

Gandhiji's Vision of Grama Swaraj and the Kurichya Joint Farming System: The Development Experience and the Way Forward

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Abstract

Grama Swaraj, the self-sufficient village republic, is intrinsic in the evolution of the concept of an Indian republic. The individual with absolute political and economic freedom is at the centre of Grama Swaraj. In such a republic, the economic freedom relies on a self-sustained production system and an understanding of real needs. Grama Swaraj, the core of Mahatma Gandhi's political ideology, focuses on a self-sufficient conservator society different from the consumer society of the modern world. This paper examines the challenges encountered by the Kurichya joint families and their sustainable farming, in the context of the present-day governance system. It critically analyses the ways in which the government policies and programmes approach the sustainable production system of the adivasi agriculturalists and their natural resource management practises. This paper, which is part of the doctoral research undertaken among six Kurichya joint families in the Wayanad district, also attempts to analyse the social organisation and agrarian relations of Kurichya joint families. Finally, on the basis of the development experience of the Kurichyas and in the light of the Gandhian thought, the paper puts forth the argument that the concept of self-sufficiency and sustainable and inclusive development is inherent in the community knowledge system. This is yet to be appropriately and adequately made

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use of and included in the developmental process, in spite of its linkage to the micro politics of community and social opportunity.

Keywords

Grama Swaraj, self-sufficiency, sustainable farming, joint family system

Introduction

“The essence of what I have said is that man should rest content with what are his real needs and become self-sufficient.”

“The Swaraj of my dream is the poor man’s Swaraj.”

“My idea of Village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity.”

“Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or Panchayat having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world.”

M.K. Gandhi (1962: 13, 19, 44, 80)

The words of Mahatma Gandhi quoted above indicate his fundamental understanding of how a society should be: a society that is content with “real” needs; a society which is inclusive of all; a society in which freedom becomes meaningful even to the poorest of the poor; a society which realises that the fruits of true freedom begin from the bottom; a society in which every village becomes self-sufficient and self-sustained and complete in itself with true independence, and yet realises the value of inter-dependence. Indian village communities have the potential to develop as self-sufficient republics in the true Gandhian spirit and philosophy. Similarly, it also has the strength to stand firm against the onslaughts of modernity and to retain its dynamism within the sustainable development paradigm.

The Kurichya, the traditional adivasi (tribal) agriculturalists in the Wayanad district of South India, is one such community which has survived the processes of modernisation, the mainstream push towards mass production and consumption. It is a self-sufficient production system based on immense knowledge of ecology and sustainable natural resource

management (Suma, 2014). This adivasi agricultural community continues with their extensive rice cultivation and conserves 21 indigenous rice varieties. This is inspite of the increasing trend among the farming community in Wayanad to opt largely for cash crops in wetlands as part of the market-driven agriculture.

Kurichya social organisation is characterised by collective land ownership and matrilineal succession which is the underlining factor for their unique agrarian system. It also ensures the collective management of natural and human resources for sustainable farming. Such a system of collective farming has evolved to ensure non-fragmentation and estrangement of land, sustainable farming and seed systems, and the availability of adequate food for future generations (Suma and Grossmann, 2016). Kurichya joint families have suffered pressures from the colonial period and later by the Indian democratic governance and development initiatives. The overall land use pattern and development scenarios have a serious impact on the Kurichya system. Conversely, the system shows a high degree of resilience in the changing socio-political situation of agrarian transformations.

The Indian Panchayati Raj Act (1993) inspired by the Gandhian ideology of Grama Swaraj, empowered the people at the grassroots level to make decisions on their development. The decentralisation programme called the Peoples' Planning in Kerala introduced the concept of sustainability to the development paradigm by introducing local level planning with high priority given to natural resource management and primary production sectors such as agriculture. The concept of joint farming is recognised by the new Kerala Model of Development for attaining sustainability through enhanced primary production (Veron, 2001). Such joint farming is identical to food production systems like that of the Kurichyas, which is characterised by collective resource management. This paper examines the experience of exclusion by Kurichya joint families in the process of decentralised governance using ethnographic data collected over three years from 2016-2018 as part of the ongoing doctoral research on the reorganisation of Kurichya joint families.

Background

Through the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments in 1993, India reinforced its quest for Swaraj within the pluralistic, parliamentary, and electoral framework. This initiated the process of decentralisation of

administration and devolution of powers in many states and has significant implications for local level development as Kannan (2000: 1) puts it:

“Decentralisation was expected to facilitate local level development by mobilising both people and resources to strengthen the productive base, especially in the primary sector by creating and maintaining public and collective goods such as land and water management and agricultural extension.”

A Panchayat is a traditional forum of local governance in India and it became the centre of political discourse as part of the Gandhian Grama Swaraj. The panchayats continued to survive within the colonial period with very little power, authority and activity. The above amendments gave constitutional status to the District, Block and Grama Panchayats, and acquired a new meaning as institutions of local self-governments (Ommen, 2004).

