

ASSAULT ON BIOSPHERE

## Glimpses of Adivasi Situation in Gudalur, The Nilgiris **Pranjali Bandhu**

In popular imagination, official and media discourse the Adivasis (the original inhabitants of this sub-continent) are the tribals, so-called because their economy is still largely at a pre-agricultural level, literacy and modern educational levels are low, modern medical facilities almost non-existent and poverty levels high with rampant undernutrition and starvation deaths. The attempt at subjugating these freedom-loving people, who refused to become part of the hierarchical *jajmani* system, started during the period of Aryan colonisation of the subcontinent. It continues to date with hunting them down in the forests, where they had retreated, for the sake of the mineral wealth that these areas contain. The intent is genocidal.

India has one of the largest Adivasi concentrations in the world. They are mainly concentrated in the vast central Indian belt from Rajasthan and Gujarat in the west to Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Bengal, and the entire north-eastern region. In peninsular India Andhra Pradesh stands out as a major hub of Adivasis. Tamil Nadu and Kerala have each a very small percentage of Adivasis, but both these States as well as Karnataka have several dozens of distinct Adivasi communities dispersed over large areas. There are a few concentrated pockets in these States and the Nilgiri biosphere is one of them. In the Nilgiris it is Wayanad district and its contiguous Gudalur Block that have a higher than average concentration of Adivasis. According to the 2001 Census, the ST population of Tamil Nadu is 1.04%, while in the Nilgiri district it is 4.32% of the total general population.

### **THE TERRAIN**

The Nilgiris are a unique biosphere in the Western Ghats characterized at the higher altitudes by savanna (grasslands) and shola (evergreen montane) forests in the ravines, moist and dry deciduous forests and thorn and scrub in the middle and lower ranges, and evergreen and semi-evergreen forests to the West. Three-fourths of the lower ranges are still forested. The Biosphere thus encompasses a very diverse variety of climatic and geographic micro regions at heights ranging from 400 m to over 2500 m above mean sea level. It is located where the Eastern and Western Ghats meet. The average height of the Gudalur and Wayanad parts of the plateau is 900 m and in the Mudumalai sanctuary and in Nilambur the forests are of the moist deciduous type. Here huge and tall valuable trees like rosewood, teak and myrobalan grow. It is also a bamboo area. The evergreen forests are found in the Silent Valley region of Kerala and in the Wayanad-Gudalur region. The Burliar-Coimbatore plains are covered with dry deciduous forests. Further thorn and dry deciduous forests exist at Anaikatty and on the Sigur plateau.

The Nilgiris are the home of a large variety of flora and fauna, some of them endemic to the region. New species continue to be discovered. But it has also become a biodiversity hotspot where some species have already become extinct and others are under threat of extinction. Some animal species of the Nilgiris like the tiger, the tahr, the lion tailed macaque and the Nilgiri langur have become endangered species and many plant species have become rarer due to environmental degradation in the past couple of centuries. Since ancient times the Hills are also home to a number of Adivasi groups, prominent among them being the Todas and Kotas on the higher ranges, the Alu Kurumbas and Irulas in the middle ranges and the Paniyans, Kattunayakans and Mullu and Urali Kurumbas in the lower ranges. Migrant peasant refugees from the Mysore plains, the Badagas (Northerners) and Gounders, as they are called in the lower ranges, are the dominant local group in the Hills.

In 1986, the Nilgiris were declared to be a Biosphere Reserve. It was one of the first biosphere reserves to be established in India under the *Man and the Biosphere programme* (MAB) launched by UNESCO. It encompasses an area of 5220 sq. km. from 8 districts belonging to three States—Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala, and includes the protected forests of Nagarhole, Bandipur, Mudumalai, Begur, Silent Valley, Mukurthi, and Wayanad. Besides these a number of reserve forests are also encompassed by the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR). These include Sathya-mangalam, Moyar, Thengumara-hada, New Amaram-balam and Nilambur.

The NBR was formed to conserve diversity of species, to restore and rejuvenate degraded ecosystems and to function as an alternate model for sustainable development. The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR) is a part of the Western Ghats that play a crucial role in maintaining global ecological balance just as the tropical rainforests of South America. As part of this oldest mountain chain (the Western Ghats are called the Sahayadris in Sanskrit, meaning robust and resilient) the Nilgiris (blue mountains) go back to a time when the earth's crust was being formed and being the faulted edge of an upraised plateau the Ghats are not a mountain chain in the same way as the Himalayas. The Western Ghats influence the well-being of the entire peninsula through modulating climate, river water flow, ground water recharge, adding fertility to river valley and delta soils and by providing a wide variety of natural produce.

The change in land use patterns in the last couple of centuries and resource extraction are threatening this unique bio-geographic zone with repercussions for all life dependent on it. Unfortunately, so far NBR remains only a concept with no legal status. The kind of research being done and its findings are available only to an exclusive set of individuals who use it for their own ends. The average local population remains uninformed and its participation in formulating and implementing conservation strategies is minimal. Hence fragmentation and destruction of habitat, wildlife and fauna continue unabated due to the development pattern imposed upon the region with no let-up by the vested interests—political and commercial.

