

INDIA

# Adivasi families in Kerala resume protest as promised land remains elusive

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Photo: Shraavan Das

In the heart of Kerala's Malappuram district, a quiet but determined struggle for basic human dignity continues to unfold. For over two years, indigenous communities in Nilambur have been fighting for something fundamental to their existence – land to call their own. What began as a plea for justice has evolved into a powerful testament to the resilience of marginalised communities and a stark reminder of institutional failures in addressing historical injustices.

The current phase of the Nilambur indigenous land struggle traces its roots to 2018, when tribal families first began their protest deep within the forests. However, the fight for land rights represents a much older battle – one that spans generations of displacement, broken promises, and systematic marginalisation. The struggle gained renewed momentum in May 2023, when over 200 indigenous families from 18 tribal settlements established a protest camp outside the Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) office in

Nilambur.

At the centre of this movement stands Bindu Vailaserry, an indigenous woman whose extraordinary sacrifice has become the face of the struggle. For 314 days, she maintained a hunger strike, her deteriorating health serving as a living symbol of her community's desperation. Her leadership, alongside activists like Giridasan and others, has mobilised families from various tribal groups, including the Paniyar, Nayikkan, Kuruma, and Alan communities across settlements in Akampadam, Idivanna, Parekkad, and Myladi areas of Chaliyar panchayat.

The legal basis for the indigenous community's demands is unshakeable. In 2009, the Supreme Court of India issued a landmark judgment directing the Kerala government to identify and return lost agricultural lands to tribal communities. The court specifically mandated that if the original lands could not be restored, the state must acquire suitable agricultural land through the Land Acquisition Act and distribute it to the affected families.

For the Nilambur region alone, this Supreme Court directive identified 538 acres of forest land that should be distributed to landless indigenous families. Yet, more than a decade after this judicial mandate, the implementation remains woefully incomplete. The Forest Department has cleared and transferred only 278 acres to the Revenue Department, while the fate of the remaining land remains uncertain, as it is buried in bureaucratic excuses about the dense vegetation making transfer impossible.

The story of the Nilambur land struggle is fundamentally one of repeated institutional betrayal. When the 314-day hunger strike reached a critical point in March 2024, with Bindu Vailasherry's health deteriorating dangerously, the Malappuram Collector finally agreed to negotiations. The resulting agreement promised 50 cents of land to each of the 60 families involved in the protest within six months, with specific locations identified at Kannankandi and Nellippoyi.

The agreement appeared comprehensive, including provisions for survey work to demarcate plots and ensuring the participation of the protest committee in the process. However, like so many promises before, this commitment proved hollow. Months passed without any concrete action, leading to renewed protests in October 2024. When approached again, officials offered new deadlines – first October 30th, then December 31st, and finally another three-month extension in May 2025.

This pattern of delay tactics reveals a deeper systemic issue. Each broken promise not only represents administrative failure but also demonstrates a fundamental lack of respect for indigenous rights and dignity. The continuous

cycle of hope and disappointment has pushed these communities to resume their struggle, this time establishing a protest camp near the Collectorate.

The urgency of the land demand becomes starkly apparent when examining the living conditions in existing tribal settlements. Many families are crammed into impossibly small spaces – one documented case shows 23 people living in a 420-square-foot house, with up to eight people sleeping in a single room. Some settlements lack basic amenities like individual bathrooms, forcing residents to rely on shared community facilities that create particular hardships, especially for women and children during nighttime hours.

Currently, the government provides only 10 cents of land per family – a space barely sufficient for housing, let alone agricultural activities that could provide sustainable livelihoods. Without proper land ownership documents or titles, these families remain in a state of permanent insecurity, unable to access credit, improve their homes, or plan for their children's futures.

The struggle for land is intrinsically linked to cultural survival and economic independence. As Giridasan, one of the protest leaders, explains, “We want to live through agriculture, not daily wage labour. We need the government to provide us with land for that purpose.” This aspiration represents more than economic preference – it reflects a desire to maintain traditional ways of life and achieve self-sufficiency rather than dependence on welfare schemes.

The treatment of indigenous protesters by state machinery reveals deep-seated discriminatory attitudes. During recent attempts to meet with the Collector, police prevented the indigenous families from entering the Collectorate premises, forcing them to wait for two hours in the rain. This contrasts sharply with the normal protocol, where other groups are typically allowed access to meet officials.

Such discriminatory treatment reflects what activists describe as “racial discrimination” – a pattern of behaviour that consistently treats indigenous peoples as second-class citizens. The fear that community members express toward police interaction speaks to a history of mistreatment and marginalisation that extends far beyond the current land dispute.

Despite institutional failures, the Nilambur struggle demonstrates remarkable community organisation and solidarity. The protest operates on principles of collective leadership, with different groups rotating between work and protest duties. Income earned by those working is pooled to support both the struggle and the daily needs of participating families. This system ensures that the protest can sustain itself while allowing families to meet their basic needs.

Women's participation in the movement has been particularly strong, with

leaders like Bindu Vailasherry and Geetha Aravind taking prominent roles. This female leadership challenges traditional gender dynamics while highlighting how land rights affect women disproportionately, given their roles in food security and family welfare.

The Nilambur indigenous land struggle represents a critical test for Kerala's commitment to social justice and constitutional values. As the Left Front government completes nine years in power, having made significant claims about development and welfare programs, the continued disenfranchisement of indigenous communities exposes the limitations of mainstream development models.

The solution requires more than administrative efficiency – it demands a fundamental shift in how state institutions approach indigenous rights. The Supreme Court judgment of 2009 provides a clear legal framework, but implementation requires political will and recognition of indigenous peoples' right to dignity and self-determination.

As these communities prepare for an intensified phase of struggle, their demand remains simple yet profound: recognition of their right to exist with dignity on their ancestral lands. Their persistence in the face of repeated betrayals stands as a powerful reminder that the fight for justice, though long and difficult, cannot be abandoned. The question now is whether Kerala's institutions will finally honor their commitments or continue to test the patience and resilience of some of the state's most vulnerable citizens.

The Nilambur struggle ultimately transcends local politics – it represents a fundamental question about whether India's constitutional promises of equality and justice extend meaningfully to its indigenous peoples. The answer to that question will be written not in government documents or legal judgments, but in the actual distribution of land and dignity to those who have waited far too long for both.

For the Adivasi families of Nilambur, the question remains: how many more times must they protest for what is already rightfully theirs?

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