

EMPOWERING KERALA TRIBAL COMMUNITIES: THE PATH FOR SOCIO ECONOMIC PROGRESS

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ABSTRACT

Kerala, known for its lush landscapes and vibrant culture, is home to diverse tribal communities. These groups have a rich heritage, full of traditions and stories that paint a vivid picture of their life and struggles. But often, their voices get drowned out in the noise of modern society. It's crucial to recognize their unique challenges and to take steps that can uplift them. Tribal communities in Kerala face multiple hurdles. Limited access to education often hinders their growth. Many children drop out of school before they can explore their true potential. Furthermore, traditional livelihoods are at risk; fishing and farming practices are getting overshadowed by modern methods, leaving many without a reliable income. Empowering Kerala's tribal communities is not just a noble cause; it's essential for the growth of the entire state. By breaking down barriers to education, supporting traditional livelihoods, and prioritizing health, we can pave the way for a brighter future. The journey may be long, but with commitment and collaboration, we can turn challenges into triumphs.

Key Words: Communities, Challenges, Collaborations, Education, Health, Infrastructure etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

Kerala, is home to many scheduled tribes that make up 1.45% of its population, predominantly residing in isolated forest and hill regions, particularly in the Western Ghats near Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. These tribal communities, characterized by their ancient Dravidian lineage, face significant challenges including poverty, exploitation, lack of access to quality education and healthcare, illiteracy, and limited economic opportunities. The study focuses on assessing their socio-economic status and identifying potential empowerment initiatives. It highlights the need for programs that promote skill development and leverage traditional knowledge in agriculture and handicrafts, which can enhance financial stability and provide pathways out of poverty. Reviving these traditional skills and connecting them to market opportunities can create economic benefits while respecting and preserving the tribes' cultural heritage.

The tribal population in Kerala has had diverse experiences, with some tribes living independently in isolated forests and hills while others were forced to settle in previously uninhabited areas. Despite living harmoniously in the forest, many of these tribes have been displaced from their ancestral land by government and other cooperative companies. Some believe that certain tribes were ancient rulers who were later displaced to the forests after defeat by invaders. Regardless of their origins, all of these tribes have a deep connection with the forest, which provided them with their primary sources of subsistence. Their extensive knowledge of the forest's flora and fauna led to the development of traditional medicines.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study examines the socio-economic conditions of Kerala's tribal communities, highlighting significant challenges such as inadequate access to quality education and healthcare, which contribute to ongoing poverty. Employing interviews with community leaders, government officials, and tribal development experts, along with an analysis of government reports and academic literature, the research highlights the importance of a holistic approach that includes education, skill development, healthcare, and community engagement for effective empowerment. Kerala's government has initiated various development programs targeting scheduled tribes, emphasizing education as a cornerstone for socio-economic advancement. Initiatives like Balavadi, nursery schools, and model residential schools aim to enhance learning capabilities among children, offering free meals, scholarships, and stipends.

The Paniyan tribes are a prominent tribal community in Kerala, primarily residing in the hilly and forested regions of Wayanad, Kozhikode, and Malappuram. Known also as Pania or Panya, the name derives from 'pani,' meaning work in Malayalam, reflecting their historical role as bonded laborers. Though their precise origins remain uncertain, some scholars suggest they may have African roots. The Paniyan have a distinctive architectural style, with villages consisting of huts made from bamboo with thatched roofs. During the rainy season, they often migrate to nearby rivers and cooler areas, living together in communal settlements.

The Pulaya tribes, also referred to as Pulayar, are a significant social group in Kerala, recently recognized as Dalits. Traditionally, they resided near village leaders and engaged in minor occupations while retaining unique customs,

including Pre-Hindu practices and beliefs in magic and spirits, termed arcane mysteries. Their rich cultural heritage is expressed through various art forms such as Kolam Thullal, Mudi-attam, Chimmanikali, and the Margam Kali dance, particularly among the Paliyan tribes of the Travancore district. Known for their amicable and non-violent nature, the Pulaya people have gradually begun to discard some traditional customs in favor of modernization.

The Muthuvan community resides along the border of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, specifically in Idukki district and the Western Ghats of Palghat and Trichur. The name Muthuvan translates to "those who carry something on their back," reflecting their traditional practice of carrying children and belongings. They are organized into six clans and historically served the royal dynasty of Madurai. Their marriage customs include the groom presenting a bamboo comb to the bride, symbolizing their union, and they do not practice dowry. Muthuvan women contribute to the family income through agriculture, where they grow crops like ragi, cardamom, and lemongrass, with notable skills in identifying water sources. The community has limited access to education and traditionally maintains a degree of separation from outsiders, with women often leading isolated lives. Although they primarily follow local tribal religions and worship deities like Karuppasamy and Mariyamman, many have adopted Hinduism. The Muthuvan favor traditional medicine over modern options and have developed self-sufficient techniques for securing food and healthcare, maintaining their distinct lifestyle throughout the years.

