

Participation of Marginalized Communities in Local Self-Governance and Development Process: A Comparative Study of Araya and Paniya in Kerala

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Abstract

Panchayati Raj is the foremost institution to promote better living for the whole community which requires active and enthusiastic participation of all. In other words, any community development programmes and schemes cannot be successful without full participation of the people. Panchayati Raj is considered as an agency which stands for economic, social, political development and the discovery of new innovations and solutions to the local problems mixed with welfare and development. Though the political socialisation process among the araya and paniya communities since independence have led to some significant changes in their socio economic life, the achievements they had made till date is not that much positive. This article examines the level and impact of participation of Araya and Paniya communities in local self-governance.

Keywords: Local Self-Governance, Marginalized Communities, Araya, Paniya, Kerala, India

Introduction

The active and deliberate participation of people and involvements of officials in the local self-governing bodies have been considered as inevitable in the successful vindication of any development programmes and policies at the community level. Mutual interactions and balanced involvements of both service providers and beneficiaries could bring desired results in the governing system and society. The core intends of delegation, decentralization and devolution of powers to the governing bodies and governed is to promote and sustain the process of development at the community level and make the system more accountable and transparent to the needs of people. The past experiences and experiments on panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) had shown us that the level of involvement on development process by local government bodies and the community are enormously increasing. But at the same time, the involvement of local bodies and participation of people is minimal in areas where marginalized communities are more demographically habituated.

Consequently, it adversely impacted the core concepts of panchayati raj system--community development and people's participation. On the contrary, the less involvement of local bodies and people in development paradigm makes the system more unaccountable and less transparent. It could be also read with people's participation in the political process or their affiliation with any political parties. It underlines the fact that development is a two way process: which requires active participation of people and positive involvement of local government bodies. This paper intends to examine the level of participation by Araya (fishing community) and Paniya (tribal community) communities in the development activities. It throws light on the amount of awareness about the rights, duties and privileges that these communities are entitled in the panchayati raj system. In

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addition, this paper carries out an analytical explanation on the initiatives taken by local self-governing bodies in accessing its services to the Araya and Paniya communities.

As per the government records, Araya and Paniya communities have been identified as marginalized communities and belongs to the reserved categories, OEC and ST. A sample of 25 households has been selected for this study from both communities. The study covered a fishing village, Padinjare Vemballur, locates in the coastal area of Thrissur district and a tribal community lives in Mullankolly panchayat of Wayanad district. Interviews with local self-government officials and ward members have been done. The results show that most of the people in Araya community are affiliated with any of the major political parties in the region. It enhances people's participation in the development process and activities of their concerned administrative wards. But in the case of Paniya community, it is found that most of the members hardly participate in the development activities of their ward and neighborhood. Their political affiliation with any political parties is seemed to be minimal. The occupational natures of both these communities are also determining factors in measuring the level of their participation. This paper ends with a comparative analysis which gives the real picture of level of both these communities participation in their panchayat activities and community development.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the study are

- To understand the socio-economic and political background of Araya and Paniya communities in Kerala
- To examine the Araya and Paniya communities basic understanding about panchayat raj system
- To analyse the behaviour of panchayat officers to Araya and Paniya members
- To point out Arayans' and Paniyas' level of participation and its outcome in the panchayat activities
- To highlight the presence and role of community based organizations, NGOs and political parties in helping Araya and Paniya members in panchayat matters
- To scrutinize the Araya and Paniya caste members link with political parties and its positive impacts on their dealing with panchayat

Research Methodology and Population of the Study

The present research for the study makes use of a explorative and descriptive method of research through unstructured and structured interview of various stakeholders. In order to represent the overall behavior and responses of both communities, a sample of 25 households have been selected. For this, stratified random sample method has been employed. Population of the study consisted of two groups-people of Araya community lives in the coastal areas of Sree Narayanapuram Panchayat of Thrissur district and people of Paniya community lives in the Padichira region of Mullankolli Panchayat, Wayanad district. A sample of 25 households approximately 225 individuals (126-Paniya and 99-Araya) including male and female have been selected from both regions. Majority of the respondents belong to the age group of 30-45. It is observed that all respondents of the study belong to Hindu religion.

