

# Rural Women and Sustainable Development - A Study on Malayali Tribes of Sitheri Hills

## OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 6

Special Issue: 1

Month: March

Year: 2019

ISSN: 2321-788X

Impact Factor: 3.025

Citation:

Meenatchi, A. "Rural Women and Sustainable Development - A Study on Malayali Tribes of Sitheri Hills." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 6, no. S1, 2019, pp. 112–21.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2586398>

**A.Meenatchi**

*Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Political Science  
Presidency College (Autonomous), Chennai*

## Abstract

*The rural women form a considerable percentage of population in rural India. Rural women are important agents for growth and development. They bring societal changes for sustainable development. They are doing invaluable contributions to the rural development. They are effectively tackling the dual responsibilities of work and home. They actively participate in local governance and they are important stakeholders in Panchayat Raj Institutions. They are largely involved in agriculture. They can improve the livelihoods of families and communities in a very big way. Work participation rate is higher in rural women, when compared to urban women. Women are active agents of rural development by formation of network of Self Help Groups. Rural development is acutely affected by the lack of sustainability in the projects and programs sanctioned by government and executed by government machinery and NGOs. Rural women play an important role in the growth of village economy. Malayali tribes of Sitheri hills are of such isolated rural centric people where the burden of shouldering family day to affair depends on the women. The lack of consistent job force men folk of that village to go too far off places to fetch job even it is of illegal. Research scholar intends to understand the issues affecting women folk and in general the sustainable job for them. The paper will enlighten issues that affect the development of the Malayali tribal women and the causes for the underdevelopment despite efforts from government and NGOs. Paper will further bring out the consistent issues that affect the sustainability in developing the women and in general Malayali tribes of Sitheri hills.*

## Introduction

Rural Women constitute one-fourth of the world's population and they are leaders, decision-makers, producers, workers, entrepreneurs, and service providers. Their contributions are vital to the well-being of families and communities, and of local and national economies. Yet rural women rights, contributions and priorities have been largely overlooked. Rural Women have also been hard hit by the economic and financial crisis, volatile food prices and export-driven agriculture. Women are central to the development of rural areas. They account for a great proportion of the agriculture labour force, produce the majority of food grown, especially in the subsistence farming, and perform most of the unpaid care work in rural areas. It is critical that their contributions be recognized and that their voices are heard in decision

– making process at all levels of Governments and within rural organizations. Rural Women face more difficulty than men in gaining access to public services, social protection, employment opportunities, local and national markets and institutions, due to cultural norms, security concerns, and lack of identification documents.

### **Status of Rural Women around the world**

Poor rural women can work as many as 16 to 18 hours per day, doing fieldwork as well as handling all their domestic responsibilities. Eight out of ten people without access to an improved drinking water source live in rural areas, and it is most often women and girls who are tasked with fetching water. The burden of Women's and girls' unpaid care work must urgently be reduced by providing infrastructure, labour saving technologies and care services in rural areas.<sup>1</sup>

### **Global Data**

- 70% of the developing world's 1.4 billion extremely poor live in rural areas. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to nearly one-third of these, while South Asia is now home to about half.
- In 2010, 925 million people were chronically hungry, of whom 60 percent were women.
- Agriculture provides a livelihood for 86% of rural Women and men, and employment for about 1.3 billion smallholder farmers and landless workers, 43 percent of who are women.
- An estimated two-thirds of the 400 million poor livestock keepers worldwide are women.
- The Burden of unpaid care work is substantial. Globally there are 884 million people without safe drinking water, 1.6 billion people without reliable sources of energy, 1 billion people who lack access to roads, 2.6 billion people without satisfactory sanitation facilities, and 2.7 billion people who rely on open fires and traditional cooking stoves.
- Rural women carry most of the unpaid work burden due to lack of infrastructure and services.
- In rural areas of the developing world, excluding china, 45% of women aged 20-24 were married or in union before the age of 18, compared to 22 percent or urban women.<sup>2</sup>

### **Issues and problems of rural women in India**

In India after six decades of Independence and industrialization, still large part of population remains under poverty line. Agricultural continues to be the backbone of rural society. 70 percent of households are held by small and marginal farmers resulting in overcrowding on the agriculture land and diminishing farm produce. This results in migration of farm worker in large numbers to the urban areas.

