The Effects of Adivasi Land Rights on Food Security: A Study of Wayanad district, Kerala

From North Carolina to India and back

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The World Food Prize Foundation

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## Table of Contents

- My Background ........................................................................................................... 3
- Foundation Overview ................................................................................................. 4
- Research Abstract ...................................................................................................... 5
- Literature Review ...................................................................................................... 5
- Methods ....................................................................................................................... 9
- Results ......................................................................................................................... 11
- Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 12
- Personal Experiences ................................................................................................. 13
- Acknowledgements .................................................................................................... 14
- Additional Photos ...................................................................................................... 16
My Background

I have lived in the same house my entire life, on a farm surrounded by fields and pastures for my father’s cattle, in Robeson County, North Carolina. I am currently a senior at the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics (NCSSM), a public residential high school in Durham, North Carolina. My parents are Eddie, a lifelong farmer, and Tyra, a high school health occupations teacher. I have three siblings: Karli, Lee, and Lenora. I am a proud member of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, one of the largest Native American tribes in the nation.

Despite coming from a family that has been rooted in agriculture for countless generations, I never envisioned myself being involved in agriculture at all. I had great respect for farmers, but I knew that I wasn’t cut out for that job. After being accepted to NCSSM, I attended a summer program intended to introduce underrepresented minorities to the school, specifically the many research opportunities offered. A major part of this program consisted of the students traveling to North Carolina State University and interacting with faculty in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences to gain valuable research experience.

One of professors that we met while at NC State, Dr. Lori Unruh Snyder, told us about an opportunity to write a paper on a topic related to food security in a foreign country for the chance a delegate to the World Food Prize Global Youth Institute (GYI) in Des Moines, Iowa. Although I had never heard of the World Food Prize or even Norman Borlaug before, I decided take advantage of this wonderful opportunity. Over the course of about a week, I researched and wrote my paper on foreign aid strategies to increase food security in Honduras. I was extremely excited when I learned a few weeks later that I had been selected to be a Delegate to the 20th GYI in October.

Simply put, I had never experienced anything like the GYI and the corresponding Borlaug Symposium in my life before. We had the opportunity to directly interact with and learn from some of the most influential and knowledgeable people in agriculture, including scientists, politicians, and humanitarian leaders. Out of all the inspiring events of the GYI, there was one moment that will stay with me forever. Ernest Bai Koroma, President of Sierra Leone, had been scheduled to give one of the keynote speeches of the Borlaug Symposium, but because of the ongoing Ebola outbreak in West Africa, he had to stay in his country and give his address via teleconferencing. His speech focused on the impact of the Ebola epidemic on food security in Sierra Leone. All that I could think about during this entire time was how privileged I, a teenager from rural North Carolina, was to have the opportunity to listen to President Koroma give a report on the state of his country during this time. At this moment I was no longer just an American who hears about the world’s problems in the news, but a global citizen who is invested in doing his part to solve these issues.

By participating in the Global Youth Institute I learned how I could help feed the world. Despite growing up on a farm and being immersed in agriculture my entire life, it was this experience that helped me to understand that I could be a part of and make a difference in agriculture and food security, even if I didn’t become a farmer. Never before had I seen so clearly how I could make an impact in the world, and this is what led me to the Borlaug-Ruan Internship.
Foundation Overview

The M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) is headquartered in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, with several field centers in different areas across south India. Dr. M.S. Swaminathan founded MSSRF in 1988 with the funds he received for winning the first World Food Prize in 1987. Prof. Swaminathan served as Chairman of the Foundation for several decades and is now Chairman Emeritus, Chief Mentor, and UNESCO Chair in Ecotechnology at MSSRF. The father of the Green Revolution in India, he is one of the most eminent agricultural scientists in the world today. TIME Magazine listed Prof. Swaminathan as one of the 20 most influential Asians of the 20th century, and one of only three Indians. The other two were Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. Javier Perez de Cuellar, Secretary General of the United Nations, said that Prof. Swaminathan is “a living legend who will go into the annals of history as a world scientist of rare distinction.”

