

IDUKKI, KERALA

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# The wilderness library retold

A unique library in the forests of Kerala's Idukki district is run by P. V. Chinnathambi, 86. Its 2,000 books – all classics – are borrowed, read and returned by poor Muthuvan Adivasis

P. Sainath

The old man rose from his chair, eyes moist with tears, overwhelmed by the standing ovation a Thiruvananthapuram audience that included schoolchildren gave him. Never in his life had he received such recognition for his unique achievement. The gathering at the 4th Kerala Legislature International Book Festival here on January 9 was bowled over. They had never seen a man running a library at his own expense for his marginalised tribe. That too, in the remotest part of Kerala. In Edamalakudi, Idukki district, the state's only tribal panchayat – and perhaps its least educated region.

P. V. Chinnathambi is now 86 going on 87.

The wilderness library still exists – 15 years after he founded it.



**P. Sainath**

P. V. Chinnathambi at age 73 when we first met him in Edamalakudi and now 86. He runs an extraordinary library in the forest of Idukki district



From left: Kerala Legislative Assembly Secretary N. Krishna Kumar, Murli Mash, K. A. Shaji, P. V. Chinnathambi, P. Sainath, and V. Sasikumar at the 4th KLIBF in January 2026 that felicitated the wilderness librarian

Wild elephants have destroyed the structure we visited in 2014 – but not the library.

“I felt that was coming,” Chinnathambi told us at the KLIBF. He, I, and K.A. Shaji (who also interpreted for him), had a chat in a session to felicitate him. He had said even when we first met him that changes in the forest and climate were affecting the great pachyderms.

“I was facing this issue for a long time. The elephants were getting more aggressive. I lived in fear of them attacking the library. Finally, I decided that if I shifted it, I would also move my house. Protecting the knowledge the library gave was important.” He did not want the learning it stood for to be disrupted.

So he shifted the library a few kilometres, though still within the forested region of Edamalakudi. “The very week I left,” he says, tuskers “demolished the whole old structure in minutes.” But, he adds proudly, “I’d moved all the books out of there.” Being a forest dweller, he understood that something was going on with the great beasts. And bears no bitterness towards them. Moving, though, was a wise decision as they ravaged the entire structure. And Chinnathambi had no wish to literally discover the elephant in the room.

“I shifted to Mulakudhara,” he says, “and began anew, setting up a 7-member committee [including himself], to run the library. After all, I will not be around forever.”

“Knowledge is more powerful than education,” he told the audience, profoundly, explaining the philosophy behind his library. “That’s why I did it.” He should know. Chinnathambi came from a poor, large, tribal family which held barely two acres of not-so-fertile land. He dropped out of school after Class 6 to help them earn a living. And today runs a wonderful library in the wilderness for the Muthuvan tribe. “I was a pupil in Idukki’s first Adivasi school at Irumpupalam,” he says. “Some students went on till Class 4. Some, like me, made it to Class 6. But I believe people learned more from reading than anything else.”

“Children are using the library,” he had told us in 2014. And proved it. His neatly kept registers showed that a quarter of his 160 books were out in circulation. That stock to lending ratio, the heads of two great libraries told me, was nothing to scoff at.

When we first published *The Wilderness Library* in 2014, he had 160 books. The story had great impact both in Kerala and overseas. Librarians in the US and UK sought permission to reproduce the piece. And donate books to his library. But the people of Kerala had beaten them to it. Within a couple of months, his collection crossed 2,000 books. Four young men marched 18-km through the forest carrying a book cupboard on their shoulders. One of them was a journalist, the late I. V. Babu who had been with us on that first trip in 2014. Soon, a happy, if astonished, Chinnathambi sent out the message: “No more books please. I’ve no space to keep them.”



