



## **Social Mobility And Tribal Identity: A Comparative Study Of Social Mobility Among Tribes Of Wayanad**

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**Abstract:** This study takes into account the interaction between tribal identity and social mobility for the prominent tribal groups in Wayanad: the Paniya, Kurichya, Kuruma, Adiya, and Kattunaickan. Through a textual analysis of academic reports, official records, and ethnographic inventories, the analysis takes into account how education, economic change, and cultural adaptation affect mobility trends among these groups. The findings reveal dramatic contrasts: the Kurichya have achieved upward mobility through land ownership and education, while the Paniya and Adiya are marginalised by long-standing problems of illiteracy and poverty. Economic change from traditional forest livelihoods to wage labour and government schemes has dramatically improved tribal living standards, while cultural identity is increasingly shaped by mainstream social forces. The study explores the conflict between socioeconomic progress and cultural preservation, illustrating that some groups remain effective in integrating into modern society while others cannot maintain their distinctive heritage. These findings highlight the need for inclusive policy frameworks that promote tribal development without sacrificing cultural identity.

**Index Terms** - Social mobility, Tribal identity, Wayanad tribes, Paniya, Kurichya, Adiya, Kattunaickan, Educational access

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Tribes in Kerala constitute 1.1 percent of the total population. Wayanad holds the highest tribal community population, with 35.8%, followed by the Idukki district. Wayanad is a land of natural beauty, wildlife and tradition. The major tribes of Wayanad are the Kurichyas, Kurumar, Paniyas, Adiyas and Kattunaicker. Wayanad is Kerala's least populated district, accounting for 2.47% of the state's population and 5.5% of its land area. Adivasis make up 17% of Wayanad's population and represent about one-third of Kerala's total tribal communities. Despite their significant presence, they remain the poorest group in the district, lagging behind in literacy, income, and health indicators compared to the rest of Kerala's population (Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode, 2006). The district's rich cultural tapestry is woven by diverse tribal groups, with the Paniyan community forming the largest segment at 44%, followed by the Mullu Kuruman (17%), Kurichiyar (16%), Kattunaickan (11%), Adiyar (7%), and Urali Kuruman (3%). Among these communities, the Kurichiyar stand out as the most socioeconomically advanced, typically owning small parcels of land, while members of other tribes primarily engage in labour-orientated occupations. (Kerala State Planning Board, n.d.) Varghese (2018) examines that Kerala's tribal populations exhibit significant diversity both among themselves and in contrast to non-tribal communities. These variations manifest in language, social structures, and subsistence practices. Notably, tribes sharing dialects from the same linguistic family may differ economically, while tribes with similar livelihoods might lack linguistic commonality. All tribal communities differ in sociocultural fields such as values, customary practices, tradition, beliefs, language, geographical area, etc. These tribes can be generally categorised as hill tribes, like the Paniya and Adiya, who were also treated as slave communities in earlier periods. There are agriculturalist tribes like the Kurichyas and Kurumars who are equally skilful in hunting and gathering since their participation in war along with Pazhassi Raj against the British regime. The

Kattunaicken community are forest dwellers and predominantly inhabit the forest belt, depending on forest resources.

The social mobility of tribes differs based on their exposure to modernity, mixing with mainstream culture, values placed upon tradition, their social network, etc. It has been seen that tribal communities are largely exposed to modernity, and their cultural traditions and practices are altered, even if the tribes do have their own religious practices. As a Sanskritisation process, they are largely imitating Hindu rituals and practices, which has altered the lifestyle of tribal communities.

Over the years, tribal youth in Wayanad have begun to access more opportunities in education, jobs, and social life. These changes are helping some of them move ahead socially and economically. However, as they move ahead, many young people also face challenges in maintaining their tribal identity. Korostelina (2007) defines social identity as a sense of belonging to a group, a strong affiliation with a social category, and a mental framework shaping perceptions and behaviour. This includes language, customs, traditional dress, and cultural values. Virginius Xaxa (2008) argues that tribals faced "double colonisation", first under British rule and later by dominant Indian groups, resulting in loss of land, cultural erosion, and political disempowerment. Tribal identity in India remains shaped by resistance to systemic oppression and cultural erosion. While some tribes fight to preserve traditions, others embrace mobility to challenge discrimination, revealing tensions between preservation and change.

