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The History and Lifestyle of the Kadambur Tribal Community: A Study

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to document the traditional history, nature-centric lifestyle, art, culture, and modern transformations of the Kadambur hill tribes residing in the Sathyamangalam forest area of Erode district. It also examines pathways for their socio-economic development. Situated within the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve, the Kadambur hill region is home to indigenous communities living amidst a dense forest ecosystem and wildlife. Historical artifacts, such as ancient burial urns, have been discovered in these hill villages. Oral histories regarding the ancestors, migration patterns, and clan traditions of these tribes attest to the antiquity of the indigenous people living in the area. Their way of life is rooted in nature worship, with agriculture and animal husbandry serving as their primary occupations. They possess generations of traditional knowledge regarding the medicinal use of herbs and plants found in the forests. Even in modern times, these communities face significant challenges, including a lack of road connectivity, difficulties in obtaining tribal caste certificates, and issues related to land rights. Government attention is required to preserve the ancestral identity of these tribal people and to ensure their rights under forest conservation laws.

Keywords: Mannan, Muduvar, Arunadan, Kanichar, Paliyar, Krumbar, Mountain Kururas, Kattu Nayaks, Mountaineers, Krichan, Thoduvars, Kondakapu and Kondareddy, Iluras.

Introduction

Tribal communities, classified as hill dwellers, inhabit various regions of Tamil Nadu. Numerous studies and government records indicate that diverse tribal groups reside specifically within the Western Ghats and the Eastern Ghats. In this context, the Urali tribe inhabits the Kadambur hills surrounding the Sathyamangalam area. While they possess a distinct identity regarding language and culture, and have adopted certain changes to adapt to evolving circumstances, this study reveals that their unique characteristics remain evident in various aspects of their lives. This section outlines the history of the Urali tribe and describes the geographical location of the hills they inhabit.

Tribal Communities of Tamil Nadu

According to the Tamil Nadu Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act, 1976, there are 36 tribal communities in Tamil Nadu. They are: Adiyan, Aranadan, Eravallan, Irular, Uraly, Kaniyan, Kammara, Kattunaicken, Kadar, Kanikaran, Kurumbar, Kurichchan, Kudiyar/Malaikudi, Kuruman, Kochu Velan, Konda Kapu, Konda Reddi, Koragar, Kothar, Solagar, Toda, Paliyar, Palliyan, Pallayan, Paniyan, Mahamalasar, Malasar, Malai Arayan, Malaikuravan, Malaipandaram, Malayakandi, Malayali, Malaivedan, Mannan, Muthuvan, and Muduvan/Mudugar.

According to the 2001 Census, the total population of Tamil Nadu was 62,405,679. Of this, the total population of the 36 tribal communities in the state was 651,321, representing 1.0 percent of Tamil Nadu's total population.

The total population of the Malayali tribal community in Tamil Nadu is 310,042. This constitutes 47.6 percent of the state's tribal population; in other words, the Malayali tribe accounts for approximately half of the tribal population in Tamil Nadu.

The tribal communities of Tamil Nadu can be classified into three categories (Bhakthavatsala Bharathi, 2013: 40).

a) **Aboriginal Tribes:** These communities have inhabited their regions since prehistoric times without migrating elsewhere. They possess distinct tribal religious and lifestyle characteristics (e.g., Kadar, Toda, Irular, Paliyar, Kattunaickar, and Kota).
b) **Primitive Tribes:** These communities have lived in their habitats for a very long period. Their origin myths contain elements that reflect a proto-form of the caste system (for instance, the myth that the Toda, Kota, and Kurumba tribes are siblings born from the sweat droplets of a deity).
c) **Tribes:** These are groups that migrated from plains to hilly or other regions due to crises—such as political turmoil, poverty (famine), or disease—and settled there permanently (e.g., Malayali, Muthuvar, Paliyar,

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Malaipandaram, Kaniyan, Adiyan, Kuruman, Koragar, Kattunaickar, and Kurichan). They continue to worship the Shaivite and Vaishnavite deities of their ancestral heritage. Notably, a feudal social structure still persists among the Malayali tribe.

The Central Government has designated 65 tribal communities across India as "Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups" (tribes on the verge of extinction). This list includes six tribes from Tamil Nadu: the Kadar, Toda, Irular, Paliyar, Kattunaickar, and Kota. These communities are socio-economically very backward, and the government is formulating and implementing various schemes for their advancement.