The library Chinnathambi started remains active 15 years after he founded it. At 86, he has set up a 7-member committee to run it



The library's humble collection of 160 books ballooned to 2,000 within months when people across Kerala donated hundreds of titles after reading the story of Chinnathambi in 2014

Back at the KLIBF we call Murali 'Mash' (master or teacher) on stage. Chinnathambi's beloved mentor is 31 years younger than he is. 'Mash' is from the Malaiarayan tribe. One that outranks most other tribes in educational attainment. Edamalakudi, where the library first stood in Irupukallakudi, has less than 2,500 people across 28 such hamlets. That's almost the entire Muthuvan (also spelt Muthavan and Muduvan) population in the world. "Murali Mash came to Edamalakudi area a year before I did," says Chinnathambi. He took up a job in a single-teacher school for Adivasis. "I found I was getting some books from the government and others," says Mash. And

the idea of a bigger repository was born. But to find acceptance among the locals, he says, “we needed a member of the Muthuvan tribe.” Enter Chinnathambi.

And the wilderness library was born.

Chinnathambi has only one regret. While parting after our 2014 trip, we had found a 161st book. He was writing his autobiography. “Have you completed it?” we asked him. “No,” he said. “I’d done about 25 per cent of the manuscript when this journalist from Thiruvananthapuram took it from me. He promised to help complete it – and find a publisher. “I never saw him again,” he says sadly.



Murali Mash (right), a Malaiarayan Adivasi school teacher, is Chinnathambi’s mentor - though 31 years younger than he is

The recognition he received today was possible because of KLIBF's uniqueness. Kerala, we learn here, is the only Indian state whose legislative assembly holds a Literary Book Festival. Here, every district – even some talukas – hold their own Lit Fests. Each of 140 MLAs is given Rs. 3 lakh to buy books for their constituencies. But can only spend the money here. We learn that as many as 170 publishers from across India are at KLIBF. And there are some 240 book stalls in this edition. The turnover, astonishingly, will cross Rs.10 crore in just one week – during which all gates of the assembly complex are thrown open to the public. Those seven days, people can wander about within, facing minimal security checks.

Winding up the session, we appealed to the audience, and the journalists present, to trace the hack and retrieve the manuscript. We made a plea to the unknown reporter himself. Chinnathambi declared he would “be happy to do it over again.” If he could get some help with it. Kerala being Kerala, volunteers lined up even before the session ended.

And so maybe one day the full story will be told. Of Edamalakudi and its elephants. Of a people's thirst for learning and knowledge. Of Kerala's smallest library but perhaps the world's greatest librarian – certainly, its noblest one.



A Class 6 drop out from a poor, large, Muthuvan Adivasi family he runs the only library in the wilderness on the foundational belief: 'Knowledge is more powerful than education'

12 years earlier in Edamalakudi

It's a tiny teashop, a mud-walled structure in the middle of nowhere. The hand-written sign on plain paper pinned to the front, reads:

Akshara Arts & Sports  
Library  
Iruppukallakudi  
Edamalakudi

A library? Here in the forests and wilderness of Idukki district? This is a relatively low literacy spot in Kerala, India's most literate state. There are just 25 families in this

hamlet of the state's first elected tribal village council. Anyone else wanting to borrow a book from here would have to trek a long way through dense forest. Would they, really?

“Well, yes,” says P. V. Chinnathambi, 73, tea vendor, sports club organiser and librarian. “They do.” His little shop — selling tea, ‘mixture’, biscuits, matches and other provisions — sits at the hilly crossroads of Edamalakudi. This is Kerala’s remotest panchayat, where just one Adivasi group, the Muthuvans, reside. Getting there had meant an 18-kilometre walk from Pettimudi near Munnar. Reaching Chinnathambi’s tea-shop library meant even more walking. His wife is away on work when we stumble across his home. They too, are Muthuvans.

“Chinnathambi,” I ask, puzzled. “I’ve had the tea. I see the provisions. Where the heck is your library?” He flashes his striking smile and takes us inside the small structure. From a darkened corner, he retrieves two large jute bags — the kind that can carry 25 kilos of rice or more. In the bags are 160 books, his full inventory. These he lays out carefully on a mat, as he does every day during the library’s working hours.



