



LIFE AND LIVELIHOOD OF KANI TRIBES IN THE WESTERN GHATS OF TAMILNADU

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Abstract

The Western Ghats region is the home to the Kani tribes. The Kanis also live in the Ghat regions of Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu. At present, there are five Kani settlements in the Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR) areas of Tamilnadu. Servalar Kani settlement is the chosen study area forms part of Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve comes under the jurisdiction of the Tamilnadu Forest Department. Once a nomadic tribe, the community now does not migrate from one place to another. Apart from agriculture, the Kani tribes collected honey from the forest regions and cultivated other minor forest produce. This helped them in earning some money to cater for their needs. The relationship between forests and the Kani tribe is intimate and age old. They have close association with forests and hills. Their dependency and association with forests are reflected in all aspects of their culture. They proudly identify them with forests and mountain. They live with nature. All the essential items for living are available in forest. Forests are their dwelling place. This research paper describes the strategic location and the ecological importance of the Pothigai Hills focusing on Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR). And it highlights the life and livelihood of the Kani tribes in their settlement at Servalar region.

Key words: Kani Tribes, Life and Livelihood, Western Ghats

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South Indian Western Ghats are considered as one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world. The Pothigai hills, also known as the Agasthiyar hills are lying in the southern part of the Western Ghats. The Pothigai hills are mentioned as “Potiyil,” “Potiyal,” “Pothikai,” and “Potalaka” in historical sources largely in relation to the river Tamraparani, the life line of the region and the ancient sage Agasthiya. It is believed to be the sacred abode of the great saint Agasthiya and the heaven of medicinal herbs. Pothigai hills are home to the Kanikkaran people, one of the oldest surviving hunter-gatherer tribes in the world.

This is an original, descriptive and analytical study based on observation and interview schedule. Extensive field survey has been undertaken to study their indigenous knowledge resources. Field study by means of questionnaires, interviews, interactions, discussion and case studies have developed the study on right perspective. The information from the local news papers, journals and television news has been added. The published articles and books related to this topic form part of the study. This study aims at theoretical, methodological and empirical insights on this area.

Agasthiya forest lies between 8^o, 30' and 8^o, 38' N latitude and 77^o, 8' and 77^o, 17' E longitude, abounds in multifarious fauna and flora and is one of the biodiversity hot spots of the world. The climate of this region is moderately hot and humid. The temperature varies from 16^o – 35^o C. The mean annual rainfall is 2,800 mm and the tract receives both south-west and north-east monsoons. Due to the varied climate and topographic conditions, the forest shows remarkable diversity of vegetation. The tightly arranged suite of bioclimatic region also provides a unique geographical backdrop to the agricultural diversity of South India, rarely found on such a scale in other monsoon contexts of the tropics.

The Kalakkadu Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR) is the only one in the state of Tamil Nadu was established during 1988. It is part of Agasthiyar hills and a priority core area for conservation in the South Western Ghats. This reserve is exceptionally rich in biodiversity and endemism. The KMTR is one of the eighteen designated hot spots of the world, and a treasure house of some of the least disturbed forests in the state of Tamil Nadu. It extends for 895 square kilometers in the Western Ghats.

The reserve is the watershed for fourteen major rivers and streams and a source for drinking water for the neighbouring districts. Banatheertham, Agasthiyar falls and Manimuthar falls are the three significant tourist destinations and places of interest for the visitors. Boating was allowed for many years to reach Banatheertham. Seven major dams and three small reservoirs owe their existence to the rivers and forest of the reserve. Five significant Hindu temples of visit are located in these areas. The hydro power plant placed in KMTR produces a good amount of electricity. Nearly 150 villages are located on the lower foot hills of this KMTR area.

This region is one of the mega endemic centers. It is said that Japan and Israel have environmental benefits out of the monsoon cycle generated from the Western Ghats. These countries pay keen attention

towards this region and also show interest to protect this area. KMTR has been brought under the pilot project of conservation under the financial assistance of the World Bank in 1994 for a period of five years. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee is planning to bring this area as world heritage site.

All over the world the hills are inhabited by tribes. Nestled in the tropical forests located mainly in the southernmost part of the Western Ghats, India, inhabit an indigenous Kani tribe traditionally nomadic. They are the original inhabitants residing in the dense forest from time immemorial. Thurston (1909) writes that the Kanikarars had no permanent abode and used to shift from one part of the forest to another. They feel proud to be called 'adivasis,' which denotes primitive settlers of the land. According to some scholars, the word "Kan" (in Tamil) means "forest" and the Kanikaran is the jungle folk and they are called "Kanis" after "Kan." Another opinion is that "Kani" (in Tamil) means hereditary propertied land. The measurement of the "Kani"(land) differs from place to place. In Tirunelveli it is 26 cents. As Kanikaran occupy land tracts in mountains, they are called Kanikarars and are the owners of the land tracts. Kanikarar are also known as Kanikkaran, but their neighbours refer them as the Kani. They themselves use Kani as their title. "Kani Kudi" means the residential area of these tribal people. Since the Kani people are living in the forest, they have their own life styles, traditions, believes and rituals to suit with the environment. And they have a rich tradition of indigenous knowledge resources.

