

Since the colonial rule, tribal people have experienced alienation and exclusion from rights over forestland. This practice continues to prevail even in Independent India. It is to correct this historical injustice, that the Indian government came up with the FRA 2006, which recognises the Tribal people's rights over forestland. Despite, the enactment of such law, there are several challenges and difficulties experienced in actually implementing the act. One of the important aspects of this is 'forest governance'. In the name of forest governance and conservation, the hitherto indigenous inhabitants of the region; the tribals have been alienated from their land. The colonial custom of viewing Tribal people as infiltrator, encroachers and exploiter of forest resources and land continue to guide forest and wildlife conservation efforts.

This data bulletin argues that, the discourse of environmental justice in Tamil Nadu needs to be expanded to accommodate the social and economic vulnerabilities of tribal people along with the ecological susceptibilities of forest land and resources.

The January 2024 notification by the wildlife sanctuary at the forest range of Bargur hills in Erode district of Tamil Nadu has rekindled the age-old debate on the rights of tribal people over their forest land. Named "Thanthai Periyar" Wildlife Sanctuary, this new initiative is certainly a step towards strengthening the already regimental nature of forest governance in Tamil Nadu. Governing some 26419 square kilometres of recorded forest area that amounts to around 17% of the total geographical area, is of course a daunting task for any government, especially when it concerns the ecologically sensitive hotspots of Western and Eastern Ghats confluence. The exemplary commitment of the state government to conserve and protect its forest wealth has not only prevented depletion of forest cover but has instead contributed to expanding its coverage considerably. The data culled out from the biennial reports of the Forest Survey of India clearly demonstrates that for over three decades in Tamil Nadu there seems to be a consistent average annual expansion of forest cover by around 1.5 square kilometres. Nonetheless, it is vital to ensure that the forest governance or any governance for that matter is not reduced to or tied up mechanically with any single indicator of performance. The conservation of forest alone can not be a sole premise of any successful forest governance. Apart from the legal foundation of the much adored Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, a wide range of socio-legal regimes – both national and international have to be integrated within the framework of responsible forest governance. In this sense, recognising and vesting of tribal people's traditional rights over the forestland warrants equal degree of attention and preference within the canvas of responsible forest governance.

Tribal Land Holdings in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu has 1 per cent of the total tribal population, which spreads across almost all the districts of the state. Even amongst this miniscule number, around 34.5 per cent of them are considered to be particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTG). As per the Agriculture Census of India 2015-16, the tribes as a social group possess the least amount of operational land holdings in Tamil Nadu. The number of tribal people having operational land holdings as such is 10 times less than the Scheduled Caste groups and of course 89 times less than other dominant social groups; and this trend has been in stasis for decades together. Almost all of the identified tribal land holders are marginal and small land holders expect some 8 per cent of them having a semblance of medium land holdings.

Whether any tangible upward movement of tribal land holdings witnessed after 2015 could be attributable to whatever the paltry land distribution undertaken under the Forest Rights Act 2006 needs to be corroborated and confirmed with further substantial evidences.

Figure 1 Operational Land Holding based on Groups

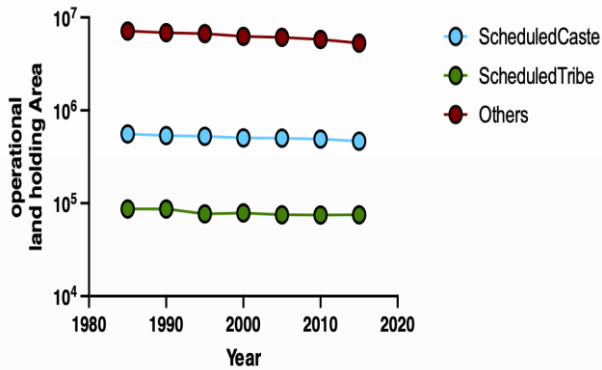
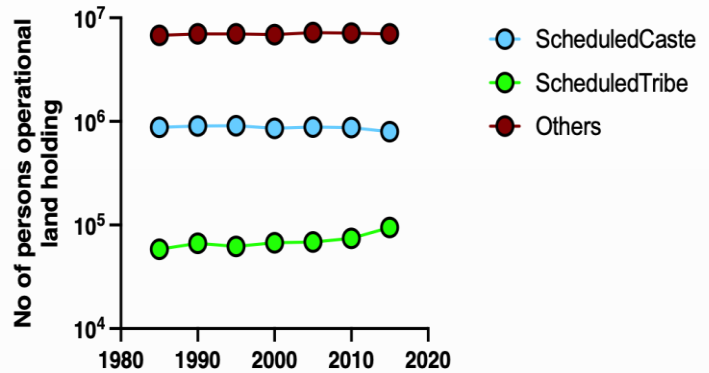


