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State and the forest-related Communities:
Issues and paradigms of Development

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ABSTRACT

Livelihood security is dependent on two related factors – one, the access to resources to meet the basic needs of a community and, second, the state policies in this regard and the attitude of the civil society are reflected in the state policies. With the result both overlap and influence, positively or negatively, the livelihood security of smaller, marginal and vulnerable communities such as the forest-related communities.

The state policy with regard to ‘Development’ of tribes and other forest-related local communities is quite clear -- it considers development unilinear with a gradation. State policies as reflected in the legal regime created such as the forest policies and the recent PPVFR ACT 2002 and Biodiversity Act 2002 need to be analysed in the light of the forest related communities – their access to resources and livelihood security.

In this paper an attempt is made to bring out and analyse the complex relationship of development and state policies as reflected in the cases of various Scheduled Tribes / forest-related communities.

(if the organisers permit, a documentary “A Nebulous Future: The Story of Onge (Little Andaman)” will be presented. Duration 42min)

*.... Bottom line (is) that how good development
is depends on what sort of people ‘we’ –
development professionals – are.
- Robert Chambers (1998,p.Xvi)*

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Livelihood security is directly related to the access to basic resources is saying the obvious. But the nature of the relationship between **livelihood security** and **access to basic resources** is a matter of debate. For , the nature of this relationship depends on the state policies and the attitude and ideology of the civil society.

Livelihood security is basically dependent on the **nature of entitlements** of people in terms of access to resources. Often the policies in this regard are mere listing of rights without much relationship to enforceable entitlements. This is more so in the case of marginalised and vulnerable communities such as forest-based communities. In the case of such communities, livelihood rights are considered **concessions** rather than entitlements. This is a definite colonial legacy being continued to be practiced in an independent and democratic state like India. The chasm between the livelihood rights and livelihood entitlements is clearly reflected in the statistical targets achieved and the real development in terms of achieving livelihood means.

The success of the so-called development programmes is often measured in terms of the physical and fiscal targets. These measures often do not have any relationship to the ground realities. Neither are these programmes comprehensive enough to really bring up the households to a level which could be sustained, nor the local **communities have** any role in the programme planning, nor are they based on the priorities of the people. Often the governmental agencies, and the NGO's as well, "manufacture" the consent through the PRA methods – people ask for only those things that are offered by these agencies. With the result the participatory planning and development many a time is merely a proxy method to generate demand for these programmes. Of course, there are a few exceptions. In recent years both governmental agencies, as well as others, find it convenient to conduct PRA's to "manufacture demand" for their programmes and services, and thus projecting a view that their frame-work/models of development are relevant even now. This simply is denying a role for the local communities to take decisions about their own lives.

Large amount of selective/partial information, and sometimes completely distorted information, is fed to the civil society in general about the developmental programmes and the budget allocations. The general stereotype prevalent among almost all sections of the civil society is that the state is doing everything possible, and allocating lots of funds, but the target groups like Scheduled Tribe communities are unable to take advantage of such programmes. The ground realities are completely at variance with this popular stereotype. But this stereotype also rationalises the top-down approach by arguing that the local communities are not capable of planning and using the resources

and some one else from Delhi or Chennai should plan and execute and determine the priorities of the people in proxy (Incidentally this is what our colonial masters told us – “you cannot govern yourself and, hence, we are governing you”). The Colonial attitude seems to be continuing even today. Masters have changed but not the attitude.

I

In this paper an attempt is made to present two cases, one from Tamil Nadu and the other from Little Andaman. This presentation is meant to bring in issues of basic livelihood among two different communities, different in many ways. This presentation also makes an attempt to bring in the specific issues related to the indigenous knowledge system and the state policies in this regard. These two communities are the Malayali of Javadhu Hills of Tamil Nadu and the Onge of Little Andaman. The life, livelihood patterns and the policies impinging on the life of these two communities are presented in the next section.

II

Malayali (lit.*malai*= hill, *alu*=person) is one of the 36 Scheduled Tribes of Tamil Nadu. The population of Malayali was 2,09,033 (1981 Census) and formed 54.14% of the total Scheduled Tribe population of Tamil Nadu.

The Malayali are supposed to have belonged originally to the Tamil *Vellala* caste who retreated to the hilly tracts... (Fuchs, 1973).

The Malayali is spread along the contiguous hill ranges of Javadhu, Kolli, Yercaud, Pacha malai and so on. In fact there are several contiguous habitations in these hill ranges, which are predominantly inhabited by the Malayali.

