

Navigating Marginalization: A Field Study on the Livelihood Struggles of Tribal Women in Kerala

Dr. Anjumol M.R¹, Dr. D. Sivakumar²

¹Guest Faculty, Department of Political Science and Development Administration, Gandhigram Rural Institute – Deemed to be University, Gandhigram -624302

²Assistant Professor, School of Law, Dhanalakshmi Srinivasan University, Tiruchirapalli – 621112.

Abstract

This paper examines the lived realities of tribal women in Wayanad, Kerala, against the backdrop of systemic socio-economic exclusion. Despite progressive legislation and welfare schemes intended to uplift tribal communities, the implementation often falls short at the grassroots level. Through field-based qualitative research involving 150 tribal women, this study captures the intersectional challenges faced by communities such as the Paniyas, Adiyans, and Kurichyas. It highlights critical issues such as land dispossession, declining forest access, inadequate healthcare, poor financial inclusion, and persistent gender-based vulnerabilities. Importantly, the study foregrounds women's agency and their role in sustaining families through forest-based livelihoods, despite institutional apathy.

The analysis of existing government schemes like MGNREGS and AMSY reveals significant gaps in awareness, accessibility, and impact. However, the research also presents hopeful examples of community-led resilience through self-help groups and informal cooperative networks. The paper aims to provoke a discussion around rights-based, gender-sensitive, and participatory policy reforms that can ensure more equitable development outcomes for marginalized indigenous populations.

Keywords: Tribal women, livelihood struggles, policy implementation, gender equity, community-led development

Introduction

India's tribal communities, often referred to as Adivasis, represent some of the nation's most marginalized populations. Defined by their distinct cultural identities, geographic isolation, and socio-economic vulnerabilities, these communities face systemic barriers to development. Among them, tribal women endure compounded hardships due to gendered inequities, limited access to resources, and the erosion of traditional livelihoods. This study focuses on the tribal women of Wayanad District in Kerala, a region with a dense concentration of Scheduled Tribes (STs), including the Kattunaikkans, Kurichyas, and Adiyans, who grapple with the intersection of forest dependency, agrarian decline, and inadequate policy implementation.

¹ Guest Faculty, Department of Political Science and Development Administration, Gandhigram Rural Institute – Deemed to be University, Gandhigram -624302

² Assistant Professor, School of Law, Dhanalakshmi Srinivasan University, Tiruchirapalli – 621112.

Contextual Background

According to the 2011 Census of India, tribal communities officially categorized as Scheduled Tribes make up approximately 8.6% of the country's total population, with nearly 90% of them living in rural areas. While Kerala has a relatively small tribal population in terms of absolute numbers, the socio-economic challenges faced by these communities are severe and deeply entrenched.

Wayanad, a scenic district situated in the ecologically sensitive Western Ghats, is home to 17 recognized tribal groups. Many among them, such as the Paniyas, Adiyans, and Kattunaikkans, are identified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), formerly known as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs). These classifications are based on historical factors such as a reliance on pre-agricultural subsistence, extremely low literacy levels, and declining or stagnant population growth. Traditionally, these communities have depended on forest resources and small-scale subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods. However, over the years, they have increasingly found themselves marginalized due to a combination of structural and environmental pressures. The loss of traditional lands often through legal loopholes, development projects, or encroachments has eroded their primary means of survival. At the same time, shifting climate patterns have led to unpredictable rainfall and reduced crop yields, making agriculture even less reliable. These vulnerabilities are compounded by exploitative labor arrangements, where tribal workers are often underpaid, unprotected, and forced into cycles of debt and dependency. In this context, the daily lives of Kerala's tribal communities, particularly in districts like Wayanad, reflect a struggle not just for economic survival, but for dignity, rights, and recognition in a rapidly changing world.

Gendered Dimensions of Marginalization

Tribal women in Wayanad carry a disproportionately heavy share of the socio-economic hardships faced by their communities. As the primary caretakers of both their families and their local economies, these women play multiple, critical roles ranging from cultivating small farms and foraging for forest produce to managing household chores and caregiving responsibilities. Despite their central role in sustaining their communities, much of their labor remains invisible in economic terms and it is undervalued, unrecognized, and almost entirely unpaid.

