

# SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE OF THE KURUMBAS IN NILGIRIS

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## **Abstract**

*Kurumbas are an important tribal community in the Nilgiris. Their status is different from their neighbours. Alu Kurumba, Jenu Kurumba, Betta Kurumba, Urali Kurumba and Mullu Kurumba are the different kinds of Kurumbas. This paper aims to highlight the origin and history of the Kurumbas and their socio – economic life through the ages.*

**Key words:** *Kurumbas, Adivasi, Alu Kurumba, Jenu Kurumba, Betta Kurumba, Urali Kurumba*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Nilgiris District is in the western part of Tamil Nadu. Etymologically the word Nilgiri means Blue Mountains. This name is given to a range of mountains spread across the borders among the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. The Nilgiri Hills are part of a larger mountain chain known as the Western Ghats. Their highest point is the mountain of Doddabetta at a height of 2,637 m. Nilgiris is the home of many tribes and one of them is the Kurumbas. They live in the mid-ranges of the Nilgiris. There were many branches among them like, *Vanajati* (castes of forests), *Vanvasi* (inhabitants of forests), *Pahari* (hill dwellers), *Adijati* (original communities), *Adivasi* (first settlers) and *Fanjate* (folk people). Among all these names the term “*Adivasi*” is the one extensively used.

## **KURUMBAS OF NILGIRIS**

Kurumbas means one who tends sheep. Though there are some Kurumba living in the plain areas of the state, they have not been notified as a Scheduled Tribe. Only those living in the Nilgiri district of Tamilnadu are included in the list of the Scheduled Tribes. The Kurumbas or Kuruba are the modern representatives of the ancient Pallavas, who were once powerful throughout Southern India.

According to 2001 Census, the total population of the Nilgiri district is 7.64 lakhs, Scheduled Tribe population in Tamil Nadu is 651321 (328917 males and 322404 females) constituting 1.04 percent of the total population. There are thirty six Scheduled Tribes; among whom the *Todas*, *Kotas*, *Kurumbas*, *Irulas*, *Kattunayakans* and *Paniyans* are the approved primitive tribes of Tami Nadu. Among the six primitive tribes, *Todas*, *Kotas*, *Paiyans*, and *Kurumbas* are exclusively living in the Nilgiris. *Irulas* and *Kattunayakans* are spread throughout Tamil Nadu. The *Kanikkaran* or the *Kanis* are living in the Kanyakumari district. This paper describes the social and economic status of the Kurumbas in the Nilgiri district.

## Origin and History

Kurumbas are the least civilized group in the district and they mostly live in the hill slopes and feverish places. ( Alu Kurumba, Jenu Kurumba ,Betta Kurumba, Urali Kurumba and Mullu Kurumba). They are the various groups are generally believed to be the descendents of the Pallavas whose rule was at its grandest in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D Losing power to the Kongus and the Chalukyas, the Pallavas were finally driven out and dispersed by the Chola king Adondai. They settled in scattered settlements in the Nilgiris and Waynad, Coorg and Mysore. It is the Kurumas of the Nilgiris whom we say the Kurumba. In many ethnograohic accounts on the tribe, the numbers vary from as few as three to as many as seven. The various groups are the Jen, Mula (thron), Betta or Vetta (hill), Urali, (Ur, a village), Ten (honey), Tac'chanadan Muppan (carpenter headman) and Alu or Palu. The most populations among the Kurumbas are the Alu Kurumbas.

## Child Birth

The parents take the new born child to the temple in the month of *Thai* (January-February). The name is given either by the parents, elders or by the temple priest. This is done after offerings are made to God. A feast is arranged a week after the child's birth, for all those who helped in the delivery of the child. Mostly non-vegetarian dishes, either pork or meat, are served for the dinner. After a month or two after the child's birth, the whole village is given a feast by the particular family.

## Adolescent Rituals

A girl attaining puberty is isolated from the rest of the family and kept in a remote hut set apart for this purpose. As these girls are said to possess *theettu*, none can touch them, or the members of their family. This lasts for a month. Afterwards, the girls are taken back to their homes, presented with new cloths and entertained to a grand feast. Generally all the tribes considered the attainment of puberty as pollution.

