

Transmutation of Economy and Transference of Status- A Case Study From Tribal Wayanad

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ABSTRACT This paper will explore the economic structure of the Adiya community with special reference to their division of labour and changes that has happened in the traditional economy due to socio-cultural factors and how this change in economic relations and roles effect their social status. Agricultural labour forms the basis of material and personal relationships in the social organization of Adiyar , so, any change in this area automatically affect the whole of the system especially the family. In the case of Adiya women, changes in the economic relations and roles has also created changes in the social status of women which is considered as the most striking point.

INTRODUCTION

In hunting and food gathering societies the categorisation of man, the hunter and woman the gatherer is well known (Pathy, 1982; 37). In comparison to food gathering, slash and burn cultivation is regarded in many parts of the world as a relatively advanced mode of livelihood (Elwin, 1986: 124). Khar (1982:158) elaborating on the slash and burn cultivation among the same tribe, discovered that ratio of female to male investment in labour was 136:100 days per year. The actual contribution of women was more in almost all activities (Menon, 1992: 96). In comparison to slash and burn cultivation ,settled agriculture may be described as a male dominated agricultural system and is based on gender specific ascriptive role and status (Menon, 1992: 98). What one infers from available studies on tribal economy is merely a sex wise division of labour described in a ritualistic fashion. An attempt has there fore been made to portray the role of Adiya women in tribal economy dominated by primitive technology and centring round the activities of wage labour.

SOCIETY

Adiyar, one of the Scheduled Tribes of Kerala are distributed mainly in the Mananthavady taluk of Wayanad district. As per the 1981 census they numbered as 8135. They were subjected to a worst form of bonded labour till 1976. They remain as a landless agricultural

labourer community devoid of any other skill for subsistence. They have no control over the resources of the area. Their culture and economy are languished by the traits of bonded labour system. The term Adiyar is synonymous with the sub-servant role they played in the past under the landlords. Their name is reported to have originated from an old rule that they should maintain a distance of 'ar' (six), 'adi' (feet) to avoid pollution (Luiz, 1962: 27). They are bilingual now a days, however their language is a kin to kannada.

ECONOMY

The economy of the Adiyar revolves round the activities of food procurement which consist of food gathering, marginal agriculture, animal husbandry and agricultural labour. Agriculture provides a livelihood to the landless Adiyar and supplements to the income of the land-owning group. Their economy also depends on the collection of forest products.

Their folklore about the traditional pattern of work itself is a true reflection of their history of wage labour. The story goes like this- in the past there were no labourers for Nairs and Namboothiris. They themselves had to plough their fields. Seeing a nair plough the land, an adiyar told them that the way in which they ploughed was not correct. The Adiyar placed his umbrella on the ridge of the field and began to plough. Then the Nair took his umbrella and told him that henceforth the Adiyar had to plough the land. This was how the Adiyar

became agricultural labourers.

They now live in a plural society. Hindus, Jains, Muslims and Christians live interspersed in this area. This area experienced large scale migration of people from the plains especially from the Travancore areas. Transaction of land to migrants resulted in the displacement of Adiyar as wage labourers.

DIVISION OF LABOUR

In the society of Adiyar a clear division of labour prevails according to sex. Men plough the land, carry head loads, collect minor forest produce and also guard crops from wild animals. In many parts of India it is taboo for women to plough (Lebra and Paulson, 1984: 21). Here also in the case of Adiyar even though they are agricultural labourers, women are not engaged in ploughing. However they considered ploughing a higher status activity. Jobs are ascribed high and low status is seen in the fact that women consider such jobs as 'in accessible' to them (Gulati, 1984: 73). Except ploughing all other agricultural activities are done by females.

The women are mostly engaged in replanting of seedlings, weeding, manuring, harvesting and coffee plucking in addition to household activities and other wage works. Karlekar (1982: 28) argued that besides the status factor, jobs like transplanting and weeding are left to women because no men can keep standing bent over all day in the mud and rain. Moreover they are also not interested in doing slow works like transplanting without using an implement. Besides this, it is understood that men are interested in doing jobs with the help of implements which reduces the excessive use of human labour.

An Adiya girl from her early childhood is considered by the society to share the responsibilities of her mother before marriage and of her husband's mother to whom she treats as her next mother after the marriage. They like the girls to be hard working and responsive to their suitors. The Adiyar do not attach any special preference to boys. Girls are viewed as important links for strengthening clan relationships. Parents felt that girls are an asset to the family as they bring brideprice and do household work. Now a days female children are also sent to schools with same dignity. From early childhood itself females play a useful role in running the family. By the age of 13 to 14 most of the girls

join the labourer force.

