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Malekudiyas and Their Relationship with Religious Institutions: With Special Reference to Kukke Subrahmanya Temple, Kadaba Taluk, Dakshina Kannada District

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Abstract:

This paper explores the evolving relationship between the Malekudiya community—a Scheduled Tribe from the hilly regions of Kadaba Taluk—and the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple in Dakshina Kannada. Deeply rooted in forest traditions and unique rituals, the Malekudiyas navigate between indigenous beliefs and mainstream temple Hinduism. Using ethnographic fieldwork and historical sources, the study examines their ritual roles, participation in temple festivals, and changing socio-economic conditions. It highlights how the temple functions as both a space of inclusion and exclusion, shaping the community's identity and ritual authority. Despite modernization and institutional pressures, the Malekudiyas continue to preserve elements of their cultural heritage through temple service and ritual practice.

Keywords: Malekudiyas, Kukke Subrahmanya, Temple, Ritual Authority, Scheduled Tribe

Introduction

Among the tribal communities of Karnataka, the *Malekudiya* community holds a distinctive place due to its unique rituals, traditions, and enduring adherence to indigenous cultural practices. Although their population is relatively small, the Malekudiyas remain one of the most prominent tribal groups known for preserving traditional customs. They inhabit the hilly regions of Kodagu, Dakshina Kannada, and Chikkamagaluru

districts in Karnataka. In Dakshina Kannada, they are called *Malekudiyuru*; in Kodagu, *Kudiyaru*; and in Chikkamagaluru, *Malaikudi* or *Malayaru*. Since ancient times, they have been known as a hill-dwelling community—hence the various local names such as *Malekudiya*, *Kudir*, *Maleyan*, *Kudiyan*, *Gaudar*, *Kudiya*, *Malaikudi*, *Melakudi*, and *Malekudiya*.

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The Malekudiyas primarily reside in the forested slopes of the Western Ghats, extending from Agumbe to Brahmagiri. They are broadly classified into two groups: the *Nalmu Malekudiyas* and the *Mooru Malekudiyas*. The *Nalmu Malekudiyas* are concentrated in Dakshina Kannada district, while the *Mooru Malekudiyas* are found in Kodagu district. Barimale, Panjarumale, Ambottimale, and Elimale are the four mountain peaks associated with the *Nalmu* group. Those living along the Brahmagiri range were traditionally identified as *Pumale*, *Temale*, and *Oomale Kudiru*. However, the name *Umale* is rarely heard today. In addition, many Malekudiyas work in cardamom and areca nut plantations on the mountain slopes, and their identity as hill dwellers remains deeply rooted in their history and geography. The term *Malekudiya* itself—derived from *male* (hill) and *kudi* (settlement)—signifies “people dwelling in the hills.” In Kodagu, the community is further distinguished into regional subgroups such as *Poo Malekudiya*, *Temale Kudiya*, and *Adike Kudiya*.

Understanding the Malekudiyas and their interaction with religious establishments is critical on multiple levels. Anthropologically, it offers insights into how tribal belief systems have survived, transformed, and negotiated spaces within the expanding domain of organized religion. Sociologically, it exposes the processes of social exclusion and the persistence of cultural hierarchies even within shared

religious frameworks. From a social justice perspective, documenting these interactions helps promote the rights of indigenous peoples and challenges discriminatory practices that persist in religious and cultural institutions. Ultimately, studying this relationship demonstrates that religion is not a static entity but a dynamic system shaped by history, power relations, and the living traditions of its practitioners.

The primary aim of this paper is to explore both the historical and contemporary relationship between the indigenous Malekudiya tribe of the Western Ghats and the formal religious institutions with which they engage. Particular emphasis is placed on the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple, examining how these interactions influence the cultural identity, ritual practices, and social standing of the community.

