

Environmental Ethics: A Tribal Perspective

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Abstract

This paper attempts to delve into the environmental ethics lived by Mavilan tribe settled in Kannur and Kasaragod districts of Kerala, India. Stemming from the basic attitude of interconnected existence, their lifestyle manifest show they consider themselves as one among the other created beings. Environmental ethics is concerned with the moral relation between the human and the non-human/natural world. Mavilan tribe maintains respect for all living beings and Nature at large. In the backdrop of the present pandemic, the human race has begun to look back at our role in aggravating this scenario. In this context it is significant to take stock of our actions that might have fueled the crisis. Therefore it is imperative that we begin to mend our ways to reestablish harmony in the cosmos. The present paper explores a few instances in the life of Mavilan tribe wherein they practise or rather live eco-consciousness. The paper explores their rituals, agricultural practices and folk songs. The inferences in the paper are arrived at through the data collected during the field work in Mavilan hamlets.

KEYWORDS: Environmental ethics, interconnectedness, Mavilan Tribe, ecological knowledge.

Introduction

The intimacy of the tribal groups with Nature is an indication of their eco-consciousness. These communities protect and safeguard Nature as there exists a reciprocal relationship between them. The ethics that stem from their mutual relationship is the manifestation of their responsibility in maintaining Nature in her inherent state. It is deeply ingrained in the indigenous consciousness that their existence depends on Nature and that detached from her they cease to exist. The tribal people live in the awareness that Nature's bounty sustains and nourishes them and in turn they are to safeguard her. The sentience of the web of relationships in Nature being the very foundation of their existence, they preserve the interconnectedness in all the aspects of their lives.

Tribal communities remain a model for us to adapt sustainable ways as we are faced with ecological crisis in general and the pandemic Covid 19 in particular. In this context, it is appropriate to study the ways in which these groups live the bio-centric way of life. In contrast to the rat race of modern human beings to survive in this competitive world, the tribal communities live a peaceful life of cooperation being content with the available resources. Tribal life is the celebration of the present moment. They literally live each moment and let the other live, sharing the responsibility of co-existence. The attitude of interconnectedness is observable in their rituals, occupation and socio-cultural life.

This paper delves into the eco-centric way of life of Mavilan tribe. The deliberations in this paper are the results of the field work conducted in their hamlets. An attempt is made to unearth the symbiotic relation between Mavilan community and

Nature as manifested in their agricultural practices, rituals and folksongs especially of the past when they followed the agricultural way of life.

An overview of Mavilan tribe

Mavilan tribe inhabits Kannur and Kasaragod districts of Kerala. They are settled mainly in Kasaragod and Hosdurg taluks of Kasaragod district and in the hilly areas of the southern part of Taliparamba taluk of Kannur district, ranging from Alakode to Ulickal and a small area of Kannur taluk. They are essentially of Dravidian origin and one of the original inhabitants of Kerala who settled only in the hilly areas near the forests. They were hunter-gatherers and relied solely on forest produce and wild life for their sustenance. According to the census of the year 2011, their total population is 29,590, of whom 14,546 are males and 15,044 are females.

Mavilan tribe lived in a close-knit social structure that supported the whole community. They led a hunting, gathering and horticulture way of life until the encroachment of *Janmi* (landlord) to their habitat (Suresh, 2010). The system of agricultural serfdom existed in Kannur and Kasaragod districts during the early twentieth century. The landlords intruded into the habitats of the tribes and eventually became the owners of their lands. They did not permit the people of the tribe to own land; instead, these people were forced to become their agricultural labourers. As a corollary, Mavilan tribe was forced to adapt to the social changes. Thus in the past though they had lived as food gatherers and hunters, in the later period they had no other option than to become shifting cultivators. The tribe slogged in the land of the property owner while these landlords exploited their agricultural expertise. Such a precarious situation led to their backwardness. Yet they maintained their belief systems and adhered to their specific way of life in whatever way they were permitted to.

