



# Traditions and Practices of the Mudhuvan Tribe in Udumalpet

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Open Access

Manuscript ID: BIJ-2025-OCT-013

Subject: History

Received : 02.09.2025

Accepted : 08.09.2025

Published : 31.10.2025

DOI:10.64938/bijri.v10n1.25.Oct013

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## Abstract

*An in-depth comprehension of a community is achieved through the examination of both ethnography and ethnoarchaeology. In the case of the tribal groups residing in Anamalai, a total of six distinct groups can be identified. Our primary attention is directed towards the Muthuvan settlement, where a well-structured society has been established, characterized by their distinctive customs and traditions. Through ethnography, we gain insight into their current practices, while ethnoarchaeology sheds light on the enduring lithic age practices that continue to persist within their community.*

**Keywords:** Muthuvan , origin , socio cultural status and tribe.

## Introduction

The Anamalai Tiger Reserve, formerly known as Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park, is a vital protected area in Tamil Nadu, India. Situated in the Anamalai Hills, its high montane forest ecosystems significantly influence the Indian monsoon, showcasing an exceptional example of this global weather system. Recognized as one of the world's eight 'hottest hotspots' of biological diversity, the reserve boasts remarkable levels of endemism and is home to at least 325 globally threatened species of flora, fauna, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and fish, representing some of the finest non-equatorial tropical evergreen forests globally. The

Anamalai Tiger Reserve is under consideration by UNESCO for inclusion in The Western Ghats World Heritage Site due to its significant anthropological diversity, housing over 4600 Adivasi people from six indigenous tribes like the Kadar, Muthuvar, and Malai Malasars, in 34 settlements. While historically hunter-gatherers, these communities now live in sedentary units within the sanctuary, as detailed in M. Chandi's 2008 work on their livelihood and resource-use patterns.

## Review of Literature

This literature review synthesizes research on tribal communities, archaeology, and agricultural



practices in Southern India, primarily focusing on Tamil Nadu and the Anamalai Hills. Several works explore the livelihood and socio-economic status of tribal groups. Chandi (2008) examines rainforest communities, while Sathyanarayanan (1998) details the Muthuvan's shift from shifting cultivation to cash crops. Sawant (2019) investigates Kadar tribes' conservation roles, and Renukadevi and Kannan (2019) highlight Malasar ethnobotany. Kumar (2005) discusses the Muthuvar youth dormitory system, complemented by historical ethnographic data from Thurston (1909) and Iyer (1939). Archaeologically, the review covers Neolithic and Megalithic periods. Paddayya (2019) broadly discusses Deccan's Neolithic Ashmounds. Selvakumar et al. (2024) provide an update on Tamil Nadu's Neolithic culture, including recent Molapalayam excavations. Iyer (1967) covers Kerala's megalithic burials. Finally, agricultural practices are examined, with Srinivasan (2016) gleaning insights from Sangam Age Tamil literature, offering a historical perspective alongside the contemporary transitions noted by Sathyanarayanan (1998).

### **Objective of the Study**

Muthuvan tribal studies aim to holistically understand their community. Key objectives include documenting traditional knowledge, culture, and unique social structures (like Cavati). Research also focuses on their evolving socio-economic status, livelihood changes (e.g., from shifting cultivation to cash crops), and health challenges. Furthermore, studies analyze their human-environment relationship, conservation roles, and assess the impact of development initiatives, ultimately examining their adaptation to changing landscapes.

### **Methodology**

Muthuvan studies primarily employ a qualitative, ethnographic approach. Researchers conduct extensive fieldwork, including participant observation, to gain deep cultural insights. Interviews (structured and semi-structured) with community members, and focus group discussions are crucial for gathering diverse perspectives. Household surveys may complement this with quantitative data. Archival research provides historical context,

while mapping and GIS help understand land use. Ethnobotanical documentation is specialized for plant knowledge. Throughout, ethical considerations like informed consent and ensuring community benefit are paramount. This holistic methodology ensures a comprehensive understanding of the Muthuvan's unique way of life.

### **Ethnography Study**

Ethnography is a qualitative research method where researchers immerse themselves in a community to observe behaviors and interactions, also referring to the written findings. While offering deep cultural insights, it presents practical and ethical challenges.

