NILAMBUR VALLEY

CHAPTER-III

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The Nilambur Valley is coterminous with the Nilambur taluk, which has been formed in 1996. The tropical nature of the flora and fauna in the habitat, chronology of ecological disturbances, the composition of the rural masses in the immediate neighbouring areas of the selected tribes and the activities of the Forest and Tribal Development Departments are given in this chapter. An attempt is also made to present the eco-cultural setting of the Nilambur Valley to provide an understanding of the emergence of cultural identity of the tribal communities understudy, individually and collectively.

Nilambur Valley- Location

Nilambur Valley is situated in Malappuram district of Kerala State. It is bounded on the north by the Sultan Bathery taluk of Wayanad district, on the south and west by Ernad taluk of Malappuram district and on the east by the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu. The Nilambur forests, which covers an area of 760.29sq.km, is administratively divided into Nilambur south forest division and Nilambur north forest division. The Nilambur south forest division has
an area of 366.17sq.km and has two forest ranges viz., Kalikavu (100.57sq.km) and Karulai ranges (265.608sq.km). The Nilambur north forest division (394.120sq.km) constitutes three ranges viz., Nilambur (140.877sq.km), Edavanna (97.958sq.km) and Vazhikkadavu ranges (155.285 sq.km). It was estimated in 1986 that out of the total 272453.60 acres in the Nilambur Valley, 166946.71 (27.25%) acres of land is considered as forest land (Kerala Forests and Forestry Handbook :1995). These forests are situated on the western slopes of the Western Ghats.

The eastern, northern and southern parts of the Nilambur forests are covered largely by semi-deciduous and wet evergreen forests. These forests are called New Amarambalam Reserve Forests, which is declared, as part of the Nilgiri Biosphere. The upper reaches of the Valley are covered by the wet evergreen forests and the lower slopes by semi-deciduous forests. The mountain ranges of the Western Ghat form the southern, northern and eastern boundaries of Nilambur and is covered by forests. These ranges form a gallery on three sides of the plains of the Valley. The forests of the lower slopes and the plains have been cleared for raising monoculture teak plantations managed by the Forest Department. In between the thickly populated rural villages and the evergreen forests, lie large tract of the teak plantations.

**Topography and Climate**

The Valley has an elevation ranging between 40m and 250m above MSL. Based on physical features, the Valley can be classified
into two distinct geographical units. The eastern high lands, which are mountainous regions, lay above 200m MSL; and the low lands with plain topography, situated at an altitude of 40m to 200m MSL.

The Valley has almost the same climatic conditions prevalent elsewhere in midland region of Kerala, viz., dry season from December to February, hot season from March to May, the south-west monsoon from June to September and north-east monsoon from October to November. The south-west monsoon is usually very heavy and brings the maximum rainfall. Nearly, 75 per cent of the annual rain is received during this season. The average annual rainfall is 2900 mm. The climate is generally hot and humid. The Valley is characterised by heavy rainfall, humid climate and moderate temperature. The temperature varies between 17°C and 37°C from winter to summer. The summer is not felt in the recess of forests.

**Flora and Fauna**

The Nilambur valley is rich with varied flora and fauna. The flora of this region is characteristically tropical due to heavy rainfall, moderate temperature and mountainous tracts. The Nilambur valley is well known for teak plantations. Nilambur forest timber has attracted Arabs and Europeans ever since the dawn of civilization. Trees of high commercial value like rosewood, choropin, mahogany and several species of cane, rattan, reed, creepers, lianas, ferns, orchids etc., are abundantly found in the forests of the Valley. Different varieties of bamboo species can be seen extensively in all parts of the forests. The
tribal communities under study subsist mainly on non-wood forest produces (n.w.f.p), that are available in the Nilambur forests. It is observed that during the last thirty years, large tracts of forest land were converted into teak and rubber plantations and this resulted in the upsetting of the ecological equilibrium. The plain land is covered with cash crops like rubber, paddy, arecanut, coconut, banana, pepper plantations etc. Rubber has become the major plantation crop of the area. Jack-fruit tree, arecanut and coconut trees are the major usufructs in the homestead plots of the people of the area.

