CHAPTER VII

The Status and The Role of Women Among The Veddas

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Chapter VII

THE STATUS AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN AMONG THE VEDDAS

7.1 Status and Role

a. Status and Role

The term 'status' is a very elusive one. In sociological literature it is often used as a synonym for 'role' (Majumdar and Madan 1986 : 144). In the nineteenth century the English evolutionist, Sir Henry Maine, and later the American sociologists, Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess have contributed to the concept of status. They have turned or shifted from status to contract. Or have contrasted between status and competition with the development of modern sociology and social anthropology, all culturally prescribed rights and duties inherent in social positions have been encompassed in the term status. In the beginning the status referred only to the 'ascribed' status. But, of late, it has been widened to 'achieved' status too (Mann 1987 : 8).

According to Linton (1936 : 115), ascribed statuses are those which are assigned to individuals without reference to their innate differences or abilities. They can be predicted and trained from the moment of birth. The achieved statuses are, as a minimum, those requiring special qualities, although they are not necessarily limited to those. They are not assigned to individuals from birth but are left open to be filled through competition and individual efforts.

The concept of status is related to the concept of role. Linton treats role as the more dynamic aspect of status. Thus status and role cannot be dissociated. In the status - role situation there are always meaningful others whose approval is sought by conformity to their shared understanding and who, in turn, provide a variety of gratifications for the well socialized individual (Mann 1987 : 9). Talcott Parsons (1951) has termed the meaning of this omnipresent process as complimentarity of expectations.

Further, the social status involves not a single social role but a whole array of such roles. Robert K. Merton (1957) contends that persons occupying a particular status, are
engaged in a series of role relationship that together make up their 'role-set.' Merton took off with the explanation that the contemporary sociological theorists, irrespective of some of their ideological differences, agree to the premise that social statuses and social roles comprise major building blocks of social structure. The concepts of status and role connect culturally defined expectations with the patterned conduct and relationships which make up a social structure. Merton (1976 : 294) comments as follows:

I begin with the premise that each social status involves not a single associated role, but an array of roles. This basic feature of social structure can be registered by the distinctive but not formidable term, role-set. To repeat, then, by role-set I mean that complement of role-relationships in which persons are involved by virtue of occupying a particular social status. It should be made plain that the role-set differs from what sociologists have long described as multiple roles. By established usage the term multiple role refers not to the complex of roles associated with a single social status, but with the various social statuses in which people find themselves. This complement of distinct statuses of a person, each of these in turn having its own role-set, I would designate as a status-role.

Max Weber defines status groups as contrasted to classes. Not getting into disagreement with Karl Marx, Weber emphasised that classes could be defined in exclusively economic or market terms. But then Weber was very specific and careful in distinguishing class from other closely related levels of stratification. The subjective or attitudinal side of this phenomenon Weber calls status, and it connotes everything that clusters around honour. For him, status suggest the consumption of goods rather than their production. Weber states, “In contrast to classes, status groups are normally communities. They are, however, often of an amorphous kind. In contrast to the purely economically determined class situation he designates status situation as every typical component of the life fate of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honour. This honour can be connected with any quality shared by a plurality and, of course, it can be knitted to a class situation. Class distinctions are linked in the most varied ways with status distinctions. Property as such is not always recognised as a status qualification, but in the long run it is, and with extraordinary regularity (Weber, quoted in Gerth and Mills 1946 : 183).

Sex is yet another, and no less important, reference point for status ascription. Assigning status on the ground of sex is a feature of almost all the societies. For prescription of roles, sex plays the most significant part. Special activities and attitudes based on sex, are
designed and developed for men and women. And the same are accorded due recognition. Most of the societies try to rationalise these patterns and prescriptions in terms of the physiological differences between the sexes or their roles in reproduction. However, a comparative study conducted for examining statuses assigned to men and women in different cultures shows that while such factors may have seemed as a starting point for the development of a division, the actual ascriptions are almost entirely determined by culture of a particular group (Mann 1987: 11-12).

Occupation is the next base of reference point for status assignment. This is in addition to age and sex. Although age and sex continue to be more relevant factors in status ascription, the occupational definition of role has assumed unprecedented importance. The growth of modern industrial society has produced a tremendous differentiation of functions, though this applies in equal measures to 'simple' and non-literate societies and to 'complex' civilization, it applies in somewhat different degree in regard to preliterate societies. To some extent the occupation decisively affects a person's status, even it may not necessarily clarify all his rights and responsibilities. The rapidity of social change, so typical of present age, is responsible to create doubt and confusion about appropriate conduct in areas where previously certainty prevailed (Mann 1987: 12).

For the establishment of a series of statuses, also used are the criteria of family relationships. The latter, as reference points, are common among all the societies. What further matters in status formation and assignment is the birth in a particular socially established group, say a class or caste. The reference point of this kind is common but not universal. But membership in a particular group makes it possible to begin the training of an individual for his potential statuses and roles and once. Keeping in view the reference points, referred above, it can be inferred that actual ascription of status to an individual is governed not by a single but a series of parameters which together serve to delimit the field of his future participation in the life of the group (Mann 1987: 12).

b. Status of the Women in Tribal Society

Here, I look at the status of some tribal women, including Veddas through a survey of early literature and the studies of ethnographers.
What is described in the *Sandesha Kavya* is that the Veddas lived up to the fifteenth century in the Sabaragamu region. It further records that though they were frightened of wild animals they were clad in clothing and ornaments fit for the environment (Meegaskumbura 1991: 8).

The *Sandeshas* often refer to wild animals. Even in these, what is found is mostly about Vedda women such as *Wanakala, Wanakath, Malakath* and *Maladu*. Even in the *Thisara Sandeshaya*, the *Tissara* (Swan) travelling from *Devundara Dewala* at Derundara to Deddigama, when coming across Maskeliya in the forest, it encounters on passing Kehel Merugal and Hispath Ella and meets *Malu* (Vedda) women there. It is quoted as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Rajidoo dimuthu muthu wela ura bithe ya} \\
\text{Sesenda monara pil nil waralase ya} \\
\text{Sinidu bolanda rasa thepulen yuthe ya} \\
\text{Maladu Kathun bala saki wana pethe ya}
\end{align*}
\]

(Meegaskumbura 1991 : 8)

Which means:

Look friend, at the Vedda females in the forest area who are adorned with strings of pearls to which pearls of elephants have been strung and worn over their shoulders; peacock feathers brace their cluster of hair and engage in conversation which is tender, interesting and childish.

Even in the *Mayura* (peacock) *Sandeshaya*, *Maladu* living in Molagodà is mentioned in the same way, during allusion to thoughts which are so pleasant. In the *Hansa* (swan) *Sandeshaya*, after passing Pamunuwa, in the forest close to Weboda, the Swan encounters females of the forest. They too are attractive ones having pleasant dialogues (Meegaskumbura 1991 : 8).

Parker (1982 ed : 26-29) mentioned in a manuscript of the early 17th century, gives an account of a civil war between Veddas and king Rajasimha II. Among the insurgent leaders were, in liason with the Sinhalese chiefs, there were several Vedda chieftains including one Vedda women. Accordingly, it was proved that not only male Veddas but the Vedda women also held a strong and powerful position in ancient Sri Lanka.

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1 This is a special type of poetry involving different birds such as swan, parrot, peacock etc., as messengers carrying a message from one place to another. Each of these *Sandeshha Kavyas* is a collection of verses through
Writing in 1887 Nevill notices, "As a rule, among the pure Veddas, the younger women are rigorously excluded or rather protected from contract with strangers. They occupy, however, an honourable and free position in the society of their relations" (Seligmann 1969 : 89).

Indian ethnographers report, that the Andaman Islanders society, men and women are equal participants in the religio-economic life of their tribes.

In a patriarchal society the position of women is low and depressed whereas in a matriarchal society they enjoy a high status. In fact, matriarchate as such is a conceptual invention, and perfect matriarchate does not exist in any part of the world in the light of our present knowledge. The nearest we come to it is the type of tribal structure to be found among the Khasi.

