

BEYOND TRADITION: HOW MALAYALI TRIBAL WOMEN IN TAMIL NADU, ARE REDEFINING THEIR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Tribal communities in India have historically maintained relatively equitable gender roles, with women playing central parts in agriculture, household management, and cultural transmission. However, factors such as expanding education, industrialisation, government welfare schemes, and Self-Help Group formation have reshaped the roles and responsibilities of tribal women in recent decades. This study examines the nature and extent of social change among Malayali tribal women in Dharmapuri District, Tamil Nadu, using a "Then and Now" comparative approach. An ex-post facto research design was adopted, and 120 respondents were purposively selected from Sitheri and Sitlingi villages, known for undergoing notable socio-economic and cultural transformation. Data were collected through a pre-tested structured interview schedule and analysed using frequency, percentage, mean, and rank-based descriptive statistics. Findings reveal a shift from farming-dependent livelihoods to diversified income sources, increased participation in education and Self-Help Groups, greater institutional dependence in resource management, and a decline in physically demanding household tasks. Respondents expressed largely favourable attitudes toward social change, particularly valuing increased freedom of choice, though concerns emerged around declining health campaign participation and slower progress in higher education and leadership roles. Overall, the results indicate real and measurable transformation in the social, economic, and cultural lives of Malayali tribal women over time.

KEYWORDS: Tribal Women; Social Change; Livelihood Diversification; Women Empowerment; Modernization; Socio-Economic Development.

INTRODUCTION

The global indigenous population size is estimated to be in the range of 470-476 million people, accounting for a significant portion of the world's cultural and ecological diversity. As per the **Census of India (2011)**, the population of Scheduled Tribe (ST) in India is 10.45 crore, which is 8.6% of the total population of the country and has more than 730 recognised tribes. Higher concentration of Scheduled Tribes is located in Central and North-Eastern regions of the country, with nearly 90% of the tribal population residing in the rural areas. In Tamil Nadu, the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population is comparatively very low, i.e., 7,94,697 persons, which accounts for nearly 1.1% of the State's total population (**Census, 2011**). Among the scheduled tribes in the state, Malayali (also known as Malayali) is one of the prominent indigenous hill tribes in the state and the twenty-fifth in the list of scheduled tribes notified for Tamil Nadu. The name Malayali means the "people of the hills", derived from two Tamil words, Malai meaning "hill" and 'ali' or 'Yali' meaning "people or inhabitants" (**Thurston**). Malayalis have settled in the hill tracts only during the mid-eighteenth century from the plains. Indian tribal communities have rich cultures, customs and lifestyles; most of them are connected with nature and based on community living. Their major livelihood systems are mainly based on agriculture, forestry and community occupations (**Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2021**).

Historically, tribal societies have enjoyed comparatively more gender equality compared to many other parts of Indian society. Tribal women traditionally have played a significant role in managing the households, cultivating agricultural land, collecting forest products and conserving knowledge systems (**Kumar & Kumari, 2021**).

Although these tasks have continued, their roles and responsibilities have expanded much in recent times and contribute to household income generation activities, welfare, transmission of culture to the younger generation, and active participation in the household and community decision-making (**Desai & Andrist, 2021**).

However, the last few decades witnessed the rapid and dynamic change in the role and life pattern of tribal women due to several institutional, social and economic changes. Factors like expanded educational opportunities, influence of industrialisation, modernisation, urbanisation, Government welfare programs, formation of SHGs, and livelihood diversification have deeply influenced their traditional life (**World Bank, 2023**).

Recent studies have documented these changes from different perspectives. **Sujeetha (2015)** reported that tribal women perform multiple responsibilities in agriculture, livestock rearing, household management, and childcare, while their workload has increased due to financial constraints and limited access to resources.

Bhattacharya and Murmu (2019) observed that although tribal women make substantial contributions to household welfare and subsistence activities, they continue to have limited control over social and material resources.

Similarly, **Lindberg, Athreya, and Djurfeldt (2007)** highlighted that women's participation in local governance institutions and Self-Help Groups has improved their access to credit, income-generating opportunities, and community participation.

Bhuvaneswari (2020) further emphasized the important role of women in sustainable development, particularly through their traditional knowledge systems and close association with natural resources.

More recent studies have shown that social and economic transformations have further strengthened the position of tribal women. **Ranjithkumar and Dimitrov (2023)** reported that tribal women continue to face socio-economic and gender-related challenges despite welfare programmes and legal safeguards, which influence their changing roles and responsibilities.

Manna (2024) found that increased participation in income-generating activities has enhanced women's decision-making roles within households and communities.

Krishnakumari et al. (2025) highlighted that education has significantly improved tribal women's participation in governance, public discussions, and economic activities, thereby transforming traditional family hierarchies.

