Mass media experience in a tribal context: A study on Malayali tribes in Salem district, Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out from the most underlying belief that media becomes a part of daily life and a day never passes without it. In today’s fast moving mechanical world each and every one wants show one upmanship with everyone. Knowledge maketh world is the Moto of Periyar University. Education and economic potential play a vital role in one's life. Globalization brings all the people under one roof. Where media plays a vital role in the dissemination process through newspaper, television and radio. As media transcend barriers like distance, money, education it has accessibility to anyone. Tribes living in hilly and socially isolated places, too, have started accessing media for various purposes dictated by their interest. But the real question before us is, how tribes use the available media and how perception differs among them. The present study describes the cultural background of Malayali tribes located in Salem district, Tamil Nadu and their experiences of various mass media. Further it explores their exposure towards media and changes effected in their daily life. Through survey method data was collected from 100 respondents, on exposure towards the media and their perception. Conventional anthropological methods like observation, unstructured interviews were also supplemented data collection efforts, in the five tribal settlements namely Periyakuttymaduvu, Nadupatty, Thummalpatty, Jalloothupatty and Arunoothumalai in Salem district of Tamil Nadu. The results highlight the role of media in tribal life and their experience.

Key words: Mass media, tribal life, Malayali.

Introduction

The mass media plays a vital role in ordering and rearranging the people’s lives. The major purposes of mass media are surveillance, entertainment, education, correlation and dissemination of information (Keval Kumar, 2004). Media brings changes in the life style of people across nations too. The present era revolves around information gathering, where media globalization paves the way towards it. Indeed, improving knowledge in the society is an essential one to all. Media makes the process of communication easier. Communication plays a catalyst in the society’s development as well (Laksmanan Rao, 1966).

Many of the communication theorists assumed that media only reiterate what the people already have and quoted as limited effects. A nother predominant scholar in communication, Schramm, (1964) talks about communication and economy which are the two most important factors that trigger the growth of a nation. The developments in mass media incorporate the people together. Since the dissemination of information by media make a change in daily life, individual’s personal beliefs, attitude towards media, cultural traits too, play a role over it.

Cultural anthropologists are mostly concerned about understanding the cultures of different people and groups and also, they examine the levels of development due to acculturation, innovation of technologies through the process of communication. Ambirajan (2011) examined the cultural changes through media, that the development in the media and technology make changes in reducing cultural diversity and increasing hegemony central in the name of free trade. The governmental projects like Chengara land issue and Narmada projects displaced many of the tribes from their place. These kinds of sudden displacements make rift in their traditional behavior.
and migration leads to change in the food consumption, religious practices etc. (Pradeep, 2010).

Other than these barriers the tribes face a severe curtail in the name of distance. Since they are living in the hill areas, tribes are not able access the mass media like radio, cinema, and television. In these kinds of circumstances folk media is the major medium to deliver the informations (Subramanian, Rama Mohan, 2006). In that context this paper aims to discuss the cultural background of Malayali tribes located in Salem district, Tamil Nadu and their viewing experience of various mass media.

It further explains their experience towards media and changes made in daily life. The five selected tribal settlements are Periyakuttymaduvu, Nadupatty, Thumbalpatty, Jalloothupatty and A runoothumalai. Except Nadupatty, other four villages are well connected with road transportation, and Thumbalpatty have some better infrastructure and transportation facility.

### Table 1 Selection of Respondents from the villages of Malayali tribes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No</th>
<th>Name of the Tribe</th>
<th>Nadupatty</th>
<th>Thumbal Patty</th>
<th>Jalloothu Patty</th>
<th>A ranoothu malai</th>
<th>Periyakutty Maduvu</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Malayali</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Methodology

The simple random sampling method was used to select the respondents and through survey method the data were collected from 100 respondents on their exposure to media. The conventional anthropological methods like observation and unstructured interview supplemented data collection effort in the four tribal settlements. Twenty respondents were purposely selected and interviews were conducted and recorded on audio tape and later transcribed. Participants were separately interviewed using one on one in depth interview. Respondents were asked to respond to 20 questions, and the relevant ones for our purposes were:

1. Why do you use media?
2. Which media helps you to get more information?
3. What is the main purpose of using media?
4. What are the differences you feel while using various media?
5. Which is your favorite media?

