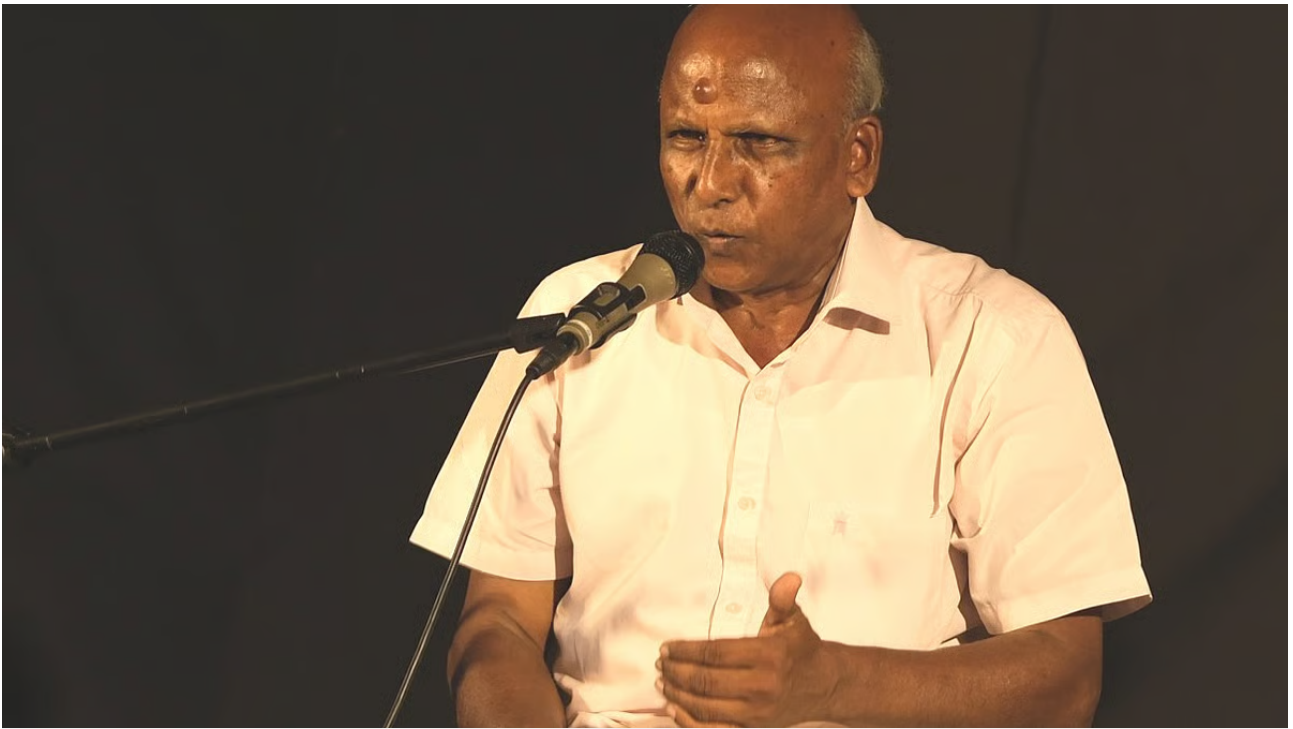


<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2026/Apr/18/our-postmodern-society-refuses-to-review-reform-says-activist-m-geethanandan>

# ‘Our postmodern society refuses to review, reform’, says activist M Geethanandan

Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha co-founder M Geethanandan opens up about his early life, disillusionment with politics, association with C K Janu, need for Rohith Act, and how the ‘system’ ignores the downtrodden



M Geethanandan at FESTA— Storytelling festival Special arrangement  
Supriya

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M Geethanandan grew up as a boy whose heart belonged to Malabar. Drawn towards the Adivasi land rights movement later in his life, following an identity crisis during the early 2000s, he became one of the strongest voices for tribal rights in the state alongside C K Janu.

Together, they formed the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha, which led an agitation that eventually came to be known as the 'Muthanga Samaram'. It was a protest in response to years of broken promises of rehabilitation and land redistribution among Kerala's tribal communities.

In February 2003, as hundreds of Adivasi families occupied forest land in Muthanga, demanding their right to live and cultivate there, Geethanandan was in the forefront. He closely witnessed the escalation that led to the deaths of two — a police officer and a tribal person. A traumatic episode he doesn't want to revisit.

More than two decades later, however, Geethanandan sustains his cause, engaging with the concepts of identity and justice. On the sidelines of a recent storytelling festival titled 'FESTA', organised by Ala Theatre in Kochi, he opened up about his early life, political activism, and association with Janu.

Could you tell us about your childhood?

I was born in Payyannur and grew up across Malabar, moving through different towns, thanks to my father's government job. Maybe that's the reason why I don't feel that I belong to any particular place. I spent my early years in Vadakara, Thiruvallur, and Mayyanur near Nadapuram. I grew accustomed to the Malabari village life, having been there till I completed my graduation in zoology from Payyannur College. Then I came to Kochi for postgraduation. That was a big change. I felt a little lost.

What led you to activism?

It was during my college days that I started having a feeling of alienation. A sort of identity crisis. I also started contemplating what my life meant.

