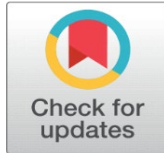


INNOVATION IN INDIGENOUS TOURISM: LESSONS FROM EN OORU TRIBAL HERITAGE VILLAGE, WAYANAD, KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous tourism plays a crucial role in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of tribal communities. This research paper explores the En Ooru tribal heritage village project in Wayanad, Kerala, and its impact on tribal development and indigenous tourism in the region. The study highlights the key characteristics of the En Ooru project, including its emphasis on preserving indigenous architecture, tribal customs, and traditions. Furthermore, the research explores the economic and socio-cultural impact of the En Ooru project. The village has become a major tourist attraction, drawing a significant number of visitors who contribute to the local economy. The paper also discusses the collaboration between the Kerala Tourism and Scheduled Tribe Development Department, which has been crucial to the success of the En Ooru project. This collaboration highlights the importance of governmental support and partnership in promoting indigenous tourism and tribal development. The findings from this study can serve as a foundation for future research and inform policymakers and stakeholders on strategies to enhance indigenous tourism and uplift tribal communities in Kerala.

Keywords: Indigenous Tourism, Heritage Village, Kerala Tourism, En Ooru

1. INTRODUCTION

Kerala is home to a diverse range of tribal communities, each with their unique traditions, customs, and heritage. The preservation and promotion of indigenous tourism hold immense potential for safeguarding these cultural practices and offering economic opportunities to these communities. It's worth noting that despite the state's tribal population being less affected by poverty compared to the national average, they still make significant contributions to the local economy

[Thimm & Karlaganis \(2020\)](#). Kerala's tribal communities are an integral part of the region's social fabric, contributing to its cultural diversity and historical legacy. To ensure the realization of indigenous communities' aspirations and priorities, it is crucial to amplify indigenous voices and involve them actively in shaping resilient development for their future [Hutchison et al. \(2021\)](#).

Indigenous tourism plays a crucial role in not only providing economic empowerment but also in safeguarding and promoting the cultural heritage of Kerala's tribal communities. By unveiling and showcasing the tribal heritage of Kerala, responsible and sustainable indigenous tourism can attract visitors who are seeking authentic experiences and facilitate meaningful cultural exchange [Scheyvens et al. \(2021a\)](#), [Ruhanen & Whitford \(2019\)](#). Wayanad, in particular, has a substantial potential tourism market, and indigenous tourism can serve as a sustainable model for the region. Initiatives like En Ooru, which focuses on preserving and promoting the unique culture of Kerala's tribal communities, can contribute to this sustainable approach [En Ooru \(n.d.-a\)](#), [Sibi & Swamy \(2015\)](#). The United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO Inclusive Recovery Guide \(2021\)](#) recognizes cultural tourism as a significant component of international tourism consumption, accounting for a substantial portion of tourism arrivals worldwide [Richards \(2018\)](#).

In the context of Kerala's tribal heritage, the decision to revitalize indigenous tourism holds paramount importance. Kerala is home to a diverse range of officially recognized indigenous groups, contributing to its multicultural society. By placing emphasis on Kerala's tribal heritage, indigenous tourism can play a pivotal role in preserving and celebrating this abundant cultural diversity [Camargo et al. \(2022\)](#). The revitalization of indigenous tourism in Kerala presents a unique opportunity to showcase the distinctiveness of tribal traditions, customs, art forms, and knowledge systems. To successfully revive indigenous tourism and unveil the tribal heritage of the region, it is crucial to have a comprehensive understanding of past and current research in the field. The purpose of this research is to investigate and gain insights into the influence and prospects of indigenous tourism in Kerala, specifically concentrating on the En Ooru tribal heritage village project in Wayanad. The primary objective is to assess the strategies and initiatives implemented in revitalizing indigenous tourism, preserving, and promoting tribal culture and traditions, and fostering the overall development of the region.

2. METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative research design was employed to gather comprehensive information and insights. The data collection process encompassed multiple methods, including observation, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Direct observations were conducted at the En Ooru tribal heritage village project in Wayanad, allowing for a first-hand exploration of the facilities, cultural performances, and interactions between tribal community members and tourists. This on-site observation provided a profound understanding of the project's implementation and the experiences associated with it.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with various key stakeholders, including tribal community members, project organizers, government officials, and tourists. These interviews aimed to gather diverse perspectives on the impact of the project, challenges encountered, perceived benefits, and recommendations for further enhancements. Additionally, focus group discussions were organized with tribal community members and tourists to delve into their insights and perceptions regarding the En Ooru project and indigenous tourism in general. Through these

discussions, participants shared their experiences, opinions, and suggestions, contributing valuable information to the study. To complement the primary data, existing literature, reports, and documentation concerning the En Ooru project, similar initiatives in Kerala, and indigenous tourism in India were analysed. This secondary data analysis augmented the understanding of the research topic and provided a broader context for the findings and conclusions of the study.

The sampling strategy implemented in this study was purposive sampling, which involved the purposeful selection of key informants and stakeholders with expertise in the En Ooru project and indigenous tourism. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed to identify additional participants who could provide valuable insights into the research topic. Ethical considerations were duly addressed by obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring the protection of their confidentiality and privacy. Moreover, cultural sensitivities were taken into account throughout the research process, respecting the traditions and customs of the tribal communities involved.

The collected data, including observations, interviews, and focus group discussions, were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis using a qualitative approach. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyse key themes and patterns pertaining to the impact of the En Ooru project on indigenous tourism, cultural preservation, and community empowerment. This analytical process facilitated a deeper understanding of the data and allowed for the identification of significant findings and implications.

3. EXPLORING KERALA'S TRIBAL HERITAGE

Kerala is renowned for its vibrant cultural festivals and events that showcase the diverse tribal traditions prevalent in the region. Among these celebrations is Attukal Pongala, held in Thiruvananthapuram, where women from different communities come together to offer Pongala, a sweet dish made of rice, jaggery, and coconut, to the goddess Attukalamma. Another significant cultural fest is Theyyam, a ritualistic art form predominantly practiced in North Kerala. Theyyam performers, predominantly men from lower castes, intricately adorn themselves with vibrant costumes and makeup to portray various deities and spirits. Many of these performances draw inspiration from tribal folklore and traditions, adding an enriching tribal touch to the festivities. Furthermore, the harvest festival of Onam, celebrated throughout Kerala, showcases a vibrant display of traditional dances and music performances, with some of these artistic expressions rooted in tribal traditions.

Kerala provides a remarkable platform for showcasing the exquisite craftsmanship of tribal artisans through various crafts and handicrafts exhibitions. One notable example is the Uravu Bamboo Village, situated in the Wayanad district, which is renowned for its bamboo crafts and products. Skilled artisans from the tribal communities in the area contribute their expertise to the creation of unique and intricate bamboo creations found in Uravu. Another remarkable craft is the Aranmula Kannadi, a distinctive type of mirror known for its intricate designs and exceptional craftsmanship. These mirrors are produced in Aranmula, with contributions from tribal artisans who bring their skills to the manufacturing process. Moreover, Kerala Tourism organizes handicrafts fairs across the state, providing a platform for visitors to experience and purchase products crafted by tribal artisans from different parts of Kerala. These fairs play a vital role in supporting the local tribal communities and preserving their traditional crafts for future generations.

4. INDIGENOUS TOURISM: UNVEILING KERALA'S TRIBAL HERITAGE

In recent years, there has been a significant rise in attention and recognition towards indigenous tourism and the preservation of Kerala's tribal heritage. This particular form of tourism focuses on showcasing and safeguarding the cultural traditions, heritage, and lifestyles of indigenous communities in the region. Wayanad, a district in Kerala, India, has taken various initiatives and established programs to promote indigenous ecotourism and provide a platform for visitors to engage with the state's rich tribal heritage. One remarkable development in this endeavour is the creation of En Ooru, the first tribal heritage village in Kerala. En Ooru is situated in Pookode, Wayanad district, spanning 25 acres on the slope of a hillock. It consists of a cluster of traditional tribal huts with hay roofs, set against the backdrop of majestic hills. En Ooru offers an immersive experience for visitors, enabling them to witness and learn about the vibrant culture and traditions of indigenous tribal communities in Kerala.

