

K J Baby, the chronicler of tribal life in Kerala's Wayanad, is no more

A theatre personality, orator, singer, and award-winning novelist, Baby's most enduring legacy is his Kanavu school for tribal children in Cheengodu

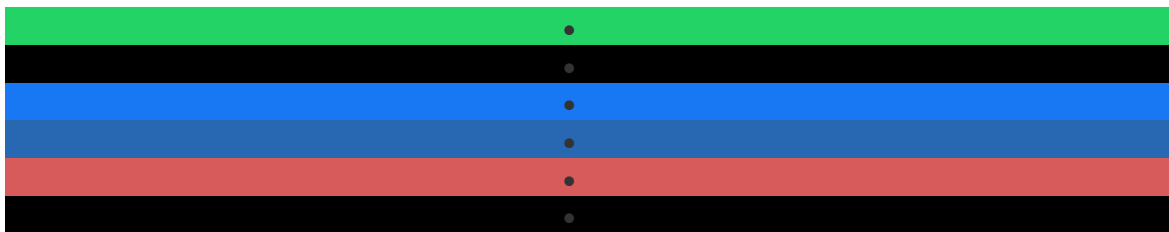


The late K J Baby Photo provided by K A Shaji

K A Shaji

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K J Baby, the founder of Kanavu, the unique school for Adivasi children in northern Kerala, breathed his last early morning on September 1, on a premises next door.

He had been ailing since his wife, Shirley, who stood with him in materialising his dream and even shared the financial liabilities involved, died two years ago.

Shirley was a college professor who spent most of her income on the school, which had never been profitable.

A theatre personality, orator, singer, and award-winning novelist, Baby, who died at the age of 70, was a chronicler of tribal life in Wayanad.

The hill district of Kerala is home to the highest concentration of tribals in the state. For generations, these tribals have been subjected to systemic and organised exploitation and land alienation at the hands of colonial settlers as well as native encroachers.

Born in a Christian settler family in Mavadi, Kannur district in 1954, Baby reached Wayanad with his extended family at a young age. After graduating from college, he wanted to become a Hindu monk and travelled to Thiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu, the abode of the late sage Ramana Maharshi.

After a brief stint at Maharshi's ashram, he returned to Wayanad to become a farmer and a drama artist. He dedicated his free time to volunteering as a tutor for the literacy movement that worked among tribals. He taught both tribal children and elders, and in return, they shared with him numerous stories of their harrowing existence.

His novel *Maveli Mantram*, the first anthropological fiction in Malayalam, delves deep into Wayanad's tribal past. It portrays a time when people lived in perfect harmony with the environment and evolved a lifestyle in sync with the forests and wildlife around them.

A literary brilliance, it won the prestigious Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award. It also explored how the influx of settlers from outside, along with colonial interventions and large developmental projects, adversely impacted Wayanad's fragile ecology and environment, making it one of the highly vulnerable hotspots of extreme weather events.

His famous song, *Kadu, en veedu Wayanad* (Wayanad is my forest and home), is a beloved anthem for the region's people. It reflects the deep sense of tribal pride that Baby's work instilled in them.

His last literary work was a drama titled *Kunhimayan Enthayirikkum Paranjath?* (What had Kunhimayan said?). It investigated the circumstances in which the then-British police arrested farmer Kunhimayan from Thalassery in 1857. Kunhimayan died later in Tiruchirappalli jail while being an undertrial prisoner. When enacted on stage, the drama won large-scale critical acclaim.

The Kerala police closely watched him after he wrote a small book tracing the Naxal movement, which was widespread in Wayanad in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and organised the direct actions at Pulpally and Thalassery.

After penning a drama titled *Nadugaddika*, which revolved around sheer poverty and exploitation to which Waynad tribals were subjected, Baby formed a collective comprising former Naxalites and fellow travellers to make its theatre version and stage it across Kerala.

Baby too became one of the actors, and it turned out to be an expose of governmental failure in resolving poverty in Wayanad's tribal community.

In 1981, then chief minister E K Nayanar ordered a ban on the drama, citing its alleged Naxalite links. Baby and 22 others, who were performing the drama in Kozhikode, were arrested halfway. with police jumping onto the stage.

