

VISWAKARMAS GENERAL FEATURES AND THEIR POSITION IN THE SOCIETY

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{This section of the article is an extract from George Koilparampil, *A Study of Caste Elements in the Inter-rite Relations of Syrians and Latins*, Ernakulam 1982, pp. 37-41. This short introduction gives an overall picture of the caste hierarchy in Kerala – Editor}

I

Caste is comparatively a new institution in South India, since early Tamil literature is silent about it. P.T. Sreenivasa Iyengar says, in 'A History of South India' that at the period of 'Tolkappiyam' (c. 500 A.D.) caste system, as such did not exist, though its beginnings may be inferred from the poet's reference to 'anthanar' (Brahmins), arachans' (rulers), 'vanikkar's' (merchants) and 'velialars' (farmers) as high (melor) and others as low (kizhor) people. According to Nanchinarkianar (c. 600 A. D.) the ancient commentator of Tolkappiyam, these distinctions were not rigid, as arachans inter-married from Vellalars. Professor Elangulam Kunjan Pillay says that literary and epigraphic sources prior to the seventh century are silent on caste, while references to it are frequent in the period between the eighth and eleventh centuries.¹

The caste divisions were functional and territorial. Thus, for example, the Kuravans inhabiting Kurinji (hill country) were hunters; the forest land dwellers became cattle farmers called Idayans and those on the low lying regions found the place fit for farming and became agriculturists and so on. 'Jatinirnaya' (an 18th century work on castes in Kerala) speaks of 72 castes in Kerala; 8 classes of Brahmins, 2 'neuna' (lesser), 12 'antheraia' (intermediate), 18 Sudras, 6 artisans, 10 'pathitha' (damned), 8 'nicha' (low) and 8 extra Jatis. In course of time a large aggregate of castes sprang up from these root castes, probably because of variations in the mode of

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¹Puthenkalam J. *Marriage and Family in Kerala*, Journal of Comparative Family Studies, Monograph, New Delhi, 1977. p. 17.

labour.² While the Census Report of 1901 mentions 3000 castes and sub-castes for the whole of India, Kerala has 578 castes listed in it.

Cochin Census Report of 1901 gives the following order of precedence of the groups in the Kerala society.³

1. Brahmins and allied castes. consisting of Nambutiri, Mutha Elayad, etc.
2. Kshatriya castes. consisting of Thampuran, Thampan and Thrumulpad.
3. Antharala Jatis consisting of Nampidi, Ambalavasis divided into Atikal, Chakkiyar, Chakkiyar Nambiyar, Nambiyar or Unni, Tiyyattu Unni, Pisharoti, Variyar, Puthuval and Marar.
4. Sudras consisting of high caste Nairs and low caste Nairs. The latter consists of Chaliyan (weaver), Veluthedan (washerman) and Velakkathalavan (barber).
5. Kammalans or artisan castes consisting of Kallasari (mason), Kollan (blacksmith), Marasari (carpenter), Musari (bell-met worker). Tattan (goldsmith), Tolkollan (leather worker).
6. Patita Jatis consisting of lluvan or Thiyan (toddy tapper), Velan, Arayan, Mukkuvan, Marakkan (all fishermen), Kaniyan (astro loger), Vilkurup (maker of bows and arrows), Panan (necro mancer), Velan (washerman for lower castes), Pulluvan (singer in serpent grooves) and Paravan.
7. Nicha Jatis consisting of Kanakkan, Kootan, Pulayan or Cheruman, Parayan, Velluvan.
8. Extra Jatis consisting of Ulladan, Nayati.

The Brahmins are at the top of the social hierarchy among th Hindus. They belong to two distinct segments, namely, the Tam Brahmins and the Malayalam or Nambutiri Brahmins. The Tamil Brahmins are supposed to have migrated from Madras; they speak Tamil at home. The Mother-

²*Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

³Census of India, 1901, Vol. XX, Cochin, pp. 181-182.

tongue of the Nambutiti Brahmins is Malayalam who believe that they are descendants of the Brahmins to whom Parasurama had distributed land. They enjoyed certain privileges in the past and were like feudal lords of the State. The Kshatriyas mostly belong to the ruling class. Though they are small in number, they could wield much power in society. The Nairs come next in importance who once constituted the fighting class, but today many of them are agriculturalists. Since the community as such show special interest in education, there is higher rate of literacy in this community and a good many of them are employed in government offices. Ezhavas who stand next in the hierarchical ladder are supposed to be immigrants and traditionally toddy tappers. They are today engaged in agriculture and commerce and some of them may be found also in other walks of life. The others occupy a relatively lower status.⁴

The distance pollution (approach taboo or unapproachability) and touch pollution (contact taboo or untouchability) known as 'Tindal' in Malayalam became the hallmark of the caste system particularly in Kerala. According to Duarte Barbosa, an early Portuguese writer, it is permissible for the Nayar to draw his sword if any low caste came too close to him. "While the high castes were out on the road they were heralded by their retainers, who shouted 'hoi, hoi,' to shoo away any polluting castes from the roads. The low castes themselves had to cry out as they proceeded on the roads to warn the high castes of their coming, like the lepers in the middle ages, when they used the public paths."⁵

"The caste stratification predominantly reflected in every aspect of life, such as food, dress, denotations of houses of various castes. When the food of Nambutiris was called nectar, the food of Pulay or Cheruman was called cowdung. The house of a Nambutiri was called *illam* and that of a Paraya, *cheri*. Tiling the roofs was the prerogative of only the royal families and temples. Others could have only thatched roofs."⁶

The caste structure was very much related to the economic structure. The Nambutiri Brahmins and Nairs formed by and large the land owning

⁴Census of India, 1961, *Monograph Series*, No. p. 4.

⁵Puthenkalam J., *op. cit.*, P. 11.

