

# Sustainable Tourism And Tribal Livelihoods: A Study Of The Nilgiris District

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## Abstract

*"Take only memories, leave only footprints."*

*This well-known proverb best describes sustainable tourism, which is essential for maintaining the world's natural and cultural heritage while stimulating local economies. This research examines the nexus of tribal livelihoods and sustainable tourism in the Nilgiris District of Tamil Nadu, a place where ecological diversity is high and indigenous cultures are very much alive. Based on secondary data, the paper examines the socio-economic conditions of the tribes, their participation in tourism presently, and opportunities for inclusive and community-based tourism development. The research indicates that although most tribal livelihoods continue to be based on primary sector activities like agriculture and forest product gathering, there is increasing interest and potential for engagement in tourism services. The research points to the imperative of sustainable models of tourism that are responsive to tribal identities and culture, and that provide economic opportunities and capacity building. On the basis of the analysis, the paper recommends policy suggestions intended to encourage tribal-led tourism programs, village-centric tourism areas, and equitable development strategies balancing preservation of culture with economic development*

**Keywords:** Sustainable Tourism, tribal-led tourism, socio-economic conditions, economic development

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## I. Introduction

Sustainable tourism, through the reduction of environmental degradation, encouragement of green practices, and sensitivity to local customs, guarantees that destinations flourish for generations to come. It empowers communities, discourages overconsumption, and promotes genuine travel experiences that are rewarding for both guests and hosts. As the world becomes more travelled, sustainability is no longer a choice—it's a mandate to preserve our world and its rich cultures for generations to come.

Nilgiris is well known for its scenic beauty and also a home to numerous flora and fauna. It is a known fact that they are also home to tribes and other people too. With its scenic beauty comes the problem of environmental degradation and issues of sustainability.

Nilgiris are inhabited by six native tribes—the Todas, Kotas, Paniyas, Kurumbas, Irulas and Kattunayakans that contribute significantly to sustainable tourism by maintaining their distinctive cultural heritage alongside providing immersive experiences.

By involving tourists in their sustainable livelihood activities—such as organic farming and conservation—these groups not only earn money but also protect their traditional knowledge, thereby becoming an integral part of sustainable tourism in the Nilgiris. Their involvement guarantees that tourism benefits the travelers and local communities alike while preserving the region's ecological and cultural heritage for generations to come.

## II. Objectives

1. To study the socio-economic status of the tribal communities in the Nilgiris District.
2. To study the contribution of tribal communities towards promoting and engaging in sustainable tourism.
3. In order to formulate policy suggestions to increase tribal participation in tourism with emphasis on sustainability and equitable development.

## III. Literature Review

Vasanthi (2012)<sup>[1]</sup> examined the primary reasons drawing tourists to the Nilgiris, including climate and natural beauty. While enlightening for planning tourism, the study does not consider the influence of tribal communities, reflecting an omission in inclusive tourism development of local cultures.

Selva Kumar and Siva Kumar (2014) <sup>[2]</sup> compared the socio-economic status of tribal groups in the Nilgiris, and the findings showed inequality in income, education, and service accessibility. Although the research identifies major issues, it does not consider tourism as a tool for improving livelihood, which implies a gap for investigating sustainable tourism as a development option.

Dhivya and Kalaichelvi (2016) <sup>[3]</sup> reported the ethnomedicinal practices of the Irula tribes in the Nilgiris, highlighting their traditional knowledge richness. Although the research promotes cultural conservation, it does not investigate how these practices might be used to promote eco- or cultural tourism, indicating a lost opportunity for integrating sustainable tourism.

Sujeetha and Ashokan (2022) <sup>[4]</sup> explored conventional animal husbandry practices of Nilgiris tribes, where sustainable and effective indigenous practices were emphasized. Yet, the study does not attribute these traditions to tourism livelihoods, and therefore, there may be scope to integrate them in community-based tourism.

Krithika, Pradeepa, and Senthilkumar (2025) <sup>[5]</sup> examined how Toda and Kota tribes sustainably use local bioresources. While the study highlights valuable traditional practices, it does not link them to tourism, suggesting potential for integrating indigenous knowledge into eco-tourism.

Hemasrikumar and Anjali (2025) <sup>[6]</sup> studies the trend of tourism in Nilgiris district using secondary data sources and also analyses the impact of this tourism on infrastructure development but they did not focus on tribals or sustainable tourism.

#### IV. Methodology

**Study area:** The Nilgiris is a hill area of 2549.0 sq.kms was chosen for the study which is located between 11° 10' and 11° 30'N latitude and between 76° 25' and 77° 00'E longitude at the junction of the Eastern and Western Ghats in Tamil Nadu in the country India is a well-known tourist location to especially when the scorching heat of the summer hits the lower altitude areas of Tamil Nadu. The Nilgiris is bounded by Kerala in the West, Karnataka in the North and Coimbatore in the Southeast.

