



# Muthanga Agitation: A Historical Enquiry On The Tribal Movement For The Promised Land

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**Abstract:** In the mainstream society, the problem of land alienation is not considered a serious issue. But for the Adivasis, the tribal population, this is not an issue which is something unimportant. It's a question of their existence. Land alienation isn't something which is to be considered unimportant. It's because, for the tribal community, the land, the soil to which they were born is associated to their culture, custom, tradition and identity. It's their lifeline. The tribals who are known as the original inhabitants of the land were alienated from their own forests, hills and mountains which they considered as their habitat, when the British colonial rulers converted them as government property and reserved areas. Even after India's independence, the people of the mainstream society of Kerala migrated from low lying plains to the hills and forests and grabbed their land. This research deals with the historical movements which took place at Muthanga in Wayanad which is one among many land struggles movements where the tribals carried out movements to claim their promised land. This research aims to analyze the historical background of the movement and the situations that led to the outbreak of the movement.

**Key words:** Tribes, Adivasis, Agitation, Promised Land, Wayanad, Muthanga, Land Alienation, Marginalization, Paniyars, Adiyans, Kurichiyans, Land Struggle.

## INTRODUCTION

In Environmental history, we learn about the history of the relation between human societies and the rest of the nature on which they depended. We get an opportunity to learn about the origin or evolution of human impact on the rest of the nature and nature's influence upon human affairs, each of which is always in instability and always affecting the other.

In fact, the study of the importance of the history of the environment came to limelight only when the industrial revolution and industrialization along with other forces greatly enhanced the human power to alter environment. Here in this article, we are going to discuss about the political and policy related environmental history. The political struggle and control over the resources is as old as human societies and close to omnipresent.

Let's begin by quoting a small incident in the Bible which describes a covenant made between God and his chosen people (Genesis 12, Genesis 26:3, Genesis 28:13). In the Old Testament of Hebrew Bible, God promises his chosen people Abraham and his descendants a vast territory called Canaan (a geography associated with the "Promised Land" in the Bible), a land located on the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea (Numbers 34:1-12). For migrating herders like the Jews, having a stable home of their own would be a great blessing. The promised land was a place to settle from their continuous wandering. The promised land is a central concept in the Bible (Old Testament) and is associated with the covenant God made with Abraham. It represents a land of hope, belonging and liberation. Otherwise, "Promised Land" can also be referred to a place on state where people seek to find happiness, peace and success. Today, we use this term metaphorically to describe those places or events that are perceived as offering a better future or opportunities. This phrase is frequently used in literature, music and art to convey ideas of hope, aspiration, and the promise of a better future. The promised land of Canaan, eventually called Israel was a fertile land

with brooks and deep springs that gushed out in the valley and hills. The rich soil produced wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates and olives. There, the Israelites would lack nothing. Described in scripture as a "land flowing with milk and honey, the soil was abundant for agriculture and shepherding, the mountains safeguarded and gave protection from the elements and enemies, and contributed perfect climatic conditions for the cattle to thrive (Exodus 3:17, Numbers 13:27, Deuteronomy 8:6-9). Well, this is a context described in the bible defining the concept of the term 'Promised Land' i.e. the land promised to the Jews by the God to introduce a new populace.

Well, here in the land of Kerala, there is a particular sect of population, who is also dreaming of owning a land of their desire where they aspire to live in happiness and in peace. That particular sect of population are the Adivasis who lived in forests and depended on the forest's habitats for centuries. They dreamt of their forest land, who were adapted in the forest environment, and carved a habitat of their own.

With the advent of the colonial rule, these Adivasi population were ousted from their paradise which they considered as their habitat and got alienated from their land, when the British colonial rulers converted the forest areas as the government property and termed it as reserved forests.

Because of this attitude from the part of the British, the Adivasis started fighting for their rights to claim their lost land. Several conflicts and skirmishes took place between the Adivasis and the colonial government because of this act. Even after the achievement of the independence of India, from the colonial rule, the struggle of the Adivasis for the land rights continued. One among such agitation from the part of the Adivasis against the government was the Muthanga agitation as the event took place in the region called Muthanga which is situated in the Wayanad district of located in the north Malabar region of Kerala.

