

The Muthanga misadventure

The leadership of the Adivasi movement in Kerala may have unwittingly sabotaged it by failing to provide a mature, sensible and peaceful direction to its agitation.

at Muthanga, the fact is that the Adivasis had been teased and baited repeatedly with the false promise of land for nearly three decades.

In 2001, the Antony government seemed to do a bit more for them when it entered into an agreement with the AGS, led by an articulate tribal woman

at Muthanga is being described as the first attempt, though a feeble one, to create awareness about the need for autonomous tribal areas, but the popular perception is that the leadership of the movement allowed it to be sabotaged by failing to provide the agitation a mature, sensible and peaceful direction from

based formally on a 1975 law and successive court verdicts to one promising at least one acre of 'government land' for all landless Adivasi families, based merely on the government's assurances (*Frontline*, October 26, 2001).

For three decades, the pursuance of the first option had pitted the Adivasis against the influential settler farmer lobby in an unequal battle. The second option perhaps offered them hope through some hard bargaining with a lenient government. "Kerala's Adivasis are not fighting the settler farmers any longer," Janu had told *Frontline* a few days before signing the agreement.

But an agreement promising at least one acre each to 53,472 landless tribal families (as estimated by the government), when the land was yet to be identified, too was fraught with the possibility of failure. After Muthanga, the future of the agreement is in doubt, with the government terming the tribal leadership it had sought to legitimise as "extremist and prone to armed rebellion", in effect questioning its credentials. Moreover, the events leading up to the police action at

Muthanga, especially the hostage-taking and the violent resistance by AGS activists, have only helped strengthen the aspersions cast on the AGS leadership and raised questions about its motives.

The allegations have focussed on the growing influence of political extremists and missionary groups (serving the cause of the largely Christian settler farmer lobby) on the organisation that claims to represent tribal interests. State Forest Minister K. Sudhakaran had told a press conference in New Delhi that the government had doubts that the agitation had support from "outside forces", "the ivory mafia" and "people with questionable backgrounds".

With the government terming it radical and seeing the hidden hands of political extremists in the Muthanga incidents, the AGS leadership may no longer get the benefit of a soft approach by the State administration for its agitation programmes when it revives itself. This could force the AGS to take to



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Adivasi agitation leaders M. Geethanandan and C.K. Janu after their arrest.

C.K. Janu, to find at least one acre of government land for each landless Adivasi family in the State. In the months that followed, the government distributed a mere 1,747.82 acres. The Adivasis soon realised that most of the land that the government had identified for distribution was either located in protected reserve forests, which could not be assigned without the approval of the Central government and the Supreme Court, or land entangled in legal problems. Despite its apparent sincerity, the Antony government seemed to be unable to deliver and landed in a crisis as a result of its hasty promises.

However, when the Adivasis increased pressure on the government to fulfil its promises and its constitutional responsibility of eventually allowing autonomous tribal areas in the State, unseen dark forces tried to foment trouble by setting fire to the forest area encroached by AGS activists at Muthanga. The encroachment by the tribal people

that point on. It instead, steered a promising agitation towards a violent, hostage-taking route, with disastrous results.

THE consequences of the Muthanga agitation going out of hand are many for the government, the AGS leadership and the Adivasi community in general. For one, the Janu-led Adivasi movement, which picked up steam in less than a year (and surely with government patronage), has been derailed. With Janu and the other leader, M. Geethanandan (a former naxalite), in jail and facing serious charges, it may take a while, if at all, for a revival of the movement.

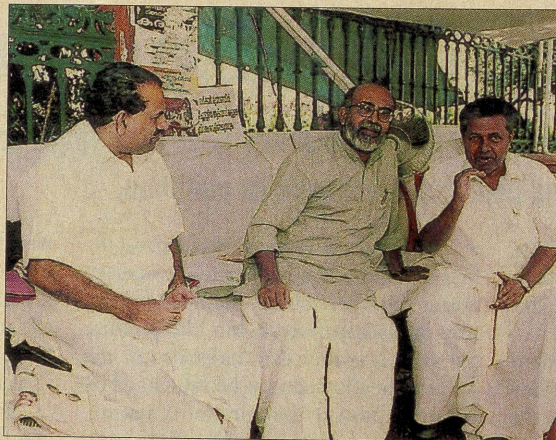
The Muthanga incident has also put a question mark on the fate of the agreement the Antony government signed with the AGS leaders. The agreement had sought to change the focus of the tribal agitation from one demanding "restoration of alienated tribal land"

self. This could force the AGS to take to more radical measures in order to survive.

