

Archiving Songs and Dance of the Jenu Kurumba Tribe from Karnataka

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Abstract

JenuKurumbas are primitive tribal groups living in the States of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka. JenuKurumbas have retained their own traditions and differ from other tribal people of the area in their language, social system, customs, and habits. The songs and dance forms of the Jenu Kurumba tribe are a reflection of their culture and heritage. Their songs and dances deal with themes relating to agriculture, marriage, myths, and religious beliefs. This project intends to archive nine songs and one dance form of the Jenu Kurumba tribe as an attempt to preserve the language of the community that they use to articulate their collective consciousness. This preservation of language leads to the attribution of respect for the 'world view' of the tribe. The digital archive not only creates a repository of information about the Jenu Kurumba tribe but also allows the rest of the world to see without compromising the uniqueness of the rich culture of the Jenu Kurumba tribe. This project adopts an ethnopoetics framework and will be focusing on the performance of songs and dance of the Jenu Kurumba tribe. To analyse the politics of archiving songs and dance videos of the Jenu Kurumba tribe, G.N. Devy's ideas of cultural and structural aphasia will be used. This archival project draws attention to the need of preserving the language and culture of the Jenu Kurumba tribe as they are victims of cultural aphasia due to the structural oppression faced by the community from the hegemonic power structures of the state in which they are residing.

Keywords: Jenu Kurumba, Tribal groups, Ethnopoetics, Collective Consciousness, Cultural Aphasia, Structural Aphasia.

Proposal

JenuKurumbas are primitive tribal groups living in the States of Tamilnadu, Kerala, and Karnataka. They are called as ‘Kattunayakas’ in Tamilnadu and Kerala and as ‘JenuKurumbas’ in Karnataka. JenuKurumbas have retained their own traditions and differ from other tribal people (and even from other Kurumba subgroups) of the area in their language, social system, customs, and habits. Jenu Kurumba, also known as Jen Kurumba is a southern Dravidian language of the Tamil-Kannada subgroup spoken by the Jenu Kurumba tribe. It is often considered to constitute a dialect of Kannada; however, Ethnologue classifies it as a separate language.

The songs and dance forms of the Jenu Kurumba tribe are a reflection of their culture and heritage. Their songs and dances deal with themes relating to agriculture, marriage, myths, and religious beliefs. This project intends to archive nine songs and one dance form of the Jenu Kurumba tribe as an attempt to preserve the language of the community that they use to articulate their collective consciousness. This preservation of language leads to the attribution of respect for the ‘world view’ of the tribe.

The digital archive not only creates a repository of information about the Jenu Kurumba tribe but also allows the rest of the world to see without compromising the uniqueness of the rich culture of the Jenu Kurumba tribe. This becomes imperative as the People’s Linguistic Survey of India states that India has lost nearly 250 languages in the last half-century, and 196 more have been declared endangered by UNESCO. To prevent the loss of such endangered languages, digital media is used for their documentation in audio-visual formats.

The heritage of the tribal population that is contained in their songs and dance plays a significant role in integrating society and provides a sense of ownership to the concerned people and culture. However, this rich tradition of the Jenu Kurumba tribe faces the intense pressure of adopting the cultural framework of the dominant section of the state. Earlier all JenuKurumbas used to live inside the forest. But to improve their economic condition, the Government (esp. in Karnataka) has taken efforts to settle them in colonies built on the outskirts of the forest so that they can come into contact with the outside world to improve their economic system. However, this step has instilled inferior feelings among the Jenu Kurumba's about their culture, which has led them to adopt the dominant cultural ethos of the state.

Because of the cultural invasion of the majoritarian state languages and the young generation of the tribe doing their schooling in the state languages, the native cultural forms of the tribe are getting lost from their memory. Hence, it becomes important to archive the dance and songs to preserve the Jenu Kurumba language and culture.

Method

This project adopts an ethnopoetics framework and will be focusing on the performance of songs and dance of the Jenu Kurumba tribe. To analyse the politics of archiving songs and dance videos of the Jenu Kurumba tribe, G.N. Devy's ideas of cultural and structural aphasia will be used.

The project contains an introductory video that offers insights about their lifestyle and provides glimpses of their culture and religious practices. It also contains nine songs and one dance video that deals with themes relating to agriculture, marriage, myth and religious practices

that are native to the tribe. These songs are published in YouTube and are available for the access of the public. The members of this tribe have given their consent for this archiving their songs and dance, and have played an important role in the materialisation of this project.

