



CULTURAL LEGACY AND SOCIAL CHANGE AMONG THE PANIYA TRIBE IN THE NILGIRIS DISTRICT

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Abstract: In today's technologically driven world, certain communities continue to be marginalized. This study examines the socio-cultural dimensions and development of the Paniya tribe, a major tribal community in the Nilgiris district that continues to be side-lined. Predominantly landless labourers, the Paniyas face severe socio-economic disadvantages due to illiteracy, lack of leadership, disorganization, and systemic deprivation. A critical factor contributing to their marginalization is the absence of effective communication skills. Many Paniyas exhibit shyness, introverted behaviour, low self-awareness, peer-group influence, and a lack of confidence, which hinder their social interactions and affect their physical and psychological well-being. As a result, they remain in a regressive socio-economic state. Among the various tribal communities, the Paniyas are often considered the most underprivileged. The marginalization of the Paniya tribe has been a persistent and relentless process. However, as they attempt to integrate into mainstream society, it becomes essential to understand the socio-cultural aspects shaping their lives. This study provides an overview of key dimensions such as culture, language, religion, education, and occupation, assessing their impact on the tribe's development. Employing an exploratory research design, this study adopts a qualitative mixed approach, combining descriptive and ethnographic research methods. Data collection is carried out through non-probability purposive sampling, utilizing face-to-face interviews and case studies as primary research tools. Although the Paniyas remain underprivileged, they aspire to improve their standard of living. Meaningful change can be facilitated through awareness programs and access to resources that support their social, economic, physical, and psychological development. Effective communication strategies play a crucial role in empowering the Paniya community, enabling them to overcome barriers and achieve sustainable progress.

Keywords- Paniya Tribe, social change, Nilgiris District

I. INTRODUCTION

The present study is about a tribal group mostly found in three states of South India, namely Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. Though their existence is spread throughout different districts of these states, this study is limited to the Paniyas of Nilgiri districts of Tamil Nadu. The Paniyan is the largest Scheduled Tribe of Tamil Nadu among the thirty-six different tribes found in the state constituting 22.5 of the total tribal population. They are living in the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks of the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu (Pranjali Bandhu, 2010). Most of them are found in the forests and remote hills. The word Paniya is obtained from Pani which is a Malayalam word meaning work. The word 'Paniyan' means worker or laborer. According to the 2011 census, the total population of the Paniyans in the Nilgiris district is 9,824 (4741 males and 5083 females (Liya Joy, 2018). The term Paniyan is used for addressing males and females as Panichi. According to the census of India report, 1891 (Volume XIII, Madras), Paniyan means a laborer, and the members of the Paniyan caste are agricultural laborers. The physical appearance of Paniyans is a short, dark-skinned tribe with broad noses and curly hair (Ershad Ali, 2019). Generally believed that Paniyans are of the Dravidian Tribes and they are the origin of Africans. The European planting community brought their ancestors to work in their estates in Malabar from Africa (Anandhakumar S, 2020). But it is not proved with sufficient facts. The

Paniyans are the most characteristic representatives of the Dravidian Tribe extended by the admixture of the Aryans, Scythians, and Mongoloid elements (Malhotra KC, 2019). The government of India categorized them as primitive tribes in the constitution as scheduled tribes to give a special status and consideration. Mostly this community people are found to be very backward in education and economic status. They have been far away from the mainstream of development as their social awareness is very low.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Most of the Tribals in India are found backward and oppressed. The Paniyans are one of the Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG's) in Tamil Nadu (Varghese, 2010). The Paniya are one of the five ancient tribal communities of Tamil Nadu. They dwell in different hill and forest areas of Tamil Nadu. Various districts where the Paniya tribes have built their settlements but they have largely settled in Gudalur and Pandalur Taluk (Malhotra KC, 2019). The detailed information about the origin of the Paniya tribe is still unclear, but some details relating to this tribal community indicate a little about the extraction of this tribal group by their appearances like thick lips, dark complexion, and curly hair (Bhasin MK, 2007). From the tribal community perspective Tamil Nadu can be divided into two geographical divisions – the eastern coastline and the mountainous region in the north and west where widely held tribal people live. They started settling in many places, finally, they joined the Western Ghats to form the Nilgiri Plateau where primitive tribes like Toda, Paniya, Kurumba, and Kota live (Liya Joy, 2018). These community people are still found to be very backward in Education and Economic status especially the Paniyas. They have been far away from the mainstream of development as they live in the forests and Remote Hills.

