

HOUSEHOLD AND COMMUNITY DECISION-MAKING: A STUDY ON MALAYALI TRIBAL WOMEN IN TAMIL NADU

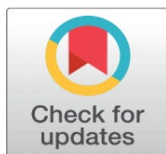
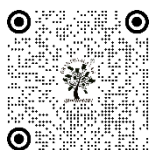
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ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted to analyze the decision-making pattern among Malayali tribal women in Tamil Nadu. Dharmapuri District was selected purposefully because, among the districts in Tamil Nadu, it is one of the highest in Malayali tribal population. Tribal women play a vital role in household management, agricultural activities, livestock care, financial management, and social responsibilities. However, their participation in decision-making processes has undergone significant changes due to education, self-help group participation, extension interventions, and socio-economic development. An ex-post facto research design was adopted for the study. Three tribal villages namely Sitheri, Manjavadi, and Sitlingi were purposively selected, and a total of 120 Malayali tribal women respondents were chosen through purposive sampling technique. The study focused on assessing women's involvement in household, agricultural, economic, educational, healthcare, and community-related decisions. The findings indicated that tribal women had comparatively higher participation in household and child-related decisions, while their involvement in financial, land-related, and community-level decisions remained moderate due to socio-cultural restrictions and limited resource access. Participation in self-help groups, literacy improvement, and exposure to agricultural extension programmes positively influenced their confidence and decision-making ability. The study concludes that strengthening extension services, women-centered development programmes, education, and livelihood opportunities can further enhance the empowerment and decision-making capacity of Malayali tribal women.

Keywords: Malayali Tribal Women, Decision-Making Pattern, Empowerment, Agricultural Extension, Tribal Development, Tamil Nadu



1. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture extension plays a crucial role in improving the socio-economic conditions of rural and tribal communities through the dissemination of scientific knowledge, modern technologies, and sustainable livelihood practices. Tribal communities in India, particularly the Malayali tribes of Tamil Nadu, primarily depend on agriculture and forest-based activities for their livelihood. However, they continue to face several developmental challenges such as poor infrastructure, low literacy, inadequate access to markets, climate vulnerability, and limited exposure to modern agricultural technologies. These constraints affect their livelihood security and overall development.

Women play a significant role in tribal households and agricultural activities. Malayali tribal women actively participate in farming operations, household management, livestock care, collection of forest products, financial management, and social activities. Over time, noticeable changes have occurred in their decision-making patterns due to education, economic participation, self-help groups, and exposure to extension programs. Agarwal (1994) highlighted that women's participation in household and agricultural decision-making improves family welfare and livelihood security. Similarly, Meena (2011) reported that extension interventions and self-help group participation enhanced women's involvement in economic and social decision-making among tribal communities.

Despite these developments, tribal women still face challenges such as limited access to resources, low educational status, and restricted participation in major family and community decisions. Therefore, understanding the decision-making patterns of Malayali tribal women in household, agricultural, economic, and social activities is essential for designing suitable extension and development strategies. Hence, the present study assumes significance in analyzing the changing decision-making patterns and extension-related dimensions of suitable livelihood practices among Malayali tribal women. With this background, the following objectives were formed.

2. OBJECTIVES

- 1) To analyze the decision-making pattern of Malayali tribal women in household, agricultural, and livelihood activities.
- 2) To assess the level of participation of Malayali tribal women in family, economic, educational, and community-related decisions.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Raj and Anitha (2024) found that land rights and access to productive resources improved tribal women's empowerment and participation in family and livelihood-related decisions in Kerala tribal communities.

Mal and Saikia (2024) analyzed the empowerment status of tribal women in India and reported that tribal women increasingly participate in household and livelihood decisions, though socio-economic inequalities still restrict their role in major community-level decisions.

Karthihai Selvi and Muthupandi (2021) reported that tribal women in Tamil Nadu contributed significantly to household and economic activities, yet they continued to face challenges related to education, employment, and empowerment. The study emphasized that tribal women played an important role in sustaining family livelihoods despite socio-economic disadvantages.

Jaiswal, Bhara, and Jaiswal (2022) studied the ethnomedical and health practices of Malayali tribes in Tamil Nadu and found that Malayali tribal women actively participated in family healthcare decisions and indigenous treatment practices. The study highlighted that women associated health with nutrition, food habits, and household well-being, while traditional healthcare practices were gradually declining due to modernization and state interventions.

Nisha and Asokhan (2016) examined the participation of tribal women in developmental programmes in Nilgiris District and found that social taboos, traditions, and superstitious beliefs limited women's active participation in development activities. The study suggested strengthening extension efforts and women's organizations to improve participation and empowerment among tribal women.

Mallick et al. (2025) found that Self-Help Groups (SHGs) support tribal women to become financially independent and socially active. After joining SHGs, women showed better savings habits, more job opportunities and greater roles in community decisions.

