

Biodiversity and Cultural Conservation: A study on the Pulluvan Community of South Kerala

Anupama Sudesan¹

¹Assistant Professor, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, CMR University, Bengaluru

Abstract

Pulluvan community is an indigenous community under the Hindu religion in the state of Kerala. This community of people perform Pulluvan Pattu (Praising hymns) in sacred groves and their associated temples. This study has three objectives; to understand the impact of rapid development in the sustenance of Pulluvan community, The role of Pulluvan community in the conservation and sustenance of biodiversity and lastly the role of Pulluvan folklore in the conservation of an age-old culture of the state. The area that has been chosen for the study is the southern part of Kerala. Three districts were selected in accordance with the predominance of sacred groves and their associated temples as Pulluvan folklores are usually performed at such places. The sample for the study was chosen through purposive sampling method and qualitative method was the technique that was used to analyse the data that was collected. This study tries to assess various factors relating to Pulluvan community mainly to understand the effect of changing environment thrust by rapid development on the survival of the Pulluvan community. Pulluvan community have been always connected to biodiversity. The word Pulluvan itself means a person who predicts from the sound of birds. The community have been performing various rituals inside the sacred groves and their associated temples from ages. The Pulluvan Pattu although praises on agriculture, it also instils in the people a need for biodiversity conservation. Pulluvan folklore can be considered as a form of nature worship whereby almost all the living creatures are considered as sacred and thereby helps in its protection. The role of Pulluvan community and their folklore in the conservation of a part of the oral tradition of the state of Kerala cannot be left acknowledged. It's said that listening to a Pulluvan Pattu is listening to the oral history of the state. The study initially goes with realising the objective and thereby trying to provide solutions and recommendations to the same. The study intends to bring about awareness to the wider population and the authorities concerned about the fast disintegration of an indigenous culture and its people from the state of Kerala. The study also tries to indirectly bring to the notice of the authorities concerned about the impact of development on the sustenance of Sacred Groves of the state.

Keywords: Pulluvan ,Biodiversity, Sacred Groves, Folklore, Culture , Religion.

1. Introduction

One of the most important matters of discussion in these contemporary times are the importance of indigenous knowledge preserved by various communities around the world and its proper utilisation. A lot of communities have come forward and offered their knowledge in resource management practices and biodiversity conservation. The importance of preserving these treasure chest of knowledge and providing livelihood opportunities to the custodians of these knowledges have become the need of the hour.

One such prominent indigenous community that preserves the biodiversity through their

customs and practice is the Pulluvan Community of Kerala. Pulluvan are an indigenous community of people whom from centuries have been performing various folklores inside the Hindu temples adjacent to sacred groves and other snake deities.

The community of Pulluvans have been practicing various folklores, the prominent being the "Pulluvan Pattu". Pulluvan Pattu, folklore, is a form of serpent worship. This folklore is also known by other terms as Sarpam Pattu, Sarpam Thullal ,Nagam Pattu, Sarpolsavam, Pambhum Thullal or Pambum Kalam. Most art forms of Pulluvan community are ritualistic in nature, though

songs are based on puranas and agriculture. The Pulluvan tribes consider serpents as their presiding deities and perform sacrifices and sing songs. During the rituals, the songs of the Pulluva community praises “holy serpents “ such as Ananthan, Manimudgaram, Adishesham and Mahapadman.

The Pulluvan pattu is accompanied by different musical instruments that are made only by the Pulluvan community. They include the one string veena, commonly known as Pulluvan Veena, the Pulluvan Kadam, an earthen pot with string fastened to it, Pulluvan Mizhavu and cymbals. Out of these the Pulluvan veena plays a major part during the rituals. For snake worship, usually a snake is drawn on the ground after purification ritual and necessary pujas.

Sadly, this indigenous community and its rituals are on the cusp of a wipe out. The ever-increasing property prices followed by developments have had an adverse impact on their survival. Not only does the development but also the contemporary generation of the community doesn't want to continue practicing the rituals citing low economic benefits and status. The skyrocketing land prices of the state have almost swallowed the existing sacred groves and their associated snake deity temples. Some of the Nair families of the state that had inherited sacred groves have also divided the groves on property divisions among the family inmates.

2. Statement of problem

The Pulluvan folklores and biodiversity are very closely entangled. It won't be wrong to state that it is the nature that helps in the sustenance of this particular community. The rituals are usually performed in worship of Snakes and the deities which reside inside Sacred Groves. However, with the advancing development in the state and the surging land prices, sacred groves are on the verge of extinction. The extinction of sacred groves also means the wiping out of the community of Pulluvans. Hence, there is a need of urgency to the situation.

