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## Cholanaikkan: Socio-Economic Condition of Manjeeri Colony

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### Abstract

This study explains the Cholanaikkan community, one of the most primitive and vanishing tribes in Kerala. These tribes are only found in the Karulai and Chungathara forest ranges of Nilambur, Malappuram district, Kerala. Historically, they lived Stone Age lifestyle. They mostly live in 'Alai' (rock shelters). This is an attempt to understand the Cholanaikkan primitive tribal community and the present-day problems they face, such as unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, and insecurity.

There are some sources that helped me understand this tribe. The "Cholanaikkan" or "Colekkaru" means "people of the forest". They are a primitive hunter-gatherer tribe. Their religious life consists of animism and ancestral worship. Their main livelihoods are hunting, gathering, and craftsmanship. We can also see a division of labor among them.

Their society is structured around 13 distinct territorial zones called 'tsemnam.' Each zone is led by a leader. Their family unit is called a 'kudumba.' They celebrate birth, death, and menstruation. As a part of their death ceremony, one important ritual is 'Adiyanthiram,' held one month after death to honor the ancestors. Their main tools are 'kodali' (axe) and 'porali' (a digging tool).

This study concludes that some members have become educated. The government is also introducing some welfare schemes to improve their lives. The Cholanaikkan are slowly integrating into modern economic systems through agriculture and welfare schemes. Even now, they remain a highly vulnerable ethnic group requiring focused conservation and support.

**Keywords:** Cholanaikkan, Cave-Dwellers (Alai), Animism, Tsemam, Maladaivam.

### Introduction

The Cholanaikkans are one of the most primitive and vanishing tribes in Kerala, and one of the oldest native communities in the State. They are only found in the Karulai and chungathara forest ranges in Nilambur, Malappuram District. They are one of the last remaining hunter-gatherer tribes of South India, living in rock shelters on crude huts beside brooks.

They historically lived within Stone Age culture. They speak the cholanaikkan language. The Cholanaikkans call themselves "Malanaikkan" or "Sholanaikkan". "Shola" means king, "chola" means the deepest, thickest part of the forest, and Naikkan means king. They are said to be warriors who migrated from Mysore and Karnataka; they are generally of short stature with round or oval faces.

### Aims and Importance of the Study

This work is an attempt to understand the cholanaikkan primitive tribal community. In the present day they face many problems, such as low literacy rates, unemployment and insecurity.

### Historiography, Source and Methodology

The general history of the villages within the Karulai panchayath, is available through specific records, though no

comprehensive historical work previously focused on this exact location. This study utilizes final program reports, the "Samagra vikasana Rekha", interviews and various books as its literary foundation. Primary sources include the "Malayala Manorama year book"(2016), the Karulai Grama panchayath samagra vikasana rekha, and personal interviews. The research employs historical methodology based on data analysis and primary records.

### Geographical Features of Manjeeri Colony

Manjeeri Colony is located 22 km from Karulai, situated within the 6th ward of the Karulai Grama Panchayath.

#### • Demographics and History

The population of the Cholanaikka group increased from 191 to 206 by 2015. While the group was officially reported by the Government in 1960, the name "Cholanaikkan" became popular during that period. The literacy rate of this group is 16%. Their primary language is 'Cholanaikkan'. General details of Manjeeri Colony are as follows:

**Formation Year:** 1960

**Location:** 6<sup>th</sup> Ward, Karulai Grama Panchayath, Nilambur Block Panchayath.

**Total Population:** 206 (145 Males and 61 Females).

### • Climate and Geography

The climate of Manjeeri Colony is tropical, with temperatures ranging between 22°C and 43°C. The average rainfall is 300 to 350 cm, consistent with other areas in the Malabar region. This area receives the Northeast monsoon from June to August. Typically, the climate is hot, with temperatures ranging from 20°C to 30°C.

The forest surrounding Manjeeri Colony is considered an elephant sanctuary. The colony is blessed with diverse natural resources and varied soil compositions. The landscape is divided into highlands, lowlands, and hilly areas. Three major rivers flow through the colony:

### • Panapuzha

- Karimpuzha
- Manjakallan Puzha

These rivers, along with several ponds and streams, provide an adequate water supply. According to the 2015 Karulai Grama Panchayath development report (Vikasana Rekha), the inhabitants engage in small-scale agricultural activities for self-sustenance. While agriculture is a main occupation, the Cholanaikkan population has fluctuated; they numbered 300 in the 1991 census but fell to 191 members later. They are found widely scattered throughout the forest range.

### • Lifestyle and Culture

Their language is a mixture of Kannada, Tamil, and Malayalam. In their daily lives, they use traditional dress, ornaments, household articles, tools, and weapons. Their staple food is rice, supplemented by wild roots, tubers, seeds, and fruits.

Their livelihood is almost entirely dependent on the forest. The collection and sale of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) is their major source of income. Many traditional customs and taboos still prevail among the Cholanaikkan. They are animists who worship nature and ancestral spirits.

Until a few years ago, the Cholanaikkans lived in the hills. The Government now classifies them as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) to ensure they benefit from various protection and welfare schemes.