Traditionally the Kanikkarars were hunters, gatherers and shifting cultivators. In their system of cultivation the Kanikarar first clear a patch of forest, and then set fire to it. The ground is shown with hardly any previous tillage. When, after two or three years, the land diminishes in productiveness, they move onto another part of the forest, and follow the same rough method of cultivation. Thus one patch of ground after another is used for agricultural purposes, until a whole treat of forest is cleared. But the Kanikarars have now to a large extent abandoned this kind of migratory cultivation, because according to the forest rules, forest may not set fire or trees fell at the unrestricted pleasure of individuals.

The present day occupation of the community is settled cultivation. They cultivate various kinds of cereals and pulses, as well as tapioca and sweet potatoes. Each settlement now has a forest block assigned to it for cultivation with which other tribes are not allowed to interface, and wherein the Kanikarars are allowed to till, clear and grow their crops. Though the Kani people in Pothigai hills have now undertaken agriculture, they work as wage labourers in the forest department.

According to the 1981 censuses the Kanikkarars were numbering 3698 in Tamil Nadu. There are five Kani settlements at present in KMTR area. They are Servalar Kanikudiyiruppu, Agasthiyar Kanikudiyiruppu, Periya Mayilar Kanikudiyiruppu, Chinna Mayilar Kanikudiyiruppu and Inchi Kuzhi Kanikudiyiruppu. Inchikuzhi is in high altitude above Banathirtham and just below the top of Pothigai Hills. It is situated close to river side and hence it is very cool always. River fish are available abundantly in this area. Mustard,

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ginger, turmeric, coriander, fennel etc., are plentifully grown in Inchikuzhi. The Kanikarar reach the top of Inchikuzhi only by holding a suspended chain.

The original name of the Servalar Kanikudiyiruppu is “Taruvettan Parai.” There are twenty seven Kani families living in Servalar Kanikudiyiruppu with the population of 82 members including 35 males and 47 females. Out of 47 females 5 are grand old ladies living all alone in their small huts. Kanikarar have one person as their leader called “Nattamai”. In Servalar settlement, 14 male and 15 female children are going to schools. Kani children are studying in a government school at Servalar up to fifth standard. They continue their secondary education near Karaiyar until tenth standard. And then they have to travel lower area of Vikramasingapuram to carry on higher secondary education. Very few girls have completed their nursing courses after their schooling.

They are allowed to build houses anywhere in the hills. They make use of woods, leaves and grasses of the forest to make their huts. Most of their houses are built with clay, bricks and forest woods. The roofs of their houses are built especially with allapanai leaves, tharuvai grass and coconut leaves. Some of them buy asbestos sheet for making roofs of their houses from Ambasamudram. Readymade steel walled toilets have been installed recently nearby their houses through the central government scheme. They are not allowed to use electric lights in their houses for the cause of wild animals. They use only solar lights. They do not have any valuable items like furniture, utensils in their houses. Very few houses have items like steel bureau, television, tape recorder, steel and wooden cots etc. They keep their ancestors photo in their houses. They generally use woods for making tools and articles. Plants and grasses are used to make mats and containers. They use mud for making pots. They keep a very good variety of hunting dog in front of their houses. They create fencing around their houses out of wooden sticks. They grow tree like coconut, jack fruit, tamarind, and plants like tapioca, pepper etc., around their houses. They rear domestic animals and birds like cow, goat, hen etc in their houses.

In olden days they wear the leaves and barks of the trees as dress. Gradually they began to make cloths from the cotton thread. They wear simple dress. Women wear “lungi” as lower garment and blouse above their waist like the people of Kerala. If some stranger enters in their premises they use a towel as shawl. Now days Kani ladies wear sarees and young women in the houses are in night wears like the people in plain area. Some of the historical accounts trace that they migrated to Travancore from the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu. Another interpretation is that they are migrants from Kerala. Their dress pattern and food habits resemble them to that of the people of Kerala because of their close regional association with Kerala. They speak in their own dialect, which is close to the Dravidian language, Malayalam. Kani language has no script. They are conversant with the Malayalam and Tamil languages in addition to their mother tongue. Tamil and Malayalam words find significant place in their language. They use Malayalam and Tamil scripts for writing.

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The transport facilities are very poor to reach their residential areas. Two buses are allotted every day to Servalar region. The school going children are depending upon these two buses to go to attend the school at Vickramasingapuram. Few of them are using modern two wheelers like scooter and cycle for transport.

