

An anthropological study of the economic hardships that impede development with special reference to the indebtedness of Veddas at Henanigala and Dambana areas in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous community means people who belong to any ethnic group having a historical existence and identity, separate and independent of the mainstream society. They usually live around a specific geographic area throughout the history as indigenous people. This study is centered on the Veddas who live in Dambana and Henanigala, focusing on their economic hardships that impede the development of the country. Although Veddas were scattered all over the country in the past, today they are confined to limited geographical areas, including Uva Binthanna, their historical homeland. Villages of Dambana and Kandegamvila (just near Dambana area) are situated in Uva Binthanna. The Vedda people of Kandegamvila were displaced due to the Accelerated Mahaweli project, and were resettled in Hennangala in 1983. This research was conducted by adopting quantitative and qualitative methods, while employing the participant observation method, interview method, including focus group and key informant discussions for the collection of data. Out of 758 families in Henanigala and 350 families in Dambana, hundred and twenty respondents were chosen for the process of data collection. As a result of resettlement in an unfamiliar geographical area, Vedda people at Henanigala have been facing numerous socioeconomic issues, compared to Vedda people of Dambana. They had been practising slash and burn cultivation while they were residing in Dambana, and after being resettled in Henanigala, they have been forcefully pushed towards paddy cultivation. Thus, Henanigala Veddas had given up their usual life pattern, but didn't adjusted to the new way of lifestyle. Henanigala and Dambana Veddas have been denied access to Madura Oya National forest by the authorities. Nonetheless, these people have not given up the practice of hunting and gathering, and on the contrary they are still involved in the forest-dwelling lifestyle, disregarding the orders and warnings issued by the officers of the Department Wildlife Conservation. Offences against the prevailing law result in monetary fines, for which they tend to mortgage paddy lands. Further, they frequently get loans from black-market loan providers to fulfil their day to day needs, and for medical care for their incurable and severe health problems like kidney diseases. Accordingly, Vedda people suffer great economic hardships that eventually lead them to debt. Hence, the government should consider different schemes to address this critical matter within Vedda society and positively contribute to the betterment of their lives and the economic development of the country.

Keywords: *Vedda people, indebtedness, economic hardships, impede development, new avenues*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Veddas are the aborigines or indigenous people of Sri Lanka. Mahawamsa reveals that Veddas descend from Prince Vijaya (6th - 5th century B.C), the founding father of the Sinhala nation, who married Yakka princess Kuweni and begot two children namely; Jeewahatta and Disala. Due to the abandonment of Kuweni by King Vijaya in favour of a 'Kshatriya' princess of the Pandya country, their two children – a boy and a girl – departed to the region of Samanakuta (Adam's Peak in Ratnapura District), and their progeny gave rise to the Veddas. Accordingly, the Veddas are believed to be identical with the 'Yakkhas' tribe in the country.

Apart from the legend of Mahawamsa, there are many opinions and literal evidences can be found among the historians, archaeologists and anthropologists regarding the Vedda origin. As sufficient artifacts and skeletons have not been found so far, there is no any acceptable and concrete conclusion available. Accordingly, their origin remains an unknown ambiguity.

Although presently the Vedda folk confined to the restricted areas, they had lived all over the country in the distant past. Vedda was using their language long ago. But now they mostly speak corrupted Sinhala, pure Sinhala or Tamil. Robert Knox, who had imprisoned by the king of Kandy, recorded in his book titled 'An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon, in the East-Indies,' there were two types of Veddas called as 'wild' and 'tame' available in the Kandyan period of the country. But no longer live wild Vedda in the country.

Presently, Vedda community has been facing numerous challenges due to rapid social and cultural changes. Because of the development projects, inaugurated after independence of the country, made drastic changes in their lives. The new political concept of democracy has been playing a vital role for the changes of Vedda society. With the influence of democracy, universal franchise was introduced into the Sri Lankan community during the period of British colonialism. After the independence, even Vedda franchise also obtained a high value as same as Sri Lankan mainstream. The concept of democracy consists of four basic elements: A political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections, the active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life, Protection of the human rights of all citizens, A rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens. But the development has failed to fulfil them within the Vedda community in Sri Lanka. As a result of it, their participation and development has been impeded and they succumbed to the indebtedness.

2. OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this research is to study the economic hardships that impede development with special reference to the indebtedness of Veddas at Henanigala and Dambana in Sri Lanka. During this research, one major objective is to study the effect of democracy, participation, and development towards the Vedda community in Sri Lanka. It was studied the impact of exclusion and inclusion of cultural traits to the community. Further, purposes of being indebtedness were some other objectives of this study. Further, the studying the impact of policies and the effects of them were sub-objectives of this research. Finally, it was focused to point out new suggestions to rescue them from these difficulties.

