CHAPTER 3

MUTHUVANS:
THE SOCIO-CULTURAL STATUS
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INTRODUCTION

Muthuvans in general are honest and trustworthy people who never cheat anybody. They prefer to live inside thick forests with little contact with the outside world. The geographical barriers like forests, rivers and mountains keep them isolated from other cultures and thus they protect their social values and traditional cultures intact. Most of the Muthuvans view non-tribals very suspiciously and spend their time doing some work in the hamlet or searching materials in the forest.

3.1 REVIEW OF LITRATURE

Several investigators studied the origin of the Muthuvans. They are one of the best tribes found in Devikulam taluk in both physique and manners. Gupta and Biswas (1956) described Muthuvans as tall, strong and stout like Sikhs and are most energetic and active. Their dress is distinctly different from that of the other Travancore tribes. They are courteous, disciplined and well mannered like the Todas of Nilgiri hills. Many Anthropologists believe that Muthuvans are not the original inhabitants of Western Ghats and that they are migrated from the nearby district of Madura in Tamilnadu (Thuston, 1909; Luiz, 1962). Existing stories and Tamil traditions also support this view. It is believed that Muthuvans might have fled from Madura to the forests of Kerala in the fourteenth century when the Telugu Naickans conquered Bodinayakanur (Nair, 1994; Singh, 1994). Iyer (1941) puts Muthuvans among the Proto-Australoids and he considers the presence of blowgun among them as a contribution of Proto-Australoids. Since they carry the Idol of their goddess, Madura Meenakshi, their children and the household articles on their back, they are known as Muthuvans. The word Muthuku both in Malayalam and Tamil denotes ‘back’ (Boban, 1998). During their living in Western Ghats, they had
accepted the *Poonjar Thampuran* as their king. He had ordained a king for them, who was known as the *Mel-Vakka*. The *Poonjar Thampuran* also had given the *Mel-Vakka* a sword, a brass picture and bangle to wear on the forearm as his signs.

3.2 OBSERVATIONS

The observations recorded on the socio-cultural status of *Muthuvans* during the study are presented as follows.

3.2.1 MUTHUVANS: PAST AND PRESENT

For getting a better understanding about Muthuvans, information about the past were collected from the elders, Kani, Poojari, and Vaidyan of the hamlets during the field investigations. The investigator has established good rapport with the members of the community and data were collected through personal interviews. The details are as follows.

3.2.1.1 STRUCTURE OF THE HAMLET

Typical Muthuvan hamlets of the past were located on foothills surrounded by dense forest (Fig-1). The structure of *Muthuvan* hamlet is quite characteristic in many aspects. It comprises of 20-30 huts, 10-15 feet apart from each other. The huts are built on raised mud platforms. They have rectangular shape and are usually 12x16x8 ft. in size or bigger. Wooden poles are used as pillars and the walls are built with bamboo mat or bamboo and other straight poles reinforced with mud. Bamboo leaves (*Ochlandra travancorica* Gamb.) and Potha grass - *Cymbopogon flexuosus* (Stud.) Wats. are used for thatching. The huts usually have one entrance and no windows. The ceilings are made with bamboo poles. Usually the huts are single roomed, sometimes parted into a kitchen and the kitchen will have a fire place to cook. Above the fire place there will be a *Cheru* for drying and preserving meat and seeds of plants by heating and smoking. Separate *Satram*
(Dormitory) for gents and ladies and a Valampura (Menstrual hut) are characteristic. The same pattern of the construction of huts and dormitories is observed even today.

3.2.1.2 POWER STRUCTURE

The power structure of Muthuvans is unique. Boban (1998) studied the continuing traditions among the Muthuvans. According to him, Mutha-Vakka assists the formal king Mel-Vakka and there are officials like Munnuttavan, Manthri, Valiya Nedumpura, and Kudiyanavan to assist Mutha-Vakka. Within the hamlet Kani is the formal head (fig-2) and has the power to regulate the activities in the hamlet. Kani, mostly an agreeable person to the members of the hamlet is appointed with the consent of Mel-Vakka. Thalaiver assists Kani in his official duties. Valiya Elamthari supervises the youth affairs and Kunchielamthary or Chottuppakkaranmar assists him in his official duties. The part-time priest called Poojari, the shaman known as Vathey or Manthrakaran and the Herbalist known as vaidyan are also present in the hamlet (fig-3). The council of elders headed by Kani serve as the decision-making body as well as court of law of the hamlet. The same power structure is being followed even today.

3.2.1.3 CLOTHING AND DECORATION

3.2.1.3.1 MEN

In olden days men grew long hair and after puberty they used to wear a head dress called Urumal, which is a two-meter long and half meter wide white cloth. This, they believed characterised the Muthuvans. The common dress was a langotti and loin-cloth. A white dhoti is the usual loin-cloth that is worn with a number of folds around the waist. Men wore earrings of silver or gold. However, at present drastic changes have come in the way of dressing. (fig-4).
3.2.1.3.2 WOMEN

Women also grew long hair. They used to wear long clothes which resembled saris and this cloth, which is brought around the waist and tucked in there, is carried over the body and the two corners are knotted over the right shoulder. This kind of dressing covers the whole body and hence no blouse was used in olden days. The women used to wear ear rings, nose rings and bangles made of coloured beads, coins etc. They also had the habit of wearing a comb made of bamboo in their hair. The way of dressing has undergone a great change in the recent past (fig-6).

