

TRIBALS IN TAMILNADU WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE PALIYAR TRIBES OF POTHIGAI MALAI

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Abstract

The western ghats region is the home to the Paliyar tribes. The Paliyar also live in the ghats regions of Tenkasi District. In Tamilnadu. At present there are 22 Paliyar family settlements. The Karuppanadi Dam is located at the foot hills of Western Ghats built across the Karuppanadi river near Chokkampatti in Kadayanallur. Paliyar settlement is the chosen study area forms part of the village of Kalaimaan Nagar. Located near the Karuppanadi dam in the Tenkasi District of Tamilnadu. Traditionally the Paliyar were hunters, gatherers and shifting cultivators. The present day occupation of community is settled cultivation. Through the Paliyar People in Pothigai hills have now undertaken agriculture they work as usage labourers in the forest department. This research paper describes the strategic location and the ecological importance of the Pothigai hills focusing on Karuppanadi dam in the Tenkasi District and it highlights the life and livelihood of the Paliyar tribes in their settlement at Kadayanallur Region.

Keywords : Western ghats, Paliyar, Kalaimaan, Parvathai, Customs, Labour afforestation.

Introduction

Tamilnadu, the tribal population is around 3.5% of the total population. The lands of Kurunji, Mullai, Marutham, Neythal and Palai have historically been inhabited by different tribes such as Malai Malar, Kurumbar, Kaadar, Irular, Muduvar, ?Todar including the Paliyars etc, reside in over 30 different districts of Tamilnadu. Inhabiting the maintains

and forests of Kerala and Tamilnadu while each tribe has their own native language most of these languages are closely related to Tamil.

The Paliyars are mostly concentrated in the districts of Madurai, Dindigul, Ramanathapuram, Tenkasi and Srivilliputhur. They are and have been known by multiple names such as the Paliyars., Pazhaiyares and Panaiyars. Historically the Palayars were spread all over the Dindugal District and the Sonumalai Palani hills, adjacent to the western ghats. Traditionally, the Paliyars were hunters and gatherers, residing in the forests of the western ghats. Presently they have transformed into traders of forest products food cultivators and beekeepers with some working intermittently as wage labourers, mostly on plantations. As the Paliyars generally lived in the hills they took shelter in big stone caves in the absence of stone caves. The Paliyars generally lived in groups each group had a committed head by a leader responsible for all important discussions the objectives of the study in changes in the life and culture of the Paliyars of Kadayanallur, The literacy of the Paliyars in general is below the rate of the general population of the country.

Their faced by them was lack of academic help from the teachers, non availability of teachers are the major reasons most tribal children do not understand the text books, which were generally in the regional language. Hypothesis study for the Government is providing assistance to tribal people in Tamilnadu. So there have been progressive changes in the lives of the Tribal people. To cite and unstance for a study of tribals culture progressive changes of the literature and interview serves as primary sources This paper deals depicts the Inter dependence of Paliyar tribe and the forests. It details the Traditionally occupation of the Paliyars and their way of living.

Tribal setting in Tamilnadu

Tamilnadu tribal population is spread across the states three geographical regions, The east coast, the central plain, and the north and west mountains the Tribal population in the state is largely.

Concentrated in fifteen districts mainly western the tribal sub plan comprises funds earmarked for the integrated tribal development programmes as well as the flow of tribal people living both within and outside these areas. The important hills and Elagiri hills of North Arcot district the Kalvarayan hills of south Arcot District the pothigaimalai hills of Tenkasi District Pachamalai the Kollimalai and Yergadu hills of Salem district the Anamalai of Coimbatore District the Palani malai of Dindugal District. The concentration

of tribal population in Tamilnadu is very low. The percentage of Tribal population to the total population was 1.03 percent. These are 36 tribal groups in the state.

