

## **REPORT**

### **Livelihood enhancement of tribes and biodiversity conservation of Wayanad District, Kerala, India**

**Academically supported by Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean  
Studies (KUFOS), Cochin- 682 506, Kerala, India.**

**Facilitated by SOL Connectnconsult, Cochin, Kerala, India.**

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#### **Areas of intervention**

- Distribution of inputs for livelihood
- Distribution of books for the library
- Organization of Awareness workshops (100 people)
- Publishing a book on “Fish diversity of Wayanad and sustainable utilization”

### **Introduction**

Kerala is the southernmost coastal State of India flanked by the Arabian Sea on the west and the Western Ghats mountain ranges on the east. Kerala geologically is a part of south Indian Precambrian terrain. Western Ghats, the foothills, the midland and the coastal low land are the four geographical domains of the State. The Western Ghats, is a mountain range that covers an area of 160,000 km<sup>2</sup> (62,000 sq. miles) in a stretch of 1,600 km (990 mi) parallel to the western coast of the Indian peninsula, traversing the states of Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The mountains of the Western Ghats (highest point 2,695 m, Anamudi Peak) mediate the rainfall regime of peninsular India by intercepting the monsoon storm systems. Western Ghats is the home for 50 million people belonging to the aforesaid six States of the country. It is exceptionally rich in biodiversity, the area is one of the world's ten hottest biodiversity hot spots and has over 5000 species of flowering plants, 139 mammals, 508 birds and 179 amphibian species spread across. At least 325 globally threatened species occur in Western Ghats. The life supporting and biodiversity rich ecosystems of Western Ghats are threatened today due to habitat and anthropogenic pressures.

Kerala is gifted with 44 rivers originated from Western Ghats of which 41 are flowing towards the west into the Arabian Sea and three are flowing towards the east

and emptied into Bay of Bengal. All the rivers of Kerala are comparatively smaller than any other peninsular rivers as the Western Ghats of the State close to Arabian Sea with a maximum distance of only 120 km. The climate is humid with high rainfall. The State has two seasons of monsoon; south west monsoon from June to September and north east monsoon from October to November. About 70% annual rainfall receives during south west monsoon, 15% during north east monsoon and the remaining 15% is received during the non-monsoon period between December and May as summer showers. The state of Kerala is considered mainly as the land of water, with high rainfall, chains of back water bodies, many rivers, reservoirs, lakes, ponds, tanks and wells. But in recent years, the State faces major visible changes in its monsoon patterns which even attain the status of environmental disasters.

The current population of Kerala is estimated as 35.3 million. Kerala has the lowest positive population growth, highest literacy rate and highest sex ratio in the country. The people of Kerala belong to different ethnic groups and religions. Major religious population is Hindus, then Muslims and followed by Christians. The official language is Malayalam. There are more than 16 other Indian languages and English are also spoken in Kerala.

### **Tribal people of Kerala**

Tribes are the aboriginal people of Kerala and called as “Adivasis” in Malayalam. They are the inhabitants of the Western Ghats. They have strong, unique and culturally firm way of living varying with different regions and communities. They have been the forest dwelling people and lived in isolation from the rest of the civilization until the forest conservation act came into existence in 1980. Based upon this act, many tribal populations have been forced to move to settlements abutting normal civilization. The declining forest area is also another reason for this shift. Generally, tribal people are seen to be in the nether end of the development. They are still struggling to get along with modern trends civilized patterns. In India, nearly 705 tribal groups are notified under the article 342 of Indian constitution. Tribes represent 8.60 % of the total population. Majority of them lives in rural areas (89.97%). The distribution of tribes in India varies from different geographical locations. They are intransigent community with strong religious and cultural systems and values. The lifestyle, religious practices and culture are varied considerably among communities and ethnic groups. They prefer isolated living from civilized community and live in consonance with nature. The forest conservation act mentioned above restricts the use

of forest land for non-forest purposes which adversely affected their livelihood to a great extent.

