

# Moongil Pallam Tribal Village : Ecology , Culture , and Continuity among the Pulaya Community in the Amaravathi Range , Udumalpet

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## ABSTRACT

Moongil Pallam is a remote tribal settlement located in the Amaravathi range of the Anamalai hills in Tamil Nadu, inhabited predominantly by the Pulaya (Pulaiyar) tribal community. The village reflects a long history of ecological adaptation, cultural continuity, and social cohesion shaped by forest environments. This article examines the origin, settlement history, subsistence practices, kinship structure, and cultural traditions of the community, drawing upon field observations and established anthropological scholarship. The study highlights the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems and the ongoing transformations experienced by the community in the context of modern development and conservation policies.

**Keywords:** Moongil Pallam, Pulaya tribe, Amaravathi range, Udumalpet, tribal settlement.

## INTRODUCTION

The Western Ghats of South India constitute one of the most ecologically diverse and culturally significant regions in the country, supporting numerous indigenous communities whose lifestyles are intricately linked with forest ecosystems. Among these communities, the Pulaya tribe has historically occupied forested hill regions, sustaining themselves through a combination of gathering, small-scale cultivation, and traditional ecological knowledge. Moongil Pallam, situated in the Amaravathi range near Udumalpet, represents a distinctive example of such a tribal settlement, where environmental conditions have profoundly shaped patterns of habitation, livelihood, and social organization. The study of this village provides insight into the broader dynamics of tribal adaptation and continuity in the face of environmental and socio-economic change<sup>1</sup>.

## METHODOLOGY

**This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach, combining:**

1. Participant observation within the settlement
2. Semi-structured interviews with elders and households
3. Oral history documentation on migration and settlement
4. Comparative literature review of South Indian tribal groups

Field observations were contextualized using classical anthropological methods. Data triangulation ensured reliability through cross-verification between oral narratives and secondary sources.

## Study Area and Environmental Setting

Moongil Pallam is located within a forested and hilly landscape characterized by dense vegetation, seasonal water sources, and significant wildlife presence. The ecological conditions of the Amaravathi range have historically influenced settlement choices, as access to water, forest produce, and arable land determined the viability of habitation. At the same time, the presence of wild animals, particularly elephants, has posed challenges that required adaptive strategies, including relocation and changes in settlement patterns. The

environment thus functions not merely as a backdrop but as an active determinant of social and economic life in the village<sup>2</sup>.

### **Origin and Etymology of Moongil Pallam**

The name “Moongil Pallam” derives from the Tamil terms “moongil,” meaning bamboo, and “pallam,” meaning a valley or depression. This nomenclature reflects both the physical geography of the region and the ecological resources that have historically sustained the community. Bamboo has played a central role in the daily life of the inhabitants, serving as a material for construction, tools, and food. The traditional consumption of bamboo rice, collected during the rare flowering cycles of bamboo, illustrates the community’s intimate knowledge of forest ecology and seasonal resource availability<sup>3</sup>.

### **Historical Settlement and Migration Patterns**

Oral histories indicate that the Pulaya inhabitants of Moongil Pallam initially settled near riverbanks, where water availability and fertile soil supported subsistence activities. However, frequent disturbances from wild animals necessitated a gradual shift to more secure locations within the forest. This process of relocation reflects a broader pattern of ecological adaptation observed among tribal communities in South India. An important aspect of the settlement history is the existence of cave habitation, as a few families reportedly lived in caves and natural rock shelters until two generations ago. This transition from cave dwelling to permanent housing represents a significant stage in the socio-economic evolution of the community<sup>4</sup>.

### **Subsistence Practices and Ecological Knowledge**

The traditional economy of Moongil Pallam is based on forest resources, including the collection of wild tubers, fruits, honey, and bamboo. Shifting cultivation and small-scale agriculture have also contributed to subsistence, although forest gathering remains central. The use of bamboo rice as a dietary component demonstrates a deep understanding of ecological cycles and resource management. Such practices exemplify sustainable interaction with the environment, as the community utilizes resources without causing significant ecological disruption. This knowledge has been transmitted across generations through oral traditions and daily practices<sup>5</sup>.

### **Social Organization and Marriage System**

The social structure of the Pulaya community in Moongil Pallam is characterized by strong kinship ties and a high degree of social cohesion. A notable feature is the restricted marriage system, in which alliances are traditionally formed only with individuals from Kodanthoor village. This localized endogamy reinforces cultural identity and ensures the continuity of social relationships across generations. Family units are generally nuclear, although extended kinship networks play an important role in social and economic life. The persistence of such practices highlights the community’s emphasis on maintaining cultural integrity<sup>6</sup>.

