

# Bargaining with Goliath: Knowledge Society and Vulnerable Communities, Lessons from Kerala

Abhilash Thadathil\*

Department of Social Studies, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

## Research Article

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**\*For Correspondence:**

Abhilash Thadathil, Department of  
Social Studies, Centre for  
Development Studies,  
Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala,  
India

**E-mail:** [abilash@cds.edu](mailto:abilash@cds.edu)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper tries to address a few hypothetical questions such as how marginalized sections like adivasis in the state, who are unable to acquire their special socio-economic rights from the state, will bargain with capital at a time when the state itself is conceding to capital. When state power is privatized, to what extent will these communities be able to bargain with the newly formed power structures? In this scenario, how far Kerala's vision of the knowledge economy will be inclusive for Adivasis? The idea of a knowledge society is supposed to reduce information asymmetry and create capability by empowering these communities to participate in the local economy so they can produce knowledge which is essential for holding sufficient power in the bargain or at least can make informed decisions when presented with choices offered by the state-capital nexus. These questions will be addressed by analyzing the communities participation in education and 'skill development' and the status of their rights over the resources. Beginning with a brief history of Adivasi's exclusion from the process of production in the state this paper further discusses how the state is looking at these issues at a time when the demand for a 'right-based approach' gets more prominence in social policy discourses. It is pertinent to understand the scenario of how the economic relations in the state viz-a-viz these communities will unfold after the arrival of global capital in the form of mega projects and its impact on the already excluded sections in society.

**Keywords:** Knowledge; Production; Capital; Development; Empowering; Rights

source are credited.

### INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that the participation of Adivasi's in the local economy has deteriorated further not only because of global capital but also due to the lack of sufficient rights over their own resources. With the market holding sway over the state and dominating exchanges within state-market relations, disadvantaged social groups are forced to bargain with market forces. The question is who can succeed in this new globalized world order dominated by capital of all forms? It is imperative to understand that the western model of indigenous development is based on self-determination and trusting traditional rights over resources. As a result, the community's bargaining position with the state and capital has improved. In addition to weakening the bargaining power of the communities, the situation turns the state into a facilitator for appropriating resources. Losses incurred by the state during this state-capital bargaining have to be borne by the community. In this context, it is essential to evaluate the inclusivity of the newly-proposed economic models such as the 'knowledge economy' in the state.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

#### Data source and methodology

This paper covers both qualitative and quantitative data sources. The qualitative data include books, articles, newspaper reports and interviews. Whereas the quantitative data include state periodical economic surveys, laws, orders and RTI reports. Overall, the methodology is exploratory and analytical.

#### State and its promises

India enacted few welfare legislation for adivasis during the neo-liberal period. As Tillin et al. argue, a combination of civil society activism, judicial interventions, supportive political leadership, and a substantial increase in the state revenue came together in the mid-1990s and mid-2000s to forge a new generation of 'right-based' programmes. The programmes sought to empower citizens to demand services as 'right' legally protected, rather than view them as patronage bestowed by a selectively benevolent state [1]. Acts like Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Area, 1996 (PESA) and Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, (FRA) 2006 were landmarks in this regard. It was a hope for adivasis in the state who were the victims of marginalization and dispossession [2-5]. Contrary to the expectations, the state did not implement the PESA as the political class failed to reach its consensus. Both the United and Left democratic fronts were skeptical that PESA might destabilize their electoral fiefdom if the right for self-determination (footnote) was given to Adivasis. Nevertheless, FRA has a different story to tell. The state began to implement the Act in 2011.

FRA offers both individual and community rights for the communities. However, the data on title distribution in the state shows a dismal picture. The records indicate the existence of 4762 adivasi settlements in the state from which 72% live within forest land or fringes of the forest, and all are forest-dependent hence eligible claimants under FRA. The average title distribution in the state was 1.34 acres in the state, whereas if we estimate the potential according to the forest department 2013 data, 86260 acres, which is 2% of the forest area, belong to the 869 tribal hamlets. But only 39 percent received the land title under FRA. Kerala is also far behind in issuing community rights under FRA. It gave only 164 CFR titles until 2017. The official records still lack the total area. Independent estimate from the district-wise records and verification of the maps indicates the total CFR area declared comes around 29,8340 acres, which is 19 percent [2,3]. This dismal picture of FRA implementation in the

state shows the government's reluctance to implement the Act. Even the CFR claim of settled agriculturist groups was denied because they are longer a forest-dwelling community. This effectively preventing them from initiating any collective economic activity in their land. Progress made by the communities in Maharashtra and Odisha after receiving community rights is an example for other states.

