



**FROM BONDAGE TO WELFARE CAPITALISM: LIFE, LABOUR AND  
LANDLESSNESS OF ADIVASIS IN THE DISTRICT OF WAYANAD, KERALA,  
INDIA.**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article examines the historical formation, socio-cultural differentiation, labour regimes, and welfare politics of Adivasi communities in Wayanad, situating the district as the central site of Scheduled Tribe governance and historical dispossession in the state of Kerala. Drawing upon government reports, policy documents, planning board records, KIRTADS evaluations, census data, and institutional studies, the article argues that the condition of Wayanad's Adivasi communities cannot be understood through homogenising narratives of "tribal backwardness." Instead, the district contains historically differentiated social formations shaped by agrarian hierarchy, bonded labour, forest dependence, settler colonial migration, and uneven incorporation into modern developmental structures. Particular attention is given to communities such as the Paniyan, Adiyani, Kurichiyani, Kurumar/Mullakurumar, and Kattunayakan, whose contrasting relationships to land, labour, and political representation reveal the internal stratification of Adivasi society in Wayanad. The study further demonstrates that slavery and bonded labour were not peripheral historical anomalies but foundational institutions of Wayanad's agrarian economy. Through systems such as kundalpani, communities like the Paniyan and Adiyani were historically tied to janmi landlords through coercive labour relations that survived juridical abolition in transformed economic forms. Contemporary precarity—manifest in landlessness, seasonal labour dependence, nutritional insecurity, migration, and welfare dependency—is analysed as the afterlife of these older structures of bondage. Simultaneously, the article critically evaluates Kerala's Tribal Sub-Plan architecture, rehabilitation schemes, food-security programmes, microplans, land redistribution initiatives, and welfare convergence strategies. While Kerala possesses one of India's most elaborate tribal welfare systems, the article argues that state intervention often remains compensatory rather than transformative because structural inequalities rooted in dispossession and labour unfreedom persist. Ultimately, the article conceptualises Wayanad as a crucial site where the historical memory of agrarian slavery intersects with contemporary welfare capitalism, revealing the unresolved contradictions of development, justice, and tribal citizenship in modern India.*

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## Introduction

Wayanad occupies a singular place in the political economy of Scheduled Tribe life in Kerala. In 2011 the district contained 151,443 Scheduled Tribe residents, amounting to 18.53 per cent of the district population and 31.24 per cent of Kerala's total Scheduled Tribe population; in other words, no other district in the State concentrated as large a share of Kerala's tribal population as Wayanad did (Working Group Report 12). The later socio-economic survey base used by Kerala's tribal administration counted 36,135 tribal families and 153,181 persons in Wayanad, with Paniyan/Paniya as the largest community, followed by Kurichiyan, Kurumar/Mullakurumar, Kattunayakan, Adiyani, and Vettakuruman, alongside several numerically smaller groups such as Wayanadan Kadar and Thachanadan Moopan (KIRTADS Evaluation Study 41-42). (1)

This article argues that the social world of Wayanad Adivasis cannot be understood through a single category of "tribal backwardness." The district contains historically distinct formations: former agrestic labouring communities such as Paniyan and Adiyani; landholding and relatively better-positioned cultivator communities such as Kurichiyan and sections of Kuruman; forest-dependent communities such as Kattunayakan; and smaller communities whose demographic smallness has often sharpened administrative invisibility rather than ameliorated vulnerability (Wayanad Initiative 20, 34; KIRTADS Evaluation Study 41-42). This internal differentiation matters because policy, labour history, access to land, educational attainment, political representation, and welfare uptake have all been unevenly distributed across communities. (2)

The article's central historical claim is that slavery and bonded labour in Wayanad were not aberrant residues but structuring institutions of agrarian society. The Wayanad Initiative feasibility report, commissioned by the Government of Kerala, synthesises ethnographic and historical accounts to show that Paniyan and Adiyani communities were long tied to janmi landlords as bonded labourers; they were paid chiefly in paddy, attached to estates and fields, and in some instances even exchanged or sold during the Valliyoor Kavu festival. The district's historically specific labour form was known as *kundalpani*, an annual contract binding landless labourers to agrarian patrons (Wayanad Initiative 34-38). Formal abolition altered the juridical status of bondage, but not the structural conditions that made labour dependence durable: landlessness, low skill diversification, weak political representation, seasonal employment, nutritional insecurity, and contractor-mediated migration continued to reproduce what may properly be called post-abolition labour unfreedom (Wayanad Initiative 34-40). (3)

