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From Nomadism to Precarious Living: Destitution and Socio-Economic Exclusion of Semi-Nomadic Tribal Communities in Kerala

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Abstract

This paper tries to analyse the contemporary socio-economic milieu of Malai Pandāram community in Kerala by evaluating the level of entitlements each household availed from the state. Beginning with the historical account of the community this paper problematises the state-sponsored changes in their settlement pattern—from non-settled to settled—and its impact on the community. The imposition of a settled life without fulfilling the subsidiary needs and the attempts made by the government to induce the community to take up permanent agriculture have not only created a number of serious problems but also storm-tossed their livelihood options and ultimately lowered their living standards. Though the attempt to resettle other hill-tribes—mostly Mala Arayan and Kanikar—who traditionally practiced shifting agriculture have been found to be successful but the story of Malai Pandāram proved it wrong. The situation reveals the fact that the resettlement of such communities needs a fresh socio-economic imagination and that should be in par with their existing economy and livelihood. The paper also tries to demystify the popular perception that Malai Pandāram is ‘idle, shy and retiring’ by foregrounding their interaction with outside world in contemporary Kerala through education and other means.

Keywords: nomadism, social exclusion, tribal marginality, hunter-gatherers

Introduction

Being at the bottom of socio-economic ladder tribal communities in India are the groups that have been excluded disproportionately in relation to other social groups. As a socially disadvantaged ethnic minority they are largely deprived of constitutional equality that often

glosses over the prevailing societal inequalities which they are subjected of since ages (Pandalay, 1920; Prakash,2002; Raman and Bijoy,2003). In this scenario they are unable to participate and enjoy the substantive benefits of citizenship and become powerless in effectively articulating their demand for rights and crucial entitlements like employment, education, housing and other social opportunities. Among them there are some communities who were traditionally nomads/non-settled and followed hunting and gathering lifestyle but the modern state termed them as ‘uncivilized and idle’ and did not heed much attention to their destitute and considered as any other backward communities and designed welfare programmes in line with the popular perception, which was not suitable for their socio-cultural premises (Rammohan, 2000). As a result, they are socially excluded. Malai Pandāram tribal community in Kerala is one among them. Being a hunter gather community they are deprived of any form of citizenship rights and entitlements, which was culminated into their exclusion even from their peer groups. Therefore, it is imperative to problematise the community’s backwardness and extent of exclusion.

The Malai Pandāram, as a community, has been excluded from social, political and economic benefits of the state resulting from a set of complex relationship between the community, state and civil society that prevents the latter from accessing resources and engaging with the government to assert their rights. Most of the areas in and around the Malai Pandāram reside have been declared as reserve forest under various forest Acts and Regulations. The Forest Policy of 1952, the Wild Life Protection Act of 1972 and the Forest Conservation Act of 1980 downgraded the privileges and concessions they were enjoying during the Travancore State Raj. Presently, few families are engaged in selling medicinal herbs and roots to pilgrims heading for Sabarimala, a Hindu pilgrim centre in the region. Before going to the nuances of Malai Pandāram’s socio-economic milieu it is important understand the overall tribal situation in Kerala. As per the census 2011 Kerala has the tribal population of 484,839, which constitutes 1.4 per cent of the state’s population. Among them five are Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Apart from the PVTGs there are few groups among tribals who have hunting and gathering lifestyle. Lack of agricultural land, educational backwardness and traditional cultural traits pushes them downward in the existing socio-economic order. Geographical dispersal of the Malai Pandāram community is scattered between the Periyar Tiger Reserve in Idukki district and Konni Reserve Forest in Kollam district. As per the Census 2011 their population is 2,422 which spread across Idukki, Kottayam, Pathanamthitta and Kollam districts. Among the 286 families covered in the study across four districts, 72 of them were found non-settled, which is 25 per cent of the total population covered in the study. Apart from minor cultivation the community’s livelihood options are based on seasonal collection of minor forest products such as honey, wax and other Non-timber Forest Produces (NTFP).

Their social life and economic relations are loosely linked to that of the non-tribals who lives in and around the areas where they reside. For a Malai Pandāram family (or individual) is associated with a forest tract, but there is little or no assertion of territorial rights or rights over forest products either by individuals or families. The forest is held to

be the common property of the whole community. At the same time the community doesn't possess land and have few material possessions. They pay little emphasis on inheritance. However, they put normative stress on individual autonomy and self-sufficiency, and from their earliest years children are expected to assert independence. They used to move about together in small bands consisting of one to five families (Ward and Conner, 1863).

