

BULLETIN OF THE MADRAS GOVERNMENT MUSEUM

THE TAMIL NADU TRIBES

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Compiled by

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Edited by the

DIRECTOR OF MUSEUM, MADRAS

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(Papers presented at the Seminar on "The Tamil Nadu Tribes" organized by the Government Museum, Chennai on 8th September 1973 in connection with the Silver Jubilee Celebration of Indian Independence)

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EDITORIAL NOTE

It was in 1972 that the subject of Ethnology was included as one of its disciplines in this Museum by Dr. George Bidie. Thereafter the Anthropological collections have grown gradually and steadily through the untiring efforts of the District Collectors, the succeeding Superintendents and the Curators in-charge of the Anthropology Section.

But in the last two decades, the field trips and surveys by the Section were conducted in such a way that almost all the major tribes in Tamilnadu have been covered district wise-i.e.in Madurai, the Pulayan, Paliyan and Muduvan, while in Coimbatore, the Irulas, Pulayan, Iravallar and Malasar; in North Arcot, the Maliyalis, Lambadis (B.C.), and Irulas; in Tiruchirappalli, the Pachai Malaiyalis; in Dharmapuri, the Chitteri Malaiyalis and Lambadis (B.C.); in Salem, the Kolli Malaiyalis; in Erode, the Sholagas; in Tirunelvely and Kanyakumari, the Kanis; and in Ramanasthapuram, the Kattunaickens. Further, during this period only, the largest populated hill tribe of Tamilnadu, the Malaiyalis was studied comparatively at Pachaimalai, Kollimalai, Kalvarayan, Chitteri, Yercaud, Shevaroy, Jawadhi and Yelagiri hills and their agricultural appliances were collected for the Museum.

With this enriched anthropology collection, three new galleries were thus opened during this decade - the Folk Arts, the Puppets and the Physical Anthropology galleries - and we had organised special exhibitions such as the Lambadis of Tamilnadu, the Hill dwellers of Tamilnadu, the Tamilnadu Tribes, etc.

Thus, the Madras Government Museum is the only prime Government Institution in the State, actively involved in projecting the life and culture of these tribals through their permanent displays, special exhibitions and publications.

There are 42 tribals in Tamilnadu with a total population of 5.20 lakhs as per 1981 Census. The papers presented at the seminar on the Tamilnadu tribes held in the Museum in 1973 form a part of the Silver Jubilee celebrations of Indian Independence held in the Museum at that time. I hope, that these papers on Tamilnadu tribes will serve as a useful and purposeful bulletin of this Museum to numerous research students in the field of Anthropology trying to understand the life and patterns of the tribals in Tamilnadu.

MADRAS-600 008,
6th June 1989.

G. KESAVARAM,
Director of Museums,
Government Museum, Madras-8

III. THE GEOGRAPHICAL RELATIONSHIPS OF TAMILNADU TRIBES

*A Paper By Thirumathi Nayeema Begum, Assistant Professor,
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Tribal study forms an integral part of human geography. A human geographer will look at a tribe in its geographical milieu. For him the study of people and their habitat to be considered together, otherwise it makes no sense. His approach is rather, holistic. The study of evolution of tribal society and culture in a particular environment is really a thought-provoking subject.

There is a close relationship between man and his environment. In some areas the relationship is direct and very simple whereas in other cases it is very complex and indirect. Human geography studies man's responses to geographical surrounding i.e., it sums up ways in which distribution of human activities and equalities is influenced by natural environment. Four classes of human responses are recognized. Among these four classes of human responses the first class is material needs which includes food, clothing, shelter and tools and means of transport.

Although all people have material needs and they follow certain occupations in order to satisfy these needs, the efficiency with which people follow their occupations varies enormously. Efficiency is greatly influenced by the stage of culture which has been reached by any group of people. In supplying their material needs, the people of different parts of the earth generally follow the occupations in which their geographic surrounding and their degree of progress give them the greatest chance of success.

There are altogether eight types of occupation:

- (1) Collecting and hunting;
- (2) Fishing;
- (3) Herding;
- (4) Farming;
- (5) Lumbering;
- (6) Mining;
- (7) Manufacturing; and
- (8) Commerce

Among these eight occupations, the first three are very simple, in which the relationship between man and his environment is very simple and direct. These three occupations are said to be the most primitive types as these are practiced only by the primitive tribes for example, the Pygmies of Congo.

In the case of the tribes of Tamilnadu also the relationship with environment is very simple and like the Pygmies of Congo, Semang and Sakai of Malaya Peninsula, these tribes also follow the very simple occupations, viz., collecting, hunting, fishing and herding. In some areas shifting cultivation is also noticed.

