

A Insider's View on Kadar Community Life in Vazhachal

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Summary- Vazhachal, a village in the Western Ghats by the Chalakudy River, holds a special place in the heart of a remarkable woman, Geetha Vazhachal. This Anganwadi teacher, social activist and moopathi (head of the community) of the Kadar community shares experiences and memories of growing up here.

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Vazhachal, a serene village nestled in the heart of nature, holds a special place in the heart of a remarkable woman, Geetha Vazhachal. A social activist and *anganwadi* teacher, she is the *moopathi* (head of the community) of the Kadar community in Vazhachal. Over field visits and conversations, Geetha Chechi shared her experiences and memories of growing up in this picturesque region with us. Born in Vazhachal, her recollections offer a unique perspective on the Kadar community—their displacement, their struggles with government laws and the environmental changes that have shaped their lives.



Figure 1. Geetha Vazhachal. Image: JANAL Archives 2023

The Kadars are a forest-dwelling and nomadic indigenous community of the Annamalai Hills sub-region of the Western Ghats. Their largest settlements are two areas in the Chalakudy River basin, Vazhachal (Thrissur District) and Parambikulam (Palakkad District), which is further East. After independence, India's forest politics has evolved from the scientific forestry approach to forest management and deep ecology, separating nature from culture and curtailing the endemic people's rights to the forest as a resource. The year 2006 saw the enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006. Otherwise known as the 'Forest Rights Act' (FRA), it recognises Adivasi's

rights to manage forest resources and participate in the governance of forest areas that were previously restricted.

Parambikulam, the site of the British Teak plantations and timber operations, underwent multiple interventions, from the forest tramway to dams and river linking projects. This resulted in evictions and forced migrations of many Kadar from this area to Vazhachal.

Childhood and Social Awareness

Geetha's father originally hails from Parambikulam, while her mother is a native of Vazhachal. In her early years, her father worked as a cook in a school while her mother diligently served at the Balavadi. Growing up amidst a loving family, she cherished her close bond with her brother and two elder sisters. Unfortunately, her frail health often kept her in the company of her parents and the Sisters at her convent boarding school.

"I think I was in fourth standard when I first heard about the Athirappilly project and its associated problems, but by the time I reached high school, I knew quite a bit," she recalled. Back home, during school vacations, she often witnessed the frequent interactions between her father and the environmentalist Dr Latha Anantha. Through her father's stories, she gained an insight into his struggles and experiences of her father and the story of their family and community. He told tales of his childhood, shedding light on the socio-cultural context of the times he lived in. Intrigued by these narratives, she developed a strong desire to learn more, leading her to engage with the elders in the community to understand livelihoods, food habits, and the relationship to their lands. This curiosity extended to studying the environment and its conservation. By the time she completed tenth grade, she had already found her calling. In those days, the community lacked access to basic amenities such as schools and hospitals; Geetha initially accompanied

people to the convents and hospitals. "I wanted to do something good for my people," she said.

Around this time, the Balavadi in Vazhachal had transformed into an Anganwadi, providing essential services to children and mothers in the community. At 17, when a position opened up at the daycare, she started working as a daily wage teacher, a job she continued for four years.

Social Work and Social Activism

Geetha Chechi identifies a workshop she attended in Kozhikode as a significant event in her life in terms of personal growth. "This was the first time I travelled outside my locality, aside from my school hostel. The 15-day training was an eye-opening experience, and I marvelled at the stark contrast between the bustling town and my *ooru* (small village). Also, I encountered people from other oorus or localities and gained insights into their culture and traditions." Mingling with the sub-groups in neighbouring rooms, she discovered that her community also had cultural programmes that she needed to be aware of. With newfound knowledge and enthusiasm, she eagerly participated in dance and music programmes during these gatherings. The camp experience ignited a more profound desire within her to explore and understand her community. Driven by this passion, she continued her work as a dedicated social activist even after the camp concluded.

Her work as a social activist, coupled with her experience in the anganwadi, became the catalyst for her entry into the field of social work. For example, Geetha has travelled to Delhi to participate in capacity-building workshops. "Despite the language barrier, I was able to learn from the experience and the people I met there," she said. She also has a deep love for reading and has accumulated enough books to establish a library at home. With

her friend Tinu and some local officers, she is working on establishing a library for the children in the community. With over a thousand books, they're now looking for a suitable library room.