It is estimated that a hard working Adiyar may get 100 to 150 days labour in an year. The females are able to get more labour opportunities than males. This is because of Adiya females are highly skilful in wetland cultivation and other agricultural works. They also supplement the income with the collection of minor forest produce and fire wood from the forest nearby. The items collected from the forest consist of both edible and non-edible forest products. The non-edible produce are essential for processing, cooking and storing food articles. Edible items collected from the forest consist of leaves, fruits, and tubers and the non-edibles are fuel wood, bark and bamboo. For a bundle of firewood they hardly receive 18 or 20 rupees in the market. This they usually do in their leisure time or days without other wage labour.

During lean periods, women supplement the food requirements by collecting edible plant matters, do fishing and crab catching. The elder children (either male or female) look after the young ones when their parents are away at work. Few Adiya females are seen working as maid servants in the houses of non-tribes living outside Wayanad. Now a days Adiya women are also engaged in construction and head load works.

Digging of tubers is a common job for both men and women. The woman of the house goes with her husband and elder children to the dense forest. No sooner her husband starts digging the tuber, she sits on the ground picks out tubers, and puts them in their baskets. Some tubers are too hot and bitter in taste. Such tubers cut into pieces and boiled. The boiled pieces are then kept in a basket and allowed to be washed by flowing stream for many hours. They are boiled again and eaten. The entire processing is patiently done by women. Adiya women are an active food gatherer in comparison to men, who spend most of their time in gossiping when there is no wage labour. In the case of males, agricultural work is becoming less with the introduction of cash crop in the area. So after the period of harvest the husband join with his wife for other works like thrashing, making bundles and store the grain in bags. Usually the wife recommends the name of her husband to the master.

In a household where the husband and wife

are not in a good relation the husband has to suffer unemployment while his wife is working. Grazing of goats, feeding of animals and keeping poultry are predominantly feminine jobs. Every Adiya household raises a small poultry because chicken are required for offering to deities and ancestral spirits. Poultry birds remain exclusively under the ownership of women. Kitchen gardening again like poultry, is exclusively a feminine job.

The vegetable grown in the tiny kitchen gardens, which are attached with, all Adiya houses are papaya, leafy vegetables, chillies, brinjals, yams, tomatoes and pepper.

During agricultural season Adiya women associate themselves actively with all agricultural activities except ploughing. They are forbidden to plough and dig the ground but manuring sowing, weeding harvesting the crop and bringing the same from fields to the house of the landowner, preparing a granary, threshing, winnowing and storing the food grains are the tasks in which women participate actively.

In their households processing of food grain is exclusively women's job. She dehusk millets and paddy in husking levers and then clean the food grains and cook them.

During the days of bonded labour system, a woman can not stand single to earn money. It is the nuclear family that was pledged to the landlord for the whole year. Moreover the landlords of that time encouraged male labour force more than the work force of females. So they have to depend their male heads of the family for expenditures. Introduction of cash crops of the area accelerated the work of women labourers. They are also experts coffee and pepper plucking, planting ginger and turmeric in small channels and taking head load.

Generally nowadays the male workers are found to be lazy and most of them are not interested in doing these kinds of 'minor jobs'. In most houses it is seen that men are sitting idle in the houses, while their women are working. Adiya woman thus seeing her family amidst the pangs of hunger thus not remain a passive and helpless on looker depending entirely on the earning of her husband. Now she is capable of taking quick decisions and translating them into shift actions in order to save the family from starvation. Her capability of making independent decisions and from the fact that maladjustment and difference of opinion with her husband are

rare and do not disturb her mind. The society has given her full allowance to choose a man who is perfect in the totality of her vision. Her decision in choosing the husband is a well calculated move for which she has been conditioned from her early childhood.

CONCLUSION

Traditionally in the society of adiyans, the members were organised under the household who was usually the male head. But now the authority is seen shifted to the person who is stirring the family expenditures i.e. Females in almost all the houses. This is the result of increasing participation in economy and the growth of personal economic independence. More over after marriage, a daughter-in-law is valued high in her bridegroom's house. The son-in-law continued to pay a particular amount of cash or quantum of paddy called 'thalappothi' to the clan leader of the brides clan for celebrating yearly worshipping ceremony called 'kakkappula'. More over he has to pay a particular amount of money or quantum of paddy to parents-in-law for subsequent years. The preferential treatment given to the woman in respect of bride price is an indicator of the importance of women in the adiya society. Any comparison based on the status and role of adiya women with those of the civilized Indian women brings forward a wide difference. A civilized Indian mother crushes under the demands of dowry and other requirements to get her daughter married. If she is not willing to do so her daughter is bound to lead an unmarried life. But an adiya girl is an economic asset to the family before and after marriage.

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