3. Need for the study

From centuries Pulluvans and Pulluvan folklore has been practiced in the state of Kerala, however, change in social values and religious

beliefs as a result of modernization and urbanization and disappearance of the traditional belief systems, which were fundamental to the concept of Folklores, these systems and their rituals are now considered mere superstition. Pulluvan folklore that has been passed down from generations to generation is a treasure chest of the state's culture. Hearing Pulluvan folklore is equal to hearing an oral history and culture of the state. The importance of preserving this folklore also helps in the conservation of many sacred groves and the flora and fauna that resides in it. The study intends to bring these findings to the notice of the concerned people so that rapid measures would be taken to re-establish the community and its people thereby preserving a culture and all its associated elements especially the conservation of biodiversity

This section provides an insight into the various literatures which are relevant to the study and are also contemporary in nature. The section includes the review of various studies relating to the relevance and characteristics of Pulluvan tribes. There are a lot of researches on Pulluvan Pattu and Pulluvan tribes. The research by (R.M.Menon, 2008) focuses on folk music of central India with special reference to Pulluvan Pattu and Pananpattu. The researcher has tried to give a large amount of information on various folk music without focusing on any particular head.

The book by (Narayanapanikkar, 1991) originally written in Malayalam, have tried to understand the origin of the folklores of Kerala. According him, Kerala's folklores are an adoption from both Aryan and Dravidian cultures. He has also tried to find the introduction of Karnatic music in Kerala. The importance of Folklore in the sustenance of culture and how folklores bring in even day to day chores into it becomes the study of (S.S.Gupta, 1964). He has also spoken about how Indian classical music and folklores show the grandeur of an ancient culture and country.

There are a number of literatures that focuses on the Pulluvan folklores and their culture, however, there are a very few on Pulluvan folklore and its connection to biodiversity. The literatures that focus on the Pulluvan tribes are as follows. The book (K.Rangachari, 1909) is a seven-volume encyclopaedia of social groups of madras presidencies and the princely states

of Travancore. It is a monumental record that has given varied phases of Pulluvan tribes, their traditions, manners and various customs associated with the people.

The book (L.A.Iyer, 1909) is yet another magnificent work that focuses on Cochin tribes and caste. The book (Choondal, 2007) provides detailed information on the Pulluvan folklore, its origin and various myths associated with the same. The book has always remained as a treasure chest of information about Kerala's various folklores. Literatures that have focussed on the negative impacts of developments in Kerala (Balasubramanian, 1989) have given due importance to the depletion of Sacred Groves in the different parts of the state due to land encroachments. The book by (Chandrashekar, 2001) have also emphasised on the long-term impact of developments by destroying the age-old traditions and cultures.

(Dunes, 2009) speaks about the meaning that folklore and has explained how folklores tries to bring out different expressions of human, which are otherwise not able to be expressed in normal conversations. He has also focussed on understanding Folklore as an understanding of one's own unselfconscious picture. A collection of Folktales is the main theme of (Sankunni, Lore & Legends of Kerala, 2009). Although the book focuses on tales, there are instances where the author has expressed the need for the preservation of Pulluvan folklore as well. (Bronner, 2019) Has focussed on the theories of Folklores and its relationship to traditions. In his book, He has discussed folklore as a mirror of Culture

4. Methodology and Analysis

- 1) To understand the effect of rapid development in the sustenance of Pulluvan community
- 2) To understand whether Pulluvan Community and their rituals help in biodiversity conservation.
- 3) Role of Pulluvan Folklore in the conservation of the culture of the state:

The area of the study are the southern districts of Kerala. Three districts, namely Thiruvananthapuram, Allapey and Pathanamthitta were selected to conduct the study. These areas were selected mainly because of the prevalence of sacred groves and their associated temples. Most of the Pulluvan

rituals are performed now days in temples and its associated groves. This ethnographic study will rely extensively on primary data. It has three objectives on the basis of which the analysis will be done and the interpretation will be formulated. Purpose sampling for the collection of data and an interview guide was formulated and the answers to the questions were grouped and some of the similar patterns were identified. Considering the nature of some of the objectives, an audio recording of the folklore performance and also an observation was conducted. The data collected was analysed through qualitative research methodology.

The aim of the first objective was to understand the effect of rapid development on the sustenance of Pulluvan community. In order to realise the objective an in-depth interview was conducted among fifty males and females belonging to the age group of 23-35. According to the data thus analysed, it has been found that 70% of people belonging to this age group don't prefer to adopt Pulluvan traditional practises as their primary occupation citing low economic benefit. Due to the fast-growing economy and cost of living becoming higher every day, most of them have opted for other jobs including plumbing, carpenter jobs etc. Many youngsters have joined higher educational institutions and vocational training courses to carve a better future for themselves. Occasional avenues given by the government to exhibit their traditional folklore customs and practises also have not benefitted the community in the right way. According to the group thus interviewed it has been found that, most of them still continue the folklore practises as parttime job in sacred groves and their associated temples usually accepting very low wages. The main motive behind the people to do parttime performances was to keep their unique culture from not disappearing into the oblivion. It has also been found that most of the sacred groves where the Pulluvan folklores is performed are also facing extinction. The ever-increasing land prices followed by the need to divide property among the family members have also led to a situation where the need to preserve these green patches seems to have earned less significance.

