

**THE POETICS OF SURVIVAL: A THEMATIC
EXPLORATION OF SELECT TRIBAL LANGUAGE
POETRY OF KERALA**

Thesis submitted to the University of
Calicut for the award of the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH

by

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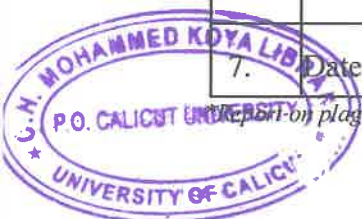


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DECLARATION

I, Aswani R. Jeevan, hereby declare that the thesis entitled, **The Poetics of Survival: A Thematic Exploration of Select Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala**, submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, is an original record of observations and bona fide research carried out by me, under the guidance of Dr K. Rizwana Sultana, Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, Farook College (Autonomous), Calicut, and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree or diploma or similar titles. The contents of the thesis have undergone a plagiarism check using iThenticate software at C. H. M. K. Library, University of Calicut, and the similarity index found within the permissible limit. I also declare that the thesis is free from AI-generated content.

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Date: October 2025

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled, **The Poetics of Survival: A Thematic Exploration of Select Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala**, submitted by **Aswani R. Jeevan**, to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, is an original record of observations and bona fide research, carried out by her, under my supervision, and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree or diploma or similar titles.

Place: Calicut

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ABSTRACT

This study, **“The Poetics of Survival: A Thematic Exploration of Select Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala”**, examines written Tribal Language Poetry in Kerala, focusing on selected works by poets from three tribal communities, including Dhanya Vengacheri (Mavilan), Sukumaran Chaligadha (Rawla), and Manikandan Attappadi (Irula). Tribal Literature in various languages initially survived for centuries through oral traditions, such as songs, tales, myths, and rituals. However, the absence of written forms kept these traditions largely unknown to the wider literary world. Most tribal languages historically lacked scripts, which hindered the development of written literature. By the 1990s, Tribal Literature emerged as a recognised movement across India through the adoption of scripts from other languages. In comparison, Kerala’s tribal language literature is relatively recent and gained momentum only after 2010.

The study also clearly distinguishes between Tribal Literature and Tribal Language Literature. It defines Tribal Literature as an umbrella category that includes both oral and written works composed in tribal and non-tribal languages. In contrast, Tribal Language Literature refers specifically to works written in various tribal languages. This study presents a qualitative, textual, and thematic analysis of Tribal Language Poetry. It is the first comprehensive study in English on the Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala and addresses a significant gap in existing scholarship. As tribal language literature in Kerala is still evolving, the number of available poems is limited. Therefore, this research adopts a broader thematic approach, serving as a pioneering study in English in this area. The analysis is guided by a combination of theories that synthesises postcolonial concepts including Bhabha’s third space, Stuart Hall’s cultural identity, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s linguistic decolonisation; subaltern concepts, such

as Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* And Crenshaw's intersectionality; ecocritical approaches, including deep ecology and ecofeminism; as well as Walter Ong's work on orality and literacy and David Crystal's on language death. These frameworks help to explore the themes in the select poems with depth and precision.

The study finds that each poet foregrounds both distinct and overlapping thematic concerns. Chaligadha records the community's experiences of slavery, indigenous knowledge, loss of tribal identity, and its connection with nature. Manikandan Attappadi depicts the life, culture, and traditions of the Irula community, addressing social structures, rituals, women's experiences, human-environment relations, destruction of tribal values, poverty, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. Dhanya Vengacheri explores the connection between women and nature, the objectification of women under patriarchal structures, and the double marginalisation of tribal women. Themes such as nature's relationship with the tribal communities, tribal identity and consciousness, and resistance recur across the poems of all three poets. The poets' choice to write in their mother tongues, even when using the Malayalam script, functions as an act of cultural and linguistic decolonisation. The thematic concerns of each poet are influenced by the tribe they represent, geographical context, gender and the tribal consciousness.

This thesis acknowledges certain limitations due to the small number of poems available for the study. It prioritises thematic concerns over formal features, including structure, diction, and stylistic devices. As the genre continues to evolve, future research can expand the corpus and examine these unexplored aspects in greater detail. Thus, written Tribal Language Poetry emerges as a dynamic and evolving component of Kerala's literary heritage by providing a voice to the historically marginalised communities.

Keywords: Irula, Kerala, Mavilan, Rawla, Thematic Analysis, Tribal Language Poetry

പ്രബന്ധസംഗ്രഹം

“ദ പോയറ്റിക്സ് ഓഫ് സർവൈവൽ: എ തീമാറ്റിക് എക്സ്‌പ്ലോറേഷൻ ഓഫ് സെലക്ട് ട്രൈബൽ ലാംഗ്വേജ് പോയട്രി ഓഫ് കേരള” (അതിജീവനത്തിന്റെ കാവ്യശാസ്ത്രം: തിരഞ്ഞെടുത്ത കേരളീയ ഗോത്രഭാഷാ കവിതകളുടെ പ്രമേയ വിശകലനം) എന്ന ഈ പഠനം, തിരഞ്ഞെടുത്ത മൂന്ന് ഗോത്ര ഭാഷാ കവിതകളുടെ രചനകളെ മുൻനിർത്തി എഴുതപ്പെട്ട ഗോത്രഭാഷാകവിതകളെയാണ് പഠനത്തിനായി തിരഞ്ഞെടുത്തിരിക്കുന്നത്. സുകുമാരൻ ചാലിഗദ്ധ (റാവുള), മണികണ്ഠൻ അട്ടപ്പാടി (ഇരുള), ധന്യ വേങ്ങച്ചേരി (മാവിലാൻ) എന്നീ കവിതകളുടെ രചനകളാണ് പഠനത്തിനായി തിരഞ്ഞെടുത്തിട്ടുള്ളത്. പാട്ടുകൾ, കഥകൾ, പുരാവൃത്തങ്ങൾ എന്നിവ വഴിയാണ് വ്യത്യസ്ത ഭാഷകളിലെ ഗോത്രസാഹിത്യങ്ങൾ ആദ്യകാലത്ത് അതിജീവനം സാധ്യമാക്കിയത്. ലിഖിത രൂപത്തിന്റെ അഭാവം ഈ സാഹിത്യ രചനകൾ സാഹിത്യത്തിന്റെ മുഖ്യധാരയിൽ പ്രവേശിക്കുന്നതിന് വിഘാതമായി. ചരിത്രപരമായിതന്നെ മിക്ക ഗോത്രഭാഷകൾക്കും ലിപിയില്ലാത്തത് ഗോത്രസാഹിത്യം ലിഖിതരൂപത്തിലേക്ക് വികസിക്കുന്നതിനെ തടഞ്ഞു. 1990കളോടെ ഇന്ത്യയിലെ ഗോത്രസാഹിത്യം മറ്റു ഭാഷകളിലെ ലിപികൾ കടമെടുത്തുകൊണ്ട് ഒരു അംഗീകൃത സാഹിത്യമുണർന്നുവന്നു മാറി. എന്നാൽ കേരളത്തിലെ ഗോത്രഭാഷാസാഹിത്യം ചലനാത്മകമായത് താരതമ്യേന വൈകി, 2010ന് ശേഷമാണ്.

ഗോത്രസാഹിത്യം, ഗോത്രഭാഷാസാഹിത്യം എന്നിവയുടെ വ്യതിരിക്തതയിൽ പഠനം ഊന്നുന്നുണ്ട്. ഗോത്രസാഹിത്യമെന്നതിനെ ഗോത്രഭാഷകളിൽ രൂപപ്പെടുന്ന വാമൊഴിയായോ ലിഖിത രൂപത്തിലുള്ളതോ ആയ സാഹിത്യരചനകളെ ഉൾക്കൊള്ളുന്ന ഒരു പൊതുപദമായാണ് പഠനം നിർവചിക്കുന്നത്. അതേസമയം ഗോത്രഭാഷാ സാഹിത്യം എന്നതുകൊണ്ട് ഉദ്ദേശിക്കുന്നത്, വിവിധങ്ങളായ ഗോത്രഭാഷകളിൽ രൂപപ്പെടുന്ന ലിഖിതസാഹിത്യങ്ങളെയാണ്. ഗോത്രഭാഷാ കവിതയുടെ ഗുണാത്മകവും പാഠപരവും പ്രമേയപരവുമായ വിശകലനമാണ് ഈ പഠനം മുന്നോട്ടുവെക്കുന്നത്. കേരളത്തിലെ

ഗോത്രഭാഷയെ കുറിച്ചുള്ള ഇംഗ്ലീഷിലെ ആദ്യ സമഗ്രപഠനമെന്ന നിലയിൽ ഈ മേഖലയിൽ നിലനിൽക്കുന്ന വൈജ്ഞാനിക വിടവിനെ ഈ പഠനം അഭിമുഖീകരിക്കുന്നുണ്ട്. ഗോത്രഭാഷാസാഹിത്യം കേരളത്തിൽ നിലവിൽ വികസിച്ചു വരുന്നതേയുള്ളൂ എന്നതിനാൽ വിശകലനത്തിന് ലഭ്യമാകുന്ന കവിതകളുടെ എണ്ണത്തിന് പരിമിതിയുണ്ട്. അതിനാൽ തന്നെ ഇംഗ്ലീഷിലെ ഈ വിഷയത്തിലുള്ള ആദ്യ പഠനം എന്ന നിലയിൽ പ്രമേയപരതയിൽ ഊന്നിയ വിശാലസമീപനമാണ് പഠനം സ്വീകരിക്കുന്നത്. ഹോമി ജെ ബാബയുടെ മൂന്നാമിടം, സ്റ്റുവർട്ട് ഹാളിന്റെ സാംസ്കാരിക സ്വത്വം, ണ്ഗുങ്ഗി വത്തിയോങ്ഗോയുടെ ഭാഷാപരമായ അപകോളനീകരണം തുടങ്ങിയ അപകോളനീകരണ പഠനങ്ങളെയും കീഴാളപഠനത്തിന്റെ സങ്കല്പനങ്ങൾ, പ്രത്യേകിച്ച് ഗായത്രി ചക്രവർത്തി സ്പിവാക്കിന്റെ 'ക്യാൻ ദ സബാൾട്ടേൺ സ്പീക്ക്?' ക്രെൻഷോയുടെ ഇന്റർസെക്ഷനാലിറ്റി, പാരിസ്ഥിതികവിമർശന സങ്കല്പനങ്ങളായ ഗഹനപരിസ്ഥിതിവാദം, പാരിസ്ഥിതികസ്ത്രീവാദം, വാമൊഴി, സാക്ഷരത എന്നിവയെ സംബന്ധിച്ച വാൾട്ടർ ഓണിന്റെ പഠനങ്ങൾ, ഡേവിഡ് ക്രിസ്റ്റലിന്റെ ഭാഷയുടെ മരണം തുടങ്ങിയ സിദ്ധാന്തങ്ങളെയും സംയോജനാത്മകമായി വിശകലനത്തിനായി ഉപയോഗിക്കുന്ന ഒരു രീതിശാസ്ത്രമാണ് പഠനം പിന്തുടരുന്നത്. കവിതകൾ മുന്നോട്ടുവയ്ക്കുന്ന പ്രമേയങ്ങളെ ആഴത്തിലും കൃത്യതയിലും പരിശോധിക്കാൻ ഈ സിദ്ധാന്തങ്ങൾ നൽകുന്ന ചട്ടക്കൂട് സഹായകമാവും.

പ്രമേയതലത്തിൽ ഒരേസമയം സമാനവും വ്യതിരിക്തമായ ആശയങ്ങൾ കവികൾ മുന്നോട്ടുവെക്കുന്നതായി പഠനം കണ്ടെത്തുന്നു. തന്റെ സമുദായത്തിന്റെ അടിമത്താനുഭവം, തദ്ദേശീയവൈജ്ഞാനികത, ഗോത്രസ്വത്വത്തിന്റെ നഷ്ടപ്പെടൽ, പ്രകൃതിയുമായി ഗോത്രസ്വത്വത്തിനുള്ള ബന്ധം എന്നിവയെ ചാലിഗദ്ധ കവിതകളിൽ അടയാളപ്പെടുത്തുന്നു. ഇരുള സമുദായത്തിന്റെ ജീവിതം, സംസ്കാരം, പാരമ്പര്യം എന്നിവയെ അടയാളപ്പെടുത്തുന്ന മണികണ്ഠൻ അട്ടപ്പാടിയുടെ കവിതകൾ സാമൂഹികഘടന, അനുഷ്ഠാനങ്ങൾ, സ്ത്രീ അനുഭവങ്ങൾ, മനുഷ്യനും പ്രകൃതിയും തമ്മിലുള്ള ബന്ധം, ഗോത്രമൂല്യങ്ങളുടെ തകർച്ച, ദാരിദ്ര്യം,

തദ്ദേശീയ ജ്ഞാനത്തിന്റെ സംരക്ഷണം എന്നിവയെക്കുറിച്ച് സംസാരിക്കാൻ ശ്രമിക്കുന്നു. സ്ത്രീയും പ്രകൃതിയും തമ്മിലുള്ള ബന്ധത്തെ അന്വേഷിക്കുന്ന ധന്യ വേങ്ങച്ചേരിയുടെ കവിതകൾ പുരുഷാധിപത്യസാമൂഹികഘടനക്ക് കീഴിൽ സ്ത്രീകളെ വസ്തുവൽക്കരിക്കുന്നതിനെക്കുറിച്ചും ഗോത്രസ്ത്രീകൾ അനുഭവിക്കുന്ന ഇരട്ട അരികുവൽക്കരണത്തെക്കുറിച്ചും സംസാരിക്കുന്നു. ഗോത്രസമുദായങ്ങളുടെ പ്രകൃതിയുമായുള്ള ബന്ധം, ഗോത്രസ്വത്വാവബോധം, പ്രതിരോധം തുടങ്ങിയ പ്രമേയങ്ങൾ ഈ കവികളുടെ കവിതകളിലെല്ലാം ആവർത്തിച്ച് പ്രത്യക്ഷപ്പെടുന്നു. മലയാളലിപി ഉപയോഗിക്കുമ്പോഴും തങ്ങളുടെ മാതൃഭാഷയിൽ എഴുതാനുള്ള കവികളുടെ തീരുമാനം സാംസ്കാരികവും ഭാഷാപരവുമായ അപകോളനീകരണത്തെ സാധ്യമാക്കുന്ന ഒരു പ്രവർത്തിയാണ്. ഓരോ കവിയും മുന്നോട്ട് വയ്ക്കുന്ന പ്രമേയപരമായ തിരഞ്ഞെടുപ്പുകൾ, അവർ പ്രതിനിധീകരിക്കുന്ന ഗോത്രം, ഭൂമിശാസ്ത്രപരമായ സന്ദർഭം, ലിംഗം, ഗോത്രാവബോധം എന്നിവയുടെ സ്വാധീനത്താലാണ് രൂപപ്പെടുന്നത്.

വിശകലനത്തിനായി ലഭ്യമായ കവിതകളുടെ എണ്ണത്തിലുള്ള കുറവ് ഈ പഠനത്തിന്റെ പരിമിതിയാണ്. ഘടന, ഭാഷാശൈലി, ശൈലീസങ്കേതങ്ങൾ തുടങ്ങിയ രൂപപരമായ സവിശേഷതകളെക്കാൾ പ്രമേയപരമായ പരിഗണനകളെയാണ് പഠനം ഊന്നൽ നൽകുന്നത്. ഈ ഘാനർ വികസിക്കുന്നതിനനുസരിച്ച് ഭാവിഗവേഷണങ്ങൾക്ക് ഈ പഠനം ഊന്നൽ നൽകാത്ത മേഖലകളെ കൂടുതൽ കൃത്യതയിൽ അടയാളപ്പെടുത്താൻ കഴിയും. ലിഖിതമായ ഗോത്രഭാഷാസാഹിത്യം കൂടുതൽ വളർന്ന് കേരളത്തിന്റെ സാഹിത്യപാരമ്പര്യത്തിൽ ചരിത്രപരമായി അരികുവൽക്കരിക്കപ്പെട്ട സമുദായങ്ങൾക്ക് ശബ്ദം നൽകുന്ന, ചലനാത്മകവും വികസ്വരവുമായ ഘടകമാകുമെന്ന് പ്രതീക്ഷിക്കാം.

താക്കോൽ വാക്കുകൾ: ഇരുള, കേരള, മാവിലാൻ, റാവുള, പ്രമേയ
വിശകലനം, ഗോത്ര ഭാഷാ കവിതകൾ

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CHAPTER- 1

INTRODUCTION

Understanding Tribes in India: From Concept to Context

“What defines a tribe?” Several scholars and researchers have been trying to answer this question for years. There is no single universally accepted definition for the term “tribe” available. It is defined from diverse perspectives in various disciplines. In general, a tribe is a community that shares common cultural practices, beliefs, and language within a specific territory led by elders or community leaders. One tribe distinguish itself from another based on kinship patterns, descent rules, customs and rituals, language, art forms, attire, and way of living.

The term “tribe” originated during the era of the early Roman Empire. The word derives from the Latin *tribus*, which denoted a group of people claiming descent from a common ancestor (Oxford English Dictionary 339). During the rise of nationalism in Europe, the term came to signify a stage in the socio-political development of a linguistic community within a defined region. In European discourse, clan, tribe, and nation were conceptualised as successive stages in the evolution of collective organisation (Ray 8). The original meaning of “tribe” has evolved and is now interpreted differently in both Western and Indian discourses. In contemporary usage, it generally refers to a socially cohesive community that inhabits a specific territory and shares cultural practices while maintaining political autonomy (Mitchell 232).

India has the second-largest tribal population globally, after Africa. The tribal population constitutes 8.61% of the country’s total population, according to the 2011

census. In India, tribals are called Adivasis, which means original inhabitants. There is no specific definition for tribes in India, be it during the colonial period or later. Apart from Adivasi, Vanavasi, Vanyajati, Harijan, and Girijan are the synonyms used for tribes in India. The colonial administration refers to tribal people using different names, including “Animists”, “Tribal Animists”, “People Following Tribal Religion”, “Hill and Forest Tribes”, “Primitive Tribes”, “Backward Tribes”, and “Tribes” in the *Census Reports* of 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941, and in the *Government of India Act* of 1935 (qtd. in A.Chakravarty).

The Imperial Gazetteer of India defines a tribe as a group of families sharing a common name and dialect, living within or claiming a shared territory, and generally not practising endogamy, although they may have originally practised it (qtd. in Chakravarty). The Constitution of India uses the term “Scheduled Tribes (ST)” under Article 366(25) and 342 to represent tribal communities. Still, it fails to provide the criteria for specifying a community as a Scheduled Tribe. Article 366 (25) defined scheduled tribes as “such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities that are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for this constitution” (India, art. 366 (25)). Article 342 prescribes the procedure to be followed in the matter of specification that:

Parliament may, by law, include in or exclude from the list of Scheduled Tribes specified in a notification issued under clause (1) any tribe or tribal community or part of or group within any tribe or tribal community, but save as aforesaid, a notification issued under the said clause shall not be varied by any subsequent notification (India, art. 342).

Hence, the Indian Constitution can include or exclude communities from the list of Scheduled Tribes. Since there is no clear definition of tribes from the government's side, the definition of tribal art and literature remains complicated.

Sociologists and anthropologists have also developed various definitions of the term "tribe". D. N. Majumdar defines a tribe as a group of families united by a common name and a shared language, who collectively occupy a single territory. This social entity is maintained by adherence to specific taboos related to marriage and work, and is crucially underpinned by a formal and recognised system of reciprocal obligations among its members (367). According to F. G. Bailey, there is no single, universally accepted criterion that can clearly differentiate a tribe from a caste. Tribal communities are often perceived as hill dwellers, non-Hindus following animism, economically underdeveloped, indigenous to their regions, and speakers of distinct tribal languages. However, Bailey argues that none of these features are sufficient on their own, and even when considered collectively, they fail to encompass all groups identified as tribes by administrative bodies or ethnographers (263). L. P. Vidyarthi defines a tribe as a social group that shares a defined territory, a common name, and a collective identity within a particular district. Such a group maintains shared cultural practices, endogamous marital patterns, common taboos, distinct social and political institutions, trust in their leaders, and a self-sufficient, separate economic system (12-14). Bardhan describes a tribe as a socio-cultural entity at a particular historical stage of development, characterised as a single, endogamous community with distinctive cultural patterns and psychological traits. Together, these definitions emphasise the tribal identity as both a cohesive social unit and a culturally distinct community with shared norms, practices, and ancestry (16 – 17). Similarly, Krishnan observes a tribe as

a social group whose members are generally simple and cooperative, sharing a common dialect, collective governance, and working together for common goals. Such groups also possess a common name, contiguous territory, relatively uniform cultural practices, and a tradition of shared ancestry (45-46). Virginius Xaxa characterises tribes as indigenous populations and highlights three central aspects for understanding them. First, indigenous communities are those who inhabited a region before colonisation or conquest by external groups. Second, such communities frequently experience marginalisation as a consequence of this domination. Third, indigenous populations predominantly organise their social, economic, and cultural life according to their own institutions, rather than relying solely on the wider legal and administrative frameworks of the state (“Tribes” 3590).

In the Indian context, tribal groups present diversely across regions, languages, customs, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and physical attributes. Many tribes possess distinct linguistic forms and unique cultural traditions that differentiate them from neighbouring communities. Many tribes live in more than one state and have adapted to their respective local environments. As a result, cultural differences and language dialects can be seen even within the same tribal group. Among all the states, Madhya Pradesh has the highest tribal population (14.69%) whereas Odisha has the highest number of distinct tribal communities with 62 tribes. There is no tribal population in Delhi NCR, Punjab, Haryana, Puducherry, and Chandigarh as per the 2011 Census of India. At present, India recognises 705 Scheduled Tribe groups, among which 75 are classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) based on the low literacy rates, small or declining populations, traditional modes of living, and limited economic development. The Bhils constitute the largest tribal community,

followed by the Gonds, Santhals, and Meenas. Overall, tribes constitute a vital part of India's population and contribute significantly to the country's cultural and social diversity.

Tribal Population in Kerala: An Overview

Kerala, often described as "God's Own Country," was formed on November 1, 1956. Geographically it lies between the Western Ghats in the east and the Arabian Sea in the west. The state is divided into fourteen districts, with Thiruvananthapuram as the capital. It occupies about one per cent of the total land area of India. The population of the state is approximately 3.33 crore, which accounts for roughly 3% of India's total population according to the 2011 Census. Malayalam and English are the official languages of the state. In addition to this, Kerala is also home to several tribal languages, which mark its linguistic and cultural diversity.

Kerala holds a unique position on the tribal map of India due to its ethnic and cultural variety. The tribal communities in Kerala, known as Adivasis, who mainly inhabit the forests and hilly regions of the Western Ghats. Anthropological definitions suggest that the tribes of Kerala are said to descend from the ancient Dravidian stock with dark complexion and short stature in height. The majority of the tribes in Kerala build their settlements in the dense forest grounds and also on the hill ranges, mainly on the Western Ghats, bordering Tamil Nadu and Karnataka (*Scheduled Tribes of Kerala* 4). There are thirty-six officially recognised tribal communities in Kerala, with the Maradi community being the most recently added. The largest tribal populations are found in Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad districts. The Paniyan (Paniya) tribe forms the largest group, constituting 18 per cent of the total tribal population, followed by the

Kurichiya (Kurichiyar), Malai Arayan, Mavilan, Kuruman, Muthuvan, Irular, and Kanikkar communities. Together, these groups constitute nearly 58 per cent of the total tribal population. By contrast, the Cholanaikkan community is the smallest, with only 124 members. Five communities, including Koraga, Cholanaikkan, Kurumbar, Kadar, and Kattunayakan, are classified as PVTGs. As per the 2011 Census, the Scheduled Tribe population in Kerala is 4,84,839. It forms 1.45 per cent of the state's total population. According to this data, 89 per cent of the tribal population live in rural areas.

The 2011 Census indicates that among the Scheduled Tribes of Kerala, the sex ratio was 1,035 females per 1,000 males, which is higher than the national average. However, the sex ratio varies among the tribes. For example, the Muthuvan community shows nearly equal, while the Cholanaikkan has a lower sex ratio of 722 females for every 1,000 males. Kerala's tribal communities are steadily increasing their literacy, from 64.4 per cent in 2001 to 75.8 per cent in 2011. It is above the national average of 59 per cent. As per the census, the Malai Arayan community has the highest literacy rate (96.3 per cent), while Cholanaikkan has the lowest (19.8 per cent). This shows that disparities exist among the tribal communities, even though the state of Kerala progresses in education with a high literacy rate in general. In conclusion, the tribal groups in the state of Kerala contribute to the cultural and linguistic diversity that makes the state unique. Therefore, it is important to ensure the complete inclusive development of the tribal communities and protect their cultural and linguistic heritage.

The Concept of Tribal Literary Expression

There is an increasing need to clearly define and differentiate between Tribal Literature and Tribal Language Literature. Once properly defined, the distinction will help writers, researchers, and scholars to significantly contribute to Tribal Language Literature, a new, dynamic, and evolving genre.

Tribal Literature, as the term suggests portrays the lives, culture, and experiences of Tribal communities. It is further classified into oral literature and written literature. Oral literature includes unique tribal expressions such as songs, stories, and indigenous knowledge, which are composed in indigenous languages. It passes down orally through generations within each tribal community. Dr Ravindra Gomaji Vaidya identifies oral literature and written literature as “traditional Tribal Literature” and “tribal creative literature” (227), respectively, in his study titled “Tribal Literature in India”. He emphasises that “the oral literature of tribals is the original Tribal Literature” (Vaidya 227). Abraham Thuruthumalil identifies poems/songs passed down generations orally as “Primitive Poems” (110). M. Maisuangdibou defines Tribal Literature as the imaginative, creative, factual, and other forms of literary expression emerging from the tribal world (1). It is worth noting that the authors of the oral literatures remain unknown, even within the tribal communities themselves. However, these works are distinct and unique to each tribal community. Vaidya explains,

Written Tribal Literature or tribal creative literature consists of two types of writings: literature by tribals and literature about tribals by non-tribal writers. Vaidya points out that Tribal creative literature generally refers to literary pieces, such as poems, novels, and autobiographies. It can be further distinguished as tribal creative literature written by tribals

themselves and the creative literature about tribals written by non-tribal writers (227).

Some scholars and critics raise doubts about the place of works by non-tribal writers about tribals within the definition of Tribal Literature. They criticise that the authentic tribal experiences of being born, living, and dying as a tribe are often absent in these narratives. Vaidya says,

It is stated that a non-tribal writer writing about tribals in any one of the recognised state languages or a foreign language like English does not produce tribal creative literature. One of the reasons for this is that the particular literary work is not a direct outcome of tribal creative imagination. Secondly, such creative writing tends to take a distinctive stance, usually informed by the class, caste, education, and political commitment, in relation to the object of representation, i.e., tribal life. And finally, it accommodates tribal life as one of the themes in a mainstream literary tradition (227).

So, at this point, Vaidya's definition of Tribal Literature is widely considered appropriate and acceptable. Just as Indian literature is defined as works by Indians about India, Tribal Literature can also be understood as literature by tribals, about tribals, and from within different tribal communities, written in any Indian language or English.

Understanding Tribal Language Literature

While the definition of Tribal Literature has been established, there is a growing need to define Tribal Language Literature distinctively. Tribal Literature, as described

above, includes the works written by tribal writers in Indian languages and English. Although the term “Indian languages” encompasses all the languages within the country, it typically prioritises the dominant regional languages of each state. These widely spoken languages, along with English, help tribal writings reach a broader audience and receive more critical attention. But it also risks pushing tribal languages to the margins. Regarding this, Dr N. Prasantha Kumar shares his view that,

A translated text becomes a marketable commodity, as the market is a space where the dominant culture appropriates any subordinate culture. Contemporary native writing is a construct of oppression. In this sense, any narrative in a native/tribal language is a specimen of polemic literature. The conflict between the native and non-native languages offers a kind of resistance to the natives/tribals to preserve their culture and identity through the medium of the text (39).

Here lies the importance of considering and approaching Tribal Language Literature distinctly within the broader category of Tribal Literature. Tribal Language Literature can be regarded as a subset of Tribal Literature, an umbrella term that includes tribal and non-tribal languages (Jeevan, “*Gothrakavithayile Sthreepradhinithyam* 36). The explicit use of the term “Tribal Language Literature” accelerates the representation of tribal languages within the broader spectrum of Tribal Literature.

Tribal Language Literature refers to creative works, such as poetry, stories, novels, and autobiographies, written in tribal languages by authors from those communities. In this study, the term “tribal language poet” refers to a tribal poet who writes in any of the tribal languages. Such poets can also be identified more precisely based on the language they use, for example, Santali poets, Gondi poets, Paniya poets,

Irula poets, and so on. Since many tribal writers are multilingual, their works written in other Indian languages or English are still recognised under the broader category of Tribal Literature. For instance, ‘Tribal Literature in Hindi’, ‘Tribal Literature in Malayalam’, and ‘Indian Tribal Literature in English’ are a few among them.

It is essential to discuss the scope of defining Tribal Language Literature. Some tribal writers prefer to write in their mother tongues. It allows them to express the genuine emotions of tribal imagination and lived experience, though this may limit the reach of their work to within their specific readers. Literature in tribal languages can also act as the repository of unique cultural expressions and historical descriptions of their respective tribal communities. In addition to this, a separate consideration of Tribal Language Literature also contributes to the preservation of tribal languages, many of which are endangered or slowly disappearing. The linguistic expert G.N. Devy opines that India has lost 220 languages since 1961, and another 150 may disappear in the next fifty years (qtd. in Soman).

A formal definition would support the archiving and research of Tribal Language Literature in academia. It can encourage the publication and translation of works in tribal languages, promoting the inclusion of such literature in school and university curricula. This approach may lead to inclusivity in the syllabus, where, in many cases tribal languages and literature are ‘othered’ and marginalised. In conclusion, formulating a definition for Tribal Language Literature is crucial to ensure the creative and scholarly contributions of all tribal languages to the discourse of Tribal Literature.

Growth of Tribal Language Literature in Kerala

A turning point in India's social and literary history is marked in the late twentieth century. Women, farmers, Dalits, Tribals, and other marginalised groups began to unite and raise issues that could no longer be understood or resolved within the old political and theoretical frameworks (Pais 69). They argued that their oppression was rooted in their identity and started to form alliances to fight against it. This process of connecting identity with resistance is called "identitism" by Ganga Sahay Meena. Tribal Literature became a form of creative and political expression of tribal communities within this wider movement. Meena notes that there are historical and material factors that led to the emergence of the contemporary tribal literary movement. For example, the economic reforms imposed by the Indian state in the 1990s opened the market to globalisation. This resulted in the seizure of vital resources such as forests, water and land from tribal communities for commercial and industrial use. Many tribal families were uprooted from their ancestral homes to the cities. Meena compares this displacement to "trees without roots", which further leads to alienation and loss of culture, traditions and language. However, this pain also paved the way for resistance through literature, which includes poems, stories, and songs. This leads to the growth of Tribal Literature in India. Tribal Literature from various tribal languages initially survived for centuries through oral traditions such as stories, songs, tales and myths as discussed earlier. Unfortunately, they remained unknown to the outer world as these works were unwritten and passed down from one generation to another orally within the communities. The situation changed when Tribal Literature had grown into a recognised movement across India by the 1980s and 1990s. It led to the development of written creative tribal expressions in the forms of poems, stories, novels and so on in

both tribal and non-tribal languages by the tribal writers.

Notably, various tribal languages historically lacked their own scripts in India. It was a major obstacle to the development of Tribal Language Literature in many languages. When new writers began to write in these languages, they had to adopt the scripts of the dominant regional languages. Dube notes that tribal languages should not be regarded merely as dialects; several of these languages are developing their own literature, and at least one has even created its own script (Dube 34-35). Some tribal communities developed scripts later, for instance, *Ol Chiki* for the Santali language, *Mundari* for the Munda language, *Warang Citi* for the Ho language, and *Tolong Siki* for the Kurukh (Oraon) language. Others adopted existing scripts of native languages or English, depending on their expertise. The first-generation tribal language writers in India includes early nationalist-era writers like Sushila Samad, Julius Tigga, and Alice Ekka, whose works were largely unnoticed at the time. The second generation emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, with writers such as Laxman Gaikwad, Lako Bodra, and Sita Rathnamal, some of whom wrote in their own languages or even created scripts for previously unwritten languages. The third generation of poets starts from the 2000s onwards. It includes poets such as Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, Jacinta Kerketta, Anuj Lugun, and Vandana Tete. The main themes in their poetry are land rights, displacement, marginalisation, and the impacts of modernity on tribal communities (Singh). Kerala's Tribal Language Literature is comparatively new and emerging and lacks the three generational continuities seen elsewhere. Its development has been slow and only began to gain momentum after the 2010s, as discussed below. In the broader sense, Kerala's tribal literary tradition in various tribal languages is still emerging and is in the early stages of development.

The emergence of Tribal Language Literature in Kerala is a significant cultural development intrinsically linked to the socio-political awakening of its tribal communities. Tribal Language Literature in other parts of India, especially those with scripts for their languages, such as Santali, Munda, and Gondi, has a more extensive history of literature and a developed readership. But the tribal literary movement in Kerala is a recent and rapidly evolving phenomenon. It is crucial to understand that all tribal languages in Kerala are primarily oral and lack their own writing systems. It compels Tribal language writers to adopt the Malayalam language script to write in their mother-tongues. The publication of *Kocharethi*, a novel by Narayan published in 1998 by DC Books marked the birth of modern Tribal Literature in Kerala. This novel is written in both Malayalam and Araya languages. It vividly portrays the history and struggles of the Malai Arayan tribal community. However, after this significant publication, Tribal Literature was sustained through a gap of nearly two decades. This scene changed the mid-2010s, marking the true beginning of the contemporary Tribal Language Poetry.

In April 2016, the Malayalam magazine *Thilanila* published poems by Ashokan Marayoor in the Muthuvan tribal language. To facilitate printing, the poems were transliterated into the Malayalam script. Malayalam translations by the poet himself were published alongside the originals to reach a wider readership. This publication encouraged first-generation poets from different tribal communities to produce poems in their own tribal languages. The momentum gradually gained institutional support through initiatives like the first-ever International Literary Camp for Tribal Writers conducted by Kerala Institute for Research, Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (KIRTADS) in 2017. In the same year,

Ashokan Marayoor's *Pachavdu*, written in Muthuvan language was published. It was funded by the Tribal Welfare Fund and published by DC Books marked the first poetry collection published in a tribal language in Kerala. The next several years brought rapid development for the genre. Manikandan Attappadi, an Irula poet released his debut anthology, *Pachcha Mara Thanal Kaththi Eriyumbol* in 2018. From 2019-2020, tribal poets were invited to several events within and outside Kerala including the 'Kerala Literature Festival' and the 'Pattambi Kavitha Carnival'. This study, the first Ph.D. on Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala, registered at the University of Calicut in 2019, seeks to engage with the academic possibilities, and global readership of Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala.

While an anthology including poems from a specific tribal language has not been published yet, a significant milestone was reached in 2021 with the publication of the first bilingual anthology, *Gothra Kavitha* (DC Books), edited by Sukumaran Chaligadha and Suresh M. Mavilan. Additionally, recent publication of individual poetry collections, such as Dhanya Vengacheri's Mavilian Tulu collection *Mire Neeru* published by Chintha Publications (2023); and Manikandan Attappadi's Irula language collection, *Malleespara Mudi*, published by the Kerala Sahitya Academy (2024), contribute to the genre. *Malleespara Mudi*, is the first book published completely in a tribal language. A dedicated publishing initiative led by Dr Santhosh Manicheri of Brennan College, Kannur, has resulted in the publication of a series of poetry collections by tribal poets in both tribal languages and Malayalam. All books published in tribal languages include Malayalam translations to reach a broader readership.

Ashokan Marayoor and Dhanya Vengacheri are the two important figures who made the pioneering contributions to Tribal Language Poetry in 2016. While Ashokan

Marayoor is often recognised for bringing out the first published collection, Dhanya Vengacheri's unpublished collection *Ninna Thayyam Ninna Menjekkuri*, a poetry collection written in Mavilan Tulu, submitted as part of her MA thesis at Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University, Tirur, Kerala, also stands as a landmark effort. This point needs to be recorded in the historical documentation of the emergence of Tribal Language Poetry in Kerala. Although Tribal Literature is now being included in academic syllabi in Kerala and is receiving serious scholarly attention, its recognition remains confined mainly to the state. Poetry is the predominant genre, with fiction, life writing and drama are still emerging. However, the movement represents a powerful act of cultural and political assertion which challenges the historical erasure of the suppressed communities. This study is intended to contribute to broadening its visibility in the global context by bringing marginalised voices to the center.

