

DISPLACEMENT, DETERRITORIALIZATION AND DISPOSSESSION: SOCIAL LIFE AMONG ADIVASI COMMUNITIES OF WAYANAD, KERALA UNDER COLONIAL CATASTROPHE 1800-1900

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ABSTRACT

The Wayanad district of Kerala has the highest population of Scheduled Tribe communities in the state, and hosts one of the most important indigenous cultural landscape areas of South India. Relying on insights from the various Adivasi, this article highlights the culture and social life of the core Adivasi of Wayanad namely: Paniya, Kurichya, Mullukuruma, Adiya, Kattunaikka, Vettakuruma, Thachanadan Mooppin and Wayanad Kadar. Using census data, ethnographic studies, government reports and contemporary scholarship, provides a history of indigenous life in the area that looks at the historical, economic and socio-cultural processes that have changed native lives. The themes of land alienation, forest rights, kinship systems, rituals, language and livelihoods, education and political mobilization are explored with a particular focus. The article proposes that the understanding of the present-day Adivasi experience critically needs to be approached outside of a homogenous tribal perspective in Wayanad. Instead, each community is located in a specific historical place with respect to wider global agrarian and labour, forestry regulations and state presence. Though extensive deposition of land firmed by the colonial regime, plantation expansion, conservation regime and also post independence migration have helped them in the process of deposition, Adivasi communities today, have shown enormous cultural resistance by preserving their oral narratives, ritual practices, indigenous ecological knowledge, and collective political action. It argues that secure land tenure and effective and authentic enactment of forest rights is central in alleviating ongoing inequities and to the cultural survival of indigenous peoples in Wayanad.

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Introduction

Wayanad district has a unique identity among the districts of Kerala from the social and cultural perspectives. Wayanad is a region in the north-east of the State and adjacent to the States of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu with excellent ecological diversity, thick forests and a particularly high population of indigenous people. Wayanad is a stronghold of the indigenous populations of southern India as it has the largest share of Scheduled Tribes among the districts in Kerala. There are several large Adivasi groups such as the Paniya, Kurichya, Mullukuruma, Adiya, Kattunaikka, Vettakuruma, Thachanadan Mooppan and Wayanad Kadar in the district, each with their own unique linguistic identity, kinship systems, ritual practices and livelihood strategies.

Documentation of cultural practices is not the end point of the study of the Adivasi life in Wayanad. It can be used to look at some bigger issues of indigeneity, citizenship, land rights, development and environmental governance. Throughout South Asia, indigenous peoples have undergone radical changes with the advent of colonialism, nation-states, market economic expansion and conservation. Wayanad is a case in particular that enlightens this as these processes have taken place in a region where tribal have traditionally had a dominant influence over the agrarian production system, forest management and ecological knowledge systems.

A body of literature has shown that notions of cultural isolation or economic backwardness do not account for the phenomenon of tribal marginalisation in Kerala. Instead, the current inequalities lie in the structures of dispossession that occurred in the past. Indigenous possession of, and access to, land and forest were changed by colonial forest regulations, plantation capitalism, landlordism and post independence migration, which led to many indigenous communities becoming wage labourers reliant on an external economy, instead of autonomous cultivators and forest users. One of the greatest legacies of this historical change is the continued struggle with landlessness of many tribal households.

Meanwhile, to depict Adivasi communities just as stories of deprivation would also be problematic. Indigenous villages of Wayanad have shown a high level of resistance to abandon their traditional culture and customs and adapt to the new political and economic situation. These include ritual practices, aural history, kinship systems, community groups, language maintenance, and land rights struggles and are still crucial in maintaining and reworking community identity.

This article takes a multidisciplinary look at the demographic, ethnographic, governmental and contemporary studies regarding the cultural and social life of Adivasis in Wayanad. It holds that the diversity of indigenous experience in Wayanad has to be seen in terms of the intertwining of culture, history, ecology and political economy. Given that, the study focuses on aspects of settlement, displacement, livelihood change, ritual practice, education and political mobilisation to help broaden the debate on indigenous rights and cultural survival in contemporary India.

Wayanad is a land of Adivasis with many villages that were once inhabited by them but were subsequently displaced. The indigenous people of Wayanad have been an integral part of the formation process of the region and cannot be neglected if the formation process is to be understood. Since the emergence of the modern district boundaries, various tribal communities existed on the plateau region with their lives connected to the agriculture, forest resources, hunting, gathering and shifting cultivation. These cultures have withstood the influence of colonial systems and evidence from archaeological research, oral history and ethnographic documentation indicate that there had been complex social and ecological interactions with the landscape for centuries prior to colonial intrusions.

The Wayanad region is both historically and geographically very significant since it lies in between the Malabar coast and the Mysore plateau. It came into the larger political system through various local kingdoms and subsequent Mysore kings and then under British colonial rule. Although politics changed, until the nineteenth century many indigenous communities maintained significant power over resources in their local area. They had a fair measure of independence, however, which was gradually eroded by colonial land policies and commercial exploitation.

The history of indigenous dispossession took a turn during Britain's rule. Forest were seen by the colonial administrators as source of revenue; mainly economic resource in which one could make money from timber harvest and plantation agricultural operations. The new nature-science based forestry approach created a new dynamic customary forestry pattern between tribal groups and forest

environments. Many lands once farmed and hunted and gleaned for food and medicine were now under state control. Formal laws rarely respected indigenous rights resulting in prohibition of their use of the land over time despite the fact that this traditional land had previously enabled tribes to earn their living.

These were further propelled by the upsurge of plantation agriculture. Wayanad's economic geography underwent a change with the introduction of commercial crops like coffee, tea, pepper etc. Early colonists as well as migration settlers used large tracts of land for plantations under the direction of landlords, colonial enterprises. Indigenous peoples were often forced out of rich farming lands and into dependent and exploitative labour practices.

These processes are clearly brought into view by the experiences of the Paniya and Adiya communities. From time immemorial these have been recorded as subject of bondage and agrarian servitude as provided in historical accounts and ethnographic studies and continued well into the twentieth century. In the end, formal slavery was all but eliminated, but the legacy of being landless was still there. Relations of economic vulnerability continued to characterize many households, relying on agricultural wage labour, which still exists in different forms today.

The critical post-Independent state brought along a new era of demographic and social changes. Wayanad experienced drastic changes in the population structure with the large scale migration from Travancore and other parts of the state. Migrant farmers also increased their landholding by ownership of the big tracts of agriculture, further limiting productive resources available for indigenous farmers. Migration not only makes a positive development in the agriculture and economy sectors, but also leads to an increased competition for land and also the pace of marginalisation of tribal communities.

Conservation efforts added layers of complexities. Conservation areas were created to protect ecological resources and biodiversity in the form of Wildlife sanctuaries, national parks and protected forests. Although these measures resulted in significant ecological advantages, they also created new constraints on communities whose livelihoods were affected by this loss of access to the forest. This led to tensions between conservation goals and Native American rights that increasingly came to the fore in the late twentieth century and will be an issue to be discussed in terms of conservation policies.

