Social Support for Hunter-gatherers: Care or Curse?

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This paper tries to understand, from an emic perspective, the different dimensions of social support among the Cholanaickan, a hunter-gatherer community of Kerala. It tries to understand why the support system extended by the state has ended as being perceived as a “curse” rather than as “care”. Their experience with the social support extended to them by the welfare state especially in housing is not congenial to their emotional system. The most useful form of support is one which is mediated and internalised within a peoples’ existing social support systems. The paper argues for a more responsible and responsive approach from the welfare state.

This paper aims to understand from an emic perspective the different dimensions of social support among the Cholanaickans, a south Indian hunter-gatherer community, and their experience with the social support extended to them by the welfare state. Social support is a multifaceted concept that is difficult to conceptualise, define and measure. Although this concept has been extensively studied, there is little agreement among theoreticians and researchers as to a satisfactory definition. The concept remains fuzzy and almost anything that involves a social interaction is now considered social support (Hupcey 1998).

According to Veiel and Baumann (1992: 5), social support may refer to a particular attitude of members of a social network, whether expressed in specific behaviours, non-verbal clues or otherwise. Caplan (1974) describes a support system as formal and informal relationships through which an individual receives emotional, cognitive and material supports necessary to overcome stressful experiences. For him, emotional support refers to behaviour that fosters feelings of comfort and leads an individual to believe that he or she is admired, respected and loved, and that others are available to provide care and security. In other words, emotional support is the expression of concern and care for another. It includes understanding, empathy, trust and reassurance and is viewed as the cornerstone of social support (Krause 1987; Norris et al 1990; Rook 1984; Turner 1983). Cognitive support on the other hand, refers to information, knowledge and/or advice that helps the individual to understand his or her world and to adjust to changes within it. Material support refers to goods and services that help to solve practical problems (cf Jacobson 1986).

According to Gourash (1978), the most frequent sources of social support are individuals with whom we share close relationships. Leatham and Duck (1992) also highlight that social support is most often communicated through ordinary day to day interactions between individuals. Any emphasis on the transactions of social support aims to tell us how social support is offered, how it is received, and what it means to a given person in a relational and cultural context (Leatham and Duck 1992:1).

Introduction

In this paper, I attempt to look at the emotional, cognitive and material dimensions of social support as a communal rather than a purely individual, interpersonal experience. Social support extended among community members is examined as integral to community valuations of certain emotional and behaviour patterns and devaluation of certain others. The support system extended to Cholanaickans from the benevolent state is contextualised in this paper in relation to the existing support system of their community. For this purpose, this paper explores how social support...
is offered by the state, and how it is perceived and received by the Cholanaickans. Further, it tries to understand these in the specific socio-cultural context of this small community.

The data for the study were collected during ethnographic fieldwork at Mannala, Karimpuzha, Panapuzha and Mylapadipoti areas of Nilambur taluk of Malappuram district in Kerala at different intervals between 1995 and 2004 and during a subsequent six-month intensive fieldwork from April 2007. The theoretical assumptions of this paper take off from Weiss’ (1976) approaches to different kinds of support at different stressful situations, but moves beyond it in trying to understand the emic perspective on one specific social support – the housing offered by the state government to the Cholanaickans for resettling this semi-nomadic tribe.

In order to understand the community’s notion on emotional, cognitive and material aspects of social support, I conducted informal interviews, participated in their daily activities, observed the nature of reciprocity, support giving and seeking behaviour, and collected case studies relating to their experience with social support. In this paper the state’s social support receives critical scrutiny from an emic perspective. However, from an etic perspective, I shall also put forward my own subjective reading of this situation to argue for a more responsive and responsible state approach.

The Cholanaickan, etymologically king of the forest, are a semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer community inhabiting the wet evergreen forests of Nilambur valley. This tribe consists of only 347 individuals, with 205 males and 142 females, organised into 83 families (itdp 2007). The tribe is distributed in different areas of the forests with well-defined territories called chemmam. Within each chemmam, the boundaries of which are marked by rivers or hills, patrilineally related Cholanaickan groups of two to 10 families live in rock shelters (alai) and huts (manai) on the banks of various rivers and rivulets. Alai used for habitation are those rocks that open towards the river mouth, covered by natural boundaries. Such alai protect them from wild animals such as elephants.

