

## LITERACY AS AN INDICATOR OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCHEDULED TRIBES OF KERALA

V. K Mohankumar<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper attempts to present how literacy acted as a indicator for the holistic development of a scheduled Tribe Community in Kerala. The literacy program which started way back in 1848 followed by the inception of vernacular schools in Tribal areas and introduction of English education enabled this particular community viz MalaiArayan to become the forerunners of the tribal development process and enjoyed the best fruits of the Constitutional scheme of reservation policy and the lead continues even today. It is significant to note that the literacy rate of the Malai Arayan community stands above the state average.

The comprehensive data collection of the Scheduled Tribes of Kerala, conducted in 2008, under the auspices of the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) and Scheduled Tribe Development Department (STDD) brought forth voluminous data for planning and implementation of various development programmes. The data are available at various levels like individual, family, hamlet, panchayat/municipality/corporation, block and district. The state level report is established.

In social science research the monograph studies or for that matter in sample studies, there is a limit to comparison and generalisation. There may be a notion about the level of development attained by each community which may be correct or incorrect. But the statistical information helps to have a more reasonable interpretation and to identify the indicators which either enable or disable progress. The above-mentioned study could reflect the trends in development. It has been noted that the literacy rate of various communities has its impact on their overall advancement. The case of MalaiArayan is an eloquent example of this.

Admittedly the data quantitative data alone cannot explain the reasons behind any phenomenon. It has to be supplemented with qualitative knowledge. Through a case study method this paper also unveils the historical process involved in the growth of the MalaiArayan Community. In the past the formal learning was not an induced programme for them. The idea of the relevance of education sprouted in the minds of elderly visionaries and they strove to attain this goal mainly through their own efforts. The case study showed us that this model could be adapted in the case of all those Scheduled Tribe Communities who are trying to build a first generation of literates and desire to move forward in the field of education.

**Key words** – Literacy, history, case study, impact, development.

### Introduction

In the evolutionary process of human beings one of the distinctive characteristics that separates Homo sapiens from the highest evolved forms of apes, is the power to articulate through language. The childhood of human beings has been endowed with the longest period of socialization which absolutely goes through a learning process that continues throughout life. These socially developed skills as opposed to genetically transmitted ones, are collectively known as culture. E. B. Tylor (1871) defined ‘culture or civilization is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’. Therefore, culture is a repository of all traditions, experiences, do’s and don’ts, handed down the generations, and language has occupied a central position among them. In simple terms literacy means the ability to read and

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<sup>1</sup>Former Deputy Director (Anthropology), Department of KIRTADS, Govt.of Kerala

write. But in an ideal situation a literate person should be able to understand all aspects of the things expressed through a particular language and react accordingly.

More than fifty percentage of the world population of illiterates is in India (Dr. K. Sivarajan -2006). It is also seen one fourth of the indigenous population all over the world, live in India, and illiteracy rate is highest among them. The literacy level of Scheduled Tribes is low in Kerala while the general literacy is very high. Majority of the Scheduled Tribes who are mostly geographically isolated and having distinct dialects of their own, have to learn in a different language to begin their formal education and that too with inadequate arrangements to suit the needs of the first-generation learners.

Admittedly, after six decades of post Constitutional development programmes, the Scheduled Tribes, in general with the exception a few communities got the least. The main reasons cited for such backwardness are illiteracy ignorance, poverty exploitation with low human capita, marginalization from every walk of life etc. Under the circumstances, this paper attempts, through a comparative study of the Scheduled Tribal communities of Kerala, to examine the relationship between the literacy rate and the level of development. In a way, this paper tries to explore whether the high literacy level and concomitant changes have enabled the Tribal communities for their holistic development or the low literacy level has disabled them leading to their further marginalization.

