

Folk Narratives from the Palni Hills: The *Pulayans* ‘left behind the dead cattle, driven to the mountain’s edge, shown the dry waterhole’

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Introduction

Currently ‘rigid truth claims’ have become unfashionable in the social sciences, instead truth is considered as ‘plural’. Truth by its very existence is said to eliminate disagreement, serves to authorize the powerful and their perspective to prevail and to make the powerless feel at fault and inadequate. ‘Truth claims to be merely the product of power games, manipulated into position by those whose interests they serve’ (Roseau, 1992). Reflecting the same Foucault (1975) says ‘Truth implies an author, thus rejection of truth confirms closely with his or her view that no single person can tell us what a particular text really means. No single interpretation of any phenomenon is acceptable with superior truth value over others. Otherwise truth is fragmentary, local and group/community specific, multiple, decentralized and ever changing.

The asymmetrical power differentials that exist between the researchers and the researched must be challenged and struggled with in the act of doing the research. It is a challenge to become aware of the historical and cultural influences that shape one’s own beliefs

and values. Researchers need to be vigilant about the power of their own subjectivity and the way this can construct the others. His position as a gendered, racial, class and caste subject affect and defy the authenticity and validity of an “objective observer.” It should be an act of searching questions not answers with overcoming the tendency to believe that they have the answers. Likewise data that is generated from any research project is determined by the method and the methodology adopted.

Hence it is proper to facilitate the process and the ability of the participants to understand their own action and the historical and social context in which they are acting and help them to challenge the existing practices, to reflect their own thinking in their actions and free themselves from the inequitable social practices and unjust social structures and institutions.

Field worker as a facilitator...

The conversational narratives were facilitated through Focused Group Discussions. The field work has been conducted in the following settlements: *Thonimala Pulayar colony*,

Petharakadu, Solakadu Pulayar colony, Poomalai, Gandhipuram and Kadayamalai settlements located on the western slopes of the Kodaikanal hills, South India one of their traditional homelands in Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu. In a few cases long monologues were recorded where the narrator had the authority to discourage any disruption in the middle of their narration by other members or the field workers.

By and large the participants in these discussions were adult males. The discussions were normally initiated, especially by the elders of the settlements. The younger generation's participation has been less in the villages where the traditional authority is still in a position to exercise the power. Except in rare incidents the *Pulayan* women never made any attempt to narrate their experiences and views in the group. It is appropriate to note here what Camus (1956) says 'we can't do without dominating others or being served.... Even the man on the bottom rung still has his wife, or his child.'

The narratives did not move on a single plane, but formed multilayers with counter narrations and also with silent observations to negate or accept the issues and points. Invariably the initial anger and hostility shown by the *Pulayans* towards the outsiders (field workers) has been slowly converted into cooperation and collaboration in terms of facilitating the emergence of multiple voices, cross validation, arriving at consensus and even agreed to disagree on certain issues! While discussing, some times the narratives were refined and strengthened by the group arriving at a consensus. In several other occasions there were parallel narratives, and these

narratives were left as such as multiple expressions of the participants.

What is true is what the community feels is true (it could be a collage of truths) or 'multiple realities' as Chambers (1997:101) proposes in Development discourse. So that is their truth. Hence it is proper to facilitate the process and enable them to understand and voice their own action and social dynamics in which they are acting and challenging, reflect their own thinking and practices through freeing themselves from the inequitable social practices and unjust social structures and institutions. These narratives carry the values of the society, and is of historical importance.

