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The Social Practices Of Maha Malasar Tribes Of Western Ghats In The Anamalai Hills Of Coimbatore District – A Study

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ABSTRACT
The paper highlights the social practices of MahaMalasar Tribes of Western Ghats in the Anamalai Hills.The MahaMalasar Tribes are a small tribal group in Coimbatore District and they are medium stature, dark in colour having curly hair.Their dialect is different from others,because they speak in Tamil which is mixed with Malayam words.They are living in 5 settlements and the total population is 76.Their houses are made of bamboo walls,odai leaves and roof with cement sheets and floors are made of mud.They are nuclear type of families with inheritance and succession through the male line.The MahaMalasarare non-vegetarians but avoid eating beef and buffalo meat.Their men wear long dhoties and women wear coloured sarees.The main occupation of the people is food gathering from the forest. Their usual custom is to have arranged marriages.They are mostly following Hinduism.The MahaMalasarare socially and educationally backward but healthcare wise they are stronger.

Keywords: Arasan, Kattujathi, Alai, Mooppan, Ponnuthalavi, Kilangu, KalVazhai, Maada, Seekakai, Thandais, Karumathi, Perungunru.

Introduction

The Anamalai Hills lies in the Coimbatore, Tiruppur and Dindigul districts and these districts are located in Kongu Nadu since ancient times. The MahaMalasar Tribe lives in Anamalai Hills and they are a small tribal community at the local level in Tamil Nadu and they are found only in the Coimbatore District. [1] The Maha Malasars are living in 5 settlements like koomatti in Ulandy Range, Nagaroothu I, Nagaroothu II, Chinnarpathy in Pollachi range and Palakinaar in Manampolli range.[2] They are in the 19th place in the list of Scheduled Tribes in Tamil Nadu. [3] The Tribe consists mere 76 people. Among the 76, 42 are male 34 are female.[4]

Historical Background of the MahaMalasar

Malasar is the generic name for the group of tribes known as Maha Malasar or Malai Malasar. Their name has originated from the combination of the words Arasan (King) and Mala or Malai (hill) to connote king of the forest. The prefix Maha has been added to indicate that they are a superior tribal inhabiting the high mountains.[1] The famous historian Ayyappan mentioned that there may be three grades of Malasars, firstly Malai (hill), secondly those who live in the slopes and thirdly those who live in the plains.[2] K.S.Singh (1997) expresses the view that the Malasar are different from the Maha Malasar and identified the Maha Malasar as a separate tribe with distinctive physical features.[3] Census of India (1961) in its ethnographic notes says that the Malasar is different from the MahaMalasar.[4]

Territory of MahaMalasar

In olden days they roamed in Anamalai hills as semi nomadic tribes and they had ‘alai’ or rock caves in dense forest areas as their huts namely mavalai, perungundru alai, seyalar alai etc,. They started integrated farming and settled near river basins before 65 years. They followed shifting cultivation method as such they moved from one place to another. According to the Micro Plan Record, 2020-2025 of Anamalai Tiger Reserve Pollachi Division mention that at first they settled as a society in Kalluparai. Then the settlement shifted to Koomatti inUlandy Range.Other settlements of the Maha Malasar people are Nagaroothu I, Nagaroothu II and Chinnarpathy in Pollachi Range, Palakinaar in Manampolli Range which are in Coimbatore District.[5] They do not like to live with any of the other tribes, and choose lonely spots away from the dwellings of the others.

Physical appearance and Language of Maha Malasars

They are medium height dark in colour and have curly hair which the men knot at the back and the women on the top of the head; Men have a poor growth of hair on their faces and seldom shave.[6] The women part their hair in the middle and knot it at the back. They have prominent noses with many having protruding pointed chins and thin lips. The
Maha Malasar youth cut their hair while older men keep it long and tie it in a tuft.
Their dialect is different from others, because they speak in Tamil which is mixed with Malayalam words.
Tenement of MahaMalasars

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They lived in overhangs and caves shifting from time to time depending on need and if agricultural of was being carried out. Rock faces and outcrops were also used to build huts out of KalVazhai. Later on huts made of bamboo thatch were used as they began shifting cultivation in some patches of the forest. They came to Kolathiparai and created rudimentary huts on the forest flower but were forced to change. As a male elephant with long tusks frequented this region they constructed their houses on trees creating platforms with a bamboo framework an thatch high up from the ground. These are called Maada and were reached with ladders and rope.[7] At present in koomatti settlement, they live in huts made of bamboo wall, odai leaves as roof with plastic sheets, tin roof huts, cement sheet huts and floors are made of mud. In NagaroothuI ,Nagaroothu II and Chinnarpathy settlements they have walls made of zinc with pillars of teak and roof made of cement sheets. In Palakinaar settlement they have huts made of mud mixed with bamboo as walls and roof made up of tin sheets.[8]

