

## Tribal Women's Livelihood in Goa: a Daily Struggle with the Nature and the Nurture

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### Abstract

Life for tribal women has become a daily struggle due to inflation and the high cost of living in 'touristic' Goa as well as government policy regarding their traditional source of livelihood – namely kumeri or shifting cultivation. This has been a common practice among the tribal communities in several parts of India. It has been called by different names, for example jhum cultivation in North India, slash and burn, swidden agriculture etc. In Goa, shifting cultivation is locally known as kumeri cultivation or kaamat in Konkani. This paper is an attempt to document the daily struggles of the women in my own community the Velip community, which is considered as one of the Tribal communities of Goa. Tribal communities seem to be closer to nature because of geographical settlement and therefore they are highly dependent on nature as a means of livelihood. But now days because of government policy, forest laws, etc., the community has been denied access to land and other natural resources making survival by this traditional source of livelihood difficult. The present paper deals with the necessity of the tribal people especially poor Velip women who are more dependent on natural resources as means of livelihood and whose search for alternates is the highlight of this paper. Being from the Velip community, this paper has a personal connection with me as I have lived through the challenges of women from different generations within this tribal community.

Keywords: *tribal community, livelihood, gender, traditional occupation, laws, struggle.*

### 1. Introduction

It is often said that India lives in her villages and these villages are sustained by nature and the environment. People in villages were intimately dependent on the forest and its produce and later on agriculture.

The Velip Community was in the past very connected with and dependent on the forest and when they began cultivation it was within the forest itself. The Velip Community was largely engaged in shifting cultivation in Canacona Taluka in Goa.

Goa, a small State on the west coast of India with an area of 3,702 square km, became a State within the Indian Union on the 30<sup>th</sup> May 1987. Goa was ruled by the Portuguese colonial rulers for nearly 451 years from 1500 to 1961. While Goa is a popular tourist destination not much information is known about the tribal population in Goa. In fact D. D. Kosambi in *Myth*

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*and Reality*, talks about the village community in the Old Conquests of Goa and states how Goan society was during the Portuguese rule with special focus on Talukas of Bardez, Salcete, Tiswadi. However there is no mention of the tribal communities in this work. (Kosambi 2005). As per the Census of India (2011), the total population of Goa is 14, 58,545 and the population of Scheduled Tribes in Goa (Census 2011) is 1, 49,275 that is 10.2% of the State population. In 2003, three tribal communities in Goa, namely Velip, Kunbi and the Gawda communities were recognized as Scheduled Tribes by the President of India. According to the available literature tribal communities were the original settlers or the first inhabitants of Goa (Correia L. 2006; Khedekar 2004; Gomes 2002; Bhandari 1999; Xavier 1993; and others). A majority of the tribal population resides in the three Talukas of Canacona, Quepem and Sanguem of South District of Goa. The Gawdas are further divided into three main categories: Hindu Gawdas, Christian Gawdas and Nav-Hindu Gawdas.

Goa communities residing in mountainous area have an access to land which is controlled by the forest department which restricts the communities in practicing their age old occupation. At the same time the Government negligence towards these tribal communities after having forest dwellers act, 2006, which seems to be eco-friendly.

The forest and the communities depending on it especially tribal communities or the forest dwelling communities cannot be separated. As their livelihood is drawn from the forest it is their right to protect it and therefore let it be free from Government laws, rules, etc. which creates this hegemony between the Government and the local communities, nature and the worshiper.

In liberated Goa, Government has captured all the forest land under their control becoming village lives difficult. Community people are losing its areas. It made community life difficult.

Giving one example there are laws wherein one cannot take mushroom from the ruins in the forest but you see people selling it in front of government offices. The one who bans it are the one who buys it.

There are some studies done in Kerala (Suresh 2010) on indigenous agricultural practices among the Mavilan tribe and on the Northern-Eastern India such Ramakrishnan (1992) who focuses on the shifting cultivation practices locally known as Jhum. The latter author focused on the role played by women in carrying out this occupation among different

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tribal populations and their links to socio-cultural practices and religious beliefs among different groups in North- Eastern India.

Sumi Krishna, 'Livelihood and Gender: Equity in community resource management' gives analyses and activism in rural and tribal India focusing on land, water, forest, etc. (Krishna 2004) Dev Nathan, 'From Tribe to Caste' gives an account of formation of Indian society by focusing on caste and tribe as two main basic categories while understanding Indian society.

