Forest and Paliyar Tribes of the Palani Hills: Impacts on Livelihood and Cultural Dimensions

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Abstract: Paliyan or Paliyar tribes are the tribal groups dwelling in the Palani Hills of Tamilnadu, located on the Western Ghats continuing from the Anaimalai Hills of Kerala. The outcomes of this study were subjected to the qualitative data collected from the Paliyar tribes in KodaiKanal block of the Palani Hills in Dindigul district of Tamilnadu. This paper analyses the livelihoods impacts on the Paliyar tribes in relation to the forest and its influential determinants. The displacement of the Paliyar tribes from the forest, the encroachment of the lands by the traders and the non-cooperation of the forest department and the revenue department are the causative factors that combinedly affect the livelihoods of the Paliyar tribes in the Palani Hills.

Keywords: Paliyan, Paliyar tribes, Livelihoods, Forest Resources, the Palani Hills

I. Introduction

India as a single country has the highest tribal population constituting 7.5% in the world (World Directory of Minorities, 2008). It is a land of around 10.4 million tribes (Tripathi, 2016). Around 256 tribal groups inhabit across the country and they speak about 105 languages and 225 subsidiary languages (Soundarapandian, 2008). Most tribal groups are dependent upon the forest resources for their livelihoods. Owing to the earlier limited needs of the tribal groups, the forest resources were not commercialised until the close of the eighteenth century (Saravanan, 2018). In the current scenario, a startling figure reveals that around 10,000 sqkm of forest lands are being destroyed annually (Soundarapandian, 2008). However, according to the National Forest Commission Report 2006 (cited in Banerjee & Madhurima, 2013), around 41% of the total forest is degraded.

Forests are natural ecosystems, significant to our ecological, economic and social well-being (Bahuguna, 2000; Bhattacharya, 2018) and they supply wood and non-wood products and other non-market goods and services such as water and clean air (Bhattacharya, 2018). Tribal groups have close association with the forest and their livelihoods are subject to the availability of forest resources, of which minor forest produce (MFP) is one of the major extracts (Tripathi, 2016; Banerjee & Madhurima, 2013). The forest has been governed by the Government; however, the stringent action to protect the reserve is often against the voiceless, like tribes, not against the exploitative groupseven though the legislation provides space for the benefits of tribes in the forest. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006 has been enacted to recognize and vest the forest rights and occupation of forest land in forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers, who have been dwelling in such forests for generations (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014). A larger mobilisation of marginalized forest dwellers and their advocates demanding rights over forests effectively negotiated India's democratic politics to achieve the passage of the law (Kumar & Kerr, 2012). This legislation, fathomed as the FRA, is a remarkable one in the government’s attitudes on tribal groups and their rights (Perera, 2009). However, according to the observations of Saravanan (2009), this Act would neither benefit the tribal communities nor strengthen conservation.

Palliyar tribes officially recorded as Paliyan, often highly observed in small isolated packets all along the Western Ghats from the Palani Hills in the North down to the Tirunelveli Hills in the South (Soundarapandian, 2008) and Kerala as well (Sambaham, 2016). Paliyars are considered as food gathering, hunting and food collection tribal group under the economic category (Samavnaya, 2017). Paliyan tribe is one of the 36 Scheduled Tribes (STs) of Tamilnadu as per the Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act, 1976. According Kathiresan (2014), the tribal groups experience grave hardships to obtain access to the services and resources despite various government initiatives for uplifting the tribal population. The outsiders of the tribal areas have emerged as influential clique groups that dominate the tribal groups that eventually sustain the tribes to experience poverty, illiteracy, land alienation, indebtedness, poor infrastructure, poor healthcare services, etc.
II. Overview of Literature Reviews

Castro and Nielsen (2001) exposed that co-management agreements among indigenous people, state agencies and other stakeholders in Canada and South Asia provide significant promise as a way of coping with natural resource conflicts in a participatory and equitable manner. However, experience disclosed that co-management regimes would either pave way to new conflicts or cause old ones to escalate. Instead of contributing to local empowerment, it strengthens the state's control over resource policy, management, and allocation.

