

Sustainable Livelihoods through Social Entrepreneurship among Indigenous People in Kerala

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Abstract

Kerala is widely recognised for its high human development indicators, yet its indigenous (Adivasi) communities continue to lag behind on almost every measure of well-being, including income, land ownership, health and education. Concentrated mainly in the forested hill districts of Wayanad, Idukki, Palakkad and Kasaragod, these communities have historically depended on forest resources, subsistence agriculture and wage labour, livelihoods that have become increasingly precarious due to land alienation, ecological change and market exclusion. Over the past two decades, social entrepreneurship—enterprise models that combine market-based approaches with an explicit social mission—has emerged as an important strategy for building sustainable livelihoods among these populations. This paper, based entirely on secondary data drawn from government reports, mission documents, peer-reviewed studies and organisational records, examines the socio-economic profile of Kerala's indigenous communities and analyses how social entrepreneurship initiatives such as the Kudumbashree Tribal Special Projects, the Van Dhan Vikas Kendras, the Nilambur Special Tribal Project and the Uravu bamboo enterprise in Wayanad have contributed to income diversification, skill development, women's leadership and the preservation of traditional knowledge. The paper also identifies persistent constraints—land insecurity, limited credit access, weak market linkages and infrastructural gaps—and offers policy suggestions to strengthen the sustainability of social enterprise models among indigenous populations in Kerala.

Keywords: Social Entrepreneurship, Sustainable Livelihoods, Indigenous Communities, Adivasi, Kerala, Kudumbashree, Tribal Development

1. Introduction

Kerala occupies a distinctive position in India's development discourse because of its high literacy rate, favourable health outcomes and strong social welfare architecture, a pattern often described as the "Kerala Model" of development. However, this model has historically bypassed the state's indigenous population.

According to the 2011 Census of India, the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of Kerala stands at 4,84,839, constituting about 1.5 per cent of the state's total population of roughly 3.34 crore. Wayanad district alone accounts for 1,51,443 tribal residents, roughly 18.5 per cent of the district's population — the highest concentration in the state — followed by Idukki (55,815; 5.0%), Palakkad (48,972; 1.7%), Kasaragod (48,857; 3.8%) and Kannur (41,371; 1.6%); together these five districts account for more than 70 per cent of Kerala's tribal population.

The Kerala Public Service Commission and the Scheduled Tribes Development Department officially recognise thirty-six to thirty-seven tribal communities in the state, grouped into Particularly Vulnerable, Marginalised and Minority categories (Indian Tribal Heritage). The Paniya community is the largest single group among these, while communities such as the Cholanaikkan, Kurumba, Kattunaikan, Kadar and Koraga are classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), together making up close to five per cent of the state's tribal population. Most of these communities have traditionally lived in the forests and hill ranges of the Western Ghats, practising shifting cultivation, forest gathering and, more recently, agricultural wage labour.

Decades of displacement caused by plantation expansion, forest policy changes and in-migration of settlers have left many tribal families landless or dependent on insecure tenancy. The 2003 police action against landless Adivasi families at Muthanga in Wayanad, and the renewed protests around its twenty-third anniversary, illustrate how the land question remains central and largely unresolved even today (Down To Earth, 2026). Within this context, conventional welfare transfers have proved insufficient to build durable livelihoods, prompting the state government, NGOs and central agencies to promote social entrepreneurship—enterprises that pursue a social mission of community empowerment alongside commercial viability—as a complementary strategy for sustainable livelihood generation among Kerala's indigenous population.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between social entrepreneurship and indigenous livelihoods has attracted growing academic attention. Bansal et al. (2024), in an integrative review of indigenous communities and sustainable development, argue that indigenous knowledge systems represent a viable resource for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals when communities are actively involved in knowledge dissemination and decision-making rather than treated as passive beneficiaries.

A conceptual study on tribal and rural entrepreneurship situates such enterprises within cultural economy, social capital and sustainable livelihoods theory, showing how cultural assets—handicrafts, indigenous knowledge and community networks—are transformed into economic resources that balance market demands with social organisation (Yomso, 2025). In a related vein, research on 612 indigenous women entrepreneurs across the Sundargarh and Koraput districts of Odisha finds that social capital exerts a positive influence on livelihood outcomes and that women's entrepreneurship mediates this relationship, underscoring the centrality of women-led enterprise in indigenous livelihood strategies (Mahato & Jha, 2024).

