



# A STUDY ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC LIFE OF MALAYALI TRIBE IN KOLLI HILLS

**Dr. S. Kamala Devi,**

Assistant Professor,

Department of History,

Queen Mary's College (A),

Chennai.

kamaladevi.anandavelu@gmail.com

**Abstract :** India being a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious country, it should not surprise us with the fact that Indian society is not homogenous. The tribal groups, who live in big or small concentrations in the midst of forests or in areas which were largely inaccessible till recent times, occupy a prominent place among such groups. They are proud of their cultural heritage and lead a distinctive way of life. India has the second largest tribal population after Africa. Although they are minority in terms of the total population, they are significant in terms of their socio cultural and economic specificities in the South Indian history. The Malayali tribes who are living in Kolli hills, Pachamalai, Kalrayan hills, Shervaroyan hills and Jawathu hills are not the natives of these hills. The Malayalis who live in Shervaroy hills and Kalrayan hills are called Periya (Big) Malayali or the Kanchimandalam Malayalis. The inhabitants of the Kolli hills are known as China (Little) Malayalis. Those from the Pachamalai hills are called Nadu (Middle) Malayali. Their population as per the census of 1981 was 209.039. The Malayali tribes of Tamil Nadu, who reside mostly in the forest of kolli hills in Namakkal District have rich cultural and agricultural heritage. This paper aims at bringing out the Socio, Economic life of Malayali Tribe, and also the challenges they face in their day-to-day life.

**IndexTerms** - Malayali tribes, Kolli hills, Pachamalai hills, Namakkal District, Marriages

## I. INTRODUCTION

India is a vast country spread over an area of 32, 87,263 sq. kms. This vast tract of land has given shelter to 1028.61 million people, of which 84.33 million of them are Schedule Tribes. A majority of the Scheduled Tribe population is concentrated in the eastern, central and western belt covering the nine

States of Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. About 12 per cent inhabit the North-eastern region, about five per cent in the Southern region and about three per cent in the Northern States. The percentage of ST'S to the total population is the highest in Mizoram (94.5 per cent) and Lakshadweep (94.5 per cent) followed by Nagaland (89.1 per cent), Meghalaya (85.9 per cent). Within major states, Chhattisgarh (31.8 per cent) has the highest percentage followed by Jharkhand (26.3 per cent) and Orissa (22.1 per cent). The proportion is in the lowest in Uttar Pradesh (0.1 per cent), Bihar (0.9 per cent), Tamil Nadu (1.0 per cent) and Kerala (1.1 per cent). Madhya Pradesh accounts for the highest percentage - proportion of ST population of the total ST population of the country (14.5 per cent) followed by Maharashtra (10.2 per cent), Orissa (9.7 per cent), Gujarat (8.9 per cent), Rajasthan (8.4 per cent), Jharkhand (8.4 per cent) and Chattisgarh (7.8 per cent). In fact, 68 per cent of the country's Scheduled Tribes population lives in these seven states only.

The tribal population in India, though a numerically small minority, represents an enormous diversity of groups. They vary among themselves in respect of language and linguistic traits, ecological settings in which they live, physical features, size of the population, the extent of acculturation, dominant modes of making a livelihood, level of development and social stratification. While tribes have a distinct culture and history, they also share commonalities with other marginalized sections of Indian society, such as the lack of adequate political representation, economic deprivation and cultural discrimination. However, tribal society must be appreciated and it must be recognized that non-tribal people have much to learn from the richness of tribal cultures and systems of knowledge. The category of 'tribe' entails a social and cultural dimension but the Scheduled Tribe category has politico-administrative implications.

## II.Objectives

- ❖ To study the social condition of the tribal people in Kolli Hills.
- ❖ To study the facility available for the tribal people in and around Kolli Hills.
- ❖ To identify the economic condition and resources available in Kolli Hills.
- ❖ To find out the challenges they face in their day-to-day life.

