The Impacts of Displacements and Land Acquisition on Tribal Communities

Dr. Shiv Kumar
Assistant Professor
School of Humanities,
Lovely Professional University,
Phagwara, Punjab-INDIA.

Abstract

The impact of displacement cannot be calculated through quantifying the amount of land lost and in the similar way the benefit of resettlement should not be proclaimed by looking at the amount of land gained through the process. The consequences of displacement and resettlement are highly linked with the socio-economic and political living grounds of each community. Changes in any of these domains are expected to have a considerable impact on the life of tribal members. Oorukoottam as a core system of self-governance developed by and for tribal communities’ have importance in asserting the socio-political and cultural identities and rights of every tribal communities.

Introduction

Resettlement of tribals is considered as one of the outcomes of any development and encroachment induced displacement. The case of Kerala tribal land alienation and displacement of tribals from their traditional land was predominately colligated with the historical dispossession of land which began from the period of British government. The political power and traditional self-governance systems were broken during this period as rightly pointed “The British colonial rule systematically attacked the self-sufficient and self-governing autonomous adivasi societies by bringing adivasi homelands under their control legitimised by legislation as the forest laws” (Bijoy, 1999). The displacements, especially in the life of tribals, in whichever stated ways it took place, the impact is higher than the realised or studied expanse (Mohanty, 2009).

The impact of displacement cannot be calculated through quantifying the amount of land lost and in the similar way the benefit of resettlement should not be proclaimed by looking at the amount of land gained through the process. The consequences of displacement and resettlement are highly linked with the socio-economic and political living grounds of each community. Changes in any of these domains are expected to have a considerable impact on the life of tribal members. Oorukoottam as a core system of self-governance developed by and for tribal communities’ have importance in asserting the socio-political and cultural identities and rights of every tribal communities. The consequences emerged after the resettlement is identified as a treat to the proper functioning of this village committees and leaving this powerful system into meaningless functions organized by LSGIs in which the roles and identities of the community members are largely no recognized.
Background of the study

Historically, there were larger and minor protests and objections from tribal people and civil society organizations against grabbing of land which was sporadically reported through various means, there were no affirmative actions from the state (Münster, 2012). Aralam farm resettlement is the final outcome of considerable outcome years-long struggles of the tribal communities in the state, especially Wayanad for the ‘restoration’ of the alienated tribal land. The idea of resettlement into Aralam, Kannur from Wayanad was not of beneficiary tribal communities and it was not the stated aim of any tribal movements in Wayanad (Sreerekha, 2010). However, the politics of bringing resettlement, instead of restoration was the golden middle path taken by the government was to ensure no land loss for the private encroachers at the same time to mute the voices of impoverished tribal people for land. Did tribal life change progressively after the resettlement to Aralam? What are the socio-economic and political impact of mass resettlement of more than three thousands of tribal households into Aralam?. The numbers of dependable scientific studies to quote here for answering these questions are missing. Apart from the disturbing news on a high number of malnourished women, frequent attacks by wildlife on tribal people settled in Aralam, we doesn’t have much to state on the holistic life of resettled tribes in Aralam.

The tribal village committee (called ‘oorukoottam’ in Malayalam) is identified as a powerful system in empowering the political right of the tribal members in decision making regarding development policies, disputes arising in settlement area and reiterating economic and cultural rights of the particular community. On the background of the constitutional provision of India, Government of Kerala has implemented oorukoottam in the tribal hamlets to ensure the participatory role of beneficiaries for preparing the developmental strategies for the tribal empowerment in the tribal hamlets (George, 2007). Resettlement as a process leading to consequences in the domains of social, economic, cultural and political life, the system of aforesaid self-governance among tribal communities are also impacted. As an effect, it also has impacted the participation of tribal members in the democratic functioning of local self-governance institution. The study attempt to qualitatively assess the destructions and treats to constitutional provision of self-determination of tribal communities. Paniya tribe being one of the largest tribal community According to the latest available census data there are 15,876 Paniya tribal households in Wayanad with 69116 total population (Census, 2011). As Panoor (1999:71) rightly notes, “All Tribes are misfortunate. However, Paniyan is the misfortunate among the misfortunate”. They pose the least amount of land compared to any other tribal communities in Kerala. Paniya is the subjugated and most marginalized tribal community lives with the minimal living conditions and highest vulnerabilities (Mohindra, 2010).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to identify the status of ‘Oorukoottam’ (the tribal village committee) as a core institution in the decentralized system of governance among tribal settlement areas and to understand how far the concerns are appropriately met through the said extension of local self-governance in ‘Aralam tribal resettlement’, one of the largest tribal resettlement project in the country. The study attempts to explore the
complexities of participatory involvement of Paniya tribal beneficiaries in the collective decision making and implementation of development policies in their settlement area. It also analyses how resettlement as a process of detachment from tribes own original habitats and socio-political and cultural environment is disempowering the community in utilizing the full potentials of oorukoottam as a system of decentralized governance as well as rightly engaging in Local Self Governance.

