Chapter 3

TRIBAL POLITY-II

IRULAS, KURUMBAS AND PANIYAS

Todas and Kotas are the two distinct Tribal Communities in the Nilgiris. Apart from them, the Kurumba, Irula and Paniya communities also constitute a part of the study of the Tribal Polity of the Nilgiris during its early period. Each of these communities had a well-organised polity, which maintained law and order in the respective hamlet. Here the socio-political organisation of each tribe is studied and analysed.

The Irulas

Irulas are found in the three states of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamilnadu in South India. In Kerala, they are in Attappady Valley in Palakadu. In Tamilnadu, they are in Gudalur, Coonoor, Kotagiri and Walayar and across Kerala and Tamilnadu border.

Origin of the Self-Governing Body, the ‘Ur Kootam’ and ‘Kattamana’

The Irulas were among the first of the traditional Nilgiri groups to be visited by a Scotman in 1800. Since Irulas are found in different parts of plains even in Karnataka, it can be said that they migrated to the hills during one time or the other due to various reasons. From the legends of the Irulas as well as that of the other tribes, it is clear that they had already existed in the thick forests from a very early time. Their name “Irula” is attributed to their place of settlement, the thick and dark forests indicates that though they lived almost with the other primitive tribes of the hills, they lived in isolation. They had not become ‘domesticated’ like other tribes. Hence, the possibility of knowing them is less. In spite of living in the forest with few huts around, the governance of the community shows an elaborate, democratic and traditional polity. This ‘Kootam’ of the Irulas no doubt has found its origin from the time they started to live in groups. This organisation of the Irulas came into vogue out of necessity to settle disputes and conflicts, which propped up in the closed community in which they lived.
The ‘Mottas’ or Irula Villages

Irula Ur or mottas consist of several bamboo huts placed far away from each other amidst the forest. These bamboo huts are plastered with mud and generally, it is built in a square. Each house has two rooms partitioned with a set of woven bamboo sticks. The roof is thatched with forest grass. These huts need to be rethatched every year. The ‘mottas’ are scattered on the northern and southern slopes of the hills, the inhabitants of these ‘mottas’ lead a hard life especially due to the severity of the monsoon, and even more, they stay isolated from the mainstream. “The huts are very small, but tolerably neat. On the hills, the ‘Iriligaru’ the Irula have small villages” 5.

Irula Settlements

The Irulas occupied the lower slopes and jungle that skirt the base of the Nilgiris 6. The Irulas, unlike the Todas and Kotas live away from the local villages. Their dwellings are situated inside the moist but dry deciduous forests of the Nilgiri slopes. They do not call their dwelling place by a special name as the Badagas ‘Atti’ or Toda ‘mund’ or Kota ‘kokkal’. The villages refer to their villages as ‘Ur’ a common term for village in South Indian language 7. Still the ancient records show that they are “Mostly a hill tribe more primitive than Cooroombas akin to bedar or hunters of the Peninsula. They speak crude Tamil living at the foot of Nilgiri Mountains. They, like the Mysore ‘bedar’ worship Vishnu, a remarkable circumstance considering the almost universal Shaivism of the aboriginal tribes of South India. They live near Rangasamy Peak and are scattered about the slopes, and at the base of the hills of the South and South east, there are several Iroola mottas” 8.

Outside Irula hamlets, close or some distance away there are graveyards with memorial temples or stones 9. Most often, these graves have trees planted in memory of the deceased one 10. This shows the affinity of the Irulas towards nature.

In order to understand better the political institution of the Irulas, one has to know their social organisation. Among the Irulas there are twelve exogamous lineages viz. Chambai, Devnnan, Kalkatti, Kuduvan, Kuppan, Kurunaga, Ollaga, Porigan, Punga, Uppikan and Vellaikan 11.
The large sections of Irulas are divided into:

The Neelgiri Irulas who are extremely dark in complexion and less civilized.

The Irulas of Chengelpet, North and South Arcot who are more civilized and fair in complexion than that of Nilgiri Irulas.

The whole Irula community is believed to have 12 clans, which they call as ‘Kulas’ according to T.M. Menon: (1996). Of course, not all the ‘Kulas’ are found in the same village. At present, the Irulas of the Nilgiris follow seven ‘Kulas’. Each of these ‘Kulas’ is known by the place of original inhabitation and it is associated with a particular deity.

1. Poongkaru
2. Kudagar (people of Coorg)
3. Kalkatti (those who tie stones)
4. Venaka
5. Denaala
6. Koppilingam
7. Samba

The Neelgiri Irulas are further subdivided into smaller ‘Kulas’, for example, Samba Kula has its subdivisions as Alumala Samba and Buthanatha Samba.

Uppiliga Kula has Ankapura Uppiliga and Mamanalia Uppiliga etc.

However, family is the basic unit of the Organisation. For practical reasons ‘Kula’ takes important place. Among the Irulas, marriage is not merely a relationship between two individuals or families but it indicates a contract between two ‘Kulas’. People belonging to different ‘Kula’ live in different villages. Not all the ‘Kulas’ are found in the same village. They follow monogamy.

The other informal group existed in an Irula village are ‘Pundar’ which constituted unmarried men and women who are called ‘Pundas’ and ‘Pundicii’. This group is appointed for doing certain jobs during temple festivals and some other auspicious occasion. There are a number of Irula hamlets on the Nilgiris.
Irula Village Council, ‘Ur Kuttam’

In each village, there will be a ‘Ur Kuttam’ or Village Council. Most of the terms used by the Irulas resemble the words either in Kannada or in Tamil. Thus, Ur means village and ‘kuttam’ means gathering. An elder or a leader who they call ‘Thalaivar’ or headman heads this Ur Kuttam. It is the duty of the Thalaivar to serve the Irula community in its social, political, economic and religious decisions.

Members of the Village Council

‘Thalaivar’ is not a hereditary position 14. He is selected by the Irulas from among them. The criteria to become a ‘thalaivar’ are not his qualification and wealth but his ability to handle the problems efficiently and find solution for such problems. He should also be a man of courage and should possess enough wisdom even to deal with the members of the other tribal community. He can be removed and replaced by a more efficient man at any time. As in each self-governing community, even among the Irulas, the members of the Village Council are the elders of the village, belonging to different families and whom the people consider as wise and experienced. They have respect for them, obey and invite them for weddings or funerals 15.

