

CELEBRATIONS AND RITUALS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE PALIYARS OF TENKASI DISTRICT - A HISTORICAL STUDY

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Abstract—Tribal performing arts have been transformed from religious rituals to rich cultural festivals, upholding the identity and traditions of native communities. These performances were originally highly spiritual, used as rites of passage, healing ceremonies, war ceremonies, and thanksgiving ceremonies to nature and ancestors. Gradually, these ritualistic performances evolved into collective celebrations, incorporating storytelling, music, and dance into festivals celebrating seasonal and social milestones. Contemporary influences such as globalization and media exposure have resulted in tribal performances being adapted with a mixture of traditional and modern elements. Although some of the practices have declined, preservation through cultural festivals, education, and documentation keeps these art forms alive. Contemporary tribal performing arts remain a dynamic means of expression, striking a balance between tradition and innovation. They continue to be an important force for storytelling, cultural maintenance, and communal identity, indicative of the strength and ingenuity of indigenous peoples all over the globe. The Paliyar community is mainly concentrated in the Western Ghats area, which includes parts of the Tenkasi district, as well as areas in Idukki district in Kerala. They live in remote, hilly areas and are often associated with agricultural practices, particularly shifting cultivation.

I. Introduction

Tribal Peoples arts are part of the native heritage, steeped in tradition, spirituality, and community identity. These forms of art dance, music, theatre, and narrative were initially performed as spiritual rituals to worship gods, forebears, and the natural world. In contrast to popular performing arts, which tend to emphasize entertainment, tribal performances are meant for more, commemorating life milestones, annual cycles, and spiritual passages. From birth and initiation rites to war dances and harvest festivals, tribal performing arts have played a vital part in keeping history alive, conveying oral traditions, and reinforcing social cohesion. Through the passage of time, ritualistic performances have changed, adapting into spectacular festivals that merge divine traditions with public joy and amusement. In the contemporary age, whereas a few tribal forms of art have lost popularity through globalization and changing cultures, a majority of them have survived and become well known globally. This knowledge of how they transitioned from ritual to celebration underlines their timelessness and the significance of saving them for posterity.

II. Paliyars

The Paliyars live in small isolated groups all along the Western Ghats from Palani hills in the north down to Tirunelveli hills in the south. In Tenkasi District, Paliyars people live in Kalaimaan Nagar, located near the Karuppanadhi Dam. Kalaimaan Nagar has 22 Paliyan families with 137 people, 74 of whom are males and 63 females. It is recorded in the 1931 Census Report that the Paliyars of Courtalam fled the persecution of the Nawab and settled there. The author of the Report opines that it might be Tipu, not the Nawab. The Paliyars of Kalaimaan Nagar are called as Kara Hu while the Paliyars of Madurai are called as kavu. As early as the early decades of this century, the Paliyars had diversified almost entirely from the tribal custom.

The Paliyars are said to have been the most miserable tribes in the State. The language that they speak is Tamil. Honey collection and hunting are their traditional occupations. They domesticate dogs. The Paliyars remained uncivilised and many lived in caves even as late as 1960's. But a socio-economic survey conducted in 1996 reveals that they resemble the people on plains in the mode of dress food habitations etc. in most cases. There are different tribes among the Paliyars. The Muthuvans are a very shy tribe. They avoid all contacts with the people from the plains. They have great respect for women and there are separate huts for unmarried women.

The Uralis, a division of Paliyars, who are not as civilised as Muthuvans or Arions are yet another division of the tribe who are industrious and hard working. They call themselves as the superior Paliyar tribe and do not associate with other divisions of the tribes. They speak Malayalam. Manna is also a division of the Paliyars. These people are not only industrious but also intelligent group. They are sturdy and fair complexioned. They lead a settled life and are ruled by a chief elected by them. They speak Tamil with a modulated accent. Marriage among the Paliyars is not a contract but one of convenience. Polygamy prevails among them and many families live together in one hut. No proper account of the origin of these Paliyar tribes is available. One school of ethnology holds that they were the early Dravidians driven to the hills by the Aryans, while another considers that they are the descendants of the people who took shelter in these hills when the Carnatic wars were raging in southern districts.

