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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Primitive Tribal Groups in the Nilgiris District with Special Reference to the Kattunayakan Tribe

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ABSTRACT

The Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu is home to all six of the State's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs): the Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyans and Kattunayakans. This paper examines these groups with special reference to the Kattunayakans, a forest-dwelling community concentrated in the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks along the Mudumalai forests. Kattunayakans are traditionally honey gatherers and collectors of non-timber forest produce, and they hold a deep ecological knowledge of plants, bees and elephants. The study is descriptive and analytical and draws on Census data, Government of India and Government of Tamil Nadu reports, records of the Tribal Research Centre, Udhagamandalam, and published ethnographic and public-health studies. It describes the geography and administration of the district, the place of PVTGs in national policy, and the settlement pattern, livelihood and ecological knowledge of the Kattunayakans. It then identifies the main obstacles the community faces: insecure land and forest rights, conservation-related relocation, a shift from forest livelihoods to insecure wage labour, low educational attainment, a heavy burden of disease and weakening customary institutions. Finally, it assesses major welfare measures, including the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and the Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM-JANMAN) launched in November 2023. The analysis finds that welfare programmes have widened access to housing, schooling and health care, but uneven implementation, weak awareness of entitlements and the remoteness of settlements limit their reach. The paper argues that development for the Kattunayakans should be culturally sensitive and participatory. It should recognise their customary rights and their relationship with the forest, so that heritage conservation and stable social and economic progress advance together.

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1. Introduction

India has one of the largest tribal populations in the world. The 2011 Census counted about 104 million members of Scheduled Tribes (STs), 8.6 per cent of the national population, belonging to 705 notified communities that live mostly in forest and hill regions (Census of India, 2011; Ganesh et al., 2021). Under Article 342 of the Constitution, the President notifies these communities as Scheduled Tribes, and Article 366(25) defines STs by reference to that notification.

Forest and hill peoples appear in Indian literature long before the modern category of "tribe". Sanskrit and regional texts refer to communities such as the Kiratas, Kinnaras, Nishadas and Vanavasis (forest dwellers), while Tamil and Telugu usage includes terms such as *Malaiyin Makkal* (people of the hills), *Palankudi Makkal* (ancient settlers) and *Girijanulu* (hill people). These names describe a way of life and a relationship with place rather than a fixed legal identity. The word "tribe" itself entered administrative use in India under British rule, as it did in other colonised regions, and the colonial census and gazetteers turned it into a basis for classification and policy.

Within the larger ST population, the Government of India recognises a smaller set of communities as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), formerly called Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs). These are groups marked by pre-agricultural technology, low literacy, economic backwardness and a stagnant or declining population. There are 75 PVTGs in the country, and six of them live in Tamil Nadu. All six, the Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyans and Kattunayakans, are found in the Nilgiris district, which makes the district one of the most important regions in India for the study of vulnerable tribal communities.

This paper focuses on the Kattunayakans, the "lords of the forest", who live in the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks on the western and northern edges of the Nilgiri plateau. They have long depended on the forest for honey, tubers, fruits and other produce, and their knowledge of forest ecology is widely acknowledged. Yet they also rank among the most disadvantaged communities in the State in land ownership, education, health and access to public services. Studying the Kattunayakans therefore throws light on a wider question: how the State can deliver basic facilities and economic security to forest communities without eroding the culture, knowledge and rights that define them.

2. Review of Literature

Colonial and early ethnography. The earliest systematic accounts of Nilgiri communities come from colonial administrators and ethnographers. Thurston and Rangachari's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909) and Francis's *Madras District Gazetteers: The Nilgiris* (1908) recorded the customs, occupations and settlements of the hill and forest peoples. These works remain valuable sources of historical detail, but they view tribal life through the classificatory concerns of the colonial state and often describe forest groups as remnants of an earlier stage of human development.

Regional ethnography. Hockings's edited volume *Blue Mountains* (1989) brought together anthropological, linguistic and ecological research on the Nilgiris and established the region as an interconnected system of

communities rather than a set of isolated tribes. Bird-David (1994) extended this view in her study of the Nilgiri tribal systems seen from below, that is, from the standpoint of the forest groups themselves.

The Kattunayakans (Nayaka) in anthropological theory. Nurit Bird-David's long fieldwork among the Nayaka of the Nilgiri–Wayanad forests placed the Kattunayakans at the centre of international debates on hunter-gatherers. In "The Giving Environment" (1990), she argued that the Nayaka see the forest as a parent that gives food freely, rather than as a resource to be exploited, and that this view shapes their sharing economy. Her later work reformulated the idea of the "original affluent society" (1992) and re-examined animism as a relational way of knowing in which forest beings and spirits, called *devaru*, are treated as persons with whom relationships are kept up (1999). An earlier essay described how Nayaka combined gathering with intermittent wage work, a pattern she termed "wage-gathering" (Bird-David, 1983), and a later study traced how economic change is reshaping their relationships with things and people (Bird-David, 2014).

Language. Zvelebil (1988) documented the speech of the Jenu Kurumba, with whom many Kattunayakans identify, as a distinct South Dravidian variety close to Kannada. This helps explain the linguistic barriers Kattunayakan children face in Tamil-medium schools.

