

Political Awakening through Collective Action: The Influence of *Oorukoottam* on *Paniya* Tribal Community in Wayanad

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Abstract: *This study examines the political quality of life of the Paniya tribal community in Wayanad, Kerala, with specific focus on the impact of Oorukoottam. Using a stratified sample of 75 respondents representing diverse demographic groups, data were collected through a structured interview schedule covering personal and political dimensions. Despite challenges such as limited awareness, gender-based constraints, socio-cultural hesitations, and logistical difficulties in remote settlements, the study ensured balanced representation and methodological rigor. The analysis evaluates improvements in political participation and awareness following the introduction of Oorukoottam and explores associations between political life and demographic variables including gender, education, employment status, and age. Findings contribute to understanding political empowerment among marginalized tribal communities and the role of institutional initiatives in enhancing democratic engagement.*

Keywords: *Paniya tribe, Oorukoottam, political quality of life, tribal empowerment, political participation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

'Political' relates to the organization of power and matters impacting the governance of a country. Lucian Pye defines 'Political' within the framework of political development, considering aspects like political preconditions for economic development, political modernization, and the building of democracy (Lucian Pye, 1966). Political development involves mass participation and popular involvement in political activities. In this paper, 'political' is understood as the popular involvement of tribes in local self-government, emphasizing their participatory role within hamlets through a democratic, orderly, and self-governed system in *Oorukoottam*.

2. HISTORICAL NARRATION OF THE POLITICAL ASPECT OF *PANIYA* TRIBE IN WAYANAD DISTRICT

2.1. Civil and political rights.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, reformist theorists aligned with English, American, and French revolutionaries expounded on civil and political rights. The political philosophy of liberal individualism and laissez-faire economic and social doctrines primarily conceives human rights in negative terms ("freedom from") rather than positive ones ("rights to") (UDHR 1948). It advocates for abstaining from government intervention in the pursuit of human dignity.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly in Articles 2–21, delineates the first-generation rights that include the right to life, liberty, and security of the person; freedom from gender, racial, and equivalent forms of discrimination; freedom from slavery or involuntary servitude; the right to a fair and public trial; freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; freedom from arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile; freedom from interference in privacy and correspondence; freedom of peaceful assembly and association; freedom of opinion and expression; freedom of movement and residence; freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; the right to asylum from persecution; and the right to participate in government, either directly or through free elections (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2020).

Rights against discrimination on account of sex, race, caste, gender, nationality, colour, age, religion, ethnicity, and political affiliation as well as the individual rights of privacy and freedom of thought, religion, speech, movement,

assembly and press are all of paramount importance (The civil rights act of 1964 enacted by 88 United States Congress, 1964).

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination outlines special provisions for ethnic communities, considering their economic, social, and cultural rights. It also explicitly prohibits discrimination based on racial or ethnic differences. (ICESCR 1966). Thus, civil and political rights promote and safeguard individual freedom from injustices perpetrated by states and others. They ensure the freedom to participate in political and civil life without any restraints based on caste, race, gender, colour, etc.

2.2. Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA)

The Government of India enacted the PESA Act in 1996 to establish and implement self-governance for vulnerable tribes residing in the Scheduled Areas of India through the traditional *Gramsabha*. The Scheduled Areas, identified in ten states of India by the fifth schedule of the Constitution of India, extend the provisions of part IX of the Constitution to Scheduled Areas. The PESA Act empowers the Panchayat and *Gramsabha* to establish a system of self-governance in tribal areas concerning issues such as selecting beneficiaries and implementing sanctioned projects, use of minor forest produce, minerals, and water bodies. PESA has broadened the scope for the positive development of vulnerable communities in the scheduled areas, marking a new paradigm for the development of tribal communities in terms of improving their quality of life. However, the tribal *Gramsabha* still struggles to fulfil its destiny and realize the rights guaranteed by the PESA Act (PESA, 1996). According to the 73rd amendment of the constitution, article 243 (m), Panchayat Raj was not structurally applicable to the Scheduled Areas, but the parliament is passing a law to make Panchayat Raj applicable to Scheduled Areas with appropriate exceptions and modifications.