On welfare and funding, Kerala presents an unusually elaborate tribal development architecture. The State's Tribal Sub-Plan allocation stayed at 2.8 per cent of the State Plan outlay from 2016-17 to 2026-27, rising in absolute terms from Rs 682.7 crore to Rs 1,012 crore. Between 2016-17 and 2025-26, cumulative TSP expenditure reached Rs 6,263.5 crore, of which Rs 4,886.2 crore was spent by the Scheduled Tribes Development Department and related departments, and Rs 1,377.4 crore by local self-governments (Kerala Development Report 102-03). Wayanad figures centrally in this architecture, not only because it contains the State's largest tribal concentration, but because several scheme pages explicitly identify Wayanad as a priority district for additional wage employment, food security, sickle-cell support, agriculture programmes, rehabilitation, destitute homes, farm development, and community microplans (Kerala Development Report 101-03; "Kerala Tribal Plus"; "Agriculture"; "Social sector interventions"; "Assistance for the welfare of Scheduled Tribes"). (4)

Yet the welfare state's density should not be mistaken for distributive adequacy. State reports still identify Wayanad as a district of high tribal deprivation, severe sanitation gaps, and weak health access in many settlements; newer scheme redesigns repeatedly return to food support, resettlement, critical gap filling, and community-based microplans because older schemes did not eliminate the structural conditions produced by agrarian displacement and labour dependence (Working Group Report 14-15, 39-41; Kerala Development Report 102-03; "Critical Gap Filling Scheme"; "Food Support/Food Security Programme"). The fundamental contradiction, then, is this: Wayanad is simultaneously the centre of Kerala's tribal welfare apparatus and the district in which the historical afterlife of bondage remains most visible in landlessness, precarious labour, and the recurrent need for corrective packages. (5)

## Methodological Note and Source Critique

This article is based principally on official and quasi-official documentary strata: the 2011 Census and State tribal population pages, the Kerala State Planning Board's *Working Group Report on Scheduled Tribes Development 2022-27*, the *Kerala Development Report 2026*, the Scheduled Tribes Development Department's scheme pages and district-office pages, the KIRTADS evaluation report on TSP expenditure, and the Government-supported *Wayanad Initiative* feasibility report prepared by the Centre of Excellence at IIM Kozhikode. These sources were prioritised because the user requested original, archival, governmental, policy, and funding materials, and because they offer the strongest evidentiary base for district demography, scheme architecture, and the evolution of TSP finance. (6)

A second cluster of sources consists of official scheme descriptions published by Kerala's Scheduled Tribes Development Department. These pages are not interpretive scholarship; they are administrative descriptions of current entitlements, design logic, priority categories, and implementing institutions. For that reason they are excellent for reconstructing the present welfare architecture, though weaker for evaluating field outcomes. Wherever possible, I have paired such pages with planning reports and evaluation studies so that the article does not reproduce official promise as social fact ("Agriculture"; "Kerala Tribal Plus"; "Housing"; "Resettlement of Landless Tribal People (TRDM)"; "Ambedkar Settlement Development Scheme"; "Social sector interventions"; "Critical Gap Filling Scheme"; "Food Support/Food Security Programme"). (7)

The "three articles" mentioned in the prompt were unspecified; accordingly, this article assumes that no predetermined article set was supplied and reconstructs the literature independently from available official and scholarly records. The uploaded files were treated as drafting prompts rather than authoritative evidence because the prompt did not provide stable bibliographic metadata for them. This report therefore privileges citable sources with traceable institutional provenance.

Two limitations should be stated plainly. First, several historically important colonial and archival texts on Wayanad—especially scanned editions of William Logan's *Malabar Manual* and A. Aiyappan's report on the socio-economic conditions of the aboriginal tribes of Madras—were partially discoverable in this session but not fully machine-readable in stable form. Accordingly, the article's treatment of the colonial archive is mediated in part through later government-sponsored syntheses, especially the *Wayanad Initiative*, rather than through extensive direct quotation from those older texts. Secondly, Kerala's current public documentation is far richer on statewide TSP totals and programme design than on a single, consolidated, district-wise expenditure ledger for Wayanad. The article therefore triangulates district-specific claims across scheme pages, district-office structures, the KIRTADS evaluation, and planning documents rather than pretending that a single comprehensive Wayanad funding register is publicly available in one place. (8)

Because the user requested MLA9-style parenthetical citation with page numbers, paginated PDFs are cited with page numbers from the consulted PDF edition; unpaginated webpages are cited by short title only, in keeping with MLA practice for web materials without stable pagination.