Kattamana

A number of Irula Ur joins to form a ‘Kattamana’ 16. It is a specific geographical area where a number of Irulas inhabit in a number of Irula Villages. Here a ‘Yajman’ performs the role of the headman. The position of a yajman is hereditary. His presence is inevitable in all the functions connected with community and even sometimes individuals. He belongs to one of the villages, coming under ‘Kattamana’ division. Since this is a hereditary position, necessarily he is a man from the dominant clan of that ‘Kattamana’. Thus, the Irulas of Nilgiris have five ‘Kattamanas’ under different ‘Yajmans’.

The scattered Irulas living in Gudalur and other part of the district do not have this specific Organisation. Each ‘Yajman’ of a ‘Kattamana’ is assisted by two persons from the same village as is, called ‘Bandari’ and ‘Punga’. They are hereditary priests and represent the second and third dominant ‘Kulas’ of the same area 17. ‘Yajman’ prefers the ‘Bandari’ first, in his decisions and then ‘Punga’. The issues which are not settled in the ‘Ur Kuttam’ is discussed and decided in the ‘Kattamana’.
Powers and Functions of the ‘Kattamana’

The ‘Yajman’ is sought after in performing a ceremony, or solving a problem, which is not settled in Ur Kuttam, such as marriage problems, theft and property issues. Any of the above issues has to be consulted with the yajman by the party concerned and prior permission has to be obtained.

The ‘Bhandari’ and ‘Punga’ are to convey the information to the yajman from the villages and if need be to the villagers from the ‘Yajman’. When a ceremony takes place the ‘Yajman’ will attend the same along with ‘Bhandari’ and ‘Punga’. While informing about this, the villagers are expected to offer a customary amount and betel leaves to them. During a marriage relationship between two different ‘Kattaman’, the Bhandari of the boy’s ‘Kattamana’ should go to the girl’s ‘Kattamana’ and get the permission from the ‘Yajman’ of the latter.

A dispute between two persons from the same village will be sought to be solved in the Ur Kuttam. If the conflict is not solved it will be discussed before the ‘Yajman’. This meeting is called as Village Panchayat today. If there is a conflict between two groups or persons of different ‘kattamanas’ both the ‘yajmans’ should participate. If it remains unresolved, the ‘yajmans’ of all the ‘kattamanas’ are invited to meet and a compromise is brought about.

As far as the rule of a king is concerned, the early Irulas were quite unaware of the existence of a royal control over them, since they were living in thick jungles. Another reason is that, very few kings who came to the hills exercised their direct control over them.

The Post Independent period has opened a wider scope for tribal participation in the governance of their community. The Village Panchayats are the local political organisations, which are in their daily use. Of course, a random survey of the Irula villages show that the inhabitants are not fully aware of the functioning of the Panchayats and all the more, they are not well informed of the schemes available to the rural population.
Political Organization of the Community

Kattamana

Ur Kuttam (Village Council)

Ur

Ur

Ur

Ur

Families (Kudumbam)
Man is the head.

Crimes and Punishments

The common offences which prevailed in the Irula Community are, theft, cheating, divorce, suicide, murder and over riding of the traditional laws and customs of the community. The usual punishments for a person found guilty is that he should prostrate before the 'Ur Kuttam'. In other cases the guilty will have to give, betel leaves to the elders gathered for the meeting. In various serious cases, if the person is found guilty, he has to distribute betel leaves and areca nut to the whole 'Ur', even sometimes feed all the tribes of his or her village. When the parties or either of the parties do not accept the verdict of the elders they are ex-communicated from the whole community until they apologise and come back to their community through the council. Therefore, the judgment of the council is final.

For cases of theft, a fine of Rs.12/- is imposed. In addition, the fine depends on the severity of the guilt. There are cases when a person caught in theft is asked to provide a feast to the fellow tribes. The man or woman found guilty prostrate before the Panchayat as a mark of apology and pays the fine.

Both in the past as well as in the present years, the system of ex-communicating the person from the community continues for reasons of serious offences. A couple either a boy or a girl, marrying from other religion or getting converted into Christianity or Islam are considered as not their own and are sent away from the village.
Role of Women in the Village Council

Usually women are prohibited from attending the deliberations of the Village Council almost in all the Irula villages. If the woman has a case filed against her only then she is brought before the council. This happens very rarely. Even in such case, the male member will attend the council, represent her case, and pay the fine. A woman is never selected as a village head, not even among the elders of the council. Hence, women and children do not have any direct role in the village administration.

Village Head and the Irula Life Cycle

During childbirth and naming ceremony, the village head has the honour of wishing the newborn baby. The elders are considered the important guests on the day.

During marriage, it is the head of the council or the representative of the clan who takes an important role and leads the events of the marriage after the second ‘nicciya’ or engagement of the boy and the girl.

In olden days, the headman of the village involves himself in the fixing of the wedding day with the consent of the parents. He discusses financial matters regarding the marriage. He decided the item to be given in consultation with the parents and made necessary arrangements. He leads the ceremonies by reciting the sayings meant for the wedding. He receives the vessels and clothes brought by the boy’s side as a girl’s clan representative. It is his privilege to conduct the ceremony of exchanging the betel of the boy and girl’s house. Ultimately, it is the headman of the village, who does even the handing over of the girl. Thus, the village head performs the whole procedure of marriage.

The headman is considered important and offered first place in the festal meal and any decision taken by him with regard to the village festival is respected and carried out by the whole community.

The funeral rituals also take place in the presence of the elders and council for which even the representatives of their clans are present. The members of the council also handle any dispute arising during these ceremonies. During the naming ceremony, the day is fixed in consultation with the village head.
Thus, the role of the council in each walk of Irula life cannot be denied. Of course, in the modern day, this emphasis has been considerably reduced.

**Irula Administration during British Period**

The advent of the British to the Nilgiris has not changed the social or political organisation of the Irulas much. They have continued with the same system of sorting their problem in 'Ur Kuttam' and in 'Kattamana'. During the British period, the word 'Ur Kuttam' underwent a change and came to be called 'Ur Panchayat' but the proceedings remained the same. The influential persons filled up this place as 'Thalaivar' 20. During the British period, there were stray references of imperial sway over the tribes. Though the tribal communities were unaware of the governmental machinery of this period, they had heard of the Government Organisations such as Municipality, revenue, tax and court. The influence of police and court are rarely seen, but not unknown to them.