Environmental Ethics

In his seminal work, *Respect for Nature: A theory of Environmental Ethics*, the American philosopher, Paul Taylor, defines environmental ethics as an ethics that is concerned with the moral relation between the human and the non-human/natural world. "The ethical principles governing those relations determine our duties, obligations, and responsibilities with regard to the Earth's natural environment and all the animals and plants that inhabit it" (Taylor, 2011). He reiterates our duties and obligations to the wider community as inclusive of all beings. "In addition to and independently of whatever moral obligations we might have toward our fellow humans, we also have duties that are owed to wild living things in their own right" (Taylor, 2011). The communitarian dimension of existence is emphasized here as the foundation of environmental ethics. He maintains that the intrinsic value of wild living things generates a clear moral duty on our part to preserve or promote their goods as ends in themselves. Any practice which treats those beings as mere means and thus displays lack of respect for them is intrinsically wrong.

In *A Sand County Almanac*, a landmark in American conservation movement, Aldo Leopold, states the basic principle of his land ethic as, "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (Leopold, 1949). He also maintains that the land ethics simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land. According to him, land ethics

changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as stated above.

Both Taylor and Leopold urge that humans have duties not only towards the fellow humans but also to the extended biotic community. The ethical principles that we, humans follow determine our relationship with Nature and all our actions in relation to all that is created. If we consider ourselves superior to other beings naturally we tend to dominate and control other beings. But if we consider ourselves as one of the created beings having an equal status as that of the others we incline to cooperate and co-exist with the others. As we are already faced with ecological disasters it is obvious that we haven't treated the other beings as our fellow beings. By way of introspection as we admit our insensitivity we can also look for ways to rectify it. Perhaps the eco-centric way of life of tribal communities could be ecological lessons for us. Therefore it is significant that we try to understand the indigenous life style.

Relevance of traditional ecological knowledge

Traditional ecological knowledge is the foundation on which we can rely on to adapt to a bio centric way of life and it is central to environmental ethics. It is still considered to be one of the determinants of the ways in which we interact with the environment. As Cleveland observes:

Humans have understood their environments in terms of traditional (or indigenous) ecological knowledge (TEK). TEK has been a major determinant of the ways in which people have interacted with their environment—for all peoples at some point in the past, and for many today as well, though much TEK has been lost via the diminution or disappearance of cultural groups, or greatly modified by interaction with scientific ecological knowledge (SEK), the knowledge generated by the more formal, organized investigation of the world that has become increasingly dominant.

TEK is central to environmental ethics and philosophy because understanding it opens up new perspectives... and praxis of ecological knowledge in general ...(Cleveland, 2009).

The role of indigenous ecological practices in maintaining eco centric life cannot be overlooked as traditional ecological knowledge is central to environmental ethics. Therefore, it is significant to delve into the indigenous ecological knowledge and practices. "Indigenous responsibilities to and for the natural world are based on an understanding of the relatedness, or affiliation, of the human and non-human . . ." (Whitt, 2001). The understanding of interrelatedness which is the root of indigenous ecological practices becomes a point of investigation at this juncture. The awareness of interconnectedness encompasses the very existence of tribal groups and it is palpable in the lives of the Mavilan tribe too.

Rituals as means to preserve bio centric life

Theyyam, a ritual dance, which is performed in the North region of Kerala is integral to the life and existence of Mavilan tribe. The *theyyam* that the Mavilan tribe performs clearly represents environmental ethics from its purpose to the materials that they use during this particular occasion. It is performed in harmony with Nature and to reestablish harmony in their lives as well.

