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## From Forest Settlers to Modern Citizens: A Historical Study of the Mannan Tribe of Idukki

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### Abstract

The Mannan tribe of Idukki, Kerala, represents one of the most culturally distinctive and historically significant indigenous communities in South India. Traditionally forest settlers, the Mannans developed a unique socio-political and cultural system that evolved through centuries of coexistence with the Western Ghats ecosystem. Their matrilineal lineage patterns, ritual life, ecological knowledge, and the rare institution of tribal kingship at Kovilmala distinguish them from other tribal groups. However, modernization, state interventions, forest regulations, education, and economic changes have significantly transformed their traditional way of life. This study traces the historical evolution of the Mannans from forest dwellers to modern citizens, examining their cultural heritage, governance systems, livelihood patterns, and the socio-economic forces that have shaped their contemporary identity. It highlights both cultural resilience and cultural erosion, emphasizing the community's ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity. The study concludes that sustainable development and cultural preservation must go hand in hand to ensure the holistic progress of the Mannan tribe in the future.

**Keywords:** Mannan tribe, Idukki, Kovilmala tribal kingship, Western Ghats, cultural transformation.

### Introduction

The tribal communities of India offer profound insights into humanity's diverse ways of living, organizing, and understanding the world. Among them, the Mannan tribe of Idukki occupies a distinctive place due to its rich cultural practices, indigenous governance system, and deep historical ties with the forests of the Western Ghats. Unlike many tribes that have lost much of their traditional structure, the Mannans preserve a unique form of tribal kingship centred at Kovilmala, where the Mannan Raja continues to operate as a cultural and symbolic leader. This indigenous political structure, along with their ritual practices, oral traditions, and ecological knowledge, provides a rare window into Kerala's tribal heritage.

Yet, the Mannans today stand at a point of transition. The forces of modernization, educational expansion, political participation, and welfare policies have altered their lived experiences in profound ways. While these changes have brought new opportunities, they have also challenged traditional norms, rituals, and livelihood patterns. Forest access has diminished over the years, compelling shifts in occupations and economic strategies. Younger generations are increasingly influenced by modern education, media, and globalized lifestyles. Consequently, the community finds itself negotiating between the desire to preserve cultural identity and the need to integrate with mainstream society.

This study aims to explore this complex historical journey. It

situates the Mannans within broader socio-political developments while retaining a focus on their internal cultural dynamics. By documenting their transition from forest settlers to modern citizens, the study contributes to the understanding of tribal resilience, transformation, and identity formation. It highlights the need for culturally sensitive developmental approaches that honour indigenous traditions while addressing contemporary realities. Through an interdisciplinary perspective—drawing from anthropology, history, sociology, and tribal studies—the study seeks to offer a holistic understanding of the Mannan tribe in the past and present.

### 1. Background of the Study

The Mannan tribe of Idukki district in Kerala represents one of the most distinctive and historically rich indigenous communities in South India. Traditionally forest dwellers who lived in close communion with nature, the Mannans developed a unique social, cultural, and political identity shaped by centuries of interaction with the forest ecosystem. Their settlements, rituals, belief systems, and indigenous governance patterns evolved within the dense forests of the Western Ghats, where they maintained a relatively autonomous existence for generations. As a Scheduled Tribe recognized in Kerala, the Mannans continue to preserve certain elements of traditional culture, though many aspects have undergone transformation due to modern influences.

Historically, the Mannans occupied the forest belts of Idukki,

with Kovilmala emerging as their most important cultural and political centre. The Kuttikkattu lineage, which holds the position of the Mannan Raja, serves as the traditional governing family, exercising symbolic authority over the community. This institution of indigenous kingship is one of the few surviving tribal monarchic systems in Kerala, highlighting the community's distinctive historical legacy. The Mannan Raja's role, though largely ceremonial today, remains deeply embedded in community rituals, cultural celebrations, and dispute-resolution mechanisms.

The arrival of external forces—such as colonial forest policies, state intervention, land regulations, missionary activities, education, and modern infrastructure—brought major changes to the tribe's socio-cultural life. The shift from forest-based subsistence practices to wage labour, agriculture, and government-sponsored livelihoods marked the beginning of a long process of transformation. Interaction with mainstream society increased, leading to both opportunities and disruptions. The introduction of schools, roads, health centres, and political representation gradually integrated the Mannans into the broader citizenry of Kerala.