## II. SOCIAL MOBILITY

Social mobility refers to the movement of individuals or groups within or between social classes in a society, which can be upward or downward. It occurs in open systems where status is influenced by both inherited (ascribed) and earned (achieved) factors. Aldridge (2001) argues that social mobility refers to the movement of individuals or families within or between social strata, often measured by changes in income, education, or occupation. Social mobility is vital for ensuring equal opportunities, fairness, and economic efficiency. It strengthens social cohesion by promoting the belief that effort leads to success, reducing resentment and fostering inclusion.

In India, Scheduled Tribes (STs) and other disadvantaged groups (SCs, OBCs, and Muslims) show limited multigenerational social mobility, particularly in occupational status. While educational mobility has improved slightly across generations (e.g., reduced illiteracy), occupational mobility remains stagnant, with most STs persisting in informal or low-skilled jobs over three generations. The pursuit of social mobility among tribal people, while offering a pathway to improved livelihoods, presents significant challenges, including the risk of cultural erosion as communities adopt dominant societal practices, potentially diluting their unique identities. (Explore Anthropology, 2023) This paper examines how social mobility is influencing tribal identity, with attention to differences among tribes in Wayanad. The study is based on textual analysis, where literature, reports, secondary sources, etc. will be examined.

## III. TRIBAL IDENTITY

Historically disadvantaged Adivasis are the descendants of India's original inhabitants. Their traditions, like ceremonies honouring ancestors, and material culture, like clothing, have often been boiled down to performances or hackneyed icons of tribal heritage. These communities were officially declared tribes by the British colonial state, which in turn consolidated their distinctive social location by regularly employing descriptions such as 'hill', 'jungle', 'aboriginal', or 'indigenous'. Most tribal identities developed around narratives of resistance against dominant non-tribal societies due to this categorisation, which was carried out within a context of unequal power relations. Policies of affirmative action have facilitated the progressive emergence of an educated tribal middle class, which has reaffirmed assertions of tribal identity as well as created new social differences. But their greatest problems are land alienation, deprivation of forest rights, and cultural decay through displacement, which diminishes their traditional reliance on natural resources. Land is deeply emotional and economically precious to tribals, but settlers from outside have gradually gained possession of it in the long run. In Kerala, there was a land reform law trying to reclaim tribal land, but implementation did not take place because the settlers were powerful. Consequently, the majority of the alienated land is still held by non-tribal individuals. Now, Adivasis are still a marginalised minority, dependent on governmental welfare schemes and constitutional protections for their empowerment and the protection of their rights and identity.

#### IV. OBJECTIVES

- To analyse the patterns and drivers of social mobility
- To examine the impact of social mobility on tribal identity,
- To compare how social mobility differentially impacts tribal identity across Wayanad's major communities.

#### V. METHODOLOGY

This study examines the relationship between social mobility and tribal identity in the Wayanad district's Paniya, Kurichya, Kuruma, Adiya, and Kattunaikkan tribes using a qualitative comparative research design that is solely dependent on secondary data sources. The study employs a thematic interpretative approach, which entails data extraction, coding, and classification according to major themes such as state intervention, educational access, livelihood shifts, land relations, and cultural adaptability. A cross-community comparison approach is then used to synthesise the themes in order to determine patterns of differential mobility and their consequences for tribal identity. In order to give an organised analysis of the interaction between economic development, structural variables, and historical marginalisation in forming tribal identities, the study makes use of well-established sociological theories on social mobility and social identity. Despite the research being limited by its exclusive use of secondary data sources and lack of primary data, it provides a macro-level comparative understanding of mobility-identity relationships in Wayanad.

#### VI. EDUCATIONAL ACCESS AND ASPIRATIONS

Education has a crucial role to play in achieving upward social mobility. Though tribal populations manifest inequalities in socioeconomic status, such as varying income, social class, and asset ownership, education has ensured a remarkable advancement in their standard of living. The government has also backed these groups with positive measures like reservation and scholarship schemes, thus ensuring their increased integration into society. Goel (1975) argued that education contributes to economic development through both direct and indirect mechanisms. Directly, it enhances productivity, employment, labour force composition, specialisation, and workforce mobility. Indirectly, it fosters savings, reduces family size, cultivates essential skills and attitudes, and removes barriers to social change and progress.

