

A STUDY OF THE COMMUNITY TRADITIONS OF THE KONGU REGION OF SOUTH INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Kongu region comprises the western parts of Tamilnadu. It is famous for its seven hills that surround its borders on all sides and separates it from adjoining regions. During ancient times, Kongu obtained a distinctive identity on account of its unique physical features, culture and History. It was also gifted with abundant forests, mineral wealth and gold deposits that attracted good deal of trade and commercial activity in the region. The geo-political significance of Kongu's location enhanced its status and it gradually became a bone of contention among various kingships of South India. During early period, Kongu was classified as Kurinjitinai, i.e. hilly zone and on account of that it passed through a prolonged struggle for supremacy with other ecosystems of the Tamil land. Kongu became a seat of Chera kings who consolidated their position through the invincibility of the region. Over the period of time, important historical events occurred in Kongu region that needs to be investigated. This study deals with the Community traditions of the Kongu region that were composed during the Medieval period. Three major community traditions selected for this study includes Kongudesarajakkal, KongumandalaSathagam and Cholahpurvapataiyam. The main objective of this study is to examine these traditions and delineate the social, economic and political significance of the data gleaned from the traditions.

Keywords: Kongu, Kongudesarajakkal, KongumandalaSathagam, Cholahpurvapataiyam, Chera, Chola, Pandya

Introduction

Researches on social history or community history are often confronted with the scarcity of historical data. Unlike royal inscriptions and state-sponsored chronicles, the vast multitude of illiterate peasantry and ethnic population neither leaves their written records nor draws the attention of travellers and itinerary scholars. The constraints of negligible data of primordial societies sometimes compel the historians to dig and explore fresh avenues in order to collect reliable pieces of information. In such cases, when accurate records are not available, it is desirable to obtain historical data from popular traditions. In the Kongu region, local communities fondly treasure some kind of oral traditions that travel from generations to generations. Certain community traditions of the Kongus, composed during the medieval period, possess considerable information about some significant developments that occurred in the course of history of Kongu. In particular, these traditions refer to certain incidents and events related to the lives of Kongu kings, as well as socio-economic conditions of the times. The chief traditions of Kongu region are *Kongudesarajakkal*, *KongumandalaSathagam* and *Cholahpurvapataiyam*.

a) Kongudesarajakkal:

Kongudesarajakkal, the celebrated Mackenzie Mss., is the greatest record for the history of Kongu region. Authored by an unknown scholar, it was probably compiled in the 17th century because it presents an account of the rulers of Kongu upto this period. This Tamil Mss. was intensely translated, studied and published by Taylor in the 19th century (Taylor, 1950). *Kongudesarajakkal* provides an account of twenty-eight kings of early Kongu, including seven Ratta rulers, beginning from Viraraya Cakravarti to Vikramadeva; and twenty-one Ganga kings, from Konganivarman I to Malladeva II (Arokiaswami, 1956). Besides, it carries detailed references to the Chola, Hoysala and Vijaynagar rule, as well as to the ruling dynasty of Mysore till the beginning of seventeenth century. This chronicle supplies graphic details of the Rattas and Gangas, particularly their administrative system, religious life and foreign policies; and elaborate description of the donations of the Hoyasals (Arokiaswami, 1956).

The historical significance of *Kongudesarajakkal* lies in its scientific and realistic composition and the prolific use of inscriptions by the author. While dealing with the Ganga rule, the author makes a point to corroborate the available date from the inscriptions and land grants. Lewis Rice says that "the utility of the *Kongudesarajakkal* is even greater than that of the inscriptions", as is evident from details to which even inscription do not refer (Rice, 1879). Noticing the merits of *Kongudesarajakkal*, Taylor describes it as "one of the best in the whole Mackenzie collection, being free from fable and supported by dates" (Taylor, 1950).

