

TRIBAL LIFE IN NON-SCHEDULED AREAS: AN APPRAISAL IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY TRIBAL SCENARIO IN KERALA

Pradeep Kumar K.S¹

Abstract

Closeness with the natural environment in its true sense is the main distinguishing feature of the tribal life. A wide range of projects and programs have implemented for the overall wellbeing of the tribal people of the country after independence and many a time such measures have resulted in changing the age-old way of life of the tribal communities along with alienation of their customary rights. Nowadays, tribal societies face a manifold of issues, and their problems vary from that of land alienation, bonded labour, health and nutrition, educational backwardness, depopulation, loss of cultural traits including dialect to the problem of identity, owing to one or the other reasons. All these reduced their mode of living and self-esteem to a lower level and make the contemporary living surroundings of the tribal communities problematic. The paper discusses contemporary life of tribal societies in Non-Scheduled areas and the necessity to develop a long term planning and policy approach to rectify the persisting development issues amongst the tribal communities of the State from an Anthropological perspective.

Key words: Non-Scheduled Areas, alienation, policy, isolation, assimilation, integration.

Introduction

Tribal^{iv} people^v of the country have been leading a life that is very much part of the natural environment. They have a lively relationship with the trees, mountains, soil, animals, and such phenomenon of natural world. Majority of their needs are being satisfied from the immediate natural surroundings. Many tribal communities make country boats and bridges out of bamboo to cross rivers in their habitat, bows and arrows for protection from wild animals, *meenkooda* (fish trap) for catching fish, bamboo pieces as cooking pots, leaves of various trees for taking food, bamboo and canes for making baskets, etc. All these reveal that the day to day life of the tribal communities is very much a part of the natural environment.

¹ Deputy Director (Training), Kerala Institute for Research Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (KIRTADS), Chevayur, Kozhikode-17.

The views raised in this paper are that of the researcher and the Dept. has no responsibility for the same.

Natural objects/things such as peculiar stones, large trees, huge mountains, etc. are worshiped as having divine powers. Souls of their dead ones are believed to be part and parcel of natural environment and looks after their worldly affairs. They also develop distinct beliefs and practices to manage day to day affairs and life of the community in its totality. The natural environment together with the rituals and ceremonies also helps to relieve their fear and pain out of death and other miseries. They also transmit a knowledge repository to interact and manage the natural environment. They have a strong 'we' feeling and an emotional attachment with the nature. Thus, there lies a unification of the tribal communities with their natural environment. Thus, balance between nature and culture and closeness with the natural environment in its true sense are the most important aspect of tribal life in India. If this balance is broken in one way or the other they may lose many features of their 'distinct' life. The above mentioned description of tribal societies as leading a nature friendly distinct life has no intention to state tribal communities as 'isolated, closed and frozen entity' but is intended only to highlight the age-old defining feature of the tribal societies in general as a reference point so as to track and appraise the tribal societies' contemporary diversifying living circumstances in Non-Scheduled areas, which is the main theme of this paper.

The Constitution of India ensures socio-economic attainments and empowerment of the ST's through several Articles, but the Constitutional provisions are not yet translated into full reality mainly because of the absence of a clear cut national policy for tribal development and the short comings and inadequacies occurred while practicing the widely accepted integration approach for tribal development.

An Appraisal on 'Development' and 'Tribal Development' Strategies

A number of definitions are in place for the topic 'development' in accordance with the discipline and the perspective of the person who put the definition. In layman terms development is a 'change in the positive or progressive direction'. However, the notions on development have gone through drastic changes over years. Oommen (2004:9-20) identifies three major perspectives in the path of development, viz., Mainstream Perspective on Development (MPD), Alternative Perspective on Development (APD), and Post-Development Perspective (PDP). MPD emerges first along with colonization and its civilizing mission. It conceptualizes development as a homogenous process towards modernization and sees growth as positively related to equality. However, in practice inequality has been increased out of the so called development and growth. The goal of APD is similar to that of MPD but it emphasize participatory and people oriented means to achieve the goal. It concentrates on three spheres, viz., agents (NGOs), methodology (participatory, self-reliant, and indigenous) and objectives (geared to basic needs). PDP totally rejects the notion of development as advocated by MPD and APD. In this perspective development is neither the felt need of the deprived people nor their

natural aspiration. Poverty is a culturally and historically variable notion and is first 'invented' and then prescribes development to eradicate it.