The tribes of Tamilnadu are classified into three sub-divisions based on their location viz.,

- (1) The tribes who live in the Nilgiris are Toda, Kota, Badaga, Irula and Kurumba.
- (2) The tribes who live in the Anamalais are Kadar, Pulayan, Malasar, Mudugar and Eravaler.
- (2) The tribes who live in other areas of Tamilnadu are Paniyan, Mannan and Malaiyali.

1. *The Tribes of the Nilgiris*.-The Nilgiris occupy an area of about six or seven hundred square miles with a central altitude of about 8,760'. These hills rise almost abruptly from the plains of Coimbatore. On the North East, they slope down through lesser ranges towards the "Kaveri chains of hills" on the west to the Kerala uplands. The area was first explored by Englishmen only in 1819. Until then, this favoured region was in the possession of the Toda, Kota, Irula and Kurumba. The Toda was the dairyman, the Kota was the artisan and musician and the Kurumba and Irula were the gatherers of forest produce. The Toda were depending on milk, the Kurumba on the flesh of buffalo calves and the Kota on anything, if they could get nothing else, they eat carrion also. There is a very little change in these tribes. Even in these days of advanced culture/civilization, they stick on their old methods. They follow only the primitive occupations. This is because their stage of culture and their environment are such that they cannot change over to the most advanced occupations, viz., manufacturing and commerce.

The material culture of these tribes, their ways of life, customs, habits, behaviour, their physical appearance, their concept for life, reflect their immediate nature i.e. their environment.

The rolling topography of the Nilgiris with pasture provide chance for herding and rearing of animals, for example, the Toda who practice a nomadic way of life, move from one place to another in search of grass with their herds of flocks.

II. *The Tribes of the Anamalais.* -The Anamalais or Elephant hills is situated to the South of Pollachi and Udumalpet taluks of Coimbatore district. It is a continuation of a huge range (the cardamom hills) which runs through Travancore and is also connected with Palani hills of Madurai district. It is bounded on the West by the Cochin and Kollengodu hills and on the South and East by the Travancore and Palani hills, respectively.

The Anjanadu valley is geographically a part of the Anamalais hills. The hills is divided into upper and lower ranges. Peak on the upper ranges are higher than 8,000' above the sea level and plateaus exist over 7,000'. These plateaus are connected with similar ones in Travancore territory. The plateau regions in the upper ranges of the Anamalais are estimated to make an area of nearly 100 sq. miles. They contain magnificent scenery and mighty charms dividing one plateau from another. Dark evergreen forests are seen over these regions. Much valuable timber existis in these forests. Besides the valuable timber, the produce of these ranges include cardamom, honey, wax, turmeric and ginger. The lower ranges contain excellent teak, at an altitude of 1,500' to 3,000'. Apart from the forests, the Anamalais is also famous for the plantations. There are four different tribes, namely, Muduvar, Kadar, Malasar and Pulayar are living on the Anamalais.

(a) Geographical relationship of Kadar

Unlike most other aborigines, the Kadar are both, few in numbers and confined to a small territory. They roam about in the hilly tracts of Malabar and Coimbatore districts. The Kadar's paucity in number and limitation to such a restricted area, are not easy to explain. Both these facts determine not only their past history but also the present period of transition which are likely to-shape their immediate future.

The territory to which the Kadar seen so rigidly attached is the Tropical forests. The Kadar's territory proper lies at an elevation of roughly 2,000' above sea level. These forests are very rich in timber. In the beginning of the 20th century the forest administration opened a small guage tram line for timber transport. In addition, the Forest department now auctions the minor forest produce against a high bi-annual rent to a forest produce contractor. These two facts have changed the entire pattern of Kadar life and economy. The

labourers, employees and minor officials of the tram line have changed the entire outlook on the life of the Kadar and have influenced very considerably their social habits and customs. The contractors know how to create new needs among them in order to induce them to collect more and more of the valuable forest produce.

The Kadar have to a certain extent adjust themselves to the newly created situation by settling down, more or less, to a three quarter aboriginal type of life. It is feared that the coolies, labour employees, contractors of all sorts, etc., will bring about the Kadar's disintegration as a tribal unit. But even should for an unforeseen reason, they be spared this fate, a large scale migration, will be forced upon them, by the sub-mergence under water, of a part of their traditional hunting grounds. This latter factor, however, is less likely to effect the life of the tribe which is essentially migratory in character.

