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著者(英)	Zubeeda Banu Quraishy
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Gender politics in the socio-economic organization of contemporary foragers: a case study from India

Zubeeda Banu QURAI SHY

Deemed University

Chennai, India

Nothing in nature explains the sexual division of labor, nor such institutions as marriage, conjugality or paternal filiation. All are imposed on women by constraint, all are therefore facts of civilization which must be explained, not used as explanations. (Meillasoux 1981: 20-21)

Keeping Meillasoux's words as a backdrop, this chapter attempts to explain how in a simple society, in spite of asymmetries of status between the genders due to unequal access to the society's most valued food-producing labor, gender equality was more closely approximated than in other social systems with different technological bases. This is the case, for example, among the Indian Alu Kurumba foragers who have undergone a transition from a hunting and gathering society with relative gender equality to a mixed economy, including foraging, horticulture, agriculture and wage labor, with relative gender inequality.

An analysis of gender relations in terms of economic activities among foragers would reveal that generally women's hunting is either marginalized or proscribed in different societies due to various reasons such as: taboos on women's hunting; ritual or spiritual influences which the genders may exert over one another's productive and reproductive domains; psychological dispositions; female odorous; reproductive immobilization; or inviolable rules that prevent women from carrying weapons or hunting large game, as among the Dobe Ju/'hoansi where women are categorically prohibited from all kinds of hunting (Marshall 1976). However, there are instances of foraging societies in which both men and women gather food and hunt big and small game, such as among the Nandukan Agta (Estioka-Griffin 1985). Estioka-Griffin describes a society exceptional in respect of the scope of women's big-game hunting, where most, but not all, women hunt and do so using gender-specific weapons and strategies (Estioka-Griffin 1985).

So what appear in foraging societies to be gendered modes of labor are usually the effects of gendered technologies. In fact, Tabet (1979: 28) observes that 'it is not the hunt that is forbidden to women but rather the weapons' (*ce n'est pas la chasse qui est interdit aux femmes, c'est les armes*). Following Tabet, Testart (1982) also identifies the sexual division of labor as the product of taboos proscribing women's use of hunting weapons. Thus, the division of labor among foraging societies (that is, into hunting by men and gathering by women) appears to be a cultural rather than a biological structure

(Brightman 1996). As a result, except for the differing values placed on the work contributions of males versus females, in hunter-gatherer societies males and females have, at least in the past, had remarkably egalitarian relationships.

One more factor that contributed to the egalitarian relationships which have prevailed in simple societies was the nonexistence of a market economy. As a case in point, among the Mbuti gender associations were characterized by harmony and cooperation. In their forest environment, both genders participated significantly in the food production process with the contributions of each being respected and valued. As a result, males and females typically viewed each other in very positive ways (Turnbull 1981). However, with the spread of industrialization the world over, such simple foraging societies with their traditional, labor-intensive, isolated and self-sufficient subsistence economies, underwent drastic alterations resulting in rapid structural changes in their socio-cultural and economic systems.

Subjugating foragers: the Indian case

In India, as in most developing countries, speedy industrialization was set in motion with the reigning belief that 'progress' and 'economic growth' were the solution to all the country's problems. So, in the name of 'national interest', the exploitation of natural resources took place as this was considered to be the only available path to India's economic progress.

During the last three decades of planned development and industrialization, trees have been treated primarily as raw material for forest-based industries and not as a renewable resource. This approach has destroyed many forests and reduced the area accessible to forest dwellers. Although initially forest dwellers were given rights in the protected forests, the reserved forests were closed to them. Over a period of time, as is evident in the approach adopted in Indian national and state policies formulated to date, more and more protected forests were transferred to the reserved category, thus forcing more and more people to lose their forest rights. The destruction of the forests and the complete denial of rights to tribal people in reserved forests resulted in the sudden deprivation of traditional ways of life, and almost produced a total crisis in the lives of tribal people. Not only were they displaced from the forest, their original habitat, but along with other forest dwellers they suffered a major curtailment of their rights, particularly women, who had a special relationship with nature.

The subjugation or over exploitation of nature which forms an important part of the process of industrialization, a process identified as belonging to a 'man's world', proved not only to be detrimental to the economic and social life of tribal people as a whole, but also created unprecedented changes in the lives of many tribal women given their central role in providing food for their families. When the availability of minor forest produce decreased considerably, tribal people had to depend on alternative sources of food. In many cases, when tribal families were relocated to areas where the soil was not fertile enough to grow subsistence crops, or where the natural food supply was insufficient, they were forced to depend on the public welfare distribution system which in most cases was located very far from their hamlets.

