

**A STUDY ON THE EXPERIENCES OF TRIBAL COMMUNITY  
PROTESTERS DURING THE MUTHANGA AGITATION**

**Dissertation submitted to**

**Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam in partial fulfilment of the requirement  
for**

**the degree of**

**Master of Social Work**

**Specialising in**

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

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**2020-2022**

## Certificate

This is to certify that this dissertation titled “**A Study on the Experiences of Tribal Community Protesters during the Muthanga Agitation**” is a record of genuine and original work done by **DEVIKA MADHU (200011034673)** of IV semester Masters of Social Work course of this college under my guidance and supervision and it is hereby approved for submission.

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## **Declaration**

I Devika Madhu hereby declare that the research work titled “**A Study Study on the Experiences of Tribal Community Protesters during the Muthanga Agitation**” submitted to the M G University, Kottayam is a record of original work done by me under the guidance of Asst. Prof. Sooraj MV, Assistant Professor, Bharata Mata School of Social work, Thrikkakara, and this research work is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Social Work Specializing in Community Development.

I hereby declare that the results embedded in this research have not been submitted to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree or diploma, to the best of my knowledge and belief.

**Place:** Thrikkakara

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**Date:**

## **Abstract**

Landlessness or land alienation isn't a trivial subject as someone thinks it to. Because in the case of tribal communities, the very idea of land is associated with their ethnic identity and culture. The state of Kerala has witnessed significant landmarks in its history and that too in the case of land movements. The historical Land Reforms Act and the motto of "land to its tiller" was both a positive and negative. The tribals, who have been known as the ancient settlers were alienated from their own hills and plains and people migrated from plains to the hills to capture land. The study here deals with the historical struggle of Muthanga where the tribals started a movement to claim their rights however it turned out to be an unfortunate incident which took the lives of 2 human beings and also a fire breakout in the forest premises. The researcher here tries to understand about the events and circumstances that led to the event and also to record the lived experiences of the leaders who played a major role. The state's as well as the general public's take on this issue, according to the thoughts of the respondents have also been recorded here. The question as to why land is important to the tribals have been sought here.

## **Acknowledgment**

I am extending my sincere gratitude to the almighty for giving me the spiritual-moral and physical strength to pursue my academic goal. I take this privilege to acknowledge all those people who have made this thesis possible and because of whom my research experience has been one that I will cherish forever. I thank the following member for their support. First, I would like to thank the management, Bharata Mata College, headed by **Rev. Fr. Abraham Oliapurath** and Principal **DR. Johnson K M**, for supporting me to complete my work as part of my curriculum.

I am highly indebted and thankful to my guide **Asst. Prof. Sooraj MV**, faculty at Bharata Mata School of Social Work, Thrikkakara, Ernakulam, for his valuable advice, guidance, and inspiring encouragement at all phases and till the fruitful completion of the dissertation.

I sincerely express my sense of gratitude to the faculty members of the Department of Social work, Bharata Mata School of Social Work, Thrikkakara, for their valuable suggestions during my work. My heartfelt thanks to my dear friends, for their great motivation and cooperation, I am grateful to my parents for their encouragement and support during the research. Last but not least I thank all my participants for their wholehearted cooperation without which I could not have conducted such a study. I'm thankful to all those who have helped me in this work, directly or indirectly.

Most importantly, none of this would have been possible without my family's love, patience, and monetary support. I express my heartfelt gratitude to my family for all their encouragement.

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# **CHAPTER 1**

# **INTRODUCTION**

Kerala stands firm and unique on the tribal map of India. There are 48 ancestral networks all through the state, out of which 36 are ascribed the title of STs and the rest are denotified tribal communities. Each locale in Kerala has some tribal population, they are tracked down fundamentally in the areas of Wayanad, Palakkad, Malappuram, Kasargod, Idukki and Thiruvananthapuram. These regions are having 80% of the ancestral populace in Kerala. The tribes in Kerala comprise a more fragile section of the society. They are exposed to different sorts of discrimination and stratification for ages and their life is described by bondage, destitution and wretchedness. Aside from these issues, one significant issue is that of the denial of land rights. Irrespective of having lived in their niche since their ancestral times, the changing legislatures in the state deny their land rights and privileges. The FRA and PESA Act keep on existing in the constitution anyway but they are not practiced across the state. The different tribal communities even in a district vary from each other in racial characteristics, language and social practices. The famous 'Kerala Model' of improvement has filled in as hypothetical reason for some methodologies at the global level. The improvement plans planned and carried out by the Union and State Governments for the progression of the tribal communities have been up until this point met with restricted achievement. The tribal community have not had the option to understand about the various schemes and policies put forward for them at the central as well as state level. To handle the issue and defeat the obstructions, it is important to give data and guidance about the administrations that are accessible to such vulnerable communities in the society.

Land alienation is a serious problem facing the Scheduled Tribes. Most of the tribal people live in the forest. About 90 percent of the tribes are dependent on agriculture as well as other allied activities. Land is a tangible asset of the tribal community. They are



emotionally attached to land. Many tribals become landless for a variety of reasons. The struggle at Muthanga near Sultan Bathery in Wayanad district was one of the most significant land struggles in Kerala. People from different communities in the scheduled tribe took part in the strike. Even after the Muthanga struggle, land struggles have taken place in various places in the Wayanad district. Tribals today face a variety of socio-economic problems as part of land alienation such as poverty, disadvantages related to education, employment, living conditions, administrative inefficiency, culture etc. Even after the struggles, the response from the state has also created a lot of problems in the financial sector of the tribes. The real issues of Tribes are still unquestioned and can be seen as a denial of legal and constitutional protection. This study seeks to find out the experiences of the different leaders of the Muthanga Agitation, and to record those and understand how and why development agenda are not actually beneficial to them. (Dr. Harsheena V.A, vol.No.10, 2014)

The Muthanga agitation led by the Adivasis of Kerala is an important chapter in the history of Kerala. Kerala has witnessed many social reform movements in the society during the period of democratization. Most of these struggles were for the attainment of social justice in all spheres of life, including the right to life, the fundamental rights to education, and the right to resources such as land.

The Kerala model of development is the result of these socio-political movements. Such social movements across the country have played a major role in unifying our country, which is diverse in culture, language and many other things. The framers of our constitution are well aware of this fact and they are eager to ensure this right to all the common people, especially the lower caste, the socially backward and minorities. Thus, our constitution gives space to every common citizen who ensures democracy. Part of

it is the rights of the Adivasis or Adivasis of India to recognize the rights of the native, the right to resources, the rights to forest land and the rights to self-government. The Adivasis of India have achieved these rights through constant struggles against all other cultures and political systems, including colonialism.

The protection of rights of tribals is in essence protection of forests and protection of natural resources. They are the guardians of nature. Although our constitution guarantees these rights of the Adivasis, democratic Kerala is well known in many ways for acting in accordance with the great wisdom of our constitution. However, the past few decades have witnessed the struggle of tribals, Dalits, fisherman and plantation workers. The Muthanga agitation is an episode in this chapter, especially an episode of the tribal struggles that have emerged since the 1980s. There are numerous socio-economic studies related to land reforms and socio-economic studies related to land reforms and social-domestic renaissance movements in Kerala. But readings and studies in this later period are very rare. Especially the underlying reason being the lack of education among the tribals. The struggles of the groups have just been said to the contemporary society through the word of mouth since they do not have a scripted language. The mainstream section of the society tends to believe what they have been told by the media and police force. But what has actually happened in their lives have not been recorded properly since the struggle.

While choosing an area of study, the investigator thought about various territorial groups to choose as the study population so decided to interact with people who were active participants in the Muthanga agitation of 2003. In Wayanad there are 35 tribal communities comprising of Paniyas, Kurumas, Adiyas, Kurichias, Ooralis and Kattunaikans. Aside from these gatherings there are additionally groups like Kadar,

Kalaadis, Karimpalan, Kunduvadiyar, Techanadan, Pathiyar and Malayarayans. The area of study for information attainment is set as Wayanad district in light of the fact that even presently there are individuals who live with the dull past of Muthanga agitation in their minds. The interaction with various members of the communities in the district of Wayanad made the investigator more curious to know about their plights importantly and also physical environment, customs, attitudes and characteristic features of tribal community. This study analyzes the circumstances that led to the Adivasis leading the Muthanga agitation, the state's take on the issue, as well as how much land rights are important for the tribals to maintain their very identity. Each of these chapters describes the history of land alienation in Kerala, alienation during colonial and post-colonial period, land attention during democratic rule, and the reasons for land alienation in democratic Kerala. The period of the Muthanga struggle is seen as a process of further democratization of our society, especially as a process of understanding more about the fundamental rights of people who depend on natural resources. Therefore, the study seeks a methodology to understand the Muthanga Agitation and how it has affected the lives of the tribal community.

**CHAPTER 2-**  
**REVIEW OF**  
**LITERATURE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

A tribe is a group of people, who together formed small or large communities in conversational societies. Their identity is generally defined by common culture, shared locality, special customs and common language and rules. In small tribes like the one we are discussing here, people mostly share means of livelihood also, especially in cases where the forest dwellers are dependent on the land and its produce for survival. In many cases the survival methods become a strong binding factor among tribal communities because most of their problems are related to having enough land to cultivate and get the best yield from it. Most of the Tribes are Agricultural Laborers or daily wage workers and agriculture is their major means of livelihood. The implementations and tools used by them are very crude. They cultivate Rice, Ragi, Pulses, Tapioca, Ginger, Cardamom, Pepper and other consumable products as conditions permit. Collection of minor forest produce is the next important occupation practiced by them. Certain tribal communities barter or sell forest produce to the non-tribals. They are experts in felling trees and collection of timber, bamboo seeds etc. Hunting and gathering of animals are also a principal occupation among the tribal and is practiced by Malavedan, Kurichiyans, Malapandaram etc. Netting, angling and catching fish by various methods are the main occupations during certain seasons among the tribal communities, Basket and mat making are very common among Koragans, Malavettuvans, Mannan and Mavilans.

Land alienation or landlessness is slowly leading to the expulsion of tribals from society. It seriously affects many of their fundamental rights and traditional way of life. 90% of the Adivasis are still lagging behind in social progress due to lack of land of their own. It prevents them from growing in society along with the mainstream sections.

There are more than 40 Adivasis communities in many districts of Kerala and most of them are landless people. Landlessness is low in Travancore and Cochin. Most of them are landless and most of them are landless tribes (Wayanad, Palakkad) (Brijoy,2013).

As part of the land grabbing by the migrant peasants, the Adivasis were reduced to the land of Hindus, Christians, Muslims, exploiters and landless slaves. Migration of people living in the Attappady plains started in the 1950s. In 25 years, 20% in the district tribal families also became landless (Brijoy,2013).

One crucial factor that has led to this change is the human's encroachment into forest land. "Forests are dynamic living systems. They are continually changing. Humans have had, and will continue to have, a change of hand in that change. Humans introduce the greatest amount of known variability" (Cook, 2012).

One major casualty of civilized community's encroachment into forest has been the tribals, who were the original inhabitants of that land. Their lives and sources of income remain threatened because of this infringement. The tribals in India may not be totally isolated and disadvantaged like those who inhabit the forests in Amazon. On the other hand, geographical isolation might have, at least in some cases, helped foster interesting cultural ramifications and art forms. However, the result of geographic isolation has been, for most Tribal communities, highly negative. This is mainly because sources of income are very limited in such isolated pockets. Further, whenever tribals have come into contact with the more developed world, they have been continuously exploited by the developed class and denied access to education and related advantages. This exploitation started from the time the British consolidated their power in India but has continued after independence as well. "Under the increasing pressure of population, many outsiders also started settling in tribal regions. With their money power, they

offered credit facilities at the doorstep. Initially, it provided relief to Tribals but gradually their system became exploitative” (Mondal, n.d).

The word ‘Tribe’ is generally used for a ‘socially cohesive unit’, as associated with a territory. The members regard them as politically autonomous (Mitchell, 1979; 232).

Often a tribe possesses a distinct dialect and distinct cultural traits. The empirical Gazetteer of India, 1911, defines a tribe as a “collection of families bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect and professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous, though originally it might have been so”. According to R.N Mukarjee, “A tribe is that human group whose members have common interest, territory, language, social law and economic occupation.”

Kerala, one of the smaller states of India is home to several tribal communities “The scheduled Tribe population of Kerala is 4,84,839 persons constituting 1.45 percent of the total population of the state (3.338 crore) as per 2011 census” (Economic review, 2016).

Kurichiya, Paniya, Malayarayar, Urali, Urali Kuruma, Cholanaikkan, mythical, mannan, Irular, etc. are some of the many districts of Kerala, Wayanad has the largest tribal population, and Paniyas are the largest tribal group. Besides Wayanad, Palakkad, Kasaragod, Malappuram, and Idukki are the other districts in which tribal populations are mainly found. Raymond Firth defines a tribe as “A group of people of a cultural order that is normally occupying a common language and in particular having a commonest of traditions and institutions and responding to the same government...”

George Peter Murdock has stated that tribe is a social group in which there are many clans, nomadic bands villages or other such groups which usually have a definite geographical area, a separate language, a singular and distinct culture and their a

common political organization or at least a feeling of common determination against strangers.

Ananda Krishna Iyer has published “The Travancore Tribes and castes ‘in three volumes, Iyer concentrated his study on the hill tribes which were fast doing out or were deteriorated. In the first volume (1937) he discussed seven hill tribes, namely the Kanikkaran, the Malakkurumbans, the Malapandaram, Malapulaya, the Malavedan, the Malayarayan. In latest study (1961) he described the hill tribes of Kerala as Pre-Dravidian. Iyer also undertook the ethnographic survey of the hill and jungle tribes of Kochi and published its result in four volumes. The first volume of his work ‘Cochin tribes and caste’ (1909) includes description of the tribes like Kadar, the Malayan, the Nayadi, the Ulladan, Paniyan and others. A. Ayyappan made several systematic studies on the various tribes of Kerala, ‘Nayadis of Malabar’(1937) and ‘Erula of Kerala’ (1944) are the important studies. Later he conducted a subsequent study on the Irulas in 1965 and the results were published which gives an insight into the socio-economic changes that took place in the Irula community. A. D Luis (1962) made a detailed study of all the 48 tribes of Kerala. He has discussed their mode of living, occupation, diet, region, taboos, marriage and rituals. He provides an insight into the changing patterns of tribal social life in the context of the socio-economic conditions of the state as a whole. P.R. G Mathur (1971) traces the socio-linguistic evolution of the tribes of Kerala. In addition to giving some valuable statistical information, the author describes some of the important problems facing the tribal people like land alienation, bonded labor, indebtedness, status of tribal women etc. This book also mentions briefly some of the recent political developments among the tribals like the formation of tribal organizations and the influence of the Naxalite movement on them etc.



Paniyan tribes are the major tribal community of Kerala. They reside in hilly and forest areas of Kerala and Karnataka. The word Paniyan means workers in the regional language Malayalam. Ancient period Paniyan tribes are amongst those tribal people who have worked as bounded laborers for the landlords. Majority of Paniya tribes live in the northern part of the Western Ghat. The main occupation of these tribes is in the field of land owners. They worked as slaves in the ancient period. Most of the people of this community engaged with agricultural works but some of them engaged in Tea and coffee estates and constructional works. Paniyan tribes live together in colonies, their settlement comprises rows of small huts constructed with bamboo with hatched roots. Paniyan tribes of Wayanad districts speak the Paniyan language, it is a complexion of Malayalam and Kannada but some of the words are independent. They choose their life partners from their tribes only. The Paniyan marriage is usually arranged by the parents of bride and groom. The priest is called Chemmi, During the marriage ceremony as part of the ritual 16 coins and new dresses are given to the bride. Monogamy is common practice among them. The Paniya tribes have a lot of religious practices. They worship Banyan trees, Kali, Kattu bhagavathi with great reverence. They also believe in spirits (Anil.2014).

The Adiya tribe is also one of the slave tribes in Wayanad. These tribes are known as 'Ravular' traditionally. The word Adiya means slave in local language Malayalam. Gadhika is a kind of traditional dance performed by them. They choose their life partners from tribes only and as per customs bride price is given to the parents of the bride by groom on the occasion of their marriage. Polygamy and divorce are practiced among them. If the woman commits any mistakes (adultery), they have to undergo a purification ceremony called Kalachu veypu to join the family back. Head of the

community is called chommikaran or peruman. Adiya community is divided in 20 classes i.e. Mandu (Anil.2014).

In India, the mainstream globalization model has neglected the inclusive growth of the tribal economy and has largely concentrated on promotion of gross domestic products, thus creating unhealthy consequences. Its impact has been displaced in large numbers by developmental projects which have ignored effective rehabilitation. The neo-liberal movement has not only deprived them of their identity but also their livelihood rights, pushing them into abject poverty; the impact of globalization on tribal life is also evident in the state of Kerala. The problem of alienation cannot be calculated through analyzing the amount of land lost and in the similar way the benefit of resettlement should not be proclaimed by looking at the amount of land gained through the process. The displacement and resettlement have highly affected socio-economic and political living grounds of each community. ‘Ooru kootam’ as a core system itself governance developed by and for “Tribal communities have importance in asserting the socio-political and cultural identities and rights of every tribal community” (Rajesh, et. al, 2019).