In this paper what is taken up for analysis is the situation of the original inhabitants—the Adivasis—in the Gudalur Block of Nilgiri district. Gudalur Block consists of Gudalur and Pandalur talukas, the other talukas in the district being Udhaga-mandajam, Coonoor, Kundah and Kotagiri. The study looks into the nature of development that has been taking place over the last couple of centuries and see how it has put the ecosystems of the place under stress, and then at the changes it has wrought in the culture and livelihood patterns of the indigenous people living in the lower ranges.

## **LAND USE PATTERN—COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL PERIODS**

In 1792, the British acquired the Nilgiri Plateau through the Treaty of Seringapatam after the defeat of Tipu Sultan and incorporated it into the Madras presidency. Initially it was part of Coimbatore district, but was separated from it in 1868 and became an independent district in 1882. The British first developed the town Ootacamund as a sanatorium and resort for old, sick and disabled British personnel and then as the summer capital of the Madras presidency. A military cantonment was also established in Wellington near Coonoor. Finding the soil and climatic conditions of the hills suitable for the cultivation of tea, coffee, cinchona, pepper, cardamom, ginger and other spices plantations were started for the growing of these as cash crops. European fruits, vegetables and flowers were also cultivated in small gardens and farms. Exotic tree species like acacia/wattle, eucalyptus, cypress, and pine trees for fuel and industrial purposes were introduced in the hills. Christian missionaries, schools run by them and by the British administration also became part of the landscape.

It was the British interventions in the region that started the process of massive changes whereby the hill peoples and the environment, the flora and fauna, were at the receiving end. The land revenue farming system of the British and their transformation of the area into a cash crop cultivation one had their repercussions on the indigenous peoples' livelihoods and interrelationships. The land legislation promulgated by them in the 1860s and '70s forbade shifting cultivation and made the forests into state property. Some land had already been bought at throwaway rates from the Todas and vast tracts of grazing land and forests were seized for tea and coffee plantations and exotic tree species without any compensation at all to the concerned Adivasi groups. In place of the native species many water guzzling exotic trees were planted to be used as fuel wood for domestic fires and in tea factories and for industrial use, to some extent in the hills, but mostly in the plains (for the manufacture of quinine, paper and medicinal oils like eucalyptus). The consequent deforestation affected the livelihoods of the indigenous people who lost hunting and grazing areas and sources of forest produce.

Here it is pertinent to note that prior to the arrival of the British the area in the Gudalur region was divided between three rulers : Vallava-noor, the leader of the Paniyas, Nelliarasi, another Adivasi ruler, and the Nilambur Kovilagam, a kingdom based in present-day Kerala. The Kovilagam expanded its borders by conquering the other two areas. Vallavanoor was killed and Nelliarasi kidnapped and forced to hand over her lands. In this way approximately 100,000 acres came under the control of the Kovilagam. Between 1845 and 1969 about half of this land, known as 'janmom' land, was leased out to major plantation owners, who used part though not the whole for cash crop cultivation.

The population of this area, hitherto sparsely populated, grew by leaps and bounds with large-scale migration from the plains for doing the coolie work on the plantations. In the Gudalur-Wayanad region it was also settlers migrating in from southern Kerala. The percentage of the population of the indigenous people declined in relation to the total population. After 1947 the most consequential thing that happened to the Nilgiris was the bifurcation of a homogenous biosphere into three States and three linguistic regions. With the States Reorganization in 1956 this biosphere was split into three States—Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. Kodagu went to Karnataka, Wayanad went to Kerala, and what is now called the Nilgiris went to Tamil Nadu. With this bifurcation of a unique biosphere and meeting point of many different ethnic groups, the identity of the Nilgiris

was artificially reduced to what is now known as the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu. This district forms roughly 40% of the total Nilgiri biosphere. Of course, this dismemberment was done on the basis of language, and this meant the languages of the most recent settlers, who were never rooted in the region. The original inhabitants of the region did not count at all, each of whom speaks in their own Dravidian tongue.<sup>1</sup>

Horticulture and tea plantations continue to be the mainstay of the economy in Nilgiri district, though now the ownership has been transferred to Indian business houses and to the State government. In Gudalur region alone nearly 8,000 acres of dense evergreen forests were cleared by the government-owned TANTEA corporation for planting tea, where the plantation workers are mainly repatriates from Sri Lanka.

### **LIVELIHOOD AND CULTURAL SITUATION**

The Gudalur region is inhabited by the following tribal groups—the Mullu Kurumbas, Urali Kurumbas, Paniyans, Kattunayakans and Urali Sholagar. With 32.08% Pandalur is the taluk with the highest concentration of Adivasis. All these communities were living in symbiotic relationship with the forests, of whose flora and fauna they had an intimate knowledge. Their religious worldview was one of considering themselves as part of the total ecosystem and not as superior beings with an exploitative attitude towards bountiful natural resources. The concept of property or of accumulation beyond simple needs was alien to them. The different tribal communities are presently at different socio-economic levels. By examining the livelihood patterns and culture of some of these tribal ethnic groups over a period of time, it becomes clear how development and modernization have affected their lives.