The forests contain many species of snakes and birds. The area is an attractive place for bird watchers. Elephant, bison, bear, wild boar, deer, rabbit, porcupine, wild dog, panther etc., are commonly found. Primate species, viz., Nilgiri langur, Macaca silensis, Bonnet macaca, Slender loris etc. are also seen. Tribes living inside the forests catch these primates. Wild elephant herds roam the forests in all seasons. The Karulai range of the Nilambur forests is well known for the catching and the taming of elephants.

When compared to the forests of the Ghat sections, more edible roots, tubers, mushrooms, medicinal plants etc., are found in the semi deciduous forests. A number of roots and tubers is consumed by the tribal communities. It is widely held by anthropologists that this bountiful nature of the Nilambur forests ensures abundant food supply throughout the year to the tribes and thus the tribal communities remain fixated to the food gathering hunting stage.
Rivers

The rivulets originating from this Valley are numerous. These are tributaries of the river Chaliyar. This perennial river originates from the Illambaleri hills in Gudallur taluk of Nilgiri district in Tamil Nadu. Important tributaries of this river are Chalipuzha, Punnapuzha, Pandiyar, Karimpuzha, Vadapurampuzha, Iringipuzha and Iruthilpuzha. The river Chaliyar flows through Nilambur, Mambad, Edavanna, Areacode, Vazhakkad in Malappuram district and Feroke in Kozhikode district before it joins the Arabian sea, near Beypore. The Karimpuzha originates from Nilgiris at an altitude of 4200ft. It joins Chaliyar along with small rivulets viz., Panapuzha, Talipuzha and Cherupuzha at Nilambur.

The rivulets viz., Karimpuzha, Manjakallanpuzha, Cherupuzha, Talipuzha, Korapuzha and Punnapuzha have a significant role in the cultural uniqueness of the tribal communities of the Nilambur Valley. These rivulets originate from the upper reaches of the ghat section and flows through the forests of the lower valley. These rivulets have much importance in the life of the tribal communities. While they roam in the forests for n.w.f.p collection and food gathering pursuits, they camp in the rock shelters found on the banks of these rivulets. The trekking trails in the forests are also located along the banks of these rivulets.

Nilambur in History

During the pre-British period, the Nilambur Valley was the domain of the Nilambur Kovilakom, a minor principality. History tells
that the Nilambur Kovilakom was established in 13th century, by Thacharakavil Eradis, who hailed from the Nediyirippu area of Malappuram district (Vikasana Rekha, Nilambur Grama Panchayat: 1996). They were known after different honorific titles such as Raja, Thirumulpadu, Thamban etc. It is held that one of the Thambans viz., Shakthan Thamban, captured the forests from the tribal people and another Thamban viz., Bhakthan Thamban had brought the tribal deity viz., the Vettakkorumakan from Nambolakotta to the Kovilakom temple. A festival, Nilambur pattu, which is held in January-February, is conducted by Nilambur Kovilakom at Vettakkorumakan temple. The festival is related to ancient war and hunting. It attracts large number of devotees including tribal people such as Pathinaicken, Aranadan, Paniyan and Kuruman.

The Kovilakom brought people consisting of different communities from the neighbouring areas for the development of agriculture, trade etc. Earlier, the area under the Kovilakom had dense forests. But constant exploitation of forest timber resulted in deforestation. The forest resources, fertile soil suitable for cash crop plantations, coconut, arecanut gardens, bamboo etc., attracted large scale migration to the area, especially during the 1940s. The denuded area was later transacted to the migrant groups by the Kovilakom and their vassals for cultivation and plantation activities.

The British started the first ever teak plantation in the world at Nilambur in 1882. Earlier timber transport was through the course of the river Chaliyar. Kallai near Beypore in Kozhikode district was
considered as the largest timber yard in the world till 1960s largely due to Nilambur timber. Nilambur was connected to Shoranur by a meter gauge rail-road in 1927 by the British transport timber. Roads leading up to upper ghat forests were built by the British. During the British rule the Calicut-Ooty road, which cut across Nilambur Valley had much importance.

