

Political Mobilization Of Paniya Tribes Of Wayanad In Kerala

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Abstract

Tribal people are important part of the country India. They are living near the forest areas; they are very attached to the hill, forest areas. Tribals in India present a significant degree of culture and ethnic diversity. They differ in their socio-cultural levels as well as in their behavior patterns. All tribal populations occupy ecological riches, which are isolated from other population having distinct territorial boundary to their habitat. The Tribes lives not only for himself alone, but also he is an integral part of the community to which he belongs. The Tribals are the sons of the same country, the born and grow as the children of the nature. The majority of tribes in Kerala hail from the Paniyan clan. They inhabit Wayanad and the neighboring parts of Kannur and Malapuram. In this paper analyze Paniya tribes political attitudes, believes and political mobilization in the past years and present scenario.

Keywords: Tribal, behavior, Paniyan, Political mobilization.

Introduction

Tribal people being the original inhabitants of India constitute a significant part of this vast nation. They have been dwelling in the forest surrounded by hills for long period. Their culture and their language are quite different from the general people of India. The post Independence era a lot of changes due to immense the government for tribal socio-economic development. But, in spite of all endeavors, they are still poor as well as illiterate and are far from the main stream of Indian society. The tribal people constitute 8% of the total population of India with more than 50 groups. The tribal population of India is approximately 20 million together. Each of the tribes is a distinctive community, either migrated from a different place or the original denizens of the land. These various tribes still inhabit the different parts, especially the seven states of the North-eastern region and almost each and every the government of India is quite clear that is to integrate the tribal people with the rest of the Indian community. Funds, which according to pre-independence standards would seem

ample, have been earmarked for various programmers to help the tribes to reach the level of the rest of our people. Tribal representation in Panchayat Raj institutions and actual participation of the tribal people in elections and party politics played a significant role in the empowerment of tribal people.

Tribes in Kerala

Tribes were earlier known in Travancore-Cochin state as 'Kattu Jathi' and in Malabar as Kattukuruman, both meaning people of the forest. Today they are known as Girijanam or Girivargam, meaning people of the forest hills. But they are called 'Adivasi' in Kerala as in other parts of India. They are mostly settled on the Western Ghats and hills bordering Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (Aerthayil, 2008). The traditional sources of livelihood for tribals were hunting, collection of forest produce, basket and mat-making and shifting cultivation. Kerala is a melting pot, where several ethnic and religious groups mingle. The historic process of cultural synthesis happened in Kerala is brilliantly reflected in its art forms, traditional rituals and sacred practices. The typical icons of Kerala throw light into the slight and elaborate details of the state; unfolding the beautiful blend of cultures owned by different religions and communities.

Tribals are the ethnic minority of Kerala, constitute one percent of the state's population. Formation of the state in 1956 and the division of the state into different districts horizontally left the tribal population of Kerala spread, mostly in hilly areas. They started facing problems of existence with the intrusion of their ancestral land by powerful settlers from the plains, starting from pre-independence days. The tribal people constitute about 1% of the total population of the state. According to the census of 2001 the population of scheduled tribes in Kerala was 3, 64,189, this is 1.14% of the total population of the state. They are distributed among thirty six communities. They range from landowning status to that of daily wage earners without having even a single cent of land under their possession.

Wayanad Tribes in Kerala

Scheduled Tribes are overwhelmingly rural as 96.1% of them reside in villages. District wise population shows that Wayanad District has the highest proportion of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala (Census of India, 2002). Majority is an area they form, more or less, a compact group.

Majority of the tribes of Wayanad are primitive cultivators and bonded labourers. Wayanad was traditionally known as the land of forests (Nair 1911). There are different versions about the origin of the name Wayanad, that it was derived from the word *Vayalnadu* (the land of paddy fields) or *Vananadu* (the land of forests) and that it was the land of forests as well as paddy fields (Nair 1976). The communities which live in this region are Paniyans, Kurichans, Pulayanas, Mullukurumans, Urali kurumans, Kattunayakans, Kattunayakna, Adiyans, Kaders and Kalandis (Mathur,1977).They are formely engaged in shifting cultivation, gathering of forest products and hunting, but now most of them have become agricultural labourers under the settlers. During the British rule, there was great improvement in transport and communication in consequence of which an influx of plain-men took place.

