Loss of Indigenous Land and Identity as Determinants of Health and Well-being for the Irula Tribe of the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve

Abinaya Devi and Shaalini Ganesalingam, IARD / CALS Cornell
Supervisors: N. Selvi, Pavitra, Snehlata Nath, Andrew Willford and Lucinda Ramberg

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Abstract

At the Nilgiris Field Learning Center (NFLC), my partner, an Irula woman named Abinaya Devi, and I conducted an ethnographic study in two prominently Irula areas in which the Keystone Foundation is working to close the healthcare gap. Our initial goal of evaluating the efficacy of its community health worker program quickly evolved into delineating the underlying factors which have created the health and well-being gap amongst the indigenous communities, particularly that of the Irulas of the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve (NBR). Our observations underscore the strong bonds between indigenous communities to their lands, both in the NBR and across the globe. Environmental changes within the NBR are the result of a series of historical policies established by British colonizers and, subsequently, the Indian government. Whether the value of land is determined on measures of commercial profit or biodiversity, policies have consistently marginalized indigenous communities and disregarded or explicitly barred traditional indigenous practices associated to their native lands, such as slash and burn agriculture. Policies dating back to the 1800’s have resulted in loss of indigenous lands, usufruct rights, and traditional livelihoods. These changes on the land have degraded indigenous Irula identity, and ultimately, undermined the health and well-being of the Irulas (Parthasarthy, 140). Despite acute stresses, the public healthcare system remains inaccessible to the Adivasis of the NBR. This inaccessibility is caused by discrimination and policies which inadvertently marginalize indigenous communities and their culture, echoing historic land use policies. Efforts to improve communications between the Adivasi tribes and government institutions must be made to increase accessibility to the public healthcare and to ameliorate socio-economic and socioecological conditions.