

## **Last of the hunter-gatherers: The Cholanaikan tribe**

A project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of a B.A. Degree in  
History

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulum

Affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam



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**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY**  
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**MARCH 2025**

*Verified by Dr. Jency. F S*

## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the project titled "Last of the hunter-gatherers: The Cholanaikan tribe" is being submitted by name in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of a B.A. Degree in History of St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University, is a Bonafide record of the work done by the students under my supervision and guidance. No part of this work has been submitted elsewhere for the award of any degree.

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## DECLARATION

We hereby declare that this project "Last of the hunter-gatherers: The Cholanaikan tribe" is an original work done by us under the guidance of Dr. Vinitha T Tharakan, Associate Professor, Department of History, St. Teresa's College (Autonomous). No part of this work has been submitted elsewhere for the award of any degree.

Place: Ernakulam

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1911, defines a tribe as a “collection of families bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous though originally it might have been so”. Another definition of a tribe by D. N. Majumdar is that “a tribe is a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name, members of which occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe certain taboos regarding marriage, profession or occupation and have developed a well assessed system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligations”.

Scheduled Tribes are defined as those communities that are scheduled in line with article 342 of the Indian Constitution in Article 366 (25) of the document<sup>1</sup>. According to this article, groups will only be regarded as Scheduled Tribes if the president has designated them as such either an initial public announcement or a later amended act of Parliament. The essential characteristics, first laid down by Lokur Committee, for a community to be identified as Scheduled Tribes are: Indications of primitive Traits, distinctive culture, shyness of contact with community at large, geographical isolation, and finally, backwardness. Among the Scheduled tribes, there are some tribes who are more backward than others. They have been classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups. The PTVGs are the most under-privileged communities among the Scheduled Tribes of the country. Pre-agricultural level of technology, stagnant or declining population, extremely low literacy, and a subsistence level of economy are the necessary features for including a community

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<sup>1</sup> Constitution of India, 1950

in to this category. As per the information available, there are about 75 such groups in India.<sup>2</sup> It is stated that the dark-skinned, short-statured tribes of Kerala are descended from the old Dravidian stock. The vast majority of Kerala's tribes establish their communities on hill ranges and in dense forests, primarily in the Western Ghats, which border Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. In Kerala five communities are recognized as PVTG's.

Many people including scholars in the field of social sciences raised a serious question, when was the existence of Chola Naikans revealed to the public? Once it was revealed the news of the government of India asked the Tribal research and Training Centre, Kozhikode (KIRTHADS) to conduct an anthropological study on the group and submit a report. In 1976, the following tribal communities of Kerala were identified as primitive tribal groups by Government of India: (1) The Chola Naikans of Nilambur Valley (2) The Kattu Naikans of Wyanad (3) Kurumber of Attappadi (4) Kadar of Parambikulam (5) Korugar of Kasargod<sup>3</sup>. Cholanaiikkan's are one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in Kerala. They are found in the Ghat section of Karulai and Vazhikkadavu forest ranges of Nilambur valley of Malappuram District. They are the only community among Scheduled Tribes who depend sole on non timber forest produces for their consumption and for exchange or sale.

Total population of this community as per 2011 census is 124. Cholanaiikkan/Cholanaika forms an indigenous community residing deep inside the Karulai and Chungathara forest ranges of Western

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<sup>2</sup> Kerala Institute for Research Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Centre for Earth Science Studies. *Geographic Information System of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal groups (PTGs) of Kerala*. KIRTHADS Library, 2013

<sup>3</sup> KT, Firoz. 2019. "Chola Naikans: The Cave Man of Western Ghats." *RESEARCH REVIEW*.



Ghats. This is in the Nilambur region of the Malappuram district in the southern state of Kerala in the Indian subcontinent. The community prefers to stay isolated and away from both agrarian and urban lifestyle as is commonly adopted by the Indian citizens. They are among those unique tribes that still depend largely on forest produce for their survival. They were added into the list of Scheduled tribes of Kerala after amending the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders Act (2002). Also known as “Caveman of Kerala” (Bhanu, 1989), even to the present date, they use natural caves as a safe dwelling space in the forest. Cholanaikkar has been identified as a numerically smaller community with a population of less than 400 members. The community speaks a distinct Dravidian language called Cholanaikkan and as per the UNESCO’s endangerment criteria, this lesser-studied language is identified by Sreelakshmi (2021) as “Definitively endangered”.<sup>4</sup>

There are theories relating to their arrival to the forests. The first theory is that they are the descendants of the Chola empire, they originated from Karnataka, and settled down in the Nilambur forests. The second theory is during a flash flood, a man and woman. they escaped to the forests for a safe haven from the floods. They sought refuge from Neelimala mountain caves, and they learned to make fire. They resided in the mountain caves, and believed God was present there and presumed that the descendants of the tribe came from this man and woman. This theory is widely accepted in the community and has been passed down as a story from generation to generation.

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<sup>4</sup> Kumar, Priyanka Pradeep. 2022. *"The digitization of an endangered language using open-access resources: the cholanaikkan case study."* Interdisciplinary Journal of Linguistics.

The second theory is that they migrated from the forests of Karnataka but this theory has proven to be incorrect as their language is more closely related to Tulu, Koda and Thoda languages than to Kannada. The third theory is that the Cholanaikar are ancestors of the Chola soldiers. Badukas and Baftars are the two factions of the chola soldiers. The Cholas were ambushed and defeated in the Chola-Chera war, and the remaining surviving soldiers escaped from the enemies by migrating to the Niligiri Hills. Half of the baduka faction arrived in Wayanad and others to Nilambur. It is assumed the cholanaickans relatives, happen to settle down in Wayanad, in an area called Baduka. But local records, refute this theory, stating that there are no ancestors living in the area. The hypothesis made from the research is that the cholanaikar may have later became Cholanaikans. But from a research perspective, we have taken the 'Chola Empire' theory to prove our research objectives.

1. To study the lifestyle of Cholanaikans, and their primitive methods of survival in the modern day.
2. To understand their relationship with their environment and how they make use of natural resources for purposes of subsistence, medicinal herbs and survival.
3. To decipher how they handle civil matters such as family values, marriage ceremonies, religious beliefs and rituals, social structures, any existing hierarchies and modes of leadership.
4. To comprehend the changes brought about over generations and the differences in lifestyle as compared to older times.

The first objective is to study the overall lifestyle of the tribe. They are one of the last hunter gatherer societies today, and given the rise in technology over the years, this paper aims to study how their primitive methods have worked for them even today.

The second objective is to study their relationship with their surrounding environment. Given that they still hunt and gather for their food, their relationship with nature is one of their most important qualities. We aim to study how they subsist using the resources around them for food, overall survival as well as how they use these resources to create medicinal herbs for their treatments and ailments.

The third objective pertains to civil matters such as family, religion, society and so on. We seek to understand their family values and how it is formed through the institution of marriage, as well as the ceremonies for the same. We also seek to understand if there are any hierarchies in their society, how they govern themselves and through what process they ascertain who is put in charge. Another aspect to study is whether there are any religious beliefs, and if so, the rituals they practice within the community.

The fourth objective deals with the changes brought about in their society, from generation to generation and whether they still honor the old habits and practices they started with and how they have adjusted accordingly to the rapid changes in India that came with technology and modernization.

This research project is divided into four chapters. The first chapter deals with the introduction of the topic, definitions of the tribe and PTVGs, as well as brief descriptions of the Cholanaikans and theories of their origin. The second chapter deals with the geography of the Cholanaikans and provides descriptions on the Nilambur valley located in Malappuram and the forests in which the Cholanaikans reside. The third chapter deals with the lifestyle of the Cholanaickans, their salient

features encompassing factors such as marriage, family, governance, astronomy, anthropology and so on. The fourth chapter includes the findings of our research as well as the conclusions derived from the same.

This topic is relevant especially today considering their declining population, threats of extinction, especially as one the last hunter gatherer tribes in India.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This research work focuses on the hunter gatherer group that resides in Nilambur, known as the Cholanaickans. We are focusing on their relationship with the environment, their lifestyle and their subsistence economy, and how they are still continuing their primitive lifestyle in today's modern age. We referred to certain books and articles from research journals.

We referred to the book *Cholanaickans of Kerala*, by B Ananda Bhanu, the most comprehensive work on the tribe by far. The book encompasses all the information about their primitive lifestyle, and how they are surviving off natural resources alone. It talks about the primary factors for maintaining their lifestyle, subsistence management and so on, as well as the recent changes and the problems faced by them throughout time and today.

For information on the geography of the Cholanaikans, we referred to the book *Geographic Information System of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of Kerala*, published by The Kerala Institute for Research Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes, Kozhikode and Scheduled Tribes in collaboration with Centre for Earth Science Studies (CESS), Thiruvananthapuram. In this book, Cholanaikans have been categorized in the term 'Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups' and illustrates many maps on their spatial distribution in Malappuram.

We then referred to *People of India: Kerala, Part 2 of People of India*. This book provides a brief description on the tribes of Kerala, and the Cholanaikan excerpt includes various topics such as their diet, subsistence economy, language, gender roles, religion and so on.

We have also referred to articles chosen from research journals. In the article, *Understanding Rationality, Culture and Scientific Temperament of Cholanaikkan Tribe of Kerala*, the researchers in collaboration with the government of Kerala have visited the tribe and provided many details in the social structures, anthropology, modes of Cholanaikan worship, scientific temperament, astronomy culture, etc.

We have also referred to the article *Chola Naikans: The Cave Man of Western Ghats*, which gives brief descriptions on the Nilambur valley, its significance as well as salient features of the tribe.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology used here is taken from primary, secondary, as well as tertiary resources. A interview was conducted by interviewing a member from the tribe. A structured questionnaire was used for the interview to derive information on the Cholanaikans. We visited the Kerala Forest Department in Nilambur as well as a tribal school situated in the area for the neighboring tribes. Though the information gotten was limited, it was crucial as the information available on the tribe is scarce.