The promotion of indigenous tourism in Kerala aims to offer visitors meaningful experiences that encompass indigenous cultures and heritage, while also prioritizing human rights, community participation, business development, and ecological sustainability [Thimm & Karlaganis \(2020\)](#). These initiatives recognize the significance of respecting the rights and traditions of indigenous communities and actively involving them in the planning and management of tourism activities. Alongside the establishment of the tribal heritage village, various attractions and programs contribute to the unveiling of Kerala's tribal heritage. One such program is the Tribal Heritage Programme, which forms part of the ecotourism initiatives. It provides visitors with insights into the lives of tribal communities through visits to tribal hamlets and the Tribal Heritage Museum [Thekkady's Indigenous Tribal Heritage Program - 5 Star Resort in Kerala. \(n.d.\)](#). These experiences offer a deeper understanding of the indigenous way of life, traditions, and ancient sightings of the tribes [Thekkady's Indigenous Tribal Heritage Program - 5 Star Resort in Kerala. \(n.d.\)](#). These efforts align with the principles and declarations of the United Nations regarding the rights of indigenous peoples [Carr et al. \(2016a\)](#), demonstrating a commitment to creating sustainable and mutually beneficial partnerships between indigenous communities and the tourism industry. This approach ensures the preservation and celebration of their cultural heritage.

Indigenous tourism in Kerala seeks to provide visitors with meaningful experiences that honour indigenous cultures and heritage. These initiatives prioritize human rights, community involvement, business development, and ecological sustainability. Through programs like the Tribal Heritage Programme, visitors gain a deeper understanding of the indigenous way of life, traditions, and ancient sights, fostering sustainable partnerships with indigenous communities and upholding their cultural heritage.

5. ROLE OF INDIGENOUS TOURISM TO REVITALIZATION OF RURAL ECONOMY

Indigenous tourism in Kerala plays a pivotal role in empowering tribal communities, offering them opportunities for economic development, cultural preservation, and self-determination. It serves as a catalyst for revitalizing indigenous communities and enabling them to regain control over their cultural heritage and natural resources. Through active participation in tourism activities,

indigenous communities can generate income, create employment opportunities, and improve their overall well-being.

Tourism provides a platform for tribal communities in Kerala to showcase their unique cultural traditions, such as arts, crafts, music, dance, and storytelling, to visitors [UNWTO Inclusive Recovery Guide \(2021\)](#). This not only helps to preserve and promote their cultural heritage but also strengthens their sense of pride, identity, and belonging. By sharing their knowledge and experiences with visitors, indigenous peoples can educate others about their history, values, and worldviews, fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Furthermore, the economic benefits derived from indigenous tourism contribute to the sustainable development of tribal communities. The income generated from tourism activities can be reinvested in community projects, education, healthcare, and infrastructure, leading to improved living standards. By actively participating in the tourism industry, indigenous communities gain a greater degree of control over their resources and have a voice in decision-making processes that affect their land and culture.

One of the key benefits of indigenous tourism in Kerala is the enhancement of socio-economic opportunities for tribal communities. Through their engagement in tourism-related activities, tribal communities can experience income generation, job creation, and overall economic development [Indigenous tourism: Empowering a sustainable future - Checkfront. \(n.d.\)](#). The demand for indigenous products, services, and cultural experiences created by tourism provides tribal communities with opportunities to market their unique offerings [Village Life Experience \(n.d.\)](#). Indigenous-owned accommodations, restaurants, handicraft shops, and tour operators contribute to the local economy while directly benefiting tribal communities [Scheyvens et al. \(2021a\)](#). Moreover, indigenous tourism in Kerala stimulates the growth of ancillary industries and services, such as transportation, food production, and retail, generating indirect economic opportunities for tribal communities [Thimm & Karlaganis \(2020\)](#). Participation in tourism-related training programs and employment in the industry can also empower tribal community members by equipping them with new skills, improving their employability, and contributing to the socio-economic development of their community [Edward & Kumar \(2017\)](#).

