

FOREST MANAGEMENT ISSUES IN EAST GODAVARI - A CASE STUDY OF PEDDA MALLAPURM *

- Ravi R Pragada **

INTRODUCTION: In the ancient times planting a tree symbolised a mans possession over land but did not confer his moral authority to cut the tree. Today the same man cuts down the tree without any moral scruples. Does this indicate that there existed traditional systems with ensured proper management and protection of forests, land & water? If so how did the traditional systems influence tribals relationships with nature & his out look on the forest? What art the reasons and implication of an attitudinal shift of the hillman, the transition from reverence of Adivitalli (Mother Forest) to a matter of fact treatment towards it? How have the plainsmen and state contributed in bringing about a slide in the traditional norms of the forest? Is it an inevitable process and does it signify an alarming trend which requires immediate concern in this ecological pandemonium? In the context of this seminar, these are urgent questions that we need to look within ourselves. It is these same questions that we are constantly being confronted with during all these years of our work with the tribal people of East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. I present here a case study of a tribal village of Peddamallapuram (which has been the headquarters of our work in these past six years) to explain the traditional systems and the transition that followed.

The paper is presented in three parts. The 1st part gives a description of the traditional system and how its distinct traits ensured the protection of the ecosystem. The 2nd part explains the break up of the traditional systems under pressure from the colonial state, commercialization and inflow of non-tribal/plainsman with different pattern of behaviour. The 3rd part poses issues relating to the protection of ecosystems under the changing conditions.

PART-1

TRADITIONAL SYSTEMS: Forest management in the connotation of indigenous people does not correspond to the corporate systems of management we have today. The traditional methods of checks and balances have their modus operandi in socio-cultural norms passed on through generations. The social customs, religious performances, superstitious beliefs and rituals imposed upon by the elders influenced the outlook of the tribals towards the forest and resulted in distinct forms of management. Although to our present day comprehension they appear to be loose and informal structures they were strictly adhered to by inter-communities and intra-communities and severely monitored by the community. The traditional systems have some distinct traits which are outlined below

1. INTERNAL HARMONY OF CULTURE: It is important that we understand the structure of society in the traditional setup. Family or individual, as we perceive in the modern societies was not the social unit in primitive societies, Communities were small

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** Ravi R Pragada is an activist of SMATA (NGO) working with tribal people of East Godavari & Visakhapatnam district - Andhra Pradesh - India.

and compact and all socioeconomic relations were oriented towards encompassing the needs of the community as a whole and resources were exploited only in so far as basic needs demand. This was the cardinal principle that was followed for the protection and preservation of both man and nature. The attachment to the culture and customs propounded by their ancestors is a dominating factor in maintaining this principle. The primitive people dreaded novelty and change out of fear and suspicion to anything new and strange. Any change had to undergo rigorous scrutiny and could be influenced only by the "learned" personalities in the community. The village elders and their councils ruled over the total life pattern of the society. Any deviation by any member of the community from the set norms brought punishment from the village council although they enjoyed liberal democracy. It is this homogenization and harmonisation of culture that preserved the internal discipline of the community.

2. **ABSENCE OF INDIVIDUAL OWNERSHIP:** The concept of individual ownership was a non-existent phenomenon to the primitive tribals. In the mode of economic living the principle was of feeding every member in the community and no single person was abandoned to his fate. In the primitive stages hunting and food gathering were the main occupations. Later when agriculture was introduced consumption crops were grown. Harmony existed between villages and communities and village councils determined their traditional village boundaries called "polimeru". The land, forest and trees fell within these boundaries and the communities strictly followed them. Ownership of natural resources was a common property of the community and trespassing beyond these boundaries brought inter-communities together to settle disputes.
3. **RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS:** Religion played a very important role where worship of natural deities like trees, forest, animals and crops was the traditional culture. To the tribal, the hills, the streams and the forest were immortal gods bestowing him with abundance of natural wealth. Consciously or unconsciously, they believed in the preservation of nature which manifested itself in the religious rituals and superstitious beliefs attached to them. In Pedda Mallapuram festivals are observed for harvesting, for sowing, for ploughing, for the rains, for the forest, etc. For example, Gangamma festival is performed before the crop is harvested, Nukamma festival is to usher in the new year, and to sprinkle the seeds, Kappalapanduga to invoke the gods for rains if the monsoons do not set on time, Rajulubabu festival is celebrated to plead with the gods to protect and guide them when they go into the forest for fuel, food or hunting. Likewise they perform festivals before harvesting of any fruit or grain - there is a pulses festival, a millets festival, a pumpkin festival, a tamarind and a jackfruit festival, before any of these are plucked and eaten. If consumed before performing these festivals the tribals believe that they will be duly punished by the gods. This religious sentiment ensures that the crop is harvested at the proper time, it puts the fear of god into those who might have the ill-intention of trespassing or pilfering. Especially common property, such as fruit-bearing trees like mango, tamarind, jack, custard-apple, citrus, etc have to be guarded from cattle and thieves by the whole village and the fruits are plucked only after they are ripe. When the elders hold a meeting to announce that the fruits are sufficiently ripe, they choose an auspicious day for a small ceremony to the village deity. At least one member from each household takes part in collecting the fruits. They are either distributed into equal parts to each household or else the whole village sells the produce and shares and money equally, or the money that is earned remain with the village-council to be used on public occasions like festivals or meetings or on visitors.