The list of tribal languages represented through poetry in Kerala is provided below. This is not a comprehensive list, but rather indicative as the genre continues to evolve with the emergence of new voices.

Sl. No.	Tribal Language	Names of Prominent Poets	Individual Books Published (if any)
1.	Bettakkuruma	Sindu Kalichingeer	
		Minnu Mol	
2.	Cholanaikkan	Vinayan Manjeeri	
3.	Irula	Manikandan Attappadi	<i>Pachcha Mara Thanal Kaththi Eriyumbol</i> (Poems), <i>Malleespara Mudi</i> , (Poems), <i>Pachch Njarambukal</i> (Poems)
		Sivalingan P.	
		R. K. Attappadi	

		(Ramesh Attappadi)	
4.	Kadar	Reshmi T.	
5.	Kattunaykka	Bindu Irulam	
6.	Kurichya	Sreeja Wayanad	
7.	Kurumba	Divya P.	
8.	Malavedar	Ratheesh T. Gopi	<i>Parath Theerath</i> (Poems)
9.	Malavettuva	Prakash Chentham	<i>Ochchayochcha Kallukale</i> (Poems)
		Lijina Kadumeni	<i>Mayilarasu</i> (Poems)
		Raji Raghavan	
		Usha S. Painikkara	
		Ajitha P	
10.	Mavilan Tulu	Dhanya Vengacheri	<i>Mire Neeru</i> (poems), <i>Ninna Theyyam</i> <i>Ninna Manjekkuri</i> (Collection of Poems Submitted as part of MA Dissertation), Edited- <i>Gothra Pen</i> <i>Kavithakal</i> (Poems)
		Suresh M. Mavilan	Co-Editor- <i>Gothra Kavitha</i> (Poems)
		Rajeevan Thumbakkunnu	
		Ragesh Neeleswaram	
		Kizhakkedath Balakrishnan	
11.	Muduga	K. A. Ramu Attappadi	
12.	Mullukkuruma	Ajayan Madur	
		Ashok Kumar	
13.	Muthuvan	Ashokan Marayoor	<i>Pachavdu</i> (poems)
		Christy Ilakkannan	
14.	Oorali	Gangadharan Thevan (Gaga Paniyoorailil)	<i>Aadhima</i> (Poems)
		Damodaran Thevan	<i>Meenoliyaan</i> (Poems)

		(Damodaran Paniyoorailil)	
		Thankachan Thevan	<i>Thennari</i> (Poems)
15.	Paniya	Bindu Damodaran	
		Santhi Panakkan	<i>Valli</i> (Poems)
		Siju C Meena	
		Sindhu Manganiyan (Sindhu Chulliyode)	<i>Idathu Nenjile Uchchalu Masangal</i> (Autobiography)
		Layesh Thelambatta	
		Hareesh Poothadi	<i>Vulakku</i> (Poems)
		Haritha K.M.	
		Jijeesh R. Wayanad	
16.	Rawla (Adiya)	Sukumaran Chaligadha	<i>Bethimaran</i> (Autobiography), <i>Kuru</i> (Memoir), First Editor- <i>Gothra Kavitha</i> (Anthology)

This table shows that only 16 of the officially recognised 36 tribal groups of Kerala are represented in the Tribal Language Literature of Kerala through tribal languages. This accounts for roughly 45% of all tribal languages of Kerala represented in Tribal Language Literature. There are 13 individual poetry collections and two edited anthologies published in various tribal languages. This indicates that 38% of the groups (6 of 16) published individual collections, and the languages are Irula, Malavedar, Malavettuva, Mavilan Tulu, Muthuvan, and Oorali. This suggests that a substantial portion has created real literary work. However, groups like the Bettakkuruma, Cholanaikkan, Kadar, Kattunayakka, Kurumba, Muduga, and Mullukkuruma show earlier stage engagement through poets although they have not yet been published. The most engaged languages with respect to the number of poets and poems, per the above information, are Paniya, Malavettuva, Mavilan Tulu, and Irula.

Importantly, it is to be noted, even though sixteen tribal languages are represented in Tribal Language Poetry, the available poems are small in number. For many poets particularly those who have not published their own collections, the average number of poems is less than ten.

This literary movement represents a major shift from oral traditions to the written in tribal languages in Kerala. The movement also shows signs of development through shared curating by editors of anthologies, for example, Chaligadha's *Gothra Kavitha* and Dhanya Vengacheri's *Gothra Pen Kavithakal*, which indicate a shift from individual authorship to shared work. Further, there is significant female representation, with poets such as Bindu Irulam, Dhanya Vengacheri, Lijina Kadumeni, Sindhu Manganiyan, Santhi Panakkan and many others from various tribal communities. Nonetheless, the primary emphasis on poetry implied that some poets may also be involved in other genres, including Sindhu Manganiyan's *Idathu Nenjile Uchchalu Masangal* and Chaligadha's *Kuru* (memoir). This implies an important area of further engagement in terms of across and into genres of life-writing, narrative and other forms or kinds of writing. The bunching of literary production in certain groups suggests barriers around access to education, support for organisation and funding from outside sources. This also leads to comments about the need for targeted development interventions, for example, in the form of writing workshops, publishing grants for groups with no published books, and an Indigenous Language Literature Digital Repository. A range of supports would help to expand this culturally important movement.

Background of the Study

Tribal Language Poetry from Kerala is an emerging area within Indian Tribal Literature. There are numerous communities within the state with the traditions of oral storytelling. But their languages were not written anywhere as they did not have standardised scripts. Thus, the tribal written literary expressions were unable to enter the mainstream literary canon of Kerala.

In 2016, these social and literary changes began with the publication of Muthuvan language poems by Ashokan Marayoor, in a monthly Malayalam magazine called *Thilanila*. This is regarded as a landmark paradigm shift in the literary realm of Kerala. Subsequently, a growing number of tribal poets from various communities began to write poetry in their mother tongues, using the Malayalam script. The use of the Malayalam script helps them to overcome the limitations related to the absence of written forms in their native languages. This transition of oral traditions into written form is not simply a linguistic transition and process. But, it represents a cultural and political stance taken by communities that have been historically suppressed and marginalised.

The poets Dhanya Vengacheri (Mavilan), Sukumaran Chaligadha (Rawla), and Manikandan Attappadi (Irula) are invaluable and influential representatives in this movement from its beginnings. They are actively contributing to the field by publishing in both print and online media. Their poems represent the struggles and experiences of their respective communities, as well as the common lived experience of tribal communities. These poets are indeed contributing to preserving their languages and challenging the dominant literary canon of Kerala.

Thesis Statement

This research investigates the emerging discipline of Tribal Language Poetry in Kerala by exploring themes in selected poems by Dhanya Vengacheri, Sukumaran Chaligadha, and Manikandan Attappadi, respectively written in tribal languages Mavilan Tulu, Rawla, and Irula using the Malayalam script. In Kerala, Tribal Language Poetry is in its early stages of development. As a result, the number of poems available for study is small in number. The study follows an exploratory research method. It identifies and explores the variety of themes present, suggesting an emerging, yet under-researched, body of literature. It is the first thematic study in the English language on this subject.

Objectives

1. To trace the emergence and study the growth of Tribal Language Poetry in Kerala.
2. To study the roles of notable tribal poets in the emergence of Tribal Language Literature in the state.
3. To analyse the thematic variety found in Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala with a focus on the select poems by Dhanya Vengacheri in Mavilan Tulu, Sukumaran Chaligadha in Rawla, and Manikandan Attappadi in Irula.
4. To translate Tribal Language Poetry into English, including selected poems, making them accessible to scholars and readers all around the world.
5. To understand the challenges and opportunities faced by tribal poets who write and publish in their own languages, adopting the Malayalam script.

6. To act as an introductory study so that future research in this emerging area can be supported.

Review of Literature

This has been the first comprehensive thematic analysis of Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala in English. It addresses a significant gap in existing academic scholarship.

Written poetry in Kerala's tribal languages is still emerging. Much of it is inaccessible to non-Malayalam readers and scholars, as most translations are limited to the

Malayalam language. This is a thematic study of selected poems in tribal languages.

The themes in this study are not narrowly defined due to the relatively small corpus of available poems. It demonstrates how these poems preserve the marginalised languages and assert the identity of tribal communities. This study provides a basis for further research as it is the first comprehensive thematic analysis in English on Kerala's Tribal Language Poetry.

The tribal poets of Kerala entered the discussion with the publication of P. Raman's widely discussed article, entitled "*Kaadozhinju Pokatha Kavitha*," in *Bhashaposhini* (2019). In this article, he introduces five tribal poets from various tribal languages, including Muthuvan, Ravula, Mavilan Tulu, and Irula. He says that these newly emerged tribal language poems are strong enough to rejoin the broken traditions of Kerala's literary history. The article states that these five selected poets represent only a small portion of the extensive canon of tribal language poets, and many others could be added to this category.

The discussions are followed by the publication of an article titled "*Vaakkukale Garbham Dharichaval*" in 2019 by Indu Menon in a Malayalam weekly titled

Deshabhimani. Eighteen tribal language poets from Kerala are featured here, with their poems presented in the original languages accompanied by Malayalam translations. At its core, the author argues that the tribal languages must be protected and their literatures must be encouraged. This article acts a comprehensive introduction to Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala.

Narayan (2019), in his autobiographical article, “*Adivasi Swathvavum Sahithyavum*” (Adivasi Identity and Literature), discusses how mainstream Malayalam literature uses Adivasi lives as raw material for their work. He says, these narratives are often inaccurate or culturally insensitive and can be both. It lacks a real understanding of or connection to the communities that are being portrayed. He has identified a crucial problem for authentic self-expression, as most Adivasi languages exist primarily in oral form and there are no established writing systems or reading communities. This makes it practically impossible for tribal writers to write in their mother tongues. For Narayan, *Kocharethi* is more than a work of imagination. It challenges dominant narratives and reclaims the right to express his community’s story in his own voice. He justifies his writing as an essential counter-narrative against centuries of historical and literary erasure.

Dr. M.S. Narayanan (2021) notes that writing by Tribals in Kerala has produced a substantial decolonial shift. The tribal population are no longer the subjects of literary work but have instead turned into the authors of their own narratives. This is an act of regaining their own space, which was once dominated by the non-tribal spokespersons replicating colonial power structures. Today’s tribal writers like Narayan (*Kocharethi*), Ashokan Marayoor (*Pachavudu*), Sukumaran Chaligadha and others are doing something that P Raman calls a ‘double-tongued’ practice, which indicates writing in

both their mother-tongues (using the Malayalam script) and in Malayalam itself. This isn't just about their preference for writing. However, it also has a political gesture in the reclaiming of languages once considered marginalised by virtue of their having no literary aspect. According to Narayanan, this literature does two things simultaneously. On one hand, it talks and creates an internal record that preserves culture within tribal communities and on the other hand, it challenges the literary traditions of Kerala.

P. Sivalingan (2021) argues that Tribal Language Poetry has fundamentally changed Kerala's literary scenario in terms of artistic style and underlying ideas. Historically, tribal communities were looked at from the outside, and they often were seen through an anthropological lens that has labelled them as 'uncivilised'. Now, tribal writers are telling their own stories on their own terms. Ashokan Marayoor, who writes in the Muthuvan language, was one of the early voices in this movement. According to Sivalingan, when poets like Marayoor write in their mother tongues, it makes a political statement that challenges the definitions created by mainstream literature by giving voice to the marginalised languages. Consequently, the author observes that Tribal Language Poetry is not an addition to mainstream literature. But it is a dynamic uprising that is actively and creatively decolonising the very definition of Kerala's poetic culture.

Sreelakshmi P. T. (2021) in her article, examines the close connection between tribal languages and the identity, history, and culture of the communities. The emergence of Tribal Language Poetry in Kerala marks an important development in the state's literary landscape. This movement was initiated by Ashokan Marayoor and has been carried forward by poets including Dhanya Vengacherry, Sukumaran Chaligadha, Manikandan Attappadi, and P. Sivanlingan. Sreelakshmi notes that their poems come

directly from lived experience and not just an external gaze. Unlike earlier portrayals of tribal life written by non-tribal writers in Malayalam, these contemporary tribal poets address real issues that their communities face, such as land alienation, hunger, poverty, deforestation and systemic violence and their ecological connection.

According to R. Chandrabose (2021), tribal languages of poetry, notably Irula, Rawla, Malavettuva, Paniya, Mavilan, and Muthuvan, are vivid expressions of identity, resistance, and cultural memory. Tribal poets have used their own mother languages to establish a place for themselves within the literary field of Kerala. These poems create a different space where heartfelt sentiments regarding land, nature, community, and survival are crucial processes of writing poetic expression. These are positioned against preconceived ideas of tribes in the dominant mainstream literature of Malayalam.

P. Sivalingan (2023) identifies Tribal Literature as a necessary and urgent act of radical cultural preservation in the face of existential threats. He notes that discussions of the tribal culture are often framed by non-tribal academia, such as scholars and researchers, which produces a major epistemological gap in authentic self-representation. Recent literature, including Ashokan Marayoor's *Pachavdu*, fills this gap. Sivalingan recognises that scriptless tribal languages are under threat of survival from many fronts. This could lead to linguistic attrition that subsequently leads to the loss of distinct knowledge systems. He argues that this literature is more than a means of aesthetic expression. It represents an act of political agency or political strategy. He concludes by ensuring that writing has become one of the main means of protecting cultural loss. And, importantly, unlike oral literature, it offers permanence to future generations.

In his work “*Gothrasaahityam*” (Tribal Literature), Ashokan Marayoor (2023) discusses the development of tribal poetry and the tribal renaissance in the literary domain of Kerala. He presents the poetry emerging from tribal communities in Kerala as more than a form of Dalit literature, but as an entirely new framework. Marayoor explains that tribal poetry is a contemporary manifestation of a long-standing tradition of knowledge, which has existed in oral form, that includes tribal traditional knowledge. He also emphasises that the Tribal Language Poetry illustrates a transformation process from the oral tradition of *Gothrappattu* (tribal songs). In other words, shift from oral literature to written literature as a way to assert cultural identity and autonomy.

Suresh M. Mavilan (2023) provides an insider’s interpretation of the literary history and renaissance of the Mavilan tribal community. He positions his community’s oral and written traditions as a counter-archive to historical erasure. The traditional *Mangalamkali* song, which was composed in the distinct *Mavilav* language, forms the foundation of Mavilan literature. According to Mavilan, a literary revolution began around 2000 within the community with the Mavilan Cultural Movement (MCM). The publication of O.K. Prabhakaran’s poem “*Appetta*” in the movement’s journal, *Mavilan Voice*, marked a noticeable shift from oral to written literature. This movement actively addressed a generation of writers, which eventually led to the representation of ten Mavilan writers in the first anthology of Tribal poetry named *Gothra Kavitha*. Suresh M. Mavilan claims that, now the Mavilan. The community obtained a prominent position in the contemporary Tribal literary realm of Kerala. Desy Chacko (2023) focuses on tribal women writers. She argues that their work fundamentally challenges the mainstream in terms of literature and religious frameworks by focusing on a distinct

world view called “green feminine spirituality”. Chacko explains that spirituality is deeply rooted in the lived experiences and rituals of tribal life. The article asserts that written poetic expressions serve two very important purposes. Firstly, it resists paternalistic and victim-centred portrayals of tribal people. Secondly, it reclaims authorship, which allows first-person authentic narratives from the side of tribal communities. Chacko marks this poetry as a political development that defends a nature-centred identity. At the same time, it resists the homogenising pressures of elite cultural and religious domination. At the same time, these poems subvert any culture or religion that is meant to assign people a homogenous label.

Anjusha N.P. (2023), however, extends Chacko’s analysis by claiming that Tribal Language Poetry by women has constituted a revolutionary shift in Kerala’s literary history. It replaces the reigning definition of the literary space from *Malayala Kavitha* (Malayalam Poetry) to Kerala Kavitha (Kerala Poetry), emphasising the multilingual population. This literary movement is a modern-day, creative advancement from ancient forms of tribal song, serving both as an advocacy for culture and language. Her analysis of the work of women poets in particular from the anthology *Gothra Kavitha* explains how their poetry reveals a unique ‘forest consciousness’ that intermingles ecological and feminine perspectives. Anjusha showed examples of how *pennethuthu* (women’s writing) reiterates a tribal feminist identity internally linked to the forest by focusing on poets such as Dhanya Vengachery (Mavilan Tulu) and Sindhu Chuliyod (Paniya). Finally, Anjusha concludes that these poems protest against and address elite power, trauma from displacement, and the agency of tribal women in keeping the community alive. Dr M.B. Manoj (2023) argues for the place of Adivasi literature in a broader global context. It is also important to mention that many of the

tribal languages are becoming dead languages despite dialects owned by mainstream languages. Manoj points out that Adivasi literature emerged as literature of resistance and innovation. He points to tribal magazines (*Aranyadeepam*, *The Tribe Voice*), art (M.R. Ramesh), cinema (Leela Santhosh), music (Kurukuru Bro), and activism (Mayilamma, Nanjiamma) as examples of how traditional voices have adapted to modern platforms. It ensures identity and resilience. He notes that, the shift from being subjects of representation to becoming authors of their own narratives is central to this development.

Aju K. Narayanan (2023) describes the recent emergence of Tribal Language Poetry in Kerala as a revolutionary paradigm shift. Poets of various tribal communities, such as the Rawla, Irula, Kattunaykka, and Paniya, are a part of this movement. They write in their mother tongue using the Malayalam language script. P. Raman describes this practice as ‘double tongue’. Narayanan states that available frameworks do not fully capture the depth of ideological and aesthetic difference present in these works. He proposes that political philosophy (specifically the Hobbesian-Negrian opposition of the monolithic ‘people’ (the state’s united body) to the revolutionary ‘multitude’ (a scattered, plural unit) can be situated within the critical theoretical approach that can be used to understand Tribal Language Poetry. He says that writing in a tribal language is a tremendously powerful political act of resistance. It is a ‘multitudinous scattering’ of language that threatens the linguistic hegemony of Malayalam, as well as the sovereign power of the nation-state itself. So, Narayanan argues that this poetry has to be included in the genealogy of Kerala literature, but not a subset of Malayalam poetry.

Rajesh K. Erumeli (2023) argues, with reference to the studies of scholars like Chandrabose and Narayanan, that the power of Tribal Language Poetry arises from the tribal languages themselves, which are not dialects but a developed system of meaning built through labour and experience. He asserts that this poetry is capable of disrupting the foundations of prevailing literary traditions. It helps to recover a submerged, ‘invisible’ history and exposes the emptiness of present literary constructs. He argues that linguistic subtleties and the narrative style of tribal poetry are shaped by material and social conditions of tribal life rather than pre-defined poetic traditions.

Athira I.T. (2023) identifies Sukumaran Chaligadha as a pivotal figure in understanding the aesthetic and political aspects of contemporary Tribal Literature in Kerala. Referring to Narayan, Athira states that Chaligadha’s poetry portrays the natural world as the foundation of epistemology, language, and cultural identity for the Rawla community. She describes Chaligadha’s “precise, sensory-rich poetry” as a self-defined cultural archive, for which new literary boundaries in Kerala need to be theorised.

Aswani R. Jeevan (2024) , in her article “*Nanga Nangade Mannil Keezhalariaath Engane?: Lijina Kudumeniyude Pattayakkallaathine Mun Nirthi Oru Padanam*” (2024) (How do we became sublaterns in our own land? A study based on Lijina Kadumeni’s “*Pattayakkallaath*”), presents a critical examination of how the question ‘whose is Kerala?’. She finds that Tribal Language Poetry has emerged as a counter to the dominant Malayalam literature. The poem “*Pattayakkallaath*” written by Lijina Kadumeni portrays the historical doctrines of betrayal and displacement of tribal communities who were once the children of the soil. The poem also documents the cultural reference points like the indigenous offering of *meeth* (a sacred offering to

God) and *punam kothu* (shifting cultivation). Jeevan argues that every poetic composition in Tribal languages becomes an act of rescuing and archiving marginalised languages and indigenous lived experiences. Thus, this forces Kerala to challenge its contested history and recognise its inherent cultural plurality.

Jeevan further explores the representation of women in tribal poetry from Kerala in the article “*Gothra kavithayile Sthreepradhinithyam: Oru Amukham*” (2024) (Representation of Women in Tribal Poetry: An Introduction). It is a distinct and specifically important subset of Tribal Literature defined by dual marginalisation based on caste and gender. She describes the tribal literary scene in Kerala as still emerging with great potential. Tribal Language Poetry in Kerala witnesses the active contribution of women writers from its inception. It also explores key themes in the writings of tribal women writers, such as motherhood and resilience, bodily autonomy and violence, political resistance and reclamation of history, hunger, and the relationship with nature. Jeevan states that there is an urgent need for the systematic documentation of women tribal writers in Kerala to avoid historical erasure.

Most of the available studies focus on individual poets or even communities of poets. The existing literature is substantial in demonstrating how these poems are able to preserve marginalised languages, assert cultural identity and contest classic narratives. However, a clear research gap persists, as no comprehensive thematic study in English has yet examined the Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala. This research addresses the gap by providing a systematic analysis that situates the poetry written in the tribal languages of Kerala through both literary context and socio-political context.

Scope of the Study

This study is the first detailed research conducted in English on Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala, which aims to fill a significant gap in the existing literature. Tribal Language Poetry, composed in the tribal languages of Kerala, has been significantly understudied. There has been little existing comprehensive research on poets and poetry composed in these languages. It adopts a broader thematic approach, opening up new areas for future research as the first study in this emerging field. In adopting this approach, the research engages with the important themes represented in these poetic expressions. It provides a comprehensive understanding of the literary and socio-cultural significance of Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala.

Methodology

This research adopts a thematic, textual, and qualitative analysis of selected Tribal Language Poetry from Kerala, in three tribal languages specifically Mavilan Tulu, Rawla and Irula, written in the Malayalam script.

The primary data, or original poems written in Mavilan Tulu, Rawla and Irula tribal languages, was collected from a variety of resources. The selected Mavilan Tulu poems of Dhanya Vengacheri were taken from the bilingual anthology *Mire Neeru*, published by Chintha Publications, Trivandrum. The selected Irula poems of Manikandan Attappadi were collected from the anthology *Malleespara Mudi* published by the Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Thrissur. The Rawla poems of Sukumaran Chaligadha were collected from magazines, journals, websites, and the poet's social media platforms. In addition, some poems were gathered directly from the poet by the researcher. Copies of the written consents from all the poets for the translation and

study of their poems are included in the appendix of this thesis. In addition, secondary data is gathered from a variety of sources, including online publications, library books, and electronic resources related to the aforementioned tribal communities and poets.

The collected poems were transliterated and translated into English, and analysed using the close reading technique. The analysis is guided by a combination of theories that synthesises Postcolonial concepts including Bhabha's third space, Stuart Hall's cultural identity, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's linguistic decolonisation; Subaltern concepts, such as Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and Crenshaw's intersectionality; Ecocritical approaches, including deep ecology and ecofeminism; as well as Walter Ong's concept of orality and literacy and David Crystal's on language death. These frameworks facilitate a better understanding of the Tribal Language Poetry, addressing issues of identity, marginalisation, language, ecological consciousness, and the dynamic relationship between oral and written traditions.

Theoretical Framework

Analysing Tribal Language Poetry from Kerala requires a combination of theoretical approaches, as these poetic traditions have been shaped by social, cultural, historical, and ecological backgrounds. To address this, the study employs the combination of postcolonial, subaltern, eco-critical and concepts related to language. Postcolonialism and subaltern concepts help to situate tribal language poetics in a broader historical context of oppression and marginalisation. Eco-criticism explores the ecological consciousness and also analyses the complexities of the connection between the exploitation of nature and the marginalisation of tribal women. The notion of intersectionality draws on multiple, overlapping ways of the marginalisation of tribal

women in the casteist-patriarchal context. Consequently, linguistic theories of orality and language death became pertinent, as some of the tribal languages are being threatened by extinction. Despite these theoretical frameworks developed from different historical and social contexts, their combination provides a refined reading of the poetry. This helps to interpret how tribal poetry gives voice to the lived experiences of Kerala's tribal communities, addressing themes of marginalisation, resistance, survival, and the interrelationship between people and nature. These concepts collectively form the theoretical foundation of the present study. The core concepts used to form the theoretical framework of the study are discussed below.

Postcolonial Concepts

The Concept of 'Third Space'

Homi K. Bhabha forms the concept of the third space of enunciation as an in-between cultural zone that emerges in colonial and postcolonial settings. Here is where the hybridity and negotiation of identities take place. He argues that cultural encounters between coloniser and colonised form a hybrid identity, a creation that comes from conversations, conflict, and adaptation. This hybridity questions old notions of cultural identity and creates something new. It creates a free space in which meanings are constantly remade. Bhabha, taken from Bakhtin, presents how cultural expressions have a double voice. Derrida's concept of difference allows to break down the binary oppositions and hegemonic colonial power. In third space, cultural identities are not fixed. They develop through ambivalence, multiplicity, and interaction. It breaks the dominant discourse and shows the influence of marginal cultures in making new meanings.

The third space also provides a site of agency and resistance. The colonised worked with unpredictability in their negotiations. They disrupted totalizing control by asserting their own cultural difference. An example is when the Indian villagers in 1817 refused to accept the ritual from a non-vegetarian priest. This resistance allows postcolonial subjects to change colonial stories and challenge the hierarchy. This creates hybridity in these fluid spaces. Beyond postcolonial studies, Bhabha's concept has implications across different fields, emphasising the role of human encounters and agency in shaping cultural identities. The third space thus provides a creative, hybrid, and politically meaningful space for showing differences, new possibilities for identity, resistance, and understanding between different cultures.

Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity

Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" explains the nature of cultural identity in the context of postcolonial and diasporic experiences. Hall argues that cultural identities are not fixed or static. They are not pre-existing things that can simply be represented. Instead, identities are constantly in process. They are formed through history, relation with the people and culture. They are inherently relational. They are constructed in contrast to other identities, and continuously influenced by time, place, and context. According to Hall, every individual speaks and acts from a particular cultural position. They are shaped by historical, social, and political factors. Identity is not a fixed aspect. It is not a final unchanging essence. The role of "Third Cinemas" in the Afro-Caribbean diaspora is a key aspect of Hall's discussion. These cinemas actively produce representations which allow marginalised communities to see themselves from new perspectives. They challenge dominant Western narratives. Third Cinemas construct new ways of understanding personal and collective histories and

affirm hybridity. It also creates a sense of difference and belonging. Such cultural practices are important for communities to communicate about themselves and their experiences instead of other powers defining them.

Hall identifies the two sides of cultural identity. The first one is the representation of continuity with shared history and ancestry. The third space also provides a site of agency and resistance. The colonised worked with unpredictability in their negotiations. They disrupted totalizing control by asserting their own cultural difference. The second one is a site of struggle and transformation. Identities are social and aesthetic constructs; they are changing things. They are affected by shifting power relations, migration, and diasporic experience. They are always something in the works and never finished. Identities are achieved through acts of representation. This way of understanding identity helps clarify that it is always a dynamic process. In this sense, meaning constantly changes and is re-interrogated. In diasporic contexts, the complexities of cultural identity are even more in flux. People have to negotiate old traditions with new cultural landscapes. Because of this ambiguity, hybrid forms of selfhood emerge that counter fixed notions of culture. In enabling the connection of cultural identity, diaspora, and representation, Hall provides a way of understanding the potential for resistance in marginalised communities.

Linguistic Decolonisation

In *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o critically analyses colonialism and foregrounds the role language plays in oppression and resistance. He contends colonial domination extends far beyond the control of land or economic resources. It dispossessed communities of their psychological and cultural space. It replaced the connection of communities with their identities, histories, and traditions by

forcing European languages upon them. For Thiong'o, language is not simply a medium for communication. It signifies people's values, ways of knowing, and perspectives on the world. Replacing indigenous languages with English, French, and Portuguese in schools, the administration, and literature, therefore, was an act of linguistic imperialism. It supported the internalisation of colonial ideologies whilst undermining traditional identities.

Colonial education systems were critically important to this process. Through schools, children were exposed to systems that regarded native languages as inferior, which marginalised their mother tongue. Children were taught to equate fluency in the language of the coloniser with modernity, progress and power, or whatever advantage suited the standards that were in vogue at the time. Ngũgĩ notes that to fully decolonise, we must also renounce the power of language as a means of subjugation. By working to revive indigenous languages, we are not merely going back to our roots, but consciously reclaiming agency, renewing cultural identity, and confronting the colonial frame of reference that still defines our thoughts and actions. This principle is borne out in Ngũgĩ's personal journey. Even though he had initially written in English, gaining international fame, he subsequently switched to writing only in Gikuyu, his native tongue. In this way, he was resisting through culture and politics with the value and use of indigenous expression.

Ngũgĩ argues for structural transformations beyond individual practice. Linguistic decolonisation is not only about recovering the structures of educational systems, or altering public consciousness but restoring indigenous voices as legitimate systems of thought and culture. With indigenous languages accommodated at the centre of intellectual, artistic, and literary life, post-colonial societies can begin the process of

mending both psychological and cultural wounds sustained during colonialism and, ultimately, work toward authentic cultural self-determination.

The tribal context of Kerala resonates deeply with Thiong'o's critique. Indigenous peoples living in Kerala have been subjected to a long history of marginalisation. Their languages and dialects have been slowly replaced by the dominant languages of the region; from Malayalam to English through colonial and postcolonial education and administration. Displaced language, in this way, contributes to cultural disconnection, paralleling what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes as 'cultural disconnection' for Africa. Tribal Language Poetry in Kerala functions as a resistance to both language and culture. It seeks to reclaim narrative sovereignty; it preserves indigenous knowledge systems; and it asserts the tribal community's distinct identities. In foregrounding their own language and experiences, Tribal Language Poetry can be seen as an act of cultural survival. This is similar to Ngũgĩ's view of decolonisation as a sense of both linguistic and psychological reclamation. Their practice represents, in some respects, Ngũgĩ's vision of decolonisation as both a linguistic, and psychological, reclamation.

Subaltern Concepts

Can The Subaltern Speak? - Spivak

In her influential essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak addressed how marginalised voices are articulated but quieted within colonial and postcolonial frameworks. Spivak is sceptical of the optimistic position that subaltern subjects can speak in the Western, post-structuralist intellectual tradition represented by thinkers such as Foucault and Deleuze, where Spivak's caution is rooted in the epistemological violence of history and systemic, neoliberal epistemic violence

that has routinely rejected the knowledge, experience, and voice of oppressed groups, in particular colonial and patriarchal structures.

Spivak describes the subaltern as people who are excluded and rendered outside of dominant structures of social, political, and cultural institutions, which include colonised subjects, indigenous peoples, lower caste people, and women in the context of non-Western cultures, discarded both in representation and historical agency.

Spivak makes a distinction between marginalised and subaltern, while noting that many of those affected are marginalised in some way. Subalterns are marked especially by denying access to the powers that represent you, to speak for you, and that would communicate the subaltern and distort and silence them by design. Thus, they are equally potentially silenced by internal discursive systems, including local elites or regional colonial elites and nationalism. She gives the example of Sati, or the immolation of widows in colonial India. Both colonial authorities and Hindu nationalists framed the practice as something that was without agency (e.g. within either the discourse of a civilising mission or simply a tradition). In both examples, the widow has no voice. This double silence recalls Spivak's argument that the subaltern is not able to speak on her own within structures of knowledge because structures tend to translate or neutralise her voice into dominant narratives. Spivak similarly positions Western thinkers as attempts to recover the subaltern's voice, cautioning that even attempts of recovery often reproduce the silencing they are trying to disrupt. The context of the incapacity to speak in this case refers to social, political or linguistic structures that disallow her voice to be recognized, not a kidnapping of thought or expression. As Spivak frames it, her idea is both a conceptual vantage point into understanding some challenges of Tribal Literature of Kerala, where communities enter

formal literary contexts but still negotiate the more structural impossibilities of how their voice is articulated.

Crenshaw's Intersectionality

The term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to acknowledge the ways in which overlapping social identities, including race, gender, and class, shape unique experiences of oppression and privilege. In her influential essay “Mapping the Margins”, Crenshaw argues that women of colour are often marginalised within feminist and antiracist movements, in part because violence, particularly violent acts of domestic abuse towards women, and sexual assault experiences or abuse towards women, are not elaborated upon by the actions of either movement alone. Structural intersectionality broadly describes how other social elements, such as poverty, immigration status, and language, for instance, situate people to be more vulnerable to experiencing gender-based violence.

Political intersectionality highlights the tendency for the needs of marginalised groups to be ignored when movements prioritise one identity (gender, race, etc.) over the intersection of identities. Representational intersectionality critiques portrayals in cultures that write out or misrepresent marginalised groups; this reinforces stereotypes and furthers the limitations of agency. Basically, intersectionality offers a critical (and theoretical) view of the layered and connected forms of disadvantage among people on the margins. Crenshaw's framework helps to explore literature examining layered social inequalities, and contemporary Tribal Literature of Kerala can also be viewed through an intersectional lens. Through this intersectionality lens, the experience of gender, caste, class, and indigeneity can be explored in terms of lived experiences, resistance, and challenges encountered by tribal women in and out of the community.

Ecocritical Concepts

Deep Ecology

Deep ecology is an environmental philosophy that endorses the inherent value of the living world beyond its usefulness to humanity. Nature is understood as a life web, in which living and non-living things develop and maintain their own vitality and autonomy. Each organism depends upon others to support its own fitness, including humans. Deep ecology warns that unnecessary damage to the ecological environment not only threatens human societies, but endangers the larger life web they depend upon to sustain life on Earth. It claims that nature is worthy of respect and protection, not simply because of its potential for human value, but because each being has an independent right to exist and thrive in place. Deep ecology advocates a view of humans, and humanity, as part of nature, and not as standing above, or apart from it. It draws on older understandings that land and creatures are regarded as relatives, as opposed to material goods or resources authorised to be productively utilised, which is common among many indigenous peoples.

“Deep ecology” is a term that was coined in 1973 by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss. He was inspired by ecologists studying how complex relationships within ecosystems function and how loss of biodiversity is interconnected with social justice. Næss argued that the motivation to defend nature arises not only from understanding it scientifically, but from a more profound moral and spiritual realisation. For Næss, protecting the Earth was a personal and social responsibility motivated by a sense of belonging in the living world, or as he phrased it “a vital connectedness with the natural world”. Deep ecology was also influenced by or borrowed concepts from other environmentally-oriented early thinkers like Rachel

Carson, David Brower, and Paul Ehrlich, who played significant roles in the environmental movements of the 1960s. One example is Carson's book *Silent Spring* (1962), which made societal realizations about pesticides and their harmfulness to ecosystems, and ecological vision was further propelled by images of our planet from space, which made a simple yet profound claim about the Earth as fragile and interconnected. Deep ecology consists of a set of ideals and values, but encourages a call to action for practice, and ultimately challenges modern society's focus on growth, consumption, and control of nature. Many deep ecologists argue that simply ensuring the ability and agencies of scientists to conduct research, or change policy and enact laws, will not actually remedy the ecological crises we face at the present moment. Instead, addressing the crises we are experiencing will require changing deep and current values and social relations, and changing ways of living, and embarking on simpler, more thoughtful and contemplative experimentations, based upon humility and care for the earth.

Deep ecology fundamentally argues that all forms of life should be free to live and develop without interference, except for what is necessary for the survival of humans. It advocates for a slow reduction in human population, the protection of wild spaces, and the promotion of communities to live in a sustainable way with nature. In 1985, Bill Devall and George Sessions articulated the basic principles of deep ecology. They asserted that human and non-human life are equal in value, biodiversity should be protected, and humans have to limit their encroachment on nature. Additionally, they proposed new ways of assessing social and economic structures that contribute to their degradation. They encouraged living arrangements that promote well-being, rather than material wealth.

