

The Tribal Women in Kerala- A Myth or Reality

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Abstract

Scheduled Tribes in India are generally considered to be 'Adivasis,' meaning indigenous people or original inhabitants of the country. The tribes have been confined to low status and are often physically and socially isolated instead of being absorbed in the mainstream Hindu population. Psychologically, the Scheduled Tribes often experience passive indifference that may take the form of exclusion from educational opportunities, social participation, and access to their own land. All tribal communities are not alike. They are products of different historical and social conditions. They belong to different racial stocks and religious backgrounds and speak different dialects. Discrimination against women, occupational differentiation, and emphasis on status and hierarchical social ordering that characterize the predominant mainstream culture are generally absent among the tribal groups. Adivasis are not as a general rule regarded as unclean or polluted in the same way as the Scheduled Caste population is perceived by the mainstream culture. However, the mainstream Hindu population considers the general tribal population as primitive, technologically backward, and illiterate. Since the 16th century, the tribes have been perceived as sub-humans who live under primitive conditions. Scheduled Tribe population represents one of the most economically impoverished and marginalized groups in India. Although Scheduled Tribes are a minority, they constitute about 8.2 % of the total population in India, or 85 million people in absolute number. The Scheduled Tribes are not discriminated against in the same way by the mainstream Hindu population as the Scheduled Caste population in India. While the latter group belongs to the lowest hierarchy of social order and is often considered impure or unclean, the Scheduled Tribes have, for the most part, been socially distanced and living outside the mainstream Hindu society.

Keywords: Scheduled Tribes, impoverishment, alienation, mainstream population.

Introduction

If we talk of natural management from a global perspective, whom do we find in the forefront of the race for protection and preservation of the resources. The answer comes very naturally, it is the women. Women particularly those living in rural areas or mountain areas have special relationship with the environment. All women have relationship with environment but the approach is different from Urban Areas. They are more close to the nature than men and this very close relationship makes them perfect managers of an eco-system. The life of mountain women is so much intertwined with the environment that whole ecosystem revolves around her and she can't even think of her survival without it. For her forest is her mother's home as she is entirely dependent on the forest to meet her daily needs such as - water, fodder, fuels, minor forest product etc.

In most of the tribal societies in Kerala women enjoy equal status with men and are the cornerstone of the social structure of the tribal societies Tribal women enjoy certain economic and social equalities and are equal partners in family and conjugal rights. But they do not enjoy pre-marital freedom. Even though they have an important position in tribal society, they are debarred from exercising power over land, performing poojas, sacrifices and other customary religious practices. They also do not hold any properties as these are always vested with the males. Though these tribal women enjoy some freedom with regard to marriage and family as compared to other societies in Kerala, they are marginalised in the socioeconomic and political spheres of life. Even tribal women who belong to matrilineal societies do not enjoy a superior position than those belonging to patrilineal societies. Due to the impact of modernization and influence of non-tribal societies on tribal societies, women are losing the socioeconomic and cultural positions that they enjoyed earlier. In many socioeconomic characteristics, the tribal women lag behind tribal men (Aerthayil, 2008): literacy rate (illiteracy rate was 32% for men and 41% for women); education at the school level for boys was higher than for girls; and there are more widows (10%) than widowers (2%). About 45% of women were unemployed, whereas only 32% of the men were unemployed. The average pay for men was Rupees 68 whereas for women, it was Rupees 40. In the context of frequent price rise of essential commodities, the unequal pay for man and women leads to a lesser quality of life for women (Aerthayil, 2008: 136). Aerthayil (2008) concluded that women are not economically independent as they used to be since they do not get enough work or equal pay. The forest produce used to be a source of income, especially for women in olden times, but they are deprived of such source of income because forests have either been or strict laws have been enforced for the existing ones. The Paniyas and Adiyans are suffering from severe structural backwardness in terms of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment. Therefore, the crucial problems which the tribal communities face today in Wayanadu is not empowerment, rather issues that are more fundamental such as illiteracy, poor health, poverty, and lack of land holdings, unemployment, and cultural diffusion (Lukose,

2004). However, since women empowerment closely interacts with these socioeconomic realities, it cannot be studied in isolation. Developing a systematic knowledge base for empowerment needs of tribal women in India for their greater community participation is a critical need for designing developmental, health and welfare programmes and policies in the country (Justin and others, 2009). The present study was designed from within these socio-economic contexts where tribal women live; thereby exploring their specific empowerment needs social problems and level of community participation. The problem under the study was conceptualised within the theoretical framework proposed by Amin and others (1998). This model is a three component model of women empowerment along with the political empowerment of women (Handy and Kassam, 2006). Empowerment was measured in four domains namely, the inter-spouse consultation index, personal autonomy index, the authority index and political index. The current study also measured levels of empowerment needs, experience of social problems in terms of severity of difficulties and dissatisfaction in social life and quality of community life.

