



Colonial Ethnography and the Representation of Caste and Tribe: Reading Edgar Thurston's *The Castes and Tribes of Southern India*

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Abstract-

“The Castes and Tribes of Southern India” is a seven-volume work published in 1909 by Edgar Thurston assisted by K. Rangachari. It is a work on the castes and tribal groups of Madras Presidency and the Princely states of Travancore, Mysore, Coorg and Pudukkottai.. This paper would look at Volume three of the work and in particular at the sections of Kallans in the present southern Tamil Nadu and the Kadiris or Kadans of the Anamalai hills of Western Ghats. This investigation primarily revolves around the intricate process of constructing and representing the "tribe" as a separate entity with the colonial discourse aiding delineation of "tribal and caste identity. The work is geared towards an analysis of Thurston's delineation of these two societal groups, within the broader framework of colonialism, thus contributing to the ongoing scholarly debates in this domain.



Keywords- discourse, tribe, caste, identity, representation.

The Castes and Tribes of Southern India is a seven-volume work published in 1909 by Edgar Thurston, assisted by K. Rangachari. It is a work on the social groups of the Madras Presidency and the princely states of Travancore, Mysore, Coorg and Pudukkottai. It was one of the many projects and publications under the Ethnographic Survey of India, instituted by the Government of British India in 1901. This paper looks at Volume Three of the work, in particular the sections on the Kallans of present-day southern Tamil Nadu and the Kadirs or Kadans of the Anamalai Hills of the Western Ghats. It intends to look at the concept of "tribe" in India as a historically constructed category in colonial discourse that was the product of interaction between various intellectual trends, with racial theories at the core. It is important to examine the formation of the discourse itself not as an autonomous development that created a new way of categorising, but as a process that was mediated and shaped by the imperialist interests of the state. The ethnographical "data" compiled by Edgar Thurston may be placed within the larger corpus of similar colonial literature. This investigation primarily revolves around the intricate process of constructing and representing the "tribe" as a separate entity. The paper is situated within the political economy of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial India. It is essentially a textual analysis of Thurston's work, placing it within the context of what Bernard Cohn calls colonial knowledge production, which was closely tied to imperialist interests.ⁱ The question of how colonial rule constructed and represented caste and tribal



identities has been explored by scholars including Crispin Bates, Radhika Singha, Prathama Banerjee, and Susan Bayly. Building on this body of scholarship, the present paper examines Edgar Thurston's ethnographic text.

Crispin Bates talks about the ambiguity in understanding and categorising the concepts of race, caste and tribes in the colonial discourse. Risley's concepts of the Aryan - Dravidian divide is a part of Thurston's understanding of racial classification as well. According to Thurston, the Mongoloid and the Dravidian races were the original inhabitants of north-eastern India and southern India respectively, with whom the invading races sometimes mixed. Those believed to be tribals were mostly characterized of being the Dravidian or Mongoloid stock, whereas the agrarian or rural populations of northern India were either of diverse roots or had Aryan origins.ⁱⁱ

Thurston stresses on the stark contrast between the tribals and the plain's people by their marked physical traits. Defining the features of the mountain tribes Kadirs, he says "The salient features of Kadirs can be summed up as follows: short stature, dark skin, platyrrhine. men and women have their teeth chipped".ⁱⁱⁱ One can also evidently see the use of philology to stress their backwardness. The difficulty faced by the Kadirs in pronouncing certain letters and sounds, for instance the letter "F" and thus "elephant" becomes "ellipence", are presented by Thurston as moments of humour. Bates looks at how philology and ethnology is an important part of the ethnographic surveys getting we see what Mueller had called "an unholy alliance" between the two, which again gets deployed as indicators of civilizational advancement.^{iv} One could place it in close reading with Risley's understanding of development of vocal apparatus.



Risley believed that the basic linguistic divisions of the Indian subcontinent could be traced back to racial origins.

In Thurston's account, the Kadirs or Kadans are identified a "typical example of happiness without culture", and "simple in manners and customs". They are seen as "isolated with being provided everything by nature and knowing little of cultivation", but "resourceful" ^v. These definitions seek to classify these groups and position them at the periphery of societal norms. Prathama Bannerjee looks at how in the colonial discourse, the representation of the tribe as timeless existence, of the "ignorant" and "blissful" - placed them placed in the lowest in the temporal hierarchization of communities, as the anti-thesis of modernity. ^{vi}

The immediate context of classifying and understanding these hill tribes, was that of the changing political ecology, where the question of state's ownership and control of the forest lands and the entitlements of the forest inhabitants came to be clashing. Sharavanan Velayutham's work has looked at how the colonial intervention altered the traditional utilization of forest resources by the forest dwelling tribal communities since the beginning of the nineteenth century^{vii}. Velayutham says that post Madras Forest Act 1882, the colonial regime actively encouraged commercialisation while placing severe restrictions on tribals and other forest users.^{viii}

Richard Grove argues that colonial environmentalism was shaped by the long-term interests of empire. Colonial forest policies sought to ensure the sustainable use of forests so that they continue to generate revenue and supply timber for imperial needs.^{ix} This necessitated the systematic production of knowledge about forests, their resources, and the communities inhabiting them. Colonial administrators, naturalists, and ethnographers therefore undertook



extensive efforts to survey, classify, and document both the natural environment and its inhabitants.

The minor forest produce of Anamalai hills was identified as wax, honey, cardamoms, myrabolams, ginger, dammer, turmeric, deer horns, elephant tusks and rattans. As per accounts a sum of Rs.7886 was said to be total value of the minor forest produce collected in the year 1897-98. The government also sanctioned the Kadar's rights to collect and sell the minor forest produce to government through the medium of a contractor^x.

