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Muthanga Police Firing: The Unthinkable is Happening In Kerala

By V. Muhammad Sharif

It all began on the 18th of February when the Adivasi Gothrasabha volunteers captured and made hostage 10 police men, three foresters and 43 others who came into the Thakarapadi forest. There are two versions why they came into the forest. The official version is that these people came to the forest to control the fire allegedly lit by the agitating adivasis (tribals). The adivasis argue that the force came to the forest to kill them by lighting a fire around them and that's why they took them hostage. The strikers argue that the officials and their collaborators had brought with them elephant dung in order to lit it and throw it into the forest. They even showed to the reporters, the elephant dung captured from the jeep in which the gang arrived .

On the next day, with the mediation of the district collector, the hostages were released. The account given by the hostages were contradictory. Some said that they were sent to put out the fire, some others said that they were asked to set fire to the forest. There was an effort to hide Jayan, the 12 year old boy, who told the reporters that he was asked to light the elephant dung with kerosene and throw it into the forest.

At the same time, there was a demonstration going on outside the forest for the blood of the Adivasi Gothrasabha leaders, Geethanathan and C. K. Janu. The police and the foresters who easily outnumbered the 100 odd demonstrators could not control them. The demonstrators broke the police cordon and entered the forest held by the agitators. The Adivasis came from the otherside with bows and arrows. Although police stood in between them and forced them to turnback, they did not take both parties into custody. If it were done the sad things that followed could have been avoided.

Wednesday, February 19. 8.00 AM

A force of around 800 police men begin operation to evacuate the Thakarapadi forest occupied by the strikers. K. Unni, Dy.S.P of Kalpatta, K. V. Satheesan, Dy.S.P of Mananthavadi, Sasidharan, Circle Inspector, KAP, led the force into the forest. Shankar Reddy, D.I.G of Police, Nadesan ,Superintendent of Police Wayand, Sureshraj Purohit, K.A.P commandant, K. Gopalan, district collector of Wayanad, camped at the Muthanga forest range office and monitored the action.

9.00 AM

Police and the adivasis come face to face inside the forest. Police ask the agitator to give up their arms and surrender. The arms the agitators had were nothing more than bows and arrows and agriculture utensils like sickles and axes. Adivasis declare they will not give up the land even if they have to die for that. Police fire tear gas shells into the agitators. And there is a direct confrontation between police and the agitators. Police capture 10 adivasis and the others retreat into the forest.

Adivasis turn back at Kakkappadam forest, one kilometre into the forest. Police were standing in a low valley and the agitators were standing on the two small hills on either side. Suddenly the agitators set fire to the forest surrounding the policemen. Police turned back and started to move forward from another side. A police man was hacked by the agitators. Two more police men were hacked. Gun shots were heard. Police followed the agitators two kilometers into the forest. Police capture about 50 agitators. Most of them women and children. The captured agitators were brutally beaten up.

10.30 AM

Karimunda forest. The police force, foresters and the day labourers of the forest department reunite and plan strategies to capture the escaped adivasis. "200 adivasis have escaped. Don't let anyone get away" DY.S.P Unni orders his men. After taking a light refreshment with some water and banana the search re-starts.

11.10 AM

Perumkuzhi forest. A 10 member police search team led by sub inspectors K. Chathu and Unnikrishnan are attacked a group of strikers numbering 100. Unnikrishnan fires into the strikers with his service revolver. Both the parties run away for safety. Both the sub inspectors and the women constables Premavalli, Shantha and Baby are injured. Dy.S.P Unni asks all the force to come together.

11.40 AM

The Whole force come together and goes into the Ponkuzhi forest. After walking one and half kilometers, the force come near a large temporary shelter. About 200 agitators are standing around it. Police constable Azeez is hacked by the agitators. His leg was almost torn and blood was flowing. He was removed from the place using a stretcher. The police force was angered and they were nearing the shelter with rifles pointed at the strikers. The police asks the strikers to surrender and leave the forests. The strikers reply that they won't give up the land. Police warns that if they do not surrender they will be shot dead.

Gothra Mahasabha third commandant Ashokan comes forward and challenges the police to open fire. "Kill us all. These nursing children, these women, kill us all ... shoot...." tearing open his shirt front Ashokan shouts at the police.

Police opened fire nine rounds into the air. The agitators do not retreat.

Ashokan tells the police that if they shoot into the people two of their men will be killed. The police were surprised. They did not know that police constable Vinod and forester T.K. Sasidharan were captured.

Dy.S.P. Unni asked "Where are the hostages?" The strikers lifted the bleeding leg of the constable Vinod who later died.

12.20 A.M

K.A.P circle inspector Sasidharan asks Ashokan to come forward and negotiate. Ashokan tells that the agitators wont negotiate with the police. He asks the police to withdraw from the forest.

Dy.S.P Unni who was leading the operation approached the press and asked to mediate. Mediation by the press was acceptable to Ashokan also. But police must withdraw, he demanded. As a compromise, police force retreated 50 meters. Ashokan reveals that five Adivasis also were injured in the police firing, they also need medical attention. He demands that a doctor be brought into the camp. It was not acceptable to the police. The police demands that the agitators must release the police and the injured adivasis for treatment. Ashokan's proposal that the injured shall be released, if the police withdraw from the forest and if the collector give the assurance that the adivasis will not be attacked, was not acceptable to the police.

