CHAPTER 5

URALIES - HISTORY AND TRADITION

The Uralies believe that they were the subjects of the Kings of Madurai and once when a king of Madurai visited Neriamangalam in the Devikulam Taluk, some of the Uralies who formed part of his retinue were asked to stay back in the land (Ur) and were given the right to rule (Aali). The name Urali (Ur + Aali) was thus originated.

There is yet another account of the origin of the Uralies. Nedittu Thampuran, a chief, who ruled over Arakulam and Thodupuzha ranges had Uralies as his vassals. The chief and his vassals were addicted to toddy and on one occasion, the chief began consuming the vassal’s share of the toddy. Some of the Uralies who were denied the usual quota of juice became very angry and they made secret attempt to kill the chief. When he came to know about this, he cursed them to damnation. But he blessed the others with prosperity. He said “may you adiyars (slaves) remain prosperous, may those who aimed at my life suffer annihilation”\(^\text{119}\). Nedittu Thampuran then left for Thodupuzha. The

Uralies still pay homage to this chief at Neditupara temple where he had his camp.

One of the reasons attributed to the migration of the Uralies to higher elevations in the Periyar Ranges was the harassment from the Mannans, a neighbouring tribe. The Mannans were numerically larger than the Uralies and better organized. They were a threat to the Uralies in the high ranges because the Raja Mannan was the arbitrator of their disputes and Uralies had to pay over forty paras of paddy for settling disputes. The Uralies feel that the Mannans are inferior to them and they call the Mannans ‘Vazhi Pulayan’, and observe pollution if touched by them. So they thought that it is better to escape from the Mannans rather than to fight with them. This made them in their present habitat.

The Uralies are a class of hill tribe residents in the Cardamom Hills. They are chiefly found in the tracts known as Kunnanat, Kurakkanat, Mannukat, Kalanat and Periyar. The Uralies believe that

---

121 Ibid
they were the dependants of the Kings of Madurai and that their duty was to hold umbrellas at times of State processions\textsuperscript{122}.

They were originally slaves employed by their Nair Masters in cultivating rice on the lower slopes of the hills\textsuperscript{123}. Afterwards they migrated to the highlands, and the reason for this movement to the hills was to get freedom from slavery and harsh treatment of Nair masters. Another reason seems to have been the lack of interest of the Nair Masters in the Urali slaves, due to availability of better workers from among the non-tribals.

**URALIES OF VANCHIVAYAL**

Vanchivayal tribal settlement, locally known as Uralikudi, is situated on the northern boundary of Periyar Tiger Reserve at a distance of 29 km. from Kumily. The settlement is surrounded by the protected area\textsuperscript{124} on its eastern southern and western sides and Thankamala Estate lies at a small distance on its northern side. The dwellings are scattered over a wide area in the fringes of 10 acre wet land. The main entry point to this settlement\textsuperscript{125} is through Vallakkadavu. Thankamala Estate also offers a passage to this destination. Its locational specificity will

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid. p.43
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid p.80.
arouse a feeling of an ideal tribal habitat to any casual entrants, as it is
right in the interior of the forests.

The Uralies were an aboriginal\textsuperscript{126} race belonging to the Negrito
stock\textsuperscript{127}, who inhabited the fertile valleys of Thodupuzha Taluk of
Idukki District. They were hunters and shifting cultivators. During
their sojourns some of their groups strayed into the areas inhabited by
the non-tribals. In this way they entered the land of the many chieftains
on the western side of the High Ranges and into the Kingdom of
Madurai on the eastern side of the High Ranges. Some of the Uralies
were captured as slaves on the western side and some were persuaded to
serve the King of Madurai on the eastern side. Later on conditions
changed and many of them returned to the forests and joined their
kinsmen. Attack from other tribes, diseases, and shifting habits
compelled them to move into the interior of the forests.

**THE LIVING SPACES – URALI HAMLET**

The ancestors of the present inhabitants in the Vanchivayal
Settlement were the people, who were made settled from Nellikampetty,
Methaganam, Poovarasu, Pothumkandam and Ponnama, the present
Vanchivayal.

\textsuperscript{126} Jacob John, op.cit, p.80

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid,p.80
The complexion of the Uralies varies from dark to light olive brown. They are short and robust, the vault of the head is low, and the direction of the skull is backward. They have dark eyes, prominent eye brows, curly hair, brain skin, well grown with moustaches and beard and an average height of 157 cms. The Urali hamlet in PTR, better known as the Vanchivayal Tribal Settlement or Uralikudi is the only Urali hamlet in Peermedu Taluk.

