

Social Workers in Empowering Landless Tribal Communities: A Qualitative Study on Tribal Communities of Thirukalukundram Taluk

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Abstract

The struggle of Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities for land rights in India is a long-standing issue that traces its roots back to the post-colonial period. Despite the availability of legal frameworks and court directives, many ST communities continue to face challenges in acquiring land in their name. While some have succeeded in securing land rights, many still live as tenants to large landlords. This paper explores the challenges faced by these communities, particularly in Thirukalukundram Taluk of Chengalpattu where government land is available in the same district and nearby areas, but remains inaccessible for the rightful beneficiaries. A qualitative research study conducted with social work students, who have actively worked on securing land rights for ST communities, sheds light on the barriers faced by these communities and the role of social workers in addressing these issues. The research highlights the problems within the community, external challenges, and the intervention strategies employed by social workers to aid the communities for accessing land rights. The paper discusses various strategies employed by social workers like seeking information under RTI Act, facilitating and educating communities for making them to advocate for themselves.

Keywords: *Land entitlement, Bureaucratic Hurdles, Roles and Strategies.*

Introduction

Deprivation and alienation of indigenous people from their land and resources have become a global phenomenon (Biswas & Pal, 2021). United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) clearly spells out their rights over the lands, territory and resources they have been using through the years and envisage to protect their rights (United Nations, 2007). In India and abroad alike minority communities are the most affected from land alienation and most suspected to suffer from development projects. Minority communities belong to scheduled tribes in India were inhabitants of forest areas and mountain regions. However, successive forest laws instituted during British rule and maintained after independence have alienated many tribal populations from their traditional lands (Padel & Das, 2010; Saravanan, 2008). Land alienation among tribal communities is not just a local issue, it is a global phenomenon (Biswas & Pal, 2021; Xaxa, 2018). Developmental projects such as dams and protected forest areas have historically displaced tribal populations (Fernandes, 2006; Cernea, 2000).

High scale development projects like construction of dams, national parks and reserve forest has highly restricted their authority and movement over forest areas. In search of livelihood and jobs these communities came to plain lands and settled under the landlords as their tenants working in their agricultural lands initially and later moved to

various jobs in unorganized sector. For a family settled under a landlord had to work on his field, and going for other jobs was not encouraged and the wage was paid in terms of paddy or other goods.

In Tamil Nadu, many of the tribal communities continue to live in what are classified as “poramboke lands” — common village lands, grazing lands, roadside areas, lands near water bodies, or areas under coastal regulation zones. Under state norms, those residing on non-objectionable land for a sustained period (often 10 years or more) may be eligible to receive a “patta” (land entitlement). Nevertheless, a combination of lack of awareness, complex procedures, missing documentation, and corruption prevents many from successfully claiming these rights (Gupta, 2012; Mahapatra, 2019). Troubles and challenges faced by landless tribal communities are multifaceted. Here comes the role of social workers. Since most of the tribal communities are interior in Chengalpattu district, number of Non Governmental Organizations working among them is few.

Thirukalukundram Taluk

Thirukalukundram Taluk is a taluk of Chengalpattu district in Indian state of Tamil nadu. The Taluk has irula settlements in areas Thiruvanaikoil, Kolathangarai, Kollamedu, Ponpadhar Koodam, Aminjikai, Mandapam, Navalir, Kothimangalam, Chinnadayathur, Kilpakkam, Annai Sthyanagar, Naduvakkarai, Vallipuram, Tattallur, Naraippakkam and Latur.

Objectives

- To study about the roles and strategies played by social workers on empowering landless communities in Thirukalukundram district of Chengalpattu.
- To study about the disadvantages faced by landless communities.
- To study about challenges faced by communities in getting land rights.

Methodology

The method used for research is a qualitative method. Researchers used semi-structured interview schedules to collect qualitative data from respondents. Respondents are social workers who work with Irula communities in Thirukalukundram Taluk. Data on various objectives of the study was collected from respondents.

The researcher used descriptive design. Data required for the research is gathered through interview schedules and the research provides a detailed picture of landless communities in Thirukalukundram Taluk of Chengalpattu district.

Data Collection

Data is collected from Social Work students who have worked with Irula Communities in various years as part of their field work. Number of respondents is six, which has attained saturation by then. Since Thirukalukundram Taluk is an interior village in Chengalpattu district, NGOs working with the communities are very few. Student social workers work with the communities as part of an ambitious rehabilitation and empowerment programme initiated by a college in Chennai.