The Nilambur Kovilakom also played an important role in the socio-cultural development of the area. Earlier, educational facilities were not provided to the lower castes. In 1903, a primary school was started under the Kovilakom Management. This school is the present Govt. U.P. School, Nilambur. In 1940, the then Raja, Manavedan Senior, started Govt. Manavedan School. These schools are open to students of all communities. Important educational institutions in the area are Nilambur Mappilla Lower Primary School (1914), Veettikuth G.L.P School, Marthoma College etc. In 1936, a clinic was started in Nilambur for controlling malaria. Today this clinic has been transformed to Nilambur Taluk Govt. Hospital.

The Nilambur Valley also attracts scholars of different discipline. This area possesses the remnants of pre-historic life like umbrella stones, dolmens, rock-cut caves, sub-terranean passages, stone circles, vattezuthu inscriptions etc. Gold panning in river beds are a common seen in the Nilambur Valley. The abundantly rich flora and fauna attract scientists.
People

A profile of the immediate neighbourhood population of the Tribes under study is presented in this section. Nilambur Valley is thickly populated by a multi-religious, multi-ethnic population. Only the forest areas are devoid of teeming masses. The habitat of the Tribal communities under study, in the context of developmental administration, comes under Nilambur Block, which come into force in 1982. This Block area experienced heavy population growth since 1950. According to 1991 Census, the Nilambur Block had a total population of 227999 people, consisting of 136204 males and 141795 females. The density of population is 257 per Sq.Km. This block has recorded a population growth of 28.67% during 1981-91 (Padbathi Rekha, Nilambur Block Panchayat :1996).

A major part of Nilambur Valley has already been occupied by non-tribal habitations. The area comprises of people belonging to Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities. Majority of them belong to the Muslim community, generally known as Mappilla. They are considered to be one of the earliest Muslim sections of India, who have embraced Islam from local population since the advent of Arab traders from the period of prophet Mohammed onwards in the Malabar coast. The Mappilla community enjoys a predominant position in the area as businessmen, plantation owners, forest coupe contractors etc. Majority of them are farmers and petty traders. The local political leadership is dominated by the Mappillas.
The Hindus come next in the order of majority. As mentioned earlier, during pre-British period, the Nilambur area was under the rule of Nilambur Kovilakom, a minor principality. Nair (traditional land owning caste, but lost its dominance); Thiyya (caste which enjoyed control over lower castes in the past - traditionally toddy tapers and cultivators); Asari, Kammala and Kollan (artisan castes); Kurnbaran (pottery caste); Veluthedan and Mannan (washerman communities); Vilakkithala Nair and Kavuthiyyan (barber castes) etc., were found in the area. Among the settler population also these castes occupy a substantial component.

The Christians constitute a major section of the population in the Nilambur block. They are comparatively recent migrants to the area. In 1948, 280 acres of land in Pullencheri, Nilambur, owned by Nilambur Kovilakam was given to one Plavungal Acchan, who hailed from Travancore area, for the construction of Bathel colony. It is reported that this colony acted as the base camp for the Christian settlers in Nilambur region. In 1950s the areas like Palangara, Thalvalamunda, Vattapadam, Karulai, Akampadam etc., experienced large scale migration of people belonging to different Christian denominations, which include Syrian and Latin Catholics, Marthomite, Jacobite, C.S.I., Pentecostals etc. Most of them own sizeable land and do dry land cultivation such as rubber, pepper, tapioca, coconut, arecanut etc.

According to 1991 Census, the Nilambur Block has a Scheduled Castes population of 22258 with sex ratio 1062 females per 1000 males.
The main Scheduled Castes communities are, Pulayan or Cheramar, Paraiyan, Cheruman, Panan, Kalladi, Paravan, Mannan, Perumannan, Velan etc. The Scheduled Castes population form only 7.98 per cent of the total block population.