A major objective that comes under 'tribal development' is to bring the tribal people as part and parcel of the so called 'society at large'. The post-independence approach to tribal development is in favor of integration^{vi} as it brings the tribal people together with the main stream without compromising the uniqueness of their respective cultural identities. According Chaudari (2004) , the Integration approach, which lies on the Tribal *Panchasheel* of Jawaharlal Nehru implied three goals; (a) culture specific and need based development programmes for the tribal, (b) participation of people in both planning and implementation, and (c) empowerment leading to the formation of self-identity and self-esteem. However, most of the time, others have imposed their will on the tribal, in the name of 'tribal development'.

Vaid (2004:4) defines tribal development, with special focus on the economic development, as "change in desired direction within stipulated time". In this paper tribal development means any action that facilitates better participation of tribal people in their own society as well as in the society at large. The above mentioned discussions with regard to the concept of development in general, and to the tribal development in particular, clearly state that the notion of the so called 'development' and the involvement of the tribal communities to the process of 'development', are issues to be addressed in detail.

Contemporary Tribal Scenario in Kerala

Traditionally, a vast majority of the tribal people of the State is residents of the hilly forest terrains along the Western Ghats mountain ranges of the State, where many amongst them practiced shifting cultivation, constructed houses by means of raw materials such as bamboo, grass, wooden poles, leaves etc., that are available in the local environment, and evolved their own rituals, belief systems, and social control mechanisms. All these reveal that the tribal people of the State have been leading a more or less 'independent and self-sufficient life'. However, over the past few decades most of their age-old means of livelihood were alienated by the so called society at large and, subsequently, many among the tribal people were compelled to settle in the dense forest areas of various National Parks and Wild Life Sanctuaries. Any how a vast majority of the tribal people were not in a position to move into the interior forest terrains or to protect their traditional settlements out of encroachment of the migrant people.

A number of 'development schemes and programs' have been implemented after independence by the Center and State Governments for the overall well-being of the tribal people in line with the policy of 'integration' but in the process of development, many communities such as Paniyan are compelled to live a 'socially detached life' from

the rest of the society in the rural areas (Case I), while some others are following an 'isolated' and 'self-sufficient' life in the interior forest terrains (Case II). There are certain other tribal communities who are more or less pursuing an 'isolated' and 'dependent' life in the interior forest areas (Case III). Majority hamlets of some communities are more or less become 'assimilated'^{vii} into the mainstream society (Case IV). However, there are certain tribal communities who are leading a life that is very much an integral part of the society (Case V), The above categorization is made based on the status of a majority of the hamlets of the communities even though traces of the above mentioned four cases can be seen within a community itself. The above mentioned features of tribal life show that life in many tribal hamlets is not moving in the right direction.

Case -I - Isolated' Life within the Rural Areas

The Paniyan community is the numerically dominant^{viii} Scheduled Tribe (ST) community^{ix} in Kerala and their major concentration is in the Wayanad^x district, (74.2 %). The community is one of the earliest inhabitants in the Wayanad region along with the other prominent Scheduled Tribe communities of the district such as Adiyar, Kattunayakan, Kurichan/Kurichiyan, Kuruman, Vetta Kuruman, Wayanadan Kadar, Thachanadan Moopan and Karimpalan, (Menon; 1980:50-51). The Paniyans were leading an independent life in the forests and they were expert hunters and shifting cultivators prior to the arrival of the migrants to the district, (GOI, 1961: 31; Luiz, 1962: 218). Later the land owners, who mostly belong to the migrant population, recruited them as 'slave' or 'bonded labourers', especially at the annual festival of Valliyoorkavu Temple near Mananthavady during the month of March and the practice was known by the name '*kundelpani*'^{xi}. Even now many of the members of the community have been working under a particular family for generations.