According to the latest Census in India, the tribal population in Kerala is 484839 (1.5% of the total population). Majority of the population are residing in rural area especially in Western Ghats area. They are the original inhabitants of the region. These tribes have coexisted with nature for centuries in quiet harmony with rich traditional knowledge and cultural life. Wayanad District has the highest number of tribes (1,51,443) in the State. Tribes in Kerala have unique physical attributes like curly hair, stout body, protruded chin bone etc. They have dark complexion and short stature in height, and also well built with flat nose. But the social isolation, illiteracy, alcoholism, low income and poor nutrition made this community so weak in health vulnerable to many diseases.

Tribal groups are at different stages of social, economic and educational development. Now a days, the literacy rate among the tribal communities is showing an increasing trend which is reported to have attained the level of 59.17% in the country. Government of Kerala promotes a series of developmental programmes for the overall development of the tribes. Most of the tribes are currently working as agricultural or non-agricultural labourers. While some communities like Kattu Naikan are still lead a hunter-gatherer life style. It has been observed that the developmental schemes that offered by the Kerala Government and the reservations in government jobs are not shared equally between tribal communities.

Their literacy level and socio-economic status are still far behind than that of the main stream. Constitution of India assures special care for this weaker population with equality of status, social, economic, educational and political guarantees. Both Central and State Governments have implemented several policies and action plans to lead the way towards their development.

In Kerala, Wayanad District has the highest tribal population. It is one of the country's most backward district and one of the districts in Kerala currently receiving funds from the Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme (BRGF). Wayanad is well known for its beautiful landscapes and tourist attractions. Located in the Western Ghats, the district is often called the 'Green Paradise of Kerala', owing to a total forest coverage of 37 per cent (Census 2011), significantly higher than in any other districts of Kerala. The district, located at the southwestern tip of the Deccan Plateau at an altitude of 700 m above sea level, extends over an area of 2,125 sq. km.

The district of Wayanad was created on November 1, 1980, as the twelfth district of Kerala by merging several areas of the erstwhile Kannur and Kozhikode districts. It is bordered by the states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, while Kannur and Kozhikode are its neighbouring districts on the Kerala side. Wayanad consists of three taluks (sub-districts)—Mananthavady, Sulthan Bathery, and Vythiri—and has a population of 8,16,558, constituting 2.45 per cent of the state's population (Census 2011).

The District is renowned for its tropical climate and its lush landscapes with green hills, valleys and forests. It is also popular for its paddy fields and extensive tea and coffee plantations, and its production of cash crops like pepper, cardamom, coffee, tea and other spices. Wayanad is rapidly emerging as a major eco-tourism location in southern India and is also well-known for its religious and cultural festivals, tribal ballads, tribal medicine and folk performances. In this context, it is important to emphasise the large Adivasi (tribal) population of this District—the Paniyar, Adiyar, Kattunayakan, Kuruma, and Kurichiya indigenous communities.

As per the data available from the draft report titled 'Scheduled Tribes of Kerala: Report on the Socio-Economic Status' published by the Scheduled Tribe Development Department, Government of Kerala, in November 2013, the tribal population of the District stood at 1,53,181 with 36,135 tribal families. The population of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (SCs and STs) comprised four and 17 per cent, respectively, of the total population of the district. Of the four administrative blocks in the district, Mananthavady had the highest tribal population (29.46 per cent) followed by Sultan Bathery (25.09 per cent), Panamaram (24.2 per cent) and Kalpetta (21.25 per cent) (Census 2011). The cultural fabric of Wayanad heavily derives from the cultural practices and ways of life of these indigenous tribal communities.