## II. METHODOLOGY

To collect data on the community, participant observation method was used i.e., to be present with Malayali people. The information was supplemented through interviews with my Malayali friends & informants. The type of interview was closed and the questions were asked on the basis of broad research guide - lines. The secondary data was collected through Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Directorate of Agriculture, Government of India, District Statistical Office of the Namakkal district, Census of India 2011, Ministry of Statistics Government of India, Kolli Hills Municipality and also from the Government publications, reports and other published sources.

### III. Tribal Population of Tamil Nadu

The main Tribes in Tamil Nadu are Malayali, Toda, Kurumba, Paniya, Irular, Kattunayakan, Kanikar, Paliyan, Sholagar, Kadar, Vedar, etc., of which Toda, Kurumba, Koda, Paniya and Irular are the Primitive Tribes. The Shilu Committee constituted by the Planning Commission in 1969 for reviewing the Tribal situation had observed that a large number of Tribal communities continued to be extremely backward and some of them were still in the Primitive food-gathering stage. The Committee described these Tribal communities as Primitive Tribes. There are 36 Tribes in all, whose combined population as per 1991 census in 5.74 lakhs representing 1.03% of the total population of the State which is 558 lakhs.

### IV. Origin of the Malayali Tribes

The origin and migration of the Malayalis to the hills are in mystery. The legends Nattukattu say that some warriors belonging to Karalar community hailing from Kanchipuram came to Kalrayan hills subjugated the native's and established their settlement. According to another legend, Nattukattu the Malayalis originally belonged to the Vellala caste of cultivators and emigrated from the sacred city of Kanchipuram to the hills, when Muhammadan rule was dominant in Southern Indian, they left Kanchipuram. They took with them, three brothers of who the eldest came to the Sherveroys hills, the second to the Pachamalai and the youngest to the Kolli hills.

### V. Kolli Hills

The Eastern Ghats Comprising a line of hills, the Javadis, Shevroys, Kalrayans, Pachamalais and Kollimalai between the Palar and Cauvery rivers and beyond, and linked with the tail of Cuddapah in the Nagari hills. **Kolli Hills** or **Kolli Malai** are featured in several works of classical Tamil literature such as Silappathigaram, Manimekalai, Purananuru and Ainkurnuru It is a small mountain range with a temperate climate located in central Tamil Nadu in Namakkal district of India. Kolli hills, Pachmalai and Kalrayan hills play a vital role in the South Indian history. It one visualises a place with a combination of sanctity, art, history and charm it is Kolli hills located in Namakkal district. It is eighteen miles (28 kilometers) long (north south) twelve miles (19 kilometers) wide (east, west) and the Kolli block covers 441.4 square kilometers. It has seventy two hair pin bends. It is also called as Chathuragiri (square mountain). Forests occupy 44 percent of the total area of 28,293 ha, while agricultural activities take place in 52 percent of the total area, leaving 4 percent for other activities. The mountain has been inhabited from pre-historic times. It is frequently referred to in the Tamil literature of the Sangam period. More than 95 percent of the estimated 50,000 inhabitants of Kolli Hills are tribals from the Malayali community. There are 263 Tribal hamlets in the hills. The population density is 119 per km. The mountains are relatively untouched by commercial tourism and still retain their natural beauty.

### VI. Farming and vegetation

Apart from its historical significance, the mountains are covered with evergreen forests, but increasing areas of forests are cleared for farming. Important farm products of the mountain ranges include coffee, tea, jackfruit, pineapple, black pepper and other spices. The hill is considered as the garden of Namakkal district. The mountains are covered by lush green vegetation in the spring and monsoon, and are streaked

with streams which add to the natural beauty. There are three reserved forest were controlled by Government of Tamil Nadu, namely Ariyur Solai, Kundur Nadu, Pulianjolai. As per Census 2001, the population of the Kolli Hills is 36852. There are 14 village panchayats and 275 hamlets. The population predominantly consists of scheduled tribes called Hindu Malayali whose spoken language is only Tamil.

