



TRIBAL SETTLEMENTS AND ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICES IN THE HILLS OF SOUTHERN TAMIL NADU

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Abstract

The untouched architectural practices of the Kani, Paliyan, Malasar and Muthuvan tribes living in the Western Ghats and Agasthiyamalai ranges are studied in conjunction with their ecology and culture. The undisturbed tribal villages in the Southern hillocks of Tamil Nadu showcase an unparalleled craftsmanship of nature using resources such as bamboo, thatch, and mud, adeptly creating structures in perfect harmony with the environment. Ethno sociological elements such as sacred groves, ritual spaces, the socio religious identity of the community as well as their socio-religious practices mark their living identity and its remnants. Colonization and contemporary issues such as displacement, assimilation, and environmental degradation from modern housing additions also receive a glimpse in the study. This work emphasizes the tribal sustainable eco-practices as wisdom along with the need to preserve and safeguard indigenous architectural knowledge for future generations through its historical narratives, field descriptions, and local earshot account.

Key Words: Kani, Paliyan, Malasar, Muthuvan, Sacred grove.

Introduction

The tribal people of the southern hill districts of Tamil Nadu is one of the tribal regions that still survives in India. Their way of life, society, and culture exhibits an intimate relationship which has evolved over innumerable years of coexistence with the Western Ghats and the Agasthiyamalai ranges. Unlike the urban or plains dwellings, tribal settlements as part of their ecological thinking are placed on clean sites and made of organic materials with simple but effective constructions that are appropriate for the land and climate. The major tribal groups such as the Kani, Paliyan, Malasar

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and Muthuvan have, out of necessity for adequate environmental and cultural sustenance, developed unique forms of domestic, devotional and communal spaces which served within and outside the home. These housing units are fundamental and capture the essence of the identity, social organization and religion of the tribal people. This study intends to document and evaluate the architectural works and spatial arrangement of the hill tribes in relation to their construction and how it outwardly reflects functional and cultural activities. It also aims to analyse these changes during colonial and post-colonial periods and describe why there is loss of traditions on the local level of knowledge and the issues of preserving indigenous knowledge in the midst of modern challenges.

Overview of Tribal Communities in Southern Tamil Nadu

The hill regions of Southern Tamil Nadu, particularly the southern stretches of the Western Ghats and the Agasthiyamalai ranges, are home to several tribal communities with rich cultural and ecological traditions. These indigenous groups have inhabited the forests, valleys, and mountain slopes for centuries, sustaining themselves through shifting cultivation, hunting, gathering, herbal medicine practices, and small-scale farming. Among the prominent tribal communities in this region are the **Kanis (Kanikkar)**, who predominantly inhabit the forests of Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts. Known for their medicinal plant knowledge and sacred groves, the Kani people maintain a lifestyle deeply intertwined with forest ecology.

The **Paliyan** community, traditionally known as nomadic hunters and gatherers, now reside in small, scattered hamlets in hill areas near Srivilliputhur and Tirunelveli. Their settlements reflect simplicity and adaptability to forest life.

The **Malasar** and **Muthuvan** tribes also inhabit these regions, each with distinct linguistic, ritual, and architectural practices. The Malasars, mainly found in forest interiors, are known for their spiritual beliefs tied to nature, while the Muthuvans are noted for their agriculturally inclined settlements and unique migratory history.

These tribal societies maintain a close relationship with their environment, which is evident in their settlement patterns, sacred spaces, housing techniques, and community structures. Their socio-religious practices, oral traditions, and ecological wisdom continue to play a vital role in preserving the biodiversity and cultural heritage of Southern Tamil Nadu's hill regions.

Settlement Patterns of Tribes in the Hill Regions

Tribal habitations in the hill areas of Southern Tamil Nadu exhibit distinctive spatial features driven by ecological, cultural, and socio-economic influences. These patterns are usually determined by accessibility to natural resources like water bodies, fertile lands, forest products, and sacred areas. The settlements vary from discrete family groups to compact, small hamlets. The Kanis prefer to settle at places close to the slopes of hills and openings in forests, which are sometimes bordered by medicinal herbs and sacred groves. Their settlements are typically small groups of 5-20 dwellings, situated organically rather than ordered linearly, portraying a deep love affair with the land and topography. Traditionally nomads, Paliyans have over time settled in

scattered hamlets along forest margins, caves, and hill plateaus. Their habitations are usually dispersed, betraying their past dependence on hunting and foraging. Malasars tend to live deep within the forests in tight clusters, whereas the Muthuvans are famous for linear habitation along hill roads, closely associated with migratory agriculture.