Though this description pertains to the Malayali of Tamil Nadu, some of the specific information is generated from two different studies in Javadhu Hills. (Jayasree, 2002 and an on going project being conducted by Centre for Water Studies, University of Madras, Chennai and SST , Chennai).

Malayali basically depend for their basic survival on agricultural and forest activities. From the household survey of Malayali in Javadhu hills, it is seen that more

than 80% of Malayali depend on agriculture. It is also seen that most of the (40.6%) households have an operational land holding of 1-3 acres. About 10% of households are landless.

The pattern of cultivation and cropping pattern varies from one hill range to the other. What is common is that type of land i.e *Mettu nilam* and *Kazhani nilam*. *Kazhani nilam* or wetlands are relatively small in proportion to the total land varying between 20 and 25%. With the result, single crop cultivation is the norm. In the dryland the major crops cultivated are *Kambu*, *Kevuru*, *Thinai*, *varagu* and *Samai* and so on. In the *Kazhani nilam* (Wetland) they cultivate paddy, often twice an year. Paddy cultivation is relatively a recent, 30-40 years, introduction to the agricultural system of Malayali.

Introduction of Paddy had clearly an impinging effect on the food system of Malayali. This crop had far-reaching effect on the food system and the agricultural system of Malayali. Similarly in Kolli hills the introduction of Yam crops has completely changed the cropping pattern and led almost to the extinction of local millet production.

In Javadhu hills the effect of changed cropping pattern, though significant, had limited overall impact on the society. While among the Malayalis of kolli hills the changing crop pattern had tremendous impact on the Malayali. One needs to go into the details to make any specific analysis. This is not attempted here, except to make a dogmatic statement that the dialectics of influence in terms of commodification, wider needs of the civil society and the influence on the Malayali society in essence produced a situation which influenced negatively the livelihood security.

Another major resource on which Malayali depend for their livelihood is the forest. With the increasing strictures on access to the forest resources and the changes in the policies created by the governmental departments on the other, the Malayali today are facing acute problems of utilizing the resources for their livelihood.

With the result a completely distressed livelihood strategy is visible and manifest in their day to day life. Most of the Malayali, especially in Javadhu Hills, on an average own about 0.75 acres of land. Which is good enough to produce the small millets which feed them once a day for about six months a year. Malayali for six months on agriculture produce, while their forest activities provide them food for about three months. Most of the households, either the male singly or both husband and wife, migrate to nearby or sometimes distant urban places for generating their livelihood by working as construction labourers and so on. The implication of such a migration results in a tremendous

disruption of normal households. The major problem is to have secondary source of income or more precisely to generate their minimum needs of food during the crisis period.

Onge of Little Andaman

Little Andaman is situated to the south of the south Andaman Island, and it is 122 kms from Port Blair. The area of the island is 721 sq. kms. The interior of the island has tropical rain and deciduous forests, with tall hardwood forest covered by climbers. The density of the vegetation is so much that penetrating into it is very difficult. The coastline is irregular. The island has a network of creeks, during high tides water from the sea penetrates; creating swamps and marshes which nurtures the wealthy mangroves. The Onge, who were the sole inhabitants of Little Andaman island, though even during British there were incidences of contact expedition to Little Andaman, their environment was not reported to be disturbed. The island was traditionally divided into three territorial groups, the Onge succeeded in maintaining their way of life throughout by bitterly opposing any intrusion into their territory. It was after independence, during late 1960s and early 70s, that the Indian government settled East Pakistan refugees, Tamil repatriates from Sri Lanka, Bengalis were given resettlement area, Moplah from Kerala, then 163 Nicobari families were brought here to establish their traditional horticultural practice (Venkatesan and Sudarsen, 1990). For these settlers, a good amount of forest was cleared there by naturally interrupting the corridor of the Onge who were bounded to their traditional territorial boundaries. This fragmentation of the contiguous area resulted in great social, cultural and physical loss for the Onge. The Forest Development and Plantation Corporation's organised timber extraction and replacing the cleared forest area with the red oil palm plantation, shrunk the natural forest cover in the island.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the estimated population of the Onge was 672, during the 1931-census their population was 250 and now the population is 94. The gradual decrease in their population reflects the forced confinement and restriction on spatial mobility and natural resource utilisation. Spatial limit to be exploited for a hunting and gathering is determined by their environment and their resource base. A hunting and gathering society exclusively utilised a space of 721 sq. kms, now a population of 14,000-odd are inhabiting in that space. There would be remarkable differences in the way of life of the society which has not given away the practice of hunting and gathering economic activity.

