

Lexical Identity and Linguistic Resilience of South Indian Malayali Tribes

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Abstract— The accelerating loss of indigenous languages under the pressures of globalisation and modern education is one of the most serious cultural and epistemic concerns of the contemporary world. When a language disappears, it carries with it an irreplaceable store of ecological knowledge, social memory, and cultural identity. This study investigates the linguistic resilience and lexical identity of the Malayali tribal community, comprising the Periya Malayali, Chinna Malayali, and Kolli Malayali sub-groups, indigenous to the Eastern Ghats of Tamil Nadu, inhabiting the districts of Dharmapuri, Salem, Namakkal, and Vellore. This study employs an ethnographic methodology involving immersive fieldwork, participatory observation, and direct interviews with over forty community members across different age groups. Thirty-eight distinctive lexical items are documented across nine thematic categories: ecological and technological knowledge, agricultural vocabulary, architecture and material culture, clothing and ornaments, kinship and social structure, spatial and directional terminology, temporal vocabulary, idiomatic and metaphorical expressions, and descriptive social vocabulary. Each item is analysed across phonological, morphological, and semantic dimensions. The process was conducted in a qualitative and quantitative manner. Data was collected through interviews and observation of 40 individuals from Kalvarayanmalai and Kollimalai regions. This emphasizes the imperative need to preserve and document the endangered artistic expressions among the tribal people.

Keywords: Ethno-ecological; Lexical Identity; Linguistic Resilience; Knowledge; Malayali Tribal Community; Morphological Analysis; Phonological Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is among the most significant of human inheritances. It is the medium through which communities pass on knowledge, maintain social relationships, and make sense of the world they live in. When a language is lost, what disappears is not merely a system of words and grammar but the accumulated ecological knowledge, historical memory, and cultural frameworks of an entire people, with no possibility of recovery. The loss of languages globally has accelerated sharply in recent times, driven by globalization, urbanization, and the expansion of formal education systems that favors dominant languages over local ones.

In India, this crisis is particularly serious. The People's Linguistic Survey of India conducted by G. N. Devy (2013) documents the disappearance of more than 250 Indian languages over the preceding five decades. Among the communities most at risk are the indigenous tribal communities of the Eastern Ghats, whose languages exist only in oral form, without written records or institutional support, and whose speakers are increasingly drawn away from their ancestral territories by economic pressures.

This study focuses on the Malayali tribes of the Eastern Ghats in Tamil Nadu. The term Malayali as used here refers specifically to three sub-groups: the Periya Malayali, Chinna Malayali, and Kolli Malayali, who inhabit the hill districts of Dharmapuri,

Salem, Namakkal, and Vellore. These communities speak a distinct oral language that, while related to the Dravidian family and connected to standard Tamil, has a vocabulary, a phonological system, and metaphorical frameworks that are uniquely its own. Despite decades of exposure to Tamil and English through schooling and economic integration, this vocabulary has shown a notable capacity for survival. Understanding how and why it has survived is the central concern of this study.

Earlier research on the Malayali community has focused largely on anthropological questions of social organization, kinship, marriage customs, and migration. This study departs from that tradition by undertaking the first systematic linguistic analysis of the Malayali tribal vocabulary, documenting thirty-eight distinctive lexical items and subjecting them to phonological, morphological, semantic, and cognitive-linguistic analysis.

The study pursues three objectives: to document the distinctive vocabulary of the community across key domains of life; to analyze its phonological, morphological, and semantic properties; and to assess the extent to which this vocabulary is being transmitted across generations. The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the research methodology; Section 3 reviews the relevant literature; Section 4 presents the lexical documentation and analysis; Section 5 reports and discusses the findings; and Section 6 offers concluding reflections.

I.I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study investigates, documents, and analyses the lexical identity and linguistic resilience of the Malayali tribal community, an indigenous population inhabiting the Eastern Ghats of South India. Rather than imposing an external linguistic framework onto a community whose language has evolved organically through its interaction with a specific natural and social environment, the study privileges the voices and practices of community members themselves.

An ethnographic approach forms the methodological core of this research. Through immersive fieldwork and participatory observation, the study involved in-depth interviews with community elders, linguistic analysis of oral traditions, and a close examination of how language is maintained alongside cultural values and daily practices. This qualitative design allows for an exploration of archaic vocabularies in the domains of kinship, agriculture, material culture, and ecology, which best reflect the community's relationship with its environment. Over forty community members were interviewed across the districts of Dharmapuri, Salem, Namakkal, and Vellore, representing the Periya Malayali, Chinna Malayali, and Kolli Malayali sub-groups. Cross-generational sampling was deliberate, enabling a comparison of vocabulary use between younger and older speakers.

Since the Malayali tribal language has no written form, validity and reliability were ensured through repeated verification of each word, its root morphology, and its contextual usage. Every item was cross-checked with multiple informants to reduce the risk of error inherent in oral data collection.

I.II. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design combines descriptive and analytical methodologies. The descriptive dimension documents words and expressions as they are used in natural, everyday contexts including conversation, ritual, and oral literature. The analytical dimension examines their structural, phonological, and morphological properties and the cultural knowledge embedded within them. Primary data were collected through direct conversation and observation of colloquial speech during agricultural labour, domestic activity, ritual observances, and informal gatherings. These naturalistic settings ensured that the vocabulary recorded was authentic rather than artificially elicited. Oral literature and available lexical records were also consulted for corroboration. Thirty-eight lexical items were collected and categorised by usage context and social function, covering ecological and technological terminology, kinship, spatial vocabulary, material culture, domestic utilities, and idiomatic expressions.

