

# Karimpalas- A Distinct Ethnic Minorities of Northern Kerala

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## Abstract

According to 2001 Census, the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of Kerala state is 364,189, which is just 1.14% of the total population of the state. The decadal growth rate of ST population during 1991-2001 at 13.5% was 4.1% higher than the growth of the total population. Kerala has a total of 35 scheduled tribes enumerated by Census 2001. Kerala's ST population is overwhelmingly rural. Wayanad district has the highest ST population (17.4%) followed by Idukki (14%). Alappuzha has the lowest population of STs (0.1%), preceded by Thrissur, Kollam, and Kozhikkode and Kannur (0.2% each, out of the thirty five scheduled tribes notified for the state. The study Karimpalas- A Distinct Ethnic minorities of Northern Kerala is focused on the features of tribal culture of Karimpala community in northern Kerala especially in Kannur District. The study also analysed their cultural transformation from ancient to the present decade and how they are different from other tribals in Kerala.

## Key words:

Karimpalas, Pothukothal, Kavalkaran, Chittari, Polikal, Chural koodu, Kuduma, Kulam, Illam, Neethipalakan, Tarawad, Kooliyattam, Mangalam, Kanam

The tribal people of India are called "Sched-

uled Tribes" in the Indian Constitution. The designation, invented by the British, covers somewhat arbitrarily 255 ethnic communities which are economically and socially least advanced and is the earliest inhabitants of India. Most Indians consider the tribal communities, which live in isolated and self-contained communities as wholly distinct from them culturally and ethnically. They are right and wrong at the same time: culturally, Scheduled Tribes and Castes are distinct from the plainspeople; ethnically, they are not. Mostly, these aboriginal tribes and castes are less Aryan or totally non-Aryan, for they are predominantly Dravidians<sup>1</sup>. Most of the tribes of Kerala state belong to the group of Dravidians; they have got similar traits and body stature. In fact these tribes of Kerala have dark complexion and are quite short in height. They are also well built with flat nose. The tribal people of Kerala grow their hair long and tie it in hair locks.

Cultural exuberances of these tribes of Kerala are rightly being highlighted in diverse aspects. House building, rituals, norms bore resemblance to the tradition and ethnicity of the tribal culture. Majority of these tribes make their settlements in the dense forest grounds and also on the top of the mountains. The houses of these tribes of Kera-

<sup>1</sup>. Tribal Development Plan, 2011, p.2

la are closely built so that they can depend on one other and thus maintain cordial relations.

The tribal group of people who live in a particular area, often under a tribal chief followed the same race, custom, language etc. After the colonisation, the British officers had considered the wide census to the whole areas of India and they categorized the people in to scheduled caste, scheduled tribe and other backward classes etc. After the independence, the tribal communities were grouped together as scheduled tribes, under the constitution of India. The scheduled tribes are mainly seen in relatively isolated habit at like desert area, plain and islands and inn forest area etc.<sup>2</sup> They were considered as the 'real owners' of the forest land.

Karimpalas settled in northern Kerala especially Kannur, and some part of Kozhikode, Wayanad and Kasaragod District. They can be found scattered in Alakkode, Udayagiri, Eruvessi, Chapparapadavu, Chengalayi, Naduvil, Padiyur-kalyad, Payyavoor, Ulikkal, Sreekandapuram, Iritty, Aralam regions of Thalasseri and Taliparamba taluks in Kannur district. There is no much evidence available on the origin of Karimpala. Hence it is difficult to explicate the origin of Karimpalas. The tradition behind the origin was closely associated with Lord Siva. According to the legends during the epic period when Siva and Parvathi visited forest for meditation, a man called Nair served them by giving milk to them. One day for testing Nair, Krishna appeared in the incarnation of a beautiful lady when he was boiling the milk and the whole milk and vessel got burned. Frustrated by the carelessness of Nair, Siva cursed him that there after he and his generation will be known by the name Karimpala<sup>3</sup>. But this story can be interpreted only as a tool of Karimpala's to defend the caste inferiority in them. It is also believed that the origin of the name may be due to their black complexion<sup>4</sup> or may be dueto traditional occupation of making Kari which means charcoal. Another concept says that the name of Karimpala means the 'protector of the land' as the word *Kari*

also means land and palan means protector<sup>5</sup>. So this concept can be argued as the most reliable one compared to the other concepts behind the origin of the word Karimpala.

