



Socio cultural status of Muthuvan tribe in Kerala: A historical analysis of Muthuvan tribe of Koodakkadukudi

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Abstract

Muthuvans are the least educated tribes of Kerala (69.78%). Moreover, they have low sex ratio and that too in the age group of below six years is 943 (census 2001). Most of the deliveries take place in the kudy itself. According to National Family Health Survey (2005), Idukki is one location, where women get least antenatal care and least trained attendants support during the delivery. The numbers of home deliveries are also the highest in Idukki when compared to that of other districts of Kerala. They have their own system of living inside the forest and at times the external interventions spoil their closeness to nature and push them into a dilemma of being torn between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. Present study is a historical analysis of socio cultural status of Muthuvan tribe of Koodakkadukudi.

Keywords: muthuvan, socio cultural status and tribe

Introduction

Tribals are most marginalized and deprived groups in the society today. They are heterogeneous group marked by differences in ethnicity languages, cultural believe and practices and regional localities. The socio-cultural and historical marginalization of tribes had begun in the pre - colonial period. This paper deals with the socio economic status of Muthuvan Tribe in Koodakkadukudi.

Muthuvan Tribe

The Muthuvan people were very loyal subjects of the dynasty of Madurai, according to tribal legend. When the dynasty was deposed the surviving royal members migrated to Travancore, Central Kerala and established the famed Poonjar dynasty. On their way to Kerala the Muthuvans carried idols of Madurai Meenakshi on their backs. So the word Muthuvans is derived from the word "Muthuku" which means back in Tamil and Malayalam languages. The tribe which carried the idols on their backs later settled in the forest near Tamil Nadu and came to be known as Muthuvans.

History of Koodakkadukudi

The present study is carried out among the tribal settlements of the Muthuvans at Marayoor. These settlements can be reached from walk of 6 or 7 km from Marayoor town forest check post through the forest land. There are several clusters or so called settlement (known as kudies in local languages) scattered in there inland forests. There is distance of couple of kilometers between each kudies. The most known settlements of the area are Vengapparakudi, Nellippethkudi, Kavakkudi, Kammalamkudi, Periyakudi and overthittukudi. Koodakkattukudi is a common name for these six settlements. These aboriginals are the primeval people of the area. They had a nomadic culture and unorganized lifestyle, customs of

nature worship, their own odd dialects, way of communication, constellation of the other world, high rate of infant mortality, own culture arts and traditions, law and rule uninformed agricultural system and pattern, temporary shelters than permanent houses etc. recent studies show that a pattern of living in permanent settlements than nomadic life style is being developed them.

They are very reluctant and afraid of being united with the other clans of the best and civilized people. They like to live a scheduled life fostering their own culture. Since they are in the deepest parts of the forest, they are illiterate, ignorant and very superstitions. The lack of basic centers of health, education and other facilities stop them to know about the necessities of life. Their economic, social and educational improvement in negligibly nil and it has been a phenomenon for centuries. Their reluctance and refusal to social development has been little bit changed and they are being motivated continuously for a better life.

Social Life of Muthuvans in Marayoor

Muthuvans are a forest dwelling scheduled tribe community of Marayoor. They are not aborigines and constitute one of the largest groups of tribes. Still a primitive group they are mostly agriculturists. They prefer a scheduled life fostering their own traditions and customs. Muthuvans tend to be highly superstitious believing in animism and totemism. They prefer their own medicinal system. Muthuvan tribe is very independent and reluctant to contract with outside the world. They refuse to connect with other tribes outside the world. Their women folk are strictly prohibited to have contact with outside clan or other people, specially other men. Their economic, social and educational improvement is negligibly nil and it has been a phenomenon for centuries. Their reluctance and refused to social development has been little bit

changed and they are being motivated continuously for a better life. They begin consuming tobacco at an early age. In the jungle habitat, they took up shifting cultivation and still is a way of life. Their most colourful social institutions of dormitory system (bachelor halls/ chattram) festivals, collective eating and sharing of food known as koodithinnuthu, beliefs, practices characterizes the Muthuvan society.