Araya Community: Socio-Economic Background

For decades, Araya community has been untouched by the benefits of constitutional reservations and other affirmative action's. No doubt, it was recently only this community start depending on panchayat or getting their civic and welfare services done. Though there is considerable improvement in their engagement with panchayat, still deliberate and active participation of members in the formation of area integrative and development plan for their community is missing. In order to understand the real plight of this picture, a sample of 25 households have been selected and interviewed. The 25 household included 99 individuals (52-male and 47 female). They live in the coastal areas of Sree Narayanapuram Panchayat of Thrissur district. Fishing is the main source of income for the araya community members. Apart from fishing, the fishermen also depends on allied activities such as working on the beach, fish distribution on a small scale, fish curing, work in peeling

sheds and fish processing work in the plants. Nearly 12% of the fisherfolk depend on allied activities like marketing/repairing nets, fish vending, processing and other fishery related activities, for their livelihoods.

Although, Kerala boasts of the highest quality of life in the country as measured by human development indicators, the state's fishing community has largely been left out of the general development experience. For example, the literacy level, educational attainment of fishermen is much lower than that of the general population. Other development related indicators such as lack of income-earning opportunities, poverty and deprivation, insanitary and overcrowded living conditions, lack of access to basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, poor health conditions amongst men and women, higher infant mortality rates, lower sex ratio and lack of access to health facilities, also show evidence of this neglect and marginalisation of the fisherfolk in the state. An analysis of selected sample shows that all respondents are capable to read and write and few of them are passed SSLC.

The study has made some observation on the nature surveyed fishing village. It has a distinctively different appearance as compared to other villages in Kerala as well as India. It is characterised by a very high density of population along the coast and are made up of a large number of houses clustered together and occupying the coastal fringes of the state. Unlike the rest of Kerala, which gives a clean appearance, the fishing villages are characterised by extremely congested houses and lack of basic facilities.

In general, the houses are hutments or semi-permanent structures made with mud with thatched roofs or tiles, varying according to socio-economic status. The annual income, land ownership and housing facilities are also very low along with a very high level of indebtedness among the fishing community. They always face a shortage of money and live on a day to day basis. Previous studies had shown that they have a high rate of dependence on moneylenders and traders. They spend all their lives managing the burden of debts. This leads to 'cyclical poverty' as call it, leading to poverty, low income, poor health and malnutrition.

Paniya Community: Socio-Economic Background

The Paniya tribe is numerically the largest tribe in Kerala. Even though Paniyas form the leading tribal community in Wayanad, they are the most backward in every respect. They are the downtrodden group holding very little land and having little amenities of life. To get a clear idea of the socio-economic conditions of the Paniya tribals, a sample of 25 households from the VIth ward of Mullankolly village of Sulthan Bathery taluk, Wayanad district was carried out. The sample families covered 126 members, (male-66 and female-60). Among this, more than 60% belong to the age group of 30-65.

Paniyas give very little importance to education. Most of them are not yet conscious of the benefits of education and consequent economic gains. There is a feeling among the Paniyas that, after education their children will become alienated from their family when they migrate to the towns for taking employment. Moreover, they believe that the educated children are reluctant to take up their traditional occupations. It is found that the problem of illiteracy is acute among the Paniya community. The literacy rate of Paniyas was thirty five percentages. This low literacy is considered to be the root cause of their socio-economic backwardness. It is observed that there are very few beneficiaries of the literacy mission. Few tribal parents are concerned about the schooling of their children. Now-a-days, the drop-out-rate is also high among them.

