

The Traditional laws of Malaiyali Tribes of the Shevaroy Hills in Salem District of Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to highlight the Traditional laws of Malaiyali Tribes of the Shevaroy Hills in Salem District of Tamil Nadu because of their efficient social organization and higher unit of administration with hereditary norms. The Yercaud hill area is called Shevaroy Hills, it is situated in the Eastern Ghats of Salem District in Tamil Nadu State. Shevaroy is the Anglicized name for Servarayan and the original inhabitants is Malaiyalis (Scheduled Tribes) a Tamil speaking Hindus. The tribal people follow own mode of management to control their groups or society and traditional laws, which are unwritten but are strictly bogeyed, as well as of their extreme level of traditional beliefs and they are normally conform to the norms and traditions through the influences of authority of the elders, public opinion and religious belief. The tribal areas of the Shevaroy Hills divided by the local inhabitants (Malaiyalis) in to Three Nadus, the chief of Nadu is called as Nattanor Pattakaran, and containing Nine Pattis under Muppans, who are elected as a rule, each from Vaguppup prescribed by custom. Nattans are assisted by Maniyakkarans, the Muppans are assisted by Kanganis. The Malaiyali tribes are settled in the Shevaroy Hills region because of the topographical nature but their culture is unchanged because of their socio-religious belief, poverty, illiteracy and hereditary customs. The tribes are culturally backward, yet they contribute more to nation by giving importance to their traditional laws.

Key words: *Big Malaiyali, Nattan, Patti, Thandam, Thevasam, Palmadi Panam, Kumbal.*

Introduction

Tribal people form a major chunk of the Indian population and majority of them remain in isolation. There are 645 tribal communities in India, according to the Constitution of Indian Republic. The Scheduled Tribes in India are the disadvantaged people who are socially downtrodden and discriminated, economically deprived and exploited, politically powerless and culturally different who have been living a poor quality of life characterized by ignorance and obscurant beliefs for ages, they form the most vulnerable section among the deprived. The exploitation of the tribal population by minor government officials, as well as money lenders, land lords and other agents of vested interests can largely be traced to the narrow confines of their traditional environment. But, there are a lot of changes among the tribal people over a period of time: most of them have started new economic pursuits. They have taken agriculture and other occupations for earning their livelihood while some of them have acquired education and entered into the public services.

As per 2011 Census, the population of Tamil Nadu was 721.47 lakhs, of which, the population of Scheduled Tribes is 7.95 lakhs accounting for 1.10 per cent of the total population. The major tribes that inhabit the State include *Kadar, Muduvan, Paliyan, Kanikkar, Malaiyali, Soliga and KondaReddi*. While there are pockets of tribal habitations especially concentrated in the Hills, there is also a significant number of tribal groups who are dispersed. Majority of them are socially marginalized, economically lack resources, their access to health, education, employment and other income generation opportunities are limited. The literary percentage of the Scheduled Tribes is 27.89 per cent as against 63.72 per cent of the general population. Based on the characteristics like distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness, the Government of Tamil Nadu has so far identified 36 communities as tribal people in the State, who are divided into three categories. They are spread over the districts of Tamil Nadu.

Category – I: Tamil Nadu's northern Eastern Ghats region is home to a number of indigenous tribes, and those who migrated there from the plains around the 16th century mingled with them.

Category – II: Inhabitants of the Western Ghats region of Tamil Nadu who made their way to the more primitive tribal areas.

Category – III: Those found in other districts' mountainous and flat terrain of other districts.

Among the 36 tribal communities living in the State of Tamil Nadu, the Malaiyali tribes of Shevaroy Hills in Salem district is comes under the 25 number in the list of Scheduled Tribes and the Salem district ranks first in the whole State with tribal population of 1,19,369 people, accounting for 15 per cent of the total tribal population in the State of Tamil Nadu. The Malaiyali, who live in Shevaroy Hills are called Big (Peria) Malaiyali or the KanchimandalamMalaiyali, their development is necessary to seek social justice and to improve

their socio-economic and cultural standard to a level of other forward sections of the society. At this juncture it is important to study 'The Traditional Laws of Malaiyali Tribes of the Shevaroy Hills in Salem district of Tamil Nadu.

