

## **Altering Perspectives and Preserving Diversities: A Look into Kerala's Tribal Reform**

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### **Abstract**

India is home to the collective consciousness of 461 indigenous tribes, each with its own established set of attitudes and customs of leading life that is now not recognized as the popular culture. As such the societal development and planning by way of the modern democratic machinery hardly satisfies their requirements of the decent life they have been culturing. The mass education contradicts such requirements, and hence the planning of all procedures of rehabilitating and upgrading the indigenous population is as unsuccessful as ever. This paper tries to check why the Kerala government's tribal reform measures failed miserably in Attappady leading to many infant deaths primarily diagnosed to have been caused by malnourishment. The main reason is that all succeeding governments were largely failures in foreseeing and implementing altering perspectives in education of these tribes whereby the diversities in their culture, living and livelihood are preserved and integrated into the education system. The budget allocations of the past few years make it very clear that the majority of the funds used was to promote education for these tribes thus striving for their progress and development. This paper also attempts to trace the marginalization of the indigenous tribes in Kerala, both at the central level and the state level, and discusses how the present governmental policies of tribal rehabilitation have altered the concept of education among them, perhaps to the extent of perpetual damage to their cultural ecology and identity politics. However the fact remains that the education system implemented was largely based on western model of education causing irreparable damage to their culture, livelihood at the cost of many lives. The same case can be universally accepted as a reference point for further evaluation and diagnosis of problems in understanding diverse perspectives of the indigenous masses. Also, the paper explores the stereotypical ways of social ethics and sense of responsibility of a nation towards the education of the indigenous tribes suggesting some remedial measures for the same which involves the urgency to reach at a consensus between their primitive practices of ecological sustenance and modern day education. It is certain that instead of taking the efforts to integrate the tribes into the mainstream cultural fabric, we need to respect their cultural perspectives and try to include their findings and research proven by the test of time into the mainstream education and research, especially those related with the study of soil, native healing and cultivation.

**Keywords:** Scheduled tribes, marginalization, tribal rehabilitation, educational reformation measures, mainstream culture

## **Introduction**

Kerala is a small coastal state, at the southern tip of India skirted by the Arabian Sea on the long western stretch. Prominent historians from Kerala like M.G.S. Narayanan believe that the evidences of settlement of human beings cannot be found in Kerala, earlier than the Megalithic age though tribal movements are likely to have happened sometime earlier. The major reason being Kerala's topography which consists largely of forests and water belts making early human settlements difficult. The climate of Kerala can be roughly divided into two-summer and monsoon. Kerala is a fertile land housing a largely agrarian society. The state boasts of the highest literacy level in the country as well as a high male- female sex ratio.

According to the 2011 census official data, urban population is 47.70 while the rural population is 52.30. The total population of Kerala is 33,406,061 and the male- female sex ratio is 15,468,614: 16,372,760. The census also clearly points out that the population of Kerala forms 2.76 percent of India in 2011 and also that the population in the state is in degrowth when compared to the 2001 census report. The average male literacy is 96.11 percent while the average female literacy is 92.07 percent. The average literacy in rural areas is 92.98 percent whereas in urban areas it is 95.11 percent. Malayalam is the official language though the people, especially in the urban areas are capable of using English and to a lesser extent, Hindi too.

Kerala is home to 34 Scheduled Tribes largely spread over the districts of Wayanad, Idukki and Palakkad. Wayanad is home to the largest population of Scheduled Tribes. Scheduled Tribes in India: The Indian Constitution designates tribes as "Scheduled Tribes" under Article 342 based on the "characteristics such as – primitive traits, geographically isolated, distinct culture, and shyness of contact with community at large, and economically backward" (as cited in "Tribal People in India: Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Areas and Tribal Self-Rule" (2012, para 10). Though there are more tribal communities in India, only 258 tribal communities speaking about 106 different languages are notified as "Scheduled Tribes" as per official data. Designating groups as Scheduled Tribes category according to the Indian constitution entitles them for major benefits and schemes of progress and development. The schemes of the Government for reformatory actions are always at par with the popular notions of the mainstream culture are to be specifically noted in the context. To quote from the text:

