

Cāvaṭi- A Case Study of *Muthuvar* Youth Dormitory System

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KEYWORDS *Cāvaṭi*. *Muthuvar*. *Ilantari*. Communal Sentiments

ABSTRACT *Cāvaṭi* is the single-sex sleeping residence of unmarried males amongst *Muthuvar*. It equips the adolescent *Muthuvar* with certain kind of social experience acquired over many years of nightly attendance in the *Cāvaṭi* that is entirely in the hands of the adolescent *Muthuvar* themselves, quite away from adult or parental authority. The institution achieves a level of harmonization that gives the *Muthuvar* settlements a focus and a degree of mutual participation that would otherwise be lacking.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists have noticed the existence of the dormitory practice among tribes and described it as a regulative mechanism of pre-marital affairs of youths (Roy, 1915; Elwin 1947). There are others such as Das (1989) and Naskar (1991) who point out that its formation is to avoid the deterrent role of children in the sexual life of parents. However, the more recent researches by Gell (1992) and Nivedita (2002) had questioned these results and established that youth dormitories really carried out a multiplicity of roles and are spaces for preserving the cultural traditions of ethnic groups. The present paper aims to describe the single sex male dormitory practice, '*Cāvaṭi*' system, amongst '*Muthuvar*' (singular *Muthuvan*), tribal group belonging to the State of Kerala.

THE STUDY POPULATION

Muthuvar are tribals residing in Idukki district of Kerala and adjoining districts of Madurai and Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu. They are said to have migrated from Madurai to the hills of Travancore due to internal dissensions. According to one narrative of their arrival to this destination, they carried the idol of the Goddess *Madurai Meenakshi* on their *Muthuku* (back portion of human body) during their migration from Madurai to the Cardamom hills and near by places of Idukki district of Kerala, and hence got the name *Muthuvar* (meaning, those who carry something on their back). Another version asserts that *Muthuvar* got this name from their custom of

carrying children on their backs. However, the *Muthuvar* connects their cause of flight from Madurai to Travancore Hills employing the story of *Kovalan* and *Kannaki* which is celebrated in the great Tamil epic *Silappadikaram*¹ written during the ninth century A.D. Thurston (1909) reported that *Muthuvar* came to the Travancore hills at the time when the *Telugu Naickers* took possession of *Bodinaickenur* in the 14th century or they were driven to the hills by the Mohammedan invaders in the latter half of the 18th century.

The present study focuses on *Muthuvar* residing in Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary under *Eravikulam* Forest Division of Idukki district. There are eleven settlements of two different tribal groups in the Sanctuary: seven *Muthuvar* settlements (*Eruttalakudi*, *Puthukudi*, *Vellakkal*, *Olikkudi*, *Thayannankudi*, *Ollavayal* and *Mangappara*) and four *Malapulaya* settlements (*Palapatti*, *Champakadu*, *Echampatty* and *Alampatty*). The location of the *Muthuvar* settlements here is at higher altitude (between 1200 to 1500 meters above sea level) when compared to the settlements of *Malapulayas*. The forest here is dry deciduous scrub and receives only an annual rainfall of at most 50 centimeters. The Chinnar River flowing eastwards drains the scarce water of the area. December and January are the coldest months and March and April the hottest.

The *Muthuvar* here live as successful agriculturalists, cultivating lemon grass,² ragi, maize, beans, sweet potatoes, peanuts and other allied vegetables. Their chief food items are *keppa* (ragi or *Eleusine coracana*) and *arassi* (rice or *Oryza sativa*) together with leaves and vegetables. Traditionally they were shifting

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cultivators practicing slash-and-burn method (Thurston, 1909; Thomas, 1958). But at present, they are settled agriculturist in the land allotted to them by the Kerala government in 1974. Each household produces their food. During periods of high labour demand, labourers may be pooled from the *cāvaṭi*, exchanged across households or sometimes hired from outside the settlements (particularly *Malapulayas*).

