

 <p>ISSN NO. 2320-5407</p>	<p>Journal Homepage: - www.journalijar.com</p> <h2 style="text-align: center;">INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)</h2> <p style="text-align: center;">Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/10027 DOI URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/10027</p>	
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FORESTRY AND TRIBAL CULTURE OF KERALA : CRISIS OF EXISTENCE.

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Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 10 September 2019

Final Accepted: 12 October 2019

Published: November 2019

Key words:-

Deforestation, Tribe, Culture, Rituals, Van
asamrakshana samiti, Vanamahotsavam.

Abstract

Physically and culturally Kerala is one of the most unique regions in India. The state is a blessed land wedged between palm fringed sea on the west and the lush green Western Ghats on the east. Constituent exploitation of these forest lands without any systematic and scientific methods have led to considerable damage to the whole environment. The very early history of Kerala provides us evidence of a constant and continuous relationship between forest and primitive tribal groups. As forest is the store house of tremendous wealth, it is mentioned as the first university of human beings. It is said because from forest he learned many lessons of social and settled life, lessons of agriculture, food habits, etc. More than that forests have witnessed the growth of human beings from a primitive beast to culturally civilised man. Influence of this forest atmosphere had helped them to develop their own unique culture, which treated forest as their first home land. But later wards the high level encroachment of outsiders and extreme deforestation have challenged the value of tribal culture in Kerala are facing great threat from encroachers. Therefore, the present paper is deliberating upon the dependence of forest and tribal culture. It also talks about the problems and prospects of traditional tribal culture of Kerala.

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Introduction:-

Diversified physiographical characteristics geology and climate have provided the state of Kerala a very rich and varied floristic wealth. Most of the forest cover of Kerala is spread over the Western Ghats. Though the state is small in size with comparatively small area under forest cover Kerala is a medley of a variety of vegetations and forest types. In early time about 28.90% of the total land area was covered by forests but at present there is only less than 20% of the total land available as attitude and exploitation by external agencies. As the forest is getting vanished, along with that the unique culture of our tribal community also faces the fear of extent. Tribal life and lifestyle is associated with biotic and abiotic thing inside the forest. They consider themselves as the real owners of forests.

Tribes of Kerala

The term tribe is derived from the Latin word 'tribes' which means the 'poor' or 'masses'. Tribe is a group of people in a primitive or barbarous stage of a chief and having a common ancestor. In India the British Government used the

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term tribe to separate a particular population under a category to denote the difference of cultural traits and to facilitate their incorporation towards the colonial system. The common names of tribes in India are Vanyajati, Vanavasi, Adimjati, AnusuchitJayati and Adivasi so on. From among all these names Adivasi is the popularly known name and AnusuchitJunjala / Scheduled Tribe is the constitutional name.

The tribes in Kerala are mainly concentrated in the northern region of Wayanad District, Southern part of Kozhikode District and in the Attappadi hills of the Palakkad District commonly on the slopes of the Western Ghats. In southern Kerala tribes are settled in Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Pathanamthitta, Kottayam and Idukki districts, closed to the areas adjacent to the Western Ghat which bordering with Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

There are around 35 major tribal groups in Kerala. Among them Cholanaikkans, Kurumbas, Kattunaikkans, Kadars and Korgas are the five primitive tribal groups. Primitive tribes are those groups with very low literacy level and experts in gathering food from forest. The estimated population of tribes in Kerala is about 4 lakhs in that the primitive tribes constitute only 5%. The most primitive tribal group is Cholanaikkans of Malappuram District and Paniyas of Wayanad region is the largest tribal group in the state of Kerala.

Issues in Tribal Culture of Kerala

Culture denotes the way of life embodied with the material, social, religious and aesthetic achievements of human endeavour. Tribal culture depends on the activities undertaken by the group involving social relationships. It includes tradition customs, behaviour pattern unified by common belief and values. So change in the tribal culture is associated with the change in livelihood system on which the society has been marching ahead from time immemorial. Tribal culture has close links with forest based activities in relation to life cycle and its sustenance.

From the beginning itself forest has been an integral part of the tribal lives. For each and everything they depended on forest and it is the main source of their livelihood. Social culture of tribes were rooted in forest. Their houses were made out of raw materials availed in forest such as bamboo, palm leaves, forest clay, etc. Cow dung was used to polish walls and floors of houses. Tribal rituals and customs were based on the rules of forest gods and goddesses and the beliefs, rituals rites practices, etc. ensured a balance between human needs and environmental preservation. Tribes lived on the forest products and in return they cared for the forest. Till the encroachment of forest laws and restrictions they considered themselves as the lords of forest.