## VII. Over View of the Malayali Tribals

The tribals who live in kolli hills are Malayalis. According to Thurston, the term Malayali has been derived from the words Malai meaning hill and al-meaning person and is used to denote people who lived on the hills. Etymologically the word is derived from Malai- Hills and ali- inhabitants. The Government of India accorded the status of scheduled tribes to the Malayali. The Malayalis come under the Twenty fifth number in the list of Scheduled Tribes. The Malayali people claimed themselves as Malayali Goundans, while members of other communities refer them by different names like Malayalis, Karalar, Goundars, Malai Jatikar and Kanchipuram Gounders. The Malayali community predominantly lives in the hills of Tamil Nadu. The Malayali settlements are formed in the districts of South Arcot, North Arcot, Salem, Namakkal, Tiruchirappalli and Dharmapuri. A majority of them are found in the hill areas are Jawathu hills, the Shervaroy, the Kalrayan, the Pachamalai and the Kolli Hills.

## VIII. Social Organisation

## IX. Habitation of Malayali Tribes

In North Arcot district, they are living in the hills of Jawathu, Elagiri and Pudur Nadu. In South Arcot district, they are found in Kalrayans. In Salem district they are living in the hills of Yercaud (Sherveroys), Kolli hills in Namakkal district, Pachamalai in Tiruchirappalli district and in Dharmapuri district they inhabit the Sithori hills. The Malayali emigrated from Kanchipuram. They took with them, three brothers of whom the eldest came to the Sherveroy hills and Kalrayan hills the second to the Pachamalai and the youngest to the Kolli hills. The Malayalis who live in Shervaroy hills and Kalrayan hills are called Periya (Big) Malayali or the Kanchimandalam Malayalis. The inhabitants of the Kolli hills are known as China (Little) Malayalis. Those from the Pachamalai hills are called Nadu (Middle) Malayali and their population as per the census of 1981 was 209.039.

Malayalis inhabiting areas in Namakkal district of Kolli hills include 14 nadas such as Valavanthinadu, Ariyurnadu, Devanurnadu, Gundurnadu, Selurnadu, Thinnanurnadu, Thirupulinadu, Valapurnadu, Idupullinadu, Bailnadu, Chitturnadu, Perakkarainadu, Alanthurnadu and Gundaninadu. The chief of a nadu is called Periya Pattakaran whose office is hereditary. Each nadu is subdivided into Urs[village] which are governed by Ur-kavundans. The office of the Ur-kavundan is elective. He is helped by Karakkaran in resolving disputes among the tribes. Karakkarans are elected from different clans in a Ur. On appeal, disputes are settled by Periya Pattakarans. Hence decisions of the Ur-kavundans and Karakkarans are reviewed Periya Pattakaran.

## **X. Dialect of the Kolli Malayalis**

The tribal people speak Tamil language with slang. Their dialects differ from place to place but in the plains, the tribal people speak Tamil dialect in the same ways as non tribal people. They are Tamil speaking people whose ancestors have migrated from the plains in comparatively recent times.

## **XI. Housing Pattern**

All Malayali houses are built with bamboo and covered with palm leaves and grass. The wall of the hut is made of bamboo thatti plastered with mud on both the sides. It has a single central room which is used both for cooking and living. There is no proper ventilation for the out let of the smoke. There is a verandah around the room, which is used as the home for pigs, goats and fowls. A fowl stay is in the front side of the parlour attached with the pail of the hut. Cattle pen is just at the side of the hut.

## **XII. Family**

Family among the Malayalis is matrilineal in descent and paternal in residence. The authority in the family rests with the man who is the head of the house hold. The tribes of the hills have no attachment to any land and they do not possess any valuable property worth the name. The residence pattern among the Malayali is paternal. The man ties with marriage relationship with maternal uncle family. The marriage brings changes in the family. After the marriage a man usually moves into a separate house and lives with his spouse. However, they do not like to be far away from their parents and relatives. The composition of families in a settlement is based on kingships and that the people seek help and cooperation from one another.

