



## SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF SCHEDULED TRIBES IN KERALA- AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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### Introduction

The socio-economic status of Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Kerala is a multifaceted issue shaped by historical, cultural, and political dynamics. Kerala, with its progressive social policies, high literacy rates, and robust healthcare system, presents a unique case for analyzing the conditions of STs. However, despite the state's progressive social landscape, tribal communities remain among the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups in terms of economic status, education, and access to basic services.

This article seeks to explore the socio-economic status of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala, focusing on historical context, socio-economic indicators, government policies, and the challenges faced by these communities.

### Overview of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala

Kerala is home to a diverse tribal population, which, although constituting only about 1.1% of the state's total population according to the 2011 Census, exhibits a rich cultural heritage. These tribal groups are primarily found in the state's remote hilly and forested regions, notably in districts such as Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad. Each tribe has its unique customs, traditions, and languages, contributing to Kerala's cultural mosaic. The geographical isolation of these communities often influences their socio-economic conditions, making it essential to understand their specific challenges and needs.

### Objectives of the Article

The primary aim of this article is to explore the socio-economic status of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala. It will delve into various aspects such as education, health care, employment opportunities, and overall economic development within these communities. Additionally, the article seeks to examine the effectiveness of government interventions aimed at improving the lives of tribal populations. By identifying both the achievements and ongoing challenges faced by these communities, this analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of their current situation and the factors that impact their development.

## 2. Historical Context of Tribal Communities in Kerala

- **Indigenous People and Early Social Structure:** Kerala's Scheduled Tribes are believed to have been the original inhabitants of the region before the advent of various ethnic groups and colonial forces. Historically, they had a self-sustained socio-economic structure based on forest produce, hunting, and primitive agriculture. They had a strong relationship with the environment but faced exploitation and marginalization by the dominant social and economic structures.
- **Colonial and Post-Colonial Displacement:** During British colonial rule, the forests were declared reserved, and the tribal populations were displaced. The post-independence era saw



continued marginalization due to land alienation and the gradual encroachment of mainstream agriculture and urbanization on tribal lands.

- **Social Reform Movements and Tribal Rights:** In Kerala, movements like the one led by Ayyankali and the reforms initiated by the Travancore and Cochin rulers brought some changes for backward classes. However, tribal communities, particularly in remote regions, were largely excluded from these reforms, further deepening their socio-economic isolation.

### 3. Socio-Economic Indicators of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala

- **Literacy and Education:**
  - Kerala has the highest literacy rate in India, and this progress is mirrored in the tribal communities to some extent. However, the literacy rate among STs remains lower than the state average. According to the 2011 Census, the literacy rate for Scheduled Tribes was around 59%, significantly lower than the state average of 94%.
  - While there have been various schemes to provide free education, scholarships, and hostel facilities for tribal students, factors such as poor infrastructure, language barriers, and a lack of qualified teachers in tribal areas continue to hinder educational outcomes.
- **Economic Status and Employment:**
  - Historically, the tribal economy has been based on subsistence farming, hunting, and gathering forest products. Over time, due to forest laws, encroachments on land, and lack of access to modern agricultural tools, most tribes have faced a steady decline in their economic status.
  - Today, a significant portion of the tribal population still depends on government welfare programs, and many are engaged in low-paying, informal jobs or work as daily wage laborers. The lack of skill development, low productivity, and inadequate access to capital and credit are major barriers to economic empowerment.
- **Housing and Living Conditions:**
  - Tribal communities in Kerala often live in remote, hilly, and difficult-to-access areas. Housing conditions remain poor in many tribal settlements, with inadequate infrastructure such as roads, sanitation, and access to clean drinking water.
  - Government programs such as the "Indira Awas Yojana" and "Tribal Development Housing Schemes" have attempted to improve living conditions, but challenges persist in terms of quality and accessibility.
- **Health and Access to Healthcare:**
  - Kerala's healthcare system is among the best in India, but tribal populations still face significant health challenges due to lack of access to healthcare facilities, unavailability of specialized services, and high rates of communicable diseases.
  - Poor nutrition, inadequate sanitation, and poor maternal health outcomes continue to plague tribal communities. Kerala's tribal health policy has aimed to improve conditions, but health indicators such as infant mortality rates and malnutrition remain concerning in tribal areas.