**Data:** This study primarily relied on **secondary data** collected from various credible sources. These include the **Census of India (2011)**, **National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) 68th Round (2011–12)**, **Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Reports (2017–2022)**, and publications from the **Tamil Nadu Tribal Welfare Department**. While secondary data provides a broad overview and is valuable for understanding demographic and economic patterns, it is important to acknowledge its inherent **limitations**, such as potential time lags, lack of specific local variables, and standardization issues across datasets.

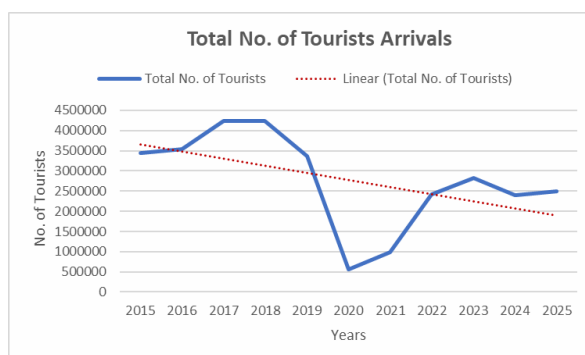
#### Analysis & Findings

##### Tourism trends in Nilgiris

**Table: 5.1.1 Tourist Arrivals in Nilgiris District (2015–2024)**

Year	No. of Domestic Tourists	No. of Domestic Tourists	Total No. of Tourists
2015	3431191	3419	3434610
2016	3533191	3616	3536807
2017	4235910	4024	4239934
2018	4235910	4366	4240276
2019	3335010	36077	3371087
2020	548069	6860	554929
2021	990333	0	990333
2022	2410848	617	2411465
2023	2814854	2535	2817389
2024	2401516	5204	2406720
2025	2501231	4002	2505233

*Source: Tamil Nadu Tourism Cooperation*



**Fig: 5.1:** The Line chart presents the trend line of Tourist arrivals in Nilgiris

From *Table: 5.1.1* we can infer that tourist visits to Nilgiris varied between 2015 and 2019, reaching a peak in 2017 and dropping in 2019, perhaps due to economic and policy issues. There was a drop in 2020 due to COVID-19, which hugely affected tourism. While there was a consistent recovery between 2021 and 2023, the drop in 2024 indicates volatility in the recovery pattern. From *Fig: 5.1* we get to know the linear trend line which shows a general downward trend in tourist visits, which implies long-term sustainability issues for the business.

The pre-2020 era reflected relative stability, but the post-2020 recession disrupted development, and attempts at revival have not yet achieved pre-pandemic levels. Policymakers need to prioritize infrastructure development, undertaking more aggressive promotion efforts, and long-term tourism policy to entice and retain tourists in a bid to reverse the trend.

## Socio-Economic Indicators of Nilgiris Tribes

**Table: 5.2. 1 The Socio-Economic Status of The Tribes**

TRIBE	LITERACY RATE (%)	WPR* (%)	MALE WPR (%)	FEMALE WPR (%)	OCCUPATIONAL PROFILE
TODAS	67.2 (highest)	48.3	58.1	38.5	42% Pastoralism, 28% Govt services, 20% Tourism, 10% Agricultural labor
KOTAS	54.8	51.2	60.3	42.1	35% Artisan work, 40% Agricultural labor, 15% Tourism crafts, 10% Wage labor
KURUMBAS	39.4	53.7	61.2	46.2	60% NTFP** collection, 25% Agricultural labor, 10% Tourism guides, 5% Traditional healing
IRULAS	47.6	56.2	63.8	48.6	30% Snake rescue, 45% Agricultural labor, 15% Eco-tourism, 10% Construction
PANIYAS	34.9	58.3	65.1	51.5	70% Agricultural labor, 15% Tea plantations, 10% NTFP, 5% Tourism
KATTUNAYAKANS	29.7 (lowest)	59.8	67.2	52.4	55% NTFP/Hunting, 30% Forest labor, 10% Tourism, 5% Traditional crafts

\*WPR: Work Participation Rate

\*\*NTFP: Non-Timber Forest Product

From *Table: 5.2. 1* we find that The Work Participation Rate (WPR) of tribal groups in the Nilgiris is distinguishable in many ways. Kattunayakans have the highest WPR of 59.8%, closely followed by Paniyas (58.3%), Irulas (56.2%), and Kurumbas (53.7%), indicating their active engagement in income-generating, labor-intensive livelihood activities such as agriculture, work in forests, and NTFP gathering. Kotas exhibit moderate involvement at 51.2%, and the Todas record the lowest WPR (48.3%), perhaps because they have a more pastoral existence and depend on government services. In general, higher WPRs indicate increased economic involvement but may also indicate subsistence-based employment out of necessity.

From *Table: 5.2. 1* we also come to know that the Tourism Dependence varies accordingly: Todas (20%) > Irulas (15%) > Kotas (15%) > Kurumbas (10%) > Kattunayakans (10%) > Paniyas (5%)  
So, here we can easily state that Todas have the maximum dependency on tourism and Paniyas the least.

