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The Sovereign of the Silent Valley: Moopil Nair, Janmam Authority, and the Political Economy of Tribal Dispossession in Attappadi, Kerala

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ABSTRACT

This research paper provides a detailed and nuanced analysis of the feudal authority exercised by the Mannarkkad *Moopil Nair* over the Attappadi Valley, a region defined by its geographical isolation, ecological richness, and indigenous tribal population. Utilising a synthesis of historical archives, legal judgments, ethnographic accounts, and administrative records, the report reconstructs the political economy of the *Janmam* (proprietorship) right. It traces the trajectory of the Moopil Nair's sovereignty from its pre-colonial origins under the Zamorin of Calicut, through the rigid codification of the British colonial era, to the constitutional and legislative dismantling of feudal tenures in post-independent India. The complex power dynamics between the landlord and the tribal communities—Irular, Mudugar, and Kurumbar—are a major area of study. The techniques of extraction, the rituals of reliance, and the final alienation of tribal territory are all examined. The report also looks at the Moopil Nair's legal legacy, especially the historic Supreme Court case that still has an impact on Kerala's conversation about land reform and forest rights. This document functions as a definitive archive of a bygone feudal system and its lingering shadow

over the Adivasi life-world by fusing the macro-legal structures of the Indian state with the micro-histories of particular hamlets.

Introduction: The Geography of Dominion

The Landscape of Isolation and Authority

In Kerala's history, the Attappadi Valley—an undulating plateau between the Palakkad lowlands to the south and the Nilgiris to the north—represents a distinctive biological and political topography.. Spanning approximately 745 to 765 square kilometres, the region rises from 750 meters to over 3000 feet at the Malleswara peak. Historically, this landscape was not merely a topographical feature but a consolidated feudal estate, a "kingdom of the forest" where the writ of the state was secondary to the word of the landlord.

Unlike other regions of Malabar where land ownership was often fragmented or held communally by temples and taravads, the entire Attappadi territory—excluding the government reserve forests established later—was mapped as the private *Janmam* property of three aristocratic families. This concentration of land created a monolithic power structure that defined the region's history for centuries. The valley, drained by the Bhavani, Siruvani and Koduntharappallam rivers, acted as a geographical isolate, cut off from the mainstream agrarian developments of the plains until the mid-20th century. The difficult terrain, infested with malaria and populated by wild elephants, served as a natural barrier that preserved the feudal autonomy of the *Moopil Nair* long after such structures had begun to erode elsewhere in Kerala.

The preeminent sovereign of this territory was the **Mannarkkad Moopil Nair**, a chieftain of the *Kunnath Nad Madambil Swaroopam*. Historical records and survey settlements from the early 20th century confirm that the *Moopil Nair* held approximately 70% of the Attappadi region. This dominion was not a unified block but a complex mosaic of forests, rivers, and tribal hamlets (*Oorus*), administratively divided into "Hills." Out of the 99 hills that constitute the geographical imagination of Attappadi, the *Moopil Nair* possessed rights over 44 distinct hills. The remaining territory was held by the Eralpad Raja (the heir apparent to the Zamorin of Calicut) with 16 hills, and the Palat Krishna Menon family with 10 hills. (1)

This tripartite division, formalised by colonial intervention, created a distinct political economy. For the indigenous inhabitants—the Irular, Mudugar, and Kurumbar—the forest was not a common but a

tenanted property. Their right to exist, cultivate, and hunt was mediated through the permission of the *Moopil Nair* (2). This report adopts a political ecology framework to understand how the Moopil Nair's control over natural resources (land, timber, forest produce) translated into social control over the tribal population, establishing ties of dependence that persisted well into the modern era.

Theoretical Framework: Feudal Sovereignty vs. Modern Property

To understand the Moopil Nair's position, it is necessary to distinguish between "sovereignty" and "property." In the pre-colonial context, the Moopil Nair's authority was akin to sovereignty—a political control over the territory granted by the Zamorin. This was not ownership in the capitalist sense but a jurisdictional authority involving the right to tax, the right to punish, and the right to demand allegiance.

