

Summary of the report

A Socio-linguistic Study of Kurichiyans of Waynad District

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Tribals of Kerala, the most neglected section of the population living even in the interiors of the forests and remote villages away from the mainstream society, are in a very miserable state. They became more and more backward even after many development projects aimed at their social and economic uplift. The issue of land alienation was one of the major problems they faced after the Independence. Land is regarded by most of the tribal communities in India not only as their reliable/dependable source of livelihood but also as the basis for collective social identity and prestige. Furthermore land is sometimes linked with the perpetuation of groups of tribal people with their autonomy, solidarity and cohesion. In the case of Kurichiyans, the situation is more complex with social status is being measured in terms of land ownership, particularly possession of hereditary land.

There are almost 50 tribal communities in the geographical boundary of Kerala state. All the tribal communities in Kerala have their own distinctive languages and they possess diverse culture and tradition. Most of the tribal languages of this region can be classified in the South Dravidian subgroup of the Dravidian Family of Languages

The present study is an attempt to explore and analyses the socio-linguistic aspects of Kurichiya tribe of Waynad District. The community is mainly concentrated in the Waynad District and adjoining areas of Kannur District. According to the 2001 census their population is 32746. Among them the total male population is 16474 and female population is 16272. The literacy rate of the community is 78 %.

The language of Kurichiyans is not dealt with in detail in any of the works on the life and culture of Kurichiyans. The language of Kurichiyans cannot be considered as a language totally different from that of Malayalam or other South Dravidian languages. But the community speaks a distinctive language which has its own identity and uniqueness. What is attempted is a sociolinguistic study of Kurichiyans in terms of language, its use in different domains, attitude towards the language by its speakers, distinctive nature of the users and the communicational matrix. The present study attempts to investigate why a speech form like Kurichiya is submerged under the willful dominance of the state language Malayalam. What is the present status of the speech form of the community in relation to Malayalam, the dominant language? What will be the prospect of the minority communities and their subculture in the wake of globalization? Does the present situation force the smaller communities into assimilation with the main stream communities? These are the major questions addressed in the research.

The sociolinguistic investigation attempted here brings to light the fact that the speech form of Kurichiyans of Waynad District is passing through a phase of transition regarding language maintenance and/or shift of the language. There is no chance for a complete shift from Kurichya speech form to Malayalam in the near future. But the linguistic shrinkage is a definitive phenomenon of the present situation. If we look into the matter from the endangerment point of view, we can see that the intergenerational language transmission is slowly decreasing now and this is an indicator to the endangerment of the language. Community members' attitude towards their own language is also not positive in the case of Kurichya language. The number of speakers of the ancestral language in relation to the total population of an ethno-linguistic group is a significantly deducing indicator of language vitality. Kurichya community, like many speech communities in Wayanad and other parts of Kerala, also shows this general tendency and it can cause language endangerment. This study aims to alert Kurichya speakers on the declining condition of their language. There are no attempts either from the side of the government or from the community to revitalize the language. This study assumes further importance in the backdrop of neglect, marginalization and relegation to the peripheries.
