AGRARIAN PRACTICES AMONG THE VELIP TRIBE IN GOA: A DISCOURSE ON CHANGE

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***Abstract*:** With not much diversification that has taken place in the occupational domain, agriculture continues to support the livelihood of the Velips, a pastoral-agricultural Scheduled Tribe existing in the villages of Canacona in south Goa. Given the rather dissatisfactory trend of work participation in agriculture in the State, one witnesses an altogether healthy work participation of Velips in the villages of Canacona. Agriculture is monsoon fed, and the lands are logically and systematically terraced. Topographic limitations create a pattern of segregation of land into small plots, unlike the pattern of distribution seen in north Goa. The continuing tussle between the tribals and the forest, and the paucity of lands in the respective settlements compelled the state government to allocate open spaces for carrying out agriculture.

Introduction of cash crops and the declining use of jaggery in diet brought abandonment of sugarcane cultivation, a practice once in vogue among their ancestors. However, lately, there is rejuvenation of interest in sugarcane due to profit orientation. Despite the high nutritional content of traditional paddy seeds such as *Panio*, *Shitto*, *Tamso* and the *Ajgo* have found a discontinuity with the introduction of sophisticated seeds and implements of production. More importantly, the Velips cling to a belief in rituals, considered as approvals for the different cultivation tasks. The broadcasting method (*rovap*) for paddy cultivation seems to have found favour than the method of transplanting (*ropap*). While there are mixed roles undertaken by men and women, the present ethnographic study looks into the emerging challenges faced by the tribal communities in the domain of agriculture.

***Index Terms* - Scheduled Tribe, Velip, Agriculture, *Panio*, Ethnography.**

Introduction

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Methodological and field considerations

The present study is undertaken within the disciplinary framework of social anthropology and the sociology of tribes. By making use of 'ethnography' as a major methodological framework which facilitates descriptive account of social and cultural life, the researcher has also used participant observation as an important method of inquiry. The villages of Gaondongrem and Cotigao in the taluka of Canacona were

selected for field research. The taluka of Canacona lies to the south of Goa, and has a predominant tribal population living in some remote areas. For the purpose of study, 1057 households were randomly selected from the different hamlets from the villages of Gaondongrem and Cotigao.

Tribal demography of Goa

Tribes constitute an important social component of the State of Goa. There is an uneven dispersal of tribal population across the villages and towns in the State of Goa. As per the 2011 Census, of the total population of 14,58,545 of the State of Goa there are 1,49,275 persons belonging to the Scheduled Tribes which constitute 10.23 per cent of the total population of the State. The survey report on the Scheduled Tribes of Goa refers to the Velips as belonging to the Proto-Australoid race. In fact, the Proto-Australoid group or race is considered to be the second oldest inhabitants of the Indian society (Government of Goa, 2004).

Agriculture: a mainstream occupation

With not much diversification that has taken place in the occupational domain, the Velips continue to be recognised as primarily a farming community. Singh (1994) mentions that more than 87 per cent of the tribal workers are engaged in the primary sector of the economy, of which a majority are cultivators (54.43 per cent) followed by agricultural labourers (32.67). In the year 1961, 58 per cent of the total working population in Goa was engaged in agriculture. The figures drastically declined when in the year 2001 with only 16 per cent were engaged in agriculture (Almeida, 2013, p. 409). Given this rather dissatisfactory trend of work participation in agriculture in the State, one can witness an altogether different facet of work participation in some villages of Canacona. Invariably, all families in the villages of Gaondongrem and Cotigao in the taluka of Canacona are cultivators. Agriculture is monsoon fed serves as the mainstream occupation of the community. In fact, Canacona has the highest number of cultivators with almost one-fourth (25.88) of the ST population is engaged in cultivation.

Nature of land holdings and rise of new settlements

One of the predominant features of tribal hamlets in the villages of Gaondongrem and Cotigao, howsoever big or small, is the presence of lands for cultivation within or around their settlement areas. Settlements in the hilly regions have found access to running water from the hills for cultivation, while those in the plain areas rely on the river tributaries. The lands are logically and systematically terraced specifically to allow water enter into them from uplands to low lands depending upon the direction of the source of water. This feature of terracing the land stratifies the agricultural lands into small plots. Each fragmented small land holding is locally referred as *'kungi'* or '*bandi'* by the Velips. This pattern of segregation of land into small plots is quite different from the pattern in the villages in the district of north Goa, which have quite longer stretches of lands. One of the limitations of not possessing large stretches of land is primarily because the topography of Gaondongrem and Cotigao is more hilly than plain.

