

# Cultural Genocide among Tribals: An Excrescence of Development Induced Displacement

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**Abstract:** *In a globalised world with developmental absurdity, the so called socially distanced people still suffers some dilemmas, bearing the preconception of being uncivilised or sub-human. The aboriginals or adivasis, (as stated in our constitution) strives for their survival and existence for their livelihood, and their miserable plight has ever since been broadened and intensified even after the existence of more than half centuries of our democracy. Throughout their history, they had been following an obscure life depending on their own peculiaristic mode of traditions including primordial culture, languages, dialects, territorial life in the forest, nature worship and religious practices-adobe of the spirits and dead people, food habits-all these being part of the core of existence of tribal life. The tribal communities themselves are diverse in the aspects of different language families, racial categories and distinctive religious and cultural practices. They have a fluid culture with certain taboos in every walk of their life. With the acquisition of tribal lands by the alien people with the claim of development, most of the tribal lands become exposed as public property. Eventhough the society is moving forward with developmental projects including the upliftment of the tribal people, they have suffered large scale displacement out of these developmental projects from their homeland. Around 10 million tribals are displaced due to the construction of developmental projects and flew out in urban areas and slums. This kind of 'development –induced displacement' also displaces their culture of community living, traditional languages, food habits and religious practices to a great extent. This paper hence tries to scrutinize the excrescences of development upon the tribal people from a cultural standpoint. It analyzes how the issue of displacement of large scale tribal population will affect the primordial tribal culture, how they loss the cultural diversity and uniqueness of their life world, how their ethnicity, race, language, religion, mode of living and community life are affected owing to the displacement by development.*

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**Keywords:** Development, Development Induced Displacement, Tribal Culture, Livelihood, Communal Life, Forest Life, Cultural Genocide

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## Introduction: The Aboriginal People

Among the total one billion population of India comprise 70 million people who are categorised as aboriginals or tribals, living in the hilly forest areas and mountains, forming a category of disadvantaged and underprivileged sections of the society. India is the second largest tribal concentrated country after Africa, which comprises 698

Scheduled Tribes. The constitutional term this denoted them as 'scheduled tribes' in Article 342 by the President of India in 1950. By identifying them as Tribes, the peculiarities like the primitive traits, distinctive culture, shyness with the public, geographical isolation and social and economic backwardness is taken into account. They are denoted as Adivasis, which depicted the meaning of original inhabitants of the land. They are entirely a heterogeneous group in various matters in society. Bhatt, elaborated this as, "Adivasis are not an homogenous group-with over 200 tribes speaking over 100 languages, which vary greatly in ethnicity, culture and language, however, there are similarities in their way of life and generally perceived inferior position within Indian society" (Bhatt 2011). The tribals suffered social exclusion and identity crisis from the rest of the dominant people in the society. The developmental approaches which was initiated primarily for the betterment of the tribals gives priority to the social and economic development, but is less concerned about the quality of the process and its outcomes.

### **Development at the Cost of Tribal Lives**

With the fast developing scenario of India, the development as such is double sided, wherein it creates progress in society and to people, but at the same time, it makes some sections of the society, vulnerable. This scenario is applicable in the case of tribal people. The tribal lands, which faces such threats of development, resulted in the eviction of large number of tribal people from their homeland. Deogharia stated that, "the tribals who are only 8.08 per cent of India's population, constitute 40 percent of the DPs and PAPs" (Deogharia 2012). This continuing process of land alienation, eviction, marginalisation and exploitation of the indigenous people is what is now considered as 'development' in modern language.

Other than displacement, the major problem they are facing is the lack of access to their traditional land and common property resources on which they have subsisted for years. This makes their life miserable to adapt in a new environment and lead them to impoverishment and powerlessness. The resettlement patterns do not give them access to the traditional resources and has disregard on the cultural identities of the tribal people. As they retain a spiritual affinity with their homeland, the displacement also displaces their bond to their land and traditional cultures. The hasty effects of displacement affected their social and cultural life. The traditional moorings of the tribals include their life in forest, religious practices, food habits, housing pattern, means of livelihood, most importantly their communal life. As Oommen stated; "the issues that the displacees are concerned with are related to livelihood security, appropriate and adequate compensation if displaced, and the preservation of their identity and culture within their traditional habitat" (Oommen 2011.330).