Functional Spaces within Tribal Settlements

The spatial arrangement of tribal hamlets in the hills of Southern Tamil Nadu mirrors the nature-forged, cohesive social organization and ecological responsiveness of these indigenous groups. Every tribal hamlet, although plain looking, comprises different functional areas skillfully planned into the natural landscape to meet practical as well as socio-cultural requirements. Residential houses make up the bulk of the settlement. These huts are usually small in size, made from bamboo, palm fronds, mud, and thatch, and are organized in organic clusters along kinship lines. The individual house typically consists of one multipurpose room, which is used for living, sleeping, and cooking, while there is an open front yard for everyday chores and social gatherings. Granaries or storage facilities for food are inevitable functional areas in tribal colonies, particularly in agricultural tribes such as the Muthuvans. Built on stilts with bamboo and thatching, these houses guard grains and forest products against rats, dampness, and wild animals. Livestock Enclosures, which consist of thorny bushes or bamboo fencing, are usually situated at the edge of the settlement. Tribes that keep goats, hens, or cattle build small enclosures next to their houses or social areas. Craft and Workspaces are open, semi-shaded spaces where activities such as rope making, basket weaving, herbal medicine preparation, and tool making are performed by women and elders in groups. Communal Gathering Areas perform various roles, such as organizing festivals, religious ceremonies, resolutions of disputes, and celebrations of seasons. In Kani settlements, they are generally open areas or sacred groves in the centre inside or close to the settlement. Sacred Spaces and Shrines constitute another important functional element. Forest temples or ritual stones are typically located on the periphery of the settlement, often under very old trees. These areas assume an important role in religious practices, worship of nature, and group rituals. The organization of these functional areas demonstrates a harmonious integration of social requirements, ecological limitations, and cultural orientations, testifying to the tribes' building skills and environmental awareness.

Sacred Spaces and Ritual Structures

The tribal communities of the hill regions in Southern Tamil Nadu possess a rich tradition of sacred spaces and ritual structures, reflecting their profound spiritual connection with nature and ancestral spirits. These sacred spaces are integral to tribal settlements, functioning as sites for worship, healing, communal gatherings, and the reinforcement of social cohesion.

A prominent feature in most tribal settlements is the sacred grove, a protected patch of forest believed to be the dwelling place of deities, guardian spirits, and ancestors. The Kanis, for example, maintain such groves around ancient trees like *Aathi maram* (*Bauhinia racemose*) or *Puliya maram* (*Tamarindus indica*), where rituals are conducted during festivals such as *Kaani Pongal*. Stone structures, known locally as *kallaru*, serve as memorials for ancestors or as shrines for nature

spirits. These may consist of rough-hewn standing stones arranged in specific patterns, sometimes accompanied by offerings of food, flowers, and forest produce.

Temporary ritual platforms constructed from bamboo and thatch are erected during seasonal festivals or ceremonies like harvest rituals and forest deification rites. These structures are typically simple but symbolically significant, often featuring plant motifs and sacred symbols drawn with rice flour. The Paliyans and Muthuvans observe ancestral worship at sacred spots near caves, rock shelters, or large boulders believed to house ancestral spirits. They also maintain forest temples rudimentary open-air shrines where natural elements like trees, rocks, or water bodies are venerated as embodiments of divine power. Pathways leading to sacred sites are often lined with symbolic markers like stone cairns or plant totems, guiding worshippers and demarcating sacred from secular space. These sacred spaces and structures not only fulfil religious functions but also act as vital socio-cultural institutions that preserve tribal identity, ecological ethics, and oral traditions, making them indispensable elements within the architectural and cultural landscape of the region.

Indigenous Architectural Practices

The traditional building practices of the tribal hill people of Southern Tamil Nadu convey a profound ecological consciousness and a symbiotic relationship with nature. The construction techniques, evolved over centuries, are based on functionality, sustainability, and cultural symbolism. The houses are usually constructed with locally available, renewable, and biodegradable resources like bamboo, reed, thatch, palm leaves, mud, and forest wood. The Kanis build straightforward rectangular or oval huts with bamboo frame and thatched roofs of Erumai panai (*Caryota urens*) or Naanal grass. Walls may be woven with bamboo strips and plastered with a cow dung clay mixture for insulation and protection from insects. The Paliyans, who were originally cave dwellers, came later to construct small, domed huts with leaf thatched roofs and mud walls. The houses are fashioned for easy dismantling and shifting according to their semi nomadic practices. The Malasars construct small, rectangular huts with low, sloping roofs to bear the rains of the monsoons. Hardwood and multiple layers of palm leaves are their favourite material for roofing. The Muthuvans have a unique building method, constructing long huts on hill slopes, with stone pillars at the bottom and raised bamboo structures.