Purposive Sampling was used for data collection. The researchers identified social workers who have done excellent work with the communities and approached them for data.

Procedural Rigor

The researcher used techniques such as theoretical sampling, iteration and coding methods. In - depth interview data was collected where the participants told their challenges in acquiring skills through field practicum. Open coding method was used by the researcher to identify and categorize new perceptions, topics, ideas, concepts and phrases accordingly. Axial coding was done in order to connect the concrete categories the investigator was able to draft new subthemes.

Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed based on the framework given by Braun&Clarke in 2013. The steps followed for analysis are 1. Familiarise with the data, 2. generating initial codes, 3. searching for themes, 4. reviewing identified themes, 5. Defining the names and themes, 6. start writing the report. The researcher went deep into themes in order to connect the themes and to derive sub-themes. Six themes emerged from collected data, which are, Disadvantages faced by landless communities, Reasons led to landlessness, Challenges faced by Irula communities in the journey of acquiring land rights, Roles and strategies played by social workers and changes noticed among communities after intervention.

Results

Theme 1: Disadvantages faced by landless communities

Landless communities face a multitude of disadvantages that affect various aspects of their lives, leading to cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

1.1 Limited accessibility to schools and healthcare

Landless communities often live in remote or underserved areas where infrastructure like roads, transportation, and public services are limited. This makes it difficult for children to attend school and for families to access basic healthcare facilities. It contributes to a high number of dropouts and less number of students pursuing higher education. Inaccessibility also mounts the costs of travel.

1.2 Lack of pure drinking water:

Most of the landless families rely on unsafe or untreated water sources, which may lead to waterborne diseases. Without access to clean drinking water, the health of children and adults is at risk, exacerbating their vulnerability. The people have to fetch water from nearby water sources. In Thirukalukundram it is observed that the water collected for drinking is hard water and the direct use of it causes intestinal disorders and other health hazards.

1.3 Poor sanitation:

Without access to proper sanitation facilities, landless communities are more likely to suffer from poor hygiene conditions. This can lead to health problems like diarrheal diseases, infections, and malnutrition, especially among children. The children are faced discrimination in school from other students because they are unable to take bath everyday and wear the same uniform multiple days without washing it. Water scarcity is also a reason behind poor sanitation.

1.4 Inaccessibility to social security schemes, PDS, pension, Anganwadi services:

Landless families are often excluded from government welfare programs because of documentation issues, lack of awareness, or difficulties in accessing government offices. This means they might miss out on Public Distribution System (PDS) benefits, pensions, or Anganwadi services that are meant to support food security, health, and education for children and pregnant women. Address proof is a very mandated document used to verify applicants in different welfare schemes. Landless communities often struggle to access these benefits because they don't have an address. Several factors contribute to this inaccessibility, including lack of awareness, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and exclusion due to missing documentation. As a result, landless families often miss out on critical food assistance, child and maternal health services, and financial security in old age. This lack of access to social security programs exacerbates their economic vulnerabilities and undermines their ability to improve their living conditions.

1.5 Labour exploitation

Many landless individuals work as laborers in agriculture, construction, or domestic services, where they are vulnerable to exploitation, unfair wages, and poor working conditions. Without land or property, they have little bargaining power and may be forced into precarious employment. They are compelled to work in the land of their land owners. Freedom to work in other lands is very poor because they are liable to their landlords and refraining from work may invite more troubles. Without ownership of land or resources, they are at the mercy of employers who often exploit their labor by offering low wages, poor working conditions, and no job security. This exploitation is compounded by a lack of social safety nets or legal protections for workers, making it difficult for them to demand better wages or working conditions. Labor exploitation reinforces economic inequality, leaving landless individuals trapped in low-paying, unskilled jobs with little chance of upward mobility.

1.6 Health hazards

Exposure to poor living conditions, including inadequate housing, poor sanitation, and lack of healthcare, increases the risk of health problems. Malnutrition, respiratory diseases, and exposure to environmental pollutants are common issues in landless communities. Respiratory diseases caused by indoor air pollution (from cooking with biomass fuels), malnutrition, and poor sanitation-related illnesses. The absence of healthcare facilities nearby also limits the ability to receive timely medical attention, leading to higher mortality rates and lower life expectancy. Chronic health problems further reduce the ability of individuals in these communities to work, educate their children, or engage in other social and economic activities.