Tourism initiatives in Kerala foster collaborations between indigenous communities, tourism authorities, and researchers, aiming to incorporate indigenous perspectives into the planning, management, and interpretation of cultural heritage sites [Carr et al. \(2016a\)](#). This collaborative approach ensures the authentic representation of tribal cultural heritage and grants indigenous communities control over the presentation and interpretation of their heritage [Carr et al. \(2016a\)](#). By engaging in cultural tourism, visitors have the opportunity to develop a profound understanding and appreciation for the diverse and vibrant tribal cultures of Kerala, thereby contributing to the preservation and promotion of tribal cultural heritage.

Indigenous tourism in Kerala empowers tribal communities in multiple ways. Firstly, it provides economic opportunities for them through income generation, job creation, and the marketing of indigenous products and services. This helps to improve their overall socio-economic well-being. Secondly, indigenous tourism plays a crucial role in preserving and promoting tribal cultural heritage by allowing communities to share their knowledge and experiences with visitors. This not only fosters cross-cultural understanding and appreciation but also strengthens the sense of pride, identity, and belonging among tribal communities. Additionally,

indigenous tourism in Kerala ensures that tribal communities have a voice in tourism planning and decision-making processes, allowing them to actively participate in shaping the direction of tourism development. This promotes self-determination and gives indigenous communities control over how their heritage is presented and interpreted. Overall, indigenous tourism in Kerala contributes to the sustainable development and empowerment of tribal communities, fostering socio-economic opportunities while preserving and celebrating their unique cultural heritage.

6. CASE STUDY OF EN OORU TRIBAL HERITAGE VILLAGE IN WAYANAD

The En Ooru tribal heritage village project in Wayanad, Kerala, is an initiative led by the Government of Kerala to preserve and showcase the rich culture and traditions of the tribal communities in the region. This project has played a pivotal role in the overall development of Wayanad by promoting tribal development and contributing to the cultural and economic upliftment of the tribal communities. Situated in Pookode, Wayanad district, the En Ooru tribal heritage village spans over 25 acres of land on a picturesque hillock. The village comprises a cluster of traditional tribal huts with thatched roofs, providing visitors with an immersive experience to learn, appreciate, and engage with the tribal way of life.

The village offers a range of facilities to enhance the visitor experience. These include a tribal market, where tribal handicrafts and products are available, prototype tribal huts for exploration, a rain shelter for protection from the elements, a toilet block for convenience, and beautifully landscaped areas. An art and crafts workshop allows visitors to witness and participate in traditional tribal craftsmanship, while a shop introduces them to the world of tribal medicines. In addition to the village itself, there are associated enterprises aimed at supporting the heritage village's objectives. These include an agricultural nursery, which promotes sustainable farming practices, a medicinal nursery that cultivates indigenous medicinal plants, and a food processing unit that adds value to tribal agricultural produce.

The En Ooru project has played a vital role in fostering tribal development by offering the tribal communities a platform to proudly exhibit their heritage, cultural practices, art, and traditions. Through the preservation and promotion of their distinct identity, the project has effectively safeguarded Kerala's abundant cultural diversity. Moreover, it has significantly contributed to the socio-economic empowerment of the tribal communities by generating employment opportunities and income through various tourism activities [Varghese \(2022\)](#).

The En Ooru Tribal Heritage Village provides an exceptional opportunity for visitors to fully immerse themselves in tribal life and indulge in authentic tribal cuisines. The village offers a diverse range of attractions, including an open-air theatre where visitors can witness and appreciate the rich art forms of numerous tribes such as the Kurichya Tribe, Kuruma Tribe, Adiya Tribe, Hill Pulaya Tribe, Aranadan Tribe, Irular, Kadar, Kanikkaran, Kattunayakan, Kochuvelan, Koraga, Kurumba, Malai Arayan, Malai Pandaram, Vedan, Mannan, Maratti, Muthuvan, Paniyan, Ulladan, Urali Kuruma, Mala Vettuvan, Kurumbam, Mavilan, Cholanayikkan, and Karimpalan tribes. These captivating performances encompass a wide array of mesmerizing art forms, including Thudi Thalam, Mavilan Pattu, Tribal Archery, Thudi, and many more.

