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Reimagining Resources: Analyzing the Politics of Dalit Land Struggles in Kerala, India with Special Reference to Chengara

P. M. Joshy[1]

Abstract

This article explores the history of land alienation in Kerala, the representation of land in social reform movements and the ongoing land struggle in Chengara. The movements discussed in the present study have similarities in terms of the nature of social mobilization, which transcended the Brahmin-imposed sub-caste fragmentations and provided common platforms for the assertion of rights of the deprived sections. Even though the reform movements orchestrated by Ayyankali and Poykayil Appachan unified the slave castes around the issues of common concern, subsequently the ruling class succeeded in thwarting the movement by employing the strategy of sub-caste fragmentation. Similarly, the Chengara movement has also been facing the same plight. The Sadhujana Vimochana Samyukthavedi, inspired by Ayyankali's movement, succeeded in constructing a Dalit identity around the issue of land. However, the ruling class, with ardent support from the Communist Party of India (Marxist), tried hard to destroy the movement. The sub-caste issues played a vital role in the weakening of the movement. Therefore, the study observes that the guidance of a charismatic leader is significant in social mobilization, particularly in a caste-ridden society, for building trust and unity among the deprived sections and countering the maneuvers of the ruling class.

Keywords

Caste System, Land Alienation, Social Reform Movements, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Kerala Model, Dalit Land Struggles

[1]Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Sree Narayana College, Chempazhanthy, Kerala
Email: joshypmanilal20@gmail.com

Introduction

The story of Chengara has always been fodder for students of the Social Sciences. The literature about the struggle generally statured around issues such as the inadequacies of land reforms initiated by the first Left Government in Kerala, the persistence of the colonial pattern of landholding (the much-celebrated land reform legislation did not touch the plantation sector), and the quest for a second land reform in Kerala (Rammohan, 2008; Sreerekha, 2012; Kapikkad, 2017; Iyer, 2018; Sebastian, 2019; Vipitha, 2023). The Dalits faced 'Triple exclusion' from land ownership: 1) exclusion due to the caste system, 2) consistently excluded from the process of land reforms, and 3) the current trends in land market activities tends to exclude the Dalits from land ownership (Yadu & Vijayasuryan, 2016; Herring, 1980). Evidently, 55 per cent of the Scheduled Caste population in Kerala lives in 26,109 Dalit colonies spread across the state and 92 per cent of the Adivasis lives in 4,645 colonies (Kapikkad, 2017, pp. 31–32). Therefore, the issue of land became a common denominator among the Dalits and Adivasis in Kerala. The Muthanga land struggle in 2003 was a breakthrough to the established images about the Kerala Model of development. The movement problematized the land alienation of the Adivasis and highlighted their constitutional rights (Raman, 2002; Bijoy & Raman, 2003; Raman, 2004). Thus, the Adivasi struggles in the later part of the twentieth century once again put the land issue in the center stage. In this premise, the Chengara land struggle occurred with new insights and strategies about social mobilization.

The present study locates the Chengara movement in the historical background of land alienation and subjugation of the lower caste people, their resurrection under the leadership of Ayyankali and Poykayil Appachan, the formation of an inclusive Dalit identity capable of bargaining with the established centers of power, and waning of the movement in the whirlpool of sub-caste power struggles. Similarly, the Chengara struggle stretched beyond the sub-caste contours and constructed a Dalit identity around the issue of land. However, as what happened in the reformist era, the movement declined due to sub-caste conflicts. Since the inception of the caste system in India, the ruling class scattered the underprivileged into numerous sub-caste groups. The graded-hierarchy imposed by Brahminical Hinduism remained a major hindrance to Dalit unity. The disunity of the Dalits provided enough immunity to the upper caste sections to accumulate more wealth and power, and the ruling class strategically used the sub-caste fragmentations to thwart any possible unified Dalit movement.

The study has been divided into four major heads. The first part explains the systematic exclusion of the Dalits from their ancestral land during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. The second address the representation of land in social reform movements led by Ayyankali and Poykayil Appachan, the two important visionaries of Dalit movements in Kerala. The third part of the study critically examines the nuances of the much-celebrated 'Kerala Model' of Development. The fourth links the erstwhile social reform movements and the ongoing Chengara land struggle. Laha Gopalan modelled the Chengara movement in tune with the movement of Ayyankali.