## Marriage

Consanguineous marriages like cross-cousin marriages are preferred among the Kurumbas as nearly half of the men marry, either mother or uncle's daughter, paternal auntie's daughter or sister's daughter (in the order of preference). Wedding, presently, among Kurumbas has become extremely a costly affair, as it exists among other castes. The parent of the groom spends a few thousand rupees on the celebrations and the bride's parents are expected to spend the equivalents on clothes, jewellery and household utensils. The guests at the wedding bring cash contribution to the couples, considered as a loan, or returnable at later. In some areas, wedding is a simple ceremony consisting simply of tying the *tali* without any ritual and feeding a small family group. A newly married couple often stays in the same house along with the groom's parents for several months or years. Shortly before the birth of the child, the women returns to her parent's house where stays atleast for three months after birth child.

## Disposal of Dead

The dead are buried on the first or second day after death. They are laid on their backs, head to the south, feet to the north, and face turned to the east. At the burial ground, a pot of milk is broken over the grave above the head; on the day, water is poured over the grave. Both these actions are considered to be a cleaning the sins of his relatives and following this grand feast is served. The following day, the families are fed a meal with meat, from which it has abstained since the death. However, these elaborate ceremonies are not performed after the

deaths also vary from settlements to settlements depending of course, on the capacity of the family to spend.

### Daily Routine

The Kurumba ancestors gathered honey and cultivated small patches of *raagi*, *saami* and other grains for food and survival. Coffee and tea are their popular drinks. Even children as young as five years are given back sweetened coffee to drink in the morning. Besides, jackfruits, another plant growing in abundance in the Nilgiris are also consumed in generous quantity in its raw and cooked form. With most of the Kurumbas working in the plantation they have to leave home in the morning and return only after five in the evening. This allows them only two meals (*ittu*) a day. The meals consist of rice (replacing *raagi*) and a curry. They eat fish, chicken and flesh of animals. Moreover, chewing tobacco and drinking alcohol irrespective of gender are popular.

The villages of the Kurumbas in the Nilgiri hills are called mottas. They consist generally of only four or five huts made of mud and wattle, with thatched roofs scattered on the steep wooded slopes of the Nilgiris. Individual huts stand alone on a flattened piece of land and are the homes to nuclear families. Moreover, constructed from a bamboo backbone with walls made of criss-crossing bamboo strips and grass, they are often fortified with mud and cow dung and support a tiled roof. A small partition, a meter deep and a meter high, divides the interior space into kitchen and living or sleeping rooms. The kitchen *isittumane* (food house) has a narrow one-foot high ledge running the length of a wall. This ledge holds the fire place and the utensils. Steel vessels have replaced the traditional bamboo vessels and leaves used earlier. The sleeping room or *vagamane* serves for all other purposes. The houses open to flattened verandahs or *thinnamane* that are used for social purposes. Many of the Kurumbas now live in the government settlements that are brick houses with tin roofs. They work in the plantations.

### Recreations

The Kurumbas share a common musical culture with other tribes. Bamboo pipes (*kolu* and *bugir*) and mono faced drums (*tambatte*) and two-faced drums are the popular instruments. Themes are either devotional or associated with death and marriage rituals. In dance there are two kinds: the *gandesaatam* is performed by the men who take part in the theatre of *Kuthu*. Staged by the firelight or under the moonlight, both the female and male roles are played by the men alone. Themes are religious and social with a penchant for comedy.

### Beliefs and Art

The Kurumbas art is an expression of its socio-religious fabric. The art is traditionally practiced by the male member of the temple caretakers, or priest to the Kurumba village. The women of the family contribute to the decorations at home in the form of borders around the door and windows and *kolams* on the floor. Other Kurumbas are not allowed to practice the art. The canvas for the painting is the outer wall of the temple and the houses. The figures representing their gods and the Kurumba man express Kurumba beliefs and the milestones of the village and the tribe. The artist also draws inspiration from his life. The figures are the basic elements. The figures also stand free of any depiction of their natural environment. The defining context is the surface of which they are painted. Four colours are used traditionally: Red (*Semm manna*) and white (*Bodhi manna*) are soils, black is obtained from the bark of a tree (*Kari manna*) and green from the leaves of a plant (*Kattavarai sedi*). A piece of cloth is used to apply the colour on to the cow dung prepared walls. Nowadays a fresh coat of plaster is given to the wall before painting beings. The Kurumbas profess Saivism. But they do not maintain temples of their own.

Now most of the young Kurumba men and women got occupation in government and banks, Hindustan Photo Window films (HPF), Hook Industry, Country's Linen Organization, Tribal Research Centers (TRC), Fundamental Federal Government Institutions and the Railways. From the foregoing narration it is clear that the Kurumba society has undergone a total change through the ages. Once a hunter and gatherer depending solely on collecting honey, the Kurumbas eschewed privacy and joined factories as laborers. It helped them to develop culturally, economically, politically and socially.

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