The cultural crisis of tribal people started with the intervention of Britishers in the forest areas. Construction of roads to the tribal regions and beginning of commercial plantation led to the migration of forest dwellers. This migration enhanced tremendously displacing the adivasis from their areas and they lost their land and number, Agriculture has been the primary source of subsistence for tribes of Kerala. They practised shifting cultivation, which entails cutting down the vegetation in the given area of land and burning it when it becomes dry. The farmers will scatter seeds at the beginning of the rainy season and continue to grow until the rainy season is over. After using one or two season they leave the land to left back the original vegetation. This type of agriculture is necessary because it does not require extreme amount of maintenance. But the western rule ignored the fact that the tribes cherished a sentimental attachment to the land. They enacted a series of laws to outset the true sons of the soil. This alienation continued due to inadequate legislation and its defective implementation. The 1952 Forest Policy of Government of India virtually shocked the tribes. Tribal economy based on forest and forest products gave way to agricultural economy, that invited dents to them. This was the starting point of their all troubles. Even though they were blind devotees of natural deities, they never interested in the constructing temples for deities. Tribes promoted the primitive nature centric religious practices to sustain the eco-friendly relations.

From the beginning of settled life, the tribes of Kerala constructed their houses with forest products such as bamboo sticks, palm leaves and clay. Vanishing of bamboo forests led to the scarcity of raw materials. Now they have started constructing houses with bricks and cement. The government of Kerala has granted housing funds to these people but to construct houses according to their individual needs but in many cases they are unable to acquire the necessary materials for constructing houses in their own style because access to the materials which are found in the forest have to be cut-off by the Forest Department through forest conservation Acts. Tribes are indigenous people with traditional usage of Herbal medicine or 'kattuvaidyam' was used by 99% household of tribes. These medicines were extracted from selected plant of forest by specialist among them called 'KattuVaidyan'. Their knowledge about Forest medicines was preserved and handed over through generations as a part and parcel of their unique culture. They practised treatment for snake bite, abortion, partial and complete sterility, stomach ache, malaria, etc. But

introduction of Health Centres and medical camps in the tribal settlements have familiarised them with modern medicine. As a result traditional herbal treatment paved way for modern medical treatment. Alcoholism has been another deep rooted problem in the tribal communities. Among them children up to 13-15 are also using Panmasala and other drugs. Many independent liqueur shops are existing in tribal areas. The tribal youths are getting liqueur from these shops in the understanding that they would pay later. It has created debt for many tribal people.

Influence of Modernisation and exploitation in telecommunication had changed certain primitive culture of Adivasis. Mobile phones are widely used by tribes for entertainment than the use of communication. They are spending a lion part of their earnings for storing music in mobiles. Forest based arts and crafts are often get outthrowden due to the adoption of modern customs and lifestyle. The rituals and customs during marriage functions and primitive funeral ceremonies are changed with the influence of non-tribal communities. Market economy has contributed great change in the dress code of tribes. Their traditional style of Chela is replaced by modern dresses. Establishment of corporate industries and multinational companies in and around the forest area increased their economy above than they are getting from minor forest products.

But this money is misused for consuming drugs, liqueur, pan masala, etc. One of the pathetic issue is that children are also the victims of drug addiction. Extreme use of such Alcohol invited silent killer diseases such as beedi diseases, cancer, etc.

Conclusion:-

Culture is a shared pattern of behaviour and interactions of a group of people encompassing language, religion, habits, music, art, rituals, , cloths, etc. Tribe is a group of people, dependent on their land for their livelihood. Forest is their land of existence but the symbolic relation between forest and tribes have been breaking down. With the dwindling of forest resources tribal constructive dependence on it which ensured a balance between people and forest being replaced by destructive dependence. Thus tremendous changes sweeping tribal life ways creating an agony among the tribes as these have eroded their old cultural practices. Only by protecting forest and environment tribal culture can be replaced. By conserving Bamboo forests their traditional handicrafts can be bought back. Forest conservation policies and programmes must give adequate attention to tribal culture along with forest management. Forest department and VanaSamrakshanaSamities may take initiative to promote traditional tribal rituals, ceremonies and art during the time of VanaMahotsava. Through strict forest laws illicite brewing and illegal consumption of alcohol to be restricted. The land is looked upon by most of the tribal communities in India not only as their dependable source of livelihood but also as the foundation of social prestige. Their social status depends on the land ownership and possession of hereditary land. So it is our duty to help them in protecting their own independent life with which they were familiar for centuries.

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