

CHAPTER - IV

TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF IDUKKI DISTRICT

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This chapter gives a brief account of the study area and the selected tribal communities namely Hill Pulayas, Mannans and the Muthuvans. The early history of the district is obscure and there is no clear evidence about the Palaeolithic age. Some historians believe that Kuzhumur, the capital of Sangam age is the present Kumily in Peerumedu taluk of Idukki District during 800-1102 A.D. The Highranges consisting of the present Devicolam, Udumbanchola and Peerumedu taluks was part of the kingdom of Vempolinad. By about 1100 AD Vempolinad was split into two kingdoms viz. Vadakkumkur and Thekkumkur.

The Dutch East India Company was attracted by the varied spices of the Highranges. In the early period the Dutch East India Company had trade contracts with the Thekkumkur Rajas for spices like pepper, cinnamon and cardamom. Manavikrama Kulasekhara who reached Vadakkumkur as a refugee from the Pandyan kingdom purchased a tract of land next to the hills known as Poonjar from the Thekkumkur Raja. Later Manavikrama Kulasekhara obtained all the rights of a king.

During the 15th century an extensive area of Highranges, stretching from Peermede to Devicolam which forms a major portion of the present Idukki District was under the control of the Poonjar Raja. The Poonjar family became a part of Travancore when Thekkumkur and Vadakkumkur were annexed by Marthandavarma in 1749-50. After that this region was part of the Travancore State and its history was associated with the history of Travancore.

Area and Physiography

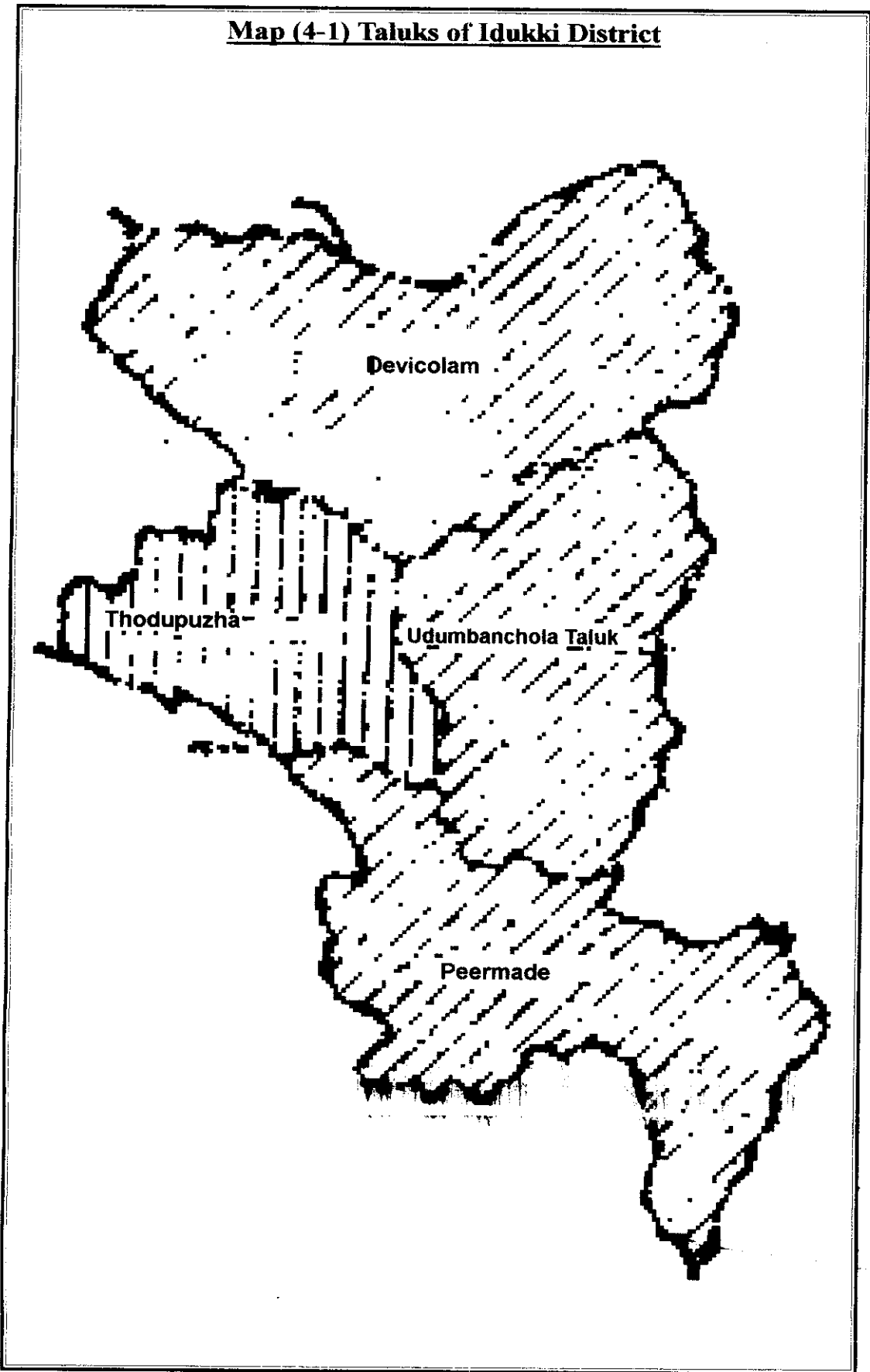
Idukki, one of the mountainous Districts of Kerala is bounded on the north by Thrissur and Coimbatore Districts, on the east by Madurai and Ramanathapuram Districts of Tamil Nadu state, on the south by Kollam District and on the West by Kottayam and Ernakulam Districts. It came into being on 26th January 1972 as per Government Notification No. 54131/C2/71/RD, 24-1-72. It is located between 9° 15' & 10° 21' North latitudes and 76° 37' & 77° 25' East longitudes. The present Idukki district consists of four taluks viz. Devicolam, Udumbanchola, Peerumedu and Thodupuzha taluks (Map – 4.1).

