

## MALAYĀLIS OF KOLLI HILLS IN TAMILNADU - A CASE STUDY

Dr. B. Kathiresan<sup>1</sup> and Dr. Soma Rajendran<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Serkkadu, Vellore - 632115

<sup>2</sup>Dept. of Tamil, Nehru Memorial College - 621007, Trichy District

### Abstract

*The Malayāli tribes, one of the treasures of Tamil Nadu, are living exclusively in the Kolli Hills regions of Namakkal District and their population goes up to 34,584 out of 1.5 lakhs in Tamil Nadu. Among all these hilly regions in the Eastern ghats, Kolli hills enjoy the moderate comforts of road and electric power facilities. As a result, Kolli Malayālis lead a different mode of life from other tribes in the mountainous region. This paper aims at bringing out the cultural changes of the Malayālis, their educational background and also the challenges they face in their day-to-day life. To bring out facts on these issues, fieldwork is done in 42 villages in and around Kolli hills. In order to compare Malayāli tribes of Kolli hills with tribes of the same community living in Kalvarayan hills (Salem and Viluppuram Districts), Pachai hills (Trichirappalli District) and Shevaroy hills (Salem District) data are collected from the selected villages of these areas.*

**Keywords:** Eastern ghats, Kalvarayan hills, Shevaroy hills, Pachai hills, Kolli Hills, Javvadu hills

### Kolli Hills - An Introduction

Kolli hills originally belonged to Salem District, later it was confined to Namakkal after its emergence as a district in Tamilnadu. The total area is 28293 hectares. It stretches 29 kilometers in the south to north and 19 kilometers in the east to west direction. The altitude is 3000 to 4000 feet above sea level. Many important peaks of this hills, invariably have this much altitude mentioned. The highest elevation is 4,663 feet. Its maximum temperature goes up to 30° Celsius and the lowest reaches 10°Celsius. Among the total geographical area, 44% happens to be reserve forest, 51.6% cultivable lands and 5% happens to be living areas. There are 14 revenue villages in Kolli hills panchayat union. The revenue villages are called as Nadu (country). From the census conducted on 2001, it is found that 36,525 (34,854 Malayālis and 1,671 others) people are living in Kolli hills, out of this 18,511 are men and 18,014 are women. Kolli hills have been referred in more than 20 and above ancient Tamil literature. There are also historical references to prove the fact that this region was once ruled by the famous King Valvil-Ori.

### Origin of the Malayālis

Many living in Kolli hills belong to the community of *Malayālis*. Originally they are considered to be the citizens of Kanchipuram who migrated and settled in these areas in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There are so many folk tales about their settlements.

Once, three brothers from Kanchipuram set out for hunting along with their dogs. They could not return home for three days due to heavy rain. But their dogs returned home. On seeing the return of the dogs without the masters, the wives of the three brothers committed suicide on a pyre thinking that their husbands had died. In fact, their

husbands were alive, and when they returned home, they came to know about the sad news about the wives and became grief stricken. They were not allowed to mingle with their community since the funeral rituals were conducted for them. They were left with no option but to leave the place permanently. The eldest brother got married to Kaikkola community girl and started living at Kalvarayan hills, otherwise called Periya malai. The second brother got married to the girl belonging to the Vettuva community and started living in Pachaimalai. The last brother married to a girl who belonged to the Devandra community and began to live at Kolli hills. Their descendants were called as Peria Malayālis, Pachai Malayālis and Kolli Malayālis. Other versions of these stories with little variations are also heard / told.

Edgar Thurston in his research about *Malayālis* is of the opinion that they live in and around the Shevaroy hills of Salem District but they originally immigrated from Kanchipuram. People who live in the Javvadu hills also belonged to Kanchipuram. He also writes about the *Malayāli* tribes who live in Yarcaud, Kiliyur area, Dharmapuri-Taluk, South Arcot and North Arcot districts. From the research study on Tamilnadu tribals, S. Sakthivel brings out the idea that *Malayālis* are largely seen in Servarayan hills, Kolli hills, Pachai hills, Javvadu hills and Yelagiri hills. Edgur Thursten is quite sure that these tribes are originally farmers from Kanchipuram. This view is endorsed by S. Sakthivel too.

*Malayālis*, living in the hilly regions, are not the ancient tribes but they are the settlers from Kanchipuram who originally belong to a farmer community. Since they lived continuously in the hilly regions they have developed certain cultures, features that are typical to the people living in the hilly region.