The social structure of the tribal society in Kerala centres on the family. In most of the tribal communities in Wayanad, Paniya in particular, the women enjoy equal social status with their menfolk. The women are the cornerstone of the social structure of tribal societies of Wayanad. The women shoulder heavy responsibilities like feeding, raising the family and maintaining social relations. When cash economy was introduced, women became the custodian of cash and controller of the household in majority of families.

Paniyas are primarily agricultural labourers but very few families possess land holdings. Now-a-days the economy of Paniyas is well-knit with that of the non-tribal settlers who control their occupational pattern and thereby influencing their economic conditions. Since they are employed for agricultural operations like sowing and harvesting only, they have to remain as unemployed for a period of 3 to 4 months. A Paniya male gets Rs. 85 per day as wage whereas Paniya female gets Rs. 50 as wage. Hard physical works are usually done by male members, example, ploughing, ridge making etc. Light works like weeding, harvesting are done by women. Since the wage rate is very low as compared to that of other areas in Kerala, Paniyas continue to be victims of the vicious circle of poverty. Occupational mobility is considered as a major factor which provides tremendous changes in the socio-economic life of the people. It is observed that ninety percentages of the Paniyas are casual agricultural labourers who depend on low wages and seasonal work. Majority of Paniyas are landless.

Data Analysis and Major Findings

Participation of Marginalized Communities in Local Self Governance and Development Process: The Case of Araya

Since the study intends to examine the level of participation by both communities-Araya and Paniya- in the Panchayat activities and the development of their own, respondents were asked several questions based on six themes: 1) basic understanding 2) level of participation 3) attitude of the panchayat officers 4) role of civil society and community based organizations 5) political affiliation and 6) performance and suggestions. In order to give a vivid picture on the same, some observations have been made and incorporated. Separate interviews with concerned Ward members and officers of Sree Narayanapuram and Mullankolli Panchayat have been conducted to understand their views on the topic.

An interrogation has been made about Araya community members' basic understandings on questions like what is a Panchayat to them, what are major rights and privileges from a panchayat, responsibilities of a panchayat, source of information panchayat, election procedures and political rights of people in the panchayat election etc. It is noticed that majority of the respondents are well-known with the responsibilities and administrative structure of their panchayat. They are also well informed about their rights and privileges from panchayat. They consider panchayat as an institution which gives them financial support during natural calamities like sea disturbances, storms, boat wreckages etc. At the same time, Araya members lack information about the different procedures in the preparation of their own area and integrative development plan. When asked about the source of information on all panchayat activities, majority of the responses said that they depend on ward member, local political leaders, notice board displayed in some corner of their ward etc. It is observed that majority of the members have basic ideas about the election to panchayat. They also know that 50% of the seats are reserved for women in ward member's election to panchayat.

Respondents were also responded to several questions like what are the purposes of your Panchayat visits (Civil services, Welfare/development services, other services etc.), their participation in any social welfare programs, their positions in any social welfare programs/Panchayat, are their position in social welfare schemes and panchayat make any difference in the attitude of other family members, are they attending Grama Sabha meetings, any caste, occupational and financial issues prevent them in attending grama sabha meetings, their suggestions in Development/Integrated Area Plan etc. As response to the first question, majority of them said they do purposeful visits to their panchayat at least once in two months. Most of the time, they seek panchayat services for getting some legal certificates and paying revenue tax. Nearly 12% said they go to panchayat to know more about the recent welfare schemes, programmes and other assistance. A huge chunk of people in the community are also well informed about all welfare schemes particularly national employment guarantee scheme. Since women are the most number of beneficiaries from this national employment scheme, they are also holding several positions like ADS, CDS etc. In addition, women who are in position of any welfare schemes are enable to enjoy better consideration from the family members which had not there before. It is also same case with other women who are employed in the national employment

guarantee scheme. Despite the fact that there are exceptional cases of women still facing plethora of hardships and struggles, new earnings give them dignity and status in society and family.

