

CHAPTER – III

***LIFE OF THE PIRAMALAI KALLAR
PRIOR TO THE INTRODUCTION
OF CHRISTIANITY***

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The Piramalai Kallars can be said to be the longest living human tribe in India and one of the oldest in the world.* They were the most conservative section of the Kallars and lovers of tradition. It is true in the sense that they had been in love with tradition and had voluntarily anchored themselves to the ancients so that with them custom had been a deity to worship and conservatism had been their watchword. Independent in spirit they had retained their Dravidian customs, unimpaired by contact with Brahmanism, to a great degree.¹

Social and Cultural Life

Social life of the Piramalai Kallars

The Piramalai Kallars led a simple life. Living on dried out lands, they could not afford to spend much on their diet. Hence they were poorly fed and coarsely dressed and lived in utter misery. As a conservative, illiterate,

* A recent anthropological research conducted by Dr. Spencer Wells (Oxford University) and Dr. Pitchappan (Madurai Kamaraj University) has resulted in identifying an ancient DNA marker in the blood of Piramalai Kallar which links them to the very first modern humans who migrated out of Africa about 60,000 years ago and by travelling through the southern coastline of Asia had eventually reached Australia and thus has substantiated the aforesaid statement. *See Annexure- i.*

1. H.A. Stuart, *Census of India*, Vol. XIII, Govt. Press, Madras, 1891, p.215.

superstitious and custom-ridden group, they were caught in a vicious circle of poverty and ignorance. They were superstitious to the extent that even before starting on their depredatory excursions, they used to observe omens and consulted their house hold gods through flowers. If white flower instead of red flower was picked up by a child of tender years, they took it as a sign of success.²

A remarkable custom prevailed among the males and females in olden days to have their ears bored and stretched by hanging heavy rings made of lead so as to expand their ear-lobes down to their shoulders.³ (See plates I & II) Formerly where a Kallar girl was deputed to guide a stranger safely through a Kallar tract, if any of her caste people attempted to offer violence to her ward despite her protests, that 'sacred guide' immediately tore open one of her ear-lobes and reported the matter to the chief and elders of the Nadu. Immediately a meeting of the village council was held at *mandei* (common meeting place) and if the violators were convicted, they were to have both their ear-lobes torn in expiation of their crime or punished by fines.⁴ Altercations between women constantly led to one or both parties having the ears violently pulled asunder and 'lobe-tearing cases' figured frequently in police records.⁵

2. F.S. Mullaly, *Notes on Criminal Classes of the Madras Presidency*, Govt. Press, Madras, 1892, p.90.

3. Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of South India*, Vol. III, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1987, p.55.

4. F.S. Mullaly, *Op. cit.*, P.87.

5. Muhammad Abdul Ghani, *Notes on the Criminal Tribes of the Madras Presidency*, Thompson and Co., Madras, 1915, p.76.

These Kallars had undoubtedly developed a healthy social life right from the beginning when they settled down in Tamilnadu. They lived to a larger extent as joint families in villages, inhabited by their own caste and therefore had close clan feelings.⁶ Practically every member of the tribe was inter-related with the other members either by blood or marriage. As Louis Dumont puts in, this tendency toward local segregation and single caste settlement except for the service castes is one of the reasons for considering the Kallar as a tribe.⁷ They were a settled race from the beginning and did not like to be far away from their homes even for purposes of crime. Rarely did they set out to other places such as Salem, Coimbatore, Tanjore and South Arcot districts for depredations and thereby proving their affinity towards the family and the clan.⁸

Forms of Marriage

To preserve the purity of the community, caste endogamy was emphasised. They did not like to inter-marry with other divisions of the Kallars and preferred to marry only among themselves, thus proving to be a sub-caste of the Kallar caste. They preferred kin marriages since such marriages strengthened

6. *Note Showing the Settlement of Criminal Tribes in the Madras Presidency Upto September 1916*, Govt. Press, Madras, p.3.

7. Louis Dumont, *South Indian Sub-Caste: Social Organisation and Religion of the Piramalai Kallar*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1986, p.19.

8. Muhammad Abdul Ghani, *Op. cit.*, p.78.

the existing relation between the two groups and reinforced the integration between them. Further as the relatives tend to take interest in the welfare of the fellow relatives, affinal relations with them were preferred.

At the same time clan exogamy was observed. Almost all the young people of a particular clan which is known as *karai* were classificatory sisters and brothers and were forbidden as spouses.⁹ To them, a Piramalai Kallar boy marrying a Piramalai Kallar girl alone was considered to be a regular union. If any one of them happened to belong to a non-Piramalai Kallar community, such union was denounced as irregular and they were abhorred as *puzhukkai* Kallars, a derogatory term to denote their impurity. This social stigma would persist and linger through all generations, thus encumbering their posterity too. Such impure Kallar could have matrimonial ties only with those who were also branded like themselves.¹⁰

Much importance was attached to chastity. Kallar women were generally chaste – was the observation made by Ghani.¹¹ Pre-marital as well as extra-marital relationships were forbidden. What Louis Dumont observed at later years was very much true in the past. A furtive smile of a girl at her lover, if

9. Louis Dumont, *Op. cit.*, p. 196.

10. C.N. Natarajan, *The Piramalai Kallars of Tamil Nadu. A study of Their Marriage, Kinship and Clan System*, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Madurai Kamaraj University, 1978, pp.204 – 206.

11. Muhammad Abdul Ghani, *Op. cit.*, p.78.

observed, was enough to take them before the village council. In case of denial of the guilt by the boy, he had to undergo an ordeal with boiling butter.¹² To avoid such untoward happenings, girls were given in marriage immediately after puberty.

Pre-puberty marriage was rather a remote possibility. The usual marriageable age for girls ranged between 15 and 17 whereas for boys between 18 and 20. Thus only adult marriages were practised. Child marriage was not entertained by them. The reason was from the time of marriage till the birth of the first child, prestations in the form of fowls, rice, goat, jaggery, plantains, betel, turmeric, condiments etc. had to be made annually. With a view to shorten the duration and thereby to lessen the expenditure, they preferred adult marriages.¹³

Usually the boys tended to marry girls younger to them though there was no hard and fast rule for that. There were cases in which men had married ladies older to them. Even in that case the wife had to pay due respect to him. While choosing the spouse, it was customary to give importance to *sudantra pathiyathai* i.e., rightful claim. Accordingly, the eldest son of a family (*sudantra mappilai*) had rightful claims for the hand of his maternal uncle's eldest daughter the *sudantra ponnu* irrespective of their age disparity. Thus the system recognised

12. Louis Dumont, *Loc. cit.*

13. Personal Interview with *Mrs. Soundari Mani*, aged 50, a PIRAMALAI KALLAR, Teacher of a Middle School at Nagamalai Pudukkottai, on 4th May, 2006, at Madurai.

only the first born to have the rights of *sudantra pathiyathai*. Even if the *sudantra ponnu* was elder to the boy, if he was willing, he could marry her. If anyone of the pair was unwilling to marry the *sudantra* person, they had to pay indemnity to the other so as to get released from the *sudantra pathiyathai*. If at all a marriage was negotiated by an alliance seeking party or so, it was mandatory to ascertain whether the proposed bride or groom had been released from the *sudantra pathiyathai*. Thus as a matter of right-cum-obligation, a Piramalai Kallar marries his maternal uncle's daughter and a Piramalai Kallathi, her paternal aunt's son. These facts have been corroborated by C.N. Natarajan's findings.¹⁴

Though monogamy was practised as a routine affair, the Piramalai Kallars were not against polygyny. If the first wife was barren, or chronically sick or physically incapacitated to do domestic works, a second wife was taken. Under such circumstances, it was usually done with the knowledge of the first wife. In fact the first wife was apprised of it earlier, though not consulted. The second wife was next in rank to the first wife. Even if she was older than the first wife, she was referred to as *eleya kudiya* i.e., junior co-wife by the latter, who though younger, as *mutha kudiya* i.e., senior co-wife by the former.