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Among the seven *Muthuvar* settlements fieldwork has primarily concentrated on three, considering their distance from the main market-centre (*Marayoor*) as well as the distance between them. Accordingly *Eruttalakudi* (3 km North), *Olikudi* (11 km West) and *Mangappara* (14 km East) from *Marayoor* were chosen. For researching the relationships between the *cāvaṭi* and households as well as the *cāvaṭi* and the settlement as a whole, an extreme functional stand or its opposite seems to be inappropriate. Therefore a middle stand is opted on the basis of the assumption that any deep-rooted institution such as the *cāvaṭi* would certainly be related to other major social institutions among which it is set. The study generates ethnographic data through secondary records, participant observation, orally conveyed memories, personal observations and interviews. We conflate the information on the general institutional arrangement of the *cāvaṭi* and the facts derived through case studies of three individual case studies.

RESULTS

The findings of this study are consistent with the view that the *cāvaṭi*'s amongst *Muthuvar* performs multiplicity of functions. Specifically, the *cāvaṭi* functions as if it is a club, a place for juvenile happiness, a non-formal school, a training center, the community labour pool, a common shelter of the community, accommodation visitors, space for convening meetings to decide performing ritual ceremonies and political events and so on for the making of youths into mature community members. At the same time, to the parents of these youths, the study reveals that the *cāvaṭi*'s do enables their privacy in their one-room huts. The study also reveals that the *cāvaṭi*'s contribute to the *Muthuvar* notion of ethnic purity and monogamy, by restricting the

youths from transgressing the community's norms.

DISCUSSIONS

For exploring the *cāvaṭi* amongst *Muthuvar*, it is necessary to situate the system in its social settings. Although it might seem more straightforward to use the *cāvaṭi* to explore *Muthuvar* social life, no other feature is appropriate in the case of communal assemblage like *Muthuvar*. For instance, the perseverance of communal sentiment is apparent even in their everyday life and customs. Gregariousness has its effect on the internal organisation of the village and individuation has not gripped their social relations. The joint clearing of the jungle for cultivation, the existence of settlement councils for the adjudication of disputes, the participation of the settlement folk in initiation ceremonies, marriages, funerals, and features like routine communal partaking of food, etc., bear ample evidence of the fact that the *Muthuvar* still appreciate the advantage of communal life. However, it is important to note that family affairs are confined to each and every family unit and the reciprocity of communal sentiments, mentioned above, is not always on a one-to-one basis; it occasionally spanned economic decisions so that while one side gave goods the other gave time, labour and 'loyalty'. The routine communal partaking of food amongst *Muthuvar* would authenticate their community sentiments:

Muthuvar normally have two meals a day, one in the morning and another in the evening (either ragi or rice with curried leaves and vegetables). In the meantime they take plain tea with a piece of jaggery, prepared at the work place, if they can or go without it. Every morning and evening, age groups amongst bachelors, spinsters, married men, and married women combine in small arbitrary groups and visit each household, eating a little, sharing a single plate. This practice is known as *kudi tinnuttu* (Sathyanarayanan, 1996).

The practice is explained by *Muthuvar* as a technique to confirm familial obligations during periods of scarcity, and to hold the notion of their settlement as a collectivity. Certain such features of *Muthuvar* social organisation make their *cāvaṭi* distinct from that of *Murias ghotuls* (mixed dormitory practice of boys and girls), described by Elwin (1947) and *Oraon's jank-erpa* and *pel-erpa* (separate dormitory practice existing for un-

married boys and maidens respectively) described by Roy (1915).

CĀVAṬI

A notable feature of the communal life, as mentioned earlier, of the *Muthuvar* is their *cāvaṭi*. It is a territorial institution and each settlement for all its intentions and purposes would have their own *cāvaṭi* house. However scanty may be the size of population, *cāvaṭi* is a necessity for a *Muthuvar* settlement. If a settlement, owing to some domestic conflict, happens to get divided into two, then each of them would have their own *cāvaṭi* house- making it an intrinsic feature of their cultural tradition. The *cāvaṭi* accommodates the entire bachelors of the settlement, guests, and men (whose wives were in their confinements) during nights. Etymologically, the 'cāvaṣi' is a Dravidian term. Its nearest possible English equivalent is a dormitory, a public building with opening on one side, or an out-house. The *Muthuvar* occasionally substitute the term 'cāvaṭi' with *ilantarimadam* (where 'ilantari' denote young unmarried men and 'madam' indicate dwelling) and *Satiram* (a rest house). At least up to the second quarter of the 20th century *Muthuvar* had both male and female dormitories (Krishna Iyer, 1939; Luiz, 1962). But now the female dormitories (*kumari-madam*- where 'kumari' indicate young un-married girls) had undergone a process of decay and unmarried girls are found accommodated either with widows or in the houses where men is absent, or in the schools provided by government agencies.

