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RIGHTS

Fifteen Years Since Muthanga, Promise of Land to Kerala's Adivasis Remains Unfulfilled

Sudheesh R.C.

19/Feb/2018 5 min read



Land redistribution measures in the state need to move beyond merely parceling out land.



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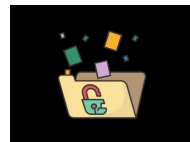
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February 19, 2018, marks 15 years of the Muthanga incident, when the police clashed with Adivasis protesting under the banner of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS) in Muthanga, Wayanad district. Jogi, an Adivasi protestor, and Vinod, a policeman, were killed in the clash. The incident became a turning point in the history of Kerala, etching the Adivasi voice in the public sphere like never before.

The protest was launched after the Congress-led government failed to act on its promise of giving land to Adivasis, reached at the end of a 48-day long struggle by the latter in the state capital Thiruvananthapuram in 2001. Every landless Adivasi household was promised one to five acres of land.



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Gopalan, a resident of Noolpuzha *panchayat* in Wayanad district and a participant of the protests, recently received an acre – 15 years after the incident.

“The land is in Meppadi. Really good soil. It will take us about six months to clear the land and prepare it for farming, but we will do it,” said Gopalan who is positive about rebuilding his life and moving out of the “colony” that he currently lives in.

Gopalan would become a small peasant working the new land with family labour. For much of history, the Paniya Adivasi community that he belongs to had been landless, bonded agricultural labourers. Those who had some land lost it to settlers from other parts of Kerala or to state reservation of forests. Kerala’s famed land reforms of the 1970s did not touch them. Laws passed in 1975 and 1999 to restore alienated lands back to Adivasis were diluted over time.

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While Gopalan moves to his new land, a large number of Adivasi households – around 12,000 as per state government figures – would continue to remain landless in the state. The number is likely to be much higher considering many have just a couple of cents of land to live on and nothing to use as a productive asset.

Colonies

These landless households are ghettoised in as many as 4,762 “colonies” across Kerala, 2,167 in Wayanad alone. In Gopalan’s neighbourhood, Geetha recently had to move out of the house of her in-laws with her three children as there wasn’t enough space for ten members in the two-room house. Each new generation adds new houses to the already crowded colony.

Once, while chatting about *Nadikalaakan Kshanikkunnu* (“inviting you to be rivers”), a Malayalam novel set in the backdrop of Adivasi colonies, I asked Geetha if she liked it. “The part where she (the protagonist) does not have land to bury her beloved and digs a hole inside the hut was most touching. It has happened to many of us,” she replied.

The term colony also acquires a casteist connotation at times. Often, I hear (upper caste) residents of Wayanad referring to a lone-standing Adivasi house as a “colony” in conversations.

Geetha now lives in a shed covered with plastic sheets at the edge of the settlement. The colony has one potable water connection for around 20 households under Jalanidhi – a government scheme that makes water available for a user fee.

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rights. Meanwhile, the Kerala Institute for Research, Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (KIRTADS), a government body whose **stated objective** is to “identify the needs and problems confronting the marginalised section of the population” is currently **occupied in spending Rs 16 crore on museumising Adivasis.**

Policies

Understandably, land has become the lynchpin of Adivasi mobilisations in the state. However, even as five lakh acres of government land **remains in the illegal possession of plantation companies**, and prime lands have been opened up to corporations like **the Adani Group for infrastructure projects**, finding land for Adivasis has remained a challenge for successive governments. The government actually does not know how much land it has; a full-fledged land survey commissioned in 1965 remains incomplete with data collected for only half the number of revenue villages.

Kerala holds the record for passing the highest number of claims (65%) under the **Forest Rights Act**. However, it does not cover the large number of Adivasi households which have been living outside the forests, like Geetha's.

A recent policy wherein the government sought to buy land for Adivasis from private persons is currently in suspended animation. The policy was called Aashikkum Bhoomi Adivasikku (“for Adivasis, land that they desire”) and was launched in 2013. Although the policy provides for buying land up to an acre (and not less than 25 cents), the average land per household bought so far has been just 34.8 cents (a total of 194.45 acres to 558 households).

