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As Kerala goes to the polls, democracy has a blind spot in Wayanad

Kerala's tribal constituencies elect MLAs, but most Adivasi communities remain absent from the Assembly



An Adiya colony in Panavalli in Wayanad. Photo: Ratheesh S R

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At dawn in Wayanad's forest-fringed hamlets, election season arrives quietly. Party flags appear along narrow mud roads. Campaign jeeps wind their way through plantation slopes. Candidates trek up steep hill paths to settlements hidden among forests and paddy fields.

In these scattered colonies, Adivasi families discuss candidates and party symbols with the same intensity seen across Kerala's famously political society. Yet beneath this familiar ritual of democracy lies an uncomfortable truth.

For decades, thousands of Adivasi voters in Wayanad have walked to polling booths and cast their ballots in the state's only tribal constituencies. But the Assembly that emerges from those votes has rarely reflected the diversity of the tribes who live in these hills.

In a district that hosts Kerala's largest Adivasi population, political representation has largely been confined to just two communities.

Wayanad contains Kerala's only two Assembly constituencies reserved for Scheduled Tribes: Mananthavady and Sulthan Bathery. The reservation was meant to ensure political representation for the district's many tribal communities. But election after election, the legislature has heard the voices of only two among them.

Several others, including the Paniyas, the largest Adivasi community in the district, have never sent a representative to the Kerala Legislative Assembly.

As Kerala approaches the April 9 Assembly election, the pattern remains unchanged. Once again, the major political fronts have fielded candidates only from the Kurichiya and Mullu Kuruma communities. These communities are relatively better organised and more stable in terms of agricultural income and land ownership. Meanwhile several other tribal communities, including the Paniyas, remain absent from the candidate lists of major political formations.

Nearly one fifth of Wayanad's population belongs to Scheduled Tribes. But the tribal population itself is far from homogeneous.

The Paniyas form the largest tribal community in the district, accounting for roughly 45 per cent of the total Adivasi population. They are followed by the Kurichiyas, who constitute about one fifth, and the Mullu Kurumas, who make up around 13 per cent.

Other communities include the Adiyas, Kattunaikkas, Ooralis and Vettakurumas. Each has its own cultural traditions, histories and livelihoods.

Yet the electoral history of Wayanad's two reserved constituencies reveals a striking pattern. Since the creation of these seats, every tribal MLA elected from Mananthavady or Sulthan Bathery has belonged either to the Kurichiya or Mullu Kuruma communities.

No representative from the Paniya, Adiya, Kattunaikka, Oorali or Vettakuruma communities has ever entered the Kerala Legislative Assembly.

Historian O K Johnny says the explanation lies in the unequal historical trajectories of Wayanad's tribal communities.

"Reservation ensured that at least two tribal representatives would sit in the Assembly," Johnny says. "But it did not ensure that all tribal communities would have equal access to leadership. Communities that historically had some access to land, education and political networks were able to build influence earlier."

Once these advantages took root, electoral politics reinforced them.

"Political parties look for candidates who can mobilise votes and maintain organisational structures," Johnny says. "Over time this creates a cycle where the same communities continue to dominate representation."

Among Wayanad's tribes, the Kurichiyas historically occupied a relatively stronger social position.

Unlike several other communities, they retained agricultural land through much of the colonial period and the early decades after Independence. Kurichiya settlements practised settled agriculture and maintained traditional village institutions.

Their history also includes participation in the resistance led by Pazhassi Raja against the British in the late eighteenth century. That legacy reinforced their reputation as a landholding and martial community.

Over time Kurichiya youth began entering schools, government service and local political institutions. By the late twentieth century Kurichiya leaders had emerged in panchayats, cooperative societies and political parties.

Major political formations increasingly relied on these networks when selecting candidates for tribal constituencies. As a result, Kurichiya leaders have dominated representation in Mananthavady for decades.

The Mullu Kurumas is another agricultural community with relatively better access to land and education. Over time, they too produced leaders who entered electoral politics.

In Sulthan Bathery, candidates from the Mullu Kuruma community have periodically emerged depending on party alignments.

But beyond these two communities, representation has remained closed.

The absence of the Paniyas from the Assembly is perhaps the most striking example. Despite being the largest tribal community in Kerala, the Paniyas remain politically invisible.

For generations the Paniyas lived as agricultural labourers under feudal landlords in Wayanad's paddy fields and plantations. The word *Paniya* itself derives from a term meaning 'labourer'.

"Many Paniya families lived in conditions that resembled bonded labour," Johnny says. "Even when those systems disappeared, the disadvantages they carried continued into the modern period."

Migration from the plains, encroachment by settlers, plantation expansion and development projects steadily pushed tribal communities out of their traditional lands. As forests were converted into plantations and estates, thousands of tribal families lost control over land and were forced into plantation labour or daily wage work.

The Paniyas were among the worst affected. Even today, a large proportion of Paniya households remain landless and depend on precarious wage labour in farms and plantations.

Educational inequality deepens this marginalisation.

While Kerala's overall literacy rate is around 94 per cent, literacy among Scheduled Tribes remains significantly lower. In Wayanad, the literacy rate among tribal communities is around 71 per cent.

Within the tribal population itself, disparities are sharp. Kurichiya and Mullu Kuruma communities record significantly higher literacy levels than many others. Among the Paniyas, illiteracy rates remain among the highest.

The Adiyas, another large tribal community in Wayanad, share a similar history of servitude. For decades many Adiya families also lived under bonded labour

arrangements with landlords. Even today many agricultural labourers live in settlements on the margins of plantations and forests.

Some communities remain even more marginalised. The Kattunaikkas, classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, traditionally lived as hunter gatherers in forest regions. Many settlements remain deep inside forest areas where access to schooling, healthcare and public institutions is limited.

The Oorali and Vettakuruma communities face similar challenges. Many live in scattered forest hamlets where livelihoods depend on forest produce, casual labour and welfare schemes.

Rights activist Dhanya Raman, who has worked closely with Adivasi communities in Kerala, says the imbalance reflects deep inequalities within the tribal population itself.

“From the outside, it appears that reservation ensures representation for all Adivasis,” she says. “But within the Scheduled Tribe category there are large differences in social and economic status.”

Among younger members of the Paniya community, the absence of political representation is increasingly becoming a subject of debate.

Manikuttan Paniyan, who holds a professional master’s degree, has emerged as one of the most visible public voices from the community. He has been vocal about the need for electoral representation for the Paniyas.

Growing up in a tribal settlement where most families depended on daily wage labour shaped his political thinking.

“Many children in our colonies could not continue their studies because their families needed income,” he says.

Manikuttan believes political representation is essential if the structural problems facing tribal communities are to be addressed.

As Kerala approaches the April 9 election, campaign speeches in Mananthavady and Sulthan Bathery will revolve around familiar themes such as development projects, welfare schemes and party rivalries.

But a deeper democratic question continues to echo through the hills of Wayanad.

Kerala is often celebrated for its literacy, political awareness and vibrant electoral participation. Yet the experience of many Adivasi communities reveals a quieter contradiction within this democratic success story.

Participation has not necessarily translated into representation.