

THE SHRINKING LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES OF THE PANIYAR

B. Francis Kulirani*

Abstract:

The Paniyar of Wayanad, who refer to themselves as the 'Ippimala makkal' (children of 'ippi hill'- Banasura peak of Wayanad) is the largest single tribe in Kerala. Their number becomes all the more significant when their distributions in two other contiguous areas of Wayanad, in the Gudalur taluk of Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu and in the Virajpet taluk of Coorg district of Karnataka are also considered.

In the earliest known literary evidence on South India namely the 'Tholkappiyam' (2nd Century AD), the 'Kurinji' or the mountainous region was described as the abode of indigenous people with avocations of food gathering and hunting. Historians (Menon 1972 and Kurup 1988) and anthropologists (Aiyappan 1992) agree that the Kurumba tribes (most likely the Mullukurumba group among the Kurumba cluster) had a principality in the eastern Wayanad, attributed to that of Vedar king. This is a pointer to the fact that the early inhabitants of Wayanad had an autonomous existence.

Communities like that of the Paniyar who lived here were subjugated and enslaved by the farming communities who immigrated into this plateau region from the south, the Malabar area and from the north, the Mysore region in the early centuries of Christian era. This immigration of communities with better farming skills resulted in the subjugation of the indigenous people like the 'Ippimala makkal' giving rise to the emergence of new ethnonym *Paniyar* – signifying workers. Yet another instance of the same processes is that of the 'Adiyar' (slave or serf) community living in the same habitat, who prefers to be known as 'Ravuler' (in their own dialect it means 'our people').

In the medieval period the Vedar king of Wayanad was defeated by the combined force of the Malabar Kshatriya Rajas of Kottayam and Kurubarnad principalities that paved way for a long period of feudalistic rule of Wayanad by the Nayar gentry of Malabar. Wayanad witnessed yet another onslaught of peasant immigration, this time from far south the Travancore region, by the Christians and Izhavas, from the early part of 20th Century. The forest land resources that were freely utilized by the tribal communities became tenureial agricultural holdings of the immigrants. The Nayar feudal chiefs preferred the immigrant tenets, as they were willing to make cash payment for lease of land.

The State Reorganisation in 1956 and the subsequent land reforms together with the democratic processes, abolition of bonded labour and emphasis on welfare of the Scheduled Tribes mark yet another phase in the changing livelihood patterns of the tribes of Wayanad in general and the Paniyar in particular.

During the above described historical phases of Wayanad the Paniyar had to resort to different livelihood strategies; 1) an early phase of food gathering, 2) a period of bonded labour-major part of the payment only in kind supplemented with food gathering, 3) liberated daily wage earner- payments in cash, and 4) dependant on welfare measures of the state being sidelined in the competitive labour market and a sense desperation setting in.

The paper thus shall examine closely the features of the livelihood strategies that evolved in - each of the above phases and discuss with greater attention the emerging scenario.

*Superintending Anthropologist, Anthropological Survey of India, North East Regional Centre, Mawblei, Shillong-793021, Meghalaya, India. Phone:0364-2537285 (O) 2534616 (R)
E-mail >ansinerc@sancharnet.in<>fkulirani@yahoo.com<

The Shrinking Livelihood Strategies of the Paniyar

The mountainous and hilly terrain of South India, both in the Eastern and Western Ghats regions of the peninsula, is the traditional abode of about eighty ethnic minorities who came to be classified under the constitutional terminology of Scheduled Tribes in independent India. Majority of them successfully pursued an avocation of food gathering coupled with fishing and hunting as late as the middle half of the twentieth century. Their exclusive domains have over the years turned out to be areas where they are outnumbered by non-tribal settlers. Such pockets are many and no state in the region is an exception. In the process the livelihood strategies of a whole lot of small communities with subsistent economies came under the influence of external cultural systems. The fast deterioration situation together with the failure of the government machinery to protect interest of the tribes, a sense of desperation has been felt by the affected communities, which is slowly but steadily forcing them to seek desperate solution.

