

Asia's last cave dwellers vanishing in the shadows of change



K.A. Shaji

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- *Climate change, deforestation, and modernity reshape the lives of Asia's last cave dwellers, the Cholanaikkan tribe, in Kerala's Nilambur forests.*
- *With less than 250 people, the tribal group faces nutritional scarcity, wildlife encounters, and fading of their ancient ecological wisdom.*
- *New technologies such as AI-based ARANYA aim to reduce human-wildlife conflict in a bid to save the last remaining Cholanaikkans.*

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The path to Karulai in Kerala's Nilambur forest winds through mist and silence. Beneath the canopy of teak and wild fig, the air smells of rain and rotting leaves. In a shallow rock cavity on the forest's edge, a small fire glows, surrounded by men and women roasting wild yam. These are the Cholanaikkans, Asia's last surviving cave dwellers and one of the smallest tribal communities in the world.

While the [2011 Census](#) puts Cholanaikkan population at 124, the local tribal development office informs Mongabay-India that the population has likely gone up to 250 now. This, however, is down from around 400 in the 1960s.

For generations, they have lived in this forest, hunting small animals and gathering tubers, honey, fruits, and wild roots. "The forest was once our mother," said C. Vinod, a Cholanaikkan from the Manjeeri hamlet, now the first in his community to get a Ph.D. His research focuses on the vanishing culture and identity of his people. "Now she (the forest) cannot feed us or protect us. The streams dry up early, the fruits don't come on time, and elephants no longer fear us. Life here is an everyday struggle."

A vanishing food culture

For the Cholanaikkans, food is identity. Their meals are gathered, not cultivated. The forest once offered

everything — *Kandathiri* (a *Dioscorea* species) tubers, wild banana flowers, mushrooms, and forest honey. A study by the [Centre for Indigenous Food Systems](#) found that their traditional diet contained far more micronutrients than the subsidised rice and lentils they now depend on.

But rainfall shifts and recurring droughts have reduced the diversity of wild edibles. “Hunger is not new,” said Chathi, 34, wife of Shibu from Kuppamala hamlet, who recently died under mysterious circumstances in Karulai. “But this dependency is. We wait for rationed grains or government schemes. We’ve lost our autonomy.”



Cholanaikkan youth rest before beginning their collection of minor non-timber forest produce. For generations, the community has gathered wild tubers, honey, fruits, and wild roots from the forest for sustenance. Image by Unnikrishnan Avala.

“People start losing their knowledge when they stop using it,” said Vinod. “Our elders can identify hundreds of edible plants, but our children only know rice and sugar.”

The Cholanaikkans are among India’s most studied tribes, yet they remain poorly understood by policymakers. Their oral cosmology blends animism, observation, and empirical reasoning. [In a 2016 paper](#), astrophysicist Mayank N. Vahia described them as “careful observers of nature who developed their own system of empirical reasoning.”

They mapped time through stars, predicted rain from frog calls, and read animal tracks like open books. “The sky and forest have changed,” said Sarojini, 52, wife of Kariyan from Uchakulam hamlet in Kalkkulam, who was trampled to death by an elephant while collecting forest produce. “The stars move differently, the rains lie, and the animals no longer behave like they used to.”

Her words capture the fears of a population whose centuries-old survival code is collapsing under a changing climate.

At the mercy of a changing forest

Nilambur lies in the moist deciduous belt of the Western Ghats which was once dense with bamboo, canes, and edible shrubs. [Climate change](#) has unsettled its delicate balance. Summers are longer, rainfall is erratic, and water veins that once fed the forest now run dry by March and stay parched for months. These changes have intensified human-wildlife conflict and eroded the Cholanaikkans’ food base.

“Extreme weather is now a daily threat,” said K. S. Anoop Das of the Centre for Conservation Ecology at MES College, Mampad, which regularly works with the community. “The Cholanaikkans face twin dangers: one from the animals being pushed out of their shrinking habitats and the other from climate events that destroy their food plants and shelters.”



Cholanaikkan women. The tribe is among India's most studied yet remain poorly understood by policymakers. Their traditional knowledge is vast; they can map time through stars, predict rain from frog calls, and expertly read animal tracks. Image by Ajeeb Komachi.



Cholanaikkan children photographed in 1981. Image courtesy of Kerala SC/ST Department.

A [2023 study](#) recorded 102 plant species traditionally used by the Cholanaikkans and their related tribe, the Kattunaikkans. Many of these have vanished due to changes in soil moisture and the spread of invasive species. “Tubers rot underground during flash floods, and honeybees are abandoning hives as pesticides drift from nearby plantations that alter the forest’s ecology. Invasive weeds like *Lantana camara* and *Senna spectabilis* are spreading fast, choking native growth and triggering a crisis in food availability,” said T.V. Sajeev, Chief Scientist at Kerala Forest Research Institute.

