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The Labyrinth of Learning: Barriers and Pathways of Education Among Kattunayakkans of Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

The Kattunayakkans are one of the six Particular Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) residing in Tamil Nadu's Nilgiris Region. This study explores the Socio-Cultural Barriers and pathways of education among Kattunayakkans. This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in January 2024 with 111 individuals from 30 households. This research employs Participant Observation, Interviews, and Case Studies to examine the intersection of socio-economic, ecological, and institutional factors shaping educational outcomes. The study reveals that poverty, unstable income, geographical isolation, and human-wildlife conflict significantly hinder school attendance and continuity. Despite Government and NGO Interventions, Education is often perceived as disconnected from livelihood realities, leading to high dropout rates. This study emphasizes the urgent need for culturally sensitive educational models that integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into formal schooling. By situating education within the broader context of livelihood security and ecological vulnerability, the research highlights pathways toward inclusive and sustainable educational development for marginalized forest-dependent communities

Keywords: Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), Socio-Cultural Barriers, Tribal Livelihoods, Human-Wildlife Conflict.

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Introduction

Tamil Nadu (TN) is home to a rich mosaic of tribal communities, officially recognized as Scheduled Tribes. TN State is often associated with rapid urbanization, industrialization, and relatively high social development indicators; however, the situation of its tribal population reflects deep-seated historical marginalization and uneven development. According to the 2011 census, TN has a total population of 72,147,030, comprising 36,137,975 men and 36,009,055 women. The scheduled tribe population is 794,697 (401,068 males and 393,629 females), constituting approximately 1.10% of the state's total population. Despite their small numerical presence, tribal communities occupy a significant place in TN's Ecological Zones, Cultural Heritage, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

TN officially recognizes more than 36 ST communities, including Irular, Toda, Kota, Sholaga, Paniyan, Malayali, Kurumba, and Kattunayakan. The Nilgiris region is home to several Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), such as Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas Paniyas, and Kattunayakkas. Historically, tribal communities in TN have maintained close relationships with forests, hills, rivers and other natural resources. Their livelihoods are traditionally based on food gathering, hunting, fishing, shifting cultivation, and collecting minor forest produce. These practices were not merely economic activities but were deeply embedded in the belief systems, cultural traditions, and social organizations of the region. However, colonial forest policies, post-independence conservation regimes, and expanding nontribal settlements have disrupted these livelihood systems. Many tribal communities today face persistent socio-economic deprivation, poverty, landlessness, indebtedness, and food insecurity remains wider spread. Access to quality education and healthcare remains uneven and inadequate, especially in the remote forest and hill regions of the country.

Traditional livelihoods are increasingly threatened by deforestation, wildlife conservation restrictions, climate change, and encroachment by nontribal populations. The implementation of forest protection measures, while important for biodiversity conservation, has often restricted tribal access to forest resources without providing adequate alternative livelihood options. Consequently, many tribal households have been pushed into wage labor, particularly in coffee, tea, and pepper plantations, construction work, and other informal sectors. Seasonal migration to urban and semi-urban areas in search of employment has also become common in recent years.

In response to these challenges, both the Government of India and the Government of TN have introduced several welfare and development schemes for STs in Tamil Nadu. These include reservations in education and government employment, financial assistance through Tribal Sub-Plans, scholarships, housing schemes, healthcare initiatives, and livelihood support programs.

Kattunayakkan: In Tamil Nadu, six communities are officially recognized as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). These include Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyans, and Kattunayakkans. The Kattunayakkans are one of the most marginalized and forest-dependent communities in Tamil Nadu. The term "Kattunayakkan" is derived from the words '*Kadu*' (forest) and '*Nayakan*' (leader or chief), signifying their traditional identity as "lords of the forest." Historically, they were known for their expertise in food gathering and hunting and their deep ecological knowledge of forest landscapes. Historically, the Kattunayakkans living in

the Nilgiris, Wayanad, and Mysore regions have largely remained outside mainstream processes of socioeconomic change. Consequently, their descendants have often been labelled as 'backward', a characterization that ignores the sophistication of their indigenous knowledge systems and adaptive strategies. They are primarily distributed across the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks of the Nilgiris district. They are spread over 44 settlements located in eight revenue villages i.e., Devarasolai, Gudalur, Mudumalai, Pandalur, Barwood, Nilakkottai, Cherumulli and Cherankodu etc. within the Gudalur forest division.