These colonies were formed as part of the old zamindar system. The tribal people would come for a walk in the plantations or fields and settle down in some corner of the land owned by zamindar. They would work for the landlords and settle down there. They have no owners of the land they stayed on. It would be a tiny piece of land where three or more families stayed in a small shed. They had no land to cultivate or keep their animals, says M Geethanadhan, state coordinator, Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha (AGMS). According to AGMS data, there are around 2,000 colonies in Wayanad which are settled in private lands without proper documents. “Migration of people from the low

land to Wayanad, construction of dams and reservoirs by the government, deforestation etc. were some of the reasons that these tribal communities, especially Paniya, Adiya and Kattunaikkan of the district, remained landless”.

Even in the state of Kerala none of the developments has touched the tribals, despite the fact that Kerala is one of the few remaining places in the world where communism continues to survive, albeit in a slightly different way than Karl Marx had originally envisioned the Idea (Jaffe & Doshi, 2017) and communist and socialist are still believed to be working for empowering the marginalized and uplifting the downtrodden (Anil, 2019).

As Amartya Sen (1999) pointed out, development is not something that can be seen in isolation, which means that just a few percentages of the population becoming immensely successful cannot be viewed as an index of development. For a country to be considered developed, the capabilities of all its people need to be tapped and problems addressed, especially those of marginalized communities who do not have proper access to education and employment opportunities. The requirements of different communities may vary, but at some level all these remain interconnected.

In India the well-being and progress of the various tribal communities is the responsibility of the ministry of tribal affairs. The ministry has consistently introduced different programmes for the welfare of the tribal populations. Debar commission (1968-61), the national commission for Scheduled Tribes set up under the leadership of Sri. V. N Debar, was instrumental in pointing out the inequalities among tribal communities. “The Debar Commission observed four different layers among Scheduled tribes at the base of which they found a group of tribes”, an extremely underdeveloped stage and at the top most level amongst the tribes, a layer that can very well afford to

forgo any further help. We feel that this lowest layer needs the utmost consideration at the hands of the Government” (Bharian et. al, 2004).

Though the various schemes introduced by the authorities for the upliftment of tribals have not been uniformly successful, some changes are gradually seeping into tribal communities and tribes are getting the rights to speak for themselves. In 2012, the National Advisors council (NAC) recommended that “the Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of attached Adivasis communities be obtained before the government acquires any land for development projects, or decides on a rehabilitation package” (Gopalakrishnan, 2013).

This is a landmark milestone because before this amendment was recommended to the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA),” constitution with Adivasis was considered sufficient for such matters, and the result was that their interests and opinions were, in essence, rarely taken into consideration, though activist groups have been presently demanding it.

Mitra & Singh (n. D) point out that “the literacy rates for scheduled tribes in India have also improved substantially from 1991 (29.60%) for both males (13.83% to 40.65%) and females (3.16% to 18.19%) respectively. Though the general trend is higher among men in tribal communities as it is in the case of most mainstream communities as well, the authors point out that “tribal society in general is categorized by lack of discrimination against women, and tribal women participate in all spheres of economic and social lives”. There is also regional variation to women’s education among tribals and the “dropout rate among tribal girls in classes I-VIII is the lowest in the states of Himachal Pradesh in northern India, followed by Kerala in south India and Nagaland in North-Eastern India”.

Though changes are indeed taking place in tribal communities, much more is required to integrate them fully with the mainstream population. In most cases, tribals live in underdeveloped and isolated forest areas and are forced to subsist on whatever they obtain from the surrounding, infertile land. Many of the schemes meant for tribal welfare are generating the desired results because of bureaucratic corruption, in difference of those in charge of implementing programs for tribal development, exploitation of the Adivasis themselves about their rights.

Eswarappa (2017) in his study about the development of Adivasis raises “policy questions pertinent to both the policy makers and practitioners on the efficiency of policies related to vulnerable groups”. According to him, “prevailing factional politics and a painting on the part of the governing agency are preventing the marginalized groups from adequately benefiting from the development inventions”.

Laws which are applicable to the rest of the country cannot always be implemented in tribal communities all of a sudden without understanding their culture. Sometimes authorities are unknowingly” slapping POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences) Act on the men from Paniya, Kattunaikkan community for following the traditional marriage system of the Adivasi community. Twenty boys were arrested in 2015 under the POCSO Act from Wayanad. Ironically the person who headed the District Child Welfare Committee which arrested the tribal boys was very lenient to the rape accused from his own tribe. Both the issues of unwed mothers and misuse of POCSO Act happen because with the advent of ‘civilized modernity the tribal Hamlet lost the traditional system of tribal chieftains having a say in the affairs of the socio-economic administration of the hamlets (Kuvalyamala, 2019).

Besides these, there are other schemes like Tribal girl's child endowment scheme and various healthcare schemes that include programs for maternal healthcare, financial help for traditional tribal heaters, and special schemes for helping sickle cell anemia patients, since this genetic disorder is prevalent in many tribal communities of Kerala (Ibid). All those are bringing about a steady though slow progress in the tribal standard of living. This topic is derived from the thesis prepared by a student on a similar topic, the tribes, the autonomous people of the land who are believed to be the earliest settlers in the Indian peninsula. "They are called Adivasis, meaning forest settlers (R.V.Varma, the Indian tribes (1990).

According to the Oxford English dictionary the word "Tribe's" derived from the Latin term 'tribus' which was applied to the early people of Rome. The term, however, has gone through a lot of changes. It meant a political unit consisting of a number of clans.

G. S Ghurey (1943) has examined the status of the tribals in the total Indian structure. In his later work he deals with the problem of integration of the tribes in the light of the latest political and constitutional issues (1957). A.A.D Luis has made a detailed study of all the 48 tribes of Kerala (1962).

He has discussed their mode of living, occupation, religions, taboos, marriage and rituals. While tribes can change many aspects of their reservation governments, other difficulties have resulted from decades of federal mismanagement and are unlikely to change soon. In 1872 E.T Dalton compiled data about the geographical setting, physical traits, economic, social and religious life of the Lepchas and Limbus of Sikkim and Darjeeling.

W. Geokes (1894) describes the culture of tribes like the Gujars, the Tharas, and the Khasas, thus bringing out their reciprocal interactions among ecology, economy and

social life. Iravati karve has made a number of studies on the tribes of Maharashtra and she has given a clear picture of the geographical distribution, demographic setting and contemporary tribal situation in Maharashtra (1969).

## **HISTORY OF LAND ALIENATION IN KERALA**

The aborigines, literally the real inhabitants of the earth, or aboriginal population, are the largest Ethnic minority at the bottom of Kerala society which includes the tribal population of the state. About 3.5 lakh people from 35 different communities make up more than one percent of the total tribal population in Kerala. Kerala is generally known for its progressive implementation of the total population of the state. Land Reform won the honor of protecting the basic rights of the tribals when the Land Reforms Act gave ownership to lakhs of tenants and landless people in the state. The aborigines were excluded from Forested highlands of Kerala since ancient times. The post-colonial government created a 'tribal' slot to include them in the constitution. Their identity as Adivasis and hence their closeness to space was evident in their struggles for the restoration of land and forest rights. The struggle of the Adivasis was not to gain new ownership of the land, but to reclaim the lost ownership of their land.

## **LAND ALIENATION DURING COLONIAL PERIOD AND POST-COLONIAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS**

### **COLONIAL PERIOD**

British colonial rule saw a planned attack on self-sufficiency. In blatant violation of tribal laws, the forest and land in the homeland of the Adivasis were brought under their control. Introduction to the alien concept of private property. Establishment of the

zamindari system, where landlords were to collect land. In addition to forest laws, lease income from farmers also contributed to the looting. As well as the resources of the tribal motherland and its commercialization. Forests were the abode and breadwinner of the Adivasis. The tribal community suffered When the British declared forests as state property. Forests were declared reserved. Problems arose when the tribals were not allowed to relocate and cultivate. The Adivasi community also sought to collect forest resources such as honey, fruits, food and timber. They began to establish an autonomy. They had no private property. Everyone had a common property. There is a sense of community, not a sense of individuality. The British brought their own laws and policies. Policies It shattered tribal lives. It shattered the social and economic system of the tribes. They interfered in the peaceful existence of the tribal community. The self-government system was destroyed by the British. They did not recognize the autonomy of the tribal communities. The chiefs lost many of their administrative powers and obeyed the rules Formed by the British. In the early days of British rule, the tribes had to pay their dues Tax in the form of natural or forest resources. But then it turned into money. As a result, they were exploited by landlords and moneylenders. They were recruited and barred at very low wages from returning to their homes. The establishment of plantations affected the tribal community The policies of British rule drove the tribals out of their homeland as marginalized.

### **INDIAN FOREST ACT AND TRIBES**

The Indian Forest Act of 1927 was enacted to protect the forests of India. The Act provides for various provisions for the protection of such forests in a scheme submitted to a State Government for the formation of any forest or wasteland owned by the Government or owned by the Government as reserved forest. The right to land within



the forest is not recognized by the forest laws. The Forest Act of 1980 made the situation worse. In many states, the decision to issue a title before the law was taken as a result of intense struggles and hardships of the Adivasis. The British were the first to restrict the free use of forests by tribes by enacting the Forest Act of 1894. They retained the responsibility of these forests from the local rulers. British colonial policy continued in the form of domestic colonialism in independent India, where natural resource segregation extended the plundering of tribal lands and forests. It is an unfortunate fact that legally the Government of India is due to the colonial base of the British Government. Unregistered titles are not given in writing to the Sub-Registrar's Office. The government is deliberately taking over the land and resources that the tribals have enjoyed as public property for ages. Only private land was approved by the British Government. It does not realize that the forest is the habitat of millions of Adivasis and that they have destroyed the forest system to sustain the life of the Adivasis. After the tribal land was legally confiscated, the government generously agreed to give some back as a measure of grace.

Thus, forest laws came into force in many parts of India. As a result, tribal interaction with the state's instruments, the forest department, has not been smooth. The Forest Act of 1868 of the Colonial Central Government initiated the process of forest acquisition by the government. The Central Government's Forest Conservation Act of 1980 was another important legislative tool that made it illegal for tribals to stay in the forest. Until then, the Adivasis who had been moving inland should be physically evicted from the forests. Today the Adivasis are the lowest strata of the social class community in Kerala. As the poorest of the poor in the state, even their extraordinary knowledge of biodiversity and medicinal plants is today being pirated and patented. The Government

of Kerala is still pursuing British policies. They do not change the rules. These British laws are detrimental to the Adivasis of Kerala (C.R.Bijoy, 2021).

## **SOCIAL FORESTRY AND EXPANSION OF PLANTATION**

Forests are important natural resources and play a major role in ecological balance. Kerala was blessed with rich forests. Evergreen forests were an important feature of Kerala. 75% of the total geographical area of Kerala is densely forested. The process of social afforestation also began with colonial rule. The British made policies for capital accumulation. They considered the forest as a commercial source. Through their policies, they have transformed traditional forests into community forests. Community afforestation is the conservation and protection of forests. In the pre-colonial period, the economic status of the so-called forest dwellers was uncertain. However, they seem to have enjoyed in many ways the boundaries of the forests and their surrounding areas, which are directly dependent on the forest habitat. Community afforestation involves complete social transformation through activities related to afforestation. These events went beyond mere tree planting rituals to establish plantations in Kerala in the first half of the nineteenth century. The gardens began with two colonial perspectives. First, it was started as part of a colonial strategy to protect the forest in a scientific way. Second, the colonial rulers wanted to expand agriculture in more areas and maximize income. The plantations were mainly divided into tree plantations and agricultural plantations. The British planted mahogany, teak and cinchona in different parts of Malabar. The availability of land and the scarcity of timber motivated them to start gardening. The demand for timber increased in the 1840s, and its availability was limited, and with the advent of the railway system the industrial demand for timber doubled. The timber from Malabar was exported to England. Teak planting in Malabar was started mainly for the

marine industry, railways, mines and public works. The government leased the land for the plantations without interest for a long time. Nilambur Valley has been selected as the state for teak plantations. In 1830 small and large plantations were started in the nominal and Darjeeling areas under the East India Company. With the defeat of Tipu Sultan, the company became a producer of natural resources in Malabar, Mysore and Kodagu. The British established tea and coffee plantations in the traditional tribal habitat. For this reason, the Adivasis were subjected to mass evictions. Their shifting cultivation was stopped. They had no right to cultivate the forest. The Adivasis were alienated from the forest. The plantation industry in Kerala originated through the predecessor of Harrison Malayalam Limited. They leased the fertile lands of Kochi, Travancore and Malabar from the kings. Then came the plantations of coffee, tea, and rubber. They still own over one lakh acres of revenue land in Kerala which started two centuries ago. The history of land grabbing began in 1921 with the registration of new companies such as Malayalam Plantation ITD (UK) and Harrison & Crossfield ETD (UK) under the English East India Company Act of 1908. Another example is the takeover of Kannan Devan Hills by Tata (C.R.Bijoy, 2003).

## **POST COLONIAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT**

- a) Migration
- b) Development and Displacement
- c) Deforestation

Kerala has been inhabited by people since time immemorial, but the reasons for these migrations varied from ancient times, with inter-local migration and local migration occurring. There was also migration to Kerala from other countries. During the pre-Malabar modern period, there were many small settlements in different parts of the

country. But in the first half of the twentieth century there was a massive migration to the dense forests of Malabar within Kerala. The most important internal migration from Travancore to Malabar took place in the 1920s. There were several reasons for this migration process. This is the movement of the people of Kerala from one rural area to another. It was an agrarian migration. The availability of cheap land in Malabar has been attracting farmers since 1920. During the period 1945-1970 the flow was at its full potential. Almost all migrations are generally from underdeveloped areas to developed areas, agricultural areas or non-agricultural communities. But the situation in Malabar is very different from other migrations. Here a group of people migrated to the underdeveloped area, where wildlife and diseases awaited them. They wanted to improve their condition and had to work against nature.

The settlers destroyed the tribal way of life. In his book "Africa in Kerala", According to shri. K Pandor, in 1976, a sub-committee was formed to look into the forcible seizure of tribal land. The settlers took over the tribal lands and enslaved them. Gradually they became migrant land workers. The strongest migration to Wayanad took place during the colonial period. The plan was to house World War II soldiers. For this, 33,802 acres of tribal land was acquired in South Wayanad, Sultan Bathery, Ambalavayal and Nenmeni villages. Large-scale migration from Central and South Kerala also took place in Wayanad. Immigrants encroached on a large number of Adivasis and forest lands for cash crop cultivation. Organized immigration took place in the 1960s. It was in the context of private afforestation and land reform. The settlers alienated the land and livelihood of the Adivasis, which led to changes in their livelihoods, employment, living standards and starvation.

The process of nation-building itself marginalized the Adivasis in their own habitat. More than 10 million Adivasis have been displaced during the so-called forest-based

eco-initiatives into development projects, mines, industries, dams, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and ecotourism areas. Tribal migration is taking place through industrialization and urbanization, and the name of national development is the main source of livelihood loss for the tribals. The fact that the primary source of modern development is the affluent tribal motherland is the reason for their brutal migration. This is not only destroying vital habitats, but also threatening the very survival of the Adivasis. Incidentally, the state has become the greatest enemy of the Adivasis. 20% or 135 lakh tribals are victims of development. About 9% or 20 lakh Adivasis have been displaced at least once. Other statistics on evictions show that 8 lakh people are being evicted through 119 Central and State Government schemes, of which 50 per cent are tribals. About 90 percent of the county's coal mines are in tribal areas. The mines have displaced more than 21 lakh people in the last 40 years, of which 14 lakhs are tribals. It is estimated that the dams alone have displaced 21 million people in the last 40 years, of which 40% are tribal. The Government of India report of 1987 estimates that out of a total population of 185 lakhs, 85 lakhs are Adivasis who have been displaced at least once. As of 1991, more than 2% of India's population was displaced by development projects, of which 7.5 million were tribals. About 50 per cent of them are tribals. Despite being a very small minority of only 8% of India, the government does not even have a rehabilitation policy. The draft rules were released in 1994 by the Ministry of Water Resources and the Ministry of Rural Government. Only 10.15% of these Adivasis have been rehabilitated and 30% have been rehabilitated non-Adivasis. It is estimated that in the near future another 10 lakh tribals will be resettled through development projects including wildlife sanctuaries and national parks. Adivasis are being relocated from their homeland for various development programs being implemented in Kerala. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the East India

Company intensified deforestation in Kerala. It shattered tribal lives. They were the ones who collected the food. They depended on forest resources for their daily lives. The British established teak plantations in Wayanad and Nilambur. Deforestation also took place for the needs of the railways. The large-scale plantations implemented by the East India Company destroyed the traditional habitats of the community.

