

## Socio-Cultural Life and Livelihood Practices of the Muthuvan Tribe: An Ethnographic Study in the Kurangani Hills, Tamil Nadu

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### **Abstract**

India is home to a rich diversity of indigenous communities, many of whom have preserved distinct cultural traditions and ecological knowledge systems for centuries. Among these communities, the Muthuvan tribe inhabiting the hill ranges of the Western Ghats represents a unique example of indigenous adaptation to mountainous environments. The present study examines the socio-cultural life, livelihood practices, and gender roles within the Muthuvan tribal community residing in the Kurangani Hills of Tamil Nadu. The research draws upon field observations, oral narratives, and secondary literature related to tribal societies in South India. The findings indicate that the Muthuvan community maintains a close ecological relationship with forest resources and hill agriculture. Their social organization reflects strong kinship bonds, collective decision-making, and traditional leadership structures. Women play a crucial role in economic production, household management, and cultural transmission within the community. However, recent influences of modernization, market forces, and state-led development policies have gradually transformed aspects of their traditional lifestyle. This study highlights the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge while ensuring inclusive development through policy frameworks such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act and international commitments related to indigenous rights and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Tribal Communities, Muthuvan Tribe, Indigenous Culture, Kurangani Hills, Gender Roles, Sustainable Development

## Introduction

India is home to a wide range of indigenous communities whose cultural traditions and livelihood systems have evolved in close interaction with their natural environment. According to the Census of India (2011), the Scheduled Tribe population in India constitutes 8.6 percent of the total population, amounting to more than 104 million people distributed across different ecological regions of the country. Many of these tribal communities inhabit forested and mountainous areas where traditional subsistence practices such as shifting cultivation, forest resource collection, and small-scale agriculture continue to shape their socio-economic life. The Western Ghats region of South India represents one of the most important ecological zones where several tribal communities continue to maintain traditional livelihood systems closely associated with forest ecosystems. These communities possess distinctive cultural traditions, settlement patterns, and indigenous knowledge that have been transmitted across generations. Among them, the Muthuvan Tribe inhabiting the hill regions of Tamil Nadu and Kerala occupies a unique position due to its strong cultural identity and ecological adaptation to mountainous environments. Early ethnographic studies conducted by scholars such as Edgar Thurston and Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf provided detailed descriptions of the social organization, customs, and cultural traditions of tribal communities in South India. Their works highlighted the diversity of tribal societies and emphasized the importance of understanding indigenous institutions within their ecological and historical contexts. Subsequent contributions by Indian scholars further explored issues such as tribal economy, social change, and the relationship between tribal communities and mainstream society. Within this broader framework, the present study focuses on the socio-cultural life and livelihood practices of the Muthuvan tribal community residing in the Kurangani Hills of Tamil Nadu. By examining their settlement patterns, economic activities, gender roles, and cultural traditions, the study seeks to understand how indigenous communities maintain their traditional identity while simultaneously responding to the pressures of modernization and development.

## Review of Literature

The academic study of tribal communities in India has developed through significant contributions from anthropologists, sociologists, and historians who have attempted to document the diverse cultural traditions and social institutions of indigenous groups. Early ethnographic studies provided detailed descriptions of tribal customs, rituals, kinship patterns, and social organization. One of the pioneering works in this field is that of Edgar Thurston, whose classic ethnographic study *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* remains an important reference for understanding the cultural characteristics and social organization of many communities in South India. Similarly, Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf conducted extensive anthropological fieldwork among tribal societies and emphasized the relatively higher social status and social participation enjoyed by women in several tribal communities. Indian scholars have also made important contributions to the understanding of tribal cultures and social change. L. P. Vidyarthi highlighted the ecological relationship between tribal societies and their natural environment and developed the concept of the “sacred complex” in tribal studies. Likewise, S. C. Dube examined the processes of modernization, cultural change, and the interaction between tribal communities and mainstream society. In recent years, several empirical studies have focused specifically on the Muthuvan tribal community of the Western Ghats. For instance, studies have analyzed the relationship between traditional socio-cultural practices and health-related behavior among the Muthuvan community, as well as indigenous knowledge systems and community responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, local researchers in the Theni district have provided vital contemporary insights. Scholars such as Ramya, Sivaselvi, Kausalya, and Maheswaran have collaborated to publish significant data on the tribal people of the region in their work titled *Traditional Walk of the Tribes*. Their documentation reveals that while there are many tribal sects in Tamil Nadu, they are heavily concentrated in areas like Andipatti, Periyakulam, Bodinayakanur, and Kadamaikundu. However, a review of the existing literature reveals that a considerable portion of the research on the Muthuvan community has largely concentrated on settlements located in Kerala, especially in the Munnar region.