Tribal economies are characterized by dependence on forest and the ecological niche, a resource, a source of living and food supply. So the tribal areas are conterminous with hilly and forested regions. The tribals of Kerala do not generally stick on to any one particular occupation alone. In fact, they usually change their occupation from one to another depending upon the availability of employment. However, they are generally absorbed in the agricultural field and in addition to it they practiced fishing and collection of forest goods. They consume all varieties of pulses, vegetables, roots and tubers. The pattern of Karimpala house is multi roomed. The walls are thickly covered with mud and cow dung and the roof thatched with grass like *odappullu*, *tharivappullu*, *palm* etc.

Traditionally, tribal cultivators practised shifting cultivation. However, deforestation, construction of dams, hydro-electric projects and introduction of commercial plantations and so on, forced them to cease the method of shifting cultivation. But in the ancient period it can be seen that shifting cultivation was an important source of livelihood. They cultivated in a land and after a period of cultivation they move on to other places. They cultivated various varieties of paddy like *chenell*, *cherulari*, *chooppayilnell*, *koyaram*, *pakayima* and other cereals like *tina*, *corn*, *muthari*, etc. and followed many rituals in related to the practice of agriculture such as *valakalsam*, *moorchakalasangam*, *putharikalasangam*. In spite of this Karimpala community has their own style of performing shifting cultivation. For the cultivating purpose of every year they moved from one place to another. Every time, they cleared the forest land by cutting and burning the trees of the area. In shifting cultivation, they followed certain methods such as *pothukothal*, *vithuvithakal*, *kaval*, *polikal*, *puthariyunu*, *pothithookal* etc.

<sup>2</sup> S.K.Tiwari, *Antiquity of Indian tribes*, 1988,p.6

<sup>3</sup> Personal interview with Kottiyil Kunhiraman, Mundanoor 13-

<sup>4</sup> Netloor P Damodaran, *Adivasikalude Keralam*, 2003,p.80

<sup>5</sup> A.A.D. Luiz, *Tribes of Kerala*, 1962,p.82

*Pothukothal* is a ritual done before clearing the forest land. The owner of the cultivation is responsible to lead the ritual of *pothukoth*. To perform the ritual, they select an area of forest land and clear the forest land in square shape in the measurement of the size of the *paramba*, meaning bamboo mat. After this they plant a wood stick in the middle of the cleared square and by parting the wood stick in the insert a paddy shaping inside the stick<sup>6</sup>. This might have been done to ensure their ownership on the land.

There are several folk traditions related with shifting cultivation

*Irumpulla nattile kannan irumpinu pokunnu  
urukkulla nattile kannan urakkinu pokunnu  
irumpum urukkum vangi porunnu kannanum.*

The poem says that a man called Kunjikanan gives iron and steel metal to a black smith which he buys it from a village where metals are available. These metals are mainly used for clearing the forest. From this we cannot infer that Karimpalas life is just limited within the boundaries of the forest. They know much about the technological advancements of using iron is the best tool for agrarian sector. In this way the Karimpalas enriched their status of the self sufficient society to self dependent society. After the *pothukoth* ceremony Karimpalas scoop the land and sow the seeds. This is done as a ceremony called *elivithu-vithakal*<sup>7</sup>. In this ceremony hymns to protect the attack of rats and insects are chanted and some seeds are sown in the forest for other creatures.