### **Historical Formation of Wayanad Adivasi Society**

Wayanad's modern tribal question is inseparable from the district's demographic centrality within Kerala. The State Planning Board records that Wayanad had 151,443 Scheduled Tribe residents in 2011, constituting 18.53 per cent of the district population and nearly one-third of Kerala's Scheduled Tribe population. The same report notes that Wayanad contains tribal-concentrated pockets such as Thirunelly and Noolpuzha, indicating that tribal settlement is not merely dispersed but territorially clustered in ways that should have made place-based planning possible (Working Group Report 12). In spite of this concentration, however, Kerala has no Fifth Schedule area, which means that Wayanad's high tribal presence has not translated into the stronger territorial protections associated with Scheduled Areas elsewhere in India (Working Group Report 12). (9)

The district's Adivasi population has never been a homogeneous collectivity. The Government-supported *Wayanad Initiative* insisted nearly two decades ago that "Adivasi communities in Wayanad cannot be treated as a single entity" because they differ markedly in livelihood, income, educational status, political access, and relation to land (Wayanad Initiative 20). On the basis of community distribution, the report grouped the major Wayanad communities into agricultural labourers, marginal farmers, and forest dependants: Paniyan and Adiyen were identified as historically bonded labouring communities; Mullu Kuruman and Kurichiyen as relatively better-positioned agricultural communities; Kattunaikkan as forest dependants; and Urali Kuruman as a historically artisan community that had also been drawn into wage labour (Wayanad Initiative 34-39). (10)

This differentiation emerged through long processes of agrarian change, migration, and enclosure. The *Wayanad Initiative* notes that "till large-scale migration of settler farmers from plains Wayanad was essentially tribal," but that the heavy influx of non-tribal settlers from the 1940s onward fundamentally transformed the district's social order and pushed large sections of Adivasi communities into deepened marginality (Wayanad Initiative 37, 40). This is a crucial historical hinge. In the pre-settler agrarian environment, even a hierarchical differentiation among tribes did not necessarily produce the same total landlessness that later emerged under settler-dominated commercial agriculture. Once settler migration, plantation expansion, and paddy conversion intensified, older labouring communities lost both access to land and bargaining power, while landholding communities faced their own pressures of fragmentation and incorporation into wider commodity circuits (Wayanad Initiative 34-40). (11)

The historical institution through which this change is most starkly legible is bondage. According to the *Wayanad Initiative*, Paniyan and Adiyen communities worked as bonded labourers for local janmis,

performed agrarian work comparable to that undertaken by Dalit agrestic labour communities in the plains, and received payment primarily in paddy. Their patron-client dependence was so severe that they could be “exchanged or sold” during the Valliyoor Kavu temple festival. The local name for this annual labour contract was *kundalpani*, through which landless bonded labourers inhabited plots allotted by landlords and renewed dependence from one agricultural cycle to another (Wayanad Initiative 37-38). The historical semantics of the ethnonyms themselves—Paniyan as “worker,” Adiyar as “slave”—were not accidental labels but traces of social position (Wayanad Initiative 37). (12)

The post-Independence history of Wayanad Adivasi mobilisation also turns on the incompleteness of reform. The *Wayanad Initiative* observes that land had been the essential axis around which Adivasis were mobilised from the 1950s onward; nearly two-thirds of Wayanad’s tribal population had historically been landless, either as bonded labourers or as forest dependants (Wayanad Initiative 40). The same report records that after the October 2001 agreement between Adivasi leaders and the Chief Minister of Kerala, the Government established the Tribal Resettlement and Development Mission and later assigned the IIM Kozhikode team the task of preparing the “Wayanad Initiative” comprehensive package in 2004 (Wayanad Initiative 17-19). The very commissioning history of this report is thus itself an archive of state recognition that ordinary welfare measures had failed to resolve the district’s land-centred crisis. (13)

**Timeline of major policy shifts**

Period / event	Shift in governance or labour regime	Significance for Wayanad
Mid-twentieth century settler influx	Heavy migration of non-tribal settlers into Wayanad	Intensified tribal land loss, agrarian displacement, and the weakening of older customary access to land and forest (Wayanad Initiative 37-40). (11)
Mid-1960s onward reform era	landFeudal land relations altered in law, but bonded communities derived limited agrarian citizenship benefit	Former bonded labouring communities moved into insecure wage labour rather than secure (Wayanad Initiative 37-38). (12)
2001 Adivasi-government agreement	Establishment of TRDM and renewed land-resettlement agenda	The state formally acknowledged the land question as central to tribal justice (Wayanad Initiative 18). (13)
2004 commissioning of the Wayanad Initiative	Government of Kerala entrusts IIM Kozhikode with a comprehensive district study	Marks the transition from ad hoc welfare to integrated planning discourse (Wayanad Initiative 17-19). (13)
2006 Forest Rights Act	National legal recognition of forest rights	Created an additional route for land titles and resource rights, later used in Kerala’s tribal land redistribution architecture (“Forest Rights Act, 2006”; Kerala Development Report 103). (14)
1996-97 to 2016-17 restructuring in Kerala	TSPTSP pooled under STDD then partly devolved to local bodies, with LSG share later reduced	Reshaped how tribal funds reached districts like Wayanad and how much discretion remained with State versus local actors (Working Group Report 35). (15)
2024-25 to 2025-26 microplan and packages emphasis	newState pivots to microplans and special packages SAFE, food support, gap filling	Reveals both policy learning and the persistence of unmet structural need in Wayanad (“Ambedkar Settlement Development Scheme”; “Social sector interventions”; “Housing”). (16)

