

Marriage System of Malayali Tribes in Tamilnadu: With Special Reference to Pachaimalai Hills

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The word tribe come from Latin word, “a social division in a traditional society consisting of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect¹”, typically having a recognized leader (Oxford English Dictionary, 1933).

According to Tamil Nadu Government, there are 36 tribes have been notified in Tamilnadu. (TN. GO, 1976). Among the tribes, there have been six primitives tribes (Malayali, Kurumbas, Kanikaran, Kammara, Kota and Toda) are more endangered. Particularly, the Malayali is a scheduled tribe lives in Tamilnadu, like Dharmapuri, Vellore, Tiruvannamalai, Pudukkottai, Salem, Namakkal, Villupuram, Cuddalore, Tiruchirappalli, Karur and Perambalur districts². According to 2011 census of India the population of Pachaimalai is 22,313 (1.9%). (Census of India, 2011). Most of them lives in the Salem and Trichy Districts.

They are preponderantly lives in rural areas with 99.83 %. They speak Tamil language and the Tamil script are used by them for both inter-and intra-group communication. Mostly they are non-vegetarians. Their staple food consists of ragi, rice, samai (a millet), jowar, horse-gram, groundnut and wild yams. Only the men consume local varieties of alcoholic drinks.

According to their marriage system, they are getting marriage at the age of twenty-one years, while the girls get married after attaining puberty. Spouses are generally acquired through negotiation. Instances of marriage through elopement and courtship have also been reported. Monogamy is common practice among them though polygamy is allowed. Divorce and remarriage of widow and divorced persons is permitted. Junior levirate and junior sorority also exist. Bride price (parayam) is paid in both cash and kind³.

Geographical Location

The Pachaimalai hill is situated on the north western border of Tiruchirappalli District and adjoining with Salem District. The boundary between Tiruchirappalli and Salem Districts passes across the plateau of Pachaimalai. The hole of southern slopes and part of the eastern and western slopes of Pachaimalai is fall within Tiruchirappalli District. The northern portion of Pachaimalai is fall within Attur Taluk of Salem District⁴. The elevation of Pachaimalai is varies from 500m to 1000m. The slopes of the hills are generally steep and sometimes precipitous.

Origin of Malayalis

Mountain men, a hill tribe of Salem District are found in the mountains of Arunootru malai, Bothi malai, Kalrayan, Kolli malai, Pachaimalai, Palamalai and Servarayan Hills. They are in no way connected with the Malayali of Kerala in spite of the apparent resemblance of names. However, certain unique feature of the Malayali culture has leaded some authorities to a theory of culture-historic interrelation with the matriarchal centre of Kerala⁵. It is yet, more probable that the matriarchal remnants of Malayali life go back to ancient time. Besides to say that pre-Indus, type of south Indian mother-right civilization.

In anatomical features and physical appearance they scarcely differ from the people of the plains. They speak a Tamil dialect of their own. As the supposed descendants of the Kanchipuram Vellalar, they sometime assume the name of Kanchi Mandala Vellelar. They are also known as the Karkatha Vellala to distinguish from Kongu Vellalar. Within the context of the Hindu caste system, they are known as *karalar* (rulers of the clouds) or *Karala muthali*. They used the term Goundar as their caste appolation in their personal names. One of their proverb states that: without the blossoming of flowers on earth⁶.

Some of them believed that they are descendants of the original hunting tribes, Vettuvar, who were widest spread in all mountains of this district. According to inscriptional evidences, they were migrated to this district from Kanchipuram in 7th and 11th centuries A.D. All Malayalis strongly believed in their common origin about which there are at least three versions. All the versions agree on the essential central theme of their emigration from Kanchipuram in search of a promised land when they could freely practice their religion of worshipping lord *Kariraman*. The emigration from Kanchipuram is common with the Kongu Vellalar too⁷.

According to the chief Guru of tribal community the founder of tribes came with their followers from Kanchipuram, where their ancestors were lived a dissolute life of irreligion and beastly behavior. In order to reform them into the religion of *Kariraman* the leaders (numbering more than ten) led a group charring the lords insignia (umbrella, fly,-whisk flag) away from Kanchipuram seeking their promised land. They found the mountains of Eastern Ghats like, Dhamapuri, Salem and south Arcot districts and established they were settlements⁸.