Historical Background of the Shevaroy Hills

Shevaroy Hills, the local name for the Yercaud Hill area in Tamil Nadu's Salem district, is located in the Eastern Ghats. Tamil Nadu State. Shevaroy is the anglicized name for Servarayan, and is a detached hill range, covering an area of 50 sq. m. The total extent of the range is 382.67 sq. kms, including Reserve Forests which includes the Sanatorium and several old Coffee plantations. The local tamil name comes from a local deity, Servarayan, which means Chera king. The main town situated in these hills is Yercaud, which is located in the Shevaroy range of hills in the Eastern Ghats. It is also called so, owing to the abundance of trees categorized as a forest near the lake, the name signifying Lake Forest. The town's name is derived from the lake located at its centre-in Tamil, Yeri meaning lake and Kaadu meaning forest. As a popular tourist destination, Yercaud is also called the Jewel of the South and as Poor Man's Ooty. The temperature never rises above 29 C (84 F) or goes below 13 C (55 F).

Stone-age implements have been found from the ancient shrine located near Shevaroy Hills, which is about 5 kms from the Yercaud Lake. The first human settlement in the hills came from Kanchipuram, during the Telugu Kings capture of the Tamil ThondaiMandalam, the Tamil refugees from the plains migrated to the hills and settled there. Sir Thomas Muroe, Governor of Madras Presidency found this place in the year, 1842. David Cock Burn, the Scottish Collector (1820 – 1829) of Salem district was called the 'Father of Yercaud' because he helped in the development of the resources of the Shevaroy and for introducing the cultivation of Coffee, Pears, and Apple. The first survey of the Shevaroy Hills was undertaken in 1827, though the first European house was built in 1840. The attention of planters on the Shevaroy has been confined solely to coffee plantations. Tea plantations had been introduced in 1840s by Dr. Wallich on the property of G.F. Fisher, trees of Cinnamon had been introduced in Shevaroy Hills, by Mr. Richardson during the same period. The cool climate attracted Christian Missionaries, who established schools for girls and boys. Tourism is the main attraction in the Shevaroy Hills of Salem district besides the lush coffee plantations. Cultivation of Guava, Hill Banana, Pineapple, Pepper, Cardamom, Tapioca, Honey, Ragi and Rice are the main agricultural activities that sustain these people to rest in nights and struggle in day light.

Some of the famous places of interest in the Shevaroy Hills area are, **Yercaud Lake** is a picturesque pool surrounded by gardens and well wooded trees. Boating in the cold water of the lake is enchanting as well as refreshing. **Lady's Seat** is a rock that overlooks the winding ghat road and provides a breath-taking view. This view is spectacular at night with the twinkling lights of Salem town in sight. Another viewing platform in a summit near Lady's seat was built about 15 years ago and was named Gen's seat. Later, a garden and play area was built between the Rose Garden and Gen's seat and named the Children's seat. **Arthur's Seat** is a vantage point,

