The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 3 | Issue 10 | October 2025
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online)
Website: www.theacademic.in

State Policies and the Persistence of Tribal Marginalisation in Kerala

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DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17616420

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 23-10-2025

Published: 10-11-2025

Keywords:

Adivasis, Land Alienation, State Policies, Marginalisation, Resettlement

ABSTRACT

Despite Kerala's reputation as a socially progressive state with high literacy and strong welfare programs, its Scheduled Tribes continue to experience deep marginalisation. This article examines how state policies intended to promote tribal welfare have paradoxically contributed to the persistence of social and economic exclusion. Drawing on historical, policy, etc it argues that structural limitations, bureaucratic implementation gaps, and the failure to recognize tribal autonomy have constrained the transformative potential of state interventions. Through case references such as the Aralam Farm and Attappady projects the paper highlights the contradictions between development and empowerment in Kerala's tribal policy landscape.

Introduction

The historical context of tribal marginalisation in Kerala encompasses land alienation, exclusion from conventional development, and colonial policies that deprived tribes of their customary rights to land and forests. Non-tribal migration into forest regions for resources has intensified landlessness and poverty, rendering tribal populations a marginalised and vulnerable population despite Kerala's elevated development status. Government initiatives for tribal development have been executed, although they frequently exhibit poor efficacy in addressing entrenched socio-economic inequalities. Although a comprehensive framework of tribal land legislation exists in India, the effective implementation of these laws remains a significant challenge. Key statutes such as the Kerala Restriction on Transfer and Restoration of Alienated Land Act (KST Act) of 1975 and its Amendment Act of 1999, the Kerala Forest

Rights Act of 2006, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 2006, along with constitutional provisions under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, were specifically enacted to safeguard tribal land rights and promote the socio-economic welfare of indigenous communities. However, despite their progressive intent, these legal instruments have largely failed to achieve their objectives due to administrative inertia, lack of political will, and systemic barriers that hinder their enforcement at the grassroots level. Despite the formulation of numerous welfare schemes and policy initiatives aimed at tribal development, significant challenges persist in reversing the entrenched effects of marginalisation. The implementation of these programs has frequently fallen short of their intended goals, resulting in limited progress in improving the socio-economic conditions of tribal communities. In Kerala, despite decades of targeted interventions, Scheduled Tribes continue to face acute economic deprivation, systemic social exclusion, and a lack of meaningful political representation. These persistent disparities highlight the limitations of existing policy frameworks and underscore the need for a critical examination of their design and execution. This paper analyses key state-level policies related to tribal development and resettlement in Kerala, to assess their effectiveness in addressing marginalisation. Furthermore, it explores the underlying structural and institutional factors that contribute to the continued reproduction of inequality, despite sustained policy efforts.

History of Tribal Marginalisation in Kerala

The history of the marginalisation of indigenous peoples extends far into the past. During the colonial era, several constitutional provisions were established that essentially stripped the indigenous populations of their customary rights to land, forests, and other natural resources. The Indian Forest Act of 1927 established the idea of ‘res nullius,’ indicating that any property lacking a certified legal owner may be seized by the government. In accordance with this idea, extensive areas of land were transferred by the British to the Forest Department established to enforce this regulation.

The alienation of tribal areas occurred during British administration and continued in the post-independence era. Upon establishing their dominion in India, the British instituted the Zamindari system, both large and minor, to facilitate tax collection on territory within their control. The zamindari system was implemented in the tribal region. Zamindars were essential components of local governance. They originated from non-tribal communities. They utilised their personnel for the collection of levies and taxes on their auctioned lands. The courtiers and servants of the Zamindar were granted jagirdari over the tribal village holdings. Zamindars also welcomed few non-tribals to the tribal regions for agricultural

activities and to engage in labour under the jajmani system. Thus, land alleviation was initiated for the first time during British rule through the Zamindari and Jagirdari systems (Reddy, 2022).

