

Tribal groups seek Paniya representation in seats reserved for STs in Wayanad

In a detailed submission to leaders of UDF and LDF, the organisations urged the nomination of C. Manikandan, an MBA graduate and social activist from the Paniya community, calling his candidature a step towards “reparative social justice” for a marginalised Adivasi group in the State

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A coalition of various Adivasi organisations under the aegis of the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS) has appealed to mainstream political parties to field a candidate from the Paniya community in the Scheduled Tribe (ST)-reserved Assembly constituencies of Mananthavady and Sulthan Bathery in the upcoming Kerala Legislative Assembly election, arguing that such a move would help correct long-standing caste discrimination in electoral representation.

In a detailed representation submitted to leaders of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Left Democratic Front (LDF), the organisations urged the nomination of C. Manikandan, an MBA graduate and social activist from the Paniya community, describing his candidature as a step towards “reparative social justice” for one of the most marginalised groups in the State.

According to the memorandum, the Paniyas constitute the largest ST community in Kerala, with an estimated population of about 90,000. In Wayanad district, they account for nearly 45% of the tribal population. However, the community has had little presence in legislative or local body politics despite its demographic strength, the memorandum said.

Leaders of the Adivasi organisations pointed out that the State Assembly has two ST-reserved constituencies, both located in Wayanad — Mananthavady and Sulthan

Bathery. At present, these constituencies are represented by leaders belonging to relatively better-off communities within the ST category, they said.

The representation cited data reported in 2021, indicating that between 1965 and 2021, major political alliances in the State, including the UDF, the LDF, and the National Democratic Alliance, had fielded 28 ST candidates in the two constituencies. Of these, 24 belonged to the land-owning Kurichya and Kuruma communities, while only four candidates came from the landless Adivasi community. Several other Adivasi communities, including the Paniyas, had no representation at all.

The memorandum also highlighted the historical marginalisation of landless Adivasi groups such as the Paniyas, Adiyas and Kattunaikas, many of whom were subjected to slavery under feudal land relations in the Western Ghats. Despite the abolition of bonded labour and the implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, the organisations said the communities continue to face landlessness, unemployment and limited access to education.

According to leaders of the Adivasi communities who signed the memorandum, Mr. Manikandan, described as the first MBA graduate from the Paniya community, has been active in Adivasi rights movements and youth mobilisation in Wayanad. They said his candidature could energise Adivasi youth, strengthen grassroots support for secular politics and counter attempts by Hindutva groups to expand their influence among Adivasi voters.

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