Agriculture is the most prominent source of income, as nearly 96.13 per cent of the population resides in rural areas. There are different accounts regarding the origins of the district's name, and some of them indicate how closely agriculture is related to the culture, history and making of Wayanad. The name Wayanad may have originated from two vernacular words—'vayal' which means paddy fields, and 'nadu' which means land or place. Thus, 'Vayal Nadu' would mean the land of paddy fields. In tribal folklore, one can find similar interpretations. According to another interpretation, the region was known as 'Mayakshetra' (Maya's land) in the earliest records. Mayakshetra evolved into Mayanad and, finally, to Mayyanad.

In Wayanad there are 8 different tribal communities are present, they are Adiyar, Paniyar, Mullukkurman, Kurichyan, Vettakkuruman, Wayanad Kadar, Kattuniakkan and Thachaanadan Mooppan and they account for 5% of the tribal population of the entire Western Ghats area in India. In recent years with the reduction in forest area, imposition of forest regulations, construction of dams etc. the lives of the tribes have been highly disturbed. Hunger, ignorance and exploitation have

forced them to leave their traditional forest living and migrate or seek employment in rural and urban areas. But their backwardness in all the area of modern livelihood keeps them inferior in the social status. Their literacy level and socio-economic status are still far behind from the main stream. Constitution of India assures special care for this weaker population with equality of status, social, economic, educational and political guarantees. Both Central and State Governments have implemented several policies and action plans to lead the way their development.



Geographical position of Wayanad District

**About the Project by CHEC**

Project objectives:

- Training and Capacity building of selected tribal beneficiaries through alternative ways of livelihood enhancement.
- Awareness creation on biodiversity conservation among the tribal population.

### **Brief about the project**

The current project addressed the capacity building and livelihood enhancement of a small group of tribes in Wayanad District. The project was funded by CHEC and the implementation of the project was done by SOL Connect n consult, Kochi with the academic support of Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies (KUFOS). Beneficiaries of the project were selected from two most backward tribal colonies of Wayanad. One is EMS colony from Idiyamwayal and the other one is Ponkuzhy colony from Muthanga. The beneficiaries were given training on various areas of livestock and fish rearing by Dr. Dinesh Kaippilly, Associate Professor and Head, Department of Aquaculture, KUFOS. Dr. Dinesh has been working among the Tribal colonies of Kerala since 2004 as part of different Government Projects. SOL Connect n consult, Kochi is an independent organization working as a servicing platform and has been in the field of implementing projects on biodiversity conservation, improving fish consumption, global seafood trade, IT related services, field survey, data management, human empowerment and skill development and projects related to environmental and economic sustainability of rural communities in India since 2018.

The beneficiaries selected for the project are agricultural labourers. Most of them are living in destitute. It is essential for them to have an additional revenue source for a better living condition. The current project aims to help them to accomplish that goal by providing training on various livestock rearing activities and to give the related inputs for further continuation of the activities by their own to achieve regular revenue for the wellbeing.

### **Mode of implementation of the project**

Two tribal colonies from Wayanad, EMS Tribal Colony, Idiyamwayal and Ponkuzhy settlement from Muthanga have been selected for the implementation of the project. The settlement at “Idiyam vayal” known as EMS Colony was named after Mr. EMS Nambudirippad, former Chief Minister of Kerala who fought for independence and labour rights. This settlement is unique in nature from any other tribal settlements in the State. Usually tribes are the people who never encourage mixing up of different tribes. They prefer to live within the same group. But in Idiyamvayal, three major tribal communities of the State are living as a single colony.

### **Tribal groups of Idiyamwayal**

#### **Kurichiars**

They are the inhabitants of Kannur and Kozhikode Districts. The Kurichiars are segmented into four subdivisions, viz. Kurichian of Wayanad, Kunnam Kurichian of Kannavam forest, Anchilla Kurichian of Tirunelly and Pathiri Kurichian. The Kurichian speak and write Malayalam within family and with others, though with a distinctive accent and intonation. The economy of Kurichian is based on agriculture. The cultivation in the lands made available by the forest department is common in this colony. The Kurichian are Hindus. They worship Bhagawati, Malakkari, Athiraplan and Munnan daivam as their family and Kulam deities. The Kurichians have a reputation for fearlessness and trustworthiness. According to the 2011 census, their population can be estimated to be 35,171.

