PREFACE

The present study is a follow-up work of my M. Phil Dissertation *Hero Worship in Medieval Karnataka: a Study based on Hero-stone Inscriptions*. Although the two studies may appear dissimilar outwardly in terms of the subject matter and geographical focus, both are in fact related topics and, on the whole, deal with the problem of death and human concerns about it. The conviction behind Hero-stones, too, was nothing but the fears and concerns about death and after-life. Though strictly confined to tribal affairs and to the geographical canvas of Malabar, this study is a pioneering attempt in a largely neglected field of knowledge. The attempt to limit the scope of the study was not just for the sake of research convenience but it is also hoped to throw some fresh light on the contribution of the tribal people towards the cultural heritage of Kerala. Similarly, it is supposed to bring out the relationship between the tradition of Kerala and the cultural practices of the present day tribal peoples. Attempts at linking anthropological studies with archaeological and historical ventures also are few and far between. Against this backdrop the present study attempts to analyze how far the tribal people, who are by and large insular till recently and who still follow simple modes of life without undergoing relatively low level of acculturation or integration, retain ancient patterns of traditions and primitive cultural ethos. The present study is expected to contribute something in that direction.

Although the laity is largely ignorant of the internal differences among the various tribal communities, any serious observer of the tribal culture would be surprised by the kind of dissimilarities that prevail over the various tribal groups of Kerala. There are rich landlords among them against the ordinary tribal who strives for a living; highly civilized people against the surprisingly primitive; heavily ritual-ridden against the extremely simple; Malayalam speaking tribes against the Tamil or Kannada speaking ones, and so on. The slow process of integration into general society is supplemented by a similar process of Sanskritization. The identity of the tribal people as the zealous custodians of an ancient culture and their unwillingness to enter into the modern life is fast
becoming a thing of the past. Since anthropologists are preoccupied with the study of the life and culture of the contemporary tribal society, the historicity of rites and beliefs are largely neglected. That most of the historical studies are focused on the problem of the tribal land issue has greatly spoiled the situation. This overemphasis on the land question has had its impact in the form of a gross ignorance of the history of the tribal communities.

What probably discouraged such investigations may not just be the relative difficulty in tapping information from the tribal people but the distorted notions that come to stay on the backwardness and uncivilized modes of their life systems. Centuries-old exploitation by the people of the plains has converted a large section of the tribal people into arch opponents of all the outsiders. There is a widespread belief among them that outsiders are taking advantage of the great treasure of their traditional knowledge that the tribes possess on various fields, especially in herbal medicine. Still, the readiness of a few to disclose matters to non-tribes would astonish us. Certain tribal people have realized that these studies would after all be advantageous to them. Gifts in money or materials would no doubt have allured some of them to that direction.

The wholehearted cooperation of the tribal people is the essential precondition for the success of any study on their cultural life; but to gain their goodwill is not an easy thing to achieve. For the present work 27 tribal communities had to be approached and studied about. There were long periods of despair with some crowning moments of success and delight in this difficult venture. For the tribes, death is not just a matter of loss and grief but a horrifying event as well and, as the funeral ceremony is a very sacred occasion, the situation assumes an extremely religious halo in which the participation of outsiders is vehemently looked down upon. The bad treatment meted out to the tribes by the non-tribal people and the extreme deprivation of them has sown suspicion in their minds against all outsiders. Thus there is an inherent antipathy in every tribal mind against a non-tribal. This manifests as a revolt of the tribal ethos against non-tribal culture. Naturally they are reluctant to open up their minds to the non-tribes who are considered intruders. Even in this prevailing situation of
animosity, and more so in the midst of economic strains, I was able to gather relevant information. Recent developments in information technology, communication networks and transportation facilities have been of great help to undertake the research work with considerable ease. Even field work was not as difficult as it would have been some five or ten years ago, if looked from the point of view of accessibility and traceability.

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