“Once, every season had its food,” Vinod said. “Now, there are months with almost nothing to eat. We depend on the ration grains brought by forest officers.”

When elephants move out of forests

For generations, elephants held a sacred place among Cholanaikkans — revered as elder beings who shared the forest. But climate stress and habitat loss have turned this relationship fraught. In the past 18 months, three Cholanaikkans have been killed in [elephant encounters](#) near the Karulai and Vazhikkadavu hamlets.

“Every death shakes the whole community,” says Divisional Forest Officer Ranjith Bhaskaran, who has worked closely with them. “When you have fewer than 250 people left, each loss feels like extinction

inching closer.”

Conventional deterrents, such as trenches, fences, and firecrackers, are largely ineffective in Nilambur's rugged terrain. Scientists are now testing low-impact technological solutions. One such innovation is the ARANYA early-warning device, developed by Paulbert Thomas, Head of Electronics at The Cochin College, Kochi.

“The device can be mounted on poles and runs on a battery-powered wireless network inside the forest,” says Thomas. “It detects elephants, tigers, and bears within a 50-metre radius. A red light flashes for elephants, yellow for tigers, and green for bears.”

His collaborator Anoop Das adds, “The aim isn't to chase wildlife away but to maintain separation between human and animal movement zones. We want to prevent accidents without disturbing the forest ecosystem.”

This aligns with the Kerala Forest Department's broader coexistence philosophy. “If we keep a safe distance and respond according to elephant behaviour, it helps both sides,” says Raju Francis, a senior forest official. But for the Cholanaikkans, who still sleep under open rock ledges, “safe distance” is an ambiguous concept.

Cholanaikkan women collect bamboo. A 2023 study recorded 102 plant species traditionally used by Cholanaikkans and Kattunaikkans, many of which have vanished due to changes in soil moisture and the spread of invasive species. Image by Ajeeb Komachi.

The push and pull of modernity

Modernity has reached the Cholanaikkans in uneven, confusing ways. A few children now attend school in Karulai and Manjeeri; Vinod himself is a symbol of education bridging two worlds. Yet most community members remain ambivalent about education. The government has built housing colonies for them near Nilambur town, but many return to the forest, unable to adapt to change. “They say the houses are too hot and noisy,” said C. Ismail, project officer of the state government's Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) in Nilambur.

Market intrusion has also led to subtle exploitation. Agents buy honey and herbs from the tribe at unfair prices, reselling them for high profits. The Cholanaikkans, unfamiliar with cash transactions, gain almost nothing.

“Even with outsiders, we prefer barter,” said Meenakshi, from Poochapara hamlet. “On Wednesdays, traders allowed by the forest officials visit our hamlets. They take honey and forest produce and give us food items, clothes, and cosmetics in exchange.”

A brief glimpse of national attention

In September 2024, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, Congress MP from the region, made a quiet but symbolic visit to a Cholanaikkan hamlet — the first by a senior national politician. She trekked for hours through the forest to meet the elders and listen to their accounts of hunger and elephant attacks.

“She came without guards and sat with them,” recalls a forest officer who accompanied her. “It was unprecedented. But beyond the gesture, not much has changed.”

Filmmaker Unnikrishnan Avala, who has spent a decade researching the tribe, is now bringing their story to the screen in a feature film titled *Thanthaperu* (Inheritance). Shot in the actual caves where the Cholanaikkans live, the film portrays their struggle for existence amid climate stress and bureaucratic neglect.

“This is not folklore or nostalgia,” said Avala. “It’s a chronicle of disappearance. The Cholanaikkans are not vanishing because they are primitive. They are vanishing because the forest that sustained them is dying.”

“The tribe carries a wealth of ecological knowledge,” T. V. Sajeev said. “They are walking archives of biodiversity and local climate adaptation. Once their language and practices disappear, we lose that knowledge forever.”

As dusk settles over Nilambur, the forest hums with insect sounds. Mist drifts through teak groves and the scent of wet earth lingers. Near a cave on the Karulai slope, a small group of Cholanaikkans prepare to sleep, their fire glowing faintly. From deep in the valley comes the echo of an elephant’s trumpet. Their survival now depends on forces beyond their control — climate patterns, policy decisions, and a modern world that scarcely knows they exist.

Read more: [Conserving caves through ecotourism in Meghalaya \[Interview\]](#)

Banner image: The single forest road that connects Cholanaikkans with the outside world. Image by Unnikrishnan Avala.

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Popular in the Community