

Kerala

## Muthanga: Pain, agony of a lost struggle

*It's been 20 years since two lives were lost in a clash between police and agitating tribals in Muthanga. TNIE revisits the events that led to the clash and its aftermath in a three-part series*



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SULTAN BATTERY: The wind blows through the bamboo thickets of Muthanga humming a melancholic tune. Scent of blood, screams of innocents still linger in the air. The rainbow that appears in the morning mist ignites hopes, but the thunder showers bring back memories of a lost agitation that ended in bloodshed. The memorial of tribal leader Jogi stands alone carrying memories of a forgotten struggle.

Twenty years! The pain and agony of the police action, to evict around 800 tribal families who occupied the plantations of Muthanga demanding land and livelihood, refuse to fade. A police constable and a tribal leader died in the clash. Many, including women and children sustained grievous injuries. The dream was left unaccomplished.



After a series of protests, the UDF government led by A K Antony had reached an agreement with the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS) in October 2001 to distribute 1 to 5 acres of cultivable land to all tribal families. The government then identified 52,000 landless tribal families. The Union government had earmarked 19,000 acres of land for distribution among tribals. However, the government went back on its promise, prompting the AGMS to forcefully occupy the plantations of Muthanga to press their demand.

On January 5, 2003, the AGMS led by chairperson C K Janu and M Geeethanandan led a group of 800 tribal families to Muthanga forest under Noolpuzha panchayat. They occupied the forest at Thakarapady, Ambukutti and Ponkuzhi (Koundanvayal) and erected hundreds of thatched huts, and a checkpost, restricting the entry of public and forest officials. A wildfire broke out in the area on February 17, and forest personnel reached the spot to douse the blaze. But they were detained by the agitators, who released them only the next day following the intervention of the district collector.

At around 8am on February 19, police started evicting the protesters. The protesters took two persons, police constable K V Vinod and forester P K Sasidharan, hostage and tortured them. While Vinod was hacked to death, Sasidharan was rescued in police action with grievous injuries. Tribal leader Jogi, who stabbed Sasidharan and tried to set fire to the camp in which the hostages were held, was shot dead by the police.



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– Chandran



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– Babu

The anguish of the failed uprising is reflected in the eyes of Chandran, a septuagenarian of Karyampadi tribal colony in Sultan Bathery, as he recounts the incident. “We were living peacefully in the forests. The settlers encroached our lands and the government gave them title deeds. We lost our land and livelihood...We never resorted to violence. It was all peaceful till the forest officers set the huts on fire.”

“The Muthanga agitation was not violent. It was the police and forest staff who unleashed violence on us. We only tried to save our people,” said Babu of Karyampadi, the 12th accused in the CBI case. However, Sasidharan, the forester who was taken hostage, has a different story to tell. “On February 18, Geethanandan was in charge of Thakarapady camp. The protesters set the forest on fire. On receiving information, a team of nine forest officers proceeded to douse the fire.



Sasidharan, who was stabbed by protesters with a knife arrow that pierced his lungs.

The forest guards were taken hostage and tied to trees,” he said. “I was a forester at Tholpetty forest station. We got a wireless message to proceed to Muthanga on February 18. A huge posse of police was deployed and we started for Thakarapady on February 19 morning. We were instructed to demolish the hutments without using force. They had set up a checkpost and kept beehives to stop the police,” said Sasidharan. “The protesters were waiting with bows and arrows atop trees. As we reached the huts a group charged at us with axes and knives. They hacked a policeman. They set the dried elephant grass on fire and we were dousing the fire. Suddenly a group of protesters started chasing women constables. The police fired in the air and threw grenades to scare them. People started running helter-skelter. The members of my team had retreated, and I landed in front of a violent group,” said Sasidharan.

“A youth charged at me with an axe and I pleaded with him. Then Geethanandan appeared and told his men to take me captive. I felt a sharp weapon piercing my back. I collapsed, and they pushed me into the hut where I found an injured policeman. It was Vinod who later died. Hours passed by and I had difficulty in breathing as the weapon had pierced my lungs,” he said.

“Geethanandan took my gold chain and removed one of the gold rings on my finger. He tried to take the second ring, but it wouldn’t budge. He pulled out a knife to cut my finger. Luckily they got information that the police had surrounded the area. Geethanandan placed the knife on my neck and threatened to kill me unless the police pulled back. I waved at the police pleading not to advance. The agitators poured kerosene on dried elephant grass that surrounded the hut and threatened to set us on fire. Ashokan, one of the leaders, was bargaining with the police. Jogi, another leader, was holding a torch. I was losing hope,” Sasidharan’s voice choked as he recounted the incident.

“Suddenly a gun was fired and I saw Jogi collapsing. The commandos led by KAP Commandant Suresh Raj Purohit stormed the hut. While escaping one of the protesters hacked Vinod in the head. I fell unconscious as the police took me to the ambulance on a stretcher. It took three months for me to recover. I was transferred to Kozhikode where I retired from service as deputy ranger in 2006. The department didn’t even give me a good service entry,” he said.



Ravi of Chadakapara a Muthanga protester at his hut. (Photo | T P Sooraj, EPS)

Refuting the allegation of violence, Janu said it was the forest staff and police who unleashed violence. “From 1989 we have been involved in a land struggle. We occupy the land, the police arrest us and send us to jail. I was arrested thrice. On February 17, 2003, the forest staff dipped dried elephant dung in petrol, lit it and threw it on hutments. These incidents took place at Thakarapady, and I was at Ambukutti. Our people caught hold of them and were planning to hand them over to the collector. But without reaching out to us, they brought a huge posse of police and unleashed violence,” she said.

“On February 19, the police and forest staff started forcefully evicting us. They were setting huts on fire. We had kept a hut for babysitting which was set on fire by the police. Our men ran to the spot to save the children, but the police lathi-charged and opened fire. We were all running for our lives. We have no role in the death of Vinod. The police wanted a martyr and they might have done something. Our leader Jogi was shot dead and there was no inquiry. We have a law to punish people who kill dogs, but there is no value for the life of an Adivasi,” said Janu.

“Around 600 Adivasis were put in jail for three months. Though I was not involved in the murder of Vinod, the police arrested me on February 21, and tortured me alleging I had killed him,” she said.

(To be continued)