

LIVING ON THE EDGE: THE IMPACT OF PEASANT MIGRATION ON
THE MANNAN TRIBE OF KERALA

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The movement of human beings from one region to another in their struggles for existence could be traced back in the annals of history. Migration, being a historical process worked throughout human history in response to or often compelled by certain economic, ecological, political factors, and so on.

This paper focuses on the impact of peasant migration on the Mannan tribe in Idukki district'. Now the Western Ghats Biodiversity Report is on the table and it is hailed as one of the largest ecological conservation efforts that independent India has witnessed. In this context, it is mandatory to understand the processes of displacement of indigenous population from the region. Among these early settlers of Western Ghats the Mannan occupies a prime position¹.

The Mannans consider themselves as the traditional settlers of the hi highlands of the Ghats and according to their lore handed down through generation they migrated to mountain regions of the present day Idukki district. Ethnologically, they form a close-knit ethnic community traditionally engaged in food gathering, small game hunting and shifting cultivation. The Mannans trace their ancient roots to the Tamil country and believed that they reached the present place by accompanying their defeated master who was related to the mighty Pandya ruling line of Madurai region. According to their tradition they were forced to flee to the Western Ghats under a chief due to some political turmoil in home country. Both the legends of the Mannans as well as the granthavaris of the Poonjar royal family reiterate that, later this chief became the raja of Poonjar. In subsequent period, we find the Mannans sharing a special relationship with the Poonjar raja as his vassals.

Social Organization

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Their social structure is simple but interestingly they consider themselves as a kingdom with a state and are quite distinct from other Adivasis of the region¹. In reality, sociological observations today suggest the chief is more of a rudimentary king rather than a sovereign. Since they are vassals of Poonjar raja, this shows either that heir king was subjugated by Poonjar raja at some point of time or that this was primarily a chieftom society.

Their settlements are scattered and clustered at some points to control the natural resources. The settlements are called Kudis. Each is organized under a Kani or headman, and all the kudis claim allegiance to the Mannan Raja. The Mannan king resides at Kovilmala in Udumbanchola taluk in Idukki district. Kovil means this hill had either a palace or a shrine.

The colonial administrative works and other earlier ethnographical studies point to the friendly nature of the Mannans when compared to other traditional societies in the Western Ghats. Thus their services have been used by the authorities in the plains. They were referred to as friendly allies by the Poonjar raja and then by the Tiruvitamkur state in the collection of forest products and later by the colonial and forest officials in doing odd jobs like porters, watchmen, digging trenches and so on. However by maintaining and nurturing own life style, identity and culture these Mannans have continued to live in the forest by adapting with the environment.

Migration of Peasants from the Plains

The entire situation was jeopardized with the advent of the immigrant peasants. Being supported by the state machinery and other institutions and forced by the material grievances, the migration of agrarian communities from the plains to the high ranges of erstwhile Kottayam division in the Tiruvitamkur state continued ‘uninterruptedly’ for decades. Though the migration to the fringes of Western Ghats had commenced in the 1930’s, the cross-migration to the interiors of the Idukki by the peasant communities on a large scale started in the 1950’s. The governmental schemes such as Grow More Food and High Range Reclamation Programme further accelerated this process. Among the immigrants, the Syrian Christians were a prominent community to settle in the region. Though peasants belonging to other categories also migrated to this region, the Syrian Christians deserve a special mention as the region where the Mannans settled was largely

¹ Anisu Mathew., 2013. The Kingship among the Mannans of Idukki, unpublished M.A Dissertation, department of History, Union Christian College, Aluva

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‘colonized’ by them. Supported by the church and political parties, they gradually appropriated land resources, encroached forest lands and became the dominant group both in number and in land holdings. With the advent of a new culture and life style from the plains, there were unprecedented changes in society, economy and culture of the early inhabitants and it eventually led to the displacement of the Mannans.

The advent of a new group of people and the culture they brought created contradictions in the tribal society. From the basic subsistence strategies upto socio-cultural practices, immigrants and Mannans were like chalk and cheese. The inability of the immigrants to understand the Adivasi way of life and the prejudiced assumption that the Mannans are group of people outside the cultured social realm created a psychological lag between the two in the beginning itself. However, these differences did not stand as hindrance to the immigrants in exploiting or using the Mannans to further their needs.