Language: Linguistically, the Kattunayakkans speak a language closely related to Kannada and are conversant in Tamil and Malayalam because of regional interactions. They did not have separate scripts for each question.

Population: The Kattunayakkan population is estimated to be approximately 46,672 (23,360 males and 23,312 females), accounting for approximately 0.06 percentage of TN's total population. Their small population size and geographical isolation contribute to their classification as PVTG.

Material Culture: The Kattunayakkan material culture reflects both tradition and gradual change. Generally, women wear saris draped in a distinctive manner, covering the upper body while leaving one shoulder uncovered. Younger women increasingly wear blouses and skirts. Men typically wear a cloth around their waist and a shirt, whereas younger males wear trousers or shorts. Ornamentation is common, with women wearing nose rings, bangles, anklets, necklaces, and toe rings made of brass, silver, plastic, and beads. Earlier practices, such as ear piercing among men, are declining among younger generations.

Social Organization: The Kattunayakkan society is traditionally organized around nuclear families, following a patrilineal system of descent. While authority has historically passed through the male line, contemporary practices show greater gender equity in property inheritance than before. Clan organization (*Kulam* or *Deivakulam*) plays a central role in social regulation, particularly regarding marriage. Exogamy is strictly followed and clans are often associated with ancestral spirits and place names.

Life Cycle Ceremonies: From pregnancy and childbirth to puberty, marriage, and death, distinctive rituals reinforce community bonds and ensure cultural continuity. Marriage practices are diverse, including arranged marriages, love marriages, elopement, widow remarriage, and divorce, reflecting a relatively flexible social structure within the community. Death rituals culminate in purification ceremonies performed on the sixteenth day, underscoring beliefs related to ancestry and spiritual continuity.

Economic Organization: Economically, most Kattunayakkans depend on forest products such as honey collection, rubber, food gathering, and hunting. Some of them depend on daily wage labor, plantation work, and limited agriculture involving food and commercial crops such as pepper, tea, coffee, and horticulture. Their knowledge of forests makes them valuable to the forest department, which often employs them as laborers and as trackers.

Religious Organization: Kattunayakkans practice ancestor worship and revere a range of deities such as Ethan (Muthappan), Marri, Guligan, Kuttisathan etc. sacred spaces known as *Deiva Mane* serve as focal points for worship.

Political Organization: Kattunayakkan village councils, led by hereditary headmen (*Modale* or *Karanavar*), govern social affairs, rituals, and conflict resolution, reflecting a well-defined indigenous governance structure.

Literature Review

The following literature review explains the educational landscape of the tribal communities in India. It focuses on the systematic barriers faced by PVTGs and the specific impact of human-wildlife conflict on educational continuity.

Tribal Education:

In Tamil Nadu, Scheduled Tribes constitute approximately 1.10 percent of the total population. The Nilgiris district of TN, known as the “Blue Mountains,” is part of the Western Ghats and is home to several unique tribal communities, including Toda, Kota, Kurumba, Paniya, Irula, and Kattunayakkan (Kumar & Kumar, 2014; Sathish & Vasanthi, 2023). Even though there is a rapid development of industrialization, tribal education reflects historical marginalization and uneven development. This literature indicates that while these PVTGs possess a rich cultural heritage, they face significant socio-economic challenges, largely driven by low literacy levels and geographical isolation (Chellasamy & Kannamudaiyar, 2022; Durga Lakshmi, 2023). Nilgiris district is characterized by common human-wildlife interactions due to its rich forest cover and nearness of tribal settlements to protected areas. This study highlights recurring conflicts involving elephants, gaurs, leopards, and sloth bears, leading to crop damage, livestock predation, and occasional human casualties (Kumar & Kumar, 2014). These struggles are exacerbated by habitat fragmentation, expansion of tea and coffee plantations, infrastructural development, and confinement of wildlife corridors.

Sathish and Vasanthi (2023) stress the importance of involving tribal communities in the decision-making process, while Chellasamy and Kannamudaiyar (2022) underline the need for targeted literacy programs to overcome socio-economic barriers. Education tailored to local contexts, such as Bilingual Materials, Community Workshops, and Experiential Learning in forest settings, has been identified as a promising pathway. Several scholars have argued for the integration of indigenous ecological knowledge into formal education systems. For instance, the Toda and Kurumba maintain oral traditions that encode sustainable practices related to grazing, forest use, and wildlife avoidance. Recognizing and institutionalizing such knowledge not only validates tribal identity but also strengthens conservation efforts. Kumar and Kumar (2014) highlight that ignoring these traditions often leads to mistrust and resistance toward state-led interventions.