Usually if the first wife was barren, her sister was taken as a second wife – thus sororal polygyny was mostly preferred. However heterogeneous

14. C.N. Natarajan, *Op. cit.*, pp.220 – 231. It was corroborated by *Dr.J.M.Chellappa*, aged 62, a Piramalai Kallar and a retired Professor, on 16th May, 2006, at Trichy.

polygyny wherein the wives were not related to each other was also prevalent with some, under normal conditions, who considered it a status symbol.

However polyandry was not in vogue. It was strongly refuted by the Piramalai Kallars during field study. Even Louis Dumont feels that Turnbull was mistaken regarding the prevalence of that practice among the women of this community.¹⁵ Francis also bears testimony in the Gazetteer, published in 1906, that he never came across any trace of it. The custom of addressing the agnates as father by the children of their lineage is quite common even today and this, perhaps, might have been mistaken for polyandry.

Concubinage

Concubinage was very much a personal matter which did not require the consent of the kin. It was quite common among village headmen who considered it a status symbol. But no marriage ceremony was observed. A concubine could replace a secondary wife but never a main wife. But the intricacies involved were if the lady belonged to another caste, or if the sons of the wife resisted it, a register marriage with her would lead to ostracism. To avoid such unpleasant development, the person concerned used to forego a new marriage but would keep her in a house and provided for her needs. Nevertheless a

15. Louis Dumont, *Op. cit.*, p.197.

concubine was looked down upon. Still she could get a share of her master's possessions for her illegitimate children while he was alive or through his will. Otherwise they had no right of inheritance.

Divorce

The Piramalai Kallars never considered marriage as an indissoluble bond. Termination of conjugal union is quite easy among them even today. Sterility was considered a great misfortune leading to divorce. Besides that the chronic illness of the wife, husband's drunkenness, insufficient wedding gifts, divorce in reprisal due to sister exchange, refusal to live in joint family, suspicion on morality etc. were some of the reasons for divorce.

Divorce was termed as *thirthukkattuthal* meaning termination. Any one of the pair, either male or female could opt for it. The case was submitted before the *mandei*, the village council. The husband and a male member representing the wife's side, usually her brother, were to stand with folded hands and bare chest. The women were not expected to be present during the proceedings. No *valakku panam* i.e., fees was collected for divorce cases. After hearing the version of both sides, the village council would try its level best through adjournments to settle the case amicably. If failed, it would pronounce divorce as a last resort. Thereupon the husband would break a straw into two

pieces and give one to his wife or brother-in-law. This act was known as *turumbu killi podhuthal* i.e., breaking the straw which implied that to the husband the divorced wife was as worthless as straw and he had nothing to do with her.¹⁶ According to Baliga, to give a straw meant 'to divorce' and to take a straw meant 'acceptance' to divorce.¹⁷ But for Francis giving a piece of straw expressed the idea that 'this is all the fine lady's value demands'.¹⁸

Divorce was invariably followed by the return of *seervarisai*, the prestations, if both the parties opted for it. If not, the person who asked for divorce when the other spouse did not acknowledge any fault, would lose their marriage prestations and must reimburse them besides a compensation for their unilateral decision. If the children of the divorced couple were small, the divorced woman had to keep them with her and alimony was to be given either in the form of cash or property by the divorced husband for the maintenance of his children and their mother. If grown ups, they could opt for their stay with either of them.

Remarriage

Remarriage was also common among these people. Not only the divorcees (both men and women) but also the widows were allowed to remarry. If

16. Personal Interview with *Mr. Chinnasamy Thevar* aged 65, a Maravar and a retired teacher, on 8th May, 2006, at Madurai.

17. B.S. Baliga, *Madras District Gazetteers: Madurai*, Part I, Govt. of Madras, 1960, p.118.

18. W. Francis, *Madras District Gazetteer, Madura*, Vol. I, Govt. of Madras, 1906, p.95.

the widow was childless she was given a small portion of her deceased husband's property which went by the name *aruppukkuli* and allowed to remarry. But if she had a child, she was expected to be the guardian of the child being the heir-apparent for her husband's property.¹⁹ This is a crystal clear proof of the fact that *sati*, the cruel custom of jumping into the funeral pyre of the husband, was not in vogue among the Piramalai Kallars.

Position of women

The position of the Piramalai Kallar women was far superior to that of the women of other castes. It is unbelievable to note that such a turbulent race had given so much importance to its womenfolk. Most surprisingly women were regarded as the leaders of the community. The name **Ochchamma** denoted important women leader and **Pappamma**, idol of women lineage.²⁰ When they got married women were given much importance to. Financial management was entrusted to them. Even though the male was dominant outside, at home he had the tendency to abide by the words of his wife. Generally the Kallar women were known for their hospitality, affection, frankness, sharp reaction to wrongs etc. as recognised by the missionaries, though not by the historians like Mullaly,

19. Personal Interview with Rev. *Dr.D. Chellappa*, an Octogenerian, a Piramalai Kallar, who is formerly the principal of P.M.T. College, Usilampatti and a present day preacher on 17th May, 2006, at Thanjavur.

20. *Ibid.*

Turnbull, Francis, Thurston etc. who had exaggerated the furious nature of the Kallar women. Very rare incidents of violent revenge were portrayed in a vivid manner and given wide publicity.

Ceremonies

A Piramalai Kallar always believed that birth, growth, puberty, marriage and death were the most important stages in a completed life cycle and naturally tended to tie up those stages with elaborate ceremonies. This tendency could be seen even today with their banners and 'cut-out' culture. In all these ceremonies the relatives were obliged to make prestations. The obligation was more strenuous on the part of the maternal uncle. It is also obligatory to give back the *moi* (gifts) to the donor on similar occasions in future.

Birth Ceremony

In the early times the Piramalai Kallars never attached any special importance to the sex of the child since they believed that birth was not in their hands. The marriage bond was strengthened only with the birth of the first child. Up to that period marriages could break up at any time. In the initial phase of marriage, the jewels were to be kept by the wife and the husband had no right to dispose them. But after the birth of the child the wife could not refuse her husband

the jewels. Hence child birth was considered an important event and so elaborate ceremonies were observed with feasts and festivities.²¹

The first delivery invariably took place in the woman's parents' house. Only complicated cases were taken to the nearby health centre. When a child was born the entire family had to observe 'pollution' for 30 days. The first born female child was christened on the seventh day of its birth followed by the ear-boring ceremony.²² For every girl child ear-boring ceremony had to take place before she attained puberty and thereafter the stretching was continued by hanging leaden rings from the hole. The ear passage thus became finally the most bejewelled part of a woman's person.

Puberty Ceremony

Girls' puberty was called *ruduway* or *rusuway* which was determined purely by nature. The ceremony was called *sadangu*. It was individual and purely a family function and the girl was secluded for sixteen days in view of hygiene in a separate hut, a temporary shelter, erected specially for this purpose by the maternal uncle's side. Except dhobi and barber, all others kept themselves away from the family of that girl. On the 16th day the temporary shed, usually a thatched hut, was

21. Personal interview with *Mr. George Virumandi*, aged around 65, a Piramalai Kallar, on 4th May, 2006, at Madurai.

22. B.S. Baliga, *Op. cit.*, p.118.

burnt by the people of the maternal uncle and thereby ending the quarantine. Through a ceremony called *sadangu kalithal* the girl and her family could become free from 'pollution'. It was observed on a grand scale and relatives, mainly maternal uncle, used to make prestations. In fact the maternal uncle was obliged to meet the expenses incurred during this ceremony since he had a rightful claim on the girl as a bride for his son. The Piramalai Kallar girls, on their maturity, wore black threads round their necks.

Circumcision ceremony

It is a curious fact that the Piramalai Kallars practised circumcision which was called *seepu kalyanam* or *marga kalyanam* imitating the Muslims. The origin of the custom is uncertain. Nelson attributes it to a hypothetical forced conversion to Islam of a section of the Kurumbar who fled northwards on the downfall of their kingdom.²³ But Francis inclines to the view that it was a custom borrowed from the Muslims or a measure imposed by them.²⁴ However it was a custom more social than religious in nature. It was carried out to all the adolescent boys of the village on a particular day fixed by the village council. The boys who were to be circumcised were carried on the shoulders of his maternal uncle to the

23. J.H. Nelson, *The Madura Country—A Manual*, Part-II, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1868, p.55.

24. W. Francis, *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 94.

mandei, the seat of the village council, with great formalities of singing and dancing by his relatives and from there taken to a grove where barber-surgeon carried out the operation and dressing. En route to the selected site and through out the ceremony, conch shell was blown. The circumcised boys were considered impure and so were secluded outside the houses. On the 30th day a general purification was done, followed by a ritual for the god Malaichami and kinship prestations. The expenses connected with this ceremony was borne by the boy's paternal aunt whose daughter he had a rightful claim in marriage.

