

Chapter 1 : About The Community

We travelled to the mid ranges of Idukki in the Western Ghats to collaborate with the Mannan community, an Indigenous group recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in Kerala. Our initial meeting with the Mannan leadership took place at Kovilmala, Kattapana, where we discussed the scope and expectations of the work. The team was warmly invited to attend upcoming community festivals, which offered an opportunity to observe and document their cultural practices directly. As the engagement progressed, a broader understanding of the community's geography, cultural systems, and their nuances began to take shape.

During our fieldwork among the Mannan community, we saw a society deeply anchored in its traditions and historical memory. The Mannan people are primarily settled in the forested regions of the Idukki district, and many community members explained to us that the very name Mannan is derived from a Tamil term meaning "King." This meaning is not merely symbolic; it resonates strongly with the community's rich and complex system of governance, which continues to follow a traditional monarchic structure. Locally, this system is referred to as "Naalu Mannan - Naalu Vaathi - Onpathu Kaani - Pathulamthaari Pathulamthaarichi Chattam," a phrase that encapsulates their socio-political order.

As we moved from hamlet to hamlet, community members shared oral traditions tracing their ancestral migration from the Madurai region of Tamil Nadu to the Western Ghats of Idukki. These stories passed down orally through myths, narratives, and generational memory. They varied slightly from one region to another, yet they all had a common origin. While the routes and reasons for the migration differed across stories, the connection to Madurai remained a constant thread. This variation in detail, we realized, reflects the fluid nature of oral storytelling: each retelling adapts subtly to suit the audience or the times, ensuring both continuity and relevance.

In discussing demographic details, we encountered significant disparities. Kerala Government State Reports from 2013 record the Mannan population at approximately 9,345. However, several members of the community firmly insisted that their actual numbers range between 50,000 and

70,000. The current Mannan King, Raman Rajamannan, recounted to us a rough population survey he once undertook across their settlements, estimating the number to be around 20,000 at the time. These contrasts highlight the gap between official data and community perceptions, a pattern not uncommon in Indigenous population records.

Throughout our interactions, it became evident that myth and history coexist seamlessly in the collective memory of the Mannan people. Multiple versions of their past circulate within the community, shaped by regional nuances and the natural evolution of oral accounts. Yet, beneath these variations lies a shared sense of identity, and a connection to their origins and to the traditions they continue to uphold.

“The community originated from a region called Mahendragiri in Tamil Nadu. The then ‘Mannan community’ lost a war with the Mahendragiri rajas and were forced to migrate from the region to the borders of Madurai, due to the aftermath of war and loss. They were later captured by the soldiers of Madurai kingdom and provided asylum after understanding their circumstances. They were provided with food, shelter and an opportunity to find livelihood under the Madurai Kingdom. A fort called ‘Mannan Kota’ was built here for the Mannan community. It is from here, as per Mannan belief, that further migration happened to the western ghat forest of Idukki, as the community was sent to harvest cane from the forest. Initially four community members went in search of cane, namely Aalpandyan, Paalpandyan, Theepandyan, Cholpandyan. They were impressed by the abundance of the forest with eggs of tortoise and monitor lizard, wild tubers, crabs and fishes etc. After making multiple trips into the forest for cane harvesting, the group eventually settled in the forest during their third trip and never returned to Madurai. Later, search parties came looking for the Mannan scouts, who also settled within the forest and never went back. This migration happened mainly in 3 routes and settled accordingly at various locations in Idukki : (i) Kombam route and settled at central region, eastern forest area, (ii) Boodhi route and settled at Mannankandam, Adimali region & (iii) Cumbum route, who settled at Kumali region.”

- Sooryapathbhanabhan, Maniyarankudi

In Mazhuvadi, we met Rajappan, a Kaani elder who told us that he, too, had heard these stories about his ancestors. However, he finds it difficult to believe the narrative of people settling in the forest because they were impressed by its abundance. Instead, he emphasizes the version in which the Mannan community crossed the now-Kerala borders under the guidance of the Panthalam Kingdom, to oversee and manage the forest lands.

