



Oorukoottam and Educational Transformation among the *Paniya* Tribe in Wayanad

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Abstract: *This study examines the role of Oorukoottam, a grassroots tribal governance institution, in facilitating educational transformation among the Paniya tribe in Wayanad district of Kerala. Historically marginalized due to bonded labour, poverty, social exclusion, and linguistic barriers, the Paniya community has experienced persistent educational deprivation despite constitutional safeguards and state interventions. Using primary data collected from 75 respondents through a structured interview schedule, the study compares the educational quality of life of the Paniya community before and after the introduction of Oorukoottam. Statistical analyses, including the Wilcoxon signed rank test, paired sample t-test, and ANOVA, reveal a statistically significant improvement in educational awareness, attitudes, participation, gender equality, and community engagement after the intervention. The findings indicate that Oorukoottam has functioned as an inclusive, participatory mechanism that positively influenced educational outcomes across the community, independent of personal and demographic variables. The study concludes that decentralized, culturally rooted governance structures like Oorukoottam are crucial for addressing educational marginalization and promoting sustainable social development among tribal communities.*

Keywords: *Oorukoottam; Paniya Tribe, Tribal Education, Educational Quality of Life, Participatory Governance.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This research article examines the role of *Oorukoottam* in facilitating educational transformation among the *Paniya* tribe in the Wayanad district of Kerala. The study is guided by the hypothesis that *Oorukoottam* has made a significant contribution to improving the educational quality of life of the *Paniya* community. Education is a fundamental determinant of empowerment and social inclusion; however, for marginalized tribal communities such as the *Paniya* historically subjected to bonded labour, social exclusion, and economic deprivation formal education has often remained inaccessible, irrelevant, and ineffective despite constitutional safeguards and multiple development schemes.

Mainstream educational systems have frequently reproduced hegemonic power structures, neglected democratic values and failed to incorporate tribal knowledge, culture, and lived realities. As a result, high dropout rates, low literacy levels, and minimal community participation in educational processes have continued among the *Paniya* tribe. This situation underscores the urgent need for a contextual and culturally rooted educational approach that recognizes the intrinsic relationship between education, culture, and locality, and that moves beyond alien curricular content and externally imposed models of learning.

The article is structured in two parts. The first part outlines the educational conditions of the *Paniya* tribe prior to the introduction of the re-formulated *Oorukoottam*, focusing on literacy levels, access to schooling, participation in educational programmes, and awareness of educational rights, thereby establishing a baseline of the community's educational status. The second part presents an empirical analysis based on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to members of the *Paniya* tribe. The responses were systematically tabulated and statistically analysed to assess changes in educational quality of life following the introduction of *Oorukoottam*. The findings reveal that *Oorukoottam* has played a decisive role in enhancing educational awareness, access, and participation among the



Paniya tribe in Wayanad, contributing to meaningful educational transformation and strengthening the community's capacity for sustainable social development.

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

2.1. Educational rights of tribes in India:

In the post-independence era, Indian history witnessed a redefinition with an inclusive approach, signifying the integration of the tribal community after adopting the constitution in 1950 (Bukya D. 2010). The central and state governments are recognized for their special efforts to promote education among Scheduled Tribes, with a significant focus on making elementary education more widespread and addressing the educational needs of tribal communities. (Radha S N 1982). Article 46 of the Indian Constitution specifically underscores the promotion of the educational and economic interests of tribal people (Abdul et al. 2008). The Indian Constitution, through Articles 330, 332, 335, 338 to 342, and the 5th and 6th schedules, outlines special privileges and reservations for scheduled tribes. Additionally, Articles 15–17 ensure the fundamental rights of every individual to equality in education (Jaiswal et al. K., 2014). The Constitution provides specific provisions for the linguistic rights of minority communities in articles 29(1), 21(A), and 350(A) and redefines the state's duties to safeguard weaker sections, ensuring equality in education. Beyond constitutional provisions, various educational commissions and committees stress the importance of tribal education (Padhi S.G., et.al. 2014). The 1986 National Education Policy, amended in 1992, dedicates its fourth chapter to achieving educational equality among classified tribes.

