CHAPTER V
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Marginalisation is a critical concern of the present-day world, and its widespread prevalence—the end-result of several interconnected factors in socio-economic development—has attracted international institutions and human rights activists/agencies. In many countries, people of the lowest stratum are pushed to the margins as a result of various historical factors and processes. Today, as capitalism expands on a global scale bringing more and more people into its system, more communities are dispossessed of lands, livelihoods, or systems of social support. It generates new and increasing levels of marginalisation within and across nation-states. Marginalisation, when defined in cultural terms, is the situation in which people sit on the borders of two cultures existing within a society but are fully members of neither culture. Marginalisation is a complex process which can effectively push people to the margins of society, where their sense of security could be under threat. It is more commonly made up of people belonging to the place/country in which they find themselves marginalised. One such grouping consists of indigenous people who are often perceived by majority/dominant group members as inferior beings. Their plight is almost universally one of marginalisation and such situations have so often been comparatively problematic.

Indeed, an economically unequal world has resulted in an increasingly unequal political world having their impact on the life of poor and marginalised people in all countries, both developed and developing. Marginalisation has also highlighted many links between the state and globalisation. The process of globalisation has obviously been marginalising some states and increasing the degree of inequality within states. The liberalisation and privatisation policies put an unfair and uneven burden on the poor and they tend to increase the degree of marginalisation within countries. Poverty/economic dislocation and disempowerment/social dislocation are thus everyday aspects of marginalisation. The situation of oppressed people is, however, characterised by resistance and resilience. In resilience there is scope for an enhanced, reclaimed and re-invented identity. The very fact of being oppressed, of having fundamental rights denied or diminished, elicits
attempts to remediate the situation. This might throw open several possibilities of articulating interests. Identity politics is one major factor. It is a new kind of politics that has emerged in the democratic life of the present-day world. It represents a host of movements, group cultural communities that are committed to the practice of identity-based political articulation and mobilisation. Though these groupings occupy an ambivalent role within democratic politics and society, their influence and impact appear to be growing. Identity politics (or politics of identity) is indicative of a qualitative alteration to the character and culture of democratic states. It reflects a shift away from political alignments driven by individual interest or ideological debates towards a culture in which citizens come together under the banner of an encompassing group with its own collective personality and distinctive culture. It has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorising founded in the shared experiences of injustice, oppression and marginalisation of social groups and communities. Identity political formations characteristically aspire to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalised within its larger context.

Identity politics as a mode of organising is closely connected to the idea that some social groups are oppressed. The aim is to subvert a given legal-ethical consensus and change the constitutive nature of the body politic. The pervasiveness of identity politics worldwide can be interpreted as a challenge to established norms of secular modernity and democracy. The identity based movements’ political goals are defined primarily in cultural terms, even though social and economic inequalities as well as political dependencies are always involved. Since their objectives include not just rights and interests but also recognition of identity, their organisations and demands are based on a shared sense of collective identity. New social movements (NSMs) represent the efforts for identity building vis-à-vis the political institutions. Through struggles to attain collective autonomy and freedom from the state intervention, NSMs uncover those issues that have been excluded by and from political decisions. These movements are seen as historically new forms of collective action resulting from the macro-structural changes of modernisation and a shift to a post-industrial society. NSMs are viewed as the efforts to fight to expand freedom, not to achieve it; they mobilise for choice rather than emancipation.
The identity politics can be seen at two levels: the politics of domination and the politics of resistance. The aim of the first is the quest for power for which identity is invoked as a means of mobilisation. The second is the politics of rights in which identity serves as a cohesive force for achieving internal solidarity. The identity politics of marginalised groups is entrenched in opposition and resistance. In India, the most powerful articulation of identity politics did occur among the members of the lower castes, who were historically kept out of the mainstream life in society. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and women form the bulk of the marginalised sections of the population in India. Tribals (Adivasis) provide the potential basis for the formation of social collectivity that represents marginal identities. Their lives have been conditioned by the highest incidence of poverty, illiteracy, ill-health, unemployment, powerlessness and various other forms of human deprivations which have pushed them to the edge of the social margin. Historically the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes epitomise the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy of the Indian society. Displacement is one of the root causes of marginalisation faced by the tribals. Development induced displacement in the country has brought several problems to these people. It is also felt that the fruits of development could not be percolated to the tribal and poverty stricken people.