**Kinship and Reciprocity in the Chemmam**

Cholanaickan are usually identified by the chemmam in which they are born and the name of a person’s chemmam is prefixed to his personal name. It is through membership in a chemmam that a Cholanaickan gets entitlement to receive the culturally approved support. The Cholanaickan, who follows chemmam exogamy, commonly arrange marital ties between members of adjacent chemmam so that, through these alliances members get access to resources and support from a contiguous chemmam. Interactions between members of two chemmam that enter into such marital ties are quite frequent and members of these two resource/kin units regularly visit each other, maintain friendly ties and extend support to each other.

While visiting another chemmam, consanguinal or affinal, they carry honey as gift. The members of the host chemmam receive the gift and as a reciprocity allow the guest’s chemmam to collect honey or dammer in their chemmam, which they had reserved for their own use. It is this kind of support network between chemmam, either through birth or through marriage, that provides the Cholanaickan an assured supply of resources and allows them to lead a life of sharing and caring unmindful of possible resource depletion in their environment or scarcity. This traditional system of access to another chemmam’s resources has changed somewhat in today’s context. As one Cholanaickan recalled:

Last month, a relative from my *enrichti’s* (wife) chemmam came to visit us and brought us honey. At that time we didn’t have enough food to share. So I went to the society (tribal cooperative chemmam) and exchanged that honey he brought for us for rice to be shared within our chemmam and the guest.

By nature, the hunting and gathering life involves risk and uncertainty, particularly where provisioning is on a day by day basis. Under such conditions, sharing appears to make good economic sense (Peterson 1993). The Cholanaickan are not concerned about preserving food for the future. Each chemmam is bountiful with various resources and the Cholanaickan roam within their respective chemmam for collection pursuits. They share the hunted game and gathered tubers within their chemmam among all the inhabitants. The vulnerable members of the community, the old, sick, physically or mentally challenged, single women like a widow, or breastfeeding mothers, all are assured of food even if they do not go to the forest for gathering. According to an elderly woman who lived with her son, getting food does not require going for gathering work. In her own words, “I don’t go anywhere. My son brings me food. Sometimes others also share their food with me.” Similarly another woman, a widow remarked, “Sometimes I go for gathering, sometimes I won’t. Even if I don’t go, I get enough food from others.”

Responses from many Cholanaickan males voiced an assurance that their habitat would provide food for them. Many expressed emotions like, “the forest has enough for us”, “as long as forest is here, I don’t worry”, “we get enough from our chemmam” and so on. The chemmam is a boundary mechanism; members of a particular chemmam have the primary right to collect resources from their chemmam but members from other chemmam can also access these resources, provided they get permission from the concerned chemmakkaran (socio-religious head of a chemmam). This organisational principle has sanction from the belief that a person who takes resources from another chemmam without such permission would meet with misfortunes like illness. As the Cholanaickan saying goes, “*Engalu chemmathinu ethalu padilla, poru kootu varum*” (Do not take anything from others chemmam, you will fall sick).

A wrong doing that has become public knowledge and causes conflict within the community, like the unsanctioned extraction of resources from a chemmam where one does not have entitlement invokes the displeasure of their dead ancestors (*devva*) who control their forests and community. In such cases the wrong doer is placed outside of their conventional support system. To get re-entry into the system a wrong doer, who may also be ailing under the wrath of the ancestors, supplicates these ancestral spirits through the mediation of the chemmakkaran.

The chemmakkaran goes into a trance and divines the cause of disease and the penalty the wrong doer has to pay. This compensation depends on the nature of his/her offence (*kuttam*). When the payment is agreed and accepted, the chemmam members once again restore their support.

In short, the traditional support system of the Cholanaickan is moulded and strengthened by their social organisation and kinship
structures mediated by their ancestors and their specific ecology. In course of time as the system has begun to weaken, other neighbouring communities, like the once hostile Pathinaicken, are admitted into their chemmam relationships through marriage. Competition from non-tribes for resources within the chemmam areas also contributes to changes in the traditional support system.

Until the latter part of the 20th century, the Cholanaickan were primarily foragers living on gathered roots, tubers, hunted wild game and fish. Though leading a semi-nomadic life in the interior evergreen forests, the Cholanaickan never lived in complete isolation from the mainstream population. They had interaction with private contractors of Nilambur, who used to visit the habitat of the Cholanaickan to barter forest products like honey and cardamom for rice and condiments. It is such interactions that crept into an already weakening system of reciprocities that is seen when a Cholanaickan exchanges in the market the honey brought by an affine to reciprocate it with other goods.

