

# **Socio-ecological Marginalisation of Tribes and Psycho-social Impacts: Reflections from Western Ghats Region of Idukki District, Kerala**

**Communication & Journalism Research**  
9(2) pp 55-64  
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ISSN 2348 – 5663

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## **Abstract**

The Western Ghats in India has a rich biodiversity with a variety of endemic flora and fauna. The dense forests and hilly lands of the Western Ghats in the Idukki region of Kerala were less populated regions with natural forest resources in ancient times. Aboriginal groups were one of the significant populations during that time. They lived in the hilly tracts and depended on forest resources for their livelihood but never settled down in a specific location for a long time. Later, the state promoted migration and encroachment activities for plantation and agricultural development, resulting in the marginalization of tribes in the Idukki District, hence forcing them to move into the interior areas. Besides, the alcoholic abuse among tribal people resulted in land alienation. The encroachers used alcohol as a tool to grab the mainland from the tribals. During this era, the government-initiated policy level changes in landholding and land rights. The land assignment acts enacted by the state protected the plantation lobbies and settler farmers but did not address the need for land as well as the land rights of these marginalized tribes. These kinds of interventions of different departments like the forest in the government sector led to the ecological marginalization of these groups from the forest resources and treated them as trespassers. The environmental degradation accelerated the marginalization process, especially from the water resources they depended on earlier. These marginalization problems, which have been persisting for a long time in this region, are examined through the lenses of social-ecology, and their psycho-social impacts are discussed in this article.

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### **Key Words**

Western Ghats, Ecological Conservation, Tribal Alienation, Socio-ecological Marginalisation, Psycho-social Impacts, Perspectives on Conservation.

### **Conceptual/ Theoretical Framework**

#### **Bio-Psycho-Social Model**

The history of migration and encroachments in the hilly tracts of the Western Ghats coextend to the story of migration-induced marginalization among aboriginal groups who lived there. Although the bio-psycho-social model generally aims to predict the relationship between biological, social, and psychological factors and illness, this chapter is an attempt to understand the psycho-social impacts of marginalization among tribes in the Western Ghats region of Idukki District, which stems from the widespread migration within the framework of this model.

According to this model, biological, social, and psychological elements interact together to contribute to the overall health and well-being of individuals. Similarly, interruptions in any of these systems adversely affect other systems. In other words, social elements such as environment, family, culture, religion, and socioeconomic status influence other systems, especially mental health. Being a marginalized community who are primarily landless with inconsiderable power over sources such as land, forest, and water, tribals remain in a socially and economically disadvantaged position throughout and experience discrimination based on the stereotypes generated by migrant farmers due to their low socioeconomic status which occurred as these people persuaded tribes who were natives of the western ghats region of Idukki to move to interior areas.

Moreover, the most renowned Kerala model of development didn't make much difference in the lives of marginalized tribes, especially in their social and economic life. Excessive levels of poverty, deprivation, and vulnerability, High developmental and social exclusion, remarkably low rates of empowerment, unpredictably swift marginalization as a result of unfair, unbalanced, and exploitative associations of production, and exchange between tribal communities and others, and least participation in development initiatives and decision-making process prevailed in the society (Haseena, 2014). As a result, these people, have comparatively limited power over their life, and the resources attainable to them. Even though tribal communities are not identical, most of their shared experiences are the same. Among the 84.3 million Scheduled Tribes population in India, the majority of them are landless, considered to be socially and economically disadvantaged with little control over resources like land, forest, and water (Devesh, 2014). These elements act as stressors that prevent tribals from leading a flourishing life as others.

This lack of autonomy and independence due to social situations along with inability of legislation to accommodate the unique traditions of tribal communities and their culture and act on the stigma associated with tribes as the homogeneous, “primitive” other, (Hebbar, 2009) contributed to an increased vulnerability by diminishing their social and coping skills which in turn result in impaired social and coping skills. Consequently, through generations, they learned to use pernicious strategies when they encounter stressors such as drug addiction instead of constructive ones.

Certain social behaviours and attitudes by migrant farmers further facilitated destructive habits among tribals. One of the most powerful methods that the migrant farmers in Idukki adopted, which threw tribals into suffering, was alcohol. There exists a noble prevalence of alcohol consumption and smoking among Indian indigenous tribes, (Subramanian, 2006), which is linked with a broad spectrum of mental as well as physical health problems and social issues such as violence, failed family, child negligence, loss of income, redirecting income away from family requirements, high morbidity, and early mortality (Wilson, 2010).

