

# Chapter 17

## Understanding Sustainability Through Traditions of Mavilan Tribes of Kerala, India

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### ABSTRACT

*The name 'Mavilan' originates from the word 'Mavilavu', a traditionally used herb by Mavilans. Recent studies have focussed on the role of ethnomedicinal and ethno-agricultural practices among the Mavilans of Kannur and Kasaragod districts of Kerala in India. These practices are in harmony with nature and their own principles. Although sustainability principles have emerged in the last few decades, tribes have been at the forefront of practising resource sustainability in their own ways. However, very little is documented about the sustainable and green practices of the Mavilan tribes. This chapter, therefore, investigates the available literature and understands the meaning of sustainability from the traditional practices of the Mavilan tribes of Kerala. This chapter further discusses how their sustainability practices can be defined within modern sustainability definitions and how they align with sustainable development goals (SDGs). Their practices are eco-friendly, do not harm the environment, and are therefore crucial for realising SDGs.*

### INTRODUCTION

A tribe is generally defined as a socially cohesive unit associated with a territory. They have distinct dialects and cultural traits (Nithya, 2014). In India, tribal communities comprise 8.6 per cent of the population (Paltasingh & Paliwal, 2014). The tribal population of Kerala is 4,84,839, which is nearly 1.45% of its total population (Kirtads, 2017). In Kerala, tribals are called *Adivasi* and are found in the mountain region of Kerala and along the Karnataka and Tamil Nadu border. The highest tribal population is seen in Wayanad, followed by Idukki and Palakkad. In Kerala, 36 tribal communities are present. Mavilan is one of the communities among them. Tribal people are primarily involved in ag-

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ricultural practices (Nithya, 2014). Mavilan is an important tribal community in the Kasaragod and Kannur districts of Kerala state in India. In Kasaragod, they inhabit highlands and midlands. The major locations where Mavilans reside in Kasaragod district are Bedadukka, Kuttikkol, Kallar, Panathady, Balal, Kodom-Belur, Kinanoor-Karinthalam, East-Eleri, West-Eleri, Ajanur and Pullur-Periya Panchayat. At Kannur they are found at Ulikkal, Payyavoor, Eruvessi, Padiyoor, Chengalayi, Eramam-Kuttoor, Kankol-Alappadamba, Peringome- Vayakkara, Chapparappadavu, Cherupuzha, Alakode, Udayagiri and Sreekandapuram Panchayat. They are commonly known as gatherers who collect medicinal leaves and sell them. Their traditional occupation is collecting and vending medicinal plants, basketry and farm labour (Damodaran, 1974). The primary occupation of Mavilans is agriculture, and they do the labour in the lands of ‘*Janmi*’ (a Malayalam word for landlord). The land is their primary economic source. In Kerala, the agrarian relation was mixed with the caste system. They practised shifting cultivation for the *Janmi* (Abraham, 2017). The landlords mostly came under the upper caste in the Kerala caste system. The landlord used to oppress the tenants. Earlier, most agricultural labour was from the Mavilan community (Vaidya, 2020).

The mother tongue of Mavilans is the *Markodi* language, a dialect of *Tulu*, a Dravidian language spoken in the southern parts of Karnataka and the north region of Kerala, which is unique to the community. They use the Malayalam language to communicate with people outside of their community. *Markodi* means equivalent to alien, and the other communities believe their language is odd. *Markodi*, which means plant creeping on the tree, is the short form of *Maratha kodi*. In *Tulu*, the term *Maratha* is used for the tree, and *Kodi* is the betel leaf, which is a creeper. In Mavilan's life, betel leaves have a significant importance. They use the leaves for medicines and rituals (Vasudevan, 2023). Betel leaves are special in every ritual, including marriage and *Theyyam*. *Theyyam* is one of the religious practices of the Mavilan tribal community in Kasargod and Kannur districts, performed in each of their clans (*Illam*), which is locally called *Tharavadu*. Virtuous individuals frequently ascend to the divine status of gods. This process of human deification stands as a central tenet within the *Theyyam* belief system (Gopi, 2020). *Theyyam* is performed from the Malayalam month *Thulam* (October to November) to *Edavam* (May to June). The betel leaves, and areca nut with one rupee coin above the leaves are given to the *Theyyam* as a *Dakshina* (*Dakshina* is an honorarium given to the spiritual guide after any ritual). The *Dakshina* is also given to the elders on every special occasion.

The name Mavilan comes from *Tulu*, from *Mavilavu*, a herbal medicine that the Mavilan community used to collect and sell. There is another belief that the name came from the people who used to wear the *Mavila* (mango tree leaves, *Mangifera indica*). Luiz suggested that Mavilan be divided into *Chingathan* and *Tulumans* (*Eda mavilan* or *Tulu mavilan*) (Luiz, 1962). In Malayalam literature, authors Vishnunamboothiri and Ramachandran commented that the community is divided into three groups, i.e., *Chingathan*, *Malayalam Mavilan* (*Malayar*) and *Cheravar* (*Cheron*) (Arya, 2022). Apart from the two subgroups, they have 36 lineages called *Tharavadu*, such as Avidath, Mothadan, Mallissery, Thalakulam, Kakka Puravan, Perenjelly or Perenchelly, Chonedeth, Neriyan, Pothera, Valakkidan, Panniyuru, Elayadath and Pal-lathu. The primary function of this *tharavadu* is to regulate the marriage functions. Their headman or local ruler is called *chingam* (meaning, simham, lion) or *mooppan*, the authority related to all cultures and rituals. The *karanavar*, the name of a position of each clan, helps the headman for all purposes, and his decisions are considered final. Another member, like sorcery, performs *odi mattal* (*Odi*, a kind of act performed like black magic. It is done to destroy the enemy). So, the destruction of the negative effects of *odi* is called *odi mattal* (Removal of *odi*). For this, they use the plant *Kadukka* (*Terminalia chebula*) and *Chennar Valli*. The *odi mattal* is done through *pooja* by a special person trained in these *poojas* and other magic functions. They have a traditional healer called *vamshiya vaidyan*. They also help the headman. The people in Mavilan preferred to live in colonies by making huts near their agricultural land to protect their farming and agricultural fields from wild animals. They practice group farming. The marriage ceremony is allowed between two different *illam* (Clan). They cannot marry from the same clan. The *Mooppan* (Headman) coordinates the marriage ceremony. The groom's father approaches the headman with the marriage proposal, and then both *Mooppan* and the groom's father visit the bride's house. After fixing the marriage, water is poured on the groom's head three times on the previous day of marriage. This ritual is called *Dhara pidikkal*. At the home of both groom and bride, they will make a *pandal* (stage made with wooden materials). In the *pandal*, four poles are securely anchored at the four corners, while a central pole known as *Brahmanakolu* stands tall. The roof of the *pandal* is skillfully crafted using *Thadichil* leaves (a kind of tree) or palm leaves. The marriage is conducted inside the stage made for the function (Arya, 2022).

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