Status of tribal women

The status of women in a society is a significant reflection of the level of social justice in that society. Women's status is often described in terms of their level of income, employment, education, health and fertility as well as their roles within the family, the community and society. In tribal communities, the role of women is substantial and crucial. They constitute about half the total population but in tribal society women are more important than in other social groups, because they work harder and the family economy and management depends on them. Even after industrialization and the resultant commercialization swamped the tribal economy, women continued to play a significant role. Collection of minor forest produce is done mostly by women and children. Many also work as laborers in industries, households and construction, contributing to their family income. Despite exploitation by contractors and managers, tribals are more sincere and honest than non tribals. However, tribal women face problems and challenges in getting a sustainable livelihood and a decent life due to environmental degradation and the interference of outsiders. The strategy for tribal development, and specially women, needs improvement, betterment, development and upliftment to effect their empowerment. Tribal women have adjusted themselves to live a traditional life style in the local environment and follow occupations based on natural resources. Undoubtedly, the programmes, oriented towards the empowerment of tribals, particularly women, have improved their socio-economic conditions and status. However, there are wide variations across regions and tribes in terms of work participation, sex ratio, economic productivity and social life. The impact of development planning needs to be evaluated in terms of desired and unanticipated consequences. The development process should be perceived as an involvement and reorganization mechanism of not only the socio-economic system but the entire eco-system. Against this backdrop, the present paper reviews the emerging perspective in the context of the socio-economic empowerment of tribal women and changing paradigms of development.

Tribal Women and Forests

Tribals have been residing in forest areas for generations, cultivating land and collecting non-timber forest produce. As per the Forest Survey of India Report, 2003, 60.04% of the 63% forest cover of the country and 63% of dense forests lie in 187 tribal districts, though the geographical area of these districts is just 33.6% of the country's geographical area. Out of 58 districts, which have more than 67% of their area under forest cover, 51 are tribal districts. A comparison of the 2001 and 2003 assessments of forest cover in tribal districts shows a net increase of 321,100 hectares underscoring a very strong symbiotic relationship between tribals and forests and of tribals being at the forefront of conservation regimes. While tribal women have more say in family decisions than their non-tribal counterparts, they also share more responsibilities. Preparing food and providing for drinking water is solely their responsibility so they operate closely with the forests from where they get water, fuel and minor products including edible fruits, tubers, flowers, vegetables and berries. Minor forest produce plays an important part in the tribal economy. Its collection and marketing is a major source of livelihood for most tribal families contributing around 70% of their total income. The different varieties are classified as plants for use in tanning, natural gums, resins and balsams, plants and seeds used in pharmacy and perfumery and *tendu* leaves.

Firewood is also provided by forests. Since firewood gathering is done mainly by women, the interaction between forests and women gets further enhanced. Since all the duties of tribal women are connected with the forests and they look towards the forest for nature's gifts, their dependence on forests is strong and intrinsic. The tribal habitat across the world is characterized by natural surroundings, undulating plateau, hills and mountains, rivers and streams, forests and valleys and water falls. They are invariably rich in flora and fauna with innumerable species of plants, birds, insects and animals. Tribal are forest dwellers who lives in the midst of plants, trees, rocks, grass, birds, animals, rivers, fresh air and good sunshine. Their way of life is patterned according to their environment.

Conceptualizing women empowerment

The concept of empowerment has been the subject of much intellectual discourse and analysis. According to the

United Nations (2001), empowerment is defined as the process by which women take control and ownership of their lives through expansion of their choices. Thus, it is the process of acquiring the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability has previously been denied. Corney, R.H. (2001) defines empowerment as 'the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them'. Almost all definitions of women's empowerment include some reference to an expansion of choice and freedom to make decisions and take the actions necessary to shape life-outcomes. The core elements of empowerment have been defined as agency (the ability to define one's goals and act upon them), awareness of gendered power structures, self-esteem and self-confidence. Empowerment can take place at a hierarchy of different levels — individual, household, community and societal — and is facilitated by providing encouraging factors (for example, exposure to new activities, which can build capacities) and removing inhibiting factors (for example, lack of resources and skills). Two vital processes have been identified as important for empowerment. The first is social mobilisation and collective agency, as poor women often lack the basic capabilities and self-confidence to counter and challenge existing disparities and barriers against them. Often, change agents are needed to catalyse social mobilisation consciously. Second, the process of social mobilisation needs to be accompanied and complemented by economic security. As long as the disadvantaged suffer from economic deprivation and livelihood insecurity, they will not be in a position to mobilise. The effects of women empowerment create a powerful influence on family, community norms, values, and finally the laws that govern these communities. Women's empowerment is the restoration to individuals of a sense of their own values, strength, and their own capacity to handle life's problems. Household and inter-familial relations is the pivotal focus in the measurement of the level of women empowerment including political participation. Women's empowerment is distinct from the empowerment of other disadvantaged or socially excluded groups because, first, women are not just one among several disempowered sub-populations; instead, they are 'a cross-cutting category of individuals that overlap each of these other groups'. Second, women's disempowerment is caused and reinforced through household and family relations much more than what is true for the disempowerment of other socially disadvantaged groups. Hence, the current study measured the tribal women's empowerment needs in the areas of personal autonomy, family decision making, and domestic consultation within household and political process.