Their challenges are compounded by systemic barriers that limit their access to essential services. Educational opportunities remain scarce, particularly beyond the primary level, which in turn restricts their access to formal employment or leadership positions. Healthcare infrastructure in tribal hamlets is often inadequate, and maternal health services, in particular, are poorly accessible. Additionally, access to formal credit or land titles is rare, leaving most tribal women dependent on exploitative informal lending systems and vulnerable to landlessness. The situation is even more complex when viewed through the lens of specific tribal groups. For example, women from the Adiyan community continue to struggle with the intergenerational trauma of a history rooted in bonded labor, where they were once subjugated by dominant caste landlords. Although this exploitative system has been legally abolished, its legacy persists today through ongoing caste-based discrimination and entrenched economic marginalization.

Similarly, Kurichya women traditionally engaged in cultivating pepper and other spices are increasingly affected by market fluctuations, climate variability, and falling prices, which have made their agricultural efforts less sustainable and financially viable. As traditional livelihoods become more precarious, these women find themselves caught in a cycle of economic instability and social exclusion,

often without institutional support or avenues for upward mobility. Yet, despite these hardships, many tribal women continue to exhibit remarkable resilience and agency, often forming informal support networks and participating in grassroots self-help groups as a means to reclaim control over their lives and futures.

Policy Gaps and Livelihood Transitions

Although the Indian Constitution provides specific safeguards for marginalized communities particularly through Articles 15(4) and 244, which enable the state to make special provisions for the advancement of Scheduled Tribes, and despite the enactment of progressive legislation like the Forest Rights Act (2006) and initiatives such as the Adivasi Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojana (AMSY), the intended benefits of these measures often fail to fully reach tribal women at the grassroots level. Structural issues such as poor implementation, lack of awareness, bureaucratic hurdles, and socio-cultural barriers dilute the effectiveness of these policies on the ground.

This study takes a critical look at these institutional limitations, highlighting the gap between policy promises and lived realities. However, it also sheds light on a more hopeful narrative—one that is often overlooked. In the face of systemic neglect, tribal women in various parts of Kerala are not merely passive recipients of aid but active agents of change. From engaging in collective farming initiatives to forming artisan cooperatives and self-help groups, they are forging new paths toward economic independence and social empowerment. These grassroots efforts represent silent yet powerful revolutions where tribal women, often excluded from mainstream development narratives, are reclaiming their agency and shaping a more dignified and self-reliant future for themselves and their communities.

Methodology

Statement of the Problem

Tribal communities are India's most marginalized populations, their lives beautifully interwoven with ancient traditions and deep connections to the natural world. These indigenous groups, despite their rich cultural heritage and sustainable ways of living, face profound systemic exclusion. Geographic isolation, language barriers, and generations of entrenched poverty have created formidable barriers to opportunity and development. In Wayanad district, communities like the Paniyas, Kurichiyas, and Adiyans face particularly severe challenges. Many families have lost their ancestral lands, trapping them in cycles of debt and forcing them to depend on increasingly fragile livelihoods - whether gathering forest produce or working as daily wage laborers. The irony is painful and those who have lived closest to the land for generations now find themselves most vulnerable to economic shifts and environmental changes.

While India's Constitution (Article 46) promises special protections for tribal welfare, the reality on the ground tells a different story. Progress has been uneven at best. Some communities, like the Kurichiyas, have managed to transition into small-scale farming, while others such as the Kattunaikkans remain trapped in subsistence living, still dependent on hunting and foraging to survive. The heaviest burden falls on tribal women, who face a triple oppression and discrimination as women, as Adivasis, and as members of the poorest socioeconomic groups. Their daily struggles for food security, healthcare access, and economic stability remain largely invisible to policymakers and urban populations alike.