Responding to the above strategic change at the national level, in 1996 Kerala launched a decentralisation programme called the Peoples’ Planning Campaign to enhance quality of life through participatory democracy (Kannan, 2000). Through this programme, 70 per cent of the rural share of the plan fund is shared with Grama Panchayats, against 15 per cent each to Block and District Panchayats. The Grama Sabhas in each ward under Grama Panchayats are legally empowered to make the final decision on local development with functions ranging from expressing the local needs, fixing plan priorities and supervising the implementation of planned projects (Ommen, 2004; Gregory, 2008). The Peoples’ Planning Campaign also included the concepts of sustainable development through community-based resource usage, giving emphasis to the primary production sector like agriculture (Veron, 2001). This was a thoughtful step towards overcoming the major criticisms such as the issues of environmental sustainability, local production systems, and social inclusion within the Kerala model of social development.

Vaidehi Daptardar (2018:3), writes in her essay on Gandhian relevance to environmental sustainability as:

“His sustainable development is based on a holistic paradigm which lays stress on all round development of individual and society in relation with nature. This entire thinking was based upon the ethical vision in which the individual is at a central position. If inward change is achieved, outward change takes care of itself. A judicial shift from the consumer society to the Conserver Society seems to be the demand of modern age.”

In the process of implementing sustainable development through

decentralisation in Kerala, people mapped their natural resources using participatory methods, considering it as the base for future development. In the second half of the 1990s, Kerala witnessed a development movement, with the participation of the people at the grassroots level.

The Sen Committee, appointed by the Kerala government to study the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act and to suggest necessary recommendations for amending the Act, defines the Local Self Government as follows:

“Local self-government is essentially the empowerment of the people by giving them not only the voice, but the power of choice as well, in order to shape the development, which, they feel, is appropriate to their situation. It implies maximum decentralisation of powers to the elected bodies to function as autonomous units with adequate power, authority and resources to discharge the basic responsibility of bringing about ‘economic development and social justice’ (Sen Committee quoted in Government of Kerala, 2017:10).

Such an approach to decentralised governance naturally implies an inclusive approach to development. In Kerala, the *Oorukootams* (Separate Grama Sabha for tribal communities) have been designed to overcome the influence of existing social hierarchies in the process of development planning and to discuss and protect their special needs of development.

The existing studies on social inclusion/exclusion of adivasis within the local development process show evidence with regard to the continued exclusion of these communities (Chemmencheri, 2013). Several studies focus on the disparities among different adivasi communities in making use of the benefits of development. The main argument raised by these scholars is about the hierarchical heterogeneity of adivasis in each village, with the domination of one or two communities (Bijoy, 1999; Baiju, 2011; Chemmemcheri, 2013; Surjith, 2015). However, the concept of sustainability in the decentralisation process is still not evaluated properly with reference to the inclusion/exclusion of development priorities and traditional knowledge of adivasi communities on natural resource management. This paper is an anthropological exploration of the exclusion of a politically dominant and landowning adivasi community of Kurichyas from the local planning process, with reference to the above stated concerns.

Wayanad: The Study Location

Wayanad is one of the hilly districts of Kerala, South India. This

important region of the Western Ghats is part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve and is known for its rich biodiversity. The total land area of the district is 2,131 sq.km., with 40 per cent forest, 22 per cent largescale plantations and 25 per cent cultivated land. The population of the district including Hindus, Christians, Muslims and 12 adivasi communities, is 816,558 as per the 2011 Census. Eighteen per cent of the total population of the district are adivasis including forest dwellers, landless labourers and marginal farmers (Suma, 2014). The majority of the working population is involved in agriculture, either as cultivators or as labourers. The economy is solely based on agriculture, dairy and the upcoming tourism industry (Indian Institute of Management, 2006).

Land Use Change and Agrarian Distress in Wayanad

Wayanad is situated at a height of 700 to 2100 meters above sea level and is an ecologically fragile region of the Western Ghats. The fertile soil of Wayanad is suitable for several varieties of crops. The traditional farming communities of the region conserved a collection of food crop diversity including 75 varieties of rice, 85 varieties of vegetables and numerous tubers and more (Kumar et al., 2010).

The British introduced cash crop plantations by removing thousands of hectares of pristine forest from the mountains of Wayanad (Nair, 1991). The region was the hub of farmer migrations from the nearby regions for centuries. The 20th century witnessed large scale intra-regional peasant migration to Malabar in general, and Wayanad in particular, from the plains of Kerala since the 1920s (Gregory, 2005; Varkey, 2005) and later, with state formation, as part of the Grow More Food Campaign. Large scale migrations changed the land use patterns, production and land relations among the communities. During this course of agricultural expansion many adivasi farmers lost their traditionally owned land (Prasad, 2003; Kurup, 2010). It was after this period that Wayanad shifted its production focus from subsistence food crops to export-oriented cash crops with government support.