They found him in the Kalrayan among the Vettuvar who refused to restore the God to the group. In the resulting fight, the Vettuars were defeated but the god stoke to the site and asked the victors to stay with him later, three brothers from the group (the eldest, the middle and the youngest) went on a hunt to kill a boor named *veeramalai panri*. It was wounded in the Javadhu Mountain ran all over the country and fell dead on the Kollimalai. Following dispute in sharing the pork the brother decided to go their ways separately. The eldest periya Annan used to stay in the Kalrayan, the middle Annan decided to settle in the Kollimalai and the youngest china Annan went to the Pachaimalai⁹. Many elderly men in the Pachaimalai claimed that they were of royal descent from Kanchipuram. Edgar Thurston says that in his book called "caste and tribes of Southern India (vol.IV; 406 1909) corroborated the same view when he wrote: The word Malayali denotes inhabitant of the hills (malai-hill or mountain). The Malayali have not, however, like the Todas, of the Nilgiris, any claim to be considered as an ancient hill tribe, but once a Tamil speaking people who migrated from the plains to the hills comparatively recent times. According to tradition, the Malayali originally belonged to the Vellalan caste of the cultivators and emigrated from the sacred city of Kanchipuram to the hills about ten generation ago, when Mohamadan rule was strong in India¹⁰.

Marriage ceremonies and other Rituals

Marriage has been recognized as being very important in the life of an every individual. It brings together two persons as husband and wife the established new family which obtains social credit and sanction through the usually approved Marriage ceremonies¹¹.

Marriage ceremonies thus attain crucial importance because they not only reflect the culture of the community but also come together it in proper perspective. Hence a study of these ceremonies cans terrified much light on the community as a whole and on its social aspects in exacting¹².

Marriage ceremonies and other Rituals of Malayali Tribes

According to the tribal community, those who are elder, who says that there is system and procedures to get marriage of any one of this community. Before marriage both bride and groom have undergo *Nitchiyadaartham or engagement, Parisam (Bride-Price), and finally marriage*¹³.

Nitchiyadaartham

Nitchiyadaartham is a Tamil word for betrothal or engagement. When a suitable girl is known, either a cross-cousin, or some distant relative through friends or relatives. The bride-groom's family sends ten members to the house of the prospective bride. The father of the groom, if he is alive, always accompanies the party. The bridegroom never goes with them, though he will be asked to give his consent later.

Even if the prospective girl lives in the same village, the party of ten has to make the formal visit to her house. All of them wear dhotis and a big turban of white cloth. On this particular day the turban has to be wound all over the head so that not even a single hair on the head may be seen. No one definitely to why hairs may not be seen on this occasion, but some Malayali said that it was to ward off evil omens¹⁴.

After reaching the prospective brides house they are provide mats to sitting down. The thing that the visitors do is to ask for drinking water. It is understood by the host that the prospective girl has to bring the water and offer it to the seated guests. She becomes the object of observation in her bearing, look and manners as she offers water in the *Sembu* (a handy brass vessel).if the visitors are not satisfied after they had a good look at her, they ask for some more water, in order to have a second look. After the visitors have seen the girl well, the parents of the bride invite them to stay for dinner. If they decline dinner, it is a clear indication that they do not favor the girl. If the invitation is accepted, it means that the girl has been found suitable and that match could be proceeded with. If and when they to have their dinner, the visitors are requested by the bride's parents to come again in two or three weeks' time on an auspicious day, for fixing up the bride-price¹⁵.

Parisam (Bride-Price)

Parisam is the Tamil word for bride-price. It is customary among the Malayalis to give bride-price, both in cash and kind. Tofix up the bride-price, few relatives and friends of the bridegroom, along with the father of the groom or in his absence another close relative, go again to the future bride's house. Again the turban is worn in such a way that no hair on the head is seen. While they are proceeding to the bride's house, the visiting party is sensitive to any evil omens that may cross their path. They will return home without going to the bride's house if they happen to meet on the way a widow or a black cat, or hear the barking of the barking deer, which abound in the forests of the Pachaimalais. The latter is considered particularly a very bad omen and they return home. If they manage to reach the house without any incidents, they are welcomed by the bride's parents and relatives and provided with mats to sit on¹⁶.