- Women in rural areas face, barriers to education and employment but more unpaid domestic work, higher risk of maternal mortality and Violence, and Psychological stress.
- Rural women make up 43 percent of the agriculture labour force in India which is time and labour intensive, informal and poorly paid, with little social protection or income security.
- Child labour is prevalent in rural areas, with girls forming a significant part of the agriculture workforce.
- Women and girls are responsible for water collection in 80 percent of households without access to safe drinking water; this work is arduous and will only become harder as water shortages increase. The journey to collect water also poses safety risks.
- Fuel collection, which can takes as much as five hours every day , and cooking with unclean fuels can result in long-term and even fatal health problems for women. In our country which rely heavily on fuels like coal, wood, manure or crop waste for cooking, women account for 6 out of every 10 premature deaths through household air pollution.<sup>3</sup>

## **Sustainable Development**

Sustainable Development is value based concept, which appeals to the universal themes of mutual coexistence and respect for others. It is a continually evolving process bringing together cultural, Social, Economic, environment and political concerns. It is desired direction of change and provides a framework to decide developmental actions by nations, communities and individuals. It also involves the equitable sharing of the benefits of economic activity across all sections of society, to enhance the well being of humans, protect health and alleviate poverty.<sup>4</sup>

## **Objectives of Sustainable Development**

Sustainable development has some forward looking and broad based objectives, which transcend class, caste, language and regional barriers. These Objectives are:

1. To maintain the standards of living of the largest number of people with equity and justice. The consideration of Trans-boundary and cumulative impacts in decision-making has to be realised.
2. To innovate new technology and scientific techniques, which work in unison with laws of nature and are not opposed to it. There needs to be consideration of sharing the risks and benefits from development policies undertaken by different nations.
3. To respect diversity and involve local and indigenous communities for a more grassroots oriented and relevant developmental policies. This would involve consideration of economic viability, culture and environment values, as policies and programmes are developed.
4. To decentralise governance institutions and make them more resilient, transparent and accountable to people. They should have an open, inclusive and participative decision-making.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of women in sustainable development was brought into the forefront in the earth summit. When the environment is disturbed, they are first to notice, but they are the last to be consulted on this issue. The discrimination against women has been detrimental to the overall developmental process. At the gross root level, the women is at the pivot of the family. The responsibility of the wellbeing of the family rests with her. If she is neglected and discriminated, then the whole unit collapses.<sup>6</sup>

## **Approaches of Sustainable Development**

### **Positivist Approach**

Conventional and classic economic development literature grossly ignores the demands of sustainable development. The early founders of quantitative economics argued in favour of the monetary approaches, known as the positivist approach. This approach centres on the physical betterment of society through market calculations or calculating advancement in terms of monetary gains. It leaves aside the issues of distribution and justices: even the environmental assets are valued in purely monetary terms. It neglects crucial factors such as public care and social organisation for the welfare of deprived and weaker sections, the approach is extremely narrow and defective.

### **Main theme of Positivist Approach**

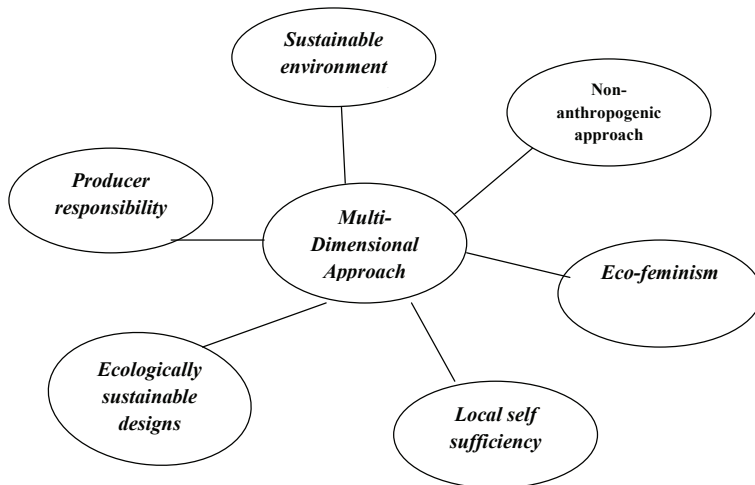
- Promotes freedom of accumulation and appropriation by a few.
- Emphasises wealth maximisation irrespective of distribution.
- Neglects public care and social organisation for the welfare of deprived people.