Methodology

The study forms a qualitative research design based on in-depth interviews, non-participant observation and key-informant interviews. The inclusive criteria for selecting the participants guided for a convenient random sampling among the population of the study, i.e. the Paniya tribal households resettled to Aralam farm from Wayanad district. Twelve households were identified by implying the sampling tool and criteria for inclusion and exclusion. The researcher attended Gramasabha and Oorukoottam conducted in the study area during the period of study to observe and collect data through the method of non-participant observation. The interviews of key informants were conducted using semi-structured interview guide. Secondary sources of data were also utilized in forming conceptualization and processing the scientific analysis of research findings. The data collection was done at various time between 2016 and 2018.

Oorukoottam as an empowering extension of the decentralized governance system

There is no doubt in stating that the oorukoottam or the tribal village committee helps in confirming the tribes’ rights to political participation. The history evident that the tribal communities all over India had their own legislative and administrative system. “Before the colonization of the country by the British, the adivasis were self-governing first nation”,

It is an official local governance and legislative system among all tribal communities, however there were minimal differences in power and functions between communities. These committees performs the right to intervene in the events of disputes among their members, reside over and plan ceremonies and festivals, organizing help towards the common cause etc. The decentralization process brings the government closer to the people spatially and institutionally in the form of grama sabha, ward sabha and ‘Oorukoottams’ in the case of scheduled tribes. The decisions of a local government should reflect the felt needs of the community. The decentralized planning process enabled induction of views of local tribes through the structure of oorukuttams (Biju, KC, 2011). As the part of an extended system of decentralized governance, the ‘oorukoottam’ uphold rights and powers to function as a bridge between panchayat raj institution and tribal communities. The meetings are conducted through a trained tribal member called tribal promoter and the location, agenda, review of implemented development policies and planning for upcoming period are discussed and decided by the team including tribal leader called ‘mooppan’. Apart from this, the oorukoottam is entitled to conduct a discussion on the situation analysis report of each tribal hamlet prepared by the tribal development department. The team set up by the LSGI include the VEO (Village Extension Officer), two tribal promoters, health workers from sub-centres, agricultural demonstrators and staffs from anganwadis should be present during the oorukoottam meeting to facilitate the process and finer the public service delivery system. The structure and functions clearly state the importance of these village-level committees in providing space for
responsive, responsible and an accountable local self-governance from the bottom levels of a democratic system. It is been more than two decades after a major policy decision is passed, during the period of 9th plan (1996-97), the Kerala state government took a shift from Tribal sub-plan to LSGI for utilizing the one half of the total tribal development fund considering the importance of participatory planning and implementation. So, this is also reiterating the importance of ‘oorukoottam’ in planning and distributing its allocated resources based on its felt need and priorities of the concerned tribal communities.

**A critical analysis of the functioning of tribal self-governance system in Aralam**

The participants reiterated that the functioning of the *oorukoottam* had gone through significant erosion in the post resettlement period and currently the process doesn’t serve the core purpose of community participation and self-determination. “Traditionally, among the Paniya tribe community, the committee leader was the head of the village known as ‘koyma’ or ‘mooppan’, elected by villagers based on various priorities. However, the ‘Oorukoottam’ after resettlement to Aralam, it has lost its political power in reorganizing the resources among their members and decide on the matters concerning to their life sue to the dominance and unnecessary influence of the ‘outsider members’ in the functioning” (Chengan, 67). He stated that the major decisions regarding the forthcoming policies are undertaken by the LSGI members alone without considering to consult the community members. “We are becoming a mere audience during the *oorukoottam* meetings”, said Latha (46) during the interview. The researcher attended *oorukoottam* also echoes these points as he observed that major planning is done even prior to the meeting and later it is just recited for the beneficiaries.

