



Kanikkar tribe of Kerala – A Cultural Study

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Abstract

Tribals are frequently known as 'Adivasis' or native inhabitants. There are 36 tribal communities in Kerala. Kerala is a home to some 500,000 tribal people. Wayanad is a homeland of various tribal communities. Each community has its own culture, belief, economy and social organization. The most important tribal groups on Kerala are 'Adiyan', 'Kattunaikan', 'Malaipandaram', 'Cholanayakan', 'Malaivetan', 'Malayan', 'Irulan', 'Kadar', 'Mutuvan', 'Kanikkar', etc. The 'Kanis' or 'Kanikkars' have settled in the forests of the Agasthyamalai hills of the Western Ghats in the Thiruvananthapuram District of Kerala. They are also seen in the Adimali hills of Idukki. The Kanikkar people have a strong clan system. According to the Indian Census report published in 1981, there are fourteen thousand Kanikkar tribe members overall. The present study attempts to evaluate the features of culture and tradition of kanikkars tribe. They have their own unique culture, lifestyle, tradition and practices.

Keywords: Tribals, Kanikkar, Culture, Tradition and History.

Introduction:

Tribes are the indigenous population found in the Southern Indian State of Kerala. Tribal people of Kerala are largely isolated from the outside world since they live in the Western Ghats' deep jungles. They survive either by using primitive agricultural systems or the free access of forest resources, which they utilise while employing customary skills. Kerala is a home to some 500,000 tribal people who live in the surrounding mountains. The natural beauty of the tribal region and its inhabitants, as well as all the traditional dances and other activities associated with them. Kerala's most populous tribal districts are Wayanad and the Attappady area of Palakkad. The three districts with the largest percentage of tribal population are Wayanad (31.2%), Idukki (11.5%), and Palakkad (10%).

Kerala holds a unique position in the tribal map of India. According to the 2011 census total tribal population in Kerala composes 1.14 percent of the total population. Among the tribal population, the majority live in the rural areas and only 0.17 percent live in Urban areas. A large number of tribal people in Kerala inhabiting in the mountain regions of Western Ghats bordering in Karnataka and Tamilnadu. Tribal population in Kerala distributed among all the districts with major concentration in Wayanad, Idukki, Palakkad and Kasargod Districts. Particularly Vulnerable Tribal groupings (PVTG) are food-gathering tribal people groupings experiencing population decline and low to very low literacy rates. They make up over 5 percent of the State's entire tribal population. There are just Cholanaikkans in the Malappuram District. The Mancheri hills of the Nilambur forest division are home to just a small number

of families. Related to the Cholanaikkans, the Kattunaikkans are a lower-hill community primarily found in Wayanad district, with a smaller population in Malappuram and Kozhikode districts. The districts of Thrisur and Palakkad are home to the Kadar population. The Attappady Block in the Palakkad district is home to Kurumbas. The plain portions of the Kasaragod district are home to the Koraga. The districts of Trivandrum and Kollam are home to the majority of Kannikars. If one visits the state of Kerala frequently, they will undoubtedly encounter numerous tribal communities that have made this place their home. Being one of the largest tribes in the entire state of Kerala, the Kanikkars are significant. According to the Indian Census report published in 1981, there are fourteen thousand Kanikkar tribe members overall.

The word 'Kanikkaran' means "hereditary proprietor of the land." They are also called Malai Arasars in Tamil, Mala Arayars in Malayalam. Bishop R. Caldwell writes

"the hill tribes called in Malayalam, Malayarasar (hill kings)

and in Tamil Kanikkar (hereditary proprietors of land) are not,

I think, to be regarded like the Todas of the Nilgris, as surviving

representatives of the earliest inhabitants of the plains; but like

the hill tribes the pulneys, appear to be the descendants

of some hinduised low-country people of a later period who were

driven to the hills by oppression or who voluntarily migrated

thither." (*A History of Tinnevely* 14)

Within the Kerala tribal community, the Kanis also known as Kanikkars. Because they usually carry a staff or pike, they are frequently referred to as Velanmar or 'spearmen'. They were mostly inhabited in the western regions of the districts of Trivandrum and Kollam. Communities can be found in the Nedumangad Taluk in places like Nalayadi, Ponmudi, Vithurai, Kalla, Nedumangad, Aryanad, Agastier Peak, and Aruvikkara, as well as in the Kollam District in places like Kulathupuzha and Chitra. These Kanikkar tribes have a highly appealing appearance because of their black bodies, round heads, curly hair, and wide noses. They speak in a Malayalam dialect mixed with a hint of Tamil. Mutti-illom and Mer-illom were the founding clans of the well-organized exogamous clans of the Kannikar people. Later, Kayy-illom and Pali-illom were added. The majority of Kannikars today identify as Hindus and follow to Hindu religious customs. The population of Kannikars is expected to be 21,251 people based on the 2011 census. They are undomesticated yet peaceful hill tribes. Since they are the landowners and their natural knowledge has grown in value. They developed a distinct culture, way of life, traditions and customs that outsiders frequently referred to as outdated and irrational. Kanikkar follow their own customs and rites. They were found as more secluded from the larger population who maintain unique cultural identity. Their interaction with other cultures is minimal.