Kongudesarajakkal is reckoned as our chief chronicle which has bearing on the early history of the Kongu country. It is the foremost source of information regarding the identity of Kongu region. In its references to Chola, Pandya and Kerala as surrounding Kongu and Karnataka during the Ratta rule, it provides adequate evidence of the existence of Kongu as a separate entity in the first centuries of the Christian era (Arokiaswami, 1956). It tells us that Skandapura was the capital of Kongu, and its kings were independent and frequently fought with the three great kings of ancient *Tamilakam*. Referring to the last Ratta ruler, Tiruvikrama, it says:

"(He) overcame the Chola, Pandya, Kerela and Malyala countries and returned." (Arokiaswami, 1956)

The author of *Kongudesarajakkal* begins the history of Kongu with the Rattas because this dynasty exercised complete control over the Kongu region.

"In the history of kings in the Cali-yuga the first name inscribed is that of Viraraya Chakravarti of the Retti tribe, who ruled in the town of Scanda in the Congu country" (Arokiaswami, 1956).

The chronicle sheds valuable light on the remarkable event— the 'Kalabhra interregnum' that had long-lasting impact on the early history of South India:

"Then a Kali king named Kalabhra took possession of the extensive earth driving away numberless adhirajas (ancient kings)" (Arokiaswami, 1956).

Besides this, *Kongudesarajakkal* also provides significant information regarding socio-cultural and religious conditions of the time. It gives evidence indicating Jain predominance in Kongu during the Ganga rule.

"The Jain Achariya, Naganandi instructed kings in the religious system of the Jains" (Arokiaswami, 1956).

In context of the Chola king, Parantaka, the chronicle refers to information of considerable social significance:

"Acquiring great fame in the world and building an agrahara called Viranarayanapuram on the bank of Cauvery he gave free endowments to the Brahmins in it and also free endowments to the agraharas" (Arokiaswami, 1956).

Parantaka is known to have covered the temple of Chidambaram with gold. In this context, *Kongudesarajakkal* gives indication of Kongu being a chief supplier of gold when it records a unique tradition current in the Kongu region during the 17th century:

"He (parantaka) being one day in (or on) the sea heard the sound as of beating of the *mathalam* (a kind of long drum) and considering whence it proceeded he thought it must be the Sitapathiswami of Chidambaram beating the *damaraca*, a kind of small hand drum, (called in Tamil *udukkai*) and most likely the god dancing with Parvati; he in consequence expended great wealth there and built the Kanakasabhai" (Arokiaswami, 1956).

Kongudesarajakkal gives a very useful information regarding the methods that the Chola kings adopted to evoke popular support from various social groups:

"The Chola king gave the towns of Keriyyur (Talakad district in Kongu) to the merchants of Talavanapuram and by their hands made agraharas for the Brahmins and gave these to them, these Vaisyas having always been accustomed to worship the divine Brahmins (deva Brahmanas)" (Arokiaswami, 1956).

Kongudesarajakkal presents a remarkable evidence that has high social significance in relation to the origin and migrations of the Vellalas. It helps us to solve the riddle of five Kongu castes that has bearing on the existence of the Vellalas in Kongu. The chronicle mentions that Aditya defeated the Vedar and conquered Kongu, which means that even as late as ninth century C.E., the Vedar formed the only prominent and dominant caste in the Kongu region. This evidence corroborates the information acquired from the Kongu Vellala tradition that the five castes originated as a matter of necessity in the face of the arrogance of the Vedar forces.

b) KongumandalaSathagam:

KongumandalaSathagam is an important tradition that helps to understand certain aspects of Kongu history. It was compiled probably in early eighteenth century by a Jain Brahmin, Jinendran, who was later known as Karmeghavinjar. It deals with brief episodes of Kongu history in one hundred stanzas out of which only sixty are available. These stanzas are precious pieces of information about the extent of ancient Kongu, its early kings and chieftains, its ancient customs and manners, shrines and temples. However, unlike

Kongudesarajakkal, the evidence provided by this document is fragmentary and can be used in form of suggestions. Its main usefulness lies in its references to a wide range of subjects such as — Kangeyan, Pegan, Karikala, Tondaiman, Konganar, Rajaraja the Great, KattiMudali, etc.

KongumandalaSathagam supplies precious information that helps us to define the Kongu region and ascertain its extent as well as its territorial divisions. It provides the list of names of 24 *nadusthat* constituted the Kongu region. It is important to note the evidence provided by this document is corroborated by the epigraphic evidence.