The significance of the falling out of the Antony government and the AGS is to be found in the eagerness of several mainstream political parties, including the CPI(M), the Communist Party of India, the BJP, the PDP and the CPI(ML), to enter the fray to further their own influence in the tribal areas. The CPI (M)'s Adivasi Kshema Samiti (AKS) had established itself as a rival to the AGS and had, following the Muthanga encroachment by the AGS, put up its own settlements in about 15 places in north and south Wayanad from January 15. The other parties have also announced their strategies for furthering the Adivasi cause and have drawn up programmes to strengthen their respective movements.

The net result of all this, including the direction the AGS has sought to take at Muthanga, could be the absence of a credible tribal leadership that will speak up for purely tribal concerns and for the entire tribal community. Sadly such a situation has arisen at a crucial juncture in their history when the Adivasis of Kerala have managed to make their voices heard all over the country, if not abroad.

The Muthanga incident leaves the government with the comfortable option of either sleeping on the Adivasi issue for the rest of its term or going



Left leaders (from right) Pinnarayi Vijayan, T.M. Thomas Isaac and Kodyeri Balakrishnan on a hunger strike in Thiruvananthapuram.

ahead with its promise of land identification and distribution, but at its own pace. Moreover, the branding of the AGS as an organisation tainted by extremist elements has only helped those forces that are out to sabotage the tribal land distribution programme, among them settler farmers and forest mafias.

Several questions remain to be answered regarding the events surrounding the police action at Muthanga and may be revealed only through a judicial inquiry. Opposition MLAs and human rights organisations have repeatedly alleged that many more people than the officially recorded figure had died and that nearly 130 people are still missing. There was no doubt how embarrassing and costly the answers to these questions would be for the Antony government. Hence its continued reluctance to order

a judicial probe. On March 5, under tremendous pressure, Antony did give an indication that he may agree to the Opposition demand.

As the events that followed the police action at Muthanga have indicated, on the basis of an aberrant incident in which the AGS leadership probably went wrong and unseen forces played a dark role to sabotage the Antony-Janu agreement of 2001, the entire tribal population in the State was sought to be penalised. The dream of acquiring a piece of land now seems as distant as it always was for the tribal people in Kerala.

On March 5, accusing the Opposition parties of trying to gain political mileage out of an unfortunate situation, Chief Minister Antony said that regardless of what had happened, his government would continue its effort to distribute land to all landless Adivasi families in the State before the end of its term. Given its record in the months following the signing of the agreement and that of previous governments in honouring promises made to the tribal people, the Adivasis who make up but only 1.1 per cent of the State's population are likely to take such statements with a generous pinch of salt.

Sadly, the Muthanga incident has at least for the moment derailed an effective group that had emerged from within the tribal community and had in a short period gained the potential to argue powerfully and credibly for Adivasi interests whenever the government showed signs of failing to deliver on its promises. In a way it is a fate, which the AGS bought upon itself by exposing itself to the allegations of seeking extreme measures to further the tribal cause. However, despite its immediate discomfiture, it is a fact that leaves the State government in a comfortable position *vis-a-vis* its promises to the tribal community.

Both the Antony government and the AGS could prove their critics wrong by turning their back on Muthanga and sticking to their original plan of action. But there are strong forces in the State that may never allow such a rapprochement to happen. Ultimately, it boils down to the issue of finding the land required for distribution to all the landless tribal families. The melee following the Muthanga incident and the clamour for a judicial inquiry has submerged this basic fact. ■

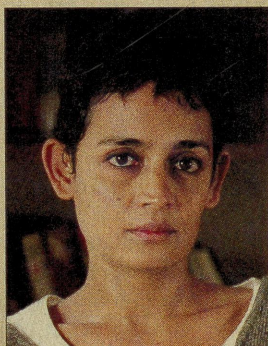


At the government hospital in Sultan Bathery, tribal people injured in the police action at Muthanga.