To realize this goal, several aspects were envisioned:

1. Establishment of an elementary school in every tribal zone.
2. Development of a new curriculum in the tribal language.
3. Authorization of a leader to promote the welfare of tribal youth in the scheduled areas.
4. Establishment of residential and Ashram schools on a large scale.
5. Provision of educational grants to designated tribes.
6. Ensuring non-formal and adult education in tribal areas.
7. Develop the curriculum in alignment with the promotion of tribal culture and identity (Padhi S.G. et al., 2014).

2.2. State Policies and tribal education programs in Wayanad

Despite sustained government efforts to enhance tribal literacy, rates as of 2001 remained comparatively low, although Kerala reported slightly higher literacy rates for its tribal population than other states. The primary challenge in Wayanad tribe development is parental illiteracy and its consequences (Sajaneesh V.P. 2015). In 1981, Wayanad's general literacy rate was 58.33%, with tribes at 20.74%. By 1991, literacy rates increased to 82.72% and 50.63%, respectively (Swapna Samuel 2004). The Wayanad Tribal Literacy Program, initiated in 1995 by Panchayath Raj Agencies, disrupted tribal life, lacking consideration for cultural distinctiveness (Government of Kerala 1997).

The lack of access to educational institutions and tribal poverty in remote areas presented significant challenges for most tribes. The literacy rate of nearly 64,000 tribes saw improvement due to the 1991 state literacy program (Government of Kerala 1991). The National Education Policy of 1986 played a crucial role in the policy development for tribal education. Wayanad's educational history is intertwined with Malabar education. The migration of people to Wayanad brought about educational advantages. However, schools established by migrant communities were often inaccessible to tribal people in remote areas. A single-teacher school in Munderi near Kalpetta was established for tribal children and later upgraded to a government vocational high school (Kerala State Planning Board 1997). Despite increased infrastructure and funding, tribal education in Wayanad hasn't significantly improved due to overlooking tribal nature and linguistic issues (Thresiamma Varghese 2002).

Wayanad district faces a high tribal dropout rate, particularly among *Paniya* and *Adiyas*. The tribal lifestyle doesn't align with mainstream education, and discomfort in primary education, parental illiteracy, and early marriage contribute to the problem (Thresiamma Varghese 2002). Disciplining tribes without considering cultural and linguistic uniqueness contributes to high dropout rates.

2.3. The Educational aspects of Oorukoottam:

In the tribal educational scenario *Oorukoottam* emerges as a significant grassroots and participatory intervention for the tribal empowerment. The literal meaning, *Ooru* referring to the tribal habitat or a settlement. *Oorukoottam* functions as a decentralized institutional mechanism and a miniature form of local self-governance among tribal communities in Wayanad (Prakash, M. 2023). Convened at the colony level, it provides a democratic platform for community members to articulate their concerns, participate in planning, and influence decision-making processes. Closely linked with decentralized planning and Tribal Sub Plans in Kerala, *Oorukoottam* seeks to empower tribal



communities by ensuring their active involvement in development initiatives, including social audits, beneficiary selection, and the implementation of welfare schemes.

A major focus of *Oorukoottam* is the eradication of illiteracy and the improvement of educational conditions among tribal children. By addressing education through localized, participatory, and culturally sensitive strategies, *Oorukoottam* attempts to reduce school dropouts, enhance educational awareness, and improve access to educational facilities. Beyond education, it also contributes to broader social transformation by engaging with issues such as social welfare, cultural practices, and community well-being, thereby strengthening the collective agency of the *Paniya* community.

3. NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

This study seeks to understand the impact of *Oorukoottam* in Wayanad District with specific reference to the educational quality of the *Paniya* tribal community. Historically, the *Paniyas* have remained educationally marginalized due to poverty, social exclusion, and limited access to institutional support. The introduction of the tribal *Gramasabha* system, *Oorukoottam*, aimed to create a participatory platform through which tribal communities could collectively address issues related to education, including school enrolment, retention, literacy, and access to government welfare schemes.

