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## The Return To Muthanga - An Affidavit

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The Adivasi (tribal) decision is to return to Muthanga. The tribal had become victims of untold brutalities. Yet there is no other way but to return. And the Adivasis have been made refugees in their homeland. There are the spirits of the dead in the forestlands of Muthanga. Not only Jogi, but also the bodies and souls of all those who had lived here as one with nature have merged irrevocably with the soil. None can separate them now. Anyone who enters Muthanga can see the scattered coins in front of the Sacred Temple at Thakarappady. There is also a splintered bamboo there. This was the hundi<sup>1</sup> of the Adivasis, smashed by the police officers and the goondas as though it was some part of the weaponry of the Adivasis. No one would pick up the coins. These coins representing the beliefs and dreams would still be there when they return....

### Those Who See the Theyyam .... and Those Who Hear Also...

2-3 January 2003: Adivasis who commenced their journey from various villages from different parts of Wayanad district belonging to different communities assemble at Pulithookky and Thiruvannur colonies. Pulithookky is a colony ravaged by hunger deaths. Pulithookky has been in the news in full glare. Those who reached Pulithookky – the aged, the ailing, the women, the youth, those who stopped their formal studies, the infants – came for a new life. They came with sacks full of miseries, the thudi<sup>3</sup>, the household and agricultural instruments, materials to construct their homes, the whicker and oil to light the lamp at the temple at Ambukuthy.... a line of thousands of refugees going to their ancestral lands. Those who returned to Muthanga conversed with the spirits of the mountains with ease, as though they got back their freedom that they lost centuries ago. They, the Paniya, the Adiya, the Bettakuruma, the Kaattunayaka, the Kurichia etc, belonging to all the tribes of Wayanad, woke up their gods in unison. Even before going to Muthanga, they had woken up their gods and got their permission. They did not need to consider any other force beyond this, and definitely not that of the state.

### The Remnants of Muthanga

Muthanga is a protected area under state laws. Entry without

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- US Imperialism
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- Economy
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- Palestine
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- Gujarat Pogrom
- Gender/Feminism
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permission is punishable. None except the wildlife and the officers can enter. But none of the laws could protect Muthanga. Only the remnants of the ravaged nature remain there. Parched fields, dried up mountain streams, the eucalyptus trees that suck out the last of the water sources, open empty land for kilometers, the desperately thirsty roaming elephants.... The only thing that had survived the ravages in Muthanga from centuries ago was the temples of Adivasis. These symbols of belief...the belief in the immense power of nature stood somehow firmly rooted. Just two decades ago, Muthanga was a place of rich biodiversity. Swampy lands, numerous streams, wild trees, diverse wild life and Adivasi tribes symbiotically related to nature. By the 1980s the forests were wiped clean of the vegetation for the Birlas. Eucalyptus trees were planted. 77 square kilometers of Muthanga range was completely wiped out. The Adivasis were also evicted. This forest land was earlier taken over by the government from private landlords. The Adivasis should have been protected in these lands by law. But instead, the majority was evicted. Only 10 Adivasi hamlets and about 250 non-Adivasi families were permitted to remain in Muthanga range. Many of those who had gone to Muthanga were those who had ancestral claims.

### **The Destruction of Biodiversity**

Officially, the interpretation is that Muthanga is part of Nilgiri Biosphere and fall within the 'core' of Bandipur Reserve. What replaced the evicted tribal gods? Bandipur of Karnataka; Mudumalai of Tamilnadu; Muthanga Range, Tholpatti Range and Sultan Batheri Range of Wayanad District; Nagarhole of Karnataka; Silent valley of Kerala ... all fall within the Nilgiri Biosphere. More than 3000 diverse species make these areas qualify as a protected area. Disregarding the importance of the biosphere, the biodiversity was completely wiped out in Muthanga Range that was vested forests. After the complete destruction of the nature in Muthanga, this area was recommended by the State to the Centre for consideration to be brought under the category of 'protected area'. There are no natural forests in Karadimunda (1,304.93 hectares), Maragatha (2,055 hectares), Thottamoola (1,961.68 hectares) and Noolpuzha (2,017 hectares) of Muthanga Range. Muthanga had become uninhabitable on a permanent basis for any wild life. More than 8,000 acres of land is completely barren. The Adivasis had put up their homes in this barren land.