## ADIVASIS

The term "Adivasi" signifies to all of India's Indigenous tribes on the Indian subcontinent. It means "any of numerous ethnic groups considered to be the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent." Tribal and Adivasi, however, have different meanings. Adivasi means prehistoric inhabitants, whereas tribal means a social group.<sup>1</sup>

The tribal political activists in the 1930s specifically created the word "Adivasi" to give tribals a distinct indigenous identity by claiming that Indo-European and Dravidian speaking peoples are not Indigenous. In the 1930s, Thakkar Bapa, a prominent Indian social worker devoted to the upliftment of tribal communities, used this phrase to describe people who lived in forests. The term which was in use in 1936 was included in the Pascal's English dictionary. Markandey Katju, Judge of the Supreme Court of India recognized the term in 2011. In Hindi and Bengali, Adivasi means "Original Inhabitants", from 'adi' meaning beginning/origin, and 'vasin' meaning 'dweller', thus literally meaning 'beginning inhabitant'.<sup>2</sup>

Other names for the tribes of India include atavika, vanavasi ("forest dwellers"), and girijan ("mountain people"). But, the term "Adivasi" is the common term used by the tribal groups to identify themselves as the original inhabitants of a particular region.<sup>3</sup>

The tribal population living in Kerala, a state located in the extreme south of India refers themselves as the Adivasis in Malayalam. Majority of the Indigenous people in Kerala has been settled in the Western Ghats woods and mountains, which border Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The Western Ghats forests and mountains were first settled by the tribal inhabitants of Kerala. They have preserved their ancient traditions and culture because they were destined to stay outside from the modernizing world. The tribal people of Kerala are honestly no different from other tribes in India.

Tribal communities are found in all districts of Kerala, except Alappuzha. According to the 2011 India Census, there are 4,84,839 Scheduled Tribe people in Kerala, which consists of 1.5% of the total population. The Wayanad district has the most tribal residents (1,51,443), followed by Idukki (55,815), Palakkad (48,972), Kasaragod (48,857), and Kannur districts (41,371) in the state of Kerala.<sup>4</sup> So, Wayanad is considered as the 'Holy land of Adivasis' because it has the largest tribal population among all the other districts of Kerala state.<sup>5</sup> The tribal population is spread across in the three taluks of Wayanad, consisting of the eight Panchayats in Mananthavady, seven Panchayats in Sulthan Bathery and ten Panchayats in Vaythiri taluk.<sup>6</sup> The Adiyans, Kanaladis, Karimpalans, Kattu naykans, Kunduvatiyans, Kurichiyans, Mullukurumberss, Paniyars, Thachanad Muppens, Thenkurumbers, Uralikurumbers, Vettukurumbers are the main tribal groups in Wayanad.<sup>7</sup> The customs and manners of these tribes whose ancestors having found their way into Wayanad centuries ago, settled here at different times and in different colonies, every community is being different from the other in customs, manners, language, faith, dress and appearance. These have no kith or kin outside Wayanad and the adjoining tracts. These communities are not correlated to one another.<sup>8</sup>

## LAND ALIENATION ISSUE

The land alienation is viewed as a serious issue faced by Kerala's Scheduled Tribes, most of whom depend on agriculture and have a deep emotional connection to their land. Many have become landless due to various factors. The Muthanga struggle in Wayanad was a key protest involving multiple tribal communities, aimed at retrieving their land. Despite such movements, land struggles continue, and tribals still face severe socio-economic challenges like poverty, poor education, unemployment, cultural exploitation, and lack of government support. The state's inadequate response has made their financial situation pathetic, and their legal and constitutional rights remain largely unnoticed.<sup>9</sup>

Despite Kerala's progressive land reforms, which gave land rights to many tenants and the landless, the Adivasis (tribals) were historically excluded, especially from forested highlands. Although recognized constitutionally under a 'tribal' category, their struggle has been focused on reclaiming their ancestral land and forest rights, not acquiring new property, highlighting their deep-rooted connection to the land.

