

<https://hindupost.in/featured/keralas-advasis-crumbling-homes-unfulfilled-promises-and-struggles-for-justice/>

FEATURED NEWS

## Kerala's Janjatis: Crumbling homes, unfulfilled promises, and struggles for justice

September 11, 2023

गूगुल्फा



Image Source: Keraleeyam Web, The New Indian Express, The News Minute

God's own Country – this is what everyone associates the state of Kerala with. But people outside Kerala hardly know the dark truths beneath the surface. Within this seemingly idyllic landscape, the indigenous janjatiya (aka 'tribal/advasi') communities, particularly the Paniya and Kattunayika communities in Wayanad, are grappling with a distressing reality. The plight of the janjatiyas reveals a deeper issue of systemic neglect, raising questions about the broader treatment of this marginalised community within Kerala's ostensibly thriving social framework.

### Crumbling Janjatiya homes in Wayanad

In a disheartening revelation, houses constructed by the government for the indigenous janjatiya communities in Wayanad, primarily the Paniya and Kattunayika communities, are crumbling within a mere decade, well short of the expected lifespan of 30 years. Investigation into this alarming trend has unveiled a trail of irregularities committed by contractors entrusted with building these homes.

Former Noolppuzha Panchayat member Baalan shed light on the disturbing situation in an exclusive interview with Keraleeyam Web. He revealed that these contractors exclusively secure contracts for janjatiya home construction, a glaring anomaly. Baalan attributes this to a practice where contractors gain access to beneficiary lists even before the beneficiaries themselves are informed.

Local administrators, it appears, play a significant role in awarding these contracts, leading to an exchange of beneficiary lists. Moreover, janjatiyas are allegedly discouraged from constructing their own homes, with officers claiming that they would misuse any funds allocated to them by indulging in alcohol consumption. This discouragement seems to have a strong influence on janjatiyas' choices despite the promise of government funds.

Despite the allocation of funds for housing projects, construction delays have persisted for years, leaving janjatiyas living in deplorable conditions. A tragic incident occurred recently when a four-year-old child lost her life due to these inadequate living conditions. Basic amenities such as toilets, proper electricity, windows, and solid flooring are lacking, forcing residents to sleep on mats on the bare floor. Wiring and doors for the houses remain unfinished, with visible cracks in the walls and the ceiling's cement posing a constant hazard.

The absence of functional kitchens forces janjatiyas to rely on traditional wood stoves and cook in separate rooms. Sanitary facilities have yet to be completed, exacerbating the living conditions during heavy rains, as witnessed in the tragic incident involving the child's death.

Janjatiya residents recount that they were promised the completion of their homes within six months, which has not materialized. Moreover, they were forced to rely on a well for drinking water, only to later discover its hazardous quality, leading to multiple hospitalizations.

Remarkably, houses constructed by janjatiyas themselves stand in stark contrast to these dilapidated government-provided dwellings. For instance, Anish, a janjatiya from Noolpuzha Panchayat's Thiruvannur colony, used the 6 lakh rupees from the government scheme to build a robust, well-constructed pucca house. Others in the colony have followed suit, demonstrating the potential for self-reliance among the janjatiya community.

The glaring solution to this crisis appears to be allowing janjatiyas to construct their own houses, which have proven to be more resilient and reliable. However, despite these evident issues in his constituency, Wayanad MP Rahul Gandhi does not seem to have addressed or even spoken about these irregularities. The scheme comes under the [LIFE Mission](#), a Kerala state government initiative aimed at providing homes to the homeless and landless. But it looks like Rahul Gandhi will not raise the issue because the ruling Pinarayi Vijayan government is an I.N.D.I.Alliance member.

## Kerala's Janjatis – A neglected community

### Muthanga agitation

On February 19, 2003, a tragic event unfolded in Kerala's history as the state's authorities sought to suppress the demands of dispossessed janjatiyas in [Wayanad](#). The Muthanga agitation began as a plea for land rights and autonomy, reigniting longstanding grievances among indigenous communities. Unfortunately, this movement was brutally quashed after just 44 days when the police initiated a violent crackdown, resulting in the deaths of both a janjatiya protestor named Jogi and a police constable named Vinod.

The origins of the Muthanga agitation trace back to the 'Build-A-Hut' campaign launched by janjatiya groups in 2001. Their core demand was the right to reside on the land of their forefathers, prompted by starvation deaths in the dispossessed janjatiya community of Attappady, south of Wayanad. Responding to these pressing issues, the Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha (AGMS) was formed to advocate for janjatiya rights.

In 2002, a promising seven-point agreement was reached between the agitators and the government, assuring land distribution and development support for landless janjatiyas. However, this agreement remained unfulfilled, compelling the janjatiyas to resume their struggle in 2003. They established makeshift huts in the Muthanga forests, but the authorities forcefully evicted them on February 19, 2003, leading to casualties on both sides.

The land in question was disputed, with janjatiya leaders arguing that their occupation was not illegal. Historical records indicated the janjatiyas' tenancy rights in the region, and the government's claim of reserve forest land was contested.

The Muthanga incident exposed the systemic neglect of janjatiya rights in Kerala, where successive governments failed to uphold constitutional safeguards for janjatiya autonomy and land rights. Janjatiyas continued to endure dispossession, exploitation, and social prejudice, despite Kerala being the hub of so-called 'progressive/Marxist' politics.

Despite the brief national attention generated by the Muthanga struggle, little has improved for janjatiyas in Wayanad over the past two decades. They remain displaced in their ancestral land, facing discrimination and denied their constitutional rights.

## **Lynching of Janjatiya youth Madhu**

In February 2018, a 27-year-old janjatiya man named [Madhu](#) was lynched by a mob in Attappadi, Kerala. Madhu had been living in the forest due to mental health issues and difficulties in social interactions. He was accused of theft by a group of people from the village of Mukkali. The attackers subjected Madhu to a brutal assault, stripping him of his clothing, tying his hands with his dhoti, and mercilessly beating and kicking him. Some of the attackers recorded the assault on video and shared it on social media, intending to humiliate him further.

The incident sparked public outrage, leading to the arrest of 16 individuals who were charged with various offenses, including murder and violations of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. Reports emerged that the accused were attempting to influence witnesses, prompting police to monitor witnesses' communications and implement a witness protection program. However, 24 out of 133 witnesses eventually turned hostile.

The trial began in June 2022, resulting in the conviction of 14 out of the 16 accused on various charges, including causing harm and unlawful assembly. The court sentenced 13 convicts in the Attappady Madhu lynching case to 7 years of rigorous imprisonment and a 3-month jail term for the 16th accused.

Despite boasting positive social indicators, Kerala seems to be neglecting its minority 1.4% janjatiya population when it comes to providing housing, constructing suitable dwellings, upholding their constitutional rights, or providing justice.