However, the British colonial administration, driven by the need for revenue stability and legal legibility, transmuted this political authority into "private property" under the Roman legal concept of *dominium*. This transition had catastrophic consequences for the tribal population. Under the pre-colonial order, complex customary rights might have allowed for shifting cultivation and forest use as a matter of tradition. Under the British legal interpretation, formalized in the Malabar Tenancy Acts and revenue settlements, the tribe's ancestral use of the forest was reclassified as "tenancy-at-will" (*Verumpattam*) or, worse, illegal encroachment on private land.

The *Moopil Nair* was thus empowered by the colonial state to act as the supreme landlord, legally entitled to evict, tax, and regulate the lives of thousands of inhabitants. The *Janmam* right became the central mechanism of tribal dispossession, converting the "kingdom of the forest" into the "estate of the landlord." The legal fiction that the Adivasi was a "tenant" implied a contractual relationship that never historically existed, forcing an oral culture into a textual trap of receipts, deeds, and evictions.

The Historical Legacy of the Janmam Right

The Myth of the Horse and the Zamorin's Grant

The origins of the Moopil Nair's authority are shrouded in the myth-history of the Malabar region. The *Kunnath Nad Madambil Swaroopam* was a feudatory lineage loyal to the Zamorin of Calicut. According to oral traditions recorded in local histories, the *Janmam* right over the vast Attappadi forests was a royal grant (*Theettooram*) conferred by the Zamorin.

The narrative suggests that the Zamorin, during a visit to the region, was exceptionally pleased by the hospitality and martial loyalty of the Nair chieftain. In a gesture of feudal munificence, he granted the Nair the title of "Moopil" (The Elder/Chieftain) and all the land that a horse could cover in a single day (3). While this story functions as a legitimising myth, it reflects the scale of the holding—estimated at over 180,000 acres in some records. This grant effectively transferred the sovereignty of the region from the central monarch to the local chieftain, creating a decentralised feudal state within the forests.

The Moopil Nair's lineage, the *Kunnath Nad Madambil Swaroopam*, thus held a unique position. They were not merely landlords but local kings, exercising judicial and executive powers within their domain. The oral history underscores the personal nature of this power; it was granted for service and loyalty, reinforcing the feudal bond between the sovereign and the vassal, which was then replicated between the Nair and the tribes.

The 1901 Bloodshed and the 1908 Settlement

The boundaries of this feudal estate were not always clear, leading to conflicts between rival chieftains. The archives mention a significant eruption of violence in 1901, described as a "bloodshed" over the rights to the Attappadi hills. The dispute primarily involved the Moopil Nair, the Eralpad Raja, and the Palat family. The timber wealth of the valley had begun to attract attention, and the vague traditional boundaries became flashpoints for resource conflict.

The colonial state, intolerant of such disorder which disrupted timber trade and revenue, intervened. A Divisional Officer settled the dispute in 1908 under Section 145 of the Criminal Procedure Code. This settlement was a watershed moment in the history of Attappadi. It formalized the partition of the valley, transforming fluid zones of influence into rigid property lines.

Table 1: Distribution of Hills in Attappadi (1908 Settlement)

Landlord Family	Number of Hills Owned	Notes
Mannarkkad Moopil Nair	**44 Hills**	Held the majority of the territory (approx. 70%). Controlled the richest timber forests.
Eralpad Raja	**16 Hills**	The Elaya Raja (Heir) of the Zamorin lineage. Also held partial rights in 6 other hills.

Landlord Family	Number of Hills Owned	Notes
Palat Krishna Menon	**10 Hills**	A prominent feudal family allied with the Zamorin.
Others/Government	**29 Hills**	Includes hills where rights were shared or disputed, later consolidated by the British.

Source: Synthesised from V.V.K. Valath, Keralathile Sthalanama Charithrangal

This administrative act ossified the boundaries. What was once a fluid zone of influence becoming rigid private property, mapped and recorded in the colonial archives. The "hills" were no longer ecological units but cadastral units of wealth, generating revenue through timber extraction and tribal taxation (4). The *Moopil Nair* emerged from this settlement as the undisputed hegemon of the valley, controlling the most valuable timber tracts and the largest number of tribal settlements.

The Timber Economy and Colonial Extraction

The Moopil Nair's interest in Attappadi was primarily economic, driven by the global demand for tropical timber. The forests of Attappadi were rich in Rosewood (*Veetti*), Teak, and other hardwoods. The extraction of this timber required a complex logistical operation, relying on the rivers as the primary mode of transport.