## **XIII. Food Habits**

The tribes are non-vegetarians eating the meat of pigs, chicken, goats, sheep and fish. They are abstaining from eating beef because they worship the cow. The staple food of the people are s samai, jowar and ragi and occasionally rice and wheat. They habitually take alcoholic drinks. The males smoke bidi, use tobacco and snuff. The tribal women chew betel net. Like all the people they eat food three times a day. Now a days they prepare food items like Idli, Dosa, Poori, Chappati etc

## **XIV. Marriage Practices of Malayali tribes**

The marriage ceremonies of the Malayalis differ but little from that of the plains. Malayalis use the word Kannalam which means marriage. The Malayalis do not invite a Brahmin priest to solemnize the marriage. All the rituals are connected with the marriage are performed by the elder of the caste. The marriages are usually performed in a temple. The betrothal is done in the presence of Ur-Kavundan. In the marriage, Ur-Kavundan of both villages is present. The consent of the Pattakaran is a must, because he is the head of the tribals settlements. The bride price varies from hill to hill. In olden days, it was always paid in kind. The

bride price ranged from Rs 10.25 to Rs. 50/-. But at present, the bride price of parisam varies from Rs. 1000 to Rs. 2000. A separate amount is paid to the village council that is called Samipanam for the village deity.

### **XV. Child Marriage system among the Malayali Tribes**

Child marriage continues to be a widely prevalent practice in the tribal-dominated district of Namakkal district of Kolli hills despite state government's efforts to arrest the social evil through various interventions. In the Malayalis community, child marriages are still practiced. About two decades ago marriages were solemnized when the bride and groom were below twelve years of age. With increasing contacts and awareness the practice of child marriage is dying fast, though the custom still persists in certain hamlets.

### **XVI. Education**

Educational level among the people was not found to be very satisfactory. Level of awareness was also very low. From the respondents, it is inferred that most of the villages did not have even one primary school within the village. The existing schools lacked infrastructure – blackboard, classrooms etc.

### **XVII. Economic and Material Culture**

#### **Traditional system of cultivation used by tribes**

Land is the only tangible asset of a tribal family. Land also occupies a pivotal place in the tribal psyche. There are a number of social factors and religious rituals connected with land, which establish emotional ties between the tribal and his land. Agriculture is the main occupation of the Malayalis. Many of them are employed in coffee estates. In the past they went to Sri Lanka or Malaya as indentured labourers. They are good hunters. At present, there is not much scope for hunting on account of forest regulations. They rear domestic animals and birds and wild pigs. On the whole, they are good cultivators. The tribal women also take on active part in all agricultural operations. Most of the tribals are engaged in agriculture. Kolli hills consist of heterogeneous vegetation along with an elevation gradient. The foothills are covered with scrub forests. Dry deciduous, mixed deciduous and evergreen forests occur with increasing elevations. Around 125 Km area of Kolli hills are under forest cover. Scrub forests are available at the foothills. The crops generally grown in this area are paddy, ragi samai, thenai, and varagu. Fruits such as mango, Jack pine - apple, citrus varieties, guava and hill vegetables like cabbage, knolkhol, carrot, radish, potato and beetroot are also grown. Kolli hills are historically famous for medicinal plants. The native medicinal system is well recognized by the community. Several of them work as landless farm labourers.

### **XVIII. Land**

Land is the only tangible asset of a tribal family. Land also occupies a pivotal place in the tribal psyche. There are a number of social factors and religious rituals connected with land, which establish emotional

ties between the tribal and his land. Thus, land is much more than merely a source of livelihood to the tribes. One of the important characteristics of a tribal community is the traditional association with a territory. Initially, the community subsisted on food gathering and hunting in the area under its command. As the pressure of population grew and the community acquired the news kills of agriculture, they cleared the forest and brought land under cultivation. However, pressure from advanced communities in a variety of forms sometimes forces him to leave his land. The tribes have lost most of their lands due to poverty. They have no lands for their cattle to graze. They are quite miserable due to alienation of lands and indebtedness.

