



Oorukoottam as a Pillar of Social Integration Among the *Kurichiya* Tribes of Wayanad District

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Abstract: *This article investigates into the long-standing marginalization of tribal communities, specifically the Kurichiya tribe in Kerala's Wayanad district, underscoring their struggle for socio-economic empowerment amidst the enduring influence of mainstream societal structures. Historically, tribal and lower caste communities have been confined to lower social strata, systematically excluded from legislative, administrative, judicial, and legal power structures. Despite constitutional provisions for the welfare of scheduled tribes, the effective implementation of these rights remains an indefinable goal, often thwarted by poverty, illiteracy, and external political influences. With the advent of Oorukoottam—an indigenous Gramasabha aimed at decentralizing governance and fostering tribal autonomy—the Kurichiya community embarked on a path toward greater self-determination and awareness of their rights. This participatory approach has urged progress in many areas of tribal life reflecting meaningful improvements in the quality of life for Kurichiya individuals. However, traditional norms in family decision-making persist, particularly among women who remain isolated from external societal influences, hinting at deeply entrenched cultural practices. This research advocates for policy interventions aiming to accelerate integration and foster sustainable development for the Kurichiya and other marginalized communities.*

Keywords: *Oorukoottam- tribal gramasabha, Kurichiya tribe in Wayanad, participatory approach, quality of life.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The mainstream society always segregated tribal and lower caste people to keep them perpetually low in the social hierarchical order. As a result, the underprivileged were kept from the power structure, i.e., legislative, administrative, judicial or legal. In other words, the underprivileged were deprived of official positions of any substance. Tribes, on their part, have been struggling through various governmental and non-governmental organizations to liberate themselves from the clutches of the debilitating social order governed by mainstream society. The tribal communities in Kerala have grappled with marginalization for decades. Despite constitutional provisions and declarations by the central and state governments regarding special privileges for scheduled tribes, effective implementation has been lacking. The constitution outlines reservations in education and employment for these communities, aiming to integrate them into the developmental process. However, more than 50% of women and scheduled tribes remain unaware of their rights and privileges due to challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, and interference from political parties and non-native communities. The tribal population often fails to realize constitutional benefits, leading to violations of their rights and perpetuating extreme poverty and other threats faced by vulnerable sections of society.

Introducing the tribal *Gramasabha* called *Oorukoottam*, clarified their rights and the imperative for empowerment. Immediate implementation of constitutional guarantees protecting tribal communities is essential. Surveys evaluating the efficacy of *Oorukoottam* indicate that political representatives, non-tribes, and bureaucratic interventions have hindered its full implementation. The potential of decentralized participatory local self-government in improving the quality of life and integrating tribes into mainstream society is yet to be fully realized at the *Oorukoottam* level.

In this article, the author evaluates the developments of *Kurichiya* community in Wayanad district on the basis of *Oorukoottam*, the participatory approach in tribal *grammasabha*. The status of a community is predominantly determined by its economic and social positioning. The article unfolds in two parts: firstly, a historical narrative delving into the socio-economic aspects of *Kurichiya* 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 *Kurichiya* community held a better socio-economic position in society and *Kurichiya* decisively benefited from the *Oorukoottam* intervention in Wayanad. However, an analysis of conditions before and after *Oorukoottam's* intervention is conducted through statistical analysis using the Wilcoxon rank test, t-test, ANOVA test to evaluate the present status of *Kurichiya* tribe after the intervention of *Oorukoottam*. Ten questions related to each social aspects were presented to *Kurichiya*, and the responses were tabulated and statistically tested. The findings, along with necessary explanations, are detailed below.