4. RESTRICTION ON OVER EXPLOITATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES & PROTECTION OF ENTIRE ECO-SYSTEM: Apart from festivals tribals have strong belief systems which, though may appear superstitious, to us are actually born out of experience and close interaction with nature. The different methods adopted by the tribals were,

- a) restriction on the exploitation of certain plants/fruits/ timber/ grass/animals to particular seasons alone. The period between 'Padyam' and 'Pournami' (Suklapaksham) ie., when the moon is on the rise, timber varieties are not felled as they rot or get eaten by termites. Between Pournami and Amavashya (Bahulapaksham) ie., when the moon is on the descent, it is suitable to fell trees. Relia (Fistula flowers) are plucked only after Gangamma festival. The 'Jeeluga' tree (Caryota Urens or Fish Tail Palm) is one of the most precious trees here. The toddy is tapped only in one season (Jan-April) and is ceremoniously consumed by everyone in the village after worshipping it;
- b) restrictions on exploitation of animals/plants at certain stages of their lives - the tribals do not eat mango until it ripens and falls down, the kernels are stored and sowed during the monsoons. Our people also do not eat the tender palm since it has future uses in terms of fruit (tatipandu), (tuber), tega and plant for regeneration;
- c) Some species were considered sacred and utilised only for some sanctimonious purposes like festivals and marriages.
- d) Certain plants are medicinally valuable hence, exploiting of these species restricted only to the medicine-men or 'gurus' as they were called.
- e) restrictions were made on the quantity of timber/plant/animals to be exploited. Hunting of animals was a community activity once a year. During the Gangamma festival, all the menfolk participate in the hunting ceremony. It is a universal belief among our tribals that cow's milk should be left to the calf and not to be consumed by humans.
- f) myths are created in hunting of certain animals or cutting down of certain trees. For instance, each tribal community has a totemic symbol of a particular tree or animal to which the origin of the tribe is attributed. Therefore these symbols are considered sacred and fiercely protected.
- g) association with forest and trees is extended to christening of villages like Vantalamamidi, To-tapalli, Gurramamidi, Kapparamajji. Surnames of persons also originate from names of birds/animals/trees - like the surname 'Gemmeli' means peacock.
- h) the tribal calendar has its chronology determined by agricultural activities and forest seasons which reveals how regular life-patterns of tribals are closely associated with nature.
- i) occurrence of calamities like floods, famines, droughts are attributed to the wrath of the gods for the sins committed by themselves.

Thus all these rituals and beliefs reveal what an intimate interrelationship exists between the tribal and his natural surroundings.

PART-II

THE TRANSITION PERIOD

- a) Entry of the outside world into these remote forest areas was heightened during the colonial times as British interests lay in the commercial benefits of the forest resources with industries, building of railway-lines, marketing of minor and major forest produce and meeting the demands of the non-forest dweller. Clearing of forest for the lucrative urban and foreign needs resulted in the rapid depletion of natural wealth. Until this time the tribal thought he was the 'king of the forest', living in tacit understanding with the other species. The traditional ethic of preservation and devotion of Mother Forest was the primary value-system that the hillman observed. With the advent of the government into the erstwhile tribal 'forestdom', governmental regulations were framed with regard to ownership and administration of the forests. The forest department was formed with the objective of conserving the forest and protecting it from undue utilisation and exploitation. This step led to the process of demarcation of forest land and categorisation of forests as protected forests, reserve forests, etc., which proved to be a major reversal in the tribals' life as they lost total control over the land and forests around them. Thus when the state introduced the system of individual ownership of land, it destroyed the system of community ownership. It became the land of the pattaraj where ownership of land through title deeds came to be the legal recognition of ownership. Due to tribal innocence and ignorance, they started to lose both their physical and legal possession of the land. He can say that it was a deliberate move by the colonial powers whose policy was to divide by rule. Thus when the colonial state started forcefully exercising their right over the forest the tribal resented and it resulted in 3 major rebellions against the British the Rampa Rebellion, Lagari Fituri & Seetha Rama Raju Fituri (1921-24). With respect to land demarcated as forest land new rules and regulations were formed which were not in conformity with tribal life. The tribal suddenly found himself dictated about what to cut, where to graze his animals, collect fuelwood and fodder and whether to hunt or sell forest produce and to whom. Circulars to this effect were sent to the people and laws were stringent only so far as the tribal was concerned. In Pedda Mallapuram tribals had to pay a toll called "pulla" to enter the forest. These receipts had to be shown to the forest guard each time they went into the forest. Goats were not allowed into the forest for grazing beyond 22 metres from reserve forest line and carrying of matchboxes and knives was also prohibited. Initially the tribals obeyed all government rules meticulously both out of fear and respect for the authorities. There runs an adage among the tribals that if they were confronted by a forest guard on one side and a tiger on the other, it is the latter that the tribal would choose to face. When they saw that while they were observing the laws, the law enforcers themselves were accomplices to the malpractices and smuggling activities of the plainsmen and industries, gradually the tribals got incorporated into the commercialisation of the forest resulting in an apathetic feeling among them because they no longer felt a sense of responsibility to the forest. One major result was that the tribals were pushed even further interior due to pressure on land from non-tribals.
- b) Let us now see how the above factors have contributed to the process of change in Pedda Mallapuram:

