

KANI TRIBE'S PROTECTION, STEWARDSHIP AND STRUGGLES; IMPLEMENTING CATHOLIC INTEGRAL ECOLOGY IN THE WESTERN GHATS, KERALA, INDIA

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Abstract

The Kani tribe, residing in the Western Ghats of Kerala, India, offers invaluable insights into ecological harmony. Studying their customs and traditions can inspire humanity to live more sustainably. Their way of life reflects the principles outlined in Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which emphasises environmental stewardship. This bridges the Catholic Church and the Kani community, demonstrating the universality of *Laudato Si'* message. This study aimed at the Kani Tribe's Ecological Wisdom for a Sustainable Future of Humanity.

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However, the Kani people face modern-day challenges. Despite their rich knowledge of survival, younger generations are losing touch with their cultural heritage. Can governments effectively address these issues? Political agendas often prioritise exploitation and profit, raising concerns about their commitment. In this context, the Catholic Church can play a crucial role. *Laudato Si'* can be a powerful tool to support the Kani people in preserving their identity and ecological wisdom, benefiting themselves and the entire world. The Kani tribe is a precious flower in the garden of human civilisation. This research, based on scientific surveys and observations, aims to explore the Kani tribe's contemporary struggles and the valuable lessons they offer for a more sustainable future. It attempts to capture the essence of their unique way of life.

Key Words: Kani Tribe, **Agasthyavanam**, Cultural Patency, **Western Ghats**, **Self Determination**, *Trichopus Zeylanicus*, *Vrikṣapūjā*, Kani Autonomy.

Introduction

During my tenure as an Assistant Parish Priest in St. George Forane Church, Amboori, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India, I had the unique opportunity to interact with the Kani tribe residing in the Western Ghats of Kerala. The *Agasthyavanam* is the mother house of the Kani people.¹ *Agasthyavanam* is known for its floral diversity and is a part of the Western Ghats. The Kani invited me to their religious celebrations in the *Kunnathumala* region, where they are coming for the festival in March, "*Shivarathri*" (The Great Night of Lord Shiva)². Talking to some of their religious leaders helped me better understand their profound ideas about God and life. These experiences ignited my passion to delve deeper into the Kani world, precisely their ecological attitudes and the distinct theological and philosophical framework that shapes their relationship with nature. This paper attempts to document my scientific survey and explore the intricacies of the Kani tribe's unique perspective on ecology, offering insights valuable to the theological and scientific communities for a more nuanced understanding of human-environment interactions. The primary data

¹Arun Vijayan, Liju VB, "Traditional Remedies of Kani tribes of Kottoor reserve forest Agasthyavanam Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala." *Journal of Traditional Knowledge*. 6(4) (2007): 589.

²Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Maha Shivaratri," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Maha-shivaratri>. Accessed 8 March 2024.

sources for this study are face-to-face surveys and interviews. An extensive field survey was conducted to investigate relevant issues. The research methodology employed questionnaires, interviews, interactions, discussions, and case studies to ensure a well-rounded perspective. Information from local newspapers, journals, and television news provided additional context. The Primary location of my case study is Amboori³ Panchayathu, *Thodumala*⁴ Ward, Kerala, India.

Amazonian Synod: A Revelation

In 2019, from October 6 to 27, the synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region gathered in Rome. It was a theological and Philosophical revelation for the Church about tribal wisdom and theology.⁵ Pope Francis envisioned through this synod, an integral ecology in the context of Amazon region. It motivates new evangelisation methods by protecting and respecting Indigenous people in the Amazon and the Church's role as a model in this region. Here comes the context of Kani tribals in Kerala, India, and tribal people in the Amazon region, facing the same challenges. "Normally, small streams in the forest *kunnathumala*, *puravimala*, and *chakkapara* do not dry. It was like breast milk for us," Yashodhara Kani, a 52-year-old kani woman from *Thodumala* ward, said. "But now those living streams are drying up, and we are in danger. The climate is fast changing. We do not know how to call it. But it is real."⁶ These words connect the Amazon to the Western Ghats of India. For example, issues like land rights, resource exploitation by outsiders, and the struggle for cultural preservation are real in the Western Ghats. The Amazonian Synod's focus on protecting tribals' environment can be applied in the Indian context.

³Amboori is a pristine and serene village on the outskirts of Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala, India, surrounded by hills and forests. Amboori is situated in Kattakkada Taluk, 38 km southeast of the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram. https://village.kerala.gov.in/Office_websites/about_village.php?nm=328Amboori villageoffice. Accessed on 8 March 2024.

⁴Amboori Panchayathu, Ward 3 is called *Thodumala* ward in which Kani Tribal People live.

⁵Marcelo Barros, "The Synod for the Amazon," *International Journal on Human Rights*, 16 (29) (2019):134.

⁶Yashodhara Kani, (a Daily Wager from *Thodumala*), in discussion with Fr. Rajeev Joseph, Palakkacherry assisted by Jijin Varghese, Palakkattu, Amboori. Thiruvananthapuram. India. March 2024.

A Miraculous Finding

In December 1987, scientists studying traditional medicine (Ayurveda) from Thiruvananthapuram, led by their coordinator, trekked through the high mountains of the Agasthyar hills. They visited the Kani tribe scattered in small communities throughout the area. A few Kani tribe men accompanied the team as guides. While climbing some of the steep mountains of Agsthyar Hills, most of the AICRPE (The All India Coordinated Research Project of Ethnobiology) team members became exhausted and sometimes felt extreme fatigue. To the pleasant surprise of the team members, the Kani tribe men accompanying the team were found munching in between some small blackish fruits.⁷ At one instance, one of the Kani young men offered a few of those same fruits to the team and told them that if they ate them, they could also remain as agile as they were. Most of the team members ate those fruits after removing their leathery skin. It tasted like almonds and had a pleasant flavour. It gave them a sudden flush of great energy and strength. They could, after that, do the trekking with added energy and enthusiasm. After experiencing the effect of those curious-looking fruits, the team inquired about the fruit. The name of the plant was *Arogyapacha*.⁸ The Kani men were initially very reluctant to reveal the identity of the fruit. They said it is sacred information that cannot be disclosed to outsiders. They said that using this plant and many other traditional herbal practices followed by them constitute an integral part of their sacred knowledge system.⁹ It was revealed to their great ancestors directly by *Saint Agasthya Muni* – the mythical ancient saint who founded the Siddha system of Medicine, and the *Agasthyavanam*, named after him, was his abode.

The Controversy

The story of *Jeevani*, a medicine derived from the Kani tribe's *Arogyapacha* plant, reveals the immense value of ecological wisdom held by Indigenous communities. The *Jeevani* Medicine derived from tribal wisdom was prepared, marketed, and commercialised by some

⁷Pushpangadan, P., S. Rajasekharan, P. K. Ratheshkumar, C. R. Jawahar, V. V. Nair, N. Lakshmi, and L. S. Amma, "Arogyapacha' (Trichopus Zeylanicus Gaerin), the 'Ginseng' of Kani Tribes of Agasthyar Hills (Kerala) for Ever Green Health and Vitality," *Ancient Science of Life* 8 (1) (1988): 15. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22557622/>.

⁸Trichopus Zeylanicus' is the scientific name of medicinal plant locally known as "Arogyapacha" in Kani tribal Area.

⁹Pushpangadan, "Arogyapacha' (Trichopus Zeylanicus Gaerin), the 'Ginseng' of Kani Tribes of Agasthyar Hills (Kerala) for Ever Green Health and Vitality."

agencies. However, it sparked deep questions about Kani autonomy and Cultural patency in medicine. The Kanis have utilised *Arogyapacha* for its medicinal properties for generations, demonstrating their deep understanding of the local ecosystem and its potential benefits. This traditional knowledge, often passed down through oral traditions, forms a unique repository of ecological wisdom. The controversy surrounding *Jeevani's* patenting highlights the importance of protecting and respecting this indigenous knowledge. While scientific advancements can lead to valuable products like *Jeevani*, ethical concerns arise when communities are not adequately consulted and recognised for their contributions. The controversy sparked my interest in conducting research into the Kani tribe. I was driven by the desire to understand not just the scientific potential of their knowledge but also to investigate the ethical considerations surrounding its utilisation. This research journey underscores the importance of appreciating and safeguarding the ecological wisdom enshrined in Indigenous communities as we strive towards sustainable development.¹⁰

1. Historical Context

The Kanis follow a unique and multifaceted lifestyle. In their time, the British had colonised the natural wealth of the Kani ancestral domain, which the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu managed as internal colonies.¹¹ With the creation of the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, their ancestral domain was divided. The states pushed them further to the periphery of smaller administrative units: the districts, taluks and Panchayaths.¹² The Kani primarily reside in the Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam districts of Kerala and inhabit the Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts of Tamil Nadu. Their estimated population is around 25,000, with over three-quarters residing in

¹⁰Tanya Saraswat, *The Kani tribe Case Study*. "Case for the Kani Tribe: Intellectual Property." Accessed March 9, 2024. <https://www.khuranaandkhurana.com/2023/06/14/the-kani-tribe-case-study/>.