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While these studies provide valuable ethnographic insights, comparatively limited scholarly attention has been given to the Muthuvan settlements in the Kurangani hill region of Tamil Nadu. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this research gap by examining the socio-cultural life and livelihood practices of the Muthuvan tribal community in the Kurangani Hills, thereby contributing new field-based insights to the existing body of tribal studies.

## Methodology

The present study was conducted in the Kurangani hill region located near Bodinayakanur in Theni District of Tamil Nadu. Kurangani forms part of the southern ranges of the Western Ghats, a biodiversity-rich mountain system known for its ecological diversity and indigenous tribal settlements. The region is characterized by steep hill slopes, dense forest cover, and plantation-based agriculture. Several tribal communities inhabit the Western Ghats, among which the Muthuvan tribe constitutes an important indigenous group residing in the hill settlements of the Kurangani region. These settlements are generally located in relatively remote areas and maintain close interaction with forest resources and hill agriculture for their livelihood. The geographical isolation of the region has enabled the community to preserve many of its traditional socio-cultural practices and indigenous knowledge systems. The present study adopts a qualitative research design in order to explore the socio-cultural life and livelihood practices of the Muthuvan tribal community. A purposive sampling method was adopted, which allowed the researcher to select respondents who possess relevant knowledge about the community's cultural traditions, occupational practices, and social organization. Through purposive sampling, individuals such as community elders, women, and working members of the settlement were selected for interaction and discussion. The field investigation covered selected Muthuvan tribal settlements located in the Kurangani hills. A total of 20 households were included in the study for detailed observation and interaction. Informal discussions and interviews were conducted with approximately 35 to 60 respondents, including elders, adult men, and women belonging to the community. The fieldwork for the present study was conducted between June 2024 and January

2025. Primary data were collected through direct field observation and informal interviews, while secondary data were collected from books, research articles, government reports, and institutional publications related to tribal studies. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and interpretative methods to present a comprehensive account of the socio-cultural life of the Muthuvan tribe in the Kurangani hill region.

#### **4. Origin and Migration**

The Muthuvan tribe inhabiting the hill regions of the Western Ghats possesses a distinct cultural identity and a strong sense of historical memory preserved through oral traditions. According to community narratives and ethnographic interpretations, the ancestral homeland of the Muthuvans is believed to be the ancient Pandya region, particularly around Madurai in present-day Tamil Nadu. Oral traditions collected during field interactions indicate that their ancestors migrated from the plains to the forested hill tracts of the Western Ghats during a period of political conflict and social disturbance in the Pandya country. The etymology of the term “Muthuvan” has been interpreted in different ways. One explanation derives the word from the Tamil term “muthu,” meaning ancient or old, suggesting that the community represents an ancient lineage. Another explanation is associated with the traditional practice of carrying children and belongings on their backs during migration, which symbolically reflects the community’s historical movement from the plains to the mountainous forests. Some scholars also suggest that the earlier form of the name may have been “Muthukkar,” meaning “those who carry on their backs,” which gradually evolved into the present form “Muthuvan” in spoken usage. Following their migration, the community gradually established settlements in the forested regions of the Western Ghats, particularly in areas that now fall within the boundaries of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Despite geographical dispersion, the Muthuvan community has continued to preserve its traditional practices, language, and cultural identity through collective memory and oral traditions.

## 5. Lifestyle and Settlement Pattern

The lifestyle and settlement pattern of the Muthuvan tribe reflects their close relationship with nature and their historical experience of migration and isolation. The Muthuvans mainly inhabit the hill regions of the Western Ghats, particularly the coffee hills and cardamom hills, where they establish settlements in remote mountainous areas away from mainstream society. Their settlements are usually located several kilometers away from major roads or bus routes, making them difficult for outsiders to access. This pattern of settlement is believed to have developed as a protective strategy after the community migrated to the hills. The Muthuvans live in small huts known as *kudi*, which are constructed using natural materials such as grass and fibre. These huts are simple structures designed for small families, usually without separate rooms, and traditionally they do not have doors, reflecting the strong sense of trust and unity within the community. The huts are not arranged in a regular pattern but are scattered across hills and valleys according to the natural terrain and the preference of the inhabitants.