The secondary sources include the books about the tribe, which were taken from the KIRTADS library situated in Kozhikode. A number of sources were taken relating to comprehensive studies on Cholanaikans, the geographical information on the Cholanaikans as well as brief descriptions of the tribe taken from books written on tribes in Kerala.

Tertiary sources include articles taken from various research journals, books and news articles to get more information about the tribe. We also visited the Trivandrum library, to research more about the tribe.

## **LIMITATIONS**

There were a lot of challenges in collecting information about the tribe. The first challenge that arose was the meeting of the tribe. Due to the recent animal attack, the Kerala Forest Department, declined the requests for meeting the tribe. The second challenge was there was an internal tribal strife happening within the community, which again led to the decline in meeting the tribe. Another factor is they communicate using the tribal language, and not Malayalam, which makes it difficult to conduct an interview. Unless a mediator is involved during the interview, overall information collection is difficult. The tribal settlement is situated in a restricted location. They are living 18 kms away from the Kerala forest department office, and to enter the settlement, officers of the department should be present while interviewing the cholanaickan people. We couldn't conduct many interviews, as the person we were interviewing, Vinod Chellan was helping out in the tribe due to a recent animal attack that took place in their settlement. Because of his busy schedule, we were only able to conduct one short interview, thus, certain information about their culture and traditions is vague.

In the next chapter, we focus on the geography of the tribe and their settlements in the forest. We delve into how they came to the forests, the theories emerging out of it, and what's their current settlement like, and where they are currently situated.

## CHAPTER 2

### GEOGRAPHY OF THE CHOLANAIKANS

The Malappuram district, situated in the state of Kerala is bounded by the Nilgiris hills on the East and the Arabian Sea on the west. Four rivers of importance in Kerala, namely the Chaliyar, Kadalundippuzha, Bharathapuzha and Tirupuzha flow through this district. Malappuram consists of three natural divisions: lowland, midland and highland. The topography of this district is undulating as it starts from the thick forest covered hilltops on the east, along the Nilgiris.

The area gradually slopes down to the valleys and the small hills, before finally ending on the sandy flat of luxurious coconut groves found in the West. The district has the same climatic conditions of the rest of the state, characterized by hot and humid temperature which varies between 30 to 20 degrees. The district has 2 revenue divisions, 6 Taluks, and 135 villages. It also has 102 Gramapanchayats, 14 block panchayats and 4 municipalities. Situated amid the rolling hills and winding rivers that flow toward the coconut-lined shoreline, the area hides an extraordinary and rich history. It is highly revered and stands out for its natural beauty, mosques, temples, and cultural traditions. It is home to many patrons of literature, political and religious leaders who have led various movements such as the Khilafat movement and Mapilla revolts which were a landmark movement against British authority in India. <sup>5</sup>

The district of Malappuram was formed on the 16th of June, 1969. The district has a geographical area of 3550 sq. kms, covering 9.13% of total area of the state of Kerala, ranking it 3rd in terms of land area.

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<sup>5</sup> About District: *Malappuram* (<https://malappuram.nic.in/en/about-district/>)



Approximately 53 kilometers from Malappuram is Nilambur, a major town, municipality and Taluk recognized for its teak plantations and various tribal communities. Being close to the Nilgiri ranges of the Western Ghats endows Nilambur with abundant rainfall, beautiful waterfalls, and vibrant green rainforests. Besides teak, various plantations of mahogany, rosewood, and bamboo are also present here. Nilambur Valley in Malappuram is situated to the west of Tamil Nadu's Nilgiris District and to the south of Kozhikode District's South Wayanad. Its mean elevation stands at 4080 feet above sea level; daily temperatures fluctuate between 80° and 90°F; and precipitation levels range from 100" in the east to 300" in the west.<sup>6</sup>

The whole valley is adorned with lush forests that are evergreen in the ghats and semi-deciduous in the foothills. The trees attain massive sizes. They are constant in greenery and come in various colors and leaf types. In the monsoon season, strong winds sweep through this area. The most notable characteristic of this valley is its teak plantation, established in 1892. The valley hosts numerous bamboos, which are appreciated for their commercial value. The valley is rich in various forest products, including ginger, Dammer, cardamom, honey, arrowroot, pepper, and others. Christian and Muslim farmers have also recently introduced paddy and tapioca to the foothills.

Several streams intersect across the valley. The two main rivers of the valley are the Chaliyar and Karimpuzha; the former originates from the Elambiler Hills at an elevation of 6780 feet. The settlements of the Cholanaikkan people can be found along the edges of various streams, such as Kariapuzha, Cherupuzha, Talipuzha, Panapuzha, Kerampuzha, and Karipuzha, among others.

The proximity of Nilambur to the Western Ghats gives it a rich tribal population. The tribes of Kerala are believed to originate from the ancient Dravidian lineage with a deep skin tone and a

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<sup>6</sup> Discovering Malabar: Nilambur (<https://www.keralatourism.org/malabar/nilambur/62> n.d.)

low height. Most of the groups of Kerala establishes its settlements in the thick forest areas and on the hills ranges, primarily in the Western Ghats. In Kerala five communities are recognized as PVTGs (particularly vulnerable tribal groups). They are Koraga of Kasaragod district, Cholanaickan of Nilambur valley, Malappuram district, Kurumbar of Attappady, Palakkad district, Kadar of Parambikulam, Palakkad and Thrissur districts, Kattunayakan of Wayanad, Kozhikode, Malappuram, and Palakkad districts.

The habitat of the Cholanaickans lies in the Ernad Taluk of Malappuram district in the Kerala state. The valley is about 60 kms from Malappuram. Gales are experienced during the month of May, June and July. The Cholanaickan community are regarded as one of the most primitive and vanishing tribes of Kerala. They are also one of the oldest native communities in Kerala. They are only seen in the Karulai and Chungathara. Forest Ranges in Nilambur in the district of Malappuram.<sup>7</sup> The main vegetation types of Cholanaickans are identified as forests. The landform types are plateau and denudational hill complexes, and the soils there are moderately low to non-productive. They only constitute 1.5% of the total population of particularly vulnerable tribes of the Kerala state. Based on a survey conducted by KIRTADS in 2007, their total population is said to be around 363.<sup>8</sup> Most of the settlements of the Cholanaickan community are distributed along the banks of the Karimpuzha and its tributaries flowing through the forest areas. Only three out of the fourteen settlements they occupy are accessible by roads, the others being accessible only through walks into dense forests that take two to three hours to reach.

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<sup>7</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaickans of Kerala*.

<sup>8</sup> Kerala Institute for Research Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Centre for Earth Science Studies. *Geographic Information System of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal groups (PTGs) of Kerala*. KIRTADS Library, 2013

The forest of Nilambur has three forests, namely the Nilambur, Karulai and Chungathara. The Cholanaickans are found to inhabit the Karulai Range and the parts of Chungathara range. The ecology of the area is different from the rest of the place, it is characterised by hills, valleys, mountains, rivers, streams, forests and meadows. The habitat of the Cholanaickans can be classified into three types on the basis of the nature of the soil found there. On the plain and on the foothills, the soil is found to be of reddish brown color with coarse grain stones and in the forest the sand is granules mixed with mud which forms a thick coating of clayish mud. The last type of soil is of granular stones on the hill tops and on the river side. The hill sides are often found covered with grass and are of granite stones, spread as high as 2000 to 4000 ft. This is known as the Nilgiri plateau and is best known for separating the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

The forest consists of deep valleys and hills, which are very prominent in the border between the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The valley of Nilambur is known for its natural beauty. It is formed due to the deep cutting of rivers from different angles through the hills. If one observes from a distance, the forests and valleys would give off an appearance of undulating hills, lush with trees, creepers and grass.<sup>9</sup>

A majority of the rivers found in the Ernad Taluk of the district of Malappuram are found in the Karulai and Chungathara range, namely the Karimpuzha, Talipuzha, Paanapuzha, Korampuzha and Kanthapuzha. The Karimpuzha river originates around the Nilgiris and at its point of origin there is an expansive area of water on the peak. These rivers and their tributaries are the only means

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<sup>9</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaikans of Kerala*.

of water for the Cholanaickan, who are usually found living either on the banks of these rivers or caves found near it. During monsoon season, they move themselves and their belongings far off from the bank for protection as the mighty currents are especially strong during this time. These rivers are a vital source for the tribe, as they not only provide them with necessities but also serve as a kind of boundary of their territories, giving them protection against wildlife.

Due to the heavy rainfall, moderate temperature and high mountaneous north-eastern borders, the flora of this region is tropical. The whole area can be divided into: the midland region, the shrub jungle, and the evergreen rainforest. Major part of the district come under the midland region, and it is thickly populated. Coconut, paddy, tuber crops like tapioca, yam, clocasia and other such vegetables are grown there in large amounts. There are also many trees grown here, mainly the *Macaranga indica*, *Mangifera indica*, *Artocarpus scholaris*, and so on. Some weeds are common and cultivated, namely *Eupatoniums*, *Clerodentron infortunatum*, *Hyptis suaveolen*, *Anisomelens ovata*, and so on. The hilltops are covered with grass like *Aristida setacea*, *Setaria glauca*, etc. Plants like *Ospeckia octandra*, *Lantena Occulata*, *Habenaria spp* are intermingled with the grass there. Rubber and Teak plantations are found on some of the hills. The mid land region gradually merges into the jungle. The area is constantly humid and uniformly clad with evergreen rainforest above the height of 2000 feet.<sup>10</sup>

The fauna of Nilambur forest includes all kinds of reptiles, birds and mammals. Some common birds are more recognized by their calls and songs than by how they look. Among rhe birds the following can be mention: *Megal aima haemocephala* – the crimson breates barbet or the copper smith, *M. Viridis* – the green barbet, *Caprimulgus asiaticus* - the Indian night jar, *Cuculas*

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<sup>10</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaikans of Kerala*.

micropterus – the Indian Cuckoo, *Cacomantis merulinus* – the plaintive cuckoo or also known as whistling school boy, etc. The carnivores are represented by the tiger, the leopard, jungle cats, toddy cats, the grey mongoose, brown mongoose, hyaenas etc.