¹¹The Attingal Princely rulers recognised large part of Kani ancestral domain in olden times. Marthandavarma Maharaja allotted 36,000 acres through a Royal Neetu (Royal Order) to 21 prominent Kani families in the eighteenth century. Of these, 25,954 acres and 82 15909 acres are in Thiruvananthapuram, and 10,045 are in Kanyakumari districts. The Indian state refuses to recognise it.

¹²Bijoy C.R, "Access and Benefit Sharing from the Indigenous Peoples' Perspective: The TBGRI-Kani 'Model,'" *Law, Environment and Development Journal* 3 (1): (2007) 1.

Kerala and the remaining population living in Tamil Nadu.¹³ Each settlement is led by an elder known as the “*Kanimooppan*” or “*Moottukani*.” Traditionally, the *Moottukani* combined the roles of the lawgiver, protector and dispenser of justice, physician and priest.¹⁴ This individual plays a vital role in advising and guiding the community towards a better life. They offer counsel and, when necessary, administer corrective measures to address wrongdoing. Additionally, the “*Moottukani*” presided over all gatherings within the settlement. However, due to external cultural influences, the term “*Moottukani*” is no longer commonly used within the tribe.

1.1. Traditional Dwellings

Traditionally, the Kani resided in small, scattered settlements within the forest. The availability of fresh water for drinking and daily use primarily determined the location of each settlement. Most of their houses are built with clay, bricks and forest wood.¹⁵ Bamboo served as the principal material for constructing their huts. Notably, these dwellings were typically positioned to face the east. It shows a deep reverence for the Sun as the chief light source.¹⁶ This orientation was considered essential for them. Within a settlement, each dwelling is located 100-500 m apart. Traditional houses are huts consisting of one room and a kitchen with roofs thatched with palm leaves and walls made of bamboo splits. The floor inside the huts is smeared with mud or left as loose soil.¹⁷ Some of their huts are elevated on wooden pillars to protect against wild animals. Additionally, in certain areas, they build dwellings within the branches of trees, specifically to avoid the dangers posed by elephants. These elevated structures were referred to as “*Erumadam*.”¹⁸ Despite this, huts with coconut leaf roofs can still

¹³Gordon, Raymond G. Grimes, Barbara F, eds. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, (Dallas: SIL International, 2005) 639.

¹⁴Anuradha, R. “Sharing with the Kanis a Case Study from Kerala, India” Accessed March 9, 2024. <https://www.cbd.int/financial/bensharing/india-kanis.pdf>.

¹⁵M.S Thangam, “Life and Livelihood of Kani Tribes in the Western Ghats of Tamilnadu,” *AGPE The Royal Gondwana Research Journal of History, Science, Economic Political and Social science*, 3(3) (2022): 142.

¹⁶A, B Saran, Gaya Pandey, Sun Worship in India: A Study of Deo Sun-Shrine, (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1992).

¹⁷B. Nandha, R. Srinivasan, “Cutaneous leishmaniasis: knowledge, attitude and practices of the inhabitants of the Kani forest tribal settlements of Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala, India,” *Health Education Research*, 29 (6) (2014): 1049-1057.

¹⁸Treehouse, called “*Erumadam*” in Malayalam, is a house built on the top of a tree, constructed with eco-friendly materials to protect itself from wild animals.

be found in some regions. The family pattern is nuclear in Nature, and they live in independent houses.¹⁹

1.2. The Kani Tribe's Deep Respect for Nature

The man who is formed out of dust is part of Nature.²⁰ His inevitable journey will reach back to dust. We can see a special attachment of Kani tribals to dust and earth. The Kanis deeply revere Nature, mainly the forest rocks and trees. Their way of life is deeply intertwined with the forest, leading them to view it as a sacred entity worthy of devotion. This reverence manifests in a unique cultural practice called "*Vrikṣapūjā*" (meaning "tree worship"). For example, the sacred Banyan tree is worshipped all over India.²¹ This deep respect for Nature shows their concept of God. During *Vrikṣapūjā*, the Kani adorn the base of trees with flowers. They spend time beneath the trees, chanting mantras and offering prayers. This practice stems from their firm belief that showing respect and appreciation for the forest, including its trees and rocks, brings good fortune into their lives.²² Subhadra Kani, a respected spiritual leader in *Thodumala* ward, explained their nighttime religious practices, "We hold ceremonies at night, lighting oil lamps. We revere snakes and reptiles as part of our faith. Our offerings to the divine include red silk fabric, fruits, stones, and recognition of the importance of snakes, trees, and reptiles in our environment. In *Thodumala* ward, we protect these creatures and even leave them food." The Kani people live in harmony with nature and its creatures.

A deep respect for Nature leads to sustainable resource usage. I observed their sustainable resource use during a visit to a Kani family in the *Chakkapara* region of Amboori. After receiving hospitality, I took note of an elder selectively harvest only a small portion of ripened plantains, leaving the majority on the plant. When asked, he exposed his philosophy of *taking only what is necessary for survival*. He considered the dietary needs of birds, squirrels, and other wildlife dependent on the same resource. This incident demonstrates the Kanis

¹⁹R.K. Bushra Beegom, "Current Living Pattern of Tribal Community: A Study of Kanikkars, Trivandrum, India," *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 9 (2021-2022): 328.

²⁰Genesis 2:7

²¹Sankar Sen Gupta, ed., *Tree Symbol worship in India: A new survey of a pattern of folks-religion*, (Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1965), VII.

²²Jijin Varghese, (a Research Student from *Thodumala*), in discussion with Fr. Rajeev Joseph, Palakkacherry, Amboori. Thiruvananthapuram. India. February 2024.

deep ecological understanding, and their practice aligns with the principles outlined in *Laudato Si'*. That is the use of our environment to express our identity.²³ Their *selective harvesting*²⁴ exhibits a balanced approach to resource use, exemplifying a stewardship model that prioritises the well-being of the entire ecosystem. This resonates with the life of Francis of Assisi, who emphasised the interconnectedness of all living beings. This firsthand account provides valuable insight into the Kani Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) systems. It highlights the potential for the Kani tribe to offer sustainable resource management models that could inform modern conservation practices.

1.3. Dress Habits

In the beginning, they used to wear the leaves and bark of the trees. Gradually, they began to make cloths from cotton thread.²⁵ The Kani, residing in the Western Ghats of India, have witnessed changes in their traditional dress over time. Historically, Kani men wore a “*Meethar*,” similar to the “*Muthur*” worn in South India. Women wear a single cloth called a “*dothi*” or “*Lungi*” and cover their chest with solely long hair.²⁶ Today, their dress code reflects the influence of neighbouring regions. Older Kani women often wear a combination of *dothis*, blouses, and towels, while men typically wear dhotis and shirts. Younger Kani women primarily choose sarees and blouses, following the traditional trends of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. This shift highlights the evolving nature of cultural expression and the influence of external factors on conventional practices.

1.4. Traditional Occupations

Historically, the Kani people were self-sufficient, practising a blend of agriculture, raising livestock (cows, goats, chickens, dogs, and cats), and collecting valuable forest products (honey, cardamom, frankincense, ginger, and turmeric) for both personal use and trade. They showcased their skill in crafting “*Vatti*”²⁷

²³Francis, Pope, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), 147.

²⁴Taking the forest resources, what is needed for their survival and leaving the remaining for other animals.

²⁵M.S Thangam, “Life and Livelyhood of Kani Tribes in the Western Ghats of Tamilnadu,” *AGPE The Royal Gondwana Research Journal of History, Science, Economic Political and Social science*, 3(3) (2022): 142.

²⁶T.D Sreeja, ed. *Chetham (Sound); Preparation of a Handbook for Kani Language of Kanikkar Community in Kerala State*, (Thiruvananthapuram: KIRTADS Kerala, 2019), 34.