British colonial rule severely disrupted the lives of the Adivasi (tribal) communities in India. The British took control of tribal lands and forests, introducing private property and the zamindari system, which led to exploitation through taxes and commercialization of natural resources. Forests, once the livelihood of the Adivasis, were declared state property and reserved, cutting off their access to cultivation and resource collection.<sup>10</sup> The communal lifestyle and self-governance of these tribes were destroyed, as British laws substituted traditional systems. Tribals were forced to pay taxes in money, leading to exploitation by landlords and moneylenders. Many became landless labourers, migrating in search of low-paid work, often unable to return home. The creation of plantations further displaced them, pushing the Adivasis to the margins of society.

A continuous series of forest laws, starting with the British colonial period and following them even after independence, has harshly affected the rights and livelihoods of Adivasis in India, particularly in Kerala. The Indian Forest Acts of 1868, 1894, 1927, and the Forest Conservation Act of 1980 restricted tribal access to forests, disregarding their traditional rights and treating forests as state property.<sup>11</sup> These laws led to the forced expulsion of tribes, ignoring the fact that forests are their natural habitat and lifeline. Even in independent India, these colonial policies continued as "domestic colonialism", continuing the exploitation of tribal lands and resources. Despite their deep knowledge of biodiversity and traditional medicine, Adivasis remain marginalized, sidelined, penniless, and omitted from decision-making about the forests they've lived in for generations.

The British colonial policies altered Kerala's forests and troubled the tribal life. Kerala once had rich evergreen forests covering about 75% of its area. The British saw forests as commercial assets and introduced community afforestation, which involved social transformation and plantation development. In the 19th century, they began converting traditional forests into plantations such as growing timber (like teak, mahogany, cinchona) and cash crops (like tea, coffee, rubber) in order to meet industrial and commercial demands, especially with the rise of the railway system.<sup>12</sup>

Land was leased cheaply and long-term to promote plantations, especially in places like Nilambur Valley. The defeat of Tipu Sultan and the Srirangapatnam Treaty in 1792 allowed the British to expand their control over forest lands in Malabar, Mysore, and Kodagu.<sup>13</sup> This expansion led to the mass eviction of Adivasis, ending their traditional shifting cultivation and alienating them from their ancestral forests.

Now let's discuss the long history and devastating impact of migration, colonialism, and development on the Adivasis (tribal communities) of Kerala, particularly in regions like Malabar and Wayanad.

Historically, Kerala has seen various types of migration, but during the 20th century, a massive internal migration occurred, especially from Travancore to the forested areas of Malabar. Farmers moved into these underdeveloped, forested lands seeking better opportunities, often displacing Adivasis. K. Panoor, a civil rights activist, poet and writer from Kerala in his book 'Keralathile Africa' (published 1963) writes that, the settlers seized tribal land, disrupting their way of life and forcing them into marginal labour roles. In Wayanad, around 33,000 acres of tribal land were acquired to resettle World War II soldiers, accelerating displacement.<sup>14</sup>

The Colonial era policies such as the East India Company's deforestation for timber and railway expansion further devastated tribal communities. Even after India achieved independence, large-scale migration, land reforms, and private afforestation continued to alienate Adivasis from their lands.

Development projects such as dams, mines, national parks, and ecotourism have also led to widespread displacement. Tribals, who make up only about 8% of India's population, have been disproportionately affected: millions have been displaced with little to no rehabilitation. Official statistics show that 50% of people displaced by government schemes are Adivasis, yet only about 10% have been resettled. Projects like Athirappally in Kerala continue this trend.



In General, the process of nation-building and development has marginalized Adivasis, robbed them of their land and livelihoods, and pushed them to the edge of survival, with the state itself becoming a key force behind their displacement.

