

LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT IN KERALA: A STUDY ON THE MUTHUVAN TRIBE OF EDAMALAKKUDY TRIBAL SETTLEMENT IN IDUKKI DISTRICT**K.A. Manjusha****ABSTRACT**

Edamalakkudy, the first Tribal Grama Panchayath in Kerala was formed during the last delimitation of Local bodies in Kerala (2010). The Muthuvan Tribe is the community in Edamalakkudy and is one of the most isolated forest tribes in the state of Kerala. This paper is an attempt to discuss the origin, history and etymology of the Muthuvans of Edamalakkudy along with their language, dress and ornaments, food pattern, their special traditions in social organisations, life-cycle rituals, religion, political organisation, economy etc. This paper also tries to bring out some of the problems of tribal development in this area. The tribals have been the victims of colonial domination, illiteracy, ignorance, caste prejudice, poverty and isolation. Then contact with the advanced and civilized people brought them into a new market economy and exploitation-both social and economic in nature. Their self-sufficient economy disorganised due to land alienation, deforestation etc. So this paper tries to make a comparative study on the past traditional life and the present condition of the Muthuvans of Edamalakkudy Tribal Grama Panchayath along with some suggestions for their existing problems.

Introduction

From time immemorial tribal communities constitute an important segment of Indian society. India is also characterised by having second largest tribal population in the world. According to 2011 census, tribals constitute 8.2% of the total population of the country. These groups also belong to various ethnic categories on the basis of geographical, racial, linguistic and economic conditions. The tribals have been the victims of colonial domination, illiteracy, ignorance, caste prejudice, poverty and isolation. Then contact with the advanced and civilized people brought them into a new market economy and exploitation-both social and economic in nature. Their self-sufficient economy disorganised due to land alienation, deforestation etc. So this paper tries to make a comparative study on the past traditional life and the present condition of the Muthuvans of

Edamalakkudy Tribal Grama Panchayath along with some of their unique contributions in handicrafts, ethno botany and ethno medicine and extends some suggestions based on the study.

Muthuvans: A Historic Profile

Origin, History and Etymology

The Muduvans or Mudugars are a tribe of hill cultivators in Coimbatore, Madura, Malabar and Travancore.¹ They are found in the Adimali and Devikulam forest regions of Idukki district . There are two different groups among the Muthuvans and they speak slightly two different dialects. Hence they call each other as Malayalam Muthuvan and Paandi Muthuvan. Malayalam or Naadan Muthuvans are seen in the Adimali areas and the Tamil or Paandi Muthuvans are found in the Munnar and Devikulam areas.

Historically speaking, the Muthuvans are believed to have fled from the Madurai district of Tamil Nadu, one of the states of India, situated at the southeastern end. There are many interpretations about the arrival of the Muthuvans. According to Iyer (1939) , “It may possibly have been at a time when the Pandyan Rajas entered the South or when the Telugu Naickans took possession of Bodynayakannur in the 14th century”.² It is speculated that the Muduvans were driven to the hills by Muhammedan Invaders in the later part of the eighteenth century and settled on the northern and western portion of the Cardamom Hills and High Ranges of Travancore, known popularly as the Kannan Devan Hills and Anamalai Hills.³ Considering the patronage enjoyed by the Muthuvans from the erstwhile kings of the region, Madhava Menon (1996) mentions that the Poonjar chieftains, whose family claimed descent from the Pandyan kingdom, had treated the uduvans as Vassals, even though they resided in the hills and forests of the territory.⁴

The origin of the name Muthuvan itself has drawn so many interpretations. A famous version is that when they left Madhurai, they carried with them the goddess of Madurai Meenakshi on their back and since they were known as Muthuvans. There is a version prevalent among the Muthuvans says that they carried only Kannagi (a divine lady known for chastity of women who forms the

principal character in the Tamil epic Silappathikaram) on their back when she proceeded towards hills after destroying Madurai, i.e., after putting it to fire. It is believed among the elderly Muthuvans that Kannagi and goddess Meenakshi represent one and the same deity. It is said that 'during their emigration from Madurai they carried their dethroned King in turn on their back while crossing rivers and climbing hills. The king pleased with their affection and loyalty and surprised by their enduring capacity, named them Muthuvans. It is also stated that during their flight to the hills they carried their children and belongings on their backs, and after settling in the hills they called themselves Muthuvans.'⁵ Today, one can still see the Muthuvassis (female Muthuvans) carry their little children on their backs; no cradle of mat is used to lay the baby. The Muthuvans carry their belongings on their backs, not on their heads.