²⁷Malayalam (Language of Kerala state) word for a Container that is usually woven and has handles.

vessels and pots from bamboo bark, stitching clothes, and using tools like “*Ottal*”²⁸ and hooks for fishing, demonstrating their resourcefulness and adaptation to their forest environment. The Kani tribe collected cane and supplied it to nearby people. They are constantly engaged in making baskets and mats. They have a seasonal collection of minor non-timber forest products like bee wax, medicinal plants, gums, etc.²⁹ “In our community, we plant tapioca on land for one season and then plant rice the next season. We never grow the same crop in the same place, year after year,” explained Yashodhara Kani, a 52-year-old Kani woman from *Thodumala* ward.³⁰ The Kanis enduring land use tradition reflects their ancestral agricultural methods **and** strong attachment to their historical way of life.

1.5. Dietary-Practices

Traditionally, the Kani people mostly eat what they can find in the forest, connecting their diet closely to their environment. Rajamma Kanikkari, a 60-year-old Kani woman, described their traditional diet, “We eat elephant yam, taro root, and jackfruit. For drinking water, we boil it and add cinnamon bark for flavour. We also boil water with tea leaves and drink it daily, without any sugar.”³¹ They collect roots, wild grains and fruits and eat them. ³²They rely on rice, bananas, yams, beans, and other vegetables. Additionally, they cultivate edible crops like tapioca and millet alongside cash crops, including pepper, coconut, areca nut, and cashew nut.³³ Kanis are always concerned about other people. “They once a month visit my shop and gift me their

²⁸It is the Malayalam word for traditional Bamboo Fish Trap.

²⁹Arun Vijayan, Liju VB, “Traditional Remedies of Kani tribes of Kottoor reserve forest Agasthyavanam Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala,” *Journal of Traditional Knowledge*. 6(4) (2007): 589.

³⁰Yashodhara Kani, (a Daily Wager from *Thodumala*), in discussion with Fr. Rajeev Joseph, Palakkacherry assisted by Jijin Varghese, Palakkattu, Amboori, Thiruvananthapuram, India, March 2024.

³¹Rajamma Kanikkari (a tribal teacher from *Thodumala*), in discussion with Fr. Rajeev Joseph, Palakkacherry, assisted by Jijin Varghese, Palakkattu, Amboori, Thiruvananthapuram, India, March 2024.

³²M.S Thangam, “Life and Livelyhood of Kani Tribes in the Western Ghats of Tamilnadu,” *AGPE The Royal Gondwana Research Journal of History, Science, Economic Political and Social science*, 3(3) (2022): 143.

³³M. Ayyanar, S. Ignacimuthu, “Traditional Knowledge of Kani in Kouthalai of Tirunelveli hills, Tamil Nadu, India,” *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 102 (2005): 247.

food items like Yams and Tapioca”, said Anitha Benet *Thodumala*.³⁴ Root vegetables are likely a big part of their diet, providing energy. They also carefully choose and eat edible mushrooms for their protein content. Honey, a natural sweetener, is another energy source in their diet. The Kani may also hunt deer, wild boar, and small animals for meat. They supplement their diet by gathering roots and tubers like Tapioca³⁵ and Kachil³⁶ in nearby forests. Their staple food is root tubers such as *Neduvan*, *Noora* and *Kavala* from the forest, and they also consume rice. Nowadays, the forest department is conducting the “Food from Forest Festival” to promote and conserve the Kani tribe’s Nature-Based food system.³⁷ The Church can collaborate with the Government and NGOs to adapt and learn from the Kani tribe about the value of a Nature-Based food system. The Church can add these types of workshops on ecological conversion to its Ecological Education ministry.³⁸

1.6. UN Recognition

The Healing tradition of the Kani tribe has secured world recognition. At the 2002 United Nations-sponsored World Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, the UN’s First annual Equator Initiative Prize (Thirty thousand US dollars) was awarded to the Kerala Tribal Ethnomedicine Project.³⁹ This project centred on the plant *Arogya Pacha* (meaning “healthy green” or “the plant that can provide evergreen health”).⁴⁰ This event could capture international attention and appreciation for the unique healing practices of the Kani tribe. The Kanis, known for their deep connection to the *Agasthyavanam* forests,

³⁴Anitha Benet (a non-Kani shopkeeper from *Thodumala*), in discussion with Fr. Rajeev Joseph, Palakkacherry, Amboori, Thiruvananthapuram, India, March 2024.

³⁵It’s scientific name is *Manihot Esculenta*, commonly called Cassava or Tapioca.

³⁶It’s scientific name is *Dioscorea oppositifolia*, commonly called Wild Yam.

³⁷Forest Plus 2.0, Helping Kerala’s Kan Tribe Conserve Their Nature-Based Food System, India’s Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change and the United States Agency for International Development. <https://medium.com/@forestplus2.0/helping-keralas-kani-tribe- conserve-their-nature-based-food-system-f648acbc35c2>. Accessed on March 04, 2024.

³⁸Francis, Pope, *Laudato Si’* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), 221.

³⁹M. Suchitra, The Kani Learning: How benefit-sharing between a research institute and the Kani tribe went awry <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/the-kani-learning-39208>. Accessed March 6, 2024.

⁴⁰Eric Miller, Murugan Narayanan Kani, “Cultivating a Forest Language: Development ideas for Kani Tribal People of Tamil Nadu’s Kanniyakumari District, In Proceedings of the First All India Conference of the Kanniyakumari Academy of Arts and Sciences (KAAS),” (Nagercoil: KAAS, 2004) 2.

historically followed a rich tradition of indigenous medicine. They utilised medicinal plants in this biodiversity hotspot to improve their immune systems and treat various ailments. *Muttookanis* are popular for treating severe diseases, even among civilised populations. They acquire the knowledge of treatment procedures from their ancestors⁴¹ and are dedicated healers who act as custodians of this ancient wisdom.

2. Preserving and Integrating Knowledge

Lakshmikutty, a 2018 Padma Shri awardee,⁴² exemplifies the wealth of knowledge held by many Kani healers. Their unwavering dedication to their practice is a source of inspiration and underscores the importance of safeguarding these age-old traditions. Recognising the immense potential of this wisdom, organisations like KIRTADS⁴³ are actively supporting the Kani healers by providing them with additional resources and training opportunities, ensuring this valuable knowledge continues to thrive and benefit future generations. Kani healing practices have some challenges and considerations. While some may view the confidential nature of Kani medicine with suspicion, it is crucial to acknowledge the cultural importance of their practices and respect their right to maintain traditional knowledge systems. The Kani healing traditions represent a unique and valuable contribution to human health and well-being. By fostering collaboration and respecting cultural sensitivities, we can preserve this knowledge.

2.1. Customs Related to Birth

Among the Kanis, there existed systematic cultural practices related to the birth of a child. Women were treated meticulously throughout their pregnancy, as described in C.K. Karunakaran's 1989 book,

⁴¹Arun Vijayan, Liju V.B, "Traditional Remedies of Kani tribes of Kottoor reserve forest Agasthyavanam Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala," *Journal of Traditional Knowledge* 6(4) (2007): 589.

⁴²Lakshmikutty (born in India, Kerala. 1943) is a Kani tribal woman from the Kallar forest area in Thiruvananthapuram District. She has received India's fourth highest civilian honour, *Padma Shri*, for her breakthrough in practising traditional medicine to treat People affected by Poisonous bites.

⁴³The Kerala Institute for Research, Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (KIRTADS) is a government **organisation** in the Indian state of Kerala, established in 1972. It works towards uplifting **scheduled castes and tribes**, which are socially and economically disadvantaged groups in India.

"Kanikkar."⁴⁴ For the first five months of pregnancy, a Kani woman could travel freely, but afterwards, she was expected to remain home. This demonstrates the tribe's commitment to protecting both mother and child. From the perspective of *Laudato Si'*, respect for life is respect for Nature. It begins with family.⁴⁵ Under the leadership of the *Plathi* (tribal physician), necessary arrangements were made to ensure a smooth delivery. In the seventh month, a special ceremony called "*Thudichatt*" would involve unique songs and rituals. Finally, the "*Parachuvettuka*" and "*Uzhinjupikdikkuka*" ceremonies would be performed for the expectant mother in the ninth month.⁴⁶ The Kanis pay special attention to the health of pregnant women as the carrier of future generations.