The Onge were found in three distinct groups with respective territorial identity, in Dugong Creek, Jackson Creek and South bay. The Government first built one settlement

at Dugong Creek in 1976 and another after a couple years in South Bay. The Onge from Dugong Creek and Jackson Creek were settled in Dugong Creek settlement and the Onge from South Bay was settled in the settlement at South Bay. The Dugong Creek settlement comprises of wooden building of community hall, dispensary, powerhouse, Onge Multi-purpose Co-operative Society and the residence of the Government staff. The wooden houses built for them neither resembled their indigenous temporary hut (*korale*) nor the communal hut (*Berai*). In the name of introduction to horticulture and encourage the Onge to a settled life pattern, the Government established a coconut plantation, which is now said to be owned by Onge, but the feeling of ownership amongst the Onge is yet to arise. Both men and women are engaged as casual wage labourers to tend the coconut grove.

The subsistence and other tasks of the Onge are associated with four seasons of almost equal duration in a year (Feb-Apr, May-Jul, Aug-Oct and Nov-Jan), based on their perception of the climatological changes. Each of the territorial units includes several exogamous, local descent-groups called *berai*. However, within a territory a *berai* does not have any specific right over either an area or a resource. A *berai* is a unit of production and consumption for a major part of the year except during Feb-Apr. A *berai* has several units of husband-wife pair and their unmarried children called *koraley*.

The Onge of Little Andaman, now have their resource base confined to 76 sq.Kms. This comprises of *Gai Buralea* (Rain Forest) and *Tangi akini* (Mangroves). The Dugong Creek settlement of the Onge is situated few meters from the seashore. It is flanked forest, creeks and plantation. The forest and the creek, on which the Onge depend for their major food needs, are also their major resource bases.

Onge consumption pattern

During 1963 December and January 1964, a study was conducted among the Onge of Little Andaman by Saradindu Basu, who recorded the food collected in one settlement of Onge. According to his observation, the list of different types of food collected and consumed were pig, turtle, turtle egg, bivalve shell, two type of crab, one from the creek and another from the sea, eight types of fishes, pig fat, edible plants, yam, five types of roots–tubers, three types of fruits, wild nuts and two types of honey.

According to Basu, the group was not consistent in number for the period of one month. The collected food consisted more of meat and fish than the fruits and tubers. Invariably, collection and hunting was carried out daily. According to him, the Onge had no practice of storing of food for future consumption, the food that is acquired is eaten till it is available and when it is over they venture for it. It is reported that an Onge can fast

for 2-3 days continuously and also could consume 6-7 pounds of meat in a day. The protein diet intake was more than the carbohydrate. But over a period due to various alterations which have taken place in the life of Onge, now they do not strictly stick to the pattern of food collection and consumption. But they aspire a lot for the meat, which was evident during our visit in 2001, and moreover their resource base had reduced to one tenth of their earlier space, confining to one corner of the island.

More over the traditional practice of Onge was not to hunt young wild boars, while hunting if an Onge spots a young boar, it would not be killed. The reason is a fully matured wild boar would be tasty than the young one. But now due the shrinking wild boar population, the Onge do not leave the young wild boars. Their justification is if they leave it off, outsiders would poach it. Also due to dwindling wild boar population, *thanagire* (initiation to manhood) ceremony for few of the young Onge gets postponed, there is one Onge man who is married and has a child, without undergoing *thanagire*.

The government's initiative to develop the Onge had affected their way of life drastically. After getting settled in Dugong Creek settlement, periodically they were introduced to various types of activities and practices. The main shift is the government dole. Though, they have access to these doles, their major interest lies in the forest for food resource and the government provisions are supplements.

Now the Onge subsist on wild boar-*Kua*, tubers, fish, crabs. They also make *roti* out of *atta*, cook rice and boil dal. They also make oil out of the coconut, which they collect from the plantation. The plantation in-charge says, " only the rest of the coconuts after the Onge's use is sold out". Coconut is a new introduction in their lives, which is now used substantially in their food system. Coconut is scraped and is put in water, the starch of the scrapped coconut is squeezed and thrown out, the residue is the coconut milk. They relish the tuber and rice boiled in coconut milk. The scraped coconut is mixed in water in a specified quantity in a vessel and boil for hours. After boiling the oil floats in the vessel with the starch below. The oil is taken and drained in the available container. This oil is used for making *chappati*.

The current system of individual being a unit of providing doles is contrary to their system of food distribution amongst them. When the hunter brings in the kill, the others in the settlement volunteer in preparing to cook. When it is ready, it is open for everybody to consume, no misunderstanding arises over the use of tubers, honey and fish collected by others. The dugong and wild boar that are prepared in the settlement, was accessible to all in the settlement. As the quantum of dugong meat is enormous, all houses had the share. All the hearths in the settlement had a provision to keep the meat above. No body is restricted to consume food from other's hearth. There is no specific

fixed timing to eat, they keep eating when ever they felt like, as the access to the food in the settlement is free. Moreover, men did not venture into the forest when there was sufficient meat.

