

TRADITIONAL FOLK COMMUNICATIONS AMONG INDIGENOUS PEOPLE: VEDDAS COMMUNITY IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Veddas communities as the aboriginal inhabitants in Sri Lanka are rich in many unique cultural values, resources and practices. Therefore, different traditional folk communications are also used by the Veddas community. In this context, the purpose of the research is to examine the role of traditional folk communications in empowering Veddas community. Development communication is the main conceptual and theoretical framework of the study. The geographical location was *Dambana* where Veddas mainly located in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the FGDs were conducted with twenty-five Veddas and in-depth interviews were conducted with four key people in the same geographical area. The qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings show that the folk communications such as traditional ceremonies, songs, dances, rite and rituals, Kem krama (a kind of ritual treatments), mantra etc. are mostly used to fulfil the socio-cultural, economic, spiritual, moral needs and issues connected to the livelihood of Veddas. Therefore, the responsible authorities should take necessary actions to empower Veddas by protecting and promoting the socio-cultural, spiritual values, traditions, communications, beliefs, language, heritages and resources unique to Veddas community.

Keywords: traditional folk communications, indigenous people, Veddas community, Sri Lanka

Introduction

The World Heritage Committee of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has also highlighted that knowledge, cultures, laws, customs, practices and lives of indigenous societies should be protected to ensure the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world. The traditional folk communications also help to maintain the unity, harmony as well as to cater to the needs and issues faced by the indigenous communities (Report on world heritage and indigenous peoples – a call to action 2012).

This shows that traditional folk communications play a significant role in empowering indigenous people all over the world. Rowkith et. al (2020) note that the tribal community, which is the indigenous community in India, also has its own history, culture, beliefs, language, dress patterns, food and traditional folk communications to survive within the community as well as to protect the socio-economic and cultural uniqueness among the other communities. Traditional folk media such as oral narratives, songs, music, dance, drumming, ceremonies, rite and rituals also help to bring about social camaraderie, communal solidarity and conformity within the community. In order to improve the physical health and psycho-spiritual health, tribal use various cultural practices, beliefs, herbs, remedies etc.

The literature shows that traditional folk communications can be used for the personal and communal empowerment at the international level. Madhubhashini (2021) states that traditional folk media can be used to empower the rural, marginalised, indigenous people as well as grassroot level people in Sri Lanka. There is also a proximity between the people and folk media as creativity, interactivity and liveliness are the unique characteristics of folk media. In Sri Lankan context, people use traditional folk communications for socio-economic, cultural, spiritual needs in the day-to-day life.

Veddas communities as the aboriginal inhabitants in Sri Lanka, and are rich in many unique cultural values, resources and practices. Therefore, many studies were conducted by covering the socio-cultural, spiritual and economic practices, beliefs, lifestyles of Veddas in sociological and anthropological perspectives. De Silva and Punchihewa (2011) note that socio-cultural and economic aspects of the Veddas can be analysed with qualitative and quantitative analyses in order to have an in depth

understanding of their life in sociological and anthropological perspective. Therefore, the literature shows that no research has been conducted on the traditional folk communications used by Veddas communities in a communication perspective. In this context, this research was conducted to examine the role of traditional folk communications in empowering Veddas community.

Literature Review

Traditional Folk Communications among Indigenous People

In simple term, 'indigenous people' refer to the distinct social and cultural groups that have traditional livelihood activities and occupations based on the natural resources, cultural practices, beliefs, values etc. Dhir (2015) states that indigenous people constitute some 5% of the world's population and more than 70% of indigenous people are based in Asia and the Pacific. The literature shows that representation of indigenous people is comparatively low when it comes to world population. Indigenous people are defined in different ways.

