

Starving Adivasis: Edamalakudy ration theft

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When it comes to exploiting Adivasis, political affiliations make no difference. Only a tiny fraction of the funds earmarked and disbursed for tribal welfare actually reaches them; instead, the lion's share of such allocations vanishes into the pockets of a corrupt politician-bureaucrat nexus.

There is no end to the reports of Adivasis being cheated with uncultivable land and uninhabitable housing.

If a starving Adivasi steals a handful of ration rice, a mob will quickly gather to tie them up, conduct a mock trial, and lynch them. Yet, no one pursues those who embezzle and smuggle the massive quantities of food grains intended for these communities. Recent audits have revealed that 65 metric tonnes of food grains

allocated to Edamalakudy-Kerala's only tribal panchayat-were misappropriated. A gang of officials and middlemen have siphoned off the PDS (Public Distribution System) supplies rightfully belonging to hundreds of tribal families, heartlessly exploiting their lack of awareness.

The embezzlement was uncovered during an inspection by the State Food Commission, which has since recommended that the government identify and take stringent action against those responsible. Ration distribution in Edamalakudy is managed by the Girijan Service Cooperative Society. Their standard practice is to turn away Adivasis who arrive at the ration shop by claiming there is no stock. Instead, they issue tokens with a promise to provide the supplies later-a practice the Food Commission's report explicitly flags as illegal.

When these families trek back for kilometers with their tokens, they are often turned away again under the pretext that the "time limit" has expired. Media reports indicate that an unholy nexus between high-ranking Civil Supplies officials and the licensees is driving this massive ration fraud. Furthermore, the ration shops in these tribal areas do not maintain basic records or registers. Despite this, the officials mandated to inspect these irregularities and take enforcement action have remained completely indifferent.

The inhabitants of Edamalakudy rely solely on forest produce and PDS food supplies for their survival. During the summer months, the availability of forest resources dwindles significantly. Denying them their rightful rations during such a time is nothing short of an absolute crime. There has been a long-standing, systemic apathy from the government machinery, operating under the cold assumption that it matters little whether an Adivasi starves or dies.

Since Adivasis do not constitute a significant vote bank, political parties show no genuine interest in their welfare. This lack of political will is precisely why such atrocities continue to recur. The details currently coming to light reveal a fraud that has been ongoing since last February. Had the Taluk Supply Officer and the Rationing Inspectors intervened properly and conducted routine inspections, these Adivasis would never have been cheated in this manner.

A police investigation is essential to track down exactly where the 65 metric tonnes of food grains disappeared. Those who secretly purchased this looted stock must also be apprehended. What happened in Edamalakudy is a heartless act of snatching food from the bowls of the poor. Unless stringent action is taken against the culprits, there is no doubt that such plunder will continue to recur.

The government must be prepared to implement new systems, leveraging technology to ensure that every tribal member in Edamalakudy receives their rations accurately. The first step must be to strip the responsibility of ration distribution from the very people who stole the bread out of the mouths of Adivasis. No longer can the fox be left to guard the henhouse.