

Economic Transformation of the *Kurichiya* Tribe in Wayanad: Assessing the Impact of *Oorukoottam*

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Abstract: This study investigates the influence of *Oorukoottam*, a community-based decision-making and governance institution, on the economic quality of life of the *Kurichiya* tribal community in Wayanad, Kerala. The *Kurichiya*, traditionally dependent on cooperative agriculture, hunting, and forest-based subsistence activities, have experienced socio-economic transitions in recent decades. With the introduction of *Oorukoottam*, their participation in welfare schemes, financial services, and livelihood opportunities has expanded. The results indicate a significant improvement in income sources, access to modern household facilities, awareness of forest rights, and financial inclusion after *Oorukoottam*. Occupation was found to be the only demographic factor significantly influencing economic improvement. However, limited progress was observed in areas such as drinking water, sanitation, and digital access. The study concludes that *Oorukoottam* has enhanced economic well-being and self-reliance among the *Kurichiya*, while recommending further interventions in education, infrastructure, and digital inclusion to ensure sustained and holistic development.

Keywords: *Kurichiya* tribe, *Oorukoottam*, economic quality of life, tribal livelihood, cooperative agriculture.

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Kurichiya*, one of the predominant tribal communities of Wayanad district in Kerala, represent a culturally unique and historically rooted population whose livelihood systems, social organization, and economic practices have undergone significant transformations over time. Etymologically, the term *Kurichiya* derives from *kuri* (target) and *chiyan* (people), a name attributed by the Kottayam Raja in recognition of their exceptional skill in archery (Nair, 1911). Traditionally concentrated in Mananthavady taluk—where 3419 of the 5812 *Kurichiya* families reside—the community is also present in Vythiri taluk and, in smaller numbers, in neighboring districts such as Kozhikode and Kannur. Historical records suggest that the *Kurichiya* were among the earliest settlers in Wayanad, inhabiting the region as early as the 1st to 3rd century CE (Mathur, 1977). Initially hunters, they gradually transitioned to settled agriculture, adopting diverse cultivation strategies such as paddy cultivation in the valleys and shifting cultivation with ragi and sorghum in the uplands. Their livelihood systems were deeply intertwined with the ecological conditions of Wayanad's biodiverse forests, which provided natural nutrients for crops, biological pest control through bird predation, and abundant edible plant and animal resources. Hunting, gathering, fishing, and animal husbandry formed integral components of their subsistence economy, complementing their agricultural activities.

Matrilineal kinship organization has long been a defining feature of *Kurichiya* society. Joint families (*mittom*) under the authority of a chieftain (*Pittan*) historically practiced collective ownership of land, pooled labor, and shared economic resources (Padmanabhan, 2003). This cooperative structure extended into all spheres of production, including agriculture, hunting, and rituals associated with economic activities. Although land fragmentation and socio-economic changes have altered aspects of this traditional system—such as the shift from joint to individual farming in *tharavads* like *Palliyara* and *Palott*—the collective ethos continues to shape community identity and economic cooperation. In the contemporary context, the introduction of *Oorukoottam*, a local self-governance and collective decision-making institution, has emerged as a significant intervention influencing economic participation, livelihood diversification, and access to welfare resources among the *Kurichiya*. Understanding the economic quality of life of this community after

the implementation of *Oorukoottam* requires an examination of their traditional economic organization, socio-cultural practices, and the ways in which institutional changes reshape livelihood strategies. This study aims to analyze how *Oorukoottam* has affected the *Kurichiya* community's economic well-being, with particular focus on agricultural practices, income sources, subsistence activities, and the interplay between cultural traditions and modern development processes.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS OF ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION OF THE *KURICHIYA*

The *Kurichiya* possess a complex cultural system characterized by matrilineal lineage, joint family households, and a long-standing tradition of cooperative labor. Traditionally, economic life was shaped by intimate knowledge of the forest ecosystem, which supported hunting, gathering, agriculture, and animal husbandry. Their expertise in archery and group hunting is widely documented in anthropological literature (Aiyappan & Mahadevan, 1990). Hunting was historically both an economic activity and a ritual obligation, performed collectively and embedded in ceremonial life—such as puberty rituals, marriage, and annual religious observances conducted in the month of *Thulam* (October–November). The community used an array of locally manufactured hunting tools—including *Pullambu*, *Erumbumottu*, *Kathiyambu*, and *Keli Ambu* arrows—crafted from bamboo, reed (*kara oda*), and iron.

