

## A STUDY ON THE TRADITIONAL LIFESTYLE AND CULTURAL STRUCTURE OF TRIBALS IN TAMIL NADU

Ms. G.Hemalatha<sup>1</sup> & Dr.A.Karkuzhali<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar & <sup>2</sup>Associate Professor & Head,  
PG & Research Department of History,  
Kundhavai Naachiyar Govt. Arts College for Women (Autonomous),  
Affiliated with Bharathidasan University, Thanjavur – 7.  
Email ID: hemarajangd@gmail.com

69

### ABSTRACT

India is a diverse tapestry of numerous tribal communities. Presently, indigenous tribal groups continue to inhabit the remote and forested areas of the country. India, with its ancient origins, sustains a significant population of these indigenous peoples, who serve as living testaments to the nation's historic heritage. Across various regions of our country, these remarkable tribal communities reside, often far from the bustling urban centers. They persist in their traditional way of life, deriving their livelihood from agriculture, the gathering of forest resources, and hunting. The Tribal population has a close traditional association with the territory or a tribal domain with the tribal community enjoying a collective command over the natural resources. Tribal human rights provide fundamental insights into the causes, manifestations and consequences of human rights violations experienced by Tribal communities. The tribal economy can be termed as a subsistence economy or a primitive economy. A large number of tribes are still dependent on cultivation, food gathering and fruit collecting exercises for their survival. They are at the lowest stage of social and economic order in India.

**Keywords:** Tribes, Tradition, Culture, ancient origins, forest, Natural resources, historical heritage,

### INTRODUCTION

Tamil Nadu, the southern jewel of India, Nestled in the hilly regions of the Nilgiris, Anaimalai Hills, Western Ghats, and other remote areas, these tribes have upheld their unique traditional lifestyle and cultural structure. This article explores the rich tapestry of traditions and customs that define the lives of Tamil Nadu's tribal people. These several tribal communities, has their unique language, customs, and traditions. Some of the most prominent tribes in the region include the Irulas, Todas, Kurumbas, Kattunayakans, Paniyans, and several others. Despite the diversity among these communities, they share a deep connection with nature and a commitment to preserving their cultural heritage. While urbanization and modernization have swept through many parts of the state, there are still tribes living in the remote and hilly regions of Tamil Nadu, such as the Nilgiri Hills, Anaimalai Hills, and the Western Ghats. These tribal communities have managed to preserve their traditional way of life, customs, and practices, which are deeply intertwined with the natural environment. In this article, we will delve into the traditional life of tribals in Tamil Nadu and explore their harmonious relationship with nature.

### Ancient Tamil Tribes

According to tradition, millions of years ago, the geological formations in areas such as Chennai, Nilgiris, Palani, and Anaimalai in Tamil Nadu came into being. It is within these regions that the Tamil people resided during prehistoric times. In Attirampakkam archaeologists from the Sharma Centre for Heritage Education excavated an ancient stone tool which suggests that a humanlike population existed in the Tamil Nadu region somewhere around 300,000 years before Homo sapiens arrived from Africa. A discovery of a rare fossilized baby brain in Viluppuram district, by a team of archaeologists was reported in April 2003, It is estimated to be about 187,000 years - 200,000 years or older. The ancestor of modern humans who appeared around 50,000 years ago was more developed and could make thinner flake tools and blade-like tools using a variety of stones. From about 10,000 years ago, humans made still smaller tools called Microlithic tools. In 1949, researchers found such microliths in Tirunelveli district



Archaeological evidence suggests that the microlithic period lasted between 6000–3000 BCE. Throughout the prehistoric era, the Tamil people underwent significant transformations. During the Paleolithic period, the inhabitants employed unpolished stone tools, as evidenced by discoveries in Chengleput, North Arcot, South Arcot, Madurai, Thanjavur, Salem, and Tiruchirappalli districts. The Neolithic period saw the usage of polished stone tools, which have been unearthed in districts like Salem, Dharmapuri, and Vellore.

