

Persisting Exclusion? Contextualizing the Tribal Welfare Policies of Kerala State

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Abstract

This article provides a critical assessment of the tribal development policy of the Kerala government over the past decade. Commencing with the recent controversy surrounding the portrayal of adivasis as a 'human zoo' during the Keraleeyam event in November, 2023, this paper delves into the transformations in the state's approach, particularly its shift towards a 'right-based approach' in the late nineties. The discussion encompasses land-related issues, the state's stance concerning adivasis during the pandemic, and, notably, the prevalent 'dropout syndrome.' The paper concludes by contending that the current state perspective appears to perceive tribal issues primarily as residential challenges rather than a confluence of land and livelihood difficulties.

Keywords: Tribal welfare, right based approach, dropout syndrome, Land alienation

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Introduction

The depiction of Adivasis in *Keraleeyam*,¹ a week-long event organized by the Kerala government from November 1-7, 2023, in Thiruvananthapuram, has sparked intense criticism from the media, human rights activists, and scholars. The state folklore academy, operating under the banner of *Adimam*, presented the art and livelihood of Adivasis in the form of what some have described as a “human zoo”. While the ruling regime contends that this exhibition is an effort to showcase the culture and identity of marginalized communities in the state, but critics question why this representation does not unfold in terms of equality and rights. They argue that it exposes a mindset

¹ A state government organized programme aims to present Kerala's progress, achievements and cultural heritage to the world with seminars, activities, exhibitions, fairs, festivals, and shows in more than forty venues. More details, See: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/human-zoo-tag-on-tribal-museum-at-keraleeyam-festival-in-thiruvananthapuram/cid/1978614>

rooted in ruling and upper-class/caste perspectives, perpetuating the notion that the disadvantaged lack the ability to represent themselves and possess an identity independent of the guardianship of the ruling and upper class. Rather than allowing Adivasis to present themselves in the contemporary world, particularly in the context of developmental initiatives, the state portrayal reinforces a narrative of them being 'more backward and underdeveloped.' Few argue that "the Marxists (ideology of the incumbent) have failed to read Ambedkar's ideals on 'self-reliance'. The fact that has been happening in the Adivasi space in Kerala over the past ten years is not known to the outside world. The inhuman portrayal of the community at the said event did not come out of the blue, rather it is the end result of the policies and perspectives followed by the state on the well-being of the adivasi communities from the very inception of adivasi welfare policies. Violations and manipulation of rights were evident in the policy framework and directions Investigating the day to day life in Adivasi world and the impact of newly designed policy regimes will have a serious impact on the very existence of the different adivasi communities in the state (Prakash P K, 2003, George,2023).

The term 'social welfare' is always dear and favorable to governments, but it is also a matter that is implemented based on their conveniences. India, as a nation, is no exception in this regard. Increasing participation of the poor and middle class in the electoral process forced the political class to think of welfare policies (Tillin,2015). The most significant impact of this is experienced by the indigenous communities with diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. Therefore, while on the one hand, the government implements extensive budget provisions, claiming to address their needs, on the other hand, the condition of these societies often worsens, leading to increased poverty and deteriorating living conditions. In the context of a federal system, the concerns regarding social welfare in India are largely seen in the framework of the accountability of states. It is not only possible but imperative for a state to address and consider the complexities of caste, religion, and class inequalities, as well as the nuances of social diversity, in its comprehensive analysis. However, the real challenge lies not only in recognizing these profound differentiations but also in incorporating a practical ethical principle, such as inclusive development, into the developmental ideology. Efforts to develop and implement welfare projects that are undertaken by various states often involve a diversity of approaches and the determination of development indices. Attempts have been made to align these initiatives with the policies of the central government, at least up to a certain limit, to achieve a semblance of consistency. The truth is that the main victims of this disparity are often the marginalized and vulnerable sections, particularly the indigenous communities, who are the primary stakeholders in this matter.

Data source and Methodology

This paper covers both qualitative and quantitative data sources. The qualitative data include books, articles, newspaper reports and interviews. Whereas the quantitative data include state periodical economic surveys, laws, orders and circulars. Overall, the methodology is exploratory and analytical.