During the British era, another instance of land alienation occurred for the development of railways, roads, government offices, residences for officials, stations, schools, hospitals, colleges, and administrative towns. Forests were cleared for the construction of ships and opulent buildings and furnishings. The founding of the Zamindari system, along with administrative towns, offices, residences, colonies, schools, hospitals, colleges, railway stations, and post offices, attracted outsiders to tribal regions. These individuals came not only for employment, commerce, and money lending but also acquired tribal lands, becoming residents of these areas. Over time, they increasingly purchased land in tribal territories, ultimately becoming the dominant landowners while the tribals became their labourers. Tribals are now compelled to earn wages through agricultural work on lands that their ancestors once owned (Reddy, 2022).

Following the establishment of Kerala in 1956, the Communist-led administration of 1957 implemented extensive land reform legislation designed to eradicate feudal landlordism. Nevertheless, these reforms predominantly advantaged tenant farmers in rural regions while excluding tribes residing in forest interiors. The ceiling-surplus distribution initiatives predominantly overlooked hilly and forested areas, where most indigenous people resided. The legislature enacted further land reform legislation in 1960, 1963, 1964, and 1969. The historical land reform act, which abolished the feudal system and secured tenants' rights to land, became effective on 1 January 1970. This Act eliminated landlordism and various tenancy regimes. The "Land to the Tiller" concept was implemented with considerable zeal (Arya, 2017).

The Land Reforms Act was a transformative legislation aimed at allocating land to impoverished, landless individuals. Due to the absence of legal documentation proving ownership, lands were allocated to the individuals currently occupying them. Consequently, numerous settlers acquired the tribal land on which they were merely renters, registering it in their own names. A method of land alienation involves the forgery of land papers. Settler tenants were inaccurately or deliberately recorded as the owners of the land they inhabited and/or cultivated. Coercion through goondaism, physical intimidation, threats, and political affiliations was employed to displace tribes and seize their territory. Certain married indigenous women engage in deception to ultimately acquire access and control over their property. Unauthorised structures are also prevalent here (Sanjeevani, 2023).

Failure of State Policies

On April 1, 1975, the assembly of state ministers adopted a resolution stating that "legislation to prevent land alienation should be initiated without delay." The task had to be completed within six months. The legislative actions aimed at preventing land alienation and restoring alienated land were of paramount importance. The CPI-led Kerala government unanimously enacted the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction on Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act, 1975 on November 14, 1975, designated as Act 31 of 1975, following the requisite approval from the President of India. The KST statute 1975 was subsequently incorporated into the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution to guarantee that the statute would not be subject to judicial review. However, it was not until a complete decade later, in 1986, that the regulations implementing the Act were established. This act made all transactions involving tribal lands from 1960 to 1982 invalid, mandating the restoration of these lands to their original owners (Bijoy & Raman, 2003).

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act, 2006, commonly referred to as the Forest Rights Act, aims to reinstate the rights of forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes (STs) and other traditional forest dwellers (OTFDs) who have inhabited these forests for generations but whose rights were unrecorded during both colonial and post-colonial eras for various reasons, allowing them to occupy and utilise forest land. The failure to acknowledge and formalise the rights of forest dwellers, as stated in the preamble of the FRA, has led to historical injustices against the forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers, who are essential to the survival and sustainability of forest ecosystems. The FRA seeks to address this by implementing a highly decentralised and democratic governance framework for documenting the forest rights conferred and the type of proof necessary for such acknowledgement and allocation concerning forest land (Kerala, 2022).

It has not benefited the Adivasis and other forest-dwelling groups. Numerous landless, forest-dwelling groups are advocating for the reclaiming of their ancestral lands. Land transcends mere livelihood for the Adivasis. It pertains to social justice and equitable economic distribution (Oskarsson, 2018). The oppressed have consistently engaged in mass mobilisation to attain social justice. The Adivasis have been excluded from all policy and decision-making processes concerning state welfare. Land alienation remains a significant issue for Adivasis in Kerala. The forest bureaucracy views them as trespassers who unlawfully occupy and exploit the forest and its resources (Kumar & Kerr, 2012). Adivasi land issues are often leveraged to advance election manifestos and agendas, without progressing beyond that scope (Ameerudheen, 2016).

