



Short Communication

Sathyamangalam Dilemma: Tribal Relocation Plan for Tiger Reserve Expansion and the Associated Psychosocial Problems

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Abstract

Sathyamangalam is home to at least twenty five Tigers and it has been declared as the fourth Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu. It is the plan of the government to relocate the tribal communities living in the declared zone to new locations outside the forest area. The tribal communities are confused and perplexed about the relocation plan. This multidisciplinary study focused on the psychosocial issues among the tribal people and explored the various problems on the process of change of domicile. The study utilizing grounded theory collected data from three different sources. They are: i. key informants, that is, the tribal people in the Tiger reserve who are asked to leave, ii. secondary informants, namely NGOs and other people who work for the tribal communities and the forest officials who are involved in relocation plan, iii. the general population from the surrounding villages of relocation. The study results show that the tribal communities are completely dependent on the forest resources for their livelihood, for their subsistence cultivation and their daily living resources. This dependency leads them to various emotional as well as psychosocial issues when they think of relocation. Some NGO's and voluntary groups who work for the welfare of tribal people identify so many violations on the basic forest laws in the relocation proposal and process. Above all, there are no awareness given, preparations done among tribal communities regarding the relocation plan, process and new life situation.

Keywords: Tribal relocation, Psychosocial issues of relocation, Tiger reserve and tribal people, Sathyamangalam tribal community.

Introduction

Sathyamangalam forest located at the Erode district of Tamil Nadu has been declared a Tiger Reserve. It is the fourth such reserve in Tamil Nadu. The three other Tiger Reserves in Tamil Nadu are at Mudumalai in the Nilgiris district, Anamalai in Coimbatore district and Kalakad-Mundanthurai in Tirunelveli district. The scat study conducted by the forest department indicates the presence of 18 to 25 Tigers in the region¹. As per the wildlife enthusiasts and the government, the creation of a Tiger reserve will lead to a total habitat improvement and rejuvenate the flora and fauna in the entire region. The government has earmarked 1,40 lakh hectares for the exclusive protection zone for the big cats. Of the total area, the core zone comprises over 90,000 hectares. The purpose of this initiative is to protect and improve the forest environment for the existing Tiger population. 'There will be no forceful eviction and the livelihood of the forest dwellers will not be disturbed due to the creation of an exclusive zone for Tigers' is the official declaration of the government. However, in reality, the tribal communities who are living inside the forest settlements are directly or indirectly forced to leave the place. If separating tribal people from Tigers is important for Tigers, it is equally important for the tribal people to live in peace and harmony in

their traditional settlements, is the legitimate question often put forward by tribal welfare thinkers.

The Tiger (*Panthera Tigris*) is a carnivorous mammal and the largest living member of the cat family, the Felidae. It lives in Asia, mainly in India, Bhutan, China, and Siberia. Tigers vary in size depending on their sub species and weigh 225 kg. Males can grow to at least 6 feet long and females are a bit smaller². Tigers, on an average, kill every eight days or so and in a single kill consume 27 kg of meat, and therefore need nearly 50 animals a year³. Tigers have orange fur with black stripes, and no two Tigers have the same pattern of stripes. The fact that every part of the tiger carcass has a commercial value has made them a target for poaching thus endangering them. The Tiger trade is primarily an export-oriented trade that has a larger market abroad than local demand in India. Tigers are hunted for their skin, teeth, claws and almost all the parts. Tigers are also sold as exotic pets in some countries. Traditional Chinese medicine uses Tiger bone as a major ingredient in a variety of concoctions⁴. Between 1990 and 1992, Hong Kong was identified as the major hub for Tiger products and was known to have imported almost 48 percent of the business in Tiger products from China⁵.

Tiger tourism is another major concern which is a budding business in India which has both an opportunity for few as well as a threat to wildlife and forest environment. Tourism brings monetary and employment benefits to some people but most of the times, it is a hindrance to the Tiger's natural habitat. Pollution arising from tourism and other human movement are a serious disturbance as well as a threat to the natural forest environment. Even though it offers employment, not many local and tribal communities are benefited^{6,7}. Tourist resorts change the environment in the course of time, to the extent of obstructing the wildlife movements.

Tribal people who live inside the Tiger reserves generally lead a simple life, with a very little daily needs. When they move to places outside the forest area, their needs will be increased. Although the life standards might improve with modern health care and education, it was observed that lived-experiences of tribal communities outside the forest is profoundly stressful, and in many circumstances, traumatic⁸. When tribal communities come under the dominant social groups, the continuous threat and pressure of the ongoing life struggles would create confusion in the life of tribal people; also, it is obvious that when they are taken out of their comfort zone, they will face a lot of problems⁹. Depriving these communities of security and freedom, changing their unique life style and philosophy they enjoy in their original habitat would give rise to psychosocial problems leading to adjustment issues, mental and coping problems¹⁰.