Deep ecology is distinct from other approaches that prioritise human needs and interests. It rejects the notion of managing nature solely for human benefit and advocates for a respectful and humble relationship between humanity and the natural world. Some critics consider such a perspective unrealistic or even demanding. Supporters of these views contend that humanity's existing relationship with nature has already caused significant damage and that continued exploitation will lead to permanent damage. Today, deep ecology continues to influence environmental thought with its focus on the idea that people are part of a larger living community. Taking care of this community means that we extend consideration for the intrinsic worth of nonhumans.

Deep ecology is very much connected to the themes from Kerala's Tribal Language Poetry. Both express a perspective of the world where nature is sacred and connected to humans. Tribal poetry regularly demonstrates a personal relationship with the land, forests, rivers, earth, plants, and animals. They are all seen as integral to daily life, repeating the deep ecology understanding that all forms of life are valuable and that humans are dependent on the natural world.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism in India seeks to make sense of women's experiences, especially with regard to rural and tribal communities, whose daily lives are deeply interconnected to nature. In the West, ecofeminism discusses the relationship between women and nature in more symbolic or theoretical contexts. Indian ecofeminism is influenced by real issues such as poverty, caste, landlessness, and survival. The health of the environment directly impacts the lives of most of the women, primarily from marginalised communities and their ability to meet basic needs, such as collecting

water, firewood, and food. These marginalised women face the double burden. They suffer from both environmental degradation and social inequality, yet they are also key protectors of the ecosystems on which they depend.

Ecofeminism emerged globally in the 1970s. The term was introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 and later developed further by Ynestra King in the 1980s. The movement grew from feminist, environmental, and peace activism. They argued that the oppression of women and the destruction of nature both arise from patriarchal and capitalist systems. The famous Western ecofeminists such as Susan Griffin, Mary Daly, Carolyn Merchant, Karen Warren, and Val Plumwood discuss how women and nature have been treated as resources to be controlled and exploited. Ecofeminism challenges the way of thinking that separates humans from nature, demands for relationships based on care, equality, and respect for all life.

Ecofeminist ideas in India were evident in grassroots movements such as the Chipko Movement of 1973. The rural women protested in the Garhwal Himalayas against deforestation by hugging trees to prevent them from being cut down. They knew that the loss of forests would result in less firewood, a lack of water availability, and threats to food supply. They protested against social inequalities, such as exclusion from decision-making and increasing economic barriers, in addition to conserving trees.

One of India's most visible ecofeminist intellectuals, Vandana Shiva, discusses the link between the exploitation of the environment and patriarchy, particularly women's oppression. In her book *Staying Alive* (1988), Shiva suggested that contemporary science and industrial development reflect androcentric and colonial values that regularly exploit nature and women. According to Indian traditions, the earth and nature (prakriti) are regarded as sacred. Building on that premise, Shiva

highlights the contributions of rural women to biodiversity and, with that, ecological processes. She later co-authored a book with author Maria Mies, *Ecofeminism* (1993), where she continues to examine those ideas. However, scholars, including Meera Nanda and Gabriel Dietrich, have cautioned Shiva about generalising women in rural areas and missing caste, class, and regional implications.

To respond, Bina Agarwal promoted a feminist environmentalism. She argued that women's connection to the environment is constructed, to a lesser extent, by their inherent or spiritual connection to nature and more so by their social and economic responsibilities. For example, in rural India, women's labour is crucial to collect water, fuel, and fodder; however, patriarchal and caste hierarchies then restrict access to land and resources. Agarwal emphasises that these social conditions contribute to understanding gendered struggles for the environment. For example, women without land rights, or women of lower castes using common property resources, such as forests and grazing lands, are at greater risk to environmental dangers when these common property resources become lost, either through privatisation or deforestation.

Environmental degradation increases women's burdens. In places where resources are not immediately available, women must walk further, spend longer periods of time working, and have limited time to farm, care for children, and/or engage in other income-generating activities. A study of Jharkhand conducted in 1991 by Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan argued that gender roles regarding resource use are socially constructed mechanisms of culture and economics rather than tendencies of nature genetically drawn toward its elements. While significant women's involvement, particularly from Adivasi and lower-caste communities, has characterised the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the Silent Valley Movement, and anti-mining protests in the Doon

Valley and Gandhamardan Hills as India's significant collective environmental movements, women's specific needs of securing land rights and protection from gender-based violence have often been lost in these movements. In India, there was a women's movement that gained traction in the 1970s and 1980s about dowry deaths, violence against women, and legal reforms, but it did not integrate environmental issues. For rural and tribal women, they must live their lives based on environmental health or lack of it. Researchers then recommend that engaging in ecological struggles would create more inclusivity within the movement.

To sum up, ecofeminism in India illustrates the interconnectedness of gender, caste, class, and environmental issues. Rural and marginalised tribal women experience the brunt of environmental degradation, but simultaneously have an intrinsic role in climate change activism. Contemporary literature written in Kerala has animated these ecofeminist concerns about women's environmental experiences. The literature places women's environmental experiences on the same continuum as marginalisation and resistance. This environmental framing is a valuable tool to interpret the themes expressed in and throughout Tribal Language Poetry written in Kerala.

Concepts Related to Language

Language Death

According to David Crystal (2000), in *Language Death*, when speakers give up use or stop speaking a language, it is death, and it has moved to the dominant language. That death often starts in public spaces (schools, offices, administrative blocks, etc.) and eventually moves to homes and families. It is at risk when parents stop passing on the language to their children. If a language has no new speakers, it is fair to assume it will die quickly. The language often dies with the last speaker if intermixed language

use is not adopted (even languages spoken by just two people die quickly if usage is not expanded to a larger community of speakers). According to Crystal, there are not a great number of cases where languages have revived once they were no longer spoken (Kaurana in South Australia being one notable case). Even then, it only involved a limited use of a recently developed form of the originally spoken language.

Crystal indicates that the death of a language is not simply losing words, but rather it is the loss of that community's knowledge, culture, and history. Languages are vehicles for unique ways of knowing the world, transmitted through stories, songs, rituals, and other oral traditions. When a language dies, the oral literature contained in that language dies, along with the knowledge it holds within that literature. For example, local customs, moral imperatives, and knowledge of the environment are also held in oral language and cannot be perfectly spoken or written down in another language. Crystal explains that this loss is cultural, not linguistic, and minority or tribal languages are all particularly at risk. It appears that speakers often abandon language and culture because those traditions and languages are seen as less valued or antiquated, and the social pressure to take on a majority or dominant language can be great. Consequently, the languages have less prestige, are used less at home, and eventually become extinct. Once a language is dead, efforts at revitalisation or resurrection cannot replace the loss of community knowledge, history, and worldview. Crystal suggests that we record and support endangered languages while they are still spoken to reconstruct or inherit knowledge in language to future generations and perpetuate that culture and its significance.

Ong's Idea of Orality and Literacy

Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982) explores how writing and print transformed human thought, communication, and culture, while emphasising that many societies remain primarily oral today. There, people think in a memorable, formulaic way, relying on repetition and stereotypical stories to retain knowledge. Thought in oral cultures is additive rather than subordinative, redundant, or copious; it is conservative, close to the human lifeworld, concrete, participatory, and situational rather than abstract. Knowledge is transmitted orally through proverbs, riddles, storytelling, and performance, often with agonistic or competitive verbal engagement to reinforce memory and comprehension. Originality consists in tailoring established knowledge to new contexts rather than inventing entirely novel ideas.

Ong contrasts this with literate cultures, which encourage introspection, abstract reasoning, linear thinking, and systematic organisation of knowledge. Writing externalises memory, allowing rearrangement, analysis, and preservation of information without fear of loss. Printing standardises texts, supports empirical reading, and enables complex narratives, non-stereotyped characters, and abstract principles. A common misperception among literate people is that oral individuals, once able to read, automatically think literately. In fact, oral cognition often persists even after basic literacy is acquired.

Oral learning emphasises memory, practice, and social participation rather than studying in isolation. Oral people value literacy for social, economic, or spiritual benefits, but literacy must be taught in ways compatible with oral traditions to be meaningful. Simply mimicking Western literate methods without accounting for oral cognition often fails. Ong also notes that oral cultures are empathetic, participatory, and

homeostatic, meaning knowledge is context dependent, embedded in the present, and regulated by real-life situations rather than abstract definitions. Oral thought preserves knowledge and passes down to generations and it maintains social and ecological balance. These attributes are especially important to Kerala's Tribal Language Poetry. It embodies oral culture characteristics such as memory aids, repetition, concrete imagery, communal engagement, and contextual utterances. In summary, the theoretical framework clarifies the thematic examination of Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala.

Chapterisation

The study comprises six chapters. Chapter One, "Introduction", situates the study within the broader context of Tribal Language Poetry in Kerala. The chapter outlines the significance, research gap, objectives, scope, and methodology. It also provides a conceptual understanding of Tribal Language Literature. The chapter also justifies the selection of the poets and explains the rationale for adopting broad thematic areas for analysis. Chapter Two, titled "From Slavery to Survival: A Thematic Analysis of Sukumaran Chaligadha's Rawla Language Poems", examines the selected Rawla language poems of Sukumaran Chaligadha. It employs a theoretical framework combining Spivak's subaltern theory, Hall's cultural identity, Crenshaw's intersectionality, Bhabha's Third Space, ecofeminism, linguistic decolonisation, and orality studies. Chaligadha's poetry archives the community's historical experiences of slavery, indigenous knowledge systems, loss of tribal identity, and its relationship with the natural environment.

Chapter Three, "Portrayal of Land, Life, And Loss: A Reading of Select Irula

Language Poems of Manikandan Attappadi”, analyses selected poems from *Malleespara Mudi*, an Irula language poetry collection. The chapter applies Bhabha’s concept of the third space and Spivak’s “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” Stuart Hall’s cultural identity, Crenshaw’s intersectionality, ecofeminism, and David Crystal’s concept of language death. The poems depict the life, culture, and traditions of the Irula community in Attappadi. It also addresses social structures, rituals, women’s experiences, human-environment relationships, destruction of tribal values, poverty, and the need for the preservation of indigenous knowledge.

Chapter Four, titled “Tribal Womanhood and Nature: A Reading of Dhanya Vengacheri’s Mavilan Tulu Poems”, explores the themes from the selected poems from her poetry collection *Mire Neeru*. The chapter employs a framework that incorporates ecofeminism, deep ecology, intersectionality, and orality. It analyses themes such as how the poems depict the symbiosis between women and nature, their objectification by patriarchal structures, and the double marginalisation faced by tribal women. Chapter Five, titled “Conclusion”, summarises the key findings emerging from the thematic analysis of the selected tribal language poems of Kerala. It is followed by recommendations for further research and scholarly engagement with Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala.

This study uses the words ‘tribe,’ ‘indigenous,’ ‘community,’ and ‘Adivasi’ interchangeably, with due respect to the communities concerned. The documentation in this thesis closely follows the 9th edition of the MLA Handbook.

CHAPTER-2

FROM SLAVERY TO SURVIVAL: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF SUKUMARAN CHALIGADHA'S RAWLA LANGUAGE POEMS

(Kaadunta kare ennebuttontumu pogam poga/ nanonntumu aalummaadey)

(The stain of the forest will never leave me/ I will never lose it (my trans.))

(*Kaadu*, lines 30-31)

Introducing Wayanad: Contextualising Sukumaran Chaligadha's Poems

The southern part of the Deccan Plateau, Wayanad, is the only plateau in Kerala. It lies at an altitude of 700 to 2,100 metres above sea level. It was formed as Kerala's 12th district on November 1, 1980. Wayanad shares borders with Coorg, Mysore, and Chamarajanagar districts of Karnataka, as well as the Nilgiris district in Tamil Nadu. It is bordered by Kozhikode, Kannur, and Malappuram districts within the state. Notably, it is the only district in Kerala that shares boundaries with two neighbouring states. It covers an area of 2,132 km². As per the 2011 Census, it has a population of 817,420, including a significant tribal population. It has the lowest population density and the highest tribal population in the state. The district's geography includes dense forests, hills, slopes, and farmlands. Additionally, the River Kabani and its tributaries support a rich biodiversity. The high altitude and distinct climate contribute to the region's diverse flora and fauna.

There are different opinions regarding the origin of the name 'Wayanad'. One folk etymology suggests that Wayanad originated from *Vana Nadu*, meaning the 'land of forests', which later became Wayanad. According to *Wayanad: Way Beyond*, "The literal translation of 'Wayanad' is 'Wayal-nad' or 'the land of paddy fields'" (6). This

folk etymology links to the farming-oriented life of the inhabitants. Perennial plantation crops and spices are common in the region, including coffee, tea, pepper, cardamom, rubber, ginger, and vanilla, as well as rice. Santha Thulaseedharan opines that the name originated from *Vazhi Nadu*, the land of pathways (21).

The large concentration of tribal populations has long been a defining feature of the land. K. Panoor, one of the renowned writers and civic rights activists in Malayalam, once referred to Wayanad as ‘Kerala’s Africa’ in the title of his controversial travelogue *Keralathile Africa*, which emphasises the poverty-stricken lives of the ethnic groups of Wayanad at the time. Around fifteen tribal groups have been identified within the region (Santha Thulaseedharan 19), including Kurichya, Paniya, Kattunaikka, Mullukkuruma, Adiya, and Thachanada (Santha Thulaseedharan 18). Each group has its language, customs, and lifestyle. Among them, Paniya is the largest tribal community in the state (Sekhar and Sumalatha 6). Kattunaikka is considered one of the most primitive tribal groups, with a very low literacy rate. The poet Sukumaran Chaligadha hails from the Rawla community of Wayanad. The Rawla/Ravula community, also known as Adiya, which was once considered a slave sect, has a significant role in the history of Wayanad.

The Rawla Legacy

The Rawla community is widely known as Adiyar. It is also identified as Adiyans, Adigars, and Adigals (KIRTADS). The community is usually found in both Kerala and Karnataka. According to the data provided by KIRTADS, the community is concentrated in Edappady, Cherur, Mottonkara, Kuppathode, Mudiramula, Bavali, and the low-lying lands of Thaliparamba and the north Wayanad Taluks. They are also to

be found in Mysore. According to the 2011 census, their population can be estimated to be 11,526. Adiyar means 'slave' or '*Adima*' in Malayalam. The Adiya is one of the tribal sects of enslaved persons in Kerala. As the name indicates, they were the bonded labourers of landlords. Rawla is a name by which people of the community address themselves.

The mother tongue of the community is the Rawla language. The Rawla language in Kerala is considered a Malayalamoid language (a language closely related to Malayalam) under the Ravulic subsection (Hammarström et al.). Azeez Tharuvana notes that the Rawla language is a distinct dialect blending Kannada and Malayalam, with similarities to the Paniyar language. It is now spoken only within their hamlets (*kullu*) and lacks a script. However, researchers speculate that it once had a script, citing lines from their death songs that mentions sending palm leaf messages to distant villages. Over time, the script may have been lost along with elements of their unique culture and identity (Tharuvana 86). Most of the people in the community are bilingual. They can converse in Malayalam as the residents of Kerala state. Rawla is a scriptless language which depends on Malayalam scripts for writing. Sukumaran Chaligadha, a writer hailing from the Rawla community, is a bilingual writer who excels in both the Rawla and Malayalam languages.

Sukumaran Chaligadha

Sukumaran Chaligadha is a prominent tribal poet from Kerala who has been actively contributing to the literary world of Malayalam and Rawla languages. His poetry centres around the lives, culture, traditions, and struggles for the survival of tribal communities. His works suggest that for him, writing serves as a more powerful

form of resistance than direct protest.

The poet, initially named Bethimaran, was born to Rajan and Machi in Chaligadha, a small village near the Kabani River, close to Kuruva Island in Wayanad. He was officially given the name Sukumaran by his school headmaster (Athira 230). He resides and acts as the *Ooru Mooppan* of his hamlet (tribal chieftain).

He has penned several notable poems and has acted as the first editor of the anthology of Tribal Language Poetry titled *Gothra Kavitha*, published by DC Books in 2021. His writings are influenced by the history, myth, geography, climate and people of Wayanad as well as the Rawla community. He has also written short stories, songs, and screenplays. Sukumaran Chaligadha has actively participated in street plays, theatre, documentaries, short films, cinema, and radio dramas in addition to poetry. His bilingual autobiography, *Bethimaran*, was published by Olive Publications, Calicut, in 2022. *Kuru* is his memoir published by Olive Publications, Calicut, in 2023. He is a member of the General Council of the Sahithya Akademi, Kerala. Sukumaran Chaligadha now acts as a powerful voice for his community, using his multifaceted creative journey to preserve and promote the cultural identity of the Rawla community.

A Critical Thematic Exploration of Chaligadha's Poems

The ethnographic and historical context of Wayanad and the Rawla tribal community, particularly through the life and works of Sukumaran Chaligadha. The chapter employs a combination of postcolonial, subaltern, ecofeminist, and linguistic concepts. This framework helps to examine the themes of Rawla language poems by Sukumaran Chaligadha. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern is relevant in evaluating how Chaligadha's writings emerge from and respond to

structural silencing. His poems provide a platform for tribal women, bonded labourers, and elders whose voices have historically been excluded from mainstream discourse. They express resistance through daily experiences, memory, and oral traditions.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's theory of linguistic decolonisation is also significant. Chaligadha's choice of writing in his mother tongue resists dominant linguistic hierarchies and becomes a political act that asserts cultural autonomy. His bilingualism helps bridge the gap between tribal and mainstream literary spaces. Walter J. Ong's ideas on orality help explain the oral characteristics in his poetry, including repetition, rhythm, and collective voice. Ecofeminism, particularly in the works of Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, shows the intimate connection between tribal women, land, and survival. The poet often portrays women as caregivers and labourers whose lives are intertwined with nature and burdened by patriarchy. Additionally, the concept of deep ecology is also used to interpret the relationship between tribal nature and humans. Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory explains how the poems express both continuity and change. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory helps read the overlapping experiences of caste, class, gender, and indigeneity within Chaligadha's work.

Embodied Traditions: The Rawla Way of Living

This section examines the Rawla tribal life portrayed in the selected Rawla poems of Sukumaran Chaligadha. The poem "*Mantam*" (Group (my trans.)) brings out the imagery of a typical Adiya tribe house, which is made up of bamboo and mud. C.V. Joy notes that there are thirty-three family groups among them. These family groups are known as *mantam* (Joy 77). The houses in the hamlet are called *kudi* or *kullu*, as mentioned by the poet in the following lines,

<i>Onte mulechcha</i>	The hamlet that was built with
<i>Mulekkaallu kullumu</i>	bamboo sprouted together,
<i>Puttu kalaantha</i>	and the wall plastered with
<i>Moginna mathillumu</i>	mud from the termite tube (my trans.)

(Chaligadha, lines 13-16)

It is typically built up of bamboo and mud, which can be sourced from termite mud tubes, as depicted in the poem “*puttu kalaantha*” (Chaligadha, line 15) (here, *puttu mannu* refers to the mud from termite mud tubes rather than ant hills). The roof is made up of wild grasses or straw. The poet portrays the usage of grass to cover themselves against the cold climate, saying “*kulirukku puthechcha/ poomi pullumu*” (Chaligadha, lines 17-18) (the grass on the earth/ covered against the cold (my trans.)), which may be a personal reference, as he hails from Wayanad, a district known for its cold weather.

Hunting of small animals and birds is a practice among the Rawla community. The poem “*Raantu Pullu*” (Two Birds (my trans.)) depicts the birds that are hunted. There is a reference that the hunted birds are saved by his mother. His father already knew about the hunting, having seen the feather on the arrow. Arne Naess opines that, in numerous instances, the act of killing an animal to sustain a starving child is construed as a moral obligation. Naess further contends that ethical responsibilities towards individuals who have long been integral members of a community outweigh those owed to transient or incidental visitors. Nevertheless, he asserts that such obligations do not constitute a violation of the principle of equality intrinsic to the natural order (Sharma 70). The narrator’s mother is carrying two wounded birds that she has found in the forest, which she believes were hunted by an unknown hunter,

when she returns home. The narrator's mother represents the same generosity towards the injured birds, just as nature provides refuge and restoration to all living beings. This imagery conveys the connection between tribal communities and the environment. It depicts the harmony and compassion that define both motherhood and nature.

The themes of family and relationships also reveal the critical aspects of Rawla tribal life. The community of Rawla usually follow the nuclear family system within the hamlets. Their houses are called *Kudi* or *Kullu*. C.V. Joy observes that "a joint family system, where all family members live under one roof, does not exist in the Adiya tradition. Each married couple builds a separate hut and lives separately. This new *Kullu* is usually constructed close to the hut of their parents" (Joy 78). Family and home are evident in the poems of Sukumaran Chaligadha. The theme of family dynamics is evident in the poem "*Teebikkadu*" (Television Forest). The family in the poem consists of the narrator, his wife and the child. The first stanza of the poem shows the job division in the family as the protagonist says, *Enne uchche mayaakki kidathinto*

Raatti poomine

tadaaberi tadaaberi

Thudekkinto (5-8)

The afternoon lulls me to sleep,

while my wife gently mops the floor

(my trans.)

The narrator, presumably the head of the family, is preparing to take an afternoon nap while his wife mops the floor, and their daughter watches television. This scene illustrates a household structure shaped by patriarchal norms, where the man is expected to be the primary earning member while the woman is responsible for domestic chores. Mies writes that much of the social cost of reproducing the labour force within industrial societies is externalised within these societies themselves. This

is facilitated through the patriarchal-capitalist sexual division of labour, whereby women's household labour is defined as non-productive and hence not remunerated. Women are defined as housewives (sic) and their work is omitted from GNP calculations. Women can therefore be called the internal colony of the system (Mies 58). This is evident when the daughter asks her mother whether they would find good firewood if they went to the forest shown on TV, seeking confirmation from her mother (Chaligadha, lines 17-21). The question implies that the mother regularly collects firewood from the forest as part of her daily routine. The responsibilities of household work are traditionally passed from mother to daughter, a notion reinforced by the use of the pronoun 'we' in the girl's question, indicating her inclusion in this inherited role. This intergenerational transmission of knowledge embodies Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist notion that indigenous sylvicultural practices are rooted in the sustainable and regenerative utilisation of the diverse forms and functions of forests and trees. This collective knowledge is transmitted across generations through active engagement in forest regeneration and the extraction of resources from forest ecosystems, supporting both forest-based and agrarian livelihoods. Women, in particular, play a central role in the use and management of forest and tree products (Shiva 58). The relationship between parents and the child is also evident in the poem, indicating a happy family atmosphere. The young girl's question about whether they would find more firewood in the forest she sees on television reveals her curiosity and innocence. The question spreads a smile to both parents. The emotion and mood of the poem suggest a peaceful and happy family atmosphere.

The poem "*Koodanthe*" (Lap (my trans.)) depicts the image of a mother who gave birth to and raised ten children amid poverty under the rules of the *Thambaran*

(the landlord). She has a child to breastfeed. While breastfeeding her child, she is compelled to interrupt midway, as she must go and bow before the *Thambaran*, the landlord to whom they are bound in servitude. The poem brings out the darker side of the social and familial relationships within a feudal system, where tribal people were once dehumanised and treated like animals. P. Prayer Elmo Raj argues that within the global division of labour, women are the most marginalised and constitute a surplus labour army. Patriarchal socio-economic structures produce value through their exploitation. The roles of women in reproduction and family life, and their connection to broader social relations, demonstrate that the “materialist” conception of the subject is inherently gendered (112).

The poem “*Chaddukanatha Oru Tata*” portrays different emotions and relationships within the family. The poem presents the image of a young tribal man coming home for a short visit from his workplace. The poem vividly portrays the happiness of the reunion and also the sadness of the departure. It also depicts the children’s happiness in contrast to the adult concerns of finances and labour, creating a poignant juxtaposition of innocence and the harsh realities of life.

<i>Makkanda otta</i>	The children run
<i>Uchchei bolttuntappalle</i>	like Usain Bolt,
<i>Daukkutti puticheyei</i>	Clung tightly,
<i>Dhritaraashtaruntapalle</i>	Like Dhritarashtra embraced,
<i>Naanakkanta</i>	With a quiet happiness,
<i>Chantochode</i>	The wife’s eyes gently closed.
<i>Raattinda kannu</i>	(my trans.)

Attenjupponna (Chaligadha, lines 14-21)

His children ran to him with the speed of Usain Bolt, their excitement propelling them forward, and hugged him tightly. His wife closes her eyes in happiness. Mother-in-law was busy in the kitchen. Neighbours peeped in and enquired, “Have you come?” This suggests the sense of belonging and contentment within his family, despite their poverty and economic hardships. His wife’s joy gradually fades as he prepares to leave, poignantly expressed in the line “*raattinte mukaaru/ beenkikkintu*” (Chaligadha, lines 48-49) (wife’s face became dull (my trans.)). Finally, he bids farewell to his family, with a “*chaddukanatha oru tata*” (Chaligadha, lines 53) (a silent tata (my trans.)). They are holding onto the hope that they will reunite again for *Kaavu*, the *Valliyoore Kavuvu* temple festival, an event of great cultural significance for the Rawla community. The silent tata conveys an absence of happiness, symbolising the burden of responsibilities and the unspoken struggles they endure.

Ritual, Culture and Indigenous Art Forms of Rawla

Chaligadha’s poems are an archive of the cultural practices and rituals of the Rawla community. The poem “*Kanaladi*” vividly portrays the traditional rituals of the Rawla community. *Kanaladi* is a hierarchical position in the Rawla community, which comes after *Mooppan* and *Chemmakkar*. Azeez Tharuvana, in the book *Wayanattile Adivasikal*, explains that, in the Rawla community, from *chemmams* (groups) like Nalappa and Mommotte are said to be of lower status. It is these groups that carry out corpse cremation; their members are known as *Kanaladis* (Tharuvana 82). The poem begins with the performance of *Kanaladi*, the chief priest who performs sacred rituals

for the Rawla community. According to C.V. Joy, a *Kanaladi*'s responsibilities include washing the deceased, taking the deceased to the cremation ground and eating *bali choru* (the sacred rice related to post-death rituals) (Joy 93). *Kanaladi* is described as wearing a red silk cloth and carrying *thudi* and *kuzhal* in the poem. Additionally, he wears a waist chain with bells. He unites the voices of the village. *Kanaladi* can be considered the embodiment of the wisdom and knowledge passed through generations. His role in the rituals is not merely ceremonial. However, it conveys values, beliefs, and historical memories that define the identity of the Rawla community. The language of these rituals, expressed through chants, gestures, and instruments, functions as a cultural text. This aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's assertion that an individual's identity and sense of distinctiveness are grounded in their values, which are mediated through language. Language functions as the repository of culture, serving as a collective memory of a community's historical and social experiences. Culture and language are inextricably linked, as language facilitates the genesis, development, preservation, articulation, and intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge (Thiong'o 15).

The rituals performed by *Kanaladi* demonstrate this transmission of cultural values and identity through oral and performative traditions. The poem also vividly portrays the post-death rituals of the Rawla community. When someone passes away in the community, a ritual called *Kuntipula* is conducted on the following day, which includes a feast. Following this, the most significant ceremony, *Pulakuliya*, is held on the thirteenth day. *Kanaladi* is assigned to lead the post-death rituals and is assisted by individuals known as *Karimmikal*. All the rituals are carried out under the leadership of the *Kuntikari*. In a specially prepared shed, two figures made of dried paddy are placed,

symbolising the dead. The *Kanaladi* recounts all the good deeds of the departed during their lifetime, regardless of their reputation. Even the most ill-reputed individual is depicted as virtuous during this time (Tharuvana 89). In the poem, the lines “*Oh.../ entenki/ koodikkommi*” (Chaligadha, lines 15-17) (Oh.../ Then/ you start (About giving the order to the women to cry together) (my trans.) is a direct indication of the post-death ritual, which refers to the tradition in which women of the community mourn collectively as part of the mourning process. Tharuvana writes, “The women closely related to the deceased gather around the symbolic figures and cry loudly. Gradually, other women console them and lead them inside to the house” (Tharuvana 89).

The poem also depicts the image of *Kanaladi* singing the *chembana* (*chembane*) song. *Chembanappattu*, also known as the *Chembana* song, is a performance by *Kanaladi* as part of the post-death rituals. *Kanaladi* is getting special remuneration for their *chembane* performance. Finally, the post-death ceremony concludes with a feast, after which everyone disperses to their places. The purpose of the song is to get rid of the sorrow of the beloveds of the deceased. It is accompanied by the indigenous percussion instrument *thudi* (Joy 89). Moreover, the last stanza of the poem indicates the practice of *daivathe kanal* (meeting the god) as part of *adiyanthiram* (post-death ritual). This is a ritual in which *Kanaladi* meets God on behalf of the deceased. C. V. Joy says that *Kanaladi* sits at the corner of the shed, fully covered by a blanket. In front of him, in a winnowing basket, were some rice grains and a few metallic bells of a *chilanka*. At the same time, others start singing using *cheeni* and *thudi* (Joy 91). Then *Kanaladi* starts answering all the questions asked by the people on behalf of the deceased, sitting under the blanket in the form of a song. This is emphasised in the following lines.

<i>Jammukka poththi</i>	Covered by the blanket,
<i>Mukichittu</i>	holding a winnowing basket.
<i>Muraaputtichu</i>	jingling rice-ghungroo bell mixture
<i>Muraammani kulukki</i>	Shivers and giving
<i>Burevvettu</i>	blessings to everyone...
<i>Nuveellinda</i>	<i>Kanaladi</i> (my trans.)
<i>Kanaladi</i>	
(Chaligadha, lines 49-55)	

“*Kanaladi*” mirrors the interaction between cultures, land, and community. It focuses on the role of ritual as a way to preserve cultural identity, connect with ancestors, and maintain social harmony. At its heart, the poem celebrates the act of bringing together a community to participate in sacred traditions, ensuring that the legacy of the past continues to flourish in the present and future.

The poem “*Mantam*” features imagery of a group conversing with children, recalling and reflecting on their past.

<i>Betti buthechcha jaag</i>	Thinking about the land once cultivated,
<i>Kannu thettiponnane</i>	Now slipped out of the hand.
<i>Ninechu,</i>	Thinking about the diseases in
<i>Melukairoga</i>	the arms as well as the body.
<i>Ninechuppudichu</i>	Telling old tales,
<i>Kathe kathe kambala</i>	Drinking leftover porridge,
<i>Kanchi kudichu</i>	Talking to the children, the group (my trans.)

Pullekku gaadhiyintu

Manta... (Chaligadha, lines 24-32)

This ties into the oral traditions of the Rawla tribe, where knowledge, customs, and history are passed down through generations orally. In the absence of written records, oral storytelling becomes a vital method of cultural preservation. This practice preserves their identity, culture, and collective memory, despite external forces of oppression. This connection between memory, identity, and oral transmission refers to Walter J. Ong's argument that, without writing, the human mind had to adapt to preserve knowledge. It did this by relying on repetition and by structuring thought itself into memorable, formulaic patterns (Ong 24). The poem showcases this form of cultural continuity, where memory and oral exchange ensure the survival of indigenous identity.

Another poem, "*Chinthe*", mentions several deities, including Siva, Kali, and the local deity *Kallurachan*. Adiyans are Hindus by religion, but have no temples of their own (KIRTADS). The reference to *Thira* is also mentioned in the poem. Adiyar conducts *Thira*, a ritualistic folk-art performance, to please the gods. It also refers to "*Kallukottage Kallu Devaru*" (Chaligadha, line 11) (stone god in the stone cave (my trans.)), symbolising the ancestral tribal gods. The lines "*Thibhantanadintu / bayannaatu jogi/ purappattu ponna*" (Chaligadha, lines 27-29) (Wayanad Jogi left the burning land, (my trans.)) mentioned the name Jogi, which can be a lead to Jogiyachan, a prominent god of the community. Indu V Menon says that Jogiyachan may be one of the cursed sons of the sage Jamadagni (Gadhika 30). Menon further describes Thirunnelli Jogiyachan as People believe Jogiyachan rests like a stone stump in *Pakshi*

Patalam, a natural rock cave situated within the jungle. According to Thirunelli Joyichayan's song, he was born in a palace of bronze. Despite being disabled, weak, blind, and physically deformed, he is depicted with a bronze earring, a bangle, an ascetic's robe, and a *kamandalu* pot. He engages with all opinions yet exerts remarkable power; his presence alone silences birds and animals. Although a wandering ascetic, he embodies supreme authority. He visits the sick and bedridden in full ritual attire, carrying a pipe and a peacock-feather fan, and is believed to cure ailments using rice flakes, coconut, and fire. He is considered capable of accessing spaces beyond the reach of other deities (Gadhika 31).

References to the indigenous art forms of the Rawla community are also evident in Chaligadha's poems. The poem "*Mantam*" (Group) references *Kambalaatti* (Chaligadha, line 12) performance. *Koramaba Kali*, also known as *Kambala Natti*, is a traditional art form practised by the Paniya and Rawla tribal communities. This agricultural dance is performed during the paddy planting season. The *Koramba*, a triangular umbrella hat crafted from bamboo, was historically utilised by tribal farmers to shield themselves from the sun and rain while engaged in agricultural activities. The term *Kambala* refers to a ploughed paddy field, while *Kambalanatti* denotes the process of planting paddy saplings. The movements of the dancers resemble paddy planting. Typically, three *thudis* are used in the performance. The percussion artists stand on the embankment of the paddy field, providing rhythmic beats that guide the dancers. Notably, the dance places greater emphasis on the rhythmic patterns produced by the *thudi* than on the lyrics. These poems exemplify how poetry serves as a space for preserving traditions and giving visibility to a marginalised culture. Rituals and art forms are a vital aspect of cultural expression. It represents the spiritual worldview of

the community and shapes both individual and collective experiences. The following section explores how Chaligadha portrays these ritual practices and their symbolic significance in his poetry. These poems demonstrate how ritual practices are integral to the community's daily life. They depict shared customs and the act of keeping traditions alive through collective performance.

Portrayal of Tribal- Forest Relationship

Wayanad, the native place of the poet, is renowned for its lush forests and abundant greenery. The hamlets of the Adiya community, from which the poet hails, are often found near the forests but not within them. Nevertheless, the community relies on the forest for their livelihood. Sukumaran Chaligadha's poems reveal the strong emotional bond the people of this community share with the forest. "*Teebikkaadu*" (Television Forest (my trans.)) is a poem that portrays the themes of tribal life and its relationship with the forest. The child in the poem wonders whether they would get more firewood if they went to the forest seen on television. This shows how the community depends on the forest for their livelihood. For many in the young generation of tribal communities, the forest is not a personal experience, as they are moving away from their culture and traditions. Children and the forest are also seen in the poem "*Ente Makka Kaadune Barekkinto*" (My Children are Drawing the Forest (my trans.)). Once their drawing is complete, they begin inviting various elements of nature, such as wind, sun, mountains, rivers, birds, animals, flowers, and rain into their imagined forest, bringing it to life.

kaadune bulikkinto

calling the wind,

<i>beyillune bulikkinto</i>	calling the sun,
<i>malene bulikkinto</i>	calling the mountains,
<i>puvene bulikkinto</i>	calling the river,
<i>pullune bulikkinto</i>	calling the birds,
<i>mrgathine bulikkinto</i>	calling the animals,
<i>poovune bulikkinto</i>	calling the flowers,
<i>paamune bulikkinto</i>	calling the rain
(Chaligadha, lines 3-14)	(my trans.)

The poem condemns a world where nature has become a concept rather than a lived reality for the youngest generations of indigenous communities. However, from the above lines, it is evident that they all carry their ancestral connection to the forest within them. The children's engagement with the imaginary forest suggests the transmission of traditional knowledge and values from one generation to the next. Vandana Shiva writes, "at current rates of destruction, by the year 2050 all tropical forests will have disappeared, and with tropical forests, will disappear the diversity of life they support" (Shiva xiii). The destruction of the forest affects all the lives associated with it, including those of the local tribes. The children's act of drawing and naming forest elements becomes a form of resistance, reasserting ecological relationships and collective memory. This continuity is vital for preserving their identity and indigeneity.

Each natural element mentioned in the above lines refers to the interdependence between tribals and nature. This interconnectedness is central to their identity and survival, which underlines respect for all forms of life. This can be

connected to the famous speech of Chief Seattle, delivered in 1854, in response to the President of the United States, who sent word that he wished to purchase their land. This speech is a profound expression of Native American wisdom, emphasising the spiritual connection between his people and the land and can be considered as the wisdom that every Indigenous community carries within them, globally. Vandana Shiva agrees with this.

Chief Seattle's letter, which has become a major inspiration for the ecology movement, states, 'This we know - the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it.

Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself' (Shiva 18)

In his speech, he emphasises the rivers as brothers, the air as a shared spirit, and the earth as a mother, reinforcing the interconnectedness of all living things. This means that tribal wisdom unites Indigenous people all over the world, and it is passed down through generations as collective imaginations and experiences, as seen in the lines mentioned above. The children's creative expression serves as a form of resistance, reaffirming their identity and the importance of their interconnectedness with nature in a changing world.

Nnaanne nnokka

As I watch all of this,

Malenjundu

In the forests, my children have drawn,

makke barechcha kadili

I am not alone sitting there;

orththene lechule

behind me,

alla ortheneyalla

many people are seated (my trans.)

ente bovvakke

baraabariyaalukkaaru

lechulaa (Chaligadha, lines 14-22)

The poem concludes with the image of the protagonist seeking to reconnect with the traditions and cultural heritage of their community. It is noted that both the parents and children are part of a lineage with a rich history, one that was once suppressed and subjugated. The speaker serves as a mediator, linking the ancestors who once lived in harmony with real forests to the children who now construct nature through imagination. In this context, the forest functions as an imaginary space for the children. Their act of “calling” the elements of nature, such as wind, sun, mountains, rivers, and more, suggests that the forest they create is alive in their minds. The children bridge the gap between reality and imagination through their artistic expression. Unknowingly, they connect themselves with their unseen ancestors, who sit behind their father in the forest they have drawn. Here, Chaligadha’s imagined forest functions as an interlocutor. It becomes a living memory that speaks to his children.

Another poem, “*Kaadu*” (Forest (my trans.)), is a personal reflection on the speaker’s relationship with their ancestral roots, particularly their connection to nature, culture, and tradition. It begins with the speaker’s father introducing them to the forest, where they receive their first lesson before attending formal schooling. The first story they learn is about life itself, which sheds light on the significance of experiential learning, where knowledge is not derived from books but through lived experiences, stories, and nature. This immersion deepens the speaker’s understanding of their

identity and community. This is clearly stated in the stanza given below.

<i>Oru marappaamu koythu,</i>	Plucking a wild fruit,
<i>Puve chaaḍi kattaanthu</i>	Leaping across streams,
<i>Billu kulechu</i>	Bending bows,
<i>Kaadutaa naatta annubhavichchu</i>	Sensing the forest's fragrance
<i>Aadhya padeppu</i>	the first lessons of learning
(Chaligadha, lines 22-26)	(my trans.)

The poem ends with the lines “*Kaadunta kare ennebuttontumu pogam poga/ nanonntumu aalummaadey*” (Chaligadha, lines 30-31) (The stain of the forest will never leave me/ I will never lose it (my trans.)). These lines express the emotional and cultural connection between the speaker and the forest. The phrase “The stain of the forest” is symbolic, suggesting that the experiences, identity, and traditions associated with the forest are an inseparable part of the speaker's life. The word “stain” can imply both a physical and metaphorical mark, perhaps the literal traces of the forest on one's body and the lasting imprint on one's soul.

The line, “Nor will I ever let it go”, reinforces this bond, showing that the connection is not just inevitable but also intentional. The speaker does not wish to erase or distance themselves from their roots. This indicates a strong sense of belonging and resistance against cultural erasure. The significant themes in the lines are identity, heritage, and the struggle of tribal communities to preserve their traditions in the face of external influences. The poem suggests that even if society expects assimilation, the speaker proudly holds onto their cultural heritage. Moreover, as Stuart Hall explains,

cultural identity is not fixed but is a matter of ‘being’ as well as ‘becoming’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past” (225). In this poem, the speaker reclaims identity by reimagining the forest not merely as a physical space but as a repository of collective memory.

The poem “*Raantu Pullu*” (Two Birds (my trans.)) opens with the vivid imagery of two birds that the narrator’s mother brought back from the forest on her way home.

Kaadukkupponna ammente	In the bundle in the mother’s hands
Kaiyyila pothikkettili	When she returned from the forest,
Raantu pullintha.	There were two birds.
Ontu karuththavo,	One was black,
ontu chuvaanthavo...	The other one was red... (my trans.)
(Chaligadha, lines 1-5)	

The two birds, one black and the other red, carry multifaceted symbolism. Black is often seen as the colour representing marginalised communities, while red symbolises resistance. The following lines suggest that these birds are hunted and hurt, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for Black people and Native Red Indians, as well as Indian indigenous communities who share a common history of suppression and subjugation, marked by violence and cultural erasure.

<i>Bedente peru pareyaathe</i>	Without telling the hunter's name,
<i>Oru kannumu chovdumaachchu</i>	With one eye and one ear,
<i>Aira kaadukku paraantha</i>	They flew into the forest (my trans.)
(Chaligadha, lines 26-28)	

The hunter does not have a name, which enhances its universality. It depicts the birds flying into the forest with one eye and one ear. It is a continuation of the imagery introduced at the beginning of the poem, where one bird is wounded in the eye and the other in the ear. This imagery signifies the birds' revenge, representing nature's response to the hunter's actions. The above-discussed poems thus underline how the forest is not just a source of livelihood, but a space of belonging, memory, and emotional connection for the community.

Humans and Animals: Coexistence, Conflict, and Compassion

Tribal communities, especially those residing in and around forests, maintain a harmonious relationship with nature and its wildlife. At the same time, they face conflicts like wild animal attacks, accidents, and deaths. The poem "*Teebikkadu*" (Television Forest (self.)) begins with the image of the protagonist's daughter watching *Pulimurukan* (a Malayalam movie in which tiger-human conflict is the theme). He says:

<i>Pulinte murechillu kettinthichu</i>	Hearing the tiger's roar,
<i>Raakubarate</i>	The daughter, unable to sleep,
<i>Olincholinchimu churundumu</i>	shivers and curls up

<i>Jammuka poththi</i>	wrapping herself in the blankets
<i>Mellu mareppadakkayantu</i>	(my trans.)
<i>magaalu</i> (Chaligadha, lines 9-14)	

The daughter, representing the younger generation, struggles to sleep when she hears the tiger's roar on the television. The sound may feel unfamiliar to the child because she lives far from her ancestral tribal settlement and true tribal identity. Another reading can lead to her fear, the universal human fear of wild animals. Additionally, the trauma of losing friends and relatives in animal attacks and witnessing their settlements being destroyed can also be a reason for her fear towards wild animals. So, it can be interpreted that an inherent sense of both harmony and conflict with wildlife remains in her subconscious.

Tribal Identity: Struggles between Ancestral Roots and Modernity Loss of tribal identity is a recurring concern in indigenous literature. It reveals their struggles to protect ancestral roots in modern times. The poem *Teebikkadu* (Television Forest) explores the struggles of the younger generation as they navigate between their tribal identity and the contemporary lifestyle shaped by dominant societal norms. The poem is set in a family where the daughter watches *Pulimurukan* (a Malayalam movie in which the forest and tiger play a significant role). The daughter, innocently fascinated by the movie, asks:

<i>Avva ee teebili</i>	Mom, if we go to the forest
<i>kandubanta</i>	We see on TV,
<i>Kaatukku ponnenki</i>	Won't we find good firewood there?
<i>Nalla kollu kittuvo</i>	Right, Mom?
	<i>Allaa avva?</i> (Chaligadha, lines 17-21)
	(my trans.)

This scene demonstrates the conflict the younger generation faces between their authentic tribal identity and the modern lifestyle imposed by mainstream society. At home, they follow different customs, which the mainstream society diminishes once they step outside their familiar environment. The daughter's idea of collecting firewood from a forest, as seen on television, reveals her innocence and the crisis of finding new ways to sustain their livelihood. Following *Pulimurugan*, her transition to *Baahubali 2* exemplifies the younger generation's ability to adapt to new cultural contexts, often leaving behind their indigenous values and identity. The girl represents the younger generation of the community, struggling to reconcile the traditional world of her tribe, embodied in her knowledge of firewood and forest life, and the modern world of cinema and technology. "Colonialism and masculinist forestry" (Shiva 58) can be one of the reasons, as Vandan Shiva says:

When the British colonised India, they first colonised her forests. Ignorant of their wealth and of the wealth of knowledge of local people to sustainably manage the forests, they displaced local rights, local needs and local knowledge and reduced this primary source of life into a timber mine. Women's subsistence economy based on the forest was

replaced by the commercial economy of British colonialism (Shiva 58).

Through this argument, the poem “*Teebikkaadu*” (Television Forest (my trans.)) can also lead to the reading that the girl representing the young generation of the community, who are disconnected from the real experiences of the forest. The poem “*Chinthe*” (Cloth (my trans.)) depicts how modern developmental policies and cultural invasions have affected the cultural and spiritual lives of the tribes.

<i>Achappey</i>	The left smell of the soil’s sweetness
<i>paadiyaanamannukku</i>	where grandfather sang and danced
<i>Chavi buttanaatta</i>	(my trans.)
(Chaligadha, lines 8-9)	

The left smell of the soil’s sweetness, where *Valyachan* (grandfather) once sang and danced, signifies the loss of cultural or ancestral heritage. As Stuart Hall explains, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall 225). Here, the tribe’s unfolding narrative reveals how memory and identity are deeply intertwined with the land and its living history. The poem ends with a lament that,

<i>Aje bechcha</i>	Goddess <i>Kali</i> , once offered <i>Dakshina</i> ,
<i>dvarupagaathikku</i>	is now bound to the walls,
<i>Baayi mookku barechchu</i>	with the mouth and nose crudely drawn
<i>Mathilu pudichu kettiyitta</i>	Our Kallurachan has no path left
<i>Enkanda</i>	To perform <i>Aarattu</i> (my trans.)

kalloorachankupaaduva

Aaraattukettuva

porubhovukani (Chaligadha, lines

34-42)

These lines portray how modern developmental policies and cultural invasions have restricted the tribes' artistic and spiritual lives. The poet laments the fading essence of the true tribal soul, as their deities and sacred traditions are increasingly neglected or disregarded.

Tribal Students and Linguistic Alienation in Classrooms

The poem “*Kaadu*” (Forest (my trans.)) explores how language acts as a barrier to tribal children in their primary education. It opens with vivid imagery of the speaker's *Appen* (father) introducing him to the forest before taking him to school. His first lessons were mythical stories and songs from his *Achchappey* (grandfather). This depicts how his mother tongue, the Rawla language, shaped his early understanding of the world. The poet further says,

Ichchukkolukku pōnnapo

Ammene avva ennumu,

Appene appey ennumu parenjey

(Chaligadha, 27-29)

When I went to school,

I called my mother *Avva*.

My father *Appey*

(my trans.)

These lines suggest the poet's struggle with language as a child in school. The term “*Amma*” (mother) felt unfamiliar to him, as he had always called his mother “*Avva*” in

his native tongue. Similarly, *Appa* (father) was a new word for him, as he was used to saying *Appay*. This linguistic gap is the first challenge faced by students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Thiong'o addresses this as "learning, for a colonial child, became a cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience" (Thiong'o 17). He explains that colonial education distanced children from their own culture and history.

Since culture is a product of the history of a people, which it in turn reflects, the child was now being exposed exclusively to a culture that was a product of a world external to himself. He was being made to stand outside himself to look at himself: *Catching Them Young* is the title of a book on racism, class, sex, and politics in children's literature by Bob Dixon. 'Catching them young' as an aim was even more true of a colonial child. The images of this world and his place in it implanted in a child take years to eradicate, if they ever can be (Thiong'o 17).

Since culture reveals the history of the people, the colonial child was exposed only to a culture produced by a world foreign to him. This phenomenon is also observed in tribal children in Kerala, who start their formal education in Malayalam, a language that is often not their native language. Like the 'colonial child' described by Thiong'o, these children are exposed to a culture and worldview that is external to their community. Their native language, oral traditions, local knowledge, and cultural practices are not represented in textbooks or classroom discussions. However, tribal students encounter even greater emotional and social difficulties, as they often face marginalisation due to caste and language. This exclusion leads to high dropout rates, as students struggle to understand the medium of instruction. The poem emphasises the need for inclusive

education, where tribal children can begin their primary learning in their mother tongue alongside the regional or English languages. A culturally relevant curriculum that incorporates tribal stories, history, and ecological knowledge in textbooks would help bridge this gap, ensuring better engagement and connection for all students.

Mythological Allusions

The imagery of *Melu Lokam* and *Keezhu Lokam* is evident in the poem

<i>“Chinthe”.Keezhu loka</i>	Evening lamps lit by
<i>Melulu loka Eechira</i>	Both <i>Keezhu lokam</i> and <i>Melu lokam</i>
<i>apperaakku becha</i>	for grand deities were snuffed out
<i>Anthithiri bulaakku</i>	(my trans.)
<i>Manjanku ponna...</i>	
(Chaligadha, lines 16-21)	

The concept of *Melu Lokam* (the Upper World) resembles *Thampuran Lokam*, which is mentioned in the novel *Maveli Mantam* by K. J.Baby. *Thampuran Lokam* represents the world of landlords (*Thampurans*), where tribal people are reduced to mere enslaved people, which can be the earth itself. This parallel proposes that *Melu Lokam* can be the sky, which is believed to be the dwelling place of the gods.

Since *Melu Lokam* is not explicitly defined elsewhere, this interpretation is inferred from the definition of *Keezhu Lokam*, as explained in the preface to K. J. Baby’s famous novel *Maveli Mantam* by the eminent poet K. Sachidanandan. “The landlords make them believe that when they die, they will reach *Keezhu Lokam* (the lower world), where Karadi Thampuran, Cheriya Thampuratti, and Ambu Thampuran

will also be present” (7). This context suggests that *Keezhu Lokam* represents ‘life after death’. The landlords propagated this myth, claiming that the tribal people must continue working for them even after death, to reinforce their servitude. This is linked to Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony; wherein dominant powers maintain control by naturalising hierarchical systems as tradition or belief. As Gramsci notices, cultural domination is sustained through “spontaneous consent” that arises from internalised norms, rather than direct coercion (Gramsci 12). The myth of *Keezhu Lokam* thus functions as an ideological tool to normalise subjugation across generations.

The poem “*Kaadu*” (*The Forest*) makes references to *Melorachchan* and *Keeyoriththi*. They are the critical figures of *Pelappaattu*, an indigenous narrative of the Rawla community (Joy 71).

<i>Areli kettiyāna mani kulukki,</i>	Grandfather showed me <i>Iththi</i> and
<i>Tutti egelliththūkki pāna pātili,</i>	Acchan. By shaking the bell tied to the
<i>Achchenemu itthinemu achchappeyi</i>	waist In the songs, by hanging the <i>thudi</i>
<i>Kāttithantha</i> (Chaligadha, lines 4-7)	on the shoulder. (my trans.)

The community considers and respects *Melorachchan* and *Keeyoriththi* as fore-parents *Aadi Pithavu* and *Aadi Mathavu* (Joy 71). *Pelappattu* narrates how *Melorachchan* and *Keeyoriththi* are trapped and enslaved by *Pakkaththappan*. When they attempted to escape, *Pakkaththappan*, with the help of *Mali*, caught them and enslaved them forever. It is believed that this leads to the generational enslavement of the community.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith further explains that “for many indigenous writers’

stories are ways of passing down the beliefs and values of a culture in the hope that the new generations will treasure them and pass the story down further” (Smith 144-45), emphasising that these oral forms serve not only memory but agency. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o reinforces the role of oral traditions as vessels of cultural and political survival when he writes:

Thus, a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history: Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries (Thiongo 15).

By incorporating these mythical figures into a contemporary poem, the poet affirms the significance of unwritten cultural knowledge and reasserts it as part of a living tradition. Walter J. Ong explains that in oral cultures, “Fortunately, literacy, though it consumes its oral antecedents and, unless it is carefully monitored, even destroys their memory, is also infinitely adaptable. It can restore their memory, too” (Ong 14). In this way, the poem becomes both an act of remembrance and resistance. It also functions as a bridge between orality and textuality, which helps the marginalised voice to survive and be transmitted through generations.

Historical References

The references to bondage and labour can be seen in the poems of Sukumaran Chaligadha. The Rawla people historically belonged to the labouring class, working as bonded labourers under harsh conditions. The poem “*Mantam*” (Group (my trans.)) vividly describes labour-intensive activities such as carrying sacks of rice on the head.

For the Rawla, this resonates with their historical reality of being bonded labourers, where they were physically and economically tied to landowners, forced to work under exploitative conditions. The poet describes the *mantam* as

<i>kaimevekuppattu</i>	Hands touched the face,
<i>kolumbu baarukkuppattu</i>	Bones touched the stomach,
<i>are murukki</i>	Waist tightened,
<i>oodhu kirencheraa</i>	Ploughed hard and wept,
<i>mantaa..</i> (Chaligadha, lines 19-23)	The group (my trans.)

This imagery encapsulates the physical strain, hunger, and collective suffering endured by the community, transforming the *mantam*, the term for groups within the Rawla community, into a living testament to their shared hardship and resilience. Resilience and suffering can be an extended theme of bondage and labour.

The imagery of tightening the waist, weeping while ploughing, and recounting old stories indicates a sense of generational suffering. The Adiya people endured hardship, marginalisation, and poverty as part of the bondage labour prevalent in the society. The poet attempts to portray this communal resilience in his poem, much like the elders in the poem sharing stories with children and recalling the hardships of their past. The poem's portrayal of collective pain among the Rawla people represents this silencing.

The poem "*Kudaanthe*" (Lap) portrays the image of a woman whose life is entangled between her child and the fear of *Thambran* (*Thampuran/ Janmi*) to whom they are bound to work. The image of the mother feeding ten children with two

servings of rice could resonate with the societal role of mothers who are forced to act as the primary caretakers, struggling to feed their children with meagre resources, in a patriarchal society. The same mother who produces milk like “*Gudugudumaavu/ Peyyinta ppalle/ Ammi churaathinna*” (Chaligadha, lines 12-13) (Like the rain pouring down, after thunder (my trans.)) in her child’s presence had to force her child to stop because

<i>Anthibaarukku</i>	Has to go to the bow before
<i>Paikke maattuvva</i>	To quell the hunger of the belly in the
<i>Thambiraan thovva poonu...</i>	evening
<i>Maavu thoorintappalle</i>	Stop oozing the milk as the rain stops
<i>Chure battu... Pulle mathi</i>	Child, enough! (my trans.)
<i>Thambran</i>	
(Chaligadha, lines 17-22)	

Historically, the Rawla people were forced into bonded labour for landlords. The mother’s struggle to provide represents not only a physical challenge but also the larger economic oppression faced by the tribe, where survival was a daily battle. The poem has a refrain “*Avva...*” (Chaligadha 24) (momma... (my trans.)). The child’s lament adds emotional depth to the poem.

The poem “*Chaddhukanatha Oru Tata*” (A Silent Tata (my trans.)) ends with the lines “*Kaavukku baruveyi/ Chadhukkaanaatha oru tatta*” (Chaligadha, lines 50-53) (Will come back for *Kavu*/ A silent Tata (my trans.)). The term “*kaavu*” refers to the local name for the Valliyoore Kavu temple in Wayanad, which plays a significant role in the history of the Rawla and Paniya tribes. Valliyoore Kavu Temple is an ancient

Goddess Durga temple located on the outskirts of Mananthavady, Wayanad. The temple's annual festival, held in March and lasting for fourteen days, has traditionally been significant for tribal communities.

Much like the slave auctions of Black people in global history, Wayanad's past also witnessed the buying and selling of Rowlars and Paniyars by wealthy landlords. These landlords, driven by power and wealth, treated Paniyar and Rowlars as mere commodities, sometimes as symbols of status. These tribal sects were born to serve and die under the rule of their masters, deprived of individual freedom and rights. However, many in the younger generations, even within these communities, remain unaware of the painful chapters of their past. The lines "*Thibhantanadintu / bayannaatu jogi/ purappattu ponna*" (Chaligadha, lines 27-29) (Wayanad Jogi left the burning land (my trans.)), Apart from the myth of *Jogiyachan*, the reference to Wayanad Jogi leads to the Muthanga strike, which is the name of a tribal person who died during the clashes in the Muthanga Land Strike in 2003. It was a movement by tribal communities in Wayanad, demanding their rights to land and resources. This struggle manifests broader issues of land ownership, displacement, and the fight for tribal rights. The Wayanad Jogi leaving the burning land signifies a withdrawal or displacement of the community, symbolising their struggles against systemic injustice and the need for their voices to be heard.

Tribal migration to Coorg is another recurring theme in the poems of Chaligadha. The feudal exploitation of tribes persists in society in a new form. The tribes of Wayanad, particularly the Rowlars and Paniyas, are widely employed as cheap labourers in Karnataka, especially in the Ginger and coffee plantations of Kodagu (Coorg), a neighbouring district. Neethi Vedhi, a Human Rights NGO working for the

unprivileged sections of society, which is based in Wayanad, in its report on People's Tribunal on Migration Held on 22nd November 2008, reveals that the issues faced by Adivasi migrant labourers from Wayanad in Coorg's agricultural sector have been a topic of concern for over a decade. In recent years, their situation has worsened significantly, with increasing reports of unnatural deaths, exploitation, and atrocities frequently emphasised in the media (Neethi Vedhi 7).

Sukumaran Chaligatha's memoir *Bethimaran* describes that the poem "*Chaddhukanatha Oru Tata*" (A Silent Tata (my trans.)) is written from his own experience as a child labourer in the ginger farms of Kodagu. He recalls his first journey to Kodagu as a small child, where he was hired for a daily wage of just five rupees. For more than two months, he laboured at various tasks, yet the promised sum of about ₹800 was never paid. The working conditions were harsh; there were no toilets, and when men fell ill, they resorted to drinking packets of arrack. The physical toll was heavy, altering their bodies and health in ways they could not forget. Nevertheless, this slavery and torture were never spoken of in Kerala. He remembers the words of the *iththiyammas* (grandmothers), who lamented that they had raised ten to fifteen children only for them to toil for a single measure of rice (Chaligadha). This is confirmed by Neethi Vedhi, during their study about the migrant tribal laborers in Coorg found that large number of suspicious deaths, severe torture of Adivasi laborers, hard and strenuous manual labor, no precaution while using pesticides, no fixed working hours, low wages, child labor, lack of nutritious food, no medical facilities, alcohol used as a means of exploitation, inadequate shelter/residential facilities and sexual exploitation were the major problems widespread in all the work locations of migrant Adivasi laborers in Coorg (Neethi Vedhi 7). "*Chaddukanatha Oru*

Tata” (A Silent Tata (my trans.)) begins and ends with the place name Kodagu (another name for Coorg), a place in Karnataka situated about 120 km from Wayanad. It opens with the imagery of a tribal young man returning home from Kodagu, where he works.

<i>Kuḍagukku ponna</i>	An Adivasi youth
<i>Oru adhivaatchi</i>	who went to Kodagu
<i>Baalakkaareyi Kudekkaanaathe</i>	Returned
<i>Thirichchubantha</i>	without an umbrella (my trans.)
(Chaligadha, lines 1-5)	

The mention of returning without an umbrella symbolises the turmoil he faced in his journey, both physical and emotional challenges. His economic status is also clearly mentioned in the poem. He has a few currencies and coins with him. “Anjhetu nottu pacche/Patthettu thuttu belle (Chaligadha, lines 6-7) (five-six currencies and ten-eight coins (my trans.))”. In addition to this, he carries,

<i>Geethe textailchinthu kittinna</i>	Wrapped in a cover
<i>Guddhili pothinja</i>	From Geetha Textiles,
<i>Raanderamundu,</i>	<i>randara</i> mundu, two shirts,
<i>randu kuppaya</i>	One bath towel, one Hindi blanket,
<i>Oru thorathu, oru Hindi putheppu</i>	And in hand, one mixture cover
<i>Kaiyyili oru guḍu michcharu</i>	(my trans.)
(Chaligadha, lines 8-13)	

This imagery signifies his financial struggles, where many tribal people offered their

labour on the plantations at high wages but were not paid as promised. The items he carries, including a pack of the mixture (an Indian snack readily available at a low cost), symbolise his economic hardship. The protagonist represents his entire community, which has a history of exploitation by the *Janmis* and continues to suffer under their modern counterparts, who are identified as *Muthalali* (Boss/employer) in the poem.

They were taken to *Kodagu* by Jeep, as it is located near Wayanad, as seen in the lines “*Jeppubantha/ Kodage... Kodage*” (Chaligadha, lines 50-51) (The jeep came, “To Kodagu... to Kodagu” (my trans.)). They were taken to *Kodagu* by Jeep as it is located near Wayanad. It is important to note that the protagonist works in a ginger plantation, which is a real-life experience of the poet, who worked in the plantations as a child labourer. The lines “*Mattannalu ponu/ Inchikku mannidanu*” (Chaligadha, lines 36-37) (have to go day after tomorrow/ have to set up the soil around ginger (my trans.)) indicate that he came home for a short visit and has to go to work. However, the following lines show how worse the situation is. He came home, receiving an advance amount of five hundred rupees from his *Muthalali*, which was to be repaid in the form of labour.

<i>Anjooru ruppi advaanch kittina</i>	Five hundred rupees advance was received,
<i>Raattikku irunnooru ruppi</i>	Two hundred rupees for wife,
<i>Raattintammeḷḷu ampathuruppi</i>	Fifty rupees for mother-in-law,
<i>Makkakku mottaayi.</i>	candies for children,
<i>Kuttuvakkaani Makkanda mottaayi</i>	<i>Muthalali</i> has not yet tallied the accounts,
<i>theervakkaani</i> (Chaligadha, lines 38-47)	The children’s candies are not finished yet... (my trans.)

The division of five hundred rupees denotes the community's poor economic background, shaped by generations of unpaid labour. The low pay they receive today can be seen as a modern equivalent of Valli (two seers of rice), the wage once given for their hard labour in the *Janmi*'s paddy fields. He is obliged to return to the plantation, as he remains under *Muthalali*'s servitude, having received an advance payment. His wife and mother-in-law, who manage the household in his absence, receive only a small amount from him, which they must use to sustain the family. This suggests the community's ongoing struggle across generations to provide for their families amid persistent scarcity. The financial instability they face is not just a personal burden but a reflection of systemic exploitation that endures to this day. The themes of economic struggle and poverty are also evident in his other poems, as discussed below.

Intersecting Realities: Poverty, Economic Strain, and Healthcare Inequity

The poem "*Mantam*" (group) depicts the themes of poverty and health. The mention of "...*melukairoga*" (Chaligadha 27) (diseases in the body, (my trans.)) connects to the lack of access to healthcare and the harsh living conditions faced by the Rawla tribe in history. Poor nutrition, back-breaking labour, and minimal access to medical care often left tribal members in poor health, a reality that is subtly woven into the poem's depiction of physical toil and exhaustion. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out, "If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak 257). The lack of voice surrounding health suffering among tribal women represents this silencing, where even critical diseases go unacknowledged in public discourse.

The poem "*Kudaante*" (Lap (my trans.)) portrays the image of a woman who feeds

ten children with only two seers of rice.

<i>Randu chheru ballilli</i>	With two seers of rice,
<i>Chaakkinne makkaale</i>	took care of the children...
<i>Pathu makkalé</i>	Gave birth to and raised
<i>Pettu chaakkinne</i>	ten children (my trans.)

(Chaligadha, lines 1-4)

The image of “two seers” symbolises scarcity, leading to poverty. “*Balli*” (*Valli*) is rice which the bonded labourer received as the wage from their *janmi*. The amount of *valli* is not enough to feed a large family. The history of *Valli* is closely related to the suppression and slave history of the community, as quoted by KIRTADS on its website: “The average daily wage of a man is reported to be two seers of paddy and for a woman something less” (KIRTADS). Vandana Shiva says:

Their control over food systems has diminished while their responsibility as the main providers for their dependents has increased. As more land is diverted to cash crops and is impoverished through the ecological impact of green revolution technologies, women have decreased space but increased burdens in food production (Shiva 109).

She further discusses that “Women’s marginalisation and gender polarisation is further aggravated by the fact that there is a male/female differential in wage earnings, with women generally being paid between half or one third less than male agricultural labour” (Shiva 110-111). This explains how the labour and resilience of tribal women like the mother in *Kudaante* often remain undervalued, even when they shoulder the burden of entire families. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality helps to

interpret this double burden, where the Rawla woman is disadvantaged both by her tribal identity and her gender. Crenshaw writes, “Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black [or tribal] women are subordinated” (Demarginalizing 138).

Financial struggles are a significant theme in Sukumaran Chaligadha’s poems. Representing the younger generation of a community that was once forced into slavery under the feudal *Janmi* system, they continue to endure economic hardships. Despite the passage of time, many of the community still work as low-paid labourers in the fields and plantations, with inadequate wages remaining the primary cause of their financial difficulties. The protagonist of “*Chaddukanatha Oru Tata*” (A Silent Tata (my trans.)), is a migrant labourer of the ginger plantations of Kodagu (Coorg). He migrated to Kodagu, like many others in his community, to earn a better wage. However, the poem reveals his continued struggle to make ends meet. To cope with financial difficulties, he takes an advance payment of five hundred rupees from his *Muthalali* (the employer). This decision binds him to return to the plantation, both to repay the debt and to support his family.

The same emotion is also shared in the poem “*Maree neeyenne panakkaarennakkinnalla*” (Sickness, You Made Me Rich (my trans.)). The poem is written in the form of a tabulation of expenses. It employs numerical details to emphasise the imbalance between income and expenditure. The title reveals the protagonist’s sarcastic reaction to seeing the five-digit amount of his expenditure. The repeated references to costs associated with basic needs, such as healthcare, rations, vegetables, and groceries, illustrate the economic hardships faced by tribal

communities. In addition to this, he also adds liquor and phone recharge, which significantly increase his expenses. The constant tallying of expenses highlights the instability of his financial situation and the pressure to make ends meet.

<i>ontu kootti nokkottu</i>	Six thousand seven hundred rupees.
<i>aarayiraththi munnoottampaturuppi</i>	Let me multiply it:
Let me add it all up	6350 x
Six thousand seven hundred rupees.	12
<i>Ontu gunichchu nokkottu</i>	-----
6350 x	76200
12	annual income
-----	Sixty-seven thousand two hundred rupees
76200	Aw?
<i>Baarchika barummaanna</i>	Sickness, you made me rich.
<i>evvaththaarayiraththi</i>	(my trans.)
<i>irunnooruppi... Avva...?</i>	
<i>Maari neeyenne</i>	
<i>panakkaarennakkinnalla</i>	
(Chaligadha, lines 31-41)	

The mention of the health centre, “*Aarogiyakendhiram*” (Chaligadha, lines 3-4), and the district hospital, “*Jillaachchuppathri*” (Chaligadha, line 8), reveals the realities many tribal people face, where travel costs can be expensive, highlighting the inequalities in healthcare access.

<i>oru abechcha</i>	It costs four thousand rupees.
<i>poorippichchu</i>	If I run for a week,
<i>koduththene keluppa</i>	To fill out and submit
<i>Oraacche odinadaanthenki</i>	An application form
<i>naalaayira uruppi</i>	(my tans.)
(Chaligadha, lines 14-18)	

These satirical lines mention “*naalaayira uruppi* “ (Chaligadha, line 18) (four thousand rupees (my trans.)), which emphasises how administrative processes can impose a financial strain, particularly on individuals from lower-income backgrounds. The week-long run implies excessive paperwork, travel, and possibly bribes or hidden costs, pointing to inefficiency and corruption within the system.

Conclusion

Sukumaran Chaligadha’s Rawla language poems depict the lived realities of the Adiya tribal community, which served as a tool of expression and resistance. His poems shed light on the deep-rooted connection of the community with their land, culture, and traditions while depicting their struggles against systemic oppression and marginalisation. One of the most striking aspects of Chaligadha’s poetry is the preservation of tribal customs, rituals, and oral traditions. Poems like “*Kanaladi*” and “*Chinthe*” shed light on the spiritual and cultural practices of the Rawla community, demonstrating how rituals serve as a medium for preserving tribal identity. The role of *Kanaladi* as a ritualistic figure, as well as the post-death ceremonies and invocation of deities such as *Kallurachan* and *Jogiyachan* in various poems, illustrates how indigenous communities preserve their beliefs and ancestral knowledge despite external influences. These poems document cultural elements and also emphasise the

community's pride in their heritage.

The bond between the Adiya people and their natural surroundings is a recurring theme in Chaligadha's poetry. The imagery of the forest portrayed in the poems acts as a lifeline, a teacher, and a source of sustenance for the poet and his people. Poems like "*Kadu*" and "*Teebikkadu*" evoke the idea that the community's survival depends on the forest and how modernisation threatens this symbiotic relationship. The imagery of the child and her thoughts about the forests she sees on television underlines the generational shift of the young tribal generation. Chaligadha's poems also lament the loss of tribal identity. The forced assimilation of tribal children into mainstream primary education, as seen in "*Kadu*", points out the linguistic alienation they face in society. The encroachment of urbanisation and the imposition of mainstream societal norms on tribal practices create an identity crisis, where younger generations find themselves caught between tradition and modernity.

The historical and ongoing economic struggles of the Adiya community are reflected in many poems. "*Mantam*" and "*Koodanthe*" depict the harsh realities of bonded labour, meagre wages, and the unrelenting toil of daily survival. The imagery of families trying to sustain themselves on inadequate earnings, the suffering endured by labourers in the ginger plantations of Kodagu, and the deceptive promises of higher wages that lure them into exploitative conditions expose the systemic economic oppression that persists even today. These poems remind society that the chains of servitude and the ways of oppression have taken on a new form. Chaligadha's poetry portrays tribal women, emphasising their strength, suffering, and role in sustaining the community. The mother in *Koodanthe* symbolises both nurture and sacrifice, as she is forced to suppress her maternal instincts due to economic burdens. Women are depicted

as caretakers, labourers, and pillars of resilience, yet their struggles remain largely invisible to the outside world. The poet's portrayal of women acknowledges their essential role while also critiquing the gendered struggles they endure within a patriarchal and exploitative system.

The historical subjugation of the Rawla people, from bonded slavery under feudal landlords to modern-day exploitation as migrant labourers, is a central theme in Chaligadha's poetry. Poems like "*Chaddukanatha Oru Tata*" reference real events such as the Muthanga Land Struggle, drawing attention to the community's fight for land rights and autonomy. The poet also exposes the harsh conditions tribal labourers face in Kodagu's ginger plantations, where they are subjected to economic deprivation, physical exhaustion, and social marginalisation. These themes bridge the past and present, demonstrating that the struggle for dignity and equality remains a persistent and ongoing concern. The mention of indigenous art forms in poetry is another significant aspect of Chaligadha's work. The references to *Kambalanatti* and other traditional performances highlight the significance of oral traditions in preserving history and cultural identity. These art forms serve as repositories of collective memory, passing down wisdom and resistance narratives across generations. The poet's profound engagement with the Rawla language, oral traditions, and socio-political issues makes his work a vital contribution to contemporary Kerala literature, which includes both Malayalam and indigenous language literature. Writing in Rawla, a language with no script of its own, he reclaims the linguistic heritage of his people, resisting cultural erasure. The poet's bilingualism allows him to bridge the gap between the tribal world and the mainstream, ensuring that the struggles of the Rawla people are acknowledged beyond their community.

CHAPTER-3

**PORTRAYAL OF LAND, LIFE, AND LOSS: A READING OF
SELECT IRULA LANGUAGE POEMS OF MANIKANDAN
ATTAPPADI**

“Lipiyillantha enaathu/ Namuthth bhasekkrukkuka saththi/ Eath bhasekkrukkuth?”

(No refusal to write in my language, just because it lacks the script / Which language
has the strength that our language holds? (my trans.)) (Attappadi 150)

Life and Literary Contributions of Manikandan Attappadi

The Irula tribal community, also known as *Irulan* or *Irular* (KIRTADS), is settled across various districts of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka. In Kerala, the Irulars predominantly inhabit the Attappadi region of Palakkad district. According to the Kerala Forest Department, the community is found “particularly in the Nelliampathy hills. Their communities are scattered across various regions like Pothupara, Mayamudi and Kunapalam” (“Indigenous Communities of Kerala”). KIRTADS further observes that the community mainly resides in Agali, Sholayur, and Pudur areas of the district.