The Kerala tribal Story So Far

The exclusion of adivasis from the Kerala model development has been extensively discussed in academia (Kurien, 1995, Parayil,1996,). However, its current status and new trajectories of exclusions has not been problematised in its entirety, especially, since last one decade. As the state cherishes upon its welfare commitments and policies aimed at the mobility of the communities, at ground level, the vulnerability and disadvantages increases. (Prakash,2002) Issues regarding land and entitlements are still undressed. Let's look at a matter closely related to land, which holds great significance. The land identified for distribution related to land reforms was only a mere 1.35 lakh acres. As of 1996, only 47 percent had been distributed. Among this, 43 percent went to the Scheduled Castes and 5 percent to the Scheduled Tribes. (Mohanty,2001). According to the Kerala Human Development Report of 2006, the average landholding per household for the Scheduled Tribes (ST) category was 71 cents, and by 2016, it had decreased to 66 cents, as revealed by a study conducted by Cochin university.² The reasons for this are population growth, land degradation and deforestation.

² On 10 January 2016, The Hindu reported the details of this study. The study also pointed out the average landholding of a Kerala tribal family has steadily plummeted from 2.77 acres to 1.30 acres to 0.66 acres over just the last three generations. The

Efforts to address such issues are not seen to be effective in practice. When auditing details released annually by the State Accountant General and the government's economic surveys related to tribal development projects, no substantial corrections or adjustments seem to be made in consonance with the report and public criticism. The mismanagement of tribal development funds often find space in Malayalam media. However, there are no direct initiatives by the government to address such issues. Frequently, the administration of welfare programs is under the control of bureaucratic structures, and it typically follows a top-down approach in the policy implementation. When it was implemented by a timorous and slothful bureaucracy it will be a detriment to society than a benefit. In this context, it is imperative to conduct a review of the tribal welfare programs implemented by the Kerala state over the past ten years. After that, it remains to be seen whether the government's pursuit of 'rights-based policies'³ has been effective in actively empowering or, along with the state government taking the lead, how successful the 'scheme-oriented' policies have been in addressing the socio-economic conditions of the tribal population.

Right-Based Policies and Adivasis

The state resumed its welfare commitments in 2004 after a prolonged hiatus that had extended since the 1990s. The new rights have been promised; the realization to rights to employment, through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005; rights food security and basic education; recognition of the rights to land and other resources of the people long lived in India's forests (Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) and rights to information and the redressal of governance over the delivery of public resources (Harris, 2013). The unwavering efforts of civil society, judicial interventions, and dedicated political leadership were instrumental in achieving this. These policies included a crucial provision for legal protection. However, the well-intentioned FRA failed to make an impact in the specific historical and legal environment of the region (Munster and Vishnudas, 2012). The state did not implement the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Area Act, 1996 (PESA). This scenario raises some critical questions. Why does the tribal development agenda become anti-democratic? Why is it not possible to bring tribal communities out of their backwardness through these projects?

Land Issues and Government Approaches

The struggle of the indigenous people for land in Kerala is widely discussed in the public domain, and numerous laws have been formulated in this regard. However, Kerala is one state where, despite the creation of numerous laws, effective implementation is still a challenge (Raman and Bijoy, 2003). The neglect of governments and the lack of political will have intensified the issues. The most pressing concern among these is the acute land issue, which has evolved into a complex problem over the past decade (Sreerekha, 2012, Sreerekha, 2010). The commitment to provide land to all landless tribals, beyond which comprehensive projects or financial allocations specifically for this purpose are not implemented here. It remains a highly challenging issue, and there is a lack of significant efforts in each budget to address this. All of them are not fully implemented. The expenditure associated with the projects related to land issues since 2015 is a matter of concern. The calculations on how much has been spent are alarming. Acts such as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006, the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996, and the Rehabilitation and Resettlement of Displaced Persons Act are projects that are linked to land and are seen in both the budget and subsequently in financial surveys.

research underscores the gravity of the situation as land holds paramount importance in the overall well-being of tribal communities. Land ownership plays a pivotal role in determining their opportunities for livelihood, employment, and education, ultimately shaping their quality of life. The swift rate of land alienation highlights tribal communities as the most susceptible social groups in the state. The study, conducted over an eight-year period concluding in December 2014, reveals that displacement and employment loss have kept the adivasis at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy.

