



The Role Of Oorukoottam In Shaping The Social - Wellbeing Of Paniya In Wayanad

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Abstract

This scholarly inquiry seeks to assess the transformative impact of Oorukoottam on the quality of life of the Paniya tribe in Wayanad, scrutinizing the socio-cultural dimensions of their integration into mainstream society. Despite the lofty ideals enshrined in constitutional safeguards, governmental welfare schemes, and initiatives fostering participatory governance, such as Oorukoottam, the Paniya community's existential plight remains dishearteningly substandard. A staggering three-fourths of this indigenous population are deprived of land ownership, with their living conditions—spanning housing, healthcare, sanitation, education, and economic stability—trailing woefully behind the state averages. This study, grounded in meticulous primary research and an erudite review of existing literature, dissects the palpable effects of Oorukoottam in uplifting a culturally distinct yet socially marginalized group. The objective is not merely to evaluate the efficacy of these interventions but to unearth nuanced insights and offer cogent policy recommendations aimed at redressing the systemic inequities that continue to plague the Paniya tribe's journey towards holistic upliftment.

Key words: Social quality, paniya tribe, After Oorukoottam, Decision making

1. Introduction

Paniya tribe are the original aboriginal inhabitants of Wayanad district in Kerala. The name 'Paniya' means worker. They were supposed to be the workers of non-tribes. They were living in the forest but later Chetties of Wayanad trapped them as their slaves for agricultural work (Susamma Isaac, 2012). Gradually they also became bonded labourers even of Kurichiya and Mullukuruma and were living in the hill slopes and paddy fields, as slaves of these landlords. Slave transactions were prevalent in the early periods and Paniya were sold in the market. They still remain dependents of the landlords even after the abolition of bonded labour. Even though the largest tribal community in Wayanad, they continue to be the most vulnerable, economically and socially most backward (Chandrika C S Nandakumar, 2015) and even do not have a satisfactory representation either in politics or in local bodies.

The status of a Paniya community in Wayanad is predominantly determined by its economic and social positioning, overshadowing political, religious, and cultural aspects. The study unfolds in two parts: firstly, a historical narrative delving into the social aspects of the Paniya tribe, providing a traditional understanding of their conditions before introducing the reformulated Oorukoottam. Secondly, an exploration of their present condition after the intervention. The historical account reveals that the paniya community held an under developed social positioning in the total population. However, they have decisively benefited from the Oorukoottam intervention in Wayanad but remains down trodden. A comparative analysis of conditions before and after Oorukoottam's intervention is conducted through statistical analysis using the Wilcoxon rank test and ANOVA test.

2 Historical Narration of the social aspect of Paniya Tribe in Wayanad District

The history of Wayanad traces back to the tribal republic under the Kudumbiyil and Veda kings, which continued till the end of the 13th century. Subsequently, the Kottayam kings became the rulers of Wayanad and the ownership of the tribal lands completely got into the hands of Nair chieftains, to whom the land had been distributed free by the Kottayam dynasty. This resulted in a drastic change in the life of tribal communities, particularly the Paniya who became landless slaves (Bhagadu K. P., 1972). In the preceding feudal administrative era, under the rule of monarchs, there was a practice of acquiring tribal land. This acquired land was later redistributed, falling into distinct categories like Janmam (indicating absolute ownership and transferability upon payment), Kanam (where the owner mortgaged the land with a fixed repayable amount and an annual payment in paddy), and Patam (involving the temporary rental of Janmam by the owner) (Raju Narayanaswami, 2011). The real reason was that the Paniya, a food-gathering tribe that possessed no land, did not feel the need to own their land in their Ooru. Thus, the development of a caste-like hierarchical system among the tribes of Wayanad categorized Paniya as the lowest and restricted their rights within the forest (Raju Narayanaswami 2011).

2.1. Bonded labour

Wayanad emerged as a significant hub for bonded labour, particularly during the colonial era. The tribes, primarily serving as agrarian slaves to traditional janmies, endured various exploitative practices imposed by chieftains and landlords, subjecting them to bonded labour (E K Rajan 2011). The Paniya and Adiyas, residing in the most socially depressed conditions, were compelled to sell family members for survival. This system, known as Kundalpani and Vallipani, became a pervasive social and economic ill perpetrated by non-tribals upon the impoverished tribes of Wayanad. The landed Kurichiya, though exceptions, experienced instances of becoming bonded labourers, potentially due to ex-communication from the tribe, resulting in the loss of property rights (Surajith, Sinha, 1982).

