



Sweet Lockdowns: Reflections on Tribal Development in Kerala, India

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This commentary illustrates how the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns (both the National Lockdown 2020 and State Lockdown 2021) enabled Kadars, an Adivasi community in Kerala's Thrissur district, better access to non-timber forest produce (NTFP) collection because of the diminished presence of the 'developmental' state. The lockdowns provide an analytic lens through which to reflect upon and critique tribal development in Kerala which despite claiming to respect the uniqueness of scheduled tribes mostly aims at mainstreaming them.

Introduction

Venu¹, a Kadar² living in Vazhachal, one of seven Kadar settlements in the Vazhachal-Malakkapara region³ in Thrissur district of Kerala, has been actively engaged in the collection of non-timber forest produce (NTFP) over the last thirty years albeit often under the strict surveillance of the Forest Department.⁴ In the course of conducting his PhD fieldwork between November 2018 and June 2019, the first author spoke frequently to Venu about the neighbouring forest and its importance to Kadar life as well as about the animals that inhabited the forest. During the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns the first author kept in regular touch with the people in Vazhachal by phone. Venu, in particular, regularly conveyed that the lockdowns⁵ were very busy periods as it was honey collection season (between March-May). The lockdowns were bountiful with frequent visits to the forest to collect *malancharakku*.⁶ Contrary to reports in the popular press and by activists (Tripathy 2020; Roybal 2020) from different parts of the country that suggested that Adivasis were adversely affected by the lockdown as it had restricted movement to the forests and consequently their ability to collect and market NTFP,⁷ Venu suggested that both lockdowns (2020 and 2021) had in fact enabled Kadars to more freely collect NTFP as the forest bureaucracy was missing. Venu, and others, referred to the lockdown periods as sweet lockdowns (*then pookalamkal*). He said that the Kadars from Vazhachal tribal settlement had collected around 1,800 kg of honey alone from March 2020 to May 2020 and 1950 kg during March 2021 to June 2021 as opposed to 670 kg for the same period in 2019. Not only were the lockdowns sweet, but so too the honey.

The sweet lockdowns in Vazhachal of April-June 2020 and May-June 2021 offer us useful insights into Kadar perceptions of tribal development.⁸ Tribal development in Kerala, like in other parts of the country, talks both about recognizing the culture of scheduled tribes (STs) and mainstreaming them (Chathukulam 2006; Rath 2006). This commentary examines these apparently contradictory objectives by looking at how the Tribal Development and Forest Departments, the two most important departments of the state in the lives of Kadars, seemingly strive to attain these objectives. More than 20 years ago in the context of tribal development in Madhya Pradesh, Baviskar (1994) had argued that state policy ignored the aspirations of the Bhil and Bhilala ST communities. We argue that little has changed despite multiple critiques of tribal development and that instead of recognizing the culture of Kadars the state has aimed to create Kadar subjects far removed from their self-identification as forest people (Menon and Bijoy 2014; Xaxa 2005). While the Tribal Development Department directly aims its policies at mainstreaming STs by promoting non-forest-based livelihoods, the Forest Department's policies only recognize the Kadar's attachment to forests notionally by involving them to some extent in the policing of forests. Not surprisingly, for elder Kadars such as Venu, the lockdown is sweet as it offers a future imaginary where Kadars are able to exert their agency by freely moving in the neighbouring forests to collect NTFP and worship their deities.

The 'Kaadu' in the Kadar

The word Kadar, from the Malayalam word 'kaadu' (forest), is suggestive of the Kadars closeness to the forest. Kadars live mostly in Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu and Palakkad and Thrissur districts of Kerala. According to a survey done by the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) in 2008, there were at that time 1,974 Kadars in Kerala, out of which approximately 1,100 lived in Thrissur district. The Vazhachal-Malakkapara region of Thrissur district comprises parts of Vazhachal and Chalakudy forest divisions. Forests are of the tropical evergreen variety with rich flora and faunal diversity (Susanth 2019).

