

Scheduled Caste Women Development Through Livelihood Diversification – A Study In Kerala

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the livelihood diversification strategies adopted by Scheduled Caste (SC) women in Kerala, India, and their impact on socio-economic conditions, educational attainment, and household income. Livelihood Diversification, a key tool for economic empowerment, enables individuals to reduce dependence on a single income source by exploring new sectors such as agriculture, entrepreneurship, and wage labour. For Scheduled Caste women, diversification offers a pathway to break away from traditional, marginalised occupations, improving economic security, autonomy, and social status. The study aims to analyse how SC women in Kerala are utilising livelihood diversification to enhance their household income, create assets, and contribute to employment generation. Additionally, it examines whether improved economic conditions through diversification lead to better educational outcomes for these women. By investigating these issues, the study sheds light on the potential of livelihood diversification as a catalyst for social inclusion, poverty reduction, and the empowerment of SC women, ultimately contributing to gender equality and sustainable development in the region.

Keywords: Scheduled Caste women, Livelihood diversification, Education and Economic development.

Introduction

Livelihood diversification is a strategic approach to reduce dependence on a single income source, enhancing economic resilience and well-being. It involves expanding income generating activities to multiple sectors, such as agriculture, livestock, entrepreneurship and wage labour. By diversifying their livelihoods, individuals and households can mitigate risks, increase opportunities, and improve their overall quality of life. Livelihood diversification promotes economic empowerment, reduce poverty and vulnerability, and fosters sustainable development. It also enables individuals to adapt to changing circumstances, such as climate change, market fluctuations and economic shocks. By adopting diversified livelihood strategies, individuals and communities can build a more secure and prosperous future, reducing their support on a single income source and increasing their overall economic stability.

Scheduled Caste (SC) women in India face significant socioeconomic challenges, including poverty, lack of education and limited access to resources. Livelihood diversification has emerged as a powerful tool for their development, enabling them to break free from traditional occupations and marginalisation. By diversifying their income generating activities, SC woman can enhance their economic empowerment, improve their household income, and reduce their vulnerability to poverty and exploitation. Initiatives such as skill training, micro-enterprise development, and access to credit and markets have helped SC woman to explore new opportunities in areas like agriculture, animal husbandry handicrafts and service sectors. Livelihood diversification has not only improved their economic well-being but also boosted their confidence, decision making power, and social status, ultimately contributing to the empowerment of SC woman and the reduction of cash based inequalities.

In Kerala, Scheduled Caste (SC) women have made significant strides in livelihood diversification,

breaking away from traditional occupations and attain the new opportunities. Through initiatives like the Kerala State Women's Development Corporation and the Scheduled Caste Development Department, SC women have accessed training, credit and market linkages, enabling them to venture into diverse fields such as food processing, handicrafts, and entrepreneurship. Many have successfully transitioned from marginal agricultural labourers to proud owners of micro enterprises, generating sustainable income and employment. Livelihood diversification has not only enhanced their economic empowerment but also fostered social inclusion, reduced poverty, and its challenged caste based discrimination. Kerala's unique model of social and economic development, combined with proactive government support, has created an enabling environment for SC women to thrive and become role models for others, showcasing the transformative power of livelihood diversification. By diversifying their livelihoods, individuals and households can reduce risks, increase opportunities, and improve their overall well-being. In this context by promoting livelihood diversification, government and other agencies support women's development and contribute to more equitable and sustainable communities.

Literature Review

Pande et al., (2017) discussed Indian women's lives have changed significantly as a result of the country's consistent strong economic growth since the early 1990s, yet female labour force participation has remained below 30 percent and may have even decreased since 2005, according to current labour surveys. The five descriptive facts regarding the labour force participation rate of Indian women using a nationally representative household survey. These facts can be used to identify barriers to greater involvement. First, woman who are not in the labour force now have a high need for work. Second it's challenging to match willing female non-workers with jobs. Third, woman who have received vocational training are more likely to be employed. Fourth, women are more likely to work in fields with bigger gender wage gaps and unexplained income gaps which are frequently linked to discrimination. Lastly, there is a correlation between more female participation in a few critical areas and regulations that are advantageous to women, such quotas.