#### 4. Government Policies and Interventions

- **Constitutional Provisions and Legal Rights:**
  - The Indian Constitution, through provisions like Article 46, aims to protect the interests of Scheduled Tribes. These protections are intended to ensure social, economic, and educational advancement for tribal communities. Kerala has implemented several measures to provide affirmative action in education, employment, and political representation for STs.
- **Tribal Sub-Plan and Welfare Programs:**
  - Kerala has implemented several welfare schemes aimed at the development of Scheduled Tribes, including the **Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP)**, which allocates a specific percentage of the state budget for the development of tribal areas.
  - Key programs include:
    - **Kerala State Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation (TRICOR):** Aimed at providing economic support, including marketing of forest produce, credit facilities, and livelihood support.
    - **Tribal Development Programmes:** These include financial assistance for education, healthcare, and infrastructure development in tribal regions.
    - **Tribal Residential Schools and Scholarships:** To ensure educational access, the government has set up residential schools for tribal children and offers scholarships for higher education.
- **Forest Rights Act (2006):** One of the significant developments for tribal rights in India has been the enactment of the Forest Rights Act, which recognizes the rights of tribal communities over forest land and resources. In Kerala, while the implementation of the Act has been slow, it is a step forward in empowering tribal communities to claim land rights and natural resources.
- **Political Representation:**
  - The political structure of Kerala provides significant opportunities for STs to engage in governance. Tribes have reserved seats in the Kerala Legislative Assembly and local self-governments. However, political representation has not always translated into tangible improvements in their socio-economic status.

#### 5. Challenges Faced by Scheduled Tribes in Kerala

- **Land Alienation and Displacement:** Despite the Forest Rights Act, land alienation remains a significant problem for many tribal communities. Encroachments by non-tribal settlers, land ownership disputes, and the loss of forest resources due to conservation policies have made it difficult for tribal populations to retain their land.
- **Cultural Marginalization:** Tribal communities in Kerala face cultural marginalization, with their traditions and languages often sidelined in favor of mainstream culture. This cultural erosion affects their identity and sense of community, contributing to social exclusion.
- **Economic Vulnerability:** Despite efforts to provide economic support, many tribal communities remain dependent on government assistance for survival. The lack of infrastructure, skills training, and market access has stunted economic development. Tribes are often excluded from emerging sectors like IT, tourism, and modern agriculture.



- **Education and Dropout Rates:** While Kerala's education system is among the best in India, tribal children continue to face barriers in education, including language issues, cultural differences, and poor infrastructure. Dropout rates remain high, particularly in higher education, leading to limited opportunities for upward social mobility.
- **Health Inequities:** Tribal communities continue to suffer from poor health outcomes, exacerbated by a lack of access to quality healthcare, poor sanitation, and high levels of malnutrition. The state's healthcare system needs to be more inclusive and responsive to the specific needs of tribal populations.

## 6. Suggestions

### 1. Improved Education Access:

- Increase the number of schools in tribal areas, with a focus on culturally relevant curricula.
- Provide scholarships and financial aid specifically for tribal students to encourage higher education.

### 2. Health Care Initiatives:

- Establish mobile health clinics to reach remote tribal areas.
- Conduct awareness programs about health and nutrition tailored to tribal communities.

### 3. Skill Development and Employment:

- Implement vocational training programs that focus on skills relevant to local economies.
- Promote self-employment schemes and support small enterprises run by tribal members.

### 4. Community Participation:

- Involve tribal leaders in the planning and implementation of development projects to ensure they meet local needs.
- Encourage community-driven initiatives that empower tribal populations.

### 5. Sustainable Development:

- Promote eco-friendly practices that allow for the sustainable use of natural resources, preserving both the environment and traditional livelihoods.
- Support initiatives in agroforestry and organic farming to enhance food security and income.

### 6. Cultural Preservation:

- Develop programs that document and promote tribal cultures and languages, ensuring their preservation amidst modernization.
- Encourage tourism that highlights tribal heritage, providing economic benefits while respecting cultural integrity.



## Conclusions

**Summary of Key Findings:** The socio-economic status of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala has improved in many respects, particularly in terms of education, health, and political representation. However, significant challenges remain, including economic vulnerability, land alienation, and limited access to quality services.

**Future Prospects:** Moving forward, the government must focus on implementing policies that ensure the economic empowerment of tribal communities, including access to land, skills development, and employment in emerging sectors. Furthermore, there is a need to enhance tribal participation in the development process to ensure that policies are culturally sensitive and effectively address their needs.

**Integration and Social Justice:** Kerala's model of social justice must be expanded to include greater support for the integration of Scheduled Tribes into the mainstream economy. This requires addressing social exclusion, improving infrastructure, and creating sustainable livelihood opportunities for tribal communities.

The socio-economic status of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala reflects significant disparities when compared to other social groups. While there have been improvements in areas like education and health, challenges remain in achieving equity. Empowerment through education, healthcare, and economic opportunities is crucial for enhancing the livelihoods of these communities.

Addressing the unique needs of Scheduled Tribes requires a multifaceted approach that respects their cultural identity and promotes sustainable development. Collaborative efforts involving government, NGOs, and tribal communities are essential to create effective policies and programs.

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