

Symbolic Violence & The Life of Tribal People

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Abstract

This article applies Pierre Bourdieu's theories to examine the marginalization of the tribal communities of Wayanad, specifically the Paniyas and Adiyas. Bourdieu's key concepts, such as habitus (ingrained habits shaped by one's environment), various forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic), and field (social arenas of competition), help explain how these communities experience exclusion. Their rich cultural traditions are often undervalued within dominant social structures, resulting in symbolic violence, where they are pressured to adopt mainstream norms and feel inferior. This marginalization perpetuates systemic inequality, economic dispossession, and loss of cultural identity. Bourdieu's theories provide a lens through which to understand better the mechanisms through which these tribal groups remain excluded in modern society.

Key Words: Symbolic Violence, Cultural capital, Habitus, Marginalisation, *Adiya-Paniya* Tribes, Reproduction of inequality.

Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) was a prominent figure in social theory who contributed significantly to our understanding of power, culture, and social dynamics. His interdisciplinary approach blended sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, addressing critical issues such as colonialism, class structure, and social inequality. This article aims to apply Bourdieu's theories to examine the marginalization of tribal communities in Wayanad, mainly focusing on the *Paniyas* and *Adiyas*.

Among Bourdieu's most notable works is *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979), where he explores how cultural preferences are intertwined with social class, revealing that what is often perceived as personal choice is deeply rooted in social structures that the elite utilize to maintain their power. His concept of *habitus*, introduced in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972), refers to the ingrained habits and dispositions shaped by one's social environment, influencing perceptions and behaviors. Bourdieu further develops this in *The Logic of Practice* (1980), emphasizing how the surrounding social milieu shapes individual actions.

Bourdieu's framework includes critical notions such as *capital* encompassing economic, cultural, social, and symbolic dimensions. Economic capital pertains to material wealth, while cultural capital encompasses knowledge and education facilitating social mobility. Social capital involves the networks and relationships that offer support and opportunities, and symbolic capital refers to the prestige and recognition one holds within specific social contexts. Additionally, Bourdieu's idea of *field* describes the social arenas where individuals and groups fight for resources, status, and influence, each governed by its rules and power dynamics.

One of Bourdieu's most compelling contributions is his theory of *symbolic violence*, which illustrates the subtle ways dominant groups impose their values on marginalized communities, legitimizing inequality without resorting to overt force. This article will investigate how Bourdieu's concepts can elucidate the structural inequalities faced by tribal communities in Wayanad, shedding light on their processes of alienation and marginalization.

By exploring the intersections of habitus, various forms of capital, and the concept of field, we can better understand the mechanisms of exclusion that tribal populations like the *Paniyas* and *Adiyas* experience. Their unique cultural capital, deeply rooted in traditions and indigenous knowledge, is often devalued within a dominant societal framework that privileges mainstream norms. This devaluation, economic dispossession, and the erosion of social networks highlight the systemic barriers that perpetuate their marginalization. In this context, Bourdieu's insights provide a robust theoretical lens to analyze the ongoing struggles of these communities, offering a critical perspective on the broader implications of power dynamics and social reproduction in contemporary society.

Let's look closely at these theories, which help us explain the process of alienation and marginalisation of tribal communities. Bourdieu's theories, particularly his concepts of habitus, capital (cultural, social, economic, and symbolic), and field, provide a robust framework for analysing the marginalization of tribal communities. Bourdieu's ideas can help explain how structural inequalities and social hierarchies are maintained and reproduced, especially in tribal communities' interaction with dominant societies.

Cultural Capital refers to the knowledge, skills, education, and other cultural assets that give individuals power and social mobility. Tribal communities often have rich forms of cultural capital rooted in their traditions, languages, rituals, and indigenous knowledge systems. However, these forms of cultural capital may not be recognized or valued in mainstream society. When tribal communities interact with dominant societal structures, their cultural capital is often devalued in favour of the dominant culture's norms (e.g., formal education, language, and professional skills). This devaluation leads to symbolic violence, a term Bourdieu uses to describe the process by which the values and norms of the dominant group are imposed on marginalized groups, making them feel inferior.

Economic Capital refers to material wealth and resources. Tribal communities often face dispossession of their lands, forests, and natural resources, which are crucial to their life and survival. The encroachment of outer societies through industrial development, mining, and agriculture often results in these communities' economic capital loss. Bourdieu's framework helps highlight how the financial structures of capitalist societies privilege certain forms of property ownership and wealth accumulation while marginalizing those (such as tribes) who rely on communal resource use. This loss of economic capital leads to increased poverty and marginalization.

