

# Tribes of Yercaud

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## Abstract

Yercaud is a beautiful Hill station situated in the southern part of the Shevaroy ranges in the eastern ghats of Salem District. Yercaud is a serene place with a pleasant, healthy and cool climate. It provides many beautiful vistas and a panoramic view. Hence, Yercaud Hill area is called "Shervaroyan Hills". It is also called *Ooty of the poor*. If Ooty is the *Queen of Hills*, Yercaud is the *Princess*. The original inhabitants of this picturesque hill station are the Malayalis, a Tamil speaking Hindus. Their huts are circular, the walls are made of split bamboo, daubed with clay and conical roof is thickly thatched with grass. Their traditional dress is a turban and a brown kambli which serves the purpose of an overcoat, a rain coat and an umbrella. They possess a bag to carry betel and tobacco, a bill-hook, ground water vessel and a walking stick. Malayali women enjoy equal status with their men. Most of the childbirths takes place at home with the help of an experienced elder woman, in the *taniya gudise*, a separate hut constructed near her house by her brother. There are vaishnavites and Saivaites among the Malayali. They consider the deity Kariraman as their community God. The Malayali tribes in Yercaud are known for their ethical code. It is a well known fact that the tribals are socially, economically, educationally and culturally backward, yet they contribute more to nation by giving importance to their culture.

**Keywords:** Inhabitation, Malayalis, Tattooing, Tribal or Adivasi

## 1. Introduction

The word '*tribal or adivasi*' brings to our mind a picture of half-naked men and women with arrows and spears in their hands, feathers in their heads and speaking an unintelligible language. Their lives often combined with myths of savagery and cannibalism. When majority of the communities in the world kept changing their life-styles, competed with each other and developed materialistic instincts to keep pace with the 'progress' of the world there were communities still living in line with their traditional values, customs and beliefs [1].

India has the second largest tribal population of the world. Different regions have different administrative history due to different administrative structures. Pre-independence tribals were living in forests and hills. The status of tribals was unsatisfactory during princely and colonial regime, as a policy of neglect and saga of exploitation. Due to this, their land and forests were

slowly and gradually grabbed by the rich people like landlords and money lenders. They were turned into bonded labourers, leading a life of extreme poverty and misery. The excessive encroachment on their rights in land and forest led to be an expression of anger in the form of risings. Thus, independent India inherited from the British colonial system 'a complex tribal problem' in view of the objectives of justice, socio, economic and political equality of status and opportunities as enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution [2].

Tamil Nadu has a large majority of Scheduled tribes in the hills like Jawadhu and Yelagiri hills of Thiruvannamalai, the Kalrayan hills of Vellore district, the Pachamalai, Kollimalai and Yercaud of Salem District, Anaimalai of Coimbatore District, Sitteri hills of Dharmapuri and Palani of Madurai District. Salem has the highest proportion of tribes because of the existence of many mountainous regions which are suitable for their inhabitation [3].

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Yercaud which means "*Lake Forest*" derives its name from the two Tamil words, '*Eri-Lake*' and Kadu-Forest respectively. In 1825, M.D. Cockburn, the then collector of Salem District built the first hut on the hills and planted coffee. Hence, Cockburn was called as the *Father of Yercaud*. The original inhabitants of this picturesque hill station are the Malayalis, a Tamil speaking Hindus [5]. Their huts are circular, the walls are made of split bamboo, daubed with clay and conical roof is thickly thatched with grass. The thatching material is mostly on kambu straw, paddy straw, cholam stalks, palmyra leaves and coconut keeths. Most of the Malayali tribes live in nuclear family.

Their traditional dress is a turban and a brown kambli which serves the purpose of an overcoat, a rain coat and an umbrella. Men and women generally wear two yard long dhoti to cover their body from the chest down wear. They possess a bag to carry betel and tobacco, a bill-hook, ground water vessel and a walking stick [6]. But with the spread of literacy and the increasing contacts with the people of the plains many of the hill tribes have adopted the dress style of the plains men. Among women draping saree is the common mode of dress.

The Malayali are non-vegetarian, who eat pork but not beef or buffalo meat. Their staple food is millets like colam, kambu and samai. Occasionally they consume rice and ragi. Their delicacy is chendhu kazhi, which they prepare on festive occasions by mixing colam and rice flour and boiling it with jaggery. They habitually take alcoholic drinks, such as sarayam and kallu. The women also drink liquor on festive occasions [7]. The men are fond of smoking beedis and loose tobacco and use snuff, while the women chew betel.

The art of tattooing is practice among the Malayali tribes. Though tattooing started as a personal adornment, in course of time, it seems to have acquired social and religious significance. The tattoo experts are well rewarded usually in kind with rice and meat [8].

The marriage customs of the Malayalis differ from those of the plains. The betrothal contract is settled in the presence of *Ur-Kavundan*. The preliminary *nalangu* is performed on Sundays. The *Pandals* erected at the house of both bride and bridegroom on Wednesday and the *Muhurtham* takes place at the bride's house on Thursday. Divorce is permitted with the consent of the Kula panchayat at a public ceremony. Either spouse can initiate divorce proceedings, but compensation is given to the aggrieved party. If a woman is responsible for the divorce, she has to give back the *thali* to her divorced husband. Children are the responsibility of the father in divorce cases. A divorced woman can marry any person within the community under the *maru kannalam* custom [9].

Malayali women enjoy equal status with their men. Though they do not have any rights over ancestral property, they participate in all the social, ritual and religious activities along with the men. They have decision-making powers and participate actively in economic activities.

Malayali women are taken to their natal home for the first and second deliveries, during the seventh month. Most of the childbirths take place at home with the help of an experienced elder woman, in the *taniya gudise*, a separate hut constructed near her house by her brother. The pollution period ends on the seventh day after birth. On that day, the mother and the child are brought home after a bath and the delivery hut is dismantled. The naming ceremony takes place on the seventh day at the child's father's house [10]. On the same day, they celebrate the *arana kayaru* ceremony in which a thread is tied around the child's waist.

The Malayalis are mainly a land-owning community. Earlier, they practised shifting cultivation, but now they have become settled agriculturists. They grow samai, kambu, varagu, cholam, paddy, ragi, groundnut and pulses. They have also started to grow sugarcane and mulberry together with fruit trees and vegetables. They grew tamarind, jack, guava, pomegranate, mango, lemon, coconut and plantain trees.

The Malayalis worship both *Siva and Vishnu* impartially and they wear both *namam and vibhuti*. They still consider the deity Kariraman as their community God. They also worship village gods and goddess such as Dharmaraja, Ayyanar, Karuppan,

Polerappan, Perumalappan, Velayudappan, Tirupatisamy, Vedappah and Siva and goddesses such as Ittukamman, Kalamman, Podariamman, Kallipaavai, Mariamman, Kateeramman and Kannimar [11]. They observe all Hindu festivals such as Tamil New Year's Day, Karthigai Deepam, Pongal, 18<sup>th</sup> of Adi and Sivaratri.

## 2. Conclusion

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The Malayali tribes of Yercaud in Shervaroy Hills are known for their ethical code. It is a well known fact that the tribals are socially, economically, educationally and culturally backward, yet they contribute more to nation by giving importance to their culture. The government has introduced many welfare schemes and facilities for the upliftment of the tribals but still gave the top most priority to their old traditions, culture and rituals

## 3. References

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