⁶Rao, M.S.A., *Social Change in Malabar*, 1957, p. 22.

castes and the majority of the working population was from the untouchable castes of Vedans, Parayans, Kuravans, Cherurnans, etc. The land-lords were called 'thampurans', who provides huts for the labourers (*adiyans*) to live in. The Thampurans were responsible for the upkeep of the *adiyans*. Even the expenses connected with marriage, birth or death in an *adiyan's* family were met largely by the *Thampurans* concerned. The *Thampurans* had authority to intervene in the family feuds of the *adiyans*.⁷

Two types of family organizations, matrilineal and patrilineal existed in Kerala and all the castes and sub-castes were grouped under one or the other type based on the system of inheritance. Since there were considerable regional variations, it is difficult to give an accurate list of these categories.⁸

The family structure in those days regulated in a way the social and economic structure of the region. Joint family system, popularly known as 'Tarawad' in case of Nairs, was the order of the day. Matriliney was the dominant form of descent and the responsibility of conducting the affairs of the joint family rested with the *Karanavan* (the senior-most male member in mother's line). By and large, the pattern prevailing among the Nairs provided the model for the other castes and for generations most of the castes in Kerala organized their social polity accordingly.⁹

The patrilineal family organization of the Nambutiris (*Illam*) was characterised by two important features, impartibility of the joint family property and the caste injunction that only the eldest brother was allowed to marry within the caste and the other males could only have *sambandham* with females of any of the three high castes: Kshatriyas, Antaralas, and high caste Nairs. The caste rule of the Nambutiris was complementary to the hypergamous rule of the three matrilineal high caste Hindus.¹⁰

⁷Census of India. 1961. *Monograph Series - No. 2. D. 4.*

⁸Rao, M.S.A., *Social Change in Malabar*, op. cit., p. 23.

⁹Census of India, 1961, op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁰Rao, M.S.A. *Social Change in Malabar*, op. cit., p. 24.

Father-son relations were more complicated if the boy was the child of a union of a Nambutiri man and a Nayar woman. Colonel Unni Nayar, born of a Nambutiri father, brought up in a Nayar joint family, could not eat with his father or touch him. If he or his mother touched the Nambutiri during the day, the Nambutiri had to bathe afresh and change his clothes. Though his father did not mind such physical contacts when he was alone, he was strictly observing all the rules of purity and pollution before others to keep up the decorum. It was not so much the children's violation of propriety that mattered, as the fact they did so in the presence of others, in the context of the public view.¹¹

The Kerala culture is unique in the sense that it represents various cultures at the same time. Western influences abound everywhere in the Portuguese style of architecture and in the walled streets of its towns particularly Cochin and its many churches. Kerala was the home not merely of the earliest Christianity and the only refuge which the Jews had ever known, but also of some of the first converts of Islam by the Arabs in the ninth century. Yet it was not a melting pot of cultures, but separate cultures each maintaining its identity and left unhampered in their development.¹²

II

The Viswakarmas are known by various names in different parts of the country such as Kamsala, Kammalan, Karma, Sarma, Kar, Viswakarma, Viswabrahma, Panchala, Acharya, Singh, Pandit, Kammara, Kammiyan etc. In Kerala they are known as Karuman, Kollan, Assari, Musari, Silpi, Kallan, Thattan, Swarnakar, Sarap, Kallasari, Pandithattan etc.

The Viswakarmas are considered as the descendants of Viswakarma who is described as God of creation in the Vedas, Puranas Smrutis, Brahmanas etc. They have a long ethnic social and cultural history and therefore the first part of the paper discusses the historical origin and the

¹¹David G.Mandelbaum, *Society in India*, 1970, p.56.

¹²Puthenkalam, J., *Marriage and Family*, *op. cit.*, p.12.

general features of the community and the second part deals with their position in the contemporary socio-political life in Kerala.

Part I

General features

1. The stories of their origin

There are different stories of the origin of Viswakarmas. We give a short account of a few of them here.

“According to one story of the origin of the Kammalans, they are the descendants of the issue of a Brahman and a Beri Chetti woman. Hence there is the saying that the Kammanlans and the Beri Chetties are one. Another story, recorded in the Mackenzie manuscripts, which are current in the Tamil country, is briefly as follows:

It is the story of a few divisions of Kammalan (artificers) whom the King of Mandapuri wanted to destroy because of their defiant attitude towards him. The King then promised a big reward to any one who would burn down the fort of the artificers and a group of *devadasis* (courtesans) volunteered to undertake the task and in the course of time one of the courtesans succeeded to seduce a Kammala from whom she wheedled to reveal the secret about the means to destroy the fortress of the artisans. With the information collected by the prostitute, the King set the town of Mandapuri on fire and from this sudden conflagration only a pregnant Kammalan woman could escape. The child from of this woman grew into a great artificer and when the King came to know of his parentage he provided him with the means for making ploughshares on a large scale and got him married to the daughter of a Chetti, and made gifts of land for the maintenance of the couple. The Chetti woman bore for him five sons who followed the five branches of work now carried out by Kammalan caste.

As to the origin of the weavers' caste we have the following account: It may be noted that the *devadasis*, whose treachery is said to have led to the destruction of the Kammalan caste, were Kaikolans by caste, and that their illegitimate children, like their progenitors, became weavers. The weavers of South India, according to old Tamil poems, were formerly

included in the Kammian or Kammalan caste (Maduraikanchi, Line 521). Several inscriptions show that, as late as 1013 AD., the Kammalans were treated as an inferior caste, and, in consequence, were confined to particular parts of villages (E. Hultzsch. South India Inscription, II, 1, 44, 46, 1891). A later inscription gives an order of one of the Chola kings that they should be permitted to blow conches, and beat drums at their weddings and funerals, wear sandals, and plaster their houses (ibid. III, 1, 47, 1899). "It is not difficult" Mr. H.A. Stuart writes, (Madras Census Report 1891) "to account for the low position held by the Kammalans, for it must be remembered that, in those early times, the military castes in India, as elsewhere, looked down upon all who were engaged in labour, whether skilled or otherwise. With the decline of the military power, however, it was natural that a useful caste like Kammalans should generally improve its position, and the reaction from their long oppression had led them to make the exaggerated claim that they are descendants from Viswakarma, the architect of the god.

