

Dilemma of Developmental Modernity: Review of K. Panoor's Keralathile Africa(the Africa of Kerala)

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the tribal writings in modern Malayalam literature. K. Panoor's *Keralathile Africa (The Africa of Kerala)* is one of the prominent books in Malayalam, dealing with the tribes of Kerala especially in the Malabar region. K. Panoor was a human-right activist and was the tribal welfare officer of the North Malabar in the late 1950s. It portrays the history and culture of the tribes. It also shows the perspective of development discourse of modernity. This is clear in his categorization of the adivasis as primitive and uncivilized. He ignores the political consciousness that has been emerging among the adivasis at least from the 1960s, treating them as incapable of possessing a political consciousness. In fact, much similar to the colonial writings, he advocates for a developmental modernity which in his view, is the panacea for all problems.

KEYWORDS: Dilemma, Modernity, Caste, People

In this paper, I would like to critically examine the tribal writings in modern Malayalam literature. K. Panoor's *Keralathile Africa (The Africa of Kerala)* is one of the prominent books in Malayalam, dealing with the tribes of Kerala especially in the Malabar region. K. Panoor was a human-right activist and was the tribal welfare officer of the North Malabar in the late 1950s. His first book, *Keralathile Africa (The Africa of Kerala)* was published in 1963 and in 1965 it won the UNESCO award. This book portrays the history and culture of the tribes. Panoor says that he got inspiration for writing this book from a Bengali novel *Aranyak* by Vibhuthi Bushan Bandopadhyaya, as he remarks: ". . . the novel *Aranyak* is telling the pathetic story of the adivasis like Santhals who were living the deeper forest of the Poornia districts of Bihar state. I get motivation from this book to know the contemporary situation of the adivasis in Kerala"¹.

The first chapter of the book deals with the life of the Adiyar community in Wayanad. Panoor writes that the Adiyar lives in border of Karnataka and Kerala. Their language is a mixture of Kannada and Malayalam. He says that they were the agricultural tribes like others, but the slavery system led them to live as adima, meaning, "slave" and they were bound to work for the landlords (P22). Panoor is skeptical of the rituals and medical practices of the Adiyar community. He says that instead of taking medicines for diseases they invoke gods and ancestors. Hence, he says that the challenges they have to overcome arise both from the gods and landlords (P28). The first chapter ends with Panoor's note of

sympathy towards this tribal group, saying that this community can be easily uplifted with the help of the sympathizers.

The next chapter deals with the Kurichian community in Kannavam forest in Kannur district. Panoor describes the Kurichian like this: "As we enter the forest, another person comes to our opposite side, unexpectedly. He is in dirty clothes, carrying an arrow and bow. This person becomes afraid when he confronts the villagers. This person is who avoids contact with the villagers, preferring to live with animals in the forest, is Kurichian" (P37). The Kurichian believes that they are the predominant tribal groups among the tribes. They practice untouchability and strictly follow rules and regulations. Hunting and gathering is their main occupation. Panoor's reliance on the modernist perspective can be seen in his description of the tribal settlement: "all Kurichian settlements are too dirty commonly we are not like to enter their house. If we are ready they are not allow to touch their house because they are very strict in practice of untouchability" (P 42). Kurichians make use of ethno-medicines and spiritual practices for healing diseases. He also refers to the morality of the Kurichians when he says that they believe that the illnesses are the results of their sins.

In third chapter, Panoor portrays the life of the Koragar tribe. Koragars are the inhabitants in Kasargodu taluk, the border of Kerala and Karnataka. According to Panoor, they are very primitive. Instead of clothes they use leaves as clothes. He writes with an ironical sense: ". . . the Koragar boast themselves by saying that they are also human beings! Panoor says that it is better if we can disown the claim that we are human beings! The Koragar eat the meat of dead cow and buffalos, cooking it with salt and chilly. Even such "unknown" tribe is also living in "civilized Kerala" (p55). The traditional occupation of the Koragar is making basket with bamboo.

Paniyan and Kattunaickan are considered to be the most primitive tribes among the tribes in Kerala. The next two chapters of Panoor's book deal with the culture and tradition of the Paniyan and Kattunaickan. Kattunaickans are honey-gatherers who live in the forest. Paniyans are bonded labourers. According to Panoor, Paniyans are slaves from the beginning itself and they work for the landlords in the hilly areas. Paniyan is numerically the majority group compared to other adivasis. The non-tribes believe that Paniyans possess some supernatural powers. For this reason people often attack this tribe. Panoor says the Paniyan are engaging with music and dances and these arts are primitive. Kattunaickans mainly depend on the forest for their day to day life. He writes that these two adivasis believe that their ancestors are living in another world. One criticism Panoor makes about these communities is that they lack moral values as they are not giving any importance to marriage relations and rituals (P94).

The last chapter of this book deals with the life and culture of the Kurumar. Kurumars are agricultural tribes settled in the border of Tamilnad and Kerala. Panoor says that there are sub groups among the Kurumars. They are Then-Kurumar, Mullu-Kurumar, Urali-Kurumar, Vettu-Kurumar and so on. The life histories of these tribes were interconnected. Panoor relates the history of the Kurumar to the epic or purana. They are also good in hunting and they have many rituals related to hunting. He remarks that the Kurumar have the habit of the keeping their settlements clean and they live in groups containing ten or fifteen families (P102).