The Khasi are a matrilocal and matrilineal people. They trace descent from female ancesresses who are often depicted in folk-tales as princesses of tribal legends. Even the God creator is frequently given the attributes of the female gender. They reckon descent from the mother, i.e., only along the female line. Property is inherited only from mother to daughter. A man's earnings go to his mother's family before his marriage, and after his marriage to his wife who keeps house for him. However, matrilocal residence is not a permanent condition. Ceremonial and religious life among the Khasi, especially that connected solely with the home, is in the hands of women. Ancestor spirits are worshipped and these are mainly female. The powers of sickness, death and protection of the household are associated with Goddesses. Priestesses assist in all sacrificial ceremonies, and male priests only deputize (Majumdar and Madan 1986: 143-144).

The Garo supply us with another example of a near-matriarchal society. But the type of Garo social organization is not a matriarchy like that of the Khasi tribes. However, both these societies yield the conclusion that privileges do develop, as a consequence of matrilineal descent, matrilocal residence and inheritance of property through the female line only, which add to the status of women (Majumdar and Madan 1986 : 144-145 ).

which the poet gives instruction to the messenger bird regarding the path it has to follow. There seems to be some parallels between these Sandesha Kavya and Kalidasa’s Megaduthaya.
The status of women in all types of societies, but particularly in the patriarchal is determined by various types of taboos that are attached to women generally. Thus, the Toda taboos on women are preventive as the impurity of women, arising out of menstruation, child birth, etc., makes them unsuited for the Toda religio-ceremonial life which centres round the sacred buffalo dairy. Consequently, anything affiliated to the buffalo dairy and milk is generally to be prevented from being made impure through contact with women. Toda women are among the most pampered of Indian tribal women. Previously they were polyandrous; but of late, polygynous marriages also have taken place without, however, making any effective change in the status of women (Majumdar and Madan 1986:142, 145-146).

Among the Gond, Grigson says that, in various aspects of social life, women enjoy status and freedom, as, for instance, in the choice of a husband, pre-marital sexual licence, seeking of divorcee and so on but in other aspects they are a depressed group working for their husbands as labourers might (Majumdar and Madan 1986:148).

The position of women among the patriarchal Naga tribes of North East India varies from tribe to tribe. Thus, the Sema women are socially better placed than Ao and Angami women, although the latter are better placed terms of the position of property and sexual licence. In choosing husbands Sema women have no dominant voice but their wishes are always inquired into and generally respected. In a wife the best quality is her ability to do useful work rather than her looks. In the husband’s household a Sema woman takes a high place, and her children are treated - kindly (Majumdar and Madan 1986:149).

Explaining the position of women in Meitei society of Manipur, Chaki-Sircar (1984:63) writes that the Meitei people constantly express the importance of a male child in everyday conversation. In her own words it is as follows:

Women say “You get a lot of harsh words for not having a son,” or “Husbands take another wife, if the first wife cannot bear a son”. The midwife can expect a much larger remuneration if she delivers a male child. If the first born is a girl, the midwife can expect a good fee, but she must not ask anything if the second and third are also females.

But Mann (1887:30), Majumdar and Madan (1986:143) state, the tribal women enjoy comparatively more freedom, and are devoid of many constraints which operate on
caste women. Majumdar and Madan (1946: 143) further say, that as far as the gap between theory and practice is concerned the best example is provided by the rural Hindu villages, where theoretically speaking, women are equated with Goddesses, but in actual practice, are treated as drudges.

In fact, except for a few exceptions the status of tribal women around the world is plagued by subordination and suppression in varying degrees from society to society. The situation of Vedda women also in this regard depicts a sorry picture. According to the early literature, though the Vedda women held a respectable position in the past, the present position is far from satisfactory. It has been discussed in the preceding sub-topics of this chapter.

7.2 Status of the Vedda Women in the Family

The early authors who wrote about the social aspect of Vedda life were of the opinion that the Vedda women enjoyed a superior or equal status with their husbands in the family\(^2\).

Seligmann (1969 ed: 88 - 89) has truly observed that “in every respect the women seem to be treated as the equals of the men, they eat the same food; indeed, when we gave presents of food the men seemed usually to give the women and children their share first”. Raghavan (1953 : 517-58) also reports the same thus “Presents in money that the Vedda receives are promptly handed over to the wife. Children brought up under such discipline grow up in the best traditions of family life. The family bond has sustained the Vedda in his struggle in life and helped him to survive”.

It is well known that the Veddas practiced monogamy. Therefore the Vedda husbands kindly looked after their wives and the husbands in turn expected chastity from their wives. These are clearly mentioned the writings of the early authors.

They speak most favourably of the fidelity of their wives, and assert that their caste is distinguished for chastity. They never repudiate their wives, whose duties are purely domestic, except that they assist in reaping the kurakkan. They are kindly treated by their husbands. As to the relative rank of the females, it is asserted that the men have more regard for their wives than for their brothers and sisters (Le Mesurier 1886 : 340 - 341).

\(^2\) Among them Baily (1863), Virchow (1886), Le Mesurier(1887), Hugh Nevill (1887), Seligmann (1911) and Raghavan (1953) stand out prominently.
Polygamy and polyandry are famous among many other tribes in the world. For instance Santals and Bhils in India practice these marriage systems. But Virchow who was explaining the Vedda way of marriage says that though Veddas do not practice polygamy and polyandry. They follow another special custom in marriage. Quoting Hartshornes and various travellers description, Virchow (1885 - 1886 : 370) states, that the Veddas can marry their own younger sisters or daughters. For proving this Virchow further provides evidence from descriptions of Knox and Bailey.

From the above mentioned information, we can get a fairly clear picture regarding the status of the women in the Vedda families in the past.

But the situation has drastically changed. Even though the Vedda society is traditionally patriarchal, the women carry most of the burden of the family. She is the one who looks after the children, does house-hold work and sometimes is even the bread-winner of the Vedda family. Observing the daily routine of Vedda women and thereby assessing their status in the family was a central part of my empirical study. Two such cases are given below.

Case No I:

T.W.Punchimanika, 38 years old, is the wife of H. M. Punchibanda. She gets up early in the morning around 5.00 o'clock. Then she clears the garden, fetches water, collects fire wood and takes the cattle in search of grazing grounds. Very rarely she takes breakfast. She goes to neighbouring Vedda villages to collect fruits. Having bought these fruits she brings them to the bridge at Dehiaththawa where the road leads to Vedda to chieftain Thissahamy’s house. There she sells these fruits and the honey collected by her husband to the local and foreign tourists who come to see Thissahamy. By noon she goes back and prepares lunch for the family. After that she takes drinking water to the cattle. If it is time for slash and burn cultivation she helps her husband in the field until late in the evening. Otherwise she goes back to the bridge to sell fruits and honey. After returning home she has to bring back the cattle. If there is anything available she prepares dinner, otherwise she goes to sleep without dinner. During the harvesting season she sells the harvest at the Saturday fair in Mahiyangana.
Case No II:

U.P.W.Hudee, 50 years old, is a widow. She gets up early in the morning around 5.00 o'clock and prepares black tea for her and the children. After sending the children to school she takes the cattle to the grazing grounds. Then she tends her garden plot, goes to fetch water, and collects firewood. She prepares rice or porridge for lunch. Preparing porridge is a tedious process. This is the only meal for the day. After a short while she cleans the house and takes water to the cattle. Then she goes to the forest to cut Illuk (*Cymbopogon nardus*) which she stores in a hut just out side the house. She brings back the cattle, pound maize to prepare porridge for the next day lunch and goes to sleep without dinner. During the harvesting season she goes for labour work in the fields to earn some money.

Other than the duties mentioned in the above two cases some Vedda women engage in various activities such as begging from tourists, entertaining the tourists through singing and dancing, working as servants in the neighbourhood for their survival.

It is clear from these observations that the Vedda women carry a heavy burden in the family without proper nourishment and adequate rest. Moreover unlike many tribal societies Veddas do not consider a male child superior and preferable to a female child. Sometimes Veddas admit that female child is more useful to the family right from an earlier age. She starts rendering help from an early age (average being seven years). She does the cleaning of utensils, and brooms the floor and cattleshed. She is engaged in baby - sitting for one's own younger brother or sister. The girl fetches water from the water source. If needed, she may be sent for cattle grazing. She is also seen collecting fire wood. Pressure of such work is more in busy agriculture season, of when the parents go out for labour job. The Vedda mothers do recognize and appreciate their daughters as helping hands in household works.