Krishnakumari et al. (2025) highlight that education plays a major role in transforming tribal women’s lives. Tribal women who receive education are more likely to participate in public discussions, governance and economic activities, changing traditional family hierarchies.

Manna (2024) states that tribal women are slowly gaining equality in decision-making at home and in community activities. Traditionally restricted to household chores, many now participate in income-generating work, which improves their status within families and villages.

Tribal women take on multiple roles at home and in the community, but they provide household care and subsistence activities, even though they are financially more important to the family and yet have very little control over social and material resources (Bhattacharya and Murmu 2019).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design adopted for this study is ex-post facto in nature. Since the study examines the decision- making pattern of Malayali tribal women and the social, economic, and cultural changes that have already taken place, over which the researcher has no control, the ex-post facto design is considered appropriate. The design helps in analyzing changes in women’s decision -making roles and responsibilities by comparing the Decadal changes past (“then”) and the present (“now”).

4.2. SAMPLE SELECTION AND STUDY AREA

Dharmapuri District is located in the north -western part of Tamil Nadu and act as a transition zone between the plains of Tamil Nadu and the Karnataka plateau. The district is bounded by Krishnagiri District in the east, and Karnataka in the west. It covers an area of about 4,497.77 sq.km and experiences a tropical semi- arid climate with an average annual rainfall of 850- 910 mm. The district is drought- prone and mainly depends on rain-fed agriculture supported by the Vaniyar and Chinnar rivers and different soil types such as red loam, black and sandy loam soils.

The study was conducted in Dharmapuri District, where a considerable population of Malayali tribes resides in hilly and semi- forest regions. The tribal village of Sitheri, Manjavadi, and Sitlingi were purposively selected for the study as they represent traditional Malayali tribal settlements and the have experienced significant social and economic changes over time.

The respondents of the study comprised Malayali tribal women residing in the selected villages of Dharmapuri District. A total of 120 respondents were selected for the study using a purposive sampling technique. The respondents were chosen to ensure the inclusion of women who possessed sufficient life experience to compare their past and present roles and were actively involved in household, agriculture, economic, social, and family-related activities. The study particularly focused on analyzing the decision- making patterns of Malayali tribal women in various activities such as household management, agriculture, financial matters, children’s education, healthcare and other day-to-day family and community activities. The selected respondents were also capable of expressing their perceptions regarding social change and future aspirations in a meaningful manner.

5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1

Table 1 Distribution of respondents according to their Decision-Making pattern													
S.No	Activity	Self-Decision		Self-Decision		Consult Family		Consult Family		Consult Others		Consult Others	
		The n	Percentage	No w	Percentage	The n	Percentage	No w	Percentage	The n	Percentage	No w	Percentage
A. Crop husbandry													

1	Crop selection/ Variety	8	6.67	14	11.67	12	10	9	7.5	15	12.5	11	9.17
2	Fertilizer application	3	2.5	7	5.83	6	5	8	6.67	18	15	14	11.67
3	Plant protection	4	3.33	12	10	5	4.17	6	5	17	14.17	8	6.67
4	Irrigation	3	2.5	9	7.5	6	5	5	4.17	15	12.5	12	10
5	Harvesting	4	3.33	10	8.33	7	5.83	6	5	14	11.67	11	9.17
6	Post-harvest	5	4.17	7	5.83	4	3.33	4	3.33	13	10.83	14	11.67
7	Value addition	2	1.67	5	4.17	3	2.5	4	3.33	12	10	14	11.67
8	Storage	1	0.83	4	3.33	3	2.5	5	4.17	9	7.5	8	6.67
9	Marketing	0	0	4	3.33	2	1.67	3	2.5	12	10	8	6.67
B. Animal husbandry													
1	Cattle	12	10	13	10.83	9	7.5	8	6.67	11	9.17	10	8.33
2	Poultry	11	9.17	13	10.83	8	6.67	7	5.83	10	8.33	10	8.33
3	Goatery	11	9.17	12	10	7	5.83	7	5.83	11	9.17	10	8.33
C. Other enterprises													
1	Sericulture	2	1.67	4	3.33	3	2.5	6	5	8	6.67	12	10
2	Vermicompost	4	3.33	6	5	5	4.17	9	7.5	10	8.33	18	15
D. Home activities													
1	Purchase household items	10	8.33	4	3.33	9	7.5	11	9.17	4	3.33	6	5
2	Nutritious food	9	7.5	3	2.5	8	6.67	10	8.33	5	4.17	6	5
3	Education of children	12	10	5	4.17	7	5.83	9	7.5	3	2.5	4	3.33
4	Family functions	10	8.33	4	3.33	8	6.67	9	7.5	4	3.33	5	4.17
5	Social functions	5	4.17	2	1.67	5	4.17	5	4.17	2	1.67	3	2.5