#### **Kaatunaikkar**

As the name (Kattu means forest in Malayalam) suggests, they are the truly inhabitants of Western Ghats. They are the most primitive and vanishing community of tribes in Kerala. In early days they lived in rock shelters or crude huts beside brook, and they are the last remaining hunter gather tribes in south India. They speak Cholanaikkan language. They call themselves as ‘Malanaikan’ or ‘Sholanaikan’. They are completely relying on forest for their livelihoods and they are isolated from other tribal communities as well as local people. They follow strict religion and unique culture and live-in harmony with nature. The changed social structure forced them to live in Government provided houses away from forest. Nowadays they are doing daily wage jobs for their livelihood.

## **Paniyar**

Paniyar is the largest tribal community in Wayanad. They are also found in Kannur, Kozhikode and Malappuram Districts of Kerala and adjoining Districts of Tamil Nadu. The term Paniyan/Paniyar means someone supposed to do physical work. As the name suggests these tribal community served as agricultural labourers to migrant farmers. In early days, Paniya tribes were served as the slaves of the local land lords called “Janmis” under the bonded labour called “Kundalpani”. In 1975 the Government of Kerala abolished this system. Today, they are doing daily wage jobs. In earlier days Paniya community was divided into various clans under headmans called Chemmikkaren or chemmi. Today this type of social structure does not exist.

The major issue faced by the members of that colony was the lack of vernacular language books (Malayalam) in the Village library. Total number of school going children in the colony is 28. Most of them are from Kurichya community and studying at Thariode Nirmala School. Travel facility from home to school is the major obstacle faced by these students as school is far from their settlement. So, having good library inside the colony itself will be a great support for them. Due to lack of funding the Panchayath authorities were not able to provide enough books to run the library. Most of the books donated by the charity groups are in English language and none of the students are competent enough to understand English. So, with the support of CHEC funding the project team purchased books written in the Malayalam and donated to the library. The details of the books are given as annexure. As per the request of Dr. Dinesh, a few books were donated by M/s Mathrubhoomi Books, Kozhikode, which is a reputed publishing company in India as part of their social responsibility programme. All the students from the colony are using the library at present for their academic needs. There is no other library is available within a reachable distance. So, it will be highly useful for the student community of the colony

In Idiyamvayal, many tribal communities are keeping fishing for their livelihood and they were lacking proper gears for the same. KUFOS with the funding from CHEC supported these people with new fishing nets and gadgets, which will be very useful for them to have good revenue from the fishing from the nearby waterbody. The project team also conducted awareness classes for the residents in the colony on biodiversity conservation for sustainable development.



The second settlement selected for the implementation of the project was Ponkuzhy settlement at Muthanga. This is a Paniya tribal colony. This colony accommodates nearly 80 families. Most of them are agricultural labourers and some are working with the State Department of Forest as honey gatherers and forest guards. Major problems faced by the inhabitants in the colony are child marriage, alcoholism, unemployment and lack of proper education.

25 families were selected with the help of ST Promoters working for the State Government. All the beneficiaries showed interest in goat rearing. Training and awareness classes on biodiversity conservation were conducted by the project team. With the funding support from CHEC livestock distribution and distribution of study materials like notebooks, pen and pencils were undertaken as part of the project. All the selected families were supplied with 2 goats each for rearing and further progress.

Efforts towards writing the book on “Fish diversity of Wayanad and sustainable utilization” is in progress. Survey of the fishing grounds of Wayanad for the fish diversity study and personnel interviews with the Tribal people to collect their traditional knowledge are going on. The incidences of reoccurring lockdown due to Covid-19 are hindering the work badly.

Photographs of the activities undertaken are follow:



Distribution of fishing nets



Distribution of books





Awareness programme for the students



Input distribution - Ponkuzhy