Health and development studies. Ganesh et al. (2021) reviewed the language, occupation, religion and problems of all six PVTGs of Tamil Nadu and concluded that many State benefits fail to reach them, while their health is shaped by social, economic and educational disadvantage. Sheshadri et al. (2021), working from the ASHWINI Gudalur Adivasi Hospital, followed a cohort of sickle cell disease patients from the Paniya, Betta Kurumba, Kattunayakan and Mullu Kurumba communities and found a high risk of premature death. Dinesh Kumar and Naagarajan (2018) examined the prevalence, treatment-seeking behaviour and economic burden of sickle cell disease among Nilgiri tribes. More recently, Udaya Kumar (2025) analysed the barriers to education among Kattunayakans of the Nilgiris, including socio-cultural factors, livelihood pressures and human–wildlife conflict.

Rights, conservation and development practice. Reports of non-governmental organisations add important evidence. The Indigenous People's Plan prepared under the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) programme, drawing on Keystone Foundation work, summarises Kattunayakan settlement, population and livelihood in the Nilgiris. ACCORD's account of Forest Rights Act implementation in Gudalur, and journalistic investigations of relocation from the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (David, n.d.; Land Conflict Watch, n.d.), document the gap between legal entitlements and lived experience.

Research gap. Existing studies tend to treat either culture (ethnography), health (medical research) or rights (activist and policy reports) in isolation. Few studies bring these strands together for the Kattunayakans of Tamil Nadu, and fewer still examine the community in light of the newest national programmes such as PM-JANMAN. This paper attempts such a synthesis.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To describe the distribution of tribal communities, and of the PVTGs in particular, in the Nilgiris district.
2. To explain the concept, criteria and policy history of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in India and Tamil Nadu.
3. To document the settlement pattern, livelihood, social organisation and traditional ecological knowledge of the Kattunayakans of the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks.

4. To identify the main obstacles the Kattunayakans face in securing land, livelihood, education, health and basic amenities.
5. To assess the reach and effectiveness of government welfare and development programmes, including PM-JANMAN, for the community.
6. To suggest a culturally sensitive and participatory approach to Kattunayakan development.

4. Methodology

The study follows a descriptive and analytical design based on secondary sources. Data were drawn from four kinds of material:

- **Official statistics:** Census of India 2001 and 2011 data on Scheduled Tribes, including the tribe-wise figures reported by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to Parliament.
- **Government documents:** reports and policy notes of the Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Tamil Nadu; the Tribal Sub Plan; records of the Tribal Research Centre (TRC), M. Palada, Udhagamandalam; the Nilgiris district administration; and Ministry of Tribal Affairs and Press Information Bureau releases on PVTGs and PM-JANMAN.
- **Scholarly literature:** ethnographic, linguistic and public-health studies on the Nilgiri tribes and the Kattunayakans.
- **Civil society and media reports:** documents of NGOs working in Gudalur (ACCORD, Adivasi Munnetra Sangam, Keystone Foundation) and investigative reports on forest rights and relocation.

The historical method was used to trace the evolution of the PVTG category and of tribal administration in the district, while descriptive analysis was used for demographic and livelihood data. Welfare measures were assessed qualitatively, by comparing their stated objectives with documented outcomes and with the problems reported by the community and by independent studies.

Limitations. The study relies on published data. Census figures for the Kattunayakan category in Tamil Nadu cover the whole State and do not separate the forest-dwelling Kattunayakans of the Nilgiris from other groups enumerated under the same name, so district-level figures from the TRC are used where available. Data on scheme outcomes specific to the Kattunayakans are limited, and the assessment of programmes is therefore indicative rather than statistical.

5. Study Area: The Nilgiris District

5.1 The name

"Nilgiri" means "blue mountain" (*nila*, blue; *giri*, mountain), and the name has been in use for about nine centuries. It appears at least as early as 1117 CE, in the record of a general of the Hoysala king Vishnuvardhana who claimed victories over the peoples of the hills (Wikipedia, "Nilgiri Mountains"). The most common explanation links the name to the blue haze that covers the ranges when they are seen from a distance, as with many large highlands. A second explanation attributes it to the mass flowering of *kurinji* (*Strobilanthes kunthiana*), which periodically turns the grassy slopes violet-blue. Older writers doubted the second view, arguing that the flowers grow mainly on the high plateau and could not have been seen by the people of the surrounding plains, who are likely to have coined the name.

5.2 Location and physical setting

The Nilgiris lies at the junction of the Western and Eastern Ghats, at the meeting point of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. The district covers 2,452.50 sq. km and rises from about 900 m to 2,636 m above mean sea level (Nilgiris District Administration, n.d.). Doddabetta, near Udhagamandalam, is the highest peak at 2,637 m. The district is bounded by Karnataka on the north, by Kerala on the west, by Coimbatore and Erode districts on the east, and by Coimbatore district and Kerala on the south. It is the most elevated and one of the most westerly districts of Tamil Nadu.

The district has three broad physical zones. The high central plateau around Udhagamandalam, Coonoor and Kotagiri is a landscape of grasslands, *shola* forests and tea estates. The Sigur plateau in the north, at about 900 m, slopes down towards the Moyar river and Mudumalai. The Gudalur–Pandalur region in the north-west forms a lower, wetter plateau, continuous with the Wayanad region of Kerala; Gudalur town stands at about 1,072 m. It is in this last zone, with its moist deciduous and evergreen forests, that the Kattunayakans live. Much of the district lies within the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, and the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve occupies its northern forests.