Apart from the dwelling houses (*veedus*) and a bachelor hall *cāvaṭi*, a *Muthuvar* hamlet (*kudi*) comprises of a women seclusion shed (*valama-pura*), a temple (*kovil*) and a school (*iskool*)-provided by government agencies. Throughout their monthly menstrual period and delivery phase, the *Muthuvar* females (*Muthuvasi*'s) were sheltered in their seclusion sheds.

Architecture of the Cāvaṭi

The structure of the *cāvaṭi* is slightly larger than a traditional *Muthuvan* hut. Its roofs are thatched with layers of grass supported by a framework of bamboo and other forest timbers, tied with split rattan. The walls are kept upright by the similar framework and plastered with thick coatings of mud. Floors are finished and plastered

with mud and cow dung respectively.

The prime difference between a *Muthuvan* hut and a *cāvaṭi* is the absence of the partition that separates the hearth from the sleeping place. So, *cāvaṭi* is simply a rectangular shaped room. It has no ventilation, except an entrance at its front. At the center of the inner area there is a fire pit (*hippoti*) for providing warmth to its members during nights. Nothing is stored inside the *cāvaṭi*, except sleeping mats, drums, bells and other instruments, which are vital parts of the *cāvaṭi* activities. The place is normally deserted during the day. For these reasons, the *cāvaṭi*'s in *Muthuvar* settlements can also be supposed as primarily a sleeping residence of the young and unmarried, as observed by Das (1989) and Naskar (1991). According to them, the utilities of youth dormitories were to avoid the restricting role of children in their parent's sexual life. However, our own observation of the *cāvaṭi* proposes that sexual privacy of parents is only an aspect for the existence of the system. Alternatively, the *cāvaṭi* functions as if it is a club, a place for juvenile happiness, a non-formal school, a training center, and so on for the making of the *ilantaris* to a mature community. At the same time, for the community, the *cāvaṭi* is a labour pool, a common shelter, a place for accommodating visitors, a space for convening meetings to decide performing ritual ceremonies and political events, etc. Moreover, the intertwining of the *Muthuvar* social organisation with the ritualistic as well as materialistic functions of the *cāvaṭi* (which will be discussed latter on along with the *cāvaṭi*'s role in *Muthuvar* social organisation) confirms us that the *cāvaṭi*'s have multiplicity of functions in *Muthuvar* settlements.

The focal point of a *Muthuvar cāvaṭi* is the extensive courtyard at its front that serves as space for many functions and rituals. The place is generally swept and kept clean in appearance. The members usually gather around the fireplace at this courtyard, for the formal and informal gatherings. It is quite common for married men to visit the *cāvaṭi* and spend their evenings at the courtyard, engaging in lively discussions with the issues of common interest and listening radio to take a watch on the latest market prices of lemon grass oil (the only cash crop they cultivate). But women folk of the community are prohibited from entering the *cāvaṭi*. However, married women can attend the *cāvaṭi* meetings and disputes, although they remain at the fringes of the courtyard. But

unmarried girls are forbidden to do so, except during the days of the annual festivities when young men and women dance together at the courtyard of the *cāvaṭi* by avoiding physical contacts. These regulations of women folk from the mainstream community reveal how women (especially maidens) are jealously protected amongst *Muthuvar*³. These features of the *Muthuvar cāvaṭi* in-turn contradicts strongly to Elwin's (1947) and Roy's (1915) assertion that the existences of youth dormitories were a means for achieving sexual gratification among youths, through establishing a temporary relationship (*jor-* in the case of *Murias*) between boys and girls, before marriage. However, our findings in the *cāvaṭi*'s do not confirm Elwin and Roy's assertion at all. On the contrary, the presence of avoidance relation between the two sexes, jealous protection of women, the conception of ethnic purity, and the features like restrictions of women folk in entering the *cāvaṭi*, etc. lead us to conclude that the *cāvaṭi*'s does not supports pre or extra marital sexual gratifications. Besides, the writings of earlier anthropologists like Thurston (1909), Krishna Iyer (1939), and Thomas (1958) too do not point to any sort of sexual relations in the *cāvaṭi*.