3.2.1.4 SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS AND TRADITIONAL GODS

In the past, the Muthuvans had been divided into six exogamous, matrilineal clans. Each clan had its own deity. The clans and the traditional deities are.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the clan</th>
<th>Name of the deity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Melekoottom</td>
<td>Kottamala Andavan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Kaniyattukoottom</td>
<td>Pathakulathukaran</td>
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<td>3. Ellikoottom</td>
<td>Thrikkal Devan</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Thushanakoottom</td>
<td>Alangandan</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Kanakoottom</td>
<td>Nayanmar Bagavathey</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Puthanikoottom</td>
<td>Ramer</td>
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</tbody>
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As the clans are exogamous, one can marry only a member of another clan. The members of each clan consider themselves as brothers and sisters and have a special attachment towards each other. They help each other in difficult situations and occasions like marriage and death. When a clan member dies, all the other members observe pollution for sixteen days. Muthuvans are matrilineal and the children belong to their mother's clan. A man's property goes to his nephew and the male children are named after their maternal grandfather and female children after their maternal grandmother or aunt.
They had no concrete idea of the traditional gods and therefore, no portrait or statues of them were seen (fig-7). In olden days, when there was no temple, the *Muhuvans* worshipped a five feet long cane stick (*Calamus rotang* L.) with its base known as *Sampraniparamb* (fig-8). They believed that their god was taking rest inside this cane stick. Poojari was the custodian of this stick and he kept it in his house. During festival occasions he took it out and poojas were carried out. They also worshipped sun, mountain, high peaks and stones. However, changes have taken place in the social organizations and the worshipping patterns of the *Muhuvans*.

3.2.1.5 DORMITORY

In the past, 'Sathrams' or dormitory formed an important constituent of the *Muthuvan* hamlet. Each hamlet usually maintains separate *Sathram* for unmarried boys and girls. In the dormitory for male an old man will act as the warden and sleep along with boys and young men (fig-5). The dormitory for female would function under the supervision of an elderly lady, usually a widow, where the female children and young unmarried women spend the night. These practices are continued even now.

3.2.1.6 OCCUPATION

In the early days the *Muthuvans* were shifting cultivators. Slash-and-burn method for ragi (*Eleucine coracana* Gaertn.) was widely adopted. They would clear the forest in January, allow it to dry for a week, burn it and with the onset of pre-monsoon showers, the seeds are sown. Slight hoeing follows sowing. Weeding was seldom done and manures were never used. During the ripening and harvest period, fields were taken care of, especially, during night. As they wandered in the forest, they were familiar with even the most difficult terrains and were experts in identifying useful plants and minor forest products. They spent most of their time
collecting honey, edible fruits, plant products, medicinal plants, wild tubers, mushrooms, bamboo and wood. Much time is spent for the construction and maintenance of huts. They were also experts in hunting and fishing. Least attention was given to agriculture in the past. Ladies do not usually go out for work but after finishing their household work, they engage themselves in making baskets and mats using bamboo. Some expert ladies can weave very thin bamboo mats, which could be rolled into the size of a small pipe. Now many changes have come in the agricultural pattern and in the occupational status of these people.

3.2.1.7 DIET

The staple food of the Muthuvans was ragi (*Eleucine coracana* Gaertn.). The dried grains after winnowing were ground in a millstone, dehusked, powdered and carefully mixed with hot water and Katty was prepared (*see 4.2.2.1.1*). This preparation was taken in the morning and evening along with side dishes made of vegetables, mushrooms, meat, crab or fish. Tubers formed another important part of their diet (*see 4.2.4.2*). There were only two meals a day, in the morning and evening. Dietary habits have undergone thorough changes in recent times.

3.2.1.8 STATUS OF WOMEN

*Muthuvathikal* were very shy to face outsiders. If we met them in the forest they would either turn their face away or hide behind trees. But inside the house they influence their husbands very well in policy decisions. Usually the husband would properly look after his wife and children and if he does not do so, others will not respect him. *Muthuvans* observe pollution for women during their menstrual period and they are not permitted to enter the kitchen. During this period they will stay in the menstrual hut (*Valampura*) and the husband will cook for the family. Women are not allowed to become the members of the council of elders. They used to get married at tender ages. Female and infant mortality are quite common among
the *Muthuvans*. Health of women is poor because of frequent pregnancy and confinement. No changes have been noticed in the status of women.

### 3.2.2 FESTIVALS OF MUTHUVANS

The *Muthuvans* of Devikulam taluk follow the Tamil calendar and use to celebrate only Tamil festivals. Their traditional festivals are Thai Pongal in *Makaram* (January), *Maryyaman in Medam* (April) *Aadi in Karkidakam* (July) and *Karthika in Vrischikam* (December). Nowadays they have started visiting holy temples at Sabarimala, Guruvayoor, Palani, Rameswaram and Tirupathi. The *Muthuvans* take these occasions as a chance to thank God for the favours received and to pray for a prosperous future. They also mingle freely among themselves and consider these occasions to get rid of the monotony of the daily routine.

#### 3.2.2.1 THAI PONGAL

Thai Pongal is the most important traditional festival of the *Muthuvans*. Starting from *Makaram* first, it lasts for eight days. Though this is the harvest festival in Tamilnadu, the *Muthuvans* had modified it in many ways to suit their living conditions inside deep forest. The colour and depth of the festival is found directly linked with the harvest they get during the season. The more they get the maximum they spend.

#### 3.2.2.1.1. PREPARATIONS

Preparations for this important festival will start at least one week before *Makaram* first. The area surrounding the hamlet will be cleaned of weeds and other debris. The houses are repaired and new thatching is given. Some times the huts are white washed and choreographed. The temple of the hamlet is repaired, thatched and beautifully fenced with bamboo (fig-9,10). A new overhead pandal is raised in front of the temple and the top is spread with small branches of trees and entrance
is decorated with palm leaves. All the materials for Pooja like coconut, camphor, betel leaf, areca nut, turmeric powder, agarbathi, njalipoovanpazham (a type of plantain), malar, kadalaparippe, rice, oil, jaggery, bhasam (ash), dried grapes, apple etc. will be collected in advance.