Keeping the above theoretical and empirical factors of marginalisation and identity politics in the background, the study has analysed the political mobilisation of tribals in Kerala with a specific focus on their socio-historical experiences. The tribal movement puts in place a style of politics that seeks to subvert/replace conventional political activities like lobbying or working for a political party. Struggles and resistances take on particular significance here, insofar as they both represent, in different ways, efforts to overcome alienation, a sense of imbalance and domination. These movements accelerate not only democratisation but also a recovery of the self in a world in which politics has been deformed. It is of great relevance to examine how the tribal movements have introduced a number of tactical and organisational innovations and how they speak to a new audience in a different way with a different voice. The denial of civil and political rights, repression, social exclusion, economic inequality and alienation were the defining conditions of most tribals.
Among the factors that have drastically affected the lives of the tribal people, the most important are their relations with land and forest. The encroachment on land rights of tribes began with the coming of the British rule. The introduction of private property in land and the penetration of the market forces opened up the way for large scale alienation of land from tribes to non-tribes, especially after the tribal areas came to be linked with the larger society by roads and railways. Despite many protective and even restorative measures taken to stop alienation of land in the post independence period, the situation remained deteriorating. The major source of alienation in the post-independence era was the intrusion of non-tribals into the tribal land, besides the process of development initiated by the state.

The condition of tribals in Kerala is not different from the rest of India. Today they are forced to create a specific space for themselves though they form only a small minority of 1.10 per cent of the State's population. As a result of marginalisation, more than three-fourth of the tribals are landless and their social conditions remain very much below the state average. However, the crucial question the tribals in Kerala face today is land alienation. Kerala is basically an agrarian economy exemplified by highly imbalanced distribution of land, and the adverse land-man ratio has aggravated the inequality in terms of income and wealth. The land and forest have been the vital sources of tribal livelihood but, today, the tribal communities have been marginalised and alienated as a result of the policies pursued by successive governments in Kerala.

The tribal question in Kerala has been embedded in the socio-economic setting and the structural conditions prevailing in the state since independence. Though Kerala has long been acclaimed as India's progressive and model state, more than 3.64 lakh tribals belonging to different communities, who form nearly one per cent of the population, have been lagging behind the mainstream society. Kerala has a total of 35 Scheduled Tribes notified under the provisions of the Constitution of India. Paniyan is the most populous tribe with a population of 81,940 forming 22.5 percent of the total tribal population of the State. Kurichchan is the second largest tribe having a number of 32,746 constituting 9 per cent of the total Scheduled Tribes population. Six other Scheduled Tribes having a population ranging from 21,000 to 32,000 along with Paniyan and
Kurichchan constitute 73.6 per cent of the total tribal population. Majority of the tribal communities of Kerala live in the northern and eastern districts of Kerala.

The slave system that existed until the middle of the nineteenth century in the northern part of Kerala, especially Wayanad, called for the import of tribal communities. This slave-landlord relationship, in fact, accelerated political intervention that brought in changes in the social order of Kerala. Yet, the tribal communities lagged behind the other backward classes of Kerala that were within the fold of mainstream society. The largely self-sufficient, culturally distinct way of life of the tribals fast eroded. Their traditional methods of cultivation were substituted with more commercially viable methods and crops. Meanwhile, the scarcity of food during the Second World War stepped up the exodus of middle-level farmers from central Travancore to Malabar, especially to Wayanad. This was a cause for the large scale migration to Wayanad. As sprawling estates began to spread in Wayanad and other hilly areas, tribals began to be increasingly marginalised. The situation was the same in Attapady where the majority of the tribals were forest-dwellers. With the arrival of migrants during 1930-50, tribals were pushed into worthless wastelands, displacing them and leading to further deterioration in their living conditions. This happened in other places too. About twenty-eight per cent of the tribal population of Kerala lives in Wayanad district. Among them, only communities like the Paniyars and Adiyars managed somehow to be part of the scheme of living and farming practices. Others remained outside the agricultural sector further aggravating their alienation. In the second half of the 1970s, around 61 per cent of the tribals were landless.