Social Capital refers to the networks, relationships, and social connections that provide individuals or groups with support and opportunities. Tribal communities typically have substantial social capital within their networks based on kinship, reciprocity, and communal living. However, these networks can weaken or fragment as they come into contact with outer societies. The imposition of new social structures (such as state governance, market economies, and formal legal systems) often undermines traditional forms of social capital, creating dependency on outside institutions and leaving tribes vulnerable to further marginalization.

Symbolic Capital refers to the prestige, recognition, and legitimacy within a particular social context. Tribal communities are often denied symbolic capital in mainstream society, where their cultural practices, languages, and ways of life are seen as "primitive" or "backward." Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital helps us understand how marginalization is not just about material deprivation but also about a lack of recognition and respect. The marginalization of tribes is reinforced by stereotypes and negative representations, which delegitimize their ways of life and reduce their ability to assert their identity in the broader society.

Habitus refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, dispositions, and ways of thinking that individuals develop based on their social environment. Tribal communities develop a habitus shaped by their unique cultural and environmental experiences. However, when marginalized, they are often pressured to adopt the habitus of the dominant society, which can lead to a loss of cultural identity and self-worth. Internalized marginalization occurs when tribal members come to see their artistic practices as inferior, a form of symbolic violence where the dominant group's norms are accepted as "natural" or "superior."

Field refers to the various social spaces where individuals and groups compete for resources, power, and recognition. In tribal communities, the "field" could represent the broader society in which they must navigate political, economic, and legal systems dominated by the state or other powerful groups. Tribal communities are often positioned in subordinate roles within these fields, unable to exert the same influence or compete on equal terms due to their exclusion from the dominant forms of capital. Bourdieu's concept of the field can thus help explain why tribal communities remain marginalized, as they are forced to operate in fields that are not structured to accommodate their ways of life or values.

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction highlights how inequalities are perpetuated across generations. Tribal communities often face systemic barriers that prevent them from accessing education, employment, healthcare, and political representation. These barriers not only maintain economic disparities but also ensure the continuous reproduction of social hierarchies that keep tribal groups marginalized. The dominant groups in society control the institutions determining what is valued, further marginalizing those who do not conform to these standards.

Symbolic Violence and Tribes

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence refers to the often invisible and subtle ways in which power and domination are exerted in society, mainly through cultural and social norms. This form of violence is not physical; instead, it operates through the imposition of ideas, meanings, and symbols that are accepted as legitimate by both the oppressors and the oppressed, thus reinforcing social hierarchies without overt coercion.

Unlike physical violence, symbolic violence is subtle and often goes unnoticed. It has an invisible character. It is embedded in everyday practices, language, and perceptions, making it challenging to identify. People are not usually aware that they are subjected to symbolic violence because it is deeply ingrained in the social fabric and normalized over time. Symbolic violence works by legitimizing the power of dominant groups (such as those with higher economic or social status) through culturally accepted norms, values, and ideas. For example, social hierarchies based on class, gender, or race may appear "natural" or justified because of the cultural values that support them.

One of the primary functions of symbolic violence is the reproduction of social inequality. Dominant groups impose their worldview and values on society, making their perspective appear universal and objective. Subordinate groups internalize these norms and perceive their social position as justified or inevitable. This helps perpetuate their domination. The concept named Mechanism of Consent emphasizes that symbolic violence is effective because it relies on the consent of those who are dominated. The dominated accept the imposed social order as legitimate, which in turn helps maintain the status quo. This distinguishes symbolic violence from overt forms of oppression, which rely on direct force or coercion.

Many examples of symbolic violence exist in different fields, such as the educational system. Bourdieu argued that education systems often function as mechanisms of symbolic violence. The culture and knowledge valued in schools reflect the preferences of the dominant class, which benefits children from privileged backgrounds while marginalizing those from working-class or minority groups. The success of students from dominant groups is perceived as meritocratic, even though it stems from their cultural capital.

Symbolic violence is also present in gender relations. Societal norms and expectations about gender roles often perpetuate male dominance and female subordination. These norms are internalized by both men and women, making patriarchal structures appear natural and unquestioned. In societies where racial inequality exists, symbolic violence can manifest through the subtle devaluation of certain racial or ethnic groups. For example, stereotypes and media portrayals may reinforce the dominance of certain racial groups while marginalizing others, all under the guise of "common sense" or accepted norms.