With a total geographical area of 5,019 square kilometres (13 percent of the total area of the state) the District of Idukki falls mainly on upland area. Of a total of forty two villages in the district, nine are in Devicolam, twelve in Udumbanchola, fifteen in Thodupuzha and six in Peermade taluk. Topographically, Idukki district is divided into two divisions. No part of the district lies in low land. Anamudi peak in this district has a height of 2659 meters above mean sea level and is the highest point in the Peninsular India. Periyar wild life sanctuary in this district is one of the famous wild life sanctuaries in India.

Climate

Owing to the peculiar topography of the District the climate of Idukki varies considerably with the rest of the State. The western part of the region experiences varying moderate temperature between 21° C to 27° C while the eastern part known as High Ranges experiences a pleasant cold climate throughout the year. As in the case

Map (4-1) Taluks of Idukki District



of other districts of Kerala this district also has the benefit of South West Monsoon (Edavapathy) during June to September and North East Monsoon (Thulavarsham) during October to November. Rainfall is larger during June and July. Since the north eastern portion of the district (Marayoor area) is on the eastern slope of the Western Ghat it has less rainfall.

Geology and Soil

History reveals that Idukki was known for its availability of iron ore, graphite, China Clay, bauxite, mica and precious stones. The Geological Survey of India has reported that there are graphite deposits in Thodupuzha taluk. Granite deposits are found throughout the district. The soils of this district are classified into laterite, forest and hilly soils. The laterite soil occurs in the Western sector of Thodupuzha, Peermede and Devicolam taluks. The forest and hilly soils occur in Udumbanchola taluk and eastern sector of Devicolam, Peermade and Thodupuzha taluks.

Rivers

Idukki is blessed with water resources constituting the river Periyar and her tributaries. Periyar, the largest river in the State, traverses through all the taluks of the district. It originates from the Sivagiri peak in the South Eastern part of the district at an elevation of 2,560 m above the mean sea level. Pambar one of the three east flowing rivers of the state has its origin near Benmore tea estates at an altitude of 6400 feet above msl.

Forest Cover

Most part of the district is covered with forests and they fall in five forest divisions viz, Chalakudy, Malayattur, Munnar, Kottayam and Game sanctuary. More than 45 percent of the district is under natural forest. The forests of Idukki can be classified into tropical, evergreen, semi evergreen and moist deciduous. The

important types of trees found in the forests are Rosewood (*Dalbergia latifolia*), Teak (*Tectona grandis*), Irul (*Xylia Xylocarpa*), Aini (*Artocarpushirsuta*), Ebony (*Diospyrus ebenum*), White Cader (*Dysoxylum Malabarium*), and Maruthu (*Terminalia panicuylate*).

