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LAND STRUGGLES

‘We don’t want to die landless’: Kerala’s Adivasis are again agitating for land promised in 2001

Nearly 200 landless Adivasis have been protesting for over a week after they were forcibly evicted from the Thovarimala forest in Wayanad.

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Adivasis in the 'protest tent' outside the Kalpetta district collectorate, Wayanad. | Special arrangement

On April 21, Priyanka Gandhi arrived in Kalpetta in Kerala's Wayanad parliamentary constituency to [campaign for her brother](#), the Congress candidate Rahul Gandhi. That same day, 25 km to the east in Thovarimala, around 200 landless Adivasi men, women and children took over a piece of forestland. They cleared some bush trees, erected huts covered over with tarpaulin and vowed to stay put until the state government gave each of their families two acres of cultivable land.

The government ignored the occupation until polling got over in Kerala on April 23. The next day, police and forest officials swung into action, [chasing away](#) the Adivasis and arresting leaders of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Red Star who had organised the agitation. The Adivasis regrouped by that evening, however, and resumed their protest outside Kalpetta's district collectorate. They have been camped there since, staying in a "protest tent" and braving the summer heat and thundershowers.



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The protesters claimed 106 hectares of the Thovarimala forest is "surplus land" that was earmarked for distribution among landless Adivasis back in 1971. But it was not until 2001 that the state actually pledged to allot between one and five acres of land to them. The promise remains unfulfilled, with successive governments citing scarcity of land as the reason.

"That land belongs to landless people. They just claimed it," argued MK Dasan, state secretary of the Red Star, when asked about the Thovarimala occupation. "They did nothing wrong."

Forest officials denied the claim. "They occupied a reserve forest area and not surplus land,"

said P Ranjithkumar, the divisional forest officer. “Encroaching upon a forest is an offence.”

Wayanad’s [landless Adivasis have been agitating](#) against the delay in the distribution of the promised land for around two decades now. In 2003, rallied by the community organisation Adivasi Gothra Naha Sabha, they [occupied the Muthanga Sanctuary](#). In the violence that erupted when the police tried to evict them, an Adivasi man named Jogi and a policeman were killed. The Adivasi community, though, maintains that 16 of its members were shot dead that day.

There are around 8,000 landless Adivasis in Wayanad, said the district’s collector, AR Ajayakumar. “Of them, 3,000 people possess less than five cents of land. The rest are completely landless,” he said.

‘More agitations will erupt’

The Thovarimala occupation has spurred similar agitations by landless Adivasis at 18 other places across Wayanad.

Ajayakumar agreed that the agitations reflected “the seriousness of the Adivasi land issue”. He claimed the government was “trying to speed up the distribution process”, but “land scarcity is a major problem”.

Dasan dismissed the scarcity claim. “The government could have brought legislation to reclaim 5.25 lakh hectares of land that is illegally held by multinational plantation companies,” he argued. “It would have put enough land at the government’s disposal. But successive governments have been scared of touching big business.”

He warned that “land agitations” would intensify across Kerala if the government failed to find a solution soon. “Thovarimala agitation is just an indication,” he said. “Land struggles will erupt in all Adivasi areas if action is not taken soon.”

Adivasi leader CK Janu, who led the 2003 Muthanga agitation, echoed Dasan. She pointed out that the government needed less than three lakh acres to provide land to all landless Adivasis. “It has already identified 11 lakh acres of land for distribution,” she added. “Adivasis will be forced to occupy land if there is no government action.”

Adivasi leaders from across Kerala are expected to meet in Kozhikode on May 13 to discuss the future course of action.

‘Adivasis should get justice’

Thovarimala was owned by Harrisons Malayalam Ltd, a private plantation company, until 1971, when the Kerala Private Forests Act enabled the state to take over private forestland and give it to agricultural labourers for cultivation. The government took a total of 30,046 hectares of land from Harrisons and Poddar Plantations across Kerala, leading to a long legal battle that ended with the Supreme Court approving the state’s decision in 2001. The court, however, gave Harrisons a reprieve by directing that 700 hectares of the acquired land be returned to the plantation company.

The government complied with the order but Dasan alleged it was now planning to hand over all of the Thovarimala forest to Harrisons. That is why the Adivasis were forcibly evicted, he said, adding, “The government is working hand in glove with the plantation company.”

Ranjithkumar rejected the allegation. “Thovarimala remains forestland and that is why we evicted the encroachers,” he said. “It is an offence to trespass in the forest.”





Protesting Adivasis clear a piece of Thovarimala forestland to erect their huts on April 21. Photo by special arrangement

The Wayanad Prakruthi Samrakshana Samithi decried the “encroachment of the reserve forest”, although the environmental advocacy group made it clear that it supported Adivasis’ demands. “The government should be blamed for forcing Adivasis to commit such crimes,” said N Badushah, the group’s president. “Adivasis would be living a happy life had the government attached illegal surplus land from plantation giants and distributed it among the landless people. We have been raising this demand for many years. Unfortunately, successive governments have not shown the will to act.”

Ranjithkumar said his department would speed up the distribution of land earmarked for landless Adivasis. “Adivasis should get justice,” he declared.

‘We will continue our fight’

For now, though, possessing cultivable land remains a dream for Wayanad’s landless Adivasis. Many of the protestors at the district collectorate said they joined in the agitation after realising they would die without owing a piece of land if they kept quiet.

“I live in a hut on five cents of land. I cannot cultivate anything to make a living,” said K Janu, 46, from Perumbadikkunnu Adivasi Colony in Ambalavayal. “I have submitted many applications to the government for land. But nothing has happened so far. I don’t have any option but to join the

agitation. I want to own cultivable land before I die.”

Janu said around 150 families, including 12 from her colony, took part in the April 21 occupation. “All of us are now staying in the protest tent,” she said. “No one can break our unity.”

Her husband Veliyan, 55, claimed the police used brute force to evict them from the Thovarimala forest. “They kept reminding us about the Muthanga firing,” he added. “They picked protestors randomly, put them in a van and dropped them at different locations. It was done to isolate us. I escaped the arrest by running into rice fields in the valley nearby.”

The police have since been raiding their homes and threatening to arrest them for participating in the agitation, Veliyan alleged. “Plainclothesmen have been threatening us to go back home,” he said. “We have been told that the state government would deny us land if we continue participating in the protest.”

But they will not give up. “We will continue our fight,” Veliyan said, as his wife nodded in agreement. “We don’t want to die landless.”

No political support

Political parties have largely ignored the protest. IC Balakrishnan, who represents Sultan Bathery constituency, which includes Thovarimala, in the Assembly, said he did not know anything about the protesters. “Personally, I am with Adivasis. If they are eligible they should get land,” he added.

Balakrishnan leads the Congress in Wayanad and coordinated Rahul Gandhi’s election

campaign.

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Though he was sympathetic to Adivasis' demand for land, the Congress leader said, he did not approve of their mode of protest. "Why did they encroach upon the land and drag women and elderly to the streets?" he asked, referring to the communist organisers of the agitation. "They should have given a list of landless people to the government instead of enacting this drama."

Asked whether he had informed Rahul Gandhi about the protest, he answered in the negative. "He will take an appropriate stance if he comes to know of the matter," the legislator said.

Also read: [In Kerala, Adivasis continue to fight for land rights 15 years after violent agitation](#)

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