

Forest, Livelihood, and Culture: A Study of the Jenu Kuruba Tribe

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ABSTRACT

Tribals are often viewed as primitive people, living socially as a homogeneous group with their own culture, distinct subsistence patterns, customs, superstitions, and unique lifestyles, often in isolation from outside influences. Forests are closely tied to their economy and culture. Today, modernization and forest laws impact their livelihoods and traditions. The most backward tribes are classified as 'Primitive Tribes,' characterized by low literacy levels, declining populations, limited technological access, and severe economic challenges. The Jenu Kuruba tribes are one of the vulnerable tribal groups residing in Karnataka. This study aims to examine the socio-demographic conditions of the Jenu Kuruba tribe and the role of forest resources in shaping their economic life, cultural practices, and belief systems. Through observations, interviews, and discussions with 89 Jenu Kuruba families in H.D Kote Taluka of Mysuru district, the research highlights their struggles for identity, livelihood, and the socio-economic issues faced by the Jenu Kuruba tribe in the study area.

Keywords: Jenu Kuruba Tribe, PVTGs, Livelihood, Forest Resources, Cultural Practices, Karnataka, Sustainable Development

Introduction

India has one of the largest tribal populations in the world. Prior to the adoption of the Indian Constitution, tribes were variously called aboriginals, adivasis, forest tribes, hill tribes, primitive tribes, etc. (Kumar, 2015). Livelihood and socio-economic development in backward areas, particularly among tribal peoples living in hilly, forest, and rural regions of Karnataka, have been advancing through tribal community development. The state of Karnataka has made significant progress in agriculture and related activities, industry, education, science, technology, human development, and media management, among other areas of development in rural regions. Another important aspect highlighted by the state is the necessity and significance of tribal development during the post-independence period. The belief system of the Jenu Kuruba revolves around their connection with the woods, their animals, and their deities residing in the forest. They gather medicine, honey, fruits, vegetables, tubers, as well as thatch and bamboo for constructing their houses (Khyat, n.d.). The Jenu Kuruba tribe is a notable forest-dwelling community in Karnataka that is classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), as they are socio-economically marginalized and highly dependent on natural resources (Xaxa, 2008). "Jenu" in Kannada means honey, and "Kuruba" refers to shepherds, as their occupation involves honey collection and forest-based livelihood (Heggade, 2012). The Jenu Kurubas have traditionally lived in and around the forests of the Mysuru, Kodagu, and Chamarajanagar districts, particularly on the outskirts of the Western Ghats and within reserves, including Bandipur and Nagarhole (Sundar, 2016).

Their occupational activity is closely related to the forest ecosystem, which comprises collecting honey, minor forest produce, shifting cultivation, and wage labor. They are not purely economic practices but are also cultural and influence their rituals, social organization, and ecological knowledge (Gadgil and Guha, 1992). Nonetheless, these traditional ways of life have been greatly affected by the introduction of forest conservation laws, displacement, modernization, and so on (Ramesh, 2019).

Understanding the forest-based lifestyle and traditional practices of the Jenu Kuruba tribe is crucial to addressing issues of displacement, preserving identity, and promoting sustainable development. This paper aims to explore the connection between forest, livelihood, and culture among the Jenu Kurubas, making it relevant to tribal rights and development efforts in India overall.

Review of Literature

Pradeep M.D. and Kalicharan M.L. (2016) analyze the way of life of the Jenu Kuruba tribes, who are organized laborers in Karnataka. It highlights their socio-economic status, cultural orientation, settlement patterns, and issues related to modernization. The study shows the impact of forest dependency, eviction caused by developmental projects, and forest laws on their livelihood. Problems such as illiteracy, poor health, superstitions, and alcoholism still persist, and welfare programs and NGO interventions offer some relief. The paper emphasizes that education, healthcare, and integration policies are essential for tribal empowerment.

Ashok Kumar H. (2015) in his study on the socio-economic status of Jenu Kuruba tribes in Mysore district highlights their educational backwardness, low income, and dependence on agricultural labour. The study focuses on the involvement of women in the Panchayat Raj Institutions, which has enhanced their social identity and empowerment. Results indicate that family background, education, and political interest influence women's participation. Poverty, illiteracy, and marginalisation remain challenges despite government efforts, and therefore, tribal welfare and inclusive development require targeted interventions.

Rajashekhara S. (2018) studied the livelihood issues of resettled Jenu Kuruba tribes in the Masthi Gudi Rehabilitation Centre in Mysuru district. The research found that their traditional honey-controlling and forest-based subsistence was disturbed because of their dislocation by the Wildlife Protection Act. The migration caused economic difficulties, as the land allocated was not suitable for farming, and many of them resorted to migrant labor. The study also observed cultural erosion, alcoholism, religious conversions, and the decline of traditional practices. It notes that it is important to have sustainable livelihood opportunities and rehabilitation policies that are sensitive to culture.

