

Interaction Pattern and Livelihood Strategies of an Artisan Tribe

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KEYWORDS Wayanad. Communities. Traditional Occupation. Waged Labourers. Migration. Environment

ABSTRACT Uralikurumar, a Scheduled Tribe of Wayanad District, Kerala State India, is the only tribal community, who pursued a variety of artisan occupations such as pottery, basketry and blacksmithy and is unique in their artisan skills. They belong to the three subdivisions of 'Kurumba' and the others being 'Mullu' and 'JenKurumba'. Uralikurumar is distributed in Vythiri, Manathavady and Sulthanbathery taluks of Wayanad district. A separate population figure is not available about these tribes in the census records as they are grouped under the title 'Kurumbar'. Uralikurumar at present can't take up their traditional occupations, due to several factors and are engaged as wage labourers in the nearby estates. They have started migrating to outside states resulting in culture change and change in occupational patterns. In this context, it would be very interesting to highlight their interaction pattern and livelihood strategies.

INTRODUCTION

India has the largest concentration of tribal population in Asia and it is the second largest in the world in terms of tribal population (Upreti 2007). The relation between forests and tribals is intimate and is age old. Appropriately referred to as Vanyajati (forest community) and Girijan (people of the hills), the tribals are known for their association with forest and hills (Rao 2001). The first and foremost characteristics of the tribal economy is the close relationship between their economic life and the natural environment or habitat, which is, in general, the forest (Mehta 1994). Technology, life and livelihood strategy of a tribal group depends on the nature of habitation, environment and resources. Tribal population lives in close nearness with biodiverse prosperous landscapes have evolved area specific and novel livelihood strategies based on their traditional knowledge. The term 'Livelihood' implies the capability and capacity to survive (Gregory 2008). Uralikurumar, a Scheduled Tribe of Wayanad District, Kerala State is the only tribal community, who pursued a variety of artisan occupations such as pottery, basketry and blacksmithy and is unique in their artisan skills. A separate population figure is not available about these tribes in the census records as they are grouped under the title 'Kurumbar'. They belong to the three subdivisions of 'Kurumba' and the others being 'Mullu' and 'JenKurumba'. Uralikurumar at present can't take up their traditional occupations, due to several factors and are engaged as wage labourers in the

nearby estates. The native Adivasis mainly consist of various sects like Paniyan, MulluKuruman, Adiyar, Kurichiyar, Uralikurumar, and Kattunaikkan. In this context the present paper brings out the interaction pattern and livelihood strategies of Uralikurumar, one of the rarest artisan tribe in Kerala.

Wayanad has the largest population of aboriginal people in Kerala State, India. Wayanad lies between north latitude 110° 27' and 150° 58' and east of Tamilnadu and Karnataka State respectively, on the north by Coorg district of Karnataka, on the south by Malappuram and on the west by Kozhikode and Kannur Districts. Placed on the southern tip of the Deccan plateau, its prime glory is the majestic Western Ghats with lofty ridges scattered with magnificent forests, tangled jungles and deep valleys. In the centre of the district, hills are lower in height, while the northern area has high hills and they give a wild and mountainous appearance. Some of the major peaks are Vellarimala, Banasura, Brahmagiri, Chembra, and so on ranging from 1,500 metres to 2,100 metres height (District Handbooks of Kerala: Wayanad 2003). The population of the district, according to 2001 census is 1, 86,627 of which male population is 3, 93,397 and female 3, 93,230. The density of population is 369 per sq km. The native Adivasis mainly consist of various sects like Paniyan, MulluKuruman, Adiyar, Kurichiyar, Uralikurumar, and Kattunaikkan. Uralikurumar is distributed in Vythiri, Mananthavady and Sulthanbathery taluks of Wayanad district, Kerala State.

METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this study were collected from Vythiri, Mananthavady and Sulthanbathery taluks of Wayanad district. A one month field study was conducted for the study, for this a total of 80 households were randomly selected. Group discussion and observation have been conducted through semi-participant method. Key informant is used to collect first hand information, besides few secondary data were also used for the study.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Ethnography of Uralikurumar

Settlement pattern of Uralikurumar is clustered in nature, where the houses are separate. The traditional houses are uniform in appearance. The walls are made of bamboo wattle plastered with mud on both sides and the roof is thatched with grass. There is only one room and a part is separated to form kitchen. The house has no windows, and ventilation is effected through the gap between the walls and the roof. The front side of the house is raised to form a small platform for sitting and receiving visitors. A notable feature is the chital an independent hut and a meeting place where all the decisions are made in the presence of the *moopan* (head). *Chittal* (altar) is built in the centre of the settlement and has a raised platform like a basement, and roof resting on wooden pillars without definite walls.