2.2. During and After Delivery

At the onset of labour, the pregnant woman is moved to the "*Pettupura*."⁴⁷ She receives an Ayurvedic bath and assistance during childbirth. On the 27th day after birth, the grandmother or mother ties a "*Karinool*" black thread around the baby's waist. An elder family member examines the child's astrological details, and a "*Pongala*" is performed before sunrise. Fragrant frankincense smoke wafted over the child, and ash was applied to their forehead.⁴⁸ The elder whispers the child's name into their ear - typically the names of deities or hill gods. The naming ceremony and the child's first solid food are done together, offering "*Pongala choru*" (rice prepared in a special pot) with salt and chilli. Childless couples within the tribe may adopt children with the full consent of their physical parents. The adopted children must be relatives of the Kani couple. The Kanis still stick to these sacred practices.

⁴⁴ Karunakaran C.K, *Kanikkar*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Bhasha Institute, 1989)

⁴⁵ Francis, Pope. *Laudato Si'*, (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), 213.

⁴⁶ T.D Sreeja, ed. *Chetham (Sound); Preparation of a Handbook for Kani Language of Kanikkar Community in Kerala State*, (Thiruvananthapuram: KIRTADS Kerala, 2019), 36.

⁴⁷ A *Pettupura* is a specially constructed hut used for childbirth. These structures have roofs made of leaves and incorporate a bed prepared with medicinal Ayurvedic leaves.

⁴⁸ It is a process of contacting the child with earth elements. (Fragrant smell and Ashes)

3. Eco-Theological Dimensions

The Kani tribe in Kerala, India, holds a unique worldview deeply rooted in their connection to the forests of the *Agasthyavanam* hills and their traditional way of life. Here are some key aspects of their vision.

3.1. Deep Connection to Nature:

The Kani view the forest as their home, provider, and spiritual space. They understand its flora and fauna intimately, using their knowledge for sustenance, medicine, and cultural practices. This connection influences their worldview, promoting values of respect, sustainability, and interdependence with Nature. The Kani worldview is holistic. They think in terms of deep respect for Nature as a divine reality. It can be considered and interpreted in the light of *Laudato Si'* as a *Non-Anthropocentric World view*.⁴⁹ They uphold the unique view that all beings are endowed with intrinsic value. They are always thinking about other plants and animals. "Even though they may look physically lean and thin, the Kanis are healthy and often live longer. This is because they live close to the rich forest, which has clean air, and they eat food and drink water that hasn't been polluted." Anitha Benet said in her interview.⁵⁰ They have a deep spiritual and cultural connection to the forests of the *Agasthyavanam*. Their way of life, traditions, and knowledge systems are all intricately intertwined with the natural environment. Kanis live together in small communities. They live with Nature in the form of a strong community. This community is deeply linked to a forest, a haven for wildlife, and is made of moist deciduous trees, grasslands, creeks, and streams and a haven for wildlife.⁵¹

3.2. *Laudato Si'* Principle of Interconnectedness

The Kanis embody and exemplify a strong sense of community and love. Their deep respect for one another is evident in their 16-day death rituals, where relatives travel from afar to participate in prayers and to

⁴⁹Van den Heuvel, Steven C. "The Theocentric Perspective of *Laudato Si'*: A Critical Discussion", *Philosophia Reformata* 83, 1 (2018): 51, <https://doi.org/10.1163/23528230-08301004>

⁵⁰Anitha Benet (a non-Kani shopkeeper from *Thodumala*), in discussion with Fr. Rajeev Joseph, Palakkacherry, Amboori, Thiruvananthapuram, India, March 2024.

⁵¹B. Nandha, R. Srinivasan, "Cutaneous leishmaniasis: knowledge, attitude and practices of the inhabitants of the Kani forest tribal settlements of Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala, India," *Health Education Research*, 29 (6) (2014): 1050.

pay homage to their deceased.⁵² This same compassion extends to the animal kingdom. During a visit to *Kunnathumala*, I came across a hidden spring within the forest.⁵³ There, I noticed animal footprints and some signs of water scarcity. The Kani's concern was evident as they spoke of the limited water sources and the animals' struggle to survive in the dry forest. Their ability to empathise with and feel the pain of other creatures demonstrates their profound connection with Nature.⁵⁴ Their genuine love for non-human animals is aligned with Francis Asissi's extension of love for non-human animals.⁵⁵ The deep concern for struggling animals during a water shortage at *Kunnathumala* reflects their profound connection with Nature and each other. The nomadic Kanis have shifted towards a more settled life, yet community remains central to their social structure. They share resources, responsibilities, and decision-making through a cooperative system led by the *Moottukani*. This fosters interdependence and collective well-being within the tribe.

3.3. Principle of Identification

Benet, a social worker living with the Kanis in Amboori, *Thodumala* ward, was visiting a friend in the *Meenmutty* area near *Agasthyavanam*. He felt very hungry when he came across a group of Kani men. A kind elder offered him a delicious fish curry made with fresh fish. Benet enjoyed it so much that he ate more than usual. **Unfortunately, he overate and started feeling nauseous and dizzy.** He found a spot to rest by the river bank near the Kani men, who were still fishing. The older Kani man noticed Benet wasn't feeling well and asked him what went wrong. Benet narrated his unfortunate episode. **Then, the elder Kani man explained that overeating fish can sometimes cause "Meenchurukku,"⁵⁶ which means feeling sick after overeating fish.** The Kanis quickly entered the forest and returned with a plant root. They gave it to Benet and asked him to chew it. The root had a milky taste. **Benet's nausea and dizziness disappeared within fifteen**

⁵²T.D Sreeja, ed. *Chetham (Sound); Preparation of a Handbook for Kani Language of Kanikkar Community in Kerala State*. (Thiruvananthapuram: KIRTADS Kerala, 2019), 39.

⁵³Joseph, Rajeev Palakkacherry, *Survey of Drinking Water Scarcity in Kani Areas of Kunnathumala - A Kani Settlement in Thodumala Ward (Near Neyyar Dam Water Reserve)*, 15, October 2015.

⁵⁴Francis, Pope, *Laudato Si'*, (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015) a feeling of identification with the poor.

⁵⁵Anatoly Angelo R, "Laudato Si' on Non-Human Animals," *Journal of Moral Theology*, 6(2) (2017): 230.

⁵⁶A tendency to vomit after eating too much fish.

minutes, and he felt much better. They danced around him, happy to see him feeling well again. **It depicted their kindness and compassion.** When Benet was hungry, they gave him food. They helped him when he wasn't feeling good and shared their happiness. Their actions reflect the principle of *identification* espoused by *Laudato Si'*, which emphasises caring for each other and the environment. They cared for Benet's well-being and made him experience their sense of community.⁵⁷

3.4. Spiritual Beliefs

The Kani believe in spirits inhabiting the forests and influencing their lives. They strongly believe in the value of the soil where their ancestors were buried. Their traditional knowledge of medicinal plants, passed down through generations, is often intertwined with these beliefs. This spiritual dimension shapes their perception of health, healing, and balance in the natural world. The Kani contribution to biodiversity conservation and traditional knowledge is increasingly recognised. While challenges remain, initiatives like the *Kerala Kani Welfare Trust* and benefit-sharing agreements strive to ensure their rightful share in protecting their environment and sustaining their unique worldview. The Kani tribe's strong community spirit, evident in their respectful death rituals, shows their reverence for the afterlife.

3.5. Mal-Development

Modern Anthropocentrism gives priority to technical thought over reality.⁵⁸ This leads to Mal-development. When I visited some places in the *Puravimala* region of the Kani settlement, I came across many abandoned concrete houses. I asked my fellow Kani named Mani Kani, who guided my tour to the *Puravimala* area, the reason. He explained the unbearable heat within the concrete houses and the healthy ambience of the mud houses.⁵⁹ Natural habitats hold significant advantages for the Kani compared to government-made concrete buildings. Studies have shown that living close to Nature has numerous physical and mental health benefits. The fresh air, sunlight, and physical activity associated with forest life contribute to the well-being of the Kani. They were previously building houses

⁵⁷Benet Karikkuzhi (a non-Kani Ruber Famer from *Thodumala*), in discussion with Fr. Rajeev Joseph, Palakkacherry, Amboori, Thiruvananthapuram, India, March 2024.

⁵⁸Francis, Pope, *Laudato Si'*, (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), 115.

⁵⁹Joseph, Rajeev Palakkacherry, Survey of *Severe Poverty* in Kani Areas of Puravimala (Neyyar Dam Water Reserve; Mayam), 10 November. 2015.

with “*Eara or Veyila*.”⁶⁰ *Kodakkad* leaves were also used to construct houses. Even though the Government provided concrete houses, old tribesmen preferred to live in “*Earapera*” (House of Bamboo).⁶¹ They practice sustainable resource management and have a low environmental impact due to their close connection with Nature. Natural habitats have the dimension of cultural preservation. The Kani tribe's unique language, traditions, and ceremonies are deeply tied to their natural surroundings. Living in concrete buildings could run the risk of eroding these cultural elements, as their traditional practices become impractical or irrelevant in an urban setting.