The Paliyars worship Palichi Ammal. They have no knowledge of any other Gods or Goddesses. The Christian Mission had played a vital role in the social and economic upliftment of the tribe. They started their work in 1902 and the services of Moses Muthumalai to the Paliyar tribe is ever remembered with great reverence. Religious conversion was essential to rouse the rational consciousness against religious hypocrisy and dishonesty. It was a revolt against the suppression and enslavement of humanity. Conversion has brought about revolutionary improvement in their habits at no cost. To the oppressed communities conversion did help to secure self-respect and to achieve social security. By embracing Christianity the oppressed communities had progressed economically, educationally and culturally and have gone up in the social ladder.

III. Ritualistic Roots of Tribal Performing Arts

The Paliyar tribe, an aboriginal ethnic group of both Tamil Nadu and Kerala, practices a variety of ritualistic performing arts that serve communal, cultural, and spiritual purposes. These performances are not only done for amusement, but have deep religious and social meaning ranging from nature worship, ancestor worship to appeasement of spirits. Shamans often go into trancelike states to contact spirits, and these trance dances and other activities like colonization of a place execute rituals of planting and reaping, and medicinal practices, and cenotaphic rites of funerals. Sacred songs and devotional folk songs chanted along with rhythmic beats from traditional instruments like the parai (drum) and kuzhal (flute) evoke the spirituality of the tribe. Dance forms such as Kolattam, a rimmed stick dance, and dancer of possession, which imitate elements and movements of nature, cultivate the attachment of the Paliyars to Nature. Moreover, theatrical narrations contain folk tales that engrave indigenous knowledge and mythologies for the coming generations. Nonetheless, modernization and dislocation are some of the worst challenges to these traditions, and so, there are accompanying attempts to document and reconstruct them in order to safeguard these traditions. Even with such challenges, the spiritual roots of the Paliyar dance forms stand as monuments and symbols within the arts that contain the people's beliefs, cultural identity, and their roots.

IV. The Spiritual and Religious Beginnings

The Paliyars, a nomadic tribal community of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, have spiritual and religious beliefs deeply rooted in nature worship and animism. They revere forest deities, ancestral spirits, and supernatural forces, believing that their well-being is closely tied to the harmony of the natural world. Their spiritual practices involve rituals performed in sacred groves, offerings to deities, and trance-induced ceremonies led by shamans who act as intermediaries between humans and spirits. They worship Kanappan, Karuppasamy, and other guardian deities, seeking their protection and blessings for health, prosperity, and good harvests. Ancestor worship is also significant, with rituals ensuring that the spirits of the deceased remain at peace and continue to guide the living. Music, dance, and chanting play a crucial role in these religious ceremonies, with rhythmic drumming and folk songs invoking divine energies. Unlike organized religions, Paliyar spirituality is fluid, oral, and passed down through generations, shaping their identity as forest dwellers in deep communion with nature. However, with modernization and external influences, these indigenous religious traditions are gradually fading, prompting efforts to document and preserve their sacred practices.

V. Healing and Hunting Rituals

The Paliyars that are deeply rooted in nature, perform healing and hunting rituals that are intertwined with spirituality and survival. For many, the methods of herbal spell casting chant medicine are magical as it is accompanied by drumming and trance like activities of shamans or elders who summon the spirits of the dead ancestors for healing. These practices are supposed to banish dark forces that bring illness or disorder to the self as well as the society. The same goes with hunting where they perform a carped ritual before going

into the woods and ask the protecting gods or spirits to grant a safe and productive hunting expedition. It is believed that the angered spirits of the forest will grant a great hunting spree when the offerings of fire, written prayers on the weapons, and the lighting of small bonfires appeases the spirits. Animal imitations of walking, singing and childlike dancing that appreciate mother nature for the food she has gifted are also included in these ceremonies. As continue, Paliyar folklore and oral stories do contain the survival of these rituals even through the essence was lost while hunting ceased to exist due to limited urban access and conservation laws.