Uralikurumar are segmented into exogamous groupings known as *kira* (house). These are grouped into four clans, like *Mooroli*, *Eytholi*, *Aroli*, and *Elthare*. The clans are patrilineal descent groupings. The *Mooroli* and *Eytholi* are the most populous clans in Wayanad. One can select his/her spouse only from a permissible *kira* of a permissible clan.

Tribal endogamy and clan /lineage exogamy is the rule for marriage. Spouses are selected from permissible categories only. Marriage between cross cousins is preferred, and monogamy is the norm. Polygyny may be permitted with social approval. Marriage by elopement, service, and love marriages are permissible. An auspicious day is fixed for the wedding at the brides' house. A feast follows tying a *minnu* (sacred thread). Both nuclear and extended families are found among Uralikurumar. The increasing trend is towards

nuclear families. The members in a settlement except affinals are mostly agnates and kinship is traced through male line.

As Wayanad is a trijunction of three linguistic traditions, *Malayalam*, *Kannada* and *Tamil*, the Language of Uralikurumar is a mixture of Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam words. It is seen that some of the kinship terminologies are closely related to usages from all the three languages. Children use to address their father as *ama* and mother as *abey*. Oldest female in the family is addressed by the term *aji* and the male counterpart as *ajan*.

Environment

The close adaptive relationship between the tribals and the environment has enabled them to survive while leading a relatively isolated life in a difficult environment (Desai et al. 1990). Uralikurumar is unique for their artisan skills. There is a close connection between the environment and their economic pursuits. They cut and fashion wooden artifacts, do carpentry for the local tribal housing, and fashion iron pieces salvaged from the wheels of bullocks carts used by the non-tribes, or purchased from the market into plough shares, arrow heads etc, which were in great demand from agricultural communities of Wayanad. Their pottery was unique. After collecting the clay (a type of gum-based mud) from the field, it is cleaned by removing all the stones and unwanted materials. It is then beaten hard and crafted in the shape of a tortoise shell, and turn around to form the bottom of the ware. After this the upper portion of the ware is prepared with the help of a wooden tool called *chadanga* (big) , and the edge of the pot is shaped by the same wooden tool but smaller in size. Excess mud inside the pot is removed by using *illi* (bamboo). After this, the pot is buffed up by using a wet cloth and pebble stone is used to make the pot smooth both inside and outside. The edge of the pot is designed by using the tip of *chadanga*, and then the pot is dried for three days, and finally the pot is subjected to burn in a traditional furnace. After that it is ready for use and is carried away by the male folk to the customers and in return they collect grain, depending on the size of the ware. Both tribes and non-tribes form part of the customers and some of the pots are also carried to the market by the menfolk.

Apart from the bio-physical environment,

social environment also plays an important role in shaping the life style of a given community. Social environment in this study means the immediate interactive social sphere comprising both tribal and non tribal communities living adjacent to the Uralikurumar. In the traditional social milieu Uralikurumar had to interact with almost all the neighbouring communities in connection with the supply of their artisan products. As Uralikurumar is skilled in artisanal work, their interaction level was very high with tribal and non tribal communities of Wayanad. A traditional socio-economic service relationship was existed between them. A closer analysis of the social situation in village India would reveal that the service relationship existed between higher castes and lower castes and because of this economic network they were tied together in bondage. However, the interaction between Uralikurumar and other tribal and non tribal communities in the area never resulted in any kind of master client relations. A policy of Mutual give and take relationship existed between Uralikurumar and neighbouring communities and this is reflected in their interaction in terms of the reciprocal adjustments. The neighbouring communities of Uralikurumar are Adiyam, Kurichiyam, Kattunaikkan, Mullukurumba and Paniyam. The word Adiyam means a slave attached to a person of social standing, they are mainly landless and their traditional occupation is agricultural labour. Adiyam contacted Uralikurumar for their agriculture implements and baskets and in return they give paddy. Like Adiyam, Kurichiyam another agricultural community of Wayanad, also established economic networks with Uralikurumar for repairing and maintaining their agricultural equipments and pottery. From Kurichiyam they collect paddy and vegetables towards their supply of pottery and implements. Kattunaikkan, another neighbouring group, (the term Kattunaikkan is derived from the words *kadu* (forest) and *nayakkan* means (head) they are mainly food gatherers also maintained exchange relationships in terms of minor forest produces, especially honey with the products of Uralikurumar. Mullukurumba are traditionally agriculturists with seasonal hunting and gathering, who maintained a close relationship with the Uralikurumar. For the implements and pottery produced by Uralikurumar, they are supplied with paddy and vegetables from