The Paniya community faces low enrolment, high dropout rates, distant schools, poverty, teacher shortages, language barriers, and lack of vocational training (A.B. Ota, 2015), creating persistent disadvantages. The Paniyan community makes up 21.77% of the total Scheduled Tribes, yet they account for 28.99% of all illiterates within this group. Additionally, 34.81% of Paniyans are illiterate, and only 2.81% have completed SSLC or higher secondary education, highlighting significant educational disparities (Government of Kerala, 2013). The Paniya tribe prioritises only basic needs (food, shelter, and clothing) and lacks exposure to modern education, healthcare, and markets. Most parents show no interest in schooling, refusing even to buy basic school supplies (Chetia, 2015). The Paniya community faces significant challenges in achieving modern development due to remote dwelling locations, poor transportation, illiteracy, and reliance on traditional practices (Sreedharan & Raviprakash, 2024). Superstitious beliefs, inadequate healthcare, and malnutrition further hinder progress, with high infant mortality and anaemia rates compared to national averages. Despite efforts to preserve their tribal identity, the Paniya community is undergoing changes in socio-economic structures, education, and cultural adaptation. However, they remain trapped in poverty, ill health, and debt due to persistent economic and cultural challenges (Ramdas, 2016).

Shibu (2020) states that in the Kurichya community, education, exposure to mainstream society, and changes in their environment are causing shifts in tribal people's traditional jobs. Government reservation policies have enabled a few individuals to secure government or private sector jobs, but most still face barriers in accessing these opportunities. While education, external influences, and changing environments are gradually shifting livelihood patterns, widespread progress remains slow and uneven within these communities.

The Uralikurumar had access to formal education since pre-independence, but high dropout rates in primary and upper primary levels persist, largely due to parental unawareness and child labour. Despite NGO and government efforts to reduce dropouts, progress remains slow, with only one female graduate in the community so far. Male children often leave school early to work as plantation labourers, hindering educational advancement (Abdul Yoonus 2012).

Raseena and Somasundaran (2024) found that the Adiya tribe faces significant barriers to education, with 36% citing inadequate school infrastructure as the most pressing challenge, highlighting the urgent need for better facilities and qualified teachers. Economic constraints affect 28% of families who struggle with education costs, calling for financial support like scholarships. Additionally, 22% report a cultural disconnect, as mainstream curricula fail to incorporate tribal knowledge and traditions, making schooling feel irrelevant to their way of life. Another 14% point to high dropout rates, as children often leave school early to support their families financially.

The study reveals that the Adiyar tribal community exhibits alarmingly low levels of formal education, with 92.9% of respondents being illiterate. Only 4.29% have attained SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate) qualifications, and a negligible 0.61% have completed PUC (Pre-University Course). This severe educational deprivation likely perpetuates the community's reliance on traditional subsistence practices and restricts their awareness of government welfare schemes. While a minority of respondents (11.4%) attribute limited access to facilities to inadequate government awareness initiatives, the findings suggest that the core barriers are structural, rooted in socio-cultural norms and chronic educational disparities. Addressing these challenges requires policy interventions that integrate literacy enhancement with culturally sensitive outreach programmes to ensure inclusive development. (Kumara & Gurulingaiah, 2024)

Gafoor and Madhu (2008) describe that poverty forces children into labour, while parental alcoholism reduces family support for schooling. Cultural challenges like early marriages and superstitions discourage education. Geographic isolation in forest areas limits access. Systemic failures include language barriers, irrelevant curriculum, insufficient schools, and teacher neglect. Poor infrastructure and weak government support sustain this educational deprivation.

Anusree and Umajyothi (2023) argue that Education has improved employability and social integration for Kerala's Kattunayakan tribe, a PVTG. However, unemployment among educated youth discourages schooling. Poverty persists despite government programmes, hindered by poor awareness and bureaucratic delays. Tailored development plans and motivational efforts are needed to address their unique socio-economic challenges

## **VII. ECONOMIC TRANSITIONS AND LIVELIHOOD PATTERNS**

Tribal communities in Kerala face economic marginalisation due to unsustainable traditional livelihoods, limited market access, and lack of credit, increasing their vulnerability to economic and environmental shocks. Despite legal protections, social discrimination persists, undermining self-esteem and inclusion. Additionally, cultural erosion threatens indigenous knowledge as younger generations abandon traditional practices. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions to promote socio-economic advancement, self-sufficiency, and resilience, improving education, healthcare, and living standards for sustainable development. (Nair et al., 2024). Such sustainable development efforts must also consider the unique socio-economic structures of tribal communities, as seen in the Uralikurumar's traditional economy, where gendered roles in pottery, trade, and basketry once ensured community resilience before external pressures eroded these systems (Abdul Yoonus, 2012). Modern challenges like clay scarcity, aluminium competition, and forest laws disrupted these livelihoods. Bamboo shortages ended basketry and blacksmithing, forcing the community into wage labour.

