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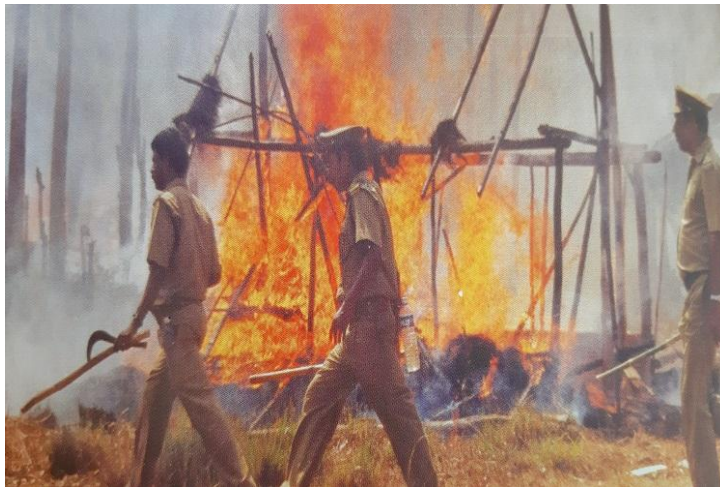
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Muthanga agitation: 16 yrs on, Wayanad tribals continue to fight for promised land

When Kerala government failed to give one-acre land to the Adivasis, around 617 families set up their tents in Muthanga forest as a sign of protest, marking the beginning of the agitation.



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On February 19, 2003, sounds of gunshots echoed through the forest of Muthanga in the Wayanad district of Kerala as the area witnessed men in uniform setting fire to the tents and huts set up by the Adivasis, who were fighting for the land that was promised to them by the State Government. Today, 16 years later, life hasn't changed much for many of these tribal families, who took part in the agitation in 2003.

Living in various colonies in Wayanad, these tribal families still live in the dream of receiving that one-acre land promised to each family. “If we get our promised land, we will grow coffee and pepper and live without depending on the forests and others for our livelihood,” says 38-year-old Ravi, leader of the Thiruvannur Adivasi colony near Sulthan Bathery.

The Thiruvannur colony, which is a part of the Noolpuzha Grama Panchayat, is one among the many tribal colonies in Wayanad that is still reeling from the ghosts of the 2003 agitation.

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Since then, the tribals of Wayanad get together in Muthanga on February 19, every year, to pay tribute to Jogi, an Adivasi who died during clashes with the police.



Thiruvannur colony.

When promised land became just a promise

Nestled amidst the silence and the towering trees, inside a forest, near the Mananthavady area of Wayanad district, it wasn't an easy task to reach the house of CK Janu, one of the leaders of the Muthanga agitation and leader of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS).

With two plastic chairs placed on the veranda of her single-storeyed house, Janu doesn't waste any time with small talk as she starts recapping the infamous Muthanga Adivasi agitation.

The Muthanga agitation in 2003 can be said to be one of the landmark protests in the history of the tribal communities in the country in their fight to obtain cultivable land. "It all began in 2001 after 30 tribals died of starvation. Following their deaths, thousands of tribals, led by the AGMS, took to a *kudil kettal samaram* (protest tents) outside the Chief Minister's office in Thiruvananthapuram," Janu tells TNM.



Police action against Adivasis, who were protesting in Muthanga on Feb 19,2003.

In 1975, the Kerala Government had passed a law promising to give cultivable land to all the tribals in the state. But despite this law, the successive governments in the state failed to keep up with their promise.

“The kudil kettal samaram in Thiruvananthapuram went on for close to 50 days until the government assured them that it will distribute land between one-acre and five-acres to all the Adivasis in the state,” Janu recalled.

The government kept its promise for one year, after which, according to Janu, they started to go back on their word. It was the United Democratic Front (UDF) government under Chief Minister AK Antony who was in power at that time.

In 2003, following inaction by the government, hundreds of tribals from various colonies in Wayanad entered the Muthanga forest region near the Karnataka border and set up their tents there and began cultivating in the land as a statement of protest against the Kerala government.