2. Historical Narration of the social aspect of *Kurichiya* Tribes in Wayanad District

2.1. *Kurichiya* in Wayanad

The *Kurichiya*, among the oldest inhabitants of Wayanad (Mathur 1977), resided in the heart of the high-range *Durga* forests alongside *Paniya* and *Kadars* before the arrival of *Namboothiris*, *Nairs*, and *Ezhavas* (Balakrishnan 1983). Engaging in agriculture and hunting, with proficiency in archery, they were recognized as *Villalikinairs* (Luiz, A. 1962). The name '*Kurichiya*' is believed to have originated from '*kurinilam*' or '*Kurichiya thalam*,' reflecting their punctuality in reporting at the mustering place fixed by the *raja*, earning them the praise '*Kuriyan*,' meaning 'precise,' 'accurate,' and 'dependable.' Thus, '*Kuriyan*' evolved into '*Kurichiya*' (K.S. Singh 2002).

Active participants in the *Pazhassi* rebellion in the early 19th century, the *Kurichiya* tribe holds the highest 'caste' status among tribes even today. With unique practices, customs, and a well-developed way of life, they play a significant role in various aspects of society (Susamma Isac 2012).

2.2. Source of income

The *Kurichiya* tribe, pioneers in Wayanad from the 1st to the 3rd Century, transitioned from hunting to agriculture and trade (Mathur, 1977). As the first agricultural tribe from Malabar, they colonized Wayanad, holding vast lands and achieving a prominent position with superior organizational leadership and physical power. Cooperative farming became their primary economic activity, replacing the earlier practice of "*punarri*" or shifting cultivation due to land fragmentation (Menon 1967). Presently, they engage in wet and dry cultivation, growing paddy on wetlands and *ragi* on hillside dry land (Nair G. C. 1911). Their diet includes both hunted products and locally available vegetables and fruits.

Kurichiya worship inanimate objects as symbols of their deity, with *Muttappan* (Shiva) as their chief hunting god, also worshipping Vishnu (Shashi S S 1997). They believe in a Creator referred to as *Perumal* in their prayers, and their religious rituals and performances are conducted by temple and god-men (Bindu Ramachandran 2003).

2.3. Inter-tribal relations

The *Kurichiya* community in Wayanad holds a prominent position among Kerala tribes, being the second-largest *adivasi* group in the district after *Paniya* (Sajaneesh V.P. 2015). They are also known as *Malai* (hill) *Brahmins* (Gopalan Nair 2011). *Kurichiya* call themselves *Mala namboothiris* as they claim to be the highest among all other tribes in Wayanad. Practicing untouchability, they only accept food from *Brahmins* and *Nayars*, believing others may pollute their houses (Bindu Ramachandran 2003). Traditional and orthodox groups maintain strict rules, barring entry and touch by other communities due to the fear of pollution (Nair 1911; S.S. Shashi 1997). Even accidental contact with a lower tribe mandates a bath and forty dips to remove pollution (*Aythum*).

2.4. Housing pattern

Kurichiya dwellings are strategically situated on elevated hills near their land, with houses elevated two feet above ground level and featuring front and back *verandahs*. Most families have a *theendipura*, a separate structure about fifty yards away for females during menstruation (Lissy P.P. 2016). Traditionally, they lived in expansive matrilineal joint families called *Mittam*, now referred to as *tharavad* (Susamma Isac 2012). There is a main room, considered as the abode of ancestral spirits, with a designated space for the *Karanavan* or head of the joint family. Additional rooms or sheds surround the main building for married members and their children. As the number of couples increases, new structures are added, while the kitchen and dining room remain communal. Notably, joint family systems with 30 to 100 members were observed. While some shifted to nuclear families with separate houses on *tharavad* premises, the essence of a joint family system persists, giving the impression of being under a landlord. They gather in the *tharavad* for rituals and festivals, cultivating jointly. Despite land division based on government land-reform limits, traditional joint family practices endure. They perceive themselves as socially superior and adhere to traditional customs. *Kurichiya s*, asserting Brahmin ancestry, strictly observe untouchability, extending even to their agricultural fields. This strict practice of



untouchability ensured the absence of *Paniya* even in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) organized in *Kurichiya tharavads* (Lissy P.P. 2016).