**BUILT SPACE**

The traditional dwelling of the Uralies is situated in clusters of thirty to sixty huts forming what are called settlements. Each house is a rectangular structure built on a mud platform, raised above the surrounding ground. The platform is beaten into a hard level, and the floor is pasted with cow dung mixed with mud. Four wooden poles are firmly fixed in the 4 corners of the platform to support the walls. The roof is covered with grass or bamboo leaves (hay). There is a separation between kitchen and the sleeping room. There are 2 entrances to a house: one the main entrance and the other on the opposite side mainly functioned as a private entrance for women for aiding kitchen work. They used wooden planks for sitting. Most of the families have

---

128 The Uralies in the Thodupuzha Range are dark-brown in complexion. It may be pointed out that the word ‘Negrito’ was coined in this way.
erumadoms\textsuperscript{129}(tree houses) in which the members spend their nights beyond the reach of wild animals\textsuperscript{130}. Each hamlet has at least 3 common tree houses, of which one is reserved for women in their menstrual period and one serves as the granary. The third tree-house is used by women for spending 2 more days after the ceremonial bath in the menstrual period. They used baskets and mats, made of split bamboo and palm leaf and utensils like earthen pots for cooking and storing food, water and liquor. Most of the houses have poppy (ganja) plants. They use ‘Katthi’, and flint for clearing the forest areas, for hunting purposes and for collecting fire wood for domestic use.

**FOOD, DRESS AND LANGUAGE**

The staple food of the Uralies is rice and tapioca. They supplement their diet with chana and muthirai, edible roots, fruits and tubers. They also eat jack fruit and mangoes and they relished flesh of domestic and wild foul, jungle sheep and goat, deer and fish except the flesh of elephant and buffal in the past. They used the roots of Naru, Venni, chola venni, pal venni, Gasvenni, Nooru, Perukku, Mathekka and pathivenni. The tasteful and nourishing tubers that they eat were

\textsuperscript{129}Erumadom is also known as Tree House.
Kannikkizhangu, Narukkizhangu, Nootakizhangu, Kuvakizhangu and Thalkizhangu. They too eat land crabs, prawns and snails. They also use betel nut, pan and tobacco and drink tea, coffee and alcohol.

Men and old women are clad only in loin clothes. Young women cover their breasts also. Stitched clothes were used and both men and women wore ornaments.

The language of the Uralies is a curious mixture of Malayalam and Tamil slang. Crude and unintelligible, their language has never been influenced by modern elements¹³¹.

**OCCUPATION**

The Uralies are forest dwellers and so their economy is mostly forest based. Agriculture is the major traditional means of livelihood of the Uralies. The vocational skills of the Uralies are also related to agricultural occupation such as basket and mat making. Collection of NTFP is the next important occupation practiced by the Uralies. They collect forest produces especially honey and cardamom and exchange

---

them for essentials. They are experts in the felling and collection of timber, bamboo, reeds etc.

The Uralies are good food gatherers and fine hunters. They are good at fishing too. Netting and angling are the methods for catching fish. They practice hunting and fishing both individually and in groups.

Most of the tribals are experts in the art of brewing alcoholic drinks and cultivating narcotic plants like ganja or poppy.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The ‘Kani’ or ‘Kanikkaran’ is the formal head of the social organization. All matters of any significance are brought to his notice, and his advice and participation are sought in all important matters. He is the formal spokesman of the settlement. He receives all complaints from the people of the settlement. It is his prime duty to do justice to all and punish the wrong doers. All disputes are brought to his notice and he is the final authority to decide on it. He received fees for performing rituals and for mediating in disputes.

132 Jacob John, op.cit., p.85.
133 S.S.Shashi, op. cit, p.174.
Generally, the Uralies’ social organization centres round the nuclear family. But the extended and joint family patterns are also seen. There are cases of nuclear families which are enlarged by the addition of uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, etc. There are instances of men bringing their mother and sisters with their family.

