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TITLE

**THE IMPORTANCE OF PALMYRA CULTIVATION IN
TRAVANCORE AMONG THE NADAR COMMUNITY IN
NINETEENTH CENTURY**

ABSTRACT

This article examines the importance of Palmyra cultivation in Travancore. In nineteenth century the Nadars were the downtrodden caste in Travancore. They were forbidden to do other works like industry or business activities. They were obliged to serve the Caste Hindus who allotted what type of jobs done by the downtrodden. The Nadars were engaged in Palmyra cultivation because there was no other option. They lived in semi-arid regions .In these regions Palmyra tree was abundant. So they opted Palmyra cultivation as their main occupation. In every record for e.g. Census Reports, Manuals and Gazetteers we can search about the Nadars, the result is these reports gave reference to Nadars as toddy tappers. In the case of Nadars the Palmyra tree was a kalpatree because it gives their food and means of subsistence. So in every respect Palmyra is very important in the lives of Nadars in the nineteenth century.

INTRODUCTION

The Nadars, also called Shanars, were known for their association with Palmyra palms. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, almost the entire population of Nadars were engaged either in the cultivation or climbing of palms. In the early years of the twentieth century, the Nadars were numerically strong in the areas to the south of the Tambraparni River extending to Kanyakumari¹ about eighty or ninety percent of the total population in the Palmyra forests of the Thiruchendur teris were Nadars. The Nadars are believed to have migrated from the northern coast of Sri Lanka and entered Thirunelveli in Tamilnadu via Ramnadu² Along with them; they brought the seeds of Jaffna Palmyra. Later, on their arrival in Tamilnadu, the Pandyan rulers granted them the title over the sandy wastelands which were found to be suitable for the cultivation of Palmyra palms.

Kanyakumari, district of the state of Tamilnadu and Thiruvananthapuram district of the state of Kerala, the concentration of Nadars were rather than high as compared to other places. As a community in the lower rungs of the Indian caste hierarchy, the Nadars were oppressed by dominating communities such as the Nayars. In the caste based social ladder, Nadars occupied a position in between the Sudra Nayars and untouchables.³ As Palmyra climbers and toddy-tappers, the Nadars suffered severe social disabilities.⁴ The landed gentry in the area, namely the Nayars, oppressed the Nadar community in a number of ways. In the southern parts of Travancore (now part of Kerala) and in the eastern areas of Kanyakumari and towards the west, the Palmyra climbers were sub-tenants to powerful Nayar landlords. In the areas bordering Tirunelveli district, they were sub-tenants to the Vellala landlords.

The palm poem, "*Tala Villasam*", by the Tamil poet Arunachalam of Kumbakonam, extols to Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, the supernatural origin of the Palmyra and its eight hundred and one uses. This poem represents men in remote ages as discontented with creation as it came from the hand of Brahma, and supplicating Siva to supply them with

the one thing needed, which should at once feed the hungry ,heal the sick, and enrich the peoples, who for want of it, were trembling like water on the leaf of the lotus. Siva heard. He interrogated Vishnu, the preserver, who laid the blame on Brahma. Brahma, with his finger under lip pleaded that he had done his best, and was ultimately directed to create the Palmyra. Since then the Palmyra has been dedicated to Ganesa, and enrolled as one of the five trees of Hindu paradise.⁵ A Tamil proverb poetically says that "it lives a thousand years and lasts another thousand years when it dies".⁶

The Palmyra is native of tropical Africa. *Borassus* is a genus of four species and *B.flabellifer* is the only species found in many dry parts of India, Myanmar, Srilanka and Malasya. The palms grew to a height of about 40 to 60 feet and sometimes as tall as a hundred feet, with a girth of 3.5 to 7 feet. It is one of the palms which produce a sweet sap called *neera*, or a sweet toddy, a nutritious beverage. The sap is being used as a stimulant and antiphelgmatice ⁷and for inflammatory affections and dropsy.

