The community has yet to receive a community certificate from the government.

¹ Chulha is a traditional Indian cooking stove used for indoor cooking. Chulha is a U-shaped mud stove made from local clay.

² Sikku mudi is the collection of hair of a woman (the hair is usually found in the comb while combing their hair). Narikuravar people used to collect it from women from every village. They used to buy it for ₹200 per 100g and sell the same for ₹400 in the market for commercial purpose.

Festival Life of the Community

Festivals significantly impact local communities by providing value-added activities and spending outlets for locals and visitors, and by enhancing the image of a destination (Getz et al., 2006; Grunwell & Ha, 2007; Quinn, 2006). Festivals also often “create a sense of belonging and pride among residents, thus fostering the sharing of local resources and local purchases” (Julien, 2007, p. 246). Festivals are considered the most significant cultural traits to influence the community’s way of life, but they are now transitioning due to changes in manners, customs, rituals and protocols. There are visits and stays in more than 50 villages and towns respectively. The stays in a village last up to 2 days and up to 1 week in urban or semi-urban areas. The community believed staying in an urban area would bring more financial opportunities than a rural stay. In addition, those auspicious occupations and rituals in urban areas attract visitors to this community for a longer stay.

Case Study Method

A qualitative study in most situations under the research enquiries required case study methods. Hence the present paper focussed on case studies with the help of an interview guide conducted in the hamlet of the Narikuravar community. Three respondents of this hamlet interacted and qualitatively narrated.

Case Study-1

It was around 10 a.m. and Mr. Raja, 58, the head of the Narikuravar colony was busy mobilising the people for the Sunday church prayer by himself. The positive interruption by the researcher requested him to allow considerable time for the interaction. Mr. Raja recollected his good old days of the festival memories. He said that worshipping the goddesses like Kali, Pathrakali, Madurai Meenakshi Amma, Durga Amma and Karaseshwari (goddesses with the power of fire) was the most important part of the festival. The phenomenon of animal sacrifices used to happen by killing buffalos. The priest would perform these rituals during the festivals. During the festival, only the head of the household was allowed to participate in the rituals. Roti (chappathi) and halwa were the most popular and preferred dishes served anytime during the festival. The consent of all the families in the community was important to conduct the festivals – only if all the families could afford it. He also shared that no specific games were involved during the festivals because the festival itself was the game.

He kept on talking about the present culture, festivals worship patterns, and so forth. He has now a different faith and believes in Christianity. He looks like a different person in thought and outlook. He said he found the reason to adopt a new religion was the humanitarian approach toward animals. His decisions eventually perpetuate a transition in the way of life of the Narikuravar community.

Case Study-2

Radhika, a 30-old woman, was on her way to attend the Sunday church. The researcher happened to meet her in the middle of the walk. Though it was a hot sunny day, she was very much fascinated to share her life learning which eventually made her go on a life-making journey. Adopting Christianity was the centre point of her life. She developed strong beliefs after her brother started recovering from the eyesight he lost in an accident. The other important reason, she continued, to change her faith really seems to represent the entire Narikuravar community. She now seems to have completely adopted Christian festive etiquettes and lifestyle for herself and the entire community. When asked about the changing pattern of festive etiquettes she assertively enlisted the changes as follows:

- the changed dress pattern of the community brings an equal outlook and treatment to the conventional community;
- abandoning the practice of begging;
- slow reduction/retreat from alcohol beverage replaced by focussing on creating wealth and possessing vehicles, that is, two-wheelers;
- attention to health and sanitation;
- adapted to both allopathy and Siddha;
- setting a strong belief system;
- engaging common and individual prayers;
- not participating in other religious festivals but engaging in economic activities like selling ornaments and handmade products during the festivals;
- not accepting freebies to receive positive recognition from either other communities or religious people;
- due importance is given to educating children.
- Further, she reportedly said that by sharing these etiquettes above, we experience the joy of reciprocity with neighbouring communities and can create a strong connectivity.

Case Study-3

Mallika, a mother of two from the same Narikuravar community, resides on the right extreme of the hamlet. Mallika and two other families in the hamlet remain in the same religion. Mallika and her husband engaged with their indigenous Siddha practices for many generations. The Siddha centre earns them the daily bread and butter.

For this reason, she does not change to any other religion because there is a divinity in their Siddha practices, said Mallika. An extended hut type of room is allotted for keeping the medical provisions and the pictures of gods and goddesses. She has been celebrating the festivals by visiting her relatives residing in nearby hamlets and villages. However, she looks like a secular woman who accepts the worship pattern of her fellow community people.

Conclusion

The results of the three case studies reveal that the Narikuravar community has witnessed a lot of negotiations and compromises over the past decade. The entire belief system faced transition due to the religious conversion by the majority of the Narikuravar families making significant changes in the way of life in general and the festive etiquettes of the community in particular.

Narikuravar community is a noisy community which is probably one reason why they stay away from the “civilised” community. However, they do cultivate trade relationships with other communities. Another reason for the self-imposed exclusion is the fear that their contact with other communities might dilute or dissipate their cultural identity. Narikuravar community is very independent and loves the idea of the community’s identity. Since other communities look down on the Narikuravars as unclean people, they do not like to contact them (Vijay, 2018, p. 51). However, evidence from the case study of this community exhibit an ultimate transition with the help of changing religious, cultural and festival features among others. Their festival celebration is undergoing remarkable changes regarding animal sacrifice, ethnic dress code and food pattern, alcoholic beverages, sharing the joy of reciprocity with neighbouring communities and connecting with them.

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