**Life, Culture, and Social Differentiation**

The first analytical correction required in writing about Wayanad is to refuse the homogenising phrase “the Wayanad tribes” except as a demographic shorthand. The IIM Kozhikode report explicitly states that community identity often exceeds a generic “Adivasi” identity in social salience, because communities differ in inheritance systems, occupational repertoires, resource endowments, language-use patterns, and degree of incorporation into state institutions (Wayanad Initiative 20, 34). This does not mean that there is no shared experience of marginalisation; rather, it means that shared marginalisation is refracted through community-

specific histories. Policy that treats all Wayanad Adivasis as equivalent beneficiaries systematically misrecognises the district’s differentiated social field. (17)

The 2013 survey data reproduced by KIRTADS offer the clearest official district profile of these differences. Of Wayanad’s 36,135 tribal families, 15,876 were Paniyan households; 5,812 Kurichiyans; 5,139 Kurumar/Mullakurumar; 4,369 Kattunayakan; 2,570 Adiyans; and 1,700 Vettakuruman, with smaller presences of Wayanadan Kadar, Thachanadan Moopan, Karimpalan, Ulladan, and others (KIRTADS Evaluation Study 41-42). The numerical dominance of Paniyan matters: it means that district-level “tribal” averages often conceal the specific burdens borne by a former bonded-labour community that constitutes nearly half of the district’s tribal population. Conversely, the distinctiveness of Kurichiyans and Mullu Kuruman histories means that not all tribal communities in Wayanad entered the present from the same starting point of landlessness. (18)

**Major communities in Wayanad**

Community	Families Wayanad	inPopulation Wayanad	inBroad livelihood profile	historical profile	Analytical note
Paniyan	15,876	69,116	Former agricultural labour dependent on wage labour	Former bonded labourer	Largest numerically central to any district-level tribal policy (KIRTADS Evaluation Study 41-42; Wayanad Initiative 34-35). (19)
Kurichiyans	5,812	25,266	Cultivator relatively positioned landholding	community;Treated in the <i>Wayanad Initiative</i> as a relatively better-off “land owning” community (KIRTADS Evaluation Study 41-42; Wayanad Initiative 62-63). (20)	
Kurumar / Mullakurumar	5,139	20,983	Agricultural marginal farmers	community;	One of the major agrarian communities of Wayanad (KIRTADS Evaluation Study 41-42; Wayanad Initiative 34). (19)
Kattunayakan	4,369	17,051	Forest-dependent gathering community		Categorised as PVTG at the State level and identified as highly vulnerable in Wayanad (KIRTADS Evaluation Study 41-42; Kerala Development Report 101; Wayanad Initiative 62-63). (21)
Adiyan	2,570	11,196	Former agrarian community	slave / bonded labourer	Historically concentrated in Mananthavady block and closely linked to <i>kundalpani</i> labour relations (KIRTADS Evaluation Study 41-42; Wayanad Initiative 36-38). (22)
Vettakuruman / Urali Kuruman	1,700 / separately tabulated in 2006 report	not6,472	Artisan and later wage labour profile	Important for showing that not all vulnerability derives from literal bonded labour; artisanal devaluation also matters	

Community	Families Wayanad	inPopulation Wayanad	inBroad livelihood profile	historical	Analytical note
Thachanadan Moopan	390	1,646	Marginal farming and craft skills	and	(KIRTADS Evaluation Study 41-42; Wayanad Initiative 34, 39). (19) Recently recognised in the ST list and vulnerable partly through small numbers (KIRTADS Evaluation Study 42). (18)
Wayanadan Kadar	174	673	Small, community	localised	Illustrates the problem of demographic invisibility in district planning (KIRTADS Evaluation Study 41). (18)

Community differences are also encoded in kinship and gender arrangements. In the *Wayanad Initiative* survey, Kattunaickan and Kurichiyar showed adverse female ratios relative to the survey average, though for entirely different reasons in the report's interpretation: Kattunaickan was described as a food-gathering community still living inside or at the periphery of reserve forests, whereas Kurichiyar was characterised as relatively better developed, matrilineal, and landholding (Wayanad Initiative 62-63). These observations should not be over-generalised from one survey, but they are analytically suggestive because they demonstrate that "tribal development" cannot assume a single family or gender structure across communities. (23)