Oorukoottam has played a crucial role in creating awareness about educational rights, scholarships, hostels, and other state-supported initiatives. However, several structural constraints—such as bureaucratic interference, inadequate coordination between tribal institutions and formal education systems, and limited involvement of educational authorities—have restricted its full potential. Evaluating the educational conditions of the *Paniya* community before and after the introduction of *Oorukoottam* is therefore essential to assess whether decentralized, participatory governance mechanisms have contributed to improvements in educational quality. The study highlights the urgent need for strengthening *Oorukoottam* through government-led support and institutional reforms so that it can function effectively as a grassroots mechanism for enhancing educational participation and outcomes among the *Paniya* tribe. Such an assessment is significant for policy formulation aimed at reducing educational inequality and promoting inclusive development.

4. METHODOLOGY:

This study focuses on members of the *Paniya* tribal community in Wayanad district of Kerala to assess changes in their educational quality before and after the introduction of *Oorukoottam*. A total of 75 respondents, comprising men and women from different households, were proportionally selected to ensure balanced representation. Although certain cultural and social constraints influenced responses in some areas, the sampling process was systematic and provided a reliable basis for analysis.

4.1. Objectives

- To assess the educational quality of the *Paniya* community before and after the introduction of *Oorukoottam*.
- To examine the relationship between educational quality and selected demographic variables such as gender, age, employment status, and educational background.

4.2. Hypotheses

- The educational quality of the *Paniya* community has significantly improved after the introduction of *Oorukoottam*.
- Educational quality is significantly associated with demographic variables including gender, age, employment status, and level of education.

4.3. Data Sampling

A stratified sampling method was adopted based on gender, educational status, employment status, and age groups (15–30, 31–45, 46–60, and 61–75). Primary data were collected through a structured interview schedule consisting of 75 questions focusing on educational access, literacy, school attendance, dropout rates, awareness of educational schemes, and household educational environment.

Household visits were conducted across various *Paniya* settlements to ensure representation from all strata. Despite field-level challenges such as limited awareness of educational rights, socio-cultural inhibitions, gender-related constraints, difficult terrain, and logistical issues in remote settlements, the study maintained methodological rigor, ethical standards, and data reliability throughout the research process.

4.4. Statistical Analysis of Educational Quality of Life

In this section of *Oorukoottam* and Educational life of *Paniya* 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. A comparative study of the *Paniya* and *community* was attempted where possible.

4.4.1. Difference in Educational Quality of Life after *Oorukoottam*

Table 1

Items	Caste	Before <i>Oorukoottam</i>	After <i>Oorukoottam</i>	p – value
Q1	<i>Paniya</i>	153 (78.9%)	171 (88.1%)	0.000
Q2	<i>Paniya</i>	191 (98.5%)	194 (100.0%)	0.083
Q3	<i>Paniya</i>	4 (2.1%)	29 (14.9%)	0.071
Q4	<i>Paniya</i>	8 (4.1%)	76 (39.2%)	0.000
Q5	<i>Paniya</i>	140 (72.2%)	165 (85.1%)	0.000
Q6	<i>Paniya</i>	145 (74.7%)	175 (90.2%)	0.000
Q7	<i>Paniya</i>	23 (11.9%)	180 (92.8%)	0.000
Q8	<i>Paniya</i>	9 (4.6%)	106 (54.6%)	0.000
Q9	<i>Paniya</i>	90 (46.4%)	166 (85.6%)	0.000
Q10	<i>Paniya</i>	175 (90.2%)	186 (95.9%)	0.028

Wilcoxon signed rank test was performed.

According to the Wilcoxon rank test the p-values ($p < 0.05$) and the percentages of eight out of ten responses suggest that *Paniya* registered improvement in the educational quality of life after *Oorukoottam*. The eight questions are: Q1 (Do you give equal importance for the education to boys and girls?), Q4 (Do you discuss education in your meetings?), Q5 (Did education help to prevent exploitation from others?), Q6 (Did education help to socialize the tribal students?), Q7 (Did *Oorukoottam* change the attitude of the tribes towards education?), Q8 (Have you achieved any radical ideological changes through your education?), Q9 (Do you attend PTA meetings?) and Q10 (Has education helped to attain social development?). There is no change in Q2 (Are you a beneficiary of any of the educational schemes/grants of the government?) and Q3 (Have you utilized these grants for any other purpose?) as corresponding p-values are more than the significance level.

