

The Grievances, Issues, and Challenges of the Kani Tribes in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu – Possible Solutions and Recommendations

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Abstract: All over the world the hills are inhabited by the tribes. Nestled in the tropical forests located mainly in the southernmost part of the Western Ghats, India, inhabit an indigenous Kani tribes traditionally nomadic. They are the original inhabitants residing in the dense forest from time immemorial. In the course of time the forest dwellers have been deprived of their livelihood in the name of national development and whose benefits reach only the powerful classes. They face many problems from time to time. The minimum standard of living is the biggest challenge for them. They are struggling very hard to survive. Awareness among tribes with regard to concessions and rights available for them is minimal. The customary rights of the tribes are not comparable to the civil codes of the minority communities. This study brings to limelight the burden sharing needs of the Kani tribes. And it has drawn attention to different dimensions of their issues and possible solutions to their problems. This work is proceeding towards the achievement of durable solution to the problems of this Kani tribal community in the focused area.

Key words: Western Ghats, Nomads, Kani Tribes, Tribal Issues.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Nestled in the tropical forests located mainly in the southern most part of the Western Ghats, India, inhabited an indigenous Kani Tribe, traditionally nomadic. Pothigai hills are lying in the southern part of the Western Ghats. At present, there are five Kani settlements in the Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve areas of Western Ghats of Tamilnadu. They are Servalar Kanikudiyiruppu, Agasthiyar Kanikudiyiruppu, Periya Mayilar Kanikudiyiruppu, Chinna Mayilar Kanikudiyiruppu and Inchi Kuzhi Kanikudiyiruppu.

2. AREA OF RESEARCH:

Servalar Kani settlement is the chosen study area forms part of Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR) comes under the jurisdiction of the Tamilnadu Forest Department. The original name of the Servalar Kanikudiyiruppu is “*Taruvettan Parai*.” There are twenty seven Kani families living in Servalar Kanikudiyiruppu.

3. OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of this study are to

- explicate the grievances, issues, and challenges of the Kani Tribes in the Western Ghats of Tamilnadu and to
- propose suggestions and solutions to their problems.

4. STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROBLEM:

- The Kani tribes face many problems from time to time. The minimum standard of living is the biggest challenge for them. They are struggling very hard to survive. Awareness among tribes with regard to concessions and rights available for them is minimal. The customary rights of the tribes are not comparable to the civil codes of the minority communities. Hence a detailed study about their grievances, issues, and challenges is imperative to create better understanding and to propose suggestions and possible solutions to their problems.

5. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY:

This study brings to limelight the burden sharing needs of the Kani tribes in the focused area. And it has drawn attention to different dimensions of their societal issues. This work has been preceded towards the achievement of durable solution to their problems.

6. DATA COLLECTION:

Personal observation and interviews form the basis of this study. Extensive field survey has been undertaken to study their problems. Field study by means of questionnaires, interviews, interactions, discussion and case studies have developed the study on right perspective. The information from the local news papers, journals and television news has been added. The published articles and books related to this topic have been verified.

7. GRIEVANCES, ISSUES, AND CHALLENGES:

The Kani tribes in this area were traditionally a nomadic community, is now mostly settled under conditions of extreme impoverishment. Many are depending upon ration rice for their daily food. They do not take food in time and it leads to ulcer formation. A man committed suicide due to his inability to repay his debt. Five old ladies in Servalar are living all alone in their huts to get their old age pension of Rs.1000/- from the government.

Though the Kani Tribes are the owners of the Pothigai Hills, they do not have any ownership documents. When the British ruled India, they gave bronze metal document called "*patta*" to them. It is told that the officers from the government department collected those documents from them and told them that they will replace metal "*patta*" with fresh document. Yet it has not been done so far.

They do not have permanent houses. They live in very poor huts. And it is not at all comfortable during rainy season. Very often wild animals visit their residence and capture their cows and hens. Since they are not allowed to have iron fencing, animals easily enter inside their garden and damage their garden plants. In recent days long tail monkey and peacocks are more in this area. Peacocks eat and damage the tender leaves of the pepper creeper.

The transport facilities are very poor to reach their residential areas. And also there is no frequent bus facility to the Kani tribes from their settlement to the outskirts. During rainy seasons the children are unable to go to school due to lack of transport facilities. Two buses are operated every day to Servalar. The school going Kani children are depending upon these two buses to go to the school in Vikramasingapuram. When the water is released from the Servalar dam, the water will flow above the steel bridge and the children are unable to go to school on these occasions. Parents are worrying about their children until they return home during rainy season.

