



## A DISTINCTIVE TRADITION OF PALIYAN TRIBES IN TAMIL NADU

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### Abstract

India has the second-largest tribal population of any nation in the world, after Africa. The whole tribal population makes up less than 9% of the nation's total population, according to the 2011 Census. The eastern, central, and western parts of India contain the lion's share of the country's tribal people. They are primarily underprivileged, oppressed, and backward segments of Indian society. The tribal people known as Paliyars are known to be among the most ancient tribal peoples of South India, with the most significant cultural features. This study is based on the premise that while seeking to explore their cultural techniques, explain their uniqueness, and understand the period of tribal society dimension development and the shades of modern changes, good lessons can be gained from an anthropological approach.

**Key Words:** Negrito, Paliyan, Customs, Western Ghats.

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### Introduction

The tribes in India are characterized by the dominant groups as distinctive with their comparatively more isolated habitation in the hilly and forest areas and their distinct social, economic, and cultural lives. The connotation of 'tribe' attributed to certain ethnic groups in India is the legacy of British colonial rule. The term "tribe" continues to be used in dealing with the exotic indigenous people of India who live outside the cities and townships. In the present day, tribes are found to live in the forests, hills, and forest terrains that are the

repository of minerals, hydraulic, and forest resources, along with their exotic culture, which is peculiar to modern-day people. When India attained independence, the democratic nation was made aware of its duty to ensure the well-being of society's weakest groups. The welfare and development of the poorer segments of society have thus been one of India's primary planning objectives. In India, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes make up close to one-fourth of the overall population. The non-material demands and the human dignity, freedom, and respect of

the indigenous women are recognized. As a result, a multifaceted approach to "Paliyar Tribal Women's Life Style Practices" is necessary now more than ever because it comprehensively embraces the many diverse developmental components of the Paliyar Tribes.

The Paliyan tribal communities can be found throughout the Western Ghats, from Palani in the north to Tirunelveli in the south. They are a prehistoric kind from the Pre-Dravidian epoch. Paliyan is thought to be the original dwellers of the Palani hills. Many Paliyans still reside in the Viruthunagar and Tirunelveli districts' Varusanadu valley, which is part of the Western Ghats. They have an odd accent when speaking Tamil, which makes it challenging to comprehend them. They don't consume beef, are less civilized, and don't harm the environment. They occasionally build grass houses, but they prefer to reside in caves, behind rocks, or on platforms atop trees. They wear a dress that is as filthy and exposed as possible, occasionally patched with bits of grass or leaves. They feed on honey, leaves, and plant roots (yams), among other things. The roots are roasted by being placed in a hole dug into the ground, wood is piled on top of them, and the whole thing is set on fire.

### **Background of Indigenous Paliyan**

The Paliyans are a nomadic tribe of a small group through the jungle-clad gorges. Paliyan have a dark complexion, small stature, an archaic-looking nose, square faces, and thick lips. They are a race of people called Negrito, the name given to a variety of Australoid known as the Negrito in South and South-East Asian countries.<sup>1</sup> The Paliyans have been considered nomadic or semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers who live in hilly forest areas and avoid contact or closer relationship with outsiders. Their subsistence has mainly been based on collecting different kinds of roots, tubers,

leaves, wild fruits and honey, as well as fishing. Constitutionally the Paliyans are placed as one of the scheduled tribes. This gives them a special legal status and recognition as part of the tribal population.<sup>2</sup>

### **Settlement of Paliyan**

The original, Paliyans are now scattered in the hills of Madurai, Dindigul, Theni, Virudhunagar, and Thirunelveli districts of Tamil Nadu. More than 4000 people, scattered throughout 43 communities, rely on the hill ecology for subsistence. The Paliyans have a thorough awareness of the Palani Hills' environment. The Paliyans have evolved from food collectors and honey hunters to food producers and Bee keepers. The majority of Paliyan communities rely on the collection of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) for their economic survival, and their reliance on forest resources differs from group to group depending on the flora's phenology. The influx of people from the plains, the growth of plantations, and interactions with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have all influenced tribal life and ecosystems in different ways. The Palani Hills are degrading as a result of development and encroachment, which has an impact on the Paliyans' livelihood. Tribal knowledge is also being passed down seldom, and the current generation is gravitating toward the metropolitan luxuries of contemporary civilization.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Lifestyle of the Paliyans**

The Paliyan live a life that is revered for its austerity and uncomplicatedness. They find great joy in a life spent outside. They do not have many possessions, and saving money is not a habit that they have developed. They used to live on the rocks, but since then, they' adopted a different way of life.