The Impact of Symbolic Violence

Symbolic violence has profound social effects, as it helps reproduce existing power structures in ways that are difficult to challenge. It legitimizes inequality by embedding it in everyday practices and can affect individuals' self-worth, opportunities, and behaviours. The dominant groups often accept the social order as "normal" or internalize feelings of inferiority. Symbolic violence is a powerful concept that explains how domination is maintained not only through coercive means but also through cultural and social practices that obscure the reality of inequality. Symbolic violence often operates through media and public discourse. For example, media representation of certain social groups, such as minorities or women, can subtly reinforce stereotypes and societal norms that perpetuate inequality, all under the guise of "common sense" or objectivity. Bourdieu's concept remains relevant today, offering valuable insight into how power and inequality are perpetuated through everyday practices and social institutions.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is instrumental in understanding the marginalization of the Adivasi population as well as the domination of tribal or indigenous people. According to Bourdieu's theory, Symbolic violence operates through the imposition of dominant cultural norms, values, and worldviews on tribal communities. Slowly, this leads to the internalization of these cultural norms and traits by the tribal people themselves. This, in turn, reinforces their marginalization and subordination. Loss of their cultural identity is the after effect which will lead to the perpetuation of socio-economic inequality.

Let's have a look at the condition of the *adivasi* people of Wayanad and understand how Symbolic violence affected them. Bourdieu says that symbolic violence against tribal people frequently manifests through forced assimilation into the dominant culture. In the case of *Adiya* and *Paniya* tribal people of Wayanad, their 'masters' ranging from migrant Gowdas and Chettis from the Karnataka region, local Nair janmis, migrant peasants from Travancore, colonial and post-colonial governments, often imposed their language, education system, and religion on indigenous populations. It affected these two communities in multiple ways. It leads to the devaluation of their indigenous languages, traditions, and spiritual belief systems. This type of activity is termed "civilizing" by colonial rulers and "development" by later migrants. The forceful imposition of such things leads to tribal people believing their own cultures are inferior. An excellent example in Wayanad is that even when the authorities boast about 100% school enrolment of tribal students, the medium of instruction is Malayalam or even English, which was never the mother tongue of these tribal people. Even some activists' efforts to teach the basic vocabulary of the *Paniya* language to the primary teachers so that at least they can communicate with students from those communities was violently opposed by the dominant communities, especially by the Christian community, which dominates the primary education sector of the district. The indigenous languages and cultural practices were suppressed in favour of the choices of the dominant communities. The school arts festival of Kerala, which is claimed to be the biggest such event in Asia, still has no tribal art forms as competition items.

In Kerala, which has nearly 1.50 % tribal population as per the 2011 Census, the formal education system is structured around the dominant culture's knowledge, history, and values. An excellent resistance movement by tribal people against colonial powers in Wayanad, known as the *Kurichiya Revolt* of 1812, appeared in the school textbook only recently, and even now, it is 'explained' in two or three sentences. Tribal communities of Wayanad possess excellent Indigenous knowledge of medicinal practices, but no serious studies have been conducted in that field. This is an example of what Bourdieu explains as 'symbolic violence', as this type of neglect and imposition creates a hierarchy of knowledge. So, mainstream education, which provides knowledge alien to them in an alien language, makes the tribal students feel entirely alienated, and the result is a large-scale dropout from primary classes themselves and a meagre Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher studies. In Bourdieu's theoretical terms, this happens because they feel "less intelligent". After all, their cultural capital does not align with what is valued in mainstream education.

Economic exploitation and land dispossession on a vast scale is another form of symbolic violence applied to tribal communities of Wayanad. The extraction of natural resources from indigenous people and their lands, such as deforestation, introduction of plantation agriculture and even gold mining, occurred in Wayanad under the pretext of "development" and "progress." The colonial government and, later, the democratic governments framed many laws that mainly affected the lives and cultures of tribal people. This is also symbolic violence, as in the process of making these laws, the authorities deliberately neglected and undermined tribal people's relationship with the land and their environment and branded them as 'primitive' and 'unproductive' people. This helped the colonial forces to legitimize the seizure of their land on a large scale for various commercial projects. Capitalist economic models were introduced and forcefully imposed on indigenous communities. This significantly undermined their traditional economies, which are based mainly on subsistence and sustainability. As a part of this type of symbolic violence, these communities lost their base of subsistence, and they were forced into precarious positions, mainly as unskilled bonded agricultural labourers in the dominant economy.

Symbolic violence has an impact on the fields of health and social services. The health and social services provided to tribal communities are often shaped by the dominant society's knowledge and perspectives on medicine, health and well-being. As mentioned earlier, the tribal communities generally had their age-old traditional healing practices and indigenous health knowledge. However, with the spread of the knowledge systems of dominant communities, these gems of wisdom are frequently devalued or disregarded. This symbolic violence undermines tribal people's autonomy over their health and related matters, leading them to depend on external systems that may not fully understand or respect their traditional and holistic approaches to health and well-being.

Due to migration of various kinds, tribal communities come into contact with outer societies. Cultural, environmental, and socio-economic disruptions may result in several health hazards. The possibility of the spread of new infectious diseases is one such health hazard faced by tribal communities. Tribes often have limited immunity to diseases like tuberculosis, measles, smallpox, and influenza, common in outer societies. These diseases can spread rapidly and act like epidemics. Increased contact

may lead to higher exposure to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, which can spread within communities that lack adequate healthcare and awareness.

