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**SEDENTARISATION OF THE NOMADIC:
MARGINALISATION OF THE MOBILE**

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Abstract

The interstices in the relation between development and the forest nomadism are presented in this paper. This is carried out by focussing on a nomadic group living in the southern most forests of Peninsular India. The broader context of this article is the ongoing process of incorporation of the nomads and tribes into the sedentary mainstream and corresponding marginalisation of them in the prevalent social networks. Another context is the ongoing contests between different groups and parties on the issue of 'land to the tribe'. It is not so much the land question but the right to sustain oneself, as a forest nomad, is the central issue taken up here.

This paper attempts to argue that the 'land questions' pertaining to the 'tribes' in general and the 'forest nomads' in particular are irrefragably and irreducibly different, although the latter group has been unproblematically conceived and classified as a part of the 'tribal universe' in both academic discourse and in administrative practices. It demonstrates the need to recognise the differences between a particular 'tribal group' in need of land to settle and the forest nomads who need access to collect forest produces. This is mainly because, it is argued here, right to property in land or sedentarisation is dramatically different from the right to remain as nomads in forest. This is something that is not yet been brought forth for discussion in Kerala, despite the fact that 'tribal land question' here has gained considerable academic and political attention.¹ Moreover, land distribution to the landless tribes has become a central issue of governance and in electoral politics.

One of the immediate contexts of the discussions made here is the repeated occurrence of discussions in dispute, party interventions in lives of the tribes, voices of dissents and unleashing of the brutal coercive forces of state apparatus to silence them; all of them centre on the non-resolved issue of the distribution of land to the landless and displaced 'tribes'.

I will first introduce a nomadic group belonging to Kerala because the members of it reveal strong preference to continue, at least, as forest nomads. They are not yet influenced by the idea of discontinuation from one's age-old life styles and do not desire to take-off to the development-oriented sedentary life.

The Forest Nomads (*Katootikal*)

There is group known as 'Malampandaaram' or 'Hill Pantaram' (Ramanath Aiyar. S, 1923:24) who were dwelling within about thousand square miles of thick moist evergreen forest of Travancore.² The members of this group led a dualistic system of life for centuries by combining food-gathering/hunting for subsistence and collecting/reaping marketable forest produces; and in turn they bought articles from the market. Among them, there is a particular group which can be recognised as forest nomads and they live in scattered groups at the higher reaches of the thick evergreen protected forest of southern Kerala. Others among them were pushed out of their life world in the forest by the first half of the previous century itself, however, the forest nomadic Malampantarams living at the upper reaches of Pamba and south of Periyar river still live in the forests and interact only selectively with the outside world.³ Their habitat is a small portion of the 777 sq. kms of Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR), which is a protected area and therefore legally they are not to be there according to the Wild Life Protection Act of 1983. This group is focussed to explicate the specificities of forest nomads, who have been maintaining intermittent associations with the market agents at the forest fringes for centuries while remaining as nomads in the forest, to substantiate the arguments formulated in this paper.

Ethnographic descriptions unanimously state that unlike other tribes of Kerala, Malampandaarams are not Dolichocephalic as they are shorter in stature than other tribes; the average height is estimated to be 61 inches. The numerical strength of Malampantaarams in general, in the year 1901, was 51

according to the Census Report but the 1991 Report of India provides the highest ever-enumerated population figure of 2210.⁴ The forest nomads among them is only a portion of it⁵; they are the most nomadic groups in the forests of Kerala State, a State which is often valorised as the model for the achievement of grass root level social development in India and other not yet developed countries.

One of the conceptual points to be underscored at the outset itself is that, although we will take up the issue later for detailed discussion, since the early twentieth century onwards scholars discussing about this group have represented and classified them as a 'tribe' following the Orientalist convention and therefore the helping hands of the state poured benevolence on many of them. The Orientalist convention has always classified any group dwelling in the forest as a 'tribe' or 'aborigin'. This implies that they are a group living in the present but stuck in the primitive past which the Orientalists said farewell very long time ago. The point is discernable from one of the exemplary statements⁶:

The Hill Pantarams lead the most wretched life of all the Hill-**tribe** of Travancore. They live in rocks, caves, and in the hollows of trees, have no clothing but the bark of trees, speak a kind of corrupt Tamil, avoid the face of civilised men and lead the most precarious life imaginable. (Census of India, Vol.XXVI, 1931, Part.1:353, emphasis added)

In this paper I discontinue from such conventional treatment of them as a tribe, which is born out of the 'modern' scholarly habits, and avoids the Euro-centric attributes foisted on them, and conceive them as 'forest nomads' and the justifications for such preference is made clear in the following pages. That is, it is important to question the homogenised and homogenising administrative category 'tribe'.

Let me come back to the forest nomadism within the Periyar Tiger Reserve eco-system. A specificity of these forest nomads, if we take them as a whole, is that they live in small groups consisting of three to four families. Yet, there are instances of single man dwelling with sparse connections with his kith and kin. There is another extreme case of seven to eight families dwelling at a place since 2001. The dwelling sites of different groups are disparately distributed at different sheer slopes of the hills. When I employ the descriptive term 'dwelling site' it does not suggest to a place where they live under a thatch for long; even if they do so most of them will always be on the move. Let us proceed to discern the point.

