



HABITS AND CUSTOMS OF AHIKUNTIKAYA

The men are expert hunters, tracking and hunting even big game as sambhur and wild boar. Under present conditions they have little scope except for hunting small game. Their hunting implements are the **maskat** or the long knife, **getapar**, or the crow bar very efficient to ferret out field rats and igunas from boles, and the **ballem** or the javelin. Before starting on a hunt an offering is made to the spirits of the jungle who are propitiated for good luck. The offering of a cock. It is essentially a blood offering and the cock killed is thrown into the jungle. The hunting tradition has been so strong in the Kurava that they were even considered to be of the same stock as "the Vedaas of Ceylon" in the words of Hatch. That in their homelands of the Tamil country they were a tribe of Vedans or hunters is obvious from early Tamil chronicles. Vedda is no doubt an extension of the term Vedan, which means a hunter - living by hunting supplemented by the precarious mode of growing food grains in jungle clearings -, a mode of desultory culti-

vation termed **punam** in malabar and **Chena** in Ceylon. This fugitive cultivation has for ages been so much practised by hill tribes that it has passed into the folklore and folksongs of **Kerala**. In the early ages of the human history of Dakshina Kanda or Deccan and of Lanka, the course of tribal life has no doubt been largely on same plane with a strong correspondence in habits and customs. Hunting tribes have been the worst sufferers in the modern age, with no scope for hunting, except to hunt minor fry. No wonder that in their dire need for flesh food, the Ceylon Ahikuntakaya do not hesitate to ferret out field rats and add them to their diminishing menu of animal food, which they cannot do without. Dogs are an essential equipment in their life and are well trained in hunting field rats, hare, sambhur, and pigs. They certainly are lucky dogs, and are well cared for. Donkeys and dogs accompanying them over their wandering life are liable to cuts and bruises, and these receive prompt attention. The remedy is something very special.



Ant-hill earth is the basis of a special plaster prepared for the purpose. Earth from an ant-hills is carefully collected, white ants and all, and stored in gunny bags. A quantity of this is taken and ground over a grinding-stone into a paste with just sufficient water. The latter is collected and rolled into little pills, which gives work to the little children, who all sit in a row before a spread mat. Rounded in the hollow of their little palms, the pellets are spread out in the sun to dry. When well dried they are carefully stored. A few of the pellets are powdered as needed, mixed with margosa oil, and applied to the bleeding joints of dogs or donkeys sores or cuts. These go by the name of "Puthukum", literally ant-hill earth.

If a wife as a companion and helpmate is essential to man, it is even more so to the primitive nomad, the marriage as an institution has an important place in Ahikuntakaya life. The marriage tie may not be absolute. The wife may even be lent to another as among the wandering kurraver of South India or a few decades ago, when her husband is convicted for robbery and goes to jail, and returns to her husband after his term of imprisonment. The marriage settlement is ratified over a drink of toddy which the father of the bridegroom gives to chief and the rest.

The marriage ceremony is simple. The auspicious

days are Sunday, Monday or Tuesday. The **tali** of black beads, with or without a gold bead, tied round the bride's neck is the essence of the marriage. Cross-cousin marriage is the inviolable rule. Failing to contract such a union, or impediments forestalling, youths lead a life of single cursedness. There is a slight excess of men over women for the whole tribe. On the marriage day, the bridegroom slips a bangle on the bride's right arm. Only married women wear bangles on both hands. The bride is given away by her father with a dowry of a snake or two in baskets, a donkey, a dog, and a few pieces of wearing apparel and bead ornaments. Women wear heavy silver bangles, throatlets of colourful rows of beads, and strings of bead necklaces. On the wedding day the huts of the bride and bridegroom are erected close together. The bride is dressed in all-white sari and white jacket decked with silver jewellery and bead ornaments. Flowers are not worn. A veli of white cloth in the purdha style is thrown over her head. The bridegroom wears a sarong and a yellow shirt, with a head gear of a turban, wearing a necklace of black beads and bracelets on his hands. A piece of turmeric is tied on the right hand of both the bride and bridegroom, and a solution of turmeric in water is smeared over the face of the couple. The officiating priest recites **slokas** or verses invoking blessings on the couple, when the bridegroom ties the **tali** round the neck of the bride in the presence of the **kulam** or the assembly. Their right hands are brought together and the two little fingers tied in knot. The maternal uncle who does this pours water on to their joined hands from a brass **chembu** or pot. This completes the marriage ritual. The feasting starts and all the guests are served with rice and vegetable curries on plantain leaves. Sweets, cakes, plantains, and tea are also served. Arrack or toddy is given as needed and men dance and sing to the sounding of the **tappu** or the broad one-sided drum. On the following Thursday, relations make presents to the couple.

