

ROOTS OF THE MULLUKKURUMAR

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**ROOTS OF THE
MULLUKKURUMAR**

THESIS

KR Ramith

Roots of Mullukurumar is unveiling the forgotten past of the *Mullukurumar* tribes of *Wayanad*. *Mullukurumars* are considered as one of the oldest tribal community of *Wayanad*. This thesis will give a clear idea about the place from where the ancestors of *Mullukurumar* started their epic journey .





PREFACE

Human history is the story of migrations. The first wave of migration has started from Africa, around 65,000 years ago. They moved very slowly into the unknown lands of this blue planet. Years and sometimes even generations had changed over short distances. Their color, body, language, and everything got changed as they moved across the globe.

Humans are generally creatures who hold fast to their beliefs and move forward. The *Mullukkurumar* tribes consider themselves as a people born in *Wayanad* itself and they firmly believe that they did not come from anywhere. It is my duty to respect their beliefs, but I am also incapable of hiding the truth that is right in front of my eyes.

While working as a photojournalist, I often had the opportunity to document the indigenous people of *Wayanad*. While taking the pictures, the technical aspects are in mind, but later the pictures taken on the computer screen are closely observed. Then I have started to identify some noticeable features on the faces of the *Mullukkurumar* and many of them could clearly see the North Indian complexion. Those faces were the first to say that, *Mullukkurumar* had come to *Wayanad* in prehistoric times from some unknown place in the north. If it was from North India, then I wished to know where exactly they came from.

The culture and life of the *Mullukkurumar* got a closer look when I made documentaries on the ancient well of *Pakkom* and the *Uchal* festival of the *Thirumugam Kurumar tharavadu*. While collecting the ornaments of the tribal people for the heritage museum in *Kunkichira*, I got very accurate information about the past of the *Mullukkurumar*.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

In 1901, *Fred Fawcett*, the Malabar District Superintendent of Police, first brought the *Edakkal* cave engravings to the attention of the world. The detailed information about the cave comes out through the pictorial article written by him in the *Indian Antiquary Journal*. Fawcett believed that the creators of the *Edakkal* rock engravings were the ancestors of the *Mullukkurumar* who lived in the foothills of *Ambukuthi* hill. These cave paintings are believed to have been inscribed between 1700 and 6000 BC. But the stone inscriptions in *Edakkal* cave are not as old as the paintings. An inscription in *Pali* language is also believed to have been written in the 5th century AD.

Edgar Thurston says in his book that the *Kurumbar* of *Wayanad* belong to the family of the *Pallavas*. It is believed that during the reign of the *Pallavas*, the *Wayanad*, *Nilgiri* regions were under the control of the *Kurumbar* and trade relations were established even with foreign countries. *William Logan* in the *Malabar Manual* tells of a hunter king who sent an envoy to China in the 5th century after Christ.

METHOD OF STUDY

Observing the people around me; was the first method of study. I have been made attempts to know the life and culture of *Mullukkurumar*. The study of their ornaments gave me the vital information on their ancestry.

FINDINGS

The ancestors of the *Mullukurumar* tribe of *Wayanad* had come from *Rajasthan*.

They might have reached *Wayanad* in the 5th century after Christ. The inscription in *Pali* language in the *Edakkal* caves may have been written by the ancestors of the *Mullukurumar*.

The people who had come to *Wayanad* from *Rajasthan* are probably the members of *Meena* community, the largest tribal population in *Rajasthan*.