The nature of land holdings does not support the growing food requirements of the members. Also, the nature of landholdings among the families is getting divided with the splitting of the joint families. Doshi (2005, p.144) in a similar line argues that the main obstacle taking place among the Bhils is the fragmentation of land due to division of property and lack of consolidation of landholdings. It is learnt that while the tribal families possessed cultivating rights, they do not possess appropriate land records (housing as well as agricultural lands). In the case of divided families, it is observed that the members have just parted with their agricultural lands merely through an oral consent. Now, with the recent introduction of the Forest Right Act (FRA), the tribals are anxiously waiting for their traditional rights to be transferred in their names.

The continuing tussle between the tribals and the forest, and the paucity of lands in the respective settlements compelled the state government to allocate open spaces for carrying out agriculture. To meet the growing needs of the tribals, the State after duly considering the proposal of the villagers decided to allocate land in the form of plots at places away from their settlements. However, what is noteworthy is that the tribal families have gained full ownership rights of the newly allotted plots. These plots are used for residential as well as for cultivation purposes. Some villagers have not exclusively used them for rice cultivation, but have grown cashew trees, while some have used for bringing up mixed vegetation such as banana, coconut, jackfruit, pineapple and also sugarcane plantation.

Paddy and sugarcane: Major determinants of subsistence

By and large the Velips have taken to paddy cultivation. There is also a growing interest among some families for sugarcane plantation. However, there is an overwhelming response (90 per cent) of the community for paddy production. Sugarcane cultivation is undertaken in the newly allotted plots and on the banks of river canals as it facilitates easy access to water. Paddy cultivation is dependent solely on the rainwater are called as *morod (mordde)*, The fields remain dry during the rest part of the year.

A predominant number (63 per cent) of families used the rice produce for self-consumption, 2.42 per cent families used for consumption as well as for sharing with their near and distant relatives who generally do not engage in agricultural pursuits, especially with relatives who reside in towns and cities while, 22.42 per cent of the households utilised for consumption and for selling purpose. Many a times they exchange their rice for purchasing items for fulfilling their day-to-day needs.

At times when the production of rice is surplus, it is sold at the fair price shop and the tribals are entitled to receive a subsidy on the proviso that they produce the receipts. There were also instances noticed during the fieldwork of families falling short of their produce even for consumption and ended up buying more than what they actually produced. In such instances, they purchase rice under the public distribution supply (ration) from the fair price shop.

The public distribution system has helped the tribal families to satisfy their basic demands especially when they fall short of adequate produce or when they are devoid of any land for cultivation. Some families that produce surplus rice sell some amount in the local market to buy in return the refined rice (*surai*)**.** Many tribal families have stopped consuming the local par boiled rice and adapted to the polished rice.

Sugarcane cultivation: Emerging cash crop

In fact, the initial phases of settled agriculture featured the cultivation of sugarcane amongst the Velips. With the introduction of cash crops and the declining use of jaggery in their diet, the production of sugarcane was almost abandoned in the region. Of late, however, there is a rejuvenation of interest among a few families in the last twenty years towards sugarcane cultivation. Now, the tribal families produce sugarcane not for self-consumption but only for selling. The few families who produce sugarcane sell it to the Sanjivani sugar factory in the north district of Goa. The cultivation of sugarcane is more profit oriented than the other crops. Only those families who possess surplus lands and have better access to water resource venture into sugarcane cultivation. The Zonal Agriculture Officer informed that a few families have also converted their cashew plantation lands for sugarcane cultivation. He further informed that there were altogether eighty farmers from the villages of Gaondongrem and Cotigao who have taken to sugarcane cultivation under the drip irrigation system.

The minimum quantum of sugarcane produced ranges between 11 to 20 tonnes to a maximum of 80 to 90 tonnes. It is learnt that during the current prices a single ton of sugarcane was sold at rupees three thousand. The Department of Agriculture and the Sanjivani sugar factory jointly offers a support price of rupees 2400 per tonne for every farmer. Had the tribals been provided with more sustainable resources for cultivation throughout the calendar year, they could emerge as established peasants. Sharma (2008) for instance notes that the Mina tribe of Rajasthan have been able to economically rise higher than the Bhils because of the capacity to grow cash crops such as the mustard. In short, agriculture itself is capable enough to wipe off the economic backwardness of the tribals.

Traditional paddy seeds

Settled agriculture among the Velips in the early days manifested the use of traditional paddy seeds such as *Panio*, *Shitto*, *Tamso* and the *Ajgo*. These varieties of seeds radically differed from the ones, which were grown in shifting cultivation sites such as *kaangu* and *orai*. In fact, they are no longer in vogue with the Velips and also in any part of Goa. The yield of these seeds generated very less output and could not meet subsistence levels. However, what is noteworthy is despite their low yields the nutrient content of the traditional seeds was very high. The production techniques, methods and non-availability of inorganic fertilizers limited the crop produce. The traditional seeds have given way to some popular brands such as *Jyoti*, *Jaya* and *Karjat* among the community.