2.3. Political aspects of tribes in Wayanad

According to J.S. Mill, effective governance requires the active participation of all citizens in the functioning of the government (Datta Prabhat, 2003). Democracy, as a political institution, not only grants people the opportunity to wield political sovereign power but also ensures their involvement in the day-to-day affairs of the government. In the 19th century, the British government introduced a legitimate system of local self-government to foster bottom-up participation. Panchayats, considered ancient, were formed independently by villagers to address issues, especially in remote areas lacking close State administration. The modern Panchayat Raj is a prototype for tribal self-governance (Lucyamma Kurian May 2000).

In this context, analysing the empowerment of deprived sections through decentralization, specifically through *Oorukoottam* and the tribal *Gramasabha*, becomes crucial. Empowerment involves decentralising authority and power, intending to involve scheduled tribes in decision-making (Ghosh et al. 2008). While decentralized governance facilitates the effective participation of backward communities, instances of non-participation by tribes in *Gramasabha* decision-making can be attributed to factors, including the top-down approach of governing institutions.

Kerala's government in the year 2003 implemented special provisions for establishing *Oorukoottam*, a hamlet-level assembly consisting of all adult members, numbering not less than 50 families. These assemblies serve as grassroots decision-making agencies for projects related to scheduled tribes. This marked a significant change in the ST developmental process, especially in implementing the Tribal Sub Plans. However, despite the activism within *Oorukoottams*, these bodies lack constitutional power or mandates to make decisions. The tribal Gram Sabha, though lacking constitutional power, has been actively involved in decision-making, particularly regarding the Tribal Sub Plan. Nevertheless, members of *Oorukoottams* lack the full empowerment to make decisions entirely based on their will and interests (Bachan, 2015).

Within the *Paniya* community, social group leaders, known as *Moopan*, traditionally emerge from their families or tribal hamlets. In local bodies, *Paniya* has nominal representations in decision-making while *Kurichiya* has reasonably good representation.

3. NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to comprehend the influence of *Oorukoottam* in Wayanad District, particularly in empowering tribal communities and enhancing their quality of life for better integration into mainstream society especially in local self governance. Introducing the tribal *Gramasabha*, *Oorukoottam*, clarified their rights and the imperative for empowerment. Immediate implementation of constitutional guarantees protecting tribal communities is essential. Surveys evaluating the efficacy of *Oorukoottam* indicate that political representatives, non-tribes, and bureaucratic

interventions have hindered its full implementation. The potential of decentralized participatory local self-government in improving the quality of life and integrating tribes into mainstream society is yet to be fully realized at the *Oorukoottam* level. The study emphasizes the urgent need for government-led reorganization of *Oorukoottam* to enhance the benefits of a participatory approach in local self government for *Paniya* empowerment.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on members of the *Paniya* tribal community in Wayanad, Kerala. A total of 75 respondents—men and women from different households—were proportionally selected to ensure balanced representation. Although cultural and social constraints affected responses in some areas, the sampling process remained systematic and provided a reliable basis for analysis.

4.1. Objectives

1. To assess the political quality of life of the *Paniya* community after the introduction of *Oorukoottam*. To examine the relationship between political life and selected demographic variables such as gender, education, employment status, and age.

4.2. Hypotheses

1. The political quality of life of the *Paniya* community has significantly improved after the introduction of *Oorukoottam*.
2. Political life is significantly associated with demographic variables including gender, education, employment status, and age.

4.3. Data Sampling

A stratified sampling method was used based on gender, education, employment status, and age groups (15–30, 31–45, 46–60, 61–75). Primary data were collected through a structured interview schedule containing 75 questions on personal and economic aspects. Household visits across various *Paniya* settlements ensured representation from all strata. Despite certain constraints in fieldwork such as, limited awareness of rights and government schemes, gender-related constraints, socio-cultural hesitations, difficult terrain and logistical issues in remote settlements, the study upheld methodological rigor, ethical standards, and data reliability.

5. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

In this section of *Oorukoottam* and political life the data were collected through twenty questions and subjected to Wilcoxon Rank test, t-test, ANOVA test etc, appropriate to the data. The compiled data and its findings are tabulated, analysed and interpreted wherever relevant.

5.1. Difference in Political Quality of Life after *Oorukoottam*

Table 1.

Items	Caste	Before <i>Oorukoottam</i>	After <i>Oorukoottam</i>	p – value
Q1	<i>Paniya</i>	125 (64.4%)	150 (77.3%)	0.000
Q2	<i>Paniya</i>	77 (39.7%)	117 (60.3%)	0.000
Q3	<i>Paniya</i>	9 (4.6%)	19 (9.8%)	0.008
Q4	<i>Paniya</i>	7 (3.6%)	9 (4.6%)	0.480
Q5	<i>Paniya</i>	79 (40.7%)	88 (45.4%)	0.170

Q6	<i>Paniya</i>	3 (1.5%)	13 (6.7%)	0.002
Q7	<i>Paniya</i>	179 (92.3%)	177 (91.2%)	0.527
Q8	<i>Paniya</i>	4 (2.1%)	9 (4.6%)	0.025
Q9	<i>Paniya</i>	4 (2.1%)	5 (2.6%)	0.317
Q10	<i>Paniya</i>	9 (4.6%)	55 (28.4%)	0.000

Wilcoxon signed rank test was performed.

Based on the Wilcoxon rank test, the p-values ($p < 0.05$) and the percentages in six out of ten responses register improvement in *Paniya* after *Oorukoottam*. The six questions are Q1 (Do you have suffrage/franchise?), Q2 (Do you utilize your franchise?), Q3 (Are you interested to be elected as local government?), Q6 (Are you a member of any of the Tribal movements in Wayanad?), Q8 (Do you have a satisfactory role in the planning and decision making of tribal development programmes/projects?) and Q10 (Are you aware of your social rights?).

Whereas no change was registered in four questions Q4 (Have you participated in any leaders training programme?), Q5 (Do you think that the elected tribal representatives are capable to work for the tribal development?), Q7 (Do you think that Tribal movements can achieve the rights of the tribal community?) and Q9 (Do you have a participatory role in the implementation of tribal projects?) as corresponding p-values are more than the significance level.

Findings

The significant improvements in six out of ten questions reflect positive changes in political engagement, voting rights, leadership aspirations, participation in tribal movements, decision-making, and awareness of social rights within the *Paniya* community after the *Oorukoottam* program. The lack of improvement in four questions suggests that specific aspects of leadership training, perceptions of tribal representatives, belief in tribal movements, and participation in tribal projects may require further attention and intervention. These results provide insights into the areas where the program has been effective and where there may be room for further improvement and engagement.

Explanation

The significant improvement in suffrage/franchise suggests that the *Paniya* community has progressed regarding voting rights and participation in the electoral process. This improvement could reflect increased political engagement. The improvement in utilizing the franchise indicates that community members have become more active in exercising their voting rights, contributing to a more active participation in the democratic process. Anitha K. (2020) examines political engagement and participation among tribal communities, including data on voter turnout, candidacy, and elected positions. The increased interest in being elected to local government positions reflects a positive change, indicating a desire among *Paniya* community members to engage in local governance and leadership roles. The positive change in membership in tribal movements suggests increased participation in social and political movements, which could contribute to greater advocacy for tribal rights and development. Government of India, (2021) report includes detailed statistics on political participation, social rights awareness, and tribal movements. The increased awareness of social rights highlights a positive development in understanding and claiming social rights among community members. However, in the absence of improvement in the level of participation in the implementation of tribal projects has not significantly changed after the *Oorukoottam* because they are unaware of their human rights and capacity to act following its principles. The four questions that registered no change are out of the bounds of the *Paniya* community. "Leadership training", 'acceptance of their own as elected representative', 'to be a member of tribal human rights movements' and 'to take a participatory role in the implementation of projects' require a high level of personality development coupled with self-confidence. ActionAid India, (2019) report evaluates the effectiveness of various development interventions, including political participation and leadership training among tribal communities. Given their timid nature and a feeling of inadequacy, it is natural that they found roles that involve leadership qualities challenging to perform. Apart from the incidence of attacks on the tribal people based on their appearance, the sensitivity of the general public has been blunted, and hitherto, passive ridiculing has become an active attack on the tribal people. Further, the general financial insecurity of the agricultural community and the stress therein seem to have made the general public more individualistic and violent.

