

## **Tribes and their Participation in Decision Making Process: A Case Study at Kuttampuzha Grama Panchayat in Kerala, India**

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### **Abstract**

Tribes are indigenous people who have a unique and distinct culture, living in remote forest areas far away from the mainstream population. They completely depend on the forest for their livelihood. The major occupations of this population include agriculture, fishing, hunting and collecting forest produce. Since independence, numerous policy initiatives have been taken by both the union and state governments for the development of tribes in the country. The most significant among them was the beginning of the Tribal Sub Plan during the Fifth Five Year Plan. This has made a breakthrough in the formulation of a special tribal plan leading to the allocation of funds for tribal development. Later, with the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Indian Constitution, the Panchayati Raj Institutions got autonomy in decision making in the areas of revenue mobilisation, plan formulation and its execution. Grama Sabha has become an institution of local democracy in which people can raise their concerns, lead discussions and finalise projects etc. Along with the general population, tribes in the country have a say in decision-making at the panchayat level. Kerala, the state which got international acclaim in its move towards decentralised decision making, offered the tribes a platform to participate in policy making spaces through Grama Sabha and *Oorukoottams*. However, it is doubtful whether tribes in the state are well aware of the process involved in decision making and whether they sincerely engage in the process of their own development.

It is in this context that the present study takes into account the current status of tribal participation in these institutions and to what extent tribes could make a difference in preparing local development projects in the study area. The study is conducted at Kuttampuzha Grama Panchayat in the Ernakulam District of Kerala.

**Keywords:** Tribes, Grama Sabha, Oorukoottam

## 1. Introduction

Tribes are aboriginal people who live in dense forests far away from the mainstream population, engaged in agriculture, hunting, and collecting forest products. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a tribe is "a group of people, often of related families, who live together, sharing the same language, culture, and history, especially those who do not live in towns or cities". A tribe is a kind of socio-political organisation made up of a number of families, clans, or other groupings that share a similar heritage and culture and often lack official or permanent leadership. In the Indian context, Majumdar's (1950) description is the most acceptable, and he defines "tribe" as a group of families or groups of families united by a common name, occupying the same territory, speaking the same language, adhering to certain taboos regarding marriage, profession, or occupation, and having developed a well-developed system of reciprocity and mutual obligations."

The tribes in the country are marginalized, and they are one of the most vulnerable segments of Indian society. For their welfare and development, special provisions were made in the Indian Constitution to address their issues. Since independence, numerous policy initiatives have been taken by both the union and state governments for the development of tribes in the country. The most significant of them all was the beginning of the Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) during the Fifth Five-Year Plan. This has made a breakthrough in the formulation of a special tribal plan earmarking exclusive funds for tribal development. The TSP was used to channel benefits from the union government to tribal populations in the state, with the goal of closing the divide between tribal and non-tribal populations by accelerating access to education and health services, housing, income-generating opportunities, and protection from exploitation and oppression. Later, with the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution, the Panchayati Raj Institutions got autonomy in decision-making in the areas of revenue mobilisation, plan formulation, and execution. Grama Sabha has become an institution of local democracy in which people can raise their concerns, lead discussions, finalise projects, etc. Along with the general population, tribes in the country have a say in decision-making at the panchayat level. Kerala, the state that got international acclaim for its move towards decentralised decision making, offered the tribes a platform to participate in policy making spaces through Grama Sabha and Oorukoottams. However, it is doubtful whether tribes in the state are well aware of the process involved in decision-making and whether they sincerely engage in the process of their own development.

Thus, in this context, it is relevant to examine the level of participation of tribes in local democratic and decision-making institutions and to what extent tribes engage in formulating individual beneficiary schemes and schemes for local development. The study also attempts to identify the problems and challenges in the conduct of Oorukoottam in tribal hamlets.