Cultural Reticence to State Support

Into such changes described above, came the new support system from the state in the form of a collection centre of the tribal cooperative society. It was opened at Myladipotti in 1976 and set off other interventions from the state. As the collection centre was situated at Myladipotti, the state, through the tribal development department and forest department, also decided to resettle the Cholanaickan into a colony at Mayladipotti by constructing houses for them there. In 1982, 20 houses were thus constructed and 20 Cholanaickan families from different chemmam (Kuppamala, Panapuzha, Karimpuzha and Makibari) were brought to the same colony for a settled life. It needs to be remembered that this was in total disregard of their customary practice and belief system that each person must stay within one's own chemmam.

Within a few months the Cholanaickan families started returning to their original habitats and the settlement was deserted within two years. The state interpreted the reason for their return to the forest as a consequence of the elephant menace. The state took steps to repair the houses destroyed by the elephants and tried to bring the Cholanaickan back to the settlement. Money was allotted to dig trenches to keep the elephants at bay and protect the community from their attacks. But this attempt was also a failure. As observed by Bhanu, “The settlement had experienced different kinds of dangers such as the one due to the natural vagaries of nature and, from the wild beasts. The people faced all stresses and strains and were left with no other alternatives but to flee back to their original natural abodes for shelter and protection” (1991:368).

When I visited Myladipotti colony in 1995, almost 70% of the houses had been destroyed by elephants. The Cholanaickan families who had houses here, occasionally spent a few days there when they visited the cooperative society for selling items classified as non-timber forest products (NTFP). During my fieldwork, on two occasions, the colony was attacked by elephants at night and we had to run for our lives to the nearby river, spending the entire night on a rock, making fires and loud noises to keep the elephants away from us. On another occasion, two Cholanaickan children were killed by elephants.

However, I learnt from some of the Cholanaickan who were shifted to Myladipotti colony in 1982 but had deserted it and returned to their native chemmam, that elephants’ attacks were only one reason for their not accepting the houses provided by the state to them. The more serious objections were voiced by them as follows:

“Myladipotti area does not belong to our chemmam. It belongs to the chemmam of Panapuzha Chathan who never allowed us to stay for any length of time. We too did not like to stay there”,

“See, we don’t like to live in those houses at Myladipotti. Those houses could not withstand even a mild storm. We don’t know how to maintain those houses. Our alai is a safer place to live in”.

“We prefer to live in our alai. It is easy for us to collect forest products or gather tubers or hunt game and bring them to our chemmam. It was very difficult for us to walk daily to the forest for NTFP collection and come back to the colony (approximately 15-16 km). We like to live in our own chemmam; we asked them (tribal development department) to build houses in our own chemmam.”

In 2006, on revisiting Myladipotti colony, I observed that only two families were living there, and this by making the traditional “manai” type shelter of the Cholanaickan on the terrace of the houses. The house built by the state, partly destroyed by elephants’ attack, formed the unstable foundation of this manai. The reason for these two families continuing to stay in the colony was that each had a member employed by the state, one as a helper in the collection centre at Myladipotti and the other as a forest guard.

They reminisced:

“We like our life inside the forest. It was good, even if we could gather only a single tuber. At that time, it was more than enough for the entire family or sometimes enough for the entire chemmam. Now, in the colony we all eat the same rice given by the society (tribal cooperative society) and there is nothing to share”.

In 2008, 20 more houses were constructed and the Cholanaickans are still showing clear disinterest in inhabiting them. Their response is, “We never asked for houses to be built for us here. This is not our chemmam and if all of us stay here, we quarrel with each other.” As is clear, the state’s support system disregarded the lack of emotional preparedness of the Cholanaickan to move out of a chemmam organisation. As a consequence, the Cholanaickans rejected the support system extended to them. There is a wide gap between the traditional emotional support system that they have internalised through age-old relations of support-giving and receiving and this external support that the state offers, totally disregarding those emotions. A people who take their ancestors with them, in the form of figurines in a woven basket of reeds called devakkotta, whenever they move out of their homes, cannot live without the constant presence of these ancestors. Their cognitive system is also at variance with the external housing support the state provides. A dilapidated house made of reinforced concrete is not something a Cholanaickan family can repair or reconstruct with their own resources. A house destroyed by elephants baffles them and loses its utility as a shelter. Their own homes – alai or manai – are often abandoned for a period of few months when death occurs. During the summers they sleep in the riverbed around a fireplace under the open sky and when the season turns to the rains they move away from the river that swells with water and occupy homesteads further up. The constant bonfire keeps the
elephants and other animals off at night. The concrete houses did not offer the shelter or protection they needed or desired.

