

A LONG JOURNEY OF LIFE STRUGGLE OF KADAR TRIBAL: A BLOOMING HOPE

No one would know what happened in the forest. Yes, it is full of mysteries. *Kadar*, one of the rightful Adivasi communities of the traditional forest dwellers, has long been struggling and confronted with ignorant forest authorities. At the hands of these prejudiced so-called saviours of the forest, the suffering could not be written in words. In such a state of affairs, Ekta Parishad Tamil Nadu, with the overwhelming support of various democratic organisations, movements, the media and the general public, took up nonviolent social actions. The media played a greater role by continuously reporting the stories of *Kadar's Struggle for Justice*, for which we are grateful. Besides all these solidarities, the *Kadar* themselves were determined not to give up the struggle and stood firm.



Kadar, the Adivasi community whose life cannot be imagined outside of the forest. The term *Kadar* refers to "one who lives in the forest". Despite their traditional and legal right to live in the forest, sadly, they have been ousted for the past 2½ years by the forest department. Nevertheless, through their continued struggle and a change of guard in the state of Tamil Nadu and its constructive measures, they have now been reunited with the forest—the motherland.

Struggle in Kallarkudi-Teppakulamedu

According to anthropologist, Edgar Thurston, the oldest / primitive ethnic Tribal of south India are *Kadar* living in the dense forests of the Anamalai hills. They are known for living in harmony with nature – the flora fauna and wild animals. They follow a unique cultural trait – unique art and speak a distinct language called, '*Kadar*'. Also possess a traditional knowledge and life. They lived like kings and queens of the Anamalai hills before the rulers made law on forest rights.

Kadar is a humble, moral, and peaceful community that does not have too many greedy-desires. But continued their struggle to reassert their inherent rights. Until the government of Tamil Nadu listened to their crying voice, they had been "fish out of water". Now, they are reinstated into the forest and breathing the air of justice. It is the dawn of justice. They can live freely and happily in the forest, their motherland.

Kallarkudi belonged to an endogamic tribal community of 23 families and a total of 75 members. It is situated in the dense forest of the Anamalai ranges. It falls under the Valparai Tehsil in the Coimbatore district. Similarly, there are only 200 families living in six forest villages. For the past 10 years, Kallargudi village has been prone to incessant landslides and heavy rains. And hence, they have been asked to relocate by the department of forest for an alternative place. Therefore, during the rainy season, they used to build small huts at "Nathukadu," a place where their ancestors had been living. These impermanent arrangements become a recurring event. As and when the rain falls, they are driven back into the forest.



Heavy rains in August 2019 caused major landslides at four places along the corridor to the settlement, extensively damaged the area adjoining the village and destroyed seven huts. Unable to continue living here any longer, they informed the forest

department and the police properly and constructed five huts in "Nathukadu", where their ancestors had lived 3-kilometre distance.

The forest department went there in a day or two (August 19) and forcibly removed five of their huts and wanted to drive them back to the village. But this time the *Kadar* sat on the spot and began the nonviolent agitation. So, the forest department observing the situation 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 in a place called Thaimudi. In any case, the *Kadar* never lived outside their territory, the forest for a day, and filled with a sense of foreboding. They wanted an alternative place in the forest. Within 10 days. But the reluctant forest official did yield to their demand but promised them INR 15 laksh cash, good housing, electricity and drinking water facilities, provided that *Kadar* should never enter into the forest again, citing the reason as it is a tiger reserve. *Kadar* being daunted and said till their last breath in their body they would never leave the forest and refused to their deceitful promises. They demanded 'Teppakulamedu' as the alternative place for 'Kallarkudi' through a resolution passed in the traditional 'Gramasabha' under the Forest Right Act, 2006. The forest belongs to tribal people who have lived in the forest for generations. It is the tribal people who finalise their forest rights. Tribal Gramasabha members are lawmakers when deciding their rights on the forest.



Furthermore, they also invited other Adivasis living in the Anamalai ranges to demand *patta* (title deed) so as to settle down at Teppakulammedu, where their ancestors had been living. And on February 10, last year, about 300 Adivasis began a peaceful march from Valparai to Coimbatore, but permission was denied and they were subsequently

arrested. They then organised a day-long fast at Valparai's Gandhi Statue. So then, 700 Adivasi communities belonging to *Kadar, Muduvar, Malasar, Malaimalasar, Iravalar, and Pulaiyar* living in the Anamalai range are given pattas for the first time in history after 74 years of Independence. Until now, they have been abruptly labelled as invaders of the forest, despite all the legal and traditional provisions already on record.

