

Tracing the Kadars a Study of Tribal Heritage and Environmental Interactions

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Abstract—Tracing the Kadars' heritage and environmental activism, this study synthesizes secondary records, colonial gazetteers, legal statutes, and primary interviews conducted in January 2016 with key Kadar leaders, including Geetha Vazhachal, chieftain ('Oorumuppathy') of the Vazhachal settlement.

The enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA), empowered Kadar Gram Sabhas to understand their customary rights, leading them to successfully pass official resolutions against the proposed 163-MW Athirappilly Hydroelectric Project to preserve riverine ecology and hornbill nesting habitats. This highlights their active role in environmental protection.

Index Terms—Kadars, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), Forest Rights Act 2006, Athirappilly Hydroelectric Project, Cochin State Forest Tramway, Western Ghats Ecology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

According to D.N. Majumdar 'A tribe I democratized rounp with territorial affiliation, endogamous, with no specialization of functions, ruled by tribal officers, hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect, recognizing social distance with other tribes or castes, without any social obloquy attaching to them, as it does in the caste structure, followed tribal traditions, beliefs and customs, illiberal of naturalization of ideas from alien sources, above all conscious of homogeneity of ethnic and specialization ration'. Indigenous people are those who lived there before colonists or settlers arrived. They are referred to as aboriginal people or native people. In general usage, the word 'tribe' is taken to denote a primary aggregate of peoples living in a primitive or barbarous environment under a naturalization. India is the nation with the highest concentration of indigenous Peoples in the world, nationally identified as Adivasis. According to the records of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, India comprises around 705 ethnic groups, of which 75 are categorized as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). These tribal groups represent the most vulnerable communities, situated at the lowest levels of development in terms of literacy rate, pre-agricultural

technology, and stagnant or declining populations. In Kerala, five communities classified under the PVTGs are: the Kattunaikkan, Cholanaikkan, Koragas, Kadars, and Kurumbas.

The term 'Kadar' is derived from the Malayalam word 'Kadu', meaning forest. The Kadars are a Tamil-speaking tribe that inhabits the tropical forests of the Western Ghats of the former Cochin State and the border of Coimbatore District in southwest India. The traditional territory of the Kadar people is termed 'Kadar land', and it lies between 10°20' and 10°48' North latitude and 76°30' and 76°55' East longitude, at the tri-junction of the Coimbatore district in Tamil Nadu and the Palakkad and Thrissur districts in Kerala. The Kadars are the most well-known tribal community of the Anamalai hills and occupy both its eastern and western regions, covered by forested hills, valleys, riverside regions, and lower slopes of hills, which are now divided into Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Kadar population is distributed in Palakkad and Thrissur Districts. In Palakkad, they are found in Parambikulam, Kuriyarkutty, Nelliampathy, Kalchadi and Taliyakallu areas, while in Thrissur, their settlements are found in Vazhachal, Peringalkuthu and Sholayar forest areas. As per the State Tribal Welfare Department records, there are only 1,848 Kadars in Kerala now.

Relevance and Significance of the Research

The Western Ghats are globally recognized for biological diversity, providing a homeland for indigenous communities such as the Irulan, Kuruman, Kurichias, Kadar, Mannan, Mal Vedan, Muthuvar, and Malai Malasars. Present Kadar settlements represent unique ecological sites inhabited by hornbills, the state bird of Kerala. The distribution of the Kadars follows the course of the Chalakudy River from the Anamalai hills. However, their migration along the riverbanks and tributaries was forced by state development interventions. In addition to this, the seasonal flooding of the Chalakudy River during the southwest monsoon season, ongoing displacement, crop losses, water contamination, and health risks have heavily affected the Kadar settlements in Vazhachal and Athirappilly, compounded by severe flood events from 2018 to 2024.