Within Kerala specifically, the Kudumbashree Mission has been the subject of extensive study as a self-help-group-based women's empowerment and micro-enterprise model that has since been extended to tribal development (Kumar & Rakhin, 2016; Rang De, n.d.). A recent field-based study of the Nilambur Special Tribal Project (NSTP), a Kudumbashree initiative in Malappuram district, used household-level data from thirty tribal families to show significant improvements in income generation, self-employment and socio-economic well-being, while also flagging limited financial access, cultural resistance and infrastructural barriers as ongoing constraints (Nisha & George, 2025; Manoj, 2020).

Broader research on indigenous knowledge as a catalyst for sustainable livelihoods emphasises the need to integrate skill development with entrepreneurship and market-linked opportunities while safeguarding ecological balance and community ownership over decision-making (Kuey Journal, n.d.). A study focused on entrepreneurship development and financial inclusion among Scheduled Tribe communities in Kerala similarly develops a framework linking successful entrepreneurship with financial inclusion, arguing that the two reinforce each other to drive economic empowerment and social inclusion (Anoop & Biju, 2024). At the national level, an analysis of tribal entrepreneurship in post-liberalisation India, based on secondary data from NITI Aayog, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and TRIFED, evaluates flagship schemes such as the Van Dhan Yojana and Stand-Up India as instruments of economic self-determination and cultural resilience for tribal communities (Shirsath & Kumare, 2025).

Taken together, this literature suggests that social entrepreneurship among indigenous populations works best when it builds on existing cultural and natural assets, actively involves women, and is embedded within a supportive policy and institutional ecosystem. However, most existing Kerala-specific studies are localised to particular districts or projects; a broader secondary-data synthesis across the state's major initiatives, of the kind attempted in this paper, remains comparatively limited.

3. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the socio-economic and demographic profile of indigenous (Adivasi) communities in Kerala.
- To identify and describe the major social entrepreneurship initiatives operating among indigenous communities in the state.
- To assess the contribution of these initiatives to sustainable livelihood outcomes such as income, employment and skill development.
- To identify the key challenges affecting the sustainability of social entrepreneurship among indigenous populations in Kerala.
- To suggest policy measures for strengthening social entrepreneurship as a livelihood strategy for indigenous communities.

4. Research Methodology

This paper is descriptive and analytical in nature and relies entirely on secondary data. No primary survey or field interviews were conducted for this study. Data and information have been compiled from: (i) Census of India reports and state government tribal welfare statistics; (ii) official publications and web

resources of the Kudumbashree Mission, including material on the Tribal Special Project and the Van Dhan Vikas Kendra scheme; (iii) reports and documentation of the Kerala Forest Department and the Kerala Institute for Research, Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (KIRTADS); (iv) publications of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED); (v) peer-reviewed journal articles and academic case studies on tribal entrepreneurship, Kudumbashree and indigenous livelihoods in Kerala and India; and (vi) organisational information from social enterprises such as Uravu Indigenous Science and Technology Study Centre, and credible news reports.

The information gathered from these sources has been thematically organised to describe the profile of indigenous communities, document representative social entrepreneurship models, and synthesise findings on livelihood outcomes and constraints. As a secondary-data study, the paper is subject to the limitations inherent in this method: reliance on the accuracy and currency of published sources, possible variation in data across sources (for instance, differing tribal population figures reported by the 2001 and 2011 Census), and the absence of first-hand field verification. These limitations should be borne in mind while interpreting the findings.

5. Profile of Indigenous Communities in Kerala

Kerala's indigenous population is concentrated in the forested and hilly terrain of the Western Ghats, bordering Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (Kerala Forest Department, n.d.). As per the 2011 Census of India, Kerala's total Scheduled Tribe (ST) population is 4,84,839, forming 1.5 per cent of the state's total population of about 3.34 crore (Government of Kerala, 2011, as cited in Kerala State Planning Board, n.d.). More than 70 per cent of this tribal population is concentrated in five districts — Wayanad, Idukki, Palakkad, Kasaragod and Kannur (Kerala State Planning Board, n.d.). Table 1 presents the complete district-wise distribution.