*The Kurumbas :* They are the pre-Dravidian ancient inhabitants of the Nilgiris. Kurumba is not the name of a single tribe. Rather it indicates a common name applied to different ethnic communities in and around the Nilgiri area in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. In the Mysore plains they are considered as a shepherd caste. Their name probably originates from their early occupation of tending sheep (kuru) as a pastoral people. According to legends the Kurumbas in the Nilgiri hills are the modern representatives of the ancient Kurumbas or Pallavas who were once very powerful throughout southern India. Their power was at its zenith in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, but the Kongu, Chola and Chalukya chiefs succeeded in winning several victories over them. They were finally overthrown by the Chola dynasty of Tanjore in about the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE and got scattered far and wide. Many fled to the hills and presently their descendants are found in the Nilgiris, Wayanad, Kodagu and Mysore.

Five different groups called Kurumbas have been identified in the Nilgiris—each of them being a distinct ethnic group differing from the others in language, religion, traditional occupations and other cultural features.<sup>2</sup> They also inhabit different parts of the Nilgiris. The Alu or Palu Kurumbas live in the higher ranges, the Betta Kurumbas (also called Kadu Kurumbas) and Jenu Kurumbas (also called Kattunayakans) in the lower heavily forested areas, and the Mullu and Urali Kurumbas in the lower ranges and foothills. Only the latter two groups of Kurumbas live in Pandalur taluk and in Wayanad district of Kerala.

*Mullu Kurumbas :* The word mullu means arrow or thorn, but can also be related to the word mula (bamboo), which grows profusely in this area and is an intrinsic part of

their culture and occupation. The Mullu Kurumbas are bow-men and hunters, who consider that they belong to the Veduvar (hunting) tribe that once ruled parts of Wayanad with the capital at Puthadi. They also participated in the Kottayam Raja's anti-British revolt and joined the Kurichians, a neighbouring ethnic group, in their rebellion against the British power in the beginning of the 19th century.

Traditionally, the Mullu Kurumbas were a forest people dependent on food gathering, hunting of small game, extensive fishing carried out mostly by women, and slash and burn agriculture. Today they have become settled agriculturists cultivating either their own land or work as labourers for big landowners and coffee and tea plantation owners. As marginal farmers they cultivate both dry and wet lands. In dry fields they raise spices such as pepper and ginger and crops like coffee and plantains. They cultivate paddy in the swampy wetlands. A very small percentage is employed in the private and public sectors, and a few Mullu Kurumbas run petty shops.

The Mullu Kurumbas speak a Kannada dialect called Kurumba bhasha with an admixture of Tamil and Malayalam words. They live in uni-ethnic settlements in the Wayanad district of Kerala, and there are 10 settlements of theirs in Pandalur taluk with 8-12 households in each settlement. Their houses are neat, clean and aesthetic with a colour wash to the walls and designs. They are arranged in a planned manner around one or more quadrangles at the centre of which is a temple house, called *deiva perai* or *koil veedu* (god's house). This is of the same design as the other houses and its walls are decorated with various designs drawn and inscribed by the men at the time of its construction. A separate shed for husking harvested grains is also put up near the temple.

The forest laws enacted by the British government establishing absolute rights over them for the purpose of their commercial exploitation and for the promotion of commercialised agriculture were a major encroachment on the rights of the Adivasi communities subsisting on the forests. The government restricted the practice of shifting cultivation and hunting and provided a few acres of land for each of the Mullu Kurumba households. Prior to the advent of the British planters and their establishment of huge plantations cultivating tea, pepper and coffee on a vast, commercial scale, there had been a migration of Jains, Gounders and Chettis into this region from Karnataka and Kerala. Establishing themselves as agriculturists they had used Adivasi labour as bonded labour. Nair chieftains had also established themselves in the area. During the Second World War there was another wave of migrant settlers, this time Syrian Christians from Travancore. This last wave of migrants wanted to acquire property and make money quickly. They are responsible for reducing the Mullu Kurumbas into a landless agricultural labour population. Despite repeated demands the 5<sup>th</sup> Schedule has so far not been applied in Adivasi areas of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

The lands allotted to the Adivasis were mostly slopes of hills and unirrigated. Hence they did not benefit much in monetary terms from settled cultivation. Even when cash crops like coffee, pepper, tapioca, areca nut etc. were introduced to them they initially lacked the knowledge of fertilizers and pesticides for getting a good yield. Following the example of the migrant settlers they took loans for these new inputs. But once the interest on these loans was paid, they had little left to support themselves till the next crop. This situation made them all the more indebted, and ultimately they gave up their lands to the settlers to free themselves from the pressure of loans and became regular



daily wage labourers. By 1965 the majority of Mullu Kurumbas had become daily wage labourers. Only a few of them escaped this fate. As a result of the break-up of communities into individual or family-based labourers class differentiation has taken place among them. Individualism is taking the place of a collective ethos and community solidarity. Poor Mullu Kurumbas borrow from their more well-off brethren and this increases the gap between them. Money-lending within the community is leading to further land alienation. A few rich Mullu Kurumbas are grabbing land by giving loans at compound interest to their own community people. Indebtedness has become a chronic phenomenon among them.

