

## Belief Systems of Malayali Tribes in Eastern Ghats of Tamil Nadu

C.Prem Naseer

PG& Research Department of History, Aringar Anna Government Arts College, Musiri- 621211.Tamil Nadu.

The Malayalis come under the Twenty fifth number in the list of Scheduled Tribes. A majority of them are found in the hill areas of Salem, Attur, Namakkal, Rasipuram, North Arcot, Karur and Thuraiyur Taluks. These hilly are the Baramahal region, which is the continuation of the Mysore plateau. The Baramahal is full of hills and hillocks, among them worthy to mention are Javathu hills, the Shervaroy, the Kalrayan, the Pachaimalai and the Kolli Hills. They are known as Eastern Ghats of Tamil Nadu<sup>1</sup>.

The word *Malai* denotes inhabitant of the hills (malai – hill or mountain). The Malayalis have not, however, like the Todas of the Nilgiris, any claim to be considered as an ancient hill tribe, but are Tamil speaking people who migrated from the plains to the hills in comparatively recent times, probably during the middle of eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

According to Thurston, the term *Malayali* has been derived from the words *Malai* meaning *hill* and *ali*-meaning person and is used to denote hill people. Etymologically the word is derived from *Malai – Hills* and *ali – inhabitants*<sup>3</sup>.

The Malayalis who live in Shervaroy hills are called *big* (Periya) *Malayali* or the *Kanchimandalam Malayalis* the inhabitants of the *Kolli Hills* are known as *little* (China) *Malayali* those who are living in the Pachamalai hills are called *middle* (Nadu) *Malayali* and their population in this parts is 310.042 as per the census report of 2001.<sup>4</sup>

According to popular folk lore of the region, the Malayalis originally belonged to the Vellala caste of cultivators and emigrated from the sacred city of Kanchi to the hills about ten generation ago, when Muhammadan rule was dominant in Southern Indian. They took with them according to their story, three brothers of who to eldest came to the Sherveroys hills, the second to the Pachaimalai and the youngest to the Kollimalai<sup>5</sup>.

There is numerous deep-rooted beliefs system in the socio- cultural and religious life of the tribes of Eastern Ghats of Tamilnadu. This paper aims to explain some the belief system prevalent among the tribes of Kolli hills, Pachaimalai and Kalrayan hills . Also attempt has been made in their paper to bring to light few important beliefs found in their Agricultural activities, hunting, rain, mental disorders, diseases, marriage, annual worship and life after-life etc

The fundamental belief in spirits and supernatural beings has led the Malayalis to believe in a number of beliefs in different domains of their life activities. The tribes believe in the magico-religious treatment for ill health. Moreover, they believe that their family deities will suggest remedy not only for ill health but also for their loss. For instance, they believe that if water is showered over *minnadiyan* deity,his mythical wife *maariyayi* is will be pleased and as a result the patient will get rid of small pox. The fever due to ill-health or fear of malevolent spirits is believed to be elided if the same ritual is observed in honour of the deity *maasimalayan*<sup>6</sup>.

If a person shows teeth crushing while sleeping, he is instructed to give up one of his favorite dishes. The tribes of the hills believe in the magical power if their deity *ayyanaru* which causes boars and other wild animals to fall into their aims, while they are involved in hunting.<sup>7</sup>

There are some beliefs relating to rain. Wherever there is failure of rainfall this person performs certain rituals three phase in order to please the rain god. In the stage they believe that making hand-sized Vigneswara out of cow dung and offer it to the rain god. Even after the ritual rains achieved, they would killing a

<sup>1</sup> Narasimaiah, B., *Neolithic and Megalithic Culture in Tamil Nadu*, Delhi,1980, p.3

<sup>2</sup> Aiyappan,A., *Sco-Economic Condition of the Aboriginal Tribes of Province of Madras, Chennai*,2000, p.142.

<sup>3</sup> Thurston, E, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India Vol- IV, Cosmo publication*, New Delhi, 1909, p.406.

<sup>4</sup> Census report of, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Thurston,E., *op.cit*, p.407

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.22.

<sup>7</sup> A. Ramasamy *Madras District Gazetteer, Salem, Madras*, 1967, pp.40-41.

domesticated pig to the shrine of *Ella karuppu* diety.<sup>1</sup> If they want rain, they pelt each other with balls of cowdung, an image of *Pillayar* (Ganesa) is buried in a manure pit, and a pig is killed with a kind of spear. When the rain comes, the *pillayar* dug up.<sup>2</sup>

During marriage ceremony they fix an iron rod near the *Ammiyarsaani* (mortar and branch of piple tree) just in front of the marriage platform.. By this belief, the tribes of the hills believe that the malevolent spirit of the hunter is avoided. They believe that non-observance of these ritual would activate the evil spirit and that would molest the bride.