The language that they speak had no connection with Malayalam, but was a connection of Tamil having a peculiar intonation. Due to declaration of the forest tracts as protected areas and due to the ban imposed on hunting and shifting cultivation these forest dwelling tribal communities who were living in these areas as hunter-gatherers and shifting cultivators for several generations, were therefore forced to abandon their traditional subsistence modes of shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering. The Muthuvans living in one particular region, negotiated with the forest department to take up lemongrass cultivation as a primary source income. They cultivate ragi, cardamom in their own farms. They have 3 to 10 acres of forest lands for cultivation. They ignore modern farming methods.

Life Situations

They are group of distinct people dependent on their land for their livelihood, they have followed ways of life for many generations that are largely self-sufficient and are clearly different from the main stream and dominant society. These are relatively bond by kinship relations, reciprocal exchange, and strong ties to place.

Wildlife

Koodakkadukudi situated under Marayoor gram panchayat. Marayoor is one of the most attractive wild spots in Kerala province. And also it is the only place in Kerala that has natural sandal wood forests. Chinnar wildlife sanctuary is located 18 km north of Marayoor on SH 17 in Marayoor Kanthallor panchayath of Devikulam Taluk in Idukki district of Kerala state in South India. It is one of twelve wild life sanctuaries among the protected areas of Kerala. Koodakkadukudi is a part of wild life sanctuary. And the tribals suffered from elephant, monkeys, wolf, wild buffalo, and wild boar, mullan, venomous snakes etc. Tribals are facing a serious threat from wild animals. Standing crops on many acres especially in the hilly hamlets had been destroyed by animals in search of foods. Invasion by elephants and wild boar is most common. Large scale loses to the houses were reported in Marayoor; Kummattam kuzhicherkad, Karppoorakudi (hamlet of Koodakkadukudi) tribal colony.

Sewage

Kudi has no sewage treatments. Because of it located under protected forest area, therefore the department of forest is not allowing to construct waste water treatment plan. They also not allow them to build a single canal to divert the direction of waste water. In Vengapparakudi, waste water from houses pass across the foot path. With our anxieties they replied that the forest department not allows them to construct any canals. So the waste water from toilet and households pass out there.

Housing

The entire kudi have 90% of houses, constructed under different government schemes. The proportion of pucca houses, however, is less than 10% of the remaining $\frac{2}{3}$ semi-pucca houses. Ration card is possessed by 100% of households. And all houses have access to power connections and also gas connections. 7% of the families have single room houses while 22% have two-room houses. In all 63% of the houses have two rooms fewer. These rooms are however smaller than that of typical houses in Kerala 30% of houses has four rooms.

Colony Life

The Muthuvans follows a nuclear family pattern. Muthuvans live in hamlets called kudi. The kudi represents the Muthuvan society, each of which consists of 30 or more families. Concerning Koodakkadukudi there are eight hamlets are there, namely Karppoorakudi, Kavakkudi, Kuthukalkudi, Periyakudi, Overthittukudy, Nellippettikudy, Vengapparakudi, Kammalamkudy. All members of a kudi are related. The kudi's headman called 'Kani'; which is vernacular means superior or protector.

Koodi Thinnuthu

A significant feature of the Muthuvan society is the practice of collective eating and sharing of food known as Koodi Thinnathu. It is the practice of sharing food. Everybody at the meal time both morning and evening, bachelors and spinsters combine in groups of two to five and eat a little in every house. Two to three plates of foods are always kept ready for the visit of such groups by every house. The whole Muthuvans perceives the members of the bachelor halls as readily available labour force to take up any kind of actively for the welfare of the settlement. In each hamlets of Koodakkadukudi easily follows it tradition. According to the comment of Kani, these types of traditions strengthen them.

Social Rituals

Muthuvans are one of the 36 notified tribes of Kerala. Muthuvan kudies are located in the Western Ghats region of Marayoor in Idukki district of Kerala. One should walk about 8 km through the forest to reach the first hamlet, Vengapparakudi. After that since 3 km distance required to reach all other seven hamlets. Seven kudies scattered in hector of land area within reserved forest. The total population of the kudi is 985. They have many rituals and ceremonies. By these they show their own unity. All rituals are so interesting ones. But they don't like to show that in front of outsiders.