The Moopil Nair's mansion in Mannarkkad, a sprawling architectural marvel, was reportedly constructed using 8,000 "candy" of the finest timber floated down the Kunthipuzha and Kanjirapuzha rivers. This mansion stood as a physical manifestation of the wealth extracted from the hills. The timber trade connected the remote valley to the global markets of the British Empire, integrating the feudal estate into the colonial capitalist economy.

The colonial state also entered the fray, leasing vast tracts of forest from the *Moopil Nair* to establish "Reserve Forests." This created a dual structure of authority where the *Moopil Nair* owned the land, but the British Forest Department managed the timber extraction in specific zones. For the tribes, this meant a double subjugation: they were answerable to the *Janmi* for their cultivation and to the *Forest Ranger* for their movement. The *Attappadi Reserve Forest* became a zone of exclusion for the tribes, where their traditional rights were curtailed in favor of scientific forestry and timber production.

The Administration of Subjugation: *Karyasthans* and *Kolkars*

The Feudal Bureaucracy

The *Moopil Nair* did not reside in the malaria-infested forests of Attappadi; he ruled from his *Kovilakam* (mansion) in the plains of Mannarkkad. His authority was projected into the hills through a hierarchical bureaucracy of agents. At the apex of this local administration was the *Karyasthan* (Manager). Ethnographic accounts provide a vivid description of the Karyasthan's power.

One **Sivashankara Menon**, the Karyasthan of the last Moopil Nair, is remembered as a figure of absolute authority. He resided in Goolikadavu or travelled between hamlets. His mode of transport was a palanquin (*Manjal*). In a striking display of feudal power, the responsibility of carrying this palanquin through the rugged jungle paths fell upon the tribal men of the hamlets he visited (5). They would carry the agent of their oppression from one settlement to the next, a physical enactment of the burden of landlordism.

Accompanying the Karyasthan were the *Kolkars* (staff with batons) and *Silbandis* (armed guards). These enforcers ensured compliance. If a tribal family failed to pay the rent or displeased the agent, the *Kolkars* had the authority to confiscate crops, livestock, or even evict the family from their hut. The *Karyasthan* was the face of the state, and the landlord combined, exercising judicial and executive powers in the absence of a formal police force.

The Economics of the "*Punchasheettu*" (Receipt)

The central instrument of this political economy was the tax receipt, locally known as the *Punchasheettu* or *Money Receipt* (MR). The Moopil Nair's administration collected a poll tax or land tax from every tribal household. Historical documents retrieved from tribal elders reveal the nature of this taxation.

A receipt dated 1932, issued to **Choriya Moopan** of Vattalakki Ooru, records a payment of "Four Kashu, Eight Annas, and Four Paise" for the *Janmam* right to cultivate. Another receipt from 1914 shows a payment of "Two Rupees and Two Annas" (6). These receipts were not benign administrative records; they were tools of control. The text on the receipts explicitly stated: *"If the amount is not paid within fifteen days of the harvest, the landlord reserves the right to enter the land and confiscate the crops"*.

This clause legalised the plunder of tribal labour. Furthermore, the receipts often did not specify the exact extent or boundaries of the land, a vagueness that the landlord exploited. A tribal family might

pay tax for years, only to be told that their receipt applied to a different plot, or that the receipt was invalid, thereby facilitating their eviction to make way for timber contractors or cash-crop settlers. The *Punchasheettu* commodified the relationship between the tribe and the land, turning a customary right into a revocable lease.

The Ritual Economy: "*Ooru Panam*" and "Kazhcha"

The dependence of the tribes was not just economic but ritualistic. The *Moopil Nair* positioned himself as the paternalistic protector (*Rakshakarthavu*) of the region. This relationship was formalized through the exchange of gifts and tributes.