which can be reached by taking a steep, narrow road going north 1 km from the center of the town. It gives a bird's eye view of the huge Lake, Yercaud town and the Shevaroyan Peak. **Grange** is one of the oldest buildings, built in the 1820s by M. D. Cockburn, who was the District Collector of Salem District at that time. He established the first commercial plantation in this area and planted Coffee, Oranges, Apples and other fruit trees brought from South Africa, which are still cultivated. During the Sepoy Mutiny, great efforts were made to strengthen the roof, and ramparts were built with Gun emplacements and 3 Canons were mounted at vantage points, which today accounts for a visit by anyone interested in the history of this beautiful town. **Kiliyur Waterfalls** is 3 km trek from the Yercaud Lake. The best time to visit this place is immediately after the monsoons. The surplus water from the Yercaud Lake reaches of the Shevaroy Hills, and falls deep into the Kiliyur Valley in the form of a 300 feet waterfall. The views from both the bottom and top of the falls are breathtaking. The trek to the bottom of the falls is only for hardcore trekkers as it takes about one hour from the lake to reach the bottom of the falls which is heavily wooded, but a good 2 1/2 hours to get ones breath and trek back again. **Bear's Cave** is situated within a private coffee estate owned by a Mettur based business man. The main part of the cave is situated about 7 feet below the ground level and contains a deeper gorge which is believed by the local people to lead up to the cave situated in the Shervaroyan Temple. **The Shervaroyan Temple** is situated on top of the flat-topped Shevaroy Hills and is dedicated to Lord Shevaroyan. The temple consists of a narrow and dark cave and the main deities are Lord Shevaroyan and Goddess Kaveri. The native tribal throng here to celebrate their annual festival during the month of May. A magnificent view of the mountains around Shevaroy, the plains below, Yercaud town and Nagalur (a big village , 8 kms from Yercaud town) can be obtained from this hill. **Pagoda Point or Pyramid Point** is a viewpoint located in the eastern part of Yercaud hills. This has four piles of stones arranged so as to form a pyramid shape (pagodas). It is said to have been built by the local tribes. Once can get a thorough view of the town of Salem and a little village called Kakambadi from this hill. The cliffs in this area look really beautiful especially in early mornings or evenings and spending some time in this point itself is refreshing to the body and mind. **ATV Trail** offers a memorable ride inside thick coffee plantations and rough terrain which is available for hire on hourly basis or on distance basis. The best time to visit Yercaud is the warmer months between May and October, May and June are the months when tourist activity is high.

With this backdrop, it is interesting to study and analyze the traditional laws and cultural life of the native Malaiyali tribes of this beautiful hill station, the Shevaroy Hills of Salem District.

Profile of the Shevaroy Hills Malaiyali Tribes

The Malaiyalis are the principal inhabitants and they form a far more homogeneous community than any of the castes of the plains, and afford an interesting, object lesson in ethnology. They trace their origin to Conjeeveram (present Kanchipuram District of Tamil Nadu). The legend runs that three brothers, by name Periyannan, Naduvannan and Chinnannan,

went a hunting in a forest accompanied by three hunting hounds, and it came on to rain so heavily for two days that they were not able to quit the forest. Their hounds, however, returned home, and their wives seeing the dogs without their masters, concluded that their husbands had died in the jungles, and accordingly, as all loyal widows should do, set fire to their houses and perished in the flames. On the third day the hunters returned to find their houses in ashes and their wives dead. The bereaved husbands thereupon consoled themselves by marrying again; Periyannan chose a Kaikolar girl, and settled on the Kalrayans and Shevaroyes: Naduvannan chose a Vedachi as his bride, and the Pachai-malai as his residence: Chinnannan married a DevendraPallan, and made his home on the Kolli-malais. These three brothers thus became the progenitors of the three clearly defined sub-castes into which the Malaiyalis are divided, the Periya-Malaiyalis, the Pachi-Malaiyalis and the Kolli-Malaiyalis.

The Malaiyalis are also divided into a large number of exogamous clans which they call *vaguppus*. A curious feature in connection with these *vaguppus* is that certain groups of them called (*dayadivaguppus*) are *inter se* exogamous also. The members of these *dayadiclans* call one another brothers (*annantambigal*), and marriage between them is, for some unknown reason, regarded as incestuous. Inter-marriage between the Malaiyalis of the Kalrayans and those of the Shevaroyes is extremely rare, owing, no doubt, to distance, a frequent cause of fission in the caste system. The Shevaroyes are divided into three Nadus, i.e. Sela-Nadu (area South and East of the Shevaroyan Temple) Mutta-Nadu (land in and around the Shevaroyan Temple) and Moha-Nadu (North of the Temple). Each under its own *Nattanor Pattakaran* and each containing Nine *PattisunderMuppans*, who are elected as a rule, each from a *vaguppu* prescribed by custom. In 1842, after the death of the *Pattakaran* (Tribal Chief) of the Shevaroyes, there was trouble between the various Malaiyalis. This struggle for succession finally resulted in the British bringing this area under their rule in 1842. Now, in Shevaroy Hills are 67 villages and 27 hamlets with a total population of the Scheduled Tribes is 28,118 (62.16 per cent), of whom 14,159 are males (50.36 per cent) and 13,959 (49.64 per cent) are females during the year 2010-2011 Census. Yercaud was a Sub-Taluk up to 14th October 1977 and it became a Taluk on 15th October 1977. Revenue villages which have been grouped into Nine tariffs for the sake of administration and each tariff have one Village Administrative Officer. Now, Yercaud has an assembly constituency (Scheduled Tribal Area), which is part of Salem Lok Sabha constituency.

