

Faith, Rituals and Cultural Identity: A Study of the Malayali Tribe in Palamalai, Tamil Nadu

Jothiprakash K¹, Shangameswaran R²

¹Ph.D, Research Scholar, Department of History, Chikkanna Government Arts College, Tiruppur.

²Associate Professor, Department of History, Chikkanna Government Arts College, Tiruppur.

Abstract

This study examines the worship practices of the Malayali indigenous community living in the Palamalai region, located within the Kolathur taluk of Salem district, Tamilnadu. Specifically, this research investigates their presiding deities and traditions, including Chellandiyamman, Koyilveedu (temple-house) worship, Sitteswarar, Sri Thainattu Mahamariamman, village-specific worship and Senrayaperumal worship, along with their associated beliefs. Data were gathered through field surveys, interviews and secondary sources. This study highlights the spiritual life of the Palamalai people, the social solidarity maintained through their religious beliefs and their cultural identity.

Keywords: Village-specific worship (Oor Sirappu), Bull taming (Manjuvirattuthal), Temple-house (Koyilveedu), Flower divination (Poovakku Kettal), Irula yam offering (Irula Kizhangu Padayal), Embraced rice (Thaluvu Soru).

1. Introduction

Africa ranks first in the world as the continent with the highest population of indigenous peoples, while India holds the second position in the continent of Asia [1]. The English term "tribe" was first used to classify indigenous communities in India only during the British colonial period. Specifically, other social groups that did not fall within specific castes and religions were included in this category [2].

In India, indigenous communities are referred to differently by various groups: politicians call them Adivasis or Kaatuvasis (forest dwellers); literateurs refer to them as Malaivalai Makkal (hill dwellers), Tholkudi, Muthukudi, Aathukudi and Poorvakudi (ancient inhabitants); Gandhians term them Girijans; Marxists designate them as ethnic groups (Inakkuzhu); and anthropologists identify them as tribes (Pazhangudigal) [3]. According to the 2011 census, there are currently 705 Scheduled Tribe communities in India [4]. Among them, 37 different types of indigenous communities currently live in Tamil Nadu, with the Malayali tribe being one of them.

The Salem District Gazetteer, published in 1918, noted that the Malayalis lived in the Kollimalai, Palamalai, Bargur Hills and Kaalimalai regions [5]. Under the Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act, which came into force in 1977, the Malayali community residing in the districts of Pudukottai, Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri, Salem, Namakkal, Vellore, Tiruvannamalai, Tirupattur, Ranipet, Cuddalore, Villupuram, Kallakurichi, Tiruchirappalli, Karur, Perambalur and Ariyalur has been recognized as a Scheduled Tribe listed under the name "Malayali" [6].

Today, over three hundred thousand Malayali tribespeople live in Tamil Nadu across the Kollimalai, Pachaimalai, Servarayan Hills, Kalrayan Hills, Yelagiri Hills, Javadhu Hills, Sitteri Hills and Palamalai.

The Malayalis constitute the largest tribal population in Tamil Nadu.

Bakthavatsala Bharathi notes that "they are not the indigenous people of the hills, but rather those who came in-between" [7]. Malayali tribespeople predominantly inhabit the Eastern Ghats. Residing in the hilly terrain, they are called "Malayalis" meaning "those who rule the hills" [8].

2. The Malayalis of Palamalai

The hill-dwelling indigenous people of Palamalai differ completely from the populations living in the plains. Although our country has achieved development across various sectors and progressed through interactions with global populations, indigenous communities have continued to live largely unchanged lives from their origins up to the present day. Without adequate progress suited to the times, they live in historically backward conditions lacking sufficient amenities. The Malayali indigenous people of Palamalai live under such circumstances. Although many cultural elements are found in their lifestyle, the primary objective of this article is to examine their noteworthy deity worship practices, beliefs and festivals. This study employs anthropological and descriptive research methods, gathering and analyzing data based on field surveys, interviews and secondary sources.

Palamalai is an indigenous hill region located in the Kolathur Panchayat Union, Mettur Taluk, Salem District, Tamil Nadu. According to the 2011 census, the total population of the Palamalai Panchayat is 2,895, comprising 2,856 Malayali indigenous people and only 39 individuals from other communities. This population includes 1,525 males and 1,370 females. The overall literacy rate is 42.39%, with male literacy at 48.86% and female literacy at 35.24% [9]. There are over 25 villages here.