## **Methodology**

As an applied anthropologist in Government service or otherwise, for the last four decades, one of the significant aspects noted in Tribal development is the problem of low level of literacy among them. The Government of India has classified certain Tribal communities as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG's) and one of the conditions specified for the such a classification, among other things, is below two percentage of literacy. Of course, this has been true in the case of a few communities like Cholanaikans in the 1970's at the same time MalaiArayan community has been found to be better in education and so case study method is adopted to earn lessons from it. But there has been no massive empirical data to classify the Scheduled Tribes according to their literacy level. While associating as a State resource person with the 'Basic data collection of the Scheduled Tribes 2008'<sup>1</sup>, the literacy and educational aspects, among other things, have been closely looked into and this paper is an outcome of that exercise. 1-Later the Govt of Kerala, in 2003 published 'Scheduled Tribes of Kerala'. Report on the socio-economic status.

## **Background**

In the pre-Aryan period, learning was not barred to anyone and in the Aryan period the teaching and learning became the monopoly of a few. Throughout the history, there has been continuous attempts by any reformers again to democratize the knowledge system. Emmanuel Kant said, 'Man is the only being who needs education'. Vivekananda opined Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man'. Mahatma Gandhi states, illiteracy is a sin and a shame and it should be eradicated'. B.R. Ambedkar stood for the depressed classes advocated the people, 'to educate, agitate and organize'. Sree Narayana Guru who spear headed the social revolution in Kerala said, 'be enlightened through education and be strengthened through organization'. In fact, Goutham Buddha advocated that the merit of a person has to be decided on the basis of knowledge acquired by him or her. The missionaries popularized education by opening a number of Vernacular schools which later shifted to English education.

Thus, the framers of the Constitution have been carried away by the ideas expressed during freedom movement and as such the commitment to the education of SC/ST is contained in Article 15(4) 21-A,29,30,31,41,45 and 46. Stemming from Article 21-A which guarantees for free and compulsory education for all children of the age six to fourteen years, the Right to Education Act of 2009, is the latest attempt to realize the dream. The various Centrally and State sponsored schemes are expected to facilitate access of SC/ST children to school, and enable them retention. With this back ground, after six decades of induced development, the present literacy status of the Scheduled Tribes of Kerala can be examined.

### **Data analysis -2**

Table- 1 District wise literacy Percentages and Differences of the General Populations and Tribal Populations.

Sl.No	Name of District	% of Literacy of Tribal Population (2011-Census)	% Literacy of Tribal Population (2008- Survey)	Difference in %
1.	Thiruvananthapuram	92.66	89.55	3.11
2.	Kollam	93.77	81.87	11.90
3.	Pathanamthitta	96.93	88.50	8.43
4.	Alapuzha	96.26	86.57	9.69
5.	Kottayam	96.40	94.31	2.09
6.	Idukki	92.20	82.70	9.50
7.	Ernakulam	95.68	80.19	15.49
8.	Thrissur	95.32	67.88	27.44
9.	Palghat	88.49	57.63	30.86
10.	Malappuram	93.55	60.51	27.04
11.	Kozhikode	95.24	82.40	12.84
12.	Wynad	89.32	71.36	17.96
13.	Kannur	95.41	77.26	18.27
14.	Kasaragod	89.85	73.14	16.71
	TOTAL KERALA	93.91	74.44	19.47

Literacy rate is the percentage of illiterates to total population aged 7 years and above. The general literacy level of Kerala as per the 2011 Census is 93.91% while in the case of Scheduled Tribes, as per 2008 survey, is 74.44 ie, the latter scored 19.47% less. It is interesting to note that of all the 14 districts, Palghat has the lowest literacy level both in general (88.49%) and

Tribal (57.63%) literacy level. Palghat has also got the highest difference (30.86) in percentage between the general and tribal populations. The two neighbouring districts viz., Thrissur (27.44%) and Malappuram (27.04%) ranked second and third respectively in difference of percentages between these two categories. On the other hand, the Tribal literacy level in Kottayam district is 94.31% and it is significant to point out here that this is more than the State average literacy level. The largest tribal concentration is in Wayanad district (35.93%) and the literacy level in that district is 71.36%, which is just below the state average (74.44%).

One fourth of the illiterates (25.53%) are from the age group of above 60 and this would mean that the overwhelming majority (74.47%) i.e., three fourth of the illiterates come from the age group of below 60. The constitutional laws and the provisions contained in the Right to Education Act are violated because as many as 2546 students between the age groups 6 to 14, are found to be illiterates. The neo-literates form 3.78% and majority (67.99%) of them are from age groups of 30 to 59. Regarding the gender disparity, in the general population the male literacy rate is 94.60% and that of the female is 90.89%. but in the case of Tribal population the female literacy level is also low (70.15%). A Community wise analysis of the Scheduled tribes of Kerala present the following details.