It is a generally accepted fact that the tribals are one of the suffering communities in our country. The barriers of Paniya community people being not into the mainstream of development are lack of trust, confidence, self-esteem, personal freedom, self-awareness, interactions with family members and peer groups, fear of criticism, dominance, shyness in contacting others, and lack of social relationships (Uma Lele, 2017). When they overcome all these barriers there will be a change in their standard of living. Factors. The other various problems are Education Low enrolment, high dropouts, the gap in education, remoteness of schools, poor livelihood, non-availability of teachers, language and cultural barriers, lack of vocational training (A.B.Ota, 2015). The solution for these problems can be given by the government by taking initiatives which will fulfill the basic needs and solve their problems. For their betterment, the Government of India categorized the Paniyans as primitive tribes in the constitution as scheduled tribes to give a special status and consideration (Mohsina B, 2018). In modern days many of the Paniyans have been influenced by Urban Culture by their dress style, food habit, and socioeconomic status (Geetha V, 2011). Though few changes are taking place the Health Inadequate infrastructure, low immunization, malnutrition, loss of traditional food, non-availability of safe drinking water, high incidence of Malaria, Sickle Cell Anemia. Lack of skills, training opportunities and backward and forward linkages- agriculture activities, inadequate connectivity, forest degradation, lack of irrigation and market linkages leading to unemployment, low income from traditional occupations, and lack of forest diversity still exists. Lack of awareness and preservation of tribal culture, interface with the academic organization (World Bank, 2012). So, the tribes remain backward in terms of their socio-economic advancement, seclusion in remote areas, and ideological specialty reflected in the primeval level of manifestation of core traditions. The Development communication process can be adjusted according to the needs, which improves the program as a learning process, as the concept of development communication is continuously evolving.

2.2.OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To trace the origin and development of the Paniya tribe of South India and their present social structure.
- To study the traditional culture of Paniyas
- To examine the extent of the development process in the field of occupation, education, culture, religion, and language.

2.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

At present they are at threat of losing their own cultural identity. The younger generation is found adopting the culture of others and yielded too many social changes. They are moving away from their traditions. Everywhere the tribes are found in the process of transformation. Urbanization has encroached into their territories. As a result, they have lost much of their traditional values and cultures. This study attempts to find the traditions which they followed and the changes that are taking place in the present era.

2.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the socio-cultural factors that can be explored in the Paniya tribal community in the Nilgiris District?
2. What are the socio-cultural changes that have been acquired by the Paniyas?

2.5 THEORY ADOPTED

The theory adopted for this study are Nightingale's environmental theory (1859) -according to this theory, the socio-cultural changes are the result of the changes in atmosphere and environment. The cultural adaptation theory (1893) by Durkheim – this theory explains that changes take place when its nature as societies become huger. The Paniya tribal community is adopting for the new changes as there is a demand for high in standard of living, so there is a change in the socio- cultural aspects as there is a change in their own environment and society.

III.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative mixed approach of both descriptive and ethnographic research methods. The study was intended to examine the socio-cultural factors and its development of the Paniya community by using the exploratory research design. Through the fieldwork, the researcher was able to collect qualitative data. Observation, Interviews, focus groups, Case studies were the tools used for better understanding the community. In this regard the researcher has visited the areas of the study by spending time with people groups, studying their lifestyle, custom, culture, and social changes. By this empirical study, the researcher was able to get first-hand information, which helped the researcher to understand the past and present status of Paniyas.

3.1 SAMPLE SELECTION AND DATA COLLECTION :

Non-probability purposive sampling is used in the selection of samples for the study. The Paniya tribes are chosen as they are extremely marginalized. In depth interview, observation, case studies, archival records, are the tools that are used for the data collection. The samplings were selected according to the need of the study. The eldest of the community were chosen to know the history, the occupation they did in the past, and to know whether there is a transformation at present. The other samplings were chosen as they were able to understand and talk to the local language. The data was collected in the written and audio recorded form.

THE ORIGIN AND OCCUPATION

There are 36 Scheduled Tribes in Tamil Nadu among them, six groups, namely, Paniyan, Todas, Kotas, Irulas, Kattunayakkan, and Kurumbas are categorized as particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTG) who are populated in Nilgiris District. Paniyas are the most important tribal community in Tamil Nadu among these sections. They have several settlements in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu. Their settlements are spread mainly throughout Gudalur taluk in the Mudanad, Cherangod, and Namblakod areas of the Nilgiris districts (Ramakrishnan G, 2020). It is believed that the Mandatan Chetties was the first to introduce them into Tamil Nadu. It is reported that the Paniyas were found in the Gudalur taluk of Nilgiris district were brought over here long ago as agricultural laborers by the Mandatan Chetties from Wayanad region of Kerala (Hemashrikumar, 2018). Most of the Paniyas are employed in the agricultural farms owned by the Chetties. Many of them are employed as bonded servants. The Bonded labor System abolition rule was issued on October 24th, 1976 by the President of India. It was applied to the Paniyas by the Government of Tamil Nadu. This order helped many bonded Paniya workers to be released from their masters and return to their settlements. The government distributed lands to the released Paniyas in 1976, after this many Paniyas became farmers in their land (Pfefer, George. 1997). The vast majority of the Paniyan work hard as coolies in tea estates and agricultural fields, from morning till evening, earn approximately 150 to 200 per day. Their original occupation is Agriculture labor but they are also famous for hunting wild animals with spears and nets. Mosse D, 2002). The occupation for most of the tribes is collecting and selling honey, ginger, onion, pepper, potato, women rear goats and cows, work a servant as days pass by men is now entering into the construction works.