New social evils like alcoholism, introduced by the Malayalee settler migrants, have crept in. New costs, like those for agricultural inputs, allopathic treatment in hospitals and clinics and by private doctors, expenses towards the education of children—all these are reasons for indebtedness that leads to land alienation. For a people who had eaten a protein rich diet in the past the new found poverty is hitting their health status, particularly that of women and children, very hard. Higher than average infant and maternal mortality rates, anaemic women, undernourished children—all are the direct result of dietary insufficiencies.

The elders' council is called *Mumpanmar kuttam* (meeting of the elder men). The hereditary chief, Mumpan, is assisted by the Porvu-nnavan, a religious ritual head, and the Veliccapati, who acts as a diviner during council meetings. This council settles all cases of violation of social norms and maintains social solidarity. With the breakdown of community life and values the authority of this council has got considerably eroded. The religion of the Mullu Kurumbas is animist and their principal deity is Boothadi Deivam or god Kirathan. They worship other deities like Thambirathi, Malam-puzha, Deivam Kali and Mariamma. With their integration into mainstream society they have also begun to observe festivals like Vishu, Onam and Sankranthi.

Having intimate knowledge of the plant and animal life of their territory some of them have specialized in herbal medicine and are experts in curing illnesses. But deforestation and lack of free access to forest interiors has curtailed their access to wild medicinal herbs. They are experts in wall paintings and the making of hunting implements. Their folk songs are sung by men and women; in their dances it is mainly men who participate. Their musical instruments are mostly percussion instruments. All this is part of their cultural heritage and is in danger of dying out due to the percolation of modern media like cinema, television and radio. Special efforts are needed to preserve and develop this heritage.

*Urali Kurumbas* : They are Kannada-speaking Kurumbas who have migrated from Mysore, where larger numbers of them live. Earlier they used to live in the depths of jungles and were hunters, musicians and artisans; but nowadays they live adjacent to big villages and towns and are hence called Urali Kurumbas, the word 'ur' meaning village. Or they may live close to their non-tribal landlords or near their own cultivable fields. Their community headman is called Mudali or Ejaman, and their traditional tribal council is called *Oorukoottam*. Their religion is also animistic and they worship spirits like Kuttichathan and the goddess 'Bhagwati' in stone form. But some of them also visit faraway sacred centres of Karnataka like Dharmasthala, Udupi, Mookambika and also Tirupathi. Their community has an oral tradition with much folklore and many folk songs. They have wind and percussion musical instruments and both men and women

participate in the dances. The Urali Kurumbas are more integrated into mainstream life and culture than the Mullu Kurumbas.

Like the Mullu Kurumbas and through a similar process the majority of them today are agricultural and tea and spices plantation labourers. A few have lands and cultivate spices like ginger, pepper and cardamom. Some are occupied in animal husbandry, or in the collection and sale of minor forest produce, while others continue to hunt small animals and wild birds, which they also sell in the market. Or they live by carpentry and black smithy and the practice of traditional handicrafts such as basketry, pottery, or the making of bamboo mats and winnows. Some of the women work as domestic maids, while some Urali Kurumbas are permanent employees in public and private sector undertakings.

Land alienation having taken place among the Urali Kurumbas, many are in the grip of indebtedness. The process of proletarianization, when individuals of a largely self-sustaining community become wage labourers, has many consequences for them. As self-reliant and self-sufficient communities they were gathering, hunting, or growing what they needed most, that is, food. Only surplus was exchanged for a few other goods that they needed. Today wages are paid in cash not in kind, and by employer landholders, who grow crops according to the dictates of the market to get the maximum profit for themselves, rather than to meet the immediate requirements of the people of the region. The crops cultivated are cash crops like coffee, areca nut, rubber etc. Most of these crops are processed, but the processing takes place outside the region. Value addition takes place somewhere else. Lack of industrial development in this region is in the interest of big planters, as they can then get their labour locally, easily and cheaply. By paying barely subsistence level wages the workers are made dependent on their employers, money-lenders and traders and this leads to indebtedness. In all respects their marginalization is complete. Socially they are marginal. Politically they have hardly any links with the centres of power. They have no common platform to assert their interests.

*The Paniyans* : Paniyans live in the States of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Within the Nilgiri district they live only in the G'idalur and Pandalur taluks. There are 47 Paniyan settlements in Pandalur taluk and about 19 in Gudalur. They are the most ancient inhabitants of Wayanad and are expert hunters, agriculturists, dancers and musicians. They were brought over from the Malabar in Kerala to the Nilgiris by the Manthadan Chettis as agricultural labourers. Often they were caught physically by members of landowning communities, provided shelter and held as bonded labourers.

The term Paniyan originates from the Malayalam word *pani* meaning work; pannikkar means worker or labourer. The term paniyan is used to address males, whereas the females are referred to as panichi. In physical appearance they resemble African tribes. At one time they were the principal stock-in-trade for the slave trade on the West Coast, and it is possible that they were imported from Africa and sold in Malabar. They speak 'Paniya bhasha,' which is a dialect of Malayalam with some Tamil and Tulu words; and they are able to converse in Malayalam and Tamil.