## **2. Oorukoottam: An institution of local democracy**

Like Grama Sabha, Oorukoottam serves as a platform and a vital organisation for scheduled tribes in Kerala to partake in local democracy. Oorukoottam is a development forum for tribal families to learn about their own rights, privileges, and available government support. "The Oorukoottams were recognised as a democratic space inside the local government system for tribal groupings" (Baiju K.C., 2011). It is the major organisation responsible for the development and implementation of all tribal programmes, not simply TSP programmes, but also state, federal, and international government initiatives. Thus, Oorukoottams functioned as a focal point for the successful integration of multiple agencies' programmes. The Oorukoottam meeting is presided over by the President or the Member of the Grama Panchayat, with the presence of the Tribal Extension Officer and ST Promoter. The meeting discusses the socio-economic needs of tribes in the hamlet, priorities are set, and specific programmes to address the needs are designed with the involvement of the tribes. This discussion will cover the complete plan and the planning process in depth, and attendees will be invited to make suggestions for forthcoming projects. The tribes that are on the voter list are eligible to participate in the Oorukoottam. Oorukoottam gives an opportunity to the tribes to ask questions, raise their arguments, and make suggestions for the design of tribal specific projects and schemes.

## **3. The Significance of the Study**

With the 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution, the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the country have become institutions of self-governance that have gained autonomy in planning and implementing development programmes together with revenue mobilisation responsibilities and expenditure obligations. Moreover, PRIs act as a platform for rural democracy in which people can join together to engage in discussions pertaining to the development issues of the area concerned. It gives an immense opportunity for people to raise their voice and concern for the betterment of society. This democratic

decision-making process is being effectively managed in Kerala, and the state has gained international recognition for conducting the business of rural democracy. However, some studies show that the decision-making process at the local level, in some circumstances, fails, especially in regions with an aboriginal population or *adivasis*. *Adivasis*, or tribes, in the state of Kerala are lagging behind in terms of quality of life compared to the main population. They are deprived of basic facilities like nutritious food, safe drinking water, shelter, toilets, clothing, transportation systems etc. Even though the government and its agencies have been designing community-specific programmes for their upliftment, the benefits of those programmes are not trickling down to the grass roots. The major problem identified in this context is that the tribes don't have adequate knowledge about the various schemes that are designed for them. They are completely or partially ignorant about the local level decision-making process, which is being carried out through Grama Sabha or *Oorukoottam*. They are unaware of the structure, purpose, and process involved in *Oorukoottam* for designing individual and local development projects. Authorities may mislead them in some cases into channelling funds to protect their self-interest. Tribes who participate in *Oorukoottam* meetings are simply listeners and do not raise questions or arguments that are essential for the formulation of programmes for their own development. Therefore, the true intention of this grass-roots level democratic institution is not being fulfilled in some circumstances without the active engagement of tribes. Thus, it is important to study the perceptions of tribes about the institution of *Oorukoottam* and their level of participation in this institution.

#### **4. Objectives of the study**

1. To study the level of awareness of the Muthuvan tribal community about the institution of *Oorukoottam*
2. To study the level and extent of tribal participation in the decision-making process in the study area.

#### **5. Methodology**

The present study used primary data to examine tribal participation in *Oorukoottam*. A Multi-Stage Random Sampling Technique was used to conduct the study. In the first stage, the district of Ernakulam was selected for the study. Then, Kuttampuzha Grama Panchayat was selected on the basis of having the highest Scheduled Tribe population in the district. As of now, Kuttampuzha Panchayat has a tribal population of 4182 with 2125 males and 2057 females within a total of 1378 families.

Out of the twelve tribal hamlets in the Grama Panchayat, the present study identified and took Vellarmkuthu as the sample tribal hamlet where the majority of the Muthuvan tribal community lives. The Vellaramkuthu tribal hamlet has a total muthuvan population of 280, spread over 76 families. Among the 280 Muthuvan tribal population, 54 sample respondents whose names are included in the voters' list were selected, and the relevant information was collected using a scheduled questionnaire. The direct interview of each respondent helped the researcher to understand the varied issues of the tribes along with their level of awareness and level of participation in Oorukoottam.

## 6. Findings of the Study

The study conducted in the Vellaramkuthu Tribal Settlement comprehensively examined the awareness level of tribes about Oorukoottam, and their extent of participation in the Oorukoottam meetings. The following are the major findings of the study:

### 6.1 Classification of Respondents on the basis of Age, Sex, Education and Occupation

**Table 1: Classification of Respondents on the basis of Age, Sex, Education and Occupation**

		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<b>Age</b>	20 – 40	23	42.6
	41 – 60	23	42.6
	Above 60	8	14.8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Sex</b>	Male	19	35.2
	Female	35	64.8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Education</b>	Illiterate	19	35.2
	LP	6	11.1
	UP	10	18.5
	High School	10	18.5
	Plus Two	8	14.8
	Degree	1	1.9
	<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Occupation</b>	Agriculture	12	22.2
	Self-Employment	4	7.4
	Daily labor	27	50.0
	Semi-government	1	1.9
	Unemployed	10	18.5
	<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Field Survey

The study shows that 64.8 percent of the respondents are females, and the remaining 35.2 percent are males. The age-wise classification of the respondents reveals that 42.6 percent of the respondents belong to the age group of 20–40 years, and the other 42.6 percent belong to the age group of 41–60 years. 14.8 percent of them are over the age of 60.

