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Land Struggle

Thovarimala (Wayanad) Tribal Land Struggle: Claiming the promised land

K Sahadevan

In recent days, Wayanad has been in media glare because of Rahul Gandhi was contesting 17th Loksabha election from this hill district of Kerala. National and International media were thronged all the nook and corner of the district and reported in details of the Congress president's visit. The polling was over. So the media also given up their interest on Wayanad.

Does Rahul Gandhi's candidature helped to raise the real issues of Wayanad, where the largest tribal population has lived? The truth is: No. The mainstream media has little interest on the topic.

As per the 2011 census, Adivasis constitute 18.5% of the total population in Wayanad district, which has the largest tribal population in Kerala. Of them, Paniyas are the largest tribe who comprise 45.6% of the Adivasi population, followed by Kurichiyas (16.6%), Kurumas (13.8%) and Kattunayakas (11.2%). Among them half of the population is living in colonies where there is no title deeds or any other valid land documents. Neither Rahul Gandhi nor any other candidates raised the issue of landless adivasis of Wayand.

Wayand was witnessed series of land struggles lead by adivasis recent past. Muthanga land struggle was one of the heroic movement lead by Adivasi Gothra MahaSabha (AGMS) in the dawn of the new millennium. C.K.Janu, a tribal woman leader emerged from this struggle.

Once again Wyanad, the hill district of Kerala, become the epicenter of the tribal land struggle.

Thovarimala Land struggle

On 23rd March 2019 hundreds of landless families, most of them are tribal, occupied government land at Thovarimala Sulthanbatteri under the aegis of Adivasi Vimochana Munnani, an offshoot of CPI (ML) Redstar. This has happened just before the general election in Kerala.

When the polling was over, the police force marched towards the struggle area and forcefully evicted the strikers. But the landless families are not ready to withdraw their strike and now they shifted their protest in front of the district collectorate.

Thovarimala estate was taken over by the government in 1970, just after the Kerala Land Reform Act (KLRA) passed, from Harrison Malayalam Limited, one of the biggest landowner of Kerala. This estate has given to the Kerala Forest Department and it has been declared as vested forest. When I contacted the forest officials, they also confirmed it as a vested forest land, even though they failed to show any document related to this. But interestingly, the inhabitants of nearby the estate have told me that, the Thovarimala estate property is maintaining and using by Harrison Malayalam Limited. Sali, one of the protesters said: "when we entered the land, the workers of the estate have come and asked us to evacuate immediately as it is HML property. The buildings were being well maintained and used by the HML workers. We also suspect that some of the workers were in disguise with the police." This was a clear cut evidence of the unholy nexus between the forest officials and the private plantation owners.

The struggle is now getting support from all over the state from different hues of social movements. Even though the mainstream political parties have kept mum over the issue social, environmental and human rights organizations declared their solidarity to the struggle. While few NGO's recorded their discontent against the struggle saying that the protesters occupied in the forest land which cannot be allowed.

A brief history of land struggle in Kerala

Tribals and Dalits consists about 9.6% (2011 census) of the total population of Kerala. Theses most depressed classes were not included in the Kerala land reform program. Since then they have been struggling for their rights. The first tribal land struggle was started at Thiruvonappuram in Kottiyoor panchayath of Kannur district. About 9 families occupied government land under the banner of Adivasi Vimochana Munnani in 1999. Then the Kerala government has given promises that they would consider the matter seriously and evicted the tribal families from the land. But the promises were not fulfilled till the date.

In 1960's hundreds of tribal families were evicted from Muthanga forest when it declared as Wildlife sanctuary. Same thing happened in 1980's for Eucalyptus plantation in Muthanga forest. Since then, their living condition was bad just because they were not being properly rehabilitated and poverty related death was a common phenomenon among the tribes.

In 2001, Tribal families were started the struggle in front of the then Chief Minister A.K. Antony's official home. They demanded 5 acres of land about 45000 landless tribal families. The struggle was continued more than one and half month. The struggle was ended with an agreement between the government and the tribal leaders that the government would provide the proper rehabilitation and distribute the land among the landless tribes. Once again the government betrayed the tribals.

In 2003, hundreds of tribal families entered into the Muthanga forest and declared the entire area has been under the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha as an autonomous tribal land. The Government crushed the struggle by using force. One adivasi protester named Jogi and one police personnel, Vinod, were killed in the whole episode. The agreement between the strikers and the government called 'Muthanga Package' never been implemented properly. The cases against the leaders of the Gothra Maha Sabha continuing in the court till today.

Left Democratic Front Government under the Chief Ministership of V S Achuthanandan made promises that the government will provide land for all landless families in Kerala until September 2006. When the Tribal and Dalit leaders realize that the governments are only interested in giving promises, one of the Dalit leader Laha Gopalan and his Sadhujana Vimochana Samyukta Vedi occupied the land of Harrison Malayalam Limited in Chengara in January 2007. There were more than 7000 families participated in the Chengara Land struggle. The Chengara Strikers demanded to the government that they should seize the illegal possession of land from the HML and distribute among the landless. But the government was not in the mood to take any action against HML. When the struggle continued more than two years government came for negotiation. The government has given assurance to the leaders that they were ready to give land for 1432 families. Even though the leaders are not fully satisfied with this package, they were agreed to call off the struggle.

The land given to the landless families was in Kasaragod, Malappuram, Wayanad and Idukki districts. The families were returned to Chengara because the land given to them was uninhabitable. Today there were 3000 people living in Chengara without ration card, voter's ID card or any other facilities.

In the midnight of December 31, 2012, hundreds of landless families, including tribals and dalits, were marched towards Arippe in Kulathupuzha of Kollam district. They occupied in government estate and demanded for agricultural land. The government tried to intimidate the protesters by using police force; but they couldn't succeed. The Arippe strikers doing farming in the occupied land and the struggle were continuing even today.

Apart from these bigger land struggles, there are several small scale land struggle movements happened in Kerala like Pooyamkutty (2018), Perianchamkutty (2012), Aralam farm protest (2004).

Although, Kerala has taken so many progressive steps towards the social welfare sector, Adivasis and Dalits were betrayed from its benefits. More than 4 lakh of landless people living in Kerala, out of this 75% are Dalits and Adivasis. There are about 30,000 colonies where these most depressed classes living. Governments, whether it is left or right, have no intention to give them due share of their promised land.

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