Children collect forest produce for trade and often spend long periods away from their parents. The Malai Pandāram group has strong ecological bonds. Most of them are dependent on various natural resources and carve out intricate ecological niches for their survival. Unlike many other tribal societies in the region the Malai Pandāram strongly believes in gender equality, individual autonomy, frequent separation of families, absence of hierarchy in and above family level, lack of aggressiveness by avoiding or fleeing from the conflicts and less concern about territoriality. The changes in ecology, environment and constant harassment from the authorities seriously affect their livelihood options. As they are constantly on the move, they do not have any domicile certificates.

Nomadic gathering and hunting in the forest have traditionally provided the basis of their economy, which is supplemented by trading forest products with the farming villagers in the plains, for whom they also, occasionally, do wage labour. One of the ways they earn money is by selling medicinal herbs and roots to pilgrims heading for Sabarimala, a major Hindu pilgrim centre in the region. The forest officers and agents of forest contractors frequently patrol their territories and attempt to cajole, sometimes coerce, and often physically assault them to force them to gather more forest products for them. The group has thus learned their shyness and timidity as a response to those practices, and they still tend to hide from the agents. However, fear perhaps is also at play. Nevertheless, this community is having productive linkages with the village societies, more precisely with the settled agricultural tribals like Mala Arayan and Mannan in the region. A proper genetic mapping of the community has not been done so far. Though the Malai Pandārams present an interesting cultural and social mosaic, they have not been studied in great detail as much as the other groups in the state.

Exclusion and Nomadism of Malai Pandāram

The term nomad, more precisely pastoral, is itself a complex concept and scholars and governments have long struggled to identify and overcome the multiple biases that affect interpretations of nomadism in Indian subcontinent. Although the word 'nomad' no longer conjures up the image of mythic and inscrutable creatures, fiercely independent and existing outside the purview of the civilized world, this romantic notion was not easily vanquished. The popular myth about the nomads that they are barbaric or primitive and do not possess land, titles and permanent settlement in a particular place or area. As per the classification of government of India nomadic tribes are considered as the Daintified Tribe or *Viumukta Jati*. But when it comes to the southern Indian nomadic pastoral tribal communities like Malai Pandāram government considers it like any other

tribal group in the region. Therefore, the community, theoretically, does not come under the title of nomadic communities in the state.

As the governments pursued its goals for the Adivasi development, communities like Malai Pandāram remained as anomalous fourth world citizens—often branded as ‘anti-development in nature’. For Malai Pandāram, “social exclusion manifests itself in the persistent relative lack of an individual's access to functioning compared with other members of society, and we model it as being in a state of deprivation over time. We view deprivation as having two basic determinants: the lack of identification with other members of society, and the aggregate alienation experienced by an agent with respect to those having fewer functioning failures” (Bossert, et.al, 2007). Throughout the study we have listened such manifestations in every utterance like: “they are lazy”, “they don’t know how to live in a society”, “they cannot save”, “they enjoy their idleness”, “they lack the ability to handle wealth and liberty”, etc. These colonial perceptions are explicit and institutionalized in the behaviour of developmental agencies and electoral representatives while they are engaging with Adivasi development. Extend of their nomadism and livelihood patterns and how it is contributing to the exclusion of Malai Pandāram are lavishly discussed in the subsequent sections.

Theoretical Premises

Social exclusion per-se considered as a state experienced by particular groups of people or individual from the authority, which is supposed to provide them constitutional equality, and civil society. Author John Hills et.al emphasize ‘it can be manifested and faced it in many levels, i.e. individual, family, community, institution, local national and global (Hills et.al,2002). From this perspective exclusion can be viewed as a dynamic, multi-dimensional process driven by unequal power relationships. Two things are important here as far as Malai Pandāram community is concerned first, how the society has been led to unequal educational and occupational opportunities, and second, such exclusions actually constitute a denial of equal opportunity for the community in relation to their socio-economic development. We shall take these points up in turn. Lack of educational attainment among the adults tends to depress the collective articulation of the rights and that condemn the next generation to extremely limited livelihood options in their turn. For Malai Pandāram their well-structured indigenous socio-economic features are incompatible with the post-colonial state’s social infrastructure such as houses, education, well-maintained physical environment, crops, agricultural patterns and social organization like group activities. From a developmental perspective, lack of social infrastructure will have an adverse impact on the community’s social capital. Social capital has been defined in various ways. It seems to be commonly understood as the shared understandings, level of trusts, associational membership and formal network of human relationship that facilitate human exchanges, social order and underpin social institutions (Mumford and Richardson, 2002). The denial of constitutional rights and traditional lifestyle are preventing the Malai Pandāram community from achieving its own cultural capital for their upward mobility.