Marriage

Marriage occupied a very significant place in the socio-cultural system of this community. The consent of the maternal uncle of the girl to her marriage was essential. For fixing the marriage, at first one or two elders from the side of the boy would approach the parents of the girl to know their willingness for the alliance. If they were interested, a day would be fixed for the engagement ceremony called *parisam podhuthal*. It was customary on the part of the boy's maternal uncle to fix up the girl by offering her parents gold or cash depending upon their socio-economic status, for getting the boy an asset of their family. Thus in the past, there was no dowry system as such but other way round. Nevertheless the bride's parents would give her the necessary household articles and gold, as a

reserve for the upbringing of her children in the form of prestations. If the *parisam* amount was accepted that was tantamount to the acceptance of the contract. The wedding date was written on two rolls of palm leaf, dyed with turmeric and were exchanged between the maternal uncles. In case of any breach of it, the concerned party had to pay the caste fine, *tirvai*, imposed by the village council.

Till last century marriage was designated by the term *kudhireiyeri kalyanam* since the groom mounted on a horse with an umbrella in his hand and was accompanied by a best man and torch bearers and it resembled more a wedding of the Muslims. Moreover, like the Muslims, the Piramalai Kallars also observed ceremonies connected with their marriages during night and groom tied the *tali* immediately before day break.²⁵ The Brahmin priests had no role to play in all these ceremonies.

Mullaly has noted down a peculiar custom of these Kallars, according to which the bridegroom's sister tied some horse-hair called *karakkayiru* round the bride's neck and took her to the groom's house where a grand feast was prepared with meat and liquor. After that the ceremony of an

25. Louis Dumont, *Op. cit.*, p.250. Where he quotes a legend which tells how the gods instituted the marriage of the first Kallar. According to it *tali* was tied at the hour when the ascetics woke up using a formula (mantra) taught by the gods themselves and hence there was no need for the Brahmins.

exchange of *vallarithadis* or boomerangs between them was solemnly performed.²⁶

During the first twelve months after marriage, it was customary for the bride's parents to invite the couple to stay with them on certain occasions such as the first Adi, Deepavali, Karthigai, Pongal and Sivarathiri and on their return they were given gifts of ram and rice.

Female infanticide

Thus right from the birth prestations had to be made to the girl children which would reach its culmination during their wedding and post-wedding period. These elaborate customs with a passage of time became an economic burden on the girl's parents. As a result the birth of another female child was not at all entertained. Hence they began to follow the inhuman practice of female infanticide. In fact this cruel practice is still in vogue in the taluk of Usilampatti, poverty being the basic reason for it. Unfortunately this taluk, one of the strongholds of the Piramalai Kallars, had all along been neglected and no substantial developmental activities had been carried out for some decades together. Continuous droughts had played much havoc on the economy of Usilampatti.²⁷

26. F.S. Mullaly, *Op. cit.*, p.92.

27. "Female Infanticide", *The Hindu*, May 6, 1988, P.21. It is estimated that female infanticide has run into thousands over years. (Editorial, *India Today*, Vol.II, No.2, June 1 – 15, 1986, p.5).

Death Ceremony

The Kallars usually buried the dead. The Piramalai Kallar either buried or cremated them. Usually they burnt the dead. Here again an elaborate and noisy ceremony with mind captivating music was observed. Funeral 'palanquin' was prepared with flowers since they considered it the most respectable way of bidding farewell to the dead. Accompanied by music the corpse was taken to the cemetery.²⁸ In principle the mourner was invariably a male either a deceased man's younger son or a deceased woman's elder son. In the absence of male children, the mourner could be the woman's husband or a brother's son for a man. In case of cremation the afore-said eligible mourner lit the funeral pyre.

If a pregnant woman died, the child was taken out and a bloody mark was made in its ears with a knife so as to prevent any misuse of the body through any witchcraft and then placed along side of its mother's funeral pyre.²⁹

The dead were mourned for 30 days. Until then meat-eating, temple entry etc. by the mourners was prohibited. The end of mourning was marked mostly by the ceremony called *urumalkattu* (tying of the turban). The most important funeral prestations were the gifts of food in the beginning and the gifts

28. Louis Dumont, *Op. cit.*, p. 272.

29. Personal interview with *Mr. Mani*, aged 55, a Piramalai Kallar, on 5th May, 2006, at Madurai.

of clothes and turbans at the end of mourning. These gifts were noted down so as to give return gifts in future in case of a death in the donor's family.

However lepers or people who died in epidemics were buried without ceremony. Cases of suicide were also burnt without ceremony. Children were buried in different ways depending on their age without ceremony. The dead were buried with their faces laid in the north since they came from the north originally.

Inheritance

In the event of the death of a man (father) his property was inherited by his sons or his younger brothers, if he was issueless. As per traditional law, women did not have a right for inheritance of property except for some personal objects. In the case of widows, they were entitled for a share for their maintenance and in case of unmarried sisters a share was kept aside to meet her wedding expenditure. In principle all the sons inherited family's assets and liabilities equally.

Amusements

The Piramalai Kallars were fond of *adu puli attam* – a game more or less like chess. Right from their childhood, they were trained in martial arts such as

silambam, madu, boxing, wrestling etc. and thus trained to be valiant. Their manly sport of *jallikattu* which was also known as *manjivirattu*, or bull-baiting, would speak for itself as to their intrepidity and invulnerability. The game was to make an endeavour to let loose the cloths, tied to the horns of the bulls. This required fleetness of foot and considerable pluck and those who were successful were the heroes of the hour while cuts and bruises were the reward of those who were less skilful. The keenness of the Kallars in this game was extra-ordinary and bulls were bred and reared specially for it. The maiden chose her husband the person who had safely untied and brought to her the cloth tied to the horn of the fiercest bull. The Kallars considered it a great disgrace to be injured while chasing the bull. Fatal knockdowns were also numerous.

Cock-fight was also another favourite pass time for them. Victory was celebrated in a grand manner and to commemorate its victory, the wife of the victor used to decorate the inside roof of her hut with the tail feathers of the defeated cock.

Similarities between the Kallars and the Muslims

It is highly curious to note the similarity of customs between the Piramalai Kallars and the Muslims in the past.

- (i) Besides circumcision, the practices of *kudhireiyeri kalyam*, night marriage, polygamy etc. were also common between the two.
- (ii) The Kallars alone, of all the castes of Madurai used to call the Muslims *mappillais*³⁰ (bridegrooms). It is highly doubtful how far the *maman*, *machchan* relationship of affinal kin category, was true in spirit.
- (iii) Further till date the Piramalai Kallars use the term *vahaiyera* to denote agnatic lineage which is of Urdu origin – meaning, others of the same sort.³¹
- (iv) Moreover the Piramalai Kallars alone used to call their maternal grandpa *shian* which is perhaps from the root word Shia, a Muslim sect, though logically it cannot be accepted.
- (iv) The Piramalai Kalar women used *karuhumani*, a kind of black beads around the neck in the place of the horse hair – *karakkayiru* previously. In Sirugudi Nadu (one of the Melur Kallar Nadus) it was common among the married Kallar women to wear *tali* on which a crescent and a star (the symbol of Islam) were engraved.

30. J.H. Nelson, *Op. cit.*, p.55.

31. Louis Dumont, *Op. cit.*, p.185.

Regarding the supposed similarities between the Kallars and the Muslims, an elite informant came out with an ingenious hypothesis. Accordingly during Malik Kafur's South Indian expedition, he came down to Madurai and imprisoned many Hindu Princesses and forcibly converted them to Islam. Incensed by this the local villagers turned against the Muslim soldiers and the Kallars took the lead to redeem them. In the fight ensued, the local villagers met with a heavy loss in men and materials. A panchayat was held at **Kallamadam** in which judgement was pronounced against the Kallars. Since they were accused of having redeemed the new converts, as a punishment, they were forced to compensate the number by themselves becoming Muslims.³²

The authenticity of the episode could not be cross checked in the absence of any recorded evidence.