The Kanikkaran, also known as Kani, inhabit the Neyyattinkara and Nedumangad taluks of Trivandrum district and parts of Quilon. They speak their own dialect, Kannikkar Bhasha, which is related to Malayalam, and use the Malayalam script. Marriage is symbolized by a bead necklace, and divorce is socially acceptable. Traditionally hunters, gatherers, and shifting cultivators, the Kanikkar now primarily engage in settled cultivation and work as wage laborers in the forest department. They maintain a tradition of using herbal medicines for healing and have a higher literacy rate compared to other Scheduled Tribes in the state. Many have adopted both traditional and modern medicine and have participated in employment generation programs. Despite their progress, they still tend to rely on money lenders and shopkeepers during financial crises, and they adhere to specific rituals for weddings and funerals.

The Kurumba, a tribal group primarily located in the Palghat district of Kerala, are also known as jungle dwellers. They communicate using Malayalam, Kannada, and Telugu and are believed to be modern descendants of the ancient Pallavas. The Kurumba have a clan system characterized by exogamous and matrilineal practices, with governance facilitated by councils. Key figures in their society include the village headman and priests, who can be male or female, and are integral to the community's religious practices, which emphasize ancestor worship and rituals regarding pollution and purity. Their livelihoods stem from hunting, gathering, shifting cultivation, and capturing small animals. The Kurumba also serve as watchmen for the Badaga tribes and are a land-owning, agricultural Hindu people and fulfill priestly duties during important festivals. They possess traditional knowledge for healing and causing harm through herbs and spells, while also engaging in crafts like mat weaving and basketry. Additionally, they celebrate their culture through folk dances performed by both genders.

The Malayan tribes, primarily located in Kerala's Idukki district, include two groups: Nattu Malayan and Kongu Malayan. Their livelihoods traditionally revolve around hunting, gathering, and the collection of honey, but they have also adapted to bamboo cutting, fishing, and bamboo carving. The Malayan tribes practice a local form of Hinduism that retains elements of their traditional tribal religion. Key festivals in their culture include Onam and the prominent Adimali fest. Marriage customs typically follow monogamy, with adult marriages arranged through negotiations, and married women wear a pendant called Thali. Economic development schemes have contributed to strengthening their community's economy.

According to the 2011 census, the Paniya tribe is the most populous in Kerala, representing 18.24% of the total tribal population, followed by the Kurichchan at 7.25%. Together with six other tribes—Muthuvan, Kanikaran, Irular, Kurumans, Mavilan, and Malaiarayan—they comprise 57.4% of the tribal demographic. Other smaller tribes include Malayan and Mannan, with populations ranging from 5,000 to 20,000, while six tribes have fewer than 500 individuals. The overall sex ratio among scheduled tribes is 1035 females per 1000 males, surpassing the national average, with notable female preponderance in certain tribes. The literacy rate among scheduled tribes improved from 64.4% in 2001 to 75.8% in 2011, with significant increases in both male and female literacy. Malaiarayan leads with 96.3% literacy, while many tribes have low formal education levels, showing a pressing need for educational reform, as a majority of literates possess only primary-level education or less, with graduates comprising just 3.27% of the literate population.

The work participation rate for scheduled tribes is 47.5% below the national average, with males participating at 60.34% compared to females at 39.65%. Between 2001 and 2011, male participation increased from 57.5% to 60.3%, while female participation decreased by 3.2%. A significant 70.1% of total workers are main workers, with certain tribal groups such as Irular and Muthuvan exhibiting higher participation rates than the state average. However, notable gender disparities remain. Regarding marital status, the 2021 census indicates that 43.65% of the scheduled tribe's population

is never married, 48.1% is married, 6.75% is widowed, and only 1.56% is divorced or separated, with very few underage marriages reported.

Challenges Faced by Tribal Communities

Tribal communities in Kerala face numerous challenges that threaten their social, economic, and cultural wellbeing amidst rapid regional development. Key issues include land alienation caused by infrastructure projects and conservation policies, disrupting their livelihoods and culture. Educational disparities arise from geographical isolation and inadequate infrastructure, resulting in low enrollment and high dropout rates, which perpetuate poverty. Healthcare access is limited due to insufficient medical facilities and professionals, leading to heightened maternal and child health issues.