There are a few intriguing legends about the origins of these Kanikkar tribes that are well-known throughout the area. Kanikkar are Aryans who moved from the north to the south. Kanikkar is a word that denotes landlords. These landlords, who also presented their presents to the renowned Attingal King, are descended from the Kings. Edgar Thurston refers to another legend,

"that there were two hill Kings, Virappan and Sithangan,

whose descendents emigrated from the Pandyan territories

beyond Agastyakudom under pressure from a superior force

and never returned to their country." (*Castes and Tribes of Southern India* 163)

According to the alternative narrative, the name Malayarayan, which refers to the well-known Hindu mythological sage Agasthya, is where the term "Kanikkar" originated. These Kanikkar tribes live in a colony with bamboo and tree-leaf homes. It is commonly referred to as Kani, and it is led by an elderly man who is tasked with leading the tribe. He goes by the name Muttukani or Kani Mooppan. The Kanikkar, often referred to as Kanis, are exclusive to Tamil Nadu's Kanyakumari District. Popular music and folklore have passed down various origin and migration stories that have been passed down from generation to generation.

For most of these Kanikkar tribes, agriculture is their main source of income. Anthropologists have focused a great deal of attention on these Kanikkar tribes for another reason. There is a tradition among these Kanikkar tribes to use herbal medicines to treat illnesses and restore wounds. They assert that these medications possess magical properties. These Kanikkar tribes have traditionally used leaves, believing them to have therapeutic properties. They also have very delicious food. People who live in forests eat 'wild honey' and 'root vegetables.' They chew betel leaves, smoke a lot, and drink alcohol. They also come to believe in other hill deities. Under the trees along the watersides, chickens are sacrificed. They have a rich cultural legacy that has been enhanced by their love of dancing and beautiful music.

Kanikkar tribes speak an old mother tongue that is unique to them. Few Kanikkar tribes speak to one another in a variety of Malayalam and Tamil languages. They have even written songs to ward off evil spirits, prevent illness outbreaks, etc. The name of these songs, 'Chattu', means holiness. The 'Kokkara' is a unique musical instrument that is performed during the singing of these songs. 'Muttukani' took the initiative to establish specific customs and traditions that these Kanikkar tribes obey to. Typically, a male Kannikar makes a proposal to a female member of the same group, ignoring the opinions of the other women. The groom's age is also not taken into consideration. The bride is presented before the husband with her eyes closed following the engagement. Wedlocks made of black thread are used to tie up with the bride. The bride arrives at the broom's house dressed in her clothes. The bride can only see the groom's face at this moment. Even though it's possible for a Kanikkar groom to be extremely elderly. The Kanikkar tribes have abandoned their ancient traditions and adopted those of a typical Hindu marriage today. In addition to the marriage ceremonies, these Kanikkar tribes also have unique customs that are observed throughout the funeral process.

These Kanikkar tribes break their fast by consuming porridge during festivities that last for a total of twenty-one days. During the last sixteen days, the Kanikkar tribes perform songs for ceremonies. Additionally gorgeous and ethnic dances, art forms, and clothing. These Kanikkar tribes typically clap with their hands and pound their heels while dancing. Stone pearls were the primary material utilised to make the ornaments worn by these Kanikkar tribes. They are armed to the teeth with spears, bows, and arrows. Nonetheless, a number of Kanikkar tribes have refrained from assimilating into the contemporary way of life.

The Kanikkar are divided into groups called illams, or families, of which five are thought to be endogamous and five to be exogamous. The latter are known as Annantampi, or brother illams, and the former as Macchampi, or brother-in-law illams. They bear names derived from locations (like Venad) and mountains (like Palamala and Talamala). The Kodayar River serves as a marriage border, preventing Kanikkar from marrying people who dwell north of it.

