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Socio-Political History of Kasaragod in Kerala

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Abstract

In the northernmost Kerala, Kasaragod has a deep-seated cultural heritage dating back to ancient times. The community here has maintained a tradition that dates back to prehistoric eras, fostering harmonious living across social, religious, and caste divisions. Like other cultures, the residents of Kasaragod firmly hold on to their time-honoured beliefs and customs, which they pass down through generations. Throughout its history, the region has experienced multiple military conquests, with its landscape, early political incursions, religious migrations, and trade connections all contributing to the formation of a rich and varied culture in Kasaragod. Outside influences have brought new traditions and practices to the local population. Over time, Kasaragod has evolved into a melting pot of diverse communities, ultimately giving rise to a multicultural society in the northernmost region of Malabar. This research aims to discover the fundamental traits and diverse culture in the northernmost part of Kerala.

Key Words: *Cultural Heritage, Political Incursion, Religious Migration, Caste Groups, Multicultural Society.*

Introduction

Kerala showcases a rich tapestry of beliefs, arts, history, traditions, customs, and manners. In the context of India's diverse cultural traditions, Kerala's unique history has contributed to its distinct cultural identity. The geographical separation of Kerala from the rest of India has influenced the lifestyle of its people. This has resulted in a blend of indigenous and external cultures, evident in the region's art forms, religion, rituals, and festivals. Dravidian and Aryan elements are reflected in various art forms and festivals across Kerala. The convergence of different communities and their customs has led to the development of a diverse culture in certain areas. Contact with people outside Kerala has also influenced the cultural traits in border regions, such as Kasaragod in the northernmost part of the State. Kasaragod's composite culture raises questions about its development and the factors responsible for this cultural synthesis. The region's geographical position, historical conquests, religious migration, and robust trade activities have significantly shaped its pluralistic culture. A thorough analysis is required to understand the influence of these factors on the origin of a multicultural society in northern Kerala.

Early Political History

Kasaragod, the northernmost area of Kerala, is bordered by the South Canara district of Karnataka to the northeast, the Kudagu district of Karnataka to the southeast, the Kannur district of Kerala in the south, and the Arabian Sea to the west. The Sahyadri Mountains act as a natural barrier to the east. Historically, the present-day Kasaragod was an integral part of the ancient Tulu Kingdom. According to Keralolpathi, Tulunadu was created by Parasurama, the legendary hero. Later, it was conquered by different dynasties from Kerala and Karnataka. The most significant of these was the Alupas, who ruled a vast territory from Barkur in Karnataka to Kasaragod. The Alupa hegemony began to decline with the arrival of the Chalukyas in this region. The inscription of Chalukya King Kirti Varman II found at Adur in Kasaragod provides evidence regarding the Chalukya hegemony in northern Kerala. According to tradition, the Tuluva area of Kasaragod was the southernmost boundary of the Kadamba dynasty under Mayura Varma. After the Kadambas declined, Alupa conquered Tulunadu and then the Vijayanagara rulers. However, with the fall of the Vijayanagara kingdom in the battle of Talkikotta in 1565, the Ikkeri rulers established their suzerainty over this area. The Ikkeri rulers, such as Sivappa Nayak and Somasekhara Nayak, constructed several forts in present-day Kasaragod. With the decline of the Ikkeri Nayaks, the Mysore rulers took over this area's political administration. After the death of Mysore ruler Tipu Sultan in 1789, it came under British control. Under British rule, Malabar, including Kasaragod, was part of the Madras Presidency. Kasaragod was also part of the South Canara district of Madras State before the reorganisation of states in India in 1956. Kasaragod taluk became a part of the reorganised Malabar district of Kerala State in November 1956. In January 1957, the region covered by the present Kasaragod district was merged with the newly formed Cannanore district, and the old Kasaragod taluk was divided into Kasaragod and Hosdurg taluks. On 24 May 1984, Kasaragod became a new district in Kerala, with Kasaragod town as its headquarters. Since then, the jurisdiction of the district or taluk boundary has remained unchanged. However, there have been some changes in the case of some villages, either by forming new villages or by renaming existing ones.

Geographically, ancient Kasaragod is divided into three central regions. The area between rivers Chandragiri and Uppala is Alavathunadu, while the region between rivers Chandragiri and Chithari is Kavayanadu. The area between river Chithari and river Karimkode is known as Paduvandu. The Kasaragod district is in three distinct areas: the Kasaragod coast, the Kasaragod plateau, and the Hosdurg uplands. The Kasaragod coast extends from Manjeswaram in the north to Thayil near Trikaripur in the south, covering the entire coastal belt of Kasaragod district. To the east of the coastal region lies the Kasaragod Plateau, a continuation of the Karnataka (Deccan) Plateau. The third physio-geographical region, Hosdurg undulating uplands, extends

over the southeastern portion of the district. This sub-region slopes from east to west, forming the catchment areas of Nileswaram and Kariamkode River and its tributaries. In terms of ancient history, it is believed that the Brahminical influence called "Aryanisation" first took root in Kerala, the northernmost region, which influenced the socio-cultural aspects of the state. According to Keralopathi, the ancient Tulu Kingdom extended from Gokarna north to the river Perumpuzha (river Chandragiri) south. However, the jurisdiction of this territory is questioned by later scholars based on historical and epigraphical records, and further investigation based on archaeological excavations is needed.