The *Pulayans* of Palni hills

One of the early references on the *Pulayans* indicates the status of the first settlers in the region, they.... were apparently the earliest inhabitants of the Palni hills and had things all their own way until the arrival of *Kunnuvans* (Francis: 104). While referring to *Mannadi* the author says 'The principle cultivating caste on the Palni hills.... their tradition says that their ancestors were the *Velalans* from the Dharapuram and Kangayam country in Coimbatore, who went up the Palnis some four or five centuries ago because the plain area of the country was so disturbed by war (other accounts say devastated by famine), and they call themselves *Kunnuva Vellalas*,..... Other traditions add that the Virupkshi and Ayyakudi poligars (feudal chieftains) helped them to settle on their land in the hills, which up to then had only been cultivated by indolent *Pulaiyans*. The *Kunnuvans* ousted these latter, and eventually turned into predial serfs- a position from which

they have hardly yet freed themselves'. (Francis: 103)

The Tamil speaking *Pulayan* are also referred as the *MalaPulayans*, a group categorized as 'scheduled caste' by State government of Tamil Nadu. But the group has been consistently contesting for their legitimate tribal identity. They live in small hamlets in huts and government constructed colonies. The actual sedentary life started with the construction of group houses by the government of Tamil Nadu in the early sixties. Generally the other communities in the region call the *Pulayan* settlements as *Pulayan* colony.

The community is vertically divided into two sub divisions called *Koora* and *Kanni*. The first is further subdivided into 40 sub sects, the second one into 7 sub sects. Each sub sect is called *Kootams*, which regulates certain social events. In the same settlement one can come across both brotherly and marriageable sub sects. Each *kootam* has its own deity, which is common to the entire group and yearly once the members of the same *kootam* assemble to worship the deity. Their traditional livelihood is foraging and small gaming in the nearby forest areas combined with cultivation of several species of minor millets in small plots located near their hamlets to meet their subsistence requirements.

The *Pulayan* identity: Positioning and representation

The conversational narratives of the *Pulayans* expressed the multiple voices of the shared reality rather than looking for a common truth and universal representation of this region. In this

regard the positioning of the *Pulayans* in the regional socio-cultural situation is vital to understand their perceptions and criticisms of the prevailing social structure and the supporting social norms and rules which have been imposed on them. The voicing for *Pulayan* self-identity is something much more than a mere emotional expression. The complexity of modern identity is constructed as many layered.

Ancestral myth.....

It was a long monologue by an old *Paliyan* about the ancestral myth, which talks about two brothers who at one point of time divided their property and got separated. The narrator heard it from his grand and great grand parents, got recorded it in his mind, (he believes) that was the education he received from his ancestors. The myth is widely known in the region. According to the myth the elder brother is the ancestor of the descendants of the *Mannadis* and the younger brother is the ancestor of the *Pulayans*.

The first time he narrated this story to the field workers, he broke down while describing the property sharing and subsequent separation of the brothers and said that

'he could not continue'
and requested the people sitting around
'not to insist him to continue' ...and
closed the narration by saying
'this is how we were cheated.. what is the point in telling that now'.

The referential theme in the myth is about the partition of property and separation of the brothers.

The younger brother was the herder, his job was to take the cattle for grazing. He went to the cattle pen and found out that the entire cattle population was there. The elder brother asked the younger to give away his share, and assured that 'I would take whatever you give, but do not ask me to divide the herd'. The younger brother saw the cattle; the whole population was lying down, because the cattle had walked all the way and were tired. One calf was lying dead near the fence. The younger brother did not know what to do, he asked his brother to take the cattle, which were lying down, and told that he would take the remaining cattle, which were standing. Hearing that the elder brother said 'no' since most of the cattle were lying down, he asked the younger brother to take the cattle lying down. The younger brother was a bit greedy and accepted the suggestion. The elder decided to accept the cattle that were standing. Then the elder clapped, the entire population stood up except the dead calf near the fence. The elder insisted that they stick to the agreement, said 'we have to respect agreement' and as per the agreement he took away all the cattle... then in the following years the younger brother built a house near the elder's house. We have not forgotten our relationship that we had in the past, we remember even today.

