



“They Call for Us”

Strategies for securing autonomy among the Paliyans,
hunter-gatherers of the Palni Hills, South India

by
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Abstract

Throughout the world societies based on hunting and gathering have been drawn into the market economy due to increasing social and economic pressure on their territories. This anthropological study analyses this process in the 1990s among the Paliyans of South India. During the first half of the twentieth century most Paliyans avoided contact with outsiders, preferring a livelihood based on the hunting and gathering of forest resources inside the steep forested valleys of the Palni Hills. By the end of the century their lives had significantly changed to a situation involving wage labour on plantations owned by neighbouring caste people, the collecting of non-timber forest produce for forest contractors and the herding of other people's cattle.

In spite of these changes the Paliyans still hunt and gather forest food and through the building of temporary alliances with non-governmental organisations they try to uphold a high degree of autonomy towards outsiders, comparable to the individual autonomy they enjoy within their own group. This autonomy is based on individualism, gender equality, social and economic flexibility and individual rights to common resources.

Today many hunter-gatherers around the world have reformulated their history and identity to link up with the more politically recognised identity as 'indigenous'. In India many forest-related groups have adopted this notion. Tribal organisations in the region of the Palni Hills have regularly invited the Paliyans to join such a general tribal cause. In spite of this the Paliyans, due to their downplaying of group interaction and authority, have so far stubbornly ignored these invitations. For the Paliyans, in a life-world where individual autonomy seems more rational, the virtue of group loyalty has little value.