“You have blood on your hands”

Arundhati Roy to Kerala Chief Minister Antony.

Following a visit to Muthanga and its vicinity, the writer Arundhati Roy wrote a letter to the Kerala Chief Minister, A.K. Antony. Here is the text of the letter, dated February 27, 2003:



BRADIP KISHEN

There are some moments in the life of a society when something happens to put its moral fibre on public display.

This is one such moment. The Muthanga atrocity will go down in Kerala's history as a government's attempt to decimate an extraordinary and historical struggle for justice by the poorest, most oppressed community in Kerala. It will go down in history because, unlike most 'struggles' in Kerala, it is not a petty, cynical fight between political parties jockeying for power. It is the real fight of the truly powerless against the powerful. It is the stuff of which myths are made.

I visited the Muthanga sanctuary (partly used as a eucalyptus plantation for Grasim's Gwalior Rayons factory, which has recently been closed) where the Kerala Police opened fire on hundreds of Adivasi. I visited the Sultan Bathery hospital where the wounded have been admitted. I visited some Adivasi settlements close to the sanctuary. I also visited the Calicut jail and met C.K. Janu and Geethanandan, both of whom are recovering after having been badly beaten by the police. Apart from this I spoke with several eyewitnesses to the firing.

For the Kerala Police to open fire on a group of hundreds of people including women, children, old people and infants is an act that has few parallels in recent history. The event that comes to mind is Jallianwallah Bagh. According to eyewitness accounts the official death toll of two is completely untrue. The people I spoke to reported a much higher toll. Had they belonged to any other community that mattered to mainstream political parties, the manner in which the crisis and its fallout were handled would have been quite different.

There is absolutely no justification or excuse for what happened. Even the police version of being provoked by a

'hostage' crisis is not a justification. To open fire like that with no attempt to negotiate shows a deep lack of respect for human life – not just Adivasi lives, but also the lives of the policeman and the forest official who were taken hostage. It is not the way governments in the past have dealt with kidnappings and hijackings by real militants. While those who killed the policeman must certainly be punished, you cannot hold all the people present there – or the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha or indeed the entire Adivasi community – responsible for that act.

Survivors who I spoke to in hospital were less traumatised by their own injuries than by the fact that many of their family members including small children had gone missing. I met a man whose child had fallen from his arms when he was brought down by a police lathi and has been missing since then. There are others, women and old people missing. It is not known whether they are dead, or alive or hiding, hurt and hungry in the sanctuary.

A week has passed and no effort has been made to draw up lists of the missing and crosscheck them with jail and hospital records and reassure those who are rigid with grief and uncertainty about their loved ones. Can you even bear to think how you would feel in their place?

Meanwhile the police is terrorising Adivasis in the region. Policemen enter settlements and arbitrarily arrest the men folk, beating them and dragging them away. Their families have no idea what has become of them. When we approached the villages we found ghost-settlements with only a few frightened women and children. The men who remained all ran away. It took a lot to persuade them that we were not government officials or police-informers. Clearly the intention is to stamp out the struggle completely. By visiting this kind of vicious reprisal on the whole community, the government hopes that people will blame their leaders for putting them on the path that lead to such terrible times for them. It is a ruthless political game by accomplished players.

Journalists and cameramen have been threatened and intimidated. After the firing they were denied access to the interiors of the sanctuary where people went to hide. For fifteen hours after the firing the place was closed to the media. Nobody knows what really happened during that period. In an attempt to terrorise members of civil society who may have any sympathies with the Adivasis, the police have arrested a DIET (District Institute for Educational Training) lecturer K.K. Surendran. He was tortured in custody and reports say that he has a ruptured ear drum. At the moment he is being held in Kannur jail.

The result of this police-raj is that Adivasis are too frightened to go to work. People are frightened to employ them. In effect, they are starving to death in their villages – their ration cards have been burnt in the carnage. This is an exacerbation of the situation that led them to fight for the return of their alienated lands in the first place.