The mission of MSSRF is “to enlist science and technology as allies in the movement for sustainable development”. To achieve this goal, the Foundation carries out research and development in six major areas, including coastal systems, biodiversity, biotechnology, ecotechnology, food security, and information, education, and communication. In addition, MSSRF carries out special projects and research in crosscutting areas. The Foundation is the lead partner for Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia (LANSA), as well as the home of The Hindu Media Resource Center (HMRC).

One of MSSRF’s field centers is the Community Agrobiodiversity Centre (CAbC), located in the Wayanad district in the state of Kerala. The specific mission of the CAbC is to “Achieve social prosperity through conservation, enhancement and sustainable & equitable use of biodiversity by adopting economically viable, ecologically sensitive, socially inclusive and equity approaches and process in development, research and technology dissemination.” The CAbC focuses on the four C’s: conservation, cultivation, consumption, and commerce. In particular, the CAbC is home to the Tribal United Development Initiative within the area of Sustainable Livelihoods and Food Security. This program focuses on holistic developmental intervention among the Scheduled Tribes of Kerala. I chose to work in this area, specifically the impact of land rights on the food security of members of Scheduled Tribes.
Research Abstract

The issue of land rights of the indigenous peoples of India has always been a complicated one. Its history is deeply marred by broken promises of land restoration by the government and the adverse effects that are seen among a people that lost the land it depended upon for its livelihood. Many, if not all, of the problems that Adivasis face today can be tied back to the theft of their ancestral lands by settlers. The tribal peoples of India are commonly referred to using the Hindi word “Adivasi”. The state of Kerala in southern India contains several areas that are very densely populated with tribal peoples. Located in the northeastern part of the state, the Wayanad district boasts 37% of the state’s 36 Scheduled Tribes with the tribal people making up 17.43% of Wayanad’s entire population. Because it has such a high proportion of Adivasis, Wayanad is the ideal place to study issues of land rights in relation to food security.

Food security ranks high among the challenges that the Adivasis face. A large part of this problem can be attributed to their lack of a sufficient amount land to grow subsistence crops on. In this study, we analyze the effects of Adivasi land rights on their ability to be food secure by conducting interviews with Adivasis in several different communities in Wayanad, Kerala. We demonstrate through the responses to questions asked in the interviews that the Adivasis would be able to be more food secure if they had more land. In other words, if the Adivasis had a sufficient amount of land they would be able to grow their own food instead of depending on other sources, thus becoming food secure.

Literature Review

Introduction

The issue of land rights of the indigenous peoples of India is extremely intricate, with many complex components. Its history is deeply marred by broken promises of land restoration by the government and the adverse effects that are seen among a people that lost the land it depended upon for its livelihood. The tribal peoples of India are commonly referred to using the Indian word “Adivasi” (Munshi). The state of Kerala, with an overall Scheduled Tribe population of 426,208 in 2008-2010, contains several areas that are very densely populated with tribal peoples (Kerala Scheduled Tribe Development Department).
One such area is the Wayanad district. Located in the northeastern part of the state, Wayanad boasts 37% of the state’s 36 Scheduled Tribes, with the tribal people making up 17.43% of Wayanad’s entire population. With such a large population of tribal people, the Wayanad district is an opportune place to study the history of the land rights of the Adivasis, as well as the current state of the movement to restore their lands to them.

To understand the current situation of the Adivasis of Kerala and India as a whole, it is important to look at their history. Many, if not all, of the problems that Adivasis face today can be tied back to the theft of their ancestral lands by settlers. This review attempts to give an overview of the history of Adivasi land rights, specifically in the Wayanad district of Kerala, and to relate that long and complicated history to the relatively recent movements among the Adivasis to gain back their lands. The outcomes of these movements, both successful and unsuccessful, will be analyzed, along with the key players in the tribal land struggle.

The thesis supported by this review is that the Adivasi people have long attempted to regain the lands that rightfully belong to them, with some of these movements being successful. It is important to note that along with the long and complicated history Adivasi land rights comes a challenge in studying that history. Therefore, no single review can be completely successful in analyzing the history no matter how legitimate the attempt. This review will do its best to study the different factors that come into play with Adivasi land rights, but will inevitably come up short.

