

## THE UNIQUE BADAGA COMMUNITY OF THE NILGIRI HILLS IN SOUTHERN INDIA: A CASE STUDY IN VILLAGE KELKAVATTY

GOURAB BERA

Research Scholar, Department of Geography, University of Calcutta, West Bengal, India

### ABSTRACT

India rightly proves the saying – “Unity in Diversity”. Since the time of various philosophers explanations and discoveries have been continued and in this process the unknown has been known the unfamiliar has been familiar and the unidentified has been identified. The separate knowledge of practical experience has led to the explorations of rare and unique events. Similarly, this work represents the unique features of the traditional community of South India, namely – The Badaga Community – spread around their so called ‘Nakku Betta’ (Nakku – Four and, Betta – Mountains, in the Badaga language). Nilgiris Civilization has started to grow and multiplied through tribes. There is a lot of controversy regarding the Badagas that whether they should be included in the tribal communities or not. But recently they have been incorporated in the other Backward Caste 2008 legislation. The present paper deals with the origin, socio- economic conditions of Badaga community

**KEYWORDS:** Hatti Kelkavatty, Seemae, Nucleated Settlement, Socio-Economic Status

### INTRODUCTION

India has traditionally been the home of different cultures and people. Among the diversified population, a significant portion is comprised of the tribal people or the other non tribal i.e. the indigenous inhabitants of the land. The culture of these communities, their traditions and practices pervade almost all the aspects of Indian culture and civilization – as the community of the Great Badagas. Warm hospitality, simple ways of living and sincere judgment of the opinions is some of the traits that mark the uniqueness of the tribal culture of India. Their custom depicts their belief in simplicity. They are perfectly well blended with nature and are in the practice of worshipping their own god and goddesses. They are very much sociable, hospitable, and fun loving along with strong community bonds. This particular community shares patriarchal ties and have their own festivals and celebrations. The people of this community are clinging to their identity despite of the external influences that threaten their culture especially after their post – independence period. The interpretation of the reign of Badaga community by several historians has led to their present state of exclusion from tribal community.

Today the original inhabitants of the Nilgiri Hills were the, Badagas, Kota, Irula and Kurunbas which co-existed through specialization and trade. The Badagas are one of the major non tribal OBC (Other backward cast) populations in the district who reside in the mountains. Many Badagas are under the mistaken impression that if they are brought under the “Scheduled Tribe”, it would be a degrading step. One of the major political parties of Tamil Nadu has publically announced that ST status would be recommended for the Badagas, if they are elected to govern the Tamil Nadu state for which elections were to be held on the 13<sup>th</sup> April, 2011.

## Study Area

Ooty Taluk has 19 villages, out of which village Kelkavatty, is one of the 'Hahi' (village termed as Hatti in Badaga Language) that lies in the heart of the Nilgiris. From Ooty E-1 Reveal Police station, its proximity was marked nearly 8 km from Ooty Central Bus Stand. Hatti Kelkavatty comes under the "Thodha Nadu seemae" of the Badaga Community – seemae, which refers to a cluster of villages which need not to close to each other. There are total four Seemae's and through the efforts of Mr. H. Madha Gosder, who edited "Nakku Bella magazine, had attempted to record all the hattis in one of its issues in the late 1970's, under the four Seemae's namely.

- Thodha Naadu Seemae
- Tarangaadu Seemae
- Mekku Naadu Seemae
- Kundhe Seemae

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this paper are as follows-

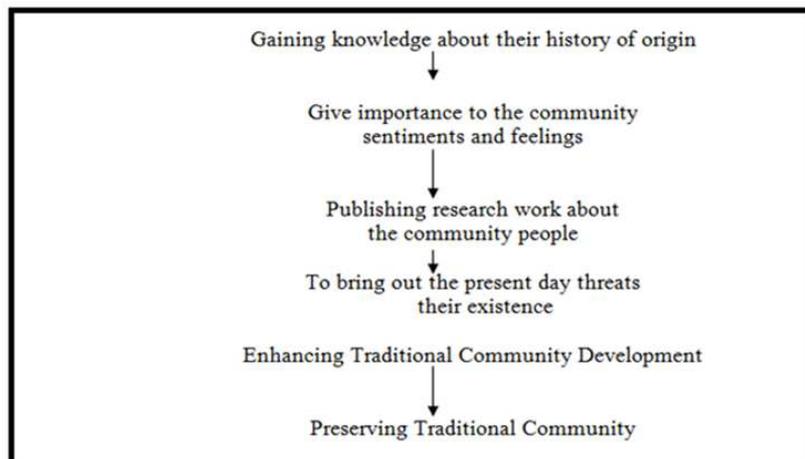
- To represent the unique Badaga Community as a traditional community of Southern India into the forefront.
- To enhance the shift of the ancient paradigm into their present day status and culture.
- To analyze the socio-economic aspects of Hatti Kelkavatty in the present day.
- To bring out the prospects, problems and grievances of the people of Hatti Kelkavatty as a whole.