Whatever may be the case, *Malayālis* are tribes originated in these hilly regions (*Malayālis* of this hilly region are different from *Malayālis* of Kerala). These *Malayālis* speak Tamil and have no separate language. They are called *Malayālis* because they rule the Malai (Malai - Mountain or hill). They also assume the title of Gounder and call themselves as *Malayāla* Gounder. This caste division is only for the sake of marriages and they don't marry from other communities. Marriages being conducted among such sections are either fraternal or caste based. These fraternal sections are identified separately in different regions.

#### **Life Style and Culture of *Malayālis* during 1880 - 2000**

Based on Edgar Thurston's book *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, written in eighteen nineties, one can arrive at the following related to *Malayālis* mode of living. They were suspicious as well as superstitious and did not believe in strangers. They never allowed strangers to meet their women folk. They believed in evil eye. Therefore they doubted strangers looking at their children, thinking that would bring them disaster. The women folk who lived in Pachai hills never wore tops to cover their breasts. Men wore Woolen shawls which were not offered to women. They never used bricks and tiles for they believe that would induce the wrath of their gods. The male children were married to

mature females, and the father in-law of the bride assumes the performance of the procreative function. They also believed that this act would save them from hell. Widow remarriages are forbidden but irregular liaison among Periya *Malayālis* are permitted. But for widows in Dharmapuri Taluk, it was almost imperative to marry again. Even at eighty years of age, a widow is not exempted from this rule. When a girl attained puberty she would be separated from the village and was not allowed to come out of her dwelling for particular days. Her food was served there separately.

From the research conducted by Prof. S. Sakthivel during nineteen seventies the following facts highlight the life of *Malayālis*: *Malayālis* take millet varieties as their staple food. In addition to pork, meat and chicken they also consume flesh of monkeys. Their hobby is hunting Deer, Tiger, Leopards, Bear and Wild Boars. The superstition of throwing cow dung on one another to get rain is also found in their life.

#### **Mode of Living and Cultural Changes**

*Malayālis* living in Kolli hills region have undergone several changes in their culture and life style in the last century.

#### **Food Habits**

Until 25 years ago, their main food grains are Italian Millet, Poorman's Millets (little Millet), Bulrush Millet (pearl millet), Common Millet and Ragi. In his research paper P. Narayanasamy opines "Most of these substances are safe, biodegradable, less persistent, non-toxic, and easily available in and around their house tenements and land."

But now they take rice as their staple food. Only in untrodden areas like Alathur Nadu and Kunduni Nadu people take the millet varieties. But generally they take dhal sambar and rasam along with cooked rice. They also take cooked cereals and Dal along with rice. They consume a lot of green leaves. Above forty different varieties of green leaves play an important role in their food consumption. They take black tea and coffee and don't mix them with milk. They never consume Buttermilk. Most of them consume raw rice, mutton, chicken, and pork during feasts. Kolli hills *Malayālis* do not have the habit of taking the flesh of monkeys as food. But still they take the cooked flesh of monkeys as medicine for sexual diseases and skin diseases. One can notice obvious changes in their conventional mode of food habits. Tribes living in Shevaroy hills and at certain other hilly regions take millets as one their food items.

#### **Dress**

In the early days they wore simple dress. Males used to wear only dhotis. The practice of wearing shirts was not found. They used to make use of their dhotis as shawls during winter days. The practice of tying towels on their heads as turbans was also found. Women used to wear white cotton cloth of 2 meter length across their breast. The practice of wearing blouse was not found among them in the early days. Wearing blouse was a

taboo. 50 years ago women wearing blouses were severely fined. But now all women wear blouses and saris. Some women also wear modern dresses. Now men wear dhotis and shirts. *Malayālis* of other region too have undergone such changes.

### Dwelling

In all places, *Malayālis* love to live in proximity with each other. In those days they lived in mud- walled houses. They made use of a peculiar grass for roofing their huts. Even today such huts do exist. But many of the huts now have the look of properly constructed houses built out of quarry stones and cement. The roofs are also tiled. At present, many live in the houses constructed by the Government. Storied houses are seldom found. Almost all houses look small. The entrances of these houses are very low that one has to bend his head while entering the house. Same is the case with all the houses found in different hilly regions.