There are rules to conduct the *oorukoottam* meeting separately for each tribal communities based on the hamlet they habitat; however, the meetings attained by the researcher was having beneficiaries from three tribal communities together from thee settlement hamlets. The Paniya tribe participants reported that it became a common practice to conduct the *oorukoottam* meeting together for various communities at one time considering the easiness of the office bearers of the LSGI. The researcher observes that it ruins the overall purpose of the procedure. The communities like Kurichiya are considered as of higher social order by Paniya communities, and in many instances, it is observed that the earlier dominates the later. Consequently, conducting a village meeting to discuss and plan the welfare and development, with various tribe communities together is not a successful practice. The Paniya tribe members are considerably introvert especially in the presence of ‘others’, and Paniya women do not even talk if there are male members from other community. So for the last some years followed after the resettlement, Paniya community of Wayanad origin have not utilised their power in the process of decision making by attending the village committee and participating in the discussions. “They (the LSGI, TRDM officials) only asks to Kurichiyans when it comes an important decision. Kurichiyans are the only one entertained to speak about the problems and necessities that they are facing. People (belongs to communities other than Paniya tribe) comes from various parts of Wayanad, having different needs and problems cannot understand our troubles and represent us in a system like *oorukoottam*”, said Balan, 43. He rightly pointed the concerns by stating that no community can represent others in an orukoottam, especially in the case of most marginalised community like Paniya since it completely ruins the purposes communities’ self-determination. To exemplify the complexities, mother of two school-going
children, Suma said that the street lights are necessary for the Paniya settlements in 2/7th block in the Aralam farm settlement area, however, the LSGI decided priory to pass it for settlement near to 13th block. She stated that considering the importance of street lights in the areas where there are numerous wild animal attacks are reported from. The 2/7th block is one of the closest settlement blocks to Aralam wildlife sanctuary and met number of wild animal attack and casualties. It is noted that the slightly well of tribal communities are comparably more influencing the decisions of LSGI regarding the development policies rather considering the importance of collective decision from Oorukoottam meetings of Paniya resettled communities in Aralam.

The location and time for conducting the tribal village meeting are decided by the members of LSGI and TRDM (Tribal Rehabilitation Development Mission) office-bearers according to their convenience without considering the difficulties of Paniya community members. The political power to negotiate their rights is more visible in the process itself, as it is rightly stated, “while we were in Wayanad as the ‘moopan’ decides the place and date of the meeting, he decides the agenda for meeting by consulting senior members of the households, he decides who all from outside (tribal development office, grama panchayath etc) to be called for the meeting, duration of the meeting and he have the power to positively interrogate the decisions of the meeting”, Gopalan, 58.

Majorly the meetings are conducted at a distant location from the locations of Paniya settlement, however, close to the settlement areas of other tribe communities, such as Kurichiyas. A significant number of Paniya women reported that the distance as a cause for not participating in oorukoottam meetings since they had to walk kilometres through the rough landscape. The researcher crosschecked the information with the tribal promoters regarding the locations for conducting the meetings. He said that it is decided by the office members concerning to the convenience of tribal members from other community as well as the reachability of staffs from LGSI and other institutions. As it is in the case of location, the time for meeting is also not decided by consulting with the tribal leader (moopan) or any tribal members. Without any election or community suggestions the panchayat members choses the leader. The process of resettlement disempowers the Paniyan to properly identify and stand for his rights. The participant stated that the functioning of this village committee was much appreciable while they were in their original settlements prior to the displacement and resettlement. “It functioned as how the Gramasabha works in the panchayat level. We were given respect and our voice were heard during the meeting. “Panchayath was actually facilitating us in conducting oorukoottam and mediate our decision and concerns to the officials. It was never performing as a dominant organ to negatively involve in influencing the decisions of the village level committee”, Kumaran, once the tribal leader of the committee in Wayanad reported.

‘Oorumooppan’, the tribal leader of the particular village, the tribal representative of ‘orrukoottam’ in Aralam belongs to ‘Kattunaykka’ tribal community. It is again contrary to the rules of the tribal village committee. An individual belonging to a considerably better-off community can never represent as the leader of most marginalized community, the Paniya. A person from the same community will only be well aware of the socio-cultural and occupational specificities of the particular community. Since he can only rightly understand the issues and felt needs of his community. The optimal utilization of leader’s power and bargaining capacities
are expected to perform only when he belongs to the community he represents. In Aralam, the concerned tribal leader is economically and politically better off than the Paniya community members. He only comes to Aralam when there is an oorukootam meeting is called by the Panchayat members, as he permanently resides in Wayanad where he owns land for cultivation. When the researcher interacted with the said tribal leader it was clearly understood that he is least informed about the problems and needs of the Paniya community he leads in Aralam. According to the rules, the tribal community have the right to decide their leader considering many factors, however, in the study location in Aralam, the tribal leader is chosen by the Panchayat members and members of other communities together.

The tribal village committee calls for meeting when there is an essential situation arises to discuss and needs to mitigate any problems. But in Aralam, the second last meeting was conducted eighteen months back from the date of the latest meeting in which the researcher had participated. The meetings in the study location in Aralam is called by the Panchayat prior to the ward level grama sabha, just as a formality or for the name sake to conduct it. The meeting resembled as address speech by officers from LSGI and TRDM aimed at informing about various fund passed for the upcoming financial year. The valuation sessions in which evaluation and discussion happen regarding the previous decisions and minutes are considered as the core strengths of tribal village committee, however largely missing from the ‘oorukootam’ meetings conducted in the study locations in Aralam.

