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Tamil Nadu

## TN Adivasi couple who fought for land rights invited to R-Day event

*While recalling the two and half years of peaceful protests, Rajalakshmi urged the Union government to include the six tribal ethnic groups of Anamalai into the PVTG list.*



Rajalakshmi with her husband Jayapaul (Photo: Special Arrangement)

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A couple from the Kadar tribal community in Tamil Nadu, who were responsible for getting their ancestral land rights in the core forest area, have been invited to view the Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi on January 26.

Rajalakshmi, a Kadar woman residing in the Anamalai Tiger Reserve (ATR), Coimbatore and her husband C Jayapaul were the face of

prolonged protests between 2019 and 2021 for

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prolonged protests between 2010 and 2011 for rights to live inside the core zone of the Tiger Reserve. This was after a part of their Kallarkudi hamlet was washed away in the heavy cloudburst. The non-violent protests resulted in Adivasis retaining their land in the core zone of a tiger reserve in Tamil Nadu for the first time after they were evicted from the forests.

“This recognition from the Union government will shed more light on the hurdles and obstacles that Adivasi communities face across the country,” Rajalakshmi said, as she rejoiced about the VVIP invitation. The granting of land rights paved the way for rights under the Forest Rights Act (2006) and changed the lives of six indigenous communities – Kadar, Malasar, Malamalasar, Eravalur, Malai Pulaiyar and Muthuvar – in the Anamalai range.



The huts that were razed down in Pazhathottam in 2019 (Photo: Special Arrangement)

Kallarkudi is 17 km away from Valparai, an important tea hub in the southern part of the country. A part of the Kallarkudi settlement of Kadars washed away in a landslide during the heavy rainfall in August 2019. When they put up

huts in Pazhathottam, a nearby location, in the core zone of Tiger Reserve, the Kadars were evicted. Their huts were razed down by the Forest Department and were forcefully moved to unused line houses that were constructed for tea plantation workers in the Thaimudi estate. The 90-odd Kadars were forced to live in four houses that were bereft of all the basic amenities. Led by Rajalakshmi, they started to protest for their rights.

“As we were outside the forest, we could not access minor forest produce or look after the agricultural produce. As our lives crumbled, we protested with our kids in the core forest area. It was not easy, but, recalling all our struggles, now, we are very proud that we did what seemed fair to us,” Rajalakshmi told TNM. She said that now her settlement has more than five huts. A dirt road was paved from the Thaimudi estate to the settlement and a check dam was built for drinking water.

The struggle of the Kadars was the watershed moment for Adivasis in the region. Between 2021 and 2023, nearly 700 Adivasis received their homestead pattas under FRA. Now 21 families in the Theppakulamedu are constructing houses. Along with Theppakulamedu, Kadars from Udumbanparai and Sankarankudi also received rights to around 10,000 acres of forest land under CFR.

### **Prolonged peaceful protests**

As their dwelling and foraging areas were declared as a sanctuary first and the Tiger Reserve later – Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary (IGWS) was created in 1976 – the Kadar community was under constant surveillance by

community was under constant surveillance by the Forest Department. Three important spots – Karia Shola, Grass Hills, and Manjampatty were notified as National Parks in 1989. Subsequently, in 2008, the sanctuary was declared as a Tiger Reserve.

The protests in 2019 were in the form of dharnas, sit-in protests and rallies. They were even arrested at one point, and security was increased at their residence. But the protests continued. Talking to TNM, Thanraj, a tribal rights activist and state coordinator of Ekta Parishad, recalled that several attempts were made to rehabilitate the Kadars out of the forest during their protests. Thanraj was the one who explained the provisions of the FRA to the six communities in the ATR.



Kallarkudi Kadars in line houses in Thaimudi tea estate (Photo: Special Arrangement)

"The resolutions passed in August 2020 by the Gram Sabha, according to Section 6 under FRA let them get the settlement inside the core zones of Tiger Reserves," he pointed out.

On October 2, 2021, the Kadars of Kallarkudi built temporary shelters at Theppakulamedu and worshipped their ancestors and performed rituals. The Forest Department again razed the temporary structures and increased security to ensure no one entered Theppakulamedu.

However, the Kadars sat in protest in the forest boundary for the next thirty days. It was then that the district administration initiated the talks.

“The beauty of the protest is how civil societies who never knew anything about the Adivasis of the Anamalai hills supported the protest. In Pollachi, people formed Anamalai Pazhangudigal Pathukappu Iyakkam (Save Anamalai Adivasis Movement) and extended their support to the Kadars. After the tenacious protests by the Kadars, the Revenue Department and district administration heeded their demands,” Thanraj recalled. On November 7, 2021, two years after their eviction from Pazhathottam, V Senthil Balaji, then Minister for Electricity, Prohibition and Excise of Tamil Nadu handed over homestead pattas to the 21 families in Theppakulamedu.

### **Miles to go**

In the 36 tribal hamlets in Anamalai Tiger Reserve in both Coimbatore and Tiruppur districts, Adivasis struggle to get basic amenities like transportation, electricity, and road and sanitation facilities. “Under the name of conservation, the Adivasis struggled a lot. But, this one protest by the Kadars became a precedent where they achieved what they wanted through discussions and peaceful protests,” Thanraj noted.

But success does not mean every Adivasi community and settlement in the Anamalai range enjoys the basic rights guaranteed in FRA. Rajalakshmi expressed her disappointment over how Adivasi communities are struggling without proper infrastructure because of conservation

proper implementation because of corruption in programs. The rights under FRA have not reached all Adivasi communities in Tamil Nadu. "There is no gradual transformation among them. For every basic need, they need to run pillar to poster to get it done. After the long struggle, a few settlements got the road facilities very recently," Thanraj said, while urging the state government to implement the FRA speedily.



Thanraj, state coordinator of Ekta Parishad, in Thaimudi estate (Photo: Special Arrangement)

Tamil Nadu was identified as one of the worst performers when it came to the FRA implementation. Thirty-seven communities are classified as Scheduled Tribes and they make up for just a little over 1% of the state's population. As of 2019, the government rejected 10,656 claims for titles out of 32,000 claims. The rejection rate was 33%.

The trend changed a little after the protest. According to the Forest Department, as of October 5, 2023, the government accorded 12,728 individual rights (which is one-third of individual claims) and 671 community rights

## Long pending demands

Rajalakshmi also noted that the Malai Pulayar community in the hills is still categorised as Schedule Caste (SC) rather than Scheduled Tribes (ST). "I want the state government to include the Malai Pulayar (Hill Pulayar) under the ST category and to ensure that their rights are protected," she said. She also urged the Union Government to recognise all six Adivasi communities - Malasar, Malamalasar, Iravalar, Kadar, Muthuvar, Malai Pulaiyar as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups.

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