

***Kalavu (Burglary), A Life Saving Profession: A Study on Kallargal  
Community of Nayakka Dynasty in Kaval Kottam***  
by Su. Venkatesan

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### **Abstract**

*Kaval Kottam* by Su. Venkatesan is an extraordinary story that deals with the history of Tamil Nadu from the period of Moghuls to the age of British Colonisation. The main focus in the story is given to the culture, tradition and the political conditions that prevailed in the Madurai region. Madurai is known for its wealth and prosperity and it is in that region where Tamil language had its great development during the reign of the Pandiya Dynasty. Apart from all its moral proficiencies, there was also another group called 'Kallargal' whose caste profession was stealing. Though they were thieves by caste tradition, they highly followed certain ethics in their profession. This paper concentrates on this group of people and the nuances of the profession they followed as depicted in *Kaval Kottam* by Su. Venkatesan.

### **Introduction**

*Kaval Kottam* is an amalgamation of history, geography and culture, which acts as a historical documentation of Tamil Nadu. The novel focuses on the Nayakkar Dynasty where a certain group of people followed "Kalavu," i.e. stealing, as their caste profession. The story of 'kallargal' (burglers) revolves around Amanamalai, Thadhanur and the ancestor of the group, Sadachi Amman, who escapes from the tortures of the Britishers and reached Thadhanur where the entire community gets developed. Though Madurai is known for its prosperity, it fails to extend its prosperity to this community. They choose 'kalavu' as their profession as there is no source for their survival. The community does 'kaval' during the reign of Pandiyas but they are pushed into 'kalavu' as the kingdom was invaded by Malik Kapoor from the North.

### **Origin of the Community**

Thadhanur is the place where the Kallargal community gets developed. Its formation and development are a result of huge struggles of Sadachi Amman who finds the reason for the death of a male child in that land. The mud of Thadhanur is rich in minerals. The pot made of this mud absorbs the entire heat of the flame and passes it on to the food which ultimately results in the death of the

male child. She prepares mud pots from the mud of their land and saves her children. She preserves her community by transferring the history to her descendants in the form of stories. At a point of time, this chain breaks as those descendants failed to pass it on to their descendants. This results in the destruction of all male members of the village. The community is preserved as there are sixteen pregnant ladies who were saved during the time of flood. She resumes telling stories to the new born children to avoid such destruction again.

All the young widowed women buried their dead husbands and went crying to their mother's home. The old ladies gained their courage for the sake of Sadachi and took seventeen pregnant women to Amanamalai . . . They gave birth one by one to the children, seven male and six female children. Sadachi told the story in the ears of new born baby after which the first milk was given to the child. The story grows with the growth of the children. (636)

### **Kallargal Community**

The community has crossed eight generations starting from Kaluvan to Mayandi. This 'Kallargal' community is highly dedicated to their profession and they go in groups for 'Kalavu'. The man who excels in stealing will be sent for 'kaval'. The group has a head called Nilaiyali and he leads them in both 'kalavu' and 'kaval'. The name of all the people in the group is "Karuppa". The man who sustains all the struggles in both 'kaval' and 'kalavu' will become the 'periyambala' of the village. He is the head and the whole community including Nilayali obeys him. These people will go for kalavu in groups and the group is called 'Kothu', to join in this kothu a man has to undergo lots of training.

### **The Training**

The training starts from childhood onwards. The children undergo five types of training including running, hurdling, throwing, lifting and eating. They have to learn all these while growing up. All these trainings are given in the form of competitions. These trainings are given by the Periyambala of the village. The members, from children to adults, will be participating in the competition. For running, they have to chase the running sheep in the ground which is a very hard task. For hurdling, they have to jump over cactus and aloe vera which is highly risky if they lose concentration. 'Stone throw' is a competition in the village where the contestant has to throw the stone over a banyan tree standing in the opposite direction. As the banyan tree is considered as Sadachi amman, the stone should not touch the tree. The competition for lifting is different in Thadhanur from other villages. Lifting an ordinary stone is enough in other villages, but in Thadhanur they have to lift a calf and run for a certain distance which is extendable and is difficult to handle. The final competition is for eating. People of the village measure the bravery of a man with the amount of the food he eats. He has to drink at least four kumbas of porridge, if not he is considered as an incapable man. "Five types of training are important for the children. Running, hurdling, throwing, lifting, and eating... the Periyambala who teaches them is Mayandi" (641).

### **Kothu**

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The man who finishes all these trainings is allowed to be a part of the Kothu after the suggestion of the Periyambala. He then goes for 'kalavu' with them. The members of the Kothu teach the newly joined members simultaneously. The members of the Kothu are responsible for the mistakes that happen during the learning process. In case of mistakes, the punishments are given, and it starts from death to punishments more severe than death. All the members of the Kothu are named as 'Karuppa' during kalavu. The head of the group is called Nilayali who guides them in kalavu. Kannakol is the prestigious stick that the Nilayali always has in his hands. This stick is the incarnation of God that will protect them from all the dangers. The man who crosses all the barriers in the kalavu is allowed to join Kaval and is made the periyambala of the village after successfully completing the job without any flaws.