Clan system and Territorial divisions

The Piramalai Kallar's clan system had a complex organisational structure. Each clan had an affiliation with a group which was territory based and temple-oriented,³³ known by terms like *Vaguppu* and *Vahaiyera*. In fact for purposes of caste and communal discipline and organisation, the whole Piramalai

32. Personal Interview with *Prof. M. Namasivayam*, aged around 55, a Piramalai Kallar, Librarian, Tamil Nadu Archives, Chennai, on February 20, 2006, at Chennai.

33. C.N. Natarajan, *Op. cit.*, p. 150.

Kallar community was divided into eight major divisions called *Nadus* or Provinces and twenty four minor divisions called *Upagramas* or secondary villages and two intermediary divisions called *Rajadanis* or villages of royal status.

The eight provinces of the Kallar Nadu in the order of precedence were as follows

(1) Tidyen (2) Valandur, (3) Puttur (4) Karumattur, (5) Pappapatti, (6) Kokkulam, (7) Veppanuttu and (8) Tummakkundu. Each province comprised a cluster of villages.

The two Rajadanis were Urappanur and Mudalaikkulam. Each was a cluster of villages stood in between *Nadu* and *Upagrama* in rank.

The *Upagrama* was a single village of secondary importance. There were many such Upagamas. They were (1) Vikramangalam (2) Nattar-Mangalam (3) Ayyanarkulam (4) Panniyan (5) Tarapatti (6) Melakkal (7) Kadupatti (8) Kodikkulam (9) Vagurarani (10) Allikkundam (11) Manutu (12) Perungamanallur (13) Kalappanpatti (14) Pusanadhipuram also called as Pusalappuram (15) Madhippanur (16) Sattangudi (17) Punkankulam (18) Chakkiliyapatti (19) Thoppur (20) Menadu Chettikulam (21) Kappalur (22) Vilacheri (23) Vadivelkkarai and (24) Suda Puliyankulam.

Each territorial unit or province was under the rule of a chief called *Talaivar* or *Adhipathi*. These chiefs were endowed with unfettered rights to administer their respective units. Collection of taxes and maintenance of law and order were attended to by them. As custodians of the customs and traditions of the community, they were empowered to ostracise as well as to readmit any Piramalai Kallar accused of the violation of customs like caste endogamy and clan exogamy. The chiefs of the *Upagramas* also enjoyed more or less same amount of power in their villages.

Caste Panchayat

For the whole of the Piramalai Kallar community, there was a common ruling council called caste panchayat with one chief, one vice-chief and two or three members. The office of the chief was held by **Tirumala Pinna Thevar**. The council was in charge of law and order in the territory. It acted as an appellate tribunal and heard the appeals of the aggrieved parties of the territorial units. Its verdict was final and binding on all concerned.³⁴

Under a more monarchical rule, the hereditary headman called Tirumala Pinna Thevar decided most caste matters. It is recorded in the Madurai

34. P. Muthu Thevar, *Op. cit.*, p.153 – 155.

The first Chief – Tirumala Pinna Thevar was instituted and his assistants, named by the Nayak king Tirumala of Madurai Kingdom through a royal charter. *Ibid.*, pp. 215 – 218.

district Gazetteer that if anyone declined to abide by his decision, excommunication was pronounced by the ceremony of placing the thorn which consisted in laying a thorny branch across the threshold of the recalcitrant party's house, to signify that for his contumacy, his property would go to ruin and be overrun with jungle. The removal of the thorn and the restitution of the sinner to Kallar society could only be procured by abject apologies to Pinna Thevar.³⁵

The village square

The residential cluster was marked as a community by a common temple and by the village square with its stone platform, a shady tree and the standing stone of a God. The village square was designated by the term *mandei* which might have been derived from the word *mantram* which consisted of elders from the caste. Being the meeting place of the village assembly it became so important that all decisions concerning the entire village usually the community matters were taken only there. In all functions religious, circumcision and even funeral, *mandei* occupied an important place. The word *ambalam* was synonym for *mandei* and the *ambalakkarrar*, meant the village headman. Originally it meant the older brother of the Piramalai Kallar (Melur Kallar) who had the right to administer justice. It normally met every Sunday and whenever situations warranted, it turned to be the village court of justice dealing with private affairs.

35. Roy Burman, et al., *Op. cit.*, Vol. IX, p.2780.

Sabai or podhu- kuttam meant common assembly which met rarely.

All adult males, owning a house there, were members by right but women, though allowed to attend it from a distance, were not supposed to speak out. The Assembly was summoned by a municipal drum beater. Direction of the common cult and the management of common fund were its responsibility. At times of community festivals it was empowered to impose a special collection on the villagers.

Thus these Kallars had their own system of local government, their own indigenous judicial proceedings and other features of common wealth form of government and recognised neither the authority of the rulers who ruled from Madurai city nor submitted themselves to it.

Economic life of the Piramalai Kallars

It is a pragmatic dictum that geography governs history. The choice of occupations on the part of the individuals and their physical and mental make up are decided purely by the geographical features of their land of dwelling. The impact of geography goes a long way in moulding the human factor itself. It was true in the case of the Kallars in general.

Traditionally the Kallars engaged themselves in martial activities, lending their services as mercenaries to kings, chieftains, poligars and anybody who required them. Under the early Tamil Kingdoms of the Chera, Chola and Pandya they were advance guards, spies and guerrilla troopers, as seen earlier. During the time of peace and settlement, the Tamil kings employed them as *kavalkarars* or guards for the protection of domestic property and public places in villages. Thus *kaval* became their traditional occupation.³⁶ With the decline of the Tamil Kingdoms, they were thrown out of employment and were trapped into evil days.

Sathianathaiyar has traced these Kallars as semi-agricultural and semi-warrior group living in marginal lands during the 17th century.³⁷ It is significant to note that the Kallars were listed among the other agricultural castes of Madras province in the first census of 1871. A percentage wise breakdown reveals that 90% of the Kallars had been classified as cultivators.

Unfortunately the land they had occupied was infertile and at the mercy of Rain God as they were bereft of any systematic irrigation channels. Their land holdings were diminutive and scattered, thereby rendering the application of improved methods of agriculture almost impossible.

36. S.H. Blackburn, *The Kallars: A Tamil Criminal Tribe – Reconsidered*, Journal of South Asian Studies, Vol. I, March 1971, p.45.

37. R. Sathianathaiyar, *Tamilaham in the Seventeenth Century*, University of Madras, Madras, 1956, p.136.

Finding agriculture insufficient for their maintenance some had to resort to alternative means of earning their livelihood. They were left with three options – beg, borrow or steal. Daring by nature and with independent disposition and a high sense of self-respect, they could not stoop down to the level of begging. They could not borrow because there was none to lend them a helping hand. The only option left out was to steal and so they took to robbery for additional income. Hence they organised themselves into a village federation and were never in tune with the successive Nayak rulers of Madurai and their military officers, the *poligars*. They disowned the suzerainty of the Nayaks and whenever tribute was demanded, the Kallars retorted, it seems, saying that the heavens supplied earth with rain, their cattle ploughed the land and they cultivated it and therefore there was no possible reason why they should pay anything.³⁸ Their strained relationship could be gleaned from the copper plates of Viswanatha Nayak, Jesuit letters and folklores such as ‘**Ramappaiyan Ammanai**’ and ‘**Madurai Veeran Kathai Padal**’. Despite this Tirumala Nayak deployed them in driving out the Muslim forces from Madurai since they were amiable to anybody who would seek their help.³⁹

38 . F.S. Mulla, *Op. cit.*, p.85.