This paper shall examine the case of the Paniyar of Wayanad, Kerala. For the following reasons the case of the Paniyar is very appropriate in the context of this seminar: -

- 1) They are among the worst sufferers of the over-run of their resources by the immigrants in their traditional habitat of Wayanad and adjoining Nilgiri (Tamilnadu) and Coorg (Karnataka) areas.
- 2) Numerically they form the largest single tribe in Kerala affected by a common problem and if a solution to their plight can be found then it shall be easy to find solution in the case of others also.
- 3) An understanding of the range of changes underwent by the Paniyar and the circumstances associated with it shall provide us with an insight into the changes in the livelihood strategies resorted by the communities like that of the Paniyar.
- 4) There is a sense of desperation that is currently prevalent in the tribal milieu of Kerala, as evidenced by the agitations that culminated in the 'Muthanga' event of February 2003. The tribal section of Kerala's ethno-political plurality have also crystallized in to a political formation that of 'Adivasi' though they constitute only one percent of the States population. The 'Adivasi' front emerged only after the failure of the state to ensure their right to livelihood through the non implementation of Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction of Transfer of Lands and

Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act, 1975. This Seminar is the right academic forum to deliberate on the issues of livelihood strategies that is confronting the tribes of Kerala as a whole and Paniyar in particular.

This author had been conducting field observations in Wayanad from the year 1975 and had the opportunity to conduct an ethnographic study of the Paniyar in 1981. Periodic visits, direct interaction and close study of the events in Wayanad are being carried on. The discussion shall focus on four historical phases of the Paniyar society.

i) Early phase

The legendary history of the Paniyar as recorded by Gopalan Nair (1911) Somasekharan Nair (1976) Aiyappan (1992 collected in 1971) and Kulirani (1984) are all pointers to a pre historic period when they actively and successfully pursued a food gathering way of life. To the first part of this legendary period the community attribute their life as children of 'Ippihills' (*ippimala makkal*) a legendary mountain range, the identity of which some attribute to the Banusura hills in the western Wayanad. It is pointer to the autochthones status of the community in Wayanad. Not only did they flourish in Wayanad (56952 in 1981 Census) they even moved to the adjoining areas of Coorg (Karnataka), Nilgiri (Tamil Nadu) and even to the plains of Kannur, Kozhikode, and Malappuram districts. It is unlikely that even in the early period the 'Ippimala makkal' were the only occupants of the area. The presence of other food gathering groups like the Kattunaicken (Jeenukuruba), Adiya (Panjari Yerava) shifting cultivators like Urali Kurumba (Betta Kurumba/Kadu Kurumba) who speak dialects of Kannada are pointers to the fact that the region was the shared habitat of other food gatherers also. The presence of Malayalam speaking Scheduled Tribes like the hunter cultivator Kurichiyar and Mullukuruma is an indication of the early inroads made in to Wayanad from the southern plains.

From the earliest known literary evidence on South India the 'Tholkappiyam' (2nd Century AD), the 'Kurinji' or the mountainous region was described as the abode of indigenous people with avocations of food gathering and hunting. Historians (Menon 1972 and Kurup 1988) and anthropologists (Aiyappan 1992) agree that the Kurumba tribes (most

likely the Mullukuruma, a group among the Kurumba cluster) had a principality in the eastern Wayanad, attributed to that of Vedar king. This is a pointer to the fact that the early inhabitants of Wayanad had an autonomous existence.

ii) Wayanad colonisation & bondage of the food gatherers:

The second part of the legendary history of the "Ippimala makkal" refers to the subjugation of their legendary ancestors' *ippimala muthappe* and *ippimala muthassi* (great great.....grand father and grand mother of Ippimala), by the Goundan and Uralikurumba (Kulirani 1984), marking a very drastic shift in the livelihood strategy of the *ippimala makkal*. Perhaps this is also the period in history when the "ippimala makkal" came to be called as "Paniyar" meaning labourer marking their social role as that of the subjugated.

The Goundar are a small group of Kannada speaking cultivators who are Jains by religion who pioneered the colonization of Wayanad from the Karnataka side. The legend narrates that the ancestors of the Paniyar sister and brother who were young (girl older to boy) were trapped by the Uralikurumba for his Goundan master and reared in captivity. When they grew up they were to treat themselves as brother and sister only from waist up had been permitted to be husband and wife below waist and had ten children; again five boys and five girls who were also allowed to marry applying the same principle. The Paniyar refer to the above twelve ancestors as *pantheerappanmara*, (who are venerated as their early ancestors). Probably this was the period when the people who prefer to be known as "Ravuler" of Wayanad also came to be enslaved and became "Adiyar." Their subjugation is attributed to Embrandiris (Tulu Brahmans), another migrant cultivator group to Wayanad from Karnataka. It is difficult to arrive at an accurate assessment of the date of these events or to the actual conditions of the enslaved communities.

