

Ecological References in the Folksongs of the Kurichiyans of Kerala

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Abstract: This article is on the folksongs of the Kurichiyans, one of many settled agricultural tribes of the Wayanad district of Kerala. Their culture is enriched by a number of folksongs and myths, which depict their traditional pattern of life and occupation, including the interesting ecological adaptations they have developed because of their constant interaction with nature. An attempt is made in this article to show how most of the Kurichiyans folksongs are, in one way or another, a narration of some environmental aspect of their life — whether about birds, animals, plants, wind, or rain. A few songs are analysed here to draw out the relationship between this tribal community and the ecosystem they inhabit and depend on.

Folklore has an important place in the culture of every tribal society, which uses folklore as a medium to transmit its tradition and traditional knowledge systems from one generation to another. It plays a significant role in the process of socialisation, for instance, it can tell listeners how different offences are punished by the supernatural power in different ways. Similarly, one can find in tribal songs descriptions about the origin of the universe, agriculture, wild life, trees and other living objects on earth. They also explain the complex relationship between man and environment by showing how man depends on plants, animals, birds and other ecological factors, and his reactions to nature.

Kurichiyans of Wayanad District

Wayanad, one of the 14 districts of Kerala, is situated on an elevated plateau in the Western Ghats. It has a total area of about 20,804 hectares of which 2,126 sq. km is covered by forest. According to the 1991 census report, a major part of the population of scheduled tribes in Kerala is distributed in the Wayanad district, which constitutes 1,14,969 of the total population. The Wayanad tribal population constitutes 36 per cent of the total population of the state. Each tribe has its own identity and they come under different economic profiles under the same ecological niche.

The tribes of Wayanad constitute Paniyan, Adiyar, Mullaluruman, Uralikuruman, Kattunaiken, etc. The Kurichiyans are mainly a settled agricultural community who practise co-operative farming and have joint ownership of property. It is said that the word 'kurichiyar' came from the two words, 'kuri' and 'chiar', 'kuri' meaning target and 'chiar' meaning people, and therefore, 'Kurichiyans' meaning those who hunt or shoot at the target. They are famous for hunting. They claim an equal status with Brahmins and even call themselves *Malanamboothiries*. They practice untouchability towards all castes other than Brahmins. Kurichiyans have their own language with alphabet.

They follow the joint family system and are matrilineal in inheritance, with the Karanavar as the supreme authority. The Kurichiyans are highly religious and follow an animistic form of religion. They are an exceptionally interesting tribe possessing a complex culture with a variety of myths and folksongs. Their linkage with ecological factors connected with life and livelihood are clearly highlighted in their songs, which are transmitted through the oral tradition. Being a settled agriculture community, their folksongs also reflect the relationship between land, water, animals and climatic factors.

Origin Myth of Kurichiyans

In the distant past, before creation, the sky was on top and the earth far below, covered by sea. At that time, Vadakkari Bhagavathi, the Kurichiyar deity had a dream in which the Almighty ordered her to find a place to create 1001 castes. God also allowed her to move the sea sideways and then she started the work. Young virgins were given as labourers. On completion of the work, the workers went out to meet God and ask for remuneration. But He said he would not give any remuneration till he had examined the quality of the work. God, therefore, created a bird called 'Chenthamarapakshi' (a bird from a red lotus) and asked the bird to fly around the earth and find out the quality of the work. After the examination, the bird found a fault - the work was incomplete in one place. There were two hills standing close together without touching and there was water between the hills. On both the hills God created and placed 18 human castes, and different types of animals and plants — the Kurichiyar caste was one among them.

There are various songs such as *Narippattu*, *Kaathippattu*, *Koomanpattu*, *Mampattu*, *Onthupattu*, *Pakshipattu*, *Mayilpattu*, *Marappattu*, *Theppattu*, *Pooppattu*, etc. As the names indicate, these songs are mainly concerned with the description of birds, animals, plants and other ecological factors. When they perform these songs during special occasions, one of the members imitates the movements of that particular creature. Though Kurichiyans have their own language, their songs follow the ordinary folk language of North Malabar.

Songs and Ecological References

The *Kumbhappattu* is the song in which the Kurichiyans talk of their belief that devils and evil creatures existed on earth and their goddess Malakkari protected the earth and sea. The song shows that the world itself is empowered by a myth co-relating the sea and the land. The folksongs of the Kurichiyans state the belief that the earth is an island surrounded by oceans and the four mountains of the earth that are the abode of 'devas' or the gods of heaven. There is an imaginary world called 'naragam' (hell) from where 24 'Asuras' (aror people) came out and destroyed the divine mountains and the calamities of the present world are due to this unexpected event. This myth also links the common practice of worshipping mountains, which later became the 'sivalingam' or 'devastanam' of Lord Siva. The worship, co-related with ecological factors, is parallel to the worship system existing in other religious practices.

Kurichiyans believe that paradise itself is constructed with 14 granite pillars having granite doors and windows. The description of the castle in the paradise mentioned above throws light on their skill of construction in granite and is indicative of their art and architecture even centuries ago. They believe that the reddish colour of the sunrise and sunset is the spreading of the blood of sun when the sun was injured from the 12 gunshots from the goddess Malakkari. Malakkari did not like the sun's rays, fearing that they would destroy human beings.