### • Topography and Climate (Detailed)

The valley has an elevation ranging between 40m and 250m above Mean Sea Level (MSL). Based on physical features, the valley is classified into two distinct geographical units:

**Eastern Highlands:** Mountainous regions lying at about 200m MSL.

**Lowlands:** Plain topography situated at an altitude of 40m to 200m MSL.

The valley shares the general climatic conditions of the midland region of Kerala:

**Dry Season:** December to February

**Hot Season:** March to May

**South-West Monsoon:** June to September (Provides nearly 75% of annual rain; often very heavy).

**North-East Monsoon:** October to November.

The average annual rainfall is 2900 mm. The climate is generally hot and humid, characterized by heavy rainfall and moderate temperatures. Temperatures vary between 17°C and 37°C from winter to summer. Interestingly, the extreme heat of summer is often not felt within the deep recesses of the forests.

### Flora, Fauna and Topography

The Nilambur valley is rich in biodiversity, famous for its teak plantations and high-value timber like rosewood and mahogany. The area is home to diverse wildlife, including elephants, bison, panthers and Nilgiri langurs. Historically the tribe subsisted on "Non-wood Forest products" (NWFP). However, in recent decades large tracts of forest have been converted into teak and Rubber plantations, affecting the local ecological balance.

### Social Life of the Cholanaikkan

The "Cholanaikkan" or "Colekkaru" (meaning "people of the forest") are a primitive-hunter-gatherer tribe. They traditionally lived in "kellele [small huts] or Caves during the rainy season. Their religious life is centered on animism and ancestral worship with "koduthu pooja" being major festival rituals-marking birth, marriage and death usually last 11 to 12 days.

### Life Style and Habitat

The Cholanaikkan people traditionally lived in caves (called Alai), especially during the rainy season. While many now prefer Small huts for permanent living, they still utilize caves for temporary shelters while-gathering forest products. Their economy is primarily based on

- **Hunting and Gathering:** They collect wild potatoes, honey (stored in bamboo pots) and wild tubers.
- **Craftsmanship:** They are skilled in making bamboo baskets.
- **Division of Labour:** women focus on cooking childcare and food collection, while men engage in hunting fishing and basket weaving.

### Social and Religious Organisation

Their society is structured around 13 distinct territorial zones called Tsemam

- **Leadership:** Each zone is led by Tsenmakkar, a hereditary chief. He is the supreme authority in social, political, and religious matters acting as a mediator for disputes, marriage and naming ceremonies
- **Religion:** They practice animism, treating the forest as their god. They worship a mountain god called "Maladaivam" and maintain a "Divine Basket" [Devakkota] containing idols. Ancestor worship is also central with rituals involving music made from dried fruit (kattlachuranga) and stones.

### Family and Kinship

The family unit is called a kudumba.

- **Structure:** They are patrilineal [lineage through the father]and follow post-marital residence rules where the couple lives near the husband's family
- **Statistics:** Research shows a high prevalence of nuclear families [approx. 72.7%] consisting of a husband, wife and unmarried children.

### Life Cycle Rituals

- **Birth:** Births traditionally occur in caves, though Separate bamboo huts are now used. A woman is secluded for 41 days after delivery.
- **Menstruation:** Girls are secluded in a specific corners of the cave for four days and perform a purification bath [Neerada] on the fifth.
- **Death:** The dead were traditionally buried in caves; today they are buried in separate grounds called pola. The

Tsenmakkaran leads the funeral procession and performs the “adiyanthiram” rite one month after death to honor the ancestors.

### Tools and Clothing

- **Tools:** key hunting and gathering tools include the Kodali [axe], the a porali [a digging tool now reinforced with iron and the Kokkai [a hooked Stick for collecting fruit]
- **Clothing:** Historically they wore clothing made from tree bark, reflecting their total dependence on the forest environment

### Marriage and Social Structure

- **Territorial Exogamy:** The Cholanaikkan practice territorial exogamy, meaning they must marry someone from outside their own tseman [territory]
- **Marriage Customs:** While marriage is often a free choice between couples (Ganda and Ennu), traditional customs such as marriage by capture [Edippiyodu] also exist.
- **Demographics:** The society is monogamous. However there is a disappointing sex ratio with fewer females than males and widows are encouraged to remarry.
- **Bride Price:** A compulsory bride price, known as kannana, is a standard requirement for marriage.

### Education and Literacy

- **Historical Context:** Historically the tribe had little formal education due to a lack of facilities, relying instead on oral traditions passed down through generations.
- **Current Progress:** The literacy rate is improving particularly among the younger generation where it has reached 22%
- **Milestones:** In 2013 a student named Vinod became the first cholanaikkan to enroll in a joint degree course.
- **Challenges:** Education is hindered by external factors like deforestation and food scarcity, which impact the community's stability.

### Economic Conditions and Livelihood

- **Livelihood:** Their economy is almost entirely forest-dependent based on hunting, gathering and the collection of minor forest produce.
- **Income Sources:** Selling forest products is their primary source of income. Some members have transitioned to agricultural labor (60%), while a small percentage work as skilled laborers (4%) or government employees (12%)
- **Dietary Habits:** Rice has become a staple food for 50% of the population. Others supplement their diet with wild roots, fruits, meat, and fish.
- **Poverty:** The tribe resides in the Malappuram district, where 41.80% of families live below the poverty line significantly higher than the Kerala State average of 36.58%

### Conclusion

The study concludes that the Cholanaikkan are one of the most primitive and “Vanishing” tribes in Kerala. While they are traditionally hunter-gatherers living in rock caves they are slowly integrating into modern economic systems through agriculture and government welfare schemes, though they remain one of the most vulnerable ethnic groups in the

Dravidian family.

### Glossary

Chola	→ Deep forest
Colai	→ Forest
Devan	→ God
Devacotta	→ Divine basket
Ennu	→ Wife
Ganda	→ Husband
Kattunaika	→ Cholanaikkan (Tribe name)

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