## METHODOLOGY

Three phases of the field study has been undertaken, namely – pre-field, field and post field study. Primary information about the Badaga Community was received from various websites, during the field study surveys, interviews were conducted and thereafter primary as well as secondary data also were collected. After the field study, post-field studies helped in the incorporation jotting down the information and data, concerning the visit to Hatti Kalkavatty.

## Origin of the Badagas

Many anthropologists, researchers and others view that Badaga Origin is nothing, but Badaga migration from Mysore (now in Karnataka state) about 300 years ago, during Tipu Sultar's time as the word Badagas, Etymologically, means northerner. Since then the Badagas of the present have believed in their migration theory in the absence of any conclusive and trustable evidences to the contrary. But the recent revelations and links about the language, from the epics and writings of the Tamil Sangam Period has turned out an untouched and unknown part of the origin of the Badagas.



**Figure 2: How to Preserve a Traditional Indigenous Community**

The Badagas, as a whole are one of the unique and one of the most important indigenous people. They are the largest single community in the Nilgiri Hills which nestle at a point where the rugged beauty of the Eastern Ghats merge with the Western Ghats. The interpretation of non-Badaga relation might be questioned as, how their northward migration was possible while the Nilgiris were found to be a part of the Mysore state which dominated till 1799. But, the other revelations of Badaga researchers, has their theory of origin related to the legendary –Tipu Sultan. During Tipu Sultan’s rules, there lived seven brothers and their only sister in Badagahalli near Mysore on the Talainalai Hills. When their sister who was a beautiful looking girl, was milking the cow, a self broke loose from the tree to which it was tied. Not finding anything, the girl let loose her coiled hair and held the cow back with it, while her brother milked the cow. Tipu sultan who was riding along the vicinity caught hold of the beauty of the girl and was ready to marry her. The brothers who were staunch Hindus were demanded to get the transformed into Islamic sect; hence they disguised themselves and their sister, fled to the Nilgiris by the night and reached River Mayor, which is the northernmost limit of the Nilgiri District. But unfortunately Tipu Shultan had sent pursuers who caught hold of them. Being helpless, the family placed a ‘Shivalingan’ on the ground and prayed before it inturn the River Mayor pouted, which made the new refugee to cross over to the Nilgiris and the pursuers were drowned by the closing waters. After a short stay near the present village of Bethelhada, the brothers dispersed in different directions and thus various seemay were formed. The elder brother told one of his younger brothers to follow a deer and build village where it stopped. Another brother settled down in Koderi, yet another in Hubbathalai. These brothers were the founders of the seemay diversions of the Badagas. The other ‘seemaes’, also have interesting histories behind them. It is said that as one group of Badaga reached the Nilgiris, they took shelter in a forest and in their hurry to leave; they left a baby behind, which crawled into a cave. A Toda father brought him up with his own child and the Thodanaadu division of the Badagas was founded to which Hatti Kelkavatty is a part.