2.5. Social Deviance and Punishment

Kurichiya individuals, conscious of the severe consequences, tend to avoid criminal activities as imprisonment is considered a form of social death for them. The prospect of breaking *Kurichiya* rules, particularly in relation to communal food practices, while incarcerated is a terrorizing thought for them (A. Ayyappan 1990).

The *Kurichiya* community in Wayanad adheres to an unwritten customary law governing social interactions, and violations result in excommunication, a level of strictness unparalleled among Kerala tribes. Sharing food with other tribes, marrying close relatives, or committing adultery outside the community results in excommunication. Members engaging in incestuous marriages within the same *mittom* face immediate expulsion, and re-admission is never granted. Decisions regarding marriage alliances involving different *Taravads* are made by the eldest members. Even minor transgressions are treated as violations of social norms, warranting excommunication from the tribe (E K Rajan 2011).

2.6. Gender discrimination

The *Kurichiya* tribe considers itself superior to other tribes and maintains a strong aversion to other communities. Traditionally, anyone, including women and children, known to have consumed anything considered impure is immediately expelled. Historically, many *Kurichiya* families avoided sending their children to non-*Kurichiya* schools due to the fear of pollution (*ayithum*). Dedicated schools like the Harijan Welfare Schools in Parambukavu (Kottayam Taluk) and Vengapally (Vythiri Taluk) were established for *Kurichiya* students, where all students and cooks belong to the *Kurichiya* community (S.S. Shashi, 1997). The social isolation prevalent in the past significantly contributed to a high level of illiteracy and hindered their advancement during earlier periods. (Lissy P.P. 2016). Despite the *Kurichiya* of Wayanad evolving away from traditional concepts and adopting innovation, they have not yet fully collaborated with non-governmental agencies, even after seventy-five years of independence.

The community has not witnessed individuals challenging superstitious beliefs. However, as education spreads and interactions with non-tribal people increase, the strict notions of purity and pollution have started to wane. Presently, younger generations are beginning to question traditional superstitious beliefs. Despite these changes, *Kurichiya* individuals maintain a reluctance to interact with blood relations who have been ostracized from the community due to a breach of traditional practices (Report of Commission on the Socio-economic Condition of SC/ST 1998).

3. Objectives:

- To examine the improvements of social life of the *Kurichiya* tribal community through *Oorukoottam* intervention.
- To test the impact of association between social life and demographic variables such as age groups, the number of family members, marital status, education, and employment status of *Kurichiya* tribe.

3.1. Hypothesis:

- There is an improvement in the social life of the *Kurichiya* tribal community after the introduction of *Oorukoottam*.
- There is an association between social life of *Kurichiya* and demographic variables, such as age groups, the number of family members, marital status, education and employment status.

4. Methodology

The study's target population consisted of the *Kurichiya* tribes residing in the Wayanad district. To achieve an equitable representation, 70 respondents were carefully selected in proportion to the population demographics. The interviews included participants from both genders across various tribal households. Despite cultural and social factors affecting response rates in some areas, the sampling approach upheld methodological rigor. This ensured the collection of robust data suitable for comparative analysis, while also addressing practical constraints.

5. Data Sampling of the Study

A stratified sampling technique was employed to ensure adequate representation with in the strata like age groups, the number of family members, education, marital status and employment status, (<25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, >55).



6. Tools of Data Collection and Limitations

Data collection was conducted using an interview schedule designed by the investigator, comprising 70 questions addressing personal information and various dimensions of social life. To ensure comprehensive representation across all social strata, house visits were made to *Kurichiya* settlements. However, the data collection process faced several challenges. Limited awareness among *Kurichiya* participants regarding their rights and applicable government policies caused delays. Gender disparities necessitated scheduling interviews on weekends and holidays to ensure accessibility. Furthermore, socio-cultural barriers in certain areas impeded participants' ability to provide complete responses. Incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the final analysis to maintain the integrity of the dataset.