Habitats of Tamil Nadu's Tribal Communities: Tribal communities in Tamil Nadu reside across 3,834 villages. Their habitats within the state can be categorized into three zones: 1. Hill regions, 2. Foothills, and 3. Plains. The majority of these tribal communities inhabit the hill regions, specifically the Eastern Ghats and the Western Ghats.

Tribal Communities of the Eastern Ghats: Spanning the states of Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, this mountain range extends from the Mahanadi Valley in the north to the Vaigai River in Ramanathapuram district in the south. It connects with the Western Ghats near the Moyar Valley, close to the Nilgiris. The total area covered by these mountains is 152,000 square kilometers.

Approximately 60 tribal communities inhabit the Eastern Ghats across India. About 17.6 million tribal people live in the northern section of the range (extending from Odisha's Mahanadi Valley through Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh to the valleys of Andhra Pradesh), while approximately 2 million tribal people reside in the southern section (stretching from the Krishna River Valley to the Nilgiri mountain range).

Seven tribal communities—Malaiyali, Konda Reddi, Kurichchan, Kuruman, Solagar, Uraly, and Irular—inhabit the Eastern Ghats, their foothills, and the plains within Tamil Nadu. The Malayali tribal people predominantly inhabit all these hills: Javvadhu, Yelagiri, Kalvarayan, Servarayan, Sitteri, Vachathi, Jalluthu, Kothu, Kanjamalai, Nagaramalai, Kadakamalai, Pachaimalai, Balamalai, and Kolli Hills. In other words, the Malayalis live exclusively in the Eastern Ghats.

Tribal Communities of the Western Ghats: Stretching from the Gujarat-Maharashtra border through the states of Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, this mountain range extends continuously as far south as the Agasthiyar Hills in Kerala. The total area covered by these mountains is 160,000 square kilometers.

More than 26 tribal communities inhabit the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu, as well as their foothills and the adjacent plains. Groups such as the Kadar, Paniya, Toda, Kurumba, Kota, Irula, Solaga, Urali, and Kattu Nayaka reside in the Nilgiri mountain region; meanwhile, communities including the Pulaiyar, Mala Vedar, Paliyar, Palliyan, Malasar, Muthuvan (or Muduvan), and Mannan inhabit the Anaimalai and Palani Hills.

Migration of Tribal Communities: Migration among tribal communities has occurred for various reasons. Early humans migrated due to livelihood needs, natural disasters, conflicts with other ethnic groups, and factors such as social ostracism. Communities that originally lived in the plains moved to the hilly regions for political, social, and economic reasons, eventually settling there permanently. A study of the legends and oral traditions of these diverse tribal communities reveals that such migrations were largely driven by political factors. Researchers note this phenomenon, stating: "At one point in time, many Indian tribal people lived urban lives, only to be subsequently marginalized into their current status as tribes due to political and social factors" (P. Naseemdeen, 1989:9); and "The circumstances surrounding the migration of these tribal groups are extensively documented in historical texts. While tribal communities predominantly inhabit hilly regions, researchers believe that some of these groups originally lived in low-lying plains but migrated to the hills to settle there out of fear, driven by political reasons" (S. Thamaraipandian, 2008:36).

Research reveals the migration histories of various tribal groups, including the Mannan, Muthuvar, Arunadan, Kanikkar, Paliyar, Kurumbar, Malaikuravar, Kattunaickar, Malaivedar, Kurichan, Thoduvars, Kondakapu, Kondareddy, and Irular.

The term 'Malayali' signifies 'one who lives in the hills' and is also interpreted to mean 'one who rules the hills.' These people have no connection to the Malayali people of Kerala; rather, they are a community that migrated from the plains to settle in the hills.

They identify themselves as 'Karala Vellalar' who migrated from Kanchipuram. The term is derived from 'Kar' + 'Aalar,' meaning 'those who rule over the rain-bearing clouds.' (K.A., 05.01.2014, Chellamuthu, 80, Periyapakkalam) Edgar Thurston states in his book that the Malayalis are Vellalars who migrated from Kanchipuram during the 15th century due to reasons such as war (Edgar Thurston, 1993:497).

Observations on the Malayali Tribal Community According to the "Tamil Lexicon"

"The Malayalis are a group of Vellalars who migrated from Kanchipuram and settled in the Shevaroy Hills (Servarayan Malai) when Muslims arrived in the southern region" (Tamil Lexicon 5.3110).

"The term "Karalar" refers to a rugged caste that existed in ancient times, or a Veda (hunter) caste inhabiting the hills of the Salem and South Arcot districts" ("Tamil Lexicon" 2.888).

