



Who are the Tribespeople of North Kerala? Exploring the Socio-Personal Profile

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ABSTRACT

The study was conducted among the tribespeople in three major tribal communities viz., *Paniyans*, *Aranadans* and *Kattunaikkans* of Malappuram; a district situated in Northern Kerala. An *ex-post facto* research design with 180 tribal respondents (sixty tribespeople were randomly selected from each community). Data obtained from pretested questionnaire survey were used to analyse the socio-personal attributes of the respondents. The study revealed general socio-economic backwardness of the tribespeople. A binary logistic regression performed between the natural resources utilisation of the tribespeople for their livelihood requirement and their personal variables revealed that the variables such as age, number of income sources, medicinal plant collection experience, and leadership quality had a positive and significant effect on the utilisation of the natural resources among the tribespeople. Despite of all the development programmes and efforts of the Government to improve the socio- economic status of the tribespeople, it could be observed from the result that there had been no meaningful change in the overall well being of most deprived section of the country. This situation calls for an urgent reform in the existing developmental programmes through rigorous explorative researches to identify the root causes of the backwardness.

Key words: North Kerala, Personal attributes, Social attributes, Tribes.

INTRODUCTION

Kerala state of India is situated at the southern boundary of the Malabar Coast. It is the homeland of several tribal communities. Most of them inhabit in the valleys of the Western Ghats. A total of 36 scheduled tribes are present in Kerala. The tribal population of Kerala according to the 2011 census is 0.4 million, which is 1.5 per cent of the overall population of the State (GoI, 2011). Tribespeople share a unique relationship with nature and follow sustainable practices of livelihood. They had religious practices of worshipping nature and live in harmony with the forest and its produces, which makes the tribal life very unique. However, due to lack of accessibility, awareness, external contact and long neglect, the standard of living among

tribal groups remains poor. High dropout rates from schools, low literacy, malnutrition and poverty plague India's tribal population (Rai, 2017).

In these circumstances, analysis of socio-personal profile of the tribespeople in the North Kerala was attempted in this study. Even though Kerala stands forefront in the education and literacy levels, which is widely known as Kerala model of development, the tribal population still remains backward in many aspects of progress and development. This study enquires whether this development has reached to its most unprivileged section, the tribespeople. This study sheds light on the status of the various personal and social attributes of tribespeople in North Kerala.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was undertaken in a tribal dominated area of North Kerala, i.e., Nilambur Taluk of Malappuram district, which is part of the Western Ghats of India. Two colonies were selected from each of the three predominant tribal communities of the region viz., *Paniyans*, *Kattunaikkans* and *Aranadans*. Thus, six tribal colonies namely Nedungayam, Theekkadi, Appankappu, Pattakkarimbu, Chokkad and Kottupara colonies were surveyed, for which the respondents were selected randomly. Socio- personal attributes like education, sources of income, land holding, monthly expenditure, experience in medicinal plant collection and health seeking behavior were analysed by using frequencies and percentages. leadership quality, contact with extension agent, addictive health behavior and social participation were analysed by using the scores obtained for each respondent. A pretested interview schedule was used for the survey. Binary logistic regression was used to analyse natural resources utilisation of the tribespeople for their livelihood requirement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-personal attributes of tribespeople

It was found that 37.77% of the tribespeople were illiterate, which means they did not acquire education from formal educational institutions. However, during the survey, it was found that, among the illiterate category, 44.1% were functionally literate (can read and/or write). They learnt to read and write Malayalam through the literacy mission programs of the Kerala government. 34.44 per cent of the tribespeople discontinued their studies from the primary school level and 24 per cent of the respondents stopped after high school education. 10.57 per cent had completed their higher secondary education. Only 3.33 per cent of the tribes had education beyond plus two. One of the primary reasons for the backwardness in the education sector could be parents' apathy in sending their children to school. The school-going children join

their parents while roaming in the forests (Kakkoth, 2017). This leads to shortage of attendance, and these children face difficulties with studies due to their irregularity, which lead the majority to end up as school dropouts. The study also revealed that there were no major differences in the education levels of the three tribal communities. In a study conducted among the tribes of Attappadi by Alex *et al* (2016) found that the *Irula* community who settled in the lower valley had frequent interactions with the settlers have the highest literacy rate (73%) followed by *Kurumba* (67%) and *Muduga* (56%). Kakkoth (2004) studied the demographic profile of the tribe *Aranadans* of Nilambur and found that the Literacy rate among the *Aranadan* is only 21.26 per cent.