Demographic features

The total population of Idukki District enumerated in the 1991 census is 1,078,066 which is 3.70 percent of the total population of the State. The sex ratio of the district is 975 females per 1000 males compared to 1,036 females per 1000 males for the State. The density of population in the district is 215 persons per square kilometres against 749 for the State. The literacy rate in the district is 86.94 percent compared to the State average of 89.81 percent.

The most characteristics demographic features of the district is its second highest proportion of tribal population in the state. The total scheduled Tribe population in the district according to the 1991 census was 50269 which formed 4.66 percent of the total population of the district and 15.66 percent of the total scheduled tribe population at the State level.

Tribes of Idukki

Idukki is the home land of numerous tribal communities of South India. The numerically dominant tribal communities in the district are Muthuvans, Hill Pulayas, Mannans, Uralys, Malai Arayans, Ulladans, Palliyans, Malavedans and Mala Pandarams.

Muthuvans

According to legend prevalent among these people, cited by Thurston (1909)¹, they originally belonged to Madurai in Tamilnadu. When Kannagi, a divine woman and the principal character of a Tamil epic Silappathikaram (some say it was the

Goddess Meenakshi) left Madurai after destroying it by her curse, a group of people also migrated with her to the hills, carrying her on their back (Muthuku). Thus they came to be known as Muthuvan or Muduvan, meaning those who carried something on their back.

Hill Pulayas

The Hill Pulayas also referred to as Malapulayas are a set of hill tribes living in the forest areas in Anjunad valley of Devicolam taluk. Various explanations are given to how the name Hill Pulaya have been derived. Mala means a mountain or a hill and pulayan is derived from Pula, meaning pollution. Iyer (1937)² has also stated pulaya to be a derivative of the term pula meaning pollution. The Hill Pulaya have their endogamous groups like Kurumba Pulaya, Karavazhi Pulaya and Pampa Pulaya. It is stated that Kurumba Pulayas are called by this name as their early occupation was sheep rearing and they were engaged in tending a particular variety of sheep known as 'Kurumba' sheep. Karavazhi originated from their agricultural occupation of 'Kara' (land). It is also possible that the name is derived from the combination of the words 'vazhi' (route) and 'Kara' (land) which shows that they came by land route.

Mannan

Mannan means king in the Tamil language. Thurston (1909)³ writes that Mannan are a hill tribe of Travancore and are said to be the descendents of the kings of Madurai whom they accompanied to Neriya Mangalam. Iyer (1912)⁴ stated, that the Mannan inhabiting the cardamom hills of Travancore were shifting cultivators. The terrain they inhabit is hilly and has forest cover. They speak a dialect of Tamil among them and with others they converse in Malayalam and use the Malayalam script.

Uraly

The uralies live in areas at an altitude of 3000 feet above sea level. These tribal are forest dwellers and live in the core of the jungles. Iyer (1937)⁵ has described them as nomadic agriculturists. Now they switched over to settled cultivation and agricultural wage labour. They have formed an association called Uraly Mahasabha, which works for their welfare and upliftment. They profess Hinduism and worship Sastha or Ayyappan and Bhagavati. There are eight exogamous clans (Kottam or Kulams) among the Uraly. A man marries his mother's brother's daughter or father's sister's daughter and also the younger sister of his deceased wife. In the past, marriage by exchange was customary and obligatory, but today, marriage by negotiation is popular. The symbol of marriage for Uraly women is a marriage pendant (thali). They bury the dead and perform ancestor worship.

Malai Arayan

The term Malai Arayan means the lords of the hills. Thurston (1909)⁶ describes the Malai Arayan as a class of hill tribes who were civilized and had fixed abodes on the slopes of high mountain ranges. They are mostly short-statured and they have a long and narrow head shape and show a short and broad nose. Earlier the Malai Arayans were dependent on shifting cultivation, hunting and food gathering. Now they have become settled agriculturists and agricultural labourers. Some are also involved in business, or have taken up salaried jobs in the govt. and private sectors. The Malai Arayan started embracing Christianity in 1851, in response to the evangelical activities of Rev. Henry Becker of the Church Mission Society.

