Chapter - 4

ECONOMY

Tribal economy is intimately connected with forest and forest economy. The tribal community had traditionally subsisted on forest and forest produce. Their social economy depends on a number of factors. A tribal society must adopt itself to the area it inhabits. It must develop a relation of interdependence with the fauna and flora of the habitat. Its success depends on its ability to live enjoying noblest health, acquiring strength, involving an adjustment to the floras of environment. The economic structure in tribal communities is specifically different from that of the non-tribal or advanced groups of people. They have a very simple technology, which fits well with their ecological surrounding.

Economic Activities of the Kadar

Until Independence, the Kadar survived by collecting forest produce, wild roots and tubers and sporadic cultivation of some food grains in their small plots. Traditional hunting and trapping controlled animal raiding and provided, along with fishing and tortoise catching, the muscle needed proteins. Above all, they were expert trackers. The forest department depended on them for all activities. They were especially famous for their skill as elephant catchers. The Kadar were adept at
making the strong ropes required for their honey collecting expeditions, and for the elephant-capturing operations. They used a hardy forest creeper called *bakkavally* which they twist into very thick and strong ropes. These are even now sold in the market or bartered.

After Independence, the construction of the huge reservoirs and the constitution of the wild life sanctuaries, the means of livelihood are severely curtailed. No longer is hunting, trapping and fishing allowed. Whatever little cultivation they attempted is subject to raiding by the animals, especially the wild pigs, which are strictly protected from any sort of let or hindrance by the tribal people. Elephant catching is discontinued. Minor forest produce is no longer the business of private contractors but is managed by the bureaucratic lower employees of various departments of Government.

The felt needs of the Kadar have expanded due to contact with outside populations like contractors, labour for the civil works, ‘tourists’ and their touts. This has introduced many new occupations, mainly as unskilled casual labour. The increasing works undertaken by the irrigation and Forest departments also provide avenues for the old “Madras State”, Kadar young men could be and were recruited by the local conservator. Thurston mentioned about the appointment of Kadar as forest guards. But in Kerala, appointments to this cadre can be only made by the Public
Service Commission (PSC). This has effectively blocked this category of posts to the Kadar, as they often are not aware of the “advertisements” put out by the PSC, nor can they satisfy the educational qualifications prescribed; far less compete with the highly educated plainspeople. The reduction in the number of “departmental elephants” owned by the Forest department has choked off this avenue of employment also.

The Kadar has developed the appropriate technology for the collection of honey. Four kinds of honey are differentiated by them. They are Karimthen, kolthen, perimthen and cheruthen.\textsuperscript{5} Thurston described that they had a superstition that they should always return by the way they go down, and therefore, climbed back along the rope even though it would have been easier to walk back through the floor of the precipice. He also emphasized the similarity of the Kadar method of climbing very tall trees by planting pegs in them and binding a series of long bamboos to them to those of the Dyaks of Borneo\textsuperscript{6}.

They hunt animals with the help of dogs. However, they prefer to trap the animals wherever they can. Their hunting dogs are very tough and tenacious animals which the Kadar trains specifically for the chase and capture of the smaller species like rabbits, mongoose and the mouse-deer. Larger animals like the wild pigs are usually trapped. Catching of tortoises is a very exciting affair for the Kadar. They go hunting in groups from
January to April, Fishing is usually a part-time activity of the Kadar women. They either angle for them or catch them by poisoning the water. The seed of a tree locally called *maramkurukkal* is used as poison in stagnant water. The early ethnographic reports are replete with instances of the Kadar's knowledge of the forests and his prowess as a hunter.

According to the 1981 Census, 67.99% were engaged in livestock rearing, forestry, hunting, gathering etc., 21.53% were agricultural labourers; 2.65% were cultivators; and the remaining 7.83% in other occupations.8

**Occupation of Malasar and Malaimalasar**

The Madras Census Report 1901 described them as “good at game-tracking and very handy with their axes, with the help of which they will construct a bamboo house for the wandering sportsman in a few hours”. Aiyappan reported that they “are said to be somewhat addicted to stealing, robbing and burglary. Their occupations are agricultural labour and wood cutting and also collection of forest produce. At present, the major economic resource is land and forest. They are mainly landless and their primary occupation now is agricultural labour. A few had become bonded labourers and are doing work for their masters who belong to the dominant Gounder community. They live in the farms of their masters. Child labour exists among them. A few are expert in catching and taming wild
elephants and several of the mahouts and kavadis employed by the Forest Department in Pollachi range are Malasar. Some work as forest labourers for the department and the contractors. They also collect minor forest produce. They are now organized under the Sarkarpathi Hill Tribes Co-operative Labour Contract Society with headquarters at Sethumadai.