The persistence of bonded labour extended into more recent times, post-independence, known by names like Kundalpani and Vallipani. Annual slavery contracts were negotiated between landlords and labourers, securing provisions such as paddy, cloth, and a nominal sum for temple festivities. Slaves were allowed to construct huts near landlords' paddy fields, sustaining themselves from the land. Paniya families, specifically, were obligated to serve landlords for a year, with landlords possessing the right to transfer labourers to others for a fixed price (Mathur, P.M.G., 1975). Panoor (1963) documented a system where Paniya, along with their families, worked for landlords for an entire year.

This labour could be transferred to other landlords as commodities. Post-independence, increasing demand for labour shifted Paniya toward kulippani, wage labour, effectively ending the bonded labour system. The transition, however, did not eliminate the challenges faced by the Paniya, as they continued to grapple with economic difficulties, indebtedness, and social marginalization (Gopimony, R., 2004).

Despite government and non-government interventions, a KIRTAD's (2010) study revealed that the social, economic, and educational aspects of the Paniya community did not witness significant improvement. Formerly known as Padi, the settlements where Paniya resided in huts are now termed "Paniya colonies" by the State. This settled way of life, initiated during the feudal and early independence periods, saw Paniya building small huts on their employers' land, but they are now residing in government-built colonies with tiled houses (Panoor 1963, Aiyappan 1992).

2.2. Housing Pattern

The Paniya, in the past, inhabited tribal hamlets across diverse ecological settings. Some resided in isolated hilly regions or forest fringes, while others lived near urban areas. Their Padis, often modest, were constructed near farms and plantations (Edgar Thurston, 1907). However, contemporary Paniya dwellings primarily consist of concrete-roofed huts provided by the government in hamlets clustered over a small patch of land, connected by narrow footpaths. Despite government aid, their living conditions remain below par compared to non-tribal communities of similar social status.

Regarding community life, the headman or 'Chemmi' traditionally held a hereditary position, commanding obedience and respect from all community members. In the absence of a male heir, the daughter's husband assumes the role. The Chemmi presides over the council of elders, making decisions on significant hamlet matters like settling disputes and administering punishment for offenses such as theft and sexual misconduct. The customary disciplinary action usually entails the imposition of fines, the amount of which is determined by the nature of the offense committed. Additionally, the Chemmi serves as a priest,

particularly during marriage and funerals. However, in recent times, the traditional role of the headman has diminished, reduced to a nominal position overseeing communal rituals and ceremonies (Thressiamma Varghese 2002).

Regarding the dowry system, marriages involve the groom paying a bride price. As per Paniya customs, the husband provides an annual subscription called Thalapatam to his wife's parents on the Uchal festival day. If the prescribed fine is not paid, there is a potential consequence: the wife may be summoned back to her parental home by her parents. The initial year's Thalapatam is fixed at 30 kolagam (one kolagam equals 750 grams) of paddy, with subsequent years requiring 10 kolagam of paddy each. Traditional practices like giving Kanam (bride price) and ornaments were also prevalent among the Paniya (Lissy P.P. 2016).

2.3. Methods of traditional intoxication

The Paniya tribe has a traditional practice known as Murukkal, involving the chewing of betel leaves, areca nuts, tobacco leaves, and lime. This practice is prevalent even among young Paniya children. Liquor consumption is a common habit in Paniya hamlets, with men typically consuming liquor daily, while women indulge during festivals and ceremonial occasions. Unfortunately, this addiction has adverse effects on Paniya families, leading to Beedi sickness, especially in the Bathery taluk of Wayanad district. The Paniya tribe, despite being the most numerous, is facing a declining population due to excessive alcohol consumption. A significant portion of their income is spent on alcohol, resulting in family quarrels, and even government funds intended for development are used for liquor consumption (Suma M M 2016).

Elderly members of the community favour traditional liquor made from rice, jaggery, and cashew fruit. Specially prepared liquor is served to both men and women during celebrations and funerals (Edgar Thurston, 1975). Immigrants introduced commercial alcoholic beverages like beer, whisky, rum, and pan masala, available in liquor stores where Paniya purchase as much as they can afford. Liquor consumption, a long-standing practice in the local population, became a major reason for poverty among the Paniya tribe, with many falling into extreme poverty due to heavy spending on liquor consumption.