### In Sangam period

The Sangam literature delineates a five-fold division of land that played a pivotal role in determining the occupation and cultural practices of its inhabitants. Within the hilly regions, various tribal groups spoke a multitude of languages. Ancient Tamil literature stands as a testament to the antiquity of the Tamil people, asserting them as an ancient human race. Tolkappiyam claims that Kurinji, Mullai, Marutham, Neithal, and Palai were the five land classifications that served as the foundation for the ancient Tamil civilization. The inhabitants were also divided into Kurumbar (forest tribes), Ulavar (farmers), Malavar (tribes), Arivar (educated people), and Parathavar (fisherman) based on their occupation. Despite the apparent absence of religion, the populace worshipped Murugan, Mayon, Indran, Varunan, and Kottravai. The Sangam Age is defined as the time from the beginning of the third century B.C. to the beginning of the third century A.D. Since the Sangam era, the Chera, Chola, and Pandya kingdoms have dominated a significant portion of Tamil Nadu. Following this, Tamil Nadu saw the beginning of the Kalabhra dynasty, which lasted until the sixth century A.D. This time frame offers a rationale for the disappearance of the established order depicted in Sangam literature as existing in the Tamil Nadu.

### History and origins of Indian tribal communities

The history and origins of Indian tribal communities can be traced back to ancient times. Many Indian tribes have lived in the region for thousands of years, with their origins dating back to the earliest human settlements. They are considered as original inhabitants of the land. The tribes have their own unique history, culture and traditions. They have their own creation stories and beliefs. They have their own system of governance, social norms and customs. They have their own economic system, based on hunting-gathering, and agriculture. During the colonial period, the British government's policy towards the tribes was that of exploitation and subjugation. They imposed their own administrative and economic systems on the tribes, often at the expense of traditional tribal practices and customs. This led to the displacement and marginalization of many tribal communities.

After the independence of India, the government has recognized the rights of the tribes and implemented policies and initiatives to promote the welfare of these communities. These policies include reservation in education and government jobs, land rights and forest rights, and financial assistance for economic development. However, many tribes continue to face significant challenges such as displacement, poverty, and loss of their traditional way of life. Additionally, during the post-colonial period, many Indian tribal communities have experienced significant changes as a result of modernization and development. This includes the displacement of tribes from their traditional lands due to large-scale development projects such as dams, mines, and industrialization. The tribes have also been affected by the changing political and economic policies of the government, which have often led to the erosion of their traditional ways of life and loss of their cultural heritage. Overall, the history and origins of Indian tribal communities are rooted in ancient traditions and cultures, but their history has also been shaped by the forces of colonization and more recent government policies.

### Language

"Language" means what is translated, what is spoken by the mouth and heard by the ear is very aptly named by the Tamils as "Language". People's lives depend on language, signs, symbols, facial expressions, hand gestures, paintings, and letters to express their ideas. But language is the chief among them. The languages of the world are divided into cultural languages and non-cultural languages. Among the Dravidian languages, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu and Tulu are considered cultural languages. Unwritten tribal languages are considered cultural languages. This is because tribal languages



remain spoken languages. It has no written form, and the tribal people of Tamilnadu speak their language amongst themselves. They also used to speak in Tamil while talking to outsiders. Each tribal people has a separate mother tongue which is merely a colloquial language. All the tribal peoples remember their ancestors, nature (sun, moon, forest, rain).

### **Cultural Practices and Traditions / Traditional lifestyle of tribals in Tamil nadu**

Tribal communities have their own unique traditional way of life, religious beliefs, and social structures. These are shaped by the environment, resources, and history of the region in which they live their culture is based on customs. It includes all the stages of the people from birth to death, so culture emerges not only from the present day activities of the tribal people but also from the tragic activities. The tribal communities have a unique relationship with the environment and have been stewards of forest and natural resources for centuries. They have a traditional knowledge which can be useful in preserving the biodiversity and ecological balance. Therefore understanding the traditional ecological knowledge and practices of these communities can be beneficial in conservation efforts.

Another aspect of the traditional way of life of Indian tribal communities is their relationship to the spiritual world. Many tribes have a rich tradition of rituals, festivals, and ceremonies that are deeply connected to their religious beliefs. These rituals and ceremonies are often associated with the natural cycles of life, such as the changing of the seasons, and are performed to honor the spirits of the land, the ancestors, and the gods. The traditional way of life religious beliefs, and social structures of Indian tribal communities are complex and diverse, shaped by a unique set of historical, cultural, and environmental factors. The tribal communities are also characterized by a close-knit relationship between generations. The tribes have a tradition of passing down knowledge, skills, and cultural practices from one generation to the next. This helps to preserve their cultural heritage and ensure that their traditional way of life is passed on to future generations.