State-Level Programs

Kerala established the Tribal Development Department and introduced targeted initiatives such as:

Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs): The Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs) were introduced in India during the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974–79) to ensure area-based, comprehensive development of tribal regions. Kerala adopted this model to focus development interventions in districts or blocks with substantial tribal populations, such as Wayanad, Idukki, Palakkad, and Kasaragod. Each ITDP functions as a micro-level planning and implementation unit under the Scheduled Tribes Development Department, to integrate welfare schemes across education, health, infrastructure, and livelihood sectors (Rajasenan, Venanzi, & Bhaksar, 2019).

The ITDP approach is designed to move beyond fragmented welfare delivery and ensure holistic development within identified tribal pockets. The major objectives include:

- Enhancing access to education, health, and basic services.
- Promoting livelihood and land-based development.
- Preserving cultural identity while facilitating integration with the wider economy.
- Empowering tribal communities through participatory governance

Education Initiatives under ITDPs

Education is a major thrust area of ITDPs, viewed as a means of empowerment and social mobility. However, significant inter-tribal disparities persist in literacy and school completion rates.

Key Components

- Pre-Matric and Post-Matric Hostels: ITDPs operate residential schools and hostels for tribal boys and girls, especially in remote regions where access to schools is limited.
- Mother-Tongue Primary Education: Some ITDPs promote multilingual education, particularly for Paniya, Kurumba, and Adiya children, though implementation remains uneven.
- Bridge and Special Training Centres: Designed to bring out-of-school children into the mainstream education system.
- Scholarships and Incentives: Distribution of study materials, uniforms, bicycles, and scholarships to reduce dropouts.

Despite increased enrollment, dropout rates remain high among certain tribes, especially girls, due to poverty, distance to schools, language barriers, and cultural alienation. Many tribal children are first-generation learners whose parents have limited engagement with formal education. The infrastructure of tribal schools often lags behind the state average, and the absence of culturally sensitive pedagogy weakens learning outcomes.

Health and Nutrition Initiatives: Health interventions under ITDPs focus on improving maternal and child health, combating malnutrition, and enhancing access to healthcare services.

Major Programs

Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and Tribal Health Units: Establishment of health facilities in remote tribal areas, supported by mobile health units for inaccessible hamlets.

Community Health Workers: Training tribal women as health volunteers to bridge the gap between health institutions and communities.

Nutrition Programs: Distribution of supplementary food through Anganwadis under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS).

Special Initiatives: In areas like Attappady, the state introduced programs such as Nutritional Rehabilitation Centres and Tribal Health Missions to combat malnutrition-related deaths (Kuriakose & K K, 2025).

Challenges

Although the institutional coverage of health services has improved, accessibility and acceptability remain concerns. Many health interventions fail to integrate traditional tribal medicine or address social determinants such as alcoholism, poverty, and food insecurity. Persistent cases of infant and maternal mortality, especially in Attappady and Idukki, reveal deep systemic gaps.

Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP)

The Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), introduced during India's Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974–79), represents a key institutional mechanism designed to ensure that tribal communities receive equitable shares of national and state development resources. The TSP approach mandates that all ministries, departments, and state governments earmark a proportion of their annual budget—equivalent to the percentage of the tribal population—for targeted tribal development. In Kerala, where Scheduled Tribes constitute around 1.5%

of the population, this policy ensures dedicated financial and administrative attention to tribal welfare across sectors. The core philosophy behind the TSP is to integrate tribal development with the mainstream planning process while preserving the distinct socio-cultural identity of indigenous communities (stateplanningboard, 2017).

