Chapter 2 : Social Life

During our fieldwork, community members recalled that in the early days the Mannan lived a nomadic life, practicing shifting agriculture across vast stretches of forest land. Over time, however, they were displaced from these forest areas and compelled to settle in various locations, either directly or indirectly provided by the government. They attributed this to several factors, including the implementation of Forest Act protection rules, the construction of reservoirs and resulting flooding, and encroachment by outsiders for plantation activities.

It is commonly believed that the Mannan community once lived across 42 hamlets in Idukki district. Some of these settlements have since dwindled, while others have been relocated. Neither government records nor community sources contain definitive data on the exact number of settlements or the total population, and even the mapping of the original 42 hamlets elicited multiple viewpoints within the community.

In most current settlements, we found that the community resides on revenue land provided by the government, holding only a possession certificate (kaivasha avakasham) rather than a land deed (pattayam). This arrangement has created a sense of dependency and insecurity, limiting the community’s ability to achieve full autonomy. At the same time, it offers some protection by preventing the land from being sold through unfair trade practices, particularly during times of financial strain.

Community members also described a distinctive architectural tradition that once reflected their close relationship with nature and collective life. Earlier, house construction was a well-preserved skill, taking approximately two months and using natural materials such as wooden sticks, bamboo frames, and wild leaves. Building was a communal effort involving 10 to 30 people under the guidance of the Kaani, with labour shared across tasks like foraging leaves, cutting timber, and preparing food. Today, however, cultural changes have led the community, like many others, toward a more capitalist mode of living, and most families now reside in concrete houses built through government housing schemes. Concerns were frequently voiced regarding the quality of these structures, particularly reports of cracks and leaky roofs.

CGH Earth Case Study
The traditional Mannan architectural style has been adopted in the tourism property Spice Village i Kumily by a hospitality firm, CGH Earth. Earlier, members of the Mannan community were employe for roof thatching and periodic maintenance. However, challenges have arisen due to (i) the scarci of the specific wild grass used in roofing and (ii) the lack of skilled artisans within the community. I recent years, CGH Earth has had to train immigrant workers from Tamil Nadu to preserve and continue this architectural technique for their huts and cottages.

Mura System: A System Co-dependance

Mannan community follows a strict clan system. This system of kinship informs almost all of the elements of Mannan culture and socio-political organisation. The whole of Mannan community is divided into two sections of clans, namely Aravakudi and Paneekudi. Though loosely called as 25 Paneekudi and Arava Ayyayiram, there are only 35 total sub clans within this system. There are multiple descriptions from hamlet to hamlet in quantifying the sub clans. According to the current king, Raman Rajamannan there are 20 sub clans of Aravakkudi and 15 sub clans of Paneekkudi in total.

As the Mannan community mainly follows a matrilineal system, the clan assignment also happens in the same way with marriages involving exogamy. Marriages within the same clans were once strictly prohibited and are believed to bring in God’s fury.

People of administrative power are mainly from the Paneekudi clan. The Mannan king is from Valiyakunakudi sub-clan from Paneekudi division and apart from that all other clans are said to be equal in power, without a structured vertical hierarchy.

We have heard multiple stories and come across many incidents where the community observes a mura system based on this family lineage. In this system for every family there exists a pullakutti, a corresponding family lineage who will be tasked with their protection and well-being. For example, for an individual in Paneekudi, a sub clan of Aravakudi will act as a pullakutti and vice versa. This system of accompanying is followed in many of the Mannan rituals such as Pongal, as well as during instances when the community treks to the forest.

Story of Livelihood: Past and Present

The Mannan community once led a rich agrarian life centered on shifting cultivation. Small forested plots were cleared for farming, cultivated for a season, and then left fallow as new plots were

prepared. They grew traditional varieties of rice and millets, practicing collective farming that emphasized cooperation and shared responsibility. The harvest was stored and distributed among all members, ensuring sustenance for the entire community. Agriculture was not an isolated livelihood activity like today, but an integral part of their culture, deeply interwoven with their beliefs, rituals, and festivals. Even marriage ceremonies were timed with the harvest cycle, celebrated through the Kalaavoottu festival and its associated rituals. In addition to cultivated crops, the community shares stories of their once rich life with sustainable and rich food habits through forest products.

