

# Kerala tribal man aims to reclaim Paniyar culture through music

*He travels across the land and seeks elderly Adivasis to document Paniyar songs that have faded away over time*

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/good-news/2020/aug/25/kerala-tribal-man-aims-to-reclaim-paniyar-culture-through-music-2187671.html>



Published: 25th August 2020 07:00 AM | Last Updated: 25th August 2020 06:12 PM  | **A+** **A** **A-**



Vinu with 'Thudi', a native musical instrument of Paniyar community

By Deena Theresa

Express News Service

KOCHI: “When our children listen to our Paniyar songs and comprehend its essence, they’ll recognise the legitimate masters and slaves of the land,” says 35-year-old Vinu Kidachulan, who hails from the Paniyar tribe, also known as

Paniya/Paniyan in Wayanad. Historically, they worked as slaves for landlords, though they have always belonged to the land and sustained themselves with agriculture.

Years of oppression, along with the takeover of a secondary language and its culture, have wrecked the tribal's community's indigenous expressions. In a quest to reclaim what is rightfully theirs, Vinu travels across the land and seeks elderly Adivasis to document Paniyar songs that have faded away over time. "During my schooling and later years, I had come to realise that many of us shied away from speaking our language, lest it is used as a weapon to demean us. Several Paniyar children were afraid to converse in their mother tongue, fearful of their identity being restricted to that of an Adivasi.

This is one reason why I decided to set forth, investigating the roots. In the process, I decided to bring back children into the fold by reciting songs sung by our great-grandparents. The Paniyar community comprises the largest population among all tribes in Wayanad, and yet our language is all we have. Therefore, I was keen to preserve the same," explains Vinu.

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Despite the government's repeated attempts to integrate the Paniyar students into mainstream education, several of them drop out before secondary school.

The fundamental reason being Malayalam, which acts as their second language. “The documented songs are repurposed and augmented with native instruments such as ‘thudi’ and Western ones like the guitar. These captivate our children.

Despite being majorly constituted by the Adivasi population, Wayanad does not have a mode of education which is culturally relevant to the tribes themselves. Studying the world through our indigenous language will teach children self-esteem and help them complete their education. This is my politics and my activism,” he says. The folk songs speak about the forest, spirits, birds, merriment, love and marriages. Vinu also started a band called ‘Kambalam’ with violin and drums, that performed on several avenues. He has also written and composed songs for movies.

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