There are eleven groups of Cholanaickans that live in the two forest ranges of Nilambur and Karulai. In these two areas, each group moves and resides in a certain area. The areas in which the groups live and travel serve as identifiers. Tsenmam is the name of the Cholanaickan's region. Hills, rivers, trees, rocks, and other features clearly delineate the boundaries and allow for the identification of the many Tsenmam. The Karulai range contains six tsenmam, while the Chungathara range contains four. The Cholanaickan society has two roles for the tsenmam. It establishes the boundaries of a certain area and provides a sense of identity to the people who live and travel there. It is possible for a senmam to contain two or more families.

Members of a tsenmam have a much in common, such as the territory's resources, caverns, etc., as well as the pressures and hardships of surviving in an otherwise harsh environment. They are intimately connected, share happiness and sorrow, and confront life's obstacles and dangers together. Tsenmakkaran is the leader of each isenmam. In terms of religion and society, his authority is paramount. Typically, tsenmam members reside in close proximity to one another. Members of one tsenmam may occasionally live with members of another tsenmam, but they always maintain their natal tsenmam identity and continue to get food and other resources from it.<sup>11</sup>

Senmam is considered to be a number of naadu by the Cholanaickan. Additional territorial divisions of Tsenmam are Naadu. There could be two or more naadus in a tsenmam. Natural

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<sup>11</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaikans of Kerala*.

boundaries marked by rocks, trees, soil, and other natural features allow the Naadu to be easily identified. A naadu's primary purpose seems to be to make it easier to identify and demarcate a tsenmam's whole region. Every Naadu has its own name. It provides the various Cholanaickan tsenmam of the Karulai and Chungathara ranges. The same demarcation that applies to Tsenmam also applies to the Naadu. In Karimpuzha and Kuppanmala, the greatest number of naadu is observed.

There are six types of naadu that make up Tsenmam Karimpuzha: Sinna aranja, Koliyan, Edakutti, Kudumba, Arangya, and Dodha thanda. Karimpuzha's area reaches as far as the Nilgiri hills, which serve as the boundary between Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Miinmidit offers a clear view of the Nilgiri highlands. From here, one can clearly see the bare rocks and the hilltops that are devoid of any grass or flora. Pullu-mala is the name given to the hilltops that are covered in grass meadows. The Cholanaickan climb this hill to hunt and gather small fruits and vegetables.<sup>12</sup>

It takes two days to trek from here to Miinmutti. Pullumalapaals are the name for the exposed rocks. The hills stretch up to Manjakallampuzha and are located to the north and south of Karimpuzha. Sinnathanda naadu is the name of the woodland that is between the Karimpuzha and Manjakallampuzha rivers. This triangular piece of forest land is located within Karimpuzha's borders.

This is the area's largest territory. Compared to other territories, this one has a significantly higher collection of minor forest products.

This region is recognised for producing high-quality dammers, or Kaalu payndams.

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<sup>12</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaikans of Kerala*.

The Karimpuzha territory is made up of twenty-two caverns and twenty-four hills. The members frequently switch between naads based on the resources that are available. The Chola-Naickan have been gathering honey from the Kuppan Mala forest near Saivala since the beginning. In the past, the same forest was used to gather produce for their forefathers.

There are thirty-nine caves and fifty-nine hills in the Paanapuzha area. You can observe the caves on the hills and valleys, as well as on the banks of the rivers. Paanapuzha, Manjakallampuzha, and Arakkayampuzha are the three rivers that wind through this region. During the rainy season, when the rivers flood, people live in the more than a dozen caves that are located on the hills. There are a lot of caves here that offer decent defence against rivers, floods, and elephants.

Although this region offers a wide variety of secondary forest products, cardamom is the main product that is gathered in significant amounts. The area adjacent to Paanapuzha is known as Kuppan Mala. The Nillan is said to have swept the floor and stored the trash in three locations. When Nillan transformed into a rock, these wastes had occasionally grown into three enormous hills. The entire region is hilly and forested. The names of the three hills are dikuppan, nadukuppan, and tala kuppan.<sup>13</sup>

Taalipuzha, located south of Kuppan Mala and west of Paanapuzha, is the fourth territory. The northern limit of this territory is the Karimpuzha River. Karimpuzha is to the north, and Taalipuzha is to the east.

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<sup>13</sup>. Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaiikans of Kerala*.

This area reaches as far north as Manchiir, where the Girijan Co-operative Society handles the sale of the majority of the forest's produce.

The three naadu that make up this territory are S'nnathali, Adithali, and Thanda naadu. This region is bordered to the north by Vett Lakolly and to the south by Kanjikayi. Achikal-thou and Pulimunda on the east, and Manchiiri on the south-west. In this area, there are about 23 caverns and 64 hills.

The fifth territory is Poochappara. Korampuzha, located south of Taalipuzha and southwest of Poochappara regions, is the sixth territory in the Karulai range. The Chungathara range forest has the following three territories: Manjakkadavu, Alakkal, and Ambili Mala. East of Poochappara is Manjakkadavu.<sup>14</sup>

The next chapter deals with the lifestyle of the Cholanaikans, how they manage their daily affairs, how they subsist in forest areas, how they conduct religious rituals, marriage ceremonies, family affairs etc.

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<sup>14</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaikans of Kerala*.



## CHAPTER 3

### LIFESTYLE OF THE CHOLANAICKANS

Today, there aren't many indigenous societies that might rely solely on hunting and collecting food. Only in a bountiful natural ecosystem that has been shielded from outside influences, whether intentionally or by accident, can such an economy thrive. A remarkable illustration of this older stage of human existence may be found in the Cholanaickans of Nilambur Valley in Erad taluk of Malappuram district. Thurston (1909) made the first mention of Cholanaickans in his books when he cited a letter from F.W.F. Fletcher. The Cholanaikkans, also known as Coolanaaykkan, are referred to as Kerala's Cavemen. This prehistoric hill tribe lives in the jungles of Kerala's Malappuram district's Nilambur Valley. The Cholanaikkan settlements are situated in this valley along the banks of the rivers. They continue to reside in the so-called rock shelters. While others refer to them as coolanaykkan, the people themselves name themselves Colekkaru (coolekkaarū). These people have names for their caves or rock dwellings.<sup>15</sup>

By putting their cave name before their given name, they can tell two people with the same name apart. To their names, they add -nu. With 176 residents, this village has a total population. According to some research, it is said that Cholanaikkars and another tribe called Pathinaicken are sub category of Kattunayakan tribe (Nair 2013). Separate census report of Cholanaickan upto 1991 were not available, since they had been included under Kattunayakan.

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<sup>15</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaickans of Kerala*

“They have been included in the Scheduled Tribes list of Kerala very recently” (Seetha 2005). Since, those who live in forest environment subsist on food gathering and NWFP collection, same applies for Cholanaikkars also.

“The Cholanaickan are distributed in various regions of the forest in territorial groupings, consisting of two to seven nuclear families. Territory is called chemmam and each chemmam has a headman called Chemmakkaran.” Cholanaickan are contemporary gatherer-hunters and generally said to have no knowledge of agriculture. “Among the Cholanaickan, naadu are territorial divisions, which are also clearly demarcated by rocks, trees, streams and hills”.<sup>16</sup>

The Cholanaikkan identify as either Sholanaikan or Malanaikan. Naikan means king, and shola or chola means deep forest (Padmanabhan 2007). Because they live in the interior forests, they are known as Cholanaikkan. It is reported that they moved from the forests of Mysore. There are two explanations for why they chose to live in the Nilambur jungles. One is that they had to hide deep in the jungle after losing a battle. According to the second story, they sought refuge in the trees after being uprooted by a flood. But the only evidence supporting the earlier account is an old sword that the locals still own.

There are 176 people living in the community overall, divided across 56 family groups. Compared to the 1991 census, there are now fewer than 360 individuals. They are separated into Jenmam, which are smaller groups. Although they don't have permanent homes, they like to live near water sources. They reside in open leaf-made campsites or in rock shelters known as Kallulai (Kallu

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<sup>16</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaikans of Kerala*

means rock, alai means cave). Between two and seven primary families make up their groups. Every group is referred to as a Chemmam. They are India's sole cave-dwelling group.<sup>17</sup>

Given that they recall four distinct identities—Arnadan, Kattunayikkar, Cholanayikkar, and Paniyar—the group must have been much larger in the past. Every community cave has a name. Additionally, people with similar names can be identified by adding their cave name to the end of their name. The Mannalar are the people that live in rock shelters. Other tribe members are constantly moving from one place to another. In the past, the people subsisted by foraging in the forest. They now receive rationing as well. They don't utilise fire to prolong the day; instead, their day begins with sunrise and ends with dusk. There isn't any concrete proof that this tribe doesn't understand fire. There is no electricity in the settlement zones. They live in a protected forest alongside elephants and other wild animals, with occasional sightings of tigers. Antelopes are extremely common.

Until about 30 years ago (mid to late 1980s), they wore no garments and were not covered in any way (as confirmed by present Mooppan during his visit to RSC Calicut). They now receive garments from the government and other charities. They occasionally sell extra bamboo baskets and forest produce to the government agency. The community has no use for this money, but it is used by young people for school and other purposes. Recently, charity organisations began donating tools to individuals for cutting down trees and bamboos. The language they speak is referred to as Dravidian, but it is not directly related to present Dravidian languages. While the sound of their speech is similar to Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu, there is no direct association of

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<sup>17</sup> Vahia, M.N, V.S Ramachandran, Jayant Gangopandhyay, and Justin Joseph. 2017. *Understanding Rationality, Culture and Scientific Temperament of Cholanayikkar Tribe of Kerala*. Kozhikode.

terms. The language is commonly described as a combination of Malayalam and Kannda. A careful analysis of the language indicates that it is Dravidian. However, it appears to share many roots with modern Dravidian languages. The names of these languages are local and do not reference Hindu mythology or other popular names, indicating a long time of isolation and the emergence of different language isolates.<sup>18</sup>

Men and women in the group move and sit separately, yet there is no gender division or suppression. Women enjoy taking on leadership roles in activities.