When I moved to Kochi, I was away from the familiar, transitioning into young adulthood. I was in my early 20s — I

read a lot, was active in extracurricular activities, and also had joined a few environmental activism movements. All along, the question 'Who am I?' lingered in me.

I went back to Malabar and started researching about the Theyyam and other folk artforms. In the process, I discovered and understood my Dalit identity.

I sought to overcome my identity crisis when I joined Left revolutionary politics in the 1980s. I had a decent academic background, but was not interested in studying further after my master's in marine biology from Cusat. I joined the government service in Thiruvananthapuram.

This is where I experienced a 'remoulding'. In the '90s, I broke away from revolutionary politics after almost a decade, as I was disillusioned. I truly understood the problems that came with being a Dalit. And this is where I still stand today (laughs).

So, you mean to say it took you a while to realise the complexity of identity issues...

It was not just about accepting my identity as a Dalit, but my identity as a whole happened during that time. There are many dimensions to a person. I understood that the Dalit identity was a major part of who I am. I also saw the difference in the Dalits who were present in Thiruvananthapuram and where I came from. That probably connected me more to my tribal identity. Well, it has been quite a journey leaving my hometown, raising a family... but this journey of self discovery was bigger for me (smiles).



Photo: Shafeeq Thamarassery

M Geethanandan Wikimedia Commons

How did your connection with C K Janu begin?

I heard about C K Janu and her movement in 1995. Since I was also discovering my identity, her movement resonated with me. I joined as a supporter, and slowly transitioned into a spearhead alongside Janu. That led to the formation of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha. 'Muthanga Samaram' was a result of that. Janu was an 'emotion' to all of us. She was a part of my identity.

Are you still in touch?

Oh, yes! We may have drifted apart because of our political ideologies, but the respect remains. Criticism too remains (smiles).

She was governed by a sort of dual identity, I think. She identified with femininity strongly, and after that, a tribal. She was fiercely against patriarchy. I understood that, and that's why I was able to work with her without any conflicts. I could easily adapt to her leadership. She is unique. It will take years for another Janu to be born. She is not simply a tribal leader — a Moopathi. She is a powerful presence.



Geethanandan with C K JanuFile pic

Last year, the film 'Narivetta' was released. It had references to the Muthanga Samaram. Were you consulted during its making?

No. But I watched it. The makers had done their own research. After the release, almost two or three weeks later, the actor who played Janu's supporter in the film came to me and shared some details. That is when I could understand the film better. I felt that it did not do justice to the artists who were involved in the making. They were sidelined, and only Tovino's character was focused upon.

Do you think the film did justice to the incident?

Judging it based on the fact that they made it based on an incident like Muthanga, it did not do justice. It was shot as fiction. But the problem is when they promote such films, saying it is based on real incidents. I had raised my objection to this.

There should have been a bit more expression of the incident, maybe through characters.

Only then would the depth of the issue have been felt. This turned out to be the story of a police officer's life and dilemma. The incident is just a milestone in his life — it was trivialised.



Scene from Muthanga protest in 2003 File pic

Despite claims of being progressive, Kerala is still rife with issues related to rights and dignity of Dalits and tribal people. How do you view this?

Kerala is home to a postmodern society. There are issues that it has to fight with on the inside. Good education, healthcare and other facilities do not reach the most downtrodden. They are forced to remain so. They are still exploited. When it comes to the Dalits or Adivasis, these issues have remained the same for decades. We, unfortunately, have become a society that refuses to review and reform our ways. It is high time we did so.

What does the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha suggest to bring about the necessary changes?

We are waiting for the election results to restart our advocacy work. We have prepared a manifesto that calls for a fundamental shift in how forests are governed in the state. We were planning to release it, but postponed it due to the elections. We will release it around April 20. The UDF, in its manifesto, has promised to implement some of the issues that we had raised — like implementing SC/ST Special Fund Development Act and the Rohith Act. Especially now with the Nithin Raj case, we have to follow the latter up urgently. We will present this manifesto to whoever wins. The manifesto covers many aspects, such as employment opportunities for the Dalits and tribals. Many budgets are announced and enacted, but even in the unplanned sector, there is no role for them. We have suggested a restructuring of the sector in a way that offers better employment opportunities to them. The commissions and corporations for SC/ST need to be expanded. Then, a cell should be set up to give them opportunities to work with the ministers, MLAs and MPs. The aim is to make administrative offices, especially in places like Wayanad, more inclusive. Not everything may happen, but we hope that the framework is set in place.

The lack of meaningful representation of dalits and tribal people in politics has also been a concern...

Yes, this is also a part of our manifesto. We will be raising this issue in the coming days, as this has to reach the Centre. We don't suggest reserving a quota like in Tamil Nadu, but ensuring there is enough representation where it matters. The Panchayati Raj Services Act needs to come. Another goal is to ensure people who work as volunteers come under the Welfare Act. These are some suggestions that we have given under the administrative reforms.

What about human-animal conflict?

This is something we take very seriously. The fundamental issues, we all know, are environmental degradation and

deforestation. The forest management we follow is a continuation of the colonial legacy.

There was no environmental approach in it. There is a need for a fundamental shift in forest governance by making it more rooted in environmental conservation. Adivasi communities need to be placed at the centre of decision-making, since they have more traditional knowledge about these aspects.