To enhance the overall experience, En Ooru offers two premium cafeterias that serve delectable tribal cuisines prepared from forest plants and edible tubers. These cafeterias not only aim to tantalize visitors' taste buds but also strive to promote and preserve the unique flavors of the tribal community. Alongside the tribal cuisines, the cafeterias also serve popular dishes from the Kerala region, providing visitors with a comprehensive culinary experience while immersing themselves in the vibrant tribal life of the village.

Furthermore, En Ooru goes beyond showcasing tribal heritage and offers additional support for the tribal beneficiaries of the project. The village provides a warehouse facility that plays a crucial role in the safe storage of products and materials crafted by tribal artisans and other individuals associated with the project. This warehouse serves as an essential resource for craftsmen, culinary experts, and stall operators within the village who require storage space for their products.

Upon arriving at En Ooru, visitors can expect comprehensive assistance from the efficient management team of the heritage village. The facilitation center acts as a hub for visitor services, ensuring their comfort and convenience. It also serves as a platform for learning about the tribal community and facilitates meaningful interactions with its members. Through these interactions, visitors gain valuable insights into the rich cultural heritage and traditions of the tribal population, fostering a deeper appreciation for their way of life. Additionally, by indulging in the culinary delights of En Ooru, visitors have the opportunity to contribute directly to the financial well-being of the tribal communities. Recognizing that food and flavors are integral to a community's culture, visitors can support the local tribes by savoring their cuisines. This unique aspect of the village allows visitors to explore and appreciate the ethnicity and cultural significance deeply rooted in the culinary traditions of the tribes.

The En Ooru project embodies several key characteristics that make it an exemplary initiative. One of its primary focuses is the preservation of indigenous architecture, tribal customs, and traditions, ensuring the safeguarding of the cultural heritage of the tribal communities [En Ooru \(n.d.-a\)](#). By immersing visitors in the village, it offers an authentic and immersive experience where they can witness and learn about the tribal way of life firsthand. A distinguishing feature of the project is its commitment to the active involvement and control of the tribal communities themselves. This participatory approach ensures that the tribal communities have a significant say in the management and operation of the heritage village [Varghese \(2022\)](#). By empowering the communities to take charge, the project fosters sustainability and maintains the authenticity of the cultural preservation efforts.

The need for tribal development projects in Kerala stems from the recognition of the unique challenges faced by tribal communities, including socio-economic disparities, marginalization, and limited access to basic amenities and opportunities. These projects aim to address these disparities and uplift the tribal communities by not only preserving their cultural heritage but also providing livelihood opportunities, promoting education, and ensuring their overall well-being [Varghese \(2022\)](#). The En Ooru project distinguishes itself from similar initiatives through its strong emphasis on tribal involvement and control, its impressive scale and infrastructure, and the successful collaboration between the Kerala Tourism and Scheduled Tribe Development Department. This project has garnered recognition and appreciation both within Kerala and from external sources. Anand Mahindra, the chairman of the Mahindra group, lauded the

remarkable work undertaken by Kerala Tourism in the En Ooru tribal heritage village project.

The impact of the En Ooru project on tribal development in Wayanad and Kerala has been remarkable. The village has emerged as a major tourist attraction, drawing a significant number of visitors who contribute to the local economy. The project has played a pivotal role in preserving and promoting tribal culture and traditions, ensuring their continuity for future generations. By providing economic opportunities, increasing visibility, and instilling a sense of pride in their heritage, the project has empowered the tribal communities. Moreover, it has made a substantial contribution to the overall development of Wayanad by enhancing its tourism potential and highlighting its cultural diversity [Manoj \(2022\)](#).