Nagendra N. (2024) examined the socio-economic background of the Jenukuruba people, a tribe residing in Karnataka, their cultural identity, reliance on forests, and the challenges they face in contemporary society. The study, based on surveys conducted on 100 households in Mysuru and Chamarajanagar, found high illiteracy (48%), nuclear families (94%), and dependence on agricultural labor (64%). Families have yearly incomes per capita below 20000 rupees, indicating extreme poverty. Even with government interventions, low income, lack of livelihood diversification, and poor education remain prevalent, highlighting the need for targeted developmental efforts and cultural preservation.

Significance of the Study

This study focuses on the complex relationship between forest, livelihood, and culture among the Jenu Kuruba tribe, one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of Karnataka. The Jenu Kurubas have traditionally relied on forests to collect honey, food, and other small forest products, making their identity and livelihood closely connected to nature. However, their traditional way of life has been disrupted by displacement, restrictive forest laws, and modernization, forcing them to adopt questionable livelihoods such as agricultural labor and migration. This study is important because it highlights the socio-economic and cultural issues faced by the community amid these changes. It provides valuable insights for policymakers, especially when designing development programs that are culturally sensitive by documenting their traditional lifestyles, facilitating their transition to modern ways, and helping them adapt their culture. It also underscores the importance of balancing conservation efforts with the rights of indigenous peoples, ensuring sustainable survival, and empowering the Jenu Kuruba tribe.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the socio-demographic profile of the Jenukurba tribe in the study area.
2. To analyze the role of forest resources in shaping the community's economic life, cultural practices, and belief systems.

Methodology of the Study

The study adopts a descriptive research design to understand the socio-demographic and cultural belief systems shaped by the forest resources of the Jenu Kuruba tribe. The research was conducted in H.D. Kote Taluk of Mysuru district, specifically in Bavali Hadi, Manimule Hadi, and Anemaale Hadi villages. Primary data were collected through field surveys, in-depth interviews with Jenu Kuruba people, focus group discussions with men and women, and participant observation. Secondary data were sourced from government reports, tribal welfare records, census data, and academic studies. A purposive sampling method was employed, covering 89 households, ensuring representation of different age groups, occupations, and family structures.

Area of the Study

One of the ecologically diverse and demographically important areas in the southern part of Karnataka, known for its proximity to Mysuru city, is the Heggadadevana Kote (H.D. Kote) taluk, which is about 55 km southwest of the city. The taluk, covering 1,895 sq. km, lies within the transition zone between the Mysuru plains and the Western Ghats' forest ecosystem, featuring topography shaped by the Kabini River, Kabini Reservoir, and the forests of Bandipur National Park and Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, all part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. A notable feature of H.D. Kote is the high concentration of Scheduled Tribe (ST) populations, who now live in

small hamlets (hadis) near the forest edges or in rehabilitation colonies established after displacement in protected areas. This ecological diversity and tribal density are distinctly different, making H.D. Kote a crucial region for studying issues related to livelihood, displacement, conservation, and government policies on development.

Results and Discussion

Scio- Demographic Profile of the Jenu Kuruba Tribe

Jenu Kuruba live in their own language while building huts in forest areas. They have developed their own healthcare practices and live close to nature in large numbers in Karnataka, particularly in the districts of Chamarajanagar, Mysuru, and Kodagu. They reside in small huts made of bamboo and tree bark. Their livelihood comes from preparing and selling herbal medicines. Additional income sources include basket weaving, mat weaving, and making and selling household utensils. Beekeepers mainly rely on crafts like honey collection, managing shifting cultivation, and making bamboo items for their livelihood.

Table 1.1 Socio-economic Characteristics

Characteristics	Categories	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Gender	Male	57	64.05
	Female	32	35.95
Age- Group	Below 15	4	4.50
	15 to 25 Years	21	23.58
	25 to 35 Years	24	27
	35 to 45 Years	27	30.32
	45 and Above	13	14.60
Religion	Hindu	82	92.13
	Christian	7	7.87
Area	Anemala Hadi	37	41.5
	Bavali Hadi	38	43.2
	Maanimule Hadi	8	8.5
	Goluru Hadi	6	6.8
Residential	Forest	70	78.65
	Village	19	21.35
Nature of Housing	Hutt	62	69.67
	Ties roofed	24	27
	RCC	3	3.33
Type of Family	Nuclear Family	63	70.78
	Joint Family	26	29.22
Type of Ration Card	BPL	76	85.40
	AY	4	4.50
	No Ration Card	9	10.1
Education Level	Illiterates	27	30.34
	Primary	38	42.69
	High school	16	17.98
	PUC/ITI/Diploma	5	5.62
	Degree	2	2.25
	Post-graduation	1	1.12
Total		89	100

