

THE
COCHIN TRIBES AND CASTES
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.



HIS HIGHNESS THE MAHARAJA OF COCHIN.

The Cochin Tribes and Castes

VOLUME II.

BY

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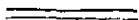
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THE
COCHIN TRIBES AND CASTES.

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INTRODUCTION.

Owing to ill-health my erudite friend, Professor A. H. Keane, was unable to write the introduction to the second volume of Mr. L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer's monograph, "The Cochin Tribes and Castes", and at a somewhat late date I was requested to do so. Those who have studied the earlier Volume of this enthusiastic and energetic ethnologist will cordially welcome the continuation of his ethnographic researches. The first volume gives a descriptive account of the hill and jungle tribes and other low castes of the State in the ascending order of social status. These backward jungle folk have a peculiar interest for ethnologists as they appear to retain many of the customs and beliefs which we may well suppose characterised mankind in very ancient times; they are ethnological survivals which bear the same relation to anthropology as that borne to zoology by those generalised or persistent types dating from geological antiquity in various groups of animals that rejoice the heart of the zoologist.

The present volume deals with other groups, higher in social grade but not of less interest or importance for the student, for the State of Cochin is fortunate in possessing an assemblage of tribes and castes which is without parallel elsewhere in an area of equal size.

The Nayars have been frequently alluded to by ethnologists and sociologists on account of their peculiar social customs. They were formerly the swordsmen and military caste of the west coast of India; Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* vi. 21) refers to them as *Narcæ*. Their origin is still problematical, but it is generally held that they are a Dravidian people who have been modified by mixture with the Nambuthiris, indeed judging from photographs it is not always possible to determine to which of these two peoples a given individual belongs. They may have been among the first invaders of Malabar and consequently assumed

a dominant position. Mr. Thurston (*Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. v. p. 284) refers to successive waves of different castes and tribes from the Canarese and Tamil countries; these settled down, "adopted the customs and manners, and assumed the caste names of the more respectable of the community that surrounded them. This process of assimilation is going on even yet. Chetties of Coimbatore . . . Gollas . . . from the north have similarly, in course of time, assumed Nayar customs and manners, and are now styled Nayars. Again the Rajas and Chieftains of the country sometimes raised individuals or classes who had rendered them meritorious service to the rank of Nayars. These men were therefore styled Nayars, but formed a separate sub-division with little or no communion with the rest of the Nayar class, until at least, after the lapse of generations, when their origin was forgotten. Nayar may thus at present be considered to be a term almost as wide and general as Sudra" (H. A. Stuart. *Madras Census Report*, 1891). Mr. M. Sankara Menon (*Census of India*, 1901, vol. xx. Cochin, Pt. I. p. 151) also believes in the mixed origin of the Nayars and suggests that there may be a Kolarian element in the population. When the observations on the physical anthropology of the inhabitants of the State are published we shall probably be in a better position to discuss the problem.

The Nayars are divided up into so many groups and sub-groups that it is not easy to define exactly what these are; on p.97 we read that "Among the high caste Nayars, the recognition of caste by occupation is not possible. They were at one time a military caste . . . Among the lower classes of Nayars, there were sub-castes (potters, weavers, copper-smiths, etc.) . . . but the men of these sub-castes have abandoned their traditional occupations and consider it a disgrace to be known by their original occupation." It seems an undue extension of the term to describe them all as members of one caste, on the other hand there does not appear to have been sufficient solidarity among them to warrant their being termed a tribe as N. Subramaniya Iyer, following Bhattacharya, has done (*Census of India*, 1901, vol. xxvi. Travancore, p. 321). M. Sankara Menon however says (*l. c.* p. vi): "A number of *tarawads* (matriarchal family groups) related together has all the features of a regular clan . . . Two or more clans having the

same social status are grouped into a *jāthi* or caste of later times, which has in its turn all the characteristics of a tribe . . . Thus, the Nayar community is even to this day divided into tribes, which are again sub-divided into clans and families." The Nayars may therefore be best described as simply a people.