As an inclusive movement, the Chengara set the background for a mass movement of the Dalits in Kerala. However, the persisting sub-caste divisions and the leadership aspirations of the leaders paved the way for the decline of the movement. The methodology used in the study is historical and analytical. In the preparation of the manuscript, we gave paramount importance to original sources, and the primary data were collected from the field through in-depth interviews.

History of Land Alienation in Kerala

Land alienation in Kerala has been inextricably linked to the caste system that marginalized the Dalits and Adivasis from mainstream society. The caste system ideationally and materially enforced the social hierarchy and fragmented the untouchables into numerous sub-caste groups (Ambedkar, 1917/1979).[1] What the caste system did to the untouchables is well evident in the pattern of land possession existing in Kerala. Most importantly, history speaks about a story that would be helpful to understanding the Brahminical transformations in Kerala. Accordingly, much before the Brahmin settlement, private ownership of land began in Kerala. The owners were the 'untouchables' in the Brahminical period such as Pulayas, Idayas, Vedas and Valluvas, who were either cultivators or local chieftains (Pillai, 1970). With the coming of Brahmin settlers, the real inhabitants of the land were sidelined. The Brahmins succeeded in establishing their hegemony—sustained through rituals, social practices, unequal resource distribution, and division of labor as intellectual and physical (the caste system holds the image that mental labor is superior to physical labor). Therefore in Kerala, the lower caste peoples' lives were frozen for centuries without any material and intellectual development.

Erstwhile Kerala was divided into three parts: Malabar, Kochi and Travancore. Malabar was under direct British rule. Both Kochi and Travancore were under Monarchy and accepted a subordinate status to the British East India Company. The feudal system in medieval Kerala demarcated caste-based hierarchy of land rights. Accordingly the Agrestic Slaves: Pulayas, Cherumars, Parayas and others were prohibited to accumulate any wealth including the land (Pillai, 1970; Veluthat, 1978). However, the aggregated exploitative system in Malabar faced severe crisis during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The socio-political oppression by the upper caste sections under British patronage prompted the Mappila peasants to violently revolt against the exploitative system (Logan, 1951; Panikkar 1989; 2021). Even though the circumstances of the Hindu lower caste people was miserable, they were

[1]The Caste system had divided the Hindu society into four water-tight compartments- Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vyshya and Shudra. The Adivasis or the indigenous people were regarded as outsiders of the Varna system or they were treated as non-human. The caste system imposed a strict division of labour in which the Brahmins, the priest class, enjoyed the most privileged status. The Kshatriya were the warrior class who maintained the statuesque. The Vyshya caste were engaged in trade and commerce. The people in the Shudra caste were in the bottom line of the Varna system, assigned to do bonded labour to all other upper caste sections in the society (See Ambedkar, 1917).

not in a position to oppose exploitation. The ideological apparatus constructed and preserved by the Brahmins had given no space to the untouchables to be a unified force against the exploitative system.

Unlike Malabar, Travancore the southern princely state of Kerala considerably enjoyed immunity from foreign conquests, which had enabled the state to maintain the land-holding status quo. As elsewhere in Kerala, the Brahmins hold the land by using the theory of Jenmam rights. With the introduction of a graded hierarchy, the Brahmins became the owners of all the resources, particularly the land. The Travancore State Manual states that:

> … all the lands in Travancore belong to a body of Janmis. There are no lands that do not belong to some Janmi or other, also Sirkar (State/Government) itself is one of these Janmis, it having come to possess Janmam lands by gift, purchase, escheat, confiscation and otherwise (Pillai, 1940/1996, pp. 134–135).