**Post-Independent Irula Political Institution**

After the independence and with the indigenous people ruling the country, the system of local government came to be called as ‘Ur Panchayat’ or Village Panchayat. The village head is no more Thalaivar or Yajman but chairperson. Among the Irulas, the disputes are referred to the Village Panchayat. After hearing the arguments of both the sides, the chairman of the Panchayat passes the verdict. Usually a nominal fine varying between Rs. 4 to 40/- is imposed on the person or party found guilty. However, until 1970's there were are cases, where the persons found guilty were asked to give betel leaves to all the inhabitants of the 'motta' or village. In those early days, the people were divided into totem-groups, the relics of which are found in tribal names like 'Irular', 'Vanniear' etc. 21.

Like the Todas and Kotas, the Irulas also have an organized administrative system headed by the ‘Kattamana ‘Yajman’ who is consulted for almost all the important events of this particular community. Family is the basic unit of the administrative machinery. This also is a male dominated community.

The Irulas had a well organised Socio-Political system. The head of the council known as 'Thalaivar' was elected by the villages and the meeting is called as 'Ur Kuttam'.
The Irula polity worked very much on democratic principles. The decision of the headman was final. The British rule did not influence the internal administration of the Irulas. The only change it brought was that the Village Council came to be called by a different name 'Ur Panchayat'.

Paniyas

The Government of India identified a tribe, under the name 'Paniyan' and was given the constitutional status as one of the scheduled Tribes. As mentioned earlier, the term ‘Paniyan’ literally means ‘worker’, which is the modified form of the Malayalam word ‘Panikkar’ meaning labourer. Earlier writers Evans: 1952, Buchanan: 1807, and Gopalan Nair 1911 referred to Paniyar people as the most numerous of the jungle tribes, found in Malabar and categorised them as aborigines. Though they work as slaves or labourers to some high caste people, they live almost a jungle life, since they are living away from the main village of caste Hindus.

Among the hill tribes, the Paniyas are considered as the low-ranking, untouchable, ex-serf community who were bought and sold until about the present century even after slavery was abolished by the British law in 1843. "A number of Wayanad Chettis some times identified as ‘Malabar Chettis’ had resided in the Gudalur area even before the British times. They were the masters of group of paniyas, supervising their clearing and planting of crops in portions of the Wayanad jungle. They provided food and a few simple amenities for the tribes". According to T. Adams, the Paniyas were a ‘nomadic group’ who established numerous semi-permanent settlements due to their nature of work. Now the Paniyas lead a well established settled life in and around Gudalur and Wayanad. Studies on Paniyans revealed that during the early 18th and 19th Century, each Paniyan was a servant of a landlord and though he had the freedom to leave his master, he was immediately traced and good care was taken that he does not get employed elsewhere.

Origin of the Paniya Local Self-Governing Body, the ‘Koottani’

Census of India 1891, reported that although “Paniyas are said to have features of the African type; there does not appear to be any distinct evidence in favour of this African descent”. The Imperial Gazetteer 1911:51 stated “the Paniyan are the most
characteristic representatives of the Dravidian type, being probably the original type of population of India now modified to a varying extent by the admixture of Aryan, Scythian and Mongoloid elements. The number of Paniyas, according to the census in 1891 was 32,282. Of their origin, nothing definite is known. The 'Nayar Janmis' landlords say that, when they are caught in the act of mischief or alarmed, the Paniyan calls out 'Ippli' 'Ippli' and runs away. They believe this to have been the name of the country where they came originally. All the same, they are ignorant as to where 'Ippimala', as they call it, is situated. The Paniyan himself, though he occasionally puts forward one or the other of the above places as the home of his ancestors, has no fixed tradition bearing on their arrival in Gudalur. They claim that they were captured by a Raja and brought to this place.

As far as the records are concerned, the Paniyas had a settled life in Gudalur as labourers. Since the time of their existence as a settled community, they organised themselves based on their kinship, possessed a Self-Governing Body consisting of the elders of different clans. Thus, since centuries they have a polity of their own. Though very often this council was influenced by the landlords and their masters, the Paniya elders had a certain amount of freedom to conduct their affairs. Thus, the 'Koottani', the Paniya Village Council played an active part in the internal administration of this community.

A brief study of the Paniya settlements, kinship and lineage would help us better understand the polity and governance of this community.

**Paniya Settlements**

The Paniyas believed to have lived in jungles, now settled down happily on estates, in huts built of bamboo. The Paniya houses are scattered. They do not live in large settlements. Most of their huts—made of bamboo and mud with thatched roof—are found close to the field in which they work. Their settlements are usually called 'Paadi', which comprises 5 to 6 houses scattered one away from the other and surrounded by forest. Each ancient Paniya house does not have more than two or maximum of three rooms. Now government buildings have replaced some of these traditional houses. The word 'Paadi' is now called as Colony.
Community organisation refers to the means of maintaining conformity and order in a society. Among Tribal Societies community organisation sometimes referred to as political organisation usually refers to the means of social control and conformity of a particular tribal group according to their informal, unwritten, customary laws or norms. The term ‘social control’ sometimes used very widely by different scholars, refer to all types of forces and constraints which induce conformity to norms and customs in human society to the mechanism of conflict management and the legal system of a society, including normal sanctions of rules of succession.

In order to learn the Political Organisation of Paniyas a study of their kinship, lineage and social customs are inevitable. The social customs are already dealt with in the first chapter. A brief narration of the Paniya kinship and lineage is given below.

**Kinship and Lineage**

Among the Paniyas a number of families constitute a lineage. Their patrilineages are locally known as ‘Makkathayam’. Every ‘Makkathayam’ has a name derived from the name of the ancestor from whom all the members trace their descent. These names are known as ‘Karana Peyar’ ‘Karana’ meaning reason and ‘peyar’ meaning name. The kinship organisation of the paniyas is based on patrilineage. Membership in a lineage is ascribed, and the females belong to their natal lineage even after they enter matrimony and take up residence with their husbands. Two or more lineages constitute a clan.

