



Grassroots Governance and Tribal Political Well-Being: The Role of *Oorukoottam* Among *Kurichiya* in Wayanad

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Abstract: This study investigates the impact of the re-formulated *Oorukoottam*, a grassroots-level tribal governance mechanism, on the political quality of life of the *Kurichiya* tribe in Wayanad district. Historically, the *Kurichiya* community has been noted for its cohesive social structure, strong leadership patterns, and well-defined traditional political institutions, which collectively shaped their internal governance and decision-making processes. Understanding this historical political foundation is essential for evaluating the extent to which the *Oorukoottam* has transformed the tribe's contemporary political life. The research first examines the traditional political organisation of the *Kurichiya* community, highlighting the role of customary leaders, collective deliberation practices, and mechanisms of political coordination that existed prior to policy interventions. It then analyses the post-intervention scenario by statistically assessing changes in political engagement following the implementation of the re-formulated *Oorukoottam*. A structured questionnaire containing twenty political indicators was administered to *Kurichiya* respondents, and the data were analysed using the Wilcoxon rank test, t-test, and ANOVA to measure shifts in political participation, representation, awareness, and agency. The findings demonstrate a significant positive impact of the *Oorukoottam* on the political well-being of the *Kurichiya* tribe. Improvements were observed in political awareness, participation in decision-making forums, confidence in expressing political opinions, and the strengthening of collective governance institutions. The study concludes that *Oorukoottam* functions as an effective platform for enhancing tribal political empowerment, although challenges such as limited institutional authority and structural constraints still hinder full realisation of political rights. These results underscore the role of grassroots governance in strengthening democratic participation and promoting political well-being among indigenous communities in Wayanad.

Keywords: *Kurichiya* tribe; *Oorukoottam*; political quality of life; tribal governance; Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA).

1. INTRODUCTION:

This study focuses on the political dimensions of the *Kurichiya* tribe of Wayanad, a community historically known for its strong internal organization, collective decision-making structures, and active participation in local governance processes. The political status of a community is a significant indicator of its overall well-being, as it reflects the level of agency, representation, and influence exercised within broader socio-political systems. A historical narration of the *Kurichiya* reveals that they possessed a relatively stable and cohesive political structure, supported by traditional leadership patterns and customary institutions that enabled effective community coordination. Understanding this historical political background is essential for assessing the tribe's situation prior to the introduction of the re-formulated *Oorukoottam*. The present study therefore begins by outlining the key political features of the *Kurichiya* community, including their traditional governance mechanisms, roles of community leaders, and collective practices that shaped their political identity over time.

The second part of the study involves a statistical examination of changes in the political quality of life among the *Kurichiya* following the implementation of the re-formulated *Oorukoottam*. A questionnaire consisting of twenty questions related exclusively to political indicators. The responses were analysed using statistical tools including the Wilcoxon rank test, t-test, and ANOVA to measure the extent and significance of political transformation. The findings indicate that the re-formulated *Oorukoottam* has had a substantial positive impact on the political engagement and empowerment of the *Kurichiya* tribe. The results highlight marked improvements in participation, political awareness,



and the strengthening of collective institutions, underscoring the critical role of *Oorukoottam* in enhancing the political life of the community.

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

2.1. Protection of Civil and Political Rights in Indigenous Contexts:

Civil and political rights are enshrined in the crucial Article 19, which emphatically declares that every citizen of the country possesses the right to life, freedom of expression, speech, religion, association, peaceful assembly, free movement throughout the country, residence, and settlement in any part of the country. Additionally, individuals are entitled to practice any profession (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1967). Civil and political rights uphold the inherent dignity of human beings and guarantee the equal and inalienable rights of each individual, sustaining freedom, justice, and peace in the world (ICCPR, 1967). This ensures that everyone may enjoy not only civil and political rights but also economic, social, and cultural rights. (ICCPR, 1967) whereby everyone may enjoy not only civil and political rights but also economic, social and cultural rights. ICCPR safeguards one's right to self-determination by which one can freely pursue economic, social and cultural development. The international conventions abolished the degrading and inhuman treatment of humans. Article 8 of the ICCPR declares that no one shall be held in slavery or obtained to effectuate or forced to do compulsory labour and Article 16 holds that every individual has the right to be recognized as a human being before the law, even if she/he is guilty. Every person has the right to enjoy opportunities without distinction or unreasonable restrictions. This secures the rights of citizens to participate in public affairs and to be elected as a representative, either directly or through free elections. The people of the state are to have access to public services without any discrimination and the law should give equal and effective protection to persons belonging to the minority groups (ICCPR, 1967). Civil and political rights embody the basic freedom of mankind in which safeguards are provided to people's physical and mental integrity, life and safety.