Traditionally, the Muthuvans depended on forest resources such as honey, roots, and tubers for their livelihood. Over time, due to food scarcity and environmental changes, they began cultivating crops in nearby lands and practicing small-scale agriculture. At present, their livelihood includes collecting forest produce, cultivating small plots of land, and working as labourers in plantations owned by outsiders. Some lands that once belonged to the Muthuvans were gradually transferred to estate owners through monetary transactions, largely due to the community's limited exposure to external economic systems. The social life of the Muthuvan community is traditionally based on cooperation, equality, and collective responsibility, with little distinction between rich and poor. A community leader chosen by the people manages common affairs and resolves disputes within the settlement. The food habits of the Muthuvans have also evolved over time; earlier they consumed roasted tubers and hunted animals, while later they cultivated crops such as millets and pulses. Today their diet includes grains like ragi, millet, and rice obtained through the public distribution system, along with vegetables and meat such as goat, chicken, and hunted animals. Their clothing style has also changed over time. Earlier they used leaves and simple cloth,

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whereas today men wear traditional garments such as dhotis and shirts, while women wear sarees in a distinctive style that allows them to carry children on their backs.

## 6. Occupation and Economy

Occupation plays a vital role in shaping the economic livelihood and social life of the Muthuvan tribe. Traditionally, the occupational practices of the Muthuvans are closely connected with the natural environment of the Western Ghats, where they have lived for generations. Their occupations are diverse and mainly include handicraft production, small-scale agriculture, plantation labour, collection of forest products such as tubers and honey, and limited trade. Living in close harmony with nature, the Muthuvans utilize forest resources to produce many items required for their daily life. They weave baskets, winnowing trays (*muram*), mats, and fishing nets using bamboo and mountain fibres such as *eetha* fibre. These handicrafts are usually produced for household use rather than for commercial sale and therefore emphasize practicality and durability rather than decoration. They also manufacture musical instruments used during rituals and festivals, such as the *Urumi Kattai*, made by hollowing wood and covering it with animal skin. In addition, the Muthuvans build their own huts using forest materials, demonstrating their traditional knowledge of indigenous construction techniques.

Agriculture is another important livelihood activity. The community cultivates crops such as tomato, brinjal, beans, garlic, ginger, and other vegetables, and in some areas they grow paddy using water from nearby streams for irrigation. They also cultivate grains such as millets, *varagu*, *samai*, and *cholam*, while a few families maintain small cardamom and coffee plantations. Forest resources continue to play a crucial role in their subsistence economy. Tubers collected from the forest serve as an important food source for several months of the year, while women regularly collect firewood for domestic use. Due to historical developments such as forest reservation policies and the expansion of plantation agriculture, many Muthuvans have also become wage labourers in nearby coffee and cardamom estates, where they work in activities such as harvesting, weeding, and pruning. Honey collection remains one of their traditional skills, involving the use of smoke and ropes made

from forest creepers to gather honey from cliffs and trees. While most handicrafts are not produced for sale, honey and certain agricultural products such as garlic, ginger, coffee, and cardamom may be sold in nearby markets. Hunting, which was once an important activity among Muthuvan men for protection and food, has significantly declined due to wildlife protection laws, though small animals may still occasionally be trapped for consumption.

## **7. Rituals, Religious Beliefs, and Festivals**

The ritual and religious life of the Muthuvan tribe reflects their simple social organization, strong communal values, and deep connection with nature. Life-cycle ceremonies such as childbirth, puberty, marriage, and death are performed in modest ways within the settlement. Childbirth usually takes place in a separate hut with the assistance of women from the community, and the mother and child remain in seclusion for about thirty days before a small ritual meal is organised by the maternal uncle. Children are named after deities and ear piercing is performed in early childhood. When a girl attains puberty, she is kept in temporary seclusion for a few days before being ceremonially brought back to the settlement. Marriage among the Muthuvans is generally based on mutual consent rather than arranged by parents, and symbolic gifts such as bangles or sarees represent marital union. Widow remarriage is permitted, and the community largely follows a monogamous system. In earlier times, unmarried youth stayed in separate dormitories that helped maintain social discipline and communal interaction. Funeral practices are also simple; the deceased are buried, and ritual meals are conducted on the second and thirtieth days after death.