P. V. Chinnathambi in his tiny tea shop next to a paper sign announcing the existence of his library in the wilderness



The Muthuvan Adivasi did everything to protect the knowledge and learning that the library gave, including shifting it when needed

Our band of eight wanderers browse the books in awe. Every one of them is a piece of literature, a classic, even the political works. No thrillers, bestsellers or chick lit. There is a Malayalam translation of the Tamil epic poem Silappathikaram. There are books by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, M.T. Vasudevan Nair, Kamala Das. Also titles by M. Mukundan, Lalithambika Antharjanam and others. Alongside tracts of Mahatma Gandhi are famous radical polemics like Thoppil Basi's You made me a Communist. "But Chinnathambi, do people here really read such stuff?" we ask, now seated outside. The Muthuvans, like most Adivasi groups, suffer greater deprivation and worse education drop-out rates than other Indians. In reply, he

fishes out his library register. This is an impeccably kept record of books borrowed and returned. There may be only 25 families in this hamlet, but there were 37 books borrowed in 2013. That's close to a fourth of the total stock of 160 – a decent lending ratio. The library has a one-time membership fee of Rs. 25 and a monthly charge of Rs.2. There is no separate payment for the book you borrow. The tea is free. Black and without sugar. "People come in tired from the hills." Only the biscuits, 'mixture' and other items have to be paid for. Sometimes, a visitor might even get a spartan meal, free.

The dates of lending and return, names of the borrowers, are all neatly entered in his register. Illango's Silappathikaram has been taken more than once. Already, several more books had been borrowed this year. Quality literature flourishing here in the forests, devoured by a marginalised Adivasi group. This was sobering. Some of us, I guess, were reflecting on the sorry reading habits in our own urban environment.

Our group, with several members earning a living from writing, was in for a further deflation of the ego. Young Vishnu S., one of three journalism students from the Kerala Press Academy travelling with us, found a different kind of 'book' amongst the lot. A ruled notebook with several hand-written pages. It has no title yet, but this is Chinnathambi's autobiography. He hasn't got far with it, he says apologetically. But he's working on it. "Come on, Chinnathambi. Read us something from it." It wasn't long, and it was incomplete, but a tale neatly told. It captures the first stirrings of his social and political consciousness. It starts, after all, with the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi

when the author was around seven years old — and the impact that had on him.



His precious collection of literature, classics, books on history and political works have been in demand within the community. A quarter of the total number of books is always in circulation

Chinnathambi says he was inspired to return to Edamalakudi and set up his library by Murli ‘Mash’ (master or teacher). Murli ‘Mash’ is a legendary figure and teacher in these parts. He is an Adivasi himself, but from a different tribe. One which resides in Mankulam, outside of this panchayat. He has devoted much of his life to working with and for the Muthuvans. “Mash set me in this direction,” says Chinnathambi, who lays no claim to doing anything special, though he is.

Edamalakudi, where this hamlet is just one amongst 28, has less than 2,500 people. That's almost the entire Muthuvan population in the world. Barely a hundred live in Iruppukallakudi. Edamalakudi, which covers over a hundred square kilometres of forest, is also the panchayat with the lowest number of voters in the state, barely 1,500. Our exit route from here has to be abandoned. Wild elephants have taken over the 'short-cut' to Valparai in Tamil Nadu that we had chosen.

Yet, here sits Chinnathambi, running what could be one of the loneliest libraries anywhere. And he keeps it active, serving the reading and literary hunger of his impoverished clientele. And also supplying them tea and 'mixture' and matches. An otherwise noisy group, we set off in some silence, touched and impressed by our encounter. Our eyes on the treacherous path in the long trek ahead. Our minds on P. V. Chinnathambi, librarian extraordinary.