Cholanayakkans are typically 1.6 meters (5 feet 5 inches) tall and have strong bodies. The complexion ranges from dark to light brown. Faces are round or oval, with a low nasal root, medium bridge and straight profile. Lips are thin to medium, and hair tends to be wavy. Compared to the general population, they have more African characteristics. No genetic profile is provided. Most likely, they are of Austro-Asian ancestry. The group we encountered was a mix of young and old, but their age cannot be determined. The absence of infants in the group could be due to data bias, since parents may not wish to travel during their first visit to Kozhikode, as previously indicated. Women handle household responsibilities such as storing food grains, cleaning, drying, cooking, sharing, and entertaining guests. In the absence of a woman, a male member can prepare and serve (Mohanty 2004). They eat plants, leaves, fruits, mushrooms, seeds, and tubers, but may also consume fish, birds, rabbits, pigs, wild buffaloes, monkeys, and turtles. However, they don't utilise milk (Mohanty 2004). During their engagement at RSC Kozhikode, Mooppan shared that they generally prefer vegetarian meals. They now supplement it with government-provided rations.

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<sup>18</sup> Vahia, M.N, V.S Ramachandran, Jayant Gangopandhyay, and Justin Joseph. 2017. *Understanding Rationality, Culture and Scientific Temperament of Cholanaiakkan Tribe of Kerala*. Kozhikode.

The method they entrap monkeys is extremely unusual. It is a collaborative endeavour. The monkey is chased and tracked down to a tree in the wilderness. After ensuring the monkey cannot escape, they will chop down the tree to grab it. Men are primarily responsible for scavenging and fishing, while women assist with gathering and transporting.

The Cholanaikkans only keep animals and birds as a hobby. Therefore, domestication and use are not part of their culture. Cholanaikkans follow a set of rules established by their ancestors. The Chief of the community is known as the Mooppan. He has the authority to settle conflicts among members. The Mooppan transfers their authority and power to the next generation by transferring their inherited Staff of Power to whomever they choose. Typically, he would give it to his kid if he had one. The Chemmathadi is the name given to the Staff of Power. A council of elders (known as Jenmekkaram) oversees the group's activities. They have forest festivals and use their own percussion instruments for music.<sup>19</sup>

To worship, they place an unadorned stone with a curved top, resembling a snake head, under a huge tree. However, they do not have high hopes for their deity. The tree is known as the Dheivamaram; which translates to god's tree. They practise both ancestor worship and general spirit worship. They revere the heavenly force and spirits. According to Mohanty (2004), they worship Malalli Diavam, a jungle god, Uliuruvu, a metal tiger, Kalaiuruvu, an ox, and the snake god. Dheivaoottu, a traditional feast similar to harvest festivals in farming areas, refers to feeding the deity. This festival takes place during the honey harvesting season in April. People offer a portion of the honey to their god.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Vahia, M.N, V.S Ramachandran, Jayant Gangopandhyay, and Justin Joseph. 2017. *Understanding Rationality, Culture and Scientific Temperament of Cholanaikkan Tribe of Kerala*. Kozhikode.

<sup>20</sup> Vahia, M.N, V.S Ramachandran, Jayant Gangopandhyay, and Justin Joseph. 2017. *Understanding Rationality, Culture and Scientific Temperament of Cholanaikkan Tribe of Kerala*. Kozhikode.

They do not have any birth ceremonies. In Cholanaikkan culture, newborns are placed on the ground in an east-west direction, with the head facing east. The east indicates the beginning of a person's life, similar to how the sun rises in the morning.

- They refer to the Sun as Nyaram or Dinga, and the Moon as Thinkam.

- They respect the Sun and bury their dead with their heads towards east.

Katui, or shooting stars, are a well-known celestial characteristic that they associate with ambers of fire brought by the gods.

Cholanayakkan is an endogamous entity. They only marry within their community. They practise exogamy within each jenmam. This is one of the reasons they avoid interacting with the outside world.

According to Mohanty (2004), people prefer to marry a bride from another subgroup of their own, such as a mother's brother's daughter or father's sister's daughter/son. It is customary for a young guy to find a mate. To maintain their relationship, the husband (gunda) and wife (ennu) allow themselves to be seen by the girl's parents or a local chieftain. The connection is acknowledged as a marriage companion (Mohanty 2004). When there were too many men competing for the same bride, the community held tournaments to select a husband. It's similar to climbing a tree with multiple honeycombs to collect the most honey. In the event of a tie, participants had to prove their mettle by wrestling! The winner marries the girl.

The Cholanayakkan dowry system is known as Mothalana. This approach differs from traditional dowry systems. There are two varieties of mothalanas. The first is awarded upon marriage and the second upon the death of the husband. The groom's family must present the bride with Mothalana at the marriage ceremony. When a husband dies, the wife is entitled to Mothalana from his siblings.

Women in the community rely heavily on their traditions and rituals to ensure their safety and welfare.<sup>21</sup>

Abduction of a girl by a guy, known as “edippiyodu” might lead to a sexual union (oppamaladu). If the couple later lives together, the marriage is deemed complete companionship (Mohanty 2004). They do not have any marriage ceremonies (Mohanty 2004). Nowadays, elders arrange marriages. According to Mohanty (2004), patrilocal weddings involve the woman joining the groom’s family. Polygamy is generally discouraged, but a man in the society may have up to three wives if he can prove his ability to support them. Polyandry is not practiced in general. When a spouse passes away, the partner (male or female) is free to remarry. Girls can marry as young as 12-13 years old due to the risk of not being engaged to.

The time of day is established by a person’s shadow. For instance, they receive their weekly rations at noon, when their shadow is lowest. They have no concept of time beyond the day. They recognise seasons based on the sounds of crickets and birds. Cholanaikkans predict seasonal changes based on natural patterns and living. They hear crickets (beetles) chirping. Crickets and their sounds vary depending on the season. The abundance of yellow butterflies at the end of the monsoon season signals the arrival of brighter days ahead. They can also hear and smell creatures from long distances. This demonstrates their high endurance in auditory and olfactory functions. As a result, they have exceptional focus abilities. They are aware of herbs that can treat various diseases. Interacting with them could provide greater insight into their traditional medical knowledge.

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<sup>21</sup> Vahia, M.N, V.S Ramachandran, Jayant Gangopandhyay, and Justin Joseph. 2017. *Understanding Rationality, Culture and Scientific Temperament of Cholanaikkan Tribe of Kerala*. Kozhikode.

They do not digest food to make alcohol and are only exposed to intoxicating liquids through recent touch. This suggests ignorance of the fermentation process. This suggests that they may have greater liver function than many modern urban or rural people.

Due to the absence of farming activity, the Cholanaikkans found sky-watching uninteresting. As a result, their understanding of the constellations in the sky is limited. In Malayalam, the Sun is referred to as “Nyaram” or “Dinga” while the Moon is referred to as “Thinkam” (similar to Nhayar in Malayalam, which means Sunday). In Malayalam, “Thinkal” denotes the Moon.

They are glad when the Sun is above because they feel protected. They respect the Sun and bury their dead with their heads facing West, symbolising the conclusion of life rather than the beginning. They had a faint recall of the eclipse. They recall how the sun may become blue. Katui, or shooting stars, are a well-known celestial characteristic that they associate with ambers of fire brought by the gods.<sup>22</sup>

They worship shooting gods, whom they refer to as “ChootuPaayuka” In Malayalam, “Choot” refers to dry coconut leaves used to make fire torches, whereas “Payuka” denotes “to run rapidly”. Thus, they are associated with comets or shooting stars. They call stars Koram and Udumbam. They lack knowledge of star patterns and are unable to identify them. When shown the night sky in the planetarium, they simply smiled and left. Many people are unaware that the sun rises at different places on the horizon throughout the year, making it difficult to correlate with seasons.<sup>23</sup>

One of Kerala’s oldest indigenous groups, the Cholanaikkans are the state’s most archaic and disappearing tribes. Only the Karulai and Chungathara Forest Ranges in Nilambur, Malappuram

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<sup>22</sup> Vahia, M.N, V.S Ramachandran, Jayant Gangopandhyay, and Justin Joseph. 2017. *Understanding Rationality, Culture and Scientific Temperament of Cholanaikkan Tribe of Kerala*. Kozhikode.

<sup>23</sup> Vahia, M.N, V.S Ramachandran, Jayant Gangopandhyay, and Justin Joseph. 2017. *Understanding Rationality, Culture and Scientific Temperament of Cholanaikkan Tribe of Kerala*. Kozhikode.



District, are home to them. The community's primary source of income is the collecting of non-wood forest products, or NWFP. Their eating patterns depend heavily on wild fruits and tubers. No matter their age or gender, every member of the community is aware of the forest's flora and wildlife, including its potential medical uses. Additionally, they are proficient at using the juice to catch fish. Cholanaickan men typically wear a piece of cloth that is barely 2½ feet long and 1½ feet broad, covering only the area of their bodies from waist to knee. The entire body will be covered with a long dhoti as well. The women are dressed in white clothing that is one to two yards long and four to six yards long. Wrapped around their waist, letting some of it cross the pit of their upper arm. Direct and indirect sustenance are the two categories into which the Cholanaickan's subsistence can be divided.

Food in any community depends on the ecology. In other words the environment to a certain extent shapes the food habits of the people.

Early man specialised in hunting as well as on other food gathering activities. The techniques also were modified in many ways.

The Cholanaickan work on an average of seven hours per day. This include the time taken for reaching the area of their operation and the time taken to return to their camping place. They also take sufficient rest which clearly shows that they are able to procure all that they require for a balanced diet in the present eco-system with their existing technology.