Households with husband, wife and children and one of the husband’s parents, and his unmarried brothers and sisters are very frequent among the Urali families. Family ties are very strong among them and both close and distant relatives are taken very seriously in their lives. The kinship terms used to refer to one’s relations through blood and marriage are in many cases common. They are the following

**RELATION THROUGH FATHER**

1. Grand father - Muthan
2. Grand mother - Muthi
3. Father - Appan
4. Mother - Amma
5. Father’s elder brother - Periappan / Perappan
6. Father’s elder Brother’s wife - Peramma
7. Father’s elder brother’s daughter - Pengal
8. Father’s elder brother’s son - Chettan
9. Father’s sister - Ammayi
10. Father’s Sister’s husband - Achan
11. Father’s sister’s son - Aliyan
12. Father’s sister’s daughter - Chettathi/Aniyathi

RELATION’S THROUGH MOTHER
1. Grand father - Muthan
2. Grand mother - Muthi
3. Mother’s brother - Achan
4. Mother’s brother’s wife - Ammayi
5. Mother’s brother’s sister - Peramma

RELATION THROUGH WIFE
1. Wife - call by name
2. Wife’s father - Achan
3. Wife’s mother - Ammavi
4. Wife’s brother - Aliyan
5. Wife’s brother’s wife - Pengal
6. Wife’s sister - Chettathi / Aniyathi
RELATIONS THROUGH HUSBAND

1. Husband - The wife does not call the husband by name

2. Husband’s father - Achan

3. Husband’s mother - Ammavi

4. Husband’s brother - Chettan or Thampi

5. Husband’s brother’s wife - Chettathi / Aniyathi

6. Husband’s sister - Nathun

Tribal protocol requires that the Kani’s presence is primary in all formal gatherings\textsuperscript{134}. He participates in all important village affairs and ceremonies like, betrothal, marriage, funeral rites etc. It is the Kani who offers sacrifice to the deities on behalf of the members of the whole settlement. Clan has a headman called ‘Kani’, who is responsible for all the socio, religious and political activities of people.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

Like other tribes of Kerala, the Uralies too have their old beliefs and practices, customs and manners connected with birth, puberty, menstruation, marriage and death.

\textsuperscript{134} Jacob John. op.cit, p.138
When a girl attains puberty she is lodged in a remote house called ‘Pallapura’ reserved for the purpose for 7 to 12 days. If the period ends after seven days she baths on the 8th day and shifts to the second pallapura and remains there for a couple of days. After that she baths again and returns home and seven jack leaf spoons of liquid cow dung and oil are poured over her head by her uncle and brother in front of the hut to purify her\textsuperscript{135}.

Besides puberty, seclusion is essential for women during confinement and they remains secluded in Pallapura and the husband is not allowed to visit her. Food and provisions are sent to her through the female member of the family.

At the time of giving birth to a child, the Urali woman goes to the remote tree-house known as ‘erumadom’ and delivers the child unaided and unassisted by others except a midwife. The pollution connected with child birth lasts for a period of 21 days and at the end of which, the mother takes a ceremonious bath and joins the family circle. The naming ceremony of the child is generally conducted on the 22nd day.

The Uralies bury their dead. Betel leaves, rice etc. are put into the mouth of the corpse to appease the soul of the dead. A thorn is pinned

\textsuperscript{135} Discussion with Smt. Vasantha Vijayan & Santha Santhosh of Vanchiviyal on 19-04-2006
to the grave, sometimes at each end and in the middle planted in a line to screw down the spirit of the deceased and to prevent other spirits from entering the grave and snatching away the spirit of the dead. They pray to Maadan, Sasta etc. to see that the spirit of the dead remains there until the sixteenth day. The medicine man (Plathi) goes on singing ‘Cahttu’ songs and they believe that the spirit of the deceased passes to heaven and joins with the ancestral spirits.

Stones are planted at the head and foot of the grave. Sometimes the grave is enclosed with a fence, thus, making the place a taboo. The burial of the dead takes place about a furlong away from their dwellings. The nephew is the chief mourner and he is the one who washes the corpse and a new cloth is tied around the loin, and the body is covered with another new cloth. It is then placed over a red mat and tied with Kaivan fabric (Helicterus isora), and carried to the grave by the nephew and the son. Billets and wood are laid in the grave. The chewing materials, implements and the bill hook of the deceased are placed over the right armpit. Green leaves are then thrown into the grave, and the pit is covered with earth. In the case of an Urali woman dies during pregnancy or after delivery in a tree-house, it is the women who carry the body to the grave and bury the dead, because the Urali men think
that if men carry the dead, then they will get ill and provoke the anger of the Gods.

Pollution by death lasts for 16 days. During this period, all the clansmen bathe early in the morning every day. On the 17th day, after bath, they are free from pollution. Cow dung and oil are mixed with water and poured in small quantities over all persons belonging to the clan. If cow dung is not available both men and women use *darbha* grass to end the pollution.