The Poonjar Connection

In our conversations with Raman Rajamannan, the 16th and current King of the Mannan community, he narrated the history of the community in relation to the Poonjar Dynasty. According

to his account, Kulothanga Cholaman II and Kulashekhara Pandyan fought a war in what is now Tamil Nadu, after which the defeated Kulashekhara Pandyan migrated across the border from Madurai to present-day Kerala, where he became known as Chirayu Varman. He is said to have built the Poonjar Palace in Kottayam, the Kannaki Temple in Kumali, and the Dharmasastha temple during his reign. The community that accompanied him, Kurum-mannarukar, the Naatturajakanmar who once ruled small patches of land in Tamil Nadu, settled in Kerala and came to be known as the Mannan community. They lived in and around Poonjar for 3-4 centuries and were bestowed with responsibilities to manage the forest lands, providing tribute to the Poonjar dynasty. Eventually, this connection between the Mannan community and Poonjar gradually faded during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Elders have cautioned

As per Suryapadhbhanabhan from Maniyaran Kudi, it is believed that the real history of the Mannan community is present in the Poonjar palace. Sections of land under the Poonjar kingdom lie in between the Mannan lands of Aaradiyan Thollayirapuram, near the banks of Periyar, on the sides of Kottukathalay, Idiyude Peraaru. Poonjar Kingdom gave these lands on lease to the Mannan community during olden times. Community elders have cautioned not to talk about certain parts of Mannan history related to Poonjattu Thampuram and others, lest unfavourable events might occur.

Nearly 97 percent of the Mannan community are inhabitants of Idukki District, settled across more than forty hamlets. These settlements are referred to as Mannakudi. Each settlement has a chieftain known as the Kaani, who oversees governance and welfare of the residents. There are minor discrepancies within the community on the actual list of the settlements as a few settlements have been relocated, some dwindled, and some have newly formed.

Although the Mannan community once lived a nomadic life within the dense forests, most settlements have since been displaced and rehabilitated for various reasons. One of the main reasons for the rehabilitation includes the Forest (Conservation) Act 1980 and related conservation policies by the forest department and the government. Idukki dam and reservoir construction were also a major reason for displacement among the Mannan community. In the aftermath, the communities were displaced from their original place of residence within the forest and were forced away into other locations.

Decoding history through memories

Ulakan Kaani from Kumily recalls the community originally came to Vandiperiyar first, during the British ruling era. Community elders used to live at Thankamala. Kozhikkanam, Mlaavapara village Mullathodu. Amma Maharani (Thiruvithaamkur Maharani) resettled the Mannan community from these regions to the present day Kumily settlement. During the British colonial era incidents of cholera and tiger attacks, along with Idukki reservoir construction and subsequent flooding of then farming lands, were also reasons for resettlement, as recalled by Rajan, an elder from Kumily hamlet.

Rajan recalls how the community thus came down from Mlaavapara and settled under the protection of Rajashree Valiyathurai by residing around his house. They used to venture into the forest nearby for farming and collecting cardamom, honey, thelli (millets) etc. These were also given as tribute to Rajashree Valiyathurai. Later the land for Kumali settlement was given to the then Kaani named Kuppan Kaani, under the Kuppan Vanavakasha Committee.

Through our field interactions with community members, it became increasingly evident to us that alongside displacement and rehabilitation, the Mannan community has undergone a significant crisis of survival and identity, having lost much of their former way of life and livelihood. Once an agrarian community that farmed and lived with resilience across vast forest lands, they are now compelled to find their footing within constrained and congested plots of 3-5 cents, with few viable livelihood options.

We also came across accounts of land allocated to the community being sold to individuals outside the community. These incidents were linked to the challenges the Mannan faced in the new era of capitalism, where money was a relatively new concept to their cultural and economic life.

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