Sreeja & Ramesh (2022) stated that the Paniya tribe lacks land ownership and relies solely on agricultural labour due to low education levels, which also excludes them from government jobs. This limited occupational mobility restricts their socio-economic progress. Educational advancement is crucial to improving their employment opportunities and economic status. Mathew and Umesh (2019) highlight a shift in tribal livelihoods in Wayanad, with Paniya and Kattunaickka communities increasingly relying on non-forest activities for income due to socio-economic changes. Traditional forest-dependent lifestyles are declining as external influences reshape their economic strategies. These trends underscore the need for policies addressing tribal adaptation to modern economic pressures while preserving cultural ties.

Jayarajan (2018) reported that the Kattunaicken tribal community traditionally relied on honey collection, hunting, and gathering forest produce like medicinal herbs and gooseberries, but these livelihoods declined due to forest department restrictions. Some now collect "Kalpaatam" fungus or work as mahouts, while others migrate to Karnataka for plantation labour. Though some women earn stable incomes through Kudumbashree jobs, many in remote areas still live in poverty with inadequate housing. Government forest regulations have severely disrupted their traditional way of life, pushing the community into precarious economic conditions.

Sanal and Atheequ (2018) documented that The Kurichiyan tribe of Kerala exemplifies a unique matrilineal, socialist community with cooperative farming and joint family systems. Economically self-sufficient, they primarily engage in agriculture, with minimal occupational diversification into wage labour or service sectors. Their cultural practices, including rites of passage, mirror those of the Nayers of Malabar, reflecting deep-rooted traditions. However, their adherence to traditional livelihoods limits modern occupational mobility, preserving their heritage while constraining economic adaptation.

## VIII .CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Identity is how we perceive ourselves and the environment around us. Modern identities are based on achievement and individualism; however, tribal communities are less individualistic and have a high communal bond. Tribal societies in India have changed a lot over time. Earlier, they lived in close-knit groups with shared resources and simple technology. The arrival of colonial rule and capitalism introduced new economic systems that disrupted tribal self-sufficiency. These changes included private land ownership, taxation, and market-based trade, which forced many tribes to sell their lands or work for very low wages. As money became essential for survival, tribal communities grew dependent on the larger economy. Government policies often supported big businesses instead of protecting tribal rights, worsening their struggles. These shifts destroyed traditional ways of life and left many tribes economically vulnerable. Despite systemic marginalisation and economic vulnerabilities caused by government policies, many tribal communities have shown resilience by preserving their cultural identity while also making social progress. A key example is the Paniya tribe in Wayanad, where gender equality has improved through reduced dowry customs, greater inclusion of women in family decisions, and a decline in discrimination, reflecting positive societal change. Enhanced inter-tribal relations and fewer social barriers further reflect their advancing societal integration. (Biju, 2024) The study by Sihas et al. (2024) found that mass media—including radio, television, mobile phones, and the internet—has significantly broadened the worldview of Adivasi communities in Wayanad, Kerala. These technologies have enhanced education by improving parent-student communication, overcoming language barriers, and increasing informed participation in decision-making.

The Kattunaika tribe, traditionally dependent on forest-based livelihoods like hunting and gathering, has been significantly affected by forest laws and deforestation. As a result, many have shifted to non-traditional livelihoods such as plantation work and small industries. (Sasidharan, 2017)

The study highlights a shift in tribal livelihoods in Wayanad, with Paniya and Kattunaickka communities increasingly relying on non-forest activities for income due to socio-economic changes. Traditional forest-dependent lifestyles are declining as external influences reshape their economic strategies. These trends underscore the need for policies addressing tribal adaptation to modern economic pressures while preserving cultural ties. (Mathew & Umesh, 2019) The study by Dineshkumar (2018) on the Kattunaicker tribal community documents significant social transformations, revealing that 57.3% of respondents reported changes in daily activities, 28.2% in recreational practices, and 14.5% in festival celebrations, while educational improvements were most notable at the secondary level (38.8%), followed by higher secondary (35%), primary (14.6%), and college (11.6%). The formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) positively influenced financial behaviours, with 46.6% developing savings habits, 29.1% gaining banking awareness, and 24.3% accessing institutional loans, though family welfare programme awareness remained incomplete (68% aware vs. 32% unaware). Economically, capacity to afford nutritious food and education was high, with 86.4% attaining home ownership, while social integration showed progress (58.3% participating in inter-community religious events), though partial exclusion persisted (41.7% non-participatory) (Dineshkumar, 2018).

