

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN TRAVANCORE

by *L. A. Krishna Iyer* IMPORTANCE OF A STUDY OF THE TRIBES

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TRAVANCORE is a land of ancient memories and forms a virgin field for ethnographic research. An attempt was made to break the ground in 1901 when Mr. N. Subramonia Iyer was in charge of the Ethnographic Survey of the State, but the materials then collected were incorporated in Thurston's *Castes & Tribes of Southern India*. The importance of ethnographic research on a scientific basis received the attention of Government during the Census of 1931, when an enquiry was conducted on "the effect of contact with civilization on the primitive tribes of Travancore." The results of the enquiry were published in Appendix I of the Census Report of 1931. The Ruling House of Travancore takes an abiding interest in

its aboriginals. The need for pursuing the study of the tribes and castes of the State on a scientific basis was felt by Government in 1933. The customs of the primitive tribes were undergoing rapid and destructive changes. By contact with low-countrymen and missionaries, the tribes were losing their primitive conditions and the opportunity for studying them was becoming less and less.

The Government, therefore, ordered an ethnographic survey not only of the primitive tribes, but also of the different low-country castes with a view to publishing a comprehensive work on the castes and tribes of Travancore. Government desired that attention should be first concentrated on the hill-tribes



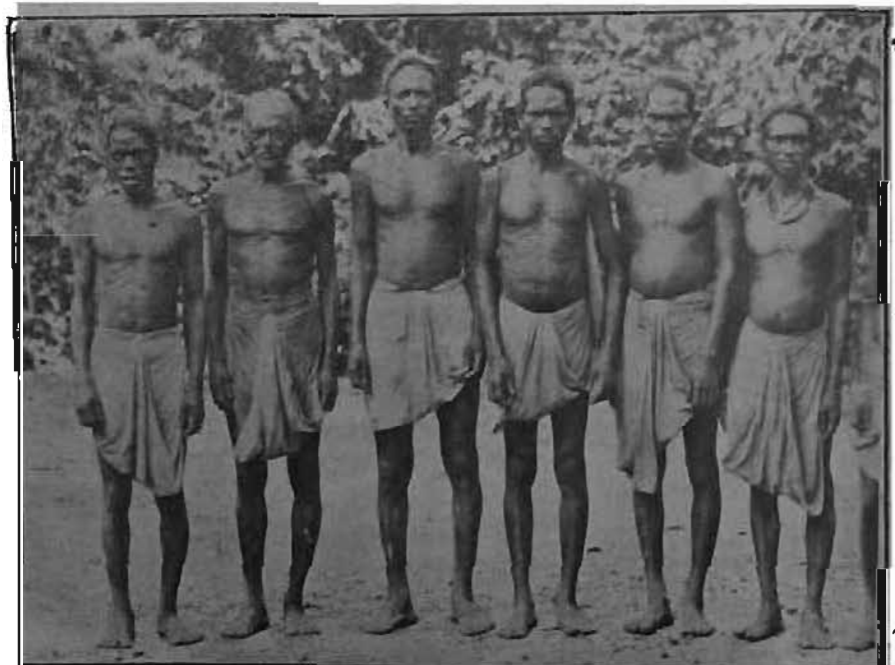
A Muthuvan
Male Group



An Urali Male-Group.

which are fast dying out or are getting mixed up with the castes and tribes of the plains, as the State includes among its population some of the most primitive tribes of the peninsula, tribes in some cases less changed by external contacts than those of any other part of India. The results of the survey are published in volumes I and II of THE TRAVANCORE TRIBES AND

CASTES. The primary object of the two volumes is to present an unvarnished account of the jungle tribes, a life apparently simple to the casual observer, but reflecting in essentials all the fundamental problems facing, though not solved by, so-called civilized man, such as food production, family, social, moral, and religious life.



A Kanikkar Male Group.

The real meaning and significance of factual data can be understood only when they are correlated to, and interpreted in the light of known facts. The accounts of the tribes cannot be complete without some knowledge of their parent stock and racial origin, their collateral branches and distribution. The third volume on the ABORIGINES

study whose importance has not received adequate attention.

The charge is laid against anthropology that it deals with matters which are most remote from the needs of practical men, that it prefers the dead past to the living present. Its remoteness from actualities is the charge



An Urali Tree-House.

OF TRAVANCORE contains the conclusions of the author on the study of the tribes. It attempts an interpretative glimpse of the inner life of the tribes who have now come under civilizing influences. It gives an exposition of primitive culture in all its aspects, a

brought against it. This is an anachronism. In the words of Smith, anthropology is the application of all relevant sciences to a comprehension of the life of actual peoples. Not merely his racial past, and his present life history from birth to death, his social organization,

customary law, his religion, his ethics, his mental capacity, his deities, the mineral contents of his pasture land, all these and many more come within the scope of the science of man. These views are found reflected in the opening address with which Westermarck prefaced the work of the Abo Academy: "Not so long ago there was a generally current idea that the manners and customs of savage tribes could at most only be of interest as curiosities and their study was scarcely looked upon as a science. And yet what an extraordinarily useful influence this study has exercised in the last few decades on the history of law, the science of religion, moral psychology and sociology in general! It has amongst other things taught us to what a large extent civilized man still preserves of savages in his institutions, in entire ignorance that he

is so doing; for a nation's customs are like balls that seem to roll on by their own impetus on through the centuries, and often it is only the study of primitive races that can give us a notion of the push that set the ball in motion!" It is, therefore, of happy augury that an opportunity first arose to present a true and complete picture of the primitive culture of the State for posterity, for foreign influences are obliterating the old landmarks like a rising tide. This stimulus to anthropological research is due to the warm interest evinced by the Government of His Highness the Maharaja Sri Chitra Thirunal. The publication of the three volumes on the tribal population is due to the sympathetic interest of Sachivottama Dr. Sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar who gave a new reorientation to the work.