

Ecological Practices and Linguistic Heritage of the Kadar Community

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Abstract

1.5 % of the total population of Kerala belongs to the scheduled tribes. The tribal people rely on hunting, agriculture, and fishing for their livelihood. Non-tribal people have found entertainment in tribal literature and culture from time immemorial. A significant portion of tribal literature is derived from the oral tradition. The knowledge and resources of the tribal people are regarded as a treasure that should be safeguarded. This paper focuses on some of the ecological methods and linguistic background of the native population of the Kadar community, who occupies the central region of Kerala. Since the Kadar community has knowledge about many ecological relationships, their knowledge ought to be conserved.

Introduction

Diversity in the existence of several societies are one of the fundamental aspects of Indian civilisation. Indian tribes are intrinsically related to the country's diverse fabric. The tribal culture, traditions, and rituals of India have an impact on almost every aspect of the nation's culture and civilisation. Every tribe has a unique style of living. Each tribe has its own culture, morals, values, traditions etc. Tribal literature represents the experiences, cultures, and struggles of tribal people, because many traditions are transmitted orally. Some of the tribal communities in Kerala are Kurichiya, Paniya, Muthuvan, Irula, Kadar etc.

Two members of the Kadar community, Mr. Senthil Kumar and Mr. Manikya Raj, provided experiential knowledge that served as the main source of data for this study. In order to translate their Malayalam narration into English for Ms. Stephanie Stafford, an independent foreign filmmaker capturing elements of the Kadar community, the information was collected through the conversation during the two-day international conference 'Bridging Science and Communities in Biodiversity Conservation and Ecorestoration'. A discussion of the participants' descriptions of their ecological practices, cultural beliefs, and daily interactions with the forest environment was made possible during this translation process.

Although their initial objective was to encourage intercultural contact rather than conduct a traditional interview, the discussion yielded several insights into the indigenous knowledge that are worthy of scholarly consideration. The narratives demonstrate how the Kadar language serves as a repository for ecological knowledge, preserving understandings of plants, animals, seasonal cycles and forest resources. Their oral traditions demonstrate how language is used not only for communication but also for cultural identity to be preserved and passed down through generations.

Methodology

This study analyses the first-hand report using a qualitative methodology to investigate the connection between the ecological practices and linguistic legacy of the Kadar people. The paper argues that the preservation of indigenous languages is intrinsically linked to the maintenance of traditional ecological knowledge. By analysing the lived experiences of the Kadar people, this paper seeks to contribute to current discussions on indigenous knowledge systems and biodiversity conservation and also highlight the vital role that tribal communities play in maintaining the ecological legacy of the Western Ghats.

India is renowned for having a wide variety of languages. The nation's oral tradition has existed for up to 3500 years and continues to flourish today. The Kadar language is one

of them. The nation is home to more unwritten languages than written ones. Kadar people communicate between each other in the Kadar language even when they are in the urban area for some purpose, as a means of preserving their tradition.

Most of our oral literature is in danger of going extinct due to a lack of institutionalised support. Oral traditions are used to preserve indigenous and traditional knowledge about the environment and society. Despite learning languages like Tamil and Malayalam, members of the Kadar tribe are quite concerned about utilising the Kadar language. The analysis views language as a storehouse of ecological memory that transmits information about biodiversity and cultural identity between generations, rather than only as a communication medium.

Historically, hunting and gathering or subsistence farming have been the main sources of revenue for the Kadars. They have managed to survive despite the significant changes brought about by urbanisation. In Kerala, there are about 3000 Kadar people. The social structure of the Kadar community illustrates the complex interrelationships of cultural continuity, ecological knowledge, and governance. According to Manikya Raj, Mooppan is in charge of each settlement and serves as the guardian of customary law and communal well-being. He resolves conflicts, upholding social harmony and make decisions as a group. By ensuring that customary standards controlling the use of forest resources are observed, the Mooppan contributes significantly to the preservation of traditional ecological practices beyond administrative duties. This leadership upholds social order and ecological ethics.

The community's view of nature is equally entwined with traditional religious activities. According to Senthil Kumar, in ceremonial life, the “Thaivamaali” plays a significant role as the oracle. Forests, rivers, hills, and wildlife are seen as hallowed places inhabited by spiritual forces in the Kadar's spiritual beliefs, which do not distinguish religion from the natural world. By deterring the careless exploitation of forest resources, these beliefs serve as unofficial environmental conservation mechanisms.

