

Ecological life of Adiyaan tribes in Kunnathur padi of Kannur District in Kerala

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Abstract

Nature is defined as a space for the interrelated living of both biotic and abiotic resources. Human being is one among such living organisms. Civilized man through the increase of uncontrollable production and consumption has caused severe damage to the ecological balance. On the other Adivasi people who are living traditionally in the forests as well as on the hill sides by depending on the natural resources for their livelihoods, properly maintained the ecological balance. They used natural resources for food, treatments, housing, clothing and also for their rituals and worshiping systems. Though different studies had happened worldwide on the lives of Adivasis and their socio-cultural features very limited number of detailed studies have done on their eco-friendly life styles. This research would have been a serious attempt on this matter. This research would aim to analyse the ecological life style of Adiyaans, one of the prominent Adivasi groups in Kerala. This study would be using the qualitative approach by interviewing the respondents and probing their ecofriendly life styles in the areas like agriculture, food gathering, health care, customs and traditions.

Introduction

The Adivasi people are living by depending mainly on the forest and forest resources in any part of the world. They earned their living through shifting cultivation, hunting, gathering forest goods etc. They even utilized the forest goods for health care and treatment. They worshiped the forest deities by satisfying them through rituals. The Adivasis and their ecological life had never caused any ecological imbalances. The old generation people in Kerala were also not different in this regard. Adiyaan community is a prominent tribal group and is included in the existing 35 Adivasi groups in Kerala. The places like Mananthavady(North Wayanadu), Kunathoorpady in Kannur district, Puralimala, Coorg in Karnataka state (a place very near to the north Wayanadu) are the important settlements of Adiyaan community. This article attempts to address or analyse the ecological life of the Adiyaan community in Kunnathoorpady.

Agricultural Methods

Traditionally, shifting cultivation in the forest is the means of the Adiyaan community to gather their necessary food grains. People of Adiyann community were made slaves or tenants by the landlords and 'Janmis' to work in their field (Viswanathan Nair,2018). Shifting cultivation is also known as *Matta krushi and Kothichutta krishi*. The cultivation is made possible by clearing any part of forest by following the slash-and-burn method. They formed different plots to cultivate different items including

food grains such as paddy, maize, little millet and ragi; pulses like black gram, horse gram and dhal gram and other vegetables (Thomas Selia,2005). The people from the old generation had remembered the cultivation of the indigenous paddy seeds like Vellavayan, Chonnavayan, Kayama, Jeerakashala, Okkapallakkan, Kottachooran, Vachooran, kunjan vithu etc. in the Paddy region. The people created tents within the cultivating yard to protect the crops from the wild animals. Though the shifting cultivation seems to be shaking the ecological balance one could understand that it had only lesser impacts on nature. The people selected the areas like valleys and meadows that are less vegetated, for cultivation. The soil and trees were not really affected by the people's refusal to use the tools or weapons like axe and *Koonthali*. The nature would get ample time to regenerate itself as the cultivation shifts from one place to another in a regular interval of time (2-3 years). In the past, the density of the forest was very vast and the people cultivated only what they really want to have. They worship forest and they didn't cut trees without any purpose. They took care to protect forest by avoiding the cultivation of permanent crops like coconut trees and areca palm. The continuous cultivation in a single place by using chemical pesticides to sustain the fertility of the land has far reaching effects on health and nature. Once, the health of Adivasi people is determined by the cultivation of products in the land of natural fertility without adding any chemical substance.

The emergence of various control systems and forest laws in the later part of the 19th and 20th centuries put an end to the shifting cultivation (*matta krishi*) of the Adivasi communities. The British administration implemented provisions and laws to take back the forest from the Adivasis to the government to consume the forest goods for commercial purposes and also attempted to start the cultivation of money crops (Gadgil Madhav and Guha Ramachandra,1992). This denied the Adivasi's right over forest and the forest resources which ultimately led to the depletion of the forest. The remaining forests were later declared as reserve forests and wildlife sanctuaries. Thus the Adivasi people, who led eco-friendly life in vast forests were shifted to small pieces of land and to the world of money economy (Prakash, 2002).

Hunting and the storage of forest products

When we examine the conditions of production and consumption in the various stages of the history of human development, it becomes apparent that for a long run, it was based on the system of hunting and gathering. Precisely it was a period when people completely relied on nature for their survival, that particular time when they ventured into forests for hunting and collecting other edible products. It moved on to shifting cultivation and further developed a permanent farming technique which incorporated livestock rearing. Ancient tribes of Kerala have also gone through such stages.

The remnants of the earliest custom of hunting and eating is still visible in the lives of *Adiyaans*. This happens to be the absolute proof of their ecological livelihood.