A clear reference to Wayanad is available only in 8th century A.D. In the political geography of that period of Wayanad was called 'Karka Nad'(meaning country difficult to access), under the Kingdom of Ezhimala (Aiyappan (1992) in the

Malabar region. It is also worth mentioning here that in the legendary history of Wayanad as told by the traditional inhabitants, during the reign of Vedar Kings (probably a line of Mullukurumar with their fortress at Veliyambam in Poothadi village) the combined force of the Kshatriya rulers of Kottayam (north Kerala) and Kurumbranad defeated the tribal chieftain of Wayanad and annexed the region to their territories, north Wayanad became part of Kottayam principality and south Wayanad was taken over by Kurumbranad. They administered Wayanad by dividing the land to several territorial units called *nadu*. Nair chiefs were appointed *janmi* or feudal lords.

Under the feudal administration the entire land became the property of the king and the *janmis* their custodians. The cultivators like the Wayanadan chetty, Mandan chetty, Edanadan chetty, Embrandiri, Goundan, Kurichiyar, Mullukuruman and others were retainers or tenants of the *janmis*. Ragi, paddy, pulses and vegetables formed the traditional crops meant mainly for consumption. The Paniyar and Adiyar were reduced to bonded labour under various ownership categories like *-janmam* (absolute ownership and transferable on payment of fixed amount), *kanam* (mortgaged by the owner for a certain amount of cash, which is repayable and an annual payment of a certain measure of paddy) and *pattam* (the owner rented out his *janmam* Paniyar or Adiyar for a short term, may be an agricultural season to another cultivator). The labourers in turn received payment in kind, a certain measure of paddy or ragi just sufficient to survive on a day-to-day basis along with salt and chilies and certain privileges during festivals. They built hutments in the properties of the tenant cultivator. Annually they were supplied with some clothing. Paniyar supplemented their food requirements by gathering edible roots, tubers, leaves, bamboo shoots, catching land crabs and fishing. They could always fall back on natural resources of the wild to mitigate their food shortages.

The biggest impact of the regime of the Rajas and *janmi* was that Paniyar and communities like them were denied the opportunity to emerge on their own. The establishment of temples and large areas of land earmarked as *devaswom* (property of the deity) further strengthened their enslavement. During the late 18th century Wayanad also witnessed the annexation by Srirangapatnam during the period of Hyder Ali

and Tipu Sulthan, but qualitatively this event did not change the livelihood pattern of the communities like that of the Paniyar. At the political level the Sulthan appointed new Nayar *janmis* in the place of those who were loyal to the Rajas of Malabar.

iii) Beginning of liberation from slavery

The fall of Srirangapatnam brought the British to Wayanad in 1792 in spite of the valiant resistance by Pazhasy Raja of Kottayam and his tribal militia of Kurichiyar and Mullukurumar. The British didn't change the tenurial system based on *janmi-kudiyan* (feudal lord and tenant) system nor did they stop agrestic slavery. According to Aiyappan (1992) the East India Company had intervened to stop slave trade from Malabar Coast by the early 19th century. Aiyappan rightly points out that in spite of the British efforts to end slavery transactions in slaves continued for a long time till the first decade of 20th century (ibid). They encouraged British and native planters to take up plantation agriculture, thus coffee, tea, pepper, cardamom and other cash crops were introduced in to the region. Wayanad was practically opened up for plantation agriculture by the British. Through out 19th century the British domination in the plantation sector continued in Wayanad. From early part of 20th century onward Wayanad witnessed massive inflow of immigrants from southern Kerala. The then prevailing tenurial system in Wayanad under Nayar feudal chieftains and their custodianship of temple properties helped the immigrants to take possession of large tracts of land and bring it under intensive cultivation of cash crops. Independence followed by the state re-organisation in 1956 brought in more immigrants and new political equations. The combined impact of the immigration and introduction of cash crop has been far reaching on tribes of Wayanad in general and Paniyar in particular (Kulirani 1982, 1996, 1999).