3.6. Challenges

The tribal leaders always express their agony over the ecological imbalance in forest areas. R. Madhavan Kani, a senior leader, said that owing to ecological imbalance, the population of specific species such as monkeys, wild boars, and sambar deer have proliferated, destroying crops near the forest.⁶² Traditional Forest dwellers, such as those from the Kani community, had a rich repository of indigenous culture. However, owing to modernisation, westernisation, and the communication revolution, the rich culture may be relegated to the background.⁶³ Deforestation and encroachment upon their traditional lands⁶⁴ threaten their way of life. Access to healthcare, Education and other essential services can be limited in remote forest areas. Despite their remarkable resilience and ability to survive without modern amenities, they face significant socio-economic hardship, with most living in poverty. They face numerous contemporary problems that contribute to their helplessness and vulnerability. Without addressing the concerns of vulnerable populations, India's socio-economic

⁶⁰*Eara* means ‘*Bambusa Vulgaris*’, a large type of bamboo. About 8-9 leaves are arranged along each branch.

⁶¹R.K. Bushra Beegom, “Current Living Pattern of Tribal Community: A Study of Kanikkars, Trivandrum, India,” *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 9 (2021-2022): 333.

⁶²Kani Tribe of Western Ghats uses ‘Indigenous local knowledge’ to co-exist with nature, August 30, 2016. Times of India, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/madurai/kani-tribe-of-western-ghats-uses-indigenous-local-knowledge-to-co-exist-with-nature/articleshow/53920991.cms>

⁶³Kani Tribe of Western Ghats uses ‘Indigenous local knowledge’ to co-exist with nature, August 30, 2016. Times of India, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/madurai/kani-tribe-of-western-ghats-uses-indigenous-local-knowledge-to-co-exist-with-nature/articleshow/53920991.cms>

⁶⁴ Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2020), 15.

transformations will remain incomplete.⁶⁵ The Kanis, now live primarily in settled conditions under extreme poverty. Many rely on rationed rice for daily sustenance, often without timely meals, leading to health issues like ulcers. The inability to repay debts contributes to a tragic rate of suicide. Some elderly members live alone in their huts; their only income is a meagre government pension. Despite their ancestral ownership of the *Agastyamala* Hills, the Kani people lack official ownership documents. During British rule, they were given bronze land title certificates called "*Venkaḷam Pattayam*." Government officials collected these, promising replacements that have yet to materialise.⁶⁶ Finding solutions that address their challenges while respecting their connection to Nature is essential for their prosperity.

4. Medicinal Knowledge

The Kani people have a deep and rich understanding of medicinal plants and their uses. This knowledge, passed down through generations orally, has been their primary healthcare system for centuries. They have an extensive knowledge of plants and their medicinal properties. They have identified hundreds of species, understand their uses, the best ways to harvest and prepare them. This knowledge is passed down through generations, with specialists called "*Mooligai*" or "*Plathi*" acting as healers and teachers. These plant-based remedies treat ailments from common colds to severe ones. Importantly, the Kani connection to the forest goes beyond just using its resources, they also practice sustainable harvesting and conservation to ensure its continued health for future generations. They face a double threat to their unique knowledge. Firstly, with modernisation and changing lifestyles, younger generations are showing less interest in traditional medicine, putting this valuable heritage at risk of being lost. These tendencies lead to blurring what is distinctive about their origins and background, which is expected due to globalisation.⁶⁷ Secondly, instances of biopiracy and exploitation by companies and researchers who use their medicinal knowledge without fair compensation highlight the need for ethical collaboration

⁶⁵Narain J. P. "Health of tribal populations in India: How long can we afford to neglect?," *The Indian journal of medical research*, 149(3) (2019): 314. https://doi.org/10.4103/ijmr.IJMR_2079_18

⁶⁶M.S Thangam, "The Grievances, Issues and Challenges of the Kani Tribes in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu; Possible Solutions and Recommendations," *International Journal of Research Culture Society*, 06 (6) (2022): 1.

⁶⁷Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2020), 33.

and benefit-sharing mechanisms. Kani medicinal knowledge represents a unique and valuable contribution to ethnomedicine.

4.1. Healing Tradition

Kani healers begin training in childhood or adolescence under mothers, fathers, or other recognised healers within their family. After years of dedicated learning, the trainee undergoes a ceremony granting them the authority to apply specific treatments. These individuals are identified within their community as possessing **mystical healing power and the necessary training in medicinal plants.**⁶⁸ **Kani tribals have basic knowledge of medicinal plants** suitable for common ailments like coughs, colds, and minor injuries. **Older community members, even those not designated as traditional healers, often hold valuable knowledge of plant remedies.** Notably, healers tend to be **predominantly male** within the Kani tribe. The healers are getting training in hymns, which are called '*Chattu Pattu*.'⁶⁹ These hymns were chanted to aid in the process of health recovery.⁷⁰ It is a great inspirational element in *Kani Music therapy*.

4.2. Examples of plants

Deep-forest Kani tribals rely on medicinal plants for primary healthcare and treating various ailments. Beyond medicinal plants, they engage in the seasonal collection of honey, beeswax, and minor forest products. **Research has revealed that the Kani tribes of the Kouthalai⁷¹ region utilise 54 plant species belonging to 26 different families for medicinal purposes.** These plants encompass various growth forms, with 19 identified as herbs, 12 as shrubs, seven as small trees, six as large trees, and ten as climbers. The two most prevalent plant families used for medicinal purposes are *Asteraceae* and *Fabaceae*.⁷² **The Kani traditionally employ these plants to treat a wide range of ailments, including skin disorders, colds, fevers, coughs, headaches, rabies, diarrhoea, fertility problems, toothaches, stomach-aches,**

⁶⁸M. Ayyanar, S. Ignacimuthu, "Traditional Knowledge of Kani in Kouthalai of Tirunelveli hills, Tamil Nadu, India," *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 102 (2005): 247.

⁶⁹Special hymns sung during the time of healing practices and work as Music Therapy.

⁷⁰R.K. Bushra Beegom, "Current Living Pattern of Tribal Community: A Study of Kanikkars, Trivandrum, India," *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 9 (2021-2022): 329.

⁷¹Part of Tirunelveli Hills, Tamil Nadu state, India.

⁷²Scientific Name of Plants of medicinal significance, such as wormwood, chamomile and dandelion.

wounds, rheumatism, hair loss, and even snake, scorpion, and insect bite poisoning.⁷³

The *Trichopus Zeylanicus* plant, locally known as “*Arogyapacha*,” is known for its revitalising properties and was used by the Kani as an energy source during long journeys. Research on this plant led to the development of the herbal drug called “*Jeevani*.” It has benefit sharing and was established with the Kani community.⁷⁴ There are some other plants used for traditional healing. *Curcuma longa* (turmeric) is used for its anti-inflammatory and antiseptic properties. *Azadirachta indica* (neem) is used for its antibacterial and antifungal properties. *Ocimum sanctum* (*tulsi*) is used for its respiratory and immune-boosting properties. The Kani knowledge base encompasses a more comprehensive range of medicinal plants. Protecting and learning from this knowledge system is crucial for the well-being of the Kani community and the wider world.

4.3. Health Factors

*Cutaneous leishmaniasis*⁷⁵ is the most common form of *leishmaniasis*, a parasitic disease transmitted by the bite of infected sandflies. This infection is very prevalent among Kani tribals. Damp surfaces within and outside houses and the accumulation of decayed leaf litter in the immediate background are conducive to sandfly breeding. Children who died before they started walking on their own were buried inside the house opposite the kitchen pyre, and this cultural practice is continuing. Using personal protection against the bite of insects is rare, and only 1.9% reported using Mosquito nets at night. CL (**Caseous Lymphadenitis**) **has not been recognised as a major disease, and CL is not treated if Symptoms persist. CL did not have a local name in the area and was colloquially explained as “Maikkuru”, meaning ‘heat boil’. When asked about common diseases in the locality, none of the respondents reported CL and fever, though no disease was mentioned as the primary health problem. In the case of persons with ulceration and severe itching, the use of natural herbs was reported to be 90.20%.**⁷⁶ Tribal communities face a complex interplay

⁷³M. Ayyanar, S. Ignacimuthu, “Traditional Knowledge of Kani in Kouthalai of Tirunelveli hills, Tamil Nadu, India,” *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 102 (2005): 249.