If a man suffers from hemicranias, (one side Headache) he sets free a red cock in honour of the sun god on a Tuesday.<sup>3</sup> Another belief relates to thunderbolts, they built a small stone shrine outside each village. This shrine is capped win a stone slab under a lofty tree, believing that this shrine would protect them from thunder bolts.

The belief system of Malayalis centers on the Hindu religious aspects. The initial migrants from kancipuram were Hindus.<sup>4</sup> The religion continued to provide the link between the human and the supernatural. The new environment must have necessitated the reinforcement of the belief system and widened their pantheon as well as the ritual base. The direct dependence on nature to overcome their vulnerability, the blessings of supernatural beings is earnestly sought before undertaking any activity. The fruits of their success are shared with the supernatural beings through the offerings.<sup>5</sup>

They believe in the existence of sprits. There are three different types of Muni, known as *Ellai Muni* (boundary God), *Ur Cutti Muni* (roams about in the hamlet), and *Kolli Muni* (responsible for the fertility of the soil).<sup>6</sup> Kollai Muni prevails on the cultivable land and is responsible for the fertility of the soil. If there is a drop in the yield, a pig is sacrificed and its blood is sprinkled along the boundaries of the land. This is normally done at the family level for boosting the yield of its agricultural land.<sup>7</sup>

For *Ellai muni* and *Ur cutti Muni* also, only pig is sacrificed at the time of worship. This particular ritual is performed by a *Pucali* (Irular) or Kurumban. The ritual is known as *Panni Kutturatu* (pig piercing). Nowadays, the younger generation of Pucali refuses to perform the ritual. Only few individuals offer these services to all the hamlets in the vicinity. In the absence of Pucali kurumbans are permitted to performed this ritual.<sup>8</sup>

Malayalis believe that *Muni* can assume human and animal forms. Muni in a human form may talk and interact with the tribal's. Tribes also attribute roughly defined outlines resembling animals as Muni. Another possibility is the whirlwind moving along a foot path.

*Maariyaayi, Kaaliyaayi, Amman, Ankalamman. Paderiaman, Saamundeeswari, Kannimaru, Minnadiyyan, Aynaaru, Vettaikaruppu* and *Ella Karuppu* are the different deities worshipped by the tribes of the hills.<sup>9</sup> Of these the first seven are female deities while the rest are male deities. Maariyaayi and Kaaliyaayi are twin deities associated with diseases small pox and cholera respectively, say the tribes of the hills. They are worshipped by them with serious devotion. If no proper propitiation is made to these deities, Pachaimalai Malayalis believe that there are the livelihood of occurrence of small pox and cholera. Such divine punishments are conceived because of *dheyvakolaru*.<sup>10</sup>

Of all the deities, Kattupillaiyar is worshipped at the individual level. Kattupillaiyar is the protector of cattle and the boys and girls who go for cattle herding, offer flows regularly. If the cattle are lost, the family prays to the *Kattupillaiyar*. As soon as missing cattle return or is found, coconut, milk and flowers are offered at the shrine.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C. Maheswaran, *Ethnography of the Pachaimalai Tribes*, Chennai, 2007, p.71.

<sup>2</sup> C. Maheswaran, op. cit 71.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71.

<sup>4</sup> Xavier Raj, *Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies* Vol. XIV No.2, 1997 pp.134-137.

<sup>5</sup> G. Krishnamoorthy, *Kalrayan Malai Makkal*, Chennai, 1994. p.274.

<sup>6</sup> C.Maheswaran, op. cit p.66.

<sup>7</sup> K.K. Pillai, *A Social Life of the Tamils*, Vol. I, Chennai, 2008, p.210.

<sup>8</sup> Xavier Rajan, *Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies*, Vol.XIV, No. 2, New York, 1997, p. 144.

<sup>9</sup> C.Maheswaran. op.cit. P.69.

<sup>10</sup> N. Subramanian, *Sangam Polity*, Udumalpet 1996, P.350.

<sup>11</sup> A. Seetharaman "God Name in Tamil Coins (in Tamil) 10<sup>th</sup> Madras Coins Society" Madras. 1998. p.13.

Malayali is a tribe in transition. Like other institutions of Malayali, belief and rituals also has been adapting to the changing socio-cultural environment. These systems still is a major factor which sustains the tradition and this acts as a buffer between the new ideas and the corresponding changes in the social institutions.