Geographical Setting and Study Area

A line drawn between Peermadu in Idukki district and Achankovil in Kollam district through Sabarimala on the map of Kerala indicates the main axis of Malai Pandāram community. The main region inhabited by this community consists of an area of about 800 square miles in extent, a forested region drained by two major river systems, those of the Pamba and the Achankovil. The high ranges which divide the Kakki watershed from the northern tributaries of the Kallar virtually divide them into two separate populations. Most of the erstwhile studies (Brian, 1982) had largely focused on the southern section. However, the present study addresses both concentrated and disbursed Malai Pandāram population. The study was conducted in the following sub-districts (taluks) of Peermadu of Idukki district; Kanjirappally of Kottayam district; Ranni and Konni of Pathanamthitta district; Pathanapuram of Kollam district. The respondents hail from 9 villages and 16 forest areas. From these districts the study equally addresses both concentrated (settled) and disbursed (non-settled/nomadic) Malai Pandāram population in and around Azhutha, Pamba and Achankovil rivers that touch Periyar Tiger Reserve and Konni Reserve Forest in four districts; Idukki, Kottayam, Pathanamthitta and Kollam.

Methodology and Sample Size

This paper is exploratory in nature and uses primary as well as secondary data. Primary data collected mainly through survey with the help of specifically designed questionnaire schedule and also FGDs were conducted by researchers. The secondary sources include government and non-government agency reports, books, news reports, data from village, taluk/district revenue offices and archival visits. Other documents are published as well as unpublished research reports and academic journal articles etc. Structured interview schedule was used as the quantitative tool. The size of sample is 286 households (40.1 per cent of the total population) from five taluks— Peermadu, Kanjirappally, Ranni, Konni and Pathanapuram—of Idukki, Kottayam, Pathanamthitta and Kollam districts where the Malai Pandāram community live. The sample constituted about 40 per cent of the total Malai Pandāram population in the state. A stratified random sampling technique was adopted to ensure the representation of community from all the districts and forest areas.

The British Policy

British policy in Madras presidency was an extension of the imperial strategy to extract maximum profit, which adversely affected the hill tribes. The British put the forest range in the Presidency under a conservator, excepting the cardamom plantations in Thodupulay (presently Thodupuzha) taluk in southern Travancore (*Madras Presidency Administration report, 1877*). They aimed to bring cardamom under regular cultivation as in the cardamom hills. The latter were under the supervision of the Conservator of the Forests till 1944, when they were transferred to a special superintendent. However, the hill-tribes were excluded from cardamom cultivation. Ironically, the administrative

reports of both Madras Presidency and Travancore-Cochin barely mention the existence of indigenous people since 1877. The state's initiative to address landlessness among the depressed classes came only in 1925-1926 when it assigned 394 acres of *Puthuval* and waste lands to them. Moreover, the British granted concession in regard to the assignment of lands in the names of ex-soldiers who served abroad in the World War I only in 1918 and which were extended for a further period of three years from 21st November, 1925. An area of 3,799.12 acres was reserved for the purpose and another 4.25 acres were registered (*Travancore Administration Report 1925-26*).

As mentioned earlier, these reports, while reiterating the necessity of protecting forest tracts, were silent about the Adivasi livelihood in the forest, but emphasized the need for strengthening forest laws to protect the forests from 'trespassers. In this period the government began to notify reserve forests to effectively control and exploit the forests and its resources. These facts establish the British forest policy was directly aimed at extracting the forest resources at any cost and not only extended zero tolerance towards the hill tribe in terms of extracting forest resources but also denied to mention the very existence of such indigenous population on the hill in their administration reports, especially forest.

Malai Pandāram: From Forest to Forest

Literature related to Malai Pandāram gives us very little information about the community and its origin. The initial record comes from a missionary, and he records the observation of a fellow missionary, the Rev. Henry Baker, who began the 'work of evangelizing and civilizing' the Mala Arayans about 1849 in the forest areas near Mundakayam in present Kottayam district. It reads: "he also met with a few miserable beings calling themselves Hill Pandaram, without clothing, implements or huts of any kind, living in holes, rocks and trees. They bring wax, ivory and other produce to the Mala Arayans and get salt from them. They dig roots and snakes and even crocodiles found in the pools among the hill-streams. They were perfectly naked and filthy, and very timid. They spoke Malayalam in a curious tone, and said that twenty-two of their party had been devoured by tigers within two monsoons" (Mateer, 1883). The Census Report of 1901, noting that they numbered only 51, describes their social conditions in similar terms, remarking that they lead 'the most precarious life imaginable' (Hutch, 1933). When Edgar Thurston visited Mala Pandaram of the Thirunelveli district (where they are known as Paliyans) he indicated that some of them were engaged in barter relationships with the local Mala Arayan villagers and with mercantile forest contractors (Thurston, 1909). Ironically, the local agriculturalists look down the tribal people, and the ill-treatment to which the latter were subjected to and perhaps has been for a long time, not only made them shy and retiring but necessitated some form of silent barter. Unlike the Kannikar, a purely food gathering community like the Malai Pandāram were no doubt about maintain some degree of freedom and independence. Consequently, they occupied, as D' Penha wrote 'a somewhat higher place in the Hindu social scale than other hill men