They were bought and sold as slaves until the "Abolition of Slavery Act" of the British government in the nineteenth century and worked as labourers on the farmlands owned by rich landlords. A number of them continue to work as bonded labour for landlords, although officially bonded labour has been abolished by the Indian government, and

many were rehabilitated on government owned farms. The Paniya habitat is thick forest where wild animals roam; or cultivated land where crops like paddy, millets, plantains and spices like pepper, ginger, tapioca etc. are grown; and also marshy low-lying lands where paddy is grown. Paniyan settlements are close to cultivating land owning caste/religious groups like the Manthadan Chettis, Muslims from Malabar known as Moplahs, and Syrian Christians from Travancore known locally as Chetans.

Most of the Paniyans are employed as agricultural labourers. A small percentage of them work in tea estates and tea factories. Many are engaged in the collection of fuel wood in assigned non-reserved forest areas. They sell the fuel wood to government run cooperative depots in Pandalur and Gudalur towns. A small number engage in self-cultivation of spices, but mostly lack the money required for the inputs. The Paniyan households being very poor are also in a state of indebtedness. They take loans from neighbouring Kattunayakans and also from non-Adivasi friends working on tea estates.

The transition to a modern capitalist monetary economy where the forest is largely out of bounds for them has hit the Paniyans the hardest and put them at the bottom of the heap in terms of impoverishment and deprivation and outright destitution, homelessness and beggary. Many have also become prey to social evils like alcoholism and prostitution. There are more liquor outlets than food or medical shops near Paniya habitations. Chewing of betel leaves and nuts to kill hunger is a common addiction among men and women. Earlier they had plenty of good food to eat—vegetarian and non-vegetarian—which they freely took from the forests and were therefore in a much better state of health than today. The forest provided timber, thatch and bamboo for their houses and abundant fuel for cooking. Their needs were few and the forest met most of their needs; and they bartered forest produce or grain for requirements such as cloth, salt etc.

The bonded labour system broke up their community and especially families. Today it is the scourge of alcoholism. The bonded labour system meant complete dependency on the Chetty landlord for all religious and social ceremonies. He provided the rice, coconuts, oil and betel nuts. A wedding was financed by him. Fire for all their religious ceremonies were brought from the Chetty temple. The religious and cultural takeover of authority by the feudal landlords impacted their religious practices because of their denigration of Adivasi values. The fact that they had to wear their mund (lungi or loin cloth) not lower than the knees was to teach them to know their place in society and not to ape their 'betters.' After the feudal system broke down under the onslaught of a cash economy the Paniyans are not able to afford a traditional wedding. Elopement has become the norm and this has led to erosion of the authority of elders and customary norms.

The Paniya habitat region of Wayanad in Malabar was partly transferred to the Nilgiri district as a result of the 1956 States Reorganization. This break-up of the Paniya habitat disturbed their traditional cultural and social patterns. Every Paniyan settlement has its own traditional panchayat or council called *Kottani*. It is a permanent body consisting of a non-hereditary headman (called Muppan or Kuttan) and a group of elderly Paniyans called 'Muppanmars.' At the meetings of the panchayat all the adult Paniyan males of the settlement can participate. The participation of women is avoided unless they are involved in the disputes brought to the panchayat. The headman is assisted by other Paniyan specialists in community organization and social control. In the Nilgiri district these specialists are generally brought in from the Wayanad (Sultan Bathery) region as



the political areas or Nadus of the Paniyans in Gudalur and Pandalur are very small. During the bonded labour stage the headman was usually selected by the landlord on whose farm they were settled and working. Nowadays he is elected by the Paniyan elders. The Paniyans simultaneously participate in the government panchayat system, where women are also elected as panchayat members. Paniyans are members of the State Tribal Advisory Council and participate in the activities of NGOs as well.

Paniya religion is animist. Ancestral spirits and male and female deities are worshipped. The spirits are invoked for good actions by their shaman called 'Attali'. Their chief goddess is Kattau Bhavathi (goddess of the forest). Devil worship is also prevalent. Most of the Paniya songs invoke their ancestral spirits and deities. Paniya stories depict the relationship between Paniyans and their non-Adivasi masters, the problems with their wives over affairs in their master's household, and their relationship with animals around them. Hinduisation is also happening to some degree where Hindu gods and goddesses are worshipped together with other castes and tribes, which implies an acceptance of the Hindu caste system with its hierarchies. Nowadays, Paniyas go on pilgrimage to the Subramanya Swamy temple at Palani and to the Ayyappa temple in Sabarimala.

There have been many suicides among Paniyans in recent times. The reasons vary from poverty and indebtedness; conflict within the family or its break-up due to migration by some members; alcoholism; chronic stress due to insecure and impoverished livelihood conditions; feelings of alienation or loneliness; lack of psycho-social solidarity or community feelings—all by-products of the present-day living conditions.

*The Kattunayakans* : Kattunaya-kans are an Adivasi group found in all the four southern States. The name connotes that they are the nayakans (chiefs) of the kadu/kattu (forest). They are autochthons of the Western Ghats. In the Nilgiris they are found only in Pandalur and Gudalur taluks and live in 43 settlements located inside or near the forests.

