

Perceptions of Tribals on Their Socioeconomic, Environmental and Welfare Aspects in Kerala

Shereen Beula L. Jose * & Prasad A. K **

Abstract: This study aims to comprehend tribals' perceptions of their socioeconomic, environmental, and welfare aspects in the selected regions of Wayanad, Idukki, and Thiruvananthapuram districts in Kerala. For that, a primary survey was conducted in tribal concentrated areas in these districts. Using a Google sample calculator with a 5 per cent margin of error, 384 tribal households were selected as sample households from the three districts. The study results indicate variability in perceptions regarding tribal welfare and environmental conditions among the surveyed districts, underscoring the urgent need for customised policies and interventions to tackle the specific challenges tribal communities encounter in each district.

Keywords: Perceptions, Tribals, Socioeconomic, Environmental, Welfare, Kerala.

This study aims to comprehend the perceptions of tribals on their socioeconomic, environmental, and welfare aspects in the selected regions of Wayanad, Idukki, and Thiruvananthapuram districts in Kerala. The term "Scheduled Tribes" was first introduced in the Constitution of India by Article 366 (25), which defined scheduled tribes as "such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this constitution". This article safeguards their interest as majorities concerning language, culture, and education and allows them to receive grants from state funds based on religion, race, caste, and language. Article 19 protects them from exploitation by enabling the creation of special laws to regulate land transfers, money lending, and other related activities. Articles 16 and 35 mandate that the State consider their claims when making appointments to public services. Article 330 and 332 stipulate the reservation of seats for them in both the Parliament and State Assemblies. Tribals are indigenous inhabitants of a region with a unique and ancient culture that differs from the mainstream population. Their way of life primarily relies on natural resources acquired from their

* Research Scholar, Department of Economics, University of Kerala.

** Professor, Department of Economics, University of Kerala.

environment.

The tribals have adapted to their surroundings and gradually integrated into the newly formed socioeconomic structure. However, their advancement has been significantly slower than that of the broader population, often viewed through a lens of social, humanitarian, and legal concern by mainstream societal and political systems. Approximately 200 million tribal people exist worldwide, about 4 per cent of the population. They are present in numerous regions globally, with a significant portion among the most economically disadvantaged. (Jayakumar & Palaniyammal, 2016). (Jayakumar & Palaniyammal, 2016). 2011 census revealed that Scheduled Tribes constitute 8.6 per cent of the population in India. Nutritional status among these populations varies significantly across different states and is influenced by various factors. (FAO, 2010).

Most of Kerala's tribal community resides in the thick forests of the Western Ghats, often isolated from mainstream society. They sustain themselves primarily through basic agricultural practices or by tapping into forest resources using traditional methods. One of the characteristics is that they possess firm ethnic boundaries based on kinship in their habitation. The number of households in a settlement ranges from 20 to 100. The dwellings were unarranged but with a dramatic setting. STs live together in clusters/settlements called 'ooru'. A group of five/or more ST households lying adjacent to each other is called an 'ooru'. About 94.66 per cent of STs reside in Ooru.

During the 2011 Census, Kerala had 36 Scheduled Tribe communities. After that, the Maratti community was also listed as a Scheduled Tribe (ST). The ST communities in Kerala are: Adiyan, Aranda, Eravallan, Hill Pulaya, Irular, Kadar, Kanikar, Karimpalan, Kattunayakan, Kochuvelan, Koraga, Kudiya, Kurichiyar, Kurumans, Kurumbas, Mahamalar, Malai Arayan, Malai Pandaran, Malai Vedan, Malakkuravan, Malasar, Malayan, Mavilan, Malayarayar, Mannan, Muthuvan, Palleyan, Paniyan, Ulladan, Uraly, Mala Vettuvan, Ten Kurumban, Thachenadan, Cholanaickan, Malapanikar, Vettakuruman.

Kerala accommodates 4,84,839 Indigenous individuals residing in 119,788 households, making up 1.43 per cent of the State's population. Of the entire 4,84,839 tribal population in the State, 2,38,203 are ST males and 2,46,636 are ST females. The ST male population forms 1.48 per cent of the overall male population, and the female population forms 1.42 per cent of the overall female population of the State (Census, 2011). Approximately 89.33 per cent (4,33,092 individuals) of the tribals live in rural regions, while only 10.67 per cent (51,747 individuals) reside in urban areas.