Richard Grove argues that colonial environmentalism was shaped by the long-term interests of empire. Rather than being driven solely by conservationist concerns, colonial forest policies sought to ensure the sustainable use of forests so that they could continue to generate revenue and supply timber for imperial needs. This objective necessitated the systematic production of knowledge about forests, their resources, and the communities inhabiting them. Colonial administrators, naturalists, and ethnographers therefore undertook extensive efforts to survey, classify, and document both the natural environment and its inhabitants.

Thurston's account of the Kallans of the Southern regions of Tamil Nadu can be read in the context of the colonial conception of the criminal communities. In the colonial discourse the understanding such communities were that of robbers by profession and even by birth. Kallan which means "thief" in Tamil is identified as one such group or castes who are dacoits by heredity. "They practice dacoity in houses or on highways, robbery, house breaking and cattle stealing." ^{xi} Scholars like Radhika Sinha looks at the importance given to the details of practices and methods of crimes of the group in the colonial narratives. This is then employed

as a major marker for identifying the different groups of such communities and also to separate them from the casual criminal offenders.^{xii} The suspicion towards significant presence of a population in constant mobility who couldn't be effectively brought under the state's surveillance turned out to be a major concern for the authority. The vagrant population that for the colonists, resembled the vagabonds and "masterless men" of the 16th - 17th century England would have called for similar actions to control and settle them.^{xiii}

A close reading of the Thuggee Campaign in since the 1830s enables us to understand the state's attempt to control and take judicial action against such criminal communities. Sinha's work looks at it as the aftermath of territorial expansion of the company from the late eighteenth century, the disbanded soldiers of the erstwhile Princely States as well as those employed by the Company. In the early nineteenth century 'thugs' passed themselves off as soldiers in search of service and attacked other parties of recruits.^{xiv} In one of the origin stories of the Kallans, Thurston refers to them as a branch among the Kurumbas who took to marauding when they found their regular soldier's occupation gone.^{xv} The reference to "vellari-thadis" their weapons that used to play a significant part in the Poligar wars as remnants of a bygone chivalrous past.

But what one could find increasingly asserted in Thurston's narrative is the reference to "barbarism, violent addiction to dacoity and defiance of authority among the Kallans. Thurston says "During the feudal system that prevailed among the Collieries for a long time, they would on no consideration permit the then government to have any control or authority over them."^{xvi} Particularly interesting in these narratives is the attempt to downplay any system of co-existence between them and the rest of the population. While it is referred that the households



and villages paid them a sum or due called “kudi-kaval” in the past, in return for their service as “kavalgars” providing assurance of security from theft and dacoity. Also there was the practice of “tuppu-kuli” whereby the people whose cattle have been stolen (by Kallans themselves) pay certain amount to the Kallan community in return for clues for the retrieval of the stolen cattle.^{xvii}

Scholars like Susan Bayly have tried looking at the ethnographical literature as a part of a wider corpus of intellectual trends within the European intelligentsia. While the questions of race, caste and tribes prominently appeared in these writings, she says that the process was not that of mere essentialising or homogenising into categories. The complexities such as the divisions and subdivisions castes and the “problems of miscegenation” of races were addressed by figures like Hunter and Topinard^{xviii}. According to Sumit Guha the idea that entrenched caste system prevented mixing between groups were seen in Risley’s understanding of India as an ethnographers' paradise. But Risley was criticised by figures like Topinard where he said that the populations were, far too mixed this.^{xix}

An examination of Thurston's accounts necessitates a nuanced engagement with ethnographical and anthropological investigations into colonial discourse. This discourse transformed the colonized population into subjects of scrutiny, immobilized within a specific temporal and spatial framework. Defining and classifying these subjects using familiar paradigms was integral to establishing and consolidating authority over colonial territories.



ⁱ Bernard Cohn. "Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge". Princeton university press 1996

ⁱⁱ Crispin Bates. Race, Caste and Tribe in Central India: The Early Origins of Indian Anthropometry.

in Peter Robb edited. Concept of race in South Asia. Delhi 1995, p21

ⁱⁱⁱ Edgar Thurston; Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Vol:III ,Government Press, Madras 1909, p.8

<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.47747>

^{iv} Bates, Race, Caste and Tribe in Central India. p.22

^v Thurston; Castes and Tribes of Southern India, p.9

^{vi} Prathama Bannerjee; Debt, time and extravagance: Money and the making of 'primitives' in colonial Bengal; IESHR. 2000

<http://ier.sagepub.com/content/37/4/423>

^{vii} Velayutham Saravanan; Economic Exploitation Of Forest Resources In South India During The Pre-Forest Act Colonial Era, 1793-1882, The International Forestry Review, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2008), p. 65

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43739701>.

^{viii} ibid

^{ix} Grove, Richard H., Vinita Damodaran, and Satpal Sangwan, editors. *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia*. Oxford University Press, 1998

^x Thurston; Castes and Tribes of Southern India, p.12

^{xi} ibid

^{xii} Radhika Sinha, A Despotism Of Law: Crime And Justice In Early Colonial India P-18

^{xiii} Christopher Hill ,The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During The English Revolution 1984

^{xiv} Radhika Sinha; 'Providential' Circumstances: The Thuggee Campaign of the 1830s and Legal Innovation. Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 27, No. 1, (Feb., 1993), p.107

Cambridge University Press

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/312879>

^{xv} Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India,p.60

^{xvi} ibid

^{xvii} Opcit, p.64



^{xviii} Susan Bayly, ““Caste” and “Race” in the Colonial Ethnography of India’, in *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, ed. Peter Robb (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.172

^{xix} SUMIT GUHA , *LOWER STRATA, OLDER RACES, AND ABORIGINAL PEOPLES: RACIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND MYTHICAL HISTORY PAST AND PRESENT*

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