**History of tribal land alienation in India**

The history of Adivasis in India losing their land to settlers is a long one that unfortunately still continues today. Dr. Haseena V.A. outlines the problems of land alienation that Adivasis face in his paper on “Land Alienation and Livelihood Problems of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala.” He lists the causes of land alienation among the tribal people of Kerala to include “economic poverty of tribals; simplicity and honesty of tribals; unawareness of forest act, illiteracy, poverty; absence of banking facilities in tribal areas are the other reasons of land alienation.” (2014). Since the Adivasis are disadvantaged because of these reasons and many more, they are vulnerable to being taken advantage of by the government and other entities that disregard their welfare. Tribal land alienation began in the 1950s when settlers from the plains moved in on their ancestral lands that were fertile (Suchitra, 2013). The good-natured Adivasis shared their land with the settlers and the settlers took advantage of the fact that they did not have documentation proving that their ancestral lands belonged to them.

Although the population in Attappady in the Palakkad district consisted entirely of tribal people, by 1951 the share of the population that were tribals had decreased significantly to 90.2% of the population. Furthermore, a report written by the Integrated Tribal Development Programme in 1982 found that tribes had lost approximately 10,000 acres of land in Attappaddy in the period between 1960 and 1977. These astonishing statistics regarding land alienation in just one area of Kerala show the severity of the problem. With every acre of land lost, the entire future of a people was impacted in a very negative way.
Attempts to restore land to the Adivasis

Action has been taken to return ownership of the Adivasis ancestral lands to them. However, these efforts have not always been successful, often because of bad implementation on the government’s part. A commission under the leadership of U.N. Dhebar, former president of the Indian National Congress, was appointed by the central government in 1960 to investigate issues of tribal land alienation.

The Dhebar commission ultimately recommended that ownership of all tribal land alienated after January 26, 1950 should be returned to its rightful owners. In 1975 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi called a meeting of state revenue ministers in which they decided to suggest that legislation be passed that would insure the implementation of the Dhebar commission’s recommendations (Prabhakaran, 2013). The result of their suggestion was eventually the passage of the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction on Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Bill, 1975. This act promised that all land alienated after January 26, 1960 would be restored to its original owners. The act was also included in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution so that it could survive any possible challenge in the courts (Suchitra, 2013).

Researcher and activist C.R. Bijoy, who is deeply involved with the indigenous peoples’ struggles, writes that although there are laws to protect the land rights of the Adivasis, the government does not always fully enforce those laws and have often violated entire parts of the laws (Bijoy, 1999). In the case of the Kerala Scheduled Tribes Act of 1975, the government found a way to go around implementing the law by amending it in 1996 to say that only lands alienated after 1986 had to be restored (Prabhakaran, 2013). This is a prime example of how the government of Kerala has gone back on its promises to the Adivasis. No matter how much legislation is passed to restore the Adivasis’ land to them, none of it will matter unless the government makes a sincere effort to implement it.

Adivasi land rights movements

In addition to official government acts that were supposed to ensure that alienated tribal land be restored to its original owners, there have been several movements among the Adivasis themselves to take back the land that is rightfully theirs. Leaders have emerged among the tribal people that have a mission of fighting for their people’s land rights. To have a leader rise from among their own people means that the Adivasis, who formerly had no voice to speak up against the alienation of their lands, now have a leader who is invested in the cause since they have been victims of the injustices that have occurred as well. One such leader that is well known among the tribal peoples of the Wayanad district and has been recognized internationally for her work is C.K. Janu. Born into the Adiya tribe in Thrissileri, Janu has devoted her life to fighting for the
rights of her people (Nair, 2003). As early as 15 she attended political marches and rallies along with other Adivasis, but they never truly had a voice of their own. Other people always spoke for them; first the communists and then the naxalites.

Realizing the reality that her people needed to be able to speak for themselves, Janu began work among the Adivasis in advocating for their land rights. In 2001 she led a protest in which tribal people pitched tents outside of the Chief Minister’s official residence in Thiruvananthapuram (Krishnakumar, 2001). This staging was prompted by reports of starvation deaths among the Adivasis in the forests. Over 150 tribal people lived in these camps for over a month, with food and even school facilities being provided by the organizers of the protest. Later in early 2003 C.K. Janu again led a movement among the Adivasi people, this time to retake their ancestral lands at Muthanga. While they were occupying the land the police conducted an attack on them when they refused to leave (Bijoy et al., 2003). At the time the government claimed that there were only two fatalities, but there were many reports of a much higher death toll. Janu and other Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha leaders were imprisoned and tortured after the incident. Protests like these are examples of the Adivasis taking matters into their own hands when the government does not act to restore their lands to them.