The literacy rate among Kerala's tribal communities is notably lower at 75.81 per cent compared to the broader population. In terms of employment, merely 10 per cent of the tribal populace in Kerala engages in

land cultivation, while 40 per cent work as agricultural wage labourers. (STDD, 2013). The government provides several initiatives to support tribal communities living in remote and inaccessible areas. Central and State governments allocate resources and funds to improve their socioeconomic status. These efforts concentrate on improving education, generating income, enhancing health services, developing irrigation systems, constructing roads and bridges, managing forests and forest villages, providing electricity and communication infrastructure, boosting rural marketing, advancing agriculture and animal husbandry, promoting food processing, developing technical and vocational skills, implementing water harvesting projects, resettling displaced individuals, managing tribal lands, fostering sports, ensuring access to clean drinking water, and conducting other activities explicitly tailored for the well-being of tribal communities, separate from standard development endeavours (Sincymol, 2016). However, despite numerous government initiatives at both Central and State levels, as well as special allocations through the Tribal Sub Plan (TSP), the hardships faced by tribal communities persist without relief (Rajasenan & Rajeev, 2013; Devika, 2016). Many tribal communities remain unaware of the available schemes and legal aids to protect their rights.

This work attempts to comprehend the perceptions of tribals on their socioeconomic, environmental, and welfare aspects in the selected regions of Wayanad, Idukki, and Thiruvananthapuram districts in Kerala. For that, a primary survey was conducted in tribal concentrated areas in these districts. Using a Google sample calculator with a 5 per cent margin of error, 384 tribal households were selected as sample households from the three districts. The number of households selected from Wayanad district is 248, Idukki-92, and Thiruvananthapuram-44. Data were gathered from the primary survey conducted in 2023, with respondents rating various factors on a scale ranging from 1 (Very Bad) to 5 (Very Good). The perceptions of the tribals encompass their responses to socioeconomic status, environmental issues, and welfare. Regular visits to the fields and interaction with the households were held to collect genuine and truthful responses.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Tribes consistently encounter challenges in their socioeconomic advancement due to various factors. These factors encompass geographical and cultural seclusion, inadequate healthcare services, unmet basic needs, insufficient control over resources and assets, low levels of education and skills, malnutrition, inadequate housing, limited access to water and sanitation, vulnerability to shocks, violence, and crime, restricted access to essential infrastructure and technologies, and a deficiency in political representation and freedom. (Vijaya Lakshmi & Milcah Paul, 2019). Numerous models, approaches, and theories have been suggested during various five-year plan periods for advancing tribals living in the State.

(Devath Suresh, 2014). All these development programs affect their socioeconomic life and positively impact them. Despite significant social development and reform movements, disparities between castes persist in Kerala, with scheduled tribes being the most marginalised among all groups. (CSSEIP, 2010). Programs to alleviate poverty and socioeconomic underdevelopment will only achieve its intended goals if effectively implemented. Past experiences have shown that the benefits of various schemes still need to meet expectations. The intended population still needs to receive these benefits. Despite significant investment, an inadequately structured program is destined to fail because it leads to inefficiencies, such as slow and poor decision-making, lack of coordination of activities, unclear duties, corruption, and conflict among members (Umer Jan Sofi, 2013). Understanding their perceptions of various factors is necessary for implementing further development programs for them. Table 1 presents respondents' perceptions regarding various aspects related to tribals in Kerala.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) indicates a high level of sampling adequacy (0.934), and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity suggests that the correlations between variables are significant (Approx. Chi-Square = 5034.071, $df = 190$, Sig. = .000), supporting the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The Rotated Component Matrix displays the factor loadings for each statement, indicating the strength of the relationship between the statements and the identified components. The statements are grouped into three components based on their factor loadings. Component 1 appears to capture perceptions related to healthcare access, government responsiveness, and cultural preservation, as indicated by statements such as "How well is the government addressing the unique healthcare challenges faced by tribal communities?" and "How do you perceive the emerging issue of cultural preservation and the loss of traditional knowledge among tribes." Component 2 seems to reflect perceptions concerning education, employment, and economic opportunities, as evidenced by statements like "How well do you think the education system addresses the cultural and linguistic needs of tribal students?" and "How would you rate the current employment opportunities available to tribal populations." Component 3 appears to encompass perceptions associated with environmental concerns and policy considerations, as indicated by statements like "Please indicate your level of concern about deforestation and its impact on tribal communities" and "To what extent are tribal voices and perspectives currently considered in policymaking in Kerala." The Eigenvalues and the percentage of total variation explained by each component suggest that Component 1 contributes significantly to the overall variation, followed by Component 2 and Component 3. The reliability of the survey instrument is indicated by Cronbach's Alpha, which is high at 0.943, suggesting internal consistency