Community like that of the Paniyar who had been deprived of possession of any land resources centuries ago but was dependent greatly on food gathering became totally dependent on agriculture labour. Initially the fear of the strangers forced them to be attached to their old masters under new systems of bonded labour that had emerged in the wake of British move to abolish slavery. The system of cultivator labour relations that prevailed in Wayanad during the 19th and early part of 20th century were known

differently as *Kundalpani* , *Valli pani* etc, were systems of annual contracts that were entered into by the landlords and the agrestic serf during the annual temple festivals like that of Valloorkavu near Manananthavady, Erulam, Pulpally etc. It had certain elements of symbiotic relationship between the cultivator and the family of the labour force, but exploitative in terms of meager wages that was paid mainly in terms of measure of paddy. The masters of the Paniyar were also continuing with the traditional crops that wetland paddy cultivation. The plight of the tribes of Wayanad under the reorganized state of Kerala started getting closer attention of the Government of Kerala by the abolition of the feudal system of landownership and the rudiments of bonded labour system in 1976 and introduced right to hutments in 1968.

Intensive plantation agriculture increased the demand for labour and the Paniyar began to take to *kulipani* (wage labour) for cash payment on daily basis. The minimum wages act 1951 made the outside labour expensive and Paniyar began to be preferred as they worked for lesser rates. The fast growing agricultural hinterland of Wayanad in the wake of cash crop production naturally led to the emergence of small towns in interior villages (Kulirani 1996). Such small towns became the hub of commercial activity throughout Wayanad. The immigrant cultivator sold their commercial crops in these market towns and purchased the staples. The wage labourers like the Paniyar also became totally dependent on the market for all their food, clothing and other house hold requirements. The complete transition of the Paniyar from a barter economy (they bartered their labour for payment in kind) to cash and market economy occurred as late as 1976, only after the abolition of bonded labour system.

iv) Traditional attitudes and competitive labour market.

The initial misgivings over, the Paniyar slowly gained familiarity with the immigrant Christian, Muslim, and Izhava communities. There were many among the above groups who had migrated to Wayanad as agriculture labourers looking for better prospects and with an aspiration to improve the quality of their life. It was this class of workers that the Paniyar and other tribal labourers had to compete for the new labour opportunities that emerged. The land use pattern of the immigrants were more in favour of labour intensive cash crops like coffee, pepper, tea, cardamom etc. The immigrant labours were already more familiar with the modes of cultivation and seasonal works associated with the above crops than the local labour force. In the

labour market that emerged in Wayanad traditional agricultural serfs were only the second choice. The general opinion of the non-tribal cultivators about the Paniyar was that they are undependable, slow and lazy. Whereas the Paniyar felt that the settlers were harsh, unkind and more demanding.

This scenario can be attributed to the clash cultural values. The Paniyar, though participate in the modern market economy still hold a world view similar to their food gathering days. They work only to meet their immediate needs, not to make savings for future. For that matter they do not cash in on the demand for their labour during peak agricultural seasons so that they can save for lean seasons. The lean agricultural season mainly falls during the July-August months and it is not uncommon to come across news items about starvation death among Paniyar of Wayanad during that period. The Govt. of Kerala had introduced free rations for the families like the Paniyar below poverty line (green card holders) which is the main stay for them. Many Paniyar families have also improved their living conditions by availing Govt. welfare measures like resettlement programmes in places Cheengeri, Sugandhagiri and distribution of surplus land, hutment rights, freely built house, educational programmes etc. However the vast majority still have many unresolved problems especially landlessness in their traditional home land and means to an assured livelihood. The Paniyar and other adivasi groups in Wayanad have slowly realised the hard realities they are facing. A very vocal and committed leadership has emerged from among them as evidenced from the events in the recent past in Wayanad (Muthanga event in Wayanad wild life sanctuary on February 19, 2003. For details please read Bijoy and Raman in EPW Vol XXXVIII No 20 pp 1975-1982). Restoration of alienated tribal land to the aggrieved and providing land to the landless Paniyar and other tribes is a justified demand which need to be addressed with urgency.

