

Socio-Cultural Reflections in the Tribal Songs of Attappadi

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Abstract

The tribal songs of Attappadi constitute a significant corpus of indigenous oral literature reflecting the socio-cultural life, ecological ethics, historical consciousness, and gendered knowledge systems of the Irula, Muduga, and Kurumba communities. Preserved through oral transmission, these songs function as cultural texts encoding ritual practices, agricultural knowledge, moral values, emotional life, and linguistic heritage. This paper adopts an ethnographic and interpretive approach to analyse Attappadi's tribal songs through the frameworks of oral tradition theory, ecofeminism, and subaltern studies. The study highlights the central role of women as custodians of cultural memory and argues that tribal songs represent an indigenous epistemology offering alternative models of sustainability, community life, and culturally responsive education.

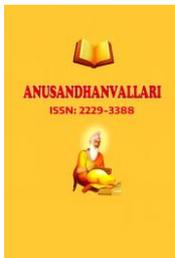
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Attappadi, located in the Palakkad district of Kerala, an area distinguished by its extensive forest cover. Within this region lies Silent Valley, situated in Mannarkkad Taluk, which constitutes one of the last remaining tracts of relatively undisturbed rainforest in the district. The valley is geographically bounded by the Nilgiri mountain range to the north, Mannarkkad Taluk to the south, and dense forested areas to the west. Attappadi is predominantly inhabited by the Irula, Muduga, and Kurumba tribal communities, who also reside in other parts of Palakkad district, including the Walayar forests, Pothupara, Mayanmudi, Palakapandy in the Nelliampathy hills, and areas of Chittoor Taluk. Linguistically, these communities speak a Tamil-based dialect influenced by Kannada, with the incorporation of several Malayalam expressions commonly used in Kerala. Significantly, the Attappadi valley represents the principal settlement area of the Kurumbas, regarded as one of the oldest tribal communities in the state.

Geographically, Attappadi constitutes a vast mountainous valley located at the origin of the Bhavani River, within the Nilgiri ranges of the Western Ghats. The region is bordered by Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu to the east, the Nilgiris to the north, Palakkad Taluk to the south, and several revenue villages of Palakkad district namely Karimba I and II, Pottassery I and II, and Mannarkkad as well as Eranad Taluk of Malappuram district to the west. Administratively, Attappadi is organised into three grama panchayats: Agali, Pudur, and Sholayur. The Attappadi Reserve Forest, covering approximately 249 square kilometres, lies along the western boundary of the region and functions as a natural buffer for the Silent Valley National Park.

The population of Attappadi comprises three major tribal groups: the Kurumbas, the Mudugas, and the Irulas. Historically dependent on forest ecosystems, these communities have developed cultural practices that are closely aligned with their natural environment.

Topographically and climatically, Attappadi can be divided into two distinct zones. Western Attappadi receives heavy rainfall, with annual precipitation exceeding 2,800 mm, whereas Eastern Attappadi falls within a



rain-shadow region, receiving less than 1,000 mm annually. The latter area is increasingly vulnerable to soil erosion and land degradation, conditions that pose a long-term risk of desertification due to irregular rainfall patterns and poor soil moisture retention.

Attappadi itself is a 731 square kilometre mountainous valley located in the Western Ghats, situated in Kerala's mid-eastern region and bordering the Coimbatore and Nilgiri districts of Tamil Nadu.¹ The region's rugged terrain, forested landscape, and relative geographical isolation have historically shaped the economic practices, settlement patterns, and cultural life of its inhabitants. The very name *Attappadi*, derived from *atta* (blood) and *paadi* (land), reflects an intimate connection between people and territory, suggesting ancestral belonging rooted in both physical space and cultural memory.²

