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Why are Wayanad tribals, farmers wary of poll prom

It seems that tribal leaders, farmers and environmentalists are not impressed with Rahul Gandhi conte their constituency



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On Thursday, Indian National Congress (INC) President Rahul Gandhi will submit his nomination to contest from the Wayanad parliamentary constituency in Kerala, apart from his stronghold Amethi in Uttar Pradesh.

Announcing Gandhi's candidature in New Delhi, senior INC leader AK Antony said by fielding Rahul in Wayanad, the party aims to end the North-South divide. Other senior INC leaders have claimed that Gandhi's charisma will help the party gain more seats from South India.

But it seems that tribal leaders, farmers and environmentalists in Wayanad are not impressed with the prime ministerial candidate, contesting from their constituency.

The Wayanad Lok Sabha seat comprises seven Assembly segments, out of which two are reserved for Scheduled Castes (SC) and one for Scheduled Tribes (ST).

Right to Live

“Chances of Rahul winning are quite high. Since its formation in 2009, Wayanad has been with the INC. So, he may win. But it is not going to change our lives,” CK Janu, a tribal leader who led the 2003 self-rule movement – the Muthanga protest – in Wayanad.

The protest saw the death of five people, including a police officer. Muthanga forest – home to the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS) – is recognised as the homeland of different adivasi communities in Wayanad. Many adivasi families were forcibly evicted from Muthanga during the 1960s (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/what-happened-in-wayanad-12804>) after the area was declared a sanctuary, and again in the 1980s to make way for eucalyptus plantations.

The remaining adivasi families in the forest sought to assert their traditional rights by setting up their own panchayat, and setting up subsistence agriculture.

Maintaining a self-supporting and regenerative natural ecosystem, primarily with regard to water sources and vegetation, was an important goal for the Adivasi communities.

However, the then Antony government did not negotiate with the protesters but simply issued a notice of scheduled eviction and police action was initiated – which led to firing and loss of five lives.

“Right to have a decent life, right to live on the land where we were born, better education facilities, job opportunities and easy access to healthcare are still our main concerns. When we were pushed out of our land, the Congress was in power. Barely, a year after the Muthanga protests, Rahul became a member of Parliament (MP). Now, even after 16 years, he has not uttered a single word on Muthanga, our lives and our survival,” said Janu.

According to Janu, tribals and Dalits are disappointed by the attitude of political parties. “They make promises during polls, but nothing turns fruitful. We still struggle to bury our dead due to shortage of land. We were owners of this land once, and now we have become daily wagers, working in modern-day slave-like conditions. So, the tribals are not at all interested in voting,” she added.

Farmers resort to suicide

John PT, president of an independent farmers association, told *Down To Earth* that while tribals and Dalits – who comprise 20 percent of the total population in the constituency – are not receiving any benefits from the skewed forest rights, conservation policies and land reforms.

“Additionally, they are also left to die out of starvation due to illogical support programmes. Further, following the August 2018 floods, farmers have been committing suicide in Wayanad due to crop loss,” he added.

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“The latest one was on March 27, 2019. VB Krishna Kumar (55) was found hanging from a tree at the back of his house near Thirunelli. According to his relatives, Kumar had taken a loan of Rs 3.5 lakh from Thrissilery Service Cooperative bank, including an agriculture loan of Rs 2 lakh, the repayment of which was due,” said John, who himself has around 3.5 tonnes of ginger powder that he has been trying to sell over the last few months.

According to media reports, there have been four farmer suicides in Wayanad district over the past seven months. “The agrarian crisis is worsening and farmers are in distress. A moratorium announced in October 2018 for loans taken by farmers is in place till October 2019. However, banks are not following the government order on the moratorium to avoid loan recovery measures. They are reportedly continuing to send notices and harassing farmers, which is pushing them to take

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drastic steps,” John said, adding that over 100 acres of land in Wayanad was flooded last year.

“The farmers need a loan waiver. We need farmer-oriented trade agreements. Who is going to give us this? We don’t think the current political parties can. They are least bothered about us. If Gandhi can talk about this, think seriously about this, work out a plan on this; then he may be accepted more,” John said.

Wayanad, being a zero-industrial zone, depends totally on agriculture as the single source of income for physical

sustenance and social progression. According to John, hopelessness over unresolved problems, dilemmas of personal life and the inability to find funds for various activities or to repay loans are some of the biggest challenges that people in Wayanad face.

Dip in green cover

Stanley Augustine, a farmer and environmentalist, said both the central and state government’s policies have brought down the green cover in Wayanad drastically, leading to an increase in human-animal conflict.

“The government rampantly planted teak and eucalyptus for no reason in the forest, which led to a decline in natural forest plants. Eucalyptus and teak draw underground water, which in turn stops other plants from growing. When the natural forest is destroyed and water resources dry up, the wildlife starts to enter human settlements in search for food and water. This has increased the human-animal conflict in the area,” Stanley said.

“Further, when people started using pesticides to kill crabs damaging plantain trees, the foxes feeding on the poisoned crabs also died. When the number of foxes started to decline, the number of boars started to go up. This, directly, led to an increase in human-animal conflict rates,” added Stanley, whose forefathers have been farming in Wayanad for decades.

He claimed the current forest fires in Bandipur Tiger Reserve (<https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/why-are-fires-frequent-at-the-bandipur-reserve/article26419280.ece>) in neighbouring Karnataka and Mudumalai National Park (<http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2019/feb/25/fire-destroys-50-acres-of-forest-land-in-mudumalai-tiger-reserve-1943298.html>) in Tamil Nadu will push animals to migrate to adjoining forests in large numbers and Wayanad is going to see the possibility of more man-animal conflicts this summer.

“Since they share their borders with Wayanad, wild animals, including elephants and gaurs, have trooped into Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in large numbers in search of food and water,” he said.

Shifting agriculture

Talking on the loss of paddy land due to farmers shifting to cultivating cash-crops, Stanely said that “in 1906, there were 39,000 hectares of paddy land, now it has shrunk to 4,000 hectares”.

“Loss in paddy land means, we are going to lose natural water reservoir. This is going to worsen our drought,” he added.

According to Stanely, issues like levelling of paddy land and scrapping policies leading to deforestation are not going to figure in the political parties’ campaign. “Eighty per cent of people in Wayanad are farmers. But issues related to our day-to-day life is not going to figure in poll campaigns. Excess human intervention is going to kill Wayanad and the greedy political parties are least bothered about it,” he added.

INC candidate MI Shanavas had been winning in Wayanad in the last two elections, held in 2009 and 2014. Compared to 2008, the margin of victory for INC in 2014 was only two percentage points in terms of voteshare. Shanavas passed away in November last year.

The main Opposition to the INC in Wayanad is CPI, which came very close to winning the last elections. It has named PP Suneer as its candidate from the constituency. Meanwhile, the BJP has fielded Thushar Vellappally, president of Bharath Dharma Jana, as the NDA candidate from Wayanad.

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