Equally important is the ecology-culture nexus. The State Planning Board's working group makes clear that a large share of Kerala's tribal settlements lie inside or near reserve forests, and identifies Wayanad among the districts with especially serious gaps in health access and sanitation (Working Group Report 15-16). The STDD's current social-sector page accordingly distinguishes programmes for "tribals living in forest" from programmes for Paniyas, Adiyas, Malapandaram, and PVTGs, implicitly acknowledging that forest-fringe isolation and former labouring status generate different developmental needs ("Social sector interventions"). This differentiation should be read not as administrative fragmentation, but as a belated recognition that livelihood, culture, and infrastructure are spatially and historically specific. (24)

The deepest cultural violence, however, lies in what may be called detribalisation without substantive equality. The *Wayanad Initiative* observed that the district's Adivasi communities had been "detribalized considerably" by the socio-economic transitions of the post-1940s period, yet the communities most heavily incorporated into Malayalam-speaking agrarian wage society—especially Paniyan and Adiyar—did not thereby achieve secure citizenship, landholding, or representation (Wayanad Initiative 40). Assimilation, in other words, often occurred as loss: loss of land, loss of autonomous production, loss of collective institutions, and subordination to caste-dominated regional labour markets. (17)

### Labour, Slavery, and Bondage across Time

Any serious account of Wayanad must begin from the proposition that slavery here was agrarian, spatial, and social all at once. Paniyans were attached to landlords and to fields, living on hill slopes and near paddy land owned by patrons; they were not merely "poor labourers" but part of an institutional order in which labour, residence, subsistence, and mobility were all mediated by janmi control. The *Wayanad Initiative* notes that they were bonded not only to non-tribal landlords but, in some instances, even to landholding Mullu Kuruman and Kurichiyar families, which is a reminder that domination in Wayanad cannot be narrated simply as tribe versus non-tribe (Wayanad Initiative 34-35). The district's labour history therefore cuts across later developmental categories and cannot be reduced to ethnic victimhood alone. (25)

For Adiyans the historical archive is equally stark. The same report states that ethnographic accounts describe Adiyans as people who were "traditionally ... slaves to local landlords and later bonded laborers," concentrated especially in Mananthavady block (Wayanad Initiative 36). When the report turns to the broader agrarian order, it makes plain that Paniyan and Adiyar communities performed the role of agricultural labourers analogous to Dalit agrestic labour communities in the plains, were paid in paddy, inhabited land allotted by patrons, and remained bound by a thick patron-client relation to landlord households (Wayanad

Initiative 37). Such labour was not “free” simply because a money wage might later appear; its social basis was dependence. (12)

The term *kundalpani* names this dependence with unusual precision. The *Wayanad Initiative* describes it as the characteristic labour relation of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Wayanad: annual contracts made by janmis with agrestic bonded labourers who had no agricultural land of their own and resided on plots assigned by their patrons (Wayanad Initiative 37). This was not casual labour but a cycle of renewed subordination, calibrated to agrarian seasons and ritual calendars. The fact that the report also records sale or exchange of bonded persons during the Valliyoor Kavu festival underscores that Wayanad’s labour order partook of slavery in a substantive, not merely metaphorical, sense (Wayanad Initiative 37). (12)

Abolition did not dissolve the structure. The report notes that even after the abolition of bonded labour, former bonded communities continued to depend on their former landlords for employment and support. With the growth of coffee plantations in the nineteenth century, Paniyans were also used to clear forests and develop plantations; yet, ironically, they did not become a dominant or secure plantation labour force in the later district economy. Their employment remained tied primarily to paddy, and the conversion of paddy fields to other crops sharply reduced labour opportunities (Wayanad Initiative 34-35). Here lies the key historical irony: the passage from slavery to freedom occurred simultaneously with the contraction of the agrarian niche in which former slaves could find work. (25)

This is why it is analytically misleading to contrast “historical slavery” with “modern labour market participation” too sharply. The *Wayanad Initiative* records that by the mid-1970s former bonded labourers had largely become wage labourers, but it also notes that they then depended totally on the market for food, clothing, and household requirements, had extremely limited landholdings, and possessed few non-agricultural skills demanded in the district economy (Wayanad Initiative 38). In addition, the report remarks that they were often taken to neighbouring Coorg in Karnataka, where Malayali farmers leased land for ginger and banana cultivation and employed such labourers there (Wayanad Initiative 38). This is characteristic of post-abolition unfreedom: juridical liberty coexisting with economic compulsion, debt-like dependency, and interregional labour movement under unequal bargaining conditions. (12)

The persistence of malnutrition and food insecurity among tribal communities is inseparable from this labour history. Kerala’s working group report notes that the largest numbers of apparently malnourished tribal families were found in Wayanad, Palakkad, and Idukki, and that sanitation and health deficits were severe in Wayanad’s settlements (Working Group Report 15-16). The STDD’s current food-security page still frames food support not as a residual supplement but as a necessary response to low employment seasons, monsoon distress, natural calamities, and chronic poverty among tribal households (“Food Support/Food Security Programme”). The very existence of such recurrent emergency provisioning demonstrates that labour markets have not produced stable subsistence for large sections of Wayanad’s tribal population. (26)