Circle Inspector Sasidharan comes forward warns again "Surrender, or we will shoot. You all would die, including women and children. What's the point of killing the police men? Surrender, we can discuss the land issue later."

"Who gave you the authority to shoot? We know that even at the cabinet meeting held at 8.30 AM this morning it was not ordered shoot at us" Ashokan shot back. (Ashokan did not reveal the source of this information when reporters queried how he came to know of this.) Ashokan told the police that the hostages and the injured adivasis are in critical condition and the police would be responsible for their death.

C.I Sasidharan asks to let him see the injured men and then he'll decide. Ashokan says he can not allow it but shall let in a reporter. Thus I was given the responsibility to visit the hostages.

I went into the camp with Ashokan. Vinod, the police constable and the injured forester were soaked in blood. They are lying in dried grass. There was pungent smell of kerosene. A fire was burning nearby. A volunteer was standing nearby holding a burning torch, ready to set fire. There were five adivasis also injured in the police firing. Geethanathan was inside the camp, overseeing everything. My efforts to talk to the hostages were interrupted by the

volunteers. They asked me to leave the place. When I came back empty handed, the police men were crest fallen.

C.I Sasidharan again asked for help from the press. Reporters again approached Ashokan and pleaded with him for negotiation. He went back to the camp and came back with a note, written by Gethananthan. The demands were

1. The police should bring back to the camp all the Adivasis taken into custody.
2. The injured Adivasis should be taken to hospital
3. Whole police force should be withdrawn from the forest
4. The forest department officials who tried to kill the Adivasis by setting fire to the forest should be removed from service.
5. Order a C.B.I enquiry into the fire
6. Pay compensation to the Adivasis for destroying their huts and food
7. Allot land to the Adivasis as per the agreements

The police were helpless as most of the demands were beyond their power. The negotiations were at a standstill.

1.00 PM

Ashokan approaches the press. The police man is dieing. A doctor should be brought to the camp. The police stick to their stand that doctor will not be brought to the forest. "Release them to us, we will do what is necessary." Police retorts.

2.30 PM

Sasidharan again comes forward. " Are you going to surrender? What is your final decision?" "No more negotiations, We will not surrender" The strikers are adamant. Women, children, men with sickles, bows and arrows, all come forward shouting slogans. The policemen contacted the officers camping at Muthanga and started to withdraw.

With the relief that the policemen were withdrawing from the place agitators started to cook. They had not eaten anything during the whole day.

5.10 PM

Police vans started arriving at Ponkuzhi on the Calicut - Bangalore national high way and the police started to march into the forest.

5.20 PM

Police surrounded the camp and started to fire at the unsuspecting Adivasis without warning. They did not even have time resist. It was Jogi, who held a lit torch to set fire to the camp if necessary, was the first one to fall. The volunteer who was guarding the constable Vinod hacked him. He was overpowered by the police. The adivasis who were at the camp ran away in all directions. Those who were captured were brutally beaten up.

Kairali T V cameraman Shaji, and me were witnessing the

assault. Shaji was shooting the whole incident. The police attacked him and destroyed his camera. I was also taking pictures with my camera. The policemen came to me with murderous intent "We will kill and bury you here like these bastards." They shouted to me. It was a moment I came face to face with death. I do not have words to describe how I escaped from there.

At least 15 people had fallen on the ground with bullet wounds. Police chased and fired at the escaping Adivasis, women and children among them. We do not know how many have died. There was an announcement from the police and the Chief Minister's office that five adivasis had died. But the figure was later corrected to one adivasi and one policeman. 1:1

There are some questions still have to be answered.

1. Who were the people responsible for arranging a crowd waiting with the foresters, to capture the escaping adivasis?

2. Why didn't police give treatment to the constable Vinod, even after the agitators asked to provide him with medical assistance? Vinod was bleeding for five hours (12.20 to 5.20). Who wanted a martyr from the police force? Why?

3. The police claim is that Jogi died from a plastic bullet. But can it be possible that the bullet that went through the head a plastic bullet? The place where the bullet went in had a small hole and the place through which it came out had a bigger hole and brain came out through the hole. This gives ample evidence of the kind of the gun used for firing and the bullet.

4. How many people really died in the shooting? If more people died, what did they do with the bodies?

5. The gun that was used for firing has a range of 200 meters. Police fired into a crowd that included women and children who were standing not more than 50 meters away. It is hard to gulp the death toll given by the police and the government.

6. The police must reveal that how many cartridges were brought, how many were used, how many were brought back, and what did they do with the rest.

7. Why did the police cordoned off the forest where the firing took place and the press were not allowed entry for 16 hours?

8. Why did an earth mover went into the forest at night?

9. The police must answer the question raised by the opposition leader V.S. Achuthanathan that police bought barrels of petrol and took it to the forest. What did they do with it?

10. Why the government do not order a judicial enquiry as demanded by the opposition?

PS: The police reprisal is still going on. Many adivasis who had gone for the strike have not returned home. Some have fled to the forest, injured also among them. Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha have told the press that some of the injured have died in the forest and the others are staying there without food and medical aid. The government is doing nothing to relocate the missing adivasis. Men are not staying at home. Police raide adivasi colonies on a daily basis. The unthinkable is happening here in kerala.

(The article appeared in Madhyamam daily on 28 February 2003, V. Muhammad Sharif is a reporter with Madhyamam daily)