Paniya Tribes in Wayanad

The Paniyans are short-statured and dark skinned. They have broad noses. The hair is curly or wavy, in limb length, there people show affinity to the long limited African Negroes. The colour of the Paniyas varies from dark to brown. Hence formerly they lived the dark life of slaves. The name of the tribe –Paniyan- originated from the word ‘pani’ which means labour or worker as they are supposed to have been slaves of the non-tribals. This community is distributed in the hilly and forested tracks of the Wayanad, Kozhikode, kannur, and Malapuram districts of Kerala. According to the 1981 census their population is 56,952 and 2001 census is 69112. They are preponderantly a rural community with only 78 persons returned from urban sectors. Earlier, the Paniyan used to depend largely on wage labour for their livelihood, but presently they are also engaged in fishing, settled cultivation and in government services.

The Paniyans are a numerically dominant tribal community in Kerala. The bonded labour exists among the Adiyans also. The Paniyans claimed that they were autochthones of Wayanad and that the Gowdans and Nair landlords, who migrated to their habitat, overpowered and enslaved them. The Paniyan Tribes had been slaves of land lords for decades. Government of Kerala has abanded the slavery and rehabilitated them in different government projects. Rights from that time onwards they got better education and life style.

They are speaking primitive Malayalam language. Kattupaniyar see in Nilambur forest in Malapuram District and leading a life style of primitive tribes.

The total tribal population 37.36% of the state lives in Wayanad, which forms 17.43% of the total population of the district. According to the 2011 census, Adivasis constitute 18.5% of the total population in Wayanad district, which has the largest tribal population in Kerala. Of them, Paniyas are the largest tribe who comprise 45.6% of the Adivasi population, followed by Kurichiyas (16.6%), Kurumas (13.8%) and Kattunayakas (11.2%). The district is also home to Mananthavady and Sultan Bathery – the only two seats reserved for Scheduled Tribe communities in the 140-member state Assembly.

The Political History of Tribes

The ancient land tenure system in Malabar of which Wayanad is a part was almost like the feudal system of tenures prevalent in medieval Europe. During this period, the caste system was prevalent and the land rights corresponded with the hierarchy of social gradation with Brahmins at the top and untouchables at the bottom. The Nair chieftains also got lands from the King as a reward for their military services to him. These land grants were continued on a hereditary basis. Such *Jenmam* lands were in turn leased out in “*Kanom*” tenure to persons belonging to the next highest caste such as *Nairs* and *Nambiars*, who maintained close relations with both Brahmin landlords and Nair chieftains. These lands are further sub-leased under “*verumpattam*” tenancy to Ezhava Muslims (Kunhaman 1989). None of them engaged in manual labour and the work on land is done mostly by hill tribes or by lower caste communities. The scarcity of workers in the field led to the development of slave labour and an extensive market for such labourers (ibid).

Tribes especially Paniyas were the worst victims of two centuries of slavery under feudal landlords and that history was unique to Wayanad. When planters first began to settle in Wayanad (part of Malabar) they purchased the land along with the Paniyas (Kunhaman 1989). In this system, the slave was treated as an object and the masters owned the life of the slave. The number of slaves among tribal people increased due to the interest in land and cultivation of the migrant population and the division of land among them through the multi tier tenure such as *kanam,verumpattam* etc. In addition to agricultural operations, slave labour was used for gold mining in Wayanad, an important source of revenue for the early

Malabar Rajas. Since it was risky to work in the mines, labour was not available for this work and hill tribes were therefore employed (Kunhaman 1989).

The tribes of Wayanad were attached to one landlord and were traditionally known as *kundal panikkar* (bonded labourers). The bonded labour (*kundal pani*) existed mainly among the four tribal communities of Wayanad – Paniyas, Adiyas, Wayanad Pulayas, and Kattunayakas and to some extent among the Kurichias (Mathur 1977). By advancing a small amount of money “*nippupanam*” during the festival period, the tribal people used to pledge her/his labour for the whole year for daily meals and a pittance in kind. At the beginning stage, this slavery extended to the whole family and it lasted their entire life.