During the 1960s, there were 39,000 hectares of wetland rice cultivation in the region (Abdussalam, 2004). The rice ecosystem supports immense groundwater recharge and conservation of associated flora and fauna. Rice cultivation is part of the traditional labour organisation of the region by supporting labour days to the landless communities (Vishnudas, 2006). The wetlands of Wayanad were converted for various cash crops and non-farming

purposes from the beginning of 1990s. The area under rice has come down to 11,832 hectares in 2007 and 7,000 hectares in 2017 (District Planning Office, 2017). The changes in cropping priorities and intensive agriculture affected the soil health, biodiversity, ground water availability and micro climatic conditions of the region. The adivasis of Wayanad have largely been deprived of their resources during this period (Kurup, 2010).

The distress in the agricultural economy of Wayanad led to livelihood crises and malnutrition due to insufficient food availability for the adivasi communities (Kulirani, 1996; Kurup, 2010). While the migrant peasantry adapted to the capitalistic wage labour system of agriculture, the tribal agriculturalists such as the Kurumas and the Kurichyas have been forced to become agricultural labourers under them (Prasad, 2003). The traditional agriculturalists and other communities who have the knowledge of the landscape ecology have been deprived of their access to land and other resources in this process of development (Nair et al., 2010). The capitalistic cash crop economy could not ensure sustainability in farm income or improve the quality of people's life (Kurup, 1998, 2010). It destroyed the traditional ecosystem-based farming systems and community organisation, as seen in the experience of decentralised governance by the traditional agrarian community of Kurichyas in Wayanad. This is not in line with the concept of sustainability which ensures equal social opportunity through the community-based strategy of collective resource management, which should have been the essence of the decentralised development.

Kurichyas, the Agrarian Adivasi Community in Wayanad

The Kurichyas are an agricultural tribe of Wayanad, which has long been engaged in collective farming. According to one of the origin myths prevalent among the Kurichyas, they were Karinairs from Travancore, with excellent skills in targeting wild animals with bows and arrows. They were brought to Wayanad by the Kottayam Raja to fight the Vedar kings, the then ruling Tribal Chiefdom of Wayanad, and to establish his rule in Wayanad. Another version of the story is that they were the inhabitants under Kottayam Raja whose jurisdiction encompassed the present-day taluk of Thalassery in Kannur District, Kerala. The descendants of the Karinairs settled in Wayanad after defeating the Vedar kings, and are said to have come to be known as the Kurichyas. In the course of time they had organised

themselves as big joint families and become agriculturalists (Nair, 1911; Chakko, 1994; Kumaran, 1996; Johnny, 2007).

As of 2018, there are 57 main Kurichya *Tharavads* (joint families) in Wayanad and under them there are 286 joint families called *Muttam*. *Tharavadu* is the main power centre of the clan, and *Muttams* are arranged as *Tharavads*, *Atharaas* and *Eruperas* in the order of social hierarchy. *Athara Muttam* evolves from the *Tharavads*, and *Erupera* evolves from *Athara* and hold the lowest rank in the hierarchy, which itself could be a big joint family with more than 100 members (Varma, 2004). They follow the joint family system under the strong leadership of an elder male member called *Odekkaran*. All ancestral properties including land, cattle and seeds are owned collectively and inherited strictly matrilineally (Chakko, 1994; Kumaran, 1996; Menon, 1996; Varma, 2004). The process of development and modernisation has brought about considerable changes in the Kurichya lifestyle, yet about 73 per cent of *Muttams* are continuing their joint land ownership and collective farming with some structural adjustments while others are in a stage of disintegration.

Political Organisation

The political organisation of Kurichya joint families is evolved around the idea of collective ownership of land and other resources. Land, cattle, human resources and the varieties of seeds they cultivate are considered to be the main property of a Kurichya *Muttam*. Kurichyas worship the ancestral spirit of the *Karanavar* who is believed to have had established the *Muttam* by acquiring land, setting up the gods, starting cultivation, and organising people and cattle. They call the spirit of that *Karanavar* as *Negal* or *Muni* and consider it to be the sole owner of the property. *Odekkaran* is only a custodian who looks after the properties on behalf of the *Muni*. All decisions are taken in the joint family meetings of all male members who have equal rights to express their opinion. A member from a neighbouring *Muttam* called *Changathi* is essential in decision-making councils. All important decisions are taken by the council, and these have to be approved by the *Muni* through the oracles called *Komaram* (Aiyappan and Mahadevan, 1988; Suma, 2014).

The male members of the family are organised under the *Odekkaran* and female members under *Odekkarathi* (wife of *Odekkaran*). There are clear divisions of labour among men and women. *Odekkaran* decides on

the work to be carried out in the field. *Odekkarathi* as signs women to different work in the house and fields. The storage of paddy and distribution for cooking is the daily duty of *Odekkaran*. Distribution of food among the members is the duty of *Odekkarathi* (Suma and Grossmann, 2016).