According to Mythical records, *Muthappan* is the hunter God of *Adiyaans*. Their songs basically glorify hunting and are meant for pleasing God to gift them a good hunt. *Muthappan thottam* mentions the act of hunting wild animals and frying their flesh to eat.

Even today the bow and arrow is sheltered in each *Adiyaan* huts. From children to elderly every person is well trained to shoot perfectly without missing the target. Birds, weasels, rabbits, jungle fowls, sambar deer, hogs are hunted and eaten by them. They continue to fish in the forest streams to the date. *Chutta meen* (grilled or

fried fish) prepared in a traditionally built stove where it automatically gets cooked in a *Paadi* is the *Nivedhyam* (oblation) in their ritualistic practices.

Even today *Adiyaans* visit forest in groups or individually in order to collect honey. Until recently, different varieties of tubers and spinaches happened to be their main food items. *Adiyaan* has certified that the *Veluva kizhang* (a type of tuber) which grows out in a single climber in the forest would be enough to eat for two weeks. This particular tuber could be eaten both as raw and cooked.

Suffice to say, the *Adiyaans* who earned their living by hunting and gathering food from the woods were never failed to maintain the equilibrium of the ecosystem they share. Like any other organism, they were also innately blessed with an ecological conscience. Ever since the storage of forest products got controlled and also when people started to depend market for food supplies, major changes happened to these types of lifestyles and the food gathering system.

Drugs and Beverages

Every Adivasi communities produced intoxicated drinks using contents available in their habitats. Palm wine was unavoidable during different festivals of *Adiyaan* community. They made arrack using jaggery and paddy. They also put the leaves of *nhattippana* (*Arenga wighti*) and cinnamon in it. They stored these in a jar made out of clearing the core fleshy part of the palm tree's trunks. *Adiyaan* community's environmental insights are visible even in their intoxicated drinks.

Ritual Worships

The life of Adivasi people is replete with different ritual worship systems. They perform various ritual customs and worships from birth to death. Each ritual custom is known for its eco-friendliness. The ecological features of some traditional customs of *Adiyaan* community are described below.

Muthappan is an important deity of the *Adiyan* community in *Kunnathoorpady*. They conduct one month performance of *Muthappan* every year, starting from 16th December to 16th January, (*Dhanu* 2 – *Makaram* 2) by constructing the worshipping centre in an eco-friendly way. It is mandatory, even today, to get the palm leaves of *nhattippana* (*Arenga wighti*) to thatch the shrine (*Madappura*) by their own hand. The remaining parts were built by using *oda* (*Ochaladra rheedi*), bamboo, *oda* leaf, and *theruppapullu* (a type of grass). Only natural elements are used in the construction of *Muthappan* shrine.

The chief deity of the *Adiyaan* community is *Moolampetta Bagavathy* and is performing as part of the *Muthappan* festival. An important feature of *Moolampetta Bagavathy* is its head gear. The head gear of the deity is made out of the leaves of *Malavazha* (*Canna indica*). The leaves of *Malavazha* are stitched with the *oda* thread in the *oda* frame. The height of the head gear will be of three meter height. This reflects as a great model of the eco-friendly ritual worship of the *Adiyaan* community.

The weapon of *Muthappan* is bow and even today its chord is made by using *Adhambavalli* (*Cheervalli*, *spatholotus* or *vallichamatha*, *Beautiya parviflora*). This material is collected from the forest is boiled to rip its outer layer to create chord for the bow. It will last long and has strength than the artificial chords available in markets. Most of the *Adiyaa* families are having arrows and bow with them. The

children and the elders in the family are using these to hunt birds and other small creatures.

The pigeon peas and paddy produced from shifting cultivation only by the Adiyaan community were used for Muthappan Painkutti worship. Nowadays pigeon peas were replaced by beans. Adiyaathi who visits Muthappan with rice (*punnellu*) as gift, which she produced herself, makes the rice crushed in a mortar (*ural*) into a meal to the Adiyaan reveals the association of rituals to nature. The crushed odathandu is used in the past for making lighted torches and which were used to give attraction to the festivals in the night. Though electric lights were replaced its place during festivals the lighted torches were also using as part of rituals.

Even today the Adiyaa community is not following the cremation of body by fire. They are still using the wooden stretcher made of Poopparathy tree (*Thespesia populanea*) to carry the dead body and they are burying it in the land by having the belief that everything including leaves, trees, animals etc are dissolving into soil after death.

Thulabharam, is the important ritual of Kunnathoorpaddy Muthappan festival and is suggestive of the nature living of the ancient man. If the items that the devotee brings are not sufficient for Thulabharam, the devotee can even maintain the balance by adding stones. The devotee can even use stones for having Thulabharam. The Thulabharam by using stones can be taken as the genuine example of ancient man's simple way of living and nature worship. Stones were used as idols for worship and most of the Adivasi communities were worshipping the erected stone idols in the mud yard. Later, carved stones in the shape of gods and goddesses replaced the position of the old stone worships. A stone idol in the shrine is being worshiped at Kunnathoorpady by the Adiyaan community, even today. The nature can be the god of Adivasis when a stone can be perceived as a reflection of nature. The nature including trees, rocks, water reservoirs and any other eco-friendly temporary constructions can be their worshipping centres.