like Irulas, Kannikars and Uralis, who are generally looked upon with suspicion and a feeling of contempt and loathing by the dwellers of the plains (1902).

Meanwhile, there is no written evidence to enable us to ascertain the relationship of the Malai Pandāram to the Travancore Raja. Author Brian indicates that: ‘some extend confirmed by G. Bhangaram Pillai, who informed me that there was once a copper plate in the Sree Padmanabha temple in Trivandrum detailing a pact between the Mala Pandaram were appointed tenants of the Achankovil forests under the condition that their *moopan* (chief, head) and his subtenants should visit the palace once each year at the time of the Onam festival, bringing honey and other valuable forest products. The King in return, gave them a great feast and rewarded them with cloth and other presents.

Although most of the Malai Pandāram is still largely or wholly nomadic some centres have been created by the allocation of land intended for permanent settlement and the adoption of agriculture. One of these, which the study will discuss in detail later, is Achankovil and Mullumala settlements in Kollam district. Here the community was leased out this land to local agriculturalists and still spends much of their time gathering forest produce in the surrounding hills. Though they are settled under the guidance of the Tribal Welfare Department and Panchayats, but most of those in the neighbourhood are still hunter-gatherers. Lack of clear data about the socio-economic parameters of the community often makes the study more cumbersome. As per the 2013 government report on Scheduled Tribe, the community has 514 families with 1662 population. Their family size works out to 3.23, which is very low compared to the state average. The population include 821 males and 841 females and hence the sex ratio is 1000: 1024. About 97 per cent of Malai Pandāram families are settled in Kollam and Pathanamthitta Districts. The rest are located in Kottayam and Idukki Districts. The population is distributed in 16 Grama Panchayats and one Municipality. However, majority of Malai Pandārams are settled in Aruvapulam and Ariankavu Grama Panchayats in Kollam District and Ranni Perunad, Seethathodu and Aruvappulam Grama Panchayats in Pathanamthitta District.

Social Life

Family organization and residential patterns are vital in examining the social life of any tribal communities. Iyer says that, ‘the Malai Pandāram lives in families of two or three in a locality. They do not stick in any one place. They remain for a week and move on to another when the food supply is exhausted. There is an understanding that the Malai Pandāram of Achankovil or Kannumpally cannot roam about the domain of those in Talapara. Each pack has its own jurisdiction for wandering and food supply and Iyer continues, ‘the community has no exogamic clan system. They live in group of two or three families on each hill. Each local group is exogamous’ (Iyer, 1937). Studies done after the independence gives somewhat different picture about the social cohesion of the community. By denying the argument of communal unity Author Mukherjee writes that, the social organization of the Malai Pandāram is not based on the clan organization but on the unity of the group (*koottam*) and a classificatory system of kinship. The group behaves as a unit as far as the collection of forest produce is concerned. The members of

the group evince a sense of unity in maintaining social relations, migration and securing protection against any foreign attacks or wild animals. Such a group is composed of several families of related persons. The group itself is neither exogamous nor endogamous (Mukherjee, 1954). This argument seems somehow satisfactory when we evaluate the social life of this group, I have witnessed during field survey. The present situation in Malai Pandāram world endorses Mukherjee's further evaluation. "The Malai Pandāram moves about in groups within a defined tract with which they are associated for their livelihood. Each local group moves together and settles in the temporary abode called *veed*. The migration of each local group is fixed into a definite track beyond which the group fears to tread (Ibid). It is also witnessed that the community is matrilineal in descent and patrilocal in residence.

