Economic Condition of Mudhuvakar Tribes and their Kannaki Worship in Bodinayakanur

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Abstract

The Mudhuvakkar (also spelled Muthuvan or Muduvan) are one of the indigenous tribal communities of the Western Ghats in South India. They mainly live in the hill regions of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, especially in the districts of Idukki, Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Theni, and Tirunelveli. The Muthuvans believe they originally lived in the Madurai region. According to tradition, they migrated to the Western Ghats after the fall of the Pandya Kingdom to escape wars and invasions. Their name is believed to come from the Tamil word "Muthu" (back) because they traditionally carried children and belongings on their backs during migration. They settled in remote forests and hills, preserving their distinct culture and traditions. The Muthuvans have traditionally depended on agriculture, forest produce, honey collection, and livestock rearing. They cultivate crops such as millets, rice, cardamom, pepper, and banana. Their settlements are usually small hamlets located in forested hill areas. They have a unique language closely related to Tamil and Malayalam. Education, healthcare, and government welfare schemes have improved their living conditions in recent decades. Many Muthuvan families now have better access to schools, roads, and healthcare, while continuing to preserve their cultural identity. They are recognized as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) by the Government of India. The Mudhuvakkar (Muthuvan) community is one of the oldest tribal groups of the Western Ghats. Despite modernization, they have retained their traditional customs, language, and close relationship with nature, making them an important part of the cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. This research article "ECONOMIC CONDITION OF MUDHUVAKAR TRIBES AND THEIR KANNAKI WORKSHIP IN BODINAYAKANUR" details about the mudhuvakar tribes economic condition and their kannaki workship

Keywords: Mudhuvakar, Economy, worship, kannaki

Introduction

The Mudhuvakkar (also spelled Muthuvan or Muduvan) are one of the indigenous tribal communities of the Western Ghats in South India. They mainly live in the hill regions of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, especially in the districts of Idukki, Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Theni, and Tirunelveli. The Muthuvans believe they originally lived in the Madurai region. According to tradition, they migrated to the Western Ghats after the fall of the Pandya Kingdom to escape wars and invasions. Their name is believed to come from the Tamil word "Muthu" (back) because they traditionally carried children and belongings on their backs during migration. They settled in remote forests and hills, preserving their distinct culture and traditions.

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Meaning of Mudhuvakar

In Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909), the community is listed as Muduvar (also spelled Muthuvan/Muthuvan) rather than "Muthuvakkar." According to Thurston, the Muduvars: Were a hill tribe living in Coimbatore, Madurai, Malabar, and Travancore, especially in the Cardamom Hills. Believed that their ancestors migrated from Madurai during a period of war or political disturbance. Were called "Muduvar" (back people) because they carried their children on their backs while fleeing to the hills. Another tradition says they carried the idol of Goddess Meenakshi on their backs. Spoke

a dialect closely related to Tamil, with some Malayalam influence. Practised shifting cultivation, hunting, and gathering forest produce for their livelihood. Lived in small hill settlements, followed their own customs, and settled disputes through a village panchayat headed by elders. Had distinctive customs regarding marriage, puberty, and burial, which Thurston described in detail.

Muduvakar in Bodinayakkanur

The Muduvakar (Muthuvan/Muduvar) tribe is one of the indigenous Scheduled Tribes living in the Bodinayakkanur hilly region of Theni district, Tamil Nadu, especially in the Kurangani Hills of the Western Ghats. These settlements are among the important Muthuvan habitations in Tamil Nadu.

Muduvakar tribe in the Bodinayakkanur hills The tribe lives in small, remote hill settlements surrounded by forests. They are believed, according to their oral tradition, to have migrated from the Madurai (Pandya) region to the Western Ghats during a period of political conflict many centuries ago. Their name "Muthuvan" is commonly explained as meaning "those who carry on their backs," referring to the tradition that their ancestors carried children, belongings, or members of the royal family during their migration. Their traditional occupations include: Hill agriculture (millets, vegetables, spices) Cardamom plantation work Collection of honey, medicinal plants, and other forest produce. They speak the Muthuvan language, which is closely related to Tamil and Malayalam. The community maintains many traditional customs, festivals, and a village leadership system headed by a Kani (headman). The Muduvakar community of the Bodinayakkanur–Kurangani hills is known for preserving its unique culture while adapting to changes in education, healthcare, and livelihood.

Vadakkuvaichi Amman

There is very little published historical documentation specifically describing the worship of Vadakkuvaichi Amman among the Muthuvan (Muduvakar/Mudhuvakkar) community of the Bodinayakkanur hills. Most available information comes from oral traditions and ethnographic accounts rather than formal historical records. Based on these traditions, the worship generally had the following features: Village guardian deity worship: Vadakkuvaichi Amman was revered as a protective goddess who safeguarded the tribe, their settlements, crops, cattle, and forests. Nature-based worship: Rituals were often performed in sacred groves, hill

shrines, or simple stone platforms instead of large built temples. Seasonal festivals: Offerings were commonly made before sowing, after harvest, or during annual community festivals to seek protection and prosperity. Offerings: Devotees offered turmeric, neem leaves, flowers, coconuts, cooked rice, millet, and sometimes animal sacrifice, depending on older local customs. These practices varied between settlements. Community rituals: Worship was usually led by tribal elders or traditional priests rather than Brahmin priests. Folk songs, drumming, dancing, and trance (oracle) rituals sometimes formed part of the ceremony.

