



## Cultural Survival of the Self-Determined, Mobile Narikuravar in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, South India

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**Abstract:** Narikuravar are the nomadic minority group of people who live in many suburbs cities of Tamil Nadu. "Nari" means fox in Tamil language. It is believed that the Narikuravar of Tamil Nadu especially in Tirunelveli district originate from the states of Rajasthan and Gujarat. In Northern India they are called as "Gulgulya" (means nomad). Hakki-Bigees of Karnataka ("Hakki" means bird), Nakla-vala and Petla-vala in Andhra Pradesh are also considered as same group. "Nakla" and "Petla" stand for fox and bird respectively. Their nomenclatures are directly associated with nature and especially birds and animals. They have all the characteristics of the nomadic tribes.

These self-determined nomads strive hard to preserve their tribal identities and cultural traits in the midst of modern, cosmopolitan, commercial and globalized society. As a result they search for greater autonomy and even secession in order to save their distinct tradition, culture and identities.

**Key Words:** Narikuravar, Nomads, Tribes, Cultural Identities, Tradition.

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

There are two types of migrant communities in Tamil Nadu having almost similar nomenclature namely "Nari-Kuravar" and "Malai-Kuravar." But both are completely different on account of their genealogy. And they are distinct groups having different identities. The Malaikuravar are the indigenous tribes who have migrated from the nearby hilly regions to the cities of Tamil Nadu. The Narikuravar are the nomadic group of people believed to have migrated from the states of Rajasthan and Gujarat. This article deals exclusively about the persisting values and cultural identities of the nomadic Narikuravar who live in Tirunelveli, one of the southern most districts of Tamil Nadu.

### 2. OBJECTIVES :

The objectives of this study are to trace Narikuravar's distinct tradition, unique values and cultural identity in the midst of the globalised society.

### 3. AREA OF STUDY:

Pettai, the area chosen for this study is a suburb lies just six kilo meters away from Tirunelveli junction. Narikuravar colony is a slum stretch out in this area.

### 4. METHODOLOGY :

It is an inductive study based on interview schedule and observation.

### 5. DATA COLLECTION:

Personal observation and interviews form the basis of this study. Extensive field survey has been undertaken. Field study by means of questionnaires, interviews, interactions, discussion and case studies have developed the study on right perspective. The information from the local news papers and journals has been added. The published articles and books related to this topic have been verified.

### 6. BARRIERS OF THIS STUDY:

Some of the barriers I have come across while during research are the following. They do not like other community people to enter into their colony without reason. In the beginning I have approached the leaders of their



community to get permission and start my work. They are speaking a unique language which has no script and hence the researcher has to pose questions in Tamil. They respond in Tamil but they chat in between in their own language with their fellow men. Since there is no script, chances of understanding their conversation are minimal. Most of them expect money for responding immediately after the interview. Every day morning they go for their business and hunting activities and return home around 6.00 p.m. At that time all are in drunken mood. Hence it is difficult to create rapport with them.

## 7. DISCUSSION:

Narikuravar are the self determined mobile, minority group of people who live in many states of India. 'Nari' means fox or jackal in Tamil. They are called as "Hakki-Bigess" ("Hakki" means bird) in the state of Karnataka. "Nakla-vala" and "Petla-vala" ("Nakla" means fox and "Petla" means bird) in Andhra Pradesh and "Gul Gulya" (means nomads) in Northern India. Narikuravar have different names within Tamil Nadu itself. In the areas of Thiruvannamalai and Trichi they are called as "Kurivikarar." "Kuruvi" means bird. Their nomenclatures are directly associated with nature especially birds and animals.

There are many myths and narratives depict their early history. It is believed that the Narikuravar are the gypsy community belonged to the royal Rajput clan. When they faced problems from the Muslims rulers of Delhi, they moved gradually towards South India. Having fear over their atrocities they hid themselves in thick jungles. They lived in the hills and forest areas of Gujarat and Maharashtra. They depended upon the forest products and resources for their existence and livelihood. Later they migrated across and around the South Indian states. In Tamil Nadu they preferred to live in the hilly regions. At that time they had developed contact with the Malaikuravar. When the British government passed the Forest Protection Act, they were naturally pushed towards the plains and developed contact with the settled communities. In the beginning regarding their economic pursuit they had promoted barter system. They had marketed the forest products with the settled communities. They spoke Vagriboli language, which is the combination of many languages in the Northern India.

In the beginning the Narikuravar community did not find any place to reside in Tirunelveli city. They made tents as dwelling places on the road sides and lived on pavements. The Social Change And Development (SCAD), the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) at Cheranmahadevi identified the problems of this community and began to work for them. The authorities of the government in Tirunelveli purchased lands from the private parties and allotted it as a colony for this community at Pettai. This colony was created in 2004, with the combined effort of SCAD as well as the government. There are 292 families in this colony.