### **Multi – Dimensional Approach**

Multi-Dimensional Approaches deal with the heterogeneous environmental and developmental issues and means to calculate the intangible in nature. The approach recognizes that any development which disturbs a local ecosystem can adversely impact regions across geographical

and political boundaries. The policy orientation in multidimensional approach is that of ‘level transfer mechanism’ to check the environmental impact and anticipate measures for preventing any Socio-Economic Crisis. This approach is an attractive operational tool for studying Environmentally Sound and Sustainable Development (ESSD).<sup>7</sup>

### Various aspects of the Multi-Dimensional Approach

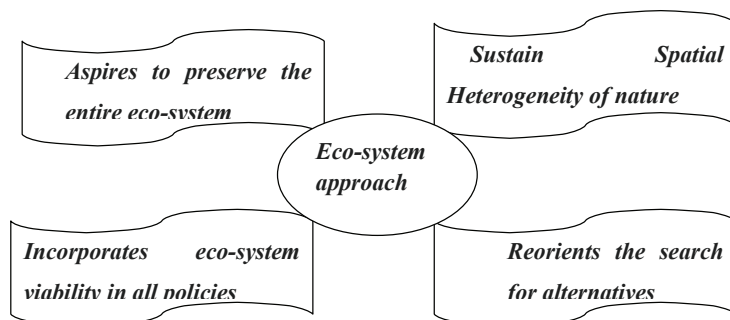


### Eco-System Approach

This approach aspires to preserve the whole ecosystem and speaks of the ecosystem viability in policy and development programmes. The ecosystem approach is a method of a sustaining four basic characteristics of nature:

- Spatial heterogeneity,
- resilience,
- Dynamic vulnerability,
- Organised connections between the Sources and sinks

### Characteristic of the Eco-System Approach

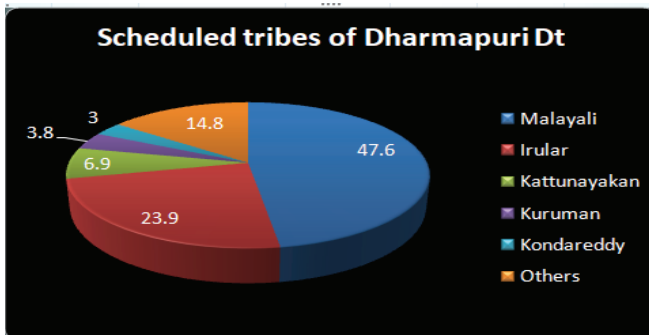


### Livelihood Approach

The livelihood approach enables various factors which constrain or provide opportunities to be organised and their inter-relationships are brought out. It is not intended to be an exact model of the way the world is, nor does it mean to suggest that people as stakeholders themselves have to necessarily adopt a systemic approach to problem solving. Rather, it aspires to provide a way of thinking about livelihoods that is manageable and that helps improve development effectiveness.

**Study Area**

Tamilnadu is home to 36 Tribal communities. Dharmapuri District which has one of the largest tribal population nurtures five major tribal groups and their percentage contribution to total ST is given below.



Major tribe community is the Malayalis and around 90% of them belong to Sitheri Hills located in Eastern Ghats. A Sitheri hill under Papireddipatti Taluk has 64 Villages inhabited by more than 15000 tribes and topographically the area is undulating with an altitude varying from 240m to 1266m.<sup>8</sup>

**The life style of Malayali Tribal in Sitheri Hills**

Malayali tribal people lead a simple life with almost everyone dependent on agriculture, cultivating different kind of grains, ragi, bhajra, maize, rice, sunflower, and fruit bearing trees. They don't have any distinctive wear for their clans and most of the people construct mud walled thatched houses with an elevation at the top. Other occupations include women is collecting forest produces like honey, vegetables etc.<sup>9</sup>



Their lifestyle is accompanied by Low literacy levels, high levels of Indebtedness, lack of awareness of basic rights which have led to their exploitation by middlemen in terms of bonded labour, illicit smuggling of red sanders, under utilization of government schemes and aversion towards development ending up in 90% of the tribal people are living the below poverty line. There has been systemic failure in giving tribals of Sitheri a stake in the modern economic processes, in assimilating with the mainstream for their betterment.<sup>10</sup>

**Penuric Conditions of Women in Sitheri Hills**

Tribal women occupy very important position in socio-economic structure of Sitheri hills. Women stand as the back bone of their family. Sustaining family life of Sitheri village mostly depends on women, the reason being that the men in that tribal region are highly addicted to alcohol

which makes the women not only carry abundance of responsibilities of their counterpart but also to face many number of day to day problems. They are highly hardworking and multi talented, performing multiple duties in running the family, maintaining the household, attending to farm labour, tending domestic animals and poultry birds.