5.3 Administration and population

For administrative purposes the district is divided into three revenue divisions (Udhagamandalam, Coonoor and Gudalur) and six taluks:

1. Udhagamandalam
2. Kotagiri
3. Kundah
4. Coonoor
5. Gudalur
6. Pandalur

The district headquarters is at Udhagamandalam (Ooty). For local self-government, it has four municipalities (Udhagamandalam, Coonoor, Gudalur and Nelliyalam), 11 town panchayats, four panchayat unions (blocks) and 35 village panchayats (Nilgiris District Administration, n.d.). The district administration has since announced a reorganisation of the village panchayats into 96 units. The Gudalur revenue division, which comprises the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks, had a population of 232,213 in 2011, out of a district total of 735,394 (Census of India, 2011).

The share of the original tribal communities in the district's population has fallen steadily over the last two centuries. Changes in land use, the spread of plantations and commercial agriculture, the growth of towns and markets, the expansion of schools and other institutions, and large-scale migration into the district from the plains, Kerala, Karnataka and Sri Lanka have all contributed to this decline.

5.4 Distribution of tribal communities

Table 1: Taluk-wise distribution of tribal communities and other dominant groups in the Nilgiris district

Sl. No.	Taluk	Major tribe(s)	Other communities and religious groups living in the taluk
1	Udhagamandalam	Todas	Kotas, Badagas, Kurumbas, Christians, Muslims, Tamil- and Kannada-speaking communities, Tibetans
2	Udhagamandalam	Kotas	Todas, Badagas, Christians, Muslims, other Hindu communities who migrated from Coimbatore and Erode districts
3	Kotagiri	Todas, Kurumbas, Irulas	Kotas, Badagas, Gounders from Pollachi, repatriates from Sri Lanka, Adi Dravidars
4	Kundah	Kurumbas, Irulas	Kotas, Alu Kurumbas, Badagas, Tamil-speaking people, Sri Lankan repatriates
5	Coonoor	Paniyans, Kurumbas	Irulas, Badagas, Tamil-speaking people, Hindi-speaking north Indians, Sri Lankan repatriates
6	**Gudalur**	Paniyans, Kurumbas, **Kattunayakans**	Irulas (Kasabas), Malayalam-speaking communities, Gounders from Coimbatore and Erode districts, Adi Dravidars, a few Badagas, Mundadan Chettis, Wayanadan Chettis, Sri Lankan repatriates
7	**Pandalur**	Paniyans, Kurumbas, **Kattunayakans**	Jenu and Betta Kurumbas, Urali Kurumbas, Syrian Christians and other Christians, Mappilas (Moplahs), Malayalam-speaking communities, Wayanadan and Mundadan Chettis, a large number of Sri Lankan repatriates

Source: Tribal Research Centre, M. Palada, Udhagamandalam.

Table 1 shows that each of the six PVTGs has a distinct core area. The Todas and Kotas are concentrated on the central plateau around Udhagamandalam and Kotagiri, the Kurumbas and Irulas on the eastern and southern

slopes, and the Paniyans and Kattunayakans in the Gudalur–Pandalur region on the Kerala border. The table also shows how closely tribal settlements are interwoven with Badaga, Chetti, Malayali, Tamil, Christian, Muslim and repatriate communities. The Nilgiris is a plural district in which tribal, religious, linguistic and migrant groups live side by side, and their composition differs from one taluk to another. This proximity shapes the Kattunayakans' economic dependence on neighbouring landholders and their exposure to competition for land.

6. Scheduled Tribes and PVTGs of Tamil Nadu

6.1 Scheduled Tribes of Tamil Nadu

Thirty-six communities are notified as Scheduled Tribes in Tamil Nadu (Table 2). Six of the entries carry area restrictions: Malayali, Kurumbas, Kanikaran, Kammara, Kota and Toda (Census of India, 2001).

Table 2: Scheduled Tribes notified in Tamil Nadu

Sl. No.	Tribe	Sl. No.	Tribe	Sl. No.	Tribe
1	Adiyan	13	Koraga	25	Malayali[4]
2	Aranadan	14	Kota[1]	26	Malayekandi
3	Eravallan	15	Kudiya, Melakudi	27	Mannan
4	Irular	16	Kurichchan	28	Mudugar, Muduvan
5	Kadar	17	Kurumbas[2]	29	Muthuvan
6	Kammara[1]	18	Kurumans	30	Palleyan
7	Kanikaran, Kanikkar[3]	19	Maha Malasar	31	Palliyan
8	Kaniyan, Kanyan	20	Malai Arayan	32	Palliyar
9	**Kattunayakan**	21	Malai Pandaram	33	Paniyan
10	Kochu Velan	22	Malai Vedan	34	Sholaga
11	Konda Kapus	23	Malakkuravan	35	Toda[1]
12	Kondareddis	24	Malasar	36	Uraly

Notes: [1] Excluding Kanyakumari district and Shenkottah taluk of Tirunelveli district. [2] In the Nilgiris district. [3] In Kanyakumari district and Shenkottah and Ambasamudram taluks of Tirunelveli district. [4] Malayali in Dharmapuri, North Arcot, Pudukottai, Salem, South Arcot and Tiruchirappalli districts. *Sources:* Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order as amended; Census of India 2001 and 2011.

