

Chola Naikans: The Cave Man of Western Ghats

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ABSTRACT

India is famous for its rich bio-diversity and varied cultural heritage. One can notice a synchronous relationship between the natural resources and endemic way of life of groups of people scattered across the country. There exist different races and groups in the country with sole mode of life specific to them. Scheduled Tribes in India are generally considered to be 'Adivasis,' meaning indigenous people or original inhabitants of the country. The tribes have been confined to low status and are often physically and socially isolated instead of being absorbed in the mainstream Hindu population. The present paper aimed to document traditional way of life and social background, cultural life of one of such groups of adivasis (chola naikans-cave man of Kerala) residing in the Eranad taluk of malappuram district of Kerala. The valley is bounded on the North by the vythiri Taluk of wayanad District, on the East by the Nilgiri District of Tamilnadu, on the South by Nilambur village, on the West by the Manjeri Tahsil headquarters. The forest is divided in to three ranges – Nilambur range, Chungathara range and Karulai range. The tribes, who live in isolation, practice their own system of life and settlement. This research effort brings light in to timely need for preserving their culture along with the traditional life style of this group.

1. Introduction

The *Chola Naikans* are a diminutive scheduled tribe of Kerala. They are the inhabitants of the interior races of forest found in the upper Ghats sections of Nilambur Valley, Malappuram District. They dwell in rock shelters found on the river banks called *Alai*.

Many people including scholars in the field of social sciences raised a serious question, when was the existence of *Chola Naikans* revealed to the public? Once it was revealed the news of the government of India asked the Tribal research and Training Centre, Kozhikode (KIRTHADS) to conduct an anthropological study on the group and submit a report. In 1976, the following tribal communities of Kerala were identified as primitive tribal groups by Government of India: (1) The *Chola Naikans* of Nilambur Valley (2) The Kattu Naikans of Wyanad (3) Kurumber of Attappadi (4) Kadar of Parambikulam (5) Korugar of Kasargod.¹

Nilambur is well known for ever green forest. The Important tribes living in this region are the *Cholanaikans*, *Allars*, *Paniyans* and *Kurumans*. The Chola Nayikans the 'Cave men of Kerala' inhabit in the Reserve forests of Karulai Range, and the Chungathara Range of the vested forests of Nilambur valley. Particularly during the Monsoon they are food gatherer. *Cholanaikan*, the cave man of Kerala still subsist exclusive on food gathering and honey collection. *Cholanaikan*, of Kerala is one of the Most primitive communities with a strength of 352 persons, who normally resides in caves and do not know any agricultural practices. The name 'Shola Naikan's first appeared in Edgard Thurston's work (1975). He mentioned it as a synonym for the Kattu Nayikans. The group lives in an area of 8900 acres of Eranad Taluk in Malappuram district. The entire group is divided into 10 territorial groups. It is known as

Karimbuzha, Panapuzha, Kuppamala, Poochapara, Talipuzha, Koorambuzha, Alakkal, Ambilmed, Olikkathode and Manjakkadavu.²

There are a few completely isolated tribal communities like the Anadamanis Onges and Shompens of the Andaman Nichobar, Island, who mainly subsist on hunting and food gathering. *Cholanaikans* are predominantly engaged on food gathering but they have symbiotic relationship with the traders and live by exchange of commodities.³

2. Materials and methods

Cholanaikans are living in remote areas and seen interior to the forests and Hill tops. Field exploration was undertaken to collect information about tribes regarding their history, demography, life style, culture, art of living, socioeconomic background, food habits, local languages they use and traditional medicinal practices they are associated with. Further knowledge related to tribes were obtained from books, research papers, scientific magazines, Encyclopedias and internet sources. The information was gathered primarily from Mr.Manjeeri mathan and Panappuza Kunkan, a 35 year old and 79 –year old man's of Cholanaikkan.

3. Nilambur Forest – The habitat of Cholanaikans

The Nilambur valley is situated in the Eranad Taluk of Malappuram District. The valley is bounded on the North by the South Wayanad Taluk of Kozhikode District, on the East by the Nilgiri District of Tamilnadu, on the South by Nilambur village, on the West by the Manjeri Tahsil headquarters. The forest is divided in to three ranges – Nilambur range, Chungathara range and Karulai range.

The Chola Naikans inhabit the reserve forests of the Karulai range and the Chungathara range of the vested forests. Chola means (forest) and Naikan means (king). The community is called *Chola Naikan* (king of the forest). Naikan is also a term broadly used for the tribal people. The most important forest products collected by the Chola Naikans from the valley are *Ginger, Dammar, Cardamom, Honey, Arrowroot, Beeswax, Neeraty, Pepper* etc.

The climate of the valley is basically tropical though seasonal variations are more. The valley is characterized by huge rainfalls, a humid climate and a moderate temperature.

