

ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS 2021

'Why don't they look at us': Wayanad's Adivasis are angry with politicians

They make up nearly a third of the district's population, yet they are the most marginalised community.

By Nidhi Suresh & Aditya Varier 31 Mar, 2021



Thinu, an Adivasi woman in Wayanad, Kerala, had a question for politicians contesting the current assembly election. "They are all sleeping in nice air-conditioned rooms, right? Then why can't they turn around and look at us at least once?"

Thinu's is one of three Adivasi families that have settled on a small inclined clearing overlooking a large grazing field. The settlement lies on the edge of the Pulpally forest range in Kommanchery area of Sulthan Bathery. They belong to the Adivasi tribe Kattunayakar, meaning "kings of forests". But royalty is far from what this community feels.



The families settled on a small inclined clearing overlooking a large grazing field.

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According to the [2011](#) census, over one lakh people in Wayanad are Adivasi, making up 31.24 percent of the district's population. There are at least nine Adivasi tribes in the region, some better off than the others, economically and socially.

Though their numbers make them a strong voting block the Adivasis are easily the most ignored community in Wayanad. "We are just a vote bank. We're not counted as human beings here," Binu said.



Binu, right, with her child and her sister-in-law Radha, left.

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A precarious life

In Binu and her sister-in-law Radha's settlement, there are four 8x12-foot bamboo structures, each covered with blue tarpaulin sheets. This is what the Adivasis call home.

Radha, shows us her home. In one corner of the single-room makeshift structure, there are a few utensils with firewood for cooking and on the other side is a small cot.



Radha's home is a single-room makeshift structure.

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“This is our condition, you see. There’s no clean water or proper food. It’s so scary when it rains. We all go, huddle and sit in the field until the rain stops. We have to wait until the water leaves our homes.”

Apart from the houses there are four bamboo structures to shelter the two buffalos owned by Radha’s family. They are tended to by her husband Gopi.



The makeshift tenements of the colony.

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A short walk away is a small hole in the ground. “This is our drinking water source. Right now the water is fresh, so it's clean. But when it rains, all the mud and dirt goes into the water and we struggle to filter it,” Radha said.

Apart from fear of rain, wind and lack of clean water, there’s a shortage of food. Binu

has barely any flesh on her bones and she has to feed her six-month-old baby. “We go hungry so often. If we had some land we could have grown food to eat instead of waiting to be fed.”



The drinking water source of the colony.

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We asked Binu and Radha their ages and they said none of them knew how old they were. "We have no memory of age. We have just seen many seasons change. We do not know how to read or write. Even when we have to sign something, we put our thumb impressions," Radha said.

Both their husbands are daily wage laborers earning Rs 300 per day. Last year, during the Covid lockdown, the men were out of work. With no other income, the families were unable to buy food. Only two people among them had ration cards but, because of the strict lockdown, none ventured out for close to a month.

“Nobody even came to check on us. We ended up going to the forest to find a particular kind of forest root which we boiled and ate for a month,” Binu alleged.



Binu with her six-month-old baby.

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In September 2020, when Binu had just given birth to her daughter, she

experienced severe starvation for a month. She said that eventually it was social activists like Ammini K Wayanad and not government officers who gave them food.

Now, Binu's family also has a ration card. "We got the card because I made a big fuss. Otherwise, we would still be starving," she said, explaining that the ration from just two cards was not enough to feed a community of 12 people.

Wildflowers and loneliness

Since 2014, the Kattunayakars living on the edge of the Pulpally forest were part of a larger Adivasi settlement inside the forest. "It used to be so peaceful inside. The wild flowers there were so beautiful, you know," said Radha, her eyes lighting up.



Social activist Ammini K Wayanad is an Adivasi herself.

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When they lived in the forest, the community had social workers such as Kunju Mohammed, a local labourer, and Ammini, a social activist and Bettakuruma Adivasi, who lives in Mankunnu area of Sulthan Bathery, delivering food and other essentials to them.

Kunju first saw the Kattunayakars in 2001, when a few of their men took food from a wedding hall in the town. "I followed them and saw their plight. I started helping them with food and clothes regularly," he said, adding that back then none of them had ration cards.

It was only a few months later, when Kunju protested alone at the district collectorate, that a few of them were given ration cards.



Ammini claims police started questioning them often after they went to deliver supplies to Adivasis in the forest. | Aditya Varier

Ammini claimed that after the police saw them go into the forest to deliver supplies to the Adivasis, the crime branch began questioning them often. “They would keep harassing us and kept asking if we had links to Maoists,” she said.

In 2015, forest officials began threatening the Adivasis to leave the forest. The community was forced to move out, and ended up scattered.