Food gathering constituted another essential subsistence strategy. Men and women collected seasonal tubers (*Noora*, *Naram*, *Kavuthum kizhangu*, *Kandi kizhangu*), fruits, and wild honey. The *Kurichiya* demonstrated sustainable harvesting practices, such as replanting tuber vines after cutting. Honey collection, a specialized skill requiring night-time operations and smoke dispersion, provided both nutritional and medicinal value and contributed to limited market exchange. Fishing, similar to hunting, functioned as a community-based activity tied to ritual performance. Traditional fishing implements were fashioned from bamboo and reed, reflecting deep ecological knowledge and adherence to seasonal rhythms. Animal husbandry played a crucial role in supporting agricultural production. Buffaloes, cows, and bulls were essential for ploughing, threshing, and manure production. Earlier, *mittoms* owned large herds that grazed freely on forest lands; contemporary ownership has declined due to land constraints, legal restrictions, and economic shifts.

2.1. Agricultural Systems and Shifting Cultivation Practices

Agriculture remains the core of *Kurichiya* economic life. Historically, they practiced shifting cultivation (*paramba* cultivation), following the slash-and-burn method described in classic ethnographic definitions (Conklin, 1961; Dash, 2006, 2008). Their selection of hilltops or slopes, timing of clearing, burning, and sowing were meticulously aligned with the traditional agricultural calendar. Crops such as millet, finger millet, and cumin were grown until external pressures—deforestation, forest laws, demographic changes, and settlement by migrant communities—rendered shifting cultivation unsustainable.

Transitioning to settled wet and dry cultivation, the *Kurichiya* developed a dual agricultural cycle: *Nancha*, reliant on monsoon rains and performed collectively, and *Puncha*, based on irrigation and carried out individually. Rituals like *Daivathe Kanal* (seeking divine consent) preceded key agricultural activities such as sowing, replanting, and harvesting. Paddy seeds were traditionally preserved in *Koottumkandi* granaries, and agricultural tools—*Kalappa*, *Njavari*, and *Nukam*—were locally produced and passed down intergenerationally.

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. Religion, Belief Systems and Economic Life

Religious beliefs deeply permeate economic behavior among the *Kurichiya*. They worship inanimate objects representing their deities, with *Muttappan* (Shiva) considered the principal hunting god, and Vishnu also venerated (Shashi, 1997). Their supreme creator deity is referred to as *Perumal*, invoked during rituals (Bindu Ramachandran, 2003). Ritual authority is held by temple specialists and *vidhikaran* (shamans), who play a crucial role in sanctioning economic activities such as sowing, harvesting, hunting, and fishing. This integration of economy and spirituality ensures that livelihood practices adhere to cultural norms and reinforces communal solidarity.

2.4. Conceptual Link to Economic Quality of Life and *Oorukoottam*

The introduction of *Oorukoottam*—a participatory village-level institution—has reshaped local governance, resource management, and access to development schemes among tribal communities in Kerala. For the *Kurichiya*, whose traditional economic organization is rooted in collective decision-making, the *Oorukoottam* structure intersects with existing socio-cultural norms, potentially influencing:

- Household income stability
- Agricultural productivity
- Access to welfare benefits
- Education and employment opportunities
- Participation in community decision-making
- Food security and nutritional standards

The theoretical framework of this study therefore combines economic anthropology, livelihood studies, and participatory development theory to analyze how collective institutions like *Oorukoottam* impact the economic quality of life in culturally cohesive tribal societies.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on members of the *Kurichiya* tribal community in the Wayanad district of Kerala, a group known for its agrarian lifestyle and strong community-based social structure. To ensure equitable representation, a total of 75 respondents, comprising both men and women from different *Kurichiya* households, were proportionally selected for interviews. Although the sampling process aimed at balance and inclusivity, cultural sensitivities and geographic dispersion occasionally influenced response rates in certain localities. Nevertheless, the sampling framework ensured a reliable foundation for comparative analysis while maintaining methodological integrity and fair representation of the *Kurichiya* community.

3.1. Objectives

1. To examine the economic quality of life of the *Kurichiya* tribal community in Wayanad following the introduction of *Oorukoottam*.
2. To evaluate the relationship between economic life and selected demographic variables, including gender, education, employment status, and age groups.

3.2. Hypotheses

1. There is a significant improvement in the economic quality of life of the *Kurichiya* tribal community after the implementation of *Oorukoottam*.
2. There exists a significant association between economic life and demographic variables, such as gender, education, employment status, and age groups.