CASE STUDY

A Paniyan named kuttan, age 37 stated about the change and development in their occupation. From hunting animals, they have changed their occupation doing construction works. Rarely young girls and married women work as maids but most of them are being housewives. From the ancient period, girls in this community don't prefer going to works, but as the need for money is more, we both men and women in the home are going to work. He also claimed that men do all agriculture, construction works. Girls go for plucking the tea leaves in nearby estates, bringing firewoods wherever it is demanded. From the statements of Kuppan it is known that Paniyas are slowly adopting to work in the new fields for their personal development. About the family, it was a joint family in the earlier days but later they split into nuclear families to get separate ration cards and benefitted from the government schemes.

CULTURE, LANGUAGE, AND RELIGION

Paniya is an ancient inhabitant of Tamilnadu and they follow their traditional religious customs and practices. The tribals are socially and geographically isolated. They mostly live-in hill settlements. They are short and their complexion varies from dark to darker shades of brown. Both men and women wear earrings and rings and women use nose rings, bangles, chains, colored beads, and rolled palm leaves in their widened ear-lobes (Hemasrikumar, 2018). Mostly, tribals are addicted to drinking, pan chewing, and smoking. They are highly superstitious, oppression, discrimination, and gender problems are common among them. Among themselves, they speak a very corrupt dialect of Malayalam with an admixture of Tamil and Tulu words and phrases. The form of marriage among the Paniyas is marriage by negotiation (Ananthakumar, 2020). This traditional system of religion is full of spirit worship, rites, and rituals. They are religiously diverse, with some following animism, while others have adopted Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity (Athena, 2018). The social traditions of most tribes make them outstand from the country's mainstream Hindu population. The area which the researcher has selected for her study comprises many Hindu people and only four families belong to Christianity. They do not easily mingle with other tribal communities. The Paniyas usually avoid marrying their cross cousins. (Ramakrishnana G, 2020) stated in his study that Monogamy is the most common form of marriage, among Paniyas whereas, polygamy form of marriage is also found in few settlements in the district.

CASE STUDY

Ammani, age 35, is the first Paniya tribal girl to be educated in this community and she owns a government job. She recalls the transformation of their dressing style, their beliefs, and attitude towards marriage, deity, a transition of works, and about the basic facilities and non-facilities, they have at present. The dressing has been changed from wearing only white cloth to saree and blouse, teenage girls like to wear pants and t-shirts which is not accepted by our community, so they started to wear chudithar. Boys don't like wearing shirts they wear only dhotis and banyans. Boys at the age of 14 will start consuming alcohol which later turns into a regular habit. If a girl attends her age, we will start looking for the boy from the Kerala Paniya community since they are much more developed and economically stable when compared to us.

At the age of 19, we ask our daughters to marry the guy who is working, even though if he is aged. We believe and choose our god based on the tree which is tall among our surrounding and produces many fruits whether it is eatable or non-eatable will be considered as our community deity. We celebrate it once a year by dancing, singing and making food as a whole, and distributing it to our community members. We have no electricity or a cement-built house. We use to live in huts and in less than five houses we own television. We take electricity connection from other non-tribal houses which is nearby. But most of us own android mobiles. The sanitation facilities are very bad. We have 2 common toilets and 2 bathrooms. Women here are not comfortable going in common toilets and bathrooms since we have to take water from the river nearby. The government has taken steps to build new brick houses with toilets and bathrooms with 24 hours water facilities. The initiatives are taken but due to lockdown the work has been completely stopped. We are economically backward but nowadays we are trying to get daily wages job for both men and women in the community. In the earlier times the girls won't go out for work but now we are allowing them to go for work which is a big transition for development in our community and boys in our community will be working only in the place which is nearer to our homes but as days passed and the demand for money increased men in the community are working for daily wages around the village.