Another narration goes thus by a middle age Pulayan from Solakadu

..among the three brothers the youngest was Pulayan and eldest was Mannadi, the middle one was Asari. The youngest was given the responsibility of herding the cattle. Once it was raining continuously, and continued for more than three months may be even six

months and the younger brother who took the cattle for grazing could not return and stayed in the forest. The eldest brother could not reach him as the rivers were flooded. The youngest brother in the forest felt hungry, killed a buffalo calf and ate it. Once the rains were over the eldest brother reached the younger brother. He had brought the food. He saw skull and pieces of bones of the calf lying around. He did not say any thing, returned back and called the younger brothers and said the time had arrived for sharing the property. He called the youngest brother and showed the 1000 pairs of cattle and asked 'which one would you like to have those that are lying or those cattle that are standing? The entire herd were lying down. The youngest brother said he would take the cattle which were lying down. The eldest brother clapped immediately and the entire herd stood up except one. Then he took the entire herd and left.....

*.. the list of properties and responsibilities given to the youngest brother were
dead cattle*

..tree(the pith is extracted and consumed)

honey comb in the pole

deer living forest

the pit to dig the wild tuber

and the responsibility of

to protect the Mannadi girl who is kept in a hut away from the settlement after attaining puberty (pollution period) for some days.

Another voice, which is more neutral about the traditional ancestral relationship between these group says as follows

'Yes, our ancestors had been brothers in the past, we do not know how they

separated or how things happened in the past. Our grand parents have not told us. We were also not curious about it'.

These local narratives about the ancestral past assume emotional interrelationship between the *Pulayans* and the dominant Mannadi in the region. The cause for the separation was implicit, the incident of `beef eating' forced the eldest brother to take the decision for separation but in the first and third narrations the cause for partition was left undiscussed.

The blatant counter narrative with the intension of discouraging the elders by the youngsters of Poomalai and Gandhipuram and Kadaimalai declares

.....that (the ancestral myth) is not correct, it is like a ritual, you know that is a constructed story by the migrants who came here looking for the livelihood, they know how to build a story.....

The younger generation viewed it as a mechanism that would reinforce the prevailing traditional hierarchical social relations, which is exploitative in nature. The younger generation view that the elders `words, however are saturated with history.... permeated with the intentions of others' (Mannheim, 1998:332). They are conscious about the functional value of a myth in the society. As Levi Strauss (1955:430) proposed `value of the myth remains preserved even through the worst translation'. Hence they reject, and don't want either to hear or narrate the myth by the elders.

The younger generation is antihegemonic. They wish to discard the belief that inculcates values and

sentiments, which suppresses the anger and the rage of the *Pulayans* and provides social sanctions to keep the *Pulayans* perpetually as their service group.

They point out the behavior of the Mannadis

*'We have always been asked to stand outside the house
Given tea, water in a coconut shell kept at the roof
etc ...'*

the same point was repeated in another narration

'they have taken our lands, But they say we are brothers, we are 'maman' and 'machan' (marriageable relatives) but they ask me to stand outside the house and give coffee in the coconut shell, or show me a tumbler which is kept at the corner of the courtyard.....we cannot even enter the patio. They would show me a place near to the drainage canal and ask me to sit down to have my food. Till now they have been keeping us away from them...Now we are more aware learned a little, we do not go to their place.. these experiences made us to realize why should we go there? we also have hands and legs, so let us use them to work and earn our livelihood...'

By deliberately refusing to do the traditional menial services they do not want to repeat the past history, which play a vital role in shaping their perception and willingly occupy the lower position in the traditional system. They strongly believe the process would help them to develop an identity that ensures social equity.

Similarly they reject the institution of 'Thoti' the traditional headman of the Pulayan hamlet. According to them the title has been imposed on them, the headman is supposed to organize other Pulayans in the village to serve the Mannadis on social and religious occasions, it carries a derogatory meaning. Things have changed and it has lost its relevance in the present situation.

'We do not like this office ` Thoti'. It is the title given to us by the Mannadis...we act as scavengers in the occasions of death, marriage etc. We have to carry the fire pot for Mannadis till the burial pit for which he gives us Kaalana (25paise)'.

They also indicate the office is worthless in the present reality, it cannot take up the serious issues like wage with the higher caste 'Samsaries' (landlords). In one case the self designation of *Patakaran* (the title of Mannadi head man) by the *Pulayan* headmen to replace the *Thoti* is not being accepted by others. The head man of a *Pulayan* settlement is still called *Thoti* and is expected to do all the traditional jobs assigned to the post.

