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[Why are they still standing? – Historic Struggle of Adivasis in Kerala](#)

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By Ajmal Khan

Background

It has been more than four month now since the Adivasis in Kerala have started a historic struggle. They are demanding a set of basic requirements from the government and society of Kerala. The protest is characterized by “standing up”, meaning standing up as mode of protest, in front of the Kerala secretariat at Thiruvananthapuram. All, including women, children and elders are standing day and night until they get their demands met.

Kerala is known for its literacy and other development indicators across the globe. However there are a few populations who are not part of this “Kerala” and their stories have been coming up for quite a while now courtesy the hunger deaths of Atppadi in Palakkadu and unwed Adivasi mothers in Wayanadu. Some might ask, why do you talk about a population which is not even two percent of Kerala? The answer lies in the historic exclusion and alienation that were consciously imposed upon the tribals in Kerala.

Adivasi Gohtra Mahasabha, a larger tribal collective that has been actively engaged in the tribal issues in the state, has called for this stand up protest demanding a set of most pressing issues. The demands are: providing the status of scheduled area to Kerala’s tribal area, restoring the encroached and alienated tribal lands, implementing Forest Rights Act-2006, stoppage of privatising Aaralam farmland and its redistribution among the landless tribals. Also included are justice and rehabilitation for Muthanga incident victims and their families, special packages for the weakest sections among the Adivasis, and to

give ST status to the tribes who are not recognized as ST's and stopping police raj and torture in the name of Maoist threats and connections.

Generally it takes some time for a serious issue of an Adivasi or Dalit to get media attention in Kerala. They are not part of the mainstream progressive Malayaleeness. There are a number of Dalit- Adivasi struggles which came up in Kerala in the recent past. They could not bring their issues into the mainstream and failed to make it to the headlines.

The case has been the same with the standing up struggle as well. There are mainstream Malayalam newspapers which did not even publish a story about the protest. However, gradually, the standing up protest has started to get support from across the state and India. People organized solidarity meetings, protest dharnas and stood up in solidarity with them. The support from the civil society is increasing day by day. However the current government is not even ready to have talks with the Adivasis yet.

Historic problems

The problems of Adivasis in Kerala are as old as the state. The movement for land reform was active in Kerala during the 1970's. However, land for Adivasis could not get importance in those years. Later, in 1975, the government of Kerala passed an act called Kerala Scheduled Tribes restriction on transfer and restriction on alienated land act (KST act-1975) considering the recommendations of Dhebar commission which suggested to reclaim the Adivasi lands that were encroached by others.

The act was a historic move. The struggles to get this act implemented marks the beginning of the Adivasi struggles for right to land in Kerala. Another law which was passed in 1971, the Kerala private forest vesting and assignment act also could not provide the right for land to Adivasis.

However, under the KST act, the government didn't consider more than 4000 applications to reclaim the encroached Adivasi land. The considered applications on which the process for the land redistribution was to begin didn't take place. In 1996 an amendment ordinance was passed by the state government to bypass the KST act. However the president of India didn't accept this. Later the Left government in 1999 brought out an amendment act which permits encroachment of the Adivasi land that is less than five hectare. Land plots that are more than five hectare were supposed to be given back to Adivasis. This amendment also suggested to abolish the KST act. This amendment was passed and the KST act was abolished with support of right and left parties alike in the state.

However this amendment was questioned in the High Court and the Court declared the move for the amendment unconstitutional. In the background of this, a number of Adivasi land struggles have taken place in different parts of the state. Land struggles in Thiruvonapuram in Kannur, the struggles in Aralam, Kundala, Attappadi and Thuveppathi could get support from Dalit and other likeminded groups within the state.

Recent History

Meanwhile, during the 2000's, there were hunger deaths among Adivasis in the state. It was estimated that about 200 Adivasis died because of hunger during this period. Inaction from the government on this issue and continuing exploitation of Adivasis and denying them their basic rights led to the formation of a larger struggle which was called as "Kudilketti Samaram" in 2001. Small shelter houses were created in front of the secretariat, and Adivasis who came from across the state stood firm with their demands. The 2001 struggle lasted from August 29th to October 16th. This protest could bring out land and other serious concerns of Adivasis of the state into the public sphere of Kerala. This could also raise the issues of rehabilitation of all Adivasis, and the need of including the Adivasi land in the 5th schedule which will prevent the land transaction to non-Adivasis.

But the government took the struggle as a rehabilitation issue of about 4000 tribal families and tried to suppress it. Adivasis stood firmly with the support from a number of other people and groups. Finally the

government was forced to accept the demands including the rehabilitation of all the landless Adivasis in the state in a mission mode, deceleration of scheduled areas to protect the Adivasi land. It was assured that hunger deaths would be taken seriously and the government would ensure that no more hunger deaths took place. Full participation of Adivasis in all the activities regarding Adivasi development would be ensured. This struggle also led to the formation of Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha, a larger collective of Adivasis in Kerala as an umbrella organization.

Accepting to the demands of Adivasis, the government established a Tribal Resettlement and Development Mission to provide land for the landless and to implement the demands which were accepted. This was made part of the tribal sub-plan in the state. Though the rehabilitation procedures were started at many places, the elements within the government and outside forces tried to bypass the mission; no positive moves from the government were visible.