The Malayali indigenous people living in the Palamalai region follow a lifestyle intertwined with nature, continuing to observe traditional deity worship and festivals to this day. The lives of indigenous people residing in the hill regions of Tamil Nadu share a very close connection with divine beliefs. In particular, the Malayali community residing in Palamalai continues to practice various traditional forms of worship that reflect social solidarity, spiritual faith and cultural identity. Specifically, through clan deity worship, Koyilveedu worship, Sri Thainattu Mahamariamman worship and village-specific worship, they honor their ancestors, maintain familial relationships, commemorate ancient history, proclaim valor and uphold certain life beliefs. Furthermore, these people accept and worship both Sitteswarar and Senrayaperumal without distinction.

3. Clan Deity Worship

The temple of Chellandiyamman, the clan deity of the Malayali indigenous people, is located in Nerinjipettai on the road leading from Ammapettai to Mettur. During the festival and special worship events of the Palamalai Sri Thainattu Mahamariamman Temple, the Malayalis first visit their clan deity Chellandiyamman temple to offer prayers before initiating any events in Palamalai. Currently, not all people frequently visit this temple; only a few go there for worship. This is because these people perform all kinds of worship and life rituals at the prominent Sitteswarar Temple located right in Palamalai. Moreover, due to inadequate transportation facilities to the Chellandiyamman Temple and the necessity of walking a long distance, the majority of the people avoid going there.

4. Worship of the Temple-House

Among tribal worship practices, the veneration of ancestral deities holds the utmost importance. The traditional temple-house built for ancestor worship is located in the village of Thuvarangadu in Palamalai.

This is a unique, thatched-roof temple-house constructed with mud walls specifically for the traditional worship of ancestors. It is a century-old building situated in a village comprising forty-two Pangali (clan-member) households, of which only a single family possesses the hereditary right to perform the puja. Currently, the individuals holding this puja right are mother Kaaliyammal, father Muthu, and son Selvam. Only they possess the right to perform puja in this temple and enter the temple-house; other villagers and fellow clan members are not permitted to enter. This tradition has been strictly observed for centuries. It is believed that the ancestors reside here, and worship is conducted once a year in memory of the ancestors who lived and died there. There are no statues or any form of idol worship inside this house. This worship is performed in the Tamil month of Thai. All the villagers collectively pool funds to purchase and sacrifice goats and roosters, while some individuals also make sacrifices in fulfillment of vows. On the night of the worship, one hundred and twenty-five types of offerings including snacks, flowers, grains, kali (porridge) and various tubers are arranged, and one hundred and twenty-five pujas are conducted. The next morning, holy water (theertham) is sprinkled on the goats to seek divine sanction (vaaku kettal). Whichever goat walks into the house and stands there is sacrificed inside the house itself. The right to cook and partake of this sacrificial offering to the ancestors belongs exclusively to the single family holding the puja rights. The remaining goats and roosters are sacrificed, cooked, and distributed as annadanam (free food) to all the villagers [10]. Thus, worship for the ancestors is conducted annually.

5. Worship of Lord Sitteswarar

There are seven hills in Palamalai and the Sitteswarar Temple is situated at the peak of the seventh hill. There are four routes to reach this temple. Walking through the forest paths via Nerinjipettai and Oomarettiur are the only ways to access it on foot. Alternatively, visitors travel by jeeps and two-wheelers as well as on foot via Pudur near Guruvarettiur and Kannamoochi. This pathway passes through tribal settlements. When traveling via Pudur, vehicles can be driven up to Periyakulam, after which the remaining two hills must be crossed on foot. Similarly, via the Kannamoochi route, vehicles can reach Singara Thoppu and the remaining two hills must be traversed exclusively on foot to reach the Sitteswarar Temple.

5.1 Temple History and Architecture

The oral history regarding the origin of the Sitteswarar Temple is deeply preserved in the oral traditions of the people. During a period of severe famine, the Irula people searched for and dug up wild tubers known as Irula kizhangu in the Palamalai region and one such tuber was deeply embedded in the earth. While digging it up, an iron crowbar struck the head of a buried idol of Sitteswarar (Lord Shiva). A milk-like fluid reportedly oozed from the spot and upon the milk touching their eyes, the people temporarily lost their sight. Realizing their mistake and praying to the deity, their sight was restored after a short while. Subsequently, they brought the idol to the peak of the seventh hill and have continued to worship it as Sitteswarar. A painting illustrating this legend is also depicted inside the temple [11].