Few Kani people use, modern two wheeler vehicles like scooter and cycle to overcome their transport problems. They go to Vikramasingapuram and Ambasamudram only on Sundays to buy some essential items, which are not available in their settlement. No communication facilities available in their residential areas. And so they are totally disconnected from other community people.

Though the dams and electric power houses are built on those hills, the Kani tribe's houses are not electrified. Though the Electric Board (EB) is permitting them to use electricity, the Forest Department is not providing power supply. They do not have pipe connection for drinking water.

Most of the able Kani men are employed in the lowest cadre jobs of the Forest Department as "Watchers." Their job is preventing forest fire, forest theft and hunting. Very few men are permanent employees and most are temporary workers. Though they toil in this work for more than 12 years, their job is not yet regularized. They get a maximum salary of Rs. 6250 per month. Men and women who involved in coolie work get a salary of Rs 400 and Rs.250 respectively per day. Their duty is to remove the dried leaves so as to protect forest from forest fire. They do have this type of work occasionally.

The school teachers in their settlements do not belong to their tribal community. They do not get jobs even in Nutritious Meal Scheme and they are unable to give bribes to get those jobs. Some unmarried girls are working in Coimbatore mills. Ladies involved in doing menial works like cleaning the houses of government employees and earn a maximum of Rs.500/- per month. Head loading of firewood for business is prevented completely in this reserve. The children after completing their schooling are unable to enter any jobs.

There was a protest in Serenmahadevi few years ago. They protest against the government's negligence towards Scheduled Tribes in appointing other community people in Nutritious Meals Scheme in place of Tribes as well as against the demand of bribes in their appointment as cooks in the Nutritious Meals Scheme at Karaiyar School.

Though they get voting rights from 1957, their grievances are not addressed to the government by the ministers. They find it very difficult to get the community certificates. One Sub-Collector of that district helped them to get those certificates. Without the community certificates they are unable to study beyond fifth standard. They do not possess any legal documents, community certificate or birth certificate to claim their rights. They are unable to prove their natural

rights in the court or in police station. The tribal community is neither an organized vote bank nor a politically powerful community. The old Kani people are illiterates and they are ignorant of their age and date of birth.

Though the Kani tribes' main job is honey collection, they are not allowed to enter inside the forest without pass. Those who collect wild honey without the notice of the forest officers are punished and often the officers catch hold of their honey. Many have fallen from the tree and died while taking honey. Hence the Kani tribes are unable to enjoy the benefits of their forest.

Yet these tribes are encountering these challenges with passive resistance. Many cases have been filed in the court against this powerless people in Ambasamudram police station and the cases have gone up to the Supreme Court. Some Non Governmental Organizations and volunteers are backing these people to face their court cases. The supporters argue that this tribal group may extinct, if they are relocated. And also their absence in the forest may create imbalance in the forest eco-system.

When the globalization process started in 1991, the developed countries in the world began to show much attention towards the safety of the Western Ghats. When the World Bank began to fund for the protection of these forests, the severity of the forest laws increased. The pasteurization in the core areas is strictly prohibited.

Forest department officers put many restrictions on those who enter this reserve as tourists. The officers are uncomfortable with the visitors who enquire about Kani Tribes thinking that they may induce and support the tribes to claim their rights. No visitor is allowed inside the core forest area, so as to protect and not to disturb wild animals. Visitors can see the animals, only in the places where they come out of the core areas to relax.

The Times of India stated on December 6, 2016 that "the Kalakkadu Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR) was shut for tourists some times in 2012, after the Supreme Court pulled the state government for allowing unrestricted tourism in the protected areas. The Supreme Court also ordered the state government to earmark core areas and buffer areas. Since the entire stretch of KMTR fell within the core area, tourism had to be completely banned. However, the apex court later allowed tourism in 20% of the core area bringing cheers to the tourists".

Opening up of KMTR for tourism means public could access places like Karayar dam, Agasthiar falls, Manimuthar dam, Banathirtham and Sorimuthu Iyanar temple besides Kalakad reserve forest areas. At present the reserve is open for tourists but the boating service in Banathirtham is closed. Forest Department has identified trekking routes and provides trekking through the Tiger Reserve for which one needs to contact in advance. There is a forest guest house in Kalakkad where tourists are allowed to stay with prior permission. However, only low impact, sustainable form of tourism is allowed and not indiscriminate entry of public into the core areas.

The impact of the so called civilized people's encounter with the Kani tribes by way of visit, tours and management is enormous. The scholars go inside their living area for the purpose of research. The tribes come to know little about modern development through their interaction. Though they stick on to their tradition, culture and values, they are forced to know about modern progress through the interaction of the country people. Hence they are unable to protect and preserve their identity.

