

Chapter 5

Receding Dependence on Forests: A Study of the Paliyar Tribes in India

T. Anantha Vijayah

Gandhigram Rural Institute (Deemed), India

ABSTRACT

This chapter considers how modernity has affected the livelihood of Paliyar community and how they have been affected by forest dispossession. Whether the weaning away from the forests has been manufactured or part of the systemic exploitation is discernible. The chapter traces the history of the Paliyars, their belief structures, and indigenous knowledge within sacred spaces. The chapter also presents a discussion of the relation between land and spiritual tradition as well as the importance of land to identity, transfer of oral tradition, and indigenous traditional knowledge. Removing the Paliyar from the land continues to erode their tradition, knowledge, and identity.

INTRODUCTION

The Paliyar tribes are lesser known and thinly populated tribe existing from time immemorial on the hill tracts of southern part of India. The oral traditions of the Paliyars, trace their antiquity to that of the Hindu pantheon, the Tamil Lord Murugan. Paliyars claim that Lord Murugan's wife Valli was from their tribe. These oral traditions not only establish their antiquity but also their locale to the hill tracts of Palani Hills. Though they live within the Tamil speaking region of southern part of India from time immemorial, there are hardly any references about Paliyars in classical Tamil literature. However, the first documentary evidences were created in a series of volumes on the *Castes and tribes of Southern India* (Thurston, 1909) with extensive description of Paliyar tribes of Tamil Nadu. The description provided evidence and observations of British missionaries as to how the culture had lived prior to colonization and how they were perceived by the British missionaries who reported to the mainland. It is pertinent to note the text was written almost 300 hundred years after the British first colonized the Indian sub-continent and used in this chapter to illustrate the indigenous origins of the Paliyar tribes.

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BACKGROUND

Every name has a reason, or reason would be attributed to the use of the name. Either way, there are two hypotheses for the reason of their names: They were seen as people from whom others should not receive a curse, hence the name Paliyar. The meaning for the Tamil word *Paliyar* would be those who would curse you and therefore one should not be recipient of their curse. It may be also that the name must have been a derivative from the name of their goddess Palichiamman—those who worship the goddess Palichiamman.

In order to establish the fact whether they belong to indigenous communities a quick look at the definition by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues would illustrate the issue. The indigenes are identified with certain parameters. Juxtaposing those parameters with the Paliyars would enable us to ascertain the fact that they are without any doubt belong to indigenous communities. Paliyars are accepted by their own people and at their community level as belonging to a specific tribe. They do have a historical continuity with pre-colonial and pre-settler societies. Paliyars do have a strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources. They do have a distinct social, economic or political systems, culture and beliefs and are non-dominant groups of the society and they attempt to maintain their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples. The Government of India has also notified them as Scheduled Tribes in the Gazette of India, and they are identified as people spread over the southern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka with names Palliyar / Pallegan / Palligan / Palliyar / Paliyan.

As a deeply rooted and settled indigenous people (LaRocque, 2011), Paliyars are also close to their natural habitat and the locale is spread across the western ghats of southern part of India (see Figure 1). And it is this rooting to the geographical locale that makes them indigenous and they believe as other indigenous tribes around the world that they are ‘inextricability linked with the earth and everything on it (Ruffo, 2009). Tracing the Paliyar history is to trace the history of humankind. The mid ranges of Palani Hills has nestled within itself prehistoric Dolmen’s caves currently discovered in over 20 locations. This suggests that the early man had once roamed the hills and had created a space for themselves on rocky terrains at higher grounds close to water bodies. These archaeological sites project the development of human population from time immemorial. Extrapolating from this scenario is that some human communities must have moved away from the hills to that of the plains. Some communities must have decided to stay put in those hill tracts. Paliyar are said to be one such community that continued to be in the forests from time immemorial. Until recent times they were living in caves and crevices. These hunter gatherer quasi nomadic people had been throughout the forest ranges mostly in the lower Palani Hills and along the Western Ghats at an altitude between 1000 to 1200 meters above sea level. Apart from Palani Hills they are also located in Tirumala hills in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India. However, in the Madura Manual, it was recorded that Paliyars are the aborigines of the Palani hills. (Thurston) According to another account, Paliyans resided in the jungles near the base of the mountains, in small isolated communities separated from each other by a distance of several miles in southern most part of Tamil Nadu in North Tinnevely (Thurston, 1909).

Thurston (1909) further recorded the dry season when the Paliyar lived in natural caves and crevices in rocks, but, when leaks occurred during the rains, they erected a rough shed with the floor raised on poles off the ground, and sloping grass roof, beneath which a fire was kept burning at night, not only for warmth, but also to ward off wild beasts. They were experts at making rapidly improvised shelters at the base of hollow trees by cutting away the wood on one side with a bill-hook. Thus protected, they

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