"When labeled "scheduled tribe" the community becomes entitled for some constitutional protections and developmental programs designed to end their marginalization and help assimilate into mainstream society. A similar protection is available to Hindu "low-caste" communities which have historically faced discrimination and exclusion at the hands of "upper-caste" people. They are labeled "Scheduled Caste"" (as cited in "Tribal People in India: Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Areas and Tribal Self-Rule", 2012, para 10).

For special developmental assistance some tribal groups are also categorized as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) (Earlier known as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG)). The article points out 75 tribal groups as included in this category (as cited in "Tribal People in India: Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Areas and Tribal Self-Rule", 2012, para 11). Scheduled Tribes of Kerala: The Scheduled Tribes are Kerala's early inhabitants. Since most of the area was dense forest, these early settlements are seen in the forest areas. Most of the Scheduled Tribe concentration is either in the forests, valleys or mountains. They are referred in the vernacular as "*adivasis*" (primitive dwellers/ early inhabitants). In urban folk language the term is also derogatorily referred for an "uncivilized" person according to the urban standards of refinement and culture. This fact itself proves their marginalized status in Kerala.

The Kerala Government website publishes that there are 34 Scheduled Tribe communities in Kerala (as cited in “List of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala”, n.d. p. 4). The 1951 census records 90.32 percent of population were *adivasis* in Attappady and it is the most backward revenue block of Palakkad District in Kerala.

Attappady has three major communities- Irular (non- primitive), Mudugar (non-primitive) and Kurumbar (primitive). Kurumbar are referred to as “Palukurumbar” to distinguish them from “Alukurumbar” tribe of the Nilgiris in Tamilnadu.

Scheduled Tribes in Attappady: There are mainly three Scheduled Tribes in Attappady- the Kurumbar, Mudugar and the Irular.

### **Kurumbar**

The ST Department, Government of Kerala has included Kurumbar community in the PVTG (particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group). It is the only tribal group which is concentrated in the Attappady region. The remaining tribes- Kadar, Kattunayakan, Koraga etc are distributed in Palakkad, Thrissur, Malappuram, Kasaragod etc, with the only exception of Cholanaickans found in the Nilambur valley alone. The 2011 census records their population as 2251 and the recorded number of families in the tribe is 543. The family size of Kurumbar is 4.14. The male-female sex ratio is the lowest in Kurumbar (1000:996). Their major settlement is in Agali and Pudur. They speak ‘*Kurumbar bhasha*’ which is a mixed dialect of Tamil and Malayalam. Their major traditional occupations are hunting, gathering and shifting cultivation.

### **Mudugar**

Their major settlement is also in Agali and Pudur. The 2011 census records their population as 4668 and the recorded number of families in the tribe is 1274. The family size is 3.16 and male- female ratio is the highest (1000:1098). They engage in traditional livelihood patterns like procurement of non-timber forest goods and cultivation. They speak ‘*Muduga bhasha*’ which is a dialect.

### **Irular**

When compared with the other two tribes the Irular population is the highest and the 2011 census records their population as 26525 and the recorded number of families in the tribe as 7614. Their family size is 3.48 and male-female sex is 1000:1015. They are settled in Agali, Sholayar and Pudur and the major traditional livelihood is cultivation and animal husbandry. They speak a dialect called ‘*Irula bhasha*’ which shows more affinity towards Tamil.