### MUTHANGA AGITATION

The human struggle for owning a piece of land began centuries ago, and the situation is the very same in Kerala; a scenic, beautiful state in the southern part of India. Nestled between the Arabian Sea and the lush green mountains of the Western Ghats, Kerala is also glorified as the holy land of tourism or as “God’s own country”—a catchphrase endorsed for exploiting tourist potentials in the state.<sup>15</sup> However, if one moves away from the dazzling world of tourism and other exalting factors, and penetrates deeper into the socio-political and economic structures that drive Kerala’s society, what one gets to see is the segregation and marginalization of the Adivasis and the Dalits, especially when it comes to the issue of land ownership.

The centuries old landlord-tenant (Janmi-Kudiyani in Kerala) landholding system that prevailed in Kerala till the late 1950s which was accentuated by a tyrannical caste system, had pushed the Adivasis and the Dalits into slavery, dispossession and displacement, which compelled them to surrender their pride, self-respect and dignity and their human rights at the feet of a caste-based society. The landlord-tenant system offered no laws to protect the Dalits and Adivasis from eviction. The social customs prevalent then gave pre-emptive powers to the landlords (Janmis) to evict the tenants at will which often led to human rights violations against them.<sup>16</sup>

So, several efforts were taken in Kerala during the 1950s to remove the landlord-tenant land-tenure system and carry out equitable distribution of land. The state carried out the Kerala Land Reforms Act to provide land for the landless, which was one of the notable legislations implemented in 1970.<sup>17</sup>

With the implementation of this Act, the centuries old landlord-tenant system came to an end. The Act was implemented with some changes on the fixation of ceiling on land holdings. But the plantations and private forests were exempted from this Act. The Act also gave proprietary rights to cultivating tenants and protected the tenants from eviction. This was viewed by the majority as a revolutionary movement for the landless Adivasis. But, the proper implementation of the Act is another story. As per the Act, the government was to distribute surplus and revenue forest land to Kerala’s landless poor. But, to this date, it has not been fully implemented, creating a huge number of landless people in the state.<sup>18</sup>

The Adivasis of Kerala, mostly reside on the mountains of the Western Ghats. Alienated and oppressed by social and economic factors, the Adivasis have never been the real beneficiaries of the government schemes implemented to reduce landlessness among them. Instead, they have been denied their customary rights over their natural resources and traditional knowledge systems, leading to several struggles for land across a timeframe of several decades.

The Muthanga agitation began as a struggle that revived long-pending demands of deprived Adivasis in the hill district of Wayanad, seeking right to land and autonomy. It lasted only 45 days before it was brought to an end by police action, but it was hasty and bloodstained, which was widely criticized nationwide. Police firing at the main protest site led to the death of an Adivasi protestor and a police constable succumbed to injuries during the clash between the police and protestors.

The events of February 19 was an outcome of a series of struggles, starting with the ‘Build-A-Hut’ agitation organized by Adivasi groups in August 2001 in the state capital Thiruvananthapuram, who rallied with the slogan “For the right to live on the land where we were born<sup>19</sup>.” One of the reasons that persuaded the protestors to renew their struggle for land was the shocking report of 32 starvation deaths in Attappady, in a similarly deprived Adivasi community further south of Wayanad.<sup>20</sup>

Investigations into the deaths emphasized that the major cause for starvation among Adivasis in Wayanad was their lack of land for cultivation, a fact that has been reasserted by studies since then. It was partly in response to this analysis that a new political wing, the Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha (AGMS), was established. Forced to make ends meet from doing menial jobs in harsh working conditions, the protestors declared that a return to the land, which their ancestors had inhabited for centuries before they were deprived, was their only means for a life lived with dignity.

The protests continued for several days. Subsequently, an agreement was reached between the agitators and the then United Democratic Front government, led by Congress leader A K Antony had reached an agreement with the Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha (AGMS) in October 2001. As per the agreement, all landless Adivasis were to get one to five acres of cultivable land to all tribal families and receive financial help to develop the land. The government then identified 52,000 landless tribal families. The Union government had earmarked 19,000 acres of land for distribution among tribals. The distributed land was to be categorized as Schedule Five areas to prevent Adivasis from being dispossessed of their land by powerful non-Adivasi groups or individuals. The government had also promised to bring lands allotted to Adivasis under the

Panchayati Raj (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996.<sup>21</sup> However, the government went back on its promise, prompting the AGMS to forcefully occupy the plantations of Muthanga to press their demand.