VI. Transition from Ritual to Celebration

Tribal Peoples arts have developed from their purely ritualistic beginnings to dynamic cultural festivals. Though initial performances were highly religious and used for religious, healing, or lifecycle functions, they eventually became celebratory affirmations of community identity and happiness. This change happened as a result of several factors, such as agricultural seasons, social ties, external contacts, and modernization. One of the key drivers for this shift was the move away from survival rituals to festivals of abundance and thanksgiving. Several tribal societies, traditionally dependent on nature for their livelihood, started adding dance, music, and drama performances to agricultural and harvest festivals. What began as a ritual to pacify nature gods and goddesses eventually evolved into a festive occasion that united communities. For instance, in various native societies, harvest dances that originally were sacred acts of thanksgiving developed into big public festivities with elaborate costumes, music, and feasts. With the growing structure and integration of societies, tribal performances also began being used to reinforce communal bonding. Traditional rituals of passage initiation ceremonies, marriage rites, and ancestor remembrances maintained their cultural meaning but increasingly developed a celebratory tone. Wedding dances, formerly serious rituals to symbolize fertility and union, turned into colourful, festive affairs in which the whole community joined in music and celebration. In the same vein, funeral ceremonies, formerly characterized by highly spiritual mourning dances, became in some societies remembrance festivals celebrating the dead through music, dance, and storytelling. Another major driving force behind this change was growing external cultural influence, trade, and globalization. As the indigenous people encountered external groups, aspects of their performing arts got integrated with novel styles, thereby making them popular among broader sections of people. For example, the traditional war dances, originally done in preparation for battles, have in certain instances transformed into symbolic performances and are now exhibited at cultural events or tourism functions. This blending of the sacred and the celebratory served to keep tribal traditions alive while enabling them to be transformed into contemporary contexts. Even with these transformations, much of the tribal performance remains infused with its ritualistic origins. Festivals that are now public celebrations tend to incorporate symbolic gestures, chants, and dance movements that were previously integral to sacred rites. This fusion of celebration and ritual makes sure the spiritual and cultural legacy of the indigenous people does not die down even as performance evolves to meet the needs of the modern day. In the face of increasing modernization in

the world, this balance of tradition and celebration makes sure tribal performing arts endure and remain vital despite their indigenous roots.

VII. Communal gathering and social bonding

Tribal arts have been a way of promoting communal congregation and social bonding for ages, enhancing the solidarity and identity of indigenous peoples. Dance, music, and storytelling were not only forms of art but also necessary social practices that united people in celebration, rituals, and experience. Festivals and ceremonies were ways in which people could meet, share knowledge, and reaffirm cultural values through collective action. Whether as harvest celebrations, initiation ceremonies, or commemoration of ancestors, these ceremonies cemented social cohesion and a sense of community. In most tribal cultures, performing arts contributed significantly to cross-generational bonding, as the elderly shared customs, legends, and values with younger people. Collective dance and music performance promoted cooperation since rhythmic synchrony and concerted movements represented oneness and mutual cooperation. Besides, these festivals also created a platform for conflict resolution, alliance formation, and kinship reinforcement. Even now, even after modernization, tribal performances and festivals remain a strong medium of social bonding, perpetuating cultural heritage and communal ethos.