Property rights

The property rights and the law of descent among Kurichyas is strictly matrilineal. The property and ritual rights rest upon the children of the female members, but the right of the produce as a means of food is always on those members who reside with and work for the family. Females have to live with their husbands at the husbands' *Muttam* after marriage. The grown-up children come back to their mother's *Muttam* where they have all the rights. The elders of the community say:

'At first it may feel like a bit complicated, but even the premier Court cannot find an alternative to the Kurichya land laws.'

'No one can simply go to the court and say it is my father's or grandfather's property and claim for individual rights. Our land is the property of our great grandfathers; many generations have lived out of it and again many generations have to come in; it is for them. You cannot just divide it among individuals.'

'Any parentless child or an aged or a helpless person will not be an orphan amongst us. They can stay in the *Muttam* (nowadays they even call *Tharavadu* or *Valiyaveedu*) where food and shelter are ensured.'

The life of Kurichya men and women inside a joint family is controlled by a number of rituals which to protect the political and social organisation of the community. The political organisation and property rights of the community evolved to protect the land from fragmentation and to organise joint labour for food production. The equitable distribution of food among the family members from their produce is also a core concern of the joint families.

The Kurichya Agricultural System

A Kurichya land holding comprises of wetland called *Kandam* and dryland called *Kunnu*. Large areas of land under joint ownership and joint farming practices help Kurichyas to continue with traditional rice farming. Before the 1950s they were engaged in shifting the cultivation of cereals and rice on the hillocks and rice and vegetables in the wetlands. With the

introduction of strict forest laws and the conversion of private forests into plantations, shifting cultivation had been stopped (Varma, 2004). Now they are continuing with rice cultivation in the wetland and coffee, pepper, other spices and vegetables in the dry land.

The intra-regional farmer migrations to Wayanad from the 1920s to the 1950s led to the large scale alienation of agricultural land from these joint families, yet the Kurichyas were able to keep land among the adivasis of Wayanad. The analysis of the primary data collected on the socio economic status of 286 joint families of Kurichya as part of this research shows that the average land holding of Kurichya joint families is 36.14 acres. More than three-fifths of these families are still keeping their land as joint property and continue the system of collective farming with some changes in residential arrangements. A little more than one-third of the joint families have divided their land among the members. Even among them, nearly all those families except a very few, have kept an average of 13 acres of land as joint family property around the *Muttam*. More than 90 per cent of the joint family property under collective ownership is cultivated with rice (Suma, 2014).

Rice cultivation is central to Kurichya culture and subsistence. The traditional rice variety of Wayanad is essential for all Kurichya rituals and community festivals. They conserve and protect 30 different varieties of paddy in Wayanad (Kumar et al., 2010). Apart from rice they grow trees, medicinal plants, palm varieties, vegetables and tubers in the dry land. Kurichyas depended on the surrounding forest for wild meat, shifting cultivation, cattle grazing, medicinal plants and plant parts for making artefacts.

Hunting was another group activity which used to keep the members together. The animal diversity in the forest provided animal protein to their diet. Governmentalisation of forest lands which started from the colonial era and the forest conservation acts of India have restricted the community access to the forest. Hunting which has a deep cultural meaning for Kurichyas became illegal. Grazing in the forest has been restricted, resulting in the reduction of the cattle population in Kurichya joint families and manure inputs to farmlands in the form of cow dung. As a result, soil fertility and agriculture production have declined.

Kurichyas believe that *kunnummaele maramaanu vayalile vellavum valavum*. This means the fertility and water in the low lying agricultural land is possible because of the tree cover on the hillocks. Large scale

deforestation, land fragmentation and land-use changes around the area affected the whole system of cultivation. They face scarcity of water at their farms due to the breaking up of streams and watersheds in the hills. In their view, rainwater comes down fast through the cleared hills and passes through their fields, taking away the nutrients than depositing fertile silt. Changing rainfall patterns and depleting soil fertility also contribute to the fall in productivity of the soil.

The Agrarian and Trade Relations

The stories of food scarcity and poverty are in the memories of elders along with pictures of prosperity in the fields (Varma, 2004). The landlord tenant system (*Janmi Kudiyan Vyavastha*) prevailed until the enactment of the Kerala Land Reform Act in 1969. Kurichyas were the tenant agriculturalists under the *Janmi* system. A large portion of their produce went to the *Janmi* as tribute and to the government as tax. The healthy male members of the family worked for the landlord (*janmi*) in his land and the young boys were employed as herders of cattle owned by the *janmis*. This was a customary service to the *janmi*, apart from the *pattam*¹ and tax to the government. The heavy land taxes introduced by the British forced the Kurichya joint families to think of splitting up the joint property and registering their land in individual names (Aiyappan and Mahadevan, 1988).

