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NATURE OF CRIMES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY  
MADURAI DISTRICT



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Short Profile

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**ABSTRACT:**

Crimes committed in the region were of economic, social or administrative nature. Economic crimes were those that were committed with a view to seize the wealth of another party. Among them the most common were dacoity, house-breaking, torchlight robbery, cattle-lifting, burglary, incendiarism and theft. Towards this end, murder and assaults were frequently committed. These crimes were mostly committed by the Kallars and the Koravas in Tamil Country especially in the Madurai District. This paper analyses the nature and various types of the crimes committed by the Kallars in the Nineteenth Century Madurai District

**KEYWORDS**

*Kallars, Koravas, Maravas, Kavalkars, Tupukuli, Dacoity.*

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## INTRODUCTION

As F.S. Mullay stated, the Kallars were addicted to dacoity, housebreaking and cattle stealing, Armed with boomerangs, clubs and knives they frequently resorted to house breaking. Their usual procedure was to effect a breach in the walls under the doors. A lad then crept in and opened the door for the elders. Then they entered the house, removed the properties. At times they returned to the owners on receipt of a clue hire called tuppukuli.<sup>1</sup> When some cattle was lost, it was approached to get back the cattle tempting with a reward. The reward was called tuppukuli. It meant wage for giving clue. It was usually as much half the value of animals stolen. The Kallar who undertook to search for the lost cattle traced them, and, received tuppukuli. If not, the booty was either shared or disposed of after the lapse of some time.<sup>2</sup>

The Kallars and the Koravas carried out the depredations without being either seen or heard by anyone. But if they were surprised, they made desperate effort to escape. When anyone of them was killed in the tussle, they carried the body away after cutting the head in order to prevent detection.<sup>3</sup> The stolen property was hidden in places like drains, wells, straw-stacks and sometimes returned to the owner on receipt of blackmail from him. The chief receivers of this stolen property were the Nattukottai Chetties. Vendors of arrack and toddy were the mediators in the disposal of petty things, clothes and the like. In grave crimes, the booty was distributed or disposed of after the lapse of a few months. Women assisted in their dealings with the Chetties.<sup>4</sup>

The Kallars seldom allowed any merchandise to pass through their country safely.<sup>5</sup> They threatened the cart men and turned their vehicles into the ditches so that it was upset. The unfortunate travellers were forced to sit by the side of the road with their back to the cart while their baggage was searched for and valuables recovered.<sup>6</sup>

Torch light robbery was a specialty of the Maravas and the Kallars. It was organised and conducted in the following way. The village where dacoity was to be committed was decided upon previously. The victim was usually a rich man or enemy of the gang. Dark nights were generally chosen for such forages and it was executed usually between 11 p.m. and 3 a.m. during a dark night. The gang would be divided into groups each with its assigned or particular duties to perform and commence operations. While some of the gang struck terror into the villagers by shouting, others kept them at bay by hurling stones in all directions and leaving free the storming party armed with bandy axes to break open the door of the house which had been previously chosen for plunder. The scene being lighted by the flames of a cart or any material available to the party. If the door was strong and did not yield, then one of two were assisted to the terrace or the roof of the house to gain an entrance by jumping into the courtyard or in some other way. When this was accomplished, the other members of the gang would be let in. Once inside the house they first caught hold of all members, thrashed them severely, either tied them up or took them out of the house and placed them under watch and ward. They were made to sit with their heads down so as to prevent them from identifying the dacoit leaders. After this the dacoity commenced. It lasted from thirty minutes to three hours during which time they laid hold on everything of value, jewels, vessels and cash. Women and children were not hurt in the process unless they showed resistance while they were being deprived of their jewels. If the object was a hidden treasure, then a member of the family usually a woman was chosen and information extracted by torture. At the slightest sign of danger the dacoits, escaped with all the members of the gang and with as much booty as they could gather and divided the spoils among themselves after reaching to a far off place.<sup>7</sup>

The ordinary house dacoity was done in a similar manner like the torch light robbery except that it was done in broad daylight. It was mostly the Kallars and Koravas who committed it. Besides house dacoities, there were field dacoities also. In field, dacoities usually three or four were involved. The object was mainly to steal cattle or grain from grain heaps. Violence was not intended though the perpetrators of the crime went armed.

Cattle lifting was carried on by the Kallars, who were trained cattle-lifters. Nearly every village in the Madurai District had jallikattu,<sup>8</sup> the origin of which seems to be cattle lifting.<sup>9</sup> The stolen animals were driven great distances on the night of the theft and driven to jungles. As pursuit became difficult by that time the owners generally approached a nearest go-in-between in their attempt to get back the cattle. They offered a fee called tuppukuliforgiving a clue. Thereupon, the owner of the cattle was asked to go to an appointed spot to get back the cattle. The information was usually correct, If on the other hand the owner reported the theft to the police, no Kallar would help him recover his animal, Consequently cattle thefts were never reported to the police.<sup>10</sup> No cattle in the district belonging either to the rich or poor was safe.<sup>11</sup> The shepherds suffered most at the hands of the Kallars as their cattle became the object of plunder for raids.<sup>12</sup> For fear of theft the cattle would not be left in the fields.<sup>13</sup>

The Kallars quite often demanded a blackmail and if that was refused, they set fire to the haystack or house or carried away the standing crop or bullocks.<sup>14</sup> The records indicate that robberies on the way to the salt pans<sup>15</sup> and many postal thefts<sup>16</sup> were committed by these groups of people,

The accounts given by the Magistrates explained how the people in the district suffered due to crimes committed by the criminal tribes.<sup>17</sup> People in the villages lived entirely at the mercy of the Maravas and Kallars. They paid half a fanam as the annual fee for purchasing security. In addition another fee called themamool<sup>18</sup> was paid and even after the Kaval system was abolished, it continued to be levied. A well known barrister in Madurai had a pair of Mysore bulls and when they were stolen he reported it to the police but with no result. When he sent for the Head Kavalkar who demanded that a fine of rupees fifty should be paid by 'the barrister for having sued in a court to a criminal case against certain Kallars. 'The fee and fine were paid and that bulls were recovered after a few days at an appointed place. The Kallars broke open the house of a tahsildar who made himself obnoxious to them and ravished his wife, The Kallars cut off the heads of the ducks in the house of another officer, whom they disliked and placed them in row on his door steps.