6.2 Population and literacy

Tamil Nadu has a small ST population relative to its size. In 2001 the State recorded 651,321 Scheduled Tribe persons out of a total population of 62,405,679, about 1.04 per cent (Census of India, 2001). By 2011 the figure had risen to 794,697, or 1.10 per cent of the State's population (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2015). The Malayali (47.6 per cent) and the Irular (23.9 per cent) made up most of the ST population in 2001, with the Kattunayakan third at 6.9 per cent. ST literacy in 2001 stood at 41.5 per cent against 73.5 per cent for the State as a whole, although it had risen from 27.9 per cent in 1991.

Tamil Nadu has no Scheduled Areas under the Fifth Schedule. Tribal development in the State is organised through Integrated Tribal Development Programme (ITDP) areas, which are contiguous blocks where STs form half or more of the population, and through the Tribal Sub Plan (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2015).

6.3 The six PVTGs of Tamil Nadu

Six of the State's 36 STs are designated Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups: the **Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyans and Kattunayakans** (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2015; Ganesh et al., 2021). All six live in the Nilgiris. The Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas and Paniyans are found mainly in the Nilgiris and its immediate surroundings, while the Irulas and Kattunayakans are also enumerated in other districts of the State.

Table 3: Population of the six PVTGs of Tamil Nadu, 2001 and 2011

PVTG	Main area in the Nilgiris	2001 Census	2011 Census
Irular	Kotagiri, Kundah and the southern and eastern slopes; also other districts	155,606	189,661
Kattunayakan	**Gudalur and Pandalur; also other districts**	**45,227**	**46,672**
Paniyan	Gudalur, Pandalur, Coonoor	9,121	10,134
Kurumbas (in the Nilgiris)	Kotagiri, Kundah, Coonoor, Gudalur, Pandalur	—	6,823
Toda	Udhagamandalam, Kotagiri	1,560	2,002
Kota	Udhagamandalam, Kotagiri	925	308

Sources: Census of India 2001; Census of India 2011 figures as reported by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in Parliament (Lok Sabha, n.d.). Main areas from Table 1. "—" indicates no separate figure in the source.

Two cautions apply when reading Table 3. First, the statewide Kattunayakan figure is far larger than the forest-dwelling community of the Nilgiris. In 2001, 61.6 per cent of the State's Kattunayakan population was urban (Census of India, 2001), whereas the TRC counted only 452 Kattunayakan households, or 1,629 persons, in the Nilgiris in 2005 (CEPF, n.d.). The Census category therefore groups the Nilgiri forest community with other populations enumerated under the same name elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. Second, the sharp fall recorded for the Kotas between 2001 and 2011 probably reflects enumeration problems as much as real demographic change, and should be verified against field counts. For the forest PVTGs of the Nilgiris, the small numbers themselves are the clearest sign of vulnerability.

7. Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in India

7.1 Origin of the category

Scheduled Tribes differ widely in their level of development, and the more advanced and assertive communities have tended to capture a larger share of tribal development funds. The Dhebar Commission (1960–61) drew

attention to this inequality and led to the creation of a separate category of Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs). In 1975 the Government of India identified 52 such groups, and in 1993 it added 23 more, bringing the total to 75 out of 705 Scheduled Tribes (Vikaspedia, n.d.-a; Drishti IAS, 2019). In 2006 the Government renamed PTGs as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), replacing the term "primitive". PVTGs remain a sub-category within the Scheduled Tribes and receive priority under dedicated central schemes.

7.2 Criteria for identification

The Government of India uses four criteria to identify PVTGs (Vikaspedia, n.d.-a):

1. a pre-agricultural level of technology;
2. a low level of literacy;
3. economic backwardness; and
4. a declining or stagnant population.

PVTGs are also generally small and relatively homogeneous communities, physically isolated, without a written script and with simple technology and a slow rate of social change. Many depend on hunting, gathering, shifting cultivation or forest labour, and many live in remote settlements with poor access to schools, health care and regular employment. Some PVTGs are extremely small. The Sentinelese and the Great Andamanese numbered only 39 and 43 persons respectively, while the Saharia, the largest PVTG, numbered 450,217 (Vikaspedia, n.d.-a). Small communities of this kind are highly exposed to disease, economic decline and the breakdown of their social institutions.

7.3 Distribution

The 75 PVTGs live in 18 States and the Union Territory of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, with the largest number in Odisha (Drishti IAS, 2019). Representative groups are listed below.

Table 4: Selected PVTGs of India and the States where they are notified

PVTG	State/UT
Birhor	Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal
Baiga	Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh
Saharia (Seharia)	Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh
Jenu Kuruba	Karnataka
Koraga	Karnataka, Kerala
Kattunayakan	**Kerala, Tamil Nadu**
Cholanaickan	Kerala
Irular	Tamil Nadu
Toda	Tamil Nadu
Jarawa	Andaman and Nicobar Islands
Sentinelese	Andaman and Nicobar Islands
Great Andamanese	Andaman and Nicobar Islands

Sources: Ministry of Tribal Affairs list of PVTGs as reproduced in Vikaspedia (n.d.-a) and in Rajya Sabha replies (2024, 2025).