On another section, some questions were put to know the behaviour of Panchayat officers to Araya community members, any discrimination or ill treatment from panchayat officers, any patronage by political leaders/officers in providing beneficiary services, incidence of bribing any officers in receiving services etc. It is observed that whenever they visit panchayat offices for any purposes, officers behave in an indifferent way and officers made them to wait for long time to get any replies. Sometimes, members felt that officers behave like an administrator rather than service provider. Based on their caste background and financial backwardness, majority of the araya community members said that they didn't face any discrimination from panchayat officers. But the low level of educational background made them to feel that they are becoming a subject of tease in front of officers. So, whenever they go to panchayat offices, they either take the company of their school going children or local political leaders with them.

Another observation has been made to understand the role and support of community based organizations, political parties, NGOs and civil society organisations in dealing with panchayat matters. Moreover, study enquires to know that what kinds of support are received by araya community members in dealing with any panchayat service matters. The major questions were asked in this section are role of political parties/NGOs/civil society organizations/activists to help you out in getting services or benefits from Panchayat, does community organizations help in any Panchayat matters, representative from your own community in Grama Panchayath, any incidences of bribing community/civil society/activists in receiving services etc. When asked about any community based organisation's or NGOs support in dealing with panchayat on any matters, most of them said yes. In the Ward, there is the presence of an Araya community organizations called Dheewara Sabha which stands for the development and welfare of araya people. This organization has been active in the region for long time. At the same time, there is no NGO reported working in the locality. It is noted that Dheewara Sabha's helps and supports have been given to the community people limited in dealing with the matters of Fisheries department office. It doesn't mean that Dheewara sabha never extends its helping hand in panchayat affairs. It gives information to the people on any matters of significance in the life of Araya people. Of course, there are number of political parties which always show its readiness to support the people on any panchayat matters but based on the political affiliation of people. It is also observed that the community organization and political parties are active during natural calamities and other times of urgency.

One of the core objectives of this study is to know the affiliation of araya community members with any political parties and its level of impacts on their participation in panchayat activities. It also carries out how their political affiliation helps them in gaining confidence to deal with panchayat matters. It's a fact that politically well-informed people irrespective of their caste and educational background would always get mobility in reaching out their rights and privileges. Considering the fact that political information and political affiliation are different in its connotations and practical aspects, both are essential to gain rights and privileges which are embodied in the panchayati raj system. Pertaining to this question, study shows that 92% of the total respondents are affiliated with one political party or another. When asked whether it would help in dealing with panchayat matters and life, most of them said yes. It capacitates them to raise more demands and raise their voice effectively related with any developmental and welfare schemes and programmes. It is because of their political affiliation, their involvement in the preparation of Area Integrative Development Plan is high. The respondents added that their political affiliation makes their demands related with infrastructural development of their region more effective. They continuously engage with panchayat on any matters and sometimes even the Ward member are pressurized to work more effectively. The community members force the concerned ward member to inform them about all welfare and development programs and schemes of the panchayat on regular basis.

Participation of Marginalized Communities in Local Self Governance and Development Process: The Case of Paniya

This section of the study intends to examine the level of participation of Paniya community in the Panchayat activities and the development of their own. Like the first section, respondents were asked several questions based on six themes: 1) basic understanding 2) level of participation 3) attitude of the panchayat officers 4) role of civil society and community based organizations 5) political affiliation and 6) performance and suggestions. Historically, Paniyas are one of the marginalized communities in the state. Even after the 68 years of Indian Independence, the reservation status, welfare policies, programmes, schemes and scheduled tribe packages didn't bring expected changes in their life. Based on this assumption, this study carries out an enquiry into their level of participation in the panchayat activities. In order to give a vivid picture on the same, some observations have been made and incorporated. Separate interviews with concerned Ward member and officers of Mullankolli Panchayat have been conducted to understand their views on the topic.