Likewise, **Mallick et al. (2025)** demonstrated that participation in Self-Help Groups has promoted financial independence, improved savings behaviour, expanded employment opportunities, and increased social participation among tribal women.

Despite these valuable contributions, most of the existing studies have focused on the socio-economic status, empowerment, livelihood, or role performance of tribal women in different geographical settings. Limited region-specific empirical evidence is available on the nature and extent of social change among Malayali tribal women in Dharmapuri District of Tamil Nadu, particularly from a comparative analysis of decadal change through a "Then and Now" perspective. Therefore, the research attempts to examine changes in their social structure, lifestyle, decision-making authority, and socio-economic status using the "Then and Now" approach.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted in the year 2026 in Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu. The district was purposively selected based on the Census of India (2011), which reports a significant concentration of the Malayali tribe in the hilly and semi-forest regions of the district. The Malayali tribe comprises one of the largest tribal communities in Tamil Nadu. Though limited studies have examined the Malayali tribe, research specifically focusing on tribal women within this community remains absent. This gap in the literature formed the primary rationale for selecting Dharmapuri district and focusing the study on Malayali tribal women in two villages Sitheri and Sitlingi, of this district. These villages were purposively selected as they are considered typical Malayali tribal settlements that have experienced notable socio-economic and cultural transitions in recent years. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 120 Malayali tribal women from the study villages. The selected women were actively engaged in household, agricultural, economic, and social activities, and were articulate enough to express their perceptions of social change and aspirations. Primary data were collected through personal interviews using a pre-tested and structured interview schedule, and the secondary data were obtained from the Census of India (2011), reports of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of Tamil Nadu publications, district statistical abstracts, and scholarly articles, books, and journals.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

Results show clear socio-economic and cultural decadal changes among the respondents:

The occupational status of the tribal women provides a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of an individual and also sheds light on the feminisation in agriculture, the sectors in which they work, the type of work they do, the income they might receive, etc., which might have a dramatic effect on the economic growth of the country as well as familial income.

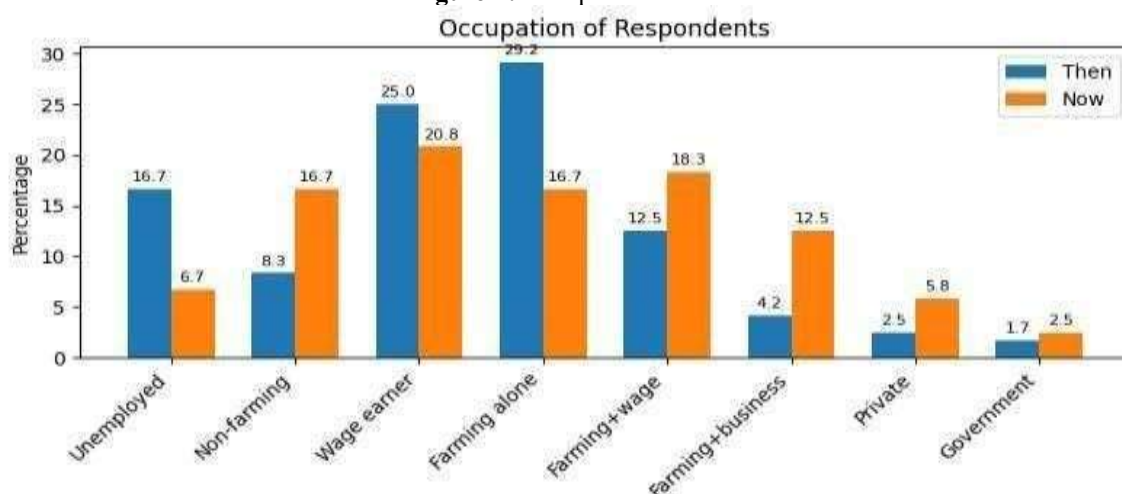
1. Occupational status

Table-1. Distribution of the respondents according to Occupation of the Respondents

S.No.	Particulars	Then (%)	Now (%)
1.	Unemployed	16.67	6.67

2.	Non-farming	8.33	16.67
3.	Wage earner	25.00	20.83
4.	Farming alone	29.17	16.67
5.	Farming + wage earner	12.50	18.33
6.	Farming + business	4.16	12.50
7.	Private sector	2.50	5.83
8.	Government sector	1.67	2.50
9.	Total	100.00	100.00

Figure-1. Occupational status



The findings indicate that before decade 16.70 Per cent of unemployed respondents decreased significantly to (6.70%) (Now), Shift Away from Farming Alone Farming as a sole occupation from (29.20%) (Then) to (16.70%) (Now). Farming + Business increased from (4.2% to 12.5%), Farming + Wage also increase from 8.3% to 12.5%, Growth in Non-farming Occupations Non-farming activities rose from 8.3% to 12.5%, highlighting a gradual shift toward alternative livelihood options beyond agriculture. Wage Earners The proportion of wage earners remained relatively stable, with a slight increase from 12.5% to 13.3%, suggesting continuity in this occupational category.