Ballabh, Balooni and Dave (2002) examined the rise and fall of institutions that managed the forest resources. They compared case studies of Van (Forest) Panchayats of Uttarakanchal and Forest Protection Committees of West Bengal. The formation of Van Panchayats is a response to the people's movement against forest reservation at the beginning of the 20th century. The concept of Forest Protection Committees under Joint Forest Management (JFM) in India has emerged in response to the severe dilapidation of forest resources and the unrelenting conflicts and movements against the State.

Kumar (2002) compared Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme and government-managed forests in order to assess their respective net social benefits to different groups of local villagers. The result disclosed that the JFM regime reflects the social preference of the rural non-poor, and that the poor are net losers over a 40-year time horizon. It has been suggested that JFM need to include suitable compensatory mechanisms to decrease the poverty of the poorest within a village.

Mosse, Gupta, Mehta, Vidya and Rees (2002) jointly examined the migrations of tribals in the tribal belts of Western India. The study disclosed that the escalating pressure on a fragile resource base has substantially contributed to the failure in making out the sustenance needs of tribal households. Dependency and indebtedness are the factors leading to migration, which is outlined by class and gender. For a minority of Bhil households migration provided with positive opportunities for saving, investment and meeting contingencies. For the poorer majority, migration is a defensive coping strategy overcoming existing debts and extreme economic vulnerability. In combining unequal and individualised income accrual with the need for joint livelihood strategies, migration has a greater impact on intra-household relations.

Bhatt and Sachan (2004) studied the firewood consumption among Garo, Khasi and Jaintia tribal communities of Meghalaya. Khasi community has the highest fuel wood consumption, followed by the Garo and Jaintia communities. Cooking, boiling water, space heating, lighting and livestock rearing are the major activities for the utilisation of fuel wood. Owing to their poor socio-economic conditions, the tribal communities experience hardships to get access to commercial fuel. Around 90% of the total population utilize biomass as an essential source of energy.

A study of the dependence of forest fringe communities on non-timber forest products (NTFPs) at three sites in south India was done. Extent of dependence on NTFPs, indigenous ecological knowledge and market organization are the key constraining factors for improving the livelihoods of the tribal groups. The empirical data derived from the three study sites demonstrated the causality of the observed associations. The key for long-term livelihood gains lies in reducing the ecological cost. (Shaanker, Ganeshiah, Krishnan, &Ramya, 2004)

Soundarapandian (2008) examined the Paliyan tribes in the Western Ghats in Tirunelveli district in Tamilnadu. In order to shift the occupation of the Paliyan tribes, agricultural development methods, sericulture, dairy farming and social forestry schemes have been implemented. After obtaining housing facilities under The National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) schemes, the Paliyars dwelling in interior forests have migrated to the plain soil situated near the hill areas that are linked with road and transport facilities. Many of them have embraced Christianity due to the influence of Christian Missionaries in the district. Relationship with the outsiders such as town people, forest officials and contracts has an influence on their cultural changes. The cultural aspects of the plain people have an impact on them, i.e., they have adapted to it.

Meher (2010) contended that the economic liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG) model of development in India is virtually depriving the tribal people who are depended on their traditional means of sustainable livelihood by promoting the unregulated growth of mineral-based industries in the tribal areas. The elites of India are exploiting the life sustaining resources of the poor tribes and pushing them into a vicious circle of further deprivation as a result of displacing them from their land and homes. Thus, the vested interests of these elites are served while the tribes live in impecunious states. The resources of the ecosystems of the tribal areas are taken over by the mining and other industries in terms of economic development. The current development model does not provide space for the poor tribes to adapt the organised non-farm sector economy.