The *Pulayan* elders still enjoy the title, feeling proud about it and not happy about the behavior of the younger generation. The headman of Thonimalai says with disappointment

Now with the younger generation have come up, there are different jobs and times have changed, they roam around; I do not know what they think....

In two settlements the traditional office *thoti* has been replaced by another

position *Thalaivar* (leader), the head man of the village who is normally nominated by the villagers based on the individuals personal qualifications like honesty, commitment, being responsible and capacity to sustain patience etc. the villagers change the person who holds the post periodically.

In Kadaimalai village, the *Thalaivar* of the village in his narration perceived that the Mannadis imposed the *thoti* title on the Pulayan. Due to this our community has been identified with the scheduled castes from the plains and this is one of the causes for the change in our status from scheduled tribe to the scheduled caste in the list compiled by the state.

He says,

'Thoti is the menial position in the traditional social system. He takes care of cleaning and performing all menial assignments'....`we are original ST, Hindu Pulayans what they do now to club us with Pallan and Parayan -the scheduled castes living in the plains. Today our children are not able to go to tribal residential schools and there is no scope for us to get government jobs'

Pulayan belief system revolves around the *Kootam* deity. These deities are protecting them and guarantee their well being. They are not happy about the way things are happening now and happened in the recent past, Pulayans believe due to this the deities have lost their strengths,

'our deities descend on us and we get possessed. The possessed would be the voice the deity. If he says ` on Friday silver lines would fall' and asked us to test the power- on the same Friday it

used to pour. That is the power of our deities even now. We still practice it. But now things are not proper, justice is overlooked. Hence it is not happening as it used to. Today the arrivals of several politicians have caused innumerable 'damages'. Then how can the power work, how would the silver line fall?.

The problem of the representation of identity has been expressed through challenging their position in the social and structural arrangement. They fully discard the interpretation and reflection on their identity by the external world and the institutions, are supporting this. But the elder generation still maintains a comfortable mindset, which could ensure a smooth accommodation of their position in the long-established social system.

The claim for legal identity...

In general the *Pulayan* population is not happy about their name being kept in the Scheduled caste list instead of the scheduled tribe. They believe originally it was in the scheduled tribe category. Beteille (1998:187) points out the problem of defining and classifying the groups in the tribal category ` the problem becomes apparent as soon as we look into the extensive and on the whole excellent ethnography of India produced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Even the best ethnographers habitually confused tribe with caste....' While continuing the discussion he adds the pragmatic dimension to it ` finding an acceptable conception of tribe is not merely an academic requirement but in some countries also a constitutional and legal one, now increasingly responsive to political demands. Since India has one of the oldest and most extensive

programmes of positive discrimination or affirmative action, the problem of identifying groups that have to be designed as tribes has been of practical importance for at least 60 years.' The *Pulayans* of this region have a similar problem. In the 1951 census they had been classified as Scheduled caste (1951: 147) relating to Madras state but unfortunately the volume could not provide castewise district level population. And in the subsequent volume published after a decade their name appeared in the Scheduled tribe list. It has been enumerated as 2,567 *Pulayan* residents in the Madurai district and 18 in Tirunelveli district of Madras.

The *Pulayans* try to defend their demand for legal identity through the history of the long-established relationship with the place

'From time immemorial we have been living here, we were born in the mountains; we have grown in the mountains and have been leading our lives here. Hence the government had given us the ST status. But, later the same government has changed the status as SC'...