The tribespeople were engaged in various income-generating activities throughout the year instead of depending on a single career. They were involved in different activities like collecting NTFPs, daily wage works, farming etc. 27.7 per cent of the respondents were not engaged in any income generation activities. The results showed that (Figure 2) 28.8% of the tribespeople was involved in daily wages alone and 26.67% were involved in MGNREGA works. 8.89% of the tribespeople consider NTFP collection as their primary income generation activity and 12.78% of them depended on farming and allied activities such as poultry and livestock rearing. Only 3.35% of them had government jobs. They were employed in the forest, police and education services of the Government of Kerala. The majority of the unemployed tribespeople were young women. Most of them had educational qualifications of 10th or plus two.

A fair proportion of the tribespeople (37.22%) were engaged in more than one income-generating activity. Among the different combinations of jobs, 7.77% were involved in both NTFP collection and daily wages jobs. Due to the seasonal availability of the NTFPs, including medicinal plants and honey, the tribes generally don't consider it as a permanent

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Table 1. Socio-personal attributes of the tribespeople in North Kerala.

Sr. No.	Variable	Category	Class interval/ score range	Frequency	Percentage of respondents
1	Land holding	Landless	0	26	14.44
		Very small	>10	81	45.00
		Small	10-100 cents	66	36.67
		Medium	1-2 acre	6	3.33
		Large	>2 acre	1	0.56
2	Monthly expenditure	Very low	< Rs. 2000	61	33.89
		Low	Rs. 2000-4000	45	25.00
		Moderate	Rs. 4000-6000	22	12.22
		High	> 6000	52	28.89
3	Leadership quality	Low	4 to 8	164	91.11
		High	9 to 13	16	8.89
4	Contact with extension agency	Low	6 to 9	168	93.3
		High	9 to 12	12	6.7
5	Health seeking behavior	For minor illness also	NA*	24	13.33
		For chronic diseases only	NA	156	86.67
6	Medicinal plant collection experience	No experience	0	45	25
		Nominal experience	>5 times	62	34.44
		Low experience	1-23 yr	24	13.33
		Medium experience	24-47 yr	31	17.22
		High experience	48-71 yr	18	10.00
7	Social participation	Low	6-9	131	72.78
		High	9-12	49	27.22
8	Utilisation of natural resources for livelihood	Low	4-7	66	36.67
		Medium	8-11	73	40.56
		High	12-15	41	22.78
9	Interdependence	Low	Low	3—6	41
		Medium	Medium	7—10	67
		High	High	11—14	72

source of income. They also did other jobs along with it. MGNREGA work had emerged as a safe, secure and easily assessable income source among the tribespeople. Many middle-aged and elderly respondents, including women were opting for this job. The advantages of the MGNREGA jobs such as the nearness to the workplace and assurance of

100 job days per annum seemed to make this a favorite option among the tribespeople. Sadeesh and Anil (2022) reported similar results among the *Cholanaikan* tribal community of Nilambur where as Kakkoth (2004) reported seasonal variations in the occupational behaviour of the *Aranadan* tribal community of Nilambur.

Fourteen per cent of the respondents don't have own lands recordically, 83 per cent of tribes had landholdings of marginal size less than 1.00 ha (250 cents). Only 3% of the tribespeople have even small land holding (1-2 ha). These tribal colonies were situated on the fringes of forests. The Government rehabilitated them from inside the forest to the fringes of the forest by giving particular land with a house to each family. Those lands were only the possession they had, and many of them did not believe in the concept of land as a resource or something to be 'owned'. Also, they have been losing their limited landholding due to encroachment and exploitation from the non-tribals near to them. Kakkoth (2000) observed a similar trend in analysing the land ownership of the tribes *Aranadans* in the Nilambur area. She found that *Aranadans* do not have any control over the land resources of the area.