**Table -2 Community wise illiterates of the Scheduled Tribe population in Kerala.**

**Group-I-Above 40% Illiterates**

SI No	Name of the Community	Illiterates	% of illiterates to the (age above 6) population of the specific community
1.	Cholanicken	191	60.83
2.	MahaMalasar	70	59.32
3.	Aranadan	105	51.98
4.	Eravallan	1953	50.33
5.	Malasar	1844	50.22
6.	MalaiPandaram	659	48.60
7	Kurumber	803	44.46
8.	Kadar	691	42.08
9.	Kattunayakan	7001	41.50
10.	Irular	9489	40.45

**Group –II. Below 40% and above 20% Illiterates**

11.	Malayan	1791	37.28
12.	Mudugar	1425	36.61
13.	Paniyan	28273	35.48
14.	Hill Pulaya	1061	35.17
15.	Adiyan	3371	34.28
16.	Mala Vettuvan	5718	32.8
17.	VettaKuruman	1871	32.82
18.	Muthuvan	5303	31.66
19.	Mannan	2323	27.82
20.	Mavilan	6351	22.39
21.	Palliyan	296	22.07

22.	Koraga	313	21.56
23.	Kudiya	172	20.43

### Group –III- Below 20% Illiterates

24.	Thachanadan Moopan	288	19.65
25.	Kurichiyan	5278	16.31
26.	MalaiPanikar	153	15.50
27.	Karimpalan	1841	13.84
28.	MalaiVedan	569	13.70
29.	Mulla Kuruman	2661	13.67
30.	Wynad Kadar	81	13.37
31.	Ulladan	1854	11.66
32.	Uraly	748	10.86
33.	Kanikkar	1725	9.91
34.	MalaiArayan	827	3.07
35.	Others	338	12.27
	TOTAL	97437	

The highest percentage of illiterates are reported from the Cholanaikan community (60.83%). They are still in a state of territorial nomadism and they subsist only on the collection and sale of Non-Wood Forest Produce (NWFP). The next four communities with more than 50% of illiterates are MahaMalasar, Aranadan, Eravallan and Malasar. It may note that Cholanaicken, MahaMalasar, Aranadan are very small communities having a population of below 500. More than 40% of literacy is noted among ten communities. Thus, among these first ten highly illiterate communities, which form 12% of the total population and out of which four communities viz. Cholaniacken, Kurumbar, Kadar and Kattunaicken belong to PVTG's. The only exception to this group is Koraga community where the illiteracy is 21.56%. of these, except MalaiPandaram, all the nine communities hail from North Cochin and Malabar regions.

At the illiteracy level, the numerically largest (21.77%) community viz. Paniyan ranks 13<sup>th</sup> (35.48%). The Paniyan community distributed in five districts viz. Kannur, Wynad, Kozhikode, Malappuram and Palghat were subjected to bonded labour system. Another community coming under this system of labour and residing only in Wayanad is Adiyar and 34.28% are illiterates.

At the top level there are eleven communities having less than 20% of illiterates and this group form 35.79% of the total Tribal population. Some of these communities have unique features. For instance, the Kurichiyan, Mullakuruman, Kanikkar and MalaiArayan are noted traditional settled agriculturists. All these four communities have connection with the ruling king during Pre-British and British periods. The Kurichiya community under its leader Thalakkal Chandu, along with the Pazhassi Raja fought against the Britishers and the Kurichiya Rebellion 1812 bears testimony to this fact. The Mullakuruman are said to be the descendants of the Veda Raja who ruled Wayanad. The MalaiArayans and Kanikkars had allegiance to the Poonjar and Travancore kingdoms respectively and the latter gifted large tracts of land to the Kanikkar for cultivation. The numerical strength of these communities is also high. At the political level Kurichiyan and Mullakuruman communities produced four MLA's each

including women and one of them had the honour of becoming the first Tribal Minister in Kerala. There had been one MLA from the Adiyar community. The Mannan community of Idukki district alone has a hereditary Raja of their own. The Malai Arayan community has produced IAS, IPS, IRS etc. and received a lion share of reservation posts in Government services including many professionals and a creative writer whose award winning novel is translated to English. The above mentioned factors like their exposure and interactions with others, have contributed much to the development and boost their self-esteem and reduce illiteracy considerably. Thus, broadly illiteracy-wise the Tribal population can be classified into three categories viz., 'high rate illiterates' with more than 40%, the middle rates' below 40% and above 20% and 'low rates' of below 20%.

