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Abstract

The fruits of economic development have not been percolated down to the tribes and marginalized communities. In the Indian experience, neither more than half a century's economic planning nor official communal reservation mandates helped to better their lot. Myriads of schemes are being announced and launched to address the social and economic well-being of the tribe communities in the national and regional levels. In this backdrop, a case study was done based on the experience of a participatory bio-diversity conservation programme initiated in a well-known Protected Area in India. The study discloses that how marginalized indigenous communities, through decentralized decision making, developed equations for symbiotic livelihood security and biodiversity conservation.

Key Words: Tribes, empowerment, innovation, Periyar, participatory, biodiversity conservation, social capital, Ecodevelopment

Introduction

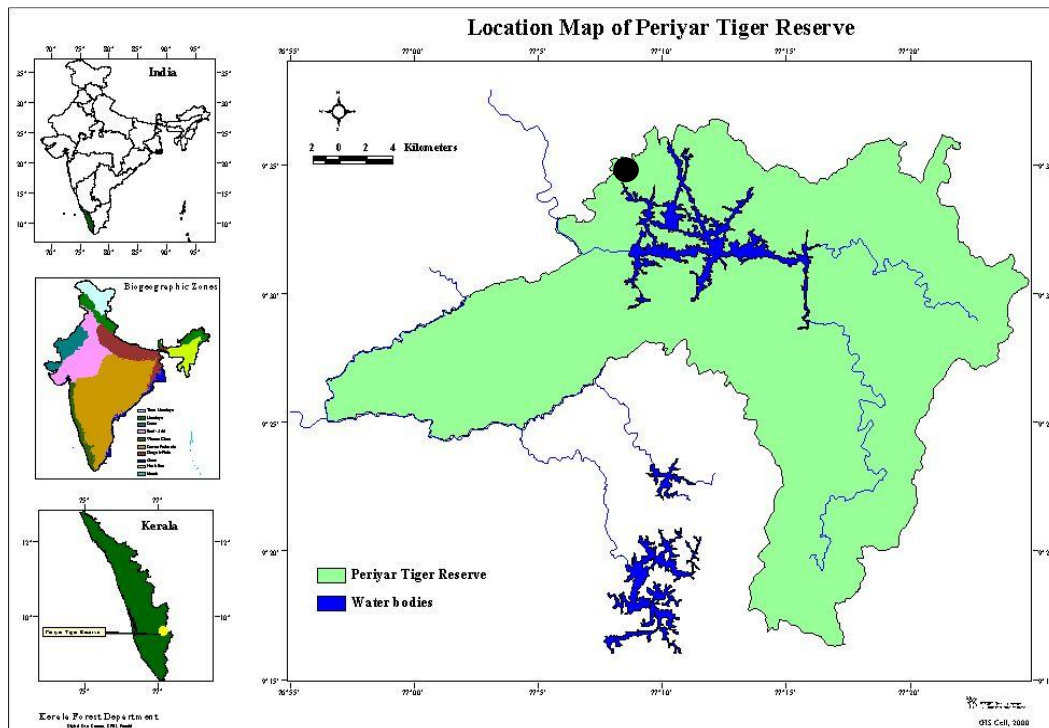
The life of aborigines (tribes) is so intricately interlaced to their surroundings in the forest and that it would be agonizing for them to take roots outside. In their natural abode (forest), their life had been fuelled by the environment that provided them the very sustenance of life. But their naïve was cut off in the name of tribal development and rehabilitation. Such efforts helped only a few to grab life-time employment and assured pay, under the guise of being public servants, but with little loyalty and commitment towards their target group (tribes). Even with series of developmental projects that were

paraded with high fanfare, the outcomes turned up show the utter ineffectiveness and the target group is becoming virtually disempowered and fully marginalized. This is because the benefits of myriads of schemes and projects have not percolated down to the beneficiaries, instead well channelised to the kitties of intermediaries and officials. The innovative projects have been implemented in lackadaisical manner with little vision and commitment. But it has already been proved that innovations from the target group, with their local knowledge, devotion towards the cause and sense of ownership, are effective in accomplishing results. Synergy is the hallmark of progress and the development of a society is rooted in their collective efforts to better their lot. From time immemorial the instinct of socialization has been with man. This might be one of the reasons for his survival to this date. Hence, innovative group cohesiveness requires attention and appreciation. This paper explains how indigenous marginalized communities addressed evenly the competing objectives of ensuring biodiversity conservation and accomplishing livelihood securities through innovative ideas.