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

The key central objectives of the study:

1. To examine the socio-cultural heritage, customary governance (Ooru Mooppan and Ooru Koottam), and economy ('thettam') of the Cochin Kadars.
2. To evaluate the historical impacts of colonial forestry, the 50-mile Cochin State Forest Tramway (1907–1963), and post-colonial dam construction on Kadar territorial displacement.
3. To analyse the environmental consciousness of the Kadar community and their rights assertion under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006, which has empowered them to resist the proposed 163-MW Athirappilly Hydroelectric Project and protect their ecological habitat.

Hypothesis: Kadars are a tribal group living in the Anamalai hills and Kerala. They were a primitive tribal community was affected by the migrations and land encroachments, state-led infrastructure and forestry interventions. The FRA 2006 enables indigenous communities to protect rainforest ecosystems against destructive developmental projects.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of Relevant Literature

Early definitions of tribal entities established foundational frameworks. The Imperial Gazetteer of India (1911) defined a tribe as "a collection of families bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous". The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology defines a tribe as an indigenous group descended from a common ancestor and led by a defined leader. D.N. Majumdar characterized a tribe as a social group with territorial affiliation, endogamy, a lack of functional specializations, ruled by tribal officers, united by dialect, and recognizing social distance from caste structures.

In the Ethnographic works of Deniker (*Races of Man*), he classified Malayans, Kadars, and Muduvans as 'uncivilized Dravidians'. Studies of L. Ananthakrishna Iyer (1909) and A.A.D. Luiz (1962) characterized physical characteristics, noting that Kadars are of average height, robust, deep-chested, specialized, platyrrhine-nosed, with curly hair and a hysteronotous recognizing filing. J.H. Hutton (1931 Census of India) observed that Cochin Kadars show more traces of Negrito ancestry than any other South Indian tribe, uncivilized, in his Indigenous legend traces their origin to the progeny of a Mala Vedan and Mala Korathy in a cave near Karimalagapuram.

Regarding state policy, Jawaharlal Nehru articulated a philosophy against both the 'anthropological approach' (treating tribals as museum specimens) and 'forcible assimilation'. In his speeches from 1952 and 1955, Nehru advocated that the state must follow the policy of 'psychological integration.' It emphasizes that the state must approach tribal people with affection and friendliness. However, subsequent policy implementations frequently failed to reflect this philosophy, causing tribal alienation.

While studying the previous studies, which focused mainly on general ethnographic features (P.R.G. Mathur; Manish Chandi), development projects (Sibi Zacharias; K. Divya), and legal studies (Divya Kalathiemphasizestha Xavier & C.C. Babu), there remains a distinct research gap. A unified historical analysis linking early 20th-century logging infrastructure (Cochin Forest Tramway) and mid-20th-century dam displacements directly to 21st-century Gram Sabha activism led by female chieftainship under the FRA 2006 was absent.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

This study adopts a qualitative, historical-anthropological research design combining secondary documentary analysis with primary qualitative field interviews. Secondary data were gathered from colonial gazetteers (Imperial Gazetteer, 1911; Cochin State Manual by C. Achutha Menon), ethnographic volumes (L.K. Ananthakrishna Iyer; A.A.D. Luiz), technical reports (Manish Chandi, NCF; Dr Sibi Zacharias, CDS), railway centenary volumes (Devan R. Varma et al.), and Kerala State Biodiversity Board reports.

Primary qualitative data were collected through field research conducted in January 2016 at the Vazhachal Tribal Colony. A semi-structured qualitative interview was conducted on January 10, 2016, with Geetha Vazhachal, Oorumuppathy(chieftain) of the Vazhachal Kadar settlement.