These are historical processes that have had a cumulative effect. The customary land rights, access to forest resources, and reliance on wage labour in such many adivasi communities are all under threat in Wayanad. But in the past, there was never a situation where people's cultures were lost as a result of being displaced. Instead, indigenous people have consistently dealt with fluctuations in circumstances, keeping in mind key features of social and cultural identity. To grasp the present debates over rights, development and culture in Wayanad one has to have the knowledge of this history of dispossession and adaptation.

If you are a native of Uttar Pradesh, you will find this is useful. For all those who are residents of Uttar Pradesh, this is helpful. Wayanad has a rich diversity of indigenous communities in Kerala. The Wayanad district has the highest concentration of tribal population in the state, almost one-fifth of population in the district according to 2011 Census is tribal. While the ethnic group-wise figures in each district have not been finalized, the tribal communities that are mainly present in Wayanad based on ethnographic studies and the state database are the Paniya, Kurichya, Mullukuruma, Adiya, Kattunaikka, Vettakuruma, Thachanadan Mooppan, and Wayanad Kadar families. These groups together make up a complex social mosaic that includes a range of languages, settlement patterns and livelihoods, cultural customs and traditions.

The Paniya are the largest tribal group among the tribal groups that are associated to Wayanad and plays a central role in the debates on tribal marginalisation in Kerala. In the context of history, the Paniya have been part of bonded labourers in agricultural fields and were one of the most impacted communities during the colonial restructuring of agriculture and landlords. Legal reforms and welfare interventions have not succeeded in removing landlessness and relying on wage labor from most households of Paniya. The contemporary conditions contain a lesson about the long-term consequences of the historical denial of their citizens of access to land and productive resources.

In certain aspects Adiya community has got a historical similarity with Paniya especially in respect of labour exploitation or agrarian dependency. However, the Adiya also have unique ritual traditions,

most importantly Gadhika, a healing ritual that plays a pivotal role in the community's life. The Adiya, as in the case of the Paniya, have many families still facing problems related to land ownership, lack of education and low access to economic activities.

In contrast, the Kurichya are traditionally portrayed as one of the most settled tribes of Kerala which is engaged in agriculture. They seem to have more secure position in matters of agriculture, which is partly due to their historical association with settled agriculture and matrilineal social organisation and partly to their collective landholding practices. Traditions are often employed to assert their historical connection with Pazhassi Raja's struggle against the British coloniser and these traditions still serve as important markers to define community identities today.

The Mullukuruma are an intermediate caste in the tribal group of Wayanad. They have traditionally been linked to farming and to hunting, but have closely remained linked to those activities and have been affected by the general trend of land fragmentation and economic transformation. Their social organisation is entirely different from Kurichya which shows the variations that exist in the kinship groups of the tribal life of Wayanad.

Kattunaikka are a case in point due to their historically close relationship with forest environments. They are now recognized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) which traditionally engaged in hunting, gathering, honey collection and subsistence activities in the forest. They live in close contact with forest ecosystems, which have rendered them particularly sensitive to conservation laws and regulations and difficulties in accessing available resources. Hence, the present-day discussions about the rights over natural resources (habitat rights), community forest right and the implementation of Forest Rights Act become especially relevant in case of the Kattunaikka.

Smaller communities like the Vettakuruma, the Thachanadan Mooppan, Wayanad Kadar and others are not as visible as others in the public sphere, but play a major role in enriching the cultural diversity of the area. Historically the Vettakuruma have been known to be involved in artisanal crafts such as pottery, basketry and carpentry. Traditions associated with shifting cultivation and forest utilization are prevailing in the Thachanadan Mooppan and the Wayanad Kadar is a small population which is culturally unique with important issues on the preservation of culture because of demographical vulnerability.

All these groups prove the futility of using "Adivasi" as an indecomposable social group. The variations in historical experiences of land ownership, labour relations, political mobilisation and state intervention are not the only differences that obtain between tribal groups of Wayanad; there are the additional variations in language and ritual practice. It is important to consider such differences in analyzing present inequalities, and in the different ways indigenous identities are being maintained by their resiliencies.

Land, Forest Rights and Political Economy

Land is one of the integral part of the indigenous communities in Wayanad, which plays a vital role in the social, economic and cultural life of communities. Land is not just a productive asset or income source of tribal societies. It is used at the same time to fulfil the multiple functions of identity, continuity of kinship, cultural memory and political autonomy. Thus the history of the tribal marginalisation in Wayanad cannot be divorced from the history of alienation of land.

Loss of land is often identified, both in scholarly research on Kerala's tribal peoples, and on the ground, as the most important means by which present inequalities have been created. The economic side of poverty in tribal regions has reduced them to a marginal status, but historically this has been constructed via certain political and institutional process, and not necessarily as a function of the isolation and absence of modernisation. The combination of colonial forest policies, plantation expansion, landlordism and plantation migration after independence have rendered the original populations who had been landholders, cultivators and forest users as labourers who have come to rely on outside economic mechanisms.

This change is still reflected throughout the district. In both cases, such as landlessness, these are unequal and biased towards the historically marginalized groups like Paniya and Adiya, who have been subjected to exploitation of their labour and have had limited access to secure land ownership.

By contrast, communities like the Kurichya and Mullukuruma farms generally still have fairly robust agricultural associations, though also the farmers' land access has likewise been curtailed over time.

The differences point to a marginalisation differentiated across tribes rather than a uniform marginalisation.

The new law came into force – Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 was another significant step to redress the injustices of the past. The Act aimed to acknowledge the traditional rights of the forest-dwelling communities on the land, house, MFP and community resources. Additionally, the Act also covered habitat rights for Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups and stressed on the decentralisation and Gram Sabha as decision making bodies.

The Forest Rights Act, in principle, was a giant leap towards bringing about a change in the relationship between indigenous communities and the state. The legislation did not view the forest-dwellers as intruders but recognised their historical occupancy of the forests and their rights to the forest resources. But its practice in India is not uniform and Wayanad expresses various problems noted in other pan-Indian studies. Delays in administration, burdens with evidence, bureaucratic opposition and controversy about eligibility have frequently curtailed the potential of the legislation to transform.

Land rights have found a dramatic visibility during the Muthanga struggle of 2003, which was politically marked. The Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha had been harboured its members onto the land inside the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary, due to its failure to carry out the pledged measures for land redistributions. The response of the police and the resulting violence put Muthanga into the larger picture of the most significant stages in the movement of tribal politics in Kerala.

The Muthanga episode highlighted key conflicts revealed in the two systems of environmental governance. The conservation model was one that supported state control of the protected landscapes while indigenous claims were based on a history of occupancy, livelihood and notions of social justice. In the conflict it became clear that issues of biodiversity protection and indigenous rights and historical dispossession go together.