*Kikirimala ponam kannan panthalu pakunnu  
Panthala paki kannan kavalu thudangiyallo  
Kooki vilichu kannan kavalu thudangiyallo  
Kooki vilichu kannan kidannulla neramanu....*

The folk song reveals that Karimpalas faced the challenge of wild animals and to protect their cultivation from these animals they followed a system '*kaval*'. This means '*protect*'. The one who performs the system is called '*kavalkaran*' which means "*protector*". The songs explain the picture of

*kavalkaran* sitting under a shed and threatening away animals. At the time of harvesting they conducted the *polikal* ceremony. As part of the ceremony the word '*poli*' is recited again and again. Karimpalas believed that bringing paddy plant at better suitable time will help them to enrich the prosperity of the house<sup>8</sup>. They celebrate the completion of harvesting by conducting '*puthariyunu*' that preparation of food with the new rice of the harvested<sup>9</sup>. Preservation and storage of rice as a precaution for famine is done through a ritual called the *pothi thookkal*. Karimpalas stored rice in *pothi*. *Pothis* are made out of special kind of *narayan valli*<sup>10</sup>. By counting the number of these *pothis* Karimpalas calculate the area of land they have cultivated. For example *pothu pothi pad punam, ahpattu pothipad punam, etc.*

*Chittari* is a bigger storage structure made with a foundation of root, wall wood and roofs with teak leaves. The cultivated paddies were stored in *chittari* and were equally distributed to all in the society. With the emergence of *jenmi* system, the period of *punnam chittari* came to an end. From then onwards, Karimpalas were forced to pay taxes for cultivation which marked the beginning the degradation of Karimpala tribes<sup>11</sup>. The emergence of feudalism severely affected the existing system of social structure.

Hunting is one of the most important activities of Karimpalas and they were expert in hunting. The main weapons for hunting consist of bow and arrow. The Karimpalas had great respect towards forest. It was due to this reason that they performed various rituals like singing hunting songs, *nayattunritham*, and *erachicalasm*, which was a symbol of asking permission to *athikottuthappan*, *karithakaringadi*, and *muthappan*-their traditional god and goddesses-before they engaged themselves in hunting. They went to forest alone with their own domesticated animals. The community had followed several hunting songs which are reflected in their traditional hunting methods<sup>12</sup>. M V Vishnu Nambutiri in his

<sup>6</sup> M.J.Jose, *Karimpalarude Nadodi Samskritham, Unpublished PhD thesis, 1994, p.286.*

<sup>7</sup> Personal interview with kunhikannan

<sup>8</sup> M.J.Jose, *Karimpalarude Nadodi Samskritham, Unpublished PhD thesis, 1994, p.287.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid., p.290*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid., p.292*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid., p.293*

*work folklore* can be explained that these hunting songs are the main source of information regarding the Karimpalas community. The work also specifies the importance of dogs along with the other tools for hunting like stones, bows and arrows.

*Nayillathenthinu bala ni.....  
Kattil pokunnu tiki tai.....*

These are the lines to convey the information about the techniques of hunting used by Karimpalas. The songs also explain the figure of a hunter going for hunting to Ezhimala and Cheevetimala with bows and arrows and different types of dogs. After hunting a portion of the hunt would be offered to the deities of the chase and the rest is for the hunters. The remaining portion of the animal was divided among the group. The physical fitness of the hunters and dog is ensured. Thus gradual changes in the periods reflected in their materialistic life. Slowly they began to make connection with people outside forest. As a result of this, modern equipment like guns were introduced in their hunting. Though the hunting practice still exists in their society, it is very limited or even absent because of the new forest policy of the government (nationalisation of forest in 1974. Hunting was banned in Kerala state). It affected the traditional practices of hunting. So hunting and collection of forest products are slowly dying out.

Fishing is another means of livelihood. Various methods are used for fishing from rivers and ponds. chural koodu or koramsa is equivalent for fishing made by bamboo. Its structure is such that when the fishes enter in to their trap it can't escape. Another prevalent method is by poison certain area of river or pond by *nanchu*. After some time, the fishes will float on the river surface through the effect of the poison. This poison was made by mixing roots, fruits and leaves of certain plants in a definite proportion. If *nanchu* is not prepared in the actual way it may either make the attempt of drowsing the fish a failure or may affect the life of the other species in the river. Fishing songs performed on the occasion of fishing are also seen

among the karimpala songs.

