

Life Outside the Forest: A Socio-Ecological Inquest To Voluntary Relocation From Protected Area In Kerala

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Abstract: *Forest land is considered as the second largest utilization of land next to agriculture by the people for their subsistence as per the report published in Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The dependency of forest and its resources was a prudence based one during the historic time. But due to various reasons such as needs of human beings increases, changes take place in societies, increasing trend of human as well as wildlife population and climate change paved the way for the depletion of forest resources. This depletion of forest resources and subsequent degradation of forest ecosystem contributed lot for the increasing trend of human-wildlife conflict and destabilization of economy of the dependents of forest ecosystem services. In this backdrop, the present study looks into the socio-economic and cultural life of forest dependent tribal communities who are voluntarily relocated from the forest as well as the restoration of forest land where previous human habitation existed. The study adopted an ethnographic case study method for collecting the primary data from the voluntarily relocated vulnerable tribal families of Wayanad. Qualitative data is collected from voluntarily relocated tribal families who belong to Paniya and Kattunayakan communities in Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. The main argument raised in this study is that family based segmentary egalitarian land holding pattern brought socio-cultural continuity in the human habitation in voluntarily relocated land. Continuity in group life brought noticeable transformation and adaptation in the changing socio-economic and cultural sphere of tribes within the alien socio-economic and cultural setting. Voluntary relocation diminishes incessant dependency on forest resources and maximizes the resource accessibility to wildlife. Mankind transforms themselves towards the development scene and fragmented wildlife habitat regenerated for wildlife.*

Keywords: Biosphere Reserve, Ecosystem Service, Forest, Rehabilitation, Tribe, Voluntary Relocation

1. Introduction

Over the human history, man has been honored lot from the interaction with the environment. This achieved status is notified everywhere while the contribution of environment for sustainable human development is left behind. Mawlong and Mitri have noted in their book, that the history of human interaction with the nature came into the records from two lakhs years ago (Babit Mitri and Mawlong, 2015). As changes take place in human society, evolution and transformation is happening in the environment too. The reason behind this environmental transformation is a result of the human interventions as well as the pattern of resource mobilization for their survival. A co-existence pattern of forest and its resources was prevalent among forest dependent communities. Forest is a place where many living objects occupy their place for survival. Dependency of forest for livelihood options has a history from mankind itself. Coexistence pattern and the management of forest resources are well practiced by the people. Population growth, excessive need of natural resources, importance of economy-based survival pattern along with the dominant other factor like lead climate change led to the further move towards environmental degradation. Many impacts emerge out of this particular socio-environmental context including man-animal conflict and degradation of ecosystem services. Degradation of ecosystem services lead to the loss in economy, biodiversity, job and meaningfulness. (Crooks S, Turner, R. K, 1999) Degradation of ecosystem service brings adverse impact in socio-economic life of man in one hand and loss in biodiversity for environment on the other.

Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary is known as one of the most important elephant reserves in Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. This Sanctuary locates in the southern tip of Deccan plateau in neighboring with the southern part of the Western Ghats which possess the 8th place in World Biodiversity Hotspot. The Wayanad Wildlife Division, as an administrative unit, has 344.53Km² of Wildlife Sanctuary area, comprising two discontinuous units of 266.77 Km² and 77.76km² respectively. Wayanad region is covered by the Wayanad plateau (about 3000 km²) and this is situated as a union of three biologically diverse regions such as Western Ghats Mountains, the Nilgiri hills and the Deccan plateau. The plateau area is mostly located in Kerala, with small parts in Karnataka and Tamilnadu.

Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary can be placed as most significant in terms of its ecological and geographic continuity with other Protected Area networks such as Bandipur Tiger Reserve as well as Nagarhole National Park of Karnataka and Mudumalai Tiger Reserve of Tamil Nadu. Hence, it is forming natural corridor for the seasonal migration of long-ranging animals within this greater conservation unit. It also supports one of the largest populations of tigers in the country. Moreover, it is offering unique ecosystem services for its people as well as wildlife. Studies on interaction-based living in forest area of this large Protected Area network between wildlife and mankind are very rare. Majority of the studies are either focused on ecological perspective or socio-economic perspective. Studies on conservation practices and man-nature relation of Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve are done by various scholarships. The studies on socio-ecological perspective on voluntary relocation from an emic perspective are most important to understand the life after voluntary relocation. In this backdrop the present study

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tries to uncover the background issues that led to the introduction of voluntary relocation project and answer the questions like life after voluntary relocation of mankind and wildlife/forest.