The whole KMTR area is now under the strict control of the Forest Department. They bother about the safety and protection of the animals and plants than the Kani tribes, who are the dwellers of land for many generations. Kani Tribes are not allowed to enter inside the forest without pass.

The people in front of Kani Tribes are enjoying all facilities as tourists. Yet the Kani tribes are not allowed to be free and enjoy their freedom. Further the Government put so many restrictions on the use of forests by the tribes. If they disobey the authorities and officials of the government they are treated as slaves. The Kani tribes have fear over the outsiders. When they saw anyone, they will go inside and shut the doors. Yet gradually they are coming out of this fear. The possessors of the forest are considered as encroachers of their own land.

World Bank is funding for the protection and promotion of forests in Western Ghats. Forest department wants to protect the forest by chasing the tribes. The provisions of the forest laws are very strict. They filed many cases against the Kani tribes when they use the forest products.

Here it is important to note that the Kani Tribes personally derived little freedom over utilizing the forest. Actually, it is the non-tribes who triggered of the intensive utilization of resources and usurped whatever benefits they are getting from the forest. It is a pity to note that tribal pattern of judicious use of resources under the belief that they are gifted from god, gave way to intensive exploitation. Everyone must realize that the tribal is only an instrument in the hand of the non-tribes to supply them forest produce and he is doing it under pressure from non-tribal society.

The Forest Department's restriction on Kani Tribes made their life more miserable. Though they are inseparable from forest, the Forest Department allotted lands in lower areas like Chettimedu and Meluthu and forced them to resettle. But the tribes feel that they cannot live anywhere except in this forest. They expressed their unwillingness to move out of the forest area. They want to remain in their houses, managing their own difficulty.

To expel these Kani tribes from this mountain, the officers of the government department tell many stories that they are outsiders, and migrants from Kerala. Since their language and dress pattern have some close association with the people of Kerala the Forest department wants to protect the forest by removing the tribes by telling them as migrants. Since they refuse to move, they are ignored and neglected by way of not providing enough basic amenities like house, electricity, provision of drinking water, bridge etc.

The Kani tribes in the area of Pothigai hills are under the strict vigilance of officials of the Forest department. They watch every move of the Kani tribes. Though they allow the animals to move freely, create all situations favourable to the plants and animals, they do not consider this Kani tribes and give freedom like that of animals.

Panatheertham is the important tourist destination, where the tourist used to visit often. Boating was allowed for many years. Only two years before boating was stopped in this area. Due to uncontrolled crowd, misuse of tourist destination and leakage of petrol from the boats on water, the boating service is stopped. Yet the Kani tribes who want to cross this water body are using unsafe method of fixing big logs as vessel to cross the water.

Due to heavy rain in 1992, the dam water was released and the Servalar river bridge was broken into pieces. All their houses were washed away. Kani tribes in Servalar were allowed to stay in EB Quarters only for fifteen days. Then they build their own huts and relocated. The Christian church rendered help to overcome their problem.

A large number of people are coming to the temple to worship *Sorimuthu Iyanar* at Karaiyar. This out skirt area of this reserve is given to Electric Board Department for lease. It is told that the Forest department tries to bring down this temple from the mountain to avoid visitors. Yet their plan is not yet succeeded.

This Kani tribal people assist the forest department in many ways. Forest department officials allot them few acres of land to grow teak trees. After two years they allot another place to grow plants. These people help them to protect the forest from thieves from outside, forest fire etc. After exploiting their help and labour, they are not valued, since they are powerless people. The employment opportunities available in forest department activities like forestation, conservation, protection etc, are limited when compared to the land-less tribes who need such employment.

Though they know the value of herbal medicines, they are unable to cure some of their ailments. Though they are expert in using indigenous medicine to cure skin diseases, poison bites, wounds and rheumatism few of them suffered and died due to jaundice, asthma, diabetes and fever etc. They cannot escape from mosquito and small insect bites.

The course of history has drawn the weak and less organized Kani tribal societies into the economic providers of dominant non-tribal society. State intervention has deprived the Kani tribes of free access to forest land, the abode of their forefathers and their only dependable asset. Large-scale influx of non-tribes into the tribal areas followed by land alienation further restricted their resource base. The tribal development programmes drifted away from forest development activities, further widening the artificially created gulf between tribes and forest. For the well being of the tribes must be assured of his rights in the forest.

It has been rightly pointed out that forest dwellers have been deprived of their livelihood in the name of national development whose benefits reach only the powerful classes. Awareness among tribes with regard to concessions and rights available for them is minimal. The customary rights of the tribes are not comparable to the civil codes of the minority communities.

8. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

A) Empowering Kani Tribes through Education:

Pre-primary education facilities should be extended to Kani tribal areas. Following adequate training and capacity building, the management of those centers should be handed over to local Kani women. Deserving Kani student's fees should be fully waived. Steps need to be taken for strengthening the implementation of scholarship schemes. For instance, scholarship rates and income ceiling of parents should be raised at regular intervals in alignment with the price index. Further, it should be ensured that scholarships to students who are day scholars or hostellers are paid on a monthly basis directly into their bank accounts to defray their expenses. The impact of the scholarship schemes on improving educational outcomes for students should be evaluated on a priority basis.

In order to reduce drop-out rates especially among girls belonging to Kani community hostel facilities must be ensured in all areas in which they are currently absent. Moreover, where facilities exist they need to be upgraded and maintained so that they are usable. More emphasis should be placed on training qualified teachers belonging to local Kani tribal communities and posting them in schools. For higher education the number of scholarships for Kani students could be increased. Vocational training should be an important part of education at the elementary and secondary school levels.

B) Enabling Kani's Economic Development:

Without having land holdings, Kani tribal communities are not economically developed. One of the steps that should be taken is allocating funds for Kani tribal communities to setup Tribal Shops in the tourist places of rural and urban areas. Export of Kani tribal handicrafts and agro-products should also be encouraged by the government. The Kani Marketing Center should be created for strengthening market linkages for Kani entrepreneurs, accessing financial support schemes and disseminating industry best practices.

In addition to land and forest based activities, initiatives should be undertaken for imparting skills to Kani tribal population near their habitations. A pre requisite to this is carrying out a socio-economic survey to determine the skills that are most relevant for the Kani communities. Targeted Kani group should be ensured through the provision of financial assistance and loans by the National Scheduled Tribe Finance Development Corporation.

C) Strengthening Implementation of Schemes for Kani Tribes:

Scheduled Tribe Sub Plan (TSP) planning process needs to be strengthened at the national level. In addition to funds for TSP, emphasis must be placed on need based planning. The Ministries of Social Justice and Empowerment and Tribal Affairs need to lead the task of development, implementation and monitoring of TSP. At the state level, an institutional mechanism needs to be put in place for appraisal of the Schedule Tribes sub plan by the Chief Minister and the designated nodal department.

Fund allocation and utilization under TSP should be monitored. The schemes of the central as well as state governments should be feasible to the Kani Tribes. Agencies responsible for implementing schemes in Kani tribal settlement areas should be strengthened to undertake plans on a priority basis. This requires developing a comprehensive development policy which covers modules on the basis of relief, recovery and reform in areas which needs primary attention.

Further, Kani tribal communities should be trained and engaged for bolstering government efforts at maximizing the coverage of education, employment, health and other services. Incentives for rendering services in tribal areas should be encouraging. The non-tribes who are posted in Kani tribal areas are not interested to remain there for long. Hence it will be cheering for the Kanis to get employed in their areas. Sensitization programmes should be organized for the Kani Tribes by trained officials.

D) Awareness of their Forest User Rights:

Strengthening implementation of the Forest Act (FRA) 2006 and the Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA), 1996 should be made. Additionally, capacity buildings should be undertaken for people who are responsible for implementing the FRA. In order to streamline implementation, greater understanding should be developed between the Tribal Welfare Department and the Forest Department at the state level. Further, in Kani tribal settlements, pilot initiatives should be launched for identifying alternative livelihood options for them which will reduce their dependence on forest resources.

E) Conservation of Indigenous Knowledge:

Innumerable medicinal plants are believed to be inexistence in the tribal knowledge, practices and tradition. Another problem with tribal medicine is the absence of recorded data. And also they have some superstitious believes that they do not reveal the medicinal secrets to others. Thus, a particular medicinal treatment is lost with the death of the knowledge holder. Abundant ancient knowledge has been lost by the absence of supportive literature. A major reason for this is the illiteracy of the tribes. Further, a large number of medicinal plants are being threatened due to deforestation and urbanisation.

In these circumstances, ethno-botanical and ethno-medicinal studies have great significance in the collection of traditional knowledge, preparation of recorded data and in the conservation of endangered medicinal plant species. With the help of new technologies, the data could be scientifically proved, so that the scientific world will accept the traditional systems.

9. CONCLUSION:

To conclude, it becomes a pattern in the recent years to blame the tribes for the depletion of forests. It is generally assumed that the tribes are ignorant of the utility of the forests and indulge in its indiscriminate exploitation to the extent of causing permanent damage to it. The forest officials raise cry against tribes and so intensive is their campaign that the tribe is being pictured as number one enemy of the forests. It is clear from the above discussion that one should not blame

the tribes for the depletion of forests. Though it is convenient to accuse the voiceless tribes who are present right on the forest scene, a deeper appreciation of various factors involved take us beyond the tribal areas.

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