However, we are not refuting or rejecting the findings of Elwin and Roy's observations of dormitory practices among *Murias* and *Oraons*. We only point out that dormitory system need not necessarily be similar to their findings elsewhere and that *Muthuvar cāvaṭi*'s have different functions. This difference of opinion may be due to the difference of mixed and bisexual dormitory practices of *Murias* and *Oraons* versus the single sex dormitory practice of *Muthuvar*. However it is important to note that the multiplicity of functions of *Muria's ghotuls*, mentioned by Gell (1992), has some resemblance with the *Muthuvar cāvaṭi*, which will be discussed along with the social reproduction of the *cāvaṭi*.

Position of the *Cāvaṭi*

The *Muthuvar* settlements generally rest on the midst of a mount. *cāvaṭi*'s have specific position in the settlements. More often than not, they are setup at the upper periphery of the settlements. But some times, their position appears to be random and asymmetric in relation to the territorial layout of the settlement. However, it is an undeniable fact that, the sole

entrance of the *cāvaṭi* in no way faces towards the settlement. It will constantly face in opposition to the whole settlement. At the same time, the courtyard of the *cāvaṭi* will certainly be in a position of surveillance, from wherein the members in it can spectate the whole settlement and the visitors to it from a distance. It is also certain that the position of the *cāvaṭi* will constantly distance from women seclusion shed. These characteristics of *Muthuvar cāvaṭi* yet again contradict with Elwin (1947) and Roy's (1915) assertion. The aspects like distancing of the *cāvaṭi* from the women seclusion sheds, opposition of the sole entrance of the *cāvaṭi* to the whole settlement, the absence of ventilations in the *cāvaṭi*'s, preservation of the conception of monogamy and thereby ethnic purity, etc., confirm us that the *cāvaṭi*'s in fact creates a distance between the two sexes rather than uniting them to transgress the community's rule and have premarital or extramarital sexual relations. Besides, the surveillance position of the courtyard of the *cāvaṭi*'s persuades us to believe that the *cāvaṭi*'s are territorial institutions of *Muthuvar* to protect their settlement from external attacks and wild animal raids. The position of the *cāvaṭi*'s sometimes in relation to the territorial layout of the hamlet once again authenticates this viewpoint.

Social Reproduction of the *Cāvaṭi*

The entrance to the *cāvaṭi* is not mandatory at a set age. The *ilantaris* themselves decide when they will enter the *cāvaṭi*. But, they cannot become regular members of it unless they were familiar with the rules, regulations and etiquette of the *cāvaṭi*. At the beginning, along with their playmates the *ilantaris* attend the *cāvaṭi* activities such as meetings, disputes, singing, dancing, etc and some times do odd jobs like bringing water or firewood to the *cāvaṭi*. Gradually they start attending the *cāvaṭi*, perhaps two or three days in a month to begin with, then more frequently and finally becomes regular members. However, once started going to the *cāvaṭi* as regular members the *ilantaris* would not be admitted as full-time member of their parent's household. They can only go to their houses for having their food. This does not mean that after becoming a member of the *cāvaṭi* the *ilantaris* are ceded totally. They continue to contribute the greater part of their productive labour to their natal

household, but it only meant that their rights over the family members are ceded.

On the other hand, it is an obligation for a *Muthuvan*-head of the household to send his children to the *cāvaṭi* under the moral pressure exerted by the debt owed to the settlement. The fulfillment of this obligation is essential for his complete acceptance and participation in the communal life of *Muthuvar*. Consequently, sending children to the *cāvaṭi* becomes a social debt whose payment comes ultimately in the form of social acceptability. As a result, going to the *cāvaṭi* is fixed at birth for *ilantaris* and is therefore a pre-ordained scheme of thing that is tied up with the identity of being a *Muthuvan*. At the same time, for the *ilantaris* the essence of the *cāvaṭi* life is the material pleasures derive from it. It is a special province of the young having more enjoyment, economic independence, more mobility outside the home, more time spent in the company of age mates, greater competence in performing their works, and so on. However, for those who lag behind there are pressures at work from their parents, brothers, and playmates. The process in-turn strengthens the internal cohesiveness and stability of the settlement relations and promotes both the social reproduction of the *Muthuvar* and of the *cāvaṭi* by itself.