Under the TSP framework, funds are channelled into critical sectors such as education, health, housing, infrastructure, and livelihoods. The Scheduled Tribes Development Department serves as the nodal agency for coordinating implementation, ensuring that both state-specific schemes and centrally sponsored programs—like scholarships, hostels, health missions, and housing grants—reach tribal beneficiaries. A significant feature of TSP in Kerala is its linkage with Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs), which act as local-level implementing units. Through these, the TSP promotes a decentralized and area-based approach, addressing region-specific needs and development gaps.

Despite these structural provisions, the performance of TSP in Kerala has been uneven. Studies highlight that much of the allocated funds are spent on infrastructure and welfare distribution rather than on transformative measures such as land restoration, livelihood diversification, or institutional empowerment. In some cases, bureaucratic delays, poor monitoring, and diversion of funds have weakened its impact. Moreover, the absence of Scheduled Areas in Kerala has limited the institutional autonomy and participatory governance that the TSP framework envisions. Consequently, while the TSP has expanded access to essential services, it has not fully addressed the deeper causes of tribal marginalisation—such as land alienation, socio-political exclusion, and cultural displacement.

To make the TSP more effective, there is a growing consensus that planning must be participatory, accountable, and outcome-oriented. This involves community involvement in project identification and evaluation, transparent fund utilisation, and convergence with other development missions. A shift from welfare distribution to empowerment-oriented strategies—emphasizing land rights, education quality, and self-managed cooperatives—can enhance the transformative potential of the Tribal Sub-Plan. In essence, while the TSP has been instrumental in institutionalising tribal welfare within Kerala's development agenda, its success ultimately depends on the extent to which it promotes self-determination, equity, and sustainable development among the state's tribal communities (Alha & Garwa, 2025).

Resettlement Schemes like the Aralam Farm Project: Aimed at Land Distribution

The Aralam Farm Resettlement Project in Kerala stands as one of the most significant state-led initiatives aimed at addressing the long-standing problem of landlessness among Scheduled Tribes. Conceived in the early 2000s, this project sought to provide cultivable land and housing to tribal families who had been displaced from their traditional habitats or were living in extreme poverty and marginal conditions. The scheme was established on the Aralam Farm, a former government-owned agricultural estate in Kannur District, spanning over 3,500 hectares. The government's intention was to transform the farm into a resettlement colony for tribal families, that had experienced severe land alienation and social displacement among tribal populations.

The primary objective of the Aralam Farm Resettlement Project was land redistribution—to provide each beneficiary family with a plot for cultivation and homestead purposes, thereby ensuring livelihood security and economic independence. The scheme was part of a broader policy effort by the Scheduled Tribes Development Department to rectify historical injustices arising from the alienation of tribal lands. By allocating land, the state aimed to integrate the tribal population into the agrarian economy while also promoting self-sufficiency. Each family was to receive around one acre of cultivable land along with access to basic infrastructure such as housing, water, electricity, roads, schools, and healthcare facilities. The project was designed under the premise that access to productive land would lead to sustainable development, improved food security, and social inclusion for marginalised tribal groups.

However, the implementation of the Aralam Farm Project revealed several challenges that have limited its effectiveness in achieving the intended goals. Many of the resettled families faced difficulties in adapting to new agro-climatic conditions, as the terrain and soil fertility differed from their native regions. The land provided, while legally secured, often required heavy investment in soil improvement, irrigation, and agricultural inputs—resources that the beneficiaries lacked. In addition, delays in infrastructure development and inadequate follow-up support from government agencies hindered the community's socio-economic progress. While the project succeeded in redistributing land ownership to a considerable number of tribal families, it did not automatically translate into livelihood stability or empowerment.

Moreover, resettlement in Aralam also led to socio-cultural dislocation. Many tribal families found it difficult to preserve their traditional lifestyles, social networks, and cultural practices after being relocated to a new environment. Dependence on government welfare measures remained high due to the lack of adequate livelihood diversification and limited access to market linkages.