Area of Study

The present study was conducted in a tribal settlement called *Labbakkandam* Tribal Settlement (here after called the settlement) located on the fringes of a well-known Protected Area (PA) in India called the Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR). The reserve got its name as it constitutes to the main catchment area of the river Periyar, the longest river in Kerala. The Periyar Plateau consists of undulating hills, varying in attitude from 100 m to 2000 m. The average rainfall is about 2500 mm per annum. The temperature ranges from 15° C to 31° C. The vegetation can be broadly classified into Evergreen, deciduous and

Study Area: Location



● *The Labbakkandam Tribal Settlement*

Grass land types. The PA is also a much sought-after destination of tourists, wildlife enthusiasts and researchers. The average rainfall is about 2500 mm per annum. The temperature ranges from 15° C to 31° C. The vegetation can be broadly classified into evergreen, deciduous and Grass land types. The PA is also a much sought after destination of tourists, wildlife enthusiasts and researchers. The annual average visitation of the park is 4.5 lakh and out of its more than 10% constitutes foreign visitors.

The PA accommodates five indigenous communities of Kerala, viz, '*Mannan*', '*Paliya*', '*Oorali*', '*Malayaraya*' and '*Malampandaram*'. The last one is still a nomadic tribe. The settlement comprises of two aboriginal communities such as *Mannan* and *Paliya* and they are considered to be the earliest settlers in the PA. The settlement was formed by made them re-settle on the north-east boundary of the PA, from its interiors,

when it was declared as a reserve forest about six decades before. The total number of families in the settlement is 451 (316 families belong to *Mannan* tribe and 135 *Paliya* families). The settlement has a total area of 210 acres. The settlement is located about less than 1 km away from Kumily, prominent spice-town in the central Kerala, and can be accessed through motorable roads.

Methods of Study

The study is based on the experience of a participatory bio-diversity conservation programme in PTR. The programme intended to mitigate the negative impacts of PA-people interface and to build a social fence around forest by winning the sincere collaboration of fringe area people. The study is solely based on participatory methods. Focused group discussions, personal interviews and participant observation were used to obtain inputs to the study. Different innovative groups in the settlement were called for focused group discussion. Their life in the yester years in the settlement, evolution of their ideas, realisation of their primitive thoughts, mode of operation etc. were elicited through series of discussions. Personal interviews with forest personnel, elders in the settlement were also contacted. Participant observation was helpful in understanding how far they are involved in their innovations and successful realisations. More over, records available in their offices were also examined to understand the economic dimensions of their innovations.

Life in the Settlement in Yester years

The saga of their life in the settlement delineates the experiences of their difficult and tumultuous past. When they were made re-settle, they were deprived of their

sustenance and feeling of safety with the lap of Mother Nature (forest). They suffered pangs of alienation from their traditional home and became almost asset less due to perpetual exploitation. Moreover, they became more vulnerable due to their close proximity with the main stream society as it was detrimental to their social and cultural fabric. They experimented with the cultivation of their chosen staple food crops like rice, maize, tubers etc. But, so was the wildlife menace that they ultimately gave up and turned into cash crops cultivation. Hence they were gradually being drawn in to the turbulence of market economy. The traditional subsistence farming practices were ignored and they started cultivating coffee, cardamom and pepper. However, pepper was their main crop as it needs less effort and offers long term sustainable benefits.

The settlers were living on enormous forest dependency that was often unsustainable. Their privilege of being the tribes conferred freedom to venture into forest for extracting various minor forest produces. Fuel-wood, honey, fish, black dammar, wild pepper, ginger, wild cardamom etc were the main items of forest produces collected for subsistent as well as supplemental source of livelihood. Most often they got into the forest, days on end, even with their wards, for resource forage. Their stay in the forest meted out damages to the forest ecosystem very often.