7. Statistical Techniques for Data Analysis

For data analysis, we utilized inferential statistical methods, including Wilcoxon test, the independent sample t-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were performed. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software, ensuring thorough examination of the findings.

8. Statistical Analysis

Table 1. Difference in Social Quality of Life after *Oorukoottam*

Items	Tribe	Before <i>Oorukoottam</i>	After <i>Oorukoottam</i>	p – value
Q1	<i>Kurichiya</i>	155 (79.1%)	34 (17.3%)	0.000
Q2	<i>Kurichiya</i>	191 (97.4%)	194 (99.0%)	0.180
Q3	<i>Kurichiya</i>	83 (42.3%)	172 (87.8%)	0.000
Q4	<i>Kurichiya</i>	190 (96.9%)	173 (88.3%)	0.000
Q5	<i>Kurichiya</i>	193 (98.5%)	160 (81.6%)	0.000
Q6	<i>Kurichiya</i>	172 (87.8%)	194 (99.0%)	0.000
Q7	<i>Kurichiya</i>	15 (7.7%)	103 (52.6%)	0.000
Q8	<i>Kurichiya</i>	180 (91.8%)	27 (13.8%)	0.000
Q9	<i>Kurichiya</i>	11 (5.6%)	193 (98.5%)	0.000
Q10	<i>Kurichiya</i>	14 (7.1%)	3 (1.5%)	0.005

Wilcoxon signed-rank test was performed.

According to the Wilcoxon rank test, p-values ($p < 0.05$) and their percentages of 9 questions, out of the 10 questions suggest that the p-value is less than 0.05, the significance level, and so there is an improvement after *Oorukoottam*. The questions are Q1 (Type of family), Q3 (Are the interests/opinions of the bride and bridegroom taken into consideration?), Q4 (Is the marriage between different tribes encouraged?), Q5 (Do you have a dowry system?), Q6 (What kind of marriage system do you prefer?), Q7 (Do you relate with other tribal communities?), Q8 (Do you have any punishment executed for the violation of traditional rules and mores of the community?), Q9 (Is there any discrimination against girls/women in your community?) and Q10 (Is your family or colony experiencing the ill-effects of alcoholism or drug abuse?).

There is no change in Q2 (Who makes decisions as family matters?) as the corresponding p-value is more than the significance level.

As a finding, in the nine aspects of the ten inquired into, the *Kurichiya* show significant change and accompanying social benefit through the *Oorukoottam* intervention. However, no change is recorded in the *Kurichiya* family matters decision-making process.

The *Kurichiya* community has experienced significant improvements in multiple aspects of family life, marriage practices, inter-community relations, gender equality, and addressing the ill effects of substance abuse after the *Oorukoottam* program. The lack of improvement in one question related to decision-making in family matters suggests that traditional practices in this area have persisted. These results provide insights into the areas where the *Oorukoottam* has been effective in the *Kurichiya* community. Mishra, R.K. (2020) alludes to these social changes within the *Kurichiya* community, including family decision-making and gender roles.



Overall, these findings indicate that the *Oorukoottam* intervention has substantially and positively impacted various aspects of the *Kurichiya* community's social and cultural practices. The statistically significant changes observed in the responses to these questions highlight the effectiveness of the *Oorukoottam* in bringing about positive transformations within the community. ActionAid India, (2020) assesses and reveals the impact of the *Oorukoottam* initiatives on the *Kurichiya* community. *Kurichiya*, being the highest in the hierarchy of tribal communities in Wayanad, which uncompromisingly practises purity and pollution, could not be penetrated easily by the mainstream society. It is observed that the home structure it remains largely unchanged, as the members, particularly the women, who are the agents of change within the home set-up, have no interaction with the outside world. They are mostly oblivious to the change. As a result, there is no change in the decision-making structure of the families.