It was triggered by the custom among the landowners to offer alcohol to the tribal men for their work. Gradually, the tribals began to expect it from the workplace, and they were reluctant to work if alcohol was not provided. Likewise, those agricultural landowners who failed to provide this faced difficulty to find workers. Another assumption that dominated the owners is that alcohol consumption makes tribals work hard. Thus, the landowners gave an increased amount of alcohol to the tribal men before they worked (Sadath, 2019). This belief transferred to the workers, and this specific social context resulted in the formation of one of the most disastrous habits capable of ruining the personal and family life of these people, alcohol addiction. Furthermore, they limited themselves to find income only from forest sources and working in the lands of migrant farmers as they became rich by cultivating money crops. As a result, the socioeconomic status and stability of tribal communities remained in the lowest strata, and it affected their overall cognitive as well as emotional development through socialization.

### **Social Ecology of Idukki Region of Western Ghats**

Guha, R. (1994) argues social ecology or environmentally oriented sociology as a study of the reciprocal relationship between four major societal elements such as culture, polity, social structure, economy, and ecological infrastructure. He discusses about basic categories of Social Ecology includes Culture refers to religion, ideology, and self-expressions that influence social life. Polity implies the power relations between different social groups and institutions in the society which influence law and the state. Social Structure is the social arrangements such as family kinship, caste, and community as well as gender relations. The economy incorporates the Marxian

sense of production, distribution, and allocation of resources. Guha mentions the growth in the environmental consciousness of people in India as they faced Bhopal gas leak and were familiar with the Chipco movement. Guha's remarkable analysis of the class contradictions in resource utilization makes it possible to examine the class influence in the use and misuse of natural resources.

The tribes in the Idukki district have customs of worshipping gods, which are closely associated with nature, and hence their environmental consciousness is a step ahead of the general population. Their culture always aims to protect forest resources and ensure the sustainable utilisation of natural resources. While these tribal populations led a sustainable life in the hilly tracts, the migration and encroachments of the general population from lower lands with the support of the state resulted in increased deforestation activities. As most of the migrants in the Idukki district are farmers, they are more concerned about agricultural productivity than environmental degradation. It creates ecological problems as a consequence of deep-rooted social problems which determine the social ecology.

### **Tribal Settlements in Idukki District**

Idukki district is home to nine categories of tribes. Most of them migrated from the plain lands of Kerala and Tamil Nadu region during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. They had been the only inhabitants of the hilly tracts till the migration of non-tribals to the region during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The tribal groups who rely on forest dwellings made the slightest damage or no damage to the environment during their habitation for more than a hundred years. As they depended on forest resources and led traditional sustainable livelihood practices, they formed valuable models of the human-environment relationship. Moreover, they have distinguished cultural practices, language, traditions, and modes of living that are environmentally friendly and healthy food habits.

Kerala history is closely associated with ancient Tamil speaking society. The Idukki region was part of "Kurinchi" as Tamils divided the land into five types: Kurinchi, Mulla, paala, marutham, and neithal. The pioneer population of this region were Kaanavar, Veedar and Kuravar, who relied on hunting and gathering for livelihood. Moreover, there is evidence of cultivation in this region till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the tribes used to grow in uncultivated forest land by cleansing it.

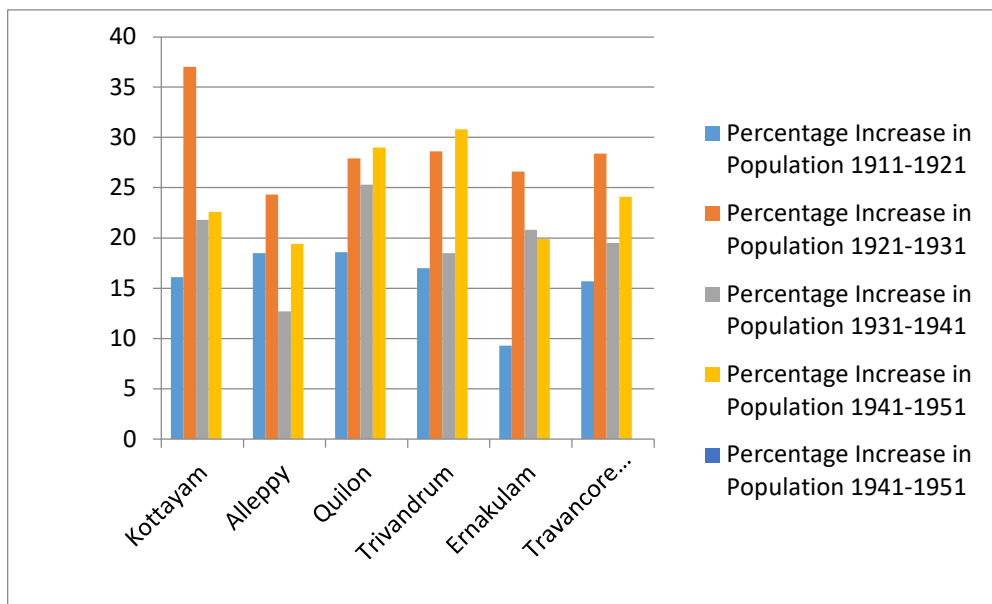
The Oorali community found in Idukki have been residing in the forests for centuries. The major tribal groups prevailing in Idukki are Mannan, Oorali, Muthuvan, Mala-arayan, Mala-pulayar, Paliyar and Ulladar, who are considered as five collective societies. The linguistic and cultural similarities of Mala-arayar, Oorali, and Ulladar helps to group them as first. Mannans and Muthuvans communities are the second

