

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE KATTUNAYAKKA TRIBE IN THENILGIRI DISTRICT: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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Abstract

The Kattunayakkas, designated as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), represent one of the most ancient indigenous communities inhabiting the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve in Tamil Nadu. This historical study examines the socio-cultural heritage of the Kattunayakka tribe, tracing their evolution from traditional hunter-gatherers to their current marginalised status within a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. Drawing upon colonial ethnographic records, anthropological studies, and contemporary research, this paper explores the intricate relationship between the Kattunayakkas and their forest environment, their unique knowledge systems, material culture, social organisation, and the ontological frameworks that underpin their identity as "lords of the forest". The study argues that Kattunayakka heritage represents not merely a collection of cultural artefacts but an integrated ecological epistemology that has sustained both the community and the forest ecosystem for centuries. By documenting their traditional practices from honey harvesting protocols to indigenous healing systems this paper contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage while critically examining the historical forces of colonialism, postcolonial forest policies, and modern development that have disrupted their traditional life ways. The findings underscore the urgent need for culturally sensitive development approaches that recognise the intrinsic value of Kattunayakka knowledge systems for both cultural preservation and biodiversity conservation.

Keywords: *Kattunayakka, Nilgiri District, PVTG, hunter-gatherers, socio-cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, forest ecology, honey harvesting, indigenous healing, cultural preservation, environmental anthropology*

Introduction

The Nilgiri hills of Tamil Nadu constitute one of the most culturally diverse regions in the Indian subcontinent, harbouring several Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) including the Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyas, and the Kattunayakkas. Among these communities, the Kattunayakkas occupy a distinctive position as traditional hunter-gatherers whose identity remains inextricably linked to the forest ecosystems of the Western Ghats. Their very name derived from the Malayalam words kadu (forest) and nayakan (leader or chief) signifies their self-perception and historical status as "lords of the forest".

Numbering approximately 1,629 individuals across 452 households in the Nilgiris district, with settlements concentrated in the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks, the Kattunayakkas represent one of the smallest and most vulnerable tribal communities in the region. Despite their numerical insignificance, their cultural heritage offers profound insights into sustainable human-environment relationships, indigenous knowledge systems, and the historical processes that have shaped tribal communities in South India.

This historical study seeks to accomplish three interconnected objectives. First, it aims to document and analyse the socio-cultural heritage of the Kattunayakkas, encompassing their material culture, social organisation, economic practices, belief systems, and ecological knowledge. Second, it traces the historical trajectory of the community from pre-colonial

times through the colonial period to the post-independence era, examining the impact of external forces on their traditional lifeways. Third, it contributes to the broader discourse on indigenous heritage preservation by highlighting the relevance of Kattunayakka knowledge systems for contemporary environmental and cultural conservation efforts.

The significance of this study extends beyond mere documentation. As the Kattunayakkas face increasing pressure from deforestation, restrictive forest policies, displacement, and socio-economic marginalisation, their traditional knowledge and cultural practices are at risk of irreversible loss. By bringing their heritage into academic discourse, this paper aims to support preservation efforts while challenging the dominant narratives that have historically marginalised indigenous communities.

Historical and Ethnographic Background

Early Colonial Accounts

The earliest documented references to the Kattunayakkas (or related communities) appear in the travelogues and administrative records of British colonial officials during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Francis Buchanan, in his account of 1807, provided one of the first descriptions of the Kurumbasa broader category under which the Kattunayakkas were often subsumed. Buchanan distinguished between two Kurumba sections: the Cad Curubaru (Kadu Kurumbas) and the Betta Curubaru. He described the former as "a rude tribe that were extremely poor and wretched," who worked as daily labourers or collected wild yam roots from the forest for subsistence.

Abbé J.A. Dubois, writing in 1897, reinforced the colonial perception of these forest-dwelling communities as "savages," noting their nomadic lifestyle and their practice of shifting cultivation. Significantly, Dubois was among the first to document the widespread fear of Kadu Kurumba sorcery among neighbouring communities a theme that would recur persistently in subsequent ethnographic literature. This portrayal of the Kattunayakkas as practitioners of sorcery served to justify their marginalisation while simultaneously constructing an image of the tribe as both dangerous and primitive.