Table – 2. Difference in Social Quality of Life after *Oorukoottam*

Tribe	Before <i>Oorukoottam</i>	After <i>Oorukoottam</i>	p – value
<i>Kurichiya</i>	61.43 ± 8.771	63.93 ± 10.88	0.016

Paired sample t-test was performed.

According to the Paired t-test, the p-value is less than the significance level of 0.05 and so the difference in the social quality of life after *Oorukoottam* is significant. The table shows that the social quality of life has significantly improved after *Oorukoottam* (63.93 ± 10.88) compared to the social quality of life before *Oorukoottam* (61.43 ± 8.771).

The finding is that *Kurichiya* community, there is a definite change in the social qualities of life. Kerala State Planning Board. (2021) report provides similar results and enhances our insights into the effectiveness of the *Oorukoottam* interventions.

Table – 3. Association between Change in Social Quality of Life and Personal Details in *Kurichiya*

Personal Details	Mean	SD	p-value
Age (Years)			
<= 25	12.14	4.251	0.024
26 – 35	0.304	2.989	
36 – 45	-0.557	3.367	
46 – 55	5.973	3.277	
> 55	3.978	3.523	
Marital Status			
Married	4.839	1.974	0.827
Unmarried	3.895	4.090	
Number of Family Members			
1 – 2	4.309	3.303	0.941
3 – 5	3.740	2.047	
> 5	5.054	4.317	
Occupation			
Nil	3.047	3.750	0.010
Cultivation	6.230	2.782	
Labour	-0.341	2.769	
Govt. Job	8.534	3.385	
Educational Qualification			
Uneducated	10.24	3.739	0.002
Lower Primary	-0.255	4.238	
Upper Primary	12.20	3.957	
High School	7.800	3.030	
Higher Secondary	2.313	3.459	
Under Graduation	3.823	3.084	
Post-Graduation	-5.552	4.188	

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed.



Age: According to the results of the ANOVA Test, the p-value of the difference in change in the social quality of life between different age groups is less than the significance level of 0.05, implying that the value is significant. The table, therefore, shows that the change in the social quality of life is significantly higher in cases with age ≤ 25 years (12.14 ± 4.251) compared to the cases with age 26-35 years (0.304 ± 2.989) and 36-45 years (-0.557 ± 3.367) of *Kurichiya*.

Marital Status: Based on the ANOVA Test, the p-value of the difference in change in the social quality of life between married and unmarried is greater than the significance level 0.05 and so it is not significant. The table shows that the social quality of life change is almost the same in married (4.839 ± 1.974) and unmarried (3.895 ± 4.090) *Kurichiya*.

The number of Family Members: Based on the ANOVA Test, the p-value of difference in change in the social quality of life between different group's family members is greater than the significance level of 0.05 and 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 (4.309 ± 3.303), 3-5 members (3.740 ± 2.047) and >5 members (5.054 ± 4.317) of *Kurichiya*.

Occupation: According to the ANOVA Test, the p-value of the difference in change in the social quality of life between different occupations is less than the significance level 0.05 and so is significant. The table shows that the change in the social quality of life is significantly higher in Government jobs (8.534 ± 3.385) and cultivation (6.230 ± 2.782) compared to labour (-0.341 ± 2.769) of *Kurichiya*.

Educational Qualification: Based on the ANOVA Test, the p-value of the difference in change in the social quality of life between different qualifications is less than the significance level of 0.05 so it is significant. The table shows that the change in the social quality of life is significantly higher in upper primary (12.20 ± 3.957), uneducated (10.24 ± 3.739), and high school (7.800 ± 3.030) compared to post-graduation (-5.552 ± 4.188) and lower primary (-0.255 ± 4.238) of *Kurichiya*.

In the case of *Kurichiya*, the ANOVA test shows a significant relationship between social quality of life and personal details such as Age, Occupation, and Education. Very intimate personal details such as marital status and Number of family members show little relation to the social quality of life.