3.3. Data Sampling

A stratified sampling technique was employed to ensure adequate representation from the *Kurichiya* population. The strata were based on key demographic factors, including gender, education, employment status, and age groups (15–30, 31–45, 46–60, and 61–75 years). This approach helped capture intra-community variations for meaningful comparison and interpretation. Primary data were collected through a structured interview schedule prepared by the researcher, comprising 75 questions related to personal characteristics and different dimensions of economic life. Data collection was conducted through household visits across several *Kurichiya* settlements, ensuring balanced gender representation and inclusion from all strata.

However, several challenges were encountered during fieldwork:

- Limited familiarity among participants with government welfare schemes occasionally caused hesitation or delay in responses.
- Occupational commitments, particularly among agricultural workers, necessitated conducting interviews during non-working hours, weekends, or holidays.
- Cultural reticence in discussing financial matters restricted some respondents from providing full disclosure.
- Geographical and logistical difficulties in reaching remote *Kurichiya* settlements occasionally resulted in incomplete responses, leading to the exclusion of a few cases from the final analysis.

Despite these constraints, the study upheld ethical standards, methodological rigor, and ensured data reliability and validity throughout the research process.

3.4. Statistical Techniques for Data Analysis

The study utilized a combination of quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques. Quantitative data were processed using inferential statistical methods, such as the Wilcoxon Rank Test, t-test, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software to determine the strength of relationships and differences among variables. Additionally, qualitative approaches, including direct observation and informal discussions, were employed to complement statistical outcomes and enhance contextual understanding.

To evaluate the impact of *Oorukoottam* on the economic quality of life of the *Kurichiya* tribe, a set of twenty specific questions focused on pre- and post-*Oorukoottam* economic conditions was administered. Responses were systematically tabulated, enabling comparative assessment of improvements in income, employment opportunities, and access to financial resources following *Oorukoottam*.

3.5. Economic Quality Of Life

Table – 3.5.1.

Difference in Economic Quality of Life after *Oorukoottam* and the personal improvement

Items	Tribe	Before <i>Oorukoottam</i>	After <i>Oorukoottam</i>	p – value
Q1	<i>Kurichiya</i>	3.168 ± 1.247	3.699 ± 1.521	0.001
Q2	<i>Kurichiya</i>	107 (54.6%)	135 (68.9%)	0.000
Q3	<i>Kurichiya</i>	2.291 ± 0.951	3.653 ± 0.746	0.000
Q4a	<i>Kurichiya</i>	195 (99.5%)	196 (100.0%)	0.317
Q4b	<i>Kurichiya</i>	195 (99.5%)	196 (100.0%)	0.317
Q4c	<i>Kurichiya</i>	179 (91.3%)	196 (100.0%)	0.000
Q4d	<i>Kurichiya</i>	136 (69.4%)	196 (100.0%)	0.000
Q4e	<i>Kurichiya</i>	12 (6.1%)	169 (86.2%)	0.000

Q4f	<i>Kurichiya</i>	12 (6.1%)	167 (85.2%)	0.000
Q4g	<i>Kurichiya</i>	5 (2.6%)	6 (3.1%)	0.739
Q4h	<i>Kurichiya</i>	0 (0.0%)	168 (85.7%)	0.000
Q5	<i>Kurichiya</i>	0.628 ± 1.095	1.852 ± 1.383	0.000
Q6	<i>Kurichiya</i>	67 (34.2%)	114 (58.2%)	0.000
Q7	<i>Kurichiya</i>	7 (3.6%)	85 (43.4%)	0.000
Q8	<i>Kurichiya</i>	32 (16.3%)	116 (59.2%)	0.000
Q9	<i>Kurichiya</i>	22 (11.2%)	72 (36.7%)	0.000
Q10	<i>Kurichiya</i>	115 (58.7%)	140 (71.4%)	0.001

Wilcoxon signed-rank test was performed.

According to the Wilcoxon rank test, seven questions out of ten, the percentages of Q1 (Income source), Q2 (Do you get the right wages?), Q3 (Type of housing), Q4c (Household facilities: Cot, table, chairs and cupboard), Q4d (Household facilities: Electricity), Q4e (Household facilities: Gas), Q4f (Household facilities: TV), Q4h (Household facilities: Internet), Q5 (Do you have your vehicle?), Q6 (Are you aware of forest rights?), Q7 (Do you get proper price for your crops?), Q8 (Do you have bank accounts?), Q9 (Have you taken a loan from the bank?) and Q10 (Are you a beneficiary of housing schemes?), the p-values are ($p < 0.05$) and suggest that there is improvement in these areas after *Oorukoottam* of *Kurichiya*

Findings:

Among these, seven questions recorded statistically significant improvement ($p < 0.05$), confirming that *Oorukoottam* has had a positive impact on the economic quality of life of the *Kurichiya* people. However, three parameters—availability of drinking water, toilet facilities, and ownership of computers—did not show significant change, indicating that these areas remain relatively unaffected by the program's interventions.