Aiyappan, writing in 1948, described the Kattunayakkas as a "very vile and backward, Kanarese speaking tribe," noting their consumption of monkey flesh a practice that distinguished them from the Jenu Kurumbas, who were primarily honey collectors. Such ethnographic characterisations, framed within the colonial civilisational discourse, established a template for understanding tribal communities as "backward" and in need of reform, a perspective that would continue to shape administrative approaches well into the post-independence period.

The Question of Origins

The origins of the Kattunayakkas remain a subject of scholarly inquiry. M. Cyril Nayagam's study on the origin of the Kattunayakas of Nilgiris, published in 1996, presents an account that traces connections between various seemingly distinct tribes in South India, attempting to identify the so-called Pariahs of Southern India and their relationship to other communities. While the precise origins of the Kattunayakkas remain debated, linguistic

evidence suggests that their language, referred to as nama basha ("our language" in Kattunayakka), belongs to the South Dravidian family. It incorporates elements of Kannada, Malayalam, and Tamil, with Kannada predominating, though the dialect remains barely intelligible to Kannada speakers.

The complexity of Kattunayakka identity is further illuminated by Nurit Bird-David's seminal work on the "social life of an ethnonym." Bird-David observes that the Kattunayakkas call themselves *sonta* (meaning "own, relatives who live together"), usually prefixed by *nama* (our), while outsiders neighbours in the multi-ethnic region, colonial and postcolonial administrators have regarded them by various ethnonyms including *Nayaka* and *Kattunayaka*. This distinction between self-designation and externally imposed identity reflects the broader politics of indigenous identity construction in India, where colonial and postcolonial categories have often obscured the complex reality of community self-understanding.

Material Culture and Livelihood Patterns

Traditional Economy: Hunting and Gathering

The traditional economy of the Kattunayakkas was centred on hunting and gathering, with forest resources providing food, drink, shelter, and non-consumable articles for their livelihood. Their primary occupation involved hunting and gathering for both consumption and trade, with honey being the main collection item, supplemented by forest pepper, cinnamon, tubers, berries, leaves, mushrooms, seeds, and nutmeg.

Their gathering technologies remained deliberately simple: digging sticks and collecting baskets made of bamboo. Significantly, the Kattunayakkas developed a strategy of "less volume, high value" collection, reflecting their sophisticated understanding of forest ecology and sustainable resource use. They established demarcated boundaries within which they foraged, with husbands and wives often leaving together to collect forest produce a practice that reflected both economic necessity and the egalitarian nature of Kattunayakka gender relations.

The Kattunayakkas employed simple but effective technologies for their subsistence activities. They used sharpened sticks and digging sticks for catching jungle lizards and other small animals. For capturing birds, they employed stone pellets and birdlime applied to coloured bamboo sticks. Their hunting practices were supported by trained dogs, with snares and traps used to catch small animals primarily for domestic consumption. The porcupine was a particularly favoured quarry.

Fishing and crab catching, traditionally undertaken by women and children, formed another important subsistence activity. Women used conical baskets to catch fish in ponds and lakes, while crabs were captured by hand from holes alongside paddy fields the Kattunayakkas developing the skill of detecting crabs through the movement of soil at the hole's entrance. An ingenious technique involved tying an insect to a stick placed in front of the hole; when the crab emerged to bite the insect, it was caught using cloth.

Occupational Diversification

The recent introduction of wage labour in plantations has, according to Bird-David's analysis, integrated with traditional economic activities in ways that do not fundamentally disrupt the Kattunayakka economic and social system. The rationale behind this assertion lies in the nature of Kattunayakka work patterns they do not plan their day in advance, combining wage labour with hunting and gathering in a fluid manner. On their way to work in plantations, and even in the course of their work, they occasionally collect forest produce for their own use or for subsequent trade. When they go hunting and gathering, their trails take them through rubber forested areas, coffee plantations, and jungle.