2. History in Legends

The history of Viswakarmas, according to legends is described by Thurston and Rangachari under "Epigraphic records"¹³ points to the existence of the five classes of Kammalans in Malabar at least as early as the beginning of the ninth century AD., as a Syrian Christian grant refers to them as Aimvazhi Kammalas. There is a tradition that they were brought to Kerala by Parasu Rama, but left in a body for Celon on being pressed by one of the early Perumal satraps of Cranganur to marry them into the washer man caste. Some time later the king of Celon was requested, as an act of international courtesy, to send back some of the Kammalans. As, however, they were loath to return to their former persecutor, they were sent in charge of some Ezhavas, who formed the military caste of the island.

The legend is given in detail by Canter Visscher, a brief account of which is as follows: In the time of Cheramperoumal, a woman belonging to the caste of the washermen, whose house adjoined that of an *Ajari* (the

¹³Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Caste and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. III, pp. 113-117.

Carpenter caste), being occupied as usual in washing a cloth and having no one at hand to hold the other end of it, called to a young daughter of the *Ajari*, who was alone in the house to assist her. The child not knowing that this was an infringement of the laws of her caste, did as she was requested, and then went home. The washer woman was emboldened by this affair to enter the *Ajari's* house a few days afterwards; and, upon the latter demanding angrily how she dared to cross his threshold, the woman answered scornfully that he belonged now to the same caste as she did, since his daughter had helped to hold her cloth. The *Ajari* learning the disgrace that had befallen him, killed the washer woman. Upon this, her friends complained to Cheramperoumal, who espoused their cause, and threatened the carpenters; whereupon the latter combined together to take refuge in Ceylon, where they were favourably received by the King of Candy, for whom the Malabars have great veneration. Cheramperoumal was placed in great embarrassment by their departure, having no one in his dominions who could build a house or make a spoon, and begged the King of Candy to send them back, promising to do them no injury. The *Ajaris* would not place entire confidence in these promises, but asked the King to send them with two Chegos (Chogans) and their wives, to witness Cheramperoumal's conduct towards them, and to protect them. The King granted their request, with the stipulation that on all high occasions, such as weddings and deaths and other ceremonies, the *Ajaris* should bestow three measures of rice on each of these Chegos and their descendants as a tribute for their protection.

In timber work the Asaris excel, but the Tamil Kammalans have outstripped the Tattans in gold and silver work. The house-building of the Asari has a quasi religious aspect. When a temple is built, there is a preliminary rite known as Anujna, when the temple priest transfers spiritual force from the image, after which a cow and calf are taken thrice round the temple, and the Kanakkan is invited to enter within for the purposes of work. The cow and calf are let loose in front of the carpenter, who advances, and commences the work. On the completion of a building, an offering known as Vastubali is made. Vastu is believed to represent the deity who presides over the house, and the spirits inhabiting the trees which were felled for the purpose of building it. To appease these supernatural powers, the figure of a demon is drawn with powders, and the

Kanakkan, after worshipping his tutelary deity Bhadrakali, offers animal sacrifices to him in non-Brahmanical houses, and vegetable sacrifices in Brahman shrines and homes. An old and decrepit carpenter enters within the new building, and all the doors thereof are closed. The Kanakkan from without asks whether he has inspected every thing, and is prepared to hold himself responsible for any architectural or structural short comings, and he replies in the affirmative. A jubilant cry is then raised by all the assembled Asaries. Few carpenters are willing to undertake this dangerous errand, as it is supposed that the dissatisfied demons are sure to make trouble for the man who accepts the responsibility. The figure is next effaced, and no one enters the house until the auspicious hour of milk-boiling.

“Vilkuruppu or Vilkollakuruppu, who used formerly to supply bows and arrows for the Malabar Army, are the recognized priests and barbers of the Kammalans. They still make and present bows and arrows at the Onam festival. In some places the Kammalans have trained members of their own caste to perform the priestly offices. The Malayala Kammalans, unlike the Tamils, are not a thread-wearing class, but some times put on a thread when they work in temples or at images. They worship Kali, Matan, and other divinities. Unlike the Tamil Kammalans, they are a polluting class, but, when they have their working tools with them, they are less objectionable. In some places, as in South Travancore, they are generally regarded as higher in rank than the Ezhavas, though this is not universal.”¹⁴

3. Their position in Vedic phase

The Vedas bring out the details of craftsmen like *taksaka*, “carver”, *rathakara*, “chariot maker”, and *karmara*, “black smith”. The Rigveda describes only of the *karmaras*, *taksakas*, weavers, tanners and the *rathakaras*. Whereas at present the number of crafts has very much increased. Later Vedic texts enumerate many other occupations. The *Vajasneyi Samhita* (XXX. 6.21) and the *Taittiriya Brahmana* bring out various categories of artisans viz. Chariot-makers, carpenters, potters, smiths, jewellers, herdsman etc. Such increase in the categories of trades

¹⁴*Ibid.* pp. 136-139.

which fall under *silpas*, "crafts", shows a greater development of economic activity. The growth in the number of crafts and their practitioners continued even in the post-Vedic phase.

During the Vedic period, though the social status of artisans especially *taksakas*, *rathakaras* tended to vary, the artisans enjoyed a respectable position in the society. The *Atharva Veda* (III. 5.6) cites that some of those engaged in various crafts belonged to the "Aryan Community". The special status of *taksakas*, *rathakaras*, and *karmaras* and their responsibility in administration have been described in some other texts. They were granted important roles in the coronation ceremonies of kings. The agricultural society during Vedic period found various use of the products of different crafts in agriculture and in war. The craftsmen therefore must have commanded respect. The crafts during this period were neither restricted to Sudras nor was their practice denounced.