Despite these limitations, the Aralam Farm Project remains an important experiment in state-led tribal rehabilitation and land redistribution. It highlighted both the potential and pitfalls of resettlement-based development policies (Sreerekha, 2010). The project underscored that while providing land is a crucial step toward reducing marginalisation, it must be supported by continuous institutional assistance—such as agricultural extension services, cooperative initiatives, access to education and healthcare, and participatory governance. In recent years, there have been renewed efforts to strengthen the project through skill development, women's self-help groups, and eco-friendly farming initiatives. Thus, the Aralam Farm Project reflects Kerala's broader challenge: balancing redistributive justice with sustainable, community-driven development to ensure that land reforms genuinely empower tribal populations rather than reproducing new forms of dependency and marginalisation.

Despite these programs, socio-economic disparities persist. Studies reveal low literacy rates among certain tribes, high infant mortality, and inadequate access to basic services. The benefits of welfare measures often remain confined to a small section of the tribal population.

Attappady Development Programme

The Attappady Development Programme (ADP) is one of Kerala's most notable state-initiated efforts aimed at addressing the chronic socio-economic and environmental problems faced by tribal communities in the Attappady block of Palakkad district. Attappady, located in the Western Ghats, has historically been home to several tribal groups, including the Irulas, Mudugas, and Kurumbas, who have traditionally depended on agriculture, forest produce, and pastoral activities. Over the past several decades, however, Attappady became a site of acute tribal marginalisation due to land alienation, environmental degradation, and the influx of non-tribal settlers. By the 1970s, tribals—once the dominant population—had become a minority and were largely landless and impoverished. The Attappady Development Programme was launched in response to this crisis, with the goal of reversing the processes of ecological decline and social displacement that had taken root in the region.

The Attappady Development Block was declared a special project area in 1975 under the Integrated Tribal Development Programme (ITDP) framework. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, the Attappady Hill Area Development Society (AHADS)—a joint initiative between the Government of Kerala and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC)—was established to implement large-scale interventions. The ADP sought to promote sustainable livelihoods, land restoration, reforestation, education, health, and women's empowerment. One of its key objectives was to rehabilitate tribal

communities through a participatory model of development, focusing on natural resource management and capacity building rather than welfare dependency (Suchitra, 2013).

Under the Attappady Development Programme, extensive efforts were made to regenerate degraded forest lands, conserve soil and water, and reclaim alienated tribal land through legal and administrative measures. The AHADS project (1995–2010) introduced watershed management programs and encouraged eco-friendly agricultural practices aimed at improving food security. It also emphasized the empowerment of tribal women through the formation of Thozhilurappu (self-help) groups and community-based organizations. Educational initiatives included the establishment of tribal hostels, residential schools, and early childhood care centers to address low literacy rates among tribal children. Health interventions, too, focused on maternal and child welfare, as Attappady was known for high rates of malnutrition and infant mortality.

Despite these ambitious goals and substantial funding, the effectiveness of the Attappady Development Programme has been a subject of critical debate. While the project succeeded in improving certain infrastructure facilities—such as roads, housing, and community centers—and in raising environmental awareness, it faced significant challenges in achieving long-term socio-economic transformation. Many of the schemes were top-down in nature, with limited participation from the tribal communities themselves. Development priorities were often decided by external agencies, resulting in a mismatch between policy objectives and community needs. Moreover, despite reforestation and soil conservation measures, the benefits of land reclamation and sustainable farming did not reach all sections of the tribal population uniformly (Joseph J. , 2023).

The persistence of malnutrition, unemployment, and social disempowerment in Attappady underscores the deeper structural issues that the ADP could not fully resolve. The continued alienation of tribals from productive resources, limited access to quality healthcare, and the erosion of indigenous cultural systems reveal the limits of development models that prioritize infrastructure over empowerment. In recent years, the government has reoriented its approach, emphasizing community-based participatory governance, women's development programs, and nutrition security through initiatives like the Attappady Comprehensive Tribal and Nutrition Project.