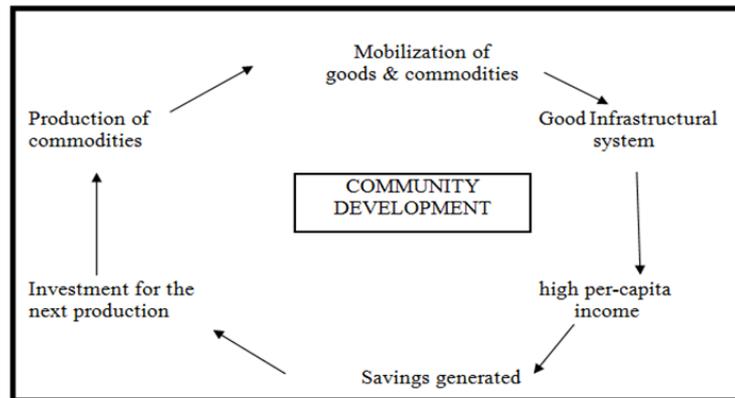
According to another legend, two Badaga brothers reached Nunthala, who were very hungry. The younger brother shot a pigeon and roasted it and ate it while the elder brother refused to have it. It is said that the vegetarian brother is the ‘Hethappa’ or ancestor of the Kundah division, of the Badagas, while the non-vegetarian brother and was the founder of the Makunader division of the Badagas. Thus the interpretation of both the Badagas and the non-Badagas should be equally dealt with, so that the sentiments of the Badagas and their origin remain a reality and does not become a mystery.

### Socio-Economic Condition of Village Kelkavatti - A Present Trend

It is very important to highlight the socio-economic aspects of Hatti Kelkavatty. According to their present status they are considered to be the OBC. So their social and economic activities must be remarked. As being OBC, they stand to be unique in their way of living and their standard of living. As said, there are a lot of controversies regarding their status – whether they should be included under the Tribal sections or not. Legislations have denied their status to be tribes but political influence and revelations of new stories about their origin, is still like a ray of hope, what could be their actual status. Despite of all these, still the village imparts various distinguishing features, as follows

- Being a backward community, they totally exhibit the role of a tribal society.
- There is high prohibition on the mixing of races of different communities or religion.
- They, as they remarked, maintain a pure and common blood race, i.e. they believe in endogamous relationship, i.e. marriage or interbreeding within their community.
- They are fully blended with the nature and do not exploit the resources too much. They are in perfect harmony with the nature.
- The people of the village are well acquainted with each other and live with the feeling of equality and fraternity.
- They share their views and conducts meeting in the common community hall in the village, where they discuss their problems and grievances.
- Badaga women, as history marked, had a glorious past, but now the position is not so prestigious. Women, since a few years back, were imparted with only the primary education. Higher education to the common is not permitted as per the community rule, but a few have struggled for so.
- The male in the village Kelkavatty are well received with education. Majority of them are graduate and many have post-graduation degrees.
- The total literacy rate of this village 80%, where the male literacy rate is about 95% and the female about 70%.
- 40% of the total population has received primary education while that of Graduation and Post-Graduation is 10% each. Secondary and Higher Secondary Education is 20% each.
- The village has a common primary school where all the children are aided with primary education. They have to travel to Ooty town for the secondary and higher secondary schools and colleges, which are at a distance of 10 Km.
- The main occupation of the people is agriculture. About 60% of the total population is related to the cultivation of crops while another 20% of the population is engaged as workers in the agricultural field.
- About 70% of the land use is under agricultural activities. Irrigation is mainly done through wells and tube well about 75%. Double cropping techniques are used where vegetables and other food crops like wheat, etc, are grown. Tea and Eucalyptus plantations are noticed throughout the village. Eucalyptus plantations are mainly adopted under the social forestry schemes of arresting soil erosion.

- Thus, about 80% of the total population are related to the primary sectors, while the remaining population is engaged in government services and business and a very few percentage are engaged in industrial related work.



**Figure 1: Developmental Processes of a Community**

- Majority of the population has landholdings on an average of 1-2 acres of land Majority of the cows and goats are domesticated for their dairy needs and in the agricultural field.
- Dominant production includes vegetables like beetroots, beans, potatoes, carrots, etc. Tea is the only beverage crop grown in Kelkavatty’s terraced slope.
- There is a common tap line connection in the village, where drinking water is fetched. While well and tube well is the other sources of drinking water.
- Monthly income of the average working population is about Rs.4, 000 and above.
- Majority of the houses is of pucca type with tiles being used for roofing and has cemented floors. The village has quite narrow lanes which connects every settlement of the village to the other. The settlements are mainly of double storied one.
- Assets of the villages includes durable goods like majority of them have landholdings and jewelleryes. Other common assets of the household involve two-wheelers, tractors, television set, etc.
- The settlement pattern is linear and is of nucleated type.
- The average age of marriage for the male is 27 to 30 years and that of women is about 20 years.