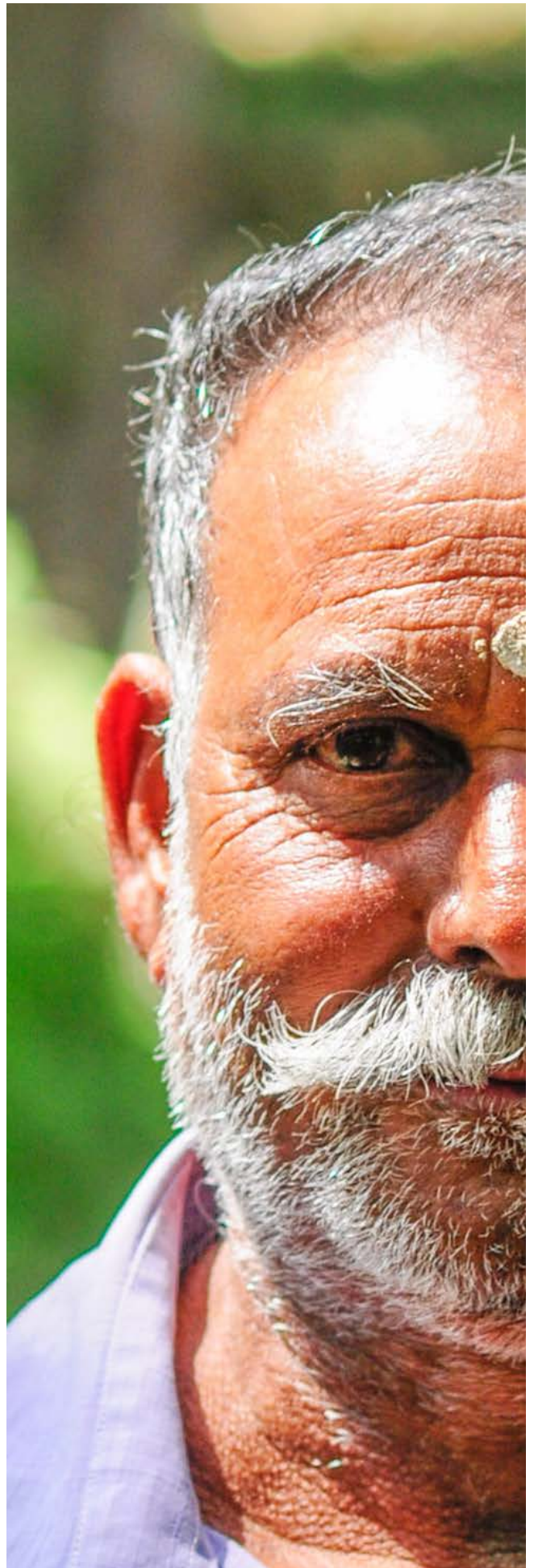
From *Rajasthan*, four families might have come to *Wayanad* and from them four clans of *Mullukurumar* were born.

Those ancestors were people who could read and write in *Rajasthani* language, were skilled in administrative system and knew how to fight with bow and arrow.

After settling in *Wayanad*, they eventually formed a tribal republic.

The paintings in *Edakkal* caves were created by the people who lived in *Wayanad* before the arrival of *Mullukurumar's* ancestors. The true creators of those images may be the *Cholanaykkar* or *Kattunaykkar* tribes who likes to live inside the caves.

The language of *Mullukurumar*, who initially spoke and wrote in *Rajasthani* , evolved into the present language during the course of time.



DISCUSSION

This is perhaps the first time that the ornaments of the *Mullukkurumar* tribe have been studied. None of the books related to the tribal people of *Wayanad* have given much importance to ornaments. But the information available from the study on jewelry is certainly surprising.

● **Thaappu vala**

Thaappu vala is one of the silver ornaments worn by *Mullukkurumar* women on their wedding day. *Thaappu vala* is made by joining three silver rings together. Small circles and triangles can be seen in the artwork on the bangle. This bracelet also features a removable nail for opening and closing. Among the *Mullukkurumar*, the only thing left at least today is the *Thaappu vala*.

When I was looking for *Thaappu vala* to display in the museum that I have noticed the similarities between the *Thaappu vala* and the tribal bangle of *Rajasthan*. *Thaappu vala*, unlike any other bangle in Kerala or neighboring states, is a replica of the one in *Rajasthan*, which is around 2,000 kilometers far.

Even though the bracelets in their hands are made by goldsmiths of *Wayanad*, new bracelets are made every time using the old bracelet as the model. Though the bangle has changed over time, but still the signature of *Rajasthan* remains unmistakable even today; with the remembrance of their ancestors.



Thaappu vala of *Mullukkurumar*



a tribal bangle of *Rajasthan*

● Tholanthi

Tholanthi is a silver ornament worn by *Mullukkurumar* women above the right knee. Only one part of the round *tholanthi* has art-work. A hemispherical bulge can be seen on all three sides. *Tholanthi*, which has almost disappeared from the *Mullukkurumar* tribe, is a replica of the jewelry of the tribal people of *Rajasthan*.