Ulladan

The term Ulladan derived from the terms Ul, meaning within and Odunnu, meaning to run as they used to run away into the forest at the sight of strangers. The

traditional occupations of the Ulladan are foraging, trapping of birds and animals, collection of honey and medicinal plants, wood cutting, basket making and mat weaving. Now they have ceased to be foragers. Recently they have taken to animal husbandry, salaried jobs in govt. and private organisations and wage labour. Adult marriage is the norm and marriages are mostly settled through negotiation. A black bead necklace is the marriage symbol for the Ulladan women.

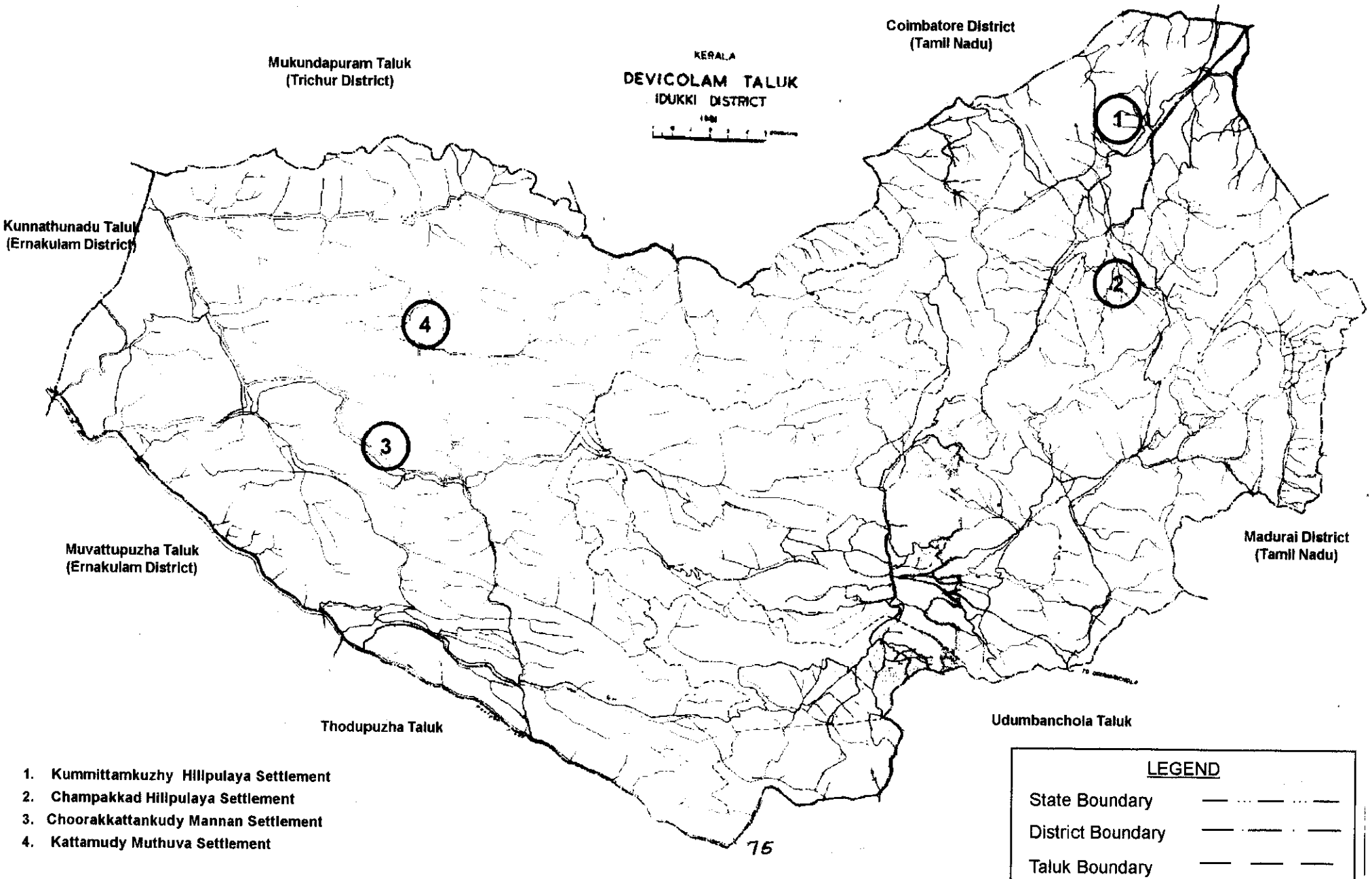
Settlements

This section deals exclusively with the settlements of the selected tribal communities (Map -4.2). Data relating to these settlements was gathered through intensive interactions with the settlement members. Details of the selected groups, Hill Pulayas, Mannans and Muthuvans are looked into.