Indigenous Peoples are distinct social and cultural groups that share collective ancestral ties to the lands and natural resources where they live, occupy or from which they have been displaced. The land and natural resources on which they depend are inextricably linked to their identities, cultures, livelihoods, as well as their physical and spiritual well-being (World Bank Report, 2019:45). The indigenous peoples represent the greater part of the world's cultural diversity, and have created and speak the major share of the world's almost 7000 languages. Many indigenous peoples continue to be confronted with marginalisation, extreme poverty and other human rights violations. Through partnerships with indigenous peoples, UNESCO seeks to support them in addressing the multiple challenges they face, while acknowledging their significant role in sustaining the diversity of the world's cultural and biological landscape (Report on world heritage and indigenous peoples – a call to action, 2012: 2).

According to the given definitions, indigenous peoples are social and cultural groups that have unique identities, cultures, livelihoods, physical and spiritual well-being. The language, practices and beliefs unique to indigenous people are vital in addressing to the needs and issues faced by them. These marginalised groups in the world also face multiple challenges including poverty. Therefore, UNESCO supports in protecting the cultural diversity while ensuring the well-being of indigenous people all over the world. Madhubhashini (2021) notes that traditional folk communications are mainly connected with the livelihood, identities and cultures of the indigenous people. Therefore, some researchers define the folk communications as indigenous communications.

Traditional folk communications are also defined in different ways by the scholars and researchers in the field of communication studies.

Traditional folk media is any form of endogenous communication system, which by virtue of its origin from, and integration into a specific culture, serves as a channel for messages in a way and manner that requires the utilisation of the values, symbols, institutions, and ethos of the host culture through its unique qualities and attributes (Ansu-Kyeremeh, 1998: 3). Folk media are the indigenous means of communication. The folk performing art forms are used for moral, religious, and socio-political ends from the time they originated (Kodavath, 2015:1).

This shows that various traditional folk communications are emerged based on the socio-cultural, economic, moral and spiritual practices, beliefs, values, customs and norms of indigenous communities all over the world. Therefore, different forms of folk media are used for different purposes by the indigenous people in various countries. In other words, the usage of traditional folk communications is varied from region to region and country to country.

The literature also shows that the majority of indigenous people are mainly located in Asia and Pacific regions. Dhir (2015) also states that Asian and Pacific countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Australia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippine, Indonesia, Cambodia

have more than 70 % of indigenous peoples in the world. The different terms such as ‘tribal people’, ‘hill tribes’, ‘scheduled tribes’, ‘Adivasis’ or ‘Janajatis’, are used for the indigenous peoples in Asia. The indigenous people in Malaysian peninsular are the *Orang Asli* (original people in Malay). *Orang Asli* are mainly categorised into four main groups: *Negrito*, *Semang*, *Senoi* and Aboriginal Malay. *Orang Ulu* and *Dayak* in Sarawak and *Anak Negeri* in Sabah are also considered as indigenous people in Malaysia. In Nepal, indigenous people especially live in Himalayan, Hilly, Terai and Inner Terai regions. Mostly the indigenous people use various types of traditional folk communications in the day-to-day life based on the socio-cultural, moral and spiritual practices, values and beliefs. Indigenous people in Nepal are mainly into agriculture, bee hunting and animal hunting. Therefore, traditional folk communications are also used in the main occupations.

Traditional honey hunting/gathering is an important element in the life of a number of groups including the Rajis in Nepal, and Kurumbas in South India. In the Hindu Kush Himalayan region more than 50% of total honey yield is collected mainly by honey hunters from wild honey bees. In Nepal, honey hunting is practiced not only for economic gains but it also has spiritual, cultural and social significance. Nowadays, the spiritual, cultural and social values however are declining (Gurung & Joshi, 2005:63).

This shows that there are different types of indigenous communities in the various parts of the world, especially in Asian and Pacific countries. The indigenous people use various types of traditional folk communications in facing issues and fulfilling needs in the day-to-day life based on the socio-cultural and spiritual practices, values and beliefs.

Veddas Community in Sri Lanka

Veddas or *Vanniyaletto* (hunter with bow and arrow) is considered as the aboriginal group of Sri Lanka. There are different debates on the history of Veddas community. Weerasekara (2020) notes that *Vanniyaletto* belong to a clan called ‘*Yakkha*’. The Veddas were living in most parts of the island before arrival of the Aryans in Sri Lanka. It is a myth to believe that *Vijaya – Kuveni* legend (*Vijaya* is the first king in Sri Lanka, married to *Kuveni* who belongs to *Yakka*) has a connection with origin of Veddas community in Sri Lanka.