4. Result and discussion

Early History of Chola Naikans

It is rather amazing that there is no mentioning about the *Chola Naikan* in any earlier writings on tribes of Kerala. The name *Chola Naikan* first appeared in the book *Tribes and Castes in South India* by Edgar Thurston 1909. He did not talk about this group afterwards. And thus the writers like, Iyer, Louis, Ayyappan etc, who heavily depended on Thurston's work also failed to identify them as a separate group.

Chola Naikan are said to have migrated from the neighboring forest of Mysore in Karnataka State. They are food gatherers and hunters. They speak mixture of Canaries and Tamil language. They are completely isolated and thus live by food gathering, hunting and fishing. They do not have any contact with the outside world, except the Muslim contractors of minor forest produce. The *Chola Naikans* called themselves as *Mala Naikans*, they continue to live in the ever green forest of the deep jungles (Chola or Shola) of valley and follow their subsistence economy. Only the non tribals call them Chola Naikans, they in fact mean those who live in the interior forests of the valley⁴

Settlement Pattern of Chola Naikans

The Chola Naikans live in natural caves in the rocks. The settlements are called "*Kallu Alai*" (Rock Cave). All these *Alai's* are inaccessible. One has no alternative but to walk 10 to 15 km in the dense forest. The *Alai's* have no communication facilities with the mainland. Each *Alai* is a Kin group hamlet comprising three to 5 households. The generally select caves accord them maximum protection from wild animals. They avoid caves at low levels along water courses which may get flooded during the rains. The *Chola Naikans* keep them dry, neat and clean. They do not even urinate near them. They live continuously in the caves only during the rainy months. The entrance (*Alaibhayi*) usually narrow, some caves may have entrance on one side and an exit on the other. The interiors are generally dark and the space inside the cave is demarcated for specific purposes, such as *I* (for sitting) and *Malathula* (for sleeping). The cave is the identifying marker; a Chola Naikan takes his names after the cave settlement of which he is a member. Eg. Panapuzha Chathan (Moopan of Manjeri Colony). There were 11 cave settlements scattered in the dense forests. The humpy mud road of about 20 km through the teak plantation in the forests ended at the Manjeeri Colony.

Distribution of Population of Chola Naikans in Karulai Range

Name of Cave	Male	Female	Total
Makki Beerai Alai	4	4	8
Enikol Alai	6	4	10
Poochappara Alai	9	7	16
Kottupuzha Alai	2	2	4
Povatte Alai	9	8	17
Koorampuzha Alai	9	9	18
Valakannamala Alai	4	3	7
Manna Alai	16	14	30
Chungathata Range			
Alakkal Alai	13	16	29
Ambili Mala	9	7	16
Olika tod	10	8	18
Combail Alai	3	2	5
Mannakadavu	8	7	15

Thus the *Chola Naikans* area found scattered living in the rock caves in the interior forests and on the banks of rivers. The *Chola Naikans* maintain the sanctity of the *Alais*. They sweep the floor every day. They generally do not urinate in and around the cave.⁵

Social Life of Chola Naikans

Family

The family of Chola Naikans is referred to as Kudumba, which includes father, mother and their children. The Chola Naikans family is nuclear and does not correspond, in any way to the joint family system of Hindus. When a grown up gets married, he gets separated from his parents and establishes a new family. The nuclear family consists of male head, his wife and unmarried children. The Chola Naikans follow patrilineal system and as such the families are patrilineal and Patrilocal. Father is the head of the family. He is the supreme authority of family affairs. The head of the Chola Naikans household not only acts as a leader but also acts as a territorial head. forms of marriage.⁶

The household head sometimes becomes the territorial head and in such cases his rules are enormous and his area of operation widens. The day-to-day household activities are exclusively done by man and other works by women alone. Household works, storing of food grains, cleaning, drying food articles, sharing and entertaining guests are the works of women. No female member in their society becomes the head of territory.⁷

The *Chola Naikans* though considered to be an endogamous group, have matrimonial relations with the Pathi Naikans of the foothills.

The Chola Naikans are patrilineal and patrilocal after marriage. Territorial and *Janmam* exogamy is strictly enforced. The Woman after marriage moves from her natal *Janmam* and her *Alai* to that of her husband's *Alai*.

Social Organization

Each territory of *Chola Naikans* has a council; the council is headed by the territorial chieftain, the *Jenmakkar*. The council meets and discusses the affairs connected with the extraction of minor forest produce and other territorial and religious problems. *Jenmakkar* is a head of an *Alai*. He is

responsible for managing the affair of the tribe in the *Alai*. He officiates as the priest for marriage and death ceremonies. Magical rites are connected by him. His permission is required for marriage and burial. His office is hereditary.⁸

The *Jenmakkar* is said to have divine powers, since he is the sole custodian of the idols of their deities which represent the spirit of their ancestors. He acts as a diviner. The *Jenmakkar* is the person to find out and distinguish the reason for uneasiness (*danna*). The chieftain also acts as a judge in the tribal meeting or council, and he takes the final decision binding on all. The *Jenmakkar* is highly respected by the members. In all matters, his decision is final and carried out by all.⁹