Due to lack of basic infrastructure necessities women there had to travel 6 to 7 km for a pot of drinking water, Condition becomes even worse during summer season. A lakh of money funded Govt project for building water tank is completed but there is no arrangement made to fill them with Hogenakkal water, the tank remains a mere building without any use. They also face frequent sexual assault on their way to fetch water as the route leads them inside forest hence their safety factor is highly questioned.

The region has high concentration of endemic fluoride in ground water so people are miserably affected by skeletal and Non-Skeletal fluorosis. Impact on women and children is higher when compared to men who go outside the tribal villages for work.<sup>11</sup>

Malnourishment of women and children is another threat to their healthy environment. People there depend on PDS and rain fed agriculture for their food needs. During unfavourable agricultural seasons they are prone to severe food scarcity leading to Malnutrition of children, Pregnant and Lactating women. PDS system has lessen the supply of food ingredients as they are Aadhar based which poured oil to the fire.<sup>12</sup>

Educational Challenges- There are 8-Primary schools, 10-Middle schools and 1-Higher secondary school available for all the 64 villages. Many students have to walk for 5 to 15 km to reach the respective schools hindering their continuous attendance to school. Villages like Jalloothu, Villamballi, Thulasikaadu, Erumakadai and Elanthankadai villages don't even have primary schools. Students of Kalnaadu, Manoor, Arasanatham, and Kalasapadi have to walk for 10-15 Km for higher secondary education. Insufficient schools affects the Quantity of the education whereas very limited availability of teachers comparatively for the number of the students, less working hours of the school immensely affect the quality of the education.

There are many instances of sexual abuse and assault of girl students on their way to school by their community men. Safety for girls travelling a long distance for education is uncertain in that region this eventually leads to stopping of girl children from attending schools and in turn to early marriage.

Sitheri Higher Secondary School is the one which maintains a hostel but there are limited seats. So, they merely have chances of completing their education. On a brief note, educating girl children becomes huge struggle to the parents.<sup>13</sup>

Jobs handled by Aged Women – Almost all the aged women do cattle rearing for their livelihood. Some of them gather root vegetables, nuts and honey from forest. They also do agricultural works for minimal wages to support their poor economical condition.

Jobs handled by Adult / Middle Aged Women – They do agricultural work outside the tribal villages, plantation works otherwise they become construction workers on contract. Most of them are migrating to Ooty, Kerala and Tirupur to work in textile industry. Some women moves to towns are cities which are far away from their place to do labour work for low wages. Due to poor working conditions, there are more chances of casualties and such victims are not compensated by the employers. Very few companies provide insurance for such labourers and hence their work place safety is a question mark.

Cause of Crime: Under development is the main cause of increasing crime records in this region. For instance, the men in the region are highly addicted to alcohol and they involve themselves in illegal cutting of red sanders for money. Many of them are either in prison or dead because of that. In this situation, married women had to struggle a lot to sustain their life and their children's life.



Women who locomotes to different region as labourers are facing numerous problems. Variation in climate, nature of work, food and work-timings are affecting the health of the women. Those low-wage women labourers are unprotected and more vulnerable to sexual harassment problem. Some men are involved in illegal affair in their work place which is far from their place. They leave their wife and children unaided. Then the unassisted women (single-handed) are forced to work in the place where there is the highest risk of Sexual Harassment and deal with work place safety issues.

Less Alternative Job Opportunities: Villages depend on rain fed agriculture which is their primary source of livelihood and they suffer when rain fails or face insufficient yield. Daily-wage agricultural jobs in the tribal area get drastically reduced when agriculture fails and alternative job opportunities around the tribal area are lacking. This situation favours the Money lenders who lends relatively small amount of money for a short duration at very high rates of interest, illegally. Cattle are their secondary source of income and they are seized by the lenders when the interest is not paid on time.<sup>14</sup>

Role of Forest Department: Department is creating seasonal job opportunities through afforestation. Work timing is good which is 9 AM to 6 PM but the wage is less. Also, the Forest department funded Poultry to the families which don't have any support, but they covered the villages in which transport facility is available like Sitheri, Pereri, Tholthooki, Puthur and Suriyakadai. Due to the changes in climatic conditions, and microbial infections cause the poultry birds to die. The Scheme didn't work out well because there is no proper awareness about disease prevention and forest department is not providing enough guidelines regarding it.

