



PALIYAN - A PRIMITIVE TRIBAL COMMUNITY IN THE THENI DISTRICT: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The Paliyan are a primitive Dravidian tribal community inhabiting in the Southern part of Western Ghats, particularly in the South Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Their original habitat was the Palani Hills, from where they gradually migrated to other parts of Tamil Nadu, including Theni District. In Theni, the Paliyan are mainly settled in the forest hills and its fringes of Bodinayakanur and Varsanadu. They possess some distinct characteristics in their socio-economic and religious life, which set them apart from mainstream society. Traditionally, they were nomadic hunter-gatherer, foragers and honey trappers with wild yams constituting their major source of food. Their religious beliefs dominated in their daily life, thereby their social life is governed by numerous customs and practices. This article is an attempt to explore the history, socio-economic life and cultural heritage of the Paliyan tribe in Theni District of Tamil Nadu.

Key words: Paliyan, Theni, hunter-gatherer, socio-cultural life, medicinal plants.

INTRODUCTION

India has a significant concentration of tribal population, constituting about 8.6 percent of the total population, which makes it the largest tribal population in the world after Africa. The majority of these tribal communities

are found in the forest hills and their suburb regions in eastern, central and western India. Tamil Nadu has the second-lowest proportion of tribal population that constitute 1.03 percent of the total population of the state. This tribal

population is distributed among thirty-six groups, of which twelve are classified as primitive tribal communities, such as Toda, Kurumba, Paniya, Irula, Kattunaykkan, Kani, Paliyan, Muduvan, Malayali, Sholagar, Kadar and Veddar.

Among these tribal groups, the Paliyans were the original aboriginals of Palani Hills in the Western Ghats, from where they later dispersed to present-day Madurai, Theni, Dindugul, Tiruppur, Virudhunagar and Tirunelveli Districts. It is generally believed that the term “Paliyan” is derived from the Tamil word Pazhaniyan, meaning ‘a man from Palani’. However, Paliyan mythology traces the origin of the term to ‘Valli’, a Paliyan woman and one of the consorts of Lord Subramania or Murugan, the son of Lord Siva. Consequently, the name Paliyan is associated with Palichiammal, who is venerated by the Paliyans as their chief goddess. Notably, the Paliyan are known by several other names, such as Palliyar, Paliyar, Palleyan, Palani Makkal, Malai and Daiva Paliyar.

Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari’s (Edgar Thurston, 2001) work is considered as one of the pioneering studies in the field, providing valuable insights into the early Paliyan settlements and their socio-economic life. However, ethnographic and anthropological studies

of Peter M. Gardner (Gardner, 1993, 1994, 2006, 2009, 2012) constitute the most substantial contributions to the subject that offering detailed description of Paliyan settlements in tropical regions, their economic and socio-cultural life as well as illness and medicinal practices prevalent among them. V. Selvakumar (Selvakumar, 2002, 2014) made significant analysis on the Paliyans through archaeological evidences thereby bringing to light about material evidence relating to early Paliyan settlements. D. Jeyachandraleka’s (Jeyachandraleka, 2021) doctoral thesis is considered as an important monograph in understanding the Paliyans Theni District and provides valuable insights in their ethnography, socio-economic conditions and cultural life. However, the present study is an attempt to provide an overview of the Paliyan foraging tribe in Theni District with a particular focus on their history, economy, society and culture, as well as their knowledge of traditional medicinal system.

Theni District lies at the foothills of the southern Western Ghats and is situated between 9° 53’ and 10°22’ North latitude and 77° 17’ and 77° 67’ East longitude. It is one of the thirty-eight Districts of Tamil Nadu which came into existence on 7 July, 1996 following the bifurcation of the erstwhile Madurai

District. Located in the south-western part of Tamil Nadu, the Theni comprises five taluks; Bodinayakanur, Periyakulam, Theni, Uthamapalayam and Andipatti, along with six municipalities, twenty-two town panchayats and more than eighty villages. The charming district is bounded by Madurai District to the east, Dindigul to the north, Virudhnagar to the south and the state of Kerala to the west. The Paliyan population is scattered across the foothills of Theni District with about 47 percent residing in Bodinayakanur taluk, followed by 35 percent in Andipatti taluk, 10.7 percent in Periyakulam taluk and 8.6 percent in Uthamapalayam taluk. Important Paliyan settlements in the District are Bodimettu, Combai and Ul-Combai, Kaumparai, Murugamalai Nagar, Paliangudi, Arasaradi, Manjalaru, Munthal and Velapparkovil.