The herbal richness of their territory made the Kadar's life free from want in olden days, but now has brought about intensive contact with the modern machine civilization, its many wants and its mortal dangers. The fauna of the regions, equally rich has given it also a touch of danger, though of a more individual and less general nature. Elephant, tiger, bison and bear are numerous and consequently, a few non-Kadar dare walk along through the dense forests. But the Kadar do, betraying thus an age-old acquaintance with this specific territory to which they belong and are adjusted.

The region is highly malarious and, on this score dreaded by the plains people. The Kadar, so long as they live in their own area, suffered comparatively little from this disease, but as soon as a Kadar visits the plains, he almost invariably falls a prey to a heavy and enduring attack, from which he would gradually recover on return to his hills, whilst the opposite happens frequently with plains people, visiting the hills.

The individual as well as the tribal character of the Kadar appears to have been at least partly shaped by environmental impressions. The hill tract of Anamalais is of extra-ordinary beauty and tropical abundances. Steep cliffs are the ever present background to the scenery of giant trees and bamboo thickets by the side of small streams, most of which carry water all the year round. The rainy season of South West monsoon is generally heavy rendering life in the jungle precarious for humans. Even the drier parts of the forests are then transformed into one thick tangle of dark green, almost impossible without the help of a strong jungle knife. The retreating Monsoon usually brings rains to this part of Anamalais hills to a lesser extent. From Novembers to May, the weather is more or less dry, though occasional showers and rain storm keep even the low lying and drier parts of the jungle green. Although the

temperature may rise to 100° F, during the day, there is always the refreshing shade of dark groves and the presence of so many big trees make the night amazingly cool. The tropical forest is full of life and life has numerous voices also in the jungles, from the sweet call of the tiniest fly catcher to trumpeting elephants, enjoying their evening bath, from the night birds, bats and deer to the deep growl of a tiger. A Kadar not only hears and sees but he actually also smells the animals of the jungles. This tropical forest is alive and it teaches that life is one great enigma.

III. *Other Tribes of Tamilnadu.*- (a) Paliyans.- The Paliyans are the most backward and are found in the hills of Madurai, (i.e., Palani, Kodaikanal and Periyar hills) and in the hill parts of the Tirunelveli districts. They are believed to have been the original inhabitants of these hills.

The Paliyans can scarcely be called a settled community for they move in small parties, collecting honey, hunting and trapping small game and gathering wild tubers and yams for food. They poison hill streams to catch fish. They cultivate nothing, nor do they keep any domestic animals except the dog.

They own no property, their only possession being an aruval (bill hook) and a digging stick. They made fire by means of two sticks or by flint and steel method.

During the dry season they lie in natural caves and crevices in rocks but if these leak during the rains, they erect a rough shed with the floor raised on poles off the ground and sloping grass roof, beneath which a fire is kept burning at night, not only for warmth but also to keep off wild beasts. They are expert at making shelters at the base of hollow trees by cutting away the wood on one side with a bill hook.

(b) *Mannans.*- They are settled in a portion of the cardamom hills, called the Makara alum. The Mannan country extends, southwards from the limit, occupied by the Muduvars on the Cardamom hills to a point south of the territory now submerged under the Periyar.

The Mannans stand ahead of the other hillmen for their knowledge of medicine. The only communication, they hold with the plains is on the Madura side. Widows can remarry. They bury their dead. They eat monkeys, but not crocodiles, snakes, cow or buffalo. Drink is a common vice among them.

(c) *Malaiyalis*.- The Malaiyalis are the agricultural tribes inhabiting the hill ranges of Salem, North Arcot, South Arcot and Tiruchirappalli districts. Three divisions are recognized among the Malaiyalis:

- (1) Those who live in the Shevaroy hills of Salem and the Kalrayan hills of Kallackurichi Taluk in South Arcot are called the Periya Malaiyalis ;
- (2) Those who live in the Kollimalais of Namakkal and Attur Taluks in Salem are called the Kolli Malaiyalis; and
- (3) Those who live in the Pachaimalais of Musiri Taluk in Tiruchirappalli are the Pachai Malaiyalis. The Malaiyalis of North Arcot District live in the Javadhi Hills of Vellore and Polur Taluks.

Agriculture is the main occupation of the Malaiyalis. Many of them are employed in coffee plantations in the Shevaroy hills. Formerly, they were good hunters. But, at present, there is not much scope for hunting on account of forest reservation. They snare small animals and birds and hunt wild pigs. On the whole, they are good cultivators. Terrace cultivation is common in the dry lands. Besides cultivating both dry and wet crops, the Malaiyalis grow fruits such as plantains and oranges and collect forest produce.