Religious beliefs occupy an important place in Muthuvan society. The community worships both major Hindu deities and local guardian spirits, with Murugan regarded as the principal deity. Other deities such as Veera Sankara Rayaru, Mupporulu, Tharan Thambiran, Meenakshi Amman, Bhadrakali, and Mariamman are also venerated. Worship is usually conducted in small temples or temporary shrines within the settlement where pictures of deities are placed instead of idols. Festivals form an important part of their cultural life, and among them Thai Pongal is the most significant celebration, involving collective cooking, ritual offerings,



music, dance, and communal feasting. Other festivals such as Karthigai Deepam and Chithirai New Year are observed in simpler forms. Ancestor worship and nature worship, particularly prayers for rain and offerings to the Sun, remain integral to their belief system. In recent times, contact with neighbouring towns and participation in external festivals have introduced certain changes, yet the Muthuvan community continues to preserve its traditional rituals, religious beliefs, and collective cultural identity.

### **8. Oral Traditions and Folk Elements**

The oral traditions of the Muthuvan tribe constitute an important part of their cultural heritage and are transmitted from generation to generation through songs, stories, beliefs, and traditional knowledge. Folk expressions among the community include lullabies, ritual songs, love songs, friendship songs, and songs associated with elopement and courtship. These songs reflect various aspects of social life, including affection between lovers, family relationships, and emotional experiences similar to themes found in classical Tamil literature. Lullabies are sung by mothers to soothe children, while ritual songs are performed during ceremonies such as puberty rites. Love songs are sung by men and women to express mutual affection, and some songs also describe the longing and emotional bonds between lovers. In addition to songs, storytelling forms another element of their oral tradition, with simple narratives often told to entertain children. Traditional knowledge of medicine is also preserved through oral transmission, and the community commonly treats illnesses using herbal remedies, roots, and leaves collected from the forest. Various beliefs and magical practices remain part of their worldview, including rituals to ward off evil spirits, protect against wild animals, and interpret omens. The Muthuvans also traditionally calculated time based on lunar phases and agricultural cycles. Although modern influences such as hospitals, calendars, and external cultural contacts have introduced certain changes, many of these oral traditions and folk practices continue to be preserved, reflecting the community's close relationship with nature and its enduring cultural identity.

## 9. Contemporary Challenges and Discussion

Although the Muthuvan community has preserved many aspects of its traditional socio-cultural system, it currently faces several challenges associated with socio-economic change and environmental pressures. One of the major challenges is the gradual transformation of traditional livelihood systems due to restrictions on forest access, environmental regulations, and the expansion of tourism and development activities in the Western Ghats region. Educational opportunities and interaction with mainstream society have created new aspirations among younger generations. While these developments provide opportunities for socio-economic mobility, they also contribute to cultural transformation and, in some cases, the weakening of traditional institutions. The shift from traditional occupations to wage labour and other forms of employment has also altered patterns of community organization and economic cooperation.

During the field investigation, it was observed that the community faces specific logistical and safety hurdles. The lack of indoor sanitation facilities creates a high risk of wildlife conflict during the night, necessitating the implementation of bio-toilets for community safety. Furthermore, children who attend residential schools often face difficulties returning home during holidays; arranging transport like Forest Department Jeeps and maintaining accessible paths are crucial for educational retention. The aspiration of the youth is exemplified by individuals such as Sridevi, who is pursuing higher education and represents the potential for the tribe to participate in administrative governance, such as the IAS. Language preservation represents another significant challenge. As younger members increasingly engage with formal education and urban environments, the transmission of indigenous language and oral traditions within the household becomes more limited. Consequently, community-based initiatives aimed at documenting and promoting traditional knowledge have become increasingly important.

## 10. Conclusion

The findings of the present study reveal that the socio-cultural life of the Muthuvan community in the Kurangani hills reflects a close relationship between

environment, tradition, and community organization. Historical narratives regarding the origin and migration of the Muthuvans indicate that their settlement in the hill regions was closely associated with the search for security, autonomy, and access to forest resources. Over time, the community developed a distinctive cultural system characterized by collective living patterns, strong kinship relations, and a deep dependence on forest-based livelihoods. Traditional institutions such as kinship networks, ritual practices, and oral traditions continue to play a vital role in maintaining social cohesion and cultural identity within the community. At the same time, the study reveals that contemporary socio-economic changes, educational mobility, and increased interaction with mainstream society have introduced new challenges for the preservation of indigenous culture. Policy frameworks and development programmes should adopt a culturally sensitive approach that respects the knowledge systems, traditions, and rights of indigenous communities. Sustainable development strategies must therefore integrate traditional ecological knowledge with modern development initiatives in order to ensure both socio-economic progress and cultural preservation for tribal communities in the Western Ghats.

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