In the case of a widow's remarriage, the bride-price is given only in cash and never in kind. Possibly this is due to the kind being considered seceding India, widows have been traditionally considered inauspicious,

but among the ball his of central India (Stephen Fuchs: 1950p.152) she fetches a higher bride-price because of her experience in work.

Once the bride-price is fixed, the wedding date also fixed the same day. Their marriage used to take place only on the days of Thursdays. It is practicing even now. Here we have to arise a question? Why the tribes are fixed wedding date particularly on Thursday. An old tribal man from Vannadu says that "the lord Ram was married Sita on Thursday that's why all of them fixed the wedding day on Thursday.

A part of the bride-price is sent to the bride's house a week in advance of the actual wedding day. The amount depends not only on the bridegroom's wealth but also on the bride's beauty and attractiveness. As one informant said, like when you buy cows or bulls, if they are well proportioned and healthy, you have to pay more. Accordingly, a petty girl would be married by the highest bidder, subject to the rules of lineage exogamy and the approval of the parents concerned¹⁷.

Preferential Marriage

Marriage within the same lineage forbidden. Parallel cousins do not marry, but cross-cousins normally have to marry each other when both come of marriageable age. In case someone wants to break this custom when his/her cross-cousin is waiting for marriage, the aggrieved party has the right to demand marriage to their daughter or son. For instance, if a man is lame, custom blinds his paternal aunt or maternal uncle to give him a daughter in marriage as no other parent would be willing to give their daughter because of his handicap. In quarrels between the mothers-in-law of the couple they readily remark is, my son is not lame that I had to insist upon your daughter for marriage¹⁸.

Wedding Day

The wedding usually takes place in the bridegroom's village. A *Pandal* (a shady structure prepared out of interwoven bamboos and coconut palms) is prepared in front of the house of the bridegroom a day before the wedding. The same structure is prepared also in front of the house of the closest relative of the bride who happens to reside in the bridegroom's village. (One finds relative in most of the villages in the same *nadu*, as the hamlets are small in size and everyone knows everyone else.) The main wedding ceremonies will take place only in their relative's house.

On the wedding day, the *Kangani* is dispatched to the bride's house with the remainder of the bride-price. If the balance of the bride-price is not paid on that day, it is said that the bride's parents would not let the bride go for the wedding. The bride-price in cash is tied in a cloth bundle and presented to the mother of the bride. Other than currency notes, it should contain coins worth at least ten rupees. A mother opens the bundle and slips the contents down in the presence of the *Kangani* and the guests. The resulting clatter of falling coins is supposed to portend good augury and brings prosperity to the new couple. Now that the complete bride-price has been received, the bride is sent for wedding. Before leaving her home, she falls prostrate before her parents who used to say a few words of advice and shed tears of parting¹⁹.

Thali

Thali is a piece of gold medal inscribed either with the name of the husband or the figurine of a goddess. It is threaded into a string which is colored yellowish with turmeric paste. In case of a *Goundan* marriage, only a gold chain should be used in the place of the thread for *Thali*. The tying of *Thali* is most sacred ceremony and it makes them man and wife. The *Goundan* takes *Thali* after garlanding and says thrice to the bride and bridegroom:

" kattuna Mangaliam
kamatchaiammal mangaliam"(the thali to be tied
(may it be) like the thali of kamatchi)
(kamatchi is the name of their important goddess.)

He then hands *Thali* to the bridegroom who ties it around the neck of the bride, at the same time drummers beating their drums loudest at this moment. With this, the wedding has taken place and then they are made as husband and wife.

Tying of Thali

After having meals, all of them assembled in the bride's *Panthal* for the actual wedding ceremony which is tying of *Thali*. There are two ural-mortars (for husking the *Samai*, *Thinai*, or Paddy) which when inverted become stool for sitting. The couple sit on these two stools facing the people, the bridegroom on the right and the bride on the left, in front of them are kept two branches of *arasu* tree (*Ficus Religiosa*) and bamboo, on a part. *Arasu* symbolizes the man and bamboo and women. By about midnight it's time for the wedding to take place and the *Goundan* takes two garlands and gives one to the bridegroom who garlands the bride and the other to the bride who garlands the bridegroom²⁰.