When stone came into use the *taksakas* of the Vedic period changed their techniques and encouraged the art-activities. During the early phase they were primarily connected with wood-crafts. The other *Silpas* grew in number in the post Vedic period. The Buddhist texts describe various occupations. In the *Majjhima Nikaya* (I – 85) twelve occupations are enumerated. The *Digha Nikaya*, the Mahavastu and the Milinda Panho describe various occupations and indicate organisation of craftsmen's guilds.¹⁵

4. Their Art Heritage

The art heritage of the Viswakarmas, artisans is widely studied by art investigators and historians. They know that the artisans who lived during various phases of art-activity are responsible for bringing forth the art history of the country. "Artist in ancient India was not an isolated institution; in the social hierarchy, he belonged to a general class of artisans engaged in various crafts. Historically, therefore, his position and his crafts has to be related to a kindred group of artisans and their occupations...In a reference in the Rigveda, Viswakarma, a God of

¹⁵R.N. Misra, *Ancient Artists and Art-Activity*, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla, 1975 pp. 3-4.

creation, is mentioned as *dhatu-karmara*, while *karmara* alone refers to artisans and artificers (Rigveda, X, 72.2; Atharveda, III, 5.6; Manu, IV, 215) Viswakarma is supposed to create things out of *dhatu*, "raw material", which act is known as *sanghamana* (Rigveda, X, 72. 2).¹⁶

5. High Position of Artisans

R.N. Misra describes the high position of Artisans in the society. "However, it will be far from correct to assume that the practice of crafts was limited only to persons in the lower strata of society. There are instances of persons of higher castes practicing crafts. A *jataka* has the anecdote of a Brahmana who earned his living from making crafts, and thus plied the trade of a *vardhaki*, "carpenter"¹⁷ the Sutras usually frowned upon such cases of individuals belonging to higher castes taking to the profession of lower castes. Baudhayana, in this connection, has ruled that a Brahmana tending cattle or living by trades, or by working as an artisan should be treated like a Sudra (I, 5.10.24; cf., *Vasishtha Dharmasutra*, II, 27; *Gautama Dharmasutra*, X-67. Haradatta, Commenting upon Gautama (X, 67) recognises the social equivalence of Sudra and a Brahmana performing an occupation allotted to Sudra. But he adds that a Sudra doing his allotted work should not be despised by those who follow the non-Aryan occupations. Such injunctions implicitly indicate that certain occupations were identified with Sudras. But at the same time, they indicate that the situation was flexible enough to admit persons of higher castes into the professions which were identified with the Sudras. In a growing society, the artisans had enormous utility and various *Silpas* had special roles in the growth of economy as well as in the urban patterns of life. In the circumstances, it is no wonder that quite often one meets with the instances of people of various social ranks practicing different crafts. The Buddhist texts offer evidence to the extent that the *gahapatis*, "householders", were engaged in various crafts. In their social status, the *gahapatis* of the Buddhist texts were equivalent to the Vaisyas of the Orthodox *varna* system. The *Anguttara nikaya* (III. 363) refers to a *gahapati* who earned his living by *sippadhittana*, "practice of arts and crafts". The institution of *gahapatis* itself seems to have come up as a

¹⁶ Anoted by Agrawala, *India Art*, p. 40.

¹⁷ R.N. Misra, *op.cit.*, p. 1-3.

result of the prosperity of artisans, several of whom swelled the ranks of *gahapatis* (cf., *Dighanikaya*, III, 281; *Jataka*, III, 281)¹⁸. Such cases clearly indicate the upward social and economic mobility of the artisans. In Vatsyana's *Kamasutra* among the virtues of a *nayaka*, "cultured man", the knowledge of various *silpas* gets a special mention. The *nayaka* was supposed to be adept in *silpas* (*Kamasutra*, VI, 1.12). Reference to the need of having a solitary place where a cultured man could practise his skill in carving various objects, indicates the popularity which certain *silpas* enjoyed amongst the higher sections of the society (Cf. *Kamasutra* I, 4.4. III, 3.16).

6. Occupational Sections

The Kammalans claim to be descended from Viswakarma, the architect of Gods. In some places they claim to be superior to Brahmans, calling the latter go-Brahmans and themselves Viswa Brahmans. Viswakarma is said to have got five sons, named Manu, Maya, Silpa, Tvashta and Viswagna or Daivagna. These five sons were the creators of the five crafts. They are engaged in smithy, carpentry, stone-carving, metal and jewelry works respectively. They are known as Kollan or Karuman, (Black smith) Assari or Tachan (Carpenter), Kalthachan or Kallassary (Stone carving or stone mason), Moosary (brazier) and Tattan (Gold smith) respectively. The Kollans are engaged in the manufacture of locks, tools, spades, knives and ornamental iron and brass work for houses of the rich. They make tyres for wheels, choppers, sickles, iron spoons, shoes for cattle and horses etc. Excellent *chellams* (betel boxes) of brass are also manufactured by them. The tools made by them are necessary for carrying out works of other four sections of the community. The assaries devote their attention to make buildings, pieces of furniture etc. They have to do every thing connected with architecture, such as fixing poles or wickets at the exact spot where buildings are to be constructed. The Kalthachans or Kallassaries are engaged in making images for temples and making walls and connected portions of buildings. All kinds of household articles, large vessels for cooking meals are manufactured with bell-metal by the Moossaries. The Thattans manufacture gold and silver ornaments.

¹⁸*Ibid* p. 88.