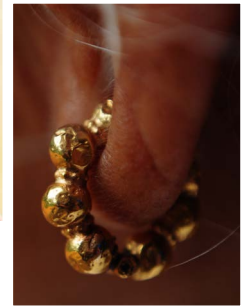
tholanthi of *Mullukkurumar*



a tribal armlet of *Rajasthan*



Kaathala of *Mullukkurumar*



● Kaathala

The traditional earring of *Mullukkurumar* lady is called *Kaathala*. This ornament is made by stringing gold beads of different sizes on the inner wire. The bead at the bottom center is the largest, and the beads gradually decrease in size as you move towards the sides. One end of every bead also has a cogwheel-like design. This method of construction, which is not familiar anywhere in this area, can be seen elsewhere only in *Rajasthan*.

a tribal earring of *Rajasthan*



● Manamalan Vala

Manamalan Vala is a silver ornament worn by the *Mullukurumar* groom on his wedding day. The surface of this bracelet is decorated with beautiful artwork. *Manamalan Vala* is a replica of Rajasthani tribal ornament known as *Kada*. Even today, it is mandatory that the groom should wear this bracelet in the wedding ceremony conducted according to the tribal customs. These rituals may have been insisted by the ancestors to provide a clear information about their roots to the future generations.



Manamalan Vala of Mullukurumar

● Manamalan Kathala

Manamalan Kathala, similar to the earrings of *Mullukurumar* women, is worn by the groom on his wedding day. The main difference from women's earrings is the presence of a small pyramid with a pointed head. This type of earring can still be seen on the ears of some men in *Rajasthan*.



Manamalan Kaathala of Mullukurumar



a tribal bracelet of *Rajasthan*



a tribal earring of *Rajasthan*

2 MEENA TRIBE OF RAJASTHAN

The *Meena* community, a tribal people of Rajasthan, got its name from the word *meen* which means fish. They believe that they are the descendants of Lord *Vishnu* in his fish incarnation. They also think that they are the descendants of the *Matsya* nation, which was dominant in the sixth century before *Christ*. The *Meenas* ruled many parts of *Rajasthan* until the *Rajput* invasion. Agriculture and animal husbandry are the main occupations, and the most important of their customs is the posthumous feast.

Fish is very important, also in the life of *Mullukkurumar*. The traditional trap *Kortha* and the basket *Koota* used for fishing can be seen close to the ancestral worship home *Deivappura*. Fishing in the traditional manner on the third or fifth day after the death is an important ritual of *Mullukkurumar*. Serving fish curry to the deceased and others is another important ritual.



old photograph of Meena tribe of Rajasthan

3 PHYSICAL SIMILARITY

Physical characteristics similar to those of the people in *Rajasthan* are very prominent among *Mullukkurumar*. An example of this is the image of a young man taken from *Muthanga* during a flood in 2020. He had tied a cloth on his head which looked like a *Rajasthani* turban. His eyes, nose, mustache and beard were clearly attached to that turban. This is not unique, many *Mullukkurumar* tribes have a similar shape.



4 CIVILISED SOCIETY

Mullukkurumars are one of the early inhabitants of *Wayanad*, which got fortified with Western Ghats and dense forest. But still we can see many signs of a highly civilized society in the lives of the *Mullukkurumar* tribe. Those signs clearly tells us that *Mullukkurmars* got the strong roots to a modern society that exists far from this ancient jungle.

- **Writing and reading skills**

Even in the olden days when letters belonged only to a minority, the *Mullukkurumars* were literate people. The *Ramayana* written on palm leaves remains in some households even today.