This shows that Veddas are respected as the indigenous people in Sri Lanka. Veddas community also has a rich culture which contains beliefs, practices, values, languages, dress patterns, traditions, folklore, arts etc. Obeysekera (2002) states that Veddas were highly respected throughout the ages of the ancient kingdoms from Anuradhapura to the Kotte rules as a member of the royal court. Vedda are given certain responsibilities in ritual *Perahera* (procession), honouring Buddhist shrines in procession, such as the Temple of Tooth (*Dalada Maligawa*) in Kandy. Even now Veddas are given the responsibilities in certain socio-cultural work in the national level.

It is important to identify the socio-cultural and spiritual background of Veddas. Weerasekara (2020) notes that Veddas were earlier divided into two varieties, tame and the wilder. Wilder Veddas were with his bow and arrow and dagger, smoking a hug pipe and wearing a thick loin cloth and the responsibility of tame Veddas was to provide tusks, honey, and wax and deer’s flesh etc. to the kings. Now there is a three-fold classification of Veddas; the pure Veddas, the Village Veddas and the Coast Veddas in terms of physical appearance, blood and cultural integrity. Mostly Veddas are located in Uva Province, Central province, and North Central Province and Eastern province in Sri Lanka. Veddas mainly engage in animal hunting, fishing and bee hunting. *Veddas* language is one of the indigenous languages which has rich cultural uniqueness and variations. The language, rituals, indigenous knowledge and tradition of Veddas have been verbally transmitted from generation to generation.

This shows that Veddas have rich cultural values, practices, identities unique to themselves such as rite and rituals, language, traditional medicine and knowledge. Lakshan (2017) also notes that the religious beliefs and rituals of Vedda are mainly based on the *yaku* (demon) and cult of the dead and spirits. *Kande Yakka* (demon of the mountain) is mainly worshiped by Veddas to get the blessings for hunting. *NaeYakku* (ancestor worshipping) is also quite popular among Veddas. The purpose of worshipping ancestors is to obtain prosperity, get rid of diseases, pandemics etc.

It is obvious that the religious beliefs, practices, rite and rituals are mainly associated with the occupations and life style of Veddas. The literature also shows that several researches were mainly done on Veddas community in sociological and anthropological perspective. But no research was conducted on Veddas community in communication perspective.

Development communication can be considered as the main conceptual and theoretical framework as this study mainly focuses on the empowerment of Veddas community. In simple term, development communication is, use of communications for the development purposes. “Development communication is the science of human communication linked to the transitioning of communities from poverty in all its forms to a dynamic, overall growth that fosters equity and the unfolding of the individual potential” Quebral (1971, P:1). The United Nations (UN) also identifies indigenous development as a major area of development communication process.

The growth or progress of an indigenous community in their originality or within the context of their ethnic identity in a holistic way. Indigenous identity is based on ten aspects of indigenous systems which are interrelated, indivisible, and interdependent. These aspects are cultural, social, spiritual, political/institutional, juridical, economic, natural resource management, technology, health and education/ways of learning (Report of Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, ninth session conducted by UN, 2010: 5).

This shows that it is important to empower Veddas community culturally, socially, politically, economically, spiritually to protect the identify and the originality of them. The literature also shows that the folk media communications help in taking people from poverty to prosperity culturally, socially, politically, economically and spiritually. It is obvious that, traditional forms of communication can also play a vital role in empowering Veddas community. Therefore, this study was also carried out in Dambana to examine the role of traditional folk communications in empowering Veddas community.

Research Methods

De Silva and Punchihewa (2011) note that Dambana is considered as the sole haven of Veddas of Sri Lanka where the recent leadership shifted from late *Uru Varige Thisahami* to *Uru Varige Vannila Eththo*, though Veddas are located in different areas in Uva province, Central province, North Central province and Eastern province such as Dambana, Rathugala, Vakarai, Dimbugalaga, Pollebadda, Dalukana, Henanigala. Therefore, Dambana in Badulla district in Uva province was selected as the main geographical location of the study. The report of Indigenous Peoples Planning Framework (2017) shows that it was estimated that 9660 of Veddas peoples in Sri Lanka. There is a total of 996 population in Dambana Veddas community.