Social Structures of Scheduled Tribes in Attappady: It could be well assumed from the details given in the “List of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala” p.23, that all these major three tribes are socially centered around the institutions of ‘*ooru moopan*’ (chieftain of the hamlet), ‘*bhandāri*’ (treasurer), ‘*kuruthalai*’ (assistant), ‘*maṇṇukāran*’ (soil expert) which are hereditary and patriarchal in nature. Though designations like that of the chieftain are very common, the presence of a soil expert is enough indication to their traditional life style that integrates ecology and sustenance.

### **Background**

The central India tribal belt stretches from Gujarat in the west till Assam in the east and covers the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand. The centre allocates heavy funds to these regions as these are believed to be the poorest and having the greatest number of tribal groups. It is also understood that 90 percent of the tribal population is still rural resorting to

primitive agriculture. The article, “Tribal People in India: Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Areas and Tribal Self-Rule,” states,

“About 80 percent of tribal populations are to be found along the Central India belt and the rest 20 percent are in the North-Eastern States, Southern States and Island groups.”

**Budget Allocation:** The Budget allocation for various schemes/ programs of Ministry of Tribal Affairs for 2014-15 was Rs. 44790.00 million and the Revised Estimates was Rs.38500.00 million. The total releases made by the Ministry during the year 2014-15 (upto 31.12.2014) were Rs. 30023.10 million, which is 77.98 percent of the Revised Estimates/Final Grants. The budget Circular and tribal Sub Plan Programmes 2014-15 points out that the central sponsored schemes (in 50 percent and 10 percent categories) amount to only 6121.2 hundred thousand rupees for the state of Kerala which is a clear indicator that the Kerala Tribal community is also facing a grave marginalization when the issue of centre funds and budget allocations are discussed. It is also to be noted that it is only as late as the financial year 2014-15, that 3 percent of the total plan outlay is earmarked for the development of the Scheduled Tribe Population (Budget Circular and Tribal Sub Plan Programmes 2014-15, p. 5). The ministry of Kerala was established in the year 1957, after 10 years of gaining independence. Moreover, the government norms of budget allocation and policy implementation are always centered on demographic variables like population.

“The Scheduled Tribes in Wayanad constitutes 18.76 per cent of the total population of the district. As such they are a decisive fraction in the policy framing of the district as well as the State. In Idukki, the district with the second largest population, the Scheduled Tribes are only 4.78 per cent of the district population. In Alappuzha, the share of Scheduled Tribes in the district population is only 0.14 per cent. Approximately 71 per cent of the Scheduled Tribes in Kerala are in four districts, namely; Wayanad, Idukki, Kasaragod and Palakkad” (as cited in “List of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala”, n.d. p. 4).

The major rehabilitation methods adopted were towards modernization of these tribes in every way, like education, food, modern hospital facilities etc.

**Diet and Immunity:** *Ragi* (finger millet), *Chama* (pearl millet), *Thomara* (horse gram), maize, pulses, vegetables. More than 60 different types of cereals and pulses were supposed to be cultivated and nearly 60 types of green vegetables like *keera*, *paali*, *munne*, *chakkara*, *tav* etc were also in plenty, earlier. Edible wild berries, forest fruits and honey apart from fish from the Bhavani and Shiruvani rivers were also in plenty, earlier. The food crops obviously provided them a rich iron supplement to fight their sickle cell anemia to which they are genetically prone. Native Healers were also in adequate numbers earlier, but this is fast to extinction. Older generation people certify that they had fewer deaths due to anemia and malnutrition as of now. K.A. Shaji’s (2015, July 27, para 8) report of the view of the tribal activist B. Palaniswamy in *the Hindu* is relevant in the context:

“When we had land and irrigation facilities, our people used to cultivate *ragi*, *chama* (*bajra*), *thomara* (horse gram), maize, millets and pulses and vegetables. Land alienation and inaccessibility to irrigation facilities have made our lives difficult. Instead of restoring our livelihoods, government is just concentrating on free meal indigestible to our community members...’

In short, the school children are also being forced to follow a food habit different from their tradition as the free meal system in government schools is one that is in agreement with the popular food habits (rice and vegetables etc).

