

FEMALE SUBALTERN: DOUBLE MARGINALIZATION OF PANIYA WOMEN

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Abstract: Paniyas are one of the most marginalized and landless tribes in Kerala. They have been deprived of resources, exploited in myriad ways as labourers. They have been deliberately misrepresented or excluded from various social, political and academic discourses. The paper attempts to look at the consequences of marginalization on the women of the Paniya tribe and particularly focuses on the aspect of their double marginalization. It critically examines the way the Paniyas have been viewed historically and points out that the developmental programmes of the state failed to achieve their prescribed goals in addressing the basic issues of the Paniyas such as poverty, lack of education, cultivable land and livelihood opportunities. The objectives of the paper are – to study the detrimental consequences of marginalization on the Paniya women and to explicate their ‘doubly marginalized’ status. While the Paniyas have been the helpless victims of the oppression and exploitation of the mainstream society, the women of this tribe have suffered more than their male counterpart as they have been ‘subalternized’ not only on the basis of their tribal identity but also on account of their gender. Based on the study conducted in the Aralam farm resettlement in Kerala, the paper traces the trials of tribal women as the ‘doubly marginalized citizens’ over the years through various means of exploitation, landlessness, modernity, relocation, etc. The researcher has chosen a qualitative research approach for this study and used descriptive research design, which helped to understand the phenomenon in a better way. The causes and effects of the marginalization process are understood through the lens of social sufferings.

Keywords: Subaltern, Marginalization, Landless, Exploitation

If...the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

India is a land of polyphonic diversity and multiplicity in terms of social, linguistic, cultural and ethnic factors. The indigenous population of the nation, known as *Adivasis* or Scheduled Tribes (STs), occupies the bottom rung of the social ladder. They are among the poorest, vulnerable and most marginalized groups in the nation. Most of them remain at the lowest social zone due to various factors such as geographical isolation cultural exclusion, acute poverty, lack of land assets, low literacy level, etc. The state of Kerala is home to about thirty- five tribal groups. Each of them starkly differs from the other and unique in their own way. The Paniyas who constitute 18.24% of the total tribal population of the state are the largest tribal group in Kerala (Census 2011). They are mainly distributed in the Wayanad belt and are also found in Kannur, Kozhikode, Malappuram, Palakkad districts and in some nearby areas of Tamilnadu.

Community living of Paniya

The Paniyas follow a communal way of life with each Paniya settlement consisting of a headman called *Kuttan*, who is responsible for the maintenance of social order among the members. However

they mostly prefer the nuclear family system within the community. Their traditional means of livelihood consisted of trapping small animals and birds, fishing and collection of roots and tubers. Just like any other community, the Paniyas have their own social and cultural laws. For instance, they strictly follow the policy of endogamous marriage and are exogamous at clan level. Although monogamy appears to be the general rule, a Paniya man is permitted to marry again if he can afford to do so. The community also allows the remarriage of widows (Yahiya, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

The researcher has chosen a qualitative research approach for this study and used descriptive research design for the study, which helped to understand the phenomenon in a better way. The qualitative research helped the researcher to comprehend the tribe's experience of social sufferings and marginalization. Qualitative phenomenological approach provided the researcher to study complex phenomena of marginalization of Paniya women and issues within their contexts. The researcher used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for this study. Here in the tribal context the phenomenon enquires how the Paniya women produce their experience with regard to their history of social sufferings and marginalization. The objective of the study is to comprehend the marginalization of Paniyam women in the context of female subaltern.

SUBALTERN AND DOUBLE MARGINALISATION OF PANIYA WOMEN

The term 'Subaltern' which literally means 'subordinate' is primarily a British military term for a junior officer. The term was first used in a theoretical sense by the Italian Marxist political activist Antonio Gramsci in his article "Notes on Italian History" which appeared later on as part of his most widely known book Prison Notebooks written between 1929 and 1935. Ever since the concept of subaltern has entered the theoretical repertoire of postcolonial studies, it has become one of the most slippery, complex and widely used terms. In the Gramscian usage, the subaltern classes refer to any group of people in a particular society who suffer under the hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class. The only groups Gramsci had in mind at that time were the workers and peasants. The notion of the subaltern acquired popularity in the academic and critical circle with the emergence of the Subaltern Studies Group or the Subaltern Studies Collective in India in the early 1980s. The theoretical debate surrounding the 'subaltern' became even more complex with the writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, particularly by her pathbreaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). In this work, she defines the subaltern classes as "the demographic difference between the total India population and all those whom we have described as the 'elite'".