Urumalkettu

It is the ceremony of boys that performed when the boys reach the age of 12- 16 and it is on this occasion that the boys are made to wear long cloth over the head for first time. Traditionally the Muthuvan men never used to cut their hair. They used to tie their hair under 3- 4 meter long cloth worn over the head, which is Thalappavu. If the Muthuvans removes the Thalappavu it means that some sad news has happened in the kudi, like death. But nowadays the Muthuvan men cut their hair. The boys are made to grow hair for some

time before the ceremony of Urumalkettu and after that ceremony they readily cut it. It is the uncle's son who performs the rituals on this day. On this day the boy is taken to all the houses in the kudi where he is mocked by the family members by throwing mud water and cow dung on him. In the evening the boy's family incites all members of the kudi for forest. The boy removes the cloth from the head within a week or a month depending on the convenience of school going children. School vacations are considered as the favorable time to perform Urumalkettu.

Kondakettu

It is a ritual performed when a girl reaches the age of eleven or twelve. The maternal cousin and friends tie her hair like a ball, konda. The girl begins to wear melpudava on the same day. From that day onwards she is supposed to lenot her hair always and she is never allowed to open her konda in front of others especially men. They wash their hair and after that tie the wet hair. A Muthuvan woman is made to open her hair at the time of her husband's death.

Thalemuttu

It is the other important ceremony in a girl's life, which celebrates menarche. They celebrate it like a marriage ceremony. Traditionally, soon after the ceremony of 'Thalemuttu' the marriage of the girl used to be arranged. Now a days in Koodakkadukudi tribes celebrate Kondakettu and Thalemuttu on the same day. Sometimes if the girls are studying outside the kudi and studying in hostel; the ceremony is arranged when they come to the kudi during the vacation. However, people celebrate Kondakettu and menarche as two different rituals. Not many girls from Koodakkattukudi are studying outside only. Earlier Muthuvans performed these two rituals separately even in Koodakkattukudi and now that is merged together in this kudi. It can be observed of transformation in the practices of rituals. School going children's convenience is the prior concern of Muthuvans of all eight hamlets of Koodakkattukudi in performing these rituals.

Occasions

Birth

Muthuvans pregnancy as a normal event; no additional care is given to the pregnant woman in items of food and work. Women themselves are not used to care during the pregnancy. Muthuvans consider pregnancy and labour as usual part of life. The place of delivery is crowded with all women of the particular kudi including children and few old women. People immediately disappear after the delivery. If the delivery is over they think the process is over. They do not think about the placenta. Children are bold enough to see the pain of the delivery and that gives them courage and familiarity with the process of labour. It enables them to handle the kind of situations even they are alone. But, no men are allowed to enter this area during delivery. One or two days someone her family helps her baby. She will carry baby on her back, tying baby on her sari. Now the situation got a few changes. In the case of problem delivery then the tribal promoters, health workers will help them to admit in hospitals. But a crucial condition is lack of road.

Marriage

In olden concept of marriage is normal at the age 12 to 14 years and includes many rituals and ceremonies. But now a days, this concept got totally changed and the wedding age level is 18 and above. The wedding is usually conducted in the groom's house. The groom has to give dowry to the bride's father. There is a grant vegetarian feast on the wedding day. It is normal and acceptable for an adolescent to marry their first or second cousin or even the second spouse of the parent.

Death

Muthuvans considers death as an integrated part of life. When there is an incident of death in the kudi, everyone in the kudi gather and mourn for the dead person and they speak about the good nature and good deeds of the dead person. None of the Muthuvan from the kudi would go for work for three days. Based on Koodakkadukudi there are 8 tribal settlements in it. So, in the case of the death in a settlement; Kani (head of tribal settlement) assigned 21 persons to inform death in other kudies; after getting the information all members will reach there within hours. Old people removes their Thalappavu and thus, to spread the news of death to all the others sympathetically. If a Muthuvan coming there without Thalappavu, it means he has some sad news to give. After all, the messengers reach back to kudi to the burial place which is referred to as Chudalapparamb.

Normal Death

After bathing the body it is placed on a net usually made by rattan. They make a coat with rattan and bamboo, keep the body on that and then the body is concerned with small sticks. They keep certain agricultural tools like thoomba, near the body. It is believed that before the adiyanthiram the spirit will not accept the dead person to the work. So far thirty days the dead should be fed along with other dead folks; this is why the relatives of the dead persons keep agricultural items alongside the body.