Environment and local economy was the base over which the entire institutions and cultural practices of the Mannans were constructed. The changes in these two contributed to a large scale alteration in the existing social structure or the superstructure. The so called superiority of the immigrants in terms of number, economic resources and institutional backup enabled them to establish control over the land and a domineering influence over the Mannans. Land alienation and the displacement from the original habitat were one among the most visible and vicious impacts which the migration inflicted upon the Mannans. The immigrants encroached and cleared the forests and went on to colonize land. Thus each piece of land came under the control of individual owners. The new land relation based on individual ownership contrary to the earlier collective community possessions confined the earlier occupants or the Mannans to petite pockets and fragmented settlements. By the 1980’s, the Forest Laws became stringent and further clearance of forest was no longer an easy task. The next option in front of the immigrants was to buy the land owned by the Mannans for petty sum, thus the land fragmentation took place vigorously as evident from the tremendous increase in the land sales for meager sum the 1960s. The ignorance of landowning Mannans in land surveying and transaction made the situation even worse.

The immigrant peasants introduced a capitalist economy and market system with the introduction of cash crops and the economic activities were monetized. He made use every chance to reveal his entrepreneurial abilities. With the alienation of land, the Mannans struggled to hold

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on to their traditional subsistence strategies. On the other hand, they failed to imitate the entrepreneurial capabilities and investment potentials exhibited by the immigrant peasants. There was not much room left for the Mannans, who were unskilled by the standards of immigrant peasants, apart from work for the peasants. Thus a land owner-wage labour relation gradually evolved and got cemented there. The self-sustained economy of the Mannans was reduced to the dependency status. They were integrated to as well as subordinated by the market economy and struggled to cope with the demands arising out of this. Besides this, due to the seasonal character of agrarian labour, unemployment and poverty became a regular phenomenon in their lives. The monetization of economy not only transformed economic relations but the traditional social relations too. Previously existing inter-community exchange systems were thus monetized.

The psychological alienation faced by the Mannans contributed to cultural and social dilemma. Superiority claims by the immigrant peasants and the imposition of inferiority reflected in the thoughts of the immigrants. The institutions set by the immigrants affected the life and culture of the Mannans. The ethnic medicinal knowledge once universal among them now was discontinued with the establishments of hospitals and clinics. Schools and educational curriculum further propelled the idea of alienation, as these had no relation with their culture or traditions but largely expressed an idea of civilizing them. The influence of evangelical groups and the attempts to incorporate them with the mainstream Hindu religion posted threats to the Mannan religious practices. Besides these, their dietary practices were altered, their dialect, a variant of Tamil is rapidly disappearing, their simple lifestyle became complex in the wake of new culture and capitalism. Cultural aspects such as Koothupattu, which consisted of the basics of their cultural milieu is also on the verge of extinction.

Indeed, a tribe could maintain their separate identity largely through endogamy and through strategies of minimal interaction with society at large. Here the Mannans failed to keep the structural distance from outsiders to safe guard their culture. Instead, they rapidly assimilated and homogenized the immigrant way of life and ensuing cultural loss is tremendous. A sharp identity crisis emerged among them in the wake of cultural and psychological alienation from what they were in the past. Thus a group of people believed in the right of existence of all organisms and found the glimpses of divinity in everything around them now led to the status of have-nots and deprived in a capitalist market culture. While continuing to be mute witnesses to the exploitation

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of their land and culture, the older generation among them lives on by cherishing the memories of the past and dream of regaining the lost prosperity. On the other hand, the younger generation among them continues to question their own existence and failed to answer who they are.

Thus we can see that, the process of detribalization among the Mannans is nor or less complete and they are living on the edge. They are losing their adivasiness or adivasitham. In fact, the history of migration to the high ranges of Idukki is also the history of the exploitation of the tribes. It is a saga of detribalization working intermittently for the last 50 years. However the complacency of the civil society, the media, the local and state governments and non-governmental organizations and the young Mannans continues.

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ⁱⁱ Thurston Edgar

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