The “Vichayaali,” who has specific knowledge of rituals, chants, and ceremonial acts, is another significant member of the community. Another aspect of the Kadar's ecological understanding is embodied by the traditional physician, the “Marunthaali,” (Gouthami 7) that represent centuries of collected ethnobotanical knowledge, with a vast understanding of medicinal plants, roots, herbs, and forest resources. This information has been passed down orally through the generations and obtained from long-term monitoring of the forest ecology.

The Kadar's sustainable link with the forest is further demonstrated by their way of life. The main source of their income is by collecting honey. Experienced collectors skilfully extract honey without damaging bee colonies, leaving parts of the comb untouched to allow the colonies to organically recover. This method guarantees the availability of honey while preserving ecological balance.

In addition to being a valuable product, honey is essential to the Kadar people's cultural identity and ecological understanding. Collectors have a thorough awareness of weather patterns, forest vegetation, bee behaviour, flowering seasons, and the whereabouts of various bee species. Through lived experience, apprenticeship, and observation, this particular knowledge is passed down orally among families and the community.

These traditional institutions demonstrate that governance, spirituality, healthcare, and livelihood among the Kadar are inseparable from their ecological worldview. Their social organisation is founded upon principles of collective responsibility, respect for nature, and sustainable resource management. These institutions collectively sustain not only the community's cultural identity but also its ecological resilience.

The Kadar community's subsistence methods show a sustainable way of life that has developed over many generations and reveal a deep awareness of the forest ecology. Rice, roots, fish, honey, fruits, and other forest products, make up the majority of their traditional diet. In addition to offering nutritional security, tubers and edible roots collected from the forest demonstrate the community's deep understanding of soil conditions, edible plant species, and seasonal vegetation. Through constant engagement with the forest, this information has been gathered and passed down verbally from one generation to the next.

According to Senthil Kumar, the “Kombukathi,” a traditional multifunctional knife that plays a major role in Kadar daily life, is one of their essential tools. It is more than just a cutting instrument; represents the Kadar's practical expertise and independence. It is utilised in nearly every facet of their way of life, such as cutting bamboo and cane, preparing food, gathering honey, processing forest products, and making basic household tools.

The Kadar employ a range of traditional tools specifically designed for gathering forest resources while minimising ecological disturbance. Unlike mechanised methods of extraction, their tools allow for selective harvesting, causing minimal damage to surrounding vegetation and enabling the regeneration of plant species. This practice exemplifies the

community's commitment to sustainable resource use and their awareness of ecological balance.

Specialised ecological expertise is also needed for fishing and honey gathering. The Kadar have a deep knowledge of fish habitats, bee behaviour, flowering cycles, forest streams, and seasonal variations. They use conventional methods that enable bee colonies to live and recover after harvesting, and they identify the best times to collect honey. These actions show that conservation, not extraction, is the foundation of the community's livelihood plans.

From an ecocritical standpoint, the Kadar's subsistence methods show that ecological degradation is not necessary for human life, challenging prevailing conceptions of resource extraction. The community has been able to cohabit with the Western Ghats forests for generations. The Kadar's traditional ecological practices provide important insights into sustainable living in a time of biodiversity loss and environmental crises. They also reinforce the significance of protecting indigenous knowledge systems and the linguistic heritage that transmits them.

The Kadar community's ecological outlook is significantly influenced by their religious beliefs. The Kadar have historically been polytheists, worshipping a number of gods closely linked to the natural world. The Kadar worship basic stone images that signify the presence of the divine, in contrast to institutionalised religions that frequently focus on ornate temples and human idols. The community's belief that the divine is present in the natural world is affirmed by these uncarved stones, which are placed inside or close to forest landscapes and symbolise the holiness of nature.

Worshipping the local deities fosters ethical responsibility in the use of natural resources and strengthens a sense of reverence for the forest. Certain landscapes are given hallowed status, which deters destructive exploitation and promotes ecologically balanced behaviours.

Thus, the religious worldview of the Kadar serves as an unofficial kind of environmental regulation. The Kadar see themselves as part of a greater ecological ecosystem where people, animals, plants, rivers, and spiritual forces coexist in mutual dependency, as opposed to viewing the environment as a resource to be managed or exploited. The community has been able to create sustainable, reciprocal, and restrained livelihood practices.

