

# Tribal Movements in India

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*Edited by*

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# POLITICAL AWAKENING AMONG THE TRIBES OF WYNAD

P.R.G. Mathur

## *Introduction*

THE PURPOSE of this paper is two-fold: (a) to describe and analyze some aspects of the political movements among the tribes of Wynad, Kerala, and (b) to discuss some of the difficulties that are being faced by the tribes in organizing their movements in this area. Before we take up the subject matter, it is necessary to describe broadly the location of the field and its general features.

The field-work for this study was conducted in a small town—Sultan's Battery—which is situated 102 kilometres north-east of Kozhikode, the headquarters of the district of the same name. According to the Census of India, 1961, the population of Scheduled Tribes in the State of Kerala was 212,762, but it was 269,358 in 1971, this registering an increase of 1.26 per cent. The settlements of the tribes are located on the Western Ghats which separate Kerala from the adjoining districts of Karnataka and Tamilnadu. The District of Cannanore has the largest population of Scheduled Tribes (50,464 or 3.82 per cent of the population of the District). Kozhikode has a tribal strength of 84,982 persons or 4.03 per cent of the total population of the District. This District is followed by Palghat and Idukki which have a tribal population of 25,954 (1.52 per cent) and 34,820 (1.60 per cent) respectively. It is evident from the above figures that well

over three-fourths of the tribal population of Kerala is concentrated in the northern districts of the State.

### *Wynad*

Wynad formed part of the territory of the Pazhassi Raja during the British regime. This hill tract consists of two taluks : North Wynad (Connarore District) and South Wynad (Kozhikode District). Wynad is an exceedingly mountainous plateau. The average height above mean sea level is 3000 feet. The important tribes who inhabit the region are: Paniyans (45,562), Kurichians (18,700), Mullakurumbans (15,116), Uralikurumbans or Vettukurumbans (2,251), Kattu-naickans or Ten Kurumbans (5,565), Pulayans (43,683) and Adiyans (6,905).<sup>1</sup>

Most of the tribes in Wynad used to practise shifting cultivation, gathered food and were hunters. During the British rule, there was great improvement in transport and communications, as a consequence of which there was an influx of people from the plains. The immigration continues unabated. As a result of the large-scale influx of non-tribals, particularly Syrian Christians from the former Travancore State, sizable chunks of arable land which the tribals used for shifting cultivation, have been encroached upon and the tribes have been deprived of their only means of subsistence.

The Paniyans are a numerically dominant tribal community in Kerala. They are still bonded labourers. Bonded labour exists among the Adiyans also. The Paniyans claim that they were the autochthones of Wynad and that the Gowdan and Nair landlords, who migrated to their area, overpowered and enslaved them. It is interesting to point out here that there are as many twenty *Devaswoms* (trusts) in Wynad and the majority of them are owned by Nairs and Warriors. However, the Gowdans are also the owners of a few *Devaswoms*. The Mullakurumbans, who hitherto made a living through shifting cultivation and hunting, have now adopted plough cultivation. The Uralikurumbans were potters and artisans. Many of them abandoned the irtraditional occupation and have today become farm labourers. The Kattunaickans are said to have migrated from the neighbouring forests

of Karnataka and led an isolated life in former times. They were hunters and collectors of honey and food. A number of them today work as *mahouts*.

The Kurichians are one of the oldest inhabitants of Wynad. There is a place called 'Kurichiat' where they claim to have fought along with the army of Kerala Varma Raja of Kottayam (Pazhassi Raja) against the British. According to some historians, the Kurichians protected the Pazhassi Raja for nine years until 1805 A.D. in which year he committed suicide. It was left to their commander, Talakkal Chandu, to command the Kurichian army against the mighty forces of the East India Company. The Kurichians are the aristocrats among the hillmen of Kerala, occupying the highest social status in the tribal hierarchy. They still observe touch pollution against all castes and communities except the Nambudiri Brahmans. They are skilled in archery. They also used to practise shifting cultivation in the extensive tracts of virgin land but have now become settled agriculturists. As many as 116 members of a lineage have been found sharing a kitchen in Kaniambatta, a village in South Wynad.