The last field of expertise is Kaval. It will take years to get a name of good name in Kaval. But the entire good name gained in the Kaval will vanish like water flows in a holed pot in a wink if the person is careless for a night. To come alive out of the profession without any flaw is not an easy task. (641)

### **Kalavu**

The house for kalavu is selected according to the information given by the spy who is one among the villagers in the nearby village. His information is called 'thuppu' (hint) which is kept as a secret by the Kothu. The base for their profession is entirely based on the thuppali, i.e. spy's information. After getting the information, comes the planning process which they call 'Kannam poduthal.' The kothu sends a girl in the disguise of an astrologer in the morning who maps the house and marks the loophole for them to do kalavu. The loophole is opened at night but not all the members of kothu will enter the house. One member enters the house and opens the door, particularly back door, for the other members. Breaking the lock is restricted in kalavu, so they have to search for the key that opens the door. Leaving any evidence in the process is dishonour for them and kalavu is considered an unfit profession for them. This is evident when Rakkan, one of the Nilayalis, risks his life to take the head that is cut during their kalavu process by kavalars.

Rakkan terrified. They are good at defending themselves; they have the capacity of confusing the outsiders who came to prove wrong against the people of Thadhanur as per the information of the spy without any evidence. But the entire community cannot defend them if they have evidence and the entire community does not spare the man who left evidence while robbing. (148)

In case they get caught, their major weapon is the stone which they carry all the time and the fight technique used by them is wolf's fight technique which is a cunning attack technique. The things that are obtained during kalavu are sold for food and the food is shared equally among all the members of the village.

### **The Uniqueness of Kallargal Community**

The men in the village consider every woman as an incarnation of Sadachi amman and protect them as their soul. They believe in their wives more than themselves and hence, share every

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secret with them. The village is often prone to the attack of soldiers from the Palayam, and the soldiers have to overcome the men in the village to attack the women. The Kallargal community is brave enough to accept their mistakes and never accepted the deed that they are not guilty for. This is evident in the reaction of the people of Thadhanur when they come to know about a stranger who uses the name of their village to get information about the houses for stealing. They are furious and try to find the man and give proper punishment. This anger fuels Mayandi to go in search of the man who misuses their village name by leaving his profession on standby.

There was a surprise waiting for the people who are known for royal robbery. The spy informed them as two days before there was a theft in the north of the Telugu speaking people's village in the name of Thadhanur. Who was the man who robs without the knowledge of Thadhanur people by crossing huge distances? That too single handed? . . . Searching for the man instead of things for robbing became the prominent job for Mayandi group. The people who went for robbing started to search the man who was robbing the name of Thadhanur. (283)

Mayandi finds the man, Chinnan, who has been misusing the name of Thadhanur. Mayandi observes his skills in robbery and brings him to Thadhanur to make him join in his group. In the beginning, the people are furious and test him repeatedly to check if he is fit to be in their group. As days pass by, they start accepting him as he is well qualified to be a thief. Though they accept him in their group, they do not accept him as a part of their village. They are highly conscious of their territory; they never allow outsiders inside their area, especially people who do not worship Sadachi amman. Chinnan has the rights to go anywhere in the village but only during daytime. At night, he has to stay in the hills outside the village. "There was no place in their village for the people who were not the descendants of Sadachi Amman. So, he stayed in the temple of Karuppu and during the rainy season he stayed inside the caves of the hills" (289). According to them, Rajakalavu, i.e. stealing from the King's treasury in spite of all hurdles is considered as the most prestigious action done during their life time. They have the talent of measuring the depth of the people's sleep with the sound of their snoring. This is evident from the action of Chinnan who robs cleverly by measuring the depth of the sleep of the house owners.

They are highly moral in their profession and they are always very cautious to protect the good name of Thadhanur. This is evident when Chinnan comes empty handed as there was a woman who commits suicide.

Mayandi asked 'Is it wise to come empty handed without stealing after getting into the mission?' Chinnan replied 'Wrong deed will spoil the name of the village'. He does not want to get the name of a murderer in addition to a robber by robbing the house of a lady who tied knots in her neck to die. (287)

They are ardent followers of Bali (sacrifice of life) technique, i.e. sacrificing one's life for the welfare of the entire community. The man who is going to sacrifice his life is called as Balikani and

the entire village treats him like God. This is evident when Nallayya, one of the villagers, is selected to sacrifice his life to compensate the death of a person who belongs to their rival village and dies in their village. Though the villagers are not responsible for his death, they accept the deed as it happens inside their village. To avoid more deaths due to war with their rival village they give Nallayya's life as an equivalent to his death. The person for 'bali' is also selected according to a process. For every incident, a man from a particular division should volunteer himself for sacrifice. In case there are more volunteers, a selection process takes place with the fish bowl method. After selection, the person is treated as God and every house has to give a feast for the person every day. The entire village strives hard to fulfil his wishes. After he is sacrificed, they bury him in a place where their ancestors are buried, and they carve his statue in a stone on the buried place which is called as 'Nadugal' and they worship him as God. Nadugal is not given to all the people who die in the village, it is given only to the people who lives and dies for the community.

### **Conclusion**

'Life is not a bed of roses' actually suits the members of this community who risk their life for the welfare of the community. They are highly talented in robbing, but they show their talents only to the people who plunder the wealth of common people. They are brave enough to take the life of a person who attacks them but at the same time, they are kind enough to sacrifice everything for the welfare of the community. Thus, they are a community who were entirely committed to the profession of robbing which may be presently considered as unlawful in the present world.

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### **Work Cited**

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