Table 1. Perception of Respondents on Various Factors

KMO and Bartlett's Test			
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy			.934
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square		5034.071
	df		190
	Sig.		.000
Rotated Component Matrix			
Statements	Component		
	1	2	3
Please rate the current State of tribal land rights and ownership documentation in Kerala:	.835	-	-
How do you perceive the emerging mental health and well-being issue among tribal populations in Kerala?	.822	-	-
How well is the government addressing the unique healthcare challenges faced by tribal communities, including traditional healing practices?	.787	-	-
Please rate the responsiveness of local authorities and non-governmental organisations to the needs of tribal communities in Kerala:	.766	-	-
How would you rate the availability of economic opportunities, including sustainable livelihoods, for tribal youth in Kerala?	.714	-	-
How well do you think the education system addresses the cultural and linguistic needs of tribal students in Kerala?	.698	-	-
To what extent do you believe that tribal women in Kerala have access to maternal healthcare services?	.637	-	-
Please indicate your level of concern about the impact of land encroachment on tribal communities in Kerala:	.632	-	-
How do you perceive the emerging issue of cultural preservation and the loss of traditional knowledge among tribes in Kerala?	-	.732	-
To what extent are tribal voices and perspectives currently considered in policymaking in Kerala?	-	.719	-
How would you evaluate the current State of sanitation and hygiene facilities available to tribal populations in Kerala?	-	.696	-
Please rate the level of access to clean drinking water for tribal communities in Kerala:	-	.675	-
Please rate your awareness of the challenges faced by tribal communities in Kerala, including both current and emerging issues:	-	.673	-
Please rate the effectiveness of social support programs in Kerala for uplifting tribal communities:	-	.631	-
How prepared do you think tribal communities in Kerala are to cope with the impacts of climate change?	-	.581	-
Please rate the current level of healthcare access for tribal communities in Kerala:	-	-	.835
To what extent do you believe that educational opportunities for tribal children in Kerala are currently adequate?	-	-	.798
How would you rate the current employment opportunities available to tribal populations in Kerala?	-	-	.738

Source: Primary Survey, 2023

among the survey items. Table 2 displays the mean ratings and standard deviations of perceptions among tribal communities in Kerala regarding different aspects of government initiatives impacting their lives.

Table 2. Perceptions of Tribal Communities in Kerala on Government Initiatives on Various Societal Factors

Statements	Mean	Std. Dev.
Please rate the current level of healthcare access for tribal communities in Kerala:	4.891	.3443
To what extent do you believe that educational opportunities for tribal children in Kerala are currently adequate?	4.857	.3724
How would you rate the current employment opportunities available to tribal populations in Kerala?	4.831	.4088
Please indicate your level of concern about deforestation and its impact on tribal communities in Kerala:	4.812	.4040
How well do you think the government is addressing land rights and ownership issues among tribal groups in Kerala?	4.802	.4248
Please rate the effectiveness of social support programs in Kerala for uplifting tribal communities:	4.792	.4130
How prepared do you think tribal communities in Kerala are to cope with the impacts of climate change?	4.779	.4576
To what extent are tribal voices and perspectives currently considered in policymaking in Kerala?	4.788	.4520
How do you perceive the emerging issue of cultural preservation and the loss of traditional knowledge among tribes in Kerala?	4.758	.4696
Please rate your awareness of the challenges faced by tribal communities in Kerala, including both current and emerging issues:	4.770	.4627
Please rate the level of access to clean drinking water for tribal communities in Kerala:	4.757	.4870
How would you evaluate the current State of sanitation and hygiene facilities available to tribal populations in Kerala?	4.784	.4543
To what extent do you believe that tribal women in Kerala have access to maternal healthcare services?	4.753	.4834
Please indicate your level of concern about the impact of land encroachment on tribal communities in Kerala:	4.781	.4502
How well do you think the education system addresses the cultural and linguistic needs of tribal students in Kerala?	4.786	.4410
How would you rate the availability of economic opportunities, including sustainable livelihoods, for tribal youth in Kerala?	4.783	.4431
Please rate the current State of tribal land rights and ownership documentation in Kerala:	4.794	.4418
How well is the government addressing the unique healthcare challenges faced by tribal communities, including traditional healing practices?	4.786	.4410
Please rate the responsiveness of local authorities and non-governmental organisations to the needs of tribal communities in Kerala:	4.805	.4224
How do you perceive the emerging mental health and well-being issue among tribal populations in Kerala?	4.789	.4397

