

---

## FOREST CONSERVATION POLICIES AND ECONOMIC CONDITION OF TRIBES IN TAMIL NADU

---

T. Praveena\*<sup>1</sup> and Dr. P. Shanmugam<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department o Economics, Bharathiar University.

<sup>1</sup>Ph. D. Research Scholar, Department of Economics, Bharathiar University.

Article Received: 10 May 2026, Article Revised: 30 May 2026, Published on: 20 June 2026

\*Corresponding Author: T. Praveena

Associate Professor, Department o Economics, Bharathiar University.

Doi: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.2980>

### ABSTRACT

*The Tribes are those who have been living in forest for millions of years and their livelihood depend on the forest resources. During 19th century there is no much restrictions on forest resources for tribes all over the country. Implementation of conservation policies during early 70's in India had a positive effects on the density of forest been improved from 17713 sq.kms to 26345 sq.kms in Tamil Nadu and also the population of tiger has been increased from 76 to 306. But the conservation policies made adverse negative effect on the economic condition of tribes due to the restrictions on forest access by government policies and programmes of the government such as construction of dams, expansion of forests, Forest Rights Act and Tiger Reserve Act . The main objective of the paper is to demonstrate the livelihood pattern of the tribes earlier and their present scenario in Tamil Nadu. Thus the study revealed that the economic activities of tribes shifted from forest based subsistence economy to labour work and MGNREGA because of the conservation policies. There is need of government initiatives like employment opportunities to the tribes in the forest department because historically tribes involved in protecting forest and wildlife and also the government should incorporate the tribes in part of conservation policies rather than displacement.*

**KEYWORDS:** Tribe, Conservation Policies, Economic Condition.

### INTRODUCTION

Tribes are indigenous communities who traditionally depend on forests and natural resources for their livelihood, culture, and survival. They possess distinct social, economic, and cultural

characteristics that differentiate them from the mainstream population (Xaxa, 2011). Tribal communities have historically maintained a close relationship with forests and have relied on forest resources for food, shelter, medicine, fuel, and income generation. In India, Scheduled Tribes constitute about 8.6 percent of the total population and are predominantly concentrated in forested and hilly regions (Census of India, 2011).

Tamil Nadu is home to several tribal communities, including the Irula, Toda, Kota, Malayali, Kurumba, Kattunayakan, Paniya, Malasar, and Soliga. These communities have traditionally practiced hunting and gathering, shifting cultivation, livestock grazing, honey collection, and the collection of non-timber forest products. Forests have not only served as a source of livelihood but have also played a significant role in shaping their social organization, cultural practices, and traditional knowledge systems (Bétéille, 1998).

The increasing concern for environmental conservation led to the enactment of several forest and wildlife protection laws in India. The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, Project Tiger (1973), Forest Conservation Act, 1980, and Forest Rights Act, 2006 have significantly influenced forest governance and biodiversity conservation. These policies have contributed to ecological improvements through the protection of forests and wildlife habitats (Government of India, 2006). In Tamil Nadu, conservation initiatives have resulted in an increase in forest cover from 17,713 sq. km to 26,345 sq. km and a substantial increase in tiger population from 76 in 2006 to 306 in 2022.

Despite these achievements, conservation policies have also affected tribal livelihoods. Restrictions on forest access, limitations on resource extraction, relocation programmes, and increased wildlife protection measures have altered traditional livelihood systems. Consequently, many tribal households have shifted from forest-based subsistence activities to wage labour, government welfare programmes, and alternative income-generating activities. Therefore, it is important to examine the implications of conservation policies on the economic conditions and livelihood patterns of tribal communities in Tamil Nadu.

### **Review of Literature**

The Forest Conservation Act of 1980 played a significant role in reducing forest diversion and promoting environmental protection. However, Gadgil and Guha (1995) argued that centralized forest governance often ignored the customary rights of forest-dependent communities. They suggested that community participation is essential for achieving sustainable forest management.

Béteille (1998) highlighted that indigenous communities possess unique socio-cultural characteristics and traditional ecological knowledge that contribute significantly to environmental sustainability. The author argued that conservation strategies should recognize tribal rights and indigenous knowledge rather than treating local communities as threats to biodiversity conservation.