The Malekudiyas, an aboriginal group of Karnataka, maintain a complex and evolving relationship with dominant Hindu temples. Although they possess an indigenous animistic faith centered on nature and ancestral deities, over time they have incorporated elements of mainstream Hinduism into their ritual life. One significant finding is their integral role in temple activities—especially at the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple—where they traditionally construct the temple chariot used during annual festivals. This participation signifies a form of religious integration, yet it remains fraught with tension. At times, the community has

protested by threatening to boycott temple ceremonies in response to government interventions or in defense of traditional customs such as the controversial *Made Snana* ritual. These instances reveal that their association with temple institutions extends beyond subordination—it also serves as a means of asserting cultural identity, safeguarding customary rights, and demanding recognition of their ancestral beliefs.

Review of Literature

Several scholars and early observers have documented aspects of the Malekudiya community's social, cultural, and religious life, providing a foundation for understanding their traditions and challenges.

Naganna Kudiya (1968) explored the Malekudiyas as a distinct tribal group known for their unique lifestyle, traditions, and beliefs. His work highlights their art forms, religious practices, social organization, and the impact of external legal systems on their way of life. Singh, K. S. (1994), in *The People of India* series, discusses the tribal characteristics of the Malekudiyas, focusing on their cultural identity and integration with mainstream society.

Abbé J. A. Dubois (1906), a French missionary, described the Malekudiyas as a community living close to nature. He noted their minimal clothing practices and mentioned an episode in which they requested Tippu Sultan's permission to retreat deeper into the forests rather than

adopt new dress codes. Their primary occupation was tapping palm trees for juice, with women known for their agility in climbing trees.

Thurston, E. (1909), in *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, identified marital and social links between the Kudiya and Malekudiya groups. He observed that in the Dharmasthala region, daughters of the Male Kudiya community were often married to men from the Madikeri Kudiya group, suggesting cultural and social interconnections between them.

Ananthakrishna Ayyar (1948) documented that the Malekudiyas of Dakshina Kannada and the Kudiyas of Kodagu were governed by a *Gurikara* (headman) who supervised community affairs, including marriage alliances and intra-group conflict resolution through traditional institutions. Moraab, S. G. (2003) described the Malekudiyas as a nature-worshipping community deeply connected to the environment. They perform rituals even while felling trees and practice cremation, immersing ashes in the River Kaveri. Their traditional *panchayat* system was strong, resolving both internal and external disputes.

Nanjundaya, H. V., and Ananthakrishna (1961) observed that in Kodagu, the Malekudiyas introduced customary divorce and remarriage practices, with the eldest son assuming family responsibilities. Divorce was made compulsory in cases of marital

incompatibility, ensuring social stability. Parvathamma, C. (2005) reaffirmed these observations, noting that such marital customs emphasized economic and social responsibility within the Malekudiya community.

Collectively, these studies illustrate the cultural richness of the Malekudiyas—their strong kinship systems, environmental adaptation, and community-based governance—yet they reveal limited exploration of their interactions with organized religious institutions.

Research Gap

Previous research on the Malekudiya community has focused primarily on themes such as tribal women's status, social change, dependency on forest resources, economic conditions, and cultural transformation. However, no systematic study has yet examined the relationship between the Malekudiyas and religious institutions, particularly in the context of the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple in Kadaba Taluk, Dakshina Kannada District.

The present study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the historical and contemporary interactions between the Malekudiya tribe and temple institutions. It aims to understand how these relationships influence their ritual roles, cultural identity, and socio-economic status within the broader framework of religion and tribal life in coastal Karnataka.

Objectives of the study

1. To understand the historical development of the Malekudiyas' connection with religious institutions, and to examine how their traditional roles and responsibilities within these institutions have contributed to shaping their cultural identity and social structure.
2. To explore the contemporary influence of legal frameworks and socio-economic changes on the Malekudiyas' religious practices and their customary positions within local religious institutions.

Methods of the Study

The study titled "*Malekudiyas and Their Relationship with Religious Institutions: With Special Reference to Kukke Subrahmanya Temple, Kadaba Taluk, Dakshina Kannada District*" adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and descriptive techniques. The research primarily emphasizes qualitative analysis supported by secondary data and an extensive review of relevant literature.