Mullukurumba. Paniyam, another major tribal community in the area, subsisted on agricultural works also interacts with Uralikurumar for agricultural implements and its repairing. In all the interactions with tribes and non tribes, pottery was the main item exchanged. Earlier Wayanadan Chettis, other non tribal agriculturist settlers exhibiting tribal features, were one of the major communities depend upon the Uralikurumar for their service. Usually weekly markets were existed, and it was a chance to showcase their materials, apart from which Uralikurumar used to carry their products and sell in the households of both tribes and non-tribes. All the communities of Wayanad used to buy their products and in return they are remunerated by paddy or other goods.

It is necessary to mention their biological environment also; Uralikurumar mainly depends on the forest for their subsistence. They collect Bamboo and reed from the forest, and both male and female engaged in collection. But now, due to strict forest rules they have to buy the forest pass introduced by the Forest Department, which costs around hundred to two hundred rupees. This is one of the reasons made them to deviate from the traditional occupation of basketry. If they are caught without pass and permission from the guards they are cruelly punished and the guards take their knives away. The resource base available for tribals is slowly shrinking with the periodical tightening of forest legislation and alienation of tribal lands (Rao 2001). At present Uralikurumar are engaged as waged labourers. It is difficult for them to buy the pass with their meager income. Another factor is that the younger generation is not interested to carry out their traditional occupation due to the high risk in collecting the resources and the low income they are getting from this work.

Like basketry, Pottery was also one of the important concerns of their livelihood. They were well known for handmade pottery. For preparing the earthenwares they collect a type of gum-based mud from the agricultural field, which was kept empty for several years. They are of the opinion that wares made out from this mud are stronger and highly durable and also of great demand. At present they are not in a position to continue this activity as the agricultural fields are converted into dry lands for various purposes including the construction of houses. More over the owners are also not permitting to collect the mud from their fields because of various

ecological factors. The popularity of aluminum vessels decreased the demand for traditional type of earthen vessels produced by Uralikurumar. This ware and the associated skill have automatically become obsolete. Almost same is the case of blacksmithy. They are not performing it now, but repairing their on implements which they used for economic pursuits. According to few secondary sources (Babu 1996) it is reported that Uralikurumar also did small scale carpentry work.

Uralikurumar, anthropologically a very interesting tribal group of Kerala State, India, is well known for their artisanal work, handmade pottery, and basketry. A clear sexual division of labour is noticed in the economic activities of Mullukurumban. Men usually do hunting and agricultural operations; whereas, women do gathering of various forest resources and minor agricultural activities along with their household chores (Bhanu and Kakkoth 2007). A clear division of labour is noticed among this group, that is, only women make handmade pottery and marketing is done by the men folk. But in the case of basketry womenfolk also help them to collect the bamboo and reed. Weekly market is held and it is an occasion for them to display their products. Almost all the agricultural groups used to buy the pottery prepared by Uralikurumar. Along with the females, males also carry the pots for sale.

CONCLUSION

Uralikurumar's traditional occupation is almost vanished, and factors like non-availability of clay, bamboo, reed and other resources required for their traditional occupation forced them to deviate

from it. The interaction pattern and livelihood strategies have totally changed from that of traditional one. It is a recent trend that these groups started migrating to other states such as *Coorg* and *Mangalore* in search of jobs and this has also accelerated their interaction with other castes and communities resulting in culture change. Their social control mechanisms are on the decline. Uralikurumar has almost forgotten the technology and skill of their traditional occupations, and now these groups are engaged as wage labourers under local landlords and estates. Due to the contact with outsiders, their traditional way of living is slowly disappearing and they are very eager to lead a life like that of the mainstream society. Now they are trying to adjust with their social and biological ecosystem by all means as part of adaptation.

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