Language

The Muthuvars have a dialect of their own (*Enavan Pech*), closely allied to Tamil, with a few Malayalam words. The patois is a debased form of Tamil. But it has no script. Now most of them are following Malayalam script.

Dress and Ornaments

By the men, languti and leg cloth (*Kechchu*) of the Tamils are worn. A turban is also worn called *Uruma* or *Urumaala* and a cumbly or blanket is invariably carried, and put on when it rains. Ear studs (*Kadukkan*) made of gold, with bits of glass of different colours in them, and also silver or brass finger and toe rings, and sometimes a bangle on each arm or on one leg. They are supposed to grow *koondal* (lengthy hair) and make tuft (*kudumbi*). Nowadays, the discarded coats of the planters and even trousers are worn by them and they are not strictly adhere to the traditional dress patterns.

The women go in very largely for beads, strings of them adorning their necks (*Kella*), white and blue being their favourite colours. Rings for the ears, fingers and toes (*Metti*), and sometimes many glass bangles (*Vala*) on the arms, *Mookku Minni* (nose- stud) and an anklet on each leg are the usual things worn by women. Married women wore silver anklets and *mayirmatti* and they also practices tattooing now. Women wear saree in such a way that a pouch is made on their back to carry their babies and this arrangement is termed as *Kunju poonardu*. Unmarried girls wear less ornaments than the married women, and widows wear no jewellery till they are remarried.

Food

The Muthuvan eat a pudding prepared out of ragi, known as *korangatti*, which forms their staple food. Ragi, Tenay, maize, tapioca and sweet potato are also grown and consumed as subsidiary food items. Fish caught from the streams and rivers forms their regular side-dish for most of the year. Various types of wild yams, roots, tubers and pulses are also consumed. Their fruit consumption is moderate and seasonal. Milk products are consumed. Animals are also hunted and eaten but nowadays, hunting is restricted by the forest department. The energy drink of the Muthuvans is Tea without sugar, known as *Teyila*.

Communal Life

The most colourful and significant feature of the communal life of the Muduvan is their dormitory system. 'There are separate dormitories or bachelor-halls for unmarried boys and girls in every settlement. Children, both male and female, after attaining the age of nine or ten years, become the members of dormitories and start sleeping in their respective dormitories during night times. Till they get married, they continue to sleep there. Boys dormitory is known as *Saavady or Saavadi voodoo or Sattiram or Ilanthari madam*. The girl's dormitory is called the *Thinna veedu or Muzhukku veedu or Kumari Madam*.'⁶ The Muthuvans always emphasize the need for group living. Mutual aid is a predominant characteristic of Muthuvans.

Social Organisation

The Muthuvan have six matrilineal clans (*Koottams*), ie, *Melae koottam, Kana koottam, Thushani koottam, Kanya koottam, Elli koottam and Puthani koottam* with hierarchical order. Each koottam again divided into six lineages (sub clans) (Iyer, 1937). The function of these divisions are mainly for marriage alliance, to keep up the social status and to indicate descent and ancestry. The members of the Melae and Kana koottams are the rulers of the community and the other koottam members are their vassals. The koottam is an exogamous unit. The ruler clans exchange mates and they do not seek marry each other. The other four koottams marry each other.

The Muthuvan adhere to community endogamy and clan exogamy. The average marriageable age for girls is 14-18 and for boys 18-25. Cross cousin marriages are given preference. Pre puberty marriages are not in practice now. The expenses of the marriage should be borne by the bridegroom. A bamboo comb made by the fiancé is presented to the bride who wears at the top of

her tuft of hair as a marriage symbol throughout her life. Along with the comb the bridegroom also presents bangles, nose-ring and bead necklaces. Monogamy is their norm, but bigamy is also permitted with the consent of the first wife, usually if she happens to be no children. Divorce is allowed to both men and women due to adultery, cruelty etc with social approval. Remarriage is permitted among the widowed and divorced.

The Muthuvans follows a nuclear family pattern. Muthuvans live in hamlets called *kudi*. The Kudi represents the Muthuvan society, each of which consists of 30 or more families. Almost all members of a kudi are related. The Kudi's headman is called *Kani* which in vernacular means Supervisor or protector. They have various penal codes for breaking their traditions and moral standards.