Nowadays, the members of the community are reduced to the status of landless agricultural labourers and are toiling hard to earn a livelihood. They were not able to carry out agricultural operations by their own owing to the lack of land under their custody. Their representation at the government sector or in any other skilled jobs is abysmal. At present, majority of the members of the community are living in the so called congested 'colonies' at the periphery of the villages, without any durable social ties with the members of the other communities. All these show that the community is now leading a more or less isolated life while living amidst the so called 'mainstream people'.

Case-2- 'Isolated' and 'Self-sufficient' Life within the Dense Forest Areas

The Muthuvan community in Kerala is residents in Idukki, Ernakulam and Thrissur districts and their population is 12305 with 6273 males and 6032 females. Many of their hamlets are in the interior forest areas. Their population is mainly concentrated in

Mankulam, Marayoor, Adimali, Kanthaloor, and Edamalakudi^{xii}, Grama Panchayaths in Idukki district and Kuttampuzha Grama Panchayath in Ernakulam district. Life in *kudi*^{xiii}, which is situated in interior forest areas is quite distinct from those in rural. The former category retains many features of their 'age-old' life while the later one is devoid of the same.

Shifting cultivation is the major source of livelihood in *kudis* situated within the interior forest areas, where a wide variety of millets such as thina (Italian Millet), *varagu*, *chama* rice, maize (Sorghum), ragi (Little Millet), and vegetables such as tomato, sweet potato, carrot, etc., are cultivated for consumption. They cultivate only food crops in a single field in such a manner that one or the other crop gives food grains or edible leaves over a major part of the year. All the agricultural activities are undertaken by the members of a *kudi* themselves. Agricultural land in those *kudis*, which practice shifting cultivation, is not clearly demarcated among the families. However, a common consensus is there between the families pertaining to the ownership of the crops in a field. All these show that there is no clear cut concept of individual family property amongst the members of a *kudi*, which is situated in the interior forest areas. Hardly, the people of a *kudi* buy any food items for consumption from the shops in markets. Likewise, the people seldom sell their yield out of shifting cultivation to others for monetary benefits instead they offer food grains and vegetables to those members of the community, who are in need of it.

Traditionally, Muthuvans built houses by using bamboo, grass, wooden branches, and soil that are readily available in the locality. Large rectangular shaped constructions made out of grass, and bamboo is usually raised around the house to protect the mud wall of it from the frequent rains and winds. All the manual activities of a *kudi*, such as building of house, agricultural activities, erecting of fences to protect the crops from the wild animals, culinary preparations on festive occasions and rituals, etc., are carried out by the members of a *kudi*. The community also evolved certain social institutions such as *savadie*^{xiv} to maintain the wee feeling, and attachment amongst the members of the community cutting across age, and family affiliations. *Savadie* is a large house for the stay of children above the age of ten, unmarried youths and aged people of a *kudi*. Males and females have separate *savadie*. Children and youths in a *savadi* has a leader, *elanthari*, who controls them. Day to day activities of a *kudi* are managed and controlled by the headmen, *kani* and *thalaivar*. Traditionally, members of Muthuvan community see themselves as superior to all others and they used to keep a 'distance' from 'others' to keep their so called 'superiority'. All the above mentioned aspects shows that the Muthuvans in interior forest hamlets are 'independent' to a great extend even though they are leading a life that is more or less cut off from the so called 'main stream society'.