Marginalization generally describes the exclusion or removal of a group of people or their relegation to a marginal or powerless position within the society. Avadesh Singh (2003:02) defines it as "The temporary state of having been put aside of living in relative isolation, at the edge of system (cultural, social, political or economic), in mind, when one excludes certain domains or a phenomenon from one's thinking because they don't correspond to the mainstream philosophy." Marginalization can occur due to a wide variety of factors such as race, class, caste, gender, religion etc. Double marginalization of women is one of most widely discussed issues in contemporary feminist discourse. It occurs when another factor (e.g.: race as in the case of African- American women, tribe in the case of tribal women or caste in the case of Dalit women) concurs with gender in the oppression of women, wherein women become victims of a twofold oppression simultaneously.

Tribal women being the most vulnerable section, fall prey to various levels of exploitation and discrimination from the mainstream society. The condition of the Paniya women is deplorable as they are the helpless and mute victims of double marginalization. Over the years Paniya women have been doubly marginalized and exploited in the name of tribe and gender. To put it differently, their exploitation occurs at two basic levels- (a) as part of the Paniya tribe and (b) as a member of the female community. Firstly, as members of the tribe, they are exploited by landlords and by the upper class society in general. Secondly, as members of the feminine community, they become the helpless victims

of the patriarchal oppression that is universal. Hence a Paniya woman is subalternized in a dual manner, i.e. due to her tribal and feminine identity.

(A) **TRIBAL EXPLOITATION:**

The tribal communities in India face a plethora of problems with the major ones being land alienation, displacement from traditional avenues of employment, malnutrition, ill health, erosion of traditional knowledge and culture, dwindling bio- diversity, denial of or restricted access to common property resources (CPRs), low literacy level, lack of educational opportunities, sexual exploitation, violence against women, alcoholism, powerlessness (Ram Ahuja,2014). The condition of the Paniyas is no different. The community life of the Paniyas is dynamic within the tribe primarily due to their communal life. They maintain a distinct way of life, speak Paniya language, dress in their traditional manner, wear special ornaments, practice a unique life style and have a different set of cultural and religious beliefs. All this contributes to and lends a distinct identity to the Paniya community. However this has a negative impact on their social life as the mainstream society perceives them as ‘uncivilized’ and ‘underdeveloped’. This results in a kind of marginalization of the Paniya tribe precisely because their traditions and customs get misinterpreted by the mainstream society. For instance, the Paniyas live in communal settlements called *padies* (Colony) which the modern man perceives as a symbol of caste. Hence the very place and manner of living contributes to the marginalization of the Paniyas. Further the Paniyas are considered as part of the lower section of the Hindu social order. Hence they are accorded least dignity, treated with little respect and are denied an active role in participating and observing Hindu social practices. This again contributes to a subtle ‘Othering’ of the Paniya tribe. Such a historical marginalization and exploitation has created a dark aura of social stigma surrounding the Paniya community and have made them “objects of collective discrimination” (Yaniya 2016)

The whole discourse about the Paniya tribe has been created and circulated by the mainstream society according to their own perspective. The mainstream discourse about the Paniya tribe perceives them as ‘uncivilized savages’. This is clearly reflected in the myths and legends that has been widely circulated over the years about the origin of Paniyas. A common belief, based on the general appearance of the Paniyas, states that they are of African origin and have descended from ancestors who were wrecked on the Malabar Coast long ago. Neither does this theory have any validity nor is it based on any scholarly investigations or objective evidence (Thurston 1909). The notion of an ‘African’ origin also connotes an element of savagery and barbarity. Interestingly a book on the Paniyas authored by Panoor K (1971) is titled *Keralathile Africa* (The Africa of Kerala). Here one cannot miss the idea that Africa, for a long time, was regarded as the ‘dark continent occupied by uncivilized people’.