Table 1: District-wise Scheduled Tribe Population in Kerala (2011 Census)

District	Total Population (2011)	ST Population (2011)	% ST to District Population
Wayanad	8,16,558	1,51,443	18.5
Idukki	11,07,453	55,815	5.0
Palakkad	28,10,892	48,972	1.7
Kasaragod	13,02,600	48,857	3.8
Kannur	25,25,637	41,371	1.6
Malappuram	41,10,956	22,990	0.6
Thiruvananthapuram	33,07,284	26,759	0.8
Kottayam	19,79,384	21,972	1.1
Kozhikode	30,89,543	15,228	0.5
Ernakulam	32,79,860	16,559	0.5

Kollam	26,29,703	10,761	0.4
Thrissur	31,10,327	9,430	0.3
Pathanamthitta	11,95,537	8,108	0.7
Alappuzha	21,21,943	6,574	0.3
Kerala (Total)	3,33,87,677	4,84,839	1.5

Source: Compiled from Kerala State Planning Board (n.d.), based on Census of India, 2011 (Primary Census Abstract for Scheduled Tribes).

The Paniya community is the single largest tribal group in the state, while other numerically significant communities include the Kurichiya (the fourth-largest, concentrated in Kannur and Kozhikode), Kattunaikkan, Adiyar, Irula and Mullu Kuruman (Testbook, n.d.; Kerala Forest Department, n.d.). Five communities—the Cholanaikkan, Kurumba, Kattunaikkan, Kadar and Koraga—are officially classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups because of their low population, food-gathering economies and very low literacy levels; together they constitute nearly five per cent of the state's tribal population, with the Cholanaikkan of Malappuram district considered the most isolated (Detailed Pedia, n.d.).

Land continues to be the most contested resource for these communities. Official surveys around the time of the 2003 Muthanga agitation identified close to 20,000 landless tribal families in Wayanad district alone, and despite subsequent land-distribution promises, large numbers of families remain without secure, cultivable land even today (Down To Earth, 2026). Scheduled Tribes form only about 1.5 per cent of Kerala's population, yet landlessness among them remains disproportionately high, and many resettlement colonies created under welfare housing schemes have provided shelter without productive agricultural land (Down To Earth, 2026). This structural land insecurity forms the backdrop against which non-land-based, enterprise-oriented livelihood strategies—including social entrepreneurship—have gained policy attention.

6. Social Entrepreneurship Initiatives for Sustainable Livelihoods

6.1 Kudumbashree Tribal Special Project and Van Dhan Vikas Kendras

Kudumbashree, Kerala's state poverty eradication mission, was launched in 1998 as a three-tier structure of neighbourhood groups, area development societies and community development societies, and today has an estimated membership running into several million women organised through hundreds of thousands of neighbourhood groups (Rang De, n.d.; NewsClick, n.d.). While originally focused on urban and general rural poverty, the Mission's mandate was later expanded to include a dedicated Tribal Development vertical and a Tribal Special Project undertaken jointly with the state's Tribal Development Department, aimed at addressing the specific livelihood challenges of tribal households through targeted micro-enterprise support, skill training and awareness programmes (Kudumbashree, 2023).

As part of this tribal development effort, Kudumbashree also facilitates Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs) under the central government's Van Dhan Vikas Yojana, implemented through TRIFED. In Wayanad, eight VDVKS are currently operational, engaged mainly in the value addition of minor forest produce such as honey, bamboo, spices and herbal products, which are processed, branded and marketed

under the VDVK label (Kudumbashree, n.d.-b). These centres also conduct regular training for tribal community members, particularly women, in processing, packaging, hygiene and quality management, thereby combining livelihood generation with sustainable harvesting practices that support forest conservation (Kudumbashree, 2023).