Pothigai Malai

The Pothigai hills also known as Agasthiyar Mountain is a 1866 metre (6,122ft) tall peak in the Southern Part of the Western Ghats of South India. The peak lies in Tenkasi District of Tamilnadu near the border of Kerala. The area contains several important faunal ancient temples natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity including forests containing theoretical species of significant value to science and conservation Pothigai hills are called by different names such as shiva Jothi Parvathi, Agasthiyar hills and Southern Kailash. The western slope is located in the Thiruvanthapuram district of Kerala state eastern slope of Pothigai hills is the located in Kanyakumari district of Tamilnadu, The Pothigai hills are mentioned as Potil, Pothiyal Patjilkai and Potalaka 15 historical sources largely in relation to the river Thamirabarani and the ancient sage Agastya

The Paliyar Tribes: Culture, Marriage, Fuel, and Customs

The Paliyar (or Palyair) tribes are an indigenous group primarily found in the southern parts of India, especially in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu and parts of Kerala. Known for their deep connection to nature, the Paliyars have a rich history shaped by their environment, cultural beliefs, and social practices. Their lifestyle reflects a harmonious balance with the forest, while their customs and traditions have evolved alongside modern societal changes.

Cultural Overview

Historically, the Paliyars were hunter-gatherers, relying heavily on the forest for food, fuel, and shelter. They foraged for tubers, fruits, and honey, and hunted small game, all of which were integral to their subsistence lifestyle. The forest was not only their source of livelihood but also the center of their spiritual and cultural world.

The Paliyars practice animism, which involves the belief that spirits reside in natural elements like trees, mountains, and rivers. Their chief deity, **Karuppusamy**, is considered a guardian of the forest, and offerings are made to him during religious festivals to ensure the community's well-being and protection. Their rituals are often simple and revolve around respect for nature and their ancestors, reflecting their deep reverence for the land that sustains them.

Marriage Customs

Paliyar marriage customs are distinct yet rooted in simplicity, much like their other cultural practices. Marriages are typically arranged within the tribe, though there are no rigid caste or clan divisions that restrict such unions. Cross-cousin marriages, a common practice among some indigenous groups, are allowed among the Paliyars.

The marriage ceremony is minimalistic, often involving a gathering of family members and elders who bless the union. There are no grand festivities, and the couple is considered married after a brief ceremony in which they exchange goods as a form of a bride price. This exchange, however, is symbolic and typically involves items like grain, honey, or other resources rather than money. Divorce is accepted in Paliyar society, and both men and women have the right to separate if the marriage is not working. This practice underscores the tribe's focus on individual autonomy and egalitarian values within relationships.

Fuel and Resources

Fuel is a critical resource for the Paliyars, especially given their reliance on firewood for cooking and heating. Historically, the tribe sustainably collected firewood from the forest, ensuring that they only took what was necessary and refrained from cutting down live trees. This sustainable use of forest resources is a hallmark of their environmental stewardship.

With increasing deforestation and stricter governmental regulations on forest access, many Paliyars have faced challenges in maintaining their traditional fuel practices. In some cases, they have had to rely on alternative sources such as kerosene, though they often find these methods less sustainable and culturally foreign. Their continued reliance on firewood reflects their strong connection to the forest, even as external pressures threaten their access to it.

Customs and Beliefs

The customs of the Paliyars are deeply interwoven with their belief in animism and the worship of forest spirits. Their rituals involve offerings to natural deities and the spirits of their ancestors. **Karuppusamy**, their most prominent deity, is invoked in various ceremonies, particularly requests for protection, good health, and fertility.

The Paliyars believe in the sanctity of nature, and their customs emphasize minimal interference with the environment. Festivals and ceremonies are simple and communal, and the community's elders play an important role in leading these rituals. The tribe also

practices various forms of divination and healing, often using forest herbs and medicinal plants. Their traditional knowledge of the forest's resources, particularly medicinal plants, is vast and forms an important part of their cultural identity.

Children's Education

One of the biggest challenges for the Paliyars, as with many indigenous communities, is ensuring access to quality education for their children. For generations, the Paliyars relied on oral traditions, and formal schooling was largely absent. However, in recent years, both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have taken steps to improve educational access for tribal children.