Thus, the contract remained only on paper for a year, thereby forcing the protestors to restart their struggle. On January 5, 2003, the AGMS led by chairperson C. K Janu and M. Geethanandan led a group of 800 tribal families to Muthanga forest under Noolpuzha panchayat.<sup>22</sup> They occupied the forest at Thakarapady, Ambukutti and Ponkuzhi (Koundanvayal) and erected hundreds of thatched huts, and a check post, blocking the entry of public and forest officials.<sup>23</sup> A wildfire broke out in the area on February 17, and forest personnel reached the spot to extinguish the blaze. But they were detained by the agitators, who released them only the next day following the intervention of the district collector. In January 2003, over a thousand Adivasi families gathered to erect temporary huts in a tract of a clear-felled eucalyptus plantation in the vicinity of the Muthanga forests in Wayanad, as a form of protest. The protest was planned by the AGMS and led by C.K. Janu, one of the foremost Adivasi rights leaders in the state, along with Geethanandan and a few others. It looked as if the government had unnoticed the developments until February 19, 2003, when an 800-member armed contingent of the police entered the forest without warning and began evicting the protesters violently. In the ensuing clashes, Jogi and Vinod lost their lives, while hundreds of Adivasis and dozens of policemen sustained serious injuries.

Such a criminal injustice and brutality had been unheard of in Kerala's recent history. Thus, a mammoth struggle that began with a long pending demand for the Adivasis' right to land became a short one that lived for only 45 days, brutally suppressed and brought to a halt using police force.

Although the Muthanga land struggle has completed a decade, the AGMS continues to lead many other land struggles across the state. The Adivasis' dream of regaining their promised land turned out to be a horrid experience. Acute poverty and joblessness have reduced them to skeletons and have traumatized their morals.

Adivasi rights leader Janu claims that theirs was not an illegal occupation of the land, a fact that has since been established in the course of the legal proceedings that followed the violence. She explains, "An order of the British government in 1914 states that the Kaatu naykan and Paniyar tribal communities have right to tenancy in the Muthanga region. Also, there are 12,000 acres of forest land in Muthanga under The Kerala Private Forests (Vesting and Assignment) Act, 1971. According to the Madhava Menon Commission report, 50% of this land belongs to tribals. In addition to that, at the time of our protest, the lease agreement on a large tract of forest given to Birla to plant eucalyptus had not been renewed for 14 years. The case against us was filed under Nilgiris Biosphere, Wildlife Protection Act and Reserve Forest Act. But the forest department does not have any proof that this is indeed reserve forest land; all they could produce in court was a letter from the Kerala government to the Central government requesting that this land be considered as a reserve forest, which was insufficient as evidence<sup>24</sup>."

Before it was a designated wildlife sanctuary and brought under state control, the Muthanga forests were inhabited by Adivasi groups like Kattu naykans, Adiyans, Paniyars, Kurumbers and Kurichyans. Janu recalls the early days of their protest camp thus: "We were not destroying the forest. When we settled in Muthanga, the first thing we did was try to revive the dried-up stream, Mamana Halla. We planted screw-pine on the bank of the stream to hold back the spring. If we had not been evicted, perhaps the natural forest would have been regenerated<sup>25</sup>."

Two decades later, the fundamental problems that afflict the Adivasi community in the state remain unchanged, struggling with their debilitating physical injuries and mental trauma. Many became physically weak or disabled, and unable to work as before, while others started showing signs of mental illness.

To this day, Adivasis in a supposedly progressive Kerala are reportedly worse off than their counterparts in many other states, and a primary reason for this situation is their dispossession of land. Every successive government in Kerala has deliberately violated Article 244 of the Constitution, which requires Adivasi lands to be declared scheduled areas that guarantee tribal autonomy, and cultural and economic empowerment.<sup>26</sup> The late former Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes commissioner B.D. Sharma called Article 244 a "Constitution within the Constitution". However, this is the truth that both the state and society in Kerala has deliberately refused to recognize, with successive governments preferring to see the 'Adivasi issue' as a matter to be resolved through welfare agendas and through the distribution of surplus land.