However, since the 1980s the agriculture sector of Kerala was affected by various undercurrents like the depletion of forests, erosion of land, decline of productivity and the growing feeling that land was just a commodity to buy and sell and the disinterest of landowners in the lands they held. The various welfare plan provisions were shown to have flowed to the tribal on paper. The tribal economy of Kerala itself could be characterised by land alienation, indebtedness, exploitation, bonded labour system and poverty. Though a number of measures were put in place to ameliorate their economic conditions, they were sporadic and lacked an integrated approach.
Land is the foundation of the tribals and more than 90 per cent of them are dependent on agriculture and allied activities. Land being the only tangible asset, tribal families are emotionally attached to it. However, with the opening up of the tribal areas, the process of land alienation started. However, it varied from state to state and region to region. In certain areas, although the tribals are the official owners of the land, the non-tribals have become the virtual owners. Ownership of land signifies livelihood, culture and identity in tribal economy. Most of the tribals are dispossessed of their land and are living without any source of livelihood. Alienation of land is the single most important factor causing their precarious economic situation. Providing land to the landless has therefore become the most important challenge to address poverty and misery of the tribals.

Tribals in Kerala have a long history of struggle for land, through legal means as well as through public protests. Yet, their small proportion of the total population has made their voice unheard. In order to deal with the problem of land alienation, all states in India have enacted laws. The Constituent Assembly itself had set up various committees with a view to protecting the tribal lands. Under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution the governor of each state has been given special powers to make regulations for the protection of the tribal interest in land. However, the passing of the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction on Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act, 1975 was a milestone in the history of land struggle of the tribes. The Act proclaimed that all transactions of Adivasi lands during 1960-1982 were illegal and invalid. It also said that all such lands were to be restored to their original tribal owners. The Act was brought into force with effect from 1982 by a notification in 1986. Though the Act got the mandatory assent of President of India, it was never implemented. Moreover, even after the passing of the Act, massive encroachment of tribal lands continued. The successive governments in Kerala failed to implement it, while on the other hand the powerful lobby of encroachers, with due political patronage, continued their tribal land grabbing spree. The tribals never knew that there was a need to possess land records for the premises they had been living in for generations. Many of them could not imbibe the new law of the modern society stipulating that they had to pay money (as land tax) for their land and also to preserve documents issued by government officials. Thus, the
vast majority of tribals were not possessing land records of ownership given by the state, though they were enjoying the possession of their ancestral lands from time immemorial. Apart from the involvement of the corrupt revenue officials, the overall situation helped the powerful encroachers from the plains to occupy tribal lands even after the formulation of the rules in 1986.

While the tribal communities in Kerala have been historically marginalised and oppressed, the policies and schemes put in place by governments in the state only worsened the life-world of tribals. Their customary rights over natural resources such as forests, cultural identity, traditional knowledge including intellectual property rights, cultural heritage and traditional wisdom have been constantly at stake due to the interplay of various forces. Tribals continued to struggle for survival as they faced daunting problems such as displacement due to internal migration, development activities and projects. Obviously, the oppression of the tribal people by economically and politically more powerful settlers has led to discontent among tribals. Thus, the historical context of the oppression and exploitation of the tribal community in Kerala needs to be understood while examining the political dynamics of identity politics and mobilisation.

Traditionally, the tribal communities cultivated land and managed natural resources in accordance with their socio-economic circumstances. Land and forest, for them, are essentially common resources to be used according to their particular needs. The judicious use of common property resources on which they depend greatly has become an integral part of their way of life. Most tribal communities do not view land as a ‘commodity’ which can be bought or sold in markets. However, over years, the concept of land as a commodity came into conflict with the traditional concepts of common property and with societies such as those of many tribal peoples throughout India, who generally do not have a documented system of land rights. The question of land use arises in this context insofar as many tribal groups lived in resource-rich regions. When outside forces started encroaching on their lands and environment, their activity gradually became limited to a narrower area, particularly for the purpose of cultivation. It was further accentuated and later strengthened in the early twentieth century with the emergence of settlers and initiation of the survey and land records. Thus, the juridical nature on land systems made the tribals confine their freedom to cultivate
only in restricted areas. The experience of Kerala tribals is no way different from other parts of the country.

The socio-economic development of the tribes of Kerala does not show any uniform pattern. There have been variations in the three erstwhile segments of Kerala - Malabar, Cochin and Travancore. The tribes in Wayanad were in a primitive state till the eighteenth century when they were enslaved by the immigrants from the plains. Since then the tribes of the region continued to be agristic slaves of non-tribal landlords, at least for another century. However, with the emergence of plantations in Wayanad in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a structural change in the conditions of the tribes though the system of exploitation (such as bonded labour) continued over decades. The establishment of British power, especially in Malabar, had also brought considerable changes in the traditional systems of land control and agrarian relations. In Attapady—the second largest tribal concentration—the situation was different. Though it remained inhospitable to outsiders, the large-scale immigrants since 1950s dispossessed the native tribals of their land which had long term consequences.