Despite these shifts, the Kattunayakkas' view of the forest remains fundamentally unchanged. Bird-David's analysis distinguishes the Kattunayakka perspective from that of other tribal groups in the region: the Kattunayakkas look upon the forest "as they do on a mother or father" "it is not something "out there" that responds mechanically or passively but, like a parent, it provides food unconditionally to its children. This "forest is parent" view distinguishes them from their neighbours, who hold the view "nature is ancestor," producing different local economic models that Bird-David summarises as "giving environment" for the Kattunayakkas and "reciprocating environment" for other tribal groups.

Material Culture and Domestic Life

The material culture of the Kattunayakkas reflects their adaptation to forest ecology and their history of mobility. Traditional huts are small, flimsy structures erected on sloping ground with no raised basement, with the entrance given at the lowest point. The walls are of bamboo wattle work with mud plastering inside, and the roof is thatched with grass obtained from nearby forests and wetlands.

The household materials found inside a typical Kattunayakka dwelling include bamboo internodes, containers, and plates; aluminium vessels; ropes and threads made from tree reeds and barks; digging sticks (both wood and metal); iron sheet blades; sickles of various sizes; hooked wooden sticks; traps for rats and cats; grass mats; wooden mortars with pestles; grinding stones; ladders and sieves; broomsticks; mud pots; and musical instruments including drums, tambette, and flutes.

Kattunayakka dress, particularly among adult females, traditionally involved a distinctive style where the dress protrudes slightly towards the front, though younger women and girls have begun adopting blouses with dhotis, colored sarees, and modern maxi gowns. Both men and women apply coconut oil to their hair, with women parting it down the middle, tying it into a knot behind, and adorning it with flowers. Both sexes wear brass rings, while women prefer silver bangles and chains made of beads, dry seeds, and old copper coins. Women typically wear earrings, nose rings, neck ornaments, and finger ornaments, with married women additionally wearing toe-rings and anklets.

Food and Dietary Practices

The Kattunayakkas consume all types of non-vegetarian food but strictly avoid beef and the flesh of black monkeys. They are particularly fond of wild boar pork and rats from paddy

fields. Their traditional dish, forming their normal diet, is ragi-kulu (ragi porridge), taken with curries prepared from green leaves, tubers, or non-vegetarian dishes. Honey (ten) is always mixed with their fooda practice that reflects both taste preference and its perceived health benefits.

The Kattunayakkas traditionally have two meals a day. The first meal, taken before noon, consists of rice gruel (kanji) with chutney or other curries depending on available materials. The water portion of the kanji is called kanjiecru. The night meal comprises boiled rice (kulu) with a curry (udukku), vegetable or otherwise. In the morning, they typically take only black tea without sugar. Most roots and tubers are consumed after roasting and boiling. Fish, crabs, and the eggs of certain birds are covered with leaves and baked over the fire, consumed in the forest itself.

Social Organisation and Kinship

Family and Marriage

The Kattunayakkas are a single ethnic endogamous group among the Kadu Kurumba, with three broad social divisions: Mala Naikka, Kattu Naikkan, and Panni Naikkan. These three divisions do not intermarry. The nuclear family, composed of husband, wife, and unmarried children, constitutes the minimum social and economic unit. As soon as a son marries, he establishes a separate house in the settlement practice that has historically contributed to small, dispersed settlements.

The Kattunayakkas are patrilineal, tracing descent through the male line, though post-marital residence is not necessarily patrilocal. The father serves as head of the family; in the case of his death, his wife, if elder to his brother, becomes head of the household. When a person has no children or lacks a male child, he may adopt a boy, preferably his brother's son or one from the same kulam (clan) division.

Marriage prohibitions include parallel cousin marriages, and polygyny is not prohibited, though polyandry is against community norms. The symbols of marriage include bangles, finger rings, toe rings, earrings, nose rings, and a yellow thread tied as a tali. The dowry system is not prevalent among the Kattunayakkas. Divorce is permissible for reasons including female barrenness, chronic sickness, cruelty, and the practice of witchcraft and sorcery. No divorce compensation is given to either party, and either party can initiate divorce. Children, after divorce, become the liability of the father. Widow remarriage is permitted to either party.