Contemporary pressures for development add to these issues about land rights in Wayanad. The patterns of access to the resources, as well as the environment governance are still influenced by the tourism development, infrastructure development, plantation economy, and conservation development. These activities create economic opportunities but can also result in greater competition for land and displacement of at risk communities.

There are non-agricultural economic implications of insecure land tenure. The right to access land is a determinant of food security, as well as education, health and political participation. Households with relatively stable access to productive resources are more likely to be autonomous and resilient relative to those completely reliant on wage labour. For this, land is the focus on which many of the wider issues of tribal welfare and development swirl.

While Wayanad thus presents a picture of cultural destruction and challenges social and cultural preservation, a political-economic analysis indicates that these issues cannot be addressed solely through the lens of culture, since the issues facing the Adivasi communities are also political, economic and social. Access and control of land and forests are crucial as regards material conditions and are closely connected to the survival of indigenous cultures. Culture, social justice and economic security go hand in hand. If there is no meaningful recognition of territorial rights and ineffectual implementation of existing legal protection measures, then the work improvised on education, health care and welfare is likely to be insufficient.

Thus, the continuance of land struggles in present day Wayanad is more a call for economic resources. It is a larger fight for the purposes of recognition, dignity, citizenship and indigenous communities' rights to decide the future of their communities in a place in which they have traditionally lived and played a role in their wellbeing. The historical background of the Wayanad Adivasis' settlement and displacement. It discusses the historical background of the settlement and displacement of Wayanad Adivasis.

In order to make sense of the current social and cultural situation of the Adivasi in Wayanad, one has to see it within the overall settlement history, dispossession and transformation of the socio-economic systems, which occurred in the last two centuries. Some of the earliest settlers of the plateau of the Western Ghats are the native communities of the district namely, Paniya, Kurichya, Mullukuruma,

Adiya, Kattunaikka, Vettakuruma, Thachanadan Mooppan and Wayanad Kadar. They have a historical and unique relationship with land, forest and ecological resources that established their unique cultural beliefs, social systems and livelihoods long prior to the modern administrative boundaries.

Indigenous Settlement Patterns

But before the arrival of the colonists, Wayanad was dotted by indigenous 'empires' spread across a forested and agrarian landscape. Tribal people had certain ecological niche and livelihood ways coping up with the ecological conditions of their respective regions. Community-specific subsistence patterns were identified, like planted agriculture and mixed farming for the Kurichya or Mullukuruma and the dominance of forest-based subsistence for the Kattunaikka, which involved hunting, gathering, honey collecting and even using the NTFPs. Some other societies integrated with farming and seasonally exploited forests which gave flexibility to their economy and thus allowed them to adapt to changing ecological conditions.

Land was not only a source of livelihood for these societies it was the source of a collective identity and a social organisation. The settlement patterns were closely related to kinship systems, ritualism and the local system of governance. A sense of place remains strong among ancestors and descendants of several communities, in the form of oral history of relationships between people and certain sites—hills, forests, rivers and cultivation sites in particular—which continues to this day and predates formal land records and administration by the State. The indigenous ecological knowledge (IEK) that was passed down over generations, helped to sustain the forest resources in a sustainable manner and also played a huge role in shaping the environment of the area.

The other three stories refer to colonial policies and the changing of indigenous landscapes. The other three stories are pertaining to colonial policies and the change in landscape of indigenous people. The British colonial economy in the nineteenth century changed these historical relationships at the core by incorporating Wayanad. Forest landscapes were assessed mainly as an economic and strategic resource by colonial authorities instead of viewed as landscapes of everyday use by indigenous peoples. New forest policies, such as scientific forestry and forest reservation, introduced new parameters that led to massive tracts of forest being reserved for the State, and severed customary rights to forest lands which had long sustained tribal lifestyles.

A series of Forest Acts were enacted in Madurai, which practically started to convert common-use landscapes to legal state forests. Initial measures to control or ban shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering, and forest-based subsistence practices. Indigenous people were left facing restrictions in administrative systems that challenged their traditional systems of resource utilization and limited their participation in decision-making about the how they were managing land.

These policies were much more than merely “environmental regulation”; they were a redefinition of “ownership,” and “authority.” Today, historically forest-dwelling communities, who lacked legal documentation for the customary use of forests, were frequently represented as intruding upon areas which they had in fact inhabited for generations. This entailed a loss of access to forest resources, and it speeded up indigenous economic dependence and deregulation of access to external labour markets. Colonial forestry thus began an epoch of dispossession which would later be prolonged in the different stages of economic development and state interference.

The plantation system expanded and there was a transformation in agriculture. The plantation system grew and agricultural system was transformed. Thirteenth and fourteenth centuries led to an increase in these pressures, with the plantation agriculture that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Commercially viable cultivation of coffee, tea, pepper, cardamom and eventually rubber occurred in Wayanad thanks to its rich soils and climatic conditions. Very extensive areas were turned into plantations, which completely changed the agrarian structure and ecology of this part of the world.

As plantations expanded, there was a rising demand for labour, many of the indigenous communities became involved in wage regimes. Vulnerability to the type of bonded labour and semi-bonded labour, such as individuals in servitude to landlords and plantation owners under highly unequal terms, was exacerbated particularly in communities like the Paniya and Adiya. How these communities became part of a process of dependency, indebtedness and a restricted social mobility in agrarian relations has been documented by historical studies.

Meanwhile, the plantation regime led to a restriction of customary lands. Formerly occupied areas were incorporated into commercial farming operations, which once harbored agricultural, picking, hunting and gathering activities, and seasonal travel. This privatization of public space caused disturbances in their customary strategies of resource utilization as well as in their usual source of livelihood. Though plantation agriculture promoted regional prosperity, its success did not generate even returns and tribal communities were often impacted by ecological and social changes.

Post Independence Migration and Population change

Indian independence brought about another round of transformation – especially the post-1950s period with extensive migration from Travancore and central Kerala that caused the demographic transformation of the region of Wayanad. Land for agriculture became available and the prospect of cultivating crops encouraged migrant settlers to set up farms throughout the district, who became more powerful in its economic and political system.

This migration had much of an effect on land ownership patterns. In many cases, indigenous peoples' customary rights to land were not explicitly recorded and they were thus at a disadvantage in the developing legal and administrative systems. Tribal communities, often dispossessed of land areas necessary for their survival, were impacted negatively as the market of exchanging properties started to grow and land markets expanded. There are many instances where the displacement was informal, it was a unequal exchange or it was done because of debt or through the encroachment of settlers into indigenous land.

It wasn't just economic marginalisation. Migration created changed local power dynamics with new hierarchies of power as well as more resource competition. Previously important roles of indigenous groups broke down and increasingly they were pushed to the boundaries of the regional landscape. The political underrepresentation of the tribal communities also had its root in the demographic fact that migrants outnumbered the tribal communities even though these tribesmen constituted part of the original population of the region.