39. B.S. Baliga, *Op. cit.*, p.55.

Kaval System

Unable neither to tolerate the lawless activities of the Kallars, nor to overawe them, Tirumala Nayak decided to bring about socio-religious identification with the rebellious Kallars so as to enlist their co-operation through royal titles and grants. Accordingly Tirumala Nayak granted in 1640 to some Melur Kallars some *maniams* and also the right of collecting *kaval* fees in the Tirumbur district near Madurai.⁴⁰ A grant given in 1645, established the Kallar rights to *kaval* among the Konars of Madurai.⁴¹ In 1655 a copper plate grant was issued to one Pinna Thevar of the Aneyur Kallar (Piramalai Kallar) conferring on him the title of 'Tirumala' and investing him with various royal regalia –a blanket, a spittoon and sandals and also granting him lands in two villages near Aneyur.⁴² Through another grant in 1656 the same Pinna Thevar and also a *Kavuntar* were granted certain rights in a village.⁴³ Thus '*kaval*' was granted a royal sanction resulting in a contractual agreement for the Kallar's police service. To all intents and purposes, Tirumala Nayak set a thief to catch a thief. While they performed *kaval* duties in exchange of certain privileges, they retained their judicial, political and military autonomy.

40. J.H. Nelson, *Op. cit.*, p.47.

41. Louis Dumont, *Op. cit.*, p.138.

42. *Ibid.*, p.139.

43. *Ibid.*

Evidence from a folk ballad – **Madurai Veeran Kathai Padal** - shows that Tirumala Nayak used the Kallars to drive away the local dacoits. With that hike in status as *kavalkarars* the Kallars gave up their thieving habits and became a more responsible lot. The Kallars had their own *kaval* system in defiance of that of the *Poligars*.⁴⁴ In Kallarnadu the office of the *Kavalkarars* was hereditary. As *Kavalkarars* they kept watch at night, observed the movements of strangers, reported the suspects to *Ambalakarar* and traced the culprits keeping track of their foot prints.

The role of *kavalkarar* seemed to have been a point of honour among them and they prided themselves on their system of safely escorting travellers through their lands and providing material security to villagers. If any theft occurred during their watch they had to recover the stolen property or else had to compensate for the loss. Thus a principle of equity which is not found even in the modern police system prevailed. They were entitled for a *kaval* fee paid either in cash or in kind and at times free lands too. In the event of violation of the rules of the system, the persons concerned whoever it might be, were dealt with severely.⁴⁵ The integrity of the Kallar *kaval* could be understood from the episode of their stiff resistance to the Nayak viceroy of Trichinopoly who came down to Madurai to harass Christian missionaries who were in the Kallar *kaval* area.⁴⁶

44. *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Provincial Series, Madura, Part II, 1908, p.235.

45. N.M. Venkatasamy Nattar, *Op. cit.*, p.114.

46. K. Rajayyan, *Administration and Society in the Carnatic*, Sri Venkateswara University Publications, Tirupathi, 1966, p.94.

During the 18th century when the Nayak rulers became weak, the poligars fished in troubled waters and enhanced their powers at the cost of the *kavalkarar*. Thrown out of employment many *kavalkarars* had no other alternative but to become plunderers. The collapse of the *kaval* system could not be attributed to socio-economic factors alone. In fact the British played a canny role in stripping the *poligars* as well as the *kavalkarars* off their powers through calculated moves. Because when the British acquired the district of Madurai in 1801 they realised that they had to deal with these refractory Kallars.⁴⁷ The feeble rule of the Nawab of Arcot provided them with a free hand in depredations. The Kallars had repeatedly attacked the British troops sent against them and declared a sort of independence setting all authority at naught. It is on the record that during the Trichinopoly war the horses of **Stringer Lawrence** and **Robert Clive** were stolen by two *Kallan* brothers.⁴⁸ On another occasion, another *Kallan* succeeded in stealing from **Samuel Johnston**, Pay Master of Madura, the silver casket.⁴⁹ The rulers of Madurai –whether the Afghans or the Mughals or the Marathas or the Wallajahs, or the Nayaks or the British – found it an arduous task to subdue the

47. K. Gowri, *Madurai under the English East India Company (1801 – 1857)*, Raj Publishers, Madurai, 1987, p.9.

48. Robert Orme, *History of Indoston*, Vol. I, London, 1764, p.381.

49. W. Francis, *Op. cit.*, p. 263.

Kallar chiefs⁵⁰ and never succeeded in exacting tributes from them. As lovers of challenges, they tried their mischief with Tirumala Nayak even, when he boasted of his achievement of ensuring the safety and security of the city of Madurai from the Kallars by the erection of strong fortresses and a deep moat. Taking it as a challenge, one **Kari Pinna Thevan** along with some companions bore a hole on the massive roof of the sleeping apartment of Tirumala Nayak, swarm down the chains of the cot hung from the roof and stole the royal jewel which was subsequently restored to him through the Head of the Kallars—**Pinna Thevar**. For this he was honoured and invested with the title ‘Tirumala’ (thence forth Tirumala Pinna Thevar) and was recognised as the independent chieftain of the Kallars and the skilful robbers were enlisted in the royal espionage system.⁵¹

Moreover whenever the Nayak regime took strong measures to subjugate and collect taxes from them, the Kallars in retaliation attacked the royal troops, plundered the government stores and indulged in all sorts of violence. When all the efforts were in vain, ultimately the government had to condescend and recognise their independent state and permitted them to have their own system of Chieftainship.⁵² With the spirit of independence they proved to be a thorn in the

50. K. Rajayyan, *History of Madurai, 1736 – 1801*, Madurai University, Historical Series – 1, Madurai, 1974, p.34.

51. P. Muthu Thevar, *Op. cit.*, pp. 212 – 216.

52. W. Francis, *Op. cit.*, p.94.

flesh of the British too. They ambushed **Col. Heron's** expedition, undertaken to collect arrears of tribute from the poligars of Madurai and Tinnevely on behalf of Nawab Muhmad Ali, in the Natham pass in 1755 and cut off his men. Further they gave a great deal of trouble to Yusuf Khan who held Madurai for three years in defiance of the Nawab and the British (1756-64) which in turn forced him to deal with the Kallars ruthlessly.⁵³ The British army passing Kallarnadu was harried so much. They even defied five battalions of sepoy and 1500 cavalry sent against them by the British under **Captain Rumley** in 1764 and had eventually submitted only after having been rounded up and their villages set on fire and around 3000 of them were put to sword.⁵⁴ Their continued suspicion of the foreigners resulted in the murder of 10 survey peons. In reprisal Rumley slaughtered 2000 more Kallars and became a terror to the Kallars. Thereafter open rebellions ceased but dacoities and theft continued.⁵⁵ All these convinced the British of the necessity of taking some drastic step against the Kallars. Hence through the strict enforcement of denudation of arms since 1799 they cut across the very basis of the Kallars' subsistence living.⁵⁶ In addition they concluded a treaty with the Nawab in 1800 which declared the collection of *kaval* fee illegal.⁵⁷

53. B.S. Baliga, *Op. cit.*, Vol. II, p.326.

54. B.S. Ward, *Geographical and Statistical Memoirs of the Provinces of Madurai and Dindugul*, Vol. III, Madurai Collectorate press, Madurai 1895, p. 8.

55. I.G. of Police, *History of the Madras Police Centenary 1859 – 1959*, Madras, 1959, p.531.

56. K. Rajayyan, *Rise and Fall of the Poligars of Tamil Nadu*, University of Madras, Chennai, 1974, pp.95 – 96.

57. I.G. of Police, *Op. cit.*, p.212.

At this juncture the South Indian Rebellion erupted. The Kallars who were the inveterate enemies of the British East India Company for generations, readily joined hands with the leaders of the rebellion⁵⁸ and were utilised to carry secret messages even to the Mysore country.⁵⁹ The Kallars looted the company's arms and ammunition and buried them in their fields, so as to be readily available in times of emergency. They even established a factory for the manufacture of weapons in the jungle of Melur and terrorised the company's officials.⁶⁰ Dr. Rajayyan had well established the fact that the Kallars played a major role in this rebellion.⁶¹ Hence with a view to bring them to naught the British government through subsequent regulations in 1816 and in 1839 abolished the kaval system totally.⁶² As Blackburn rightly puts in, "in this annihilation of the natives, largely Kallar resistance to the British rule, lies the origin of later administrative policy towards the Kallars..... any attempt to defend one's village, family and way of life against the foreign invader was taken to indicate the savagery of the defenders, and was the very justification for conquering them".⁶³

58. *Revenue Consultations, Madura Council, December 6, 1799*, Vol. 99 , p.3321.