It is only after the Green Revolution and especially after the state liberation that the tribal regions have experienced a gradual rise in paddy production. Until the year 1925, the then Goa, Daman and Diu could export rice to neighbouring states of Maharashtra and Karnataka. Even till the beginning of 1981 the economy of Goa continued to be based on agriculture contributing about 17 per cent of its income to its

Gross Domestic Profit (Almeida, 2013, p. 408). The introduction of the Japanese method of doing agriculture brought about a massive transformation in paddy cultivation. Newer varieties of rice have been introduced on a trial basis; however, the *Karjat*, *Jyoti* and *Jaya* varieties still continue to dominate and are most prominent among the Velips. The modern paddy seeds on an average yield a produce of 3500 kilogram to 5000 kilogram per hectare; while the traditional ones could hardly give 500 kilogram per hectare.

Cultivation and the belief in rituals

All agricultural works carried out throughout the period of four to five months are coupled with the undertaking of rituals by the Velip community. In fact, rituals are considered as approvals for the different cultivation tasks. The community follows the practice of consulting and taking consent of the *Ghaadi* (shaman) before performance of cultivation acts such as *mer marop* (preparing bunds), *luvop* (crop cutting), *molap* (thrashing of crops) etc. His advice pertains to the things to be offered in their fields at the time of performing the tasks. He also offers a handful of rice to be spread before beginning those acts. Every act involves a different set of things to be offered. For instance, the *mer marop* included things such as a set of betel leaves and betel nut, set of five bananas, a clay horse and a live cock. Similarly, at the time of thrashing of grains *kaajal* (collyrium), *kumkum* (vermilion), *khastache fala* (*Hydnocarpus pentandra*), betel leaves with nut, bananas, a clay horse, a cock and the grains are offered by the *Ghaadi*.

The tribal families generally take a week time to cut the harvest. Two important rituals, namely, *kokud khalar sodap* and *jogon ghalop or bharo* are performed after the crop cutting is done. *Kokud khalar sodap* refers to the offering of chicken to the land. This ritual is collective in nature and therefore binding on all individual families to participate in it. The Velips consider chicken as highly polluting in nature. Mere touch of a chicken is believed to defile them, and hence do not consider it as a food item. To refrain from its touch, they sometimes hold it by tying it to two sticks. The *kokud khalar sodap* ritual is performed by the *Devli* (temple servant) from the nearby hamlet.

This is followed by the ritual of *jogon* undertaken in the field belonging to the budavant (wiseman). The *jogon* is offered below the *sasan* tree (*Alstonia scholaris*). Every household gets a *pod* (a share of rice and a coconut) for the preparation of *choru* (food for the Gods) at the *khal*. They pool their individual shares collectively for undertaking the ritual of *jogon* in the field of the *Budavant*. A handful of grains dipped into water are placed over small leaflets of banana tree and offered for the nearby Gods. This offering of food is called as '*akes*'. The common share of rice brought by the families is boiled with water into a huge vessel along with jaggery. There is no salt added to it. This food is known as *choru*. The *Budavant* offers the *choru* as *vaadi* (food for the Gods) at the *khal*. The *choru* is then offered to the villagers assembled at the *khal* as a holy meal.

Broadcasting versus transplanting of paddy

The Velips generally use the broadcasting method (*rovap*) for paddy cultivation. The method of paddy transplanting (*ropap*) seems to have found very less favour among them. The transplanting method is treated as beneficial as it gives a good yield as compared to the method of broadcasting. The broadcasting method does not always guarantee the cultivators of a good yield. But, there are other reasons for preferring the broadcasting method over the method of transplanting. The transplanting method is labour intensive as it involves more tasks as against the practice of just seeding or broadcasting. Families devoid of manpower, especially nuclear family units increasingly turn towards the broadcasting method. Under the *ropni* type of cultivation an additional layer of mud is used which requires excess amount of water. Paucity of rainwater may also sometimes hamper the growth of the paddy plant. The villagers thus favour broadcasting, as it needs less rainwater against transplanting of paddy crop. The *ropni* method is more productive as it lessens the growth of weeds and the cutting process becomes faster. However, the practice of transplanting hardens the surface of the soil inviting the difficulty of tilling the soil in the subsequent year. Therefore, some families follow the system of alternating the practices. Nevertheless, lately most of the tribal families have started the *ropni* type of cultivation, though it is time consuming.

Methods and tools of cultivation

Despite development occurring at faster pace, tribal societies if not totally, but to some extent continue to rely on traditional methods of farming. In fact, the possession of cattle and its use in agriculture and other purposes has been a mark of the Velip society since long. Historically speaking, Roy (as cited in Ghurye, 1963) mentions that the Oraons introduced the plough culture, and their livelihood is mainly centred around agriculture. The bullock driven plough method finds emergence among the Velips only with

the beginning of settled cultivation. However, one may notice that until the end of the last decade the community by and large made use of the plough cultivation culture. The last five years has witnessed a dramatic change from traditional to mechanised faming.