The reviewed literature suggests that human-wildlife conflict in the Nilgiris cannot be addressed solely through ecological or infrastructural solutions. Education is a critical mediator that enables tribal communities to balance cultural heritage with modern conservation imperatives. However, the success of such interventions depends on culturally sensitive, participatory models that respect Indigenous knowledge while addressing literacy and socioeconomic challenges. Access-centric models are a recent scholarly discourse on Tribal

Education in India. It focuses on meaningful participation and cultural relevance (Wadhwa, 2025; Kumar & Reddy, 2026). While primary school enrolment has improved through welfare schemes, recent data indicate a sharp rise in dropouts at the secondary level, reaching as high as 28.4% in certain Tribal Regions (Maithreyi et al.2026).

Singh and Lone (2026) revealed that approximately 72.3% of tribal students identified language barriers, seasonal migration, and parental illiteracy as primary hurdles. Wani and Majid (2026) explain that the linguistic mismatch between home dialects and the state-mandated medium of instruction significantly impairs academic comprehension. Wadha (2025) explains that economic insecurity often forces a trade-off between school attendance and subsistence labor, with girls facing a “double burden” of domestic care and agricultural work. Current research emphasizes the necessity of culturally responsive teaching, mother-tongue-based multilingual education, and community-centric interventions to foster a “scientific temper” that respects Indigenous epistemologies (Kumar & Reddy, 2026; IJSSR, 2026).

Research Methodology

This study used a descriptive and analytical research design to achieve its objectives. Because this research focuses on the “Labyrinth of Learning” and the socio-cultural barriers to education, it adopts a qualitative approach.

Data Collection: The researcher used both primary and secondary data collection methods. The present study is based on primary data collected from 111 individuals belonging to 30 households across three villages of Gudallur Mandal and Nilgiris district. The researcher conducted the research in January 2024. He employed ethnographic methodologies, including participant observation, comprehensive interviews, case studies, and secondary sources such as census data, government reports and prior ethnographic studies. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Crucially, the methodology adheres to ethical standards of voluntary participation and community cooperation, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect the lived experiences of the tribal population without external bias. This systematic approach ensures that the transition from field observations to theoretical conclusions is valid.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile: The Table 1 presents the age wise distribution of 111 individuals across three villages (Sembakolli, Machakolli & Vettikolli), divided by Age group, Gender (Male and Female) and expressed both in absolute numbers and percentages. The population is nearly evenly split, with 55 (49.55%) males and 56 (50.45%) females. Children aged 0-10 years come up 20 (18.02%) of the total, with slightly more boys than girls. 11-20 age group accounts for 21 (18.92%), again showing a balanced gender ratio. The working age group will come up under 21-30 years of age group and it is the largest single segment at 23 (20.72%), with more females than males. The 31-40 group contributes 14 (12.61%) showing a decline compared to younger cohorts. The middle age will come under the age of 41-50 years group represent 18 (16.22%) notables for having twice as many females as males. Then 51-60 group at 9 (8.11%) with males outnumbering females. The elderly 61-70 age group, senior citizens will come form 6 (5.41%) of the population, evenly split between genders. The 21-30 age group dominates, suggesting a youthful, potentially productive population. Female representation is stronger in the 41-50 age group, which may indicate longevity or social factors influencing survival. The elderly population is relatively small, highlighting a demographic skew toward younger age groups.