It is impossible to define strictly the role of the Vedda women as in the case of women all over the world. A United Nations Report in 1980, came to the conclusion that women perform nearly two-thirds of the work hours in the world. Similarly, several micro level studies in India show that a women's working day is much longer than man’s (Kishwar 1984: 4).

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3 J.J. M. Punchibanda is a Sinhalese.
In spite of the work done for the sake of their families women are also subjected to enormous hazards. The case of ‘A’ (See Chapter VIII case no 1) is a clear example for this. Sunderlal Bahuguna (1984 : 131) reports a striking example from the Indian North hill society:

Mothers-in-law remember the forest as full of greenery. So they scold the daughters-in-law “Have you been sleeping all day? Why have you gathered so little grass?” Due to erosion of fertile soil from the fields, men migrate to Bombay and Delhi in search of work. Unable to cope with their painful existence, young women often commit suicide by jumping into the river. Since the last three years, I have been hearing of cases of two or three young women, and in one year even of seven women, who tied themselves together with saris or ropes and committed suicide by jumping into a river. Last July, three women of Bheluntha village drowned themselves in the Julkur, a tributary of the Bhagirathi. Enquiries revealed that during the previous years, four women of the same village had committed suicide in groups of two. All these women were between 18 and 22 years of age. There was a shortage of water fodder and fuel in this village.

Through a study conducted by Mann (1987 : 69 - 72) regarding the Bhil tribe in Udaipur, he explains how the Bhil women are subjected to severe restrictions and male dominance. The Vedda women are not subjected to harassment’s by their mother-in-laws as in the above mentioned case of Hindu peasant society. But they are subjected to restrictions and hegemony of males, as in the case of many tribals in India.

Vedda women frequently undergo physical and mental agonies at the hands of their husbands. Some of them related their suffering to me. During the field study I got to know seven such incidents. In one of those incidents ‘L’ at Wathuyaya showed me the wounds on her shoulder which she suffered on the previous day at the hands of her husband. There are many reasons for this domestic violence against women. Drunkenness, extra marital - affairs and the superior sense of egoism among Vedda males are the most significant reasons.

This situation can be witnessed among many tribal and peasant societies all over the world. A camp was organized in March 1973 at Kharwad village in India on the theme ‘violence on women in tribal and peasant societies of India’. During this camp one tribal woman participant had this to say: “We sing song we like. First, we were scared of the police inspector, now we no longer fear him. The times have changed. However, we are still beaten by our husbands” (Savara and Gothoskar 1984 : 143). In his book entitled Sex
and Repression in Savage Society, Malinowski (1960ed: 29) explains, how the women and children in Trobriand society suffer due to patriarchal cruelty.

To understand the dynamics of violence on women in the present Vedda society we have to analyse the factors at play. As I have mentioned in chapter IV, the traditional Vedda society was decimated by external factors. On the one hand they were deprived of the sufficient resources needed for their traditional life style. And on the other hand they could not cope-up or adjusted to the rapid changes that proceeded. One of the consequences of this situation was that traditional Vedda society which was largely closed transformed into a more open society. Adverse effects of these changes are clearly reflected in the Vedda family. For instance the Vedda family could not survive only on the subsistence of the Vedda males which prompted the Vedda women to go out and earn money. Therefore the Vedda women were exposed to the outside world. Vedda males could not accept their wives going out and interacting with outsider. Males still thought that their contributions were enough. Therefore the Vedda males reacted in hostile manners, abusing and beating their wives. On the other hand due to the exposure to the outside world the attitudes and outlook of Vedda women have changed considerably.

Hence some Vedda women, specially the younger generation, reacted to the hostilities of their husbands by going back to their parents or by involving themselves with another partner. There are some Vedda women, mostly of the elder generation, who react passively to the hostilities of their husbands by bearing the sufferings. Also some families who live peacefully coping up with the changes is quite successful. This is the present situation regarding the status of Vedda women in the family according to what I observed.
7.3 The Contribution and Status of the Vedda Women in the Economic Sphere

Vedda women make a significant economic contribution towards the maintenance of the family. At present it is necessary for the Vedda women to earn because the earnings of the males alone are not sufficient. It is evident from the early writers on Veddas and also the information I gathered from elderly Vedda women that in the past Vedda women played an important role in the economy of the family by gathering of food, helping the males in honey gathering, setting traps and by slash and burn cultivation.

In fact, one common element in the life of tribal women throughout the world is the responsibility of running the economy and playing a role as the main or supportive earner of the family. For instance Andaman pygmy women work hard in their families. Compared to Toda woman, an Andaman pygmy woman lives a life of drudgery. Among the Kadar there is a well-defined division of labour, giving full opportunity to women within the field which is demarcated as theirs (Majumdar and Madan 1986: 143).
Unlike in the past the economic contribution of the Vedda women at present has become more complex. There are different means of earning by Vedda women. Helping in slash and burn cultivation is a common feature. I have even noticed some Vedda women, mainly widows, engaging in the slash and burn cultivation without the help of men. Mann (1987: 89 - 90) reports that, nearly 99.09 per cent of the Bhil women contribute to agricultural economy. It is mentioned that women participate in all the operations such as sowing, irrigation, weeding, harvesting, thrasing, storing, labour, etc., except ploughing. Because of the large economic contribution of the woman, the Bhils ask for bride-price when the daughter is married out. Since she won’t be able to work for parents, after her marriage, they are to be compensated. In addition to this, cattle rearing is exclusively women’s work. Tourism has opened up a number of avenues of earning to Vedda women such as performing Vedda singing and dancing, selling ornaments, fruits and honey and begging.

7.2 - A dance of a Vedda woman – one source of revenue for them
7.3 - A Vedda woman selling honey and fruits on the roadside.
During the cultivating and harvesting seasons Vedda women go for work in the fields of Veddas as well as neighbouring villagers. A number of Vedda women have worked as laboures at various Government work sites such as road construction and Mahaweli development project. Whenever there is labour work in Government sites, they get a pay of Rs. 100/- per day for a labourer. However, most of them earn only about Rs. 50/- to Rs. 60/- per day by working in the fields. Since the Vedda women are incapable of any other skills they are unable to find alternative sources of income.

But the situation of Vedda women is not pathetic as that of most Indian tribal women. For instance, this is how an Indian tribal woman activist describes the recruitment
process and work conditions in her area. In a protest letter to the Ministry of Labour, She says:

The month of August and September are particularly pathetic for the impoverished tribal peasantry. The women often do not even have clothes to cover their bodies. In the villages it is much harder for them to earn cash income for buying the simplest of saris and other such necessities. They lose their mental balance due to hunger and starvation. At such times, recruiting agents are sent to villages. The agents get in touch with anti-social elements, usually young men, in the villages. Those men are provided with liquor, food and other bribes. These village men in turn entice young tribal women to accept bonded conditions of labour. The munshis offer money advances to the parents of young adivasi women. Each tribal woman is booked under a woman agent for a dadan of Rs. 100 or 150. Thus they lose the right to work for any other employer, and cannot refuse to work for the brick kiln which has originally booked them. In this way they are rendered absolutely dependent and helpless to resist their exploitation. In the brick kilns dependent and helpless to resist their exploitation. In the brick kilns they are mainly given the job of carrying headloads of unbaked and baked bricks, for which they are usually paid less than the minimum wage.

Even out of this meagre amount a part of their payment is held back by the owners saying they would get it as lump sum during the monsoon when the workers go home. However, this money is seldom given to them. All they get at the time of leaving is a sari and railway fare.

These women are seldom allowed to step out of the work sites without armed guards following them. The huts provided to them are worse than pigsties. They have to live close to the blazing hot brick kilns even during the peak heat of the summer months. They work seven days a week, 12 to 14 hours a day. There are no rest days, no holidays. There is no provision for clean drinking water at these work sites. There is also no provision for latrines and urinals, so women have to squat in the open space round the work sites to relieve themselves. If they are injured while working, even first aid treatment is not provided, let alone any other medical facilities. These women are routinely subjected to various forms of sexual exploitation ranging from rape, to being forced to pay sexual bribes for small favours, to living as mistresses of owners or supervisor. Many of the experienced women are also made to act as recruiting agents for other women (Kishwar 1984: 21-22).