Their economic relations with the main stream society unfold untold miseries of continuous financial dependency. For a long period of time the settlement was in the clutches of perpetual debt trap. The pepper grown in to the premises is very special, as it is organic. The local merchants under the guise of generosity used to extend them money periodically. There by the loyalty of the hapless people was capitalized by the money lenders. They were made surrender pepper crop to the money lenders, in return to the

“generous” loans received. As a result they could not even to know how much pepper was harvested from their own premises. About 96% of the families were subjected to this type of exploitation. Every year the same had been repeated and hence kept the people in a state of perpetual debt trap and penury.

Their concept of a suitable dwelling was rather bleak earlier, as they considered it was much ethnic to live in huts. Their houses were dilapidated. Every comfort in the houses was absent. Their perception of saving was irrelevant as they were sinking in to fathoms of debt. They could never entertain the thought of having any form of saving. The few who could save did not materialise it, as the surplus was blown in to alcohol, cinema and dress. They were really threat to the civil life in the adjacent places in the evenings. The impact of cannabis and alcohol was beyond words upon them. Moreover, their worst enemy was the forest department officials. In their intoxicated condition they used to pour foul language on the department officials.

The elder generation was a little sad and frustrated, as their off-springs had been frittering away their traditions. The senior citizens in the community expressed two types of opinions on the interest of their wards to keep their traditions up. Some unveiled it as calamity that the youngsters were being alienated from their tradition. The younger generation was not interested in getting acquainted with it. Their slang itself was imparted orally. The only consolation was that the youngsters knew their colloquial twists, to be proud enough. Others observed that it would be too difficult, hereafter, to live in accordance with their tradition. To them it was possible to follow their tradition only when forest becomes their abode. They are, now, plucked away from their traditional habitat, and hence there is no use of following their traditions. Their tradition

cannot rule over the modern sophistications. Therefore, their children are right to cling to abstain from tradition, otherwise, they might be branded as uncivilized or boor and there by alienated in the main stream society.

Platform for Group Dynamics

It was in this back drop, just mentioned above; a pilot project was experimented in PTR. The project, India Ecodevelopment Project, was initiated in the seven PAs in India as an alternative strategy of biodiversity conservation. The strategy of Ecodevelopment has become a necessary prop for the participatory management of the Protected Areas, in response to pressures on Protected Areas. The strategy aims to conserve the biodiversity by addressing both "the impact of local people on the Protected Areas and the impact of the Protected Areas on the local people"(World Bank, 1996). Ecodevelopment has, thus, two main thrusts: improvement of Protected Area management and involvement of local people. The wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 points out that "every person shall, as long as he resides in the sanctuary, be bound to prevent the commission in the sanctuary, to help in discovering and arresting the offender". Ecodevelopment addresses the welfare and the behaviour of local people and integrates these into management of Protected Areas.

The primary thrust of the Project was the effective and integrated conservation of biodiversity of Periyar forest. The conservation was expected to materialize through the sincere collaboration of PA management personnel and local communities, who were the stakeholders of forest. To seek the participation of people in this regard it has been targeted to improve the socio-economic condition of the people who depend upon the forest in different ways.

Ecodevelopment is a strategy for protecting ecologically valuable areas (PAs) from unsustainable or unacceptable pressures resulting from the needs and activities of people living in and around such areas (Manoharan, 1996). Ecodevelopment and Joint Forest Management are celebrated strategies for bringing people back to PAs or of making local people stakeholders and partners in wildlife conservation and forest protection (Badola *et al.*, 2002). It is argued that the old strategy of keeping people out of protected areas through "Guards and Guns" no longer works, instead it has a dubious distinction of being "anti-people". To save the tiger or any other threatened species, therefore we, the conservationists now-a-days say, must first win the hearts and minds of the people living inside and around wildlife reserves (Pillai, 2000). The local people need to be provided with new economic resource or alternative means of survival as their access to the forest is heavily restricted by the establishment of a sanctuary, wildlife reserve or national park. It is here that Ecodevelopment comes in as the new strategy.

