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Interview: Land alienation biggest issue for Attappady tribals, says journalist slapped with police case

Police acted on a complaint by an alleged encroacher who attempted to grab 12 acres inherited by a tribal in Attappady.



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Published Sep 27, 2023 | 10:30 AM _ Updated Sep 27, 2023 | 10:30 AM



Journalist R Sunil receiving the B R Ambedkar award of Kerala Government in 2022 for excellence in reporting on issues concerning scheduled caste and scheduled class communities from Minister K Radhakrishnan. Photo: Madhyamam Daily

A year ago, Kerala's Pinarayi Vijayan-led LDF government issued an order restricting the entry of individuals, including journalists, social workers, and researchers, to the tribal settlements in Attappady and other hill regions of the state without special permission from the Scheduled Tribes Development Department (STDD).

Rights activists working to empower the tribes have resisted the order as they now find it tough to undertake data collection and videography in the impoverished, tribal-majority region.

Critics contend the order was part of an attempt to prevent the media from reporting on the malnutrition and poverty among the Attappady tribals despite the many crores pumped into state and Union government welfare initiatives.

Journalists and those working with the tribals say the biggest threat to their survival is the powerful settler community — outsiders who use their influence to control thousands of acres of tribal land.

They say that the government order has restricted the free flow of information about the real state of affairs in the region. Instead, a narrative that shows the government in a favourable light circulates widely.

Despite the restrictions, senior journalist R Sunil of the Malayalam newspaper *Madhyamam*, has continued to report the grim realities of Attappady, especially tales of settlers grabbing tribal land by enticing the indigenous people with cheap liquor and meagre amounts of money — or simply by intimidating or coercing them.

Sunil, who has reported on tribal land rights and survival issues for over 22 years, now faces police action following a complaint filed by a settler called Joseph Kurian in Attappady.

The provocation for the complaint was a report Sunil filed about Kurian, based on a petition by a local tribal to the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) that accused him of grabbing 15 acres of land he and his two sisters jointly inherited.

The Attappady police secured permission from the Judicial First Class Magistrate Court at Mannarkkad in Palakkad to proceed against Sunil.



Journalist R Sunil.

The offence, according to the petition, is that the journalist and M Sukumaran, an Attappady-based rights activist, defamed Joseph Kurian, who hails from Agali village in Attappady, by using a photo from his Facebook page and faking news to discredit him as a land-grabber destroying prime tribal lands.

Sunil says the case is false and aimed at silencing journalists reporting on injustices suffered by Attappady tribals. He argues that his report is based on petitions accepted and being probed by the CMO, the land use commissioner, and the district collector. He claims to have verified documents accessed from the tribal landowner.

The move to arrest him sparked protests by journalists and rights activists. *Madhyamam* and the Kerala Union of Working Journalists (KUWJ) termed the police action unwarranted, finding it strange that the police should initiate action against a journalist for doing his professional duty.

In this exclusive interaction with **South First**, Sunil explains the tribal land alienation issue in Attappady, and the case against him.

Q. Why did the so-called land mafia encroaching upon tribal land in Attappady single you out? Do they expect the police case will discourage media interventions on behalf of the tribal population there?



A tribal hamlet in Attappady. (KA Shaji/South First)

A. Spread in 745 sq km in Kerala's Palakkad district and located hardly 40 km from Tamil Nadu's second-largest city, Coimbatore, Attappady is home to over 33,000 tribals who hail from the Irula, Muduga, and Kurumba communities.

The development block, part of Mannarkkad Taluk, is also the largest tribal cluster in Kerala, where poverty and malnutrition deaths are periodically reported.

My association with tribals in Attappady started over 15 years ago when infant deaths there created a national-level uproar. I have attempted to trace the region's backwardness and its people by closely

associating with the local communities.

Over the years, I have concluded that land alienation is the largest cause of deprivation in Attappady, where tribals have a near-animal existence despite cosmetic and highly publicised relief measures by the government. In Kerala, buying and selling tribal land is legally banned.

Despite that, settlers in the region are faking documents for thousands of acres of tribal land and using them with the support of corrupt officials and the police. Revenue officials are playing a significant role in fabricating land documents, facilitating the alienation of tribal lands.

The tribals are losing lands they inherited through generations. Along with the land, they are losing their livelihood. Their food security and economic independence are in trouble.

As everywhere else, restoring land rights constitutes is the best remedy for the tribal miseries in Attappady. Sadly, the political leadership is least concerned about it.

Land mafias are ruling Attappady, forcing tribals to remain subservient to them. The whole administrative mechanism is anti-tribal there. The land mafia is now targeting me because I exposed some of the biggest land scams in the tribal region and forced the government to act against those who committed them.

I may be a symbol. They aim to silence journalists who reach Attappady out of social commitment and report on the miseries there.

Q. What is the context of the present case? The allegation is that you fabricated a news item to defame a farmer who toils with the soil. Do you harbour hatred for the settler community in Attappady?