The tribal promoters in tribal areas are individuals selected and appointed by tribal development department in-order to bridge the gap between the tribal beneficiaries and various public service delivery systems. They help in channelising the welfare schemes and policies designed for the development of tribal communities by the tribal development department. They are trained in participatory rural appraisal, participatory monitoring, primary health care and natural resource management. Thus, the roles of tribal promoter are essential in the proper functioning of any tribal village committee. In the studied location, the scheduled tribal promoter does not belong to Paniya community, for the last many tenures. However, there are many qualified people available to serves as tribal promoters among Paniya communities who can function better enough between their own community members and government departments. It is also noted that the current tribal promoters are not empathetically understanding and addressing the problems of the Paniya community members rather they uphold much stigma towards the culture and social systems of Paniyan.

In an ideal tribal village committee, the agenda for meeting is decided by the community member together with the tribal leader and other concerned government office bearers as facilitators. However, in the study location, it is noted that the Paniya tribal members perform less role in deciding the agenda of meeting; instead, the authorities like concerned ward member from the Panchayat alone or together with the TRDM officer prepares the agendas and decision before the meeting initiates. Interviews with the said officials exhibit that they uphold a notion that the Paniya community members are less educated, mostly unaware and negligibly should be part of the decision making procedure in a full-fledged manner. Pokkan, (56) rightly noted, “In the events of any problems to any member of the particular tribal community was adequately addressed in the concerned village committee, however, now (after resettlement to Aralam), weather to
identify it as a problem to discuss or to nullify is decided by ‘other’ people”. It reiterates that the system of self-governance among the resettled Paniya tribe community in Aralam lost its fundamental rights in utilising its political power and duties.

A significantly less number of Paniya community members participates in gram sabha meetings conducted by the Aralam grama panchayath. One of the significant reason reported by the participant is the distance between their settlement area and the venue of meeting. The distance is about 16 KM and there is no proper public transport facility for them to commute for attending the meetings. Even if some of them are ready, then they had to find their travel expenses themselves, which demotivates them from attending it. Those who attended the meeting stated that none of the decisions made during oorukoottam is reiterated or addressed at gram sabha by the ward members. The gram sabha meeting is usually conducted at a parish hall of a Christian church in Keezhpally. A dominant number of beneficiaries are from other religious and tribal communities. These both helped in escalating the inferiority among Paniya members and they decided not to participate in gram sabha meetings. As it is in the case of oorukoottam, none of the members from Paniya tribal community given a chance to raise any question or participate in the decision-making process during the gram sabha meeting attended by the researcher as the part of data collection.

**The role of resettlement in deteriorating the strengths of oorukoottam**

From the data collected, through various sources employing different methods, regarding the functioning of the oorukoottam indicates that it works par away from its visualised strengths and powers as a democratic decentralized system. Resettlement from their original habitat into an entirely newer area precipitated and furthered the existing socio-economic and political vulnerabilities and marginalisation of the Paniya tribal communities in Aralam. An unplanned resettlement project emerged out of the consistent struggles of the tribal population for their alienated land is can be seen in Aralam. While the government get applause for distributing an acre of land for each tribal households in Aralam, nobody realises the fact that none of the Paniya households cultivates in their given land due to reasons varying from geographical constraints of cultivation to frequent disturbances wildlife. The years-long struggles to survive in a newer area without proper livelihood, living amenities including safe drinking water and sanitation facilities, rigidly isolated settlement etc have reflected in the inferior socio-economic and political life by the resettled Paniya tribal members in Aralam. As an extension of these troubles that they experienced especially after the resettlement affected in the rightful function of their ‘oorukoottam’. The situation of conducting oorukoottam for Kuruchiya and Paniya community together arose only after the resettlement took place, the very act ruined the major purposes of these village committees since then the community is not entertained for its decision making, self-determination and participating in implementing the development policies. Every critical analysis of current status of oorukoottam functioning which is discussed in the above section of this paper can be linked to the consequences of resettlement.
Conclusion

The *oorukoottam* or the village committee is envisaged as the neighbourhood beneficiary group in the democratic decentralised system of governance in India. The committee upholds political power in making decisions and participating in the overall development processes of the government through a responsive and responsible platform. However, the unplanned resettlement of highly marginalised communities like Paniya into a completely newer area threatens the proper and desired functioning of these committees in utilising the full potentials. Nevertheless, the government should understand the functional erosions and possible action should be taken to tackle the problems. This extension of the decentralised system itself can be used as a powerful tool against the socio-economic and political marginalization of the backward communities like Paniya if utilised properly.

References