I.III. DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Data were collected through in-person conversations during multiple field visits to the Eastern Ghats region, focusing on vocabulary related to kinship, agriculture, and the natural environment. Community members' speech was observed closely in naturalistic settings: during agricultural work, domestic activity, rituals, and social gatherings. These contexts captured language

as it is genuinely used rather than as it might be modified in the presence of a researcher. Oral literature, including songs, narratives, and ritual speech, was also used as a supplementary source. Where available, existing tribal word lists were cross-referenced to validate the field data.

I.IV. RESEARCH GAP

Prior scholarship on the Malayali tribal community has focused predominantly on anthropological concerns: social organisation, marriage customs, kinship systems, and migration patterns. The linguistic dimensions of tribal identity, and in particular the distinctive lexical system that reflects and sustains that identity, have been largely overlooked. The present study is the first, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, to undertake a systematic collection and linguistic analysis of vocabulary from this community. By focusing on lexical identity and linguistic resilience, it opens a necessary avenue of inquiry in the field of South Indian linguistics, where the languages of tribal communities remain significantly underrepresented.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The endangerment of indigenous languages is a pressing concern across linguistics, anthropology, and cultural studies. The review below situates this study within that broader scholarly conversation, identifying the key themes and frameworks that inform its analysis of the Malayali tribal community's lexical identity and linguistic resilience.

II. I. LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT, SHIFT, AND EDUCATION

A foundational report by UNESCO (2018) establishes that the majority of the world's endangered languages are indigenous languages, and identifies modern schooling as a significant driver of language shift, insofar as it privileges dominant languages such as English, Hindi, or Tamil at the expense of local vernaculars. This institutional pressure is examined by Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), who uses the term 'linguistic genocide' to describe the systematic exclusion of indigenous languages from formal education. When children are compelled to abandon their mother tongue, an act of cultural violence occurs that severs the intergenerational transmission of language and knowledge. Heredia (2007) adds that a community's identity is encoded specifically within its lexical choices: the words used by indigenous people are tied to the landscapes they inhabit and function as carriers of self-identity that cannot be adequately replaced by dominant language vocabulary. This is directly applicable to the Malayali context, where terms such as Thombai, Kudan, and Kongodai encode entire systems of ecological and cultural knowledge.

Montoya; Diaz & Usquiano (2025) and Ha et al. (2024) demonstrate that pedagogical alternatives such as intercultural bilingual education and community-supported language programmes can serve as effective counterforces to this process, suggesting that language preservation is not an inevitable casualty of modernisation.

II. II. GLOBALISATION, LEXICAL EROSION, AND CULTURAL INTEGRITY

Crystal (2000) argues that globalisation privileges a small number of economically dominant languages, accelerating the decline of lexical richness in minority languages. As tribal communities engage in wider economic networks through migration and trade, they increasingly adopt the commercial vocabulary of dominant languages, displacing culturally specific terminology. Sharma (2024) confirms, through corpus linguistics analysis that urbanisation and dominant language pressure directly correlate with native vocabulary depletion. The loss of ecological knowledge that accompanies language extinction is particularly severe. As Flores (2022) notes, the territorial and environmental knowledge accumulated over centuries, including knowledge of medicinal plants and agricultural techniques, is permanently lost when a language disappears. The parallel for the Malayali community is clear: terms like Mungisitti, a bamboo measuring device used for medicines, represent not just a word but an entire system of knowledge.

II. III. LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND LEXICAL DISTINCTIVENESS

Hakim; Hidayat, & Jusrianto (2025), in their ethnographic study of the Limola language in South Sulawesi, argue that language is a fundamental cultural tradition through which communities affirm social membership and reinforce shared values. Language is a constitutive element of identity, not merely a vehicle for communication. Jayaraj & Kumar (2019), examining Mappila Malayalam, demonstrate that specialised or divergent lexicons are not mere deviations from a standard language but sophisticated systems that mark community identity. This directly informs the present study's approach: the phonological and morphological features that distinguish Malayali tribal vocabulary from standard Tamil are evidence of an independent linguistic identity, not corruptions of the dominant language. Yu, Sim, & Mamat (2024) reinforce this point, arguing that the preservation of lexical distinctiveness is an epistemic necessity: losing a distinctive lexicon means losing an irreplaceable way of knowing and engaging with the world.

II. IV. INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Devy (2013), in the People's Linguistic Survey of India, reports that India has lost over 250 languages in the past fifty years and specifically warns that languages like that of the Malayali community, which exist solely in oral form, face rapid extinction once the oral tradition is disrupted. Mandavilli (2015, 2016) traces the historical forces, including colonial language policy and the social prestige attached to English that have shaped India's linguistic hierarchy and marginalised vernacular languages. It is within this context that the Malayali community's effort to maintain its native vocabulary must be understood: not as a passive cultural residue but as an assertion of political and cultural autonomy. A closely parallel case is Sreelakshmi's (2011) study of the Cholanakkara tribe of Kerala, classified as 'definitely endangered' by UNESCO, in which daily contact with non-tribal populations through labour and commerce is identified as a principal driver of language loss, a situation the Malayali community shares.