The Kattunayakans are unusual in being a PVTG in two States. In Kerala they are one of five PVTGs, alongside the Cholanaickan, Kadar, Koraga and Kurumbas, while the closely related Jenu Kuruba are a PVTG in Karnataka. The community's range across the tri-junction of the three States reflects the continuity of the Nilgiri–Wayanad–Mysore forest belt, which predates the State boundaries that now divide it.

8. The Kattunayakan Tribe

8.1 Name and identity

The name Kattunayakan combines *kadu* or *kattu* (forest) and *nayakan* (chief or lord), and means "lords" or "kings of the forest". The term is said to have been given to them by their Malayalam-speaking neighbours. In different parts of the tri-State region the same or closely related people are called Jenu Kurumba or Thenu Kurumba, "honey Kurumbas", after their skill in gathering honey (CEPF, n.d.). In the anthropological literature they appear as the Nayaka or Naiken (Bird-David, 1990, 1999). Many Kattunayakans regard themselves as the same people as the Jenu Kuruba of Karnataka, though older administrative records treated the two as separate tribes (Zvelebil, 1988).

The Kattunayakans call their language *nama basha* ("our language"). It is a South Dravidian speech closest to Kannada but contains elements of Malayalam and Tamil, and it is barely intelligible to speakers of standard Kannada (Zvelebil, 1988; CEPF, n.d.). Most Kattunayakans also speak some Kannada, Malayalam and Tamil, a multilingualism that reflects centuries of movement and exchange across the forest frontier.

8.2 Geographical distribution

In Tamil Nadu, the forest-dwelling Kattunayakans live in the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks of the Nilgiris, especially near the dense forests of the Mudumalai landscape. In Gudalur taluk they are found around O'Valley (Barwood), Gudalur, Devarshola and Mudumalai, and in Pandalur taluk around Nellakottai, Cherumulli and Cherangode. Their distribution follows the Gudalur Forest Division and the fringes of the reserved forests. According to the Indigenous People's Plan prepared under the CEPF programme, the Kattunayakans of the Nilgiris live in 44 settlements spread over eight revenue villages of the Gudalur Forest Division, with 452 households and 1,629 persons according to the TRC count of 2005 (CEPF, n.d.). Gudalur taluk is thus the principal home of the community in Tamil Nadu.

8.3 Settlement pattern and housing

Kattunayakan settlements are small, scattered and oriented towards the forest. Instead of forming large, compact villages, families traditionally lived in small hamlets at some distance from one another and from the villages of other communities. Individual houses within a hamlet are usually grouped together. A single house is called a ***manai***, and a hamlet a ***padi***.

The traditional house shows close adaptation to the forest environment. It was built on level ground, usually without a raised plinth or an upper storey, with the entrance facing the lower side of the slope. Walls were made of a wattle or herringbone frame of timber and reeds, plastered with mud. Roofs were thatched with grass collected from the surrounding forest. Such houses were cheap to build and easy to repair or abandon, which suited a mobile, forest-based life.

8.4 Social organisation

Kattunayakan society is small-scale and egalitarian. Each settlement recognises a headman, known as the *Muttan*, who is obeyed and respected, and elders play a central role in settling disputes and conducting rituals (Raleigh

International and CTRD, n.d.; Udaya Kumar, 2025). Bird-David (1990, 1992) showed that Nayaka social life rests on sharing: food and other goods are distributed among relatives and neighbours, and status depends little on accumulation.

8.5 Relationship with the forest

The forest is the foundation of Kattunayakan economy, identity and belief. Bird-David (1990) described how the Nayaka think of the forest as a parent that provides for its children. Community members express the same idea today; Bellie, a Kattunayakan elephant caretaker at Mudumalai, has said that for her people the well-being of the forest matters above all (NPR, 2023). Kattunayakan religious life centres on relationships with *devaru*, forest beings and ancestral spirits associated with hills, rocks, trees and animals, who are treated as persons in a shared social world (Bird-David, 1999). Over time, worship of Hindu deities such as Bhairava has been added to these older practices.

In the past, the location of Kattunayakan hamlets was determined by access to forest produce such as honey, tubers, fruits, leaves, mushrooms and wild pepper. Families moved widely through the forest following the seasons. Restrictions on forest use, the expansion of plantations and reserves, and new economic opportunities have since led to a more settled life (Keystone Foundation, 2007, as cited in CEPF, n.d.). Many hamlets have grown larger and now stand on the forest edge, near administrative centres, estates and agricultural land.

9. Livelihood and Traditional Occupations

The Kattunayakan economy has moved from a forest-based subsistence system to a mixed livelihood in which gathering, small-scale farming and wage labour are combined. The main components are described below.

9.1 Honey gathering

Honey gathering is the occupation most closely associated with the community, and honey remains the main item of collection (CEPF, n.d.). Kattunayakans are renowned for harvesting honey and wax from wild hives on tall trees and cliff faces, a task that demands climbing skill, knowledge of bee behaviour and ritual precautions. The honey is consumed at home, shared, and sold.

9.2 Collection of non-timber forest produce

Besides honey, the Kattunayakans collect beeswax, forest pepper, cinnamon, tubers, berries, leaves, mushrooms, seeds, nutmeg and medicinal herbs as non-timber forest produce (NTFP). They use simple tools such as digging sticks and knives (CEPF, n.d.). These products serve both household consumption and trade.