Nevertheless, the Attappady experience offers valuable lessons for tribal development in Kerala. It demonstrates that sustainable and inclusive development cannot be achieved through external interventions alone but must be rooted in local participation, cultural sensitivity, and ecological balance. The Attappady Development Programme, though imperfect, remains a landmark attempt to integrate

environmental restoration with social justice. Its history encapsulates the broader challenge faced by Kerala's tribal policy: transforming welfare-oriented initiatives into genuine instruments of empowerment that restore not only livelihoods but also dignity and self-determination to the state's indigenous communities.

The Paradox of Policy: How Marginalisation Persists

Kerala's tribal policies reflect a paradox: a combination of progressive intent and regressive outcomes. Several interrelated factors explain this persistence.

Structural Inequalities

Structural inequalities refer to the deep-rooted, systemic disparities embedded within the political, economic, and social institutions of a society. These inequalities are not the result of individual failings or isolated incidents but stem from historical patterns of exclusion, discrimination, and unequal access to resources and opportunities. Structural inequality shapes how power, wealth, education, healthcare, and rights are distributed among different groups, thereby creating persistent hierarchies of privilege and disadvantage. In the context of India—and particularly Kerala—structural inequalities are visible in the historical marginalisation of Scheduled Tribes (STs), whose socio-economic position has been shaped by centuries of dispossession, cultural subordination, and institutional neglect. At the core of structural inequality lies the unequal distribution of power. Dominant social, economic, and political systems privilege certain groups while systematically excluding others from meaningful participation. For tribal communities, structural inequalities manifest through land alienation, lack of political representation, inadequate access to quality education and healthcare, and the erosion of traditional livelihoods. These are sustained by policy structures and governance models that, while claiming inclusivity, often fail to address the historical and cultural dimensions of tribal exclusion. For example, even when welfare schemes like the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) or Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs) are implemented, they often operate within frameworks that perpetuate dependency rather than empowerment, reflecting the deeper asymmetry in state–tribe relations.

Economically, structural inequalities are reinforced through patterns of land ownership and resource control. In Kerala, much of the tribal land historically occupied by indigenous communities was taken over during colonial and post-colonial periods by settlers and plantation owners. Despite land reform laws and resettlement initiatives like the Aralam Farm Project, many tribal families remain landless or possess non-viable plots. This economic marginalisation is compounded by limited employment

opportunities, poor access to markets, and dependence on low-income or informal labor sectors. As a result, poverty becomes intergenerational, passed down not through lack of effort but through structural barriers to upward mobility (Fernandes, 2008).

Socially and culturally, structural inequalities are sustained by mainstream norms and institutional biases that undervalue tribal knowledge systems, languages, and customs. Educational curricula, health services, and development policies often ignore or override indigenous worldviews, leading to alienation rather than inclusion. Furthermore, bureaucratic and political structures seldom give tribal communities real decision-making power over their own development. This lack of agency reinforces the perception of tribal people as passive recipients of welfare rather than as active participants in governance.

Addressing structural inequality, therefore, requires more than redistributive welfare—it calls for transformative justice. This includes recognizing tribal rights to land and forest resources, ensuring political representation and community governance, and promoting culturally relevant education and healthcare. Policies must move beyond token inclusion to dismantle the institutional mechanisms that perpetuate exclusion. In the Kerala context, this means bridging the gap between progressive state policies and their on-ground implementation, which often fails to challenge entrenched hierarchies (CR, 2016).

In essence, structural inequality is not just a social problem but a systemic condition that perpetuates marginalisation and limits the capacity of vulnerable communities to achieve equality. For the Scheduled Tribes of Kerala, overcoming these inequalities requires sustained political commitment, participatory governance, and the restructuring of state institutions to ensure genuine empowerment and social justice.