The results suggest clear changes from traditional farming toward diversified and mixed livelihood strategies. The reduction in unemployment and farming-alone categories, along with the rise in farming combined with business or wage activities, suggests that respondents are increasingly adopting multi-source income strategies to enhance economic resilience. This reflects broader socio-economic changes, including exposure to non-agricultural opportunities.

2. Contribution towards Social Institutions

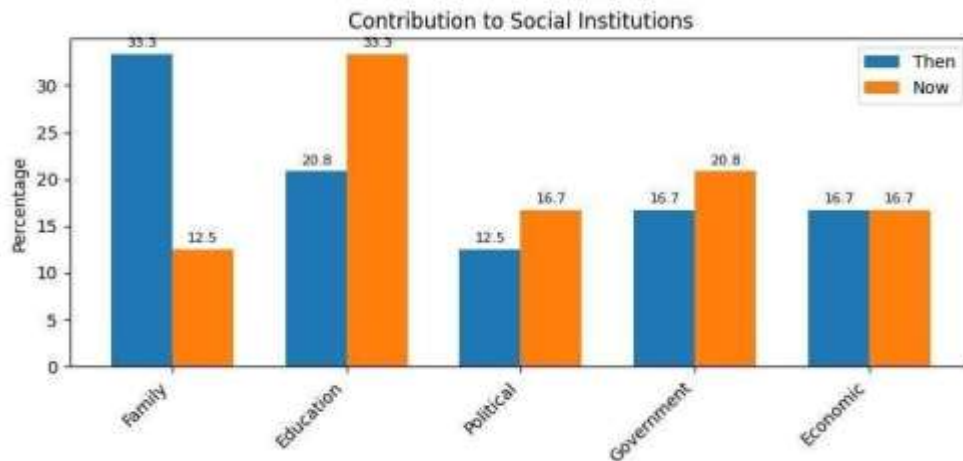
The social institution is one of the main sources of allotting roles and responsibilities to tribal women, and institutions like family, education, political, government and economic institutions are common types of institutions. The roles of tribal women across these institutions reflect both continuity and change.

Table-2. Distribution of the respondents according to contribution towards Social Institutions

S.No	Particulars	Then (%)	Now (%)
1.	Family	33.33	12.50

2.	Education	20.83	33.33
3.	Political	12.50	16.67
4.	Government	16.67	20.83
5.	Economic	16.67	16.67
6.	Total	100.00	100.00

Figure-2. Contribution to social Institutions



The findings reveal that out of the five institutions, except family remaining all the institution contribution was increased: education from 20.80 per cent to 33.33 per cent, political institution contribution from 12.50 per cent to 16.70 per cent, government institution contribution from 16.70 per cent to 20.80 percent and there is no change in economic institution, which is 16.70 per cent.

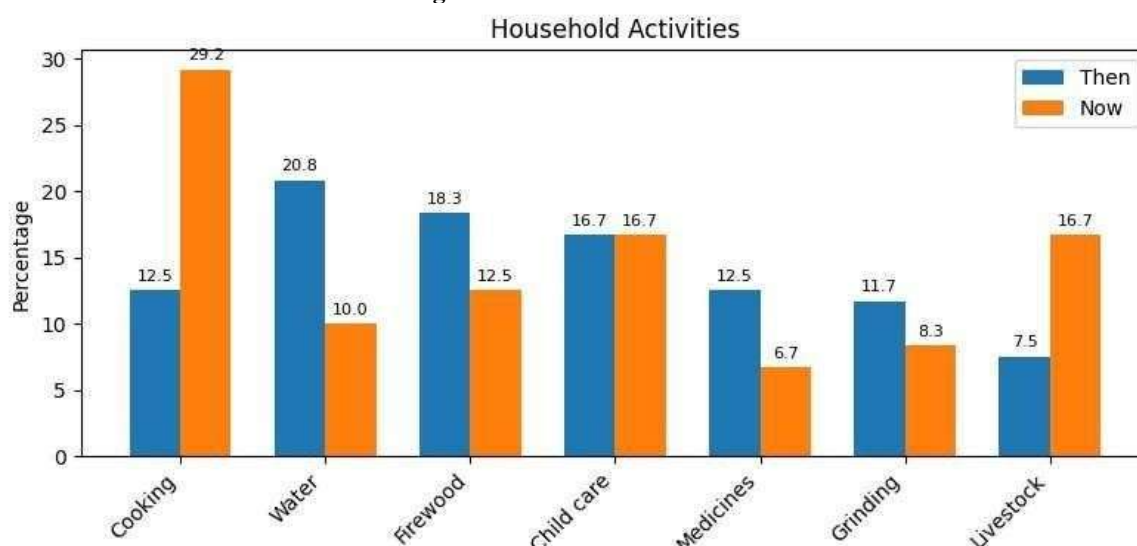
This could be attributed to modernisation, migration, or changing socio-economic pressures that reduce the emphasis on family-centred contributions and increase educational contributions. The increase in political and government contributions points to a growing awareness and participation in civic life, and the government also implemented more schemes and programmes for tribal people; this might be a reason towards increasing the increase in contributions to political and government institutions. The stability in economic contributions reflects continuity in livelihood-related participation, suggesting that while other social roles have shifted, economic engagement remains a constant necessity.