3.2.1.2 THE FESTIVAL PROCEEDINGS

The data about the pongal festival were collected from Companykudy near Mankulam by the investigator after attending the functions consecutively for three years. This hamlet is characterized by the presence of three temples, which are closely situated. Of the three, the most important and common is the Subramanian temple. In addition, there is a Ganapathy temple owned by Sri. Dharman, and a Parvthy temple, owned by Sri. Kamaraj. Sri. Angamuthu, the main priest of the hamlet leads the functions and carries out the poojas in the Subramanian temple. There are a few young people to assist him. On the pongal day all the people in the hamlet will gather in front of the common Subramanian temple by 3 O'clock in the afternoon. At first, five fireplaces are put up (fig-14). Earthen or aluminium pots with milk or kaady (water obtained by washing rice) is kept over the fire place and is allowed to boil. Now the elder male members of each hut along with the poojari will come forward, lay flat on the ground with face downwards (Nilamvanangal fig-11) for a while and in the presence of Manthrocharanam they will sprinkle some rice around each fire place and later put sufficient quantity into the boiling water and rice is cooked (fig-12). Later the vowed families of the hamlet will put a fireplace of their own (fig-19) in the premises of the temple and prepares the pongal rice. Meanwhile the poojari will utter manthrams inside the temple, thank God for favours received and pray to God to protect his community from diseases, wild animals etc. and beg for a good crop (fig-16).

By this time the rice kept in the first five fireplaces will be ready (fig-21). Out of the five, the poojari will take four of them inside the temple and
will submit to God in a *thoosan ela* (*Musa* sp. leaf, fig-23) which is having two piece of broken coconut, *agarbathi*, betle leaf, *aval*, *malar*, *njalipoovan pazham* and a piece of burning camphor (fig-15). The remaining one is set aside for *Kozhi beli* (cock/fowl sacrifice).

Meanwhile one woman from each house will bring turmeric water in a small vessel, place it in front of the Subramanian temple (fig-17) and with folded hands pray for a while, move out of the pandal and observe the proceedings from outside (fig-25). Then the *poojari* will come out of the temple, will show some gestures, move in a peculiar style with *manthrocharanams* to keep away the evil spirits and will take the pots filled with turmeric water one by one and raise it above his head and pour backwards (fig-18). When all the turmeric water filled pots are emptied, the *poojari* who is wearing only a white loincloth will be bathed in turmeric water. Now the *poojari* will lay flat on the ground with face downwards, just like taking pushup (*Nelamvanangal*) and offer prayers (fig-20). During this time, the priest will be possessed by deities and ancestral spirits. He will exhort the people to live in harmony and help each other in difficult situations. Now the *poojari* will go inside the temple and come out with the offered pongal rice and the people waiting outside (fig-24) will accept it after *nilamvanangal* and will distribute among the devotees (fig-22, 23).

### 3.2.2.1.3 OTHER TEMPLES

Other temples of this hamlet are *Parvathi* and *Ganapathy* temples. After the commencement of *puja* in main Subramanian temple, *poojas* will begin in the other temples. The *poojaries* will be the owners of these temples. *Pooja* is performed by the *poojari* or his close relatives and the participants are mostly their family members. Ladies pray in front of these temples (fig-26). When the *pongal* rice is prepared, (fig-13) it is first offered to God and then taken by the family members. The remainder is usually distributed to guests and participants.
3.2.2.1.4 KOZHI BELI (COCK/FOWL SACRIFICE)

*Kozi beli* forms an important item of the *Thai Pongal* festival of the *Muthuvans*. The people who had a vow to sacrifice a cock will bring them to the premises of the temple. The main *poojari* who had set aside one pot of *pongal* rice out of the five pots prepared in front of the common temple will be used for this purpose. With prayers and *mantras*, the *poojari* will take the first cock outside the fencing of the temple, after some gestures and utterances he will cut its throat with a sharp knife (fig-31, 32). The blood thus shed will be sprinkled on the rice and is submitted to God. Those who wish to offer the cock will come forward one by one and cut the throat of their cocks and with an identification mark will be thrown into the woods (fig-33). Later they will be picked up and used for preparing chicken dish known as *Kozhi sampar*.

3.2.2.1.5 TREATMENT FOR PROLONGED ILLNESS

During *pongal* festival, people suffering from prolonged illness will be brought to the *pandal* at the time of *poojas*, and are allowed to sit on the floor. The *Manthrakaran* by his divination identifies the evil spirits and will convey the causes and remedies. In Companykudy the investigator has seen a *Manthrakari*, an elderly woman, who could successfully eliminate the evil spirits engaged in the body of other women (fig-27). People from outside, especially non-tribals come on these occasions and the *poojari* prays for them and gives them *nivediams*.

3.2.2.1.6 KOMALIES (BUFFOONS)

*Komalies* are the male members of the *Muthuvan* community, who appear in fancy dress on the occasion of *Thai Pongal* (fig-28). They are the people who are responsible for making the festival very lively. Usually the people who had a vow at the end of the previous years celebrations will act as *Komalies* during the current festival. They can put on any dress (fig-29), even that of ladies and are free
to move inside any house and can eat any food without permission and can also tease everyone. But they are not allowed to change the dress, take bath, sleep in the night, to have non-vegetarian food or sex, but are supposed to sing and dance throughout the night, beat the drums and stay in the pandal made for night celebrations.

3.2.2.1.7 MUDIEDUPPU (HAIRCUTTING)

Maiden haircutting of children is carried out at the time of the pongal festival. The poojari will ask the consent of the God through his prayers and after that he will cut the hair of the kid (fig-34). The removed hair will be kept in a bronze plate containing turmeric powder and water. It is then carefully taken to the stream and allowed to float away.