Economy and Livelihood: Contemporary Scenario

Then region of Malai Pandāram community consist an area of about 800 square miles, which is a forested region drained by two major river systems; the Pamba and the Achankovil. The high ranges which divide the Kakki watershed from the northern tributaries of the Kallar virtually divide them into two separate populations. The government do not have data on Malai Pandāram population in each Panchayats because of their nomadic nature. But the Tribal Department, especially Tribal Extension Office (TEO), has provided the details of the area where they usually live and do wage labour for settled agricultural tribes like Mala Arayans. Of the total household covered 25 percent of Malai Pandāram households are nomadic and 75 per cent are settled. It is relatively easy to find out the habitats and villages since the Malai Pandāram have settled lifestyle in Pathanamthitta and Kollam districts. However, they also have a nomadic lifestyle during the NTFP extraction period, mostly, February to June. Moreover, families in these districts have close contact with their relatives those who are leading a nomadic life in the forest-clad hills of Konni and Periyar reserve forest.

After independence government relocated them to particular places. Of the total households covered 214 families i.e., 75 per cent were found to be living in these settlements. Though, this may not apply to the community as the coverage of households is 40 per cent of the total population so it may be critical to say that most of them live in settlements. This information is based on the numbers of houses we have identified in different villages and forest areas. From the settlements most of these houses are abandoned by the beneficiaries because of its defects or they are forced to leave to find livelihood options in the forest. Therefore, it is difficult to assess how many are permanently live in these houses. In such a scenario, it can be argued that, few individuals are only associated with villages. Also, from field observation it was found that members of the most of the settlements in Kollam and Pathanamthitta were making day trips to the forest to collect NTFP they hardly do agriculture. Most of the Malai Pandāram was engaged in NTFP collection for livelihood. But their association with settlements made significant changes in their pattern of living like sending children to

school and availing governmental schemes with the help of Tribal Volunteers is also evident. See the pictures of unfinished Malai Pandāram houses.

Though they are under ‘settled’ category for the government we found that most of their houses are abandoned. Many families are still solely depending on forest for livelihood. Hence, for majority of Malai Pandāram the government doesn’t materialize their hope; ‘permanent house’. The settlement at Achankovil in Kollam district has a small agricultural community in the heart of the forest. In 1962 Kerala government distributed 62 acre of forest land for 62 Malai Pandāram families as part of the settlement plan. Later, with the help of the Department of Tribal Affairs Kerala Rubber Board planted rubber tree—a cash crop usually found in the lower and middle elevation of Western Ghat, for each family. Presently, the settlement has 170 families. The change in the livelihood had almost storm-tossed the nomadic hunting and gathering lifestyle of the community, but few cope with it gradually. Over a period of time most of them have leased out their rubber plantation for non-tribals with minimum price and continued traditional lifestyle. Still, besides the 25-year-old rubber trees, except little tapioca or some vegetables in the immediate vicinity of their huts, all the tapioca and banana trees are grown (under verbal agreement or over a bottle of liquor) either by local non-tribal villagers or by entrepreneurs employing outside labour.

NTFP Collection

It is vital to examine the popular argument: ‘reducing forest resources because of over extraction’, in the context of Malai Pandāram’s NTFP extraction and its present status. Collection of honey is the primary economic activity in the NTFP collection. Honey season begins in March and ends in May. They collect three species of honey. Firstly, the *Cheruthen*, (*Melipona* genus or dammer bees), a small black bee that look like little larger than mosquito. It nests in the crevices of rocks and trees (Crane, 1999:301). This honey is extremely rich and is considered to have medicinal qualities. Its present market value is for one kilogram is Rs.1000. Therefore, it has a high demand in Ayurveda medicine industry. Approximately 41.26 per cent are involved in traditional way of income generation. Even settled households in Achankovil and Attathodu villagers are largely depending on forest produces for their livelihood. Approximately 32.17 per cent are involved in wage labour as livelihood option. Interestingly 116 households were not responded to the survey in this regard. The data has proved the fact that the community is still attached to their traditional economy for livelihood.