Here, it is of interest to compare the *Muthuvar cāvaṭi* to those presented in Gell's (1992) study of *Murias ghotul*. Gell also realise that among *Murias* too sending children to the *ghotul* is an obligation of parents. However, her insight about the obligations of families to give up their offspring's to the *ghotuls* is just as a marriage that brings an alliance relationship that is owed to village as a collectivity, rather than to a specific affined. She pointed out the feasting obligation during the admittance of a boy to the *ghotul* as a symbolic exchange relationship between a family and the whole settlement. However, there are instances that support Gell's argument in *Muthuvar cāvaṭi* too. That is, to be accepted as a *Muthuvan*, an *ilantari* should be initiated into *Muthuvar* community, through an initiation ceremony (*muti-kettu*). *Muti* denotes 'hair' and *kettu* indicate 'tying'. Therefore *muti kettu* is tying of the hair. The ritual is conducted every year during the celebration of *karthika* (in the month of October or November). For this ceremony, an *ilantari* should not cut or knot his hair at any rate before his initiation. The maternal uncle of the initiator, deep in the forest, ties the hair for the

first time. This is because; there is a belief amongst *Muthuvar* that no one should sight the occasion. After the initiation, the hair should be knot at the back portion of head in an oblong shape, secured with a long wooden pin called *kondoosi* and is covered with a turban. Hereafter, the *ilantari* is forbidden to expose his hair in public. Following this ceremony the parents of the initiator is obliged to organise a feast. This feasting obligation is exactly the same as that of mutual feasting obligations during marriages. Therefore, if Gells (1992) argument is taken into account, the initiation ceremony of *Muthuvar* and the feasting obligation associated with it can also be interpreted as a symbolic exchange relationship between a family and the settlement community. In addition, *muti-kettu* has also a practical reason in *Muthuvar* life cycle. i.e., there is a custom amongst *Muthuvar* that an initiated *Muthuvan* can only procure his bride from his maternal cross cousins (which is the only preferred kind of marriage amongst *Muthuvar*). This yet again connects the initiation and marriage in *Muthuvar* community. Thus there is no denying of the fact that the *cāvaṭi*'s have multitude of functions as in various dormitory practices with or without gender exclusiveness prevailing among the different tribes in the Indian subcontinent. The following discussion would substantiate how various ritualistic as well as materialistic functions of the *cāvaṭi* are intertwined in *Muthuvar* social organisation and benefits the community.

***Cāvaṭi*'s Role in *Muthuvar* Social Organisation**

As stated earlier, various factors of *Muthuvar* social organisation are seen interconnected with their *cāvaṭi* that in-turn lead to the existence of the system. The major among them are: the annual *tai-nombi* festivities, the agricultural practices and the marriages. Throughout the *cāvaṭi* phase its members have specific and comparatively heavy duties in these ceremonies.

During the annual *tai-nombi* festivities, associated with goddess *marimma*, the *cāvaṭi* members are entrusted with several religious ceremonies. As soon as the settlement council officially announce the date of the festivities, nightly practice-sessions in the *cāvaṭi* becomes active. The *ilantaris* sing and dance at the courtyard of the *cāvaṭi* throughout the evenings, which sometimes continues until dawn. During

the festival days also they were entrusted with rituals accompanied by dance and worship, which is believed to ensure the subsequent year of the community. In addition, the *ilantaris* have to offer hospitalities to guests who were obliged to sleep in their *cāvaṭi*. Thus, the festivities establish relational networks, linking *Muthuvar* settlements to one another as well as the moral integrity of the settlement and the *cāvaṭi* members in religious terms. This in-turn enables the *ilantaris* to know the community rituals and rites and also how to participate in them, provides an avenue to be community conscious and corporate in their feelings and actions thus making them responsible to the community.

At the beginning of the agricultural operations, three ritually significant events pertaining to the *cāvaṭi* take place: 1) the *veli ilantari pattam vilikkaradu* (bestowing title to the *veli-ilandi* in the settlement), 2) The *kri velli potaradu*, (feasting the members of *cāvaṭi* in return for labour contributed by them), 3) The *tandal teratturadu*, (collection of firewood by the boys of the *cāvaṭi* from each household by a fixed formula) (Sathyanarayanan, 1996). All these events lend support to the *Muthuvar* concept of communal life and the authoritarian nature of settlement council over the *cāvaṭi* members. Before harvesting the crops too, *cāvaṭi* members were entrusted with special task: The settlement council officially announces the date for offering *pongal*,⁴ to the members of the *cāvaṭi*. On the prescribed date, *cāvaṭi* members along with all other male members of the settlement, assisted by the priest (*poojari*) offer *pongal*. As a final point a fowl is sacrificed to please the divine power and the *cāvaṭi* members are supplied with raw rice and vegetables along with the sacrificed fowl. They make a feast out of it and serves to all the male members and the guests presented there. The women are prohibited to take this feast. After this ceremony the households can harvest their crops on any day they wish to.