The study on the educational background of the respondents shows that 35.2 percent are illiterates, 19.6 percent have primary education, 18.5 percent have completed secondary education, 14.8 percent have higher secondary education, and only 1.9 percent of the respondents have completed degree level education.

The occupational status of the tribes shows that the majority (50 percent) of the respondents are day labourers engaged in agriculture and construction work. A few of them are regularly working under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (MGNREGP). 22 percent of them are agriculturalists, and 18.5 percent are unemployed.

## 6.2 Level of awareness of the Muthuvan Tribe about Oorukoottam

For studying the level of awareness of tribes about Oorukoottam, the study has relied on the knowledge of tribes about the structure of Oorukoottam, the purpose of attending Oorukoottam, and the knowledge of the process involved in the conduct of Oorukoottam meetings.

### 6.2.1 Knowledge about the Structure of Oorukoottam

**Table 2: Knowledge about the Structure of Oorukoottam**

<i>Structure of Oorukoottam</i>	<i>Know</i>		<i>Don't Know</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Oorukoottam has a major power in decision making	18	33.3	36	66.7
Specified quorum is required for the conduct of Oorukoottam meetings	24	44.4	30	55.6
Oorukoottam enjoys the power to select beneficiaries under various schemes of the govt.	47	87.0	7	13
Oorukoottam has a definite method of beneficiary selection	18	33.3	36	66.7
Oorukoottam has its purpose and agenda	25	46.3	29	53.7
Oorukoottam has its role in the implementation of projects in the hamlets	46	85.2	8	14.8
Oorukoottam periodically monitor and evaluate the development projects	26	48.1	28	51.9

Source: Field Survey

The study on the awareness level of tribes about the structure of Oorukoottam shows that the majority of the respondents don't have basic knowledge about its structure. 87 percent of the tribes know that Oorukoottam enjoys the power to select beneficiaries under various schemes of the government, and 85.2 percent know that Oorukoottam has a role in the implementation of projects in the hamlets. In the remaining cases, the majority of the respondents don't have complete knowledge. 67 percent of the tribes don't know that Oorukoottam has major power in decision-making. 55.6 percent of them are unaware that the Oorukoottam meeting requires a specific quorum. 67 percent of them are unaware of a specific method used by Oorukoottam in beneficiary selection. 53.7 percent replied that they don't know whether each Oorukoottam meeting has a purpose and agenda. And 52 percent of the respondents replied that they didn't know whether Oorukoottam periodically monitors and evaluates the development projects. The above results reveal that the Muthuvan Tribal Community in the study area is not fully aware of the structure of Oorukoottam where they participate in decision-making.

### 6.2.2 Purpose of Attending Oorukoottam

**Table 3: Purpose of Attending Oorukoottam**

<i>Purpose of Participating Oorukoottam</i>	<i>Yes</i>		<i>No</i>	
	<i>Frequenc y</i>	<i>Percen t</i>	<i>Frequenc y</i>	<i>Percen t</i>
Attending the meeting to know Information on various schemes which will be presented in the meeting	51	94.4	3	5.6
Attending the meeting for getting personal benefit from those schemes	50	92.6	4	7.4
Attend the meeting contribute towards formulation of development plan	19	35.2	35	64.8
Attending the meeting to contribute towards local development	26	48.1	28	51.9
Attending the meeting to raise questions and get clarifications various matters	19	35.2	35	64.8
Attending the meeting to engage in discussions on various matters	10	18.5	44	81.5
Attending the meeting for the overall development of the tribal community	27	50.0	27	50

Source: Field Survey

The study has examined the purpose for which they participate in Oorukoottam. 94 percent of them responded that they were attending the meeting to get information about various



schemes for their development. 92.6 percent of them attend the meeting in order to benefit personally from the schemes. Only 35% of them attend the meeting to develop a development plan. Furthermore, 35.2 percent of those who attended the meeting did so to ask questions and get clarification on a variety of issues. 18.5 percent attended the meeting to engage in discussions on various matters. And 50 percent attended the meeting to contribute to the overall development of the community.

