



## Socio-Cultural History of the Mannan Tribe with Special Reference to Kozhimala in Idukki

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### Abstract

The Mannan tribe is one of the ancient indigenous communities of Kerala, with a distinctive socio-cultural identity shaped by forest ecology, customary practices, and historical interactions with mainstream society. This study examines the socio-cultural history of the Mannan tribe with special reference to Kozhimala in Idukki district, focusing on their traditional social organization, belief systems, livelihood patterns, rituals, and cultural transformations over time. The research highlights how geographical isolation and forest-based subsistence influenced the Mannans' unique way of life, while colonial administration, post-independence policies, and modern development initiatives brought significant changes to their social and cultural structures. Using historical sources, field observations, and secondary literature, the study traces the transition of the Mannan community from a forest-centered existence to gradual integration with contemporary society. The paper also discusses challenges such as cultural erosion, economic marginalization, and identity preservation in the context of modernization. By documenting the socio-cultural heritage of the Mannan tribe in Kozhimala, this study aims to contribute to tribal historiography and provide insights for cultural preservation, inclusive development, and policy formulation related to indigenous communities.

**Keywords:** Mannan Tribe, Kozhimala, Idukki, Socio-Cultural History, Indigenous Communities.

### 1. Introduction

The tribal societies of Kerala occupy an important place in the historical and cultural formation of the state. Each tribe possesses distinct cultural practices, belief systems, social structures, and modes of interaction with nature. Among these tribes, the Mannan community of Idukki district stands out due to its unique matrilineal structure, traditional kingship, ecological knowledge, and strong cultural identity. While many tribal societies in India have undergone rapid changes and cultural erosion in recent decades, the Mannan tribe—especially those residing in Kozhimala—continues to maintain a significant part of its traditional practices. Kozhimala, which is often described as the “capital” of the Mannans, remains the seat of their tribal king and the focal point of rituals, ceremonies, and collective governance.

The socio-cultural history of the Mannan tribe offers valuable insights into the ways in which indigenous communities negotiate continuity and change. Their rituals, oral traditions, architecture, costume, kinship organisation, and administrative arrangements all provide clues about their past. In a period marked by modernization, environmental degradation, and increasing interaction with non-tribal populations, documenting the heritage of the Mannans

becomes academically important. This study attempts to present a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the socio-cultural institutions of the Mannan tribe, emphasising Kozhimala as a cultural and political centre.

### 2. Background of the Study

The Mannan tribe is believed to be one of the earliest inhabitants of the Western Ghats. Their presence in the forested hill ranges of Idukki has been documented in historical records, ethnographic accounts, and oral narratives. Historically, the Mannans lived in close association with nature, depending on agriculture, forest produce, and hunting for survival. Their social life reflected intimate knowledge of the environment, patterns of monsoon cycles, and forest ecology. Many of their customs, festivals, and songs express gratitude to natural forces and ancestral spirits.

One of the striking features of the Mannan tribe is its hereditary kingship. Unlike many tribes where leadership is collective or rotational, the Mannans follow a matrilineal succession system in determining the next king. The Mannan Rajah traditionally exercised authority over community matters, resolved disputes, protected customary rights, and presided over festivals. Kozhimala, the hill that functions as

the traditional headquarters, is both a ritual centre and a symbol of unity. During important festivals and ceremonial occasions, members of the community gather at Kozhimala to reaffirm their cultural identity.

The study of the Mannan tribe gains importance in the context of rapid socio-economic transformation. Tribal communities across India are facing challenges such as displacement, land alienation, poor access to education, cultural commodification, and loss of traditional knowledge. Despite these pressures, the Mannan community continues to preserve many of its customs. This research attempts to understand the reasons behind this cultural resilience and the significance of Kozhimala in sustaining tribal heritage.

### 3. Scope of the Study

The present study explores several interconnected dimensions of the Mannan tribe. It covers their historical origins, modes of subsistence, land relations, kinship structure, belief system, and traditional governance. The aim is not only to present a descriptive account but to interpret how these aspects form a coherent cultural system.

The scope also includes an analysis of the festivals celebrated by the Mannans, such as Aattuvela, Mariyamman Pooja, Kummiyattam, and harvest rituals. These festivals reflect the deep connection between nature and culture within tribal life. The study examines the significance of dance, music, oral narratives, and ritual performances in constructing their collective memory.

Economic aspects are examined in relation to both past and present. Traditionally forest-dependent, the Mannans have faced restrictions due to forest regulations, environmental laws, and land encroachments. Agricultural patterns have changed over time with the introduction of cash crops and government schemes. The study evaluates how these economic shifts have influenced the social fabric of the community.