Even in the hill district of Wayanad, where in many localities Adivasis are the mainstream population, the PESA is yet to be executed. The same is the case with The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006, which gives the right to sustainably use and protect the forest land for livelihood of the Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers who have been living in forests for generations, and which came into force a few years after the Muthanga incident. A still greater treachery came in 1996, when the Left Democratic Front government, with support from Congress MLAs,

amended a 1975 law for controlling the transfer of land of Scheduled Tribes and for the restoration of alienated land in favor of non-tribal settlers in the tribal areas.

This purposeful neglect of the Adivasi right to land needs to be noted against the historical injustice of the land reforms introduced by the Left government in the 1950s, which left Adivasis and the mostly Dalit agricultural workers out of the equation. The Adivasi landless in the state were betrayed again by the administration when the Kerala Private Forest (Vesting and Assignment) Act of 1971 too failed to benefit them. It is against this historical and still continuing injustice that the Muthanga struggle needs to be realized, and not in the simplistic and self-serving manner it has been portrayed; that is, as a case of encroachment in a wildlife sanctuary.<sup>27</sup>

When we deal with the Adivasi issue in Kerala, there lies a painful truth. The truth is that the majority society in the state continues to regard Adivasis as primitive, dirty, ignorant, careless, lazy and so on. These categorizations are installed partly because they are considered as being external to the 'progress and development' pattern of the modern world, and express no desire to prosper and adapt into the mainstream society and its capitalist-based culture of maximum extraction and consumption. The state too downgrades them to second-class status as a community that does not contribute to GDP growth. Unfortunately, when they do attempt to be part of the mainstream society, they are often forced to bear isolation, discrimination and injustice at different phases.

It is because of this long history of negligence that culminated into a massive unrest in Wayanad in the post-Independence era where Adivasis became alienated on their own land, while recent migrants arrived to their territories as new settlers and occupied the tribal lands with implicit official support, and became the landowners who in turn now hire the Adivasis as wage labourers, pushed to lead broken lives affected by alcoholism and domestic violence.

The desire for cash crops among the settlers made sure that the gap broadened more between the migrants and the Adivasis by any means. This subsequently led to a disastrous effect on Adivasi diet and nutrition. Cumulatively, these factors have led to recurring starvation deaths among Adivasis in a state known for its relatively high health and social indicators.

Racial typecasting and prejudice against Adivasis in Kerala have at times taken a deadly turn, as when Adivasis have been attacked or even lynched by mobs over accusations of theft and so on. Such an incident took place in February 22, 2018 in Palakkad district's Attapadi where a 30-year-old tribal man named Madhu was lynched by due to suspecting of him for stealing rice from a grocery shop. He was captured by a group of men in the buffer zone area of forest near Attapadi, where he was residing. The mob handed him over to police. However, on the way to the police station, Madhu collapsed and died in the police jeep as he was taken to a Government Tribal Specialty Hospital at Kottathara.

The protestors at Muthanga have always specified that theirs was not just a land rights struggle; it was equally about dignity, self-respect, self-sufficiency, self-governance and a life free from mistreatment that harks back to the traditional life of the tribal people. But, even today, the sight of sidelined people involved in a forceful struggle to recover its distinct culture, social life and politics is not something that either the state or typical society in Kerala could accept.

Twenty-two years after their expectations were crumpled violently by the state, landless Adivasis in Wayanad continue to dream of a life free of mistreatment, which is no luxury but a constitutional assurance for these innocent people. The state, as well as the society in Kerala, needs to go through a self-contemplation about why even after seven decades of independence, the state's Adivasis, who constitute around 1.5% of the population, have not been given their constitutional rights.