This study seeks to illuminate these hidden challenges by centering the voices and experiences of Wayanad's tribal women. Beyond collecting statistics, we aim to listen deeply to their stories and answer

a crucial question: Are the government's welfare programs actually reaching and effectively serving those who need them most? For generations, the women of Wayanad's tribal communities have been the backbone of family and village economies. They have sustained their households through forest-based livelihoods like gathering firewood, medicinal herbs, and other natural resources with remarkable knowledge and skill. Yet today, many find themselves pushed to the edge. Losing access to ancestral lands has created profound economic insecurity, while limited nutrition awareness has led to widespread health crises, including anemia and preventable diseases. What makes this injustice particularly stark is that despite working tirelessly alongside men - contributing equally to household and community economies and tribal women remain marginalized. This research aims not just to document these challenges, but to amplify tribal women's perspectives in the hope of driving meaningful policy changes that respect their rights, wisdom, and dignity.

Research Objectives

This study seeks to:

1. To understand the daily realities of tribal women in Wayanad—their work, struggles, and aspirations.
2. To examine how livelihood challenges like shrinking forests and unstable wages created impact in their survival.
3. To assess whether existing welfare schemes truly reach and empower tribal women.

Sample and Data Collection

This study captured the voices of 150 tribal women from Ambalavayal, Wayanad form the core of this research, who courageously shared their life stories, the obstacles they face, and their dreams for a better tomorrow. Their voices form the foundation of our research, ensuring authentic representation of their realities. We collected these firsthand accounts through in-depth interviews and careful observations, spending time in their communities to truly understand their daily lives and struggles. To provide deeper context to these personal narratives, we supplemented our findings with insights from scholarly books, academic journals, and government reports. This combination of personal testimonies and documented research allows us to present both the intimate human stories and the broader systemic challenges facing tribal communities. By bridging these perspectives, we aim to create research that honors individual experiences while addressing larger patterns of marginalization.

Limitations

This study is based on a limited sample size from Wayanad district. Due to time constraints, the scope of the research is confined to this region. As a result, the findings should be interpreted within this specific context and cannot be broadly generalized.

Results and Findings

Living Conditions and Daily Struggles

The study provides a vivid picture of the daily hardships faced by tribal communities in Wayanad. Over half of the families (51%) say they receive little to no real support from government welfare programs, leaving them feeling neglected by the very systems meant to protect them. Accessing clean water is a major daily struggle. While 80% of households rely on wells, 84% face severe water shortages, and 58% are forced to share their water sources with neighbors. Nearly all families (97%) still use firewood for

cooking, which not only causes health problems due to smoke inhalation but also underscores the urgent need for clean and affordable energy alternatives.

Table No: 1- Living Conditions and Daily struggles in Wayanad's Tribal Communities

Indicator	Percentage (%)	Observation
No meaningful government support	51%	More than half of families feel neglected by welfare programs.
Households relying on wells	80%	Majority depend on well water, often with limited infrastructure.
Households facing severe water shortage	84%	Water scarcity is a critical and widespread issue.
Sharing water sources with neighbors	58%	Over half must rely on shared water sources, showing lack of independent access.
Households using firewood for cooking	97%	Nearly universal dependence; serious health and environmental implications.

Source: Primary Data, Computed

Financial Hardships and Livelihood Challenges

Economic insecurity is a harsh reality for these communities. Less than half (45%) of the women have access to formal banking services, such as those offered by the Grameen Bank. A significant 76% avoid taking out loans, often due to a deep mistrust of the system or the complexity of bureaucratic procedures. While 55% are able to save some money through bank accounts, a majority (54%) have no financial safety net to fall back on each month. Most adults (80%) rely on daily wage labor to make a living, and an overwhelming 95% are stuck in unstable, off-farm jobs. Although nearly all households (98%) technically own some land, more than half (51%) are unable to cultivate it largely due to a lack of farming tools, training, or access to markets. The income data paints a bleak picture that 45% of families survive on less than ₹1,000 per month, while 72% report monthly expenses between ₹1,000 and ₹2,000. This leaves them with almost nothing to handle emergencies or invest in their future.

Table No 2: Financial Insecurity among Tribal women in Wayanad

Indicator	Percentage (%)	Observation
Access to formal banking (Grameen Bank)	45%	Less than half use formal banking services.
Avoidance of loans	76%	High level of distrust and/or difficulty in accessing credit.
Ability to save through banks	55%	Just over half save money formally, but savings are minimal.
No monthly savings cushion	54%	Majority have no financial buffer for emergencies.