SHG: Tribal women form small Self Help Groups and lend small amount of money to sustain their development. AWARD (Association for Women Agriculture & Rural Development) is an NGO which provide loans to the SHG members with an interest amount and also helps to get loans from bank. Srinivasa Charitable Trust (TVS) also arranges bank loan with less amount of interest for the SHG members of such villages without any additional charges. Though there are such opportunities, the tribal people don't have awareness and guidance to earn and repay the loan.

Srinivasa Charitable Trust (TVS) provided Nurseries in some villages without continuous monitoring and guidance, it becomes a failure again. They involve tribal women in tailoring cloth bags but they don't get opportunity to develop tailoring skills for their livelihood and sustainable development. The trust taught the tribes to prepare cattle fodder which was discontinued recently. Only selected villages and some people are benefitted through these initiatives, Villages with very less or no infrastructure facilities aren't reached by Government bodies as well as NGOs. They get very limited support since it is hard to reach them.<sup>15</sup>

Cooperative Societies provide loan to buy cow but there is no plan of procurement. Loans are given to the tribals having more than 1 acre land will be given loan amount to 30,000 rupees to grow paddy and Marigold in their field. Villages which doesn't have infrastructure facilities are unaware of such opportunities and people with less than 1 acre land will not have any development.

Hatsun Milk society in Sitheri is the only place where milk is procured and there is better infrastructure, still the tribes have very less profit margin.

Organic food like grams are grown in the villages but they are sold for very less price due to limitations like lack of transport and market facilities (lack of infrastructure required for distribution) due to that there is middle men intervention and restriction of Forest Department to transport goods out of forest.

### Feasible solutions

- Government should have followed bottom-up approach to bring water to these people. Instead, water tanks were constructed with lakhs of rupees in each village and left without filling them with Hogenakkal water. Few villages could have been tested initially and then improvements could have made. If the plan doesn't work out, installing Water pumps, digging Wells and ponds can be helpful to the villagers with comparatively less expenditure. Government should take steps for providing water through Lorries to the village people and the people who are living in inaccessible areas should also get benefitted.
- More concentration and inspection to stop illegal liquor production and consumption by police department will be helpful for the tribal women to be safe, which will also pave way for huge reduction in crime rate against women prevailing in the region.
- Nearby region like Vatchathi, Harur adopted Drip Irrigation but Villages in Sitheri hills are unaware of the methods of irrigation like Drip Irrigation which is suitable for places with insufficient water. Local Government can take initiatives to educate and create awareness to such under developed villages on methods of irrigation suitable for them and to improve organic farming. Therefore, they can achieve good nutrition, which is a source of income and helps to reduce food scarcity.
- Government with support of NGOs can arrange periodical health camps to monitor their health conditions and control the impact of people affected by skeletal and Non-Skeletal Fluorosis.
- Required number of schools can be opened with female teachers and transport facilities can be arranged at least during the school timings. Awareness regarding the education of girl children must be created among the village people. Also, accommodation facilities for girls need to be increased in Sitheri higher secondary school girls' hostel which is the only higher secondary school available for all the 64 villages of Sitheri Hills.
- Provide alternative job opportunities through local government institutions and Small-Scale Industries. Traditional food can be made out of Varieties of Millets available in large quantities with good quality and arrangements can be made to procure such food items by connecting small shops or food processing companies.
- Create awareness about Labour rights or Workers' rights in their respective place of work which will make them understand about their rights like equal wages, benefits, freedom from discrimination, safe working conditions as well as relation between workers and their employers, under labour and employment law. Government need to take necessary steps to control private money lenders which will bring relief to indebted families in Sitheri village.
- Forest Department could provide more job opportunities for those villages with suitable wages and the department need to provide continuous guidance and support to the villagers.
- SHG shall arrange Entrepreneurship Awareness Programs to effectively communicate to the people the importance of Entrepreneurship for their sustainable development. The Entrepreneurs can create jobs as well as improve the standard of living of their region. Burden of Sitheri hills tribal women can be reduced greatly by approaching businesses which are suitable for their climatic conditions like Sericulture or silk farming (cultivation of silk worms to produce silk), growing Mulberry herbs of high medicinal value which can be exported, forming milk society, tailoring, cattle rearing, preparing Incense sticks (called Agarbatti in India), etc.
- NGOs like AWARD and Srinivasa Charitable Trust (NGO of TVS group) are performing commendable role in this region which can be effectively extended to remote places through SHG. Tribal women have learnt about maintain nursery, preparing organic manure and basic