Case- 3, ‘Isolated’ and ‘Dependent’ Life within the Dense Forest Areas

The Cholanaickan community inhabits in the Karulayi and Chungathara I Range of the Nilambur forest in the Malappuram district. They have their dialect for communication, which is a mixture of Kannada, Malayalam and Tamil. Most of the settlements of the community are distributed on the banks of the Karimpuzha and its tributaries, which flows through the forest area. They are leading a semi-nomadic life. Only three out of the fourteen settlements of the community are accessible by road. All the other settlements requires half an hour to three hours walk within the dense forest having wild animals from the mud road in the forest. The community is very much part of the natural environment. Collecting Non Wood Forest Products (NWFP) is their main livelihood activity. At present, the Scheduled Tribe Development Department of the State has been distributing cooked as well as raw food materials for the consumption of the community. Many among the community occasionally visit the nearby market place at Karulayi for purchasing essential items. The visual medias and the mobile phones under their custody provide them ample opportunities to know the mainstream day to day life as well as to appraise their own life in that background. Their language and other cultural aspects remain to be intact as they lead an isolated life, away from the mainstream population, in the interior forest areas.

Case -4, Majority of the Hamlets as ‘Assimilated’

The Urali community, inhabit at the western slopes of the high ranges of Idukki district, practiced shifting cultivation in the dense forest areas. Later many of them were uprooted from their age-old habitats owing to the construction of various hydroelectric projects in the District. Nowadays, they are more or less adapted to the mainstream way of life even though some of their hamlets are in the remote areas and also at the fringe areas of the forest. The process of adaption is more of an assimilatory in nature than integrative as the younger generation of the community is not exposed to many of their cultural practices. The most significant amongst them is their dialect, which has a combination of the features of Tamil and Malayalam languages

Case 5, Community that Live as an Integral Part of the Society

Kurumbar^{xv} is one among the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) community of the State and they occupy second in population amongst the five PVTG communities of the State. They are usually referred as ‘Palu Kurumba’ so as to distinguish them from the ‘Alu Kurumba’ of the Nilgiri area of Tamil Nadu State. Their total population is 2251^{xvi}, and is mostly living in Reserve and Vested Forest areas.

‘*Panjakad Vellama*’, a mode of shifting cultivation, is the major economic activity of the Kurumbar. *Manookaran* is the soil and agricultural expert of the community and he supervises the agricultural operations in a hamlet. Besides,

Manookaran, a Moopan for looking after the entire affairs of a hamlet, and *Kuruthala* and *Bhandari* for assisting them in discharging their roles are the major functionaries of a hamlet. Usually, they belong to different *kurumbkal* (clans). Only food crops such as maize (Sorghum), ragi (Little Millet), and *Thina* (Italian Millet), are cultivated and the seeds are sown immediately after getting rain. The households of a hamlet are erected around a plane open space, where all the members of a hamlet sit together by evening, after the days agricultural work, and spent the evening by singing and dancing. Both men and women are actively participated in the evening get-together. *Kuzhal*, *parai*, *davil*, *dampetta*, and *tala* are the musical instruments used along with the performance of songs and dance. In the light of the above features it can be assumed that the Kurumbar society enjoyed a high degree of self-sufficiency and distinct identity. In spite of being a small PVTG community Kurumbar is very much living as part and parcel of the society at large. The community is also successful in maintaining many features of their traditional life even though participating in the life of the society at large. They do cash crop cultivation along with the traditional food crop cultivation. They have representations in Government service even though small while living in a little accessible hamlets and practicing traditional modes of living to a great extent. Many of the development projects have failed to produce the desired and long lasting behavioral changes in the tribal societies by not addressing the real needs of the tribal peoples. Apprising the tribal development issues of the State of Kerala, Chathukulam and John, (2006:197) comments that, "The tribes remain showpieces for development planners and a source of easy money for corrupt officials".