Another notable initiative in Kerala is the Kani tribe in Trivandrum, which has implemented an access and benefit-sharing (ABS) model since 1987 [Darsana et al. \(2018\)](#). This model allows the Kani tribe to maintain control over their land and resources while also benefiting from the sharing of knowledge and resources with external parties. The ABS model has played a significant role in documenting the Kani tribe's ethno-medicinal knowledge, leading to the conservation and utilization of valuable biological resources [Darsana et al. \(2018\)](#). The Kani tribe has identified and documented 101 medicinal plants that they use for treating various ailments. Among these, herbs constitute the most commonly used plants (48%), followed by climbers (28%), trees (12%), shrubs (11%), and lianas (1%) [Darsana et al. \(2018\)](#). This documentation not only preserves their indigenous knowledge but also contributes to the overall understanding and utilization of traditional medicinal practices.

The ABS model implemented by the Kani tribe serves as an inspiring example for other tribal communities looking to preserve and promote their indigenous knowledge and resources. By establishing self-help groups and community-based organizations, these communities can empower themselves and protect their rights to land and resources [Rajasenana et al. \(2019\)](#). The Kani tribe's ABS model showcases the importance of community participation and control in the sustainable management and conservation of their cultural heritage and natural resources. It serves as a model that can be replicated and adapted by other tribal communities in their efforts to protect their traditional knowledge and secure their rights.

The En Ooru tribal heritage village project in Wayanad, Kerala, holds great significance as a platform for preserving and promoting tribal culture while driving socio-economic development in the region. It offers visitors a captivating and educational experience, immersing them in the vibrant tribal life. Beyond this, En Ooru provides practical support to the tribal beneficiaries through its warehouse facility, ensuring their products and materials are stored safely. The facilitation center enhances visitors' experience by facilitating interaction and understanding with the tribal communities.

7. CONCLUSION

The En Ooru tribal heritage village project in Wayanad, Kerala, along with initiatives like the ABS model implemented by the Kani tribe in Trivandrum, have played a pivotal role in rejuvenating indigenous tourism and uncovering the tribal heritage of Kerala. These projects have been instrumental in preserving and promoting tribal culture, traditions, and indigenous knowledge while simultaneously providing economic opportunities and empowering tribal communities. The En Ooru project distinguishes itself from similar initiatives both

within Kerala and in other states, thanks to its unique characteristics, emphasis on tribal involvement and control, and successful collaboration between government departments.

The En Ooru project in Wayanad stands out by its commitment to preserving indigenous architecture, tribal customs, and traditions. It offers an immersive experience for visitors, allowing them to witness and learn about the authentic tribal way of life. The project's participatory approach ensures that tribal communities have a significant say in the management and operation of the heritage village, guaranteeing its sustainability and maintaining its cultural authenticity. Compared to projects in other states, the En Ooru initiative boasts a comprehensive and well-developed infrastructure, encompassing tribal huts, a tribal market, workshops, and cafeterias serving genuine tribal cuisines. This robust infrastructure enhances the overall visitor experience and contributes to the economic upliftment of the tribal communities. The successful collaboration between the Kerala Tourism and Scheduled Tribe Development Department has been a key driver of the project's success.

The En Ooru project serves as an exemplary model for other states and regions aspiring to revitalize indigenous tourism and promote tribal heritage. Its emphasis on tribal involvement and control ensures the preservation of cultural authenticity and instills a sense of ownership among the tribal communities. By offering economic opportunities, showcasing diverse art forms, and providing immersive experiences, the project generates income and contributes to the overall development of the region. Moreover, the En Ooru project in Kerala differentiates itself from other tribal development initiatives within the state through its scale, infrastructure, and dedicated focus on cultural preservation. Its comprehensive approach, encompassing facilities such as agricultural and medicinal nurseries, food processing units, and a warehouse for tribal beneficiaries, demonstrates a holistic strategy towards tribal empowerment.

In conclusion, the En Ooru tribal heritage village project in Wayanad, Kerala, exemplifies a successful model for revitalizing indigenous tourism and promoting tribal culture. Its ideal characteristics, emphasis on tribal involvement, and collaborative efforts between government departments make it a unique and impactful initiative. By preserving and promoting tribal heritage, providing economic opportunities, and fostering cultural pride, the En Ooru project sets a benchmark for other states and regions to emulate in their endeavors to revitalize indigenous tourism and empower tribal communities.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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