Wynad has the largest concentration of tribes in Kerala. In this area they form, more or less, a compact group. The majority of the tribes of Wynad are primitive cultivators and bonded labourers as we have stated earlier. In former times, they also practised hunting, but this has now been stopped by the Government. Paucity of land has forced the Mulla-kurumbans and Kurichians to abandon their traditional shifting cultivation and to adopt the plough. They are unskilled and backward in this technique of cultivation, but their time-tested method of cultivation require extensive lands. The influx of non-tribals into Wynad during the past five decades has made land dear. Extensive tracts of tribal land have been surreptitiously acquired or usurped by Christian and Muslim cultivators, who are immigrants from the plains. The tribals have been dispossessed of their lands in most cases, and have been reduced to landless serfs of the Christian, Muslim and Hindu exploiters. The greatest sufferers are naturally the bonded labourers—the Paniyans and Adiyans. Ruthless exploitation by the plainmen and money-lenders and lax administration in the area has added to the economic

distress and social degradation of the tribal people of Kerala in general and those of Wynad in particular. Attempts at alleviation of their sufferings came not only from Government agencies but also from voluntary organizations and associations. Hindu and Christian missionaries are active among the tribes of Wynad, but they have been unable to win them over to their respective folds. However, a few tribal unions or associations have been formed in Wynad in recent years with the support of well-established political parties in order to find ways and means to further their socio-economic upliftment. We shall examine the functioning of these associations below and try to assess their impact on the political awakening among the tribes of Wynad.

### *Adivasi Sangham*

The leaders of the Kurichians and the Jana Sangh of Kozhikode district met in a conference at Kalpetta in 1969 and formed an association called the Adivasi Sangham. The Jana Sangh-led Adivasi Sangham functioned very actively for a time in Wynad, particularly among the Kurichians. All the office-bearers of the Adivasi Sangham, with the exception of the Joint Secretary, belonged to the Kurichian community. The Joint Secretary is a Mullakurumban. The President, Secretary and Vice-President and Treasurer of the Sangham are all Kurichians. The leaders of the Adivasi Sangham got inspiration and guidance from the Jana Sangh. For instance, it is learnt that K.G. Marar and O. Rajagopal, Secretary and President respectively of the Kerala unit of the Jana Sangh, and other leaders attended a number of meetings arranged by the Adivasi Sangham. Besides, Devaki Amma, Vice-President of the State Jana Sangh, addressed one of the conferences of the Sangham in 1972.

My informant Raghavan, a Mullakurumban, was actively associated with the Adivasi Sangham. According to him, over 90 per cent of the members of the Adivasi Sangham are Kurichians and the remaining ones are Mullakurumbans, Paniyahs and Kattunaickans. Over 90 per cent of the Kurichians are believed to be sympathizers of the Adivasi Sangham. The aims of the Adivasi Sangham may be described as follows:

1. To work for the retention of the tribal culture and heritage in general, and Kurichian culture in particular, and to inspire a sense of solidarity and brotherhood among the tribal people of Wynad.
2. To promote the cause of tribal enlightenment by establishing and running schools for them.
3. To work for the all-round development and welfare of the tribal population.
4. To impart training to the members of the Adivasi Sangham.
5. To preserve and protect the cause of the traditional Kurichian sport of archery.
6. To promote unity, understanding and close relationship, on the basis of social equality, among the different tribes of Wynad.
7. To bring all the tribes of Wynad together with a view to promoting their solidarity for protecting and preserving the traditional tribal culture.
8. To enlighten the members about the constitutional provisions for tribal development.
9. To negotiate with the public as well as the Government on issues and problems like taxation and land alienation affecting the tribals in accordance with the customary laws, particularly for the protection of the Kurichians' heritage and also for the welfare of the tribes in general.
10. To oppose the spread of Christianity in Wynad.
11. To work for the restoration of alienated tribal land and to urge the Government to enact the Land Alienation Bill.
12. To oppose the imposition of levies by the Government.