The Scheduled Tribe population of Nilambur Block is 7904 and sex ratio comes to 1032 females per 1000 males (1991 Census). The tribal population forms only 3 per cent of the total Nilambur Block population. A number of small tribal communities inhabit the Nilambur taluk and its forests. It is held by anthropologists that the Nilambur forest nurtures, the most primitive food-gatherer hunter tribe of Indian mainland viz., the Cholanaicken. The Valley is also inhabited by the tribal communities viz., Pathinaicken, Kattunaicken, Paniyan, Kattupaniyan, Aranadan, Kuruman, Allar, Malamuthan and Malai Panicker.

*Habitat of the Three Tribes*

Of the three tribal communities under study, the Pathinaicken and the Aranadan settlements are located in the catchment areas of the river Karimpuzha, a major tributary of the river Chaliyar. The Kattupaniyan settlements are found on the banks of the Kuravanpuzha and Chalipuzha, which are minor tributaries of the river Chaliyar. The Aranadan and Pathinaicken are distributed in Kalikavu and Karulai ranges of the Nilambur south forest division and Vazhikadvau range of the Nilambur north forest division. But the Kattupaniyan inhabits the Edavanna range of Nilambur north forest division and Thamarassery range of Kozhikode district (Map 3-2).
3.1 Map of Kerala State showing the location of Malappuram district and the Area of study.
3-2 MAP OF MALAPPURAM DISTRICT SHOWING THE AREA OF FIELD WORK

Scale 1: 600000

Name of Ranges
1. Edavanna
2. Nilambur
3. Vazhikadavu
4. Karula
5. Kalikavu
The Aranadan are seen in rural areas, which borders forests. These areas have an undulating topography. Compared to the Aranadan, the Pathinaicken population inhabits the area covered by semi-deciduous forests and teak plantations. The Cholanaicken lives in evergreen forests, 200m above MSL. The Kattupaniyan hamlets are located at an altitude, which varies between 400 to 800m above MSL in Edavanna range and 100 to 400m above MSL in Thamarassery range. Thus, these three groups live in different geographical settings.

**Interaction with Non-Tribes**

The non-tribal populations surge is also felt on the boundaries of Nilambur forests. The non-tribal population influences the tribal communities mainly in two ways. In different seasons the non-tribaes enter into the forests for variety of purposes. Forestry operations like plantation works, bamboo cutting, rattan cutting, road construction or repair works etc., are some of these. These works are confined to the semi-deciduous forests of lower Valley, where the Aranadan and the Pathinaicken also roam. The Aranadan and Pathinaicken also constitute the work force of forest labour along with the non-tribes.

Another type of contact with non-tribes takes place when the tribal communities visit the neighbourhood market centres once in a week or so. The Aranadan and Pathinaicken visit growth centres viz., Karulai, Chungathara, Edakkara, Vazhikkadavu, Chokkad etc., which are 4 to 20 km away from their habitat. Similarly the Kattupaniyan of Ambumala and Vettialakolli visit growth centre at Akampadam and the
Kattupaniyan of Chembukadavu and Pathippara pay visits to the nearby market centres at Chembukadavu, Nellipoyil, Kodencherry etc. They buy dress materials, rice, provisions, iron implements, hook and line etc., when they visit growth centres. They are very particular in visiting the local cinema talkies.

The habitats of the Aranadan and the Pathinaicken are accessible by jeep. Recently, road communication has improved greatly in the area. The Aranadan live interspersed with non-tribes. They are employed by non-tribals as wage labourers, coconut pluckers etc. Their interactions with the non-tribals are much more than the other two tribes under study. Irrespective of their life in forest fringes, these tribal communities lead forest related subsistence economy. The tribal communities are exposed to the functions of the Forest Department. Most of the tribal families are engaged in n.w.f. p collection and are also in contact with Nilambur Pattikavarga Vikasana Society officials. Anganwadi teachers, literacy workers, researchers etc., also visit the area.

Among the tribes under study, the Aranadan alone live in the fringes of forests, interspersed with non-tribals. They are considered as a community equivalent to Cheruman, Kalladi etc., who form the agricultural field hands. The Aranadan's interactions are more with the above two communities rather than with others. The immediate neighbourhood of the Aranadan is constituted by Muslim, Christian and Hindu population, whereas that of the Kattupaniyan of Chembukadavu and Pathippara, it is Christian settlers. In the early
literature, the Aranadan are referred to as an untouchable community. The Kattupaniyan and the Pathinaicken have only limited exposure to rural social life in the past.

**Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP), Nilambur**

The tribal communities of the Nilambur area started receiving serious attention from Tribal Development Department since the identification of Cholanaicken and Kattunaicken as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) in 1976. In the same year, a Co-operative Society viz., Kalkulam Girijan Service Co-operative Society (currently known as Nilambur Pattikavarga Vikasana Society) was formed for the transaction of n.w.f.p collected by the Cholanaicken and the Kattunaicken of the area. An Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) area has been carved out in 1983 with Nilambur as its head quarters. The project area constitutes 1429.23 sq.km and this is 40.26 per cent of the total area of Malappuram district. 85.70 per cent of the Scheduled Tribe population comes under this ITDP area. It covers both Wandoor and Nilambur Blocks (*Padhathi Rakha, Nilambur Block Panchayat*:1996).

ITDP has implemented various schemes such as housing, drinking water, digging trenches around forest hamlets for protection from wildlife etc. It provides grants to students, financial support for attending interviews, agricultural implements, training for females in tailoring and males in autorickshaw driving etc. Under the ITDP, *Balavignankendra* (Children’s education center) are functioning at
Myladipotti, Punchakolli etc, Multilevel Learning Centre of DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) are running in Mundakadavu, Vettalakolli etc. In Nilambur ITDP area there are eleven pre-matric tribal hostels, out of which eight hostels are for boys and three for girls. An Ashram school (Indira Gandhi Memorial Model Residential School), meant exclusively for the Kattunaicken, (inclusive of Cholanaicken and Pathinaicken), has been functioning at Manjeri, Malappuram district, since 1993. Periodical medical camps have been organized for them. Several conscientisation camps for the Aranadan and the Pathinaicken were organized by KIRTADS (Kerala Institute for Research, Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) since 1991. ITDP conducts regular medical camps among the tribal communities of the area.

The Forest Department

The forests of the Nilambur Valley are considered to be a well-managed territory of the Forest Department. Check posts are seen at various entrance points of Nilambur forests. During British period, the forest officials undertook routine trekking through the Pathinaicken habitats. They invariably have had contact with the forest officials since then. It is observed that after felling the forests, the area is given for cultivating various dry land crops. These cultivations are undertaken by the non-tribals.

The Forest Department had its own working plan for the exploitation of the forests of the area. During pre-independence days, the tribal development activities in these forests were undertaken by the
Forest Department. During 1970-85, thousands of acres of semi-deciduous forests have been converted into teak and rubber plantations. Teak plantation activities have become intense in the last forty years. The planting of teak trees also requires the bringing in of non-tribal labourers in good number. In teak plantations, every four years there is thinning and logging activities, for which the non-tribals are deployed. Tribal communities, particularly the Pathinaicken are a part of these work groups in which overwhelming majority are non-tribals. It is noted that Aranadan and Pathinaicken participate together in timber and bamboo loading activities in trucks. Pathinaicken have earned the name as expert mahouts. A few Pathinaicken are also employed as mahouts, at the Nedumgayam elephant camp, Karulai range, Nilambur south forest division. It is one of the earliest elephant camps in the country. Once the seasonal forestry operations are over, the non-tribal labourers move out from the forests. But they depend on these forest dwelling tribes for honey, dammer, medicinal herbs etc. All these show that these tribal communities of Nilambur forests were having contact with non-tribals since historical period.

Conclusion

The tribal communities under study viz., Aranadan, Pathinaicken and Kattupaniyan can be considered as the autochthones of the area. The forest ecosystem of the valley has a decisive role in the cultural identity of these communities. During the last forty years or so the Nilambur Valley had undergone tremendous changes due to settler influx. Large tracts of the forests of the Valley had been converted into
teak and rubber plantations. Contact with non-tribal population had created terrible impact on these small tribal communities. The cultural turmoil of these diminutive communities in the context of the above extraneous factors in the eco-cultural context of the Nilambur Valley provides unique opportunity for anthropological analysis.