

LIVELIHOOD PATTERNS AND OBSTACLES: A STUDY OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the economic participation and livelihood challenges of tribal women in Mananthavady Taluk, Kerala, a region with dense tribal settlements, through primary data from 100 respondents and secondary sources. Findings reveal that 55% of women depend on agriculture (25% as landowners, 30% as laborers), while 20% engage in forest produce collection and 15% in handicrafts, yet 75% earn below ₹5,000 monthly due to systemic barriers like landlessness (55%), low literacy (48%), poor market access (38%), and restrictive social norms (30%). Although 60% participate in MGNREGA and 45% in SHGs, only 20% benefit from the Forest Rights Act, with 25% excluded from welfare schemes altogether. While 50% perceive partial economic independence, only 25% feel fully empowered, highlighting gaps in policy implementation. The study advocates for securing land rights, enhancing skill development, improving market linkages, and expanding childcare infrastructure to foster inclusive empowerment and sustainable development in these marginalized communities.

Keywords: Tribal women - economic participation - livelihood challenges - land rights - empowerment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tribal communities form an integral part of India's socio-cultural mosaic, with women playing a significant role in sustaining their households and preserving traditional knowledge systems. According to the Census of India 2011, tribal people constitute about 8.6% of the total population, and in Kerala, they form 1.5%, with Wayanad district alone housing more than 35% of the state's tribal population. Among the three taluks of Wayanad, Mananthavady stands out due to its dense tribal settlements and heavy dependence on forest-based and agrarian livelihoods.

Tribal women in this region are deeply engaged in subsistence and income-generating activities such as agriculture, collection of minor forest produce, and handicrafts. Despite their significant role in sustaining the rural economy, their contributions remain largely undervalued due to various socio-economic constraints such as lack of land rights, low literacy levels, and inadequate access to markets and formal financial institutions (Kumar & Mishra, 2020). Moreover, tribal women face gendered challenges that often curtail their participation in mainstream economic activities, leading to a cycle of poverty, exclusion, and dependence.

Studies have shown that nearly 70% of tribal women in rural Kerala are either agricultural laborers or forest produce collectors (Sreedharan & Joseph, 2019). While government schemes such as MGNREGA, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and the Forest Rights Act aim to improve their socio-economic conditions, the effectiveness and reach of these initiatives remain uneven across regions.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the livelihood patterns and economic participation of tribal women in Mananthavady Taluk, with a focus on their occupational structure, income levels, and access to government welfare programs. By capturing ground-level realities through primary data, the study aims to highlight the challenges faced by these women and explore avenues for their economic empowerment and inclusive development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tribal women in India, particularly in Kerala, have historically been integral to their communities' survival, playing crucial roles in agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, and cultural preservation. However, despite their active economic participation, they continue to face marginalization due to a complex web of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. According to **Sreedharan and Joseph (2019)**, tribal women in Kerala are predominantly engaged in agricultural labor and collection of minor forest produce, yet their work is often informal and unrecognized in official statistics.

Several studies have explored the impact of government welfare schemes on tribal populations. Research by **Kumar and Mishra (2020)** indicates that while MGNREGA provides a critical safety net, especially for rural tribal women, the implementation remains inconsistent. SHGs have shown promise in improving financial literacy and access to microcredit among tribal women, enhancing their decision-making power within households and communities.

Gender and development literature emphasizes that economic empowerment cannot be separated from issues like education, health, mobility, and social norms. Studies show that limited literacy, lack of land ownership, and patriarchal structures often hinder tribal women from accessing the full benefits of government programs. Empowerment, therefore, must be approached holistically—going beyond income generation to include social inclusion, autonomy, and voice.

Together, these studies provide a strong foundation for understanding the multi-dimensional challenges faced by tribal women. They also highlight the need for integrated, context-sensitive approaches that combine livelihood support, legal empowerment, and capacity-building for sustained economic inclusion.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The economic participation of tribal women is a critical factor in their empowerment and the development of their communities. However, their contribution is often underreported and undervalued due to socio-economic barriers. Given the high tribal concentration in Mananthavady, there is a pressing need to examine the actual patterns of economic participation and livelihood choices among tribal women. Understanding these dimensions is essential to address the systemic barriers they face and to formulate inclusive policies that promote economic empowerment, self-sufficiency, and sustainable development. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the occupational structure, income levels, and access to welfare schemes among tribal women, thereby providing insights into their socio-economic realities and developmental needs.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the occupational patterns and income levels of tribal women in the study area.