The term *Irul* in both Malayalam and Tamil means “darkness.” Luiz (1962) attributes the name *Irula* to the dark complexion of the tribe, while Thurston (1975) speculates that it may have referred instead to the dense forests in which they traditionally lived. An oral tradition narrates that the Irula people are descended from a couple who emerged from an anthill and escaped a great flood in a canoe. After drifting for some time, the canoe reached the Western Ghats, where they clung to a branch of

the *Irul* tree (*Xylia xylocarpa*) to survive above the floodwaters. Once the waters receded, they climbed down and hence came to be known as Irula, that is, those who descended from the *Irul* tree. The community speaks *Irula Bhasha* (Irula language) among themselves but uses Malayalam or Tamil when interacting with outsiders. In Tamil Nadu, the Irula language is written in the Tamil script, whereas in Kerala, it is written in the Malayalam script. Notably, Irula is listed by UNESCO as an endangered language.

Several members of the Irula community have achieved distinction in recent years. These include Smt. Nanjiyamma, recipient of the National Film Award for Best Female Playback Singer in 2022; Kum. Anu Prasobhini, Miss Kerala Runner-Up (2023) and actress in the film *Dhabari Kuruvi*; Sri. Pazhani Swamy, actor; and Sri. Kanthaswamy, recipient of the Kerala Folklore Academy Award. Among Kerala's tribal languages, Irula has one of the strongest literary traditions, having produced poets such as Manikandan Attappadi, Sivalingan Attappadi, and R.K. Attappadi.

Manikandan Attappadi, a leading figure in modern Irula literature, was born in 1998 to Maruthan and Nanji in Kolappadika Ooru, Attappadi, Palakkad district, Kerala. He studied up to the tenth standard in Kozhikode M.R.S. and Agali. He writes in both *Irula Bhasha* and Malayalam, and is recognised as one of the pioneers of modern written literature in the Irula language. He has published three books: *Pachcha Mara Thanal Kaththi Eriyumbol*, *Pachcha Njarambukal*, and *Malleespara Mudi*. The last of these is the first-ever anthology entirely in the Irula language, containing poems in Irula alongside their Malayalam translations. Unlike earlier tribal language anthologies, it is more extensive and excludes poems originally written in Malayalam, except for the translations provided. He received the 'Madhu Smrithi Award' in 2018 for his

contributions. He currently resides in his native Kolappadika Ooru, Attappadi, Palakkad. His works serve both as an artistic expression and as a means of preserving and strengthening the Irula language.

This chapter examines selected Irula language poems of Manikandan Attappadi, primarily drawn from the poetry collection *Malleespara Mudi*. The thematic analysis is guided by Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, Spivak's subaltern theory, Stuart Hall's notion of cultural identity, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. Ecofeminist perspectives from Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies address the interconnected marginalisation of women and nature. David Crystal's concept of language death informs the study of linguistic vulnerability and the significance of preserving the Irula language. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive approach to analysing the poems and understanding the lived experiences, knowledge, and resilience of the Irula people.

Poet and His Native Terrain: Portrayal of Attappadi in the Poems

Manikandan Attappadi, as his name suggests, is a native of Attappadi, a tribal region in the Palakkad district of Kerala. Attappadi is an expansive mountain valley covering 731 square kilometres, situated within the Western Ghats. Located in the mid-eastern part of Kerala, it lies northeast of the Palakkad district and shares its borders with the Coimbatore and Nilgiri districts of Tamil Nadu. The population of Attappadi consists of both tribal and non-tribal communities. The region is home to three major tribal communities, the Irulas, Mudugas, and Kurumbas. Attappadi is renowned for its stunning natural beauty, featuring dense forests, picturesque hills, and tranquil rivers. The river Bhavani, originating from the Silent Valley National Park, flows through

Attappadi, enhancing its natural beauty. The region's elevation ranges from 750 to 2,200 meters above sea level, contributing to a calm and pleasant climate throughout the year. The area is home to scenic waterfalls, such as Meenvallam and Siruvani Waterfalls. The locale of Attappadi influences the poet and is portrayed in the poems as discussed below.

The anthology *Malleespara Mudi* (Malleswaran Peak (my trans.)) derives its title from a poem of the same name. Malleswaran Peak, the highest point in the Attappadi Forest Reserve, rises to an elevation of 1,664 meters. It is situated within the Agali Hills range of the Western Ghats. The peak holds strong spiritual and cultural significance for the tribal communities of Attappadi. It plays a crucial role in their religious traditions and is considered sacred. According to the tribal belief, the peak resembles the *mudikkettu* (tied hair) of Lord Malleswara, an incarnation of Lord Shiva. The poem "*Malleespara Mudi*" (Malleswaran Peak) begins with the picaresque beauty of Attappadi.

<i>Mallis para mutikakkette</i>	Beyond Malleshwara peak,
<i>Mrekth sooryae</i>	The sun fades away.
<i>Kaade poththi ronkkth</i>	The forest sleeps under a blanket of
<i>Rutt, melethirka kre</i>	darkness,
<i>Tannimatta nikkaathe odkth</i>	while the river in the hills
(Attappadi17)	flows endlessly, never pausing (my trans.)

These lines depict the landscape of Attappadi, comprising forests, rivers, and hills. The following line mentions the presence of mist, an indication of the region's climate. The reference to mist can also be seen in the poem *Manju* (mist (my trans.)).

The poem *Neelavana* (Blue Sky) also references the locale of Attappadi.

<i>Kolspotu aadi paadi</i>	Wearing an anklet,
<i>Varukku Bhavani.</i>	singing and dancing
<i>Muthth male potta sirvaani</i>	comes Bhavani
(Attappadi 17)	Siruvani, adorned with a pearl chain
	(my trans.)

The poem also mentions *Malleswaran Mudi*. The poem vividly portrays *Bhavani* and *Siruvani*, two significant rivers of Attappadi. These rivers play a crucial role in irrigation, provide drinking water, and enhance the region's scenic beauty. Apart from rivers, forest streams are also mentioned in the poem "*Sole Thanni*" (Forest Stream), which is also part of Attappadi's geography and is closely connected to tribal life.

Some poems directly mention the name Attappadi, reflecting the poet's strong connection to his homeland. One such example is the poem *Kannu Thanni*, which references "*Atteppaadu aandave*" (Attappadi 56) (the god of Attappadi (my trans.)). The poem *Aadi Bhaase* (The First Language (my trans.)) mentions "*Atteppadi aadivasika*" (Attappadi 154) (the tribals of Attappadi (my trans.)) to show the unity among tribal communities as the land is their motherland, as the centre of their life. Similarly, the poem "*Attappadi Agge*" (Mother Attappadi (my trans.)) expresses his profound affection for the land, portraying Attappadi as a nurturing mother. The poet says, "*Naamu Atteppadi aggeth prallaka*" (Attappadi 100) (we are the children of Mother Attappadi (self trans.)). This sense of place and belonging aligns with Stuart Hall's view that cultural identities are sites of identification, fluid and constructed

within the discourses of history and culture. They are not fixed essences but positions within these contexts. Identity is always political, involving negotiation and positioning, without any absolute certainty based on a universal or unchanging law of origin. (Hall 226). Here, the locale of Attappadi portrays a space lived in and shaped by memory, history, and culture.

Tribal Way of Living and the Communal Life of Irula

Manikandan Attappadi's poetry consistently engages with the tribal way of living and the communal life practices of the Irula community. The poem "*Malleespara Mudi*" (Malleswara Peak) portrays a vivid picture of daily life. People are gathering on a *Karthika* morning, a scene unfamiliar to urban life. The month of *Karthika* marks the beginning of winter, and the mornings are misty. "*Vutiya kaalaththi enthu Krekke pone*" (Attappadi 17) (wake at dawn, then walk to the river (my trans.)). "*Vulinkaas kallukke theemootut kaar silaru*" (Attappadi 17) (To light the fire, some people use white pebbles (my trans.)). In addition to this,

<i>Veppa kuchchikke pallu</i>	Some brush their teeth
<i>thekkaaru silar.</i>	with neem twigs,
<i>Koottama kukki vuttinaaya</i>	Some gather in groups,
<i>Peskaar silaru</i> (Attappadi 17)	sharing idle chatter (my trans.)

Brushing teeth with neem twigs demonstrates a natural and straightforward way of living, and idle chatter indicates the bond within the community. The imagery further extends to people washing their clothes. Tribal life is emphasised when the poet says,

“*Meenu pdikkaaru silar*” (Attappadi 17) (some catch fish (my trans.)). This depicts the nature-centred life of the community. The imagery of the tribal way of living is also seen in the poem “*Kavakkarae*” (The Guard (my trans.)). *Easi Kasange Vutti* Cutting and eating Palmyra sprouts,

<i>Thinthathum</i>	Digging up <i>Noore kizhangu</i> burned in the
<i>Noore Kasange Kalli theekke</i>	fire and eating
<i>Sutt thinthathum nanari vere</i>	Digging up <i>Nannari</i> roots; brewing coffee
<i>Kalli kaappi vethth kuduthathum</i>	and drinking,
<i>Eppamu enne nenvoottuka nenevuka</i>	These memories are always there within
(Attappadi 20)	me (my trans.)

The imagery illustrates the traditional diet of tribal communities through *Easi Kasang* (Palmyra sprout), *Noore Kasang* (Noore Kizhangu, *Dioscorea pentaphylla*), and *Nannari Veru* (Nannari root (*Hemidesmus indicus*)). The poet recalls these foods as memories to portray how tribal diets are changing due to modern influences. The tribal communities traditionally followed a diet rich in local crops and forest produce, which was both prosperous and healthy in Attappadi. Their meals included Ragi (finger millet), Chama (pearl millet), Thomara (horse gram), maize, pulses, and a variety of vegetables. They once cultivated more than 60 types of cereals and pulses, along with many green vegetables, including *keera*, *paali*, *munne*, *chakkara*, and *tav*. Wild berries, forest fruits, honey, and fish from the Bhavani and Shiruvani rivers were also part of their daily food.

Over time, this traditional diet has been replaced with others. The ration system

has also changed their lifestyle. Through ration shops, the government provides rice, wheat, sugar, and kerosene at low prices to ration cardholders. Government programs, such as the free meal scheme in schools, have introduced rice and vegetables, which are not part of the traditional food habits of children.

As a result, rice, which was previously not part of their meals, has now become a common ingredient. The tribal people are forced to eat low-quality rice from the ration shops, moving further away from their healthy and diverse traditional diet. Vandana Shiva points out that the green revolution has displaced not just seed varieties but entire crops in the Third World, just as people's seeds were declared 'primitive' and 'inferior' to the green revolution ideology, food crops were declared 'marginal', 'inferior' and 'coarse grained' (Shiva 121).

It is essential to note that the Irula tribes of Attappadi traditionally consumed *Rai Pittu* (Ragi Puttu) with curry twice daily, a practice still observed by many. However, some have now incorporated rice into their diet. The dietary habits of the Irula people are also mentioned in the poem "*Unji*". The poet remembers the porridge (*Kanji*) made of *chama* (Little Millets).

<i>Saamene aruththduthth</i>	beat it with a stick to separate the grains
Cut the <i>chama</i> ,	By placing it in the courtyard,
<i>Aduthth vethene eduthth</i>	Ground it in a stone mortar,
<i>Rallukke vththi kuthth</i>	cooked it into porridge,
<i>Kanji vethth kuduththa</i>	Then drink it, Ah! What a taste!
<i>Aha! Enna rusi</i>	(my trans.)
<i>Vuttekke vethth thadikke</i>	
(Attappadi 140)	

This indicates that rice was never a staple of their diet, unlike in the rest of Kerala. He remembers the taste of Chama porridge, which has now been replaced by rice porridge. Earlier, they would grow Chama and process it using traditional methods. The poet also mentions *Rai Puttu*, a steamed dish made from finger millet, which was common in their meals. He nostalgically recalls the taste of *Rai Puttu* with fish curry. Today, these familiar tastes are slowly disappearing from the daily food habits of the community.

The changing dietary habits lead the Irula tribe in Attappadi to face problems like infant deaths and malnutrition. Earlier, the Irula diet primarily consisted of millets, along with green, leafy vegetables, roots, and tubers from the forest. Now, most people depend on rations and buy food from the market, as many have started working as daily wage labourers. Vandana Shiva points out that only an agricultural science shaped by capitalist patriarchy labels highly nutritious crops like ragi and jowar as ‘inferior’. Peasant women understand the nutritional needs of their families and the value of the crops they grow. They choose food crops that provide the most nutrition rather than those with high market value. Crops often called ‘marginal’ or ‘coarse grains’ actually offer the highest nutritional productivity in nature (122). Although many families keep chickens and goats, they rarely consume eggs, milk, or meat. They also eat very few fruits and traditional greens, such as Moringa and Amaranth, even though these are available nearby. Infant deaths are also reported in Attappadi because mothers do not get enough nutrition before and during pregnancy. The Integrated Tribal Development Project provides financial support to pregnant and breastfeeding mothers to alleviate financial burdens and enhance their health and that of their children. The Kerala government has started community kitchens in all tribal villages in Attappadi to reduce poverty and hunger. Kerala has improved living conditions for many people, but tribal

communities continue to face challenges in accessing the same benefits.

The theme of hunger is also presented in the poem “*Pasi*” (Hunger (my trans.)). The background of this poem is a real incident of the Madhu lynching case. The poet says,

<i>Thaanga mudiyaaththa pasi kaarana</i>	Unable to bear the hunger,
<i>Kdekalththi koja saamanaka</i>	A man who took a few items from a shop
<i>Eduththavane vuunu vuunu</i>	was beaten to death
<i>Adiththe konthaaru</i> (Attappadi 176)	(my trans.)

It refers to a tragic incident that happened in February 2018 in Attappadi. Madhu was a 27-year-old tribal man from the Kurumba community who was suffering from psychological problems and lived in the forests. He was accused of stealing food items from shops and houses in the nearby areas. He was caught by a mob, tied up, and brutally beaten, leading to his death. The Madhu lynching case is often mentioned as a serious example of how vulnerable tribal populations can be victims of violence and discrimination, even in modern society. The poem ends with a painful question, “*pasikk vele saava?*” (Attappadi 176) (Does hunger cost death? (my trans.)). Regarding this, the poet says in his interview, recollecting his experiences:

The poems in *Malleespara Mudi* were written after the death of Madhu. He was someone who wandered the forest with mental distress... In truth, he wasn't the one with a mental illness; it was society itself! There was a time when if someone from Attappadi went outside, they would face a lot of insults. People would ask, “Aren't you from Attappadi?” or say, “You should be sent back to Attappadi.” I used to wonder what was

wrong with Attappadi. Even now, remembering all this brings me pain.

(Namthth Bhaasekkrrku Ka Saththi Eth Bhaasekkrrkth?)

The poem “*Pore (Para)*” depicts a tribal home where the narrator sleeps on a *paaya*, a traditional mat made from natural materials such as screw pine, grass, palm leaves, or even plastic. These mats are commonly used in tribal and rural households. Sleeping on a *paaya* instead of a bed indicates a simple lifestyle. However, it can also symbolise the struggles of poverty and limited resources.

This incident can also be critically understood through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of subalternity. Spivak argues that the subalterns, those at the margins of society, are systematically denied the right to speak and to be heard by dominant structures. As she famously asks, we must confront whether the subaltern can speak in the context of the global division of labour, separated from socialised capital. This question applies both within and beyond the structures of imperialist law and education that reinforce earlier economic domination (Spivak 25). Madhu’s life and death reveal how the voices of tribal communities remain unheard and invisible until they surface through violence and tragedy, and even then, are quickly forgotten by the mainstream. His story painfully illustrates Spivak’s observation that when the subaltern does ‘speak’, it is often through silence, erasure, or moments of suffering imposed by dominant society.

The communal life of the Irula tribe is vividly described in the poems of Manikandan Attappadi. One such example is the poem “*Uthame*”.

<i>Kudumbaththode ooruvttu</i>	With the whole family, going to
<i>vre oorukke, swanthabandhathe</i>	<i>Uthame</i>
<i>paakkaakku uthame povem</i>	To visit relatives in another village
(Attappadi 76)	(my trans.)

The poem describes the tradition of *uthame*, that is, to visit relatives in another *ooru* (settlement) to strengthen family bonds. The poem depicts the essence of communal life within the Irula community of Attappadi.

Portrayal of Socio-Cultural Organisation of the Irula Community

The poem “*Ooru Kttu Manaka*” (The *Ooru* Rules (my trans.)) describes the socio-cultural organisation of the community and laments how the *ooru* rules are fading over time. The poet laments the disappearing customs and regulations of his community. He begins the poem by saying:

<i>Ooru kttumanaka oorevttu</i>	The laws of the <i>ooru</i> have
<i>Poyi romba naalas!</i>	long faded away.
<i>Mooppanuthth naayakk, marunaaya</i>	In the past, the people of <i>Ooru</i>
<i>Pesaaathe mooppanuthth naayakk</i>	followed and obeyed the
<i>Kttupattu sonnapadi nadanthaaru</i>	<i>Mooppan</i> ’s words without
<i>Orru janaka inthu</i>	question. Today, they are scattered
<i>Pattikaluththi irukka aadmaadukale</i>	across different places, like cattle
<i>Avuththvitta kanakke</i>	set loose from their shed
<i>Ororuththarumu oro salaththi!</i> (Attappadi 80)	(my trans.)

The *Mooppan*, also referred to as the *Ooru Mooppan*, is the chieftain of each *ooru* (settlement) within the Irula tribe. He traditionally held the highest authority in the Irula's social structure, and his words and decisions were once regarded as final and binding upon the community. However, over time, *Mooppan*'s authority has gradually declined. The poet further notes that this decline has resulted in a breakdown of discipline and unity within the community. The depiction of people scattered like cattle symbolises their disconnection from one another and also from their indigenous customs and values.

This gradual weakening of the *Mooppan*'s authority and the decline of traditional rules can be understood through Homi K. Bhabha's idea of the "Third Space," which functions as "an interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative" site that produces new cultural meanings by challenging fixed traditions (Bhabha 37). In this space, cultural identity is "never primordial unity or fixity" (Bhabha 37) but instead "initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation" (Bhabha 1), where the adoption of external cultural forms may come at the cost of eroding indigenous structures and knowledge systems, ultimately leading to a loss of indigeneity. The poet further explains,

Moopan, vandaari,

kuruthele, mannkkaaran,

jathiyen ellavarm

onnaseronantha

saavo, seero varono!

(Attappadi 80)

Moopan, vandaari,

kuruthele, mannkaaran, jathiyen

for all of them to come together,

Death or *seeru* should come!

(my trans.)

Apart from *Mooppan*, *Vandari*, *Kuruthale*, *Mannkaaran*, and *Jathiyen*, there are other social positions within the community. After *Mooppan*, *Vandari*, *Mannukkaran*, and *Kuruthale*, the hierarchical order of the community is established. *Vandari*, also known as *Bhandari*, is the treasurer of the tribe. *Kuruthala* holds a ministerial position. He also acts as a messenger between different *ooru* (settlements) and is responsible for accompanying outsiders who wish to meet the *Mooppan*. It is to be noted that, in the poem “*Ooru Kttmanakka*” (The *Ooru* Rules (my trans.)), the poet mentions that “*moopputhth sammathayillaathe/ vliyaalukale ooruk pakka koodyaa/ seththamattaaru*” (Attappadi 81) (Without the *mooppan*’s permission, outsiders will not be allowed even near the *ooru* (my trans.)). It shows the power and leadership the *mooppan* once possessed.

“*Mannukkaran* was a reverential position in the social order. He was considered a folk environmentalist, determining the sowing season, managing crops, and utilising indigenous methods. Even now, the elders reverentially remember this hierarchy” (Pillai, 1989). *Mannkaaran* or *Mannukkaran*, meaning ‘the person of mud’, is the ritual head of agricultural activities in the hamlets. He is regarded as a skilled expert in soil and farming. It is believed that when the sacredness of the *Mannukkaran* is lost, the land will no longer produce crops. The *Mannukkaran* decides if the land is suitable for cultivation, sows the first seeds, and leads the first harvest. His wife prepares the food from the first yield. The *Mannukkaran* loses his sacredness if he fails to follow the ethical way of life (*neethi* (justice) and *neru* (truth)) as handed down by tradition. He does not take part in death rituals, as it is believed that doing so would make him impure. Further mention about *Mannukkaran* can be seen in the fifth part of the poem. The poet says,

<i>Mannkkaara, bhoomathaye kumuttu</i>	The <i>Mannukkaran</i> bows to Mother
<i>Orupidi vithth mannukke vetheththa</i>	Earth,
<i>Pinnethe, kaadukkaattu, kaadukke</i>	sows a handful of seeds in the soil,
<i>Vetheme vetheppaaru.</i>	and only then do the forest owners
<i>Pllaame vlenths pasath guruvkk</i>	Sow seeds in the forest.
<i>Kaanikkeyyai ora valla methe</i>	After the harvest,
<i>Vekkono ippa (Attappadi 81)</i>	a <i>nazhi</i> of grain must be offered
	to the deity in <i>pasath</i> (my trans.)

Mannukkaran is the first to bow to Mother Earth and begins the sowing on behalf of the community, after which the other members continue the work. The poet refers to the Irula people as the “owners of the forest” because they once utilised forest land for cultivation. A *nazhi* (a measurement in Kerala) of grain is offered to the deity in *Pasath* from the first yield. Mariamma J Kalathil notes that there were no distinct plots in their agricultural practice. They cultivated and utilised any part of the forest they chose for farming. In the earlier periods, they used bamboo chips to rake the land, and later a simple tool called Lowari came into use. On the day of sowing, everyone in the village cleaned their houses and took a bath. On that night, the Mannukkaran would sleep in the Kula Daiva Veedu, a room or house reserved for the deity. Early in the morning, a man from the Karatti kulam prepared Ragi and brought it to show the Mannukkaran, an offering known as Kanikanal. Before five o’clock, the Mannukkaran went out to sow the seeds while offering prayers. No one was allowed to watch him sowing the seeds; others only emerged from their homes after he left the village. The major crops cultivated included Ragi, Chama, Thina, Varak, Pichama, Cholan, and

Maize (21). Together, these details confirm the critical position of *Mannukkaran* in the community. *Jathiyar* (a person related to caste) is the person who introduces tribal people to one another, usually during the time of marriage. These individuals, together, lead the community under the leadership of *Mooppa*. The poet laments that the leaders of the community also lack unity and that they come together only in emergencies, such as death or *seeru* (a post-death ritual of the community).

The communal life of the Irula can be seen in the division of meat after hunting, as seen in the poem “*Ooru Kttu Manaka*” (The *Ooru* Rules (my trans.)). The poet says that it is a custom in the community that,

<i>Melekke vuttekku poyi</i>	If someone back with meat after
<i>Kari kond Vantha, ooru janakale</i>	hunting from the hill, the Ooru people
<i>Lethth, panthivethth virunth podono</i>	should be called, offered a feast
(Attappadi 81)	(my trans.)

This communal feast, described by the poet as a rule of his *ooru*, supports the notion that everyone receives a share of the meat. It is a valuable practice that helps them, especially during times of poverty. It also strengthens unity and harmony within the community. The reference to “hill” can be the hilly forest area of Attappadi, the abode of the Irula community.

Belief Systems and Ritual Practices of the Irula Tribe

Tribal belief systems and ritual practices of the Irula Tribe form a central theme in the poetry of Manikandan Attappadi. It captures the community’s spiritual life

through indigenous rituals, customs, and worldview. *Malleswara*, an incarnation of Lord Shiva, is the spiritual centre of the Irula belief system. This theme is examined in detail below.

Malleswara: The Centre of Irula Beliefs

The Irula tribe follows a blend of animistic beliefs, Hinduism, and indigenous spirituality, with profound respect for nature, ancestral spirits, and Lord Shiva. Their most significant religious site is *Malleswaran Mudi*, a sacred peak in Attappadi, worshipped as an incarnation of Lord Shiva. *Mahashivaratri* is their most important festival, marking the beginning of their harvest season. Before the harvest, the *Moopan* (tribal elder) and a few men, accompanied by forest officers, climb the mountain to light a ritual lamp, signifying the festival's commencement. The tribespeople observe abstinence on this day, eating only after they have seen the sacred light atop the mountain.

Devotees undertake a strict vow for 7 to 41 days before the pilgrimage, drinking milk mixed with wild turmeric and refraining from food prepared by women. Only men are allowed to ascend the peak during Shivaratri, carrying sacred offerings and lighting the lamp at the summit. According to legend, Lord Shiva (*Mallan*) and Goddess Parvati (*Malli*) once lived among the tribes. Still, their love was opposed by both the Irula and Muduga communities, forcing them to seek refuge with the Kurumba tribe, who also rejected them. In despair, Parvati vanished, and Shiva began a penance by the Bhavani River, his hair growing into the massive rock formation now worshipped as *Malleswaran Peak*. Later, the Muduga chief had a divine vision, instructing devotees to climb the peak on Shivaratri, leading to the present-day pilgrimage tradition.

The Irulas also worship deities such as *Mariamamma* and *Murugan*, influenced by *Sanskritization*, and celebrate clan-based festivals like *Paruvam*, as well as ancestral remembrance rituals like *Kanji Cheera*. Tamil cultural influence has introduced festivals such as *Pongal* and *Thai Nombu* into their traditions. Beyond religion, the Irulas are skilled in handicrafts, making baskets and mats from cane and bamboo. Their oral traditions are rich, with songs, tales, and dances accompanying various occasions, and they have even begun incorporating Tamil-style stage plays into their performances. Their religious and cultural practices remain deeply rooted in their environment, preserving their spiritual bond with nature and their strong sense of tribal identity, despite external influences.

The Malleswara myth and its spiritual significance are evident in the poems of Manikandan Attappadi. The *Malleswara* myth is significantly connected to the Malleswara peak. The poem “*Kannu Thanni*” (Tears) refers to

<i>Malleswaran.Eppanaasa ornaala aa</i>	One day,
<i>Atteppaadu aandave</i>	The Attappadi Malleswaran
<i>Kanne Thorakkathena</i>	Will open his eyes (my trans.)
<i>Poyi Rave</i> (Attappadi 56)	

The line “*Atteppaadu aandave*” (Attappadi 56) (the god of Attappadi (my trans.)) refers to Malleswara, an incarnation of Siva, whom the tribal people of Attappadi find as their saviour. The poem “*Neelavana*” (Blue Sky) portrays the image of a lit lamp from the *Malleswara* temple.

<i>Sivaraathiriyana, mallisu para</i>	When Shivaratri approaches,
<i>Aandava mudithi valakku paakka</i>	and the day nears to see the lamp
<i>Naalu vantha, emthu manasithim</i>	at the temple of Malleswara,
<i>Oru valakku ethivu pem</i>	We too light a lamp in our hearts
(Attappadi 106)	(my trans.)

The lamp on the Malleswara peak is also seen in the poem “*Malleespara Mudi*” (Malleswara Peak).

<i>Mallis para mutithi</i>	May the lamp be lit on
<i>Erika valakku</i>	Malleshwara Mudi
<i>Ktathe eriktt</i>	never be quenched.
<i>Ktta namuth valukke</i>	May it be the light in
<i>Vlusamai marukttu</i>	Our shattered life
(Attappadi 18)	(my trans.)

This imagery vividly describes the rituals of celebrating *Shivaratri* (a Hindu festival held each year between February and March to honour Lord Shiva). Lighting the lamp is one of the key rituals on Shivarathri at the Malleswara temple in Attappadi. According to tradition, the light from this lamp could once be seen from the balcony of the Zamorin’s palace in Kozhikkode. The Zamorin, who once ruled the region, provided the oil and wicks for the lamps during the festival. Mannarkkad Mooppil Nair, a minister under the Zamorin, was responsible for receiving these items from the King and delivering them to the Malleswara temple. From there, chosen members of the Muduga tribe carried the materials to the Malleswara peak and lit the lamp. Today, the

oil and wicks no longer come from the Zamorin, and Mooppil Nair's role has also ended.

Despite these changes, the ritual and celebration at the temple continue to foster unity among the various tribal communities of Attappadi. The poet emphasises this tradition by saying, in the poem "*Neelavana*" (Blue Sky), when the lamp on Malleswara Peak is lit "We too light a lamp in our hearts". The poem "*Malleespara Mudi*" (Malleswara Peak) ends with the line "*Ktta namuth valukke Vlusamai marukttu*" (Attappadi 18) (May it be the light in our shattered life (my trans.)) in which Lord Malleswara is becoming the incarnation of hopefulness. This depicts how Malleswara represents hope, protection, and joy for the tribal people of Attappadi. The image of *Malleswara* is also portrayed in the poem "*Ooru Kttmanakka*" (The *Ooru* Rules (my trans.)).

<i>Mallis para</i>	Those who folded their hands
Malleswara <i>Nine kayyeththe kuttavar,</i>	and worshipped you
<i>nithu kutte pattikkaakku</i>	Now raise their hands
<i>kyyi thooki nika kaala</i> (Attappadi 82)	to strangle your neck (my trans.)

Here, the image of *Malleswara* is becoming an embodiment of indigenous beliefs and culture. The poet laments that his people, who once worshipped *Malleswara*, are now raising their hands to strangle his neck. This imagery stands for how tribal people themselves are moving away from their traditional beliefs and culture. The following section examines the portrayal of birth, death, and marriage rituals of the Irula tribe in the poetry of Manikandan Attappadi.

Portrayal of Birth, Death, and Marriage Rituals

The community's birth rituals are depicted in the poem "*Pasath*" (*Family God*),

which describes a ceremony associated with childbirth and the newborn. Manjusha quotes, “Clan gods are known by the generic name Pasad (Pasath)” (Manjusha 824). The poet himself explains that *Pasath Koora* (holy hut) is a place where departed souls and ancestors are honoured and remembered (Attappadi 73). The poem begins with the imagery of a ritual associated with the newborn.

The community’s birth rituals are depicted in the poem “*Pasath*” (Family God), which describes a ceremony associated with childbirth and the newborn. Manjusha quotes, “Clan gods are known by the generic name Pasad (*Pasath*)” (Manjusha 824). The poet himself explains that *Pasath Koora* (holy hut) is a place where departed souls and ancestors are honoured and remembered (Attappadi 73). The poem begins with the imagery of a ritual associated with the newborn.

<i>Pllle parantha,</i>	When a child is born, the newborn
<i>ratha pllene</i>	must not be shown to anyone for seven
<i>Elu naalekk aarkkeme</i>	days. After seven days, offer prayers
<i>Kaattathe, el naal klunth</i>	to <i>Pasath</i> , placing the infant at its feet
<i>Pasathkke adavththono</i> (Attappadi 22)	(my trans.)

The newborn is kept away from others for seven days. After seven days, prayers are offered, and the infant is placed at the feet of the family deity. This act demonstrates that the child is now an integral part of the family and the community.

<i>Rant pttikale thookki veththrkkauru</i>	In the house where the household deity
<i>atthhe pasath pttikale</i>	resides, two boxes are hung.

<i>thookki veththrukaaru</i>	These are the boxes where the
<i>aththe pasath pttika</i>	household deity
<i>Onththi aanpasath</i>	Dwells.
<i>Vre onththi pen pasath</i>	In one box resides the male deity,
<i>Plllene ada vththinathme</i>	And in the other, the female deity.
<i>aa rant pttikam aankem</i>	After placing the child at the deity's
<i>inkem aadv (Attappadi 22)</i>	feet and
	After placing the child at the deity's
	feet and worshipping. The two boxes
	are swung back and forth (my trans.)

Placing the child at the feet of the family deity shows that the baby is not just joining a family but also becoming part of a spiritual tradition. This act symbolises respect for the divine and ensures that the child is blessed from an early age. It also reinforces the tribe's belief that their gods and ancestors play a significant role in their lives. The tribe keeps two sacred boxes, one for a male deity and one for a female deity. This shows that they believe in the balance between masculine and feminine forces. Many traditional cultures view harmony between these energies as essential for a fulfilling life. The swinging of these boxes may be a way to invite blessings, symbolising movement and life. The poet explains this ritual in his interview:

I have not witnessed this ceremony in person; I have only heard about it from my uncle. There are about nine clans in Attappadi — Kuppulika, Uppulika, Karttika, Velleka, and so on. I belong to the Uppulika clan. The clan deities of the Uppulika are known as *Pasath*. The *Pasath* have

a separate shrine of their own, where they are worshipped by a *Guruvan* (priest) and *Guruvathi* (priestess). When a child is born in the Uppulika clan, for seven days, the infant is not shown to anyone. The first to see the newborn is the *Pasath*. The child is placed before the sacred boxes where the male and female *Pasath* reside. The belief is that the child belongs first to the ancestors, and hence, they must be the first to behold the newborn. The *Pasath*, in joy, are believed to sway gently, blessing the child. However, this age-old ritual, once practised with devotion, has now fallen into disuse.

(*Namthth Bhaasekkrku Ka Saththi Eth Bhaasekkrkth?*)

The birth rituals of the Irula tribe accentuate their strong beliefs in protection, spiritual guidance, and balance. These customs help the child become part of both the family and the tribe's traditions. They also show how powerfully the Irula people value their connection to their deities and ancestors. The poem ends with the imagery of "the *Pasath Koora* covered in dust". The poet suggests that the holy hut should be kept neat to honour the family deity and the community's traditions.

The traditional death rituals of the Irula community are seen in the poem "*Pore*" (Para). *Pore*, also known as *Para* in Malayalam, is a traditional percussion instrument of the Irula people. The poem begins with the imagery of cawing crows sitting atop a coconut tree.

Maale neraththi oru pathth

At dusk, ten to fifteen crows

Pathininj kaakkeka

Perch atop the coconut tree,

Thengayi markk melurunth

cawing loudly 'kaa... kaa...'

Ka...kaanth larukuth! (Attappadii 26)

(my trans.)

Crows cawing at dusk are considered messengers of death in many folk traditions.

Their gatherings and loud calls are seen as omens of an impending loss. The next part of the poem confirms this belief when the poet wakes up to news of a death the next morning. The poem explicitly elaborates on the community's death rituals. *Guruvan* and *Guruvathi*, the male and female ritualists, lead the funeral ceremonies and conduct all the rituals for each clan in the Irula community. They fast throughout the ceremony, and if they drink water, it must be from the house of the deceased.

Sapprakk

<i>thevayaaana</i>	The necessary wood for bier
<i>Kambungalellam vuttivanth</i>	is cut and brought,
<i>Sappra veththaru</i>	The bier is prepared and <i>Sappra veththaru</i>
<i>Sapprakke saavemu veththaru</i>	The body is placed upon it
(Attappadi 26)	(my tans.)

The first task is to cut *sapparathadi*, the wood used to build a *sapparam*, a small house-like structure where the deceased is placed. The choice of wood for *sapparam* may vary depending on each clan and their traditions. *Aadukavaru aadukaru, paadukavaru*

<i>Paadukaaru, laarukavaru laarukaaru</i>	Some dance,
<i>Aana, sapprathi irukka saavu matta</i>	Some sing,
<i>Nimmathiye ronkukath</i>	Some weep,
(Attappadi 26)	But only the body on the bier
	sleeps in perfect peace (my trans.)

The *Guruvan* chants *gurusollu* (a ritual slogan) and begins digging a pit to construct the *sapparam* (coffin) after offering *sapra-kanike* (money). The people then join in to complete the structure. The deceased is placed inside, with both legs folded in a meditative posture. The big toe of the right foot is tied, a practice known as *Sambalam Kothukath* (folding the legs). The *Guruvathi* (female ritualist) mourns by chanting two verses, and only after that do others begin to cry. The Irula community then performs ritual dances accompanied by traditional percussion instruments, including the *kozhal*, *tavil*, *pore*, and *jalra*. The poet mentions a place called *Kayyine Palli*, saying,

<i>Guruvane munnukku vuttu</i>	sending the <i>Guruvan</i> in the front,
<i>Saave pinnukku vuttu</i>	followed by the body
<i>Naamu konja vunaaru</i>	We, some youngsters,
<i>Kambunkankale thookki</i>	took the bamboo trunks and
<i>Kayyine pallikke ponemu</i>	Went to kayyine pally (my trans.)
(Attappadi 27)	

“It is a place after Hamlet where all the things related to burial are disposed”, said another Irula poet, P. Sivalingan, in a direct conversation. Sreehari and Eswarappa say, “If the dead person is a man, during the journey to *Koppe*, the marriage contract with his wife is separated, and the woman is considered as freed at a place just after Hamlet is called *Kaine Palli*” (6).