### Agricultural Issues

Agriculture happens to be the major occupation for the *Malayālis*. Some people get honey from the forest and make an extra living. Bee-hive honey collection is also another source of additional income. They rear goats, hens and pigs for their food. As there are no suitable animals for them to hunt in the forest the habit of hunting is not found in them. They grow rice in wet areas and dry crops in dry regions. As their habit of consumption has changed they do not show much interest now in the traditional cultivation of crops. They buy rice from the plains as the areas suitable for rice cultivation is very less. The ration rice provided by the government comes handy to them. In most of the areas they grow tapioca. They consider it as a cash crop. Other cash crops are: Plantain Gauva, Lemon and Pineapple. From the growth of such cash crops they get some material comfort. Though the soil and geographical condition are suitable to grow pepper and coffee, they are not ready to grow these cash crops. It is because of the fear that these crops would give them late yield. But it is common to see people who come from plains involving themselves in growing pepper and coffee. The pepper and coffee are cultivated only in limited places by the *Malayālis*. Still this takes place below 0.1 % in the total cultivable land. In certain areas *Malayālis* grow pepper and coffee to a limited extent. The practice of felling trees was one of the main occupations for about 10 to 30 years. The region known for its heavy rain becomes a dry region on account of felling trees. This has caused hazardous change in the ecological system.

The practice of growing silver oak to facilitate the growth of pepper creepers is very much effective for the past 10 years among the rich *Malayālis*. The benefit from pepper growth comes to them after waiting for 6 to 7 long years. Many are not ready to cultivate pepper because of this late yield.

On contract basis, farmers get money from the agents of tapioca merchants. As a result, the farmers do not get any desirable profit. Further the fluctuations found in the

market also affect the farmers. But now many farmers show great interest in growing traditional crops. Persons living in and around Kalvarayan hills also show interest in the emergence of the new trend. This trend of cultivating traditional crops on commercial basis is also found even in Pachai hills and Shevaroy hills.

Pepper, Coffee and Cardamom are crops grown in Shevaroy hills. Turmeric, Sugarcane and Betel nuts are crops grown in Kalvarayan hills. Growing tapioca is found in Pachai hills and Kalvarayan hill regions but not in Shevaroy hills.

### **Social Organisation and their Rituals**

#### **The Administration of the Society**

'Karakarars' (The leaders of tribal society) play an important role in the life of *Malayālis* and their social organization and social rituals. Vur Gounder is the title given to Karakarar in small villages. Nattu Gounder is the title given to a leader of 20 to 30 villages drawn together called as Nadu. The Chief Pattakarars have control over 3 to 4 Nadus. All of them play a keyrole in their marriage matters and temple festivals and also in several such functions. Karakarars also settle the social disputes among *Malayālis*. Even today this social custom is strictly practiced.

#### **Marriage and Customs Practiced**

For *Malayālis* the marriage is a simple ritual. Spouses exchange garlands before the deity of the temple and the marriages are held only in the divine houses particularly built for conducting marriages. The first knot of the Thali, MangalSutra, is tied by the bridegroom and the successive two knots are tied by the Karakarar. The practice of child marriages, an evil practice for some 50 years ago, now is totally wiped off from the society. Men do not hesitate to marry elderly women who are a few years older than them. Thali is often made out of gold or silver.

The evil practice of dowry system is not found among them. On the other hand, parents, of girls shall be given Rs. 1016.25 to Rs. 2016.25 on the occasion of the bride's reception. The point to be noticed is that the amount should be any amount plus 16.25 rupees.

In earlier days bridegrooms' parents got a certain amount from brides parents by force and compulsion. But now this is not being insisted upon. The practice of offering Rs. 16.25 to bride's mother even today exists. This is called as 'Milk money', confirming the fact that mothers feed their daughters to be recognized and honoured.

In recent days, during the occasion of marriage, the trend of offering Jewels by bridegrooms to brides and brides parents offering jewels of their choice to daughters is slowly showing its way in their social custom. But these social customs are not matters of compulsion.

In Kalvarayan hills, the practice of offering 6 bags (each 50 kg of weight) of corn and Rs.300 to bride's parents is in practice even today.

In Shevaroy hills, bride's parents extract money, ranging from Rs.5551.25 to Rs.8551.25 from the bridegroom's parents. In Pachai hills it is Rs.1026.25.

In social matters like marriage there exist certain variations in some regions of Kolli hills. In certain areas, instead of temples, marriages are conducted at bridegroom's residence and a Brahmin priest performs the marriage rituals in recent times.

