

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Preparing for fieldwork in the Siruvattukkadu Parapular Watershed region

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Kodaikanal, Tamilnadu, South India

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Dear Peter,

First, let us rid ourselves of this tongue-twister, Siruvattukkadu Parapular. I stumble over it every time I try to say it. I am sure I will have just as difficult a time trying to type it. I think you may not want to read it repeatedly either. I easily can solve this problem by substituting the name Kombai, the 2 km² area directly located in the middle of this watershed. Whenever I discuss with fellow Kodai-ites where I am headed to do research I simply say, "Kombai." If they are familiar with the work of the Palni Hills Conservation Council (PHCC), they know exactly the area I am talking about and might even ask if I am going to go study the native squirrel. Sometimes one will ask which Kombai. At times like these I spew the name forth as quickly as possible and follow it up with, "Where the squirrel lives." Kodai residents know their grizzled giant squirrel.

The Parapular watershed encompasses 4570 hectares in the northeastern foothills of the Palnis (See Figure 1). The Forest Department controls 3757 ha. as reserved forest. The remaining 813 ha. are cultivated areas. As I mentioned earlier, Kombai totals 200 hectares in the center of this watershed. At the end of February, I spent two nights and three days in Kombai. The settlement falls within a basin (780 m) that is surrounded by numerous peaks ranging in height from 1086 m to 1437 m. During the day, the sun beats down on the lime plantations and small plots of agricultural crops. In low elevation areas the primary crop is lime intercropped with banana and silver oak trees. Coffee estates and orange plantations are found at higher elevations. At night a cool breeze blows. The deciduous forest here is the habitat for the grizzled giant squirrel (*Ratufa macroura*) that is endemic to South India and Sri Lanka (I am also told it is an endangered species), and the protective cover on the slopes surrounding the Parapular Dam. For these reasons, PHCC wants to designate the area as a wildlife sanctuary. They currently have a nursery in Kombai that provides fruit and commercially-valuable timber trees to the local villagers. The purpose of my visit was to acquire a feel for the area by talking to a few local people and by walking along the trails that lead throughout the forest. If I liked the area and its people well-enough, PHCC wanted me to return to the area and conduct an ethnobiological survey of the plant and animals products that the local people utilize. This is exactly what I plan to do beginning next week.

Cynthia Caron is a John M. Musser Memorial Fellow of the Institute studying forest conservation in South Asia

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There are five permanent settlements in Kombai. I spent most of my time speaking with the residents of the two local tribes called the Pulaiyars and the Paliyars. Pulaiyars are believed to be the earliest inhabitants of the Palni hills. Their main deities are different than the gods worshipped by the lowland Hindus. Before animal sacrifice was discouraged, they would offer sheep to the god Mayandi during important festivals. To the god Karumalaiyar they would offer ragi pudding made from the locally-grown cereal. The Pulaiyars ate beef, pork and rats. They were skilled hunters and always offered the skin or a piece of a slain animal to the deity at the nearest temple. This was an offering of thanks and a gesture for similar good fortune in the future. The Pulaiyars knew the power of medicinal flowers and herbs. They had other powers as well. "Their aid is involved in cases of demonic possession as it is believed that the local deities can be propitiated only through their intervention", wrote a British officer in 1906.