### **Settlements**

The topography plays a crucial role in determining the way of life for people who are living in harmony with nature. Typically, these tribes reside in forested regions and the surrounding areas, adapting their strategies based on the local ecology. The tribes' settlements are dispersed across the hills, with a low population density and expansive land coverage.

**Housing and Settlements:** Tribal dwellings in Tamil Nadu are typically simple, reflecting the nomadic or semi-nomadic nature of their lives. The architecture is designed to be in harmony with nature, using materials like bamboo, thatch, and mud. These eco-friendly houses are well-suited to the local climate, providing comfort and shelter in both hot and cold weather.

**Traditional Housing and Settlements:** Tribal dwellings in Tamil Nadu reflect a deep understanding of the environment and an eco-friendly approach to life. Typically constructed by using local sourced materials like bamboo, thatch, and mud, these homes blend seamlessly with the surrounding landscape. They are well-suited to the region's varied climate, providing respite from both the scorching heat and the chilly nights.

### **Family and kinship**

The family, which serves as the foundation of social structure, plays a crucial role in bringing individuals together. It serves as the primary and versatile organization within society.

### **Agriculture and Forest-based Livelihoods**

The traditional lifestyle of Tamil Nadu's tribal people revolves around agriculture and forest-based livelihoods. Shifting cultivation, commonly referred to as "podu" farming, is a widespread practice. This method involves clearing a small portion of the forest, cultivating crops for a few years, and then relocating to another site. The tribal economy is primarily based on agriculture. But, now the systematic and settled cultivation is not largely found due to unequal terrain and slope of the land. The important crops cultivated by the tribes are paddy, coffee, tea, cinchona and plantation crops like Pepper, Garlic, Ginger, Nutmeg, Glues and Cardamom and also they are growing vegetables like Radish, Carrot, Beet root, Cabbage, Curnip, Potato, etc. It is an eco-sensitive approach that allows the land to regenerate naturally and sustain their agricultural needs without causing significant harm to the environment. Millets,



ragi, pulses, and indigenous varieties of rice are among the crops grown through this method. Forest resources are a significant source of sustenance for these tribes. They possess an intricate knowledge of the local flora and fauna, which has been passed down through generations. This knowledge enables them to lead a sustainable lifestyle, as they collect medicinal plants, honey, and various non-timber forest products without over-exploiting the natural resources. Additionally they engaged in accumulating minor wooded area merchandise which includes roots, tubers, fruits, leaves and additionally deer horns. In the wooded area they gather hill brooms, special forms of tubers like hekke, bennia, korani, narane and nuraga. They additionally gather fertilized eggs of the peacocks from the wooded area and hatched, putting them together with hen's eggs. Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, has prohibited the looking the wild animals and birds with a view to ensuring the ecological and environmental security so they were turned into fishing and crab catching that are most familiar among the tribal people.

### Honey Harvesting

The historical device of honey harvesting remains accompanied with the aid of using Kattunayakans. There is an opinion that this profession is operating as a mechanism to defend each small department of a tree, in order that the tree is massive and sturdy and bees can prosper. They agree with that eleven though it's miles injustice to the insects, however a mechanism to preserve forest.

### Cultural Practices

The tribal communities of Tamil Nadu treasure their rich cultural heritage, which is centered on oral traditions, music, dance, and rituals. Folk songs, traditional dances and street play and storytelling are integral components of their lives. Also they have a tradition of art forms such as Art and crafts. These art forms are important aspects of these cultural expressions often celebrate their profound connection with nature, with many songs and dances depicting stories from the forests and their everyday activities. These communities have a rich cultural heritage that is an important part of Tamil history and identity. Understanding the cultural practices, traditions, and customs of these communities allows us to gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of Tamil and Indian cultural diversity. They have some of unique cultural practices and traditions of different tribal communities these practices and traditions are shaped by the environment, resources, and history of the region in which they live.