### Results and Discussion

Cultural background of the Malayali tribes in Salem district, Tamilnadu, India is described in this investigation. Along with the cultural background, the paper explored their experience of various mass media like newspaper, television and radio, and the impact of these on their daily life. The study reveals that most of the tribal people are exposed to television than the other media like newspaper and radio. A free television scheme for every home, a governmental scheme led to the use of television in these villages. Most of them treat the media as an entertainment and recreation tool.

### Who are Malayali?

The word Malayalis or Malaialis denotes inhabitants of the hills (Malai – Hill or Mountain). Malakaran and Malanayakan are also used as synonymous for Malayali. The Malayalis of Salem district are not the inhabitants of Salem Tamil Nadu, India. They believe that they migrated from the plains especially from Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, India. They have three versions of stories about their origin [Bakthavatchala Barathi (2008), Edgar Thurston (1909), Rajanan, Busangi (1981)]. Malayalis of Salem lives in the mountain of A runoothumalai, Bothimalai, Kalrayanmalai, Pachaimali, Palamalai and Shervarayanmalai. But today most of them have migrated to plains.
Except the similarity in name, Malayalis never follow or are connected with the Malayalis of Kerala. They call their self as ‘Kavundar’. Additionally, they are also known as Karkatha Vellalar, Karalar (rulers of the clouds) and Karala M udhal (Rajanan B usangi, 1981). The Malayalis of selected villages migrated from the Kolli hill which is located in the district of Namakkal. They would go there once a year to worship or celebrate the festival of A raapleeswarar.

In the early days the house of Malayalis were split bamboo and roofed with jungle grass. But now they build houses just other like the people in the plain. Murugan (Fig.1), a respondent clearly stated the reason as follows “the invasions of plain people led us to follow their way of living. In those days our people did not have much economical potential like the present day.”

**Fig.1 Hut (House) of Malayali Tribe**

Food habits

Globalization made a lot of changes in the consumption of food as well. Earlier, use of rice among Malayalis was very low. Due to the scarcity of water for agricultural purposes, many of them are into agriculture only for economic sources. Malayalis are called as settled foragers, for not wandering for food. They used to follow the system of delayed return system in agriculture (Bakthavatchala Barathi, 2008). Scarcity of water for agriculture led them to leave traditional work, and education and media made some changes in food consumption. Aptly, we can understand this with Kokila’s statement, a school going girl “I like to have soft drinks, chocolates and foods like pizza which are shown in advertising.” A part from this, alcoholism among men in tribal societies is somewhat high. They brew a special drink spirit and call it as M alai Saarayam.

Dress and Ornaments

The dress pattern of Malayalis is very simple. The elderly men used to wear Kovanam during work. Dhoti and shirt for men and saree and blouse for women became a regular dress code. But the old age women left their shoulders uncovered.

Language

Language is an important element in each and every society for communication. Malayali tribes speak the regional language “Tamil” with bit of difference from the plain people (Krishnamoorthy, 1992). The invasion of media and education, have brought in lot of changes in that. The younger generations use lot of English words and imitate the dialogues in cinema and televisions. Saravanan aptly put it as follows “I used the word NANGAI to call my wife’s sister in earlier days but now no one uses the word in my family.” Selvi told that “I didn’t go to school ever. But I learned some words in English by watching TV.”

Family type and marriage custom

Among Malayali tribe nuclear type of families are common. They follow the patriarchal system in
families. Monogamy is the preferential form of marriage. Marriage by capture and elopement are also in practice. But they keep away the person who marries from a scheduled caste and stop all the contacts with that person. Even though they tagged as Hindus, preference of Brahmin priests for the marriage and other functions are not in practice. A priest in a tribal village exposed the view over Brahmin as follows “we do not need or invite any Paarpan (Brahmin) at any cost to our functions ever who is he to initiate our functions, and there is nothing important in Vedha about what Brahmin chants during homam and all.”