Labour precarity is especially legible in the state’s decision to provide an additional 100 days of MGNREGS employment for tribal families through Kerala Tribal Plus, with a dedicated revolving fund operating in Wayanad, Attappady, and Aralam (“Kerala Tribal Plus”). No state creates a district-specific advance wage fund unless ordinary employment cycles are proving inadequate. The scheme’s architecture therefore implicitly confirms the continued vulnerability of tribal labour households in Wayanad: the abolition of bondage did not abolish dependence on seasonal public employment, nor did it produce a labour market in which landless tribal households could reliably reproduce themselves through private wages alone. (27)

The afterlife of bondage is also political. The *Wayanad Initiative* emphasised that although Paniyans formed the largest Adivasi community in the district, they lacked adequate representation in local bodies, in political-party leadership, and in government service; rehabilitation schemes primarily intended for former bonded labourers had not significantly benefited them (Wayanad Initiative 35). If slavery names a condition in which a group’s labour is extractable without commensurate social power, then the contemporary situation is no longer slavery in the legal sense but remains anti-emancipatory in a sociological sense: labour remains cheap, representation remains thin, and mobility remains welfare-dependent. (25)

### **Welfare Architecture, Funding, and Institutional Actors**

Kerala’s contemporary tribal welfare regime is both vertically layered and administratively dense. At the highest level, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs frames central law and selected funding channels, including Article 275(1) support and Eklavya Model Residential Schools; one such school, EMRS Pookode in Kalpetta (Vythiri), is listed as functional and historically sanctioned under Article 275(1), giving Wayanad a direct institutional link to central tribal education funding (EMRS List). Within Kerala, the State Planning Board and Finance Department determine the TSP envelope; the Scheduled Tribes Development Department functions as nodal department; district implementation in Wayanad proceeds through the ITDP office at Kalpetta and allied tribal development and extension offices; and scheme execution requires coordination

with local self-government bodies, KIRTADS, TRDM, Forest, Revenue, Rural Development, Health, Education, and Kudumbashree (Working Group Report 23, 35, 57; “Project Offices”; “Ambedkar Settlement Development Scheme”). (28)

The scale of finance is substantial by Kerala standards. The *Kerala Development Report 2026* shows that TSP allocation rose from Rs 682.7 crore in 2016-17 to Rs 920 crore in 2025-26 and is budgeted at Rs 1,012 crore for 2026-27, while remaining at 2.8 per cent of the State Plan outlay across the series. The same report notes a cumulative TSP allocation of Rs 9,199.6 crore between 2016-17 and 2026-27 (Kerala Development Report 101-02). This is more than proportional to the tribal share of Kerala’s population, and the State explicitly presents that above-population-share earmark as a policy commitment to corrective justice (Kerala Development Report 101-02). (29)

### Funding trends and key allocations

Year	Total State Plan outlay (Rs crore)	TSP outlay (Rs crore)	TSP as % of State Plan	Total TSP expenditure where available (Rs crore)
2016-17	24,000	682.7	2.8	639.4
2017-18	26,500	751.1	2.8	669.5
2018-19	29,150	826.2	2.8	653.4
2019-20	30,610	866.3	2.8	538.6
2020-21	27,610	781.4	2.8	793.1
2021-22	27,610	781.4	2.8	743.7
2022-23	30,370	859.5	2.8	781.5
2023-24	30,370	859.5	2.8	533.7
2024-25	30,370	859.5	2.8	626.4
2025-26	32,500	920.0	2.8	284.2 as on 31 Aug. 2025
2026-27	35,750	1,012.0	2.8	—

Source: *Kerala Development Report 2026*, Tables 10.5 and 10.6 (Kerala Development Report 102-03). (29)

The given data demonstrates steady long-term growth in the nominal TSP envelope, though expenditure does not always rise in parallel. In cumulative terms, from 2016-17 to 2025-26, expenditure reached Rs 6,263.5 crore, amounting to 76.5 per cent of outlay; STDD and allied departments spent Rs 4,886.2 crore and local self-governments Rs 1,377.4 crore. The exceptionally high utilisation in 2020-21—101.5 per cent of outlay, according to the report—suggests that the machinery can spend at scale under crisis conditions, but the lower expenditure in some other years equally suggests slippage in ordinary implementation cycles (Kerala Development Report 102-03). (29)