The net result of policies of the colonial government, plantation expansion and the post independence migration was alienation of land amongst the Adivasi communities in a large scale. One of the specific markers of tribal marginalisation in Wayanad was the very thing that seemed to be standing out there, – 'Landlessness' – which is thoroughly connected with the current scenario of poverty, food insecurity, educational disadvantage and political exclusion.

The study of the tribal question in Kerala has always been opposed to considering deprivation as a consequence of cultural isolation or economic underdevelopment of tribes, and viewed it as the result of historical dispossession. This historical legacy is still being experienced by the land movements in Wayanad. Indigenous survival, dignity and self-determination depends on access to land, which is why land reform, forest rights and habitat protection movements have arisen.

Thus the history of displacement of Wayanad also points towards the general pattern of indigenous marginalisation by successive governments. It also serves as a reminder, however, of the strength of the grasping power of the tribal communities who have endured processes of dispossession to continue practising and holding their culture, homeland and political activism. This history of settlement, displacement and resistance is inevitably intertwined with the current conflicts regarding land rights, forest governance and development. A knowledge of these processes has failed to comprehend the assessment of the social and cultural life of Wayanad based Adivasi communities during the present times.

Among Adivasi communities, the Paniya are the largest tribal group that can be actually correlated with Wayanad and are most significant in the context of tribal inequalities. The Paniya have always been associated with bonded agricultural labour, and today face a greater risk of being landless than other communities and are more likely to be employed in wage labour. Their numerical strength and historical reasons of their perceived exploitation in the agricultural field has placed them at the core of research and policy discussion on issues of poverty, labour relations and social exclusion in Kerala. On the other hand, the Kurichya have enjoyed a relatively powerful position over the agrarian structure in Wayanad society. According to ethnographic work, they are one of the most established farming groups in the region which has traditionally been involved in established farming and high

levels of control and utilization of land resources. Their matrilineal social organisation and cohesive collective identity has helped them have a unique cultural profile that is fundamentally different from groups that are more strongly associated with their day-to-day experience of dependency to the labor regime. The Kurichya and Mullukuruma have some similar agrarian traits; but the Mullukuruma social organisation is transformatively patrilineal and patrilocal. They are traditionally thought of as a people of farmers and hunters, and are considered an intermediate group between the forest dependent and the agriculturally established tribal groups.

The Adiya community displays a trajectory of social change in a number of respects similar to that of Paniya.

Earlier landholding division systems subjected both communities to some kind of agrarian servitude and labour exploitation which led to a high level of economic vulnerability. But the Adiya have their very distinctive cultural traditions, including ritual performances and healing and that still plays an important part in the life of the community. Their experience proves that apparent differences in cultural identity can remain with a community which has a similar economic situation.

Different pattern is observed among the Kattunaikkawho's relation with forest through the history has determined their views on forest livelihood practices and present-day political issues. Kattunaikka is traditionally hunting, loving, gathering, collecting honey and other forest fringe living tribal people and they are designated as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). The strong link with the forest environment sets them apart from communities with stronger connections with the agri-prod system. This makes issues related to the rights of habitat, access to forest, forest policy, implementation of forest rights act and their socio-economic status of particular significance.

Vettakuruma, Thachanadan Mooppan and Wayanad Kadar form small but less noticeable communities in terms of population size in public debate but still it is an important community in terms of culture. The traditional livelihoods of the Vettakuruma are handicrafts such as pottery making, basketry making, carpenter and blacksmith. Historically the Thachanadan Mooppan practice hunting, gathering, shifting cultivation along with craft production and the Wayanad Kadar is a small population with serious issues on preservation of culture and social protection due to their insignificant numbers.

Compared to these communities, it becomes apparent how obsolete it is to think of the Adivasis as a homogeneous group. There are considerable differences in kinship structure—matrilineal in one group, patrilineal in another. Similarly, different types of land relations exist which varies from relatively strong agrarian basis of the Kurichya and Mullukuruma to chronic land insecurity of many Paniya and Adiya households. Forests have also been a vital source of income for the Kattunaikka and for some of the smaller communities. These differences are further affirmed by linguistic diversity with each having their own linguistic history and differing levels of relationships with Malayalam, the dominant regional language.

But, there are some common problems that bind Wayanad's tribal communities. The majority have gone through some level of alienation of their land, access to customary land is less, wage labour is more of a dependency and there is unequal access to education, health care and representation in political structures. Meanwhile, they maintain strong cultural and collective identity practices and traditions that defy narratives of assimilation or decline. In summary, the demographic characteristics of Wayanad indigenous population have a diverse pattern and indicate a common experiences of history, thus, Wayanad seems to be a significant location for the understanding of multifacetedness of the tribal life in contemporary India.

Land, Forest Rights and Political Economy

Wayanad is an area where land serves as the focal point of the socio-cultural, economic and political existence of Adivasis. Land is much more than a productive resource, it is a way of nurturing identity, cultural continuity, social status and political autonomy. Across the globe, dispossession of land by indigenous populations is not just an economic loss, it is also one of social relations, cultural practices, and historical memory—particularly in cultures where the past is more closely tied to the materiality of its underpinning landscape. As a result, the issues of land ownership, access to forest lands, and control over the resources have been at the core of tribal conflicts in Wayanad from the colonial era till now. Wayanad today is identified by a very odd contradiction in the realm of political

economy. Adivasi people were among the first people to inhabit the area and were important in developing the agrarian and ecological narrative of the area, but many adivasi people are in the most precarious position in the landholding regime in the district. Many indigenous communities underwent a shift from cultivator and forest user to wage labourer, reliant on external economic systems, as a result of historical processes of dispossession, such as colonial forest reservation, expansion of plantations to the forests and settlement after Independence. However, this landlessness among the tribal people reflects a lack of structures and not cultural or economic inability.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 popularly referred to as the Forest Rights Act (FRA) is one of the most important laws to try and end this historical legacy. The Act has come out of an increasing awareness of the systematic denial of customary rights of forest dependent communities, both during colonial and post-colonial forest governance systems. Tribal communities in India for decades were considered in terms of "encroachers" in forests which they have been living and managing for generations.

The reason for this historical injustice was to be corrected when the FRA started to recognize rights of individual and community over the forest land and resource. In addition to the rights over cultivation, there are habitation rights, rights in minor forest produce, the rights of community forest resources and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) habitat rights as well. More in tune with this, the act gave considerable powers to Gram Sabhas treating those at the grassroots as critical players in establishing and validating claims.

The Act is of great meaning to the people of Wayanad, who are part of the tribals community. Provisions relating to habitat rights and community resource rights should prove beneficial to communities like Kattunaikka, with traditional forest-dependent livelihoods. Communities that have suffered historical alienation of their lands may similarly demand the knowledge of cultivation rights at places that they have been living in, but whose treats were earlier forest reserved. The FRA is, in principle, a change in the way that forest is managed, from a closed to a rights-based framework, by recognising indigenous peoples' historical connection and ecological knowledge to the forest.