2.2. PESA, the Realization of Civil–Political Rights among Tribes:

The PESA Act also provides various provisions for the scheduled community, and the state can follow the PESA Act. If state law contradicts the PESA Act, it will be considered null and void. In the Panchayat raj structure, every village should have a *Gramsabha* under Gram Panchayat as per section 4 (C) (PESA, 1996). Even though tribal hamlets with low-density populations are considered villages, the impact of general development never reaches the tribal hamlets. The PESA Act provides provisions to convert hamlets into villages, ensuring a participatory model of democratic decentralization at tribal hamlets and providing funds and functionaries to operate as per the provisions of the PESA Act, 1996. Regarding the PESA Act, every *Gramsabha* has the right to protect and preserve its cultural identities, traditions, customs, and community resources.

Many social activists claim that the PESA is an archetype of grassroots-level democracy, marking a radical turning point toward tribal participatory governance and development to improve their quality of life. The Vth schedule of the Indian Constitution sets apart special privileges for tribes to administer the Scheduled Areas. To promote their empowerment, the government has granted special aid and funds. The PESA Act strongly affirms the local self-governance of the Scheduled Areas through tribal *Gramsabhas* and Panchayat Raj institutions (Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas Act, 1996).

2.3. Political Participation of the *Kurichiya* tribes in Wayanad:

Historically, tribal and lower-caste communities were segregated from mainstream society and excluded from positions of power within legislative, administrative, and judicial spheres, a marginalization reinforced by the caste system that remained rigid until the colonial period (Bayly 2001). Constitutional guarantees and reservation policies have improved opportunities for Scheduled Tribes, promoting justice, equity, and protection from discrimination, although parity with non-tribal groups remains largely unrealized (B.D. Sharma 1998). Traditionally, *Kurichiya* settlements were governed by a headman who adjudicated disputes and maintained order; however, this system has weakened, giving way to increased engagement with modern political institutions. Field observations indicate that many *Kurichiya* settlements align with particular political parties, which play active roles in addressing community needs and facilitating developmental programmes. Participation, broadly understood as involvement in socio-economic, cultural, and political processes (Marilee 1995), has expanded among *Kurichiyas*, although their electoral involvement remains limited despite reserved seats and political mobilization efforts. Political socialization among tribal groups is shaped by social environment, agitation over land alienation, and vote-bank politics, through which parties influence attitudes and encourage participation in protests and public actions. While family influence on political awareness is relatively weak, collective identity fosters group-based cohesion and political alignment (Brewer & Caporael 2006). *Kurichiya* political participation includes direct actions—such as voting, contesting elections, and engaging with leaders—and indirect actions like campaigning, demonstrations, and issue-based protests, all considered legitimate as long as they operate



within constitutional frameworks. Civic participation further enhances community well-being by promoting collaborative problem-solving (Ellen 2008). Within Kerala's context of relatively minimal caste-based stratification, tribal participation remains varied but significant, supported by Panchayati Raj Institutions and Oorukootam, SHGs, and local development initiatives.

3. NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

The *Kurichiya* tribe, historically regarded as one of the relatively better-placed tribal communities in Wayanad, occupies a distinctive position in the region's political landscape. Despite their reputation for organizational discipline and collective decision-making, recent observations indicate that their political quality of life—encompassing political participation, representation, access to decision-making spaces, and the effectiveness of tribal self-governance structures—requires systematic examination. Even with constitutional protections and decentralised governance mechanisms such as the *Oorukoottam*, the actual translation of political rights into meaningful political empowerment for the *Kurichiya* community remains underexplored.

There is a clear need to understand whether the *Kurichiya* tribe is genuinely able to exercise political agency in local governance, assert collective interests, and ensure accountability within administrative systems. While they are often considered more advanced compared to other tribes such as the *Paniya*, this assumption risks masking internal disparities, emerging vulnerabilities, and limitations in political voice. The functioning of the *Oorukoottam*—designed to enhance grassroots participation—requires critical assessment to determine whether *Kurichiya* members are actively influencing policies, budgets, and developmental decisions that affect their lives, or whether structural and procedural barriers continue to weaken their political influence. This study is significant because political quality of life is central to sustainable empowerment. Without effective participation and representation, constitutional safeguards and welfare measures cannot achieve their intended impact.