### **LAND ALIENATION DURING DEMOCRATIC RULE**

Even after the belated framing of the rules, the successive government failed to implement the 1975 Act. On the other hand, encroaching on the tribal lands continued with due political patronage. The 1975 Act categorically states that all transactions of Adivasis lands during the period between 1960 and 1982 are illegal and invalid. It also says that all such lands are to be returned to the original tribal owners. The Act further restricted transfer of tribal land to non-tribals from 1982 onwards without prior consent of the authorities. The Implemented Act stated that it would apply only to those cases of land alienation where the tribe had records to prove their prior ownership of their respective land. The tribal population never knew that they should have possessed land records from the government for the land they inhabited for generations. The vast majority of the tribes never had records of ownership given by the government officials, even though they were enjoying the possession of their ancestral land from time immemorial. The position of the government in general only helped the powerful encroachers to the occupying tribal lands. After the implementation of the act several applications were received in their original forms. Moving the bill in the assembly, the then state Revenue Minister said that encroachers had snatched the land from the tribals adopting fraudulent methods, apart from providing them dry fish, tobacco, and paltry amounts of money in return. He declared: 'Whatever may be the methods adopted, this government considers all such land transactions as thefts and we are determined to

return the stolen property to their rightful owners'. The Act could get the mandatory assent of the president of India in November of the same year. However, no action was taken on the part of the state government to implement the Act, even though it was a period of emergency. In the meantime, encroachment of the tribal land continued during this period. The encroachment on the tribal land had become more regular during the period between 1950s and 70s. The non-tribals from the plains went to the tribal areas and snatched the tribal land using different methods. These encroachers had a different perspective of the concepts of land ownership, which was unknown to the Adivasis (C.R.Bijoy, 2003).

Finally, the state government formulated the necessary rules to implement the 1975 Act, after 11 years of its passing, In 1986 with retrospective effect from January 1<sup>st</sup> 1982. However, by 1982, massive encroachment was already done by non-tribals in the predominant tribal belt of Attappady in the Palakkad district and the tribal dominated Wayanad district. Even after the belated framing of the rules, the successive government failed to implement the 1975 Act. On the other hand, encroaching on the tribal lands continued with due political patronage. The 1975 Act states that all transactions of Adivasis lands during the period between 1960 and 1982 are illegal and invalid. It also says that all such lands are to be returned to the original tribal owners. The Act further restricted transfer of tribal land to non-tribals from 1982 onwards without prior consent of the authorities. After the implementation of the act, several applications were received by the state governments, but no action was taken by the successive UDF-LDF government to restore the alienated tribal land to the original owners. The tribal sub plan of 1995 says that the government has received 8641 applications for the restorations of the alienated tribal lands, but only 563 applications have been disposed of and land has been restored only in one or two cases. It was in

this background that Dronellar Tampico tribal of Manadhavadi in Wayanad moved a public interest litigation in 1988 before the Kerala High court. The High Court in its order of 1993 asked the government, however, the court granted further extension to implement the act till April 1996. Still the government refused to implement the act and carry out the court orders even during the extended period. Though our constitution guarantees these rights of the tribals, democratic Kerala has failed to act in accordance with the great wisdom of our constitution in many ways. Kerala has several progressive laws including land reforms to end land ownership, but lacks policies and programs to preserve the right of traditional resource dependent people like Tribal, Fisher folks Dalits and minorities groups. However, the last few decades have witnessed the struggle of tribals, Dalits, Fisher folk and plantation laborers. The Muthanga struggle is an episode of this chapter, especially of Adivasis struggles that have surfaced since 1990. Since Independence, the Governments in both the centre and the states have launched a series of welfare programs for the uplift of the Tribal people.

The Constitution of India accorded them special legislation for bringing them on a par with the modernized sector of the society. Indeed, the constitution has included a separate schedule for this purpose. The major constitutional provisions include reservation of seats in the union and state bureaucracies and in the educational institutions run or assisted by the state.

The various Tribal welfare programs instituted to improve the lot of these people and have their counterparts in other states. Many of them are financed by the union government. Indian Adivasis were apparently there before Aryans and Dravidians occupied the lands, though it is difficult to assess the exact time of the origin of most



tribes as their recorded history about them nor are there any well-known records from equations to understand anything about their lifestyle.

In technical terms Article 342 of the Indian constitution relates to a special provision in respect of “scheduled Tribe” which are defined as the “tribe or Tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribal communities which the president of India may specify by public notification”. The tribal groups are presumed to form the oldest ethnological sector of the national population. The term “Adivasis” (Adi-original: vasi- inhabitants) has recently become current to designate these groups. The tribes are: hunters, forest lands cultivators and minor forest. Product collectors lived in isolation with nature hence divided into a large number of sub tribes, all mutually inclusive and the common features of all these tribes are (1975).

### **REASON FOR LAND ALIENATION IN DEMOCRATIC KERALA**

Alienation of land is a serious problem faced by the scheduled tribes. Land is the mainstay of the tribes and more than 90 percent of them are dependent on agriculture and allied activities. Hence, land is the only tangible asset of a tribal community, and they are emotionally attached to it. The number of landless tribals has increased during the last decade and several reasons can be attributed to this phenomenon. Scheduled Tribes largely depend upon non-tribals to meet their credit requirements. The socio-economic survey of tribals reveals that tribals alienate their lands mainly for meeting their domestic expenses and for clearing their past debts. The main causes of land alienation and landlessness among the tribals are poor economic conditions, drinking habit, indebtedness, urbanization, industrialization, lack of land records, administrative inefficiency, delay in getting Judgment, oral mortgage of lands in the hands of non-tribals, non-possession of Judgment, interest not shown by tribal pleaders or not taking

interest due to heavy bribe, fear from police and court establishing marriage with tribal women and sharecropping. Land alienation has given birth to several allied problems among the tribals, that is, increased poverty among the tribals, decreased the occasion of employment, migration of tribals, exploitation of tribal laborers, exploitation of tribal women, created tension between tribals and non-tribals, increased the distance between the rich and the poor tribals, developed extremism and naxalism in tribal areas, brought law and order problem in tribal areas, directly or indirectly. In post-independent Kerala, large-scale alienation of tribal lands took place mainly due to the immigration of plainsmen to the hill areas, displacement for projects etc (C.R.Bijoy, 2003.vol.38).

### **LAND REFORM AND LAND ALIENATION OF TRIBALS**

The historic Kerala Land Reforms Act 1963, with its “land to the tiller” policy unfortunately turned out to be a nightmare for the tribals. Under the new law, the occupiers of the land (settler farmers) became the owners and the original owners (the tribals) became landless and were reduced to the status of agricultural laborers. This resulted in the total derailment of their lives. After the enactment of Kerala Land Reform Act, the non-tribal communities who invaded Attappady and Wayanad behaved ruthlessly towards the Adivasis who were the real owners of the land. They exploited the Adivasis more unscrupulously than their former rivals, the British or landlords. The new masters and the Government bypassed the Dalit and adive laborers by focusing on giving land rights to tenants only. In fact, it was the apathetic attitude displayed by successive governments that made the issue more complicated.

Thus, the Adivasi issue in Kerala presents a dismal picture. As the Government remained indifferent, the Adivasis have from time to time tried to assert their land rights but were brutally crushed by the state violence as at Cheengeri (1995) and Panavally

(1997), Muthanga and Chengara. The celebrated Kerala model of development has not made much change for the socio-economic life of the marginalized sections of Kerala. According to Chathukulam and John, tribals have been largely left out of the gains of the vaunted Kerala model of development (2006). According to Kunjaman (2002) systematic marginalization of the subaltern sections has been a blot on the Kerala model. In the implementation of land reforms, the fundamental programme for which Kerala is well known, the legitimate claim of the Dalits, the traditional tillers of the soil, to cultivable land was never recognized. Among the few states that have achieved Land Reforms in India, Kerala has been rated very high.

However, it is equally true that Kerala did not achieve complete success in land reforms. In the meantime, the tribals acknowledge the fact that mobilization without any individual interest and ideological aspect can successfully address their real unrest in front of others. Therefore, when analyzing the recent history of tribal unrest in the last 100 years, over one million acres of land are believed to have been grabbed from Kerala's tribal population.

Their long agitation to regain the forests and lands where Their ancestors have lived for generations intensified after the starvation deaths of 32 tribals last year. And the struggle is just about beginning to pay off in a scheme that could benefit hundreds of tribal families; the Kerala government is giving away surplus land to landless tribals. Four hundred tribals in Idukki, Kerala's largest district, have been promised between one and five acres of land per family. But that is just the beginning. For in the last 100 years, over a million acres of land are believed to have been grabbed from Kerala's tribal population. The government believes the free land will enable the tribals to sustain themselves instead of relying on state support. However, to benefit its nearly

50,000 landless tribal families, Kerala needs over 100,000 acres of surplus land -- which it says it doesn't have (Dr. Haseena V.A, 2014).

### **ADIVASIS LAND ALIENATION AND LAWS IN KERALA**

Our constitution provides several rights to the Adivasis. The constitution took into consideration that there existed clearly vulnerable groups who were subjected to systematic exploitation. The establishment of an egalitarian social order with equity for all sections of the society, free from any form of discrimination what's ever, on the grounds of religion, race, sex or place of birth was the stated goal for our nation. Therefore, equity for weaker sections of society was the moving spirit of the constitution. Considering the existence of iniquitous forces embedded in the socio-economic and political system, specific safeguards in the favour of some communities were included in the constitution to hold officials responsible to act in their favour in specific terms. Members of the Schedule Caste and Scheduled Tribes are two such categories. A clear policy of positive discrimination was to be perusal. Wherever necessary specific provisions were to be made in the constitution. Many of the social rights of Tribals, Dalits and other Indigenous people are embraced in our constitution as a part of fundamental rights. Though the state of Kerala is considered as a progressive state, the fundamental rights of the resource-dependent communities have never been addressed by the political society.

### **PROVISIONS IN ARTICLE 341 & 342**

Articles 341 and 342 of the constitution provides for the classification of certain sections of the people as STs and SCs for the specific purpose of providing special provisions and safeguarded them. This clearly is based on categorical recognition of a historical fact that these sections are subject to the worst kinds of deprivation, that they

need to be protected and promoted and that it was the responsibility of the state to undertake the task. It was also a fact that the Adivasi were distinct and they resent changes being imposed upon them. Under article 341, the President of India has been given the responsibility to specify through public notification in consultation with the Governor of respective states and Union Territories the castes, races or tribes or parts of a group within castes, races or tribes. Such notified castes or tribes or parts then for the purpose of the constitution, would be deemed to be a scheduled caste or tribe as the case may be for connected state or union territories. Once such a list has been promulgated, any changes can be made only by the parliament according to clause (2) of article 341 and 342.

In addition, article 342 defines tribe as an endogamous group with an ethnic identity who have retained their traditional cultural identity. They have a distinctive language, a dialect of their own. They are economically backward and live in seclusion governed by their own social norms. They have a self-contained economy. The ST and SC list that was notified was amended through acts of parliament in 1956 and 1976. Even though these changes were made as per provisions in the law, non-Adivasis have been included in the list. The state is duty bound to enlist the Indigenous people to give them constitutional protection but ever after the controversies related to the listing of Schedule Tribes of Veda still remain unsettled (C.R. Bijoy, 2008, Vol.51, No. 12).

#### **FIFTH & SIXTH SCHEDULE**

Article 244(1) provides for the fifth schedule which may be made applicable to any state other than those areas in North East India, where a separate schedule namely the sixth schedule applies. According to para 4 of schedule, each state having scheduled areas should constitute a tribal Advisory council, consisting of more than 20 members

whom  $\frac{3}{4}$  should be tribal MLAs for the state. TAC can also be established in states having STs even though they may not have scheduled as per Amendment introduced in 1976. In addition to 8 states having scheduled areas, 2 other states without scheduled areas namely West Bengal and Tamil Nadu have established TACs. The duty of TACs is to advise on matters pertaining to the welfare and advancement of STs in the state. The TACs are expected to meet at least twice a year.

The fifth schedule envisaged the self-rule of Adivasis. Under the fifth schedule the Governors of the state were given unlimited powers. The governor may by public notification direct that any particular act of the parliament of the state shall not apply to the fifth schedule areas or amend a law enacted by the parliament. The governor is also empowered to frame new laws and make regulations in consultation with the TACs. The schedule was ensuring that tribal areas brought under it function as a sub-system with the scope to promote the self-governing of communities and evolving this system as dictated by the social and economic situation with the well-being of Adivasis as prime consideration.

In 1972 a review of the application of the fifth schedule was made. In 1976 the constitution was amended empowering the president to extend the schedule areas. The resolution of the parliament on the occasion of the amendment envisaged that in order to intensify 'tribal development' all areas which are currently not classified as scheduled areas but having more than 50% of ST concentration could be brought under it. Extension of present schedule areas bringing all other tribal areas under the fifth schedule and were the tribal areas where the tribal areas are presently fragmented., to recognize these areas so to make them compact. This process of extension ground to a halt in 1978 itself leaving the state of West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala untouched and vast areas in other states left uncovered (C. R. Bijoy, 2008).

## **SIXTH SCHEDULE**

Article 244 (2) of the constitution provides for the sixth schedule which applies for the administration of the Tribal areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Para 20 of the scheme provides a list of tribal areas covered by this schedule in three parts. There shall be a district council for each autonomous district consisting of not more than 30 members of whom not more than 4 persons shall be nominated by the Governor and the rest shall be elected from There are different STs in the autonomous district. The Governor may by public notification divide areas into autonomous regions and they shall separate regional councils for each area. The ADC, a regional council, may make rules for approval of the governor regarding formation of subordinates, local council and conduct of their functions and on matters of administration of the district council and regional council are empowered to make laws and regulations. Further, this tribal group has been vehemently demanding the inclusion of tribal areas under the fifth schedule since 1994 (C.R Bijoy, 2008).

## **DECENTRALIZATION IN KERALA V/S PESA 1996**

Kerala is considered as the first state in the Indian union, where decentralization through Panchayati raj is implemented. But the specific form of Panchayati Raj governance in the tribal areas has not yet been properly addressed in Kerala. A radical transformation in the governance especially at the village level in the scheduled areas was affected in 1996 with the enactment of the Provision of Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act. It came into effect on 24/12/1996. The community at village level managing its affairs in accordance with its customs and traditions is now fundamental in the governance of scheduled areas. The competence of Gram Sabha has

been acknowledged in safeguarding and preserving the community resource, which in the context of scheduled areas covers all-natural resources including land, water, and forests and minerals. Through the PESA Act 1996 the primary unit of the gram Sabha envisaged in the act is incorporated in the Forest Right Act. The PESA act has not yet been applied in Kerala. Since the Nilpusamaram was launched by the tribals in 2014 the state government of Kerala submitted a proposal before the central government to implement the act (C.R.Bijoy, 2003).

### **NEGATION OF INTERNATIONAL COVENANT**

Further the democratic governments kept silent over the constitutional safeguards in Kerala. Political parties were lenient in protecting the rights of migrants and also new political parties representing them. Hence democratic government kept silent over the provisions of article 244 of constitution, and overlooked the Debar commission that recommended the restoration of alienated land of Tribes. In administrative reforms they never contained the spirit of ILO Convention and the UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous people (convention 107: Convention concerning the protection and integration of Indigenous and other Tribal and Semi Tribal populations in independent countries, convention 167: concerning Indigenous and Tribal peoples in independent countries).

The Government of Kerala neither invoked the provisions of the Kerala Private Forest Act of 1971 for assigning or conferring forest land/forest rights of Adivasis. Instead, the govt of Kerala repealed the only law to restore the alienated land of tribes -the Kerala schedule tribes (restriction on transfer of land restoration of alienated land) Act and enacted another law to bestow alternate land for tribes during the year 1999. The provisions of this act was also not implemented. The lots that were enacted for Tribals



uphold the basic principles of the International Covenants. By not implementing the laws ensuring the protection of Tribals, the government of Kerala is violating the International Covenants (C.R.Bijoy, 2003).

### **FAILURE OF LAND REFORM**

Until Independence and the formation of the state Kerala, the Adivasi who lived in the Malabar area did not receive much attention from the authorities. Among the other reasons, the powerful non-Dalit, non- Adivasis who controlled the plantations in this area were successfully in bargaining with colonial administration for better provision to maintain their legal and economic status, suppressing the needs of the local population. With the entry of the East India Company and creation of a huge number of cash crop plantations, Adivasis, especially those belonging to the Paniya, Adiya, and Kattunaikka communities, were completely evicted from these forest areas of Malabar. With the steady growth in timber business and massive deforestation for decades, a good majority of the Adivasi community became tenants in paddy fields of cash crop plantations. The Paniya and Adiya community suffered the most through slavery and constant displacement since they never owned land and had to work for the settlers. The emerging issue of a large number of landless Adivasis from the northern part of the state, especially from Palakkad, Wayanad, and Kannur and desperate for their rehabilitation has to be seen in the light of experience.

### **IMPLEMENTATION OF LAND REFORM ACT OF KERALA**

The tenancy reform act passed in 1970, specifically meant for providing land to landless, it benefited a few but a large majority were allotted only a few cents in the so-called colonies designed for them. Even with the creation of the One lakh colony, quite a few Dalit-Adivasis and fish workers were still left out systematic marginalization that

has only become aggravated in current times. Whether from a class perspective or from a community identity perspective, it is the failure of a democratic state. A good majority of the Dalits and Adivasis remain fully landless. There is an increasing number of people living in colonies. It is reported that a total number of 36,000 Dalit and Adivasi families are residing in colonies. Lakhs more are landless. Adivasis have lost their traditional forest abodes since the colonial invasion. The forest department systematically converted the Adivasis into habitats called colonies. Expansion of plantations and post-colonial development like construction of huge dams /irrigation projects also pushed the Adivasis into colonies. Further, the social forester's organized migration from low lands did the same thing to these resource-dependent communities. Though the safeguards like Tribal autonomy are clearly ensured in the constitution, the democratic society in Kerala, including our legislature, is more lenient to the cattiest approach, putting the tribals into caste colon.

