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Muthanga, 23 Years later: The unfinished question of land and justice in Kerala

From Wayanad to Attappady, the struggle for tribal land rights continues to shape Kerala's conscience as welfare measures fail to resolve a deeper crisis of ownership, dignity and survival



A tribal colony in Wayanad. Photo: Ratheesh S R

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Twenty-three years after the brutal police firing on landless Adivasis at Muthanga in Wayanad, the vexed tribal land question has once again moved to the centre of public debate in Kerala.

Recent statements by senior tribal leaders C K Janu and M Geethanandan, warning of renewed agitation, reflect a larger reality unfolding across the state. Land struggles involving Adivasi communities continue in different forms, and the core demand that brought hundreds of families into the forests of Wayanad in 2003 remains unresolved.

Speaking on the anniversary of the Muthanga crackdown on February 19, C K Janu said the condition of Kerala's tribal communities has not fundamentally changed since the

agitation. According to her, governments have responded with welfare schemes and administrative measures while avoiding durable solutions to landlessness.

M Geethanandan, who has also adopted a pro-United Democratic Front position in recent months while making it clear that he has no political ambitions, echoed the same concern. He argued that large plantation holdings in Wayanad could significantly address the crisis if there were political will. Successive administrations, he said, have reduced the issue to welfare and surplus land distribution instead of recognising it as a question of rights and justice.

Two paths

Both, Janu and Geethanandan, are now on different political paths. Yet both agree that justice and land rights still elude tribal communities in Kerala, who are also facing a severe existential and livelihood crisis shaped by climate change, government policies and continued encroachments by affluent land interests.

Janu's political outfit, the Janadhipathya Rashtriya Sabha, recently became an associate member of the Congress-led UDF after brief associations with both the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) in Kerala and the National Democratic Alliance at the Centre. She remains sharply critical of the LDF government, arguing that despite two consecutive terms in power, little has been done to address structural issues affecting tribal communities. Symbolic changes such as replacing the term "colony" with "Unnathi," she says, cannot substitute for meaningful land restoration or compensatory land distribution. Tribal land alienation continues, and one among those affected is Nanjiyamma, the tribal singer who won the National Award for Best Playback Singer, whose personal story reflects the contradiction between recognition and security.

Present and past

Janu and Geethanandan's statements come at a time when tribal protests and land disputes are visible across several districts. In Attappady, tribal organisations have raised allegations of continued land alienation and irregularities in land records. Local protests reflect growing frustration that decades of intervention have not ensured secure ownership. In Aralam in Kannur, rehabilitation settlements created for tribal families continue to face livelihood instability and rising human-wildlife conflict. The struggles of landless Adivasis in Arippa near Thiruvananthapuram have also reached nowhere, reinforcing the sense of unfinished justice. Livelihood and survival crises have engulfed key Adivasi segments like Paniyas, Kattunaikas, Mullukurumas, and Cholanaickers.

"The continuity between these struggles and Muthanga is clear," says tribal leader Sreeraman Koyyon. "The 2003 agitation emerged from the same structural problem of landlessness despite laws and political promises. The roots of the crisis stretch back decades. As migration expanded into Kerala's high ranges, large areas traditionally used by tribal communities passed into the hands of settlers, plantations and institutions. Legal safeguards existed but implementation was weak and often delayed. By the late 1990s, thousands of tribal families were living in welfare colonies without cultivable land and surviving through wage labour."

In 2001, landless tribal families led by Janu and Geethanandan staged a prolonged protest outside the state Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram demanding agricultural

land. After 48 days of protest, the government signed an agreement promising land distribution, including five acres for each landless tribal family. The failure to implement that agreement pushed families towards direct action. In January 2003, nearly 825 families entered the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary and established settlements across several valleys. They built temporary huts, cleared small patches for cultivation and attempted to rebuild livelihoods rooted in land.

The state viewed the occupation as illegal encroachment inside a protected forest. On February 19, police and forest officials moved to evict the settlers. The operation turned violent. Police firing killed an Adivasi protester named Jogi, while a police constable named Vinod also died during the clashes. Images of burning huts and fleeing families triggered widespread outrage and forced the government into negotiations. The incident became a defining moment in Kerala's tribal politics and shifted public discourse from welfare to rights.

In the aftermath, the government announced what came to be known as the Muthanga Package. Official surveys at the time identified around 20,000 landless tribal families in Wayanad alone. Land distribution was promised, but implementation moved slowly. Over the years, some families received titles, yet large numbers remained without secure cultivable land. The gap between policy announcements and ground reality continued to widen, producing a lingering distrust that still shapes tribal politics.

Ground realities

Data available from government and independent studies indicates the scale of the problem. Scheduled Tribes form around one and a half per cent of Kerala's population, but landlessness among tribal communities remains disproportionately high. Many settlements created under welfare schemes provide housing but not productive land.

The experience of Attappady is reflective. Despite years of government attention and special packages, tribal communities continue to raise concerns about land insecurity in this Adivasi heartland. Activists in the region argue that without secure ownership and agricultural support, welfare measures have limited impact. Young people increasingly migrate for daily wage labour, while traditional forms of livelihood decline. In Aralam, a large rehabilitation project that distributed land to tribal families has faced criticism for inadequate livelihood planning. Families who received land often struggled with poor infrastructure, wildlife damage and lack of market access, leading to persistent economic uncertainty.

Another unresolved aspect of Muthanga is the legal aftermath. Cases filed against protesters have continued for more than two decades. Many accused tribespeople still face charges including rioting and unlawful assembly. Court proceedings have moved slowly, and several accused have died while trials were still ongoing. For poor families, legal expenses have become an additional burden. Janu has said that tribals contribute small amounts from their meagre earnings to sustain the legal fight, reflecting how the consequences of the agitation continue long after the event itself.

The persistence of the land issue reflects deeper structural factors. Large-scale land redistribution remains politically sensitive because of competing interests involving settlers, plantations and commercial projects. Governments have increasingly relied on welfare delivery rather than structural reform. Housing schemes, education

programmes and subsidies provide visible outcomes but do not alter ownership patterns. At the same time, land has become more contested than ever, with tourism, conservation and infrastructure projects competing for limited space.

Conservation politics has added another layer of tension. Tribal communities often live at the edge of protected forests where access to resources is restricted. Human-wildlife conflict has increased, with elephants and wild boar damaging crops and threatening settlements. Climate change has further complicated livelihoods through erratic rainfall and ecological change, making small-scale agriculture more uncertain. For communities whose survival has long depended on intimate ecological knowledge, these changes are not abstract environmental shifts but immediate disruptions to everyday life.

In this context, the warnings issued by Janu and Geethanandan carry significance beyond symbolic memory. They reflect a growing impatience among tribal communities who see little change in ownership patterns despite decades of agitation and policy discussion. The central argument remains unchanged. Welfare without land cannot ensure dignity or autonomy.

Kerala is widely recognised for strong social indicators and a history of land reform. Yet the experience of tribal communities reveals a different reality where land insecurity continues despite legislation and repeated promises. As Manikuttan Paniyan, a leader who emerged from the most backward Paniya community, puts it, “Kerala is widely recognised for strong social indicators and a history of land reform. Yet the experience of tribal communities reveals a different reality where land insecurity continues despite legislation and repeated promises. Muthanga changed the language of tribal politics by asserting land as a question of rights rather than charity. Twenty-three years later, the issue remains unresolved.”

Until land rights are addressed as a structural issue rather than a welfare concern, Kerala’s tribal land conflict will continue to return to the centre of public debate, challenging the state’s self-image and reminding it that development without justice remains incomplete.