



# *Assessment on livelihood situation of Indigenous tribes in Kolli hills of Tamilnadu*

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**Abstract:** This study examines the livelihood situation of the tribal community in Kolli Hills, Tamil Nadu, India. The region's unique topography and biodiversity support indigenous tribes whose lives are closely linked to the natural environment. The research aims to understand their socio-economic conditions, traditional practices, and contemporary challenges. Using Ex-post facto research, the study integrates qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and quantitative surveys to collect comprehensive data. Significant issues identified including limited access to education and healthcare, marginalization in political processes, and environmental degradation affecting agricultural productivity. Despite these challenges, the tribal community demonstrates resilience through traditional knowledge systems and adaptive strategies. The study concludes with recommendations for better healthcare access, boosting education initiatives, promoting eco-friendly livelihood options, improve infrastructure, and enhance the socio-economic status of the tribal community in Kolli Hills. It emphasizes the need for inclusive policies that respect and integrate indigenous knowledge and practices into broader developmental frameworks. Addressing these areas is crucial for the long-term well-being and sustainability of the tribal communities in Kolli Hills.

**Keywords:** Tribal community, Quantitative survey, Healthcare, Framework and Socio-economic status

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Kolli Hills, known for their rich biodiversity and cultural heritage, have become a focal point for understanding the socio-economic dynamics of tribal populations in rapidly changing environments. The origins of the Malayali tribes are shrouded in mystery, with various legends offering different accounts. One popular folk tale suggests that they originally belonged to the Vellala caste of cultivators and emigrated from the sacred city of Kanchi (Kanchipuram) to the hills about ten generations ago. According to this legend, three brothers left Kanchipuram during the period of Muhammadan rule in Southern India. The eldest brother settled in the Shervaroy hills, the second in Pachamalai, and the youngest in Kolli hills.

We've been exploring the unique challenges faced by the tribal communities in Kolli Hills, a picturesque region nestled in Tamil Nadu, India. Our research has revealed a complex interplay of factors involving in the enhancement of livelihood capabilities and food security of these indigenous groups. It is important to note that unlike some other hill tribes, such as the Todas of the Nilgiris, the Malayalis don't have a claim to be considered an ancient hill tribe. Instead, they're Tamil-speaking people who migrated from the plains to the hills in relatively recent times, probably during the middle of the eighteenth century.

Our study aims to shed light on the current situation of the Malayali tribes in Kolli Hills, examining their historical background, present-day livelihood scenarios, and the state of health and education. We'll also delve into the environmental concerns and sustainable development initiatives in the area. By analyzing

these aspects, we hope to provide a comprehensive assessment of the tribes' living conditions and identify potential strategies to improve their well-being while preserving their unique cultural identity.

## II. STUDY AREA:

The Kollimalai or Kolli Hills are one of the seven hill ranges constituting the Eastern Ghats of Tamil Nadu, situated in Namakkal district. It lies west of the Pacchaimalais, with a total area of 503 sq. km. The altitude ranges from 180 m to 1415 m above sea level. It is 32 km away from the Namakkal town and 120 km away from the study centre. Geographically it is situated between 11° 10' 00" to 11° 30' 00" N and 78° 15' 00" to 78° 30' 00" E (Fig.1). The tribals who live in the Kolli hills and the adjacent hills like the Kalrayan hills, the Shevaroy hills, the Javadi hills, the Pachamalai hills are called 'Malayalis' or hill-dwellers. Among the total population of Kolli hills 94.8% are tribal's as per the Census of India (1991). The houses are situated in elevated rocky places. The number of houses per hamlet ranges from 10 to 200. The main occupation is agriculture and cattle rearing.

## III. TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS

We've found that the Indegenous Kolli tribes (Malayalis) have a well-organized and tradition-bound system of tribal administration. Their tribal areas are divided into "nadas" (regions), with Kolli Hills specifically divided into 14 nadas. Each nadu is governed by a chief called "Periya Pattakaran," whose office is hereditary.