The close connection between ecological sustainability and indigenous wisdom is best illustrated by the Kadar community. Their daily routines, oral traditions, ceremonial observances, and linguistic expressions all incorporate their understanding of forest ecology. The Kadars have created adaptive tactics that allow them to use forest resources without jeopardising their regeneration through constant study of environmental changes, flowering seasons, animal activity, and climate trends. One of the main elements supporting the forest ecosystem's long-term resilience and guaranteeing the community's livelihood stability is this traditional knowledge.

The Kadar language also functions in maintaining ecological awareness. The names of gods, flora, fauna, and ceremonial customs make up a specific diction that is used to pass down cultural values and environmental knowledge to future generations. It is difficult to adapt these linguistic phrases into dominant languages without losing their cultural richness since they encode ecological relationships, moral obligations, and communal memories. As a result, both cultural variety and the conservation of priceless ecological information accumulated over centuries are at risk due to the decline of indigenous languages.

Beyond economic need and subsistence, the Kadar community's relationship with wildlife has deep cultural and spiritual significance. Some animals are considered to have ancestral, metaphorical, and spiritual importance in addition to being forest dwellers. These ideas are a reflection of an indigenous worldview that views non-human life forms and people as members of a common ecological community rather than as distinct individuals. Respect for biodiversity is fostered by such a worldview, which also upholds the moral standards that guide the community's interactions with the natural world.

The usage of variant names for specific animals is an equally important part of the Kadar language legacy. According to Senthil Kumar, the tiger is called "Mattan" instead of its common name. The adoption of such alternative names reflects cultural attitudes about respect, caution, and the spiritual force associated with hazardous animals, in addition to language variance. Naming strong creatures directly is seen in many indigenous tribes as either inviting their presence or showing a lack of respect. Therefore, using a polite alternative serves as a verbal manifestation of ecological ethics.

Anthropocentric presumptions that elevate humans above the natural world are challenged by the Kadar's animal-centered cosmology. Rather, it reflects an eco-centric ideology that holds that all living things—including humans, animals, trees, and spiritual forces—are part of a single, interrelated system. Recording these customs is crucial for both

maintaining the Kadar's cultural and linguistic legacy and acknowledging traditional knowledge as a valuable resource for modern environmental conservation.

Conclusion

Earlier, people thought that tribal communities including Kadars are causing havoc to the forest and ecosystem by looting the forest. But now it is clear that through their eco-friendly and indigenous way of living, they preserve the forest and environment. Besides, their ethnoecological knowledge is additional benefit to the ecosystem.

The ecological practices of the Kadar community demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the interconnectedness of life within the forest ecosystem. Their traditional knowledge is founded on the belief that the forest is a dynamic and living entity sustained through the interactions of diverse species, each contributing to the balance and resilience of the ecosystem. Rather than perceiving plants, animals, rivers, and mountains as isolated resources for human use, the Kadar recognise them as integral components of an interdependent ecological network. This holistic worldview has shaped their subsistence practices, religious beliefs and linguistic traditions, enabling them to coexist harmoniously with the forests of the Western Ghats for generations.

The Kadar's ecological wisdom is inseparable from their linguistic heritage. Their vocabulary relating to flora, fauna, traditional tools, sacred landscapes, and customary practices serves as a repository of environmental knowledge accumulated over centuries. Oral narratives, ritual chants, indigenous terminology, and naming practices preserve not only cultural memory but also practical knowledge of biodiversity, medicinal plants, and sustainable resource management. Consequently, the erosion of the Kadar language would signify not merely the loss of a means of communication but also the disappearance of an invaluable body of ecological knowledge.

The Kadar's relationship with nature is governed by an eco-centric ethics rather than an anthropocentric one. Their customary institutions, spiritual beliefs, and everyday practices encourage respect, reciprocity, and restraint in the use of forest resources.

In an era of biodiversity loss, climate change, and the rapid decline of indigenous languages, the ecological worldview of the Kadar community offers important lessons for contemporary environmental thought. Their recognition that every species contributes to the functioning of the ecosystem anticipates modern ecological concepts of interdependence and biodiversity conservation. The Kadar people remind us that environmental sustainability is not merely a scientific or technological challenge but also a cultural and ethical responsibility grounded in respect for the more-than-human world.

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