Cultural Barriers and Dropout Rates

Despite these efforts, Paliyar children face several challenges in accessing education. Cultural differences, language barriers, and economic pressures often lead to high dropout rates. Many Paliyar families, who are reliant on seasonal labor or forest-based livelihoods, find it difficult to prioritize formal education for their children. Moreover, the curriculum in mainstream schools often lacks relevance to their cultural background and indigenous knowledge systems, which makes it harder for children to stay engaged.

To address these issues, some NGOs have introduced **bridge programs** and **mobile schools** that integrate tribal culture into the curriculum and offer more flexible learning schedules. These initiatives aim to create a learning environment that respects and reflects the Paliyar way of life.

Occupational

The traditional occupation of the Paliyars was based on a hunter-gatherer economy, where they collected forest products such as honey, fruits, tubers, and medicinal plants. However, with the advent of deforestation, legal restrictions on forest use, and changing economic conditions, the Paliyars have had to adopt new forms of livelihood.

While extracting the spices, a single member of the Paliyar tribe climbs at least four or five trees a day. Paliyar women also indulge in the process of extraction of these spices. They also carry multiple kilos of the spice to markets in order to earn a living. While this is a dangerous occupation as poisonous life forms and big animals reside in this forest, it is comforting to see the ease of Paliyars here. They do not fear these forests and treat them as their homes.

Honey collecting is another occupation of the Paliyars. The Paliyar people divide honey into three types: small, large, and stick honey. Audi, Thai and Masi(Tamil months) months are often chosen as the best time to take honey. They also divide the honeycombs according to the season of the month according to the month of flower honey, little honey, and good honey. They worship their forest angel before going to fetch this honey. They also worship the yellow-green flower, a flower that grows in these forests and has medicinal properties.

Agriculture

Many Paliyars have shifted from forest-based subsistence activities to agriculture. The land rights secured under the **Forest Rights Act** have enabled them to practice small-scale farming, cultivating crops such as millets, vegetables, and pulses. Some Paliyars also work as agricultural laborers on larger farms in nearby villages. However, their dependence on erratic monsoon rains and limited access to irrigation systems makes agriculture a precarious occupation .

Wage Labor

Wage labor, particularly under government schemes like MGNREGA, has become an important source of income for the Paliyars. Many now work in construction, road-building, labour of estate and forest restoration projects, where they receive regular wages. Though this has provided a more stable income than forest foraging, it has also disconnected many Paliyars from their traditional knowledge systems and forest-dependent livelihoods .

The Tamil Nadu Afforestation

The Tamil Nadu Afforestation Project is a project implemented by the Forest Department of the Government of Tamil Nadu with the help of a loan from the Bank of Japan for Japan's International Partnership. Under this scheme in 2005 2006 Kalaiman Nagar Paliyar residential village was selected and implemented in the then Tirunelveli District Thenkasi Circle Kadayanallur Union.

The objective of the project is to work together with the forest department and the hill people who depend on the forest to improve the poor quality of the forest through joint forest management and share the revenue generated thereby.

Kalaimaan Nagar Paliyar Residence

Kadayanallur Panchayat Union of Tenkasi District Under Chief Minister's Green House Scheme in Chokkampatti Panchayat, Kalaimaan Nagar Paliyar residential houses have been constructed for the Palliyars.

There are 22 Baliyar families in this Kalaimaan Nagar, comprising 137 people, of whom 74 are males and 63 are females.

Conclusion

The Paliyars, once primarily dependent on the forest, are now undergoing significant changes in their livelihood, education, and access to government services. Government schemes such as MGNREGA and the Forest Rights Act have played an essential role in securing land and income for them, while educational initiatives like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Eklavya Model Residential Schools have increased access to education for their children. However, challenges remain, particularly regarding the preservation of their cultural identity and traditional knowledge systems. The Paliyar tribe's culture, marriage customs, fuel practices, and social organization are deeply intertwined with their environment and their historical way of life as forest dwellers. Though modernity has brought challenges, the Paliyars continue to embody a lifestyle that respects nature and values community. Their cultural practices offer important lessons on sustainability and resilience, and efforts to preserve their heritage will ensure that their traditions endure for future generations. The future of the Paliyar tribe will depend on how well they balance modernization with the preservation of their cultural heritage and sustainable use of natural resources.

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