CHAPTER – 8

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, my concerns have been to analyse the transformation of Mannan and Urali tribal communities of Periyar Tiger Reserve. We have tried the saga of their social transformation by looking at their socio-economic and cultural practices.

The tribals and non-tribals are extremely different in socio-economic variables such as entitlements and access to land and other resources, technology, and economic competence in production and exchange. The scheduled tribes, the scheduled castes and migrant settlers in PTR are also different in socio-economic terms from the tribals and even among the tribes, the situation is different and they remain at different levels of development.

The present study has tried to analyse the history of the last six decades of development experience of the tribal communities of PTR in the larger context of tribal development programmes in India as well as in Kerala. These developments were primarily rooted in the theory of modernisation that aimed at developing tribal communities without really engaging with the ground level realities. The multiple factors of
exploitation that fettered the life of the tribal communities were never taken into account when solutions were offered to their deprivation, poverty and marginality. Modernisation theory would expect communities and social groups to develop, once external stimulants are added. In our case, the external stimulants came in the form of financial allocation from the Central and State Governments for the tribal development projects. However, the bureaucracy at the local level along with the dominant classes and castes prevented the accomplishment of the projects. Much of the funds from the tribal sub-plans were being drained off by the bureaucracy and even diverted into projects like the construction of honeymoon hideaways, which is not in any way benevolent to tribes. In other words, bureaucracy and local elites continued to dominate the tribal communities. As a result of it, the developmental programmes initiated by various Governmental agencies had only a trickle down effect on the tribals. None of the programmes initiated by the Government could help tribal communities to enhance their asset basis and livelihood options. As a result of this, the tribal communities became more and more dependent on welfare measures. On the other hand, the very same period witnessed large scale alienation
of tribal land, and increasing marginalisation of the tribes in every aspect of social life.

In the larger context, in the framework of ‘development’, the tribals had come a long way from their traditional set up and their interaction with outside world had caused transition in certain aspects of their social life.

We find changes in the agricultural practices that come to have substantial effect on tribal population. We have observed here a decisive change from subsistence agriculture to commercial agriculture. Ragi cultivation was substituted by rice and subsequently rice cultivation paved way for perennial commercial crops such as pepper, cardamom, coconut, areca nut, tea and coffee. They also experimented with annual crops such as sugar cane, plantain and vegetables for household consumption. The changes in cultivation led to fundamental changes in their food habits. Instead of protein rich ragi, they began to adapt to ‘maida’, that is available in plenty in the market.

Although they were cultivating commercial crops they did not benefit much out of it, as the market was controlled by middlemen who amassed profit at the cost of the tribal communities. Middlemen who goes to the tribal hamlets and offer certain amount of money in advance,
to those who are in need. Those who received such money would be forced to sell their entire produce to the money lenders. The middlemen harvest the crop, process it and sell it in the market realising a huge profit. This became a repetitive practice in tribal hamlets. Because of the financial insecurity the tribals could not think of any other alternatives.

The non-tribals or the migrant settler community was the main agent of change in the tribal life. The tribals began to engage themselves in different occupational sectors such as Forest Department, building-construction and eco-tourism sectors, started generating income. Changes began to occur in the labour relations also. The effect was that the tribals no longer wished to work for the same employer; they started working under different employers. Although they were working under different employers they did not benefit much out of it, as the tribals were controlled by the local bureaucracy.

Education played a dominant role in the transition of the tribal lives. It is an effective weapon and instrument in bringing out changes in their social world. The real transition depends on the availability of best educational facilities. State sponsored modern education had a profound impact on their family settings and community life. It legitimized many new practices like reluctance to practice the old customs, such as man
and woman staying with the bride’s or bridegroom’s family for one year before marriage and dormitory system of education.

With the introduction of modern system of education new values and norms have come up. As a result they began to be modernised. The interaction with the non-tribals has brought about some fundamental changes in the life style of the tribals. They began to imitate the dressing pattern of the dominant society.

The knowledge and notion of the system of ethno-medicine has also undergone certain changes. The dominant non-tribals were trying to transfer their knowledge of modern medicine to the tribals and the various health programmes of the Government had made a dent in the tribal lives of the communities.

The practices of religious rituals of the tribal communities also underwent transformation. Hinduism could make inroads into their religion and transferred their belief system. Their present religion is a mixture of traditional ‘animism’ and Hinduism. The Mannan community of PTR has appropriated certain Hindu practices of dominant Hinduism which is exemplified in the fact that they have appointed a Brahmin priest to perform religious rituals which shows the hegemony of Hinduism, which is acceptable to them.
The eco-development activities initiated by the officials of the Forest department in PTR have brought about changes in the tribal life of Mannan and Urali communities. They participated actively in the programmes related to conservation. The immediate impact of these eco-development programmes was that the tribal communities of PTR have reduced their dependency on forest produces.

The development activities of the Government failed to fulfil their promises as the contractors and bureaucracy together siphoned off money, meant for development.

The empirical data regarding the tribal communities of PTR show that the inequalities between the tribals and the non-tribals are widening and new forms of associational lives, that have evolved, create a sense of awareness, which helped the ‘coming together’ of the tribals for their rights and privileges.

There is an increased awareness of their cultural distinctiveness which became very pronounced with their desire to resurrect their ‘Inavan’ language for their every day transaction.

The tribal youths of Mannan community has formed Mannan Youth Club and other clubs like Navadhara Arts and Sports Club, to
promote cultural and sports activities. The increasing trend of the coming together of tribal youth is a phenomenon that is noted recently.

With the implementation of eco-development project there evolved new spaces of interaction between tribals and Forest Department. Similarly there evolved new forms of relationships among the tribal people themselves.

The interaction with NGOs working in the field of social development in the tribal areas also has created a situation of dynamic interaction between tribals and non tribals.

Interaction with tourists has opened up new forms of generating income and the close association with the tourists gave opportunity to familiarise with new cultures.