### **'Mudugars' in Kerala**

In Kerala, there are evidences about the outcome of development induced displacement in Attappady. Attappady is one of the tribal concentrated, forest region and also one of the backward areas in Kerala. The thick forest areas in Attappady,

named Silent Valley, in which the Govt. implemented the Silent Valley Project. This is a major initiative by the Government to protect the forest stretch and declared it as wild life sanctuary. The tribals who concentrated on these areas are Mudugar, which forms the second largest tribal community in Attappady. Paradoxically, there is a large scale displacement and land alienation that occurred due to the project. Around 30 Mudugar families are resettled at Mukkali, under the Mukkali Pilot Project Scheme and the govt provide houses for them. The Mudugars are forest labourers, agricultural labourers and shifting cultivators.

The Muduga dialect which is often referred to by the Mudugas as 'mudugat athu nayam' or 'muduga basha' is basically of the South Dravidian family and contains elements of Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada (Zvelebil 1988). Tamil, however is most predominant in this language and many of the personal names and kinship terms are derived from Tamil. The dialect is distinct and is hardly intelligible to Malayalam speakers. Nowadays most young men speak in addition some Malayalam and Tamil and they frequently use these languages in their interaction with outsiders.

About 30 households of Mudugar tribes from 3 to 5 acres each are displaced; as stated by Mathur and he further explained the concerns of the tribes as "we want either the price of the land or equivalent area in Attappady Valley. We will not generally move from our traditional settlement because we will earn the wrath of our deity called Kara Daivam" (Mathur 1977) It is thus imperative that religion forms a major part of their traditional culture and they are more concerned about it due to the displacement from the land. He also stated that "the need for a proper understanding of the matrix of tribal culture in relation to any comprehensive planning for the development of the tribal areas cannot be over-emphasized". And they have problems in the integration of a new economic and social order while they are speaking a language (a corrupt form of Malayalam, Tamil and Canarese) which is less feasible for a cultured interaction with the modern day society. Concerning the tribal resettlement after displacement, it calls for need for an adequate plan to include all their cultural practices in the location. As Alexander et.al establishes; "while shifting the tribal families, the religious practices followed by them in such matters should always be respected. The taboos and customs prevalent in the tribal society also should be respected" (Alexander 1991).

### **Mullukurumbas in Nilgiris**

The Mullukurumbas in Nilgiris is another example which has been gained attention in the discourse of development and displacement and its multiple effects on the tribal culture. The Mullukurumbas is the traditional inhabitants of Nilgiris and the total Mullukurumba population is 1300.

### **Tribal Development Projects**

The migration of outsiders into the forest and fringe areas and development projects in Nilgiris has affected large scale consequences to the tribals. The major outcome of this process has been the dispossession of land and displacement of tribals from their

residence. Very few tribal villages have been left to stand in their past locations and those which do, have lost their traditional features and turned into settlements of mixed groups with a large percentage of non-tribal groups as well (Sathianathan 1993:118). The developmental programmes and projects which aim for the upliftment of their social and economic status have a limited practicality. These projects lead them to a social and cultural shift from the traditional village life to the national frontiers but the Mullukurumbas did not envisage this as development. These projects and programmes enhance the economic and social gap between various tribal groups as well as in the Mullukurumbas itself. They have become more isolated and marginalised from the traditional way of life and culture.

### **Health and Medicine**

Displacement also caused changes in the health and traditional medicinal practices of the Mullukurumbas. As per J.H. Bodley, social transformation contributed to the transmission of disease, modification of diet and living conditions and social change and stress impairing the health of tribal people (Bodley 1982:102). Modification of diet and living conditions has occurred due to loss of land, resulting in consequent change in the traditional manner of its use. Relocation and resettlement has led to alterations in food availability. Wage labour has led to an inadequacy of time to work their own lands. This has resulted in higher purchase of manufactured or processed foods. Malnutrition, dental decay and lowered resistance to disease have followed. Anaemia, sickle disease, scabies, kwashiorkor, marasmus, gastroenteritis, ulcer, tuberculosis and venereal diseases are now common among the Mullukurumbas. Social change and stress has also led to social tension. There has been increasing vulnerability to emotional disorders. This in turn has led to loss of self-esteem, increase in actual and perceived role conflict and ambiguity (Sathianathan 1993: 120)