### **Language Speaking**

The People of the Paliyan tribe lived in small, isolated settlements scattered across

the jungle at the foot of the mountains. Tamil jargon has been damaged and twisted to such an extent that it takes some time to understand what is being said, with terms like "common Tamil" and "so forth" standing in for what they mean. They have a distinct accent when speaking Tamil, which makes them think of the Paliyan.

### House Types

Their settlement is called '*Kudi*'. They used to live in temporary sheds of bamboo reeds, thatched with straw or leaves, appropriate to their nomadic life. Nowadays, they live in permanent huts, which are single-roomed, with rectangular floor plans. Doors are formed by plaiting split bamboo. An additional fireplace is located in the middle of the floor. The roofing is formed of the leaves of the reeds abundant in the locality. They are self-sufficient in the skills necessary for the construction of their huts, with both men and women participating in the work. Recently, the State Government constructed some tiled houses with stone walls for them, typically with a room, a kitchen, and a veranda.<sup>4</sup>

### Headman

The Paliyans are low on the list of tribes' leaders because they don't have a single person in charge of the whole tribe. Conflicts within a settlement are not solved well. Each settlement have a leader. In the Sirumalai area, people call him *Muthiri*. In the Palani and Thaandikudi areas, they call him *Nattamaikaran* or *Nattamai*, and in the Thirunelveli district, they call him *Kannikaaran*. In Sirumalai, the Kambalians help the Muthiri. It is their job to call someone to appear before the tribal panchayat. Kolakara or drum beater occupies an important place in the life of Paliyans. He conveys all news and message to them. He is honoured next to nattamaikaran during that time of marriage and festivals.<sup>5</sup>

### Family

A family is an important unit of any society. It serves as the principal group for the recruitment of new members of society. Society acquires its new members either through birth or through immigration. The nuclear family is the basic unit of the Paliyans social organization. Father is the head of the family. Interpersonal relations are cordial among family members. The Paliyan follows endogamy at a community level. Both husband and wife are free to separate at their will. Inheritance is in the male line. If a deceased person has no sons, the property goes to the brother's son (year, 1936). In the immediate family, there is a husband or wife, a parent, a brother or sister, and a son or daughter. The grandparents' aunt, uncle, cousin, nephew, niece, brother or sister-in-law could be part of the extended family. In societies, the family is the main place where children learn how to get along with others.<sup>6</sup>

### Birth Ceremony of Paliyan

Every human race celebrates when a new generation comes into this world. In the same way, the Paliyans also celebrate when they have child delivery when that child sees this world. When the woman had a confinement period, she would have reached and gotten their relations help. Most of the time the elderly woman in their group makes successive delivery of the child. Some of them make their child delivery alone with prayers to Palichammal. During pregnancy, they eat cooked monitor lizards. After the delivery, they wash them with warm water. At that time they separate the child and mother from their daily work for 30 days. Because they thought that the mother lost some purity. At that time the mother should not touch anything in the house.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the whole family should not use the room for cleaning the house. They clean their house with some leaves.

On the 30th day the mother of the child cook feast for their relations. They welcome their relations with turmeric and mustard oil. They give presents such as a new sari and jaggery to the person who assisted them in the delivery. On that day they apply custard oil and turmeric powder to the baby's eyebrow. And they tie some beads on the neck of the baby. And they make a cradle with a cloth. They first put the paddy measurement bottle into the cradle. Secondly, the baby swings on that cradle. On that day the maternal uncle of the child touches his finger with some honey on the tongue of the child. They gave the mother's milk only to the child.

### **Puberty Ceremony**

The mother of the girl will inform her about their relationship. And her maternal uncle made a separate hut with some of the branches of wood. And they gave separate food items to her during the first 15 to 30 days. During that period, she is not allowed to meet any male. Between 10 to 30 days the parents of that girl welcome their relations with betel leaf for a Puberty ceremony.