Analysis Techniques and Ethical Considerations

Qualitative thematic content analysis was applied across four core analytical axes: (1) customary governance and sacred ecological beliefs; (2) colonial timber infrastructure and forced dam migrations; (3) statutory FRA 2006 implementation and Gram Sabha resolutions; and (4) riverine ecosystem protection and flood vulnerability along the Chalakudy basin. Ethical considerations were ensured through informed consent, respectful engagement with indigenous traditional knowledge, and adherence to community self-determination.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Cultural Structure and Customary Governance

Kadar social life is centred around autonomous settlements called 'Pathy'. Earlier settlements comprised 10–20 families, but now consist of 20–40 families due to population growth or a reduction in the number of settlements. Kadars do not possess a clan system. While joint family structures were traditionally preferred, households maintain individual choice. Earlier strict settlement exogamy has evolved into flexible marriage practices.

Each settlement follows its own rules under a headman called 'Uru Mooppan' or 'Ooru Mooppan' and a council called 'Ooru Koottam'. Historically, the elderly member was selected as headman without a hereditary system. Today, leadership is selected through a voting system; the headman of the Vazhachal settlement is Geetha Vazhachal, the first woman chieftain among tribal communities in Kerala and the leader of the local protest movement.

Kadars maintained strong historical ties with the Cochin royalty. When the Maharaja toured the forest, Kadars carried him in 'Manjals' (palanquins) and assisted his journey, receiving clothes, provisions, ornaments, combs, and mirrors in return. Social customs include 'Theendari Salas'—separate huts built for girls reaching puberty, where they stay for seven days before undergoing a sacred turmeric bath.

Ecological Economy and Sustainable Resource Interactions

The Kadar economy relies entirely on forest resources through foraging, small-scale hunting, trapping, and fishing. Collection practices are termed 'thettam'. They gathered medicinal plants, harvested honey, and, historically, hunted birds (including hornbills) and small game, and captured elephants during the colonial period. Traditional dwellings included tree huts, leaf huts, and tree-top platforms suitable for semi-nomadic foraging. Although the Tribal Development Board assists with concrete 'pakka' houses, many Kadars prefer traditional houses. Settlement autonomy is strictly observed, and groups do not trespass into others' domains.

Religion follows animism; Kadars believe natural entities (plants, animals, rocks, thunder) possess spirits and consider themselves 'sons of the forest' whose souls return to the forest after death.

Ancestors are worshipped as trees and stones, alongside Kali worship, forest festivals, and Makar Sankranti. Environmental consciousness is reflected in their collection practices, gathering only what is needed for survival without harming nature.

Colonial Logging, Cochin Forest Tramway, and Dam Displacements

The forest contractors entered the forest areas in search of forest products, first as demand increased in the markets. Gradually, they began to exploit the Kadar population for their own material benefit. In the initial stages, they were used for collecting forest products such as medicinal plants and honey, as well as for hunting and trapping elephants.

After the establishment of colonial rule, their condition worsened. The establishment of the forest department and the implementation of forest acts and 'Scientific forestry' alienated the forest dwellers from their homeland. The repercussions affected not only the Kadars but also the entire tribal population in India. It restricted Adivasis' entry into forest areas. Eventually, they became wage earners or labourers of either the British or the contractors. Their economic freedom was snatched away.

The first major encroachment on the Kadar territory was the construction of a tramway by the Cochin administrators to transport timber. Forestry was an economic pursuit for the British. They implemented forest classification and scientific forestry even after identifying the commercial value of selected trees. It was only after devastating the primary forests that they turned toward the Parambikulam teak plantations. It became a treasure trove of timber, which they used to build ships and railway sleepers. The approach road to Parambikulam from Pollachi in Tamil Nadu's Coimbatore district goes through a densely forested hillock called Top Slip. It was not easily accessible to the unusual machinations of the timber harvesters.

Operating from 1907 to 1963, the 50-mile (80 km) narrow-gauge logging line utilised German Orenstein & Koppel locomotives, British bridges (such as the Punnakuzhy iron bridge), and Kadar labour. The 50-mile (about 80 km) Cochin State Forest Tramway began operations in 1907 with German Orenstein and Koppel locomotives, British bridges and culverts built by P&W MacLennan, and Indian engineers and labourers. After independence, Cochin and Travancore were merged, and in 1956, after the merger of Malabar, the state of Kerala was formed. In the late 1920s, the tramway fell into disuse; it was no longer a profitable venture, and was abolished and dismantled in 1963. It was submerged in the 1960s when the Parambikulam Dam was completed. Today, little material evidence survives of its 56-year legacy.