### **Labour Pattern**

The Mullukurumbas has following agriculture as means of their livelihood. But with the relocation of people from their residents and land, agriculture is come across a rapid change in its pattern as well as in the process. Due to over exploitation of land for developmental projects and migration of outsiders together leads to the destruction of agriculture. Now they feel insecure regarding their livelihood, land and forest resources. They feel alienation from these traditional resources and bounded with the new ways of production and consumption pattern. They permanently lost the opportunity to survive as an agriculture labour or plantation worker and are in scourge for new employment opportunities like construction worker, casual labourer and menial works under other people. This is an embarrassing fact that, the traditional independent tribal group now has become mere casual labourers under the supervision of non-tribal people.

### **Cultural Change**

The most distinguishing factor in the lives of tribes is their traditional cultural practices

and beliefs. After the initiation of development projects and migration of outsiders, the cultural bond of tribes to their land has been lost. They find weaknesses and difficult to stay in their new settlement with the losing cultural practices and values.

The Mullukurumba life style-an older, relaxed form of living-meets fresher, vivid, growing cultural forms that gradually in ever widening circles begin to constrict, disregarding the social, religious, cultural values of the Mullukurumbas (Sathianathan 1993: 127).

### **Forest Life**

The Mullukurumbas who has been living in forests for centuries has been displaced due to the developmental activities. This has led to the lack of access to forest resources and common property resources in those areas. The tribes are in constant use of these resources now unable to enter into the premises of forests and fringe areas.

Demand for timber has led to large scale exploitation of forests. It is an important source of revenue for the state which regulates timber extraction as well as other forest products. Large forest areas in Nilgiris have been designated as 'reserved' and placed under the control of forest departments. In these forests, Mullukurumbas have been evicted or forced to resettle elsewhere or denied access to those forest produce on which they were dependent. (Sathianathan 1993: 129).

Forests which served as a means of livelihood and source of sustenance are now considered out of bounds. The traditional de-facto relationship to the forests by the Mullukurumbas has been replaced by the de-jure ownership of the state. It involves the exploitation of forest resources with total disregard for the Mullukurumba life and needs. The nature of forests itself is undergoing a change. The natural mixed forests of the Nilgiris are rapidly becoming single-type forests and plantations. (Sathianathan 1993:129).

### **Discussion**

The major excrescences of development induced displacement on tribals and their culture covers some pertinent aspects of their lives like- communal life, means of livelihood, religious festivals, rituals and language.

### **Communal Life**

The devastating outcome of the development induced displacement on tribal culture is the disruption of their communal life. The communal life is the root of their culture, which paved the strong social structure of the tribal people. The development planning is seldom on the basis of the socio-cultural aspects of the tribals and hence there isn't any access to forest resources, pastures or means of livelihood in the resettlement areas. The community life is the basis of tribal culture in all settlements. Most of the settlements possess a common platform for discussing their common issues, entertainment, and other social and religious purposes. With displacement, they lost or

are deprived of all these aspects of communal life. In the newly inducted place, they seldom have a common place to meet and are forced to sustain with the host people, which restricts or is an impediment to following the attributes of their communal life. Moreover, the network of kinship relations which is an aspect of bonding between the tribal people will be limited or gets limited after displacement as they are resettled in different clusters of villages. The transformation from an informal, homogeneous, cohesive life world to a formal, heterogeneous and scattered life in a new place, lead them to a state of psychological trauma with the feeling of demoralization, frustration and alienation. The cultural divergence between the oustees and host population is another major factor which leads to a disagreement and divergence in the norms, standards, customs and morale of both groups.