The regimes came after ( since 2011) the initial implementation of the Act did not heed attention to the further stages of its diversification, such as making the local laws in accordance with the Act, devolution of power to adivasi gram sabhas (Oorukoottam), and traditional rights over the land and resources. Various local laws are still in conflict with the provisions of the FRA that prevent the communities from enjoying the real spirit of the Act. Why do academicians and right activists see FRA as an antidote to the adivasi question? Unlike the typical top-to-bottom bureaucratic heavy Acts, FRA had gone through thorough and rigorous scrutiny by the communities, right activists, and a like-minded political class. The Act emphasizes individual and community rights over the land and forests it has lived and hereditarily transferred. As mentioned earlier, it also proved right in its implementation in other states. The Act proposes a separate governing system to address the land question, namely, Oorukoottam (grama sabha), Sub-divisional Level Committee (SLDC) and District Level Committee (DLC). However, most of the decisions, especially on community rights, taken by the Oorukoottam, are often turned down by the DLC, which bureaucrats often dominate. Government audit reports show a substantial underutilization of funds earmarked for conducting Oorukoottam meetings (Madhyamam, 12 February 2022).

### **The companionate state**

Successive regimes in the state have not only been less enthusiastic about addressing tribal land issues, but also trivialized them through unjust amendments [4]. They focused on scheme-oriented welfare programs that are convenient for the electoral aims and calculations. Issues like land questions, which can positively alter the livelihood of the communities seems conveniently ignored. The focus of fund allocation has been shifted only to education, housing, health, and rehabilitation. A birds-eye view on this allocation may give us an impression that these schemes can address the community's development questions. However, the existing centralized form of decision-making, lack of supervision, and absence of a social audit seems to be negatively affect their inclusion. There are no prior consultations with the recipients on any social policies. In short, the state has reduced the myriad of tribal developmental issues into mere housing issues and also an extension of the poverty among the general population. Another area of concern is related to budget allocation. Though there is a marginal increase in every budget for tribal welfare, it is largely silent on the historical developmental deficit of each community. The state spends approximately 2.8% of its budgetary allocation to SC/ST and OBC welfare, whereas the national ratio on same is 2.7. Telangana spends 7.6%, which is the highest in this regard. Still, the popular perception always says that compared to other states, the situation of tribal communities in Kerala is far better. It is worth examining the material conditions of non-tribals in Kerala are also far better than their counterparts in other states. Therefore, an intra-state comparison must be made among the different social groups instead of an inter-state assessment to understand the developmental deficit of such marginalised communities [5-8].

### **Tribal realities**

The role of an educated class at the community level is vital for the communities to avail the benefits of any new socio-economic policies. This is true for many tribal communities. The media often report dropouts from primary classes. But the exclusion of many tribal students from higher secondary level came to the limelight in 2020. Around 5424 students applied for higher secondary admission in the 2019-2020 academic year from Wayanad,

Idukki, Palakkad, and Malappuram districts combined, but only 4020 were given admission, and 1404 were left out. Many thought that it was due to the onslaught of COVID-19. However, the data from previous years showed a different picture. See the following Table 1.

**Table 1.** Higher secondary admission status of ST students (5 districts).

2019-2020					2019-2020				
No	District	Applied	Enrolled	Left out (%)	No	District	Applied	Enrolled	Left out (%)
1	Idukki	816	549	267(32.7)	1	Idukki	845	564	281(33.2)
2	Palakkad	949	630	319(33.6)	2	Palakkad	1097	724	373(34)
3	Malappuram	243	233	10(4)	3	Malappuram	276	232	44(16)
4	Wayanad	2321	1659	662(28.5)	4	Wayanad	2208	1572	636(28.8)
5	kasargodu	1095	949	146(13.3)	5	kasargodu	1176	990	186(15.8)
	Total	5424	4020	1404(25.8)		Total	5602	4082	1520(27)
2017-2018					2019-2020				
No	District	Applied	Enrolled	Left out (%)	No	District	Applied	Enrolled	Left out (%)
1	Idukki	758	497	261(34.4)	1	Idukki	734	523	211(28.7)
2	Palakkad	965	568	397(41.1)	2	Palakkad	946	696	250(26.4)
3	Malappuram	249	214	35(14)	3	Malappuram	292	267	25(8.4)
4	Wayanad	1878	1420	458(24.3)	4	Wayanad	1872	1428	444(23.7)
5	kasargodu	1299	1060	239(18.3)	5	kasargodu	1303	1116	187(14.3)
	Total	5149	3759	1390(26.9)		Total	5147	4030	1117(21.7)

The data shows that this issue is not a by-product of COVID-19; instead, it started a few years back. Palakkad district suffers the most in this case. On average, 33.7% of eligible tribal students failed to secure higher secondary admission in this district from 2016 to 2020. For Idukki it is 32.2% and Palakkad has 26.3%. To address this problem, the government issued a special Order in October 2020 asking the education department to provide admission for the 424 eligible candidates from Wayanad district. Fate of the students from Palakkad and Idukki districts are unknown.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Contextualizing knowledge economy