There are two forms of marriage among the Nayars: the *tālikettu kalyānam* obligatory only on females, and the *sambandham*. The former or *tāli*-tying ceremony is compulsory on every girl before she attains maturity, though there is a tendency towards laxity in this respect now-a-days. The ceremony takes place every ten or twelve years, when all the girls down to the baby in the cradle must undergo it if they have not already done so. It is a formal affair, celebrated with complicated rites and much festivity. There may be a bridegroom or *tāli*-tier for each girl, or he may be married to all the girls. He may be of any age, but in the northern parts of the State and elsewhere a boy or boys are customary. On the fourth or fifth day the wedding dress is torn to signify the dissolution of marriage, the *tāli* may be removed then or later. In poor families the mother ties the *tāli* in the nearest temple. If the *tāli*-tier, of whatever rank he may be, wishes to take the girl as his wife he is at liberty to do so with the consent of her parents, in which case he has to celebrate the *sambandham* by giving her presents of cloth. It is also understood that till the severing of the cloth on the fourth or fifth day he has the right to cohabit with her. Every conceivable designation has been applied to the *tāli*-tying ceremony from a "formal marriage" to "a ridiculous farce". N. S. Iyer (*Census of India, 1901*, Travancore pt. 1. p. 328) quotes Sir T. Muttuswami Iyer who describes it as a religious ceremony "to give the girl a marriageable status . . . A ceremony which creates the tie of marriage only to be dissolved at its close suggests an intention rather to give the girl the merits of a religious ceremony than to generate the relation of husband and wife."

The second or real marriage, *sambandham*, good or auspicious union (also known as *guna dosham*, good and evil), is invariably accompanied by gifts of a cloth and money and is a quiet affair with the minimum amount of ceremony. The proper spouse for a young man is the daughter of his maternal

uncle (cross-cousin marriage). "The union is generally effected with mutual consent, but is terminable at the will of either party" (M. S. Menon *l. c.* p. 160).

There cannot be intermarriage between descendants of any female ancestor. A man may not marry the sister of his deceased wife. Among the high class people marriage is hypergamous, but endogamous for the low castes.

The Nayers are not only a matrilineal people, but they afford one of the most striking examples of that rare social condition, the matriarchate. We are probably safe in regarding this as a very ancient institution among the original Nagas and in their case it was associated with another rare custom polyandry.

Polyandry seems usually to be related in Central Asia with poverty and unfavourable conditions of existence, but this cannot be a determining factor in Cochin. Various circumstances here appear to contribute to this custom. In the first place there is the rigid organisation of the *tarawad* which, at all events in former days, relegated the husband or consort to the position of a negligible outsider. Mr. Anantha Krishna Iyer says that according to the orthodox view "the *sambandham* or *pudamuri* ceremony is not a marriage in the legal or sacramental sense of the term . . . The Nambuthiris do not look upon it as a marriage . . . The union may terminate at any time from wantonness, caprice or any other reason, and if the couple joined together by *pudamuri* were satisfied with one night of hymeneal bliss, there is no legal impediment to prevent separating without any formality on the following morning" (p. 35). "Further the person that begot a child in a *marumakkathayam* [*i. e.* matrilineal] female was originally regarded as a casual visitor and the sexual relation depended for its continuance on mutual consent . . ." As a matter of fact "all or nearly all of the Nayers [now] cling to one wife for life, and with them *sambandham* is the real marriage, *de facto* and *de jure*. This is the real state of affairs in the States of Cochin and Travancore as well as in British Malabar" p. 36).