3.2.2.1.8 NIGHT CELEBRATIONS

Usually, the poojas in the temple will be over by 5.30 p.m. All the people will return to their huts and will prepare supper. After supper at 7.30 p.m., they will gather in a pandal, which is sufficiently large to accommodate all the people in the hamlet. Fireplace will be arranged at four corners to escape from chilling cold and bamboo mats are spread on the floor. Gaslight will provide sufficient light, music from tape recorder and rhythmic beating of Kotty (big drum) and Urumsy (small drum) (Fig-181) will create a relaxed atmosphere. Now it is time to start the folk dance. The Komalies will dance according to the beating of the drums and sing their own songs. Anybody other than ladies, even the guests from outside, can participate in the dancing. Ladies occupy one side of the pandal and are silent spectators of the entire programme. When one group is exhausted the other group takes over its place. At intervals black tea or coffee will be provided. The programme extends to early morning hours. Finally all will be tired and sleep in the pandal near the fireplace.
3.2.2.1.9 GOD HAS COME TO THE HAMLET

*Muthuvans* practice a method to identify whether God has visited the hamlet during the festival. While preparations are going on for the celebrations, one elder member of the hamlet without the knowledge of the others digs a pit somewhere in the premises of the temple and buries one dehusked coconut and a coin. At the end of the festival, the Komalies have to locate and dig out the hidden coconut and coin. If they fail in locating it, then it is believed that they had violated the taboos and pledges taken. Then the *poojari* will make an attempt to locate it and if he too fails, it is believed that the God has not come to that particular hamlet during the festival period.

3.2.2.1.10 KOZHIYATTAM

*Kozhiyattam* is the last function in the *Thai pongal* festival. One among the Komalies will dress like a monkey, with his body smeared with charcoal, and a rope tied on his waist. Now all will circle around the Subramonian temple and move towards the huts. First they will go to the *poojari's* hut. The Komaly dressed as monkey will get inside the house and requests for a cock/fowl. The members of the house will sprinkle water on him and give him either a fowl or money. After visiting every house they will come back to the temple and after prayers will remove the Komaly dress. Now they will go to the river and take bath. After bath all the Komalies will gather in a house and they will prepare a feast with the fowl, share the money and take rest.

3.2.2.1.11 KATTALAN

*Kattalans* are Komalies who appear at the last day of the pongal festival to please the jungle Gods. Two or three young people dress fancifully, mostly with twigs and leaves of plants (fig-30). They pretend as if they are the representatives of the jungle Gods and make loud noise and cause fear among children. They remind
the people of the hamlet to live in harmony and to stick on to the laws and regulations of their communities and care to satisfy the jungle Gods. Those who violate the taboos will invite the wrath of jungle Gods.

3.2.2.1.12 KAPPIKETTU

On the pongal day, the Muthuvans tie together the leaves of Mango tree (Mangifera indica L.), stem of Changalanparanda (Cissus quadrangularis L.), stem, leaves and flowers of Cheruvula (Aerva lanata Jes.) and leaves of Vepu (Azadirachta indica A. Jessu). This collection is known as Kappikettu. They hang this in front of the main entrance of houses, temples and plantations to protect them from evil eyes.

3.2.2.2 AADI

Muthuvans celebrate Aadi in Karkidakam (July) to commemorate the death of the evil spirit Arackan. Ramer had killed Arackan and saved the people from his evil doings. So the Muthuvans believe that all should be happy on that day and for that they prepare good food with meat and fish, eat lavishly and take rest.

3.2.2.3 KARThIKA

Karthika is celebrated in Vruschikam (December). After taking eight days noyambu, they attend poojas in a Murukan temple and Karthika is celebrated.

3.2.2.4 MARIYYAMMAN

This is celebrated in Medam (April). Those who have made vows will take eight days noyambu and go to Veerapandy in Tamilnadu. They visit the Mariyyamman temple there and offer plantain, areca nut, agarbathey and camphor and bring the blessings and come back.
3.2.3 MARRIAGE

According to traditions there are six exogamous matrilineal clans among the Muthuvans. Those who belong to the same clan are not allowed to get married. But a system of marriages between cousins is followed. Sons and daughters of brothers and sisters can get married, if they belong to different clans. But sons and daughters of brothers and brothers and sisters and sisters cannot get married even if they belong to different clans. Usually Muthuvans get married at an age below twenty. Most of the marriages take place as per the decision of the parents and relatives of the bride and bridegroom. There is no dowry system among the Muthuvans and the marriage functions are simple. The bridegroom will purchase a Pudava (a long cloth resembling a sari) and a chain and hand over them to the bride in the presence of their parents. A vegetarian feast follows. With this they will start living together. For a short period, they will stay in the bridegrooms residence and as soon as possible they construct their own hut and shift into it.

3.2.4 DELIVERY

Delivery takes place in the same menstrual hut known as the Valampura. This will be under the supervision of the elder ladies of the hamlet. If any complication arises at the time of delivery the ladies will come to the Vaidyan and seek herbal remedies. After delivery, for a period of three weeks, women will bath in hot water and during this period they will get special food with meat and herbal medicine to recover their health. But no special food is given during pregnancy.

The father is not allowed to see his child for a period of one month. For a girl child, after ninety days the parents will tie a white thread around her waist and for a male child a black thread is tied after six months and maternal grand father will call their name for the first time. Usually the children are named after their maternal grand parent. The children will stay with the parents up to the age of ten years and then they will spend the nights in the dormitory.
3.2.5 FUNERAL

The funeral rituals of the Muthuvans is simple. The body is buried at the earliest. First they will wash the corpse in water and put on white dress. Then the corpse will be wrapped in a bamboo mat and buried. Usually a pit with size of 6.5 ft. length 2.5 ft. breadth and 4.00 ft. depth is digged for the purpose of burial. There is no common burial ground instead each one is buried in his own land. Women and children are not permitted to go to the burial site. After covering the corpse with soil, the Muthuvans wave the spiny twigs of Thudali (Zizyphus rugosa Lam.) and Kattukottapazham - Zizyphus oenoplea (L.) Mill. over the burial site and put these twigs on the tomb to protect the participants from being affected with the spirit of the dead one. This is knows as Mudipoottal. After the funeral all the people who have taken part in the funeral ceremony will go to the river, take bath and come back to the dead person’s house, light a lamp and pray. Next day morning, the relatives of the dead person arrange a vegetarian feast with the assistance of the members of his clan to all the residents of the hamlet. After thirty days another feast is arranged for the members of his clan. But no special pooja is observed in connection with these feasts.