Family Life

The MahaMalasar live only in nuclear type of families with succession are through the male line. They prefer simple nucleated families, as soon as a son gets married he is asked to live separately in a separate hut. The daughter in law is not expected to speak to her father in law. She cannot talk to her husband's elder brother. Finer details about their family life about intimacies and rivalries are not so well known to outsiders. The women carry their baby on their back using a cloth tied across their shoulders as a bundle.[9]

Administration in the MahaMalasar Tribe

MahaMalasar settlement has a elderly man who is called as Mooppan. He is the head man for the community in that settlement. After the death of an office holder his brother or son whoever is elder is made the Mooppan, In all social matters pertaining to the community he decides issues with the help of other male leaders in the settlement. The tribals generally go by the decision of this council. Women also participate as ponnuthalaivi who has an important role in the mechanism of social control. The headman Mooppan prescribes the work to be done on the landlord's fields and hears complaints and presides at marriage festivals. He has to look after the welfare of the community.[10]

Food Habits

They are non - vegetarians but avoid eating beef, buffalo and bison meat. They treat the cow as a polluting animal and carefully avoid touching it or its dung[11] They avoid products from cow like milk, buttermilk, butter, ghee etc,. If by chance they take tea or coffee they drink them without milk. They eat certain edible roots like KanalKilangu, Noorakkilangu, Nalikkilangu, Narkilangu, AyanaKilangu, SenganKilangu, KonkanKilangu, KurungKilangu etc.[12] They bought ragi or rice for food. Later they started cultivating ragi, maize, kuchivalliksilangu. Ragi became their staple food but now a days they have changed and started eating rice.[13]

Dress

The men used to wear short dhoties and they covered their body with half arm shirts or banians. The women wore coloured sarees with pallav thrown over the left shoulder. Some wore two cut pieces with one wound round their waist and another thrown over the shoulder. The waist piece does not extend to cover the ankles. Wearing of blouses was confined to a few of the younger women. The Children are mostly semi naked,they are not fully clad to protect themselves from the cold but they sleep by the side of the fire.[14]

Ornaments

The women folk wear cheap base metal ornaments in the neck and theywear plenty of silver or aluminium chains. In the nose they wear nose-screw or stone studded Besris. In the ears besides plugging the dilated ear lobes they also wear Koppu and Talukkas. They also wear Mayirmattis which is a white metal chain extending from the Koppus on the top of the ears to the centre of the tuft at the back. In the ankles they wear thick bangles called Thandais. In the wrist also they wear plenty of glass and base metal bangles. Some are seen to wear tight fitting Valais or silver rings in their upper arms. Many women have tattoo marks.[15]

Occupation

They practiced shifting cultivation and they planted ragi, maize, jackfruit,mango and yam. They collected forest produce and transported them to other areas so that they can barter and fetch food and commodities.[16] By Forest Rights Act 2006 they are able to gather honey, seekakai, seemarpul, injipul, kasthurimanjal, pepper, gooseberry, noorakkilangu, kanakilangu, thalikilangu. These items are given in the co-operative societies.[17] They also work in the forest department for creating fire lines, road repairs, patrolling and guiding anti-poaching teams. Some work as forest guards and fire watchers which are permanent and sometimes temporary.[18]

They carry a bill hook for cutting shrubs for cutting bamboos and for protecting themselves from wild animals. The women carry iron-pointed digging sticks to collect wild edible roots.[19]

Marriage

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The MahaMalasar is an endogamous division they marry their elder sister's daughter. The boy has to live in the girl's house for some time. This may extend from a month to a year and if the parties are satisfied the marriage is agreed to. The age of marriage varies from 13-16 for girls and 18-22 for boys. On the occasion of marriage and feasting they indulge in aatam which lasts the whole night. The consummation ceremony takes place the next day at the bride's home. They live in the neo local residence after marriage. Polygamy and junior surrogate are allowed in case the first wife is infertile but monogamy is the norm.[20]
Divorce cases are not found among the MahaMalasar, but their community allows for divorce (or) desertion on grounds of barrenness, chronic sickness or impotence. Divorce cases are decided with the consent of the Mooppan (headman). Divorce compensation is given to the aggrieved party. Either spouse can initiate divorces but children are the responsibility of the father. A divorced woman can remarry any person within the community under the rendantharam (2nd marriage) custom. Widows are allowed to remarry by the marukannalam (Remarriage) ritual.[21]