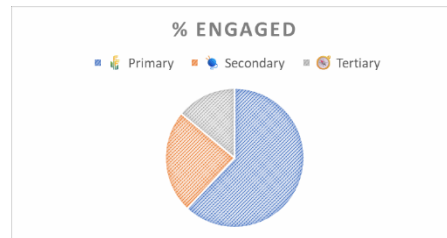
## Key Findings from NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) (68th Round) & PLFS (Periodic Labour Force Survey):

On studying the NSSO and PLFS reports of recent years we can come to certain conclusions as mentioned below:

### 1. Income Disparities

- **Average Monthly Income (by Tribe):**
  - ₹6,800 – Todas (Highest)
  - ₹3,200 – Kattunayakans (Lowest)
- **78% of tribal households earn less than ₹5,000/month (PLFS 2017–18)**

### 2. Sectoral Employment Distribution



**Fig: 5.3.1:** Shows the Sectoral-wise Employment Distribution among the Tribes of Nilgiris District

Fig: 5.3.1 shows that most (62%) of the tribals in Nilgiris depend on the primary sector, that is, on agriculture and forest-based occupations, indicating a high reliance on nature. Approximately 24% are found in the secondary sector, including crafts and building materials, whereas merely 14% are in the tertiary sector, including tourism and cultural activities. This highlights the limited but growing role of tourism in tribal livelihoods and indicates potential for expanding sustainable, community-based tourism to diversify income and reduce dependence on forest resources.

## V. Recommendations:

### 1. Literacy & Cultural Tourism Potential

- Todas (67.2% literacy) vs Kattunayakans (29.7%)
- High-Literacy Tribes (Todas/Kotas):
- Training them as cultural interpreters for heritage walks (UNESCO, 2019)
- Better positioned to manage homestay registrations (MoTA(Ministry of Tribal Affairs) homestay scheme)
- Low-Literacy Tribes (Kattunayakans/Paniyas):
- Need visual/audio tools for visitor education
- Priority for verbal storytelling tourism models

### Policy Implication:

*"To Tailor tourism training programs to tribe-specific literacy levels"*

### 2. Occupation-Based Tourism Products

**Table 6.1: Tribal Occupation and Future Sustainable Options**

TRIBE	CURRENT OCCUPATION	SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ADAPTATION
KURUMBAS	NTFP (60%)	Medicinal plant trails (WHO guidelines)
IRULAS	Snake rescue (30%)	Wildlife safety workshops
PANIYAS	Farm labor (70%)	Organic farm-to-table experiences (FSSAI eco-tourism)

### Case Example:

On understanding Table 6.1 we can compare it with this example *Kurumbas' honey harvesting → "Bee Tourism" increasing income by 40% without overharvesting (NTFP Exchange, 2022)*

### 3. WPR & Community-Led Tourism

Kattunayakans (WPR 59.8%) engage mostly in informal labor

#### Solution:

- Convert high WPR into regulated forest guide roles (MSTrIP (Monitoring System for Tigers - Intensive Protection and Ecological Status) scheme, MoEFCC (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change ))
- Cooperative model: 5 Kattunayakan hunters = 1 certified eco-tourism unit

#### Data-Backed Benefit:

*Similar models in Periyar Tiger Reserve increased tribal incomes by 65% while reducing poaching (WII, 2020)*

### 4. Income Disparities & Equitable Tourism

#### Problem:

- ₹3,200 (Kattunayakans) vs ₹6,800 (Todas) monthly income

#### Solution

- Cross-subsidy: 20% premium from Toda homestays funds Kattunayakan forest guides

- • WTO-approved "Solidarity Tourism" certification

**Evidence:**

*Kerala's "Thenmala Model" reduced tribal income gap by 32% through revenue-sharing (KITTS, 2018)*

**5. Village Living**

There needs to be active encouragement by policymakers for village-focused tourism models under which tribal people receive a manageable number of visitors in specially established areas within villages. This mechanism enables tourists to experience genuine, real-time contacts with tribal cultures, ways of life, traditions, and green practices.

All this is while maintaining community privacy, avoiding the dilution of culture, ensuring small-scale and respectful tourism that is environmentally conscious. Capacity development programs, community guidelines, and monitoring systems have to be fashioned to enable effective support for the model.

**VI. Conclusion**

The Nilgiris District offers a special case to combine sustainable tourism with tribal socio-economic development. This study, drawing on secondary data, brings out the current reliance of tribal populations on primary sector activity and the modest but increasing involvement in tourism-related services. Tourism can diversify tribal livelihoods and support local economies, but it has to be undertaken with cultural sensitivity, ecological responsibility, and inclusive planning.

The research emphasizes the need for community-based models of tourism that empower tribal communities as stakeholders and not mere passive recipients. Tourism at the village level, skill upgradation, and supportive policy environments can help narrow the gap between traditional existence and contemporary economic opportunities. For tourism to be genuinely sustainable, it should not only safeguard the natural and cultural heritage of the Nilgiris but also ensure that the gains are felt by the communities that have conserved these assets over generations.

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