The average monthly expenditure of 78.9 per cent of the tribespeople was low to very low. Only 29 per cent of them were included in high expenditure category. In the colony wise analysis, it could be seen that Pattakkarimbu colony and Kottupara colony had comparatively higher expenditure pattern. The reason might be the overall socio-economic progress in Pattakkarimbu colony and availability of lending hands in Kottupara colony. The lowest expenditure pattern was observed in Chokkad *paniya* colony, where the tribespeople have very less job opportunities. Majority of the women were unemployed. Reduced job opportunity in Chokkad was due to geographical distance to town. Similar trends in household expenditure were earlier reported by Alex *et al* (2016).

Majority of the tribespeople (91.11%) had low leadership quality. They agreed that they don't have much controlling power over others' decisions. Few elderly people who were known as *Mooppans* and *Karnnol* showed leadership quality to an extent. But the acceptability of such people was also decreasing. For example, in both of the *Aranadan* colonies, presently there were no

Mooppans. Because, other members of the colonies could not identify the son of *Mooppans* or any other elderly person as an agreeable candidate for this position. Therefore, currently, there is no *Mooppans* in the three out of six surveyed colonies (in both *Aranadan* colonies and *Theekkadi Paniya* colony). Sachana(2020) also found a low leadership quality of tribes of Attappady.

Contact with extension agency of the tribespeople in North Kerala was very low (93.3%). The tribespeople were generally reluctant to seek help from anyone other than their own people, the exclusion they were facing as a society might be the reason behind this. Asha workers, tribal promoters, tribal animators and tribespeople working in NGOs like keystone foundation were the extension functionaries they interacted frequently. The extension workers like Agricultural officers or Agricultural assistants generally did not visit the tribal colony. Most of them were unaware of the services offered by Krishibhavan.

While analyzing the health seeking behavior of tribespeople, it was found that majority (86.67%) of the tribespeople visit hospitals only when the illness became severe/ chronic. Very few (13.33%) visit hospitals even for minor illnesses. This result shows the hesitation of tribespeople to seek modern medicines. Factors like distance to nearby health centers/ hospitals may contribute to this. Though the treatment and medicines are provided free of cost, the cost of travelling was very high for them.

Experience in collecting NTFPS, including medicinal plants in years ranged from 5 years to 70 years. 25% of the tribespeople did not have any experience in medicinal plant collection. 34% of the tribe people have little experience in the past, but don't do collection activities currently. Only 73 tribespeople are currently going for ethnic medicine collection. Among them, 17 per cent of the tribespeople had medium experience followed by low experience (13.33%) and high experience (10%). The young generation showed very little interest in accompanying the elders during

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Table 2. Estimate of logistic model of the factors affecting natural resources utilisation of the tribespeople in Malappuram district.

Variables in the equation								
Sr No.	Variables	B	Std. Error	Wald statistic	df	Sig.	Exp (B)	Probability (%)
1	Landholding	-.025	.008	9.459	1	.002***	0.975	49.37
2	Education	.137	.133	1.058	1	0.304	1.147	53.42
3	Gender	.102	.419	.059	1	0.809	1.107	52.54
4	Age	.959	.384	6.251	1	0.012**	2.609	72.29
5	Income sources	.551	.274	4.045	1	0.044**	1.735	63.44
6	Medicinal plants collection experience	.059	.015	16.118	1	.000***	1.061	51.48
7	Health seeking behaviour	-.062	.306	.042	1	0.838	0.939	48.43
8	Extension agency contact	-.086	.107	.651	1	0.420	0.917	47.84
9	Social participation	.162	.132	1.506	1	0.220	1.176	54.04
10	Leadership quality	.366	.122	9.047	1	0.003***	1.442	59.05
11	Citation	.096	.060	2.604	1	0.107*	1.101	52.40

*** significant at 1% level (sig <0.01), ** significant at 5% level (sig <0.05), *significant at 10% level (sig <0.1)

collection. Women's involvement was also reducing drastically. The emergence of other employment opportunities like MGNREGA works and works in plantations and estates are the reason behind their reluctance. The tribespeople collect honey, medicinal plants, edible tubers, fruits and vegetables from the forest for their living and also go for fishing regularly to deep inside forest. Majority of the tribespeople engaged in the collection of NTFPs agreed that they had a very good relationship with the forest.