II. V. LINGUISTIC RESILIENCE AND REVITALISATION

Purba (2026) & Rijal et al. (2025) demonstrate that domain-specific lexicons, particularly those related to agricultural and ecological practices, tend to exhibit greater resilience than general vocabulary because they are anchored in practices the community continues to perform. This is directly relevant to the Malayali context, where terms such as Thombai, Palla, Mungisitti, and Kongodai are tied to ongoing material and agricultural life. Annet (2024) & Hakim et al. (2025) both emphasise that documentation is the most critical first step in language preservation, and that revitalisation efforts are most effective when grounded in understanding the specific mechanisms through which communities maintain their linguistic practices. This paper responds to that imperative directly.

II.VI. LANGUAGE, MIGRATION, AND LINGUISTIC ALIENATION

Veettil, Binu & Karthikeyan (2020) show that even temporary migration disrupts the language use patterns that sustain minority languages. As Malayali community members migrate to urban areas for work, they enter environments where their native vocabulary is incomprehensible to those around them, creating strong incentives to shift towards standard Tamil. For children educated exclusively in Tamil or English, the result is linguistic alienation: they are not merely acquiring a new language but being steadily distanced from the linguistic world of their elders. The vocabulary most at risk in this intergenerational transition is precisely the specialised vocabulary of agriculture, kinship, material culture, and medicinal knowledge that elderly community members still carry.

III. SUMMARY AND THEORETICAL POSITIONING

The literature converges on three key arguments. First, indigenous languages are endangered by formal education systems that exclude them and by the economic forces of globalisation. Second, the loss of an indigenous language is not merely the loss of a communication system but the permanent destruction of cultural identity and ecological knowledge. Third, the lexical system of an indigenous language is the most sensitive indicator of both linguistic vulnerability and linguistic resilience. The present study builds on these arguments by directing its analysis specifically to the lexical identity of the Malayali community, an aspect

overlooked by earlier anthropological scholarship, and contributes to the field of South Indian linguistics and to the broader project of indigenous language preservation.

IV. LEXICAL DOCUMENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This section documents thirty-eight distinctive lexical items from the oral vocabulary of the Malayali tribal community and subjects them to phonological, morphological, semantic, and cognitive-linguistic analysis. All items were gathered through direct fieldwork and verified through repeated consultation with multiple informants, including elders who are the primary custodians of the oral tradition. The vocabulary is organised into nine thematic categories reflecting the domains of life in which these terms are used, on the understanding that the Malayali lexicon is not a random collection of words but a coherent system in which language, environment, society, and cognition are deeply connected.

IV.1. DOCUMENTED LEXICAL ITEMS: THEMATIC CLASSIFICATION

Table 1 presents the complete corpus, with transliteration, Tamil script, root word or etymology, English meaning, and usage context for each item.

Table 1: Thematic Classification of Malayali Tribal Vocabulary

S.No	Word (Transliteration)	Tamil Script	Root Word / Etymology	English Meaning	Usage Context
<i>A. Ecological and Technological Knowledge</i>					
1	Mungisitti	முங்கிசிட்டி	Mungil (Bamboo) + Sitti (measure)	Traditional bamboo measuring container	Used for measuring medicinal herbs and grains; reflects ethno- technological precision
2	Thombai	தொம்பை	Thomb- (store, above ground)	Above-ground grain storage structure	Agricultural storage; distinguished from underground storage by terrain
3	Palla / Seru	பல்லா / செறு	Palla from Pallam (pit/depression)	Underground or pit-level grain storage	Root word 'Pallam' reveals ecological terrain awareness
4	Kongodai	கொங்கொபட	Kong- (palm fibre) + Odai (shield/cover)	Palm-leaf rain shield	Traditional utility; crafted from locally sourced palm fibre
5	Mungi Pada	முங்கில் படல்	Mungil (Bamboo) + Pada (protection/fence)	Bamboo thorn protective fence	Part of Mungil- derived lexical cluster; multiple bamboo functions distinguished

6	Mungil Koodai	முங்கில் கூடை	Mungil (Bamboo) + Koodai (basket)	Large bamboo-bark storage basket	Storage and utility; part of Mungil-derived lexical cluster
B. Agriculture and Economy					
7	Katta Vandi	கட்ட வண்டி	Katta (wooden frame) + Vandi (cart)	Bullock cart for transporting goods	Domestic and agricultural utility; central to rural economy
8	Maniyam	மானியம்	Manya (granted land, Sanskrit/Tamil)	Government-allotted land or land rights	Reflects integration of external administrative vocabulary
C. Architecture and Material Culture					
9	Kudan	குடான்	Kud- (shelter/dwelling, archaic Dravidian)	Traditional thatched tribal hut	Central identity marker; distinct from Tamil word 'Veedu'
10	Metha Vudu	மேத்த வீடு	Metha (raised/solid) + Vudu (house)	Concrete or tiled-floor house	Distinguishes modern construction from traditional dwelling
11	Modaa / Moda	மோடா	Moda- (large, round vessel)	Large earthen pot for water storage or fermentation	Distinct from standard Tamil term 'Paanai'
12	Manasatti	மண் சட்டி	Maan (earth/clay) + Satti (vessel)	Traditional clay cooking pot	Contrasts with modern metal cookware; also used figuratively (see Category I)
13	Mathu	மத்து	Mathu (to churn/mash, Dravidian root)	Wooden hand masher for pulses and greens	Reflects continuation of traditional food preparation
D. Clothing and Ornaments					
14	Aranakkayiru	அரனாக்கயிறு	Aranu (waist) + Kayiru (string/cord)	Traditional waist string or loincloth accessory	Identity marker worn as part of tribal attire