A lineage is a corporate group; it exists in perpetuity and is an exogamous unit. Members are recruited into a lineage only by birth. Members of a lineage share common rights and obligations towards other members of the lineage. Among the twenty-four lineages that can be identified, ‘kollerian’ lineage is represented by maximum number of individuals.

Marriage pattern among the Paniyan conforms to tribal endogamy. The general practice of choosing one’s spouse is the responsibility of the parents. They follow lineage exogamy. Usually the preference is given to cousin Father’s sister’s daughter for a Paniyan son.
Lineage among the Paniyas

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Name of Lineages to the head [1990]</th>
<th>No. of Household with reference</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Boetilan</td>
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<td>3.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
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<td>24.</td>
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‘Koottani’ - Paniya Political Organisation

Every Paniya settlements otherwise called as ‘Paniyan paadi’ has usually its own traditional Village Council referred to by them in their language as ‘Koottani’, with its own council members and system of meetings. It is a permanent body consisting of headman and group of elderly Paniyan called ‘Moopanmar’.

Membership of ‘Koottani’

Every ‘paadi’ has a headman called ‘Kuttan’. This ‘Kuttan’ initially was the part of the efficient elders of the village. The one who is capable of imparting justice and decide well for the benefit and well being of the community. Since they lived a life of slaves, under landlords, the owners of the land exploited the post of ‘Kuttan’ and the ‘Kuttan’ was appointed by ‘Nayar Janmi’ to look after his interests, and be responsible to him for the other inhabitants of the village. The tribes have three kinds of existence today as labourers, agriculturists and businessmen. They lived with nature. They were more aware of their clan community living. The investiture of the ‘Kuttan’ with powers of office is celebrated with a feast and dance, at which a pair of bangles of traditional value is presented to the ‘Kuttan’ as a badge of authority. This appointment is done at a ceremony in which a ritual is conducted in a temple and the ‘Aattali’ the religious priest gives sacred paddy grains to both the master and the prospective ‘Kuttan’. The pair of armlets given to the ‘Kuttan’ as the insignia of his ‘kuttam’ office is the external mark of his power. Next in rank to the ‘Kuttan’ is the ‘Mudali’ or head of the family who assists ‘Kuttan’ in decision-making and other functions. These two elders of the village are called as ‘Muppanmars’. This post of ‘Mooppanmars’ is non-hereditary. These ‘Moopanmars’ can be a single ‘Paniyan padi’ or can represent a cluster of Paniyan settlements.

The ‘Kuttan’ remains in power as long as the armlets remain with him. He was responsible for the activities of the Paniyas of his ‘paadi’, who were of his caste and was found loyally to look after the interests of the master.

There are cases where the village heads are referred as ‘Moopans’- who look after the affairs of a ‘paadi’ alone and few ‘moopanmars’ join together and elect a ‘Kuttan’ who acts as a mediator between the ‘Janmi’ and the landowner on the ‘moopans’ of each ‘paadi’. The work of a ‘Kuttan’ is not remunerative but he received respect from
his community. Just like him his wife also commands respect from her fellow ‘Panichis’ and is called as ‘Kuttathi’ or ‘Moopathi’.

The main duty of the ‘Kuttan’ is to attend to the customary regulations of the norms of the Paniyan society by giving related judgments and by punishing the culprits. He is in consultation with the ‘Muppanmars’ pronounce the judgment of the council. His presence is considered essential in all the rituals, especially in death ceremonies.

Other Functionaries

‘Koyma,’ literally means ‘ruler’, is the hereditary headman of the Paniyan, who represent a traditional group of Paniyan villages of Wayanad including Gudalur region. He is free to visit other settlements at the request of the respective ‘Kuttans’. ‘Koyma’ represents higher repository of power on the whole of the Paniyan of Kerala.

‘Chemmi’ is the one who assists ‘Koyma’. The ‘Chemmi’, in a sense, performs most of the duties of ‘Koyma’ at interior settlement level; he acts as a liaison officer of the ‘kottam’ between ‘Koyma’ and ‘Kuttan’ or between Kerala and TamilNadu. His presence and participation validate the Paniya Community. He also receives a fee during marriages and other rituals in either cash or kind. If it is cash, today it varies from Rs.20. p25 to Rs.52. p25.

‘Aattali’ or sometimes called as ‘Komaran’ is a priest of the Paniya Community, who acts as a religious human symbol and helps the ‘Kuttan’ in getting correct answers from the culprits of the case. He performs the investiture ceremony of a ‘Kuttan’ by presenting him with the armlets. He, at the insistence of the ‘Kuttan’ acts as a ritual dancer in the rituals conducted in honor of the gods and spirits. He is an expert religious singer, who must know various songs to invoke the gods and spirits. He is the only one who can fix the auspicious dates for different ceremonies and plays an important role as a religious adviser to the ‘Kuttan’.

Powers and Functions of ‘Koottani’

‘Kuttan’ or Village Council plays a vital role in the maintenance and regulation of customary social life of Paniyan community. It also helps in crystallising and formulating Paniya Community opinion and acts as an agency for maintaining order in the ‘paadi’.
Place of Meeting

At the meeting that usually takes place on the middle of the ‘paadi’ in a yard or in front of the ‘Irula deivam’ temple, before their community god, all the adult Paniyan males of the settlement participate. Women do not attend the deliberations unless women are involved in the disputes brought to the council. The headman asks the help of the specialists of the community in resolving the disputes. They even call specialists from neighboring ‘paadi’ near Sultan Battery and Wayanad where they call them as ‘Koyma’, ‘Chemmi’ and ‘Aatali’.

Crimes and Punishments

The cases that usually come under the purview of ‘Koottani’ or tribal Panchayat are of three kinds:

- Disputes regarding conducting festivals and rituals.
- Disputes involving married women, particularly adultery, divorce and remarriage.
- Disputes regarding forest, firewood sharing and other transactions.

The form of punishments implied by the judgment of the Paniyan tribal council varies from, physical torture to ex-communication. The severity of the punishment depends on the seriousness of the guilt, e.g. in Manalavayal two boys were given physical punishment for disrespecting the traditional norms particularly for not paying bride wealth before marriage. If the case is concerned with the rituals and ceremonies, a special kind of reward is to be given to the Paniya who performs their ritual action, especially of life cycle. Apart from the above-mentioned offences, common theft, cheating, disobeying Village Council is also considered as offences and punishments are dispensed to them.

