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Pottery as Traditional Occupation of Kumbaran: Emerging Trends and Concerns

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INTRODUCTION

Kumbaran community is one of the notable traditional communities in India. Presence of Kumbaran community in Indian villages was evident from the caste-based society. They were counted as "village servants" who would supply in contrast to villagers' needs with regard to pots and utensils. They are found in various states of India, possessing different names such asKumhars, Kumor, Kummara, Kusavan etc. Likewise, potters work in diverse ways in different part of the country from the clay they use to the techniques they imply in the pot making process. In Kerala, Kumbaran community is spread over in the districts of Thrissur, Palakkad, Malappuram, Kozhikode and Wayanad. Traditionally, they follow pottery as their livelihood. It is not only a traditional occupation for them, rather pottery is connected with their religion, culture and everyday life. Pottery is an art that is learnt with time, patience and consistency. Expertise is achieved by practice and keen observation and most importantly the interest one stretches at it. A Kumbaran starts his first attempt on pottery from an early age of five or six. More tender the hands, more they are able to mould wonders with clay. Only men are participated in all stages of pot making process while women engage mainly in the finishing stage and selling. For Kumbaran, pottery is their identity and livelihood which they religiously follow. They have myths attached to their traditional occupation. According to the community, each potter descends from that one source- Prajapati, the first potter created by Vishwakarma or the creator. They also believe in the role of Lord Shiva in the creation of first Kumbaran. However, there is a gradual fall in the traditional occupation of Kumbaran in the past one decade. Many of the community members are withering away from their traditional occupation. It calls for a deep enquiry on this very matter where traditional occupation of Kumbaran faces existential crisis as well.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

L. K. Ananthakrishnayyar mentions about the presence of Kumbaran community in northern Kerala who speaks stained Telugu language in his work, 'Tribes and Castes of Cochin'. Baidyanath Saraswati explains about the way of life of Kumbaran and the process of pottery making. He further explains about the traditional nature of pottery among Kumbaran community in his book, 'Pottery-making Cultures and Indian Civilization'. Declining nature of rural traditional artisan community is well explained by Laxmi Devi in her edited work 'Encyclopaedia of Social Change'. She mentions urbanization, modernization and globalization as the causes for the same. A notable remark is made by Dr. A. Sumathi and V. Sujadevi in their article, Intergenerational Occupational Mobility of Workers in the Traditional Pottery Industries in Kottayam District, Kerala: A Critical Approach' that globalization made many youngsters to adapt changes in occupational sector which has led many to divert from their traditional occupation.



In her work, 'Challenges of Livelihood Security of Craftsmen: A Case Study', Sini M. observed that high risk and high effort nature of pottery making have influenced their community's mobilization.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a study that aimed to understand the current state of traditional occupation of Kumbaran. It also tried to seek factors leading to occupational shift in the community. The final objective of the study is focused on the concerns of community members regarding the recent trends in their traditional occupation.

Qualitative methodology has been used to carry out this study.Case study is implemented along with indepth interviews and Focused Group Discussion to collect primary data. Secondary data from newspaper articles, research papers, books and online journals have been collected as well. Kumbaran settlement in Pathramangalam village, Thrissur district of Kerala was selected as the area for this study.

EMERGING TRENDS AND RISING CONCERNS

A drastic change is happening in Kumbharan community in all possible aspects. Their traditional occupation is at the verge of complete decline. Unavailability of raw materials is the biggest challenge faced by Kumbharan nowadays. Those who engage in traditional occupation have unanimously worried about this alarming issue especially about the unavailability of clay. New regulations have come in place by the Government of Kerala where only a limited amount of clay can be allotted to each potter family at a fixed price. Considering the effort, time and risk incorporated in pottery making, the abovementioned regulation constraints the income of community members. This is becoming problematic while some community members are having second thoughts on following their traditional occupation. Disappearing paddy fields and shrinking of rivers have paved way to the lack of good clay. Success of pottery making is in the use of pure and suitable clay according to a Kumbharan. They consider their traditional occupationas divine hence they do not prefer to compromise on quality of pots and products they create. A pottery workshop attached to every household is a common find in Kumbharan settlements. However, this picture is also fading as many are deviating from their traditional occupation. Negligence from the authorities is seen in the weaking of a traditional occupation like pottery making. According to the community members, their traditional occupation is no longer satisfying their economic needs in this modern times.

Apart from the technical issues mentioned above there are few factors forcing the community members to discontinue their traditional occupation. Spread of formal and free education have given new openings to the youngsters Kumbaran. The new generation is exposed to the technological revolution and they are receiving the positive outcomes from the same. It is of great pride for a first generation Kumbaran member to achieve great educational qualification and it further is leading them to a larger world of occupational opportunities other than their traditional occupation. Higher education status and exposure with outer society have impacted positively on Kumbaran community but unfortunately is has also led to the weakening of their traditional occupation. Pottery making is considered as a high effort, high risk and mostly a manually done task which often fails to impress the young minds of Kumbaran. They find new jobs better over their traditional occupation which offer them meager income.

Globalization has widely impacted Kumbaran community from many perspectives. The process of globalization has brought drastic changes in the areas of Kumbaran's livelihood, family structure,



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culture and so on. Globalization opened new doors to all members in society irrespective of caste, class and space. Replacement of traditions to modernity became possible and it has paved way to the end of many traditionally followed ways. Likewise, as a result, Kumbaran's traditional occupation also witnessed a downfall with the coming of technological revolution, competitive markets and globalized setting. Migration among young community members to Middle East is also caused by globalization. However, there is a handful young members in community used these major changes brought by globalization as new opportunities. Few of them are enthusiastically continuing traditional occupation by implying new technologies and novel marketing and selling methods. This way, they are trying to preserve their traditional occupation in the same globalized world. Yet, they are highly concerned about the lack of raw materials and high cost of pottery making.

The members of Kumbaran community including school going children are very particular about the social status they possess. They believe that high economic status brings high social status by default. It is observed that M. N. Srinivas' "Sanskritization" is well applicable in this scenario where lower section in the society imitate upper section for achieving higher social status. In a globalized world, it doesn't seem to be imitating upper caste's rituals but it can be a community tires to moving away from their own ways and merging with outer society in order to attain upward social mobility. Caste based status is vanishing away from our society and the new unwritten "criteria" for better social status has become one's economic hold. Having agreed to such notion, new generation is only looking for career opportunities other than their traditional occupation. Elders in the community is approved about this fact but they are equally concerned about the future of their traditional occupation. They are helpless in the sense that they can do nothing about it but call it fate.

CONCLUSION

Kumbaran community is facing existential crisis with regard to their traditional occupation. Unavailability of raw materials added with new regulations from Government limiting the access to raw materials has adversely affected the community. Higher educational status and new career opportunities are attracting the young generation while they are forced to discontinue their traditional occupation due to low economic outcomes. Income being a major concern, traditional occupation becomes a question which is unanswered for this community. Globalization has also led the community's traditional occupation in a trouble phase where they are unable to cope with new marketing strategies, large scale production and highly competitive globalized markets. Nevertheless, a ray of hope is seen among the community where a handful of young people are working hard for the revival of their traditional occupation amidst all challenges and using possible opportunities.

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