The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and Project Tiger introduced a new approach to wildlife conservation in India. According to Kothari, Pathak, and Vania (2000), protected area management often resulted in restrictions on traditional resource use by local communities. While these measures helped conserve biodiversity, they also created conflicts between conservation objectives and livelihood needs.

Shahabuddin and Rangarajan (2007) examined the implications of protected areas for indigenous communities in India. Their study found that conservation policies frequently limited access to forest resources, resulting in livelihood insecurity among tribal populations. The authors emphasized the importance of participatory conservation approaches that involve local communities in decision-making processes.

Xaxa (2011) observed that tribal communities in India have historically maintained a close association with forests and natural resources. Forests provide food, fuel, fodder, medicine, and employment opportunities for tribal households. The study emphasized that tribal identity, culture, and economic activities are strongly linked to forest ecosystems. However, modern conservation and development policies have altered traditional livelihood systems and increased the vulnerability of tribal populations.

## **OBJECTIVE**

The main objective is to demonstrate the livelihood pattern of the tribes earlier and their present scenario in Tamil Nadu.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study is based entirely on secondary data collected from various sources such as Census Reports, Forest Survey of India Reports, Tiger Census Reports, Ministry of Tribal Affairs publications, National Tiger Conservation Authority reports, government documents, research articles, books and published literature related to tribal livelihoods and conservation policies. The collected information has been analyzed using descriptive methods. Trends in tribal population, forest cover and tiger population have been examined. Furthermore,

changes in livelihood patterns before and after conservation intervention have been analyzed through comparative assessment of socio-economic indicators.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

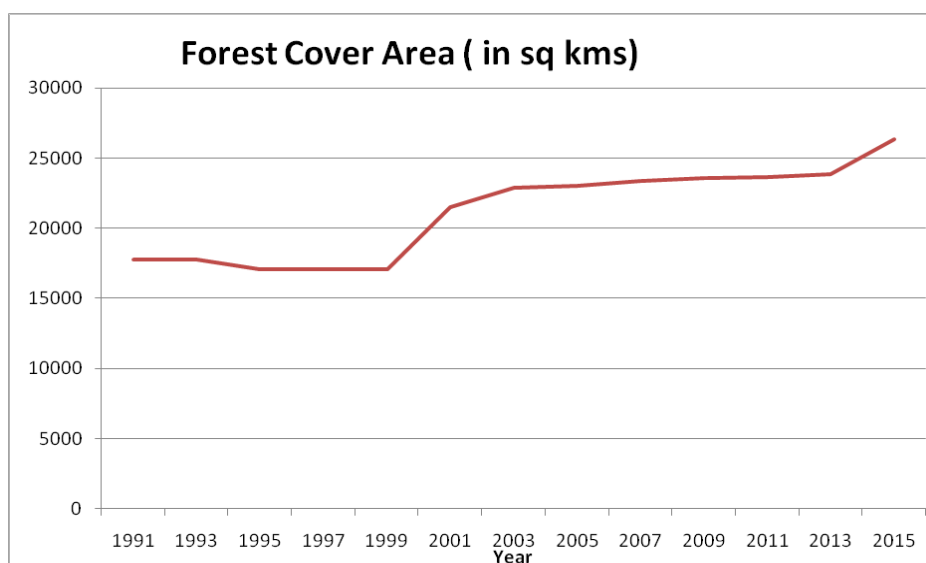
This section examines the impact of conservation policies on tribal communities in Tamil Nadu. The findings are presented through an analysis of tribal population trends, forest cover, tiger conservation achievements, and changes in livelihood patterns before and after conservation interventions.

**Table 1: Decadal Tribal Population of Tamil Nadu.**

Census Year	ST Population in Tamil Nadu	Percentage of Total Population
1971	2,52,000	0.7
1981	4,50,000	0.8
1991	5,74,194	1.03
2001	6,51,321	1.04
2011	7,94,697	1.10

Source: Census Report

The table 1 indicates a continuous increase in the Scheduled Tribe population in Tamil Nadu during the period 1971–2011. The tribal population increased from 2.52 lakh in 1971 to 7.95 lakh in 2011. Similarly, the percentage of Scheduled Tribes in the total population increased from 0.7 percent to 1.10 percent. The growth reflects demographic expansion and improved identification of tribal communities through successive census operation



**Figure 1: Forest Cover Area in Tamil Nadu.**

Source: Forest Survey of India

The figure 1 shows the trend in forest cover area in Tamil Nadu between 1991 and 2015. Forest cover increased from 17,713 sq. km in 1991 to 26,345 sq. km in 2015, indicating significant improvement in forest conservation. A slight decline was observed during the period 1995–1999 due to factors such as encroachment, forest fires, and illegal extraction. However, forest cover increased steadily after 1999 due to afforestation programmes and conservation initiatives.