2. To assess the extent of tribal women's participation in government welfare schemes and identify key socio-economic constraints affecting their economic empowerment.

5. METHODOLOGY

A combination of primary and secondary data was used to ensure the reliability and depth of the findings. Primary data was collected through structured questionnaires. A sample of 100 tribal respondents was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation from various tribal communities and geographic areas within the taluk. Secondary data was obtained from government records, reports of the Tribal Development Department, Census data, academic publications, and NGO reports relevant to tribal welfare and development in Wayanad.

6. UNIVERSE OF THE STUDY

The universe of the study is the tribal population in Mananthavady Taluk of Wayanad district, Kerala. The study focuses on major tribal communities such as Paniya, Kurichiya, Adiya, Kattunaikka, and Pulaya. A sample of 100 tribals was selected from different regions within Mananthavady Taluk for the purpose of this study. Wayanad district, established in 1980, is located in the northeastern part of Kerala and shares its borders with Kozhikode and Kannur districts to the west, Malappuram to the south, and the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu to the east. Mananthavady is one of the three taluks in Wayanad, known for its significant tribal concentration and proximity to the Western Ghats. Hence, the universe of the study includes all tribal populations residing within the jurisdiction of Mananthavady Taluk in Wayanad district.

7. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

7.1. Occupational Structure of Tribal Women

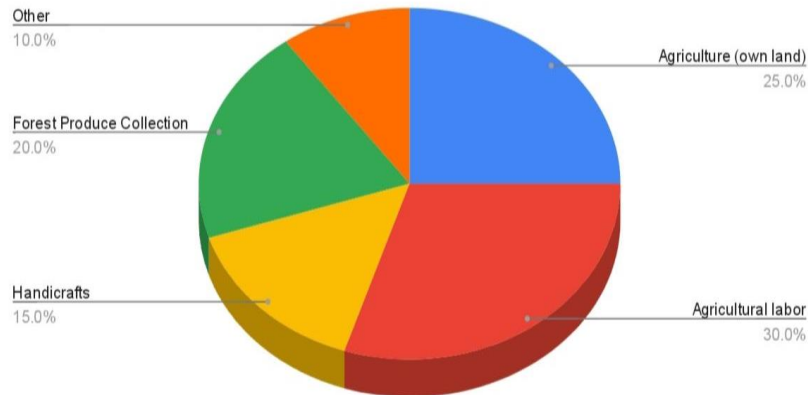
The table below presents the distribution of tribal women based on their primary occupation:

Table 1: Occupational Distribution of the Respondents

Occupation	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Agriculture (own land)	25	25%
Agricultural labor	30	30%
Handicrafts	15	15%
Forest Produce Collection	20	20%
Other	10	10%
Total	100	100%

Source: Primary data

Figure 1: Occupational Distribution



The occupational structure of tribal women in the study area reveals that about 55% of the respondents are engaged either in cultivation on their own land (25%) or as agricultural laborers (30%). These women contribute significantly to food production and rural livelihoods. However, the over-reliance on wage-based agricultural work highlights their limited access to productive assets, especially land. Forest-based activities such as the collection of honey, firewood, and medicinal herbs provide income for 20% of respondents, reflecting the traditional dependence of tribal communities on forest resources. Handicrafts and other activities, though practiced by 25% of the women, are often informal, seasonal, and lack access to stable markets.