3.2.6 ANNUAL POOJA

It is performed to satisfy the ancestral spirit. Some area inside the forest is cleared of grasses and the lamp is lighted. Fireplace is put and the rice is cooked. The cooked rice is poured on Peethal leaf (Schumannianthus virgatus Rolfe.). Then a cock is brought, its throat is cut and the blood is poured on the rice (fig-38,39) with Manthras. This follows a feast with rice, meat and toddy. The elder male members of the hamlet will lead the function and ladies and children are not allowed to participate (fig-40). This ceremony is more prominent among the Keetheri group and carried out during Karkidakom (July).
3.2.7 HYGIENIC HABITS

Extremely pathetic sanitary conditions prevail in the Muthuvan hamlets of Devikulam taluk. Latrines and toilets are absent in almost all the hamlets. The floors of the houses are mud smeared with cow dung or charcoal. Absence of window make the house a smoke chamber while cooking. Lot of materials dumped inside the house attract insects and rodents. It is observed that the wastes from the kitchen are carelessly thrown outside which attracts disease-spreading flies and favour microbial growth and produce foul odour. Muthuvans never keep the cooked food for the next day. They finish the food on the same day and discard the remaining. They clean the utensils with ash or green leaves. They spit here and there outside the huts and even on the ashes of the fireplace inside the hut. Children with running noses is a common sight in hamlets.

Muthuvans prefer open-air defecation. Both men and women defecate in early morning hours, mostly by sitting on stones and directly into the streams or in the peripheral forest area but never in their crop field. They treat crop field as divine place and they believe that polluting such places may invite the wrath of God. Children and old people are found defecating near their hamlets. After defecation they will wash their parts in the stream, but some use green leaves to clean their parts. Children urinate in the premises of the dormitory during night, as they are afraid to go out. Hence there is always foul smell around the dormitory.

Muthuvans clean their mouth early in the morning hours. They use charcoal, Mattikallu (a type of stone) or mango leaf for cleaning the teeth. There is no practice of tongue cleaning. Later they will wash the mouth with the water from the stream. Nowadays tooth powder is widely used, but tooth brushes are rare.
3.2.8 FOOD, DRINKS AND DRUGS

Now the staple food of the Muthuvans is rice (Oryza sativa L.). They also use ragi (Elucine coracana Gaertn.) whenever it is available. They will have their first meal by 7.30 a.m. before they go to work. The second meal will be between 6.30 and 7.00 p.m. They will not take any solid food in between, but enjoy black coffee and tea according to the season and availability. In the rainy season when the weather is cool and humid they take a lot of hot tea. During their journeys in the forest, they take tender shoot tips, fruits, fleshy leaves, plant sap and honey to provide energy and vitality. They take meat mostly from hunted animals and fish caught from streams and rivers. After delivery the Muthuvathikal will get special food for three weeks with medicinal herbs, honey, vegetables, and flesh of wild game. In the forest, Muthuvans will extract toddy mostly from Ayyapana (Arenga wightii Griff.) (See 4.3.1. and fig-81,82) and some times from Kalipana (Caryota urens L.). They have the know-how to extract starch from these palms (See 4.2.5.1.) and underground rhizomes of some Curcuma sp. and consume it as pudding. They also spend a lot of money for the locally made Vattucharayam (Arrack) but are not experts in distilling the country liquor. Muthuvans also take the other liquors like brandy, rum and whisky. Muthuvans smoke country made beedi, cigarette, and some elders use ganja (Cannabis sativa L.) and they use to grow some plants in their vicinity. Tobacco plants, which are used for pan chewing, are found in some hamlets and they have developed their own techniques for processing tobacco. (See 6.11)

3.2.9 DOMESTICATION OF ANIMALS

Muthuvans are least interested in domestication of animals. Dogs and cats are the only pet animals found in their houses. Dogs are usually playmates of Muthuvan children and can be seen freely moving inside the house. Dogs are found accompanying their master when they go for hunting. Muthuvans grow fowls for egg and meat. Recently they have started rearing cows and goats, mostly obtained under various government schemes.
3.2.10 ECONOMIC STATUS

*Muthuvans,* the well-mannered tribes of Travancore, were once very self-sufficient and were living in prosperity. They possessed large area of cultivable land, lot of forest products, good yield from *Keapa (Elucine coracana* Gaertn.) and upland rice (*Oryza sativa* L.). They were represented by a small population, aware of efficient herbal remedies, made use of the practice of shifting cultivation and limited expenditure. Now their population has increased, Government is not allowing shifting cultivation, forest resources have become scarce, dependence on ethno medicine has decreased and the *Muthuvans* have to depend on the grocery shop just like the non-tribals. All these circumstances increase their expenditure and at the same time exhaust their internal resources. Now most of them have to depend on spices like Cardamom, Pepper, Ginger, Garlic, Turmeric and other vegetables that too poorly maintained and low yielding as sources of their income. All these are seasonal crops and during the lean period of May to August, the *Muthuvans* have to get money from money lenders at high interest rates and have to borrow from grocery shop. Rainy season is real hell for the *Muthuvan* tribes. Leeches will multiply in the forest, small streams will overflow, mist and rain will cover the forest and the *Muthuvan* will be forced to remain in his hut, mostly starving. These innocent people are exploited to the maximum during this period. Even in this adverse climatic condition, the local traders and money lenders visit the settlement, give money and collect the resources of the *Muthuvans* at a very cheap rate. These unscrupulous people lease the cultivated land at the lowest price and make a huge profit.