This placed a special burden on women in that it is the responsibility of women to feed, clothe and care for their families as part of the sexual division of labor. Moreover, the destruction of the forests combined with the denial of forest rights, meant that tribal communities were deprived of the food, fuel, fodder and medicinal herbs which had been freely available to them. Consequent upon deforestation, fuel, fodder and even water became increasingly distant from their hamlets, thus increasing the workload of women who had to fetch these items while continuing to do all their traditional work both within and outside the domestic sphere.

With deforestation and the declaration of forests as 'reserves' or 'state property', foraging societies which were once isolated and independent became transformed under the pressure of the larger society to adopt its values and norms. As a result, a transition took place in the age-old economic and social systems of tribal communities in India. For tribal people, who had for centuries survived on the bounty of nature, the forest was the life-giver and sustainer, their land, on which no power but the supernatural and community norms could restrict their movements. In other words, all the basic requirements for survival, that is, food, fuel, fodder, fertilizer and medicine, came from the forest. In addition, forests played a major role in entertainment, religious and cultural beliefs as well as the entire economy (Fernandes, Menon and Viegas 1988). Among most of the forest dwelling tribes there were rules regulating conduct; some species of trees, for example, were protected from over exploitation, and during times of disaster a code of conduct was expected to be followed.

The logic of industrialism is not only antithetical to the traditional tribal culture of conservation but also detrimental to the whole tribal community. In particular, one consequence of the modern capitalist industrialization process is the increasing division of tribal communities. This is manifested in a sense of separation of the family from the community, each family being left to cope with its own problems. This puts increasing stress on women who are responsible for both the production and reproduction of household resources irrespective of their direct access to primary resources or income. The stress on women becomes especially accentuated during transition periods when the survival of the household becomes more difficult.

In India, unfortunately, the unabated destruction of forests undertaken in the name of economic progress was promoted under the banner of 'civilizing' the foragers or bringing tribal people into mainstream life. However, little effort was made to understand the impact of an entirely alien economic and cultural system on an unprepared community. Along with the denudation of the forests and the erosion of the economic, social and cultural values of the people which resulted in a complete transformation of tribal life, there was also an increasing competition for scarce resources that is evident today among vulnerable groups. This competition further adds to the deteriorating situation of women, since it reduces the possibility of sharing the burden of work both within and outside the household sphere.

As far as women in these simple foraging societies were concerned, the onset of development produced new stresses and a disturbance of women's roles, affecting their socio-economic status. In this chapter a brief scenario of the transformation of foraging

societies will be outlined to show how the transition from foraging to other economies brought changes in the gender dynamics of some traditional Indian cultures.

Transformations among foragers: a brief scenario

The problem of economic development in developing economies is usually thought of as one of transforming simple foraging economies into an industrialized system. In India, as in many other developing countries, tribal people living in forests were completely dependent on forest resources for their survival and were averse to sedentary life and cultivation. When the British Colonial Government took over the administration of the whole sub-continent of India, its officials recognized the importance of forests as a source of revenue and products for export. Consequently, a series of forest policies, including a memorandum on forest conservation, were developed, which resulted in a process of transition for the forest foragers who were resettled from their original habitats to areas outside the forests. As a result, they changed their hunting and gathering economy and culture.

The transition from nomadic hunting and gathering to sedentary farming involved a variety of adjustments of a socio-economic nature and a change in their entire value system. In India, although a majority of foraging tribes underwent a socio-economic transition, there were many who were able to retain their sylvan character (Stephen 1992). South India, which had a great number of such nomadic tribes living in the jungles of the Western Ghats and on the Nilgiris over a long period of time, was in a worse economic position since the fast growing population of India required a large, uncultivated area of land to live on.

Not only is arable land becoming scarce, but also, especially, forests are increasingly being cleared. The produce of the remaining forests is strictly controlled by the forest department. Moreover, it has proved impossible for foraging communities to defend their territory against usurpers in possession of more effective weapons. Thus, many foraging tribes have abandoned their traditional economy and switched to new economic pursuits. An example of a foraging tribe which underwent the transition and transformation from foragers to agriculturalists, the Alu Kurumba, is presented here.