### 6.2.3 Knowledge about the Process Involved in the Conduct of Oorukoottam

**Table 4**  
**Process Involved in the Conduct of Oorukoottam**

<i>Process of Oorukoottam</i>	<i>Know</i>		<i>Don't Know</i>	
	<i>Frequenc y</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequenc y</i>	<i>Perce nt</i>
Conducting meeting at regular intervals	49	90.7	5	9.3
Proper intimation about the meeting is being done by the authorities	50	92.6	4	7.4
Oorukoottam observe rules of procedure during its meeting	27	50.0	27	50.0
Stipulated quorum is necessary to conduct the Oorukoottam meeting	31	57.4	23	42.6
Attendance of Oorukoottam is noting down meticulously in every meeting	44	81.5	10	18.5
Members participating in the meeting always demand minutes	16	29.6	38	70.4
Authorities present various schemes of the panchayat in the meeting	46	85.2	8	14.8
During the meeting the members ask question on various matters	42	77.8	12	22.2
The meeting promotes the discussion on various issues	43	79.6	11	20.4
Periodic monitoring and evaluation is being done by the Oorukoottam to complete the projects on time	24	44.4	30	55.6
The department fixes a venue convenient for the tribal to participate in the meeting	50	92.6	4	7.4
The decisions of the Oorukoottam is sometimes influenced by the interest of the political parties	9	16.7	45	83.3

Source: Field Survey

The study reveals that the tribes in the study area have a proper awareness about the process involved in the conduct of Oorukoottam. More than 90 percent of the respondents replied that the Oorukoottam meetings are conducted at regular intervals, and proper



intimation is given to the participants about the time and venue. 81.5 percent of them respond that the attendance of Oorukoottam is noted down meticulously and the authorities present various schemes of the panchayat in the meeting. 79.6 percent of the tribal respondents claim that the meeting promotes discussion on various issues and motivates the members to ask questions on various issues. About 50 percent of them don't know whether Oorukoottam observes rules of procedure during its meetings, and it is also doubtful whether a stipulated quorum is necessary to conduct the Oorukoottam meeting.

### 6.3 The Level of Participation of Tribes in the Oorukoottam

**Table 5**  
**Participation of Tribes in the Oorukoottam**

<i>Participation</i>	<i>Yes</i>		<i>No</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Attend the meeting before its commencement	33	61.1	21	38.9
Take part in discussions actively	20	37.0	34	63.0
Ask questions in the Oorukoottam	19	35.2	35	64.8
Authority responds satisfactorily to the questions	37	68.5	17	31.5
Give suggestions in the meetings of Oorukoottam	6	11.1	48	88.9
Active participation in the meeting helps me to get individual benefits form schemes	42	77.8	12	22.2
Participation in the meeting increases the decision making skills of the people	24	44.4	30	55.6
Effective organization of Oorukoottam empowers the tribal people	26	48.1	28	51.9
The advent of Oorukoottam has made the functioning of Panchayat more transparent	26	48.1	28	51.9

Source: Field Survey

The study shows that 61 percent of the tribes attended the meeting of Oorukoottam before its commencement. Even though they are attending the meeting on time, they are not active since the majority of them do not ask questions or engage in discussions. Only 37% of respondents actively participate in the discussions, 35% ask questions, and 11% make suggestions during the meeting. However, the majority of the tribes replied that their participation in the meeting helps them to get personal benefits from different schemes, increases their decision-making skills, and also empowers the tribal people. 48 percent of the respondents think that the advent of Oorukoottam has made the functioning of the panchayat more transparent.