Though arrack is their great drink, a woman cannot have arrack before she is a mother. Toddy is allowed during her period of confinement: the mother is isolated in a *separtae* hut, attended by a midwife, **Mukul-dura-andibada**, and another woman, a near relation. During the days of her confinement, the mother is given arrack mixed with **Kayam**, as the composition is known, of a variety of medicinal ingredients and spices - **kaluduru** (black-sesamum seed), **tippili**, **asamodagam**, **karabu-nati**, pepper, dry ginger, and garlic. The ingredients are powdered and mixed in half a bottle of arrack. This medicated arrack the mother takes three times a day, before food. Ceremonial pollution is observed for seven days, after which the mother has a bath and is admitted into the **Kulam**.

A girl attaining puberty is segregated for seven days in a hut of leaves, with a younger sister for a companion. Her food is rice and vegetable curry. After this period of seclusion she is removed to a palm-leaf hut where she remains for another 5 days. On the fifth day her aunt (father's sister) comes and bathes her, after which she is removed to their regular hut where a feast is held.

Despite their simple habits of life, women have an

abundance of jewellery. heavy silver bangles worn on the right hand are **bondel**, and those on the left, **sandikadal**. All bangles are **gaijil** (gazulu) or **muchati balla**, the common name. Coloured bead necklaces adorn the neck. Bead chains are called **pusang**. Strings of beads make effective throatlets, of **andagul danda**. Ears are decorated with the rounded kammal, and the nose-stud or **mukku bottu** adorns the nose.

Favourite beads are red, black and white. Beads are purchased at the fairs, boutiques and from hawkers. No separate names are used for the beads, all being **mani**. Though they are often seen stringing beads, they scarcely sell bead chains. The stringing follows colourful conventional patterns. Among the more familiar patterns are: (1) one long red bead, two small white beads, followed by one big black bead: (2) one small black bead and two small white beads: (3) two small red beads followed by five small white beads: (4) a necklet of three bead-strings held together by means of six large black vertical beads.

If snake-charming is the man's role, fortune-telling is the woman's field. In this she displays not a little skill. Not all are however good at the art. The really proficient has a smart turn-out and a cute look. Her equipment has an interest of its own. Baby is her first care, and she invariably has a suckling. Taking a piece of cloth she adroitly wraps it cross-wise over her right shoulder, and in the cavity of this hammock the child is well cradled, and there it sleeps quiet. A cloth apron, the four ends of which are tied together to form a bag, is slung on her left shoulder. This is to collect rice and food provisions she receives or buys.



Reaching out a stick she takes it in her right hand. Thus equipped she starts on her cross-country jaunts. Fortune-telling has a traditional technique of its own. Cash down is the first condition. 50 cents is the rule. This being duly deposited in her palm, she invokes the deities, and goes on at a rhythmic pace with a sing-song information which is part of the technique, her pointing finger following the lines on the palm as she goes on telling you the past, present and the future. Each reading occupies some ten minutes. Fortune-telling is among the greatest common factors of gipsies all over the world.