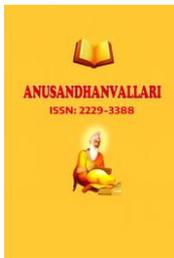
The population of Attappadi comprises both tribal and non-tribal groups, though the Irula, Muduga, and Kurumba communities constitute the primary indigenous inhabitants. Their settlements, known locally as *ooru*, are small hamlets of approximately fifty houses arranged in rows, reflecting a communitarian social structure based on kinship, cooperation, and shared labour.³ Life within the *ooru* is organised around collective activities agriculture, forest gathering, ritual observance, and festivals where music and song play a central integrative role. Economically, the tribes have traditionally depended on subsistence agriculture and forest produce. However, land alienation, restrictive forest policies, and development interventions have increasingly disrupted these livelihoods, rendering the tribal population among the most socio-economically vulnerable groups in Kerala.⁴

The tribal songs of Attappadi represent one of the most enduring and culturally significant forms of indigenous oral expression in South India. Embedded within the everyday life of the Irula, Muduga, and Kurumba communities, these songs function as living archives of collective memory, socio-cultural values, ecological ethics, and historical consciousness. Unlike written texts that are often produced within institutional or elite frameworks, Attappadi's tribal songs emerge from lived experience and are sustained through performance, repetition, and communal participation. As such, they provide invaluable insights into indigenous epistemologies ways of knowing and being that have historically been marginalised within dominant narratives of culture, history, and development.⁵

Oral tradition has long been recognised by scholars as a primary mode of cultural transmission in societies without written scripts. In Attappadi, songs serve not merely as artistic or recreational expressions but as pedagogical instruments through which knowledge is communicated across generations. They encode myths, moral codes, social norms, ritual practices, agricultural techniques, ecological wisdom, and emotional life.⁶ These songs accompany individuals from birth to death, marking every major life transition and embedding personal experience within a collective cultural framework. Lullabies soothe infants while simultaneously transmitting linguistic rhythms and cultural metaphors; wedding songs articulate ideals of companionship, fertility, and social continuity; funeral songs express grief while reaffirming communal bonds and cosmological beliefs.

Within this context of marginalisation, tribal songs function as instruments of cultural survival. They preserve histories that are absent from written archives and articulate values that resist homogenising forces of modernity. As subaltern scholars argue, such cultural forms provide access to "history from below," enabling marginalised communities to assert their presence and agency within broader historical narratives.⁷ Attappadi's tribal songs thus serve not only as reflections of social life but also as subtle modes of resistance against cultural erasure.

Language plays a crucial role in this process. The tribal dialect spoken in Attappadi, commonly referred to as *Adivasi Basha*, exists exclusively in oral form and lacks a written script. Consequently, songs assume heightened importance as carriers of linguistic heritage. Jan Vansina emphasises that oral traditions are not chaotic or unreliable but are governed by internal structures and conventions that ensure continuity and accuracy.⁸ Through song, elders transmit vocabulary, metaphors, idioms, and culturally specific modes of expression that cannot be



easily translated into dominant languages. The erosion of tribal dialects due to formal education conducted in non-indigenous languages, migration, and media exposure therefore threatens not only linguistic diversity but also the survival of indigenous knowledge systems.⁹

A defining feature of Attappadi's tribal songs is their deep ecological orientation. Nature is not represented as an external or exploitable resource but as a living, sacred presence intimately connected to human existence. Forestland is regarded as mother, and the land is believed to sustain not only human needs but the well-being of the entire creation.¹⁰ Songs frequently celebrate trees, rivers, mountains, animals, and agricultural cycles, reflecting a worldview grounded in reciprocity rather than domination. This ecological ethic is governed by the principle of "enough," whereby nothing is taken from nature beyond immediate necessity a value that contrasts sharply with extractive models of development.¹¹

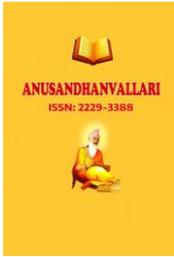
Environmental values in Attappadi's tribal culture are closely intertwined with feminine values. Women and nature are perceived as unified life-giving forces associated with fertility, nurture, and continuity. This symbolic alignment resonates strongly with ecofeminist perspectives, which argue that indigenous cultures often articulate alternative relationships between gender and ecology that challenge patriarchal and capitalist modes of exploitation.¹² Barefoot folk dances performed during rituals symbolise physical and spiritual unity with the earth, while songs portray elements of nature as manifestations of the divine. The worship of the mountain deity *Malleeswaran* at the Malleeswaram Temple exemplifies this integration of landscape, spirituality, and cultural identity.

