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Keep promise, ensure land for Kerala

In the
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the 20th century, farmers from central Travancore migrated to the hill ranges



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In this representational image, Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha leader C K Janu interacts with community members at Pulimoodukunnu colony near Mananthavady. (Photo | T P Sooraj)

The 2003 Muthanga agitation was a milestone in Kerala tribals' struggle for their rights, and the violence it culminated in should be considered one of the darkest episodes in the state's sociopolitical history. The agitation for land rights during which the tribals, led by their leaders like C K Janu, an uneducated woman born to slave parents, occupied plantations in Wayanad district, took a violent turn on February 19, 2003, when the state chose to use its muscle power to silence the voices of anguish and protest. The resultant police action claimed the lives of two people—a policeman and a tribal leader—and hundreds were injured. Though the agitation failed to achieve its goal, it succeeded in bringing the issues faced by the community under the national glare.

The struggle of the adivasis, who constitute about 1.5% of the state's population, for land rights, is a story of betrayal by successive governments. In the early decades of the 20th century, farmers from central Travancore migrated to the hill ranges of Idukki and Malabar. They deceitfully acquired lands from tribals by wooing their men with alcohol and tobacco.

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Though the government enacted the Kerala Scheduled Tribes Restriction on Transfer of Land and Restoration of Alienated Land Act in 1975, the implementation was lax. By 1991, around 53,000 tribal families had lost their land holdings, which prompted the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha to launch a struggle. In 2001, the A K Antony-led UDF government agreed to provide one to five acres of land to tribal families. But the project lost steam under the influence of settlers and other vested interests.

Out of frustration due to constant betrayal, 800 tribal families occupied three plantations in the Muthanga forest area in Wayanad in 2003.

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Two decades on, the plight of the tribals remains the same. Though around 35,000 families have been provided land, they cannot avail of any government benefits, including compensation for crop loss and loans, as they have not been provided with title deeds. It is a fact that the tribals have been subjected to exploitation for centuries, and we now need concrete steps to correct the wrongs done to them. Justice delayed is certainly justice denied in this case. It is high time the government ensured that the tribals could live dignified lives preserving their tradition and culture. Providing them with long-promised land with full ownership rights is the least it can do.

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