However, the implementation has faced challenges, and there have been criticisms about uniformity. Various delays in the verification of the claims, resistance shown by the bureaucracy, high rejection rate of claims, and the less than adequate recognition of the community forest resource rights have been documented across India. Kerala has also seen comparable worries, as the transformative effect of the bill has at times been hampered by administrative aspects and conflicting institutional interests. Consequently, far from ensuring meaningful control over natural resources or enhancing livelihood security, the legal rights have not always resulted in this desired outcome.

Landlessness and Labour Relations

Lands are lost tremendously in the past which is the history, which has a great effect on the labour relation in Wayanad Tribal Economy. The communities like those of the Paniya and Adiya were integrated within agrarian systems which featured dependence, bondedness, and unequal social relationships. The former regimes of servitude were abolished under the law but economically, the effects of landlessness remained. Many households continued to rely on agricultural wage-labour activities, plantation work, and other kinds of precarious jobs that they did not have secure access to productive assets.

Landlessness constitutes a structural mechanism which perpetuates inter-generational inequality. Households without land are the most susceptible to changes in labour demand and crop input failure, as well as to economic downturns. This reliance of day-to-day work gives less chance to get education, healthcare, and opportunities to move up the social ladder. Especially women and children are impacted as the need for informal labour arrangements often intensified with economic insecurity. The continuity of labour dependency influences interpretative frames of the socialmarginalisation. There is stigma and exclusion against communities who traditionally have been linked to labour related to agriculture, which are not only vividly experienced in an economic sense but still persisted. Thus the current situation of tribal poverty cannot be interpreted in isolation and as a purely income or consumption phenomenon, but needs to be taken in the backdrop of a past of dispossession and inequal labour incorporation.

Contemporary Livelihood Insecurity

Challenges that faces the Wayanad Adivasis in the present day can't be restricted only to land ownership, but in fact the broader issues of livelihood security. The traditional economic activities are facing increasing challenges to sustainability, owing to environmental laws, the reduction of customary resources, the evolution of the labour market, and ecological stresses. There are some restrictions on the use of resources by forest dependent communities and there are problems of surplus of agricultural labourers, who are influenced by the fluctuations in plantation economy and by employment opportunities in rural areas.

This has been exacerbated by recent environmental crises. Difficulties in livelihoods have been created across the district due to human-wildlife conflicts, climatic changes and landslides, most of whom are already economically insecure. Rerehabilitation programmes tend to be concerned about housing and infrastructure and yet not quite reach the level of understanding of how to take care of the access to livelihoods that is tied to specific ecological areas.

A different set of "challenges" are tourism and conservation programs. Such schemes are supposed to be drivers of 'sustainable development' but can create new types of exclusion if there is no meaningful input by local populations into decisions. The promotion of tribal cultures for tourist purposes can also result in the symbolic appropriation of tribal cultures, without any substantial changes in the material conditions.

Thus, the political economy of current day Wayanad can be seen as one which has a constant linkage between land rights, livelihood security and social justice. Land and forest access remains an influencing factor to education, nutrition, political participation and cultural survival. The evidence shows that there are no easy ways to improve sustainable development for tribal communities through addressing welfare issues alone. Instead it needs genuine recognition of territorial rights, fair access to resources and policies to tackle underlying structural factors of marginalisation.

The fact that land issues continue to be pertinent in Wayanad shows that it is not just the need for economic redistribution that is driving indigenous demands. These stand for larger aspirations to dignity, recognition, self-determination and the right to continue social and cultural living in the landscape that has supported the tribal living. In this manner, there is no longer a question of the separation between the fight for land and the fight for justice itself.

The cultural diversity of the various Adivasi communities of Wayanad is most noticeable in their kinship groups, ritual activities, language usage and their oral narratives. The knowledge, memory, values and the sense of belonging to a culture, are important and passed on from generation to generation in these institutions which are the basis of indigenous social life and offer significant mechanisms. While much of community life has been changed as a result of modern economic and political developments, kinship relationships, ritual life and oral narratives, and native languages are important factors in maintaining community unity and continuity.

Wayanad's tribal community has a unique characteristic of the occurrence of two types of descent and inheritance systems side by side. The notion of culturally uniform tribes used by the mainstream in derogation of tribal people is pyrrhic, as ethnographic analysis provides some insight into evidence of varying types of kinship organisation among indigenous groups in the region. These differences have profound consequences for the system of kinship, inheritance, marriage, gender and community power.

The matrilineal tradition, historically an important place in the social organization of the Kurichya, is an important one in the Adiya as well. The matriarchy is where the line of descent is passed on through the female, and inheritance has a preference for matrilineal kinship links. This kind of provision helps build larger kinship circles, which have an impact on where they live, how resources are distributed, and what kinds of social obligations can exist. While some orthodox patterns have been changed by social, education, market integration and state politics, some remain in the matrilineal system and affect the social relationship and community identity.

In contrast, the communities like Mullukuruma, Kattunaikka and Vettakuruma generally have patrilineal descent. In these societies lineage, inheritance, and authority are literally patrilineal, with men's household heads and men's clan affiliation being important forms of authority. The Mullukuruma, especially, are also related to a type of residence in which the women after marriage reside in the husband's household (patrilocal residence). This indicates that social structures of indigenous communities of Wayanad have evolved differently – as they have different kinship

relations, which show the indigenous people of the region have evolved unique social structures as per their historical and ecological context.

It is important to note that matriliney cannot be interpreted as an unmovable cultural entity, as well as patriliney. Modern day tribal families find themselves constantly negotiating between traditional values and social change that goes with education, migration, state law and economic change. However, kinship is also an important structure in which rights and responsibilities are attributed, as well as social identities. These institutions' survival show the indigenes' social organisation to be resilient in the face of pressures towards cultural homogeneity.

This work explores how Gadhika can be interpreted as the ritual dimension of social life. The dimension of Gadhika as ritual of social life is discussed.

Rituals are also an important aspect of the Wayanad Adivasi way of life. Rituals are not isolated religious practices, but a means for social integration, for the transmission of cultural knowledge and even for the management of moment of sickness, bad fortune, and insecurity. They bear a relation between persons and systems of morals or cosmology that have an impact on daily life.

The ritual act called the "Gadhika," has a prominent place among the Adiya people. Gadhika is a ritualistic act originally connected with the aid of healing and the removal of afflictions and is related to ideas of spiritual imbalance, ancestor forces, divine displeasure and social well-being. The ritual is more a combination of song, dance, narration and symbolic enactment, and aims to re-establish the harmony between people, community and the supernatural.

Anthropologically, the Gadhika is an example of indigenous healing system creating unity with one's physical, social and spiritual being. It is not only considered as a matter of life and death, but illness might also be considered as a disorder of social relations, morality or cosmological order. Ritual specialists thus have important functions not just as healers but as the repository of cultural knowledge and memory as well.