According to the World Bank Project document (World Bank, 1996) the central process of participatory micro-planning starts with the formation of Ecodevelopment Committees (EDCs). 'Without people organised in to such committees, there can be no Ecodevelopment, in the parlance of the Bank (World Bank, 1996). An EDC consists of manageable number of families (the ideal size is said to be between 30 and 60 households). Every household should be represented and the committee should consist of both men and women. The committee is described as the 'decision-making body' of the local people, and it is through them that the Ecodevelopment activities will be implemented and project benefits distributed. The committee will have an executive body to delegate the EDC matters with the protected area managers. It consists of seven

members including a Chairman/Chairperson. At least three members must be women. Moreover, Scheduled caste representation in the executive committee is a must, if it is applicable. A forest officer having a status of not less than forester is appointed secretary of every committee, and he will act as the treasure of this democratic body. All families in the settlement were organised in to four EDCs.

Empowerment through Indigenous Innovations

Periyar shows the saga of community empowerment through decentralized democratic innovative ideas. This part of the study brings about certain collective arrangements that helped to enhance the quality of life, reduce poverty, reinforce the social fabric and diversification of the economy in the settlement. The innovations are described below.

Centralized Marketing of Pepper

The democratic governance of EDCs helped them to organize against the odds of their life. The first step in the concerted efforts of the settlers was to undertake the marketing of green pepper grown in the settlement. To enable this, money lenders were evicted from the settlement by setting off the debts of the settlers with the help of forest department and police personnel. Seed money advanced through the project was used to pay-off the debts. As part of heading to prosperity, a new marketing strategy, forward marketing, was introduced in the year 1998, by freeing their pepper farms from the unscrupulous money lenders. Under the scheme, green pepper is procured and marketed through forward auction in centralized manner. An ad hoc marketing committee will be formed and the committee, in consultation with EDCs, facilitates the centralized

marketing of green pepper. What is special in the committees is that both the committees (EDCs and Ad hoc committee) will have minimum representation of women. And hence the role of women in decision making and governance is upheld and realized as well. Just before every harvest season (normally October to February), the committee invites public tenders from pepper traders to participate in the auction. The upset-price (floor price) is determined by negotiation between the traders and the committee members, in the presence of forest officials. Those traders who conform to the upset-price, has to remit the stipulated EMD (earnest money deposit) as set by the committees and the amount will be repaid only after the harvest season.

Every day, except Sunday, at 10 am, the auction is taken place at the EDC office for setting the price of the pepper that is going to be sold in the very next day. Then the price is published in the notice board of the EDC to inform the prospective pepper sellers in the settlement. This mechanism provides latitude and privilege to the farmers that they can abstain from harvesting and selling the pepper, if the price fixed for a particular day does not conform to their expectation. And there by the particular bidder cannot by sufficient quantity. The sellers will get a premium over the market price under this mechanism. Since the pepper from the settlement is unique and much demanding in the market, the buyers compete among themselves. The committee collects the sale proceeds from the buyers and remits the amount in the bank accounts of the respective EDCs depending on their supply. The farmers will collect only the advance amounts to meet ways and means expenditures and the accounts are normally settled after the harvest season. And it is also ensured that the pepper is not sold in other channels by engaging the 'pepper squads'. The pepper squad is a voluntary vigilant group of men and women,

who watch and forestall illegal transport of pepper from the settlement. They do it on turn basis and they can also seek the help of forest personnel in this regard. The social and economic impact of the scheme was beyond imagination. When the scheme was introduced during 1998-99, the total debt obligation of the people in the settlement to the money lenders was approximate USD. 17,000. But the sale proceeds of that year were more than USD. 200,000. It implies that the money lenders would have collected pepper by advancing a comparatively meager amount to the hapless people. During the year, there was more than 12 fold rise in their pepper income. More over, the community perceived the strength of unity in troubled times and there by a 'Social Capital' (Grootaert and van Bastealaer, 2002) gradually came in to being in the settlement. But their fortune did not repeat in the coming years, due to price crash of pepper in the international market as well as the fall in production.

Though in the subsequent years the pepper trading was subjected to the vagaries of market on the one hand, due to international price crash, and due to nature's fury, the community maintains their enthusiasm and momentum. From the year 2003 onwards, in addition to the auction sale, they could network with an organic pepper exporter and sold their produce still at higher premium price. To be eligible for this, a German firm conducted soil tests for three consecutive years preceding to 2003-04 pertain to organic certification. All farm lands in the settlement have now got organic certification. This offered them a 25% price premium over the auction.

When we examine the dynamics of centralized pepper marketing, we can summarize the economic impacts as follows.