In some settlements, all of them are forest dwelling. The mahouts of the local departmental elephant camps are drawn from among them. They have been allotted small plots in their settlements. They attempt cultivation of millets, vegetables, getting whatever remains after raiding by wild pigs from the sanctuary. They scavenge carcasses left behind by the predators; collect minor forest produce as and when permitted by the authorities; often, the collection of items like honey is hardly sufficient to meet their own requirements. Some get casual remuneration by acting as guides to wild life enthusiasts who visit the area as tourists. Among the Malasars in Anamalai region, 10.12% were in livestock rearing and forestry related occupations; 88.75% were agricultural labour and the remaining 1.13%, in other occupations.

Economic activities of the Muthuvas

Muthuvars are essentially cultivators. In this respect they are decidedly better than the other hill tribes, as they are comparatively hard working. They were nomadic and indulged in shifting cultivation usually
hill paddy, *ragi* and *tenai* (minor millets). They shifted the cultivation site every two years. This would be just after the Tai Pongal festival in January-February. The selection of site is decided on the basis of the characteristics of the locality and also by the oracular declarations made by the Priest during the day of Tai Pongal. They commence the construction of huts, residing in the nearby caves till the huts are ready. The headman would allot the lands to each member; it is the headman’s privilege to have the land retained by him cleared collectively, free of cost. Widows and incapacitated members are also helped by the others. When everything is completed, they make an offering to the ancestor spirits at their respective houses, and pray: “O Ancestor spirits! Accept this rice offering and go; let not elephants, panthers and bears come near us!”15

One day before the jungle clearing of the agricultural sites, they would gather after a bath; the pujari cuts three reeds. If they find the water inside the reeds clear, the site is considered all right; if not, they move on to another site. Bad omens which also result in the abandonment of a site are rat snakes, rats, a man coming with flowing hair and wet clothing16.

The jungle is cleared in the month of January / February with the help of a billhook and the debris set afire by March. A spade (*mammatty*) is used for preparation of the land for cultivation. Ragi, paddy, pumpkin and other vegetables are their main cultivated crops. Weeding is done by
women and the guarding by the men. If they do not get enough rain, they perform *kumbidal* (prayer). *Muttu keppai*, a variety of ragi which ripens early is harvested in September and the main ragi, in November. Grains are stored in small temporary granaries. Iyer (ibid.) reported that in some areas like Anjanad, where the rainfall is how and the soil clayish, they took to terraced cultivation, making them ten to thirty feet broad down the hill sides. They arranged irrigation through bamboo pipes or so it bamboo channels, the flow being from field to field.

Now-a-days, they pay less attention to food production, they prefer to cultivate commercial crops like cardamom, pepper, nutmeg, etc., for which their district is famous. Even forest dwelling sections among them have developed ingenious methods of selecting from individual cardamom plants which are high yielding, and multiplying them by vegetative propagation. Even though many of them have lost their lands which have been grabbed by “settlers”, some still retain enough and produce valuable croups; there are many Muthuvan families which may be considered affluent in comparison with their non-tribal neighbours with small holdings.
Hunting

December to March was the traditional hunting period. The hunting party would consist of about five to ten members. They hunted the deer, the Nilgiri tahr, monkeys, jungle fowl, and squirrels. The flesh would be divided equally after the carcass was dehaired by singeing over a fire. The liver, palms and feet of black monkeys were cut into small pieces, skewered and roasted. It was then offered on a leaf plate to the ancestor who went in quest of food and lived by the spoils of the chase, may we be blessed with the same luck! If I am lucky, I shall offer you a share of the spoils before they are tasted by any one else". The slices were then divided equally among those present\textsuperscript{19}.