Geburu et al; (2018) Geburu et al., (2018) examined farm households diversify their livelihoods through off-farm and non- farm activities to cope with agricultural instability and drought, as farm income alone cannot ensure food security and livelihood resilience.

Loison and Sarah Aloba (2019) focused diversifying one's source of income is seen as a possible way of achieving poverty reduction objectives. The analysis revealed major structural changes in the sources and composition of household cash incomes, with farm incomes sharply dropping and driving households headed by women into absolute poverty. On the other hand, nonfarm revenue's share of overall household cash incomes rose noticeably. The findings indicate that changes in livelihood diversification at the regional level are positively and significantly correlated with changes in household asset wealth, suggesting that diversification serves primarily as an accumulation strategy for wealthier farm households. Furthermore, there exists a considerable correlation between the degree of livelihood diversification and the beginning level of diversification, as well as household demographic variables like age, gender, education level, and labor hiring. Furthermore, it appears that property rights security and easier access to financing for agricultural inputs encourage specialization in farming as opposed to diversification. On the other hand, poverty significantly and negatively affects the diversification of sources of income. The findings have implications for rural development policy, emphasizing the need to use livelihood diversification's benefits to combat poverty while mitigating its detrimental effects on lower-income households by lowering asset entry barriers to gainful employment.

Saritha (2019) explained scheduled castes that experience discrimination in the workplace are governed by social hierarchy, customs, and traditional methods. The issue of equal compensation for men and women does not emerge when there is less involvement in the workforce. Dalits, also known as Scheduled Castes, are a politically marginalized and oppressed group that are periodically forced to perform untouchable tasks like clearing dead animals from village graves, cleaning streets, promoting them to jobs like cobblers, leather workers, farmers, and manual scavengers without pay. Desiring social progress is a strong internal desire, and obtaining wealth, work, education, and other necessities must be demanded. By incorporating social networks, entrepreneurship unquestionably boosts the confidence level to live like others with the assistance of the government and reservation system. Beyond women's empowerment, women's entrepreneurship in SC contributes to communal development.

Shan and Ahmed (2020) analyzed most rural households (63 percent) have diversified their livelihoods,

with 37 percent at medium and 26 percent at high levels, through various income-generating activities. Livelihood diversification is positively influenced by gender, education, land ownership, and credit access, but negatively affected by dependency ratio and savings. Policies should focus on entrepreneurship, credit expansion, rural infrastructure development, and pro-poor initiatives to increase income-generating opportunities and diversification.

Research Questions

1. What are the livelihood strategies and diversification of Scheduled Caste women?
2. Is there any impact on educational status of Scheduled Caste women through their diversification?

Objectives

1. To study the socio-economic conditions of the Scheduled Caste women.
2. To study the educational status of Scheduled Caste women in the study area.

Data Collection and Methodology

The present study is undertaken in Kottarakkara block, Kollam district. From Kottarakkara block two village panchayats namely, Ezhukone and Kareepra panchayats have been selected for the study. An interview schedule was used to collect the information from the Scheduled Caste women. Based on the objectives and research questions have been framed and researcher confined to collect information pertaining to livelihoods of Scheduled Caste women and their earnings in the study area. In the Ezhukone and Kareepra villages 3929 women are involved in different livelihoods. Out of 3929 samples 60 SC women are from Ezhukone and 60 SC women are from Kareepra village. From both villages each 60 women workers were selected as sample respondents. Totally 120 women workers were selected by using simple random sampling method and they have been interviewed.

