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Muthanga: Tribal Land Struggles Amid Promises And Perfidies – OpEd

📅 February 20, 2023 👤 K.M. Seethi 💬 0 Comments

By [K.M. Seethi](#)

It's been twenty years since the state of Kerala in South India witnessed an unprecedented tribal land struggle. It was on 19 February 2003 that the Adivasi (tribal) community in the northern part of Kerala experienced violent bouts, including firing, from the state police following their long agitation for land rights. After twenty years, the leaders of the Adivasi movement who spearheaded the agitation admit that the social conditions of these marginalized communities remain as they were, notwithstanding public debates and follow-up land struggles across the state.

The Adivasi land struggle has a long history, marked by promises and



perfidies in the hands of both the state and the settlers in the Adivasi lands. The most fundamental cause of such struggles is land alienation in the wake of the intrusion of settlers into the Adivasi land. This forced them to organize themselves though they constituted

only a small minority of 1.43 percent of the State's population. Owing to land encroachment, more than three-fourths of Adivasis became landless and their social conditions are still far below the state average. Though the Indian Parliament passed the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, which recognizes the rights of the forest-dwelling tribal communities and other traditional forest dwellers to forest resources, the Adivasi community in Kerala remains deprived of all benefits of FRA.

Muthanga Struggle

For the 4.8-lakh Adivasis of Kerala, what happened on 19 February 2003 in Muthanga, in the Wayanad district of Kerala, was a sort of unprecedented 'state terrorism,' as told by the leaders. They say that with the violence being let loose on a large scale, the Adivasis became virtually 'humans without human dignity'. Muthanga had even drawn the attention of the world on account of the violence perpetrated on the unarmed indigenous people – that too when only months were away from the finale of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2004). For the Adivasis, the decade that was just passing over was a decade of empty promises and betrayals, and hopes and frustrations culminating in a witch-hunt assuming violent proportions. This was the first time in the history of Kerala that the Adivasis became the target of police firing and brutality which resulted in deaths and destruction. Questions were also raised as to why the media personnel were not allowed to enter the area when the operation was underway against the Adivasis. During the operation, which lasted for almost 18 hours, the police cordoned off the entire area creating a panicky situation. Many Adivasis and human rights activists believed that the police as they went berserk within the forest area would have buried all evidence of brutality.

Hundreds of Adivasis belonging to Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS) led by C.K. Janu and M. Geethanandan had occupied the forestland in

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Muthanga in early January 2003 in protest against the government's inaction on the promises made to them in 2001. The AGMS had made it clear from the beginning that the tribals would leave the forest only after the government conceded their demands. The leaders also insisted that any further discussion on the land issue could be held only with the Chief Minister. The Adivasis had put up huts and other shelters in the area and announced that they would start cultivating the occupied area. However, even after weeks of their occupation of the forest land, the government chose to remain silent. In fact, the Adivasi leaders were expecting a call from the State capital to start talks on the land issue. But the State cabinet, which met a few days before the Muthanga operation, had decided "not to take any immediate steps to settle the issue" as "the time was not ripe for talks." This was seen as criminal negligence of a democratically elected government.

The circumstances that led to the police firing and subsequent brutal 'follow-up' operation need to be looked into against the background of the developments that commenced in 1975 when the State Assembly adopted legislation on land alienation of Adivasis. The Adivasis had at their disposal large tracts of forests in the State, particularly in Palakkad, Wayanad, Idukki, Pathanamthitta, Kollam, and Thiruvananthapuram districts. These lands were slowly but steadily taken over by settlers, and successive governments were only passive spectators while the encroachment drive was gradually underway. As the pressure on land had increased in the plains, non-Adivasi settlers further went ahead with a land grab. The 1975 Act had assured the Adivasis that their alienated land would be given back. However, the euphoria was short-lived. All governments that came to power in Kerala since 1975 were still reluctant to implement the provisions of the Act, obviously under pressure from the settlers. Meanwhile, the State government formulated rules for the restoration of alienated lands half-heartedly. But nothing happened. Instead, the government went ahead with other measures to short-circuit the provisions of the 1975 Act. This was actually the background of the Adivasi mobilization.

It was estimated that there were 4.8 lakh Adivasi people in Kerala (with more than a lakh families). Evidently, as many as 50 percent of families were landless. Under the provisions of the 1999 Act, there were only 4,500 applications, which meant a good majority of the landless Adivasis would not come under the purview of the new Act. In fact, the starvation deaths reported during this time were from these landless Adivasis. For example, when the Adivasis launched their agitation in August 2001, not less than 32 Adivasis had died of starvation in a few weeks' time. The agitation was in the midst of that year's Onam festival when starvation deaths were reported in the State. Led by the Adivasi-Dalit Agitation Committee, hundreds of Adivasis started streaming into

Search

the State capital from the forests and mountain regions and had put up huts in front of the Chief Minister's official house as well as the State Secretariat. Their major demand was that 45,000 landless Adivasi families be given five acres each of cultivable land. At this stage, the Adivasi leadership had come to the realization that their attempts to recover alienated land from the settler farmers would result in a new set of contradictions given the fact that all political parties had a common stake in the 'affairs' of the settler farmers. Adivasi leadership itself pointed out that all governments were playing hide and seek on this question by pointing to the issue of 'tension' between Adivasis and settler farmers. Meanwhile, they were reported to have identified 11 lakh acres of land that could be easily available for distribution. It may be recalled that the government needed to distribute only less than 3 lakh acres to provide land to all landless Adivasis in the State.