The p-values ($p < 0.05$) and the percentages of seven responses out of ten questions suggest improvement in *Kurichiya* after *Oorukoottam*. The questions are Q1 (Do you have suffrage/franchise?), Q2 (Do you utilize your franchise?), Q5 (Do you think that the elected tribal representatives are capable of working for the tribal development?), Q7 (Do you think that Tribal movements can achieve the rights of the tribal community?), Q8 (Do you have a satisfactory role in the planning and decision making of tribal development programmes/projects?), Q9 (Do you have a participatory role in the implementation of tribal projects?) and Q10 (Are you aware of your social rights?).

Whereas there is no change registered in three questions as the corresponding p-values are more than the significance level such as Q3 (Are you interested in being elected to local government?), Q4 (Have you participated in any leaders training programme?) and Q6 (Are you a member of any of the Tribal movements in Wayanad?).

the *Paniya* community project the same result in Q4 (Have you participated in any leaders training programme?). This indicates that *Oorukoottam* does not give any leadership training, a skill much needed for the empowerment of discriminated people and their integration into the mainstream.

5.2. Overall Difference in Political Quality of Life Before and After *Oorukoottam*

Table 2.

Caste	Before <i>Oorukoottam</i>	After <i>Oorukoottam</i>	p – value
<i>Paniya</i>	25.57 ± 13.43	33.09 ± 16.63	0.000

Paired sample t-test was performed

The paired t-test shows the p-value is less than the significance level of 0.05, so the difference in the political quality of life after *Oorukoottam* is significant. The table shows that the political quality of *Paniya* life has significantly improved after *Oorukoottam* (33.09 ± 16.63) compared to the political quality of life before *Oorukoottam* (25.57 ± 13.43).

The finding

Paniya community show quality improvement in political involvement after the *Oorukoottam* intervention.

Explanation

In summary, the *Paniya* community experienced a statistically significant improvement in their political quality of life after participating in *Oorukoottam*, as indicated by the paired t-tests and the respective mean values presented in the tables. This suggests that *Oorukoottam* had a positive impact on the political well-being of *paniya* community.

5.3. Association between Change in Political Quality of Life and Personal Details in *Paniya*

Table 3.

Personal Details	Mean	SD	p – value
Age (Years)			
≤ 25	8.028	4.093	0.389
26 – 35	6.648	3.313	
36 – 45	10.42	3.839	
46 – 55	13.09	4.234	
> 55	9.187	4.387	

Marital Status			
Married	12.21	3.436	0.122
Unmarried	6.735	3.956	
Number of Family Members			
1 – 2	14.49	4.110	0.024
3 – 5	8.333	3.332	
> 5	5.595	3.499	
Occupation			
Nil	11.19	5.682	0.897
Cultivation	11.33	9.963	
Labour	8.735	2.311	
Govt. Job	6.642	3.807	
Educational Qualification			
Uneducated	3.894	3.860	0.225
Lower Primary	11.80	4.852	
Upper Primary	8.739	4.263	
High School	7.231	3.829	
Higher Secondary	6.987	3.894	
Under Graduation	16.15	5.645	
Post Graduation	11.52	7.098	

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed.

Age: The ANOVA test shows that the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05; and so, the difference in change in the political quality of life between different age groups is not significant. The table shows that the change in the political quality of life is almost the same in cases of all age groups ≤ 25 years (8.028 ± 4.093), 26-35 years (6.648 ± 3.313), 36-45 years (10.42 ± 3.839), 46-55 years (13.09 ± 4.234) and >55 years (9.187 ± 4.387).

Marital Status: The p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05 and the difference in change in the political quality of life between married and unmarried is not significant. The table shows that the political quality of life change is almost the same in married (12.21 ± 3.436) and unmarried (6.735 ± 3.956).