**Table 3: Tiger Population in Tamil Nadu.**

Year	Tiger Population
2006	76
2010	163
2014	229
2018	264
2022	306

Source: Tiger Census 2022

The table 3 reveals a substantial increase in tiger population in Tamil Nadu between 2006 and 2022. The number of tigers increased from 76 in 2006 to 306 in 2022. This growth reflects the success of Project Tiger, habitat protection, anti-poaching measures, and effective wildlife management practices. The establishment and strengthening of tiger reserves have significantly contributed to tiger conservation.

**Table 4: Positive Changes in Tribal Livelihoods and Forest-Based Practices Before and After Conservation Interventions. (2000–2026)**

Aspect	Before 2000	Present Situation (2000–2026)
Housing Pattern	Scattered forest settlements	Semi-settled colonies and relocation villages
Food Security	Forest foods supported subsistence	Greater dependence on PDS and purchased food
Education & Health Access	Very limited	Improved access in some relocated settlements
Relationship with Forest Department	Limited administrative interference	Frequent monitoring and conservation regulation
Income Source	Forest-based subsistence economy	Mixed economy: labour work + government schemes

Source: Compiled from Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2006), NTCA Guidelines, Current Conservation (2020), IRAC Report (2022), and studies on tribal livelihoods and relocation in Sathyamangalam and South Indian tiger reserves

The table 4 highlights several positive changes in the socio-economic conditions of tribal communities between the pre-2000 period and the present period (2000–2026). Before 2000, tribal households predominantly lived in scattered forest settlements with limited access to basic amenities such as education, healthcare, transportation, and government services. Their livelihoods were largely dependent on forest resources, and food security was mainly supported through the collection of forest produce and subsistence activities.

In the present period, many tribal communities have experienced improvements in access to education and healthcare facilities, particularly in relocated or semi-settled villages. Housing conditions have also improved in some areas through the establishment of resettlement colonies and government-supported housing schemes. Food security has been strengthened through the Public Distribution System (PDS) and other welfare programs, reducing dependence on seasonal forest resources. In addition, livelihood opportunities have become more diversified through wage employment, MGNREGA, self-help groups, and government assistance programs. Increased interaction with the Forest Department has also facilitated access to conservation-related employment opportunities and welfare initiatives. These developments indicate a gradual integration of tribal communities into broader socio-economic development processes.

**Table 5: Negative Changes in Tribal Livelihoods and Forest-Based Practices Before and After Conservation Interventions. (2000–2026)**

Aspect	Before 2000	Present Situation (2000–2026)
Forest Access	Mostly open and customary access to forests	Restricted and regulated access under wildlife protection laws
Main Livelihood	Hunting-gathering, honey collection, shifting cultivation, grazing	Wage labour, MGNREGA, eco-tourism work, small farming, welfare dependence
Forest Produce Collection	Free collection of honey, tubers, firewood, medicinal plants	Limited collection with forest department regulation
Agriculture	Traditional millet cultivation and subsistence farming	Reduced cultivation area; dependence on market economy
Grazing	Common inside forest regions	Grazing restrictions increased in protected areas
Mobility Inside Forest	Relatively unrestricted	Controlled movement with permits and monitoring
Migration	Very low seasonal migration	Increased migration for wage employment
Cultural Practices	Strong forest-centered rituals and traditions	Gradual decline due to displacement and modernization
Human–	Lower due to traditional	Increased crop damage and livestock

Wildlife Conflict	coexistence	loss
Land Rights	Mostly customary, undocumented rights	FRA claims and legal struggles for land recognition

*Source: Compiled from Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2006), NTCA Guidelines, Current Conservation (2020), IRAC Report (2022), and studies on tribal livelihoods and relocation in Sathyamangalam and South Indian tiger reserves.*

The table 5 reveals significant negative changes in the livelihood patterns and socio-economic conditions of tribal communities between the pre-2000 period and the present period (2000–2026). Before 2000, tribal households enjoyed relatively unrestricted access to forests and depended heavily on traditional livelihood activities such as hunting-gathering, honey collection, shifting cultivation, grazing, and the collection of minor forest produce. Forest resources served as the primary source of food, income, and cultural identity.