EDUCATION

The Paniyas have very limited wants. Food, shelter, and clothing are the only important wants. Better education facilities, modern health systems, and a variety of commodities in the market are not familiar with this community. Most of the Parents do not take any effort to send their children to school, they are not even ready to spend money to purchase school bags and stationery for their kids (P Chetia, 2015). The teachers in the elementary schools take an effort to visit the settlements and bring the children to schools. At times the children hide themselves from teachers. Though they have got the provision of Tribal Residential Schools within few kilometers from the settlements, children often flee from attending school. It should be understood that education has an intrinsic relationship with the culture and locality of the specific people (Manojan, 2018) since their way of life is very much destined with it so that it has to perform particularly a major role in the tribal societies. As Choudhury (1982) points out, the tribals are victimized by development projects and external interventions and have been exploited to a large extent by taking advantage of their relative state of backwardness. Those measures have been mainly in the form of constitutional safeguards, legislation, financial incentives, reservation in educational institutions, and so on. Nevertheless, contemporary researches show that the tribal children are not interested in the processes of formal schooling and there exists a wide educational gap and inequality between the tribes and other weaker sections in Indian society (Sachidanandha1999; Singh, 1994; Sujatha, 1999).

CASE STUDY

Vellachi, Age 88, the eldest lady of the entire community stated about their people's education status and development. We never thought of education in our lifetime the only job for men is to go hunt the animals and for women is to cook and eat. Only now do we feel that education is important since we want our children to see in good positions in the future. If they are educated, they can go to work in shops and increase their standard of living. We are regretting not educated and we don't want to do the same for other members of the community. At least one child from the family should go to school as everything is free for us in school the uniform, fee, slippers, dress, food, etc. but children don't want to go to school. When boys attend the age of 11 or 12, they are starting to consume alcohol and girls want to do household works. they are not interested in studies. Among 80 families only 2 children are going to school others discontinued. The main reason is that they are not aware of the importance of education. Many of them have dropped out in the school at the primary level itself, the main reason for this dropout is when children come to school, they are not getting an education in their mother tongue. But we want them to be educated so we beat our children and will make them attend the class but we can't stay for the whole day in the school at that time they will escape from the classes and will roam outside. We wanted our children to be educated but they are not going to school. Especially girls we permitted them to study but four girls eloped continuously with other community boys and also with the same community boys. This is now being a block for other girls to be educated.

IV. DISCUSSION

Based on the study, it is concluded that the Paniyas are different tribal groups with their unique lifestyle and culture. They provide an insight into the process of growth of human society (Mohsina B, 2018). If proper support is given to these people, they can continue their tradition and culture, and also, they will have a better standard of living as their needs and wants have been increased. The Paniya group is trying to retain their tribal character, changes are bound to continue in their traditional social organization, economic status, adoption of a new culture, awareness about education, the need for employment opportunities, etc. Despite governmental efforts for their economic uplift, these tribal groups continue to live a pathetic life amid ignorance, indebtedness, ill-health, and above all unhealthy economic and cultural practices (Ramdas R, 2016). Paniya tribal community is their manual labor and there is not much diversity in their employment pattern and source of income. They have just started to mingle with society. Their earning capacity is very low. Even if it is a monthly-based salary or daily wages this community people will be getting a low amount for the work done. It is basically that these people won't demand anything, they only ask for the amount which is enough for consuming alcohol. Only the women who go to work will ask for a hike in the salary. They will be continuing even if they didn't get the amount asked. This is because this community is looking for a change in their standard of living.

The education system in India generally does not take into account the vernacular languages of tribes (Ramdas R, 2016). This fails to provide for the holistic development of local cultures, including tribal cultures, as part of the life-world of various socio-cultural groups in India of supposedly equal status despite cultural differences. In other words, there is a lack in instrumentalizing 'unity in diversity' (Ghurye, 1980 [1963]).

While it cannot be denied today that education has brought some social mobility for some tribes and has effectively allowed some individuals to grow. It is evident from case study 2, Jothi the minimal education qualification is enough for them to get a government job to raise their living standards. But only three to four members know the importance of education, others have no clear concept regarding health, education, availability of resources. The knowledge should be given to them to overcome the social barriers they face in day-to-day life. It can be given through effective communication. The awareness about the importance of education should be given since they are undergoing a rapid social change caused by modernization, deforestation, globalization, and other developmental activities. These changes drag them into a series of problems, like various kinds of exploitations, landlessness, high rate of mortality, vulnerable diseases, drug, and alcoholic addictions especially among youth, ethnic conflicts, unemployment, prostitution, poverty, etc. The government can take more initiatives for the development and welfare of the people to be the same. In the process of cultural, social, and religious changes, they have lost some of their traditional values. If the society is imposing new things on them then their own identity will vanish. They just wanted to have few changes which will have benefits for their betterment of life but by not changing their culture, their ethnic identity.

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