

Social Changes Among Malayali Tribes Of Eastern Ghats

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Abstract:

Background: The Malavali, or Malayali, are a tribal community in the Eastern Ghats of India, primarily found in the hilly regions of Salem, Attur, and surrounding areas. They have a rich cultural heritage that is closely linked to their surroundings. Their social interactions were characterised by economic, religious and cultural factors which has been orally transferred through generations. Yet, in recent decades, the Malavali community has experienced considerable socio-cultural changes driven by factors like urbanisation and technological progress. This research focuses on examining how these transformations have affected their socio-economic structures, cultural traditions, and spiritual beliefs.

Methods: In this qualitative study, 45 participants including both male and female above 18, were randomly selected. The individuals were primarily from three villages namely, Mellur village in Jarugumalai & Vellakadai village in Shevaroy hills of Salem district, and Gedamalai village in Bodhi hills of Theni district. Moreover, the study involved semi structured interviews and narrative analysis for extracting relevant insights.

Observation: The Malayali tribes embody a nature-human-religion complex deeply rooted in their surroundings and characterised by socio-economic activities. Over the past 40 years, exogenous and endogenous forces such as urbanisation, westernization, and migration has led to the shift in this complex. This has led to a gap between social progress and technological adoption

Conclusion: The study reveals the core objective of the research which is to highlight the social transformations of Malayali tribes. The Tribal group is in a constant state of transition towards economic integration. This transition has led to more negative than positive impact. Therefore, proper introspection on social services is required for holistic growth of the Malayalis.

Key Word: Tribes, Malayali, Social Change, Literacy Rate, Technological Adoption, Religious Systems

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I. Introduction

Indian tribal landscape is a complex array of various cultures and practices. Each tribe possess certain traits which reflects their core values and traditions. From *Bakarwals* of the north to *Irulas* of the south, each one of them exhibit unique facets which determines their 'tribal-ness'. These distinctive features have been facing numerous exogenous and endogenous challenges which have led to a state of vulnerability. This study deals with one such group namely, the 'Malavalis' of the Eastern Ghats of India.

The 'Malavali', also referred to as 'Malayali', are a tribal community predominantly residing in the hilly tracts of Salem, Attur, Namakkal, Rasipuram, North Arcot, Karur, and Thuraiyur Taluks. This community is characterized by a rich cultural heritage deeply intertwined with its ecological surroundings. Historically reliant on hunting and gathering, the Malavali tribes have undergone significant socio-cultural transformations over the past several decades. This paper aims to highlight these social changes that are witnessed by the Malavali tribes residing specifically in the hill ranges of Shevaroyan, Jarugumalai, Bodhimalai hills and to understand its impact on their everyday lifestyle.

Through qualitative research, which includes group discussions and semi-structured interviews with community members, this study investigates the evolving socio-economic systems, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs of the Malavali tribes. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as L.P. Vidyarthi's Nature-Man-Spirit complex¹, M. N. Srinivas' concepts of westernization² and Leslie White's technological determinism³, the analysis highlights the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity. As urbanization and technological advancements increasingly influences this community, understanding the Malavali tribes' responses to these shifts offers valuable insights into the resilience and adaptability of indigenous cultures in a rapidly changing world.

II. Data Collection

The state of Tamil Nadu comprises a tribal population of 651,321, among which 'Malayalis' constitute 47.6 per cent of its total Scheduled Tribe population.⁸ This qualitative study was conducted via interviews in the

tribal villages of Salem and Theni districts considering the willingness of these villagers to participate. A total of 45 participants aged above 18 years involving both men and women were a part of this study. The study was carried out between September 2024 and October 2024 in Mellur village in Jarugumalai & Vellakadai village in Shevaroy hills of Salem district, and Gedamalai village in Bodhi hills of Theni district. The primary intention of the data collection is to identify the changes in the socio-cultural systems of Malayali tribes and further underline the cultural resistance displayed by the tribal group. Questions assessed the social changes in the economic, educational and religious spheres of the participants. The data was analysed thereupon.