Due to its high mountain-peak location, a compact, rectangular-shaped temple has been constructed with sturdy pillars capable of withstanding strong winds and a flat roof structure. The presiding deity (moolavar), Sitteswarar, is housed in a square-shaped sanctum sanctorum (garbhagriha), preceded by a very small ardha mandapam (hall). Above the main entrance are the statues of the Trinity (Trimurti): Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer. Directly opposite the temple stands a statue of Nandi, followed by minor deities accompanied by spears, while statues of the Navagraha (nine

planets) are located on the front-left side. This temple stands as a spiritual worship site harmoniously blended with natural beauty, surrounded by towering mountain ranges and dense forests.

5.2 Maha Shivaratri Festival

Maha Shivaratri stands out as the most significant annual festival celebrated at the Sitteswarar Temple over a span of three days. Prior to the celebration, formal invitation cards are printed and distributed. These cards feature the event schedules along with the names of the community leaders and hereditary trustees: Oor Pattakkaraar; Oor Manthiri; and Oor Gounder, alongside other prominent figures [12]. Representatives visit their relatives, neighboring villages and nearby towns to distribute invitations, collect donations, and receive contributions for the communal feast (annadanam).

For the Maha Shivaratri celebrations, several locations are decorated with public address systems, colored paper, colored electric lights and festoons: the Samimadam [13] (Swami cottage) housing the festival deity (utsavar) at Periyakulam on the fifth hill; the Theradi Veethi [14] (chariot street) on the sixth hill; and the Sitteswarar Temple on the seventh hill. On the morning of Maha Shivaratri, the festival commences with special pujas at the cottage in Periyakulam where the utsavar idol of Sitteswarar is kept, and annadanam is provided to devotees. The decorated utsavar idol is placed in a palanquin and carried with instrumental music (melam) and fireworks to the Sitteswarar Temple at the peak of the seventh hill. Necessary ritual items, drinking water, blankets, and safety equipment are also carried along.

Around 3:00 PM, the procession reaches the intermediate Theradi Veethi on the sixth hill, where the palanquin is placed down, local deities are worshipped, and annadanam is served to devotees. The procession then resumes toward the Sitteswarar Temple on the seventh hill, arriving by nightfall. Despite the severe cold, devotees including women and children stay awake all night to participate in the special Maha Shivaratri pujas. During intervals, women sing kummi songs. Local villagers bring grains harvested from their fields and scatter them around the Shiva temple as offerings. As prasadam, devotees are served mosakkottai (field beans), harvested grains, and Irula kizhangu considered a vital ancestral food which is boiled, offered to Shiva and distributed to everyone. The serving of Irula kizhangu holds profound significance, as the discovery of the Shiva lingam and the establishment of the temple occurred while searching for these tubers; thus, this tradition is maintained to this day. Fireworks light up the night during the midnight worship.

Seven rounds of pujas (Ezhu Kaala Poojai) are conducted throughout the night. After the seventh puja, a white cloth is tied around the wounded head portion of the Shiva idol. According to belief, if blood stains or pus appear on the cloth the following morning, it portends hardships for the people or livestock that year, whereas a clean white cloth signifies general well-being for all. Following the inspection of the white cloth at dawn, special pujas and archana are performed, and sarkarai pongal (sweet pongal) is offered and distributed to devotees as prasadam.

Pujas continue until the evening, after which the Shiva idol is placed back in the palanquin, circumambulates the Sitteswarar Temple three times and descends to the Theradi Veethi on the sixth hill for the night. Pujas are performed there, annadanam is served for dinner, and everyone stays overnight at the Theradi Veethi, where folk theater (Koothu) predominantly stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata is performed [15]. The following morning, shirt-and-veshti sets for men and sarees for women, inscribed with divine verses of Shiva, are distributed free of charge. Finally, the Shiva palanquin is brought back and placed in the Samimadam at Periyakulam, concluding the Maha Shivaratri festival [16]. Special pujas are also conducted at this temple every Saturday, Sunday, full moon (Pournami) and

new moon (Amavasai) throughout the year, drawing devotees from various parts of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

5.3 Poovakku Belief

Among the Malayali indigenous community of Palamalai, the practice of seeking divine consultation known as "Poovakku" at the Sitteswarar Temple has been in vogue since time immemorial. Auspicious family events are undertaken only after consulting this oracle. Devotees pray to Sitteswarar and place white oleander flowers (arali poo) upon the deity's head. If one oleander flower falls, the endeavor is believed to succeed; if two fall, it will be slightly delayed; and if more than two fall, the endeavor is expected to encounter obstacles, prompting actions aligned with this divination.

