

# **EVOLUTION OF LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES AMONG GEOGRAPHICALLY ISOLATED HILL TRIBES OF SOUTH INDIA**

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## Introduction

South Indian Hill tribes are blessed with rich biological diversity and a high level of traditional knowledge. Tribal communities live in close proximity with biodiverse rich landscapes have evolved locality specific and novel livelihood strategies based on their traditional knowledge. The local knowledgeable persons play a key role in sustaining or eliminating those strategies. Each livelihood strategy that is practiced now would have undergone a lot of change before it has reached the current status. In this century many driving forces are added in the process of evolution of strategies. Loss of biodiversity, global climatic change and information dissemination are some of the major factors that drive the rate of livelihood changes and determine the direction of its evolution.

To study the dynamic process of evolution of livelihood, two geographically isolated South Indian hill tribes were selected. One is from Kollimalai (Eastern Ghats) in Nammakal district, namely the Malayali tribe; the other is from Sathuragiri (Western Ghats) in Madurai district, namely the Paliyan tribe. Both the tribes speak Tamil, an ancient Dravidian language. Otherwise they are totally different from each other. Malayalis are a settled agrarian community whereas Paliyans are a nomadic, hunting gathering tribe. Since 1900 these tribes are influenced by the local market force and are actively participating in the local landscape transformation to satisfy the market demands. Their way of living has changed. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Paliyans were scantily dressed and were living in rock crevices; now they dress well and have learned to build huts at the foothills. Paliyans were expert honey gatherers which is their prime economic activity: now they have shifted their original occupation and collect raw drugs (dried medicinal plants) for the local and global market. The Malayalis, who used to do shifting cultivation of local traditional varieties of millets, have now shifted to cash crop cultivation.

Our understanding of the evolution of livelihood strategies of these two communities have helped us to infer the association between these two communities and the market. For the sake of the market linkages both the tribes participated in the transformation of their landscapes. Markets play a major role in the transformation of their livelihood strategies and options. By “market linkages” we here mean the increased role of cash economy in their livelihood activities. At present

both have lost their original landscapes but they have established market linkages at local and global level. The skills of both tribes are used extensively by the various agents of the market. The operation of market force is very significant in these areas. The tribes have become part and parcel of the market network. Unfortunately both Malayalis and Paliyans occupy the tail end of the market network. To gain this status in the market they have lost many of their life supporting systems. Their losses are many fold for example, the loss of biodiversity (Agrobiodiversity in case of Malayalis), loss of their local traditional knowledge, loss of their traditional occupational skills and many more. All this losses are directly linked to the transformation of the original landscape and level market linkages.

## **Location of our study area**

Our study area, the Sathuragiri hills are located on the eastern side of Western Ghats between 9.42°- 9.44° latitude and 77. 375° – 77. 415° longitude (1:50,000). Following Champion and Seth (1968) the vegetation of our study area has been classified as follows Tropical Southern Thorn forest; Tropical Dry Deciduous forest; Tropical Moist deciduous forest and Tropical semi evergreen and Evergreen forests. Tropical southern thorn and Dry deciduous forests occur between 200m –800m above MSL. The Paliyan habitat in Sathuragiri hills is located in a narrow strip of rocky slopes which lies in the transition zone between these two forest types.

Our study area has road access only through two different route namely Thannipparai and Saptur. The Paliyan settlement is accessible only through Thanniparai which is connected with road to Vatrap, a small town. Because of steep slopes and the distance involved in reaching Sathuragiri, the region is fairly well protected. The elevation varies from 200 M to 1275 M. The terrain is primarily rocky with steep slopes, ridges and valley. Paliyan settlements are located in the southern slopes of Sathuragiri. Many streams cut through Sathuragiri hills and act as a perennial source of water for the Paliyans.

## **Approaches**

In our field studies, we have employed semi -structured interviews, structured interviews, participant observation, and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methods at both sites. The community opinions were sought through informal group discussions. In the case of Paliyans of Sathuragiri, our focus was mainly on the collection and recording of their ethnobotanical knowledge. Ethnobotanical research focuses on Socio-biological interaction between tribal people and their immediate environment. Ethnobotanical data were collected following the methodology suggested by Jain (1964), Jain & Rao (1977) and Martin (1995).