The Paniyas during the British

The British rule did not affect the Paniyas much. They continued to be slaves and their economic status remained static. The Imperial sway did not reach the interior villages, where the Paniyas were settled. Neither did they do anything to improve the condition of life in these areas.
Paniya in the Post Independent Period

Paniyas a jungle tribe, according to Risley, and bonded labourers according to Shobana are no more so. They are at the threshold of liberation.

The emergence of Tribal Welfare Associations, Panchayats, and Rural Development Organisations has taken the place of ‘Kuttani’ ‘Kuttan’ and ‘Moopanmars’. There are conflicts between the ‘Kuttan’, ‘Moopanmars’ and ‘Paniyan’ youths. The influence of other tribes such as ‘Mullukurumba’ and ‘KattuNayakans’ on the Paniya also has reduced the power of Paniyan village head merely to the ritual celebrations. The fact that the Paniyas are the most neglected as well as the slow developing community among the hill tribes cannot be denied. Their educational status is very low. They have not felt the need of educating themselves until the last decade. As usual, women do not play any significant role in the decision-making in the family and in the Village Council. Of late, the Paniyas are in the Village Panchayats and gradually entering into village administration through the Panchayats.

Kurumbas

In the early Sanskrit texts the Kurumbas or Kurubas, are also known as Pallavas, Kusumas, Kumanas and the Kupathas. They are also described as the people of the Southern region. They were once a very powerful tribe in the South India and occupied the territory, which comprised the modern district of Madras, Chinglepet North & South of Arcot, Salem and South East portion of Mysore with Kanchi as its capital. But after their downfall in about 8 Century, A.D., they dispersed in various directions. Many of them fled to the hills of Malabar, Nilgiris, Coorg, Wynad and Mysore. Though there are few facts which make one feel that the Kurumbas are originally the Tribes of Karnataka, who in due course of time, for want of food and shelter, distributed themselves into different places of the Nilgiris, yet we do not have adequate means to support either the fact that Kurumbas as original Tribe of Karnataka or how long they have inhabited these mountains.

‘Curubas’ or ‘Kuruba’ of Karnataka

‘Curubar’ are an original caste of Karnataka and wherever they settled, retained their language. They are divided into two tribes

Again, they are divided into a number of families such as

1. Ane or Ani Curubas (Elephant)
2. Hal Curubas (Milk)
3. Colli Curubas (Fire)
4. Cad Curubas (Forest)
5. Cumbly Curubas (Blanket)

Proper duty of the Curumbas in Karnataka is that of shepherds and blanket weavers. They are also ‘Candachaca’ (Militia), cultivators and a few of them served as Amildars, Post messengers and Porters during the later years. The God of their caste is ‘Birappa’- one of the names of Lord Siva. They worship a rough round stone under the name: ‘Hiriadeva’, set up in a cave or in a circle of stones like the so called ‘Curuba Gudi’ which means ‘the temple of the ‘Kuruba’.

The ‘Curubas’ of Karnataka specially living between Sira and Seringapatam have a book called “Tiraga Cha-Pagodu” which gives an account of this tribe. The Kurubas of Karnataka show a great resemblance in their mannerism and mode of worship to the Kurumbas of the Nilgiris. A research in this aspect might prove that the origin of the two is the same.

Kurumbas of Coimbatore

“Kurumbas living in Coimbatore grow dry grains, chillies, Indian corn and yam in an extremely small quantity” says Dr. Shortt. As a rule, they do not cultivate and hence they had to depend on honey, jack, and wild fruits from the forest. Though hunting was not a regular occupation of the Kurumbas, they lived on small mammals and minor forest products. They are fond of chase and are expert in catching animals by laying nooses, nets or rude constructions of stone gins. Thus frequently they live on the flesh of the spotted deer, squirrels, wild cats, fowls, rats and snakes. They are known for their hunting. Their life-style, food habits and behaviour show that they prefer to live in the forests, unnoticed and away from the mainstream. The Kurumbas are scattered in different districts of Tamil Nadu.
Recently they are also found to engage themselves as labourers and are expert in felling jungles and forests, cutting wood, squaring timber etc. They even used household utensils made of bamboo. We also find some of the Kurumbas educated and holding posts in the Government offices.

Apart from these above-mentioned places, Kurumbas are also found in parts of Kerala, Wyanad. The name Kurumbanad, one of the Taluks of North Malabar, still attests to their ancient greatness.

**The Kurumbas of the Nilgiris**

Among the Kurumba settlements in Tamil Nadu, a sizeable number is seen on the Nilgiri Hills. Kurumbas were one of the first Nilgiris Communities and it is ironic that they were the last to be studied at all. Dr. Francis Buchanan (1870) and Thurston (1898) have made attempts to touch upon the various aspects of Kurumbas. Kurubas were Kannada speaking shepherds living in Mysore plains. The Tamil form of the word, Kurumba was applied to the inhabitants of the Nilgiris and borderland parts of Coimbatore District. 47.

The Kurumbas of the hills do not occupy the higher range of the hills. They are found in the middle belt of the hills, just like the Irulas. “Though Kurumbas were referred to in literature in the whole of Tamil Nadu and beyond, the real Kurumbas are studied in Nilgiri District of Tamil Nadu” 48. As far as the Kurumbas of the Nilgiris are concerned, A.A.D.Luiz, member of the Central Advisory Board, was the first scholar who tried to define the meaning of the word ‘Kurumba’. According to him, “The ‘kurumba’ name is said to have originated from their early occupation of tending the ‘kuru’ meaning sheep. It is also possible that their name originated from the Tamil word, ‘Kurumbu’ which means mischief, because in their savage state they were very arrogant” 49.

The social customs of the Kurumbas are quite simple and the performance of the rituals and religious activities are a new introduction into the communities due to the influence of Hinduism.

**Origin of the Social and Political Organisation of the Kurumbas**

The first mention of the Kurumbas living on the Nilgiris is seen in one of the early epics of Tamil Nadu ‘Silappadigaram’. This shows that the Kurumbas lived on
the hills along with the other primitive tribes of the Nilgiris, the Todas and the Kotas. Their existence dates back to first century A.D or even earlier than that. The Kurumbas belonging to different sects might have developed a self-governing system from the time of their settled life.