7. Sub-castes

The sub-castes of Kammalans are analysed as under. "In the Madras census, 1901, the following sub-castes of Malabar Kammalans are recorded:- Kallan Mooppan and Kallukotti (stone-workers), Kotton (brass-smith), Ponchetti (gold merchant), and Puliasari (masons). In the Cochin census report, 1901, it is stated that "the Kammalans" are divided into six sub-castes, viz. Marasari (carpenter), Kallasari (mason), Mussari (brazier), Kollan (blacksmith), Tattan (goldsmith), and Tolkollan (leather-worker). Of these six, the first five interdine and intermarry. The Tholkollan is considered a degraded caste, probably on account of his working in leather, which in its earlier stages is an unholy substance. The other sub-castes do not allow the Tholkollan even to touch them. Among the Marassaris are included the Marassaris proper and Thacchans. The Thacchans are looked upon by other castes in the group as a separate caste, and are not allowed to touch them. All the sub-castes generally follow the Makkathayam law of inheritance, but there are some vestiges of Marumakkathayam also among them. There is a sub-caste called Kuruppu, who are their barbers and priests. They officiate as priests at marriage and funeral ceremonies. When they enter the interior shrine of temple for work in connection with the image of a god, or with the temple flagstaff, the Asari and Mussari temporarily wear a sacred thread, which is a rare privilege. Their approach within a radius of twenty-four feet pollutes Brahmans. On the completion of a building, the Marasari, Kallasari and Kollan perform certain Pujas, and sacrifice a fowl or sheep to drive out the demons and devils which are supposed to have haunted the house till then.¹⁹

The following is an account of N. Subrahmania Iiyar on the Kammalans Travancore: "The titles of the Malayalam Kammalans are Panikkan and Kanakkan. The word Panikkan means a worker, and Kanakkan is the title given to a few old and respectable Kammalans in every village, who superintend the work of others, and receive the highest remuneration. It is their business to sketch the plan of a building, and preside at the Vastubali rite. Many Tamil Kammalans have naturalised

¹⁹Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. III. pp. 134-135

themselves on the west-coast, and speak Malayalam. Between them and the Malayalam Kammalans neither intermarriage nor interdining obtains. The latter are divided into five classes, viz. Assari or Marapanikkan (workers in wood), Kallan or Kallassari (workers in stone), Musari (braziers and copper smiths), Tattan (gold smiths), and Kollan (workers in Iron). To these the *Jatinirnaya* and *Keralavisheshamahatmya* add a sixth class, the Tacchan or Irchchakollan, whose occupation is to fell trees and sow timber. The Tacchans are also known as Villasans (bow men), as they were formerly required to supply bows and arrows for the Travancore Army."²⁰

8. Betrothal Ceremony

Thurston and Rangachari writes: "It is recorded in the Gazetteer of Malabar, that, "amongst Kammalans, the betrothal ceremony is similar to that of the Tiyans. If more than one brother is to be married, to the same girl, her mother asks how many bridegrooms there are, and replies that there are mats and planks for so many. Cohabitation sometimes begins from the night of the betrothal, the eldest brother having the priority, and the rest in order of seniority on introduction by the bride's brothers. If the girl becomes pregnant the formal marriage must be celebrated before the pregnancy has advanced six months. At the formal marriage the bridegrooms are received by the bride's mother and brothers; two planks are placed before a lighted lamp, before which the bridegrooms and the bride's brothers prostrate themselves. The bride is dressed in a new cloth and brought down by the bridegroom's sister and fed with sweet meats.

"Next day all the bridegroom's party visits the Tantan of the bride's desam (village), who has to give them arrack (liquor) and meat, receiving in his turn a present of two fanams (money). The next day, the bride is again feasted in her house by the bridegrooms, and is given her dowry consisting of four metal plates, one spittoon, one kindi (one vessel), and bell metal lamp. The whole party then goes to the bridegroom's house, where the Tantan proclaims the titles of the parties and their desam. All the brothers who are to share in the marriage sit in a row on a mat with bride on the extreme left, and all drink coconut milk. The presence of all

²⁰*Ibid.*

bridegrooms is essential at this final ceremony, though for the preceding formalities it is sufficient if the eldest is present."²¹

9. Polyandry in other Castes

Concerning Polyandry Thursturn and Rangachari have quoted the following from the Malabar marriage commission's report: "among carpenters and blacksmiths in the Calicut, Valluvanadu and Ponnani taluks several brothers have one wife between them" (ibid. p.129). Polyandry of fraternal type is prevailed among the blacksmiths who lead the precarious existence and have to observe the strictest economy.

They celebrated "Talickettu-Kalyanam" as in the case of Nayars. The parents of the girl have to find a suitable Manavalan or bridegroom by consultation of horoscope. An auspicious day is fixed and new clothes are presented to the Manavalan. The girl wears new clothes after bath. She and the Manavalan are guided to the Pandal (booth) where Tali-tying ceremony takes place.

When a Kammalan wants to marry, his parents make enquiries, for a suitable bride. The parents of the boy are received by the girl's parents and enquiries made about her. The visit is repeated twice and when an agreement is arrived at, the village astrologer is summoned and the horoscope of the boy and girl are examined. It is sufficient if the horoscope of one of the sons is agreed with that of the girl. The parents of the sons deposit earnest money or *acharapanam* of four, eight, twelve or twenty one *fanams* in the presence of the Kammalans of the village; and a new cloth, *kacha* is presented to the girl who thus becomes the wife of all the sons. There are instances of having taken the girl to the husbands' house immediately after the *Acharam* marriage.