**Exposure to mass media**

In the earlier days Malayali tribes were receiving the information from outside through interpersonal communication or oral communication. Now media is aptly doing the job. But the problem is how far the media like television, newspaper and radio reach the people. In present scenario, information is wealth to all societies’ developments. Since the independence government of India has taken a lot of steps for the development of aborigines. Unfortunately, many of the plans have gone in negative and faced many problems without the proper communication among them. For better communication we require use of the mass media.

Indeed before the introduction of modern media like newspaper, television, radio and mobile phones among tribes, folk media was played a better role to disseminate information and entertainment. The modern media have a lot of benefits, but have some flaws too. The tribes who are living in the hills, experience a lot of problems like accessibility, economic welfare and cultural diversities. Sometimes these barriers lead to perceptual differences, usage of media among tribes.

Table 2 explains about the number of Television owning families and the families without Television. Out of 100 samples 93% of respondents own Television sets. The Government’s free Television scheme led to this change despite not having economic potential to buy. It was found that respondents were just using for entertainment and recreation than other purposes, though the generation gap shows a difference in the usage. Some of them expressed the following:

**Table 2: Respondents Exposure to Television**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No</th>
<th>Name of the Village</th>
<th>Television owning House Holds</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Without Television</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Nadupatty</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Thummal Patty</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Jalloothu Patty</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Arunothumalai</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Periyakutty Maduvu</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>93</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Manimegalai says, “I like the reality shows which give me some positive ideas to improve my knowledge. I do watch advertisement and sometime imitate the character in the films”. Poovathal, “while watching the film, I want to improve my life style as stated in the films. In earlier days many of the films explained some good things, which should be adapted to life. But now it all went as glamour and rubbish”. Raman, “I do watch the news daily to get to know about what is happening in the country and around me”. Mani says “I watch only the films and songs for entertainment purpose”.

**Table 3: Respondents Exposure to News Paper**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No</th>
<th>Name of the Village</th>
<th>Subscribe News Paper</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Don’t Subscribe</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Read occasionally</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Can’t Read</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Nadupatty</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Thummal Patty</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Jalloothu Patty</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Arunothumalai</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Periyakutty Maduvu</td>
<td>01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>05</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 shows the respondents’ exposure to newspaper and the variations in the subscription. Only 5% of the respondents subscribe to the daily newspaper and these five are regular readers. In Nadupatty no one subscribes the newspaper since it is located far from available sources. But, occasionally 12% of respondents from Nadupatty read the newspaper. They are the college going and daily wage earners who go out from the village regularly. In other villages also the respondents are exposed to minimal newspaper reading. Among the 68% of occasional newspaper readers, 14% are college going students and daily wage people. Except the village Nadupatty in other villages a tea and retail shop subscribe to newspaper regularly. In the village Thumbal Patty only one person subscribes to the newspaper regularly.

Table 4 shows the number of radio listeners and non-listeners among the 100 respondents. Only 22% of respondents listened to radio and rests of 78% were non-listeners. Among 22% only one owned a radio set, mean while others listened through the mobile phones. In general a lot of tribal people do not listen to radio even during their leisure time. They do not show any interest in listening to radio.

### Conclusion

This study describes the cultural background of Malayali tribe and their experience of various mass media in the villages of Salem, Tamil Nadu. In all the five villages most of the respondents are exposed to Television than newspaper and Radio. The reason behind it is the free Television scheme by the government. But most of them are treats Television as entertainment and recreation medium only. The villages connected by road transportation facilities are showing some positive response over the media. But, the use of newspaper is very low. Even the educated or college going students are not able to get newspaper in their villages. The government and media should expose the tribal into the lime light. They should be given much care and attention for the development. These kinds of preparations help the nation to go forward and help the people to take part in the national development.

### References