### Case study

The Malai Arayan community marked a literacy level 96.43% which is above the State average level of general population (93.91%). The genesis of this silver line, in the history of Tribal development, goes to eight scores ago. The missionaries belonging to L.M.S. (1806), CMS (1816) and Basel Mission (1826) as a part of evangelization started churches, and schools attached to it, which paved the way to the local marginalized people of Travancore to get educated. The Malai Arayans then led a backward life and all superstitious beliefs marred their progress. A few elders of the community came to know about the system of formal schools opened in the plain areas by the missionaries and visited Henry Baker who was camping in Pallom near Kottayam in 1848 and requested him to start schools in hill areas. But their request was not accepted although Henry Baker Jr later acknowledged them to be very 'truthful and chaste'. They came to him three times with the same request with no results. But on the fifth occasion they provoked him and he narrates the incident as follows.

But the heads of several villages at last came down, and remonstrated on account of delay. 'Five times' they, 'have we been to call you'. You must know we know nothing right; will you teach us or not? We live like beasts and when we die, we are buried like dogs; ought you to neglect us?' 'Cholera and fever' said another, carried off such and such members of my family, where are they now?' They stated that they 'wanted no pecuniary help, as they had plenty of rice'.

Henry Baker Jr. moved by this plea accepted their request and visited the hill areas next week and there after served them stretching from 1848 to 1878 for the benefit of the Malai Arayan community. During his first visit the offer to convert came just after he finished his speech, but he had remained them to think properly and to take a decision as he did not want any impulsive response. By 1850 there were 350 students from two villages of Mundakayam and Assapian and he started his work in Melukavu area since 1852. About the Melukavu centre Henry Backer Jr. remembers: 'My hill people are improving every way-that I trust a sincere work on the spirit is going in their hearts' It is also reported 'People built schools and prayer halls by themselves'.

T. Madhava Rao, Diwan of Travancore (1872-74). who promoted education treated it has an entry to Government Service? The Diwan himself visited Melukavu and tested the quality of English education and those performed well were given rewards. It can be seen that the contributions of Henry Baker Jr. are of high value to the community as he had concentrated not only on their literacy but also on their overall development as individuals. Thus, the Malai Arayan community could even excel the literacy rate of the general population and March

much ahead in all spheres of development than the rest of the Scheduled Tribe communities of Kerala. In short, the pro-educative attitude of the community, over the years has yielded its dividends. Further the high literacy level has a direct impact on their higher education too. In this way each community has a historical past which shaped their present-day status.

### **Conclusion**

Education is a corner stone to the progress and development of human kind. The high, middle and low-rate illiterate communities are administered with a common policy. As a result, the high-rate illiterates communities get further marginalized, the middle rate may go up or down, and only the low-rate illiterate communities may stabilize their position and survive. The prime and immediate purpose of literacy and education for the valuable sections is to get them liberated from poverty, ignorance, oppression and all kinds of exploitation, as observed by Paulo Freire.

The case study of MalaiArayan community tells us loudly that if there is concerted effort and investment coupled with the participation of people in the field of literacy and education, sustainable and ever-expanding development is guaranteed in successive generations. Incidentally, C.K. Janu, noted Tribal women leader, basically an illiterate, came to lime light through her association with the literacy campaign programme.

The framers of the Constitution have visualized an independent India where there is equality of opportunity and where no one would be neglected. It is high time that we have to address the problem of low level of literacy among the Scheduled Tribes. They are intelligent in their own way. Therefore, community specific tribal friendly and target oriented programme with in a stipulated time frame, are essential for social justice.

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