

Consumer Behaviour of a Forest Dwelling Tribe of Kerala: A Business Anthropological Study

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ABSTRACT

The forest dwelling tribes are deprived of many facilities available in the non-forest areas. They were living with limited technological advancements. The tribal communities living in the Reserve Forests were following a traditional way of life by engaging in wage labour and other works. They were living in their traditional houses without electricity. Recently, when their houses have electrified 10 years ago, the people started to buy modern amenities for their household activities, travel and conveyance, communication, television sets for entertainment, etc. They had very limited household amenities just 10 years ago. At present, their consumer behaviour is growing and it is reflected in their life and culture. In this context, the present paper tries to provide an analysis on the consumer behaviour of a forest dwelling tribe of the Kannavam Reserve Forest of Kannur District in Kerala. It is analysed from the theoretical framework of business anthropology.

Keywords: Consumer Behaviour, Business Anthropology, Forest Dwelling tribes.

INTRODUCTION:

Consumer behaviour exists among all human societies and the extent of it varies from society to society. Schiffman et al. (2013) have defined “consumer behaviour as the behaviour that consumers display in searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services that they expect will satisfy their needs.” In anthropology, the study of consumer behaviour is generally accomplished with Business Anthropology, relatively a new branch of Social and Cultural Anthropology.

During the initial decades of the present century, extensive changes have occurred in the field of Business Anthropology. Jordan (2015:21) has rightly pointed out that “the interest in Business Anthropology is global as the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences now includes the Commission on Enterprise Anthropology ... Business Anthropology conferences are being held in Japan and China and the first International Conference of Business Anthropology was held in China in 2012”.

Jordan (2015) has provided the subject areas of Business Anthropology as “(1) marketing and consumer behaviour, (2) product design, and (3) organisational anthropology.” Martin and Woodside (2016) opined that “to better understand consumer behaviour, Marketing Anthropology Research offers a unique vantage point for contributing to the discipline of marketing research”.

In convergence with the above developments, during the last two decades, many multinational companies have started to employ anthropologists in their companies to study the culture specific consumer behaviour as the methodology of social and cultural anthropology is considered as appropriate tools to study the consumer behaviour of customers and/or people in general. To study consumer behaviour, it is needed to find what consumers want and for which one must ask and observe them. This is the context of Business Anthropology and the conceptual framework of which is used as a methodological device to understand the growing consumer behaviour patterns pertain to specific aspects of a tribal community living in a Reserve Forest of Kerala.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

There are many studies on the tribes of India and Kerala on various aspects of their life from anthropological perspectives. Most of such studies are ethnographic in nature by encircling with culture, society, changes and/or social transformations. However, there are some studies have provided the changes in the behaviour of tribal cultures, which are ultimately leading to the consumer behaviour of the respective tribal communities.

Sinha (2004) has made a study on the impact of Doordarshan on the tribes, namely, Oraons, Mundas, Santhals, Hos and Kharias of Jharkhand. He has discussed about the television viewing culture of these tribes and has not provided the descriptions with household-wise statistics of television sets and buying behaviour or motivation of the tribes. The study is confined to the television watching behaviour of the tribes.

Patnaik (2011) has made a brief anthropological account on the film watching behaviour of the Bhil tribes of Jhabua District in Madhya Pradesh. They mostly watch films in TV and sometime in talkies. In some cases, they watch film in TV with CD players. The tribal people bring CD for rent from a small shop near to their settlement. Patnaik has briefly portrayed a qualitative perspective on the film watching behaviour of the Bhil tribal people.

The use of vehicles, household amenities, entertainment, mobile phones for communication, etc., are growing among the tribal communities and there is no specific literature discussing such aspects from the angle of business anthropology and therefore the following objects are framed to study the consumer behaviour of a forest dwelling tribe of Kannur District in Kerala.

OBJECTIVES:

- To study the consumer behaviour of the tribal people living in the Reserve Forest;
- To understand the major consumer goods possessed by the selected tribal group; and
- To assess the socio-cultural aspects of the consumer tribal groups within their social and cultural setting.

