

From Muthanga to Mananthawady

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The full day programme conducted by the *Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha* (AGM) at Mananthawady in Wayanad district on the 19th of February was the formal declaration of its re-emergence in a perseverant manner after a gap of six years. It was on this day six years back in 2003 that the Muthanga struggle for land by members and supporters of AGM was attacked with vicious brutality by a heavily armed large police force in which a front ranking Adivasi activist, Chemmad Jogi, was gunned down at point blank range and several dozens of people seriously injured. The rare TV grabs captured by a cameraman hiding in the foliage of a tree were sickening. What followed was illegal arrest and barbarous torture of hundreds of Adivasis across the State. The level of brutality was such that many Adivasis were forced to flee to unknown locales and some of them are yet to return to their habitats. The two prominent leaders of the struggle who surrendered to the police—CK Janu and Geetha-nandan—thinking that their surrender will stop the police repression of innocent Adivasis were tortured into shapeless forms and the police did not care a damn about bringing them in that shape to the law court. By all indices it was a traumatic experience for them and a dozen people died subsequently either due to the direct impact of torture or suicide induced by the after effects of torture. The government and the apologists of its brutality thought that a crushing blow has been inflicted on the hapless Adivasis and it will be impossible for them to raise their heads again. The brutality was precisely intended to produce that result. But they are clearly proved wrong by Mananthawady on 19th February. In fact, the Adivasis have emerged stronger and wiser after Muthanga.

The event on 19th by itself was the 6th anniversary of the martyrdom of Chemmad Jogi. The programme started in the early morning in Muthanga where the lamp was lit at the memorial to Jogi in the presence of many Adivasis and homage paid to his memory. The lamp was taken in convoy from there to Mananthawady town, thirty-five kms away. After a full day meeting addressed by numerous speakers, the programme culminated with a rally through the town and public meeting which continued till late evening.

The whole programme graphically unfolded yet another round of betrayals shamelessly practiced on the Adivasis of Kerala who on all counts are the worst oppressed and dispossessed of all the people of the State. Over centuries they had been relentlessly marginalized and there is no end to their woes in sight. Muthanga struggle was directly the product of an earlier round of betrayal six years back. The difference between then and now is mainly in terms of the perspective of the victims and not in terms of the degree of oppression. The degree of oppression is currently compounded because of the additional persecution by means of numerous legal cases foisted on hundreds of Adivasis. The foisting of these cases was clearly meant to cripple their movement for justice because the AGM can scarcely afford to fight these cases which are often registered in courts hundreds of kms away from their huts. The present

government had promised to withdraw these cases; but what actually happened was that instead of withdrawing the cases new ones had been added on. Another link in the series of betrayals!

During the earlier phase of the struggle the AGM was mostly alone though there was a certain degree of solidarity expressed outside Muthanga by sections of civil society groups and socially sensitized individuals. Even then, for all practical purposes their struggle was their own. Now the situation is different and that is the main difference between then and now. The Dalits who are actually the Adivasis of the plains are now with them. This qualitative difference was exemplified by the programme on the 19th. The Chengara struggle for land going on in the Pathanamthitta district of the State seems to have played a catalyzing role in this much desired unity. In this context it is worthwhile to look at the true nature of the much hyped land reforms in the State.

The Dalits who paid the maximum price for the growth of the communist party in the State were left in the lurch when the actual land reforms came. The slogan 'land to the tiller' was interpreted by the land reform designers/communist party ideologues as land to the tenants who invariably belonged to the oppressor castes simply because the stigma of untouchability also made the Dalits unfit to cultivate land on their own even as subtenants. The Dalits who were the traditional agrestic slaves and workers had to be satisfied with tiny plots or what is called hutments and simultaneously huge plantations were exempted from land ceilings and reforms thereby depriving the Dalits and Adivasis of their rightful share of land. The tiny plots that the Dalits received was bound to vanish into thin air as the 5-10 cents were divided and subdivided. The situation now is that the vast majority of Dalits are also landless and thus in the same boat as the Adivasis. The full impact of this betrayal has now hit home in a forceful manner. Reports of Dalit families having no place to bury their dead with the result that they are forced to dig up their huts and cowsheds to bury the dead have increased in periodicity. The so-called success story of the land reforms stands exposed as a contemptible sham by these reports. The Dalits are increasingly realizing the horrors of this betrayal. Objectively speaking they have every reason to unite with the Adivasis in the struggle for land. Chengara is clearly a clarion call.

The disenchantment of the Dalits with the leftist political parties is day by day becoming very much visual in the State. Even after they were betrayed as a class and caste by the social democrats it was still possible for these parties to mobilize them to some extent for their jamborees through unscrupulously utilizing past loyalties or by corrupting them through giving wages for participating in party programmes. But it is no longer so. Their mass organizations are increasingly taking independent positions to protect and further their own class and caste interests. And they are also taking clear cut positions on who are the friends and who are the enemies. It was this positive trend that was manifested unambiguously in the Mananthawady meet. Dalit leaders were unambiguous in their support for the land struggle of the Adivasis and this is something that will have far-reaching consequences for the politics and economics in the State. The opportunistic political equations currently existing in the State are bound to get an unpleasant jolt through this new unity. This fresh wind can easily blow away the lies and hypocrisies that are sought to be perpetuated by the social democrats,

the leadership of which invariably belongs to the oppressor castes and classes, thus unmasking their real class character. When the Dalits and Adivasis occupied the illegal estate belonging to Harrison Plantations in Chengara, it was the followers of the social democratic parties that enforced an economic blockade and attacked the occupiers. Chengara became the Nandigram of Kerala, but the predominantly Dalit occupation continues undaunted. Dalits are certainly not going to forget this that easily. Hence, the call for the second round of land reforms to empower the landless has been raised. If the first round abolished parasitic landlordism the second round must empower the landless. This has now become the collective demand of both Adivasis and Dalits and all the other landless people.

The argument that Kerala is a land scarce region and hence there is no suitable land for distribution to the landless is patently absurd. There is no dearth of land to give to lawless Special Economic Zones. Tens of thousands of hectares of high quality land is illegally under the possession of corporate giants like the Tatas in the name of plantations which were cleverly kept outside the purview of land reforms. Even a cursory survey will expose more than enough land available for redistribution. But what is happening now is that even the little amount of land identified for redistribution among the landless is being diverted to the hands of vested interests through governmental decisions. Kerala is not a land scarce region but it is clearly a highly dependent region for the most essential food items. If there is a transport strike in Tamil Nadu or Andhra Pradesh there will be no rice or vegetables or meat in the markets of Kerala. The food dependency of this one time land of food abundance is now crippling and pathetic. What the landless in Kerala are demanding is cultivable land that is available and such a redistribution of land can easily resolve the perpetual food crisis and insecurity of the State. Moreover, it can be a sustainable, healthy food production. It is in the interest of the entire people of the State that the landless are given sufficient land for agriculture. To counter this position by saying that there is no land is practicing deception not only on the landless but on the whole people.

The Mananthawady programme of the AGM has no doubt imparted fresh vigour to the Adivasi struggle for land in the State. A powerful section of the oppressed landless has joined hands with them without reservations, strengthening the struggle enormously. In fact, the scope for even further broader unity with other sections like oppressed minorities is very much there and the logical development of the presently achieved unity of landless Dalits and Adivasis points towards that potentially highly fruitful path. The initiative is with the Adivasi leadership whose credibility stands unscathed and strong in spite of the enormous pressures weighing on them. The Adivasis of Kerala are once again proving that brutal suppression cannot beat down a courageous people with justice on their side. □□□