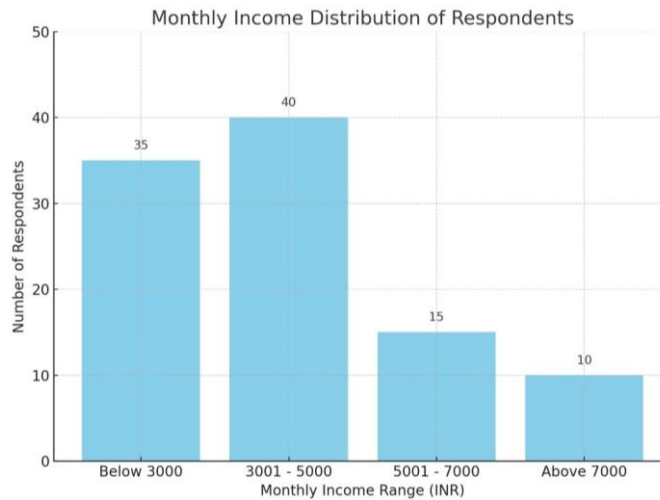
7.2. Level of Income Received from Economic Activities

Table 2: Income wise Distribution of the Respondents

Monthly Income	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Below 3000	35	35%
3001 - 5000	40	40%
5001 - 7000	15	15%
Above 7000	10	10%
Total	100	100%

Source: Primary data

Figure 2



In terms of income, a significant majority of the respondents (75%) earn below INR 5000 per month, indicating a widespread issue of low and unstable earnings among tribal women. Only 10% earn more than INR 7000, suggesting that higher-income opportunities are rare and usually limited to tribal women.

7.3. Participation in Government Schemes / SHGs

Table 3: Scheme wise Distribution of the Respondents

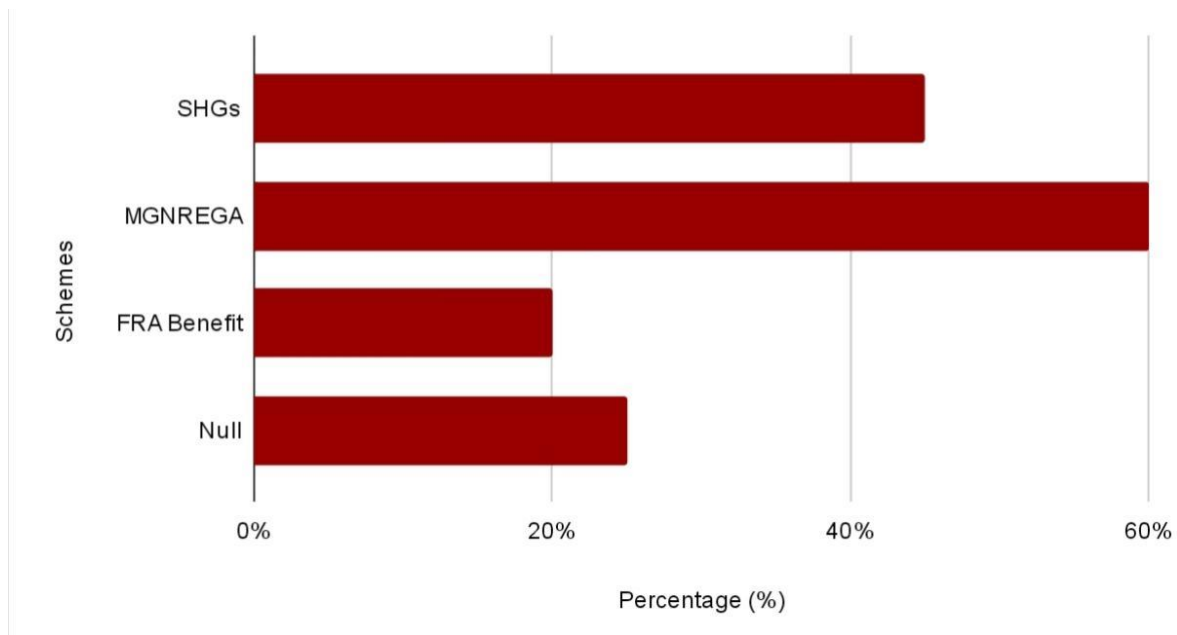
Schemes	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Active in SHGs	45	45%
Received support under MGNREGA	60	60%
Accessed forest rights Act benefit	20	20%
No participation	25	25%

Source: Primary data

Note: Multiple responses allowed; and percentages are calculated based on the total number of responses

Government welfare schemes have reached a portion of these women, with 60% having benefitted from MGNREGS and 45% participating in Self-Help Groups (SHGs). These programs have provided seasonal employment and some degree of financial inclusion. However, only 20% have received benefits under the Forest Rights Act, indicating either poor awareness or administrative hurdles in accessing land rights. Notably, 25% of respondents reported having no access to any such programs, underscoring the gap in policy implementation.