A total of 40 Malekudiya households were selected for the study using the purposive sampling method. Care was taken to include only those households actively participating in the religious activities of the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple. The primary data were collected through detailed personal interviews conducted among the selected households, focusing on their participation in temple

rituals, perceptions of religious institutions, and the socio-cultural implications of their engagement.

The secondary data were obtained from ethnographic studies, government reports, academic publications, and archival materials to contextualize the community's relationship with temple institutions within a broader historical and sociological framework.

Religious Systems and Practices

The *Malekudiya* (also known as *Malaikudiya*) community is primarily composed of idol worshippers who have, over time, integrated local deities and festivals into their religious life. Their beliefs and practices reflect both indigenous traditions and influences derived from the broader religious and cultural environment of India. The community's worldview is deeply spiritual, rooted in the conviction—passed down through generations—that an unseen divine force governs all aspects of life, encompassing both joy and suffering, good and evil. The Malekudiyas believe that this cosmic power operates autonomously and that resistance to it is futile.

Religious sentiment permeates their daily lives. Even in the weapons and tools they use, the Malekudiyas perceive a divine presence, recognizing a sacred element in all aspects of their existence. Ancestor worship forms a central component of their belief system and is especially observed during *Deepavali*

(Diwali). They believe that appeasing ancestral spirits annually ensures family unity, prosperity, and the well-being of their cattle. Neglecting such rituals, in their view, invites misfortune, disharmony, and economic decline.

The festivals celebrated by the Malekudiya community provide valuable insights into their religious philosophy and cultural origins. Through these observances, one can trace the evolution of their faith and the ways in which their religious identity has been shaped by both local ecology and regional Hindu influences. These festivals are not only moments of communal worship but also serve as cultural expressions of the community's social structure, history, and identity.

As noted by Lewis (1963) in *Tribes of Mysore*, the Malekudiyas are adherents of Hinduism and worship a wide range of deities, including *Subrahmanya*, *Manjunatha*, *Ishwara*, and *Ganesha*. During major religious fairs such as those at *Dharmasthala* and *Kukke Subrahmanya*, the Malekudiya community traditionally performed significant ritual duties, including pulling the temple chariots. Such participation reflects both their integration into mainstream Hindu practices and their continuing role as custodians of certain ritual traditions within the temple culture of the region.

The Relationship between the Malekudiya People and Lord Kukke Subrahmanya

According to the oral traditions of the Malekudiya community, the connection between the Malekudiyas and Lord Kukke Subrahmanya dates back nearly a thousand years. The earliest known ancestors of this community—two brothers-in-law named Kukkappa and Lingappa—are believed to have been the first Malekudiyas to settle in the dense forests surrounding the Subrahmanya region. The remnants of their ancient dwelling are said to exist even today within the temple's surrounding lands.

The Malekudiyas traditionally engaged in forest-based occupations such as basket weaving from cane, honey collection, hunting, and gathering incense and forest produce. Their subsistence was closely tied to nature, and they practiced shifting cultivation, growing crops like sorghum and paddy after clearing and burning forest patches.

One evening, while Kukkappa and Lingappa were in the forest, a wildfire broke out near the mountain region that now forms part of the Subrahmanya temple property. Amidst the blaze, they reportedly heard the cry of a child. Following the sound, they encountered a large serpent that spoke in a human voice, revealing itself as a divine being. The serpent addressed them:

“Kukkappa, Lingappa, do not be afraid. Save me from this fire, and I shall bless you.”

Responding with courage, the two men tied arrows together, placed them into the flames, and gently lifted the serpent, carrying it like a palanquin. This act is said to have inspired the ritual of carrying Lord Subrahmanya in a palanquin (pallakki) during the annual temple fair—a practice believed to have originated with the Malekudiya community.

When the brothers became weary, they set the serpent down on a plain known as Harigudi, later called Adi Subrahmanya. The serpent then asked for milk, fruits, and nuts to be offered daily beneath a sacred Baine tree, proclaiming itself a deity. Kukkappa and Lingappa faithfully performed these rituals each day.