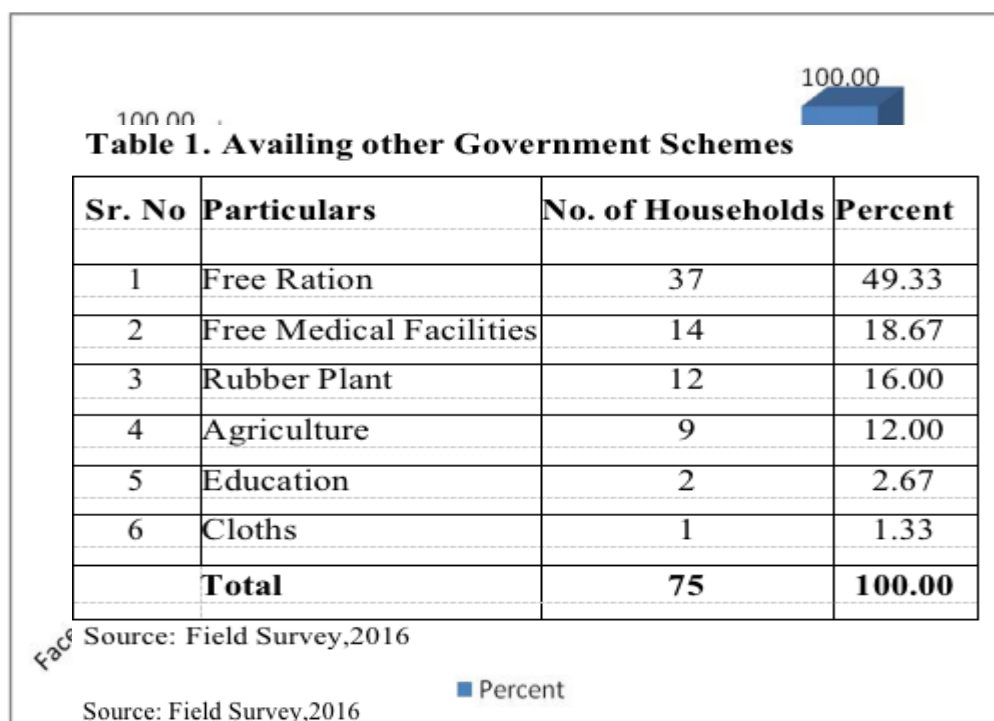
Malai Pandāram and State-sponsored Inclusive Programs

Unlike the other relatively well-informed, developed and settled-agricultural tribal groups Malai Pandāram community is largely deprived from availing the tribal development schemes. Lack of knowledge about the schemes and educational backwardness exacerbate the situation. As a result, non-tribal often takes advantages of their ignorance. Few stories regarding this subject have come up during the Focused Group Discussion (FGD) in Attathodu village. Every year few commercial spaces are

being reserved for Malai Pandāram community in Pamba during the Sabarimala pilgrimage season but these allotments were never handed over to the community. Ironically, the community came to know about it only last year, which means somebody has been taking advantages of the community’s rights since last many years (FGD, Attathodu, 10 October ,2016). In 1962 almost 40 families received an acre of land each in Achankovil later in 2003 three families were received one acre land each in Koruthodu panchayat. Apart from this, the community had not given land anywhere.

At present too few people from the community have received any grant other than home. The popular perception about the government grant seemed to be principally entwined with ‘home’ only. It may be because of most of the people in the community has been deprived of their constitutional rights for decades. This might require the government agencies to craft a new strategy to educate the community about their rights. Otherwise, the profit hungry—mostly predatory—encroachers will circumvent the law by influencing the forest officials and elected representatives to encroach the tribal land. Approximately 59.4 per cent households are absolutely oblivious about their constitutional rights and information about the grants that are being issued under their name. Among the 286 households the study has covered only 116 were (40.6 %) aware of about government schemes and out of these 75 families were availed government other than housing schemes. Further details of the availed schemes are shown in Table 1.

Figure: 1 Impediments faced while Receiving Schemes



As a representative from the government, it is essential to understand the behaviour of bureaucracy while dealing with the community. And almost 75 per cent has spent between 1000 to 5000 rupees for availing schemes. In terms of availing amenities 78.6

per cent hold BPL ration cards and 80.1 per cent has voter ID card. In the economic sphere, 31.8 per cent has bank accounts and 19.9 per cent has Self Help Group (SHG) membership. On the other hand, 21.3 per cent doesn't have ration card and 19.9 per cent is deprived of voter card. See the Table 2.

Table.2. Availing Services

Sr. No	Particulars	Having	%
1	Ration card	225	(78.67)
2	Type of ration card		
	A) BPL	218	(76.2)
	B) APL	7	(2.4)
3	Pan card	9	(3.1)
4	voter card	229	(80.1)
5	Aadhar card	169	(59.1)
6	Bank account	91	(31.8)
7	Type of bank		
	a) Public	64	(22.4)
	b) Private	5	(1.7)
	c) Co-operative	22	(7.7)
8	SHG membership	57	(19.9)
9	Loan from SHG	19	(33.33)

Source: Field Survey, 2016

The ground realities that exist in the Malai Pandāram world endorse the fact that there is considerable amount of negligence from the state machinery in terms of availing the schemes. Constituting tribal volunteers under the auspicious of department of tribal

affairs ease the situation information gap between beneficiaries and different departments. But forest areas in Pathanamthitta and Kollam districts still remain inaccessible to these volunteers. The survey has found that 74.8 per cent—214 households—are deprived of any kind of external help in availing government schemes. NGOs intervention in the Adivasi marginality is visible in the northern tribal belt whereas apart from few religious groups and its philanthropy southern tribal belt largely remains out of their radar.