Adivasi leaders who I spoke to expressed disappointment with the way the policy turned out. Bureaucrats could fix a price that they found suitable in the initial stages, as beneficiaries were not involved in the monetary transactions. Many beneficiaries received lands that were not habitable or arable.

Changes in land use and labour

Land itself has been undergoing changes stealthily in the backdrop. Gopalan has been desperate to find work since agricultural labour is now hard to find with **paddy cultivation in Wayanad under crisis**. Tourism has ushered in additional pressure on land: the panchayat he lives in has 44 resorts now as per the panchayat office records, standing on at least two acres each. The next panchayat of Sulthan Bathery has been quietly urbanising and was upgraded to a municipality towards the end of 2017. Upper-caste households are switching from farming to businesses and service sector jobs for wealth accumulation.

Gopalan, like many from his community, has been migrating to various districts of Karnataka for work in ginger farms since the 1990s. Entrepreneurial farmers from non-Adivasi communities in Wayanad lease land in these districts and grow ginger, speculating a boom. While some have lost all investment, others have accumulated large fortunes. When I had come for fieldwork in 2012, I found many Paniya houses empty as adult members had all gone for work to “Kodagu”, the district in Karnataka where the ginger trend began. Kodagu has now come to refer any ginger district in Karnataka.

Of late, however, local labourers in Karnataka have picked up the farming techniques and are fast replacing the Paniyas. These labourers take a contract together and work for a fraction of the wages that the Paniyas demand. Back home, the booming construction sector still provided some work to the Paniyas. However, migration of male labourers from the eastern states of Bihar, Bengal, Odisha and Assam, probably pushed by agrarian changes in these states, is providing stiff competition as they are given a much lower wage – around Rs 300 – compared to the prevailing market wage of Rs 500 for male labourers in Wayanad. “I cannot work for that less if I have to feed the family,” notes Gopalan.

His excitement at moving to the one acre he just received would make sense in this backdrop. The plan is to test out tapioca first. Gopalan is hopeful about a future in agriculture, despite the larger picture: Kerala has been moving out of agriculture with paddy as well as tapioca **recording a fall in the area as well as production**. Most of the wealth accumulation in agriculture has been happening in cash crops requiring huge investments, something that Gopalan would not be able to afford.

Geetha, meanwhile, relies entirely on work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). Wages currently stand at just Rs 263 per day. She barely gets 100 days of work in a year. “Upper-caste workers who are local ADSs (area development secretaries from the Kudumbashree who mobilise as well as participate in NREGA work) mark their attendance in the register and go for works that provide higher wages, like picking coffee,” Geetha points out. “We STs (scheduled tribes) have to work their share as well so that the inspectors do not reduce our wages citing incomplete work”. Thus, for the little that Geetha receives, she has to work extra to helplessly hide the accumulative strategies of landed, upper-caste workers in NREGA.

“Education is the only way forward. The Kurumas (an Adivasi community that has owned some land traditionally) are far ahead of us in education and *sarkar joli* (public employment),” added Geetha, while recollecting her failed experiment with farming paddy on a piece of land for a share to the landlord.

Gopalan and Geetha represent Adivasis trying to make sense of land in the midst of the structural changes occurring around them. Land redistribution measures, then, would need to consider such changing expectations, rather than merely parcel out land.

Legality and intergenerational changes

Inspired by the Muthanga story, Geetha too had occupied and squatted on a piece of land nearby, along with a couple of other households. Geetha was given a *kaivasharekha*, a certificate of temporary possession, but was rejected *pattayam*, the full title, after a wait of four years. “Kaivasharekha means nothing,” said Geetha sternly.

I heard the same exclamation from several Adivasi households that had only a certificate of temporary possession. In Aralam in the neighbouring Kannur district, 3,000 acres of an agricultural farm were redistributed to 3,000 Adivasi households, starting 2004. No *pattayam* has been given yet. “We cannot cut a tree there if we need to. Then how do you expect us to call it our land?” asked Koyma, a Paniya resident on the campus, referring to the *kaivasharekha*.

Even with a *pattayam*, Adivasis cannot ordinarily sell redistributed land. Banks frown upon at these lands as collateral as they cannot be confiscated in an event of default. The other route to a bank loan is to have a relative with assets or a public servant stand as guarantor, a luxury that the Paniyas cannot afford.