An analysis has done on Paniya community members' basic understandings on questions like what is a Panchayat to them, what are major rights and privileges from a panchayat, responsibilities of a panchayat, source of information panchayat, election procedures and political rights of people in the panchayat election etc. It is noticed that majority of the respondents are un-known with the responsibilities and administrative structure of their panchayat. They are also not well-informed about their rights and privileges from the panchayat. It is also observed that they consider panchayat as an institution of elite people where they couldn't able to find their own community members. Though a very few know that panchayat stands to formulate and execute development and welfare policies for all, but it remains an exception. At the same time, Paniyas lack information about the different procedures in the preparation of their own area and integrative development plan. Their level of participation in any meetings and discussions related with area plans, welfare schemes etc is abysmal. When asked about the source of information on all panchayat activities, majority of the responses said that they depend on their community leaders. Apart from that, majority of the members lack basic ideas about the panchayati election and even they do not acquire knowledge about the actual meaning of right to vote. Nearly 22% know that 50% of the seats are reserved for women in ward member's election to panchayat.

On response to several questions like what are the purposes of your Panchayat visits (Civil services, Welfare/development services, other services etc.), their participation in any social welfare programs, their positions in any social welfare programs/Panchayat, are their position in social welfare schemes and panchayat make any difference in the attitude of other family members, are they attending Grama Sabha meetings, any caste, occupational and financial issues prevent them in attending grama sabha meetings, their suggestions in Development/Integrated Area Plan etc. As response to the first question, majority of the respondents said they go to their panchayat for civic services. Most of the time, they seek panchayat services in order to get some legal certificates and paying revenue tax. Nearly 2% said they go to panchayat to know more about the recent welfare schemes, programmes and other assistance. When asked about the National Employment Guarantee Scheme, majority of them said they are aware of it but lacks information on daily wages, the way it works and institutional structure. Paniya women are pre-occupied with other local works, their representation in the national employment guarantee scheme is abysmal. Majority of the women are part of self helps groups but not holding any positions. At the same time, paniya tribal social system gives women much consideration on any family matters. But when it comes in the case of their engagement with panchayat and social welfare schemes, the percentage of their activism remains low.

On another section, some questions were put to know the behaviour of Panchayat officers with Paniyas, any discrimination or ill treatment from panchayat officers, any patronage by political leaders/officers in providing beneficiary services, incidence of bribing any officers in receiving services etc. The study shows that paniyas are totally disappointed whenever they visit panchayat offices for any purposes. They added that sometimes they get confused the name of one certificate with another. When they ask for clarifications on any matters, officers behave in an indifferent way and officers made them to wait for long time to get any replies. It made them feel that panchayat is an

institution of elites or administrators where they do not have any consideration. Based on their caste background and financial backwardness, majority of the paniya community members said that they didn't face any discrimination from panchayat officers.

Some of the previous studies pointed out that the presence of community organizations and NGOs are high in areas where marginalized communities are habituated. It's a fact that these organizations have been doing tremendous jobs for them. In order to understand the role and support of community based organizations, political parties, NGOs and civil society organisations in helping the paniyas in dealing with panchayat matters, n other enquire has been done. In addition to that, study enquires more to know what kinds of support are received by paniya community members in dealing with any panchayat service matters. The major questions were asked in this section are role of political parties/NGOs/civil society organizations/activists to help you out in getting services or benefits from Panchayat, does community organizations help in any Panchayat matters, representative from your own community in Grama Panchayath, any incidences of bribing community/civil society/activists in receiving services etc.

When asked about any community based organisation's or NGOs support in dealing with panchayat on any matters, most of them said yes. In the Ward, Gothra Maha sabha and Pattika Varga Samiti are active which basically stands for the overall development and welfare of paniya people. This organization has been active in the region for long time. But these organizations confined to certain areas of tribal life including land issues, community related issues etc. Paniya members expressed that these organizations support on panchayat matters limited to a few occasions. At the same time, there are two NGOs working in the locality. They function with a purpose to develop saving culture among the tribal's and empower them through education. In the case of political parties, two-three political parties are active in the region but affiliation of paniyas with any of these political parties are considerably low.