These are only fond memories now; the black monkeys are protected animals; most of the area is one sort of wildlife reserve or another; the animal poachers, smugglers and "settlers" of all description get to the surviving animals first! They used to and continue, at a pinch, even now, to trap small animals like rats, squirrels, and porcupine by using different types of snares\textsuperscript{20}. They used three types of snares; a triangular snare consisted of a bamboo base, extended to form a bow. The side nearest to is doubled and a noose passed through it in such a way that any animal or bird getting into the triangle releases the third side and is caught between it and the double side.
Different techniques of fishing were used. The fishing trap is made of bamboo splits. The rod and line is popular. Fishing by poisoning the water with vegetable matter (powdered Curcuma augustifolia is the usual material) was practiced. Learning from the “settlers”, they nowadays set off underwater explosions with country made crackers, which throw up a lot of matter including, may be, some fish also.

Collection of Minor Forest Produce

This is the most important activity of the forest dwelling settlements. They collect ginger, turmeric, kunkiliam (resin of Canarium strictum), ciyyakka (pod of Acacia concinna), mattlepil (exudates of Ailanthus malabaricum), honey and beeswax. In the past, the right of collection had been auctioned out to contractors, who traded with the Muthuvan, as well as other tribal communities who knew the forests and the techniques of collection. Now-a-days, the Girijan Service Co-operative Society has been given this right.

Unlike the other communities, the Muthuvan were not expert free climbers but they could distinguish among many varieties of honey, according to the season and the flowers from which the bees had foraged. The most highly valued honey was that collected by the smaller bees from the Kurinchi (Strobilanthes spp), which flowers gregariously in the epics of
the post Sangam age. The honey is somewhat blue in colour and has a distinctive flavour.

Wild cardamom (Elataria cardamomum) is the item which yields the maximum income to the Muthuvan families. Under convention, the forest department had allowed the communities to collect the wild cardamom growing in the areas allocated to each, on a “permanent” basis. By observation and experimentation, the Muthuvan vegetative propagated culms from high yielding individual plants, and thus raised the productivity as well as availability of the commodity. Prior to 1975, traders from Tamil Nadu used to take over the entire produce, and exchange all sorts of items including transistor radios. Being ignorant, the Muthavan were made to believe that the value of items given to them was greater than that of the cardamom, thus keeping them perpetually in a “debt trap”. During the “Emergency” imposed then, the Department prevented the access to the forest of the traders. The Girijan Cooperative Society undertook the monopoly sale of the cardamom collected by the tribal communities. Value realisation immediately improved, and many Muthuvan families became affluent. Now, even though the efficiency of the Society has suffered a set back, and it has lost its monopoly hold, the Muthuvan know the value of the crop, and are not easily cheated. Several trade in the
cardamom directly in the auction markets. Many have accumulated bank savings and assets including gold ornaments.

They used to keep buffaloes, which they grazed on the mountain pastures. A few had taken up milk production with the cows supplied to them by the Indo Swiss cattle development project. During the initial period when the guidance and assistance of the project authorities was immediately available, the scheme worked well, but later on, there was a tapering off. Families also keep fowls; they generally keep the eggs for hatching and sell the birds.

**Economic activities of the Pulayas and Eravallas**

The Pulayas were formerly food gatherers and hunters, subsisting on slash and burn cultivation. They used to cultivate ragi, milets and red gram. The jungle clearing would be in March, April, and the seeds broadcast in April-May. Each individual family would mark off the area cultivated by it with a stone or wood marked boundary. The headman and his assistant would get the free services of the community for jungle clearing and broadcasting on the plots allotted to them, but harvest was done individually. The women would weed the area occasionally with a *kothkole* (a digging stick) or a *kalakothu* (a small hoe). After the harvest, they would sacrifice a fowl to the sylvan deities.
Nowadays, hunting is strictly and totally prohibited; collection of minor forest produce including their own subsistence items like roots and tubers strictly curtailed; shifting cultivation is put down severely. Their access to resources is thus virtually nil. They have been compelled to depend solely on casual labour engagement, either under the Forest Department or under the non-tribal agriculturists. The Pulayas were dependent on the Vellala (agricultural community) cultivators. They had to do all the agricultural operations in the fields, owned by the Vellala, near the forests and got a fifth of the produce after harvest in return. Nowadays, they are landless and subsist on farm and forest labour.