tailoring skills through Srinivasa Charitable Trust and the trust issued seeds like Cucumber, Watermelon and coconut plants, etc. to the tribal women. If necessary plans are made to procure the organic food items, women will be greatly benefitted and they can improve their living conditions.

- All the remote villages are not aware of the loan given by the Co-operative Societies for buying cattle, and they don't have any knowledge regarding the loans given by such organizations. They can be supported through SHG women who can approach the co-operative societies to get the loan to buy cattle and rear those to improve the livelihood of women.
- Local government officials shall approach the Co-operative Societies not to consider acre wise loan. Then through Local Government intervention, land which belongs to local government, community owned land or temple owned lands can be utilized by SHG women to do agriculture and create nursery. Since the climatic condition of this region is suitable for coffee and tea plantations, NGOs and government can support development of tribal women through such plans. Achievements of SHG can be spread to other villages to motivate them and to help for their sustainable growth.
- Ha sun milk society which is in Sitheri village can be requested to spread themselves to other villages otherwise they can be requested to plan for procuring milk from other villages as well. If Government milk societies (like Aavin) are established to procure milk from those villages, then it will be more beneficial for the villagers.
- Approximately, 90% of people who live in this region do organic farming but there is no transport and procurement facility there which favours the Middlemen to get the organic food for very less price. This can be avoided through the cooperation of Forest Department with local government and the government can introduce Uzhavar sandhai scheme to promote direct contact between the villagers and the consumers, through which the tribal women obtain full profit and improve their income status and living standard.

### **Conclusion**

Rural Women are key agents of change and their leadership and participation are needed to shape responses to development challenges and recent crisis. On October 15, the united Nations Commemorates the International Day of Rural Women, this Year the theme is Sustainable Infrastructure , services and social protection of gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls.. We should join with international community to work with Rural Women and girls everywhere and to invest in the sustainable infrastructure, services and social protection that can revolutionize their livelihoods, well-being and resilience.

### **References**

1. Marishkumar, P (2017). "Problems and Prospects of the Rural Women Entrepreneurs in India" , International Research Journal of Human and Social Sciences, Vol.4, April.
2. [www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw56/documentation.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw56/documentation.htm).
3. [www.eclac.cl/English/research/women/indicators/women11.htm](http://www.eclac.cl/English/research/women/indicators/women11.htm).
4. Van Crowder, L (1998). "Agriculture Education for Sustainable Rural Development: Challenges for Developing Countries in the 21st Century", The Journal of Agriculture Education and Extension, Vol.5, pp. 71-84.
5. Lafferly, William, and Langhelle Oluf.(1990), " Towards Sustainable Development", St.Martin Press Ltd, New York.
6. Human Development Report (1994), United Nations Development Program, Oxford University Press.

7. Redclift, M. (1987) Sustainable Development : Exploring the Contradictions, Methuen, London, Uk.
8. Edgar Thurston, "Caste and Tribes of Southern India", Volume IV (K to M), MJP publishers, Chennai, 2014.
9. K.S.Singh, "People of India, Volume III, Tamilnadu", XL, Madras, Affiliated East-West Pvt Ltd, 2001.
10. Prof.A.Jayakumar, and P.Palaniyammal,"Socio Economic Status of Scheduled Tribes in Kalrayan Hills" International Journal of Research- Granthaalaya, Vol.4.No.3: SE (2016); 22-30.
11. Sitheri Panchayat Vao Record 2017-2018.
12. Primary Health Care centre in Sitheri village, sub-primary Centre in Pereri Village Record – 2018.
13. Government Higher Secondary School, Sitheri School Record – 2018, Suriyakadai Primary School Record – 2018.
14. Sitheri Panchayat Fair Price Shops Record – 2017-2018.
15. AWAARD and Srinivaasa Charitable Trust Record – 2018.