Archive

Links to the YouTube videos

<https://youtu.be/6gBUtpVFp4>

<https://youtu.be/OVUoD-rf0Og>

https://youtu.be/jX_rk9Wj1SE

<https://youtu.be/p5qEUqIZtTU>

https://youtu.be/3SgA7XpI_is

<https://youtu.be/H97Hjx6GCJE>

<https://youtu.be/KGMQZHVHwis>

<https://youtu.be/FKCozfHIBPI>

https://youtu.be/8Q_as9sX3ds

<https://youtu.be/F8DLQNZlbaQ>

<https://youtu.be/0TGk2q4gz50>

Structure

The archive starts with an introductory video about the Jenu Kurumba tribe, which gives information about the location of the tribe, their way of living, glimpses of their culture and religious practices. Then, nine individual clips of Jenu Kurumba tribal songs are provided. The songs are not compiled together as the songs talk about multifarious activities of their culture. The archive also consists of a native dance video of the Jenu Kurumba tribe. Through various videos about the songs and dance of the tribe, the archive gives the audience an understanding of the diverse aspects of the Jenu Kurumba culture.

Main Argument

This archival project draws attention to the need of preserving the language and culture of the Jenu Kurumba tribe as they are victims of cultural aphasia due to the structural oppression faced by the community from the hegemonic power structures of the state in which they are residing.

Observations

India has a rich palate of traditional diversified tribal art and cultural forms that need to be preserved due to the emergence of synthetic homogenous macro-culture as a result of globalisation. Due to the hegemony of the all-pervasive macro-culture, the multifarious tribal cultures of the country are suffering from cultural aphasia.

One of the main reasons for this cultural aphasia is the refusal to term tribal cultures as 'cultures'. The homogenous macro-culture only takes into account the 'elite' cultures of India

and deem the heritage and cultural practices of the various tribal communities as subordinate to the 'elite' cultures and hence not worthy to be preserved. Raymond Williams in his essay "Culture is Ordinary" makes a similar observation, where he argues that the term 'culture' includes not only the 'elite' cultures but the everyday lives of people. Therefore, it's high time to accept that the tribal communities' way of living is also 'culture' and every possible step need to be taken for its preservation.

The objective of this digital archive is to preserve the socio-cultural exclusivity of the Jenu Kurumba tribe in Karnataka so that they do not suffer cultural aphasia and attrition. With the help of the introductory video, nine songs and dance videos in the archive, the various nuances of the culture of the Jenu Kurumba tribe are preserved so that they do not undergo marginalisation due to the matrix of class and caste that is employed in the Indian society that is fragmented over two thousand castes, six hundred tribes and more than a thousand mother tongues.

Critical Evaluation and Analysis

Discourses of power and language reveal that the tribals of India are a minority and oppressed group devoid of any sorts of power. The Adivasis of India are categorised, labelled and classified as part of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes' group of India's classification of society. This classification implies that their education statuses and benefits are counted alongside the Scheduled Caste populations, and they are believed to occupy a similar existence and status. Though the addition of Adivasis to the larger group of Scheduled Caste population is only a slight alteration, it ignores a diversified identity of a people who have maintained their own culture for thousands of years.

Ganesh Devy in his essay “Culture and Development: An Experiment with Empowerment” talks about the marginalisation faced by the tribal community in India. Their condition is worse than the Dalits in India as the tribals have ‘zero visibility’ in the public sphere (Devy 10). The tribal population of India that includes approximately 87 million people of India are stripped of validation, of individualism, and recognition. The structural oppression faced by the tribals has historical basis as it can be traced from the British rule with the formulation of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) in 1891.

About the same time as the CTA was getting formulated, the colonial government produced another list of communities under the caption ‘the Tribes of India’. These were the communities that had come in conflict with the British rule on the issue of imposition of the government’s sovereign authority over the forest areas. During the 1860s, the British had created a Forest Department, primarily to provide good quality timber for building railways and naval ships. The forest-dwelling communities in India opposed the colonial takeover of their forests. They neither cared for the colonial government nor did they understand the idiom of the British law. Not surprisingly, most of these conflicts were often violent and involved armed clashes (Menon 7).

