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SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES OF THE KATTUNAYKKAN TRIBAL WOMEN IN WAYANAD DISTRICT, KERALA

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ABSTRACT
This study explores the socio-economic conditions and developmental challenges faced by the Kattunaykkan tribal community in Wayanad district, Kerala, with a specific focus on adult women. Recognized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), the Kattunaykkan inhabit forest-fringe areas and remain socio-economically marginalized despite various welfare interventions. Based on primary data collected from 150 tribal households in Noolpuzha and Ambalavayal panchayats of Sulthan Bathery taluk, the study examines demographic distribution, educational levels, occupational patterns, health status, and access to healthcare. The findings reveal widespread illiteracy, high dependence on unpaid family labour, prevalence of acute and chronic diseases, and delayed medical treatment-seeking behaviour. These socio-economic and health-related deprivations highlight persistent structural inequalities and call for targeted, culturally sensitive policy interventions that promote inclusive development, especially for tribal women.

KEYWORDS: *Kattunaykkan Tribe, Socio-Economic Conditions, Tribal Women, Health Disparities, Education, PVTG, Inclusive Development*

INTRODUCTION
Tribal communities in India represent a diverse and historically marginalized section of the population, often residing in remote and ecologically sensitive regions. In Kerala, the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population constitutes 1.46% of the total population (Census, 2011), with Wayanad district accounting for nearly 37% of this tribal population. Despite various constitutional safeguards and developmental programmes, tribal groups in Kerala continue to face systemic socio-economic exclusion. Among these communities, the Kattunaykkan - classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) - inhabit forest-fringe areas and are known for their traditional livelihood practices closely tied to nature. Kattunayakan women, in particular, play a vital role in sustaining their households through both productive and reproductive labour. However, they face multiple forms of disadvantage stemming from intersecting axes of gender, poverty, geographical isolation, and cultural marginalization. Their access to education, healthcare, paid employment, and other basic services remains critically limited. The lack of infrastructure, institutional support, and culturally appropriate interventions further deepens their vulnerability. Given this context, it is imperative to examine the socio-economic realities of Kattunayakan tribal women in a comprehensive manner. This study focuses on assessing the demographic profile, educational attainment, employment status, health conditions, and access to services among Kattunaykkan women in the Noolpuzha and Ambalavayal panchayats of Sulthan Bathery taluk in Wayanad district. By using household-level primary data, the study aims to identify the key challenges they face and offer insights for more inclusive and gender-sensitive policy frameworks.

Age Composition of the Sample Female Respondents
Understanding the age distribution of respondents is crucial in analysing their socio-economic roles and developmental needs. As shown in the primary survey conducted among 150 Kattunayakan tribal women in Wayanad district, the largest proportion of respondents (42%) fall within the 30-40 age group, followed by 26% in the 40–50 age bracket. Notably, 16% of the respondents each belong to the 50–60 and 60 and above age groups. This age distribution reflects a predominantly middle-aged population, indicating that significant shares of tribal women are in their economically active years. The presence of a considerable number of elderly respondents also highlights the importance of addressing age-specific needs, such as health care and social support. The data suggests that any development intervention should be sensitive to the age-related capacities and vulnerabilities of tribal women, especially in the context of unpaid labour, health issues, and access to services.
Age composition of the sample female respondent

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Table No: 1
Age Composition of the Sample Female Respondents

Age of the Sample Female Respondent	Number of household	Percentage
30-40	63	42.0
40-50	39	26.0
50-60	24	16.0
60 and above	24	16.0
Total	150	100.0

Source: field survey, September 2022

Educational Status of the Sample Female Respondents

The educational profile of the Kattunayakan tribal women surveyed reveals a stark picture of educational deprivation. Among the 150 respondents, an overwhelming majority - 84% - are illiterate, indicating that formal education remains largely inaccessible to most women in the community. Only 10% of the respondents have completed lower primary education, while a mere 4% reached the upper primary level. Notably, just 2% of the women have attained high school education. This limited educational attainment can be attributed to several interrelated factors, including the remote and forest-based habitation of the community, lack of culturally responsive educational institutions, economic hardship, and the prioritization of subsistence activities over schooling. The data underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions aimed at improving educational access and outcomes for tribal women, particularly through inclusive and context-specific educational policies that address both infrastructural gaps and socio-cultural barriers.

Table No: 2
Educational standard of the sample female respondents

Education qualification of the sample female respondent	Number of households	Percentage
Illiterate	126	84.0
Lower Primary	15	10.0
Upper Primary	6	4.0
High School	3	2.0
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, September 2022

Activity Status of the Sample Female Respondents

The activity status of Kattunayakan tribal women, as observed in the survey of 150 households, highlights their significant but often unrecognized role in the family economy. A large majority - 78% of the respondents - are categorized as unpaid family workers. These women actively contribute to household subsistence through labour-intensive activities such as collection of forest produce, agriculture, and caregiving, yet their work remains economically unacknowledged. Only 2% of the respondents identified themselves as housewives, indicating that even those traditionally considered non-working are likely engaged in informal or subsistence-level tasks. Notably, 20% of the women fall under the category of pensioners, most of whom receive old-age pensions. The data points to the invisibility of tribal women's labour in formal economic assessments and underscores the need for policy frameworks that recognize and compensate unpaid work, ensure social security, and create sustainable livelihood opportunities for tribal women in marginalized settings.