In Travancore, the land administration was legally well-codified, and maintained the status quo without any alteration.[2] However, with the integration of the Travancore economy into the capitalist core, drastic changes happened in the state. Post the treaty signed between the Government of Travancore and British colonialists in 1795 and 1805, Travancore became an ally of the Empire and as per the treaty, the Government of Travancore had to pay a huge amount to the British government for providing security to the princely state. To deal with the situation, an increase in agricultural production was inevitable. In this context, the Travancore government was forced to distribute full ownership rights to the cultivators. The Government in Cochin princely state was also forced to make similar structural changes (Varghese, 1970). The Travancore government also initiated commercialization of the traditional agriculture sector by inviting the Europeans to start plantations in the hilly areas of the state (Government of Travancore, 1915). The emerging scenario set the framework for larger socio-economic transformations in Kerala. Specifically, in Travancore, with the Pandarappattom proclamation of 1865[3] (Pillai, 1953, pp. 144–145), there emerged a middle stratum of peasantry mainly from the upper castes, including a substantial number of Ezhavas (Varghese, 1970). Subsequently, the ownership of land was diffused among all caste groups, which had only a marginal effect on the untouchable slave castes of Travancore such as Pulayas, Parayas and Kuravas. They came under

[2]In Travancore there was well-codified land system. For the practical purposes it was divided into six categories- 1) Sirkar or Pandaravaga (Sirkar is in the position of landlord), 2) Sirkar Devaswamvaga (Devaswam land taken over by the Government), 3) Kandukrishi (private property of the sovereign, and tenants have no rights of property in them), 4) Sreepadamvaga (land possessed by Edavagas), 5) Sreepandaramvaga (lands allotted for temples) and 6) Janmam (Devaswam and Brahmaswam lands) (The Government of Travancore 1915, pp. 1-18).

[3]In Travancore, during the period of King Marthandavarma, the entire assets were regarded as the property of the State Treasury (Pandaram). The Pandarappattom Proclamation of 1865 together with the Janmi-Kudiyan Proclamations of 1867 is hailed as the 'Magna Carta' of the Travancore ryots. Pandarappattom was like a lease without any transferable right. By the royal proclamations, the holders of these lands were given full property rights (See Pillai, 1953).

the category of 'agrestic slaves', as noted in colonial and missionary documents, and were bought and sold like any other property by their landlords (Saradamoni, 1980, p. 10). The oral narratives of slaves available in missionary records show how they constantly feared the impending danger of separation and alienation (Mohan, 2015, pp. 27–28; Jeffrey, 2023).

With the expansion of British capitalist interests in the region, there were attempts to move on the existing stagnant economic system. The non-competitive and sluggish nature of economic activities based on social stratification was identified as a major hindrance on the path of British commercial interests. In the traditional Keralite society, land was only depicted as a status symbol. There were hardly any attempts to improve its productivity (Jeffrey, 1979, pp. 29–32). Conversely, the Britishers introduced the principles of modern capitalism, accordingly, the land was regarded as a transferrable material asset that might be used for making profit. They introduced new avenues of cultivation (plantations) that demanded cheap labour. The Travancore government ensured the availability of cheap labour through the abolition of slavery in 1853 (Menon, 1911, p. 262; Saradamoni, 1980, p. 80; Jeffrey, 1979; Yesudas, 1980; Raman, 2000; Balakrishnan, 2020). While the abolition of slavery only partially liberated the agrestic slaves from their traditional bondages, Saradamoni viewed that:

> The ruling powers native as well as foreign—wanted the status-quo to be maintained with minimum adjustments. This could be seen in the overt references of the Travancore rulers to caste practices and the British emphasis on the need to protect private property (1980, p. 96).

Similarly, in Cochin State Manual, Achyuta Menon observed that even fifty years after the formal abolition of slavery in the state, the life situation of the slave castes had not changed. After the formal ending of slavery, they had no land for cultivation and were paid in kind and at the same old rates (1911). Even though the abolition of slavery produced relatively free labour from the clutches of feudal landlords, the untouchable agriculture workers were not liberated from the caste structure—because, the native state rulers, as well as the colonialists, were reluctant to alter the root cause of slavery in Kerala—the caste system. However, the abolition of slavery and interactions with missionaries gave the slave castes new images of life. To attain the goals, they had to negotiate with the established regimes. With accessibility to new resources such as land, education and other secular institutional spaces, they were keen to start their lives as free people. In this scenario, social reform movements emerged in Kerala.