METHODOLOGY:

Anthropological fieldwork was conducted to collect data from the tribal group inhabiting in the Kannavam Reserve Forest of Kannur District. A household survey was conducted among a selected sample of population of the tribal community. Interview and observation were also conducted to collect data and the article is written on the basis of primary data.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:

The area of the present study is Peruva, a part of the Reserve Forest of Kannur District in Kerala. The study area is belonging to the Kolayad Grama Panchayat in Peravoor Block, which belongs to the Thalassery Taluk of Kannur District. The total area of Kannur District is 296797 hectares and of these 48734 hectares is Forest Area, which constitutes 16.42 per cent. The Kolayad Grama Panchayat has an area of 33.15 Sq. KMs and 43 per cent of the Grama Panchayat is coming under Reserve Forest. The Kurichiyas and the Paniyas are the two tribal communities living in the Reserve Forest. In Kolayad Grama Panchayat, the tribal population is more concentrated in the Reserve Forest area, which is the Peruva ward of the Kolayad Grama Panchayat in Kannur District in Kerala State.

There are 390 tribal households in the area of study and 50 households are surveyed to understand the consumer behaviour of the tribal communities inhabiting in the Reserve Forest. The family types, size and composition of households, the influence of family on its members' development as consumers and the family as a basic consuming unit are studied to understand the socio-cultural aspects of the tribes and their developing consumer behaviour.

Family Type:

The family types of the people have changed from the joint family system to nuclear family system. The Nuclear family has become the common type of family among the tribes of the Kolayad Grama Panchayat. As per the data, 60 per cent of the families are nuclear families and six per cent of the families are joint families and 18 per cent of families are incomplete nuclear families. The vertically extended families consist of 12 per cent. The types of families are provided in the Table 1.

Table 1: Family Types

Sl. No.	Family Types	Frequency	%
1	Nuclear Family	30	60
2	Incomplete Nuclear Family	9	18
3	Single Member Family	2	4
4	Joint Family	3	6
5	Vertically Extended Family	6	12
Total		50	100

Size and Composition of Households:

The size and composition of families vary from each other. The minimum size of the family is with single member and the maximum size is with nine members. The 26 per cent families are with four members and 24 per cent are with three members. The family sizes are provided in the following Table 2.

Table 2: Family Sizes

Sl.No.	Members in Families	Frequency	%
1	1	2	4
2	2	8	16
3	3	12	24
4	4	13	26
5	5	8	16
6	6	5	10
7	8	1	2
8	9	1	2
Total		50	100

Use of Vehicles:

Earlier, in 2010, only 11.8 per cent households were using vehicles that too were Bicycles and Motorcycles (Bikes). That is, 88.2 per cent families were without any vehicles although they were living in the interior area of the Kannavam Reserve Forest and 12 KMs away from the head quarters of the Kolayad Grama Panchayat. As per the present survey, the consumer behaviour of the tribal people has changed and now they have purchased bikes and scooters for coming out of the forest. The details of vehicles are provided in the Table 3.

Table 3: Possession of Vehicles in 50 Households

Sl. No.	Type of Vehicle	No. in 2010	%	No. in 2019	%
1	Bicycle	2	4	1	2
2	Two wheeler (Bike/Scooter)	2	4	30	60
3	Three Wheeler (Auto)	0	0	4	8
4	Four Wheeler (Car/Van)	1	2	3	6
Total		5	10	38	76

In 2010, only four per cent out of 50 households had two wheelers; but in 2019, it is hiked to 60 per cent, which has become the major mode of conveyance among the tribal people living in the interior areas of the Kannavam Reserve Forest of Kannur District in Kerala. At present, two families own cars and one family own a van. There is only one private bus plying between Kolayad town to the Peruva tribal area and it has only two trips, one in the morning and the other in the evening. This situation made them to form an attitude to buy some vehicles to go to the nearby urban centre. The tribal people, then, started to buy bikes and scooters for going to the nearby small town in the Kolayad Grama Panchayat, which is almost 12 KMs away from the main tribal colony of the very Panchayat.

Household Amenities:

The tribal people have started to purchase a lot of items such as refrigerator, mixi and iron boxes and all these have started since 2011, which was the year of electrification of some houses in the tribal colonies. Now, most of the houses are electrified. The Table 5 provides the present status of the household amenities among the tribes.