**6.4 Participation of women in the Oorukoottam****Table 6**  
**Participation of women in the Oorukoottam**

<i>Women Participation</i>	<i>Yes</i>		<i>No</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
a) Women in the settlement regularly participate in Oorukoottam meetings	51	94.44	3	5.56
b) More than Half of the participants are women	51	94.44	3	5.56
c) Women participate actively in the discussions of Oorukoottam meetings	46	85.19	8	14.81
d) Women ask questions regularly	42	77.78	12	22.22
e) Authorities fairly responds to the questions raised by women	50	92.6	4	7.4
f) Women make suggestions in the meeting	40	74.07	14	25.93
g) Participation in the meeting increases the decision making skills of the women	51	94.44	3	5.56
h) Effective working of Oorukoottam is essential for the empowerment of women in the settlement	50	92.6	4	7.4

Source: Filed Survey

The study reveals that women in the settlement actively participate in the meetings of Oorukoottam. 94.44 percent of the respondents claimed that women regularly participate in the meetings of Oorukoottam, and more than half of the participants were women. 85 percent of the respondents stated that women actively participate in discussions on various topics during the meeting; 77.78 percent stated that the majority of women ask questions on a regular basis during the meeting; and 74.07 percent stated that women make suggestions on various topics during the meeting. The study also makes an attempt to examine how authorities respond to the questions raised by women. 92.6 percent responded that authorities in the meetings responded fairly to the questions and clarifications raised by the women. Regular and active participation in such democratic institutions will definitely improve the confidence in decision-making and lead to the empowerment of tribal women. 94.44 percent of the respondents accepted that the participation of women in the Oorukoottam meeting would increase the decision-making

skills of the women, and 92.6 percent responded that the effective work of Oorukoottam is essential for the empowerment of women in the settlement.

### 6.5 Participation of youth in the Oorukoottam

**Table 7**  
**Participation of youth in the Oorukoottam**

<i>Youth Participation</i>	<i>Yes</i>		<i>No</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
a) Youth in the settlement regularly participate in Oorukoottam meetings	20	37.04	34	62.96
b) Participate actively in the discussions of Oorukoottam meetings	18	33.33	36	66.67
c) Youth ask questions regularly	14	25.93	40	74.07
d) Authorities fairly responds to the questions raised by youth	9	16.67	45	83.33
e) Youth make suggestions	14	25.93	40	74.07

Source: Field Survey

The study has also examined the extent to which the youth in the settlement participate in the Oorukoottam meetings. Since the tribal youth are more educated than their elders, their interest and participation are crucial for the preparation of the development plan in the meetings of Oorukoottam. But for several reasons, the youth in the settlement fail to participate actively in the meetings regularly. 62.96 percent responded that youth in the settlement do not participate in the meeting, 66.67 percent replied they do not engage in the discussions in the meetings, 74.07 percent opinioned that youth never asks any questions and make any suggestions in the meeting.

### 6.6 Reason behind the low participation of youth in the meeting

**Table 8**  
**Reason behind the low participation of youth in the meeting**

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Due to lack of knowledge and awareness	13	24.07
Lack of motivation and support	22	40.74
No interest in attending the meeting	11	20.37
Reside away from the settlement for education or job	8	14.81
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey

The study has identified several reasons for the low participation of youth in the meeting. The majority (40.74 percent) of the respondents responded that the low participation of young people is due to a lack of motivation and support. Another 24.07 percent of the respondents said that the low participation of youth is due to their lack of knowledge and awareness of Oorukoottam, 20.37 percent replied that the youth have no interest in attending the meeting, and 14.81 percent of the respondents gave another reason for the low participation of youth, i.e., they reside away from the settlement for education or work.

### **6.7 Conclusion**

The Oorukoottam is a democratic decision-making unit in the tribal settlements in Kerala. The institution got recognition from the tribal population since it gives them a platform to think about their own development. The present study found that the Muthuvan tribal community has a minimum knowledge of this institution. They have complete knowledge of the process involved in the conduct of Oorukoottam meetings, and they are very much aware of why they should participate in these meetings. However, their level of understanding of the structure of Oorukoottam is low. Tribes in the study area participate actively in the meetings to discuss the development issues and schemes of the government. Participation of women in the meeting is appreciable in the settlement. They believe that their participation in Oorukoottam makes the authorities sincere and responsible. Moreover, it could enhance their capabilities in public speaking and decision-making and lead to their overall development. In fact, the participation of youth in the meeting is very low for some reason. Adequate steps must be taken to bring educated young people to the Oorukoottam. Their potential abilities could be tapped into in designing the tribal development plan. A genuine and consistent effort should be made to educate and motivate tribes to participate in and contribute towards tribal development.

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