The cultivation of the Palmyra, toddy-tapping, wrote Ringel Tuabe, is the "whole employment and means of subsistence" of the Nadar community.⁸ Beyond the Palmyra forest where the palms and Nadars abounded together, in the areas of northern Tinnevelley and Ramnad districts and throughout Tamilnadu wherever the Palmyra was to be found, the Nadars climbed the trees. To the north of Tambraparni River the Palmyra's were few, often going only along the edges of the fields. With an insufficient number of trees for the production of jiggery sugar, the few Palmyra did at least provide the juice for fermented toddy, and the scattered minorities of the Nadar community in these northern districts largely depended on this trade.⁹ Toddy tapping could provide a family with income from only a few trees, but jaggery production demanded a larger operation for the industry to be remunerative. The costs of firewood used in boiling the sap into the coarse sugar would alone preclude production in small quantity. In these areas of the north where the Nadars numbered usually no more than a few families in a single village, they suffered all of their community's social disabilities. Forced to reside outside the village itself in a separate

hamlet, the Nadars were denied the use of the public well and were refused even the service of the barbers and washer man used by the caste Hindus of the village. Landless and economically dependent on the owners of the trees, the Nadars climbed the Palmyra during the six-month tapping season, from the rest of the year.

To the south of Tambraparni, down along the coast to the tip of India at Cape Comorin, the Nadars constituted the vast majority of the population, as high as 80 or 90 % in the Palmyra forests of the Thiruchendur teris. In the Palmyra forest, the trees reach a density of more than eight thousand to the square mile.¹⁰ In these sandy stretches, where often the only vegetation is the brambled *udai* used for firewood, and the Palmyra, the Nadars secured a meagre living from the fabled eight hundred and one uses of the trees.

The Palmyra is perhaps the least elegant of all palms. It thrives alone where others would die in arid sands, sinking roots as deep as forty feet to draw water far beneath the surface.¹¹ Almost as straight as the mast of a ship, the Palmyra reaches a height of from sixty to ninety feet, with an erect plume of fan-shaped leaves at its top. The leaves are stiff, with none of the grace of the coconuts. Among the lower classes, the manufacture of mats, baskets, and vessels of almost every description; and the slips of the young leaf form the traditional stationery of southern India. The Palmyra is the only palm whose wood is of value, supplying the finest rafters. The greater praise for the Palmyra, however, is for the value of its products as food. The young root is edible, as is the ripe fruit, but the unripe fruit is greatly preferable "in as much as it contains the purest, most wholesome, and most refreshing jelly in existence".¹²

One tree gives approximately 0.5 gallon (2.25 litres) *neera* day during the season, but it varies from month to month. A particular season and its duration vary from place to place within the same state. The season in which the sap of the Palmyra flows is only six lengths and the yield varies with the rainfall. The yield of *neera* (palm Juice) will be more during winter. As well, there are male and female palms and the later produces relatively more

neera. Male tree produces only two-thirds of a female tree can produce. When a tree is 25 to 30 years old, it is ready for tapping and it will yield for about 30 years.¹³ In some places, tapping begins around the 15th year. Every three years, the trees are left to recover.

It is the *kalpa tree*, the Hindu tree of life, and one among the five trees of the Hindu paradise that is used for tapping¹⁴. The Tamil poet Arunachalam speaks of 801 uses of Palmyra.¹⁵ Palm gur (karupetty), Palm candy (Panam kalkandu) are other major products from neera. Annually, a palm can produce an average, 150 litres of neera, one kg. fibre, and 1.5 kg. Ark and eight leaves. Out of this, one can make 24kg.gur, two baskets, two brush and six mats.¹⁶