**MARRIAGE / INHERITANCE**

According to the primitive custom, marriage among Uralies is by exchange. If a man has no sister to give, he cannot get a wife. A man with no woman to offer in exchange, has to remain unmarried and one, with many sisters has the privilege of having many wives. Marriage between members of related clans is forbidden. Polygamy is found among the older generation. Pre-puberty marriages were very common. There are instances of run away marriage also.

The Uralies generally are abiding by the monogamic rules of marriage. Yet there are instances of both polyandry and polygamy. Generally a person keeps only one partner at a time. Divorce and
remarriages of both partners appear to have always been frequent\textsuperscript{136}. Among the Uralies there does not exist any prohibition against cross cousin marriage. The woman’s consent is an essential element in the Urali marriage and she can, at her will, seek a divorce. A married woman may return to the house of her father and mother after divorcing her husband. During her stay in her parent’s house, she is considered as an unmarried resident by other members and after a certain period: she is again married and then leaves her parents and stay with her husband.

Marriages are not taking place between members of the same clan name and usually the marriages are arranged with families in the neighbourhood\textsuperscript{137}.

There are instances of polygamous and bigamous marriage relationship among the Uralies. There was no system of giving bride price among the Uralies. Instead, there is the exchange of sisters\textsuperscript{138}.

Traditionally, inheritance among the Uralies was through the male line. The Uralies believe that Urali Women are still considered as incapable of holding property. Hence, if there is no son, property goes to the nephew. And in the absence of a son and a nephew, property

\textsuperscript{136} S.S.Shashi , op.cit . p.60.  
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid. p 63  
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid
devolves on the daughter’s son, in the absence of sons, nephew succeeds to the chieftainship. Property consisted of paddy, brass, vessels, tools, fowls; minor forest produce and cash will be distributed among the sons, the uncle’s children and nephews of the deceased. The question of inheritance of immovable property does not arise as there is no private ownership of land since they live in reserve forests owned by the Government.

POWER STRUCTURE OF THE URALIES

Political organization includes the institutions by which the laws and orders are maintained with the neighbouring communities of a similar nature and protected against feuds within. In this sense, the Uralies do not have any organized political institution besides the office of the Kani. In the past the Panchayats controlled the tribal life. The village elders constitute the Panchayat and the Kani presides over it. The Panchayat take necessary steps in all matters regarding their community such as breach of promises of marriages, adultery, divorce, disputes regarding land, family quarrel, breach of morality etc and their decisions were final and could not be challenged or remitted.

---

Each hamlet has a ‘Plathi’ or priest cum-medicine man, and he is also responsible for the law and order situation. When a dispute arises in a village, the medicine man informs the Kanikkaran who goes to the spot and settles the dispute and ensure that such instances does not occur. The Plathi is in charge of propitiating Gods, spirits and devils either by rituals and prayers or by black magic. He is also the medicine man who treats diseases both by medicine, magic and exorcism. The office of the ‘Plathi’ always has been hereditary. Thus the traditional Urali political structure centres round the institutions like the Kani, the Panchayat and the Plathi.

**RELIGION**

Tribal religion is composed of three elements – the worshiping of Gods and spirits, the rituals and the totemic ceremonies. The tribals worship different spirits and the sacred belief in the spirits has led to animism. For them animals, plants, trees, ponds, rivers, stones, hills etc. are all abodes of spirits. They believe that ‘disease, famine, scarcity of water, low fertility of soil, low productivity, high incidence of deaths
etc. all these happen only when the evil spirits are not worshipped properly and the sacrifices are not made timely\textsuperscript{140}.

The Urali religion is a mixture of primitive and traditional beliefs and practices. The major elements of tribal religion, such as nature worship, animism, totemism, taboo, magic sorcery and ancestor worship, are blended with crude elements of Hinduism. They also worship the sun and the moon. They worship ‘\textit{Maladaivam}’ and make offerings which consist of fruits, meat, toddy etc. to these hill spirits. They also have faith in ancestor worship because they believe that the ancestors are their best protectors and they help them to find abundant food and protect them from wild animals and also appear occasionally in dreams to the Plathi (Priest) and communicate their desires through him. They also believe that there is a ‘high-God’ ‘\textit{Padacha Thampuran}’ who is the creator of all men and the universe.

The favourite male god of the Uralies are Maadan and Aiyappan or Sastha. To them the Sastha is a martial god riding on a tiger or on an elephant and fighting against evil spirits. The prominent female deities are Kali or Bhadrakali and Maariamma.

The Uralies also believe in certain other spirits. Certain spirits are believed to safeguard the people and they are worshipped by the whole community because they are considered as protective spirits. They also believe that there are some spirits who may do harm to them, by causing diseases like small pox, fever and abortion, unless they are worshipped by them.