However, over years, the structure of the tribal economy began to undergo changes as non tribals started interacting with them. It resulted in sowing the seeds of a differentiated tribal economic structure which, in turn, affected the man-land relationship among the tribals. The cultivating tribals in Malabar were thus dispossessed while in Travancore, it resulted in the replacement of the extensive by the intensive mode of agriculture. In Cochin the pattern of cultivation did not undergo any significant change. Thus the question of landlessness emerged as a critical issue though its nature and intensity varied from one region to another. As per the official statistics, by late 1970s nearly 30 per cent of the tribal households remained landless. Over years, two broad categories of tribals emerged in Kerala—the landed and landless. There was also a structural change in the community of tribals also. Before the advent of settlers, the tribal workforce relied on agriculture as “self-cultivators.” Later on, the displacement of tribal cultivators from their lands caused a major segment of them being reduced to the status of agricultural labourers. The share of agricultural labourers among the tribal workers grew from 43 per cent in 1961 to 72 per cent in 1976.
The land reform legislation has not achieved social justice and growth to the tribal communities in Kerala. Though the land reforms legalisation abolished the system of tenancy and landlordism and brought fixity of tenure on all tenant and prohibited eviction of all kinds of tenants from their holdings, the tribal communities in general had no advantage. The exemption given to plantations under the land reform act had led to a large scale conversion of land into plantations. The tribals engaged in shifting cultivation under oral tenancies were given no protection. More importantly, hydroelectric projects and dams in various places caused displacement and eventually landlessness. Similarly, wild life sanctuaries and national parks also led to tribal dislocation. There are other incidences of tribals being continuously betrayed. Wayanad region has a large number of projects for the development of the most marginalised tribals. Yet, they hardly benefitted. When the livelihood resources of the original inhabitants were taken over by the state and the settlers, conflicts were bound to occur with the migrant population, both the earlier migrants as well as the newer ones.

The provisions under Schedule V of the Indian Constitution should be realised by suitable legislations as well as by declaration of tribal majority areas as 'scheduled area' with provisions for certain degree of self-governance since the enactment of the Panchayat Raj (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) 1996. Though the Act was put in place, no tribal area in Kerala has been notified as a scheduled area. However, even the state governments that have no scheduled area are constitutionally bound to enact suitable legislation to protect land rights. Way back in 1960 the Dhebar Commission had recommended that all tribal land alienated since after 1950 be restored to the original tribal owners, but no effort has been made to implement it. Neither did the land reforms in Kerala bring any change to the life of tribals who lost more of their occupancy rights to the settlers who had now become their tenants.

The Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction on Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act, 1975 did not have any impact on the ground level situation, and despite the restriction, the transfer of lands continued as it were before. Statistics showed that the number of landless families alone grew from 3,549 in 1976 to 22,491 in 2001 albeit the ban on land transfer - a seven folds increase. It was obvious that successive
governments did nothing to enforce the implementation of the Acts and regulations in hand. Their lack of knowledge of the concept of ownership, along with unsympathetic and prejudiced administrative system that played down the traditional rights of the tribals, contributed to a situation where the tribals were left with no valid proof of ownership or enjoyment.

In the years after the enactment of the KST Act 1975, the socio-political situation in Kerala had changed considerably. The major political parties had started making inroads into the tribal areas under the organisational control of the non tribal settlers. The state policies of containment and the fast growing market for cash crops under the plantation economy tended to undercut the potential of radical movements. During this time, the tribals had become a numerical minority in their native hamlets. This was also the time when the government as well as the mainstream political parties made a volte face, from support of the 1975 Act to a general opposition to it. The volte-face came with a new-found argument that the Act itself was unfair to the non tribal settlers who had invested their money and energy for the development of the area and that the implementation of the Act at this time would trigger conflict between the tribals and non tribals. However, the prejudiced mindset of the politically conscious, largely middle class masses of Kerala has done nothing to ameliorate the tribal predicament.