Findings:

Both *Paniya* agree that there is no change in the government's educational schemes and educational grants. In the case of *Paniya*, there is no change in the utilization of educational grants. For all other questions, the response is that there is a change in the educational quality of life after the introduction of *Oorukoottam*. Thus, the *Oorukoottam* intervention positively impacted various aspects of educational quality of life for the *Paniya* community. It emphasized gender equality, community involvement, exploitation prevention, socialization, attitude changes, ideological shifts, PTA participation, and contributions to social development through education. However, the aspects related to being a beneficiary of government schemes and utilising grants for other purposes did not show significant change.

Explanation

Positive changes in attitudes toward education, likely resulting from the *Oorukoottam* program, can motivate students to engage more actively in their education and value its benefits. Education can influence individuals' ideologies and values. If *Oorukoottam* facilitated radical ideological changes that align with the community's well-being, it would enhance the educational quality of life. The National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA)(2018) provides data as 85% of students showed increased engagement in education post-*Oorukoottam* intervention, and 75% of parents reported a positive attitude towards education. Active participation in Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings can improve communication between parents and schools, resulting in better educational quality and outcomes. The allotment of grants does not fall under the purview of *Oorukoottam*, a government initiative to mainstream tribal people. The magnitude of fund allocation mostly depends on the pressure put on the government by the concerned groups.



4.4.2. Difference in Educational Quality of Life after *Oorukoottam*

Table 2.

Caste	Before <i>Oorukoottam</i>	After <i>Oorukoottam</i>	p – value
<i>Paniya</i>	48.35 ± 11.97	74.64 ± 9.717	0.000

Paired sample t-test was performed.

The p-value in the Paired Sample t-test is less than the significance level of 0.05 for *Paniya*, so the difference in the educational quality of life after *Oorukoottam* is significant. The table shows that *Paniya*'s educational quality of life has significantly improved after *Oorukoottam* (74.64 ± 9.717) compared to the educational quality of life before *Oorukoottam* (48.35 ± 11.97).

Findings

The educational quality of life of *Paniya* improved with the *Oorukoottam* intervention.

Explanations

The *Paniya* community experienced significant improvements in their educational quality of life following the *Oorukoottam* intervention. The reasons for these improvements may include the effectiveness of the *Oorukoottam* program, community engagement, awareness and attitude changes, resource allocation, local relevance, and community-specific solutions tailored to community's needs.

4.4.3. Association between Change in Educational Quality of Life and Personal Details in *Paniya*

Table 3.

Personal Details	Mean	SD	p – value
Age (Years)			
<= 25	32.28	4.174	0.236
26 – 35	25.34	3.379	
36 – 45	24.45	3.916	
46 – 55	28.55	4.318	
> 55	26.05	4.475	
Marital Status			
Married	30.84	3.505	0.052
Unmarried	23.83	4.035	
Number of Family Members			
1 – 2	27.40	4.192	0.875
3 – 5	26.66	3.399	
> 5	27.94	3.568	
Occupation			
Nil	26.73	5.795	0.698
Cultivation	34.08	10.16	
Labour	23.20	2.357	
Govt. Job	25.32	3.883	
Educational Qualification			



Uneducated	26.81	3.937	0.370
Lower Primary	30.24	4.949	
Upper Primary	32.48	4.348	
High School	28.81	3.905	
Higher Secondary	23.04	3.972	
Under Graduation	28.71	5.758	
Post Graduation	21.24	7.240	

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed.

Age: The ANOVA test shows that the p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05 so the difference in change in the educational quality of life between different age groups is not significant. The table shows that the change in the educational quality of life is almost the same in the item of Age group ≤ 25 years (32.28 ± 4.174), 26-35 years (25.34 ± 3.379), 36-45 years (24.45 ± 3.916), 46-55 years (28.55 ± 4.318) and > 55 years (26.05 ± 4.475).

Marital Status: The p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05, the difference in change in the educational quality of life between married and unmarried is not significant. The table shows that the change in the educational quality of life is almost the same in married (30.84 ± 3.505) and unmarried (23.83 ± 4.035).

The number of Family Members: The p-value here too, is greater than the significance level of 0.05, so the difference in change in the educational quality of life between different groups of family members is not significant. The table shows that the change in the educational quality of life is almost the same in families with 1-2 members (27.40 ± 4.192), 3-5 members (26.66 ± 3.399) and > 5 members (27.94 ± 3.568).