Indicator	Percentage (%)	Observation
Dependence on daily wage labor	80%	Most households rely on unstable, low-paying daily jobs.
Employment in off-farm, unstable jobs	95%	Almost universal reliance on non-farm, precarious labor.
Land ownership	98%	Nearly all families own land.
Inability to cultivate land	51%	Over half cannot farm their land due to lack of inputs or access.
Monthly income less than ₹1,000	45%	Nearly half of the families earn below subsistence level.
Monthly expenses between ₹1,000–2,000	72%	Majority spend more than they earn, resulting in chronic financial stress.

Source: Primary Data, Computed

Health, Gender Roles and Community Safety

Healthcare access in Wayanad's tribal communities reveals both resilience and gaps. About two-thirds of families (67%) still use traditional tribal medicines, while 83% also rely on modern allopathic treatments when they are available and showing a practical mix of cultural practices and necessity. Encouragingly, in 87% of households, both men and women now participate in financial decisions, suggesting some progress in gender equality. Most families (94–96%) report feeling safe from violence in their villages, but there is still a concerning reality: 30% of women have experienced domestic abuse. This hidden issue highlights the urgent need for stronger support systems for women's safety and well-being.

Table No: 3- Health, Gender and Community's safety

Indicator	Percentage (%)	Observation
Use of traditional tribal medicines	67%	Cultural health practices remain important.
Use of allopathic (modern) treatments	83%	Modern healthcare is widely used when accessible.
Joint financial decision-making in families	87%	Reflects improving gender participation in household economics.
Feeling of safety in villages	94–96%	Majority feel secure in their local communities.
Experience of domestic violence	30%	A significant portion of women face hidden violence, needing urgent attention.

Source: Primary Data, Computed

Government Programs: Awareness vs. Reality

The study shows that while awareness of government programs is relatively high among tribal women in Wayanad, the actual impact of these schemes often falls short. Most families (77%) learn about welfare

benefits through local community leaders, highlighting the importance of grassroots communication. A large number of women are aware of major programs and 77% know about MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) and 78% are informed about pregnancy-related benefits. However, awareness does not always translate into satisfaction. While 89% of respondents receive some form of government assistance, only 72% report feeling moderately satisfied with the support they get. This gap suggests that while outreach may be improving, the implementation and effectiveness of welfare schemes still need serious attention.

Table No: 4 – Impact of Government Programme Awareness

Indicator	Percentage (%)	Observation
Learned about programs through community leaders	77%	Local networks are crucial for spreading information.
Awareness of MGNREGS (rural employment scheme)	77%	Most women are informed about this major welfare program.
Awareness of pregnancy-related benefits	78%	Good knowledge of maternal health-related schemes.
Received some form of government assistance	89%	Most families access at least one government benefit.
Satisfaction with welfare support (moderate+)	72%	Many feel the support is limited or inconsistently delivered.

Source: Primary Data, Computed

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a sobering yet nuanced picture of the lives of tribal women in Wayanad. Despite constitutional protections and a range of welfare programs, systemic neglect continues to define their daily realities. Most families report limited or ineffective government support, with vital needs such as clean water, stable employment, and access to healthcare remaining unmet. Economic insecurity is widespread and characterized by low incomes, unstable labor, and minimal savings while the inability to cultivate owned land points to structural barriers in resource access and skill development.

Healthcare practices reflect a blend of tradition and necessity, yet the coexistence of modern and indigenous treatments also reveals gaps in public health infrastructure. Encouraging signs of progress, such as women's participation in financial decision-making and strong community networks, suggest growing awareness and agency. However, the high incidence of domestic violence and lack of emergency preparedness underscore continued gender-based vulnerabilities. While awareness of government schemes is reasonably high, the disconnect between policy and lived experience remains stark. Programs often fail to address the deep-rooted issues of land insecurity, environmental degradation, and gendered exclusion that shape the lives of tribal women.

This study underscores the urgent need for a more inclusive and culturally responsive policy framework and one that listens to tribal women's voices, ensures transparent implementation of welfare measures, and strengthens local capacities. Empowering these communities will require not just policy reform but

sustained engagement, equity-driven investment, and a fundamental shift in how the state partners with its most marginalized citizens.

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