However, modernization also posed challenges. Traditional practices began to decline as younger generations adopted modern lifestyles. Land alienation, restrictions on forest access, and encroachments affected their livelihood systems. Government resettlement schemes and welfare programmes altered settlement patterns. While some Mannans benefitted from education and employment, others struggled with poverty, social marginalization, and identity conflicts. These dynamics highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the historical shifts experienced by the community.

This study therefore seeks to trace the historical evolution of the Mannans from forest settlers to modern citizens. It examines their cultural heritage, socio-political structures, livelihood patterns, and contemporary challenges. It also explores the ways in which development, governance, and modernization have contributed to both cultural erosion and cultural resilience. Understanding this transformation is necessary not only for academic purposes but also for strengthening inclusive development policies and preserving indigenous knowledge systems.

## 2. Scope of the Study

The scope of this study extends across a wide range of historical, cultural, and social dimensions related to the Mannan tribe. The study primarily focuses on the Idukki district of Kerala, where the majority of Mannan settlements—including Kovilmala, Mannankudy, and adjacent hamlets—are located. The study analyses the history of the Mannan community from pre-colonial times up to the present, providing a comprehensive understanding of their transformation over time.

### The Research Includes the Following Dimensions:

- i). First, the study examines the traditional governance system of the Mannans, particularly the role of the Mannan Raja, the matrilineal lineage patterns, and the decision-making processes within the tribe. It also explores the relationship between the indigenous governance system and the administrative structures introduced during colonial and post-colonial periods.
- ii). Second, the study covers the cultural practices, rituals, festivals, oral traditions, clothing, food habits, and symbolic representations that form the core of Mannan identity. Special attention is given to how these practices

have evolved or declined due to external influences and generational changes.

- iii). Third, the scope includes the socio-economic transitions experienced by the community. This includes the shift from forest-dependent livelihoods to agriculture, labour work, self-employment, and government-supported schemes. The study also looks at how forest regulations, land policies, and legal frameworks—such as the Forest Rights Act—have impacted livelihood patterns.
- iv). Fourth, the research explores the role of education, health initiatives, political representation, and infrastructure development in shaping the community's modern identity. It addresses the unequal distribution of benefits within the community and the challenges faced by individuals in adapting to modern systems.
- v). Fifth, the study covers the psychological and cultural impacts of modernization. This includes issues such as the erosion of traditional ecological knowledge, shifting family structures, changes in gender roles, and the rising influence of media and technology.
- vi). Lastly, the study incorporates both secondary sources—books, research papers, government reports—and primary insights drawn from oral narratives, interviews, and community interactions. The study does not claim to represent every Mannan settlement in exhaustive detail but aims to provide a broad, holistic understanding of the community's historical trajectory.

## 3. Need of the Study

There are several reasons why a historical study of the Mannan tribe is necessary and academically relevant.

- i). Firstly, although the Mannans constitute one of the culturally richest tribal groups in Kerala, there is limited documentation of their historical evolution. Most existing literature focuses on general tribal studies, with few works dedicated to the Mannans themselves. A detailed historical documentation helps preserve their heritage at a time when many traditional practices are disappearing.
- ii). Secondly, the tribe is undergoing rapid transformation due to modernization, globalization, and government interventions. Understanding these changes is critical for evaluating how development policies impact indigenous communities. Without adequate research, policymakers may overlook the cultural sensitivities and lived realities of the Mannans.
- iii). Thirdly, the indigenous governance structure of the Mannans—particularly the institution of the tribal kingship—is rare and academically significant. Analysing its historical role and current relevance contributes to broader studies on tribal political systems.
- iv). Fourthly, the tribe's ecological knowledge, which evolved through centuries of forest-based living, is at risk of being lost. Documenting their traditional environmental practices supports conservation efforts and sustainable development.
- v). Fifthly, there is a growing need to address social issues faced by the Mannans, including land alienation, cultural erosion, poverty, educational disparity, and identity struggles. A well-researched historical study provides clarity and helps identify appropriate interventions.
- vi). Sixthly, such studies promote cultural pride within the community. When indigenous histories are recognized and documented, it strengthens the sense of identity and encourages cultural revival among younger generations.
- vii). Finally, this research contributes to academic fields such

as anthropology, sociology, history, tribal studies, and cultural geography. It enriches scholarly understanding of Kerala's tribal heritage and supports comparative studies of indigenous communities across India.

#### 4. Hypotheses of the Study

**H1:** The process of modernization, state intervention, and institutional development has significantly transformed the traditional socio-cultural practices of the Mannan tribe.