Almost sixty per cent of the families make use of the traditional *jot* (plough) for cultivation purposes. They persist to make use of the traditional *jot* for the purpose of levelling the surface of the field on the day before the sowing of seeds. They also think that the *jot* tills the soil deeper and efficiently than the tractor, which helps in better growth of the paddy crop. The major agricultural tasks of ploughing, cutting and thrashing are now increasingly performed with the help of tractors. The use of tractors is also increasing in modern times, i.e. nearly half of the families in the different hamlets use tractors. In other words, nearby half of the population is still dependent on traditional means of cultivation.

Traditional and modern fertilizers

Until recently, the community by and large persisted with age old practices of using natural fertilizers in shifting cultivation and settled cultivation. Natural or organic fertilizers such as *saavol* (organic manure) and cow dung were regularly used in shifting cultivation sites and in the agricultural fields. Of late, availability of high yielding variety of seeds and inorganic fertilizers has percolated into the community to a great extent. The availability of subsidised fertilizers has also created an additional demand, thereby bringing down the scope of organic fertilisers. Inorganic fertilizers have received a bigger appeal from the community, i.e. almost ninety per cent of households use inorganic fertilizers. Nevertheless, the community has not totally given up the use of organic fertilisers. The decline in the number of cattle in the villages is however resulting in the less use of the dung being used as potent manure in the fields. The construction of temporary cattle sheds (*waad*) in their fields during the post monsoon period is considered favourable for preparation of organic manure.

Another method of adding organic content to the fields is a quite similar method of preparing an organic seedbed called as '*rab*' was practiced by the Warli, Kathkari, Kokna, Koli, Thakur tribes in the Thane district in the State of Maharashtra. In this, a seedbed was prepared by burning loppings of trees, shrubs grass, leaves and clay. The clay was used to prevent the ashes from blown away by the winds (Munshi, 2007). Notwithstanding the importance of organic manure, the families show more inclination for inorganic fertilisers. It was observed that the *Sampurna* was a popular inorganic fertilizer among the tribals.

A very less (one fourth) of the households avail government subsidy for buying fertilizers.. It is learnt that many tribal families do not possess the essential document of Krishi card for availing fertilizer subsidy from the government. The Krishi card is provided to those families possessing appropriate land records and is considered as the identity of the farmer. In many cases, it was noticed that the villagers did not possess proper land records and hence were not entitled for the benefit of any form of agricultural subsidies. Under the newly implemented Pradhanmantri Sinchan Yojana, the farmers can now avail a facility of owning Soil Health Card. Farmers who possess the Soil Health Card can get their soil tested periodically or at least once in a year and receive valuable suggestions for upgrading its quality from the officials of the Department of Agriculture.

Cultivation roles

In olden days, the agricultural tasks were largely designated on the basis of a particular gender. The modern times however, witness mixed roles undertaken by men and women in the agricultural domain. The joint family provided the necessary work force required for performing the multiple agricultural tasks. The burden of undertaking cultivation was not felt as all family members participated in the agricultural pursuits. Traditionally, ploughing and cutting of the crop was the prerogative of the men folk. The disintegration of families has resulted in the breakdown of gender centred roles. Today, the different agricultural tasks are shared between men and women, irrespective of the traditional character attached to them. Tasks such as plant weeding, preparation of bunds, releasing of water, cutting, thrashing, winnowing, boiling and drying of rice are managed effectively by men and women. However, the only activity that remains men centred is of ploughing the field (*jot kasap*).

Major challenges in agriculture

The possession of old lands and the provision of new lands for cultivation have not completely resolved the problems of the community. Though agriculture supports livelihoods of nearly 70 per cent of India's rural population, land based livelihoods of small and marginal farmers are increasingly becoming unsustainable, forcing the farming community to look at alternative means for supplementing their

livelihoods (Hiremath, 2007). Crop production is not always consistent. Scarcity of rainfall, poor irrigation, fear of wild animals, land topography, modern occupations, dearth of lands, environmental conditions, expensive fertilizers and technical equipments, increasing labour cost, soil condition and intensive physical labour are major concerns for the cultivators. Though agriculture is a major source of livelihood for the people living in North East India, the productivity is very low owing to poor irrigation facilities, low mechanisation, limited usage of high yielding variety (HYV) seeds, and predominance of mono-cropping and *jhumming* or shifting cultivation (Mishra 2007, p. 70). The Zonal Agriculture Officer (ZAO) revealed the fact that the agricultural community is not fast responding to modernisation in agriculture, and hence the anticipated change is very slow. It can be thus well affirmed that the tribals are encountering the problem of adjustment due to tradition-modernity conflict (Somayaji, 2010, p.viii).

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