15	Talaivatti	தலைவட்டி	Thalai (head) + Vatti (band/ring)	Traditional turban worn by tribal men	Symbol of community membership and masculine dignity
E. Kinship and Social Structure					
16	Mutharu	மூத்தாரு	Mootha (elder) + Aaru (honorific suffix)	Husband's elder brother (brother-in-law)	Encodes kinship hierarchy; diverges from Tamil 'Muthavar' meaning simply 'elder person'
F. Spatial and Directional Vocabulary					
17	Mekka	மேக்க	Merku (West, standard Tamil); consonant shift r to k	The western direction	Phonological transformation from standard Tamil 'Merku'
18	Mekkappakkam	மேக்கப்பக்கம்	Mekka (West) + Pakkam (side/region)	The western side or region of the hills	Used in locating settlements and agricultural plots
19	Thekka	தேக்க	Therkku (South, standard Tamil); consonant shift r to k	The southern direction	Mirrors the same phonological rule as Mekka
20	Thekkapakkam	தேக்கப்பக்கம்	Thekka (South) + Pakkam (side/region)	The southern side or region	Used for geographical reference within the hills
G. Temporal Vocabulary					
21	Ravula	ராவுல	Iravu (night, standard Tamil); aphaeresis and vowel shift	During the nighttime	Initial vowel 'I' dropped; terminal phoneme shifts
22	Rathiri	ராத்திரி	From Sanskrit Ratri via Tamil	General term for night	Retained with tribal phonological colouring
23	Kadakka	கடக்க	Kada (end/cross) + kka (locative suffix)	At the very end; finally,	Marks the conclusion of events or narrations

24	Mudinjavaraikum	முடிஞ்சுவரைக்கும்	Mudinja + Varai (until) + Kum (inclusive suffix)	As much as possible	Reflects dialectal contraction and phonological compression
H. Idiomatic and Metaphorical Expressions					
25	Muthandri Kotta	முந்திரி கொட்ட	Muntiri (cashew nut) + Kotta (shell/strike); cashew seed grows outward faster than other seeds	A rash, impulsive person	Metaphor drawn from botanical observation; example of cognitive linguistics
26	Mekka Poran	மேக்கப் போறான்	Mekka (West, direction of departure) + Poran (one who goes)	A disengaged or non-committal person	Connects geographical direction with psychological state; geo-cognitive metaphor
27	Mokarakatta	மொகரகட்ட	Mokara (ugly/unpleasant, colloquial Dravidian) + Katta (face)	An unpleasant facial expression; mild pejorative	Colloquial register used in informal interaction
I. Descriptive and Social Vocabulary					
28	Manasatti (figurative use)	மண் சட்டி	See Category C; dual usage	Used metaphorically for a slow or dull person	Demonstrates polysemy; same word carries literal and figurative meanings

IV.II. PHONOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

A comparative analysis of tribal forms against their standard Tamil equivalents identifies three phonological processes that systematically distinguish the tribal dialect: consonant elision with compensatory lengthening, word-final vowel shift, and the transformation of consonant clusters. These processes operate consistently across the lexicon, confirming that the tribal dialect is a coherent, rule-governed linguistic system and not a simplified version of standard Tamil.

Table 2: Phonological Processes in Malayali Tribal Vocabulary

Standard Tamil Form	Tribal Form	Phonological Process	Rule Applied
Merku (மேற்கு)	Mekka (மேக்க)	Consonant Elision with Compensatory Lengthening	V + r + C becomes V + CC; trill 'r' elided, following consonant geminated
Therkku (தேர்க்கு)	Thekka (தேக்க)	Consonant Elision with Compensatory Lengthening	Same rule; consistent across directional terms
Iravu (இரவு)	Ravula (ராவுல)	Aphaeresis with Word-Final Vowel Shift	Initial vowel 'I' dropped; terminal phoneme shifts from 'u' to 'ae'
Mundri (முந்திரி)	Mundhari (முந்தாரி)	Vowel Substitution in Medial Position	Internal vowel 'i' replaced by 'ae'
Mungil + Pada (முங்கில் படல்)	Mungipada (முங்கிபட)	Cluster Simplification	Terminal 'il' of first word elided; two words fused into a single phonological unit

IV.III. CONSONANT ELISION AND COMPENSATORY LENGTHENING

The most consistent phonological process is the elision of the trill consonant 'r' in medial position, accompanied by the doubling of the following consonant. The rule is: V + r + C becomes V + CC. Standard Tamil Merku (West) and Therkku (South) become Mekka and Thekka in the tribal dialect. The regularity of this process across multiple items confirms that it is a productive rule of the dialect, not random variation.