The Kurichiya community has experienced significant socio-cultural changes due to participation in development schemes like Kudumbashree and MGNREGS, with younger generations and women increasingly interacting with non-tribal communities, leading to a decline in strict purity-pollution norms and joint family structures. These interactions have fostered cultural adaptations, such as celebrating mainstream festivals like Christmas and Onam, while economic engagement through SHGs and government programmes has weakened traditional hierarchies, unintentionally transforming social dynamics by integrating the tribe into broader societal networks (Jyothsna, n.d.). The study by Biju (2025) recommends culturally sensitive interventions for the Kurichiya tribe, including workshops to enhance women's participation in decision-making through collaboration with women's groups and community leaders, educational initiatives like scholarships and career counselling to expand opportunities beyond agriculture, and programs that balance modernization with cultural preservation by

involving local leaders. These approaches aim to improve gender equity, education, and social integration while respecting traditional values.

## IX COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The Wayanad tribal communities have vast variations in economic and social mobility. These variations are caused by history, culture, and government policies. The Kurichiyas, with property and steady agriculture, have progressed due to education and reservation policies that enabled them to secure government jobs. On the other hand, the Paniyas and Adiyas are poor, as they do not own land, have poor literacy, and are engaged in low-earning activities. They are deprived of education because of bad roads, cultural constraints, and child labour. This limits them to unskilled labour. The Kattunaickens and Uralikurumars are economically distressed as forest laws and market fluctuations impact their traditional occupations, such as honey collection and pottery. These drive them into insecure jobs in plantations or migration. Government initiatives try to assist all the tribes but end up missing their requirements. For instance, most Paniyas are not aware of welfare schemes, and Kurichiyas gain more due to reservations. This indicates the necessity of policies based on each tribe's own problems.

Balancing tradition and new development makes difficult decisions for tribes in Wayanad. The Kurichiyas and Adiyas are transforming their customs in a cautious manner. They utilise self-help groups and media, which are beneficial for women and youth. But these instruments also weaken their traditional ways. For instance, they celebrate mainstream festivals like Onam now rather than traditional ones. The Paniyas, who remain secluded, preserve their traditional ways but are rejected from the outside. The superstitions and gender disparities remain dominant among them. The Kattunaickens rely on forests but lose their lifestyle due to government policies. Their limited exposure to education prevents them from seeking new alternatives. These are manifestations of larger failures, such as land reforms benefiting outsiders, school curricula that disregard tribal traditions, and centrally imposed policies without their wisdom. Policies need to safeguard land rights, such as implementing the Forest Rights Act.

tribal identity in Wayanad is constantly negotiated between adaptation and preservation, influenced by historical oppression, economic necessity, and policy intervention. While land-owning Kurichiyas have been able to selectively embrace modern education and employment while holding on to fundamental traditions, more marginalised groups such as the Paniyas and Kattunaickens suffer from extreme cultural erosion through isolation, forest livelihood loss, and poorly planned education systems that ignore indigenous knowledge. Government development programmes have generated paradoxical results – facilitating some mobility through schemes such as Kudumbashree while at the same time hastening the disintegration of the older social organisations and customs. Finally, modern tribal identity is a mixture of resistant cultural survival and the inevitable changes imposed by modernisation, with groups torn between holding on to their uniqueness under pressures towards assimilation that are systemic in nature.

## CONCLUSION

The study of social mobility among Wayanad's tribal communities reveals significant differences led by historical, economic, and policy factors. Few communities like the Kurichiyas have achieved upward mobility through land ownership, education, and affirmative action, while the Paniyas and Adiyas remain in poverty and marginalisation due to landlessness, education, and exploitative labour. The Kattunaickens and Uralikurumars face destabilization due to forest laws and market forces. Systemic failures, such as culturally insensitive education and inadequate land reforms, perpetuate inequalities. The study calls for inclusive policies prioritising tribal agency, empowering tribes as active stakeholders in their own progress.

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