Research Questions

1. Why did the tribal communities accept the project of voluntary relocation?
2. What are the major changes happening in the lives of voluntarily relocated tribal people?
3. How does the process of natural forest rejuvenation happen in the relocated land?

2. Methodology

The study follows ethnographic case study method to analyze the socio-economic and cultural changes take place in the life of relocated tribal families and examine the present condition of wildlife habitat. Non-participant observation, focus group discussion and personal interview have been done to collect the primary information and review of available articles from journals and newspapers has been done to collect the secondary information. The data analyzed by adopting narrative analysis as the primary data is collected through a story telling method. The locale of the study is Sulthan Bathery Municipal area and Noolpuzha Panchayath. Key informants of the present study are the tribal people who belong to Paniya and Kattunayakan communities. Since the study is qualitative in nature, the result of the study cannot be generalized. The study intends to put forward this successful model of voluntary relocation of a marginalized community to the conservationists, academic and research communities. The study also highlights an argument that a collective habitat relocation of vulnerable tribal communities can be bringing continuity in group-based habitat style of them.

Why Voluntary Relocation?

‘The Man and Biosphere Program’ (MAB) of UNESCO is posited for identifying the role of local forest dependent communities in the conservation practices of forest, ecosystem services and biodiversity as a whole. This program designed for the formation of three areas viz; core zone, buffer zone and transition zone. The NBR was divided into a core zone of 1, 240 km² and a buffer zone of 4, 280 km² but no transition zone. The Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve is the official name for a set of reserves, with different levels of protection and it includes the integral Protected Areas managed by the Forest Departments of the States of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. The spatial organization of these Protected Areas has led to the boundary incorporation of wildlife habitat and human-dominated spaces such as agricultural fields, cultivable lands and settlements. This continuity of Protected Area network provides calm movement of wildlife through various forest areas. Boundaries and corridors that are proximal to human habitations comparatively more disturbed to wildlife than human settlements located faraway. This has increased habitat fragmentation by cutting off wildlife corridors which is important for their frequent and unrestricted movement. This special

peculiarity has led to increasing trend of human-wildlife conflict. Subsequently, this change in mankind-wildlife interaction (antagonistic interaction towards wildlife and towards mankind) compelled the forest dwellers for moving away from the wildlife habitat. Followed by this, so many voices for moving out of the forest has been increased. Forest dwellers demanded for peaceful life outside the forest area for maintaining their agrarian socio-economic life and better development like the mankind in outside the forest.

As per the observation of National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), ecologically unsustainable land uses induced loss of connectivity, habitat fragmentation, increasing trend of man-tiger conflict, poaching and trafficking, lack of local support and insufficient inviolate space can be considered as main threats to tigers. Technical support has been given by the NTCA for normative guideline, tiger estimation, standard operating procedures, species recovery, securing connecting landscapes, management effectiveness evaluation, economic valuation and guidelines on tiger safari. At the same time NTCA has also given financial support for voluntary village relocation, special tiger protection force, anti-poaching, habitat management, M-STriPES (Monitoring system for tigers, intensive protection and ecological status), awareness and outreach, man-animal conflict, eco development, HRD, monitoring through phase IV protocol, technological interventions like UAVs and e-Eye. NTCA has issued a guideline for voluntary village relocation/rehabilitation in 2008. This is the background of the project voluntary relocation.

Reasons for Voluntary Relocation

There are various for implementing voluntary relocation. Continuous need of the people who are living in the interior forest area is the one of the major reasons behind this. Increasing incidents of human-wildlife conflict induced crop damage, life loss, continuous threat to human and wildlife lives and property loss are important issues that lead for continuous request for implementing the project from people. Besides the problems of mankind, there are various environmental issues emerged out of the people’s dependency on forest. Anthropogenic pressure induced destruction of wildlife habitat, over exploitation of forest resources, pollution, introduction of invasive plants, commercialization of forest resources, threat to wildlife such as poaching, placing snare, wildlife kills etc.

Anthropogenic Pressure on Forest

Anthropogenic pressure from human activities on forests plays an important role in degradation of ecosystem services. From the observation of the human activities on forest ecosystem, it can be divided into two; direct pressures and indirect pressures. Direct pressure on forest due to human activities are unscientific collection practices of forest resources such as firewood collection, fodder grass collection, collection of medicinal plants, roots, tree barks, seeds, cattle grazing, transformation of forest land to agricultural land etc. Indirect pressure on forest can be considered as the climate change, ecosystem service

depletion etc. Increasing trend of population with inadequate traditional livelihood provision create issues related to the survival for daily needs. All these issues together lead to the destruction of natural habitat of wildlife. One of the respondents who belong to Paniya community opined that, *“settlers from outside came to the forest land and later brought their other family members for extending cultivation practices. They widened their cultivable land to natural forests that was the habitat of wildlife. The youth irrespective of tribe and caste, used to collect forest resource on a competition basis. They don't think about future of our children or food for wildlife. All these factors are the reasons of increasing man-animal conflict.”* With the entry of settlers, the prudent model forest resource consumption turned towards profligate model consumption.

