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## Tribals Threaten To Revive Muthanga Agitation As Their Demand For Land Goes Unaddressed

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*Tribals Threaten To Revive Muthanga Agitation As Their Demand For Land Goes Unaddressed (ETV Bharat)*



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**Thiruvananthapuram:** With their core demands still unmet over the last two decades, tribal leaders in Wayanad's Muthanga have threatened to revive their agitation. Twenty-three years have passed since the violent Police crackdown on the tribal land rights agitation in Wayanad's Muthanga.

On the anniversary of the crackdown, prominent activist C.K. Janu said, "The plight of Kerala's tribals remains identical to what it was in 2003."

She pointed out that despite continuous pleas for land, successive governments have merely suppressed their struggles without offering tangible solutions. She has warned that a renewed agitation might be inevitable.

Echoing this sentiment, prominent tribal leader M. Geethanandan accused successive political regimes of systemic betrayal. He said that taking over large plantation holdings in Wayanad could significantly resolve the crisis but the political will to do so remains absent. "Instead of recognizing tribal land rights, successive administrations have reduced the issue to a mere welfare scheme or a surplus land distribution program, effectively ignoring the spirit of the Muthanga struggle," he said.

### Muthanga Agitation

On February 19, 2003, a historic struggle for a piece of land to call their own was met with state's force. When protesters refused to surrender and stood their ground chanting slogans, the Police opened fire and set their makeshift huts ablaze. The violent clash claimed the lives of Jogi, an Adivasi protester, and Vinod, a Police constable from the Kerala Armed Police's Kannur Battalion.

The roots of the Muthanga tragedy trace back to 2001, when landless tribals led by activist C.K. Janu erected huts outside the Secretariat demanding agricultural land. Following a 48-day standoff, the government brokered a pact promising five acres of land to each indigenous family.

However, the agreement was largely ignored, leaving the community with nothing but broken promises. Fueled by this 'betrayal', the tribal families under Janu's leadership marched to the Muthanga forest in early 2003. Over a span of two weeks, they established eight settlements across the valleys from Thakarappadi to Ambukuthi. Clearing the undergrowth and cultivating soil by day, the community brought the forest tracts to life with their traditional songs and gatherings by night.

The state's violent retaliation came 48 days after the indigenous families 'reclaimed' the forest land on January 5. As the Kerala government prepared to host the Global Investor Meet (GIM) in Kochi that February, authorities resolved to suppress the Muthanga uprising.

Tensions peaked on February 17 when a forest fire broke out near the protest site for which the police swiftly blamed the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha. The ensuing confrontation rapidly spiralled into violence. Following the fatal Police firing that killed Jogi, protesters scattered in panic while constable Vinod lost his life in the ensuing clashes.

The Police forces subsequently torched the tribal huts and unleashed a brutal wave of assaults, leaving numerous tribals severely injured. The harrowing visuals of the crackdown triggered statewide outrage, mounting immense pressure on the then A.K. Antony-led government.

In the wake of mass arrests and widespread public backlash, the government initiated talks with the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha that culminated in the announcement of the 'Muthanga Package'.

Official surveys at the time identified approximately 20,000 landless tribal families in Wayanad alone. Although an agreement was reached to distribute land to those on the approved list, the bureaucratic machinery has moved at a glacial pace. Even today, the vast majority of these families remain landless despite ongoing administrative procedures.

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