Lund and Panda (2011) examined the emergence of new activism among tribal (adivasi) women in Odisha. New activism is described as a multi-scalar quest for better rights, and adopts the form of collective resistance and mobilization. It was observed that the present mining-based industries have amounted to forced displacement, escalating economic deprivation and corrosion of resources and rights among poor, adivasi women and men. In order to overwhelm these problematic situations, the tribal women’s collective action has emerged as a strong force. They have allied with other social activist movements in order to resist against the exploitation. They have become more professional and strategic in their action, by this means gaining voice and visibility and creating a new political spectrum for them.
Bose, Arts and Dijk (2012) examined the historical trajectories of both British colonial rule and independent India to categorise scheduled tribes and to appropriate and legalise forests in tribal areas. The efforts to politicise forest tenure rights have bolstered political control over the scheduled tribes through new forms of authority, inclusion and exclusion. In order to claim their individual and community right to forestland and resources, the scheduled tribes have internalised their ‘new’ ethnic identity, thus creating countervailing power and room to manoeuvre within the current forest governance regime.

III. Objectives of the Study
This study aimed at finding the livelihoods impacts on the Paliyar tribes of the Palani Hills in terms of forest rights and resources.

IV. Materials and Methods
The descriptive research design is employed to describe the influential determinants that have impacts on the livelihoods of Paliyar tribes of the Palani Hills in relation to the forest. The qualitative techniques such as focus group discussions, one-to-one interviews and collection of secondary source data were employed for data collection. An interview guide was evolved and used as a ready-reckoner for data collection.

Palani (Palni) Hills is an eastward extension of the Western Ghats in southwestern Tamilnadu in India. It is the extension of the Anaimalai Hills in Kerala. The upper Palani Hills, in the west, comprises of rolling hills loaded with abrasive grasses. Peaks include Vandaravu, 2,553 metres; Vembadi Shola, 2,505 metres; and Karunnakadu, 2,451 metres. The lower Palani Hills form a heap of peaks than ranges from 900 to 1,500 metres and are split by steep wooded valleys. (Britannica, 2018)

Kodaikanal block in the Palani Hills of Dindigul district was selected as the field study. This block has 15 panchayats and from these 4 panchayats were selected, namely Kumbaraiyur, Poombarai, Thandigudi and Vadagouchni. These panchayats are selected based accessibility to the area and availability of the tribal members for interviews. In each panchayat, a focus group discussion (FGD). Totally, 4 FGDS were held and each FGD around 8 to 10Paliyar tribal members participated as respondents. The study population considered of Paliyar tribes from 2 to 3 villages. These tribal members had the representation of both genders in different age categories barring the children under 18 years.

V. Major Observations of the Study
- Paliyar tribes consider them as a primitive tribal group who lived in rock crevices and caves in the Palani Hills 50 years ago. Until the 1980s, they were hunter-gatherers, especially hunted small male animals for their foods and livelihoods. When they lived in the forest, they cultivated food crops in requirement to their food needs. During those periods, they had no outside interference or influence and maintained their own tribal cultural identities.

- After Independence, the introduction of the forest department, entry of business communities for selling dry fishes and palm jaggery and intrusion of outsiders in the name of tourism in the Palani Hills impacted the lifestyles of the Paliyar tribes. The business people who are often money lenders encroached the tribal lands by paying loans to the tribes for usury interest rates. Since the Paliyar tribes failed to pay back the principal loan amount with interests, their lands went into the hands of those business people.

- The Paliyar tribes started to relocate from the forest to the settlements allotted by the State during the 1980s. From 1990 to 1995, most of them were shifted to constructed houses. During those periods, around 15 families to 50 families settled in the government allocated land areas that are 3-4 acres respectively. At this instant, the households have increased significantly. In the future, when the population explodes, they feel the land earmarked for housing would not be sufficing to accommodate more households.

- Endogamous marriage system still prevails among the Paliyar tribes. Earlier they did not practise dowry system, but presently their associations with the culture of the mainstream society influenced and conditioned them to practise dowry.

- The Recognition of Forest Act, 2006 has provision for the tribal groups to claim their forest lands if they lived there until 2005. Since they have been evacuated from the forest from 1980 to 1995, they currently experience grave hardships to obtain their tribal lands in the forest domain in the Palani Hills. The government officials deny them to provide land pattas in the forest on the basis that no evidential documents prevail to prove them as forest dwellers. However, some families who proved them as forest dwellers with the civil societies have obtained land pattas.