Figure 2 Operational Land Holding based on Persons



If we take into consideration the classificatory categories of Forest Survey of India - the hill and tribal districts, then by these categories Tamil Nadu accounts for around 55 per cent of tribal population living on forest land; of these forest dwelling tribes only 17 per cent of them have any operational land holdings at all. Out of the total recorded forest area of these eleven hill and tribal districts, just around 4 per cent of the forest land are under the possession of the tribes. Even this kind of meagre possession is not uniform all across the tribal districts. In the Kolli hills of Namakkal district more than 50 per cent of its tribal population does possess some sort of operational land holdings; but the tribals of Madurai and Kanniyakumari districts hardly have any tangible operational land holdings. The Nilgiris district, one of the best representative districts of both hill and tribal categories of Tamil Nadu, has only 9 per cent of its tribal inhabitants possess land, whose total does not even exceed 1 per cent of its total recorded forest area.

Figure 3 District Wise ST Land Holder and Total Forest Land

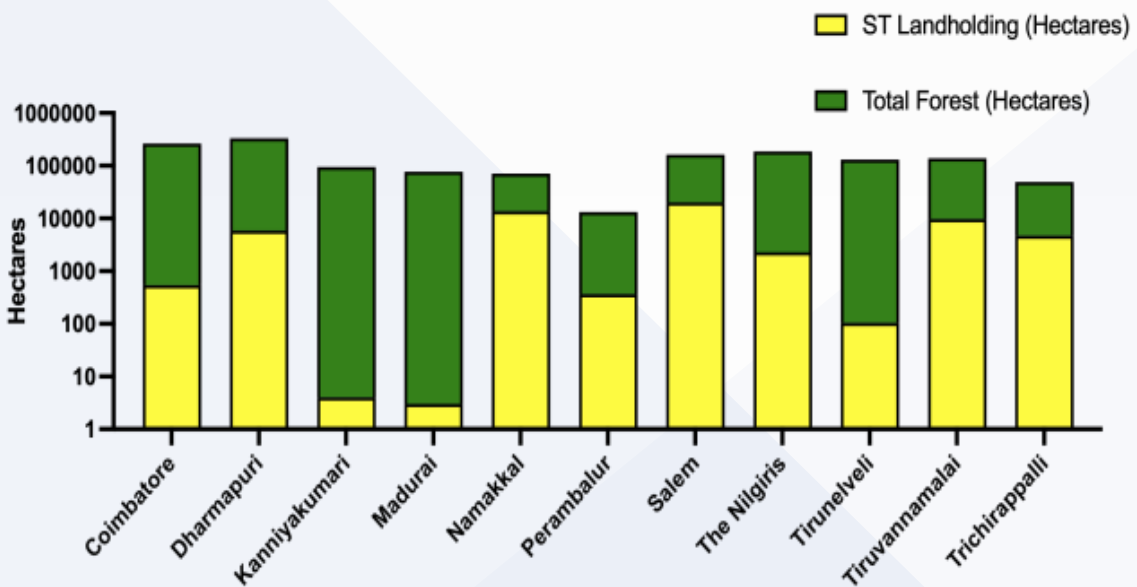


Figure 4 District wise ST Landholders against the ST Population

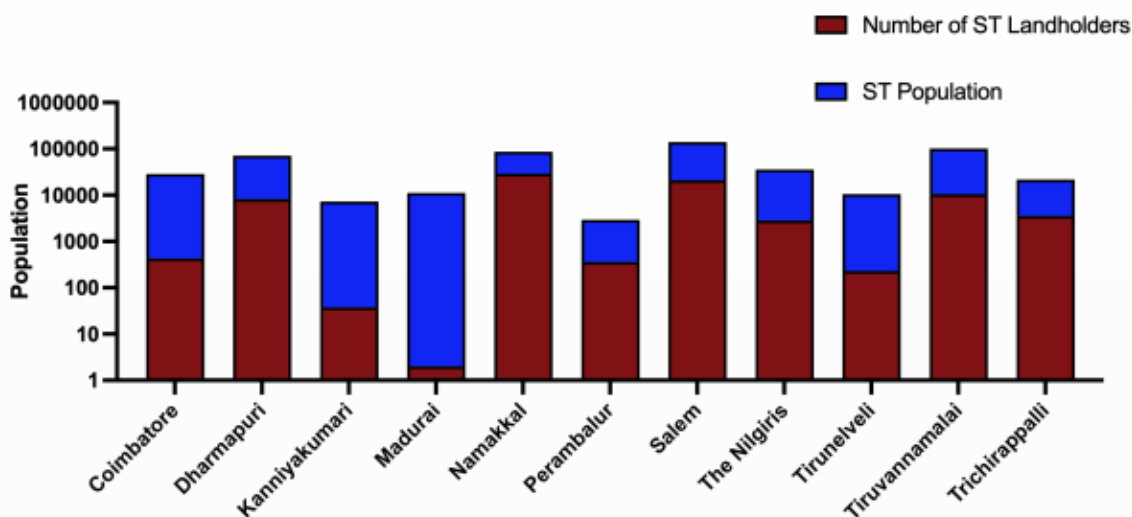


Table: Number and Area of Operational Holding 2015-16

State: Tamil Nadu										Area (in hectares)	
Sl.No.	Size Group	Scheduled Caste		Scheduled Tribe		Others		Institutional		Total (All Category)	
		Holdings (Nos.)	Area (in hectares)	Holdings (Nos.)	Area (in hectares)	Holdings (Nos.)	Area (in hectares)	Holdings (Nos.)	Area (in hectares)	Holdings (Nos.)	Area (in hectares)
1	Marginal	673062	236791	70046	26164	5465296	1900352	15915	5398	6224319	2168706
2	Small	93921	128494	16898	22935	1004385	1398270	4025	5782	1119229	1555482