- ***Ooru Panam* (Hamlet Money):** This was a collective tribute paid by the hamlet. The *Ooru Moopan* (Tribal Chieftain) was responsible for collecting this from his people and delivering it to the landlord. This system co-opted the tribal leadership into the feudal structure, turning the Moopan into a lower-level functionary of the estate.
- **Investiture of the Moopan:** The authority of the tribal headman was not derived solely from tribal tradition but required the seal of the Moopil Nair. Upon the death of a Moopan, the heir had to surrender the symbols of office—the silver bangle (*Vala*) and the silk cloth (*Pattu*)—to the landlord. To be reinstated, he had to pay a fee (often 1.25 rupees) and offer betel leaves and areca nuts to the *Moopil Nair* at the Mannarkkad mansion (7). This ritual stripped the tribe of its political autonomy, making the Moopan a vassal of the Nair.
- **Kazhcha (Offerings):** During major festivals like Onam or the Shivaratri festival at the Malleswara temple, tribal groups were expected to travel to the Moopil Nair's mansion bearing "Kazhcha." These offerings consisted of the finest forest produce—wild honey, ivory, cardamom, and medicinal herbs. In return, the landlord would provide a feast and token gifts. While this appeared to be a reciprocal exchange, it was a mechanism of extraction where valuable commodities were exchanged for a meal and feudal patronage.

Tribal Life Worlds under the Moopil Nair

Demographics and Social Structure

The tribal population of Attappadi comprises three distinct groups: the **Irulas**, the **Mudugas**, and the **Kurumbas**. Each group occupies a specific ecological niche and maintains a distinct relationship with the Moopil Nair's estate. According to the 1971 Census, the tribal population was 16,800, though

earlier estimates suggest they constituted a much higher percentage of the valley's inhabitants before the influx of settlers.

Table 2: Tribal Communities of Attappadi and their Ecological Niches

Community	Ecological Niche	Primary Livelihood	Relationship with Moopil Nair
Irulas	Lower valleys, dry deciduous forests	Agriculture (Ragi, Chama), Cattle grazing	Direct tenants, heaviest tax burden, closest to administrative centers.
Mudugas	Mid-elevations, moist deciduous forests	Agriculture, Forest collection	Tenants, ritual role in Malleswara festival.
Kurumbas	High altitudes, evergreen forests (Silent Valley buffer)	Shifting cultivation, Honey collection, Hunting	Relative autonomy, tribute in forest produce, less direct supervision.

Source: Synthesised from P.R.G. Mathur, Tribal Situation in Kerala and Ramachandran Athippetta, Bhoothali

The tribal social structure is organized around clans (*Kulam*) and moieties. The Kurumbas, for instance, have a dual organization with moieties named *Thamayam Thampi* and *Maman Macha*, each subdivided into exogamous clans like *Vellaka*, *Arara*, *Chempaka*, and *Uppili*. This complex kinship system governed marriage alliances and social obligations, which were often disrupted by the economic demands of the landlord.

The Agriculture of Uncertainty

The tribes of Attappadi—specifically the Irulas, Mudugas and Kurumbas—practised shifting cultivation, known locally as *Punam* or *Kothukadu*. They cultivated **Ragi** (finger millet), ***Chama*** (little millet), ***Thuvara*** (pigeon pea), and ***Kiral*** (amaranth) on the hill slopes. Under the Moopil Nair's regime, this traditional practice was tightly regulated. The landlord's permission was required to clear a new patch of forest (*Kothukadu*) (8).

The agricultural cycle was deeply intertwined with ritual. The *Mannukkaran* (the tribal soil-knower and ritualist) would determine the suitability of the land and perform the first sowing rites. (9) However, the *Karyasthan* determined the legality of the cultivation. The tribes were effectively tenants-at-will. They had no permanent rights to the land they tilled. If the *Moopil Nair* decided to lease a forest tract for timber felling or, later, to a plantation company, the tribes were displaced without compensation.

The "shifting" nature of their agriculture was used by the colonial and feudal administration to deny them permanent ownership rights, classifying them as nomadic encroachers on the *Janmi 's* private property.

Detailed ethnographic accounts describe the preparation of food, particularly the staple **Ragi paste**. Ragi powder is added to boiling water and stirred constantly until it becomes a thick paste, which is then swallowed in small balls without chewing. This diet was supplemented by wild tubers like *Naru*, *Noora*, and *Kavalu*, collected during the lean months. The precariousness of their subsistence was exacerbated by the landlord's demand for a share of the crop, leaving many families in a state of chronic malnutrition.