<i>Pndune mnde kluth</i>	The women return
<i>Mansattiye detthth</i>	to their houses

<i>Pndrika avavarutthu</i>	Making the wife a widow,
<i>Koorekalkke pronaaru</i>	By shattering the earthen pot
<i>Naamu koncha aambleke</i>	while we, the men,
<i>Saave thookki</i>	carry the body
<i>Koppe palli ponemu</i>	to the cemetery
(Attappadi 29)	(my trans.)

Making a woman a widow is an integral part of the death rituals of the community. If the deceased is a man, his marriage contract is symbolically dissolved during the journey to the *koppe* (cemetery), freeing his wife from the bond. She carries a mud pot on her head and circles the coffin three times. At the end of the third round, she breaks the pot on a stone, which was earlier used to grind turmeric and to cleanse the feet of the deceased. After this ritual, she removes her *thali* (symbolic marriage necklace), bangles, earrings, and *minchi* (toe ring). She then cuts a portion of her hair and ties it to the corpse as a final gesture. Following this, she returns to the hamlet. The men then perform *nenj vekk* (anointing the body with oil) before taking it to the *koppe* for the final rites. Each clan has a designated burial space in the cemetery. *Palam* is the place where Manikandan Attappadi's clan bury the body. The *Guruva*n selects the burial spot, ensuring the pit is aligned in a south-north direction, with the deceased placed toward the south.

The poem ends with the image of a *Koomepaaru* (owl) hooting at midnight. This creates a sense of fear and sorrow after the burial. The poem begins with the cawing of crows and ends with the hooting of an owl. The caw of the crows is a message of death, while the owl's cry in the midnight marks the final farewell. The

imagery connects nature to human emotions and rituals.

The funeral ritual *Seeru* (*cheeru*) is mentioned in the poem “*Ooru Kttu Manaka*” (The *Ooru* Rules) and refers to the *Seeru* and *Kanji Seeru* ceremonies of the Irula community. *Seeru*, also known as *Cheeru*, is the main funeral ceremony where the community mourns and honours the deceased. The ceremony begins with *Attakozhal*, a dance performed by men to represent Lord Shiva. This is followed by *Oottattu*, which invites women to join the *Kummi* dance, symbolising Shiva inviting Goddess Parvathi. Finally, men and women together perform *Kummi*. The Irulas believe that *Kummi* must be performed to help the deceased’s soul reach heaven.

Kanji Seeru is an annual feast for the ancestors, meant to give peace to the departed souls. Each clan has its customs for *Kanji Seeru*, including animal sacrifice (*Kadaivettu*) and preparing food with Ragi and the meat of the sacrificed animal. The *Kummi* is performed on the occasion, and the *Kozhal* is played to invite the spirits of the ancestors to the feast. These ceremonies, led by a *Guruvan* (male priest) and a *Guruvathi* (female priest), demonstrate the respect of the Irula tribe towards their ancestors, as well as their beliefs about death and the afterlife.

Manikandan Attappadi’s poems also serve as an archive of marriage and related rituals within his community. The poet says, in the poem “*Ooru Kttmanakka*” (The *Ooru* Rules (my trans.)) that, “*ore jaathithi kllyana pannina/ oorevuttu thalli veppaaru*” (Attappadi 81) (If marriage happens within the same clan, they will be ostracised from the *ooru* (my trans.)). These lines depict the traditional marriage customs of the Irula community. The Irula community has seven *kulas*, which are referred to as clans (*jaathi*) in the poem. The Irulas observe *kula* exogamy, wherein marriage is permitted only between members of different clans. They simultaneously

practice strict community endogamy, restricting marriage to within the Irula community. Representatives of all seven *kulas* were present at the wedding ceremony. In the ceremony, the *thaali*, known as *kerepaasi* (an ornament made of black stones), is presented by representatives of all seven *kulas*, after which the bridegroom ties it around the bride's neck. It highlights the significance of the *kula* system within the Irula community. Those who violate the rule by marrying within the same *kula* are usually expelled from the *ooru*, as mentioned in the poem. As Stuart Hall observes

...there are also critical points of profound and significant difference which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather – since history has intervened – 'what we have become'... Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. (Hall 225-226)

The Irula rituals and customs indicate Hall's view that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a position formed and reaffirmed through historical and shared practices, while also illustrating how it is actively shaped and maintained through these traditions.

Amma Noyi and its related beliefs are mentioned in the poem "*Ooru Kttmanakka*" (The *Ooru* Rules (my trans.)) "*Ooruthi oraalukku amma noyi Vantha/ ooruthi oraalumu enne varikka koodath*" (Attappadi 81) (If one person in the village is affected by chickenpox, no one in the *ooru* should use oil for frying (my trans.)). The Irula people, like many other tribal groups, follow unwritten codes of conduct (*Ooru* rules) during times of illness, especially during the time of contagious diseases like *Amma Noyi* (chicken pox). This is closely related to their belief system. Indira V quotes Chandrasekhar et.al.,

The Irula tribes of Attappadi were aware of food restrictions during illness. Certain foods and food combinations were aware of food restrictions during illness. Certain foods and food combinations were given or withheld by them during illness. During epidemics like chickenpox and mumps, they used to take light foods and avoid oily foods. Tender coconut, curds, fruits, buttermilk and milk were reported to be included by the Irulas of Attappadi during chickenpox, and they avoided oily foods and salt during such conditions (qtd. in Indira 268).

Chickenpox is a disease with a spiritual significance in many cultures in India. In the Irula language, it is called *Amma Noyi*, which is similar to *Ammal Noyi* in Tamil. The word “*Amma*” refers to *Mariyamma*, also known as *Mariamman*, a goddess believed to be associated with pox diseases, such as chickenpox and smallpox, in the South Indian Hindu belief system. The Irula community also believes in the *Mariyamma* concept. The believers of *Mariyamma* treat chickenpox with great care and respect. They believe that *Mariyamma* can curse and cure the affected. Turmeric and neem leaves are commonly used in various traditions to treat diseases.

Additionally, many communities, including the Irula, refrain from using oil in their food during this period. As the poet mentions, in the Irula community, if anyone is affected with chicken pox, the entire *ooru* avoids oil. These customs are believed to ward off the curse of *Mariyamma* and to appease the deity. Thus, the poetry of Manikandan Attappadi holds significant academic value as it provides an authentic literary representation of the rituals and belief systems of the Irula tribe. His poems document and interpret these practices within their cultural and spiritual contexts. It also contributes to the preservation of indigenous heritage and traditions.

Traditional Occupations of the Irula Tribe

Most families in Attappadi depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Earlier, the tribal communities relied on farming, as well as collecting forest produce and hunting. Over time, deforestation and the overuse of forest resources reduced their dependence on the forest. Now, only a few families living near or inside remote forests earn a small income from forest produce. Many tribals lost their farms and started working as landless agricultural labourers, as non-tribal settlers owned the majority of the land. For most tribal families, agriculture shifted from being their primary occupation to a secondary source of income. In recent times, many young men and women have stopped preferring farming and instead choose to work in brick factories for daily wages. AAD Louis observes,

The Irulars are persevering and clever agriculturists and are skilled Ponam (shifting) cultivators. What is cultivated depends on the soil and environment. Paddy, raggi, dhal, plantains, chillies and turmeric are grown in large quantities. Both men and women take and an active part in agricultural operations, hunting, rearing vending goats and poultry. Many have their own permanent cultivation on leasehold or Government lands. They also collect bamboo, firewood, and forest produce, and sell or exchange these for cereals and essentials. Their implements consist of a chopper, wooden plough, spade and axe. When there is acute shortage of cereals, they live on roots, herbs and bamboo rice (Louis 54).

The tribal communities were originally shifting cultivators. However, due to large-scale encroachment by settlers, they moved to settled agriculture and plough-based farming. Traditionally, they grew millets such as *makka cholam* (maize), ragi (finger millet), and

chama (little millet), along with pulses like *thuvava* (red gram) and oilseeds like groundnuts and castor. Today, their farming practices have expanded to include nearly all the crops grown by Tamil and Malayali settlers in the region.

The tribal communities traditionally engaged in subsistence agriculture through slash-and-burn (shifting cultivation) methods. Their primary crops included coarse cereals, supplemented by the collection of minor forest produce such as honey, lac, incense, medicinal herbs, tubers, and fruits. This system supported a largely self-sufficient economy with minimal ecological disruption. Over time, the area under shifting cultivation declined due to several factors, including the arrival of settlers with different agricultural practices, the growing monetisation of the tribal economy, and government-imposed restrictions on extensive cultivation. The most significant factor was the entry of people from neighbouring regions who introduced advanced farming techniques. Consequently, the tribal economy became integrated with external markets, commercial crops gained prominence, and traditional tribal agricultural methods gradually lost their relevance.

The most significant factor was the entry of people from neighbouring regions who introduced advanced farming techniques. Consequently, the tribal economy became integrated with external markets, commercial crops gained prominence, and traditional tribal agricultural methods gradually lost their relevance. Unlike settled cultivation, shifting cultivation follows traditional customs and rituals. The process involves several steps, including selecting the land, determining the cultivation date, preparing the land, sowing seeds, weeding, and harvesting. The first and most crucial step is the careful selection of land for cultivation. The *Mannukkaran* (soil expert) selects the land for cultivation, and the Tribal Council, led by the *Moopan*, gives final

approval. The *Mannukkaran* also sets the date for cultivation after studying the natural vegetation and soil conditions. Once both the land and date are decided, the *Moopan* leads all the healthy members of the *oorut* in clearing the selected land, usually starting after the Sivarathri festival.

They cut down and burn trees and bushes, leaving large trees untouched. The ashes from burning serve as natural fertiliser. Sowing begins in May. Instead of deep ploughing, they lightly prepare the land and plant seeds by making small holes. Women sow crops like *thuvara*, *thumara*, and *amara*. Later in May, they broadcast a mixture of seeds, including ragi, chama, *kaduku* (mustard), and *cheera* (amaranth). By June, when plants reach about a foot in height, they begin to flower, a process that continues until August. However, they limit weeding to reduce soil erosion. Harvesting takes place from September onward, depending on each crop's maturity. They first harvest *kaduku* and *cheera* in September, followed by ragi from October to November, chama from November to December, and *amara* and *thuvara* by January or February. A key feature of shifting cultivation is that once the soil fertility declines, the tribals leave the land and move to a new area for clearing and cultivation.

The shifting cultivation in Attappadi transitioned to settled cultivation with the influence of the migration of both Malayali and Tamil settlers to the Area. As more forest land was cleared, Malayali settlers began growing seasonal crops such as tapioca, tubers, and plantain for both subsistence and cash. However, rodent attacks and poor climate conditions caused frequent crop failures. As a result, the settlers shifted to cultivating a mix of perennial crops like pepper, coconut, arecanut, coffee, and rubber, along with some seasonal crops such as tapioca, plantain, ginger, and turmeric. By the mid-1970s, the rising prices of perennial crops encouraged settlers to convert more land

from seasonal to perennial crop cultivation. This is represented in the poem *Unji*. The poet says,

<i>Thokari, nellu, same, kadale, kollu</i>	Where once <i>thuvvara</i> , rice, <i>chama</i> ,
<i>Kambu, sola, rai vulantha</i>	Groundnut, horse gram, pearl millet,
<i>Mannuthi thangai mara, va mara</i>	maize and ragi grew; now the coconut
<i>Mamaranth vlekkaru</i>	tree, tree, banana and mango trees
(Attappadi 140)	grow (my trans.)

These lines represent the changing agricultural landscape of Attappadi and its impact on traditional cultivation methods. The farming culture of Attappadi is changing and facing various challenges, including threats from wild animals and the impacts of climate change. These themes are discussed in detail in the following sections. It is worth noting that the “Millet Hamlet” initiative, launched in 2013, is a project aimed at reviving traditional tribal farming practices in Attappadi, Kerala. The program focuses on helping tribal farmers grow millets, including *Ragi* (finger millet), *Chama* (little millet), and *Cholam* (sorghum), over a large area of 2,500 hectares. The crops are primarily grown using organic methods, which not only enhance the health of the tribal people but also ensure improved food security for them.

Hunting is another essential activity among the Irulas. Most men, particularly the younger ones, regularly take part in it. Traditionally, they are required to obtain permission from the headman before going on a hunt, though this rule is often ignored today. Hunting is typically carried out in groups. They usually hunt wild pigs, deer, wild fowl, jackals, and similar animals. For this purpose, they use specially crafted

bows and arrows, as well as spears, cleavers, guns, and traps.

Hunting for tribal communities, as Vandana Shiva writes, “hunting, per se, need not be violent; most tribal societies apologise to the animals they have to kill, and their hunting is constrained by nature’s cycles of production and reproduction” (Shiva 48). The activity of hunting, as an essential activity in the communal life of the Irula, particularly in the division of meat, is depicted in the poem “*Ooru Kttu Manaka*” (The *Ooru* Rules (my trans.)), which is already discussed in this study, under the title “Tribal Way of Living and the Communal Life of Irula”.

Animal-Human Conflict and Traditional Crop Protection Techniques

Manikandan Attappadi, in one of his interviews, observes that the loss of connection with the forest is the root cause of the conflict between tribes and animals. According to him,

Today, we depend on the forest only when we need something. We go to the forest and return, but more than that, we destroy it. Whether it’s bamboo or grass, we cut and destroy it. There is nothing for elephants and other animals to eat in the forest. As a result, they are forced to come into human settlements. When animals attack, it is out of fear of humans. We are the ones creating the circumstances for this to happen.

(*Namthth Bhaasekkrku Ka Saththi Eth Bhaasekkrkth?*)

The poem “*Kavakkarae*” (The Guard) begins with the imagery of the rising fear among farmers as animals threaten their fields.

Vtiya vtiya kaavankaaththalamu

Even if watch until dawn,

Oru vllaamevem vtt vekkale

The animals leave no harvest

<i>Vndu viruka . kaade suththeem</i>	untouched.
<i>Veli pottaalum veliye deth</i>	Even if a fence is built around the forest,
<i>Ulle varukaaru thrdaaru!</i>	Thieves break through and enter (my
(Attappadi 20)	trans.)

The speaker watches over the land, but animals still eat the crops. Even when fences and traps are set, thieves and animals find a way in. This illustrates the challenges of protecting food and resources. Attappadi, situated in the Palakkad district of Kerala, is a hilly region characterised by dense forests and a challenging terrain. The people here, especially the tribal communities, depend on farming and gathering forest produce for their survival. However, the wild terrain makes it hard to protect their crops from animals. The people must stay awake at night to guard their fields, as wild animals can destroy months of effort in a single night. The poet further laments that,

<i>Kaadu mulikka kaththari veththe</i>	Traps are set everywhere in the forest,
<i>Oru Elimum mattaale</i>	yet not a single animal has been trapped!
<i>Kaadu mulukka avuttu kaayi veththe</i>	Snares are laid everywhere in the forest,
<i>Oru vundumu sikkaale</i>	yet not a single animal has been trapped!
(Attappadi 20)	(my trans.)

These lines vividly depict the ongoing human-animal conflict, where tribal communities struggle to protect their crops from insects and wild animals. The reference to traps and snares is associated with the persistent efforts of the Irula people, who were once highly skilled in rat trapping and hunter-gathering. However, the poem

also represents the gradual erosion of traditional knowledge and survival skills of tribal people in the face of modernisation. The poet, representing the younger generation of the community, finds these methods futile. It symbolises the community's struggle to adapt to a rapidly changing world while trying to preserve their ancestral ways of life. The poem ends by saying, "*Kaaduthi sola potta mbunduthi/ Kuruvikalth sallya mudiyaath*" (Attappadi 20) (In the forest where maize was sown/ the sparrows' nuisance is unbearable (my trans.)).

The poem "*Pasi*" (Hunger) also references the rats that are devouring the yield. The poet says, "*vllaamekale thikk mudikka/ elikale kaththari vethth pdikkono*" (Attappadi 176) (We must catch the rats with traps that devour our harvest (my trans.)). This also symbolises how wild animals and pests are becoming a threat to farmers, especially those living adjacent to the forest, such as the Irula community of Attappadi. Some of the traditional crop methods are also mentioned in the poems of Manikandan Attappadi. Wild animals, such as deer, wild pigs, rabbits, elephants, and monkeys, often pose a challenge to farmers by destroying their crops and foraging in fields. Tribal farmers use traditional methods to protect their fields without harming animals, maintaining human-animal harmony. The poems below discuss some of these practices. The poems "*Kavakkarae*" (The Guard (my trans.)) and "*Kaavakk Vanthavae*" (The One who Came to Guard (my trans.)) portray the method of "guarding" as being awake in the night to prevent wild animals from destroying the crops. Farmers typically set up small huts or use large tree branches near their fields to spend the night. When they detect a wild animal, they alert one another using vocal sounds, loud noises from metal tins, or torchlight and fire. This system requires constant vigilance throughout the night. Firewood or old tyres are often used to provide illumination and deter animals. In some

cases, trained dogs assist by detecting intruders, chasing them away, and warning the guards. When an emergency arises, those guarding different fields come together to offer support. The poem “*Kaavakk Vanthavae*” (The One Who Came to Guard (my trans.)) describes the qualities a guard should possess. He should

<i>Koyi sokkthe sokkono</i>	You must sleep like a Rooster,
<i>Sinnaha jandha kuttalumu.</i>	Waking up quickly at the slightest
sound. <i>Plusunthu eunthono</i>	A choottu, a lamp, and a knife
<i>Eppamu sootte, valakku, kaththi</i>	A choottu, a lamp, and a knife
<i>Kyyithi irukkono</i> (Attappadi 24)	should be kept in hand (my trans)

The poem describes how the guard fails by falling asleep at night, leaving the field unprotected and vulnerable to animal attacks. The poet says the guard must stay as alert as a rooster, waking at the slightest sound to safeguard the crops. He should carry a *choottu*, a lamp, and a knife for emergencies. *Choottu* is a traditional torch made by tightly binding dried palm leaves, cloth, or other flammable materials, soaked in oil or wax, and set aflame. Before electricity became widespread, rural communities used it as a portable light source, much like a modern flashlight in Kerala.

The poem “*Kavakkarae*” (The Guard (my trans.)) mentions another method to protect crops from animals and thieves, that is “fencing”. Fencing is a widely used method to deter wild animals and can provide long-term protection. Agricultural fences are an effective way to safeguard crops, but their use is often subject to regulations. Some local and state authorities may impose restrictions on certain types of fences, such as electric fences. The durability and effectiveness of a fence depend on its

material and the construction method used. Typically, tribal people utilise bamboo and other natural materials to construct fences, which serve as temporary barriers for wild animals.

Climatic Changes and Related Challenges

Climate change is a recurring theme within the context of agricultural practices. In this study, this theme will be further discussed in detail under the title “Nature as Destroyer”. Farming in Attappadi is entirely dependent on rain. Rain deficit due to climate change is a significant challenge faced by the farmers of Attappadi. In the poem “*Kavakkarae*” (The Guard (my trans.)), the poet portrays the image of plants waiting for the rain.

Maene kaath sokki nikkthu

The ragi, corn, and plant vines

Rayi, saalesti kodika

stand weary, waiting for rain

(Attappadi 20)

(my trans.)

Ragi and corn are vital crops in the Attappadi region. The imagery features the hardships caused by a rainfall deficit, with crops and plants standing parched, yearning for rain. However, excessive rainfall also poses challenges for the tribal communities. The poet expresses this struggle through the lines, “*Otta salethi mae petha/ sottuvu athinemi marekkena*” (Attappadi 21) (If it rains in the broken hut / it will leak and drip, even that must be covered (my trans.)). This illustrates how both rain deficit and heavy rainfall affect tribal life, highlighting the poor living conditions of those residing in fragile and leaky huts.

Depiction of Indigenous Ornaments/Dresses/ Utensils/Equipment

David Crystal reminds us that, if you are the last person to speak a language, the language already dies as a tool of communication. A language remains alive only while someone has someone to speak it to. When you are the sole speaker, your knowledge of the language serves as a repository or archive of your community's spoken linguistic past. If no one has ever written it down or recorded it on tape and many languages remain unrecorded, your knowledge is all that survives. Unlike a conventional archive, which can endure long after the archivist has passed away, the moment the last speaker of an unwritten or unrecorded language dies, the archive vanishes entirely. When a language dies without ever having been documented, it is as if it has never existed (Crystal 2). This scenario applies to the cultural vocabulary embedded within a language, such as terms for objects, clothing, tools, and practices that carry the memory of a people's way of life. Once these words fall out of use, the knowledge of the objects they name is also endangered, risking erasure from the vocabulary. Notably, the Irula language in which the poems are written is listed by UNESCO as an endangered language ("The Irula" 46).

The poem *Moonka Sole* (Bamboo Grove) mentions the indigenous equipment in the lines "*Ippa emme aarukkumu vaandanth/ solli mora, kurukke, kaththari thavikkuthu*" (Attappadi 30) (no one wants us anymore/ crying *muram, kotta, kaththari* (my trans.)). *Muram* is a flat, tray-like multipurpose tool primarily used as a traditional winnowing tool for separating grains from chaff and impurities, as well as sifting pulses or rice. *A kotta* is a basket-like container typically used for carrying, storing, or displaying various items. It is used for harvesting and transporting crops such as grains and vegetables in agricultural fields, and also serves as a storage container for daily

essentials. Certain baskets are explicitly designed for catching fish. The *muram* and *kotta* are crafted from bamboo, reeds, or palm leaves, using traditional weaving techniques. The latest models are also available in plastic. A *Kaththari* is probably a multipurpose scissor-like equipment.

The poem *Sole* (Forest (my trans.)) portrays the traditional attire of Irula tribal women, particularly the dressing style of grandmothers. It describes their indigenous clothing as “*seenene nenjuvare eathi ktti*”(Attappadi 34), meaning a sari tied at the chest. The long piece of cloth, known as *chela*, is wrapped around the body, covering the chest and extending down to the knees. The front portion of the *chela* is folded twice, creating a small pouch that can be used for carrying items. The poem also mentions the traditional ornaments of the tribe, such as *Kaas male*, *Paasi male*, *Kallu male* (all three are neckpieces), and *Kaalu thandai* (anklet). The poet also mentions *mannu vle*, which is likely a bangle made of mud. In earlier times, women adorned their shoulders with clay bangles, as well as bangles made of copper, silver, or gold. They also wore earrings and toe rings. However, in the present day, it is rare to see women wearing ornaments on their shoulders.

The poem “*Unji*” refers to *the* traditional storage device of the same name. It is a swinging shelf used to keep food safe and out of reach of animals and pests. The poet says that, back then, people would place the cooked food on the *Unji*, tie it securely, and hang it up before leaving for work. Today, many people are unaware of the word ‘*Unji*,’ and the *Unji* itself has disappeared from their homes. Here, *Unji* acts as a symbolic representation of disappearing traditions and habits of the community.

The Irula language is recognised by UNESCO as endangered (“The Irula,” 46). It has unique words for plants, tools, rituals, and practices. These words are at risk of

disappearing from the community's culture. By including them in his poetry, the poet preserves this disappearing vocabulary. Many young people in the community no longer know these words. The poems act as a record of this fading indigenous knowledge.

Nature in Tribal Life: Protector, Victim, and Destroyer

Manikandan Attappadi's poetry presents a multifaceted relationship with nature, depicting it as a nurturing mother, a vulnerable entity subject to exploitation, and at times, a powerful and destructive force. These poems echo the profound dependence of the Irula people on the forest environment, while also expressing concerns about environmental degradation and ecological imbalance. This perspective aligns with eco-critical theory, which examines the relationship between humans and the natural world, as well as postcolonial theory, which focuses on the effects of colonialism and modern development on indigenous communities and their environments. Through vivid imagery and personification, the poetry articulates the Irulas' reverence for nature and their apprehensions about its ongoing destruction. This section examines how the poems portray nature as a protector, exploited victim, and destroyer.

Nature as a Protector

This poem, "*Sole*" (Forest (my trans.)), personifies the forest as a nurturing mother. The forest is an integral part of the Irula life. The poet uses vivid imagery and symbolic elements to bring the forest to life as a maternal figure, protector, and provider. The poem begins by describing the *sole thai* (mother forest).

<i>Pachche seene ktti</i>	Dressed in a green sari,
<i>Peeli viruththa mudine</i>	Tied train-rattled hair neatly,
<i>Othkki ktti, solethi</i>	She adorns herself with garlands of
<i>Alakalaka pooththrukka</i>	flowers
<i>Poovukale maale ktti</i>	that bloom beautifully in the forest,
<i>Thele mudikke vethth...</i>	placing them in her hair.
(Attappadi 34)	(my trans.)

The forest is personified as a woman dressed in a green sari with her hair neatly tied, adorned with beautiful wildflowers. The poet further proceeds to say that the woman wears indigenous ornaments such as *kaas male*, *paasi male*, *kallu male*, *mannuvle* and *kaal thandai*. These ornaments suggest that the forest is associated with a tribal woman, specifically, in this context, an Irula woman. The poet ends the first part of the poem by saying that, wearing all the adornments and ornaments, the *sole thai* (mother forest) is coming happily, dances, and sings. The poet refers to the forest as ‘mother,’ emphasising the intense bond between the forest and tribal communities, which forms the foundation of their lives. The next part of the poem vividly portrays the forest as a provider of resources for the tribal people.

<i>Seenene nenju vare</i>	With her sari tied just at the chest,
<i>Eaththi ktti, veththele pott</i>	and turning lips red,
<i>Vaayella raththa nrammaakki</i>	a betel leaf tucked in her mouth
<i>Kyyikke koththeduthth</i>	carrying a knife in hand,
<i>Eaththi ktti, veththele pott</i>	going to the forest,

<i>Kaadungetekke pokavaru</i>	our grandmothers
<i>Emuthu paattila</i> (Attappadi 34)	With their matted hair tied in
<i>jde mudine kondektti</i>	and wrapped in a cloth,
<i>thkke orumule ktti</i>	Go to the forest before dawn
<i>Poth podikkaththukku</i>	to plough the land,
<i>Munnukke kaadukke poyi</i>	our grandfathers.
<i>Mannuthi earott kavaru</i>	(my trans.)
<i>Eamuththu paattaaru</i>	
(Attappadi 34-35)	

The above lines reinforce the idea that the forest is an integral part of the lives of tribals. The poet says the forest was a firsthand experience for the previous generation, especially their grandmothers and grandfathers, compared to the youngest generation, who are much more modernised in their lifestyle. The above lines depict the grandmothers, with betel-stained lips and a knife, as strong and resourceful. Similarly, the grandfathers are portrayed with matted hair and woke up before dawn to plough the land, embodying labour and resilience. These lines depict the agrarian life of the Irula people and how the forest provided them with enough land and other resources for their livelihood.

The poem further portrays the forest as sleeping in tranquillity, listening to the song of the mountain stream. The leaves form a welcoming carpet, and the falling flowers bless those who walk beneath them, supporting the idea of the forest as a benevolent entity. The final stanza further develops, personifying the forest as a maternal figure.

<i>figure.Sole thayina madithi</i>	If you sleep in the lap of the mother
<i>Kadanth ronkina, santhosamaa</i>	forest,
<i>Kannu pov, thaalaatt paadi ava</i>	You will drift into a joyful slumber.
<i>Ronga veppa, nalla nalla ktheka</i>	She will sing you lullabies and put you
<i>Solli thava, eppaamu</i>	to sleep.
<i>Ktti pduththu muththa veppa</i>	She tells you beautiful stories,
(Attappadi 35)	She holds you close and kisses you
	every time (my trans.)

The poet says the mother forest cradles those who sleep in her lap, sings lullabies, tells stories, and gives kisses. These are gentle and affectionate gestures of care and love that a mother shows to her children. This imagery depicts the forest as a nurturing presence that offers comfort, strength, and a sense of belonging to its dependents.

Nature as an Exploited Entity

“We are interbeings. We are interconnected. When we poison the Earth, we poison our bodies. When we pollute the atmosphere, we create climate chaos. When we destroy biodiversity, we create hunger, disease, and climate imbalance” (“Vandana Shiva on the Wisdom of Biodiversity”). These words emphasise the inseparable link between human life and the natural world, and the consequences that follow when this balance is disturbed. The exploitation of nature, arising from such disturbance, is a recurring theme vividly represented in the poems of Manikandan Attappadi. Nature and its elements are personified in various poems as a lamenting entity, as discussed below. The poem *Moonka Sole* (Bamboo Grove) opens with the imagery of two individuals arriving to cut bamboo. The poet personifies the bamboo, expressing its sorrow and lament.

<i>“Emuththu vtti, vaaye ktti,</i>	“The one who comes to tie our
<i>Kththe vttu kyyine vtti</i>	mouths, cut our throats, chop our
<i>Kaale vtti kondu pokakku</i>	hands, Moreover, sever our feet to
<i>Vanthavre... namu ena</i>	take us away... What sin have we
<i>Paavasenthamu?” Nth solli</i>	committed?” Bamboos are crying,
<i>Moonkaka gonth larukuth? (Attappadi 30)</i>	saying this (my trans.)

The imagery of tied mouths, cut throats, chopped hands, and severed feet implies that cutting bamboo is an act of violence against nature. It prompts the readers to address the act against nature from nature’s perspective. The bamboo questions humans, asking what sin it has committed to deserve such treatment. The cry of the bamboo here is a symbol of the cry of nature itself.

The same question is repeated at the end of the poem by firewood to the poet.

<i>Varaake palaththakkulle</i>	<i>When I split the firewood</i>
<i>Varaake enke sullukth</i>	It speaks to me
<i>Mlukukke enne palaththi</i>	“You split me with an axe,
<i>Vekkekke kanakana naththi</i>	Dried me perfectly in the sun,
<i>Aduppakke vethth theeyeruth</i>	Placed me in the heart
<i>Kollu kithi, naamu ena paesathemu?</i>	And burn me to death. What
<i>(Attappadi 30)</i>	Sin have we committed?
	(my trans.)

The firewood’s journey from cutting to burning is described as a slow, agonising death, like nature is destroyed over time. The poet acknowledges the pain of

firewood, even though it is essential for survival. These lines emphasise the importance of sustainable resource use in modern times. The repeated question “What sin have we committed?” underscores the need for harmonious living with nature rather than adopting a consumeristic approach.

The poet draws attention to the disappearance of specific bird species, discussing the loss of biodiversity and the disruption of the ecosystem. He laments that wild birds such as *the Poosundi*, *Stte Kuruvi* (House Sparrow), *Kottale*, *Somboth* (Crow Pheasant), and *Sthaari* (Sithari) are no longer seen as they were before. Their absence indicates the adverse effects of deforestation, habitat destruction, and climate change. These lines serve as a reminder of the urgent need for conservation efforts to protect endangered species and restore ecological balance. Vandana Shiva, in the introduction to *Staying Alive*, notes that India loses 1.3 million hectares of forest each year due to commercial plantations, river valley projects, mining, and similar activities. She adds that globally, 12 million hectares of forest vanish annually. If this pace of destruction continues, all tropical forests will have disappeared by 2050. With their disappearance, the rich diversity of life they sustain will vanish as well (Shiva xiii). The lament of trees can also be seen in the poem “*Mluku Minnukuthu Mara Laarukuth*” (The Axe Gleams, the Tree Weeps (my trans.)).

Aayira mlkkale paathu

Seeing a thousand axes,

aalamara anchi laarkathe

The banyan tree trembles and weeps.

paathu ethu kannu

Moreover, it makes my eyes flow like

kre thanni kanakke paanthu!

a river! (my trans.)

(Attappadi 94)

These lines describe a Banyan tree trembling and weeping as it sees the gleaming axe. Here, the Banyan tree symbolises nature, expressing its pain and helplessness. The axe, on the other hand, represents humans who exploit and destroy nature for their needs. The poet empathises with the suffering of the tree, feeling its pain so deeply that it brings tears to his eyes. The poet acknowledges the brotherhood between tribal communities and nature through this imagery. For tribal people, nature is not just a resource, but a vital part of their existence. It reflects the philosophy of tribal life, which is based on harmony, respect, and brotherhood with the natural world. Then, the poet asks:

<i>Ee kadune vutti kollukakku</i>	Who is not capable of
<i>Aarukke mudiyaaththath</i>	Cutting down this forest?
<i>Aana, kaadune uruvaakkukakk</i>	But creating a forest,
<i>Evlavu paad!</i>	What a difficult task it is!
(Attappadi 94)	(my trans.)

These lines suggest that while cutting down trees is relatively easy, establishing a forest is a lengthy and challenging process that spans generations. The poet, who resides in Attappadi, a region near the Silent Valley Biosphere, views the forest as the foundation of life. The forest is not just a source of livelihood for the Irula people, but also a vital part of their culture and identity. This holds for many other indigenous communities as well. Additionally, forests serve as reservoirs of rare flora and fauna. The poet reminds us that deforestation has profound and far-reaching effects as it contributes to the loss of biodiversity and ecological imbalance. Later, it evokes the imagery of the same Banyan tree standing straight and unafraid before the axe and

knife. This can be a symbol of the last fight for life and rights, even in the face of destruction. The poem ends with tribal wisdom. The poet says,

<i>nee poduka vthe, nallatha iruntha</i>	If the seed you sow is good,
<i>nallavanna molekku, ath</i>	It will sprout well. If it is bad,
<i>kttatha iruntha mannukkulle</i>	It will disappear under the soil
<i>murenthe pov! (Attappadi 94)</i>	(my trans.)

These lines directly refer to the agricultural wisdom of the tribe, which emphasises that good seeds sprout well. They can also serve as a metaphor for human actions, as the proverb suggests, “what you sow is what you reap”. Similarly, humanity’s current treatment of nature will have a significant impact on the planet’s future.

Nature as a Destructor

“The earth is rapidly dying: her forests are dying, her soils are dying, her waters are dying, her air is dying” (Shiva xii). This observation encapsulates how ecological disequilibrium can invert nature’s role from sustainer to destroyer, a shift exemplified by the extreme summer heat of Palakkad, where Attappadi, the native place of the poet, is located. It records the highest summer temperatures in Kerala. As part of this region, Attappadi also experiences intense heat during the summer, symbolising how nature can sometimes act as a destructive force. The poem “*Vekke*” opens with the imagery of a scorching sun, powerful enough to destroy living organisms.

<i>Aduppaththi mansattithi</i>	Like rice boiling
<i>Soru veka kanakke</i>	In an earthen pot on the stove,

<i>Vekkethi karunth naanu veke!</i>	I burn under the sun!
<i>Naduekkethi uchanthele</i>	Like rice boiling
<i>Randaa dekh</i>	Scorching at midday,
(Attappadi 38)	My head is splitting into two!
	(my trans.)

The opening lines compare the speaker's experience of extreme heat to rice boiling in an earthen pot. The line "Scorching at midday, my head splitting into two!" vividly portrays the physical agony caused by the intense summer heat. The narrator recalls how his mother reminded him to carry an umbrella before stepping outside. However, even with the umbrella, he found no relief as the heat was unbearable, and walking in the sun felt like stepping through fire. His feet burned, his body was drenched in sweat, and he struggled to endure the scorching conditions.

The poem expands beyond personal suffering to depict the widespread impact of extreme heat. A blue sparrow is looking up, longing for rain. The land is dry, and the riverbeds are barren. The desperation is emphasised in the line, "*kudikkaakk oru sott thanni ille*" (Attappadi 38) (there is not a drop of water to drink (my trans.)). This suggests the distressing effects of drought, where life itself is at risk. The final lines "*vesakake kaala vekke bhayankara jood*" (Attappadi 39) (summer's sun is extremely hot (my trans.)) portray the destructive power of nature, presenting it as an unavoidable force. The poem "*Kode Maae*" (Heavy Rain (my trans.)) portrays the images of heavy rain and extreme heat, both of which act as the destructive powers of nature. The heavy rain and strong winds also bring chaos, uprooting trees and reshaping the landscape, despite the rain being essential for life and agriculture. Similarly, the contrasting imagery of drought confirms the unpredictable and harsh realities of nature.

<i>Kode Maethi</i>	In the heavy rain, without an umbrella,
<i>Kodeyillathe</i>	My entire body is drenched.
<i>Dhoppnth Slenthe.</i>	The uprooted trees fall to the ground
<i>Kode Kaaththaduthth Maraka</i>	Due to the stormy wind
<i>Verathth Vukuth Mannukke!</i>	(my trans.)

(Attappadi 52)

The poem opens with an image of relentless rain, leaving the speaker drenched and vulnerable. The stormy winds uproot trees, showcasing nature's immense power of destruction. However, the poem later suggests that the rain revitalises the land, making it ready for new growth, and thus adds an optimistic approach to the poem, counterbalancing the destructive imagery. This imagery portrays nature as both a source of nourishment and a force of destruction.