Pedda Mallapuram is a village in what is now termed as tribal sub-plan area of East Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh, where recognition of the government has come quite late. Over 50 years ago Pedda Mallapuram had around 20 house holds belonging to Konda Kapu & and Konda Kammara tribes. This village was visited by the legendary revolutionary Alluri Seetha Rana Raju who fought the British for 3 years (1921-1924) for tribal rights over land, forest & water. This is a village which was once too inaccessible to the outside world and has gone through a drastic transition. It is a classic example of its relegation into a semi-tribal 'township'. In its present form Pedda Mallapuram has grown into a large village of Two Hundred Sixty Five households of which Eighty to Ninety consist of non-tribals. The extent of revenue land belonging to the village runs to almost One Thousand Two Hundred acres. Traditionally the crops grown were ragi, jowar and a wide range of millets. There was only one single annual crop, the yield of which could barely sustain the people for 5 or 6 months. The rest of the year was occupied in collecting minor forest produce like adda leaves, gum, honey, nuts, fruits, etc., and bartering these for their consumption needs in nearby towns of Sankavaram, Santa Paidipala, Ravutulapudi. This opened a communication and inflow from the external societies. In the beginning tribals encroached onto revenue lands and cleared them for cultivation and settled down to agriculture. As the influx of plainsman increased all unreserved land was cleared by around 1956 and, therefore forest land higher up needed to be cleared for the tribal population to survive. With urban demands skyrocketing and forest trade getting more lucrative, vested interests ruthlessly trebled their deforestation operations. In the 1950s and 60s Pedda Mallapuram was a densely forested area. The density of the forest can be illustrated from the fact that women walked barely 300 yards from their houses to collect firewood. Soon timber-mills were permitted to be established very close to the forest. In the years between 1966-67 AP Paper Mills came up at Rajahmundry (110 kms) and started laying roads for their trucks and they used to pay a paltry two paise for a headload of bamboo. Around the same time a beedi-leaf contractor, M Ethiraj Chettiar came to the area and lured tribals into collection of beedi-leaves for which he paid three paise per bundle. There were other traders between 1960-65 like Koppu Reddy Kamayya, Matla Kamayya, Motla Chinayya, Mukireddi Pamu, Parvata Apparao and others. In the late 60s and early 70s the poor and backward plainsmen began seeking livelihood in the hills. Over the years this stream of people became steadier and are now well-established in Pedda Mallapuram. In these conditions land-hungry non-tribals from the surrounding towns and unscrupulous moneylenders occupied tribal lands through fraudulent means. Being in the sub-plan area our tribals were not covered by any protective laws and hence the exploitation of their vulnerability. Non-tribals poured in from Pitapuram, Sankavaram, Geddanapalli, Guwmregula, etc., and have encroached onto 30 percent of the wet land. With their settlement the village took the hue of a rural rather than a tribal village as tea-stalls, grocer's shops and sahuakar businesses sprouted up. A few years back the shandy or the weekly market was also started in Pedda Mallapuram, it having proved to be the strategic point for traders and merchants. Politically too, it grew up into a centre of local power with the non-tribals forming a powerful lobby. Some of them buy firewood from the tribals and sell them to the nearby towns. Some others engage tribals in and around Pedda Mallapuram to make coal and trade them outside. Every morning one finds a stream of tribals making a bee-line into the forest for chopping wood and making coal which they bring down to Pedda Mallapuram in the evening. The old men of Pedda Mallapuram bemoan that ninety percent of the forest that

existed in their childhood has disappeared now. What I have personally seen since 1987 confirms the old man experience regarding accelerated deforestation. Pedda Mallapuram is 18 kms from Sankavaram, the mandal headquarters. Six years ago there was 12 kms of forest cover between Pedda Mallapuram and Sankavaram but this forest along the road has been slowly cleared away by headloaders and cyclists. In the 70s is a timber mill was setup at Sankavaram, and another at Kathipudi. The road being laid in 1980, timber trade increased and atleast hundred cartloads of timber and fuelwood per day used to slip out of the area. The paper mills had cleared all the bamboo in the area by 1980, ninety percent of the valuable timber trees have disappeared. Now-a days women have to spend at least half day for collection of firewood. Tribals of Pedda Mallapuram are going to more interior villages to look for timber to make ploughs and other agricultural implements. Gradually after the non-tribal influx the tribals also have become rice eaters and today there are two rice mills in the village.