In our study on the Malayalis of Kolli hills, an interpretive approach was made following Geertz (1973). Interpretive model emphasises on the interpretation of the researcher regarding the human-environmental relationship in the area of interest. Interpretive approach helps us to

understand the knowledge, perception and attitudes of tribal communities towards biodiversity, its utilization and conservation.

## **Historical Settings and Landscape History of Sathuragiri**

Sathuragiri is an isolated hill situated at the eastern side of Western Ghats. This hill range is an off - shoot that is connected to the Western Ghats through the Varushanadu hill ranges in the north. A Tamil book titled Sathuragiri Thalapuram published by Gurusamy Kone (1940) gives an account of Sathuragiri as an abiding place for many famous Siddhas of Tamil Siddha cult that dates back its origin to 5AD. Thalapuram speaks specifically of Thirumoolar, Bogar, Agathiyar, and Korakkar who are the founding fathers of the Tamil Siddha tradition. Thalapuram also relates Sathuragiri hills with the Indian epic Ramayana. It is mentioned in the Thalapuram that while Hanuman (Monkey God) was carrying the Sanjeevi mountain, a portion of it was dropped containing all the rare medicinal plants so that the saints can inhabit it.

In Sathuragiri the Adi amavasai is an important festival that is celebrated elaborately. In the early 50's the Paliyans were allowed to perform pooja and today this right has been taken away by the caste Hindus of the plains.

The Sathuragiri hill range was under the regime of Raju Zamin for nearly 200 years during the colonial period until up to 1947. The Zamin lost control over Sathuragiri hills after independence because of Zamin abolition act in 1947. Our interviews with the descendants of the Zamin who live today in Saptur (60 Km west of Madurai) revealed that the hill ranges were well protected by employing guards mounted on horses. However, we have not come across any literary or historical evidence to suggest any kind of impositions of restrictions on Sathuragiri Paliyans from outside forces including the Zamin. The forest department took over Sathuragiri hills 1951 and now it is a part of Grizzled Squirrel Wild Life Sanctuary, which was established in 1972 under the wild life protection act (1972).

## **Paliyan: People Description**

Thurston (1909) quoting from the writing of Rev. F. Dahman (1908) describes Paliyans as nomadic tribe, who for the most part rove in small parties through the jungle clad gorges that fringe the upper Palnis plateau. Pate (1916) describes Paliyans as a "Very backward caste who live in small scattered parties amid the jungles of the upper Palnis and the Varrushanadu valley". Paliyans are dark in complexion, short in Stature with an Archaic type of Nose, Square face thick Lips. Gardner (1972) describes the Paliyans physical characteristics to fall within the range of South and South East Asian – Australoid types formally referred as Negrito.

## **Paliyan: Life style and Sustenance**

Paliyans live as isolated groups in the slopes of Eastern slopes of the Western Ghats along the boundary between Tamilnadu and Kerala. The Paliyans of Sathuragiri who are Semi - nomadic types live in the lower slopes of hills which forms part of Grizzled Giant Squirrel Wild Life Sanctuary (WLS). In the slopes of the hills they have built semi - permanent houses and confine themselves to small territory. The walls of the houses are built using mud interwoven with various wiry stems. Thatched roofs are made up of grasses (*Themeda cymbaria*) in majority of the cases; some times they also make use of Palm leaves (*Borassus flabellifer*).