Representation of Land in Social Reform Movements

By the end of the nineteenth century, with missionary activities,[4] there was a realisation among different strata of people that modern Western education should be the source

[4]The activities of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and London Missionary Society (LMS) provided new religious practices and social space to the untouchable castes in Kerala. Missionary Christianity, Schools, hospitals, courts and markets opened up a new space for

of liberation from the anti-human social practices of a caste-ridden society. But the education of untouchables was vehemently opposed by upper caste landlords because they feared that if the agrestic slaves acquired education, they may not get cheap labour (Chentharassery, 2005, p. 21; Mohan, 2015, pp. 116–118). It was against this background that Ayyankali (1863-1941), a charismatic leader from Pulaya, an agrestic slave caste, emerged. Ayyankali was significantly inspired by the revolutionary movement of Sree Narayana Guru, a social reformer from southern Travancore (Saradamoni, 1980, p. 36).[5] Most importantly, the social reform movements orchestrated by Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and Poykayil Appachan attacked the discriminatory caste practices prevailing in Kerala society and they became torchbearers on the path of the liberation of the underprivileged.

Even though he belonged to the Pulaya community, Ayyankali (1803-1941), a pragmatic leader and revolutionary in spirit and practice, was not ready to limit his space within the contours of the sub-caste divisions imposed by Brahminical Hinduism. All people socially marginalised and exploited were one caste in his eyes (Chentharassery, 2005, p. 19). Taking inspiration from Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP, Organisation for the preservation of Sree Narayana Dharma) formed by Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali founded Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS, Servile Peoples' Welfare Organization) in 1907. Notably, the organization was not meant for any particular caste, rather it provided a platform for all the depressed servile people. The uniqueness of Ayyankali's movement was that he was uninterested in being a part of any religious sect, but rather deeply concerned about the deprived status of the Dalits. The SJPS brought solidarity among the marginalised sections, and unified them under the title 'Sadhu Janam' (Servile People). The SJPS and its activities can be seen as the genesis of the emergence of modern Dalit consciousness in Kerala (Nisar & Kandasamy, 2009, p. 75; Mohan, 2016, pp. 78–79).

Ayyankali identified three important pillars for the upliftment of the historically marginalised sections in Kerala: 1. accessibility to public space, 2. modern education and, 3. availability of land for cultivation. In 1913, Ayyankali led the historical struggle, the first strike by agricultural workers in Kerala to open the doors of schools for untouchable children. The upper caste landlords unleashed ruthless violence against the movement, though the laborers showed the strength of their unity amid extreme poverty and oppression. The strike spanned one year and in 1914 the historic strike of the agriculture laborers was called off as they had their demands accepted by

public interaction. However, as far as the slave castes are concerned, the institutional space was not fully accessible and with the Missionary teachings and prayers, the untouchables acquired a sense of new social imagination which was absent in their lived experiences. For a discussion see (Mohan, 2015; Balakrishnan, 2020).

[5]Sree Narayana Guru, a revolutionary Saint, who emerged from the middle caste Ezhava, had questioned the inhuman caste practices of the Hindu religion. His revolutionary endeavours inspired many and were the beginning point of social reform movements in Kerala. The activities of Guru such as temple consecration in Aruvippuram and elsewhere in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, his support to Vaikom Satyagraha and other anti-caste movements inspired his contemporaries and future generations (See Jeffrey 1974; 1976).

the Travancore Government (Chentharassery, 2005, pp. 28–29). The strike showed off the linkage between labor and land that had historically been undermined by the landlords. Simultaneously, Ayyankali demanded agricultural land for his people. Then onwards, the land has achieved a symbolic value, represented as a material base for liberation. He was nominated to the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly (SMPA, since 1912 Ayyankali was a member of successive state legislature for two decades). As the sole representative of the Dalits in the Assembly, Ayyankali represented the problems of the entire Dalits in the Assembly beyond narrow casteist mentality (Nisar & Kandasamy, 2009, p. 85). He fought in and out of the Assembly for social justice.