In 1974 the members of the Adivasi Sangham met in a conference at Kalpetta, which was attended, among others, by the President, Secretary and Vice-President of the State Jana Sangh. The following resolutions, among others, were passed:

1. The Kerala Land Reforms Act should be implemented as early as possible.

2. There should be reservation of 75 per cent of excess land for the Adivasis when the Act is fully implemented.
3. The conference advised the Adivasis not to pay the price fixed by the Government for the purchase of *jammam* rights. The conference resolved to picket the Land Tribunal Offices for getting their demand conceded.
4. The conference urged the Government to exempt the Adivasis from the basic Land Tax.
5. The Adivasi Sangham also urged that land alienated from the tribals should be restored to them.

### *Action Council*

The Adivasi Sangham formed a Samara Samithi (Action Council) in 1973 in order to press for their demands. One of the most important demands that the Sangham put forward was that the Kurichians should be exempted from the agricultural levy. In Kerala, a farmer owning up to two acres of paddy land is exempted from the levy. But those cultivating land more than two acres in size are required to pay a levy at the prescribed rate. For instance, a farmer who cultivates land which is more than five acres in size has to give twenty-five quintals of paddy to the Government at the rate of Rs. 63 per cent quintal. Among the Kurichians, an estate of 50 to 100 acres of land is generally held by the eldest male member of the *mittom* (lineage) as often as many as 100-150 people live under a single roof in a *mittom*. About 300 members of the Sangham conducted a *dharna* in 1973 in front of the Supply Office, Manantody, demanding exemption from the levy imposed by the Government. The demonstration was led by K.G. Marar, Secretary of the Kerala State Jana Sangh. The demonstrators threw stones and smashed the glass panes of the office. When the police interfered, their caps were reported to have been removed and thrown away. They also picketed other offices. It may be mentioned here that the Kurichians became restless on account of this levy. Although the Government ordered exemption of the levy, the local officers continued to impose it.

The Sangham filed a suit in the High Court praying that the Adivasis be exempted from paying the levy. It is also interesting to point out here that a Christian was their pleader. In fact, the same Christian advocate was invited along with Jana Sangh leaders to the conference in which the above resolutions were passed. The advocate addressed the conference and assured the members of the Sangham that he would fight for their social and economic liberation.

We have already mentioned that the Sangham demanded that the alienation of tribal land should be reversed. In one of the meetings, it was resolved to march to Muttil village and evict one Hussain from the tribal land. According to Raghavan, the then Joint Secretary of the Action Council for the restoration of Alienated Tribal Land, about 2000 Kurichians, Kattunaickans and Mullakurumbans marched on to Kolparakunnu, of Muttil village in January 1975. It was alleged that Hussain had encroached upon twenty-five acres of land belonging to the Kattunaickans. When the demonstrators reached the village, the local Revenue Divisional Officer interfered and promised them that the encroached land would be restored to them within fifteen days. Finally the *pattach* for fifteen acres of land was given to the Kattunaickans. The Sangham wanted to continue its agitation to get back the remaining portion of the land. However, the agitation could not be continued because of the declaration of Emergency. Five members of the Sangham were arrested. Raghavan claimed that it was due to their agitation that the tribes in Wynad got exemption from the payment of the levy. But he severed his connections with the Sangham in order to join the newly-formed Adivasi Samajam, which is led by the Indian National Congress.

When cloth was distributed to the tribals in S. Battery in 1974, the Sangam staged a black flag demonstration before the Minister for Harijan Welfare in order to press for the supply of superior and costly clothes to them, as a part of the removal of beads and discarding of traditional costumes. In 1974, the Sangham extended its activities to Kozhikode and picketed the Kozhikode Collectorate. The members of the Sangham wanted to picket the Tribal Research and Training Centre for shifting it from Kozhikode to Manantoddy. Some

of the slogans they shouted on the occasion were:

1. Planning and tribal development activities are only on paper. Starvation stalks the Adivasis of Wynad.
2. Wynad is the land of the Pazhassi, who fought against the mighty British. Are we today slaves in this country?
3. There is not enough land in Wynad even for burning the dead.
4. We are the owners of Wynad and are its children.
5. Laws should be made for getting back our land from the non-tribals.

