



## Wayanad: Its History, Economy and Demography

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### Abstract

The district of Wayanad, etymologically rooted in Malayalam or Tamil, embodies a land of fields, rich in historical and geographical significance. Despite its ancient habitation by Stone Age peoples, recorded history only emerges in the 18th century with colonial rule, prompting a deeper understanding of its past for administrative purposes. Ruled by various entities over time, from the Veda kings to colonial powers, Wayanad's fate shifted with conflicts like the Anglo-Mysore wars. The British colonial era reshaped the region's economy with plantation agriculture and infrastructure development, impacting trade and society. Modern Wayanad, constituted in 1980, remains agriculturally dependent, particularly on crops like coffee and pepper. Yet, it grapples with socio-economic challenges, exemplified by agrarian crises and backwardness indicators, although governmental initiatives aim for upliftment. Today, while progress is evident, Wayanad continues to confront issues like farmer suicides and socio-economic disparities, emphasizing the ongoing need for intervention and support.

**Key words:** Edakkal, naduvazhy, Mysore invasion, plantation crops, Pazhassi Raja, Treaty of Sreerangapatam, Paniyar, Adiyar etc.

Etymologically the word 'wayanad' is a combination of two Malayalam or Tamil words, 'vayal' and 'nadu'. Vayal means field and 'nad' means land. Thus Wayanad means land of fields<sup>1</sup>. There is another version regarding the origin of the name. According to this, the region was known as Mayakshetra (Maya's land) in



the earliest records. Mayakshetra evolved into Mayanad and finally to Wayanad.<sup>2</sup>

Geographically most of the district is covered by thick forests. Archaeological evidences shows that the land was inhabited by Stone Age people thousands of years back. The new Stone Age carvings at Edakkal caves in Ambukuthimala near Ambalavayal is a living testimony of stone age culture in Wayanad.

Though the land has great historical background, recorded history of the land is available only from the 18th century onwards. The introduction of colonial rule in India paved the way for the colonial historiography. New attempts had been taken by the colonial masters to understand the history of the colonial people for consolidating their hold. An understanding on the life, customs, traditions etc were an administrative necessity of the colonial masters

Tradition says that the earliest rulers of Wayanad were the Veda kings. Their history is mixed with myth and is not reliable. With the disintegration of the Chera Empire, so many local chiefdoms came into existence in Kerala. Naduvazhis and Desavazhis began to exercise authority over the people. Of these, in the early decades of 18th century, Wayanad came under the rule of the Kottayam rajas of present day Kannur District.<sup>3</sup>

From 1760 onwards Wayanad was occupied by Hyderali of the Mysore kingdom. After him, his son and successor, Tipu sultan gave back Wayanad to the Kottayam rulers. The Anglo Mysore conflict for political domination changed the history of Wayanad also. The defeat of Tipu Sultan in the 3rd Anglo - Mysore war led to the Treaty of Srerangapatanam of 1792. By this Treaty, Tipu Sultan handed over Malabar to the English. Then the English East India company claimed Wayanad as their own which was objected by the Pazhassi raja of the Kottayam dynasty. Kerala varma Pazhassi raja organized a militia comprising the Kurichia tribe of Wayanad. The guerrilla warfare caused great hardships to the company. But finally they succeeded in eliminating rajas influence over Wayanad with his death in 1805.

The British occupation of Wayanad had great impact on the economy and politics of Wayanad. The company introduced plantation economy in Wayanad. Tea and coffee estates had been set up. For military and economic purposes roads were laid across Wayanad which connected Kozhikode and Thalassery. Those roads brought the military equipments and hill produces to the company camps. With the fall of Mysore ruler and Pazhassi Raja, the monopoly on spice trade enriched the company.



The colonial administration made every attempt to control the spice trade. They built inland transportation facilities to collect the hill produce. Further they improved the roads built by the Mysore rulers and connected with the new roads built by the company. The new roads were connected with major markets and townships of South India like Mysore, Guddalore and Ooty.