Table 5: Household Amenities

Sl.No.	Items	Frequency	%
1	Refrigerator	7	14
2	Mixi	43	86
3	Iron boxes	10	20

The 14 per cent households have started to use refrigerators at home whereas 86 per cent of the households are using mixi for grinding various food materials. Only 20 per cent of the people are using electric iron boxes.

Use of Telephones:

Earlier, for communication, some of the tribal households were using land phones but gradually they shifted to mobile phones. As their access to mobile phones has been increased remarkably in recent years, some tribal members have multiple mobile phones and connections. The use of Land Phone is very low and it has reduced from 10 per cent to 4 per cent. The Tables 6 and 7 provide the use of land phones and mobile phones in 2010 and 2019.

Table 6: Use of Land Phones

Sl. No.	Category	No. of Households using land phones in 2010	%	No. of Households using land phones in 2019	%
1	Using Land Phones	5	10	2	4
2	Not Using Land Phones	45	90	48	96
Total		50	100	50	100

The use of land phone has been reduced and the use of mobile phones has been increased extremely. In 2010, the 50 households were using 49 mobile phones whereas in 2019 the very 50 households are using 109 mobile phones, which show a hike of 218 per cent in the number mobile phones.

Table 7: Use of Mobile Phones

Sl. No.	Connections	No. of connections in 2010	%	No. of connections in 2019	%
1	Vodafone	31	63.4	103	94.50
2	Idea	15	30.6	2	1.84
3	Airtel	1	2.0	0	0
4	BSNL	1	2.0	3	2.75
5	Reliance	1	2.0	0	0
6	Jio	0	0	1	0.91
Total		49	100	109	100

The consumer motivation with regard to the purchase of mobile connection is based on their cognitive awareness. In the interior forest environment, they tried various connections and identified that most other services are very feeble in their surroundings. Finally, from their experiences, they were selecting Vodafone mobile connection and at present 94.5 per cent of the connections are belonging to the Vodafone.

The household and phone ratio of the sample shows the frequency of phones and it is given in the Table 8. As per the data, in 34 per cent households, the tribal members have two mobile phones whereas in 28 per cent households there are three mobile phones. In 26 per cent households, there is only one mobile phone. But, in the remaining four households, there are 15 mobile phones.

Table 8: Household and Mobile Phone Ratio

Sl.No.	No. of Mobile Phones	No. of Households	%
1	0	2	4
2	1	13	26
3	2	17	34
4	3	14	28
5	4	1	2
6	5	2	4
7	6	1	2

The Table 8 shows that most of the tribal households have two or three mobile phones, which shows their present consumer behaviour. It is also noted that they are not buying expensive phones. But, the use of touch phones is also becoming common among the youngsters. Older people still use keypad type of mobile phones and generally they are not showing interest to use android smart phones. A few educated and employed people among them use smart phones irrespective of age.

Use of Television:

In 2010, the houses were not electrified and the tribal people were unable to use televisions. Most of the houses of the sample are electrified during and after 2011-12 and from then, they started to buy televisions and therefore, 66 per cent of the households have picture tube type of televisions.

Table 8: Use of Television

Sl.No.	Items	Frequency	%
1	Picture Tube TV	33	66
2	LED TV	9	18
3	Total No. of Households with TV	42	84
4	Total Households without TV	8	16
Total Households		50	100

At present, the consumer attitude of the tribal people has changed and they started to buy LED televisions and presently 18 per cent households possess LED TVs. The tribal people are very much interested in buying television sets and watching TV programmes. They are presently interested to buy LED TV.

CONCLUSIONS:

The tribal families living in the remote forest areas are interested to have all the modern amenities like TV, Refrigerator, Mixi, mobile phones, bikes and scooters. They have bought such amenities and the very consumer behaviour of tribal people are growing today, which is making strong influence among the family members in developing them as consumers of these modern goods and services. The family is acting as a basic consuming unit among the tribal people living in the Reserve Forest. Except televisions, all other modern amenities are the basic necessities of any family. Among them, 84 per cent households have television sets at present. The tribal people are purchasing vehicles as they are living nearly 12 KMs away from the mainstream population and society. The majority family type is nuclear families and they are showing growing consumer behaviour in terms of household amenities, entertainment and for travel and conveyance. The forest dwelling tribes are developing at least in some aspects of their life and culture while maintaining their age old cultural complexes.

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