Results and Discussions

Socio-economic conditions of the respondents

Table 1.1

Personal characteristics of the sample respondents

Personal characteristics	Livelihoods				
	Main occupation	Subsidiary occupation			
	(Cashew factory) (N=120)	Animal husbandry (n=21)	Domestic work (n=25)	Haritha Karma Sena (n=18)	MGNREGP (n=56)
Age					
30-34	13 (10.9)	2 (9.6)	2 (8.0)	3 (16.8)	6 (10.8)
35-39	25 (20.8)	6 (28.6)	4 (16)	3 (16.7)	12 (21.6)
40-45	37 (30.9)	7 (33.3)	9 (36)	5 (27.9)	16 (28.7)
46-50	25 (20.9)	4 (19)	8 (32)	3 (16.8)	10 (17.9)
51-55	20 (16.7)	2 (9.6)	2 (8.0)	4 (22.9)	12 (21.5)
Marital status					
Married	120 (100.0)	21 (17.5)	25 (20.8)	18 (15.0)	56 (46.7)
Type of family					
Joint family	37 (30.8)	6 (16.2)	8 (21.6)	6 (16.2)	17 (45.9)
Nuclear family	83 (69.2)	15 (18.1)	17 (20.5)	12 (14.5)	39 (47.5)

Source: Computed from Primary Data.

The table 1.1 provides an overview of Scheduled Caste women employed in a cashew factory (N=120) and their

subsidiary occupations. Most of the women are (46.7 percent) engaged in MGNREGP as a secondary occupation, followed by domestic work (20.8 percent), animal husbandry (17.5percent), and Haritha Karma Sena (a green initiatives) 15percent. Majority of the SC women those who are involved in age group of 40-45 years (30.9 percent), with a majority involved in MGNREGP and domestic work. All workers are married, with 69.2percent living in nuclear families. Joint family workers are more involved in MGNREGP (45.9percent), indicating that larger households might rely more on this government-supported employment.

The table highlights livelihood diversification among cashew factory workers, indicating that many of them rely on secondary occupations to supplement their income. A significant portion (46.7 percent) engaged in the MGNREGP, a government employment program, indicate its role as a key source of additional income. Other workers diversify into domestic work (20.8 percent), animal husbandry (17.5 percent), and Haritha Karma Sena (15 percent), reflecting a combination of agricultural, service-based, and public employment for financial stability.

Most of the SC women those who are in the 40-45 years age group are participated most actively in MGNREGP and domestic work. Furthermore, women from joint families show a higher dependence on MGNREGP (45.9 percent), indicating that larger households may diversify into government-supported jobs to meet household needs. This livelihood diversification serves to mitigate risks associated with relying solely on cashew factory employment and providing SC women with multiple streams of income that contribute to their economic resilience and stability.

Table 1.2
Educational status and livelihoods of the respondents

Educational details	Livelihoods				
	Primary occupation	Subsidiary occupation wage/salary			
	(Cashew factory) (N=120)	Animal husbandry (n=21)	Domestic work (n=25)	Haritha Karma Sena (n=18)	MGNREGP (n=56)
Primary	12 (10.0)	2 (16.7)	5 (41.7)	1 (8.3)	4 (33.3)
Secondary	77 (64.2)	14 (18.2)	18 (23.4)	8 (10.4)	37 (48.1)
Higher secondary	16 (3.3)	2 (12.5)	--	7 (43.8)	7 (43.8)
Under Graduate	10 (8.3)	1 (10.0)	--	1 (10.0)	8 (80.0)
Post Graduate	5 (4.2)	2 (17.5)	2 (40.0)	1 (20.0)	--

Source: Computed from Primary Data

The table 1.2 shows the educational qualifications of Scheduled Caste women involved in various livelihood activities, including primary and subsidiary occupations. It highlights the involvement of women in a cashew factory, animal husbandry, domestic work, Haritha Karma Sena (a green initiative), and the MGNREGP (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Program).

The table revealed secondary education dominate the workforce across most sectors, particularly in cashew factories (64.2percent) and MGNREGP (48.1percent). Higher levels of education, such as undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications, are mainly represented in more structured and formal job roles, like MGNREGP. The participation of less educated individuals is more prevalent in informal occupations such as domestic work and animal husbandry. This indicates that livelihood diversification tends to accommodate varying educational backgrounds, with those having higher education engaging in more formal and stable employment, while those with less education often to informal or supplementary occupations.