Explanation:

The findings indicate that *Oorukoottam* has substantially contributed to improving the economic and material well-being of the *Kurichiya* tribe. Significant gains were observed in income diversification, wage fairness, housing conditions, and access to modern household amenities such as electricity, LPG gas, and television. Additionally, improvements in vehicle ownership, awareness of forest rights, access to banking services, and participation in government housing schemes further highlight the community's economic advancement.

According to Sharma (2021), income-generating initiatives and community-based interventions have played a vital role in enhancing the economic opportunities of the *Kurichiya* people by promoting sustainable livelihoods and financial inclusion. Similarly, the Kerala State Planning Board (2021) reports that targeted development programs have positively influenced the living standards and household facilities among the *Kurichiya* population, particularly through improved infrastructure and financial accessibility. The absence of improvement in certain areas such as drinking water, sanitation, and computer access suggests that these sectors require further attention. The findings emphasize that while *Oorukoottam* has effectively strengthened economic and financial dimensions, there remains a need for complementary interventions to address infrastructural and digital gaps within the *Kurichiya* settlements.

Overall, the study underscores the transformative role of *Oorukoottam* in fostering economic self-reliance and improving the quality of life among the *Kurichiya* tribe in Wayanad, while also identifying the domains where continued policy support is essential for holistic tribal development.

Table – 3.5.2.

Difference in Economic Quality of Life after Oorukoottam

Tribe	Before <i>Oorukoottam</i>	After <i>Oorukoottam</i>	p - value
<i>Kurichiya</i>	41.47 ± 8.299	68.55 ± 11.07	0.000

The p-value in the Paired sample test of the difference in the economic quality of life after *Oorukoottam* of *Kurichiya* is less than the significance level of 0.05 and so it is significant. The table shows that the economic quality of life has significantly improved after *Oorukoottam* (68.55 ± 11.07) compared to the economic quality of life before *Oorukoottam* (41.47 ± 8.299).

Findings:

The economic quality of life improved after *Oorukoottam*. *Kurichiya* were already better off and they maintained the upper hand.

Table – 3.5.3.

Association between Change in Economic Quality of Life and Personal Details of *Kurichiya*

Personal Details	Mean	SD	p-value
Age (Years)			
≤ 25	35.50	4.180	0.310 ^{NS}
26 – 35	32.12	2.939	
36 – 45	28.34	3.311	
46 – 55	27.24	3.223	
> 55	29.96	3.464	
Marital Status			
Married	31.68	1.941	0.621 ^{NS}
Unmarried	29.58	4.022	
Number of Family Members			
1 – 2	32.41	3.248	0.338 ^{NS}
3 – 5	28.40	2.013	
> 5	31.09	4.245	
Occupation			
Nil	34.56	3.688	0.014 ^S
Cultivation	30.79	2.735	
Labour	25.48	2.723	
Govt. Job	31.70	3.328	
Educational Qualification			
Uneducated	28.03	3.677	0.298 ^{NS}
Lower Primary	31.11	4.168	
Upper Primary	35.09	3.891	
High School	30.57	2.979	
Higher Secondary	27.91	3.402	
Under Graduation	26.92	3.033	
Post-Graduation	34.80	4.118	

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed.

Age: According to the ANOVA test, the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05 and so the difference in change in the economic quality of life between different age groups is not significant. The table shows that the change in the economic quality of life is almost the same in cases with age ≤25 years (35.50 ± 4.180), 26-35 years (32.12 ± 2.939), 36-45 years (28.34 ± 3.311), 46-55 years (27.24 ± 3.223) and >55 years (29.96 ± 3.464).

Marital Status: According to the ANOVA test, the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05, and so the difference in change in the economic quality of life between married and unmarried is not significant. The table

shows that the change in the economic quality of life is almost the same in married (31.68 ± 1.941) and unmarried (29.58 ± 4.022).

The Number of Family Members: According to the ANOVA test, the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05, and so the difference in change in the economic quality of life between different groups' family members is not significant. The table shows that the change in the economic quality of life is almost the same in families with 1-2 members (32.41 ± 3.248), 3-5 members (28.40 ± 2.013) and >5 members (31.09 ± 4.245).