Child Birth
The woman is taken to her natal home for the first and second deliveries during either the eighth or ninth month. Most of them deliver their children at home with the help of an experienced mid wife. They observe birth pollution for seven days. They go for regular hospital visits and take medication these days. On the seventh day the mother and child are brought into the house after being given a bath. On this occasion they prepare payasam (sweet dish with jaggery) and serve it to their close relatives.[22] The naming of the child usually takes place 28 days or 3 months after birth. A child is named after a deity, by the pujari who gets inspired into an oracle Velichapadu and announced the name. Common names are Mallan, Mooppan, Karuppan etc., for males and Arasi, Malli, Kathi, Mayal, etc., for females.[23]

Puberty
When a girl attains puberty, they make a hut and the girl stays in it. The hut is made by the prospective groom of the girl. This hut is in the shape of a inverted cone. It is made of bamboo and odai leaves and the inside is covered by a saree. Some old lady gives company with the girl for nearly a month. The MahaMalasars consider that there is pollution for a month on the attainment of puberty. On the 30th day, the girl is taken home after the bath. Here turmeric water is sprinkle on the girl. New dresses are purchased and the girl is adorned with them by the women. They celebrate the day by singing some songs. Ear boring is not celebrated as a separate function but it is either combined with puberty or marriage ceremony.[24]

Religion
The MahaMalasars are essentially animists. They worship mountain peaks and rivers as symbolising them as goddesses in the shape of stones. The Mala Malasars of Valparai area worship VanabadraKaliamman and Banathiamman (Banaru is a river of the locality). The MahaMalasars of Top Slip area worship Perungunruamman, Ponnalamman, and Nagaroothuamman. Perungunru is a predominant peak and Nagaroothu, a rivulet of the locality.
For Banathiammanthey cook Pongal in the month of Thai (mid –January). They do not give any animal sacrifice to the deities. They worship by placing flowers, coconut, fruits, pansupari etc., before the idols. They smear the idols with Kumkum.[25]

Literacy
According to 2011 census total number of literates is 48; male 27 and female 21, total number of illiterates is 29, male 16 and female 13.[26] The number of degree holders in Chinnarpathy is 1 (female), Nagaroothu I is 2 (female) and Nagaroothu II is 1 (female). There are no degree holders in koomatti and Palakinaar settlements.[27]

Status of women
The women of MahaMalasar have a status equal to their men. They participate in all social, ritual and religious activities along with the men. They also participate in political and economic activities. They have decision making powers. As tradition the female member does the cooking, child care and helps in all activities.[28]

Health and Sanitation:
They are not so much pestered down by Malaria as in old days. They appear to be fairly clean. They frequently take baths in the streams flowing in the forests. They also take water fromthese streams for drinking purposes. To reach the stream they may have to go far deep along the slope in which they have built the houses. They keep the inside of the houses fairly clean but since they do not apply cow dung plaster, the flooring appears muddy.
For small ailments they have their own local remedies. When someone is bitten by a cobra, they grid the root of a plant called Pambukodi and apply it on the wound. For other cut wounds they apply the juice of a herb called Appathalai mixed with lime. For headache they apply a plaster of mustard, gallnut etc., on the forehead. For small pox they do not have any remedies. If there is any attack of this epidemic, they run away too far off places. They do not however have any antipathy for small pox vaccination.[29]

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Death

In olden days, it is said that the dead are taken to a remote place and left without any burial, to be eaten away by birds and wild animals. This, however, is not followed at present. They bury the body with head towards the south and face looking upwards. The body is wrapped up in a mat of Odai and then lowered into the pit. It is not the custom of the MahaMalasars to give a bath to the dead body before it is taken to the burial ground, but they wrap it with a new cloth and apply oil to the head. On the way to the burial ground, they chant some Mantram with a small stick or stone and throw it away with the belief that any ghost that may be following the bier may be prevented.

They perform Karumathi, the last day obsequies, on the 7th day. For this they cook rice with dhal, pepper etc, in a new pot and take it to the burial-around and leave it there to be eaten away by birds. The party returns home after taking bath on the way in some stream. On coming home they sprinkle turmeric water and burn incense with Kunkalyam in the house.[30]

Conclusion

The MahaMalasars are peace loving but virile people. They are still in the food-gathering stage.While they gather food, they observe taboo in eating mutton,which is the most common flesh-food consumed by non-vegetarians. They also avoid milk and milk products. They have simple ways of living. They shun civilized society. They very much belong to the forests. They are happy only when they are in thick forests infested by elephants.[31]

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