This is to urge you to immediately release people who have been held on baseless charges and see that they are able to return safely to their villages. Most have lost all their worldly possessions – they have no food, no vessels to carry water, and no clothes to wear. (People and well-wishers had to take them clothes in jail). Everything has been burned and destroyed by the police in their 'action'.

Forgotten in the reportage about the carnage and its aftermath is the fact that this confrontation was the outcome of yet another cynical promise by the Government of Kerala to provide land to 53,000 Adivasi families by the end of December 2002. It was another link in the chain of 28 years of unforgivable manipulation. Ours is a nation built on the jagged shards of broken dreams.

You have blood on your hands, sir. You need to make amends. And quickly.

P.S: A small observation: In its eagerness to restore the eucalyptus plantation to its pristine condition, apart from killing human beings, between bouts of firing the police squadron had a picnic lunch. The plastic cups and plates scattered on the 'eco-sensitive' battlefield tell a story. This one meal by the guardians of the State produced more non-biodegradable waste than the homes and worldly possessions of one thousand Adivasi families.

Arundhati Roy

U 18 Green Park
New Delhi

What really happened

An account of the sequence of events in the Muthanga forest on February 19.

MARI MARCEL THEKAEKARA

WHAT really happened at Muthanga in Wayanad district on February 19, when the police went berserk against Adivasis who were demanding the return of their land? One policeman and one Adivasi were officially declared dead in the violent clash, but the stories that circulated were a clutch of contradictions, making it impossible to gauge the truth. First reports said that extremists – the People’s War Group, the People’s Democratic Party, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – were involved.

The following sequence of events was pieced together after talking to eyewitnesses, including mediapersons and local people. The official version was given by District Collector K. Gopalan at Kalpetta. The police version could not be got as the personnel were not available for comment.

The District Collector is of the view that “it was the hostage situation” that precipitated the violence in what was a completely peaceful situation for almost a month and a half.

He said: “The Adivasis began pouring into the area on January 1. They had been promised land by December 30. I was on leave and on hearing about this I rushed back. We contacted Thiruvananthapuram. The government was under the impression that this was a token protest; the people were really poor. The Chief Minister was sympathetic. I have no party affiliations. But for the first time in spite of great opposition, the Chief Minister has put into motion a process to give land to Adivasis. We have identified some thousands of acres and funds have been allocated. I have already distributed land. So we did not take any action other than requesting them to come out.”

“What sparked the trouble?”

The Collector said: “The Forest Department was doing its routine work of creating fire breaks. The Adivasis felt a fire was started to drive them out and they seized 21 people on February 17. Officials considered it dangerous for me to go into the forest alone at night, so I went the next day. Between 9 a.m. and

1-30 p.m., DySP (Deputy Superintendent of Police) K. Unni and I managed the release of all the prisoners. We dealt with the second line of leadership, Asokan and Haridasan. They are not Adivasis. They were cordial and friendly. Janu (C.K. Janu, leader of the Adivasi agitation) was nowhere on the scene. The men were in total control.”

“You managed the negotiation with utmost diplomacy and no force whatsoever. Why, then, did the police have to go back the next day?”

The Collector replied: “The local people were furious because their neighbours had been taken hostage. They stopped my car and demanded the arrest of those responsible. At that point the government decided to proceed with eviction.”

THE police moved in the next morning. Ayappan (name changed), an inhabitant of one of the villages directly overlooking the scene of the clashes and a witness to the incident, said: “This was a eucalyptus plantation. Three years ago, they clear-felled it. (This is clearly visible and was what prompted Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, who visited the site, to ask, ‘It is not forest, why can’t they give it to Adivasis.’) On January 1, Adivasis began to arrive in droves. Word had spread like wildfire that they were going to get land. Even while the police were firing, some Adivasis arrived asking, ‘where is the land they are giving us?’ They settled in three pockets – Thagarapadi, Ponkuzhi and Ambukthy. The Forest Department officials came every day, circled the site, checked and left. It was peaceful.”