The Kattunayakans of the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu speak Kannada and Malayalam with Telugu and Tamil words. Their traditional occupations are hunting and gathering, fishing, bird trapping and shifting agriculture. A large section of Kattunayakans still depend on their traditional occupation of gathering non timber minor forest produce from forests and plains areas and selling it to traders with the knowledge of the forest department. The whole family including children move out during the collection season in search of roots, tubers, fruits, leaves, honey and deer horns. Some of them work in the forest department as watchers, fire destroyers and tamers of wild animals. Although now most of the Kattunayakans have their own allotted lands, not many go in for self-cultivation of paddy and spices; most go in for wage labour on tea and spices plantations. Some of them lease in land and do all the work themselves on a family basis and share the crops and grass on a 50:50 basis. With their knowledge of plant and animal species of the forests they are considered adept sorcerers; many women work as health workers and healers using magico-religious herbal medicine.

The Kattunayakans are well-known honey collectors. They collect honey from the honeycombs inside the hollows of trees or stones. They use honey as a special diet for newborn children, pregnant women and aged male patients. By using reeds and bamboo logs the Kattunayakan men and women weave baskets and make bamboo vessels of different sizes and shapes for their own use and also for sale. Today,

because of the scarcity of raw materials they have to go long distances into the forests in search of them.

The Kattunayakans worship nature in the form of animals, birds, the sun, the moon, even shelter and the shade. They still worship rocks, hills, snakes and animals claiming their origin from them. They have implicit faith in charms, sorcery, black magic and mantrams. Deities are Mari, Mastideivam (male) Hethappan and Mala Deivom and they also worship Siva by the name of Bairava. They celebrate festivals like Onam, Vishu and Adiyantiram jatre. Their oral tradition flows through music and dance along with songs and tales about forest trees, wild life, famous temples and about acceptable behaviour in kinship relationships. Musical instruments used are the thambattai, kuzhal, pipi, kulalu, mard, parai, tempte, pukiri, kadimai and tavai.

Their council, headed by the muttam (headman), is called Nyaya. Every settlement also has a headman called karanvar or modale. Like the other Adivasi communities the Kattunayakans today are also an indebted community due to land alienation and deforestation. Work being seasonal, earnings are often not enough to cover all the costs of food, clothing, shelter and life cycle rituals in a monetized economy. They borrow from the neighbouring Kannada-speaking cultivators and Muslim money-lenders residing in Gudalur town.

*The Urali Sholigas* : They are a subgroup of the Soligas of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Their traditional occupation was shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering, fishing, basket-making and the collection of minor forest produce. Today they continue with these activities along with working as agricultural labourers and are employed by the Forest Department. Some of them have converted to Christianity. Others follow their traditional religion of reverence for natural objects, plants and animals and their deities along with worshipping Hindu deities. Indebtedness is a fact of their life.

Each of these communities tries to maintain its distinct ethnic identity and, therefore, maintains a social distance from the others. In the past the ethnic groups, while maintaining their social distance from one another and preserving their cultural, life-style and occupational differences, respected each other's territory and there was no conflict of interest. In fact, there was an exchange of goods and services. Even today, Paniyans and Mullu Kurumbas have economic or monetary transactions between them besides the ritual exchange of gifts, but Mullu Kurumbas consider themselves to be a more superior and advanced community as compared to the others. All the communities are afraid of the Kattunayakans because of their practice of black magic and sorcery. At the same time, in the early period all three communities took the help of the Kattunayakans' herbal medicine and magical powers to cure the diseases of men, women, children and domestic animals. The concept of private property in land has been introduced and is now usually passed down the male line.

The Paniyas are considered to be the lowest in the social hierarchy and the most polluting by the other Adivasi communities. The Kattunayakans will not eat food cooked by them, and the other communities do not allow them to enter beyond the outer verandah of their houses. Unfortunately today, with some breakdown of community values, there is insufficient interaction and solidarity on the basis of their loss of freedom and exploitation and consequent deprived and disadvantaged status. The Adivasis of Wayanad and the Nilgiri district are no longer homogenous groups. Caste and class

differentiation has taken place, and the Paniyas are the lowest among the low and are treated as untouchables by the others.

Hinduisation and the proselytizing activities of social service Christian organizations have to be questioned in terms of their inroads into the unique Adivasi culture and their assimilative and mainstreaming tendencies. Displacement and marginalization of tribal communities due to developmental activities like tourism and resource extraction is also taking place. So-called eco-tourist initiatives leading to the formation and extension of national parks are environmentally unfriendly in addition to the displacement of the indigenous people that they cause. The Forest Department has been responsible for clear-felling much of Mudumalai and is responsible for most of the degradation that has taken place there. Corruption in the Forest Department is high; for example, the house of an earlier lawyer of the FD, who today postures as an environmentalist and educationist, is lined from top to bottom with around several crores worth of smuggled out, not paid for, teak wood. Illegal logging and poaching with the connivance of the Forest Department is a daily occurrence.

With large-scale habitat destruction, animal-man conflicts are on the rise. This particularly affects those Adivasis who live in the fringe areas of the forests. Crop raids by elephants and wild boars are frequent. Tiger, bear, gaur and leopard attacks lead to human and cattle casualties. Overall rainfall has decreased due to deforestation and this has affected the role of the region as a watershed for neighbouring plains areas.