KongumandalaSathagam sheds valuable light on the high state of learning in the Chola period. It gives useful reference to the famous sage of Kongu, Bavanandi, the author of the immortal grammar, *Nannul*:

“*Olga perumBavanandi*

EntrothiUpakaritha

ValkavalanSiyagangan

NinralKonguMandalame”(Arokiaswami, 1956)

It is perhaps the only source that reveals the high standards of Tamil learning in the Kongu region. It further informs us that *Nannul* was composed in Kongu in obedience to the request of Ganag king, Siyagangan, who was keen to have an easily-understood grammar of Tamil, in contrast to complicated *Tolkappiyam*.

c) *Cholapurvapataiyam*:

Cholapurvapataiyam is another tradition that carries ample information about certain social divisions and communities of the Kongu region. It was composed by an anonymous author and on the basis of its content, it can be roughly placed in the eighteenth century. It is believed to have been based “on an ancient copper plate preserved for a long time in Conjeevaram, which first came to the notice of King Karikala.” It is important to note that the author had meticulously collected in it all the existing traditions of Kongu region. Its chief importance lies in the fact that it throws a good amount of light on the communities, peasants, ethnic groups and social life of the Kongu region. *Cholapurvapataiyam* refers elaborately to the *Valangai* and *Idangai* divisions, a process that bifurcated the ancient Tamil society into left-hand castes and right-hand castes. The origin as well as the basic concept of the social divisions of the Tamil society has been adequately dealt with. It also shed light on the social and economic conditions of the various occupational groups such as the Vellalas, Mudaliars and the Kaikkolas. It also gives useful information about the ancient customs, religious usages and ceremonies. *Cholapurvapataiyam* is also a good source of information regarding the towns and villages of Konguregion that existed during its period.

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THE ORIGINS OF THE MEOS OF MEWAT

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ABSTRACT

The Meos of Mewat is considered as one of the dynamic peasant communities of northern India. Originally they belonged to some Rajput clans but over a period of time during medieval period they got converted to Islam. The process of their conversion was a remarkable phenomenon as the new faith could not split them from their ancestral heritage, and they devoutly adhered to some old Hindu customs and traditions. On account of their unconventional modes of religion and society, the Meos attracted the curiosity and interest of scholars belonging to Anthropology, History and Sociology. The importance of this community can be attributed to their composite culture and plural identities which is quite remarkable for those who are possessed with notions of uniform cultural patterns and monolithic identity of peasant communities. This study intends to dig into the genesis of this wonderful community and tries to trace their origins and descent from antiquities and mythological traditions. The main sources of this study include medieval chronicles, modern ethnological studies, and colonial reports and district records. The main objective of this study is to build a scientific basis to comprehend the genuine nature of the origin, descent and historical roots of the Meos.

Keywords: Meos, Mewat, Khanzada, Rajput, Mina, Pal, Got

The Origins of the Meos of Mewat

The Meos of Mewat set an unprecedented example of a dynamic peasant community that survived a prolonged armed struggle for about a millennium. The Meos are an indigenous and highly composite tribe found in the hill country of Mewat, an ill-defined tract lying south of Delhi and comprising part of the British districts of Gurgaon, Mathura, and most of Alwar and a little of Bharatpur state (Rose, 1990). They were originally Rajputs who were converted to the Mahomedan faith in the medieval times but still retain a good many Hindu religious customs. Meos professed the beliefs of Islam but the roots of their ethnic structure are in Hindu caste society. In fact, the neighbouring Hindu Jats, Minas, Ahirs and Rajputs share the same *bans*, *pals* and *gotras* (Singh, 1998). They were predominantly agrarian and lived mostly in villages. The dialect spoken by the community among themselves can be termed *theth* Mewati which is a dialect of Rajasthani and belongs to the Indo-Aryan languages of Indo-European origin (Grierson, 1916; Singh, 1994). The most striking feature of the Meos is their composite culture, i.e. the fusion of Hindu and Muslim cultural traits in their customs and practices (Shamsuddin, 1981). They have no conventional written histories but possess excellent cultural memory and oral traditions which narrate their prolonged resistance with the Turks, Afghans, Mughals, Jat, Rajputs and the British.