Regarding social deviance and punishment, in every Paniya village, the headman or elders are referred to as Kuttan, appointed by Nayar Janmi to oversee agricultural fields and ensure the welfare of the tribal village. The appointment of Kuttan is celebrated with a feast and dance, and a bangle is presented as a symbol of authority (stana chinnam). Kuttan, along with Mudali or the head of the family, typically called Mooppanmar, constitutes the Panchayat (Edgar Thurston 1909). The Panchayat, consisting of headmen, settles disputes and imposes fines or punishments for issues like adultery. In cases of proven adultery, a fine is imposed, equivalent to the marriage fee and wedding expenses. In tribal hamlets, divorce is permitted with the approval of the elder man of kudi and the elder man of the concerned family, based on grounds such as chronic sickness, maladjustment, cruelty, or barrenness. However, divorce is legally approved through the judiciary (K.S. Singh 2002).

3. Methodology

This study centres on individuals from the Paniya community in Wayanad district. To ensure a fair sample distribution, 75 respondents, both men and women from different households, were selected proportionally for interviews. However, response rates were affected by cultural and social factors in certain areas. The sampling method was designed to be balanced and rigorous, providing reliable data for comparative analysis while addressing practical constraints and ensuring fair representation from the community.

3.1. Objectives:

1. To examine the social life of the Paniya tribal community in Wayanad.
2. To evaluate the association between social life and demographic variables such as gender, education, employment status, and age groups.

3.2. Hypothesis:

1. There is an improvement in the social life of the Paniya tribal community after the introduction of Oorukoottam.
2. There is an association between social life and demographic variables, such as gender, education, employment status, and age groups.

3.3. Data Sampling of the Study

A stratified sampling technique was employed to ensure adequate representation from the Paniya tribal group. The strata included factors like gender, education, employment status, and age groups (15-30, 31-45, 46-60, 61-75).

Tools of Data Collection and Limitations

Data were gathered through an interview schedule developed by the investigator, which consisted of 75 questions covering personal details and various aspects of social life. House visits to Paniya settlements ensured representation across all strata, with careful attention to gender balance.

However, several challenges were encountered during data collection. A lack of awareness among Paniya participants regarding their rights and governmental policies caused delays. Gender disparities necessitated that interviews be conducted on weekends and holidays. Additionally, socio-cultural barriers in some areas impeded full responses to the questionnaires. Certain locations posed restrictions that hindered data collection, and incomplete responses from some participants led to their exclusion from the final analysis.

3.4. Statistical Techniques for Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative techniques were employed in the study. Inferential statistical methods, including the Wilcoxon Rank test and analysis of variance (ANOVA), were applied. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software. Qualitative methods, such as observation, were also used. In the section on Oorukoottam and social life, twenty questions were posed, and the responses were collected and tabulated. A comparative study of the Paniya community's social life before and after the introduction of Oorukoottam was undertaken where applicable.

4. Statistical Analysis

Table –1.

(i) Difference in Social Quality of Life after Oorukoottam

Items	Tribe	Before Oorukoottam	After Oorukoottam	p – value
Q1	Paniya	(34.0%)	(7.7%)	0.000
Q2	Paniya	(59.3%)	(45.4%)	0.004
Q3	Paniya	(47.4%)	(85.1%)	0.000
Q4	Paniya	(95.9%)	(83.0%)	0.000
Q5	Paniya	(92.8%)	(73.7%)	0.000
Q6	Paniya	(100.0%)	(100.0%)	1.000
Q7	Paniya	(18.6%)	(71.1%)	0.000
Q8	Paniya	(14.4%)	(14.9%)	0.891
Q9	Paniya	(62.4%)	(86.1%)	0.000
Q10	Paniya	(5.7%)	(8.2%)	0.096

Wilcoxon signed-rank test was performed.

According to the Wilcoxon rank test, the p-value is ($p < 0.05$) at the significance level and so indicates improvement after Oorukoottam in the Paniya community. Out of the ten questions, the p-values ($p < 0.05$) and the percentages of seven questions suggest improvement. The responses to the questions suggesting improvement are Q1 (Type of family), Q2 (Who makes decisions as family matters?), Q3 (Are the interests/opinions of the bride and bridegroom taken into consideration?), Q4 (Is marriage between different

tribes encouraged?), Q5 (Do you have a dowry system?), Q7 (Do you relate with other tribal communities?), Q9 (Is there any discrimination against girls/women in your community?).