The Eravallas used to be bonded labour attached to the farmers in the neighbourhood, who used to make customary gifts to them. In early times, during the harvest festival in the village temple of their landlords, every male member in the Eravalla community gets from his landlord two vaisties and every woman gets a saree (potavai). During the Onam a small quantity of gingili and coconut oil are also given. The landlords partly defray their marriage and funeral expenses by a grant of a few rupees worth of paddy, some salt and chillies. Sometimes they agree to work for twenty vallams (measure) a year. Sometimes, to improve their condition, they borrow some money from their landlords and purchase a clearing a portion of the forest belonging to their masters. They raise some crops and save
something to pay off the debt. Should they be so unfortunate as to fail in
the undertaking, they willingly mortgage themselves to their masters or to
some other person. Women never surrender themselves to work in a state
of bondage, but are independent day labourers.

Now-a-days, with the implementation of land reforms, the old
feudal ties have broken down. Bonded labour is illegal, though some sort
of informal bondage is still in vogue. They have become landless is still in
vogue. They have become landless agricultural labour, many owning the
kudikidappu (homestead) plots. In addition to the agricultural wages they
earn, they cultivate their homestead plots with vegetables and fruit crops.

They used to be skilful hunters and collections of minor forest
produce. They would go hunting in a group of ten or fifteen, armed with
bows and arrows and nets to trap small animals. It is reported that they
were so skilful that they could bring down flying birds with their arrows\(^30\). The catch used to be equally divided among them. Now of course, with the
denudation of the forests and the strict implementation of forest laws in
the remaining forested areas, these occupations are no longer feasible. Only
a portion of the root of particular plant is taken out for consumption. This
practice is unique from conservation point of view. According to the 1981
Census 90.55% were agricultural labour, 5.95% were engaged in forestry
related occupations, 2.01% cultivators and 1.49% in other occupations\(^31\).
Household & Other Equipments

In former times, the material culture was totally determined by the availability of forest produce. Hence their utensils consisted of items formed from bamboo, supplemented by a few earthen wares obtained from the local markets. Drinking water drawn from the streams and rivulets used to be kept in balance cylinders which they would carry with them when out in the forests. According to Ehrenfels, the Kadar used to cook food in bamboo cylinders and preserve the food in them. Even now, bamboo cylinders are used for keeping honey, oil etc., But a change in the dietary patterns necessitated the acquisition of aluminum vessels for boiling and frying food, as the items now include tea, rice etc., They weave kora (grass) mat which they use to sleep on, using a special type of needle for this purpose.

The tools used for food gathering include the digging sticks. Korakollu is a long digging stick with a pointed end, whereas parakolu is also long, but with an iron blade fitted at one end. These are even now used for digging out roots and tubers from the forest. The vettukathi is a chopper with a long and curved iron blade fitted to a wooden handle. An iron ring fastens and connects it to a handle. It is the Kadar’s constant companion, being a weapon in addition to being an implement. A person’s vettukathi is carried with him to the grave, as it is believed that it protects the soul of the
deceased on its journey to the other world. The *pichathy* is a kitchen knife with a long blade and a short wooden handle. The *kaikodali* is an ordinary handy axe with an iron cutting edge about six inches long, fitted to a short wooden handle. It is of immense use for cutting down branches of trees as well as, more importantly, the collection of honey. The *kulumbu* is a pipe and is the musical instrument used during their dances. The *chenda* is a drum, used also for ritual ceremonies. Earthen pots were used by the Muthuvas for the preparation of food; bamboo tubes for storage and for carrying water and liquids. Leaves served as plates. These have been replaced, except in the remotest settlements, by the usual aluminum and brass vessels. Bows and arrows made of bamboo and reeds respectively are the chief weapons used by the Muthuvas and also the Eravallas. The bill hook, hoe and the axe are the common implements used by the Pulayas.
References - Chapter - 4

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