The Alu Kurumba of Nilgiri District, Tamil Nadu

Locale of the study

The Nilgiris or Blue Mountains, identified as one of the world's eighteen hot spots of biodiversity (Gadgil 1994), are located in Tamil Nadu among the Western Ghats, the most important topographic feature of peninsular India. Different tribes with diverse cultures inhabit the area, including the Toda, the Kota, the Alu Kurumba, the Paniyan, the Irula and the Sholiga. Their survival depends on the natural resources of the region. All these tribal communities, living at different altitudes in the hill ranges of the district, form an inseparable component of the ecosystem. They practice different occupations, ranging from simple foraging, pastoralism, shifting cultivation, and traditional cultivation to

modern farming, horticulture and wage labor. The entire population of the district, including the above groups, is influenced by the mountain range through differential rainfall, modulating climate, river flow, and ground water discharge.

Among the various tribes inhabiting the Nilgiris District, the Alu Kurumba, are an indigenous people who were once forest dwellers completely dependent on the forests, in which they collected forest produce and hunted small game, for their survival. They now practice shifting cultivation and traditional agriculture, and also work as wage laborers. The name 'Alu Kurumba' (also known as 'Halu Kurumba' or 'Pal Kurumba') is thought to be derived from the words *alu*, *halu* or *pal* which refers symbolically to purity in thought or mind, since the word *alu* or *pal* means milk. It is also believed that another possible origin of their name lies in the former practice of cleaning houses with a mixture of cow-dung and milk.

In recent years the forest policies and other development schemes introduced by the government to bring tribal people into the mainstream society, along with other influences such as economic factors, have meant that the Alu Kurumba, who were once primarily foragers, have moved out of the forests to other areas in the district to pursue shifting cultivation or traditional agriculture, or to work as wage laborers in tea and coffee plantations near their settlements. Thus, not only their settlement pattern but also their subsistence pattern and lifestyle have undergone rapid changes. As a result, Alu Kurumba in different areas of the district have been forced by the need for sheer survival to undertake or pursue new occupations different from those of their ancestors.

The Alu Kurumba have been resettled from their original habitat to different areas in the Nilgiris District. For the present study four Alu Kurumba settlements that were in different phases of economic transition were considered: Nedungal Kombai settlement near Manja Kombai Village in Coonoor taluk; Kotta Kombai Settlement in Coonoor taluk; Bavayuru settlement in Kizh Kottagiri taluk; and Bellathy settlement near Manjur village in Kottagiri taluk. Before discussing the impact of macro-economic policies (such as globalization) on the Alu Kurumba, a brief description of the locale and economy of each settlement will be given.

Nedungal Kombai settlement

Nedungal Kombai comes under the jurisdiction of Mancha Kombai Village Panchayat in Coonoor taluk. It is approximately four kilometers by road south-east of Mancha Kombai and there are regular buses from Mancha Kombai to Ooty and Coonoor. The road from Nedungal Kombai to Mancha Kombai mainly passes through tea estates, interspersed with coffee plantations in places. The *sholas*, or natural forest of the Nilgiris, is found only near the settlement, about 300 meters before the village on the left-hand side as one approaches it from Mancha Kombai.

There are about 25 one-bedroom houses in this settlement provided by the government, which relocated the Alu Kurumba from the forest to this area. The Alu Kurumba of this settlement are engaged as wage laborers in nearby tea and coffee plantations. Some of the men of this settlement have also migrated to Ooty and Coonoor for jobs as wage laborers, laying roads and undertaking other construction work. Some

foraging activities are also practiced, mainly consisting of the gathering of minor forest produce and hunting of small game.

Kotta Kombai settlement

Kotta Kombai, or Burikal Kombai as it is commonly known among the Alu Kurumba, is located near Kottekal, that is, ten kilometers from Nedungal Kombai village in Coonoor taluk. The Alu Kurumba of this settlement practice shifting cultivation in addition to some minor foraging. In recent times only eight families have resided in the settlement; a number of others have left the settlement in search of other livelihoods. There are two big thatched huts where the families live and two small huts used by women during their periods of 'pollution' when they are isolated from the general community. On one side of the settlement is a kitchen garden, and on the other side of the slopes is land where shifting cultivation is practiced and varieties of traditional cultivars are grown.

Bavayuru settlement

The Bavayuru settlement, located within the precincts of a large, private tea estate on the hills of Kizh Kottagiri taluk, is surrounded by monoculture plantations of tea or coffee. In spite of the pressure from the government and other developmental agencies such as the UPASI (United Planters Association of South India) to concentrate on monocultural cash cropping, the Alu Kurumba of Bavayuru settlement still practice traditional cultivation on small fragments of land along with foraging activities, as well as cultivating cash crops.