Key features of these indigenous architectures

- **Sloping or conical roofs** for efficient rainwater runoff
- **Earthen floors** occasionally treated with cow dung for cooling and insect control
- **Open verandahs** or platforms for social interactions and drying forest produce
- **Granary structures** built on stilts to protect food grains from pests

In addition to residential spaces, these tribes construct **sacred enclosures, forest shrines, and communal halls** for religious rituals, festivals, and meetings. These architectural practices are not merely utilitarian but hold deep cultural and spiritual significance, representing the tribe's connection with their ancestors, deities, and the forest ecosystem.

Material Culture and Eco Architecture

The hill tribes of Southern Tamil Nadu have a material culture, which is distinguished by their skilful and sustainable use of locally present natural resources. Their tools, household implements, buildings, and ritual objects are made from renewable, eco friendly materials, affecting the environment as little as possible. This close affinity to nature is reflected in the day to day life as well as religious practices of these groups. The chief building materials are bamboo, reeds, thatch grass, palm leaves, mud, stones, and hardwood obtained sustainably from the nearby forests. These materials are chosen not just because of their availability but also because they are durable, climatically suitable, and symbolic. For example, the Kanis make wide use of Erumai panai leaves as roofing material, which is thought to be heat-resistant and rainproof. Naanal grass is utilized in wall weaving, with bamboo acting as the primary framework material because it is flexible and strong. Mud and cow dung mixed together are smeared on walls and floors to act as an insecticide and natural insulator. Likewise, Paliyans prefer light materials such as palm leaves and reeds for their easily movable huts, in accordance with their historically nomadic existence. The Malasas and Muthuvans employ robust wood and stone for their more settled dwellings, suited to hilly tracts and heavy monsoon rains.

Changes in Tribal Architecture in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods

The architectural traditions of Southern Tamil Nadu tribal communities, which were once traditionally rooted in indigenous materials, ecological knowledge, and cultural symbolism, were drastically changed in the colonial and post colonial eras. Such changes were initiated by a mix of external intervention, socio-economic change, and government policies that sought to mainstream tribal populations. Under colonial times, forest rules and land revenue systems interfered with the settled ways of hill tribes. Shifting cultivation, forest use, and the harnessing of forest resources were restricted, pushing many tribes to vacate their traditional habitats. The British government sometimes adopted planned settlements in terms of recruitment for labour, particularly for forestry services and plantations, affecting the spatial organization and housing types of tribal societies. In the post-colonial period, state-sponsored welfare programs and tribal development initiatives encouraged the building of 'model houses' out of contemporary materials such as brick, cement, and asbestos sheets. Whereas such developments tried to raise living standards, they frequently overlooked the ecological appropriateness and cultural choice of tribal society. Many traditional building traditions thus fell into disuse, and environment-friendly materials like bamboo, thatch, and mud came to be substituted by industrial alternatives. Moreover, education, migration, road access, and exposure to urban living patterns affected tribal attitudes toward modernity, slowly changing architectural tastes. Classic multi-use spaces were replaced by more divided habitations, and holy space such as groves and woodlands shrines lost ritual significance in various regions. But even with these developments, most of the tribal people still manage to maintain elements of their native building culture, especially in areas that are far and forested. Of late, there has also been increased interest in a return to traditional eco-architecture and its relevance to sustainable development and preservation of cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The hill tribal settlements of Southern Tamil Nadu provide significant information on indigenous knowledge systems, nature-sensitive architecture, and spatial organisation rooted in their cultural heritage. The research informs that the Kanis, Paliyans, Malasars and Muthuvans, among other tribal societies, have traditionally evolved settlement styles and forms of architecture ecologically intertwined with the natural setting and their socio-religious systems. Their utilization of local materials such as bamboo, thatch, mud, and stone, in combination with functional spatial organization for domestic, ritual, and communal affairs, underscores their ecological insight and sustainable practices. Sacred sites like groves, forest shrines, and ancestor stones are very much part of their cultural heritage and spirituality. But colonial policies, land acts, and post-independence development schemes resulted in critical disturbances to customary settlements and building practices. The advent of new materials and organized housing schemes has slowly transformed the native architectural scene. In spite of these alterations, most tribes have continued to maintain elements of their original building traditions, testifying to resilience and resilience. It is imperative that indigenous architectural practices are documented, conserved, and incorporated into modern sustainable development plans. Identification and appreciation of tribal heritage can go a long way towards environmental conservation, preservation of culture, and encouragement of context-dependent rural architecture in India.

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