PALIYAN - A PRIMITIVE TRIBAL COMMUNITY

Historical as well as archaeological evidence indicates the primitive characteristics of the Paliyan tribe in the Theni region. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Edgar Thurston described the Paliyans as a nomadic hunter-gatherer and foraging tribal group living in the hilly tracts of Tamil Nadu (Edgar Thurston, 2001). A researcher (Selvakumar 2002 and 2014) conducted extensive ethnographic and archaeological

studies of the Paliyan settlement in the Varsanadu hill fringes of Andipatti region in Theni District. He characterises the Paliyans as primitive hunter-gatherers whose settlement can be traced back to the Mesolithic and Iron Age (1000 BCE to 500 CE). He unearthed evidence of early cave shelters and the use of microlithic artefacts associated with the Paliyans. The rock shelter sites of Pettankal and Chittirakkalpodavu near Chettiyapatti in Andipatti region were used as cave shelters by them (Selvakumar, 2002). Interestingly, the Chaturagiri hill's rock shelter site of Kuliratti cave reveal evidence of pottery and rock paintings depicting honey-gathering scenes, which constituted as the chief economic activity of the Paliyans (Selvakumar, 2014). In the early phase, the Paliyans lived in caves, which were hut-like structures between two rocks. Gradually they shifted to temporary shelters made of bamboo reeds, thatched with straw or leaves, known as hut or *kudi*. In recent decades, the Government of Tamil Nadu has rehabilitated the Paliyans and most of them now reside in concrete houses located along the hill fringes.

PALIYAN SUBSISTENCE AND HUNTER-GATHERING

Hunting-gathering subsistence is considered as a defining feature of the Paliyan tribal community. Traditionally, the Paliyans were nomadic hunter-gatherers

who followed hunter-gatherer adaptation from early historic times (Mesolithic and Iron Age) until the twentieth century. The Chaturagiri hills provide substantial evidence of their hunting activities that indicate they exploited their natural habitat in small groups of two to five individuals (Selvakumar, 2014).

They hunted small games such as sambar deer, boar, wild goat, monitor lizard, giant squirrel and chevrotain and often trapping animals in pitfalls which carefully concealed with twigs and leaves. These animals were hunted both for subsistence and for medicinal purposes. Their hunting equipment generally includes billhook (*aruval*), sharpened sticks and stones. They used dogs to aid them in tracking and driving game into ambushes (Gardner, 1994).

Besides hunting, the Paliyans also depended on wild roots, fruits, leaves, honey extraction and fishing for their subsistence. Wild yams dug from the forests constituted their staple diet (about 80%), and both men and women involved in digging and cooking them. The wild yams collected by them mainly included three varieties: *vatale valli* or *malai tiinu* (*Dioscorea oppositifolia*), *mullu valli* (*D.pentaphylla*) and *nuulam paTai* or *caipam* (*D.tomentosa*) (Gardner, 1994). Similarly, the Paliyans extracted four

varieties of honey, namely *kombu then* (branch or twig honey), *malan then* or *kaTante then* (extract from cliffs or large tree branches), *kosun then* or *sirun then* (extracts from holes in trees) and *potan then* (formed in multiple layers of comb in hollow trees). Both men and women participated in the collection of all four types of honey. Generally, honey was collected individually; however, the extraction *malan then* required cooperative labour of the involvement of groups of six people. (Gardner, 1994). In addition to hunter-gathering, yam collection and honey extraction subsistence, both men and women were also engaged in fishing.

However, the contemporary Paliyans no longer strictly adhere to their traditional subsistence pattern and a major section of them has shifted into agricultural and plantation labour. Nevertheless, some continue to collect forest products, such as honey and medicinal plants and sell them in local market. Today, as in many other societies, rice constitutes their staple food.

SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE

The Paliyans possess certain distinct features in their socio-cultural life that set them apart from mainstream societies. These characteristics can be best understood through an examination of their marriage system, beliefs, customs and

social practices. Unlike many other tribal communities, the Paliyans did not have a tribal chief or leader who held the authority to issue orders or impose punishments. When conflicts arose, one or two men or women, whom they regarded as respectful elders or ‘good heads’ would intervene to mediate the dispute and resolve it amicably (Gardner, 2006).

The Paliyans practised monogamous, polygynous and polyandrous forms of marriage. The majority of their unions were monogamous and were often contracted with *sontakarar* (close consanguineal and affinal kin). Significant age differences between spouses were common and marriages involving immature girls and boys were also prevalent. Polygyny was the most common form of plural marriage, while polyandry occurred only occasionally. The Paliyan marriages were generally simple and less ceremonious. The first union was solemnised through the exchange of betel leaves and salt, accompanied by a promise of lifelong fidelity, whereas subsequent marriages did not involve any formal wedding rituals (Gardner, 2009).

The Paliyans are deeply religious-minded people, and their customs and social practices are closely intertwined with religious beliefs. They belong to the Hindu religious tradition and worship

deities such as *Palichiamman*, *Murugan* and *Mayandi*. *Palichiamman* is regarded as their chief goddess from whom they seek protection for life and well-being before engaging in subsistence activities like hunting and honey extraction. They believe that *Palichiamman* has their soothsayer and would protect them from wild animals and empower their weapons. *Mayandi* is revered as an ancestral deity and typically represented by a stone placed beneath a fig tree (*atti maram*). They were also strongly believe in malevolent spirits and efficacy of magic. Animal sacrifices, usually goats are performed to obtain the blessings of their ancestral spirits (Jeyachandrakka, 2021).