III. Data Analysis

To recognise various themes, the qualitative interviews were analysed using a narrative approach including familiarization with the data, identification of the thematic framework and interpretation of the same. The data collected from the three major village studies are segregated and analysed separately to identify the traits which are diffused and differentiated throughout the Malayali tribes. Furthermore, the data collected was analysed through the exploratory approach to add to the knowledge base which is still at a preliminary stage.

IV. Discussion

Along the lines of L.P. Vidyarthi's Nature-Man-Spirit complex⁴, the Malayali tribes possess a nature-human-religion complex. The element of 'nature' relates to the intrinsic connection with ecology. The term Malayali in itself is derived from 'malai' meaning hill and 'ali' denoting to people inhabiting a place.⁵ They are divided into three groups: the Periya Malayalis ("big" Malayalis) who live in the Shevaroy, the Nadu Malayalis ("middle" Malayalis) from the Pachaimalais, and the Chinna Malayalis ("small" Malayalis) from the Kollimalais.⁶ This reflects the stratification within the tribes based on their geographical location in line with their respective ecology. Further, the 'human' element reflects the socio-economic structures of the tribes. Currently, job description of these tribes involves participation in pastoralism, agriculture and other unorganised sectors. This is observed through the study vis-à-vis pastoralism of goats and cows practiced by Malayali tribes of Jarugumalai hills. Moreover, their religion is primarily based on Hinduism with multiple local deities including the worship of benevolent spirits like *Maasimalayan*, who are invoked for treating ill health. In addition to this, the practice of magico-rituals is witnessed within this simple society.

The aforementioned interplay among nature, human, and religion captures the essence of tribal life. However, this complex is undergoing a gradual shift which is reflected in their everyday practises. Based on oral histories collected from Bodhimalai villagers, a significant shift can be witnessed among the tribes in the past 40 years. With rampant urbanization in neighbouring areas namely, Salem and Theni, faster technological adoption can be seen among the villagers who move to surrounding cities in search of new employment opportunities. The increase in the number of satellite connectivity among the Keelur & Melur villages in Vellakkadai hills serves as a testament to this observation. The concept of Technological determinism⁷ can be observed among the folk culture, where the growth of telecommunication infrastructure and internet centres have a direct correlation with the adoption of online tools such as UPI and e-Aadhaar. This leads to transition of Malayali tribes from an isolated community to an integrated one.

Notwithstanding these changes, M. N. Srinivas' westernization⁸ can be observed amongst these groups. According to the local narrative, traditional attire of these folks included a turban and a brown kambli, which also functioned as an overcoat. Men and women normally wore a two-yard-long dhoti that provided coverage from the chest down. Additionally, they carried a bag for betel and tobacco, a billhook for agricultural purposes, a water vessel, and a walking stick for support and mobility.⁹ However, there appears to be a material alteration in all the said practices and usages. Their clothing style has seen a shift towards shirt & pant attire similar to the people living in the surrounding plains. Interactions with the nearby cities of Salem and Theni mandated many tribal members to take up numerous blue-collared jobs, necessitating their day-to-day travel. This has fastened the process of social change.

Due to excessive dependence on folklore and oral history, most of the indigenous knowledge systems are encultured from one generation to another, orally. Marriage alliances of these tribes with people outside their proscribed villages has led to the loss of such oral transmission of knowledge systems. Considering the case of ethno-veterinary knowledges, conservation methods of sheep and goats have seen a reduced preference, which is slowly being replaced by western veterinary treatments.¹⁰

In association with these changing trends, the Malayalis have seen transition from a simple to a more complex religious system. The construction of a temple complex in Mellur village located in Jarugumalai Hills has witnessed the arrival of many artisans from Kumbakonam, a temple town in Thanjavur district. This practice has brought the sculpture techniques along with religious practices from Kumbakonam to Mellur village. Apart from worshipping their community gods namely, Kariaman and Karuppan, the tribes also worship dominant Hindu gods such as Shiva as 'Eesan' and Vishnu as 'Perumal'. This is further reflected in their practices of applying 'vibuti and naamam'. During drought season, the tribes perform rain rituals to Pillayar (lord Ganesha)

who is shaped out of cow dung and assembled together by the community. Most of the clan members have a ‘kula dievam’ (ancestral diety) linking to the Shevroy temple. Qualitative analysis suggests that the frequency in visiting their kula dievam has drastically reduced with generations.