Kozhimala receives special attention as the geographic and cultural core of Mannan identity. The hill serves as the seat of the king, a place for communal gatherings, and a location where festivals are formally conducted. The study attempts to interpret Kozhimala not only as a physical space but as a symbol of authority, memory, and belonging.

The research also examines contemporary issues such as education, employment, health problems, governmental welfare schemes, and the challenges posed by tourism and cultural commercialization. However, it is important to note that the study is primarily based on secondary sources, published materials, and documented oral traditions.

### 4. Hypotheses

**This study is guided by the following hypotheses:**

- i). First, the Mannan tribe possesses a highly distinctive socio-cultural system that has remained relatively stable over generations. Their matrilineal kinship structure, traditional ceremonies, and tribal administration demonstrate enduring cultural continuity.
- ii). Second, Kozhimala functions as a cultural and administrative centre that reinforces tribal unity and serves as the axis around which Mannan identity revolves. The enduring importance of Kozhimala indicates the strong role of sacred geography in tribal societies.
- iii). Third, modern influences such as formal education, government welfare schemes, and interactions with mainstream society have contributed to gradual

transformations in lifestyle, economic patterns, and cultural practices. While some of these changes have opened new opportunities, others have contributed to cultural erosion.

- iv). Fourth, the long-term survival of the Mannan heritage depends on environmental protection, land rights, and the preservation of traditional institutions. The connection between ecological conservation and cultural sustainability is especially significant in the context of Western Ghats.

### 5. Important Words (Conceptual Clarifications)

Certain key terms frequently used in this study require conceptual clarity. "Adivasi" refers to indigenous peoples who are recognized as original inhabitants of a region. The "Mannan Rajah" denotes the hereditary tribal king. "Kozhimala" refers to the traditional headquarters of the Mannan tribe. "Matrilineal" indicates a system where lineage and inheritance are traced through the female line. "Kanikkars" are the ministers who support the king in governance. "Aattuvela" and "Kummiyattam" are culturally significant festivals. "Cultural erosion" signifies the loss of traditional practices under external influences.

### 6. Historical Evolution of the Mannan Tribe

The origins of the Mannan tribe are surrounded by myth and oral history. Some accounts trace their lineage to ancient hill tribes that migrated through the Western Ghats thousands of years ago. Others connect the Mannans to early Dravidian groups, suggesting that their cultural practices may predate many settled communities of Kerala.

Throughout history, the Mannans lived in small forest settlements known as "kudies." These settlements were usually located near water sources, forest clearings, or fertile slopes. Their livelihood depended on seasonal agriculture, foraging, and hunting. Over time, they developed a close relationship with nature, worshipping deities associated with rain, fertility, forest spirits, and ancestral protectors.

Colonial interventions deeply affected tribal life. British forest laws restricted access to forests, reducing traditional livelihood opportunities. After Indian independence, forest conservation policies further limited their rights. Despite these challenges, the Mannan tribe maintained internal cohesion through their cultural institutions, especially the kingship system based in Kozhimala.

### 7. Governance Structure and Kinship System

The governance system of the Mannan tribe is one of the most unique features of their socio-cultural life. The Mannan Rajah serves as the head of the community, both spiritually and administratively. The succession to the throne follows a strict matrilineal system, where the king's sister's son inherits the position. This matrilineal pattern reflects the high status given to women in lineage continuity.

The Rajah is assisted by a council of ministers known as Kanikkars. They help in dispute resolution, organization of festivals, supervision of social behaviour, and protection of customary laws. Decisions are usually made through collective discussions, reflecting the democratic spirit of tribal societies.

Kinship plays a central role in social organisation. Families are extended and matrilineal, with inheritance passing through female descendants. Marriage practices emphasize community cohesion, and elders traditionally played significant roles in arranging alliances. Ritual purity, ancestral

worship, and communal solidarity form the foundation of Mannan social ethics.

### 8. Cultural Traditions, Festivals and Rituals

The cultural life of the Mannan tribe is rich with festivals, songs, rituals, and performances. Their festivals are closely related to agricultural cycles, monsoon patterns, and forest ecology. Aattuvela, one of the major festivals, is celebrated with great enthusiasm, featuring traditional dances, music, and offerings to deities. Rituals performed during Aattuvela express gratitude for agricultural prosperity and divine protection.

Kummiyattam, a circular dance form, is performed during festivals and community gatherings. It reflects collective unity and involves rhythmic clapping, songs, and coordinated steps. The songs contain references to ancestral stories, natural elements, and mythological figures.

Healing rituals occupy an important place in traditional culture. Tribal healers use herbal medicines and ritual chants to cure illnesses. The belief in forest spirits and deities shapes their understanding of health and disease.