### **GENESIS OF MUTHANGA STRUGGLES**

Movements for the Restoration of Unauthorized Land and Forest Rights The 1990s were an important period for the tribal communities in Kerala. Under the leadership of community groups and non-governmental organizations, a number of organizations launched a rights campaign for the tribes. In Wayanad, a group of NGOs and social activists called "South Indian Adivasi Sangam" was started during that period of which C. K Janu was the chairperson of that sangamam. Several questions of tribes in south India including tribal autonomy and restoration of alienated land were raised in that collective In 1970, legislation was passed in Kerala relating to land reform. There was no legislation to protect the autonomy of the adivasis and their land. The Dhobar Commission, appointed by the Central Government in 1960, recommended the

restoration of unclaimed tribal land. In view of the Central directive, the Kerala Legislative Assembly unanimously passed a law for the restoration of unclaimed tribal lands from 1960 onwards. This Act is known as the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Control over Transfer and Restoration of Tribal Land) Act, 1975 (KST Act for short, 1975).

Rules were framed in the year 1986. Through the tribes were not aware of the act, more than 8,000 applications were registered by them. It was assessed that based on the act the government of Kerala was bound to restore more than 10,000 hectares of the land. Opposition parties have stated they will not run in the byelections, but will seek redressal of their grievances. Meanwhile, tribal organizations and civil rights groups began agitation to reclaim the unclaimed tribal land. The controversy continued throughout that decade. Ruling and opposition leaders took part in the agitation, regardless of party affiliation. But the central government rejected the proposal. Towards the end of the decade, the Left-led government of Kerala repealed the 1975 Act and introduced another amendment in the Assembly. The Kerala Legislative Assembly unanimously approved the bill. CPM member Smt. Gauri Amma disagreed with the bill.

The Kerala High Court then declared the bill unconstitutional. However, the Kerala government approved the bill in the same year. The case has been pending for over a decade. The Supreme Court partially approved the 1999 Amendment Act of the Government of Kerala. Provision was made to provide alternative land to the adivasis who had lost their traditional habitat and agricultural land, but till date the government of Kerala had not made any concert effort either for restoring the land or for giving alternate land. Tribals all over India have a long history of freedom struggle. They fought against the Aryans and the colonial rulers to protect their land and autonomy.

The constitutional provisions regarding tribal autonomy are the result of their defensive struggle. In Kerala too, the community along with Pazhassi Raja fought against the British Raj. Although there is no recorded history, many tribes such as Paniya, Muthuvan, Mannan and Mala Arayar resisted the alien forces to protect their communal rights. Many communities like the Nairs, Ezhava and Pulaya started consolidating civil society in Kerala in the nineteenth century. But it was not easy for the tribal communities to unite as one common nationality as they were isolated in the forest and divided into different communities. Therefore, they were not considered as a pressure group in Kerala politics. They were not represented in the legislature. But in the 1980s, tribal organizations and members of civil society began to speak out on behalf of the adivasis.

Tribal rights since the early 1990s have been addressed by tribal organizations for land reform and criticized by social activists. Constitutional protection, including legal protection for the protection of land and culture and the restoration of unclaimed land, were two important questions that arose in the early 1990s. In the early 90s, a movement for the restoration of tribal alienated land emerged throughout Kerala. At the beginning of that decade, C.K. Janu rose to become a tribal leader. Many struggles took place in Kerala under the leadership of CK. Janu, Ambukkuthi, Kolikampally, Panavalli, and Chingeri struggles. The main feature of the 18 struggles was the participation of women.

### **LAND STRUGGLE AND RESTORATION**

During that decade, many tribal organizations and civil society groups came forward to restore the unclaimed tribal land. Immediately after the 'Adivasi Sangam', C.K. Janu emerged as the youth leader of the adivasis. Before becoming active in organizing

tribals, she was involved in a literacy campaign with the support of some NGOs, but by the end of 1992 she was organizing tribal women and started several land grabbing movements in Wayanad district. In 1993, she entered the reserved forest land at Ambukuthi near Mananthavady. Hundreds of landless tribals took part in the agitation. The agitation was started by a platform called 'Adivasi Vikasana Pravarthana Samithi'. The adivasis were imprisoned and cases were filed against them. Soon they started another land grab movement in Kolukkumalai. In 1994, C.K. Janu organized the adivasis and carried out a satyagraha agitation for the adivasis on the Chingeri farm. She was arrested and jailed for several days.

In 1995, they started another Grab Movement in the Panavally surplus land. Meanwhile, a state-wide forum called 'Adivasi Coordinating Committee' was organized to restore unclaimed tribal land. The agitation came to a standstill after 1999 when the issue of restoration of unclaimed land came up for consideration by the Supreme Court. Another phase of land struggle started in Kannur district in the same decade. The community built in Kannur district was attacked by landowners and evicted from their habitat. The people's movement was organized until the adivasis were rehabilitated. Kannur district was not considered a tribal district. With C.K. Janu and activist M. Geethanandan were also present, soon another broad platform called 'Adivasi Dalit Samara Samiti' was organized. The strike committee expanded the strike across Kerala. In 1999, a cultural meeting was held in Kundala (Idukki) and a hunger strike was held in Thodupuzha to restore the Kundala tribal land. The land restoration agitation at Thoovaipathy in Sholayur in 2000 and the Panavally land protection yajna against the government were some of the notable struggles.

## **REFUGEE CAMP**

During the last two years (1990-2000) 157 tribes in Kerala died due to starvation. This is not the first such death in Kerala. Ministers and officials said the cause of death was drinking sewage as usual. On August 29, 2001, hundreds of adivasis from Kannur and Wayanad came to CK. Janu and M. Geethanandan marched to the state capital, Thiruvananthapuram, and set up refugee camps in front of the CM's residence and secretariat. The movement received considerable popular support from civil society. The struggle continued for 48 days.

During this period hundreds of Adivasis came from different parts of Kerala and joined the struggle. It was a nonviolent struggle. The adivasis staged a satyagraha in front of the CM's residence and secretariat. They built a hut in front of the Secretariat. They sang and danced. They exposed the immoral nature of the state which exposed its sincere indifference to the problems of the state towards the tribal issues. While the dying adivasis were holding a refugee camp called the "Kutil Kettal Samaram", police and authorities made several attempts to demolish the hut built by the adivasis. Finally, 48 days later, on October 16, 2001, the government was forced to end the strike. The state of Kerala, agreed to the following:

- Resettle all landless tribes in Kerala
- Financial support mechanisms will be provided for resettled tribes
- Adivasi "ooru kuttam" shall be taken into confidence
- Considering the preponderance of Adivasis, the government of Kerala will place a request before the union government invoked the provisions of the Private Forest Act, 1971 to divert vested Forest for the assignment to the landless.
- Tribal habitation will be bought under the Vth schedule of the constitution.

- Resettlement of tribals will be implemented in a Mission Mode.

During the 48 days of the agitation, various tribal communities gathered around the federal platform of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha. On March 2, the Antony government issued leases to 243 families in Marayoor (2.50 in Kundala, 160 families (5 acres), 60 families in Chavassery Kannur (1 acre 10 cents) and 740 plots in Chinnakanal-Idukki. Opposition parties, such as the CPIM opposed the project from outside. A tribal court was also held at Mananthavady to symbolically prosecute the bureaucratic behavior of the forest department. A state wide campaign was launched to establish land rights and launch a land grab movement. Adivasis and government of Kerala compelled the AGMS to launch another phase of land agitation, thus leading to Muthanga struggle.

### **MUTHANGA STRUGGLE**

It is yet to be ascertained what happened in Muthanga as part of the restoration of tribal self-government. The Muthanga agitation and its aftermath were reported in popular journals and newspapers in early 2003 for three consecutive months. No one has done further investigation to find out the exact details of what happened in Muthanga. The decades 1990-2010 witnessed the mass participation of the adivasis in restoring their lost land and rehabilitating the adivasis. The constant struggles for land restoration have led to numerous land grab moves since the beginning of that decade. The adivasis challenged the immorality of the 'state' in the mass movements of the adivasis, especially in the refugee camp in front of the Secretariat. The result was the upliftment of thousands of adivasis across Kerala, which culminated in an agreement, which the State promised to rehabilitate all landless tribals in Kerala with effect from 1.1.2002. A Tribal Resettlement and Development Mission (TRDM) was formed and rehabilitation

was envisaged as part of the Tribal Sub Plan of Kerala. In essence it was the political manifestation of a social movement. The rehabilitation program was started and the concept of "gram sabha" or "village community" was revived in the community. Achieving the visibility of the adivasis provoked the ruling class. They refused to recognize the constitutional rights of adivasis. This prompted the adivasis to return to their traditional exile center, Muthanga. Tribal groups led by the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha started the agitation. They made preparations for rehabilitation in various parts of Kerala. On January 2, 2003, hundreds of Adivasis gathered at Thiruvannur Colony in Wayanad district. About 2000 people gathered. The people are from different panchayats like Thirunelli, Mananthavady, Panamaram, Nadavayal, Noolpuzha, Kottathara, Pulpally and Mullankolli: Most of them are from different forest areas of Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary.

On the morning of January 3, 2003, people entered the Muthanga Range of the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. Although considered a wildlife sanctuary, the Muthanga Range was completely deforested. Biodiversity in this range has been completely wiped out for the birch eucalyptus garden. The forest department itself has completely destroyed the environment. Officials have turned the wildlife sanctuary into a tourist destination. The masses of the tribes were rapidly uniting with their homeland. About 800 families lived in three separate settlements at Muthanga: Ambukuthi, Thakara Padi and Ponkuzhi. Although the adivasis came to Muthanga from different panchayats in Wayanad, they organized into 28 gram sabhas (villages) and started farming and environmental rehabilitation.

The influx of tribals into the Muthanga range itself was a major blow to the commercial and corporate interests of the ruling class. The Muthanga range was enlisted for eco-



tourism by the Forest and Industry Department of Kerala in the First Global Investment Meet 2001. The right assertion of Tribals provoked the politicians. Immediately after the culmination of GIM-2001, the Government of Kerala took a decision to evict the tribals.

On February 17, 2003, a wildfire broke out in the newly established tribal settlements in Muthanga. Acres of dry grassland and eucalyptus orchards were destroyed by the fire. The adivasis alleged that the fire was the result of a conspiracy by the authorities. The adivasis detained some officers and men they suspected of having seen at the scene of the fire. Detention provoked officials and political parties. They mobilized the locals and organized hartals to evict the adivasis. On February 19, 2003, hundreds of policemen, rangers and selected locals entered Muthanga. Police opened fire on the tribals. Their huts were set on fire. Everything in the possession of the adivasis was burnt. Many, including children, were brutally abused. Hundreds of women and children were imprisoned. There was an organized racist attack on the adivasis in Wayanad. In addition, police began arresting tribal activists in all districts. In Muthanga, a tribal named Jogi was shot dead and a policeman was killed. The brutal arrest of Adivasis by the then Congress led Government, continued for days, until public opinion surfaced in the civil society against the brutality of the government. Under the hue and cry of the violations of human rights and related issues, the real politics of the Muthanga struggle was least discussed. The adivasis entered the Muthanga range to question the legitimate claim to forest land.

The government had agreed to grant the forest land under the provisions of the Westing and Assignment Act. In addition, the activists organized 28 villages in Muthanga and started several environmental rehabilitation projects along with agriculture. It also took

over schools for children, health activities, and the anti-alcohol campaign in accordance with the PESA Act. Women's participation in community life, land/farm ownership and maintenance was encouraged. The movement focused mainly on developing the model of self-governance and adopting the provisions of the PESA Act 1996. The Act recognizes the traditional rights of the Adivasi as Gram Sabha in dealing with the affairs of the community. The adivasis lived peacefully in the forest. But the state has charged hundreds of women, children and the elderly with numerous crimes and jailed them for months. Twelve cases were registered against the tribals at a cost of crores of rupees and a charge sheet was prepared against them. More than 20 people involved in the case have died. An year later, in 2004, following the peaceful struggle of the adivasis, the Government of Kerala announced a rehabilitation package for the adivasis. The government began to answer PESA's question. Subsequently, the Forest Rights of the Adivasis were approved by Parliament in the form of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.

**CHAPTER 3-**  
**RESEARCH**  
**METHODOLOGY**

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

This chapter encompasses the methodology of the research. It discusses various aspects of the research. It deals with the statement of the problem behind the research which points out the significance of the study. The research objectives, both general and specific are mentioned here. The different concepts involved in this study have been defined theoretically as well as operationally. The inclusion as well as exclusion criteria of the sample of the universe is clearly defined. The tool used and the method employed for data collection have been mentioned in this chapter. The researcher has also stated the universe of the study, sampling procedure and sample size.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Tribals or the indigenous people are so called because they have been the original inhabitants of the area since the time immemorial. They live in harmony with the environment leading a symbiotic relationship with the nature. However, since the period of British invasion in India, the tribals have been replaced from their own habitats because of the profit motives of the governments during that time. This practice continued for years and in Kerala currently a large number of tribal communities are landless (Najib, 2022).

The struggles to regain lands and to ensure land rights of the tribal people had been in the pages of history. Europeans described the acquired lands as being ‘waste lands or deserts or uninhabited or unoccupied terrains’ as the tribals were not even considered as human beings. The subaltern groups of Dalits (the down-trodden group in the caste hierarchy in India) and Adivasis (the indigenous or aboriginal communities of India) have lost their lands due to illegal encroachments, land seizing, emergence of plantations and various government developmental projects. Struggles for rights over

land have occurred throughout the world at different periods of time. Among these movements, the struggles of tribal people become particularly relevant as they are considered to be the true children of soil (Geethanandan, 2013).

The native tribal population of India has been one of the most underprivileged sections of the society from the precolonial era and continues to be even so after 72 years of Indian Independence. Even though they are assorted as Scheduled tribes and are granted reservations according to Indian constitution, injustice continues to be served out to the actual owners of land. Tribals fall prey to big corporates or MNCs who betray them by robbing their land (Najib, 2022).

Aralam in Kannur is a typical example. This tribal resettlement area epitomizes the gross injustice done to the tribals as a large chunk of the farm is now under private ownership. The Adivasis are forced to inhabit the portion where there is acute shortage of drinking water and other basic amenities. As per the general statistics, the Adivasis in Kerala constitute just one percentage of the entire population and inhabit in the mountains of the Western Ghats. Thrust aside by socioeconomic factors, they have never been the real recipients of the governmental schemes executed to reduce their impoverishment (Pillai, 2010). In fact, they were bereaved of their traditional rights over their natural resources and conventional knowledge, resulting in several struggles for land across the time. The prominent Adivasi land struggles at Kannur (1999), Muthanga (2003), Aralam (2004), Chengara (2007), Arippa (2012), Perim chamkutty (2012), Pooyamkutty (2018) and Thovarimala (2019) were attempts to claim their promised lands to live in peace and harmony.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Habitually, a harmonious relationship was maintained by the tribal communities with their land, both cultivated and forest plantations, which was indeed an integral part of their lives. Large number of these resources were inseparable to their authentic way of living and thriving. Their genuine survival is through the symbiotic relationship with their lands and even now they haven't turned away from this eco-centric culture which is absolutely unique. The crisis of their peculiar culture is visible by the random construction of Adivasi colonies as a part of side-lining and disenfranchisement. The primal symbol of power is the land of a territory. The problems of Adivasis cannot be resolved unless and until their disputed issues of the land ownership is tackled effectively. Whereas, for these people, the resources that they collect from the land were their sole revenue and therefore they maintained a lifelong blood-relation with their land. Hence, they cannot survive without their lands. Unfortunately, individuals with land ownership only can play a dynamic and greater role in the socio-political spheres of a society. So, the marginalized sections are tactically distanced from all kinds of political and bureaucratic institutions of power (Najib, 2022).

C.K Janu fights even now for the redistribution of land to the 3.5 lakhs of landless people in Kerala. Muthanga agitation was a major turning point as it engendered political marshalling among the tribal people for their rights. She had to face more than 75 false cases filed against her of which most of them have been dismissed later. Janu thoroughly believes in the life of ordinary tribal people even though she lacks any revolutionary manifesto or guiding philosophy of her own. The lack of education hardly ever stood in her glorious combats as an obstacle once she has determined to fight for the rights of her people as land becomes inextricable to them (Najib, 2022).

The landless tribals share with immense pain about the forced displacement of tribal folks from their ancestral homes towards the crowded colonies for the sake of rehabilitation causes mental distress for these people. As every community has its own customs and rituals, which people are forced to give up when they get uprooted and displaced. The so-called developmental projects, employment schemes and rehabilitation facilities by governments are not sufficient to protect the interests or livelihood of these tribal communities. For those people who are engaged in land encroachment activities and acquisition of forest lands, they contemplate the land as a space to conquer, or the land as a commodity. The land in the gaze of the colonizers fails to account for the mythical vista of the land as a sacred and vital space in the Aboriginal life. In the case of Kerala, some of the landless people were taken to colonies and flats in the name of rehabilitation where they could not survive. The lives of the Adivasi women are often taken for granted in Kerala. The upsurge in the starvation deaths and suicides due to huge debts and liabilities resulted in Aripipa, Muthanga and Chengara protests. The impractical implementation of the Kerala Land Reformation Act of 1957 was the reason behind all these disastrous results (Pillai, 2010).