Table 1: Age wise distribution of respondents

| Sl. No. | Age Group | Male | % | Female | % | Total | % |
|---------|-----------|-------|------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1 | 0-10 | 11 | 9.91 | 09 | 8.1 | 20 | 18.02 |
| 2 | 11-20 | 11 | 9.91 | 10 | 9.01 | 21 | 18.92 |
| 3 | 21-30 | 10 | 9.01 | 13 | 11.71 | 23 | 20.72 |
| 4 | 31-40 | 08 | 7.21 | 06 | 5.41 | 14 | 12.61 |
| 5 | 41-50 | 06 | 5.41 | 12 | 10.81 | 18 | 16.22 |
| 6 | 51-60 | 06 | 5.41 | 03 | 2.70 | 09 | 8.11 |
| 7 | 61-70 | 03 | 2.70 | 03 | 2.70 | 06 | 5.41 |
| Total | | 49.55 | 56 | 50.45 | 111 | 100 | 100 |

Education Levels: According to the 2011 Census, the total literate population is 26,382; (male-14,627 and female -11,755); and the total illiterate population is 20,290 (male: 8733 and female: 11,557 females). In the current study, 30 household (30 HH) schedules were collected, and there were 111 populations. A total of 28 people (12 males and 16 females) were illiterate, accounting for 25.22% of the sample (10.81% males and 14.41% females). Fourteen (12.61%) people (seven males (6.30%) and seven females (6.30%)) dropped out of primary education from the 3rd to the 5th grade. A total of 34 people (17 males and 17 females) dropped out of secondary education from the 6th to the 10th standard. In my observation, the majority of people drop out of primary and secondary education programs. Ongoing School Children: Nine people (six males and three females) are studying primary education. Nine people (seven males and two females) are studying their higher secondary school education, that is, from the 6th to the 12th standard. Only one female student from B. Sc. and one female student from B.Sc. Nurse, and one female from the ITI. Three children (one male and two females) attended Anganwadi.

Under educational development programs, the government has provided a Tribal Residential School (GTR) in Kanchikolli village, which covers six other villages. GTR schools provide facilities such as four-time food and free clothing. To encourage the enrolment of tribal girl children and to avoid dropouts, the government is giving Rs 500 per annum to girls studying in 3rd to 5th grades. An NGO called the Center for Tribals and Rural Development Trust (CSI) provides school and hostel facilities to Kattunayakkan students in the study area. The NGO School is located in Padandurai, Gudalur Taluk, Tamil Nadu. Students from Sembakolli, Nagamballi, Muduguli, Vattikolli, Veechankolli, Thenkolli, and Makkumula villages are study in the school.

Government initiatives, such as Tribal Residential Schools and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) program, operate in Kanchikolli and Monguli in the Gudalur Taluk. The Kanchikoli center is maintained by the Action for Community Organization Rehabilitation and Development

(ACCORD) NGO, and the Monguli center is maintained by the Rural Development Organization (RDO) Trust. Kattunayakkan students who passed eight standards from Sembakolli, Nagamballi, Muduguli, Vattikolli, Veechanakolli, Thenkoli, Kundithal, Kapikadu, and Mundakunnu are admitted to government schools in nearby areas for the ninth standard. However, high dropout rates persist, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary education. These situations highlight the urgent need for context need for context-sensitive educational interventions that address not only schooling but also livelihood security, infrastructure, and cultural relevance. In summary, the tribal situation in Tamil Nadu, particularly that of the Kattunayakkans in the Nilgiris, underscores the complex intersection of history, culture, ecology, and regional development. Understanding this context is essential for framing meaningful educational and policy interventions that move beyond token inclusion toward genuine empowerment and social justice.

Case Study 1: Vijayan, a 48-year-old married man with two daughters, resides in Chambakoli village under Devarasol Panchayat, Gudalur Taluk, Nilgiri District, Tamil Nadu. He belonged to the Kattunayakkan community. He owns 20 cents of land, where he cultivates coffee and other crops. To supplement his limited agricultural income, he works as a daily wage laborer. Traditionally, honey collection from nearby forests has been an important supplementary livelihood for Kattunayakkans. His family depends on multiple sources of livelihood for survival. The forest department is increasing restrictions on access to forest resources. Many community members, compelled by necessity, take loans from private moneylenders and secretly collect honey, exposing themselves to legal risks and penalties. These restrictions have highlighted tensions between local communities and forest officials, as honey collection remains crucial for household survival. With shrinking livelihood options, Vijayan and his neighbors are now exploring alternatives such as sustainable agriculture and ecotourism, hoping to align income generation with conservation priorities and forest cooperation with the forest department.