The nadas are further subdivided into "urs" (villages), each governed by an elected "Ur-kavundan" (village headman). The Ur-kavundan is assisted by "Karakkarans" in resolving disputes among the tribes. Interestingly, decisions made by the Ur-kavundans and Karakkarans can be reviewed by the Periya Pattakaran, creating a hierarchical system of governance

## IV. CULTURAL EVOLUTION

We've observed that the Malayali tribes normally conform to the norms and traditions of their society, influenced by three main agencies: the authority of elders, public opinion, and religious beliefs. Their cultural practices are passed down through generations, with no written norms but rather a reliance on ancestral ways.

However, we've also noticed some changes in their social structure. For instance, tribal women are not traditionally recognized to participate in the Panchayat council. This aspect of their culture reflects the ongoing challenges in balancing traditional practices with modern notions of inclusivity and gender equality.

## V. CURRENT LIVELIHOOD SCENARIO

We've found that agriculture remains the primary occupation for the Indigenous tribes in Kolli Hills. Our research reveals that most tribal members are engaged in farming activities, with many also employed in coffee estates. The agricultural landscape of Kolli Hills is diverse, reflecting the region's varied elevation and vegetation. We've observed that the foothills are covered with scrub forests, while dry deciduous, mixed deciduous, and evergreen forests occur at higher elevations.

## VI. PRIMARY OCCUPATIONS

In our investigation, we've discovered that the indigenous tribes cultivate a variety of crops. The main staples include paddy, ragi, samai, thenai, and varagu. Additionally, they grow fruits such as mango, jackfruit, pineapple, citrus varieties, and guava. Hill vegetables like cabbage, knolkhol, carrot, radish, potato, and beetroot are also part of their agricultural produce.

We've noticed that tribal women play an active role in agricultural operations, contributing significantly to the community's livelihood. However, it's concerning to note that several tribal members work as landless farm laborers, indicating a shift in land ownership patterns.

## **VII. INCOME SOURCES**

Our research indicates that while agriculture remains the primary income source, some tribal members supplement their earnings through other means. We've found that forest villagers, in particular, collect minor forest produce to earn extra money. However, we've observed a decline in the availability of traditional forest resources like honey, phooljharu (broom grass), medicinal herbs, and sal seeds.

## **VIII. STANDARD OF LIVING**

We've noticed that the tribal groups in Kolli Hills have been facing challenges in economic sustenance, often dwelling at the margins without proper resources. The impact of uneven developmental measures has become more pronounced, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to these challenges, we've seen efforts to improve the standard of living. For instance, with support from partners like RYTHM Foundation, a COVID care center was set up in the hills to help fight the pandemic. This initiative has had a positive impact on the health and well-being of the tribal community during these difficult times.

## **IX. HEALTH AND EDUCATION STATUS**

We've conducted an in-depth analysis of the health and education status of the tribal communities in Kolli Hills, uncovering both challenges and progress in these crucial areas.

## **X. ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE FACILITIES**

Our research reveals that accessibility to healthcare remains a significant challenge for tribal populations. In Kolli Hills specifically, we've observed that the government has made efforts to improve healthcare access. There's one government hospital, three government primary health centers, 16 sub-centers, and mobile hospitals serving the hill area.

However, we've noticed that several factors continue to obstruct healthcare accessibility for tribal communities. These include:

1. Lack of transport and communication facilities
2. Traditional practices and superstitions
3. Poverty and financial constraints
4. Logistical barriers from the healthcare providers' side
5. Long waiting times at health centers

Interestingly, our survey shows that 53% of respondents prefer government hospitals for treatment, primarily due to lower costs. However, 34.16% of respondents reported inadequate infrastructure in government hospitals, citing issues such as insufficient instruments, beds, and unsanitary surroundings.

## XI. LITERACY RATES

We've observed that literacy rates among tribal populations, while improving, still lag behind the general population. As per the census hand book 2011, census of tamilnadu, showing the literate population of the kolli hill with 16 revenue villages. The total literate population is 21073, the male Population is 12240 and Female population is 8833. The **highest literate population is Valavanthinadu**, Ariyurnadu, Valapuranadu, and Bailnadu, the **lowest Literate population is Adakkampudukombai** and Pelappadinadu. The moderate literate population is located in Thirupulinadu, chithurnadu and Periaikkarinadu.

## XII. EDUCATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Our investigation into the educational infrastructure for tribal communities has revealed several challenges:

1. Negative parental attitudes towards education
2. Lack of basic amenities in schools
3. Communication problems, especially language barriers
4. Shortage of trained teachers
5. Inadequate transport facilities

We've found that these issues contribute to higher dropout rates among tribal students. Between 1990-1991 and 2007-2008, the dropout rate for tribal students in standards one to ten decreased from 85% to 76.8%, showing some improvement but still remaining alarmingly high..

## XIII. ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

We've found that the Kolli Hills face significant environmental challenges, primarily due to the rapid transformation of the landscape over the past few decades. The once pristine forests that covered the hills have been quickly replaced by cultivated land, prompting the State government to protect the boundary forest to prevent complete depletion of the forest ecosystem. This shift has had profound implications for the region's biodiversity and the livelihoods of its inhabitants.

## XIV. DEFORESTATION

Our research reveals that deforestation has been a major concern in the Kolli Hills. The disappearance of the indigenous agroforestry system over the decades has been primarily due to changing socio-cultural values, population increases, poor income from marketed agricultural produce, and extravagant social and cultural activities of the tribal people. This has resulted in the depletion of forests and self-denial of the food requirements of the people.

We've observed that deforestation has had direct impacts on food security and nutrition availability. The removal of shade trees has affected inter-crops, and the declining fruit production in recent years has been attributed to the increasing area under tapioca, catering to industry. Moreover, deforestation has led to the drying up of some forest streams, reducing the yield of cereal crops such as paddy and millets.

## XV. BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

Despite the challenges, we've found that efforts are being made to conserve the rich biodiversity of the Kolli Hills. The region is known for its agrobiodiversity, especially the genetic diversity in minor millets. To address the erosion of agro-biodiversity and traditional ethno-botanical knowledge, we've recommended sponsoring a germplasm conservation program.

We've also observed that certain patches of forests have persisted due to the will of inhabitants to voluntarily preserve them as sacred groves. To promote this traditional practice, steps have been recommended to protect forest patches as 'Koil kadu' or 'Samikadu'.

## XVI. ECO-FRIENDLY LIVELIHOOD OPTIONS

In our efforts to address environmental concerns while supporting local livelihoods, we've identified several eco-friendly options. The M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) has been involved in a program providing enterprise management skills and knowledge of supply systems along the chain. This capacity-building strategy follows a trainers training methodology for rapid replication of skills and knowledge dissemination among the tribal communities.

We've also found that promoting traditional handicrafts can be an effective way to support sustainable livelihoods among tribal artisans. These handicrafts are generally prepared using resources available in their immediate ecology, making them inherently sustainable.

. We've observed that these efforts have led to a drastic reduction in seasonal out-migration, with farmers cultivating multiple crops such as jackfruit, mango, cashew, and coffee, ensuring long-term income opportunities from their own land.

## CONCLUSION

The exploration of the indigenous tribes in Kolli Hills has shed light on their complex situation, revealing a delicate balance between tradition and modernization. Our research has highlighted the challenges of these communities face in areas such as healthcare, education, and sustainable development. The impact of environmental changes on their livelihoods and food security underscores the need to address these issues holistically.

Moving forward, it's crucial to develop strategies that respect the tribes' cultural heritage while improving their quality of life. This means working on better healthcare access, boosting education initiatives, and promoting eco-friendly livelihood options. By doing so, we can help ensure the indigenous tribes not only survive but thrive in their ancestral lands, preserving their unique identity for generations to come.

## ABBREVIATION

MSSRF - M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation

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