Table 1.3
Details of monthly income of livelihoods (main and subsidiary) of the respondents

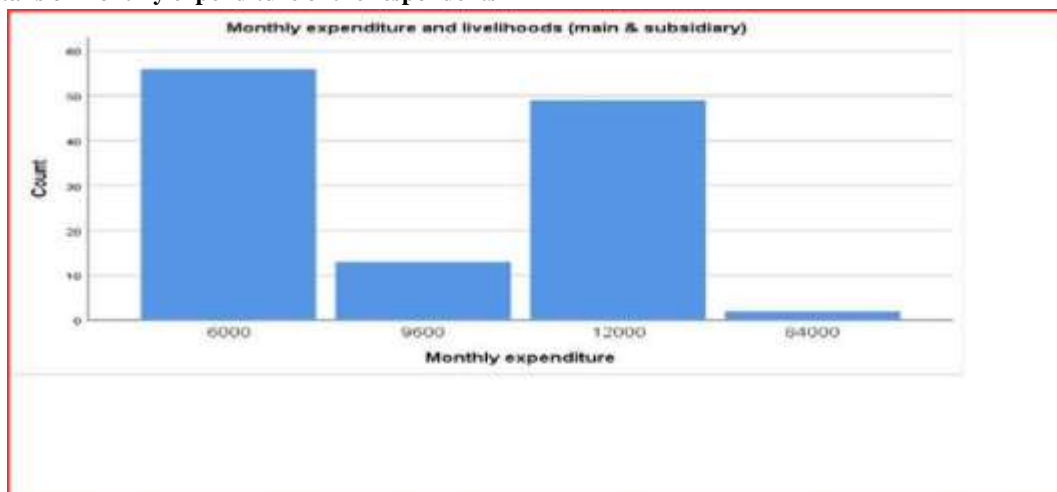
Monthly Income from livelihoods (main and subsidiary)	Livelihoods main (cashew factory, N=120)	Livelihoods subsidiary (animal husbandry n =21, domestic work n= 25, Haritha Karma Sena n=18, MGNREGP n=56)			
		Animal husbandry n =21	Domestic work n= 25	Haritha Karma Sena n=18	MGNREGP n=56
2500 - 3500	19 (15.8)	6 (28.5)	4 (16.0)	2 (11.1)	7 (12.5)
3500 - 4500	65 (54.2)	9 (42.9)	14 (56.0)	13 (72.2)	29 (51.8)
4500 - 5500	23 (19.2)	4 (19.0)	5 (20.0)	3 (16.7)	11 (19.6)
5500 - 6500	7 (5.8)	1 (4.8)	1 (4.0)	--	5 (8.9)
6500 - 7500	6 (5.0)	1 (4.8)	1 (4.0)	--	4 (7.1)
Total	120 (100.0)	21 (100.0)	25 (100.0)	18 (100.0)	56 (100.0)

Source: Computed from Primary Data

The table 1.3 highlighted the livelihood diversification among respondents, illustrated how income is generated from both main and subsidiary sources. The main livelihood for most respondents is employment in a cashew factory, where the majority (54.2 percent) earn between rupees 3500 and rupees 4500 monthly. Subsidiary livelihoods such as animal husbandry, domestic work, Haritha Karma Sena, and MGNREGP provide additional income, mostly falling within the same rupees 3500 – rupees 4500 range. This shows that while some respondents engage in multiple sources of income, the overall income levels remain modest across both primary and secondary livelihoods. Subsidiary income sources, although varied, tend to supplement but not drastically increase the respondents' overall income, indicating a relatively low level of livelihood diversification in terms of income enhancement.