4. OBJECTIVES:

- To assess the political quality of life of the *Kurichiya* 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.

Hypotheses:

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

5. METHODOLOGY:

This study focuses on members of the *Kurichiya* 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 influenced responses in some areas, the sampling process remained systematic and provided a reliable basis for analysis.

5.1 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 covering personal, economic, and political aspects. Household visits across various *Kurichiya* settlements in Wayanad ensured representation from all strata. Despite certain fieldwork constraints—such as limited awareness of political rights and government schemes, gender-related constraints, socio-cultural reservations, difficult terrain, and logistical challenges in remote *Kurichiya* hamlets—the study maintained methodological rigor, upheld ethical standards, and ensured reliability of the data collected.

5.2 STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

In this section of *Oorukoottam* and Politico-Educational life of *Paniya* and *Kurichiya*, the data were collected through twenty questions and subjected to Wilcoxon Rank test, t-test, Logistic regression analysis, ANOVA test etc, appropriate to the data. The compiled data and its findings are tabulated, analysed and interpreted wherever relevant. A comparative study of the *Paniya* and *Kurichiya* communities was attempted where possible.



Difference in Political Quality of Life after *Oorukoottam*

Table 4.1.

Items	Caste	Before <i>Oorukoottam</i>	After <i>Oorukoottam</i>	p – value
Q1	<i>Kurichiya</i>	159 (81.1%)	183 (93.4%)	0.000
Q2	<i>Kurichiya</i>	129 (65.8%)	172 (87.8%)	0.000
Q3	<i>Kurichiya</i>	30 (15.3%)	41 (20.9%)	0.063
Q4	<i>Kurichiya</i>	17 (8.7%)	22 (11.2%)	0.297
Q5	<i>Kurichiya</i>	155 (79.1%)	172 (87.8%)	0.002
Q6	<i>Kurichiya</i>	17 (8.7%)	21 (10.7%)	0.394
Q7	<i>Kurichiya</i>	167 (85.2%)	181 (92.3%)	0.003
Q8	<i>Kurichiya</i>	2 (1.0%)	21 (10.7%)	0.000
Q9	<i>Kurichiya</i>	2 (1.0%)	16 (8.2%)	0.000
Q10	<i>Kurichiya</i>	21 (10.7%)	81 (41.3%)	0.000

Wilcoxon signed rank test was performed.

Findings:

The significant improvements in seven out of ten questions in the *Kurichiya* community indicate positive changes in political engagement, voting rights, perception of tribal representatives, belief in the effectiveness of tribal movements, participation in decision-making and project implementation, and awareness of social rights. The lack of improvement in three questions suggests that specific aspects of interest in local government positions, leadership training program participation, and membership in tribal movements 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. Out of the ten responses of the *Kurichiya* community, seven are in agreement; only three show negative responses, so the finding is that *Oorukoottam* has improved the Political quality of life of the *Kurichiya* community.

Explanation

The significant improvement in suffrage/franchise suggests that the *Kurichiya* community has made progress regarding voting rights and participation in the electoral process. This improvement could reflect increased political engagement, and the community members have become more active in exercising their voting rights, contributing to a more active participation in the democratic process. They have an improved perception of the capabilities of elected tribal representatives, reflecting a growing confidence in their ability to work for tribal development. The improved role in planning and decision-making for tribal development programs signifies a more active and participatory involvement of the *Kurichiya* community in shaping the initiatives that affect them. The increased participation in implementing tribal projects suggests community members' enhanced involvement in projects aimed at tribal development. The increased awareness of social rights highlights a positive development in understanding and claiming social rights among community members. All these findings positively impact their involvement in local governance, participation in tribal movements, and awareness of their social rights. Anu K. (2021) examines the political engagement of the *Kurichiya* community, with data on voting rights, electoral participation, and perceptions of elected tribal representatives. But three questions that register no improvement after *Oorukoottam* in *Kurichiya* are the aspects of leadership. It is observed by the researcher that the *Kurichiya*'s cultural ethos always cherishes a superiority complex above the other communities except the Brahmins. The possible reason is that leadership involves association with the polluting people, which goes against their traditional belief in purity and pollution. Nonetheless, the first female minister from the tribal community was a woman from the *Kurichiya* community. The first woman from Kerala to be selected for the Indian Women's Cricket team is from the *Kurichiya* community. This indicates that the compulsions related to social exclusion are gradually dissolving.