The problem for Wayanad is not that nothing is allocated to tribal welfare; rather, it is that even substantial allocations are distributed through a large field of schemes that oscillate between structural reform and compensatory repair. Consider land and housing. The *Kerala Development Report 2026* records that landless Scheduled Tribe households in Kerala declined from 10,748 in May 2016 to 6,242 in August 2025, that TRDM received Rs 495.3 crore between 2016-17 and 2025-26 and spent Rs 328 crore, and that 8,919 families statewide received 8,573.5 acres through a combination of FRA titles, reserved-forest distribution, revenue-land distribution, land purchase, and land-bank routes (Kerala Development Report 103). The same pages note a specific 2025-26 Wayanad Development Package allocation of Rs 5 crore to compensate 141 workers of the Mariyanad Estate and facilitate resolution of a long-pending land-distribution issue affecting over 2,000 Scheduled Tribe members (Kerala Development Report 103). (29)

The STDD’s current TRDM scheme page clarifies the normative target more directly: at least one acre for landless ST families, up to a ceiling of five acres, alongside infrastructure, health, education, digital-divide mitigation, and FRA-related expenditure, all to be planned and implemented “through Oorukoottams” on a project basis (“Resettlement of Landless Tribal People (TRDM)”). Yet it is precisely here that Wayanad’s long history intrudes. If two-thirds of the district’s tribal population had historically been landless or forest-dependent (Wayanad Initiative 40), then one acre grants, though valuable, do not by themselves undo the historical disembedding of communities from broader agrarian commons, from forest access, or from patron-controlled labour markets. (30)

Housing policy likewise toggles between expansion and repair. The *Kerala Development Report 2026* states that STDD spent Rs 718.1 crore between 2016-17 and 2025-26 to provide housing to 13,303 ST families, while the broader LIFE Mission identified 88,348 ST beneficiaries, found 80,109 eligible, completed 45,976 houses, and had 7,521 under construction as of November 2025 (Kerala Development Report 103). Complementing this, the current STDD housing page explains that the SAFE programme provides up to Rs

2.50 lakh per house for completing unfinished houses and renovating dilapidated ones, prioritising flood-affected families and those identified in extreme-poverty surveys (“Housing”). The significance for Wayanad is immediate, not least because landslides, difficult terrain, and older colony-style settlement patterns make housing quality inseparable from environmental vulnerability. (31)

Livelihood schemes show the same pattern of targeted compensation. The agriculture page explicitly names Wayanad within the Haritha Rashmi project, and further identifies Sugandhagiri and neighbouring areas and the Cheengeri farm in Wayanad as priority territories for farm development, value addition, nursery units, beekeeping, and related agro-processing (“Agriculture”). Kerala Tribal Plus, meanwhile, provides an extra 100 days of employment above the ordinary MGNREGS ceiling and maintains a revolving fund for advance wages in Wayanad, Attappady, and Aralam (“Kerala Tribal Plus”). In analytical terms, these schemes are attempts to move tribal households from casual labour dependence toward either expanded public employment or tribal-controlled agri-livelihoods. Their existence, however, also reveals that large parts of the tribal population still cannot rely on inherited land or stable private labour demand. (32)

Health and nutrition policy is equally revealing. The State Planning Board identifies Wayanad among the districts worst affected by settlement-level health-care deficits and lack of sanitation (Working Group Report 15-16). The STDD’s health page provides treatment support for major illnesses including sickle-cell anaemia, tuberculosis, cancer, cardiac and kidney ailments, and water-borne disease (“Comprehensive Tribal Health Care”). The STDD’s welfare page singles out Wayanad, Palakkad, Kozhikode, and Malappuram as districts where sickle-cell anaemia significantly affects tribal communities and provides for monthly aid and livelihood-related support for such patients (“Assistance for the welfare of Scheduled Tribes”). The food-security page similarly frames food support as essential during low-employment seasons, monsoons, disasters, and emergencies, with explicit priority for pregnant and lactating mothers, widows, sickle-cell patients, and undernourished children (“Food Support/Food Security Programme”). This clustering of schemes makes sense only if one recognises that labour precariousness, health burden, and nutritional insecurity remain tightly linked. (33)

At the community and settlement scale, the State has recently moved toward microplanning and convergence. The Ambedkar Settlement Development Scheme page lists roads, drainage, drinking water, solar lights, internet connectivity, waste systems, housing renovation, community centres, retention walls, and cultural centres as eligible works within settlements. It also states that in the first phase 162 settlements across Kerala would be selected for family- and settlement-based microplans, with convergence expected across STDD, local self-governments, LIFE, MGNREGS, Health, Education, Kudumbashree, ICDS, and other agencies, and with an allocation of Rs 4,000 lakh (Ambedkar Settlement Development Scheme). This is one of the clearest formal recognitions that tribal welfare cannot be delivered through isolated individual benefits alone; it requires territorially coordinated settlement development. (34)