Introduction to Kadambur Hills: Kadambur is situated in the Sathyamangalam hill region, which falls under the Erode district—one of the districts in the Kongu region. "This hill region stands at an elevation of approximately 1,200 feet above sea level and is renowned for its natural beauty. Originally under the direct administration of Sathyamangalam, this area was carved out as the Kuthiyalanthur Panchayat in 2015. Government records indicate that more than 14,213 tribal people inhabit this hill region, which spans an area of 1,545 square miles"1. With Kuthiyalanthur Panchayat serving as the headquarters, the administrative unit encompasses 48 hamlets in the surrounding area.

Origin of the Name 'Kadambur: Studies on place names reveal that the names of settlements—whether in hilly regions or the plains—are often derived from specific reasons. Field research indicates that "Kadambam" flowers (Neolamarckia cadamba) were once abundant in the area surrounding the Kadambur hills; the name 'Kadambur' is believed to be a derivative of 'Kadambam'.

History of the Tribal People of Kadambur: Kadambur serves as a central hub for the communities residing in the Kadambur hills. Government records indicate that this hilly region spans an area of approximately 11,411.60 hectares.

Various tribal groups inhabit the surrounding hills; notably, more than fifteen thousand individuals identify themselves as belonging to the 'Malayali' tribal community. Historical records show that Kadambur was historically part of the Kongu region. While the area was traditionally inhabited by hill tribes, the establishment of government offices and schools in the central part of Kadambur has led to the settlement of people from other communities as well.

Historical Background and Etymology of the People of Kadambur

Diverse tribal communities inhabit the Kadambur hill region within the Sathyamangalam Taluk. Statistical data reveals a significant population of hill tribes such as the Solagars, Ooralis, Irulas, Malai Gounders, and Lambadis. In the Solagar language, the word "Sogura" means "forest"; consequently, the people refer to themselves as Solagars—meaning "forest dwellers"—a tradition passed down through oral history. Regarding the Ooralis, oral traditions—supported by historical perspectives—suggest that they migrated to these hills and the Kolli Hills from the Mysore region in ancient times, with some claiming the Kolli Hills as their ancestral homeland.

A legend exists regarding the origins of the Solagars. It is said that in ancient times, two brothers named Karayan and Madeswaran (also known as Pillayya) lived on the Kothesal Hill in the Thalavadi region. A demon named Savanan reportedly transformed Karayan into a shepherd and imprisoned Madeswaran, subjecting him to various forms of cruelty; however, Madeswaran was eventually liberated through the grace of Lord Krishna and killed the demon. It is further recounted that Karayan subsequently pursued Madeswaran, but the two eventually entered into a peace treaty on a hill known as Kothi Poli. The Solagars and Ooralis are said to be the descendants of Karayan.

Social Structure of Tribal People: Tribal people are those who have inhabited a specific region since ancient times—often for over 10,000 years. They possess their own distinct customs, languages, and territories, leading self-sufficient lives that are deeply connected to the local flora and fauna. They maintain unique traditions regarding art, beliefs (concerning the divine, religion, and the cosmos), kinship systems, and communal living. Generally, they do not interact extensively with modern society and do not operate within a money-based economy; instead, they live with a profound attachment to and reverence for nature.

Caste System Hierarchy: In a social context, caste refers to a distinct, self-contained group. An individual born into a specific caste cannot change it, nor do they typically marry outside their caste. The Malayali tribal community, for instance, is often relegated to the lowest stratum of the social hierarchy. Research indicates that the caste system is structured in this hierarchical manner.

Location of the Hill: Kadambur Hill is situated amidst a landscape of captivating natural beauty. It is bordered by Tiruppur District to the south, Salem District to the east, the state of Karnataka to the north, and the Coimbatore and Nilgiris districts to the west.

Population: The Census of India was conducted in 2011. According to this census, the inhabitants of Kadambur Hill reside across hills, valleys, and plains within the expansive hilly region. Settlements typically consist of clusters of ten to twenty houses. Government records indicate a total population of 14,213 people in this hilly area, comprising 7,022 women and 7,191 men.

Settlement Layout: The settlements of the tribal communities living in the Kadambur hills are situated across diverse terrains, including rocky areas, valleys, and plains. The boundaries of these villages are often defined by natural features such as rock formations, mounds, streams, and depressions, while the settlements themselves take on shapes like rectangles, circles, or triangles.

Social Status: Historically, these communities lagged behind in terms of literacy and economic development. However, research indicates that following the arrival of electricity and access to government welfare schemes, they have begun to engage with global events and are now transitioning toward a new way of life.