⁷⁴“Jeevani: The Source of Life,” Fox News, 7 July 2010, <https://www.foxnews.com/health/jeevani-the-source-of-life>. Accessed on 9 March 2024.

⁷⁵CL, or **caseous lymphadenitis**, is a chronic bacterial infection primarily affecting **sheep and goats**. It is caused by the bacterium **Corynebacterium pseudotuberculosis**.

⁷⁶B. Nandha, R. Srinivasan, “Cutaneous leishmaniasis: knowledge, attitude and practices of the inhabitants of the Kani forest tribal settlements of

of health challenges. These include **nutritional deficiencies** due to limited access to diverse food, making them susceptible to **infectious diseases** like malaria and tuberculosis. Some studies suggest a higher prevalence of **risk factors** for **chronic diseases** like hypertension and diabetes among these groups. At the same time, **limited access to healthcare** and the potential **loss of traditional knowledge** further exacerbate their health struggles. This leads to **increased morbidity and mortality**. Limited access to diverse food accelerates higher illness rates and potentially lower life expectancy than India's national average. This vulnerability is further exacerbated by crowded living conditions and limited healthcare access, making them susceptible to outbreaks of infectious diseases. Just as the Amazon reveals the face of Jesus Christ,⁷⁷ who is poor and hungry, the Indian Kani tribe depicts the powerful image of Christ, who is hungry and thirsty.⁷⁸

4.4. Positive Developments

Concerning the case of CL Infection in Kani, the Government initiatives are praiseworthy. However, the Government must work harder to ensure the welfare of these vulnerable people. 12 CL initial cases were given free allopathic treatment at Government Medical College, including the cost of transportation and food during admission. They were followed up by subsequent visits by health staff to the settlements.⁷⁹ In this context, the Church can cooperate with government agencies and render services through mobile medical units for the betterment of the tribals.⁸⁰ While challenges remain, efforts are underway to improve health outcomes in tribal communities. Government initiatives aim to enhance healthcare access and services, while collaboration with NGOs addresses health awareness, sanitation, and the integration of traditional knowledge. Research and development initiatives explore the potential of

Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala, India," *Health Education Research*, 29 (6) (2014): 1054.

⁷⁷Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2020).

⁷⁸Mathew 25:35.

⁷⁹B. Nandha, R. Srinivasan, "Cutaneous leishmaniasis: knowledge, attitude and practices of the inhabitants of the Kani forest tribal settlements of Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala, India," *Health Education Research*, 29 (6) (2014): 1055.

⁸⁰St. Thomas Hospital, Chethipuzha, Changanacherry, Kerala, India, Under the Archdiocese of Changanacherry, rendering services to vulnerable people of remote villages through mobile clinics.

combining traditional and modern healthcare systems for better health outcomes in the future. Ongoing efforts and positive developments offer hope for improved health outcomes and overall well-being for the Kani. The Kani tribe highly respects priests, nuns, and laypeople. This positive attitude presents a unique opportunity for the Church to collaborate with NGOs and government organisations to improve healthcare access and services for the Kani community. As Pope Francis emphasises reaching out to the *marginalised*,⁸¹ the Indian Church can play a significant role in uplifting the well-being of the Kanis who live on the peripheries of society.

5. Injustice

The Kanis lack familiarity with things like the value of money and contracts. This makes it hard for them to protect themselves when people offer small loans. These loans can seem helpful initially, but it can hurt them in the long run. But these small loans come with a big catch. Kani families have to agree through contracts to give up their crops, like nuts, coconuts, and spices, for low prices and for a long time. The people who advance the loans extract more money from these crops than they loaned in the first place, often ten times more. Kani people's lack of knowledge is exploited for personal gain, mirroring the "cry of the poor" concept mentioned in *Laudato Si'*. It highlights the need for people to speak up for the Kani community. There should be initiatives to educate them on financial literacy and legal awareness to empower them to make informed decisions and protect themselves from future exploitation. Exploitation and Unfair Compensation are serious issues. Companies and researchers have been accused of exploiting their knowledge of medicinal plants without fair compensation. Thus denying them the benefits of their intellectual property. The middlemen often exploit the lack of market access and negotiation power of the Kani tribe, buying their products at low prices and selling them at significantly higher profits, limiting their economic opportunities and income generation. These issues highlight the need for mechanisms that ensure fair compensation for their knowledge and resources, improved market access and more equitable trade practices.

⁸¹Pope Francis, 14 Sunday Homilie, Marginalized.)6.07.2014. Mathew 11:25-30. <https://sites.google.com/view/pope-francis-homilies/marginalized>. Accessed March 4, 2024.

5.1. Present Housing Challenges

The lack of housing is a grave problem to be discussed.⁸² They face significant housing challenges. Some people have no homes. Every person has a natural right to possess a reasonable allotment of land where he can establish his home, work for the subsistence of his family and a secure life.⁸³ They are deprived of this fundamental right. Attacks from Animals pose another major challenge.⁸⁴ Though the Kani tribe's elders possessed a deep understanding of how to coexist peacefully with animals, the younger generation faces challenges in maintaining this knowledge. The Kani people are increasingly turning away from their traditional, durable mud houses in favour of temporary tarpaulin huts. While the strong mud houses offered protection from the elements and potential health benefits, these temporary shelters are not ideal living spaces. During the rainy season, these structures become incredibly uncomfortable and prone to leaking. Lack of permanent, secure housing makes them vulnerable to wild animals. The absence of iron fencing allows animals like cows and hens to be easily captured by predators. The vegetable gardens are frequently raided and damaged by creatures like long-tailed monkeys and peacocks.⁸⁵ The emerging population of predators such as tigers, leopards, hyenas and wild dogs has negatively impacted the ecology of the Western Ghats.⁸⁶ According to the opinion of *Appu Kani*, a senior leader of the *Cherukadathu*-Kani clan, the prey population has increased. The predator species need better conservation to bring back the balance.⁸⁷ A group of representatives from Kani, living in the Western Ghats of Kanyakumari district, voiced the concerns mentioned above at the workshop organised by the Tribal Foundation

⁸²Francis, Pope. *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), 152.

⁸³Francis, Pope. *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), 94.

⁸⁴R.K. Bushra Beegom, "Current Living Pattern of Tribal Community: A Study of Kanikkars, Trivandrum, India," *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 9 (2021-2022): 335.

⁸⁵M.S Thangam. "The Grievances, Issues and Challenges of the Kani Tribes in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu; Possible Solutions and Recommendations," *International Journal of Research Culture Society*, 06 (6) (2022): 2.

⁸⁶Ashwin V. N, "Incidents of human-wildlife conflict are on the rise in Kerala, and it is back in focus with the killing of man by a wild elephant in Palakkad district", *The Hindu Newspaper*, 11 July 2022, 2. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/explained-keralas-escalating-human-wildlife-conflicts/article65615103.ece>

⁸⁷"The Kani tribe of Western Ghats uses 'indigenous local knowledge' to co-exist with nature," *The Times of India*, 30 August 2016. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/madurai/kani-tribe-of-western-ghats-uses-indigenous-local-knowledge-to-co-exist-with-nature/articleshow/53920991.cms>

and hosted by UNESCO.⁸⁸ In this context, governments should combine traditional Kani knowledge with modern technology to promote sustainable living.

5.2. Transportation

Transportation poses a significant challenge for them. Access to their living area is minimal due to poor roads and infrequent bus services. During the rainy season, children often cannot attend school because of the lack of reliable transportation. While a few buses now operate, Kani students rely heavily on them, causing parents to worry about their children's safety until they return home – especially during harsh weather. Some Kanis have begun using modern two-wheelers like scooters and bicycles to purchase essential goods unavailable in their settlements. However, they remain largely disconnected from other communities without basic communication infrastructure. Tribal settlements are located at different altitudes, ranging from 267 to 2425 feet in a difficult-to-reach area. Not all settlements can be reached by vehicle. The primary threat faced while trekking to these settlements is the presence of blood-sucking leeches.⁸⁹

5.3. Loss of Cultural Identity

The Kani tribe faces challenges as younger generations may lose their unique practices and knowledge due to modern life and education. This weakens their cultural identity and ability to care for themselves. Kani tribal faces are *blurring* in the Western Ghats.⁹⁰ Jijin Varghese Palakkattu, a research student living near *Thodumala* who assisted me with the interviews, noted, “Young people are increasingly drawn to life outside the forest. They’re studying in tribal hostels and choosing to build homes in cities, embracing urban life and potentially leaving behind their traditional way of life.”⁹¹ Deforestation, development, and tourism threaten their way of life and connection to

⁸⁸“The Kani tribe of Western Ghats uses ‘indigenous local knowledge’ to co-exist with nature,” *The Times of India*, 30 August 2016. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/madurai/kani-tribe-of-western-ghats-uses-indigenous-local-knowledge-to-co-exist-with-nature/articleshow/53920991.cms>.

