

Market Integration and Social Change: The Transition from Barter-based Reciprocity to Wage Labor among the Malamuthan Community in Nilambur, Kerala

Malavika Suresh^{*} and Yashoda Kumari^{}**

*Department of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences
Manipal University Jaipur, Rajasthan*

Abstract: This research explores the significant socioeconomic transformation of the Malamuthan community, an ethnic group residing in the Nilambur forest regions of Kerala, India. Traditionally, the community functioned within a ‘moral economy’ centred on forest subsistence and barter system. In the recent years, this system has begun to transform through wage labour and state-led employment programmes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) into a cash – based market economy. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Marcel Mauss and Marshall Sahlins, this study investigates, how the introduction of cash and formal financial structures have impacted the community’s long-standing practices of sharing and social ties. The finding shows that, while the traditional community-based sharing practices and attitude once formed the bed rock of the community’s survival, the market integration has introduced the attitude of ‘individualization’, a shift towards more balanced exchanges, and the gradual emergence of a ‘culture of poverty’, marked by financial exclusion and a decline in collective resource sharing. The study examines the commercialization of this community life including the evolution of cultural aspects like rituals into market commodities; to assess how indigenous social structures are under the shadow of global capitalism. Furthermore, it highlights the conflicts between private income and traditional values of mutual support.

Keywords: Socioeconomic Change, SDG 2, SDG 12, SDG 15, Ethnic Community, Exchange System

^{*} Research Scholar. Email: edakkatillekha@gmail.com

^{**} Corresponding author. Email: yashoda.kumari@jaipur.manipal.edu