Vedda women prefer those work because the remuneration is good. Sometimes Dambana Vedda women go as far as 20 to 25 k.m. upto Henanigala in search of labour work during the harvesting season. A Vedda woman earns Rs. 50/- to 100/- per day for labour work. It should be specially mentioned that there is no discrimination at all in the payments for labour work between Vedda men and women. But the wage discrimination is very common in tribal and peasant societies of India. The women's physical inferiority and lesser capability of work input are proved by the fact that the payment given to them is less in comparison to the men. According to Mann (1987: 92) the Bhil women respondents, 92.28
per cent have stated that they do not get equal wages to men. Not only the wage discrimination but also the wages are extremely low. Tribes reside at Shahada taluk in Dhulia district Maharashtra, in 1972, for men who worked eleven hours a day it was Rs. 2 to Rs. 2.25 a day and for women who worked seven hours, 75 paise per day (Savara and Gothoskar 1984: 136).

During the harvesting season the Vedda women sell their surplus harvest at the Friday and Saturday fairs in Giradurukotte and Mahiyangana. There are some Vedda women specially young girls who work as domestic servants in the towns. The Vedda parents like to send their daughters as domestic servants in the towns because it eases the burden on the family and the parents get an income from this.

Illuk cutting and storing is always done by women. Illuk is important to Vedda life as fodder is for peasant life. As their houses are thatched with Illuk they can sell it. Most Vedda women collect yams and medicinal plants from just around the border of Madura Oya National Park. They dry the medicinal plants and sell them to the neighbouring that sell herbal medicine. Very few Vedda women run small boutiques where they sell sundry eatables and black tea.

There are lot of hardships that the Vedda women face in their struggle for survival. Even though there is no discrimination in the remuneration between men and women it is getting increasingly difficult to get labour work in work sites because there are no new development projects coming up. Therefore the labour work is now limited only to cultivating and harvesting seasons. As there are no paddy fields in the Dambana village they have labour work only in slash and bum cultivations.

Those Vedda girls who work as domestic servants in the towns very rarely get a reasonable payment or a kind treatment by their employers. Very often these girls are exploited and subjected to harassments.

The Vedda women who bring their surplus harvest to the week-end fairs about 17-25 k.m. away do so without proper transport facilities (For most part they have to walk carrying the goods). Their main grievance is that they don’t get a reasonable price for their commodities which are brought with numerous difficulties. This is because of the traders who collect the same food stuff in large scale, bring them to the fairs by private transport.
and sell them at lower prices which the Vedda women cannot afford. The few who run small tea shops also have a same story to say. The eatables and tea that they bring from far away without proper transport facilities cannot be sold at a reasonable price because the Veddas cannot afford that much.

To earn a living from the tourist trade looks uncertain in the future. At the rate of change that the Vedda village is undergoing today its not too far away that it will become another Sri Lankan village. It has already happened to the Henanigala Vedda habitat. Tourists no longer visit there. Dambana Veddas are aware that they are heading towards a gloomy future.
7.4 Sex Life of Vedda Women.

a) Sexual Life

Through the early authors have not discussed the sexual life of Veddas specifically, while commenting on the family life of the Veddas they have touched upon certain aspects of Vedda sexual life. Through the information from early writings on Veddas, Meegaskumbura (1991 : 29) is of the opinion that the Veddas did not practice polyandry or polygamy as a custom, they also loved their wives intensely and it is difficult to conclude that their relationship with the wives heavily depended on sex. Regarding this Meegaskumbura (1991 : 29) cites a popular verse among the Veddas thus.
Sex is one of the basic requirements of the human beings. The above verse seems to justify this. Therefore different societies follow various customs and taboos regarding sex life. In some societies people begin their sex life before marriage, while other societies they do it after marriage. For instance according to the research carried out by Ford and Beach, in the African tribe ‘Ashanthi’, if a girl engages in sexual intercourse with a boy before attaining puberty, both of them are condemned to death (Sarafino and James 1980 : 478).

In some societies boys and girls are encouraged for sexually active life even before attaining puberty. According to Ford and Beach the reason for this is the belief of the people in these societies that, if a girl does not get the advantage of having intercourse early in her life, she will not mature and also will not conceive. Therefore in certain cultures it is considered that engaging in sexual intercourse before marriage as a preparation for marriage. Among the Trobriands of Polineasan society the beginning of sexual life is between 6-8 years for girls and between 10-12 years for boys. In this society marriage is never permitted without a period of close sexual relationship during which the attachment, honesty and sexual matching of the parents are observed (Sarafino and James 1980 : 478).

It is seen that the customs, taboos, rules and regulations devised and maintained by a society arise according to the needs and attitudes of the people of that society.

In this regard, it is important to consider the present situation of the Vedda society especially of Vedda female. Vedda girls get married as soon as their attain puberty. The most common form of marriage among Veddas is elopement. Believing that the attaining of puberty is the major qualification for them to start sexual life, the Vedda girls quickly get involved in love affairs. This ends up in two ways. Very often the love affairs culminate in

\[^4\] A herbal preparation.
marriage without their parents being aware. The other way is that they engage in sex without marriage either with the Vedda boys or outsiders. This results in teenage pregnancies. After the pregnancy, males abandon the girls or the actual identities of the male lovers (mostly they are married outsiders) are revealed. Thus some love affairs end up with the girls giving birth to illegitimate children. My case studies no. 5 and 7 bear witness to the tragedies faced by the Vedda girls through their love episode with outsiders such as tour guides, bus drivers, other visitors and also with their own Vedda boys.

It seems that the lonely life led by the Vedda girls is the main reason for their getting deceived. The Vedda girls are unable to identify and not fall prey to the deceivers due to their social exposure being limited to the Vedda society. On the other hand they don’t seem to have any means of pleasure other than sex. Various aesthetic entertaining activities such as tribal dances, games etc., inherited by many tribal societies are not present in Vedda society. Even their religious functions are dominated by Vedda males. Hence we cannot find Vedda women engaged in entertainment activities except for rare cases of a woman singing a Vedda or Sinhala song.

Not only pre-marital sex relationships but also extra-marital sexual relationships are now being heard of in the Vedda village. Although this is common for both the sexes the tendency for extra-marital affairs lies more with the males. In spite of the insistence by the early writers on Veddas about the absence of adultery among them, their practice of monogamy is threatened in the face of changes that are sweeping the Vedda society. The wives of those Veddas who engage in adultery are deeply frustrated. While the Vedda society is moving away from the practice of monogamy, women in other tribal societies around the world, in which the practice of polygamy and polyandry are prevalent, are leaning towards monogamy (Sec Meekers and Franklin 1995 : 315 - 316). Therefore it is not surprising that the Vedda women are frustrated and do not accept the practice of adultery by their husbands, when the women in other tribal societies in which polygamy was approved by their ancestors, are resisting this practice.

On the other hand the societies in which there is greater freedom of sexual relations for both the sexes, they are being controlled to some extent by various institutions in those societies. For instance in many Indian tribal societies, the males who engage in sexual relationships disapproved by those societies are fined through the institution called Panch
(See Savara and Gothoskar 1984 : 138). But this type of institutions are not present in the Vedda society.

Reports of rape of women are rare in Vedda society. Rape and sexual molestation among peasant and tribal societies happen in two ways. The first is that of women being raped or molested by the members of the same society. Second way is that the women are raped or molested by outsiders. The cases of Vedda girls being sexually harassed by their male counterparts are not heard of. It is a common sight to see young Vedda girls engaged in their daily activities treading through isolated jungle trails. These young Vedda girls take the cattle to grazing grounds, go to fetch water and collect firewood in the jungle. When I inquired I was told that there is no threat or danger to those young Vedda girls while they are alone in the jungle. Key informants told that no incidents of sexual harassment of Vedda girls have taken place while they were alone in the jungle even in the recent past.

During the field study, I came to know of only one rape case from one of respondents in the Vedda village ‘A’ was a respondent who was very close to me. One day when I visited her house after sometime, she told me that she was waiting for me to inform about a special event. It was about her husband. This respondent had separated from her first marriage and was living with this second husband. She had two children from the first marriage, the eldest being a 11 years old girl. She had four children from the second marriage. She had left to Henanigala for ten days of labour work in the fields from 23rd August 1994 to 3rd September 1994, leaving the six children in the husband’s custody. During this period this husband ‘B’ (about 60 years old) had raped her 11 years old daughter (‘C’) from her first marriage who had not attained puberty by that time. He had raped her for 8 days out of the ten days duration. With tears in her eyes ‘A’ told me that the sexual organ of ‘C’ was so badly damaged that she couldn’t even walk properly for some days. ‘A’ also told me that she was furious and impatient to quarrel with ‘B’ who was avoiding her. I advised her not to leave the children alone in the custody of her husband even for a day, and I returned to Colombo.