10. Burning Corpses and Connected Functions

The corpses of adults of Kammalans are burned and the young ones buried. Pollution after death is observed for fifteen days and at the end of it the *Talikuruppu* sprinkles water in the house for purification. The bones

²¹ *Ibid.* pp. 132-133. After the adoption of the Constitution of India monogamy is the law of the land except for the Muslims. (Edition).

of the cremated are collected on the third day and placed in a new earthen pot which is buried at the grounds of the house of the deceased. One of the sons performs *beli* (makes offerings) and observes *Diksha* (hair growing) for one year. The bones are then carried to any one of the rivers such as *Tirunavaya* in Ponnani, *Thiruvilamala* in Cochin, *Perur* in Coimbatore and *Tirunelli* in Waynad and thrown into it. A final *beli* is performed and the *shradha* ceremony celebrated. It is believed that if the deceased was killed due to sorcery his ghost will haunt the house and trouble the inmates. To escape from this, the village washer-man (*mannan*) is brought with his drums. By means of songs he forces the devil to enter into one of the members of the household, who is asked to say what *murthy* or evil spirit possesses him and how it should be satisfied. It is then satisfied with the sacrifice of a fowl and drinking the juice of tender coconut. Moreover, there may be a demand that it must have a place consigned to it in the house or grounds and be worshipped once a year. Accordingly after seven days a small stool representing the deceased is placed in a corner of one of the rooms and worshipped annually with offerings of coconuts, toddy, arrack and fowls. In the grounds of some of the houses small shrines are seen erected in memory of the deceased. These shrines are opened once a year and offerings made to them.

The Kammalans worship various minor deities such as *thikutti*, *parakutti*, *kalabhairavan* and others. Some of them worship only stone images erected under trees annually. They have barbers of their own of whom the *mannan* shaves the men and the *mannathi* shaves the women. These individuals are not admitted in to the *mannan* caste who follows more decent profession of washing cloths.²²

Part II

The Contemporary Situation in Kerala

1. Inequalities within the Sub-castes

The Viswakarmas believe that they are the descendants of Viswakarma, architect of the gods. They are Manu (*kollan*), Maya (*asari*), Tvashta (*musari*), Silpi (*kallassari*) and Visvagna (*tatan*). But according to

²²*Ibid.* pp. 133-134.

the list of sub-castes of Viswakarmas published by the government, there are twenty-one castes. They are as follows: 1) Assari, 2) Kallassari, 3) Kalthachan, 4) Kammala, 5) Kamsala, 6) Kannan, 7) Karuvan, 8) Kitaran, 9) Kollan, 10) Malayala Kammala, 11) Musari, 12) Pandikammala, 13) Pandithattan, 14) Perum kollan, 15) Thachan, 16) Tattan, 17) Vilkurup, 18) Villasan, 19) Viswa Brahmanan, 20) Viswa Brahmanar and 21) Viswakarmala.

The communal organisations of Viswakarmas in Kerala do not recognise the castes other than Kollan, Asari, Moosari, Silpi (kallassari) and Tattan as Viswakarmas. But the government have recognised the above twenty-one sub-castes as the members of Viswakarma community for the purpose of reservation.

In Kerala there are 78 backward communities. Viswakarma community is one among them. It is a collection of twenty-one sub-castes. Assaries (carpenters) and Kollans (black smiths) form the two thirds of the viswakarma community. They are the two powerful sub-castes among the total sub-castes and are equal in population. The other sub-castes are minorities.

The Viswakarmas are traditionally artisans. Assaries are traditionally architects. The old writings on architecture were in Sanskrit. Hence some knowledge of Sanskrit was essential for the study of architecture and this made assaries the first educated group among the Viswakarmas.

The Kollans are traditionally engaged in making locks, tools, spades, knives etc. with steel and iron. Education is not necessary for their traditional works. Their illiteracy paved the way for their economic and social depression.

A 3% job reservation is allowed to all the twenty-one sub-castes of the Viswakarma community. Though the Assaries and Kollans are equal in population, they are not equal in all other respects. Since the Assaries have advanced more in education, a lion's share of reservation is being taken up by them. Since the Kollans could not advance in education they could not secure equitable share in government jobs as compared to Assaries. There are gross inequalities within the sub-castes of Viswakarma

community. The Kollans and other sub-castes allege that the Assaries form the "creamy layer" among them. They also complain that Assaries have secured the lion's share of government jobs in the absence of caste-wise quota system. The opponents of caste based reservation system allege that it will perpetuate caste and casteism if the quota system is introduced. But there is also some truth in saying that the caste-wise quota will eliminate the rivalry, bickering and violence existing among the sub-castes of the same community due to unequal distribution of benefits.

Many of the Kollans are utterly dissatisfied with the activities of the communal organisations such as Akhila Kerala Viswakarma Mahasabha and Viswakarma Service Society. They allege that the A.K.V. Mahasabha and the VSS are dominated by Assaries and Tamil Viswakarmas respectively. As a mark of disunity within the communal organisations, certain separate unions representing the Kollans are formed. Kerala State Blacksmiths' Development Association Reg.No. 275/84 with H.Q. at Nedumkandam, Kerala State Blacksmiths' Association Reg. No. 405/86 with H.Q. at Mukuttuthara and Kerala Viswakarma Blacksmiths' Association Reg.No. 06-08/99 with H.Q. at Thodupuzha are a few the examples.

2. The Caste System Weakened the Community

Once the Viswakarmas had an honourable position in the society since they were artisans working in the five materials. The superior position enjoyed by the artisans is described by R.E. Enthoven as follows: "It is not easy to decide whether a guild of artisans working in the five materials of gold, iron, brass, wood, and stone has become a caste of Brahmanic status, or whether, on the contrary, Brahmans, having taken to work in these materials, have become an artisan caste while retaining their superior position. The fact that the skill required for working in either metal, wood, or stone, does not differ greatly would explain to some extent both an affinity between castes working in the different materials and the fact that a caste taking to the handicrafts could adopt all these methods of earning a living. It is on the whole more probable that the caste had its origin in a Brahman group becoming artisans than in an industrial guild assuming Brahmanic rites and privileges, and that the fact is an illustration

of the stage of social development in India when status ceased to depend on occupation and became hereditary.