Dwelling sites and composition of inhabitants

The dwelling site of a group gets shifted from time to time. We will discuss such shifts later when we trace their nomadic movements. The composition of the group at a site also changes over short times; this change takes place when few members or families are away from their dwelling sites gathering marketable and other forest produces stretching weeks to months. Even those who remain at their dwelling site may engage in foraging for their self-consumption which may take a day or prolong to several days depending on the availability of consumables. Their dwelling sites cannot be represented with the help of any static or dynamic concepts; it requires fluid concepts. The proportion between the people who are outside a dwelling site at a point in time and inside it is also highly variable. The contexts of composition change are several. And it is rare to find a site with its entire population at any given time; invariably some body is always away from the dwelling site and someone is always on the move; 'walk about' is characteristics of them.

Within a dwelling site each family, consisting of father, mother and infants, lives under independent thatch or encampment. The encampment is lean-on-to roof thatch known as *Ottathoonupera*. One side of the thatch rests on the slope of the hill and the other on a branch of a tree or a fallen trunk

on a slanting branch of a tree. Of late plastic sheets also go into the roofing and sidewalls which are otherwise made out of grass and leaves. As children reach at the age of five to six, they stop sleeping under their parent's roof. They refrain from drinking water from river/stream or pond; instead they drink water that percolate out from the springs or the spring water partially stored in declivities on the rock. Their habitat choice has close structural connection with their specific life cycles and any shift of habitat can spark off turbulent changes in their behavioural pattern, process of adaptation and their life in general.

They also do not prefer flat lands or top of the hills for habitation. They generally erect their *ottathoonupera* on virtually vertical slopes and away from rivers and streams. This preference is another element in their set of needs⁷. One of the Malampantaarams who has been living all alone at such a slope so far in his life still refuse to stay with their kinsmen even at his very old age of more than hundred years. This preference is despite the repeated invitation from his kinsmen who were dwelling, at the time of our fieldwork, on relatively lesser degree slopes at the fringe of the forest near a place named Kooruhoodu. Their sensitivity to location while choosing a dwelling site is another factor that can influence their life at a different location other than their habituated locations.

Their preference for forest nomadism enables them to maintain their choicest contacts with the outsiders; it seems that they usually bypass intra-group relations in general. The specificities of choice of habitat for dwelling are inextricably linked to their life as forest nomads and they influence their relation with their habitat, kinsmen and to themselves. Mobility to them is life and resource for the perpetuation of 'themselves' and their life world. At the same time, they are reluctant to move across the boundaries of social stratification and environmental niches which are intricately and immanently related to their forest nomadism. Therefore, even though their habitats or dwelling sites shift from one to the other, they always prefer to be within the outer limits of the forest. Any

shift of their patterns of mobility and changing of dwelling sites located on the sheer slopes of hills of deep forest are factors, among many others, that can deprive them to sustain their natural rhythm of life.

Let us move on to discern the relations among them; inter-personal relations within a dwelling site are taken up before discussing inter-dwelling group relations—groups dwelling at different sites. There is intimate relation among those who dwell at a site; they give priority to the independence of ‘others’ at a dwelling site and independence of oneself from others. The composition of people living within an *ottathoonupera* resembles, to us, a nuclear family set-up but it is not that in terms of the inter-personal relations. The relation among people of different *ottathoonupera* is extremely linked to affinity and intimacy. The metaphysical idea of ‘equality’ is blissfully absent in their cultural codes that influence inter-personal relations and therefore their hierarchy is incomparable to the hierarchy of non-nomadic communities. Many have observed existence of symmetry in their mutual relations (Morris, B, 1982:109-110). Anthropologists have noted this general characteristic not only among Malampantaarams but also among other nomadic tribes. We have not come across any event of aggressive behaviour of adults to children; in fact we encountered no event of children crying due to such behaviour.

Encampment of each family in a dwelling site is autonomous in relation to other families in it. This tendency towards relative autonomy of individuals living in an *ottathoonupera* and in a dwelling site is strongly linked to their preference for small group dwelling sites. This is a statement that needs some more exploration. Non the less, we can state that such autonomy exists between the groups of different dwellings as well and it stretches to the situation of non-relation. Notion of equality/in-equality does not seem to function in their inter-personal and inter-group relations.

Groups at different dwelling sites are autonomous without equality/hierarchical relations among them. Territorial behaviour does not come in-

between them; exchanges of commodities do not take place between them as well. We have noted that generally only flashing communication takes place between the members of different dwelling sites, including, the whereabouts of life at different sites. Their inter-group relation tends towards minimum. Moreover, as noted elsewhere in this paper, while they move away from the dwelling site, sub-groups are formed and they consist of few members. The individual has primacy but they are not individualistic or individuated or individual-centric or resembles to any individuals of any 'mainstream society'.

If they are characterised as 'individualistic' without qualification,⁸ then such characterisations give the impression that our present is projected on them.⁹ They don't appear to be preoccupied or concerned with one's selfhood when they do something together or do something all alone. Moreover, to them 'You' and 'I' are not mutually exclusive and they are not *separated* although they are *differentiated* in their worldview. When they relate to 'others' of their own dwelling site, they do not address them as a homogenous group, but as individuals with distinctions. Their 'individual' pursuits are not always referentially related to 'individual' needs. Therefore, rather than resorting to conventional characterisation of them as individualistic and personalistic, it is better to describe them as having remote anchorage to 'individual-other' separation when discussing their endogenous relations. The importance of such a preference for newer terms is that it enables to visualise the consequences of clubbing them together and sedentrising them in colonise as it happened in the history of most of the forest dwelling communities during the period of development; the history was filled with annihilations of the continuity of their histories and their live worlds, and therefore people.

So far the focus has been on the patterns decipherable from the dwelling sites, now we move on to some of the patterns in their forest nomadism. One general aspect about their mobility can be highlighted. They are mobile like us but unlike us they move only on their legs they do not use animals or carts