ABSTRACT

Perceptions and Experiences of Development:
A Study of Two Tribal Communities in Wayanad District, Kerala

The development discourse, critiqued by scholars and peoples’ movements, continues to expand and encompass all aspects of Adivasi life. Studies show that the development projects exclude and alienate Adivasi communities in India and they describe the history of Adivasi development in India in terms of material deprivation and cultural marginalisation. While the socio-political and cultural ‘exclusion’ is acknowledged as a universal feature of Adivasi life, the everyday experience of their ‘exclusion’ differs among different Adivasi communities. This is reflected in their development status and the socio-economic stratification among them. Existing research attributes the differential development outcomes to certain historical advantages and disadvantages. By exploring the experiences of development of two different Adivasi communities in Wayanad in Kerala, this study attempts to understand the differential development outcomes, the processes of marginalisation and the reproduction of historical advantages and disadvantages. Two Adivasi communities with contrasting development status and historical features have been selected: the Paniyas with a history of slavery and landlessness and currently with a low educational and health status, and the Kurichias who were matrilineal and landed, with relatively better educational and health status.

Specific Objectives

1. To understand the Paniyas’ and Kurichias’ access to land, forest and other material resources.
2. To analyze how the two select Adivasi communities perceive and utilise development programmes for education, health and employment.
3. To understand and analyze the Adivasis’ perception of the idea of development vis-à-vis that of the state.
4. To analyze the Paniyas’ and Kurichias’ everyday experience of the development process and their individual and collective struggles.
5. To examine the position of women in the two communities and to analyze the consequences of development on gender relations.
6. To explain the differential development trajectories of two Adivasi groups within a region.
The ecological Marxist framework that accommodates the Adivasis’ intimate relationship with land and nature for their survival analyzes the material deprivation and marginalisation of Adivasis under the capitalist development process. However, this framework is inadequate to explain the subjective experiences of Adivasis' alienation and exclusion adequately. Insights from James Scott’s analysis that gives importance to the conscious human being who is an active participant in the construction of reality, and from the writings of Veena Das and others who show how violence shapes subjectivity and affects the capacity to engage in everyday life and argue that the collective experience of violence can alter individual subjectivity and patterns of sociality are used to understand the responses of the Paniyas and the Kurichias to the violence inherent in their development processes. Bourdieu’s social and cultural reproduction theory offers a framework to understand the reproduction of inequality and symbolic violence exerted in subtle ways to perpetuate the inequality and discrimination among Adivasis especially in their educational experiences. However, in Bourdieu’s thinking, structure or the objective condition has detrimental power on one’s agency and thus cannot explain adequately the creative interventions and resistance of the subjects for social change. Escobar, Karlsson, Dietrich and Smith show how agency and social movements break through the systematic discrimination and marginalisation and thus help understand how the Paniyas and the Kurichias offer a critique of development through enormous suffering and resistance to build their life as well as to bring forth a different vision of the world.

As reflected in the objectives, this study aspires to delineate and explain the perceptions and experiences of the Adivasis on development/marginalisation and thus follows an interpretive paradigm giving importance to the subjective experiences of the people. Qualitative methodology and ethnographic methods are adopted for the study as it is intensive, in-depth in nature and allows immersion into the culture and everyday life experiences of the Adivasi communities. Multiple tools such as, participant and non-participant observation, in-depth unstructured interviews (for individuals and groups), interviews of key informants (elders, leaders, educated members etc. among Adivasis), group discussions, case narratives and informal conversations were used for data collection.

The thesis contains nine chapters. Chapter I provides an introduction, while Chapter II reviews the literature on tribal development. Chapter III discusses the methodological context to understand the epistemological positions and the methods used to understand the process of ‘development’ among the Kurichias and the Paniyas. Chapter IV introduces the historical context and the specific socio-cultural and political contexts of the two communities selected for the study. Chapter V discusses how schooling reproduces social inequalities and cultural asymmetries by examining the experiences of the Paniyas and Kurichias. Chapter VI explores the perceptions of the Paniyas and the Kurichias regarding health and illness and their experiences of traditional...
as well as modern health care services. The chapter discusses how the Adivasi conceptualisations and practices are different from the biomedical development notions of health and illness and how the health system marginalises them. Chapter VII explores the wage labour, employment opportunities and livelihood issues of Paniyas and Kurichias. This chapter analyses the present forms of bondage and the new tools such as advance money, debt, dependence, religion, alcohol etc. as socio-cultural, economic and political strategies to perpetuate the bondedness of Adivasis. Chapter VIII aims to understand the landholding patterns and land relations of Adivasis. This study attempts to understand how state policies and programmes ignore the land question of Adivasis as well as their relation to land and how landlessness leads to denial of their material and symbolic worlds. It also discusses the gap between Adivasi perceptions and state perceptions of the significance of land and the epistemic violence in negating Adivasi world views and by not seeing the relationship between landlessness and their inability to participate in the development programmes. Chapter IX summarises the main conclusions of the research study and stresses the importance of incorporating Adivasi epistemologies in development policies and practices not only for their well being but also for that of a society enriched by plural epistemologies and cultural diversities.

Some of the key findings that emerge from the study include the continued significance and centrality of land in the Adivasis’ world views, epistemologies and the idea of development, and their access to land as a significant factor that determines the extent and ability to participate in the development process. However, state initiated development programmes fail to acknowledge the meaning and significance that Adivasis attach to their land. It emerges that, the historical and social status enjoyed by Kurichia community on account of their collective land ownership and their ability to prevent its alienation to an extent gives them a sense of superior cultural identity which acts as a form of cultural capital in negotiating the process of development. Adivasis especially Paniyas’ inability to participate in the state initiated development programmes should be considered as a form of cognitive violence inherent in the very programmes and policies that negate their world views and epistemologies. Their material marginalisation is compounded by the delegitimisation of their knowledge in education, health and employment as state and the non-Adivasi communities continue treat them as devoid of any cognitive and epistemic understanding. However, while experiencing extreme marginalisation and cognitive injustice, the Adivasis continue to offer a critique of development and portray the importance of development that accommodates plural cultures, knowledge and world views.