3. Household & Family Activities

Table-3. Distribution of the respondents according to Household & Family Activities

S.No.	Activity	Then (%)	Now(%)
1.	Cooking food	12.50	29.17
2.	Fetching water	20.83	10.00
3.	Collecting firewood	18.33	12.50
4.	Child care	16.67	16.67
5.	Traditional medicines	12.50	6.66
6.	Grinding grains	11.67	8.33
7.	Maintaining livestock	7.50	16.67
8.	Total	100.00	100.00

Figure-3. Household Activities



The findings indicate that fetching water accounted for the highest share in the Then period (20.83%), while maintaining livestock recorded the lowest (7.50%). In the Now period, cooking food emerged as the highest household activity (29.17%), whereas traditional medicine practices declined to the lowest level (6.66%).

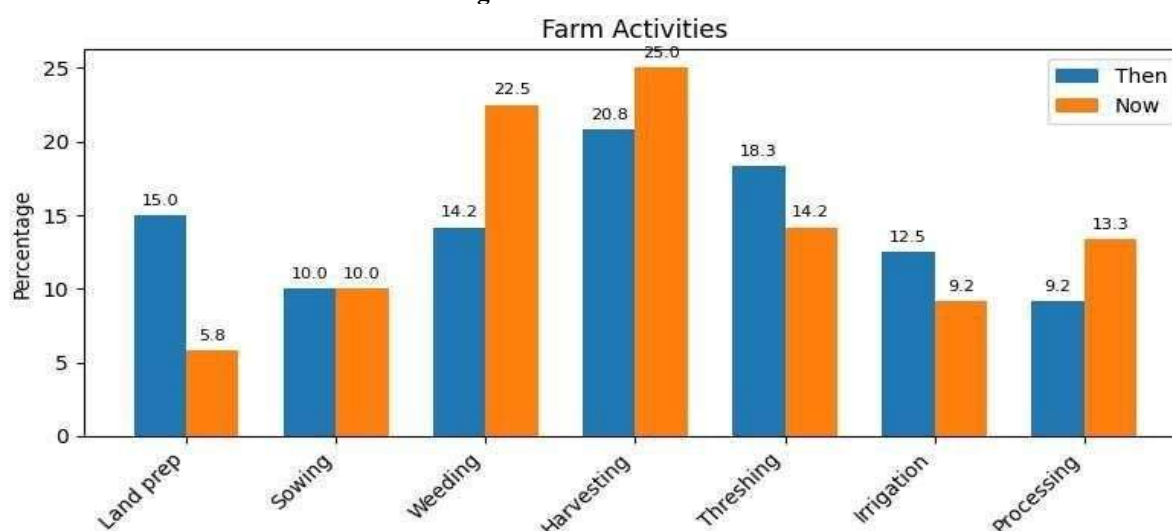
The results suggest a gradual shift in household responsibilities, with greater emphasis on domestic management and livestock care, while participation in physically demanding activities such as fetching water and collecting firewood has declined. This change may be attributed to improved access to basic amenities, modernization, and changing household living conditions.

4. Farm Activities

Table -4. Distribution of the respondents according to Farm Activities

S.No.	Activity	Then (%)	Now(%)
1.	Cooking food	12.50	29.17
2.	Fetching water	20.83	10.00
3.	Collecting firewood	18.33	12.50
4.	Child care	16.67	16.67
5.	Traditional medicines	12.50	6.66
6.	Grinding grains	11.67	8.33
7.	Maintaining livestock	7.50	16.67
8.	Total	100.00	100.00

Figure -4. Farm Activities



The findings reveal that harvesting remained the dominant farm activity in both the Then (20.83%) and Now (25.00%) periods. Land preparation showed the greatest decline from 15.00 per cent to 5.83 per cent, whereas weeding increased from 14.17 per cent to 22.50 per cent.