Tribal songs also function as repositories of practical and technical knowledge, particularly in relation to agriculture. Numerous songs provide detailed descriptions of preparing the soil, removing stones and thorns from furrows, mixing red and black *thina* seeds, protecting crops from birds, harvesting produce, and preparing food.¹³ One song vividly describes the construction of a watch hut twelve feet above the ground, from which cultivators guard crops by shouting and throwing stones to chase birds away. Such songs encode ecological knowledge accumulated over generations and function as informal educational texts transmitted through performance rather than formal instruction.¹⁴ Collective performances such as *Kummy*, a group dance accompanied by song during sowing, invoke divine blessings for soil fertility while reinforcing communal participation in agricultural labour.

Women occupy a central and indispensable position in the performance, preservation, and transmission of Attappadi's tribal songs. Historically, women have been the primary singers, composers, and custodians of oral tradition, ensuring its continuity across generations.¹⁵ Songs depicting everyday life often portray women advising their husbands, collecting fallen grain during harvest to prevent waste, and emphasising unity and cooperation as the foundation of prosperity. These narratives highlight women's economic agency, practical intelligence, and moral authority within both household and community.¹⁶ Songs related to childbirth portray tribal women welcoming their children with joy regardless of gender, reflecting values of inclusivity and emotional openness.

The nationally recognised Irula folk singer Nanjiyamma exemplifies the contemporary visibility of this tradition. Her song "*Kalakkatha*," rich in natural imagery such as the blooming sandalwood tree, brought widespread recognition to Attappadi's tribal music and earned national awards.¹⁷ Nanjiyamma not only performs but also composes songs, drawing upon her lived experience and cultural memory. Her song "*Koothu Kondakkari*" narrates stories of young lovers who choose their partners independently, reflecting emotional agency and social change within tribal society.¹⁸ Such songs challenge stereotypical portrayals of tribal communities as static or tradition-bound and reveal dynamic negotiations between continuity and transformation.

In the context of land alienation, socio-economic marginalisation, and modernisation, tribal songs have become crucial symbols of cultural resilience. As Pazhaniswami observes, these musical traditions represent conscious efforts to "recapture a lost musical identity" in the face of external pressures. Initiatives such as the



work of Azad Kala Samithy and the production of albums like *Emthu Naadu Mael Nadu* demonstrate sustained attempts to document and preserve this endangered musical heritage. Cultural recognition has also empowered women within the community and renewed collective pride in indigenous cultural expressions.

From an ethnographic perspective, the study of Attappadi's tribal songs demonstrates that understanding a community requires analysing its cultural priorities from within rather than through externally imposed frameworks. Tribal culture embodies integrated values of ecological balance, cooperation, gender equity, and sustainability that challenge dominant developmental paradigms. Educational systems must therefore move beyond assimilationist models and develop culturally responsive curricula that integrate indigenous languages, oral traditions, and experiential learning. Tribal history is inseparable from world history, and the ethical values embedded in tribal culture offer vital lessons for a contemporary world grappling with ecological crisis and social fragmentation. Attappadi's tribal songs thus stand as living testimonies to a holistic worldview in which humanity, nature, and the divine coexist in balance.

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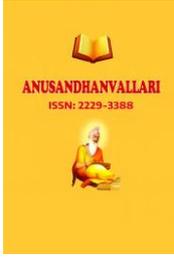
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