The modern system of health has grown in Kerala in general but rituals like Gadhika are still important in the culture. They defy simple notions that indigenous belief systems have to disappear as a result of the modernisation process. Many communities, however, selectively combine biomedical practitioners and services with traditional healing methods and produce hybrid methods of integrating services and healing that are both continuous and adapted.

Oral Narratives and Collective Memory

The oral tradition has been one of the prime storehouses of indigenous knowledge in Wayanad in the past. In contrast to societies where the primary source of knowledge and information is written texts, many Adivasi societies have preserved memories of the past, understandings of ecology, practices of social values, and perceptions of the cosmos in the form of oral narratives, songs, myths and ritual performances. These traditions form a sort of 'living archive' in which collective experiences are passed from generation to generation.

Stories of origin, migration, ancestral hero, forest, rivers, animals and sacred landscape are integral in the community life. These stories are typically origin myths which create social categories, create claims to land and set up human/environmental relations. Oral history often offers different views of history than what are officially recorded or written, in many instances.

Oral narratives among Kurichya, referring to his/her involvement in the Pazhassi Raja's resistance movement, still help in the perpetuation of collective identity and a history for the community. In turn, within other tribal groups, narratives often highlight connections to lands of their ancestors, plots of land and other natural elements of the landscape. These stories help to create a sense of place and support place-based connections.

Oral traditions can also be educational purposes. Younger generations learn responsibility towards their own family, how to behave in the right moral ways and how to take care of the environment and the history of a community by using storytelling. Thus oral tales are not just souvenirs of the past, but tools that can be used to uphold cultural continuity. They are not only a part of folklore but also a reflection of issues related to identity, memory and indigenous knowledge production.

One of the significant indicators of indigenous identity in Wayanad are language. The Pankeys, Adiya, Kurichya, Kattunaikka, Mullukuruma and Vettakuruma have their own language and

traditions, which have grown by virtue of their different historical experiences and their cultural outlook. The language systems contain specialist knowledge and information on ecology, agriculture, kinship, rituals and social organisations, thus they are part of cultural heritage.

But the languages of people will come under growing pressure of assimilation. Malayalam is the language of education, administration, newspapers and public communication in Kerala as a whole and this provides opportunities for language change to take place among young Malayalis. Bilingualism may be the key to educational and economic opportunities, but it also can lead to the loss of the native language, if it is not supported in institutions.

Language loss is more than just the loss of a system of communication. It is related to cultural memory loss, ecological knowledge loss, oral literature loss and collective identity loss. In response to this challenge, there are different efforts which seek to enhance language preservation, including community-based education, cultural events and media channels. One such strategy has been community radio broadcasts in tribal languages that have become a very important option for indigenous voices to engage in public debates and increase the visibility of indigenous language.

The ongoing struggle to preserve and protect native language therefore is bound with the general struggles for cultural survival and self-determination. Language is the medium that marks out both how worlds are perceived and understood, how knowledge is handed down and worldly politics expressed in communities. Work to support linguistic diversity is therefore cultural interventions as well as an act of resisting a past of marginalisation and cultural erasure.

As a whole, the Kinship system, the ritual tradition, oral tradition, and linguistic heritage itself show that, the cultural life of Adivasi is rich and complex in Wayanad. These institutions illustrate that indigenous people are not hapless throwbacks who are following an already vanishing trail but rather active producers of cultural processes of adaptation and renewal. Weakening their vitality provides an additional motivation for adding cultural rights to economic and political rights in any measure of indigenous development and social justice.

Livelihoods, Education and Health

The present social situation of Adivasi is related to the change in livelihoods, access to education, health care etc. of the Adivasi community now in the Wayanad region. Even though Kerala is well known for its progress in literacy, public health and social development, there is a huge gap between the population in general and indigenous people. These inequalities are not only a result of economic disadvantage, but also of historical trends of alienation of land, isolation on the one hand, and inequitable entrenchment in state institutions on the other. Therefore, in order to comprehend the actual lives of the Adivasi population in Wayanad, issues like security of livelihood, access to education and health are important.

In Wayanad the agriculture has always been the main source of livelihood of the tribes, but the extent of engagement of various tribes in agriculture had been different. The cultivation and management of agricultural lands have often been taken as the traditional occupation of the communities like Kurichya and Mullukuruma, and at the same time as the customary land gradually vanished the communities like Paniya and Adiya got entrained into a wage economy. Traditionally, forest dependent people like the Kattunaikka engaged in various economic activities in the forest like gathering and hunting along with off-season labour work. Two clear patterns of livelihood change in the face of gradual land losing and access to forest resources are identified in different tribal communities. The agricultural wage labour, plantation and construction jobs, and Public Agency promoted livelihood schemes are crucial for most of the households today. Standard daily wage work is a significant source of livelihood which is often characterised by seasonality and precarity, with low wages. Households suffer from the lack of stable employment opportunities and thus do not have protection against fluctuations in economic depression, climatic changes and especially labour demand.

Relying on wage work is more society wide consequences. It restricts autonomy in economic activities, decreases possibilities for asset accumulation and elevates liability situations. Still there appears to be considerable correlation between landlessness and livelihood insecurity as many tribal families live this situation. These pressures, coupled with environmental factors such as landslides, climate change and human-wildlife conflict, have worsened due to challenges in relation to environmental population.

Education is one of the main fields in which social change has been sought in Adivasi groups in Wayanad. There has been a greater participation in education compared to previous generations with the expansion of public education, residential hostels, literacy programs, and welfare. Despite the high literacy rate in Kerala, however, there are many inequalities in education.

The availability of schools is not all that can be a hindrance to the school attendance of Adivasi children. The participation in education can be influenced by geographic isolation, transportation problems, the need for children's labor within the home, language barriers, and economic barriers. This is because in remote settlements, villages may further away from education institutions thus affecting the absenteeism of pupils, especially the younger ones. Such difficulties may be compounded by lacking infrastructure and lack of culturally sensitive educational materials.

Tackling an additional barrier to educational inclusion is language. Malayalam is the language of instruction in most schools but many of the tribal children are aware of their native language within the school and community. The switch from tribal languages to education in Malayalam may pose challenges in the initial years of school and this can lead to dropouts and to an educational disadvantage. Several scholars have thus highlighted a multilingual cultural competent educational approach that takes into account indigenous knowledge systems and linguistic diversity.

But educational levels have seen appreciable improvement in recent decades among tribal youth in spite of these problems. There have been an increase of access to formal education through government hostels, scholarship programmes, residential schools and literacy campaigns. More tribal students are going on higher studies and entering into different profession too to get new opportunities of mobility and political participation. Additionally, there are issues of negotiation among community expectations, continuity of culture and demands of modern institutions for educational success.