Trajectory of Tribal Life in Non-Scheduled Areas

Nowadays, the policies and interactions with the people of the 'main stream society' changed the age-old way of life of the tribal societies in non-Scheduled Areas to a great extent. Communitarian lives in majority of hamlets of many tribal communities have been lost. Individuals and families in many tribal hamlets are now leading their own 'distinct life' by taking decisions independently without bothering the community's customary laws and practices. Nowadays they face many issues and their problems vary from the problem of land alienation, bonded labour, problems of health and nutrition, educational backwardness, depopulation, loss of cultural traits including dialect to the problem of identity, owing to one or the other reasons. All these reduced their mode of living and self-esteem to a lower level and make the contemporary living surroundings of the tribal people problematic.

Land Alienation and Social Isolation

Around a century back most of the tribal communities were leading an independent life in the forests and they were expert hunters and shifting cultivators prior to the arrival of the other population to their habitation areas. Within a short period of time the non-tribal

population became emerged as owners of land in the tribal areas, and recruited many members of the tribal population as ‘bonded labourers for their agricultural operations. Nowadays, many members of most of the tribal communities are reduced to the status of landless agricultural labourers and are toiling hard to earn a livelihood. Many tribal people were not able to carry out agricultural operations by their own owing to the lack of land under their custody. Their representation at the government sector or in any other skilled jobs is abysmal. At present, majority of the members of many tribal communities are living in the so called congested ‘colonies’ at the periphery of the villages, without any durable social ties with the members of the other communities.

Language, Oral Literature, and Art Forms

Traditionally, almost all the tribal communities in non-Schedule Areas have their own distinct language but nowadays many tribal languages are identified as a corrupt dialect of a prominent language with some features of some other prominent languages even though they possess the characteristic features of a unique language. For instance the Paniyan tribal language in Kerala is often described as having a “very corrupt dialect of Malayalam with an admixture of Tamil and Tulu words and phrases ...” (Luiz, 1962: 218). The members of the tribal communities have a deep affection to their language and it acts as a cultural and identity mark of the communities. Usually, the tribal people speak among themselves in their language. However, at the same time many amongst the tribal communities face communication difficulties when they have to mingle with outsiders in the language of the ‘mainstream’. The prevalence of a particular language among the tribal communities is often alleged to pose some impediments in the learning process, especially at the primary level since the text book language and the medium of instruction is in the dominant language of the State and the tribal children in their early childhood do not have familiarity with it. Along with this, most of the teaching faculties of the schools including those in Model Residential Schools (MRS), run by the State and other educational institutions have no acquaintance with any of the tribal language. In fact language never pose a threat in bringing the tribal people as part of mainstream rather it act as an essential component for maintaining their identity, heritage, and cultural traits.

All the tribal communities in non-Scheduled Areas have a rich tradition of oral literature and art forms. Both oral literature and traditional art forms need an uninterrupted follow of traditional life for continuity and perpetuation through generations. But unfortunately nowadays only a few hamlets of many tribal communities retain their traditional life to a great extent. As a result natural settings for the protection and promotion of the oral literature and art forms are fast disappearing and there requires certain pro-active steps for their continued existence.

Majority of the hamlets of much tribal population in non-Scheduled Areas earn a living out of wage labour even though NWFP collection, shifting cultivation and settled

cultivation are also means of subsistence. Traditionally, the tribal people cultivate only food crops and are used only for consumption. Nowadays, only a few hamlets of many tribal communities practice shifting cultivation as a main source of livelihood. Goulet^{xvii} (1971) identifies three basic components in the 'development' of the tribal communities, viz., *life sustenance, self-esteem and freedom*. Life sustenance refers to the accessibility to basic needs such as food, housing, clothing, health and minimal education. Self-esteem means self-respect and independence. The feeling that one has some role in power-sharing and decisions making process boosts his/her self-esteem. Freedom rests on freedom from three evils – want, ignorance and poverty and misery. One is free if he/she can choose, and determine his/her own destiny. In the light of the above aspects it is evident that nowadays the life of the tribal communities is not moving in the right direction. What the need of the hour is to treat tribal world "as perpetually in dynamism rather than a closed, stable, and frozen entity, and special schemes and laws are devised for safeguarding its interests" (Srivastava, 2008).