3	Semi medium	26718	70136	6010	16064	416314	1120137	3194	9008	452236	1215345
4	Medium	4599	25078	1586	8704	119021	665238	2444	15150	127650	714170
5	Large	374	5864	88	1493	12028	198768	2023	110903	14513	317028
	All sizes	798674	466363	94628	75360	7017044	5282765	27601	146242	7937947	5970730

Tribal People in the Forest Governance: Paradox to Colonial Assumptions

When compared to other major tribal states of India, Tamil Nadu has a higher number of particularly vulnerable tribal groups but at the same time these tribes possess the least amount of land, particularly forest land. However, as per the Indian Agriculture Census 2015-16, all Scheduled Tribes land holdings in Tamil Nadu are wholly-owned and self-operated by the tribes themselves and around 98 per cent of their land is under cultivation. This means tribes of Tamil Nadu engage actively in agriculture and land in turn plays an important source of their livelihood sustenance.

The colonial presumption of tribes as non-agrarian, nomadic footloose encroachers and exploiters of forest land and resource is no longer been valid and sustainable. Internationally, the indigenous and aboriginal people's right over forest land is being acknowledged and legally approved by some countries like the Australian and Canadian governments. The Article 26 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples explicitly directs every state to give legal recognition and protection of land, territories and resources of indigenous people. Therefore, the Forest Rights Act 2006 has to be made an equally integral component of the forest governance in Tamil Nadu, just as the Forest Conservation Act 1980 was made earlier. The discourse of environmental justice in Tamil Nadu needs to be expanded to accommodate the social and economic vulnerabilities of tribal people along with the ecological sensitivities of granting rights to forest land and resources.