Table No: 3
Activity Status of the Sample Female Respondents

Activity status of the female sample respondent	Number of households	Percentage
Unpaid Family Worker	117	78.0
Housewife	3	2.0
Pensioner	30	20.0
Total	150	100.0

Source: field survey, September 2022

Health Status of the Sample Female Respondents

Health remains a critical concern among Kattunayakan tribal women, primarily due to inadequate infrastructure, poor sanitation, limited access to clean drinking water, and nutritional deficiencies. The survey data from 150 households indicate that 40% of the respondents suffer from acute diseases such as fever, headaches, and respiratory infections, reflecting their high vulnerability to seasonal and environmental health risks. Skin diseases affect 28% of the women, which may be linked to unhygienic living conditions and frequent contact with contaminated water bodies, especially among those involved in fishing or collecting forest produce. Chronic illnesses, including heart problems, tuberculosis, and mental health issues, are reported by 20% of the respondents, signalling long-term health neglect and lack of regular medical intervention. Waterborne diseases affect 12% of the sample, pointing to the dire need for improved water and sanitation facilities. Although traditional herbal medicine once formed a robust part of their health system, environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity have significantly eroded this knowledge base. Moreover, tribal women often delay seeking medical care, typically approaching health facilities only in the advanced stages of illness, further complicating their health outcomes. The data highlights the urgent need for culturally appropriate,

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accessible, and preventive health interventions targeting tribal women in remote areas

Table No: 4
Type of diseases affected by the sample female respondents

Type of diseases of the sample female respondents	Number of Households	Percentage
Waterborne Disease	18	12.0
Chronic	30	20.0
Skin Disease	42	28.0
Acute Disease	60	40.0
Total	150	100.0

Source: field survey, September 2022

Duration of Treatment Taken by the Sample Female Respondents

The pattern of healthcare-seeking behaviour among Kattunaykkan tribal women reveals a tendency to delay medical treatment until symptoms become severe. According to the survey data, 40% of the respondents required treatment lasting between one to two weeks, suggesting a moderate level of illness severity and delay in seeking medical attention. Approximately 24% of the women underwent treatment for more than one month, primarily for chronic conditions such as cardiac problems, mental health issues, and eye disorders. This prolonged treatment duration reflects both the seriousness of the health conditions and the limitations in accessing timely and effective medical care. Another 18% reported receiving treatment for four to five weeks, while only 12% sought care within the first week of illness onset. This delay can be attributed to multiple factors, including poor health awareness, reliance on traditional remedies, financial constraints, and the inaccessibility of healthcare facilities in remote tribal areas. These findings highlight the need for improved health literacy, accessible medical services, and culturally sensitive health outreach programs to encourage early intervention and reduce the burden of prolonged illness among tribal women.

Table No: 5
Duration of treatment taken by the sample female respondents

Category	Number of households	Percentage
Below One Week	18	12
1-2 Week	60	40
2-4 Week	9	6
4-5 Week	27	18
Above One Month	36	24
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, September 2022

Health Insurance Coverage of the Sample Female Respondents

Access to health insurance is a crucial determinant of financial protection and healthcare accessibility, especially in vulnerable communities. The survey findings indicate that among the 150 Kattunayakan tribal women interviewed, 68% are covered under the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY), a government-sponsored health insurance scheme aimed at providing financial relief for below-poverty-line households. However, 32% of the respondents reported not having any form of health insurance coverage. This lack of coverage exposes a significant portion of the community to out-of-pocket health expenditures, potentially discouraging them from seeking timely medical care. The data suggests that while RSBY has reached a majority of the tribal households, gaps in awareness, documentation barriers, and limited outreach in remote areas may hinder universal enrolment. Bridging this gap through targeted awareness campaigns, simplified enrolment procedures, and active involvement of local self-governments could enhance healthcare access and reduce financial vulnerability among tribal women in Wayanad.

Table No: 6
Health insurance coverage of the sample female respondents

RSBY Card	Number of households	Percentage
Yes	102	68
No	48	32
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, September 2022

Occupational Status of the Sample Female Respondents

The occupational engagement of Kattunayakan tribal women in Wayanad reflects a dependency on government-assisted employment schemes and limited access to stable livelihood opportunities. According to the survey, 72% of the respondents are employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which provides a critical source of income through manual labour. This indicates the significant role of public employment programs in sustaining the livelihoods of tribal women, especially in the absence of diverse employment avenues. On the other hand, 28% of the sample women are unemployed, highlighting the persistent challenges related to job scarcity, skill mismatch, and restricted mobility due to social and geographical constraints. Although tribal women have traditionally contributed actively to the economy through agriculture, forest gathering, and other

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informal sectors, the current data reveals a shift toward dependency on state-supported schemes. This underscores the need for inclusive skill development programs, sustainable livelihood options, and empowerment initiatives to enhance economic participation and self-reliance among tribal women.