Mavilan tribe also follows many other rituals and practices with regard to land, cultivation and seeds. They begin the cultivation only after requesting the animals that live in the land to vacate the place making it free for cultivation (Karipath, 2005). Another ritual of offering *elivithu* (seeds for rats) for the bandicoots and other rodents is very significant. It is the manifestation of their belief system that if they offered food to the rodents in the forests itself they would not come to the cultivated area to disturb the crops. This ritual was performed after the completion of planting seeds during the shifting cultivation. It was conducted in the evening when the rodents came out foraging. In this ritual the officiating person disguises as an owl. Some paddy seeds are kept on the ground in a small basket during the performance. As the performance proceeds, someone from among the workers gets possessed. He takes the basket and runs to the forest area to plant it there. This symbolic ritual evinces the bio-centric approach of the tribe. It is to be noted that the tribe takes care of the rodents by respecting their identity and their right to live.

As Paul B Thompson maintains, "Agriculture is, ... a natural activity, properly emergent within many of the ecosystems in which the human species is found. To speak this way is to take the earth, the soils, the waters as living, if not animated, and to understand this life is to seek, in some sense, the spirit of the soil" (Thompson, 1995). The rituals that the Mavilan tribe practised are the clear indications that they sought the spirit of the soil. By requesting all those who dwell in the dens and forest to leave the land free for them to cultivate and by providing food for them, the people of Mavilan tribe kept up the aspect of respect for life. They do not want to harm any living thing while they cultivate the land. They are aware that harming one creature would have its repercussions on the entire cosmos.

As Laurie Ann Whitt and his co-authors suggest that, "that the human and non-human worlds are bound by relations of reciprocity has significant implications for appreciating the role responsibilities of indigenous people. They are obligated to provide their lands with sustenance, to sustain them by means of practices and ceremonies..., even as the land sustains them" (Whitt, 2001). Aldo Leopold, condemning the Abrahamic concept of land as a commodity belonging to us, humans, as the cause of our abuse of land, proposes land as a community to which we belong (Leopold, 1949). This attitude radically changes our approach to Nature. That the Mavilan tribe considered the land as a community is evident from the aforementioned rituals. This sensitivity of Mavilan tribe is an example of mutual co-existence and an evidence for environmental ethics.

Agriculture as means of sustainability

Mavilan tribe took utmost care of the earth while they were practising shifting cultivation in the land of the landlord. It is contrary to the monoculture ways of modern ages where all the other crops are disregarded for the maximum yield of a single variety of crop. It means that the Mavilan tribe follows the ethics of interconnectedness and interrelatedness in all the aspects of their lives. They believe in the sanctity of land. For them, land is not only a means of production or a possession but also part of the total environment in which they carry on their lives. Even if they didn't own the land, they tended with utmost care the portion in which they worked as labourers. Having no land of their own did not dissuade them from keeping up their reciprocal attitude towards nature. Lynn White, Jr. maintains, "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them" (White, 1996). It is evident from the ways the people of Mavilan tribe treat Nature that they respect the intrinsic worth of all created beings. Moreover, in

their reciprocal outlook towards Nature they sustain the attitude of stewardship, for according to Eric Katz, “the central idea of stewardship is that the steward exercises care for an entity that is in its power (Katz, 2001).”

Myth as binding force for eco consciousness

Myths are vital to the existence of a tribal community. Mavilan tribe too has their origin myth that directs them to their traditional occupation of *punam* cultivation (shifting cultivation). Janet Parker and Julie Stanton observe:

Tribal communities embraced a world view in which all aspects of life were connected (language, teachings, ceremonies, food gathering). This, of course, is not to suggest that indigenous peoples lived in paradise. The ways of harmony included acceptance of social disruption, even unforeseen tragedy. And myth played a vital role in explaining the ways of the world, and the individual's place in it. In our modern world we note a conspicuous reality of detachment from the natural and spiritual world around us, and it is with this contextual understanding of historical tribal communities that we approach the role of myth...