Initially, the Meos were recognized as a distinct people in the region of Mewat with culturally distinguishable traits. Interestingly, the community remained constant while the nomenclature was a variable in their history and tradition. They are generally referred to as 'Meds', 'Mids', 'Khanzadas', 'Mewatis' or 'Meos', but the latter term has been more preferred and found convenient particularly after their conversion to Islam.

The origin of the term 'Meo' eludes the scholars, some deriving it from Mewat, which is said to be the Sanskrit *mina-vati*, 'rich in fish,' while the Meos themselves derive it from *maheo*, a word used in driving cattle (Crooke, 1975). According to Rose, 'it seems highly probable that Meo simply means "hill-man."' (Rose, 1990) To some, 'Meo' originated from the word 'Med.', 'The *Meds* or *Mands*', Cunningham writes, 'as they are called by the Mohammedan writers, are almost certainly the representatives of the *Mandrueni*, who lived on the *Mandrus* river, to the south of the Oxus; and as their name is found in the Punjab from the beginning of the Christian era downwards, I conclude that they must have accompanied their neighbours, the *latii*, or *Jats*, on their forced migrations to Ariana and India (Cunningham, 2001).

According to one tradition, Meos are also known as Meo and Meo Bohra (Singh, 1998). The Meos believed that they are the progeny of one of the two brothers, namely, Meo and Maru. The descendants of Meo settled in Mewat and those of Maru in Marwar.

Mewat derives its name from the Mev or Meo, who might have originally belonged to the same stock as those of the Minas of Rajputana, but they claim that they have not intermarried with them since the time of Akbar. Mina is believed to have come from Amina Meo or 'pure' Meo, a term applied to those who did not adopt Islam (Imp. Gaztt, 1908). The Hindu Meos and Minas make Rajput claims, but they are not so regarded by other Hindus, and it is certain that outsiders have often been admitted in the past. Their tribal constitution differs in different places, and for instance, the Mohammedan Meos preferred to call them Mewati. Their most remarkable trait is that despite being a Muslim community, they claim that they belonged to the *Kshatriya* caste and their origin can be traced to the *Chandrabansis*, the *Suryabansis* and *Agnikuls* of the Rajput nobility glittering with such appellations as the Tomars, Yadavas, Chauhans and Rathors (Shamsuddin, 1983).

Etymologically, the word Mewati means a resident of the land of Mewat. The frequency of the historical references to the term Mewati, particularly by the Persian chroniclers, makes the question of their identification quite pertinent. Who are the Mewatis? Mewat or the country of Meos, which included the districts of Mathura, Gurgaon and parts of Alwar and Bharatpur states, became an abode of notorious rebels and a source of constant trouble to the rulers of Delhi. It was ruled by Khanzadas, a line founded by Bahadur Nahir. The Yaduvanshi Rajputs of Bayana and Tahangarh, having been deprived of their strongholds and territories, had migrated to this region; the descendants of Prithviraj of Ajmer were already living in the area now known as Ratha (Alwar district); the Jadon Bhattis had established themselves at Kaman, Tijara and Sarhatta [Northern Alwar] (Bharatpur, 1971). These disgruntled nobles were known as Mewatis, who combined together to form a more or less solid block against the Delhi authority.

Though Khanzadas claim independent genealogies but it is evident that they were part of the larger group called the Mewatis that included ancestors of Meo clans (Mayaram, 2004). It is also suggested that the followers of the Khanzada Bahadur Nahar are Mewatis or Miwan (Elliot & Dowson, 2001 "a"). It may be noted that Bahadur Nahar's own grandson is referred to as Jalal Khan Meo. Later British writers distinguished between the Meos and the Khanzadas, but they became differentiated only at this stage of Mewat's history, when for a brief period the Khanzadas were co-opted by the sultanate. The Khanzada chiefs were active in court politics, and Bahadur Nahar played a prominent role in succession dispute, switching sides to enhance his own maneuverability (Elliot & Dowson, 2001 "b").