Men were caught up in the vicious circle constituted by the money lenders and blade mafias and were exploited brutally. As the Adivasis are landless, they cannot have houses, survey numbers, ration-cards, rationing food or electricity. The residents are denied all access to basic facilities and are constrained to a pitiable existence and abominable conditions.

The researcher found that the real and actual facets of the Muthanga agitation have never been made clear to the people in the society. Therefore, this study tries to bring out the truth and the actual experiences of the Muthanga agitation leaders and their

experiences during the struggle so as to convey to the larger public that they are not the anti-socials which they have been coined by the media and state, however, their protest is against the injustice they have faced in all these years.

**OBJECTIVE:**

To understand about the experiences of the leaders during the Muthanga land struggle.

**SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES:**

- To learn about the problems faced by the tribals that has led to the land struggle.
- To record the testimonials of Muthanga protesters.

**THEORETICAL DEFINITION OF LAND STRUGGLE**

**Land struggle:** refers to the protests by the actual inhabitants of a particular geographical area for their own land which has been seized by other parties.

**OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF LAND STRUGGLE**

**Land struggle:** tribal people in the Muthanga protested against the denial of their own land rights which account for their struggle for land.

**THEORETICAL DEFINITION OF EXPERIENCES**

**Experiences:** is the practical knowledge, skill, or practice derived from direct observation of or participation in events or in a particular activity.

**OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF EXPERIENCES**

**Experiences:** what the tribal people had gone through during the time of the Muthanga agitation.



## **THEORETICAL DEFINITION OF AGITATION**

**Agitation:** the arousing of public concern about an issue and pressing for action on it.

## **OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF AGITATION**

**Agitation:** the inhabitants protest against the denial of their own land.

## **THEORETICAL DEFINITION OF TRIBE**

**Tribe:** any collection of pre-literate local group that occupies a common general territory speaks a common language and practices a common culture as a tribe- Gillan & Gillan.

## **OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TRIBE**

**Tribe:** tribe means the leaders who are from the Muthanga who led the agitation in 2003

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The researcher has adopted the narrative research design for carrying out the research. Narrative research design or oral history is employed as a research design when there is a need for recording the people's experiences.

Oral history is a process of obtaining, recording, presenting and interpreting historical or current information, based upon personal experiences and opinions of some members of a study group or unit. These opinions or experiences could be based upon eye-witness evidence or information passed on from other sources such as older people, ancestors, folklore, stories. According to Ritchie (2003: 19), 'Memory is the core of oral history, from which meaning can be extracted and preserved. Simply put, oral history collects

memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews.' According to Burns (1997: 368), 'these are usually first-person narratives that the researcher collects using extensive interviewing of a single individual'.

**SAMPLING:** Purposive sampling

Purposive sampling is a sampling technique in which the researcher uses his or her own judgement to select members of the population to take part in the study. It is also referred to as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling.

The non-probability sampling technique known as "purposeful sampling" is used when the researcher makes the decisions about which items to include in the sample. Researchers frequently think that by using excellent judgement and obtaining a representative sample, they may save time and money.

When just a small number of persons can serve as primary data sources because of the nature of the research design and its aims and objectives, the purposive sampling method, on the other hand, may show to be beneficial. For instance, the researcher may use his or her own discretion to select senior level managers who could participate in in-depth interviews for a study analysing the effects of personal tragedy, such as a family death, on senior level managers' performance. Personal judgement must be employed in purposive sampling to select cases that contribute to the resolution of research issues or goals.

The researcher has decided to do the purposive sampling because the objective is to understand about the experiences of the main leaders during the Muthanga struggle. However, since many of the leaders of that time have aged and some passed away, the

researcher has tried to include the people who gave major contributions to the struggle have been tried to be included in this study.

**METHOD USED:** In depth interview

An in-depth interview is a special kind of interview with a person that seeks to elicit specific information beyond the questions and answers given up front. Because of this, these interviews are frequently fairly lengthy and may include several interviews with the same individual. An unstructured or semi-structured technique is generally employed because there is a lot of focus on in-depth responses.

**TOOL:** Interview Guide

An interview guide is just a list of the broad subjects you intend to discuss in the interview and the broad questions you hope to be asked in relation to each subject. To make it simple to refer to and ensure that we aren't going too low level, we often keep the guide to one page. Making a guide like this might help you organise and focus your questions and lines of thought.

**INCLUSION CRITERIA**

- The tribal leaders or their family members who were part of the Muthanga Struggle, Wayanad.

**EXCLUSION CRITERIA**

- The tribals other than the ones who are not leaders and who didn't participate in the Muthanga struggle have been excluded.

**UNIVERSE**

The tribals who were part of the Muthanga Agitation.

**SAMPLE**

4 leaders of the agitation who led the struggle.

**CHAPTER 4-**  
**CLASSIFIED**  
**NARRATIVES**

Narratives are useful methods of analysis used in interpreting incidents of importance in a storied form. It is assumed that narrative methods help people to organize and make sense of their lives, experiences and their storied accounts are vital, and purposeful. Different approaches to narrative analysis are categorized on the basis of whether they focus on the narrative content or structure, with the thematic version interrogating what a story is about.

According to Kohler Riessman (2008), one could also add the dialogic/performance narrative analysis, which focuses on the context and view of narratives as being multi voiced and co constructed.

Therefore, here the researcher was able to talk to 4 of the leaders who were actively involved in the Muthanga Agitation and they openly shared with the researcher the actual problems faced by the tribal community and why land is important for the very sustenance of the tribal community. The major aspects discussed by the different narrators or the respondents include the culmination of the Muthanga Struggle, the political ecology of land and how landlessness and land alienation has contributed to the social stratification and discrimination, underdevelopment of the tribal communities in the state of Kerala. The method used is not in a structured manner and hence the thoughts and reflections of the respondents have been narrated in the best way possible. The thoughts of these respondents on the legislations such as PESA Act and FRA has also been recorded in the study.

## **Narrative 1**

**Name: Balan**

**Age: 45**

**Place: Manmadanpaaly**

**Date: 25<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

Balan has been a young and dynamic activist during the Muthanga struggle and he was one amongst those who were impacted most with the Muthanga incident. He lost his 3-year-old daughter during the police attack and got her only after 3 days as she was lost inside deep forest. He was brutally injured by the police for being an active leader of the struggle. Later on, the trauma took years and years to subside. He was elected as the Panchayat Member of Kallur panchayat in 2017 and worked relentlessly for the welfare of the tribal community in his panchayat. He is also a writer who has this rigour to empower the readers with his powerful words and way of speech.

### **MUTHANGA: AN UNFORGETTABLE MEMORY**

When the researcher enquired about the impact and history of Muthanga struggle, he says that..

“The actual number of participants there is not known to us because we usually don’t have the habit of recording this manually. Since time immemorial our history and our legacy have been passed on through word of mouth. What we know is about what’s written here in the records of the police or mainstream society. We only know about the certain incidents that took place during that time because we experienced them. In fact, recently we had this doubt popping up in our mind whether the struggle happened

in 2003 or 2013. The biggest failure of the Muthanga struggle is that we don't have written records of the same within our tribal communities. We have this history of passing knowledge through word of mouth. The struggle was a victory in many aspects but since it's not written down in the history, it will die with the participants and leaders itself. Some people are still alive and when people come as part of their studies, people including me can share our experiences. But once we are dead, our history, legacy and this struggle would also be gone with us. Every time I narrate my experiences, I feel like I'm reliving those memories again and again. To my knowledge, in my younger age I haven't witnessed any kind of land struggles. Because of that incident, we have seen such a large number of police officers only in movies and we haven't witnessed such a scene till that date. And this was an unforgettable memory for me. Because, thoughts of police and khaki uniform instills a feeling of fear and hatred in my mind but that day I wasn't afraid of anyone who stood in front of me. I stood there bravely without even fearing my death; because of which I got injured a lot and even I witnessed so many self-proclaimed leaders running away from the tantrums of police. I wasn't afraid and didn't run away and stood to fight for us only because of a single reason: I used to give speeches during that time, and one thing I said during one of those speeches was, only because Gandhiji stood and fought in spite of the many difficulties he had to face, we are enjoying freedom today. Similarly, I believe it is my duty to fight for my people and their progress. I had this inner fear when I saw the police officers but I stood up for my own words. Because I stood up there, I had many things to lose including my family, my parents, my health etc. I didn't think of any of those people, instead the only thought that came to my mind is even though I don't live a life, I'm ready to sacrifice it for my tribes. That was the only thought in my mind, I could have died back then but it never bothered me. I am alive today only because of God's grace and nothing else



because that time I lost so much blood from my body since I was attacked by the police officers and I was not even able to have food because there was no blood in my body. When I was taken to the hospital in an ambulance from Bathery to Medical College, 2 police officers escorted me and one of the police officers squeezed lemon juice into my mouth only because of which my life was sustained. He was a very good police officer and even now I remember him with a grateful heart. There are good officers even now I believe. Not all police officers are cruel hearted. While the rest of the people started running away with their kids and wives and families, what I did is stand there and fight for our rights, and I feel that people these days are losing that zealous spirit to work hard for something that they have been craving for a long time. But I had this spirit back then and thank God I didn't die that time.

### **THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF LAND**

I had gone there to get land which is a dream come true, but even now, after 19-20 years, our situation is the same: landless tribals, people have been alienated from our own land. But that time, the government had given us some land at Papplassery for all the Muthanga agitators. But in the current situation, these same people are conducting strikes in the Mariyanad estate. So, looking into the history, our grandparents (*uthappan* and *uthamma*) came up here and they said that these hills and villages belong to them. But then in today's context, people can see these hills, yet none of the tribes are owners of these. But during that time, it was cleared by them and now they have lost it and now the situation is such that we have to fight for our own land. Now we are at the mercy of the mainstream section to have a few cents of land and we have to fight and get injured for the same. The Adivasi community here is even now getting exploited. Even the political parties have their own agendas and they have different sub groups for them as

well including, Adivasi Congress, Dalit Morcha, Dalit League. But none of them speak for tribals and if anyone raises their voice against the injustice faced by the tribals, they will be silenced. It is complete politics that is going on here and they come here only to get votes. They seek votes and do nothing for the welfare of our community. No political party actually seeks to solve the problems faced by the tribals in Kerala. I was the panchayat member for 5 years and I am an active member of AKS. But none of these people let us speak up for ourselves. That is my experience in politics. There are many limitations and they restrict us from doing that. I have this habit of speaking directly on people's faces and because of which people do not actually like me. And that has actually pulled me down in my political career. People are afraid and they let us down with fear and contempt.

The government during that time had actually declared 1 acre land for the Muthanga agitators but even now it has not been implemented and now you could see the Mariyanad estate land struggle is going on under the leadership of Geethanandan. You see political parties in Kerala are really afraid of the tribal upliftment and emergence of tribal leaders. Because they fear that once we are uplifted, they won't be having our voter base. They want us to remain in the same condition that we are in right now. And that's really visible from the Muthanga struggle itself because no party thought of standing for us or supporting us, but they all fought against us amongst the police officers. They think that if we establish a party under CK or Geethanandan, they would lose their control over us. Politics we have here is not at all in any aspects leading to the development of the community members. Because they fear tribal leaderships and even now there are these people under the AKS who are fighting for the land which is already given to the Muthanga struggle participants. The people fighting for it are

actually tribal members only, but they are trying to please their party leaders and coordinators.

### **THE UBUNTU FEELING AND MUTHANGA**

The reason why I joined in the struggle is that the issue of landlessness or land alienation is not at all a trivial matter. We have lost our land which belonged to our ancestors for ages and ages. So, we want it. It's now that people in our community have a shelter to protect themselves from anything. People look at us with contempt and ask us "you don't even have a proper toilet or washroom to hide your respect and dignity, then how dare you speak in front of us like this? All this land has been cleared by our great grandfathers. There is this place called Thelampatta, they had to run away from there because of the contraction of smallpox. But now when it comes to our family, my wife and 4 children, even now we don't have a land to live in; that's the main reason why I participated in the Muthanga struggle. But it's true that we didn't check whether Muthanga was a reserved forest or even a place where we can't conduct our protest. Maybe people are interpreting in a negative way since it is a reserved forest, they might be asking, was there any need to go there and call a protest? But we didn't think of all that because the only thought we had in our mind was that our community deserves and needs land; and of course, we can't launch a protest which already belongs to some people. So, we chose Muthanga because it was not pre owned by anyone. More than the agricultural side, the place is connected with the spirituality of our people and community. You might know, the '*kaavukal*', are located within the forests of all the tribal communities. And sometimes in the lands owned by general people. And the question that arises here is how did they (the general people) occupy land which has '*kaavukal*'? But no one dares to ask this. So, it is clear that it was actually owned by

the tribals but when migration happened from low plains to hilly areas, the tribals were alienated from their own land because of which now the mainstream section possesses the land which has the tribal *kaavukal*. And because people are afraid of spirits, tribals are even now allowed to enter their land and do the necessary ceremonies for the pleasing of their gods or spirits. Even now majority of the tribals have their *kaavukal* in reserve forests and Muthanga also was one such place. Once in a year, people would go there and clear up the forests and worship their gods on their festival time. The Muthanga protest actually lasted till 2 months and we tried to grow some banana plantations and small crops within the Muthanga where we launched the '*kutil kettal*' movement. It started on January 1<sup>st</sup> and ended on February 19. The protest lasted for around 1 month and 19 days when the unfortunate incident took place on 19<sup>th</sup> February.

### **MUTHANGA: STATE VS. TRIBALS**

Whenever a protest happens, at a point of time, people try to reach a compromise with the government and the protesters. But in Muthanga, it didn't happen and there was no compromise talk between the 2 parties. Even the muthanga struggle took place only because of the injustice we suffered, if there was a compromising meeting held before, the government was not willing for a negotiation and that is what actually led to the Muthanga struggle. And 2 people wouldn't have been dead back then and it happened only because the government wasn't willing for a talk with the tribals. If the ruling party had taken an initiative to liaison back then, people wouldn't have died.

### **TRAITORS AMONG OURSELVES AND THE ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

During that time, the only agenda of the government was to expel us from the land at any cost and because of which there was conspiracy as well. On 17<sup>th</sup>, they put a fire in our settlement, the watchers- they belonged to our tribal community but they were

bribed and they were used by the government party back then. The watchers get like 3000-5000 per month and it was for this amount that they cheated on us and they played against us even being a member of the tribal community. They betrayed us for just some amount of money, but if they were brave enough to say that we want land and not money, that time I think people in Muthanga would have got 1 acres of land at least each in a family's name but unfortunately the traitors were among ourselves. There were 2 watchers belonging to the Oorali community and another belonging to Kattunayakan community, they are fire watchers and they are posted in the role to ensure that there are no fire outbreaks. They are appointed by the forest department and it is their duty to prevent fire but what they did was opposite to that. One among them I used to see him even now and we used to have some very casual talks, but other one I don't know about his whereabouts. What they did is they poured kerosine on elephant dung and throw it over to our settlements. We were trying to control the fire and what these people did is that they stood mocking us and did nothing. We know reserved forests are protected forests, and especially when it comes to Muthanga, it is abundant with medicinal herbs. But the protectors turned to be the destroyers. Only because they wanted us to leave from there, they fired the whole place and the settlement, they didn't think of mother earth or the plants there. The only thing they wanted was to make us leave from there. It was manipulative and they wanted people to know that, we ourselves, the protesters themselves have fired the Muthanga, so if they are allowed to live here anymore, they would destroy the entire forests. This was what they wanted the world outside to know. But we fought against it and tried to control the fire, unfortunately we couldn't live there, we were helpless, we had no one to question for us or fight for us only but ourselves.

**18<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2022**

On 18<sup>th</sup> February, the district collector came for a discussion and usually the protestors are invited to talk in their office. But he came here in his private vehicle and of course we know that the forest department has a number of vehicles for their needs. But that day the collector came in a private vehicle and what we could see is his driver was tied up. It was also another conspiracy where they organised the general villagers and drivers' union there to start fighting against us thinking that it was us who tied up the driver. But that was solved the very day and all of them left. But on 19<sup>th</sup>, totally unexpected, a police force comes up there and they announce the AGMS to surrender, but no one surrendered.