Geetha reflects on the distinction between being a social activist and working at the anganwadi, which influenced her journey as a social worker. When asked about the difference between a social activist and a social worker, she replied, "Being a social activist involves having a job under the Tribal Department, providing a steady income for our livelihood. The work primarily entails carrying out tasks assigned by the Department and serves as a form of assistance. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, we had office work at the Department, while on other days, we worked in the *ooru*." Her work as a trained social worker informs her work as an activist.

The issues surrounding the proposed hydroelectric plant peaked during her tenure at the anganwadi. The 163 MW Athirappilly Hydroelectric Plant (HEP) proposed by the Kerala State Electricity Board in the Vazhachal Forest Division was to be the seventh Hydro Electric Project in the Chalakudy River Basin.

Dr. Latha approached her father to lead the Kadar opposition to the dam, but he wisely suggested that Geetha take up the cause. Filled with a sense of purpose, Geetha saw this as an opportunity to engage directly with the people.

A Timeline of Athirappilly Hydroelectric Power Project

- 1979 - The inception of a project proposal for construction of the seventh 23 meter high dam on the Chalakudy river. to generate 163MW of electricity.
- 1998 - It receives its initial environmental clearance.
- 2001 - Following a Kerala High Court order, the project is put on hold until a public hearing was conducted by the

electricity board.

- 2005 - The Union ministry of environment and forests granted a second environmental clearance, but it was invalidated by the high court due to significant procedural violations.
- 2007 - The project obtained a third environmental clearance, contingent upon the assessment report from a central expert team that surveyed the project area.
- 2011 - The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) of the Ministry of Environment (MoEF) deems the project 'undesirable' and emphasizing the ecological risks it posed.
- 2012 - A subsequent evaluation by Kasturirangan panel constituted by the MoEF indicates the project can proceed based on their re-evaluation report.
- 2017 - Conflicting statements in the State Assembly as the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) attempts to move forward with the project.
- 2020 - KSEB receives a renewal of the 'No Objection Certificate' from the State Government allowing it to obtain a fresh environmental clearance.

Figure 2. Timeline of the Hydroelectric Power Project.^{1,2,3}

Resistance within the Community

Over time, Geetha traced changes in the community. She delved into understanding their food preferences and traditional cooking methods and unearthed the history of their displacement. She embarked on extensive journeys, sometimes up to 65 kilometres

¹ Report of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, August 2011.

<https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/library/resource/report-of-the-western-ghats-ecology-expert-panel/>

² 'Controversy returns to Athirappilly as Kerala government reactivates the hydel project proposal', Mongabay India, 16 June 2020.

<https://india.mongabay.com/2020/06/controversy-returns-to-athirappilly-as-kerala-government-reactivates-the-hydel-project-proposal/>

³ EJAtlas - Global Atlas of Environmental Justice
<<https://ejatlas.org/conflict/athirapalli-dam-kerala-india>>

in a day, to converse with the community's elders, absorbing their wisdom and experiences. Although she has yet to document everything she learned, the wealth of knowledge remains etched in her memory. "I did all this because I wanted my narrative to be authentic. I had to know about our people, their history and experiences, to speak about it to someone else." Her relentless efforts for her community gradually gained recognition. Initially, words of criticism would deeply affect her, but over time, she realised the futility of taking them to heart, finding solace in her family's close-knit bond and the time they spent together.

Furthermore, the children she encounters at the anganwadi are a constant source of happiness for her. "How can anyone hold on to anger when these little kids surround them?" she said, pointing to her young students playing around us. She said that when she is in their presence, she becomes like a child, allowing her to forgive even those who may be harsh towards her.

She also learned the importance of collective response when faced with criticism or negative comments. Instead of individually responding to such remarks, she found gathering the community and addressing the concerns more effective. By doing so, everyone is a part of the response, fostering better understanding and unity within the community. This approach allows for a more inclusive and comprehensive exchange of ideas and perspectives. As participatory forest management gathered momentum across India, Geetha and her community were able to draw learnings from similar struggles.