When I returned after one month to the Vedda village I was flabbergasted from what I saw. ‘A’ and ‘B’ was coming towards me in a happy mood carrying with them, their share of Janasaviya food package. Next day when I went to Gurukumbura I didn’t forget to visit ‘A’s house. As ‘B’ was not present at that time I was free to talk with ‘A’. I first questioned
'A' about how she managed so soon to forget the trauma undergone by her daughter and lived so happily with the culprit. The following is the reply in her own words:

Madam, after my anger gradually dried down he returned home. What else could I do other than accepting? If I keep quarreling, he will bring another woman. Then who will feed me and my children.

I got to know extremely private and secret information only because of my close relationship with her which had developed gradually and over a long period. Hence it is difficult to conclude about the no. of such incidents occurring in the Vedda village.

Though there are incidents of Vedda women being cheated by outsiders, rape and molestation of Vedda women by outsiders are not heard of. But the frequent cases of rape and molestation of peasant and tribal women have become a serious problem all over the world. Specially the setting up of army camps in the villages and tribal areas has resulted in the rape and molestation of women in these areas by the soldiers. One of the speakers Srilatha Svaninathan explained how Naga women are frequently raped by the Indian army. The speaker further mentioned that according to the report of an Indian supreme court lawyer, Nanditha Haksar there is hardly any women in the Nagaland who has not being raped by the Indian army personnel. Jarjum Ete and Imami Marmu who represented the rights of the tribal women in Arunachal Pradesh and West Bengal respectively, revealed information regarding various sexual harassments on tribal women. According to Robin Rowland (1991/1992: 433 - 434) most of the women subjected to rape in Australia belong to Australian tribes. Writing about the status of indigenous tribal women of Sindh in Pakistan, Khurshid Kaim Khan (1996: 8) reveals the same in this regard. Almost all over the world the majority of the victims of sexual harassment belong to peasant and tribal societies.

The immense vicissitudes of life and poverty of the Veddas have clearly affected their sexual life. They live in small houses consisting of only one room with very limited space. In some houses even cooking is done in the same room. Under these circumstances I was curious to find out how the adults managed to maintain privacy in their sexual life. Therefore she inquired about this from my respondents. In this regard one Vedda woman (5)}
case no. 5 : E) explained to me how she gave birth to the younger children while her elder children were looking on. The description in her own words is thus:

I delivered in the very same hut where my small kids are. They don't understand. So they are not scared either. The eldest is a boy of 12 years of age. For the reason that they have witnessed me delivering the babies itself they have lost all fear. This boy would wait by my side until I delivered those younger to him. He has never cried with fear. My lady.....we have only one piece of house. So everything must be carried out here. So these things are not anything unfamiliar to them you see. They don't even ask about those things. In fact they know everything. They even see both me and my man engaging in sex. They never ask me about such things, because they have been seeing those things from the time they were kids.

This situation is common to many tribal societies. According to Mann's (1987 : 64) study 96.36% of Bhils have only one room for the whole family. The above mentioned example clearly illustrates the situation of Veddas. I also noticed a very few Vedda families using a separate hut for their sexual activities. Except for these few families all the others are unable to maintain a private sex life due to sheer poverty.

b. Pregnancy and Childbirth

When a woman gives birth to a child she fulfills a role prescribed by both nature and society. If it is her first child, she and her husband attain a proud new status of parents. But in all societies childbirth is regarded as a difficult time, and in many of them signs, omens and ritual prohibitions are observed to avoid the dangers and evils associated with it and these often deal with the fears surrounding birth (Carlisle and et. al 1978 : 2282).

Seligmann (1969 : 101) has mentioned that the early Vedda women came to know of pregnancy when two consecutive discontinuities of menstruation occurred. They also know that the delivery will be due after nine appearances in a row of the full moon from the first discontinuity of menstruation (Josef 1933 : 392). The Veddas believe that the pregnant woman should engage in strenuous physical activity in order to have a smooth delivery and otherwise the child in the womb will become weak. Therefore it is customary for the pregnant Vedda women to engage in slash and burn cultivation, to fetch water, collect fire wood, go in search of yam, pound maize, stir porridge and all other domestic work. When the delivery time approaches those who are expecting their maiden delivery get advice from the elders on how to face delivery. Apart from this midwives are also available among them.
According to the elderly Vedda women a pit known as *uru wala pojja* (which means the pig pit) had been used by Vedda women for child delivery in the distant past. This was practiced when the Veddas were dwelling in the thick jungles. The story in this regard is thus. Once while roaming in the jungle a pregnant Vedda woman developed labour pains. Having seen a pig pit nearby she delivered her child into it. From then onwards that mother and child, and their descendants were labeled (known) as ‘Uruwarige’ (uru clan). Further the Vedda women continued to use a pit, known as the ‘pig pit’, for child delivery. But according to Seligmann, during the period of his study (1911), under normal circumstances the Vedda women give birth inside their caves unless they develop labour pains suddenly while in the jungle. During my study the elderly Vedda women who provided information told me that in those houses where the ‘*yak pettiya*’ (devil box) was reposed, a separate hut made of barks and thatched with illuk (*Cymbopogon Nardus*) was erected for the purpose of childbirth. This was done in order to protect the ‘*yak pettiya*’ from the ‘*killa*’ (defilement). At present, since the ‘*yak pettiya*’ is being kept in a hut outside the house the Vedda women give birth to their children inside the houses.

Among the Arapesh of New Guinea also, women given birth outside their village in a little hut where no men are allowed. The father’s brothers’ wives assist at the birth (Carlisle and et. al 1978 : 2282) but among the Veddas, during the delivery the major responsibility lies with elderly women. Males too participate in this event and the Vedda Shaman’s participation is significant.

Some women appeal to the devils during their pregnancy to protect them from evil effects during the delivery. It is the Vedda shaman who invokes this blessing. Some take vow for the devils as soon as the pregnant mother develops labour pains. They prepare garlands of red flowers and place them on three clay pots. The shaman appeal to the devils to protect the pregnant woman during her delivery, promising that the vow will be fulfilled within three months of the childbirth. Finally, the three pots are hanged at an isolated place.

The manner of childbirth varies in different societies. Tzotzil Indian woman from Mexico, fully dressed, kneels on fresh cloths, fresh grass or cool banana leaves, and holds on to a chair. The midwife stands behind her and grasps her round the waist while the husband, seated nearby, comforts and encourages her. If the midwife is absent, the husband takes her place but is only allowed to touch his wife over her clothes. Ashanti women in Ghana, again assisted by midwives give birth in a sitting position (Carlisle and et.al 1978 : 2282).
Among Veddas some women tie-up a rope on the roof to use during the childbirth. When she develops labour pains the midwife and the elderly women come for her help. She gives birth with the help of the rope and the helpers. It is recorded that in the past the mother and the new born child were separated by severing the umbilical cord with the arrow head (Seligmann 1969 : 101). But later sickles, knives or blades are used for this purpose. I was told that they heat the sickle and heat the blade before use only if it is a new one. Having severed the umbilical cord after tying it with a piece of thread, they apply various substances from pang rabbit dung, kahata leaves me leaves pieces of clothe, soot etc. One of these items are burnt and coconut oil is added to the resulting ash. This mixture is their applied to the wound.

In most pre-literate societies the umbilical cord and afterbirth are treated with caution, usually because of beliefs that they could be used in sorcery. The Tahitians, who believe that the umbilical cord is the actual essence of the child, bury it in a special place in the public square. Tzotzil babies have theirs tied closely to their bodies with a cotton thread. If the child is a boy, the father later attaches the cord to one of the higher branches of a tree so that the child will be able to climb fearlessly and collect fruit when he grows older. If it is a girl he places it by the hearth so that she will become a good helper to her mother and, later, a good wife (Carlisle 1978 : 2284).