Kurumbas live on the slopes in villages called ’Mottas’. Each ‘motta’ comprises of four or five houses. They are unlike the usual tribes. They hardly have any tribal existence, for they are but isolated, scattered families. They do not have a ‘manigar’ or a village head with a title. Instead, generally one of them is recognised as the headman of the ‘mottas’ of one or few of the mottas of the neighbourhood. Kurumbas also live with another tribe called Irulas in one ‘motta’. The studies of Noble (1968), Morgan, a forest officer (1876) and Paul Hockings show that the Kurumbas lived in

1. Caves or rock shelters,
2. Dwelling near forest clearings and
3. Houses or huts in small hamlets. Recently we see them almost close to any other tribal villages or even Badaga hatti, e.g. Kinnakkorai.

The ‘mottas’ have houses scattered in the forest. This dispersed building pattern is usually so because of the slopes. Building materials are local timber and almost all the houses are thatched huts. Often these huts are plastered with mud. This keeps the hut warm during winter. Periodical re-thatching or rebuilding of the house is inevitable. The house does not have many rooms. The entrance room and the next room serve as the kitchen. They smear cow dung on the floor and keep their house and surroundings clean. The places where the Kurumbas live usually are called as ‘Kurumbadi’ and the name will have the suffix ‘Combai’. It is only now that the plantation or government agencies have built row houses for different tribal people. These houses are of bricks and mortar. Kurumbas have their house walls ornamented with drawings.

Since there are different categories of Kurumbas this scholar made a study of four main sects of Kurumbas who are found on the Nilgiris at various places. They are:

Alu Kurumbas, Mullu Kurumbas, Betta Kurumbas and Jenu Kurumbas.
Alukurumbas

The family being the smallest unit of social organisation has the man as its head. Their society is divided into two endogamous divisions by names ‘Nagara’, those who are dark and ‘Bellaga’, fairer sects.

The Kurumbas have a traditional political organisation, which is like any other Village Council. The important members of the council are ‘Mudali’, ‘Mannukkera’, ‘Kuruthalai’ and ‘Vandari’.

‘Mudali’ is the village head that is responsible for the law and order, customs and traditions in the village. He also controls the social behavior of his community people. His decision is considered as final and he holds the ultimate authority of the Community.

‘Mannukkera’ has to look after the rituals related to agriculture, life cycle and performing worship of the community gods whom they call ‘Kula deiva’. ‘Mannukkera’ is the priest of the ‘Alu Kurumba’ community. ‘Kuruthalai’ acts as an assistant to ‘mannukera’ in worship and celebration. He also takes the place of ‘Mannukkera’ in his absence. ‘Vandari’ is the messenger between ‘Mudali’ and the other Kurumbas and vice-versa. ‘Vandari’ also advises the parties during conflicts.

All these members along with the eldest male member of the family make the Village Council, which makes decisions, and passes judgments and punishments for the offences of the people.

Mullu Kurumbas

The Mullu Kurumbas of Nilgiris is divided into four exogamous matrilineal clans called ‘kulam’. They are:

1. Kathipa
2. Vadakka
3. Vengada and
4. Villippa.
Though the ancient version reveals that Mullu Kurumbas were identified with the ancient Pallavas. It is believed that after their defeat by the Cholas they receded to remote forests, there are however no such evidences to prove the fact. Pallavas were a royal sect. They had already established themselves traditionally and culturally. They followed traditional way of marriage ceremony, educational system and funeral rites. If the Kurumbas were of the same origin, they would have carried with them the culture and tradition, since every race takes along with them their ancestral tradition, especially with regard to marriage and funeral. The Pallavas were an artistic people. The Pallava epigraphy and sculptures in ‘Vaikuntha Perumal’ temple illustrates the standard of the Pallavas. We learn about the later Pallavas, from the ‘Velurpalayam’ plates of ‘Ko Vijaya Nandivarman’. Shivaskanda varman performed the ‘Aswamedha’- horse sacrifice in Western India in the second century A.D. The kurumbas do not have any ancestral remnance in the Western India. When the Pallavas posses such glorious past, the Kurumbas do not show any trace of such greatness. Hence, this theory of Kurumbas being the descendents of the Pallavas cannot be accepted.

The Mullu Kurumbas normally conform to the norms and traditions of their society, through the influences of three agencies, They are;

1. Authority of elders.
2. Public Opinion
3. Religious beliefs.

Each Mullu Kurumba settlement has Village Council, which decides and settles their problem. They have a headman in each area called as ‘Appadu Veedu’. Under him two ‘talaichal’ elders known as ‘Kottoor Veedu’ elder man and ‘Edoor Veedu’ elder man. The three ‘thalaichals’ of ‘Appadu’, ‘Kottoor’ and ‘Edoor’ also have the duties of hunting, giving sanction for the marriages living in the ‘Veedu’ under his control. They can also levy fines to the guilty.

The headman of the Mullu Kurumba Village Council is called as ‘Porunnavan’. This post is not hereditary. He is selected according to the age, his wisdom and ability to advice and impart justice. Each ‘Veedu’ has a ‘Porunnavan’ who is also a member of the council of elders. ‘Porunnavan’ is responsible only to deal with offences and
political administration. The duties of a ‘Porunnavan’ are to collect and preserve the offerings to the deity from the members of his ‘Veedu’ during celebrations and on any other occasion, settle the divorce cases of members living in his ‘Veedu’.

They also have another headman equally as powerful as ‘Porunnavan’ and is called as ‘Moopan’ or ‘Thalachi Moopan’. The post of ‘Moopan’ is hereditary. His younger brother can succeed him or if he is old, by his son. There are thirteen ‘moopans’ representing various regions in which the Mullu Kurumbas live. The duties of the ‘Moopan’ are to conduct ‘Vilinayattu’. ‘Vili’ is to call; ‘nayattu’ is hunting. He goes hunting by summoning the people. He invokes the deity during hunting expedition, gives sanction for marriages of the Mullu Kurumbas living in the ‘veedus’ under his control and is present for the marriages. He has to preserve ‘ennai’, the oil for the Mullu Kurumbas of his region, he has to report to the ‘Appadu Thalaichel’ all the cases of the violation and attend the meetings of elders.