During the Sangam period, the regions of Kasaragod district were under the rule of the Ezhimala kingdom. The Cheras also gained control of Kasaragod through the conquests of Baskara Ravi Manukulatiya (962-1021 CE). The inscription at the Pullar-Kodavalam temple of the ruler reveals the political dominance of the Perumals of Mahodayapuram in the present-day Kasaragod region. The Kumbala in the north and Kolathiri and Nileswaram in the South were the feudatory principalities that held sway over Kasaragod. The Nileswaram Rajas, belonging to Allada Swaroopam, extended their kingdom over the present Hosdurg Taluk. They had to withstand frequent invasions from the Nayakas of Bednore, also known as Ikkeri Kings. Ultimately, the principality of Nileswaram came under the control of the Bednore Nayaks, and its rulers had to pay an annual tribute. During this time, Somasekhara Nayak built the Hosdurg fort and erected a Victory Column at Nileswaram to commemorate his victory. The origins of the Kumbala dynasty, which covered most of the present Kasaragod taluk, remain obscure. According to one view, the Kumbala King descended from a Kshatriya family that migrated from northern India or the descendants of Cheraman Perumal, as this family followed the matrilineal system of succession known as Marumakkathayam. They sometimes emulated the Vijayanagara rulers by accepting honorary titles like Raya. The Portuguese identified Kumbala as an essential trade centre during the 16th century CE. The ruler of the Kumbala dynasty was also known as Mayippadi Thampuram after the capital was shifted to Mayipadi. After the defeat of Tipu Sultan in the Third Anglo-Mysore War in 1792, Malabar became part of the British Empire through the treaty of Sreeranga Patanam. The ruling dynasties in the Tuluva regions, like Nileswaram and Kumbala, also surrendered to the British and accepted pensions from the English East India Company. Consequently, the southern areas of South Canara District, comprising the present Kasaragod and Hosdurg Taluks, came entirely under the control of British power.

Formation of a Pluralistic Society

Religions have a significant role in shaping the peculiar cultural background at Kasaragod. Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Jainism are the most prominent religious groups that dominate in this region. Hinduism in Kasaragod was mainly organised based on the caste system. The Brahmin groups like Sivalli, Havika, Keradi, and Saraswathas occupied high societal positions and were the principal owners of agricultural lands. Along with priestly occupations, they also engaged in agriculture, which is still evident on the northern side of Kasaragod. Nair, Nambiar, Kurup, Atiyoti, Poduval, Varriar, and Marars are the major forward castes, and most perform the duties associated with the temples. The Tulu-speaking Bunts and Billavas are the most important among the non-Brahmin castes in the north and northeastern side of the present Kasaragod district. The Bunts and Billavas closely resemble the Nairs and Thiyyas in the Malabar area, respectively. Both communities followed the Aliya Santana (like the matrilineal system) of inheritance and enjoyed high social status. But their social position was just below the Brahmins and other forward castes. They speak the Tulu language, and most of them are agriculturists and day labourers. The backward Hindu communities like Saliyas or Devangas (weavers), Mogers (fishermen), the Kaniyans (astrologers), Vaniyas (oil-pressers), Kulalas (potters), Maniyanis or Yadavas (agriculturist), Thiyaas or Ezhavas (toddy tapers), the Kammalar; including Aasaris (carpenters) Thattans (goldsmith), Kollans (blacksmiths) etc. had significant place in the social formation of Kasaragod. The Malakkudiyas, Malayarayas, Malavedas, Pulayas, Mavilas, Vettuvas, Velan, Koragas, Koppalas or Nalkadeyars, Malayas, and Vannans are the earliest inhabitants in present Kasaragod. Most are engaged in agriculture and traditional handicraft industries, such as bamboo baskets and mat making. The conventional system of treatment and black magic prevails among most of the scheduled communities in Kasaragod. Certain groups like Malayan, Vannan and Velan also perform the devil dances. The Maratis in Kasaragod were immigrants from southern Maharashtra or Goa regions. An agricultural-based economy developed among the Hindu people throughout the district. Temples and other ritual places have a significant role in the Hindu people's social formation and day-to-day life in Kasaragod.

Islam entered Kerala in the 8th century CE due to the trade links between Kerala and Arabia. According to belief, Malik Ibn Dinar and his family from Arabia were the early promoters of Islam in Kerala. They built the first mosque in Kodungallur, and with support from local rulers, Islam gradually gained ground. The ruler of Calicut, Zamorin, played a crucial role in enabling Muslims to have a significant presence in the public life of North Kerala.