One day, a Brahmin traveler appeared and requested milk, claiming to be exhausted from fasting. Despite their refusal, the Brahmin insisted that offering water-mixed milk to God would not matter. He drank the milk and vanished. When the mixed milk was later offered to the serpent, it declared,

“This milk has been touched by Kali. I shall no longer reveal myself here.”

The serpent then instructed them to cover the spot with clay (huttha) and continue to worship it, promising blessings upon their descendants who maintained the rituals. The following morning, the clay mound had grown larger, signifying the divine presence. This mound, believed to embody Lord Subrahmanya, remains an important site of worship even today.

However, with the influence of Kali, doubt and forgetfulness spread among the people. Gradually, Kukkappa and Lingappa ceased the worship and returned to their forest occupations. Later, realizing the significance of the divine encounter, they sought guidance from Brahmins in the nearby Panja Seema kingdom (Tunda Arasa's domain). Yet, the Brahmins refused to let them enter their settlement, calling them impure and unworthy of worshipping the deity.

Rejected, the Malekudiya men moved on to Kokkada (Harigudi), where Brahmins were performing Upanayana ceremonies. Hiding nearby out of shyness, they observed the ritual of sending a Brahmin boy to "Kashi," symbolically represented by crossing a stream with a bowl and stick. When the boy returned, Kukkappa and Lingappa caught him and—according to the oral tale—appointed him as the first priest to perform rituals at Adi Subrahmanya.

Through this legend, the Malekudiya people trace their spiritual and custodial connection to the Kukke Subrahmanya temple. The story signifies not only their deep devotion and role in the temple's origin, but also illustrates the transition of ritual authority from tribal custodians to Brahmin priests—a process reflecting broader social and religious transformations in South India.

Findings of the Study

The fieldwork was conducted among 40 Malekudiya households in and around

the Kukke Subrahmanya region through the questionnaire and interview method. The findings reveal the community's deep ritual, cultural, and occupational association with the temple activities and its festivals, which continue to play a central role in sustaining their traditional identity and livelihood.

Ritual and Preparation for Chariot Construction

The Malekudiya community follows a deeply rooted traditional schedule and ritual process for constructing the annual chariot (*ratha*) used during the *Shasti Utsava* at Kukke Subrahmanya. The process begins during *Navaratri*, when community members visit the Posara Forest for three days to seek blessings from their local *Daivas* (spirit deities), particularly *Panjurli*, for the successful completion of the chariot. Following this, in the month of November, around forty-eight members of the community venture into the forest to collect bamboo (*bidiru*) required for the construction. They remain in the forest for about eight days, performing associated rituals and maintaining traditional customs throughout the process, reflecting their spiritual connection to nature and their enduring role in temple-related activities.

Wages and Work Schedule

Traditionally, the Malekudiya workers received one *aane* (a local currency unit) and one kilogram of rice from the temple as compensation for their labor. In the present day, this has evolved into a

structured payment system where they are provided with a fixed salary and food supplies from the temple. The construction of the chariot begins one week after returning from the forest, specifically on the day of *Hunnime* (full moon day), marking the formal start of the sacred process.

Religious and Ritual Roles

The Malekudiya community holds vital ritual responsibilities during major temple events at *Chandramandal* and *Biridavali*. During the *Chariot Fair*, they carry the *belli stick* (sacred silver staff) and walk behind the chariot, signifying their traditional role in maintaining ritual sanctity. Historically, they also participated in the controversial “*Ele Made Snana*” ritual, which has since been banned; the community has been advocating for its reinstatement for the past five years. After the *Shasti Utsava*, they perform the *Uri-Mari* ritual in the forest to purify the area and ward off evil influences, reaffirming their position as custodians of ritual and spiritual balance.

Spiritual Connection between Temples

According to the head of the Malekudiya community at Kukke Subrahmanya, a spiritual bond exists between the *Sringeri Temple* and the *Subrahmanya Temple*. Whenever challenges or obstacles arise at Subrahmanya, members visit Sringeri to offer prayers for resolution, maintaining an ancient tradition of inter-temple spiritual linkage.