and third collective. The Paliyar group is the fourth collective living in this region and the fifth group of Mala-pulayars. They migrated from the Madurai region of Tamil Nadu like Mannan and Muthuvans.

As per the census report 2011, Idukki district has a total population of 1,107,453, including 4% of the tribals with a number of 50,000. Among these tribal communities, most of the tribal population still live inside the forest in 181 settlements and 91 settlements away from the forest, and five settlements in isolated regions. They were hunters and gatherers who lived in the natural environment. They occupied the forest land and lived in temporary shelters made of materials collected from the forest. These tribal groups worship gods which are part of their culture and closely associated with nature.

### Migration and Deforestation in Western Ghats

**Figure 11: Percentage Increase in Population in Travancore Cochin Region From 1911 to 1951**



Source: Census of India, 1971

The exact number of migrations to the Idukki district in the early 1900s is not available as land transfers are not legally recorded. The extent of migration during those days can be drawn from the history of deforestation in the Western Ghats as well as the extent of the agricultural sector in the region. Encouragement for migration from the Travancore Province to the hilly areas of the Western Ghats has

accelerated with the government-level incentives to address the Great Famine that resulted from the First World War.

Available records from the 1931 auction testify that as part of the development of settlements in the hilly areas of the Western Ghats in 1940, the wetlands and forest lands auctioned by the government were concentrated in the Upputhara and Munnamkandam areas of the Idukki district and served as early settlements. After independence, to combat post-World War II food shortages, the government again encouraged immigration in the 1940s with the 'Grow More Food Scheme' program. As part of this, ten thousand acres of land was allotted to settler farmers in Ayyapancoil and Adimali areas and three thousand acres in the Kattappana area to encourage agriculture to alleviate food shortages.

Then in 1954-55, the ruling minister of Kochi, Pattom Thanu Pillai, announced the 'High Range Colonization Scheme' and established colonies in Kallar, Pattom, Marayoor, Kanthalloor and Deviyoor by allotting more than 7500 acres of land to the settlers. Migration continued during the 1950-1970 and as a result of it, the population of the district increased almost 16 times during the period from 1901 to 1971 and recorded a very high rate of population growth in the state (Suneesh K K 2016).

The land transformation of the topography of the Idukki district began with land-use changes related to plantation cultivation, human migration, and the origin of human settlements. Human interactions at different levels have led to the transformation of flora. Increased migration accelerated the conversion of forests into agricultural land and led to environmental degradation in the Western Ghats. Later, settler farmers began their fight for the ownership of lands while the tribal communities adhered to their philosophy that no one owns land or nature. Consequently, farmers gained dominance and marginalized the tribals, which clearly impacted their psyche.

### **Social Exclusion and Marginalization of Tribes**

The marginalisation of indigenous people is a global phenomenon that resulted from colonisation in the past and later through the economic development and privatisation of properties. The marginalisation became intensified due to the ecological conservation efforts without the participation of indigenous communities. Besides, these policy-level decisions often outrage the rights of indigenous people by limiting their access to natural resources. It affects their cultural practices blended with nature and the shared knowledge and practice followed by the people in a society. The prevailing ecological conservation initiatives often perpetuate a paradigm that separates the nature-culture dualism, which separates the reciprocity of indigenous people with nature. As the Western Ghats is one of the World Heritage Sites listed by UNESCO, there is particular attention to protecting this region. The top-to-bottom

approach in the planning process for conserve this region weighs the natural and cultural values distinctly without a critical analysis of its implications. Moreover, the material-centred approach has been adopted to characterise natural and cultural values.