Hill Pulayas

A typical Hill Pulaya settlement is called 'kudi.' The pattern of housing and settlement of Hill Pulayas does not follow a regular trend. The Kurumba Pulaya settlement at Kottappalam is clustered whereas the Karavazhi Pulaya settlement at Dhandukombu is partly clustered and partly linear. In some settlements, houses are found in a disorderly manner while in some others, individual houses are constructed in parallel rows facing each other forming a front yard in between. The houses are

Map (4-2) Selected Tribal Settlements



Mukundapuram Taluk
(Trichur District)

Coimbatore District
(Tamil Nadu)

Kunnathunadu Taluk
(Ernakulam District)

Muvattupuzha Taluk
(Ernakulam District)

Thodupuzha Taluk

Udumbanchola Taluk

Madurai District
(Tamil Nadu)

1. Kummittamkuzhy Hillpulaya Settlement
2. Champakkad Hillpulaya Settlement
3. Choorakkattankudy Mannan Settlement
4. Kattamudy Muthuva Settlement

smaller in size, having one or two rooms and Verandah which barely meets the space requirements of the family members.

The Hill Pulayas claim themselves to be Hindus and worship many of deities of Hindu pantheon. The deities worshipped by both Karavazhi Pulayas and Kurumba Pulaya are Kali, Mariyamma and Chaplamma. Besides the Hindu Gods and Goddesses usually worshiped, they also worship forest deities such as Karappaswamy and Kannimari who are supposed to protect them from all evils. In a temple called Arunakshi Amman koil situated near Marayoor, offerings are performed by Karavazhi Pulayas during festive occasions. The temple where the deity called Chaplamma is worshiped, is located near Chinnar river and this is the most important temple of Kurumba Pulayas.

Hill Pulayas consider marriage as an important event in their life span. Marriage by negotiation is the popular mode of acquiring bride among them, though now and then love marriages and elopement take place. The system of payment of bride price is in vogue among the tribe. Marriage negotiations starts from the boy's side both among Karavazhi Pulayas as well as Kurumba Pulayas.

Kummittamkuzhy and Champakad settlements

There are 635 Hill Pulayan families living in 22 settlements in Devicolam taluk. While Marayur village houses the Kummittamkuzhy settlement, Champakad settlement is situated in the Kanthaloor village.

Kumittamkuzhy settlement has 120 houses while Champakad has 57 houses. Altogether in the 177 Hill Pulayan families the male members out number females. (females 51.2 % and males 48.8%). The Hill Pulayas typical huts called Kudis, are constructed with unburnt bricks, with a maximum of two rooms and a kitchen. Bamboo and wood are also used for construction purposes. Ventilation is often very

poor and the floor is usually a mixture of soil, rice husk and cow dung. The houses are well maintained and walls are painted with red soil sometimes in a designed pattern. With the advent of various schemes and projects of the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribe Department and other social organisations, a few houses have been reconstructed with tiled roofs and access to electricity. Marayoor is the nearest commercial centre. The origin and history of Hill Pulayas is vague and ambiguous. There are no legends which explain their origin. They themselves claim that they had migrated years back from Madura to the Anjunad valleys and settled in the forests of Devicolam taluk

Mannan

Iyer (1912)⁷ identified two divisions among the Mannans, namely Arava and Paniya. each comprising several exogamous clans. Community endogamy and moiety exogamy are the rules of marriage. The symbol of married women is the marriage pendant (thali). Usually divorce is not permitted. The marriage of widows and widowers is allowed rarely.