If we look at some of the published ethnographic accounts it could help us to compare the status of the *Pulayans* of this region with other regions with whom a historical link has been traced. The origin of *Pulayans* of Kerala state, designated as scheduled tribe is traced from Tamil Nadu. According to Iyer (1937:118) 'it has been mentioned that they had migrated to their present habitat from Madura (Tamil Nadu), after the advent of the Vellala settlers'. Luz (1962:79), found that they `admitted' they had come to the Anjanad valley as

`agricultural serfs attached to the Vellalas, who claim the Coimbatore and Madura districts ... as their early home. It is possible that they are a section of the Mangalams of the Kodaikanal hills, also known as hill *Pulayans*, who moved in to the higher mountains of Kerala. He further strengthens the point by mentioning about the language as `that they speak a dialect of Tamil which is unintelligible to Tamil speakers; it contains large number of Malayalam words and phrases'

The *Pulayans* are not aware and are rather confused as to why the change has taken place and their names have been shifted from Scheduled tribe to Scheduled caste category. They are unhappy because either they could enjoy certain concessions extended to scheduled tribe population. It was told at Petharakadu by a middle aged Paliyan that

...certain concessions were given to us, we had been given cattle, horses and implements like crow bars, digging hoes etc...we sent our children to tribal residential school but now the concessions have been stopped.

Contextualizing life and livelihood

The following aspects are crucial to understand the livelihoods of any community. At the household level who is doing what, on which asset, and how much income is made? Changes occurred in the livelihoods, the sources and the results. Diversification of economic activities, the need for diversification and its impacts must also be studied and analysed. Finally access and exclusion in terms of key economic

and political opportunities must be taken in to account.

In the past.....

'there was time when we had not even seen the face of the country! Our people had not seen the face of the country. We ran away into the bushes if we saw a person with white dhoti! This is how our life was in the past a human being feared even the sight of another human being! '

The narration tries to capture the picture of the past life of the *Pulayans* in the area. Their mobility had been very much restricted to their own settlements and the surrounding forest territories. They rarely encountered outsiders or even visited their relatives in other settlements or markets in Adalur or Pandri malai villages. In the past, the *Pulayans* traditionally practiced foraging combined with millet cultivation in their own patta lands and also periodically clearing the forestlands. The following record from the discussion at Solakadu supports the *Pulayan* practice of foraging.

In the past we collected honey and collected wild tuber, Valli kizhangu. Even now we dig for tuber collection, but the season is over now, Karthigai (November-December) is the season in which, even now we practice tuber collection. If we can not get labour and are not able to manage to earn money to buy grains, to feed our children, we go for tuber collection. If we dig out the tuber, now it would be water and it would not boil properly....

They remember cultivating several land races of millet species till about thirty years back.

'here the entire land was cultivated with millet crops. We cultivated ragi, thinai, mundanthina, arithina, varagu. We also ate pith extracted from the stem of the tree known as Koonthapanai. The pith was collected and dried, ground and powdered. This was then cooked and eaten. It was nutritious. But, now we are not allowed to fell the tree and extract the powder. It is the government rule...but we do not get the millets either...they too have disappeared...

They worked in the millet fields of the local landlords for their wages. Apart from this the landlord also allotted a patch of land to the Pulayan family which, which did all the menial jobs for his family, for millet cultivation. This helped the Pulayan family to meet their requirements for the whole year.

Their culture is associated with spiritual rather than materialistic values.

We are born and brought up in the mountains, this is our land (they insist this point they always say they do not have any link with the people in the plains). These forests are our shelter, courtyard and our land. Our life is harmonious with the forests. If we find a bee with broken wing we glue the pieces and help the bee's survival! We have the energy and attitude to live in harmony with nature. We never did any harm to the surrounding environment....

The Pulayans of Kadaiyamalai say

'In the past we lived here, in this mountain for some time and then moved

to the next mountain after some time. We moved where ever we liked. There are 900 mountains in Thonimalai region. We lived where ever we liked. There was no one to control and comment on our mobility. We lived like this. Then people from the plains came here to sell tobacco, betel nut, pulses, jaggery, rice. They requested our support to migrate here. But what happened later was that a person who owns 100 acres patta lands started claiming ownership over 1000 acres

The villagers of Gandhipuram showed us the land located in the western side of the settlement and said

'the villagers harvested millets like sama, thinai till about 30 years ago. In the past we collected honey and dug tubers as and when we wished. Now every thing has changed. We move freely from place to place. We collected honey as we wished we dig tubers. We lit fire where we liked and roasted the tuber and ate. We rarely encountered outsiders. But now there are thousands of houses that have come up. People have migrated from the plains from different regions like Theni, Kambam and Bodi. All these happened within the last 60 to 70 years'....