⁸⁹B. Nandha, R. Srinivasan, “Cutaneous leishmaniasis: knowledge, attitude and practices of the inhabitants of the Kani forest tribal settlements of Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala, India,” *Health Education Research*, 29 (6) (2014): 1056.

⁹⁰Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2020), 33.

⁹¹Jijin Varghese, (a Research Student from *Thodumala*), in discussion with Fr. Rajeev Joseph, Palakkacherry, Amboori, Thiruvananthapuram, India, February 2024.

the forest, which are essential for their survival and cultural beliefs. In addition to these, we must also add climate change, which is becoming a big concern for all governments. Deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and pollution of our environment affect poor people above all.⁹²

5.4. Healthcare and Sanitation Challenges

Due to their remote location, the Kani tribe faces challenges in accessing healthcare. Inadequate infrastructure and a lack of culturally appropriate services create barriers to timely and quality medical care, impacting their health and well-being. Furthermore, the absence of proper sanitation facilities and clean water sources increases the risk of waterborne diseases and other health complications. These challenges highlight the need for improved healthcare infrastructure, culturally sensitive services, and better sanitation and clean water access within the Kani communities. The Kani Tribe faces Social and Political marginalisation. The Kani tribe, along with many other tribal communities, faces many social issues. These include societal prejudice and discrimination that limit their access to opportunities and hinder their progress, as well as a lack of adequate representation and political voice, which makes it difficult for them to advocate for their rights and address the unique challenges they face.

5.5. Helplessness

The issues they face collectively engender a sense of helplessness among them. Limited resources, exploitation, and marginalisation make it difficult for them to improve their living conditions, protect their cultural heritage, and access their rightful opportunities. Most Kanis rely on daily wages and are unsatisfied with their current livelihood.⁹³ This can lead to further social and economic disadvantages and health problems. The helplessness of Kani lives can be alleviated by empowering them through education. The Supreme Law of Fraternal Love⁹⁴ can be the guiding principle for that. The Church can educate them about how to enable economic development. They have many schemes, but its implementation process should be strengthened. The Church can cooperate with NGOs to spread

⁹²Francis, Pope. *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015).

⁹³R.K. Bushra, Beegom, "Current Living Pattern of Tribal Community: A Study of Kanikkars, Trivandrum, India," *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 9 (2021-2022): 335.

⁹⁴Francis, Pope, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2020), 39.

awareness among them about their forest user rights.⁹⁵ Kani tribe is *the injured man in the Good Samaritan parable, who is bruised and abandoned on the roadside* because of our institutional neglect.⁹⁶

5.6. Possible Solutions

A multifaceted approach is essential to ensure a brighter future for the Kani. This involves promoting **fair compensation and benefit-sharing mechanisms** through ethical partnerships. That gives the tribe proper recognition and rewards for their unique knowledge and resources. Members of tribal communities who migrate to populated areas for work deserve fair compensation. Like everyone else, they possess inherent human dignity (*that leads to fraternal openness*)⁹⁷ and should be paid wages equal to their non-tribal counterparts. The Church has a vital role in advocating for their fair treatment. During my field visits to many houses in Amboori, I learned that the Christian community offers jobs to the Kani tribe.⁹⁸ The Christian community has shown human dignity to the Kani tribe, but in the future, these Christian communities can help them to overcome their struggles. As stewards of God's providence,⁹⁹ they can inspire their congregations to become a powerful *voice for the voiceless*, specifically the marginalised Kani people.

Improved market access and sustainable livelihoods can be fostered by supporting initiatives that empower the Kani to market their products directly and develop sustainable income-generating activities. This approach will reduce the chance of exploitation by middlemen. **Culturally sensitive knowledge preservation is crucial through programmes integrating traditional knowledge with modern education.** To protect the Western Ghats and Kani tribe, we must combine ancestral wisdom with contemporary technical

⁹⁵M.S Thangam, "The Grievances, Issues and Challenges of the Kani Tribes in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu; Possible Solutions and Recommendations," *International Journal of Research Culture Society*, 06 (6) (2022): 3.

⁹⁶Francis, Pope, *Fratelli Tutti*, (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2020), 76.

⁹⁷Francis, Pope, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2020), 1.

⁹⁸ In 2015, during field visits to *Amboori, Mayam and Arukani* Christian Migrated Communities, as an Assistant Parish Priest of Amboori, St. George Forane Church, I gathered information about how Kani people work for daily wages among Christian families and their properties.

⁹⁹Leo XIII, Pope, *Rerum Novarum*, 1983, 22. https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum_novarum.html. Access on March 11, 2024.

knowledge.¹⁰⁰ That provides opportunities for younger generations to learn and practice their heritage. Investing in **improved healthcare access and infrastructure** is also necessary, encompassing culturally appropriate facilities, infrastructure development, and training healthcare professionals to address the specific needs of the Kani tribe. **Empowering them through representation and participation** in decision-making processes is vital. That will affect their lives, land, and resources for self-determination¹⁰¹ and shaping their future. By holistically implementing these strategies, we can create a future for them. At the same time, it is an attempt to preserve their unique cultural identity and achieve economic self-sufficiency. While the Kerala government has implemented various programmes to improve the lives of the Kani, several improper development approaches have hampered their holistic development. Let us analyse some critical issues.

5.7. Top-Down Approach Neglecting Tribal Participation:

The Kani faces challenges related to development approaches. **Lack of consultation and consent** for projects can disrupt their way of life and fail to address their needs. Listening and dialogue with the people and understanding the history of the land are the pivotal ideas here.¹⁰² **Standardised interventions** designed for general populations may not be culturally appropriate for Kani people. It may lead to ineffective or harmful outcomes. Development efforts often focus solely on **material development and resource extraction**. Thus, it potentially neglects preserving **traditional knowledge, resource management practices, and cultural heritage**. The mal-development lead to cultural erosion and loss of identity. Unsustainable resource extraction can harm the Kani forest ecosystem. Their forest system holds deep cultural significance, ultimately related to their well-being. Addressing these issues requires a shift towards development approaches that prioritise **meaningful consultation, cultural sensitivity, and the preservation of the Kani tribe's unique practices** alongside material progress.

¹⁰⁰ Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2020), 51.

¹⁰¹Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2020), 13.

¹⁰²Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2020), 66.

5.8. Inadequate Implementation and Corruption

In addition to challenges regarding development approaches, Kani also face issues with a lack of **transparency and accountability**. Corruption and a lack of clear communication during project implementation can divert resources meant for them. It leaves them with minimal benefits. Furthermore, **inadequate monitoring and evaluation systems** make it difficult to assess the effectiveness of development projects and address any shortcomings, potentially leading to projects failing to achieve their intended goals. Addressing these issues requires greater transparency, accountability, and precise monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure that development initiatives truly benefit the Kani tribe.

5.9. Possible Solutions

A sustainable and equitable approach to development is crucial for Kani's well-being. This can be achieved through **participatory development**, where they actively participate in decision-making, regarding projects impacting their lives and resources. In this regard, the Church has started many programmes. The Kani communities located between Amboori and Ponmudi regions of Kerala have proximity to many churches nearby. These churches generously admit Kani children into their schools, providing them with basic education (primary school) and further studies (High school and Higher secondary school).¹⁰³ Catholic Schools in this region can make some additional education curriculum to promote the integral ecology of the Church. Promoting **sustainable resource management practices** is essential to protect the vital forest ecosystem and ensure the Kani long-term resource access. **Transparency, accountability, and monitoring** are crucial for effectively implementing development projects. Proper mechanisms should be in place to track progress, address challenges, and, ultimately, empower the Kani tribe to shape their future. Recognising the challenges faced by the Kani tribe necessitates collaboration between the Kerala government, NGOs, researchers, and, most importantly, the Kani people themselves.