#### **Process of Divorce**

Divorce is very much accepted and it is not a taboo. When a man or a woman feels unsatisfied with their partnership all that he or she has to do is to express their unwillingness before the village Karakarars and find the remedy called divorce. One who seeks such divorce either has to remit the sum asked by his or her spouse or has to remit the compensation decided by the Panchayat. Then he or she is free to get remarried. Many say that divorcees are at lower rate. Still in Pachai hill region the fee fixed for divorce is as follows: a male seeking divorce has to remit Rs.50, 000 and a female has to remit Rs. 25,000. Pachai hill *Malayālis* have this practice in order to reduce the rate of divorce and it has proved that there is a remarkable reduction in divorce.

#### **Widow Remarriage**

Widow Remarriage is an acceptable social custom even in Pachai hills and Kolli hills. Considering widows as inauspicious is not found there. Even in other communities, living in other mountainous regions, widow remarriage is an acceptable affair. In Shevaroy hills, widows who have no children are allowed to remarry.

#### **An Important Change in the Marriage System**

*Malayālis* living in Kolli hills do not get married to other *Malayālis* of other hilly regions. But now this attitude has changed. This is a significant improvement in their social outlook. Concrete evidences are there to prove the fact that marriages are held between *Malayāli* tribes of Pachai hills and *Malayāli* tribes of Shevaroy hills.

#### **Superstitions**

Keeping the girls alone in a separate hut from 15 days to one month when they attain puberty is common. But, in Pachai hills they are allowed to stay in the pials of their houses covered with coconut leafs

Keeping the mother and the baby in a separate hut for 15 days after delivery is a social affair. Only after 15 days of child birth mother and their babies are allowed to enter in to their home. The mother has to offer a chicken to their family deity on 16th day and then has to eat it. This is to cleanse the dirt of delivery. Then only she can enter the home with the child. They call this as cleansing of dirt and it is also in vane today. During the occasion of child birth the fraternal relations of the child consider themselves as beings of

dirt and keep themselves at a distance from all social affairs for 15 days. On those days the clan does not take food in their houses. But this too is slowly disappearing.

Another strange superstition prevails among them is that they used to tie the idol of Lord Ganesha with the bark of plantain and they hide the idol. Then they used to play a game of frenzy, pouring cow dung mixed water on one another. By this act, they believe that the Lord Ganesha would relieve Himself and bring them rain. Further they believe that rain would come to wash away the dirt of their dresses. They say that, this would really workout. They confidently say that only after the rain they would go and untie the idol.

Lashing with whip and sacrificing goats & cocks to chase away ghosts from the possessed person are also seen. But when compared to the olden days these superstitions rituals are on the decrease.

#### **Rituals Related to Death**

Dead are buried by them. The practice of burning the dead is practiced in the suicide cases. For three days funeral rituals are practiced. On the third day after death they eat chicken as a sign of cleansing their death dirt. On the 30<sup>th</sup> day observance the relatives are called to attend a feast in memory of the departed. If that does not happen, then on the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the death occurrence, the relatives of the dead have to keep a spear on the jack tree and perform an invocation ceremony of the departed and finally feast their relatives with chicken and mutton.

#### **Worship**

These *Malayālis* worship 'Araplaleeswaran' (Lord Siva) and Perumal (Lord Visnu) as their Gods without showing any Siva and Vaishnava distinctions. All castes worship Lord Shiva as their important deity. Worshipping Earth goddess is practiced in a particular village called Velikadu that is in Kundunni Nadu panchayat. A stone mould in a pit is worshipped as Boomadevi (Earth Goddess) in this village. Also, there exists family deities in all villages and they worship these deities too. Periyannasamy is the common deity for all of them. The literary goddess Kolli Pavaai that is found in the poems of ancient Tamil literature also happens to be one of their important female deities of worship.

#### **Education**

Most of the *Malayālis* get the benefits of school education. But they do not have the facility to receive higher education. There are 57 elementary schools inclusive of 14 middle schools, 4 high schools and one matriculation school and one higher secondary school. According to the data collected from the field work, there are now nearly 6500 students pursuing their studies at the elementary and higher levels put together.

Among *Malayālis* there are 152 graduates: 4 Lawyers, 5 Doctors and 3 Engineers have completed their respective courses of study. This might have gone up after the intensive field study. Almost equal to this number, there may be students studying at the

higher levels of learning. This shows their interest of becoming an engineer, a doctor and a lawyer. From the study conducted among 500 members in the area, the result is in the following table

At present, *Malayālis* show keen interest in education. The chances of providing them higher education are now remote and doubtful.