Knowledge economy aims to create, disseminate, and use knowledge to enhance growth and development. In June 2021 the state government launched the knowledge economy mission to bring the ongoing efforts to provide employment to the educated and support knowledge workers under a single programme. The project the project was being spearheaded by Kerala Development and Innovation Strategic Council (K-DISC) K-DISC was asked formulate a plan to provide basic facilities and a social security system for knowledge workers, working close to their homes and interacting with employers. Providing impetus to such efforts, the allocation for the knowledge economy fund meant for skill promotion, technological transformation, and strengthening of higher education system had been hiked from ₹200 crores to ₹300 crores.

It is often taken to mean only high-technology industries or information and communication technologies (ICTs) [9]. Knowledge plays a pivotal role in the growth of every society. Knowledge was prominent ever since we started using it to defy nature and look for comfort in life. But knowledge's perceived prominence came about when knowledge can be used to exert power over other humans. From there, in modern society, capitalism commodified it and

placed it at the centre of our political and economic discourse. The terms knowledge economy and knowledge society are often interchangeably used in academia. Here, knowledge is being considered as commodity and capital. It is regarded as a post-capitalist project in which the economy is based on knowledge. Knowledge gets prominence in the whole economic thinking and analysis. But how knowledge can be transformed into a profitable commodity? How far the process will be inclusive and how inclusive knowledge dissemination would be? Whose and what kind of knowledge is commodified? These are the crucial questions that need to be addressed.

Commodifying knowledge will have a varied effect on different social categories in India, where socio-economic inequalities persist. Individuals and communities' social and economic location matters the most in their upward mobility. This is why it is essential to look into the inclusivity of this idea. To whom we are accompanying to this new terrain and who are the beneficiaries of these ideas are the questions one needs to be asked.

Indeed, the representation of students from dalit and adivasi backgrounds is less in our universities. Why is that so? It is proved from the data mentioned earlier that the government is silent on this issue. It reiterates that the state is no longer ready to understand the socio-economic constraints of students from vulnerable backgrounds. When knowledge production that suits a specific type of capitalist development becomes the focus of education, how would such a development see the existing disparities in education levels. What type of a state intervention could place these children so that they are able to bargain a fair deal? It is important to consider the existing inequalities within the contemporary socio-economic order to understand the kind of influences and impacts it will inflict upon this policy decisions in the future. How such policies will respond to the digital monopolies who controls the knowledge and power? It should be noted that Kerala is an examples of localized development models with the help of decentralization. Can the strength of decentralisation could be utilised in building a knowledge society and what kind of a give and take would happen in such a case between the power of global corporations and our own local self-government institutions?

### CONCLUSION

Moving beyond the popular perception (mentioned in the title as romantic idealism) that adivasi livelihood in Kerala is way better than other states in the country, the preceding discussion has highlighted the state of affairs in Kerala's tribal world. Dwelling into the nuances of their contemporary socio-economic life would explain that their vulnerability are metamorphosized into a different level where the individuals (adivasis) are visible, but their livelihood and developmental issues are not. As mentioned initially, it is essential to contextualize the adivasi developmental question within the newly emerging developmental model such as knowledge economy and public private partnerships. Theoretically, the idea of a knowledge society is supposed to reduce the information asymmetry and create capability by empowering these communities to participate in the local economy so they can produce knowledge which is essential for holding sufficient power in the bargain or at least can make informed decisions when met with choices offered by state-capital nexus.

Interestingly, the government is not the job creator in the knowledge economy; instead, it is just a facilitator for the market where job providers are private players. With the introduction of this policy, the government aims to capitalize on the educated workforce, who used to migrate to different countries earlier. This policy should also see in the context of the ongoing K-Rail project. The development thinking behind the K-Rail project is that large-scale industries are not viable in the state due to its geographical and ecological concerns. The state is also densely populated. Therefore, focusing on service industries seems to be a wise idea for the state. The service industry is

dominated mainly by the knowledge economy players. The state's logic is that people will be absorbed in these new markets in the long run. Though there are anomalies associated with the implementation of this program, it seems to be feasible within the existing development thought. It essentially aims to capitalize on the state's human resources and provide them jobs in knowledge industries there by; the economic activity in the state will be benefitted. Even if we accept this argument in principle there will be exclusions in this model. It will be difficult for the disadvantaged and marginalized communities to bargain with the market forces whereas at present, they have a certain amount of sway over the state. In such a scenario, will the state act as an intermediary for these disadvantaged?

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