Vadakkuvaichi Amman and Kannaki Worship

The relationship between Vadakkuvaichi Amman (Vakkuvaichi Amman) and Kannagi worship in the Bodinayakkanur region is a subject of local tradition and scholarly interpretation rather than a firmly established historical fact. Here are the main views: Folk tradition In parts of the Bodinayakkanur hills, some people identify Vadakkuvaichi Amman with Kannagi, the heroine of the Tamil epic Silappatikaram. According to this tradition, after burning Madurai, Kannagi traveled west toward the Western Ghats. Some communities believe she rested or was deified in the hill regions, where she came to be worshipped as a local mother goddess. Meaning of "Vadakkuvaichi" The name is often interpreted as "the goddess who was placed facing north" (*vadakku* = north, *vaiththa* = placed). Some local legends connect this north-facing aspect with Kannagi's journey after leaving Madurai, though there is no definitive historical evidence for this interpretation. Mudhuvar/Muthuvan tradition Among some Mudhuvar (Muduvakar) communities of the Western Ghats, there are oral traditions that revere Kannagi as a protective ancestral goddess. +In some villages, these traditions merged with the worship of local Amman deities, leading researchers to suggest that Vadakkuvaichi Amman may represent a localized form of Kannagi worship. Historians generally consider the connection possible but not conclusively proven. The association is based mainly on oral traditions, folklore, and similarities in ritual practices rather than inscriptions or contemporary historical records. The most widely accepted view is that Vadakkuvaichi Amman in the Bodinayakkanur region may be a localized folk form of Kannagi worship, especially among hill communities such as the Mudhuvars. However, this identification rests primarily on oral tradition and folklore rather than definitive historical or epigraphic evidence.

Economic Condition of Muduvakkar Tribes

The Mudhuvakkar (Muthuvan) tribal community lives in the hill regions around Kurangani and Muthuvakudi, near Bodinayakkanur in Theni district, Tamil Nadu. Their

economic life is closely connected with agriculture, forest resources, and plantation work. Agricultural Activities Agriculture is an important source of livelihood. The hill region supports plantation crops such as cardamom, coffee, and pepper. Some tribal families work in agricultural plantations. Plantation Labour Many tribal people work as labourers in cardamom and coffee plantations. Their income depends on the availability of seasonal agricultural work. Daily wages vary between male and female workers, according to reported accounts. Forest Resources The community maintains a close relationship with forest resources and hill agriculture. Traditional knowledge of the natural environment supports their livelihood. Access to forest resources is influenced by forest protection laws and regulations.

Seasonal Employment Plantation work is not available throughout the year. Seasonal employment creates challenges in maintaining a stable income. Families may experience economic difficulties during periods without agricultural work. Transportation Problems The hill settlements face difficulties with transportation. Poor road connectivity makes it harder to access markets, healthcare, and other services. Travel to nearby towns can be expensive. Housing and Basic Facilities Some families have constructed houses using locally available materials. Government housing initiatives have benefited certain households, but reported accounts indicate that not all families have received the same facilities. Economic Challenges The major economic challenges include: Dependence on seasonal plantation work. Limited transportation facilities. Difficulty accessing markets. Dependence on daily wages. Limited access to essential services. The Mudhuvakkar tribal community of Bodinayakkanur depends mainly on plantation labour, agriculture, and forest-related livelihood practices. Improved transportation, sustainable employment, education, and access to government welfare schemes can support their economic development.

Economy condition of Paliya and Mudhuvakkar

The Paliyan tribes are indigenous tribal communities living in the Palani Hills of Tamil Nadu, particularly around the Kodaikanal region. Their traditional economy depends on forest resources, hunting, gathering, and agriculture. Over time, their economic activities have changed due to forest restrictions, settlement, and contact with outside communities. Forest-Based Economy Forest resources are an important source of livelihood. They collect honey, medicinal plants, amla, lichens, and grasses. These forest products are sold in local markets to earn income. Honey Collection Honey collection is a traditional occupation. Honey is collected

from wild bee colonies. It is sold or exchanged for essential goods. Seasonal availability affects their income. Agriculture Some Paliyan families practice small-scale agriculture. Families with agricultural land may cultivate crops such as coffee and oranges. Agricultural production provides food and income.

Wage Labour Some community members work as agricultural labourers. Younger people and adults have also entered construction, tourism, and service-sector occupations. Wage labour has become an alternative source of income. Marketing of Forest Products Forest products are sold to traders and local agents. Limited bargaining power can result in low prices for their products. Dependence on intermediaries creates economic difficulties. 6. Poverty and Indebtedness Many Paliyan families face economic hardship. Seasonal shortages of forest products affect their livelihoods. Some families experience debt when income is insufficient to meet basic needs. 7. Land and Forest Rights Changes in forest access and displacement have affected traditional livelihoods. Land encroachment and difficulties in securing rights have been reported. Recognition of forest rights is important for livelihood security. Economic Changes The Paliyan economy has gradually changed from traditional hunting and gathering to a combination of: Forest product collection Agriculture Wage labour Tourism-related work These changes reflect their adaptation to changing social and economic conditions. The economic condition of the Paliyan tribes in the Palani Hills is closely connected to forests, agriculture, and wage employment. Limited income, seasonal unemployment, and difficulties with land and forest rights create challenges. Improving livelihood opportunities, fair marketing, and access to government support can help strengthen their economic security.

Conclusion

The economic condition of the Paliyan tribes in the Palani Hills is closely connected to forests, agriculture, and wage employment. Limited income, seasonal unemployment, and difficulties with land and forest rights create challenges. Improving livelihood opportunities, fair marketing, and access to government support can help strengthen their economic security. The Mudhuvakkar tribal community of Bodinayakkanur depends mainly on plantation labour, agriculture, and forest-related livelihood practices. Improved transportation, sustainable employment, education, and access to government welfare schemes can support their economic development.

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