Source: Primary Survey, 2023, Note: Very Bad-1, Very Good-5

The findings indicate high mean ratings across various factors, suggesting positive perceptions among tribal communities regarding government initiatives in Kerala. These perceptions reflect the perceived effectiveness and adequacy of government programs and services in addressing the needs and challenges faced by tribal populations in different spheres of life. The relatively low standard deviations suggest a consensus among respondents regarding their perceptions, indicating a consistent viewpoint within the tribals on these societal factors. These findings underscore the importance of continued efforts and policies addressing the diverse needs and concerns of tribal communities in Kerala. Table 3 provides a comparative analysis of perceptions regarding tribal welfare and socioeconomic and environmental conditions across three districts in Kerala: Idukki, Thiruvananthapuram, and Wayanad.

Table 3. Comparative Analysis of Perceptions on Tribal Welfare, Socioeconomic, and Environmental Conditions in Different Districts

Factors		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	ANOVA
Perceptions on Tribal Welfare and Socioeconomic Conditions (Average of 8 Variable)	Idukki	91	4.7843	.33699	.03533	F (2,379) =4.345 p=0.014
	Thiruvananthapuram	44	4.6392	.36688	.05531	
	Wayanad	247	4.8122	.36502	.02323	
	Total	382	4.7857	.36192	.01852	
Perceptions on Socioeconomic and Environmental Conditions Impacting Tribal Communities (Average of 7 Variable)	Idukki	92	4.7981	.35066	.03656	F (2,377) =7.927 p=0.000
	Thiruvananthapuram	42	4.5748	.43775	.06755	
	Wayanad	246	4.8072	.33830	.02157	
	Total	380	4.7793	.35981	.01846	
Perceptions on Socioeconomic and Environmental Challenges Faced by Tribal Communities (Average of 5 Variable)	Idukki	91	4.8637	.24015	.02517	F (2,380) =18.043 p=0.000
	Thiruvananthapuram	44	4.5955	.46951	.07078	
	Wayanad	248	4.8718	.25612	.01626	
	Total	383	4.8381	.29747	.01520	

Source: Primary Survey, 2023, Note: Very Bad-1, Very Good-5

Data were gathered from the primary survey conducted in 2023, with respondents rating various factors on a scale ranging from 1 (Very Bad) to 5 (Very Good). In terms of perceptions of tribal welfare and socioeconomic conditions, Wayanad emerged with the highest mean perception score of 4.8122, followed by Idukki at 4.7843 and Thiruvananthapuram at 4.6392. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant difference in perceptions among the districts ($F(2,379) = 4.345$, $p = 0.014$). Similarly, when considering perceptions of socioeconomic and environmental conditions impacting tribal communities, Wayanad exhibited the highest mean perception score of 4.8072, followed by Idukki at 4.7981 and Thiruvananthapuram at 4.5748. ANOVA results showed a significant difference in perceptions among the districts ($F(2,377) = 7.927$, $p = 0.000$). Lastly, perceptions of socioeconomic and environmental challenges faced by tribal communities indicated the highest mean perception score in Wayanad at 4.8718, followed by Idukki at 4.8637 and Thiruvananthapuram at 4.5955. ANOVA results again highlighted a significant difference in perceptions among the districts ($F(2,380) = 18.043$, $p = 0.000$). These findings highlight the variability in perceptions regarding tribal welfare and environmental conditions among the surveyed districts, emphasising the need for tailored policies and interventions to address the unique challenges tribal communities face in each district. Table 4 presents a comparative analysis of perceptions of tribal welfare and socioeconomic and environmental conditions across different tribal communities in Kerala.