Unlawful Kaval system continued to exist in the Madurai District for fear of Kallars. Any individual not keeping a Kavalkar was harassed in every possible way.<sup>19</sup> The long distance that the people had to travel to make a complaint and the fear of the robbers wreaking vengeance on the way prevented them from reporting thefts to the police.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, reporting thefts and the cases to the police never helped the victims.<sup>21</sup> Hence people engaged their own Kavalkars and paid fees, Merchants, richmen and even Europeans engaged a Kallar Kavalkar in their pay.<sup>22</sup>

The Kallars were not a wandering tribe but they visited the adjacent districts to commit depredations with the pretext that they were traders in cattle visiting various cattle markets. Signs were exchanged by whistling or scribbling on the ground and while committing crimes the names of each other were never mentioned. They addressed each other as 'big one' or the 'little one', using ambiguous terms.<sup>23</sup>

Many of the European families were required to employ one or more watchmen of the Kallar caste as they might recognize their fellow thieves and forewarn them about their approach, Houses that were thus guarded were free from the attacks of the Kallars. Most of the Kallar Kavalkars were

thieves and any village that did not pay the fees regularly was liable to be burnt down. Any individual not keeping a Kavalkar or not paying his fees regularly was harassed in every possible way. Reporting the cases to the police never helped the victims. Every toll gate keeper and every pettah paid the fees to the Kallars. All the towns in the District paid the fees. If such were the state of affairs in the cities, the position of remote and unreported villages need not be explained. People were afraid of complaining since they feared that there would be no redress but only annoyance and trouble from the Kavalkars.<sup>24</sup> The very distance that people had to travel to make a complaint and the fear of the robbers wreaking vengeance on the way prevented any genuine redress and protection to the people by reporting thefts to the police.<sup>25</sup>

To conclude, Madurai District was prone to criminal activities in the past and present. There was an increasing crimes in this district in the Nineteenth Century. The district was much populated by the martial race of the Kallars who also involved in the crimes. They committed a lot of crimes in this district, violating the law and order in the Nineteenth Century. To bring them under the law, the British Government enacted rules and regulations which were ended in vain. Hence, as an utmost measure, the British Government Passed Criminal Tribes Acts on many occasions. Along with the Kallars, the Maravas and Koravas also involved in crimes in Madurai District.

#### END NOTES

1. Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. III, Madras, 1909, p. 63.
2. Note Showing the Progress made in the Settlement of Criminal Tribes in the Madras Presidency, Madras, 1916, p.62.
3. Abbe Dubois, J.A., *op. cit.*, p. 67.
4. Note Showing the Progress made in the Settlement of Criminal Tribes in the Madras Presidency, *op. cit.*, p.62.
5. Ward, B.A., *Geographical and Statistical Memoir of Madurai, and Dindugal*, Vol. III, Madras, 1895, p.6.
6. Francis, W., *Madura District Gazetteer*, Madras, 1906, p, 90
7. Madurai District Collectorate Records (M.D.C.R.), Vol. 5339, 30 September 1843, p.341.
8. Edgar Thurston. *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p.75. At the Mattupongal feasts towards evening festoons of fibre and clothes containing coins are tied to the horns of bullocks and cows and the animals are driven through the streets with tom-tom and music. In the villages, specially those inhabited by the Kallars in Madurai, the maiden chose the person as her husband who safely untied and brought to her the cloth tied to the horn of bull. The animals are let loose with their horns containing valuables amidst the din of tom tom and harsh music, which terrifies and bewilders them. They run madly about and are purposely excited by the crowd. A young Kallar would declare that he would run after such and such a bull and this is sometimes a risky pursuit and recover the valuables tied to its to its horn. The Kallar considered it a great disgrace to be injured while chasing the bull.
9. *Papers on Habitual Offenders in India*, Calcutta, 1893, p. 54.
10. Edgar Thurston, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
11. *Papers on Habitual Offenders in India*, p. 54.
12. Chandler, J.S., *Seventy-Five Years in the Madura Mission*, n.y., p.22. The oppression of the Kallars made the shepherds to agitate against the Kallars in Palani, Periyakulam and Coimbatore.
13. Edgar Thurston, *op. cit.*, p. 64. A report of the Inspector General of Prisons indicated that nearly 42



percent of the convicts in Madurai jail belonged to one or the other of the three castes.

14. M.D.C.R., Vol. 4681, pp. 98-99.

15. M.D.C.R. Vol.1156, p. 248; Vol. 5332, pp. 82-83.

16. Papers on Habitual offenders in India, pp. 54-.55.

17. Mamaool means customary payment .

18. Papers on Habitual offenders in India, op.cit., pp. 54-.55.

19. Judicial Sundries (J. S.), Vol.3A, 1805, p. 129.

20. Ibid., p. 54 .

21. M.D.C.R. Vol. 1198, pp. 295-296.

22. Ibid., Vol. 9083. p. 68.

23. Elijah Hoole, Personal Narrative of a Mission to the South India, London, 1829, p.140.

24. Papers on Habitual Offenders in India, pp.54-55.

25. J.S. Vol. 3A., 1806, pp. 129.

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