A few cases of inter-tribal marriages, particularly with neighbouring Paniyan and Kurumba communities (Betta Kurumbas), have been reported. In such cases, the Kattunayakka boy or girl is barred from attending social and religious functions of the community.

Kinship and Social Hierarchy

Within the Kattunayakka family, hierarchy is minimal, but elders are respected. Certain avoidance relationships exist: between mother-in-law and son-in-law, daughter-in-law and father-in-law, between sisters-in-law (younger), brother's wife and elder brother-in-law, and

husband's elder brother. Joking relationships exist between elder sister-in-law (brother's wife and brother-in-law), husband's younger brother with sister-in-law (wife's elder sister and wife's younger sister), and between grandparents and grandchildren.

The mode of inheritance among the Kattunayakkas is matrilineal, with male equigeniture; property is equally divided among all male children. If there is more than one wife without children, the property is equally shared between them on their husband's death. Male children of a divorced wife are entitled to a share in their deceased father's property.

In the family, male children receive training in various economic activities from their father, while the mother socialises daughters. Kattunayakka women enjoy equal status and play active roles in economic activity, political spheres, and mechanisms of social control, though they have no role in performing rituals or in religious spheres.

Pregnancy and Childbirth

Pregnancy rituals among the Kattunayakkas are relatively simple. First pregnancy gives a woman more social prominence, and pregnant women are anxious to eat roots, tubers, birds, and animals procured from the forest by their husbands. First deliveries typically take place in the mother's parents' house. A corner of the room is arranged with a wooden cot prepared with leaves and bamboo sticks for delivery this room is called hetaerae where a Kattunayakka midwife (aya) attends to the woman.

On the eighth month of pregnancy, the pregnant woman's parents offer gifts of bangles and one shoulder cloth amidst invited relatives, taking her to her husband's house for a two-day stay before she returns to her parents' house. She is warned against walking or going to places frequented by evil spirits. Only women who have children are permitted at the delivery place; childless women are forbidden inside the delivery room. Cow dung, cow urine, and charcoal are kept nearby the delivery cot to ward off ghosts or evil spirits. After delivery, cow urine is sprinkled on the baby to provoke crying, and the mother is given a sweetened decoction of pepper mixed with ginger and tamarind. The mother does not suckle the baby until two days after birth; other Kattunayakka women feed the baby during this period.

As a patrilineal society, the Kattunayakkas exhibit gender discrimination from birth the birth of a son is considered more auspicious and prosperous than the birth of a daughter. Old parents expect sons to take care of them, as daughters go to their husbands' houses. The naming ceremony (Maguhesaru Nalu) takes place in the third month at the child's father's house, where a Kattunayakka priest (Kuladeva) sprinkles medicinal herbal water on mother and child and utters a name in the child's right ear. A non-vegetarian feast is given to close invitees. The first feeding ceremony is performed as a simple ritual when the baby is one year old, and the tonsure ceremony is performed after nineteen months of delivery.

Ecological Knowledge and Traditional Practices

Honey Harvesting and the "Pact" with Nature

Among the Kattunayakkas, honey harvesting is elevated from a mere economic activity to a sacred ecological practice underpinned by a profound ethical framework. The Kattunayakka

relationship with bees, bears, and trees is conceptualised as a "pact" or agreement, centuries old, that ensures mutual benefit and ecological harmony.

According to Kattunayakka oral tradition, the bee first approaches a tree and asks permission to build a hive, seeking assurance that the tree agrees to host thousands of bees. The bee then asks whether the tree permits both bears and finally Kattunayakkas to climb its branches to take honey. Only after the tree gives its consent does the bee build its hive. This explains, in Kattunayakka epistemology, why some trees have no hives, some have only one or two, and others host dozens each tree's consent varies.

