



The History Of The Paliyar Tribe Of Tamil Nadu

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The lands of Kurinji, Mullai, Marutham, Neythal and Balai, have historically been inhabited by different tribes, including the Paliyars of Tamil Nadu. Inhabiting the mountains and forests of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, this nomadic Dravidian tribe has a rich history and culture. Adivasi Awaaz creator Ramarajan brings to light the history of the Paliyar tribe in the following article.



The Paliyar Tribe of Tamil Nadu; Picture Credit: Ramarajan

With more than 40 different tribes living in Tamil Nadu, the tribal population is around 3.5% of the total population. Various tribes such as *Kaadar*, *Irular*, *Muduvar*, *Malaimalar*, *Paliyar*, *Kurumbar*, *Todar*, etc, reside in over 30 different districts of Tamil Nadu. While each tribe has their own native language, most of these languages are closely related to Tamil. Each tribe also has its own unique history and culture. In this article, I have looked at the history of the Paliyar tribe.

The Paliyars are mostly concentrated in the districts of Madurai, Ramanathapuram, Dindigul and Srivilliputhur. They are and have been known by multiple names such as the *Paliyans*, *Pazhaiyares* and *Panaiyars*. Historically, the Paliyars were spread all over the Dindigul district and the Sirumalai Palani hills, adjacent to the Western Ghats. As they inhabited the Palani hills, they were known as *Panaiyars*.

Various studies have been conducted to understand the culture, history and way of living of this tribe. Thurston (1909), described the Paliyars as "a nomadic tribe, who for the most part moved in small parties through the jungle-clad gorges (Sholas) that fringe the upper plains plateau." Pate (1916), stated that the Paliyars were "a very backward caste who lived in small, scattered parties amid the jungles of the upper plains and the Varrushanadu valley." The Times of India (2019) reported that Rajanikhil Malaramudhan, a student of journalism had lived among the Paliyars for some time to understand their traditions, culture and history. He stated that the Paliyars were more progressive than the mainstream society and 'gender equality found in the community was matchless.' ([Paliyar tribes more progressive than modern society' | Madurai News - Times of India \(indiatimes.com\)](#))

Traditionally, the Paliyars were hunters and gatherers, residing in the forests of the Western Ghats. Presently, they have transformed into traders of forest products, food cultivators and beekeepers, with some working intermittently as wage labourers, mostly on plantations.

Also read: How The Paliyars Of Tamil Nadu Earn Their Living? (adivasilivesmatter.com)



Stone cave, used by the Paliyars for shelter; Picture
Credit: Ramarajan

As the Paliyars generally lived in the hills, they took shelter in big stone caves in the mountains. They also used mud caves in the absence of stone caves. The Paliyars generally lived in groups. Each group had a committee headed by a leader responsible for all important decisions. However, the mark of a good leader was to listen to the advice and opinions of everyone on the team. This team/committee also consisted of women.

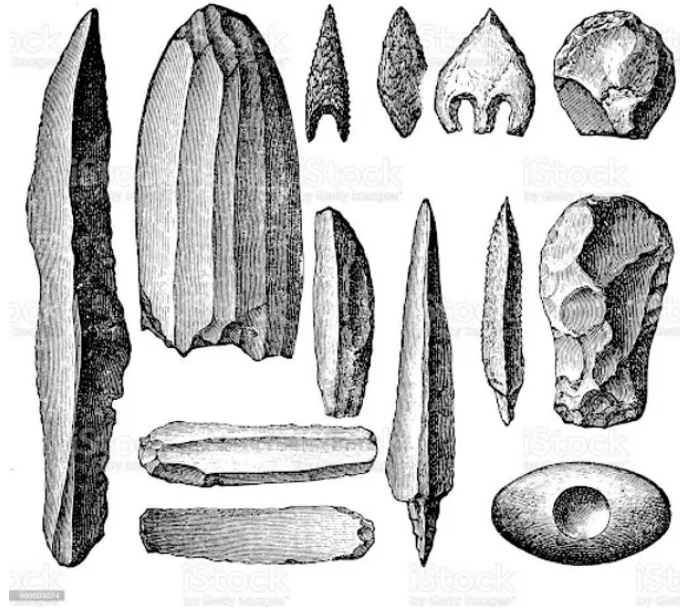
As stated earlier the Paliyars were hunters and gatherers, hence they depended a lot on hunting, for food. However, only men went hunting. Women stayed in caves, gathered forest produce and looked after the children in the community. It is interesting to note that children were raised collectively by the Paliyar women.



The Paliyars worshipped the forest deities. They sought protection from these deities. As they resided in forests and caves and were dependent on nature for their survival, the forest deities were extremely important to them. The Paliyars had many interesting practices to survive in the forests. For instance, they believed that whispering and talking to animals was one way of ensuring their safety and protection. They often whispered to elephants that crossed their way while they were in forests looking for

Mud caves used by the Paliyars for shelter; Picture Credit:
Ramarajan

food. The elderly in our community, tell us stories of our ancestors talking to elephants saying, "We have come to the forest to look for food to satiate our hunger. You look for food and we will look for ours."



Stone tools used in hunting; Picture provided by
the author Ramarajan

It is worth mentioning that the Paliyars depended on forests for food and survival, but they never harmed the forests or overutilized resources. They took only according to their needs and also took care of the forests. They preserved water resources and cut down trees that were dying, to fulfil their needs. When sick, they used ethnomedicines made out of herbs, leaves, bark, etc., from the forests. They truly lived in unison with nature, and much can be learned from their relationship with the forests. They practised preservation and used sustainable methods for their survival, something that the world urgently needs today.

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