Kadars believe that they are one amongst the forests. Ramayi, an elder Kadar woman, told the first author that forests are their life. The Kadars, according to her, live with the trees, animals, bees and rivers. Kadars consider the forests as sacred and as their ancestors. They believe that the forests protect them from evil spirits. Mountains within the forests such as Karimala Gopuram, Vairi and Kallyanathi are considered to be spiritually important (Divya 2014). Kadars even consider wild guars as their ancestors. They do not take anything from the forest without the permission of the forest spirits. For example, if they happen to see carcasses of animals in the forest, they seek oral permission from the Maladaivadikal, a spirit worshipped by Kadars, and ancestors before taking the carcasses for consumption. Taking and consuming carcasses without taking permission from these spirits will lead to punishments in the form of animal attacks.⁹

Kadars collect a number of different NTFPs such as honey (*then*), white dammer (*thelli*), gooseberry (*nellika*), turmeric (*kattu manjal*), arrowroot (*koova*), Indian sarsaparilla (*nannari*), beeswax (*mezhuku*), and tamarind (*puli*) and spend weeks at a time within the forest. The spiritual is very much enmeshed in Kadar NTFP activities. Take the case of honey. Before the harvest season, Kadars conduct a pooja for Maladaivadikal as he is believed to protect them in the forest. Similarly, Kadars say that conducting a pooja near any river source is meant to increase the quantity of honey harvested. When they get a good collection, they attribute it to the blessings of the ancestors. The divineness they attribute to the forest translates into the care they show when they collect NTFP. Kadars will not harvest immature honey and will not burn the entire honey hive. This is to ensure that the honey keeps generating. Kadars also will not collect honey during the monsoon, primarily because they think that the honey collected during the rainy season will have rain water mixed with the honey. Surendran, a regular honey collector, mentioned that collecting honey during the monsoon amounted to cheating the buyer and would result in local honey obtaining a bad reputation. With regard to dammar resin collection, Kadars cut the bark of the dammar tree and let the cut heal before they collect the dammar. While the tree is healing, no one is allowed to harvest the dammar. In the past, certain families had family trees which they would worship. Others were not allowed to collect honey from those designated trees. This practice, however, has been discontinued.

'Development' of Kadars

While Kadars consider forests central to their life, the state Tribal Development Department views Kadar affinity to the forests as a sign of primitiveness. Although the discourse of tribal development is about respecting Kadar culture while mainstreaming development for them, specific programmes are for the most part aimed at moving people away from the forest. As Scott (1998) has argued, the state extends its control over its subjects through intrusive and coercive methods to 'simplify' local practises and make them 'legible' to state officials. The Tribal Development Office (TDO Office) in Thrissur district is currently running development programmes for housing, health, education, and marriage assistance amongst other livelihood/training programmes. Complementing these programmes are schemes such as the Critical Gap Filling Scheme, which is run with central assistance, and aims to provide 'alternate' livelihoods to Kadars through training for bulb making and other industrial activities such as machine operating and coaching for the Kerala Public Service Commission exams. Administering these programmes is far simpler than trying to understand Kadar affinities to the forest. Most Kadars, especially elders, however, are at best indifferent to these efforts as they see these programmes as ways to destroy their life. There are of course youngsters like Vishnu who aspire for a government job and settling down in a town.

The day to day functioning of the Tribal Development Department is also testimony that mainstreaming Kadars is the real priority. The Tribal Extension Officer¹⁰ (TEO), Puthukad, mentioned that the department is striving hard to change the behaviour of Kadars through introducing multiple development programmes.¹¹ The weekly meetings between the TEO and the village Tribal Promoters (TPs)¹² are an occasion when the TEO advises the TPs to encourage more Kadars to join various livelihood programmes to change their 'nomadic attitude'.¹³ For example, in a meeting held on 23 January 2019 the TEO advised

TPs to encourage more youth to join the public service commission coaching programme otherwise their lives would be miserable like that of their parents. As the TEO put it, progress and change will take place only when the Kadars stop venturing into the forest unnecessarily. These programmes are the way the state exercises its bureaucratic control and disciplinary power (Gupta 2012) over Kadars.

