



# A Study On The Tribal Welfare Initiatives And The Preservation Of Kurumba Culture In The Nilgiris

**SUPERVISOR****Dr. S. SUNDARARAJAN M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.,**

Associate Professor,

Department of Public Administration

Government Arts College (Autonomous)

Coimbatore-641018

Tamil Nadu

**RESEARCH SCHOLAR****T. SHILPA**

PhD (Full Time)

Department of Public Administration,

Government Arts College (Autonomous)

Coimbatore641018

Tamil Nadu

**ABSTRACT**

The Kurumba tribe, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) residing in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu, possesses a rich cultural heritage rooted in traditional livelihoods, oral language, and indigenous art forms. In recent years, this unique cultural identity has faced serious threats due to modernization, ecological displacement, and socio-economic marginalization. This study examines the role of the Tribal Welfare Department in preserving and promoting Kurumba culture through targeted welfare initiatives. Using a qualitative research approach including field observations, interviews with tribal members and welfare officials, and analysis of departmental reports the study assesses interventions in three key areas language preservation, traditional art promotion, and support for forest-based livelihoods.

Findings reveal that while several initiatives have yielded positive outcomes, particularly in creating awareness and market access for tribal products, there remain critical gaps in community participation, intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, and long-term sustainability. The study concludes with recommendations for more culturally rooted, participatory, and holistic approaches to tribal welfare policy, emphasizing the need for tribal communities to lead in shaping their own cultural future.

**INTRODUCTION**

The Kurumba tribe, one of the six officially recognized Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Tamil Nadu, is indigenous to the forested regions of the Nilgiris district. Traditionally forest dwellers, the Kurumbas have long been known for their deep ecological knowledge, honey collection, herbal medicine practices, unique art forms, and a distinct oral language. Their lifestyle reflects a symbiotic relationship with nature, with cultural traditions that are closely tied to their environment. However, in recent decades,

the Kurumbas have faced growing challenges that threaten their cultural survival. These include forced displacement, deforestation, loss of traditional livelihoods, lack of access to education in their mother tongue, and increasing exposure to dominant cultural influences. The cumulative effect has been a gradual erosion of their identity, traditions, and self-sufficiency. In response, the Tribal Welfare Department of Tamil Nadu has launched a variety of welfare and cultural preservation initiatives aimed at empowering tribal communities. These include programs focused on education, health, skill development, and more recently, efforts to revive traditional art, protect indigenous language, and sustain forest-based livelihoods. This article critically examines the effectiveness of these government interventions, with a specific focus on how they have impacted the cultural preservation and identity of the Kurumba tribe in the Nilgiris.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary conceptual framework that draws from Cultural Sustainability Theory, Participatory Development Theory, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Epistemology. Cultural Sustainability Theory emphasizes the resilience of indigenous communities in preserving their cultural identity amidst socio-economic and environmental changes. Concepts such as *cultural resilience* and *adaptive reuse* are central in examining how the Kurumba tribe maintains traditional practices—such as language, crafts, and forest-based livelihoods—while adapting to modern welfare interventions.

Participatory Development Theory informs the analysis of community engagement and empowerment in the design and implementation of welfare programs. This framework supports the notion that development should be community-led, reflecting local aspirations, knowledge, and agency rather than imposed from above. It provides insight into the extent of Kurumba participation in policy processes and program execution.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Epistemology offer a critical lens to value and validate the Kurumba tribe's traditional ecological knowledge, cosmology, and cultural expressions. Recognizing these systems as legitimate forms of knowledge challenges dominant development paradigms and advocates for culturally embedded approaches to policy-making. Together, these frameworks facilitate a holistic understanding of how welfare schemes interact with the Kurumba tribe's cultural integrity, enabling both critique and constructive recommendations for inclusive, culturally rooted development.

## OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- ✓ To examine the specific welfare schemes implemented for the Kurumba tribe by the Tribal Welfare Department.
- ✓ To assess the impact of these initiatives on cultural preservation (language, art, and livelihood).
- ✓ To analyse community perceptions and participation in these initiatives.
- ✓ To identify gaps and propose recommendations for inclusive cultural policy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

- ✓ Existing studies on tribal welfare in India.
- ✓ Cultural threats to PVTGs in Tamil Nadu.
- ✓ Success stories of tribal cultural revival in other states (e.g., Odisha, Tamil Nadu, or Kerala).
- ✓ Scholarly work on Kurumba or Nilgiri tribes by anthropologists, historians, or NGOs.

## METHODOLOGY

- ✓ This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the role of Tribal Welfare Department initiatives in preserving the cultural heritage of the Kurumba tribe in the Nilgiris district. The research focuses on understanding the impact of welfare programs in three key areas: language, traditional art, and forest-based livelihoods.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

A case study method was used to gain in-depth insights into the cultural dynamics of the Kurumba tribe and the implementation of welfare initiatives in their communities. This approach allows for a contextual analysis of both government actions and community responses.

## STUDY AREA

The research was conducted in selected Kurumba settlements in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu, specifically in areas around Kotagiri, Gudalur, and Ooty, where Kurumba populations are concentrated and actively engaged in tribal welfare programs.

