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MALAYALAM

Self-rule to serfs

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Rajeev KR

Little or nothing has changed for landless tribals 19 years since the Muthanga agitation. Meanwhile, C K Janu and M Geethanandan have gone their separate ways

On February 19, 2003, the sound of gunshots tore through the otherwise tranquil Muthanga forests in Wayanad as the police, with full sanction of the state government, started to 'evict' over 600 landless tribal families who had set up thatched huts inside the forest as part of



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the struggle for land promised to them. After the police fired 18 rounds amid violent clashes between the police and Adivasis which left two dead, including tribesman Jogi and policeman Vinod, scenes of brute force abounded as the huts set up by the protesters were set ablaze and the agitators including women and children were rounded up and bundled onto police vans.



The decision by Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS) to occupy the forest and declare 'self-rule' was taken in the backdrop of around 30 starvation deaths which had taken place in Wayanad district and also following the non-implementation of the pact entered with the state government in October 2001 at the end of a 48-day agitation before the state secretariat that one acre each would be given to all Adivasi families in the state and greater autonomy allowed for indigenous communities.

Though the agitation by tribals to assert their rights was crushed, the Muthanga agitation was historic for being a rare instance of the tribals of the state making

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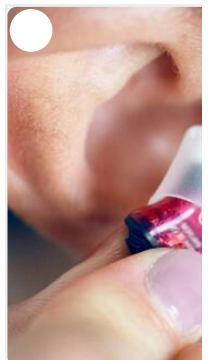
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their voice heard and also for the fact that it inspired many land agitations to come like the Nilpu Samaram and the land agitations at Aralam and Chengara.

However, nearly two decades after the agitation, tribal landlessness and alienation stare starkly at the face of the state's much vaunted Kerala Model. Of the over 600 families who had participated in the Muthanga agitation, only 287 have been provided land and tribals say many lands allotted are uninhabitable and are in landslide-prone locations.

Like every year, on the 19th anniversary of the Muthanga agitation on Saturday, the adivasis would gather at the memorial set up for tribal martyr Jogi to and conduct rituals as per tribal customs. But two icons of the agitation, tribal leader C K Janu and AGMS state coordinator M Geethanandan have long parted ways and are now a opposing ends of the political spectrum with Janu's political party Janathipathya Rashtreeya Sabha (JRS) joining as an ally of BJP-led NDA in 2016.

Janu's alliance with the BJP had come as a surprise considering the fact that she had made her political foray as a member of CPM-affiliated KSKTU and had emerged as a nationally known tribal land rights crusader through umpteen land agitations she had led since 1989. Janu's

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Faustian Bargain? C K Janu says that she had to ally with NDA as the two major fronts in the state -LDF and UDF -failed to give any consideration politically. "It was the LDF and UDF who should have given consideration for the tribals who for many gen-

erations were their vote bank. So, when another political dispensation was ready to give consideration to the people at the lowest strata of society by including them in the front, we allied with them," said Janu.

Asked about the perceived political contradiction of a leader like her with a legacy of fighting for the cause of the deprived sections, including Adivasis and dalits, joining hands with BJP and Sangh Parivar brand, Janu said, "If the crucial life issues of these people can be solved by even taking help from a devil who comes to devour you, then one should first take the help and how to handle the devouring part can be thought about later".

Janu said that even 19 years after the Muthanga agitation, the tribal protesters still have cases and legal proceedings against them going on in the courts. "It is a disgrace and will remain a dark chapter in the history that the tribals who took out

an agitation for their right to have a piece of land have to go through this ordeal for 19 years.

Most of them who are laborers are finding it difficult to conduct the cases with their meager daily wages. It has happened when both the successive LDF and UDF governments have withdrawn many political cases against their cadres when in power," she said.

Janu said that the Muthanga struggle had the positive fallout of making political parties realize that tribal landlessness was a burning problem and some major parties even resorted to agitations on their own.

She, however, said that the manner in which Kerala society responded towards the agitation in its immediate aftermath exposed the strongly entrenched bias against the Adivasis.

The crackdown by police and authorities was so brutal; it was though they didn't want any tribal to come to the forefront of a public movement in the future.

Branded As 'Maoists' AGMS leader M Geethanandan said that the land struggles organised by AGMS from the 1990s on-wards were an attempt to regain the community consciousness of the most marginalised tribal communities like Paniya, Adiya and

Kattunayikka communities who were left with only their cultural resources and were robbed of everything else.

“The attempt was to bring the tribal communities together on the land issue and set in motion a social reconstruction process. In the beginning, the state government took a positive view which led to the signing of the agreement with the A K Antony government and on seeing the initial success, the tribal communities were feeling victorious. But when it started growing, the authorities suppressed it,” he said.

“When tribals demand autonomy it is construed as extremism and secession and those who demand land are termed extremists. It is also a reflection of the deeply ingrained retrograde thinking in a caste society,” he said. Asked if the parting of ways with Janu had affected the joint tribal movements led by AGMS, he said that it has had an impact as Janu was a nationally-acclaimed figure. But now they have been able to overcome it to a great extent, he added. He said that Janu’s joining hands with the NDA should be viewed in multiple perspectives.

“To a large extent, it is the failure of main democratic parties like CPM and Congress to embrace Janu which made her go to the rightist fold. While those parties had even made so many film stars

as their candidates in elections, they didn't recognize a nationally acclaimed person from one of the most oppressed communities who wanted to enter politics. It was from that sense of frustration she aligned with the NDA. We can't wholly blame Janu alone for that though the path she took was wrong. But whatever she has done for the tribal cause cannot be forgotten," Geethanandan said.

On the Muthanga anniversary this year, the AGMS is holding a two-day workshop on Tribal Land, Forest Rights and the PESA (Panchayat (Extension of the Scheduled Areas) Act at Sulthan Bathery on Saturday and Sunday.

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