
PECUNIARISATION - AN ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

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Abstract: Peculiarisation is essentially an Economic Anthropological theory, which was originally introduced through my Ph.D. thesis (2002) and the theory was published in 2006 through my first book entitled 'Peculiarisation - A New Theory of Social Change in India'. Although the theory was proposed to explain the social change, it deals with the economic behaviour of man. Therefore, Peculiarisation can be referred to as an Economic Anthropological theory, which deals with the socio-economic change due to the economic motivations of the heterogeneous population of the villages in Kerala. The economic motivations of various castes and communities determine the economic activities of the people and which in turn shapes the village economies. The paper examines the theory of Peculiarisation in the context of Economic Anthropology.

Keywords: Peculiarisation, Economic Anthropology, Occupational Mobility, Downward Mobility, Upward Mobility.

Introduction: The theory of Peculiarisation¹ was proposed in 2002 through the study of village economy and the economic activities of the heterogeneous population of villages in Kerala. The theory was published in 2006 through the book 'Peculiarisation - A New Theory of Social Change in India'². Peculiarisation is essentially an Economic Anthropological theory pertains to the socio-economic and cultural changes of village communities. Economic Anthropology is a branch of Socio-Cultural Anthropology. Economic anthropology attempts to explain human economic behaviour within the widest historic, geographic and socio-cultural context. In the words of Firth (quoted in Ronald Frankenberg 1967: 55)³, economic anthropologists study "the economic role of a person in a particular situation against his social role, and against that of the system of groups of which he is a member". Gudeman (2001)⁴ views that "anthropology [Economic Anthropology] plays a special role in broadening our understanding of material life, for the less-recognized processes are displayed with special clarity in the situations ethnographers study".

The history of Economic Anthropology dates back to the anthropological studies took place at the time of the First World War. In Anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski studied the economic behaviour of human societies, for the first time, while conducting his master piece study on the Trobriand Islanders, one of the island populations in the Pacific Ocean, in 1914. Since then, anthropologists have studied the economic behaviour and economic organisation of human societies across world and the explanations on economic organisation of societies have become an integrated part of every ethnographic study.

In the first half of the 20th Century, the anthropological studies became more theoretical along with its empirical knowledge production. Study of economic organisation of a human society from the developing anthropological perspective was emerged in a conspicuous form with Malinowski. Malinowski's work,

'Argonauts of Western Pacific'⁵ deals with the reciprocal economic activities of the Trobriand Islanders. In India, there are many studies emerged in this line with various levels of descriptions and/or analyses on economic organisation of Tribes, Castes, and Communities, for instance Dube (1955)⁶, Bose (1975)⁷, Hiramani (1977)⁸, Ansari (1980)⁹ and others.

In the Indian context, there are many studies conducted on the economic organisation of tribes, castes and/or Indian Village communities. In most of such studies, anthropologists have studied the economic organisation of the people. In Indian villages, for a long time, the traditional subsistence activities, occupations or traditional services of people were considerably based on Indian caste system and it is reflected on the economic organisations of the villages. In Indian villages, the caste occupations and its structure were rigid and complex, and the opportunities for occupational change have not existed. As per the traditional system, the members of each caste group were following specific functions and that services and/or occupations were considered as the traditional occupations or economic activities.

Ghurye has pointed out that "generally a caste or a group of allied castes considered some of the callings as its hereditary occupation, to abandon which in pursuit of another, though it might be more lucrative, was thought not to be right" (Ghurye 1932; 1988 rpt.: 15)¹⁰. Mayer (1958; 1986 rpt.: 24)¹¹ has stated that it would be impossible to discuss any major aspect of the villager's life without mentioning his caste. The manner of the rites he performs, often his occupation, the kind of social and economic relations he has with his fellow-residents, and all vary with caste membership. Madan (1979: 207)¹² opined that, "Nesfield regards occupation as the exclusive basis of caste distinction. Although this is not true in all cases as agriculture is followed by both higher and lower castes, there is some truth in his contention, for many of the castes followed a particular occupation and they were named after that occupation".

The traditional occupations and its patterns have been changing from the early decades of the 20th Century. The Census Report (1931: 296)¹³ states that there was “a tendency of castes to abandon hereditary calling and take up others...and there was a similar tendency to give up caste calling for trade About a quarter or less of the half that has abandoned their hereditary occupations as their principal means of subsistence retain them as subsidiary”. Again, the same Census Report (1931) mentions, “in certain directions of course this tendency [i.e., the tendency of castes to abandon hereditary calling and take up others] has long existed. “The tendency for occupational change is essentially need based and the occupational diversification may be due to several reasons such as to compensate for cyclical or seasonal fluctuations in demand and/or desire to maximise profits” (Mahendrakumar, 2006: 74).