The Kurichya agricultural system was developed around the production of rice and other cereals to satisfy the food needs of the joint family. They traded rice and ghee in the market for other goods such as salt, coconut oil, soap and clothes. Muslims were the main traders of rice and this continued with coffee and pepper in the 1940s and 1950s when they started cultivating cash crops such as coffee, pepper, yam, turmeric and ginger in the dry land. Muslim merchants were regular visitors who walked to their houses with many items from salt to clothes and bartered for rice and spices such as turmeric.

As joint families, Kurichyas have enough manpower for their agricultural activities. Men and women in groups work in the field (Kumaran, 1996). While men do ploughing, land preparation activities and post-harvest works such as thrashing, women do sowing, replanting, weeding, harvesting, cleaning and processing. They are experts in making baskets from bamboo,

¹ *Pattam* is the share of produce that the tenants agree to give to the *janmi* who is the owner of the land where they are cultivating. *Pattam* is a fixed quantity of produce, usually grains, which does not change according to the yield.

bows and arrows, and the agricultural implements they need. There are specialists such as healers, carpenters, and weavers among them. They have their own architectural style and expertise to erect houses. Kurichyas never employ workers from other communities in their fields to assist them in any work (Chakko, 1994). As they experienced touch pollution from other communities, they would not allow others to enter their house or eat food from others (Chakko, 1994; Kumaran, 1996; Varma, 2004).

Traditional Knowledge and Natural Resource Management System

In the course of the interaction with nature over generations as cultivation, hunting and coexistence, Kurichyas acquired a deep knowledge of the surrounding resources. They developed systems to manage these resources for agriculture and sustenance. They have unique cultivation practices with distinct seeds suitable for each season, soil type and climatic conditions. The pest and disease management techniques using the native plants and materials, developed through years of observation, are in place for each crop. The water management practices which conserve the upstream and marshes, linking them with the rituals ensured year-round surface water flow. They worship all marshes, the strategic ecological units where streams originate, believing that there is the presence of the god *Kuliyān*. The community healers among them know hundreds of medicinal plants and their combinations for treating varieties of diseases. Their knowledge of biodiversity including seed collection, seed preservation, and crop, water and soil management is considered to be of global significance. The *Kurichya* community is also gaining international importance as contributors to the global need of biodiversity conservation and sustainable natural resources management (Kumar et al., 2010).

The Kurichya Collective Farming System in Conflict with State Legislations

After independence, the democratic institutions and new legislations brought power and freedom to people. The progressive Land Reforms Act 1969 in Kerala abolished the land tenant system and freed the farmlands to the farmers. The Kurichyas are one community among the adivasis who benefitted from it, while others could not enjoy its advantages. At the same time, it fixed the ceiling for land possession as 15 acres in one single

document which forced Kurichya joint families to register their land in different names. While the Act considered the individual land ownership and ensured 'cultivated land to the farmers,' it failed to take note of the systems with collective ownership like that of the Kurichyas. The elders of the community say that it had an adverse effect on the Kurichya joint family and collective ownership system, forcing them to resort to land fragmentation.

The agricultural department was a decision maker in the farming sector after independence. The government welfare measures and funds to support agriculture started coming through the line-departments to the people. They introduced new seeds (hybrid seeds), cash crops and chemical-based intensive farming techniques, as materials and knowledge. These interventions at the village level not only failed to take cognisance of the traditional farming system of the Kurichyas, but also forced them to adapt to something entirely different from their traditional egalitarian and collective farming system. Under the impact of the new land legislations as well as the modern cultivation practices, the Kurichya farming system was confronted with several challenges. Achappan Peruvadisarcistically remarks,

'Sacks of fertilisers supplied by the government department, many a times, exceed even the supply of rice through ration shops... as all those chemicals would spoil our soil, we are not using them at all'.

He continues:

'If we use the seeds supplied by the government department, we need to depend on them for the subsequent years too and for all the years to come. That is why our ancestors ask us to protect our seeds and soil.'

Kurichyas began to experience the pressure of individual-centredness not only in land ownership but also in their residential patterns as evidenced by their own words. Kunki, the eldest woman of the Kakkottara *Mittom* and the chairperson of the Kudumbashree² says,

'... It was the requirement of ration cards for various purposes that made us to think of the individual households. Then we were after getting separate house numbers for each room in the joint family household to avail sugar, kerosene and other items from the public distribution system.'

² Kudumbasree is the network of women's self-help groups formed by the Kerala government with the objective of alleviating poverty.

Lakshmi, a young woman and one of the active members of JLG,³ who was also with Kunki adds.

‘...Later, the colony houses given by the government split us apart.’

All these make it obvious how the policies of the new political dispensation, including the land ownership laws, the adherence of which is insisted upon by the village officer, agricultural officer, police, tribal development department, and public distribution system in order to receive any benefit from the government schemes became a liability for the Kurichyas. The matrilineal system and the prevailing inheritance tradition of the Kurichyas and the pattern of their collective land ownership convey very little meaning to the patriarchal-centred mainstream system and policies.