Restrictions on the sale and use of land by Adivasis are, of course, located in the historical context of land alienation. However, in the current times, Adivasis seem to be questioning the children-of-the-soil image ascribed to them. Receiving land does not automatically lead to a romantic relationship with land; full rights are what provides meaning to the relationship.

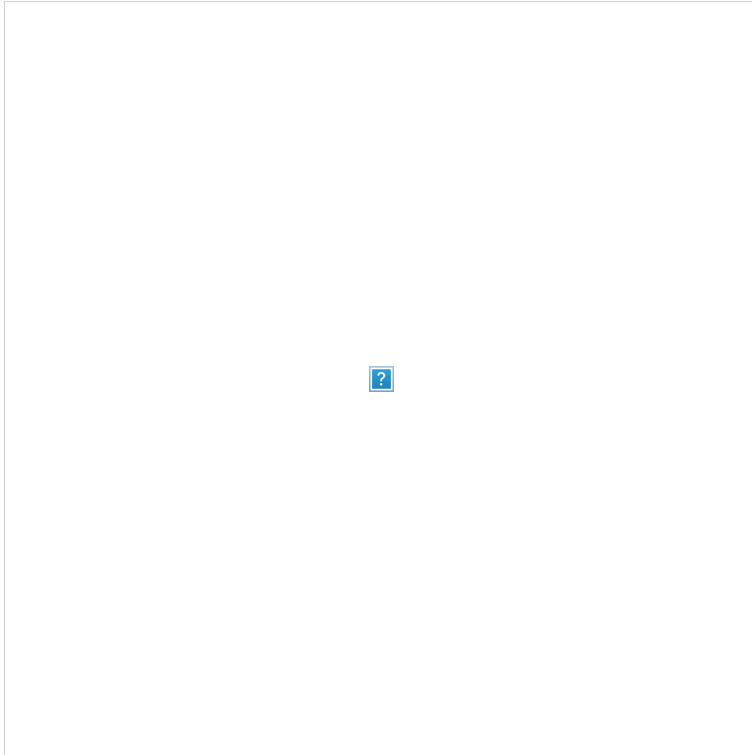
Meanwhile, the uncertain status of the *kaivasharekha* has not deterred Balan from working the redistributed land he received in Aralam. He has planted rubber on the one acre and does not sleep most nights to guard them from wild animals. The trees will take another four or five years before latex can be tapped.

“Would your son be interested in doing rubber when the trees mature?” I ask. “I really don’t know. He doesn’t like to come to this ‘forest’ from his school hostel. He prefers the town.” Balan seems to be pointing in Geetha’s direction when he talks of a future beyond land in the case of the next generation.

On December 11, 2017, youth belonging to the Paniya, Adiya and Kattunaika Adivasi communities staged a protest in front

of the Kerala Public Service Commission (PSC) office in the district headquarters against the commission's laxity in recruiting members of these communities as "forest watchers" in the department of forests and wildlife.

Activists involved say that landless Adivasi communities fare far below than the landed ones in receiving education, PSC coaching and employment, and thus need special recruitments. Slowly, but steadily, Adivasi struggles that move beyond land are picking up in Wayanad.



The protest staged by Adivasi youth for employment. The banner reads: "Adivasi youth unite to wrest rights from PSC-bureaucracy-political nexus that sabotaged the special recruitment of Paniya, Adiya and Kattunaika youth". Credit: Sudheesh R.C.

The old and the new players

The banned Communist Party of India (Maoist), with its **dated understanding of land and agrarian change**, has been losing influence in the Adivasi areas. It received a severe blow in November 2016 when two of its workers were **killed in a police encounter**.

The Paniyas are currently split between the Adivasi wings of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Congress and a dozen other autonomous movements and forums.