After being acquitted, Baby continued with his literary and educational experiments. He contacted Medha Patkar while travelling in Maharashtra with his theatre group. That association made him a fellow traveller of the Narmada movement, and he spent many months with the agitating, land-alienated people of the Narmada valley. He also

explained to people there about the magnitude of historical injustice borne by Kerala's tribals.

Until recently, he vigorously championed environmental protection, tribal land rights, and basic human rights.

A dream comes true

Kanavu in Malayalam means dream. And a dream it was for Baby half a century ago when he first thought of a school exclusively for Adivasi children in the hinterlands of Wayanad.

He envisioned a school that would educate Adivasi children and instill a sense of pride in their cultural heritage and identity. This unique approach aimed to empower tribal students and foster a strong community spirit.

Thirty years ago, a Bengaluru-based trust donated six acres of land at Cheengodu in Baby's neighbourhood. *Kanavu* became a reality.

Cheengodu is a remote village near Wayanad district's largest town, Sulthan Bathery.

Baby lived there with his activist wife Shirley, their two children as well as the first batch of 60 tribal children, using the institution to understand their inner thoughts and encourage them to cultivate their hidden talents, which evolved as part of community inheritance.

The family taught the tribal children how to live with dignity, minimise adverse environmental impact, and sustain themselves in ways similar to their ancestors.

The institution faced significant challenges after losing the support of the trust that had provided the land and basic requirements. The lack of funding became a major obstacle, especially since Baby was committed to maintaining the institution's integrity and refused offers from funding agencies with questionable credentials.

Despite the difficulties, *Kanavu* became successful, gaining a reputation among researchers and academics, even internationally, as a successful model for imparting knowledge to tribal communities. Combining traditional knowledge, wisdom, and ethnic practices with contemporary education enabled this.

When Baby announced in 2008 that he would hand over the institution's administration to a group of young people who had graduated from the residential institution for the first time, *Kanavu* once again made history.

After that, Mangloo, a girl from the Paniya tribal community, and Santhosh, a boy from Mullukuruma, were appointed governing trustees of *Kanavu*. They supervised every activity that took place at the school, including teaching.

In their mid-twenties, both showed exemplary leadership qualities as they had when they were Baby's students.

A unique institution

During his time at *Kanavu*, Baby consciously decided to abandon traditional methods. There was neither a classroom nor a syllabus.

“We aimed to demonstrate that children from Adivasi communities can acquire the same skills as youngsters from mainstream societies. First and foremost, we must instill in them the value of respecting oneself. We dreamed that Kanavu would inspire other people to start similar institutions in the country that would not have any non-tribal influence,” Baby used to say.

The children were not urged to confront their past through textbooks; rather, they were urged to do so through examples from community life. The efforts to strengthen their sense of identity were centred on their participation in tribal folk songs and ceremonies.

They were also encouraged to develop abilities in music, painting, dancing, theatre, or martial arts. Farming skills are also highly emphasised as an example of a traditional career that can be profitable.

Interestingly, Baby’s students were also guided through the process of taking competitive examinations. “We don’t follow a question-answer format, but our children are grounded in the basics,” he said once.

The youngsters were from different tribal groups that had a history of violence against one another, and they were taught that it was necessary to rise above impulses that caused division.

Because of his efforts, these goals have been incorporated into the school’s daily routine. Each student was assigned a daily assignment and placed in a group.

The day began with classes in Kalaripayattu, Kerala’s traditional martial art. After lunch, the students received instruction in classical dance and music before moving on to academic instruction from teachers who frequently visited the school.

Undoubtedly, one of the most amazing aspects of Kanavu is the fluency with which even the younger students can speak numerous languages. Many tribal children who completed their education at Kanavu, now work for companies in Ahmedabad and Bengaluru.

Performing traditional tribal dances and folk music, these pupils have garnered much attention for their excellent performances. The *gurukula* system is used in Kanavu, which means that professors live with their students and are not compensated for their work. The school’s budget is balanced thanks to the earnings from the performances, which are barely enough to cover expenses.

Baby directed one film, wrote seven dramas, two novels, and two non-fiction books. Several educational institutions now require students to study his books.

At the same time, Kanavu continues to garner notice as a model institution that employs new teaching methods and has a visible influence on a group that has long stayed on the margins of society.

Tribal people
Kerala
Wayanad
Waynad Landslides