Decision-making pattern, Self-decision

Figure 1

1. Self Decision: Highest & Lowest (Then vs Now)

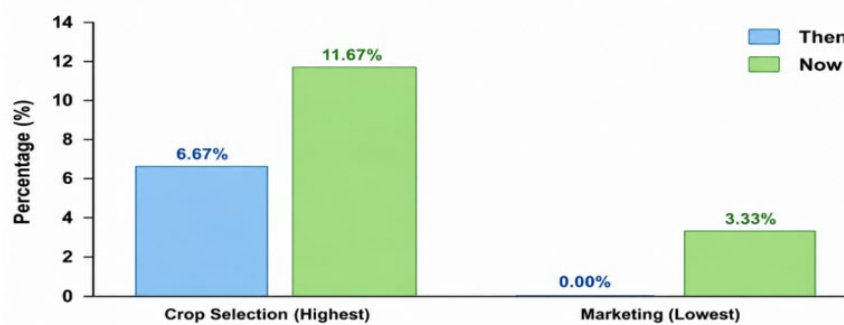


Figure 1 Decision-Making Pattern, Self-Decision

In figure-1 Results indicate increased confidence in self-management of crop husbandry, major improvements in activities such as crop selection, plant protection, and irrigation management, increased decision-making in harvesting and post-harvest work. Although decisions in marketing, storage, and value addition are still limited and improving, and overall, a shift toward more independence and confidence in farm decision making.

Decision making pattern, Consult Family

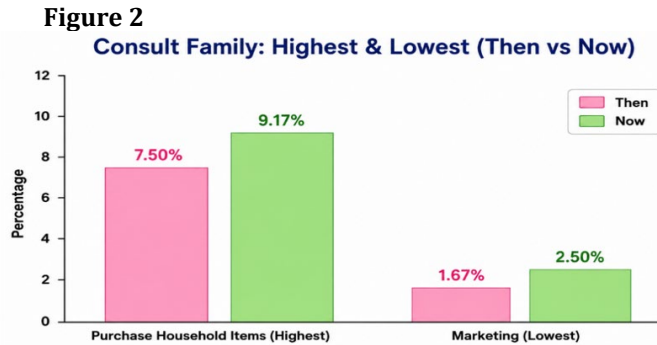


Figure 2 Decision Making Pattern, Consult Family

In Figure-2, the outcomes reveal that self-decision making has increased across the years, especially in productive activities, and that respondents are more confident to make decisions, especially in farming activities where experience and exposure has increased. But the highest activity has a sharp rise in self-decision making and the lowest activities still remain with limited independence, which indicates areas where support and confidence building are required.

Decision making, consulting others

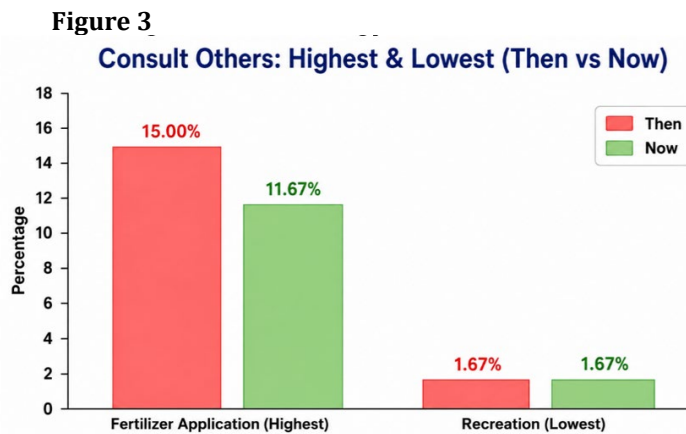


Figure 3 Decision-Making Pattern, Consult Others

Figure-3 shows, that this increased participation in major decisions by the partner suggests increasing independence from parents-in-law and extended kin groups for adult children living with them. There still remained a considerable amount of reliance upon family consultation about household or socially sensitive issues; slightly more than half indicated that they would consult other members of the family on important decision-making.

6. CONCLUSION

From the study, it is found that the Malayali tribal women are still the key players in family and agricultural aspects and emerging to become active participants in different family and livelihood issues. There is a significant positive changes found in their involvement in household management, children's education, health care, agricultural aspects owing to increase in their literacy, economic participation, self-help group activities, involvement in extension programs. Though, their participation in financial, property related, community level issues is still low as compared to family and agriculture levels due to the existing socio-cultural aspects, lower levels of education and lower access to productive

resources. The study also pointed out that the agricultural extension services and women focused developmental programs enhanced the awareness, confidence and leadership qualities among tribal women. Increasing the extension services, providing skills development opportunities, income generating activities, institutions could make an appreciable progress in improving the socio-economic empowerment and decision-making ability among Malayali tribal women. Hence, policy makers and extension workers need to prepare location specific gender sensitive programs to achieve an inclusive tribal development and secure livelihoods among tribal people in Tamil Nadu.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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