Cultural Displacement and Assimilation

Cultural displacement refers to the loss or erosion of traditional cultural practices, beliefs, languages, and social systems experienced by a community when it is uprooted from its original environment or exposed to dominant external influences. For indigenous and tribal communities, culture is deeply tied to their land, ecology, and collective way of life. When these communities are displaced—either through development projects, land alienation, or state-led resettlement schemes—they often experience not just physical dislocation but also a profound cultural rupture. This process is frequently followed by assimilation, where displaced groups are compelled, overtly or subtly, to adopt the cultural norms, lifestyles, and values of the dominant society in order to survive or gain acceptance (Corntassel, 2005).

In the context of Kerala's Scheduled Tribes, cultural displacement has been one of the most significant and under-discussed consequences of development and resettlement policies. Tribal groups such as the Paniyas, Adiyas, Kattunaikkans, and Kurichiyas have historically lived in close relationship with forests and the natural environment, which shaped their economic activities, social structures, and spiritual beliefs. However, large-scale land alienation, forest laws, and migration of non-tribal settlers into tribal regions disrupted these traditional ecosystems. When resettlement schemes like the Aralam Farm Project relocated tribal families into new areas, they were separated from their ancestral lands and forest-based livelihoods, resulting in the disintegration of traditional occupations, rituals, and community governance systems (A & Thirumoorthi, 2025).

Cultural displacement also manifests in the loss of language, folklore, and indigenous knowledge systems. Tribal languages and oral traditions, which once played a vital role in transmitting ecological knowledge and social values, have been gradually declining due to limited institutional support and exposure to mainstream education and media. The formal schooling system, though beneficial in expanding literacy, often ignores the cultural context of tribal children, leading to alienation from both their heritage and the school environment. Similarly, changes in housing, food habits, and dress patterns under resettlement and welfare programs reflect the slow but steady replacement of tribal cultural identity with dominant social norms.

Assimilation, on the other hand, is often presented by the state as a form of integration or modernization. However, it can result in the erasure of distinct tribal identities. When development policies promote homogenization—expecting tribal communities to "adapt" to mainstream lifestyles—they inadvertently perpetuate cultural inequality. This is evident in Kerala's welfare-driven model, where tribal communities are encouraged to conform to agricultural practices, consumption patterns, and value systems that differ from their indigenous modes of living. While some level of cultural exchange can foster inclusivity, forced or uncritical assimilation leads to dependency, loss of self-esteem, and weakening of community cohesion.

The consequences of cultural displacement and assimilation are not merely symbolic—they have tangible effects on social organisation, mental health, and inter-generational continuity. The weakening of collective identities often diminishes community solidarity, making it difficult for tribes to mobilize politically or assert rights over land and resources. Women, in particular, face dual burdens as they navigate between traditional roles and imposed modern expectations, often losing their central role in community decision-making.

To counter these processes, there is an urgent need for culturally sensitive development approaches that recognize and preserve tribal heritage while supporting socio-economic advancement. This includes promoting education in tribal languages, safeguarding indigenous art forms, and allowing community participation in policy design and implementation. Projects like eco-tourism and community forestry, when managed by tribal cooperatives, can serve as examples of development without cultural erasure.

In conclusion, cultural displacement and assimilation among Kerala's tribal communities highlight the deeper dimensions of marginalisation beyond economics. True inclusion requires not assimilation into the mainstream, but the recognition of cultural plurality and the creation of spaces where tribal identities can flourish alongside development. Only by valuing cultural diversity as a form of strength rather than a barrier can Kerala's tribal development policies move toward genuine empowerment and social justice.

Socio-Economic Marginalisation

Kerala exhibits the highest literacy rate in India, a trend that is partially reflected in its tribal communities. The literacy rate among Scheduled Tribes is lower than the state average. The 2011 Census indicated that the literacy rate among Scheduled Tribes was approximately 59%, markedly below the state average of 94%. Various schemes have been implemented to offer free education, scholarships, and hostel facilities for tribal students; however, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and language barriers persist. The shortage of qualified teachers in tribal areas persists as a significant barrier to educational outcomes (A & Thirumoorthi, 2025).