There are two stages of Cholanaickan subsistence: direct subsistence and indirect subsistence. Hunting, fishing, collecting tubers, roots, fruits, and other items are all considered forms of direct subsistence. Indirect subsistence is the collection of small forest products for barter, which allows

them to acquire essentials like rice, tobacco, beedi, tea powder, salt, clothing, and so forth. The climate has a major influence on this.

The Cholanaickan people live in a constantly shifting climate. They have limited resources during the monsoon season. They have a rather solitary existence throughout this period, with virtually no indirect subsistence. Throughout this time, they primarily live hand to mouth.

Gathering food is the primary occupation of the Cholanaickan. In addition to fishing and small game hunting, gathering in this context refers to the collection of tubers, roots, fruits, leaves, and seeds. A minor pastime among the Chola-Naickan is hunting. They lack any advanced hunting equipment, such as a bow and arrow or a spear. Their sole means of hunting is a tiny net that traps small creatures like squirrels, monkeys, and rabbits.

The Cholanaickan rarely hunt huge animals like deer, wild buffaloes, bison, etc., and even hunting small game needs a thorough understanding of the environment and behaviour of animals.<sup>24</sup>

There are preferences among the Cholanaickan. Based on factors including taste, quantity, and simplicity of gathering, the vegetable food is ranked in order of desirability. They claim that some of the tubers have a bad taste and are therefore more often collected. Cholabenni (*Dioscorea* sp.) is the best tuber available. capable in the woods. However, it can only be found in the forest's interior.

Fish, pork, rice, and tubers are among the foods that should be cooked with fire to make them palatable because they cannot be consumed raw. A 40-day study of three Cholanaickan households

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<sup>24</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaikans of Kerala*.

showed a dietary pattern that included rice, fish, meat, fruits, leaves, and other foods strong in nutrients and protein, such as honey, honey bee larvae, wild tubers, etc.

Only one meal a day is prepared by the Cholanaickan. The evening is when the cooking begins, and it lasts for hours. Every household in a cave cooks sparingly. The meal, known as eettilu timpatu, is typically consumed at night. The meal prepared overnight is saved for the next day. The term "uchilu timpatu" refers to the food consumed at noon. Every household's dishes are gathered and arranged in front of the waiter. The cooked rice is distributed equally, and each home receives a stack of cooked rice with curry on top.

Only the next morning is the third household fed if everyone is happy with the previous two meals (provided by two homes). It's crucial to remember that the host who served the genji (nice soup) initially begins serving kulu. After the genji is served, it is assumed that the kulu will be served later. As a result, everyone disperses to the riverbank to wash their clothing or take a bath.

Typically, the parents and kids eat together. Their parents eat the food that they left behind. The adults are forced to join in when the children have finished eating.<sup>25</sup>

Plates of leftover food are stored there. No one cleans their hands for a month. Typically, they rub their hands on the leaves that are lying on the ground or on their clothing. When they are hungry or feel like eating, they eat the food that is still on the plates.

The adult single girls share a single plate of meals and coffee. Additionally, three or four kids were observed sharing a single plate.

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<sup>25</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaikans of Kerala*

The members also share the rice that they exchange for from the Co-operative Society. Each household splits the rice into three halves if there are three families residing in the cave. It's not usually an equal division. The big portion goes to the person who bartered the minor forest produce, while the other two households split the two little shares.

The Cholanaickan follow this sharing pattern. If there are three households overall, each household receives two shares and one share of its own. As a result, even after much sharing and compromise, the amount of rice stays roughly the same in every household. After being cooked, rice that has been shared from other houses will not be given back to the same household. Therefore, to identify it and prevent accidental mixing with other items, the rice is stored separately in a cloth. If a family receives food items or rice from another family, they do not share it with other families.<sup>26</sup>

Every territory operates as an independent entity. Collectively, the members congregate in one cave or in nearby caverns. They have many chances to meet and, if needed, exchange commodities and information if they live close to one another. Their close-knit community shields them from strangers and gives them a sense of belonging. They also have the moral fortitude and vigour to withstand the many dangers that come with life in the forest. Because they are afraid of the Pathynaickan, who are the relatively violent members of the tribe, they always attempt to camp together when they are in the forest.

As they move to different locations to collect as much subsistence as possible in addition to the small amount of forest produce, close living may not last for very long. They must relocate because the minor forest products are only found within a one to twenty-kilometer radius. In addition to

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<sup>26</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaikans of Kerala*

having open lines of contact, the individuals who live nearby also share the joys, challenges, and frustrations of life.

The Cholanaickan people typically have nuclear families. The initial friendship can frequently develop into love. If both of them want to continue their relationship, they move on to the next stage. The couple then reunites, moves back into the groom's domain, and starts a new family. Until the adult sons and daughters marry or elope to another area, this unit is the only one that remains constant.

Due to a practice of avoidance with the husband's father, the couple only sets up their residence outside the cave if there is insufficient space inside. The son gathers and collects from the naadu of his father's region after starting a new household. Although they live as a separate household, the father and son still share meals and food items.<sup>27</sup>

For their subsistence, the elderly Cholanaickan must rely on their sons or other family members. On rare situations when a person loses their spouse, other Cholanaickans take care of the elderly widow and widowers. The widow or widower will have to rely on any other relatives if there are no other members in that area. A territory's inhabitants can be divided into three categories: (i) working groups, (ii) sharing groups, and (iii) consuming groups. There is relatively little inter-territorial communication. Members from other territories may visit once or twice a year, but this is rare.

The Girijan Co-operative Society serves as a hub where members from many regions can gather, share information, and make choices on certain still-unresolved, important issues. Members have the opportunity to see their relatives at least once a week because the majority of Cholanaickan

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<sup>27</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaickans of Kerala*

must visit the society. They typically leave messages in the society if they wish to reach any Cholanaickan, and the individual in question is notified when they visit the society.

In society, close relatives show their love and affection when they get together. Touching each other's folded hands while facing each other is a common way for them to express their affection for one another. The gesture of touching each other's hand is done multiple times. Additionally, they trade the black coffee that the society serves them. They then assist in preparing the meal and serving it to the members who came to the organisation that day. They bring supplies for themselves when they return to their homeland, as well as for those who were unable to visit the community because of illness or time constraints.<sup>28</sup>

Because the Cholanaickan are nomadic, it is exceedingly hard to locate them in one location or forecast where they will live at any given time of year. However, wherever they relocate, it is known, albeit in part, by the local Cholanaickan or the members of the community. To let the interested parties know about their movements, they leave information in the community whenever they move from one camp to another, or at the very least, on their subsequent visit. Everyone who lives in the cave or nearby is fed the meal that has been prepared. Each member takes turns serving first, then the others.

The idea that one household should initiate and others should follow is not common. Serving begins with the person who prepares the dish first. As soon as the food is consumed, the other housekeepers wait. When the first household has finished eating, the plates are gathered and brought to the second, which is still waiting for food to be served.

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<sup>28</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaikans of Kerala*

On the same night, the food from the second household is also eaten. The last of the food is saved for the next day.

The Cholanaickan have two distinct terms for raw and prepared food in their lexicon. Raw food is referred to as *achcha*, and cooked food as *aatti*. In this context, "aatti" refers to the process of transferring food items that have been treated with fire to a new substance that has a different texture, shape, and flavour. Fish, meat, roots, tubers, and supplies are the items that are cooked. There are some foods, including fruits and leaves, that are either eaten raw or cooked. Most of the food items are eaten uncooked.

Direct subsistence food could be divided into two categories: Animal food includes fish, crabs, turtles, birds, rabbits, deer, pigs, wild buffaloes, monkeys, and more. Plant food includes things like leaves, tubers, dry roots, fruits, seeds, and mushrooms. It is possible to eat fruits and leaves raw or cooked. The majority of consumables, especially plant-based meals, are eaten raw. They don't drink milk. They avoid drinking milky tea. Preferred are black tea and black coffee with honey. The Cholanaickan abstain from drinking.<sup>29</sup>

While consumption of foods obtained through barter, such as rice, pulses, potatoes, wheat, oil, chilly, onions, and so on, is increasing, the amount of natural food consumed is decreasing. The territorial groups of the Cholanaickan are bands. Within these zones, each group is identified as a *jenmam* and resides and travels in a specific territory. The territorial groups of the Cholanaickan are bands. Within these areas, each group is known as a *jenmam* and resides and travels in a certain zone. Hills, rivers, trees, rocks, and other natural features clearly define the boundaries and point of identification of our various *Jenmam*. Every *jenmam* has a *jenmakkaran*, or leader. Every

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<sup>29</sup> Bhanu, B. Ananda. 2008. *The Cholanaikans of Kerala*

Jenmam has several nadu, each of which has its own name. A Jenmam's entire region can be easily delineated and defined thanks to the boundaries marked by natural features, which clearly identify Nadu. They get married outside of the Jenmam, the Cholanaickan. The alliance for marriage is formed between Jenmam, the neighbours. The post-marriage habitation of the Cholanaickan is viripatrilocal, meaning that the sons bring their spouses to their father's land and place their homes beside his parents in their nadu. The Cholanaickan are patrilineal. Their preferred companions are the daughters of their mother's brother and father's sister, but they typically pursue one from a different region.

Kudumba is the term used to describe the Cholanaickan family, which consists of the mother, father, and children. There is not a single instance of a whole joint family among the 27 houses in the Karulai forest range; 17 of them are nuclear in nature. As a small group, a Cholanaickan family maintains four different distribution patterns. The first is the direct distribution of some of the food collected to other households. The second stage involves giving some of the raw food items to other families in a territory when the forest produce is bartered.<sup>30</sup>

As part of the third exchange, a family's gift is bartered in the Girijan Cooperative Society, transformed into gift food, and then some of it is distributed to other members. A territory's daily activities include the fourth, which is the sharing of prepared meals with others. While the second and third happen at irregular intervals, the first and last happen daily in the territory. Children, orphans, and the elderly are cared for in the community by adhering to this kind of living pattern and exchange system. This way of sharing makes sure that everyone has enough food.

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<sup>30</sup> Vahia, M.N, V.S Ramachandran, Jayant Gangopandhyay, and Justin Joseph. 2017. *Understanding Rationality, Culture and Scientific Temperament of Cholanaikkan Tribe of Kerala*. Kozhikode.