The social-sector page reinforces that diagnosis by singling out programmes for tribals living in forests, programmes for Adiyas, Paniyas, Malapandaram, and PVTGs, and destitute homes including those at Mananthavady and Sugandhagiri in Wayanad (“Social sector interventions”). A special Paniya package was specifically envisaged for 2024-25 on the basis of a comprehensive study, and district-level studies were to identify development gaps before microplans were finalised (“Social sector interventions”). This is a rare and important administrative admission: universal “ST welfare” had not adequately reached the district’s largest and historically most exploited community, so a community-specific package became necessary. (35)

### Critical Appraisal and Open Questions

The evidence assembled here suggests a clear but uncomfortable conclusion: Kerala’s tribal welfare architecture in Wayanad is extensive, historically self-conscious, and financially non-trivial, yet it remains partly compensatory because it has never fully overcome the district’s foundational political economy of landlessness and labour dependence. The State Planning Board itself describes the existing condition of Kerala’s Scheduled Tribes as one of “social backwardness, economic vulnerability, poor health and low educational standards,” and places Wayanad among the districts with high deprivation, substantial malnutrition, and poor settlement infrastructure (Working Group Report 13-16). That diagnosis is consistent with the logic of current schemes, most of which either patch deficits—food, health care, wage employment, completion of houses, internet connectivity, transport of ration—or attempt piecemeal structural repair through resettlement, microplans, and farm development. (37)

The most important strength of Kerala’s approach is that it does not rely solely on one model. It combines above-population-share TSP funding, departmental schemes, local-body expenditure, land and housing missions, education support, forest-rights implementation, and targeted community packages. In comparative Indian perspective, that is significant. The problem is not absence of governmental attention; it is the persistence of a gap between allocative sophistication and transformative outcome. Where historical

exploitation has taken the form of labour without property, emancipation requires not only welfare transfers but durable control over land, markets, skills, and institutions. Wayanad's regime often reaches households as beneficiaries, but more rarely secures them as economic subjects. (38)

A second critical point concerns category design. The official system now rightly distinguishes PVTGs, forest-dwelling groups, Adiyas, Paniyas, and other marginalised communities instead of treating all STs as equivalent ("Social sector interventions"; Working Group Report 16-18). Yet this refinement also reveals an old failure: Adiyas and Paniyas, though not always captured by the PVTG label, remain communities whose historical relation to slavery and bonded labour continues to structure present deprivation. The administrative challenge for Wayanad is therefore not merely to "include tribals" but to tailor justice to distinct historical injuries: former bonded labour, forest exclusion, artisan decline, and the vulnerabilities of numerically tiny communities. (39)

A third point concerns transparency. The State's public documentation is strong on aggregate TSP allocation, broad sectoral expenditure, and scheme descriptions; it is weaker on routinely published, easily accessible, district-wise expenditure dashboards that would allow scholars or citizens to trace how much of a given scheme actually reaches Wayanad, block by block, year by year. The KIRTADS evaluation itself was necessary precisely because ordinary public reporting did not make local performance sufficiently legible (KIRTADS Evaluation Study 1-4). A district with Kerala's largest tribal population should not require such heavy triangulation merely to reconstruct the fiscal cartography of its welfare regime. (40)

What follows from this evidence is not a dismissal of welfare but a hierarchy of priorities. The historically most relevant measures for Wayanad remain, first, land and forest rights with publicly auditable district records; secondly, labour-centred interventions that reduce seasonal compulsion, contractor dependence, and low-skill immobility; thirdly, community-differentiated education and health systems that recognise the uneven burdens borne by Paniyas, Adiyas, Kattunayakan, and smaller communities; and fourthly, transparent convergence at the settlement level through Oorukoottam-based microplans rather than merely top-down beneficiary enumeration (Wayanad Initiative 17-20, 40; Ambedkar Settlement Development Scheme; Resettlement of Landless Tribal People (TRDM)). If Wayanad is the test case of Kerala's tribal policy, then its real metric of success is not the multiplication of schemes but the withering away of the social conditions that make such corrective schemes perpetually necessary. (41)

Open questions remain. Because direct machine-readable access to some older archival texts was incomplete in this session, more work remains to be done on the precise textual genealogy linking colonial administrative descriptions of Paniyas and Adiyas slavery to later developmental categories. Likewise, district-wise public expenditure data for many current schemes remain fragmented, so a future version of this research would benefit from RTI-based district ledgers, assembly questions, or departmental budget annexures specific to ITDP Kalpetta. Those limitations, however, do not alter the article's central conclusion: Wayanad's Adivasi question is fundamentally a question of how a former agrarian order of slavery and bonded labour persists inside contemporary welfare capitalism, where the state now subsidises the survival and partial advancement of communities that the older regional economy systematically dispossessed. (42)

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