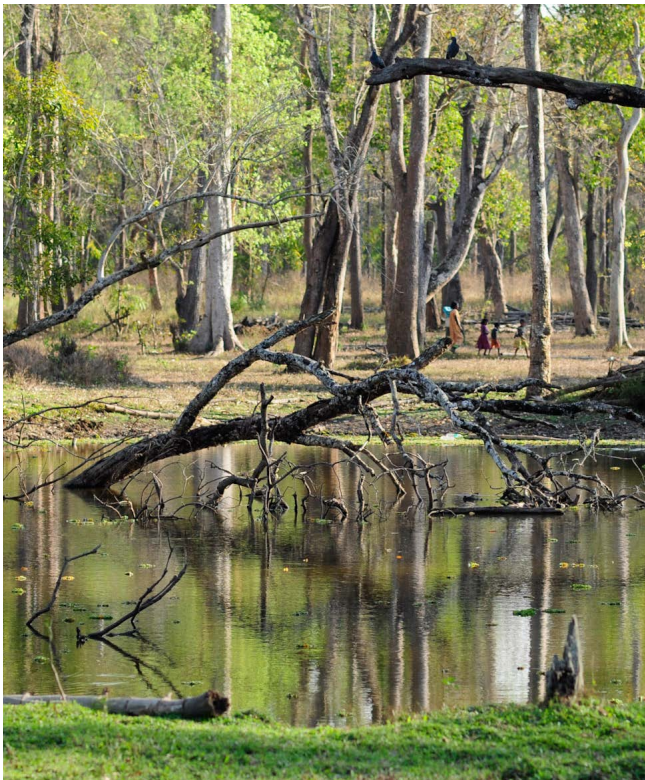
The ancestors from *Rajasthan* brought their language and script along with ornaments to *Wayanad*. One of the inscriptions found in *Edakkal* caves is in *Pali* language. But it must be assumed that their scripts were lost over time and it evolved itself into a language similar to the languages of the land it reached.



- **Ramayana of Wayanad**

Many places in *Wayanad* are associated with the story of *Ramayana*. In all these places the presence of *Mullukkurumar* is evident, while at the same time it is also noteworthy that there are no place names associated with *Ramayana* in places without *Mullukkurumar*. Their main habitat is *Ponkuzhi* and *Muthanga*. The major *Ram* temple of *Wayanad* is located in *Ponkuzhi*. The small lake called as the "tears of *Sitha*" is also in the same area. *Ram palli* is an important settlement of *Mullukkurumar* which also situated next to the *Ram* temple. *Ram* is the North Indian word for *Raman*; but that word is used here in *wayanad* for the *Mullukkurumar* settlement of *Ram palli*.

In *Rajasthan*, it is a custom to join the hands by palms towards the chest and say "*Ram Ram*" when they meet each other. It is an interesting fact that the main door of an old family house of the *Mullukkurumars* is carved with a human figure standing with clasped hands and such figures are very common in *Rajasthan*.



Most of the *Vattakkali* songs of *Mullukkurumar* tells the story of *Ramayana*. *Mullukkurumar* has a great connection with *Ramayana*. *Rajasthan* is so close to *Ayodhya*. Perhaps because they came from the land of *Ramayana*, they associated the lands of *Wayanad* with *Ramayana* and worshiped them.

● Kuruma dynasty

A system of administration by *Mullukkurumar* was existed in *Wayanad*, which consisting of a king and ministers. Military systems and forts were part of that kingdom. The remains of the forts that stood near *Veliyambam* and *Pakkom* can still be seen in the forest.

Perhaps the wealth of experience of ruling the territories of *Rajasthan* helped the *Mullukkurumars* to create a tribal administrative system in *Wayanad*. It was a sovereign society, living with all splendor and freedom, until the army of *Kottayam* and *Kurumbranad* came to make the pepper-growing country their own.

In the same way *Rajasthan* was ruled by the *Meena* tribal people who dominated the population till the invasion by the *Rajputs*. It can also be seen as a government by the people and for the people.

● Edakkal Cave Inscription

Fred Fawcett is brought to the *Edakkal* caves by men from the *Paniyar* tribe of the area. In his article, *Fawcett* says that he sought the help of *Mullukkurumar* too, but they turned away for some mysterious reason. From this it can be understood that *Mullukkurumar* was clearly aware of *Edakkal* cave from a very early time.

One of the stone inscriptions inside the cave is in *Pali* language. *Pali* is the language spoken in the regions including *Rajasthan*. A district in *Rajasthan* is also named *Pali*. The ancestors of the *Mullukkurumar* who handled that language may be the creators of the *Edakkal* cave inscription. It is believed that the writing of the inscription in *Pali* language took place in the 5th century after Christ, and people from *Rajasthan* must have arrived in *Wayanad* at that time.