**Ration:** Ration is a system of providing grocery in subsidized rates to the citizens as part of an initiative by the Civil Supplies Department. In Kerala, rice, wheat, sugar, kerosene etc is provided through ration only to ration card holders. Ration Card Holders are also divided into

APL (Above Poverty Line) and BPL (Below Poverty Line). The real fact is that some tribal settlements in the interior are not even aware of such facilities. 10160 of the total tribal population in Kerala are calculated to be ration card holders. The total number of households in Attappady is 8589 and the total number of households having ration cards is 6180. That is, the total number of households that do not have ration card is 2400. 10160 households of the total tribal population in Kerala are calculated to be ration card holders, out of which 25.34 percent belong to APL (Above Poverty Line) category. The subsidy rates and amount of subsidized goods eligible is not the same for APL and BPL category ration cards. This fact itself suggests that the Kerala government's schemes of Tribal Reform have not been successful despite the huge amount spent on such reformatory measures. 10160 of the total tribal population in Kerala are calculated to be ration card holders. 25.34 percent are APL Ration card holders.

Moreover what is being supplied through these ration shops are not of high quality and not in consensus with the diet system of the tribespeople of Attappady. K.A. Shaji's (2015, July 27, para 8) report in *the Hindu* also contains an excerpt of R.J. Rajendra Prasad, a social worker, whose words are also relevant in the context.

"We are forcing them to follow a food habit different from their tradition. The earlier government promise to supply pulses and millets through ration shops for tribespeople in Attappady is not getting implemented. Rice was never part of their food habit but tribespeople here have been forced to become rice eaters and that too of poor quality rice," (para3).

Ownership of Property: Land for the tribes is another area of concern which is safeguarded by two laws because earlier and perhaps still the land mafia and big shots in real estate business try to take advantage of these tribes' ignorance, illiteracy and vulnerability to acquire their agricultural land for selfish motives associated with modernization and globalization.

i) Kerala Scheduled Tribes Restriction on Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands Act, 1975.

ii) Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.

There are paper reports stating that these acts are not implemented effectively. K.A. Shaji's report (2015, July 27, para 12) states that, "The Forest Rights Act, 2006, has not been properly implemented in Attappady and it has been pointed out as one of the major issues confronting them."

### **Methods of Research**

This research mainly resorts to secondary data- sources published by the Scheduled Tribes Department, Government of Kerala, news reports, journals, findings by doctors and also NGOs. The data is analyzed to find out how and why the tribal reform measures adopted by the Government of Kerala have failed, perhaps beyond repair and what must the main cause of this degeneration be in planning and implementing proper tribal reform measures in Kerala, no matter how many governments succeed one after the other. The statistical data of budget allocation and implementation of plans in education of tribes is analyzed to realize which models of education are chartered out for the tribes and also to measure their effectiveness.

### **Findings**

Civilization may be construed as a much confused term in India. Indian civilization is regarded as one of the ancient civilizations in the world but what Indians call civilization today is largely influenced by western thoughts and ideals, a part of the cultural infiltration that happened during the colonial times. It is a fact that Indians are still not sure whether their present day

culture really suits them or not and this confusion continues in every aspect of Indian life, right from basic needs to the needs of luxury; from conservative gender pull in provincialism to the modern cosmopolitan view. The extent to which the popular government measures in actively including the tribes into mainstream culture as the only potent solution to avoid them from the status of being marginalized is very high.

The Reasons behind Infant Deaths: IMR (Infant Mortality Rate) and ratio of body weight in Attappady is much below the standards prescribed by WHO and much below the statistics of other marginalized sections in India alone. Deaths due to malnutrition took a huge toll in Attappady in the year 2013 which continues in 2014 and perhaps still. Women and infants were largely affected. The reasons for death were diagnosed to be asphyxia, ARDS, apnoea, low birth weight, development growth delay, and IUGR (UNICEF Report, 2013) apart from anemia. Reasons specified were lack of health care facilities, proper hygiene and malnourishment apart from tribal reformatory scheme implementation lapses.