The Vedda midwife as well as the Vedda woman know, that the placenta should fall before the severing of the umbilical cord. A midwife told me that in case the placenta does not fall she inserts her hand inside the womb and removes the placenta. She also told that the woman will die otherwise will the placenta hiding in the chest. The placenta so removed or fell is dumped into a pit dug near the house and the pit is closed.

Next the mother and the new born child are washed with hot water. The child is bathed while the mother is given only a body wash. In some cases the mother’s stomach is rapped with either a bark of a pathiranda or a cloth. In order to make the wounds heal a special smoke is applied for a few days to the mother’s vagina. That particular smoke is prepared by burning curry leaves (Murraya Koenigii), lemon leaves (Citrus acida), chillie leaves (capsicum) and charcoal together.

6 Cassipurea ceylanica.
7 Careya arborea.
8 Madhuca.
9 Citrus megaloxylarca var.
There are a number of other duties to be performed in the case of a mother who has just delivered a child. In the past the only food given to such a mother for the first 3 days was a special curry prepared from jungle chillies and salt. At present a curry prepared from black pepper and garlic is given. Neem oil is also given to drink in some cases. After three days of delivery, the mother is provided rice with a curry made of black pepper and garlic. Few days later the mother is allowed to eat meat, honey, porridge made of kurakkan millet, and roti etc. The meat of the pig and armadillo are prohibited. But at present these food restrictions are not followed due to poverty. Nine days after the delivery of the child the mother is bathed with hot water.

In case of emergencies that prop up during child delivery, Veddas use various medicines, kem and beliefs peculiar to them. For example when the delivery is not forthcoming even as the mother has developed labour pains, a special mixture is applied to the mother’s belly. This is prepared by chanting to a mixture of saffron, chunam and coconut oil. Veddas believe that by doing so the labour pains will increase and the delivery will take place smoothly.

If the placenta does not fall the mother is given to drink the juice squeezed out of Nica leaves. Otherwise they pound coconut shells using the pestle and mortar. They believe that the placenta will fall due to the sound so generated. When all the above methods fail they wipe the belly with a broom made of coconut reed and press it (belly) using the nebiliya. The juice extracted by squeezing the leaves and bark of kapu is also given for drinking in order to induce labour pains.

Sometimes when the delivery is delayed, the Vedda shaman performs chanting on the flowers placed in a mal-thatuwa. The types of flowers to be used here, is decided by the shaman with the help of an oracle. Through this oracle the shaman finds out the devil who is causing the harm to the pregnant mother, the place where the harm was done (whether the women was alone while roaming in the jungle or was sleeping etc.). Depending on these findings the shaman perform the chanting on the flowers, mirror, comb, wig, oil, thread and ties the treads around the hands, neck, hip, legs. Then he chases out the

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10 Ocult medicine.
11 Vitex.
12 A special clay pot used in cleaning rice.
13 Gossypium herbaceum.
15 A flower/betal offering basket made of coconut leaves.
devil by cutting some lemon fruits. If the child in the womb has not turned the proper way, two types of chantings are performed. One of the chantings (named Gemmata mathuranawa) is for the sake of turning of the child into the correct direction (orientation). The other chanting (named bada thel mathurnawa) is done for quick delivery of the child. Ederu oil\textsuperscript{16} and coconut oil are used for the first and second chanting respectively.

There is a sorcery (black magic) named villi bandeema practised by Veddas on their adversaries. When this is performed the adversary woman is unable to deliver the child even though she has developed labour pains. In such a situation the effect should be dispelled by performing a counter sorcery (white magic) by a Vedda shaman.

According to elderly Vedda women in an earlier period women who gave birth were subjected to more restrictions than today. During that period, women had to go to a separate hut outside the house for the delivery. They were allowed to come out of that hut only after nine days after delivery. Before entering the house they had to clean themselves by bathing. As the Killa (defilement) strongly affects the father and the maternal uncle of the woman who delivered the child, special care is taken to keep those two male members of the family out of bounds from the woman for the nine days after delivery. Even the washing of blood stained clothes was done inside that separate hut. For this purpose a stone was kept in a small pit dug up inside a corner of the hut. For washing water was taken inside the hut and the contaminated water was directed out of the hut through a tiny hole. The mother and the new born child are taken out of the hut only after bathing them and the floor of the house being spread with newly prepared cow-dung and mud mixture. Earlier the mother who had to live in a separate hut for nine days after birth. She was not kept alone in order to protect her from Samni Yaka (a devil who cause decease). For another three months the mother was considered to be a carrier of Killa.

The belief that a woman who has just given birth to a child is a carrier of Killa is prevalent in the Sinhala society too. Hence, this same practice among the Veddas may be based partly on their association with the Sinhalese and partly on their belief in devils and protection of devil box. In the Sinhala society also the Killa or defilement is believed to effect mostly to father and the maternal uncle of the woman. That the same belief is prevalent among the Veddas clearly shows the influence of the Sinhalese. This view gets a

\textsuperscript{16} Ricinus communis.
further boost from the absence of any mentioning of this practice in the works of early writers on Veddas.

However, most of the tribal societies still consider a woman who has just delivered a child as impure and polluted for a certain period after the delivery. For instance, among Bhils the period of impurity and pollution is recognised as almost forty days. But she resorts to normal working after ten days of delivery. It is only after the performance of ritual, meant for the occasion, that the impurity of the person is removed (See Mann 1987: 112-113).

But now most of these customs, taboos and belief are changing rapidly in the Vedda society. The main reason for the inability of the Vedda women to plan their child delivery in advance is due to the destitute life they lead today. Case studies no 1, 5 and 8 are examples in this regard. They illustrate very clearly how those Vedda women deliver their children unexpectedly and how they manage the situation courageously on their own without any outside help. Vedda women tolerate any amount of suffering. I observed this in my field study. In case study no 1 : A, the mother herself delivered the child and severed the umbilical cord:

The child was born. I could not even keep a blade with me beforehand. There was no one at all for my support. I grasped the sickle that was beside me ; Kept the umbilical cord on top of a piece of firewood and cut it off with one blow of the sickle all by myself. It didn't sever at the first blow. The piece of flesh began to stretch, and I began to stretch, and I began to experience profuse bleeding. In order to put a stop to the bleeding, I burnt a piece of cloth and mixed a little bit of coconut oil to the ashes produced from it and applied it on the wound.

But now there is a trend towards obtaining the service of the midwife. This is mostly with regard to the complicated cases of delivery. During the field study, the midwife who had been assigned that village, narrated an encounter she experienced. One midnight a Vedda woman gave birth to a child. But the placenta did not fall. Her husband came in search of the midwife only in the morning. She rushed to that house immediately. The mother had still not been separated from the child and due to profuse bleeding the mother's condition was critical. Responding quickly the midwife separated the child from mother and advised them take her to the hospital and as soon as possible. They were not interested in taking her to the hospital, instead preferred their occult medicine. But due to the
insistence of the midwife she was taken to the Mahiyangana hospital. There the doctor quickly removed the placenta and directed her to the better equipped Badulla hospital. He told that the mother would have died if they had been late by another half an hour. The midwife further told me that when she arrived at the house, men, women and children were flocked around the patient. At present child delivery in the Vedda society is not a secret or private affair. Even the small children are aware of it. Case study no 1 and 5 provide ample testimony in this regard.

According to the Vedda elders child delivery in the past was fairly smooth because in those days the life style of the Vedda women demanded strenuous physical activity. They blamed the frequent hazards involved in child delivery today to the drastically changed life style that does not involve regular and strenuous physical activity. Therefore at present the Veddas have to seek the services of the midwife or the hospital at least in special cases (See case no. 3). More and more young mothers are turning away from the traditional practices and preferring to go to the hospital.

c. Family Planning

Many Governments are taking a keen interest in implementing family planning projects specially among the tribals and poor sections of the society. But most tribal people find it difficult to come to terms with modern concepts like family planning. A family planning project introduced to the tribal villages at Sankergarh in Surguja district of Madya pradesh in India; and the negative response shown by an Indian tribal towards a family planning project is reported thus:

Family planning programme in tribal villages of Sankergarh is reviewed in the light of demographic parameters. Sterilizations were performed at a period when age specific fertility is low. Participation in the programme is mostly passive. As such, the resulting average family size is not appreciably changed. To achieve desired goals various constraining factors are to be identified (Mukherjee and et. al 1988 : 184).