1.6 No current connection, which affects education

In the modern world, connectivity plays a critical role in education, yet landless communities often lack access to electricity, internet, and mobile networks. Without these resources, children from these communities struggle to keep up with online education, especially during times when digital learning becomes necessary, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the absence of electricity means that children cannot study after dark, and families cannot access information or engage in economic activities that require digital tools. This digital divide exacerbates existing educational disparities and reduces the future opportunities for the next generation of landless individuals.

1.7 Less political participation

Landless communities often lack the resources and support to engage in political processes. This marginalization leads to underrepresentation in decision-making bodies, leaving their voices unheard when policies that affect their lives are being crafted. Without political representation, landless communities are unable to advocate for their rights or influence decisions that directly impact their lives. As a result, their voices remain unheard, and their struggles continue to be

Theme 2: Bureaucratic Challenges in Land Allocation and its effects on landlessness

Bureaucratic challenges often play a significant role in perpetuating landlessness, particularly for marginalized communities such as indigenous groups, rural migrants, or low-income populations. The barriers in land acquisition and land rights are often the result of inefficient systems, lack of knowledge, and entrenched corruption. Below are the key bureaucratic challenges that landless communities, including groups like the Irula people, face when attempting to acquire or retain land:

2.1 Lack of Knowledge

A major bureaucratic challenge for landless communities in Thirukalukundram is the lack of knowledge about their legal rights and the procedures involved in land acquisition. Many landless individuals, especially from are unaware of the processes involved in land allocation, land rights documentation, and legal protections. This lack of awareness hinders their ability to apply for land or appeal decisions, leaving them vulnerable to landlessness. Often, there is no clear or accessible guidance from government agencies on how to navigate the complex bureaucratic systems, making it even harder for these communities to secure land.

2.2 Lack of Proper Documents

Access to land is heavily dependent on having the proper documentation, including proof of identity, residence, and community certificate. Landless individuals often lack the necessary legal documents required to claim land rights or access welfare programs. Many rural or marginalized communities do not possess formal identification or land records, either due to historical exclusion, illiteracy, or lack of proper registration systems. Without these documents, they face an uphill battle to prove their claims and, as a result, are often excluded from land entitlement programs or other state welfare schemes. Bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption can make obtaining or rectifying these documents even more difficult. According to a social worker “ *Even Though we are willing to help them , lack of documents make the process extremely time consuming. We had to go to multiple government hospitals many times to avail a single document and move a step forward*”.

2.3 Poor Support from Local Authorities

Local authorities, including village leaders and administrative officers, often lack the capacity or willingness to provide support for landless communities. Whether due to limited resources, inadequate training, or indifference to the needs of marginalized groups, local officials do not prioritize land claims from landless people in most cases. Furthermore, when local authorities do provide assistance, it is often slow or incomplete. In some cases, corruption or personal biases at the local level lead to favoring certain groups over others, which further exacerbates the challenge for landless communities trying to access land rights.

2.4. Bribery

Corruption and bribery are significant obstacles for landless communities trying to navigate bureaucratic systems. In many cases, landless individuals are required to pay bribes to government officials in exchange for processing land claims, issuing legal documents, or facilitating land transactions. Bribery not only slows down the process but also raises the cost of securing land, making it even more inaccessible for poor, marginalized communities. This also means that only those with financial resources are able to navigate bureaucratic hurdles, while the most disadvantaged are left out. Corruption deepens the inequities in land distribution and enforcement of land rights. According to a social worker in his experience at Thirukalukundram says “ *electricity was not given in communities who managed to secure land entitlement inorder to extract bribes from the community. Until the bribe is given or somebody who is powerful intervene the electricity connection is not done*”.

2.5 Denial of Villagers to Allot Land for Irula People in their village

Local villagers and non-indigenous communities sometimes refuse to allot government land to the Irula people in their village due to different kinds of discrimination and preoccupied notions.his denial is often reinforced by biased

local authorities or political figures who may be reluctant to intervene or rectify the situation. The Irula tribe, despite their traditional connection to the land, often faces resistance when trying to reclaim or secure land rights.