IV.IV. APHAERESIS AND WORD-FINAL VOWEL SHIFT

The standard Tamil word Iravu (night) produces the tribal form Ravula through two simultaneous processes: the initial vowel 'I' is dropped, and the terminal phoneme shifts from 'u' to the broader 'ae' characteristic of the dialect. This ensures the tribal form is recognisable within the community while remaining distinct from standard Tamil, functioning as a marker of in-group identity.

IV.V. TRANSFORMATION OF CONSONANT CLUSTERS

When two words are compounded, clusters are often simplified. Mungil and Pada fuse into Mungipada by dropping the terminal 'il' of the first word. Similarly, Mundri becomes Mundhari through medial vowel broadening. These processes produce a phonological system clearly related to yet distinctly different from standard Tamil, mirroring the community's broader cultural position: connected to the Tamil-speaking world but maintaining a distinct identity.

IV.VI. MORPHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

The morphological analysis identifies two productive word-formation processes: derivational morphology, where affixes are added to root forms to create new words, and compounding, where two or more words are combined. Both generate vocabulary that is functionally precise and culturally specific.

Table 3: Morphological Analysis of Select Tribal Vocabulary

Word	Morphological Breakdown	Type	Semantic Function
Mutharu	Mootha (elder) + Aaru (honorific suffix)	Derivational (suffix addition)	Encodes kinship rank and social hierarchy; honorific suffix elevates relational status beyond mere age to a specific kinship role
Mungisitti	Mungil (bamboo) + Sitti (measuring unit)	Compounding (noun + noun)	Precise technological term; suffix defines function as measurement
Kongodai	Kong- (palm fibre) + Odai (shield/cover)	Compounding (material + function)	Names rain-shield by both material and purpose; reflects ecological engineering
Mekkappakkam	Mekka (West) + Pakkam (side/region)	Compounding (direction + spatial noun)	Precise locational vocabulary from a directional base; important for hill terrain navigation
Aranakkayiru	Aranu (waist) + Kayiru (string/cord)	Compounding (body part + object)	Names garment by body placement and material; encodes identity through material culture
Katta Vandi	Katta (wooden frame) + Vandi (cart)	Compounding (construction + vehicle)	Distinguishes bullock cart by structural feature, not merely function
Mudinjavaraikum	Mudinja + Varai + Kum	Agglutination (root + postpositions)	Adverbial phrase compressed into one form; reflects Dravidian agglutinative morphology

IV.VII. DERIVATIONAL MORPHOLOGY: THE CASE OF MUTHARU

The kinship term Mutharu is formed from the Tamil root Mootha (elder) and the honorific suffix Aaru. In standard Tamil, Muthavar simply means an elderly person. In the tribal dialect, the Aaru suffix transforms the root into a precise kinship term meaning the husband's elder brother, encoding a social relationship with specific implications of respect and authority. This demonstrates that the tribal dialect does not simply borrow Tamil vocabulary but actively reworks it to encode culturally specific meanings.

IV.VIII. COMPOUNDING AND THE MUNGIL LEXICAL CLUSTER

The root word Mungil (bamboo) generates three distinct compound words: Mungisitti (bamboo measuring container), Mungi Pada (bamboo thorn fence), and Mungil Koodai (bamboo storage basket). Each suffix specifies a different function: Sitti denotes measurement, Pada denotes protection, and Koodai denotes containment. This lexical cluster reflects the ethno-technological precision of the tribal vocabulary: bamboo is not just a material but a conceptual base from which multiple functional objects and their names are systematically derived.

IV.IX. SEMANTIC AND ECO-LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

The documented vocabulary reveals a rich semantic system that reflects the community's relationship with its natural environment, social organisation, and material culture. Three domains are examined below.

IV.X. THE SEMANTICS OF STORAGE: THOMBAI AND PALLA

The distinction between Thombai (above-ground grain storage) and Palla (underground pit storage) is one of the most semantically significant in the tribal lexicon. Standard Tamil would likely use the same generic term for both; the tribal language distinguishes them by their relationship to the terrain. Thombai stores grain above ground; Palla, derived from the Tamil root Pallam (pit or depression), stores it below. This distinction reflects practical knowledge about temperature regulation, moisture control, and pest protection in a hill environment, knowledge encoded permanently in the vocabulary. Alongside this, the Mungil cluster (Mungisitti, Mungi Pada, Mungil Koodai) shows that the community classifies bamboo not generically but by its specific functional properties, a level of ethno-technological knowledge that cannot be recovered once the language is lost.

IV.XI. KINSHIP VOCABULARY AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY

The term Mutharu designates the husband's elder brother, a specific kinship relationship carrying distinct social responsibilities. The dedication of a unique word to this relationship, rather than relying on circumlocution or a Tamil borrowing, shows that it is socially significant enough to demand its own name. This illustrates the broader principle that the tribal lexicon does not replicate Tamil's semantic categories but creates its own, calibrated to the specific social structures of the Malayali community.

IV.XII. IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS AND COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

Two idiomatic expressions, Muthandri Kotta and Mekka Poran, demonstrate the community's capacity to map ecological and geographical knowledge onto human behaviour through systematic conceptual metaphor. Muthandri Kotta (literally 'cashew shell strike') is used for a rash, impulsive person. The metaphor draws on the botanical observation that the cashew nut protrudes from its shell outwardly and more rapidly than almost any other seed. The community has taken this precise natural observation and made it a cognitive tool for understanding and judging human character. Mekka Poran (one who goes westward) refers to a disengaged or non-committal person, mapping the western direction, associated with departure and purposelessness, onto a psychological state. These expressions show that the Malayali community uses its landscape not only to navigate the physical world but to interpret human experience.