- Majority in the settlement have started maintaining proper saving habits now.

- Organisational strength and group dynamism were imbibed in the settlement.
- There was multi-fold rise in income during 1998-99 when they started harvesting and selling the pepper on their own
- They earn an extra premium price to the tune of average 20% of market price through Auction sale
- Again they are in a position to earn an extra premium price to the tune of average 25% of even the auction price through their tie-up with organic exporter.

Tribal Guiding Team

This group was formed by selecting 20 tribal youths from the settlement. They were imparted with necessary training in tourism; with communication, interpersonal skills and basic etiquettes. Before being formed in to group all of them were involved in various forest dependencies. The conduct guided trekking in the tourism zone of the PA and finds source of income out of it. Though their programme started in 1998 on an experimental manner they were organised in to a solid group only in the year 2000. The programme has been highly successful and still going on in full swing. Eventually the self-esteem of these tribal youths enhanced and they attained a financial discipline in the due course. And this group became role models and encouraged others in their settlement.

Perhaps the most obvious opportunity for local residents to benefit from tourism is employment and income (Lindberg, 1999). In this regard this is an ideal community based nature tourism programme as the entire benefits ultimately goes to their

community. They take tourists for three hour long trekking to the forest and the income there from constitutes their source of sustenance. Some prominent hotels in the locality have also made annually renewable contracts with this group to entertain their own customers. These hotels pay a monthly lump sum, as agreed upon, irrespective of the availability of guests. This group was not only beneficial to themselves, but offer pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefit to the management of the PA, and there by the State Government. They voluntarily undertake the crowd management out of high visitation and remove plastic and other non-degradable waste from the visitation zone. The PA, being prone to Sandalwood smugglers, two members from their group joins the night perambulation every day.

Conservation efforts will mainly focus on the protection of fringe area forests protection from poaching, illicit felling, and illegal entry illegal guides with tourist groups to the Mannan settlement and forests. Their participation is sure in any conservation efforts of Forest Department like extinguishing the wild fire, Protection oriented patrolling (day in and day out), plastic eradication campaign, Traffic regulation in the park, Wildlife Week Celebration and so on. This service is voluntary and its financial implication is a much relief to the State Government. More over, 10% of their total earning is remitted as Government kitty as Revenue and another 10% is to Park Welfare Fund, for meeting the ways and means expenditure of the PA. They are among the resource persons for the nature campers at Thekkady. In addition they are the watch and ward at one of the entry points to the forest. The visitors' perception, observation, suggestions and feedback are recorded.

Tribal hamlet (A Peep in to the past)

The success of the programme of the Tribal guiding team was instrumental in the evolution of this programme. Twenty youths from the *Mannan* Tribe started thinking of forming a group to develop a tribal hamlet (a museum sort of thing) in which their own past culture could be recreated and interpreted to tourists. They shared this idea to the Chairmen of EDCs, Tribal leader in the locality (*Kani*) and forest personnel. Every body appreciated and encouraged this innovative idea and extended all sorts of help to make their dream comes true. The land for constructing the museum was granted by Chairman of the EDC. Then these youths started exerting all sorts of hard work in building the hamlet, collecting the artifacts from different settlements in Idikki district. Each of these artifacts is related to their traditional life style and activities. They beautifully placed these artifacts in relevant positions. They also collected their traditional medicinal plants and their parts from their area and exhibited in the museum. They made beautiful paintings on each and every traditional activity and placed them in the museum, with informative write-ups in English. They have also created a beautiful demonstration garden for their traditional cereals around the tribal hamlet. They christened it as “peep in to the past.” Yet another attraction is the ground that was prepared in front of the hamlet to perform their traditional performance art form called “*Kooth*” on advance booking.

The guest can get acquainted with their traditional life, such as herbs used as medicine, weapons, musical instrument, household articles etc. Various types of artifacts related to their ancient agricultural practices, marriage ceremonies, cultural events, floor mats, dress code, rituals and death ceremonies. Display of different varieties of fishing gear, hunting weaponry is yet another attraction. One section of the museum is

exclusively for the exhibits of indigenous medicine they used for many ailments. In kitchen, one can find an array of indigenous vessels for storing cooking and serving purposes. Mechanism for drying the fresh fishes and other things are shown as such. Garden is unique in the sense that the original indigenous cereals are grown in tiny beds and one can observe a variety of medicinal herbs as well. A few benches made out of bamboos are placed near the garden lend an excellent ethnic ambience for one who peep into the original Dravidian culture.