● Fighters for Freedom

Mullukurumars are generally not those who surrender their freedom to anyone. Living with a sense of pride, this community fearlessly fights their enemies with their bows and arrows. While *Mullukurumars* fought bravely against the British in 1812, the *Meena* people of *Rajasthan* also fought against the British in 1840.



Edakkal cave inscriptions, photographed by Fred Fawcett

क	ख	ग	घ	ङ
च	छ	ज	झ	ञ
ट	ठ	ड	ढ	ण
त	थ	द	ध	न
प	फ	ब	भ	म
य	र	ल	व	श, ष, स
ह	अ, आ	इ, ई	उ, ऊ	ए, ऐ

Letters of *Rajasthani Marwari* language

● Keani, the ancient well

Mullukurumar collect drinking water from traditional water sources called as *keanis*. They pay respect to the *keanis* because they consider it is very sacred. Bringing at least one pot of water to the god house and the kitchen every morning is the most important routine of *Mullukurumar* women. The *Keanis* of Pakkom, Mundanadappu & Mandhathu have survived to this day with their old pride and culture.

Rajasthan is the most scarce land for drinking water in India. The reason why the *Mullukurumars* still consider drinking water and *keanis* so sacred, is the life experiences of their forefathers in *Rajasthan*. The first thing women in *Rajasthan* do when they wake up is to fetch water with a pitcher. Many of them walk around 10 kilometers through the desert and return home with a pot of water. The sight of *Mullukurumar* women traveling to *Keani* with their pots early in the morning gives the same view of *Rajasthan*.

● Kolkkali

Kolkkali is an indispensable art form during the celebrations of *Mullukurumar* in *Wayanad*. *Kolkkali* is performed by men with sticks in both hands. The song of *Kolkkali* has lyrics from *Ramayana*.

Among the tribal people of *Rajasthan*, *kolkkali* also holds a great place. *Kolkkali* is mandatory during the festivals like *Janmashtami* and *Holi*.



CONCLUSION

In the light of the facts that we have discussed here, we can assume that the ancestors of *Mullukurumars* of *Wayanad* came from *Rajasthan*. I hope this information will add to their pride to realise that they are descendants of a tribal people who lived, ruled and fought in India's heartland. I also hope that this study will guide towards realizing the true history of other peoples of *Wayanad* and *Kerala*.

APPENDIX

1 Adiyar

The *Adiyars* of *Wayanad* have a similar historical background. Their jewelry and culture lead my thoughts in the same direction. I understand that their ancestors were also traveled to *Wayanad* from north *India*.

2 Kurichyar

The jewelry of *Kurichyar* gives a very surprising information that they may have roots to *Africa*.

3 Betta kurumar

The ancestors of *Bettakurumars* might be from *Andhra Pradesh*.

3 Paniyar

The ancestors of *Paniyars* might be from *Tamilnadu*.

4 Kattunaykkar

The *Kattunaykkar* might have reached *Wayanad* during the first wave of migration from *Africa*, that was around 65,000 years ago. They are the ones most deeply connected with the geography of *Wayanad*. The *Edakkal* cave paintings probably belong to them.

The study on the tribal jewelry has given me very valuable information about the history of *Wayanad*. It is also desired that more clear information will be released as a book.



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KR Ramith

Documentary film maker, photographer and graphic designer. A native of *Valavayal* in *Wayanad*. Studied at *Shoranur* Institute of Printing Technology in 2003-06. In 2007, started working as a customer coordinator at *Emirates Press, Dubai*. Ended the life in exile and returned to the country in 2015 when the vibe in photography got mixed up. *Poopoli* International Flower Festival held under the auspices of Kerala Agricultural University was covered on camera from 2016 to 2019. In 2018, designed the book on *Wayanad's Unique Rice Crops*, published by Agricultural University in collaboration with Department of Agriculture. From 2019 to 2022, worked as a photojournalist in *Kerala Kaumudi* newspaper. From 2022, documentaries related to the tribal culture and life of *Wayanad* are being shot.



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"The history of mankind is the history of migrations "