59. Perumalswami Pillai, *A Declaration, Board of Revenue , Proceedings , March 16, 1799*, Vol.223, pp. 2748 -2753.

60. *Board of Revenue, Proceedings, December28, 1801*, Vol. 305, PP. 15350 – 15355.

61. K . Rajayyan, *South Indian Rebellion*, Rao and Ragahavan Publishers, Mysore, 1971, pp. 230 – 272.

62 . I.G. of Police, *Op. cit.*, p.249.

63. S.H. Blackburn , *Op. cit.*,p.43.

The abolition of *kaval* system threw the Kallars into frenzy. Having been reduced to abject poverty, some among them indulged in arson, looting, plunder, cattle-stealing, burglary, highway robbery etc.⁶⁴ in order to exhibit their enemical attitude to the British on the one hand and to make their living on the other. Thenceforth crime was considered an honourable profession. Thus a warrior clan was forced to turn notorious thieves and robbers.

Kudi kaval System

In defiance of the British authority they perverted the *kaval* system in to a blackmail called *kudikaval* system. In the words of Louis Dumont “actually both watching and thieving seem to have been used by the Kallars in order to levy a 'tithe' on the productive castes.⁶⁵ Accordingly the Kallar *kavalkarars* imposed themselves on the villagers so that their village was exempt from Kallar crime which resembled more or less the levy of the *Chauth*⁶⁶ by the Marathas. In case of theft during their watch, stolen property was either recovered or compensated. But if the crime was reported to the police, no portion of any property was ever recovered or compensated. For fear of the Kallars, the villagers refrained from

64. S.H. Mullaly, *Op. cit.*, p.83.

65. Louis Dumont, *Op. cit.*, p.14.

66. Chauth – According to J.N.Sarkar, the payment of Chauth saved a place from the unwelcome presence of the Maratha soldiers and thus only a means of buying off one robber.

V. D. Mahajan, *India Since 1526*, Chand and Co., New Delhi, 1964, p. 180.

reporting and that enabled the Kallars to get a free hand. The Kallars had got the upper hand over the police and at times it appeared as though the British Raj was powerless and meek against the Kallar Raj.⁶⁷

Gradually the *kudikaval* system deteriorated involving no responsibility with regard to residence or patrolling in the localities. No guarantee of immunity of crime or compensation of stolen property was given by the *kavalkarars*.⁶⁸ Sometimes two different sets of Kallars claimed *kaval* right for one particular village and attributed crimes to the other group thus making the life of the villagers quite miserable. Matters got still worsened as arrears of payment were reflected in the form of cattle-theft and 'accidental' fires in houses. Whenever the villagers rejected the Kallar *kavalkarars* more and more cases of cattle-theft occurred.

The Kallars were adept in the 'technique' of manipulating the trachea of the cud-chewing animals (*sangu odhukkuthal*) in such a way that they became mute while stolen. With amazing and mind-boggling speed, they were carried away to distant places and hidden. Cattle were returned to their owners only through a Kallar intermediary who was invariably a close associate of the thief, on

67. E.B. Loveluck, "The Kallar Problem", *The Police Magazine*, Journal for Publicity Bureau, September, 1921, p. 90.

68. F.S. Mullay, *Op. cit.*, p.79.

payment of *tuppu-coolie* or 'clue-hire' which was about half the value of the stolen cattle.⁶⁹ If *tuppu-coolie* was paid, the Kallars were 'honest enough' to return the stolen ones. But if reported to the police, no Kallar would ever help the owner to recover his lost animals and the police would be of no avail in this regard. Thus the Kallar *kavalkarars* derived their additional income from theft as well as protection against theft. The people who suffered most at the hands of the Kallar *kavalkarars* were the shepherds i.e., *Konars* or *Ideiyars* whose sheep and goat fell an easy prey to the Kallar raids.⁷⁰ They were lifted usually for *kaval* fees, alleged to be overdue and restored on payment of *tuppu-coolie*. Thus their recidivism went on unabated that culminated in the anti-Kallar agitation, started by one Ammayappa Kone and lasted from 1893-1896 in which many lives were lost and villages burnt on both sides. Disorder lingered on until the British Government took effective police vigilance to curb it. From around 1900 onwards, suspected *tuppu* agents were arrested and punished. Still crimes continued challenging the police.

Cattle branding system

The Police magazine gives a vivid picture about this. It states that to prevent cattle-lifting by the Kallars, a novel system was introduced in 1909 by the

69. Roy Burman et al., *Op. cit.*, Vol. IX, p. 2771.

70. Muhammad Abdul Ghani, *Op. cit.*, p.75.

then District Superintendent of Police⁷¹ which involved branding of cattle with particular letters or numbers. The aim was to make it difficult for the Kallars to dispose of those identified animals. Even possession of those identified animals was a cognizable offence. This system was in vogue for more than a decade but had to be given up owing to several reasons.

First of all this system of branding the cattle failed in its principal aim of deterring the Kallars from lifting them. Instead the elusive and crafty Kallars invented new methods of cattle lifting and began extracting more ransom money (*tuppu-coolie*) by hiding the branded animals in non-traceable places. Moreover they had their own way of deterring the villagers from having their animals branded by slaughtering the branded ones and thereby leaving the owners at a total loss. The message they tried to convey to the villagers was simple and explicit – had they not branded their cattle, they could have at least recovered the cattle at half of its value. Besides, the villagers believed that branding of the cattle spoiled the skin of their cattle due to the application of strong chemicals. Further branding technique involved onerous and repetitive process which was painful not only to the cattle but also to their owners due to the expenditure involved. Hence the villagers, despite police persuasion, allowed only 1/5 of their cattle branded

71. E.B. Loveluck, *Op. cit.*, pp. 88-90.

and that too only unhealthy and old animals, that no 'self-respecting' Kallar would ever demean himself by stealing those thrown out junk.

The failure of this branding system made the Government realise that even if the Kallars were prevented from lifting the cattle they would indulge in some other nefarious activities. Convictions and imprisonments had no deterrent effect on this community at all because the Kallars considered committing crimes as adventurous as well as rewarding deeds. The enormity of this clan made it impossible for the Government to have any proper settlement with them and to mend their habitual misdemeanour. Even agricultural settlements proved futile. The crime rate was on the increase especially in the Piramalai Kallar dominated areas of the presidency thus rendering the Government helpless.

Other Kallar Crimes

The crimes and criminal methods of the Kallars have been dealt with in a very descriptive manner by Mullaly. They were usually armed with *vellari thadis* or clubs and occasionally with knives of Malabar pattern. Their method of house breaking was to make a breach in the wall under the door with an instrument called *kannakol* and a lad would creep in and open the doors for the elders. Jewels worn by sleepers were seldom touched. The booty which was hidden somewhere for sometime would be returned to the owner on receipt of *tuppu-coolie*, or else

were disposed off through 'Mangapotto' and 'Nattukottai' Chettis in the case of costly items and through vendors of arrack and toddy in case of petty things.⁷² The womenfolk seldom joined them in crimes but assisted them in their dealings with the Chettis.⁷³ Disguises were not adopted by them. But whenever crimes were committed in places near their native place they used to muffle up their faces. Signals were exchanged either by whistling or by scribbling on the ground. Names were never mentioned at the time of committing the crime. Instead ambiguous terms like *perusu* (big one) *sirusu* (little one) were used to baffle all attempts towards identification. Attempts of capture were thwarted by the free use of slings and pelting of stones. They never hesitated to attack the *bandis* (carts) of Government officers no matter whether they were Europeans or Indians.⁷⁴

Another audacious type of cattle-lifting was also practised. During nights when the bandy drivers were fast asleep, two of the Kallars would unyoke and drag the bandy to some distance so as to lull the suspicion of the driver and place the yoke on a stone to maintain the height and then would drive away the bulls to a far off place and disfigure them to thwart any attempts of identification. They were also adept in grain thefts especially from the *bandis* travelling on the

72. F.S. Mullaly, *Op. cit.*, pp. 89- 90.

73. *Ibid.*, p.90.