### **XIX. Minor Forest Produce**

The forest villagers are mainly agriculturists. They however, earn some extra amount of money by way of collection of minor forest produce. At present, there are hardly any mahals of honey, phooljharu, medicinal herbs, sal seed etc, The strong linkages of the Malayalis with forest and trees can be seen in the context of Samisolai or sacred groves. Most of the medicinal plants used by the Malayalis are collected from the wild and a few numbers of plants are cultivated in their home gardens. Some of the medicinal plants are of great use in the study area and are regularly mentioned by the informants. The use of medicinal plants is important among the Malayali tribes in Kolli hills of Namakkal district and their indigenous knowledge in the traditional health care system of domestic animals. Malayali tribes use many wild plants, flowers, weeds, seeds, bark, root, and leaves in their traditional treatment. Tribes possess rich traditional knowledge and documentation of this knowledge has provided novel information from the area. This could help in creating mass awareness regarding the need for conservation and preservation of such medicinal plants .

### **XX. Plants grown in their surroundings and home gardens**

Malayali tribes growing some plants in their nearby houses and in front of their houses .Besides their food and medicinal value, plants also play a very important role in the socio-economic life. The prolonged use of plants has played an important role in the economy, to the extent that some of them have found place in the ritual ceremonies and some are accorded the status of sacred plants. Other than the medicinal and food purposes Malayali people use the plants available in their surrounding and deep forests for various economic uses viz., mat, net and rope making, construction purposes and for hedge, sacred plants (for worship). They also use some of the plants for cultural purposes and decorative purposes.

### **XXI. Hydro Electric Power Project**

Kolli hills is a cluster of mountains that forms part of Eastern Ghats. For one, the hills are dotted with the unique 'shola' forests, which are really pockets of evergreen jungle scattered around grassy, shrubby landscape. Besides destroying the sholas, the construction of these dams will also disturb the forest corridors between the Western and Eastern Ghats. The Tamil Nadu Electricity board has identified Kolli Hills as a potential place for generating Hydro- electric power. A project has been designed to generate 20MW power by construction of six dams across different valleys in the hills. The cost of the project was estimated to Rs. 80 Crores.

This project envisages the utilization of water resources from a total catchment area of 99.64 KM of the river Aiyar in its upper reaches in the Kolli hills. The various tributaries of the river take their origin in high peaks with elevation ranging from 1229 m to 1362 m. After flowing in a gentle slope up to about 1000m elevation, the river drops to an elevation of about 200m in a series of cascades and falls finally merging out of the hill ranges in the plains, near Puliyancholai village on the border of Salem and Trichy Districts. The entire project was conceived as a run off the river scheme which proposes a total number of six dams/ weirs across the tributaries of Aiyar river in the upper reaches above 925m elevation with a network of flumes and tunnels to intercept and regulate flows for power generation over a head of about 700m before the river enters the plain. The project contemplates the construction of the following:

1. Construction of six dams of varying heights from 9.35m to 22m across six arms of the river Aiyar.
2. Inter- connecting flumes, open channels and diversion tunnel.
3. A 3725m long power tunnel and surge shaft of 5m diameter.
4. Single – line penstock of 1820m and of varying diameter to feed one unit of 20MW over a maximum head of 716m.
5. A power house of size 22m to house one unit of 20MW generating unit of horizontal pelt on wheel turbine.
6. Feeder roads to various dam sites from the existing roads, diversion of existing road including construction of a bridge and formation of new road to power house with a bridge across Aiyar near Pulliancholai. & A Single line circuit of 110 k.m line of 15 k.m line and other necessary infrastructure.

