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“Engale Mannu Engalkku”: Tale of a Tribal Land Struggle

in India by Dr Khadeeja Mumtaz 16/09/2025



96-year-old trade union activist A Vasu addressing the strikers

The story begins in March 2024, when R.K. Malayath, a kind-hearted magician from Nilambur, Kerala, visits A. Vasu, a 96-year-old political prisoner who, unyieldingly walked into prison with his head held high, becoming a part of country’s history. Malayath brings a petition: a young woman from his hometown, Bindu Vaylassery, is on a months-long hunger strike and nearing death. Her life hangs in the balance, and only Vasu (called as GROW Vasu after his leadership in Gwalior Rayon strike) can do something to save her.

Upon arriving Nilambur, Vasu finds Bindu lying near death outside the ITDP office surrounded by her helpless companions. He learns that their demand , based on a 2009 Supreme Court verdict now requires only the process of district collector to measure and allocate from the prescribed land for that purpose under Revenue department . Vasu secures a promise from the collector that 50 cents of land will be allocated to each of the 200 participating tribal families within six months. Actually the Supremecourt judgement allow them the ownership of one to Five acres of land.They agree to this

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compromise and Bindu ends her 11-month (314-day) hunger strike, and the remaining 60 families, still awaiting land, return to the hardships of colony life, where cramped conditions make daily survival a struggle. Yet, the story does not end here.

By December 2024, the promised six months have passed. After a further five-month wait, the second phase of the strike begins in Nilambur and shifts to Malappuram, the district administration's headquarters. The protesters, now on day 118, have built a hut in front of the Collectorate. On Thiruvonam day, they embraced hunger's quiet vow, a poignant emblem of neglect, as authorities and revelers feast, heedless of the protesters' silent starvation.



Desheeya Manavika Vedi activists visit the struggle front

On September 11, 2025, activists from the Desheeya Manavika Vedi (DESMUV), a national humanist forum, chaired by renowned poet K. Sachidanandan and patronized by actor-activist Prakashraj, revisit the protest site. Representatives from multiple districts join, unlike the first round, which primarily involved Nilambur and Malappuram members. We have been with Vasu and his fellow protesters, sharing stories, songs, discussions and a simple lunch. We met the collector, submitted a petition, and emailed copies to the Chief Minister, Revenue Minister, and SC/ST Minister. However, securing title deeds for the claimed land requires greater public support. While court orders have long been issued, bureaucratic delays persist, and the protesters remain entangled in legal complexities.

Tribal communities have a long history of resistance against exploitation, from British colonialism to modern encroachments by plantation owners, settlers, and tourism ventures. Forests and hills, rich in India's natural resources, were their homes, yet they were displaced and reduced to laborers on others' farms. Brave voices who advocated for them often became martyrs or spent their youth in prison. Democratic governments, instead of punishing encroachers, relocated tribes to colonies or isolated flats, eroding their way of life, language, and spirituality. Only recently have they begun to learn about their constitutional rights, though new laws in northern and central India threaten to undermine these gains.

Two decades ago, C.K. Janu and M. Geethanandan of the Gothra Mahasabha led a protest by building huts in the government-owned eucalyptus forest in Muthanga, demanding their rights. Their forgotten struggle gained attention

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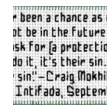
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recently through the popular film Narivetta. Janu and her comrades eventually secured land after immense suffering. Similarly, we find R. Chakki of Nilambur, a newly literate tribal disciple of 'Naxal Maulavi' (Abdurahiman Moulavi , a voluntary teacher in literacy Campaign) describing in a preface note in Moulavi's autobiography, how literacy empowered tribals to demand wages and speak publicly, reclaiming their agency.

Currently, 60 families still await land. In Malappuram, land from Nilambur and Mankada Kovilakams, vacated plantations, ITDP, and forest areas now under Revenue department , could provide 50 cents each to 147 tribal families. Once these 60 families receive their share, allocations can begin for a third list of later applicants. The issue lies with a statement by the well-intentioned collector, who, after December 2024, suggested prioritizing the 60 protesting families. However, SC/ST department rules mandate that scarce land be allocated by lottery among eligible applicants. This led to the file being sent for adjudication.

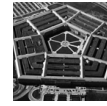
Vasu, understanding this technical hurdle, traveled to the state capital and met the Revenue Secretary. He clarified that prioritizing the 60 families from the second list is fair and that new applicants should not delay justice for those who have waited years. The Secretary agreed, yet delays persist, raising suspicions of interference by influential figures tied to plantation and tourism interests, who have allegedly threatened the strikers.



DESMUV activists meet the district collector

The collector's remarks during discussions revealed a troubling perspective: many who received land previously did not cultivate it due to issues like wildlife interference, and providing land alone is insufficient without schools and hospitals. Vasu countered that the government's primary duty is to deliver land as per the court verdict, with additional facilities to follow. The protesters emphasized that land titles often remain mere documents, as officials fail to include the tribal representatives in survey process, no efforts in showing and endorsing the land to be owned or allocate usable land with no access to water, leaving recipients helpless.

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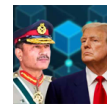
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Critics who dismiss tribal land allocations as futile — claiming tribes won't farm or will sell the land — alienate them as an unchangeable group. Yet, tribals have historically lived simply and sustainably, distinct in culture and values. They need modern facilities, education, and opportunities to nurture their talents, not just land to farm traditionally. As Azim Premji University professor Prashant Dontha stated at a recent Dalit-Adivasi seminar in Tirur, organized by the Deseeya Manavika Vedi, "Land ownership provides an address, identity, and confidence, enabling them to engage as socially and politically conscious citizens. Land is fundamental to dignity and empowerment".

O scribes and keepers of culture's flame, what part will you weave in this tapestry of struggle, as the tale of justice unfolds?

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