The significant relation in the *Kurichiya* community suggests that age, occupation, and education are interrelated factors. For example, younger individuals might be more likely to pursue higher education, which can lead to improved job opportunities. Occupations, in turn, can influence access to educational opportunities and shape social networks. This interconnectedness highlights the importance of considering these personal details when assessing and addressing the social quality of life in the *Kurichiya* community. Here, a reference can be made to Singh, A. K. (2018) who explores the relationship between education, occupation, and age within tribal communities, focusing on how these factors influence social quality of life.

Additionally, the specific dynamics of the *Kurichiya* community, their cultural practices, and regional factors influence how these personal details impact social quality of life. Understanding these relationships can inform targeted interventions and policies aimed at improving the well-being of this community, taking into account the significance of age, occupation, and education in their social context.

Based on the findings and specific dynamics of the *Kurichiya* community, here are some suggestions to address areas of persistence and further improve the social quality of life in Wayanad's tribal communities:

- Since traditional family structures limit women's roles in decision-making, workshops and programs could be introduced to encourage women's active participation in household and community decisions. This might involve local women's groups and community leaders, promoting gradual shifts toward inclusive decision-making practices.
- Increased access to education has shown positive effects on social quality of life. Providing scholarships, career counselling, and skill-based training tailored to younger *Kurichiya* individuals can help create pathways for higher education and employment, especially in sectors beyond agriculture. This will support the interconnected cycle of age, occupation, and education identified in the findings.
- Given the *Kurichiya* community's emphasis on maintaining cultural purity and traditions, interventions can be designed to respect these cultural practices while promoting modernization in a culturally sensitive manner. Programs can include local leaders to bridge the gap between tradition and development, making it easier to introduce beneficial changes in family life and gender roles without challenging cultural values.



- Although there has been progress in addressing substance abuse, further reinforcement can be beneficial. Community-driven awareness programs, possibly led by former substance users who have reformed, can encourage continued community commitment to reducing substance abuse. Incorporating health education and counselling in schools can also prepare younger generations to make healthier choices.
- Enhancing livelihood opportunities that resonate with traditional *Kurichiya* skills, like sustainable agriculture, handicrafts, or eco-tourism, could increase income levels without disrupting cultural norms. Training in modern techniques related to these traditional skills, along with market access, could provide economic growth while preserving cultural identity.
- Since many *Kurichiya* women have limited interaction with the outside world, introducing social programs, including health camps, cultural exchanges, and educational workshops with women from nearby communities, could broaden perspectives while building social support networks. Such programs would promote both cultural exchange and awareness of broader social changes, gradually introducing ideas that support gender equality and empowerment.
- Policy initiatives for the *Kurichiya* community can benefit from consulting with community members, particularly by considering age, education, and occupation. Creating policies that reflect their unique social fabric and address their specific barriers will likely enhance the impact and acceptance of interventions.

By focusing on these targeted interventions, the *Kurichiya* community could see improvements in social quality of life, while preserving the values and traditions that are central to their identity.

8. Conclusion :

In conclusion, the findings reveal that the *Oorukoottam* intervention has brought about positive changes in the *Kurichiya* community, particularly in areas such as family life, marriage practices, inter-community relations, gender equality, and substance abuse awareness. These improvements underscore the program's effectiveness in addressing various social issues and enhancing the quality of life for the *Kurichiya* people. However, the persistence of traditional practices in family decision-making, especially among women with limited exposure to the outside world, indicates that some cultural aspects remain deeply rooted.

The data also highlights the interplay between age, occupation, and education within the community, factors that significantly shape social quality of life. Younger members pursuing higher education appear to gain better employment opportunities, which in turn expands their social networks, demonstrating the importance of integrating these variables into future interventions. As observed by Mishra (2020) and Singh (2018), targeted policies that consider these interconnections could more effectively support the *Kurichiya* community's social progress.

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