In the words of Vellan, the Odekkaran of *Paramoola Muttam*:

‘Our land is *Kunjukuttyswath*.⁴ It has been in the name of three of my sisters since long. However, the government officials insist on documents, which had forced us to convert it in the name of the present *Odekkaran*. Now they are asking about the relationship between the Odekkaran and our members, making the youngsters get frustrated. They don’t like to go to the officers who ask hundreds of questions... As a solution, then, the needy is given a possession certificate, and still, the officials insist for several other documents and papers and processes, which we find not so easy.’

He further adds:

‘We wanted to measure the land and make the documents clear as the value of land is getting increased, and still we could not do it as it is not that easy.’

Even now, the Kurichya families do not consider rice farming as an economic activity but as subsistence production as it is linked with their rituals and belief systems. The income from cash crops from the jointly managed homesteads are not enough for their new livelihood needs. As the system is complicated, mechanisation, production improvement techniques and government subsidies are not made use of by many Kurichya joint families, so the productivity and income remain low to meet the increasing needs of the joint family.

³ JLG is the Joint Liability Groups formed by the Kerala Kudumbasree Mission at village level to bring women into group farming.

⁴ Kunjukutti is the sister(s) for Kurichya and Swath is property. According to them, sisters and their children have the property rights. That is denoted as Kunjukuttiswath in their usage.

Individuals are forced to seek separate income sources for meeting expenses for education, medicine, entertainment, and other facilities in the modern age. The main livelihood option for a majority of the Kurichya youth is agriculture wage labour while they continue with the tradition of rice cultivation for subsistence (Government of Kerala, 2011). That means Kurichyas could not modernise their farms and increase productivity to meet their increasing livelihood needs within the framework of the democratic state, even though they are rich in terms of land, natural and human resources.

Kurichya Experience of Democratic Decentralisation

The 73rd amendment of the Indian Constitution brought local Panchayats to the centre of development planning and implementation. It empowered the people at the grassroots level to participate in decision making. In Kerala, the implementation of the Panchayati Act has given priority to the primary production sector and local level management of natural resources. The adivasi communities are given special governance space in the name of *Oorukootams*. It sounds an ideal condition for communities like the Kurichyas who have recourses and systems for building up a sustainable livelihood model. In reality, the system itself is struggling between the individual and community interests, and the social concerns within the state.

The new institutions such as Grama Sabha and Oorukootams which were part of the decentralisation process, have expanded the socio-political relationship of Kurichya members. The *Oorukootams* consist of all the adivasi communities living in a particular ward, which is the lowest tier within the Grama Panchayat. Each adivasi community has different development needs which vary from landless agricultural labourers and forest dwellers, to landed agriculturalists like the Kurichyas. The *Oorukootams* elects one representative as *Ooru-Mooppa* from any one of the adivasi communities. It is usually a political decision made by the ward member and the respective party to which the ward member belongs, says the *Ooru-Mooppa* at Vellamunda.

‘It is decided by the party person who win from here in the ward to Panchayat... They suggest the *Oorumooppa*. There will not be any election or something...They want someone who would abide by their words...’

The *Odekkaran* in the Kurichya *Muttam* or the decisions of their

*Kootam*⁵ does not have any special voice in the *Oorukootam* or Grama Sabha. *Oorukootam* and Grama Sabha are usually conducted in the same place at the same time or if it is wanted of quorum, with an interval of half an hour. Adivasis mostly speak out in the *Oorukootam* and keep silent in the Grama Sabha where the general public dominates.

The *Odekkaran* or *Karanavar* do not consider *Oorukootam* as an important activity, as the *Odekkaran* of *Athikkolly Muttam* says:

‘I have attended several *Oorukootam* before, but later realised that there is no point in going there and wasting time. I have so many works here. The things discussed there, are not beneficial to us. If they discuss about improving irrigation system or the problems faced in the course of farming, it will be more relevant to us. Now, we are depending more on natural showers alone that comes from the sky. It is very difficult to do cultivation nowadays. Those who need houses only need to go there...’

The ranking exercise done by this study on the decisions taken by the *Oorukootam* against the development needs raised by the people indicates that the highest ranks concentrate on issues related to housing, road construction, welfare pensions, drinking water schemes, and animal husbandry. Agricultural needs have the least priority, except when preparing a priority list of the eligible farmers for different subsidies. The procedure for accessing the subsidies is too complicated for adivasi farmers to avail themselves of the benefits.

The ward members from Kurichyas preside over the *Oorukootam* but do not voice the concerns of their own community. They rather imitate the procedures generally done by all other ward members in the *Oorukootams*. Thus *Oorukootams* are becoming places where the ward member explains government welfare schemes and finalises the beneficiary list. *Oorukootams* also undertake there-distribution of different welfare schemes of different line departments and panchayat plans.