Conclusion

At present the tribal people 'themselves are caught between the temptation of the quick short-term high-tech fix and the mid-to long-term option which builds in local knowledge', (Ellen, 2007:30). Actually, they have an 'eco-culture' where environmental phenomenon have a determining role but now they are compelled to live in an industrialized culture with the memories of the natural environment upon which the 'eco-culture' is developed, (Dirar, 2007:30-31). Nowadays the 'small voices' of the tribal people is more often 'drowned in the noise of statist commands'. The ideas of the elite strata of the society that defined the nourished 'statism'^{xviii}, which leaves 'small' tribal societies little choice about 'their own relation to the past', is not supportive for the continued existence of the 'tribal life', where the cultural diversity and colorfulness of human life rests.

Actually, the world views and notions of the tribal people are entirely distinct from those of the 'other people' and many a time in conflict with each other, (Pradeep, 2016:52-57). Nowadays, the so called 'mainstream discourses' are also powerful in controlling and deciding the life of the small societies such as tribal communities as well. In general, at present, innovations in information and communication (ICT) technologies such as What's app, You tube, Face Book, etc., and their increased use among other things has brought the life of the 'elite main stream' of the society to the ethnic communities such as tribal societies and out of their influence many amongst the tribal people has seen the life of the 'elite main stream' as desirable and like to became part of it. This in turn resulted in the vanishing of many defining features of the life of the tribal people, which have great relevance even nowadays. It also results in the alienation of many traditional means of livelihood of the tribal people of the country. Thus, such induced changes that supports of the equal participation of the tribal people in their own

society and in the society at large are beneficial for the tribal societies of the country. For that culture inclusive / specific 'development' is the need of the hour for materializing the integration of the tribal people with the society at large in its true sense. To achieve that goal an overarching National Policy for Tribal Development is needed.

References

- Chathukulam, Jose and John, M.S. 2006. "Issues in Tribal Development: The Recent Experience of Kerala". In Govinda Chandra Rtha. Tribal Development in India. New Delhi. Sage Publications.
- Ellen, Roy. 2007. "The Relevance of IEK (Indigenous Environmental Knowledge) Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow", in 'Traditional Knowledge in Contemporary Societies' Kamal K Misra (Ed.). New Delhi. Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal & Pratibha Prakashan.
- G O I 1961. "*Paniyans of Kerala*". In Census of India 1961. New Delhi. Office of the Registrar General.
- Guha, Ranajith. 1997. 'The Small Voice of History'. In Shahid Amin & Dipesh Chakrabarty. (Ed). *Subaltern Studies IX, Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Oxford India Paperbacks: Calcutta: 1-1
- Luiz, A.A.D 1962. "*Tribes of Kerala*". New Delhi. Bharathiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh.
- Majumdar, P.K. 2010. "Fundamentals of Demography". Rawat Publications. Jaipur.
- Oommen, T.K 2004. "*Development Discourse*". New Delhi. Regency Publications.
- Pradeep, Kumar K S 2016. "*Marunna Mannu Sankalppam: Muthuvan Gotra Janathayilude*" (Malayalam) (Changing Perspectives on Soil: In the Context of the Muthuvan Tribal Community). In Seethal V.S (Ed.). '*Mannakam, Mannum Samskaravum*' (Malayalam) (*Mannakam*, Soil and Culture)
- Srivastava, Vinay Kumar. 2008. "Concept of 'Tribe' in the Draft National Tribal Policy". Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. 43. Issue No. 50.
- Vaid, Kumar, Naresh. 1975. "Who Cares for Tribal Development". New Delhi. Mittal Publications.