Although the custom appears to have died out except perhaps in a few out-of-the-way places, there is no doubt that true polyandry occurred among the Nayers. Hamilton says that the women except those of high rank may marry up to twelve

husbands at one time if they please, "the husbands agree very well, for they cohabit with her in their turns, according to their priority of marriage, ten days, more or less, according as they can fix a term among themselves" ("A new account of the East Indies", in Pinkerton, *Coll. of Voy. and Travels* VIII. 1811, p. 374). The husbands were not necessarily brothers though they probably usually were. They in their turn do not seem to have been limited in the number of terminable marriages which they could make. Dr. Rivers has pointed out similarities between the marriage institutions of the Nayers and Todas (*The Todas*, 1906, p. 699). Evidently in olden days there was a system of more or less temporary marriage which was at the same time polyandric and polygynic, in other words it was a true polygamy, and this was the recognised method of increasing the membership of a *tarawad*. Mr. Anantha Krishna Iyer points out (pp. 36, 38) that the old state of affairs has passed away and the people are virtually monogamists, though there is still considerable diversity of opinion and practice.

The perpetuation of the inconspicuous position of a husband was probably strengthened by the military organisation of the Nayers. It is not desirable from a military point of view that warriors should be cumbered with the cares of a wife and family. This was acted upon by Zulu chiefs and by the Masai, though the latter recognised the frailty of the flesh by allowing young girls to live in the warriors' kraals. Polyandry among the Nayers was also fostered by the power of a chieftain of selling to a man the rights of a husband over another man's wife (p. 59), and especially by the teaching and practice of the Brahmins (p. 40). The Nambuthiri dominance threw on the subject classes a large number of wifeless males without any property of their own, but the Nayar social system was "admirably suited to their peculiar circumstances and urgent needs" (M. S. Menon, *l. c.* p. x), and they had every reason to conserve it as there is no restriction to the number of Nayar women with whom a man may be associated.

M. Sankara Menon believes that, judging from what still obtains among the non-Aryans of Malabar, Cochin and Travancore, the people of Kerala, as the whole district was called, were organised in tribes each led by a chief who took possession of lands by clearing waste ground, or by expelling or enslaving

the owners, the land being afterwards distributed among clans or smaller groups which co-operated in the work of clearing or of conquest; the tribes without landed estates obtained subsistence by different kinds of services to the rest. The government was in all probability in the hands of the *karavans*, or head men of families, there being no evidence of any monarchical constitution.

There is hardly any doubt, Mr. Menon thinks, that at least in the first half of the fourth century B. C. Aryans invaded Kerala. These were the Nambuthiris (Nambutiris or Nambudiris), who by temperament and training were quite a different kind of people from what their peace-loving, unobtrusive descendants have long since become. As Parasurâma, their accredited leader, was the bitterest enemy of the Kshatriyas it is improbable that members of the warrior caste accompanied him, therefore the Nambuthiris must have been fighting men and doubtless brought followers in their train. The Aryans were first repelled by the Nagas or serpent people, who were probably the ancestors of the Nayars, but later they overcame them, and it is an interesting example of the irony of fate that there is a serpent grove in almost every compound or garden occupied by high caste Malayali Hindus, and snakes are fed and nursed in the house of the "*Pâmbumêkât Nambûdri*" (M. S. Menon, *l. c.* p. 25). Finally came the time of social assimilation and national consolidation, but the abiding predominance of the Nambuthiris in the community was probably due as much to the occupation by force of arms as to their superior religion and civilisation. After the conquest they were settled by their leader in villages occupied by the indigenous agrarian peoples, who were subsequently classified as Sudras. To induce an idea of nationality the new-comers were prevailed upon by Parasurâma, among other things, to wear their tuft of hair in front instead of at the back of the head as in other parts of India. He also attempted with but partial success to assimilate to the Aryan system the many customs and practices which prevailed among the conquered.