The Constitution of India defines Scheduled Tribes (ST) in Article 366, recognizing 574 tribal groups, with education being a significant issue impacting their economic status and poverty levels. Data from the 2011-12 census shows that ST students constituted only 1.86% of total school enrollments, with graduation rates for ST students improving markedly from 41.16% to 52.31% between 2010-11 and 2011-12. The challenges to tribal education are multifaceted, including external factors such as planning and administrative issues, internal constraints like inadequate school infrastructure and resources, and socio-economic and cultural obstacles, which encompass poverty, social customs, and a lack of awareness regarding education's value. These issues contribute to low attendance and high dropout rates among tribal students, further exacerbated by the dual administrative system governing educational policies for tribal communities.

Economic marginalization is evident as traditional occupations become unsustainable, compounded by restricted market access and credit. Social discrimination persists despite legal protections, affecting tribal members' self-esteem and societal inclusion. Cultural erosion occurs as younger generations drift from traditional practices amid socio-economic changes, threatening indigenous knowledge preservation. Furthermore, political representation is lacking, hindering effective policy-making for their needs. Connectivity issues, such as inadequate infrastructure, limit access to markets, education, and healthcare. Additionally, the implementation of welfare schemes aimed at upliftment is often flawed due to corruption and bureaucratic hurdles, undermining their effectiveness.

Education: The Key to Empowerment

Education is crucial for empowering tribal communities and serves as a catalyst for human resource development. Its absence leads to exploitation and adverse conditions for these groups, making education vital for their progress. By providing knowledge in science, technology, and socio-economic updates, education enhances the capacity of tribal members to escape poverty and seize economic opportunities. The constitutional framers recognized this need, incorporating provisions in articles 15 and 46 to promote educational development among scheduled tribes. Article 15 allows for special measures to aid socially or educationally backward classes, with both state and central authorities responsible for educational initiatives. State departments focused on tribal welfare implement programs, manage facilities like scholarships and hostels, and are essential in making education relevant and accessible to tribal communities.

Kerala's tribal communities, predominantly situated in forest and hill regions, encounter a multitude of challenges, including poverty, exploitation, and socio-economic disadvantage. Despite the Kerala model of development primarily benefiting the mainstream population, these tribal groups experience significant barriers such as limited access to quality education and healthcare, perpetuated by poverty, inadequate transportation, and cultural obstacles. This results in a cycle of exclusion and hinders their economic opportunities. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive strategy that integrates education, skill development, healthcare access, and community involvement. Existing literature highlights the specific difficulties faced by tribal women and provides a historical context for understanding the issues encountered by Indian tribes. The study aims to assess the socio-economic conditions of these communities and pinpoint effective empowerment initiatives.

Empowering Women: A Catalyst for Change

Empowering women, particularly those in scheduled tribes, is essential for fostering a healthy society and combating systemic discrimination. This process involves comprehensive efforts in education, skill training, and raising awareness, as empowering one woman can lead to the education of her entire family. In tribal societies, gender significantly influences participation in daily life, with women playing critical roles in managing household affairs and contributing to economic activities. Despite their active involvement and cultural significance, tribal women face considerable challenges due to low status, limited access to economic resources, and diminished personal autonomy compared to men. Overall, while tribal culture often recognizes equal roles for men and women, the empowerment of tribal women remains crucial for societal advancement.

This empowerment involves education, skill training, and awareness programs, with a particular emphasis on the challenges faced by scheduled tribe women who are often the most marginalized. Within tribal communities, gender plays a significant role in participation in social and economic activities; while women contribute substantially to family livelihoods, their status remains lower than men's due to limited access to resources and autonomy. Status in tribal societies is influenced by participation in subsistence activities, with tasks being divided based on risk and physical strength. For example, in the Kurumbar community, women assume significant roles in non-volatile work, enhancing their status, while in communities like the Cholanaikkan, lower participation in labor leads to diminished status for women. Participation in traditional arts also reflects women's status, with varied levels of involvement among different tribal groups. Cultural beliefs surrounding purity and impurity further restrict women's opportunities, particularly during menstruation and childbirth, contributing to ongoing oppression and discrimination.

Schemes for Empowering:

The Government of Kerala has initiated various development programs to empower weaker sections, particularly focusing on tribal development. Education is highlighted as a crucial means to achieve peace, justice, freedom, and equality. Backwardness in education is identified as a key factor contributing to economic backwardness, leading to significant investments in educational initiatives for tribal communities. Various schemes and programs have been launched to enhance educational opportunities for tribal children, including Balavadies, nursery schools, single teacher schools, and model residential schools.

Additionally, the government provides support for higher education through fee exemptions, grants, and stipends for scheduled tribe students. Employment training centers have been established to enhance job opportunities for tribal youth, with financial assistance provided for self-employment. Housing projects, financial aid for marriage of poor scheduled tribe girls, and healthcare initiatives, including Ayurvedic and Allopathy dispensaries, aim to address the health concerns of tribal communities.