Depictions of Women: Roles and Representations

The poem *Pnd* (Wife (my trans.)) portrays the harsh realities of a woman's life in a male-dominated society. It is evident from the poem that the woman belongs to the Irula tribal setting. Tribal women often face multiple levels of oppression based on both caste and gender within their families and in the broader social structure. The central figure in the poem is a married woman who experiences profound physical and emotional suffering as a result of gender-based oppression within a patriarchal family system. The poet says,

<i>Koyi kookukathukku</i>	Before the rooster crows, she wakes
<i>Munnukke eunth</i>	up,
<i>Ava karikkatta kanakke aayiththa</i>	Washes all the dishes, Sweeps the
<i>Satti mooke vulukki, kalamodukki</i>	yard,
<i>Aduppaththi oothi oothi</i>	And blows up fire in the hearth
(Attappadi 32)	She turned herself into charcoal!
	(my trans.)

The image of a woman waking early and walking to the kitchen has long been a painful and poignant symbol in the Indian scenario. Crenshaw writes,

Many women of colour, for example, are burdened by poverty, child care responsibilities, and the lack of job skills. These burdens, largely the consequence of gender and class oppression, are then compounded by the racially discriminatory employment and housing women of colour often face, as well as by the disproportionately high unemployment among people of colour, which makes battered women of colour less able to depend on the support of friends and relatives for shelter (“Mapping the Margins” 1246).

It depicts a woman’s struggles within a patriarchal family setting to address her ‘invisible labour’. The physical and emotional turmoil of the woman in the poem is conveyed through the image of a woman who has turned herself into charcoal.

She has the burden of an abusive husband who is suspicious and a drunkard. The emotional level of the poem changes when the poet says, “*anthi aana adi othe thingono*” (Attappadi 32) (she endures beatings in the evenings, (my trans.)). Here, the poet exposes the domestic violence and alcoholism, both of which are serious issues in

many marginalised communities, including the Irulas. Darwin notes that within the Irula community, most members drink locally brewed alcohol. However, rising literacy levels and awareness initiatives have led to a significant decline in alcohol consumption among women and children. Smoking, he adds, is relatively uncommon among them (Darwin 40). The physical abuse she suffers in the evenings is enough to make her life pathetic, physically and mentally. The habit of suspicion of her husband shows that she is doing a thankless, invisible labour, surrendering her health and peace of mind.

Additionally, the financial instability is also addressed in the poem. The poet says that “*sonthama koore ille*” (Attappadi 32) (no house of their own (my trans.)). However, they own land. The land may be traditional farmland, but nobody is there to work it. This shows that the abusive husband is not ready to work in the farmland, and he is not letting her wife do it as he is suspicious. Regarding this, Mies observes, “...women are not owners of their bodies or the earth, but they co-operate with their bodies and with the earth in order ‘to let grow and to make grow’” (Shiva 41). The poem is titled *Pnd* (Wife (my trans.)) and is genuinely a real-life portrayal of gendered oppression faced by a woman in a patriarchal tribal family setting.

The poem “*Agge*” (Mother (my trans.)) depicts the image of a mother who acknowledges her sacrifices and endurance, even in her absence. The poem begins by saying, “*Pathth maasa somanth peththeduththava nee/ pille vali evlavu thangirappi*” (Attappadi 72) (You, who carried me for ten months and gave birth/ how much labour pain you must have endured (my trans.)). These lines describe the emotional and physical sufferings of motherhood, beginning with the mother carrying the child for ten months and bearing the pain of childbirth. The poet remembers how his mother nurtured him in his childhood.

<i>Nenjikke, tholukke</i>	You fed me,
<i>Madikke kadaththi vaththinava</i>	You raised me,
<i>Dhoviye kaatti, kaye kaatti</i>	cradling on your chest,
<i>Maraththe kaatti, naaye kaatti</i>	showing the moonlight,
<i>Soru theeththinava</i>	shoulders, and lap
(Attappadi 72)	hen, tree, and dog
	(my trans.)

These lines depict a mother's care and affection for her child. She feeds and cradles the child. She also introduces the child to the environment, nature, and surroundings by showing them the moonlight, a hen, a tree, and a dog. Now, all these affectionate acts of the mother-child relationship become irreplaceable memories that the narrator cherishes. The mother is also portrayed as a protector who wipes away the child's tears after the father's anger. The poem elevates the mother to a divine status, stating, "*Ninne kanakka daiva ee bhoomithi engmille*" (Attapadi 72) (There is no god on this earth like you (my trans.)). The daily prayers at *Pasath Koora*, a holy place in the Irula community for the departed souls, demonstrate the profound value placed on her presence, even after death. The poem addresses and honours the physical and emotional hardships of mothers, which often go unnoticed. It respects the mother's suffering, showing her endurance as a powerful sign of resilience.

Preserving the Mother Tongue: Urgency and Importance

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o stresses the intimate link between language and culture, stating, "written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular

language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries” (Thiong’o 15). The poems “*Bhase*” (Language) and “*Aadhi Bhase*” (The First Language) highlight the importance of preserving tribal languages and emphasise the value of the mother tongue. The poem “*Bhaase*” (Language (my trans.)) opens with the question, “*Bhaaseyillaathe plekke mudiva*” (Attappadi 150) (Can one live without language? (my trans.)), which stresses how language is essential for human survival. He further says “*emuththu bhaase sole bhaase/ soleth sokaththe maaththhakku vundi naanu eluthuke*” (Attappadi 150) (Our language is the forest’s language/ I write to immortalise the sorrow of the forest (my trans.)), showing the intense bond between tribal people and the forest. The poet uses the language of the forest to preserve its essence, symbolising harmony between the forest and the tribal people.

The poet also points out the marginalisation of tribal languages. He says, “*uththeme Vantha bhaseka orupaadu/ athi othnkinintha bhase namuthth bhase*” (Attappadi 150) (Many languages have come as guests, but the language that is sidelined is ours (my trans.)). This shows that many tribal languages have marginalised due to the linguistic hegemony, and it is to be addressed as a serious issue. It is also a reflection of language death, or language extinction, which happens when a language loses all its native speakers and disappears. This usually occurs when a dominant language gradually replaces a minority language, or when the last surviving speakers of that language pass away. This line reminds us that the loss of a language leads to the loss of culture and tradition. The poet further says that,

Lipiyillantha enaathu

Namuthth bhasekkrukkuka saththi

Eath bhasekkrukkuth?

No refusal to write in my language,

just because it lacks the script. Which

language has the strength that our

(Attappadi 150)

language holds? (my trans.)

This conveys the core ideology of tribal language literature emerging in Kerala today. The tribal languages of Kerala traditionally lacked their own script, which limited the development of written literature. However, with the use of the Malayalam script, tribal poets are now able to write in their mother tongue. They are beginning to recognise the power of the mother tongue in their creative expressions. The poet also points out the challenges of writing down in his mother tongue, saying that,

When I was writing the poems in *Malleespara Mudi*, I told someone that I was writing poems in our language. They asked me in return, “Can’t you write in Malayalam?” Even now, many people believe that only if you write in Malayalam will you get attention. Children who are studying, and those who have studied and gained power, are all abandoning their tribal languages. Children who only learn Malayalam stop speaking their tribal languages. Under the dominance of Malayalam, our languages are dying. (*Namthth Bhaasekkrku Ka Saththi Eth Bhaasekkrkkth?*)

The poem “*Aadhi Bhaase*” (The First Language) begins with a statement that “*Aadhibhaase emuththu aadhivasi bhaase*” (Attappadi 154) (The first language is our tribal language (my trans.)). He says that “*Erlaa bhaase ethth thaayi bhaase*” (Attapadi 154) (Irula language is my mother tongue). He points out the consequences of language death.

Erulae bhaase saththa Erulae saave.

If the Irula language dies,

Mudka bhaase saththa Mudkae saave.

The Irula people will die.

<i>Kuramba bhaase saththa kurumbam saave</i>	If the Muduga language dies,
<i>Ee bhaasekayella saththa</i>	The Irula people will die.
<i>Atteppadi adhivasika</i>	If the Muduga language dies,
<i>Usrode saavaru!</i>	The Muduga people will die.
<i>Ee bhaasekayella saththa</i>	If the Kurumba language dies,
<i>Atteppadi adhivasika</i>	The Kurumba people will die.
<i>Usrode saavaru!</i>	If all these languages die,
(Attappadi 154)	Attappadi tribals
	will die with them (my trans.)

This passage explains the strong connection between language and identity. It means that if the Irula, Muduga, or Kurumba languages disappear, the cultural identity and heritage of these communities will also vanish. Language is not just a means of communication. It also carries traditions, knowledge, and ways of life unique to each group. The death of these languages would lead to the loss of the unique cultural world of the Attappadi tribals. Therefore, saving the language is equivalent to preserving the people and their way of life. The poet laments that “*naanu kaalupduthth kekke/ namuthth bhasekale kollandaayi*” (Attappadi 155) (I fall to my knees and plead do not kill our languages, (my trans.)).

The poet reminds us at the end of the poem that turning away from one’s mother tongue is no different from turning away from one’s mother. Language ties a person to their roots, culture, and identity as the umbilical cord ties a child to its mother. Hendrik Stuurman, speaking about his Khoikhoi background in north-western South Africa and manifesting what it is like to be without one’s rightful mother tongue, says he feels as though he has drunk the milk of a strange woman and grown up

alongside another person, because he does not speak his mother's language (Crystal 24).

The poet observes that the relationship between humanity and language is stronger than the relationship between the mother and child. A mother gives birth to a child, but language gives life to a community, shaping thoughts, emotions, and traditions.

Conclusion

Manikandan Attappadi's poems in the Irula language shed light on the life, culture, and traditions of the Irula community in Attappadi. Major themes in his poetry include the locale of Attappadi, cultural practices and traditions, rituals and beliefs, social structure, community life, occupation, and the tribe's relationship with nature. He also portrays the lives of Irula women. The poems vividly depict Attappadi's hills, rivers, and forests as integral to daily life and its belief systems, illustrating festivals, marriage, birth, and death rituals, as well as religious customs. Nature appears as a mother, provider, victim of human actions, and at times, a destroyer. The works address pressing issues, including the erosion of tribal values, environmental degradation, and poverty. Through his poetry, Manikandan Attappadi documents the Irula community's cultural practices, social structures, and relationship with the natural environment, preserving their traditions and daily life.

CHAPTER - 4

**TRIBAL WOMANHOOD AND NATURE: A READING OF
DHANYA VENGACHERI'S MAVILAN TULU POEMS**

The Mavilan Tribe: An Introduction

The Mavilan tribal community is primarily located in the northern districts of Kerala, specifically in the districts of Kannur and Kasargod. According to the official website of KIRTADS, the community is seen mainly in Vayakara, Thadikadavu, Padvoor, Kalliat, Nidvanga, and Eruvessi of the Taliparamba Taluks in Kannur. Kurup observed that “Mavilans inhabit Kannur and Kasaragod districts of North Kerala. They are essentially a Dravidian tribe and one of the original inhabitants of Kerala” (Kurup 47). This community comprises 14,972 members, according to the 2011 census. Abraham quotes R.C. Karipath in the article titled “An Ecocritical Reading of the Orature of Mavilan Tribe,” which states, “Mavilans are subdivided into Chingathanmar, Malayala Mavilar and Cheronmar” (Abraham 1).

It is recorded in the *Gazetteer of Malabar* that the Mavilons are divided into Tulu Mavilons and Eda Mavilons, and further subdivided into thirty illams. Suresh, in his study titled “Indigenous Agricultural Practices among Mavilan Tribe in North Kerala”, says, “they are employed as mahouts and collect honey and other forest produce; their headmen are called Chingam (simham, lion) and their huts mapura” (Suresh 103). Several stories prevail regarding the origin of the name, Mavilan. Thurston quotes, “the name, Mr H. A. Stuart writes, is said to be derived from mavilavu, a medicinal herb. I think, however, the real derivation must be sought in Tulu or Canarese, as it seems to be a Canarese caste” (51). Accordingly, it is believed that

the word Mavilan originated from the name of the herb called *Mavilavu* (Koovala/Indian bael/*Aegle marmelos*), as the community is expert in collecting and using herbs as traditional medicines.

Another legend states that some of the forest dwellers used the leaves of the *Mavu* tree (Mangoe tree) as clothing and were known as Mavilan, which later became the name of the community. The Mavilan populace was one of the primordial tribal groups of hunters, and it is possible that *Mahavillan* was a subgroup of Mavilan, as stated in the 1901 census report. Mavilan were known in the early days as the *cherumenmar*. It was also suggested that Mavilan is one of the names of a person later known as the Mavila Cheron. There are several versions regarding the etymology of the term Mavilan. Some say that they used *Mavila*, i.e., mango tree leaves, to cover their body. Some others claim that *Mavila* is a medicinal herb used by them, while a few others suggest that *Malayilae Velan* (Forest Velan) came to be known as Mavila.

The Mavilan community traditionally lived as hunter-gatherers and is skilled in shifting cultivation, a practice that remains an essential means of livelihood. Land remains their primary economic resource. Besides farming, they also gather and sell medicinal plants, weave baskets, and work as agricultural labourers. KIRTADS notes that many community members are now involved in animal husbandry, small-scale trade, and employment in both the government and private sectors (KIRTADS).

They are also experts in shifting cultivation, known locally as *Kumeri*. In the early twentieth century, landlords owned most of the land. The Mavilans became skilled in *Punam Kothu*. This practice involves clearing virgin forests for wetland paddy cultivation under the control of landlords (*Tribal Communities of Kerala*). They used tribal communities, including the Mavilans, as agricultural labourers. Shifting

cultivation and forest-based farming have stayed central to their life and identity (Suresh 104). The Mavilan tribal community has its own unique cultural practices. Customs and ceremonies related to marriage, death, and other indigenous rituals distinguish them from those of different tribal communities in the state. Mangalamkali is a significant indigenous art form of the Mavilan community. It is performed during weddings, ear-piercing ceremonies, and rituals marking the first menstruation. Men and women dance together, follow the indigenous songs and the steady beat of *Thudi*, a percussion drum. The Mavilans also perform Theyyam and Thira apart from Mangalamkali during temple festivals. Through dance and performance, the Mavilans reclaim their history and dignity after generations of oppression under landlords (L. Abraham 7). The native tongue of the community is Tulu. Many members of the community are also excellent speakers of the Malayalam language. They use Malayalam scripts for communication, as Tulu is a scriptless language. The poet Dhanya Vengacheri, who hails from the Mavilan community, is a bilingual writer, specifically in Mavilan Tulu, the tribal language and Malayalam.

Dhanya Vengacheri: Bringing Mavilan Life to Verse

Dhanya Vengacheri is a poet and activist from the Mavilan tribal community of Kerala. She was born in 1992 in Tavannoor, Vengacheri, in the Kasaragod district. She studied at the Department of Teacher Education Centre, Mananthavady, Wayanad, and later at the Department of Malayalam, Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University, Tirur, Malappuram.

Dhanya is the first known poet to write in the Tulu language spoken by the Mavilan tribe of Kerala. She uses the Malayalam script for Tulu, as the language does

not have an independent script. She also writes in Malayalam. Her scholarship in Malayalam literature helps to shape her tribal language poems in a modern poetic style. Like many tribal poets, she translates her poems into Malayalam to reach a wider audience. However, this often alters the tone and style of the original, which is a common challenge faced by tribal writers. Her poems unveil the daily life and struggles of tribal women in both tribal and outside settings. She demonstrates how women and nature are closely intertwined, and writes about land and ecology as integral to tribal identity. Through her poems, she speaks out for the rights of women and nature, opposing the neglect of tribal languages by dominant cultures. Dhanya also participates in state and national conferences and seminars to share her views on the importance of protecting tribal language literature.

This chapter analyses the main themes of select poems from Dhanya Vengacheri's bilingual poetry collection *Mire Neeru* (Breast Milk), published in March 2023 by Chintha Publications, Thiruvananthapuram. This chapter applies the frameworks of ecofeminism, deep ecology, intersectionality, and the significance of oral traditions to guide the analysis. Ecofeminism, as discussed by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, draws attention to the parallel marginalisation of women and nature. Deep ecology, as proposed by Arne Naess, emphasises respect for all living beings beyond their instrumental value. Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, enables an understanding of how caste, gender, class, and indigeneity intersect to shape the experiences of tribal women. Additionally, Ong's concept of orality is incorporated to examine the role of oral traditions in preserving knowledge and cultural practices. Together, these concepts enable an interpretation of Dhanya's poems as expressions of lived experience, memory, identity, tribal womanhood, and the collective

consciousness of the Mavilan community. The following are the central themes addressed in Dhanya Vengacheri's poetry.

Tribal Womanhood and Nature

Nature is the most prominent motif in all the indigenous literatures worldwide. Dhanya's poems equate nature with tribal womanhood. Vandana Shiva says, "Ontologically, there is no divide between man and nature, or between man and woman, because life in all its forms arises from the feminine principle" (Shiva 38-39). Dhanya Vengacheri's poems explore the ecofeminist concept that women and nature share marginalisation and resilience. The poem "*Uppli Kaytt Ponatt Jappanaka*" (After Ecdysis on the Way back to Paddy (my trans.)) portrays how tribal womanhood and nature are connected by combining the experiences of both nature and woman, which is the key idea of the ecofeminist concept. The title itself is a direct connection to nature, where ecdysis (shedding of old skin) is a natural process. The poem begins by saying "perukkuna banjikk ktte/ Ponam nellu" (Under the postpartum abdomen/ rice farming (self. Trans.)) (Vengacheri 30). This leads to the image of a mother's experience, who is forced to work in the paddy field, soon after giving birth to her child. It can also be a representation of 'rebirth' after a long period of pregnancy and related mental, physical and social struggles. Here, the poet connects herself with the paddy, which is full of crop, like a pregnant woman. "*Ponatt*" in the poem means *punam* or *ponam* in Malayalam, which means slash-and-burn fields for farming. Slash-and-burn agricultural practices are standard among the Mavilan tribal community. The *punam* (*ponam*) field, which often has breaks after cycles of cultivation, can also be compared to a body that sheds its skin.

The imagery of “postpartum abdomen” also connects the nature with the poet’s tribal self in the same poem. Women and nature are often stereotyped as the epitome of ‘motherhood’ and ‘affection’ in patriarchal narratives. Here, the poet, a woman alone, suggests the struggles of being a mother and not being perceived as beautiful enough by society’s standards. The same poem ends with the imagery of a mother bird and its nestlings in fire.

<i>Uppli kayth</i>	On the way back to the paddy,
<i>Ponattu jappanaka</i>	After ecdysis
<i>Opparam kullupknd</i>	There is a new companion.
<i>Beethi adithth</i>	A bird who seen
<i>Thoo jiyekana</i>	Nest and nestlings in fire!
<i>Kooda kunjkeniya</i>	(my trans.) <i>chookna onji pachchi</i>
<i>Thoo thintu mathippknath</i>	(Vengacheri 28-29)

The protagonist, a mother of a newborn, had to return to the fields right after giving birth and cut her own umbilical cord with the same sickle she used for harvesting. She shares this pain with the sorrow of a mother bird watching her nest and nestlings burn in a fire. In this way, the pain of the mother and the sorrow of the bird depict the same shared suffering. Possibly, a mother, as a victim of both caste and patriarchal structures, is forced to leave her newborn and return to the paddy fields just after the delivery. In the same way, the mother bird watches helplessly as her nestlings burn. Both images reveal how patriarchy and social structures exploit both women and nature. Vandana Shiva notes this as “‘productive’ man, producing commodities, using

some of nature's wealth and women's work as raw material and dispensing with the rest as waste, becomes the only legitimate category of work, wealth and production. Nature and women working to produce and reproduce life are declared 'unproductive'" (Shiva 42). Vandana Shiva quotes K. Saradhamoni's study of women agricultural labourers, referring to women in the fields, often unseen but vital.

They challenge the view that the male agricultural labourer is the honest worker, breadwinner and supporter of women and children. Through their work, 105 knowledge and skills, both categories of women make crucial contributions to the production and processing of rice, and their contributions have a nurturing quality. As Saradhamoni observes, the women involved in the study revealed their knowledge about cultivation and their concern and participation. They have shown a tenderness to paddy crop and fields almost similar to what they would show to their own children.' She concludes that without these women, their households would not have survived, yet their work is unrecognised and, too often, uncounted and unrecorded (Shiva 105-106).

The imagery of the mother-child relationship is also evident in the poem "*Chelathu*". The poem brings out the picture of a young rabbit which guards the mother rabbit, which has been trapped by the humans as "*oru kunji kombai aykku kaavala*" (A kit is guarding it (my trans.) (Vengacheri 32). The rabbits, symbol of nature, align with Vandana Shiva's assertion, quoting Bacon, "nature was no longer Mother Nature, but a female nature, conquered by an aggressive masculine mind" (16). The trapped mother rabbit can be the most potent symbol of eco-feminist ideology, which considers that both women and nature are subjugated in a patriarchal society.

Another poem, “*en*” (I), is a short poem in which the poet, as a woman, again finds oneness with nature. The protagonist identifies herself as the “*pachcha mannen*” (raw soil (my trans.)) (Vengacheri 34), symbolically the foundation of life. It can also represent fertility and sustenance. This aligns with the bond between women and nature, both of which are often identified as the nurturing forces of life. The phrase “*onji kunji maadi baayppe benkkna*” (borrowed a burrow (my trans.)) (Vengacheri 34) identifies a need for a shelter and independence to escape from all the subjugations, which she has been bearing for generations. As Crenshaw said, “because of their intersectional identity as both women and of colour within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of colour are marginalised within both” (Crenshaw 1244).

The line “*maariyund*” (drinking the rain (my trans.)) (Vengacheri 34) evokes the imagery of pain and resilience in the poem. It also depicts the conditions of tribal life, where people face natural calamities and environmental challenges with limited support from the authorities. The act of “slipping in” discusses how tribal communities are forced to withdraw from mainstream society due to the pressure produced by mainstream society against the members of tribal communities, especially women, based on caste, class, colour and gender.

The poem ““*Onji Undetha Kadhe*” (Story of Eating a Rice Ball (my trans.)) portrays the image of a single mother focusing on the socio-economic-gender challenges faced by women, considering poverty as the central theme. Single and unmarried tribal mothers are the absolute epitome of exploitation. The patriarchal notions assert that children are the responsibility of mothers. Accordingly, sometimes women are forced to accept motherhood as a responsibility and are forced to be the

ideal mothers. The poem ““*Onji Undetha Kadhe*” (Story of Eating a Rice Ball (my trans.))” reveals the emotional and financial struggles of a single mother who is unable to provide for her children. She consoles her children by “*chelttit mannuduththu kanjiyadkke/ chappile peyythth monchchi araththe*” (preparing porridge with a coconut shell full of soil and ground chillis using the leaves (my trans.)) (Vengacheri 36). Then she cleaned a banana leaf to serve the porridge. The image of the banana leaf is an indication of *sadya*, the rich banquet in the Kerala context.

The helpless mother was forced to serve a fake *sadya* to her children to distract them from hunger. At the end, the protagonist says that she is called “*edde appe*” (good mother (my trans.)) (Vengacheri 36) by her children after serving the *sadya* (Vengacheri 36). Here, the poet questions the idealisation of motherhood that places the entire responsibility for raising children solely on the mother. Lewis criticises this saying, “many mothers with intolerable burdens of responsibility, in need of support, whether physical, emotional, social or practical, are too often merely blamed for failing to conform to a stereotype of social acceptability” (41).

The image of poverty is also evident in the poem “*Chamayal*” (Preparation (my trans.)). The following lines indicate the theme of poverty in the poem:

<i>Kotte mullu chichchthu keettkna</i>	With the boiling raw water on the
<i>Kuppayam thunnuk</i>	stove
<i>Adppttu patharukuna</i>	Sewn the <i>kotta mullu</i> bitten dress
<i>Pachche neeruththonjuppam</i>	(my trans.)
(Vengacheri 64)	

Kotta mullu is the thorn of the Zunna plant, a common wild plant seen in the Western Ghats. Raw water on the stove, apart from a worn dress, is also a clear indication of poverty. It is to be criticised that many of the government funds are not reaching the tribal people to the fullest, as poverty among tribals is getting reported. One of such examples is the mob-lynching case of Madhu, a tribal man of Attappadi from Palakkad district, who was attacked by a group of strangers, accusing him of being a thief who tries to steal food. The incident is not an isolated one but part of a larger landscape where hunger and marginalisation are treated as invisible issues until they result in tragedy.

Motherhood and poverty are repeated in the poem “*Naatti Thintkanna Koyi*” (The Cock that Ate the Harvest (my trans.)). The poem begins with a painful imagery of the death of an infant due to hunger. The child is addressed as “*onjiyellumkottu mattettu kdathth narkkuk*” (a skeleton groans in the lap (my trans.)) (Vengacheri76), who has nothing to eat, not even breast milk. The impact of the pain in the poem rises when the poet brings the imagery of the breast, which produces the final “*onjiyittu chore*” (drop of blood (my trans.)) (Vengacheri 76). The pain of the woman in the poem is not only personal but political, as her voice articulates a silenced narrative of hunger and loss. Then the poet depicts the imagery of her father:

<i>Nare maanththu maanththu</i>	My father, who scraped and
<i>Mannu thintu</i>	scraped for <i>Nara</i>
<i>Cheythhkuna amme</i> (Vengacheri 76)	Died, eating the soil (my trans.)

Nara is a common tuber in the diet of the Mavilan. The father, who once worked in the same soil, ended his life in hunger. The mention of scraping for *Nara* indicates the relentless fight for survival. The protagonist says “*inthonjila ernela/ bairyam korpyari*” (Vengacheri 76) (None of this made anyone cry (my trans.)). She shows her anger towards the indifferent attitude of her people, saying “*imbulu padaukorth/ derknapyanala*” (not even those who slept here, hungry (my trans.)) (Vengacheri 76). It is an indication of a harsh reality where suffering becomes normalised and societal apathy towards loss and hunger, particularly in a context where the struggle for staple foods is a daily reality. Here, the poet witnesses the hunger of both her father and her child, showing the generational suffering of her people.

The poem reveals the poet’s rage towards both the system that fails to acknowledge the sufferers and the people who blindly obey the system without standing up for their rights. Finally, she is taking “sky for lease” to feed the skeleton on her lap, which can be a new fight for survival or to wait for new rainy drops to feed her child. The title of the poem “*Naatti Thintkanna Koyi*” (The Cock that Ate the Harvest (my trans.)) contains a powerful metaphor of the cock, which represents the system that fails to fulfil the needs of the tribal people. Even though hunger deaths are not common in Kerala, infant deaths due to malnutrition are still prevalent in the state, especially in areas like Attappadi of Palakkad district, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The plight of unwed mothers can be seen in the poem *Naay Kothi* (Dog’s Evil Eye (my trans.)). The poem portrays the image of a woman who is exploited and later impregnated. It is understood from the context of the poem that the woman is unwed because nobody is expecting pregnancy, seeing her enlarged stomach.

<i>Beenkth beenkth</i>	She got the evil eye.
<i>Banji mookku mutteyaanappo</i>	Said, when enlarging the stomach
<i>Jikkulekk</i>	Was about to touch her nose (my
<i>Kothi kooduknathaandund</i>	trans.)
<i>panduku</i> (Vengacheri 80)	

The struggles of unwed tribal mothers are consistently a focus of various studies. In a survey conducted by Jose et al., among the unwed mothers of Wayanad stated that “forced and intimidated sexual exploitation” (77) is also a reason for unwed mothers, along with the false promise of marriage. The researchers also identified that “Women who conceived after relationships with non-tribal men or with men of other tribes face greater stigma and abuse as compared to women who became pregnant when in relationship with men from within their tribe” (Jose et al. 77). Here, a woman who is impregnated without her consent, mainly by a non-tribal man and whose child is then rejected faces stigma and discrimination enforced by family, community, and societal structures. It further leads to severe psychosocial trauma and alienation (Jose et al. 91).

The poem ends with the rage of the protagonist saying “*ith raddu karukallulla onji naayna kothi*” (this evil eye is of a dog with two legs (my trans.)) (Dhanya 81), intended for the one who exploits her. The noun, dog (*Naay*) is often used as a derogatory term in the Kerala context. So, the rage of the narrator is depicted in the last line, calling the exploiter ‘a dog with two legs’, not knowing what else to do as a helpless victim. In this context, motherhood is not a celebration but a consequence of

systemic gendered violence. Another poem “*Kracchel*” (Lament (my trans.)) portrays the image of a mother who loses her house and land. The title of the poem represents her isolated and abandoned state when she laments “*periththdikkuna paalaklege beda*” (even my children do not care (my trans.)) (Dhanya 60). The poem encapsulates the dual marginalisation of tribal women. Tribal women are often marginalised and ignored in both public and familial spheres. The loss of house and land can be a representation of social marginalisation. Similarly, children who do not care can be a reflection of how neglected the mother is and her emotional and physical states within the family's spatial structure.

Women and Terrains of Labour

The experience of women in the labour place can be seen in the poem “*Madankal*” (Return (mytrans.)). The poem begins with imagery that objectifies women.

<i>Koottett chaanam barbth idenaka</i>	When dung is poured into the basket
<i>Aayi onji chookey.</i>	He gazed at me
<i>Tharett therike jeeth</i>	Carrying the load,
<i>Ath chmbenekala, aane may</i>	balanced on his head,
<i>Ennechchittenneyndek.</i> (Dhanya 98)	His eyes remained fixed on my body (my trans.)

This stanza immediately juxtaposes the labour of dealing with dung with the objectifying gaze of a man. The dung, a natural byproduct of life and farming, symbolises something necessary yet dirty, much like the way women's labour is often viewed as essential but undervalued or taken for granted. The man's gaze on the speaker's body emphasises the objectification of women, degrading her to a physical object to be consumed.

<i>Thareththonjippam</i>	Carrying the weight of the chest
<i>Nenjttla kanam chimbath</i>	along with the head,
<i>Makdna puriyaath</i>	I went to crawl into the manure pit
<i>Chaana kundtt enu noodiye pok</i>	like a hiding worm (my trans.)

(Dhanya 98)

The imagery of the speaker carrying the weight of her chest along with the load on her head symbolises the emotional turmoil she has undergone. It suggests that women, especially in tribal and rural settings, often bear both the physical strain of labour and the emotional burden of their bodies being objectified. “Crawling into the manure pit like a hiding worm” symbolises the mental trauma she suffered from the male gaze, which forced her to be invisible instead of being physically resistant.

The smell of urine, a pungent and unpleasant odour, symbolises both degradation and the loss of dignity. When she says “*aayi markkala chook*” (he looked again (my trans.)) (Dhanya 98), combined with the stench of cow dung and urine, underlines the humiliation that the protagonist as a woman undergoes. This incident reminds her of “*onji baricha kaalatt/ jathth pothndekna/ motte karukalni*” (limbed legs that descended in a rainy time (self. Trans.)) (Dhanya 98), adding another layer of vulnerability. The sexual objectification of women’s bodies in the workplace, especially with those who are working as labourers, is depicted in the poem. It is to be noted, as Shiva & Mies say, “depression and suicide are on the increase in many affluent societies, and direct violence against women and children seems to be growing, both public as well as domestic violence, as well as sexual abuse; the media are full of reports of all forms of violence (61).

Womanhood and Menstruation

The Mavilan community, like many other tribal communities, celebrates the first menstruation in the form of *Thirand Kalyanam*. Manikkuttan Meethale Purayil observes that menstrual customs are associated with a wide range of emotions experienced by women. Women frequently face loneliness, sadness, a sense of avoidance, and various forms of discrimination. Even during significant family celebrations, women are left alone at home, which often leads to disappointment and emotional distress. The practices of untouchability and temporary tent stay during menstruation are common across all community groups in Northern Malabar. These customs consistently disregard women's emotions, feelings, and the difficulties they encounter, and they profoundly affect women's daily lives, often resulting in prolonged loneliness, low mood, and intense sadness. The community imposes numerous restrictions on menstruating women, limiting both their mobility and interaction with the outside world. Women from all communities are kept out of the view of male members of the household throughout the menstrual period. Furthermore, women are forbidden from entering temples during this time, as it is widely believed that any attempt to alter or challenge these practices will provoke punishment from the deity (Purayil 576). The poem "*Keechelkkatte*" (At the Edge of the Steep (my trans.)) presents the image of menstruation as shown in the following lines:

<i>Thoyppanaka</i>	The water,
<i>Therandkna jikkalna</i>	That stole the hot flashes of
<i>Chud chere edith pothnna thanni.</i>	Menarche of a girl washing laundry.
<i>Ath choothlla jikkette</i>	The <i>Chechi</i> , who delude a boy;
<i>Denji irkkuknd</i>	The witness of the bleeding

Keni pandkna akkam.

Telling it as a ‘crab-bite’ (my trans.)

(Dhanya 51)

Water represents time that “stole the hot flashes of menarche”. The poem depicts the image of a *chechi* (elder sister figure) trying to explain menstrual bleeding as a “crab bite”. This implies the silencing of women’s experiences and the need for inclusive feminine narratives. The image of the *chechi* explaining menstruation as a ‘crab-bite’ represents the cultural taboos surrounding women’s bodies and experiences. The theme of menstruation is repeated in the poem “*Thottam*”. *Thottam* or *Thottam Pattu* is a ritualistic ballad usually sung before Theyyam performances in Kerala temples. Percussion instruments like the *Chenda* and *Thudi* accompany the song. The song is meant to invoke divine spirits in the Theyyam performer. Girls and women are not supposed to enter temples according to the prevailing beliefs and customs in Kerala society. The title itself is a juxtaposition between societal expectations and the real-life sufferings of women.

Unlike the other poems, *Thottam* has a named protagonist, Poklichchi. The lady named Poklichchi represents all the women who are forced to bear emotional and physical suffering related to menstruation to thrive within traditional customs imposed by patriarchy. The poem portrays Poklichchi as “*adeppottukna maaryad karakkna pattak chidth, poochcheththiraya churnd kedappanaka*” (lying curled up like a cat, under a weeping hut during heavy rain (my trans.)) (Dhanya 72). She suffers “*minnerekulla pauthhnaka nombalam*” (pain burning in the abdomen (my trans.)) (Dhanya 72), which represents both physical and emotional struggles during menstruation. However, she is reminded of her mother’s *Thottam* (the speech of the deity, in this context): not to touch anyone. Considering the menstruating woman as a

pollutant is a strong patriarchal view prevalent in society. Unfortunately, like Poklichchi's mother, many women act as the carriers of patriarchal beliefs in different spectrums of society, fearing that both gods and the human system will punish those who violate the customs. This explains the generational transmission of oppressive customs as seen in the relationship between Poklichchi and her mother.

Rhythms of Indigenous Life

Farming

In the past, the Mavilan community had lived as food gatherers and hunters, and later they became shifting cultivators. During the early twentieth century, the system of agricultural serfdom existed in these areas. The landlord had owned the land. They used the tribal people for their agricultural purposes. The Mavilan community has been experts in 'Punam Kothu', which involves clearing virgin forests and converting them into wetland paddy cultivation owned by their landlords. The landlord had given little freedom to engage in Kumeri cultivation. Slash-and-burn, or shifting cultivation, is an age-old farming practice locally known as Kumeri. Family members or a group of villagers clear a patch of natural forest of all plants, shrubs, bushes, and trees, which are then burned on the land to provide natural manure. The landlord exploited their workforce to clear forestland without knowing them. In that way, the forest was transformed for pepper cultivation, coconut plantations and the farming of other crops.

The tribal people, especially the Mavilan, followed traditional agricultural techniques. Their agricultural cycle begins in December and ends in November, and they follow this practice according to the seasons. They possess extensive knowledge about crops and their cultivation. The diversity of crops is another peculiarity of this

kind of practice. The indigenous farming method is entirely organic. They had their indigenous methods for storing seeds. Nowadays, the Mavilan community is disconnected from its traditional farming methods. There are various reasons for this. One of the primary reasons is the unavailability of land. The tribal people depended on the landowners for kumeri cultivation. During the 1950s, as part of the Great Malabar Migration, non-tribal people from Travancore, the southern part of Kerala, migrated to their ancestral habitat. Later, they took over the forest land. The settlers changed the land for monocrops and cash crop cultivation. They introduced new kinds of fertilisers and pesticides in that area. This has highly affected indigenous agriculture.