Conclusions

The foregoing discussion does not argue for a withdrawal of state support to the Cholanaickan. On the contrary, following Weiss (1976) who distinguished between three types of stressful situations – crisis, transition and deficit state, 7 appropriate responses and different kinds of support will be required at different times. The most useful form of help in all types of situations – stressful or otherwise – is emotional support. This is so because it provides a person with reassurance that others care and are willing to help. This is especially important for a community like the Cholanaickans who are numerically very small, have their traditional habitat invaded by outsiders who have come into the forest seeing only the commercial aspect, and who are being increasingly drawn to the state system and the market. Further, external support will neither be effective nor recognised by the distressed individuals as helpful (cf Jacobson 1986:254) unless it is mediated and internalised within their emotional support system. As anthropologists like Ingold (1987) and Bird-David (1990) have noted, in many hunter-gatherer societies, people think metaphorically of their physical environment as a benevolent relative and these metaphors convey a common picture of the environment as a loving, unconditionally supportive and sharing family member. The Cholanaickans view their forest as a giving and reciprocating environment (Bird-David 1990) and hold a kin-centric8 (Salmon 2000; Turner 2005) approach to their ecosystem. For them that social support is willingly acceptable which appeals to their emotions. Such a support system need not be only from their own community members, their habitat and ancestral spirits. As long as such support does not threaten their concept of chemmam or the kin-centric nature of social organisation even when they are increasingly willing to admit outsiders like the Pathinaiackans with whom they once had hostile relationship. They believe that their forest and ancestors are always there to provide care and security.

To conclude, the social support extended by the welfare state is unidimensional in that it focuses only on the material support to the community, viewing it as the “beneficiary” of the state. It has failed to understand the culture-specific notion of social support within the Cholanaickans. This appears unacceptable to them and hence has ended up as a curse rather than care for the community. It is therefore argued in this paper that the emic perspective of social support required should be taken note of by the welfare state, if it is interested in successfully providing social support to communities like the Cholanaickan.

REFERENCES


NOTES

1 Cholanaickan (both singular and plural) are classified as one of the primitive tribes of Kerala. They are enlisted in the scheduled tribes list of the State as per the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act, 2002 (Act 10 of 2003) Vide Part VII – Kerala – Second Schedule notified in the Gazette of India, 8 January 2002.

2 The Nilambur forests, which cover an area of 760.29 sq km, is administratively divided into Nilambur south and north forest divisions. The Nilambur south forest division has an area of 366.17 sq km and has two forest ranges, viz., Kalikavu and Karulai ranges. The Nilambur north forest division (394.120 sq km) constitutes three ranges, viz., Nilambur, Edavanna and Vazhakkadavu ranges.

3 Mannala, Karimpuzha, Panapuzha, Myladipotti and Alakkal (For more details on territorial divisions, see Bhanu 1989).

4 The ten chemmam identified at the time of study are Karimpuzha, korumpuzha, Panapuzha, Kuppamala, Poochappara, Talipuzha, Manna alai, Mannala alai, Myladipotti and Alakkal (For more details on territorial divisions, see Bhanu 1989). In different parts of the forest (Bhanu 1989:86).

5 Mathan from different chemmam are identified as Panapuzha Mathan, Karimpuzha Mathan, Thalipuzha Mathan, Poochappara Mathan and so on.

6 Crisis defined as a situation of sudden onset and limited duration, severely threatening to one’s well-being and marked by emotional arousal; transition is a period of personal and relational change that involves a shift in a person’s assumptive world; and deficit state is a situation in which an individual’s life is defined by chronologically excessive demands.

7 As noted earlier, they had made their own manai over the range of Anthropol ogy: The Indian Scenario (Jaipur: B G Halbar and C G Hussain Khan (ed.), 1998), pp 349-56.

8 Bird-David (1990) and hold a kin-centric approach to nature whereby environmental features and entities are imbued with humanness and are all related to us and to each other.