**Table 1: Literacy Rate of *Malayālis***

Age groups	Male	Female	Total (Male & Female)
Above 60	8 %	-	8 %
46 to 60	56 %	8 %	32 %
31to45	62 %	60 %	61 %
16 to30	76 %	72 %	74 %
Below 15	98 %	96 %	97 %

#### **Other Changes**

The population of Kolli hills shows a steady fall and rise for the past twenty years. Initially there were at least 5 children in each family but now parents are satisfied with two or three. The practice of arranging marriages for girls in the age of 13 to 16 and in the age of 15 to 18 for boys has now changed to 18 to 20 for girls and 20 to 25 for boys. Family planning is another crucial factor for the size of population

#### **Refined Behaviour**

Approximately 250 kilometers of road facility is available in Kolli hills. Even during midnight one can travel without any fear from waylaid robbery or theft. This it self shows how these people are cultured and refined. On many occasions the researcher traveled alone in the midnight on his two-wheeler, in connection with his the research activities, has not met with any single anti social activity from the *Malayālis* He has not experienced any assault or any threat from them.

#### **Challenges that Present Day *Malayālis* Face**

It is found that the places in and around Shevaroy hills and Yercad areas appear to be extremely attractive and beautiful. They enjoy the status of attractive tourism Zones. Many outsiders from the plains buy lands in the above mentioned places and start farm activities. In these farms tribes work as labourers, having lost their lands. Even in Kolli hills, Kalvarayan hills and Pachai hills, people from plains with their financial pride and richness, buy lands from tribes and start farm activities. This act forces the tribes to lose their lands and they become strangers to their own soil. This is an important socio - cultural issue that is to be taken into account.

In the Government tribal welfare boarding school of Kolli hills, there is a provision for accommodating 300 students. But only 220 students are accommodated. These

vacancies show that they are not able to sit for government examinations. Another study proved the fact that the total number of students studying in 9th standard is more than 300 but only 120 students could reach up to 12th standard

Since Malayālis adopt themselves to the modern culture at present they suffer from huge financial crisis. Hence they send their wards to work as manual labourers to plains, especially to the state of Kerala or Tamil Nadu (Tirupur). This reason also prevent the young Malayālis from seeking proper education

### **Conclusion**

The people of Kolli hills take immense delight to adjust and accommodate themselves to the growing influence of modernity. They do not feel that their customary values get eroded out of such changes. Certain orthodox people do not approve of these changes.

Malayālis now know how to keep abreast with the life trends commonly found among the people of the plains. In this regard, the Malayālis of Pachai hills come first and are followed by Kolli hills Malayālis. However, they are unable to come out of their struggle for life. There are a lot of changes in food, dress, shelter and agricultural methods.

Considering their socio cultural rituals, there occur mixed influences of modern and traditional mode of living to a significant level. The evil practice of polygamy and the practice of divorce are in decline. In agriculture, the trend is moving towards traditional crop again instead of cash crop .

The Yojnas (plans) for the tribes by the Central and State governments have reached them to a considerable level and also have made reasonable changes in their life style.

### **Recommendations**

Had the Government come forward to help them in a big way for the cultivation of cash crops like pepper and coffee, their life pattern would have definitely got improved and also it will prevent the Malayalis from selling their land for the lively hood. Further, such a growth of cultivation shall improve the environment, showing original signs of mountain chillness and coolness.

Though economics plays an important role for not allowing them to pursue higher studies, many who failed in 10<sup>th</sup> standard and 12<sup>th</sup> standard do not have any facility available for them to continue their studies. This is due to the fact that there are no proper tutorial colleges to help the students who failed. Government should help them to cultivate cash crops like Pepper and Coffee. If so their life pattern would definitely improve and also it will prevent them from selling their lands for the lively hood. Further, such a growth in cultivation shall improve the environment, showing original signs of mountain chillness and coolness.

Because of their economic conditions they could not pursue higher studies. Many of them failed in 10th standard and 12th standard because they do not have any facility. There are no proper tutorial colleges or special tuitions to help the students who have failed. Government should provide facilities and support for those who study and also for those who fail in order to motivate them in their due course of studies. This will help them in future to be individualistic and stand on their own legs.

Such a provision for Education and employment will help them to improve their knowledge, social awareness, status and economy. This way their superstitious beliefs and practices may automatically vanish from their life

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