Therefore, as the sole agency for Adivasi development it is vital to evaluate the government machinery at local level. During FGD many community members were pointed out the attitudes of government officials when it comes to the community's entitlements. During the survey only 5.24 per cent agreed that the officials are helpful to the community while 38.81 per cent said that the officials are non-cooperative. See the figure given below. There are good stories about the helpfulness of the officials. Gopalan (48) from Achankovil village says, 'officials in Pathanapuram tribal project office are helpful and they inform us all the details of the schemes and its deadlines correctly' (FGD, Achankovil Tribal Colony, 10 June 2014). That could be the reason behind maximum number of recently constructed homes in Achankovil village has been issued by tribal department. This testimony reveals the fact that the government agencies could become a major stakeholder in the development of the backward communities like Malai Pandāram if they function properly. But the FGD held in Achankovil village also pointed out the soaring nature of the expenditure for availing any schemes. Among the 75 housing scheme recipients 33 said that they had to spend between Rs. 1000 to 5000 for getting the scheme issued.

Forest Department vis-a-vis Forest Right Act

The Malai Pandāram community who lives in the forest interior of Ranni and Peer made taluks are unheard of such an Act. But the data provided by the forest department indicates there are 15 households in Achankovil and 10 in Avanipara have received individual rights (see Annexure 2). For a normal Malai Pandāram family in these areas FRA authenticates their traditional rights on the forest produces but it is not happening as expected. Few people from Attathodu village criticised the way forest department handling the issue of collecting NTFP in the FGD. The department has entrusted the monopoly of procurement of all NTFPs to *Girijan* co-operative Society and it [department] provides passes to the society for transporting NTFPs from collection areas to go downs. Legal actions are taken by the Department against the middlemen/private traders and non-tribals who are involved in the unauthorized collection of NTFPs in Kerala. But in Attathodu hamlet the entire collection centre managed and run by a non-tribals with the auspicious of forest department. At the same time tribals are not allowed to sell the products outside the village. By doing this the forest department is undermining the spirit of FRA.

People also allege that the society doesn't follow most of the rules laid out by the forest department because of the DFO has the right to impose fine for any illegal extraction of NTFPs. Constituting *Vana Samrakshana Samiti* NTFP collection centre in Achankovil colony was a result of a government order. Apart from Achankovil nowhere we had found any such mechanisms. But the percentage distribution for community development activities is non-functional even in Achankovil. Rather the people will get

mere amounts to fulfil their necessary needs. The rest of the profit will be deposited in bank. Excessive bureaucratization of the processes related to FRA is a major hurdle in the implementation of FRA in Kerala. Though there is a draft policy issued by the government in 2007 regarding the implementation of FRA the forest department often undermines it. As a result, still, joint forest management is not good idea for Adivasis. Meanwhile, political silence over the implementation of PESA in the state is also affecting the smooth implementation of the FRA because that could be a complimentary to the Act. It can successfully protect the Adivasi rights from any external interference and empowers the Gram Sabha, village level institutions in areas where there are any forest rights holders and the forest rights holders to inter alia protect the wild life, forest and biodiversity and to ensure that their habitat is preserved from destructive practices affecting their cultural and natural heritage. According to the FRA, the Gram Sabha plays a major role in determining who has what right to which forest resources. This is an attempt to devolve the decision-making powers to the grassroot level. However, as described by author Jayantha Perera, if a forest dweller village is only one among many villages that form a panchayat, where the non-forest dwellers are the majority, the forest dweller village might find it difficult to get its right approved if the others oppose. This is because of corrupt officials and village elites could easily exploit the vulnerability of forest dwellers in such a council and manipulate the council's resolutions in favour of the vested interests, or against forest dwellers (Perera, 2010). This scenario has replicated in villages like Kombukuthy in Kottayam and Attathodu in Pathanamthitta districts.

Though the government has developed a model of Participatory Forest Management (PFM) and emphasize is given to regeneration of natural forests through protection rather than afforestation by emphasizing the notion that it is monetarily beneficial and more effective. The participatory forest management action plan focuses on sustainable management of NTFPs, consisting of sustainable harvesting and regeneration along with bio-diversity conservation, with the active participation of tribals. The Forest Department allots specific forest ranges/ areas every year for extraction of NTFPs by the tribals to prevent over exploitation of NTFPs in a particular area. Here, information given by the forest department about the implementation of the FRA may have emphasized the importance of participatory forest management but it seems to be not reflected in the ground level. First, the state doesn't have a proper definition for NTFP. Second, most of the local laws, which pertains the authority of forest department, still remains as it is in village and forest areas where Malai Pandāram largely resides.

