

# Land agitation, Gothra Maha Sabha & CK Janu's party: What's in store for Adivasi politics in Kerala



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Topic | Kerala Assembly Elections

Two years after parting ways with the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), Adivasi leader and land rights campaigner CK Janu's political party – Janadhipathya Rashtriya Sabha (JRS) – has not joined any political formations in Kerala despite the elections being round the corner.

She had held discussions with the CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) leaders, but they apparently asked her to wait. "I was told that new entrants should wait for sometime before joining the coalition," Janu said. "But such formalities were not followed in Jose K Mani's entry to the LDF. The Left coalition leaders might have asked us to wait because we are Adivasis," she said.



C K Janu. Photo: TA Ameerudheen

Janu said Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) has not even approached her. She hinted that JRS may not contest the Assembly election this time. For, experience has taught her that a party's voice will be heard if it is part of a coalition in Kerala.

“Adivasis and Dalits were not part of coalition politics in Kerala. That is why mainstream political parties ignore them. I have learnt from my experience that Adivasi or Dalit issues will be addressed only if we become part of a coalition,” she said.



Adivasis erected huts inside Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary in 2003 demanding land for the landless. File photo/Manorama

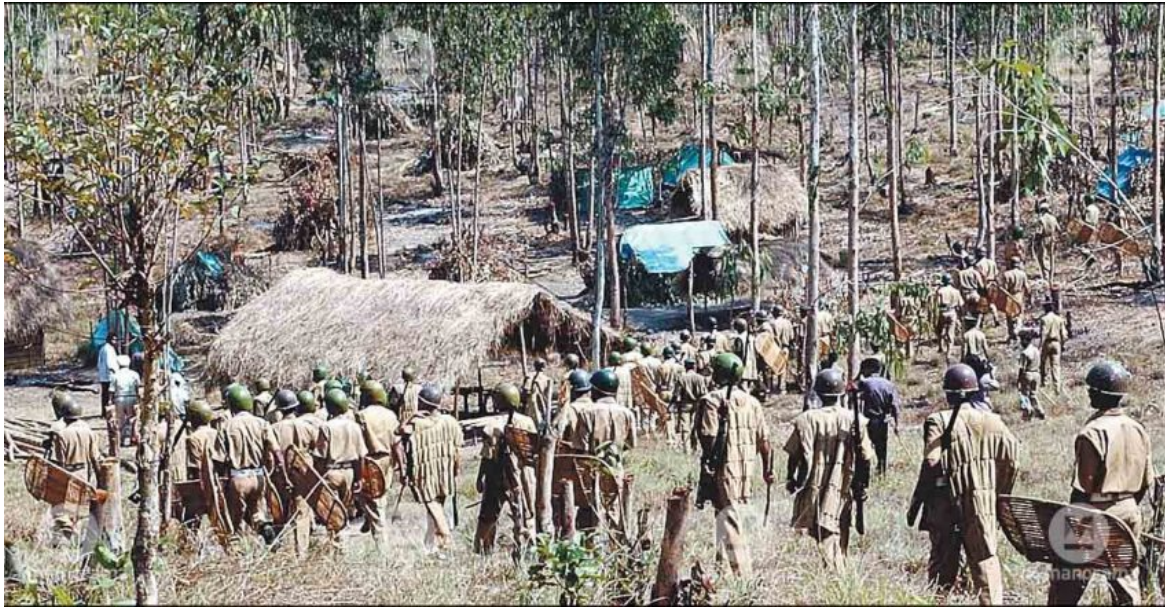
Kerala has been watching Janu's political moves seriously after she led the historical Adivasi land agitation movement, under the banner of Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS) in the early 2000.

It was the biggest Adivasi uprising in Kerala.

### **How it happened?**

The struggle began in 2001 after 30 Adivasis starved to death. This forced the Adivasis to take back their lands for farming. Thousands of Adivasis under the banner of Adivasi Dalit Action Council – which later became the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS)– set up huts in front of

the chief minister's office in Thiruvananthapuram. They dispersed 48 days later after receiving an assurance from the government that it would distribute between one acre and five acres each of cultivable land to the landless poor.



The state sent police force to evict Adivasi protesters from Muthanga. File photo

But the government did not keep its word. Two years later, in February of 2003, thousands of Adivasis walked into the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary in Wayanad and set up camps there. They declared self-rule and started cultivating the land. The state responded with force and sent the police to evict them. Government maintained that the clashes killed one Adivasi protester and one policeman. The Adivasis, however, maintain that 16 of their community members were shot dead that day.

The agitation was followed by Nilpu Samaram, or standing protest, in 2014, demanding a package for families involved in the Muthanga agitation, compensation for children and for those who were arrested, and the handover of 19,600 acres of forestland allotted by the Central government. They called off the agitation 162 days later after the state government agreed to most of their demands. But the state has not kept its promise so far.



All the political parties had tried to defeat the agitation. They were worried about the growing clout of AGMS and Janu among Adivasis.

Eighteen years after the Muthanga agitation, thousands of Adivasis - who were terrified by the police action in Muthanga - remain landless. Mainstream political parties or successive governments have not put in serious efforts to address the issue.