9.3 Hunting, gathering and fishing

In the past, the Kattunayakans supplemented their diet by hunting small animals and birds and gathering wild foods. Forest and wildlife laws and changes in their way of life have greatly reduced hunting. In some areas, fishing in streams and rivers has also historically supported their subsistence.

9.4 Agriculture

After settling down, some Kattunayakan households began to cultivate small plots of ragi, paddy, vegetables and other crops suited to the area. As dependence on primary forest resources declined, farming became more important, although most families hold little or no titled land.

9.5 Wage labour

Wage work is now a key source of income. Kattunayakans work in plantations, agriculture, construction, forestry operations and other casual jobs. Those near Mudumalai have long worked in the paddy fields of Mundadan Chetti and Mappila landholders and supplied them with forest produce, including firewood (Keystone Foundation, 2007, as cited in CEPF, n.d.). Bird-David (1983) described this combination of gathering and intermittent wage employment as "wage-gathering". The shift marks a decisive change from forest subsistence to a mixed and often insecure livelihood.

9.6 Elephant care

Kattunayakan knowledge of the forest has also found a place in modern conservation. Many mahouts and *cavadis* (assistant mahouts) at the Theppakadu Elephant Camp in the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, one of the oldest elephant camps in Asia, belong to the community (The Quint, 2023). The documentary *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022), winner of the 2023 Academy Award for Best Documentary Short, followed the Kattunayakan couple Bomman and Bellie as they raised the orphaned elephant calves Raghu and Ammu. Bellie was later appointed the first woman *cavady* at the camp (The Week, 2024). The film brought national attention to the community's skills, but it also showed how much Kattunayakan livelihood now depends on employment by the Forest Department.

9.7 Marketing of forest produce

Forest produce collected by the community is either consumed at home or sold to traders, cooperative societies and consumers. The income helps meet household expenses, but heavy reliance on middlemen often reduces the gatherers' share of the value. Organised channels such as tribal cooperatives, Van Dhan Vikas Kendras and minimum support prices for minor forest produce can improve their returns.

9.8 Traditional ecological knowledge

The customary environmental knowledge of the Kattunayakans is a significant, though largely unseen, part of their culture. It includes:

- identification of edible plants, tubers, fruits and fungi, and the seasons when they are available;
- the use of herbs and plant parts for medicine;
- the behaviour, nesting and seasons of honey bees, and safe methods of harvesting;
- the movement and behaviour of elephants and other wildlife;
- the location of water sources, sacred groves and resource patches in the forest.

This knowledge is transmitted orally and through practice. It is a resource for biodiversity conservation as well as for the community, but it is vulnerable when young people spend less time in the forest.

10. Challenges Faced by the Community

The Kattunayakans' way of life rests on the forest, forest produce, honey gathering and an indigenous ecological knowledge, and the Tamil Nadu Tribal Research Centre recognises them as one of the six PVTGs of the Nilgiris. The same features that define their culture also expose them to a set of interlinked problems.

10.1 Insecure land and forest rights

Most Kattunayakan families live on forest or revenue land without secure title. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA) provides for individual and community rights, and for habitat rights for PVTGs, but its implementation in Tamil Nadu has been slow. In

Gudalur, ACCORD and the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS), an organisation of about 25,000 Adivasi members, have trained community leaders, helped form special tribal gram sabhas and supported claims under the Act (ACCORD, n.d.). Even so, community members describe a constant fear of eviction while titles remain undistributed (The News Minute, n.d.). Land in Gudalur is further complicated by the long-running disputes over former *janmam* (landlord) estates under the Gudalur Janmam Abolition Act, 1969 (Onmanorama, 2026).

10.2 Conservation and relocation

The declaration of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in 2007, and its notification as a Critical Tiger Habitat, brought seven villages comprising 28 hamlets and about 449 families within the core area (Land Conflict Watch, n.d.). Families were relocated in phases from 2016–17 onwards, with an option of a lump-sum payment of ₹10 lakh or land. Residents of hamlets such as Bennai, many of them Kattunayakans, have reported irregularities, including payments withdrawn soon after deposit and moves into houses without title deeds or amenities (David, n.d.). Some relocated Kattunayakan families later returned to forest land and rebuilt houses there. Relocation, even when voluntary in name, can sever a forest community from the resources and sacred places on which its economy and identity depend.

10.3 Livelihood insecurity

Restrictions on entering forests, on hunting and on the collection of some produce have narrowed traditional livelihoods. Families increasingly depend on seasonal, low-paid wage work on estates and farms. The sale of forest produce through middlemen yields low returns, and few households have the land, credit or skills to move into stable occupations.

10.4 Education

Literacy among the forest PVTGs of the Nilgiris remains low, and dropout is high. Udaya Kumar (2025) identifies socio-cultural barriers, livelihood pressures and human–wildlife conflict as key obstacles to schooling among Kattunayakans. Children who speak *nama basha* at home often struggle in Tamil-medium classrooms, and the long distances between scattered hamlets and schools, often through forest with wild animals, discourage attendance. Residential schools address distance but can separate children from family and community knowledge.