The Annual Kukke-Linga Fair

Every year, the Malekudiyas organize the *Kukke-Linga Fair* on January 14th and 15th at *Ratha Beedi* (Chariot Street) in Subrahmanya. The two-day celebration includes various cultural programs, musical performances, and the honoring of local achievers. The fair concludes with a grand *Yakshagana* performance on the night of the 15th, reflecting the community’s commitment to preserving and promoting local art traditions.

Participation in Other Temple Festivals

Throughout the year, the Malekudiya community actively participates in several temple festivals, including *Sri Krishna Janmashtami* and *Ganesha Chaturthi*. During *Janmashtami*, they play a crucial role in *Mosaru Kudike* (curd pot breaking) and *Rathotsava* (chariot procession). For *Ganesha Chaturthi*, they craft a clay idol of Lord Ganesha and install it near the temple’s *Ugrana* (storehouse). As part of the offering, they ceremonially break 1,008 coconuts, symbolizing devotion and community unity.

Year-Round Temple Services

Beyond festival occasions, the Malekudiyas contribute to the temple’s daily and seasonal upkeep. They prepare wood for the *Shasti Utsava*, beginning the process with a ritual during *Navaratri*, and are responsible for cleaning and washing the *Naivedya* vessels used for deity offerings. These acts represent their continuous service and deep sense of ritual purity and devotion.

Economic Aspects and Compensation

In earlier times, the Malekudiyas received a modest payment of ₹300 for their temple services. Today, seven to eight members are employed by the temple on a regular basis, collectively earning ₹48,000 per month. This transition from symbolic, ritual-based rewards to structured wages reflects the gradual institutionalization of their temple-related roles within the modern administrative framework.

Ritual offering and Recognition

During *Ekadashi*, as part of the preparatory ritual for the annual fair known as *Kopparige Eruvudu*, the temple provides *Mruttige Prasada* (sacred soil). The first share of this *prasada* is always offered to the Malekudiya community, symbolizing their ancestral privilege, sacred entitlement, and enduring importance in the temple's ritual and cultural traditions.

Suggestions

The head of the Malekudiya community emphasized the integral role of the Malekudiyas in the day-to-day and ritual functioning of the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple. He reiterated that members of the community are involved in almost all aspects of temple work, from the preparation of materials for rituals to participation in major festivals. His observations highlight the need to preserve cultural heritage while ensuring the socio-economic well-being of the community.

The key suggestions that emerged from the field study are as follows:

Preserving Ritual Purity

The community leader stressed the importance of maintaining the sanctity and integrity of all festivals and religious observances. He emphasized that Brahmins and temple authorities should follow ritual practices with the same devotion and precision as in the past, expressing concern that the traditional purity of the temple is gradually declining.

Combating Commercialization

He urged temple administrators and devotees to eliminate money-mindedness and excessive commercial activity from the temple premises, noting that such trends diminish the spiritual atmosphere and holiness of the site. The temple, he argued, must remain a sacred space dedicated to devotion, not profit.

Supporting the Community

The community head called for greater employment opportunities and institutional recognition for Malekudiya members within temple administration. He noted that the community has been pursuing legal action to secure these rights, underscoring their desire for social justice and equitable participation in religious institutions.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it is evident that the Malekudiyas occupy a vital and enduring position within the religious, ritual, and economic structure of

the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple. Their participation extends beyond mere attendance; they are active ritual functionaries who contribute indispensable skills and knowledge to the temple's annual calendar of festivals and ceremonies.

From chariot construction and bamboo collection to their integral roles in major festivals such as Ashtami, Chauthi, the Kukke-Linga Fair, and the historically significant (though now discontinued) Made Snana ritual, the Malekudiyas have preserved a living heritage that connects their identity with the sacred geography of Kukke Subrahmanya.

The study thus concludes that the relationship between the Malekudiya community and the temple is both symbiotic and foundational. The temple's ritual continuity, cultural heritage, and social organization are deeply intertwined with the labor, devotion, and traditional wisdom of the Malekudiyas. Recognizing and safeguarding their contributions is essential not only for cultural preservation but also for ensuring inclusive participation and sustainable community development in the broader framework of religious institutions in Karnataka

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