A recent phenomenon is the shift from food crop to cash crop economy. Tobacco is the major crop grown now sponsored by mega-corps with promises of high remuneration. Cashew plantations were sponsored by the Integrated Tribal Development Agency, with the motive of social forestry for income generation. For their consumption purposes the tribals have no cleared more land further up, some of it in the reserve forest as well.

PART-III

Issues in protection of eco-system under the changed scenario

The present scenario is full of ironies and contradictions. On the one hand forest has to be conserved, wildlife has to be protected and on the other, survival and sustenance requirements of the tribals also needs a major priority.

As an activist what I can put forward to you are queries regarding these issues: Is it really possible for the tribal to revert back to his primitive customs? In the present circumstances where tribals do not live in isolation any longer, how can the traditional patterns be adapted to the changing times? Yet state as it views the utilisation of the forest is far removed from the tribals view and hence the contradictions in the approach.

Governmental attitude has been of giving superficial concessions to the tribals instead of recognising their rights over the forests. Hence, what is required of the State is a mature and realistic social policy with regard to regularising and recognising people's participation in management. The government has to accept the traditional village boundaries or polemeru. Each tribal village has to be demarcated their village forest boundary irrespective of the species present. This can be given to the community to manage since people will protect only if they also benefit from it. In other words the forest department has to participate in the people's activities instead of thrusting programmes which the tribal has not created and has no interest in, some of the tribal elders and youth in Pedda Mallapuram have shown concern over the degenerating forest situation. They have personally faced negative repercussions and hence, have decided to confront their problems collectively. Fifty of them had encroached onto a fertile valley land which fell within the traditional 'polimeru'. The contention of the tribals is that since they have occupied originally cultivated land and since it

falls on a low gradient it should be either recognised as revenue land or at least be given possession rights. Another reason for the formation of the struggle committee was to withstand the onslaught of the plainsmen's demands on their forest. In effect, the committee feels that the land belongs to the community with individuals cultivating it. This move shows a rising anxiety among the tribals to salvage themselves through the nature around. Recently all the gum tappers protested strongly as some gum trees were felled by non-tribals and smuggled away.

Assessment of the local needs of the village in terms of fuel, fodder, timber agricultural and horticultural consumption has to be made. Also the energy and other forest requirements of the surrounding villages and towns have to be studied and then how much of these demands can be met from the forest has to be decided. Urban demands should be met by developing the degraded forests around the towns so as to reduce the pressure on the tribal and forest area i.e., states responsibility. These programmes should involve woodcutters and coalmakers as they are the instruments of deforestation as there is a link between smuggling and unemployment.

Next, tribal demand for agricultural activities have to be looked into by clearly specifying the boundaries of the forest on the basis of gradient of land, leaving valley and flat lands for agricultural purposes and hillslopes for treecrops and fuelwood.

The importance of people's identification and participation with programmes is gradually being realised by the authorities which is reflected in the recent trend in programmes like Joint Forest Management (JFM). However, the authenticity of the professed amicable intentions have to be proved and yet to be implemented as it is a known fact that the credibility of the authorities in power is fragile among people. The concept of JFM has already been tried successfully in a few places in India. In West Bengal which has premiered this program there are 16,000 village protection committees looking after 200,000 Hectres of forest area. These committees not only achieved effective protection of forests with minimum investment from the government but also improved the livelihood of villagers. In a study conducted in these areas it was found that village women were earning eight to ten rupees per day from collection of Minor Forest Produce such as sal seeds etc. The study also showed that returns from well protected natural forest are higher than plantations. SUKOMAJRI - water shed development near Chandigarh and RALEGAON in Maharashtra are other successful examples of management of natural resources by local people.

Regeneration of forests is not the sole responsibility of the tribal as utilisation is more in the outside world than with the tribals. Ultimately, the major cause for the degeneration of forests is the materialistic and consumeristic life style of the urban elites whose objective is luxury and not preservation. Unless and until the ethics of these folk are redefined laws however stringent will never be sincerely followed and forestry programmes with tribals however well-planned will not be fruitful. All the same we have to accept the trust that the tribal is capable of protecting the forest which is what he has been doing all through the ages.