In view of these above mentioned concerns and problems, this study is focused on the following objectives: to identify the various issues and psychosocial problems related to government's relocation plan of tribal communities for Tiger Reserve expansion; and, to enumerate the causes and problems that the tribal communities fear that they would face in relation to i. psychological conditioning to new life style, ii. social adjustment to new place and environment, iii. new life style difficulties in adopting modern and semi-urban culture. The primary outcome of this study is expected to help the government officials, NGOs and the tribal communities to manage the relocation issue and to give courage to face the challenges. The study will also identify areas for improvement, psychosocial education, intervention strategies and action plans towards the improvement of their status and quality of life.

Methodology

This exploratory-descriptive study was conducted in the newly formed Tiger Reserve at Sathyamangalam that falls in the tri-junction of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. The data was collected from three sources. They are: 260 key informants (tribal people who are asked to leave), 24 secondary informants (NGOs who work for the tribal people and, government and forest officials), 380 participants (general public from Erode district). The key components of Grounded Theory methodology: coding, memoing, theoretical sampling, and

theoretical sorting were also utilized in data analysis¹¹. To avoid subjective bias, an ethnographic approach was applied. Besides interview, observation by the researcher into some social functions, informal conversations that initiated storytelling to elicit information was also employed. Most of the interviews were done at the homes of the respondents to understand the contextual meaning of what they say and understand their real-life situation to comprehend the people and their worldview. The researcher interviewed some participants near the riverside or in the fields when they were at work. Throughout the research process, specific topics that arose from the data were frequently discussed with tribal leaders, NGOs and other specialists who have knowledge about tribal people¹². This paved the way for respondent validation and to check on the credibility of the data being analyzed.

Results and discussion

The study results are classified into three major categories. They are i. tribal communities and the relocation plan, ii. psychosocial and emotional issues related to the relocation plan, and, iii. preparation and psychosocial-education for relocation.

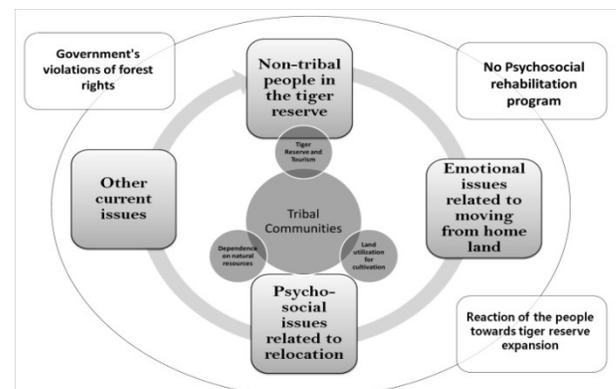


Figure-1: Identified problems of tribal people in relocation plan at Sathyamangalam.

The tribal communities and the relocation plan: Agriculture is the main occupation in all tribal settlements in this study. Some cultivate subsistence crops like hill rice, millets such as Tenay, Ragi, Maize, Samai and Kambu. In some settlements, cash crops such as pepper and banana are slowly creeping in. Some tribal people are exploited by landlords and farmers of the plains, who entrust their cattle to be grazed in the forests. Meat is not a staple food due to cultural taboos and religious restrictions. With their proximity to wildlife, the occasional hunting for food is also under scanner, and they are often blamed for extinction of all kinds and species of wildlife. Besides these, the use of forest resources like firewood and wild honey are major products the tribal people depend for their survival.

NGOs and other tribal welfare groups claim that the law to expand Tiger Reserve and evacuate tribal communities out of

their native homeland require scientific analysis and consultations with the people who live there. However, many NGOs claim that the Ministry overlooked many legal requirements and arbitrarily declared that the settlements need to be removed from the forest land. The tribal people comment that the Tiger Reserve expansion plan and the ban of tribal people moving in the forest are decided or declared without any consultation with the affected tribal communities. This announcement and the related prohibition make the tribal people handicapped for many of their survival needs, which they have been practising for few generations. The government and forest officials consider the local people as enemies of the forests and they are being treated and alienated from their livelihood which they were enjoying before the reserves came up.

The following positive and negative outcomes are identified and foreseen if the relocation materializes. The positives are: tribal people will be eligible to have land titles and other government aid. All households will have access to electricity, running water and health care services. Children will be able to get quality education and younger generation can attend college for the first time. The identified negatives of relocation would be: people will have limited access to firewood, and other forest products, and have to supplement their income by working as labourers. Psychologically the people are not prepared to mingle with the mainstream society and they will have self-esteem and self-confidence issues as well as other emotional problems and stress. They might also face some hostility from dominant groups in the area.

Psychological and emotional issues: A lot of unexplained psycho-emotional issues are hidden in their expressions. When the tribal people leave the forest residence, the influence of formal education, religious and cultural influences, and the mass media directly and indirectly encourage the younger generation to abandon the remnants of their ancestors' traditional values, knowledge, and way of life¹³. Moving away from the traditional cultural way of life and adopting a foreign culture can create dilemmas in the life of the people. The forced relocation from traditional to modern culture would be a disaster in the wellbeing of the people. This is a major psychological warfare in which the conflict is seen in people in the form of 'inner mind adhering to tradition and the conscious mind trying to live the modern life'. The major identified psycho-social issues of relocation would be, therefore, poverty, land ownership, loss of access to ancestral land leading to anxiety, fear, confusion and depression, adjustment to new environment, fear of acceptance from mainstream society.