IV.XIII. ANTHROPOLOGICAL-LINGUISTIC SYNTHESIS

The vocabulary of the Malayali community cannot be fully understood through a purely linguistic lens. The meanings of words and the distinctions between words in the same domain are shaped by the community's social organisation, material practices, and relationship with the Eastern Ghats landscape. The architectural terms Kudan and Metha Vudu, for instance, do not merely name two types of dwelling: they mark a boundary between the indigenous built environment and the modern one. The continued use of Kudan even by community members who now live in concrete houses shows that the term functions as a cultural marker of traditional identity, not just a label for a building. Similarly, the presence of loanwords such as Maniyam and Metha Vudu in the tribal lexicon is not evidence of cultural surrender. These terms name things, such as government-allotted land and concrete houses that did not previously exist in the community's world. Their adoption does not displace any existing tribal vocabulary.

The core vocabulary of kinship, ecology, and material culture remains intact, which is itself a sign of linguistic vitality rather than decline.

IV.XIV. VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Each lexical item was verified through repeated consultation with multiple independent informants. Every word, its root morphology, and its contextual usage were confirmed across several conversations. Cross-generational consultation, comparing usage between younger and older speakers, helped identify instances of semantic shift, phonological variation, or obsolescence. Where informants disagreed, discrepancies were noted and investigated further rather than resolved by choosing a single authoritative form, since variation itself indicates where lexical change is most active and where the risk of loss is greatest.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of thirty-eight lexical items from the Malayali tribal community yields findings that are significant across linguistic, anthropological, cognitive, and socio-cultural dimensions. This section presents and discusses those findings across six themes: linguistic resilience; ethno-ecological knowledge; phonological distinctiveness; cognitive-linguistic frameworks; intergenerational transmission; and adaptive lexical borrowing.

Table 4: Summary of Key Findings by Analytical Domain

Analytical Domain	Principal Finding	Illustrative Example	Broader Significance
Linguistic Resilience	Core vocabulary in kinship, agriculture, and ecology has survived sustained contact with standard Tamil	Kudan, Mutharu, Thombai, Mungisitti	Lexical identity is the most durable register of cultural survival
Ethno-Ecological Knowledge	Specialised vocabulary encodes precise ecological and technological distinctions with no equivalent in standard Tamil	Thombai vs. Palla; Mungil lexical cluster	Loss of these terms would permanently destroy centuries of ecological knowledge
Phonological Distinctiveness	Three systematic phonological rules produce a coherent dialect distinct from standard Tamil	Merku to Mekka; Iravu to Ravula	Confirms the tribal dialect as an independent linguistic system
Cognitive Linguistics	Idiomatic vocabulary maps ecological and geographical knowledge onto human behaviour through conceptual metaphor	Muthandri Kotta; Mekka Poran	Reveals a geo-cognitive and ethno-botanical conceptual system unique to this community

Analytical Domain	Principal Finding	Illustrative Example	Broader Significance
Intergenerational Transmission	Domestic vocabulary is most stable; idiomatic vocabulary is most at risk	Kudan stable; Muthandri Kotta largely unknown to younger speakers	Identifies priority areas for urgent documentation
Selective Lexical Borrowing	Absorption of loanwords reflects adaptive resilience, not cultural surrender	Maniyam; Metha Vudu	Community navigates modernity while preserving its core lexical identity

V.I. LINGUISTIC RESILIENCE: SURVIVAL OF CORE VOCABULARY

The most fundamental finding is that the Malayali tribal community has maintained a substantial body of distinctive vocabulary despite decades of exposure to standard Tamil through education, commerce, and administrative interaction. Terms such as Kudan (traditional dwelling), Moda (large earthen pot), and Mutharu (husband's elder brother) have survived without displacement by their Tamil equivalents, Veedu, Paanai, and Muthavar respectively. As Rijal et al. (2025) and Purba (2026) argue in relation to comparable communities, vocabulary anchored in daily practices and intimate social relationships tends to be the most resilient, because it is used repeatedly in contexts far removed from formal or economic interaction where dominant language pressure is strongest. This confirms Heredia's (2007) argument that lexical identity is the deepest repository of a community's cultural selfhood.

V.II. ETHNO-ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE: THE LANGUAGE OF LAND

The tribal lexicon makes distinctions between storage structures, uses of bamboo, and spatial directions that reflect a detailed understanding of the Eastern Ghats environment accumulated over centuries. The distinction between Thombai and Palla, discussed in detail in Section 4, shows that the community's knowledge of grain storage is not generic but terrain-specific and ecologically grounded. The three-term bamboo cluster demonstrates that the community classifies bamboo's uses with a precision that standard Tamil cannot replicate. As C.M. (2019) argues in relation to the Mullakuruma community, such ethno-technological vocabulary is irreplaceable: it encodes knowledge that exists nowhere in written form and cannot be recovered once the oral tradition breaks.

