

Widow Remarriage and Innovative Dowry Practices Among Jawadhu Hill Tribes: A Historical Study

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Abstract: *This study aimed to investigate the origin, social structure, and unique cultural elements of the Malayali tribes living in the Jawadhu Hills in the Tirupattur District. In particular, their marriage practices, secondary remarriage, and innovative dowry systems are based on historical evidence. This historical study is based on historical sources such as 19th-century documents, such as John Shortt's The Hill Ranges of Southern India-III (1871). Salem District Manual-1883, Part-2, H. Le Fanu and reports from British officials. Jawadhu Malayalis and pojaris are identified as the indigenous inhabitants of the Jawadhu hills. This tribe had progressive marriage practices that respected women's rights, including widow remarriage. In particular, there was an innovative dowry practice called "Perungatti Selluthal", where money and grains were given from the groom's house to the bride's house. This social custom is beneficial to women. In India, where dowry is a major problem in modern society, this custom of the Jawadhu hill tribe people speaks volumes about their cultural superiority and the social elevation they have given women. This study is important because it reveals admirable elements of the tribe's social structure.*

Keywords: Widow remarriage, innovative dowry system, Jawadhu hill tribes, Malayali tribes, Pujaris, Perungatti Selluthal, Jawadhu Hills

1. Introduction

The Jawadhu Hills are located 13 miles east of the Tirupattur district. It is approximately 3,000 feet above sea level and has an area of 350 square miles. The highest peak in the Jawadhu Hills is the Melpattu Peak. As mentioned in the early 19th century by John Shortt (*The Hill Ranges of Southern India-III*, 1871), it has 145 villages and a population of 9,296. According to the second edition of the Salem District Manual, towards the end of the 19th century, the Jawadhu Hills were divided into nine Nadu with 138 villages and a population of 17,799. Each Nadu has five to 36 villages. They are 1. Nellivasal Nadu: 11 villages, 2. Pudur Nadu: 08 villages, 3. Pungampattu Nadu: 10 villages, 4. Tenmalainadu (present Thenmalai)-10 villages, 5. Moolakkadu Nadu- 05 villages, 6. Bargur Nadu: 24 villages, 7. Pallappa Nadu: 36 villages, 8. Nadupattu Nadu: 17 villages, 9. Bhimakulam Nadu: 17 villages. There are nine Nadus.

Indigenous Inhabitants:

The Malayalis, a tribal people living in the Jawadhu Hills, are natives (*The Hill Ranges of Southern India-III* 1871). John Shortt states that the Jawadhu Hills are divided into two groups of people: the original inhabitants and the later ones. The original inhabitants of this area are the Malayalis and the Pujaris, the latter being referred to as Irulas, who arrived later.

The latter (Irulas) call themselves Vellalar. However, they mix freely, eat together, and eat at each other's houses. However, he states that the tribes called Malayalis do not intermarry with the Irulas, who are called Vellalar. From this, only the Malayalis and Pujaris are the original inhabitants of this hill. The Vellalars (Irulas), who are said to be the later arrivals, may have been immigrants to the Jawadhu Hills. Therefore, the Malayali tribes and the later ones (Irulas), who called themselves Vellalars, are different. He says that the class called Pujaris is a small caste and that the Pujaris have been helping the Malayalis in farming and many other jobs.

Fabrication:

Most researchers have misconceptions about the origin of Jawadhu Hill Malayalis. Edgar Thurston, in his book *Castes and Tribes of South India-1909* states that the Jawadhu Hill Malayalis migrated from Kanchipuram to the Jawadhu Hills during the Muslim period. However, there is no authentic evidence for this. Moreover, he did not directly investigate this idea but said that he took it from the North Arcot District Manual-1895 Part-1, Arthur F. Cox, M.C.S. Furthermore, while examining the authenticity of this idea, Arthur F. Cox, M.C.S., says that the idea that the Malayalis living in the Jawadhu Hills are descended from the customs described above throws serious doubt on the Vellála origin of the Malayális. Writers, surveyors and British government officials, after John Shortt wrongly recorded the Malayali tribe as the Vellalar tribe, who were the majority population of North Arcot at that time, in government documents, as there was no record of the Malayali tribe in the 1871 census. However, before them (*The Hill Ranges of Southern India-III*, 1871). According to the report of John Shortt and the surveyor and forest officer Lieutenant Walker, who visited the area in person, it is believed that the Malayali tribe of the Jawadhu Hills is the original inhabitants.