Monogamy is the most common form of their marriage, but cases of polygamy have been reported. The symbol of marriage is a bead necklace. Yet recently the young women begin to wear golden leaf as wed lock. Bride price is paid in cash during Kanikarar marriage. They give minimum jewels like a pair of ear stud, a chain, anklets and bangles as gifts to their daughters during marriage. But it is not mandatory. In recent days the Tamil Nadu Kanikkarar pay dowry in kind during marriage. Anyway dowry problem does not exist.. Yet some well to do begin to demand dowry in Kerala. These tribal people do not marry with in their blood line. They not even marry their uncle's or aunt's daughter or son. They have close marital relationship with their own tribal groups in Kerala. Inter-community marriage is a recent trend among them. A few young girls and boys began to marry other community people. Though they live together, the parents are not happy with inter-community marriages. Some of them perform simple pubertal function for their girl children when they attain menstrual process. Divorce is permissible with social approval. The widows who are having male children are particular in wearing bangles.

Kani people engage in agriculture, hunting, gathering and fishing. They collect roots, wild grains and fruits and eat them. They also eat various wild tubers. Two to three ladies join together and go inside the forest to collect the edible roots like chambu, siru kilanku, kaisal kilanku, koovai kilanku, kavalak kilanku, noorai kilanku, seeni kilanku, kattu kilanku etc. Tapiocas (marcini root) are their common edible roots. Rice and tapioca are their staple diet. Their edible fruits are naval, maanthai, eenthi, thondi, banana etc. They eat raw fruits and vegetables and do not preserve for future. During famine season, they collect and eat some varieties of vegetable and fruit seeds available in forest. The edible part of honey comb is available in their house. They eat and give to the visitors also They use to chew betal leaves always. And they drink alcohol often.

They consume seeds like pirandaikodikai and salankeikai or salapanaikai. They burn the pirandaikai and take the nuts out of it and boil them in water for about 3 to 5 times and after filtering water, they eat them like coconut. Salappanai is a wild plant used for decoration during festivals and functions of the country side. The fruits are poisonous. Hence the remove the fruits separately and spread over running river water. They boil and stain the water before eating. Then they make is as floor and eat it.

River fish is one of their common protein rich food items. They are unable to buy sea fish and goat meat due to high cost. They do not prefer cooked vegetables rather they eat the salted burnt river fish. They hunt wild animals for food like mizha, karumanthi (black monkey), koorai deer, porcupine, forest pig, deer, rabbit, alungu etc. They do not eat beef and pork. Now days, the Forest Department restricts them not to hunt wild

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animals. They eat honey comb after selling honey. The Kanikkarar drink alcoholic beverages available in the local market or tap toddy from a particular type of wild palm.

They collect spices, cardamom, kuntharikkai (sambiranikai), and cinnamon from the forest for their domestic purpose. They prepare food early in the morning around 3.00 am to give their school going children and also cook food in the evening around 5.00 pm.

Kani people in Servalar worship a god named "Boothathar". They gather and observe festival once in a year in Boothathar temple. They do not sacrifice animals or birds in that temple. They cook only vegetarian food during temple festivals. They do not observe any strict rituals. A Hindu temple, two Christian Churches both Protestant and Catholic and a Mosque has been built for the worship for other community people in Servalar area. A few of the Kani people in this area have converted to Christianity also.

The Protestant Church people render help in times of their need. A ration shop is available nearby Servalar settlement. They get 12 kg rice and half kg sugar per person free of cost every month. They buy palm oil at the rate of Rs.16, pulses for Rs.30, wheat for Rs.7 per kg, raw rice for Rs.5 per kg and kerosene Rs.126 for 3 liters at concession rate. They do not get any special concessions in ration shop because of their tribal status.

Kani people use a very simple technology in their economic activities. They used to collect wild honey from the interior forest area in the past. Even now collection (apiculture) is their main occupation. They are innovative and expert in taking wild honey from honey combs. They follow a peculiar method for honey collection. They tie a larger size dried bottle-guard skin cover in their hips. A nylon thread is hooked-up with an arrow is connected with the bottle guard cover. When they throw the arrow on the honey comb the honey flows through the thread and collected inside the bottle guard cover. At present the Kani people rear honey bees in their neighborhood. They collect and sell honey for their day to day expenditure.

Their system of labour is very simple. The men hunt, cultivate, labour in the forest department and take part in the ceremonial procedures in their settlement. The women take care of the home, prepare food, and look after the children. Kanikkarar women also participate in economic activities and contribute to the family income.

The Kani people consider forest products as gifts of god. Hence they must be used judiciously. Traditionally their economics are automated towards the satisfaction of their basic needs. Another important feature of their financial system is that their demand on the forest resources is minimum only for personal consumption. And such demands are easily met. Though there is free access to all resources for over-utilization is not in practice. Their wants are limited to necessities only. Traditionally accumulation of produce is less. And all activities are directed towards immediate consumption. They do not worry about future and do not preserve anything in their house. And profit motive is very less. A sense of mutual obligation and sharing is prevalent.

Generally speaking, the Kani people in Pothigai hills possess a sense of unity, speak a common language and form an endogamous group related to blood. Since they are homogenous in composition, the social control is effective.

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