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## Satyagraha of Adivasis Win Historic Victory in Nilambur, Kerala

in India 10/04/2024



A satyagraha demanding land for tribal families in Nilambur went on for ten months to finally get their demands partially approved by the district collector. Their demand was to enact the 2009 judgment by the Supreme Court that guaranteed 538 acres of land for landless tribal people in Kerala. In a meeting with Malappuram district collector held on 19th March 2024, the protestors were assured that sixty tribal families will get 50 cents of land. They had demanded one acre of land for each family.

The Nilambur tribal people's protest for land went on for eleven months. The protest leader's health was deteriorating when the collector's body weight had reduced to half of what she

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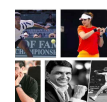
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called for negotiation. Bindu's body weight had reduced to half of what she

weighed before. Bindu was surviving on water, in a three to four days interval she will have water, black tea or lemon juice, she stopped having any solid food. But it didn't alter her spirit, she was the one who talked to the supporters, visitors and media to update about the movement. Bindu wouldn't back off from the struggle without fulfilling the demand to implement the Supreme Court verdict that says land for cultivation must be provided for the tribal people.

She thinks that having no land is the root cause of problems that arise in the colony. There is no distance between their houses. If someone spits from their patio, it falls on the neighboring house's kitchen or patio. Recently a fight erupted in the colony because of such an incident. When an elderly man urinated, it spread to the neighboring house, he looked in, she said this, walked through the patio, complaints like these too are the reasons. In the tribal colonies, peace is something that can be broken at any moment, it all has become always tense. If they own the land they deserve, their houses will be set in a distance with enough privacy. They can cultivate vegetables and rice in the land and live away from poverty. They strongly believe if the domestic atmosphere is good, their children can study in peace and get employed and make their lives better. "We are not seeking any help or charity, we are asking for the rightful. We need our soil. We will not think about ending this protest without that," Bindu said.

This is not a first tribal struggle for the land in Nilambur. In 2007 they had protested raising the same demands. The strike was held inside the forest. Giridas, the secretary of this protest committee recollects that the then collector had verbally stated that they will find out the land. But this word was not kept. Even years passed by without solving the land issue.

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Around two hundred Adivasi families were in strike. Some of them had withdrawn from the movement after getting ten to forty cents of land. The protestors come from 18 tribal colonies that are situated in Akampadam, Idivanna, Parekkad, Myladi (Malappuram's Chaliyar panchayath), Potthukallu, Pookkottumpaadam, Kalikaavu etc. they all belong to different tribal communities including Paniyar, Naykkar, Kurumar, Aalar etc.

Kerala have witnessed several Adivasi movements. During the iconic Muthanga land struggle in 2003 that was in the leadership of CK Janu and Geethanandan.

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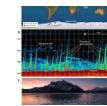
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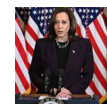
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the police used firing to suppress the struggle. In the firing done by the government headed by AK Antony, on the adivasis who claimed their rightful land by declaring the land as their own on February 19th, a young man named Joggy was killed. The political environment that emerged in Kerala post Muthanga firing was approved by the Supreme Court philosophically in 2004. In 2009, the Supreme Court produced a final verdict in this case. According to this verdict the state government must provide 538 acres of land to the landless tribal people. But till 2019, the forest department and the Scheduled Tribes department kept the order hidden. Actions taken by tribal rights organizations brought the information out. The 538 acres of forest land is spread across Chaliyar, Chungathara, Nilambur regions. This is very evidently stated in the Supreme Court order. The adivasis have tried over the years to get the land by meeting the chief minister and of the 538 acres of land only 278 acres of land were handed over to the revenue department. The forest department stated that the rest of the land is dense forest land and such land can't be transferred. When it is evidently stated in the Supreme Court order that 538 acres of land must be handed over to the tribal people, the question why the department cleared the forest in 278 acres and handed it over to the revenue department, is still unanswered.

Usually whenever there is a court intervention and judgment declaration, the government takes up to new law making. According to the 2009 Supreme Court judgment the tribal people must be given one to five acres of land. But it is to undermine this judgment the government put forward the agenda of providing 10 to 40 cents of land and have already distributed land to some of them. When the Supreme Court judgment clearly states that land must be provided to landless tribal people, the government claims that those who have 10 to 20 cents of land are not eligible under this judgment. Thus they are betraying the tribal people once again and protects the encroachers of the land.

The new bill introduced by the union government that says the forest land act can be used for non-forest purposes must be read along with this. This opens up the Western Ghats Mountain range towards exploitation to extract soil, stone and other forest resources, to use for government's developmental projects. A circular issued by the Kerala government in July 2020 clearly indicate this. The circular was barring journalists, researchers, and social activists from entering tribal living areas. It is through the journalists and social activists, the news about malnutrition that exists in the tribal areas, and the news about sexual exploitation of the Adivasi women comes out. The governments are trying to end such interventions.

Journalists who are reporting about the tribal areas are being charged with cases. A senior journalist named R Sunil, who had been studying about the land issues in Kerala in depth and writing about it in the form of reports and books was booked for reporting about an Adivasi land scam. A case against Sunil was registered in Attappadi, Agali.



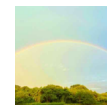
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Having their own land causes severe issues to the lives of Adivasis. Having no toilet or having no land to bury the dead are their everyday challenges. They can't do cultivation for survival. So, the tribal farmers are forced to be slave like labourers in the land of high-end landlords. This is what happens to most of the tribal people in different tribal hamlets. Recently we came to know through reports that tribal youngsters who have gone to Coorg in Karnataka as agricultural laborers are being brutally killed and even internal organs are being lost. This is the result of Adivasi people being landless and the government not implementing labor laws in the tribal areas.

The government's approach towards the Adivasi land struggle is utterly racist. The government encounters them using fake information campaigns. Even with a judgment from the Kerala High Court that orders to reacquire the land illegally owned by PV Anwar MLA, who was the left's independent candidate from Nilambur. There is no action taken as a follow up to this. The government is complicit in this by aiding the MLA by transferring the officials who are supposed to act on this and hindering their duty.

The MLA hadn't visited the movement that is being carried out by the poorest and oppressed people of his own constituency. When asked by the journalists about this, he responded, that it is a protest sponsored by the Congress and Muslim League leaders and he will not visit the protestors.

If they get disturbed to see the tribal people protesting and feels like the movement is aiming to shame them, they themselves consider as committing a crime.

"The MLA's racial attitude was explicit when he said that the tribal people can't organize on their own and it is a challenge to the voters. We too have the right to be politically active, express our opinion and protest. The authorities want us to remain in the colonies, availing the welfare schemes that the government provide. Feuds like Anwar who thinks he has a right on any land, their racial mindset gets raw exposure," Bindu said. The protestors have all the details about the land under government ownership and those illegally owned by private individuals. Nilambur Kovilakam, Palakkayam plantation, Vennakkode, Kallund Thambrankunnu, Kannamkund Mankada Kovilakam, Palunda Pothan Estate, Kalikavu Pullenkode Estate, Chokkadu ST Society, Chunkathara Nellippoyil Kodyeri, Akambadam Atthikkadu, Nilambur Thrikeyakuth Edakode beat, Moolepadam Forest quarters, Munderi 1000 acre land etc. are some of such areas. The protestors think if the land must be taken back and given to the tribal people, this will solve their landlessness, they say.

**Ambika** is the editor of Maruvakk, a Malayalam magazine where this article was first published while the struggle was still going on.

Translated by Mrudula Bhavani



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