“Around 617 families had set up their tents in Muthanga and this means, there were close to 1,000 Adivasis, including children, in the agitation,” said Janu.

“We wanted the protest to be peaceful,” she says. “We knew there would be arrests and we came prepared for that. But none of us expected it to turn out the way it did,” she added.



On February 19, 2003, the state had sent the police force to evacuate the Adivasis from the region. “Instead of engaging in any forms of negotiation with the Adivasis, the police resorted to violence and forced to drive the Adivasis away from Muthanga,” recalls Janu.

Janu remembers that when the police set the tents on fire, the children who were witness to all this, felt terrified and began crying. “The mothers, who went to pick up their children, were also beaten up by the police,” she recalled in pain.

That day Janu was arrested by the police, along with K Geethanandan, who was one of the coordinators of the agitation. Janu states that both she and Geethanandan were tortured in police custody, just like many of the Adivasis who were arrested that day.



CK Janu being arrested during the Muthanga agitation.

According to Janu, the agitation in Muthanga gave the Adivasis the courage to fight for their rights. "It was following this agitation, that the whole concept of '*bhoomi samaram*' (protesting for land) was formed, where Adivasis would enter the land, set up tents and start cultivating as a sign of protest," Janu tells TNM.

But the scars that were left following the agitation still remains in Wayanad. It was not just Jogi who died during the clashes. A policeman, named Vinod had also died that day.



Jogi's memorial in Muthanga.

16 years on and no development yet

In the last 16 years, only 283 families, out of the 617 that took part in the agitation, have received the one-acre land each. According to Janu, the government cited the lack of availability of land as the reason for the delay. "But this is not true," she added.

Among the families who have not received their deserving land are the Paniyar tribes of the Thiruvannur colony, from where all the families had participated in the agitation. It is the men of this colony that go out to work as daily wage labourers while the women stay back at their homes and take care of the household chores.

Ravi, who was also the part of the Muthanga protest, is agitated as he speaks to TNM about the delay in allocating the land. "It's been 16 years. Every time we approach the officials, they keep telling us that we will get our land in the Irulam village in the Pulpally town in Wayanad. But it has been years and we haven't seen any developments yet," said Ravi.



Ravi.

The colony has a total of 42 families and in many of the families, there is at least one person who was arrested and harassed by the police following the agitation.

"Our life is anyway coming to an end. But we are fighting for our future generation, which should flourish on the land that was promised to us," said 50-year-old Karuppan.

"There is no space for the future generation to live here," he reminded.



Karuppan (right).

Chathi, a 69-year-old woman who was observing the men all this while, interrupted and told TNM that they have been dreaming of getting the land for many years now. “If we get our own land, our men don’t have to go deep inside the forest to get honey or cardamom or tea. We can cultivate all of that on our own land. We can also cultivate our daily food from our land. But what is the use of dreaming all of this if we are not getting the land?” she asks.

The members of the Paniyar tribe in the colony have expressed their displeasure at all the political parties. According to these tribal members, several political parties have ignored them during the agitation and even now. “During the agitation, all the political parties were against us and even now, no one comes to us, except for votes,” says an outraged Ravi.



‘Will give land in phased manner’

According to Vani Das, the Project Officer of the Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) in Kalpetta, the State Government is giving lands to the Adivasis in

various phases and only the first phase has been completed till now, during which 287 families were given one-acre land.

“The Government has kept aside land in various vested forest regions, but these forest regions have to be cleared of all the dense vegetation and made sure that there are water and other facilities before handing over the land. That is why there is so much of delay,” Vani Das told TNM.

The Project Officer also stated that it was not just the families that took part in the agitation that are landless. “The total Adivasi population in Wayanad comes up to around 1,53,000 belonging to around 36,100 families. Out of this, there are more than 8,000 homeless families. We have to give them land also, so the question of land availability also arises here,” said Vani Das.

He, however, emphasised that the Kerala government and the ITDP are working together to come up with various benefit schemes that include the Adivasis of Wayanad.