The Mullu Kurumbas are very proud of being a member of their community. In order to proclaim his belongingness to his community, a Kurumba needs to collect ‘ennai’ and ‘mathi’ (oil, ash and water) from a ‘Nair’ barber and ‘Nair’ washer man respectively. Thus, the Kurumbas have a relationship with the other communities of their neighbouring villages. If ex-communicated from the community he will not be given this oil and ash. It is the work of the ‘mooppan’ to inform the barber and washer man not to issue ‘ennai’ and ‘mathi’ to a particular ‘Veedu’, which has committed an offence. This continues until the case is decided.

The barber and washer man are also authorised to attend the council meetings and to collect a share in the fine levied on the guilty person. Women are not considered in any decision-making.

The council of elders is called ‘Moopanmar Koottam’. It has an elaborate structure and much power to control the whole Kurumba Community. At the apex of their Council is a ‘Nair Janmi’. He seems to be only a nominal head, because no case is referred to him by the Mullu Kurumbas. His office is hereditary. Today he is little respected and obeyed.
The usual issues among the Mullu Kurumbas are regarding “Deive Perai” and ‘Uchchala’ which are the community festivals. Since Kurumbas perform priest’s duty for the Badagas, they also call a Badaga for their meetings.

**Betta Kurumbas**

The Betta Kurumbas are ‘forest dwellers’ and ‘friends of elephants’. They are also called as ‘Kattu Kurumbas’ and ‘Yaanai Kurumbas’. Apt to their names they prefer to live in the forests and not in the villages. One of the model villages of the Betta Kurumbas, is ‘Nedugal Kombai’. Here most of the development inputs both by government and ‘Sri Sathguru Ramalinga Swamy Adigalar Mission’, a voluntary organisation were fed into colony type of houses in three rows of buildings with tiled roof to accommodate 25 families, two rows of buildings with zinc sheet roof were given to the tribes. It was found that the Kurumbas do not like to live in the recently built houses, because of three reasons. One is a sentimental attachment and belief of either the direction or facing of the house, which is not according to their tradition. The second reason is that house built with masonry walls and roofs made of tin or zinc sheets, which are not sufficiently, warm. The third reason is that they have to live in a new surrounding and strangers around. Hence, they prefer to live in the forests.

They speak a mixture of Kannada and Tamil—where the majority of the words are in Kannada. They are not seen all over the Nilgiris. They have settled around the forests of Gudalur in

1. Methiri in Theppakkadu village,
2. Pen Methiri near elephant camp,
3. Light Methiri near check post of Mudamalai Sanctuary,
4. Near Thorappalli in Gudalur,
5. Near Estate Kalladi Moyar,
6. Singara Kuruba colony,
7. Thalur Colony,
8. Near Aiyankolli,
9. Kalluru or Kalmukku.
These Kurumba settlements are closer to Paniya and Kattunayakar tribes of Gudalur. They have their own distinct village headman and council. The headman of Betta Kurumba settlement is designated as ‘Mudali’; he is also referred to as ‘Moopan’, who is the sole authority over the social as well as political Organisation of this tribal community. Many elders of the village help him in his decision-making.

**Jenu Kurumbas or Thenu Kurumbas**

This sect of Kurumbas is called so because of their profession. The word ‘Jenu’ is honey in Kannada and ‘Thenu’ in Tamil means the same. This group of tribal population engage themselves in collecting honey from wild bees comb on cliffs and huge rocks. They climb down the cliff with the help of rattan ladder. They call themselves ‘Jenu Koyyo Shola Nayakans’ which means honey-harvesting lords of the forest - a mixture of Tamil and Kannada. Their settlements are:

1. Theppakkulam,
2. Mounalla,
3. Thorappalli in Gudalur,
4. Tottlang near Bokkapuram and
5. Pillipakkam.

They too like other Kurumbas speak Kannada and Tamil and live in bamboo huts.

Unlike the other Kurumbas who have clans, Jenu Kurumbas do not have exogamous clans. They often visit their ancient settlements in Mysore.

The tribal council of Jenu Kurumbas takes care of all the social and political organisation of the community. The headman of their council is called as ‘Kariyan’. Each village has a ‘Kariyan’ who settles local affairs. All the members of this community have a headman or tribal chief called as ‘Toddavar’ or ‘Thalai Paluthavar’. The chief council meets only when there is a serious issue to be dealt with or when an important decision needs to be taken which concerns all the Jenu Kurumbas.

The other sect of the Kurumbas who live at the foot of the Nilgiri Hills is the Urali Kurumbas. The Urali Kurumbas are distinguishable from the other Kurumbas nearby and other people living around them because they show greater evidence of acculturation.
particularly in their dress pattern 65. The village head of the Urali Kurumbas is called as ‘Mudali’ and the community headman is called as ‘Ralai Mudhan’. The village meetings and other proceedings take place among the Urali Kurumbas just as in the other Kurumba communities.

Whichever division the Kurumbas belonged to, each had a Village Council of its own. They called their leaders with a particular name. They conducted the whole proceedings in similar places and the procedure and the offences and punishments were of the same nature.

**Place of Meeting**

Each Kurumba settlement finds a place to conduct the proceedings of the council. Since most of the Kurumbas live in the forest and have isolated houses, they gather near the little temple or a tree where the goddess is seated, and in front of this temple, in the yard or under the tree, the meeting takes place. During earlier days, the meetings were held in front of their temple or the goddess with a belief that only truth will be spoken in front of the deity. Of late, these meetings are held in community hall, or on the verandah of any house, which is convenient. In the earlier days, the meetings were conducted quite often. Now the meetings take place at least once in a year during the month of February or March, mainly to decide about their festival.

**Mode of Conducting the Meeting**

The affected party or one of the parties involved in the issue calls for a meeting. Before calling the other members of the community, the party informs the ‘Moopan’, ‘Kariyan’, or ‘Mudali’ whichever the sub-division of the Kurumba Tribe to which they belong. Once they all gather under the usual tree or the temple yard, as the custom is, the party, which calls for the meeting, expresses its case. The other party is given a chance to defend. After listening to both the groups he also listens to the advise of the elders of the council and then the headman gives his judgment. Once the punishment is uttered, the oppressed party has no excuse. He has to abide by it. The word of the headman is the final.
**Crimes and Punishments**

The council of elders is called for a meeting by the party or by the headman. The usual offences are about the forest produce, witchcraft, divorce, remarriage, decisions regarding festivals, and in modern times they also discuss about their children, education other encroachments of the land and government interference. Even the cases of theft are discussed in the council. Illegal pregnancy, marrying from outside the community, marrying even in one's own clan, failure to collect 'ennai' and 'math' among the Mullu Kurumbas are discussed here.