Ayappan continued: “People used to go for manual labour and return in the evening. After the hostage-taking on February 17, the situation became tense. On February 19, the police arrived. They announced, ‘Everyone should vacate.’”

By the time mediapersons arrived, the police were already there. Said Ajeeb, photographer of the Malayalam daily *Madhyamam*: “We (the press) arrived at 6 a.m. It was very quiet. The Adivasis didn’t seem to know that the police were there. There was no one at their check-post. We looked around.”

Madhyamam reporter Mohammed Sharif reported that an 800-strong police force surrounded the area. Using megaphones, they began to shout, “Everyone vacate this land you have wrongfully occupied.” “At about 10-30 a.m. the watchers moved the posts. The police fired tear gas. But the leaders went around saying, ‘Don’t panic. Don’t rush. Nothing will happen.’ It was amazing. They did not panic even when the tear gas hit them. The women began packing their few possessions – clothes, rice, vessels – tying everything in their mats. They didn’t anticipate violence. When the young Adivasi men came to the barrier, the police responded with a lathicharge. The men brandished machetes, the kind every Kerala farmer carries, and axes. Many had catapults, bows and arrows.”

This bows-and-arrows story was puzzling. Only Mullukurumbas and Kuri-chiyas used bows and arrows. They were the only hunter tribes. Others were food-gatherers. Hunter tribesmen who saw the newspaper pictures, said, “They don’t know even how to hold the bow properly. If they were expert archers, the arrows would have moved with speed and hit the police. You wouldn’t have had just one dead body.”

“Paniyas, Kattunaickens and Adiyas don’t know how to shoot,” this writer pointed out.

Ajeeb laughed. “Yes. They were only using it to threaten. Finally, when the police attack became serious, they threw down the bows and hurled the arrows by hand, which, of course, had no impact. This was when the battle began in earnest. It was like watching a war. The police would advance, and the Adivasis would hurl stones and knives. Then both sides retreated. The Adivasis retreated into the thick forest and the police hid in the bushes. The Adivasis then set fire to the bushes to drive away the police. One Adivasi threw a plastic bag, but he didn’t open it properly. It contained bees. At this point, with the fire and smoke, the police personnel ran helter-skelter. A policeman and a forest official ran into the Adivasis. They were tied up.”

At around 11-10 a.m. according to



Tribal youth during their clash with the police force at the Muthanga forest on February 19.

Sharif, a 10-member police party led by Sub-inspectors (S.I.) Unnikrishnan and Chathu ran into a 100-strong group of the Adivasi Gothra Sabha (AGS) activists in the Perunkuzhi forest. An encounter ensued. S.I. Unnikrishnan drew out his service revolver and began firing. People from both sides ran pell-mell. Two S.I.s and three policewomen sustained injuries. No one knew how many Adivasis were hurt. DySP Unni recalled his forces to plan strategy.

At 11-40 a.m. the police launched a search operation. They moved in two groups and converged on a large shed. There they found constable Aziz of Kannur battalion, badly injured in the leg. After they moved him out on a stretcher, their mood changed. Rifles and revolvers cocked, they moved forward. "Everyone surrender immediately," they yelled. "We will not leave our land," the Adivasis retorted. "We will open fire. You will die," the police warned.

AGS leader Asokan stepped forward, tore open his shirt to bare his chest, and challenged the police: "Kill me first. Kill all of us – women, infants – fire the first shot." The police fired nine rounds in the air. They then issued a final warning. Asokan pulled out his trump card. "We have two of your men. The moment you start firing, we will kill them," he said. "Where are the hostages?" asked DySP Unni. A person lifted up the injured leg of policeman Vinod. He was lying on the ground, bleeding profusely.

"No one outside saw the policeman being knifed," said Ajeeb, taking up the

narration. "But the news infuriated the police. They moved in like enraged bulls. They hit women, children, the old and the infirm with their rifles and lathis... We saw them smash a man's leg over and over again. The reporters of *Deepika*, *Chandrika*, *The New Indian Express* and *Malayala Manorama* were there as the only eyewitnesses. We saw four or five bodies. We have photographs of three. All this was before they opened fire."

