



The Kadar Community Charts An Inspirational Journey Of Resilience As They Take Back Their Forests

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The Kadars were displaced from their ancestral forests in 2019

The Kadars are an Adivasi group who reside in the Anamalai Ranges, located in Valparai Tehsil of Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. They are traditional forest dwellers who depend on forest produce for sustenance. They alternate their habitation between two areas. During dry seasons they lived in a village called Kallargudi and during rains, when landslides occur, they shift to Nathukadu where their ancestors used to live. From 2019 onwards, this community has been struggling to retain their rights over the forests that has been their home for hundreds of years.

According to the members, 2019 was a year of heavy rains that caused several landslides which damaged the roads and villages of the hill range. Unable to continue living in Kallargudi any longer, the Kadar community consisting of 23 families and 75 members, informed the forest department and the police that they will be moving to Nathukadu where they have temporary settlements. They constructed five huts where they would be protected from the rains and landslides. However, they allege that in August, the forest officials came to their habitation and drove them away from the location. The officials dismantled the makeshift huts and said that the families have no right to live there as the area belongs to the government.

This denial of access to ancestral land and forests sparked a protest movement that has shown the resilience of the Adivasi community. This article is about how a small community fought with the bureaucracy to win back what is rightfully theirs. The community took the help of Ekta Parishad, a nationwide movement which fights for Adivasi land rights, and got the overwhelming support of various democratic organisations, the media, and the general public, to get their voices heard.

Struggle in Kallarkudi-Teppakulamedu

According to anthropologist Edgar Thurston, Kadars are the oldest ethnic tribal group of southern India. They are known for living in harmony with nature – the flora, fauna and wild animals. They also possess a traditional knowledge of medicine.

When the Kadars were driven out of Nathukadu in August 2019, they started a non-violent struggle to reassert their inherent rights over their traditional habitat. They claimed that without the forest, they are like "fish out of water". Observing the situation, the forest officials told them: "This place would not work for you and we will give you another alternative place." Then the Adivasis were forced to take shelter at dilapidated labour-quarters of nearby Thaimudi Estate.



A meeting being held on how to resolve the issue

This was a new experience for the *Kadars* who had never lived outside of their territory. The broken-down estate was of no use to them. They demanded an alternative place in the forest for their habitation within the next 10 days. This demand was denied by the forest officials who instead offered them cash relief of INR 15 lakhs, along with good housing, electricity and drinking water facilities either in Valparai town or Sirukundra area, provided the *Kadars* commit that they will never enter the forest again. The villagers were told that their ancient villages were located in a tiger reserve, hence, they cannot live their anymore.

their condition. All the atrocious acts of the forest department were video recorded, shaking the conscience of everyone who saw them.



The Forest Department allegedly destroyed the homes of the Kadars

After the video surfaced, the district administration intervened on this issue and both the forest and revenue departments conducted surveys jointly – new settlement, village limit demarcation, and other formalities at Teppakulamedu. Moreover, the Government of Tamil Nadu, which has this corridor marked as a Tiger Reserve, promised to send the notification about their new settlement at Theppakulamedu to the National Tiger Reserve Authority in New Delhi. But, after a year of waiting for the result, the forest department issued an arbitrary announcement that the Teppakulamedu area sought by the *Kallarkudi Kadar* could not be provided. Thus, the Kadars were pushed to great distress as they were hoping for a reasonable outcome.



On October 2, 2020, on the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, another struggle was initiated and the Kadar took out a march again. Children held the photographs of Gandhi, the Kadar women carried the soils of Teppakulamedu and reached the protest location. Their protest continued despite in pouring rain and cold. Children, women, and all of them carried the protest without food, and without sleeping, for days and nights, singing and dancing. When this news reached, the Government of Tamil Nadu, paid attention to the matter and organised a meeting with the community members as a gesture to ensure their rights in Teppakulamedu area.

After 60 days of nonviolent and tenacious protest, despite the rainy season, the Honourable Minister, Mr Senthil Balaji, presented land rights *pattas* to 21 families at an event held in Valparai on August 7, 2021. It was the swiftest action ever taken and offered an alternative location in the 'Core zone' of the Tiger Reserve under the provision cited in the Forest Rights Act, 2006. This landmark development created a model for forest land rights issues. Thereafter, the Kadar erected five huts on the *patta* land that had already been surveyed at Teppakulamedu.

Peace did not last long. On the morning of December 3, 2021, the forest department allegedly visited the location and dismantled the huts.



The Kadar families lodged a complaint with the Valparai police station seeking to book the concerned forest officials under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Later, the District Collector of Coimbatore, Mr. Sameeran, ordered a re-measuring of the location where *pattas* had been issued, on December 4. There was a contradiction between the traditional habitat of Kadar and the land allotted, which was like a cluster of houses allotted in non-tribal areas. In a separate meeting held at the Collector's office on December 6, 2021, the District Collector ensured that, under the Forest Rights Act, the tribals are the owners of forest land. At the same time, the Kallarkudi Kadar will be provided with 12 acres of residential land at Kallarkudi-Teppakulamedu. Meanwhile their farm land will remain at the Old Kallarkudi settlement.

Further, the Collector announced that a house could be constructed in a safer place within an area of about 2.5 acres of land, subject to the rules that prevail in the Tiger Reserve. The government will also build safe cluster houses for them. He assured them that it would take place once the survey was done and a resolution was passed in the *Gramasabha* meeting. As this meeting was held in the presence of all concerned department officials (forest, revenue, and police), the *Kadars* expressed their sense of happiness.

It is a fact that tribal communities always believe in dialogue. But the concerned government officials neither listen to them nor allow them to speak. They often despise them. They do not understand the tribal view and purposely disregard it.

Based on the complaint made by them, the District Collector summoned the forest staff for their highhanded act of vandalising the temporary shelters of the *Kadar* community. All those offenders were sitting in a state of great reluctance and guilt. But the *Kadar* people, who suffered a lot at the hands of those abusers, did not even utter a word about them to the District Collector or District Magistrate during the enquiry process. Thus, they simply forgave their perpetrators, which probably opened the officers' eyes

to Adivasi culture.



Recommendation further action

The Anamalai ranges are inhabited by the Tribal communities of Iravalar and Malasar, at Sarkarpathy, Navamalai and Kavarkkal who are also vulnerable to frequent harassment by forest officials. They are also affected due to the construction of dams and hydropower projects. Their rights on forest land under the Forest Rights Act, 2006 should be protected by taking the following steps:-

- Each forest dependent tribal in Tamil Nadu should be provided with 10 acres of land for habitation and cultivation.
- Wherever Community Forest rights are provided, the area should be converted into revenue villages and it should be governed by tribal village panchayats.
- 50% of the forest dwelling tribes should be given priority in employment in the forest department.
- Eco friendly houses should be built for the tribals.

The Adivasi people's right to a dignified life must be protected and respected. They have been safeguarding the environment for hundreds of years and have been the guardians of the forests.

About the Author: Thanaraj is an activist from Tamil Nadu who works for Tribal Rights. He is the state coordinator of Ekta Parishad.

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