Myth was once at the core of maintaining this harmonious balance in tribal life. Stories offered indigenous peoples an understanding of many different things: their origins; their relationship to land, water and animals; and their connection to the spirit world. All of the above served to shape an expansive tribal worldview that informed tribal communities of collective values, and of a complex body of knowledge that served to direct tribes for a number of generations. (Parker, 2006)

For the Mavilan community too myth served as the very base of their way of life. R.C. Karipath recounts the myth of how the first parents of Mavilan tribe was created with the mission to provide food for the famished kingdom by working in the hilly areas. Another myth narrates how the tribe was entrusted with shifting cultivation (Karipath R. , 2005). They considered shifting cultivation a sacred ritual and engaged in it as performing a sacred duty. They also take pride in being one of the original practitioners of this way of cultivation. Hence the attitude of respect for paddy and agriculture is ingrained in the people of Mavilan tribe. These myths and stories contribute to keep up their basic outlook of deep affinity with Nature and to treat her with respect and gratitude evincing environmental ethics in their way of life.

Folksongs as means to preserve the ecological traditions

The attitude of respect for nature is seen in some of the folksongs of Mavilan tribe. “Muthappankotta”, a song sung at the beginning of *Nattutheyam*, when the *theyyam* performer gets ready in the *aniyara* deals with the theme of shifting cultivation. It is the story of a landlord who orders his tenants to cultivate on a sacred mountain and of the ensuing disaster. The tribal communities consider certain places in nature like the mountains, hills and rivers holy. They safeguard and worship these places and do not interfere with them. No one is supposed to breach this unspoken rule. The repercussion of breaking the laws of nature is destruction. Not only is the property owner punished but also the tenants who cultivated the land, conforming to his orders. Just as Nature is bountiful to good or bad alike, her annihilating aspect is also to be encountered by everyone whether it is deserved or not. It is evident from the song that the callous attitude of humans trigger the disaster.

The first principle of deep ecology reminds us that the inherent worth of human and non-human life on Earth is independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes (Naess, 1984). A mountain needs to be a mountain and it has its intrinsic worth. That is why it is there. It is not to be reduced to an agricultural land or a stone mine as it is done today. In the song, the egocentric attitude of the landlord is juxtaposed with the eco-centric attitude of the tribe. Despite being the tenants of the landlord, they respected the laws of nature while cultivating his land. If the humans don't listen to the natural laws, Nature has to teach them harsh lessons. While the beliefs and customs of indigenous people protect the non-human world, the knowledge of the modern people leads to an exhaustive use of natural resources. Thus, the song remains a warning for all the generations to protect Nature for its intrinsic worth.

The folksong 'Karimpulikkannan' is about the eponymous hero who cuts a mango tree to make his marriage a grand affair. The song depicts how his mother reprimands him. Despite her warning Kannan proceeds with his decision to fell the tree. The song ends with the disastrous result of his callous attitude. The song highlights the need to protect and safeguard Nature and to use the resources only when it is a real need. In this folksong the mother reminds Kannan of the long history of interconnectedness the family shares with the tree. The song indeed is a reminder of our insatiable greed towards Nature and our lack of care for the upcoming generations. These folksongs indeed can be viewed as a medium to transmit the ecological lessons to the younger generations.

Conclusion

The biocentric outlook and the attitude of respect for nature advocated by Paul Taylor had already been practised and lived by Mavilan tribe. Mavilan tribe consciously transmits these practices of the ethics of interconnectedness to the younger generations through their religious rituals, agricultural practices and oral literature. Their belief in the origin myth that they were created to provide food by cultivating on the mountain cliffs sustains them as caretakers of land. The rituals the tribe observe indicate their eco consciousness. Some of the folksongs of the community are ecological lessons transmitted to the younger generations. The agricultural practices of Mavilan tribe are evidences of their awareness of interconnectedness with Nature.

Environmental ethics of Mavilan tribe still remain a challenge for modern human beings to work consciously for sustainable development. They invite us to the communitarian dimension of our existence which emphasizes that we cannot exist as a separate entity but as part of the whole ecological system.

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