During his long tenure in SMPA, Ayyankali frequently raised land issues and demanded favors from the government (Saradamoni, 1980, pp. 159–160). In response to Ayyankali's demands in the assembly, Travancore state favorably considered the distribution of Puduval land for the Dalits. The Dalits were allowed to use land in few areas like in Neyyattinkara, Nedumangad, Viluvamcode, etc. (Nisar & Kandasamy, 2009, p. 86). Even though this had a marginal impact on the lives of Dalits, symbolically the issue of land got wider attention, and set a new perspective for Dalit politics in Kerala.

During the lifetime of Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan (Poykayil Sree Kumaraguru) a social reformer emerged among the slave castes, contested the religiously insisted caste segregations and abandoned Hindu religion. He belongs to the Paraya community, agrestic slave castes like the Pulayas, who was inspired by the religious teachings of Christian missionaries. Appachan was fascinated by the humanism of Christianity, and its concept of equality and spiritual security. He embraced Christianity and became a devoted follower of the Marthoma Church. He became a Christian evangelist, and worked among the slave castes in the plantations. However, he was disturbed by the caste discrimination within the Marthoma Church, where the converted Christians were represented as 'Pulaya' Christians and 'Paraya' Christians. In his speeches, Appachan problematized the caste segregation and eventually left the Marthoma Church with his followers (Rejikumar, 2005, pp. 14–21; Mohan, 2015, pp. 155–156; Mohan, 2016, pp. 87–89; Chirappad, 2015, pp. 24–28). The discrimination experienced by his people in both Hindu religion and Christian churches prompted Poykayil to start independent initiatives to liberate the slave castes. It was in this context Appachan formed Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS, The God that redeems in person organisation) in 1910. Like Ayyankali, Poykayil spoke for all the sections of the Dalit community. He had problematized the distribution of material resources, particularly land in Travancore, and recognised the lack of accessibility of land as the major reason behind the historical marginalization of his people. Often, he raised this question in SMPA.

Poykayil demanded land for all the people of his community and requested the government not to grant land to other communities without resolving their demand. He further requested the government to conduct a survey of the landless people of his community and to give 2-10 acres of land to each family without imposing base land prices and timber prices. He stated that many communities owned acres of land

and kept them without any cultivation. Therefore, he requested the government to grant the unutilized land to his people. Poykayil put forward another demand that the reserve forest land suitable for cultivation should be given to his people, and further, the government should impose a tax on those lands only after several years (Poykayil, 1921, March 1, cited in Rejikumar, 2005, pp. 51–52; Chentharassery, 1983; Chirappad, 2015). Poykayil observed that all the fertile and cultivable land was given to the upper caste people and only wasteland was distributed to his people. He requested the government to appoint experienced revenue officials in each district to allocate land to his people (Poykayil 1931, March 3, cited in Rejikumar, 2005, pp. 53–55). However, various bitter experiences from the upper castes prompted Poykayil to suggest his people to buy land with their labour. Following his words, the PRDS with financial support from his people purchased land across Kerala (Chentharassery, 1983, p. 48; Rejikumar, 2005, pp. 46–47, 60–66). Thus, Poykayil opened new avenues for his people to cope with the challenges imposed by the dominant centers of power in the emerging Keralite society.

Theoretically speaking, both Ayyankali and Poykayil set a common platform for Dalits. Ayyankali, through his mobilizations, problematized the historical issues responsible for their exclusion from the civil domain, and forcefully opened the doors of modernity to the slave castes. Most importantly, Ayyankali's perspective was modern and his focus was solely on the material and educational prosperity of his community. In a modern society, the availability of material resources, and accessibility to modern social and institutional space- abstractly, an inclusive civil society and public sphere is a necessary prerequisite for the people to get into the mainstream. Moreover, Ayyankali envisaged SJPS as an inclusive space, a Dalit space, for all the sub-caste groups to deal with the established centers of power. The very title of his organization resonates the necessity of unity among the untouchables. The fragmented people and their hierarchical social status prevented the slave castes from becoming a unified force against the exploitative system. Therefore, with the establishment of SJPS, Ayyankali provided a new space for the deprived sections and mobilized his people towards the issues of common concern. However, after Ayyankali left active politics, SJPS failed to sustain unity among its people. The ruling class succeeded in thwarting the lower caste unity. The government of Travancore's decision to nominate members from each sub-caste group to SMPA limited the possibility of the sustenance of Dalit unity, and also the internal schism in SJPS weakened the organisation. The decline of SJPS proved to be a setback for Dalit unity and liberation.[6]