74. Muhammad Abdul Ghani, *Op. cit.*, p.79.

roads at nights. Thus all kinds of crimes like house lifting, burglary, highway and field robbery etc. were carried out with uncanny success.⁷⁵

Unfortunately their success in robbery in due course made them feel that it was not wrong to commit such crimes. The successful criminal was regarded as a hero and a most eligible and sought after life partner by the girls of his village. Any Kallar convicted three or four times became a martyr. Naturally with a sense of emulation even boys of well-to-do families indulged in crimes just to prove that he was inferior to none.⁷⁶ Nelson was perhaps right with his observation. He states “the boyhood of every Kallar is supposed to be passed in acquiring the rudiments of the only profession for which he can naturally be adapted, namely, that of a thief and robber”.⁷⁷

Thus right from the unsettled times prior to the advent of the British rule in Madurai District and during a considerable portion of the British rule, the Kallars had earned bad name as dacoits, thieves and cattle-lifters.⁷⁸ Hence the British were intent upon finding out ways and means to intimidate these Kallars on a permanent basis and the result was the imposition of the Criminal Tribes Act on them.

75. *Ibid.*, p.80.

76. E.B. Loveluck, *Op. cit.*, p.88.

77. J.H. Nelson, *Op. cit.*, p.55.

78. *The Hindu*, Madurai edition, dated November 25, 1915.

However it should be borne in mind that the Kallars were deprived of any welfare measure by the then British Government which considered them as thorn in its flesh. When reduced to abject misery and beggary the instinct of survival forced them to have recourse to the act for which they had been trained traditionally. Here it would be apt to quote **Tannenbaum** -"crime is the web and woof of society The amount, the character and the kind of crime are socially conditioned".⁷⁹ **P.K. Rao** also inclines to the view that, "criminal behaviour as such is a reaction of human nature and human experience to the total situations such as social, economic and political". He further adds that "crime is the product of a combination of various causative factors such as nationality, race, geographical characteristics, social and communal hatreds and psychological aberration".⁸⁰ These comments are self-explanatory. After all, all the Kallars were not born criminals. They became criminals only when they were deprived of the bare necessities of life. During the settlement period, the Kallars were pushed down and not allowed to come up. This made them feel insecure and under privileged and so they turned violent and indulged in various nefarious activities. In fact values are only relative and not relevant always. *Sati*, once considered a noble deed, was later condemned as a crime. Similarly so many other practices such as Temple prostitution and courtesanship which had the royal

79. F. Tananbaum, *Crime and The Criminality*, Glencoe, Illinois, 1968, p. 7.

80. P. Kamalakara Rao, *Professional crime in India*, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 1983, p.4.

patronage were later denounced and made cognizable offences. Likewise, undoubtedly the Kallar's profession once considered an exemplary one and an act of valour came to be condemned as a crime when it was directed against innocent civilians. No one with a sense of justice could ever tolerate or justify their debasing atrocities. The Kallars after the passage of time ought to have changed their life-style and refrained from committing such barbarous activities. But they had failed to change themselves according to changing times. Hence they were branded as criminals and looked down upon even by their own brethren settled in other places.⁸¹

Nevertheless it must be understood that they fell an easy prey to the evil designs of the British who had driven these people to such abject criminality of supporting themselves at the cost of the poor and innocent people through the 'industry' or 'trade' well known to them traditionally i.e., a prolific source of Kallar crime as caste custom approves. **Blackburn** has substantiated the fact that 'wild collerie' and 'criminal' images were nothing but wanton creation of the British⁸² who had the established policy of maligning their victims before they did away with them.⁸³

81. Louis Dumont, *Op .cit.*, p.15.

82. S.H. Blackburn, *Op. cit.*, pp. 38-51.

83. K. Rajayyan, *Op. cit.*, p.22.

Religious life of the Piramalai Kallar

It is very difficult to define the religious life of the Piramalai Kallars. In fact it is/was a combination of so many concepts such as poly-theism, ancestor worship, animism, demonolatry, totem worship etc.

In the opinion of **H.A. Stuart**, they were nominally Saivites but in reality, the essence of their religious belief was devil worship.⁸⁴ However Francis, the author of the Madurai gazetteer differs. According to him though they put on sacred ashes like the Saivites on festive occasions, they were to all intents and purposes Vaishnavites.⁸⁵ **M.A.Ghani** also shares the same view since he considers *Alagarsami–Kalla Alagar* as their chief deity.⁸⁶ Perhaps Alagar was their principal deity while they were residing in Melur i.e., prior to their westward movement but now is worshipped once a year during Chithrai festival.

Poly-theism

Whoever might be their prime god, it is true that they were poly-theistic in character. They never risked offending any god or goddess either wantonly or unwittingly which caused them to repose their faith in the plurality of

84. Roy Burman et al., *Op. cit.*, Vol. IX, p.2777.

85. Edgar Thurston, *Op. cit.*, p.82.

86. Muhammad Abdul Ghani, *Op. cit.*, p.77.

gods and goddesses. This pluralism got widened so much so they admitted even alien gods whom they came across during their marauding expeditions in to their fold. However they never seemed to be religious bigots because they attached more importance only to rituals, feasts and festivals than to religion as such.

It is quite interesting to note that they had no fear for their own village gods with whom they had a 'strong bond' so as to come to a sort of agreement⁸⁷ to get them a share of their booty in the event of their assistance in their enterprise and the Kallars were 'honest enough' to keep up their word of promise. Moreover they had taken so much of privileges with their gods that they never hesitated to steal a god or dig up the coins or jewels generally buried under an idol.⁸⁸

Nevertheless they strongly believed that their lives could be controlled and directed by some super natural powers with whom they were not ready to fight with. They also considered that the supreme value was to live a long, happy and prosperous life and hence were intent on propitiating their gods.

Ghost Cult

It is highly paradoxical that the brave Kallars feared the spirits or ghosts. To them premature death in any form whether it was a case of suicide or

87. *Ibid.*

88. *Ibid.*

accident or disease was a curse from god and they believed that the souls which failed to lead fulfilled lives could harm others as bad spirits or ghosts. It was feared that such spirits bore hatred against the living and were very much fond of mischief and blood and would cause damage to crops and even deaths especially of the youth. They also believed that the spirits were capable of influencing the welfare of the living in a mysterious way. Further they strongly believed that even malevolent spirit could become tutelary, if provided with a cult. Hence in order to appease them, they were deified. As **Durrant** suspects, perhaps this type of ghost cult would have gradually transformed in to ancestor worship.⁸⁹

Ancestor spirits were also worshipped perhaps out of admiration or fear. To invoke their blessings and to propitiate them, the children were named after their ancestors. They believed that their ancestors continued their existence as spirits and had power over their children's lives. To keep them happy, ceremonies with offerings of cooked food of their usual preference, banana, coconut etc. were observed by members of the family or lineage.

The Kallars had deified women especially the deceased ones like *Silakkariamman of Chellampatti*,⁹⁰ *Sivandammal of Tideyanad*⁹¹ and a few others.

89. Will Durrant, *Our Orient Heritage*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1954, p.63.

90. Silakkari was a priest's daughter who was killed by the god. She is worshipped as a secondary deity in the temple of her lineage and as main deity in the lineage of her son who was miraculously saved by the god at the time of his mother's death. Louis Dumont, *Op. cit.*, p.435.

91. Sivandammal's fiance Pichan went to Madurai to buy jewels for his marriage with Sivandammal. But he was arrested by the police and put to death. His fiancée Sivandammal killed herself by fire. *Ibid.*, p.437.

Moreover hero worship was also a common feature. They respected those who were shot dead or hanged by the government while fighting for their freedom by erecting memorials with citation and even stone images were made for them and worshipped as deities. Even today, besides ancestor worship, the Kallars tend to worship their community leaders like **Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar**, **Mookaiya Thevar** and others by erecting statues in their villages.