“The wealthy position held by workers in precious metals may have enabled the *panchals* to uphold their claims to Brahmanic rites and status over a long period of time in face of the strong opposition which has at times been evinced towards them by Brahmans of a more Orthodox occupation, notably during the rule of the *peshwas*.”²³

After the introduction of the caste system by the Brahmins who came to Kerala between 600 and 700 AD, the position of Viswakarmas dwindled to a life of servitude and suffered several handicaps-social and political. The position assigned to them under the caste system was very meagre. They were not recognised as people by the caste Hindus. For the construction of temples and houses the Viswakarmas were admitted to the work-sites. After completion of works they are thrown out of the temples and houses. The doors of temples they constructed were remained closed before them. They were allowed to stand twenty-four feet away from the Brahmins. The very same pollution system prevented them from studying in government schools. They could hardly appear before courts of law and other public offices. They were forbidden to hold umbrella and to wear shoulder-cloth. The Viswakarmas being untouchable, not allowed to walk along public roads and to use tanks and wells. These social disabilities resulted in exclusion of this community from schools and Govt. services.

The Viswakarmas, Ezhavas and other backward communities being untouchable were denied all the civic rights as well as equality. Dr. M.S. Jayaprakash explains the despicable position of the backward classes prevailed in Kerala as follows: “The right for movement was denied not only to the Ezhavas but other backward communities as a natural sequel to the custom of pollution by touch. “The right to walk through public roads is one even dogs and pigs enjoy everywhere, without having to resort to any *satyagraha* at all”, says Dr. Palpu (P. Palpu, Private Papers of Dr. Palpu, File No. 7). In the public roads near temples, palaces, abodes of Brahmins etc. were put up sign-boards by the Govt., prohibiting the Ezhavas and other lower castes from entering the area (legislative council

²³R.E. Enthoven, *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay*, Vol. III, p. 157.

proceedings, vol. VI, pp. 321-324). These sign-boards (*theendal palaka*), put up by the Govt. prohibiting certain classes from entering the area, indicate the uneven justice imparted by the rulers and their eagerness to perpetuate the 'racial' superiority of caste Hindus. When the British in India prevented Indians, howsoever neat or well placed they may be, from entering their exclusive clubs or parks in India by putting up sign-boards saying "Indians and dogs not permitted", the people of India had every reason to show extreme resentment. But the sign-boards in Kerala were erected by Hindus against Hindus, and should therefore be considered as more despicable. These *theendal palakakal*, wherever they existed, silently announced the supreme contempt for the lower classes which the Govt. did not consider even necessary to cancel. The officers of the state, as a matter of duty, renewed the faded sign-boards, thus reminding the men that time was not ripe for the removal of these hideous documents.²⁴

3. The Pecuniary Position of the Community

The Viswakarmas, being untouchables were forbidden to acquire land and other properties. They were forced to work for the progress and welfare of the upper castes. All the materials for the comfortable life of the rich were made by them. The temples were constructed by them on the basis of *oozhiyam* (servitude). *Oozhiyam* is a special labour system prevailed in Kerala for the period up to the later half of the nineteenth century. All the construction works of the Govt. were also carried out by the Viswakarmas and other oppressed classes on the basis of *oozhiyam* (work without wages). The *oozhiyam* labour system put the Viswakarmas and other oppressed classes into a very meagre financial condition. The pecuniary disabilities that prevented the progress of the Viswakarmas were the direct offspring of the institutions created by the caste Hindus.

Kollans (blacksmiths) were constrained to work day and night for the welfare of the landlords and other caste Hindus. Their services were inevitable for the day to day activities and agriculture of the people. The remuneration for repairing of spades, knives, tools, sickles, locks etc. had not been given to them then and there. The labour charges had been given

²⁴M.S. Jayaprakash, *A Study of the Ezhavas in Kerala*, Gurukripa Publications, Kottayam, 1977, pp. 35-36.

once in six months in the form of corn. Rice was given to them then and there only for making new articles such as spades, knives, tools, locks, sickles etc. The rate of the remuneration for each item of work was decided by the landlords. The Kollans who manufactured the articles had no right to claim the rate fixed by them. This labour system prevailed here for the period upto the first half of the twentieth century, had paved the way for their fiscal difficulties.

Now, the agricultural tools and other articles required by the people for the day to day use are manufactured by industrial firms using machines. The services of the Kollans are not required for the manufacture of the above articles. Most of the Kollans are working in workshops owned by private parties. The owners of the workshop in which they work are rich people, while they themselves remain financially poor.

The traditional goldsmiths are facing a financial crisis since cheaply produced gold ornaments are being dumped into Kerala from other states. The jewellery shops in which the Tattans (goldsmiths) work are owned by the rich people. Only a low remuneration is being paid to them. The despicable attitude of the owners of Jewellery shops force them to seek other jobs.

Owing to the introduction of machines in manufacturing of utensils and agricultural tools, the traditional artisans have lost the chances of jobs. Viswakarmas, the traditional artisans are facing many problems. But their problems are left unattended. They are apprehensive that how long their arts would survive. The efficient and skilled artisans are working in private sectors. The artisans allege that Govt. is not willing to extend enough financial assistance to them for supporting their artistic activities.

4. Communal Organisations

The Viswakarmas in Kerala have three main communal organisations viz. 1) Akhila Kerala Viswakarma Mahasabha 2) Viswakarma Service Society and 3) Tamil Viswakarma Samooham. The history of the communal organisations in Kerala. Pandalam M.N. Krishnan Achari gives: In 1930 a communal organisation entitled 'All Travancore Artisans' Association' was formed under the leadership of N. Velu Achari

with H.Q. at Thiruvananthapuram. But it could not function properly due to a conflict between N. Velu Achari and G. Neelakandan on a controversial bill entitled Karmala Bill/Viswakarma Bill in 1932.