However, the situation and the life of the community were not changed any better. The ignorant forest department began harassing them and despoiling their huts. Hence, on Independence Day, 2020, the people, in fear of losing their rights to the forest and culture, built huts at Teppakulamedu.



The Kadar displayed their slave-like condition through a nonviolent protest by worshipping their ancestors, and performing cultural activities, so that the outside world would know their condition. All the atrocious acts of the forest department were video recorded, shaking the conscience of everyone who saw them. Now 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. This change was achieved by tenacious nonviolent protest as they could not live outside the forest. With them, all the media, organisations of nonviolence activism, various political parties, and social movements across the state, and particularly those in and around Pollachi, wholeheartedly participated. Moreover, the government of Tamil Nadu, which has this corridor marked as a Tiger Reserve, has promised to send the notification 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. The people push the people to great distress who were hoping for a reasonable outcome.

On October 2, the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, another struggle was initiated, since the doors were keep closing, a march from the temporary shelter to Teppakulamedu. The children held the photographs of Gandhi, the Kadar women carried the soils of Teppakulamedu and reached the protest location. Their protest continued despite rain-pouring, severe cold, bearing the pain of leech sucking their blood, children, women, and all them carried the protest without food, and without sleeping, days and nights, singing and dancing.



On the land of their ancestors, Teppakulamedu, on August 4, they continued with the sit-in-protest along with Tamil Nadu Tribal Association, demanding their inherent rights and legal right on the land of their ancestors. When this news reached, the Government of Tamil Nadu, paid attention to the matter and organised a meeting with community members as a gesture to ensure their rights there in Teppakulamedu.



After 60 days of nonviolent and tenacious protest, despite outpourings of rain, they cooked and broke the fast. 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. And this 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. This was the situation again when the all-powerful forest department removed the huts without giving them any notice at 8:30 in the morning on December 3, 2021, despite the state government having legalised their stay. "Their huts were cut off like a child’s neck was cut off from the body," a Kadar woman said.



The people lodged a complaint with Valparai police station seeking to book the forest official under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Later, the District Collector of Coimbatore, Mr. Sameeran, ordered a remeasuring of the *pattas* issued location on December 4. There was a contradiction between the traditional life of Kadar and the land allotted, which was a cluster of houses 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 forests in a separate meeting held at the collector's office on December 6, 2021. At the same time, the Kallarkudi Kadar will be provided with 12 acres of residential land at Kallarkudi-Teppakulamedu, and at the same time, the cultivation 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 also built safe cluster houses for them. He assured them that it would take place once the survey was done and the resolution passed in the *Gramasabha* meeting. As this meeting was held in the presence of all concerned department officials (forest, revenue, and police), the *Kadar* expressed their sense of happiness.



It is a fact that tribal communities believe in dialogue. But the concerned government official neither listens to them nor allows them to speak. They often despise them. They do not understand the tribal worldview and instinctively disregard it.

Based on the complaint lodged, the district collector summoned the forest department staff for their illegal act of vandalising the huts 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. Thus, they simply forgave their perpetrators, which caused them to feel ashamed of their attitude.

The *Kadar* community has been found to be blameless, as they have frequently been labelled as forest invaders, which has been proven. Despite the hardships they endured for nearly two decades, they expressed relief from all the accusations of greed by hard-hearted authorities. Tamil Nadu's government acted quickly and set a precedent in resolving several long-standing issues affecting tribal communities across the country.



Recommendation Further Action:

Yet, there are Tribal communities namely, Iravalar and Malasar, at Sarkarpati, Navamalai and Kavarkkal in Anaimalai hill ranges are also vulnerable to all the ill and inhuman treatment which has greatly affected their life, livelihood and their existence due to the dams and hydropower projects. Their rights on forest under the Forest Rights Act, 2006 should also be protected. Such as:

- 10 acres of land for habitation and cultivation for forest dependent tribals in Tamil Nadu.
- Community Forest rights should be converted into revenue villages and convert them into tribal village panchayats,
- 50% of the forest dwelling tribes should be given priority in employment in the forest department.
- Build eco friendly houses for the tribals.

Beyond protecting all their cultural values, art, traditional knowledge, and the languages, their dignified life must be ensured. More importantly, they respect and protect mother nature, we all must respect them. .

-S. Thanaraj

Tribal activist & Ekta parishad State coordinator

dhanamradhai@gamil.com.