Said Sharif: "At 12-20 p.m. the Circle Inspector (CI) of the Kerala Armed Police (KAP), Sasidharan, came forward. 'Asokan, we are ready for negotiations,' he announced. Asokan replied, 'No negotiations with the police. You withdraw from our forest.' DySP Unni approached the mediapersons, seeking their intervention. Asokan insisted that the police withdraw. They withdrew 50 metres. 'Treatment is required for not just the injured policeman but the Adivasis too,' he said and wanted a doctor to be brought to the camp. The police refused. 'You release the injured and we will take them all to hospital,' they said. The police also dismissed Asokan's demands that the police retreat and that the Collector assure them that Adivasis would not be punished. The Adivasis also demanded that the Collector or a Minister or Deputy Inspector-General of Police (DIG) Shankar Reddy come for negotiations.

"At this point CI Sasidharan issued another warning. 'We shall discuss the land issue if you surrender. You know

the consequences of killing a policeman.' Asokan replied 'You killed two of us. Who gave you permission to shoot? Even the Cabinet meeting at 8-30 a.m. did not give you permission to shoot us.' The mediapersons asked: 'How do you know that?' No answer. Instead, Asokan demanded a doctor immediately. 'If the injured die, you will be held responsible,' he ended."

Sasidharan once more pleaded with mediapersons to mediate to save the life of the policeman. Sharif and Kairali television cameraman Shaji Pattanam went into the Adivasi camp. "It was around 4-30 p.m., the leaders invited us to photograph what was going on. I went in after them. They had asked for a doctor to treat the wounded but this was refused. I went into the shed and saw the policeman, Vinod, and the forest official. They were in extreme exhaustion. Vinod had been badly wounded and was blue. He asked for water, which they gave him. They told me to photograph him. I was frightened. I thought I too would be taken prisoner. I saw their leader Geethanandan and begged him to let me go. He did."

Sharif reported that Vinod and the forest official were soaked in blood. "They were lying on dry hay. The smell of kerosene was everywhere. Two volunteers were on either side with lighted torches held aloft." DySP Unni and Sasidharan appealed to the mediapersons to negotiate.

"Asokan put forth a set of demands: 'Release all the Adivasis; take the injured to hospital; the police withdraw; suspend the forest officials who set fire to our surroundings to evict us; order a CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) inquiry into the forest fire incident; give compensation for destroyed huts and possessions of the Adivasis; implement the agreement with the Adivasis.' Sasidharan responded that it was not within his powers to fulfil these demands. Asokan replied: 'They (the authorities) are camping in Muthanga. Bring them here.' The stalemate continued."

At 1 p.m. Asokan told the media: "The policeman is dying. Bring a doctor quickly." "Release him for treatment," replied the police. At 2 p.m. Sasidharan called out: "Will you surrender or not?" "No. We will never surrender," came the reply. Slogans reached fever pitch, with women and children joining in. Messages went back and forth on the wireless until, finally, the police withdrew. At 5-10 p.m. the police personnel returned and asked the mediapersons to leave.

Ten minutes later, they began firing, taking the Adivasis, who were expecting more negotiations, by surprise.

SHAJI PATTANAM climbed up a tree and recorded the events on camera. His footage is the only evidence of what happened after the other mediapersons were forced to leave.

Shaji described the scene:

"The tribal people were shouting slogans but standing far away. The police attacked first. The women started screaming and tried to run. The police began shooting. They used .303s not rubber bullets. Those who were not shooting were lashing out with their lathis. They dragged the women by the hair and hit them viciously. One small child had his head split open. A pregnant woman fell down but still they hit her. They hit even dead bodies. Maybe they were unconscious. But at the scene of an accident you know instinctively by the posture, a person is dead. I counted four or five.

"Then I fell from the tree. A policeman saw me and shouted. They surrounded me. A bullet whizzed past my face; my head was spinning. One policeman kicked me, another hit me on the head and I fell on my camera. I thought I was going to die. I ejected my cassette and shoved it into the front of my jeans."