Education: Due to their remote location in the hills, accessing schools and colleges requires traveling long distances; consequently, the remoteness has historically hindered educational opportunities. While parents are now sending their children to school—with primary education available locally and secondary/higher secondary education pursued in Sathyamangalam—students still face significant hardships when seeking higher education, as it necessitates long-distance travel.

Social Structure: The Oorali people have appointed a leader for themselves. Whether it concerns village festivals, auspicious occasions, funerals, or even disputes between husband and wife, the villagers gather and invite the village leader to deliberate and reach a decision. A leader is appointed from each of the seven clans; when they convene, the decision pronounced by the village leader is final. The Oorali people continue to live within this social framework.

Housing: A house serves as the primary shelter where humans find safety and protection from elements such as wind, rain, and heat. Among these hill-dwelling people, various types of structures are built, including permanent residences, watch-huts for guarding crops, and special shelters for girls attaining puberty. Tribes cultivating crops on undulating hilly terrain construct elevated platforms (“paran”) atop trees to monitor their fields. With the changing times, some now reside in houses made of cement or cement-sheet roofing, while others live in small huts constructed from materials like sugarcane trash and “Kavattam” grass. Thus, a variety of housing styles can be found in the Kadambur region, with the type of house reflecting the economic status of the residents.

Land Characteristics

The lands in the Kadambur hill region are not highly developed. While there are some level or gently sloping areas, the terrain is predominantly steep. These lands—originally characterized by scrub forests and red soil on elevated ground—are reportedly being transformed into orchards and farms irrigated by wells. Although the terrain generally features red soil, the quality of the land varies from place to place.

Soil: Red soil accounts for 75% of the soil in the Kadambur region. It is suitable for agriculture and intercropping. Field surveys revealed the presence of red soil, sandy soil, and 'Kaakka' soil (a local soil type).

Water Bodies: Along the route to Kadambur, one finds numerous small waterfalls, streams, and rivers flowing between the hills, as well as a dam situated at the foothills. Rainwater cascading down the surrounding semi-circular range of hills swells into rivers; the Peruppallam Dam, located at the base of the hill, impounds this water for irrigation

purposes. However, the people living in the Kadambur hills derive no benefit from this dam.

Pulse Crops: Due to the rugged, sloping terrain and the prevalence of scrub forests and upland fields—often described as "rain-fed land" (dependent solely on rainfall)—it is not possible to cultivate a wide variety of crops. Consequently, irrigation facilities are limited. Farmers cultivate crops such as “Avarai” (field beans), “Thuvarai” (pigeon peas), “Kollu” (horse gram), “Paasippayiru” (green gram), and various other pulses. Crops like “Kezhvaragu” (finger millet), “Saamai” (little millet), and “Panivaragu” (proso millet) are grown in the upland fields. Additionally, tapioca is cultivated extensively.

Fruit Varieties: In this region, various types of fruits—such as mango, jackfruit, banana, guava, lemon, wood apple, Indian gooseberry (amla), custard apple, tamarind, jamun (black plum), jujube, and fig—are found in both forests and agricultural fields. These fruits fall into two categories: those obtained naturally from the wild and those harvested from trees cultivated by the local people in their home gardens.

Birds and Animals: Mountains are naturally teeming with bird and animal life. Research indicates that this mountainous region is home to a wide variety of birds, including pigeons, jungle fowl, quails, crows, parrots, sparrows, sunbirds, partridges, peacocks, herons, black quails, black eagles, parakeets, owls, and woodpeckers.

Housing Structure: The layout and size of the tribal settlements vary in form and structure, adapted to the specific needs and circumstances of the community. Houses are constructed using trees as a structural basis, situated within mountain crevices and on hillocks; they typically take the form of simple huts or small, thatched-roof dwellings. Notably, only members of their own community are permitted to enter the homes; outsiders are engaged in conversation and sent away at the village outskirts or a designated secluded spot.

Healthcare: All tribal residents of the Kadambur hills utilize the Primary Health Centre in Kadambur for first aid; the centre also provides round-the-clock, free delivery services. For advanced medical needs, they travel to the town of Sathyamangalam, located 30 kilometers away.

Conclusion

This study provides a detailed account of the history of the tribal people living in the Kadambur hills and the origins of the names by which they are known, based on information gathered through fieldwork. It elaborates on the geographical extent of the Kadambur hills—situated among the mountains of the Kongu region—and provides statistics on the local population. Furthermore, it offers a comprehensive explanation of the social, clan, and caste structures, as well as the hierarchical organization and layout of the villages inhabited by the Kadambur tribal community.

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