The *Mazhaipongal* or the rain invoking ceremony (*Mazhai* means ‘rain’ and *pongol* denote a celebration by cooking rice) is a distinctive religious ritual of the Paliyan society. During the dry months, the Paliyans pray to their chief goddess *Palichiamman* seeking rain and her benevolence. As part of the ritual, rice or millet is cooked and poured over the stone representing their *Palichiamman*. The ceremony is conducted and supervised by a Paliyan priest. Notably, the *Mazhaipongal* ceremony is observed as a joint celebration involving both Paliyans and their non-tribal counterparts, the Thevar community, who are agricultural

landowners living in the neighbourhood. The Thevars' believe that the Paliyans are ritually specialised with supernatural efficacy in inducing rainfall and therefore sponsor the *Mazhaipongal* ceremony. Although contemporary Paliyans are largely engaged as agricultural labourers on lands owned by the Thevar community, the rain-invoking ceremony accords them ritual prominence and social significance within the local socio-cultural hierarchy (Jeyachandraleka, 2021).

Although Paliyan women enjoyed a comparatively better position in society, they are subjected to several social and religious taboos during child birth, attainment of puberty and other life cycle events. Following childbirth, mothers observed a period of birth pollution for eight days, during which the mother and child were secluded in a separate hut, where the mother managed all domestic responsibilities herself. On the ninth day, a purificatory ceremony performed in which both mother and child would bath in turmeric infused water. A further ritual bath was conducted again on the sixtieth day during the *namakarna* (name giving) ceremony of the child. Children were usually named after gods, goddess or ancestors (Nagaraj, 2014). The puberty ceremony among Paliyans was also bound with specific ritual practices. Upon

attaining puberty, a girl was secluded in a separate hut for sixteen days, during which male members are prohibited from approaching her. On sixteenth day, she performs a ceremonial bath, wear new clothes and ornaments and then returns to her original hut. Subsequently, she was presented before her prospective groom and a betrothal ceremony confirm her future marital partner (Jeyachandraleka, 2021).

The Paliyans also possess rich traditions of music and dance. During festivals, they often engaged in dancing throughout the night with participants forming circles in which both men and women take part. Occasionally, smaller circles were formed thereby married couples danced together (Gardner, 2006).

With regard to education, the majority of Paliyans remain illiterate. Their settlements in remote areas and foothills generally limit access to educational institutions. The state government has made some efforts to improve their educational status by establishing three schools for Paliyan children in Theni District. Similarly, the Forest Department has opened two schools, one of which continues to function today. Despite these initiatives and incentives like scholarships, free books, free clothing and mid-day meals,

school enrolment among the Paliyans remains very low. Owing to prevailing socio-economic conditions, many illiterate parents are reluctant to send their children to school. Nevertheless, the central and state governments along with NGOs continue to work towards the welfare and educational upliftment of the Paliyans (Jeyachandraleka, 2021).

KNOWLEDGE ON MEDICINAL PLANTS

The Paliyans possess very unique and well-developed body of indigenous medical knowledge that has evolved over generations. Gardner classify the Paliyan illness into two broad categories: ‘naturalistic illness’ caused by internal factors and ‘personalistic illness’ attributed to external forces. Naturalist causes include infections, accidents and microorganisms whereas the personalistic causes are believed to the result from spirit attacks or divine punishment (Gardner, 1994). The Paliyans have their own methods of treatment of both categories of illness and maintain extensive knowledge of ethnomedicines. Their traditional remedies are used to treat ailments such as dog bites, snake bites, insect bites, headaches, stomach pain, teeth pain, and to facilitate smooth delivery during childbirth. Some of the commonly used medicinal plants include *Pothaipullu*

(*Eragrostis aspera* [Jacq]) for fever and headache, *Kaatukarunai* (*Amorphophallus campanulatus*) for appendices and piles, *Nilapanai* (*Curculigo Orchioides Gaertn* *Synonym*) for toothache, *Siriya nangai* (Acanthaceae) for stomach pain and snake bite and *Garudkkodi* for easing delivery, treating stomach ache and curing snakebite (Gardner, 1994; Jeyachandraleka, 2021). A study reveals that the Paliyans use more than sixty varieties of medicinal plant species which reflect their extensive ecological knowledge and deep understanding of the therapeutic potential local flora. (Jeyaprakash, 2011; Divya, 2024). Although the Paliyans are gradually adapting modern medicine, owing to its inaccessibility, lack of transportation and prevailing their socio-economic conditions, they remain largely dependent on indigenous medicinal practices. However, deforestation and degradation have led to the disappearance of many of their ethnomedicinal plants which has adversely affecting their traditional healthcare system and leading to deteriorating health conditions.

CONCLUSION

A close examination of the history, economy and socio-cultural life of the Paliyans reveals that they were traditionally a primitive hunter-gatherer foraging community inhabited in the

foothills of Theni District. The process of modernisation has significantly altered their way of life and many of their earlier characteristics are no longer prominently visible among contemporary Paliyans. However, to some extent their traditional practices continue to persist. Despite socio-economic transitions, the Paliyans retain distinctive socio-cultural traits and a rich heritage of indigenous medicinal knowledge which together underscore their cultural resilience and historical continuity.

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