The Kattunayakkas made a separate agreement with the bears: the bears would not trouble the Kattunayakkas while they collected honey, and in return, the Kattunayakkas would leave the wax for the bears. This is why, traditionally, Kattunayakkas do not bring wax out of the forest but leave it as the bear's share.

Before honey collection, a puja (prayer) is performed to all forest spirits for protection, and to the trees, bees, and bears. The Kattunayakkas ask the trees to forgive them for climbing and promise not to break branches. They ask the bees to forgive them for taking honey but promise not to hurt the young bees or destroy the hive entirely, allowing bees to rebuild. To the bears, they reaffirm their promise to leave the wax. Only after this puja do they proceed to collect honey. The Kattunayakkas believe this is why they do not fall from trees even when climbing very high, why bees do not sting them during collection, and why bears do not attack them because the centuries-old agreement is honoured.

Marigan, a Kattunayakka elder from Chembakolli village, explains that bees communicate through their humming. From different kinds of humming, the Kattunayakkas can tell whether bees are angry, playing with their young and teaching them to fly, happy because they have found many flowers, or going home after a day's work. The bees' humming tells the Kattunayakkas where they have built their hives, and the Kattunayakkas visit only when they are sure the bees have made all the honey they can and there is a little extra.

This ecological epistemology is now threatened by pesticide use in tea and coffee plantations. As Marigan observes, while he never saw a dead bee as a child, dead bees are now commonly seen. Chemical pesticides sprayed on weeds that have flowers providing pollen for bees cause the bees to die. The Kattunayakkas now sell their wild honey under the name "THE THIRD SHARE" one share for the bees and nature, one share for the Kattunayakkas, and only the third share available for buyers.

Indigenous Healing Systems

The Kattunayakkas' healing practices represent a sophisticated system of ethno medicine that has sustained the community for generations. Their reliance on nature for primary medicinal needs stems from their forest-based existence, and their indigenous healing system ensures a healthy life free from disease.

The Kattunayakkas identify and employ numerous medicinal plants for treating common ailments. The healing plants are readily available in the forests and hills of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. Documented medicinal plants and their applications include *Syzgium cumini* (naval) for diabetes, *Centalla asiatica* (vallarai) for memory loss, *Azadirachta indica*

(vembu) for bile-related problems, *Cissus quadrangularis* (pirandai) for gas trouble, *Acalypha indica* (kuppaimeni) for cold disorders, *Abutilon indicum* (simthuthi) for sexually transmitted diseases, and *Thesputia populnea* (poovarasu) for leprosy.

Rajan and colleagues documented nineteen flowering plants belonging to eighteen genera and thirteen families employed for remedial purposes by the Kattunayakkas, with detailed records of local names, ethno medicinal claims, and methods of application. The Kattunayakka pharmacopoeia includes treatments for stomach problems, psoriasis using *Aristolochia*, and various other conditions.

Basketry and Craft Traditions

Basketry, particularly flourishing in certain Kattunayakka settlements like Naaicherry and Ayyankolli, represents a craft tradition inherited from ancestors. The Kattunayakkas use reeds and bamboo logs to make vessels of various configurations and dimensions, both for self-consumption and sale. However, scarcity of raw materials has made them travel long distances into the forest to obtain suitable bamboo and reeds.

The Kattunayakkas' basketry tradition reflects not only their craft skills but also their relationship with forest resources. The raw materials for basketry bamboo and reeds are collected with an understanding of sustainable harvesting practices, ensuring that the forest continues to provide for future generations.

Historical Disruptions and Contemporary Challenges

Colonial Forest Policies

The Kattunayakkas' historical relationship with the forest was fundamentally altered by colonial forest policies enacted in 1865 and 1878, which empowered the government to make decisions on forestry. These policies marked the beginning of the Kattunayakkas' severance from the land they had inhabited for generations. The forest, which had been a source of sustenance and identity, was increasingly redefined as a state resource, subject to state regulation and control. The Kattunayakkas were transformed from independent "lords of the forest" to forest dwellers whose access to resources was mediated by state authorities.