³ RBAs underscore the pivotal role of power dynamics and advocate for fundamental principles such as participation, accountability, and non-discrimination. They highlight the duty of duty-bearers to uphold human rights and aim to empower rights-holders in asserting their entitlements (Peter, 2004).

An expenditure of one crore was allocated to implement the Restoration of Alienated Tribal Land Act of 1999. But as of 2015 only Rs. 9.1 lakh has been spent on this. In 2015, around Rs.50 lakhs were allotted in this case but only Rs. 25,000 utilized. In 2017 Rs. Rs.15000 spent against the allotment of Rs. 50 lakh. In 2019-20, an allocation of 10 lakhs was made, and the actual expenditure was limited to Rs. 140,000 (Economic Survey, 2015-2021). To implement the Forest Rights Act, from 2015 to 2017, an annual allocation of one crore rupees was made, and the expenditures incurred were approximately 99.10 lakhs, 93.23 lakhs, and 6.71 lakhs respectively. The government's reluctance to implement the Forest Rights Act is evident in this. In 2015-16, a budget of one crore was allocated to facilitate the organization of FRA Grama Sabhas, locally known as *oorukoottam*, and for related stationery needs, with an expenditure of 30 lakhs. In 2016-17, out of the sanctioned amount of 50 lakhs, 36 lakhs were spent. From 2018 to 2021, when the average allocation was above 70 lakhs, the expenditure until 2020 was distributed as follows: 52.2 percent, 26.5 percent, 11.4 percent respectively. In 2018-19, out of the allocated six crore for the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), only 1.48 million was spent. In 2019-20, out of the allocated five crore, only 30 lakh was spent. PVTGs are the one who experienced the most challenges in the state as a result of Covid 19.

The question of Rehabilitation

The rehabilitation and resettlement of financially disadvantaged tribal communities, involving expenditures related to land, is another area closely associated with land (Kalathunkal, 2019). In this project, which involves slightly higher expenditure compared to the various projects mentioned above, there has been no significant increase in expenses since 2016. The expenditure incurred has been only seven to eight percent of the approved fund both in 2017-18 and 2019-20. The detailed information about the projects implemented by the government to make available the right to self-determination along with the fundamental right to land, the financial loss occurring due to these projects, and the decrease in the financial expenditure each fiscal year are presented above. The economic impact is minimal for each fiscal year, and it is not evident that such projects are effectively implemented for the benefit of tribal communities.

Convoluting Land Question

The detailed information needed to assess the land distribution related to various land projects is not available. Although the financial survey provides details on the land acquired and the expenditure incurred in various districts until September in 2019, specific information about the beneficiaries who are yet to receive land is not visible. According to the economic survey of 2020, between 2015 and 2019, a total of 3664 acres of land was distributed to 4622 beneficiaries. During this period, the average land received by each beneficiary is approximately 77 cents. However, according to the calculations of the Scheduled Tribe Department for the year 2013, there are 5158 tribal families in Kerala are landless (Report on Socio-Economic Status of Scheduled Tribe, 2013) However, it is not clear here whether these calculations are individual or family-based in terms of economic survey. If we consider it on a family basis, within the past five years, 71 percent of impoverished tribal families in Kerala have acquired land. However, there are no other details available to confirm this. Meanwhile, illegal sale of protected tribal lands continues unhindered in the state (News Minute, 1 July 2022). The distribution of what type of land is not clear in this.

State, Pandemic and Adivasis

The state government's response of Covid-19 in the public sphere was commendable and earned appreciation across the globe (Chathukulam and Tharamangalam, 2021, Choolayil and Putran, 2021). How has the state helped the tribal communities to cope up with such situations needs a rethinking. Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) are the most susceptible among the adivasis in the country, and Kerala is home to five communities: *Kadar*, *Kurumbar*, *Kattunaykar*, *Cholanaiakar*, and *Koraga*. Even now, they continue to reside in forest areas and depend on the forest for their livelihood. In addition to building houses for them within the forest, there appears to be a lack of proactive government initiatives aimed at ensuring their sustainable livelihood (Thadathil, 2017). At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the central government convened a meeting of the secretaries of states in order to allocate additional funds for various projects aimed at supporting the PVTGs. However, states like Kerala

demanding the age-old unstable projects like mobile ice cream units and training in photocopy centers (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020). The state demanded Rs. 5 crore for the project and received only one crore. While the state demanded Rs. 5 crore for constructing the community centers but received only mere Rs.50 lakh. On the other hand other states demanded essential commodities like mobile phones and mobile towers for tribal studies, special funds for *Ekalanya* schools and some states even demanded funds for FRA implementation.