This clearly shows that a tribe, willing to carry on with their traditional life style, finds it difficult to grasp a modern concept like family planning. But the situation among the Vedda society in Sri Lanka shows a clear distinction in this regard. At present the family planning methods are rapidly becoming popular among the Veddas. This may be due

17 See Chapter IX.
to various factors. 1) The near impossibility of preserving their traditional life style. 2) The reluctance of younger generation to stick to the traditional life style. 3) Their interaction with the Sinhalese. 4) The prevailing poverty and the struggle for survival. 5) The pressure from the family planning officials.

Most of the Vedda women subjected to the author observations at Dambana and Henanigala had undergone LRT\(^{18}\) surgery. According to the 1994 report of the midwife of Dambana eighty one mothers had undergone LRT surgery. Most of them are Vedda women. In addition, there were about ten to twelve Vedda mothers who were regularly taking the contraceptive injection once in three months. Among the various family planning methods most popular technique among the Veddas is the contraceptive injection. They dislike using tablets or loops. It is only the Vedda women that undergo family planning procedures, while the Vedda males do not use any kind of contraceptives. Sometime they even object to their wives undergoing family planning.

During the period of three years, from 1991 to 1994, eighty nine women in Vedda village of Henanigala/South had undergone LRT. Accordingly by 1994 out of two hundred and seventy five eligible Vedda families\(^{19}\) eighty nine had undergone LRT. According to the midwife of Henanigala most of the Vedda women who had undergone this surgery had three to six children in their families. In addition to that the Henanigala midwife had a list of fourty women who were willing to undergo LRT in 1996. That list was taken from the families who had more than three children. By that time it had already started taking groups of seven or fifteen to undergo LRT at Giradurukotte and Plolnnaruwa hospitals.

The mid wife also told me that those women who had more than six children in their families they were still reluctant to undergo LRT. But most of the recently married young mothers were eager to undergo LRT even after two children. As the Vedda girls marry at a very young age of 15-16 years their fertility rate is very high. Hence those women of about 35 years of age who had not practiced any family planning method had borne about -eleven to twelve children. Those mothers show less interest in LRT and they have a fearful attitude towards this surgery. But some mothers of the age group of 30-40 who also had many children had undergone LRT told me that they were not aware of this surgery when

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\(^{18}\) Lapa-Roscopy Tube Ligation.
\(^{19}\) The married women in the age group of 15-49 were considered eligible to bear children.
they had two or three children and had they undergone it, the burden of the family would have been much less.

From this we can conclude that the family planning is widespread and popular among Vedda women.

7.5 Conclusion

This study regarding the position of Vedda women would be of considerable use to us in understanding and addressing most of the problems that confront them today. In the process of investigating the status and the role of Vedda women and by studying their life histories many facts relating to the numerous problems facing them are revealed.

The main problem that affects all the Vedda women I studied is extreme poverty. Each of their life histories provides ample evidence in this regard. The extreme poverty of Veddas was emphasized even way back in 1950's by famed anthropologist Verrier Elwin who visited them. He states thus:

I have lived for twenty years among some of the poorest people in India and I thought I knew all about poverty. But I have never seen anything approaching the poverty of these Veddas. They had no food at all in their house, no store of grain, no oil, no salt, no spices -- only just a few bits of dried meat and a handful of chilies. There were no cattle, no goats or pigs such as are invariably kept by the Indian tribesmen.

I do not know how the other Vedda settlements are progressing but the Pollebedda group, which Dr. Spittel tells me is the purest of the wild Veddas, is in desperate need not of uplift or education or even of medicine, but of food. The young men are willing to work for wages but during the months of labour in the chenas they have no reserve stores of food to fall back on and they are very hungry (Elwin 1950: 8)

He further says that the British policy of neglecting Veddas continues unabated and was deeply touched by the courage, love and cheerful attitude of these hardy aborigines in spite of their extreme poverty.

54 Life histories of Vedda women are in chapter VIII.
Even though poverty is not unfamiliar to most of the developing countries, specially South Asian, the situation of tribals of these countries is extremely pathetic. The situation of women in these tribal societies is much worse.

While the problems facing the Vedda women are not totally different from those of Indian tribal women, there are some significant differences. The total population of the scheduled tribes in India stands 51,628,638 (the 1981 census). They constitute 7.76 per cent of the total population (the 1981 census) (Singh 1994: 2). But the total Vedda population is about 2500. It is 0.02 per cent of the total population of Sri Lanka. Accordingly, there are significant number of Indian tribal women who have acquired higher education and responsible positions in the society which enable them to highlight the grievance of tribal women. Therefore they are not prepared to suffer passively from the social injustices thrust upon them. As a result of this various organizations have emerged from within the tribal societies to raise the problems facing them. For example many tribal women participated in the first women's conference held in the village Kharwad in the year 1973. Their they spoke openly about their grievances such as the cruelty of their drunkert husbands, the sexual harassments by rich peasants and police, their long days of work, the burden of house work and the obstacles they faced in order to participate in this camp. The journalists who covered this conference reported that it was a frank discussion about their problems with tremendous response from the participant tribal women. They reported thus:

During the camp, the women from Karanheda village had described how their husbands drank and beat them up, and they asked the women at the camp to help them eradicate liquor from their village. Spontaneously, all the women walked to the village. On the way, more and more women from villages along the route joined in. They marched to the liquor den and broke all the pots. ‘We will not allow you to produce and sell liquor again’, they threatened. They also gheraaoed the police inspector and asked him for an explanation. This was a clear manifestation of the power of women. Soon, a wave of liquor pot-breaking shook the area. As in Moad village, women moved around in bands to break liquor pots and terrorize the ruffians of the village (Savara and Gotheroskar 1984: 144).

But in the Vedda society there are no such organization or activists even to bring out the numerous problems facing Vedda women. Among the Indian tribals the services rended by the tribal movements towards the tribal women who are subjected to various harrasments are quite significant. In contrast the women in Sri Lanka's Vedda society are almost helpless. Even the numerous scholars who discuss the problems of Vedda society through
their research and publications have neglected the Vedda women. The absence of any literature on Vedda women clearly illustrates this point. Therefore, following the Indian experience it is of utmost importance for the social workers to organize tribal movements within the Vedda society and for the scholars to pay more attention on the problems facing the Vedda women.

During my study of the status and role of the Vedda women, it became evident that they have been deprived of some fundamental human rights such as legal divorce and participation in politics. The absence of legal divorce among Vedda women is mainly due to social structure and poverty. As there are no legal marriages among Veddas consequently there are no legal divorce. The prevalent mode of marriage among Veddas is ‘presumption and co-habitation’. Therefore the Vedda husband or wife can abandon their marriage and resume a new partnership. Mostly it is the Vedda wives who are adversely affected by this situation. This is not much of a difference even among the very few cases of legal marriage. I came across some pathetic Vedda women who were abandoned by their legally married husbands. Most of them do not know how to go to courts against their unfaithful husbands. Even if they know, the legal procedure is laborious and expensive, which is beyond their reach. On the other hand, the Vedda wives are aware that their poverty stricken husbands are not in a position to pay compensation in the event of legal action. Hence, they do not have access to this fundamental human right of legal divorce enjoyed by other Sri Lankan women.

Further the political consciousness of the whole Vedda society is extremely low compared to the mainstream society. Though there is a local government body binding the Veddas, the bureaucracy and the rulers, malfunctioning prevents the voice of the Veddas from being heard. Under these circumstances the Vedda women are reduced to silent spectators. As a citizen of Sri Lanka she has the right of franchise. But many a Vedda women do not use this right either in general elections or local Government elections. During the field study in 1994, the general election of the country was held. There I had an opportunity to investigate the voting pattern of the Vedda society and I came across many Vedda women who did not cast their vote in that election. When I inquired about this, their response was that the election does not make sense to them and whoever wins the election, their hunger will not be extinguished.
In most tribal societies either the women’s response to politics is neutral or they are being deprived of political rights. Mann (1987: 118-119) describes how the Bhils women are being distanced from politics thus. “The women’s association in terms of position, with traditional council is, almost nil. Centpercent of the respondents stated that a woman cannot become Gameti or member of the traditional council”. But the situation of matrilocal societies in this regard is still satisfactory. For example Elwin (1943: 11) has stated that a Khasi woman in India had served as a cabinet minister in the Assam Government even before the Independence.

