

ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF FOLK WOMEN OF KONGU REGION As Depicted In Folklore

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Abstract

The focus of this research is to study verbal folklore with historical thinking. The work aims to find out the importance of folk sources for historiography. The research paper aims to bring out the economic contribution of folk women of Kongu Region. Kongu nadu is the traditional name of the study area. It consisted of present six districts of Tamilnadu. The ancient Kongu nadu consisted of present Salem, *Dharmapuri*, *Erode*, Coimbatore, and part of *Trichirapalli*, and *Dindugal* districts and some adjoining parts of *Kerala* and *Karnataka*. The study utilizes the folk literature to understand the position of Folk women and also to study the regional history.

Key Words: *Folklore, Folk Women, History from below, Subaltern Studies*

Introduction

Folklore is the body of expressive culture shared by a particular group of people; it encompasses the traditions common to that culture, subculture or group. These include oral traditions such as tales, proverbs and songs. Folklore also includes customary lore, the forms and rituals of celebrations such as festivals and weddings, folk dances and initiation rites. Each one of these, either singly or in combination, is considered a folklore artifact. These traditions are passed along informally from one individual to another either through verbal instruction or demonstration.

As the majority of the Kongu population is rural, village is the unit that establishes the social and economic set up of the Kongu nadu. From the folklore, the economic condition of the folk is brought to limelight. Agriculture has been the prime living, as many folk songs are associated with it. The people lived a sustained life as they depended on land.

Women looked after both the domestic and agricultural work. They carried on all sorts of cleaning work like cleaning, daubing the floor, and tidying the house. Household work predominantly was the domain of the women. All their work in their home and land were unpaid work. At the same time, they contribute to the family's additional income. After completing their day-to-day duties at home, they looked after other agricultural works such as separating grains from dust, pounding, husking and milling the grain.

In addition to that, the women also undertook the other economic activities. They go out to sell their milk products or go to the field to work, At that time, they take their children with them to the field. They would sell the buttermilk to supplement income. In the towns and big villages the milk, buttermilk curd, and ghee-sellers exist in sufficient numbers A folksong pictures a woman who carries buttermilk pot on the head and **guards it with** one hand, In her waist, she carries her youngest child. She supports the child with her another hand Thus a woman helped the family by her uphill struggle.

Women involved themselves in the agriculture sector also, both inside and outside the villages. Majority were unskilled thus confined to low paid occupations. They learnt the work from the family members or parents. They belonged to backward sections of the society Seasonal changes affected their work.

Agricultural Operations

Folklore gives information on various agricultural operations. There were two types of cultivable land. *Kattuvivasayam* was called as dry land cultivation. The land was called as *vanarn partha boomi* meaning land depended on rainfall. The peasants of such areas had to resort to defensive strategies with millets as the main crop. The tableland was called as *kadu* or dry land.

There was another kind of agriculture Thottavivasayam or garden cultivation and it was called as wetland farming The two most important types of agricultural labor are transplanting and weeding in paddy field. There are both highly skilled and tiresome works. There two types of operations are the exclusive monopoly of women in Tamil Nadu. For transplanting paddy, seedlings women have to standing muddy fields with their bodies bend double, planting the seedlings one by one without damaging the roots. They have to work without changing their posture for hours on end.

Transplantation songs called 'Natukai pattukal' were song by women while they transplanted paddy seedling to drive away weariness. There used to be singing and dancing before the transplanting operation began. A folk saying advises the farmers to start cultivation in Aadi (June-July, the rainy season in the Kongu area). Another folk saying praises the plough in the month of *Chithirai* (April-May, the South West monsoon period in Tamilnadu) as it would provide best results.²⁴ Some folk sayings directed the farmers on cultivation of certain crops at appropriate timings determined by weather conditions. They choose the right time after the rains for starting the ploughing and sowing operations

A song explains the nature of work of women who were the indenture workers. The womenfolk had three categories of agricultural work. Sometimes they supervise the work of sowing in their land. Women looked after weeding, transplanting, watching of crops, application of manures, and irrigating fields. References are there in the folk songs about weeding undertaken by the women. Harvesting, thrashing, winnowing were also some of the work they did. The process of protecting the seeds from the birds, and that of clearing the weeds from the land are mentioned

A woman sings in a lullaby that if she keeps her baby in her hand, she cannot complete her work before noon. Therefore, she asked her child not to cry and to sleep in the cradle hung from nearby banyan tree. As they had to complete their share of work in the paddy fields, they could not think about their crying children during working hours. A song describes about the growth of the seedling, which was planted by a woman. It says that, the seedling would grow better, according to the character of a woman who planted. However, the women were culturally restrained from touching and working on the plough and cart driving.