Bellathy settlement

Bellathy is another settlement of the Alu Kurumba in Kottagiri taluk. In this settlement there are about 30 houses built by the government. The settlement is surrounded by tea and coffee plantations. The land distributed by government to the community is also earmarked for development into tea and coffee plantations. The men and women of this settlement are engaged as wage laborers in the tea plantations of rich Badagas and land-owning peasants, as well as practicing minor foraging.

Gender politics among foragers

In all the Alu Kurumba settlements, where economic transition from foraging to different economic pursuits is occurring due to the process of globalization and changes in macro-economic policies, there exists a gender bias in both social and economic aspects of life. In all the economic pursuits of Alu Kurumba, which range from shifting cultivation and traditional agriculture to working as wage labor and family labor, indigenous women play an increasingly important role both in meeting the basic needs of their families and in the social and economic life of their communities. For example, in shifting cultivation and traditional agriculture, they play a role in maintaining sustainable agriculture by conserving biodiversity, not only by utilizing their profound knowledge of the plants and animals in their environment, but also through their multifunctional

approach, which promotes the preservation of different species of plants and animals.

Although entire households are involved in shifting cultivation and traditional agriculture, the role played by women, be it unpaid, family labour or wage labor outside the family, is significant and particularly critical to both securing a reliable household food supply and conserving crop genetic biodiversity. Women are invariably involved in all the agricultural activities of shifting cultivation from the clearing of patches of land by cutting and burning bushes and shrubs of medium height, to digging and preparing the soil, weeding, transplanting, harvesting, threshing, winnowing, storing and preserving the grain for household consumption and the next season's planting. Similarly, in traditional agriculture, Alu Kurumba women undertake a wide variety of agricultural activities. In the above communities, women had to work particularly hard on areas of slash and burn cultivation since the yields obtained from it are relatively low due to soil erosion. Also, in areas of settled agriculture, women had to bear the burden of tedious work as well as travelling increasing distances in search of minor forest produce and firewood.

In Nedungal Kombai and Bellathy, where both men and women depend primarily for their subsistence on wage labor in tea and coffee plantations, the drudgery of work is greater for women compared with men as they have to complete domestic chores before going to work in the plantations. It has been noted that in each of the four settlements, apart from working in agricultural fields or plantations either as wage labor or family labor, women also go to the forests to collect minor forest produce. In all the settlements, the entire responsibility for housework and processing agricultural and minor forest produce lies on women.

Thus, many Alu Kurumba women have to work for extraordinary lengths of time each day to fulfill their responsibilities. However, the products of their labor, be they agricultural or minor forest produce grown or collected, are sold only by men at the market. In all the settlements it is the men and not the women who mediate with the market, and hence have primary control over family cash income, resulting in gender differences in income spending patterns. In many Alu Kurumba families, since men control the income, major portions of it are spent on men's needs, whereas women tend to spend money on family needs. In the case of wage labor, women are discriminated against in comparison with men in respect of wages and other benefits, in spite of the fact that both do the same work for similar hours. Thus, women face an 'unseen force', that is, they have to work more intensively than men due to their lack of bargaining power both at work and in the home. Their bargaining power in turn is determined by the existing pattern of gender relations.

The implications of macro-economic policies for foragers

Generally, pre-existing power relations or the relative bargaining position of women and men, for example, husbands and wives, will determine the outcome of new or changing situations. Thus, if the initial bargaining power between a husband and his wife is unequal in that one has relatively more power than the other, then the outcome of a new situation will be better for the one who has the greater power. This outcome is manifested, for example, in the distribution of income and patterns of consumption within

a household (Wahyana 1994). An important factor in such an outcome is often the relatively weak position of women in relation to decision-making.

In all four settlements where the Alu Kurumba have been relocated from their original forest homes, the government in the process of resettlement distributed land primarily to the male members of the community. In spite of the fact that arable land in the control of the government is limited, the state has direct control over the land and state policy can influence social norms and attitudes in relation to women's claims to private land. Typically, the government in this instance reproduced private biases by allotting land to male household heads, even though women do the major share of work in the fields.

As in most third world societies, among the Alu Kurumba women's rights in land are only use-rights rather than outright ownership-rights. Though women may have access to land, in practice Alu Kurumba men have greater claims on land than women, and in many cases it has been found that land has been mortgaged by men to outsiders or Badagas, the rich land-owning peasants, for very little money.

The situation is worse in those cases where the land has been converted for growing cash crops since women in such cases lose their use-rights and are left merely as family or wage laborers. This results in women, particularly poor women, facing restrictions in access to credit and other financial institutions because they do not have collateral. Title to land or other property is required to gain loans, and without such title women lack the potential to exploit the opportunities provided by loans. Thus, the distribution of income and asset ownership is further distorted.

