

MALAYALI PEOPLE GROUP PROFILE

<http://legacy.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=17433&rog3=IN>

by Thomas Kyle

Introduction and Location

Two distinct groups of people from one geographically small area both claim the name “Malayali.” One group is from the Indian state of Kerala. They seem to be more modernized, with an emphasis on the fishing industry, trade, and the global diaspora. The second group, and the one that this profile focuses on, is found primarily in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, with smaller populations in the states of Karnataka, Pondicherry, Delhi, Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh. There are about 375,000 Malayalis in India.¹

These two groups, while fairly close to one another in terms of geographic distance, are separated by the southern end of the Western Ghats mountain range. The climate of Southern India ranges from cool and dry to hot with heavy rainfall, depending on the season. India experiences a monsoon season for a few months of the year. It is typical to expect high winds, very heavy rains, and some flooding during this season.²

History

While the Malayalis are a tribal people,³ they have only inhabited the southern tip of India for about ten generations. The ancestors of the Malayali slowly immigrated from the Middle East and through South Asia, combining with other peoples along the way, to eventually

¹ “Malayali in India,” People-in-Country Profile, accessed March 13, 2015, <http://legacy.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php>

² James Heitzman, *India: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C., Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1996), 76-77.

³ R. Prabakaran, “Role of Non Timber Forest Products in the Livelihood of Malayali Tribe of Chitteri Hills of Southern Eastern Ghats, Tamil Nadu, India.” *Journal of Applied Pharmaceutical Sciences*, vol. 3 (May 2013): 56, accessed March 13, 2015. <http://imsear.li.mahidol.ac.th/bitstream/123456789/151630/1/japs2013v3n5p56.pdf>

end up in their current location.⁴ It is Malayali tradition that three brothers each settled on separate nearby hills to form the three primary and oldest Malayali villages.⁵

According to legend, the apostle Thomas evangelized and performed miracles throughout Southern India, specifically in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, in the late first century.⁶ In later years nearly all of the peoples of South India were introduced to seafaring traders from other locations such as China, South East Asia, Eastern Africa, and Europe.⁷ The Malayalis likely interacted to some extent with Vasco de Gama and other European explorers and traders.⁸ Some of these Europeans, such as the Dutch, used South India as a major source of slaves for their plantations.⁹

Malayali Life

While globalization is continuing to affect the Malayali people just like it is affecting all people groups on the planet, the Malayalis are still primarily a tribal people. Most of them live in a rural setting with an economic emphasis on farming, herding, and gathering non-timber forest products from the forests around them. Some of the most common crops include rice, millet, and a variety of spices.¹⁰ Many Malayali people live in mud huts or small houses with thatched roofs.¹¹ Most Malayalis speak Tamil, the primary language of Tamil Nadu and the oldest of the

⁴ R. M. Pitchappan, "Castes, Migration, Immunogenetics, and Infectious Diseases in South India" (Community Genetics, 2002), 158.

⁵ Paul Roche, "The Marriage Ceremonies of the Malayalis of the Pachaimalais," *Asian Folklore Studies* 39, no. 2 (1980): 123, accessed March 13, 2015, ATLA Religion Database.

⁶ Heitzman, *India: A Country Study*, 169-170.

⁷ Paul Hockings, *Encyclopedia of World Cultures* (New York, N.Y., G. K. Hall & Co., 1996)

⁸ Heitzman, *India: A Country Study*, 27-29.

⁹ Heitzman, *India: A Country Study*, 28.

¹⁰ Heitzman, *India: A Country Study*, 385.

¹¹ Prabakaran, "Role of Non Timber," 57.

four Dravidian languages that descended from Sanskrit.¹² In 1961, only 2.3% of the Malayali population could read and write, and that number remains low today.¹³

Traditional ways of doing things are very important to the Malayalis. For the process of engagement and marriage, for example, they have elaborate rituals involving almost all of the family, multiple ceremonial visitations, traditional scripts to be recited, and a bridal price to be paid.¹⁴ Many of these ceremonial interactions involve very high context communication, and this type of high context communication is likely to be found in daily life as well.¹⁵

A social hierarchy rules parts of Malayali life. There is a Govendan, who is the leader of the highest tier, the Mooppan, who is the intermediary between the Govendan and the common people, and then the common people on the lowest tier.¹⁶ Also, elders are generally highly respected.¹⁷ Family is very important to the Malayalis, and they are not afraid of going out of their ways or being inconvenienced for the sake of family.

The average Malayali does not make very much money, but they are content with what they have. More recently, scientists have been working with the Malayali to study the non-timber forest products that they use for traditional medicine.¹⁸ They are adaptable and are able to meet the challenges that an ever-changing world brings.¹⁹

Beliefs

¹² Heitzman, *India: A Country Study*, 15, 186.

¹³ Roche, "The Marriage Ceremonies," 123.

¹⁴ Roche, "The Marriage Ceremonies," 125-130.

¹⁵ Roche, "The Marriage Ceremonies," 127.

¹⁶ Roche, "The Marriage Ceremonies," 124.

¹⁷ Roche, "The Marriage Ceremonies," 130.

¹⁸ Prabakaran, "Role of Non Timber," 57.

¹⁹ "The Psyche of the Malayali," *New Indian Express*, August 23, 2015, accessed March 13, 2015, <http://ezproxy.hputx.edu:2179/hottopics/lnacademic/>

While the Malayalis' history has caused many different religions and belief systems to cross their paths, today they are nearly all Hindu. The Malayalis are unreached, with only .08% of the population identifying themselves as Christians.²⁰ They are pluralistic as far as nationalism is concerned, meaning that they value the diversity found in the country and do not see the people of India as one homogeneous group.²¹ Concerning religion, they do not believe that Hinduism is necessarily the only right religion.²² They are generally open minded and accepting of the beliefs of others. Indians in general also have a high level of respect for the separation of church and state.²³

The Malayalis have several traditional bad omens, such as crossing the path of a widow during a marriage ceremony, passing by black cats, and hearing the bark of a barking deer.²⁴ While traditionally women and men have different roles in society, apart from their rituals and ceremonies Malayalis are beginning to value equality between men and women more and more.

Needs and Prayer Points

While medical treatment is showing improvement throughout the world in general, there is still work to be done among the peoples of South India. Tuberculosis and Leprosy are still found today among India's inhabitants.²⁵ Pray that proper medical treatments would be more readily available to the Malayalis. Since the Malayalis are so accepting of other religions, there is a need for a change in their worldview in order for the gospel to be accepted as the one true way. Pray that the Lord would send more workers to the Malayalis and that they would be effective in

²⁰ Joshua Project, "Malayali in India."

²¹ Shashi Tharoor, *India: From Midnight to Millennium* (New York, Arcade Pub., 1997), 51.

²² Tharoor, *India: From Midnight to Millennium*, 56.

²³ Tharoor, *India: From Midnight to Millennium*, 52.

²⁴ Roche, "The Marriage Ceremonies," 127.

²⁵ Pitchappan, "Castes, Migration, Immunogenetics, and Infectious Diseases in South India," 158.

explaining the gospel in a way that can be fully understood. Pray that a national church would be planted that the Lord can use to sweep through the Malayali population.