Theme 3: Roles played by social workers for landless communities

3.1 Representative Roles in Government Offices

Social workers often act as representatives for landless communities in government offices, ensuring that these communities have a voice in policy decisions and land distribution processes. Given that many marginalized communities lack the means to directly engage with government officials or navigate complex bureaucracies, social workers represent their interests in these spaces. In their representative role, social workers present petitions and represent landless communities in public hearings. According to a respondent “ *We take the landless people to collector on petition day with the petition written by themselves with signature of all needy* ”. They may also guide clients through the legal and administrative processes required to secure land tenure, ensuring that government officials understand the needs of the landless population. Social workers acting as representatives ensure that the voices of landless communities are heard in the halls of power. Social workers also use networking with NGOs to advocate for them.

3.2 Educator Role Played by social workers for Landless Communities

Social workers in landless communities assume the role of educators to inform and empower individuals about their rights, legal processes, and available resources. Social workers in landless communities provide education on land rights, government policies, and available programs. They may teach individuals and families about the processes involved in acquiring land, legal documentation needed for land claims, and how to navigate bureaucratic systems. For example, they may organize workshops or community meetings that help members of landless communities understand their entitlements under national or local land laws. A social worker who provided education on land rights to the community people has said, “*The people don't know what to do next after each step. We help them to navigate through the process, at least one person in a community got knowledge about the process so they can guide other members*”. The social workers train people to file petitions and advocate for themselves.

3.3 Facilitator in Land Rights Process

As facilitators, social workers play a crucial role in helping landless communities navigate the often complex and bureaucratic processes involved in acquiring land. Social workers act as intermediaries between the community and the various government bodies, legal systems, and other stakeholders involved in the land rights process. By acting as facilitators, social workers streamline the process of land acquisition and rights recognition. They ensure that community members are able to interact effectively with key stakeholders, which helps reduce barriers and speed up the land claims process. As a social worker said “*We go to government offices with clients. Mostly they process applications when they see social workers advocating for them, maybe thinking that delaying the process may invite any troubles.*”

3.4 Technical Roles

Social workers in land rights contexts often perform technical roles that require specific knowledge of land laws, land reform programs, and community development practices. They may conduct assessments, offer counseling, and support the implementation of land reform initiatives. In technical roles, social workers conduct needs assessments to identify the specific challenges faced by landless communities and gather data that supports land

reform initiatives. They also play a role in designing programs that address these challenges, such as providing legal assistance or offering counseling services to help individuals navigate disputes related to land. As one social worker said “*when we approach authorities for land allocation, sometimes they deny availability of non-objectionable land in the district. Then we file RTI under Right to Information Act and gather data. Sometimes we get data of available land in Chengalpattu which help us to proceed and nowadays the trend of denying information on different grounds hinders us*”

Theme 4: Strategies employed by social workers

4.1 Community Organization

The social Workers who were working among the Irula tribes in Thirukalukundram Taluk have practiced Community organization which helped to bring together members of the community to address collective needs, improve well-being, and ensure sustainability. The unique social, cultural, and political structures within tribal communities often require a more culturally sensitive and tailored approach to community organization. The social workers organized the community by initially making rapport with them and gaining their support, later they educate them and organize to fight for their needs. A social worker mentioned how he organized a community for land rights and took them to the District Collector office to talk about their rights.

4.2 Conscientization Model

The efforts taken by social workers to create awareness about different issues among their own community is consolidated under the theme conscientization model which is initially put forward by Paulo Freire. A respondent said

“the people in the area know that they need land for decent living and cultivation, but they are totally unaware about existing schemes, provisions or their right for property”. The major strategy played by social workers in the area includes awareness creation which is very significant as once knowledge is imparted to someone in the community, it is disseminated among themselves and helps them to help themselves.

4.3 Strength- based Approach

The tribal communities possess some unique strengths which are not often seen in other communities. One of which is we-feeling among them. The bond between each community member is so strong. The social workers have effectively used this to mobilise and gather members and make one to advocate, support and educate for others.

Conclusion

One of the most significant changes following social worker interventions is an increased awareness of exploitation within landless communities. Many marginalized individuals are subject to land grabbing, unfair tenancy arrangements, or exploitation by landowners, employers, or middlemen. Social workers help raise awareness of these exploitative practices and equip community members with the knowledge and tools to protect themselves. Social workers played a key role as representatives and facilitators in navigating bureaucratic structures (Desai, 2016; Healy, 2014). Their work aligns with Freire’s concept of conscientization (Freire, 1970), which promotes empowerment through awareness, educating community members about their rights, including how to recognize and resist exploitation. This includes informing them about corrupt practices in land transactions, how to identify

unjust labor conditions, and how to challenge abusive practices through legal or social action (Ramachandraiah & Venkateswarlu, n.d.).

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