New communal organisation entitled 'Madhya Thiruvithamkur Viswakarma Yuvajana Sangham' was formed under the leadership of M.N. Krishnan Achari. Later its activities were extended to all over the country and its name was changed as 'Akhila Thiruvithamkur Viswakarma Mahayogam' and 'Akhila Thiruvithamkur Viswakarma Mahasabha'. When the state was reconstituted in 1957 the name of the organisation was changed into 'Akhila Kerala Viswakarma Mahasabha'.²⁵

Sixteen communal organisations including some local organisations functioned in Kerala representing the Viswakarmas. 'Kerala Viswakarmala Sangham' was formed uniting seven local organisations. Then nine organisations functioned in different parts of the country. They are as follows: 1) Akhila Thiruvithamkur Viswabrahma Mahasabha 2) Kerala Viswakarma Sabha 3) Madhya Thiruvithamkur Loha Thozhilali Union 4) Tamil Viswabrahma Samajam 5) Viswakarma Desa Sahasra Samiti 6) Kerala Viswakarma Vamsodharana Sangham 7) Viswakarma Carpentry Workers' Union 8) Viswakarma Brahmana Samrekhana Sangham 9) Viswakarma Thozhilali Union. Out of the above organisations only three organisations (Akhila Kerala Viswakarma Mahasabha, Kerala Viswakarma Sangham and Akhila Thiruvithamkur Viswabrahma Mahasabha) functioned properly. Later Viswakarma Service Society was formed in 1968 comprising Kerala Viswakarma Sangham and Akhila Thiruvithamkur Viswabrahma Mahasabha.

In addition to the above organisations there are a number of independent organisations. Most of the Viswakarmas have no connection with their communal organisations. Since the Viswakarmas in Kerala have no earnest and efficient leaders, the members are in a state of dilemma.

It has been alleged that the Akhila Kerala Viswakarma Mahasabha and Viswakarma Service Society are dominated by Asaries and Tamil

²⁵Pandalam M.N. Krishnan Achari, *Viswakarma Service Society Kendra Mandira Udghatana Smaranika*, 1992 May, p. 16 (Malayalam).

goldsmiths respectively. Though certain leaders of the community tried to form a single communal organisation representing the whole Viswakarmas of Kerala their efforts were in vain. The leaders of each communal organisation are not willing to relinquish their leadership. Since Viswakarma community is a composition of different sub-castes engaged in different traditional jobs, there is no unity among them.

5. Their Religious Faith

The Viswakarmas follow the customs and practices of Hindu religion. Since they were not admitted to the temples during the period upto 1936, they constructed their own temples and worshipped their own deities. *Naga* (serpent) worship is very common among Viswakarmas. There are *Naga* temples of their own in different parts of the country. *Naga* festivals with *Naga* songs are being celebrated by the community. In addition to the temple worship, they have consecrated deities in separate rooms of their houses for worship.

The caste system prevailed in the Hindu religion has thwarted the progress of Viswakarmas and other oppressed classes on account of untouchability. A number of Dalit and oppressed classes have therefore embraced Christianity to escape from the continuous humiliation and social disgrace from caste Hindus. A few Keralite Viswakarmas of Emakulam, Alappuzha, Thiruvananthapuram etc. have embraced Christianity along with Dalits. Most of those Viswakarmas who came to Kerala from Tamil Nadu for construction of Churches had embraced Christianity. But their conversion to Christianity has not improved their social and cultural status. They have no protection against the social and economic exploiters.

6. Their Position in Politics

The Viswakarmas have no influence in political field despite the considerable numeric strength of the community. They are only the stooges of the political parties such as Congress (I), BJP, CPI(M), CPI etc. led by upper castes.

After independence in the general election 1948, the Viswakarmas have got five MLAs in the state of Travancore before the formation of Kerala State. Before the general election 1948 the right of franchise was

fixed on the basis of revenue tax paid. Most of the oppressed classes including Viswakarmas had no right in exercising franchise since they were very poor.

The circumstances under which the Viswakarmas secured 5 MLAs are described by Pandalam M.N. Krishnan Achari as follows: On the eve of the general election, 1948 a resolution was adopted by the general body of 'Akhila Thiruvithamkur Viswakarma Mahayogam' on 23.11.1947 requesting the state Congress to allot 5 seats to the members of Viswakarma community, in proportion to the number of their population. The activists of the Viswakarma Mahayogam approached the state Congress leader, Kumbalathu P. Sankuppillai and requested him to give five Congress tickets to the Viswakarmas. He agreed to give one ticket each to the President and General Secretary of Viswakarma Mahayogam and three tickets to other Viswakarmas in the election. Accordingly U.K. Vasudevan Achari (President, Viswakarma Mahayogam), P.K. Kumaran Achari (General Secretary, Viswakarma Mahayogam), K. Ramachandran (Pathanamthitta), G. Neelakandan (Kollam), and K. Ramakrishnan Achari (Neyyattinkara) contested in the general election held in February 1948 and succeeded. Out of 120 seats, Congress succeeded in 97 seats out of which Viswakarmas secured 5 seats. G. Neelakandan died in the assembly on 09.08.1948 due to heart attack. Then S. Sivaraman Achari had been elected unopposed in the by-election.²⁶

Conclusion

The socio-political and religious history of the Viswakarmas in the last few decades goes along with that of the struggle of other backward communities in Kerala for their human rights and dignity. Being proud of their birth identity and cultural endowments backward classes now organize themselves for their rightful share in the resources and opportunities in the national life. The strengthening of *Jati* (caste) consciousness should be, however, within a commonly accepted framework of action in which no sect is neglected or marginalized. The cultural and artistic contribution of the Viswakarmas to the society makes them a community to be highly respected and helped in its common effort for further development.

²⁶Pandalam M.N. Krishnan Achari, *Ente Jeevitha Smaranakal*, Pandalam, 1984, pp. 206, 207, 209, 211 (Malayalam).