And that's how the police fire broke out. And how I got attacked is there was this old woman who ran into her shed when police came running, and the male officers pulled her out of the shed and they started slapping her and seeing this a lady named Bindhu came up and tried to protect her at that time she was also brutally attacked with the lathi sticks and seeing this her brother came to rescue her but the police officers kept on attacking her and the brother and I went there I was also brutally attacked on my head and back and afterwards what happened I don't remember. Later as I mentioned before, I was taken to the medical college and admitted there for treatment for 35 days. After I got discharged, I had not lived this long away from my family. I wanted to see my parents, my wife and 2 children. I didn't know what condition they were actually in but I was taken to the station saying that after signing, I could go home. I was cheated by the police officers and they took me to the station and the CBI interrogated me till 3:30 pm, after which they shifted me to jail. They asked me questions like whose idea was this and whom all did I injure during the agitation and why did you decide to launch a protest etc. I can't forget that police officer because he betrayed me and I have this hatred for him in my mind. I was jailed then for like 34 days and I don't remember how

many people were there. People in the jail are also 2 in kind, good and bad, and I was able to come out of the jail with no other problems and partly because of my personality I believe. We were not tortured there in Bathery jail. None of the Muthanga agitators residing there were actually harmed.

But during that time, paniya community, the community to which I belong, people would betray us and beat us with no reason. We were seen with so much contempt, hatred and disgust during that time, we were like hiding from the police but others would betray us then. Our community used to be educationally and economically weaker among other tribal communities in Kerala.

### **PARTICIPANTS OF STRUGGLE, LOSS OF EVERYTHING**

People who participated in the Muthanga struggle are indeed in difficult situations even now. During that time, our only source of income used to be cattle farming and we had to sell all the three cows for just 4500 and went to protest in Muthanga. We went there, started living there and took all our dress materials there with the faith that, for a month, we have been living peacefully, so now no one is going to disturb us and we can live peacefully in Muthanga. But this incident happened unexpectedly and shockingly and we returned to our homes with nothing in our hands, empty and penniless. We had to restart our lives after the struggle because whatever we had was lost to us. We returned empty handed and penniless and hopeless and depressed. We are coming back with a totally failed human being's mind. Our minds were hopeless and feared. My parents were injured and they died soon even though they were not so old. Education is important for our economic and social upliftment. Child marriages are prevalent here because of the colony system and also lack of proper education, and alcohol addictions etc. they don't get to go outside of these places and they get used to this environment

and start loving a boy or a girl in the nearby home. They are not bothered about the future or looking after their family etc. and that is how I also got married, I failed 10<sup>th</sup> class.

### **OUR OWN NATURE HAS FAILED US**

We have this habit of accommodating and admitting our community members in any small space we have. Here in this colony, what you need to understand is we have given our land to a person belonging to the general category as well. We have this habit of accepting people. If we wanted, we could have actually used that land for our farming, but we know the pain of being landless. We could have been selfish and say that we won't give our land. But people have been exploiting our good qualities like these because of which we remain landless even now. A home is important for our safety and maintaining our modesty. We don't have a good home or even a properly covered toilet. But people would come and say like he doesn't have a home, but look how he is dressed up. People discriminate against us in terms of our economical status, even if we try to come up in this social stratification, we are suppressed by people like these. As a father, sometimes I feel bad because our small and basic needs aren't met and I sometimes fail my girls because if they don't have a proper toilet to cover and protect themselves, what am I doing as a father? These thoughts really pull me down. We stay with my wife Meena's parents and that too in a very small hut. We are planning to build a home but there are many financial constraints. I'm thinking if I can get the 1 acre soon which actually belongs to me, so that I can build my own home there in my own land, but I don't know when my dream will come true.

### **COMPENSATION AND EMPOWERMENT**



Coming to compensation given to the Muthanga agitators, not everyone got the compensation, only very few people got compensation and what we need to understand is the land given to some of the tribes is not even hospitable or liveable. Some children who were abused during the struggle got a compensation amount of Rs. 1 lakh. But not all children were given and as usual some people were denied justice. Even if the ruling party keeps on changing, no party is in favor of tribal development. The parties don't have any kind of interest towards Geethanandan because he never recedes to the thoughts and ideology of any party. He has his own views and ideology because of which parties do not go hand in hand with him. He is really a man of personality and I respect him a lot. He is making his best efforts to educate children because he has realized the fact that, through educating these children only, tribal communities can be developed and uplifted. And that's really true because our people remain like this only because of the unawareness and illiteracy for years and years. I appreciate the efforts of the general community to become educated and developed. But I believe if we were also equipped with certain resources, then we would also have been empowered by this time. All these communities got empowered only through agriculture, and if we also had the land we are fighting for now, then surely, we would have been in the same position as other people. I would say the Adivasis are the most knowledgeable people in farming more than any other community. But with land we lost everything.

I'm telling this with so much emotion; the land which we owned and cultivated years back, the same land now we are to go and work as laborers. And when we had abundance of rice in the past years like in quintal, when we work as laborers, we get only a handful of rice for the entire family. And our mothers might be starving and what she may have leftover is rice water and nothing else. But now things have changed, we have food and resources as per our need. But thinking about the glorious past where we

had anything and everything, we have reached a position where we have become nothing. How the tribal economy shifted with the land reforms act is that's what we see here. So, I think speaking about all these, maybe you might have understood the importance of Muthanga struggle and why we actually participated in it.

We have not faced any kind of discrimination from government offices after this incident. The Muthanga struggle was majorly led by communities such as Paniya, Adiya, Kurichyar and Paniya are majority in Wayanad, and we faced many threats after the struggle and as I mentioned before, we were hiding from police. But to rise from the trauma and impact of the struggle, it really took us some time, because we gave everything and when we came back, we had nothing. We had to start living once again and start saving once again. It took us so much time. Geethanandan and CK tried their best to get us more resources like dress materials and utensils.

### **DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT**

Coming to the development projects carried out by the government, there are many but only very few reach the beneficiaries. For example when it comes to building a home, when a house is sanctioned, the house owner may not be allowed to carry out the construction works because the government officials or other contractors may not get the money or the commission. When the contractors carry out the construction work, there is sometimes this scarcity of resources and the house construction is not completed yet they leave because they have looted some money from the govt fund which was actually meant for construction. When it comes to different posts and interviews, even if a person from a tribal community turns up, because of the lower educational qualification as compared to the general category, they may not be selected. Even among the scheduled tribes, there is hierarchy because even by looking into the

physique of people belonging to different sections you might understand, the Kuruma community are well-off in terms of education, agriculture, employment etc. so when our children and their children go for a physical test conducted by police, forest or excise, officers would find them more appealing and strong because of which they would be employed to such posts. This actually points to the malnutrition our community and our kids face. And this ultimately leads to unemployment and problems such as these. So, coming to the underlying problem of all these aspects, it is the problem of land alienation or landlessness. Now in this context, what has happened is that they have turned our weaknesses into their strengths and they are living well-off. So, funds are allocated but they aren't used properly.

### **THE MENACE OF TOBACCO CONSUMPTION**

More than alcohol, I feel that tobacco consumption is the most dangerous issue that I have felt among our communities. This is because, even though they have water, they don't wash it off properly and sometimes we can see poor hygiene practices in some colonies. We don't feel like going there but what we can do is give them awareness. But as I have said, a number of awareness sessions won't do any change in their lives because their life situations are the same. They spit it off wherever they are sitting. Tobacco has serious effects on the health of the people, loss of teeth and lips discoloration and even deterioration of physical health. But people find it very difficult to quit because they feel like it's part of their customs and they feel like they can't live without tobacco.

### **ECOLOGICAL SUSTENANCE OF LAND AND IMPORTANCE OF TRIBAL LIVELIHOOD**

And when it comes to the fire in the Muthanga, actually we could file a case against the forest officers for putting the forest under the threat of fire because it is their responsibility to prevent the fire and yet they themselves put the fire and they blamed it on us. That was actually against the ecology, no one, not even the officer has the right to burn the forest like that. We, the Adivasis have always been looking after nature and our environment in the best possible way and I can give you proof for the same as well. When we construct houses, we make use of bamboo shoots and not the teak or mahogany wood. And we don't destroy it completely as well. And even you might know that the teak and the eucalyptus etc, aren't actually species of Indian origin, instead they were bought from foreign countries and they were planted here in hectares of land as plantations. And also, these trees absorb a large amount of water when compared to other plants thus causing depletion of groundwater. The natural forests were destroyed with the advent of colonial empire and also it was continued throughout after the Indian independence as well. But Adivasis since time immemorial have tried to protect this forest and environment. So, what I'm saying is that the putting of fire in the Muthanga is in fact an unjust deed from the part of the forest officers, because with that they were destroying the natural ecosystem and also the natural medicinal herbs available in the area which are rare. We always followed a sustainable way of living.

I say that land is very important to live our traditional way of living. It's not possible that all people get job and settle that way, but instead some people may be into farming whereas others are into other jobs. To sustain the Adivasi way of living, land is important. Food is the very source of life, and without land and farming its not possible to produce food. But farming requires land, and we have food produce in large quantity. Instead, if there is no land and we are not able to produce food, it affects our healthy way of living and we are affected by malnutrition. You probably know about the hunger

deaths happening in places like Attappady, and the mob lynching of Madhu as well. Main thing is we all know agriculture and farming, and neither do we need to be called as laborers nor do we have to hire laborers if we have a piece of land of our own. We can do the farming all by yourself. And as I told before, I had these banana plantations, which I used to work on, after my daily wage work. I would work there from 9 to 3:30 before and after which I would work in my own field. And it actually is another source of income for me during that time. Farming is not alone the thing that can be done with land, if we want to start an enterprise or send our children for higher studies, we can avail loan from a bank and do the necessary. But that's not possible for people like us because we are tribes and we are landless. There have been many situations when I had to depend on other people for a 1000 Rs for my daughter's educational purposes. Which they would give me and I would return to them as soon as I get money. Now there is this scheduled tribes' corporation working here from which we can actually avail loan. But if we want loan, we have to present 2 documents there; one is the *pattayam* of a land belonging to a general community member and the other one is an income certificate, which unfortunately both of them we don't actually have. Do you think that any one of the people belonging to general community would be willing to give any of these? It is pretty clear that, even the scheduled tribes department, what they carry out as formalities could be actually seen as a way of exploiting us. If we happen to involve into a case, then also we are to be at the mercy of people in the general community to get *pattayam*, only then we will be freed from the case. Isn't this actually questioning our own dignity?

They keep us waiting all this time for the land's *pattayam* and once if we are successful in getting it, we realize that the land actually assigned to us is not fit for farming and not even fit for housing. Most people have got land but not *pattayam*. If they are in a

financial emergency, they can do nothing without a *pattayam*, or else we will have to beg in front of a general community member. There are people within our community who think that we shouldn't be given land because we would sell it off to other people and get the money and go for drinking business. But that might have happened in the past and that doesn't mean that people are always the same. Land is very important and what is more important is the *pattayam* because without it we can't do anything.

### ***NILPUSAMARAM AT THE SECTRATRIAT***

It was after the Muthanga struggle and it was held at the secretariat. We striked for it and finally the government agreed and some of our community members got this 1-hectare land. As we discussed before, there was no discussion on agreement after the Muthanga struggle and that's how we decided to go forward with the *nilpusamaram* and it was a success we could say even though all people didn't get the land. People who got land back then, they didn't actually have any other kind of materialistic possessions. So, to work, we need some tools, people didn't have that and nor did they have the money. Now if I get a land, my good times are over because I'm getting old and I have some high blood pressure and issues like that. So, I won't be able to look after the land properly. That's one issue. I used to work a lot during my young age like for collecting sand etc, we go there in early morning and work till 6 pm or 7 pm. And we had to walk kilometres and kilometres. Later I was diagnosed with Arthritis because of which I was bedridden and Ayurveda helped me out.

If I get a land now, I have to hire someone because my good health is gone especially because of the physical abuses that I got from the police officers during the Muthanga struggle. Even if some people have got land, they are not in good health to do this work and farming and most people are into daily wage works because they don't have to do

so much work yet they get 500 Rs every day. People have made it their daily routine and got used to it easily with the government provided home and this daily 500 Rs work.

### **THOUGHTS ON FRA AND PESA**

I don't think that in Kerala these would be practically applicable because even among the tribes there are communities who hold grudge for each other. And also most people are divided into different parties and they are very rare people whose thoughts are independent of the existing political ideology. People like Geethanadan is an excellent example of an independent and unbiased person whereas CK is the opposite. Even if we launch a struggle for land, there won't be a huge participation because of these opinion differences and the ideology differences. And most importantly, the entire forest dept is at the mercy of politics I have witnessed it because I have been the panchayat member for 5 years. Even if the officers want to do something, they would be hesitant to do it because of the political pressures. When I was the panchayat member I got this opportunity to visit Assam and there I could visit a temple of the Adivasis inside a forest which is looked after by the tribals with the complete support of the government. And it has also been made a tourist attraction as well. Whereas in Kerala's context, now if a tribal enters the forest, it is a case against him because he is not allowed to. Surpassing is prohibited even for the tribals which actually belongs to them. We have been totally restricted from doing anything like, they ask us how far we go into the forests, so the next day onwards we are not supposed to go beyond that point. Similarly till now if we have been collecting some materials from the forests, from next day onwards we are not supposed to collect anything other than the things which we used to collect earlier.

Our rights are getting reduced day by day in every sense. But all we can do is obey the rules.



## **Narrative 2**

**Name: CK Jaanu**

**Age: 52**

**Place: Panavally, Mananthawady**

**Date: 26<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

CK Jaanu is a renowned social activist belonging to the Adiya tribal community in the Wayanad district of Kerala. She has been active in the social movements as a youngster for land rights of the tribal communities since the 1980s. She has written her autobiography and it is being published in an E-paper on Saturdays.

### **STRUGGLES BEFORE MUTHANGA**

I started land struggle in 1989 and in the upcoming years as well there were continuous struggles for the land rights. If we take the history of last 50 years, our parents were not involved in any kind of struggles. One reason is, my family actually had land possessions in Thrisslery, the place where I lived, other people in our community also had land. People belonging to a community, as you know live together in a location. And most of our community members had land back there during that time. My father had 1.5 acres land in his name and rest of them also had the same. So, in my family, there was no problem of landlessness. But other people did have problems with land. I belong to the Adiya community; Thrusslery is where my ancestral home is and actually the Adiyas there had land before. But it was later that land was alienated from them.

## **THE CULMINATION OF THE MUTHANGA STRUGGLE**

In 2001, a ‘*Kutil Kettal*’ protest was launched in front of the Secretariat by all the landless tribals in the state. So, in that protest all the landless tribals would be provided with land; that was the consensus we had reached back then in 2001, an agreement between the government and the protesters. For one year, the govt was involved in different works to ensure the provision of land however later on, there was no further information about that and no discussions regarding land distribution took place. It is then that in 2003, we decided to go ahead with the Muthanga struggle. Since the government didn’t keep its word, people started living in Muthanga as a protest against the injustice faced by the tribals for the past years. On 5<sup>th</sup> January 2003, we started our protest there and it is on 19<sup>th</sup> of February, the incident occurred where the police opened fire and people shattered away. During that incident, the police officers beat up all the people including men, women, children and even pregnant women without any humanitarian concern. The people who were peacefully fighting for their rights were seriously injured during the police attack.

Almost all of us were arrested then. The police opened fire on 19<sup>th</sup> and I was arrested on 23<sup>rd</sup>, until then I was hiding in the forest along with others and trying to rescue our people from the forest. On 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of February, people were there hiding inside the forest as I mentioned before. I was arrested and put in jail for 3 months and a medical professional from Farook Medical College came to check my progress every day in Jail. And in case of severe health issue, they took me to Calicut Medical College. I was under 3 months of treatment and no one else from my family was part of the struggle. Afterwards I got bail only 3 months later. Some 34 medical check-ups and tests including MRI had to be conducted for me at the Medical College.

## **THE STATUS OF LAND DISTRIBUTION**

Even after the Muthanga Struggle and the death of 2 people, the government didn't come up with an initiative to reach an agreement with the tribals. Later we organised the '*Nilpu Samaram*' at the Secretariat and it is following this that the government decided to provide land to Muthanga agitators (post this '*Nilpu Samaram*'). It was declared that the tribals who protested in Muthanga would be given the ownership of 1 acre land each. So it was decided that all 283 families will be provided with land and most of them are provided land in different places like Bathery & Mananthawady. And currently too around 200 families have got land in their names but they haven't still been shown their piece of land. Whereas the rest of the families have not even got any information regarding the land they are supposed to receive as per the government's agreement. The fact that people have not been shown their piece of land is disturbing to the community members. Government says they have measured the land and allocated accordingly. The Possession Certificate given to the tribals actually has a plot-number in it but in reality, the land hasn't been assigned to families individually.

The issue of land is pretty much a serious affair even now in different places. Previously there were people who would say they have hectares of land but now when people have got married their big settlements have now been reduced into 5 or 3 cents of land thus leading the tribals to the old way of living (that is, living in colonies). That is, young adults in a house have started getting married and now they have to live along with other Siblings and parents in that 5-cent home because they have no other place.

## **LANDLESSNESS AS A PROBLEM WITHIN THE COMMUNITY**

When I was young, while going to colonies we conducted meetings in different houses and at times people would not cooperate saying that we don't talk to those families. Basically, there were issues within colonies among our own people. Hence, we tried to conduct meetings in public places. While asking them about the disputes, the basic underlying problem is landlessness, because of which they didn't go to meetings in others' homes. And that is how we reached to the problem of landlessness and land alienation. While we tried to solve disputes among them, what we got to understand is land is the underlying issue. Conflicts among family members, including husband and wife, conflict with neighbours and other family members, all of this culminates to a single problem: landlessness.