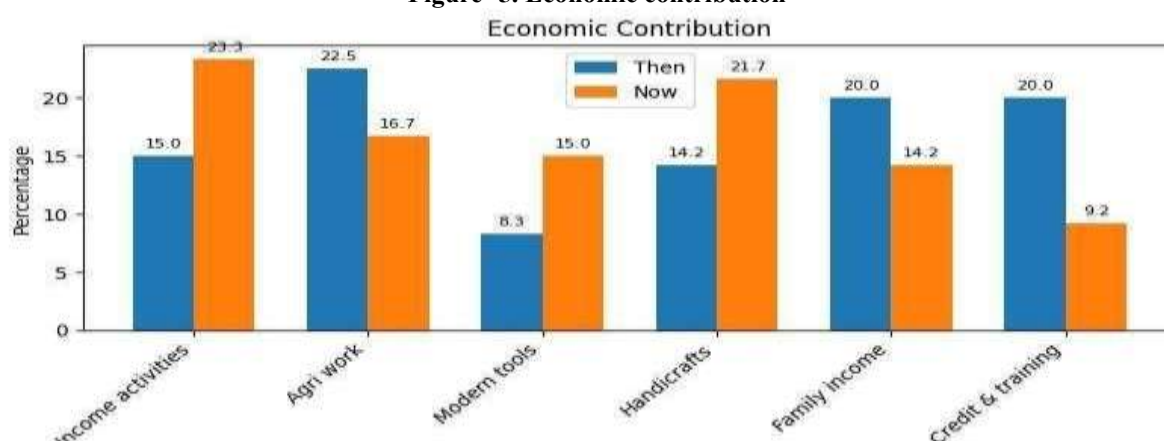
The results indicate a shift in women's participation from labour-intensive farm operations towards harvesting, weeding, and post-production activities. This change may be associated with mechanization, improved farming practices, and changing labour requirements in agriculture.

5. Economic Contribution

Table -5. Distribution of the respondents according to Economic Contribution

S.No.	Particulars	Then (%)	Now (%)
1.	Income-generating activities	15.00	23.33
2.	Agricultural work	22.50	16.67
3.	Use of modern tools	8.33	15.00
4.	Handicrafts / forest products	14.17	21.67
5.	Role in family income	20.00	14.17
6.	Access to credit & training	20.00	9.16
7.	Total	100.00	100.00

Figure -5. Economic contribution



The findings reveal that agricultural work contributed the highest share during the Then period (22.50%), while the use of modern tools was the lowest (8.33%). In the Now period, income-generating activities became the major contributor (23.33%), whereas access to credit and training recorded the lowest share (9.16%).

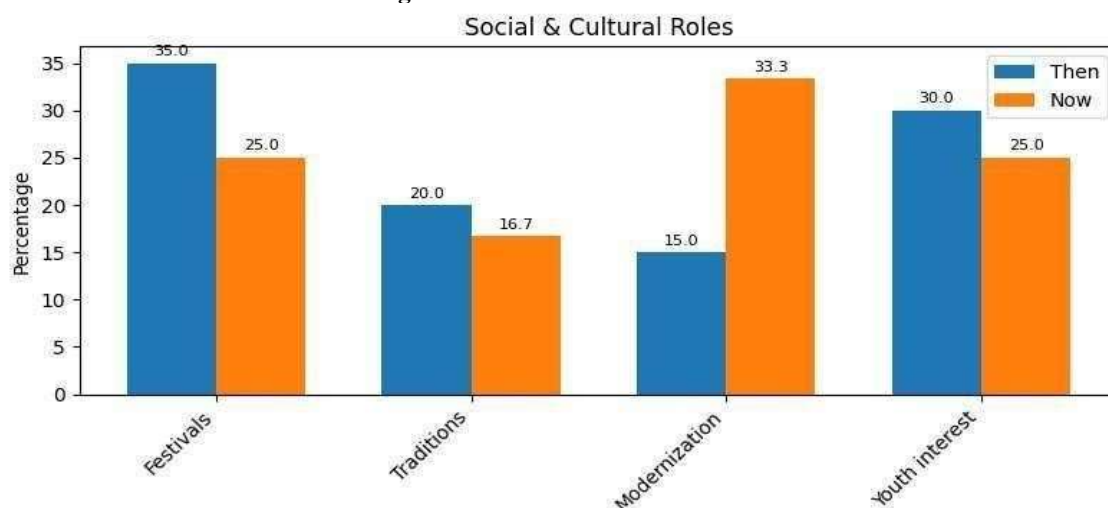
The results indicate that tribal women are gradually diversifying their economic activities beyond traditional agriculture. Increased involvement in income-generating enterprises and handicrafts reflects improved livelihood opportunities, financial independence, and exposure to modern technologies.