*Keeliyadukodum kayathil ponemenkil  
Pandiyllathe poykooda  
Pandiymel kattukam perum keti  
Koliyadu kodum kayam kalakkunnundu*

These lines explicate the fishing style of Karimpala community in the areas of Kolayadu River. The song also notified various names of the fishes like *korumeen*, *pameen*, *irumeen*, etc. By fishing of Karimpala were using pandi or changadam for applying *nanchu*<sup>13</sup> in the deep areas of the river. Different tribal communities use different names to denote their houses. Generally, the tribal houses are known as '*Chalaa*', '*Chiittaries*' and '*Kudies*'. In the past, the tribal huts were made of bamboo and thatched with leaves, straw or grass. But, after the introduction of housing schemes to the tribal communities the traditional method of houses has radically changed. The government provided houses and constructed on the basis of plans and estimate. Nevertheless, it can be observed that the huts constructed by the tribal's without government aids follow the traditional methods and form.

The language, life style and religious practices of these classes are entirely different from those of other tribal communities in Kerala. The dressing pattern of Karimpala communities dressing pattern is different from others. Traditionally the Karimpala women do not wear blouse; instead of they wear a piece of cloth as a *thorth*. Men and women do not cut their hair. Men used to tie their hair in a particular style known as *kuduma*. Women used ornaments like ear rings, bangles, necklace etc. They were highly fascinated by ornament. The men use golden stud known as *kadukka*.

The Karimpala community followed a kinship relation. Each had its own kulams which is based on blood relation. They used different names to denote their houses. The houses were commonly known as *illams* like monnattikath moonnikkar, Nalattanakath Nalillakkar, Anchatinakath Anchillakkar, Aradekam pad Arillakkar,

<sup>12</sup> M.J. Jose, *Karimpalar*, 2003 p.81.

<sup>13</sup> Is a traditional fishing practices in Kerala, they applied a poisoned form of medicine in the water

Ezhadakam ezhillakkar etc. Under the *illam* they have several tharavad such as chappili, kalla, pran, chambili, kanna, pulikkiri, karna, thoyan, pallathu, puthusseri, vallipatta, choriyatta, kottanchira<sup>14</sup>.

Family is the ultimate unit of their social organization and most of them followed the joint family system. The eldest male member of the family was known as *karnavar* or *mooppan* who is the authority in all matters and who looks after the family and the affairs of the family. *Jenmari* and *thalayadiyan* are titles enjoyed by the person who are just below the rank of *karnavar*. The *jenmari* controlled the law and justice of the entire group. The *jenmari* is otherwise known as *neethipalakan*. The *thalayadiyan* the recognized group among the *Karimpalas* controlled most of the land whose main duty is to control the labours of the land. The wife of *karnavar* supervises the household activities. She keeps up the food supplies and looks after the children and cooking arrangement.

During this period the traditional system of family life underwent a total change and they followed nuclear family system. The *Karimpalas* followed the matrilineal system of inheritance. Succession is through nephews. A significant aspect is that the property is inherited through matrilineal lineage. These special privileges are now only nominal and in practice, dealing related to property is controlled by the male themselves. But the new system of *marumakkathayam* does not exist and the right on property is transferred directly from the parent to the children<sup>15</sup>.

The tribal communities follow many rituals and ceremonies in relation to birth, death, puberty, marriage etc. The first delivery of a woman is at her uncle's house, in a secluded hut which is situated in almost every house. Every *tarawad* has a mid-wife known as *vetty*. At the age of five, the child is either send to school or made to look after the paddy kept to dry. The child is given such minor jobs at home. They are given some other jobs only after ten years<sup>16</sup>.

The ear boring ceremony is practiced

around the age of seven. Both boys and girl bore their ear. Ear is bored with sharpened bamboo sticks after making a mark with ash. After this there will be a feast which is served in the plantain leaf<sup>17</sup>. There are some rituals conducted when a girl attain puberty. It is called "*thirattu mangalam*" or *mudilu kettu mangalam*. She has to live in a secluded hut for seven days. On the seventh day she goes to the stream for bathing. During this time the other women conducted the ritual *vettilla ozhukkal*. For this ceremony all the relatives and neighbors are invited by giving them areca nut and betel leaf. After these ceremonial practices she is given new clothes and ornaments to wear.