On the day the girl and their relations went to the riverside (or) some water bodies near their homes. And they also took 7 pots with them. They dug a hole in river banks. And fill the hole with water. And again they filled the seven pots with the water from the hole. And the maternal uncle of the girl kept one pot of water for that girl. The other women bathed the girl. One pot was filled with fruits and the other 6 pots were filled with water, and it was taken to the house of that girl. There they had a feast. The girl's uncle wore a shirt, dhoti, and turban. They gave them a bow and arrow in his hands. And he would stand near the girl. Then they all met at the dancing place and their relation beat the drum (*Mathaliethalam*). They kept that girl in their arms and danced along with that beat.

### **Marriage Ceremony**

In those days, the marriage ritual was relatively straight forward, and it was common practice to wed the daughter of the bride's maternal uncle. They will search for the Groom among the members of their group who have made a certain place their home. They only occasionally looked for the bridegroom among the Paliyans who lived in the many other locations in the Western Ghats. The same tradition is followed today as it was centuries ago. In earlier times, the bride and groom were given a present of a tiny cooking pot as a way to mark the beginning of their new life together after they were married. This marked the beginning of their independence from the groom's family home. The young couple needed to learn to adapt to begin a new life in the woods.<sup>8</sup>As a sign of love and affection, the young woman placed the Tharanippugarl on her finger as a symbol of their marriage. Once society began mixing with outsiders, the traditional marriage structure began to crumble. Instead of a mud pot, the Bridegroom's family is now used to receiving goats and cows as a wedding gift

They married within their caste. Before marriage, they engaged with the support of both families and the couple. The marriage took place the day before all their relations assembled at the house of the bridegroom. On that night they had a feast with their relations. Again they beat "Mathaliethalam"(drum) and the next morning the marriage ceremony was conducted by them. The bridegroom tied holy block beads to the bride's neck. And they gave a feast to their relatives. The bride would clean and dispose of wear of all the plates. After that, they seated on the mat.

On that day evening, the new couples were taken to the river with beating drums And they put betel leaves into the river. They thought that if the leaves move and joined together they have a peaceful life. And they took some water on a small vessel.

They changed the bride's black beads with yellow rope. They are tied with a spoon type of pendant on the bride's neck. And their relatives gave a gift to the couples in the form of some rupees (or) vegetables (or) potatoes (or) rice. Paliyan wedding is a simple affair where both the bride and groom have to announce that they are getting married in the presence of the elders and create a tasty feast for them. At this level, the marriage ends. It's the responsibility of the female to cook while the male is responsible for collecting the roots of some and killing and bringing in the predators.<sup>6</sup>

### **Divorce**

Divorce and remarrying are practiced in the Paliyan community. The children of the divorced couple live either with the father or the mother. The women submitted the thali for the panchayat. The wife who initiated divorce or adultery through the panchayat should return the entire amount of partisan Panam Rs.52/- pay to the husband returned. If the divorce is demanded husband the panchayat directs to pay Rs.42/.<sup>7</sup>

### **Food habits of the Paliyans**

Paliyan tribes are non-vegetarians since they are hunters. They are traditionally hunting and involved in fishing activities. They are hunting animals and fish for self-consumption and are hardly ever used for commercial purposes.<sup>9</sup> They also make non-vegetarian curries and prepare cooked rice tamarind rice. On special occasions when the men come home, they make idli and dosa. They also take turtles and fish. The most commonly eaten rice is bought from ration shops. And they also ate Vallikizhangu. And they did not use big-sized chillies. They used one inch of chillies. And they also ate some of the green leaves, and they also drink honey commonly. During the festival times, they ate chicken and goats.<sup>10</sup>

### **Dress and Ornaments**

The Paliyans traditional wear their simple the dress and ornaments. protects the body and also segregate them from the other clans and communities. Men folk wear dhotis and shirts while women wear sarees and blouses. Most of the boys wear trousers and shirts while girls wear skirts and jackets. While speaking about the dress code of the Paliyan, Edgar Thurston says that they wore many shrunken clothiers in a limited manner. The majority of them wear very dirty clothes. The Paliyan of the mountains area wore teak leaves. They also wore the dress given by the town folk. Now a days the men and women of the Paliyans tribe wear a variety of ornaments. In the beginning, the women tried to teach the tiger to a string and wore around their necks.

### **Traditional Dances of Paliyans**

At every festival, they use to play drums and Kushal (a musical instrument made of bamboo). Music will mostly be accompanied by dances. They dance and play around. Sometimes they even sang songs. Mostly at night times, they used to have their dances.