Table 1: Summary of Key Infrastructure Projects Impacting Kadar Territory

Infrastructure Project	Period / Date Engineering	Features Impact on Kadars & Forest
Cochin State Forest Tramway	1907–1963 50-mile (80 km) railway;	German locomotives; Punnakuzhy iron bridge. Breached forest isolation; logged teak; employed Kadars as timber labor.

Parambikulam Dam & PAP Project	1960s Inter-basin water diversion;	damming submerged tramway line—forced migrations from Parambikulam to Vazhachal settlement area.
Sholayar & Peringalkuthu Dams	1950s–1970s	Hydroelectric damming of Chalakudy River tributaries. Submerged ancestral foraging areas; fragmented settlement territories.
Proposed Athirappilly Hydro Project	1996–Present	163-MW project; 23m dam; 104 ha forest submergence. Resisted by Kadar Gram Sabhas (2015) to protect hornbills and habitat.

In the post-colonial period, hydroelectric and irrigation dams—including Parambikulam, Peringalkuthu, Sholayar, Pothundi, Mangalam, Thunakadavu, and the Parambikulam-Aliyar Project (PAP)—caused forced migrations westward toward Vazhachal and Athirappilly, transforming foragers into wage earners.

FRA 2006, Athirappilly Hydroelectric Project Protest, and Monsoon Flooding

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 (FRA) initiated democratized forest governance, recognizing customary rights, ownership of minor forest produce, and PVTG habitat rights, managed through Gram Sabhas. In 1996, the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) proposed a 163-MW Athirappilly Hydroelectric Project on the Chalakudy River (a 145 km river with rich fish diversity and existing dams), environmental impact studies by the Kerala State Biodiversity Board dated the 23-meter dam, recognizing 104 hectares of forest land and destroying habitats for 196 birds, 131 butterflies, and 51 odonate species.

Kadars collaborated with Dr K.H. Amita Bachan of the Western Ghats Hornbill Foundation to protect hornbill nesting trees. In 2015, the Kadar Gram Sabhas, comprising 73 tribal representatives, passed official resolutions rejecting the project. Chieftain Geetha Vazhachal stated: "Despite our best efforts and confrontations by the natives, especially the Kadar community, the 163-MW hydroelectric project is still under active consideration of Kerala State Electricity Board. If it gets implemented, the first casualty will be the region's rich hornbill population".

In addition, the Chalakudy River, which experiences significant monsoon flooding, exposing settlements at Vazhachal and Athirappilly to flash floods, displacement, crop destruction, water contamination, and health risks, exacerbated by repeated catastrophic flood events from 2018 to 2024, will also completely wipe out the area's biodiversity very soon.

V. CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study emphasizes the historical, cultural, and economic understanding of the Kadar community in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial phases. It demonstrates that state-led infrastructure projects—starting with the 50-mile Cochin Forest Tramway (1907) and continuing through mid-20th-century river valley dams—inflicted repeated forced migrations on the Kadars. However, statutory recognition under the FRA emphasizes Kadar Gram Sabhas, led by female chieftain Geetha Vazhachal, to pass binding resolutions against the 163-MW Athirappilly project, protecting rainforest biodiversity and hornbill habitats.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings from this study underscore the necessity of democratizing forest governance and recognizing indigenous PVTG habitat rights as an effective mechanism for biodiversity conservation and river basin management.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study area is limited primarily to the Kadar settlements of Athirappilly and the Vazhachal area in Thrissur district. Future research should examine long-term, sustainable flood mitigation, evaluate the implementation of habitat rights across all Kadar settlements in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and assess biodiversity loss from the implementation of developmental projects and their impact on the Kadar community as a whole.

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