10.5 Health

The Nilgiri tribes carry a heavy burden of disease. Sickle cell disease was first detected in India in the Nilgiris in 1952 (Dinesh Kumar & Naagarajan, 2018). A cohort study of 157 patients from the Paniya, Betta Kurumba, Kattunayakan and Mullu Kurumba communities in the Gudalur valley found that the disease sharply shortens life, with a median age at death of 25 years, about 20 years less than among other members of the same communities (Sheshadri et al., 2021). Anaemia, malnutrition and the difficulty of reaching hospitals from remote hamlets add to this burden. The ASHWINI Gudalur Adivasi Hospital, which grew out of the AMS movement and is run largely by Adivasi staff, shows how community-owned health care can improve access.

10.6 Human–wildlife conflict

Kattunayakan hamlets lie in prime elephant, tiger and leopard habitat. Encounters with wild animals threaten lives, houses and crops, and fear of such encounters limits movement to schools, markets and health centres (Udaya Kumar, 2025).

10.7 Housing and basic amenities

Many settlements still lack durable houses, safe drinking water, sanitation, electricity, all-weather roads and mobile connectivity. Scattered settlement makes the extension of these services expensive, and some hamlets inside or near protected areas face legal barriers to new infrastructure.

10.8 Erosion of culture and customary institutions

Traditional governance through headmen and elders is weakening, sacred groves are under pressure, and young people spend less time in the forest. Gram sabhas in Gudalur have themselves identified the weakening of traditional governance and the breakdown of social and cultural practices as concerns (ACCORD and CEPF, n.d.). The loss of language, ritual and ecological knowledge would deprive the community of the very resources that sustain its identity.

11. Government Welfare Schemes and Development

The Governments of India and Tamil Nadu run a range of programmes to improve the social and economic condition of tribal communities. These aim to protect customary rights, raise living standards, extend education and health care, and promote livelihoods while respecting tribal values and traditions.

11.1 Constitutional and institutional framework

The Constitution provides for special measures for STs through Articles 15(4) and 16(4) (reservation in education and public employment), Article 46 (promotion of their educational and economic interests and protection from exploitation) and Article 275(1) (grants to States for tribal welfare). In Tamil Nadu, the Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare Department, created in 1988, is the nodal department, working through the Directorate of Tribal Welfare, the Tamil Nadu Tribal Welfare Board and the Tribal Research Centre (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2024). The TRC was established at Udhagamandalam in 1983–84 under Tamil University, Thanjavur, and came under the Department in 1995; it conducts research on the 36 STs of the State, gives special attention to the PVTGs, and maintains the Tribal Museum at M. Palada (Directorate of Tribal Welfare, n.d.).

11.2 Major schemes relevant to the Kattunayakans

Table 5: Major welfare and development measures for PVTGs in the Nilgiris

Measure	Level	Main provisions
Tribal Sub Plan and ITDP	State	Earmarked funds for ST development; integrated programmes in tribal-majority areas
Development of PVTGs scheme (Conservation-cum-Development plans)	Centre and State	Habitat-level plans for housing, livelihood, health, education and culture of PVTGs
Forest Rights Act, 2006	Centre (implemented by State)	Individual, community and habitat rights over forest land and resources
Residential schools, hostels and scholarships	Centre and State	Free education, boarding, pre- and post-matric scholarships
Van Dhan Vikas Kendras and MSP for minor forest produce	Centre	Collective processing and sale of NTFP at fair prices
PM-JANMAN (2023)	Centre and State	Saturation of PVTG habitations with 11 critical interventions

Measure	Level	Main provisions
Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan (2024)	Centre and State	Saturation of tribal-majority villages through 25 interventions

11.3 Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM-JANMAN)

PM-JANMAN was launched on 15 November 2023, Janjatiya Gaurav Divas, at Khunti in Jharkhand, to improve the socio-economic condition of the 75 PVTGs across 18 States and one Union Territory (Vikaspedia, n.d.-b; Morung Express, 2024). The Union Cabinet approved it on 29 November 2023 with an outlay of ₹24,104 crore, of which ₹15,336 crore is the central share and ₹8,768 crore the State share, for the period 2023–24 to 2025–26 (Housing.com, 2023). The Ministry of Tribal Affairs is the nodal ministry, and the mission brings together 11 critical interventions implemented by nine ministries:

1. pucca houses under PMAY-Gramin (target about 4.9 lakh houses);
2. connecting roads;
3. piped water supply and community water supply;
4. mobile medical units;
5. hostels;
6. vocational education and skilling;
7. Anganwadi centres;
8. multipurpose centres;
9. household electrification, including solar power;
10. Van Dhan Vikas Kendras;
11. mobile towers.

The mission also seeks to saturate PVTG households with other entitlements, such as Aadhaar, community certificates, Jan Dhan accounts, Ayushman cards and forest rights titles. Habitation-level gaps are surveyed through a mobile application and the PM Gati Shakti portal.

In Tamil Nadu, PM-JANMAN covers all six PVTGs, including the Kattunayakans (Lok Sabha, 2024). A habitation survey reported to Parliament in February 2024 estimated 85,852 PVTG households in the State (Rajya Sabha, 2024). For the Kattunayakans of the Nilgiris, the mission's goals of secure housing, clean water, roads, electricity, health and livelihood are directly relevant. Successful adoption, however, depends on identifying every eligible household, overcoming the barriers of distance and terrain, and ensuring that benefits reach the intended recipients.