Among the economies of the group are sheep farming and poultry keeping. In the North-Central Province a number of them keep flocks of goats rearing them for sale to the Moor. Poultry is kept on a fairly large scale, the brood being confined in string baskets. Eggs come handy to feed the snakes, surplus eggs and chicken being sold.

The Ahikuntakaya child can be an adorable little mite. A child of Nature, born on the march, he knows of no birth registration and no astrologer forecasts his **lagna** or the **nakata** under which he is born. He grows in the tribal setting, resistant to the rigorous strain of tribal life. From childhood to adolescence, and from adolescence to manhood, he is a rolling stone: and though he gathers plenty of tribal moss, nothing of schooling touches him. Tribal life and tribal ethics are the only schostatoling he knows and he knows no other.

Life on the move does not give much of a scope for recreation: yet keen as they are on the joyous side of life, children let themselves go when they ever get the chance.





They play the "Gudu" forming themselves into two teams, the 'elephant' and the 'horse' each under a leader. A small cavity two inches deep is scooped out and a short stump about 6 inches long placed transverse across the pit. One side fields and the other plays. The player comes with a stick in hand. Inserting it in the pit just behind and touching the stump, he propels it forward with all force. It goes up spinning in the air and the fielders rush to catch it before it falls on the ground. If the catch is successful, the player is out. If no catch is made, the fielder throws it back with his propelling stick. The distance from the pit to the point where the stump now falls, is measured by the player with his propelling stick. If he misses to strike the stump, and it happens to fall close to the playing hole to a lesser

length than that of the stick, the player gets out. Scores are maintained in terms of the stick length, and scores of each side totalled. The winning side feels humiliated and pays the penalty of the game. The leader of the winning team hits the stump with might and main, and from where it falls, he repeats the process twice again. One of the boys on the losing side has got to run back from the point the stump falls last, to the starting hole, holding his breath and shouting "gudu, gudu". If he succeeds in this difficult task, the game ends. If however as often happens, he breaks down in his progress and takes breath, the winner hits forward the stump again, and the loser has to repeat the process of running back all over the course again.

A very popular sport, it has a wide distribution in Ceylon and South India. In certain places, as Kerala, the short stump is sharply tapered off on either side. No hole is dug - it is just placed on the flat ground. The player with the striker strikes at one end, which sends the stump up in the air, and taking correct aim before it falls, he strikes hard at it, sending it far afield.

A common game is the **vala-kaju**. Boys assemble with a handful of cashew nuts (wohle nuts). One of the boys taking his stand about ten feet in front of a small cavity on the ground, tosses the nuts into it. A number of the nuts lie scattered about the sides of the hole and each of the boys aim at these with a pebble so as to hit each with just sufficient impulse to move them and make them slide into the hole. The game consists in pitting as many of the cashews as possible.

Yet another popular play in **Tattu Paninava** or **Tattu Keliya**. A large open ground is the first requisite for this game, played by a large number of boys. A rectangular court about 40 ft. by 20 is drawn on the ground in outline by means of a pointed stick. Down the middle is drawn a longitudinal line. Three more transverse lines are now drawn, which divides the whole court into eight squares. At each of the points of the central line, a boy is stationed and a leader patrols over the entire length of the central line. The other boys, lining themselves in front of the front line, try to dodge the boy who guards this line, and cross over into the next set of squares. If the patrol touches him or strikes him the latter is out. The process goes on, until the boys are either out or succeed in reaching the opposite side of the court. There he picks a little earth, termed "uppu" or salt and he goes through the same process in his progress back to the place he started. A player thus reaching the opposite side successfully, without being hit by the patrolling boys or the centre patrol, gains a point and he becomes "uppu". One set of boys defends the approaches to the squares, while the other set engages in quest of the salt, and vice versa. A very vigorous game, it is largely in favour among boys all over South India and Ceylon. The name "uppu" in Tamil has given it the alternative name of "Lunu Paninave" in Sinhalese.

(Reproduced from *Wistas of Mahaweli*, October issue of 1989)