3. METHODOLOGY

This was carried out by adopting qualitative and quantitative techniques. Participant observation method was occupied during the data gathering. Focus group discussions and interview method also used during the data collection. Interviews were held in many public places like paddy fields, small boutiques, near the village lake, canals, in the lands of slash and burn cultivation etc. Key informants like government officers, community leaders were interviewed and thereby able to apply qualitative method to the study.

Out of 758 families in Henanigala and 350 families in Dambana, altogether one hundred and twenty (120) individuals were interviewed. Purposive sampling method was employed to collect qualitative data. Therefore, the researcher could able to identify the extent of economic hardship of the Vedda village by using the sufficient amount of sample size. Further, collected data was analyzed using narrative analysis.

4. RESULTS

Vedda has been successful in retaining within themselves to some extent their socio-economic structure up to the middle of this century. Between 1940-1955, Sri Lanka instituted the several irrigation projects (Minneriya, Minipe, Gal Oya) which drastically affected the Vedda in the eastern region.

The accelerated Mahaweli (river) development project which was the largest development program ever in Sri Lankan history, was commenced in 1977. The government was taken necessary steps to resettle Veddas people at Henanigala in 1983. They were displaced from the past habitats and resettled in an alienated and disadvantageous region without their consent due to said project. Instead of the traditional slash and burn cultivation, Vedda folk happened to be forcefully practised paddy cultivation after resettled in Mahaweli colony. But they were not able to adjust to the new way of life as like as the Sinhalese peasants of the country. As a result of it, they had faced numerous inconveniences and problems such as food scarcity, houseless, nostalgia, alienation, loss of self-dignity, loss of image, identity and so on.

Since the Madura Oya forest had announced as a national park by the government, the Vedda folk were prohibited to enter the forest. From then onwards their whole lives became chaos. The people those who were collecting food in natural forests happened to adjust to the artificial peasant life.

For the past 30 years, this displaced group of Vedda has struggled to live in the colony. Their cultural heritage was influenced by the neighbouring cultures. Thus, the original occupants of the country are suffering a cultural decline. The rehabilitation project had completely failed and resettled Veddas became strangers of this new colony and suffering from the adverse effects of the so-called development.

By understanding the difficulties of the resettlers, the World Food Organization had supplied two years food ration, to the people who resettled in Mahaweli colony. As considering the retardation of the Vedda folk, the World Food Organization had provided this ration to Vedda people for three years. As a result of it, the Vedda people got depended mentality and they were not seeking any means of life. However, when the government stopped the food donation after three years, Vedda people have found its difficult to get used to their usual lifestyle.

Engage in hunting has become a critical and serious issue for declining the economic growth of the Veddas in this area. Even Sinhala traders persuade the hunters to engage in hunting. These traders in the village supply food items to the hunters on a loan basis to enable the later to roam the jungles. In this manner, the trader can sell his food items comparatively easily and for a high price. Illegal fishing also has become a reason for their indebtedness. Using nylon nets for fishing is prohibited in Maduruoya reservoir. When Veddas involve in fishing, they use nylon nets and happened to pay fines to the court very often.

The Vedda people do not know any other livelihood other than hunting. But the Veddas were prohibited to enter and hold any firearms in the forest. They allow them to practice hunting using bow and arrows. But it was not applicable, as the present Veddas are not good at using bow and arrows like their ancestors. Under this circumstances Vedda further use illegal weapons and they often being arrested by the Wildlife officers. Accordingly, Veddas happened to be paid high amount of prices to the courts frequently. As Veddas were not in a position to bear this penalty, they tended to mortgage their paddy lands by illegal methods. Sometimes they happened to sell their any belongings to seek money for arbitrating the offender. Furthermore, these people mortgage or lease the paddy fields in many ways as follows:

- Lease or mortgage the paddy fields illegally in two seasons called *Yala* and *Maha* for a less price around Rs. 100,000/- or above.
- If any kinds of immediate necessity arise they mortgage their lands even below Rs. 100,000/-. For instance, when they committed crimes like killing rare wild animals, these people are being fined.
- Elder villagers illegally transferring their paddy fields to another when they are unable to cultivate them. They commit it with the promise of in returning over half of the harvest reaped. It is known as '*Weeporoduwa*'.
- The mortgaging of paddy fields on a tenor basis.