The Uralies believe that their Kudi and household are fully surrounded by a number of deities and supernatural powers. The belief is that the ancestral spirit resides in the kitchen and the other deities reside near the Plathi’s house and the god of the forests resides in the streams, rivers, old trees, etc. and they pray to their Gods when they are in trouble.

The ritualistic attitude of the Uralies towards gods and ancestors is not clearly differentiated. The ‘Karanavanmar’ (elders who are dead) are installed in places, where they were buried and marked by one or more stones. Gods are also represented by pieces of stones and wood. The difference that one can identify is that the Gods are worshipped by all in the community; the ancestors are worshipped by member of a particular group only. Besides this, the spirit of headman and Plathi is worshipped by the larger community.
The ceremonies in the name of ancestors are performed in the month of Makaram (January – February). The materials used for the offerings include, rice, toddy, betel leaves, coconut and wicks of rolled cotton, chillies and fowl. The Kanikkaran cuts the neck of the fowl and pour the blood on the stone and figures and then cook the rice and the fowl in earthen-ware vessels.

Regarding the conception of the Uralies about life after death, they believe that the soul remains near its former living place “Muthiar”\(^\text{141}\).

The traditional Urali religion at the lowest level is the worship of the ancestors’ animals, trees and other natural objects. At the highest level is the belief in a universal creator – Padacha Thampuran and in between gods like Aiyappan, Maadan and Goddesses like Kali and Maariamma. Magic and sorcery form another element of the Urali religion. Nowadays, the Urali religion has undergone some changes and lost much of its rigidity.

**HEALTH CULTURE**

Each hamlet has a priest cum medicine man called ‘\(plathi\)’ who treats diseases using medicine and magic. The Plathi propitiate the god

---

\(^{141}\) Jacob John, op. cit., p.156.
‘Madan’ and the goddess ‘Maariamma’ and protect the people from different diseases like malaria, fever and small pox. They use different types of medicinal plants for curing common diseases such as fever, diarrhoea, cough etc. At present the tribes-folk go to the nearby hospitals for better care and treatment. They pay much heed to their health problems and frequently visit doctors for seeking advice and taking treatments.

**ECONOMY AND EDUCATION**

The economy of the Urali tribe was mostly forest based. The Urali economic structure was based on shifting cultivation and hunting for food collection. The economic system of the Urali is without any complex division of labour. Work is normally divided between men and women. Men perform the heavier and more hazardous work such as climbing atop tall trees to collect honey, felling of trees, while women tend to do work that involves less physical strain such as cooking, collecting firewood, harvesting and so on. Men are specialised in craftsmanship such as carpentry and black-smithy and women are specialised in making baskets and *kannadi paya* (mats) which helped them earn an additional income. They also collect NPFP and get about 30% of their subsistence needs.
Customarily the Uralies were food gatherers and now they taken to settled agriculture. Shifting cultivation was the principal means of subsistence of the Uralies. But now the Uralies are not allowed to move out of their area in order to do shifting cultivation. At present they cultivate perennial cash crops such as pepper, cardamom, vanilla, Tapioca, rice, plantain, coconut palms and betel nut.

With regard to the educational standards, the rate of literacy is very high among the Uralies compared to the Mannans. The parents do realize the importance of educating their children. In Vanchivayal there is only one multi grade learning centre. The Urali children upto fourth standard study here. Since the Urali hamlet is very far from the town (Kumily) most of the Urali children are sent to hostels for their study. They have to cover a long distance of twelve kilo meters (one way) to reach a school at Vandiperiyar for their Upper Primary Education. No parent ventured to send their children to the school as the children would have to travel over rough mountain tracks frequented by wild elephants, wild boar and snakes.

---

142 Field data- Uralikudy 27-04-2006
Lack of education is a stumbling block to the tribals in attaining a higher standard of life. The present parents of Uralikudi motivate their children to take-up their studies seriously.

The Uralies are not able to meet both ends with what they earn. The savings and debit position of the Uralies of Vanchivayal show that almost everybody is in debt and a very few have savings. Some of the Uralies are employed in the neighbouring cardamom and tea plantations, but they are not given the usual rate of wages offered to the non tribals. They too find it difficult to get jobs regularly. They make use of the seasonal chances through sale of goods and services to pilgrims.

In this chapter we have discussed the socio economic profile of the Urali community. The following chapter tries to analyse the transition of Mannan and Urali tribal communities in terms of their respective developments in the socio economic, educational and health care fields.