The project was under implementation very silently without any information let out to public. All the basic surveys were over and sites for construction of six dams were marked. Drilling for checking the rock and soil for civil engineering works are also over. Forest were burnt and clear for the purpose of laying new roads to replace the new roads. Kolli Hills, having already undergone a major ecosystem flip from natural to 'semi-natural' state, require immediate conservation efforts to avoid a complete disintegration. Conservation efforts should give top priority for educating people regarding the need to preserve the nature together with the traditional practices and knowledge systems.

## **XXII. The invalidity of the project**

After the enactment of the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, all the powers the state had on its forest are transferred to the centre. The forests were included in the Concurrent list. So any use of forest or forest lands for any non- forestry purposes should be passed by both the houses of Parliament before planning any such project. But, the Kolli hills hydroelectric project has violated the law. Availability of Bauxite in Kolli Hills has already attracted private and public sector mining operations. Most of the hill tops were cleared for extraction of Bauxite and vast stretch of forests are removed day by day. If the trees would cut for the purpose of dam means the water flow throughout the year can't be sustained. It would lead to flood and siltations of the dams reduce the storage capacity. More than a lakh of trees are to be cut for the various purpose of the project. Supreme courts allow cutting of trees more than 70 years old after replanting the trees.



Moreover these tribals are dependent on the forest produces for more than 60% of their livelihood needs. When the perennial water sources are stagnate at the dam site the trees and bushes shall vanish depriving the people from their own home. Being the place inhabited by Tribal people it constitutionally deserves special case and attention. Good governance should be ensured for the Tribals who are socially and economically vulnerable. This impact of this hydroelectric project shall soon manifest in social disruption by the infiltration on non tribals into the hills for this project. Business and other service sector shall also attract many others into this Tribal Hamlets. The culture and way of life of the tribals are already under threat by introduction of Tribal Development Schemes into their areas.

More over commercial tourism shall intrude into this hill as a chain effect of the dam project. But the dam shall promote elite commercial tourism and simultaneously many sophisticated resorts and hotels. All these implications put open the tribal resources for a plunder and tribal culture a disruption.

### XXIII. Conclusion

The people of Kolli hills take immense delight to adjust and accommodate themselves to the growing influence of modernity. They do not feel that their customary values get eroded out of such changes. There are a lot of changes in food, dress, shelter and agricultural methods. Considering their socio cultural rituals, there occur mixed influences of modern and traditional mode of living to a significant level. Ethno botanical knowledge in under severe pressure of urbanization, expanding agricultural demand and acculturation trend of village people. Due to urbanization, availability of modern day facilities and mostly transferred by oral means ethno medicinal knowledge inevitably can be lost in future years, so it is paramount need of hour to collect and systematically document this precious and empirical folklore knowledge and pay due consideration to protect and conserve wild medicinal plants. Many evictions are carried out in the name of urban re-development, with little regard for consequences among the poor, who are left without alternative shelter provisions. According to the Census Report of 2001, the total population of the Malayalis is 47.6 percent of the total population of the scheduled tribes of Tamil Nadu. The Malayalis mostly are engaged in agriculture or do work relating to agriculture. 63% of Malayali tribals are working as agriculture coolies and only 1.67 percent of people are in government services. The tribal economy has traditionally centered on land and other land based resources. Nowadays only a few Malayalis possess land. The Malayalis are very good cultivators. After independence, the tribes have lost most of their lands to the moneylenders. As a result they have no lands for their cattle to graze. They are quite miserable due to alienation of lands and indebtedness. The government should also take steps to improve the communication facilities, like providing good roads, telephone connections and wireless connection in tribal areas; this will help the tribal people to transport their commodities from the hills to the plains. However, during the twentieth century the life pattern underwent radical changes as a result of their interaction with the people of the plains. The tribals were subjected to many changes and they began to adapt themselves to the new environment. They were also subjected to scientific temper and as a result a very bright and promising future is procrastinated.

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