Habitat Degradation of Wildlife

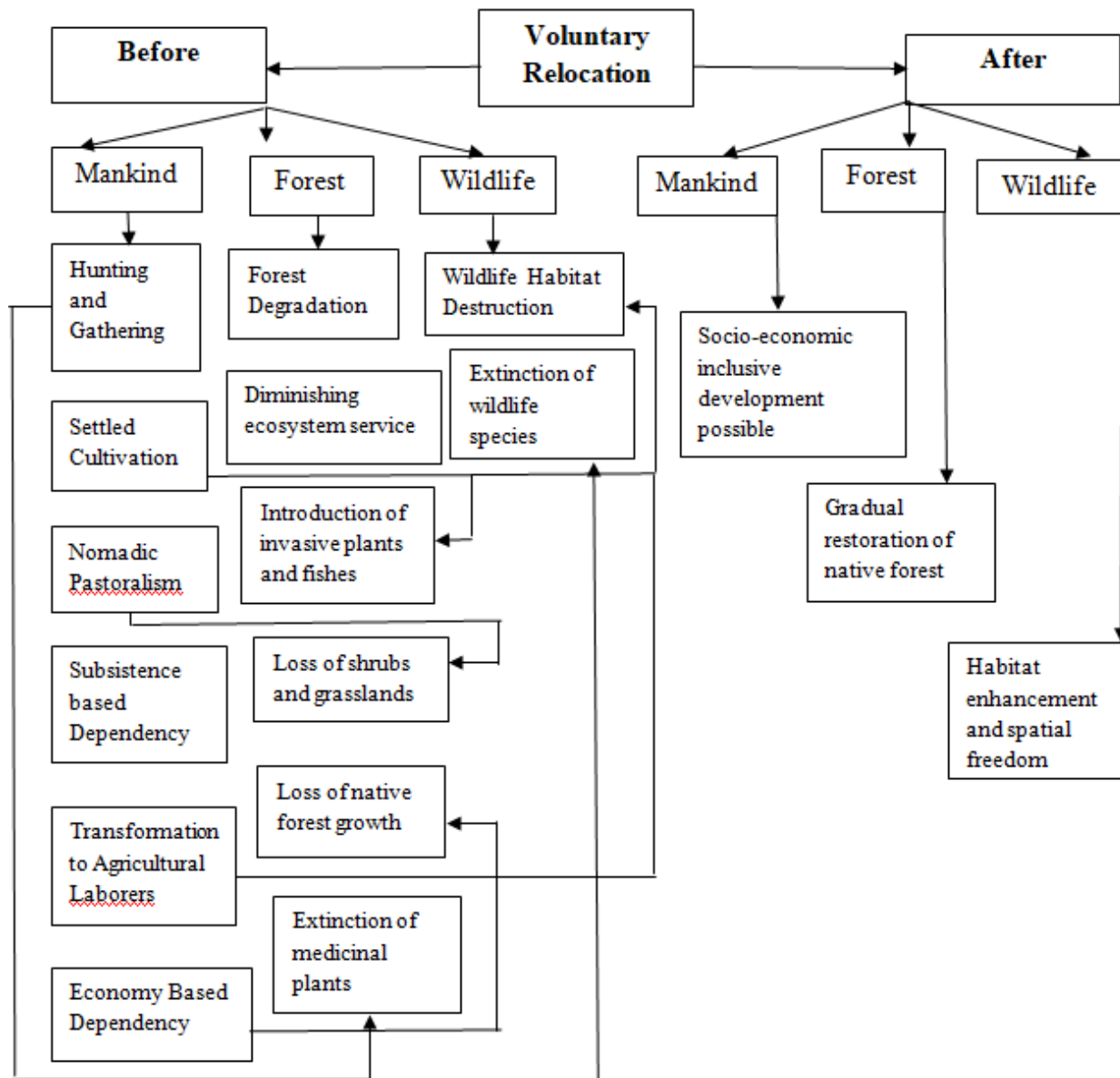
The natural habitat of wildlife has been destroyed by man for developing his habitation because of the increase in population. The need of mankind increases for their subsistence. Captured more grazing grounds, extend agricultural land, etc. leads to the destruction of natural habitat of wildlife. As a consequence of this; all species of wild life have succumbed to predation, starvation or disease and some may either died or in a path of extinction. An old man opined, *“in my childhood days, here I have seen numerous foxes, butterflies, owls, wild fowls, vultures, variety of bison, tubers, edible leaves etc. But all those things are rare or not seen in the forest recently. We have lost so many medicinal plants those are unavoidable in the lives of tribes. Living in the forest without all these is not possible. Moreover, food from forest is not enough for all that's why we need to move out for food. Wildlife, especially elephants and tigers are more problematic than ever now a day. So, it's necessary to move out from forest.”* Forest watcher who belongs to Kattunayakan tribal community says, *“Settlers have used chemical fertilizers for earning more crops from their paddy and plantain fields. This was dangerous to the life of animals. Many species have evicted from this forest due to the use of chemical fertilizers in the agricultural farms inside the forest.”*