As a natural sequence demonolatry was also very common. The spiritual beings who were not contained in temples and who did not receive a regular cult were called demons.⁹² They feared that the malice of the demons would cause them heavy loss of lives and properties. Many children used to wear iron rings on their ankles even at present so that demons might not attack them. To appease them, animal sacrifices were offered.

Totem worship was also common among them. The Kallar temples till date have housed statues of dogs and horses as to help the deities to protect people from demons.

Undeniably they were animists. Sun was considered as the Father and the Moon as the governor of fertility. Women worshipped her as a protecting deity. Since they believed trees, mountains and water sources as abodes of spirits,

92. *Ibid.*, p.449.

they were all worshipped. Even some of the stone tablets, marking the old boundaries in villages had become deities and were worshipped as *Ellai Amman* and *Ellaichamy*. Even today people have the same belief.

Classification of the Cults

Three kinds of cult were prevalent among these Kallars namely, Lineage cult, Village cult and Nadu cult. The general social characteristics of the cults were *Maniyam* (tax-free land tenure), Governing council of the temple and *Mudalmei* or Primacy, i.e., distribution of honours.

Lineage Cult

If the families of a particular lineage contributed, to the exclusion of others, it became a *sonda kovil* or private or lineage temple. A lineage temple was richer and more elaborate than the village temple, found in the residential cluster and it could be duplicated. Usually only during annual festival it came to life. The priests and *kodangis* (shaman) were exclusively Kallars with rare exception.

Each temple had a pantheon of 21 gods. Shiva, Iswari, Iyer, Sarugayi, Ulagayi, Chokkan, Idumban, Ladatavasi, Ganesh, Veerapathran, Thokkili, Chinnan, Palani Andi, Pappathi, Mayandi, Avadi, Padalai, Drum, Bull, Ancestor (Male), Ancestor (Female) and Lamp. Out of these 21 gods, one was the

god of primacy, 10 were vegetarian (*suddha* or pure) gods and 10 meat eating (*asuddha* or impure) gods who stand outside the sanctuary as watchmen. Worshippers of a certain deity claimed to be agnates and marriages were forbidden among them. Usually they sought marriage alliance with the worshippers of another deity who were affines.⁹³ Karumathur, the religious capital of the Piramalai Kallar Nadu, is famous for lineage temples. Among these Kallars, membership in a clan was demonstrated and also asserted by the performance of certain rituals during the festivals, organized in lineage temples. The people who had migrated from their original territory used to retain their affiliation and contact with the original temple. While migrating they used to take a sod of earth from the original temple and enshrine it in the place of their new home.⁹⁴ Even if the shrine became well established in course of time, the families used to recognize the original temple and maintain contacts with it.

Village Cult

Each village had a common temple called *pothu kovil* with a presiding deity – either male or female and was called after that deity. Village gods and goddesses were worshipped to protect the respective villages from epidemics and natural calamities. Hence the worship was occasional. In most of the villages

93. *Ibid.*, p.370.

94. C.N. Natarajan, *Op. cit.*, 174.

the guardian deity was a female one in the name of *Mariamman*, *Ochchandamman* etc. These temples could not be duplicated. Each family or each house in a village contributed a sum of money prescribed by the members of the governing council, designated as *Thevars*, to celebrate the cult in the village temple and also for its maintenance. Non-Kallar castes could also be priests here.

The goddess of the village square was *Mandaiamman*, referred to as *Mariamman* or *Kaliamman*. Her temple was invariably seen on the southern side of every village behind a tree. It consisted of a small square cell made of stone. Oil was burnt there on all Fridays. In the month of September or October an annual festival common to all including the non-Piramalai Kallar communities of the concerned village was celebrated.

Another cult was that of *Karuppasamy* (Black god) whose temple was located to the north of the village. It consisted of a stone lamp. (See Plate III) Plantains were offered to him and lamp was lit during festivals. When *puja* was offered to *Karuppasamy*, the caste god, the worshippers used to turn to the north.

Another god, *Aiyyanar* whose temple was situated on the bank of the tank, was concerned with the prosperity of the village.

Nadu Cult

Each province had a common temple with a presiding deity and was called after that deity. It was the location of the chief temples that entitled the respective places to be the capitals of the territorial units. The following were the chief deities of the 8 Kallar Nadus.

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|--|-------------|
| 1. Sonai Muthaiah and Nalluthu Karuppasami | Tideyan |
| 2. Angaleshwari and Kalyana Karuppasami | Valandur |
| 3. Moonusami (Kaluvanadan, Angala Iswaran
& Nalla Kurmbaiyar) and Ochchandamman | Karumathur |
| 4. Perumal Malairaman | Puthur |
| 5. Mayandisamy and Ochchandamman | Pappapatti |
| 6. Pekama Karuppasamy and Chinnasamy | Kokkulam |
| 7. Malaichami alias Perumal | Veppanuthu |
| 8. Ochchandamman | Tummakkundu |

However the temples were not reserved for the Piramalai Kallars only but were open to the people of all castes, living in the concerned province, royal village or secondary villages.

The Nadu cults had a dual nature. On one hand they were lineage cults or local cults which the Piramalai Kallar community inherited and on the other, they represented the union of the lineages. For instance Moonusami Koil at Karumathur was originally a lineage temple of the Kallars and later it was developed into a Nadu temple for all the caste people of the region and was the most important place of worship for all the Piramalai Kallars. Karuppasami was their prominent deity and there were numerous shrines for him all over Kallarnadu and his priests were either *Kallars* or *Kosavars* (Potters). For the local god *Peykaman*, a meat eating demon, Harijan was the priest. There were no regular daily pujas in the temples except on Tuesday and Friday. But on festive occasions such as Tamil New Year's day, *Adi Padhinettu*, *Periya Karthigai*, *Sivaratri*, *Pongal* etc. elaborate *pujas* took place. No animal sacrifice was made. But once in 3 or 4 years, *Sivaratri* festival was celebrated in the month of *Maci* with great pomp and show for 3 days. Sacrifice of a goat by each family was one among the principal items of the festival. They strongly believed that their sins would be forgiven through animal sacrifices. Each family set apart a he-goat and on the appointed day of the festival, the goats were led to the temple where saffron water was poured on them and when they shook the water out, it was interpreted as god's acceptance of their offering. The son-in-law of the family should cut it with a single stroke and the head was given to the *pujari* (priest) as his share and the body was consumed by the family.

Every temple had its own *shaman* and *pujari* who formed the totality of clergy. *Pujari* had to perform worship, rituals, cure ailments, protect one from evil spirits and officiate at their life cycle rituals. He contacted the ancestors and spirits on behalf of his own people and discerned what powers were being used against them. Nowhere a Brahman priest was employed. *Kodangi* or Shaman's function was that of an Oracle. *Kodangi* means incarnated the god and was supposed to be the one who was possessed by the deity. He divined the fortunes and misfortunes ahead of the people. Since he was believed to be directed by the deity, his words were taken as the words of the deity and obeyed in toto. He also enjoyed the privilege of choosing a successor to *pujari* on his demise. A group of dancing *kodangis* was a general feature of festivals.

A peculiar feature of their religion was the sacred boxes⁹⁵ which all important deities of the Piramalai Kallars had. The jewels, silk cloth of the deities, models of eye balls, eye brows and a sacred thread made of gold were kept in it. *Pujari* was the custodian of that box which was kept in a sacred place. Once a year during *Mahasivaratri*, the sacred boxes of all the temples were carried from temple to temple by the second *pujari*. *Kodangis* and the *pujaris* of the temples used to go dancing before the sacred boxes to the accompaniment of music.

95. This sacred box resembles the Ark of Covenant of the Israelites which contained the Ten Commandments of the Lord and carried wherever they went.

Every temple was governed by a Council of Chiefs called Thevars. Almost all the temples had two or three Thevars on their governing councils. These councils were in charge of the maintenance and upkeep of the temple they governed. They acted as the financial custodians of the temples and also as organizers of the festivals.

Thus in the realm of their religious life, fear was all dominant. Fear of the evil spirit, fear of the departed spirit of ancestors, fear of the evil powers playing with human life in times of disease and death proved to be the inner reason for many an unreasonable illogical action. Held and paralyzed by it, the common mind was seldom able to reason from cause to effect.