The usual punishments are collections of fine from the offender, physical punishments, and collection of things from the offender. The extreme method of punishment is ex-communicating the person from the community. Rejecting oil and ash to the guilty person is the common punishments among the Mullu Kurumbas.

Though the Kurumbas are of different divisions, they all have similar social and political organisations. The crimes and punishments are similar. The common factors are they all have a head in the family, in their clan and ultimately in the whole community. They have organised themselves to manage their own affairs. The word of the headman is final among the Kurumbas.

**Commonalities of the Nilgiri Tribes**

The five tribal communities of the Nilgiris, the Todas, Kotas, Irulas, Paniyas and the Kurumbas have common features in their socio-political organisations; they are:

The Todas, Irulas, Kurumbas lived in small settlements known as ‘Munds’, ‘Ur’ and ‘mottas’ respectively. Each such settlement has 5 to 8 huts. Whereas the Paniyas lived in a slightly bigger settlement known as ‘Paadi’ having 8 to 12 houses and Kotas lived in ‘Koalas’ having 3 rows of houses called as ‘melkeri’, ‘nadukeri’ and ‘kilkeri’. Thus, their settlements also indicated their endogamous and exogamous social sects and their matrimonial relationships.

- They have a well-defined social organisation with the family as the basic unit of the system. The eldest male member is its head.
- All these tribal communities have great regard for the village headman.
- Almost all the internal as well as the inter-communal problems of the tribes are brought before the Village Council.

- Each headman of different tribal community is called by a special name, and the Council of Elders has a name in their own tribal language, like ‘Noim’, ‘Koot’, ‘Kattamana’, ‘Ur Kuttam’ and ‘Kottani’.

- The post of the village head is hereditary among the Todas and Kotas, elected among the Irulas and Kurumbas and nominated by ‘Janmis’ among the Paniyas.

- Each tribal community faces similar problems such as conflicts and disputes regarding celebration of festivals, marriage and divorce cases, theft and cheating.

- Punishments given by the Village Council are also similar like fine and excommunication. Only among Mullu Kurumbas denial of oil and ash is considered as a punishment. Each family is expected to abide by the rules and decisions made by the Village Council.

- Women have no role to play in any decision made in the family or in the Village Council. She has no right even to be present near the meeting place. Even if her own case has to be discussed in the council she has to depend on a male member of her family, either father, husband or son to represent her. This is the same in all the five tribal communities of the hills. They do not enjoy any social or political freedom as portrayed by a number of anthropologists.

- Each of the tribal group on the hills has social as well as political relationship with the other tribal as well as with non tribal communities. This is indicated/shown by the presence of a Badaga head in the decision-making of the other tribe, collecting of oil and water from a barber or a washer man by a Kurumba, exchange of milk products with others by Todas, making implements for cultivation for others by Kotas. Thus, the tribal community on the hills lived an inter-communal harmonious life.

At present due to Government interference and concessions given to the tribes, they are partially looking up to the external help, especially for their village or community in common. Major demands of the tribes in general and Kurumbas in particular, put forward during the data collected in July- August 1999 are as follows;
Good drinking water supply, good roads, repair of the existing houses, credit facilities from Nationalised Banks, jobs for those youths who have completed training, to get back the land from those who have encroached onto their land, modern health facilities and raise of daily wages on tea plantation 67.

**Various Influences on the Tribes of the Nilgiris**

The Badaga settlement has forced the tribal population to move away from their original settlements. The coming of the Europeans also pushed the tribes aside from the mainstream. They have moved away to secluded, remote places.

The increasing rate of deforestation is another threat to their peaceful living. Commercial interests have induced the businessmen to remove teak and other timber species. For example, in Silent Valley and other places, illegal commercial-exploitation of the giant bamboos and other wood pulp have reduced the forest cover and exposed the living of the tribes in general, Irulas and Kurumbas, the forest dwellers in particular to a dangerous living condition.

The introduction of cash crops has replaced their small cultivation. Hence, many of them are absorbed in the tea estates and factories. The use of medicinal herbs and forest produce as edibles are gradually disappearing. To make it worse, washing away of the topsoil towards Bhavani River and loss of leafage has left the soil hard for cultivation.

Prohibition of hunting wild animals has affected the Irulas and Kurumbas, who find their food quite often from the forest by killing the animals. Still worse is the blame transferred on to the tribes for the hunting done by the people of the other community.

In spite of Government giving Youth Scholarships to learn basket weaving, the tribal youth could not utilise this scholarships for want of legal rights to gather raw materials and worst yet no markets needing it 68.

A tribal study observed that new techno-environmental agriculture, dominant non-tribal demands for tribal status, commercial motives of high order hill tourism are provoking the Nilgiri native tribal people, to opt for unrest actions. The study accepts that intervention of governmental and non-governmental agencies must be the imme-
Summing up

The Irulas, Paniyas and Kurumbas have organised administrative system under The Village Council, ‘Ur Kuttam’, ‘Kattamana’ and ‘Kootani’. They conducted their affairs efficiently in the early days. The Irulas and Mullukurumbas had election system in choosing their village head. Where as the other tribes either had their village head as a hereditary post or nominated by other community. The tribal administration did not face much change during the British rule. However, during the Post Independent period, the control of the Village Council is considerably reducing and the power of the Village Panchayat is on the increase. Ten years ago, without visible drama and fanfare, India’s statute books witnessed a new addition that represents one of the most significant legislative changes in post-Independence India, which is the Provisions of the Panchayats Extension to the Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) 70. In 1996, in one of the public agitations, in Delhi, the assertion of the adivasis were powerfully summed up in one of their central motive slogans, “Our Rule in Our Villages” 71. The realisation of this slogan would provide the tribes of the Nilgiris a just Local Self-Government. This self-rule would provide more active tribal participation in their own Communities.
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