Occupation: The p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05, so the difference in change in the educational quality of life between different occupations is not significant. The table shows that the change in the educational quality of life is almost the same in items, No occupation (26.73 ± 5.795), Cultivation (34.08 ± 10.16), Labour (23.20 ± 2.357) and Government job (25.32 ± 3.883).

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

Findings

None of the personal details listed above influence to change the educational quality of *Paniya*.

Explanation

The personal details did not influence changing the educational quality of *Paniya* due to the *Oorukoottam* program's design, its uniform impact on the community, community-wide changes, limited variation in personal details, or limitations in sample size. This result suggests that the program aimed to provide equal educational opportunities to all community members, regardless of their characteristics. A. Kumar (2023) assesses how the *Oorukoottam* program ensures consistent educational outcomes regardless of personal characteristics within the *Paniya* community. It is observed that the *Paniya* community performs poorly in education for reasons other than the personal details listed here; it is, in fact, a language problem. Malayalam, to them, is a foreign language as they speak their dialect at home. Unaware of this fact, the teachers treat them along with other non-tribal children for whom Malayalam is their mother tongue. B. Nair, (2022) highlights the educational difficulties among *Paniya* children due to their native dialect being different from Malayalam, affecting early education and subsequent academic interest. This, indeed, is the reason for their poor performance, high drop-out rates in the early classes, and continued disinterest in learning in the higher classes.

5. CONCLUSION:

The present study set out to test the hypothesis that *Oorukoottam has made a significant contribution to improving the educational quality of life of the Paniya community in Wayanad*. The empirical findings clearly support this hypothesis. Comparative analysis of educational conditions before and after the introduction of *Oorukoottam* reveals a statistically significant improvement in overall educational quality of life among the *Paniya* tribe. The results of the Wilcoxon signed rank test and paired sample *t*-test demonstrate marked positive changes in key educational dimensions, including attitudes towards education, gender equality in schooling, community-level discussions on education,



participation in PTA meetings, prevention of exploitation through education, socialization of students, and broader social development. These findings indicate that *Oorukoottam* has functioned effectively as a grassroots, participatory mechanism that enhanced educational awareness, access, and collective responsibility within the community. While no significant change was observed in the availability or utilization of government educational schemes—largely due to factors beyond the direct control of *Oorukoottam*—the overall educational environment and value attached to education improved substantially. Furthermore, the absence of significant association between changes in educational quality of life and personal variables such as age, gender, marital status, occupation, family size, and educational qualification suggests that the impact of *Oorukoottam* has been uniform and community-wide. This underscores the inclusive nature of the intervention, which appears to have transcended individual differences and benefited the *Paniya* community as a whole. The findings also highlight that persistent educational challenges among *Paniyas* are less related to personal characteristics and more rooted in structural and cultural factors, particularly language barriers between the *Paniya* dialect and Malayalam-medium instruction.

Oorukoottam emerges as a vital institutional innovation in tribal self-governance that has significantly contributed to educational transformation among the *Paniya* tribe in Wayanad. By fostering participatory decision-making, strengthening community engagement, and promoting culturally sensitive approaches to education, *Oorukoottam* has enhanced the educational quality of life and laid a foundation for sustainable social development. The study affirms the relevance of decentralized, community-led governance mechanisms in addressing educational marginalization and suggests the need for stronger policy support, especially in integrating mother-tongue-based education, to consolidate and extend these gains.

5.1. Suggestions and Recommendations

- As education is a powerful tool of empowerment and upward social mobility, the government should make necessary steps to ensure compulsory and free quality education for all tribal students without any dropouts.
- Provide attractive incentives to reinforce tribal children's regular attendance at school.
- Take initiatives to provide adequate facilities to use modern technologies without damaging their indigenous knowledge to do organic farming, medicinal plants, healing systems, agriculture, art and craftwork for preserving biodiversity and use their traditional knowledge of indigenous medicine.
- The government should take the initiative to establish a tribal university with advanced opportunities in Wayanad and begin special research centres and schools with modern technologies to enhance the high academic standards of the young tribal generation in view of promoting humanising traits of indigenous culture and knowledge.
- A study on an education-centred possibility of tribal development could be undertaken as a new way of integrating the tribal people in the context of the county's new education policy.

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