Vandana Shiva, 'Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India' focuses on development, ecology and gender debate. The author talks about ecological struggles in opposing the domination and exploitation of nature. She further argues for harmony, sustainability and diversity of nature as she focused on women in the developing Countries such as India. Further she states that there is a link between the degradation of women and degradation of nature in society. (Shiva 1988)

Guha (1995) talks about people's relationship with nature by studying the environmental movement by analyzing natural resource conflict and anthropological traditional conservational pattern in Indian society.

Arnold and Guha brings together a pioneering essays of the environmental history of South Asia with the changing human relations affecting both ecological and cultural terms. (Arnold and Guha 1996)

Agarwal Bina (1995), shows how gender inequalities are there in the present religious bodies whether it is Hindu inheritance law, Christian law or Islamic law. Further she focuses on the changes that have taken in laws by giving an example of Christian women in Kerala and women's rights in agricultural land.

Kishwar Madhu (1987) gives an account how Ho tribal women denied land rights which was the subject for debate even after playing an important role in sustaining family and community.

The State of Goa is divided into two Districts (North Goa and South Goa). Goa is further divided for administrative purposes into 12 talukas. Canacona is the southern-most taluka of Goa, covered by the dense forest and bound on the west by a coastline formed by the Arabian Sea. Canacona is the least populated taluka and is the home to the majority of the tribal population of Goa. The total population of Canacona taluka is 45,172 out of which 13,657 are Scheduled Tribes of which 13,451 are living in rural areas and only 206 persons are staying in

an urban setting. Canacona is comprised of seven villages namely; Khola village, Agonda village, Shristal village, Gaodongri village, Paiguinem village, Khotigao village and Polem village. There is one municipal council which unites the whole of Canacona people for administrative purposes. A majority of the Velip community resides in Canacona taluka.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *Shifting Cultivation amongst the Velip Community*

According to literature on shifting cultivation, it is a form of cultivation or an agricultural system in which plots of land are cultivated temporarily and then abandoned for a while. This system often involves clearing of a piece of land, followed by several years of wood harvesting or farming, until the soil's fertility needs replenishing. Once the land becomes inadequate for crop production, it is left to be reclaimed by natural vegetation, or sometimes converted to a different long-term cyclical farming practice.

According to Momin (2009;), shifting cultivation is “characterized by rotation of fields rather than rotation of crops”. He also talks of important features such as the absence of animals for ploughing and manure, the dominant use of human labour and that food produced by this method of farming was usually only for family consumption. He also states that shifting cultivation required “short periods of occupancy alternating with low fallow periods. After two or three years the fields are abandoned, the cultivators shift to another clearing, leaving the old one to natural recuperation”.

Shifting cultivation is called by different names, for example, it is known as *jhum* cultivation in North India, slash and burn, *swidden* agriculture etc. In Goa, shifting cultivation is locally known as *kumeri* cultivation or *kaamat* in Konkani. Like in other parts of India, Goan tribal communities also follow the steps in shifting cultivation which were mentioned above. The preparation starts in the month of April before monsoon season then followed by selecting an area, clearing that area and latter burning that place so that there are less chances of getting wild weed at the same time by burning trees it makes that area more fertile due to ashes. Meanwhile in the month of May women in the villages sow chilly seeds or other vegetable seeds in an open agricultural land, followed by watering it every day. In the beginning of June, with the rainy water these small tender plants transplant in the selected areas. Than begins the actual process of shifting cultivation.

### 2.2 Hurdles to Kumeri Cultivation

There are Government laws and rights which seem to be human friendly, nature friendly, community friendly etc. But what is contradictory is the implementation of Government laws and rights for example there is Forest Dwellers Act which seems to be tribal community friendly. As per this act tribal communities have access to land to practice their traditional source of income activities which means tribal communities are free to practice *kumeri* cultivation but people of Canacona is not allowed to practice this particular occupation. There is Forest department which keep eyes on people. Sometime Forest officials remove planted trees and reasons are: that is government property, one cannot have income source from it, and one can guard it but cannot use it. Therefore practicing *kumeri* cultivation has become problem at the same time it is a need of the family.