Religion and festivals

According to Iyer (1937), the Muthuvan are tribal religionists. Further he also states that 'the Muthuvans show signs of influence of Hinduism on their religion and adopted some of the forms and rituals of Hindu-worship'. Hindu pantheon gods and goddesses were worshipped by the Muthuvans now like *Vinayakan, Murugan, Meenakshi* etc. They also worship the malevolent deities like *Karuppu Swami and Mariyamma* so as to avoid disasters and calamities. Worship of the spirit of ancestors is very popular and they have faith in jungle dwelling spirits. Their worshippings are done always in the presence of *manthrakkaran*. He is a witch doctor too. *Thai Pongal*, celebrated for a week in the month of January-February (Thai), and *Karthika*, in the month of November, are the two major festivals celebrated by the Muthuvans.

Unique knowledge systems

Some of their unique knowledge systems are in the following fields.

Agriculture: In the distant past, for raising crops Muthuvans used the traditional method of shifting cultivation (*Kottu kaadu vevasaayam*). While selecting a site for the cultivation, they used to make sure the conditions like the lay of the land, the nature of the trees and undergrowth, the accessibility of the waterways and suitability of the land for setting up of their kudis. Usually the clearing up of the site will take place in an auspicious day of January as decided by religious headman. The sowing and harvesting will be in the month of November which was followed by the festival *Karthikai* in pomp and pleasure. After this they move to another hill or valley. The whole process would repeat there also starting with *Thai Pongal* of mid-January. The practice of shifting cultivation was to

preserve the soil fertility of a particular area and protect its natural resources from pollution and depletion.

Handicrafts

They are rich in skills in creating the unique bamboo mats and handicrafts items with various designs which was unknown to the outside world. Their mats are so nice that one can sleep on it and if properly kept, it could be used for a very long time. They call the mat “*Kannadipaya*” (mirror mat) due to its nice surface. Muthulakshmi, a skilled artisan in this field said that the new generation is not interested in learning the skill from the elders. As alternative items are available, the making of the handicrafts items are slowly disappearing. However, now with the creation of the Kudumbasree Community Development Society, the handicrafts of Edamalakkudy is expected to make a market outside also.

Ethnomedicine

The knowledge of medicine of Muthuvans was not acquired by them intentionally, but through their experiences in everyday life. The methods and techniques developed by them are symbolic and expressive rather than scientific and experimental. But most of them can stand the rigorous test of the scientific standards of modern medicine. Plants and plant derivatives form major constituents in most of the medicinal preparations. They do not store medicines. The medicinemen opined that the efficacy of the medicine will be lost as a result of storage for long periods. Now, the deforestation resulted in the scarcity of various precious medicinal plants. They collect it from the natural habitat and they never cultivate them for their use. There was a specialist medicine man known as *Vaidyan* whose duty is to collect medicinal plants, preparation of medicine and treatment of the patients.⁷

Preparation of Maravuri

Muthuvans are experts in preparing *Maravuri*, a type of cloth from the bark tree *Aranjali* (*Antiaris Toxicaria* (pres.) Lesch.) This skilled work was carried out after constructing tall supports around the tree, require much experience. The cork is carefully removed with a sharp knife; bark is softened by beating with wooden hammers, and separated and cured by sun drying. It is used as bed spread also. As modernisation is fast progressing, the new generation is unaware of the technical

know how to prepare the bark for cloth. So it is highly important to record and preserve such valuable information'.⁸

Extraction of Starch and Palm Wine

'*Arenga Wightii Griff* is a palm and muthuvan utilizes this plant for extraction of starch and palm wine. They have developed and standardised their own techniques for extraction of starch and palm wine. The starch extracted is used for the preparation of various dishes while palm vine is consumed directly without fermentation during the famine period. They could also be utilised for the production of value added products such as palm jiggery, soft drinks and clean starch. It is the need of the hour to record and reserve such time tested valuable traditional practices before it lost forever'.⁹

The Muthuvans use a variety of bows and arrows, slings and snares, besides blow tubes for attracting birds and small game animals. They have glorious collection of superstitions and folksongs.

Edamalakkudy - A Profile:

Edamalakkudy, the first Tribal Grama Panchayath in Kerala was formed during the last delimitation of Local bodies in Kerala (2010). Earlier Edamalakkudy was the 13th ward of Munnar Grama Panchayath. Edamalakkudy GP has 101.6 Sq.km area. There are 28 tribal settlements (named as Kudi) spread over 13 wards of the GP. The Muthuvan Tribe is the community in Edamalakkudy and is one of the most isolated forest tribes in the state of Kerala . Presently the Grama Panchayath is headed by a tribal women leader Kanniyamma.