- Most Paliyar tribes are engaged in the collection of minor forest products such as kakudukai(a medicinal plant item), gooseberry, kalpasanam(lichens), honey, bamboo grass, etc from the leased forest resources. They sell the collected produces to the businessmen from the plains for cheaper rates. Both men and women are engaged in the collection of non-timber forest products (NTFP). However, the current associations with the communities dwelling in the plains has driven the male youth and some male adults to engage in occupations such as construction, service and tourism sectors.
During the lean seasons falling from January to March and September to November, the minor forest produces are low in quantity. Hence, they struggle to eke their livelihoods in the lean seasons. Owing to their livelihood struggles during the lean seasons, they get trapped in debt to meet out their basic needs.

- The Paliyar tribes who have agricultural lands are cultivating either coffee or orange or both. The modernization has changed their traditional cultivation pattern. The tribal farmers are also facing similar situations like the collectors of NTFP, i.e., they sell their coffee and oranges to local agents that decide the prices.
- Due to the higher market value for lichen, the traders force the NTFP collectors to provide them with a larger quantity of lichen. For short-term gains, some collectors scrape off lichens along with barks. Concerning this, the forest department has restrained some tribal members from leasing the forest produces that affect their livelihoods as well.
- Despite serious hurdles in terms of transportation, economic and other factors, a few Paliyar tribal youthshad successfully graduated, but they experienced adversity to obtain educational-related jobs. Inopportunately, they have landed as collectors of NTFP and unskilled manual workers in other sectors.
- A strained relationship exists between Paliyar tribes and the government officials, especially the forest department and the revenue department. The Paliyar tribal families who are seeking pattas for agricultural lands feel they are being ill-treated by the officials of those departments. They feel that the officials are apathy on them. The families who had obtained agricultural land pattas possess lands in the range of 10 to 15 cents respectively. However, the eligibility for owning agricultural land is 4 to 5 acres but the government officials deny approving it.
- The tribal status has been constantly denied by the government officials claiming that they are not Paliyar tribes because they do not have the outlook of the tribes such as curly hair and dark skin. Even those who look like with the stated features are also denied the tribal status.
- For the land entitlements, the Paliyar tribes in collaborations with tribal associations have been constantly striving for their forest rights at state and national levels. The tribal leaders of the Palani Hills have protested in front of the Parliament House as well. The Paliyar tribal leaders who protested for claiming their land entitlements were arrested and then released.
- The introduction of welfare measures by the State and non-profit organisations have drifted them away from their traditional occupations. The intention of the State for the implementation of the welfare measures primarily is to chase them out from the forest. The role of the civil society organisations is significant in mobilising and organising them and bringing them into the fore.
- The displacement of their inhabitations from the forest to the settlement has largely affected the livelihoods of the Paliyar tribes in the Palani Hills. They feel that they do not want to compete with the plain people, they just prefer to live in their forest domains with available food and resources.

Conclusion

The thrust of this study was to analyse the livelihoods impacts on the Paliyar tribes of Palani Hills in terms of forest rights and resources. Since independence, the Paliyar tribes have no control over forest resources and in the 1990s, they have lost their land entitlements and forest rights. They have been cultivating agricultural crops to meet out their food needs. Currently, those who are involving in agriculture cultivate coffee and orange, thus the crop pattern has been changed. The intrusion of the outsiders, especially the traders who turned into money lenders had grabbed their agricultural lands. The Recognition of Forest Act has provided them with required forest rights, however, no strong relationship between the Paliyar tribes and the government officials prevails. It seems that the officials are not realising the situations of the tribes and they have an indifferent attitude towards them. Apparently, an open conflict prevails between the government officials and the Paliyar tribes of the Palani Hills. The displacement of the Paliyar tribes from the forest, the encroachment of the lands by the traders and the non-cooperation of the forest department and the revenue department are the causative factors that combinedly affect the livelihoods of the Paliyar tribes in the Palani Hills.

Bibliography