C.K. Janu, the former AGMS leader, had shook the state around the legislative assembly elections in 2016 when she formed a new party – the Janadhipathya Rashtriya Sabha (JRS) – that allied with the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

But the Sangh seems to make its entry directly in the Adivasi

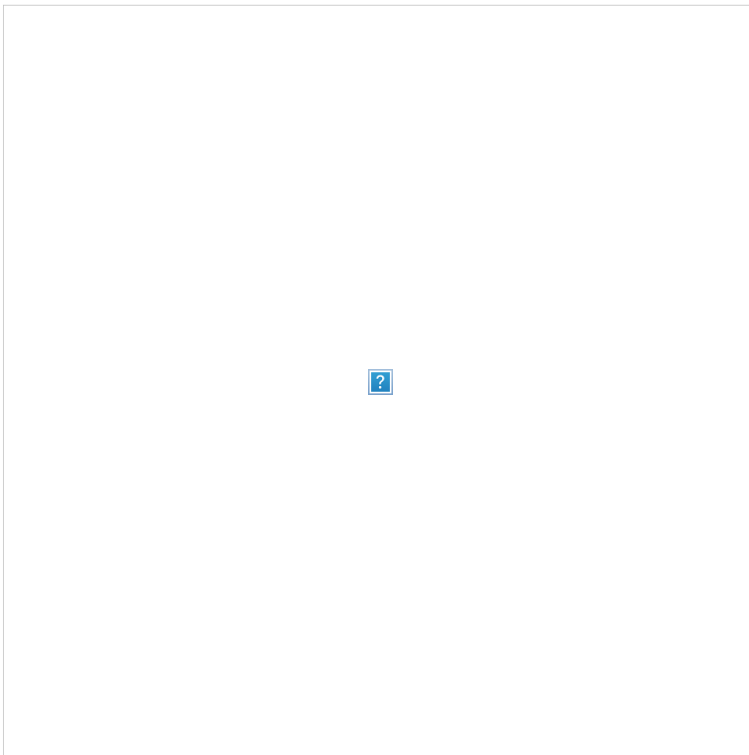
settlements rather than through the JRS. In settlement after settlement, Adivasi kids and youth can be spotted wearing the saffron thread – symbolic of Sangh *parivar* affiliation.

Rajan, who lives in a Paniya settlement just outside Aralam Farm, had left the AGMS and joined the Vanavasi Kalyan Samithi, the Adivasi wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. “Both the Left and the Right (the Congress in Kerala) have betrayed us,” Rajan notes. Inviting me to sit out on the ground, he adds “Let the land hear what we speak”.

Rajan has been thinking about the issue of landlessness. “Land redistribution is just an issue of planning, something that can be easily solved if the funds are utilised well. I read all the newspapers and watch all TV channels [to see how they cover Adivasi issues]. Only Janam TV (a channel with a saffron bend) does it well.”

Like Rajan, the NDA has also been doing its homework. On January 10, 2017, a rally was taken to the Wayanad district collector’s office under the banner of “SC-ST Morcha”, highlighting the issue of Adivasi landlessness. The narrative used was borrowed from autonomous Dalit-Adivasi movements, invoking land held illegally by plantations and ongoing land struggles in Chengara and Aripa. The Paniya participants of the rally merely said they were following the others while coming down to the collector’s office.

Land is thus proving to be an Achilles’ heel in Kerala politics for the Sangh to make inroads into the Adivasi settlements.



The rally by BJP in the district headquarters of Wayanad. The banner reads: “Thousands of Landless Adivasi households, households without pattayam, increasing atrocities against the Adivasis: Collectorate march and rally: SC-ST Morcha District Committee, Wayanad”. Credit: Sudheesh R.C.

What is land?

Dalit leader Jignesh Mevani's rallying call of "Keep your cow's tail, give us our land" has once again highlighted at the national level the significance of land for marginalised social groups. Fifteen years on, Muthanga still reminds the Kerala society of its unfulfilled land promises to the Adivasis.

At the same time, land is not a static entity. In the context of Adivasi landlessness in Kerala, land has become a record of the changing patterns of tussles between different political groups to bring the Adivasis under their fold and gain/retain visibility. It is also a register of structural changes happening around. Land acquires meaning through the specific permutations of prevailing notions of value, legal-administrative instruments used to control access and intergenerational changes in aspirations, among others. Rajan, Gopalan and Geetha are all navigating these features of land through their own struggles.

Land redistribution that does not take these complexities into account is likely to remain merely land distribution, devoid of its egalitarian spirit.

Note: Names of people have been changed to protect their identity.

Sudheesh R.C. is a DPhil candidate at the department of international development, University of Oxford. His work engages with the impacts of agrarian change and land policies on landless Adivasis in Kerala.

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