Conclusion
Overall, this review gives a brief history of the alienation of tribal lands in India, analyzes government action taken regarding Adivasi land restoration, and looks at movements among the Adivasis themselves to gain back their land when the government falls through on their responsibilities. The Adivasis’ original land was stolen from them because they were vulnerable to the settlers coming in, and they have been weakened even more by the loss of the land that they have historically depended upon for their well-being. The successful and final restoration of ancestral lands to the Adivasis is crucial to ensuring their survival. The Adivasis have long been taken advantage of for the gain of others, and now it is the government’s responsibility to right
the wrongs against the Adivasis. They simply want the fundamental right, as C.K. Janu has said, “to live and die in the lands where we were born,” and they should be granted that right.

**Methods**

The overarching goal of this study was to empower the Adivasis to speak for themselves regarding the issue of their land rights. Therefore, we decided that it would be best to collect mostly qualitative data to answer our question. Then, based upon the results of the interviews, we would make a conclusion regarding the affects of the Adivasis’ land rights on their ability to be food secure.

Overall, we wanted to get answers to questions from the farmers in three core areas: general challenges faced solely because they are Adivasis, land rights, and food security. I decided to ask about the challenges that the Adivasis face currently and have faced in the past just to get a general idea of how their ethnicity has impacted their lives so far. The questions that were focused on land included asking how much land they possessed, if they had a deed to their land, and if they had enough land to cultivate. By asking the farmers’ opinion on whether or not they had a sufficient amount of land to cultivate to support their family, we would be able to determine if our hypothesis that having more land would help the Adivasis be more food secure was true. In addition, we asked if they were cultivating their land if they had any and what their main crops were. This information was important to know so that we could analyze any variations in the answers given by the farmers along the lines of the crops that they grow.

In the next part of the questionnaire we asked specifically about the respondents’ land rights, both in the past and present. We asked if they had ever sold any of their land, and if they had sold any of their land if it was to another Adivasi or not. When examining land rights among the Adivasis, it is important to analyze the movement of land ownership from Adivasis to non-Adivasis. When land that was historically possessed by Adivasis is sold to non-Adivasis, it will most likely never return to being owned by Adivasis. Therefore, since the amount of land that the Adivasis have to farm has decreased, they will likely not be able to grow as much food for themselves and to sell for money. If the respondent had sold land to a non-Adivasi in the past, we also asked them if they sold it for a fair price. Next, we asked the farmers if any of their land had ever been alienated. The alienation of Adivasi land, which is described in detail in the literature review section, is one of the main causes of the Adivasis’ loss of land.

Lastly, two questions about food security were included at the end of the questionnaire. These questions helped to evaluate our hypothesis of whether or not the Adivasis’ land rights had an impact on their ability to be food secure. The first of these questions asked what the source of the respondent’s daily food was. This could include the public distribution system (PDS), food harvested from their own farming, other livelihood options, wage labor, etc. It is important to know where the farmers are getting the food for themselves and their families so that we can examine the reliability of their food sources. For example, if an entire family is reliant on one family member doing wage labor in order to buy food and something inhibits this persons ability to work for a period of time, then the family will be left without a source of purchasing their food. Likewise, if a family gets most of their daily food from the public distribution system, then if something happens to stop the administration of that system, the family will have to find
another way of getting food. In both of these scenarios and many more, the family has a significant chance of being left food insecure as a result of something that is mostly out of their control. The last question was seemed simple enough, but it was probably the most difficult one of the entire survey: Do you frequently experience hunger? This question touched on the most important aspect of this study and the work being done to increase food insecurity around the world: eliminating hunger.