### *Kerala Girivarga Sangham*

The Kerala Girivarga Sangham was formed under the leadership of Annan, an ex-tribal MLA (CPI-Marxist), in 1972 under the auspices of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The headquarters of the Sangham are situated at Kalpetta. In fact a Thiyya social worker was the brain behind the formation of this Sangham. The said Thiyya married a Paniyan woman in order to identify himself with the cause of the tribes of Wynad. But when the Emergency was declared he deemed it politic to leave Wynad and take up service with a private firm in Kozhikode. The main motive behind the formation of the Kerala Girivargha Sangham was to terrorize the non-tribal settlers of Wynad in order to compel them restore the alienated tribal land. The Sangham had the blessings of the Karzhaka Thozhilali Union which is an organ of the CPI (Marxist). Unfortunately, owing to the infiltration of some Naxalites, the Girivargha Sangham failed to enlist popular support. Moreover, some Adiya members joined hands with the Naxalites and burned the house of a landlord. They conducted a *dharna* and staged a *satyagraha* in front of the houses of landlords in Trissileri and Tirunelli. Relations were so embittered that a landlord was murdered by a Naxalite. He was shot dead in turn by the police. The participants in the movement, including the tribals, were arrested and imprisoned. The Sangham is not very active now on account of the demoralized state of its leadership.

*Kerala Adivasi Samajam*

The Kerala Adivasi Samajam was formed in 1973 with the following aims and objectives:

1. To struggle for and press for their demand for the immediate creation of a separate department for tribal welfare.
2. To achieve economic and cultural independence and to save the Adivasis from the exploitation of non-Adivasi settlers.
3. To protect the Adivasis as guaranteed by the Constitution of India.
4. To forge unity and solidarity among different tribal communities of Kerala in general and those of Wynad in particular.
5. To expedite and accelerate the economic development of the Adivasis.
6. To create an awareness among the Adivasis of their rights and safeguards as provided by the Constitution.
7. To demand for the immediate classification of the denotified tribes of Kerala.
8. To integrate the activities of the Samajam and the Indian National Congress.
9. To bring all the tribal communities of Wynad under the banner of the Samajam.
10. To put an end to the step-motherly attitude of the non-tribal officials working in tribal areas and the mal-administration and corruption of Government officials.
11. To take appropriate steps to preserve the traditional tribal culture of the area.

*Organisational Structure*

The Samajam functions at three levels--(a) the taluk (mandalam), (b) block (Panchayat), and (c) village. The Samajam exercises an influence over the entire area of South Wynad. The office-bearers of the central Organization are President, three Secretaries and one Treasurer. Similarly, at the block and village levels, there are Presidents, Secretaries and Treasurers. Mullakurumbans, Pathiyans, Kattunaickans,

Tachanad Mooppans, Uralikurumbans and some other tribes have become members of the Samajam. However, 75 per cent of the members of the Samajam are from the Mullakurumban tribe. The denotified tribal communities, like the Pathiyans and Tachanad Mooppans, are actively associated with the Samajam. All office-bearers of the central organization belong to the Mullakurumban community.

Shri K. Raghavan Master, the local tribal MLA, a Mullakurumban himself, is actively associated with the Samajam. This is evident from the fact that most of the resolutions passed in the meetings of the Samajam have been sent to the Chief Minister, Revenue Minister, Forest Minister and Harijan Welfare Minister of the State Government through him. Shri A.K. Antony, President, KPCC, Dr. K.G. Adiyodi, Minister for Forest and other leaders have addressed several meetings of the Adivasi Samajam. The tribals claim that this has enhanced the status of the Samajam as well as the Adivasis of Wynad.

During the past three years a number of meetings have been held under the auspices of the Samajam. The following are some of the important resolutions passed in some of these meetings held in 1974 and 1975:

1. That the Prevention and Restoration of Tribal Land Act, 1975, should be implemented immediately. The Samajam resolved that the above Act should be included in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution.
2. The conference resolved to submit a memorandum to the Government for establishing co-operative credit banks in the tribal areas.
3. That the Tribal Research and Training Centre should be declared as an autonomous Research organization.
4. That the Adivasis should be exempted from the payment of levy.
5. That the cattle belonging to the tribes should be allowed to graze in the forests, reserved and vested, freely.
6. That 50 per cent of the vacancies for third and fourth grade employees in the Forest Department should be reserved for tribals.