In contrast, the present period is characterized by increasing restrictions on forest access due to wildlife protection and conservation policies. Traditional livelihood activities have gradually declined, forcing tribal households to depend on wage labour, government welfare schemes, and other non-forest occupations. Restrictions on grazing, reduced access to forest produce, controlled mobility within forests, and increasing human–wildlife conflicts have further affected their livelihood security. Moreover, cultural practices associated with forest life have weakened due to displacement and modernization, while issues related to land rights continue despite the implementation of the Forest Rights Act.

The study reveals a complex relationship between conservation and tribal livelihoods. On one hand, conservation policies have successfully improved forest cover and tiger populations. On the other hand, these policies have transformed traditional livelihood systems that were historically dependent on forests. The findings indicate that conservation interventions produce both positive and negative outcomes. Improved access to education, healthcare, housing, and welfare programmes has enhanced living conditions. However, restrictions on forest access, displacement, cultural erosion and livelihood transformation have created new challenges. The results support the argument that conservation and development should not be treated as separate objectives. Sustainable conservation requires active participation of tribal communities, recognition of traditional ecological knowledge, and protection of livelihood rights.

## CONCLUSION

The study concludes that conservation policies in Tamil Nadu have significantly contributed to environmental protection and biodiversity conservation. Forest cover has increased substantially, and tiger populations have recovered successfully. These achievements demonstrate the effectiveness of conservation measures implemented over the past three decades.

However, conservation policies have also transformed the livelihood systems of tribal communities. While improvements in housing, education, healthcare, and welfare services have enhanced living conditions, restrictions on forest access, displacement, livelihood transformation, and cultural changes have created socio-economic challenges. Therefore, future conservation strategies should adopt an inclusive approach that balances biodiversity conservation with tribal welfare. Sustainable development can only be achieved when tribal communities are actively involved in conservation initiatives while their livelihood rights, cultural identity, and socio-economic well-being are protected.

## SUGGESTIONS

1. Greater forest based employment opportunities should be created to the tribes wildlife management programmes.
2. Community-based conservation approaches should be encouraged.
3. The tribes should be a part of the forest conservation measures.

## REFERENCES

1. B eteille, A. (1998). The idea of indigenous people. *Current Anthropology*, 39(2), 187–192.
2. Current Conservation. (2020). Community capacity and FRA implementation: Local factors mediating recognition of community forest rights in the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve of Tamil Nadu. *Current Conservation*, 14(4), 18–23.
3. Forest Survey of India. (1991, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015). India State of Forest Report. Dehradun: Forest Survey of India, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India.
4. Gadgil, M., & Guha, R. (1995). Ecology and equity: The use and abuse of nature in contemporary India. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.

5. Government of India. (2006). The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. New Delhi: Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
6. Kothari, A., Pathak, N., & Vania, F. (2000). Where communities care: Community-based wildlife and ecosystem management in South Asia. Pune: Kalpavriksh and IIED.
7. Kumar, S., Prasad, K. S., & Ramasamy, C. (2017). Sathyamangalam dilemma: Tribal relocation plan for tiger reserve expansion and the associated psychosocial problems. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Economic Research*, 2(12), 5751–5763.
8. Ministry of Tribal Affairs. (2014). Report of the High Level Committee on Socio-Economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India. New Delhi: Government of India.
9. National Tiger Conservation Authority & Wildlife Institute of India. (2023). Status of Tigers, Co-predators and Prey in India, 2022. *New Delhi*: National Tiger Conservation Authority, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India.
10. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (1971). Census of India 1971. New Delhi: Government of India.
11. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (1981). Census of India 1981. New Delhi: Government of India.
12. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (1991). Census of India 1991. New Delhi: Government of India.
13. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2001). Census of India 2001. New Delhi: Government of India.
14. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2011). Census of India 2011. New Delhi: Government of India.
15. Shahabuddin, G., & Rangarajan, M. (Eds.). (2007). Making conservation work: Securing biodiversity in this new century. Ranikhet, India: Permanent Black.
16. Xaxa, V. (2011). Tribes and development in India: The contemporary debate. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.