Nenmeni vaka (*Albesia lebek*) is a medicinal tree which has given prime importance in the rituals of Adiyaan. After menstruation the women community have to take bath from the Adiyaa fountain and have to reach under this tree to get purity back by touching it. Applying the paste of the crushed outer layer of this tree along with turmeric to the body of women after child birth is also a custom of Adiyaan community. Nenmeni vaka is given prime importance to maintain body purity in Ayurveda. It is also used for the treatments to reduce the poison of the insects; leprosy; and diabetes (Nair PN and Nair CS, 1985). The importance given to this tree is pointing to the ecological life that the Adiyaan community leads.

The expansion of money crops, the loss of land due to migration etc. caused the clearing of Nenmeni vaka in these regions.

Water Worship

Water as a precious natural element is an object of worship to all communities. They worshiped fountains and ponds in their forests. Neerkkund (water reservoir) in Kunnathoorpaddy hill is a centre of Adiyaan's Thiruvappana festival. The water in the Adiyaa fountain, which flows near to the Adiyaa huts is acted as a basis of Adiyaa's purity concept. Taking a bath from the Adiyaa fountain is compulsory for attaining purity from the taboo called *Pula-Valayma*, which comes out of menstruation, child

birth, death etc.. Except in those monsoon season, Adiyaa fountain faces severe problem of water scarcity and such issues comes out of natural resource's exploitation poses serious challenge to the customs and beliefs of Adiyaa community.

Whatever it may be, a thorough examination of the ritual worships of the Adiyaan community proves the eco-friendly nature of their customs. We can't even deny the fact that the life customs of the Adiyaa community are influenced and changed by the emergence of urbanization, migration and other socio-cultural factors.

Medicinal Approaches

One of the popular aspects of *Adiyaan* community's eco-friendly lifestyle is their traditional treatment system. For centuries, *Adiyaan* has been using natural medicines for treatment. They have found medicines from nature for any disease in humans and animals. They kept ingredients of the drug secret. As they believed that sharing the details of secret ingredients would make the medicine less effective. The invasion to Adivasi's land and the deforestation has adversely affected their treatment system. Moreover the non-transmission of the traditional knowledge and the lack of conscious efforts to document it have led to the loss of tribal ethnic medicine.

Shelter Construction

Adivasis were the ones who exhibit nature friendly attitude in every domains of their life. The architecture of tribal huts set the finest example of their eco-friendly lifestyle. This particular method of constructing *Adivasi kudil*(hut) have evolved over centuries in the woods and mountain valleys, based on their existing natural conditions and the availability of local and organic architectural products, and it is the most significant evidence of their ecological life. Bamboo, mud, *theruppapullu*(a type of grass), were the main materials used to build the Adiyaan huts in Kunnathoorpadi. The base structure of the hut is built through stamping and kneading the mud. Usually inner walls were constructed of a particular material *medala* which is made by plating the bamboo branches, and either sides of *medala* is polished with finely mixed mud. *Medalas* are also used for constructing doors and windows of the hut (Joy CV, 2017). Then came the method of building a wall by stacking the unfired earthen blocks. Bamboo is also used for building the roofs. After constructing the girder and cross beams with bamboo, it is thatched with *theruppapullu*. *Thailapullu* and *Nambeeshanpullu* are also used other than *theruppapullu* for crafting the roof. There was also the custom of replacing the leaf thatched roof in every two year.

Later on, they began to use fired earthen bricks instead of non-fired mud bricks for hut wall construction.

Until 1990, there existed such huts in Kunnathoorpadi. It was during the Eighth five year Plan in 1992-97, by various housing schemes much of *Adiyaan hut's* organic nature was replaced by concrete houses (Nazar M, 2012) . *Adiyaan* huts are organically constructed spaces. This method of construction using mud, bamboo, and grass can adjust the heat and cold inside the house according to the climate change.

Conclusion

Adivasi life is witnessing several changes from the modern time. The economy which depends on the mass production and consumption in a globalized era as well as the urbanization process have severely influenced and changed the lifestyle of the Adivasi communities including the Adiyaan. The forest laws and the policies of the

governments over time led the Adivasi community outside the forest. They are forced to involve in other jobs to earn their living and are also influenced by the urban lifestyles. Though the majority of Adivasi communities worldwide are on the path of change there are some who refused to leave forests by upholding the values of eco-friendly life. Such people are in the forefront of nature protection with their eco-friendly life styles comparing to others.

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