While we consider the tribal communities and Dalits as the pillar of the agricultural economy of Kerala, what we can analyze is that they have not yet benefitted from the land reforms that the Kerala Government initiated in the 1950s. Several land distribution policies and packages that were meant to minimize landlessness among the Adivasis and the Dalits, didn't worked out. As far as the landlessness in Kerala is concerned, the Dalits and the Adivasis form around 85 per cent of the landless in the state. There has been a steady decline in food production and farming in Kerala for the past few years. The agricultural activity has touched the bottom line and the state is mostly relying on the neighbouring states for its food necessities. In such a pathetic situation, the Government of Kerala, instead of trying to bring back the Adivasis and the Dalits to agriculture and farming, they have thrown them to the suburbs of the society and has reduced them to living in colonies. A detailed study on the way the state has managed in executing various reforms and how it has affected the Adivasis and the Dalits explain us how the absence of interest among the successive governments that came to power in Kerala to appropriately implement various land legislation policies and to honestly redistribute land among the Adivasis affected their lives. Also, if we take a look at the various legislations introduced, it shows that there is a huge gap in the introduction of the policies and their actual



effective execution. For example, The Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction on Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act was adopted in 1975, but it was only implemented after 1986, creating a huge delay. Moreover, the Adivasi lands have been lost due to encroachments, land grabbing, forest notifications and the formation of private estates and plantation firms. Other than that, the Isolation of Adivasis from forest and nature, and the ban on access to forest produce has increased the Adivasis' dependence on other sources of revenue, and has compelled them to travel to other places for work such as casual labour etc. This has created discomfort among the Adivasis over the years which has led to loss of livelihood, hunger, malnutrition and starvation deaths. This denial of source of revenue and the struggle for sheer survival has led to the formation of several Adivasi struggle groups for land rights across the state and the rise of Adivasi land rights movements.<sup>28</sup>

C.K Janu, one of the prominent Adivasi leaders in Kerala opines that although the Kerala State Government decided to limit the individual possession of land to 15 acres during the Land Reforms in the 1960s, excluding plantations from the horizon of this law subsequently led to the marginalization of the Adivasi communities, as they were either pushed to the reserves or to three cent plot colonies. In spite of several provisions in the law, the State Government has been unsuccessful to provide enough land to the Adivasis to safeguard their survival. Instead, what one gets to witness is the indifference of the state towards the Adivasis. The majority of the society at times looks at the Adivasis and their dissenting voices as an annoyance and a trouble to India's development.<sup>29</sup>

Manoranjan Mohanty, a renowned Political scientist and a distinguished Professor of Political Science, says that the contemporary trend of Adivasi awakening is a defining characteristic of contemporary Indian politics. He sees the new awakening as an optimistic symbol of the democratic revolution in India. Yet, a large section of the Indian polity does not treat the Adivasi struggles as a positive phenomenon, because they are under the influence of mainstream India's progress, growth and the development. Thus, caught between the apathy and inaction of the state and a section of the mainstream society that looks at the Adivasis as a nuisance, their struggle for their right to life continues amidst a confused state of affairs.<sup>30</sup>

### CAUSES OF THE OUTBURST OF THE AGITATION

The primary cause of the problems faced by Adivasis in Kerala, especially in Wayanad, is landlessness. Over the decades, Adivasi movements have sought the return of their alienated lands, but despite laws enacted in 1975, implementation failed. A new Act in 1997 abandoned the idea of restoring their original land and instead promised alternative land and housing, which sparked protests from Dalit groups demanding agricultural land. Historically, Adivasi land was lost due to debt, household needs, or medical expenses. Migration and encroachments since the 1940s, especially for industrial and plantation purposes during British rule and after, displaced tribal communities. Forests, which were central to Adivasi life, were increasingly exploited for non-forest and industrial uses, eroding tribal livelihoods and community bonds. Colonial policies and land Acts further contributed to their dispossession.<sup>31</sup>

It is not true to say that the tribals of the Wayanad district in Kerala have protested against the state for the first time. In fact, the recent incident at the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in northern Kerala in February 2003 is the third of its kind.<sup>32</sup>

The first outburst was seen at the dawn of the 19th century when Pazhassi Raja, the famous monarch of the Kottayam kingdom of Wayanad region who fought against the British administration in Malabar. The king's death and defeat in 1805 marked the end of tribal independence in Wayanad.<sup>33</sup> Thereafter, the tribals were forced to work as labourers for landlords and European planters.