In this context Adivasi land struggles started again in Aralam farm in Kannur and Muttanga in Wayanadu district. In 2003, hundreds of Adivasis in Muttanga made huts in the forest land and claimed right over the land and created the Adivasi Gramsabhas there. However the state brutally suppressed them. Police opened fire on hundreds of unarmed Adivasi women and children. Jogi, an Adivasi, was killed in the police firing and many others were seriously injured. One thousand Adivasis were falsely implicated and imprisoned. The Muthanga incident again highlighted the issue of landlessness and land alienation of Adivasi in Kerala which was suppressed by the state. The Forest Right Act-2006 was passed by the government of India but it was also bypassed in the state of Kerala.

Current Struggle

There is a set of issues that Adivasis of the state are going through today. First is of taking back the encroached Adivasi land through legal and other procedures; secondly, the rehabilitation of landless Adivasis; thirdly, implementation of Forest Right Act. Standing up struggle emerged in this context to demand a set of rights from the government of Kerala. They are demanding that government should keep its word which were given during the Kudilketti Samaram in 2001. It is a betrayal not to keep the words and promises which are given to most deprived, marginalized and poorest of the poor of the state. They are demanding for few things which are not impossible for a state like Kerala.

The first demand is to give the status of scheduled area to Kerala's tribal area, restore the encroached and alienated tribal lands and implement the Panchayati Raj (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) to formulate the Adivasi Gramsabhas. It was accepted in 2001 that there would be special provisions made to consider the power of Gramsabha to Adivasi Urukuttams. But no such law or special rules has been made yet.

The second demand is to make provisions to take back the encroached Adivasi lands and redistribute. There are lands which were given under the Tribal Rehabilitation and Development Mission 2001 in Kundara, Marayoor, Chinnakkanal and Attappadi. Huge areas of Adivasi land are being encroached here for different development projects including wind mills and tourism industry. There should be strong laws which protect the land from the encroachments of outsiders.

The third demand is to implement the Adivasi rehabilitation in a mission mode and implement the accepted demands, such as giving one to five hectares of land to all the landless Adivasis and granting financial help to those who have not yet started to get income from farming in the given lands. It was estimated that there are 55000 families who are landless and there are about 6000 families to whom land has been given. There were 30,000 hectares of forest land which were needed to be distributed. The central government and Supreme Court with very strict guidelines had sanctioned 19.600 hectares of land to be distributed in the first phase. However the land was not given to Adivasis.

The Kerala Veterinary and Animal Sciences University that is coming up in the Vaythriti at Wanayadu district is on the same land which was given to Adivasis. Alaram farm was planned to be a public sector company which would be useful for the welfare of Advasis. However it's a private limited company

today. In the land of the farm, about 1500 hectares of land have been encroached by private individuals who are cultivating pineapples using hormones and pesticides with far reaching consequence. All this is happening with the help of the state government and concerned departments. There are also reports that this private limited company is causing five crores rupees annual loss to the tribal department in the state. There is no special package for Attappadi where malnutrition and hunger death of the tribal children are being reported even to this day.

The fourth demand is to implement Forest Rights Act-2006. The right over the forest was one right that Adivasis in India fought for and achieved partially by the legislation of Forest Right Act, Scheduled Tribes and other forest dwellers right recognition act 2006. This act is not literally implemented in the state. The way the act has been conceptualized in the state is, it is to give the land ownership documents to the Adivasis without accepting the community forest rights of tribals.

Another demand is to protect and provide security to Adivasis in Attappadi. Attappadi has been creating headlines for malnutrition and hunger death of Adivasi women and children. The tribal population in Attappadi has been reduced to one third over the years and there is a dire need to take this issue seriously. Furthermore, the victims of Muttanga incident in 2003 have not been given justice, and tribal families who were displaced were not rehabilitated. Those who were injured in the police brutality and lost land were not compensated.

There are vulnerable and weak Adivasi groups such as Paniyar, Adiyar, Muthuvan, Mannan and Malamandaram who should be protected and given special consideration. There are primitive tribal groups such as Cholanaikkar and Kattunaikkar who are facing special threats. Also there are tribal groups in the state like Vedar who are still not given scheduled tribes status. There is police raj in the tribal hamlets of Kerala in the name of Maoist links. Adivasi youths are being falsely implicated and tortured by the police. This should stop and the government instead should focus on the welfare and development of the Adivasis across the state.

The Standing Up Struggle

This month the standing up struggle will cross four months. Children, the elderly and women are standing, standing in the scorching summer in the pavements in front of the secretariat at Thiruvananthapuram. Though Kerala has a tribal woman minister who looks after the tribal affairs portfolio, the current government is responding in a way as if they have not seen much of what is happening in front of the secretariat. Despite support from few civil society and NGO groups none of the political parties has taken this issue seriously.

Recently a CPI(M) leader from the state has mocked the struggle by saying it's an anarchic struggle. Adivasis in Kerala do not have any agency, no political or other voices, they are not a substantial vote bank of any political party. They are still standing because they have not been granted the minimum demands and requirement by the government in Kerala. "We will stand until we get our demands met. We might fall if we get tired, but we will stand up again". The approach from the government is discouraging and they have not shown a positive sign from their side. We are also part of this state, we also have a right to live here peacefully," says C K Janu, leader of Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha. Adivasis have been standing, they will continue to stand until they get their demands. Ignoring them and their demands are crimes against Adivasis. So is protecting the crime and violence that have been already imposed upon them by the state, political parties and mainstream Kerala society.

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