This study used a qualitative approach to obtain data using Focused Group Discussions (FGD) and interview method. FGD is a structured discussion used to obtain in-depth information (qualitative data-insight) from a group of people about a particular topic (Omar, 2018). Therefore, twenty-five people were randomly selected for the FGDs. The in-depth interviews were personally conducted with the head of Veddas community – *Uru Varige Vannila Eththo*, *Grama Sewa officer* (the government officer appointed for Dambana), *Samurdhi officer* (Development officer in the village) and an officer in the Department of wildlife in this area. The purposive sampling was used to select the respondents. The data were collected in January 2021 with support of three research assistances after following all the health guidelines during the pandemic. The qualitative data were analysed thematically.

Some limitations were caused in the study due to some geographical and subjective reasons. Veddas communities were only selected from Dambana among the other areas where Veddas located in Sri Lanka. But the population and sample size can be expanded and more research area can be covered in order to find more practical findings/ results in a future study in a systematic and methodical manner.

Results and Discussion

According to the results, the purpose was achieved, and problem was answered in the study. In other words, the role of traditional folk communications in empowering Veddas community was examined. Before presenting the original findings of the study, it is important to identify the socio-economic and cultural background of Veddas. When it comes to occupations, Veddas are now into paddy cultivation, though animal hunting, and honey hunting are the main traditional occupations of the community. Apart from the paddy cultivation and hunting, Veddas also engage in chena cultivation and fishing. Due to the socio-economic changes and needs, now some Veddas engage in self-employments, army and civil forces, tourism, foreign employment, businesses, government services and others.

The income level of Veddas is extremely poor. As far as the education is concerned, the majority of Veddas have only primary education or never had school education. When it comes to family life, mostly men and women in Veddas community have multiple marriages. Polygamy and polyandry are also practiced in hidden. Legal marriages are quite rare among Veddas. Adequate Infrastructure facilities are not available for the Veddas in Dambana. The main issues faced by Veddas are scarcity of water, interaction with wild life, malnutrition, teenage mothers, low income, education and so on (Grama Sewa officer in Dambana- the government officer appointed for Dambana).

This shows that socio-cultural and economic background of Veddas is not up to satisfactory level. In other words, Veddas communities face various issues in the day-to-day life. Madhubhashini (2021) notes that various folk communications are used to fulfil the needs and to find the solutions for the issues faced by the indigenous people in the day-to-day life. Therefore, Veddas also use various forms of traditional folk communication based on the cultural, moral and spiritual practices and beliefs.

The findings also show that the availability of television and radio is quite limited in the households. A very few mobile phones, laptops, desktops and the other technical devices are also available. In terms of media usage, traditional folk media are popular among Veddas, though television, radio and print media usage are limited. New media such as internet are not used by Veddas due to the non-availability of ICT and social infrastructure in Dambana. The literature shows that the traditional folk communications are mainly used by the Veddas compare to the mainstream media.

De Silva and Punchihewa (2011) note that at least a considerable proportion of the Veddas culture is still remaining in Dambana. The traditional knowledge, folk communications, rite and rituals, traditional practices etc. are carried forward to a certain extent for future generation. The results of the study also show that especially traditional practices are carried forward to maintain the social structure and system within the Veddas community. For instance, there are different family names (*varige*) among Veddas community. *Uru Varige* is the most influential and common *Varige* represented by *Vannila Eththo*. *Unapana Varige*, *Nabudana Varige*, *Morana Varige*, *Thala Varige* are the other family names unique to Veddas in Dambana. Especially when it comes to marriages, mostly the marriages take place between people belonging to the same *Varige*. Moreover, it is not officially allowed to marry a person belongs to other *varige*. This shows that Veddas also practice a hieratical social structure as the Sinhalese maintain the caste system in the larger society.