Meanwhile, litigations emerged in courts for legal remedies. The High Court issued a writ of mandamus in 1993. But the government remained silent. The Kerala High Court, however, gave the state government six months to dispose off applications of restoration pending with it. The government said that it could not implement the Act as there was organised resistance from the non tribal settlers. In this background, the High Court issued yet another direction. The government in power made an attempt to amend the Act by an ordinance in early 1996. It was widely seen as completely unjust because it made legal all transactions of tribal land up to January 1986. The government suffered a major setback when the Governor of Kerala refused to sign the Ordinance. In August 1996, the LDF government filed an affidavit with the High Court admitting its inability to implement the 1975 Act due to ‘organised resistance’ from the powerful non tribal settlers. But the court issued a final directive rejecting the state government’s position, demanding implementation of the Act within six
weeks i.e. before 30 September 1996. Faced with this time limit the
government passed the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction on Transfer
of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Amendment Bill, 1996 to
escape contempt of court proceedings. In order to avoid further contempt
of court, The Kerala Restriction on Transfer by and Restoration of Lands to
Scheduled Tribes Bill, 1999 was hurried up through the State Assembly and
thereby encroachments of up to two hectares of land were to be
condoned. It gave a message that the alienated lands could never be
restored. The tribals were thus caught in the legal tussle with hardly had
any material assistance in hand. This pushed them towards mass starvation
deaths. It was reported that more than 30 Adivasis died in the 1990s alone.
This was the beginning of tribal mobilisation at various levels.

The tribal communities maintained that their demand was nothing short of
ownership to land. They considered land as the only means towards an
enduring solution to their long-standing problem. However, in the
prevailing scenario, this demand for land by such sections invited the worst
kind of state repression as they lacked the support of the mainstream
political parties. Hence in the absence of any response to democratic and
peaceful struggles, the landless tribals tried to respond by ‘encroaching’
and ‘occupying’ into a chosen land. What contributed to such a situation
was the general indifference towards the exploitation and abuse of the
landless poor and their struggle for survival on an everyday basis.

The decade of 1990s witnessed a sudden upsurge in the exploitation of the
tribals both in their traditional habitats and in their new struggle sites. The
emergence of a number of civil society organisations during this period
played a key role in the making of their identity and consciousness. Local
activists as well as certain wings of political parties also helped advance
the Adivasi question to the centre-stage of political decision making at that
time. The newly formed Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS) and its
identity-based articulation should be viewed in this context. The politics of
land struggle initiated by AGMS had spectacular effects on the growth of
both political mobilisation and militant struggles among the Adivasis of
Kerala. The experience of the tribal mobilisation revealed that such
identities are constituted by and constitutive of the struggles in which they
have been engaged. As Kjosavik (2009) argued, the tribal identity is “more
about becoming than being.” An ideology embedded in the Adivasi
identity could be articulated into the Adivasi movement in the process of the struggles. As such, the struggle for land rights in Wayanad was a concurrent process of articulation of Adivasi identity as well. The formation of Adivasi Aikya Samithi which united itself at the regional level to create the Adivasi Vikasana Pravarthaka Samithi was the culmination of these articulations. It led to the emergence of a significant group of leadership among the Adivasis during this time. Their positioning as Adivasi and the rights inherent in that identity supplied the initial impetus for the struggles for land.

The Adivasi movement gained significant momentum in the background of the developments associated with the rights of indigenous peoples in the decades of late 1980s and early 1990s in the global arena. The Adivasi movement in Kerala also received a lot of positive energy from the discourses of the indigenous peoples’ rights movement across the world to challenge the state and its institutions at the national and provincial levels.

The terrain of Wayanad had played an important role in the process of articulating Adivasi identities in the land movement. The Kerala Restriction on Transfer by and Restoration of Lands to Scheduled Tribes Act 1999 initiated a chance for the Adivasis to re-articulate their identities. The Adivasis of Wayanad were worried about the operational aspects. They were rather alarmed that the authorities would provide lands for them in faraway places, where they would become strangers. Their major assertion was that it was their right to have the lands restored as they had a historical attachment to the place, in a way the non-tribal settlers could not demand.

The history of tribal mobilisation in Kerala could be traced back to the 1950s when the communist party was gaining foothold in the tribal areas of Wayanad by launching struggles against the landlords. The party workers at that time had organised party classes in tribal settlements with support from the poorer sections of the community. The formation of Wayanad Adivasi Swayam Sevak Sangh was the first attempt by the pro-Adivasi sympathisers within the communist party. The WASS functioned as an umbrella organisation uniting under its fold various tribal groups, members of which carried diverse political ideologies. The formation of
new groups such as Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU) and Kerala Grivarga Sangam also played their respective roles in the tribal belts. The younger cadres of KS KTU were also being radicalised by groups influenced by the extreme left. These groups, generally known as Naxalites, were organising peasants to wage armed rebellion against the government and identified tribal bonded labourers as potential support base in their struggle against landlords. But following the state repression, the movement dissipated gradually. During the eighties and early nineties, issues related to tribals were in the agenda of the district units of all major political parties. However, barring the occupation of forest land by the tribals under the auspices of KS KTU there was no major effort to mobilise the tribals in the district. A major tribal movement that had significant influence over the tribal communities was Adivasi Kshema Samithi (AKS) formed in 2000 under the patronage of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). With the support of the party machinery, AKS was able to take foothold in most of the tribal settlements in the district.