Another interesting factor is they bury the body with all jewels without removing even gold jewellery also. A white cloth is placed over the face of the dead body and then the people lift the rattan and carry body away. Another group of people dig the pit. Only the person who knows the mantra removes the white cloth. The white cloth is handed over to the widow or widower. After the funeral this white cloth should be kept without showing it to the others and she or he should over their head with it after taking bath on 13th day.

During burial the head of the body is kept facing upwards and placed in the direction of north to south. The grave has a little thatched roof, put over it. A stone is put at the head and a similar stone at the feet. The dead person's son stands at the head side of the body and he would first throw mud over the body. If woman dies the husband first sprinkles mud. The depth of grave is for man judged sufficient if the grave digger, standing on the bottom, finds the level of the ground up to his waist. But for the woman, it must be up to his armpits. They keep the dead body of the women in the surface level, and over with leaves and mud. But in the case of man Muthuvans keeps the body deeper. The widow opens her hair and the next day her friends tie her hair. She will not take bath for 30 days. On the third day they have adiyanthiram and 30 day after

another one, when all relatives and people in the kudi gather and share meal. If it is the death of an elderly person that they commemorate then they dance after the meal.

Suicide

Suicide cases are associated with martial conflicts, sexual relationships outside the marriage. This is common in all age groups, but is more among adolescent girls. But in Periyakudi (one of the hamlet of Koodakkadukudi) a teenager boy committed suicide. Reason is for further education he went outside and the colleagues teased him because of his gothra languages and also his look also. It hurts him. When he reached the kudi he committed suicide. This is the main problem among tribals. The world out of the settlement won't accept their rituals, belief, customs and also their gothra languages. This brings a feel of guilty among them. Therefore they are afraid of facing the outer world. This suicide changes the attitude of tribal people for their children to go for higher studies.

Education

Muthuvan children avail primary level education either from the Girijyothi LPS and Govt. lower primary school from the single teacher school. Those are present in the kudi. Girijyothi lower primary school is located in Vengapparakudi and govt. single teacher school is in Periyakudi.

Girijyothi LPS Vengapparakudi

Girijyothi LPS Koodakkadukudi was established in the year 1997. The management of Girijyothi LPS is social welfare department. It is not residential type. The total number of teachers in Girijyothi is 4. The total number of non-teaching staff is only 1. The medium of instruction is Malayalam. The total number of classroom is 4. Based on the opinions of tribals they fully interested in the activities of Girijyothi School. And they argue that with the help of this school their children can acquire maximum level of knowledge. And they are really interested about the team work of the teachers. The teachers are residing at the school itself. Goodwill of the school stands by the scaffoldings of social development society. Rev. Fr. Sebastian Kochupurackal is the director of Hirange social development society. It works in Idukki diocese. The activities of development society cover over 11500 tribal in various settlements. These aborigines are concentrated in the forests. They are socially economically educationally and culturally backward.

Government LPS

Koodakkadukudi Govt. LPS is located in Periyakudi. It is a single teacher school. And the tribals are not willing to send their children there. According to Pandi (from Periyakudi) opined that is that single teacher school, teachers are not well educated, and they will not be qualified one. They will be from their own community. And they are not interested to send the pupils there. They are interested to send the pupils in Girijyothi LPS. They commented that in that school teachers are highly educated, and they believe that in their pupils are highly secured.

Education level among the major Scheduled Tribes in Kerala

Table 1

Education	Muthuvans
Literate without education level	5.9
Below primary	47.5
Primary	27.9
Middle	12.7
Metric/secondary/HSS/intermediate	5.6
Tech/non-tech diploma	0.3
Graduate & above	0.1

Muthuvans are 21,666 in number and 5.9% of muthuvans are literate without educational level. Only 47.5% are in below primary level. 27.9% attained primary level education. 12.7% laid under middle education level. 5.6% obtained metric/secondary/HSS/intermediate etc. 0.3% are in Tech/non-tech diploma. The negligible percentage of graduates and above is 0.1%.

Percentage & Population of School Going Children of 5-14 Years

Table 2

Tribes	Percentage
All STs	75.2
Paniyan	63.0
Kurichchan	87.9
Malaiarayan	90.1
Marati	85.2
Kurumans	86.2
iruler	69.8
kanikaran	84.3
Muthuvan	61.1

Muthuvans are 21,666 in number and more than half of their population is concentrated in Idukki district (census of India 2001).

