

Home · Community & Culture

Kaanu: A glimpse of South India's Adivasi knowledge centre

The centre will mark the beginning of an ambitious project to document and archive the histories, languages, and cultural practices of South Indian tribal communities.



By **Deeksha Devadiga** Published Aug 24, 2024 | 9:00 AM _ Updated Aug 24, 2024 | 9:00 AM



Members of the Kaanu collective with bags showing the Indian Constitution's preamble. (Supplied)

Sunday, 25 August will mark the beginning of a significant step towards the preservation of South Indian tribal heritage with the launch of Kaanu, a knowledge centre, in Chamarajanagar.

<

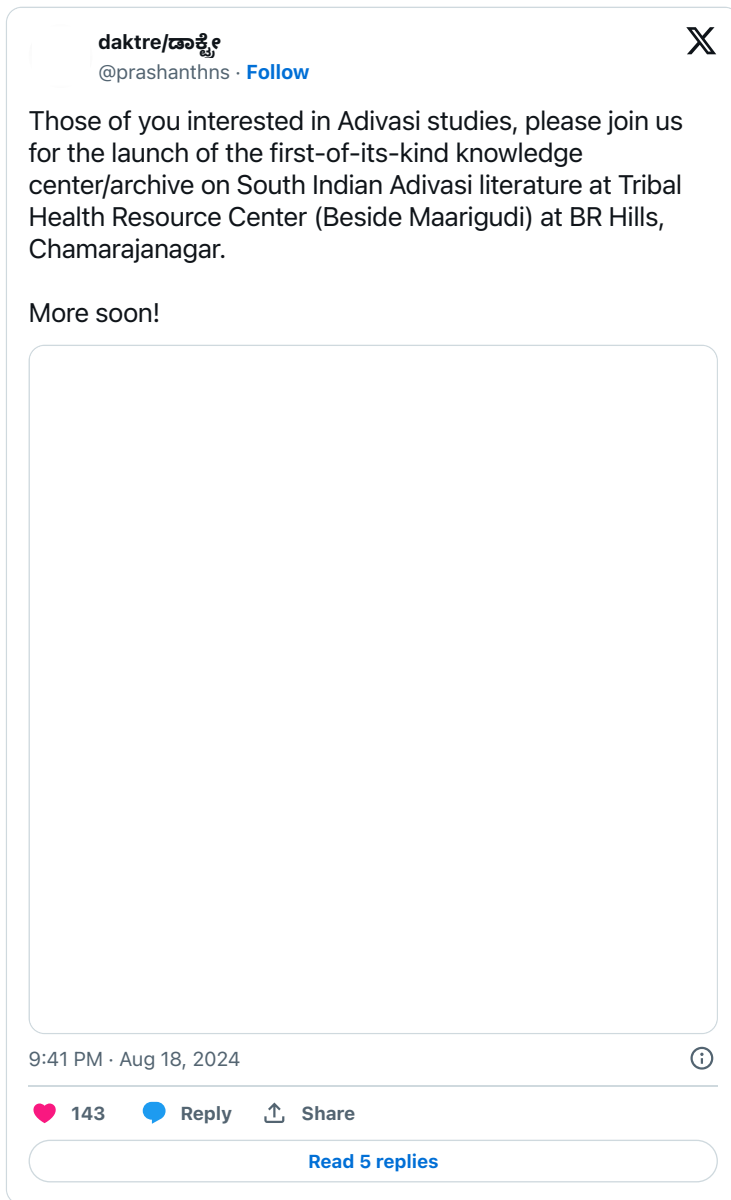
Ad served by Google

Ad options

Send feedback

Why this ad? ⓘ

Spearheaded by the Kaanu Collective, the centre will mark the beginning of an ambitious project to document and archive the histories, languages, and cultural practices of South Indian tribal communities.



Also Read: [Budhini, a Santhali girl banished for being Jawaharlal Nehru's tribal 'wife'](#)

The Kaanu Collective

The Kaanu Collective, involving Adivasi and non-Adivasi scholars, was formed with the vision of creating a space where the narratives of South Indian Adivasi communities could be preserved and shared with the broader public.

Dr Prashant N Shrinivas, a public health researcher and one of the members of the collective, has spent over a decade working in Adivasi health in Chamarajanagar. His work in healthcare led him to realise that the issues faced by these communities extend far beyond medical access.

“A lot of the work that happens in Adivasi health is related to the history, social, and political context of Adivasi communities,” Dr Shrinivas said. “Many approach Adivasi health with the notion that there is something inherently wrong with the community—that they need to be taught or integrated into modern society. This perspective often overlooks the broader social and political struggles that these communities have endured over time, particularly during pre-colonial and post-colonial periods,” he added.

Recognising the need for a more nuanced understanding of Adivasi communities, the Kaanu Collective was born out of a desire to reclaim and reframe the Adivasi identity in South India.

Unlike the stronger tribal identities found in Central and Northeast India, South Indian Adivasi communities have often been overlooked. The Kaanu Centre aims to change this by serving as a repository of knowledge and a platform for cultural pride.