Contact with outside societies often changes traditional diets, moving from nutrient-rich indigenous foods to processed, less nutritious foods. This can result in malnutrition, obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Loss of land and resources due to deforestation, mining, or agriculture driven by external forces may reduce access to traditional food sources, leading to hunger and malnutrition.

Industrial activities such as mining, logging, and agriculture can pollute water sources with chemicals and heavy metals, leading to waterborne diseases and long-term health issues like cancer. Air pollution from factories, deforestation, or burning activities associated with outside development can lead to respiratory problems like asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

The introduction of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs by outside societies can lead to addiction, which has severe health and social consequences in communities unaccustomed to these substances. In the case of the *Adiya* and *Paniya* communities of Wayanad, their link with external communities made them addicts to different types of alcohol and related drugs. The loss of cultural identity, land, and traditional ways of life due to interaction with outer societies can lead to depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. In some tribal communities of Wayanad, like that of *Panijas*, increased stress, marginalization, and cultural dislocation have been linked to higher rates of suicide, as revealed by recent studies.

Even when exposed to new diseases or lifestyle changes, tribal communities often lack access to adequate healthcare facilities. This can exacerbate both chronic and acute health conditions. Healthcare systems in outer societies may not cater to the cultural beliefs and practices of tribal communities, leading to reluctance to seek treatment. For example, delivery-related customary practices force tribal people to try delivery at home, which leads to further complications.

Tribes, especially women and children, can become vulnerable to sexual exploitation, trafficking, and abuse when they come into contact with outer societies, leading to both physical and mental health issues. Thirunelly, a local self-government of Wayanad attracted national attention a few decades back due to the highest number of unwed mothers in India.

The economic impact of these types of symbolic violence also needs to be considered. Tribes may be drawn into labour-intensive industries like mining, logging, or plantations, where they are exposed to hazardous working conditions, resulting in injuries, respiratory diseases, and exposure to toxic substances. Tribal communities often face social discrimination and inequities when interacting with larger societies, contributing to poor access to health services, lower educational attainment, and higher rates of poverty, all of which are linked to worse health outcomes. These health hazards highlight the need for careful, culturally sensitive approaches when engaging with tribal communities to mitigate the negative impact of such contacts. The legal and political systems imposed on tribal communities by the state often reflect the dominant culture's norms and values, disregarding indigenous governance and conflict resolution forms. This imposes a framework of legitimacy that privileges the state's authority while marginalizing tribal leadership and decision-making structures. Indigenous people may be forced to navigate legal systems that do not recognize their land rights or cultural practices, perpetuating their marginalization. For example, the *Paniya* and *Adiya* communities had their socio-political institutions for decision-making, but the complicated democratic institutions intruded into them and made them helpless.

Tribal people may internalize the dominant cultural values imposed upon them through symbolic violence, seeing themselves as inferior or believing that abandoning their traditions and adopting mainstream ways is the only path to success. This internalization contributes to the erosion of self-esteem and cultural pride, reinforcing the power structures that keep them marginalized. For instance, young tribal members might distance themselves from their heritage in favour of modern urban lifestyles, viewing their traditional ways of life as backward.

A closer look at the life of the tribal people of Wayanad reveals that indigenous communities have faced symbolic violence through the imposition of new legal systems, land ownership patterns, and educational systems that devalue their knowledge, practices and ways of life. The young generation may turn into "Stolen Generations" as these tribal children are forcibly taught the understanding of dominant communities, which induces them to reject their own cultural identity. This type of activity causes profound psychological harm and contributes to an increase in the intensity of the ongoing marginalization of Indigenous people.

Conclusion

Pierre Bourdieu's theories offer powerful tools to analyze the marginalization of tribal communities, particularly in Wayanad. His concepts of *habitus*, *capital* (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic), and *field* help explain how structural inequalities are reinforced and reproduced over time. In the context of *Paniya* and *Adiya* communities, Bourdieu's ideas reveal how their cultural capital is often devalued, leading to their marginalization. It helps to analyse how tribal and indigenous peoples of Wayanad, especially the *Paniya* and *Adiya* communities, are subjected to cultural domination that legitimizes their subordination. Through education, legal systems, economic policies, and even health services, dominant societies imposed values that devalued and marginalized indigenous knowledge, cultures, and identities. This form of violence is often invisible and accepted as expected, both by the dominant group and, tragically, by the oppressed themselves, perpetuating cycles of inequality and disempowerment. Through symbolic violence, dominant societal norms and values are imposed on these communities, eroding their cultural identity and perpetuating their exclusion from economic, social, and political resources.

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