## SAMPLING

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants based on their involvement in cultural practices or tribal welfare schemes. Attention was given to gender, age, and occupation to ensure diverse representation.

## DATA COLLECTION METHODS:

Multiple sources of data were used to ensure reliability and triangulation

### In-depth Interviews:

#### Semi-structured interviews were conducted with

- ✓ Tribal elders and community members (both men and women)
- ✓ Tribal Welfare Department officials
- ✓ Representatives of local NGOs and forest officials

**Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Three FGDs were held with Kurumba youth, artisans, and honey gatherers to understand generational differences in cultural engagement.

**Document Analysis:** Review of government policy documents, Tribal Welfare Department reports, program evaluation summaries, and NGO reports relevant to Kurumba welfare and culture.

**Participant Observation:** Researchers visited cultural events, artisan workshops, and tribal schools to observe ongoing initiatives in practice.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data were analyzed using **thematic content analysis**. Key themes such as cultural preservation, administrative support, livelihood sustainability, and community perception were identified and examined. Field notes and interview transcripts were coded manually.

## THE ROLE OF THE TRIBAL WELFARE DEPARTMENT

The Tribal Welfare Department of Tamil Nadu operates under the Department of Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare and is primarily responsible for the socio-economic and cultural upliftment of Scheduled Tribes, including the Kurumba tribe. The Kurumbas, identified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), reside mainly in the Nilgiris district and possess a unique cultural identity rooted in traditional livelihoods, oral language, forest knowledge, and indigenous art forms. Recognizing the challenges faced by such communities due to displacement, modernization, and marginalization, the department implements targeted welfare programs to ensure inclusive development.

Key areas of intervention include education, healthcare, housing, skill development, and cultural preservation. Educational programs aim to increase literacy while integrating tribal languages and knowledge systems. Health initiatives focus on maternal care, nutrition, and access to basic medical services in remote tribal areas. Livelihood and skill development schemes support traditional practices like honey gathering, herbal medicine, and crafts, offering economic empowerment while preserving indigenous skills. In recent years, greater emphasis has been placed on cultural conservation—not as a symbolic gesture but as an essential strategy to preserve the dignity, identity, and continuity of tribal life. The department now recognizes that sustainable development for tribes like the Kurumbas must include the protection and revitalization of their cultural heritage.

## KEY INITIATIVES IN CULTURAL PRESERVATION

**Language Preservation:** The Kurumba dialect, which is orally transmitted, has seen a decline among the younger generation due to formal education in Tamil or English. The Tribal Welfare Department has partnered with local NGOs and language researchers to document the Kurumba language and integrate elements of it into early education through bilingual teaching aids and storytelling sessions led by elders.

**Art and Craft Promotion:** Traditional Kurumba art, characterized by geometric motifs and natural dyes, is being revived through government-sponsored exhibitions, training camps, and the establishment of tribal artisan cooperatives. Some Kurumba artists have received national recognition, and efforts are underway to include tribal art in school curricula and tourism promotion.

**Support for Traditional Livelihoods:** Kurumbas rely heavily on forest-based livelihoods such as honey gathering, herbal medicine preparation, and bamboo craft. Through the Tamil Nadu Tribal Welfare Department and allied forest development agencies, the government has introduced schemes for value addition, branding of tribal products, and market access under initiatives like TRIFED and Van Dhan Yojana. These not only provide economic support but also ensure cultural practices linked to livelihood are retained.

**Support for Traditional Art and Music:** Kurumba mural art, known for its symbolic depictions of nature, is being revived through workshops and exhibitions funded by the welfare department. Tribal artists are provided with training, raw materials, and marketing support. Additionally, traditional Kurumba songs and musical instruments are promoted during cultural festivals and school events.

**Forest-Based Livelihood Programs:** Initiatives like the **Van Dhan Yojana** and tribal cooperative societies help Kurumba families market honey, medicinal herbs, and forest products. These programs are designed

to protect traditional livelihoods while offering income stability, thereby strengthening cultural ties to the forest.

**Cultural Documentation and Digital Archives:** The department, in partnership with local NGOs and academic institutions, is working on creating digital archives of Kurumba oral history, rituals, and customs.

**Establishment of Tribal Cultural Centres:** Cultural centres have been established in tribal areas as spaces for learning, expression, and training. These centres host weekly storytelling sessions, dance practice, and art instruction, offering both cultural engagement and informal education.

**Annual Tribal Festivals and Cultural Events:** The Nilgiris district administration organizes annual tribal festivals where Kurumba communities participate in showcasing their traditional music, food, clothing, crafts, and folklore. These platforms create awareness among the wider public and instil pride among the Kurumbas.

**Integration into Curriculum:** There is a growing effort to include tribal knowledge, stories, and environmental practices in the school curriculum for tribal children. This approach respects local epistemologies and creates a sense of cultural continuity.

**Women-Centered Cultural Programs:** Special focus is given to **Kurumba women**, who are the custodians of songs, food traditions, and herbal medicine. Programs train women to share this knowledge in local schools, museums, and exhibitions, linking preservation with empowerment.