The Hindu, a leading national daily which is stronger in the southern parts of India reports, “Forty-seven infant deaths in 2013, 22 infant and 37 unborn infant deaths in 2014, and nine more so far this year... the statistics from Attappady are disturbing, even alarming” (Parthasarathy, S. (2015, July 18)).

The Kerala government’s measures of saving the tribe from high IMRs were mainly targeted on opening of more health centers, ensuring proper facilities of medical practitioners and medicines in health centers, providing them free food high in nutritional content and the like, of which the main scheme was the opening of nutritional rehabilitation centers notes Parthasarathy S. (2015, July 18).

“Nutritional rehabilitation centers have been started at Agali, Sholayur and Pudur for the children suffering from Severe Acute Nutrition; this brought down the SAN numbers from 299 in April, 2013, to 64 in April, 2015.”

More importance is being given to the western model of rehabilitation and modernization as these Scheduled Tribes are largely marginalized from mainstream culture. Stereotypical movements to eradicate such marginalization were taken by the Government of Kerala which ultimately has been proven a great failure.

### **Discussion**

Since man was essentially nomadic in leading his life, it is obvious that human settlements were not without any specific reason. Man has got a habit of taking what he thinks necessary and omitting what he considers to be irrelevant. This is a continuous process that happens through years which we now popularly call “culture”. Behind every settlement there is always a genuine cause of culture and ecological sustenance which are interrelated and complementary.

The Kerala government did not give any importance to the studies of culture and inhabitation including ecology of the tribal settlements. The Kerala government’s tribal reform is based on an attempt to make the tribes, a part of mainstream in everything right from culture to lifestyle. The implementation of ration and various other measures for the progress and development of the tribes in Attappady was a failure. Moreover the budget allocations and vast number of schemes were categorized not according to the need and vulnerability of the tribal groups rather according to their population statistics which indirectly allows a better ‘progression’ for a particular group than the other.

It could well be assumed that this lack of planning of education reforms for the tribes is the main cause of high death rates among the infants and their malnourishment which was why the Kerala Government had to launch additional schemes for their rescue. ‘*Janani Janma Raksha*’ is

a special scheme to save expecting mothers and their new born kids from malnourishments and high IMRs. It is found out that there was no such scheme in 2012-13 and it was launched only in 2013-14 seeing the greater toll of death. 655 hundred thousand rupees was reserved for this scheme in 2015-16 which varies starkly from the 100 hundred thousand rupees in the year before. The figure itself is a poignant indicator to the alarming death rates. The fund for the ‘Food Support Program’ also has been on the increase from 165-500 hundred thousand rupees from 21012-13 to 2015-16. The funds reserved for the treatment and rescue of sickle cell anemia patients to which they are genetically prone is 120 hundred thousand rupees. These figures indicate that the amount spent to rectify the damage already incurred could have been put to better use for the development and progress of the nation if the education reforms were modified and implemented integrating their traditional ecological practices. Refer to the below figure for more details.