Tribal heritage visit is a two-hour programme for experiencing the ancient lifestyle of the primitive Mannan community and it is operational in all days. A maximum of ten tourists can go for the programme at a time. The EDC has stipulated a proper dress code for the guiding team. They have a uniform of white dhotis and light blue shirts for males and white sari and blouse for female member. All the members are given an identity card from the Forest department. The code of conduct for the guiding team also is specified by the EDC in detail and any violation of the code will entail the removal of the member from the programme. A series of capacity building training programmes were organized by Kerala Forest Department for the members of the guiding team on Ecotourism from time to time. The syllabus of the training programme include manners and etiquettes, interpretation skills, communication skills, park values, animal diversity, plant diversity, spoken English, account keeping etc. Meetings and discussions are organized between local hoteliers and the guiding team and also with the park officials to improve the quality of the service and their skills.

The programme was started during September 2003. Though its economic impact is not as much impressive as other programmes at Thekkady, the spirit and initiative of

the group is quite admirable. Considering this programme alone it is not sustainable based on the data available so far. Their earning is not sufficient to share bare minimum income per month. In this situation an equity aspect is maintained by the Park managers either by drawing from the Park welfare Fund or by engaging them other income generating activities.

The two programmes like tribal guiding and tribal hamlet have the following positive impacts

- Livelihood support for tribal youths and their families could be augmented.
- Brought down the negative dependency of tribal youths towards forests for their livelihood.
- Enhanced positive relationship of young and old generations within the tribal community
- Developed self esteem and financial discipline among tribal youths
- Tourists get an opportunity to understand the values of the PA and to get acquainted with the ancient tribal culture
- The groups ensure untiring interpretation of the Park values
- Emergence of two additional ecotourism products so as to reduce the enormous tourism pressure diversify entertainment activities.
- Availability of manpower for helping the management and protection of the PA.
- The voluntary contributing of the two groups to the conservation of the PA, so far, has strong economic implications also

Women Empowerment

The tribal colony has recently revitalised the EDCs by forming women Self Help Groups (SHGs). A total number of 17 SHGs have been formed in the colony under the aegis of the EDCs. Instead of remaining as paper organisations, the groups have ventured in to so many income generating activities, like door-to-door to sale of household articles, tailoring and group farming. They cultivate a large number of organic vegetables that fetch them a premium price in the local market. The initial working capital was facilitated from the respective EDCs.

Of late, women from the EDCs in PTR started lobbying for a good cause of biodiversity conservation. This was a reciprocal commitment from the part of the rural marginalized group as the Ecodevelopment programme attended rural development by extending financial and technical support to increase the quality of life and rural productivity. These women, comprising a total number of 90, conduct voluntary day patrolling in the forest. They do it in a group of 6 women everyday on turn basis. They are collectively called “*Vasanthasena*” (Pillai, 2005). More than one-sixth of the members in this group are from the settlement. Three groups, each consists of 6 women, regularly take part in the voluntary day patrolling. When the programme is conducted in small groups, one group is required participate in the programmes once in a fortnight. The programme was started in November, 2003 and is going uninterruptedly so far. If we convert their voluntary contribution in monetary terms, the result will be really bewildering. And this can be taken to be a kind of unpaid labour contribution to the government for protecting biodiversity.

Conclusion

The success story of the people in the Labakkandam tribal settlement is due, not merely, to a rural developmental project. But due to the changing bureaucratic attitudes and work ethics of the implementing authority and the innovative ideas come from 'primitive' communities. It is a process of social transformation that helped in developing new equations of symbiotic rural development and biodiversity conservation. Instead of turning down the genuine livelihood requirements of rural poor, the PA authorities acted as providers of socio-economic benefits to the local people. The reciprocity from the part of the rural people is admirable and shot up new ethos of rural development and conservation. The settlement is an important social fencing in the conservation point of view, as it lies quite at the boundary of the PA. There fore, let the people themselves come up with their wild thoughts, and what is adviseable the authorities is to refine and fine tune.

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