In order to maintain the continuous purity of blood and stability of their families and to prevent their becoming weakened by the multiplication of impoverished branches, the rule is enforced that under ordinary circumstances only the eldest son of the Nambuthiris is allowed to marry and he must

marry one within the caste but outside his own family or *gotra*. Marriage is prohibited within six degrees when the common ancestor is a male and within six or four degrees when the ancestor is a female; conjugal relationship between first cousins is seldom practised, but when it is allowed a man marries the daughter of his maternal uncle after taking a ceremonial bath to indicate that all relationship with his cousin has ceased. Very often the absence of a son to the eldest brother and the necessity of providing the girls with husbands lead a junior member to marry into the same caste as the elder brother's wife, usually her sister. As a rule, however, the junior members enter into *sambandham* with young women of other castes below them up to the high caste Nayars. When a girl of vedic parentage, owing to poverty or other causes, is allowed to be married to a young man of the non-vedic class she loses her status. Polygyny is often indulged in partly to ensure having a son and partly to dispose of the superfluous number of girls. "Two or three girls are married to one man to avoid the payment of heavy sums which are required to get suitable bridegrooms" (p. 210). Polyandry and widow-marriage are absolutely unknown among them.

The relation between the Nambuthiris and the Nayars is a very interesting one and each community has been affected by the other.

Another interesting community is that of the Mappillas who are described in the *Census Report* of 1871 as hybrid Muhammedans whose numbers are constantly increased by the conversion of the slave castes of Malabar, which conversion Mr. Logan says "has had a marked effect in freeing the slave caste in Malabar from their former burthens. By conversion a Cheruman obtains a distinct rise in the social scale, and, if he is in consequence bullied or beaten, the whole Muhammedan community comes to his aid." They too have adopted many Hindu customs, for instance a *tâli* is tied round the neck of a bride by her sister, and though inheritance is patrilineal in the Cochin State in North Malabar the Mappillas, like the local Nambuthiris, have adopted the matrilineal law of inheritance. "Curiously enough," Mr. Anantha Krishna Iyer informs us, "even among those whose inheritance is patrilineal the wife seldom lives with her husband in his own home, but on the

contrary the husband visits her as in a *marumakkathayam* family."

It is impossible to do justice in an Introduction to the mass of valuable information which Mr. Anantha Krishna Iyer has presented to his fellow-students, so I will content myself with a reference to the Black Jews.

One of the most interesting features of the ethnology of Cochin is the community of Black Jews, concerning whom there has been much controversy. There is no doubt that Jews came in early times as settlers, possibly according to some from Yemen, and that they intermarried with the natives. Dr. Redcliffe N. Salaman has recently shewn in a suggestive paper on "Heredity and the Jew" (*Journal of Genetics*, Vol. i. 1911, p. 273) that contrary to current opinion those physical characters which though difficult to describe are generally recognised as "Jewish" are (in Mendelian terminology) recessive when Jews mate with European Gentiles, whereas Gentile physical characters are dominant. Indeed so far as his observations go the Jew-Gentile hybrids conform to Mendel's law, and they "strengthen the view that complex as the origin of the Jew may be, close inbreeding for at least two thousand years has resulted in certain stable or homozygous combinations of factors which react in accordance with the laws of Mendel and which may explain the occurrence of the peculiar facial expression recognised as Jewish (*l. c.* p. 290). With regard to the Cochin Black Jews he says: "The Beni-Israel of India have been settled in India at any rate since 1400 of the present era, but traditionally from pre-exilic times. They are essentially a black people quite unlike the European Jew. They have always been looked down on by their white brethren in India and they have lived as the natives amongst whom they dwell, and with whom there is little doubt they have freely mixed. In the description of them given by Fischberg, he agrees that they are non-Jewish looking and dark skinned; he remarks, however, that every now and again a practically ordinary white skinned individual with Jewish features occurs amongst them. If, as is probable, the Jewish facial features are recessive to the native, then it is only what one should expect to find that the great majority of this isolated community are native-looking and that an occasional recessive should crop out from the mating of two hybrids" (*l. c.* p. 286). It is certain that race mixture has taken

