Chapter-3
Tribals in Kerala

3.1 General

Today, Kerala population is the melting pot of various races, religions and ethnic groups. The vast majority of Keralites carry three racial strains in their genetic make-up; Munda, Dravidian and Aryan. Of this, majority of today's Keralites have a Dravidian ancestry. Nevertheless, many of them pride themselves on their Aryan descent. Tribes of Kerala belong to the famous group of Dravidians; they have got similar body stature and traits. Majority tribes of Kerala have got dark complexion and are quite short in height. They are also well-built with flat nose. The mountainous regions of Kerala are inhabited by tribes namely Urali tribe, Paniyan tribe, Kapu tribe, Kanikkar tribe, Kadar tribe, etc. They are reckoned as the descendants of the Negrito race. Cultural exuberances of these tribes of Kerala are rightly being highlighted in a number of aspects. House building, norms and rituals bear resemblance to the tradition and ethnicity of the tribal culture. A majority of these tribes of Kerala build their settlements in the dense forest grounds and also on the top of the mountains. The houses of these tribes of Kerala are closely built so that these tribes of Kerala can depend on each other and thus maintain cordial relations. As a result of the rugged topography of the region, these tribes of Kerala remain undisturbed by any kind of invasion from the foreigners, especially the Aryans. This is one of the factors why these tribes of Kerala have maintained the originality intact. Influences of the modern day times hardly have brought about any changes in their life styles and in socio-economic scenario of their tribal society.

According to the observations of the anthropologists of the Indian subcontinent, the tribes of Kerala state have developed ardent faith on spiritualism and religion and they follows a great tradition of knowledge. The tribes of Kerala dwell in groups and depend largely on the vast nature for their various needs. Almost all the tribes of Kerala follow religion, which is centered round Animism. They appease devils for calamities and sickness. Apart from this, there is a plethora of local gods and goddesses, whom majority of these tribes of Kerala revere and show immense respect and veneration. Worship of Amman or Goddess Kali and Ayyan or Ayyappan was quite common. Moreover, there are
few tribes of Kerala amongst whom ancestral worship is prevalent. Fairs and festivals are a part of the tradition and culture of these Keralite tribes. Especially during the festive seasons, the whole population of the tribes of Kerala gets enthralled by the dance, music and get engross with the mood of jubilation and frenzy.

As per 1991 census report, the tribal population in Kerala is 320,967 which represented 1.1% of the total population. They belongs to 35 distinct tribal communities. Wayandu has the highest tribal concentration with 35.85% of the total tribal population of the state and 17.11% of the total population of the district. Iduki comes next with 15.66% and 4.66% respectively.

3.2 Primitive tribals

Tribal groups with pre-agricultural stage of development, diminishing or dwindling population and very low literacy rates are defined as Primitive Tribe Groups (PTGs). Cholanaikans, Kurumbas, Kattunaikans, Kadors and Koragas are the 5 primitive tribe groups in Kerala. They constitute nearly 5 % of the total tribals in the State. Kattunaikans are mainly seen in Wayanad district. Their other areas of habitation are Malappuram and Kozhikode districts. Cholanaikans are said to be a sub-community of the Kattunaikans and are seen only in Malappuram District. Nearly 59 % of the Kadar population is found in Trissur district and the balance in Palakkad district. Kurumbas are living in the Attappady Block of Palakkad district. The Koraga habitations are in the plain areas of Kasaragod district.

3.3 Classification

The tribals of Kerala can be broadly classified based on their inhabitance into seven major zones (Velappan, 1994). They are as follows.

1. **Kasargod**: This zone includes two taluks of Kasargod district, Kasargod and Hosdurg. The major tribal groups in this area are Koragars and Maradis.

2. **Wayanad**: This zone include North and South Wayanad, and the area include high altitude mountains. The major tribes inhabiting this region are Paniyars, Kurichiar, Mullukkurumar, Kattunayikkans or Thenkurumars, Wayanad Kadors, Adiyar, Kunduvadiyar, Kanalaadikal and Thachanadans.
3. **Attappadi**: This region includes Mannarkkad taluk of Palakkad district and has high altitude forests coming under the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. The chief tribal groups in this region are Irular, Mudugar and Kurumbar. The government implemented Attappadi Hill Area Development Scheme for the socio-economic upliftment of the tribals and also for rejuvenating the lost greenery in the area.

4. **Nilambur**: This region comes under Mancheri Taluk of Malappuram district. The renowned “Cave Men of Kerala” a less civilized tribe, ‘Cholanaykkan’ inhabit here. They are located in Forests ranges of Nilambur namely, Karulai and Chunkathara. They are living in caves and are away from the main stream. The other tribal groups in this region includes Aranadans, Aalaar, Paniyar, Kurumar and Kadar. They are mainly inhabiting the peripheral regions.