Human-wildlife conflict further aggravates this vulnerability. Frequent encounters with elephants and fear of tigers pose serious threats to life and livelihoods. Elephants damaging crops is a common occurrence. Villagers have repeatedly requested that the government construct protective fencing and appoint forest watchers for their safety. Despite repeated appeals, no effective measures have been implemented to date. The Basic infrastructure and essential services in Chambakoli are grossly inadequate. Most households lack electricity, and poor road connectivity poses a major challenge. The 5-kilometre stretch from the Changili gate to Chambakoli becomes almost impassable during monsoons. During the rainy season, vehicles stop operating, forcing villagers to walk through forest paths and risking encounters with wild animals, particularly elephants. Housing schemes remain incomplete due to insufficient funds, leaving many families in partially constructed or unsafe dwellings. For these reasons, elephants sometimes come in front of their doors at night and damage things.

Education and health services are severely constrained in these regions. Children must walk four to five kilometers to reach primary schools, leading to high dropout rates after the 5th or 8th standard. Access to high schools in Devarasolai or Gudalur is unreliable because of irregular bus services. Health facilities are equally distant, with no primary health center in the village. Visiting health workers and officials often remain at the village entrance or nearby shops, limiting communication and excluding many residents from receiving the services. Overall, Chambakoli, home to approximately 100 Betta Kurumba and 150 Kattunayakkan households,

faces systemic neglect. Vijayan's case reflects the urgent need for inclusive governance, improved infrastructure, direct delivery of welfare schemes, and respectful engagement by officials to ensure dignity, development, and sustainable livelihoods for forest-dwelling communities in India.

Case Study 2: Vasu, 45 years old, is a member of the Kattunayakkan community residing in Chambakolli village in the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu. He works as a daily wage agricultural laborer, earning Rs. 450–500 per day. This income supports the survival of their households. However, these are irregular and insufficient, particularly during lean agricultural seasons. This family lacked basic amenities such as proper electricity, housing, and road connectivity. Their forest-based living is known for its cultural traditions and close relationship with nature. Despite this rich heritage, contemporary realities have pushed families like Vasu's into acute vulnerability.

Education poses significant challenges. Vasu has four children: his eldest daughter is married, the second daughter is pursuing a B. Sc. in nursing, and his two sons are studying in the 10th and 6th standards. All children attend school or college in Kottambedu town, located approximately 12 km away. From Chambakolli to Machakolli, the nearest bus point, they must walk nearly 8 km each way every day. For two weeks, the children were unable to attend school due to exhaustion and the physical strain of walking long distances with heavy school bags. Previously, a teacher arranged transportation for the students, enabling regular attendance. However, this support ceased after the teacher's transfer to another school. Current teachers insist that parents drop off and pick up their children, which is impossible for family's dependent on daily wage labor. The route to school passes through coffee plantations and forest paths, exposing children to serious risks from elephants, tigers, and bears, particularly during the early morning hours. Vasu and other villagers have requested the government to construct 10-15 km of road and dig protective trenches along forest paths. Their case highlights how inadequate infrastructure, wildlife, conflict, and lack of institutional support combine to restrict education, livelihood security, and the future prospects of Kattunayakkan children in Tamil Nadu.

Educational Barriers

This study on the Kattunayakkan community in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu presents a stark and unsettling reality for many members of this PVTG: Education continues to remain a distant and often unattainable dream. The researcher's work, "The Labyrinth of Learning: Barriers and Pathways of Education among Kattunayakkans of Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu" brings into sharp focus the complex web of socio-economic, environmental, and institutional factors that obstruct educational access and continuity.

The Kattunayakkans have a close relationship with the forest, which has traditionally served as their primary livelihood source. They collect honey, gather minor forest produce, use medicinal plants, and engage in occasional timber-related work, which has shaped their cultural identity and worldviews over generations. In recent decades, restrictions on forest access have reduced these livelihood options, forcing many to depend on daily wage labor in nearby tea, coffee, and pepper plantations for their sustenance. This transition has resulted in unstable and inadequate income, thereby intensifying their economic vulnerability.

Despite their rich indigenous knowledge and strong ecological awareness, the Kattunayakkans' formal education levels are low. School attendance is irregular and largely dependent on external motivation, such as temporary encouragement from teachers or sporadic visits by officials rather than sustained community engagement. Education is often perceived as disconnected from daily survival, especially when its benefits are uncertain and long-term. Several interrelated barriers emerged from this study's findings. Poverty and unstable income compel families to prioritize immediate economic needs over education. Children are often viewed as dependents and contributors to household survival, making education a secondary concern for many families. Remote habitation further compounds the problem, as many settlements are located deep within forested landscapes, far from schools, roads, and transport facilities. Wildlife threats, mainly from elephants, tigers, and bears, make daily travel to school dangerous and psychologically frightening for the students.