The narration continues

In the past people were honest and justice prevailed. We could go anywhere. No body questioned us. But now, the situation has changed. We cannot enter into the plantations. The land from which we benefited is now owned by the rich people. We do not have any land to cultivate. In the past the entire area belonged to the government, no land was under private

ownership. But now very rich people are there who own as much as 50 acres or 100 acres of plantations!!.

One of the early accounts recorded describe the subjection of *Pulayans* to the Mannadi masters as 'the Kunnuvans, who would not let them have a light at night or sleep on a cot, lent them money at usuries interest and turned them into slaves if they were unable to pay it back'.(Francis:105).

Land alienation and pauperization...

The problem of marginalization and pauperization of the tribals is common in the Indian situation. 'By the middle of the 19th century, what are called tribes today had on the whole been either subordinated or marginalized economically, politically and socially' (Betle, 1998:189). This is mainly due to the outsiders' encroachment and loss of control over their traditional resources. The process of migrants forming new settlement or expanding the existing settlements and usurpation in the region resulted in the local *Pulayans* becoming the marginalized population.

Maximum area in the region has been cleared and converted into coffee, pepper and banana plantations and vegetable fields in the last fifty years. Mannadis the early migrants who from the plains, are the present owners of the plantations!. Roads were laid to transport the agricultural inputs and the harvest. This change has reduced drastically the traditional resource base of the *Pulayans*.

The villagers of Kadaimalai showed an estate that they said is owned by a Mannadi land lord and showed another

which they claimed is owned by a Chettiar and continued.

'Once, these lands were ours. They have taken it away from us. We practiced dry land farming in these lands, our ancestors have lost the land.....the local landlord gave an amount and took the landunder contract and continued cultivating for the next ten years. The Pulayans were not in a position to repay the loan, then the cases were taken to local panchayat leaders who belonged to higher caste and settled....the Pulayans have been driven to the dry (Karattu) pockets. The tiny plots we own are located in the dry areas.

they showed the land belonging to the settlement.....

'See, the plains and the fertile lands are owned by the, higher caste samsaris (landlords)our lands are useless....no good soil, no water..

'The house hold economy is very poor. They borrow money for their sons or daughters marriage. Later, due to their inability to repay the loan, the land is taken away as compensation.

The nominated leader from the Gandhipuram settlement describes the condition and the process as follows

These people settled here (migrants), invite us to their home and volunteer to give us loan. If you take the loan then that is it. Your land would become his land over a period of time. They wear uniform like police and threaten us and beat us. These people do every thing and play all the roles. I know this very well! Seviappan is the sub-inspector and Kandapillai is the police, these local

farmers act as police. The moment we hear that the police is coming we run away from the settlement. They prepare the agreement and take us to Reddiarchatram and Aatur instructed not to open our mouths. We have to say 'yes' to every thing they say and they buy us food and bring us back. Then they say we have sold the land and the agreement has been signed in legal papers. We are illiterates. We cannot even sign. They instructed us to put our thumb impression and leave the place without asking any thing...'

Lack of any understanding or very poor understanding about the land right system and legal entitlements of the local population paved the way for the exploitation and the resource loss.

There is a marked and fundamental difference in what the *Pulayan* ancestral population understood as their right to resources and their right to land. They consider the rights exercised by the foraging and millet cultivation is equivalent to rights and legal entitlements given by the state revenue department.

This does not help when the encounter the migrant caste groups who are equipped with education and several other skills.