Traditional Laws of the Shevaroy Hills Malaiyali Tribes

The Shevaroy hills Malaiyalis are normally conform to the cultural norms and traditions of their society through the influences of three agencies, viz, authority of elders, public opinion and religious belief, they have a well-organized and tradition bound system of tribal administration. The tribal areas divided into three *Nadus*, the chief of a Nadu is called *Nattan or Pattakaran*, whose office is hereditary, each Nadu is sub-divided into Nine *Pattisunder Muppans*, who are elected as a rule, each from *Vaguppuprescribed* by custom, *Muppans* are assisted by *Ur-goundan*. *Urs* (village) which are governed by *Ur-goundan*, the office of the *Ur-goundan* is

elective. He is helped by *Karakkaranis* setting disputes among the tribes, *Karakkarans* are elected from different clans in an *Urs*, on appeal, disputes are settled by *Nattans*, hence decisions of the *Ur-goundans* and *Karakkarans* are renewed by *Nattans*. There are no written norms only they followed the ancestor's way, it has to jurisdiction over all the settlement in the divisions of the hills. They discuss important functions, panchayats and festivals, the head man of the tribal council is referred to as *Nattan* and he is superior authority of all villages and he is dealing authority of the entire hills.

Traditional laws and implementations in Three Nadus

The Shevaroyas, as per the Malaiyali Tribes consisted of Three Nadus, i.e. Sela-Nadu (area South and East of the Shevaroyan Temple) Mutta-Nadu (land in and around the Shevaroyan Temple) and Moga-Nadu (North of the Temple). Each Nadu of 21 to 24 villages constitute and it is the higher unit of administration, this unit is under the control of hereditary chieftain called Nattan or Pattakkaran (Headman of Nadu). Each Nattan has an assistant, the name is Maniyakkaran, the duty of Maniyakkaran is to give notice of weddings, to summon villagers for meetings and do all other related works. The Nattan of each Nadu is the highest one-man tribunal where all unsolved disputes by the Ur-goundans are settled. The village of Chitteri is the residence of all three Nattans, who appears to be revered by all people of Malaiyalis in the Shevaroy Hills.

(i). Sela – Nadu:

Sela-Naduhave 24 villages namely Vellakadai, Anaikadu, Solampadi, Melur, Kadukkamarathur, Periakadu, Arasamarathur, S. Puthur, Mangalam, Sengalathupadi, S. Narthanchedu, Mundachedu, Muluvi, Kolagur, Karadiyur, Elavadi, Veppadi, Veur, Kondaiyanur, Sonapadi, Kombuthooki, Narthanchedu, Arangam, Mottur.

(ii). Mutta-Nadu:

Mutta-Naduhave 22 villages namely Nallur, Puliur, Manjakuttai, Asambur, Athiyur, Semmaduvu, Mailapatti, Kombaikkadu, Semmanatham, Solur, Olavakodu, Puthur, Nagalur, Suraikaipatti, Puliampatti, Yercaud, Mundagampadi, Kiliyur, Vasampadi, Gundur, Theppakadu, Pattipadi.