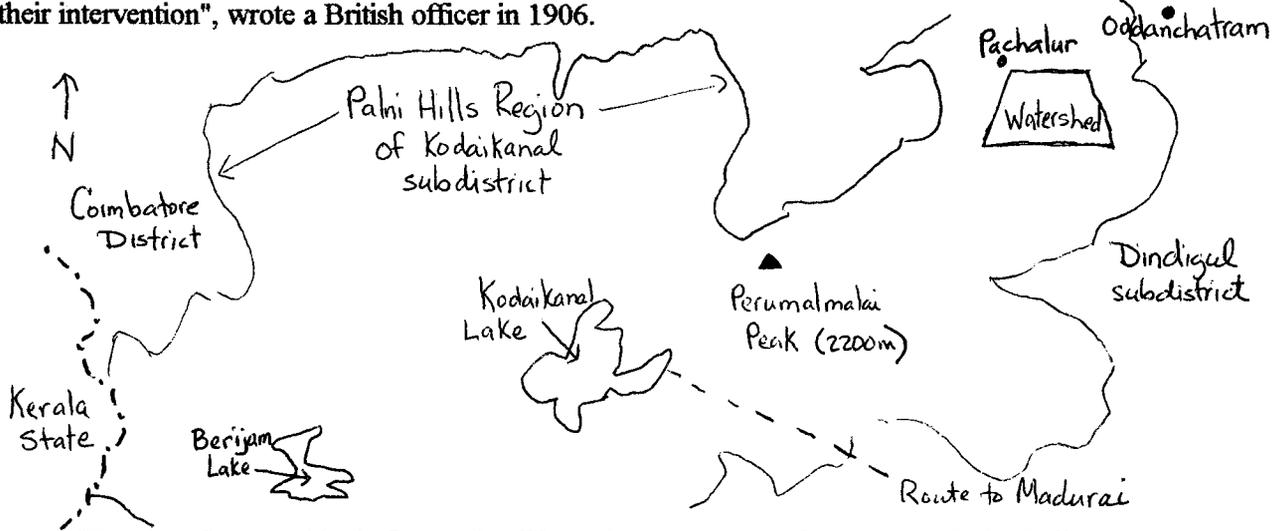


Figure 1: Siruvattukkadu Parapular Watershed region in relation to the Palni Hills.

The Paliyars are traditionally a group of hunter-gatherers. The Paliyar population of Tamilnadu is 8,000. The Palni Hills are home to approximately 2,500 individuals. Francis (1906) referred to them as "a very backward caste." Paliyars lived in small and scattered parties in the high-elevation jungle of the Palnis. They resided in grass huts or caves. Their diet did not include beef, but did include roots, honey, yams, and monitor lizards. Roots were cooked in an underground pit heaped over with firewood and set aflame. The fire would burn all night to keep away wild animals. Their fire-starter was made with steel, quartz and the floss from the silk cotton tree. (Today this floss is used to stuff pillows and mattresses.) Paliyars were shy and avoided other people, "We ran away if we met strangers. Because of fear only." The traditional wedding presents were roots, honey and beads which the new bride took to her husband's home.

It all sounds very exotic. Although keep in mind that the above sources date back to 1906 and 1909. Unusual is not a term I would use to describe my first visit to Kombai. The Pulaiyars live in mud-packed, whitewashed two-room houses. The Paliyars live in thatched huts. Talk was not of hunting and mysterious and magical powers, but of poverty, exploitation and difficulties.

Throughout the nation, tribals are the poorest group in Indian society. Tribals live in remote areas. Throughout history, they retreated farther into the forests and the hills to avoid contact with outsiders. Today, tribal communities live in small pockets throughout India. The largest number

live in the eastern states of Bihar and Orissa. In western Tamilnadu, tribal groups are concentrated in the Nilgiri and Palni Hills. When the forest, the tribals' traditional homelands (to which they had no "legal" rights) were encroached and converted by the colonial and present-day administration, many tribals found themselves as bonded laborers and as daily laborers known as coolies.

This is true of the both the Pulaiyars and the Paliyars. The groups have very different histories before permanently settling in Kombai, but their ancestors worked as coolies and as laborers on coffee estates in the Palnis. Many Pulaiyars settled in Kombai in 1953 under a tribal resettlement scheme. All of the families of the Pulaiyars I spoke with were laborers on coffee and cardamom estates before accepting the government's offer of three acres of farm land in Kombai. Back then farmers grew paddy and two varieties of millet: finger and horse-tail. Deer and guar raided their crops. The decision to grow the limes that are now the dominant crop occurred twenty years ago. The early years in Kombai were good ones. Today many Pulaiyars feel that life would be better on the estate. Due to debts and "outright trickery" by men from the plains, several Pulaiyars have sold off all or a large portion of their land. Depending on the amount of land planted in lime, landowners are earning between Rs. 5000 (\$162.00) and Rs. 40,000 (\$1296.00) a month from lime sales. The Pulaiyars are now daily laborers on land that they used to own at a rate of Rs. 25 (\$0.81) a day. One kilogram of rice costs Rs. 12 (\$0.39). More and more diets are foregoing this starch. To supplement family income, women collect the flower of the silk cotton tree. The flower has medicinal qualities and sells for Rs. 6 per kg in Madurai.