The Mannan women participate in social, ritual and religious activities along with men. They also contribute to the family income. In this community childbirth takes place in a hut made for the purpose and nine day pollution period follows. The marriage rituals and the nuptial ceremony are performed at the bridegroom's residence. The marriage feast is also hosted by the bridegroom's family. Their traditional occupation are hunting and gathering, trapping of birds and animals and shifting cultivation. At present their occupations are agricultural labour, settled cultivation, animal husbandry and net weaving. The Mannans have their own traditional council of ministers. The Raja Mannan is their ruler, he has the right to nominate members to the traditional council of ministers.

Choorakkattan Settlement

Among the 23 settlements where the Mannans of Devicolam taluk live, Choorakkattankudy is one, which is easily accessible and comparatively better off. Situated within the Adimali Forest Division, the settlement is 12 kilometres from Adimaly enroute to Machiplavu. The people of the settlement are in constant contact with the non-tribals living nearby which has resulted in some of their old customs and traditions undergoing considerable change.

The settlement comprises of 212 families with a total population of 674 persons. While the males form 49.6 percent, the female constitute 50.4 percent of their total population. The houses are constructed more or less in an orderly line with only a few scattered here and there. The houses are thatched with grass. Bamboo poles support the roof and the walls are made of mud and stones. They get the necessary raw material from the forest. On an average, there are only two rooms per house. Ventilation is found to be poor in the absence of windows. Preliminary arrangements to provide electricity to the locality have been made, but nothing further has been done yet. The settlement's water requirements are met by a stream running through the settlement and a hand-pump provided by the panchayat. The nearest commercial centre where banking and hospital facilities are available is Adimaly, 12 Kilometres away. There is a Harijan co-operative society at Adimaly.

Muthuvan

The Muthuvan are divided into six kuttoms (clans) namely Mela, Kana, Kanayattu, Elli, Susana and Puthani. Among these kuttams, Melakutam is considered aristocratic which maintains marital relations only with the Kana (Iyer, 1937)⁸. Muthuvans have the institution of the Kani (headman) in all their settlements. He is an important personality in their society. Theft, Omission or Negligence are debated and

disposed off at a common meeting presided over by the Kani. They have Poojaries (priests) and Vakas (medicine men). They are entitled to remuneration when their services are availed.

Marriages are immediately after puberty and as such a bride can be as young as twelve years. Men are free to marry outside the clan, but the popular orthodox bride is the Murapennu (daughter of the maternal uncle or paternal aunt). Pre-nuptial morality is appreciable. The father searches for the bride and when the alliance is agreed on, the bridegroom goes to the jungle and the bride follows him accompanied friends and relations. Finger rings and bamboo combs symbolise married women.

Muthuvans are agriculturists. Shifting and terrace cultivation are widely practised by them. A notable feature of their agricultural practice is their expertise in locating springs and streams and bringing the water to their cultivable lands. Animal husbandry, wage labour in the Forest Department and collection of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFPs) are their subsidiary occupations. They depend on the weekly markets and Girijan co-operative societies for the sale of the produce and for buying their essential commodities. They worship of Malevolent deities like Karuppa Swami and Marriamma. They have a collection of superstitions. Folk-songs are sung by both men and women.

Kattamudy settlement

There are 107 families in Kattamudy settlement. To reach the settlement there is a 7 kilometre Jeepable track passing meanderingly through the Adimali forest. The dependence of these Muthuvans on the forests for their sustenance is significant. The settlement comprises of 20 families with a total of 71 persons. They live in small low huts thatched with grass, which is clustered on the forest land. The walls are made of mud or bamboo. The floor is levelled with soil and cow dung. Ventilation is

very poor in the absence of windows. Their water requirement is met by a hand-pump and a well provided by the panchayat. The hand pump has gone out of order and the well goes dry during summer. So they depend on a muddy water hold a little away from their settlement to meet their water needs. Living in the midst of the forest they are at a constant threat of wild animals. The nearest commercial centre is Machiplavu from where they purchase their day to day necessities. The long risky walk through the forest thus forces them to make the purchases once or twice a week only.

The High Ranges of Idukki has undergone serious deforestation during the past with adverse impacts on the socio-economic conditions of the tribal. The forest has been cleared, and the non-tribal from the plains below have migrated to these regions. Some of the settlements have lost their original sylvan isolation. The following chapter deals with deforestation in the State.

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