This bonded labour system was institutionalised around the temple, “Valliyoor kavu” and the annual festival there. This gave social and religious sanction to the bonded labour system and the Adivasis feared Valliyooramma who punished those who did not obey and keep their promise to the landlords. The Paniyas were beaten to make them work and punished for their disobedience (Panoor 1963). Panoor compares the slave trade of Paniyas in Valliyoor kavu to the cattle trade in the market.

Among the Paniyan, traditional caste council exists headed by semmi and Karayma as second in command. They function at naddu (territorial) level and are the pivotal forces that control the society. Succession to these offices are in the paternal line and order of succession is based on the principal of generation of age, subject to ritual approval of Kaarneemre (ancestors spirit) and semi and karayma function together on most occasions. Their duties include settling disputes between persons within the year the Naadu and keeping an overall control on the mode of behavior of people of the people in accordance with the traditional norms of the society. Traditionally village council has the power to impose cash fines and physical punishment in case of adultery, rape, elopement, disrespect for traditional norms, insult to traditional council and theft. They have also the power to give cash reward. These organizations are gradually losing their authority.

Political Mobilization

Mobilization was invariably linked with an activity. It is necessary to devote attention to local level institutional development in order to promote grass roots participation and empowerment. Participation as a means of empowerment does not involve only the delegation of the powers of project functionaries. It includes the entrustment of functions, funds, and control to participatory groups at the local level. The building of groups and the development of institution that are nurtured over a period of time result in a successful empowerment process.

Independence followed by the state reorganization in 1956 brought in more immigrants and new political equations. The combined impact of the immigration and large scale introduction of cash crops was far reaching on the tribes of Wayanad in general and Paniyar in particular. Intensive plantation agriculture increased in demand for labour and the Paniyar began to turn increasingly to 'Kulippani' for cash payment on daily basis. Learning from the history, the land and other crucial issues of the Tribals of Kerala will go on unattended, since the major political parties are just concerned to appease the vote bank of Kerala, which is in no way the Tribals. Looking to the Peoples' organizations, they try to organize the Tribals just for the sake of some projects and as and when the project period gets over they leave them half way. Moreover such organizations seem to lack a political will and vision to carry on the tribal issues with persistence. Even the media gives only little attention to this. So the real political discourse, vision and direction to take up the cause of the Tribal people of Kerala are drained up with either the threat of the CPI (M) or with the other interests of the Congress and the lack of political will of the people's organizations.

Land alienation is the pivotal issue of the tribals in Kerala past and present. Records say that among the tribal families in Kerala 30% are landless; it was in Malabar the number of landless tribal families was high and that too in the district of Wayanadu. The Adiyas and Paniyas of the region who formed almost 27%, of the tribal population in the state, remained landless for centuries. Landless among the tribes varies from 52% in Kurumas to 57% the Paniyans and 61% among the Adiyans in Wayanad. The tribals everybody regularly attended in Grama sabha meetings, though not all were active participants. Whenever 'Oorukootam' was called by the Panchayat they participated. This shows that Panchayat Raj was successful and effective with tribals especially under the people's Plan Campaign. The reasons could be

that they got many benefits like houses, drinking water, and that Panchayat was localized to their situation.

Panchayat Raj, as local self government, could be an agent which can be of benefit to the tribals. Therefore, for active and meaningful participation in Grama Sabha, the tribals should be systematically trained in Panchayat Raj. The new Panchayat Raj Act accelerated the process of political participation and empowerment of the tribals in Kerala. Of the total 17,086 Panchayat members of all the three tiers in the state 193 persons are tribals. In the state legislative assembly, the tribals hold one seat. Among the tribals strengthened in various forms for the purpose of empowering these sections.