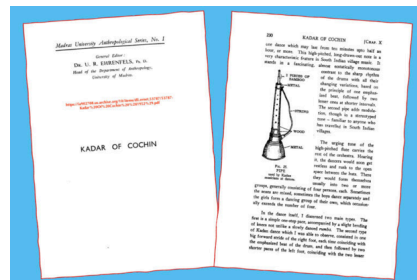
Also Read: [Meet G Nithya and M Ravi, first from vulnerable Kolam tribe to enter IIT](#)

What is Kaanu?

The name, “Kaanu”, is deeply rooted in the identity of South Indian Adivasi communities. In the Soliga language, “kaanu” refers to a thick forest, an apt metaphor for the dense and intricate histories that the centre seeks to preserve.

“Forest is very central to their identity,” Dr Shrinivas explained. “It is also the starting point of their struggles, their rights, their access to their ancestral lands—all of it has been contested.”

The Kaanu Centre will house a growing collection of over 1,150 documents related to various South Indian Adivasi communities. These documents include historical records, research papers, and archival materials that have been carefully curated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Adivasi experience.



Ehrenfels' 1952 monograph 'The Kadar of Cochin.

(Supplied)

The centre will offer both online and offline access to this collection, making it a valuable resource for scholars, students, and the general public.

Besides offering a panorama of present-day Adivasi testimonies, Kaanu also brings into the open a careful selection of long-forgotten and hard-to-find gems. One of them is Ehrenfels' 1952 monograph '*The Kadar of Cochin*', the first-of-its-kind to describe Adivasis and their culture respectfully.

The Kaanu Center is more than just a repository; it is a platform where the Adivasi community can reclaim their narrative.

Historically, much of what has been written about South Indian tribal communities has come from the perspectives of outsiders, often misrepresenting or misunderstanding the true essence of their culture.

The centre aims to rectify this by housing documents that have been carefully reviewed and verified by members of the community themselves. These will include research papers, articles, and books that provide accurate and respectful representations of the Adivasi way of life.

Also Read: [How Dalit and Tribal welfare funds are spent in Karnataka](#)

A collaborative effort

The Kaanu Collective is not an organisation in the traditional sense. Instead, it is a collective of like-minded individuals and scholars who are passionate about Adivasi rights and cultural preservation.

Among its members are notable Adivasi scholars like C Madegowda and Muthaiah, both from the Soliga community, as well as non-Adivasi researchers who have dedicated their careers to studying and supporting these communities.

C Madegowda, who plays a pivotal role in the collective, emphasises the importance of critical thinking and writing within the Adivasi community. “We don’t have a network of Adivasi writers in South India,” he says.

“Very few people are in the academic sector and have the writing skills. We need to write research articles and critically think about issues like forest policy, which directly affects our communities.”

Lakshmi M, who hails from Biligiri Rangana Betta, and is an active member of the Aadi programme, expressed her deep connection to the project.

“The Kaanu Center is vital for preserving the rich heritage of the Soliga tribes. For too long, our culture and language have been at risk of fading away. This centre will serve as a repository for our traditions, language, and history, ensuring that they are documented for future generations,” she said.

Muthaiah, a Soliga Adivasi activist and former secretary of the Hannur Soliga Abhivruddhi Sangha, the community-based organisation of Soliga people, underscored the importance of this initiative.

“For years, we have struggled to document our culture due to the lack of researchers within our community. The Kaanu Center offers a chance to change that, allowing us to tell our own stories, in our own words,” Muthaiah explained.

“The goal is to make our people independent, not reliant on external aid, and the Kaanu Center is a step towards achieving that,” Muthaiah added, emphasising the centre’s role in fostering self-reliance among the Adivasi people.

Also Read: [This filmmaker chronicles Coimbatore tribes’ path to landmark forest rights](#)

Looking ahead

The Kaanu Centre is a work in progress, with its founders viewing this launch as just the beginning. “This is really a very humble beginning,” Dr Shrinivas noted. “What is being launched is

HOME | STATES | POLITICS | MOVIES | HEALTH | DAKSHIN DIALOGUES | MORE |

interpretations will evolve over time.

The collective’s hope is that the centre will grow into a vibrant hub of Adivasi knowledge and culture, attracting scholars and public attention alike. In the coming years, they plan to secure additional resources to enhance the centre’s offerings, including translating and showcasing selected works from their collection.

The Kaanu Center stands as a symbol of hope, not only for the Soliga tribe but for all South Indian tribal communities. It promises to be a place where the past is honoured, the present is understood, and the future is shaped by the hands of those who know it best. As the centre opens its doors, it carries with it the aspirations of a community determined to preserve its culture and pass it on to future generations.

Those interested in attending the launch or getting involved with the Kaanu Collective can attend the event which is held at the Tribal Health Resource Centre campus in Chamarajanagar. The event is open to the public.

(Edited by Majnu Babu)

(South First is now on WhatsApp and Telegram)