The sign and symbols give different meanings in the communications. Appearance, clothing, gestures or any form of non-verbal communications convey a message or meaning (Stewart, 1966). Therefore, the cultural uniqueness is also shown by the clothing and appearances of Veddas.

Veddas community has a unique culture based on the traditional practices and beliefs. Veddas also maintain unique identity through their short sarong, axe on shoulder, naked upper body, long hair and beard. Elders in the community still practice the old traditional and rituals though the younger generation has moved with some modern practices. But still as the aboriginal community in Sri Lanka, we protect our traditional practices, rite and rituals. The other communities in Sri Lanka and foreigners visit to see us as they appreciate our cultural uniqueness. The different forms of folk communication are mainly associated with the unique culture of Veddas. Therefore, traditional ceremonies, rite and rituals, kem krama (a kind of ritual

treatments), mantra etc. are strongly connected with the livelihood of Veddas (The head of Veddas community, Uru Varige Vannila Eththo).

Therefore, it is obvious that traditional folk communications unique to Veddas are used to fulfil the needs in the day-to-day life. The findings show that the folk communications are mostly used for bee hunting, animal hunting, fishing and agriculture. Before leaving for animal hunting or bee hunting, Veddas pray for *Indigolle Kiri Amma* (a female devil) for the protection during the journey and to grant good hunts by putting rice into a pot and keep a coconut on the pot. Finally, the pot is covered with a piece of cloth. A group of Veddas pluck a branch of a tree and hang it on another tree before entering a forest for hunting to obtain the blessings from God *Kalu Bandara* and God *Gale Bandara*. People usually spend two or three days in the forest for hunting (this is known as “*rada yanawa*” in Veddas language). Veddas leave a portion for devils after killing an animal. The first share is given to the leader and the rest is shared among the communities in the village. It is believed that Veddas may face danger while hunting next time, if a portion is not offered to devils.

Apart from worshiping devils, Veddas use various types of techniques in hunting based on the available resources, beliefs and practices unique to the community. *Ugul ataveema* (Setting traps), *boru wala sadeema* (setting pitfalls), installed guns, *maru Vala* (death creeper), ambushing, using dogs, etc. are the traditional methods of hunting among Veddas. Mantras are also used to chase bear, wild buffalo and elephants. Fishing is another traditional form of occupation of Veddas.

We use different traditional techniques in fishing. A natural poison can be prepared by mixing thibiri leaves (Diospyros embroypteris), kukuru mahan fruit (Randia dometorum), Kalawel roots (Derris scandeusi) for traditional fishing. Putting this natural poison into the water is the best way of catching fish. Building temporary bunds to stop escape and removing water inside the area surrounded by the bund is another way of catching fish. Spearing, using rods, nets, hooks, catching by hands are some of the traditional techniques of fishing (A forty-year-old Vedda).

When it comes to bee hunting, rite and rituals are also practiced by Veddas. The findings show that “*Dolayak Ceremony*”, “*Rahuyak Ceremony*” are conducted to obtain the blessings from the god to get more honey harvest. These ceremonies are done by offering pooja to Gods while doing traditional dancing and singing. Mantras are also used to protect the honey collectors from the insects (honey mantra). Same as in bee hunting, animal hunting and fishing, rituals are done to increase the harvest in the paddy and chena cultivation. Veddas make a vow to Gods and devils to offer a portion of crops after getting the harvest in April. This particular ritual is called *yale kariya*.

Apart from the rituals connected to the occupations done by Veddas, some folk ceremonies and folk dance such as *Hathme*, *Kiri koraha* are conducted to obtain the prosperity and blessings from the gods and devils. The main purposes of having *Kiri koraha* are to save cattle from diseases, to save people from infections and diseases, to protect people in hunting, fishing and farming. *Hathme* is done for God *Kalu Bandara*, one of the ancestors of Veddas who died a number of years ago.