Table No: 7

Occupational status of the sample female respondent

Type of occupation	Number of olds	Percentage
MGNREGA	108	72
Unemployed	42	28
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, September 2022

The survey data reveals that Kattunaykkan tribal women in Wayanad engage in various subsidiary occupations to supplement their household income, reflecting their strong dependence on natural resources. Among the respondents, 46% reported involvement in the collection of minor forest produce (MFP), such as honey, medicinal plants, and wild edibles - activities deeply rooted in their traditional forest-based lifestyle. Fishing, practiced by 22% of the women, also remains a significant supplementary occupation, particularly in areas near water bodies like the Karappuzha dam. About 2% of the sample reported rearing cattle as an additional livelihood activity. However, it is notable that 30% of the women indicated they do not engage in any subsidiary occupation. This may be attributed to factors such as age, health issues, or lack of opportunities and access to resources. The data underscores the importance of forest ecosystems in sustaining tribal livelihoods and highlights the need for policy support in the sustainable management of forest resources, along with the promotion of alternative income-generating activities for improved economic resilience.

Table No: 8

Subsidiary occupation of the sample female respondents

Subsidiary occupation of the sample female respondents	Number of households	Percentage
Collection of Minor Forest Products	69	46
Rearing of Cattle	3	2
Fishing	33	22
Nothing	45	30
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, September 2022

Number of Days of Employment in a Month

The employment pattern of Kattunayakan tribal women in Wayanad reveals considerable fluctuations in the availability of work throughout the month. As per the survey data, 46% of the respondents are employed for 10 to 15 days a month, indicating irregular and part-time work engagements, most likely under schemes such as MGNREGA. Another 22% of the sample manage to secure employment for 15 to 20 days, reflecting slightly more stable work conditions, yet still falling short of full-time employment. A smaller segment (12%) reported working fewer than 10 days per month, suggesting extremely limited income opportunities. Alarmingly, 20% of the respondents reported no employment at all during the month, highlighting a serious concern regarding economic vulnerability. These figures point to the seasonal and unstable nature of employment among tribal women, often influenced by factors such as lack of skill training, poor connectivity, and low access to diversified job markets. There is an urgent need for livelihood interventions that offer consistent and sustainable employment opportunities tailored to the socio-cultural context of tribal communities.

Table No: 9

Number of days of Employment in a month

Days	Number of House Hold	Percentage
Below 10 Days	18	12
10-15 Days	69	46
15-20 Days	33	22
No Employment	30	20
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, September 2022

Estimated Monthly Income of the Sample Female Respondents

The estimated monthly income data of Kattunayakan tribal women in Wayanad reveals a predominantly low-income profile, underscoring their economic vulnerability. The largest proportion - 56% of the respondents - earn between ₹1,500 and ₹2,000 per month, which, though comparatively higher than other groups in the sample, still reflects subsistence-level earnings. About 22% of the women earn between ₹1,000 and ₹1,500 monthly, while 10% fall within the ₹500 to ₹1,000 range. A small yet significant segment (12%) earns less than ₹500 per month, pointing to acute income insufficiency. Only 18% of respondents reported monthly earnings between ₹100 and ₹500, indicating extreme poverty. These findings illustrate the limited access of tribal women to stable, well-paying employment opportunities. The data also reflects their dependence on low-wage, irregular work such as daily labour and forest-based collection. The persistent income disparities

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call for robust policy measures, including skill development, livelihood diversification, and improved access to markets, to elevate their economic standing and reduce dependency on uncertain wage sources.

Table No: 10
Estimated Monthly income of the sample female respondents

Monthly Income	Number of Households	Percentage
100-500	18	12
500-1000	15	10
1000-1500	84	56
1500-2000	33	22
Total	150	100

Source: field survey, September 2022

CONCLUSION

The socio-economic conditions of the Kattunaykkan tribal women in Wayanad district reveal a complex interplay of historical marginalization, cultural specificity, and contemporary developmental challenges. Despite possessing a rich repository of indigenous knowledge and playing crucial roles within their communities, these women continue to face systemic disadvantages in areas such as education, healthcare, employment, and access to basic amenities. Gender-based vulnerabilities further compound their struggles, limiting their agency in both private and public spheres.

This study highlights that while various governmental and non-governmental initiatives have been launched to support tribal welfare, their reach and effectiveness remain uneven, often failing to address the unique socio-cultural contexts of the Kattunaykkan community. There is an urgent need for inclusive, participatory, and culturally sensitive development policies that empower tribal women not merely as beneficiaries, but as active stakeholders in the development process.

Sustainable progress for Kattunaykkan tribal women must be rooted in an approach that recognizes their distinct identity, preserves their traditional practices, and simultaneously equips them with the resources and rights needed to thrive in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. Only through such integrated efforts can true social justice and equitable development be realized for this marginalized group.

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