A. I started engaging with tribal land rights issues in 2001 by reporting a landmark struggle, the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha under CK Janu and M Geethanandan, organised in front of the state secretariat by erecting tribal huts.



A tribal hut in Attappady. (KA Shaji/South First)

They demanded justice for tribals who lost land and livelihoods to powerful settlers.

In the last 15 years, I have traveled to Attappady regularly and have done stories after visiting tribal hamlets and interacting with the victims of the land mafia. Many of my reports caught the attention of the authorities and necessitated remedial measures.

The most notable is the scrapping of a government decision to hand over 2,700 acres of land under the Attappady Farming Society, a government-run cooperative comprising tribals meant to promote collective farming, to a powerful local settler on lease.

Many alienated lands of individual tribals were restored after my reports were published. They brought me closer to the tribal communities.

Tribal leaders like M Sukumaran, P Murukan, PV Suresh, S Sivani, TR Chandran, and Vellingiri started contacting me and giving me crucial information on land alienation and other forms of cruelty meted out to the tribals.

Several honest officials from the tribal welfare, police, and revenue departments contact me and share crucial information. As a result, I am a target of the settler lobbies. They think they can hide their illegal activities by silencing me.

Q. Let's talk about Joseph Kurian and his complaint, on which the police filed the case against you. Why is he targeting you selectively?

A. In Attappady, I once visited the hut of Nanjiyamma, the famous tribal musician who won the National Award for the Best Playback Singer for the blockbuster Malayalam film *Ayyappanum Koshiyum*. The visit was much before she received the award.



National Award-winning singer Nanjiyamma.

She spoke to me about the alienation of the land her late husband inherited from his father. She said the tribal land grab case registered against the encroacher has been pending for several decades.

She needed more documents to establish land ownership. I went to the sub-collector's office in Ottappalam and collected all documents and details

related to that land. I found Joseph Kurian to be the person who encroached upon her traditionally inherited tribal land.

The issue won state-level attention when *Madhyamam Weekly* ran it as a cover story. Kurian threatened and abused me repeatedly over the phone. He also used a lawyer's notice.

When the MLA KK Rema raised the issue in the state Assembly, then revenue minister K Rajan responded by ordering an investigation supervised by the assistant land revenue commissioner.

The probe found Kurian guilty of alienating the tribal land by fabricating documents. Kurian even started constructing a petrol pump on that land.

The process of restoring the land to the genuine owners is on.

Q. What's the latest case?

A. It's natural that Kurian feels angry that I spoiled his plans. Only last month, a tribal, Chandramohan, from Varagampadi Settlement in Attappady, called me.

He and his two sisters inherited 12 acres of land as parental property. The Tribal Welfare Department built a house each for them on the land. He told me Joseph reached his house and threatened his father and asked them to vacate the land immediately.



A tribal family in Attappady. (KA Shaji/South First)

Kurian claimed he bought the land long ago and showed a fabricated land document. Chandramohan also shared with me the complaints he lodged with the CMO, the Revenue Department, and the district collector.

I contacted the concerned offices, who told me that investigation orders had been issued. Then, I filed the report in the online edition of *Madhyamam Daily*. That infuriated Kurian, and he approached the Attappady police.

Under his influence, the police registered the case as a non-cognizable offence by securing permission from the local court. When I contacted the police, they falsely claimed that it was not they but the petitioner who had obtained court permission to proceed with the case and that they were only probing the matter.

But now the police accept that it was they who sought the court's permission. So, I have reason to believe that the police are also acting out of vengeance against me. My only crime is filing news reports supporting the larger tribal cause.

Q. Are you sure you attempted to uphold a larger public interest by filing the reports against Kurian?

A. I never singled out Kurian. I wrote several articles mentioning land appropriation committed by other regional settlers and named them, too.

Whenever Kurian contacted me recently, I published his version as well. I respect objectivity and have never hesitated to publish the other side of the story.

The larger question is the impoverishment and marginalisation of tribals in Attappady. How can the settlers fake land documents in a state with progressive moorings to claim ownership of lands

traditionally inherited by tribals? That is the larger question.

Despite a prevailing ban on transactions involving tribal lands, how is the land mafia thriving in Attappady and targeting the hapless Aborigines?

They made activist Sukumaran a co-accused only because they thought fear psychosis could better silence those who stood with the tribals.

Q. What is the way ahead?

A. The *Madhyamam* management promised me all possible legal help. The KUWJ also extended solidarity and help. The fight will continue.

I don't think the case is the outcome of the frustration of a single individual. It involves the collective will of all the anti-tribal elements in Attappady and outside.

The police are making common cause with the encroachers, as are revenue officials. For the government and political parties, it's not worthy of their concern.

We are living in a time of lethargy and insensitivity. The powerful have different priorities, and tribals seldom matter to them. But we will continue the fight in all possible ways.

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