So, when asked about problems, one family said that the grandmother in the next house uses tobacco and spits it in this shared courtyard; when asked to another family, they said that the neighbouring family's kid came running into their home during the rain making their home all dirty. So, when they complained about the same to that family, they stopped talking to them.

Another issue when asked they said is that, the used water when thrown out it dirties the wall of the opposite house and when they complained, people stopped talking to each other. Not having proper passage to home (passing through 'Elamthinna') lack of proper cleanliness etc all ultimately contributes to the problem of landlessness. And that's how I started land struggle in 1989.

During the 1980s, I would go to different colonies with some of my friends to understand about the different problems existing in our tribal settlements. This place which I'm currently staying, this was grabbed as part of a land struggle in 1995. There were 52 families who protested here and all of them here got a land of 1-1.5 acres. This

was a forested area back in 1995 and comprises like 36 hectares of land covered with 'Injamullakaadu'. To clear out this forest is not an easy task because the thorns are pretty hazardous and painful. And also, people are were badly injured while clearing the forest. Some people were lazy and they kept talking doing nothing and at that time other people started complaining that only they were working and they are not doing anything. So we found a solution by holding a meeting and declared that since you have to come to live with your family, you can have as much as land you can clear. If you clear more forests, that will be yours and if you can't clear so much then whatever you have cleared is yours. And that's why these 36 acres of land has been distributed unequally with the 52 families.

So they were asked to separate the boundaries on their own and hence there were no complaints afterwards. And hence people who cleared 25 cents have only that- and those people who cleared 1.5 acres have that land. But now as I mentioned earlier, the children, have grown up and started marrying. So, they need new house to live in. Since family planning is not so good among tribals, each family would have 3-5 children; so these children grew up and started marrying and when they need house to live in, the parents partitioned the 25 cents among them and now the tribals have reached the previous state of colonies because only if they have land in their names, government would allow construction of houses. But this problem is not faced by people who managed to get 1- 1.5 acres of land in 1995.

Tribals these days (earlier also) depend on daily wage works and now things have changed because the farming patterns have changed these days. During the time of bonded labour/slavery the people had to work from 6 to 6 but now things have changed and 8 hours is the maximum people can work. So, in that case, earlier they didn't have

time to engage themselves in other activities but now it's not like that. People work from 8 to 3 or 4 and they have enough time to get along with their friends at junction and get into drinking. But this won't actually happen if people have land of their own. If they have land, they would be engaging themselves in some farming practices there. Basically, landlessness is the main problem leading to all these because possession of land actually makes people independent and self-reliant because people won't have time for unnecessary talks, they would be happy and think about educating their own families, their children etc. People's lifestyle would actually change if they are given land but instead while living in colonies, they are provided with umpteen number of awareness sessions all throughout their lives. But the truth is that nothing is going to change in their lives unless their living conditions are altered. Even though the people try to bring change in their lives, any significant change wouldn't take place because people also need basic facilities to implement these changes in their lifestyle. And since they do not have these, they listen through one ear and let go through the other. I believe land is one among the basic rights including food, clothes and shelter. Tribal people in Kerala have been denied off these very basic rights. The life situation of tribals can be altered only if land is there. People in this area are much transformed compared to others because they have land. They are much different from people in other places because they go for work in other places and come back here and do some farming in their own piece of land and they make an earning for their living. In fact, some of them also possess vehicles as well. That is because they got this facility for farming. The daily wage workers may have this desire to travel in vehicles but they don't have enough money to afford a vehicle.

## **DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT**

The reinstating of the tribals into colonies is actually destroying the future of the tribal communities. The different political parties and different contractors carry out development projects only by looking into their convenience and benefits and the tribals are the ones who have to suffer. That is, if electricity is to be supplied to the tribal settlement if they live in a single colony, it's more convenient and profitable for the contractors to set-up a single electric post there which is going to give electricity connections to all the people in that area. But if the people are not living in colonies, then the contractors have to spend more and set up a greater number of electric posts depending upon the distance between houses. Similarly, building contractors find it easy to unload the building materials together in one place rather than in different places. They don't live there afterwards but the later consequences and problems are faced by the tribal communities. Only the inhabitants residing there actually know the difficulties, but the contractors finish off their works and leave. And also living in colonies is actually leading to problems such as drunkenness and brawls and fights between the inhabitants.

### **POSSESSING LAND IN WORDS AND NOT IN DEEDS**

In Kerala, the governments have been creating a 2nd grade citizen in the recent decades. Because when Tribals were given land, they were not given the *pattayam*, instead they were all given possession certificates. This actually denies their access to loans on starting up of small enterprises. Tribals are not required to pay land tax or housing tax but at the same time, if they want to avail a loan, they are denied because banks ask for tax receipts of the same. If the parents want their children to go for higher studies by availing a loan, that's not possible in this context. Loan is not allowed for tribals since they don't have tax receipt or *pattayam*. Even if they have desires like that, they are not

capable of doing that. They try their best to educate children but once they fail, they get back to their daily wage works to meet their livelihood needs. This's a common problem faced by all tribals. Even now, the land disputes have not yet been solved. But it is actually a solvable issue because Kerala has that amount of land to be distributed among the tribals. Not only the tribals, but also the entire landless population in Kerala. There is a provision for land distribution. Actually, if we dig deeper, the situation is such that the land is owned by many private companies that too illegally, including the companies like Harrisons, Birla etc. This illegally seized land is actually enough to distribute amongst the entire landless population in Kerala. The government doesn't have to actually create land for the tribals here, but if this illegally seized land is taken from these corporates and distributed among them, then that is more than enough for the landless tribals in Kerala. And if its not possible, then proper implementation of the legislations including the PESA Act and FRA is suffice to provide land to tribals. But the government won't do it because it is clear that their works are purely aligned with the interests of the corporates in Kerala. So far whatever the tribals have achieved is only because of the struggles and strikes carried out by us. And around 33,000 tribal families have received land as of now. But the problem with this land is that, some of them aren't inhabitable and hence we have informed our objection to that; but no further updates in that. Majority of land struggles and land distribution has taken place in Idukki but the problem is that, even though they have given the possession certificates of the land, they haven't yet been shown the piece of land which they actually own.

## **LAND DISTRIBUTION & ITS EFFECTS ON THE TRIBAL UNITY**



According to the narrator, land is very important for the tribals to maintain their traditional ways of livelihoods. So, when the researcher asked about whether this land distribution would affect the unity of tribal families, what she said is...

“...see, if a man wants to live happily with his family, then he has to move away to where he is given land so that he can build a home of his own. Ultimately, what every individual wants are a decent living ensuring the dignity and worth. But at the same time if we think that his community and the harmony among the community members would be gone if he leaves the colony, then he knows that his life would be spoiled. I have gone to many houses to solve the family disputes. So major problems there would be because of the alcoholism. The husband won't be giving the wife money to meet the household expenses because he uses it to drink and merry with his friends. When the family stays within a colony, a husband and wife may not get the privacy which is actually a mandate to solve the issues. Even if wife wants to, she won't be able to because she would be involved in the chores including other women in the colony. This gradually increases the communication gap between the husband and wife and it converts to a grudge between them. And this leads to severe alcoholism or it may tempt him to commit a suicide. So, if the issues between the partners need to be solved properly, then it is important for them to have some privacy.

It is clear political agenda that they want us to stay together in a colony because if our families split up and scatter and live in different places, it would eventually be difficult for these political leaders to come to different areas and appraise for their vote during the election time. So, if we all stay together, political leaders can save their time and energy. They want us to live in congested places because of their mere selfishness. Yes, we are ardent believers and followers of our ethnic culture. But our people internalise

certain feelings towards the land because of the misconceptions induced in our minds by the general public. Their questions and thoughts like “leaving your own land where your forefathers and ancestors have lived and died, that would bring bad luck upon you” these are induced in our people’s minds and it is simply an emotional manipulation as you can see. The political parties do not actually want us to spread out and live. Even there have been situations where people do not even have land to bury the carcasses of their dead relatives; situations where they bury one over the other and children playing on top of the buried body because they have no space to even play as well. I agree that our people are used to living together in groups, but today in this world, our community wouldn’t really have an existence if our people are not willing to live in different places. Our living conditions and our livelihood is actually being exploited by the political parties because they know, if we are uplifted, we won’t pay heed to their words. So their agenda, no matter which ideology, is to make sure that we live in the same underdeveloped way.

### **HOW LAND ALIENATION AFFECTS POPULATION**

Year by year when the census is taken, you might observe that the population is rising. However, when you observe closely, you could see that the tribal population in Kerala is steadily decreasing. And this decrease would ultimately cause the extinction of our ethnic groups. Tribal groups which had a population of 1000 and above, they have reached a phase where now only 12 of them are remaining. I would say that the tribal communities in Kerala are facing a serious genocide. And that is the main reason why we adopt land struggle for our people because nothing else can help us sustain here in this world. Development projects in the name of tribal communities would be efficient only if there are people left out to enjoy the benefits; but if people are no more, then

what is the purpose of these. The number of tribal groups in Attappady has significantly decreased during the past years; and surprisingly, we are supposed to find the land when they wither away or die, but the land which used to be before their death is nowhere to be found. In Bathery, there is this colony which had 16 households, but now there are only 4 men remaining there. Men are into brawls and fights after they drink on a daily basis. And because of unnecessary fights and lack of proper nutrition and healthy diet, people are dying there at an alarming rate. And this is the main reason behind tribal extinction and only if the colony system changes among the tribals, and they are given land and they start living on their own, the tribal community could be saved or else our tribal communities are at the verge of genocide.

So, what I'm trying to say is, for the very sustenance of the tribal communities, land and land struggles are important. The very idea behind land struggle keeps changing with the passing times. The needs of people before 20 years is different from their needs now.

### **COMPENSATION FOR MUTHANGA**

I believe most of the children got compensations worth 1 Lakh and no one else was provided with compensations. Putting all of us in jail, even children who are just 3 months old, they actually violated the very JJ Act of 2000. And the child was in Kozhikode district jail and the mother was jailed in Kannur Central Jail. People including young children, pregnant women, no one was spared from the police attacks. The seriousness of these issues is beyond what we can actually comprehend. Also, whichever incidents took place in the Muthanga agitation, all were carried out illegally. Nothing happened at the disposal of law existing in our society. Most of the individuals complained against the atrocities that happened but no one actually paid heed to it. In

fact, how is that possible when the police itself were the wrongdoers. And all the complaints were rejected because we were the culprits of our own loss. Our people also filed complaint in the Human Rights Commission and there were 2 sittings as well, but nothing happened afterwards in spite of the fact that we provided evidences. All of us applied for compensation, but only very few and that too children only got them. In fact, the tribals who protested in the Muthanga struggle have always been side-lined only because we participated in a struggle for the vindication of our land rights. The political agenda of the different parties were pretty much visible to us during the struggle because in the meantime when we were organising our strikes, the Left and Right Fronts in Kerala organised small strikes for land accompanying tribal people. They were afraid of losing their tribal votes and they feared that the entire tribal communities in Kerala would come under a single, united umbrella of Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha. And when we look into all the struggles, the case which is even now existing in Kalpatta District Court is that of the Muthanga struggle and no other land struggle or its people are still tortured in the name of the strike they launched; that's how they have been treating us. We experience the same disregard even now after the 19 years of our struggle. This is a clear violation of our basic human rights and social injustice.

### **THOUGHTS ON FRA & PESA ACT**

Whatever land distribution has taken place till now, all of this is based on the FRA Act, and that's why they are giving the possession certificates for the land they own. PESA hasn't been implemented in Kerala and even strikes were launched. But there was no outcome for that and it is the Central Government's discretion to decide whether or not it is to be implemented here. The PESA Act has been implemented in the North-Eastern

states where the tribal population is significantly high as compared to other states. It comes under the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution. As per the FRA Act of 2006, each tribal family is supposed to be provided with 15 acres of land and also people living inside the deep forests must not be rooted from their habitats and also, they are allotted with a fixed amount of land from where they can collect the forest materials. So, what I believe is if the FRA Act is properly implemented in Kerala, then the problems of tribals which had started since the Land Reforms Act was passed in Kerala shall be solved. The implementation of Land Reforms Act is what makes Kerala unique from other states. And it is as part of this that tribal communities were made to live in colonies. We believe that land is not any single person's possession but it belongs to all of us. Land is not anyone's possession because when we die, we are not taking our land instead it is handed over to the next generation. Land belongs to the entire living organisms on the Earth and we are only allowed to take the required things during our lifetime and not to establish our authority over land. But what happens now is, the people who have had possession pass it on to their children and grandchildren; and the people deprived of land shall always remain deprived because no one is there to give them land or no one wants to see the tribals developed. The power and hegemony exists in society and the people with power always want a group of people to be powerless because only if they remain the same, only then can they flourish. This system should actually change and I feel like democracy is denied to our people because the democratic rights and the development activities actually never reach us and never benefit us. Even now, this discrimination against the tribals exist. I haven't attended school but all these experiences throughout my life has helped me understand how the world and the people work.

### **Narrative 3**

**Name: Bindhu and Babu**

**Age: 40 & 47 respectively**

**Place: Murikkalady, Cheeral**

**Date: 27<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

Bindhu and Babu are one among those who were significantly impacted by the Muthanga agitation. They stood along CK and Geethanandan all throughout the struggle because they believed that this fight was against the injustice served to the tribals in the state. Therefore the researcher went to their colony named Murikkalady which is in the Cheeral panchayat and near to the Muthanga forests.

When asked about their current living conditions in the colony, they said, "...there are 35 families in our colony, out of which 14 families participated in the Muthanga struggle. Rest all families in the area have land in their names. We belong to the vettakuruma community but since our population is less in number, the government merged us with the Hindu oorali tribe in kerala. And because of that we are not getting any kind of benefits from the government assuming that we belong to a developed tribal section. Our relatives in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are still known by the name of vettakuruma." Babu says that he doesn't remember certain things because it has been around 20 years however he would try to recollect and share in the best way possible. But Bindhu says that she won't forget anything because of the trauma she has been through after the incident took place. Babu said, ... "Muthanga is the first struggle we are participating in and we decided to launch a struggle because we were tired of going from one office to another in the panchayat, block and even the tribal development

department. And it's during this time that we got to know that CK and Geethanandan are holding meetings to launch a tribal protest for the land struggle. Prominent leaders like Rameshan, Jouhar, Sankarankutty, Balan, Geethanandan and CK were active participants in the meeting that was held in Nambankolly." When asked about their knowledge of CK and Geethanandan's movements she says, "Even though all these people belong to different tribal communities, we were acquaintances from earlier times. After the struggle my husband and I and our entire family was arrested and I was pregnant during that time. My other kids were just 6 years and 4 years old and they were jailed in different places. I was jailed in Kannur and my husband was in Kozhikode. They stamped me on my stomach during the protest when I was pregnant. My delivery had many complications because of the police attacks as I said before they stamped on my stomach."

Babu says that, "... we were told and also government had this agreement that they would give land to all the tribals since we have been protesting for the past few decades. However, the government didn't follow the agreement and they resorted from giving land to the people. And that is when we decided to go to Muthanga and launch our struggle. There were people mainly from 2 areas, viz, Thakarapaady, Ambutti and Ponkuzhy. The government and the political parties need us for their votes during the elections and they would do anything for that at that time. But even now there are people who are actually owners of land just in records and not in deeds because they haven't been shown their share of land even after the 19 years of struggle. The government giving us ration and providing these homes are just their strategies and nothing else. Because they are required to carry out some projects in the name of tribal development. I stayed in the jail for 45 days and even now I have this case filed against me under section 441 of IPC for criminal trespass and section 302 for the murder of the police

officer. Around 200 and above of our people were claimed guilty for the events that took place at Muthanga. Even now, the case is going on for the criminal trespass at the Kalpetta court. In the state of Karnataka, our relatives say that they have been provided with a 3 acres land with some land for farming also. But in Kerala's context it has not yet happened in the history of tribals as well as the state. In our case, like everyone else, we also went for the struggle with the dream of getting a share of land but we came back with nothing, our lives destroyed and shattered in disillusionment. And now, I have 3 daughters who have grown up, and when they have families my children won't have land, now where will they go afterwards. Our life is sustained right now only because of the PDS carried out now, or else we would have been dead sometimes back."

### **COMPENSATION AND THE RESPONSE AFTER THE STRUGGLE**

Bindhu says that actually none of the adults received compensation and what we need to know is only the young children got compensation and 3 children from our colony also got it- Rs 1 Lakh. People from different political parties used to discriminate and insult us in many ways. After we came back from our struggle, even the panchayat members or people who came to seek vote during the elections would mock us by saying that these people are CK's or Geethanandan's followers and they do nothing but listen to them alone.