Forest Policy and the Making of Kadar Forest Subjects

The Forest Department appears to be more popular than the Tribal Development Department in Vazhachal settlement. This is because Forest Department programmes are centred at one level around the forest. The Adivasi Vana Samsarkshana Samithi (AVSS) was established in Vazhachal in 2002 under the ambit of participatory forest management. The Government of Kerala guidelines¹⁴ for the implementation of VSSs and AVSSs states in Section 12 on sharing benefits that the Executive Committee of AVSSs are entitled to collect specified quantities¹⁵ of NTFP from areas under its jurisdiction. But in Vazhachal settlement, the official forest representative in the Executive Committee of the AVSS objected to the procurement of forest produce in the first committee meeting itself and since then the AVSS has not been involved in NTFP collection though it goes against the guidelines of allowing Kadars access to NTFP.¹⁶ Thus while Kadars such a Prabhakaran go to the forest to collect NTFP, they face the possible ire of Forest Department officials. Kadars, who go for AVSS work, mainly pick up garbage around the Vazhachal waterfalls (a tourist spot), work as security guards at the ticket counter of the waterfalls¹⁷ and undertake tree sampling work for the Forest Department. Other Kadars work directly for the Forest Department as temporary workers, namely as forest watchers, fire line workers, and sampling workers. It would be fair to say that the Forest Department is trying to create particular types of forest subjects who partake in protecting the forest but under the control of the Forest Department (Agarwal 2005).

Some Kadars are content with such jobs as they get a stable income of about Rs. 550 per day.¹⁸ Gopalan, a temporary forest watcher, says that Forest Department jobs not only gives him income but also some connection to the forest. While he recognizes that these jobs are very different than the traditional NTFP activities of Kadars, they are nonetheless preferable to the Tribal Development Department schemes.

The sweet lockdowns illustrate a different forest imaginary where Kadars do not have to have AVSS jobs or be employed as temporary workers by the Forest Department, but rather have free entry into forests and the ability to collect NTFP. According to Radha, the chieftain¹⁹ of Vazhachal settlement various legislations, such as The Wildlife Protection Act 1972 (WLPA), curtail the freedom of Kadars to collect NTFP from the forest, even though they had historical rights to collect NTFP from the forests. She went on to say that the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 was the first piece of legislation that in practice gave legal rights, both individual and community, to Kadars. Section 3 subsections (c) and (i)²⁰ of Chapter 2 of the Act recognizes the right of ownership and the right of access to collect, use and dispose of NTFP. In the year 2012, all the settlements that fall under the Vazhachal and Chalakudy forest division applied together for community forest resource rights and community forest rights (for individual settlements) under The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. In 2014, all the settlements were granted forest resource rights over the 40,000 hectares of forest land in the Charpa, Athirapilly, Vazhachal, Sholayar and Kollathirumedu forest range along with individual settlement rights. Despite these rights, the focus of the Tribal Development Department continues to be to wean Kadars away from the forests.

While many Kadar youth say they have never collected NTFP and that their affinity to forests is not like that of older generations, they nonetheless partook in honey collection during the lockdown periods. Though these youth might opt for a different future than their parents and grandparents, they acknowledged that the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 opened their eyes to the beauties of the forest. They also felt 'relieved' that the Tribal Development Department had a relatively diminished presence during both these periods. Elders, on the other hand, said the lockdowns were an opportunity to teach the youth about forests and forest livelihoods. While in 2020 March, the number of Kadars in Vazhachal engaged in the honey collection saw a moderate increase, the 2021 lockdown witnessed a sharp rise in those involved. This might be primarily due to the experience of the sweet lockdown of 2020.