One of the elders from the Solakadu settlement explained what occurred in the past thus:-

'during my grand parents, and great grand parents times our land deeds were thrown into the compost pit, and burnt them. One tended the goats, another one the cows, and the third one the horses. About ten people worked in

the agricultural farm. I myself have seen the tube which was used to keep the land deeds. But they were told that the deeds were not valid and said why are you keeping these. All these are useless as you haven't paid any tax. The land cannot be used free of cost. The government has auctioned your lands, we have bought them and taken possession'....

....we borrow loans like 100 rupees but it was very difficult to repay the loan with our daily earnings of Rs.1.25 we have been forced to work day and night in their fields to repay only the interest and we are never able to repay the amount. Finally our lands have been taken by them

'we have been driven to the mountain edges, dry and unfertile areas because we were ignorant. We followed their instructions because we were ignorant. Actually we have been ditched. You are well read and you know about the world, you know many things, we believe you will show us what is good and what is not good. But you shouldn't take advantage of our ignorance and cheat us....

'This is our land. In the past because we were ignorant (masakalam) they took away all our land, registered it in their names. Now if we enter the land they ask us, 'whose permission did you take to enter in to land, who asked you to come?'. Sometimes they beating us!

Land usurpation did not end with taking away their cultivable lands and forest territories the major sources of the livelihood; the neighboring landlords also encroached upon the land allotted by the government to build houses. The problem has been expressed as follows:-

'the government allotted us one acre land for constructing houses. Now we have eight houses, the remaining space was encroached up on by the neighboring land owners who claimed that this was their own land. But we managed to get the land back. We informed the Village Administrative Officer and vacated the encroachers. Now we are requesting the village Panchayat to help us to build houses. They are asking for legal papers. We really do not know how we are going to get it because if we go to one office they send us to another and we keep running.....as we do not know where to go or what to do..

The livelihood strategies....

Our parents did not, were not in a position to give us education and the members of our community over the region they could only work as wage labourers

The wage labour package in the past consisted (till ten years also) of lunch and some times even betel nut but the day started in the early hours of the morning and continued till late in the evening and the person had to work like a slave. But now it has changed.

At present wage labour in the plantations owned by the higher caste landlords is the main livelihood of the *Pulayans* in Pethrakadu, Poomalai and Kadaimalai settlements. The wage structure varies from place to place, like the per day wage for male ranges from Rs.30 to Rs.100, it depends upon the type of the job. But in the case of women, wage per day is between Rs.20 to Rs. 30. In a few settlements the males have adopted the 'contract' method. The advantages are

that they have freedom to decide the timings and can negotiate for a better deal.

'now we refuse to listen their instructions. We have been civilized bi. We have realized that they are cheating and exploiting us. Hence we refuse to work like we did in the past. We also work regular hours and the timings are fixed'.

Lichen collection is the main livelihood for some of the households in Gandipuram settlement, but they encounter problems both with the forest department and the private owners. Still they manage to gather and sell to the agents who come from the plains.

'to scrap the Lichen in a plantation I have to hide in the bushes, so as not to be seen by the landlords and collect the Lichen and sell it for Rs.40/ kg,. If I am spotted by the landlord, the issue will be taken to their village panchayat where I will be beaten and kicked'.

The narrator has this to say about the activity and its importance in their life:-

'...it is a difficult task. One needs skill to scrap Lichen. One should have the knack to scrap it without hurting the hands. If it is held tight it will get crushed. The job should be completed before it becomes very hot..'

'apart from their own land the local landlords claim ownership to the surrounding forest areas. We cannot enter for lichen collection in the forest area lying close to the private plantations...'

'...the produce which helps us to get our gruel is Lichen. Collection is possible

round the year and I have been doing it for the past twenty five years....'

The other item, which they collect, is 'Kosakodi' a vine that grows in the wild environment. The narration describes the drudgery involved in it

'walking seven or eight kilometers away from the settlement and carrying the collection back home is a difficult task. We bring them as head loads from the forest territory and sell to the visiting outsiders. The price ranges from Rs.1.25/- to Rs.2.50 per kilogram. Wild pepper is collected for two months Panguni (April – May) and Chithirai (May - June). There is no market value for it and so they make little income out of it'.