It is also observed that various development schemes of the state government implemented do not reach the actual beneficiaries. The investigator has observed several hundred metres of galvanised iron pipe laid years back remaining rusted without water. Tanks and ponds constructed remain useless without water. Efforts put in by the government to make the people aware of the need for education, hygienic practices, family planning, saving habits etc. have not yielded a positive result.
3.3 DISCUSSIONS

*Muthuvans* are one of the prominent tribes found in Devikulam taluk. They are well built and well mannered. Most of the anthropologists believe that the *Muthuvans* are not the original inhabitants of Western Ghats and probably migrated from Madurai district of Tamil Nadu (Thurston, 1909; Luiz, 1962). The investigator also agrees with this. Most of them follow the Tamil calendar and all their festivals have link with Tamil Nadu and this is a possible indication of their Tamil heritage. Apart from the six social organizations among the *Muthuvan* (Boban, 1998), the present investigation has brought to light another social grouping exist among them, mostly based on the area where they dwell in, the language they use, and the crops cultivated (*See map 4*). They are *Keetheri, Mekanattu kaira* and *Vadakanattu kaira*.

a) **Keetheri**

Those who are living below Kallar River, cultivating all crops and speaking Malayalam fluently along with Muthuva language and Tamil. (Areas mostly belonging to Adimaly panchayat).

b) **Mekanattu Kaira**

Those who are living above Kallar River, cultivating mostly cardamom, speaking Malayalam in Tamil accent, Tamil and muthuva language. (Areas mostly in Pullivasal, Mankulam and Munnar Panchayat).

c) **Vadakanattu Kaira**

Those who are living in the rain shadow regions, cultivating vegetables sugar cane and rice, speaking mostly Tamil, muthuva language and little Malayalam. (Areas in Marayoor, Kanthallore, and Vattavada panchayat).
MAP SHOWING
THE SOCIAL GROUPINGS
OF MUTHUVANS

- Muthuvan Settlements

MAP - 4
According to Shri. Savanmuthu, an elder member of Companykudy, who belongs to *Mekanattu kaira*, in olden days they considered *Keetheri* as a separate group and even marriages with them were not allowed. But members of *Mekanattu kaira* and *Vadakanattu kaira* were permitted to mingle freely and get married. The investigator has observed that, while the latter two groups exhibit more cohesion among themselves, the former is more individualistic and they interact freely with the local public. They are not enthusiastic about Tamil festivals, respond to various developmental activities of the government, and easily accept modern medicine and mostly live in the fringes of the forest. The *Keetheri* group is more sociable than the other two. From the anthropological point of view, the use of three languages among these people is an advanced character. The mother tongue of the *Muthuvans* is ‘*Muthuva,*’ a scriptless language.

Even today a typical *Muthuvan* hamlet is located deep inside the forest; consists of 20–30 huts, *Sathram, Valampura* and one or more temples. Earlier there was no temple and they worshipped the *Sampraniparambu*, the cane stick and now it is kept inside the temple. Hindu Gods have much influence on the *Muthuvan* community and photographs of their portraits can be seen in their houses and temples (fig-35). *Sabarimala Ayyappan* is one of their favourite Gods and they use to have their pilgrimage to Sabarimala (fig-36). It is worth mentioning that those who had a vow to visit Sabarimala will stay together in a common hut during their *noyambu* period with vegetarian food and keep away from females (fig-37). Recently in various hamlets, new houses with tiled roofs, strong walls and cement floorings are constructed with the assistance of government. But the investigator observed that majority of the houses are made up of bamboo. Single entrance and absence of windows continue to be particular features of the *Muthuvan* huts. This may help in protecting the people from cool weather. Smoke prolongs the durability of bamboo, protects the seeds stored and at the same time harms them by the intake of large quantity of carbon dioxide released from the fireplace. The investigator has
found that even in the government built houses with windows, *Muthuvars* never open it to allow free air circulation. This clearly shows their hesitation to accept changes and most of them are of the opinion that they prefer to stay in the conventional hut, as it is more comfortable. It is a matter of fact that the government agencies have failed to develop a housing technology suitable for the climatic conditions of the area, customs and traditions of the *Muthuvars*. The investigator has stayed in the mud walled bamboo roofed huts in Plamala, Companykudy, Edamalakudy and felt that these huts are cool and comfortable for stay.

Regarding the power structure, even though the *Muthuvars* accept *Mel-Vakka* as their king, no such king exists now. *Kani* is the only functional head of the hamlet. As a widely accepted man he has the authority to regulate the activities of the hamlet. But nowadays the control of the *Kani* over the members of the hamlet is much reduced and some do not obey him. The Investigator’s long experience in this area shows that a number of *Kanies* take decisions in biased ways influenced by liquor and cash. Gradually, he loses his credibility and the members of the hamlet disregards him. Now there is no role for *Valiyaelamthari* and *Kunchielamthari*. This is an indication of decline in the power structure. It is worth highlighting the role of *Poojari* during the festival period and he is found regulating all the activities. The services of the *Manthrakaran* and *Vaidyan* are available to any member at any time of the day without any fee. This is a unique feature found only among the *Muthuvars* and it is a sign of social commitment. In almost all hamlets the council of elders function successfully and is found to settle many of the disputes and also takes important decisions affecting all the residents. The existence of a strong leadership and council of elders to settle the quarrels and disputes is a unique character of the *Muthuvars*. These well-knitted system of functioning helps the *Muthuvars* in preserving their customs and traditions by denying opportunity for external interference.
Modern Muthuvan community has undergone a thorough change in their dressing and decoration pattern. The Urumal and earrings are limited to Kani and a few elder members of the community. Middle-aged men prefer to have white loincloth and shirts just like the non-tribals of that area. They are also found very much attracted to modern culture and put on briefs, vests, shirts, pants and costly shoes. They use watch and some of them use cooling glass and leather purse. The young people avoid earrings. They are very fond of movies and spend a lot of time and money on it. The women wear sari and blouse, young ladies wear mostly churidar and girls muddy and frock. They use cosmetics like hair oil, talcum powder, kanmashi and pottu. They also wear bangles, earrings, ribbons, slides, hairpins etc. available in the market. Nowadays they do not wear comb on the hair. Ladies use to carry their children on their back in cloth pouches during their journeys from one hamlet to other (fig-6). The changes in the dressing and decoration patterns can be considered as a positive response towards the acceptance of modern culture.