place, and in the Jewish Encyclopædia article a very good account is given of how the Black community has been augmented by the addition of freed slaves belonging to the White Jews, and the conditions of admission are of interest. The absence of Levites amongst the Black Jews is almost certain proof that there can be but very little Jewish blood present. The tradition of Levite and Kohen exists in full strength to-day all over Europe, and there is every reason to believe that it is absolutely well-founded and that no man calls himself Levite or Kohen, who cannot in reality make good the claim. No Levite or Kohen according to Jewish law, may marry a stranger, a proselyte or the daughter of a proselyte, or a divorcee, the sect may therefore be regarded as of strictly Jewish descent. Its absence from the Black Jews is highly suggestive. The community of Black Jews is thus an interesting example of the persistence of social and religious customs long after they have ceased to have any racial significance.

It does not appear from the account of Mr. Anantha Krishna Iyer that the Black Jews have any peculiar customs or ceremonies which are not characteristically Jewish, but M. Sankara Menon (Census of India, 1901, XX Cochin pt. 1. p. 67), says: "The Jews of all sections have adopted a few customs peculiar to Hindus. Before going to the Synagogue for marriage a *Tali* is tied round the bride's neck by some near female relative of the bridegroom generally his sister". The tube, or *mezuzah* on the doorpost can be seen in London, and together with the kissing of the finger is an old orthodox custom still common among the Polish Jews.

The desire for sons, with which the custom of the Levirate among the Jews is associated, is not confined to Hindus or Jews. It is not clear whether the Black Jews themselves admit that this desire "is an outcome of the idea that the spirit of the dead would be made happy by homage received at the hands of the male descendants". Letourneau (*The Evolution of Marriage*, p. 265) says: "For the Hebrews, a much more practical people than the Hindoos, the levirate had only an earthly object that of keeping up the name or family of the deceased and all that belonged to it." The idea is tersely expressed in *Ruth* iv. 5, "to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance." Whatever may be the significance of the

levirate among other peoples, its occurrence among the Jews was not due to the idea of property in the widow but to the desire to establish the deceased brother's name and property and was only necessary if the deceased was childless. If the statement that the Jews (presumably the Black Jews) may be married before they "come of age" implies that they may be married before puberty, then we must regard this as a borrowing from Hinduism as there is no evidence that such a thing occurs in any other Jewish community. The breaking of the glass is universal at Jewish weddings and serves as a reminder in the midst of joy of the destruction of Jerusalem. Mr. Anantha Krishna Iyer has made a slip in speaking of the *Kethubah* as a commandment, it is merely a plain contract enjoining the husband to maintain the wife and mortgaging all his property as security for the return of her dowry should she be left a widow. It is essentially a document for the protection of the wife. Another variation from accepted usage occurs in regard to divorce and is quite contrary to the Talmudic and mediæval Jewish practice. If the Black Jews look upon the Great Day of Atonement as commemorating a national calamity they are in error as it was observed before any such occurred.

It is true that the Cochin Jews either Black or White have produced very little literature, but we can scarcely call individuals uneducated if they study Hebrew and can read and write the language though few may be able to read and write Malayalam.

If the Cochin Jews may not eat any species of fish they have gone far beyond the Mosaic food taboos, as "whatsoever hath fins and scales in the waters, in the seas, and in the rivers, them shall ye eat" (Leviticus xi, 9).

The accompanying illustrations also point to the foregoing conclusions: the Black Jews present few, if any, traces of Jewish blood, whereas in the photograph of White Jews these are readily discernible.

Students of Ethnology will warmly congratulate Mr. Anantha Krishna Iyer on the completion of his investigations on the customs and beliefs of the peoples of the State of Cochin; and they also would like to mark their appreciation of the

liberality of the enlightened Raja and Government of the State for entrusting the work to such able hands and for the excellent manner in which it has been published.

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ALFRED C. HADDON.

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