V.III. PHONOLOGICAL DISTINCTIVENESS AS IDENTITY

The three phonological processes identified in Section 4 operate consistently across multiple lexical items, confirming that they are rule-governed features of the dialect rather than individual variation. As Jayaraj and Kumar (2019) show in relation to Mappila Malayalam, dialectal phonological variation functions as a social marker of in-group identity. A tribal speaker's use of Mekka rather than Merku, or Ravula rather than Iravu, signals community membership. The consistency of these rules also refutes the assumption that tribal dialects are impoverished or simplified versions of dominant languages. The tribal dialect has its own internally coherent phonological system, supporting Sharma's (2024) argument that such variations are sophisticated systems in their own right.

V.IV. IDIOMATIC EXPRESSION AND COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

The expressions Muthandri Kotta and Mekka Poran show that the community's lexical creativity extends beyond naming objects to building conceptual metaphors that map ecological and geographical knowledge onto human psychology. Muthandri Kotta

encodes the community's value of deliberateness in a form drawn from close botanical observation, making it vivid and socially effective as a tool for commentary on behaviour. Mekka Poran reflects a geo-cognitive structure in which cardinal directions carry cultural and psychological meanings beyond navigation. For the Malayali community, the landscape is not merely a physical space to be named but a conceptual resource through which human experience is understood. The loss of this idiomatic vocabulary would not be the loss of colourful expressions alone but the loss of an entire framework of social thought.

V.VI. INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION AND LEXICAL RISK

Cross-generational fieldwork reveals a differentiated picture of transmission across vocabulary domains. Table 5 summarises the key patterns.

Table 5: Intergenerational Lexical Transmission Patterns by Domain

Vocabulary Domain	Retention Among Elders	Retention Among Younger Speakers	Transmission Status
Kinship (e.g. Mutharu)	High; full semantic precision maintained	Moderate; term known, social hierarchy less observed	Partial transmission; semantic erosion risk
Agricultural and storage vocabulary (e.g. Thombai, Palla)	High; central to daily agricultural practice	Moderate among farmers; unfamiliar to urban migrants	Conditional; tied to continuation of farming
Ecological and bamboo terminology (e.g. Mungisitti, Mungi Pada)	High; part of active material culture	Low to moderate; unfamiliar to younger urban members	At risk; accelerates with urbanisation
Domestic and architectural (e.g. Kudan, Moda)	High; stable in daily use	High; retained even in village settings	Stable; strongest intergenerational continuity
Idiomatic vocabulary (e.g. Muthandri Kotta, Mekka Poran)	High; used fluently by elders	Low; younger speakers unfamiliar with metaphorical logic	Highest risk; urgent documentation required
Phonological features (e.g. Mekka, Ravula)	Consistent; rules fully operative	Variable; some features converging with standard Tamil	Partial erosion under school influence

Domestic and architectural vocabulary shows the greatest stability, consistent with the finding that home-environment terms resist displacement most effectively. Agricultural vocabulary is conditionally stable: well-maintained among those still farming, but quickly lost among urban migrants. Idiomatic and metaphorical vocabulary is the most severely affected. Younger speakers are often unfamiliar not only with the expressions but with the botanical and geographical frameworks that underlie them. This

confirms Devy's (2013) warning that languages without a written form lose their most complex registers first, once the intergenerational chain is broken.

ADAPTIVE LEXICAL BORROWING: RESILIENCE, NOT SURRENDER

The loanwords Maniyam and Metha Vudu name things that did not previously exist in the community's world: government-allotted land and concrete houses. Their adoption does not displace any existing tribal vocabulary. The core lexicon of kinship, ecology, and material culture remains intact. This selective borrowing is a sign of linguistic vitality: the community engages with the modern world on its own terms, incorporating new vocabulary where genuinely needed while preserving the vocabulary that encodes its cultural identity. As Jayaraj and Kumar (2019) observe in a related context, the retention of indigenous language is, for such communities, not merely a communicative choice but an assertion of cultural autonomy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, DOCUMENTATION, AND POLICY

Three implications follow from the findings. First, lexical analysis of tribal vocabulary is a productive mode of inquiry that prior anthropological scholarship had overlooked. The phonological, morphological, semantic, and cognitive-linguistic dimensions of the Malayali lexicon reveal a richness that only systematic linguistic analysis can access. Similar studies of other tribal communities across the Eastern Ghats are likely to yield comparably significant results. Second, the idiomatic and metaphorical vocabulary of this community is at serious risk of loss within a single generation, making documentation an urgent priority. The present study creates a scholarly record of this vocabulary; further work should extend and deepen it. Third, mother-tongue-based education and community language programmes represent the most effective long-term safeguard. As Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) and Montoya et al. (2025) demonstrate, language maintenance is most successful when communities are not forced to choose between their native language and participation in formal education.

CONCLUSION

This study has undertaken the first systematic linguistic analysis of the vocabulary of the Malayali tribal community of the Eastern Ghats, documenting thirty-eight distinctive lexical items and subjecting them to phonological, morphological, semantic, and cognitive-linguistic analysis. The findings confirm that the community possesses a coherent, rule-governed lexical system that is distinct from standard Tamil, that encodes ecological, technological, and social knowledge with no equivalent in any dominant language, and that continues to show resilience despite sustained modernisation pressure.