Since the 1990s, the activities of Hindu communal organisations, Christian missionaries and voluntary agencies had also increased in the tribal areas. The decade also saw the disillusioned tribal people become closer to radicalism. This was the time when the social movements of Adivasis found themselves in deep conflict with political parties and their front organisations. New forms of radical mobilisation emerged through the re-negotiation of the arena in which social struggles for democracy and resistance to marginalisation take place.

The National Adivasi Sangamam held in the year 1992, organised by ‘Solidarity’ in collaboration with all the known tribal organisations of South India and concerned NGOs at the national level was a turning point in tribal development. C.K. Janu, who later became the symbol of Adivasi struggle, was at the helm of affairs of the Sangamam and became President of South Zone Adivasi Forum (SZAF) formed at the gathering. She took the leadership to facilitate different tribal organisations in Wayanad, who were also affiliated to SZAF, by the Adivasi Samyuktha Samara Samithi, and set forward securing ‘Right over Land’ as the main agenda of ensuing political struggles. These organisations were: Adivasi Vikasana Pravarthaka Samithy (AVPS), The Adivasi Aykhya Samithy and the Kuruma Samajam. These organisations had their limited social development interests, but Janu was
able to bring them together and ensure their solidarity in future political strives to secure their traditional rights over land.

The struggle for right over land by a minority non-party alliance of the Adivasis began on 26 January 1994 in Wayanad. The aim of the agitation was to take over the lands due to Adivasis by law in the context of the refusal of the government to act despite the prevailing act and laws and relevant High Court orders. In April 1994, Adivasi Vikasana Pravartaka Samithy undertook a march to Ambukuthy, in Mananthavady Panchayath, where there were 128 acres of vested forest. 130 odd migrant families had encroached the land and got hold of tacit endorsement of the government bureaucrats for occupation. The Cheengeri struggle was another example of Adivasi mobilisation. The ‘self land restoration programme’ was launched on 26 January 1995 by SZAF under the leadership of Adivasi Aikhya Samithy. The Adivasis entered the project land. 249 families were settled in an area of about 100 acres. The government and political opposition came down heavily against the action. The Cheengeri experience raised several questions about the Adivasi predicament. The question of Adivasi sustainability was the main issue. Being agricultural labourers, they must go for work on a daily basis without which the sustainability of their families would be in danger. The Adivasis further realised that the struggles were not for acquiring alms or charity from the government but to reclaim their traditional livelihood rights and cultural identities as laid down in the Constitution and protected by various Laws and Acts. Hence, Adivasi groups decided that each organisation must ensure the struggle localised within their capacities and the sustainability problems/issues concerned with each family need to be considered. It was also decided that moral and organisational supports be extended to all such localised struggles. Thus, immediately after the release of the Adivasis from jail following the Cheengeri Struggle, a new front was opened at Panavally in Thirunelli Panchayat on 5 March 1995.

The Adivasis again launched a campaign during August-September 1995 in order to mobilise public sensitisation on Adivasi issues and gain support for the ongoing struggles. The participation and solidarity of Adivasi organisations like Thiruvithancore Malay Araya mahasabha, Mannan Mahasabha, Vettuva Mahasabha, Agastiyavanam Kanikari Samithi and Dalit Organisations like Kerala Pulaya Mahasabha Athasthitha Navodhana
Munnani, Bahujan Samaj Party, the Dalit Panthers and the Trade Union GROW helped strengthen the campaign. However, over years, the Adivasis found the political-bureaucratic authorities remain insensitive to the mounting agitations by the Adivasis. With the confidence achieved of solidarity supports from various sections of the civil society, the Adivasi leaders worked out new strategies and methods in the struggle front. Thus, the struggle began on 30 August 2001 in the state’s capital and huts were built and families symbolically occupied them with the slogan “given us land so that we may live.”