Alienation of Tribes from Modernity

Socio-economic backwardness of the tribal youth is also an important reason for accepting the project, voluntary relocation. Education, medical care, job opportunities etc. became most important when they realized about the better life opportunities outside the forest. Tribal old woman said, *“My children struggled to achieve the present government job living in the forest. But now after coming out of the forest his children can easily go to school and college. My children went to hostels and I could only see them once or twice in a year, at that time. After getting job in the panchayath, my son told us to apply for including us for voluntary relocation.”* Scarcity of traditional medicine in forest land worsened the health condition of many tribal people especially the aged groups. Tribal youth said, *“My parents and grandparents were not ready to accept modern medicine initially even if they did not have enough ethnic medicine in forest. Once they came out of the forest, I bring modern medicine to them for their health issues. Many people have lost their lives when we were inside the forest”* From the opinion of the voluntarily relocated people, it is clear that they struggled terribly due to the scarcity of forest resources including edible and medicinal essentials. Besides this, increasing human-wildlife conflict is also compelled them to choose this project for a peaceful life outside the forest. Tribal promoter says, *“Brining aged people who are severely affected cancer like health issues to hospital was unable while they were in the forest area. Their apathy towards modern medicine and hesitation towards outsider's help for curing ailments were the reasons. The situation has changed lot due to this voluntary relocation.”* The insufficiency of ethnic medicine, edible articles and increasing human-wildlife conflict together challenged the peaceful social life of tribes inside the forest area and gradually they are forced to come out by utilizing the benefit of centrally sponsored program named voluntary relocation.

3.Result and Discussion

Academicians and researchers have been inquiring about the legitimacy and humanitarian crisis related to the project Voluntary Relocation. This project is enlisted as one of the most controversial socio-environmental projects implemented with an intension of the welfare of interior forest dwellers as well as the rejuvenation of degraded forest land and fragmented wildlife habitat. The thematic analysis of the life stories of key informants is given below.



Voluntary relocation has been studied through a holistic approach. The present study tried to bring out an emic point of view of Voluntary Relocation. The paper tried to uncover the voice of tribal people who are voluntarily relocated from the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. The outsiders' point of view has highlighted in almost all existing studies. Basic themes derived from the qualitative data analysis of the study are; continuity in integrated social organization of tribes, self-redesigning in practicing customary laws, change in communitarian-based land holding to familial based land holding, mainstreaming through relocating, gradual restoration of forest ecosystem services, habitat rejuvenation of wildlife, gradual reconversion of agricultural lands to forest land and supremacy of wildlife in their own dominion.

Continuity in Integrated Social Organization of Tribes

Tribal people have been living in a norm, socially organized and integrated community life from the time immemorial onwards. While they are moving from their ancestral land to an external land, majority of them tried to purchase a land where they can live as socially united

families. Tribal youth say, "We decided to select a land where our siblings can live in separate houses in the same plot. We opted such kind of land here." Even after voluntary relocation it is seen that there is continuity in integrated social organization based on the family.