### **Origin of Muthuvan**

The Muthuvan tribe, claiming Madurai origins, attributes their migration to the hills to internal strife. Ethnographers suggest they arrived in Travancore with Madura Princes, possibly during the Pandyan or Telugu Nayak eras, or due to 18th-century Muhammadan invasions. Settling in the Anamali Hills and Travancore's High Range, their name "Muthuvan" (from "Mutugu," meaning back) likely refers to their practice of carrying children or the goddess Meenakshi during their journey. A prevalent Muthuvan legend states their ancestors carried Kannagi, the central figure of the Tamil epic Silappadikaram, on their backs to the hills, receiving her blessing for peace. Elders often call her 'Karnakan,' believing she's the same as Meenakshi.

However, Arjunan (74) of Vellimudi offers a different origin for the "Muthuvan" name, attributing it to 'Thavasiyammal' who led them and gave 'Sakthi Vel.' He also noted their tradition of carrying children while farming but conflated Thavasiyammal with Kannagi and Sita, blurring the lines between human and divine figures.

### **Population Distribution**

The Anamalai Tiger Reserve, spanning 958.59 sq. km, hosts six tribal communities across 36 settlements, totaling about 5916 people as per a 2023 survey. These groups are renowned for their traditional knowledge and harmonious coexistence with wildlife. The Muthuvar tribe specifically inhabits 11 settlements in regions like Udumalpet



and Valparai. Their communal life, marked by joint cultivation, shared funeral costs, and a strong village council, reflects their adaptation to high-forest living. Notably, a strong matrilineal clanship prevails, with children inheriting their mother's clan.

### **Attumalai**

Attumalai, a remote Muthuvan hamlet in the Anamalai Tiger Reserve, is reached by a challenging 12 km jeep ride. Marked by dolmens and featuring 30 huts, a communal saavadi, and a Kuli Veedu(dormitory), it centers around Murugan worship. The 'Muppan,' Kanagaraj (65), notes that government restrictions now limit their traditional shifting cultivation. Daily life involves men and women collaboratively working in fields until 3 PM, followed by men discussing issues in the saavadi and women handling household chores, with a nightly watchtower vigil against wild animals.

### **Porupparu**

Porupparu, located 5 km from the Chinnar check post and accessible by jeep, is a hamlet led by Kanniyappan (45). The settlement features an inscription at its entrance, followed by a temple hut, with separate living structures for males (Saavadi Veedu) and females (Kuli Veedu), and fifteen central family huts. This community separated from Attumalai to gain easier town access, which is evident as three of their ten children now study in Marayur. Despite this, their daily routines largely mirror those of Attumalai.

### **Vellimudi**

Vellimudi is a highly populated Muthuvan settlement. It's 45 km from Aliyar Check Post to Kadamparai Dam (with limited bus service), then a 5 km personal vehicle ride. Arjunan (74) is the 'Muppan or Kannikudi'. The entrance features a saavadi and a temple hut. A separate temple for goddess Tavasiyammal exists in the forest, hosting annual festivals. The girls' dormitory here is called Muzhukku Veedu. Some youngsters work temporarily with the forest department. Cultivation land and watch towers are present around the hamlet.

### **Language**

The Muthuvan people, residing at the border of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, speak Muthuvan Baashai, an unwritten language that blends Tamil and Malayalam vocabulary. Muthuvan men are fluent in both languages due to their business travels, while women, who rarely leave their homes, show a stronger command of Tamil. All their rich traditions, rituals, histories, and knowledge of herbs are passed down orally.

### **Boys Dormitory**

The boys' dormitory among the Muthuvan people, known as Bayan Ilandaari (residence for unmarried boys over twelve), is often called Saavadi or Saavadi Veedu, similar to traditional village gathering places in rural Tamil Nadu. This term might have been chosen to signify the boys' celibate status. Historically, boys celebrated puberty with a feast and grew their hair for one to two years before the 'Varma Kattu' festival, after which they could marry. While these specific customs have evolved, the male dormitory remains an exclusive nighttime sleeping area for all unmarried males, divorced men, widowers, solitary male residents, and male guests

### **Girls Dormitory**

Muthuvan girls' hostels, locally called 'Kuli Veedu' or 'Mulukku Veedu' (Kumari madam), house unmarried girls over twelve, separate from boys' hostels. These structures also serve as menstrual huts where married women stay for eight days, preparing their own food.