Liquor and the Community

In the past, the Kadar community used *Karuppu* (a local variety of opium)⁴ as an

⁴ *Karuppu* or a variety of opium is used for making a beverage. No other additives are used, and when boiled, it takes on a tea-like appearance. Typically, only one or two pieces of *Karuppu* are added to

intoxicant until alcohol was introduced to serve the interests of various political outfits. The introduction of alcohol into their community is difficult to pinpoint precisely, but politicians have long visited the area during election campaigns, often bringing chicken, tapioca, and alcohol. These gatherings usually occurred in the evenings, with some politicians even getting biriyani from their hometowns. As a result, the Kadar people became addicted to alcohol without fully realising the detrimental effects it could have on their lives. Often the very same politicians refer to the Kadar men as drunkards. "What they don't understand is that when I or someone from my community speaks about politicians introducing alcohol into our community, it is based on our own experiences and observations. We are not talking about something we heard someone say. It is what we have seen and experienced." The politics she knows and believes in is different from the actions of politicians.

There was also an issue of illegal liquor production (*vaattu*) in the area, which prompted Geetha to venture into the forest to find and destroy such operations, braving threats from the manufacturers. She recounted an incident in which she responded to the threats, "I told them that the blood that runs through both their and my veins are the same. We are all equal. So, they can kill me if they want, but I am not running away in fear. I will continue to say and do things that I believe are right". She does not endorse violence, beatings, or conflicts; her focus is solely on working for the welfare of the community.

Geetha acknowledges that asking them to stop immediately may not be feasible, but she believes in the importance of encouraging individuals to limit their alcohol intake. She has suggested the idea of the health department organising a demonstration video highlighting the side effects of alcohol, hoping it might have a more significant impact.

achieve the desired strength of the drink. Geetha mentions that in the past, people usually only used one or two pieces of Karuppu for preparation.

Displacement of People

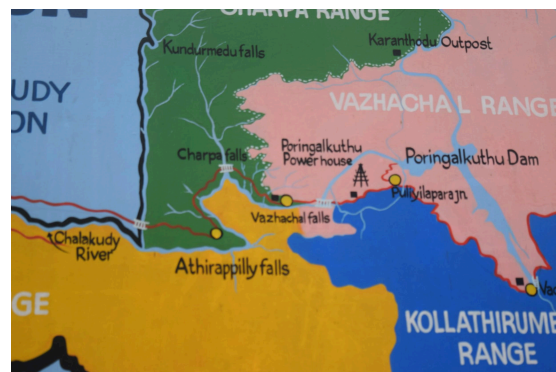


Figure 3. Forests, streams and dams around Vazhachal. Image: JANAL Archives 2023

The history of the Adivasis from Parambikulam is intertwined with the construction of dams in the area from the colonial era onwards. The British dam projects led to the displacement of many Kadar tribespeople to places like Kuriyarkutty, Mukkumpuzha, Vachumaram, Anakkayam, and Sholayar and forced them to settle and engage in agriculture, cultivating crops like coconut, banana and tapioca. "Not once but many times in the last century, during construction of the Parambikulam-Aliyar, Peringalkuthu, Sholayar, Mangalam and Thunakadavu dams. Many people who left Parambikulam had to go through further displacement with the declaration of the Tiger Reserve. The Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) and forest officers often chased them away. Their houses were destroyed, and they were forced to leave without any proper arrangements being made for them," Geetha stated while speaking about the constant shifts the Kadar community had to go through over the years.

Initially, only five families came to Vazhachal, while others settled in Athirappilly. "Athirappilly was then called Maattummal," said Geetha while explaining the movement of the Kadar community. Five people, including Geetha's maternal grandfather, were among the initial five individuals who received land there. It was land granted

by the forest department. However, by 2006, when the KSEB proposed the HEP, around 36 families were residing close to the project area, and landslides due to the felling of trees were inevitable. Geetha says, "Although we successfully fought against the Athirappilly project, the future remains uncertain."