Socio- Cultural Factors

Socio-cultural practices of Muthuvans play a significant role in the overall development of children in study village. The formal education which is imported to Muthuvan children is devoid of learning about their own society and their vernacular language; they are forced to learn alphabets in alien languages. Even the teachers are not well versed with Muthuvan language and they reach in text book language. They are not bothered about whether the children are capable of understanding what they are taught. It is the fact that despite their tradition and culture these societies have to accept the innovations for getting employment. But they feel that the medium of instructions should be local up to primary level and the syllabus should be based on their culture and society.

Non -Availability of Facilities

This settlement has two primary schools and two Anganavadies, but there have no middle schools and high

schools. One of the primary school in the study area is working with a single teacher. And another primary school has all facilities and it is working with four highly qualified teachers. In the single teacher school all students from standard I to IV are sitting in same class room and the single teacher manages all classes. The drop-outs generally occurred after the child completed the school. Where schools are not located at close quarters from settlements, rates of drop-outs as well as non-enrollment are high. There is a natural hesitation on the part of most parents to send children to schools located at distance.

Pre -Metric Hostel for Female Children

In Kerala, state government provided a boarding institution for tribal girls – pre metric hostel as it is called. There is a hostel in Marayoor, the nearby town of the study area, for the convenience of the tribal girls who are coming from remote settlements. The hostel has now thirty two boarders who are students in government run and private school for only 6 Muthuvan communities. As Muthuvans consider themselves as superior to the other tribes they do not prefer to admit their children to the hostel where they would have to live, interline and interact with Malayapulaya children. Muthuvans are claiming superior status over Malayapulaya. The school drop-outs rate among Muthuvan children is said to be considerably high. It would seem that besides their hesitancy to stay and interact with Malayapulaya children. Muthuvan children who are used to high attitudes and evergreen forest habitat and associated way of living find the school and the hostel alienating. The resistance of Muthuvan parents to their children intermingling with Malayapulaya children is very high. This is also forms one of the reason for not sending the children in the schools away from the Muthuvan hamlet. There are many plans conducted by the tribal department for the promotion of educations.

Schooling

Soon after puberty there are restrictions imposed on the young girls in terms of social mobility and education. Notions of purity and pollution are introduced strictly in connection with menstruation. In Muthuvan community the children stop education of girl children after menarche or any other rituals associated with puberty.

Educational Programs

Pre - Metric Lump Sum Grants

Table 3

Sl. No.	Classes	Lump- sum grant	Monthly stipend
1	LP section (I to IV)	140	55
2	UP section (V to VII)	240	60
3	HS section (VIII to X)	330	70

There is a lump – sum grant and monthly stipend plans up to standard X. For this purpose government allotted 700 lacks. In LP section lump – sum grant is 140 rupees and also stipend is 55 rupees. In UP level (V TO VII) 240 rupees lump – sum grant and monthly stipend is 60 rupees. Under HSS section (VII – X) 330 rupees as lump – sum grant and 70 rupees as monthly stipend.

Post – Metric Level (Non – Plan)

After completing matriculation the students were required to get fees, yearly lump-sum grant and monthly stipend also. If they joined any government approved universities or institutions they will get these grants continuously without delay.

Post- Metric Lump Sum Grants

Table 4

Sl. No.	Courses	Amount
1	Plus two / Vocational higher secondary	715
2	BA / B.Sc / B. Com / B. Ed / Equivalent	790
3	MA / M.Sc / M. Com / Equivalent	1010
4	Engineering / Veterinary / Agricultural etc.	1500
5	MBBS / MS / MD	2065

And also it provides travelling allowance if it distant from 8 km they will get Rs. 405, above 8 km they are required to get Rs. 475 as a monthly stipend. And in the case of medical engineering students they will get Rs. 120 as a pocket money and in case of other courses Rs. 100 as pocket money.

Religions

Religion plays an important part in the life of the Muthuvan. Every event in his personal life and in nature around him is attributable to the will of superior, non- material being or beings, subject to feelings of pleasure and annoyance like and dislikes. The most complex of Muthuvan religious beliefs embraces a variety of deities of varying potency and unequal spheres of influence. The religion concepts of Muthuvans have their own extremes. Hinduism of the higher and lower planes is so vastly different that they appear almost as unconnected sets and beliefs. In between these two extremes of higher and lower there is a broad middle plane in which lies the bulk of Hindu beliefs which are neither Brahminical nor tribal. Brahminical is at its higher end and on the tribal at its lower end. Muthuvans religion could be spoken of as being on the border line between the middle and the tribal groups.