The relationship between Pulluvan Folklore and Biodiversity conservation was the focus of the second objective of the study. In-order to

realise the objective an observation was conducted during the Pulluvan folklore performances at 12 different sacred groves. The observation was conducted to understand the meaning of the folklores and to find out whether the folklore encourages biodiversity conservation. The observation was followed by detailed explanations of the songs sung by the Pulluvars. According to the analysis, it has been found that, the folklore mainly focuses on snake worship, rituals and exorcisms. The folklore primarily focuses on snake dieties and performing rituals like Sarpam Thullal, Paambhum Thullal etc inside the sacred groves. The need to worship snakes and their surroundings are stressed to utmost importance in the folklore. Although through the medium of religion, the folklore has been helping the Kerala community to understand the relationship between man and nature and the need to conserve the flora and Fauna. Since most of the Pulluvan Pattu are performed Infront of Sacred groves, the importance of conserving these unique patches of biodiversity has also been stressed equally. Hence it is understood that the folklore directly helps in the conservation of biodiversity of the state.

The third objective of the study was to understand the role of Pulluvan Community and the folklore in the conservation of the culture of the state. Culture is both an ideological and materialistic concept. Here, the idea of culture being a materialistic concept was given priority. An observation was conducted at various houses where the indigenous artifacts and musical instruments were preserved. It has been found that most of the instruments that are developed by the Pulluvan community are unique in its formation and any reproduction of these instruments needs knowledge that has been transformed from generations. The Pulluvan Veena, Mizhavu and Kadam being the most prominent instruments. The musical notes played in these instruments provide a very suiting echoing of sounds to creatures like snakes and Birds. Hence it is being found that these musical instruments acts as a testimony of the states rich culture. The extinction of these musical instruments also means the extinction of an age-old culture of the state.

5. Outcome and Conclusion

The study intends to bring about awareness to the wider population and the authorities

concerned about the fast disintegration of an indigenous culture and its people. From centuries Pulluvans and Pulluvan folklore has been practiced in the state of Kerala, however, change in social values and religious beliefs as a result of modernization and urbanization and disappearance of the traditional belief systems, which were fundamental to the concept of Folklores, these systems and their rituals are now considered mere superstition. Pulluvan folklore that has been passed down from generations to generation is a treasure chest of the state's culture. Hearing Pulluvan folklore is equal to hearing an oral history and culture of the state. The importance of preserving this folklore and its people also helps in the conservation of many sacred groves and the flora and fauna that resides in it. The study intends to bring these findings to the notice of the concerned people so that rapid measures would be taken to re-establish the community and its people thereby preserving a culture and all its associated elements especially the conservation of biodiversity

References

- K, N. (1991). *Folklore of Kerala*. Trivandrum: National book Trust.
- Balasubramanian, A. (1989). Preserving Village Temple Forests in Tamilnadu. *Blackbuck*, 19-22.
- Bronner, S. J. (2019). *The Practice of Folklore: Essays Toward a Theory of Tradition*. Missisipi: University Press of Missisipi.
- Chandrashekar. (2001). *Sacred groves of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts of Karnataka – sliding towards a silent death*. Karnataka: Institute of forest genetics and tree breeding.
- Choondal, C. .. (2007). *Kerala Folk Literature*. Trivandrum: Kerala Folk Academy.
- Dunes, A. (2009). *The meaning of folklore*. Utah: Utah University Press.
- K.Rangachari. (1909). *Castes and tribes of southern India*. Madras: Government Press.
- L.A.Iyer. (1909). *The Cochin Tribes and Castes*. Cochin: Johnson Reprint.

- Narayanapanikkar, K. (1991). *Folklore of Kerala*. Trivandrum: National Book Trust.
- Propp, V. (1949). *Theory and History of Folklore*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- R.M.Menon. (2008). *Folk Music of kerala with special reference to Pulluvanpattu and Pananpattu*. Calicut: University of Calicut.
- S.S.Gupta. (1964). *Studies in Indian Folk Culture*. Calcutta: Indian Publication.
- Sankunni, K. (2009). *Lore & Legends of Kerala*. Thiruvananthapuram: Malayala Manorama.
- Sankunni, K. (2015). *Aithiyamaala: The Great Legends of Kerala*. Kerala: Hachette India.