6. Catholic Church and Integral Ecology

The Church can play a significant role in protecting the culture of the Kani tribe in Kerala, inspired by Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato*

¹⁰³St. Geroge UP and St. Thomas HSS Amboori, St. Mary's Mary Giri UP, Mayam, Arukani Tamilnadu Chempakapara St.Marys's UP are all run by Catholic Management. These schools still provide educational facilities to Kani Tribal children.

Si'. However, its current and past activities towards this community are multifaceted and warrant a nuanced analysis. Like the Amazon and Congo basins, the Western Ghats and Kani tribes are essential for the earth and humanity's future.¹⁰⁴ By Implementing *Laudato Si'* principles, the Church can play a multifaceted role in supporting the Kani. This includes **advocacy for social justice**, raising awareness about their plight and advocating for their rights to land, resources, and cultural preservation. This is supported by the encyclical's emphasis on care for the underprivileged and social justice efforts. The Syromalabar church has certain institutions in the Kani region. Sacred Heart Nuns (SH Congregation) started a *Kani Girls Hostel* on 1995 June 23 in Amboori. Archdiocese of Changanacherry, long years back, started a hospital named Good Samaritan Hospital.¹⁰⁵ This hospital is very close to the Kani region. They have benefitted from the Good Samaritan Hospital services in Amboori. While staying in Amboori, as an assistant parish priest and palliative voluntary worker¹⁰⁶ for the Kani community, I became acquainted with Dr. Fr. Joseph Puthuparampil, the Vicar of St. George Forane Church. **He created a detailed map showing where people live and the locations of forest Gendas (stone markings at the forest border). By studying buffer zones, he could identify and exclude residents' land from these protected areas. He submitted his findings in a formal scientific report. These findings led the government to take significant action in favour of the residents of Amboori and Mayam.** It shows how a parish priest in the Kani tribal area can implement *Laudato Si'* by engaging with the public.¹⁰⁷ Church-run institutions can contribute to

¹⁰⁴Francis, Pope, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), 38.

¹⁰⁵Good Samaritan Hospital, in Amboori, Poochamukku, still serves the Kani and local community. Accessed on 8 March 2024. <https://www.onefivenine.com/india/Places/checkin/good-samaritan-hospital-amboori>.

¹⁰⁶In the Amboori region, pain and palliative workers are doing a significant service in addressing the "Cry of the poor." *Mini Thomas*, Nellikunnathu, a Palliative Care Nurse at Kerala State Palliative Care Project, Family Health Sub-Centre Amboori, facilitated an opening to meet the most vulnerable Kani patients in their homes in October 2015.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thiruvananthapuram/family-centre-to-be-upgraded-in-states-capital-says-keralas-health-minister-veena-george/articleshow/93243909.cms>. Accessed on March. 08. 2024.

¹⁰⁷Dr. Fr. Joseph Puthuparampil, a faculty member from 2014 to 2016 at Lourde Matha Engineering College in Kuttichal, Thiruvananthapuram, which is managed by the Archdiocese of Changanacherry, proposed to the Kerala Government an analysis of the impact of the Gandgil Report on the residents of the Amboori, Mayam Region in Thiruvananthapuram. He conducted scientific mapping of the buffer zone area to

education and cultural preservation by integrating Kani knowledge and practices into their curriculum, fostering understanding and respect for their heritage, which can be seen as an extension of *Laudato Si's* call for Ecological Education.¹⁰⁸ The Church-affiliated organisations can provide **healthcare and social services** for them. Thus, it improves the Kani tribe's overall well-being, reflecting *Laudato Si's* emphasis on integral ecology and interconnectedness. Ethical partnerships allow the Church to promote *Laudato Si's* call for sustainable development and responsible resource management.

6.1. Specific Suggestions

Recognising the criticality of cultural preservation for the Kani, the Church can contribute significantly through **dialogue and collaboration**. Establishing open dialogue and forming partnerships with the Kani tribe's leadership is crucial to **understanding their needs and priorities**.¹⁰⁹ The Church can leverage existing expertise and resources by supporting initiatives and partnering with NGOs and organisations working with the Kani. Furthermore, the Church can support **cultural documentation and education** by backing initiatives to document their cultural practices, knowledge, and language. According to Pope John Paul II, the Church does not intend to deny the autonomy of any culture. On the contrary, she has the greatest respect for it.¹¹⁰ The Catholic Church of the North East, India, has a Salesian institute called the *Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures*. It is a unique venture of the Salesians of Don Bosco in the North East India to develop expert facilities to preserve and promote numerous indigenous cultures of India.¹¹¹ These kinds of initiatives can be implemented for Kani tribe. While the Church has the potential to play a significant role in protecting the Kani culture, its approach must be carefully considered and rooted in genuine collaboration, respect, and understanding of their specific needs and aspirations. By focusing on

differentiate between forested areas and lands belonging to the residents. Utilizing the findings from his survey and mapping studies, the Government took action and excluded the residents' properties from the buffer zone.

¹⁰⁸Francis, Pope, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), 202.

¹⁰⁹Francis, Pope, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), 163.

¹¹⁰John Paul II, Address to University Professors and Cultural Leaders, Coimbra (15 May, 1982): *Insegnamenti* 5/2 (1982), 1702-1703.

¹¹¹Andrew G. Marwein, Don Bosco Museum of Indigenous Cultures, Accessed 5 March 2024. <https://www.museumsofindia.org/museum/11772/>.

Laudato Si''s core theme of social justice and ecological responsibility, the Church can contribute to a brighter future for the Kani people.

6.2. *Laudato Si'* as an Action Guide

Inspired by *Laudato Si'*'s call for **integral ecology**, which demands a holistic approach to environmental and social challenges, we must address the Kani tribe's struggles comprehensively. This entails acknowledging their unique cultural traditions, dependence on the environment, and economic hardships. Applying the *Laudato Si'* principle of **sustainable development** requires supporting their efforts to secure sustainable livelihoods. Ultimately, *Laudato Si'* urges a global commitment to a **culture of care and ecological conversion**.¹¹² This necessitates individual, community, and institutional action to support vulnerable groups like the Kani tribe. The Church should be the *Paraclete*¹¹³ (Paraclete, Comforter (L. *Consolator*; Greek *parakletos*) for the Kani tribe, amplifying the voices of the voiceless. The Church has the potential to impact the decisions of Indian and Kerala Government's significantly. However, methods of the church must prioritise respect and collaboration and avoid any form of coercion. This can be achieved through advocating for fair policies that promote Kani welfare. At the same time, it supports and raises awareness about initiatives that empower the Kani to manage their resources and develop sustainable livelihoods in ways that respect their culture. Engaging in dialogue with the Kani tribe and other stakeholders is essential to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are addressed in collaborative decision-making processes.

Conclusion

Rajendran Kani, a 42-year-old Kani man, explained, "The forest provides everything we need for our current way of life. We don't need to leave it behind. However, we need access to hospitals and medical care, so we sometimes come to populated areas. I feel truly free and connected to myself only when living in the forest, which I perceive as true freedom."¹¹⁴ The Kani people possess an inner call to true freedom. The Church can engage with these people to promote their authentic existence or true freedom. Standing firm in its moral

¹¹²Francis, Pope. *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), 231.

¹¹³Sollier, J., Paraclete. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911). <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11469a.htm>

¹¹⁴Rajendran Kani (a peasant from *Thodumala*), in discussion with Fr. Rajeev Joseph Palakkacherry, assisted by Jijin Varghese Palakkattu, Amboori, Thiruvananthapuram, India, February 2024.

authority and social reach, the Church can support the Kani through **multifaceted advocacy**. The faithful who have gone through ecological conversion can make significant impacts. This includes issuing public statements, launching awareness campaigns, and organising events highlighting **their plight and the importance of protecting their ecological wisdom and lives**. The Church can mobilise local communities and the faithful through Ecological Spirituality. They can **write to government officials, participate in peaceful protests, and support organisations working with the Kani** to contribute to positive change directly. **Partnering with NGOs and media outlets familiar with the Kani tribe's issues** allows the Church to **amplify their voices and gain wider public attention**. This ultimately creates a more impactful and sustainable support system for the Kani. This involves initiating respectful dialogue with relevant national and state government officials to understand existing policies and propose collaborative solutions. Partnering with government agencies working on tribal welfare, environmental protection, and sustainable development is crucial to exploring joint initiatives that address the Kani tribe's specific needs. A multi-pronged approach is essential to empower the Kani and ensure their well-being. This includes **capacity building** by supporting initiatives that help them articulate their needs and participate in decision-making. Collaboration is a keyword that documents **their ecological knowledge, traditional practices, and language** for future generations.