Social participation of the tribespeople of the Malappuram district was very low. 73 per cent of the tribespeople had a low level of social participation and only 27.22 per cent of the respondents had a high social participation. This may be due to their lack of cosmopolitanism and activities as a group. Due to innate scepticism and lack of initiative, they were not generally very participative in social

activities. The results were in conformity with the findings of Suresh (2001).

The results show that most tribespeople (40.5%) had medium usage of natural resources for livelihood requirements. 36.67% of them had a low utilisation pattern and 22.1% had a higher utilisation pattern of natural resources. This result was obtained by adding the scores of their dependency on natural resources in various livelihood options such as medicinal plant collection, honey collection, fishing, edible tubers, fruits and vegetable collection etc. This imply that majority of the respondents currently are not highly dependent on the forest. Respondents expressed that tribespeople are going away from the activities related to forest and its produce.

Majority (40%) of the respondents had a high level of interdependence with other members of the social system. 37.22 % of the members had a medium level of interdependence and 22.8 % had

low level of interdependence. This indicates their cohesive nature and attachment as a community. They agreed that they had a higher dependency on their colony members than on the members of other colonies or localities. They used to celebrate all the cultural ceremonies together by involving all the members of the colony.

Effect of personal and social system variables on the natural resources utilisation behaviour of tribespeople

Binary logistic regression was used to find out the effect of personal and social system attributes on the natural resource utilisation of tribespeople.

Out of the eleven variables selected, five of them, viz., medicinal plant collection experience, leadership quality, income sources and citation had a positive and significant influence on the utilisation of natural resources by tribespeople. Whereas the landholding had a negative influence on natural resources utilisation of tribespeople. It was found that Nagelkerke R^2 value and Cx and Snell R^2 value were 0.423 and 0.317 respectively which were satisfactory.

Medicinal plant collection experience and leadership quality had positively influenced the tribespeople's natural resources utilisation. These factors are significant at 1% level of significance. Similarly, income sources and age are significant at 5 % level of significance. Citation was significant at 10% level. The elderly or middle-aged tribes people (factor 'age') with good knowledge (factor 'citation') and good 'experience in medicinal plant collection' had good 'leadership quality' were more likely to fall into the above average utilisation of natural resources utilisation category. Those tribespeople who had more land holding have a negative influence over natural resource utilisation (where Exp (B) is less than 1, i.e., 0.975 for landholding). The Pattakkarimbu *Kattunaikka* colony members had more landholding, were socio-economically more progressive were less involved in forest related activities.

CONCLUSION

A cordial and acceptable extension approach by understanding the culture of the tribal society is needed for the meaningful conduct of successful development programs. The authorities should give awareness of the importance of higher education and improve their employability by conducting some vocational training programmes that would empower the whole community. An educational approach with a more humanistic and empathetic face towards the needs of tribes by embracing the tribal culture and its essence only will sustain and give a better result. A focused and participatory approach to development programs by understanding the essence of tribal culture and their actual need is the solution for the improvement in the socio-economic conditions of tribespeople in North Kerala. Value-based training on the significance of the tribal culture and its unique relationship with the forest, newer livelihood based trainings to improve the standard of living etc. can be imparted to tribespeople.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researchers express appreciation to the members of tribal communities and tribal watchers of the surveyed colony in Nilambur Taluk for their cooperation and help in the smooth conduct of the survey. Heartfelt thanks to the Forest Department of Kerala for giving the sanction to survey the tribespeople. We express sincere gratitude to the Kerala Agricultural University for providing all the support for the successful completion of this research work.

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Received on 20/8/2022

Accepted on 22/10/2022