[6]After Ayyankali left active politics, sub-caste groups asserted in the organization. The sub-caste rivalries paved the way for parochial caste identity-based movements that did not have a social vision to hold the diverse communities together. The new generation was led by Kesavan Sastri. He dismantled SJPS and started a new organization of the Pulaya caste. The organization was narrowly defined which was presumably against the visions of Ayyankali. The ruling class used Sastri to torpedo SJPS. Not surprisingly, Sastri was a worker in the Hindu mission, which was controlled by the upper caste Hindus. Sri. C.P. Ramaswami Iyer, a Brahmin Divan of Travancore, worked out a truce that culminated in the marriage of Ayyankali's daughter to Sastri. The very development had badly affected the leadership of Ayyankali.

Like SJPS, after the demise of Poykayil, PRDS became an arena of conflicting interests. The conflict arose based on the debate on the influences of Hindu and Christian religions on the organisation. The PRDS fragmented into various independent groups such as Ettupara PRDS, Zebulon PRDS, Karimpanakkuzhi PRDS, Sathya PRDS, Mannuthadam PRDS, Asan PRDS, Kanakkari PRDS, Thottakkad PRDS and Janamma PRDS (Chirappad, 2015, pp. 83-84). The fragmentation of the organization weakened its bargaining capacity and further deteriorated the socio-economic capabilities of the community. It is pertinent to note that especially after the demise of the founding leaders, the slave castes moved towards fragmentation. The upper caste and middle caste groups gravitated towards centralization and used their collective power to accumulate resources.

After independence, Dalit movements declined in Kerala for multiple reasons. First, the representation of Dalit leaders in the popular assembly limited their criticisms against the regime, and gradually, the leaders deviated from a mass social movement to mere representatives of their particular communities in democratic engagements with the state. The withdrawal of Dalit organizations from social movements weakened the unity of the deprived sections. Also, leadership conflicts within these organizations gave rise to caste identities superseding Dalit unity. Second, with the emergence of Communist movements in Kerala, the majority of the Dalits imagined the Party as the messiah of liberating the slave castes. Meanwhile the Communist Party pursued the dormant class approach and left the issue of caste in the super-structure. The Party stuck to its position that the advancement in productive forces would eventually erase parochial caste identities, which would be replaced by class identity. However, capitalism developed in Kerala without altering the basic caste structure. Therefore, the Communist Party failed to rise to the expectations of Dalits because Dalit issues had been inextricably linked to the caste system (see Teltumbde, 2018, pp. 91–116). Third, the caste-based reservation system crystallized the caste system in its originality. Leaders like Ambedkar opined that the reservation system (quota system to the deprived sections in education and government employment sector) has to be removed since the state-led social transformation has been completed. But in the post-independence period, the Indian state failed to accomplish the task of social transformation, therefore the Dalits were frozen in the pre-set framework of reservation. Therefore, Ambedkar's idea of 'annihilation of caste' gave way to the crystallization of the caste system, and the Dalits are still struggling to get basic resources such as land even in Kerala.

Dalits in "Kerala Model"

The widely acclaimed "Kerala Model" combines low-level economic development with high levels of social development indicators. The protagonists of the 'model' advocate social indicators such as high literacy rates, low infant and maternal mortality

Sastri's resentment of Ayyankali was his decision to nominate Pampady John Joseph to the Popular Assembly. These developments show the role of external forces in deciding the course of Dalit movements (See Chentharassery, 2005, pp. 36-37; Mohan, 2016, pp. 95-96).