Tribal communities live in the forest for centuries and have their own customs, practices, all centred on their life in the forest. When they are in an uncertain situation about their own traditional settlement, which differs geographically and socially, they are traumatized; they don't like to talk about the issue itself. Tribal communities have a sentimental attachment to the

land of their ancestors and thinking of leaving the place of their ancestors is a very painful and traumatic.

Therefore, living in an uncertain situation and thinking of a doubtful future gives them a lot of anxiety and helplessness that has changed their, otherwise peaceful life in to a hopeless miserable situation.

There are non-tribal settlements which consist of families that came and settled in the forest years back at Thengumarahada village near Moyal River. This settlement is home to 300 families, who moved in after the Bhavanisagar dam construction in the 1950s. In this non-tribal settlement, people have agreed for the relocation plan of the government, as they feel isolated inside the forest area without modern-day facilities. Besides these people, there are also more than 10 blue metal quarries very close to the reserve forests that has become a threat to the wild animals. As per the Ecologically Sensitive Zone notification, no activity detrimental to wildlife should be allowed within 10 km radius of these areas. However, these quarries using detonators for blasting rocks and continuous movement of trucks and other vehicles which drives the wild animals from their natural habitat, creating man-animal conflict. NGOs and other environmental groups often lament that forest rules are overlooked when violations are perpetuated by politicians and affluent people.

Psychosocial preparation and rehabilitation: Relocation of tribal communities at Sathyamangalam when analyzed deeply has several issues involved, such as basic rights violations, poor government decisions, unexplained complexities of resettlement goals, and many more. Since the relocation is involuntary, the government order on Tiger reserve expansion and forest officials implementing the rule, forcing the people to leave their homes and lands create psycho-emotional issues and economic uncertainty for the people. When tribal people lose access to vital natural resources which they enjoyed for the last hundreds of years, and when they are fully dependent on the forest for their basic resources like firewood, fresh water, and some income generating products like honey, the uncertain situation creates a kind of hopelessness and helplessness in the minds of people.

The need for rehabilitation and the related psychosocial training are vital before the people are asked to leave their traditional territory to the new location. The tribal communities are currently unprepared, ignorant of many modern trends and developments in the society. From an ecological point of view, once urbanized or semi-urbanized they tend to neglect the care for nature and the natural resources; from a social point of view, there is the devaluation of traditional values and the inability to adapt to life situations leading them to depression. They would become dependent on another culture to the extent of losing their own original identity. A stressful life situation is often foreseen due to dilemmas in facing existential situations.

Rehabilitation is a long process which needs an intense preparation by psychologists and social workers. Rehabilitation usually means reversing the debilitating effects of a physical, psychological and social trauma¹⁴. Psychosocial interventions need to be worked out in three core psychosocial domains i. skills and knowledge, ii. emotional and iii. social well-being. The aim of rehabilitation would be restoring mental health and well-being that has been lost or injured by uncertainty or anxiety creating. Psychotherapy, counselling and psycho-education are some psychological interventions that could be used in rehabilitation. Besides these, NGO networking, vocational training can be considered together with giving purpose and meaning for their existence and strength to produce resilience and new life orientation to create and improve their new identity. The Forest Department should provide ecologically viable livelihood options to the tribal people, after convincing them to relocate. Making them agree to relocate would be a difficult task. Forest Rights Act, passed in December 2006, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act recognize the rights of forest dwellers which gives tribal people right to live in the forest land. However, it is not considered in the current situation. The denial of indigenous and tribal people's rights to ancestral lands and disruption of traditional livelihoods, indigenous knowledge and culture are evidently seen in forcing the people to move out of forest land.

Wildlife enthusiasts demand that it is necessary to create an inviolate space for the Tiger. They desire that the core of the Tiger reserve could be designated as a national park with no human activity, while the buffer area could sustain people where tribal communities can continue to co-exist. However, the concept of core and buffer is not clearly articulated in the forest laws. The law provides different classification: it has two categories of protected reserves which are national parks and sanctuaries and two categories of protected forests, reserve forests and protected forests¹⁴. If there are a larger number of tribal communities live in a place, adjustments should be done to keep those areas under lesser category to ease human movement.

Conclusion

This multidisciplinary study was conducted to explore the psychosocial issues arise among tribal people on the process of forced change of domicile for Tiger reserve expansion at Sathyamangalam. The study has identified that the government's relocation plan is poorly conceived and the planned execution is being conducted in an unorganized way, violating various rights of tribal people. The tribal communities are completely dependent on the forest resources for their livelihood for their subsistence cultivation as well as for other natural resources. This dependency leads them to various emotional as well as psychosocial issues when the relocation is thought of. The overall reactions of the tribal people are very

negative and many NGO's are supporting the cause of tribal people who are illiterate. The NGO's and other voluntary groups identify so many violations of basic forest laws in the relocation proposal due to the authoritarian government officials. The study also identifies that there is no psychosocial or psycho-emotional preparation for relocation or any psychosocial education assistance for rehabilitation provided for the tribal people.

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