There is no dearth of women leaders in India who rise up against the social oppressions affecting them. As mentioned earlier, at the workshop on The Rights of Tribal and Indigenous Peoples55 in which I also participated, a tribal woman activist from Arunachal Pradesh, Jarjum Ete and Santhal tribal women leader Imami Marmu in forceful and impressive manner drew the attention of the local and foreign delegates on the grievances and injustices that their own tribal women are undergoing. Moreover the status of Maori women is currently being examined and redefined by Maori women themselves. A case is currently being prepared for the Waitangi Tribunal to affirm and recognise their traditional status. The expectations and abilities of many Maori women attests to their role as leaders in a complementary role to Maori men (Clarke 1996: 3). But unfortunately the absence of a single tribal woman leader among the Veddas is a big disadvantage for them.

The main obstacle with regard to the upliftment of the position of Vedda women is their illiteracy. Vedda girls drop out of school at a very early stage. On the other hand informal educational programs to improve their living standards are extremely rare in Vedda society. Other than an occasional health or nutritional programme conducted by a Government institution, we cannot find any adult educational programmes among the Vedda society. Even an adult educational program implemented at the Henanigala Vedda village was abandoned in a very short period. Hence these people do not recognise the importance of those educational program. Also those who try to organize these programs are not properly equipped to handle them. Without an understanding of the Vedda society and their problems, these educational programs are bound to fail. All these factors contribute to their inability to raise a voice against the sufferings they undergo.

At present family planning methods are becoming popular among the Vedda women. This is an indication of the changes sweeping through the Vedda society. They are embracing new concepts like family planning because they are no longer firmly rooted in their tradition. But most of the tribal societies who are firmly rooted in their traditions still reject these new concepts. Even in India family planning methods are becoming popular among those tribal societies which are intermingling with mainstream societies. For example Mann (1987: 66) states that family planning is prevalent among the Bhil tribals who are intermingling with the mainstream people. But in Undri and Bhilon Ki Naal tribal societies in which the traditional outlook continues to dominate family planning are not popular. This clearly shows that when the traditions are getting eroded new concepts easily creep in. Therefore it is not surprising that family planning is becoming popular among Vedda women who are more distanced from their tradition.

But in some respects the Vedda women still believe in their tradition. For example in pregnancy and child delivery they prefer their traditional medicines and treatments. Though Vedda midwives continue to carry-on their services through experience they do not have systematic education or training in that respect. Hence, the pregnant Vedda women have to face precarious situations. They face this risky and dangerous situation with a lot of courage. This situation can be improved without much difficulty. As the Vedda women prefer their own midwives rather than the Government appointed midwives, it is more practical to systematically train and educate women from Vedda community. This will greatly reduce the risks and dangers that the pregnant Vedda women face. I have mentioned about a 35 year old female informant who handled the delivery of her eleven children almost on her own. But she has a peculiar belief regarding the unsuitability of child marriage. According to her as the womb is formed with the maturity of age, child marriage will result in conceiving children outside the womb. This reveals the importance of giving a systematic education and training in this regard to these Vedda women who are bold enough and talented enough to have an explanation of their own.

It is also important for the Government and organizations to lend a helping hand constructively to those Vedda women who engage in various productive activities. Sri Lankan Vedda women are involved in various livelihoods which are not stable means of income. One way of liberating these women is to encourage them in self-employment and to provide them a reasonable market for their products. But if those very institutions which
are initiated for these purposes betray them and engage in fraud and corruption then it will be useless for the tribal people. For example in India, "Tribal Development Co-operative Corporation of Orissa Limited" (TDCCOL) was set-up to avoid exploitation of cottage products of the Khondh tribal women. But at the end they did not give a reasonable price and finally refused the brooms produced by those tribal women. This clearly shows that mere setting-up of Government or other institutions will not serve any purpose at all if they themselves become a burden on the people.

All over the world most leaders have stressed on the liberation of women. Equal rights for men and women is constitutionally recognized in most countries. M. K. Gandhi, the torchbearer of Indian independence movement, broadened the social basis of the nationalist movement by drawing the masses within its fold. The women also were involved in it. This further geared up attention on women. Gandhi’s contribution to the emancipation of Indian women is unique. He argued and propagated that the women is not backward but is made so by the mean mentality of male chauvinism. He made efforts to create conditions favourable to development and progress of women (Mann 1987: 27).

Nehru's more progressive attitude is also revealed in his ideas about female education. He did not agree that there was a fixed sphere for women and that education for women should therefore have a different emphasis. On 31st March 1928, he took part in the foundation laying ceremony for a women's college at Allahabad, but discovered that its prospectus laid down that women’s place was in the home, that her duty was to be a devoted wife, bringing up her children skillfully, and dutifully obedient to her elders. Nehru was quite outspoken in his criticism of these ideas.

May I say that I do not agree with this idea of women's life or education. What does it signify? It means that women have one profession and one only, that is the profession of marriage and it is our chief business to train her for this profession. Even in this profession her lot is to be of secondary importance. She is always to be the devoted help-mate, the follower and the obedient slave of her husband and others. I wonder if any of you here have read Ibsen’s 'Doll’s House', if so, you will perhaps appreciate the word ‘doll’ when I use it in this connection. The future of India cannot consist of dolls and playthings and if you make half the population of a century the mere plaything of the other half, an encumbrance on others.

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56 See chapter VIII: case no 1
57 This was reported by Saleem Farook who submitted a paper at the international workshop on 'The rights of Tribal and Indigenous people' in 1996.
how will you ever make progress? Therefore, I say that you must face the problem boldly and attack the roots of evil (Jayawardena 1986: 98).

During the same period Anagarika Dharmapala led semi-political campaigns against missionaries and foreign influences in Sri Lanka. Dharmapala had travelled in Europe and the USA and was well aware of the struggles of suffragists and feminists. He wrote:

Look at England today, watch . . . . the strenuous efforts made by the women of England to gain their rights politically and on whose behalf some of the greatest men in England are willing to work. Mrs Besant . . . who is preaching to the people of India gentleness and obedience, yet in England, speaking on behalf of suffragettes says ‘Europe looks on amazed as crowds of well-born, well-bred women go patiently to prison for the sake of their sex. The scandal caused is too great to be prolonged, there is only one way out-- granting the vote . . . .

Kumari Jayawardena states that Anagarika Dharmalala’s attitude with respect to the status and role of women is somewhat mixed. But when looked at Dharmapala’s views relative to his era it was rich with progressive ideas.

However, almost fifty years have passed since both Sri Lanka and India gained independence. Inspired by the Indian freedom struggle the Independent movement as well as the women movement of Sri Lanka benefitted immensely from Indian experiences. Throughout the histories of both countries, we can see a host of women leaders. Both Sri Lanka and India produced women Prime ministers. Even today the President as well as the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka are women. Can we feel content with the situation of women in our countries based on these achievements? Even while women are ruling a country majority of its own women continue to be plagued by numerous problems. Mere substituting of few women into certain key positons of the society held by men will not substantially improve the situation of women as a whole. In this regard it is interesting to note the views of Avijit Pathak (1997: 8) commenting on the female representation of politics in Indian scenario “It is, therefore, difficult to believe that this politics can emancipate women. Instead, the possibility is that, as more and more women enter the political sphere, they get coopted by the system and begin to behave as irresponsibly as their male counterparts. The reason is that, far from challenging or altering the dominant paradigm of politics they are accepting and legitimising it. That is why our anxiety: even if women join politics without challenging its basic premises, no revolution is going to take place.” Citing examples from past and present he further states thus: “Mahathma Gandhi
gave them a call and involved them in the struggle for liberation. But that politics was of a qualitatively different kind. It was a process of self-purification. It was a new way of seeing. It was an experience of overcoming violence, injustice and exploitation. And, in recent times, Medha Patkar, for example, has demonstrated that it is possible to activate the agency of tribal-subaltern women as well as men and involve them in radical social transformation. Because here we see an alternative worldview that emphasises ecological balance, not developmental violence; decentralisation, not bureaucratisation; ethics of love and responsibility, not separation and distance. And remember that Medha Patkar and her comrades are not members of legislative bodies .......