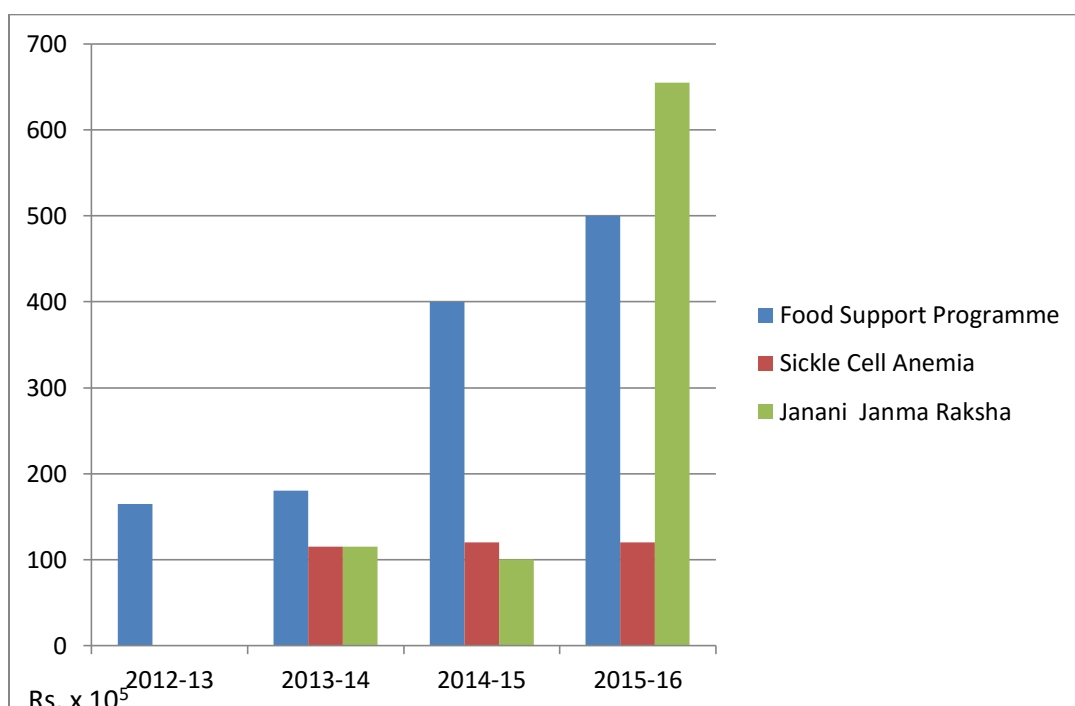


Fig. 1 Special Programs for Attappady to save the tribe from Malnourishment and alarming IMRs.  
Source: The Budget Circular and Tribal Sub Plan Programs, (2012-13, 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16)

It could be noted that the fund allocation under the head, ‘Direction and Administration’ of the Scheduled Tribes, gradually increased from 606.48 hundred thousand rupees in 2012-13, to 712.98 hundred thousand rupees in 2013-14 to 786.91 hundred thousand rupees in 2014-15 which steeply rose to 1023.89 hundred thousand rupees in 2015-16. The budget allocation for education is also ever on the increase. Education may include everything from primary schools, to higher education sector set-ups, building of infrastructure like hostels, buildings, imparting training to teachers and the like. The budget allocation for education was 11493.45 hundred thousand rupees in 2012-13, 14514.33 hundred thousand rupees in 2013-14, 17348.86 hundred thousand rupees in 2014-15, and 18443.29 hundred thousand rupees in 2015-16. The fund reservation under the sections of ‘Landless Tribal Settlement’ and for the implementation of ‘Scheduled Tribal Act 2006’ has remained the same, 2000 hundred thousand rupees and hundred thousand rupees respectively. No fund was allotted to Hamlet Development scheme in 2012-13.

2013-14 saw 2000 hundred thousand rupees allocation which increased to 2500 hundred thousand rupees in 2014-15 which again decreased to 1000 hundred thousand rupees in 2015-16. The budget allocation for the implementation of Schedule Tribe Act (1975) also has remained somewhat stable the fluctuation being only 10 hundred thousand rupees. The budget allocation for health and building homes for the tribes is also ever on the increase since 2012-13 starting from 422.25 hundred thousand rupees in 2012-13 to 2172.98 hundred thousand rupees in 2015-16 for health and 2500 hundred thousand rupees in 2012-13 to 4783 hundred thousand rupees in 2015-16 for building and maintaining homes for the Scheduled Tribes. These figures indicate that the Kerala Government has stressed education far higher than anything else and the difference in fund allocation for other developmental measures is striking which may be regarded as very meager when compared to that reserved for education.