Women are not allowed to enter the kitchen during the menstrual periods. They are allowed to touch anything at home only after two days. It is also known as ceremonial bath of the menstrual period. A lot of such ceremonies are prevalent in the society. Such practices have not been changed completely. The marriage ceremony of *Karimpala* is known as *mangalam*. When a boy comes with a proposal for marriage, he should approach with areca nut and betel leaf in order to fix a marriage. A boy should be '*kanam*' in order to fix the marriage with the girl<sup>18</sup>. Among the *Karimpala* of *Kannur* district the marriage is conducted at bride's house. Marriage expenses are jointly met. After the *tali* tying ceremony, a feast is served to all invitees. The consumption takes place on the same day at the bride's resident<sup>19</sup>. During the marriage ceremony an oil lamp is hung upon the main pillar "*chithrthoon*" supporting a 'pandal'.

The marriage outside the tribe and within the clan is strictly prohibited. Age difference between the bride and the groom, is not concerned, and some time the bride may be elder than the groom. Divorce is permitted for adequate reason with the permission of *nattu koottam* or tribal council consisting of elder members of the *Karimpala* community. Remarriage is permitted and common in the case of women; the new husband is responsible for looking after the children of pre-

<sup>14</sup> T.J.Austine, *Srimat Karimpala Charitam*, 2000, p. 1

<sup>15</sup> K S Sing, *People of India:Kerala*, 2002, p..584

<sup>16</sup> Personal interview with *Koran*, *Alakkode*, 15-01-12

<sup>17</sup> M.J.Jose, *Karimpala*, 2003.p. 83

<sup>18</sup> Personal interview with *Chammaran*, 18-01-12

<sup>19</sup>M.J. Jose, *Karimpala*, 2003 p. 84-85.

vious marriages.

The funeral ceremony of Karimpala is different from other tribal groups. Funeral ceremony or *chavu adiyanthiram* is performed on the 11th day. On this day offerings are done in the name of the deceased and a feast is given to the invited relatives and friends. There funeral worship is known as *kooliyattam*. They were the strict followers of ancestral worship<sup>20</sup>. Karimpalas also followed their own medicinal practices which are hereditary. They offer treatment for all form of diseases and hundreds of medicinal plants were used for the treatment. They claim to have descended from a common culture, religion, dialect etc and usually occupy a specific geographical area and have a recognized leader.

As per the observations of the anthropologists, these tribes of Kerala have developed ardent faith on religion and spiritualism. They live in groups and depend mostly on nature for all their needs. Almost all the tribes of Kerala follow religion, which is centered a round animism etc. They appeased devils for sickness and calamities. Besides there is a plethora of local gods and goddesses, whom majority of these tribes of Kerala revere and show immense respect and veneration. Worship of Amman or goddess Kali and Ayyan or Ayyappan was quite common. Moreover, there are few tribes of Kerala amongst whom ancestral worship is prevalent. Festivals and fairs are part and parcel of the culture and tradition of these tribes of Kerala. Especially during the festive seasons, the whole population of the tribes of Kerala get enthralled by the music, dance and get engrossed with the mood of frenzy and jubilation.

The Kerala government implanted a lot of programmes for the upliftment of the community and some of them are very much successful in the material condition of these groups. Road, vehicles, electricity, telephone, concrete building, schools, etc are constructed by the government

in their habitat. Most of the present generation are educated and they enter in to government services, private sector and even politics. The Panchayat Raj system and tribal welfare activities helped them to improve their livelihood. New the educated generations are not ready to accept their traditional way of practices. At present the Karimpalas have lost their traditional way of livelihood and it becomes a part of this modern world.

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<sup>18</sup>M.J. Jose, *Karimpala*, 2003 p. 84-85.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid* .,p. 5-6