Blessing from the elders

The village elders come one after another in front of the new couple and say few words of blessing. Some women are singing a song in a form of greeting the couple. This is traditionally sung at all wedding days and various symbolisms are used to convey good wishes and prosperity to the newly-wedded couple. Nature, which abounds in the Pachaimalai is, provides themes for the greeting. One such song could translate by author, that is;

“Spreading like the banyan tree
Extending roots like the field grass
Flourishing like the *punga* tree
And flowering profusely like the tamarind
May you shoot up, like the *moosi* tree
And grow heavenward like the bamboo...”

The last person to greet the couple as the singing is progress is always a pregnant woman. Perhaps it signifies the collective wish for future fertility.

For the rest of the night there is Therukkoothu. Theru means 'street' and *Koothu* means 'play' or 'performance'. The 'street play' is the only form of entertainment for them. The tribal folk (until cinema had started attracting them to the plains in the past few year). These plays taken nearly six months to compose and lean by heart. Themes are taken from the *Ramayana, Mahabharata* or from local folk tales like *Nallathanga* a popular Tamil tale about a virtuous woman.

Often two or three groups compete with each other in dramatizing different plays, trying to attract the attention and applause of the audience. Only men take place in front of the wedding *Pandal* of the bride's house. The actors are performing in music, dance or dialogue are accorded recognition and honor. Incidentally, all lays are locally composed by men who have had good experience in performing art. It is amazing that a play lasting two or three hours is composed and learnt completely by heart, without the use of writing or reading aids which was comes to them only very recently.

When the plays come to an end in the early morning hours,, the bridegroom presents gift Rs. 5/-and one dhoti to the director of the play while the brides gives Rs. 3/-and one dhoti to him.

In the next day morning the newly-married couple is taken by the drummers around the village after which the bride is taken to the pond or well where provides drinking water to the hamlet. The bride fills one *Sembu* water and brings it to her husband's house. The bringing of water from the village pond is the last of the ceremonies of the wedding. The garlands which the couple wore for the wedding will be hung on the bamboo pole and displayed in front of the house. It is never thrown away.

After bride brings water to her husband's house, the couple leaves the same day to the bride's house for seer or the special wedding feast meant for the bridegroom. After three days of feasting there, they return to the bridegroom's house, the bride being accompanied by two of her best friends. These friends stay with the bride for ten days and return to their respective homes, leaving her to fend for herself in her new home and new surroundings²¹.

Type of Marriage

In Pachaimalai child marriages are practiced twenty five years ago. According to reliable informants about to decades ago all marriages were solemnized when the bride and groom were below twelve years of age with increasing contacts and Inter-action with non-Tribal's and also due to a greater influence of government administration, the practice of child marriage is dying fast, though the custom persists. One reason offered by Tribal's for child marriages was the overdoing concern of the parents about the future of their children. They wanted to be alive to see their children married off early. This type of Marriage is called *sellakalyanam (pet marriage or favorite marriage)*.

Marriage by elopement was fairly common, though its incidence is on the decrease since a strong sense of guilt is being attached to elopements. This was not the case; however, fifty years ago, it was accepted and practiced. Elopement takes place if the parents of both the parties do not agree to the match, while the boy or girl are desperate marrying each other's sisters.

Marriage be service is resorted to when the bridegroom is unable to pay the required bride price. When deliberations about the bride price take place, it is decided that the bridegroom will work for the father-in-law for a certain number of years to compensate. For the bride price. When a family has only daughters, the eldest son-in-law usually stays with them to take care of their land and property. He later become head of the family after his father-in-law retires from active work²².

Marriage Gifts

Moy

“*Moy*” is a traditional collection of formal cash or gifts by the family which celebrated a marriage. Each family in the village as well as relatives of the couple from other villages has to offer *Moy*, both to the brides and

bridegrooms families. The amount presented by each person is carefully noted down and announced aloud to all those present. *Mozhithal* in Tamil means saying aloud and the word *Moy* is said to have derived from *Moythal*, degenerative of the word *Mozhithal*. *Moy* is usually reciprocated by the bridegroom's family or the bride's family during wedding in any of the families of those who presented the *Moy*.