rates, low population growth, low crude death rate, and a strong public health system (Parayil, 1996, pp. 941–942; Heller, 1999). A strong sense of social security is the noteworthy feature of the Kerala Model. However, there were criticisms against the Kerala Model from different viewpoints, particularly emphasizing the exclusionary nature of the model (Saradamoni, 1994; Uyl, 1995; Devika, 2010; Madhavan & Komath, 2023). In the present context, the most notable drawback of the so-called Kerala Model of Development is its failure to address the symbiotic relations between land possession and socio-economic and cultural status. Historically, in all societies, those who control the land control the surplus, therefore the land remains the core determinant factor in deciding further accumulation and social status (Albertus, 2025, p. 12). In Kerala, with the introduction of land reforms, the Communist Party concluded that the question of land alienation has been resolved forever. This immature conclusion stems from an improper understanding of the caste question in Indian society. The Dalit land alienation was inextricably linked to the historically prevailing Varna system that excluded the Dalits from material resources and the ideational realms. The intersectionality of caste, class, and gender had not been addressed by the Indian Communist parties. Therefore, land reform and redistribution of landed resources among the peasant communities, specifically the tenants, have not benefitted the Dalit communities (Madhavan & Komath, 2023, pp. 358–359).

The land reform legislation was brought forward by the first Communist Ministry in 1957 and subsequently implemented by the CPI (M)-led Ministry in 1969. As per the law, the tenants got ten cents each in panchayats, five cents in the municipal area, and three cents in the corporation area. The land reform was romanticized as "the land to the tiller" however, in reality, it was "the land to the tenants." The Communist Party understood the issue of land as the necessary conflict between the landlords and tenants. The Dalits were located outside of the tenant category due to their untouchable status and were forced to settle on the outskirts of the paddy fields. As tenants, the majority of the middle-caste groups like Ezhavas got small portions of land for settlement purposes, however, Dalits remained landless. Thus, the land reforms, a landmark legislation that propelled the Kerala Model excluded the Dalits and Adivasis. In due course, successive governments attempted to mitigate the issue with new strategies. M.N. Govindan in C. Achuthamenon's Ministry introduced 'Laksham Veedu', colonies for Dalits and Adivasis (houses constructed in a budget of Rs. One Lakh) which paved the way for the ghettoization of Dalits and Adivasis in three-cent colonies. Coincidently, the stereotypical images about the colonies also came up (Pramod, 2020). The Kerala Sastra Sahithya Parishad, a pro-left NGO, surveyed the community-based land distribution in the state and revealed that the per capita landholding of the upper caste is 105 cents, while the Dalit community has only 2.7 per cent (KSSP, 2006; KILA, 2009).

The land alienation of the Dalits, specifically the denial of land as a productive resource, badly affected the future development of Kerala. Indeed, social security

laws such as the Kerala Agriculture Workers Act of 1974 improved the working conditions of the Dalits, however, in the longer run, the decline in agriculture and large-scale conversion of farmland for other industrial and commercial purposes worsened the circumstances of the Dalits (Krishnaji, 2007; Isaac & Mohankumar, 1991; Devika, 2010). Paradoxically, Kerala is dependent on other states for food grains, and vegetables, however, the successive governments are not ready to give the land to the actual tillers of the land. Also, the lack of resources prevented the Dalits from competing in an open market society where the privileged social groups dominate. Moreover, the protagonists of the Kerala Model, particularly the CPI (M) and its votaries, always took an oppositional stand against the struggles of the deprived sections for resources.

Chengara Land Struggle: Linking the Past to the Present

The Chengara land struggle reflects the inadequacies of the land reforms in Kerala. The Communist Party-introduced land reform legislation only resolved the issues between landlords and the tenants. However, it failed to address the land issues of the Dalits because they did not belong to the tenant category. The Communist Party reduced the entirety of the issue between the landlords and peasants to the question of wage as in the industrialized society, hence failed to analyze the complexities embedded within the historical marginalization of the Dalits in the Indian situation (Krishnaji, 2007; Rammohan, 2008; Raman, 2002). The land reforms in Kerala excluded the Dalits, and reduced the other peasant categories such as the Ezhavas to small holdings. The reforms did not touch the plantation sector, and the Ceiling Act was not implemented. This policy approach had far-reaching implications—such as a decline in agriculture, emergence of absentee landlordism (Balakrishnan, 2008; Oommen, 1994; Radhakrishnan, 1981) monopoly of land by the upper caste/class people and continuing deprivation of the Dalits and Adivasis in Kerala.