Alongside this they decided to form an umbrella organisation, the Adivasi Dalit Samara Samithy to lead the movement. The Samithy also included a grand council of elders and leaders representing the 34 tribal communities in the state that progressively led to the formation of Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (Adivasi parliament) on 3 October 2001 at Thiruvananthapuram. The next task was to mobilise support from the rank and file of the Adivasi community as well as from the sensitive and democratic sections of the civil society. The struggle went on for 48 days. Yet, the government was adamant. Considering this, to put pressure on the government, C.K. Janu declared a fast unto-death. Facing the possibility of widespread criticism and loss of support, the government decided to initiate talk with the leaders. Negotiation began and concluded an agreement on 16 October 2001. As per this, the Government agreed to give (1) five acres of land to all Adivasi families having less than one acre of land. To begin with, 42,000 acres of land of between 1-5 acres would be distributed and the work would begin from 1 January to 31 December 2002; (2) a master plan would be made before December 2001, to be included in the 10th five-year plan beginning from 2002; (3) a cabinet decision to include Adivasi areas in the V schedule and a proposal would be made which shall be sent to the centre for further notification by the president; (4) the Supreme Court judgment related to the case pending on the 1975 Act would be abided by the Kerala government; and (5) a tribal mission would be constituted to carry out all the above headed by a senior IAS officer.

Though disappointed they were, the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha ended the strike to provide room for implementing the commitment made by the government, and temporarily pacified on the goals and objectives of the strike. But AGMS was making further preparation for a more aggressive
mode of struggle, if the government failed to keep its promises. Meanwhile, the Tribal Mission identified 36,012 acres of land to be distributed and as on 1 January 2002, 370 acres were given. The Mission engaged in finding lands and dealing with procedures for obtaining the Central Government’s permission to distribute vested forestlands to the tribals. The Master Plan Committee proposed the constitution of Gothra Maha Sabha (Adivasi Assembly), Oorukkoottangal (village assemblies, and formalising this administrative arrangement in the tribal zones, the formation of a sort of autonomous tribal republic. But the mission’s work was a failure and distribution of land remained on paper only. Only 1.06 per cent of the families were provided with land (which came to 2.2 per cent of the identified land) within the first four months of the stipulated 12 months period. However, the government, without giving any reason, stopped all these processes and reduced the Tribal Mission to the status of an advisory body, and redeployed all the employees who were actively engaged in the work.

The AGMS demanded that the government must enact and implement the promises made within a period of six months. The AGMS resolution to enter the Muthanga forest came after extensive consultations across the state’s Adivasi belt. As the government failed to implement the agreement, AGMS decided to intensify the stir. For the hapless Adivasis of Kerala, Muthanga was a milestone in the history of their struggles. The AGMS took to the path of a different struggle in Muthanga when the government did not keep its words. The Muthanga struggle was part of a state-wide campaign to occupy land. The movement, started in early January 2003, was both an attempt to redress the wrongs and an act to protest against the state’s failure to live up to its commitments made in 2001. The Adivasis built huts in the occupied area and posted pickets to prevent the entry of forest guards or policemen. But the state force unleashed violence on the Adivasis on 19 February 2003. The events that showed the way to Muthanga and thereafter clearly indicated that the government was more sympathetic to the powerful settler people.

Violence on the Adivasis by the police and miscreants continued for days in and around Muthanga, and in the entire Wayanad District and throughout Kerala state. Innocent Adivasis who fled the scene were lifted up from the street and their settlements in several districts. Hundreds were arrested
and charged with a number of crimes including murder. The Muthanga firing and other state atrocities had strengthened the Adivasi conviction that they had no other option but to wage a relentless struggle for gaining land rights. In response to the land struggle and the consequent police action in Muthanga, there were strong reactions from democratic Institutions and civil society. The National Commission on Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes, the National Commission for Women, the People’s Judicial Enquiry Commission, Kerala State Human Rights Commission, People’s Union for Civil Liberties, etc intervened to highlight the atrocities against the Adivasis. Many considered Muthanga “a symbol of Adivasi protest,” and almost all cultural leaders, writers and lawyers in Kerala and outside came forward in solidarity for the Adivasis.

As the public opinion in favour of the Adivasis from the civil society and the recommendations of different agencies, including NHRC came in, government of Kerala had to order an independent inquiry, entrusting the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) for an inquiry into the police firing ad circumstances leading to the same. But the Adivasis were disappointed and they alleged that it was a travesty of investigation because the CBI report concluded that the Adivasis were “trespassers.” Later the CBI justified the forcible removal of Adivasis and said that the police had taken action following forcibly evicting the tribals.