Widow Remarriage and rights given to women:

Marriage system:

The Jawadhu hill tribe people supported two types of marriages: 1) the marriage of a virgin is termed "Kalianam," or "marriage proper, 2) widow remarriage (Kattikirathu or Kattuvathu). These people allowed women who were abandoned by their husbands and those who lost their husbands to remarry. The marriage system of the Jawadhu hill tribe is very innovative. According to the Salem District Manual-1883 Part-2 H., in Le Fanu, the wedding ceremony is held on Monday. This is followed by tying the thali on Friday. The wedding ceremony is held over a week. It is an essential condition that it should not be the day after the new moon. The services of Brahmins are not used in wedding ceremonies. Moreover, they do not show any concern in

choosing the ascendant, muhurtham, or auspicious day for tying the thali. When a girl is to be married, the choice of husband is not left to the wishes of the girl or her parents. The village headman must inquire about the eligible girl for marriage in the village (the headman of the village is called the Ur-Goundan). The headman of Nadu, which comprises several villages, is called the naattan. He then calls the naattan to the location. When the naattan arrives, the panchayat of the residents is convened, and a son-in-law is selected with their help. The parents of the bride and groom then make arrangements for the wedding day. When we investigated this, we found that even today, when the tribal people of Jawadhu Hills marry off a boy, the groom's family does not directly contact the bride's family. In contrast, the village elders, in a group of three or five respected people, go to the bride's house to inquire whether they will give him a girl. Only after that do they contact the bride's house from the groom's house, and only then do they start the marriage rituals. When a girl is married, she is given a dowry of 12-8-0 rupees in cash and 07 kandagam (kandam) of samai or kezvaragu in kind. This method/ritual is called "perungattikittu porathu" in the marriage customs of the Jawadhu Hill tribes. In it, various items such as samai or kezvaragu and betel leaves are tied in large bundles in the shape of a large ball and taken to the bride's house along with banana fiber. Here, the same right to remarry was given to the sows. This marriage system is called Kattikirathu or Kattuvathu. The women who remarried the sows were given only 07 rupees and 16 vallams of grain as dowry. "The Javathu hill tribes cultivated samai or kezvaragu as their main crops and handled them in the following measurements: one maanam of 1 kg, five maanams as one vallam, 40 vallams as one kandam/kandagam, and 80 vallams as two kandagam or one putti."

They stored it in large grain storage containers called dhombai, which they used during monsoons and famines. A small Dhombai was the size of one kandam, a medium-sized Dhombai was the size of one putti, and a large Dhombai was used to store up to five putti.

New Kind Dowry System:

The hill tribe Malayali people living in this hilly region follow an innovative dowry system that is favorable for women. Generally, dowry, as we know it, is received by women in the form of money or goods in the name of seethanam from the bride's house during marriage. However, the hill tribe people practice dowry in the opposite way. The above-mentioned dowry systems are given to a groom to give the girl as a bride to the bride's house. This custom is still called the engagement system of Panam Kattuthal to a large extent. It is worth mentioning that this practice is still in practice among the Jawadhu hill tribe people. In a time when dowry is against the society of various women, this type of dowry system is commendable, from which we know that the culture of the Jawadhu hill tribe people is commendable.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, this historical study of the Jawadhu Hill tribes reveals a unique and socially progressive set of marital customs, particularly regarding widow remarriage and dowry practices. By examining 19th-century sources and integrating

firsthand interview data, we highlighted the Malayali tribe's cultural norms that stand in contrast to mainstream Indian dowry traditions. The tribe's practice of Perungatti Selluthal, where the dowry is given from the groom's family to the bride's, reflects a notable inversion of conventional dowry systems and underscores the tribe's respect for women's rights and autonomy. Moreover, the acceptance and institutionalization of widow remarriage illustrate a forward-thinking social structure that provided women with dignity and economic security. Ultimately, this research not only contributes to our understanding of the Jawadhu Hills' indigenous social systems but also invites a broader appreciation of cultural diversity in historical marriage practices. These findings underscore the importance of re-examining regional histories to recognize and preserve unique and progressive cultural practices.

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