Data were collected from a primary, with respondents rating various factors on a scale ranging from 1 (Very Bad) to 5 (Very Good). Regarding perceptions of tribal welfare and socioeconomic conditions, the Adiyani community exhibited the highest mean perception score of 4.8247,

Table 4. Comparative Analysis of Perceptions on Tribal Welfare, Socioeconomic, and Environmental Conditions in Different Tribal Communities

Factor		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	ANOVA
Perceptions on Tribal Welfare and Socioeconomic Conditions (Average of 8 Variable)	Adiyan	169	4.8247	.36933	.02841	F (7,374) =1.881 p=0.071
	Hill Pulaya	38	4.8059	.32060	.05201	
	Kanikkar	44	4.6392	.36688	.05531	
	Kattunayakans	12	4.7917	.32567	.09401	
	Kurichiya	2	4.6875	.44194	.31250	
	Kurumbar	1	4.1250	.	.	
	Muthuvan	53	4.7689	.35048	.04814	
	Paniya	63	4.7976	.35811	.04512	
	Total	382	4.7857	.36192	.01852	
Perceptions on Socioeconomic and Environmental Conditions Impacting Tribal Communities (Average of 7 Variable)	Adiyan	168	4.8223	.34905	.02693	F (7,372) =4.559 p=0.000
	Hill Pulaya	38	4.9323	.12750	.02068	
	Kanikkar	42	4.5748	.43775	.06755	
	Kattunayakans	12	4.7976	.26870	.07757	
	Kurichiya	2	4.7857	.30305	.21429	
	Kurumbar	1	4.0000	.	.	
	Muthuvan	54	4.7037	.42164	.05738	
	Paniya	63	4.7823	.31304	.03944	
	Total	380	4.7793	.35981	.01846	
Perceptions on Socioeconomic and Environmental Challenges Faced by Tribal Communities (Average of 5 Variable)	Adiyan	169	4.9243	.16602	.01277	F (7,375) =9.895 p=0.000
	Hill Pulaya	38	4.8947	.18446	.02992	
	Kanikkar	44	4.5955	.46951	.07078	
	Kattunayakans	12	4.8833	.18007	.05198	
	Kurichiya	2	4.6000	.56569	.40000	
	Kurumbar	1	4.0000	.	.	
	Muthuvan	53	4.8415	.27276	.03747	
	Paniya	64	4.7531	.36989	.04624	
	Total	383	4.8381	.29747	.01520	

Source: Primary Survey, 2023, Note: Very Bad-1, Very Good-5

followed by the Paniya community at 4.7976 and the Muthuvan community at 4.7689. ANOVA results indicated no significant difference in community perceptions ($F(7,374) = 1.881, p = 0.071$). Regarding perceptions of socioeconomic and environmental conditions impacting tribal communities, the Hill Pulaya community displayed the highest mean perception score of 4.9323, followed by the Adiyan community at 4.8223 and the Paniya community at 4.7823. ANOVA results revealed a significant difference in community perceptions ($F(7,372) = 4.559, p = 0.000$). Lastly, perceptions of socioeconomic and environmental challenges faced by tribal communities indicated the highest mean perception score in the Adiyan community at 4.9243, followed by the Hill Pulaya community at 4.8947 and the Muthuvan community at 4.8415. ANOVA results demonstrated a significant difference in community perceptions ($F(7,375) = 9.895, p = 0.000$). These findings emphasise variations in perceptions regarding tribal welfare and environmental conditions across different tribal communities in Kerala, emphasising the need for tailored interventions to address the unique challenges faced by each community.

Conclusion

The study found that tribals in Kerala generally have positive views about

government efforts, indicating that they find these initiatives adequate in tackling their various challenges. The consistency in responses suggests a shared viewpoint among tribal members. However, there are differences in perceptions across districts, underscoring the necessity for customised strategies to address the specific issues tribal groups face regarding their well-being and environmental circumstances in each area. Even though they have positive perceptions of existing socioeconomic, environmental, and welfare aspects, their socioeconomic conditions are poor compared to other sections of society. The level of socioeconomic progress varies between tribals and others. These disparities make their development more challenging for the policymakers. Implementing well-structured programs and policies for further development is necessary to protect them from underdevelopment.

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