Edathana is one of the biggest Kurichya joint families where the *Oorukootam* of one ward is represented only by them. Chandu, *Odekkaran* of *Edathana Muttam* says:

‘Our *Oorukootam* requested to ban the usage of pesticides in this area, as it is adversely affecting our paddy cultivation and water quality. Panchayat did not mind it at all.’

‘But this time we could make them decide on to adjust the MGNREGS

⁵ Kootam is the decision making council of Kurichya Muttam.

work schedule with our paddy replanting schedule...'

'That is because majority of labours are from our family. But our issue is our people and fields are in two wards it creates problems for us to represent as a single unit.'

The decisions taken in the *Tharavadu* committee (recent usage for *Kootam*) of Kurichyas is not at all reflected in the *Oorukootam*. The *Tharavadu* committee plans for the season's cultivation, crop and variety to be cultivated, land allotments for different crops and varieties, irrigation strategies, and the possibilities of some mechanisation support from the government. The present set up of the *Oorukootam* based on the distributive welfare by the state is not giving space for these concerns to be discussed and bring into the local level development. The Kurichyas elected ward member who is part of the joint family decisions, presents as an alien and a total outsider in the *Oorukootam*, which perplexes the community members. It is obvious that the decentralisation completely fails to reflect the community interests and their knowledge in planning development.

The works under MGNREGS⁶ are mostly related to soil and water management and land preparation. The majority of the labourers are from the Kurichya community in their wards, but their knowledge or priorities of the landscape and its ecological zoning are the least considered in the planning and policy formulations. Darappan, the *Odekkaran* of Athikkolly *Muttam* says,

'... they open and clear the vegetation around all the streams untimely; they clear the places which should not even be touched, according to our custom; they made rain pits all over. I don't know why. I am sure it won't help you to preserve water at least in our farm... except getting some employment. Again the problem is that we don't get labour in time for our works because of this.'

The implications of unscientific rain pits, check dams and earthen bunds constructed as part of MGNREGS was evident in the experiences of recent flooding and heavy rains in Wayanad (Vishnudas and Suma, 2019).

Balan from Paramoola *Muttam* says,

'In the last so many years we have been raising, in the *Oorukoottam*,

⁶ MGNREGS is the Mahathma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme which is a centrally sponsored programme for ensuring employment for rural Indians. It ensures 100 working days for enrolled individuals. Panchayat has a system to implement it and to decide on the works to be undertaken under the scheme.

the issue of linking MGNERGS to rice farming. We have also been requesting for special package for sustaining the traditional rice farming. But none of these come under the priority list when it is taken at the higher level.'

It is true that the *Oorkootams* or Grama Sabhas have decentralised the processes of beneficiary selection in the development planning. However, they have failed to represent the developmental needs of specific communities at the grassroots level. They are yet to explore the possibilities of sustainable development, including the traditional knowledge systems and resource utilisation strategies of communities like that of the Kurichyas, and these have to be addressed.

Padasekara Samithies and Sustainable Local Resources Management

The promotion of the primary production sector and the sustainable management of local resources was the core of the Kerala Model of development principles initiated through the Peoples' Planning Campaign. As part of this, the state sponsored group farming initiatives were implemented through the *Padasekara Samithies* which came under the governance framework in 1962 in the Kerala Land Development Act. This was promoted as farmers-clusters for planning group farming in wetlands. Decentralised development planning and implementation reaffirm the role of *Padasekara Samithies* in the promotion of rice farming in the state. Kurichyas hold 19 acres of wetland on average in each joint family which constitutes almost half of a *Padasekaram's* total area. The ownership document (*Adharam*) of the joint property land is usually in the name of one or two persons who lived some time ago. The tax receipt is usually in the name of the present *Odekkaran* but the number of farmer households dependent on this land is 20 to 50 (in Edathana it is 55 and in Athikkolly it is 27). Kurichyas have only one member in the *Padasekara Samithi*, irrespective of the land area and the number of members, as it is decided by the land tax receipts. Four of the six *Padasekarams* in this study are dominated by mainstream community members. All the key position holders in the *Padasekara Samithies* are from general communities. The exceptions are the *Nedungodu* and *Edathana*, which are the exclusive adivasi (*Kurichya*) *Padasekarams* with no other farmers as members. The dominance and majority of people other than Kurichyas in the *Padasekara*

Samithi leads to a high rate of conflict over resources such as water. Water management is vital to rice farming and should be done with the *Padasekaram* considering it as a single unit. While farmers who have land upstream convert it for crops such as bananas and areca nuts which need less water, it affects the water flow to *Kurichya* land. Such basic issues are not receiving any priority for discussions in the *Padasekara Samithies*.