5. **Parambikulam**: This zone comes under the Chittur Taluk of Palakkad district. The tribal group living in this zone are Kadar (Muthuvan), who resemble the Negritto race.

6. **Idukki**: This region comes under 4 taluks of Idukki district namely Devikulam, Peerumedu, Udumbanchola, and Thodupuzha. The tribals inhabiting this region are Malayar, Uralis, Ulladar, Mannan, Muthuvan, Paliyar, Kurumbappulayar and Karavazhippulayar.

7. **Travancore**: This zone includes the rest, upto Thiruvananthapuram includes part of Idukki, Pathanamthitta, Kottayam, Kollam and Thiruvananthapuram districts. The prominent tribal groups in this region include Malavedan, Kanikkar, Ulladar and Malaarayan.

### 3.4 The major tribal people inhabiting the forests of Kerala

The major tribal people inhabiting the forests of Kerala state are as follows.

**Kanis**: They are inhabiting the forests of Thiruvananthapuram and kollam districts around the Agastyamala hills. They practice shifting cultivation and also collect hill produce. The “Moopan”, chief of the group mainly practices herbal medicine. The use of “Arogyapacha” *Trichopus zeylanicus*, as a rejuvenating health tonic, is a traditional knowledge of this tribe. Many of the Kani families living around the Neyyar sanctuary is engaged in cultivation of rubber. They are now in a changing stage and the new generation is not interested in the traditional methods. Acculturation is eroding the traditional life style of this tribe.
Kochuvelans: They are residing at Ranni, Konni, Pathanamthitta and Sabarimala reserve forests. They are also called Malakuravans. They are mainly hunters. They are living inside the forests with little development.

Malavedans: They are settled at the places bordering Kollam and Pathanamthitta districts namely Kadameenchira, Narayananuzhi, Kumarapuram, Katachira, Ottakkal, Thenmala and Achenkovil. They are primarily hunters but also cultivate rice and collect hill produce.

Malapandarams: A primitive hunting tribe lives along the deeper forests of Achenkovil, Sabarimala and Manimala. They used to wear ‘Maravuri’ the bark of trees, usually *Antiaris toxicaria* and gather hill produce while roaming around the forests.

Mannans: An agricultural tribe that inhabit the forests of Pathanamthitta, Kottayam and Ernakulam. They are generally found in elephant attacked areas and live in tree-top huts. Their settlements are scattered in Kanjirappally, Devikulam, Udumbanchola and Thodupuzha taluks.

Mala Ulladans: The name means peoples who live in interior forests (in Malayalam). They are nomads and live mainly by hunting and gathering hill produce. Women members spent their free time by making baskets and mats out of bamboo and men collect medicinal plants like roots of *Celastrus paniculatus*, *Rotula aquatica* etc.

Karavazhis: They are confined to Chinnar and Marayur in Anchanad Valley in Idukki district. This tribe is popularly known as Malapulayan (Hill pulayas), they are basically agriculturists.

Kurumbas: This tribe is seen in the Anchanad valley of Idukki and Attappadi of Palakkad districts. They were basically food gatherers who rely upon fruits, wild yams and fish. Most of them are now employed as forest labourers and changed their life style a lot.

Mala Arayans: As the name indicates, they are the kings of forests and are considered one of the earlier settlers. They inhabit the hilly tracts of Kanjirappally & Meenachil in Kottayam and Peermede in Idukki and Thodupuzha of Ernakulam district. They are mainly agriculturists, cultivating pepper on forest trees and also sustain on minor forest produce such as honey, wild fruits like gooseberry, mango etc.
Muthuvans: They are found only in Devikulam and Neriamangalam of Idukki district. They are more civilized and are engaged in different occupations like cattle rearing, agriculture, collection of hill produce etc.

Paliyar: This is another tribe confined to Kumily, Periyar and Vandanmedu of Idukki district. They were originally restricted to eastern slopes of Kerala, Cumbam in Tamil Nadu and are comparatively primitive. The women wear maravuri (bark of trees). They are mainly agriculturists, mainly depending on cultivation of cereals and pepper on forest trees and collection of forest produce. Now they are civilized and many of them are workers in the forest department.

Chola Naikens: The most secluded hill tribe of Kerala, Chola Naikens of Nilambur were unknown to outside world till recently as they live in caves in deep and inaccessible areas of forests. They live in colonies and their population is dwindling. They mainly depends on root tubers, yams, fruits, honey etc. They also collect minor forest produce.

Naikans: These tribal groups live in the fringes of Nilambur forests, and are more advanced groups. These people freely mix with outside world and often go inside forest for collecting minor forest produce.