Creation of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in 2007 out of the Mudumalai Sanctuary and National Park, itself not done in a particularly transparent and democratic manner, as local panchayats were not consulted on its formation as required by law, again puts into jeopardy the livelihood concerns of Adivasi groups living in the precincts of the Reserve. This is done while at the same time encouraging resorts. Some researchers and activists have come to the conclusion that forming the Tiger Reserve is another form of land grab from the Adivasis and local non-Adivasi farmers by vested and interlinked political and commercial interests. It also indicates that the Forest Rights Act [The Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006] has become yet another seemingly progressive Act, which is continuously being breached on the ground level and requires all the tenacious energies of the people to make the law-enforcing agencies implement its provisions in a way that ensures justice to the Adivasi communities. This resembles the situation on the Dalit front where all the various laws and provisions on prevention of atrocities have not led to any significant amelioration of the situation of the Dalit masses.

Extensive land grabbing continues to be done by new individuals in a speculative way and by big estate owners, who are always trying to increase their holdings in this way. Adivasis are again a casualty in this process. The PUCL report of 2002 cites an Adivasi family residing near the village of Chalivaial who allegedly had been forcibly evicted from their houses and farmlands three times within a period of 3 months. The evictions were performed by a neighbouring estate, which continuously expanded its area and tried to take over their lands. Each time they were beaten, their houses demolished and their property destroyed. Powerful interests have varied ways in which to utterly marginalize the Adivasis. Globalization and market dependency of cash crops have added to the difficulties of the marginalized. The tea crisis with the crash and stagnancy of tea prices since quite some time, and overall price increases of essential commodities due to the inflationary policies of the Central government have worsened the situation of

the Adivasi labourers. They have to contend with job losses, fall in the number of days of employment in a year, further job losses due to mechanisation, and increase in the number of working hours and workload.

### **EDUCATION STATUS OF THE ADIVASIS**

Literacy level is one of the key indicators of the socio-economic conditions of a society and of the social groups within it. There is a considerable gap in the literacy level of SCs and STs as compared with that of the general literacy level in the State, which mirrors that in India as a whole. The literacy level for SCs is 63.2% while for STs it is 41.5% in the State as against the general average of 73.5%. The gap in tribal female literacy is still more glaring. According to a 2000 Planning Commission report, the school drop-out rate among STs in Tamil Nadu between classes 1-8 is 71.60%. In the Nilgiri district it is about 74% between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> standards.

This was higher than that recorded in Karnataka and Kerala. In the Nilgiri district the drop-out rate of the tribal girl child is much higher than among the STs of other districts. The literacy level among the Adivasi communities in Pandalur taluk is the lowest in the district with high drop-out rates at the upper primary and high school levels.

In Tamil Nadu—as in the rest of India—formal school education began to be imparted to the Adivasi population by Christian missionaries during British rule. After independence following the provisions of our Constitution under Articles 15(4) and 46, the Government of India and the State governments have established primary, middle and high schools in Adivasi areas. The Government of Tamil Nadu has been extending formal education to Adivasi children through the Department of Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare. The Department runs tribal residential schools spending 77% of its budget on schemes relating to education in Tamil Nadu as a whole and about 72% in the Nilgiri district. Various incentives are offered to increase enrolment in these schools like free scholarships, stipends, hostel facilities, material aids in the shape of stationary, textbooks, uniforms, cycles etc. To encourage the enrolment of Adivasi girls and to avoid drop-outs, the government is giving Rs. 500 per annum to Adivasi girls who are studying in standards 3-5. The Adivasi girls entering 6<sup>th</sup> standard are given a sum of Rs 100 each per month for 10 months.

There are 280 government tribal residential schools and 26 hostels in the State and 25 such schools and 2 hostels in Nilgiri district. In Gudalur block there are 9 GTR schools, 21 government primary schools, 15 government middle and higher secondary schools, and 10 mostly church run private schools from the primary to the higher educational levels. The fees charged by the private schools are on the high side with the tuition fee being more than Rs 5000 per year. Additional expenditure has to be done on the uniform, transport costs, books and so on. The schools are also quite far from the villages. It is not only Adivasi children who study in these schools; SC, MEL and BC students as well as students from other communities are enrolled. In some of the schools the non Adivasi students outnumber the Adivasi students, although a quota of at least 60% is allotted by the government to STs in these schools.

With all the facilities provided by the State government one finds a high wastage, i.e. drop-out rate, at the upper primary level, and the percentage of Adivasi students passing the 10<sup>th</sup> standard exam is also very low. The pass percentage in Adi Dravidar schools

has consistently been lower than in almost all other categories of schools. For example, in 2006 the pass percentage of Adi Dravidar students in the Higher Secondary Exam recorded a new low of 53.61%, while the average pass rate was 74.51%. This means that the students are promoted from class to class without having learnt much. There is in fact even an allegation by a Tamil writer (D Ravi Kumar) that if at all Adi Dravidar students pass the Higher Secondary exam it is because they are allowed to copy en masse!