The vocabulary of the Malayali community is not a collection of linguistic remnants. It is a living store of cultural identity, ecological knowledge, and cognitive sophistication. Terms such as Thombai and Palla preserve centuries of understanding about hill terrain and grain storage; expressions such as Muthandri Kotta and Mekka Poran encode a conceptual universe in which the landscape and human experience are inseparable. To lose this vocabulary is to lose something irreplaceable, not only for the Malayali community but for the broader inheritance of human linguistic diversity.

This study is a foundational contribution to the field of South Indian tribal linguistics and a call to action. Scholars must continue documenting indigenous oral vocabularies. Educational policy-makers must create space for mother-tongue instruction within formal schooling. The broader academic and policy community must recognise that linguistic diversity is not a peripheral concern but a matter of cultural justice. The Malayali community's words are their history, their knowledge, and their identity, and they deserve to survive.

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APPENDIX - A

LIST OF INFORMANTS

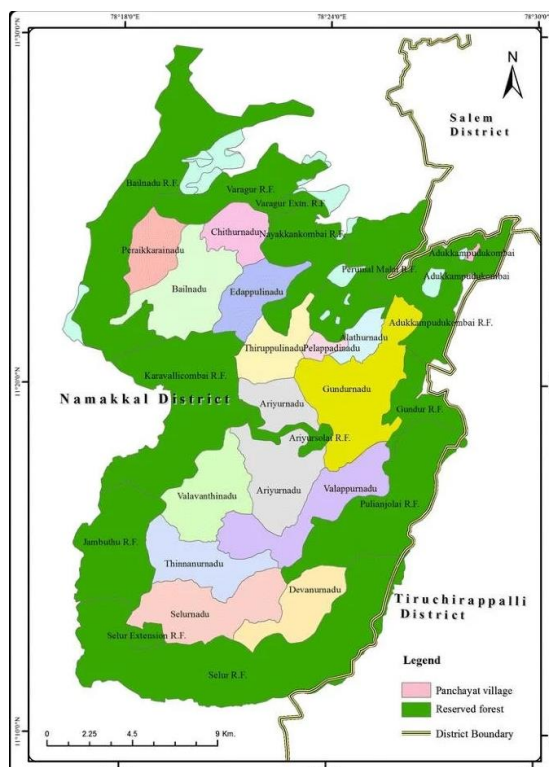
S. No	Name	Age & Gender	Place / Village	Education Level
1	Aandiyappan	Male / 68	Maniyarakundam	Nil
2	Vediyappan	Male / 65	Maniyarakundam	Nil
3	Pappal	Female / 52	Maniyarakundam	Nil
4	Chinnammal	Female / 40	Kariyaalur	Nil
5	Solai	Male / 50	Thoradipattu	Nil
6	Arul Selvi	Female / 25	Thazh Vazhappadi	Degree Holder
7	Mannagatti	Male / 63	Pacheri	Nil
8	Vengadesan	Male / 37	Vilvaaththi	10 th Standard
9	Mahalakchumi	Female / 28	Keezhnilavuur	12 th Standard
10	Sadachi	Female / 64	Erukampattu	Nil
11	Dhanapal	Male / 50	Karumanthurai	12 th Standard
12	Chinnaponnu	Female / 43	Karumanthurai	8 th Standard
13	Ammaasi	Male / 60	Pakudupattu	Nil
14	Govintharaj	Male / 38	Pakudupattu	5 th Standard
15	Ramar	Male / 45	Kondiyanantham	Nil
16	Sannasi	Male / 60	Melparigam	Nil
17	Ilayaraja	Male / 30	Maradipattu	Degree Holder



18	Thavayi	Female / 42	Maradipattu	Nil
19	Veerammal	Female / 45	Keezhuththukuli	5 th Standard
20	Theerththan	Male / 52	Aarampoondi	Nil
21	Kaaththaan	Male / 60	Aarampoondi	Nil
22	Sumathi	Female / 35	Vanniyur	5 th Standard
23	Perumal	Male / 41	Maniyarakundam	10 th Standard
24	Vellaiyammal	Female / 48	Kariya Kovil	Nil
25	Thangarasu	Male / 45	Pukappaadi	8 th Standard
26	Raja	Male / 40	Pakudupattu	12 th Standard
27	Jaya guru	Male / 24	Kannimaththi valavu	Degree Holder
28	Manikkam	Male / 39	Thazh Vazhappadi	10 th Standard
29	Govintharaj	Male / 37	Thazh Vazhappadi	Nil
30	Ramayi	Female / 45	Aruna	Nil
31	Chinnathambi	Male / 42	Molaiyanoor	Nil
32	Dhanapal	Male / 45	Molaiyanoor	Nil
33.	Vengadeshwaran	Male / 35	Maniyara kundam	Degree Holder
34	Perumal	Male / 40	Melavalavu	5 th Standard
35.	Unnamalai	Female / 45	Kariyaalur	Nil
36.	Aandi	Male / 67	Melparigam	Nil
37.	Arul Selvi	Female / 25	Mel vaazappaadi	Degree Holder
38.	Mahalingam	Male / 27	Mel vaazappaadi	Degree Holder
39.	Solaiyammal	Female / 65	Kondiyappattu	Nil
40	Unnamalai	Female / 51	Vanjikkuzhi	Nil

APPENDIX - B

KALVARAYAN HILL MAP





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