The Kanikkar people have a strong clan system and are split into two illams such as 'Muttillam' and 'Menillam'. The practice of discovering a dead elephant's body is thought to be the genesis of the clans. The deceased elephant's haunches and hind limbs were visible to him, and he became 'Muttillam' the trunk revealed its identity to him. Present-day Kanikkars assert that they are descended from these two clans' ancestors. Over time, the clans grew to become four. Palillam, Kayyillam, Menillam, and Muttillam are their names. Because Muttillakkar believe they are better than the other two clans, they exclusively marry members of Meni Illakkar. Neither intermarriage nor interdining occurs between them. When it

comes to marriages, the two lower clan members are not even invited, and if they do show up, they eat last among the higher clan members. A song makes it clear that there were seven illams: Menillam, Thottathillam, Kurumbottillam, Andathillam, Kathirakottillam, and Chayakottillam. Menillam members marry from Muttillam, Andottillam and Chayakottillam, while Thottathillam members marry Kathirakottikkar. It is noted that the Annantampi and Macchampi phratries are two further unique divisions or phratries. Menillam, Perinchillam, and Kayyillam are among the Annantampi phratry, while Muttillam, Velanattillam, and Kurumillam are among the Macchampi phratry. It is strictly prohibited for members of the same phratry to marry each other. To the south of Kothayar, among the Kanikkar, is another division of the clan system. Perinchillam, Kayyillam, Mangottillam, Thalamala illam, and Venillam are among the Annantampi phratry. Clan members from Annantampi phratry intermarry with Macchampi phratry clan members. Among the Kanikkar, there are interesting tales about how their clans came to be. The Kanikkar of Mothiramala claims that their ancestors detested the promiscuous lives they had previously led. Illampalli Muthan and Thiruvampalli Muthan founded the Annantampi phratry and Macchampi phratry, two separate Kanikkar organisations, to bring order to their disordered social status. The modern Kanikkar are claimed to be descended from the five clans into whom each phratry was further subdivided. The Kanikkar community in Mankutty has fictitious a deeper ancestral narrative regarding the genesis of the clan hierarchy.

There are two additional primary phrases such as Menillam and Muttillam. Mannati, Vellayilam, Thumbara, Thalayatillam, Kottapara, Mukkonath, and Kurumi illams are among the phratry in Muttillam. Meenanga, Pethottillam, Patikalillam, Paramala, Erumbiyat, and Kythode are among the Meni illam. About the beginnings of these clans, there is a legend. There was a wild elephant in the bush that was dead, and many men shared different portions of the animal. Mannattillam was the name given to the folks who could retrieve the ground containing the cadaver. Vellayillam was the name of the person who held the heart. Thumbara illam was the one who took the genital organ away. Talayattillam was the name given to the person who removed the head. A Kotta (basket) belonging to Kottappara illam was discovered by someone on a rock. Mulaikonath illam was the name given to the person who removed the haunches. Kurumillam was the name of the person who stole a tiny portion. Meenanga illam was the person who received the biggest portion. Erumbiyattillam was born to the one who obtained only the ants that swarmed there.

Kerala, known as the land of plenty, is home to over 35 different tribal dances. These dances showcase Kerala's rich cultural heritage and represent its customs and ceremonies. A few Keralan tribal dance styles have music and lyrics to go along with them. Singing is most commonly done by the performers themselves, although audience members can also join in and take part in the performance. While other instruments are included, drums are frequently a mainstay in Keralan tribal dancing styles. The Nritham Dance, or Kaanikkar Nritham is a tribal dance of the Kanikkar tribe. The dancers' movements their hand and arm gestures, and the sound of the drumming all blend together exquisitely. Kerala's tribal dances offer a singular illustration of how remote people maintain their traditions and manners. There are still a few hamlets in Kerala where you can witness the tribal dances, despite the impression that they have vanished. Each tribe showcases its distinct dancing customs, many of which have survived because of the way of life of the people. The performer in this dance, which is another favourite of the Kanikkar tribe, moves exquisitely in time with the sound of the drums beating.

Conclusion:

Tribal people in Kerala reside in tiny communities dispersed throughout the Western Ghats. One of the significant tribal communities residing in South Kerala is Kanikkar. Kanikkar villages were renowned for being extremely virtuous and engaged. Adults often have a brief structural history. A portion of them reside in the interior of the forest, particularly in the regions of Podiyam, Mukkothivayal, Chonampara, Erumbiyad, Pothod, Plath, Anakal, and Aamala in the Nedumangad Taluk of Trivandrum

district, Kerala state, which are part of the Agasthiyaar and Kottur Forest ranges. This study discusses the culture of the Kanikkar communities, their unique linguistic traits, tradition, lifestyle, history and dance.

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