The reasons for this abysmal performance lie in the quality of the schools. The infrastructure with regard to furniture, classrooms, laboratories, toilets, drinking water and other facilities is inadequate; there is an acute shortage of good, qualified and motivated teachers. Even the appointed teachers often play truant and fail to turn up in the school because of the distance they have to travel to reach the schools. They are often from other community backgrounds and do not have a positive attitude towards the students they teach. Sometimes they double up as money-lenders for the poor parents. Certainly they do not act as a source of inspiration for the students. As the medium of instruction is not the Adivasi languages students are often unable to comprehend the lessons. The syllabus is inappropriate to felt needs and is alienated from their culture and life patterns encouraging rote learning. There are few middle schools at a walking distance. The school hours interfere with hours of work that the children need to do for their families particularly during the peak agricultural seasons. Migration of parents in the search for employment interferes with the education of their children. They are unwilling to leave their children in hostels where facilities are inadequate. The general poverty levels are a deterrent in the continuation of formal education, which has many hidden costs despite the subsidies.

The government schools are not supposed to charge fees at all. But many teachers go on leave to Mettupalayam or Coimbatore, and then the Parent-Teacher Associations collect money from the parents and give it to the school for appointing a teacher in the school. Money is also collected for maintenance work and for building extensions. Such monies are not collected against receipts. There is no accountability. It is alleged by local people that headmasters of government and GTR schools regularly bribe the District Officer in charge of the Adi Dravidar and Welfare Department to look the other way at their own siphoning off of government funds for the schools. Many headmasters are known to be corrupt and have built themselves big bungalows and own tea estates.

As the Adivasi parents are both busy—they leave early and come home late—they are unable to care properly for their children. They are not able to prepare them for school and in no way can they help them in their homework or studies, unlike the parents of middle class children.

The high girl child drop-out rate has its own specific reasons. One of the important reasons for low enrolment of girls in the Adivasi areas is the lack of relevance of formal education for their roles and responsibilities in their own culture. Parents encourage girls to participate more in economic and domestic' lies after they attain puberty. Public celebration of 'puberty rites' is there and very often marriage alliances are fixed around this time. From this time on the girl is oriented to marriage and family rather than formal education. Girls are not encouraged to stay in GTR hostels due to the scarcity of lady wardens and the lack of proper toilet and food facilities. Life cycle and other rituals and festivities also demand the presence of girls at home for many days at a time. Parents have a fear of possible affairs and elopements taking place out of the Adivasi communities. The wages that adolescent and adult girls can earn through their labour is



needed by the poverty stricken parents, and they are sometimes not allowed to continue with their education for this reason also.

### **THE WAY FORWARD**

The Adivasis are the group most affected by the development trajectory taken by 'independent' India. In any turnaround from the current situation their interests and concomitantly the environmental conservation interests need to be fore-grounded. In Gudalur, land and forest produce rights have to be restored to the Adivasis and ensured to the other poor of the area, particularly to the large Dalit population of Sri Lankan extraction. At the same time, an alternative development and land use pattern is the need of the hour. The current predatory tourism and monoculture plantations based economy has to be given up in favour of one which would seek to regain food security and self-sufficiency on the basis of chemical free organic agriculture in the region and would seek to conserve original forest species and biodiversity. It would seek to promote traditional artisan activity, traditional herbal medicine, and the development and maximum possible use of renewable energy sources. The presence of only those educational institutions should be allowed that are inclusive and sensitive to the needs of the Dalits, Adivasis and other poor. All these radical changes cannot come from above through the corrupt and lethargic bureaucracy, existing political parties, or NGOs. To get the economy and society onto this development trajectory the Adivasis would have to join with other poor and middle income sections and like-minded individuals in the area and beyond, who believe in putting people before profits and uphold humane values.

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#### **Notes :**

1. Post-independence the Nilgiri region was claimed by the Kannadigas and Tamils. Malayalees claimed mainly Wayanad and Gudalur (previously called Nilgiri Wayand), as their rajas had controlled parts of these territories over a long period of time, and they had a strong presence in these areas due to immigration during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Each group put forth its arguments to the Linguistic Provinces Commission formed by the Government of India. Wayanad subsequently became part of Kerala State and Gudalur was retained in the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu.
2. The currently accepted divisions of the Kurumbas are the ones put forth by Dieter B. Kapp. See, "The Kurumba Tribes" by Dieter B. Kapp and Paul Hockings in: Hockings (ed.).
3. Consent from the gram sabha and public consultations with the stakeholders as the scheduled tribes and other forest dwellers in the region is required before a Critical Wildlife Habitat/Critical Tiger Habitat is declared both under the Wildlife Protection Amendment Act and the Forest Rights Act. The FRA was oriented towards recognizing and vesting scheduled tribes and other forest dwellers with 13 different rights within forests, including that of cultivation for livelihood, based on historical claims. Before declaring an area to be CWH or CTH "scientific evidence" that activities of local people would cause irreversible damage to wildlife has to be produced. None of this was adequately done. Furthermore, not having obtained consent from local communities was a move that undermined the central purpose of the FRA. namely that of increasing local democratic control over natural resources. (See Taghioff and Menon).

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