Despite Kerala's education system being among the best in India, tribal children encounter significant barriers to education, such as language challenges, cultural disparities, and inadequate infrastructure. High dropout rates persist, especially in higher education, resulting in restricted opportunities for upward social mobility. The majority of tribal communities in Kerala are engaged in agriculture or forest-related activities, with a significant number employed as daily wage labourers. The absence of formal employment opportunities and restricted access to skill development programs results in a significant segment of the ST population remaining in low-income, unstable employment. This precarious economic position highlights the necessity of financial inclusion, as access to credit, insurance, and savings can assist these communities in developing financial resilience. Tribes in Kerala frequently reside in inadequate housing, especially in the remote regions of Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad, where infrastructural development remains constrained. Many tribal villages lack essential facilities such as electricity, clean drinking water, and sanitation, which adversely affect the quality of life and increase vulnerability to health problems (Chandran, 2025).

In recent years, the budgetary allocation for tribal welfare schemes in the state has witnessed a marked decline, attributed primarily to the ongoing fiscal crisis confronting the government. This contraction in funding has significantly impacted core development initiatives, notably the housing programme for homeless tribal families, which has been curtailed to ₹53 crore. Similarly, financial support for the rehabilitation of landless tribal communities has been halved, reflecting a reduction of ₹20 crore. In addition to these cuts, several critical components have been excluded from the current budgetary framework, including schemes for self-employment and skill development, targeted assistance for academically meritorious tribal students, and locally-driven development interventions (Ravi, 2025).

Discussion: Policy Contradictions and Structural Constraints

Kerala's state policies reflect a welfare-centric but paternalistic orientation. While they aim to uplift tribal communities, they rarely transfer control over resources or decision-making. The absence of Scheduled Areas, limited implementation of PESA, and bureaucratic management of welfare funds have perpetuated dependence on the state. Moreover, development projects often treat tribal lands as "underutilised resources," legitimising their conversion for plantations or tourism. Thus, marginalisation persists not despite policy but partly because of its underlying logic.

Kerala's celebrated "human development model" has focused on universal social indicators, but it masks internal disparities. For tribals, the benefits of education, healthcare, and political representation remain unevenly distributed. The structural bias of the development paradigm—favouring market integration over cultural preservation—has deepened exclusion (A & Thirumoorthi, 2025).

Towards Inclusive and Empowering Policy

To reverse persistent marginalisation, state policy must move beyond welfare and towards empowerment. This requires:

Effective Implementation of the Forest Rights Act (2006): Recognising both individual and community forest rights.

Participatory Governance: Adapting PESA principles in Kerala's tribal regions to ensure autonomy in decision-making.

Land Restoration: Expediting pending cases under the 1975 Land Restoration Act and preventing further alienation.

Livelihood Diversification: Promoting sustainable and culturally appropriate livelihoods instead of uniform agricultural schemes.

Cultural Sensitivity: Integrating traditional knowledge and practices in health, education, and environmental management.

These steps can bridge the gap between policy intent and ground reality.

Conclusion

Kerala's experience underscores a critical paradox: a state renowned for social progress continues to harbour pockets of deep tribal marginalisation. The persistence of this inequality reveals the limitations of state-centric development policies that prioritise welfare delivery over structural change. While policy interventions have expanded access to education and health, they have failed to secure land, autonomy, and dignity for tribal communities. True inclusion demands a shift in both the philosophy and practice of governance—from top-down administration to participatory empowerment, from welfare dependency to self-determination. The challenge is not the absence of policy but the absence of transformative intent. Only by recognising tribes as agents rather than beneficiaries can Kerala reconcile its development success with the realities of its most marginalised citizens.

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