“Five families moved to this spot. The forest officials built these bamboo structures for us, promising that they were temporary shelters. But it’s been over five years,” Radha said.

Two years ago, two people from one of the families died. Radha and Binu are not sure whether it was from disease or starvation.



Two families left the colony after two people died, either from disease or starvation. | Aditya Varier

After witnessing the deaths and their deteriorating living conditions, two of the families went away. Three families, comprising three men, three women and their six children, now live at the settlement.

Both Radha and Binu preferred their lives inside the forest. “It’s lonely here, I don’t like it,” Binu said.

CK Janu’s struggle

Sulthan Bathery is one of the two constituencies in Wayanad that are reserved for the Scheduled Tribes. CK Janu, president of Janadhipathya Rashtriya Party, an Adivasi woman, is one of the contestants.



CK Janu is the president of Janadhipathya Rashtriya Party.

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In 2016, Janu had contested as an independent backed by the BJP on the condition that if she lost her party would be given a Rajya Sabha seat. She lost and none of her demands, including for declaring Scheduled Areas in accordance with Article 244 of the Indian constitution, [were met](#). In 2018, she quit the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance.

Ahead of this election, her party held 8-10 rounds of talks with the CPIM to work out an alliance, but in vain.

Despite saying “there’s [no going back](#) to NDA”, when the BJP offered her a seat again this year, she agreed. So, she’s again contesting with the BJP’s support.

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Fighting the system

Even though she was betrayed once, Janu continues to believe that lasting change can only come from within the political system.

According to her, Adivasi issues are only looked into when they protest en masse. “Why is that the case? I believe it’s important to fight the system from within the system. This is why I will continue to do my best to get a seat.”

Janu explained that it was the 2003 Muthanga agitation that first led to the Adivasis being taken seriously.

“Despite this, it seems like even today, we might have to organise ourselves for a land rights protest. There’s still too many Adivasis who need to be pulled out of poverty and be given housing, land and education.”

On March 17, when the BJP announced their list of candidates, they declared Manikandan C, who belongs to Paniyar tribe, as their candidate from Mananthavady constituency. Nevertheless, the next day Manikandan clarified that when members of the BJP had previously asked him, he had already told them that he was not interested.

In a Facebook video, he said, “Even if I’m hanged upside down, I will not betray my people.”

Meanwhile, unlike Janu, social activist Ammini fights for the community from outside the system. Ammini, who grew up witnessing Adivasi women being sexually assaulted by locals, now provides legal and emotional support to sexual violence and land rights cases of Adivasis.

Ammini feels joining politics is a distraction. “Look at Janu. Her priorities have changed. I support her because I feel as an Adivasi woman, she must not get isolated but ever since she joined the BJP, she has definitely lost a lot of trust among us Adivasis.”

Meanwhile KK Surendran, a former professor at District Institute of Education and Training in Wayanad who also participated in the Muthanga agitation along with Janu believes that Janu’s entry, exit and re-entry into BJP was inevitable. “You can’t expect her to sit in protest all the time. If BJP is the only party offering her a seat then what’s so wrong if she changes her mind and wants to come back?”



KK Surendran participated in the Muthanga agitation.

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Warrier

Manikandan echoed this. “We can’t judge her because neither the Left Democratic Front or United Democratic Front gave her a platform.”

The Adivasi hopes have risen and fallen far too many times. In the Lok Sabha election of 2019, former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi won in Wayanad. This raised the hope of many Adivasis who thought that the new member of parliament would listen and raise their issues.

“But it’s been two years and nothing’s happened. Our conditions are still the same. Now, we don’t have any expectations from him,” Ammini said.

On the other hand, Manikandan feels that while Rahul Gandhi has done few things, the Adivasis need sustained support which has not happened.

Isolated and ignored

It’s not just the system that turns their back on the Adivasis in Wayanad. They feel abandoned by the non-Adivasi villagers as well.

An exception to this are people like Surendran and Kunju. Even though most Adivasis are often employed by locals in Wayanad, Surendran said that the locals have never really supported them.

Ammini echoed this and added that during election, Adivasi men are often lured with alcohol and cash in exchange for votes. “They don’t see Adivasis as human beings. For politicians, we’re nothing but a vote bank.”

Manikandan pointed out that the current system has ensured that the Adivasi is never empowered. “If the Adivasi comes up, it will threaten the social position of the locals here,” he explained.

Radha at the bamboo structure for her buffaloes.



Radha at the bamboo structure for her buffaloes.

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After spending a few hours with Binu and Radha, we decided to leave. As we walked away, Binu called out and said, “The people around here don’t even care about us. So do come and visit us sometimes. It’s the only way we get to feel some love.”

Pictures by Aditya Varier.

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