7. That 50 per cent of the cultivable land in the Vested Forest land should be reserved for the tribals.
8. That the paddy lands available in the Reserved Forests should be given to the local tribes.
9. That minor irrigation should be introduced into the Wynad area, besides extension of electrification.
10. That the price of paddy levies should be increased from Rs. 63.00 to Rs. 100.00.
11. That the law courts should have no jurisdiction over the civil and criminal cases of the Adivasis. For enquiring into such cases, legal experts may be appointed.
12. That the Government should take appropriate action to protect the Adivasis from the clutches of usurious money-lenders.
13. That the misappropriation of valuable trees from the Chingeri tribal colony and their unauthorized felling by certain officials should be stopped and the culprits apprehended.
14. That the Adivasis should be exempted from the payment of the price for the purchase of *janmam* rights of the lands that they cultivate under the Kerala Land Reforms Act. All injunctions against the Adivasis should be vacated.
15. That all appointments by the Public Services Commission should be stopped and the vacancies be filled by the respective departments giving due representation to the tribal population in various regions.
16. As part of the Prime Minister's 20-Point Programme, the Government have enacted two important measures: (a) Abolition of Bonded Labour, and (b) Prevention and Restoration of Alienation of Tribal Land. The Samajam resolved that these laws should be implemented immediately.
17. That under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Development Corporation more than 200 auto-rikshaws have been issued to harijans. The conference therefore resolved that the Adivasis should be given their due share under the Development Corporation Scheme.

18. That the Adivasis who are primitive cultivators and food-gatherers should be given training in animal husbandry and farming with special emphasis on improved techniques of cultivation.

### *General Observations*

The activities of the Adivasi Sangham under the auspices of the State Jana Sangh, were tinged with an anti-Government attitude, though it was started as a purely economic organization. The members of the Sangham not only picketed Government offices, but were trained in the use of fire-arms under eminent leaders of the Jana Sangh.

The leadership of the Adivasi Sangham vests with the Kuruchians who are eager to perpetuate their own tribal heritage, rather than the interests of the tribes of Wynad as a whole. They instigated the members of the Sangham to fight against the onslaught of Christianity in Wynad and the intrusion of money-lenders and plainsmen. The Adivasi Sangham suspended its activities on account of the declaration of Emergency. The arrest of the leaders of the Sangham demoralized the rank and file of the organization.

The Girivarga Sangham was formed mainly to vocalize the dissatisfaction of the tribes against the policies of the Government and to start a land grab movement in Wynad. It had the support of CPI (M) and the Kareshaka Thozhilali Union, but the movement fizzled out on account of the infiltration of Naxalites.

It is interesting to point out here that the Adivasi Samajam led by the Indian National Congress is functioning today though not very actively. The Samajam has the blessings of some of the leaders of the Congress in the State, but it has not been able to make impact on the tribals of Wynad. The Samajam is dominated by the Mullakurumbans under the leadership of the local tribal MLA. It is true, though, that they have succeeded in getting most of their demands conceded on the economic front with the help of this MLA, some of the leaders of the Samajam claim that it is due to their activities that the Acts relating to the alienation of tribal land, bonded labour and exemption from payment of

levy have been passed by the State Government.

The leaders were convinced that the Samajam was not functioning actively mainly because of the paucity of funds and illiteracy among the tribal people, besides lack of politicization among them.

The declaration of Emergency helped some leaders of the communist-led Union and the Jana Sangh-led Sangham to find an excuse for dissociating themselves from their parent associations and to join the Adivasi Samajam.

Some leaders of the Samajam were well aware of the tribal development activities initiated by the State Government and the aims and objectives of the declaration of Emergency. Owing to the isolation of the hamlets coupled with the poverty and squalor in which the tribals are living in Wynad, the Samajam has not been able to organize its activities at the grassroots level.