When girls reach puberty, their families celebrate. During menstruation, women use a dedicated village hut, observing a customary practice of cleansing afterwards. Historically, women would hide from strangers in the forest, especially with male children. This has changed, with older women now more openly communicating.

### **Marriage**

Muthuvan marriage customs have evolved, yet cross-cousin marriage remains accepted. Historically, unions were arranged, sometimes involving maternal cousins and a decision period in a cave, a practice now absent. Men could have multiple wives. Today,



the groom's family approaches the bride's, followed by mutual agreement and a feast. Couples receive new clothes, the bride wears a yellow rope, and they build a new hut. Widows live with their sons; inter-caste marriages are forbidden. However, some individuals, as observed by Chandi M (2008), now choose love marriages, often with partners from neighboring Muthuvan communities, even without parental consent.

### **Family**

The Muthuvan community strongly emphasizes the family as the core economic unit, demonstrating significant cooperation and interdependence. Primarily, they form nuclear families a couple with unmarried children, sometimes including a widowed parent or unmarried sibling. Due to their small, temporary huts, only parents and children under ten reside in the main home. Other adult family members, though contributing to daily work, sleep in separate dormitories at night. Elderly, dependent parents are provided for in separate huts built by their married children. Notably, studies confirm that only nuclear families are present in Muthuvan settlements, with no evidence of joint family structures.

### **Hierarchy**

The Muthuvan community's highest authority is the 'Kannikudi' or 'Muppan', a male-held, hereditary role. The Muppan is the ultimate decision-maker, guiding the community, overseeing family activities, festivals, and marriage proposals. They foster communication and resolve issues. When new people arrive, the Muppan greets them, or the 'illandrari' (unmarried males) assist. The Saavadi serves as a political meeting place. Females hold the lowest social position, are not actively involved in social activities, and males lead festivals due to the women's introverted nature.

### **Children and Education**

The Family is departing for the house early in the morning, where they will assist their parents with farm work. In Attumalai and Porumpapai, the children were accommodated at the Marayur hostel and engaged in their fundamental education. Meanwhile, in Vellimudi, they were housed at the Valpari

hostel and also participated in their basic education. Currently, there has been a decline in the number of births within this community. In summary, out of the 10 children, only three were pursuing their education.

### **Religion and Organization**

The word, religion has been derived from the root word religion, which means 'to bind together' and religion actually does it. Religion can maintain social control, social solidarity and promote change. It also helps people to adapt with the changing conditions.

### **Religious Practices**

The Muthuvan community reveres Hindu gods and goddesses like Murugan and Madurai Meenakshi, performing annual sacrifices. Each settlement has a small, elevated, thatched-roof temple displaying sacred images. Divination is crucial; a diviner determines causes of illness or crisis, suggesting offerings to appease deities. Monthly home cleaning during 'Nombu Naal' is a common religious practice. They celebrate significant festivals such as 'Chitra Kaani,' Pongal, Shivaratri, and Diwali. Vellimudi has a unique ceremony for Thavasiyammal. Life events like weddings, puberty rites, and funerals are also marked by inviting neighboring Muthuvan communities.

### **Muthuvan Attire and Ornaments**

Muthuvan men traditionally wear a white loincloth (Kechchu), white headgear (Uruma), and a shirt; older men often use a walking stick and wear ear studs (Kadukkan). While long hair was once common, younger men less frequently grow it. Muthuvan women drape sarees to form a baby pocket, adorned with beaded necklaces (Kella), bangles (Vala), nose-studs (Mookku Manni), and silver toe rings (Metti). Husbands historically gifted bamboo combs, though this is rare now. Older women wear silver armlets, married women wear silver anklets, while widows abstain from all ornaments. Children wear modern urban clothes.

### **Painting, Dance and Music**

Tattooing is generally absent among the Muthuvan, though older women were historically noted to have them; no current instances were observed in research.



Their simple huts remain undecorated, cleaned only for festivals. Post-harvest, the community enjoys leisure, marked by music and dance during their annual Thai Nombu/Pongal celebration. This week-long festivity, typically from Monday to Saturday, is timed by the settlement to ensure wide participation from neighboring communities .