Differential Power Relations: Kurumbar vs. Irular/Mudugar

The power relations were not uniform across all tribal groups. The Kurumbar, inhabiting the deep evergreen forests of the Silent Valley buffer zone and the upper slopes (e.g., Thudukki, Anavayi), maintained a greater degree of autonomy due to their isolation.

- **The Kurumbar:** Their interaction with the *Moopil Nair* was less frequent. They were often more engaged with the Forest Department officials regarding hunting and gathering restrictions. However, they were still considered subjects of the *Janmam* estate. Their economy relied heavily on collecting forest produce (honey, resin), which the *Moopil Nair's* contractors monopolised. The Kurumbar were feared for their alleged sorcery (*Odiyan* myths), which perhaps offered them a layer of supernatural protection against excessive exploitation (10).
- **The Irular and Mudugar:** Living in the lower valleys and mid-elevations, these groups bore the brunt of the feudal administration. They were the primary agricultural workforce and the main source of the *Pattam* (rent). The *Karyasthan's* palanquin visits were most frequent in their hamlets, and their labour was routinely commandeered for estate works.

Social Control and Justice

The *Moopil Nair* also exercised judicial authority. Disputes within the tribal community, if not resolved by the *Ooru Moopan*, were often referred to the landlord or his agent. The "Adhikari" (Village Officer), often a feudal appointee like **Thimmaiyan Chettiar** in the later period, acted as the local magistrate. The line between the "State" and the "Landlord" was blurred. The Village Officer's bungalow and the Moopil Nair's rest house were centres of power where justice was dispensed, often in favour of the landlord's interests (11).

One poignant example of this social control is the practice of **"Adima Vela"** (Slave Work). Ethnographic accounts mention individuals like **Nenchan** from Nenchan Ooru, who worked as a bonded labourer for a settler landlord (often a sub-tenant of the Moopil Nair) under a one-year contract. The payment was meagre—four measures of grain and five rupees a month—illustrating the near-slavery conditions that existed within the feudal economy. The *Adhikari* also had the power to inflict corporal punishment, and the fear of the "cane" was a potent instrument of social discipline.

The Transition: Migration and the Monetisation of the Estate

The Sale of the Wilderness (1930s-1950s)

By the mid-20th century, the economic dynamics of the Moopil Nair's estate began to shift. Facing liquidity needs or perhaps anticipating the coming agrarian reforms, the *Janmi s* began to monetise their vast land banks. They started leasing or selling large tracts of forest land to settlers from the plains of Travancore and Tamil Nadu. This period marked the beginning of the demographic inversion of Attappadi. Two key transactions illustrate this phase:

1. **The Father Varghese Purchase (c. 1930s-40s):** Father Varghese (Thadakam Varghese) purchased approximately 500 acres of land from the Moopil Nair. This land, stretching from Kalkandi to Chembannur, became the nucleus of early Christian migration. Crucially, the sale deed ignored the existence of tribal hamlets on the land. The "Attappadi Ooru" was dismantled, and its residents were forcibly relocated to Kollamkadavu to clear the land for the new owner. This act of erasure symbolised the new settler logic: the land was valuable, but the people on it were an encumbrance.

2. **The Puvvathunkal Mathan Purchase (1950):** Mathan purchased nearly 1,000 acres, including lands that were traditionally cultivated by the Muduga tribe. The subsequent establishment of settler agriculture (rubber, tapioca) displaced the Mudugas, pushing them into marginal lands. The *Janmi* effectively sold the *Janmam* right, transferring the power of eviction to the new settler-landlords. (12)

The Commodification of the "Money Receipt"

The *Karyasthans* played a pivotal role in this dispossession. They began selling "Money Receipts" (MR) to migrant settlers for cash. These receipts, which originally signified a tribal tenant's tax payment, were now used as proof of possession by settlers. A settler with cash could buy an MR for a

plot of land that a tribal family was cultivating. When the legal dispute arose, the settler produced the MR (often backdated or freshly issued by the corrupt agent) as proof of tenancy, while the tribal family, relying on oral tradition or lost receipts, was evicted (13).