Conclusion

The community has a complex and uneven relationship with the forest department. As they live entirely on the forest land —often reserves—their subsistent activities are under the direct control of the department. The community is forced to sell Non-Timber Forest Produces (NTFP) only to the *Adivasi Vana Samrakshana Samiti* (Tribal Forest protection organization), which is a co-operative initiative established by forest department. But the community members allege that the society collects marketable NTFPs by giving lower rates than what is available in the open market. Legal action will be taken against those who sell the NTFP outside the co-operative. Since most of forests in their areas are demarcated as Reserve Forest now. Therefore, taking any activities in the forest is an offence now—but they often have small cultivation plots hidden in the interior forests.

Moreover, they are forbidden from catching fish from the rivers in forest. The situation has proved that the stringent forest laws and regulations are seems to be a major stumbling block in the socio-economic development of the Malai Pandāram community. In this scenario, they are clearly dependant on forest officials for their daily livelihood. The forest officers have great command and control over them. Forest officials are usually called 'Sir' by the community in conversation and the relationship is subservient one. At present, though most of them have adopted the modern lifestyle their hardships still continue. Unlike the other settled agricultural tribal communities, Malai Pandāram largely depends on forest for their livelihood. Their life is entwined with forest. Therefore, chances of forest department's interventions/interferences in their socio-economic milieu are also high and this often culminates into an asymmetric interdependence between the two parties and in which the community will fall always at the receiving end. Approximately 54.20 per cent household said that land distribution and land rights are their immediate concerns for livelihood while 47.55 per cent sought for proper implementation of FRA in their forest area as a model for community development and provide available market price for NTFPs. But the forest department doesn't follow a uniform price mechanism for NTFPs in the state and it seemed keen to hold their grip over the community; the power they have been enjoying since British Raj.

Because of these reasons the community seemed divergent in most of the welfare programme initiated by different government departments because many of them—JFM and EDC—were proved counterproductive in terms of community development and forest conservation. Without the community's intervention and participation, the programmes of government and its machineries will be dysfunctional in tribal world. It also proves the fact that development cannot bloom miraculously on a separate track insulated from the subversive socio-economic challenges of the day. Their specific lifestyle does not always cope with the schemes implemented by the government. A bird's eye view on the statistics of the schemes shows that only few received schemes other than houses. Interview with few non-settled households in Moozhiyar-40 settlement were revealed that they had received housing schemes without having any land in their possession so they were failed to construct it. People in the forest area need more medical attention than any other schemes, but the government is silent on this issue. In short, lack of a specific policies and programmes towards each nomadic and settled-agriculturist tribal groups exacerbated the Adivasi marginality and social exclusion in the state.

The forest department seemed to be reluctant to relinquish or share key environmental rights to the forest-dwellers even after more than seven years of FRA implementation (Munster and Vishnudas,2012). Meanwhile, as argued by Perera on the Act's implementation in north Indian states, 'in most villages the community is not aware of the strength and value of the FRA and therefore, it has been diluted by the rules that have been approved to implement it and by the rules that are missing, leaving gaps instead of covering the entire charter of the forest rights(Perera,2009). Villages like Attathodu and forest areas in Ranni tehsils are the classic examples in this regard. Lack of organization strength among the community— seen in Achankovil— is also hindering collective articulation of their rights. In short, while accepting few qualitative changes in the life of Malai Pandāram community because of the government intervention it is also true that role of the state machinery is elusive in their socio-economic development. Unlike the settled agricultural tribal communities in southern Kerala, Malai Pandāram largely

depends on forest for their livelihood. Therefore, chances of forest department's interventions/interferences in their socio-economic milieu are also high and this often culminates into an asymmetric inter-dependence in which the community is always at the receiving end. Approximately 54.20 per cent household said that land distribution and land rights are their immediate concerns for livelihood while 47.55 per cent sought for proper implementation of FRA in their forest area as a model for community development and provide available market price for NTFPs. But the forest department doesn't follow a uniform price mechanism for NTFPs in the state and it seemed keen to protect their grip over the community they have been enjoying since British Raj while the community seemed divergent in most of the welfare programme initiated by different government departments and proved wrong in terms of community development and forest conservation.

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