### **DURING THE STRUGGLE**

We set up an anganwady in the Muthanga for our young children. We want them to be learned and educated so they can come out of their life situations. We definitely don't want our children to live in the same bad living conditions as ours. When we started living peacefully in Muthanga like for 1 month, we believed that we are safe here. But it wasn't like that. There was a hidden conspiracy from the side of government and



other political parties. One among our tribe members himself was bribed and he set fire in our settlement using the elephant dung. The next day, police including the district collector and magistrate came to our settlement, and observed and they said you can stay peacefully here we are not going to disturb you in any sense. But what happened is the very next day, police officers came in large number and started evacuating us from our settlements. We were in shock because it is not the agreement which they said on the previous day. We were boiling our rice for the breakfast in the morning and that's when a huge number of police officers came attacking us. The number of police officers were such that 5 police officers for each tribal, so you can imagine how many police officers had come then to arrest us. We are actually in very poor health condition because of the attacks we experienced during that time. "His (Babu's) head was stitched and legs were fractured because of the attack of the police officers. And he was also jailed 45 days...", says Bindhu. I was carrying my children when I saw him collapsing into the ground. One of the police officers took away my elder child and throw her into the fire, and I fell on his feet begged him not to do anything; it was during this time that he kicked on my stomach and tortured with the lathi stick. And the news spread out during that time was there was no fire opened and that no women or pregnant women and children were arrested. The government negated the news of tear gas attack. And it is as if we ourselves put the fire on our settlement. They were spreading news like we ate dried meat during our struggle which we got after poaching wild animals. But we ate green spinach which grows in the Muthanga field.

Babu said that 13 cases were issued against him including that of

- a. keeping the dried meat,
- b. murder of police officer

- c. sexually harassing women,
- d. cutting trees and bamboo,
- e. illegal encroaching of land etc.

and the fact is that we didn't even know that the police officer had died and we were arrested in the beginning itself. And that murder case is still on.

Bindu says that when she was back from jail after receiving her bail, she saw her youngest sister without hair and asked what have you done to the hair. Then she replied that when she was trying to escape, a police officer got hold of her long hair and to rescue herself from him, she cut her hair with a knife she had in hand. And she also suffered tear gas burns on her face and the entire people including the tribals believe and even now say that they have never witnessed a struggle such as the Muthanga struggle.

#### **DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNMENT'S TAKE**

Bindhu says that the discrimination they have been facing is beyond anything that can be explained and she stated this with an example of her experience from the Taluk Hospital. "I took my elder daughter to the Bathery Taluk Hospital because she was anaemic and we reached there in the morning and I tried seeing the doctor in duty but he was making vague excuses like he is writing the discharge of other patients and my daughter was too tired, her energy was too low that she had partially fainted. We waited there till 4 pm in the evening but the doctor never paid attention to my daughter's medical condition. He asked me to get out of the hospital if I can't wait. I waited till that time and then I decided to take my daughter to another private hospital." She was verbally harassed by the doctor but she was helpless in that situation. And when the

daughter was taken to the private hospital, they said that her condition is very poor that blood needs to be transfused because she is very low in blood. And they asked her husband Babu to find a blood donor and he went to the Bathery town and found some loading workers. And one of them was willing to give blood and he came and helped them out and he also said that a report should be submitted against the doctor's behaviour at the government hospital. Bindhu said that I'm thankful that my daughter is fine now, I don't want to get into other troubles. But she now says that in situations such as these, people should raise their voice against the injustice against the people.

My husband was diagnosed with Jaundice and we went to the nearby government hospital. Here also we unfortunately met the same doctor and he didn't check my husband properly. When my husband's condition was getting worsened, I took him to the private hospital. And after that we have never gone to the government hospital because of the injustice and inequality they show towards us. Even when the vaccination was going on we were not willing to go there and get vaccinated there. And when my youngest daughter had to get 11th admission, it's been 3 years now she didn't get admitted in any school. They say that there are reservations for the tribal students but look at my daughter who is sitting idle at home for past 3 years only because she didn't get admitted in any government school, in spite of the fact that she is a tribal student and that there is still tribal reservation going on.

### ***NILPUSAMARAM***

We stood there for 28 days and came back and it was then that Geethanandan called us informed that our strike has succeeded. But afterwards nothing happened with that victory. One or two years following that, there were follow ups but afterwards nothing happened in that. And in our case, we are given land but we don't know where it is and

that's why we have launched this strike in Mariyanad estate because it is where the land has been allocated for us.

We do daily wage works including MGNREGS, areca nuts, coffee seeds etc. And the concept of staying together as a colony is actually a system developed by the government itself. Because they were hesitant in providing us land, they showed a small piece of land and asked us to stay together so that they don't have to give any other land further. And that's how we were colonized by the Right and Left governments in Kerala.

#### **Narrative 4**

**Name: Rameshan**

**Age: 50**

**Place: Koyalipura**

**Date: 25<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

I was an active participant in the Muthanga struggle. My wife, daughter and son also took part in the struggle. The main reason for participating in this struggle is landlessness. There was a situation when there were incidents of hunger deaths in our district that too because of malnourishment. So when situations like these happen, usually in my young age, I would go and help people in problems by joining hands with the political parties. Irrespective of their agenda, I always stood by their side to carry out any welfare activity possible by me. Later I started questioning myself as to why not do all these by myself and not depend on any others. I started asking these questions to my community members and some of them also reflected on this question.

We later realised that its important for us to raise questions associated with development projects carried out exclusively for us. And hence we formed “Ooru sabhas” in different tribal settlements in our panchayat and it has its core committee with equal participation from men and women (3 each) from their communities. I was also a part of the Ooru sabha and because of my exemplary works carried out for the welfare of tribsl communities, I was promoted to the state level.

In the colony where we were staying there were 4 thatched houses. 8 married families lived in those 4 houses. Married people, children and the elderly all lived in four houses.

The food was cooked in one house. All of them earn their livelihood by cultivating and working in the paddy fields. He was actively involved in understanding the tribal issues before the Muthanga agitation and in the Nilppu samaram before the Secretariat regarding the land issue. The idea of building a hut in Muthanga came up as a result of the Ooru Kootam going to many colonies and understanding their land issue. The struggle begins with ensuring the self-governance of the adivasis. But the struggle to build that had greatly affected the bourgeoisie. But the bourgeoisie smuggled sandalwood from the Muthanga forest, killed wild animals and smuggled meat on a large scale. Their smuggling was severely affected when the adivasis built huts in the Muthanga forest. With the connivance of the bourgeoisie, the police and forest officials unleashed massive violence against the adivasis and their huts in the Muthanga forest. There were three settlements: ponkuzhi, Thakara Padi and muthanga. Apart from the police, there were other atrocities against the adivasis. Women and children have been subjected to various forms of cruelty. They still face mental and physical problems. He is now in a condition where he has to face hearing loss due to being kicked in the ear during police brutality. One acre of land has been acquired in Meppadi as part of the agitation. Government support for cultivation is required.

When it comes to the aspect of development, what government thinks is development is not actually helping us in any way to reach empowerment and upliftment. The best example is where the contractors had built a home under the housing plan and that too supposedly for 15 years government was deciding to give it to a poor family. This is all fine, but the contractors didn't dig the septic tank space indepth because of which human waste wasn't disposed off properly from their home. and since it was no longer useful, they atarted taking their goat to stay within the toilet. Whereas when the government officials went upto the home and they see this situation, they start assuming that its of

no use providing these people with any kind of development because they don't know the worth of it and its total waste.

Our customs are pretty much connected with the land and we respect land like anything. Tribal communities revered their land because of the umpteen number of resources it has been producing. Therefore, land is truly an integral part of our lives which is inevitable.

**CHAPTER 5-**  
**DISCUSSION AND**  
**ANALYSIS**



The concept of land seems a materialistic one to people but it is beyond what we can comprehend. The very idea that land defines the identity of an ethnic group is not understood by many. In order to analyze the cause behind the Muthanga struggle and its impact on the life of Tribals, the researcher conducted this field study in the Wayanad District. The researcher conducted indepth interview with 5 participants, who were actively involved in the struggle. Around 800 families across the state participated in the struggle and the data collected through the interview has been substantiated by Geethanandan M. The respondents belong to the tribal communities such as *Adiya*, *Paniya* and *Vettakuruma (Oorali* in Kerala). The researcher has tried probing into the fact as to how far the constitutional rights were achieved by participating in the Muthanga struggle. The government and the state's take on the struggle and the policies followed by the government has also been questioned. Questions were related to the causes for the participation in the land struggle, the nature of problems and violences experienced by them and the discrimination experienced and the political ecology of land was investigated. The type of land received after the struggle and the state's response and the policies of the government are also included in the interview guide.

The researcher has tried to understand the underlying causes that triggered the struggle. As discussed by the narrators, severe problems including that of livelihood and the issues between the families within a tribal settlement are pretty much clear through the narratives. Poverty and even hunger were common problems causing malnutrition and anaemia among the tribals. Majority of tribal families depend on the Public Distribution System distributed by the government. Poverty, landlessness and ultimately the loss of one's own way of living and identity were a few reasons why the protestors decided to launch their struggle in the Muthanga.

During the forceful eviction and police attack, all the people were cruelly beaten and tortured. As discussed earlier, all the members were put in jail. Balan's father Veruvan was beaten and he died due to the police torture during the period of investigation carried out. Balan, has struggled throughout these years to get out of the trauma experienced there. Balan was cruelly tortured during the police attack. He had to fight his case in the court whereas his children were jailed. The Kerala High Court had ordered compensation for the children jailed, which was actually against the JJ Act of 2000.

AGMS had staged a 'Nilpusamaram' in front of the Thiruvananthapuram secretariat demanding distribution of land to the Adivasis for the people who took part in the Muthanga struggle. As part of this, the government had actually agreed to give 1 acre of land to the Adivasis. No land has been distributed anywhere as part of the rehabilitation for all the people who took part in the strike. Though sixteen landless tribals were given land in the area, implementation of resettlement schemes didn't take place. All the families were supposedly allotted in different places in Wayanad District.

### **MUTHANGA AND ITS AFTERMATH**

After the Muthanga agitation, many changes took place in the lives of the tribal communities in Kerala. Today, tribals have become empowered in some way as they have become politically conscious. They cultivate the land they get and meet their financial needs. And they gained the knowledge to bring their problems before society. Even today, despite the land issues, they have the energy to establish their presence in all areas. Balan was recognised as an active political activist by the political parties in the areas because of his involvement in the social issues. And gradually he became the panchayat member. Having gained the people's support,

Balan was nominated as a panchayath member during the period from 2016 to 2020. The acceptance by the political party was due to the recognition gained by Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha as a socio-political outfit.

Tribals of Kerala have been continuing their struggle for decades. From the evaluation and qualitative analysis of the samples it may be inferred that tribals of Kerala, especially the most backward landless families, have been fighting for their constitutional rights like rights to live, land, forest rights and self-rule. Though Kerala is considered as progressive society upholding socialist values, it lacks the constitutional commitment for inclusive governance for tribals, Dalits, fisherfolk, and linguistic minorities. The democratic state could not assimilate the essence of social-reconstruction movements led by marginalized people during pre-independence and the current movements. Though dozens of progressive legislations regarding land reforms have been implemented, constitutional provisions to protect the land and culture of tribes were not embraced in any law in Kerala. Hence the alienation of tribal land is being continued in the democratic Kerala.

**CHAPTER 6-**  
**FINDINGS AND**  
**SUGGESTIONS**

## **FINDINGS**

The study as mentioned above has mainly focused on recording the lived experiences of the leaders of the Muthanga Struggle. The major findings of the study include:

- The political ecology which is associated with the land. Land to many of the people is just a materialistic possession at the same time, the ethnic identity of the tribal communities are significantly connected with the land. The acres of hills which previously belonged to them and with which they had a symbiotic relationship, they started losing it with the advent of the system of slavery. Land to the tribals mean a living being unlike mainstream society. The different political parties make use of the tribals to get through their things however, the status of tribal communities remain the same because even though there have been developmental activities and projects carried out in the name of the tribals, very few actually benefits from them. The tribal people in Wayanad actually decided to go ahead with the struggle of Muthanga because the promises made by the government wasn't fulfilled in the coming years. However, even after 19 years, they have failed. The saying, "justice delayed is justice denied" is rightly applicable in this case where in spite of the martyrdom of Jogi, a tribal leader and many other people who died following the Muthanga incident were actually denied justice. The politics associated with the environment, land especially in this case has been technically reflected in the narratives of the respondents.
- The inclusive development strategies adopted by the government is still away from reaching the right beneficiaries because of a number of hindrances including the social stratification existing and prevalent in the Kerala society, the lack of knowledge of the projects carried out for them etc.

- The different narratives explained about the awareness sessions carried out for people staying in colonies but understanding the fact that the behavioural change communication, if carried out, it can be rightly adopted to their lives only if they have such living conditions in their environment. No matter how many sessions are given, even though they think of coming out of their current situations, they won't be able to do it because their environment plays a crucial role in the formation of their personality and habits and behaviours.
- The need for the land is raised by the communities mainly because they believe that they can be on their own, self-reliant and independent in different aspects. This actually helps them to lead a peaceful life looking after their family and farms.
- As per the different narratives, the growth and upliftment of the AGMS is feared by the people following different Right and Left political ideologies. They fear that if they are unified, they would lose their votes and they can't reach power.
- The traumatic experiences of Muthanga struggle aren't actually known by the common sections of the society because what is said to public and what happened in reality are contradictory. Therefore, the researcher has tried her best to understand the underlying causes and truth behind the incident with the help of the respondents.
- The tradition of maintaining the legacy through word of mouth is something that arises curiosity in the minds of common people however, its drawbacks were evident when incidents such as these happen and they fail to record these incidents.
- The implementation of PESA and FRA to ensure autonomy of the tribals over the forest lands in the state of Kerala is something that the tribals are looking

forward to. However, they also understand the fact that there are limitations to that.

- Many of the people have been allotted with land however, some of them have not yet been shown their land whereas some of them found the land uninhabitable because of the hard rocks. The land distribution seems to have been done to merely pacify the tribal people.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

- The researcher felt that the concept of “Ooru Sabha” needs to be seriously and effectively carried out at the community level and this should be linked to the PRI as well. This is because the development activities which actually the people need, could be found out if “Ooru Sabha” is implemented. Therefore, here during the administration and implementation of development projects, in places where tribal people are more in number, for example, districts like Wayanad, Idukki, Palakkad etc, the best possible way is that of bottom-up approach rather than the top-down approach because this would ultimately ensure the actual participation of the tribals in social activities.
- Kerala is home to 100+ tribal communities and hence recording the legacy of these tribal sections is very important because they are known as the actual protectors of nature. Therefore, the development of a language script for the communities is a mandate which the trainee has felt because their history needs to be recorded. But a major challenge in carrying out this is the fact that each community has its own dialect which is different based on the region. Some of the languages are a mixture of Kannada, Malayalam and Tamil. Yet they are different from each other as well. A language of their own and a proper script ensures their power in recording incidents of significance such as the land struggle and also other activities.
- Providing proper and safe housing facilities to its citizens is a very important responsibility of the state. Therefore, even if housing construction works are carried out by the contractors, the state should be instrumental in serious and continuous monitoring and evaluation of the implementation carried out by the contractors this is because, the narratives present some instances where the



tribals have been exploited because of being the lowest in the social stratification. There are improvements when compared to their previous history, however, the tribals need to be empowered in every single way possible for their as well as the development of the entire society.

# **CHAPTER 7-**

# **CONCLUSION**

## **CONCLUSION**

The Muthanga incident is a new chapter in the democratization process of Kerala society. Contrary to the general description of this process as the Muthanga incident, the episode of the tribal struggles is a reflection of the growing awareness among the marginalized people. To appear in civil society, as some scholars have observed. Struggle is part of the modern history of marginalized people. Through this study the researcher sought to understand the reasons why the tribals have been fighting for land since 2000, how land alienation has affected the socio-economic condition and the very identity of Adivasis, and how well constitutional and legal protection of tribals are implemented in Kerala.

Through this research, the socio-cultural, political, economic, and educational problems faced by Adivasis could be understood. Land is an integral part of their lives. The earth plays a major role in any development that is supposed to work among them. They have a deeper understanding of the pros and cons of the Muthanga struggle in their lives. In each case, they have seized it, despite obstacles we can scarcely imagine. They are still trying to ensure their self-governance. Kerala model of development is well known for its social indicators like education, health and other social services. Social scientists have compared such social indicators to that of European and former socialist countries. The reason for the growth of education and health is generally attributed to the land reform implemented in Kerala during the 1970s. It is true that slogans like 'land to the tiller' had changed the face of Kerala radically with the Land Reforms Act of 1963.

In conclusion, the landless tribals in Kerala are a group that is suffering from genocide. The state and political parties' interests are only vested on their selfish needs. The different political ideologies, though they are different, they stand united against the

development of tribals because development of tribals would mean they lose a huge share of their votes during the state and PRI elections. The tribals have different problems in their lives among themselves but the state fails to understand the fact that the underlying cause of these problems is mere landlessness and land alienation. The land where their ancestors lived since time immemorial, becomes alienated to them and their lives have shrunk into cents of land.

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# **APPENDIX**

## **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

The major questions asked to the respondent by the narrator revolves around the areas such as

- The turn of events that led to the culmination of the Muthanga Struggle.
- Their thoughts on the previous history of land struggles in Kerala (if any).
- The thoughts of the respondents on the government's take and development projects carried out.
- The actual experience vs what has been disclosed to mainstream society.
- The importance of land distribution and its current status.
- How Muthanga has contributed to framing the identity of the tribal communities in Kerala in recent years.

Whether justice has rightly been served to the tribals in Kerala.