Sharif reports:

"When the police began firing, the Adivasis did not know what hit them. They began screaming. Jogi, the man who was standing with the lighted torch over Vinod, was the first to be hit. Without waiting, the man next to Vinod hacked at him. He was immediately arrested. Then we heard non-stop gunfire; pitiful screams; people were running. The police were in hot pursuit, firing relentlessly at even women and children. Others followed, hitting them with lathis and rifles. They surrounded me and said: 'We will bury you also along with these people here.' It was a face-to-face encounter with death. I cannot describe how I ran and managed to escape. At least 15 people fell to the bullets. That is what I saw. The police were chasing and shooting women and tiny children. There is no count of those who fell and died there. Though the police and the

Chief Minister initially announced that five Adivasis had died, they later changed it to one. There were mobs assisting the police and forest officials to catch the Adivasis who escaped from the violence.

"The official explanation was that Jogi died after being hit by a plastic bullet. Is there a plastic bullet that can go from one side of the head to another? There was a small hole on one side and a big hole on the other. His brain was splattered outside. This gives an idea of the guns used. They were .303s. They were firing at women and children who were barely 50 metres away."

Shaji, who made friends with some policemen, asked one of them, "Did you burn all the bodies? I was there so I know the truth." The policeman, he said, laughed and replied: "No need to burn them. They are all buried in Pakshi Pathalam (a remote spot in the jungle). Not even a fly can find them."

The truth is buried deep in the forest with the unrecovered bodies. The government does not seem interested in uncovering the truth or the bodies. In Kerala, today, it does not matter. They are only Adivasis. Who cares where they sleep or how they die?

The villagers living close to the spot where the violence took place are sure that between 15 and 20 bodies were burnt in the aftermath of the carnage. "After setting fire to the place,

and burning everything to a cinder they brought in bulldozers and elephants to clear the evidence," they said. They are upset about the combing operations that continue. "The police have gone on the rampage, entering Adivasi villages and rounding up people. Even women are taken away. They are attacking the poorest Adivasis – the Paniyas, the Kattu-naickens and the Adiyas – who cannot fight back and have no idea what crime they have committed. There is a reign of terror. The police entered Pullithukki, Thelampatta and Nambikolli, where Janu was found.

The people are apprehensive about the days to come. The hunt goes on. "While the police have the right to search for fugitives, what is their rationale for beating up men and women who are obviously innocent?" ask the tribal people of Wayanad. ■

■ THE STATES

PRAVEEN SWAMI

in Jammu

LATE last year, the government of Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed took power in Jammu and Kashmir, promising to initiate a dramatic programme of change. The economy would be revived; the controversial Special Operations Group of the State police would be disbanded; the State's regions would receive genuine autonomy; an unconditional dialogue with secessionist organisations would soon commence. A little over a hundred days on, almost none of these has happened. Barring moments of action – a much-hyped drive to recover power dues, or the demolition of illegally constructed roadside stores in Jammu and Srinagar – very little forward movement has actually taken place. Like its unlamented predecessor, the People's Democratic Party-Congress (I) alliance government is just about managing to splutter on, its progress interrupted by noisy and increasingly regular backfires.

Desperation was evident in the enormous glee with which the State government welcomed the appointment of N.N. Vohra, the Principal Secretary to former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, as the Union government's new interlocutor in the State. The appointment was hailed by the State Cabinet as "a milestone on the road to peace", and the Chief Minister himself described it as "very good news." On February 19, Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani told Parliament that the veteran bureaucrat had been chosen to replace K.C. Pant, the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission. The Union government, Advani said, "would continue discussions with any group or section which eschewed the path of violence." It takes little to see that this formulation falls well short of Mufti Mohammad Sayeed's repeated calls for unconditional dialogue with all groups, including mainly ethnic-Kashmiri terrorist organisations. "The fact is," says Communist Party of India (Marxist) legislator Mohammad Yusuf Tarigami, "we need a structured, formal framework for dialogue, not just a change in faces." Pant, interestingly enough, had not insisted that groups he dealt with reject violence. Neither had Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who in 2000 offered a dialogue with armed groups without even insisting that they first accept the Indian Constitution. The Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission