



THE VITAL LIVES IN THE MARGINS OF A THRIVING TOWN: LOCATING INDIGENOUS LIFE AND CONDITIONS IN ERNAKULAM. A CASE STUDY ON KUTTAMPUZHA

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Abstract

This research paper explores the indigenous life and socio-economic conditions of the communities residing in Kuttampuzha, a tribal belt on the periphery of Ernakulam district, Kerala. While Ernakulam thrives as an economic and cultural hub, its indigenous populations remain largely marginalized. The study aims to analyze the intersection of urban expansion and indigenous livelihoods, focusing on issues of land rights, resource accessibility, cultural preservation, and governmental interventions. The findings highlight both the resilience and the vulnerabilities of these communities as they navigate the pressures of modernization and environmental changes.

Keywords: *Livelihoods, Indigenous Life, Tribal life*

Introduction

The indigenous communities of Kerala, particularly those in the Kuttampuzha region, have long been integral to the state's ecological and cultural heritage. Despite their rich traditions and knowledge systems, they face significant socio-economic challenges. This study seeks to investigate how these indigenous groups sustain their livelihoods amidst urban expansion, and how policies and local governance impact their way of life. Among the ancient tribal chieftains remain the Aadumbaras, Vrishni, Yaudheya etc. Who have proved to mint copper and silver coins. Not only that the coins meant political dominance, it also assumed wealth, beliefs and culture icons of their society. The 18th century modernising efforts on education and employment also saw reflections of change in the cropping patterns and trade reflections exchanges resulting in clearing of more forest lands in Kerala. This gave way to mass migrations from central Kerala to places like Wayanad in Malabar, thereby making remarkable changes in the socio-cultural pattern of the indigenous lives there.

Among the tribes of Kerala, the group in Ernakulam remains a significant cluster as they live in

maximum contradiction with the general crowd. As the ‘magic wand’ of “Development” so normally falls on Ernakulam being the crowded port, Business centre, metro town, tourist destination and a hub of modernity. There, located in a corner, singled out and the only tribal inhabitants in the district is the Kuttampuzha village. Regarding the Geographical details, it falls on the Neriamangalam division in the Assembly constituency of Kothamangalam. Total area comes up to 543.07 sq. kms. With the population around 25000 and in line with the Indian average, half of the population are women¹⁰.

Review of Literature

Mohanty (2004) in his book *Encyclopaedia of Primitive Tribes in India* discusses about the means of livelihood of the tribal people in India.

Oommen (2008) discusses about the sustainable development in his journal *Reforms and the Kerala Model*. This article raises certain emerging issues relating to equity and sustainability of the Kerala Model Development

Sinha and Bahera (2010) in their report on *Changing Socio-economic Conditions and Livelihood of Geographically Isolated Tribal Community in Kandhamal and KBK Districts of Orissa*, discusses about the changing socio-economic conditions of the three selected communities in Orissa.

Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the livelihood conditions of Kuttampuzha
2. To examine the socio-economic status of indigenous communities in Kuttampuzha.
3. To assess the problems and provide suitable solutions to them

Methodology

The study used exploratory design and ethnographical approach in collecting data. Both primary and secondary data is used in this study. Primary data is collected through interview, observation and focus group discussion, etc. and secondary data is collected from Census Report (from 1969-2011), Working Plans of Kerala Forest Department, Records and Reports of Tribal Extension Office, Kothamangalam, reports of Kuttampuzha Panchayat and Bamboo Corporation of Angamali and other regional centres. In addition, relevant supportive information from various reports of government departments, books, journals and newspaper articles are also be used. A mixed-method approach was used, combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques. The study employed **purposive** sampling to select key informants, including tribal elders, local administrators, and NGOs working in the area.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Group (Years)	Agricultural (n=98)	Non-Agricultural (n=98)	Total (n=196)
<20	12 (12.2%)	8 (8.2%)	20 (10.2%)
20–40	40 (40.8%)	35 (35.7%)	75 (38.3%)
41–60	35 (35.7%)	40 (40.8%)	75 (38.3%)
>60	11 (11.2%)	15 (15.3%)	26 (13.2%)
Total	98 (100.0%)	98 (100.0%)	196 (100.0%)

Source: Primary data

A significant proportion of respondents fall within the 20–40 and 41–60 age groups, representing the active working population. Non-agricultural households had a slightly higher proportion of respondents aged >60, indicating reliance on older members for non-farming income sources.

Table 2: Monthly Household Income

Income Range (INR)	Agricultural (n=98)	Non-Agricultural (n=98)	Total (n=196)
<5,000	30 (30.6%)	18 (18.4%)	48 (24.5%)
5,001–10,000	45 (45.9%)	50 (51.0%)	95 (48.5%)
>10,000	23 (23.5%)	30 (30.6%)	53 (27.0%)
Total	98 (100.0%)	98 (100.0%)	196 (100.0%)

Source: Primary data

Non-agricultural households demonstrated a slightly higher proportion of incomes above INR 10,000 compared to agricultural households. This could be attributed to the diversification of income sources in non-agricultural activities, offering more stable earnings.

Table 3: Housing Conditions

Housing Type	Agricultural (n=98)	Non-Agricultural (n=98)	Total (n=196)
Kutcha (Temporary)	35 (35.7%)	20 (20.4%)	55 (28.1%)
Semi-Pucca	45 (45.9%)	55 (56.1%)	100 (51.0%)
Pucca (Permanent)	18 (18.4%)	23 (23.5%)	41 (20.9%)
Total	98 (100.0%)	98 (100.0%)	196 (100.0%)

Source: Primary data

Agricultural households were more likely to live in kutcha housing compared to their non-agricultural counterparts, indicating lower levels of infrastructure development and economic stability in the agricultural sector.

Thus, the analysis reveals significant socio-economic and demographic variations between agricultural and non-agricultural households. Agricultural households are more likely to face challenges

such as lower literacy rates, limited income, and inadequate housing. In contrast, non-agricultural households show better educational attainment, income stability, and living conditions. These findings suggest the need for targeted policies that improve educational access, promote income diversification, and enhance housing infrastructure for agricultural communities. Addressing these disparities could lead to a more equitable development trajectory for tribal households in the region.

Inference

The village of Kuttampuzha was initially settled in the forests, close to the outskirts, where the residents faced insecurity on multiple fronts. Due to frequent attacks by wild animals deep within the forest, they were rehabilitated to their current location. However, their primary concern has always been access to land. Lacking land of their own, they struggle to establish a cultivation pattern and, consequently, a steady income. The plight of tribal communities in Kerala, fighting for their land rights, has garnered attention from political thinkers. Nevertheless, the issue of land access and the potential for a settlement cycle must be considered in conjunction with the community's lack of education. This knowledge gap has led to instances where land is easily resold or lost due to internal agreements.

The pathetic situation of education, though finding a streak of hope in the present generation; that is the youngest generation of this colony have access to Education, but mostly boys get the chance, and girls remain along with their mothers in the colonies. This actually indicates a negative trend of the unequal distribution of society on education and other social access. The employment possibilities and their openness toward social change look very dull in this regard.

➤ Problems in Panthapra:

1. The 2 acres of land received in Panthapra is plantation, and as per the law, trees including teak can only be cut down and replaced after 60 years. Since the community is heavily dependent on agriculture for their livelihood, cutting down the trees entirely is necessary for farming.
2. There are no suitable roads to reach their villages. The existing ones are muddy paths with numerous uphill and downhill twists and turns, which become potholed during rains. Landslides also occur, making the roads impassable at times.
3. The absence of a community hall often causes inconvenience for the villagers to assemble, for weddings and for other family functions, and to conduct various medical camps and classes.
4. The lack of streetlights on the paths leading to the village which involve walking kilometers from the main roads, poses a danger.
5. There are no wells for drinking water facilities in these households.

The pipe connection from the Kerala Water Authority is used for drinking water. Paying the bill every month and sometimes facing days without a water supply creates a big challenge. Not having wells results in very high water bills, which are beyond their means to afford.

6. Wild animals, including elephants, frequently raid their farmlands, continuously destroying coconut

trees, banana plants etc.

7. There is an Anganwadi for the children here. However, there is no LP school for small kids. If there was one, it would have avoided the need for distant schooling, and they could have studied near their village.

8. There is no primary health center here for their healthcare. If someone falls ill, they have to travel five kilometers to reach the nearest PHC.

9. Vehicle facilities are very limited. There are no roads here suitable for public transportation. Auto Rickshaws and jeeps are the main modes of transportation used by the people here.

There is very little bus facility for travel.

10. They do not have stable jobs or other sources of income, which severely affects the financial status of their families.

11. Since there are no bridges built across the river, they have to walk for kilometers to reach the town.

12. Another issue is the lack of a work shed for women to process and prepares the forest produce they collect.

13. The majority of the people are illiterate and uneducated. Only the children have received considerable education.

Solutions for the Problems

1. The trees on the 2 acres of land they received should be cut down and converted into good agricultural land. The law that the trees on the plantation land cannot be cut down for 60 years should be abolished and agricultural land should be made available to them.

2. Provide irrigation facilities necessary for cultivation. Dig a large pond in an area with a water stream and provide irrigation facilities to everyone's cultivation site using a motor pump.

3. Dig wells and provide them to all families without wells to meet their drinking water needs.

4. Provide free water connections and electricity connections to all homes. 5. Tar or concrete all roads to make them suitable for travel.

6. Install Street lights everywhere on the road.

7. Build a community hall with all facilities for community gatherings, family functions, camps, classes, and other activities.

8. The young people here have good physical abilities. To nurture their athletic skills, build a good playground and provide it to them. Hire expert coaches.

9. A 24-hour Family Health Center should be established here, with facilities including X-ray, scanning, lab facilities, and more.

10. If two bridges are built across Urulanthanni and Kuttampuzha, it will reduce their travel difficulties and help them avoid walking kilometers.

11. A trench should be constructed to prevent the nuisance of wild animals, especially elephants that destroy crops.

Currently, the livelihood of everyone here is based on employment guarantee, forest collection, and daily wage labor. They survive on the rice from the ration shop and the aid received from the Tribal Department. All the children study in hostels. It is difficult to pinpoint a regular income. The average monthly income is below ten thousand. There is nothing left after expenses.

Findings and Discussion

1. **Socio-Economic Conditions:** The research indicates that many indigenous families in Kuttampuzha rely on agriculture, forest produce collection, and daily wage labor for sustenance. However, access to stable income remains a challenge due to limited market integration and land ownership issues.
2. **Education and Healthcare:** While government initiatives have improved literacy rates, drop-out rates among indigenous children remain high due to economic hardships and lack of culturally relevant education. Healthcare services are present but often inadequate, with traditional medicinal practices still playing a significant role.
3. **Impact of Urbanization:** Rapid urbanization in Ernakulam has led to land encroachments, reduced forest cover, and conflicts over resource use. Traditional knowledge and sustainable practices face erosion as younger generations migrate to urban areas in search of employment.
4. **Policy and Governance:** Various welfare programs, such as the Scheduled Tribes Development Department's schemes, aim to uplift indigenous communities. However, gaps in implementation and bureaucratic hurdles limit their effectiveness.
5. **Cultural Preservation:** Despite external pressures, indigenous communities actively engage in preserving their traditions through festivals, oral histories, and crafts. However, cultural commodification and tourism pose both opportunities and threats to their heritage.

Conclusion

Tribals or indigenous people are groups of people who have depended solely on forests for their livelihood. Due to the constant destruction of crops by wild animals and the lack of basic infrastructure, they moved down from the deep forests and settled in the forest areas adjacent to them. The government provided them with two acres of land each, house, electricity, and water connections. The government has also provided all families with a Forest Rights document, which grants them ownership rights over the land. However, this document cannot be used to obtain loans from banks or other financial institutions, or to transfer ownership of the property.

The other means of livelihood are the benefits received from the Tribal Department and the food grains from the ration shop, which is the government's public distribution center. All the grown-up children are now studying from hostels. Nobody in the village can say they have a steady income. Forest resources are collected only during the summer season.

Without education, social change is impossible. Therefore, a learning center should be established in Panthapra to provide primary education to all illiterate people in the village. This can be implemented

through the Kerala government's Literacy Mission program.

Dependent solely on the forest, these people live, preserving numerous life values. They have traditionally survived by collecting forest produce and practicing subsistence farming. It is our collective responsibility to uplift this marginalized community, providing them with basic amenities and education, and integrating them into the mainstream.

The study underscores the need for inclusive development policies that respect indigenous rights and knowledge systems. **Recommendations include:**

- Strengthening land rights and forest protection measures.
- Enhancing education through culturally responsive curricula.
- Improving healthcare access with a focus on integrating traditional and modern medical practices.
- Promoting sustainable livelihood opportunities, such as eco-tourism and value-added forest produce industries.
- Encouraging participatory governance, ensuring indigenous voices are heard in policymaking.

The village settlement of panthapra tribal colony, kuttampuzha:



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