6. Worship of Sri Thainattu Maha Mariamman

The Sri Thainattu Maha Mariamman Temple is located in the Periyakulam area of Palamalai. The annual festival of this temple is celebrated with great splendor during the Tamil month of Panguni. This Mariamman festival is traditionally observed to invoke rain and heal epidemic diseases [17]. Led by the community's governing leaders, the Oor Pattakkaraar, Manthiri and Oor Gounder the villagers proceed to the clan deity Chellandiyamman Temple, fetch Kaveri theertham (holy water), perform puja there and bring it to Palamalai to perform abhishekam for Sri Thainattu Maha Mariamman before planting the ritual pillar (kambam). Unlike other regions where wooden poles are used, a fresh banana tree stem is planted as the kambam, a tradition strictly preserved.

The festival spans fifteen days. The Sri Thainattu Maha Mariamman in Periyakulam is considered the elder sister, while the Mariamman Temple in Nagampathi, located two villages away, is considered the younger sister (Thanga), and the two goddesses are believed to be siblings. The final three-day festival of the Nagampathi Thanga Mariamman Temple is celebrated in conjunction with the Sri Thainattu Maha Mariamman Temple. Rituals and pujas are held twice daily, morning and evening, accompanied by traditional instrumental music and folk kummi songs performed by men and women at night.

The festival gains heightened significance from the thirteenth day, featuring fulfillment of vows such as carrying milk pots (Vilakku Maveduthal), carrying fire pots (Agni Satti), body piercing (Azhagu Kuthuthal), and fireworks. On the morning of the fourteenth day, after animal sacrifices (goats and roosters), preparation of pongal, and annadanam, the ritual pillar (kambam) is uprooted, carried around the temple three times, and immersed in a well or water body. Folk drama (Koothu) is performed that night.

The fifteenth and final day features the highly significant event of reciting the oral history of the Malayali indigenous people [18]. Community leaders and hereditary trustees governing the Palamalai villages are honored with turbans (urumaalai) and floral garlands as a mark of supreme respect. These leaders address the gathering to highlight the festival's glory and heritage, followed by the recitation of their lineage history through oral tradition. According to this account, their origins trace back to Kanchipuram, recounting folktales of their settlement in the hills.

As the narrative goes, three brothers from Kanchipuram once set out into the forests with hunting dogs. Due to heavy rains, they were unable to return home for three days. When only their dogs returned without their husbands, the wives presumed their husbands were dead and died by suicide. In reality, the men returned home safely, and upon learning of their wives' tragic demise, they were overcome with profound grief, rendering them unable to live within their original society. They decided to leave permanently: the eldest brother married a woman from the Gounder (Kaikolar) community and settled in the large hill

known as Kalrayan Hills; the middle brother married a woman from the Vettuva community and settled in Pachaimalai; and the youngest brother married a woman from the Devendra community and settled in Kollimalai. Their descendants came to be known as the Big Malayalis (Periya Malayalis), Pachaimalai Malayalis, and Kollimalai Malayalis, respectively [19].

However, Bakthavatsala Bharathi notes that three Vellala brothers set out from Kanchipuram to retrieve the idol of their clan deity, which had been stolen by Irula priests; subsequently, the youngest brother settled in Kollimalai, the middle brother in Pachaimalai and the eldest in Kalrayan Hills [20]. Malayalis living in various parts of Tamil Nadu accept the tradition that they are descendants of migrants from Kanchipuram and Edgar Thurston identifies the Palamalai Malayalis as a branch of this Malayali community [21]. Those who migrated from Kanchipuram to Kollimalai subsequently journeyed in search of Irula kizhangu and settled in Palamalai. The Irulas were the earliest inhabitants of Palamalai, followed by other tribal groups who eventually migrated elsewhere due to changing times, leaving the Malayali tribespeople as the sole continuous residents to this day [22].