Due to these arbitrary and short-sighted deeds, their development has been interrupted. Further, indebtedness has arisen in their society. Since Veddas are not traditional farmers, they have been gripped by problems due to their unfamiliarity with the new environment. As said by Vedda peasants who engage in paddy cultivation, they spend an

amount of 50 000 is expended each time a paddy field is harvested. Such an amount of cash is not a small amount for a peasant who lives in Henanigala area since they don't have proper an income. Though fertilizers and insecticides were supplied at a reduced rate in the early stages by the Mahaweli Project, the farmers are now compelled to buy them from the private sector. Moreover, their less knowledge about fertilizers and insecticides has become a major reason for their harvest is not that rich. If there were many field officers to prevent the soil becoming infertile as a result of cultivation over some time and to compensate for it by engaging in cultivating additional crops. As a result of this, they have a less chance to produce high-quality rice. But the stores at the paddy marketing Board in Naw Medagama, Paranagma, Giradurukotte or Hennaigala North would purchase this village produced only if it were of a high quality. This factor also leads them to impede their development and being indebtedness.

Felling of trees for timber also takes place within the Madura Oya Park. The Vedda- Sinhala mixed group also engage in such activities on a wider scale. Some people supplies the Vedda villager sawing equipment to cut timber in the Park, This sawn timber is sometimes stealthily loaded into the government vehicles and transports them to the outstations. They are clever enough to evade the police officers on their way.

The racketeers in mass society, traders, officials and sometimes even politician are using Veddas in such misdeeds. When above-mentioned people earn lots of money, the Veddas also getting some little amount of currency without understanding strategies of their masters.

The land problem has become a major issue for the backwardness of this society. The government has given 2.5 acres of land to grow paddy and 0.5 acres of land to grow maize, manioc or other crops. Although they are used for growing crops or agriculture, they find it challenging to protect them from wild animals; especially wild elephants. They often face wild elephant problems and although they are used to control these wild elephants using anti-elephant crackers, they find it extremely difficult nowadays. As a result, some of the members have to pay the price with their lives. These Vedda people take loans for cultivation, but ultimately fail to pay their loans because of different problems they face. This is another way the black-market businessmen take undue advantages from these innocent Vedda people. At the beginning, the government had given 0.5 acres for each family to build their homes and grow crops.

But the successive governments have held the projects of transferring lands for agricultural and residential purposes. As a result, today, in a land of 0.5 acres, 4 or 5 families are living altogether. This results in numerous inconveniences and health problems. Their toilets and wells are very closely located. Therefore, with the population increasing, 0.5 acres are by no means enough for a family group.

Water supply is another burning issue, as the waterways are polluted by fertilizer, weedicide and pesticide. According to the statistics report, 80% of Veddas are suffering from diabetes and other unknown illnesses. Even if the government has the facilities to promote free healthcare, they have to pay for medical tests and certain medicines. Some Vedda people either cannot pay money or are not willing to take medical advice properly and as a result of it, they become vulnerable and sometimes lead them to death.

Diabetes is common among the adults in Vedda community. Although diabetes is not an infectious disease, its effects are severe. When a member is diagnosed by suffering from diabetes, the doctors advise them to live under the medical care. But instead of following doctors' advice they further involve in hard work as labourers. Under this condition, some Veddas happened to implant their kidneys.

Further, bankers have introduced new loan schemes to these Vedda people, so that they can get loan facilities from the government and non-government banks under the low rate of interest. Some Vedda people cultivate their crops using these loans. However, they ultimately fail to pay loans about numerous problems which they face during the cultivation process. If they fail to pay them, the bank does not provide them any more loans.

Some Vedda people pawning their any asset, when they fall ill or have a wedding or any other function at home. Consequently, they happen to pay loans with high rates of interest. As a result, they are not in a position to spend smooth lifestyle due to indebtedness.

When some Vedda people purchase any stuff to pay on the instalment paying basis, find it difficult to pay them due to financial hardships. To settle their bills, they also lend money again with high rates of interest. Hence, some are borrowing money from businessmen with interest of high rate. This vicious circle ruins their whole lives.

Consumption of alcohol – both legal and illegal – is one negative habit for which they spend a lot of money. Some of them even addicted to narcotic drugs too. Thereby, their financial issues get more aggravated. The infestation of ‘Sena’ caterpillar has been destroying their cultivations nowadays and it becomes a major issue affects for their economic decline. Accordingly, Vedda community has been facing numerous economic difficulties including continues deterioration of their standard of lives. Under such circumstances, any community would not able to maintain their self-dignity with safeguarding traditional cultural identity.

5. CONCLUSION

The government should essentially take initiative to introduce a new development scheme to uplift their lives. It should be promoted a substantial and sustainable development scheme which can help to preserve their culture, image and identity. It is the responsibility of the government to get the participation of these people to the development of the country. By introducing a quality education to the Vedda children government would able to improve their means of life. We all should understand that these people should not attempt to change artificially and allow them to be changed through a natural process which not hinders their favourable lifestyle.

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