In addition to serving as a leader, the head of a Cholanaickan household also serves as a territorial head. In addition to taking care of each person's wellbeing, the head of the family keeps everyone together through group activities. As the leader of the household, he distributes the work and enforces social rules while enjoying additional power and influence. When the leader of the home takes on the job of territory head, his responsibilities become much more extensive. Some tasks are performed exclusively by women, while others are performed by them alone in the daily activities of the home.

This indicates that each sex specialises in a certain activity; only fishing and foraging are shared by both sexes. Women are responsible for washing, drying food items, sharing, entertaining guests, and handling household chores and food grain storage. When there are no women in the family, the men prepare and serve the food. In comparison to men, Cholanaickan women make a negligible contribution to their sustenance, even though they go hunting, fishing, and collecting with their men and collect a few small forest products like pepper and cardamom. The head of a territory is never a woman in their society.<sup>31</sup>

Women are obedient to their husbands and chieftains, even if they participate in territorial gatherings and deliberations. A lady who does a wrong is not penalized. Religious professionals frequently communicate with ancestor spirits as well as other malevolent and benign spirits.

For the Cholanaickan community, the forest is their main source of income. The three main activities are hunting, fishing, and foraging. Through the Girijan Cooperative Society, they can swap small forest products for rice and other goods. Seasons affect fishing. Their fishing season is

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<sup>31</sup> Vahia, M.N, V.S Ramachandran, Jayant Gangopandhyay, and Justin Joseph. 2017. *Understanding Rationality, Culture and Scientific Temperament of Cholanaickan Tribe of Kerala*. Kozhikode.

limited to the summer. Dammer, cardamom, ginger, pepper, turmeric, astringent fruit, medicinal roots and barks, oilseeds, honey, and other forest products are gathered for barter.

There is a council in every Cholanaikkan territory. The Jenmekkaran, the territory chieftain, is in charge of the council. The council meets to consider issues related to small forest produce extraction as well as other religious and territorial issues. A fee is imposed as punishment for those found guilty.

Since he is the only person in charge of their deities, idols, which stand in for the spirits of their forefathers, the Jenmakkar is believed to possess divine abilities. He performs diviner duties. They believe that all diseases are caused by either wrongdoing (kuttam), which is a violation of traditional customs and causes their gods, spirits, and ancestors to be displeased by calling forth evil spirits.<sup>32</sup>

Through an interview conducted, the next chapter deals with the account of the Cholanaikans' current lifestyle and practices as well as traditions and theories on their origin recalled through a member of the tribe who was the first research scholar from the tribe.

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<sup>32</sup> Vahia, M.N, V.S Ramachandran, Jayant Gangopandhyay, and Justin Joseph. 2017. *Understanding Rationality, Culture and Scientific Temperament of Cholanaikkan Tribe of Kerala*. Kozhikode.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

#### FINDINGS

We conducted an interview with Vinod Chellan, a researcher and community activist, from the Cholanaikan tribe. Through his articles, we found that he is pursuing his PhD in applied economics at Cochin University of Science and Technology. He is the first in his tribe to be a research scholar, pursue higher education and has conducted international seminars about the socio-economic challenges faced by the hunting tribes in India, with particular reference to Cholanaikan tribe.<sup>33</sup> He belongs to the Manjeeri tribal hamlet in Nilambur. On the Cholanaikan tribe according to Vinod, "Ours is the only tribal community that lives in rock cave shelters. It was through news reports that I realized that I'm the first research student from the community in Asia. This could be because we exist only here in Kerala in the continent". We formed a questionnaire and conducted an online interview in the pursuit of our research.

The Cholanaikans were assumed to be the soldiers of the Chola dynasty. The Kannada language is similar to the Cholanaikan language, which came through Panthallur. In the previous generations, especially during the interviewee's grandfather's time, strong ties were established in Panthallur. This is why the statement arises: "It is through Karnataka that they came and are known as the soldiers of the Chola dynasty." Both the statements are part of a single narrative. The soldiers,

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<sup>33</sup> Naha, Abdul Latheef "Scholar from Cholanaikan tribe sets history, heads to Norway" The Hindu, 27 March, 2023. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/scholar-from-cholanaikan-tribe-sets-history-heads-to-norway/article66665102.ece>

fleeing through Panthallur, ended up in the forests, and that's the connection. The main example here is the language similarity. After the floods, there's a story within the community about how the generations were formed. The story goes that only two people remained after the floods, and then their generations continued. This is the story passed down in our region, stating that there was a great possibility of floods at that time. The Cholanaikan community connects more to this theory in comparison to other theories.<sup>34</sup>

In their area, it is more common for children to be born in caves or cave-related situations. The number of births outside caves, particularly in hospitals, is very low. In their communities, there are elder women who handle these matters. For example, in Malayalam, the elderly women are referred to as "Vaithatti," and these are typically women in the household. In the tribal community, such titles are not necessary in this context. The mother or her mother usually takes care of these things. It's not something done outside the family. In general, elder women manage these situations. After childbirth, for a few days (the exact number of days is unclear), the mother and baby stay together in a secluded space. The new generation, especially, doesn't focus on the exact number of days anymore. After that, they return to their own home. During this time, men cook and serve food. During these times, it is common to see men handling things in the kitchen. Men play an important role during and after childbirth. After this period, the child is raised like any other, following the usual practices. In the community, they generally have two options: one can follow the father's path or the mother's, and neither is considered bad from the community's

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<sup>34</sup> Chellan, 28. Interview. Conducted by Sivapriya Pradeep. 27 Jan, 2025.

perspective. One can either continue the work done by the mother or join the father's side, engaging in activities like honey collection, etc.

In total, there are four common types of marriage traditions. The first one, Etuppothu where when a man and a woman like each other, they may live separately for a month or two in a different place. After some time, they return home, and then they officially become married. The second one, Kaiyeduttu Koduvu is a formal community marriage, where the tribe join their hands. For example, if one house has a wife whose husband has passed away, and another house has a husband whose wife has passed away, they are joined them through this custom. There are two other marriage customs which were not disclosed during the interview.<sup>35</sup>

The Chemmam method – "Chemmam" refers to the ruling area. The people of this community can only gather food and resources within this region, maintaining their cultural, social, and economic practices. Only those from this ruling area are allowed to gather food here. The Chemmam area is considered the foundation of the community. It is also the place where social customs, including food gathering, are practiced and where people have the right to collect resources. In a community, there may be more than ten such Chemmams. Each Chemmam may have 5-10 families. These families can only gather food in their designated Chemmam. If one moves to another Chemmam area, they can only go with permission from the people there or their consent. The benefit of this arrangement is that food resources will be sustained in the area. If it becomes part of their business or if people collectively manage it, there is a possibility of sustainability. The community has set

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<sup>35</sup> Chellan, 28. Interview. Conducted by Sivapriya Pradeep. 27 Jan, 2025.

it up in such a way that once something is taken, no one will use it excessively; it will only be used minimally and only when necessary. This ensures the sustainability of the resources. Safety is also considered in this setup. Hunting of wild animals is the main livelihood of the community. Hunting is something that exists as a community practice. It is a method done primarily for food. Although it's not that significant today, small-scale hunting still occurs for food. Legally, it is a crime, but as part of tradition, it still happens in a small way. Hunting has decreased, and now fishing has become more common.

The community used to live in large joint families. It was part of the culture. There was a strong bond between everyone. Similarly, there was a sharing mentality. But today's generation, after marriage, mostly chooses to live separately. Between all settlements, there is a good distance, about an hour or two. The shift has been from a joint family setup to a more private, nuclear family setup. This change has caused some difficulties in the community. People moving out for privacy, had to face a lot of challenges. The current generation is more focused on privacy. In this way, their values are a direct parallel of the modern world today. When moving out of a joint family, young children miss out on learning from the elders, such as grandparents and the older generation. Cultural values seem to be lost when looking at the older values.<sup>36</sup>

The main intention of Chemmam is to protect nature. The main reason for keeping things only for people born in that particular Chemmam is to prevent it from being destroyed. Once it is set in that way, there will be no exploitation of our forests or woods, because they consider it just

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<sup>36</sup> Chellan, 28. Interview. Conducted by Sivapriya Pradeep. 27 Jan, 2025.

like their home. From their childhood, they are taught how to protect the forest and communicate with animals as part of education. However, when the new generation comes, there is a noticeable lack of this communication. The older generation had clear knowledge or guidelines about this. By becoming part of modern society, there is a gap in such knowledge.

In urban areas, if a person encounters an elephant, he/she would throw stones at it. But when Cholanaikans see a wild elephant, they first check whether it is violent or not and then decide whether they should step aside or give the elephant space and time to pass. If human beings react violently, the elephant will also develop a tendency to respond in the same way. Such communication is part of community education. The children naturally learn this from older people. Domestication of animals and birds are also there. They raise them and look after them well, which is another form of communication they learn. They develop communication with the animals in the forest similar to how we know which side to go when an opposite vehicle is approaching.<sup>37</sup>

There is a difference between a cave and a rock shelter. So, the rock shelter method exists within the community. However, generally, it is still referred to as a cave. They have a nomadic culture. The tribal people used caves depending on the seasons. They lived in caves more, especially during the rainy season. Looking back at the old times, there have been many changes in the new generation, and now even during the summer, people have started using the caves more. Caves were typically found near rivers, and during the summer, the need for water was higher, so it was common to see people living in more caves.

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<sup>37</sup> Chellan, 28. Interview. Conducted by Sivapriya Pradeep. 27 Jan, 2025.