Status of tribal women in society

The status of women in a society is a significant reflection of the level of social justice in that society. Women's status is often described in terms of their level of income, employment, education, health and fertility as well as the roles they play within the family, the community and society (Ghosh, 1987). A tribal woman occupies an important place in the socio-economic structure of her society. The Dhebar Commission Report (1961) mentions that the tribal woman is not drudge or a beast of burden, she is found to be exercising a relatively free and firm hand in all aspects related to her social life unlike in nontribal societies. The tribal women in general and in comparison with castes, enjoy more freedom in various walks of life. Traditional and customary tribal norms are comparatively more liberal to women.

Forest ecology and women's health

The forest based tribal economy in most parts of the world as women-centered (Menon, 1987-1991). Women made provisions for the basic necessities like food, fuel, medicine, housing material etc. from the forest produce. Food was obtained from shifting cultivation and from minor produce (MFP) like flowers and fruits collected from the forest. Extraction from herbs, roots and animals were used for medicine. All these efforts incurred an excessive workload on women. It is calculated the ratio of male or female investment in labour in shifting cultivation to be 100:136 days per year. Because of the extensive felling of trees by vested interests, the distances between the villages and the forest areas had increased forcing the tribal women to walk longer distances in search of minor forest produce and firewood. In this rapidly changing milieu, tribal women load increases. Women put in an average of 14 working hours per day as compared to 9 hours put in by men. Given this additional workload, even women in advanced stages of pregnancy were required to work in the agricultural fields or walk great distances to collect fuel and minor forest produce. The over strain on tribal women however, was not adequately compensated due to the non-availability of minor forest produce and decrease in food grain production. As a result of deforestation, additional distance and less fertile soil, the availability of food for the tribal family was reduced. This had implications particularly for the housewife who was responsible for the provision and distribution of food, in cases of shortage, she even deprived herself of food in order to feed the others.

Table.1
Tribal women engaged in Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) Collection

Items	Ranking
Honey	1
Eidible fruits	5
Cereals	7
Mushroom	12
Edible vegetables	2
Oil seeds	9
Medicinal plants	8
Fodder/grass	4
Tuber crops	10
Soap nut	11
Fuel	3
Materials for house construction	6

State approach towards local communities with regard to forests and tribal people

Settlement of rights of forest dwelling communities was conducted in a highly lackadaisical manner leading to harassment of people by the forest officials. With the increase in paper, timber, mining and other industries in the forest areas bringing in new populations, the pressure on the local communities and on the natural resources multiplied spreading a vicious web of exploitation of the resources and of innocent tribal communities traditionally living in these regions. The realization of the need for dialoguing with the local communities began when government failed to stop the large-scale deforestation which was caused both by people, large development projects and by industries. The alarming rate at which thousands of hectares of forests and biodiversity have become extinct, has led to the administration's focus on re-strategising its intervention in forest conservation. Social forestry programmes were initiated which in the 90's took the shape of joint forest management programmes under the influence of both internal rethinking and external financial institutions. Quasi legal institutions and programmes like the Joint/Community Forest Management (J/CFM) programmes for forestry are being created currently in various states for conserving forests with huge external aid, also bringing in policy changes. At the national level there are contradictory processes happening in the forestry management approaches. On the one hand, there is a great impetus to participatory models of forest governance like the JFM programmes and on the other, there is an increasing pressure on local forest dwelling communities by the State by terming them as 'encroachers' and 'illegal' inhabitants of the forest regions, the greater pressure being on the tribal people whose existence in these regions for centuries is not being recognized. Thus, it is in this legal and social background that the Eco Development programme was started with GEF and World Bank funding.

Conclusion

Tribal women have been particularly badly affected in recent times. They are discriminated against not only because of their sex but also because of religious, social and cultural structures which have given them the lowest position in the social hierarchy. The stigma of untouchability makes them especially vulnerable victims of all kinds of discriminations and atrocities. In areas of health, education, housing, employment and wages, application of legal rights, decision-making and political participation, and rural development, tribal women have been almost entirely excluded from development policies and programmes. The national population policy, which is geared to population control and in the process targets tribal women for family planning programmes, does so on the grounds that they are the cause of the population 'explosion' and of poverty. No change has been made in the attitudes of society towards these women and they continue to be oppressed, marginalized, violated and all but forgotten. . In the expression used often in development policies and plans they are: 'women in extreme poverty'.

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