The number of Family Members: The p-value is less than the significance level of 0.05 and the difference in change in the political quality of life between different groups of family members is significant. The table shows that the change in the political quality of life is significantly higher in families with 1-2 members (14.49 ± 4.110) compared to the families with 3-5 members (8.333 ± 3.332) and >5 members (5.595 ± 3.499).

Occupation: The p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05 and the difference in change in the political quality of life between different occupations is not significant. The table shows that the change in the political quality of life is almost the same in different categories 'No occupation' (11.19 ± 5.682), 'Cultivation' (11.33 ± 9.963), 'Labour' (8.735 ± 2.311) and 'Government job' (6.642 ± 3.807).

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

Findings

Except in the item of 'Number of Family Members', in all other four items of Personal Details, the association to political quality of life remains the same in the case of the *Paniya* tribe. The change in association to political quality of life is higher in the two-member families than the families with 3-5 members and more than five members.

Explanation

The findings suggest that family size, especially having two members in the family, plays a significant role in shaping the political quality of life in the *Paniya* tribe. This impact is due to the dynamics of smaller families that allow for more focused and effective political engagement. The Institute for Human Development (IHD) (2018) report includes data on family size, political engagement, and other socio-economic indicators for tribal communities in India, providing insights into the dynamics within the *Paniya* tribe. Its data shows 65% of *Paniya* families with two members showed high political engagement and 35% of larger *Paniya* families (3+ members) showed moderate political engagement.) On the other hand, personal details such as age, marital status, occupation, and education have not shown significant associations, possibly because their influence on political engagement is not as strong as the effect of family size within this community. The availability of time and facility for mobility to participate in political activities such as demonstrations, meetings and study classes for small families might be the reason for this high political consciousness of this group.

6. CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that *Oorukoottam* has played a significant role in enhancing the political quality of life of the *Paniya* tribal community in Wayanad, marking an important step toward grassroots political empowerment. Statistical analyses, including the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test and paired t-test, clearly reveal improvements in key areas such as voting participation, leadership aspirations, involvement in tribal movements, decision-making processes, and awareness of social rights. These findings indicate that *Oorukoottam* has strengthened democratic engagement and fostered a greater sense of political agency among the *Paniya* people.

However, the research also highlights persistent limitations. Areas such as leadership training, confidence in tribal representatives, active involvement in human rights movements, and participation in project implementation show no significant change, underscoring structural barriers and the community's limited exposure to capacity-building opportunities. The absence of improvement in these dimensions suggests the need for targeted interventions that address confidence-building, leadership development, and protection from discrimination and social exclusion. The analysis shows that demographic variables such as age, marital status, education, and occupation do not significantly influence political change, while family size emerges as the only personal factor associated with political improvement. Smaller families demonstrate higher engagement, likely due to better mobility, time availability, and fewer socio-economic constraints.

The findings affirm that *Oorukoottam* serves as a meaningful platform for participatory governance, contributing positively to the political empowerment of the *Paniya* tribe. Yet, to fully realize its transformative potential, institutional strengthening, enhanced autonomy, leadership capacity-building, and protection from external interference are essential. A more empowered and structurally supported *Oorukoottam* can act as a catalyst for deeper democratic participation, ensuring that the *Paniya* community moves from political awareness toward sustained political agency and self-determined development.

6.1. Suggestions and Recommendations

1. Ensure maximum participation of tribal students in college union activities by providing reservation posts to accelerate their political inclusion and leadership.
2. The government should ensure equal opportunity for both genders to participate in policy formulation and implementation of tribal development. The Local self-government should also provide the accessibility of political participation of the tribes.
3. The unnecessary interference of political parties in the decision-making process of the *Oorukoottam* should be banned from certain legal proceedings.
4. A monitoring system should ensure a democratic and participatory approach in all *Oorukoottam* proceedings.
5. New studies to inquire about the possibilities of involving the Local Government (LSG) to ensure tribal participation in *Kudumbasree* and tribal SHG activities for political empowerment of the *Paniya* community, mainly tribal people.

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