11.4 Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan

Launched on 2 October 2024 at Hazaribagh, Jharkhand, this programme extends the saturation approach to about 63,000 tribal-majority villages in 549 districts, with an outlay of ₹79,156 crore over five years and 25 interventions across 17 ministries (Vikaspedia, n.d.-c; JK Monitor, 2024). For the Nilgiris, it complements PM-JANMAN by covering tribal villages that include non-PVTG communities.

11.5 Assessment of effectiveness

The available evidence suggests that welfare programmes have opened real possibilities. Housing, residential schooling, scholarships, mobile health services and electrification have reached many Kattunayakan hamlets, and

community-led institutions such as AMS and ASHWINI show what is possible when Adivasis manage services themselves. At the same time, Ganesh et al. (2021) observe that many State benefits do not reach the PVTGs of Tamil Nadu. Four problems stand out:

- **Awareness and access.** Many families do not know their entitlements or lack the documents needed to claim them.
- **Implementation gaps.** Forest rights titles remain pending, relocation packages have been poorly delivered, and remote hamlets are served last.
- **Design mismatch.** Standard housing designs, Tamil-only instruction and individual land titles do not always fit the needs of a mobile, forest-based, multilingual community.
- **Time-bound funding.** PM-JANMAN was designed as a three-year mission ending in 2025–26; sustaining its assets and services will require continued State commitment.

The effectiveness of welfare measures for the Kattunayakans therefore depends less on the number of schemes than on the quality of delivery, the participation of the community and the recognition of their rights.

12. Findings

1. The Nilgiris is the only district where all six PVTGs of Tamil Nadu live, each with a distinct core area; the Kattunayakans and Paniyans are concentrated in the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks on the Kerala border.
2. The forest-dwelling Kattunayakans of the Nilgiris are a very small community, about 1,629 persons in 452 households in 44 settlements according to the TRC count of 2005, far fewer than the statewide Census figure for the Kattunayakan category suggests.
3. Their identity is bound up with the forest: honey gathering, NTFP collection, a forest-centred religion and a deep ecological knowledge of plants, bees and elephants.
4. Their livelihood has shifted from forest subsistence to a mixed economy of gathering, small farming and insecure wage labour, with forest produce sold largely through middlemen.
5. Insecure land and forest rights, conservation-related relocation from Mudumalai, low educational attainment, a heavy burden of disease including sickle cell disease, human–wildlife conflict and the weakening of customary institutions are the main obstacles the community faces.
6. Welfare programmes, especially PM-JANMAN, have widened access to housing and services, but their effectiveness is limited by low awareness, documentation gaps, remoteness, slow FRA implementation and designs that do not fit the community's way of life.

13. Suggestions

1. **Secure rights first.** Complete the recognition of individual, community and habitat rights under the FRA for Kattunayakan settlements, and ensure that any relocation is genuinely voluntary, fully compensated and followed by long-term support.
2. **Plan with the community.** Prepare habitation-level plans through special tribal gram sabhas, traditional headmen and organisations such as AMS, so that housing, water and roads suit local needs and settlement patterns.

3. **Make schooling bilingual and local.** Introduce mother-tongue support in the early grades, appoint Kattunayakan teachers and assistants, provide safe transport through forest areas, and link residential schools with family and cultural life.
4. **Strengthen health care.** Expand sickle cell screening, counselling and treatment, address anaemia and malnutrition through nutrition programmes, and support community-owned facilities such as the ASHWINI hospital and mobile medical units.
5. **Raise the value of forest livelihoods.** Organise honey and NTFP collectors into cooperatives and Van Dhan clusters, enforce minimum support prices, provide training in sustainable harvesting, processing and branding, and reduce dependence on middlemen.
6. **Reduce human–wildlife conflict.** Involve the community in early-warning systems and conservation work, and ensure prompt compensation for losses.
7. **Value traditional knowledge.** Document Kattunayakan language, oral traditions and ecological knowledge with the community's consent; recognise skills such as elephant care through permanent employment and training; and promote community-controlled cultural and eco-tourism that benefits the community directly.
8. **Improve data and monitoring.** Collect disaggregated data for the forest Kattunayakans of the Nilgiris and track scheme outcomes at the hamlet level, so that progress can be measured beyond the closing date of time-bound missions.

14. Conclusion

The study of the PVTGs of the Nilgiris, with special reference to the Kattunayakans, highlights a community defined by its long and intimate relationship with the forest. Through honey gathering, the collection of forest produce and a rich store of ecological knowledge, the Kattunayakans have sustained themselves and contributed to the conservation of one of India's most important forest landscapes.

Despite this heritage and local expertise, many Kattunayakans still struggle for decent housing, stable work, health care, education, financial security and access to basic amenities. Government welfare programmes and development initiatives, from the Tribal Sub Plan to PM-JANMAN, have created real opportunities to improve their quality of life through better health care, schooling, affordable housing and economic support. Access to public services, awareness of entitlements and efficient implementation, however, remain serious problems.

The social, economic and educational advancement of the Kattunayakans therefore needs sustained attention. Development plans must also protect their heritage, distinctive culture and customary relationship with the forest. A culturally sensitive, rights-based and participatory approach, in which the community itself shapes the programmes meant for it, offers the best path to combining heritage conservation with stable social and economic growth.

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