The ancient Mosque at Thalankara, established by Malik Ibn Dinar, bears testimony to the deep historical connection between Kasaragod and the Muslim faith. Over time, Islam attracted many followers from various societal groups, growing into a prominent religion in the region. Presently, Muslims constitute the second largest religious community in Kasaragod, often referred to as Mapplias, with the majority adhering to Sunni beliefs. Also, distinct groups like the Byaris have settled in the northern area of Kasaragod Taluk. The merchants in Kasaragod urban areas are primarily Muslims, although there are also day labourers and fishermen from the Muslim community. Today, the majority of businesses in urban Kasaragod are run by Muslims. The Muslims in this area strictly adhere to the five pillars of Islam: reciting the Shahadat or Creed, performing the five daily prayers (niskaram), observing the Ramzan fast (Eid-ul-Fitr fasting), giving alms (zakat), and undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj). The annual festival at the Jamat Mosque in Kasaragod is a significant local celebration for the Muslim community in the district, honouring the contributions of Malik Ibn Dinar to Islam. While almost all Muslims gather at the mosque for the Friday prayer, it's customary for women not to attend prayers in the main areas of the mosque. The mosque is the focal point for learning and all spiritual and social activities within the Muslim community. Their distinct rituals and practices mark every moment of their spiritual life. The Muslim community has made noteworthy contributions to literature and art, greatly enriching the cultural identity of Kasaragod.

The hilly regions of Kasaragod District were the main settlement areas for Christian immigrants. The legend of St. Thomas is intertwined with the rise and spread of Christianity in Kerala, as he played a crucial role in converting several Brahmins and establishing seven churches. Christianity began progressing in Kasaragod district when the Portuguese arrived towards the end of the 15th century CE. However, migration from Travancore to the regions of Kasaragod only gained strength in the 1940s. The Syrian Christians comprised the majority of the population. Latin Christians, who spoke Konkani and belonged to the Mangalore Diocese, settled in the northern areas of the present Kasaragod taluk in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The churches in Hosdurg taluk were also under the jurisdiction of the Mangalore Diocese until June 1960, after which they became part of the Calicut and Kannur Dioceses. Several churches in Hosdurg Taluk came under the Kottayam Diocese and played a role in converting many individuals from other communities, primarily the Billavas or Ezhavas in the Hindu religion. Christianity steadily gained ground, and the church eventually became a well-established institution in Kasaragod. Over time, the church's liturgy and organisations were influenced by diverse cultural factors at different points in its history. The majority of Christians in Kasaragod were involved in agriculture. They introduced several new agricultural products to the region, such as Tapioca, Pineapple, and Guava, which were previously unknown to the local population. Additionally, they extensively cultivated rubber as a commercial product, providing significant income to the inhabitants of the hilly areas of Kasaragod. The Christian community also ran the educational institutions and hospitals in various district areas. A notable aspect is that the hilly regions of Kasaragod saw modern advancements primarily due to the influx of Christians.

The Jain faith made its way into Kerala before the Christian era. It is highly likely that after the significant migration of Jains from Magadha led by Bhadrabahu during the rule of Chandragupta Maurya and their settlement in Sravana Belgola in Mysore, Jain influence extended to the neighbouring regions of Kerala. The northern areas of the current Kasaragod taluk were significant settlements for Jains who predominantly came from Karnataka. The Alupa rulers in Tulunadu and the Bangara rulers in Manjeswar encouraged the Jain religion and supported the construction of Basadis (places of worship). In the district, there are two significant Basadis located at Manjeswaram. These Basadis, known as the Parsvanatha Basadi and the Chathurmukha Basadi, are either being maintained or lingering. The Parsvanatha Basadi is dedicated to Parsvanatha, the 23rd Theerthankara of Jainism, while the Chathurmukha Basadi is dedicated to Aadhinatha, Chandranatha, Santhinatha, and Vardhamana. The Hindu community showed their willingness and support for the construction of Jain temples, and in return, they had no reservations in respecting Hindu religious and spiritual beliefs. The Jain community's strong opposition to the caste system contributed to the development of a secular culture in the Kasaragod region.

Conclusion

Kasaragod's cultural life evolved by blending different cultural influences and the clashes of conflicting social groups. The unique culture of Kasaragod was shaped by the primitive tribal societies in the region, as well as other South Indian societies and various religions such as Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam. Each religious community has its distinct traditions and practices. A sense of tolerance and harmony exists among people despite religious differences, which helps to uphold unity in diversity and nurture a diverse cultural identity. The pluralistic culture of the Kasaragod region possesses distinctive characteristics that distinguish it from other regional cultures, including unique languages, lifestyles, art, architecture, literature, religions, beliefs, and social awareness.

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