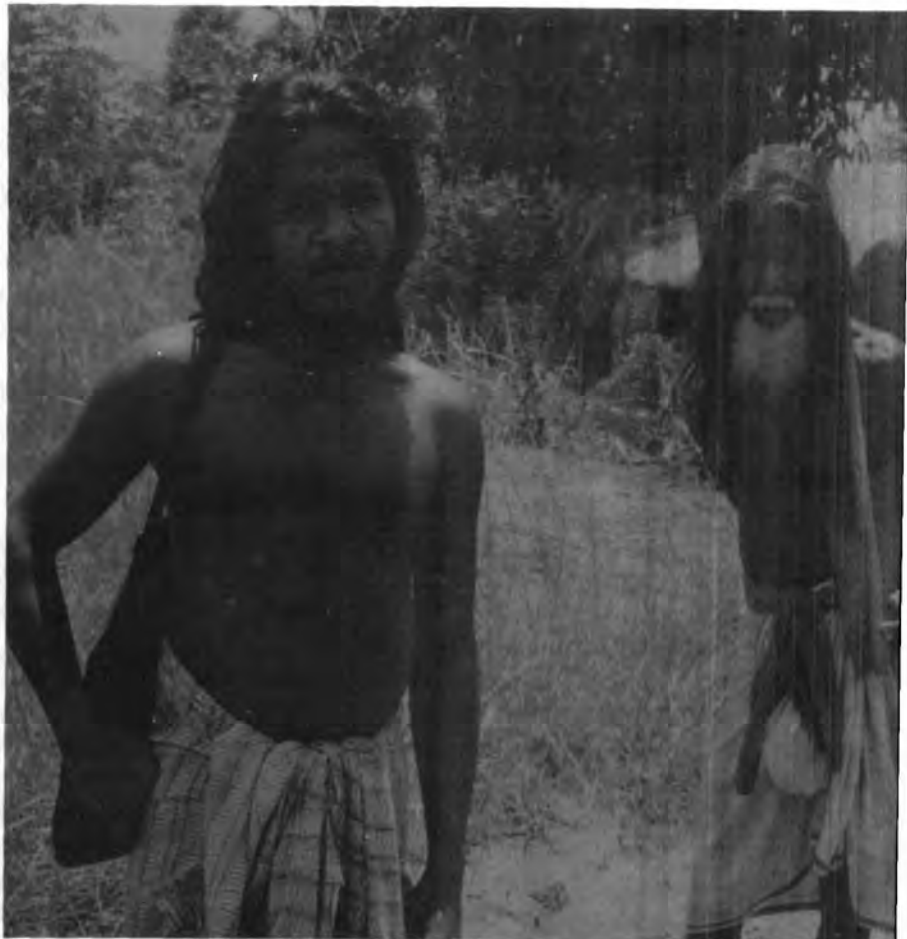


VEDDAS OF THE EASTERN COAST

YUVI THANGARAJAH



The United Nations has declared 1993 as the International Year of the Indigenous People. Who are the indigenous people? People who live in a state or in a region since ancient times is considered as indigenous people.

It is estimated that 300 million indigenous people live in more than 70 countries of the world. Their life has been intertwined with nature for centuries. During the past few centuries, dramatic changes have occurred in their mode of life. Some of the impacts are the foreign and local colonisation, competitiveness in the use of vital resources such as food and land, which have close relation with development etc. Development projects swallow large parts of traditional lands of indigenous people. Wildlife

protection laws deny and prevent them their traditional means of livelihood - hunting. Those who colonised the lands, and rule over them are making efforts to 'improve' this community and draw them into the mainstream of cultured life-styles. In these efforts the indigenous people do not enjoy equal status, the name 'indigenous society' and 'backward' continue to hold their places. Hence, this community is unable to progress and develop its traditions, and suffer from poverty.

In recent times, the indigenous people felt their positions and are fighting to establish their rights. They have already fought for their basic human rights including at international fora. An awareness became evident among the public to recognise and respect the cultures and mode of living of the

indigenous population. Hence the declaration of the Year of Indigenous People.

Veddas: The Indigenous People of Sri Lanka

The Vedda community had lived in Sri Lanka before the Indian and Arabic colonisations. The history of Sri Lanka also recognised them as the indigenous people. Veddas, similarly in other countries, are also affected by development projects. The Sri Lanka government is drawing several plans to preserve the traditions of the Veddas.