The situation for access to health care is complicated as well. While Kerala boasts a strong public health infrastructure system, indigenous communities still faces challenges in accessing and using health services in the state and high levels of positive health changes have been seen throughout the state. Poor access to health interventions in tribally local communities may result from lack of transportation, limited awareness of the services available and/or economic issues.

Historically, there were many Adivasi communities that depended on their indigenous methods of treatment using medicinal herbs, rituals and specific indigenous knowledge. These traditions still play a role, especially with the older generations, and can still influence how people feel regarding sickness, healing and wellness. However, this is not only an opposition between traditional and modern medicine, but the presence of a number of different medical systems coexisting in health care practices in many tribal communities.

Studies of anthropological importance reveal that health is a way of life in many indigenous contexts which is holistic, including physical, social, spiritual, environmental. Thus, culturally-appropriate health care would need to be greater than delivering medical care—it would be sensitivity to the local belief system, practices, and experiences within the community. These programmes that involve indigenous knowledge and bring all of them to biomedical treatment are more likely to bring sustainable results compared to those programs that power down traditional practices as a hindrance to development.

Gender, Youth and Social Change

Gender and youth experiences are key to gaining insight on current processes of change in tribal society. Within a community, the roles of women may be widely different, as a result of the way kinship and inheritance are defined, and how the economy is organised. Women may be more symbolically acknowledged in kinship relationships in societies with matrilineal traditions but, this does not always mean that economic and/or gender inequalities which may exist are eradicated. Commonly, women carry many burdens of wage work, household tasks and household duties as well as community activities.

Youth hold a special place in the context of their cultural heritage and changing social contexts. The

younger are more inclined to be involved with formal education, digital technologies and migration and better employment opportunities than the older generation. Both of these experiences have potential for social mobility, as well as presenting issues of cultural identity and community inclusion. Young people are often caught in between indigenous ways and larger social systems, faced with having to code switch demands from the two worlds.

The problems at hand will heavily influence the Adivasis' future in Wayanad. Equitable educational opportunities, culturally sensitive healthcare, meaningful women and youth participation, and reinvigorated livelihoods are integral to social well-being, but also missions of social movements that seek to ensure the vitality of indigenous cultures. The health, education and livelihoods are therefore not distinct policy areas, but rather interconnected aspects of an overall struggle for dignified, equal and self-determined development.

A political history of aadivcommunities in Wayanad is inevitably tied up to the issues of land, representation and recognition. But indigenous peoples in Kerala have been subject to various kinds of marginalisation since historical eras as a result of their historical dispossession, social exclusion, etc., thus there has been an increasing degree of political mobilization in Kerala, especially during the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. It was not only a demand for land and resources, but also an affirmative recognition of Adivasi peoples as political subjects, who are able to express their own priorities of development and culture. Thus, Adivasi politics in the present day in Wayanad is not only about welfare but is about citizenship and self-determination, environmental justice, inclusive and participative democracy as well.

Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha and Indigenous Political Assertion

The Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS), one of the most influential organisations in the history of tribal mobilisations in Kerala is noteworthy in this context. It arose at a time when there was increasing frustration among tribal groups that they were landless, impoverished, and that the promised land reforms were never implemented, enabling a collective voice to make their grievances and demands for land reform known. The AGMS shifted the focus from the previous model which tended to want to intervene into the lives of citizens through a welfare state, to a focus on questions of historical injustice, indigenous rights, and political autonomy.

It rose to prominence as it criticizes development policies which neglected to deal the question of structural causes of the tribal marginalisation. It had posited that it was not cultural backwardness, but the problem of landlessness which was the main cause of indigenous poverty. This was an attitude that contradicted prevalent themes that framed tribal people as 'recipients' of welfare programmes instead of citizens who had rights and legitimate claims to land and resources.

The most visible manifestation of the political mobilisation was the Muthanga land occupation in 2003. The movement put collective pressure on the state on the issues of land redistribution and forest rights and changed the nature of a movement among Kerala's tribals and brought the issue of the perpetuation of the effects of historical dispossession into the national sphere. While the fight's short-term results were up for grabs, Muthanga did make indigenous land rights an issue in public discourse, and bolstered the political visibility of tribal communities throughout the state.

Even after having provision for political reservation in the constitution, there are strong questions pertaining to representation that are at the center of debate in Wayanad. Being formally included in democratic institutions does not mean that this automatically has led to substantive power in politics. Scheduled Tribe reserved constituencies create a platform for political participation but, according to many tribal activists, existing systems do not necessarily evince representation of the interests of the most marginalised tribes at best.

Among the key issues is the internal inequalities between peoples within tribes. Larger, or relative to one another, communities that are relatively well-positioned may have more access to political networks, education and access to organisational resources and thus have disproportionate influence on representative institutions. In this context, the risk of smaller and more vulnerable communities to fail to effectively have their concerns listened to in policy discussion is quite common.

But political representation is made more complex by demographics. Though Wayanad has the largest share of Scheduled Tribe population in Kerala, they remain just a small percentage of the total population of the district. Thus, electoral competition frequently means making deals with non-tribal

electorates which can bring into being strains that can weaken the expressedness of specifically indigenous demands. The outcome has been a constant conflict between the political status of tribes as formal citizens and the substantive representation that they have received. Public consciousness around issues not only of land rights, but of access to education, health, and cultural preservation have been heightened through political mobilisation. Important roles played by the indigenous organisations, community leaders and civil society groups in shaping debates on the development and social justice within the district remain intact.

Tourism, Conservation and Environmental Conflicts

The development of tourism and conservation has created new problems to the Adivasi communities in Wayanad. Today it is one of the popular tourist areas in Kerala with its forests, wildlife reserves, waterfalls and the hills. Tourism is a source for jobs and a contributor to economic development of the region, but also has intricate social and environmental impacts.

In many cases indigenous peoples have a schizophrenic place in tourism development. Tribal culture is often used as a frame to highlight the Wayanad as culturally and ecologically rich area in the promotional discourses that center on Wayanad cultural diversity. However, the benefits of such economic activity are seldom even, and local communities may lack control over how they are portrayed through their cultural practices and identity. In other instances, indigenous people's culture is validation for outsiders and there is still no solution to the problem of land rights and economic insecurity.

There are similarities and contradictions in conservation policies. The contribution of protected areas like wildlife sanctuaries and national parks in maintaining the biodiversity in Western Ghats is important. Conservation activities, however, also have the potential to limit access to forest resources and the forests themselves that have traditionally been important to indigenous livelihoods. Forest communities which rely on forest products, collection of those products and traditional cultural practices are likely to be negatively affected by poorly formulated or executed conservation management, in absence of isi- lesi/lesiba inclusion.

In the conflicts that ensue, it is possible to see the flaws and constraints of a (pro)environmental discourse performed under the pretense of a (pro)social justice discourse. There is growing interest among academics and activists to see indigenous communities, not as a problem for conservation, but as a solution for sustainable conservation. Tribal communities' knowledge is invaluable and can be a key component of environmental governance and protection.