Farmers in the Mavilan community cultivate a diverse range of paddy. The variations include *chennellu*, *kaliyan*, *kayema*, *kunhutti*, *thadichil*, *karinthadichil*, *vellutharan*, *thonnuran*, *raven*, *paliyan*, *kallae kottae*, *ponnarian*, *maleyedubban*, *okapadi*, *chathappan*, *kaipan*, *chemmolu*, and *koyivalan*, among others. Some paddy seeds can be recognised by their names, such as *kunhutti* (mal.trans. small child), which is a tiny seed, and *kaipan* (mal. trans. bitter), which is black in colour and bitter to taste. Additionally, they grow ragi, sow kaduku (mustard), and plant maize along the edges of the paddy field, as well as grow various vegetables throughout the field. Government forest regulation policies also prevented them from kumeri cultivation. This indigenous community was forced to abandon their traditional agricultural practices and adopt monocrop cultivation. Presently, among the Mavilan community, a few are farmers, and the majority are marginal farmers. The majority of them work as agricultural labourers or wage labourers.

The portrayal of farming is evident in various poems by Dhanya Vengacheri. The poem “*Uppli Kaytt Ponatt Jappanaka*” (After Ecdysis on the Way back to Paddy

(my trans.)) portrays the images of “*chennellu, thwaari, chaame*” (red rice, pigeon pea, and millet (my trans.)) (Dhanya 28), all of which are related to the farming background of the Mavilan community. Some of these crops are indigenous to the Kasargod region, where the poet is hailing from. The poem “*Kavelu*” (Guarding (my trans.)) begins with the steps of farming, such as *naatti*, guarding and ploughing. *Naatti* is the process of transplanting rice saplings on a specific day of maturity. The title ‘Guarding’ refers to the action of safeguarding the farm and its crops. All these images represent the traditional way of farming among the tribals.

Ancestral Customs or Embodied Traditions

The Mavilan tribal community has its unique cultural practices. Customs and ceremonies related to marriage, death, and other indigenous rituals distinguish them from those of other tribal communities in the state. The poem “*Kadath Povanaka*” (When Crossing Over (my trans.)) emphasises the imagery of betel-nut chewing, which is a common practice among the majority of the tribal people of Kerala, irrespective of their gender. Chewing betel leaves and areca nut is an activity for entertainment and relaxation. The poem portrays the imagery of women collecting wood from the forest. When the last wood is tied, they find happiness in the betel-nuts. The poet observes that sometimes arranging the betel nut is a ceremonial act. Global readers can connect this act with the Japanese tea ceremony, a formal ritual that involves serving and drinking tea to promote mindfulness, harmony, and well-being. The poet witnesses that the mother takes:

Pachchiredthth onji kadam

One-half of a betel leaf

Adekkedthth onji kadam

and one-half from the areca nut

Thirubth kandan kayippkna on-half cut from tobacco (my trans.)
Chappdththu onji (Dhanya 38)

The preparation of betel nut chews is a cultural ritual that highlights the significance of communal activities in tribal life. The act reaches into the realm of spirituality when the mother,

Chavale moodukna Mother, arrange them all like flowers
Onji orekkna kalltt appe on a cold stone covered with dry leaves.
Athene poovvu kanakke jeevum And murmurs ‘eat’ to nobody around
Erutteyo thinund pdachchum (my trans.)
 (Dhanya 38)

The protagonist observes that the mother arranges the betel pan like a flower and offers it to somebody unseen. She considers “the twin stones in the forest are our predecessors” and “those who slept here are those who laughed as flowers in this soil”. This shows tribal people are respectfully worshipping their ancestors with appropriate offerings. Similar to many other tribal cultures, the Mavilan tribe also worships natural elements. Stone worship, as depicted in the poem, is a common practice among many tribal cultures. The act of the mother signifies the importance of respecting one’s roots, even if they are forced to be displaced from their ancestral land.

Another poem, “*Kavelu*” (Guarding (my trans.)) has the image of *thudi*, an indigenous drum of the Mavilan community in the line “*idi muttukna maathiriyonji thudikkoot*” ((A *thudi* sounds like thunder (my trans.)) (Dhanya 45). The *thudi* sound is a powerful symbol of culture and communal life. It also represents a connectedness to

the indigenous roots of the community and the tribal self. The poem “*Chamaya*” (Preparation (my trans.)) portrays a significant understanding of tribal life, illustrating how the community engages with its environment. The labour described in the poem, such as chopping and setting up firewood, cutting grass as fodder for cattle, and building shelters for goats and hens (Dhanya 65), is commonly seen in the rural areas of the state from which the poet is hailed. Women play a crucial role in these tasks, as they are the primary source of their livelihood, finding goats and hens.

The poem “*Thottam*” portrays the customs related to menstruation. The poem develops through the imagery of the protagonist lying down in a separate hut, as part of the ‘untouchability’ practised by women during their menstrual periods. Like many other tribal communities of the state, Mavilan also celebrates first menstruation as *Thirandu Kalyanam*. The imagery of people coming with “turmeric, pestle and the sheaf” (Dhanya 73) can lead to the custom of *Thirandu Kalyanam*.

The poem “*Naay Kothi*” (Dog’s Evil Eye) has several references to the evil eye. The word *Naay* means dog. The word *kothi* has a negative connotation, referring to ‘the evil eye,’ which is often associated with eating. It is believed to cause uneasiness or health issues. The title *Naay Kothi* stands for the evil eye cast by a dog. Similarly, the poet mentions ‘*Pooche kothi*’ (Cat’s Evil Eye) and ‘*Kooli kothi*’ (God’s Evil Eye) (Dhanya 82). People often assume that one is affected by the Evil Eye based on feelings of uneasiness and health issues in the body. Here in the poem, the assumption is wholly based on the enlarging stomach of the lady. The holy water (*kurthi neeru*) (Dhanya 80) is advised to be sprinkled all over the body from head to toe to eliminate *kothi*.

Tribal Displacement

The image of ‘twin stones’ in the poem “*Kadath Povanaka*” (When Crossing Over) evokes the image of tribal displacement. The mother of the poet tells her that the ‘twin stones’ in the forest are their ancestors. This image evokes a sense of connection to the land and the legacy of those who came before. This connection is crucial in the context of displacement, where many tribal communities face the loss of their ancestral lands due to external pressures such as urbanisation, deforestation and changing government policies. The line poet says “*imblu thint derukinapye/ee mannuttu poovath thelippknayye*” (those who ate and slept here and who laughed as flowers in this soil are their ancestors (my trans.)) (Dhanya 38-39). Those who once laughed are no longer available for the next generation, like flowers. The new generation that the poet represents still carries the scars and struggles of displacement in a different manner, as seen in the history of the infamous Muthanga Strike, a struggle for their land and legacy by the Paniya tribes of Wayanad district of Kerala.

The poem “*Kavelu*” (Guarding (my trans.)) has intense imagery of tribal displacement. The line “*Enna chorekaluna k kippalu kend praththu pokkkend enna kaathukalu*” (My ears fly off Hearing the cries of my blood (my trans.)) (Dhanya 44) emphasises the resilience that different tribal communities have undergone, especially during their resistance against displacement and also for their proper allocation after the displacement. Most of these fights were against the state, and some have been settled, but others are still ongoing. The forced displacement of communities to non-tribal habitats sometimes leads to the loss of their direct connection to nature, which further contributes to both ecological and cultural disintegration, including the disruption of collective tribal knowledge. The “cries of blood” can also be a reference to the

ancestral pain, a common theme in indigenous literature, where the ancestors' spirits are distressed by the exploitation or destruction of their motherland.

The poem "*Keechelkkatte*" (At the Edge of the Steep (my trans.)) brings out the image of a "*kaung palak keeyye koodi cheyyedthlla bakkukana theru*" (road leading to death under the Areca Palm bridge (my trans.)) (Dhanya 50), which signifies the existential threat to the tribal way of life. The idea that tribal people "strew stories in the soil" but then "cover it" suggests the erasure of their history and culture through displacement. They bury their experiences, which may be forgotten or hidden as they are forced to leave their ancestral lands. Another reason for tribal displacement is the occurrence of natural disasters. The poem "*Kraachel*" (Lament (my trans.)) begins with the lines:

<i>Ennonji chappe Kaatt kondak</i>	The wind took away one of my houses
<i>Ennonji mannu Parichchala kondak</i>	The rain took away one of my lands
(Dhanya 60)	(my trans.)

This shows the hardships of tribal ways of living. Their traditional huts are not equipped to withstand natural calamities. Tribal people live together in settlements. 'The loss of land' can be the loss of a settlement, leading to the loss of space, identity and cultural roots. The 'loss' can be a representation of the broader exploitation of both women and nature under patriarchal and capitalist systems, as natural calamities can also occur due to the exploitation of nature and the environment. Indigenous women, in particular, are forced to suffer the effects of environmental destruction, as they often rely on the land for their livelihoods and are significantly involved in the preservation of the ecosystems.

The imagery of tribal displacement and the loss of land ownership is evident in the poem “*Thodakkala Oddukkala*” (The Beginning and the End). The poem describes how the tribal people are treated as strangers in the land they occupied. The poet describes her experience. Every day, she hears a story about a mango tree. According to the story, it was planted, watered and fertilised by her grandmother. The poet says:

<i>Kode usklttu ponaka</i>	On the way to school yesterday
<i>Aa kukktha</i>	They threw chilli powder in my eyes
<i>Chittam kodikk</i>	For looking at the top of that mango tree
<i>Chukkneykk</i>	(my trans.)
<i>Apye enna mayytt</i>	
<i>Parankippodi beeththkk</i> (Dhanya 68)	

Mainstream society consistently marginalises tribal myths and stories. The mango tree, for the poet, is the epitome of her culture and generational legacy. The mainstream society, which is represented as ‘they’ in the poem, obliterates the myths and stories of the unvoiced. Here lies the importance of Tribal Literature, as seen in the writings of poets like Dhanya Vengacheri, who strive to preserve their myths and generational knowledge through their works. Society throws chilli powder in the protagonist's eyes by eliminating the legacy she carried through the myth about her grandmother. Society is not allowing her to see mangoes, as the mango tree no longer belongs to her community.

The lines also underline how mainstream society used the workforce of the tribal people for its growth by giving no appreciation or benefits in return. Now the

protagonist, who is “going to school”, understands the turmoil they have been undergoing for generations. She, as the youngest of the community, is suffering from new forms of marginalisation and suppression from mainstream society.

The act of throwing chilli powder in the speaker’s eyes represents violence towards Tribals and Dalits. This painful experience contrasts sharply with the sweetness of the mango, when she says (*enu ankeri/ ekk mangeththa ruchi edda paangakk*) (I did not cry/ I love the taste of this mango (my trans.)) (Dhanya 69), illustrating the complexities of childhood and the struggles of growing up in a casteist society. The speaker’s refusal to cry signifies resilience in the face of adversity. The statement that the story has “*thodakkala odukkala inti*” (no beginning and no end (my trans.)) (Dhanya 69) emphasises the idea that experiences are interconnected and ongoing. This poem weaves a poignant narrative about memory, identity, and the cyclical nature of stories. The grandmother plays a pivotal role, embodying the wisdom and strength that transcend generations, emphasising the profound bond between individuals and their environment. The attempt to give a voice to her people encourages Dhanya to write a thought-provoking poem titled “*Ramayana*”, which is widely discussed and appreciated among critics and readers in its first publication. All the tribal communities, even those residing in the state of Kerala, follow unique customs and traditions. They have their mother tongue, which is not Malayalam, the state’s dominant language.

Dhanya, in her poem, attempts to convey that the *Ramayana*, the epic that narrates the life of Rama, receives recognition from society, where tribal myths, epics, and history are often invisible or unwritten. She says she knows nothing about the *Ramayana* and Rama. However, she knows ‘Black Ramas’ who cleared the forest to do shifting cultivation, the ones who hunted crabs from their burrow near the stream, the

ones who got unstoppable stoning even when they stood eighteen feet away, the ones who sang songs of the forest, the ones who worked late in the fields” (Dhanya 106).

She ends the poem saying:

<i>Aklana Pattth Erala Onjila ellala</i>	Nobody wrote anything about them.
<i>varadhitti Akalukk podant Ambalalla</i>	Nobody built a temple and worshipped them
<i>poojala mattidi</i> (Dhanya 105)	(my trans.)

The poem strongly suggests the need for an alternative narrative which emphasises tribal myth, history and traditional knowledge. The image of the Black Rama can be combined with that of the Black Christ, which stands as an epitome of protest against slavery and racism. The image of standing eight feet away and getting an unstoppable stoning is an indication of the suffering the tribal people underwent during the time of the caste system. They were placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and were considered ‘untouchables’. However, their sufferings were not recorded anywhere, and this is where the importance of alternative narratives lies.

Hunting

The Mavilan community is interested in hunter-gathering. Hunting is a traditionally significant cultural practice for the community, as seen in the poem “*Chelathu*” (Some Things). The poem evokes the image of a traditional rabbit trap, known as *chavittu keni* (Vengacheri 32). The image of *chavittu keni*, a traditional trapping method used to hunt small animals, in the poem can also be a symbol of indigenous knowledge that has been passed down through generations. The trap also

represents the emotional turmoil of the hunted through the imagery of a young rabbit guarding the entrapped rabbit. This echoes Naess's view that.

We might agree upon rules that imply different behaviour towards different kinds of living beings without negating that there is a value inherent in living beings, which is the same value for all. However, it is against my intuition of unity to say 'I can kill you because I am more valuable', but not against the intuition to say 'I will kill you because I am hungry'. In the latter case, there would be an implicit regret: 'Sorry, I am now going to kill you because I am hungry.' In short, I find it obviously right, but often difficult to justify, different sorts of behaviour with different sorts of living beings. However, this does not imply that we classify some as intrinsically more valuable than others (Naess 168).

This perspective echoes the poet's belief that taking a life, even when driven by need, leaves a quiet sorrow because every living being has an equal right to live in the natural world. The poem ends with a lament, "*Eruthalu thitith jeeye pattaanteylla chelathlaynd*" (there are some things that once taken, cannot be put back (my trans.)) (Vengacheri 32). The poet, who represents a community deeply rooted in nature, understands the role of every life in ecology, and this can be considered the philosophy behind tribal ways of living and practices.

Indigenous Knowledge System

The tribe's indigenous knowledge is not documented in writing but passed down orally. Ong says, "the new way to store knowledge is the written text" (24).

Vengacheri, as a member of the Mavilan community, uses her poetry as a repository of

this knowledge. She gathers what she learned from the older generation and shares it with the next, through the poems as seen below.

The poem “*Keechelkkatte*” ((At the Edge of the Steep (my trans.)) discusses the indigenous beliefs associated with the Baheda tree (*Thanni*) and the Black Varnish tree (*Cheru*).

Cherelu pothththaaalu

Granny tells

Thanni marak ahuttadumnd

to circumambulate the Baheda

Mallappe panpum (Dhanya 50)

If the Black Varnish Tree burns the
skin (my trans.)

It shows how the natural world is intertwined with the lives of tribal communities. The Baheda tree is a guardian figure in the poem. It is often considered an element in traditional medicine and rituals, such as circumambulating to heal burns from the Black Varnish Tree. It is worth noting that the Mavilan tribe is renowned for its expertise in collecting medicinal herbs.

Flora and Fauna

The poem “Aattam” portrays the imagery of a Banyan leaf. The bunayn tree (*Ficus religiosa*) is considered sacred in many Indian cultures. The offering *Bali* is performed using a Banyan leaf in the poem, symbolising the direct connection between the tribal death rituals and nature. The representation of flora and fauna is vivid in the poem “*Uppli Kaytt Ponatt Jappanaka*” (After Ecdysis on the Way back to Paddy (my trans.)). The poem features rough rice, red rice, pigeon peas, and millet, representing the community’s close connection with nature and ecology. Tribal ecofeminism emphasises the sustainable and vital role that women and indigenous people often play

in food production. The mention of relevant crops in the poem signifies the traditional knowledge of the community, including that of the young generation, as well as the poet. The same poem evokes the imagery of a 'Jungle Fowl' that cries out "*kokkatre*" in the poem. The jungle fowl, a common bird in the forests of Kasargod, represents the co-existence of the Mavilan tribal community and the natural elements.

The poem "*Chelathu*" develops through the imagery of rabbits, a typical scene in the villages of Kerala. Many of the tribal settlements are built near forests and have often coexisted in harmony and conflict with wild animals. The poem "*Kavelu*" (Guarding (my trans.)) has the image of a coconut leaf. The coconut tree (*Cocos nucifera*) and its products, including leaves, are commonly seen in Kerala state. The poem "*Keechelkkatte*" (At the Edge of the Steep (my trans.)) mentions the Baheda tree (*Terminalia bellirica*), the Black Varnish tree (*Holigarna arnottiana*), and the Areca palm tree (*Chrysalidocarpus lutescens*), all typical flora in Kerala. The fauna, particularly the Kingfisher and the crab, are also mentioned in the poem. "*Chamaya*" (Preparation (my trans.)) depicts the flora, including the *Kongini* plant (*Lantana camara*), a common wild plant found in the Western Ghats, and Kotta mullu (*Ziziphus rugosa*), a local firewood and fodder grass for cattle, where the names are not specified. The fauna includes both wild and domestic animals, such as Jungle Fowl, hens, and goats.

"*Thodakkala Oddukkala*" (The Beginning and the End) has the imagery of a Mango tree (*Mangifera indica*), which acts as a metaphor for resilience and suppression. The mango tree is closely related to the ancient story that relates to the origin of the community's name. Some of the forest dwellers used the leaves of the tree *Mavu* as clothing and were known as Mavilan, which later became the name of the

community. The poem “*Naatti Thintkanna Koyi*” (The Cock that Ate the Harvest (my trans.)) has a reference to *Nara*. *Nara*, often referred to vernacularly as *Nara kizhangu*, is a rare medicinal tuber that grows underground in forested or similar areas. It is part of a thorny vine and is highly valued for its medicinal properties among tribals. The tuber grows several meters underground and requires careful extraction to prevent damage to its outer skin, as this preserves its potency and integrity. Only tribal communities typically have the expertise to locate and harvest it. Finding mature *Nara kizhangu* is challenging and may take an entire day. It is believed that *Nara* powder mixed with milk is effective in treating conditions such as asthma and phlegm in children. The poem “*Naay Kothi*” (Dog’s Evil Eye) has a reference to Cape gooseberry (*Physalis minima*), which is vernacularly known as *Motta Molinga* or *Njotta Njodiyen*. This wild fruit is also known as Goldenberry. This plant has high medicinal value. The same poem evokes the image of an Antlion, which is commonly found in the rural areas of Kerala state.

Conclusion

Dhanya Vengacheri’s poems, analysed in this chapter, present a strong connection between tribal womanhood and the natural world. The poems portray various stages and struggle of womanhood, such as motherhood, menstruation, hunger, and labour, through everyday images rooted in tribal life. These themes are not treated as abstract ideas but as real, lived experiences shaped by land, culture, and memory. The theoretical perspectives applied, including Eco-feminism, Intersectionality, Deep ecology, and Orality, help to understand how these poems speak both from and about a marginalised position. The ecofeminist approach clarifies the way nature and women

are equally controlled and devalued in patriarchal structures. Intersectionality explains how tribal women are affected by overlapping conditions of caste, gender, class, and indigeneity. The poems also depict an apparent attempt to preserve tribal knowledge and oral traditions. Dhanya's poetry presents significant insights into tribal life from within the community. Her work challenges conventional images of tribal people constructed from outside and presents alternative ways of understanding land, labour, and womanhood. These poems can be seen as part of a larger attempt to record and preserve the everyday realities, emotions, and resistance of her people.

CHAPTER-5

CONCLUSION

The Tribal Language Poetry in Kerala is a living, dynamic, proclaiming and evolving tradition. This thesis sets out to explore the thematic richness of Tribal Language Poetry of Kerala, focusing on three prominent tribal poets: Dhanya Vengacheri of the Mavilan community, Sukumaran Chaligadha of the Rawla community, and Manikandan Attappadi of the Irula community. The study aimed to achieve four main objectives: to examine and document the themes expressed in these poems; to identify both similarities and differences in thematic concerns across the three poets; to understand how these themes discuss issues of identity, land, womanhood, memory, resistance, and poverty; and to interpret these themes through different theoretical frameworks. The analysis draws on a combination of theories that integrate postcolonial perspectives, including Bhabha's notion of the third space, Stuart Hall's cultural identity, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's linguistic decolonisation; subaltern studies approach such as Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and Crenshaw's intersectionality; ecocritical frameworks, including deep ecology and ecofeminism; and insights on orality and literacy from Walter Ong alongside David Crystal's work on language death. This multi-layered framework enables a detailed understanding of the poetry, addressing questions of identity, marginalisation, language, ecological awareness, and the interplay between oral and written traditions.

Through detailed reading and analysis, the study found that specific themes run consistently through the poems of all three poets. The most prominent shared theme is the strong relationship between the community and the land. Land appears not simply

as a physical setting, but as a living presence that holds memory, culture, and survival. For Sukumaran Chaligadha, paddy fields, forest clearings, and shifting cultivation lands recur frequently, evoking both nostalgia and a sense of cultural belonging. Manikandan Attappadi, in turn, writes of daily agricultural labour and forest paths, referring to how land remains central to the Irula community's everyday life and cultural strength. In the works of Dhanya Vengacheri, specific references to medicinal plants, sacred groves, and forest spaces show how closely the Mavilan identity is tied to their ecological surroundings.

The second central shared theme is memory and the fear of cultural erasure. Each poet observes the fading of rituals, songs, and collective practices. Dhanya remembers the voices of grandmothers and community elders, showing the tension between past and present. Sukumaran's poems often carry a tone of quiet longing, recognising the shared work in fields and traditional festivals that are now less common. Manikandan's verses record stories told by elders and the emptiness that follows their passing. Through these works, the poets act as keepers of collective memory, resisting historical and cultural forgetting. The third theme that links the poets is the experience of poverty and marginalisation. The poems describe hunger, worn-out clothes, illness, and the struggle to meet basic needs. Yet this theme is presented not only as suffering but also as a testament to resilience and quiet dignity. In "*Onji Undetha Kadhe*" (Story of Eating a Rice Ball (my trans.)) Dhanya depicts a mother calming her children's hunger by pretending to cook. The act shows both the harshness of poverty and the strength of care and imagination. Sukumaran and Manikandan also include references to physical hardship without self-pity, using simple, direct language that neither romanticises nor erases their reality.

While these shared themes reveal common ground, the study also found significant differences that represent the poets' specific community contexts and personal perspectives. Dhanya Vengacheri's poetry gives special attention to womanhood and the daily life of tribal women. Her verses often show how the labour of women, both physical and emotional, sustains cultural practices and family life. She uses images from nature, linking women's bodies and experiences with the forest, land, and seasons. This approach aligns closely with ecofeminist thinking, examining how women and land are both protectors and bearers of wounds. In contrast, Sukumaran Chaligadha's poetry places more emphasis on memory and cultural continuity. His verses bring back the voices of elders, traditional festivals, and communal agricultural practices. The tone is often nostalgic but not passive. Remembering becomes a form of subtle resistance, affirming that even if practices change, memory itself is an act of cultural survival. His work also demonstrates how oral storytelling rhythms influence written poetry, preserving older narrative patterns.

Manikandan Attappadi's poems, on the other hand, focus more strongly on daily labour and collective strength. He writes of farming, gathering firewood, and other shared activities that define Irula life. His verses suggest that identity is built not through heroic acts but through everyday work and mutual support. Even when mentioning hunger or loss, the poems retain a sense of rootedness and quiet pride. In connecting these findings to the study's objectives, the research documented and analysed how themes of identity, land, womanhood, memory, resistance, and poverty emerge both as shared experiences and as expressions of community-specific histories. The close thematic reading revealed how the poets construct identity not as fixed but as something shaped by the interplay of memory, language, daily work, and environment.

Land is shown not merely as property but as living heritage, central to cultural survival. The theme of womanhood in Dhanya's poetry connects the struggle for survival to the artistic work that women perform. Memory and resistance are intertwined, as remembering becomes an act that resists cultural erasure.

This thematic study demonstrates that Tribal Language Poetry in Kerala is both deeply rooted in local culture and broadly human in its appeal. The poems originate from specific landscapes, histories, and linguistic traditions, yet they resonate with universal themes of memory, identity, loss, survival, and hope. Rather than offering idealised pictures of tribal life, the poets present a balanced view that includes both hardship and dignity. Their works resist being reduced to folklore or nostalgia. Instead, they create living records that engage with history, social change, and personal reflection.

The thesis also recognises its own limitations. It focused on three poets and selected works, and its analysis centred mainly on themes rather than formal aspects such as structure, sound, and metre. Future research could explore comparative studies involving poets from other tribal communities, both within and beyond Kerala. It could also analyse newer generations of tribal poets, how digital platforms influence their work, or how themes of migration and youth identity emerge in recent writings. Despite these limitations, the study contributes to a growing understanding of tribal language literature of Kerala. It exemplifies how themes of land, womanhood, poverty, memory, and resistance form the core of these poetic works. By drawing connections and contrasts among the three poets, the research shows that Tribal Language Poetry is not monolithic but richly varied, emphasising different community experiences while sharing everyday struggles.

This thesis confirms that Tribal Language Poetry is more than artistic expression. It is a form of cultural testimony and resistance. The poets write from the margins, yet their words speak to the heart of questions about identity, belonging, and dignity. They show that land, memory, and language are not just background to tribal life; they are central to it. By listening to these voices, readers can see beyond stereotypes and begin to understand the depth and complexity of communities often labelled as “primitive” or “backwards.”

The poets studied here employ simple yet powerful language to remember, question, and affirm. Their work reminds us that the survival of a culture depends not only on external recognition but on the living voices within it. By writing in their own languages, about their own lives and landscapes, these poets keep cultural memory alive and make it visible to others. In doing so, they transform the act of writing into one of care, resistance, and hope. Through its thematic focus, this thesis aims to validate that Tribal Language Poetry in Kerala is a living, evolving tradition. It carries the weight of history and the breath of everyday life. It connects past to present, women to land, memory to identity. In each poem, it quietly insists that these voices, once marginalised, deserve to be heard, studied, and remembered.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study represents a pioneering attempt to thematically explore written Tribal Language Poetry in Kerala, focusing on select poems by Dhanya Vengacheri (Mavilan), Sukumaran Chaligadha (Rawla), and Manikandan Attappadi (Irula). The research covers themes such as land, womanhood, memory, poverty, and resistance as central to these works. However, given the limited number of published poems currently available in each language, the analysis could only trace broad thematic patterns and motifs rather than detailed sub-themes. This limitation itself opens meaningful directions for future research and development in the field of written tribal language literature.

Firstly, there is significant scope to expand the written corpus. Future scholars could document, compile, and study a larger collection of published and unpublished written poems from more poets within the same communities, as well as from other tribal communities in Kerala. This would enable the identification of more specific sub-themes and a deeper understanding of regional, generational, or individual differences in poetic expression. Secondly, the present study focused mainly on thematic content. Future research could also explore structure and form in greater depth. Analysing the poets' use of repetition, rhythm, metaphor, and imagery, as well as their adaptation of the Malayalam script to write in tribal languages, would help reveal how cultural memory and identity are carried not just in what is said but in how it is expressed in writing.

Thirdly, there is scope to study the evolution of written tribal poetry over time. Comparing the works of established poets with those of younger writers can reveal how

social changes, formal education, and exposure to broader audiences influence the development of new themes and styles. Such a study would also help document whether younger poets continue to write in tribal languages or opt for mainstream languages to achieve a broader reach.

Fourthly, the theme of gender remains an important future direction. While this study included poems that draw attention to the women's experiences, focused research on written works by tribal women poets could strengthen the understanding of how gendered perspectives influence both theme and form. Fifth, there is a clear need for translation of tribal language poems into English (and other major languages). Careful translation can bring these works to a broader audience within and outside Kerala, encouraging academic interest and public recognition. Translation must aim to retain cultural context and poetic nuance while making the work accessible, and could be supported by annotated bilingual editions that include cultural explanations alongside the poems.

Finally, comparative studies could place Kerala's written tribal poetry alongside tribal or indigenous poetry from other Indian states and global indigenous literatures. This would help identify common patterns, unique cultural features, and shared themes of resistance, identity, and connection to land. In summary, although limited by a small available written corpus, this study has opened a space for wider scholarly and cultural attention to written tribal language literature. Expanding the corpus, studying form, exploring generational change, showcasing women's voices, and translating these works into English for broader access can together help establish this field as a recognised and valued part of Kerala's literary and cultural landscape.

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APPENDIX – I

GLOSSARY

1. Terms Related to Kinship and Social Relationships

Sl No.	English Word	Malayalam Equivalent	Rawla Equivalent	Irula Equivalent	Mavilan Tulu Equivalent
1.	Baby, Child	Kunju, Kutti	Pulle	Plle	Kunju
2.	Employer	Muthalaali	Mothalaali		
3.	Children	Makkal	Makka, Makkal		Kunju, Palaklega
4.	Daughter	Makal	Magaalu		
5.	Father	Achan	Appe	Amma	Amme
6.	Feudal Landlord	Thampuran	Thambraan		
7.	Girl	Pennu	Pennu	Pn	
8.	Grandfather	Muththassan	Achchappey	Paattan	Thondayya
9.	Grandmother	Muththassi	Periyaatti	Paatti, Appe	Thondi, Mallappe
10.	Human Being	Manushyan	Maichen	Manusan	
11.	Mother-in-law	Ammayi Amma	Raattintamma		
12.	Wife	Bharya	Raatti	Pnd	

2. Terms Related to the Human Body and Organs

Sl No.	English Word	Malayalam Equivalent	Rawla Equivalent	Irula Equivalent	Mavilan Tulu Equivalent
1.	Body	Sareeram	Melu	Odambu	
2.	Bone	Ellu	Kolumbu		
3.	Breast	Mula	Mule		Mire
4.	Chest	Maaru, Nenj	Mare	Nenju	Nenju
5.	Eye	Kannu	Kannu	Kannu	Kannu
6.	Face	Mukham	Mukaar		
7.	Finger	Viral		Varaalu	

8.	Hair	Mudi		Mudi	Thanaaru
9.	Hand	Kai	Kai	Kyy	Kayy
10.	Head	Thala	Thile	Thele	
11.	Lap	Madi	Koodanthe	Madi	
12.	Leg	Kaalu	Kaalu		
13.	Mouth	Vaaya/ Vaayi	Kaar		
14.	Nose	Mookk	Mookku		
15.	Shoulder	Thol	Ege	Tholu	
16.	Soul	Jeevan/ Aathmavu	Uguru		
17.	Stomach	Vayar	Baaru		
18.	Teeth	Pallu	Pallu		
19.	Waist	Ara	Are		

3. Rawla Language Terms for Numbers, Money, and Measurements

English Word	Malayalam Equivalent	Rawla Equivalent	Arabic Number Representation
Two	Rand	Raandu	2
Three	Moonnu	Moontu	3
Four	Naal	Naallu	4
Five	Anj	Anju	5
Seven	Ezhu	Evvu	7
Eight	Ett	Ettu	8
Nine	Ombath	Ombethu	9
Ten	Patth	Patthu	10
Fifty	Ambathu	Ambathu	50
One fifty	Noottambath	Noottambathu	150
Two-hundred	Irunnoor	Irunnooru	200
Three-fifty	Munnootti Ambathu	Munnoottabathu	350
Five-hundred	Anjoor	Anjooru	500
Thousand	Aayiram	Aayira	1,000
Four-thousand	Naalayiram	Naalayira	4,000
Six-thousand and three-fifty	Aarayirathi Munnootti Ambathu	Aarayirathi Munnoottambathu	6,350
Seventy-six thousand and two-hundred	Ezhupathi Aarayirathi Irunnooru	Evvatthaarayirathi Irunnooru	76,200
One kilogram	Oru Kilo	Orukkillaa	1 kg
Seer (An Indian Measurement)	Ser	Cheru	—
Rupees	Roopa	Ruppi, Uruppi	—
Currency	Nott	Nottu	—
Coin	Naanayam / Thutt	Thuttu	—

APPENDIX – II

CONSENT LETTERS FROM POETS

Permission letter for study and translate poem
 I, Ramla poet and member of the
 Sahithya Akademi, General Council of the
 Kerala Sahithya Akademi, hereby grant permission
 to Aswani R. Jeevan Research Scholar in the
 Department of English, Farook College,
 to study and translate my poem into English
 for her Ph.D research. Along with my published
 Selected Poems, I also grant permission to study
 and and translate the poem 'Bombe, Chinthe, Gudi
 Kanuladi, mantam, kundanthe, Manju, Entemakhs-
 kaadune Barekinto, and kadu.

Sukumaran Chaliyath.

ദിവിതകൾ പഠിക്കുന്നതിനുള്ള പരമോപദേശം.

നാമുള്ള ദിവിതകൾ ഭേദമെല്ലാ പാലിയം അക്കാദമി
 അക്കാദമി കൗൺസിൽ ചെയർമാൻ എന്റെ ദിവിതകൾ
 പി എച്ച് ഡി പി എച്ച് ഡി പഠനത്തിനും അംഗീകരിക്കുക
 പരിഭാഷപ്പെടുത്തുന്നതിനുമായി ഫുൾ ടൈം അക്സെസ്സിലെ
 അംഗീകൃത ഫിഷൽ ഫെൻഡ് റിസർച്ച് സ്കോളർഷിപ്പ്
 അഗ്രസി ഓഫ് അനുവാദം നൽകുന്നു.

ഈ പ്രസിദ്ധീകരിക്കപ്പെട്ട ദിവിതകളോടൊപ്പം
 ഗുഡി, ദിനലാദി, മന്ദം, കൂടാതെ, കാട്ടുവെളിക്കിന്റെ
 കാട്ടു, അന്നി ദിവിതകളും പഠിക്കുന്നതിനും പരിഭാഷ-
 ചെയ്തെടുക്കുന്നതിനും അനുവാദം നൽകുന്നു.

സ്കൂളാൻ പാലിയം.

രവ്. - Suk

Permission letter for study and translate
Poem.

I. Irula poet from Palakkad district in
Attappaali area. hereby grant permission
to Aswani R jeevan Research scholar in
the Department of English, Farook college, to
study and translate my Poem into English for
her Ph.D research.

Manikandan Attappaali

കവിതകൾ പഠിക്കുന്നതിനുള്ള സമ്മതപത്രം

ഞാൻ കവിതകൾക്കുവേണ്ടി അഭ്യർത്ഥിക്കുന്നു. പലക്കാഴ്ചകളിലൂടെ
നിങ്ങളുടെ മനസ്സിലെ കവിതകൾ എന്റെ കവിതകൾ പിഴുതി
പഠിക്കുന്നതിനും മറ്റുമായി പഠിക്കുന്നതിനും പഠിക്കുന്നതിനും
അനുവദിക്കുന്നതിനും അനുവദിക്കുന്നതിനും അനുവദിക്കുന്നതിനും
അനുവദിക്കുന്നതിനും അനുവദിക്കുന്നതിനും അനുവദിക്കുന്നതിനും
അനുവദിക്കുന്നതിനും അനുവദിക്കുന്നതിനും അനുവദിക്കുന്നതിനും

എൻ.

Manikandan Attappaali

Mani:

Mob: 9072791309

Permission Letter for Study and
Translate poems.

I, Dhanya Vengacheri, a marilian poet
from Kasaragod, here by grant permission to
Aswani R. jeevan, Research scholar, in the
Department of English, Farook college, to
Study and Translate my poems into English
for her Ph.D Research.

Dhanya Vengacheri

കവിയുടെ പരിഭ്രാന്തതയെക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള സമ്മതപത്രം.

ഞാൻ ധന്യ വേങ്ങച്ചേരി. കാസറഗോഡ്
ജില്ലയിൽ നിന്നുള്ള മാവേലി കവിയുടെ ഭാര്യ.
കവിയുടെ പി.എച്ച്.ഡി പഠനത്തിനും അധ്യാപനത്തിനും
പരിഭ്രാന്തതയെക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള സമ്മതപത്രം അയച്ചു കൊടു-
ത്തിലെ അധ്യാപന വിഭാഗത്തിൽ റിസർച്ച് സ്കോ-
ളർ ആയി അയച്ചിരിക്കുന്നു. ജീവൻ അനുവാദം
നൽകുന്നു.

ധന്യ വേങ്ങച്ചേരി

Dhanya