

Chapter 1 : About The Community

During our field visit to the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border regions around Thekkady, Paliya community members described how their identity is closely tied to the forested landscapes they have long inhabited. Many expressed a strong belief that their ancestors lived in these forests for generations. They also spoke about how the later demarcation of the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border created different narratives about whether their identity should be linked to one state or the other. While large Paliyar populations continue to live in the Tamil Nadu border areas, in Kerala they form a small diaspora. Kerala Government State Reports from 2013 record the Paliyar population at 1,484 in Kerala, though people in the hamlets often said the actual number is much lower.

“Aruvi, chieftain of the Kumali settlement, explains that the word Paliyar originates from Palichiyamayudemakkal, which literally translates to “children of the Goddess Palichiyamma.” In contrast, Ganesh, chieftain of Chakupallam, offers a different etymology for Paliyan, suggesting it comes from baliye pedichu vannavan, meaning “one who was afraid of the human ritual sacrifice, or bali.”

Elders described an earlier nomadic life within the forest. They practiced shifting agriculture and moved from place to place. Several individuals recalled how the construction of the Mullaperiyar dam during British rule submerged their traditional farmlands. This event appears central in their collective memory and is linked to the dispersal of the single settlement that once existed.

Community leaders such as Aruvi and Sarojama from Kumali shared their belief and collective memory that the community has resided in the Thekkady forest region across generations. In contrast, leaders including Ganeshan and Selvan from the Chakupallam settlement referred to ancestral narratives that speak of the community’s migration from the region now known as Tamil Nadu to Kerala, under various circumstances. One such narrative recounts a migration led by a community leader who was faced with a mandate to sacrifice one of his sons, prompting the community’s departure.

“There are now seven to eight Paliyar settlements in Kerala, including Chakkupallam, Puliyanmala, and Anakkara. The original settlement had to split when people fled the spread of epidemics during the colonial period. Later, they dispersed into multiple hamlets across what is today the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border.”

- Aruvi, the chieftain of the Kumali settlement

“The community here in Kerala is remembered as having descended from a single family. Over time, conflicts among the leaders caused the family to separate, and they eventually formed settlements in Puliyanmala, Chakkupallam, and the surrounding areas.”

- Kumaresan, Chakkupallam

We observed that the largest Paliya settlement was located at Kumali. Other hamlets such as Chakkupallam and Shivalingakudi had significantly smaller populations. We were informed that many of the smaller settlements have, over time, largely adopted Christianity. These shifts appear to have contributed to cultural differences and, at times, tensions in the ways of life practiced across different settlements.

The Paliya community in Kumali, which is situated within forest reserve lands, appears to organize much of its social and ritual life around the worship of Palichiyamma. The community has a more established temple and shows greater adaptation to mainstream forms of worship, along with the continued practice of Paliya Nritham within the hamlet. These practices suggest a particular articulation of tradition shaped by both continuity and interaction with dominant cultural forms.

In contrast, the Paliya community in Chakkupallam is located outside the forest reserve lands and was more accessible during our field visits. Community members there perceive their cultural identity as being closely associated with, and deeply influenced by, the cultural patterns of Tamil Nadu. This orientation is evident in everyday practices and social life.

Paliyar people of Kumali described to us their earlier life in Poovirishi and Kalluveri, located within what is now the core zone of the Periyar Tiger Reserve. The forest department later resettled them to their current location. Residents recounted that their relationship with the department was strained at first. According to Aruvi, interactions began to improve around 1996 or 1997 with the creation of the Eco Development Committee and its associated activities.

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