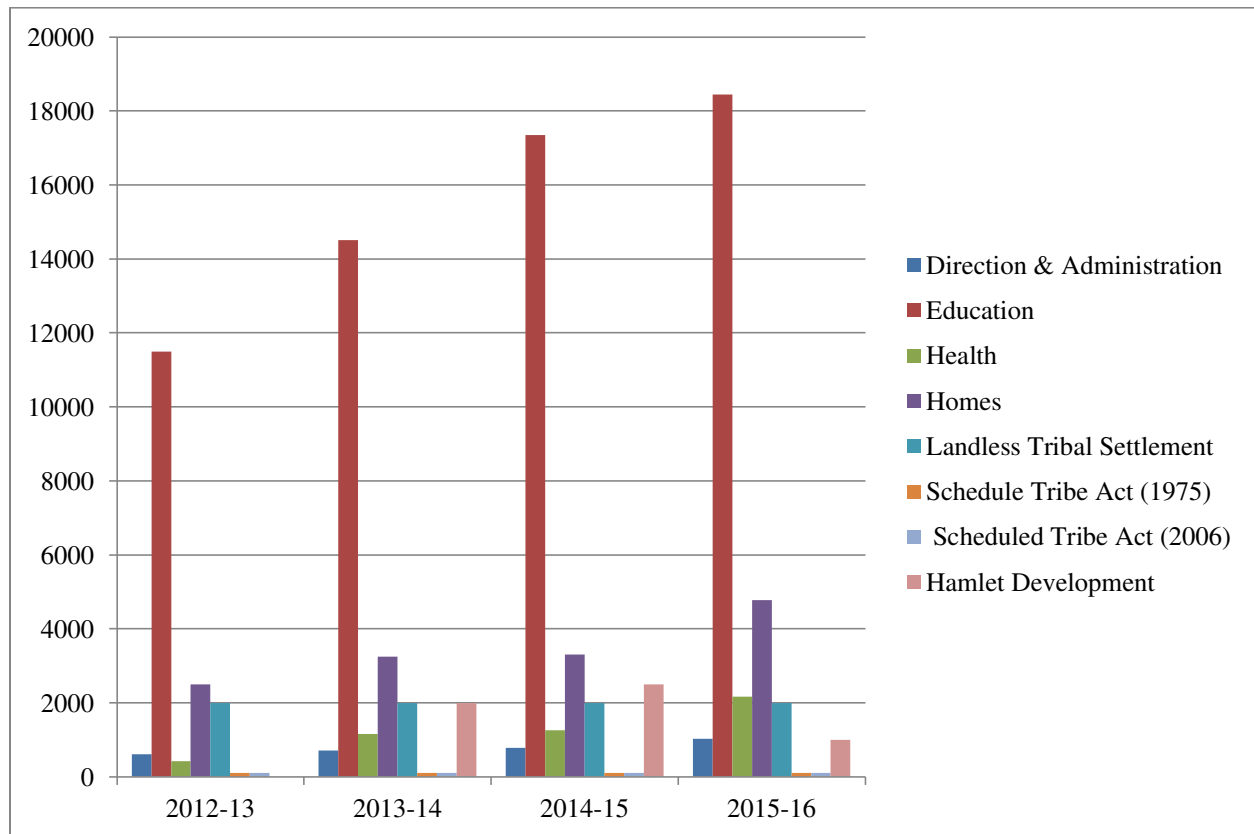


Fig. 2 Kerala Developmental Model. Source: *The Budget Circular and Tribal Sub Plan Programs*, (2012-13, 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16)

Fig. 3 points out that the literacy rates in Attappady show that 64 percent of men and only 56 percent of women in Attappady were literate when compared to the literacy rates of the general population where 96 percent of men and 92 percent of women were literate. This data shows that despite the government's schemes of education reformation in Attappady for the tribes not much progress has been achieved as various socio-economic factors still affect their capability for availing these schemes. Moreover even after they are educated they resort to some governmental jobs which again distance them from their traditional knowledge of primitive cultivation, native healing and ecological sustenance.