In ancient times, especially till 2000, our medicine was very strong. The medicine culture was significant, that gained a lot of popularity within the community. With people going outside as part of higher education, the community's traditional education couldn't be passed down, and as a result, today's generation is losing that medicinal knowledge. However, in the older generations, if there was a snake bite or any illness in the community, the medicine was available within the community itself. Then, as part of food culture, a major change took place within the community. This change led to internal health issues like high blood pressure and diabetes. Medicines were only available for old-style illnesses, and it was difficult to find remedies for new types of diseases. Therefore, from 2000 onward, the medicinal value in the community has greatly decreased, because, along with the changes in food, new kinds of diseases emerged. Such changes created confusion about what to do.<sup>38</sup>

There came a situation where there were no medicines for new illnesses. Sometimes, the distribution of medicines was a family tradition. In most cases, those who understood the value of this passed it down to others in the family. Overall, the generation that understood this value is now dwindling. This is the difference between the old and the new generation. Additionally, these medicines would have been communicated in the community's own language, but most children in the new generation speak Malayalam, which has caused a confusion. The new generation is going through a very challenging time, while the older generation is trying to preserve this knowledge. They are trying to maintain community education.

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<sup>38</sup> Chellan, 28. Interview. Conducted by Sivapriya Pradeep. 27 Jan, 2025.



The construction of the “kotta” is the main craft. There are various types of kotta. It is an integral part of the community, from birth to death. The kotta holds great significance in the community's craft. It is part of food collection, income generation, and other activities in life. In this craft area, women are more involved, as they have more time for it.

When we talk about the "life style," education plays a significant role. It was around 2010 that education started gaining more importance in the community. As part of this, many changes have occurred. In the past, people lived in more secluded areas, but now they have started living in places with road access within the community. This is mainly to quickly get children to school and take care of their needs. In the medical field, we have increasingly relied on hospitals. As a result, communities began to shift. When there were patients, people started moving to areas with road or vehicle access to ensure safety. <sup>39</sup>

Diseases like high blood pressure are also becoming more common in the community. Compared to the past, there is now better communication with the wider society. In the past, there were no such societal connections, but today, relationships are more established. However, these relationships can be both good and bad within the community. Food habits and various practices have also changed, along with the diseases. Through these changes, there have been both benefits and drawbacks in all areas of life.

Crimes become a major issue only when they occur between two Chemmams. In the area, it is not common because everyone belongs to one family, either the father's family or the mother's family.

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<sup>39</sup> Chellan, 28. Interview. Conducted by Sivapriya Pradeep. 27 Jan, 2025.

Currently, in his settlement, there are around 200 people, and they have direct connections with all of them. Therefore, disputes are very rare. There is no situation where a conflict arises. Disputes between Chemmams occur only when someone moves out of the lineage illegally. In such cases, the elders, known as "chemmakkar" (elders of the lineage), are the ones with the authority over the Chemmams. They discuss and resolve the issues. The final decision is made by the "Chemmakkar" (lineage heads), and whatever they say becomes the law of the community. So naturally, the conflict is resolved there. Now, with such a structure in place, there are many benefits for the community. No one can step out of line within the community. Violence or any form of misuse has limits within the community.<sup>40</sup>

Through these findings, we have satisfied our objectives and derived conclusions which will be addressed at the end of the chapter.

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<sup>40</sup> Chellan, 28. Interview. Conducted by Sivapriya Pradeep. 27 Jan, 2025.

## CONCLUSION

As the title suggests, they have lived up to the title of 'The last of Hunter-Gatherers'. Through this research, we have learned about their lifestyle, subsistence methods, relationship with the environment, their flora and fauna, and how their tribal values have changed over time and coincided with some of the modern values practiced today. There has been a steady decline in their values, culture, language, and observed that their population as well as there is on the verge of extinction. Their origin is most attributed by the tribal people to the theory that they were descendants of the Cholas. They are also one of the last tribes in Kerala, if not the last, to reside in rock cave shelters. Their livelihood depends on the Kerala Forest department. Their medicinal system has also been on the decline as they depend more and more on the facilities of modern medicine. Their family values mirror modern family values, particularly the nuclear family system, as opposed to older systems like joint families. The newer generation are facing a loss in their strong connection with their environment compared to previous generations. Education has played a remarkable role in changing their lifestyles. Their main governance relies on the 'Chemmam' system which serves as a foundation of the community, they deal with disputes and crimes as well as the gathering of food and so on.

The first objective is to study the overall lifestyle of the tribe, their lifestyle is still primitive but they are slowly adapting to the modern ways. They are starting to accumulate modern family values into their tribal cultures. For example, they are starting to live together as nuclear families, and moving from the joint family systems. They are beginning to use Malayalam as a way of communication, and there's a decline in their use of tribal language.

The second objective is to study their relationship with their surrounding environment. They see the environment as a provider and thus respect it. They treat nature with respect, and through the cultivation of herbs, they maintain their subsistence with simple diet, and rely on the herbs for medical issues. They begin to sell their products through the Kerala forest department every Wednesday.

The third objective pertains to civil matters such as family, religion, society and so on. their family values are diminishing as they are starting to live in nuclear families. In the past, they used to as joint families, but as the time passed through, they started to live away from the group at a certain distance. It shows that they are starting to add modern values into their lifestyle.

The fourth objective deals with the changes brought about in their society, from generation to generation. The youth now aren't much interested in the tribal cultures and they are starting to adapt the modern culture. Only the past generations are preserving their cultures. They are now using medical facilities and taking in western medicines and not relying on traditional medicines.

Through the course of this research, we can conclude that the tribe being one of the last hunter gatherer societies, we must bring an awareness to the declining rate of the tribal population and introduce methods to preserve their livelihood. Their primitive methods, though it faces a decline, continue to be sustainable through decades.