The wind, also worshipped by Aryans, is treated as the strongest force by Kurichiyans because they imagine that even the darkened cloud with its fearful look can be wiped out by the strong movement of the wind. Of course, this is an ecological factor that the wind will reduce the density of the clouds decreasing the fall of rain. They worship Lord Vishnu to ask him to recreate the sun and destroy Kali and the children who lived in the sailor's castle troubling all human beings. Lord Vishnu is re-originated through Malakkari and recreates the sun.

After recreating the sun, Malakkari wants to fertile the land. Seedlings of reeds and palm trees are planted for livelihood. She also wants to prevent the unnecessary encroachment of the devils from the sea and constructs the sea wall to stop their attack. The sea itself is made calm and the witches conquered forever. In order to feed the worshippers of Malakkari, God himself ploughed the hills and cultivated the plants. The Kurichiyans believe that Malakkari was the first farmer and they are still agriculturists, being the followers of their goddess.

The existing Banasura hill of Wayanad has two peaks - the bigger one is known as large hibiscus and the smaller one as small hibiscus. The hibiscus is a sacred flower used for religious purposes. These hibiscus flowers are used for *poojas* of Lord Malakkari to retain prosperity and good will. Kurichiyans also believe that there is a sacred pond in the Banasura

hill called 'Kanakachira' (gold pond) and if anybody bathes in it and uses the 'Padamanhal' (dark yellow turmeric), they will be protected from all kinds of injuries, as they believe that the tuber itself contains blessings of Lord Malakkari.

The Kurichiyans who are agriculturists believe that ecological factors like mountains, climate, and sea are the contributions of their beloved god and they worship paddy, hibiscus, turmeric and other plants as the sources of divine existence. The folksongs of Kurichiyans are embodied with ecological factors, which mould and shape their traditional beliefs with some contemporary aspects.

In the 'Onthupattu' (song of calotes) which describes a simple food web in animal ecology), four calotes are mentioned: *Aalonth*, *Pillonth*, *Charonth*, and *Vellonth*. The habitats of these calotes are described differently, for example, *Aalonth* are found on the banyan tree, *Charonth* are seen on rocks, *Vellonth* in water and *Pillonth* in grass. This song also describes how these calotes are adapted to their respective ecosystems. An example of an Onthupattu is given here:

ONTHUPATTU (SONG OF CALOTES)

Akkaraechaenila vannathanikkoran
Akkaraechaeroodae chellunnanerath
Therum kalathimmalonthinae kandappol
Kunthameduthange onthinaekkuthootte
Kuntham vayuthippoy onth parannootte
Oonapparambilae thaneendae keelunne
Onthaya onthokkai kootam parayunne
Kootam parayunnu kurikalay theerunne
Paronth ennoru onth parayunnu
Paraemmal thakkanne vannam ngan veppikkum
Allenkile vannathaninganae kutharu
Vellonth ennoru onth parayunnu
Vellathile mukkunnath nganillandakkuvae
Neelonth ennoru onth parayunne
Neelathile mukkunnath nganillandakkuvae
Allenkile vannathan kunganae kollanam
Allenkile vannathan veedoyichi pokanam
Allenkile vannathan olae oyikkanam
Allenkile vannathaninganae kuthare

In 'Marappattu' (song of trees), the Kurichiyans believe that the first fruit of a tree is a forbidden one since it is believed to contain the curses of the devils from hell and it will obviously lead to death if eaten. In the song called 'Pakshippattu' (song of the bird), there is a description of the ecological adaptation of a bird called 'Kattirittipakshi'. According to the song, these

small birds are found in the paddy fields left after the harvest. The birds construct their nests with small mud-blocks and paddy straw. After hatching eggs, these birds leave the fields. This type of habitation helps the bird in two ways: first the bird gets sufficient paddy grains from the harvested lands; and second, it can make use of the useless paddy straws from the fields to construct its nest. These folk songs also describe the traditional method of ploughing with bullocks.

In 'Nellukuthupattu' (song of husking paddy), there is reference to various types of paddy like 'Chomaala', 'Chennellu' and 'Kamariya'. Methods of cultivation are also described in this song. In addition, the *Kaithappattu* (song of pandanus), 'Theeppattu' (song of fire) and 'Pooppattu' (song of flowers) refer to ecological constituents such as animals, flowers, plants, fish, etc. An example of *theeppattu* is given here:

*Veliyay polikkunnath pashuvanne
Pashuvay kuthunnath krishiyanne
Krishiyay kadayunnath moranne
Moray pulikkunnath eengayanne
Eengayay theyunnath urumbanne
Urumbay kadikkunnath pambanne
Pambay odunnath vellamanne
Vellamay kettunnath nadayanne
Nadayay udayunnath thengayanne
Thengayay kettunnath theyanne
Theeyaloru thee kollitha vellenpulaya.....*

The folksongs of the Kurichians are a crystallised picture of their origin, social behaviour, worship and source of livelihood. The themes themselves are a reflection of their ecology where belief and tradition are limited to unseen gods with supernatural powers to give them a comfortable life. It is no doubt that the folksongs of Kurichians, whether in Wayanad or in Kannavam, are a lullaby of nature, moulded and shaped with ecological adaptations and traditional occupations. A study of the folksongs takes us back to their golden age when the Kurichians lived with no pollution in air, water or land, and depended purely on nature. Even their physique is blessed by nature.

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