Since the political idioms of the conflicting parties were radically divergent, it became difficult for the colonial rule and its diplomacy to forge treaties with the forest-dwelling communities. Communities located at all such areas of conflict were bundled together by the colonial government within the term ‘tribe’. Soon after the need to conceptualize ‘tribes’ became clearer, sophisticated machinery of scholarship was put in place to enumerate, describe and define the Indian tribes. The historical, linguistic and cultural differences among these

communities were so vast and complex that it would have been impossible for any rational scheme of sociological classification to place them in a single conceptual category.

While all this was happening in India's political history, already a branch of Orientalism in Europe had emerged in the form of Anthropology, perhaps more appropriately termed as 'savageology' (Devy 19). Some of the attributes discussed in 'savageology' were applied to the Indian 'tribes' due to which they came to be considered as necessarily primitive. By the end of the 19th century, the concept of tribe and the notion of criminal tribes had received acceptance even among the educated Indians-- writers, journalists and lawyers. As a result, when the 1891 version of the CTA was enacted, or when in the following year the register of forest codes was prepared there was no evident protest from any quarter (Devy 6). By the turn of the century, the tribe had come to stay as an unchallenged category constitutive of the primitive in Indian society.

Moreover, as a result of the colonial rule, written text was given more privilege than the oral, which conferred a certain sense of 'inferior' status to the tribal languages like the Jenu Kurumba that does not have a script of their own. After Independence, the Indian states were conceived as 'linguistic states'. If a given language had a script and printed literature, it was granted a territory as a separate state within the Union of India. Languages that did not have printed literature, even though they had rich traditions of oral literature, were not given such states.

A special Schedule of Languages (The 8th Schedule) was created within the Indian Constitution that consists of twenty-two languages in it. It became obligatory for the government to commit all education-related expenditure on these languages alone. The languages spoken in India far outnumber the languages included in the Eighth Schedule (Menon 4). Most of the

languages that do not find a place in this schedule are spoken by the Adivasis and the DNTs and are on the way to rapid extinction, if not already gone.

This danger of attrition can be seen in the Jenu Kurumba tribe as the medium of education is the state language and the members of the community are made to feel that if they want social visibility, they have to forsake their native culture and language and assimilate with the hegemonic culture. As G.N. Devy in his public lecture “Inclusive Education: A View of Higher Education in India” points out “a speech community comes to believe that education in some other language alone is the way ahead for its very survival, the given community decides to adopt to the new language situation” (19).

It is essential therefore to consider if there is something inherent in the dominant development discourse in the contemporary world that requires a diminishing of the world’s language heritage that demands a kind of a phonocide. The communities like the Jenu Kurumba, which are already marginalised within their local and national contexts, become a minority within their cultural contexts. They become victims of structural oppression as they are offered ‘zero visibility’ in their national and local context, which leads to a situation where they are placed at the frontline of the phonocide.

In the process of the archival project, the Jenu Kurumba tribal members have communicated the loss of their language, religious traditions, songs, dances, and rituals. There is immense pressure on them to adopt the dominant language and cultures of Karnataka for a ‘better’ lifestyle. The absence of a script for their language has always presented an inability for them to express certain sounds. The younger generation of the Jenu Kurumba tribe who receives education in Kannada faces a lot of difficulties during their primary education as they do not

receive education in their mother tongue. Once the younger generation of the tribe has attained their education in the dominant language of the state, they express a certain sense of disdain for their mother tongue. This poses danger for the Jenu Kurumba language and culture as there are high chances of attrition of the language due to the lack of usage by the younger generation.

Also, the folk dance and songs of this tribe contain a plethora of information about the community and offer insights about their 'world view'. This collective consciousness of the community is under the threat of extinction due to the invasion of the hegemonic culture of the state in which they reside. If the language and culture of this tribe are not preserved, the younger generation would be distanced from the 'world view' of this tribe and would experience identity crisis as they would occupy the liminal spaces even after their assimilation into the dominant culture of the state.

Moreover, the loss of language and the loss of cultural memory lead to cultural aphasia, which risks the existence of the 'world view' of the community. Also, if the children are not exposed to their rich cultural heritage from a young age, they may suffer from cultural aphasia. To preserve the culture of the Jenu Kurumba tribe, the songs and dance can be transcribed and recorded. Preservation of the language and culture of a community essentially lead to preservation of that community itself.