The Paniya version about their own origin, as described by Somshekar (1976), said that they were *Ippimala Makkal*, which means ‘children of a legendary mountain range’ in Wayanad. According to the legend, there were initially only two people- a brother and sister named Angala and Pengala respectively, who did not even have clothes to cover their body. They lived in the forests in caves just like animals and covered their body using the bark of trees. Later Angala and Pengala were captured and subjugated by the Gounder through a trap. The Gounder thus took the Paniyas and trained them. Soon after the Gounder realized their manual strength and made them his slaves. Somasekaran explained the situation as follows: “It may be true; the clever people train animals for their use and the cleverest make humans work by training them”. The Paniya population gradually increased and their conditions of living became worse as successive generations of Paniyas remained slaves just as their forefathers. Eventually the Paniyas came under the control of *Janmis* (feudal land lords), Namboothiris, Nairs and others who controlled their land. Slave trade became a common practice among the landlords. Each Paniyan ‘belonged’ to a landlord. Although the Paniya slaves had freedom to leave their masters, they never did so as they were unable to find employment elsewhere (Santhosh 2008). Hence the Paniyas were cleverly exploited by the upper strata of the society.

(B) Bonded labour

The situation of the Paniyas became even more miserable due to the existence of bonded labour, also known as *Kundalpani* or *Nilppupani*. It began in the precolonial era and continued till the independence. *Kundalpani* was actually a system of slavery under which the Paniya and Adiya tribes were compelled to work for a mainstream community such as the Nairs or Gounders. The contract of bonded labour was renewed during the annual Valliyurkavu temple festival in Wayanad. During the festival season landlords visited the temple from various regions in search of Paniyas for labour. The system of bonded labour proved to be extremely exploitative as the Paniyas were paid very low wages. To top it off, women were paid lesser than their male counterparts. Hence historically the Paniyas remained tillers of land and they never became the owners of the land they tilled. While the condition of the Paniyas remained pathetic, the only thing that changed was the identity of their masters. Prior to the arrival of the British, they worked under the landlords as slaves and once the British set foot on the Indian soil, the Paniyas were forced to work in coffee plantations. This set in motion a vicious cycle of poverty and dependency with successive generation of Paniyas getting trapped in this vicious circle. Thus the state of dependency continued even after independence as the Paniyas were unable to earn on their own due to the lack of capital which forced them to depend entirely on the welfare measures of the state (Yahiya, 2016).

The problem of landlessness is not limited to the Paniyas alone. The Adivasi community as a whole have been never been allowed to own land. The condition of the Paniyas and Adiyas were all the more miserable as they were branded as slave communities. Chandran, a 43 year old man from a place near Aralam told to the researcher:

“For generations my father, his father, his grandfather, have been living in forest for a very long time. We collected woods, leaves, and various fruits and vegetables from forest, we were the slave community ruled by upper class people, when the British came they started tea and coffee plantations by cutting our forest land and then they threw us out to margins and the migrants from the Travancore they really uprooted us from our land”.

The abolishing of slavery by the British in 1838 in the Malabar region made little impact on the lives of these tribes. They remained bonded labourers even after independence. The migration from Travancore region to the north especially Wayanad worsened the condition of the tribes as people encroached into the tribal land depriving the tribals of their resources and means of subsistence. When the cultivators from the plains acquired land in Malabar region in the 1940s and 50s, the greatest sufferers were the Adiya and Paniya communities. Thus the lack of availability of cultivable land and adequate employment opportunities has worsened the condition of tribes. The Paniyas eventually get caught in mesh of exploitative labour, indebtedness often leading to alcohol dependence and suicide.

The Paniyas also face other problems such as the erosion of their culture and traditional way of life, alcoholism, change in food culture etc. Kumar, a 25 year old man from north Wayand who lost his land due to indebtedness explains to the researcher some of the key issues in tribes during the personal interview.

Due to involvement with non Adivasi community, everything had changed, our food habit, culture, relationships; our youngsters started drinking alcohol and got, addicted to tobacco. The change in food habits had contributed various diseases in us. Our close interaction with nature has been disrupted’

(C) EXPLOITATION IN THE NAME OF GENDER

It is evident from the above analysis that the Paniyas are one of the most exploited tribal communities in Kerala. The condition of the Paniyas has been rightly summed up by Panoor as “All tribes are misfortunate. Paniyas are the misfortunate among the misfortunate” (1971:95). While the condition of the Paniyas is lamentable enough, the situation of the Paniya women is even more pathetic as they are the helpless victims of double marginalization. The double marginalization of the Paniya women (in the name of tribe and gender) can be understood through a study of their sufferings and woes. The gender based exploitation of Paniya women is explicated on the basis of tribal customs, sexual violence, domestic violence, economic, exploitation and neglected political sectors.

