# Chapter 2 : Social Life

Based on oral accounts that were shared with us, it is understood that in earlier times the Paliyar community practiced shifting cultivation within the forest, working collectively as a community. They also depended on the collection of forest produce for their livelihoods. Over time, the introduction and enforcement of strict forest regulations under the Forest Act curtailed these practices and limited the community's access to forest resources. In the present context, many members of the Paliyar community are employed by the Department of Forest and Wildlife, Government of Kerala, serving as forest watchers and tourism guides.

**Traditional Governance System**

Paliya community settlements are known as *Paliyakudi*. These hamlets are traditionally governed by a chieftain referred to as the Kaanikaran. During conversations, community members also referred to the presence of a Naattama, a younger individual who assisted the Kaanikaran in the administration of the community. There are further references to roles such as Thandakkaran and Thalayari, who were responsible for maintaining law and order within the community.

However, there is a notable discontinuity in both the practice and collective memory of this traditional governance system. Over time, the community has adapted and evolved through significant cultural transitions, resulting in the gradual abandonment of many customary practices and the adoption of new ones under the influence of external cultural forces. In earlier times, the community adhered to strict *chittakal*, or customary orders. Punishments then included practices such as tying individuals to trees, flogging after restraint, and expulsion from the hamlet, known as *ooruvilakk*.

Aruvi, the chieftain of Kumali, calls for greater self-determination, advocating increased authority for the hamlet and its leaders in managing and resolving internal matters. He believes that such a system would enhance the community's autonomy.

*Selection of Kaani :* The Kaani is elected through the matrilineal system of *Marumakkathayam*. The position of Kaani is traditionally held only by men. Furthermore, the designated individual should possess the desired maturity, and be a believer in Paliya beliefs and customs. If multiple candidates are eligible, the selection is made through a process known as *nellittu nokuka*. The selection usually takes place on the 16th day following the death of the previous Kaani. Unlike the

Mannan community, the Paliyars do not enter into a trance during this process.

**Rituals: from birth to death**

**(i) Thottil Charthuka**

*Thottil Charthuka* is a ritual associated with the naming of a newborn in the Paliya community. It is observed on the seventh day after birth and marks the formal inclusion of the child into the matrilineal household. During the ritual, the infant is placed in the *thottil* (cradle) while older women of the matriline sing traditional lullabies. The naming of the child takes place as part of this ceremony. In the Paliya community, a separate name is usually given to the child according to their own customs, reflecting the importance of lineage and cultural continuity. Aruvi, the chieftain of Paliyakudi at Kumali, was born near a small stream (Aruvithodu) and hence was named Aruvi.

**(ii) Motta Adi**

The first shaving of a child's head is known as Motta Adi. This ritual is generally performed by the maternal uncle. Motta Adi is conducted before the clan deity to whom ritual vows or promises have been made by the family.

On this occasion, prayers are offered to Karappuswamy, Palichiyamma, and the *Vanadevathakal*, or forest deities. The ritual begins with the preparation of *Pongala*, a practice involving the boiling over of rice. The direction in which the pot overflows is carefully observed and interpreted as an indication of the will of the deities. Following this, a designated person shaves the child's head, after which turmeric is applied to the scalp. A rooster is sacrificed as part of the ritual, and the *Pongala prasadam* is then distributed among the community members who have gathered.

**(iii) Menstruation**

Based on accounts shared by members of the Paliya community, women in earlier times followed specific rituals during menstruation, particularly at the onset of first menstruation. When a girl attained menarche, seven women were assigned to assist her, and she was required to stay for seven days in a separate house specially constructed for this purpose. During this period, her first cousin, identified as the potential groom or *muracherukkan*, along with his friends, stands guard outside the house to ensure her safety.

On the seventh day, the girl bathed in a nearby water stream. Stones were laid out to create a path for her return to the house. After this, she carried a pot of water to the kitchen and prepared

Pongala, marking the completion of her period of seclusion. At the end of the ritual, *kappam*, offered as a token of appreciation, was given to the *muracherukkan*. Community members described how, before receiving this offering, the *muracherukkan* would playfully block the kitchen stove with his feet, preventing the young woman from proceeding with the ritual. Only after the *kappam* was presented would he step aside, allowing the ritual to continue.

**(iv) Marriage**

In our conversations with people of the Paliya community they told us that marriages in earlier times were conducted under the authority of the chieftain or *kaanikaran*. Following Paliya custom, marriage ceremonies took place at night, with fire serving as the primary witness. They were generally held during *chitramasam*, corresponding to April and May, a period associated with harvest and communal festivities. For the ceremony, grains were collected from every household and a common feast was prepared, reflecting the collective nature of marriage celebrations. Traditional songs and dances formed an important part of these events, which were remembered as expressions of community togetherness.

Community members also described how a bride often had multiple prospective grooms. Village elders such as the *kaanikaran* examined the proposed alliances through a process known as *nellittu nokuka* before arriving at the final decision. Prospective grooms were required to undergo several tests to assess their skills related to livelihood and survival. One such test involved hiding an object deep within the forest and asking the groom to locate it, thereby demonstrating his ability to navigate the forest and scout successfully. These tests were conducted only for male candidates, and were considered essential for marriage within the community.

A distinctive feature of Paliya marriage rituals is the use of a stone grinder, known as *thirike*, which is traditionally used for grinding grains such as millets. Community members explained that the grinder consists of two slabs, the lower *adikallu* and the upper *melkallu*. During the wedding ceremony, the woman stands on the *adikallu*, symbolizing her role in bringing stability and continuity to the household.

**(v) Death**

According to accounts shared by members of the Paliya community, the community maintains a common burial ground where the dead are buried. In earlier times, specific techniques were followed to create segments and sections within the burial pit, though in the present day wooden boxes are commonly used. Community members noted that the spouse of the deceased observes widowhood for the rest of their life, as second marriage is not permitted under Paliya custom.

Death is accompanied by a series of elaborate rituals. Aruvi, the chieftain, described a ritual in

which soil and rice are mixed, prayers are offered, and the spirit of the deceased is bid farewell. During this ritual, the spirit is also requested to protect the family as a benevolent presence. Different songs are sung depending on the status of the deceased, such as in the case of the death of the *kaanikaran*, a youth, a close relative, or a spouse.

The preparation of the body is carried out by the brothers in law, known as *machinamar*. They bathe the body and place it on a bamboo woven mat. In the case of deceased women, the *thali* or auspicious thread is broken and placed near the feet, and bangles are also broken as part of the ritual.

On the third day after burial, a ritual known as *kuzhi mezhukuka* is performed. The favorite food of the deceased is prepared and offered at the burial ground. Until this ritual is completed, food is not cooked in the house of the deceased. A glass of water is also kept at the burial site, as it is believed that the spirit of the deceased returns to drink the water.

**Paliya Language**

During our travels across several Paliyakudi hamlets, we encountered repeated references to *Paliya Basha* (the Paliya language). We learned that it is an oral language without a written script and is often described as being similar to Tamil, though marked by distinct tonal differences. Our observations indicate that only a few community elders currently retain knowledge of *Paliya Basha* in its original form, while many other community members have gradually shifted to speaking Tamil and Malayalam.

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Revision #3
Created 2026-01-09 08:23:38 UTC by Vysakh R
Updated 2026-01-09 09:09:20 UTC by Vysakh R