The Paliyars of Kombai do not own any land. Most settled in the region after 1953. In this particular settlement, nine grass-thatched huts overlook a lime plantation. Husbands and fathers work as laborers in nearby plantations on contracts that normally pay them Rs. 2000 (\$64.80) for two months work. They also leave for weeks at a time on contracts outside the area. An old woman told me that her ancestors were coolies during the agricultural season. In the off-season, they would shift to the forest to hunt, gather roots and honey. Raj Kumar, an employee of the mission hospital in nearby Oddanchatram, loaned a few Paliyars in this settlement money so that they could purchase milking cows and gave them a horse to transport the milk out to the road. Money from milk sales goes directly to Mr. Kumar until the loan is paid. Cow dung is sold as fertilizer. Women still search for roots and honey.

There are a few interesting issues that I hope to follow-up on in the coming month. The first concerns land and tree tenure. In this 2 km² area, there are several different natural resource user groups: original settlers (prior to 1953), resettled tribals (Pulaiyars in 1953), voluntary settlers both tribal and non-tribal (Pulaiyars, Paliyars, and most backward caste communities), absentee landlords, forest department officials who coordinate the extraction of nontimber forest products such as dyes, tannins, ornamentals, medicinals, foods and latex, and PHCC. Each of these groups uses and values the land and its natural resources differently based on their historical ties to the area, their individual economy, and culturally-contingent long-term views. The Pulaiyars are traditionally agriculturalists. Their future lies in obtaining legal titles called *patta* to the land they cultivate, or retrieving the *patta* that they believe they were cheated out of. The Paliyars have never been settled agriculturalists. I want to know whether or not they would even desire land ownership. Secure tenure to gather forest products and a marketing scheme that gives them a higher return on their goods is extremely important to their well-being.

Upon seeing a new face in the area, I suspect the local residents associated it with a new idea, namely the wildlife sanctuary / park proposal. This proposal is not a secret. Several people asked me when the national park was coming. I answered that I neither knew if or when the park was coming. This always led to a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of a park. Currently the residents feel that the park will only bring more problems. Their fundamental concept of what a park stands for is, "we will be denied access to the resources we need to make a living." In most instances (especially if the rules are enforced), the establishment of a park does change the access to the resources contained therein. What I find most ironic about their concern is that the forests around Kombai are already government-managed reserved forest. Until the Forest Policy Resolution of 1988, the needs of communities living in and around forests could not override the national interest to preserve these reserved forests. Therefore, collection of nontimber forest products, fuelwood and fodder was prohibited. While the 1988 resolution sanctions the rights of tribal groups and forest communities to the resources necessary for subsistence and cottage industry, it is not implemented (Appasamy, 1993). Many Paliyars bribe the local forest guard anywhere between Rs. 50-60 (\$1.60 - \$1.95) a month to collect bamboo for basket weaving. Why some individuals think that redesignating the area as a park or wildlife sanctuary would change their current means of accessing resources is an interesting question. Hopefully, the formation of the park would be a vehicle for local people to assert their rights.

When I am not making a list to insure that I have all the supplies I will need later this month, I am diligently turning the pages of my Tamil-English-Tamil dictionary to find the Tamil-equivalent for vocabulary words I am sure I will regularly use during my work. I have accumulated a nearly-symmetrical stack of home-made flash cards. Primarily I seek words related to the physical environment, agriculture, health, and forest products. As I plan to work with women part of the stack is devoted to diseases, the culinary arts, kitchen appliances and other wares found in rural villages. Tamil words such as *passilie* meaning medicinal leaves in the herbal form immediately after collection, *natappul* a type of tapeworm, the *nilassuvar* who is a local landlord, and *koorl* a porridge-like preparation from the flour of grain like ragi (*Eleusine coracana*) a staple food in the region, are among those that I have never needed to use before. My saris, insect repellent (the forest is tick-infested), plant press, medical kit, cameras, extra rolls of film and journal are ready to be packed.

While I did not find the Pulaiyars and the Paliyars to be as exotic as Francis (1906) and Thurston (1909) found them to be ninety years ago, I do not feel the least bit disappointed. As I set off on this ethnobiological study I will try to uncover which edible plants and animals are still part of their diet and what knowledge of medicinal plants has survived until the 1990's.

Best regards,



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Appasamy, PP. 1993. Role of nontimber forest products in a subsistence economy: The case of a joint forestry project in India. *Economic Botany* 47(3): 258-267.