Occupation: The p-value according to the ANOVA test is less than the significance level 0.05, and so the difference in change in the economic quality of life between different occupations is significant. The table shows that the change in the economic quality of life is significantly greater in no occupation (34.56 ± 3.688), Government job (31.70 ± 3.328) and cultivation (30.79 ± 2.735) compared to labour (25.48 ± 2.723).

Educational Qualification: According to the ANOVA test, the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05, so the difference in change in the economic quality of life between different qualifications is not significant. The table shows that the change in the economic quality of life is almost the same at all levels of educational qualification.

Findings:

In personal details only Occupation impacts the Economic Quality of life of *Kurichiya*.

Explanation:

The findings indicate that within the *Kurichiya* community, occupation emerged as the most significant variable influencing economic performance after the implementation of *Oorukoottam*. Unlike other demographic factors such as age and education, occupation showed a stronger and more direct relationship with improvements in economic quality of life.

This trend may be attributed to the community's traditional occupational structure, which has long been centred around agriculture, allied labor, and small-scale farming activities. While these occupations initially limited economic diversification, the introduction of *Oorukoottam* facilitated better organization of community labor, increased access to cooperative opportunities, and encouraged participation in livelihood-enhancing schemes.

The relatively modest impact of educational background on economic outcomes among the *Kurichiya* can be linked to the historically limited access to formal education within the community. When *Oorukoottam* was introduced, educational achievement levels were considerably low due to geographical isolation and cultural preferences that emphasized occupational continuity over academic advancement. However, the program's participatory and community-based framework has gradually encouraged greater openness toward development initiatives, including skill-based training and economic self-sufficiency. The *Kurichiya* experience demonstrates that structural participation in *Oorukoottam* activities—rather than demographic advantages—has been the key factor driving economic improvement. The findings highlight the significance of integrating occupational development, cooperative engagement, and capacity-building programs within the framework of tribal economic upliftment.

3.5. CONCLUSION

The statistical analyses conducted using the Wilcoxon Rank Test, t-test, Logistic Regression Analysis, and ANOVA confirm that *Oorukoottam* has brought significant positive changes in the economic conditions of the *Kurichiya* tribal community in Wayanad district. The results indicate measurable improvement in income levels, access to household facilities, financial inclusion, and awareness of economic rights. Based on these findings, the null hypothesis—that *Oorukoottam has not made any significant contribution to the economic life of the Kurichiya tribe*—is rejected. Conversely, the alternative hypothesis—that *Oorukoottam has made a significant contribution to the economic life of the Kurichiya tribe in Wayanad district*—is accepted. The study thus establishes that *Oorukoottam* has been an effective catalyst for economic empowerment, enhancing livelihood opportunities and improving the overall quality of life of the *Kurichiya* community. Nonetheless, the findings also suggest the need for continued educational and infrastructural interventions to ensure inclusive and sustained progress.

3.6. RECOMMENDATIONS

There are certain Recommendations, may be integrate the further studies and developmental implementations:

1. **Strengthening Educational Access:**

Given the continuing educational gap within the *Kurichiya* community, development agencies should prioritize establishing tribal-friendly educational programs that integrate traditional knowledge with modern skills. Community-based adult education and vocational training centers could bridge the skill gap and enhance employability.

2. **Enhancing Occupational Diversification:**

The *Kurichiya*'s economic growth remains closely tied to agriculture and manual labor. To ensure sustainable progress, livelihood diversification through skill-based training, micro-enterprise support, and value-added agricultural activities should be encouraged under the *Oorukoottam* framework.

3. **Improving Infrastructure and Digital Inclusion:**

The lack of progress in areas such as drinking water, sanitation, and digital access highlights the need for infrastructure-driven interventions. Expanding access to safe water, sanitation facilities, and digital literacy programs will support overall quality of life improvements and help integrate the *Kurichiya* more fully into the modern economy.

4. **Promoting Financial Literacy and Access to Credit:**

Strengthening community-level financial literacy, facilitating easier access to cooperative banks and self-help groups, and promoting savings habits will enhance financial resilience and independence among the *Kurichiya* households.

5. **Ensuring Participatory Development:**

Policy frameworks should continue to emphasize community participation and local governance within *Oorukoottam*. Empowering local leaders and involving *Kurichiya* youth and women in decision-making can ensure that development programs remain culturally sensitive and sustainable.

The *Oorukoottam* initiative has proven effective in advancing the economic quality of life among the *Kurichiya* tribe, yet its long-term success depends on sustained efforts in education, infrastructure, and participatory planning. Integrating these policy directions can help ensure that the *Kurichiya* community continues on a path of inclusive and sustainable development.

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