These structural challenges collectively weaken the perceived value of education in the region. When children must walk 4 to 8 km one way and sometimes up to 16 km daily through forest paths to reach the bus stop or school, education becomes physically exhausting and unsafe for them. The researcher interviewed Vasu, who stated that his children had discontinued their schooling for weeks because of physical strain and fear. Earlier arrangements, such as teacher-facilitated transport, once enabled attendance, but their discontinuation exposed the fragility of these informal support systems to the students.

Parental constraints further exacerbate these problems. Parents engaged in daily wage labor cannot afford to escort their children to school, as they risk losing a day's income. Institutional responses often reflect insensitivity; teachers reportedly suggest that children stay home if their parents cannot accompany them. Government officials are frequently perceived as inaccessible and indifferent, stopping at village entrances rather than engaging with the community, resulting in poor awareness and uptake of welfare and educational schemes. At the systemic level, the study highlights the absence of educational models suited to the socio-cultural context of the Kattunayakkans' community. The prevailing schooling framework neither integrates Indigenous knowledge nor aligns with livelihood patterns. Literacy is taught in isolation from lived realities, leaving children and families to navigate a "labyrinth" with few meaningful pathways forward.

Recommendations

Addressing Educational Deprivation among Kattunayakkans requires Holistic, Inter-sectoral Interventions rather than Isolated Educational Reforms. The following recommendations are:

- 1. Enhancing Physical Accessibility and Protection:** The government must prioritize the construction and maintenance of all-weather roads connecting remote Kattunayakkan's tribal hamlets such as Machakolli, Sembakolli, and Vettikolli to main roads and schools. Dedicated, free, and reliable school transportation should be introduced to collect children directly from hamlets. Wildlife protection measures, such as fencing, trenches, and the employment of local watchers, are essential to ensure safe travel routes for the children.
- 2. Addressing Socio-Economic Barriers:** Stable livelihoods are foundational to educational participation. Sustainable income-generating options, such as regulated

forest produce collection, value addition, and ecotourism should be promoted. Providing scholarships, attendance-linked incentives, and free educational materials can offset opportunity costs. Access to electricity, housing, and clean water must be urgently addressed to create conducive learning environments.

3. **Consolidation Educational Infrastructure and Pedagogy:** Educational models must be culturally sensitive, Anganwadis should be strengthened, and well-managed residential schools, that is, Ashram Schools, may be considered for older children. The curriculum should integrate traditional ecological sensitization training, and local youth should be engaged as educators or assistants. Targeted financial aid, hostels, and mentoring should support higher-education aspirants.
4. **Refining Governance and Administrative Responsiveness:** Government officials must ensure last-mile service delivery by regularly visiting tribal hamlets and directly engaging with residents. Awareness campaigns on schemes and rights should be conducted in villages to educate women. Strong interdepartmental coordination and community participation in planning, implementation, and monitoring are essential for achieving meaningful outcomes.

Conclusion

The educational challenges faced by the Kattunayakkans of Nilgiris reflect a complex interplay of poverty, ecological vulnerability, and institutional neglect. Although government schemes and NGO initiatives have provided partial support, structural barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, unsafe travel routes, and limited livelihood security continue to undermine educational participation. The findings demonstrate that education cannot be addressed in isolation but must be embedded within broader strategies of socioeconomic empowerment, ecological sustainability, and culturally relevant pedagogy. Strengthening residential schools, improving transportation and safety measures, and integrating Indigenous ecological knowledge into curricula are essential steps toward meaningful inclusion. This study contributes to the discourse on tribal education by emphasizing that empowerment requires holistic interventions that respect community context and aspirations. Ultimately, education must evolve as a pathway to dignity and resilience, enabling PVTGs, such as the Kattunayakkans, to navigate the Labyrinth of Learning with greater confidence and opportunity. A broader, “out of the-box” approach is required, one that ensures income stability, reduces the overemphasis on classroom-based learning, strengthens livelihood-linked skill development, and reinforces attachment to land and soil. Education must evolve as a tool for empowerment rather than alienation.

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