Source: Field work

The socio-economic information of 89 respondents provides a clear picture of their demographic and living conditions. Regarding gender, males make up 64.05 percent (57) and females 35.95 percent (32). Age distribution indicates that, 4.50 percent (4) of the respondents are below 15 years, 23.58 percent (21) years 15-25 years old, 27 percent (24) old are 25-35 years, 30.32 percent (27) are 35-45, 14.60 percent (13) old above 45. The highest percentage is the 25-45 age group which is 57.32 percent (51). This means that middle-aged members are the ones that will be evaluated when it comes to economic survival.

In terms of religion, 92.13 percent (82) are practitioners of Hinduism whereas only 7.87 percent (7) are Christians and this indicates continuity of culture with slight foreign impact. The pattern of settlements indicates that Bavali Hadi has 43.2 percent (38), Anemala Hadi 41.5 percent (37), Maanimule Hadi 8.5 percent

(8) and Goluru Hadi 6.8 percent (6). This unbalanced distribution indicates the fact that there are more populous and resourceful hadades and those that are small and separated.

Restricting to the residential data, it is emphasized that 78.65 percent (70) of all persons live in forests, and 21.35 percent (19) live in villages. Dependency on forests gives life, yet limits access to schools, health and government facilities. The housing conditions are also a sign of poverty: 69.67 percent (62) are in huts, 27 percent (24) in tiled houses, and only 3.33 percent (3) in RCC houses.

The family structure indicates that 70.78 percent (63) are lived in nuclear families and 29.22 percent (26) live in joint families. The migration and the modernization of society entail the transformation into nuclear families and undermine the traditional kinship. Economic vulnerability is confirmed by the data regarding ration cards: 85.40 percent (76) Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards, 4.50 percent (4) Antyodaya (AY) cards and 10.1 percent (9) without ration card.

The levels of education are deplorable. Illiterates constitute 30.34 percent (27), primary education 42.69 percent (38), high school 17.98 percent (16), PUC/ITI /Diploma 5.62 percent (5), degree 2.25 percent (2), and post-graduation only 1.12 percent (1). Almost a third of them is illiterate, or at best has primary education.

Social life

The Jenu Kuruba have a cooperative spirit and hold exemplary values such as coexistence, harmony, and selflessness. They live a life of kinship, sharing their pains and sufferings, respecting the elders and advising the younger ones. Everyone participates in all kinds of activities in each household in Hadi. Jenu Kuruba adhere to their traditional practices. If they experience any health problems, they treat their ailments using herbal medicines prescribed by their elders, rather than seeking medical attention.

The Jenu Kuruba know how to identify every plant and tree in the forest. Their innocence in explaining the reasons for worshipping certain specific trees as divine trees and their backgrounds is remarkable. We experienced that their love for the forest and their connection with the forest is inseparable. Javarayya and Thimmaiya would show us the places where they used to live in the past and also show us some traces as evidence of it. The gods they worshipped, the fallen coconut trees. The broken mud walls. The shards of broken pottery were evidence of their past settlement. The marking stones planted by their masters in the past reminded us of their ancestral identity.

Marital relationship

The concept of insiders and outsiders can be seen in the family life of the beekeepers. Among the family members, the husband, wife and unmarried children are considered 'insiders'. Married children are considered 'outsiders' as they have established their own bases. In the family system of the honey Jenu kurubas, as children get married, they live with their parents for a while, and then after the other members of the family get married, they build separate houses to support their families and live there, responding to the joys and sorrows of their parents. If all the children of the daughter, husband and son live in the same house, the mother-in-law is not allowed to see or talk to the mother-in-law.

In the tradition of the honey Jenu kurubas, there was a custom of marrying only blood relatives within their tribe, which was called 'in-tribe marriage'. In recent times, when they get married, they are marrying people from other families other than their blood relatives within their tribe. This custom is called 'out-tribe marriage'. If a boy and a girl fall in love with each other, they talk and run away from the village. After they return, they start a new life according to the custom of remaining united till the end, adhering to the verdict given by the master. Then both of them are married. No matter what type of marriage it is, the marriage is celebrated with great pomp by all the people.

Diet

Jenu kurubas are both vegetarian and non-vegetarian and eat simple food. In vegetarian diet, there is a practice of cooking and eating millet, yam, bamboo, bamboo rice, , coconut,. In addition, wild chilies are commonly used. Among the above, 'yam' is not only a favorite food of Jenu Kurubas, but also a nutritious food. yam is a type of tuber that grows in the hills. Poule is highly nutritious and is grown extensively in Kerala, Bandipur and Nagarhole. Some people eat it cooked and some make a paste from it. There is a high demand for 'chips' made from it in Kerala and Karnataka. In this regard, I came to know about its uses when I met several people during fieldwork.