6. Social & Cultural Roles

Table-6. Distribution of the respondents according to Social & Cultural Roles

S.No.	Particulars	Then (%)	Now (%)
1.	Participation in festivals	35.00	25.00
2.	Preserving traditions	20.00	16.67
3.	Effect of modernization	15.00	33.33
4.	Youth interest in culture	30.00	25.00
5.	Total	100.00	100.00

Figure-6. Social & Cultural Roles



The findings show that participation in festivals accounted for the highest share in the Then period (35.00%), while the effect of modernization was the lowest (15.00%). In the Now period, modernization emerged as the most influential factor (33.33%), whereas preserving traditions declined to 16.67 per cent.

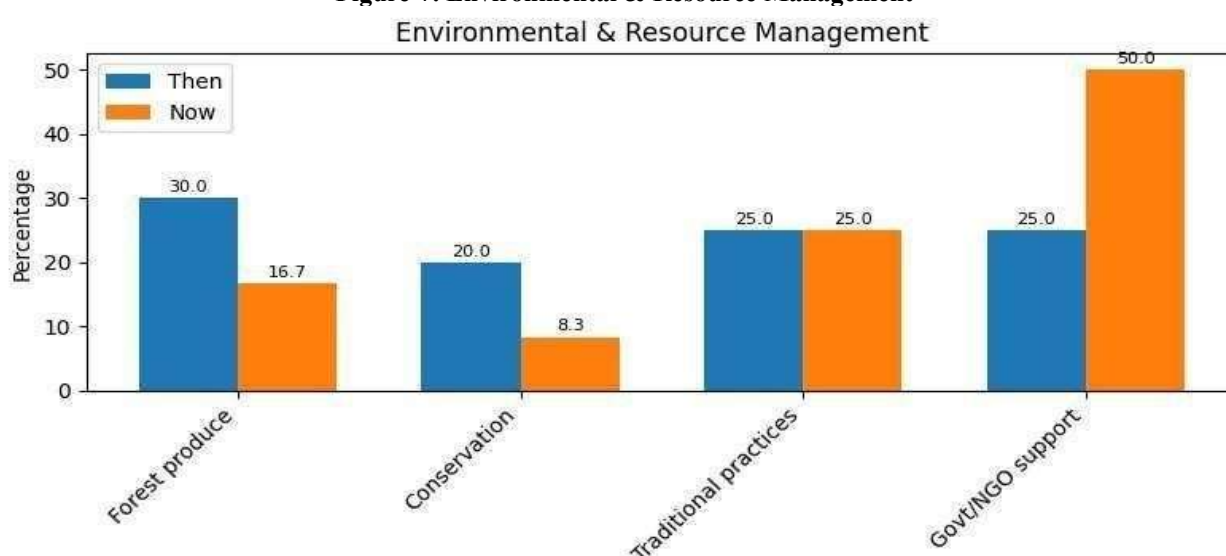
The results suggest that modernization has increasingly influenced the social and cultural lives of tribal women. Although traditional cultural practices continue to exist, their relative importance has declined due to changing lifestyles, education, and greater interaction with mainstream society.

7. Environmental & Resource Management

Table-7. Distribution of the respondents according to Environmental & Resource Management

S.No.	Particulars	Then (%)	Now (%)
1.	Forest produce management	30.00	16.67
2.	Resource conservation	20.00	8.33
3.	Traditional practices	25.00	25.00
4.	Govt/NGO support	25.00	50.00
5.	Total	100.00	100.00

Figure-7. Environmental & Resource Management



The findings indicate that forest produce management accounted for the highest share in the Then period (30.00%), while resource conservation recorded the lowest (20.00%). In the Now period, government and NGO support increased substantially to 50.00 per cent, whereas resource conservation declined to 8.33 per cent.

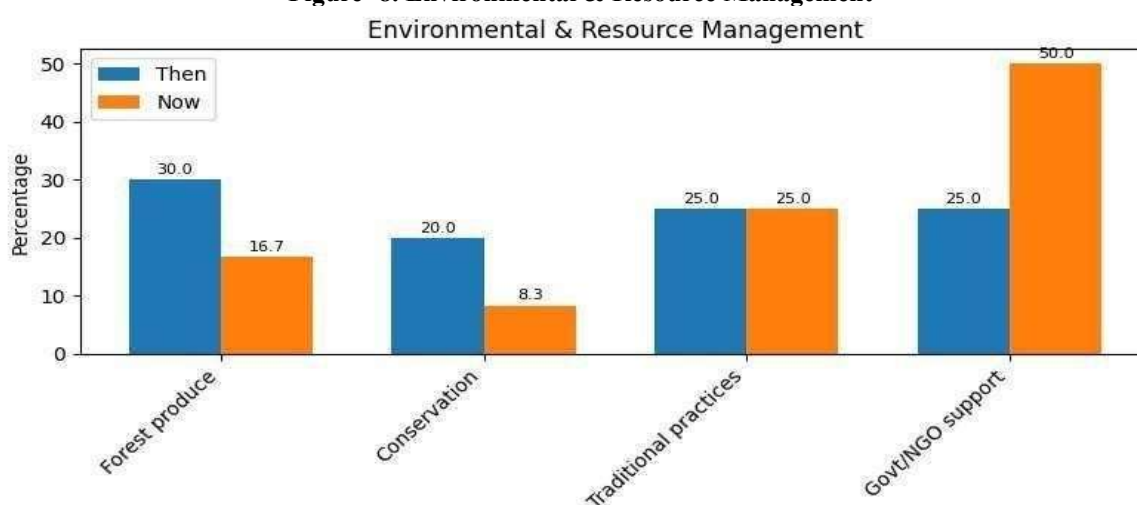
The results suggest a growing dependence on institutional support for environmental and natural resource management. This shift reflects increased government intervention and development programmes, while the direct reliance on traditional forest-based practices has gradually reduced.