### **Means of Livelihood**

The livelihood pattern of the tribals is greatly connected with their life in the forest. Most tribals are cultivators of crops and some tribals are gathering community, who collect forest produces for their livelihood. They also owned and reared livestock's like cattles, goat, sheep etc.; of which they lost access due to displacement. Their mode of sustenance gets limited. Their displacement calls for a coercive adoption of new consumer goods and products, which seldom is of any direct value for them. The tribals have been allocated provisions for new products/consumer items by govt. However, the dietary supplements in no way supplements their early healthier livelihood at the bossom of the Mother Nature. A deep decline of the inherent health is evident, on their exposure to modern living/ unhealthy resettlement patterns. Thus a sharp deterioration in their innate immunity is discernible on the sidelines of displacement.

### **Religious Festivals and Rituals**

As Parida, stated; "in the tribal society's prime importance is given to religious practices in every walk of life. Religion, for them, assures or explains most of the complexities of nature" (Parida 2006). The religious practices after displacement shows a largely diminishing trend and gradually the importance of tribal Gods may be decreasing. Parida, further stated that "The tribals are very traditional and they value their traditions despite the hardship they face. They portray their past as glorious and feel nostalgic, the attachment they had with their tabernacles and sacred groves is emotional and cannot be returned back the new resettlement site" (Parida 2006).

In the tribal settlements, the religious rituals were performed in a sacred place, which is the adobe of their spirits, gods ad deities. Alexander et.al earmarked that "the rehabilitation policy ensured that the religious institutions and sacred places of the tribal communities that are disturbed are recreated along with their settlement at the new site" (Alexander 1991). But most of the displacements do not address this issue. Through the denial of their religious ties with their homeland, they find it hard to survive in the resettled places and to carry on with their customs, traditions and practices; which infact they believe bring wrath of the natural spirits, whom they

worshipped for long. Their bonds with the natural powers are being toppled or their natural veneration gets disinherited.

### **Language**

The tribal culture is distinct in its own which differ from non-tribal people. Mathur described it as the “differences in tribal culture relate to language, social organization and means of subsistence. Two tribes speaking different dialects belonging to the same linguistic family may sometimes vary in their means of subsistence whereas there may be two tribes of more or less the same economic pursuits, who have no linguistic affinities” (Mathur 1977). Thus with the displacement, the traditional dialects and language pattern gets affected and it is further integrated with the languages of the host populations. In fact, they are ‘displaced’ from their own traditional languages also.

### **Cultural Genocide and Displacement**

Ralph Linton (quoted in Harlambos 2000) observes; “the culture of a society is the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmitted from generation to generation. In Clyde Kluckhohn's well-designed phrase, culture is a 'design for living' (Kluckhohn 1951:86) held by members of a particular society. Lack of a shared culture, will have an outcome in confusion and disorder. Culture, is learned and shared over generation to generation. Mead described that “...a change in any one part of the culture will be accompanied by change in other parts, and that only by relating any planned detail of change on the central values of the culture is it possible to provide for the repercussions which will occur in other aspects of life. This is what we construe by “cultural relativity”: that practices and beliefs can and must be evaluated in context in relation to the cultural whole”(Mead 1954).

The culture of the tribal community includes their economic system, kinship ties, religious rituals and practices, system of values, material culture, power structure, food pattern and housing pattern, but the dichotomy is that displacement transforms the social structure of the tribal society. Padel and Das, stated that, “tribal people's economic and political systems are fundamental to their culture, and when dispossessed of their land these systems were effectively destroyed. The sacredness of nature, respect for elders' knowledge, ritual contact with the ancestors, growing their own food on family land, and making their own houses and tools, exchanging food with neighbors with an egalitarian spirit: these things are swept away by corporate values, which emphasize money and financial power”(Padel and Das 2008:110).

Above cultural attributes gets derogated with the functioning of a cultural genocide among the people (or tribe) which occurred due to the displacement, which is as described by Padel that; “ there are two aspects of genocide-“the physical extermination, and the killing of a culture”. He further elaborates that, the term ‘culturicide’ given by a US anthropologist is clumsy and does not conjure the

appropriate sense of death and outrage (Padel 2008:110). UNESCO's San Jose Declaration (1981) defined 'Ethnocide, that is, cultural genocide' as a 'violation of international law equivalent to genocide'. Cultural Genocide means essentially the killing of people's culture by uprooting them from their ancestral lands".

