



## Exploring economic livelihoods and educational access among the Kani Tribal Community in Thiruvananthapuram District

Dr. Deepa MS

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Sree Narayana College, Kollam, Kerala, India

### Abstract

The Kani tribal community, concentrated in the forest regions of Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala, represents a society negotiating between traditional practices and modern pressures. This article investigates their economic subsistence and educational developments as two distinct yet interrelated dimensions of their existence. The Kanis have seen their livelihoods shift under the influence of state regulations, modernization, and market encroachment. Similarly, despite Kerala's literacy achievements, the Kanis continue to confronting educational challenges due to poverty, isolation, and cultural barriers. Taking from field observations, oral narratives, and secondary sources, this study analyzes the structural obstacles faced by the community and emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive, participatory developmental strategies.

**Keywords:** Kani tribe, livelihoods, education, kerala, tribal development, marginalization

### Introduction

Kanikkars are a prominent group among tribals in Kerala. Kanikkar is traditionally known as Kani, who are brought into being in extreme south India, around the Agasthyakudam and Mahendragiri peaks of the Western Ghats in the Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam district of Kerala, as well as in the adjacent areas of Tamilnadu. The Kanikkar are a wild but inoffensive hill tribe found in south Travancore. The forest which they inhabit lies along a chain of wooded hills. These are intersected by numerous watercourses, the most notable of which are the Puraliar, the Kothayar, the Neyyar, the Karamanayar, the Vamanapuram, and the Kallada rivers. They have their own distinct culture, identity, and social systems. Kanikkars are characterized by a high standard of character, honesty, and truthfulness.

### Materials and Methods

Qualitative fieldwork was conducted in Kottoor, Vithura, and Amboori hamlets in Thiruvananthapuram district. Methods included semi-structured interviews with elders, women, and students, focus group discussions with teachers and health workers, and documentation of oral histories. Secondary materials include census tables and scholarly works were used for triangulation and context.

### Significance of the Study

This study foregrounds an understudied Kerala tribe, clarifies the mutual reinforcement of livelihood precarity and educational exclusion, and contributes to tribal development debates by proposing culturally rooted interventions that align indigenous knowledge with inclusive education and regulated market linkages.

### Economic Livelihoods of the Kani Tribe

The Kanis' economy historically revolved around forest produce such as honey, tubers, fruits, and medicinal herbs with women playing key roles in gathering, weaving, and farm tasks. Forest restrictions, conservation regimes, and commercialization curtailed access, pushing households toward wage labor in agriculture, plantations, and

construction. MGNREGA has offered intermittent income but little long-term security.

**Kottoor:** families reported a shift from honey and herbal products to plantation work, women trek long distances to sell firewood at low prices to intermediaries. Vithura: Seasonal migration for construction work is common, women shoulder dual burdens of domestic and income-earning labor.

**Amboori:** Partial reliance on banana cultivation persists, but irrigation gaps and weak market access limit profitability.

Across sites, rich ecological knowledge remains underutilized, institutional support to develop community-controlled value chains (e.g., certified herbal products) could improve resilience.

### Educational Access among the Kanis

The tribal education should be primarily dealt with within the Education Departments of the state governments in collaboration with representatives of the Department of Tribal Welfare. The eighth plan specifically has stressed the need to promote the education of SC and ST women. One of the aims of consequent governments is also the universalization of education.

While incentives (mid-day meals, free textbooks, scholarships) have raised enrollments, distance to schools, inadequate transport, and poverty drive high dropouts after upper primary.

**Gendered barriers:** early marriage and domestic responsibilities limit girls' continuation, boys are drawn into wage work.

**Institutional barriers:** language gaps, limited teacher training for tribal pedagogy, and cultural alienation undermine learning, even hostel options can feel culturally dissonant.

Sustained improvement requires mother-tongue based multilingual education, community teachers, context-relevant curricula, and synchronized livelihood support so schooling is not displaced by short-term income needs.

### Results and Discussion

Findings show a tight feedback loop: livelihood insecurity depresses schooling, and truncated schooling perpetuates low-paid, insecure work. Like other Kerala tribes Paniyas, Malayarayars etc., they indicate systemic design flaws in tribal development well-deliberate schemes without adequate cultural fit, market access, or community ownership.

A practical pathway blends indigenous knowledge and regulated markets (e.g., community enterprises around herbal products) with culturally responsive education (mother-tongue instruction, local content, parent committees). When families see credible economic returns, educational aspirations become durable.

### Conclusion

The Kani experience illustrates the contradictions of Kerala's development. To move beyond token welfare, interference must be participatory, culturally grounded, and jointly target livelihoods and education. Empowerment will follow when community knowledge is valued in the economy and reflected in the classroom. The aim and vision should be developed through proper awareness programs. If the students are promoted in a better perspective, they will be the stars of the tribal community as a whole.

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