This commodification of the tax receipt was a masterstroke of dispossession. It used the very bureaucratic instrument that had subjugated the tribes—the *Punchasheettu*—to alienate them completely. The **Nair Service Society (NSS)** also entered the scene, leasing 2,000 acres from the Moopil Nair, further institutionalising the colonisation of the valley by non-tribal groups.

The Infrastructure of Alienation

The construction of infrastructure facilitated this transition. The road from Mannarkkad to Agali, and later to Mukkali, opened the floodgates for migration. The **"*Moopil Nair* Bus Service,"** the first bus to operate in the valley, symbolised the penetration of the modern market economy into the feudal hinterland. The bus not only carried people but also ideas of property, commerce, and law that were alien to the tribal worldview.

The establishment of the **first government office in Agali in 1955** marked the beginning of a dual authority—the waning power of the *Janmi* and the rising power of the Bureaucracy. For the tribes, however, the official in the khaki uniform was often as exploitative as the agent in the palanquin. The "Malaria Quarters" and the "Block Development Office" became the new centres of power, where the illiterate tribes had to navigate a bewildering array of forms and procedures to claim rights that were once customary (14).

The Legal Battleground: Janmam vs. The Republic

The Constitutional Challenge: K.T. *Moopil Nair* v. State of Kerala

The most significant clash between the feudal order and the modern Indian state occurred in the courtroom. Following the formation of Kerala in 1956, the communist government sought to curb the power of the *Janmi s* and increase state revenue through the **Travancore-Cochin Land Tax Act**. The *Moopil Nair* challenged this Act in the Supreme Court of India. The case, *K.T. Moopil Nair v. State of Kerala* (AIR 1961 SC 552), became a landmark in Indian constitutional law (15).

The state had imposed a uniform tax on all lands, regardless of their productivity. The *Moopil Nair* argued that taxing his vast, uncultivated forest lands at the same rate as productive agricultural land was discriminatory and confiscatory, violating his Fundamental Rights.

The Verdict: The Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Moopil Nair. It held that:

1. **Violation of Article 14 (Equality):** Treating unequals (productive and unproductive land) as equals for tax purposes was discriminatory.
2. **Violation of Article 19(1)(f) (Right to Property):** The tax was so high in relation to the income derived from the forests that it amounted to a confiscation of property, infringing upon the fundamental right to hold property.

This legal victory was a pyrrhic one for the feudal system but a significant delay for land reform. It affirmed the Moopil Nair's ownership of the forests and stalled the state's ability to use taxation as a tool for redistribution. It demonstrated the resilience of the *Janmam* logic against the egalitarian aspirations of the new republic (16). It reinforced the idea that the forest was "private property" rather than a national resource or a tribal commons.

The Vesting of Forests (1971)

The state struck back with the **Kerala Private Forests (Vesting and Assignment) Act, 1971**. This radical legislation sought to nationalise private forests without compensation, specifically targeting the vast estates of *Janmi s* like the Moopil Nair. The objective was to distribute these lands to the landless agricultural labourers (a category that theoretically included tribes).

However, the definition of "Private Forest" became a subject of fierce litigation. The Moopil Nair's successors and the settlers who had bought land from them argued that their lands were "plantations" (coffee, cardamom, teak) and thus exempt from vesting. The legal battles dragged on for decades. While the Act successfully stripped the *Moopil Nair* of his sovereign claim over the wild forests, the exemptions allowed many large settler-estates to remain intact, while the tribes—who practiced shifting cultivation and thus did not have "plantations" in the legal sense—found their lands vested in the Forest Department, transforming them from tenants of the Nair to "encroachers" on State land (17).

The Receiver Administration

Following the abolition of the *Sthanam* (the feudal title) and internal family partition suits, the direct administration of the estate by the *Moopil Nair* ceased. The court appointed a **Receiver** to manage the properties. This bureaucratic interregnum was chaotic. The Receiver continued to collect rents and issue receipts, but the personal bond of "protection" was gone. It was during this period that the

alienation of tribal land accelerated, as the Receiver's administration was often more interested in liquidating assets than maintaining feudal obligations (18). The Receiver era was characterized by a vacuum of authority, which was quickly filled by encroachers and timber mafias.