(iii). Moga-Nadu:

Moga-Naduhave 21 villages namely Thalaisalai, Pilleri, Sengadu, Pottukadu, Valavandhi, Kakkampadi, Puliankadai, Aranmanaikadu, K. Puthur, Keeraikadu, Kumbipadi, Maramangalam, Pelakadu, Kovilur, Kombuthooki, Mavoothu, Sendhittu, Madur, Chinnamadur, Kottachedu, Kelaiyur.

Traditional laws and implementations in Nine Pattis

The total tribal areas of Shevaroy Hills containing Nine *Pattis* under *Muppans*, who are elected as a rule, each from *vaguppup* prescribed by custom, the *Muppans* are assisted by *Ur-goundan*. The Nine *Pattis* are namely Vellakadai, Manjakuttai, Semmanatham, Nagalur, Yercaud, Velur, Thalaisalai, Valavandhi, Maramangalam.

The *Muppans* settle all the issues concerning the Nine *Pattis* under their control. Seeking a bride for the groom is also done by the *Muppans*, in case, the bride belongs to some other settlement, then the *Muppan* seconds the proposal and represent it to his superior that is the *Nattan* of the hills and it is he finalizes the negotiations concerning the betrothal. However, the headman visits the bride's house only after the *Kangani* gives the formal acceptance for the alliance. The *Muppan* of the *Pattis* are given the first invitation for the marriage and it is interesting to note that the invitation is given in the form of betel leaf and areca nut. The one which is given to headman of a settlement is called *MuppanPakku* and the first respect goes to the *Muppan* of that settlement⁹. During the marriage ceremony only the *Muppan* of that settlement is provided with woolen blanket to sit, if the *Muppan* of the *Patti* is also present on that occasion, it is he who shares that privilege. However, the first respect goes to the *Muppan* of the settlement and the same respect is given in the case of a mourning which took place in the settlement. He is given the first respect that is the chief mourner of that hut where the death had occurred should fall at the feet of the *Muppan* of the settlement and receive him by giving betel leaf and areca nut.

The *Kangani* in turn assists the *Muppan* in arranging the meetings of the tribal council, he visits the various Malaiyali settlements and informs the date, time and venue of the meeting. Moreover, he accompanies his immediate superior that is the *Muppan* whenever the latter visits the other settlements. It is he who used to control the offenders if they turn out violent or problematic. Moreover, he is the person sent to the bride's hut to convey the formal acceptance for the alliance sought. Only after his confirmation that the people of that hut are affirmative in this regard. The other members such as *Karakkarar*, *Pujari*, and *Thandalkarar* of the tribal council accompany the groom's party to that bride's house. The noteworthy points in this juncture is that though the major official matters are done by the *Kangani* and his superiors do not show any regard for him as they consider him just as a paid servant.

Traditional laws and implementations in Urs (Village)

The village council is headed by the *Ur-goundan* (village headman), his office is hereditary and his assuming charge to this post is celebrated with the sacrifice of some animals and holding a feast, to whom the other members like *Karakkaran*, *Tharmakarta*, *Thahdalkaran* and *Poojari*. The entire member to assist him in solving the inter and intra-village disputes, every village meeting is conducted in the presence of the members of the traditional village panchayat. The *Ur-goundan* and *Karakkarar* take the leading roles both of them equally respected by the village but

the tribal women not recognized to participated panchayat council. The tribal council of the Shevaroy hills is functioning effectively with join actions of the office bearers and it is settles the entire matters of the tribes of the hills. Violation of tribal code and the directions of its office bearers are viewed as serious offences rather than offences such as adultery theft, no -remittance or refusal of remittance of tax demanded by the tribal council, only by observing such rigid practices, they are keeping their tribal council as a powerful one till today. However incest is viewed as a serious breach of tribal code as they posit some supernatural punishment viz, draught, flood disintegration and ultimate rain of that house hold, in cases like quarrel, theft etc. The accused is asked to remit *thandom*(fine) in the form of case if he or she is proved to be guilty. If they refuse very offence itself or to remit the fine and he is excommunicated up to fair days, hence generally even if they did not commit that offence they remit the penalty. However the office bearer of the tribal council is not too blind to victimize a virtuous man.