Deogharia, (2012), described the worst effects of displacement as "the tribals also face the risk of marginalization. This means that their economic, social and psychological infrastructure makes it impossible for them to rebuild their lives, let alone improve it" (Deogharia 2012). Also he adds, "Displacement creates in them a crisis of social and cultural identity and a sense of acute powerlessness. They devalue their own culture and internalize the dominant system". Thus a cultural genocide is inevitable as well as inescapable among them.

Rather than impoverishment and poverty, most painful misery for the tribals as stated by Padel et.al that the erosion of people's sense of community and cultural identity, values and traditions, which invariably accompanies their separation from the land which they and their ancestors cultivated over many generations" (Padel and Das 2008:110). This indicates collective devaluing of the people and cultures being displaced due to development induced displacement.

## **Outcomes of Displacement**

After Independence, the development and displacement of the tribal people is common and it has affected the tribals tremendously. Among the Mullukurumbas and Mudugars, these changes have been unbearable. The land acquisition by the non-tribal people with the support of the government officials, forced displacement have also lead them to a state of insecurity and deprivation with others. Many new Government projects have been installed, among them vast hydro-electric schemes, and afforestation programmes leading to displacement of indigenous people (Sathianathan 1993:108). In the case of Mudugars, the Silent Valley Project has the same effects upon the tribals as they are alienated and dispossessed from their land.

The means of livelihood has also been changing. Mullukurumbas either become poor tenants and share croppers working for an outsider-landlord producing crops for the market rather than, as in the past, for their own subsistence. The other alternative is to join the landless, felling trees, cutting bamboo and- hauling timber for contractors usually from the plains. The Mudugars, as the traditional tribals, who only depend on the forest produce and agriculture, has been lost their means of livelihood permanently. Land alienation, displacement, eviction, problems with forest officials, loss of land rights, denial of access to forest produce, problems with forest officials, atrocities faced as tribal people, loss of fights to forest and forest produce among others are some of the consequences (Sathianathan 1993:188).

The effects of displacement to tribal people have been best explained by Vandana Shiva, as: "The shift from Prakriti to natural resources, from mater to matter was

considered (and in many quarters is still considered) a progressive shift from superstition to rationality ... for women ... the death of prakriti is simultaneously a beginning of their marginalisation, devaluation, displacement and ultimate indispensability” (Shiva 1989; 145, Sathianathan 1993:268).

### **Towards a Just Resettlement: A Human Rights Approach**

From the human rights perspective, especially applied in the case of tribal people, the ICESCR-International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights identified a set of economic, social and cultural rights of the people which has to be ensured by the states. To substantiate the same, Bhatt notes thus, “the rights outlined in the ICESCR include the right to work and to just and favorable conditions of work, and to form trade unions, the right to social security, protection of the family, the right to a adequate standard of living, including food, housing and clothing, and the right to health” (Bhatt, 2011). All these are crucial for the better life of tribals, however after displacement, they will not be ensured of these rights in the new settlement. Thus it is advisable that the resettlement policy should incorporate or take into consideration the aspects of social, economic and cultural rights of the tribals while policies are implemented while displacing the latter from their traditional land. Even with the new Act by the Government of India regarding the resettlement and rehabilitation of the displaced people did not address the issues of tribal people and the preservation of their culture.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, development and displacement to a great extent caused a physical relocation as well as psychological dilemma among the displacees. With this relocation, they have left over their ancestral land, which is the stronghold of their culture and traditions. In addition , with regard to culture, which includes all aspects of their life-communal feeling, religious practices, food habits, housing pattern, means of livelihood, kinship ties-have been affected and indicates a uncountered cultural genocide among the displaced tribals. The change in society on development leads to progress and improvement of the standard of living, while the displacement by development leads to retreat from their cultural patterns, which forms the basis of their survival and existence as a community possessing a unique identity of its own. As mentioned in the current article Government and authorities need to be taken the rehabilitation of tribals since the tribal community is the most vulnerable due to development process. When the land acquired for the rehabilitation of tribals , utmost care should be given to the preservation of the indigenous culture and it is the common responsibility of Ministry, Police, academia and policy makers and the public altogether.

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