The end of the National Lockdown in June 2020 meant the return of the developmental state with all its flaws and adverse consequences. First, many 'new' NTFP collectors returned to their Adivasi Vana Samrakshana Samithi (AVSS) work or other temporary Forest Department work, leaving behind NTFP collection. Second, instead of being 'free' citizens roaming 'their' forests, the same constraints of entering

forests returned as well as the overbearing presence of the Tribal Development Department. Finally, due to the re-opening of the economy and the increased number of tourists, Covid-19 which had been absent was now prominent (45 cases till date) in Vazhachal settlement. Though tourism no doubt brings with it certain economic benefits, it is worth considering an alternate vision for the future where Kadars determine their own destiny and make their own choices in terms of livelihood options. The return of the sweet lockdown in 2021 suggests that the NTFP economy under their (Kadar) control offers one possible future alternative. It also suggests the need for the Tribal Development Department to be more participatory in its functioning.

Conclusion

During the pandemic lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, Kadars frequented the forest much more than they did before the pandemic. Despite the hardships of the lockdowns, many Kadars looked upon it as opportunities to collect more NTFP and more freely roam around the forest. We see the lockdowns as an opening to rethink state-centric tribal development and its priorities. Despite the discourse of tribal development articulating a need to respect the culture of Adivasis, in practice this has rarely been the case. We have illustrated in the context of Vazhachal how both the Tribal Development Department and Forest Department, in different ways, have tried to create Kadar subjects who are mainstreamed away from their close affinity to the forests.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, by providing legal support for both individual and community forest rights, is a possible way forward in truly recognizing the cultural and livelihood priorities of Kadars. It remains to be seen whether the state and its departments are willing to engage with Kadars in a more democratic way and listen to the priorities of Kadars so that the intended spirit of tribal development is really followed.

Notes

- ¹ To protect the identity of individual Kadars, we have used pseudonyms.
- ² Kadars are a scheduled tribe (ST) community living in both Kerala and Tamil Nadu
- ³ The area falls under two forest divisions in Thrissur district, Kerala
- ⁴ People like Venu are selling NTFP to private sellers near Athirapilly and Chalakudy towns.
- ⁵ This article is based on telephonic discussions during the pandemic with people in Vazhachal settlement.
- ⁶ This is the term that the Kadars use for NTFP.
- ⁷ Joint preliminary assessment report by Community Forest Rights - Learning and Advocacy (CFR-LA), All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM) and other rights groups.
- ⁸ The concept of sweet lockdown was articulated to the first author by many of the people he spoke to during the lockdown. There are of course a variety of opinions concerning the lockdown.
- ⁹ All these are inputs from the in-depth interviews conducted during field work for the PhD work.
- ¹⁰ Tribal Extension Office is the second tier office at the district level.
- ¹¹ Ethnographic field work was conducted for collecting data for the PhD work of the first author. The weekly meetings of the TEO and tribal promoters as well as other meetings were attended for collecting information.
- ¹² Tribal promoters are the temporary workers of the Tribal Development Department. Promoters are each in charge of one tribal settlement. They are ground level staff of the Tribal Development Department. They are always Scheduled Tribes and are selected for a period of three years.
- ¹³ The TEO said this in the weekly meeting held on 19 December 2018 in the TEO office, Puthukad, Kerala.
- ¹⁴ G.O No. 84/97/F&WLD dated, 13.10.1997. Forest and Wild Life Department of Participatory Forest Management- Guidelines for Implementation- Revised- Orders-issued
- ¹⁵ The quantity of NTFP will be decided by the Executive Committee and should be proposed in the micro plan of the committee.
- ¹⁶ The forest officials think that NTFP collection because of its monetary value will lead to corrupt practices. The Executive Committee decided not to procure NTFP from Kadars and advised them to continue with the existing system of selling the forest produce to outside sellers in Chalakudy town.
- ¹⁷ Tourists need tickets to see the waterfalls.
- ¹⁸ This is remuneration offered for VSS work. One person gets a maximum of 15 working days in a month. Payment for the Forest Department temporary workers are made on a monthly basis.
- ¹⁹ Chieftain is the head of the tribal settlement. Malayalam word for chieftain is *Ooru Moopathy*
- ²⁰ 3(c) provides right of ownership, access to collect, use, and dispose of minor forest produce which has been traditionally collected within or outside village boundaries. Section 3(i) mentions rights to protect, regenerate or conserve or manage any community forest resource which STs and other traditional forest dwellers have been traditionally protecting and conserving for sustainable use.

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