Figure 1.1

Details of monthly expenditure of the respondents



Source: Computed from Primary Data

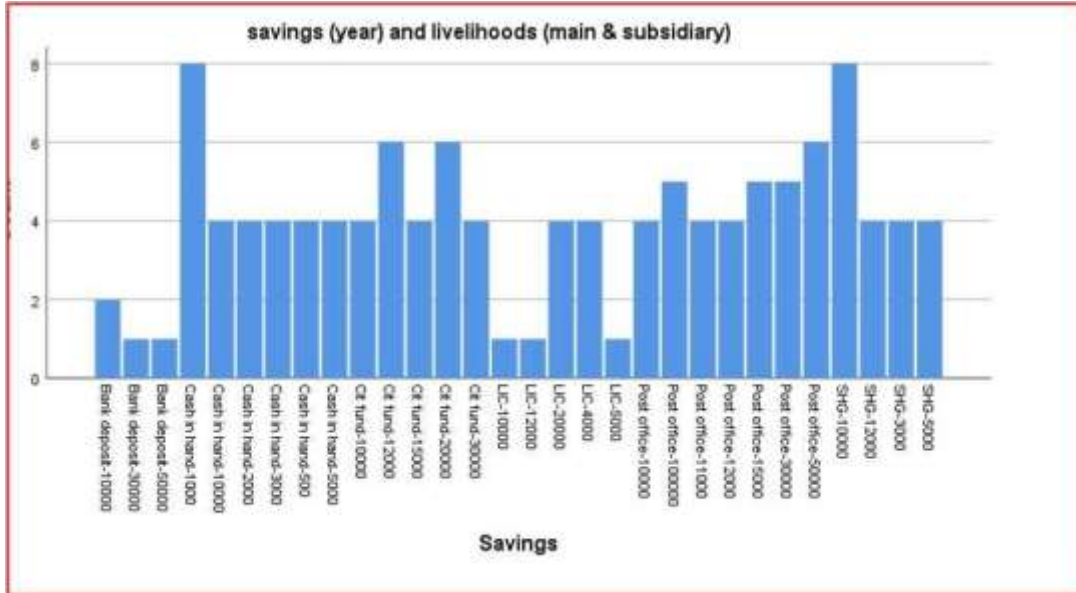
The bar chart 1.1 shows the monthly expenditure distribution of respondents engaged in both main and subsidiary livelihoods. A significant number of respondents (around 55) have monthly expenditures of rupees 6000, followed by a similar (around 45) with expenditures of rupees 12000. A smaller group has a monthly expenditure of rupees 9600, while very few respondents (around 1-2) report an unusually high expenditure of rupees 84000.

The distribution suggests that while most respondents maintain relatively low to moderate levels of expenditure, there is limited livelihood diversification to support significantly higher spending. The concentration of expenditure at rupees 6000 and rupees 12000 indicates that even with multiple income sources, most

respondents' financial capacity remains modest, with very few able to sustain significantly higher spending levels. This reflects the modest income levels from their main and subsidiary livelihoods.

Figure 1.2

Details of savings (year) of the respondents



Source: Computed from Primary Data

The bar chart 1.2 illustrated the annual savings of respondents engaged in both main and subsidiary livelihoods. The savings vary widely across different income groups. A significant number of respondents have savings in the range of rupees 25000 – rupees 35000, as well as in the rupees 45000 – rupees 50000 range, indicating some ability to save despite modest income levels. However, there are also noticeable clusters with lower savings, such as those below rupees 10000, which suggests that some respondents struggle to accumulate significant savings.

This pattern highlights the challenges faced by respondents in increasing their financial stability through livelihood diversification. Even with both main and subsidiary sources of income, many respondents have limited savings, reflecting the relatively low income from both livelihoods. Those with higher savings likely benefit from more stable or better-paying subsidiary activities, but overall, the data suggest that income from these livelihoods is generally insufficient to support substantial savings for most respondents.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study highlights the livelihood diversification strategies of Scheduled Caste women employed in cashew factories and their subsidiary occupations. Most women rely on multiple income sources, with MGNREGP being a key secondary occupation, particularly for those in joint families. Despite engaging in diverse livelihoods, income levels remain modest, with the majority earning between rupees 3500 and rupees 4500 from both main and subsidiary occupations. This limited income is reflected in their expenditure patterns, with most respondents maintaining low to moderate monthly expenses. Additionally, savings among the respondents show variation, but many struggle to accumulate substantial savings due to the modest income from both primary and secondary livelihoods. The study also indicates that educational background influences livelihood choices, with more educated women securing formal employment, while less educated individuals engage in informal or supplementary occupations. Overall, while livelihood diversification provides some financial stability, it does not significantly enhance income or savings for most respondents.

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