When the foraging communities were shifted from the forest, their food supply was threatened, particularly in the case of the Alu Kurumba of Nedungal Kombai and Bellathy settlements. The members of these settlements were forced to depend on the public distribution system because of their insecure work as wage laborers. In recent years, due to the process of globalization and the introduction of New Economic Policy in India, subsidies to the social welfare sector (including programs such as the public distribution system, free primary education, and health services) have been cut. The reduction of food subsidies, and of the scope and extent of the public distribution system, has put pressure on the reliability of household food supplies, creating a circumstance in which women are typically the greatest losers.

Given the shortage of food at home, women often distribute the major portion of food to other family members, particularly their husbands and other males, keeping very little for themselves. Also, with their dependence on the public distribution system, the workload of women has increased and food intake has decreased. This has resulted in deteriorating health. Moreover, the change in diet has resulted in nutritional deficiencies and the development of diseases such as anemia, tuberculosis and diarrhea. These new diseases, against which the foragers have no resistance and know no medicine, also take their steady toll. Thus, the gradual deforestation of the natural forest combined with increasing restrictions on access to minor forest produce has forced upon tribal communities not only ecological but also social, political, economic and other changes.

Among the Alu Kurumba some new trends have developed in association with the

change in their economic pursuits. The simple political and social egalitarian institutions governing their day to day affairs are slowly being replaced by structures that are inequalitarian in nature. For example, Panchayat Raj (or village self-government) and community development projects which were meant to be egalitarian symbols were introduced without changing their inherently inequalitarian power structures. The new land-ownership pattern strengthened those structures, particularly as men, who already had some economic and political power, took control of the new structures. Consequently, the position of women has been further eroded as with new state laws they have lost both access to and control over the land, and power both within and outside the domestic sphere.

Other changes are occurring associated with the new socio-political institutions. For example, marriage ceremonies and funeral rites are becoming more elaborate among the Alu Kurumba, and related expenses are increasing. Women and men frequent the markets for regular purchases of provisions and other items such as clothes and cosmetics. Both men and women pointed out that to manage rising expenses in many families the habit of saving money is increasing. They do this in the form of a *chit* system, a local way of saving money by collecting a particular sum from each individual who participates. On a particular day of the month the total amount collected is given largely at random to one member of the group. This is done every month until all members receive payment. In addition, alcohol addiction is growing among men, and divorce and extramarital sexual relations among both men and women are on the increase. However, the present social and political institutions are not able to tackle these issues within the system of existing social norms.

Although in recent years the process of globalization has led to numerous creative and interesting jobs in many of the new industries and factories, residents of the above settlements are not able to avail themselves of such jobs because they lack the necessary education and skills. Moreover, the position of women has worsened as the subsidization of income-generating activities by the government is generally based on the assumption that women largely do not work in paid employment. Recent reforestation schemes are similarly based on inadequate analysis and unrealistic assumptions. They focus on commercial species that provide raw materials for industry and some income to Alu Kurumba households, but also force women to travel further and further in search of the basic needs of food, fuel and fodder. The situation is made all the worse for women who, after working equally alongside men as wage laborers in the plantations of rich Badagas for a minimum income, are discriminated against not only in terms of wages.

Linked with the inferior position of women in the economic sphere are socially-based gender differences, that is, rites and rituals connected with rites of passage and other social and religious aspects of life. For example, among the Alu Kurumba of Bavayuru where traditional agriculture is practiced, a gender bias exists in the ritual taboos against women plowing and sowing seed. The effect of this bias is more accentuated in female-headed households, where either the men have migrated to other districts for jobs or the women are widows. Here the taboos against women ploughing the land and sowing seed increase female dependence on male help and, if ploughing and

sowing is not done at the right time, reduce yields, thus making the position of women worse and resulting in their increased poverty. At the same time, men will also not participate in some jobs, such as manuring, transplanting, and weeding, which are considered to be only women's work.

Formerly, in the foraging society of the Alu Kurumba the work done by men and women was asymmetric but complimentary. However, during the economic transition that asymmetry has developed into the 'inequality' in both the economic and social spheres that modernization represents in tribal areas today. This transition, which is directly and indirectly related to the larger process of the economic development of the country, has brought with it a scarcity of resources and avenues for significant development. Along with the transition, the new cultural construction of gender roles and behavior is also responsible for reducing women's ability to function effectively. Women are seen by men only from an instrumental perspective because of the marginalization of their contribution to the economy, be it among foragers or in other societies.

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