Post-Independence Development and Conservation

Post-independence India inherited and intensified the colonial framework of forest management. The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 prohibited the hunting of wild animals and birds, fundamentally affecting Kattunayakka subsistence practices. While the Kattunayakkas have largely discontinued hunting, they occasionally still go in groups with trained hunting dogs, snares, and traps to catch small animals for domestic consumption. However, the legal prohibition has created significant challenges to their traditional economy.

Conservation policies have created further tensions. In 2023, 20,000 tribes people in Mudumalai faced relocation drives to leave forests exclusively for wild animals. Most Kattunayakkars have refused to shift, rejecting the government-sponsored rehabilitation package of INR 10 lakh per family. Those who accepted the package now feel displaced and misplaced, with many travelling 30-40 kilometres from their new locations to reach the

forests and engage in the only profession they know. Several others who were forced to shift have stopped gathering honey and collecting minor forest products, now working as farmhands.

Socio-Economic Marginalisation

The Kattunayakkas face multiple dimensions of marginalisation. Their small population 1,629 individuals in the Nilgiris renders them particularly vulnerable to demographic pressures and cultural erosion. Economic marginalisation is compounded by their dependence on minor forest products, which are subject to restrictive state regulations. The introduction of wage labour in plantations, while providing an alternative source of income, has not fundamentally resolved economic insecurity.

Socio-economic challenges are further exacerbated by the lack of formal education and limited access to health services. Studies have documented the poor socio-economic conditions, cultural practices, living conditions, and health-seeking behaviours among the Kattunayakkas, highlighting their vulnerability and the need for targeted interventions.

The climate crisis, forest fragmentation, and deforestation have also affected the availability of honey, with restrictions imposed by forest departments on collecting minor forest products. The combination of environmental degradation and state regulation has created a situation of acute vulnerability for the community.

Language and Cultural Erosion

The Kattunayakka language, referred to as nama basha, is facing extinction due to migration, lack of recognition for indigenous languages, dwindling population, and socio-economic factors. Each tribal group in the Nilgiris has a distinct language with unique stories, history, songs, and proverbs that embody elements of culture and tradition that can be expressed only in their language.

Efforts to preserve endangered tribal languages include initiatives such as the "Language Box" installed at a tribal residential school at Semmanarai village near Kotagiri, where tribal students can write words from their language in English or Tamil and drop them in a box. Such efforts, spearheaded by activists like Odiyen Lakshmanan, aim to inculcate a sense of pride among students about their language and improve pronunciation and interest in their native tongue.

Conclusion

The Kattunayakka tribe of the Nilgiri District embodies a rich socio-cultural heritage that has sustained the community and the forest ecosystem for centuries. Their identity as "lords of the forest" is not merely a descriptive designation but encapsulates a worldview that integrates ecological knowledge, social organisation, material culture, and spiritual beliefs into a coherent system of human-environment relations. From their honey harvesting practices to their indigenous healing systems, the Kattunayakkas demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of forest ecology that challenges Western assumptions about indigenous knowledge as "primitive" or unsystematic.

The historical trajectory of the Kattunayakkas illustrates the profound disruption caused by colonial forest policies, post-independence conservation measures, and modern development interventions. From an independent community whose identity was inseparable from the forest, the Kattunayakkas have been transformed into marginalised forest dwellers subject to state regulation and socio-economic pressures. The contemporary challenges they face displacement, economic insecurity, cultural erosion, and language loss represent not only a crisis for the Kattunayakka community but a loss of irreplaceable knowledge for humanity.

The preservation of Kattunayakka heritage requires approaches that recognise the intrinsic value of their knowledge systems for both cultural preservation and biodiversity conservation. Recent proposals for enhancing tribal livelihoods through better school infrastructure, distribution of non-sellable land, and value addition in traditional products offer promising avenues for supporting the community while respecting their cultural identity. As the Kattunayakkas themselves insist through the practice of "The Third Share," sustainable development requires that nature's needs are prioritised alongside human needs a principle that has broader relevance for contemporary environmental challenges.

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