Agricultural schemes, such as rubber cultivation, have been introduced to promote economic development among tribal settlements. Various programs focus on land acquisition, agricultural development, self-employment, and training for securing employment. The Tribal Sub Plan schemes ensure that 2% of developmental resources are allocated for the benefit of scheduled tribes, with a focus on all-round development through the Intensive Habitat Development Programme. The district working group plays a crucial role in planning and implementing these programs to achieve time-bound progress in essential areas like transport, water, electricity, health, housing, and economic growth.

The Scheduled Tribes' Development Department has introduced several initiatives aimed at improving the status of tribal women. The Women Empowerment Program focuses on social mobilization to empower rural women, while assistance for the marriage of scheduled tribe girls provides financial support of up to 1 lakh rupees to alleviate marriage costs for families. The schemes under Article 275 aim to enhance infrastructure in human development sectors including income, health, and education. The Oru Koottam initiative encourages tribal community gatherings to foster empowerment, with a meeting budget of 2500 rupees per quarter. The Tribal Girl Child Endowment Scheme (Gotravatsalya Nidhi) offers insurance-linked social security for tribal girls to elevate their societal status. Additionally, the National Scheduled Tribe Finance and Development Corporation (NSTFDC) implements various financial and development schemes including loans and empowerment programs specifically designed for tribal women and communities.

3. FINDINGS

Empowering Kerala's tribal communities is not just a matter of social justice, but also a key factor in the state's overall development. By providing access to education, economic opportunities, and support for entrepreneurship, we can help break the cycle of poverty and marginalization faced by tribal communities. Through concerted efforts and collaboration between government, civil society, and the private sector, we can pave the way for a brighter future for Kerala's tribal population.

One of the most significant findings of the study highlights the lack of educational resources available to tribal children. Schools are often distant, and the curriculum doesn't resonate with their cultural context. Imagine trying to fill a bucket from a well that's miles away—this is how education feels for many tribal families. When children can't access quality education, it limits their future prospects.

Economic opportunities are scarce for these communities. Many tribal members rely on subsistence farming or foraging, making them vulnerable to market fluctuations and environmental changes. The study indicates a need for skill development programs that align with market demands. It's like having all the ingredients for a delicious meal but not knowing how to cook them—it's essential to bridge that gap.

One exciting opportunity is eco-tourism. By showcasing their rich culture and pristine environments, tribal communities can attract visitors while preserving their traditions. This approach not only generates income but also promotes environmental sustainability. Picture this: hosting visitors in a vibrant village, sharing stories under the stars, and earning a living while doing something you love.

The study emphasizes the importance of skill development tailored to the interests and strengths of the community. Training programs in crafts, agriculture, and hospitality can pave the way for economic independence. When people learn skills that resonate with their culture and interests, it's like giving them a new toolbox filled with everything they need to build a successful future.

Self-Help Groups are a powerful tool for empowerment. These groups can provide a platform for tribal members to save money, access micro-loans, and start small businesses. The sense of community and shared responsibility can invigorate these efforts. Think of it as a group of friends forming a support system—everyone contributes and, together, they achieve more.

The study highlights the potential of partnerships between tribal communities, NGOs, and government bodies. By working together, stakeholders can create tailored programs that meet the specific needs of these communities. Imagine a powerful alliance, where everyone brings something unique to the table, leading to a feast of opportunities that benefit everyone involved.

Empowering Kerala's tribal communities is not just a responsibility; it's a shared opportunity for growth and enrichment. With the right strategies, such as education, skill development, eco-tourism, and community-driven initiatives, these communities can rise to new heights. The findings of this study serve as a beacon of hope—proving that when we invest in people, we invest in a brighter future for all.

By harnessing the unique strengths of Kerala's tribal communities, we can unlock their potential and pave the way for socio-economic progress. The journey might be challenging, but the rewards are undeniable. Together, we can create a flourishing ecosystem where everyone has a chance to thrive.

4. CONCLUSION

The socio-economic advancement of tribal communities in Kerala is essential for sustainable development, necessitating targeted interventions to address their challenges while empowering their participation in the broader socio-economic realm. By fostering self-sufficiency and resilience, improvements in living standards, education, and healthcare access can be achieved. Comprehensive strategies should include culturally tailored skill development programs, enhanced access to financial resources, and market opportunities to support entrepreneurship, thus leveraging traditional knowledge in a modern context. Effective governance and collaborative efforts among government agencies, NGOs, and tribal communities are vital to ensure inclusivity and cultural sensitivity in development initiatives. Education is pivotal in breaking cycles of poverty, particularly among tribal youth and women. Furthermore, raising awareness for tribal rights and focusing on environmental conservation tied to traditional practices contributes to sustainable resource management. Despite existing government policies aimed at empowering scheduled tribes, a unified and comprehensive approach is crucial for meaningful socio-economic change and overall progress in Kerala.

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