8. Environmental & Resource Management

Table -8. Distribution of the respondents according to Environmental & Resource Management

S.No.	Particulars	Then (%)	Now (%)
1.	Forest produce management	30.00	16.67
2.	Resource conservation	20.00	8.33
3.	Traditional practices	25.00	25.00
4.	Govt /NGO support	25.00	50.00
5.	Total	100.00	100.00

Figure -8. Environmental & Resource Management



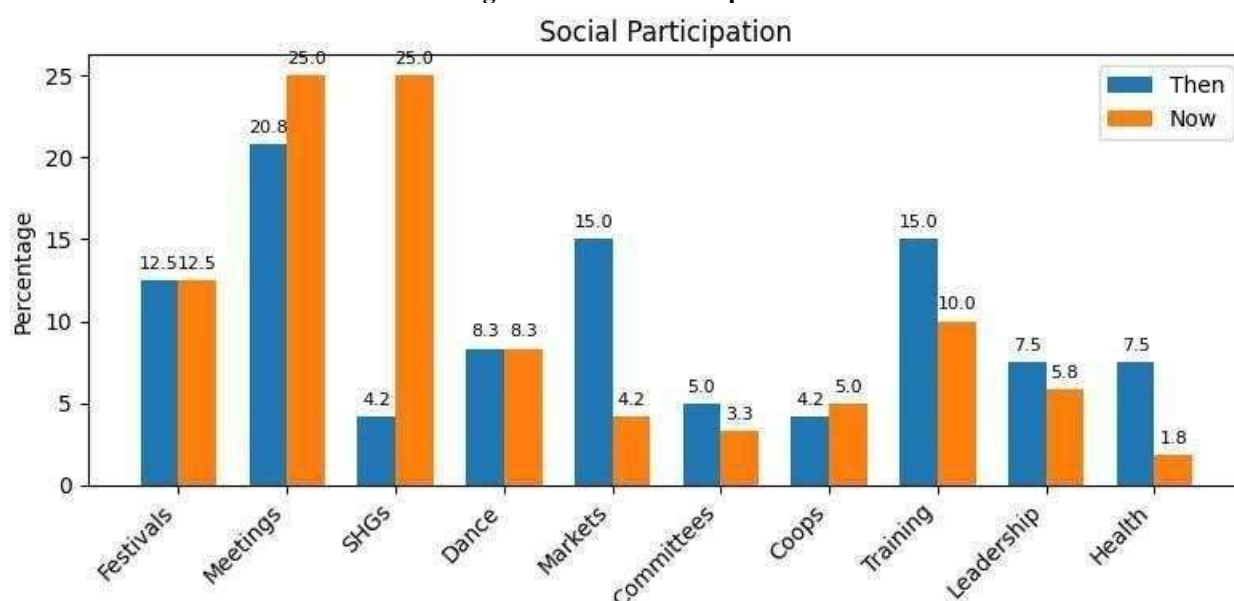
The findings reveal that forest produce management was the major activity during the Then period (30.00%), followed by traditional practices and government support (25.00% each). At present, government and NGO support has become the dominant component (50.00%), while forest produce management and resource conservation have declined. The results indicate a transition from community-based resource management towards institution-supported environmental practices. However, the continued practice of traditional methods suggests that indigenous knowledge remains an integral part of tribal livelihoods.

9. Social Participation

Table-9. Distribution of the respondents according to Social Participation

S.No.	Particulars	Then (%)	Now (%)
1.	Festivals & rituals	12.50	12.50
2.	Community meetings	20.83	25.00
3.	SHGs	4.17	25.00
4.	Dance & music	8.33	8.33
5.	Local markets	15.00	4.17
6.	Forest committees	5.00	3.33
7.	Cooperatives	4.17	5.00
8.	Training programs	15.00	10.00
9.	Leadership roles	7.50	5.83
10.	Health campaigns	7.50	1.84
11.	Total	100.00	100.00

Figure- 9. Social Participation



The findings indicate that community meetings recorded the highest participation during the Then period (20.83%), whereas SHGs and cooperatives showed the lowest participation (4.17% each). In the Now period, community meetings and Self-Help Groups emerged as the highest contributors (25.00% each), while participation in health campaigns declined to 1.84 per cent.