The Anthropology of Dispossession: Case Studies

The Pettikkal Landslide (1961)

The ecological consequences of the deforestation and land mismanagement under the later feudal/settler period are exemplified by the Pettikkal Landslide of 1961. The Pettikkal Ooru, situated at the base of the Malleswara peak, was wiped out, burying 80 tribal residents alive.

This disaster was not just a natural calamity but a socio-political one. The intense deforestation in the catchment areas, partly driven by the timber extraction authorised by the *Janmi* s and the state, destabilised the slopes. The response to the disaster highlighted the marginalisation of the tribes; the relief efforts were minimal, and the survivors were relocated to **Kurukkathikkal *Ooru*** inside the reserve forest, further alienating them from their ancestral agricultural lands (19). A survivor named **Satan**, a young boy who was buried up to his chest for two days, became a living testament to the tragedy. The landslide was a grim warning of the ecological limits of the extraction economy.

The Story of Choriya Moopan

The life of **Choriya Moopan** of Vattalakki Ooru serves as a microcosm of the tribal experience. The archives contain his tax receipts from 1908, 1914, and 1932.

- **1908:** Paid 6 Annas, 1 Paise.
- **1914:** Paid 2 Rupees, 2 Annas.
- **1932:** Paid 4 Kashu, 8 Annas, 4 Paise.

These receipts were his only link to the land. Yet, despite decades of payment, he never became the owner. When the land reforms came, the definition of "cultivating tenant" required proof of continuous cultivation of a specific plot. (20) The shifting nature of his agriculture and the vagueness of his receipts meant that he and his descendants struggled to establish ownership, while settlers with clearer "Money Receipts" secured titles. Choriya Moopan's receipts are now archival relics, proof of a tax paid for a right that was ultimately denied.

The Cultural Erosion: Loss of Sacred Geography

The alienation was not just material but spiritual. The **Malleswara peak**, the sacred axis of the tribal cosmos, was technically the property of the *Moopil Nair*. The Shivaratri festival, the most important tribal gathering, was heavily mediated by the landlord. The *Muduga* tribe held the hereditary right to light the sacred lamp on the peak, but the materials for the lamp—the oil, the wick, and the cloth—were provided by the landlord (Eralpad Raja or Moopil Nair) as a feudal entitlement (21).

As the feudal order collapsed and the settlers moved in, the sacred geography was desecrated. The ancient **"hero stones"** (*Veerakkallu*) that dotted the landscape, marking the graves of ancestors, were often removed or ignored by the new owners of the land. These stones, some dating back to the Iron Age, were physical markers of tribal history. Their removal was a form of historical erasure. The Kurumbas, known for their megalithic burial traditions involving dolmens and stone circles, found their sacred sites encroached upon by plantations (22).

Conclusion: The Ghost of the *Janmi*

The legacy of the Mannarkkad *Moopil Nair* in Attappadi is a narrative of sovereign power transitioning into private property, leaving a trail of dispossession. The *Janmam* right was not merely a form of land ownership; it was a totalizing system of social control that governed the economy, religion, and daily life of the tribal people.

The Moopil Nair's "protection" preserved the forest geography for centuries, shielding it from the intense agrarian expansion of the plains until the mid-20th century. However, this protection was predatory. It preserved the forest as a timber bank and the tribes as a labour reserve (23). The "Kingdom of the Forest" was effectively a labour camp where the inmates paid for their own imprisonment.

When the modern state dismantled this feudal order, it failed to recognise the customary rights of the tribes. Instead, it adopted the colonial logic of "property" and "documents." The *Janmam* estate has been dismantled, but the structure of inequality presided over remains. The tribes, once the "children of the forest" paying tribute to the "King of the Hills," are now the "beneficiaries" of state welfare, landless in the valley they once inhabited (24).

The ongoing Supreme Court cases regarding the rights of the Moopil Nair's successors over Ecologically Fragile Lands (EFL) are the final legal echoes of a feudal sovereignty that refuses to fade into history. The ghost of the *Janmi* still walks the hills of Attappadi, not in a palanquin, but in the pages

of property deeds and court verdicts that continue to deny the Adivasi their earth (25). The transition from the "Sovereign of the Silent Valley" to the "Respondent in the Supreme Court" marks the journey of Attappadi from a feudal fiefdom to a contested frontier of the republic, where the original inhabitants remain waiting for justice.

Endnotes and References

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