There are pieces of evidence globally for this kind of conservation efforts aimed at resolving environmental problems through nature-culture disjuncture (Andrade, 2000). Even though the progressive scientific paradigm looks forward to the interdisciplinary approach that addresses indigenous people's concerns regarding their culture and the nature they live. The term 'cultural landscape' and 'natural landscape' were discussed in the sociological paradigm, which became a part of these conservation reports came out for the protection of heritage sites, including the World Heritage Committee Report (Jones, 2003).

The frequent interference into their life in the form of conservation policies and restrictions on land utilization along with attempts to protect the ecosystem of Western Ghats by the government further stimulated their problems by pushing them into the pit of financial crisis by establishing control over their land use and utilization of forest resources. This increased the gravity of identity crisis and a feeling of social exclusion that they have been experiencing since ages because a large proportion of the tribals continued as labourers in the agricultural, casual, plantation and industrial sectors irrespective of the fact that they are the natives of Western Ghats region. This crisis further worsened by the fact that land is the only tangible asset of a tribal community, and their affect is to a large extent is deeply linked to it (Haseena, 2014). When they lose control over this, poverty and poor psychological well-being were the ultimate outcomes. Thus, they were forced to fall into the most underprivileged layers of the community and faced critical mental health problems due to high vulnerability and triggering social situations (Devesh, 2014). This is a clear indication of the impacts of the social stigma and cultural isolation and the continuing distress caused by migration.

Furthermore, the developmental activities that took place in the Idukki district led to the displacement of the tribals from their habitats, especially during the construction of hydroelectric projects. In 1895, the tribal community was forced to relocate from the project area for the construction of Mullapperiyar Dam. Moreover, the Periyar Tiger Reserve Project limited their access to forest resources and took place in a large-scale displacement of tribal communities in 1934. Later, several major and minor dam construction projects resulted in repeated habitat change among these vulnerable groups.

## **Conclusion**

Idukki District has the fourth-largest tribal population in Kerala. From 2013 to 2018, Idukki, the police department, has registered 168 cases of atrocities against indigenous people. Furthermore, these aboriginal groups have been exploited by mainstream society. The migrants grabbed the agricultural land owned by these vulnerable groups through alcohol abuse, and the tribes became landless in their land. Another form of exploitation that took place was sexual abuse which resulted in an increased number of unwed mothers among tribal communities in the Idukki district. Even the state did not consider these tribal populations who work in the land owned by the mainstream during the land reform acts implemented in Kerala. However, it resulted in the emergence of a middle-class society in Kerala through the land reform act of 1969, which put an end to the feudal system, and tenants got ownership over the land they cultivated. The tribal population did not cultivate as tenants even though they took part in agriculture as daily labourers and continued to work as the same in the lands of the newly emerged middle-class society.

Later the situation became drastically changed, and the attention of the state to grow more food into ecological conservation. The conservation initiatives of the state created a threat of eviction and challenged their existence in the hilly tracts. The increased human-animal conflicts in the nearby forest regions affected their agrarian crops and extended the cultivation struggle. These difficulties generated a double marginalisation among tribes as most of them live close to the forest area, and the majority of their farmland shares a boundary with the forest. In addition, their access into the forest became restricted, and they became treated as an exile in their own land.

## **Recommendations/Way Forward**

The indigenous people who live in the hilly regions of Idukki have been the earliest inhabitants for centuries. They followed a sustainable lifestyle without harming the environment and did not settle in a specific area for cultivation. This nomadic nature led to their marginalization during the migration of mainstream society to the district for developmental activities, plantation expansion, and agricultural development. Later, as a result of various social movements, most of the settlers got land ownership. However, a section of the society still holds and cultivates the land without ownership rights. The tribal community in the district faces double marginalization as they live in rural areas with conditional land rights. The forest department restricts their access to the forest, and the environmental degradation resulted in the vanishing of water resources they used earlier.



The government has to take the initiative to tackle the social and ecological marginalisation faced by the tribal community. The developmental or empowering activities should ensure the active participation of the people in this community. These programmes have to be a continuous process which will result in gradual overall development among them. However, the basic amenities and educational as well as land distribution have to be the primary concern. In-depth studies on the tribal land alienation can be conducted and laws have to be enacted to protect their rights and implementation of which has to be ensured.

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