New dimensions have been added to the challenges faced by Adivasis of Wayanad with the recent eco-disasters. Regular climate disruption, heavy rainfalls and landslides have which put at risk habitations built in ecologically sensitive areas. The landslides in a few areas of Wayanad that occurred in 2024 drew widespread focus and attention to the differential social impact of environmental hazards and the differential vulnerability of Tribal communities.

Rehabilitation plans after disasters are often geared towards the reconstruction of houses and infrastructure. These interventions have been necessary, but risk ignoring other social and cultural aspects of displacement. The process of relocation can also mean a loss for many tribal communities, in many cases, they are forced to leave behind highly related places to their culture, livelihood resources, kinship relations and places of ancestors.

As such, discussions about rehabilitation are now making more and more room for community involvement and the planning according to culturally appropriate approaches. Clearly, relocation policies have to consider living needs, forest access and social relations, and not simply consider populations affected by relocation as a homogenous group of beneficiaries of state action, Indigenous groups have argued. These concerns highlight and emphasize a broader principle: development and disaster response efforts should be guided by the views and priorities of the communities that they serve.

Thus, the current political scenario in Wayanad is a continuing battle of quest for recognition, representation and justice. From challenging land exclusion, environmental controls, tourist development, to responding to disaster relief, Adivasi communities are active actors during the creation of the future of the region. One way that this is shown is through their political mobilisation, because indigenous peoples are not passive recipients of policy interventions and interventions are

constantly being renegotiated, attacked and redefined by indigenous groups.

Though they have been subjected to dispossession, economic marginalisation and social exclusion for long time, the Adivasis in Wayanad have shown great resiliency in holding on to their culture and have been able to adjust to the changing political, economic and environmental conditions. But the notion of resilience does not just mean passive endurance, or to be fair, mere survival of the tradition. Instead it can be thought of as an active and ongoing process whereby indigenous communities engage with modern institutions, "resist" cultural practices and assert political rights, and create new strategies to sustain collective life. The Wayanad's tribals' experience will show one that cultural continuity cannot only be won through curtailed exposure to change but also through the creative adaptation of 'old culture' to modern day reality.

The continuity and presence of indigenous cultural activities in Wayanad can be a model of the dynamic situation of tradition. Although younger generations are more likely to be pursuing formal education, using new technologies, and finding employment in urban areas, ritual events like "Gadhika", oral stories, kinship structures and community festivals still play an important role in social life. Most of the cultural practices, however, have not been lost, but have been reinterpreted and adapted to the new social situation.

It is a process of adaptation, lying in opposition to modernisation as cultural erosion. Tribal communities don't simply absorb new ideas, technologies and institutions — they are agents in the process, selectively taking in changes into their current cultures. The maintenance of cultural identity and political collectivity, and relevant control of their own cultural transmission and collective decisions, may be compatible with educational achievement, political mobilization and economic diversification.

Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Engagement

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) are also relevant to this day, a testament to Adivasi resilience. Throughout their history, tribal communities have built up a lot of knowledge – about ecology, medicinal plants, agriculture, when to expect howl monkeys to pass by, how to manage nature and many other things. This knowledge has helped and also continues to help sustain the use of forest and landscape resources of the Western Ghats; and can be utilised in confronting current environmental issues.

The growing awareness of indigenous knowledge of the environment has implications for conservation and sustainable development. Tribal communities have a specific knowledge of biodiversity and community-based natural resource management, which can be utilised and integrated with scientific natural resource management. Integrating indigenous knowledge to conservation planning can help improve the ecological viability and social justice aspects of conservation, since communities are considered partners and not the impediments to the conservation of the environment.

Policies that go beyond a welfare approach towards marginalisation in order to tackle the root cause of the same are essential for the future welfare of Wayanad's Adivasi communities. Secure Land, Tenure, meaningfully implementing the Forest Rights act, culturally responsive education, accessible healthcare and meaningful political participation are critically needed prerequisites for equitable development. The importance of cultural rights, such as the support of indigenous languages, oral history and cultural institutions developed by the community itself are equally important.

Development projects need to be planned and developed in consultation with indigenous communities, and not with top down administration. It is more likely that programmes which involve locals in decision making and listen to their input will create sustainable results, as compared to a programme that treats tribal people as the passive beneficiary. With the changing environment, economic changes and climate induced risks nudging Wayanad even further into a new reality, there will be a greater need for policies that are attuned to both, social justice and cultural preservation.

As a concluding remark, the strength and endurance of Wayanad's Adivasi communities do not only derive from their ability to hold on to the past but also from their efforts to influence the future. They have shown us that cultural continuity, political empowerment and sustainable development are not mutually exclusive, but rather series of interwoven aspects of a struggle for dignity, recognition and

self-determination.

Conclusion

Wayanad's cultural and social context of the Adivasis is a blend of continuity and change. With the largest share of Scheduled Tribe population of any district in Kerala, Wayanad play a unique part in the discussion on indigeneity, development, citizenship and environmental governance. The lives of the above mentioned people - Paniya, Kurichya, Mullukuruma, Adiya, Kattunaikka, Vettakuruma, Thachanadan Mooppan and Wayanad Kadar – illustrate the fact that a single analytical framework is inadequate to understand indigenous societies. Instead, they reflect various historical processes of ordering with different modes of reception of land, forests, work, family and power.

The History of Wayanad shows how the indigenous forest policies of the past, and migration after independence and plantation encroachment led to the osmosis of the people from the forest. Landlessness became a key vessel of resocialisation and reproduction of social and economic inequalities and turned many communities into wage labourers and from cultivators and forest users to dependent upon external economic systems. The current lack of livelihood, educational opportunities, health and political representation, is, therefore, indelibly linked to this more extended history of dispossession.

Meanwhile, the article has also indicated that Adivasi communities are not helpless gullible victims of historical processes. They have exhibited a high level of flexibility and resilience through kinship systems, ritual, oral culture, native language, community associations and political gatherings. Movement like the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha and struggles like Muthanga continue to play a significant role in the future of indigenous people in terms of land rights, political recognition and self-determination. Likewise, community radio programmes, cultural preservation and actively involving communities in governance processes show

innovative ways of interaction with the institutions of today.

The findings suggest that meaningful development in Wayanad requires moving beyond welfare-oriented approaches toward frameworks grounded in rights, justice, and participation. Secure land tenure, effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act, culturally responsive education, accessible healthcare, and recognition of indigenous knowledge systems remain essential for addressing persistent inequalities. Ultimately, the future of Wayanad's Adivasi communities depends not only on preserving cultural heritage but also on ensuring the political and economic conditions necessary for its continued reproduction. The struggle for cultural survival, social justice, and environmental sustainability remains deeply interconnected, making indigenous rights central to the broader project of democratic development in contemporary India.

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