Marital Relation

It is a general rule that girls marry at an earlier age immediately after attaining puberty. The *Chola Naikans* have very little ideas about their age. They calculate their age by their body build up and capacity to go for hunting and food gathering. The *Chola Naikans* marry outside of the *Janmam*. The marriage alliance takes place between neighbors *Janmam*. Multilateral cross-cousin marriages are allowed. But patrilineal and parallel cousin marriages are forbidden among the *Chola Naikans*. A *Chola Naikan* man is not allowed to marry his wife's elder sister. They are not also allowed to choose their mates within the blood relationship of any kind. *Chola Naikans* marry generally from outside the *Alai*. They consider that members living an *Alai* are related by blood. Thus each *Alai* is considered to be exogamous units (*kudumbam*). Hence marriage within the *Alai* is not permitted. They encouraged widow marriage. Divorce is rare or absent. In recent times some new customs like "Taliket" and celebration with feasting have begun.¹⁰

The most popular form of marriage is free choice. When a young man during his excursions outside his territory meets with a girl and they like each other, they sleep together (*Oppa Malatu*) and they become man and wife. The arrangements are made through the *Janmakkar* of the Brides and Grooms *Janmam*. It is solemnized at the bride's residence. This pair sits face to face on the ground a leaf is placed between them and food served on it.

They speak Malayalam, besides their mother tongue. The Older generation did not have sufficient command in Malayalam. Most of the people are illiterate. *Chola Naikan's* language is a distinct Dravidian language in its own right, and the notion that it is a mixture of Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada is erroneous. Nilambur forest is the meeting place of these 3 languages. The lexical items of the area are closer to Kannada than to Tamil or Malayalam.

Life Cycle Rituals

Puberty

No puberty rites and rituals are observed among the *Chola Naikans*. The menstruating girls are secluded for four days in one corner of the cave. She is not allowed to touch the cooking utensils. The bath on 5th day after puberty is called *Neeratal*. A woman during the menstruating period, which is

called "*Thinka*", is supposed to be unclean. Cohabitation is prohibited during menses.¹¹

Birth

A mid-wife (*Othachi*) is called in to attend the expectant mother when labour pain starts. The mother is secluded in his hut for forty days. The child is bathed by *Othachi*. Mother is bathed for forty days in hot water. The mid-wife cut the umbilical cord. No name giving ceremony is performed among the *Chola Naikans* but name is selected by the *Janmakkar* from the mother's life. Generally a child is named at the age of eight or ten. *Kangan*, *Kuttan*, *Mathan*, *Chellan* etc, are popular names for males, *Kadu*, *Kali*, *Bula*, *Nani*, *Karika* etc. are names of girls.

Food Pattern

Rice is the staple food of the *Chola Naikans*. It is supplemented by wild roots, tubers, seeds, fruits. Cooking is done once a day, in the evening. The surplus after the night meal will be kept for the next morning. The term for the night meal is '*etilempatu* and the noon meal, *Uchilutimpatu*.

Burial Customs

The *Chola Naikans* dig a shallow grave, only about waste deep for burial. The deceased is buried with the head towards west. They have their own burial ground. The personal belongings of the deceased are generally buried with the dead. It is the responsibility of the *Janmakkar* of each *Alai* to arrange for the funeral procession and dig the grave. A minimum of seven persons are required for the funeral.

The *Chola Naikans* conduct the mortuary rites after a month or so when funds are available. The *Janmakkar* officiates as the priest. For this ritual, the kin supply rice roots, and tubes for conducting the rites. The *Janmakkar* used dark turban in olden days when officiating as priest at the mortuary rites. *Janmakkar*, consanguine and others are fed on this occasion at night. Cooked rice is placed on a leaf for the dead. The kin and *Janmakkar* danced around the leaf throughout the night. The following morning the *Janmakkar* eats the rice; all the dead ancestors are also worshiped on this day by giving offering of rice, fish curry and pepper.¹²

Weapon and Tools used by Chola Naikans

No *Chola Naikans* generally leaves his *Alai* without weapons. He would at least have a *Kodali* (Axe) stuck on his shoulder. The most important weapon is the *Kodali* the blade of which is about 7 inches long hafted on a wood. It used for falling trees; splitting bamboos, slaughtering wild animals and fowls. It is seven used for cutting the hair. Main tool of food gathering is the *Parai* an iron blade, hafted on long wooden handle. In olden days a sharp wooden stick without iron blade paws used for digging roots or and tubers.

The house hold utensils are a few and simple. Utensils made of bamboo were in use in good old days. The main cooking utensils were *Kotta Andai* (bamboo pot) and *Kolambi* (bamboo dishes and plates).

5. Conclusion

The case study of the cholanaikans; the cave man of Western Ghats in Kerala based on cholanaikans revealed the customs and traditions of this specific group. It is highlighted here their mode of communication, mode of living and their food. An in depth analysis of the habitat, settlement pattern and

social life of cholanaikans are described in the study. An extended investigation is also done in their life cycle rituals. A thorough analysis of this group paved way for the in depth analysis of what cholanaikans are and what are their peculiarities.

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