Changes have taken place in the social organizations and belief in the traditional Gods of the Muthuvans. Earlier there were six exogamous matrilineal clans among the Muthuvans and now for all the practical purposes there are only three clans viz. Ellikoottom, Thusanakoottom and Kaniyattukoottom. But the Keetheri group living in the lower elevations are not strictly following these divisions. Mekanattu kaira and Vadakanattu kaira strictly follow these social organizations for marriage, death and other related functions. The presence of clans is considered as a unique feature of the Muthuvans. The clans help them a lot in surviving difficult situations, as there are other members to help and to take care of. These well thought divisions might have played a vital role in avoiding marriages between close relatives and subsequently inbreeding depression.

Muthuvans' practice of shifting cultivation is completely stopped and hence their staple food has changed from ragi to rice. Now they have become settled agriculturists. Those who stay in the evergreen forest area cultivate cardamom, pepper and tapioca. It is observed that the Muthuvans have started growing attention
to their cultivated crop by fencing, manuring and pesticide/fungicide application, night watching etc. But if a critical situation like spontaneous incidence of diseases and natural calamities occur they fail to manage the situation. This is due to the financial backwardness and lack of training. Tapioca has taken the place of wild tubers. Palm starch is rarely extracted as it involves a lot of manpower. Muthuvans practice of two meals a day help them to keep a good physique. This clearly shows that they are aware of healthy food habits.

Dormitory was reported among the Hill- Pulayas of Devikulam taluk by Nair and Jayakumar (1998). But the dormitory system of the Muthuvan remains unique in its function and discipline. Dormitories known as Sathrams or Chavadies serve the purpose of a guest room and a club. As all the children had to spend eight to ten years in the sathram, they will develop good attachment and social cohesion among themselves. Luiz (1962) observes that Muthuvans have chavadies for young men, which combine the feature of dormitory, club and guest room, so that they may not have any contact with females and no knowledge of the sexual life within the home. The presence of an elderly man and woman in the male and female sathram respectively add to the safety consciousness of the children and prevents the possible incidence of homosexual relations.

The Muthuva ladies popularly known as Muthuvathikal enjoy little freedom to move freely or to talk with others. Now with the establishment of small primary school within the hamlets, the Muthuvans send their children to school up to the primary level. To attract the children to the school, government provides one time food. According to the teachers (ladies, mostly non tribals) “once inside the class room the Muthuva children respect the teachers, carefully attend the class and are intelligent too. But bringing them to the class room is a big task”. The influence of the wandering life of the parents might be a reason for this. Muthuva children are very sincere and the investigator has found these children accompanying their teachers during weekends up to the main road walking several kilometers through the forest.
The absence of dowry system and simple arranged marriages are noteworthy features of this tribe. Recently the investigator came to know about love marriages among the Muthuvan youth. If the parents object to their love affairs the boy and girl run away to some distant places, mostly to other hamlets where their relatives stay, live together for some time and come back to their hamlet. It is found that later the parents accept their relation.

As the confinement takes place mostly in the Valampura, without any modern facilities the infant mortality is much higher among the Muthuvans. If any complication arises at the time of delivery, they depend only on herbal medicine.

For funeral functions, Muthuvans use eco-friendly materials like white cotton cloth and bamboo mat. The vegetarian feast in the next day is a point to be noted. The preparation of the feast reduces the sorrow of the relatives, as they have to work hard for the feast. It is observed that by the feast on the thirteenth day all of them come back to normal mood.

Awareness about personal hygiene is very poor among the Muthuvans. They do not use toilets and often spits here and there. Children with running nose are a common sight. Houses constructed without windows, careless dispersal of kitchen wastes etc. help the fast spreading of communicable diseases. Diarrhoea claims several lives in the interior areas because they don't know the oral rehydration practices. Even though healthy people say that they take bath every day, the investigator could not observe such regular practice among these people. Faraway streams, lack of facility to heat water, cool climate and scarcity of water during summer could be considered as reasons for this. It is a known fact that when people cannot afford to spend adequately even on food and clothing, they do not bother on personal hygiene and environmental sanitation.

Alcohol addicts are rare among the Muthuvan community. A type of prohibition exists inside the hamlet. The investigator could not observe any type of distilling practices among them. Attraction to alcoholic drinks is very strong among these innocent people. They spend a lot of money for it. The investigator has
observed that most of them take alcoholic drinks by adding a little water and sometimes without water. When they drink they take large quantities in short time and lose control. It is also observed that most of them take liquor when they go outside for selling their produce, getting subsidies and other assistance and mostly under the influence of local non tribals.

*Muthuvans* long stay in the forest and the threat from wild animals prohibited them from domesticating animals and birds. Their habit of not using milk and the availability of hunted animals are the other factors discouraging them from domesticating animals. Now there is a change in the trend and they have started domesticating animals and birds through government schemes.