Many Adivasi leaders believed that the Muthanga agitation and its fallout had strengthened the political consciousness of the Adivasis. Since then, the mainstream political parties also started wooing the Adivasis and highlighting the Adivasi causes. The Muthanga struggle had even affected the political consciousness of the Dalits in the state. AGMS leaders claimed that as a result of the mobilisation, they could provide land to hundreds of landless families, “a real achievement.” Pointing to the fact that the mainstream parties who have decade’s long experience did nothing to provide even single piece of land to Adivasis, AGMS said that others are also compelled to talk more about land rights for tribals. As such, AGMS believed that they were able to set agenda before them. The AGMS said that the agitations that were underway had shaken the foundations of the political parties of the state.
After seven years of the Muthanga struggle, leaders like C.K. Janu said that though they could not sustain and carry forward the momentum of the struggle, they could elicit empathy and sympathy from the socio-political spectrum of the state and country that influenced the pro-Adivasi decisions on the part of the government. The most remarkable result of the struggle was that the Adivasis started asserting themselves as a collective social entity with distinct culture and right for humane existence in the national society. The AGMS leaders, however, admitted that there has been a disintegration of Adivasi solidarity due to several reasons—foremost among them was the question of survival and sustainability. Most of the Adivasis find it difficult to survive if they do not go for their daily work and in their sphere of employment they get influenced by those for whom they work. The specific interests of different Adivasi formations also limit them to their social interests only and forbid them to go beyond. The Muthanga struggle experience also taught them some bitter lessons. However, the Dalit-Adivasi front which was dreamed of and strived for has been partially successful, though it remained more or less localised. With all these challenging factors, AGMS leaders believed that the Adivasis in the state have become critically conscious of their rights existence with dignity and distinctiveness.

It is a fact that the restoration of land to Adivasis continued to be a major predicament in the post-Muthanga period. Even before that only 1.06 per cent of the families were provided with land within the first four months of the stipulated 12 months period. Till 2008 thereafter, there has not been any substantial change in these figures. The number of Adivasi families who have benefited land allotted on the basis of the declaration during Muthanga Agitation in Wayanad district is 997 and for them 2526.6 acre land has been distributed. The number of Adivasi families who have been provided land by the government after 2003 Muthanga Agitation in all districts of Kerala is 5803.

In sum, the mainstay of the tribal question in Kerala is their right to live with dignity in their lands. Their real issue is land rights. The Government of Kerala with full cooperation of the opposition unanimously passed the Kerala Scheduled Tribal (Restriction on Transfer of Land and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act 1975. It was then announced that the Government would treat all alienated tribal lands as stolen property and that the lands
would be restored to its right owners, the tribals. But this law was never implemented and the tribals were deprived of their rights without any justification whatsoever. However, because of the vested interests of the politicians, businessmen and land mafia, attempts have been underway to scuttle the law. It resulted in the attempt to amend and dilute the law in 1996 and again in 1999. Though the judgement of the High Court was in favour of the Adivasi aspirations, the Supreme Court, while allowing the appeals filed by the state government, upheld the constitutional validity of the 1999 Act, and thereby upheld the repeal of the 1975 Act. The implication of the new judgment is that while enacting the 1999 Act, the state could not have deprived the persons who held non-agricultural land and as far as the compensation to the owners of non-agricultural land was concerned, the 1975 Act would continue to be applied. The Supreme Court verdict stated that only those laws which are in derogation of the provisions of the 1999 Act would stand repealed. This obviously came as a setback to the Adivasi aspirations.

Consequently, the Adivasi movement today confronts serious existential crises though we can no longer ignore the reality of the rise and increasing acceptance of NSMs in Kerala as a strategic form of mobilisation. It is a fact that the Adivasi movement had to grapple with a thoroughly united and strong political society, unyielding in its basic approach to the issue of land rights. The legitimate demand of the Adivasis for restoration of their alienated lands was denied for more than three decades despite an explicit commitment premised on Constitutional validity. As stated before, this could be clarified in terms of the political society's consensus on, and ideological commitment to, the project of development that tended to dispossess and marginalise the Adivasis. More significantly, the Adivasi demands on the restoration of lost land has been considered by the political society as meaningless culturalist argument. This is the crucial dimension of the tribal question that necessitates further introspection on the politics of identity—not necessarily as a negation of modernisation but as a problematic in addressing issues of modernity and all its attendant ills.