(D) Customs and practices

The Paniyas, just like any other community, have their own customs and practices. At times customs within the tribe have a negative impact on the health and self-confidence of the women. For instance, menstrual customs of the Paniyas greatly affect the way in which girls perceive themselves. Paniyas consider menarche as the indicator of the girl’s puberty. On the day of her menarche, the girl is kept confined in one corner of the hut. During this period

she is considered ritually impure and is prohibited from doing household duties. On the seventh day purification ceremony is observed. The fact that their natural biological process is considered as impure proves detrimental to the way the girls view their identity.

(E) Health status

While the health status of the Paniya tribe is alarmingly low, problems such as malnutrition and lack of hygiene affects women greatly. The Paniyas of the earlier generations were quite healthy as they ate healthy and organic food items, mainly cultivated by themselves or collected from the forest. However factors such as contact with modernity, lack of fertile land for cultivation, alcoholism has brought about drastic changes in their food culture which in return has led to a downward spiral in their health condition. The worst victims of such health problems are women. For instance, lack of nutritious food and proper health care for during pregnancy has led to higher pregnancy related health issues. Most of the tribal women are anemic and the condition is acute among pregnant women and lactating mothers. Tobacco chewing is another factor that adversely affects the health of the Paniya women. This is the case with even pregnant women as about 95% of pregnant women in the Paniya community are addicted to tobacco chewing (Mohammed Labeed PK 2015). An elderly woman, probably in her eighties, shared the following experience with the researcher:

Earlier if we go for the agricultural work under the chettis (a feudal landlord) they will give eight anna and one ser nellu, anna is for Murukkan (tobacco chewing) from that, one ser nellu we have to use for that day meal.

The habit of chewing areca nut is associated with several health problems among the Paniyas. However use of areca is culturally accepted and has been widely considered as part of daily life.

(F) Economic front

Paniya women are also victimized in the economic front. They work as hard as their men, toiling from dawn to dusk, but are paid significantly less than men. There is a wide difference in the wages of tribals and non-tribal labourers. Among the tribal labourers, the wages paid to the male and female labourers vary widely. Most studies and reports have pointed to the fact that Paniya women are paid considerably lower than their male counterparts. While a Paniya man earns about eighty- five rupees a day, a Paniya woman is paid about fifty- five rupees for her labour. The difference in wages greatly affects their quality of life, especially in families where women are the primary bread winners. For instance, a middle aged lady Shantha explains to the researcher how she suffers to sustain her family.

Now our earning is enough for providing good education for our children or to do something worthy. Here we live from hand to mouth. It is impossible for us to save even an amount of Rs.10. Sir what can we do without jobs. I

have to play host to my mother, to my grandmother, I have to give my elder brother a glass of tea when they may visit us what can I do?' Even if it rains and we shiver with cold or catch fever, we must go for work. We have no real document on land here so we won't get any housing loan or other type of loans. We survive by shedding tears for the wellbeing of our children without even worrying about our illness.

(G) Political platform

The condition of Paniya women on the political front is hardly any better. The Paniyas in Wayanad belong to different political parties like Indian National Congress and the Communist Party of India. Paniyas vote regularly and majority of them are aware that it is their right to vote. In recent times Paniya youth have displayed a renewed interest in party politics. Though the Paniyas generally show less interest in contesting elections, a large number of them regularly attend Grama Sabha meetings. However the participation of Paniya women in politics is very limited. One can rightly say that the voice of the Paniya female is mute or unheard on the political level. Paniya women are not generally attracted to politics due to their backwardness in all respects. As a result, tribal women participation is very low in local level administrative bodies like panchayat council, village council etc.

(H) Educational sector

Education is an important element in the on the whole development of an individual, provides them to better awareness, proper understanding of their socio cultural and political environment. It also helps in the improvement of their socio economic conditions (Statistical profile of ST in India, 2013). Double marginalization of women is evident even in the educational sector as the literacy rate of women is much less than men in the Paniya community. While 46% of Paniya men have never been to school, the rate increases to a shocking 56% among women (Yahiya 2016). Since 1961 to 2011 the trend of literacy is increasing in Kerala state also. And tribal literacy rate of Kerala is higher than the national average. But literacy gap between the general population and tribals is high. It is proved that the government literacy programmes are failed to promote tribal literacy (Raju Narayana Swamy, 2010).