The Paliyan like majority of the hunting and gathering tribes are heavily dependant upon collection of edible roots, tubers and hunting small games for their sustenance. Along with this they also collect non-timber forest produce (NTFP) like honey, fruits, bark, leaves and other edible items for exchange. Though foraging of forest for sustenance is in practice among Paliyans since long time, this pattern has changed in recent times owing to market pressures. Thurston (1909) report of Paliyans acting as gatherers of NTFP for exchange of food materials with forest contractors. The collected items such as honey wax, myrobalans were reported to have exchanged for rice, tobacco, beetle leaves and nuts, chilies, tamarind and salt. The food thus earned as wages were supplemented by yams (*Dioscorea* sp.) and roots. The Paliyans of Sathuragiri now collect items of commercial value due to the external influences by the middlemen and local herbal traders. This has led to the introduction of cash economy in place of traditional self- sufficient pattern (Foraging). Thus the Sathuragiri Paliyans have become a group of people who acquire most of their food by purchasing it with the money that is earned through the collection and trade of NTFP. In recent times some of the Paliyan families in our study site have migrated to the plains near by and have started working as agricultural laborers.

### **Traditional Subsistence pattern of Sathuragiri Paliyans**

Up to the early decade's independence, the existence of Sathuragiri Paliyans characterized by the life of Hunting and Gathering. Occasional barter trade of NTFP for minor millets and rice were recorded. Under normal circumstances a Paliyan family in Sathuragiri spends the daytime in the forest gathering tubers and roots. They return back to settlement during the evenings.

However the springing up of the Sundaramahalingam temple (Shiva Deity) in the late 50's have brought the Paliyans to contact with the agro -pastoral groups of the plains. It is interesting to note that the origin of this temple is linked to Paliyan finding a linga who inturn informed the Zamindar. The Zamindar built a temple and initiated the worship. However, Sathuragiri Paliyans seem to have very weak attachment with the temple and continue to worship their god Karuppan by visiting a remote area of the forest along with the families. It is a common sight to see Paliyans work as porters for people from plains during festivals. Manual labour has brought money in to Paliyan life and has transformed his forest-oriented subsistence to that of a rural proletarian life.

## **Paliyans and their Ethnobotanical Knowledge**

The Paliyans were directly dependent on the biodiversity. Their livelihood is based on the collection of various forest produce such as roots, tubers, leaves, fruits and barks for their food, fuel, medicine, and many other purposes. A few Paliyans of Sathuragiri own cattles and they consider it as their wealth. Owning cattles is considered as a sign of material prosperity by the young generation Paliyans of Sathuragiri hills.

Our Ethnobotanical investigations among the Sathuragiri Paliyans resulted in the identification of 134 medicinal plants that are used by them to treat common ailments such as cold, cough, head ache, snake bites, poisonous insect bites and digestive disorders. Many of these diseases can be traced back to their environmental and occupational hazards. The Paliyans of Sathuragiri are prone to skin diseases. A few members in the community are recognized as Vaidyars or medicine man to whom the majority turns up when sick.

## **Food habits of Paliyans in relation to their changing environments**

Paliyans of Sathuragiri are basically non - vegetarians. They also organize hunting games such as Wild Fowl, Rabbit, Wild Boar, Trap Deer and Monitor Lizard. Several species of *Dioscorea* provide the staple food for Paliyans. Apart from yams they also consume leaves of *Amaranthus sps.*, which is collected around their settlements. Minor millets such as Thinai (*Setaria italica*) and Kelvaragu (*Eleusine coracana*) have been added as their staple food in the recent past. Anecdotal informations gathered from the elder Paliyans indicates that NTFP (Honey, Soap nut) were exchanged for Minor millets with the plain people since long time which is confirmed by the writings of Rev.Fr. Dahman (1908).

## **Monetisation of Paliyan livelihood**

Though Paliyan life is being described as a life of hunting and gathering, in recent times this description is being contested by many social anthropologists (Norstrom, 1994, 2001). Gardner (2000) describes the Paliyan way of life and interaction with the out side world as a “bicultural oscillation” between that of a self-sufficient nomadic life and of working as an occasional laborers. Bicultural oscillation model emphasizes the complete autonomy Paliyans enjoy in their relationship with the outside world (Gardner, 1985, 1991). This gradual shifting of strategy from hunting and gathering to working as manual laborers is mainly focussed on securing their material resources, a case many of the Paliyan families of Sathuragiri Hills. Paliyan-forest relationship itself has transformed from a relationship of subsisting on forest resources to that of sustenance by commercializing forest resources