Land Ownership

The community believes each family should receive at least an acre of land, but the government has yet to fulfil this requirement. "Initially, I thought that submitting applications was enough. But writing complaints is not enough; our needs are not prioritised by the officers who make excuses for the lack of progress," Geetha said. With their opposition to the hydroelectric plant, the concept and importance of *vanaavakaasham* (forest rights) became apparent. "It's about our rights, how much land has to be given to us according to the law and what we can and cannot do with that land", Geetha mentioned while discussing the difficulty of understanding the complex rules of the forest law. She says that she has read books on *vanaavakaasham* multiple times to understand it, but even now, she cannot fully comprehend it. The *oorukoottam* (community meetings) is a great tool to educate others about their rights, but she still wonders how many people take it seriously. The discussions and decisions made during the *oorukoottam* are minuted and circulated within the community. Submitting applications on the letterhead of the *oorukoottam* carries significant value, and the authorities' failure to acknowledge them has legal consequences. "There have been meetings rescheduled, and there's a lack of coordination between the Revenue, Panchayat, forest and Tribal Development departments...numerous challenges make land issues inconvenient to deal with," Geetha said while talking about the community's hardships while trying to go through the legal procedures.

During British rule, the area in Vazhachal, where the Kadar community now resides, served as a timber auction site. Each piece of land belongs to an individual to whom or to whose ancestor (one of the five families relocated), it was given. Over the years, the number of families who live in the Kadar community in Vazhachal has increased considerably. Still, the area of land available for their occupation has remained the same.

In terms of housing, out of the 38 families who currently reside on the land, only 35 have titles to their houses. These individuals received the titles based on proof, including photographs demonstrating the long-term residency of their ancestors from the beginning in Vazhachal. They could get the documents in order because the *oorukoottam* (community meetings) approved them. Others currently living on the land do not possess titles proving ownership of land but have a *kaivasha regha* or a document giving them permission to occupy the land but do not amount to ownership. This land cannot be sold, and the buyer and seller would face punishment if they attempt to do so.

Environmental concerns

Vazhachal today faces two environmental concerns: the river and the forest. Recalling the past, Geetha reminisces about the river's pristine state, voicing her concern over its current condition. Once a source of joy and sustenance, the river held a special place in her heart. Many days were spent in its embrace, whether with friends or family, as they caught fish and cooked them on its idyllic banks before returning home. "After the flood, the width of the river changed; forests, bushes and trees along the riverbanks provided cover for baths during the day. However, these natural elements are no longer present, including the rocks and sand that used to be there. The river now flows at a different level than before. The original location of the river no longer contains sand." The

Adivasis use a particular method to replant the banks periodically. For example, to plant *eetta* (reed bamboo), they first plant another grass called *pullu*. River sediment has to then seep in between these plants. It is here that *eetta* can grow properly. However, these efforts have faced challenges, including difficulties obtaining the required sediment. "We had to get sand from elsewhere and bring it here," said Geetha.

The initial thumbs-up for the hydroelectric plant had significant repercussions. The project reports say the forest department cut down 15,145 large trees from the site to facilitate construction. This controversial undertaking posed a substantial risk of submerging approximately 136 hectares of pristine forests and displacing numerous tribal communities. In 2007, the Kerala State Biodiversity Board, under the leadership of renowned environmental scientist V.S. Vijayan, warned about the power project's adverse ecological impact on the fragile river ecosystem in the region. Many environmentalists saw the dam threatening the forest's remaining plant and animal life. Notably, the area has four rare varieties of hornbills and other unique wildlife. The decision to halt the construction has been met with great relief by the residents of Athirapally and Vazhachal villages, which are located in the basin and were facing the imminent threat of submersion.

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge the help and support provided by the following people in writing this article. Geetha Vazhachal was gracious enough to spend time with us and explain her community's struggles. Bibitha S., a B.Ed student and resident of the Kadar community in Vazhachal, gave us a young woman's perspective on life in Vazhachal⁵. We would also like to thank Dr Sreeja K.G. for introducing us to Geetha Chechi and Bibitha and the forest and tribal officers who helped us with

permission to go to the Kadar community in Vazhachal.

⁵ Interviews with Geetha Vazhachal and S Bibitha conducted on 13 April and 10 August 2023.

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