Since a great amount of time was required to conduct a literature review to gain a basic understanding on the Adivasis and more specifically on the topic of land rights, the time available to actually conduct the interviews was extremely limited. Due to the relatively short amount of time I had to carry out this study, we decided to limit the sample group to ten Adivasi farmers constituting various tribes and landholding and non-landholding farmers. Our sample consisted of three landholding members of the Paniya community, three landless Paniyas, two landholding Thachanadan Moopans, and two landholding members of the Kuruma community. While the different tribal groups in the area have a lot in common in terms of their experiences as Adivasis, they differ from one another in terms of integration into mainstream society, language, traditions, etc. Therefore, we chose a sample group that represents the major tribal groups in the Wayanad district of Kerala.

We also decided to include both landholding and landless individuals in the study in order for the group to be more representative of the total population. The interviews were carried out over several days in the Mukkilpeedika and Puthoorvayal areas of Wayanad. I traveled to the tribal hamlets along with an MSSRF staff member who is currently pursuing his doctorate in tribal studies and who acted as my interpreter, as well as another intern. In addition, a staff member at MSSRF who works as a community organizer accompanied us to some of the farmers’ homes that she knew and had an established relationship with. Verbal and/or written consent was acquired before the interview began, with the understanding that the information received would only be used for research purposes.
Results

There were many significant results from the study that helped to answer the question at hand. The average age of all the respondents was 51.8 years old. Out of all the people we interviewed, all but one 28 year old male was married. This man is likely to get married in the coming years. The mean of the amount of land held by the respondents was 0.78 acres. Eight of the ten farmers had a deed to their land. This was especially promising with regards to land rights, because if the Adivasi farmers have deeds to their land then they will be better poised to fend off people that attempt to encroach on their land. However, it is concerning that two of the respondents did not have a deed to their land.

When asked if they were cultivating their land, only three of the respondents said they were not. All three of these farmers were landless Paniyas who only had enough land for their homes. In response to being asked if they had ever sold their land before, three of the farmers responded in the affirmative. These three respondents all sold their land to non-tribals for unfair prices. Although it is positive that no more than three had sold their land to non-tribals, it is concerning that these farmers had done so.

Seven out of the ten farmers answered that they did not have a sufficient amount of land to cultivate for their needs. However, half of the respondents had received some amount of land from the government. The government distributed all of this land through the Forest Rights Act of 2006. While it is good that these farmers were allotted land, it is concerning that not all of the respondents had received land through the Forest Rights Act.

The main crops grown by the farmers were coffee, bananas, peppers, and vegetables. Many of the landless Paniyas responded that they grew vegetables on land they rented seasonally, but in the seasons they were not able to rent the land they had no way of growing food. During the seasons that they are not able to grow their own vegetables they must rely solely on food from other sources.

When asked what the source of their daily food was, all of the farmers said that they rely on the public distribution system to some degree. However, their dependence on this system ranged from very heavy to minor reliance. Half of the respondents depended on wage labor to earn money for their daily food. The reliability of this source of income to buy food varied greatly, with some elderly people performing wage labor. This is concerning because the elderly family members may not be able to work in the future, therefore leaving the family without a source of income to buy food.

The farmers interviewed reported many challenges that they face solely because they are Adivasis. These included lack of equal access to education in their youth, lack of confidence, social alienation, landlessness, being overworked, and lack of proper housing. However, many of the interviewees emphasized that their situations are much better now than they were in the past. In particular, they said that their children now have access to education.

When asked if they frequently experience hunger in the present, all of the respondents said that they do not experience hunger now. However, many of them said that they had faced hunger in
the past. They often cited specific events that occurred which led to their family being left without enough food for everyone.

Conclusion

Overall, the data gathered from the ten interviews conducted among the Adivasi farmers supported the hypothesis that if they had more land they would be able to grow their own food and be more food secure. The overall consensus among the respondents was that things are much better now than they were several decades ago, especially as it relates to education access, but they still face significant barriers to achieving food security. Having a sufficient amount of land to cultivate for their own food needs would greatly help the Adivasis to better their situation and become food secure.

There were several significant challenges to our study that are important to note. One of the most obvious barriers was the limited sample size of ten Adivasi farmers. As was discussed in the methods section, we had a relatively short amount of time to conduct this study. Since a single team conducted all of the interviews, it took a great amount of time to conduct just the ten interviews. Although the results of our study conclusively supported the hypothesis, more validity would be added with a larger sample size. Also, there was not a way to randomly select the participants for the study, so some bias in sample selection likely occurred.