### **Cultural Practices and Belief Systems**

The cultural life of the community is deeply rooted in nature-based belief systems and animistic traditions. Rituals are performed in natural settings, such as sacred groves and forest spaces, rather than in formal temple structures. The worship of ancestral spirits and natural elements reflects a worldview in which the environment is imbued with spiritual significance. Music, dance, and oral narratives serve as important cultural expressions, facilitating the transmission of knowledge and values across generations. These practices form an integral part of the community’s identity and social cohesion<sup>7</sup>.

### **Human–Wildlife Interaction and Adaptation**

Human–wildlife interaction has been a defining aspect of life in Moongil Pallam. The initial relocation of settlements from riverbanks to interior forest areas was largely driven by the threat posed by wild animals, particularly elephants. Even in the present, the community continues to adapt to these challenges through careful selection of habitation sites and resource-use strategies. This coexistence reflects a dynamic relationship between humans and the environment, shaped by both necessity and traditional knowledge<sup>8</sup>.

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## Contemporary Changes and Challenges

In recent decades, Moongil Pallam has experienced gradual changes due to increased interaction with external institutions and state-led development initiatives. The transition from temporary shelters and caves to permanent housing has improved living conditions, while access to welfare schemes has introduced new economic opportunities. However, these developments have also led to reduced dependence on traditional practices and increased reliance on external systems. Conservation policies and restrictions on forest access have further complicated the relationship between the community and its environment, creating challenges for sustaining traditional livelihoods<sup>9</sup>.

### Anthropological Theoretical Framework

#### 1. Cultural Ecology (Julian Steward)

Explains how subsistence practices and settlement patterns evolve in response to environmental conditions (Steward 1955: 42).

→ Evident in bamboo use and forest-based livelihoods.

#### 2. Functionalism (Bronisław Malinowski)

Social institutions function to meet basic needs (Malinowski 1922: 91).

→ Kinship and marriage systems ensure social stability.

#### 3. Structural Functionalism (Radcliffe-Brown)

Social structures maintain cohesion (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 10).

→ Endogamy reinforces group identity.

#### 4. Historical Materialism (Marvin Harris)

Material conditions shape cultural practices (Harris 1979: 67).

→ Shift from caves to permanent housing reflects economic and environmental change.

#### 5. Symbolic Anthropology (Clifford Geertz)

Culture as a system of meanings (Geertz 1973: 89).

→ Rituals and nature worship encode ecological values.

### Comparative Perspective

Compared with other South Indian tribes such as:

Toda tribe – pastoral specialization vs. Pulaya forest dependence

Irula tribe – shared forest knowledge but greater integration into wage labor

Kadar tribe – similar ecological adaptation but different mobility patterns

### Moongil Pallam stands out for:

Continued reliance on bamboo ecology Strong localized marriage networks

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## Recent transition from cave habitation Contemporary Changes.

State welfare schemes and conservation policies have:

1. Improved housing and infrastructure
2. Reduced dependence on forest subsistence
3. Restricted access to traditional resources

These shifts create tension between traditional knowledge systems and modern governance frameworks (Baviskar 2005: 154).

## CONCLUSION

Moongil Pallam represents a significant example of a tribal settlement where ecological adaptation, cultural continuity, and social organization are closely interconnected. The history of the village, including its origin, migration patterns, subsistence practices, and marriage system, reflects the resilience and adaptability of the Pulaya community. Despite the pressures of modernization and environmental regulation, the community continues to maintain a strong connection to its cultural heritage and natural surroundings. Documenting and understanding such communities is essential for preserving indigenous knowledge and promoting sustainable and inclusive development in ecologically sensitive regions.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Gough, *Rural Society in Southeast India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 45–52.

<sup>2</sup> Madhav Gadgil & Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 35–41.

<sup>3</sup> Gadgil & Guha, *op.cit.*, pp. 90.

<sup>4</sup> K. S. Singh, *The Scheduled Tribes* (Anthropological Survey of India, 1994), pp. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Verrier Elwin, *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* (Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 63–63

<sup>6</sup> Edgar Thurston & K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. IV (Madras: Government Press, 1909), pp. 102–103.

<sup>7</sup> ElwinElwin, *op. cit.*, pp. 145–147.

<sup>8</sup> Gadgil & Guha, *op. cit.*, pp. 112–115.

<sup>9</sup> Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar, 1854–2006* (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 210–212.

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