The Malayali tribes of Sheveroyan hills possessed a wide range of indigenous agricultural practises such as raised bed method for chilli cultivation, soil conservation by indigenous soil bunds, winnowing of grains through usage of winnower called muram.¹¹ With the shift from agrarian to blue-collar jobs the loss of the traditional knowledge systems with respect to agriculture is witnessed.

Government schemes have significant effects on the social changes of Malayali tribes. Formerly, the Malayali tribes were practitioners of hunting and gathering. Through oral folklore, we realise that the community used to snare small animals and hunt wild pigs as a means of livelihood. However, with the advent of forest reservation policies and the 1972 Wildlife Protection Act, these tribes opted for agriculture as the primary means of sustenance leaving their traditional hunting skills behind. During the financial year 2023-24, financial assistance has been sanctioned specifically for promoting road connectivity to Keelur, Melur and Gedamalai villlages in Bodhamalai hills of Namakkal district, under the NABARD RIDF XXIX scheme. This has promoted everyday movement of the tribes from hilly tracts to neighbourhood cities, opening up more opportunities to access basic education, healthcare, etc.

The literacy rate among Malayali tribes has grown from 27.1% in 1991 to 37.4% in 2011.¹² This modest growth can be attributed to the development of government schools and convents such as St Charles convent in Kupannur, Yercaud. Yet, the overall literacy rate remains lower than the state average among scheduled tribes (ST literacy rate in Tamilnadu - 41.5%). Based on qualitative analysis, the primary reasons pertaining to the slow adoption has been observed in the poor infrastructure, lack of educational awareness and poor socio-economic status of these tribes.

Name of ST	Literate without educational level	Below primary	Primary	Middle	Matric/Secondary Higher Secondary Intermediate etc.	Technical & Nontechnical diploma	Graduate & above
All STs	10.3	26.3	33.3	14.7	12.8	0.6	1.8
Malaiyali	10.6	27.6	35.2	14.2	10.8	0.5	0.9

Figure 1: Comparing the educational attributes of Scheduled tribes in Tamil Nadu specifically with Malayali tribes

Almost 83% of the tribal group falls within the income bracket of rupees 5000 to 10000.¹³ This has a direct correlation with their socio-economic conditions leaving them trail behind other surrounding communities. Most of the members are either agriculturalists or daily wage workers making them susceptible to the vagaries of local economy. In a domino effect, low literacy rate combined with poor economic conditions continue to decelerate their standard of living leading to a poverty trap.

Industrialisation has also led to its fair share of social changes in the tribal group. The advent of Bauxite mining by Vedanata group in Yercaud hills has led to conflict and chaos among the tribes. The Manjakutai gram panchayat in Yercaud comprising of Malayali tribes had passed several resolutions against bauxite mining citing the enviro-religious impacts of such mining. On the other hand, interview data suggests that several tribes have opted for blue-collar jobs in these local mines causing tensions with the larger tribal group.

V. Conclusion

From the overall study, we can conclude that the Malayali tribes are in a drastic phase of transition. From isolated hunter gatherers to integrated agriculturalists, the simple society has seen changes in various socio-cultural aspects. Nevertheless, the socio-economic standards of the group continue to remain below de minimus level, which is reflected in their income levels and economic participation. Government policies such as Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana have aided the tribes in their modest growth. Further, growth in literacy and healthcare must be focussed to create a holistic change in the livelihood of Malayali tribes. Thus, long strides need to be taken in order to bridge the gap between Malayali and other Scheduled tribes of the state.

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