After the formation of Kerala state, Wayanad District is come in to existence on 1st November, 1980 as the 12th District of Kerala consisting of Mananthavady, Sulthan Bathery and Vythiri Taluks. The district has an area of 2131 square kilometres. The District is situated on north eastern portion of Kerala state. The District is bounded on the North by Kodagu District of Karnataka State, on the East by Mysore District of Karnataka State and Nilgiri District of Tamilnadu State, on the South Malappuram District and Kozhikode District on the West by Kozhikode District and Kannur District. Wayanad is a mountainous tract with picturesque plateau.

Kabani River, one of the east flowing rivers of Kerala, is the main river of the District. Almost the entire Wayanad District is drained by the Kabani river and its three tributaries viz. Panamaram, Mananthavady and Thirunelly. The District lies at an average height of 900 to 1200 metres above the mean sea level. The mean annual temperature is 23.8°C. During December- January temperature lowers to 15°C and experiencing severe cold and during summer season the temperature will go up to 35°C<sup>4</sup>. The district was one of the worst affected places during the devastating flood of 2018

Though the original settlers of the land are the adivasis, later they were displaced by the emigrants. The earliest migrants were the Jains. They came from Karnataka in the 13th century. The feudal system of land relations was introduced into Wayanad with the arrival of the Nairs from the nearby Kottayam and Kurumbranad kingdoms in the 14th century. The Muslims of Kozhikode and Malappuram also started their migration in the subsequent periods. From 1940 onwards there was a large scale Christian and Ezhava migration from south Kerala to Wayanad.

The important agricultural crops are coffee, tea, paddy and cardamom. Agriculture is the principal occupation of this district. The most important crops which are cultivated in the district are pepper and paddy. The major plantation crops are Coffee and Tea. Wayanad contribute 9% of pepper production in the state which is second largest producer in the State. Similarly Wayanad district stand first position in the production of coffee and ginger. Its contribution is about 79% and 44% respectively.



The geographical and climatical conditions are very helpful in making the land as a 'land of fields'. The district has a pleasant climate because of its distance from the mean sea level. The main economic activity of the people of Wayanad is agriculture. Different food crops like rice, tapioca and plantains are cultivated. The cash crops like Coffee, Tea, pepper and cardamom etc. are the backbone of the economy. Though large tea and coffee plantations are here, no major production centres are operating in the district.

As per the report of the ministry of Panchayati Raj in 2006, out of a total of 640 districts, Wayanad is listed as one of the country's 250 most backward districts. Because of the high dependence on agriculture, there are frequent agrarian crises in the district. Between 1997 and 2005, more than 150, 000 farmers across India have committed suicide, of which nearly 8% were from Kerala (11, 516). 90% of these were in Wayanad. The decline of prices of coffee, pepper, ginger, areca nut etc. adversely affected the farmers. The Jain Community contributes a major share in the economy of the district.

### **Population**

As per the Census Report of 2011, the total population of the district is 817420. Of this, 785840 are living in rural areas where as 31580 are living in urban areas. Among the rural population of 785840, 386283 are male and 399557 are females. In the urban settlement there are 15401 males and 16179 females.<sup>5</sup> Like other districts in the state the number of females in the district is higher than the males.

As per 2011 census, sex ratio in the district is 995 per 1000 males. The density of population is 383 per sq. kms. The decadal census shows an increasing tendency in the density of population. One important characteristic feature of this district is the large tribal population, consisting mainly of Paniyar, Adiyar, Kattunayakan and Kurichiyans communities. SC and ST population comes 4% and 17% respectively.<sup>6</sup>

In 2017, the district had been identified as one among the 115 backward districts of the country on the basis of select indicators of backwardness such as deprivation, nutrition, health, elementary education etc. The Central govt included Wayanad in the Central Govt's Special uplift Plan which aimed to transform the backward district by 2022.<sup>7</sup>

Nowadays the district has overcome many of the hardships as a result of the timely intervention of democratic and representative institutions. The welfare programmes of the govt. are successfully implemented in the district with utmost care. Though cases of farmer suicide is reported from some places in the recent



past, the number is getting low and the authorities hope that it could be ended completely by providing financial assistance and mental support to the affected. Yet many issues like land, labour, medical facility, higher education etc are there in the district which is to be addressed immediately.

### **End notes:**

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