Divorce as reported in earlier contexts is not as pronounced as the women folk of the hills enjoy considerable freedom. However, one cannot deny the fact that it is in practice, both men folk and women folk are hand to apply for divorce before the tribal council. At the first phase, the council tries their level best to compromise the pains and it only it ends in vein they sanction divorce for remarriage. The second husband should return the bride price to the first husband which was given to the women by the latter at their first marriage. If it is the man who wants the divorce just for separation and not for remarriage then no give and take is observed and the separation is sanctioned just by formal declaration of office-bearers of the council. In such case it the man wants his off springs to be with him, and then he is asked to give a sum of the amount or so to his spouse as compensation for her breast-feeding the off springs in their infancy. This amount is referred to as *paalmadipanom*.

When case of extra-marital adultery is brought before the tribal council and if ample proof is produced the tribal council takes action such as granting divorce. Pre-marital adultery, on the other hand, is penalized with fine of cash and grain, the note worry point in this context is that fine is collected both from man and the girl. The *thevasom* (grain) collected is utilized to prepare ceremonial feast and the cash is spent either for getting country liquor or pig, if the adultery is found in the girl's residence then she is penalized with low amount than her partner. On the country, if it took place at the man's residence, then he penalized less than his partner in the case of extra-marital adultery. The fine of women should be remitted by her husband and in the case of pre-marital adultery her parents or her brother, if she has lost parents, remits the fine, such a practice of collecting fine from both the man and woman, that too from the kin of their households has minimized the offences, on the one hand and hinting them, on the other hand. In social matters, polygamy, remarriage, divorce cases are brought before the panchayat the day and time fixed. The *kumbal* (group of people) was held in under the tree now a days the meeting is held in a Temple and discussed as a matter of public concern, usually punishments are given in the formed *kutham*(fine)

The entire Malaiyali community can be divided into two sects of Ur-goundan, the former sect is vested with ruling power while the latter sect comprises ordinary citizens under the rule of the former. Moreover the goundan enjoys certain privileges like tying of marriage budge, wearing of turban, possession of umbrella, woolen blanket and the right to sit on woolen blanket during marriage and other subsequent ceremonies. At least one member of each house hold in a settlement is invited by the Sittambalam, an assistant to the Kangani. Usually a small sum is collected by the office bearers as tax from each house hold, this sum is used for miscellaneous expenses incurred in connection with the meeting.

Conclusion

The tribal community is settled in the Shevaroy Hills region because of the topographical nature but the tribal culture is unchanged because of their socio-religious belief, poverty, illiteracy and hereditary customs. As we have seen in the case study of Malaiyali tribes in the Shevaroy Hills, it is proved that the living conditions of the people is not favorable compared with the plain area people because most of the people are living in the interior forest areas and the regular life is still traditional oriented. The isolation remains the main cause of cultural and moral backwardness to lead lives of disparity and poverty. Their customs and traditions are totally different from that of the plain area people; therefore they fell shyness of contact to the communities and maintain a distance between the outsiders. The government should take adequate steps to make them friendly with the plain area people by interactions that they can learn other languages making them comfortable in turn helping them to modify their standard of living. The literacy level of the Shevaroy tribal almost 55 per cent of the females and 41 per cent of the males are illiterates, it has been observed that tribal community in the study area, have studied only up to primary education, they are not interested in pursuing higher education. After primary school, they have been advised to look after the domestic work rather sending them to higher studies. It is evident that lack of education leads to ignorance at all levels causing them to still blindly believe in old age customs and traditions. So, they have been misused by the money lenders and officials easily due to their backwardness and illiteracy. Governments both state and central have introduced various welfare programmes for the welfare of the tribal community in the study area, but the implementation is very poor due to backwardness of the people and their ignorance therefore still they give top most priority to their old traditions, culture and rituals. Therefore government should take steps to introduce tribal developmental activities to enhance their ability as individuals and making them comfortable to lead normal lives like that of the plain area people.

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