Kurichiya community together 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.



Difference in Political Quality of Life after *Oorukoottam*

Table 4.2.

Caste	Before <i>Oorukoottam</i>	After <i>Oorukoottam</i>	p – value
<i>Kurichiya</i>	35.66 ± 11.59	46.43 ± 13.57	0.000

Paired sample t-test was performed

The p-value obtained is less than the significance level of 0.05, indicating that the difference in the political quality of life before and after *Oorukoottam* is statistically significant for the *Kurichiya*. The results show a clear improvement in the political quality of life after *Oorukoottam* (46.43 ± 13.57) compared to the period before *Oorukoottam* (35.66 ± 11.59).

Finding

The paired t-test conducted for the *Kurichiya* community reveals a significant enhancement in political involvement and political quality of life following their participation in the *Oorukoottam* intervention. The statistical evidence confirms that the intervention brought about a meaningful positive change in their political status.

Explanation

In conclusion, the *Kurichiya* community experienced a statistically significant improvement in political quality of life after the implementation of *Oorukoottam*. The shift in mean scores clearly demonstrates that the intervention strengthened political participation, political awareness, and overall political well-being within the community.

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

Table 4.6.

Personal Details	Mean	SD	p – value
Age (Years)			
<= 25	24.61	4.091	0.034
26 – 35	12.11	2.877	
36 – 45	9.722	3.240	
46 – 55	9.875	3.154	
> 55	11.72	3.391	
Marital Status			
Married	14.11	1.900	0.810
Unmarried	13.11	3.936	
Number of Family Members			
1 – 2	15.11	3.179	0.565
3 – 5	12.16	1.970	
> 5	13.56	4.155	
Personal Details			
Occupation			
Nil	13.88	3.609	0.019
Cultivation	15.41	2.677	
Labour	9.105	2.665	
Govt. Job	16.03	3.257	



Educational Qualification			
Uneducated	14.30	3.598	0.000
Lower Primary	8.366	4.079	
Upper Primary	22.26	3.808	
High School	19.14	2.916	
Higher Secondary	13.81	3.329	
Under Graduation	6.666	2.968	
Post Graduation	10.71	4.030	

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed.

Age: 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 age groups is significant. The table shows that the change in the political quality of life is significantly higher in the case of age ≤ 25 years (24.61 ± 4.091) compared to the other items of age 26-35 years (12.11 ± 2.877), 36-45 years (9.722 ± 3.240), 46-55 years (9.875 ± 3.154) and >55 years (11.72 ± 3.391).

Marital Status: 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 married and unmarried is not significant. The table shows that the change in the political quality of life is almost the same in married (14.11 ± 1.900) and unmarried (13.11 ± 3.936).

The number of Family Members: The p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05 and the difference in change in the political quality of life between families with diverse numbers of family members is not significant. The table shows that the change in the political quality of life is almost the same in families with 1-2 members (15.11 ± 3.179), 3-5 members (12.16 ± 1.970) and >5 members (13.56 ± 4.155).

Occupation: The p-value is less than the significance level of 0.05, so the difference in change in the political quality of life between different occupations is significant. The table shows that the change in the political quality of life is significantly lower in 'Labour' (9.105 ± 2.665) compared to 'No occupation' (13.88 ± 3.609), 'Cultivation' (15.41 ± 2.677) and 'Government job' (16.03 ± 3.257).

Educational Qualification: 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 qualifications is not significant. The table shows that the change in the political quality of life is significantly higher in Upper primary (22.26 ± 3.808) and High school (19.14 ± 2.916) compared to Under graduation (6.666 ± 2.968) and Lower Primary (8.366 ± 4.079).

Findings:

The personal details of 'Age', 'Occupation', and 'Educational qualifications' show a higher association with political quality of life, whereas 'Marital status' and the 'Number of family members' have less association with the political quality of life.

The association to political quality of life is higher in cases of people less than or equal to 25 years of age and lower in wage and education (upper primary and high school).

Explanation:

Younger individuals are more politically active and are often more aware of social and political issues. They are also more inclined to participate in political activities and engage with the community. Older individuals have different priorities, and their political engagement might vary. The type of occupation can significantly impact political engagement. Certain professions may require individuals to be more politically active or aware, especially if their work is directly tied to government policies or regulations.