Three days prior to the ceremony, an area is selected in the middle of the jungle for the performance. A perahera (procession) is arranged from the Devalaya (Veddas temple) to this place in the afternoon with the bringing of alms and offerings such as pepper and jewelry. The payers and performance are started in the night and Kiri Koraha is conducted in the following day. In Kiri Koraha, Kapuwa (Main prayer) starts his performance at the begging and cuts the coconut in half and the coconut is scraped with a sharp tool. Incense smoke is lit near the scraped coconut and finally smoke is covered with the koraha (a traditional large clay pot) while chanting Yathika (prayers). Then Kapuwa is covered with a towel and the coconut is squeezed (juiced/ milked) while dancing. Mixing coconut milk with some turmeric and creating a holy mixture is done by Kapuwa while dancing. Kapuwa sprays holy milk to people to bless them to protect from illnesses and dangers (A sixty-six years old Vedda).

The findings also show that both ceremonies are mainly held to obtain the blessings from Na *yakku* (relations who have passed away), devils, *kiri ammas* (milk mothers), and *nachchila* (Grandmothers). The majority of Veddas in Dambana are Buddhists though worshiping ancestors is mainly done by

Veddas. De Silva and Punchihewa (2011) also highlight that though Veddas are the aboriginal people in Sri Lanka, some similarities can be identified between the Sinhala majority people and Veddas in terms of rituals and rite, folk media etc.

The findings also show that the honey, meat, and fish are mainly taken by Veddas in the meals. Bee honey is mainly used for many diseases including malnutrition, wounds and so on. Traditional kind of medications are used for bear bite, snake bite etc. during hunting. For an example, using an anti-venom stone and several leaves such as Neem leaves (*kohomba*), Devil leaves (*Rak Attatana*). This shows that Veddas use available resources, beliefs, practices for the needs and issues faced in the day-to-day life. The language is the most powerful tool in communication. The language also plays a significant role in the traditional folk communications as the language is a unique identify of any culture. “The cultural differences, variances and uniqueness of a particular society or a group can be identified based on the slangs and jargons of a language. Likewise, language and its jargons, slangs etc. can vary from community to community and region to region” (Madhubhashini, 2021:66). When it comes to language, Veddas community also has a unique language, which is a key symbol of Veddas identity. Weerasekara (2020) notes that Vedda language is one of the indigenous languages in the world, but now it has become an extreme language mix as Veddas have been struggling for the survival of the traditional lifestyle. “We still use our unique language, but there is a huge impact of Sinhala language on Veddas language. We use a lot of Sinhala words in communicating. Young people in our village mostly speak Sinhala which is the majority’s language in Sri Lanka, for their survivals” (A eighty-year-old Veddas).

Conclusion

The development communication as the main theoretical framework of the study supports to examine the role of traditional folk communications in empowering Veddas community. In other words, the findings show that the livelihood of Veddas community is directly connected with the various traditional forms of communication within the community. Moreover, the traditional folk communications play a vital role in finding solutions for the issues connected with the livelihood of Veddas.

This shows that the purpose of the study was achieved based on the findings. According to the findings of the study, the majority of people in Veddas community use traditional folk communications such as traditional ceremonies, songs, dances, rite and rituals, Kem krama (a kind of ritual treatments), mantra etc. to fulfil the socio-cultural, economics, spiritual, moral needs and issues connected to the livelihood of Vedda. Moreover, the traditional forms of communication are used by Veddas for get rid of diseases, epidemics, crises, struggles and needs in their occupations such as bee hunting, fishing, animal hunting etc., and to maintain the uniqueness of their food culture, to protect the cultural and religious values, heritages etc. Therefore, the responsible authorities should support Veddas communities to protect and promote the cultural, socio-economic values, heritages and resources unique to the community. According to the Report of UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues conducted in 2010, the indigenous communities should be protected at the national and international levels. It is also important to protect the originality and the identity of the indigenous communities while empowering them socially, culturally and economically. In this context, the most important thing is to help Veddas community to overcome the socio-economic, cultural issues such as scarcity of water, interaction with wild life, malnutrition, teenage mothers, low income, education and so on. Therefore, it is a responsibility of the relevant authorities to develop the infrastructure facilities and facilitate people to overcome these issues.

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