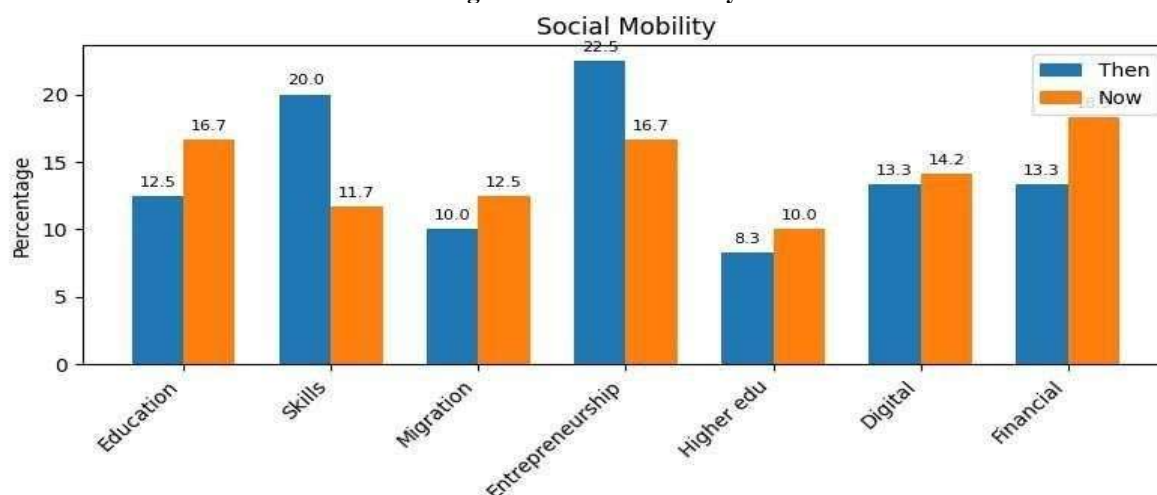
The results demonstrate improved social participation through community organizations and Self-Help Groups, reflecting enhanced collective action and women's empowerment. However, the declining participation in health campaigns indicates the need for strengthening health awareness and outreach programmes among tribal communities.

10. Social Mobility

Table-10. Distribution of the respondents according to Social Mobility

S.No	Particulars	Then (%)	Now (%)
1.	Access to education	12.50	16.67
2.	Skill development	20.00	11.67
3.	Migration for work	10.00	12.50
4.	Entrepreneurship	22.50	16.67
5.	Higher education	8.33	10.00
6.	Digital technology use	13.33	14.16
7.	Financial independence	13.34	18.33
8.	Total	100.00	100.00

Figure-10. Social Mobility



The findings reveal that entrepreneurship represented the highest indicator of social mobility in the Then period (22.50%), whereas higher education accounted for the lowest (8.33%). In the Now period, financial independence emerged as the highest indicator (18.33%), while higher education remained comparatively lower at 10.00 per cent.

The results indicate a gradual improvement in the social mobility of tribal women through enhanced financial independence, educational access, and digital technology use. These changes reflect increasing socio-economic opportunities, although greater efforts are still required to improve higher educational attainment among tribal women.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the extent of actual change in the lives of Malayali tribal women in the district of Dharmapuri. The data suggest significant and measurable change in roles and responsibilities across decadal periods. While agriculture remains the single biggest component of the household income of the women after ten years, it is supplemented, in many more instances, with additional income generated by labour outside the household. While a small gain is reflected in the percentage of government employment, the difference between Then and Now is modest. The contribution to the household's social role in the broader society diminished, with increased contribution to social welfare institutions reflecting a major shift towards a greater societal contribution of the women. Cultural life reflected an influence of modernisation, which more than doubled, and festival participation declined significantly, while the effort to preserve the cultural heritage has been sustained only marginally. While Government and other aids in natural resource management more than doubled, it was seen that both Conservation efforts by the communities and their participation in forest resources diminished drastically. The increase in the level of social participation by women's SHGs was the most significant change of all in any aspect, increasing from about four per cent of all respondents to about twenty per cent. Health services delivery to these communities seemed to be lacking as Health Campaign Participation Declined Significantly. The positive perceptions among women about their changing roles were evident in the significant rise of those who have a positive outlook and in a corresponding fall of those who view changes negatively. While the menial role of their entrepreneurial efforts appeared to decline to some extent, their capacity to contribute financially grew significantly, as did their Capacity to develop higher skills. Both were not at par, with a high percentage showing Financial Mobility and a smaller, albeit still present number being High Education attainments.

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