### **Work and Cultivation**

After household tasks, Muthuvan villagers cultivate crops like beans and ginger, selling surplus or consuming it. Some also work with the forest department. Daily, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., most adults go into the forest to raise goats and cows, gather firewood, collect honey for sale, and fish. Lemongrass and cardamom are their primary cash crops, introduced for stable income. While hunting, historically significant, is now strictly prohibited by the government, fishing and honey gathering remain permitted activities for the community.

### **Shifting Cultivation**

Shifting cultivation, known as ‘Jhum’ in India, involves rotating cultivated plots to maintain soil fertility. Land is cleared, farmed until depletion, then left fallow while farmers move to a new plot. This method is prevalent in Indian tribal economies, including the Muthuvan people, who call it ‘kotthu kaadu vevasaayam’. Though traditionally for subsistence, government interventions now provide registered land to prevent migration, impacting this ancient practice. Evidence of shifting cultivation dates back to Neolithic and Sangam periods. However, despite historical use, government restrictions now prohibit shifting cultivation among tribes.

### **Architecture**

Humans initially utilized natural caves like Gudiyam, with architecture evolving from Palaeolithic thatched structures to Mesolithic wooden ones. The Neolithic period brought more elaborate homes, marking humanity’s shift from food gathering to farming, alongside pottery and advanced tools.

Neolithic peoples constructed rectangular or circular houses of mud and reed. Communities, including the Muthuvan, skillfully built bamboo huts and watchtowers. The Neolithic site of

Burzahom in Srinagar showcases this architectural evolution, transitioning from subterranean dwelling pits to raised mud and mud-brick structures. Southern Neolithic sites also indicate wattle and daub houses, similar to those still built by the Muthuvan using mud, bamboo, and grass, plastered with clay mortar for stability .

“The walls of the clay houses were plastered inside and outside with a 2 cm thick clay mortar”, recorder by Jean-Fran,ois Jarrige in Mehrgarh Neolithic<sup>17</sup>. Same as this site reports Muthuvan also build houses in rectangular shape natural raw materials like bamboo. In mud and olaivaari pul(grass). At the site of Molapalayam in Coimbatore pits were used for storage and periodic stay (Selvakumar et al. 2024) . In the southern Neolithic sites burnt clay clods have been found and they possibly suggest that the Neolithic people had wattle and daub houses similar to those of the Muthuvan (Paddayya 2019).

They are establishing a solid base from the ground up. This base is supported by bamboo sticks positioned at each corner, bearing the weight of the hut. To ensure stability, the four sticks are interconnected with bamboo shuffling. Mud collected from the surroundings is then placed between the shuffling for added support. Finally, the walls of the hut are coated with a 3-4 cm thick layer of clay mortar both inside and outside. If such houses get destroyed in an archaeological context, we will only get burnt clay clods. If they got accidentally burnt or clay clods .

### **Funeral Ceremonies**

When a man dies, nearby villages are notified, and mourners gather to dig the grave about a mile from the settlement, believing it keeps spirits from harming the living. Grave depth varies by gender: waist-deep for men, breast-deep for women, reflecting beliefs about protection and safety. Ornaments are buried with women, excluding silver due to extinction fears. Men are buried with items like blowpipes and fishing rods, but silver is also removed. In Mehrgarh Neolithic, a male tomb revealed shell beads and a lapis lazuli bead. The main mourner (nephew) removes personal ornaments for 31 days. The body is wrapped in new cloth and lowered, head north, into the grave . After a body is placed in the grave, grains



are scattered, and a protective prayer is recited. The grave is then filled, marked by stones at the head and feet, and covered with a thatched roof. Mourners bathe and return home. The practice of placing stones on graves is linked to ancient migrations. Final obituaries are observed on the second, sixteenth, and thirty-first days. Ethnoarchaeological studies of the Muthuvan burial practices reveal specific orientations and the inclusion of ornaments, showing similarities to findings at the Mehrgarh site.

### Conclusion

Ethnoarchaeology, as defined by Marvin Harris, provides a “portrait of a people,” exemplified by the Muthuvan community. Their traditional self-sufficient lifestyle, architecture, and cultivation offer valuable archaeological insights, mirroring Neolithic practices like shifting cultivation and funeral ceremonies. However, government interventions and modern influences are impacting their traditions. Archaeological findings resonate with unique Muthuvan artifacts. The younger generation now holds the key to continuing their rich heritage.

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