## CHALLENGES AND LIMITATION

Despite these positive steps, significant challenges remain:

- ✓ Top-down approach is the Many welfare schemes are designed and implemented without adequate consultation with Kurumba communities.
- ✓ Documentation gaps are the Much of the Kurumba oral tradition, rituals, and ecological knowledge are still undocumented or poorly archived.
- ✓ Youth disengagement is mainly Exposure to urban culture and formal education is causing younger Kurumbas to detach from traditional ways of life.
- ✓ Bureaucratic hurdles have Delayed fund disbursement and red tape often hinder timely implementation of cultural programs.
- ✓ Inadequate Monitoring and Evaluation is often no structured mechanism to assess the effectiveness of cultural programs. This lack of follow-up results in underperforming or abandoned projects with little accountability.
- ✓ Insufficient Field Staff and Cultural Mediators the shortage of trained field officers or cultural mediators who understand the Kurumba context leads to poor implementation of initiatives and a disconnect between policy and practice.
- ✓ The Kurumba language is not formally taught or included in school curricula beyond the pilot level, increasing the risk of linguistic extinction.
- ✓ While NGOs play a key role, the government's overreliance on them can lead to uneven program quality and lack of sustainability, especially when projects are donor-driven rather than community-led.
- ✓ Although Kurumba women are primary bearers of cultural knowledge (especially in herbal medicine, food, and songs), their role is often overlooked in formal preservation efforts.
- ✓ There is a growing risk of reducing Kurumba culture to performances or products for tourism and markets, which can distort its original meaning and disrespect community values.

## COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

Interviews and focus group discussions with members of the Kurumba community particularly elders, artisans, and local leaders reveal a range of perspectives on the cultural preservation efforts initiated by the Tribal Welfare Department. Many community members express appreciation for the growing recognition and financial support being directed toward traditional arts, forest-based livelihoods, and language documentation. Government-sponsored exhibitions, training programs, and tribal festivals have, in their view, helped create a sense of cultural pride and visibility.

However, there is also a noticeable concern regarding the sustainability and depth of these efforts. Several Kurumba elders voiced fears that initiatives are often short-lived or externally driven, lacking meaningful community participation. Some believe that cultural programs focus more on symbolic gestures (such as performances or artwork displays) rather than ensuring day-to-day cultural practices are preserved and passed on. A strong sentiment among interviewees was the need to involve tribal knowledge holders' healers, storytellers, craftspeople, and elders in both the design and implementation of cultural policies.

Additionally, there is growing demand for intergenerational learning platforms, such as cultural education in tribal schools and community centres, where young Kurumbas can engage with their traditions in relevant and meaningful ways.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen the preservation of Kurumba culture, the following measures are recommended:

- ✓ Participatory planning is Actively involving Kurumba community members in the design and monitoring of welfare programs.
- ✓ Institutional support is Set up dedicated cultural centres in tribal hamlets for language, arts, and oral tradition preservation.
- ✓ Capacity building in Train tribal youth as cultural documenters and educators.
- ✓ Integrated approach is Align welfare initiatives with environmental conservation and tourism development, ensuring they are culturally respectful.
- ✓ Introduce the Kurumba dialect as an optional subject or part of co-curricular activities in tribal schools. Develop storybooks, songs, and teaching aids in the local language to promote linguistic heritage.
- ✓ Encourage and fund programs that empower Kurumba women, who are key custodians of herbal medicine, food traditions, and ritual knowledge, to lead workshops and community education efforts.
- ✓ Ensure consistent funding for cultural programs beyond one-time events. Introduce regular impact assessments and community feedback mechanisms to track progress and adapt interventions.
- ✓ Create a digital repository for Kurumba culture, with community consent, to store oral histories, rituals, songs, and ecological knowledge. This can be used for education, research, and intergenerational learning.
- ✓ Organize district-level tribal festivals that highlight Kurumba dance, music, rituals, and crafts, while ensuring the community's central role in planning and participation.
- ✓ Encourage partnerships with universities, anthropologists, and local NGOs to carry out in-depth research, capacity-building, and documentation projects that are community-centered and ethically sound.

## CONCLUSION

The Tribal Welfare Department's initiatives in the Nilgiris have provided a strong and much-needed foundation for the preservation and promotion of Kurumba culture. Through efforts in areas such as traditional art revival, livelihood support, language documentation, and community events, there is growing recognition of the Kurumba tribe's unique identity and heritage. These programs have helped foster a sense of pride among community members and have opened pathways for economic and social empowerment, particularly among tribal youth and artisans.

However, while positive outcomes are visible, much work remains to be done. Many of the current interventions still rely on a top-down approach, with limited community involvement in planning and decision-making. For preservation efforts to be sustainable, they must become more community-led, intergenerational, and culturally embedded. True cultural preservation requires more than documentation or performance; it demands everyday practice, education, and empowerment rooted in the tribe's lived realities.

In the context of rapid social and environmental change, preserving Kurumba culture is not simply an act of honoring the past — it is a step toward ensuring a diverse, inclusive, and resilient future. Empowering tribal communities to shape their own cultural journey is both a right and a necessity for sustainable development.

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