Tribal Development in Edmalakkudy

Education: - Most of the tribes are illiterate. Few of them have completed SSLC. Seven of them have completed Plus Two. One girl is there having passed Degree Course. There is one Government Tribal Lower Primary School which is almost 10 to 15 km away from the nearest settlement. There are four single teacher schools and about 10 Anganwadis. The only valuable properties in the Edamalakkudy L.P. School are a half sided globe, a solar lamp and a useless tape recorder. There is a multi-purpose office room which functions as the kitchen and also as room for accommodation for

teachers and other important personalities visiting the area. 'A Head Mistress was also appointed here but even now without joining duty, she is drawing her salaries'. These are the basic educational facilities available in Edamalakkudy.

Road :- It is 35 km away from Munnar Town. To reach Edamalakkudy one has to travel by jeep upto Pettimudy and then by walk for nearly 20 km through dense forest. After the formation of the Tribal Grama Panchayath, road is being constructed under MNREGS and is under way. But due to the paucity of funds it is delayed. As per the reports, Rs. 1 crore is estimated to complete the road.

Housing :- All tribal houses are of thatched nature as sufficient grass is available. Forest department has sanctioned some amount for the infrastructure development in the GP. The Forest Department has set up a coordination committee of all line departments to complete the project in time.

Occupation :- Most of the tribes are farmers. They also used to collect forest goods like honey, firewood etc for their living. There is no government employees in this settlement.

Water :- There is a river flowing through this GP and they use this river water for their all water needs. They collect water through their own methods from these springs.

Sanitation :- There is no sanitation facility in the settlement and the tribes are used to open defecation. There are cases of water borne diseases and the death of 3 children due to this was reported by Mathrubhumi Daily News Paper in the previous week also.

Recent Developments: - The muthuvan tribe in Edamalakkudy is one of the most reclusive forest tribes in the State and as per the tribal custom, the women keep indoors. But for the first time women cast their vote in Edmalakkudy in the last Grama Panchayath Election. With an intention of making the village self-sufficient in vegetable and rice cultivation, Kudumbasree district mission started launching group farming in Edamalakkudy. For the first time in its history, the Tribal Development and Youth Welfare Minister of Kerala, P.K. Jayalakshmi visited the place on 3rd April 2012. Kerala State Biodiversity Board started the Preparation of a Biodiversity Register (PBR) on 12th April 2012 and it is planning to prepare a documentary also.

Suggestions

These are some suggestions based on the existing study:

1. All the Projects and Plans for development should be implemented in Edamalakkudy only after making sure of its suitability to that area and also that it will not affect the existing ecosystem and biodiversity of the area.

2. It is better to employ the tribals themselves as Forest Guards to preserve the forest and also for avoiding exploitation from the outsiders.
3. Tribal Development Department should encourage them to follow their own system of cultivation, to preserve their tradition of ethno medicine, their ethno botanical knowledge , dialect , Handicrafts and other unique knowledge systems of the Muthuvans as far as possible.
4. Better water facilities and Good sanitation facilities should be provided for them to protect them from many of the existing diseases.
5. A Primary Health Centre should be established there along with necessary staff and facilities.

Conclusion

Edamalakkudy is the first Tribal Grama Panchayath in Kerala and the only GP left out in the e-governance and electricity is still a luxury there. The Muthuvans are the best stewards of the natural resources. No nature conservation efforts would be a complete success without ensuring the support of the tribes of local inhabitants of that region. There are lots of ways we can learn from these tribes in understanding nature and devising ways to conserve her riches. Anyway, plans and projects for their development should be in accordance with their traditional living system. It is highly essential to preserve and record their unique knowledge systems for the future generations. Literacy and Education can change their lives and powers of exploitation and bondage. Knowledge can broaden their minds to the future and also wisdom can open their hearts to preserve the hills and nature.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Manjusha K. A is now working as Assistant Professor in the School of Gandhian Thought and Development Studies in Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala. Formerly, she had worked as Assistant Professor in History in the Government Maharajas College, Ernakulam, Kerala. She obtained her M.A. in History from Calicut University, Kerala. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D on "Socio Economic Change among the Tribals of Kerala: A Study on the Ulladan Tribe of Ernakulam District" in the University of Kerala. Her areas of interest include Tribal Studies, Women Studies and History. She has published various articles in different journals.