The p-values of three questions Q6 (What kind of marriage system do you prefer?), Q8 (Do you have any punishment executed for the violation of traditional rules and mores of the community?) and Q10 (Is your family or colony experiencing the ill effects of alcoholism or drug abuse?) is more than 0.05, at the significance level and so suggests no improvement in these aspects after Oorukoottam.

The significant improvements in seven out of ten questions reflect positive changes within the Paniya community, including shifts in family dynamics, social norms, gender equality, and inter-community relations. The lack of improvement in the remaining three questions suggests that the Oorukoottam program has not significantly impacted certain traditional practices and social issues. These results provide insights into the areas where the program has been effective and where there is room for further intervention and improvement. There is improvement in seven indicators in the Paniya community suggesting changes after the Oorukoottam initiative and they are: 'type of family', 'decision making in a family', 'consideration to the interest of the bride and bridegroom', 'encouragement of mixed marriages', 'dowry system', 'interactions with other tribal communities' and 'women discrimination.'

Decision-making in family matters shows improvement, which indicates that the Paniya community has seen a positive change in the way decisions are made within families. This is related to increased participation and equality in family decision-making processes. The improved consideration of the interests and opinions of the bride and bridegroom within the community suggests a positive shift toward more inclusive and participatory decision-making in marital matters. Upadhyay, K.K. (2021) supports this finding in his discussion of the empowerment and participation of women in decision-making processes among tribal communities in Kerala. The positive change is that the Paniya community has made progress in reducing the practice of dowry, which is a positive development in the context of gender equality and marriage traditions. Chandran, S. (2019) attests to this finding based on his research on marriage practices and the decline of dowry traditions among tribal groups.

The improved relations with other tribal communities indicate that the Paniya community has enhanced its social interactions and collaboration with neighbouring tribes. A reduction in discrimination against girls and women within the Paniya community, promoting gender equality and inclusivity. Mishra, R.K. (2020) supports this finding through his study on the social changes within the Paniya community, including family decision-making and gender roles.

These findings generally indicate that the Oorukoottam intervention has had a positive and statistically significant impact on various aspects of the Paniya community's social and cultural practices, norms, and attitudes. The significant changes observed in the responses to these questions underscore the effectiveness of the Oorukoottam in bringing about positive transformations within the community. The fact that the intervention has led to statistically significant improvements in these aspects suggests that it has been a successful endeavour in addressing various social and cultural issues within the community. Kerala State Planning Board. (2021) attests to the effectiveness of the Oorukoottam interventions. The system of marriage and the traditional mores that sustain the social fabric of Paniya is no longer strictly followed as it is almost destroyed by the intervention of the government as well the other agencies in their effort to mainstream the tribal communities without taking their deeply ingrained cultural values and emotional tempo. Kumar, R. (2018) examines these social and cultural changes within the Paniya community, including family dynamics and marriage practices. It is observed that, the use of intoxicants has never been taken as a negative experience for the Paniya community, as it used to be a part of their celebration and entertainment. Intoxicant use is deeply built into the culture of the Paniya, however,

Table – 3.5.

(vii) Association between Change in Social Quality of Life and Personal Details in Paniya

Personal Details	Mean	SD	p-value
Age (Years)			
<= 25	10.17	5.012	0.543
26 – 35	8.417	4.057	
36 – 45	6.456	4.702	
46 – 55	3.472	5.185	
> 55	9.949	5.372	
Marital Status			
Married	9.186	4.208	0.490
Unmarried	6.201	4.844	
Number of Family Members			
1 – 2	7.127	5.034	0.410
3 – 5	5.913	4.081	
> 5	10.04	4.285	
Occupation			
Nil	13.93	6.958	0.490
Cultivation	10.44	12.20	
Labour	3.966	2.830	
Govt. Job	2.446	4.662	
Educational Qualification			
Uneducated	6.184	4.727	0.149
Lower Primary	6.003	5.942	
Upper Primary	9.096	5.221	
High School	7.327	4.689	
Higher Secondary	9.304	4.769	
Under Graduation	21.85	6.914	
Post-Graduation	-5.907	8.692	

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed.