Kurumbpullu : A Lost Tradition

One notable forest produce, Kurumbpullu, was widely consumed and used to prepare a traditional dish called katti, reflecting the community's connection to their natural environment and culinary traditions.
Ramani shared the memories of Kurumbpullu farming from her memories "We clear small patches of forest and grow our own food. Until the month of Onam, the forest provides us with plenty to eat. After that, we plant Kurumbpullu and other crops. When the harvest is ready, we dry the grains, powder them, and use them to make katti."
Nagamma told us how katti was prepared: "To prepare katti, we heat water on a firewood stove and add pullu (finger millet). We hold the pot steady with a mathukol, a two-pronged wooden stick and stir the mixture with an idikambu. Once it thickens, the katti is ready. We usually eat it with anavu, a side dish often made with dried fish and other ingredients. The meal is served and eaten on leaves."

After the resettlement of many hamlets, the community experienced significant disruption in their livelihood. Aggressive resettlement policies and development encroachment restricted their access to traditional lands and resources for agriculture, challenging their ability to sustain their cultural and economic practices.

"Around 1977-78, Mannan families from Chinnapara earned their livelihood by selling firewood in nearby Adimali township at a rate of Rs. 2 per stack. In addition to cash, we often received food items and fruits like jackfruit and mangoes in exchange. There was a scarcity of seeds at that time. We used to collect fallen seeds in this journey for our farming needs. This system continued until the 1990s but gradually declined due to stricter forest regulations and migration within the community."

- Raju Mani, Chinnapara

Today, the community is not actively pursuing traditional agriculture as it is largely nonviable due to land scarcity and conflicts with wildlife. Many community members have now shifted to newer

work sources such as masons, daily wage laborers, or in limited agricultural and plantation work in nearby towns. Some Mannan hamlets on the forest fringes of Kumily benefit from employment as forest watchers, guides, or through community-based tourism initiatives organized under the Department of Forest and Wildlife’s ecotourism programs.

As we travelled across various settlements, we found that opportunities were uneven across different settlements. Restricted access to income-generating activities pose significant challenges in many hamlets. A few elders from various regions have commented how most students leave school after completing the 10th standard and plus two, while only a few continue to undergraduate studies and attempt government employment. Only a small number seems to secure jobs, and engagement in private sector work remains minimal, apart from a few individuals employed in local shops. Raju Mani recalls how their life was quite challenging post displacement of their settlement and how in today's world they are able to find stable income in the form of salaries.

This transition reflects the community’s ongoing struggle to adapt to a pro-capitalist economy while maintaining cultural identity and traditional knowledge.

Rituals: from birth to death

Birth: In earlier times, great-grandmothers or other senior women in the household oversaw childbirth. Prayers were offered to the Mannan deity for a safe delivery. When a delivery was delayed, the community sometimes consulted Kodangi, a divination practice comparable to astrology. In such situations, a name associated with the Mannan deity was assigned to the unborn child to ensure a healthy delivery.

It is believed that newborns should carry the names of their gods or ancestral elders. This initial name, referred to as chavar peru or chaami peru, is considered essential for a safe birth. Examples of such names mentioned by community members include Thevi, Thevan, Rami, Raman, and Chakkan.

Certain regions within Mannan settlements observed additional rituals related to childbirth. In the Chinnapara region, a practice known as Kallu Kondu Iduka takes place during the first year after birth. After the infant is born, the parents receive a blessed stone from the ooru karmi (the ritual specialist of the hamlet). The family then visits the Manappadan Kaani, a sacred site, to perform a prayer ritual and place the blessed stone in a designated area. This act is understood as seeking

protection and blessings for the child.

Vannakkoora

“If you start menstruating, you’re supposed to move to the vannakoora, a house built about 7-8 feet away from the main house. The man is supposed to stand guard for wild animals with a lit chootu lamp. Earlier, the vannakoora was always in use, but not anymore. These days, menstruating women stay in a room near the kitchen inside the house itself. In Kumili, there are still separate structures for this, with separate washrooms. For these 5-7 days, they won’t use the same washrooms as others. Even food will be kept separately for the menstruating woman before anyone else eats. We do this so that no wrath comes our way”.

- Rajamma & Maniyamma

Marriage: Mannan community traditionally practiced a system of community marriage, in which several marriages were conducted on the same day during the Kaalayootu festival. These ceremonies took place at the residence of the chieftain, the Kaani, and the associated expenses were borne by him.

Marriage practices are structured through a strict clan system. Members of the same clan are not permitted to marry one another, as such unions are believed to invoke divine displeasure and potentially lead to severe consequences, including death. Instead, the internal caste structure of the community outlines specific and permissible marriage alliances between clans. Individuals who violated these rules were, in earlier times, expelled from the hamlet in accordance with community regulations. In recent years, however, marriages outside this system have become more common, reflecting broader social and cultural changes.