Keralathile Africa (The Africa of Kerala) cannot be seen as purely ethnographic narration of the community. Rather, it can be regarded as the author's reflection on the tribes of Kerala, from a modernist perspective. Panoor's description of the life and history of the tribes in Malabar verges on fantasy. He imposes binaries such as slave/master civilized/uncivilized, modern/ primitive, etc., without taking pains to define them. He doesn't use any reference or methodology for describing these communities. He simply narrates the history of the adivasis in a fictional way. There is no definition of tribe or adivasi and the terms like "slaves".

One of the ironic facts is that Panoor was a government officer who worked for the adivasis and at the same time he was also an agent of the government. This book gets added significance as it came out immediately after the introduction of new development policies for the lower class people by the government. Panoor was well-trained in the modern development discourse adopted by the government and as shown above, his book is exemplar of this discourse.

The modern state of Kerala was formed in November 1, 1956 by uniting three distinct provinces: Malabar to the north ruled directly by the British, and two princely states, Cochin and Travancore, ruled "indirectly" by the British. In 1957, the first communist government came to power and they introduced Welfarism in the state. According to Manali Desai, the Communists in 1957 pursued a logic of redistribution based on emergent class solidarities and aimed at further promoting the class formation of workers and tenants, the predominant social base that brought them to power. The government introduced the Welfarism and reform policies for the welfare of the lower and working class people in the state. The first is the land reforms implemented in 1957 and reattempted in the early to mid 1960s after the communists were re-elected having been ousted in 1959. A second reform was the abolition of landlordism, which neither the princely states (especially Cochin) nor the British (Malabar) had undertaken fully. The third crucial policy of reform is granting the minimum wages for the agriculture labourers. The fourth policy area concerned education (P483-484).

1960s were the crucial period of the political transformation in the Kerala society. Government introduced these policies for the unification of the people. At the same time a lot of political parties also formed in the 1960s and the lower caste movements also emerged for protecting their rights. The government was forced to introduce the developmental discourse in the tribal regions. The reform policies helped the migrants to take over the power of tribal lands and consequently, the tribes were alienated from their land. The origin of the social movements among the tribes in the late 1960s can be understood only if we take into account all these complex political and social formations.

In this complex scenario, the tribe became an important category for the government to be taken care of. The introduction of modern development discourse was thus an inevitable strategy for the government to impose so as to manage this group. Hence, the appearance of various tribal welfare departments Panoor's position, thus, becomes more vivid: a mediator of the government for exploring the possibilities of the development discourse among the adivasis. Whatever his understanding and knowledge of the tribes of Kerala, knowingly or unknowingly, it was doomed to serve the governmental purpose.

Kerala model of development sees the tribe as an object of modernity. The category of the tribe is used to define what modernity is. Modernity can only be understood taking into account various dimensions of the aspects such as the subject, object, and the agent. In this instance Panoor functions as an agent/subject of developmental modernity who looks at the community, which is the object. Panoor's stance is really ambiguous: he deplores the adivasis and at the same time, romanticizes them. In the last analysis, we can see that he functions as a tool of the state's developmental modernity.

The discourse of developmental modernity can be identified through aspects such as clothes, food habits, labours, religion, morality, etc. The advocates of modernity argue that the primitive people have different life style; hence they are uncivilized and deviant. Panoor's book is written from the perspective of developmental modernity. His inclination to base everything on this normative discourse can be seen in his description of their everyday habits. For instance, he says: the food habits of the adivasis are barbaric and primitive. He used derogatory terms for describing tribal foods. Examples are the terms like "corpse eaters", "left over takers" etc. He is criticizing them after romanticizing their habits. They have become "corpse eaters" because they were not familiar with the food culture of the mainstream society. In the chapter about the Koragar, Panoor writes, "...at night the sights of the Koragar settlements haunted me. When I started to have my dinner, I remembered the bad smell of the corpse-eaters. I felt sick. An image came to my mind: the Koragars are sitting around a corpse and eating it with chilly and salt as we eat bread. I want to tell them that you are like animals, but I can't because they are smiling to me as innocent children (P59)".

Another element which the modern developmental discourse pays attention is the religion of the adivasis. Panoor says that their religion is supernatural and they are practicing the "black magic" for their medical treatments. They are not familiar with the doctors so that they are practicing ethno-medicines. He also says that the adivasis don't have a proper legal system or governance. The government's legal system would help them to abolish the uncivilized practices among the adivasis.

In this book, Panoor displaces and projects his own political consciousness to the younger generation of the adivasis. He writes that the younger generation has started to question the old generation's "supernatural" activities. This conflict will help them to change their "barbaric culture" (p28). He never treats them as having any political consciousness. The tribal is apolitical. From the 1960s and 70s onwards, the mainstream political parties have started their engagements with the adivasis. Panoor ignores the consequences of such engagements. He also pays little attention to the subsequent career of the land reform in relation to adivasis.

To conclude, Panoor's book is written from the perspective of development discourse of modernity. This is clear in his categorization of the adivasis as primitive and uncivilized. He ignores the political consciousness that has been emerging among the adivasis at least from the 1960s, treating them as incapable of possessing a political consciousness. In fact, much similar to the colonial writings, he advocates for a developmental modernity which in his view, is the panacea for all problems.

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