### **The Thirsty Elephants**

It is a small wild river that divides the Bandipur Reserve of Karnataka and Mudumalai Reserve of Tamilnadu from Muthanga Range. This wild river called Maamana Allam (Chelithodu) was the traditional water source for the elephants and other wild life of Bandipur Reserve. Years

before, this small wild river had completely dried up along with the destruction of the forests and establishment of eucalyptus plantations. With the loss of all water sources, the river is but a few kilometer stretch of white sand. The painful attempts of the elephants to dig holes in the sand in the dried up river bed searching desperately for water is a constant sight. This presents the other side of the saga of the disrupted lives of Adivasis. The elephants searching for water source wander around crossing the Muthanga Range to Noolpuzha located east of NH 212. This was not because Noolpuzha was the traditional water source of the elephants. Muthanga did not also have a regular elephant path. The elephants now have no other alternative. But Noolpuzha, located east of Muthanga, is also drying up. The water of Noolpuzha has also been dammed just below at the edge of the Wild Life Sanctuary Office. The water is pumped out to the Sultan Batheri town as well as to other panchayats and this is a cause for the destruction of Noolpuzha. The forest and wild life officials ensures the protection of the Nilgiri Biosphere in this manner.

### The Abode of Mafias

Most of the biodiversity of Muthanga has been sucked out by the parallel economic system of progress in Sultan Batheri, Kalloor and Naykatty area. A mafia power base has been created here years ago. The elephant tusks and sandalwood from Bandipur area were regularly transported with ease through the forest path adjacent to the Muthanga Forest Check Post. It was indeed Ponkuzhi, Thakarappady and Muthanga that constituted the free base of the poachers and the liquor mafia. The establishment of the sandalwood factory here was taking into consideration this possibility of links with the mafias. With the reduction in sandalwood, elephant tusks and trees, they became the implementers of foreign funded projects. Many became respectable. A strong coalition of forest contractors, professional environmentalists and forest officials soon emerged.

Projects worth crores such as Elephant 2000 project, the water conservation project at Thakarappady, electric fencing project etc were implemented here. The forest-wild life officials are not far away when it came to providing protection to those who hunt down herds of deers which are then parceled off, while 4 or 5 domesticated elephants are used farcically to deceive the tourists. The basic problems of the wild life that come to Muthanga are ignored even as crores are lost. The task of reviving the wild forest stream that separates the Bandipur

Reserve from Muthanga Range is quietly covered up by the forest-wild life officials. The Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha established the check posts on the pathway that skirted the official forest check post at the point where this pathway joined the NH 212. It may be recollected that it was the 'nature lovers'

of Wayanad District who had actively protested and succeeded to forestall the demand to erect check posts beyond Muthanga at Ponkuzhi. They had then raised the issue of protection of elephants to subvert this as they did

this time too. Both, the Adivasis and elephants, are the victims of these pests who cart away the finance capital.

### **The State that Lost All Moral Rights and The Preparation for Self Rule**

The coalition fronts did not believe in the rule of law. Neither do they recognize Adivasis and Dalits as citizens. The rulers had flung to the winds the Article 244 of the Indian Constitution, the restoration of alienated land act of 1975, the 1974 vested forest act where half of the vested forests thus taken over was to be given to the Adivasis and numerous court orders with utter contempt. And the latest in this saga was when the agreement of 16 October 2001 of the government with the Dalit-Adivasi Samara Samithy was ignored. The Adivasis who returned to Muthanga commenced implementing each of the provisions of the agreement one by one and began a life where all the civil rights are protected in an ideal manner. It was the beginning of integrating the diversity of the various tribes and commencement of a village life capable of self-rule. The tribal life recreated through the numerous gram sabha meetings were wonderfully transformed in the forestlands of Ambukuthy, Thakarappady and Ponkuzhi through the collective will power and labour. The rhythm that the tribal communities lost was reestablished through the protection of the forests, putting up huts and preparation of the lands for cultivation. Besides the establishment of three schools for the children, a public distribution center, an initiative for health care in the preparatory stage and a special project for the protection of wild life and environment, the Muthanga area became totally liquor free. Check posts were established by the Adivasis to demarcate the lines clearly to prevent the encroachment tendencies of the general public. This was to focus the attention against those who wished to come to the neighborhood of their lives. The proud bearers of the bows and arrows stood guard – a symbol of the pride of tribal life. But the celebration of the slaves of their existence was not tolerable to the owners of wealth. The Chief Minister Antony, the Forest Minister Sudhakaran and others understood the proclamation of self-rule in Muthanga as a challenge to the State. The Speaker of the law making Assembly proclaimed aloud that the Adivasis should be shot dead, despite the fact that the Adivasis did not do anything that could be construed as criminal.