Climbing the Palmyra is both dangerous and arduous. Each year many of the climbers, no matter how skilful, fall from the trees to die or to remain crippled for life. In ascending the tree, the climber clasps the trunk with joined hands, supporting his weight with the soles of his feet, which, held together by a short span of rope, bend inward like grasping hands. Then in a series of springs, in which both hands and feet move together, the climber ascends the tree as rapidly as a man could walk a distance of equal length.¹⁷ "Woodpeckers are called Shanaa kuruvi by birdwatchers, because they climb trees like Shannars"¹⁸ in years of climbing, the body of the tapper becomes twisted, his powerful chest scarred, and his hands and feet like the enormous paws of some animal. The climber owned neither the land nor the trees which he tapped-only the sharp, tapper's knife, few earthen pots, and meagre clothing. His home was a Palmyra-thatched hut, and if the Palmyra leave to take residence with his family among the trees. The tapper received no money for his labour, but a share system gave the produce of alternative days to the climber and to the owner. Whether the districts of Tambraparni, where the owner of the lands were Maravars, Naickers, Vellalas, or others of high caste, or in the barren Palmyra forests of Thiruchendur, where the Nadans held the land, the climber was bound to the trees by tradition and an accumulation of debts. The profits of climbing were small and usually exhausted by the *panaiyeri* two or three months after the end of the season, and, even with

the cottage industries from the by-products of the Palmyra, such as mat-or basket making by the women, the climber had little recourse other than to seek the enfeebling advances from the owners.¹⁹ Even in the best of yields, the climber led a marginal existence, his poverty "as deep as that of the Parair and Puller slaves in the rice-growing districts".²⁰

The work of the *panaiyeri*, or climber, begins before daybreak, and in the course of the day, working until noon and then again from late afternoon until night, he will ascend thirty to fifty trees, climbing each twice –sometimes three times-to extract the juice. During the season in which the sap flows, from March through the hottest months of the year until September, the tapper can never leave the trees unattended, even for a day. Tapping is both a difficult and hazardous job. A young and healthy tapper can climb usually 40 to 50 palms twice a day. In the week hours of the day, at around 5 o' clock, tappers start climbing palms for collecting the *neera* dripped into the *kalasam* (pot). It will last until noon. Again in the afternoon, at around 3 o'clock, they ascend the palms for the second time. This time it is to cut and prepare the inflorescence for the next day. This work may continue right into the night. As a dairy cow must not be left unmilked, so the Palmyra-proverbially "the Shannars' cow"-will cease to yield its juice if untapped.²¹

The sap of the Palmyra is drawn from the flower stalk at the top of the tree, which when bruised or sliced yields, drop by drop, about one point of juice each day. The flow is received in small earthen pots attached to each stalk. The sap is then collected two or three times during the day by day the climber, who with each climb trims the stalk to allow free flow of the juice. In male tree, the flowering shoots are bruised used wooden sticks called *kadippu*.²² Once it is bruised, two or three days later in the evening, it is scraped and the tips are paired off with the tapping knife. (Katthi). Throughout the night, *neera* will be collected drop into a small earthen pot tied to the stalk. In the case of female palms, the inflorescence is cut when the nuts are very small, but only the tips are squeezed, beaten and pared off.

Once *neera* is too collected and brought down, it has to be processed to be converted into jaggery (*karupetty*). This process involves considerable human labour. The labour of the whole family is required at this stage. The tapper's wife and children then take

charge of processing *neera*.²³ Boiling *neera* requires hours of work. Fuggiest firewood has to be procured, often by trekking long distances. Women and children in the family stay close to the fireplace, watching the boiling of *neera* in the earthen pans to the level required to form jaggery. When the juice thickened, it was poured either into coconut shells or into pits dug in the ground for the purpose. The hard, black jaggery cakes were often eaten as the midday meal of the tappers, but most of it was sold, either for low grade sugar or for the distillation of arrack, the native "gin".²⁴ To produce one kg of jaggery, eight litres of *neera* are to be boiled. When the final product is ready, they then carry it head load to the local market, and return with the things for the day's consumption. The price they fetch for their product is hardly enough for meeting the family's daily needs. The price of the jaggery is invariably determined by the merchants, mostly from Kottayam and Chennai. Other products like baskets, mats etc. were made by the leaves of Palmyra. Another product is *panam kizhangu* i.e. the tasty seed of the Palmyra tree. Palm juice is another important product and it is also a medicine. Another important product was the sweet toddy prepared as a beverage commonly used by the higher castes during nineteenth century.