They would harvest the riped crop from morning. After that, the men would separate the grains from the field dust. They used *Muram* to clean the grain. *Muram* is wickerwork of the broad shallow basket, like an elephant's ear in which grain is winnowed. A proverb advises to separate grain from dust, when there is wind available. After cleaning the grains from the dust, the produce would be stored in the home for future use or sold in the market. A woman describes in a folk song that in her natal family, the produce from the field would be collected and stored like a fort.

Voice against Exploitation

A *Kankani* was the supervisor, who used to give more work, persecuted the labourers and took money from them. If anyone whispered against him, that person had to drop his job. They entitle their masters as '*durai*' or '*pannadi*'. A song also mentions about the estate owner, a Britisher, by name, Dunken, still worse. He drank much and slept with any labour-woman he liked. The supervisor or *Kankani* helped him.

A woman feels dissatisfaction on the inhuman attitude of her master. She complains that when her mother expired, he did not allow her to attend the funeral. She had to work seven days a week. He cut off her wage if she takes rest at home on Sundays. A folk woman voices her protest and asks for timely dispersal of wages. She warns the master, to behave decently. A folk song portrays the sluggish attitude of an English manager who sleeps and takes rest while the poor works in the field. They had to wait at his gate until late evening to get coolie for their

work. As there is no effective way to resist the landowners, the people content themselves with the belief that those who do injustice would suffer in one way or other.

The poor women sometimes would work for the rich people at their home. The amount earned thus would be used to buy their personal belongings like sari or blouse. A folk woman clarifies her husband that she bought her golden nose-stud with the savings from *coolie* (daily wage) she earns after a toiled work.

The poor women also helped the rich women in their household works like cleaning the agricultural produce etc. They would help in clearing out *Varagu*, a kind of millet used for food. They pound it and made to dry in the sunlight on the rocks. As a result the millet could be stored and used for months without being spoilt. Thus they earn money, which they used for their family and for themselves.

Animal Husbandry

From the ancient days, the Kongu country was popular for its cattle breeding operations. Animal husbandry always had been the savior of the poor, and the weaker sections of the society. It provided subsidiary occupations, offers gainful employment and generated income. Animal husbandry also provided security during drought, power, manures, and fuels. It was a caste based occupation. The women accumulated their income through cattle.

The folk people called the *cholam* grass as *thattu*, a special word used only in Kongu. After the harvest, dried cholam grass, *thattu* would be taken from the fields and would be kept in reserve at the backyard of the home like a fort. They would serve as cattle feed when there is no chance of grazing in summer due to dry weather conditions. The old people in the agricultural families looked after the cattle when others were engaged in farming activities. They prepared food for the animals and gave them food and water, keeping watch over crops etc. The aged woman, who did not indulge in household work, looked after animals as they supplement the income.

Cottage Industries

Besides agriculture, there were some traditional industries also helpful to the rural economy. If they were divided into three classes. In the first class were industries, which were a whole time traditional occupation like that of weaving. In the second class were industries which were subsidiary to agriculture like that of oil milling, rice milling, sugarcane crushing etc. In the third class were the cottage industries, which enabled the agriculturalist and his family to be occupied in their spare time. The folk women in one way or other contribute in the industries.

Several mills for manufacturing margosa oil were found in and around *Kangayam* where there was a large growth of neem trees. The seeds were collected in May and June by children and women of the poorer classes and were dried and sold to merchants. The outer shell of the seeds would be removed by beating the dry seeds and the pulp was put into wooden mills and worked for oil. The oil is in demand in the *Madurai* and *Ramanad* districts of Tamilnadu. Thus, it yielded additional income to the family.

Conclusion

Thus women as folk live by hard work. Their creativity in the form of lullabies or labor songs or a community song reflects the restricted realm of action to which their life tethered. Their creativity and freedom curiously blended with restrictions, bring out out in the various roles women perform in the society.

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