The Meos are divided into fifty-two original gots, which include twelve *pals*. Of the fifty-two original gots, three gots are named after the parent village, eight show Rajput tribal names, and eight those of Brahman and Gujar, and four occupational names, while the remaining sixteen are of unknown derivation (Rose, 1990). Thus, the Mewat is inhabited by and the Meo tribe is composed of four Rajput stocks, Tunwars from Delhi, Jaduns from Mathura, Kachwahas from Jaipur and Chauhans from Ajmer.

The Meos who accepted Islam were divided into seven *pals*— Dahngal (Kachwaha), Saingal (Badgujar), Chirklot, Demrot, Panglot, Dhulot and Nai (the last five being Jaduns by origin).

The origins of the *pals* reveal the distinct identity and the spatial spread of each *pal*.

The Kalesa *pal* is eponymous and originated in Mewar, Kalsia (Kalesa?) the eponym being called Meo in consequence. The *pal* is sometimes called Pal Palhat.

The Derowal *pal* was founded by Dera of Malab in Nuh. Der means 'a piece of land detached from the foot of a hill.'

The Landawat *pal*, founded by Landu, of Niana in the Kishengarh tehsil of Alwar is also called Bhagoria from Bhagora, its earliest settlement in Alwar, and Larawat, owing to its warlike propensities.

The Ratawat *pal* claims descent from Rattu, of Santhori in Alwar; but the name may well be derived from Rath or Rathauri, its earliest seat.

The Balut *pal* is also eponymous, and originated in Silkhoh, in the Nuh tehsil.

The Dahngal *pal* claims descent from Raja Harpal, a descendent of Raja Nal. His eldest son Dahngal became a Muhammadan and the *pal* is named after, but it is also called Raisinia from Rasina, his original home in Nuh tehsil, or Ghaseria from Ghaseera in the same tehsil, to which place Dahngal migrated.

The Saingal *pal* is named after its eponym.

The Chirklot *pal* claims descent from Chirkan Rao of Dhulawat in Nuh, but it is said that the ancestors of this and the four following *pals* were imprisoned by Qutb-ud Din Aibak in Ballabgarh, and only escaped in various disguises. Thus the Chirklots forebear was disguised as a chinka seller and so obtained for his descendants the name of Chirklot.

The Demrot *pal* is also known as the Raopala after Rao Bhimar, its founder, who was styled Demur. It, too, is fancifully derived from deru, a drum or some kind of musical instrument.

The Panglot *pal* claims descent from Poan, and is improbably derived from pongi, also a kind of musical instrument.

The Dhulot *pal* is similarly descended from Dohal, its ancestor, or the name is derived from dohal, 'in which he used to lie, as if insane.' The head-quarters of this *pal* is at Doha in Firozpur.

Naipal is derived from Nai, 'barber,' or hardly less improbably from niyai, because its founder gave an impartial decision in the tribal dissensions.

The Meos also derived strength from a number of goddess myths and cults found in Puranic mythology and epic traditions. Meo myths suggest linkages with Hindu traditions, such as the Vaishnavism of Brajbhumi and the Nath Jogis. The theme of the descent of the thirteen Meo pals or clans from Hindu gods or heroes can be traced in their oral traditions. The *Palon ki Bansabali* describes the five Jadu Pals or clans as having descended from Krishna's Jadu Rajputs (Yadavas); and four Tonvar Meo pals consider Arjuna their ancestor, and their genealogies are thereby also mythically aligned to Smriti texts such as the Mahabharata (Mayaram, 1997). Ramayana also figures prominently in the Meo traditions when we find ample references such as those of Kachhawaha Meo genealogies deriving Rajput lineages from Lord Rama's sons, Lav and Kush.

The evolution of the Meos and their development into a distinct community presuppose a fairly high level of historical consciousness and a prolonged process of identity-formation. The key to the mystery of the emergence of this composite community lies in the Meo narratives and folk traditions. Be that as it may, it cannot be disputed that the course of their history was orchestrated by the dichotomies of conversion and conflict, relationship and resistance, domination and subjugation, tradition and transformation.

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