### Traditional Healing and Natural Medicine

In the days when pills, medicines and surgical procedures are growing amazingly in the modern days, only the Goths, the people of the Nilgiri Hills, still practice herbal medicine in the majority. These people are introducing herbal medicine in their diet. The practice of going to government and private hospitals for medical treatments are rare. Apart from healing, they are also go to doctors for the diseases. Herbal medicine is used for diseases such as headache, eye pain, body heat, stomach ache, injured ulcer, bone fracture, rash, scabies, vomiting, poison bite, thorn bite, maternity, mother's health maintenance, jaundice. Leaves, pulp, stems, roots, etc. are also used in herbal medicine. They often practice a lot of medicine in an unscripted manner

### Traditional believes, Festivals, Rituals, Ceremonies and Nature worship

Indian tribal communities have a rich tradition of festivals, rituals, and ceremonies that are deeply connected to their religious beliefs and cultural practices. These festivals, rituals, and ceremonies are often associated with the natural cycles of life, such as the changing of the seasons, and are performed to honor the spirits of the land, the ancestors, and the gods. Animism, in its complete development, consists of the notion in souls and in a destiny state, in controlling deities and subordinate spirits the ones doctrines almost ensuing in a few form of lively worship. Thus, in primitive societies, faith is having that means of the notion in religious beings. The practices of Worship the animals, nature, Sun, Moon and fire. Tribal rituals and ceremonies are essential elements of their cultural structure. These ceremonies are often conducted to seek the blessings of nature, appease deities, and mark important life events such as births, marriages, and deaths.

### Clothing and Adornments

Traditional tribal clothing is both functional and artistic. Men typically wear loincloths or dhotis, Adornments hold a significant place in their culture, with jewelry crafted from locally available materials



like beads, shells, feathers, and stones. The Irula women predominantly wear sarees, typically in bright colors. These sarees are often adorned with intricate patterns and embroidery. Traditional jewelry, such as nose rings and bangles, complements their attire. The men of the Irula tribe typically wear a traditional dhoti, a rectangular piece of cloth tied around the waist. This dhoti is often accompanied by a shirt or vest, and they may accessorize with bead necklaces or metal jewelry. The Paniyan women are known for their distinctive dress, which includes a skirt made of woven palm leaves. They pair this skirt with a blouse and often embellish their attire with beadwork and other ornaments. Paniyan men are known for their unique attire, which consists of a simple loincloth made from palm leaves or cotton fabric. They also wear a shirt, and their clothing is often adorned with beadwork or patterns. The Kurumba women typically wear simple and comfortable clothing, including a saree with bold patterns and jewelry made from beads and metals. The sarees are bright and colorful, reflecting their vibrant culture. The Kurumba men wear dhotis or lungis, both of which are traditional lower garments. They may pair these with a simple shirt. Their attire is typically functional, reflecting their way of life in the hilly terrains. The Badaga women are recognized for their unique traditional dress, which consists of a pleated skirt called 'pattu pavadai.' The fabric is made of silk and is characterized by intricate designs and bold colors. The Badaga men don a traditional attire known as "mundu," which is a draped garment similar to a dhoti. The mundu is usually white and is complemented by a shirt or kurta. They may also wear a turban. These ornaments are often imbued with cultural significance and are worn on special occasions and festivals.

### Challenges and Preservation

While the traditional life of tribals in Tamil Nadu is unique and sustainable, At the same time tribal communities often face significant challenges in the modern era and marginalization, including poverty, lack of access to education and healthcare, and displacement due to development projects. Increasing deforestation, encroachment on their lands, and a lack of access to education and healthcare pose significant hurdles to their way of life. Efforts are being made by the government and non-governmental organizations to address these challenges and protect the rights and traditions of tribal communities. It includes land rights, skill development, and educational programs that aim to strike a balance between preserving tradition and embracing modernity. Understanding these issues is crucial for developing effective policies and initiatives to address these challenges and promote the well-being of these communities.

### Research Methodology

The aim of the study is to bring out the Tribes of Tamil nadu, their habitats in the District, their mode of life attributed and to understand their society and culture in their place. Further, their pattern of agriculture, Cultural condition, Traditional system, worship, believes and faith and the social control mechanism of them. The study is mainly based on primary data supported by secondary literatures. The data collected were sorted out and scrutinized scientifically without bias and the facts derived in such a way have been presented under suitable chapter heads. The four different methods of historical research i.e., exposition, explanation, narration and critical analysis have been applied wherever needed. The objectives of the study are draw an ethnographies profile of the tribes, To understand traditional occupational structure- mean of likelihood, To protect the tribal's Nobel culture-way of life, To reveal the character and history of the tribes in comprehensive manner, To know the Tribes habitats in their geological area and their distribution in it, To identify the cultural feature of Tribes.