VIII. The Role of Music and Dance in Festivals

Music and dance are focal points of tribal festivals, serving as a way of artistic expression as well as a tool for preserving culture. They are not just mere entertainments, but carry deep spiritual, social, and symbolic meaning, capturing the values, beliefs, and heritage of a people. Tribal festivals, usually connected with seasonal changes, harvests, religious practices, or rites of passage, utilize music and dance to call forth blessings, show gratitude, and reinforce communal ties. Music during tribal festivals is generally marked by rhythmic drumming, chanting, and playing indigenous instruments like flutes, rattles, and string instruments. Drums are held sacred in most cultures, representing the heartbeat of the earth and a means of communicating with the spiritual world. Chants and songs, frequently transmitted orally across generations, have histories about ancestors, mythology, and moral values, which enforces cultural identity. Call and response singing, prevalent in most tribal cultures, creates a sense of belonging and togetherness between the performers and the audience. Dance, a ubiquitous part of such festivities, tends to be done in groups, highlighting the community's collective spirit. Every move in the dances of tribes holds meaning, such as that representing animals moves, seeds' planting, or victories by warriors. Dances performed in circles illustrate oneness, eternity, and nature and life's cycles. The masks, elaborate body painting, and clothing adorning these dances contribute even more to their spirituality and beauty, in most cases denoting dancers' affinities to deities, spirits of their ancestors, or to elements. Apart from their religious meaning, music and dance during festivals also act as a social bonding platform, source of intergenerational learning, and solution to conflicts. The young are taught by the elderly the complex rhythms, songs, and dance steps, thus perpetuating these

traditions. The festivals also offer avenues for marriage, coalition formation, and exchange among tribes, which cements social bonding. Today, although most tribal festivals have been influenced by modern times, they still retain their original essence. Music and dance are the cornerstones of keeping the spirit of these festivals alive, serving as a link between the past and the present. Through performances at cultural festivals, tourism festivals, and international forums, indigenous peoples are keeping their art forms alive while presenting their vibrant traditions to the world.

IX. Modern Adaptations and Cultural Influence

The Paliyars, like many other indigenous communities, have experienced cultural shifts due to modernization, socio-political changes, and external influences. Traditionally, their rituals and celebrations were deeply intertwined with their forest-based lifestyle, nature worship, and ancestral traditions. However, with increased interaction with mainstream society, urbanization, and government policies promoting assimilation, many of their customs have undergone transformations. Certain customary rituals, originally conducted in holy forest areas, now find their application in villages since there are prohibitions against accessing the forests as well as movement to settled habitats. Religious syncretism has also contributed to the contemporary practices of the Paliyars. Although they still worship their gods and spirits using the conventional offerings and rituals, some aspects of Hinduism and other mainstream religions have entered their rituals. For example, attendance at local temple festivals or the adoption of new symbols in their rituals demonstrates this cultural blend. Technology and education have helped to preserve and transform PaliyarS traditions. Younger generations, who are exposed to formal education and online platforms, are recording oral traditions, folk songs, and stories that were once transmitted orally. Social and cultural associations are also contributing to the creation of awareness about their heritage by conducting cultural events and festivals. Even with these adjustments, the Paliyars are challenged by cultural degradation, loss of linguistic identity, and economic forces that drive them towards mainstream livelihoods, often at the expense of their traditional knowledge and expertise. But attempts at preservation of culture, community driven developments, and acceptance by the state of their intangible heritage are assisting in upholding their identity while enabling them to confront modernity on their own terms.

X. The Influence of Globalization on Tribal Performing Art

Globalization has dramatically touched tribal performing arts, offering chances and difficulties in equal measure. Historically, tribal performing arts have been greatly influenced by customary practices, spirituality, and word of mouth oral traditions handed from one generation to the next. The performances involved are music, dance, and narration, presenting cultural identity expressions, social bond, and religious practice. Yet, globalization has brought in new dynamics that have reworked these ancient art forms. One of the greatest impacts of globalization is the enhanced visibility of tribal performing arts before larger audiences via media, tourism, and internet platforms. Tribal dance and music, previously restricted to the local community, are now