Community members also described a traditional practice in which a prospective bride or groom would reside in the in-laws’ household for a period ranging from six months to one year prior to marriage. This stay served as an assessment period during which elders of the host family evaluated the individual’s suitability. During this time, the prospective spouse is engaged in tasks such as housekeeping, construction, foraging, forest maintenance, and farming. Designated elders observed their conduct and skills and later conveyed their decision to the Kaani, who then informed the families and granted or withheld approval for the marriage.

> “I recall my own experience vividly. My mother arranged my marriage. One late evening, while I was near a fire roasting jackfruit seeds and seeking warmth, I saw my mother approaching with a woman from the community. I understood immediately what was happening. The bride-to-be stayed for six months at my house, performing her duties, without speaking to me or looking at me. After the elders gave their approval, our marriage was formalized.
> I belong to the group of Murukan worshipers, while my wife follows the deity Krishnan. In the event of any ailment or misfortune, she prays to her Gods for me, and I pray to mine for her. In our community, marrying within the same sub-caste is believed to prevent the Gods from listening to prayers, which can put one’s life at risk.”
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> - Rajappan, Mazhuvadi

Death: In the event of a death, we were told that koothu is performed for one night in the hamlet. Beyond this, there are few immediate ritualistic practices at the time of death. Spiritual performers, termed karmi, visit the house and designate a spot for digging the grave. The remaining karmis engage in prayers during the proceedings. After the burial, a small thatched roof shed is constructed over the grave, and incense sticks are lit and placed around it.

For a year following the death, relatives of the deceased adhere to rules associated with pela, including the preparation of separate food, referred to as choru vekkal. The spouse generally refrains from wearing flowers, earrings, or garlands for a period of three years. During the annual Kaalavootu festival, the Payayil Iruthal ritual is performed at these households, continuing for a duration of three years.

Payayil Iruthal: Mourning Ritual of the Mannan Community

Payayil Iruthal (also called Payel Iruthal) is a traditional mourning ritual practiced by the Mannan community of Kerala. The ritual is performed by the spouse of a deceased individual to honour their memory, traditionally for three consecutive years, and involves a period of intense grieving, remembrance, and gradual healing.

During the ritual, the spouse lays out a mat (paya) along with designated pooja items arranged in a prescribed manner. Food items such as rice, curry, and coffee are placed to invite the spirit of the deceased, and sometimes personal items like a betel pack are included, depending on the habits of the departed. A mat is reserved specifically for the spirit, which is believed to inhabit it for the duration of seven days each year.

The spouse remains seated on this mat for seven continuous days, abstaining from all work. Family members provide food, and the spouse is allowed only short walks within the house and toilet breaks. Both male and female spouses participate, following gender-specific observances: men refrain from cutting hair or shaving, while women remove ornaments such as earrings and necklaces during the ritual.

Community elders, including the Kaanikkaran, Pullavashi, or Ilayaraja, oversee the ritual to ensure it is conducted according to tradition, guiding the spouse and relatives regarding their responsibilities. After the seven days, the elders revisit the household to formally conclude the ritual. The mat is shaken three times to symbolically remove the spirit, and the spouse, accompanied by in-laws, visits the deceased's graveyard for further prayers. Here, they cry briefly and offer prayers to ensure the spirit transitions to the afterlife, returning only when called for protection or guidance.

The ritual concludes with a ceremonial bath, after which family members, typically the sister-in-law, assist the spouse in dressing and adorning her with flowers, jewelry, and other ornaments to mark her return to daily life. This deeply humane practice culminates in Kaalavoottu, a vibrant festival celebrating life and illustrating how sorrow is transformed into healing through ritual and tradition.

In the hamlets we visited during the course of our fieldwork, we encountered Mannan Bhaasha, the Mannan language. The language appeared distinctive, with considerable differences from both Malayalam and Tamil, despite some members of the community describing it as a mixture of the two. While Mannan Bhaasha does incorporate many Malayalam and Tamil words, it also possesses its own vocabulary, tonal patterns, and phonetic features that set it apart as a language in its own right.

We observed that older members of the community spoke a thicker and more fluent form of Mannan Bhaasha, whereas among younger age groups there was a noticeable increase in the use of Malayalam vocabulary. This shift appears closely tied to formal education. Schools attended by Mannan children, often Model Residential Schools established for tribal students, play a significant role in the gradual erosion of the language. Both children and adults recounted experiences of being shamed or subjected to ridicule by teachers and peers for speaking Mannan Bhaasha.

Elders expressed concern that Malayalam is now spoken more frequently than Mannan Bhaasha in many households, particularly in homes with children. The intergenerational transmission of the

language is thus weakening. At present, there appear to be no organised efforts aimed at the preservation or revival of Mannan Bhaasha, further heightening anxieties about its future within the community.

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