Anthropologists have categorised the Veddas of Sri Lanka in three distinct groups (Wijesekera).

1. Veddas, who live in scattered hamlets in the South Eastern part of the country (They live and hunt in the forests of Amparai, Badulla, Batticaloa Districts - But their number is dwindled);
2. Veddas, who live in North Central Province and in Anuradhapura area. These Veddas involved in Chena cultivation and agriculture.
3. Veddas who live in Eastern coasts, between the areas of Valaichchenai and Trincomalee. These Veddas are called as "Coastal Veddas". Coastal Veddas differ vastly from the above two categories in two respects: The language of coastal Vedda is Tamil: their livelihood is mainly concentrated on chena cultivation and fishing.

Veddas of the Eastern Coast

The Veddas of the Eastern coast live in small villages. Other communities are also found in these pockets. According to the census and statistics of 1946, there were 1,866 coastal veddas in 44 villages. Most of the Veddas are found in Vakarai, in the area North of Koralaipathu. They also live in Kandaladi, Palchchenai, Puliyanakandy, Ooriyankadu and Vammivattan. Veddas also inhabit several other villages such as Pannichankerny, Mankerni, Kayankerni and Pallanchenai (Wijesekera, 1964, Dr. Dart. 1985).

The three modes of life-hunting, chena cultivation and fishing - were the factors to categorise them in these distinct groups. The "Concept of Vedda Life" is based on this theory. Majority communities' life-styles and practices have their impacts on the Vedda Community. The mode of life, social structures and rituals which existed when Veddas were in a separate entity also changed after they have had contacts with Tamils and Sinhalese.

Anthropologists consider that 'pure' Vedda Community which was less affected by these changes imply study and research.

Professors Charles and Brenda Seligmanns have made a comprehensive study on these "Pure" Veddas. Their opinion is that the Veddas of the Eastern Coast are the ones who lost their Vedda's life; therefore they are not entitled to be studied.

Social Structure

It is natural that any society that acquires the intrinsic characters of the majority community which is numerically

larger and which has politically and economically sound footing, cause structural changes. Unless the movements arise against this change the minority community will lose its heritage. This is social change.

The Vedda Community of the Eastern Coast had its impacts from the Tamils' way of life. The Veddas of the Eastern coast make their living by fishing and agriculture and also hunting for certain extent. They practice Tamils religious customs, and rites, They use no bows and arrows for hunting. A few of them possess fire arms. Others borrow these fire-arms and go for hunting. A part of the flesh of the prey is made as payment of loans.

As far as the Tamils, in the Eastern Province, Dravidian relationships prevail and matrilineal modes are pursued (Megluns 1994). Veddas also have matrilineal relationship. But it could be the subject of study whether this is a common feature of among all the Vedda Community of the Eastern Province.

In the opinion of Charles and Brenda Seligmanns, the Eastern Veddas live as a endogamous society. Today we can witness the matrilineal social structure existing among the Tamils and Muslims of the Eastern Province. But it is being paternalised by Sanskritism. This could have made its impact on Vedda society too.

Dart says that there are several communities called Ilasingavannian Kudy, Kathiravannian Kudi etc. in Vakarai. This is also a sign of the minority community acquiring the social characteristics of the majority community.

Rituals and Worship

Vairavar, Veerapathirar and several methods of Amman worships, Murugan and Lord Kumara worships are a common feature among the veddas of Eastern Coast. Ancestral worship also can be observed. They are called the spiritual Deities. Sooth saying also takes place once a year during the temple festivals. In Batticaloa District shrine and deity worship has gained momentum. As these modes of rituals and worship are considered "uncivilized" they are in the process of changing to orthodox worshipping and rituals. This change has its effects on the Veddas' temples. Palchenai Periyasamy Temple is an example for this change.

In most of the temples in the Batticaloa District where the temple festivals and poojas are held, during the non-pooja time, liquors, flesh and cannibus are offered to shrine and other deity poojas.

Seligmanns say (1911) that ship demons, Ammal, lord kumara were worshipped in Pallanchchenai, which is in close proximity with Palchenai. There is a belief among Veddas that these ship demons brought infectious diseases such as diarrhoea, mumps etc. Poojas were held to satisfy these ship-deities. This is a significant note in the study of indigenous people.

Prior to European colonisation there were no such infectious diseases among the indigenous people worldwide. After the arrival of Europeans, as these diseases were anti-resistant, the number of lives lost were very high. In this context, the worship of ship-deities acquires special importance.