performed at national and international cultural events. While this has brought more recognition and appreciation of indigenous art, it has also caused commercialization, where performances are at times altered to fit outside tastes, which may dilute their original meaning and essence. The incorporation of modern elements, including contemporary musical instruments, stage arrangements, and fusion performances, has also changed tribal art forms. In other instances, the classical rhythms and melodies have been combined with contemporary styles such as pop, electronic, or fusion music, resulting in a new form of art. Though this development may serve to save the art by making it appealing to the younger generation, it also threatens to lose the originality of indigenous tribal expressions. Moreover, economic and social reforms fuelled by globalization have affected the involvement of tribal communities in their performing arts. As younger generations seek education and employment opportunities in urban areas, their engagement in traditional performances has declined. Some tribal artists have adapted by using social media and digital platforms to showcase their art, thus preserving and promoting their heritage in a modern context. Despite these challenges, globalization has also facilitated cultural exchange and collaboration between tribal artists and mainstream performers. Government and non-government agencies are attempting to document and preserve these art forms through cultural heritage programs and funding schemes. Initiatives to establish sustainable livelihoods for tribal artists through ethical tourism and fair trade practices are also being developed as means of balancing modernization with preservation. Globalization has had a significant effect on tribal performing arts, transforming their expression and availability. Though it poses challenges of cultural dilution and loss of authenticity, it also provides new opportunities for preservation, adaptation, and worldwide appreciation. The future of tribal performing arts will hinge on how well communities can balance these changes while preserving their distinctive tradition.

XI. The Impact of Globalization on Tribal Performing Art

Impact on tribal performing arts, resulting in both negative and positive impacts. Historically, these forms of art were entrenched in traditional local practices, spiritual faiths, and community rituals, existing as a cultural medium and means of social unity. But with rising exposure to the wider world in the form of tourism, mass media, and the internet, tribal performing arts have also undergone changes. While globalization has opened a platform for tribal artists to promote their traditions to larger groups of people, assuring cultural recognition and economic gain, many tribal performances are today showcased at national and international cultural festivals, bringing visibility and appreciation. However, commercialization and adaptation to contemporary tastes have occasionally resulted in dilution of traditional art forms, as performances are altered to attract outside audiences. Traditional music and dances are frequently interwoven with modern influences, including modern instrumentation and stage interpretations, which, though progressive, can modify their authenticity. Further, economic factors and the dynamics of shifting societal structures have also affected younger generations' participation in traditional arts as many migrate to cities seeking education and work, resulting in reduced traditional arts practices. Nonetheless, cultural institutions

and digital media are helping to conserve and display tribal arts by documentation, web-based performances, and heritage projects. Though globalization brings along issues of erosion of culture and loss of originality, it also presents avenues for adaptation and appreciation on a worldwide scale, hence the need to balance modernization with conservation of native art traditions.

XII. Conclusion

Indigenous peoples rituals and celebrations are important manifestations of their cultural identity, spiritual practice, and continuity of history. The Paliyars in Tenkasi District, like other indigenous peoples, have been able to retain their distinctive tradition in spite of modernization, social transformation, and external interferences. Their rituals, well grounded in the worship of nature, ancestors, and communal relations, demonstrate their ecological harmony with nature and ancient wisdom. Nonetheless, effects of socio-economic changes, limitation of access to forests, and impact of mainline religious life have resulted in some changes within their traditional rites. In spite of these vicissitudes, the Paliyars adhere to their heritage by celebrating the annual festivals, sacred rituals, and oral transmissions that have evolved through generations. The initiative of cultural researchers, anthropologists, and the government to record and save these traditions goes a long way in their continuity. Moreover, community-based conservation practices, awareness campaigns, and incorporation of traditional wisdom into contemporary scenarios can go a long way in protecting their rituals from decay. Finally, the Paliyars rituals and celebrations are not just cultural phenomena but a bridge between their past, present, and future. Safeguarding these traditions is vital to ensuring that their identity remains intact and the rich diversity of indigenous cultures is sustained. Sustained efforts at preservation, coupled with an appreciation of their lifestyle, will ensure that the Paliyars distinct heritage continues to flourish for generations to come.

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