(I) Sexual exploitation and Domestic violence

More than the economic, educational and political aspects, two of the most significant factors that point to the double marginalization of Paniya women are – (a) sexual exploitation and (b) domestic violence. Violence against women is one of the most crucial mechanisms by which women are thrown into a traumatic and inferior rank in the social space. In fact the right to equality, right against gender discrimination, right against sexual harassment and the right to privacy are among the basic human rights of women. The Supreme Court of India in the Shri Bodhisattwa Gautam vs. Miss Subhra Chakraborty case stated sexual violence affects “the entire psychology of a woman and pushes her into deep emotional crisis. It is a crime against basic human rights, and is also violative of the victim’s most cherished of the fundamental rights, namely the right to life contained in Article 21 of the Constitution of India.” The Paniya women are one of the most vulnerable sections of the society and are frequent victims of sexual exploitation. They are treated as easy targets of sexual gratification by non-tribal communities. The sexual exploitation of Paniya women has aggravated with the increasing contact between the tribe and the mainstream society. The Report of the Welfare Committee of the Kerala Legislature-1996-98 on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Wayanad district states that “destitute and marginalized people suffer extreme difficulties all the time with the increasing inhuman atrocities, excessive, shocking and heinous sexual exploitation.” With the tribal women being sexually exploited, ‘unwed mothers’ have become a common sight in tribal regions. Majority of the tribal girls are given false promises of marriage and are impregnated by non-tribal men. These girls, some as young as 13 years, struggle to survive along with their children. Tribal girls who are employed as labourers in plantations are sexually abused by their employers and fellow workers. Once they become pregnant, they are left to fend for themselves. In some cases, these women are forced to take up sex work for survival (Yhaiya 2016).

(J) Alcoholism

Alcoholism is another crucial problem among the Paniya tribe. This in return has other negative consequences such as health issues, domestic violence especially Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), lack of savings etc. Often women have to bear the brunt of the male addiction towards alcohol. With alcohol being easily accessible, many of the Paniya youth are now attracted towards it. A forty- five year old lady, Shantha, explained to the researcher:

Our men are paid with alcohol along with wage earning, whatever money they earned they spend on liquor so our family needs are under threat. They are addicted to alcohol and consequently they are not interested to go for work that reduces our family income. Formerly the feudal land lords used to distribute the alcohol for working under him without much payment, so our forefathers got addicted, these days some new landlords are distributing alcohol to attract us, if we get addicted they know that, they can even exploit our women too.

A tribal promoter Sumathi informed to the researcher:

Here some employers are distributing liquor to attract Paniya men to work for them, after their work they won't receive the complete daily wage they are supposed to, since they will subtract the liquor expenses from their wages. Most often they target younger Paniya men, the landlord know that once we are addicted to liquor everything is easy for them. They can loot our land, our resources or whatever.

A lady named Chirutha told the researcher, "We are like slaves, suffer everything silently and live on. Nobody takes any action." Her comment explicates the pitiable plight of Paniya women.

The development activities in kerala state are highly biased against the tribal people. Although few communities do benefit from development, they representing the forward communities and not the backward communities like Paniya, Adiya etc. The paniyas are marginally represented to the process of development. They have been deprived of resources and exploited in different way. And they have been deliberately excluded from various social, political and academic discourses. This study helps dwells in to some of the resultant problems that the paniya women faces a result of their systematic social exclusion and alienation such as the lack of self esteem and social capital, social economic problems etc. Although paniya women can be consider as marginalized group with the subaltern.

CONCLUSION:

Despite governmental efforts and numerous welfare schemes, the Paniya community is still submerged in a wide array of problems such as ignorance, indebtedness, ill health, economic and political powerlessness etc. as the nation embarks on a speedy race of development, the Adivasi communities lag behind. The Paniyas have not only been conveniently ignored or forcefully silenced, but have also been deliberately misrepresented in various social, political and academic discourses. Although the condition of the Paniya tribe is wretched and woeful, the situation of Paniya women is all the more horrifying. They remain as silent sufferers or mute victims of tribal and gender exploitation. Hence it is high time that the nation introspects her 'progressive leap' and addresses the major flaws and challenges in tribal development.

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