Invitation for the Moy

The *Goundan* is seated on a mat inside *Pandal*. In front of him five betel leaves are placed on a day. Over each of these leaves a Ball of flowers' (pooppandhu) is placed. The *Mooppan* and the *Kangani* fall prostrate in front of the *Goundan* and invite him over to the bridegroom's house for the *Moy*.

Arrived the bridegrooms house, the *Goundan* gives the first *Moy*. It is always in the form of cash, account of one rupee to ten or more, cash may be. After the village elders invite the *Gounda* to apply sandalwood paste on him. On wedding day sandalwood paste is applied liberally on the bare chest, hands, foreheads and cheeks. Besides serving as a gesture of honor, it is also a very cooling lotion in the summer months when weddings usually take place. Following the lead given by *Goundan*, all the elders and boys apply sandalwood paste on their person. By that time it is late evening and dinner will prepared jointly by the women folk who attended the marriage²³.

Festive Dinner

The festive marriage dinner is cooked by women of the village near the edge of hamlets. Stones are placed in triangular position and big vessels are used for cooking. The entire necessary items for dinner like rice, vegetables and cereals are supplied by bridegroom's family.

The custom was to slaughter one or two pigs for every wedding since pork was main dish of festive meal. Now days there are several Tribal's who do not eat pork of domestic pigs and therefore to accommodate them and some non-tribal friends from the plains is generally not served at wedding meals. This is observed more strictly in the village on periphery of the hills which have maximum contact with people in the plains. The interior, however, parks are still served for weddings.

Meals are ready by about evening 9 O' clock pm and again the *Kangani* and *Mooppan* fall prostrate before the *Govendan* and invite him to have wedding dinner. The *Govendan* and his brother and those who are *Govendans* in the marriage party sit down first for meals inside the *Panthal*. No *Mooppan* or *Kangani* or commoner may join them. The dinner is served on banana leaves placed in front of each person. All of them seated for the next serving to have their meals. Only men are allowed to serve, the women can have their dinner only after having men. The bride removes the banana leaves after every batch of dinners have had the meals. The couple to the married to not sit in the *Panthal* and eat with everyone else. They have it in their house²⁴.

The Pachaimalai Malayali's are developed in socially and economically. Their life style is like modern society in the plain region. Because the Pachaimalai hill tribes are migrated from the plain. So they are followed the social customs and marriage ceremonies also. They are able to cultivate in the top of the hills. Mostly water for lifted from the Bore well for cultivation purpose. The government of Tamil Nadu is providing financial support for them to develop and protect the forest areas. Most of the medicine is protected by them. The Pachaimalai natural Herbals are securing all the deceases.

Reference

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² *Census of India, 2011*.

³ Interview with Tribal people of Naduvancheri, Pachamalai on, 25.7.2014.

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⁵ . *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁶ Busnagi Rajannan, *Salem cyclopedia (A cultural and Historical Dictionary of Salem district Tamil Nadu)*, Institute of kongu Studies, Salem, 1992, p. 157.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁸ Edgar Thurston, k. Rangachari, *Caste and Tribes of southern India*, Vol.IV, Cosmo publications, New Delhi, 2009, p. 406.

⁹ . *Ibid.*, p. 407.

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¹² Ramasamy.A., *Gazetteer of India-Madras*, Salem, 1967, p. 139.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁴ . Interview with Tribal people of Senkattupatti, Pachamalai on, 23.7.2014.

¹⁵ . Interview with Tribal people of Senkattupatti, Pachamalai on, 23.7.2014.

¹⁶ . Rouch, Paul, *Marriage Ceremonies of the Christian Paraiyans of Kumbakonam Area: Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol.XXXVI-1,India, 1977,p. 133.

¹⁷ *Idem.*

¹⁸ Interview with Tribal people Selvakumar,Punachi,Pachamalai, 30.7.2014.

¹⁹ Bunagi Rajannan, *Op.cit.*, p. 159.

²⁰ .Interview with Tribal people in Punavarai on, 27.11.2014.

²¹ Interview with village head man of Sinna Palamalai on,2.12.2014.

²² Interview with Tribal womea in Kodungal,Pachaimalai on, 3.12.2014.

²³ Interview with Tribal women in Periyapakkalam,Pachaimalai on, 8.12.2014.

²⁴ Interview with Pachayat president in Adinadu Panchayat,Periyapakkalam On, 15.1.2015.