## 8. PERSISTING VALUES AND IDENTITIES:

Changes are happening in all walks the life of Narikuravar. They are essential and unavoidable for their survival. The changes happened in their life are apparent and external. But there are some underlying values and identities which are unchanged. They do not compromise in changing their inherent values. The Narikuravar community will disappear if someone tries to change the remnant unique qualities. They never like to change their way of life, environment, searching food and migrant life.

They are leading a very simple and happy life. They live in groups. Their communal bond is thick and strong. They are satisfied with what they have. They never worry about the future. They are not even bothering about their basic needs. But for their survival, they are roaming without even bothering about the hot sun or cold rain.

They are leading a secluded life in Pettai slum. They want to stay away to protect their community from the interference of other people. There are many reasons for this. They crave to preserve their identities and cultural practices. They are spending their time happily, without mingling with others. They never want to pollute that atmosphere. But they freely move with all people for doing their business.

They speak a unique language "Vagriboli" and preserve it by speaking in practice. Others cannot understand their language. The dress code, food habits, way of life of Narikuravar community are unique and different from the main stream communities. They strictly adhere to joint family system. In a joint family all family member, grandparents, parents, children, and grand children share their food in one plate. Within their community they do not show any differences. They tolerate and accommodate each other. They remember a long genealogical history.

The Narikuravar girls attain maturity at the age of eleven and they choose their partners at their own interest. This practice is against the Tamil culture because the system of arranged marriage is predominant in the Tamil society. Both the boys and girls of Narikuravar community roam together while doing business. But never have sex before marriage. They give importance to chastity. Parents used to conduct marriage function even at the age of thirteen. Child marriages prevail even now. Since the government officials warn to punish them, they conduct marriage function at night. They strictly follow their hereditary practices.



There is no dowry problem in their community. Dowry is given by the bride-groom to the bride family during marriage function. The amount varies from Rs. 5000 to Rs 10000.

They are worshipping goddesses namely “Kali” and “Madurai Meenakshi.” While selecting bride and bride groom, they select from different lines. They never marry the person worshipping same goddess. They stick on to this while fixing marriage. Since they are in limited numbers, this restriction brings some positive impacts on their future generation. Because it is scientifically proved that if any one marries their close relatives they may give birth to physically handicapped children. But here in this community this restriction prevents them to marry in the same blood line by maintaining two groups. Hence they are maintaining a healthy relationship within their community. They do not like to have matrimonial relations with higher as well as lower caste groups in other communities.

After marriage if they do not like to live together, they inform the matter to the elders in the community. They arrange another marriage to both of them. Sometimes both men and women married two or three times. And after remarriage they did not disturb each other. Widowhood is not in practice. Both men and women can marry as many times as they wish up to the selection of their right partner. Meena’s sister Sathya was not living with her husband. So they were separated and remarried to other person. If they have children they are looked after by their grandparents. If anyone does not like to remarry, then they are not forced to do it. They can live with their children.

Women in Narikuravar community are almost having equal rights with the men. Female children are not looked down upon unlike in other society. They consider both male and female are their blessings. They are working community. Hence discriminations are less in their society.

They have their own value system. We cannot find any commercial sex workers or prostitutes in their community. And we can never find anyone affected with HIV/AIDS. It is said that the suicide attempts are rare in this colony. Likewise, there are no cases of dowry deaths, and there is no one suffering from mental illness or stress. All this is due to the strong family culture and strict norms they follow in their community. They also have some other characteristics like maintaining control over their community to maintain discipline and protect their community members from external threat.

They never like to change their way of life, environment, searching food and migrant life. They are rigid in following their religion, rituals, habits, and relationship with other community people. They preserve their religious identity. They rarely convert to other religions. They are strictly following their religious rituals. The way in which they are carrying their babies in a cradle hanged in their neck is something special.

<i>Narikuravar – In the Past</i>	<i>Narikuravar – At Present</i>	<i>Persisting Values and Identities</i>
<b>Nomenclature:</b> They were called as “Narikuravar.”	They like to call them as “Gypsies” in order to avoid verbal discrimination	Their connection with fox in hunting and business still persists.
<b>Shelter:</b> They led a nomadic life and they did not have shelter to reside. They roamed here and there.	They settle in a colony with own houses or sheds. They tend to live like settled community.	They move only for their business activities. Anyhow they are leading a semi nomadic life.
<b>Dress:</b> Women wore their traditional dress with short skirt and carried their babies in a cradle hanged on their neck.	Women wear their traditional dress with long skirt. Occasionally they wear sarees to get easy acceptance in the society. Some of the young people wear night dresses.	They never give up wearing their traditional pattern of dress like wearing skirt, blouse and small piece of cloth as upper garment. Women carry their babies in the same type of cloth looking like cradle hanging on their necks.
They did not wear costly cloths	They purchase costly dresses during Diwali and temple festivals.	They wear ordinary cloths on other days.
<b>Wearing ornaments:</b> Both male and female wore a number of bead “malas” and threads. Women used to wear many bangles.	They wear few “malas” and women wear few bangles. Many young boys pierced their ears to wear ear rings to show their modernity and they also use modern wrist watches.	Both male and female stick on wearing some bead ornaments. They wear some specific ornaments that differentiate them from others. Their community people can identify them immediately after seeing them.