Thus, it is evident that child marriage is not practiced here as well as child labour is also prohibited. Education is imparted to all but the females are not much given the higher education. The villages in the Ooty Taluk are administrated by the village administrative officers and three Revenue Inspectors who are posted to govern and supervise the work of these 19 officers of the 19 villages. Thus, all in one, village Kelkavatty has a well integrated system of social and economic activities. But due to the external influence regarding their origin and confirmation of status, it is a point of negligence and hindrance to their development. Other problems are also associated with the village and their socio-economic activity.

### Problems and Prospects of the Villages

Economic hindrances are also marked. As they said, only vegetables are cultivated on a large scale basis. Thus the seeds for cultivation are needed to be brought from the market. Previously Rs.300/- was paid for purchasing per kg of carrot seeds, but somewhat the present scenario have changed. Now per kilogram of carrot seed is purchased at an exorbitant price of Rs.10, 000. Moreover the qualities of the seeds are low which yields low quality production. Same is the case with other vegetable seeds. The geographical requirement of the region does not permit it to sow food crops on a large scale, and thus the total demand of the village is fulfilled by purchasing food grains from the market. Other problems include the transportation system. The village is about 8 km from the Ooty Town, and main nodes of transport include three wheeler vans to the market. As said, the average cost incurred from the production sometimes exceeds the total production and sometimes they are also underpaid. So, as a whole, profit margins are very much less and thus the next production gets hampered.

Other marked problem of the Village which hampers its development is the absence of medical and health clinics. The people have to travel about 10 Km to reach the nearest clinic or hospital and also the transportation system is not so frequent. As cited earlier also, educational institutions are also at a distance of about 10-12 km, which make people to feel inconvenient to send their children especially daughters.

Kelkavatty stands as an important community which if interfered by Governmental help and support, can stand as a self-sufficient village. And it is well known that the role of a self-sufficient village economy means to be in the limelight, where backwardness remains at the back. Thus by solving the problems and restoring the needs and settling the grievances of this traditional community will indirectly help in preserving the traditional culture and indigenous community of our mother land.

The hospitable environment, negligible criminal records, well mannered people of Kelkavatty makes it a distinguishing community. Moreover its heritage in the past or its history of origin, shall be known by each and every Indian, as they are acknowledge with the foreign invasions in India. Thus, this paper work is nothing but the assessment of the evolution of the Badaga community with its present state. Future prospects are thus high if subsidies to agricultural activities are given along with loans with less amount of interest imposed. The transportation system must also be improvised for the mobility towards education and health services.

### CONCLUSIONS

This paper is a tribute to the legend of the Badaga Community. Our past is our heritage so it is very important to bring forth every records and incidents of History. Many researchers have been going on, about the origin of the Badaga Community. Hatti Kelkavatty has emerged in the way of being a self-sufficient village economy and thus the socio-economic activities must be encouraged and aided with help and support. Links have also suggested that Badaga language existed with old Kannada. Thus the Badagas have been considered to be of Dravidian origin due to the fact that the language spoken is Dravidian but is disputed. Their customs, cultural aspects are distinct and not closely related to other Ethnic Groups, hence their origin are in great debate.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The visit to Village Kelkavatty is of a memorable one. The atmosphere was hospitable in the village. The hospitable welcome of Mr. K. M. Nanjar was kind enough. He is the Retired Agricultural officer and was fully acknowledged with his village's every little matter and information. His village people were also hospitable enough and a pure and serene ambience was there.

## REFERENCES

1. Jayaprakash.B. (2009). Badagas of the Blue Mountains.
2. Balasubramaniam,B. (2009). Paame - the history and culture of the Badagas of the Nilgiris. Elkon Press,Bangalore.
3. Badaga Social Network (2010). Badagas of The Nilgiris and the World over.
4. Hockings, P. (1988). Counsel from the ancients, a study of Badaga proverbs, prayers, omens and curses. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
5. J.W.Brecks (1873), An Account of the Primitive Tribes of the Nilgiris; Nilgiri Manual, vol. i. pp. 218–228.