During marriage ceremonies too the *cāvaṭi* members are entrusted with ritual as well as material assist. They have to provide music and dancing for the celebrations, cook the curry vegetables, and supply their labour during various occasions like serving the feasts and so on. Here, it is important to note that during marriage ceremonies, the cooking of rice is a communal activity. The rice supplied by the bridegroom is cooked at each household by its members and

brings it to a common place (generally besides temple). Thereafter the *cāvaṭi* members distribute it, together with the curry vegetables they cooked. Thus, it can be seen that the preservation of the *Muthuvar* religious system is extensively dependent on the *cāvaṭi* members who seem to have nothing to do with their belief system.

CĀVAṬI AS AN INSTITUTION

Finally we look at the institutional arrangements that determine the authoritarian nature of the settlement council over the *cāvaṭi* members, as well as the authoritarian structure within the *cāvaṭi*. Although the *cāvaṭi* is thought of as an arena within which the *ilantaris* take responsibility for their affairs, regarding its rule as an institution, it is from the settlement council (headed by *thalaivar* and *kani*⁵) at large that the *cāvaṭi* members derive their ultimate legitimacy. This authoritarian relationship with the settlement council makes the *cāvaṭi* members a secondary community within the *Muthuvar* community, a unit of a larger social organisation. Simultaneously, with this hierarchical order of authority the settlement council continually reinforces its solidarity with the *cāvaṭi* members.

The authorities and the formal offices within the *cāvaṭi* are determined by age and certain other personal characteristics amongst the *ilantaris* i.e., from the senior ones, a dominant having discreet character to mediate the *cāvaṭi* and the settlement council is given the title of *veli-ilantari*, (the head of the *cāvaṭi*). A subordinate is also chosen consequently from the possible age cluster to assist the *veli-ilantari*, for performing the task in his absence, note any defiance of *cāvaṭi* rules and in seeking the comforts of guests who visit the settlement, and so on. However, it is important to note that the officials of the *cāvaṭi* are not vested with the power to enforce sanctions unilaterally. If the officials personally were involved in any case, then they were also subjected to a cross-examination by the rest of the members to confirm the truth in an identical manner as in any other similar instance. A process of discussion and debate among all the *cāvaṭi* members decides the punishment that ranges to a cash fine and sometimes to an expulsion from the *cāvaṭi*, although temporarily. Generally the controversies and conflicts in the *cāvaṭi*'s are not exposed to the settlement members as well as to outsiders. This is because, there is a notion amongst

Muthuvar that if so happens it would give ground to suspect their *cāvaṭi* being ridden with division and disagreement, that would adversely affect the community consciousness of the *cāvaṭi*.

The every day activities of the *cāvaṭi* are also internally arranged by age criterion among the boys. The younger ones are requested to bring drinking water and firewood essential to the *hippoti* (fire pit). The boys of intermediate age cluster are allocated with the duties to sweep the floors daily and occasional spreading of mud on it. The elder boys are held responsible for the maintenance of walls, roofs and other coarse works. These characteristic in-turn makes it obvious that the *cāvaṭi*'s are places for mobilization of youth labour, centers of juvenile socialization, places for initiation to community polity, a training center, and so on. It also shows how the authoritative nature of the *cāvaṭi* activities molds the behavioural pattern of the *ilantaris* and thereby notes any defiance from the *Muthuvar* procedures of contact.

CONCLUSION

In the foregone ethnographic discussion of the bachelor dormitory practice among the *Muthuvar*, what emerges at the outset is the centrality of the *cāvaṭi* institution in the settlements of the community. Another point that became explicit is the linkages of the institution of *cāvaṭi* with the family organization, marriage system, concept of womanhood and chastity, institutional enabling of parental privacy, mobilization of youth labour, juvenile socialization and initiation to community polity and so on.