Today the tribal communities in Goa have been hindered from *kumeri* cultivation and their right to traditional livelihood because of two reasons; 1) During the Portuguese period, large hilly areas had been declared as forests and later further sections of the hills were declared as forest areas by the Goa government. This has drastically reduced the availability of land for tribal communities, 2) A further decrease in land availability to the tribal communities has resulted from the forest department conversion of common land into forest cultivation of spices, rubber, teak plantations, etc.

In spite all these limitations today *kumeri* cultivation is still practiced by the tribal community as many families are dependent on it for their livelihood. People were used to grow chillies, different local pulses like *Kulid, Gonde, Udide, Oroia, Kangu, Tor*, etc. to sustain lives.

### 2.3 Struggles of Shifting cultivation affect Livelihood

Due to the non-availability of land and also to the laws concerning to this particular occupation communities are struggling for their survival. Also day by day rising inflation prohibits them from buying the local things which can be shared as a part of their service or custom. For Example Velip community people find it difficult to buy local chillies for their daily consumption due to high market price then the question arises what they will offer if they themselves cannot cope. It is therefore more struggling for the Velip women who look after the food factory. Here it means the whole process of thinking what to cook, how much to cook how to get cooking ingredients, how much to keep for the next day or in future.

According to K. S. Singh (1993), there are more than four hundred different tribal communities in India and India have the largest tribal population in the world after Africa. The tribes in India are spread over the length and breadth of the country and the tribal population differs in different states. Most of the tribal communities in India have been practicing shifting cultivation as their means of livelihood.

The main characteristic of the tribal communities was that they were more closely associated with the nature; their livelihood was basically drawn from the nature for basic survival needs and one such is the way they practice their age old traditional occupation that is *Kumeri* cultivation or shifting cultivation. Practicing this age old occupation is to sustain family needs, and also the way of coping with life by being self sufficient in this inflation targeting era has become a problem affecting women in particular because it is women who is looking after food security.

At present there are numerous laws to safeguard or protect the community interest at the same time tribal communities have been part of countless or everyday struggle for their livelihood. Going back to 50 years where there were no such laws but communities lived with an inter-related or community web. Here community web means interdependence of communities for their survival.

### 3. Conclusion

Tribal people especially poor tribal women are more dependent on natural resources as means of livelihood and the ones who look after family needs. It is she who has to deal in handling the food security for the family members and the community too. Within the Velip community engaged in *kumeri* cultivation, it is the women who decide how much to cultivate, how much food will be required for community rituals, how much produce can be sold for generating income etc. But today because of government policy, forest laws, etc., the community has been denied access to land and other natural resources making survival by this traditional source of livelihood difficult. *Kumeri* cultivation has been a common practice among the tribal communities in several parts of India. It is known as the oldest method of cultivation.

This was usually on the hilly slopes in the forests of South of Goa, which were abundant in natural resources such as water and fertile soil. Women's involvement in *kumeri* cultivation was to minimize the need for cash and to sustain the family's basic needs of food. But today

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because of government policy, forest laws, etc., the community has been denied access to land and other natural resources making survival by this traditional source of livelihood difficult. The age old way of coping with life by being self-sufficient has become a problem affecting women in particular.

Women play an important role in sustaining family needs. They are the one who are toiling without any rights. Their house work is always considered as unpaid work. Beside doing house work that is cooking, cleaning, washing clothes etc. there are other home task such as collecting firewood, collecting water, collecting vegetables (here I mean women in *kumeri* cultivation ) etc. which make women more closer towards nature.

Claude Alvares '*Fish Curry and Rice*' gives an account on ecology and life-style wherein he has stated that the Goa Government has failed to rehabilitate kumeri cultivators and it continues to be the same.(Alvares, Gadgil, and Goa Foundation 2002).

The struggle which tribal communities been into for their basic rights are indifferent from the rest. They carry a tag of discriminatory practices. Their traditional livelihood is in danger. Their traditional right is incapable in this modern contemporary fortunate error of era.

Is modern society or society with govt. laws and policies will be in a position to tackle the problem faced by the tribal communities? I repress!!!!Then question arises is that are tribal communities been used as a subject in the name of development? Or they feel secure in their native soil? Do tribal women is capable in handling the rise of inflation? Should tribal communities practice their traditional occupation or not?

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