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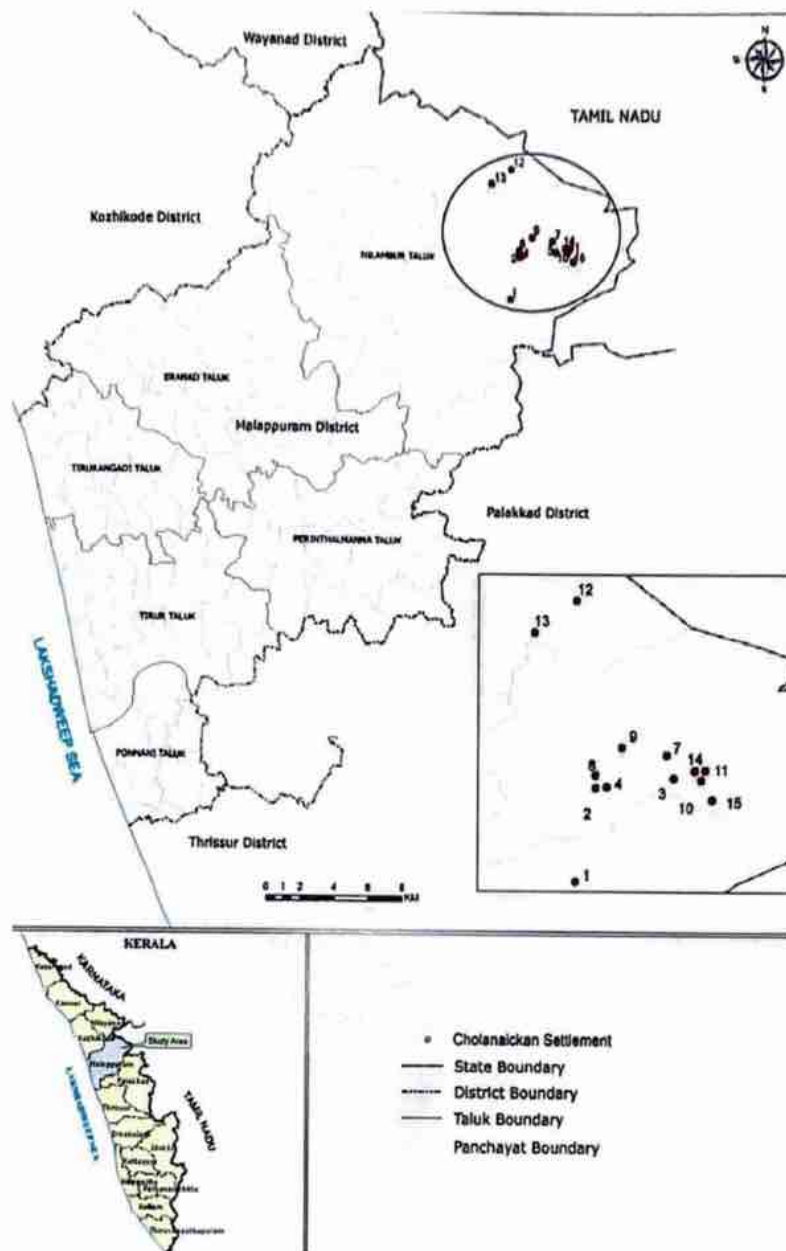
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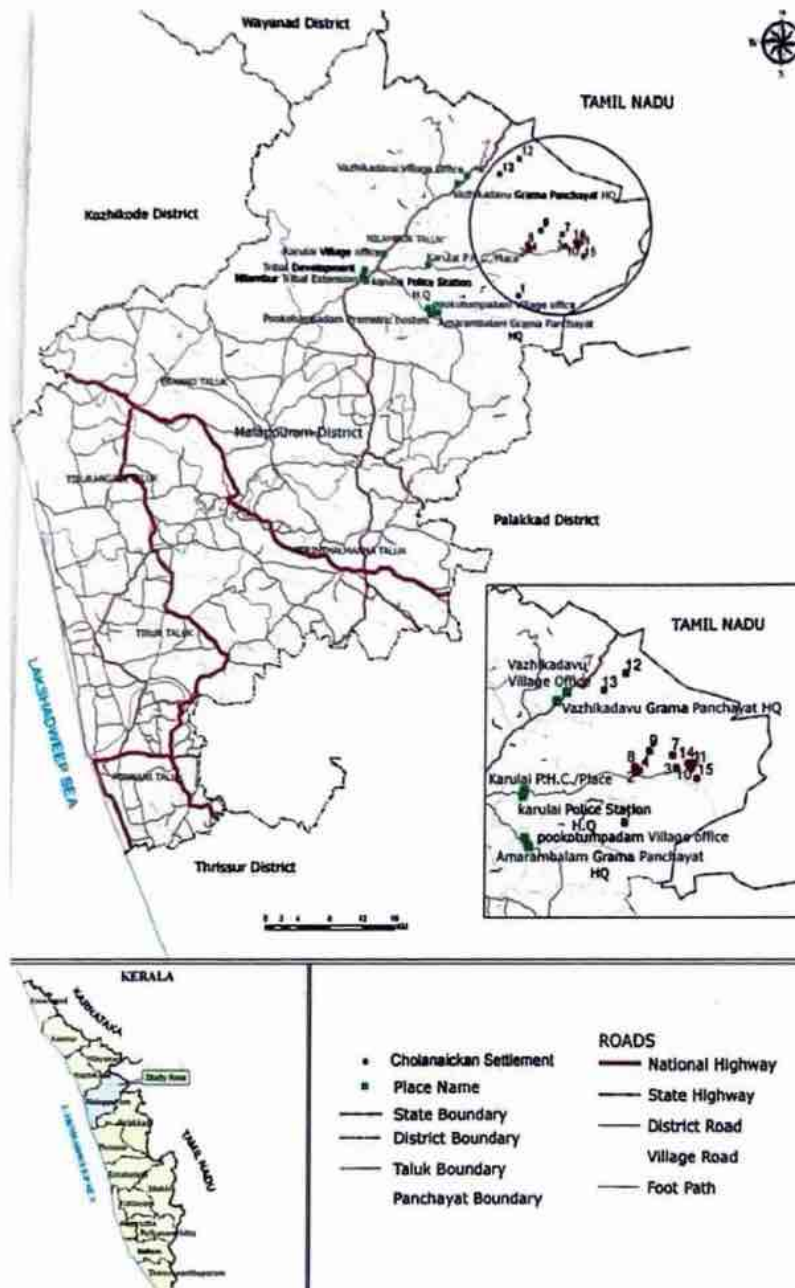
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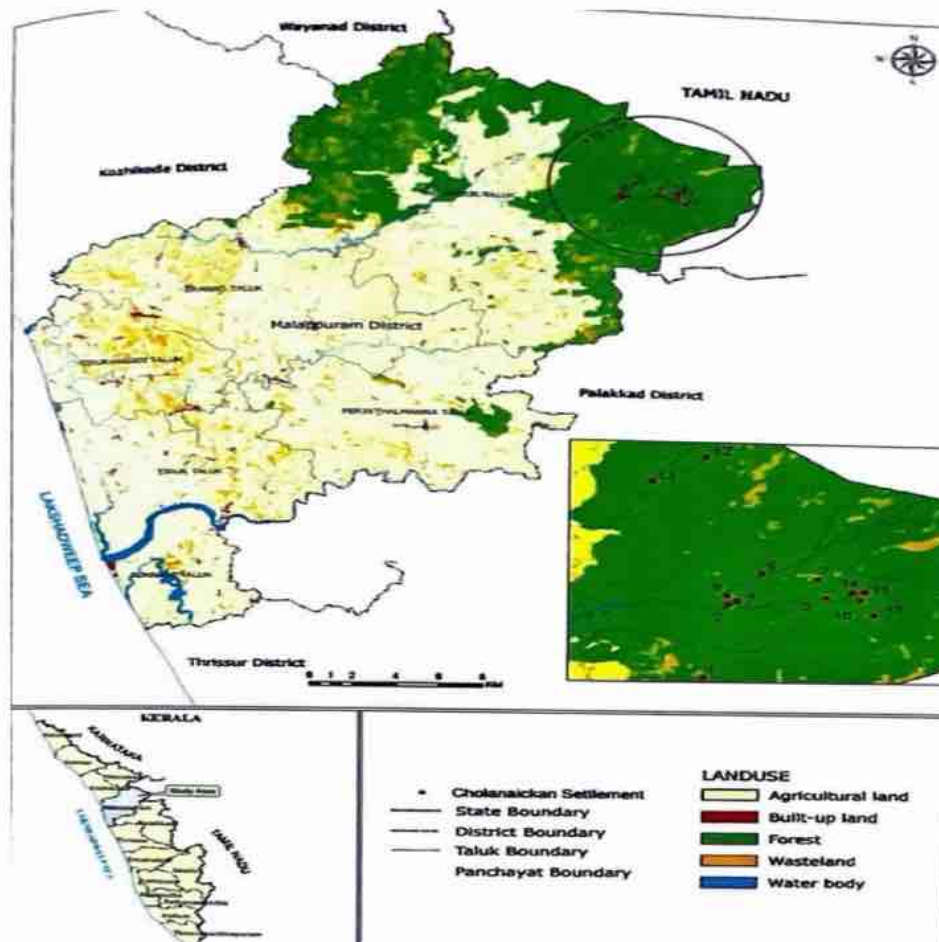
## APPENDIX- 1 Maps



Spatial distribution of the Cholaickans in Malappuram district.



Distribution of Cholanaickans in Malappuram with road network in the background.



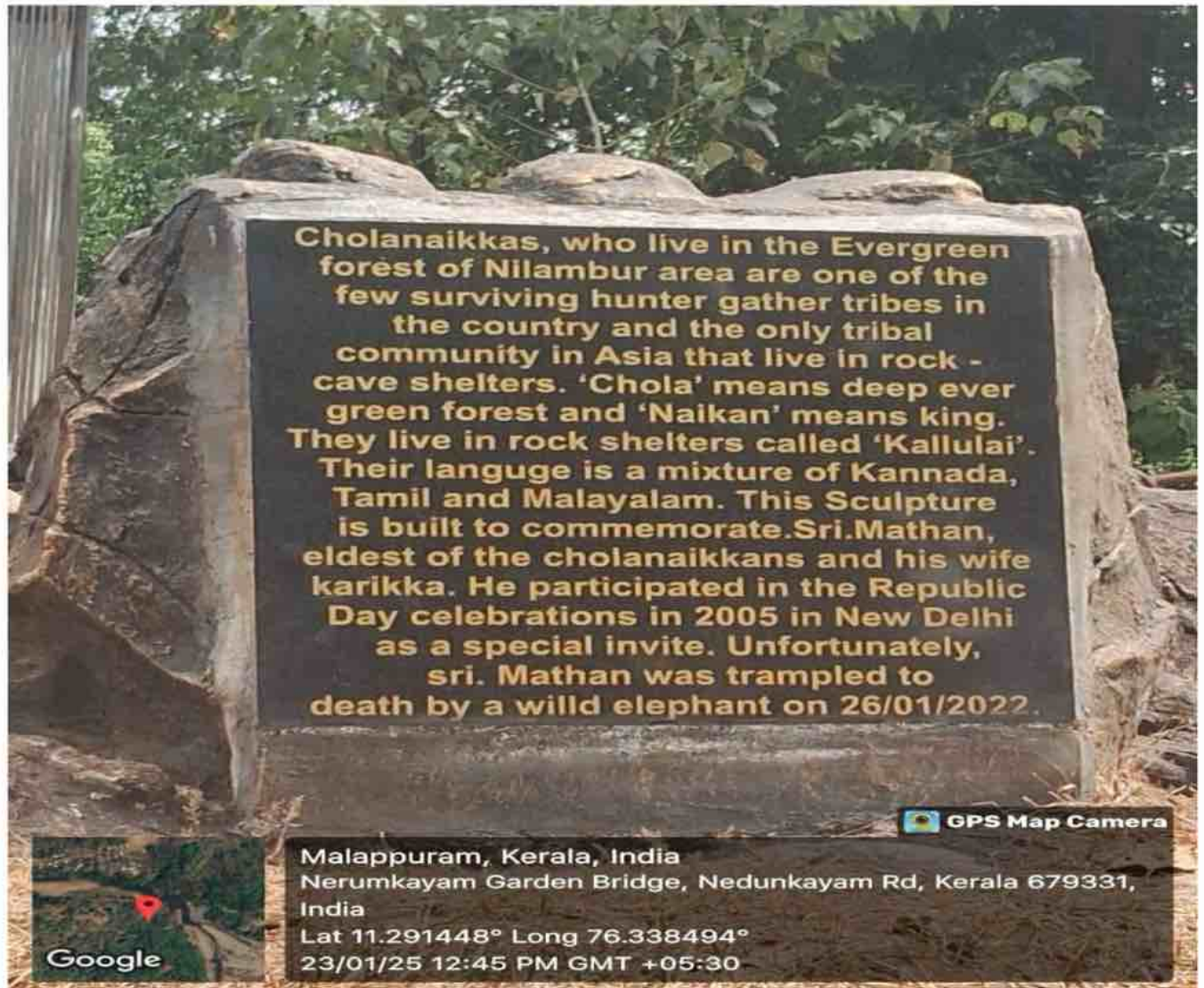
Distribution of Cholanaickans in Malappuram with landuse in the background.



## APPENDIX-2 PICTURES



Statues of Cholanaikan Tribe



Epitaph of the eldest of the cholanaikan tribe.



House of cholanaikans tribes





First graduate of the cholanikkan tribe

### **APPENDIX-3 QUESTIONNAIRE**

Q1: How did they arrived at their current location and if there are any theories regarding their origin?

Q2: Do they have social structures or hierarchies in their community and if so, how it operates?

Q3:How do the marriage rituals and the community practices takes place. Are there marriage traditions if so, how many?

Q4: How do they hunt food on a daily basis and maintain subsistence?

Q5: What are the family values they uphold in today's modern age?

Q6: How is the relationship of the Cholanaikans with their environment, given that the environment is integral to their lives and subsistence?

Q7: How the tribe treats animals in comparison to how the people in urban areas would treat them?

Q8: How are their settlements are like in the forest?

Q9. How is the medicinal system in the tribe, and how are medicines produced within the tribe?

Q10. What are the types of crafts produced within the community?

Q11. How does education play a role in the tribe in today's age? Do they have a greater role in shaping today's values of the tribe?

Q12. In the tribe, how are the crimes solved by the community?