Oral literature forms the basis of Mannan cultural memory. Stories about the origin of the tribe, tales of brave ancestors, and accounts of ecological events are transmitted across generations through storytelling sessions. These oral narratives not only entertain but also educate younger members about cultural values.

### 9. Kozhimala: The Cultural and Administrative Centre

Kozhimala functions as the heart of the Mannan community. It houses the royal residence, sacred spaces, ritual grounds, and administrative structures. During festivals, Mannans gather at Kozhimala to reaffirm their unity. The hill is regarded as a spiritual centre, and its physical landscape reflects symbolic meanings related to power, ancestry, and identity.

Architecturally, Kozhimala features simple but culturally significant structures. The king's residence, council house, and ritual spaces combine traditional design with practical considerations suited to the hill environment. Every major decision affecting the community is traditionally formalized at Kozhimala.

The importance of Kozhimala extends beyond governance. It acts as a cultural archive where festivals, performances, and ceremonies are regularly conducted. In recent decades, Kozhimala has also become a site of tourism and public attention, creating both opportunities and challenges for the community. While tourism can generate income, it also risks cultural commodification if not managed responsibly.

### 10. Economic Life and Environmental Challenges

Historically, the Mannans depended on agriculture, forest produce, and hunting. Their agricultural system was largely subsistence-based, involving crops such as ragi, millet, tapioca, and seasonal vegetables. They also collected honey, bamboo, medicinal plants, and edible roots from the forest. These practices connected their economic life to ecological rhythms.

However, the introduction of forest regulations significantly altered their livelihood patterns. Restrictions on access to forest resources created economic hardship. Over time, many Mannans shifted to wage labour, small-scale farming, or government employment under tribal welfare schemes. Some families began cultivating cash crops, although this often required financial dependence on external markets.

Environmental degradation, deforestation, and wildlife conflicts have affected agricultural productivity. The loss of forest land has threatened their traditional food security and cultural practices tied to nature. Climate changes in the Western Ghats have also impacted water availability and crop cycles, making traditional farming difficult.

### 11. Modernization, Education and Social Change

Modernization has brought both positive and negative influences. On the positive side, government initiatives have increased access to education, healthcare, housing, and nutritional support. Many young Mannans have entered schools and colleges, opening new pathways of employment. Exposure to mainstream society has encouraged aspirations for higher education, professional careers, and political participation.

However, modernization has also produced cultural transformations. Some traditional practices have weakened, especially among the younger generation. The adoption of modern clothing, food habits, and entertainment has influenced cultural preferences. The older generation often expresses concern that oral traditions are no longer transmitted as frequently as before.

Another challenge is the increasing dependence on government welfare programmes. While these bring economic relief, they may also weaken traditional self-sufficiency. Balancing modern benefits with cultural preservation remains a complex task for the community.

### 12. Challenges Faced by the Mannan Tribe Today

The Mannan community faces several challenges in contemporary times. Land alienation continues to be a major concern. Many tribal families do not possess secure land rights, making them vulnerable to displacement. Education levels have improved, but dropout rates remain high due to financial constraints and cultural gaps in the school system.

Healthcare access is still limited in remote areas. Malnutrition, anaemia, seasonal diseases, and lack of sanitation pose health risks. Environmental changes, including deforestation and soil erosion, threaten traditional livelihoods. Cultural erosion is another significant issue. With increasing exposure to modern values, some traditional beliefs and rituals face neglect. Tourism, though economically beneficial, can sometimes distort cultural practices for commercial display.

Despite these obstacles, the Mannans have shown remarkable resilience. Their traditional leadership, communal solidarity, and cultural consciousness continue to provide stability to the community.

### 13. Conclusion

The socio-cultural history of the Mannan tribe offers a powerful example of cultural resilience in the face of historical changes. Their matrilineal kinship structure, traditional governance, nature-centric rituals, and collective social organisation reflect a sophisticated cultural system. Kozhimala stands at the centre of this heritage, functioning as both a spiritual and administrative centre. It embodies the collective identity of the community and anchors their historical continuity.

While modernization, environmental pressures, and socio-economic changes have influenced their lifestyle, the Mannans continue to preserve a substantial part of their cultural identity. Safeguarding this heritage requires conscious efforts from both the community and the

government. Policies must prioritize land rights, educational opportunities, healthcare access, and protection of cultural institutions. Promoting sustainable development that respects tribal autonomy is essential.

The Mannan tribe, with their deep connection to the Western Ghats and their enduring traditions, represents a valuable part of Kerala's cultural mosaic. Their history demonstrates the importance of diversity, ecological harmony, and cultural continuity in an increasingly globalized world.

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