This project has adopted the methodology of ethnopoetics and contains the archival of the performance of songs and dance forms. Ethnopoetics focuses on not only the poetics of language but also on the methods of translation and transcription that would bring into the forefront the artful qualities of performances in an oral society like Jenu Kurumba. Ethnopoetics not only bridges the gap between orality and writing but also brings out the centrality of verbal art as a

dynamic force in the preservation of language and cultures that suffer structural oppression (Ganyi 3).

Adopting ethnopoetics as a methodology to preserve cultures that are subjected to cultural aphasia is depended on the need to record traditional society's oral performances in context and to bring out the vitality of these performances as repositories of the linguistic complexities of the societies that compose and perform these cultural artefacts. This project by documenting the performances of the oral narratives of the Jenu Kurumba tribe brings out the poetics and aesthetic qualities and emphasizes the attempt of artists to provide representation for their community as well as create identities for their culture.

This project involves transcription and archival of songs and dance forms to inform and expose their culturally informative dimensions that focus on the aspect of performance that is often neglected by a text-oriented analysis which is peculiar to specific traditions or occasions. By documenting the performance of dance and songs of the Jenu Kurumba tribe, the project offers an insight into the rich palette of genres of tribal culture that the country has got.

However, this project can be critiqued on various grounds. Many argue that it is natural for a language and culture to suffer death in the struggle for power and status of being assimilated into the hegemonic cultures. Most of the tribal communities in India are pressurized to adopt the vernacular majority language and culture of the state for better access to improved socio-economic benefits. It is assumed that many Adivasis of India may prefer the gradual loss of the mother tongue for better access to a world of power, money and opportunities.

It is also difficult and extremely subjective to measure what is lost when a language dies. It can be a loss of culture, language, history, lifestyle, traditions and so on. But it might as well as be viewed as none of the above and simply a natural sacrifice of one language and culture to gain another. In such a scenario, many might think that the death of the Jenu Kurumba language and culture is natural and the project of archiving their cultural artefacts is a futile attempt.

Also, another critique of this archival project is that language loss is experienced in India not just by the 'minor' languages and 'unclassified dialects' but also by 'major' languages that have long traditions and rich heritage of imaginative and philosophical writings. The younger generation of the speech communities that claim 'major' languages like Kannada, Oriya, Malayalam, Marathi and so on, may not attach a sense of self-identity in their cultural identity. So any attempt to protect and preserve languages and cultures in this globalised world can be considered as a futile attempt.

Moreover, this archive can also be critiqued in terms of the ideological positioning of the person who has undertaken this project. The question of who is speaking for the Jenu Kurumba tribe becomes relevant here as the person who is behind the archiving project does not belong to that community. This politics of representation becomes important as there is a danger of patronising and romanticising this community through archiving their songs and dance form.

The person who has undertaken this project is aware that the ideological position from where one speaks from affects both the meaning and truth of what one says and thus that one cannot assume an ability to transcend her location. In other words, a speaker's location (which here refers to her social location or social identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or dis-authorize one's speech. The person is

also aware that though the location can be epistemically salient, certain privileged locations can discursively dangerous. Persons from the dominant groups who speak for others are often treated as authenticating presences that confer legitimacy and credibility on the demands of subjugated speakers; such speaking for others does nothing to disrupt the discursive hierarchies that operate in public spaces.

This project is careful not to fall into such ideological pitfalls and has tried its best to present the authentic voice of the Jenu Kurumba tribe. As a part of this, the person has sought permission from the members of the tribe and has also shown them the dance and song videos that are uploaded on YouTube. The members registered their happiness in seeing their songs and dance in a public platform like YouTube and expressed their desire in knowing various aspects of the project.

In conclusion, this archival project draws attention to the need of preserving the language and culture of the Jenu Kurumba tribe as they are victims of cultural aphasia due to the structural oppression faced by the community from the majoritarian culture of the state that they are residing in. The project uses the methodology of ethnopoetics to highlight the importance of performance in the dance and songs of the tribe. The idea of aphasia employed by G.N.Devy helps in bringing forth the structural oppression faced by the language and culture of Jenu Kurumba tribe.

An alternative to this project is to produce a talking dictionary to document the struggling Jenu Kurumba language. The dictionary can contain audio recordings of the native speakers of the Jenu Kurumba tribe pronouncing words and sentences. It can also contain photographs and videos of their various cultural art forms. This audio-visual format will be

helpful for the researchers and language enthusiasts to understand a language like Jenu Kurumba that does not have a script.

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