### **Re-establishing Law and Order**

The Adivasi villages are currently discussing the 1996 Panchayat Raj (Extension to the Scheduled Areas Act) – the new legislation related to the Panchayat Raj Act. The prevention of land alienation, the restoration of illegally alienated lands, ownership of minor forest produce, the right to ban liquor, control of local institutions, control over money lending, control over local market, command over resources and planning for

local development are all intended to make the villages self-reliant. The law on this was passed by the Indian parliament in 1996. The Muthanga struggle arena was the cry for establishing social justice and rights over resources within the parameters of this law.

### **The Denial of Right to Act**

The whites believed that the blacks did not have souls. There are the university academics who believe that Adivasis lack the capacity to act on their own as do those intellectuals who are in touch with the forest department. There are those in Kerala who think that the Adivasis are 'vanavasis' like the elephant, the leopard and the wild buffalo. The foreigners, foreign loan providing agencies, the developmentalists who are the favourites of funding projects, pure environmentalists, Hindutvavadis – all share this opinion viewed from different corners though. All their intensions are to protect the wild life and forests by bringing the tribals outside the forests and into the mainstream. The fundamental basis of their love for environment is their hatred to their brethren. Their development projects have till date neither saved wild life, nature or human beings. The remains – both the wiped out hills of Muthanga and the displaced Adivasis from Muthanga are proof of this development. Their last word is the AHADS4 model. In the ultimate analysis, only the crores from foreign loans that reach their hands are the prime moving force for human action. They forget that this is very much the key element that reproduces the criminal mafia culture in Kerala. There was immense potential for action in the collectivity of tribal life. Nature could be recreated. It is only that they should not be denied the opportunity to recover the rhythm of life. They tried this in Muthanga.

### **The Racist Face of State Terror**

17 February 2003: As far as the accomplishment of the organized brute force of power, there is no other parallel in the history of Kerala as that took place in Muthanga. It came as a wild forest fire. The mafia gangs, protected by the administration and the police, set fire to the northern part of the Muthanga Wild Life Sanctuary. Hundreds of Adivasis would have been burnt to ashes in the long war against the fire that lasted for hours. No administrative official demanded of the Adivasis even to leave the place to save their own lives. The strategy of war adopted by the State/mafia alliance failed though. The mafia gang who set fire to the forests, along with the officials, fell into the hands of Adivasis. Even then the Adivasis demanded that the law be enforced. The criminals were produced in front of the magistrate in full view of the masses. The criminals were taken over by the State but then the government set free the mafia gang. The State, which has lost all sense of decency, could not but unleash its terrorist face. A war with racial overtones was unleashed on 19 February in Muthanga.

## The 'Criminal' Tribes

The hundreds of Adivasis...from infants to women....who were brutally attacked were locked up in prisons as accused in 7 criminal cases. Hundreds of cases have been registered across Kerala against Adivasis for demanding a place in their land of their birth. Branding Adivasis as 'criminals' was but the age-old tradition of the British. The surrender drama of the forest looters was enacted in an organized manner after which they were set free from the cases. And of course the forest department is carrying out the responsibility to 'protect the forests' in many parts of Kerala. And they have been writing newer scripts in branding the Adivasis as the accused. Just as the American State searched for evidence of chemical weapons in Iraq, the Antony government was searching for evidences of links to PWG, LTTE etc. All that they could get were the coins that lay scattered, broken vessels and thudis. What was burnt down was a culture of a people. There has been attempts from different quarters to paint those areas in red colour with stories of extremism – areas where for many years now those socially segregated from Kerala's political map, especially the Adivasis and Dalits, have dared act. The professional human rights activists, journalists, the leadership in the ruling political system etc have done this.

These are but modern tactics for racial isolation. At last they propagated that there were special 'intellectual centers' to direct the Adivasis to wrong paths. The intention behind these was to ensure the destruction of the emergence of a new socio-political force from amongst the Adivasis and its transformation to a new force of renaissance. It is not possible to eliminate a process of renaissance through force of arms or false propaganda. The sections of people who attain consciousness of their own will some day find a place of their own in a democratic society. All peoples who are denied the rights to resources, social justice and self-rule will gain self-confidence from such struggles.

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