As discussed in the first section, one of the core objectives of this study is to know the affiliation of paniya community members with any political parties and its level of impacts on their participation in panchayat activities. It also carries out how their political affiliation helps them in gaining confidence to deal with panchayat matters. As responses to these questions, study shows that nearly 22% of the total respondents from paniya community are affiliated with one political party or another. The study again proves that these politically affiliated members joined political parties by the influence of their community heads. When asked whether it would help in dealing with panchayat matters and life, most of them said NO. The reason behind this is that their political linkages neither capacitate them to be critical towards social injustice and surroundings nor it helps them to raise more demands and raise their voice effectively related with any developmental and welfare schemes and programmes of panchayat. All these made Paniyas involvement in the preparation of Area Integrative Development Plan of panchayat remains low. Majority's political disconnection and lack of social activism have been failing them to nurture a ward member or political representative from their own community.

Conclusion

The Panchayati Raj is the foremost institution to promote better living for the whole community which requires active and enthusiastic participation of all. In other words, any community development programmes and schemes cannot be successful without full participation of the people. Panchayati Raj is considered as an agency which stands for economic, social, political development and the discovery of new innovations and solutions to the local problems elated with welfare and development. Though the political socialisation process among the araya and paniya communities since independence have led some significant changes in their socio economic life, the achievements they had made till date is not that much positive.

As already discussed in the previous sections, the araya and paniya communities lag in several fields of their socio economic and political life. But based on the objectives of this study, it found that the involvement and participation of araya community in the panchayat matters is comparatively high than paniya community. It is assumed that the geographical locations of both these communities

would also play a huge role in evolving their socio economic and political understandings. Since the social mobility and social interaction of araya community members with others has been marked better, it has positive impacts on their engagement with panchayat. They also got benefitted from the deep rooted cultural and political movements which had started early in their locality. Compared to araya community, paniyas are habituated in a geographically land locked areas. These areas were characterized by the migration of non-tribals and intruded into their lands. Such movements and settlements of non-tribals made the paniya to always live in seclusion. Consequently, it restricts them to be part of any social welfare and development schemes or programs introduced by state, district and panchayats.

With regard to the political affiliation of community members and its impacts on their participation in the panchayat matters, the araya community stands in bit advanced positions. As explained earlier, majority of the respondents from araya community are active members of one political party or another. It shows that in the last three panchayat elections, they have elected ward members from their own community only. It gives them an opportunity to list their demands in front of panchayat through the ward member. The supports of ward members for the community members in getting things done from panchayat are highly appreciated. But in the case of paniya community, numerous very less number of members is joined with any of the political parties. In one way or other, it prevents their interaction and mobility with other non-tribals and involvements in panchayat activities. It has been so long since they last elected their own community members in the ward election.

Paniyas do vote regularly and majority of them are aware that it is their right to vote. The Paniyas generally show less interest in contesting elections and the study finds that a less number of them regularly attend Grama Sabha meetings. Paniya women are not generally attracted to politics due to their backwardness in all respects. It is observed that even the non-tribal women in these areas are reluctant to enter politics or take up leadership owing to their conservative outlook. As a result, tribal women participation is very low in local level administrative bodies like panchayat council, village council etc. It was observed the Paniyas were not aware of the incentives provided by the various agencies like Krishi Bhavan, Blocks, and the like. Hence, the government and the voluntary organisations should provide them better employment opportunities, training, life skill development sessions and financial support for a better future.

Despite the fact that there are several areas to be discussed and unsolved yet, number of affirmative actions taken by central and state governments for these groups in local governance has resulted in social identities and political awareness among them and created an urge to become part of the mainstream political, economic and social life. The political space has given to marginalized sections has dealt a blow to the asymmetrical social structure at the local level and given greater space for their participation and involvement in decision making at local.

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