### Review Discussion

**Magimairaj et al (2017)** tried to analyze the socio-economic status and problems of the Toda tribes in the Nilgiris area. There are six particularly vulnerable tribal groups in the Nilgiri area - Todas, Irulars, Kotas, Kurumbas, Paniyas, and Kattunayakans.

**Shabeer et al (2017)** reviewed the health status of tribal communities in Kerala and tried to analyze the health status of eight prominent tribal communities in Kerala based on a primary survey of 300 tribal households in three states with a predominance of tribes. The results of the study showed that the assets and incomes of tribal households show significant differences and inequalities between communities.

**Jasmine et al (2018)** tried to understand the migration of tribes in India and use secondary data from the



Indian census. The study showed that most tribal areas are undulating, inaccessible and undulating plateaus in the forest areas of the country, which leads to a detour of general development programs. They have a negative energy balance, a high incidence of disease and a low level of child survival.

**Tame Ramya (2018)** addressed the socio-economic problems facing tribal youth in Nyishi due to unemployment in Arunachal Pradesh. The purpose of the study is to identify the social and psychological consequences of unemployment among young people of the Nyishi tribes and their families. The study showed that unemployment is not an individual problem, but it is a serious and serious problem for the whole society and the state.

**Pratap Kumar Jena et al (2016)** attempted to analyze the forest and the livelihoods of the tribes in the Kandhamala, Odish region. The study was conducted solely on the basis of the initial survey. This study also showed that there are more people involved in the main occupation, that is, the agricultural sector. In secondary occupation, a large number of people collect forest products.

### Conclusion

The traditional lifestyle and cultural structure of Tamil Nadu's tribal people are living testament to the harmonious coexistence of humans with nature. Their deep-rooted customs and profound connection with the environment offer invaluable lessons in sustainability and cultural preservation. As Tamil Nadu continues to develop and modernize, it is vital that efforts are made to support and safeguard the unique traditions and lifestyles of these indigenous communities, ensuring that their rich heritage thrives for generations to come.

### ReferenceAs:

- Thurston Edgar. 1987. The Caste and Tribes of Southern India, VII (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services): p.377
- Laxmidhar Swain. 2017. "Political Empowerment of Tribal Women Legislators and Parliamentarians in (Odisha) - An Indian State", Asian Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities, 7 (11): Pp. 186-203.
- Jakka Parthasarathy. 2005. Kattunayakans of Nilgiri District, Tamil Nadu (Udhagamandalam: Tribal Research Centre): Pp.28,Pp.63- 64
- Religions and Religious Freedom in India", page 20
- Rajendran, Ancient Asia, Homo Sapiens (Archaic) Baby Fossil of the Middle Pleistocene, December 2014. Retrieved 10.03. 2014.
- K.A.N. Sastri, A History of South India, p. 45.
- The Times of India. "Over 2 lakh years old fossilised skull found", 31 March 2003.
- K.A.N. Sastri, A History of South India, p. 46.
- Shanti Pappu; Yanni Gunnell; Maurice Taieb; Jean-Philippe Brugal; K. Anupama; Raman Sukumar; Kumar, Akhilesh. The Excavations at Palaeolithic Site of Attirampakkam, South India Antiquity. 77 (297).
- "Archaeobotany of Early Historic sites in Southern Tamil Nadu". 13 February 2006. Retrieved 15 May 2006.
- Vellore Revolt 1806- Archived on 27 September 2007. Retrieved 15 May 2006.
- Historical Atlas of South India-Timeline - French Institute of Pondicherry. Archived from 28 September 2006. Retrieved 15 May 2006.
- Excavations at Arikamedu - 24 April 2006. Retrieved 16 May 2006.
- Chattopadhyaya, Brajadulal (2009). A Social History of Early India CSC and Pearson Education. pp. 31–32. ISBN9788131719589
- K.A.N. Sashtri, A History of South India, pp 109–112 -, p 129 August 2006.
- Kanchan Sinha, Kartikeya in Indian art and literature, Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan (1979).
- 'Everywhere within Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi's domain, and among the people beyond the borders, the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Satyaputras the Keralaputras, as far as Tamraparni...' 'Ashoka's second minor rock edict". Colorado State University 15 November 2006.
- K.A.N. Sastri, The Cōḷas, 1935 p 20, Hathigumpha Inscription - Epigraphia Indica, Vol. XX (1929–1930). Delhi, 1933, pp 86–89. Missouri Southern State University-15 November 2006.