“The Dropout Syndrome”

In 2020, Kerala heard the news that a significant number of tribal children are dropping out of higher secondary education. (Konikkara, 2020). In the same year, Adi Shakti Summer School, a collective of indigenous students in the state, has revealed some surprising information about the tribal students⁴. As per the information, during the academic year 2019-20, comprising the districts of Idukki, Palakkad, Malappuram, Wayanad, and Kasaragod, a total of 5,424 individuals applied for admission to higher secondary education, but only 4,020 were granted admission. Approximately 1,404 individuals did not secure admission. Wayanad district leads in this issue. In 2020, around 2,009 students were eligible for admission to higher secondary education but the available seats were limited to just 529. The government, taking note of the situation, issued a new directive in October, allowing 424 students deemed 'eligible' in Wayanad district to be admitted. Eligibility in this context refers to the timely submission of online applications within the specified timeframe. In case a student with valid eligibility fails, they will not be able to secure admission. Due to the lack of internet facilities and technological resources in settlement areas, and as a prerequisite for the final date, it is not possible for tribal students to upload all certificates and submit applications. This further exacerbates the challenges faced by tribal students in various educational domains where government or alternative mechanisms are not available. When the COVID lockdown restricts mobility, the exclusion of these individuals becomes complete. The government's online admission procedures need to adapt effectively to address the social and economic challenges faced by tribal students during these times.

Conclusions

It is widely recognized that the government's involvement in addressing adivasi developmental issues has become more proactive compared to the past. However, the current policies are struggling to effectively tackle the evolving challenges arising from the adivasi socio-economic milieu. Mere constructing homes, providing cooked-food (Ameerundheen, 2018) and providing financial assistance for school education cannot resolve the adivasi question. It is pertinent to address the foundational issues such as land rights and protection against the overwhelming power of the authorities, helping them in rebuilding the economic infrastructure, and initiating them into the realms of modern educational disciplines are essential. However, there remains skepticism regarding their capability to directly engage with ongoing policies and projects. The potential for them to participate in an inclusive initiative, recognizing their own capabilities as advocated in Nehruvian Panchsheel principles, seems to be the only way forward for ensuring inclusion. Furthermore, it is imperative to evaluate the state's perspective not just in terms of how much money has been spent for them but rather in how effectively each society has achieved social progress through the various schemes and policies implemented. Currently, the state seems to view the tribal issues more of a residential problem not a combination of land livelihood issues. It is crucial to address these issues directly, rather than treating them as leftover challenges. In this context, initiatives that directly address the underlying structural problems, such as land rights and protection against excessive state power, and help in rebuilding economic infrastructure and introducing modern educational disciplines to the tribal communities, are essential. However, there remains skepticism regarding the state's capacity to directly engage with ongoing tribal policies and projects. The potential for the state policy to participate in an inclusive initiative, recognizing communities socio-economic and locational milieu, as advocated in Nehruvian Panchsheel principles, seems to be the only way forward for ensuring stability. Moreover, attempts are being made to address the issues that arise as a result of spending money on building houses, providing cooked food through settlement programs, or imparting education to children up to

⁴ RTI, Directorate of Public Education, Trivandrum, RTI No. ICT CELL 201100030/DGE-HSE/2020, Dated. 02/12/2020.

a certain age. However, it is crucial to note that the present approach of the state towards tribal issues often falls short of addressing the complex and interrelated problems faced by these communities. Finally, refining these approaches and making them more inclusive and sensitive to the unique needs and challenges of the tribal communities is essential. The success of these initiatives lies not just in the amount of money spent but in how effectively they bring about positive social change and empower tribal societies. If not done this way, as visualised in the *Keraleeyam* event, the tribal communities may be reduced to mere objects in the development narrative, functioning solely as display items.

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