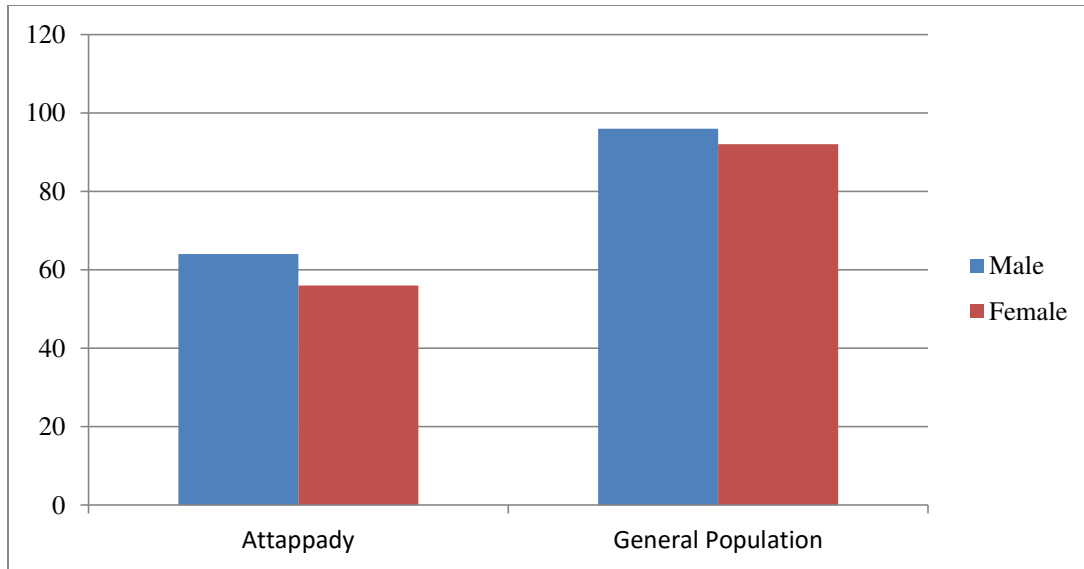


Fig.3 Literacy Rates: A Comparison. Source: KILA 2008 and Census 2011 as cited in “Tragedy Unfolding: Tribal Children Dying in Attappady,” (2014 January 11) *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. - XLIX No. 2.

### Conclusion

The government’s tribal reform is based on an attempt to make the tribes, a part of mainstream in everything right from culture to lifestyle. Already irreparable damage in tribal life has been incurred due to the poor vision and lack of proper planning and some tribes are facing dangers of extinction. The civilization that we believe as ours, itself is paradoxical along these lines. The need to act fast deciding on the altering perspectives and bringing out diversity in education is the need of the hour.

### Recommendations

- a) Study of Ecology and educating the tribes- the need for ecological sustenance including farming.
- b) Preserving cultural implications and attaching scientific perspectives to the same.
- c) Preserving indigenous Languages and rescue mechanism like native healing
- d) The proper implementation of the Forests Development Act whereby the *Adivasis* or Scheduled Tribes are preferred for land allocation.
- e) The focus need be laid on agriculture and cultivation and not on dwellings and buildings.
- f) A suitable market for promoting rare forest goods can be developed whereby they get some resources/ financial aid as well.
- g) Promoting Sustained Tourism, ensuring minimum damage to ecology and culture preservation, allowing minimum cultural infiltration to happen.
- h) Promoting education- indigenous and modern practices with a higher end to the indigenous education.
- i) Promoting native healers with lots of schemes and allowing further research in the area inspecting the scope of productive assimilation of their practices into the mainstream treatment techniques, if possible.

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