Sustainable Farming System and the Emerging Crisis

The Kurichya traditional agricultural system put forward a sustainable land use, human and natural resource management and livelihood framework. However, today they are encountering challenges in maintaining their traditional farming system. The overall land use patterns and development scenarios of the region have a serious impact on the Kurichya system. The rice produced in the joint land is not enough for the subsistence of all the members because of low productivity, due mainly to the loss of soil fertility, water conflicts and land fragmentation, which are reflected in the prevailing ecosystem. Conversely, the Kurichya system shows great resilience in adapting to the changing socio-political situation of agrarian transformation. The adjusting joint families reform into individual households under joint land ownership, to cope with the present situation and to protect the joint property (Suma, 2014). Youngsters in groups and single families started cultivating rice and vegetables and cash crops like bananas in the second season (*punja*), to fulfil the individual consumption and cash needs, which was not the practice earlier. However, for this they have to depend heavily upon the availability of water and face common resource conflicts with other farmers in the *padasekaram*.

The Kurichya system internally carries the values for a sustainable development model. Gandhiji envisioned a society which imbibed the values of democracy and individual freedom and at the same time rejected the culture of consumerism and excess importance of individual property ownership with the emphasis on collective efforts, truly reflected in the joint farming system of Kurichyas. As Gandhiji's concept of trusteeship explained by Daptardar (2018:3),

“Every member of the society is the trustee of the wealth generated out of the collective efforts of all. Thus, it denies individual pursuit and collection of wealth and converts it into the wealth of all for a better

society. He expected that the trusteeship will result into non-violent and non-exploitative socio-economic relations and development models based on production systems centred around the preservation of nature.”

However, under the influence of modern values, the younger generation of the Kurichya community tends to adapt to the mainstream development culture with materialistic orientation, distancing themselves from the community-core. Giving secondary importance to joint farming and collective living, nearly 75 per cent of the Kurichya youngsters in the study area are involved in wage labour in the agricultural field of migrant farmers, and in construction works and salesmanship as their prime means of livelihood, in order to earn cash income to fulfil their expanding materialistic needs (Suma, 2014).

Conclusion

The traditional knowledge system of natural resource management of a community is different and is located in the socio-political context of their social opportunity to access the resources and to take decisions. The systems themselves are transforming along with the pressures within and outside. Each community redefines their position in the power structure of the society in order to maintain their livelihood opportunities and to access the resources. The inclusion of traditional knowledge in planning depends on the social opportunity of the community to actively participate in the Grama Sabha and in the planning process. This, in turn, depends on the prevailing social system that is integrated with religion, caste and community relations and hierarchy which are embedded in the village society (Veron, 2001). In the context of decentralisation, the Local Self Government Institutes (LSGI) have created a political space for individual representatives of the community to overcome the inherent hurdles against social inclusion through the process of affirmative action.

However, in reality it has not developed as a political process in which the community priorities reflect in the local level development decisions. *Oorukootam* in practice acts as a platform for distributing state welfare measures where the community is at the receiving end. The development interests of the communities and their traditional knowledge are hardly reflected in the *Oorukootam* meetings as well as in the local development

plans and programmes. The agricultural programmes designed by the state agricultural department are implemented through *Padasekara Samithies* where Kurichyas have less voice and representation. Even though Kurichyas own the major portion of the land in many *Padasekarams*, their land management practices, crop and cultivation priorities and irrigation system are not recognised.

The ground level realities show evidence that the Kurichya joint farming system, based on collective ownership and traditional knowledge of natural resource management, is an unused potential of collective action towards achieving the sustainable development goals of the state and Gandhiji's dream of Grama Swaraj, inherent and in-built in the formation of the Indian Republic. The concept of Grama Swaraj or self-sufficiency includes the value of being independent and equitable, the skills to produce necessities, and the consciousness of understanding the differences between need and greed before consumption. The Kurichya system is a package of knowledge about the surrounding environment, the skills to produce whatever they need and extract resources in a thoughtful way, and the values to set apart property rights over the equity concerns across generations. These key features are embedded in the community life as symbols, priorities and cultural values and knowledge systems. Thus the knowledge system of the Kurichyas which is the core of their community life is valuable for generations ahead while the world is looking for an alternative.

The centrally decided state policies of decentralisation and sustainable development fail to include the pluralities of cultures including that of the Kurichyas, and the pluralistic concepts of development within the local level planning. This is in contrast to the present environmental discourses which are strongly in favour of the traditional knowledge system and its preservation, and for integrating the political organisation and social opportunity of the communities. In this context, unless and until the local level communities have a meaningful social opportunity to resist the imposition of power by external forces, and their production system attains sovereignty, the Gandhian idea of Grama Swaraj would still remain as a distant dream. This is much more so in the context of the adivasi livelihood systems like that of the Kurichyas. Hence there is an urgent need for rethinking the present development priorities as the political meaning of the traditional knowledge of each community is determined by the

community access to resources and social opportunities, not only in voicing their concerns in the decision making process but also to see them included in the policy formulations and their implementation. Furthermore, the decentralised governance system and the process of implementation of the related laws favouring the adivasi self-sustaining system, need to be revisited to reflect the Gandhian vision of Grama Swaraj, particularly in the context of the emerging global development discourse of eco-socialism, in addressing the challenges of Anthropocene.

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