CONCLUSION:

I have attempted to present here briefly the social, political, and economic changes that have happened in Wayanad from a socio-historical point of view and tried to examine how the above changes had influenced the livelihood

strategies of the Paniyar in the course of these events that happened around them, but in no way could alter it in any manner favourable to them.

Viewed in totality it would appear that the range of change from a primitive food gathering economy into a modern cash economy is very fundamental. But at ground level the change is not fundamental at all and that the subsistence mode of food gathering is qualitatively and fundamentally not much different even in the context of wage labour and participation in modern market economy. The concern of each individual still remains to be the question of day to day livelihood.

A study of Nurit Bird (1983) on the Naiken of Nilgiri Wayanad, a food gatherer tribe, who also share the habitats with Paniyar also reveals a similar situation. The Naiken also taken up wage labour as a means of livelihood supplemented with occasional for a giving and collecting of forest produce for trade met by and large belong to the world of wage employment, the cash economy and bureaucratic industrial organization. Bird's study concluded that though the Naiken took to shops for purchase of commodities with the wages received, their response to the possibilities of wage employment was to "gather" wage in the plantation and that the notion of "wage gathering" implied that the Naiken managed to interpret their new experience in traditional terms.

The response of the Paniyar was also similar in many ways. In the early phase of their change to wage labour under bonded labour system they too could fall back on foraging and gathering. But the experience of the Paniyar were much harder. The Naiken could enjoy the freedom to fall back on the jungle the Paniyar totally lost their freedom rather they became commodity. The "Ipplimala Makka" became "Paniyar" through a process of 'objectification' and 'alienation' (Marx quoted by walklate 1984). According to Marx "the advancement of capitalism, characterized by the division of labour, resulted in workers becoming equated with the product of their work". This process he referred as 'objectification' that the 'workers became like objects, servants to the product of their work, having little power over the product of their work'. Having been alienated from the labour process, their labour power became a commodity to be bought and sold in the market system.

The above Marxian postulate is very relevant in the case of Paniyar during the feudalistic period till the abolition of bonded labour system in 1976. The

Paniyar had faced the worst agonizing experiences of subjugation and lack of means of livelihood. They are fully aware of the deprivations and the marginalization in all areas of human activity. The community is desperately seeking a solution to their sad plights. In this effort they have joined hands with the inter-tribal political forum of “Adivasi Gotra Mahasabha’ to air their grievances especially restoration of alienated tribal land and providing land to the landless.

References

- AIYAPPAN,A. 1992. *The Paniyas*, Institute of Social Research and Applied Anthropology, Calcutta.
- BIRD, NURIT. 1983. ‘Wage –Gathering:Socio-economic Changes and the Case of the Food Gatherer Naickans of South India’ in Peter Robb (Ed.) *Rural South Asia: Linkages, Changes and Development*, Curzon Press, London.
- GOPALAN NAIR. 1911. *Wayanad: Its People and Traditions*, Higginbothams, Madras.
- KULIRANI, B. FRANCIS. 1982. ‘Impact of Cash crop Economy on The Tribes Of Wayanad’ *Journal of Indian Anthropological Society*, Vol.17, No.1
- _____ 1983. ‘Agrarian Development and Growth of a Small Town: A Case Study of Pulppalli’ in Chakrabarthy S.B. (Ed.) *Agrarian Situation in India*: Calcutta, An.S.I.
- _____ 1996a. ‘Emergence of a Small Town in Tribal Wayanad: A Study of Pulppalli’, Ph.D Thesis Submitted to the Calicut University (Unpublished)
- _____ 1996b. ‘Kerala Model and Wayanad’s Development Experience’ Paper submitted in the ‘International Conference on Kerala’s Development Experience’. 8-11 December 1996, New Delhi, Institute of Social Sciences.
- KURUP, K.K.N. 1998. *Modern Kerala*, Mittal Publications, Delhi.
- MENON,S. 1972. *The Kerala District Gazetteers: Cannanore*, Government Press.
- SOMASEKHARAN NAIR,P. 1976. *Paniyar* (Malayalam) National Book Stall, Kottayam.
- WALKER, SUNDRA. 1984. ‘Marx and Marxism’ in Anthony Forder (Ed.) *Theories of Welfare*, Routledge & Kegan Paul. London.