Marital status has less association with political quality of life because it does not necessarily determine one's level of political engagement. Whether married or single may not be a strong predictor of their political involvement or their perception of political quality of life. The number of family members has less association because it is a broad and indirect factor. The dynamics of political engagement within a family are complex and depend on various factors beyond family size. Other family-specific variables or individual dynamics within the family may have a more direct influence on political engagement.

The two basic requirements for change in the political quality of life are the time for political work, health and energy to do uninterrupted hard work, and the motivation for higher achievement with the minimum one possesses. This is the reason behind the *Kurichiya* of less than 25 years of age, with a high school level education registering a higher level of interest in politics, which is the only option for people of this category to achieve their ambitions. The more



financially secure the job, the more advanced the age and the higher the level of education, the lesser the interest in politics.

6. CONCLUSION:

The study set out to evaluate the extent to which the *Oorukoottam* intervention has contributed to improvements in the political quality of life of the *Kurichiya* tribe in Wayanad. Although the *Kurichiya* are often perceived as relatively advanced within the tribal developmental hierarchy, the findings reveal that meaningful political empowerment is still uneven and incomplete. The *Kurichiya* community demonstrates comparatively higher levels of political awareness, organizational capability, and interest in collective decision-making. Yet these strengths do not consistently translate into real political influence or decision-making power within local governance structures. Participation in the *Oorukoottam* is present, but its depth, autonomy, and effectiveness vary. Institutional challenges, limited political literacy among certain segments, bureaucratic dependence, and occasional sidelining by dominant actors continue to restrict the political agency of *Kurichiya* members.

Despite constitutional mandates and decentralised governance provisions, the study underscores that formal opportunities alone do not guarantee empowered participation. The *Kurichiya* tribe continues to face obstacles in asserting their rights, influencing resource allocation, and shaping development priorities. Strengthening political quality of life requires more than representation—it demands capacity building, institutional accountability, and a sustained process of enabling self-governance.

7. Suggestions:

- Enhance Political Literacy and Leadership Skills Programs that explicitly focus on political processes, rights, and governance can deepen *Kurichiya* members' ability to participate confidently and critically.
- Strengthen the Functional Autonomy of *Oorukoottam* *Oorukoottams* must operate as genuine tribal self-governance forums rather than as extensions of higher administrative bodies. Greater decision-making power at the grassroots would enhance political ownership.
- Ensure Inclusive Representation Within the *Kurichiya* Community Women, youth, and marginalised sub-groups within the *Kurichiya* tribe must be systematically included in leadership positions to prevent elite capture and ensure equitable participation.
- Improve Transparency and Accountability in Local Governance Procedures such as public hearings, social audits, and community-led monitoring can increase trust and ensure administrative responsiveness to *Kurichiya* needs.
- Facilitate Continuous Dialogue Between Government Agencies and Tribal Institutions Regular consultations can prevent miscommunication, align development goals, and strengthen the political legitimacy of *Oorukoottams*.

8. Recommendations:

- **Policy-Level Interventions:**
 - Introduce tribal-focused political empowerment modules under Panchayati Raj training programs.
 - Mandate representation of *Kurichiya* members in key decision-making committees at local government levels.
- **Capacity-Building Initiatives**
 - Provide sustained training for tribal leaders on budgeting, governance procedures, legal entitlements, and negotiation skills.
 - Promote community-based political education campaigns facilitated by trained tribal resource persons.
- **Institutional Strengthening of *Oorukoottam***
 - Establish clear guidelines defining the authority and jurisdiction of *Oorukoottams* in development planning.
 - Provide financial and administrative support to ensure these bodies function independently and effectively.
- **Research and Monitoring Mechanisms**
 - Set up periodic assessments to evaluate changes in political participation and the functioning of *Oorukoottams*.
 - Encourage longitudinal studies on the political evolution of the *Kurichiya* tribe to track emerging challenges.



- **Empowering Youth and Women Politically**

- Create forums and mentorship programs to encourage *Kurichiya* youth to engage in local politics.
- Provide targeted training and leadership opportunities for women to enhance gender-balanced political participation.

The study highlights that while the *Kurichiya* tribe shows potential for strong political participation, significant gaps remain in their ability to exercise sustained political power and influence. Strengthening *Oorukoottams*, enhancing political literacy, ensuring inclusivity, and institutionalizing accountability mechanisms are essential for improving their political quality of life. With focused interventions and community-centered governance reforms, the *Kurichiya* tribe can achieve meaningful political empowerment and a more equitable position within Wayanad's developmental landscape.

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