Alexander (1992: 152)¹⁴ opined that “the processes initiated by the colonial government, such as bureaucratic administration, rule of law, impersonal administration of justice, expansion of economy, improvement of technology, expansion of transportation and communication facilities, introduction of modern educational system, etc., sowed the seeds of change”. After Independence, extensive plans and programmes administered by the Government of India brought about a series of changes in the Indian village communities. With the advent of industrialisation, the people could find new job opportunities in different areas other than their traditional caste bound occupations. The diversification of occupations has strengthened the inter-caste, inter-village, village-town, and national and international relations. These changes are increasingly reflecting on the life-style of the people. This ultimately exposed the traditional vocational groups to new areas of life and culture.

Village Economy And Socio-Economic Change: The Vallachira village in central Kerala was selected for the study since it possessed some of the typical features such as the heterogeneous population comprising of a few castes, subcastes, and communities. Further, it consists of traditional as well as modern cultural traits as well as its changes. The functional interdependence of contiguous castes, subcastes, and communities were also identified through the study. The caste system and its occupational permissions and restrictions have existed in the studied village as it has been prevailing in the contiguous villages and almost all the Indian villages.

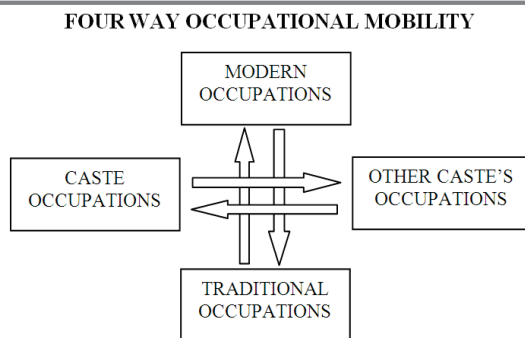
The subsistence activity or the traditional caste occupation or services of a caste group was one of the decisive factors for the way of life. The change in the traditional caste based occupation is pervasive throughout the villages in Kerala as well as India. Many castes have abandoned their traditional caste

based occupations and adopted new ones. The occupational mobility within the caste and outside the caste can be seen in the dynamic village life.

The traditional and or caste based occupations of the castes and communities, and the changes of their occupations from caste to non-caste and traditional to non-traditional occupations are examined. In the traditional set up, the members of each caste group had to perform specific functions, and that service and/or occupation was considered traditional occupation. In the last century, the villagers were confined to their own villages to satisfy most of their needs and only a few like traders, etc., were exposed to urban centres. But, at present, almost all people have contacts with urban centres or cities through various means.

Occupational Mobility: In the village, among the traditional caste occupations, upward mobility and downward mobility have been identified. The upward mobility of occupations is a general aspect that is available in many villages in Kerala whereas the downward mobility is rather a new phenomenon. For instance, carpentry is the exclusive occupation of the caste Marasari, but members belonging to five different castes such as the Nayar, Ezhava, Kalarikurupu, Pandaran, and Pulaya, and the Christians have entered into this occupation. Similarly, in this village there are 19 castes, sub-castes, and communities adopted goldwork as their present occupation. Originally, goldsmithy was the traditional occupation of a caste group known as Thattan. The four sub-castes of the Nayars, namely, the Vellaima Sudra Nayar, Sudra Nayar, Pallichan Nayar, Veluthedath Nayar, and the Ezhuthachan, Ezhava, Ezhavathi, Kalarikurup, Viswakarma (Kallan), Marasari, Kallasari, Musari, Karuvan, Pandaran, Kudumbi, Perumanna, Vettuvan, Pulaya, and the Christians have entered into the goldsmithy. In essence, lower castes as well as upper castes have adopted the traditional occupation of the Thattan, a Backward Community.

There are two major directions of occupational change, as occupational mobility outside the caste system and within the caste system. The former development is mainly due to modern education, science and technology, and the emerging occupational opportunities. The latter is the occupational mobility within the caste system, which is an alternative opportunity developed due to the inadequate development of the modern system in the rural areas. Among the traditional caste occupations, upward mobility and downward mobility have been identified. The upward mobility of occupations is a general aspect that is available in many villages in India whereas the downward mobility is rather a new phenomenon. Altogether, there are four directions of occupational mobility and the socio-economic change.



For instance, a few lower castes adopted the traditional occupation of a backward caste, the Thattan and at the same time, a few upper castes also adopted the traditional occupation of the Thattan. The rules of caste permit a caste group to continue its own traditional occupation and services and duties. The very feature is contrary to the concept of caste system.

Discussion: The present study shows a compatible trend of occupational mobility pointed out by Sivaram (1990)¹⁵ but it has been identified among all the caste groups in the village. Further, the occupational choice in the village is also made by economic considerations as pointed out by Freeman (1977)¹⁶, Sivaram (ibid), and others.

The study of Sivaram (1990) on the occupational mobility among the Backward Classes of Cuddopah District of Rayalaseema region, an urban area, in Andhra Pradesh, argues that “any moving away may be termed as mobility, whether it be the change of residence, or of an occupation or of a social stratum”. The study indicates that the caste system as a determinant in occupational choice is still a dynamic force; and that there are castes, which are occupationally oriented in the sense that the selected [for the study] Backward Castes are following their occupations.