Figure 3: Scheme wise Distribution



7.4. Constraints Faced in Economic Participation

Tribal women face several constraints that limit their economic participation.

Table 4: Major Constraints Faced by the Respondents

Constraints	No. of Respondents	Percentages (%)
Lack of land ownership	55	55%
Low literacy and skill levels	48	48%
Poor market access	38	38%
Lack of child care facilities	20	20%
Limited mobility due to customs	30	30%

Source: Primary data

Note: Multiple responses allowed; and percentages are calculated based on the total number of responses

Landlessness (55%) and low literacy levels (48%) were the most common challenges, followed by poor market access (38%) and social barriers to mobility (30%). Some women (20%) also reported lack of childcare facilities as a hindrance to participating in income-generating activities. These constraints often intersect, compounding the marginalization faced by tribal women and reinforcing their economic dependence.

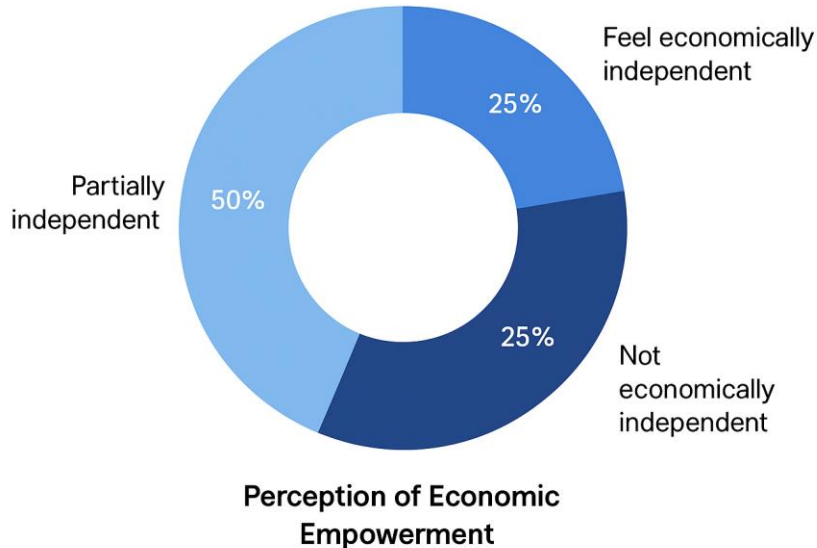
7.5. Perception of Economic Empowerment

Table 5: Respondents Perception about Economic Empowerment

Perception	No. of Respondents	Percentages (%)
Feel economically independent	25	25%
Partially independent	50	50%
Not economically independent	25	25%
Total	100	100%

Source: Primary data

Figure 4: Perception about Economic Empowerment



The data reveals that only 25% of the respondents felt economically independent, while 50% stated partial independence, indicating that although they contribute economically, final financial decisions are still influenced by male family members. The remaining 25% felt fully dependent, primarily due to lack of income or control over resources.

Policy Suggestions

- Simplify Forest Rights Act procedures and raise awareness to secure land and forest access.
- Provide vocational training and basic education tailored to local livelihood needs.
- Support SHGs with digital tools, financial literacy, and better access to markets.
- Set up community childcare centers and provide safe transport options for women.
- Ensure better reach of MGNREGA, FRA, and SHGs through tribal community workers.

- Encourage tribal women to Participation in Local Governance

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that tribal women in Mananthavady Taluk are actively involved in agriculture, forest-based activities, and handicrafts, yet they face significant economic challenges. Most earn less than ₹5000 per month, with limited access to land, education, and markets. Although schemes like MGNREGA and SHGs offer some support, gaps remain in awareness and access-especially under the Forest Rights Act. Social customs, childcare responsibilities, and low mobility further hinder their participation. Still, the rise in partial economic independence signals progress toward empowerment. Strengthening land rights, skills training, and market linkages is essential to ensure these women achieve greater economic security and contribute fully to community development.

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