Due to the dangerous nature of the job, accident rates are high among the tappers. Some workers sustain serious injuries, which prevent them from returning to work. Very grave injuries may result in the workers' being permanently bed-ridden, or worse, death. A fatal injury hits the already poor family the hardest.

Another suffering they faced by the negligence from others. The police harassed the tappers for accusing drinking toddy. The odour of the toddy that was retained on their body, the tappers say, not due to drinking, but was inherent to the job they were engaged in. Police attributed criminal activities to drinking. The community remains in neglect and is oppressed. Samuel Amritham, the former Bishop of South Kerala Diocese had seen the sad plight of the tappers at his service in Cheruvarakkonam church in the border area.²⁵ He showed very much sympathy towards the Palmyra cultivators. Those days he thought how to uplift the tapping community from all sufferings.

Thus due to the efforts of Samuel Amritham and many philanthropists an organisation was formed in 1975 under the direction of C.Harichandran. The first meeting was held at Marthandam in 1976, the members decided to register the organisation named Palmyra Worker's Development Society (PWDS)²⁶ as a society under the Societies Registration Act. It declares its objective of working for the welfare of Palmyra workers, and other socially and economically backward sections in Kanyakumari district and parts of Thiruvananthapuram district. C.Harichandran was the secretary and co-ordinator of the organisation. Thus due to the efforts of the organisation the condition of the Palmyra cultivators were relatively better at present.

CONCLUSION

Toddy tapping was the main livelihood of the Nadars during their pathetic condition. This profession made them self confident and hard working tendency. They search for new opportunities in order to develop their profession. They propagated different types of palm products among the people. They made the by-products of Palmyra likes mats, baskets, small bowls, *arupetti*, decorated articles etc. Gradually the tappers were able to acquire lands with the help of their organisations. They cultivated Palmyra in large scale. They use modern machinery to improve their cultivation. Their position in the society became elevated. They became aware of their past heritage and started struggle for achieving their lost heritage. In fact toddy tapping played a main role in uplift the community to a higher level. Now most of the Palmyra cultivators and tappers left their former job and search for new jobs. The impact of English education and proselytisation activities among the Nadar community indulged them to left their former jobs and many of the members of tapping family now engaged in government jobs. Some of them turned into business. Some of them engaged in other agricultural activities and menial jobs. KELPALM is another organisation of the Kerala Government aims to uplift the Palmyra cultivators, It is the mobile business unit selling jaggery, *panam karkandu* or sugar candy and palm juice. It also gave occupation to many numbers.

Notes and References

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³Robert.L Hardgrave, *Nadars of Tamilnadu*,Bombay,1969,p.21

⁴ *ibid*, p.vii]

⁵ William Ferguson, *The Palmyra Palm*,Clombo,1850,Appendix,pp.1-5

⁶ Nagam Aiyya.V,*Travancore State Manual*,Trivandrum,1906,III,68-69

⁷ *CSIR*, 1948:204)

⁸ *Letter from Messrs Rhenius and schimd regarding criticism of the Tinnevelly mission appearing in the Calcutta Press, August 7,1827,in the proceedings church missionary society,1827-1828 (London:1828),p.162}*

⁹ *Proceedings of the church missionary society, 1823-24 (London-1824), p.227}*

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¹¹ Hardgrave, *op.cit*, p.25

¹² Caldwell, *Letters on the Tinnevelly Mission*,p.31-32

¹³ R.Sooryamoorthi, *Climbing Up-The story of Palmyra Workers Development Society,PWDS,Marthandam,2000,p.13*

¹⁴ Robert Hardgrave, *op.cit*, p.25

¹⁵ *Ibid*. P.25

¹⁶ PWDS, 1990:p.8

¹⁷ Caldwell, *letters on the Tinnevelly Mission*,pp.34-35

¹⁸ Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol.VI.,p.374

¹⁹ Hardgrave, p.26

²⁰ Caldwell, *Tinnevelly Shannars*, p.48

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²³ R.Sooryamoorthi,op.cit,p.13

²⁴ Samuel Mateer, *Land of charity*,Newyork,1870, p.126

²⁵ R.Sooryamoorthi,op.cit,p.13

²⁶ Ibid,p.17