Age: According to ANOVA Test, the Association between Change in Social Quality of Life and Personal Detail, Age of Paniya, the p-value is greater than the significance level 0.05 so the difference between different age groups is not significant. The table shows that the change in the social quality of life is almost the same in cases regarding age <=25 years (10.17 ± 5.012), 26-35 years (8.417 ± 4.057), 36-45 years (6.456 ± 4.702), 46-55 years (3.472 ± 5.185) and >55 years (9.949 ± 5.372).

Marital Status: According to the results of the ANOVA Test conducted on the sample, the Association between Change in Social Quality of Life and Personal Details, Marital Status of Paniya, the p-value is greater than the significance level 0.05 and so the difference in change in the social quality of life

between married and unmarried is not significant. The table shows that the change in the social quality of life is almost the same in married (9.186 ± 4.208) and unmarried (6.201 ± 4.844) Paniya.

The number of Family Members: According to the ANOVA Test, the Association between Change in Social Quality of Life and Personal Details, the number of Family Members of Paniya, the p-value is greater than the significance level 0.05 and so is not significant. The table shows that the change in the social quality of life is almost the same in families with 1-2 members (7.127 ± 5.034), 3-5 members (5.913 ± 4.081) and >5 members (10.04 ± 4.285) of Paniya.

Occupation: According to ANOVA Test, the Association between the change in Social Quality of Life and Personal Detail of occupation, the p-value of the difference in change is greater than the significance level 0.05, and so is not significant. The table shows that the change in the social quality of life is almost the same in cases with no occupation (13.93 ± 6.958), cultivation (10.44 ± 12.20), labour (3.966 ± 2.830) and Government job (2.446 ± 4.662) of Paniya.

Educational Qualification: According to ANOVA Test, the p-value of the difference in change in the social quality of life between different educational qualifications is greater than the significance level 0.05 and so is not significant. The table shows that the change in the social quality of life is almost the same at different levels of educational qualification of Paniya.

As a conclusion no significant change was registered in the Social Quality of Life and the Personal Details of Paniya such as 'Age', 'Marital status', 'Number of family members', 'Occupation' and 'Educational' qualifications.

The community's traditional way of life is not to place importance on factors like age, marital status, family size, occupation, and educational qualifications. Therefore, variations in these personal details do not substantially impact their social quality of life and the resilience, collective values, cultural traditions, and close-knit nature of the Paniya community may contribute to their social quality of life remaining relatively stable and less affected by personal details. The stigma attached to the Paniya is so entrenched and internalized by them that the positive changes get submerged in the feeling of inadequacy in the community that, in reality, got elevated socially. The recent incidence of killing tribal community members accusing theft based on their complexion and dress is an adequate testimony that the stigma is not busted but instead increased. Nair, S. (2018) explores how the traditional values and close-knit nature of the Paniya community contribute to their social quality of life, despite variations in personal details.

Conclusion

The social well-being of the Paniya tribe in Wayanad has undergone significant transformation, with notable improvements in family decision-making, gender equality, and marriage practices. The increased participation of both men and women in family matters, particularly in the context of marital decisions, reflects a positive shift towards inclusivity and equality. The decline of dowry practices and reduced discrimination against women within the community further emphasize progress in gender relations. Additionally, improved relations with neighboring tribal communities and the reduction of traditional social barriers signify a broader social advancement for the Paniya.

The Oorukoottam intervention appears to have played a pivotal role in facilitating these changes, as it has successfully addressed various social and cultural issues within the community. While the intervention has been largely beneficial, it has also led to a disruption of certain traditional practices, particularly regarding marriage customs and intoxicant use. These shifts, while aligned with broader social progress, highlight the delicate balance between modernization and the preservation of cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the overall impact on the Paniya community's social well-being has been positive, with a clear trajectory towards enhanced social equality and integration.

The results of the ANOVA tests indicate that the demographic variables do not significantly influence changes in the social quality of life among the Paniya. Despite differences in age groups, marital status, family size, occupation types, and educational levels, the overall change in social well-being remains consistent across these categories. This suggests that other factors beyond these personal characteristics may be influencing the social well-being of the Paniya tribe. The findings highlight the need for further investigation into the specific elements that contribute to social changes within this community.

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