Economic aspect of the traditional occupations is also important because people continue their occupations in order to meet their livelihood. In general, people have abandoned their traditional occupations due to two major reasons: first, due to less monetary gain; second, due to inferior social status. This type of occupational shift has been identified in the neighbouring villages in the Thrissur district, and throughout Kerala and outside. The economic part has greater implication as the people are engaged in all services and duties for a livelihood. Once the economic side of the occupations declined, people move into other areas of occupations for higher wages.

Sinha's (1992)¹⁷ studied the occupational mobility of the Moyra caste of West Bengal, and it explains that in ancient period the profession of sweetmeat making was exclusively meant for the Moyra caste and they provided food to the orthodox Hindus. The Brahmins used to take water from them. When traditional occupations of the Moyras became unprofitable, as they were preparing the sweetmeat in the traditional way,

they adopted different professions. Meanwhile, a few members of other castes have adopted machines and modern technologies for the production of sweetmeat. The economic backwardness of the Moyras compelled them to work in such sweetmeat shops besides other vocations. At present, about 75 per cent of the other castes are engaged in this profession. Sinha, however, has not provided any theoretical explanation for this pattern of change. The occupational shift identified in the present research is similar to the above pattern of change.

Occupational diversification has been a significant factor for the present change. The very occupational diversification is providing new job opportunities other than their traditional occupations of the villagers. Occupational diversification is an outcome of various socio-cultural innovations. “Occupational diversification is defined as the development and/or proliferation and/or multiplication and/or diversification of occupations due to the introduction and/or adoption of new occupations into the existing occupations for novel social requirements. Occupational diversification may emerge and/or is influenced by the reasons such as to compensate for cyclical or seasonal fluctuations in demand and supply and/or desire to maximise profits. In addition, occupations are modified according to human needs, when the existing social systems or network of social relations or social institutions fail to meet the existing requirements, or when new material wants are felt for a better living” (Mahendrakumar, 2006).

The present study has identified that the caste is still functioning in many aspects of life and culture. Though some of the traditional occupations have declined, all the traditional occupations cannot perish because of the insufficient growth of the secular occupations. In addition to that a number of traditional occupations have adequate demand even today. The occupational rigidity does not exist today. Presently, there are no restrictions in selecting and eliminating any occupation, as a result of which many caste groups have adopted different caste occupations. The Ezhavas have adopted carpentry, masonry, goldwork, etc. The Nayars, Asari, Karuvan, Perumanna, Musari, etc., have adopted goldwork. For the present study, 363 households were surveyed. According to the household survey, only 25.4 per cent of the people are engaged in their traditional occupations whereas 74.6 per cent of the people have entered into non-traditional occupations.

The inference of the study shows that there is an obvious shift of emphasis from the concept of the “dignity of occupation” to the “economic advantage”. This was the one and the only reason for the occupational mobility towards goldwork in and around the village. Upward mobility and downward mobility, within the caste occupations, are taking place greatly.

In this context, the new paradigm of socio-economic change of village community is framed as the theory - Peculiarisation.

Peculiarisation: The village people are adopting various caste occupations by taking into account the pecuniary aspect. At present, economic wealth of an individual is one of the bases for power and prestige in the villages than the prestige attached to occupations. The shift from the traditional concept of "dignity of occupation" to the "economic advantage" is pervasive among the village people. The change from the old paradigm of occupations to a new paradigm, which is based on pecuniary motivation, is one of the features of Peculiarisation. The very process embodies a pattern of occupational mobility, which is consisting of the downward and upward occupational mobility pertaining to any occupations.

The theory of Peculiarisation includes the pecuniary motivation of the four-way process of occupational mobility; where the adoption of the traditional occupation of a caste by any other caste either as an individual or as a group merely with an economic motive is defined as Peculiarisation. Moreover, among a heterogeneous population, the non-caste people also follow some traditional economic activities and they

started to adopt other vocations in the line of other people, hence they too possess the very pattern. Therefore, the theory of Peculiarisation is applicable to Non-Hindus also. In this context, the theory of Peculiarisation can be redefined as a process in which people adopt any occupation other than their traditional occupation with a pecuniary motivation is referred to as Peculiarisation. Therefore, this theory is a secular theory and can be applied among any human groups or population where traditional livelihood activities and modern livelihood activities co-exists and people adopt any livelihood activity with a pecuniary motivation and that economic anthropological process can be referred to as Peculiarisation.

Conclusions: The theory, Peculiarisation, was originally framed after conducting a socio-cultural anthropological study of a village in Thrissur District of Kerala State. The inference of the present study points out the shift in the concept from the "dignity of occupation" to the "economic advantage". Since, the theory Peculiarisation discusses the economic behaviour of village people, the very theory can be substantiated as an Economic Anthropological theory.

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