The second strike of the tribal uprising in Wayanad was in the late 1960s. The origin of this mutiny went back to the 1950s, when the government of the erstwhile Madras State introduced a scheme in Wayanad to provide land mutually to the tribals and migrants. But this experiment proved to be a tragedy.<sup>34</sup> Though it aimed to modernize the tribes involved in shifting cultivation to settled agriculture, unfortunately, the tribes, uncomfortable with settled agriculture, leased out their lands to settlers. Taking advantage of Kerala's tenancy laws, these settlers succeeded in seizing the tribal's lands. Subsequently, these tribes which benefited from land allocations got into debt traps and had to become bonded labourers.

Approximately around 165 years after the first wave of rebellion, the Adiyar and the Paniyar tribals of Wayanad were roused by the Naxalite movement to rebel against the landlords. But the movement faded and disappeared. Interestingly, it was left to the national emergency of 1975 and its '20-point programme' to quicken the liberation of bonded labour in the district. However, successive state governments pulled their feet on the issue.<sup>35</sup>

The state of desperateness caused by these catastrophes was further intensified by the forest legislations which strengthened the statement of singular stakeholder scheme introduced by the British. Even the Forest

Conservation Act 1980 separated forest lands from the traditional inhabitants. The Wildlife Protection Act 1972 and the National Forest Policy 1988 too were connected to the narrow conservationist line of the Forest Conservation Act.<sup>36</sup> Tribals were treated on the same footing as 'outside communities', when it came to the issue of relocation and encroachment of forest lands. Huge funds were made for relocation of tribals outside national parks and sanctuaries. However, in relocation programs, no special consideration was shown in administration plans for the original inhabitants.

Fascinatingly, in 1990, the Union ministry of environment and forests had issued a set of guidelines on 'tribal forest interface'. Apparently, these rules were meant to accord importance to tribal sentiments and tribal rights. In reality, they rules were only decorated. Though they touched upon the review of disputed claim over forest lands and Pattas(leases/grants) involving forest lands, they gave very little away to the tribes.<sup>37</sup> Rather, these guidelines only served to reinforce the principle of singular stakeholdership. A case in point has been the guideline regarding the Bonafide claims of tribals over forests in areas, which are not observing due process of settlement. Though the norms provided for resumption of rights to tribes in reserved forests, in practice they gave authorities the muscle to restrict these rights in the larger interest of 'conservation'.

It is this story of neglect of tribals of Wayanad by Kerala's forestry establishment that led to the third rebellion. This is the first major challenge against forest laws and establishments by the tribals of Wayanad. What has been challenged in the Muthanga forests is the notion that tribals are inimical to forests and wildlife.

## CONCLUSION

After the Muthanga agitation, many changes took place among the Adivasis. Today, many have become politically conscious and aware of their rights. They cultivate the land they get and thereby find the finances they need. In addition, the children of those who took part in the struggle are educated and many are working. Gained the knowledge to bring their problems before society. Even today, despite the land issues, they have the energy to establish their presence in all areas. The Adivasis in Kerala fall in to different categories and follow different cultural decent. While some cultivate, others gathered forest produces while some others make handicrafts for their livelihood. It may be said that the origin of the problems of Dalit of present day is the incomplete land reforms.

The Muthanga incident symbolizes the second homecoming for Wayanad tribals. It also shows a longing for their habitat, which they had lost to the British in 1805. Finally, they wanted to move away from the language of globalized India, which considers them as an essential raw material providing a source of unlimited labour for multinational corporations. The tribal forest issue in Wayanad thus goes beyond the narrow issue of 'land ownership' to the more fundamental issue of 'cultural identity' of these members of India's marginalized civilization.

It's been Twenty-two years. The pain and agony of the police action, to evict around 800 tribal families who occupied the plantations of Muthanga demanding land and livelihood, refuse to fade. The dream is still left unaccomplished.

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