Pointing to the bitter experiences in the past, many had argued that the Adivasi demand for – 'land for all' – might result in the large-scale illegal transfer of Adivasi land to non-Adivasis. It was at this time that the Adivasis decided to form the Adivasi Dalit Samara Samithy to spearhead

the movement. The Samithy set up a council of leaders representing the 34 tribal communities in Kerala that eventually led to the formation of the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (Adivasi parliament) on 3 October 2001 at Thiruvananthapuram. The AGMS sought to mobilise support not only from the Adivasi communities but also from broad sections of civil society. The struggle went on for more than a month and a half. But the government did not show any interest in addressing the issues raised by them. This was the background of C.K. Janu's declaration of a fast unto death. Facing widespread public criticism, the government then decided to initiate talks with the leaders.

The 48-day-old struggle of the tribal people in Kerala ended on 16 October 2001 in the wake of a seven-point agreement between the State government and the Adivasi Dalit Action Council. The agreement assured, among other things, that wherever possible, the government would provide five acres of land to each landless Adivasi family; at other places, the offer is a minimum of one acre, which may go up to five acres depending on the availability of land; and a five-year livelihood program would be implemented in the land thus provided until it

becomes fully productive for Adivasis to sustain themselves. Many called the conclusion of the agreement as a 'historic triumph' and 'a morale booster' for similar struggles across the country. It is true that the agitators' main demand that all landless Adivasi families be provided with five acres each was not fully conceded. Yet, the agitation was seen as a near success given the fact that for the first time, landless Adivasis in Kerala got a positive commitment from the government on, at least, one acre of land. They were also to get the protection of a new law preventing any further alienation of their land. The most significant aspect of the agitation was that the agenda of the five decades-old Adivasi struggle in Kerala had been changed from the 'restoration of alienated land' to 'land for the landless tribal people.'

The then chief minister of Kerala announced, after the agreement that the government would try to get lands in Wayanad where the number of landless Adivasis was the highest, besides the 42,000 acres of land already identified for this purpose in different parts of the State. For the fourteen months since October 2001, till the AGMS occupied lands in Muthanga, the government went on delaying the implementation of the agreement. Though the government had officially started land distribution, it turned out to be a farce. By April 2002, 568 families were provided with 1308 acres of land when the Chief Minister, along with C.K Janu of AGMS, began the first land distribution at Marayur in Idukki District. That means just 1.06 percent of the families were provided 2.2 percent of the identified land within the first four months of the period earmarked to complete the task. However, nothing much had happened after that, except the report appeared in the media that the land actually allotted was 1770 to 848 families, i.e., only 3 percent of the promised land. The government continued its negligence by bringing in numerous legal and administrative hurdles. This was the background of the Muthanga struggle and the consequent violence unleashed by the State.

As public opinion gathered momentum in favour of the Adivasis after the Muthanga violence, particularly with the intervention of different agencies such as the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the government of Kerala had to order an independent inquiry. Thus, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) stepped in for a comprehensive inquiry into police firing and the circumstances leading to violence. But the Adivasis, having been disappointed subsequently, alleged that it was a sham investigation because the CBI report concluded that the Adivasis were 'trespassers.' Later, the CBI even justified the forcible eviction of Adivasis, saying that the police had taken action following untoward incidents.

The Muthanga episode, however, enhanced the political consciousness

of the Adivasis in the state. After that, even mainstream political parties began capitalizing on the Adivasi sentiments. The Muthanga struggle had also strengthened the Dalit political consciousness in the state. Aralam and Chengara land struggles need to be viewed in this background. C.K. Janu and others argued that as a result of the mobilization, hundreds of landless families benefitted. They said that the dominant parties in the state—who wielded political power from time to time—never did anything to provide land to Adivasis. During the post-Muthanga period, however, they were compelled to talk about the land rights of Adivasis. AGMS believed that they acted as a catalyst for setting an agenda of 'land for landless.'

Two decades have gone since Muthanga, and the leaders like C.K. Janu acknowledged that they could not do much to carry forward the struggle though it could evoke substantial sympathy from the wider public that continued to influence the decisions of the government on questions related to Dalits and Adivasis. The most lasting contribution of the Muthanga struggle was that the Adivasis began asserting as a collective social entity with increasing consciousness about their right to live in society. The Adivasi leaders, however, admitted later that there were also symptoms of the disintegration of Adivasi solidarity. This was mainly due to the continuing apathy of the state and their existential struggle for survival and livelihood. The Adivasis found it difficult to survive if they did not go for their daily work.

For some sections, the Muthanga struggle also offered some bitter lessons. Notwithstanding all these compelling factors, Adivasis leaders believed that they became critically conscious of their rights, dignity, and distinctiveness. Yet, even after several years of the Muthanga struggle, the restoration of land to the Adivasis continued to be a major pending question. Before Muthanga a mere 1.06 percent of the families were provided with land within the first four months of the stipulated 12 months period. There has not been any major change in these figures in spite of the efforts underway. This was projected to be a major reason why a leader like C.K. Janu opted to be a part of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Janu even contested with the BJP's support. For the NDA, the State Assembly Election 2016 was a litmus test of its capability to break the bipolar coalition dispensation. Hence it sought to bring in a rainbow coalition of various caste-communal groups in the state. Thus, the Adivasis again became another object of exploitation in the hands of the Sangh Parivar in the state. The Adivasi movement today faces the most critical existential crisis in spite of the limited achievements, following their mobilization through the framework of identity politics. However, the Muthanga episode will be remembered in history as yet another case of collective perfidy – of the successive state governments, political parties, and other forces in the

state.

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