Compiled Data from Agriculture Census 2015-16 and Census 2011 on the Land Holding Details of ST

District	ISFR 2015	Agri. Census 2015-16			Census 2011	
	Total Forest (Hectares)	ST Landholding (Hectares)	Number of ST Landholders	% of ST Landholdings to the Total Forest Land	ST Population	% of ST Landholders among Scheduled Tribes
Ariyalur	32900	172	545	0.523%	10,722	5.083%
Chennai	1300	NA		NA	10,061	0.000%
Coimbatore	262700	538	427	0.205%	28,342	1.507%
Cuddalore	41700	60	119	0.144%	15,702	0.758%
Dharmapuri	328000	5865	8298	1.788%	63,044	13.162%
Dindigul	166200	19	52	0.011%	8,064	0.645%
Erode	242100	2266	1659	0.936%	21,880	7.582%
Kancheepuram	29600	153	170	0.517%	41,210	0.413%
Kanniyakumari	95000	4	38	0.004%	7,282	0.522%
Karur	12100	0	0	0.000%	575	0.000%
Krishnagiri	-	203	273	-	22,388	1.219%
Madurai	77400	3	2	0.004%	11,096	0.018%
Nagapattinam	19800	3	5	0.015%	3,756	0.133%
Namakkal	57400	13743	29088	23.943%	57,059	50.979%
Perambalur	12900	366	362	2.837%	2,584	14.009%
Pudukkottai	33300	24	55	0.072%	1,283	4.287%
Ramanathapuram	22500	2	4	0.009%	1,105	0.362%
Salem	143500	19980	20953	13.923%	1,19,369	17.553%
Sivaganga	36600	0	0	0.000%	790	0.000%
Thanjavur	43600	16	17	0.037%	3,561	0.477%
The Nilgiris	185300	2266	2825	1.223%	32,813	8.609%
Theni	112700	25	31	0.022%	1,835	1.689%
Thiruvallur	24700	160	261	0.648%	47,243	0.552%
Thiruvarur	5900	11	6	0.186%	3,034	0.198%
Tirunelveli	130800	104	230	0.080%	10,270	2.240%
Tiruppur	-	107	88	-	5,458	1.612%
Tiruvannamalai	129900	9733	10530	7.493%	90,954	11.577%
Trichirappalli	44800	4694	3558	10.478%	18,198	19.552%
Tuticorin	23900	6	4	0.025%	4,911	0.081%
Vellore	185700	6670	5190	3.592%	72,955	7.114%
Viluppuram	85300	8165	9838	9.572%	74,859	13.142%
Virudhunagar	46900	0	0	0.000%	2,294	0.000%
			94628		7,94,697	11.907%

Data Challenges

For this bulletin, data sets from Agriculture Census 2015-16 and Forest Survey of India 2015 have been used. Since the Agriculture Census data only focuses on operational land holding, rather actual land holding, it is difficult to arrive at the exact percentage of ST ownership of land holdings. Also, it does not have disaggregated data on tribal community wise individual ownership. If the census covered land ownership as one part with the necessary bifurcations, it would be more beneficial in understanding who holds major land in the forest land.

In terms of Forest Survey of India, though reports are available till 2019; the 2015 Forest Survey of India Report has been used to compare the data from the Agriculture Census. This report majorly focuses on forest covers and its conservation. It does not have any mention of role of tribal people in the protection of forest and conservations.

Policy Inputs

Colonial knowledge and assumptions viewing tribal people as encroachers continue to circulate in present forest governance policies. Tribal communities even now do not have any place in the current system of forest governance. Hence, there needs to be a clear notional or conceptual change among the policy makers, creating an understanding that the tribal people play a vital and integral role in forest conservation, governance and wildlife protection efforts. In other words, due implementation of the Forest Rights Act 2006 must play an integral part in forest governance.

Data Sources

Agriculture Census 2015-16
Forest Survey of India, 2015
Census 2011

Authors

R. Pavananthi Vembulu*,
G. Ramkumar*,
Sankara Pandi K*

Centre for Social Justice and Equity
Madras School of Social Work, Chennai

The opinions expressed in this data bulletin are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of Tamil Nadu or the institute.

The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of its authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Government of Tamil Nadu.

Data Bulletin: Forest Governance and Tribal Landholdings in Tamil Nadu
Issues. 01/2024

CENTRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUITY

(Established by Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare Department, Govt. of TN),

**Madras School of Social Work, 32,
CASA Major Road, Egmore, Chennai 600008
Email: csje@mssw.in**