Depletion of Resources and onge

The depleting forest resources and aquatic food resources are resulting in the decrease of wild boars and aquatic fauna due to improper utilisation. The growing non-tribal population in the island and their irrational exploitation of the land and water resources have deprived the Onge of their natural wealth. This is threatening their social, cultural and biological existence. The transitional phase is prolonged due to **ad hoc** intervention by the government to push them slowly into the **mainstream**. The worldview of the Onge happens to repel many of the mainstream traits. The earlier experience of the government in the case of Great Andamanese who as a result of **development** measures have completely lost their identity both in numbers and spirit. In due course the Onge would have no other alternative when all of their wealth of natural resources are dwindled and their knowledge system crippled.

III

The thrust and strategy of tribal development varied considerably in the past nine Five-Year Plans. A major shift in the strategy was seen during the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974-79) when the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) approach was adopted. This was a synergising efforts wherein all the sector-wise funds for tribal welfare were pooled together to form a single and integrated plan for the tribal welfare. Every state while drawing a State-level Five-Year Plan, has also to draw a TSP. Basically TSP is a change in the strategy rather than change in the goals/objectives.

A quick look at the formulation of TSP in the past two five-year plans, the Eight and Ninth Five-Year Plans, will be sufficient to provide the nature of development that is envisaged and the nature of assessment of such development.

The State Planning Commission document (1998) entitled **Ninth Five-Year Plan: Tamil Nadu, 1997-2002** mentions the goals set for the plan period, which are:

To provide economic support to 64,025 Scheduled Tribe families to cross the poverty line; providing basic amenities and facilities in the tribal areas and their habitations (p.465).

In the same document there is a brief mention of targets and achievements of Eighth Five-Year Plan TSP in Tamil Nadu:

As against the Eight Five-Year Plan target of 49,525 families, 50,273 families were assisted for their economic betterment under various programmes of Tribal Sub-Plan. Besides the above, infrastructural facilities like drinking water, street lights, roads connecting the tribal areas with the plains, opening of tribal schools, health sub-centres, primary health centres etc., were also provided during the Eight Five-Year Plan period (P.495).

Tribal Sub-Plan in Tamil Nadu - Allocation and Expenditure (Rs.lakhs) (VIII and IX plan periods)

Year	TSP outlay	Expenditure	Expe/ Outlay (%)	No. beneficiaries (families)
1992-93	1932.53	1710.76	88.52	8759
1993-94	2248.40	2005.24	89.19	10382
1994-95	2833.27	2305.22	81.36	10437
1995-96	3639.55	2723.13	74.82	10500
1996-97	3942.25	3020.63	77.00	10400
1997-98	4245.18	2228.10	52.49	8647
1998-99	4624.40	2116.73	45.77	9345
1999-2000	5848.72	1757.06	30.04	8027
2000-2001	5859.87	1754.88	29.94	-
2001-2002	7295.46	1615.79	22.14	15711

*Source: Annual TSP 2000 –20001,2001-2002

It is clearly manifest that the utilisation pattern of TSP outlay shows a tremendous downward trend-from 80.6% in VIII-Plan to 27.2% in IX plan. It is also seen that by using about 80% of the funds allotted, about 102% of target was achieved during the VIII plan.

No where in these documents, is there any reference to the goals and what was achieved in tangible terms. For instance, if the welfare/development programmes have reached 50 thousand odd families have crossed form the Below Poverty Line (BPL) to Above Poverty Line (APL?)?. Without such clearly measurable and tangible indicators, it is extremely futile to talk about development and such exercises will remain a maze of confusion.

One can talk about the future of Onge (and other indigenous groups of Andaman) only in terms of “ifs” and “buts”. Reddy (1988) rightly pointed out “unless a miracle happens, none can save these (Andaman) communities from extinction” (p.172). The Indian government assumed that the development of these islands will invariably lead to the integration of the indigenous groups. From the view-point of both a modern

democratic society and Human Rights guaranteeing livelihood, it is pluralism in way of life and practices which need to be the corner stone of any policy and planning. This requires a sea-change in the mind set of the civil society at large.

Development, with participation of the community, should not be taken for granted in proxy, it should be the basis. Let the development grow out of their volition and not by force. Sustainable development essentially needs pluralism and diversity, both cultural and biological, and passing on the same to the next generation. Homogeneity, either cultural or biological, is not sustainable.

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