Habitation of Jenu Kuruba



Figure: Jenu Kuruba House

A typical Jenu Kuruba settlement is a cluster of 10 to 15 huts surrounded by hilux inside the forest. The huts are rectangular in shape, built by bamboo slits, the wall is finished with supplementary packing and mud plastering from outside up to the height of 3 feet the the height wall is about 5 to 10 feet the breath about 8 feet and they frem rectanglular shape a slant roof is constructed and covered by the elephant grass the hut is divided by bamboo cottonthat marks the kichen the door of hut is verrysmall and one to creep to enter inside the house. Attike House (Attike Mane) During the fieldwork, the researcher observed that among the Jenu Kuruba in the interior forest, they sometimes come and destroy it. There is a treat for the tiger and elephant. Sometimes there is a treat from the tiger and elephants. They may kill Jenu Kuruba, that's why they have constructed the house on the three.

Traditional Occupation of the Jenu Kuruba Tribe

Traditional Occupation of the Jenu Kuruba is collection of Honey they can locate the direction and the probable size of honey comb just by wacting the direction of movement of honey bees, they can also know whether the bees are going back after collecting honey the concept of bee incorporated in folk songs “ Honey bee you are coming one direction” you going any direction while coming back to come they are come alone from any direction that is basic concept of honey bees, here you can se the jenu kuruba tribes.

Jenu Kuruba's Relation with the Forest

The Jenu Kuruba tribe's relationship with the forest is like having a kin relationship. The forest is like their brother and sister; they are born together. For generations, they have been living together as one family. The separation or removal from the forest causes us pain that has lasted generations. We have protected the forest plants and birds, as is evident from the British period, when they also had a cordial relationship with the forest. We have also lived happily without harming the forest; our way of life is still entirely based on forest produce.

Poverty and Migration

In a forest, Jenu Kuruba make their food by gathering food in the forest, collecting herbs, hunting, and collecting honey. They do not give priority to money. As the saying goes, 'I will stretch my legs as far as the bed can go', the money they have is limited only to the business of the day. They are very poor and cannot afford to send their children to school, let alone spend money on it. Also, if their son goes to school to study, they go to work and take care of the house. Who? They estimate that if a child deadicates his school time to work, he will earn four paisa.

Jenu Kuruba migrates to different places to earn a living. Be it to the coffee estates of Kodagu, to manage the gardens of wealthy families, or to work in higher-paying jobs, they go to different places. In the meantime, they do not bother about their children's schooling or education, except to talk to them lovingly and send them off happily.

Ignorance of government benefits

Jenu Kuruba is not aware of the benefits they are getting from the government. Therefore, there is a need to create awareness regarding this issue. Similarly, many organizations are working for this cause. The government needs to inform the people about the benefits that children get by enrolling them in school. What are the benefits of education? It can be observed that many schemes, benefits, and grants reserved for them are not reaching them but are going to the rich and officials of the town.

Findings of the Study

- The study found that the Jenukuruba tribe is gradually transforming its economic position as it commutes to get jobs. The majority of the Jenukurubas are employed as laborers, coffee workers in Coorg district, as shop assistants, hospital attendants, auto rickshaw drivers, forest watchers, etc.
- The paper found that the Jenu Kuruba tribe believes in the forest as their family and maintains an extended family relationship that reflects their identity, way of livelihood, and continuity of their culture, and that the displacement creates both lasting pain and disturbance in their peaceful coexistence.
- The study reveals that Jenu Kuruba family life is a differentiating factor between the insiders and outsiders, balancing tradition and change, where the marriage practices are no longer in-tribe marriage but alliances, without losing the communal celebration and communal responsibility.

To sum up

The story of the Jenu Kuruba tribe goes beyond just forests, subsistence, and cultural practices; it reflects themes of resilience, identity, and survival. For centuries, the forest has been their mother figure, teacher, and protector, shaping every part of their lives. The tribe's songs, spiritual beliefs, and traditions are deeply connected to the sounds and rhythms of the wilderness, creating a close bond that modern society often overlooks. Today, however, they face a difficult crossroads struggling to protect their cultural heritage while dealing with complex challenges like displacement, poverty, and social exclusion. The gradual loss of their forest habitat is not just an ecological disaster but a deep blow to their collective spirit. As we listen to their stories, we remember that protecting the Jenu Kuruba is not just about saving an indigenous group; it's about honoring our oldest connection to the natural world. Their resilience is a shared responsibility, and their struggles call us to reflect on our ethical duty.

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