Subramanya, son of Shiva who provides the closest link between Muthuvan religions And Sanskrit Hinduism, down to the purely local activities likes kottammala Anduar and Sankudikkiamma. In between Sanskritic or semi- Sanskritic and the local or indigenous deities who stand as it were at the highest and lowest points respectively in Muthuvan dietary configuration, there are numerous deities in graduated order in respect of their relative connection with Hinduism at large. For instance there is Madurai Meenakshi, chief deity of the famous temple at Madurai, who is the consort of lord Shiva in one of his manifestations. Muthuvans themselves do not ascribe spatial or structural limitations to the power of deities, but the idea is suggested only to explain the position occupied by the different deities, in relation to the total Hindu pantheon. It would seem, however, that Muthuvans attribute limitations to the operative powers of deities or at least of some deities. Thus there are different deities who preside over particular activities or phenomena such as hunting, agriculture, rain and diseases.

Muthuvans believed to be special guardians of the wellbeing of a village or a group of villages; they are part of the folklore

and traditions of the group. Physical abodes in the shape of rocks, hills, rivers or glades are assigned to them and it is also believed that they were human beings at one time. It is interesting that these guardian deities are, in nearly all cases, female deities. Subramanya is the supreme deity of the Muthuvans; he is Kadavul or God. The village temple is called Kovil. In study area the tribes have a temple. In that temple they worship all lords in Hinduism. Mainly they worship Subramanya, Krishna, Shiva, Murukan, and Bhadrakali etc. They have a priest from their own settlement. Under the leadership of him they are conducting Poojas and festivals.

Religious Rituals

Muthuvans have a variety of religious rituals. The chief among these is Thai Pongal. It is conducted in Thai month. It falls between January and February. Thai Pongal is not merely the harvest festival, but it is also the occasion for the collective religious rituals of the settlement. The Pongal celebration takes place on the first Monday of Thai or falling this on the second Monday. The unmarried boys of the village repair and clean the Kovil. The Kovil and its surroundings are necessarily in the state of ritual purity; its floor and forecourt are painted with fresh curding paste. Women are not allowed to go inside the temple. A woman even in her normal ritual status is not sufficiently pure to enter a place of worship. But she may go up to the threshold and make obeisance to the deities inside. Total Pongal offerings are always more than the collective offerings on behalf of the hamlet. The contribution from each family may be in the form of paddy, or money. Pongal is offered to all deities, the poojari (temple priest) begins the ritual dance. As the poojari and other possessed men dance around the Pongal, the boys of the hamlet decapitate the fowls and first the blood of animals (like goat / cock) flow into the Pongal of the deities concerned. Each family would probably have promised one or more fowls to one more deities during the year, in anticipations of some favour, and these promises are fulfilled at Pongal. Besides the fowls from individual families two or three fowls are cut on behalf of the hamlet as a whole, and for health, welfare and prosperity of the people.

The Pongals are offered to Subramanya, Meenakshi, Sasta, Kali, Mariamma and any other deity to whom a Pongal is due on this occasion. Kottammala Andavan and Karappanaswami, the deities of the hills and forest are prohibited separately in the forest with goat sacrifice. Among Muthuvan the occasion of collective effervescence are nearly always of a religious character, or are at least closely linked with religion. The fact is that for the primitive men, no clear-cut distinctions exist between the religious and secular. Malinowski's third point itself lends support to this when he says that "tradition embraces and in primitive societies keeps in a tight grip, both profane and sacred.

Conclusion

The Muthuvan culture in Edamalakudy is vibrant and colourful with rituals and associated practices. The rituals and practices are unique when compared to other tribal groups of Kerala in terms of their place of living and their system of dormitory. The Muthuvans prefer to live a secluded life, separated from the mainstream land. They have their own

system that takes care of the administration and functions of kudy. They avail things for their survival from the forest which include raw materials for the house construction, food and medicine. Therefore, they hardly have to go out to the mainstream society.

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