The festivals are considered as occasions to strengthen social cohesion among the people of respective communities. Feasts and festivals speak more of the culture of a people than the realities of their economic condition. The one week long pongal festival is a participatory one. All the people in the hamlet get involved in one function or the other related to the festival. The adornment and renovation of the temple, fencing and *pandal* construction are joint activities of the elders. The *poojari* has a main role in controlling the activities and he is the main focus during the festival. The young people who are assisting him will get trained themselves for the future. His role is that of a mediator between God and his people. The festival gives ample opportunity for the members of the hamlet to fulfill the vows they had made while passing through difficult situations. The sharing of *pongal* rice, *Kozhibeli*, *Kozhiyattam*, *Komalies* and treatment for prolonged illness ensure the participation of all the categories of people from the hamlet and give opportunity to build warm relations. The belief about the involvement of the supernatural power during the festival will boost the self-confidence of the people and help them to face calamities and diseases. Ancestral spirits visiting the hamlet during the occasion are believed to safeguard the people from all misfortunes and ensure prosperity. The *Komalies* who add colour to the festival by way of their dressing and behaviour promote the interrelations within the hamlet. Teasing all, singing and dancing and beating the
drums throughout the night they create a relaxed atmosphere and satisfy the super
naturals and ancestral sprits. The method employed to test whether God has come
to the hamlet is an indirect way of insisting the people to stick on to their customs
and beliefs. Kozhiyattam, the concluding item of the Pongal festival can be
considered as a symbol of gratitude and love towards the Komalies, for the efforts
they have taken to make the festival a live one. The relation of this harvest festival
with the similar festivals of other communities needs further investigation.

The present-day Muthuvan community of Devikulam taluk is passing
through a transitional period. On one side, the attraction towards material pleasures
of modern living, and on the other side, the prick of conscience for violating their
traditional customs and beliefs put them in a dilemma. While they are in the small
towns they try to behave like the non-tribals by using costly dress, cigarettes, and
even liquor. In the hamlets they survive with the available resources. Even though
the government is implementing a lot of programmes for the socio-cultural and
economic boosting of the Muthuvan community, the benefits do not reach the actual
beneficiaries. Lack of proper education and awareness about their rights, the dirty
link between officials and politicians are the reasons observed. Proper guidance
has to be given to the Muthuvan people before they start imbibing the bad aspects
of modern living. Providing inputs for agriculture, marketing their produce and
promoting the handicraft skill of the ladies could improve their economic status.
Stringent measures at government level are needed to prevent the possession of the
tribal property by the non-tribals. Muthuvans' traditions, customs and beliefs usually
stand on the way of their development by limiting ambitions. As they don't know
how to utilize money, they borrow heavily on the occasion of marriage, festivals,
death, and pilgrimage and become debtors. Compulsory education, making
awareness about their rights, health and hygienic practices, participating them in the
forest and other natural resources management, generating a source of income for
the ladies and finally involvement of committed non governmental organizations are
the need of the hour to save this innocent people.
Fig. 1 - Traditional hut and government built house of *Muthuvan*.

Fig. 2 - The investigator discussing and recording data with the *Kani* of Companykudy. Note the *head dress* of the *Kani*.

Fig. 3 - The Herbalist, *Kani*, the investigator, *Thalaivar* and his daughter.

Fig. 4 - A *Muthuvan* family in front of their house.

Fig. 5 - The inmates of the dormitory along with some elders.

Fig. 6 - A *Muthuvathi* (*Muthuva* lady) with her kid on the *muthuku* (back).
PLATE - 2

Fig. 7 - Old place of worship with stones.

Fig. 8 - *Sambraniparambu* kept inside the new temple.

Fig. 9 - Beginning of *Thaipongal* festival, decorated temple.

Fig. 10 - *Pandal* and fencing in front of the temple on *Thaipongal* occasion.

Fig. 11 - *Nilamvanangal*, a traditional practice at the beginning of *Thaipongal*.

Fig. 12 - Elder family member pouring *Pongal* rice into the vessel for cooking.

Fig. 13 - Family members together pouring *Pongal* rice for cooking.

Fig. 14 - Five main *Pongal* fireplace, cooked *pongal* rice and praying devotees.
PLATE - 3

Fig. 15 - Thaipongal pooja inside the main temple.

Fig. 16 - The poojari uttering mantras.

Fig. 17 - Turmeric water kept in front of the main temple brought by ladies.

Fig. 18 - Poojari emptying turmeric water with his action and manthrocharanam.

Fig. 19 - Thaipongal fire places of the families of the settlement.

Fig. 20 - Nilamvanangal in front of the cooked pongal rice.

Fig. 21 - Cooked thaipongal rice, accessories and area of cooking.

Fig. 22 - Devotees praying in front of the cooked pongal rice.
Fig. 23 - Cooked *Thaipongal* rice in plaintain leaf along with broken coconut, plaintain fruit, agarbathi and burning camphor submitted to the God.

Fig. 24 - Devotees waiting outside the main temple for *prasadam*.

Fig. 25 - *Muthuva* lady viewing the proceedings from outside the fence.

Fig. 26 - An old *Muthuva* lady praying in front of the temple.

Fig. 27 - Lady shaman in action.

Fig. 28 - *Komali* in action.

Fig. 29 - *Komalis* entertaining the gathering.

Fig. 30 - *Komalis* in *'Kattalan'* dress

Fig. 31 - *Kozhibali, poojari* praying with the fowl to be sacrificed.

Fig. 32 - Cutting the throat of the fowl.
PLATE - 5

Fig. 33 - Devotees performing the Kozhibali (fowl sacrifice).

Fig. 34 - Poojari performing Mudiyeduppu (maiden hair cutting) of young children. Note the turmeric water in the plate along with removed hair.

Fig. 35 - Interior of the temple, photographs of the portraits of Hindu Gods.

Fig. 36 - Sabarimala devotees in front of their temporary residence.

Fig. 37 - Devotee in front of the portrait of Sabarimala Ayyappan.

Fig. 38 - Annual pooja, blood of fowl poured on the rice.

Fig. 39 - Annual pooja, cooked rice submitted to the ancestral spirits. Note the burning lamp and agarbathi.

Fig. 40 - Annual pooja, feast inside the forest- with toddy.