### **Death ceremony of the Paliyan**

The Paliyan`s burial ceremony is known as *ilavu* among them. When a death occurs the information is sent to all relations. If there is any death they first told their cousins. And the cousins would take that body and hand it over to their brothers. Usually, they bury their dead. At present, due to outside influences, their customs are not very unique, as they follow the practices of people on the plains.

### **Economic Activities**

The economic activities of the Paliyan of Tamil Nadu stated that their traditional occupation is hunting and gathering `fishing, bird trapping and Labour which continue to form the means of livelihood



for many of them even today. They Paliyan were traditionally food gatherers and wandered in the forest depending mainly on edible, tubers, roots, wild fruits and honey. Now they are engaged in different occupations. The Paliyan inhabit forest areas of Kodaikanal range. Palani hills wildlife Sanctuary and the introduction of cardamom plantations have reduced their scope for food gathering.<sup>11</sup>

### Hunting

Hunting is a major occupation of the Paliyan tribal people; they identified the animal's footprints to find paths for animals. And then they attacked animals in that place. They use weapons for hunting, bow and arrow, which are made of bamboo stick, and they hunt with the help of dogs. They hunt deer, goose, monitor lizards, pigs, etc.<sup>12</sup>

### Honey Collection

The hereditary occupation of the Paliyans is a honey collection and Bee keeping. Honey is harvested during the day on tree trunks, twigs, plants, vines, and ordinary rock formations. But the great mountain honey is taken at night. If he sees fresh honey on a tree, plant, or vine, he will break off a bunch of foliage and put it on the road for identification. If others see it they will know that there is honey. But the first person to see the honey comp will pick the honey. If others see it they will know that there is honey comp. Paliyan tribes collect honey from the trees and rock caves. They classified the honey into various varieties like 'Kombucha', 'Perumthen', 'Thotumthen' and 'Kosuvathen'.<sup>13</sup>

### Fishing

Fishing is one of the main occupations of the Paliyan tribe. They catch crab from Mountain Rivers and streams, and they used them for their consumption and not for sale.<sup>14</sup>

### Agriculture

The tribal economy depends on forest products. The economy of the nomadic tribe was entirely based on the accumulative method of food gathering and hunting. In the early period, cultivation, animal breeding or handicraft were unknown to them. But nowadays they are involved in cattle rearing and handicraft for their personal use. Paliyan tribes are cultivating ragi, millet, paddy, coffee, and banana in their surrounding places.<sup>15</sup>

### Palipattam

Palipattam is another occupation of the Paliyan tribes. They go into the interior forest to collect many things like honey, tuber, and green leaves and hunt wild animals. They share equally what they collected from the forest on that day. In some instances, tribes have managed to hold their own in contact with outsiders.

### Collection of forest Products

Paliyan mainly collects moss (from the tree), gallnut, gooseberry, passion fruit, date palm, pepper, mango, soap nut, wild yarn, tubers, honey, bamboo, jujube, jackfruits, etc., they get from a day many of the Paliyan do not have any occupation.<sup>16</sup> Nowadays they are not allowed into the deep forest. At the same time, they get free rice from ration shops.<sup>17</sup> The discovery of a beehive in the cavity of a tree is like stumbling into a treasure trove for them. They haven't quite finished smoking the bees out of the hive before they start grabbing the combs with greedy hands and devouring everything in them, wax, grubs, and all, right there on the spot. The Paliyan have their treatments available for various diseases.<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusions

Indigenous people are widespread throughout the world. These tribes are inhabited mountains and forests for generations to generations living in hills. Moreover, most of the Indian and Tamil tribes live in the 'mountains'. There are

tribal people in Tamil Nadu, especially history of the 'Paliyan' people living in the Dindigul district, especially the tribal people in Tamil Nadu, and the 'stories' about the origin of their history vary slightly from place to place. To attain their goals of communal development, legal protection of their rights, and human rights, the Tribal Paliyar women must be given more power. In order to preserve their social harmony and togetherness by offering environmental protection, tribal women should be honored for their culture and best practices. The government should educate Paliyar tribal women on how to combat oppressive social forces and disseminate information about how to benefit from government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in order to adopt scientific innovations and technological advancements by fostering the development of their personalities.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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