KK Surendran. Photo-TA Ameerudheen

In this context, CK Janu and K K Surendran, who keenly study and interacts with Adivasi societies in Wayanad, discuss the future of Adivasi political movements in Kerala.

**Q: What is the history of Adivasi political movements in Kerala?**

**CK Janu:** Historically, Adivasis and Dalits were labourers. They used to work as slaves. Political parties patronised them and never supported their political entry. Adivasi loyalties were divided between political parties. The parties feared loss of support if Adivasis formed their own political outfits. So they did not allow Adivasi political outfits to grow. They destroyed several such movements. The attempts are continuing even now.

**K K Surendran:** Sangh Parivar outfits made first attempts to organise Kuruma and Kurichia Adivasi tribes in Wayanad. But the first genuine attempts to improve the living conditions of Adivasis were initiated by Communist leader Varghese. Varghese came to Wayanad to spread CPM ideology. The special political situations in Thirunelli drew him close to the Naxal movement. Varghese's interventions and agitations freed Adivasis from slavery. But the state terrorised Adivasis who stood with Varghese. The state machinery killed Varghese. Muthanga agitation too met with the same fate. The state terrorised the Muthanga movement led by C K Janu. The state got support from all political parties to suppress the agitation. There were some similarities between the two agitations. Varghese was murdered on February 18. Brutal police action in Muthanga happened on February 19.



Police dismantle huts made by Adivasis. File photo

### **Why do Adivasi political movements remain weak in Kerala?**

**CK Janu:** Adivasis and Dalits in Kerala do not have a political agenda. This lack of agenda is the reason for their backwardness. They need to have an agenda. They should consolidate their votes too. Adivasis should unite in the current circumstances. We should become a political power. Only then we can solve our problems.

**KK Surendran:** Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS) steered Adivasi politics in Kerala. The organisation grew in the wake of various agitations for land, including the Muthanga agitation. But the state's suppression of the agitation weakened the AGMS. Political parties formed Adivasi feeder outfits and blocked the growth of AGMS.

And it resulted in the near-end to the Adivasi political movements in Kerala.



Police beat up Adivasis who erected huts inside Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary in 2003 demanding land. File Photo/Manorama

### **What are the changes brought in by the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha?**

**CK Janu:** The land agitation by Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha brought in a lot of changes in Kerala society. All political parties were forced to take

up AGMS' agitation seriously. They even formed their own Adivasi feeder outfits. The governments formed three inquiry commissions to check the availability of land for distribution. The commissions found out that Kerala has enough land to distribute among landless Adivasis.

### **What were the reasons for the decline of AGMS?**

**KK Surendran:** Police tortured Adivasis who participated in Muthanga agitation. They registered false cases against them. But CK Janu and other AGMS leaders failed to counter the state terror and strengthen the organisation. Police raided Adivasi colonies in the guise of arresting Janu and Geethanandan. The society-at-large too turned against the Adivasis. They chased Adivasis and handed them to the police. In the meantime, other political parties organised Adivasis. The failure to take the land agitation forward resulted in the waning of AGMS.



Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha leaders CK Janu (left) and M Geethanandan after their arrest from Muthanga agitation site in 2003. File photo

### **What will be the fate of land agitations in Kerala?**

**CK Janu:** Adivasis cannot back off from land agitations. So land agitations will continue even if there are arrests and torture. The agitations will end if all the landless people get land.

### **What was the biggest lesson from the land agitations?**

**CK Janu:** It was the decision to form a political party. Governments will act when the agitations gather momentum. They will forget promises when the protests weaken. We can put pressure on the government only if we form a political platform. That was the reason for the formation of Janadhipathya Rashtriya Samithi (JRS).

### **Will JRS join the Left Democratic Front?**

**CK Janu:** The issues faced by Adivasis and Dalits were ignored because they were not part of coalition politics in Kerala. We learnt that our issues will be addressed only if we become part of a coalition. So we tried to enter one of the coalitions in Kerala. The National Democratic Front was the first coalition to invite us though we did not subscribe to the Bharatiya Janata Party ideology. The Left Democratic Front or the United Democratic Front were ideal coalition platforms for us. But they

ignored us.

NDA agreed to many of our demands, but nothing materialised in the two-and-a-half-years we stayed with them. So we decided to part ways in 2018.

The LDF held discussions with us a couple of times after we quit NDA. It needs our support. But we were asked to wait. That is the procedure before admitting a new partner to the coalition, we were told.

But such formalities were not followed while admitting Jose K Mani. His party was given an LDF entry quickly.

LDF might have asked us to wait because we are Adivasis and Dalits.

We are not part of any coalition now.



K K Surendran. Photo-TA Ameerudheen

### **What do you think about future Adivasi leaders?**

**CK Janu:** Young leaders will definitely emerge from Adivasi communities. That is a necessity. They will lead the land agitations in future.

**K K Surendran:** I have faith in the young Adivasis. Established political parties can no longer ignore them. The Muthanga agitation helped in bringing the Adivasi land issue to the fore. I am sure the movement will continue strong.