Just as most of the studies on the variety of dormitory practices with or without gender exclusiveness prevailing among the different tribes in the Indian subcontinent clearly show, the *cāvaṭi* system also was primarily an arrangement to ensure sexual privacy for the cohabitation of husbands and wives. The existence of the *cāvaṭi*'s for bachelors, accommodation of spin-sters with widows, the position of *cāvaṭi* in the periphery, the architecture of the *Muthuvar* hut with single room and a hearth, etc clearly shows that the purpose of the *cāvaṭi* is to secure separation of the grown up children from their parents during nights, at the same time ensuring their security. In addition, the study reveals that the *cāvaṭi* also function as an institution for protecting the *Muthuvar* notion of monogamy, by restricting the

women folk in entering the *cāvaṭi*, creating a jealousy towards the protection of women, and by enforcing the strict rule that all the *cāvaṭi* members must present in the *cāvaṭi* during nights, except those who were in their watch-shed to protect their crops from the raids of wild animals.

The study also confirms what the scholarly literature of the community dormitory practice has informed us about its multitude of roles and functions. The *cāvaṭi* function as if it is a club, a place of juvenile happiness, a non-formal school, a training center, and so on for the making of *ilantaris* to a mature community member. It enables them to get to know how to protect the community by learning the ways of defence against animal raids and enemy attacks, teaches them how to be useful for the community through co-operative labour, enables to know the community rituals and rites and also how to participate in them, provides an avenue to be community conscious and corporate in their feelings and actions thus making them responsible to the community. On the top of all the *cāvaṭi*'s function as a common shelter of the community, serving a variety of public purposes like community's guesthouse, space for convening meetings and conducting political deliberations, and after all a site for community entertainment and amusements. All these features make it obvious that the existence of the *cāvaṭi* amongst *Muthuvar* is not accidental. To conclude, *cāvaṭi* is still a pivotal institution entrenched in the community culture of the *Muthuvar*.

Many other questions that can be addressed with these observations remain to explore in future research. The present study has only shown the multitude of functions of the *cāvaṭi* against the viewpoint that youth dormitories were merely 'systems' to regulate the pre-marital affairs of youth before marriage, by establishing a temporary relationship between boys and girls, and to prevent the children from their parent's sexual life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. Rajan Gurukkal (Prof & Director, School of Social Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University) for extending suggestions at various stages of the preparation of this paper and Dr. S. Raju (UGC National Research Awardee, Department of Futures Studies, University of

Kerala), who has gone through the draft of this paper and provided valuable suggestions for its improvement.

NOTES

1. For this, see “*Kannil Zvalebil, The Smile of Murugan: on Tamil Literature in South India*”, Leiden (1973), p.28
2. Lemon grass is harvested twice or thrice a year depending on the availability of rain. The grass is distilled using a boiler and a condenser, from which lemon grass oil is collected. During 2001-2002, one kilogram of lemon grass oil costs Rs 380/- to Rs 430/-, depending upon its quality.
3. This does not mean that the status of *Muthuvan* female is miserable. The factors that the female members are over-protected and jealously guarded are not enough to say that they suffer subordination and at the extent of the exploitation of their labour. There is no subjection to women of any kind. Women’s rights and claims over the progeny are duly recognized in the *Muthuvar* families. They do not have to forfeit their share of production or income for their husbands (Engels, 1884; Meillassoux, 1987). It is in this context of the over-protection of women, emphasis of ethnic purity and stability of the institution of the marriage, etc that the male dormitory system is examined.
4. *Pongal* is an offering of material wealth (made of rice and jaggery) to the god. During harvesting, it is performed as a sanction from the god to harvest the crop.
5. *Kani* and *thalaivar* are the two different levels of functionaries seen prominent in the present *Muthuvar* hamlets. *Kani* looks after the matters exterior to the settlements, viz. dealings with panchayats and other

government and non-governmental agencies, where as *thalaivar* looks after the internal matters like marriage, initiations, conflict, other ritual ceremonies and every matters concerning the settlement. The term *thalai* means ‘head’ and therefore *thalaivar*, is head of the hamlet. Contrary to the earlier writings neither *kani* nor *thalaivar* to an extent were unquestioned authorities, now days. Both need formal approval from the whole members of the hamlet to imply sanction.

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