They stick on to their traditional items.	Now they began to use modern wrist watches and costly mobiles.	Not all but only affordable people buy these items. Others stick on to traditional wears only.
<b>Hair dressing:</b> Men coiled their long hair on the top of their head called as “kudumi.” They tie towels around their head known as “thalaipagai.”	Young boys cut their hair like other community people.	Only few young people have changed their hair dressing. Others do not maintain their hair properly. Some are still having “kudumi” and “thalaipagai.”
<b>Business:</b> Hunting was their main business. They were expert in hunting. They can hit even the flying birds	Due to restriction of the forest department hunting has been reduced considerably. They switch over to selling artifacts made out of beads and fancy items.	They never give up their traditional business activities of trading their hunted items and tattooing.
<b>Hunting:</b> Everybody reared hunting cows to catch birds in the forests. They hide themselves besides a cow and chase the forest birds to go near the nets spread over.	Only one family is having a hunting cow in Pettai.	Anyhow they are rearing hunting cows.
They used instruments like nets and “kavattai” made out of cotton thread and wood respectively for hunting.	Use plastic as well as wooden “kavattai” and nylon nets.	They still use “kavattai” and net as instruments for hunting.
They sold beads and needles.	They purchase and sell all modern fancy items.	They sell beads and needles also.
They carried their business items in a long cloth bags.	They use carts attached in two wheeler vehicles to carry them to distance places.	They use cloth bags for doing business in the nearby places.
<b>Tattooing:</b> They did it as hand work. They have drawn pictures like scorpion, lamp (“kuthu vilakku”), snake, bird etc., on the body of their customers. They also scribed the names in their hands. They used three needles to inject the ink.	They are using so many modern designs in synthetic materials and impress the designs on the hands. They use some electronic devises and blocks for tattooing work.	Tattooing is one of their important business activities.
<b>Women:</b> Women were restricted not to stay outside their tents.	They are staying outside for the purpose of doing business activities.	Restriction on women still prevails.
They did not adorn with flowers, wear anklets and rings (“metti”) in their legs.	They are wearing all the ornaments like other community people.	They cling on wearing their traditional colourful bead items.
<b>Wedlock (Thali):</b> They wore simple wedlock known as “pottu thali” in black string called as “karugamani.”	They add gold to their “thali” according to their richness.	Weather rich or poor they wear “pottuthali and karugamani.”
<b>Child Marriage:</b> Child marriages were common and open. Girls were married to boys even before they attained puberty.	Girls get married immediately after they attain puberty.	Anyhow early marriages are still happening without the knowledge of other community people and government officials.
<b>Sex:</b> They even performed sexual activities in the street in front of their children and others during day time. They consider it as fun and laugh at them.	Such practices disappear. Parents sleep with their children in a tent.	No separate bed rooms. All of them sleep together in open space.



<b>Family Planning:</b> They did not use any family planning mechanism in those days. They had many children in each family. Since they got married very early age, they delivered more children.	They have the awareness and use the family planning mechanisms like copper “T” to control berth.	They do not strictly adhere to family planning methods.
<b>Religion:</b> They worshiped only the goddess “Kali” and “Meenakshi.”	They fast for 41 days to go to Iyyappa temple in Sabarimala, fast for 21 days to worship goddess “Mutharamman” in Kulasekarapatnam and goddess “Athiparasakthi” in Melmaruvaththoor.	They keep the idols of “Kali” and “Meenakshi” as their inherited goddesses in their home. In the month of “Chiththirai” they are celebrating the grand festival for these goddesses.
<b>Medicines:</b> They followed traditional practices of medication using herbs and animal products.	They are going to hospitals the treatment of major risky deceases.	Anyhow they are adhering to their traditional medicine for common sickness.
<b>Drinking alcohol:</b> They drank alcohols like arrack on important occasions and celebrations only.	They are addicted to alcohol.	Drinking alcohol persists since early times.
<b>Betel leaves:</b> They used to chew betel leaves.	They use some tobacco powder also.	Their teeth are always colourful.
<b>Watching Cinema:</b> They used to go to cinema theatres.	They watch more television programmes. Their only entertainment in this colony is watching television. Some of them have purchased and fixed dish antennas in their houses.	They go to theatres occasionally during festive occasions.
<b>Fear:</b> They had fear to move and mingle with other community people	They have overcome that fear.	They do maintain some distance with other people.

## 9. CONCLUSION:

To conclude, these self-determined nomads strive hard to preserve their tribal identities in the midst of modern, cosmopolitan, commercial and globalized society. As a result they search for greater autonomy and even secession in order to save their distinct tradition, culture and identities.

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