6.2 Nilambur Special Tribal Project and Community-Based Eco-Tourism

The Nilambur Special Tribal Project (NSTP), a Kudumbashree-linked initiative in the Nilambur region of Malappuram district, has been documented in recent field research as a representative case of social entrepreneurship benefiting tribal households. A mixed-methods study covering thirty tribal households found that the project contributed to economic empowerment, skill development and social inclusion, with significant positive changes recorded in income generation, self-employment and overall socio-economic well-being (Nisha & George, 2025). In a related study, Manoj (2020) examines community-based eco-tourism promoted through Kudumbashree, including the En Ooru tribal heritage village project in Wayanad, as an example of how the preservation and presentation of tribal cultural heritage itself becomes a source of livelihood, allowing traditional knowledge to be maintained even as new income streams are created.

A notable feature of the NSTP and similar Kudumbashree tribal projects is their emphasis on women's participation: the inclusion of tribal women in self-help groups and their active involvement in entrepreneurship and leadership roles have fostered financial independence and a stronger sense of community agency, while training in handicrafts, organic farming and eco-tourism has helped preserve traditional knowledge even as it aligns household economies with modern markets (Nisha & George, 2025).

6.3 Uravu Indigenous Science and Technology Study Centre, Wayanad

Uravu Indigenous Science and Technology Study Centre, established in 1996 at Thrikkaipetta village in Wayanad district, is among the longest-running social enterprises working with Kerala's tribal and rural communities, using bamboo as its core livelihood resource (Uravu, n.d.). The organisation maintains one of the largest bamboo nurseries in South India, hosting more than fifty species, and supports a Skill Development and Livelihood Support Programme in which around two hundred artisans—about ninety per cent of them rural and tribal women—are organised into self-help groups and producer clusters engaged in bamboo handicraft production (Uravu, n.d.; Give Discover, n.d.).

Uravu's model integrates several dimensions of social entrepreneurship: a common facility centre provides shared infrastructure, design and training support to the SHG clusters; partnerships with agencies such as UNIDO, NABARD and the Khadi and Village Industries Commission provide capacity-building and market linkages; and a collaboration with a private tourism resort promotes responsible, community-based eco-tourism built around bamboo cultivation and craft demonstrations (Uravu, n.d.; Pavithra et al., 2022). By combining ecological restoration of bamboo stands with artisan livelihood support and knowledge dissemination, Uravu illustrates how a locally rooted, indigenous-knowledge-based enterprise can sustain itself over nearly three decades while remaining focused on rural and tribal women's employment (Pavithra et al., 2022).

6.4 Tribal Development Initiatives in Attappady

The Attappady block of Palakkad district, home to the Irula, Muduga and Kurumba communities, has been a specific focus area of Kudumbashree's tribal welfare work through its dedicated Attappady Project, which forms part of the Mission's broader Special Projects portfolio (Kudumbashree, n.d.-a). Alongside the Van Dhan Vikas Kendra model applied to non-timber forest produce elsewhere in the state, tribal development efforts in Attappady illustrate a broader pattern in which existing indigenous agricultural and forest-based knowledge is upgraded through organisation, training and market access support rather than being replaced altogether.

6.5 National-Level Schemes Supporting Tribal Enterprise

Kerala's state-level initiatives operate alongside national schemes coordinated by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and TRIFED. The Van Dhan Vikas Yojana, the umbrella scheme under which Kerala's VDVKS function, aims to promote value addition to forest produce, improve income opportunities and enhance the socio-economic status of tribal communities nationally by providing training and infrastructure for processing forest-based products (Kudumbashree, n.d.-b). Broader analyses of Indian tribal entrepreneurship also point to schemes such as Stand-Up India and TRIFED's market-linkage programmes as instruments that, alongside state missions such as Kudumbashree, form the institutional ecosystem within which local social enterprises among indigenous communities operate (Shirsath & Kumare, 2025).

7. Findings and Discussion

Read together, the initiatives reviewed above suggest that social entrepreneurship contributes to sustainable livelihoods among Kerala's indigenous communities across several dimensions consistent with the sustainable livelihoods framework of human, social, financial, natural and physical capital.

- Financial and human capital: Programmes such as the Kudumbashree Tribal Special Project, the NSTP and Uravu have translated into measurable income diversification, self-employment and skill development, moving households away from purely subsistence or casual-wage-based livelihoods toward more market-oriented micro-enterprise activity (Nisha & George, 2025; Manoj, 2020).
- Social capital and women's leadership: Across almost every initiative reviewed, women's self-help groups form the organisational backbone, and their participation in leadership and enterprise roles has strengthened community-level social capital and household financial independence (Mahato & Jha, 2024)
- Natural capital and sustainability: Forest-produce-based models such as the Van Dhan Vikas Kendras and Uravu's bamboo programme explicitly combine livelihood generation with sustainable harvesting and ecological restoration, aligning economic activity with the forest-dependent lifestyles that many indigenous communities have traditionally practised.
- Cultural preservation: Eco-tourism and heritage-based enterprises, such as the En Ooru tribal village project, demonstrate that traditional knowledge and cultural practices can themselves become livelihood assets rather than being displaced by market integration (Manoj, 2020).

At the same time, the literature consistently flags a set of constraints that limit the scale and sustainability of these gains. Land insecurity remains the most fundamental constraint: with large numbers of tribal

families in Wayanad and elsewhere still lacking secure cultivable land, enterprise-based livelihoods often develop on a narrow and precarious asset base (Down To Earth, 2026). Field-level studies of the NSTP identify limited access to institutional credit, cultural resistance to new economic practices, and infrastructural barriers such as poor connectivity and market access as recurring challenges (Nisha & George, 2025). Broader reviews of tribal entrepreneurship in India similarly note that access to larger markets remains restricted, limiting the income potential of tribal producers even where government and non-government support exists (Naik & Panda, 2023).

8. Key Challenges

- Persistent land alienation and landlessness among tribal households, undermining the natural-resource base for enterprise (Down To Earth, 2026).
- Limited access to institutional credit and formal banking services in remote tribal settlements (Nisha & George, 2025).
- Weak market linkages and dependence on a narrow range of buyers or government procurement for value-added forest and craft products (Shirsath & Kumare, 2025).
- Infrastructural gaps in transport, storage and processing facilities in hill and forest areas (Nisha & George, 2025).
- Dependence of many initiatives on continued government or donor funding, raising questions about long-term financial self-sustainability once external support is withdrawn.
- Cultural and generational factors, including resistance to unfamiliar market-oriented practices and the migration of younger community members away from traditional occupations (Nisha & George, 2025).

9. Suggestions and Policy Implications

- Prioritise resolution of pending tribal land claims and titling, since secure land tenure underpins the viability of most forest- and agriculture-based social enterprises.
- Expand tailored microfinance and credit-linkage programmes designed around the seasonal, forest-produce-based cash flows typical of tribal micro-enterprises.
- Strengthen backward and forward market linkages for Van Dhan Vikas Kendra and Kudumbashree tribal products through e-commerce platforms, government procurement and branding support.
- Invest in last-mile infrastructure—roads, storage and common processing facilities—in tribal-dominated blocks such as Wayanad, Attappady and Nilambur.
- Build in structured exit strategies and revenue diversification plans so that enterprises such as VDVKS and community eco-tourism ventures can operate with reduced dependence on subsidy over time.
- Continue to centre women's self-help groups in programme design, given their demonstrated role in translating social capital into livelihood outcomes.
- Support convergence between skill-development missions (such as Skill India) and tribal entrepreneurship programmes so that training aligns with actual regional market demand.

10. Conclusion

Kerala's indigenous communities, despite living in a state celebrated for its human development achievements, continue to face disproportionate landlessness, limited market access and livelihood insecurity. Social entrepreneurship, as evidenced by the Kudumbashree Tribal Special Project and Van Dhan Vikas Kendras, the Nilambur Special Tribal Project, the Uravu bamboo enterprise in Wayanad, and value-chain interventions such as Attappady's millet programme, has emerged as a meaningful complement to conventional welfare approaches. These initiatives demonstrate that combining indigenous knowledge and natural resources with organisational support, training and market linkages can generate income diversification, strengthen women's leadership, and support cultural preservation alongside economic gain. However, the secondary evidence reviewed here also shows that these achievements remain constrained by unresolved land questions, limited credit access and weak market infrastructure. Sustained progress will likely depend on addressing these structural constraints alongside continued investment in community-led, women-centred enterprise models.

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