The most peculiar feature of Kerala politics is the presence of two political coalitions LDF and UDF. These two political coalitions monopolized the political power of the state. These two coalitions did very little to enforce the tribal protection laws effecting in the state. The politically sensitive issue the tribals are they with no lands in this part of the Western Ghats. The main stream political parties are indifferent towards tribal problems, there were very eager to have vote banks in tribal areas, which is why almost all the political parties have organized their tribal wings. The Adivasi Sangam organized by the Jan Sang, Kerala Girivarga Sangam by the communist party of India, Karshaka Sangam by CPI(M) Kerala Aivasi Samajan of Indian National Congress are some examples. The Wayanadu Adivasi Swayam Sevak Sangam(WASSS) was the first in this attempt. It was organized by the Jansangh in 1963 and was registered in 1969. A number of political programmes including Dharanas, picketing, sathyagrahas were organized by this Sangam mainly for the restoration of their lost land. In 1969 a new Jan Sangh supported organization called Wayanadu 'Adivasi Sangham' was formed.

The ninth Five Year Plan 1997-2002 focused on the issue of the empowerment of tribals that is social and economic empowerment as well as social justice. The objective was to enable the tribes to exercise their rights freely, to enjoy the privileges and to land a life of self confidence and dignity at par with other citizens of the country. But in the tribal sections of Kerala realized the loss that occurred to their community and the need to regain their power and rights. As a result the tribals began to question the developmental strategies adopted by the main stream political parties. The tribals of Kerala are to extent alienated from the

mainstream political parties and are increasingly asserting their identity and culture. Outside the mainstream political parties, they are formed their own organizations and even political parties for the protection of their rights and the promotion of their interests.

In Kerala became a party to the perpetuation of injustice against the tribal people. This provided a historical context of the emergence of identity politics among the tribal communities which they effectively used for political mobilization. The discontent among tribals was visible since early 1990s. A section of the tribals who were disappointed with the mainstream political parties formed an organization called Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS) led by C.K. Janu. It was an organization functioning among the tribal communities in Kerala. AGMS has been able to bring the plight of tribals to the limelight and set off a large-scale agitation, mostly in an unconventional way.

The Muthanga struggle (in the Wayanad district of Kerala) in February 2003 was a culmination of the adivasi frustration over the failure of successive governments in the state to restore Adivasi land. The Adivasis had put up huts and other shelters in the area and announced that they would start cultivating the occupied area. Even after weeks of their occupation of the forest land, the government chose to remain silent. Capitalizing the aggressive mood of the local people and the agitating Adivasis, the police launched its operation on 19 February resulting in human loss and considerable destruction. For more than 1000 Adivasis living in the area for a month and a half, it was a day of horror. Muthanga was a turning point for the tribal mobilization in Kerala. In this agitation many Paniyans are participated.

The Adivasis not only deployed unconventional tactics to highlight their marginalization, but effectively utilised the power of the media and the expanded circuits of communication. After one year of the Muthanga incident, AGMS became Adivasi Rashrtiya Maha Sabha. Very commonly, police, forest, officials, bully and intimidate Adivasis and large numbers are routinely arrested and jailed, often for petty offences. Later, the agitators were given rights for the land under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. When the stir intensified in Wayanad, with support from major political parties in 2012, thousands of landless Paniya tribal people participated. They erected

huts on forest land, hoping that they would get to own it at the end of the agitation. This led to 53 agitation points in the two forest divisions.

Conclusion

The Tribals in Kerala more interested in main stream political parties rather than their own forums. A good number of them are politically conscious and are attending political party programmes and they constitute a mass base to most of the political parties in tribal areas. But at the same time they are not the vote bank of a particular political party. They are keenly observing the policies of parties and are responding with vigour. They have respect towards their traditional political system and at the same time no hesitation to join hands with the modern participatory democracy. Their increased participation in orukuttoms and Gramasabha also shows that their political awareness and participatory spirit. The members and leaders of various political parties recruited from among the tribals have also proved to be effective. There are nearly 12,000 adivasi families here who have no land at all, while a similar amount have just five cents of land or less. "So our demand is to give sufficient land for agriculture for them, because we cannot survive without farming," said Sankaran, the AKS state committee member. Paniya tribes in Wayanad feel right to different political parties like Indian National Congress and the Communist Party of India. Indian National Congress is the dominant noticed party among them. Paniyas do vote regularly and majority of them are aware that it is their right to vote. Owing to the economic and social backwardness of tribals, the tribal leaders are not in a position to play an equal role in party politics compared to the non-tribal leaders who are politically more active.

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