Cultural barriers also posed a large problem to getting accurate results from the questions asked in the interviews. Many of the farmers we interviewed lived in relatively isolated areas without much contact with mainstream people at all. The answers given when a foreigner whom they had never met before asked the questions likely differed from the answers they would have given to someone they were more comfortable talking to. The results that were most likely impacted the most by cultural barriers were the answers to the question about hunger. Although all of the respondents reported that they do not experience hunger now, they would likely have been hesitant to report experiencing hunger in this study. The actual definition of what hunger is may have also varied between cultures. Translation barriers may have also added addition misunderstandings into the interviews.
Personal Experiences

When people ask me today what my experience in India was like, it’s hard to find the right words to say. How can I explain something to someone else that I don’t fully understand myself? The truth is that my experience living in India and interning at MSSRF for two months cannot be explained in a few words or even sentences. The things I learned during my Borlaug-Ruan Internship in India are too many to recount, but I will discuss a few of them here.

The most important lesson that I learned during the summer was that inequality exists in the world on a massive scale. Before going to India I thought I was relatively informed about the inequities of the world, both at home in the United States and abroad. I had seen the statistics about poverty and hunger, and I had my own preconceived notions about what the causes of these problems.

It wasn’t until I went to India and saw the extreme poverty juxtaposed with great affluence that I truly realized the magnitude of inequality in the world. Why should a person be left to beg for money and food in the streets in front of massive, newly built buildings? What is the difference between the beggar in tattered clothing and the rich person wearing expensive garments? How can these people live in the same city, but essentially be from two different worlds? I don’t know the answers to these questions and I don’t know if I ever will. That is what scares me the most and had the biggest impact on my view of the world.

It’s important to relate to people. When you’re in a country on the other side of the world in a country with an entirely different culture from your own, it can seem impossible to find anything in common with the people there. However, I learned during my time in India that the things we have in common with people in other parts of the world are more important than our differences. On my first trip to the beach in Chennai I stood and looked out across the Bay of Bengal. While I was there I couldn’t help but think to myself that the ocean looks the same for all the worlds people. When it all comes down to it, we’re all people of the human race.

Dreams do come true. I found out about the Borlaug-Ruan Internship in July of 2014. I had never been out of the country and I couldn’t even dream of going to the other side of the world to India. A year later I was in India working at a renowned international research foundation. My story is proof that anything is possible in life. Dare to dream big.

During my internship I realized that my purpose in this world is to be an advocate for others. I can help to empower the underprivileged and give a voice to the silenced. Ultimately, the biggest thing I can do is to help equip others to speak for themselves. Whatever I end up doing in life, I can only hope that I serve my purpose of fighting for others.

This summer definitely wasn’t an easy one for me. In fact, going to India was probably one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. It’s never easy to challenge yourself and get out of your comfort zone. The realities of this world are cruel. Poverty and hunger exist around the world and there are no clear solutions to the problems we face, but it’s up to us to solve them. It won’t be easy, but nothing worth having is easy to get. I know we will win this fight, because as Nelson Mandela once said, “A good head and a good heart are always a formidable combination.”
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Additional Photos
Bibliography


Appendix

Interview Questions for Farmers in Tribal Communities

Demographics:

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your marital status? Married/unmarried
4. Do you have children? Yes/no
5. Number of children:

General challenges:

6. What are some of the challenges you face because you are a tribal versus a non-tribal?

Land:

7. How much land do you possess, if any?
8. Do you have a deed to your land? Yes/no
9. Do you have enough land to cultivate? Yes/no
10. Are you cultivating your land? If no, why not? (Do you have the resources besides land to be able to cultivate it?)
11. What are the main crops you are cultivating (cash crops or subsistence crops)?
12. Have you ever sold any of your land? Was it to another tribal or a non-tribal? Did you get a fair price for the land you sold?
13. Have you ever had any of your land alienated? Yes/no
14. Have you received any land from the government? Yes/no
15. How much land was given?
16. Is it under FRA or other schemes?
Food security:

17. What is the source of your daily food (PDS, own farming, other livelihood options, wage labor)?

18. Do you frequently experience hunger? How often (daily, weekly)?