Following this oral history recitation, the traditional Manjuvirattuthal (bull-taming/chasing) ritual takes place. In this traditional Malayali ritual, decorated bulls are released one by one into the public arena where villagers gather. Amidst the beating of traditional drums and instruments, young men chase the bulls, repeating the ritual three times [23]. This is followed by a tug-of-war competition where maternal uncles and brothers-in-law pull on one side against the clan members (Pangalis) on the other. Afterward, the rope used in the competition is carried three times around the Mariamman temple to conclude the contest, a similar event also taking place at the Nagampathi Mariamman Temple.

Subsequently, the Sri Thainattu Maha Mariamman idol is placed in a palanquin and taken in a ceremonial procession with turmeric water (Manjal Neerattu) to the Nagampathi Thanga Mariamman Temple, where devotees stay overnight for special pujas. The following morning, the idol is brought back in a palanquin to Periyakulam, and the festival concludes with final worship at the clan deity Chellandiyamman Temple.

7. Village Specific Worship (Oor Sirappu)

The worship practice known as "Oor Sirappu" (Village Special), conducted at the Vinayagar temples in the Palamalai region, holds special prominence. Rituals such as warding off the evil eye (kan drishti), divining oracles (vaaku kuri kettal) and consuming Thaluvu Soru are observed as traditional faith-based ceremonies. Vinayagar temples are typically situated for every two or three villages, and special pujas under the name "Oor Sirappu" are conducted in these temples to seek divine oracles.

For instance, for the Oor Sirappu puja held in the Eichangadu village of Palamalai, villagers collect a household tax among themselves, travel to nearby Guruvarettiur to cover public expenses and perform special pujas for Vinayagar, culminating in the smashing of a ritual ash gourd at a triple-junction (muchandhi) to ward off the evil eye. Following ancestral customs, special pujas including pongal and kali offerings are made to Vinayagar. Accompanied by ritual horn-blowers (Dasars) [24], the priest and villagers carry all ritual items, sandalwood paste, garlands, and holy water to the Sitteswarar Temple at the peak of the seventh hill to perform pujas for Sitteswarar and Perumal before returning to the Vinayagar temple.

Three to five Dasars are then seated in a row, and meals including sambar rice and Thaluvu Soru [25] (rice shaped into balls) served on banana leaves are offered. Childless couples seek divine grace by receiving a symbolic lap-arms (madi pichai) of Thaluvu Soru from the Dasars and consuming it, believing it will bless them with offspring through divine favor. Following this, the Dasars partake of their meal and annadanam

is distributed to the general public. This event vividly showcases the social participation, traditional customs, and beliefs of the village community [26].

8. Worship of Lord Senrayaperumal

This temple was originally established by the Irulas. According to oral history, the Malayali indigenous people who migrated from Kanchipuram have continued to observe Perumal worship as part of their traditional religious heritage [27]. Perumal worship is conducted throughout the Tamil month of Purattasi in Palamalai. Thousands of devotees visit to worship, particularly on Purattasi Saturdays and Sundays, as well as on full moon (Pournami) and new moon (Amavasai) days. Because Perumal is housed within the Sitteswarar Temple at the peak of the seventh hill, the people accept and worship both Shiva and Perumal without distinction, joyfully shouting "Govinda, Govinda" with profound devotion during their darshan.

9. Conclusion

The worship practices of the Palamalai people form a vital part of their deep spiritual faith and social life. The veneration of Chellandiyamman, temple-houses, Sitteswarar, Sri Thainattu Maha Mariamman, Oor Sirappu and Senrayaperumal are intimately connected with the lifestyle of these people. Notably, the Sri Thainattu Maha Mariamman festival and Maha Shivaratri worship serve as key occasions reflecting social solidarity, tradition and tribal identity, while ancestor remembrance is perpetuated through temple-house worship.

The narration of oral history preserves and transmits the origin and migration history of the Malayali indigenous community to subsequent generations. Traditional heritage elements such as kummi songs, folk theater (Koothu), annadanam, pillar planting (kambam naduthal) and bull-taming (manjuvirattuthal) articulate the cultural identity of the tribe. These ritual traditions, performed to cure ailments and invoke rain, exemplify the unique heritage of Tamil tribal culture. This study serves as an essential documentation recording the spiritual and cultural memory of the Palamalai indigenous lifestyle.

10. References

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13. The place where the Shiva utsavar idol is safeguarded is known as Samimadam.
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