

INDIA

Adivasi groups say Kerala's "extreme poverty-free" claim hides harsh realities faced by marginalised communities

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After [ASHA workers](#), Adivasi organisations too have urged film stars not to attend the Kerala government's upcoming declaration of the state as "extreme poverty-free," calling it a "misleading, election-driven political move."

In a joint statement, the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha and Adishakti Summer School said the declaration, to be made on November 1 (Kerala Formation Day), hides the harsh realities faced by marginalised communities including Adivasis, Dalits, and fisherfolk.

They alleged that inviting film stars Mohanlal, Mammooty, and Kamal Haasan to the official event was an attempt to "legitimise a false narrative" and appealed to them to withdraw from the ceremony, stating, "Kerala cannot be called free from extreme poverty while we continue to live in misery."

"Poverty, hunger, landlessness, homelessness, unemployment, diseases, and the lack of social security schemes are some of the most serious socio-political issues in Kerala. The November 1 declaration is an attempt to hide this grim reality for the sake of cheap political gains," they said.

Citing studies and government data, the statement noted that 64,000 families are officially identified as extremely poor, of which only 5% are Adivasis, 20% Dalits, and 75% from other groups—figures the organisations described as

“deceptive.”

They highlighted widespread malnutrition, landlessness, unemployment, and poor health indicators among Adivasi communities in Wayanad, with over 50% of tribal children undernourished and high rates of anaemia among women and children.

“In Wayanad, where a large number of tribal communities such as the Paniya, Adiya, Kattunayakan, and Vettakuruma live, the majority are landless, homeless, and unemployed. Hundreds of families live in leaking huts along riverbanks, on government-owned lands, and forest fringes,” they said, adding that there are 1,234 recorded cases of sickle cell anaemia and widespread malnutrition among children.

They argued that a 2020 study (Sabu et al.) found that 59% of tribal children were underweight and 52.3% had stunted growth, while a 2022 study published in the International Journal of Community Medicine & Public Health reported that 54.8% of children under five in Wayanad suffered from malnutrition.

The statement highlighted that the decline in agricultural employment, particularly for women, has deepened poverty and nutritional deficiencies.

According to them, mechanisation in paddy fields and the influx of migrant labourers have displaced local workers, while employment schemes benefit only a small fraction of the poor.

Educated youth remain jobless, and those who dropped out of school lack the skills for urban employment. Thousands earn less than ₹157 a day—the daily wage benchmark set by the UN—and survive on free ration supplies.

They said the situation in Attappady, which has witnessed repeated infant deaths, is equally grim.

A National Institute of Nutrition study covering 20 tribal hamlets, 480 households, 523 children, 40 pregnant women, and 110 lactating mothers found that 48% of children were underweight, 40% were stunted, and anaemia affected 91% of children, 96% of adolescent girls, and 80% of pregnant women. Thirty percent of those surveyed were landless.

The statement further observed that Dalits, fishers, plantation workers, and other marginalised labour groups across Kerala continue to live in deprivation, with many, including ASHA workers, earning meagre wages despite their crucial social service roles. Natural disasters and climate change have further worsened their lives.

“The government is trying to conceal the severe living conditions of these

marginalised communities,” the statement said, calling the November 1 declaration of “extreme poverty-free Kerala” a “deceptive, election-driven political stunt” that hides the real face of poverty in the state.

They urged the government to conduct a comprehensive survey on the social and economic backwardness of marginalised communities and to implement sustainable welfare programmes to address it.

Kerala will formally declare that it has eradicated extreme poverty on November 1. According to Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, Kerala will become the first state in India to achieve this milestone.

The Chief Minister described this as a “historic achievement,” claiming that Kerala has become the first state in the country to fully realise the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals of “No Poverty” and “Zero Hunger.”

South Indian film icons Mohanlal, Mammooty, and Kamal Haasan are expected to join the Chief Minister in making the announcement.

Earlier, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), who earn barely ₹233 a day and live in conditions of extreme poverty, also appealed to veteran actors Mohanlal, Mammooty, and Kamal Haasan to refrain from attending the state government’s November 1 ceremony declaring Kerala an “extreme poverty-free” state, stating that “Kerala cannot be called free from extreme poverty while we continue to live in misery.”