Self-redesigning in Practicing Customary Laws

Self-redesigned customary practices for adapting to the new locale have been chosen by the tribal communities. They have brought their traditional deities to the new place after seeking the consent from their ancestors. New places for their ancestors, Gods and Goddesses are created and offer prayers for them. Majority of the tribal communities opted slope terrain which resembles their forest life. Aged man says, "This land full of coffee and land's slope nature attracted me a lot. While I live here, I never miss my forest life. Many people asked me why you chose this kind of land. I told them that only this place can bring my face happiness all time. Even my ancestors are so happy because I have chosen this land." Younger generation shared their happiness of living in the new place with basic amenities in the vicinity of house. They are also interested

in performing religious rituals at new place. Youth says, *“we have brought our ancestors with us in this new place. That’s why they are happy and they bless happiness in our lives too. Now we can travel without elephant’s fear. In the initial days of here, whenever I walk to the market, my head moved left and right in searching wild elephant. Many months later, I started to walk properly.”* Hill based life was followed by Kattunayakan community. Chemmakkaaran was the leader of particular hill. This kind of land selection criteria is adopted by them in the revenue land too.

Change in Communitarian Land Holding to Familial Based Land Holding

In forest land, they lived on a communitarian land holding pattern. Each community live in a particular place as a social group. Kin based large landholding became important after the settlers came into their region. While observing the land holding pattern of voluntarily relocated tribal families, especially Kattunayakans, familial based land holding of vast area can be seen. Three or four eligible families in a house purchased one or two acres of land and they build separate houses in the land. Tribal woman says, *“When the officers told us that we are eligible for 60 lakhs, they suggested us to buy one acre land and build separate houses for each family. That was the guidance we have got from the officers. That option was very much suitable for us. Because we had been living inside the forest like one family for so many years. We like group like. So, this group life is most interested and supporting for us.”* There is a shift in community-based land holding to family based land holding which shows the adaptive mechanism of the tribal families with a changing social structure.

Mainstreaming through Relocation

Mainstreaming of marginalized communities are most important if they are rehabilitated from their ancestral place. Education from once own home was a dream for many of the tribal children. Higher Secondary boy says, *“I have prayed to God every day for getting me an opportunity to live with my parents and go to school each day from my home. Now its possible and I am so happy.”* A degree holder lady says, *“my first menstruation happened at my hostel. I was worried until I reached to my mom. Teachers have given me entire support. But I wished my mother’s presence. From then onwards I seriously think about the life outside the forest with my parents. My dream came true when I was in ninth standard. If I were in forest, I could not have completed my degree.”* Many tribal youths have found multiple job opportunities in the cities. Selecting vocational education, computer courses, professional courses, attending exam orientations, degree and PG courses are the positive sign of socio-economic transformation. This kind of transformation in selecting job can be considered as mainstreaming of marginalized community. The study is not arguing that with this project, complete transformation of marginalized tribal people happened. Instead, it argues that voluntary relocation became a fuel for tribal people for reaching a part of mainstream society.

Habitat Rejuvenation of Wildlife

The participant observation with the forest watchers in the forest land from where people are relocated shown that destructed habitat of wildlife is rejuvenating due to the absence of regular human activity. Regular cattle grazing were one of the important causes for the destruction of wildlife habitat. Conversion of forest land to agricultural practices was another important reason. Tribal watcher opined, *“The grassy swamps became the best elephant habitat that destroyed due to the human habitation. After the voluntary relocated, gradual change in this swamp has started to seen.”* The habitat rejuvenation is in a progressive manner due to the redevelopment of converted forest land to cropland.

Restoration of Forest Ecosystem Services

Forest ecosystem services can be improved once the fuel wood collection and unscientific resource mobilization diminishes and removal of exotic weeds increases. Large scale fuel wood collection and commodification of non-timber forest produce were prevalent while human habitations were there inside the interior forest area. The restoration of forest ecosystem services is most important to recover degraded forest ecosystem due to the continuous human activities. Once the human habitations from the interior forest shifted, the reconversion of crop land to forest land can also be possible.

4. Conclusion

The voluntary relocation, as an altruistic project for mankind and wildlife, brought significant impact on the socio-economic lives of relocated people and destructed habitat of wildlife. The present study argues that the habitat widening of settlers by converting forest land to crop land narrowed the habitat of wildlife consequently conflict between the two increased. Some scholarships (Morris & Roth, 2010; Bhatia & Gubbi, 2002; Karanth, 2003 & Margolius et al., Margolius, Beavers, & Paz, 2002) have evaluated the voluntary relocation from national parks in Asia and South America and suggested that relocation is voluntary because the affected people were consulted by the government in the process of relocation. In the case of Wayanad, the facts explored through this ethnographic account, it is clear that the relocated people live their own redesigned life have got genuine and realistic opportunity to mainstream their future generation. In the case of wildlife and protected area, the reconversion of crop land to forest land increases the habitat for wildlife.

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