Goat rearing is a common practice. They bring a lamb from the local landlords and rear it, the profit sharing is 1:2 ratio, one portion meant for the labour put by the *Pulayan* and two portions for the capital that the landlord has put in. The Pulayans resort to foraging if they could not get labor in the plantations; they visit the forests for gathering wild tubers to manage their subsistence requirement. The members in the Focus Group Discussion collectively said

..the forest officials not allow us to go the forest for digging tubers, they prohibit us, we cannot enter in to the forest territory, if we go and collect tuber they beat and kill us...

The present staple food is rice that they buy from the ration shops run by Public Distribution System, Government of Tamil Nadu. Their wage earned through working in the plantations is being used for buying rice. The value of the source

has been explained by women in the group in Solakadu as:-

'we can not afford to lose the rice supplied to us. For the last three days they have been telling us that they would supply rice to us. We have been waiting and has a result have lost three days of earning'.

The Pulaiyans have strong antagonistic views about the politicians and the state:-

'..the politicians have been constantly ditching us. They come when they need our votes. They come in cars and motor bikes and promise us that they will do what ever we want and say 'till now we have not done anything for you but now we will do what ever you want', but this lasts only till they get the vote from us, after that they forget us. After that no body visits us and no one is there to enquire about our needs and well being'

'...so today we can not go either to the politicians or to the government. We can not go anywhere. We are suffering here..'

The state has been perceived as not helping the poor. It is perceived as a place for robbers and murderers. Politicians are the same. The request of the poor has been never heeded, for the last week there has been no drinking water. We reported it to the village president but he never cared

Still some of the Pulayans have not lost their hope. They believe they can fight and get back their rights and properties.

'we have lost every thing but we have not left the place. Only if we leave this

place it will mean we have lost. We are still here. How can we be responsible for your cheating.....we would like to become our own leaders, we would like to rule our people, we would like to safe guard our rights. We have to fight the government and the politicians..'

The anger is about the identity, misrepresentation and resource loss which is a fundamental issue, which is essentially related to individual rights, collective rights and historical rights.

But there are some rare voices, which perceive that the changes in their life could be converted to progress. The results being freedom to act, building capacity and to ensure resource for livelihood security.

'now slowly civilization is creeping into our society, we are learning and changing. At present the Pulayans take up independent jobs and earn money, but majority of us are still going to work as wage labourers....

The tribals are uneducated and own no property. if we are provided education and the resource for livelihood, we will have a chance to progress in our life....

The several narrations on livelihood reflect the act subjugation; process of continues social and economic exploitation, alienation from land and other resources, managing with marginal sources, indifferent attitude of the state/ serving the powerful, relative isolation and lack of skill and capacity to negate the institutions and history, which serves the dominant.

It is worth to quote Kupar (2003:) here that 'The rhetoric of the indigenous -

peoples movements rests on widely accepted premises that are nevertheless open to serious challenge, not least from anthropologists. In a similar way I like to add the ILO convention no. 169 (1989) concerning Indigenous and Tribal peoples in Independent nations laid down that national governments should allow indigenous peoples to participate in the making of decisions that affect them, that they should set their own development priorities, and that they should be given back lands that they traditionally occupied. But no African and Asian state has adopted it.

Concluding remarks

Facilitation captures the multiple truths and multiple realities; it modifies the existing conventional asymmetrical power relationship between the researcher and the researched. The slow breakdown of the tradition and imbibing of new values develop counter narratives and multiplicity of voices. The discourse creates the tension, which in turn creates the discourse of subject position and assumptions of truth. By presenting their own subjective position they challenge the objectivity of the conventional sense through multiple interpretations. The exploration reveals multiple narratives on the construction of identity and representation and the nature of the livelihoods of the *Pulayans*. The narratives reflect the historical consciousness of the tribal group. Within the *Pulayan* community the power game excludes the women. The paper failed to make deliberate efforts to construct the reality from the *Pulayan* women's perspectives, who form nearly half the *Pulayan* population.

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