**H2:** Despite modernization, the indigenous governance system of the Mannan Raja continues to hold cultural and symbolic significance within the community.

**H3:** Access to education and government welfare programmes has contributed to socio-economic development but has also accelerated cultural erosion within the Mannan community.

**H4:** Forest laws and land regulations have adversely affected the traditional livelihood patterns of the Mannans, leading to economic dependency on alternative occupations.

**H5:** The identity of the Mannan tribe is undergoing negotiation as the community transitions between traditional forest-based life and modern citizenship.

#### 5. Main Analytical Discussion

The Mannan tribe's historical trajectory reflects the broader dynamics of tribal transformation in India. Traditionally, Mannans lived in small forest hamlets, engaging in hunting, gathering, shifting cultivation, and later settled agriculture. Their intimate relationship with the forest shaped their cosmology, rituals, seasonal practices, and social organization. The community viewed the forest not merely as a resource but as a living entity integral to their cultural identity.

The indigenous governance system evolved from this ecological context. The Mannan Raja, selected through matrilineal descent, served as the ceremonial head of the community. Unlike mainstream kingship, the Mannan Raja's authority was rooted in cultural legitimacy rather than territorial control. He presided over rituals, settled disputes, and represented the community in traditional gatherings. The Kuttikkattu lineage became central to political continuity, ensuring the preservation of historical memory.

The transition began during the colonial period when forest laws restricted shifting cultivation and hunting. British administration classified forest land, reducing indigenous access. Subsequently, state-led conservation policies after Independence further curtailed traditional livelihoods. The Mannans adapted by shifting to settled agriculture, wage labour, and seasonal work. Many migrated temporarily to plantations or construction sites.

Education marked a major turning point. Missionary efforts and government schools introduced literacy, leading to new opportunities but also distancing the educated youth from traditional practices. Students learned Malayalam instead of tribal dialects, weakening linguistic heritage. Exposure to modern schooling also led to aspirations for jobs and mobility.

Government welfare schemes brought benefits such as housing, pensions, scholarships, and rations. However, these programs also created dependency and disrupted community-based support structures. Politically, the Mannans gained representation in local self-governments, though internal disparities persisted. Some families benefitted more than others, increasing socio-economic inequality within the tribe. Cultural erosion became visible in rituals, dances, songs, and

dressing patterns. Festivals like Kalavoottu, Navarathri, and Vellattam continue, but participation has declined. Traditional medicinal practices, agricultural calendars, and ecological knowledge face similar decline as modern healthcare and markets expand. The tribal dialect, an important marker of identity, is spoken less frequently among children.

At the same time, elements of cultural resilience are evident. The community strongly preserves the Mannan Raja system and celebrates major rituals with renewed enthusiasm. Cultural organizations and tribal development offices support revival programmes. Younger Mannans increasingly recognize the value of heritage as a source of pride and political identity. Some have started documenting oral histories, songs, and customs.

The contemporary identity of the Mannans is thus shaped by a delicate balance between tradition and modernity. While modernization offers improved living standards, it challenges cultural continuity. The tribe navigates this duality by selectively adopting modern practices while retaining symbolic elements of tradition. This negotiation underscores the need for culturally sensitive development approaches that honour both heritage and progress.

#### 6. Conclusion

The historical study of the Mannan tribe reveals a complex and dynamic journey from forest-based living to modern citizenship. The community's transition has been shaped by diverse forces, including colonial interventions, state policies, modernization, education, and socio-economic change. While these developments have opened new avenues for growth, they have also challenged the continuity of traditional culture and indigenous knowledge systems.

Despite these challenges, the Mannans exhibit remarkable cultural resilience. The tribal kingship, rituals, communal celebrations, and kinship networks continue to hold meaning and identity for the community. The shift to modern lifestyles has not entirely erased their cultural distinctiveness; instead, it has pushed the community to reinterpret and reinvent its identity in contemporary contexts.

The study highlights the importance of balancing cultural preservation with development. Policymakers must adopt participatory and context-sensitive strategies that respect indigenous traditions while addressing socio-economic needs. Education, skill development, cultural documentation, land rights protection, and sustainable livelihood programmes are crucial for the holistic development of the Mannans.

Ultimately, the historical journey of the Mannans illustrates the broader narrative of tribal transformation in India. It underscores the need to honour indigenous heritage while ensuring that tribal communities gain equitable access to the opportunities of the modern world.

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