After independence, the Dalit-Adivasi issues froze under the grand narratives of development. Even though the Dalits were the mass base of the Communist Parties, their life in the colonies (Pramod, 2020) statured around government concessions and freebies. This shows the limitations of the Communist Parties in pursuing a social movement agenda in the electoral democratic system.[7] By the 1980s, the reports of deaths due to starvation from Adivasi settlements once again problematized the disparities in land distribution in Kerala. It was in this background that the Muthanga struggle happened. It was a breakthrough to the tall images of the much-celebrated Kerala Model of Development (Raman, 2002; Bijoy & Raman, 2003; Raman, 2004).

[7]The policies of the first Communist government in Kerala (even though it failed to resolve the land issues of the vast majority of the people) provoked the upper caste/class, and they mobilized the followers against the government- known as the liberation struggle. This had deteriorated the law and order situation or the perpetrators succeeded in generating such an image, and based on the Governor's report, the Central government dismissed the democratically elected government under article 356 of the Indian Constitution.

The Muthanga struggle was exclusively an Adivasi land struggle that ended with an armed conflict between Adivasis and the State. Drawing insights from Muthanga, the Chengara land struggle took a different path. Laha Gopalan, leader of the movement, set a platform for the landless people in Kerala beyond caste differences and strategically orchestrated the movement without indulging in violence. In a pamphlet, Laha Gopalan narrates the background of the Chengara land struggle:

> In due recognition of the fact that last six decades of democratic rule and working of many caste, sub-caste organizations have eventually not produced social justice for the oppressed class; and for the liberation of all the untouchables in Kerala, demands an organisation to pursue the struggles initiated by Ayyankali. It was not a caste organisation, but rather an organisation for the liberation of poor people in all caste groups. This perspective has been reflected in the formation of *Sadhujana Vimochana Samyukthavedi* (SVSV, Servile People' Liberation Organisation), an organisation formed in Laha village in Pathanamthitta District on October 31, 2001, and got registration on March 13, 2002, in the register number P128/2002 (Gopalan, n.d., p. 2).

Laha Gopalan, formulated SVSV in tune with the middle caste and upper caste organizations. Despite the sub-caste divisions, these organizations displayed unity, especially in their dealing with the centers of power (Ibid). His movement was the continuation of Ayyankali and Ambedkar, who underscored the importance of Dalit unity. SVSV was the replication of Ayyankali's organisation SJPS, an organisation that fought for the uplift of the deprived sections beyond sub-caste divisions. However, the ruling class maneuvers significantly limited the sustenance of Ayyankali's movement beyond his lifetime. The sub-caste divisions were a major weapon used against Dalit unity. By employing the strategies of intimidation and selective co-option, the ruling class succeeded in preventing a united movement of the lower caste people in Kerala. Laha was well aware of the situation, especially the success story of Ayyankali and the subsequent weakening of the movement along the parochial sub-caste line. Therefore, Laha took stringent measures against liquor and sub-caste narcissism which he understood as the major hindrances on the path of Dalit unity (Gopalan, 2013). Rajendran, State Vice President of SVSV recollecting memories of Laha, said that strong leadership was necessary because there were several reasons to scatter the movement (Rajendran, 2023).

Chengara land struggle was not a spontaneous movement. Laha prepared the ground for the movement years back. On October 3, 2001, SVSV submitted a memorandum of 22 demands to the government regarding the constitutionally guaranteed rights of the deprived sections. Since then, the SVSV conducted corner meetings, awareness programmes, district meetings, picketing and press meetings. From August 15, 2005 to January 11, 2006, a Satyagraha was conducted in front of Mini Civil Station, Pathanamthitta. The approach of the caste leaders towards the

movement was lukewarm. Laha observed that 'the caste leaders took a passive stand towards the movement, criticized the movement and questioned the leadership of Laha Gopalan' (Gopalan, n.d. a., pp. 4–7). Because the sub-caste leaders were very cautious about the possible threats to their areas of influence, they maintained strict control over the people. The political parties in Kerala also recognised the privileges of the caste leaders, and were happy with the status quo. Laha said:

> In my understanding, the obstacle on the path of the development of our people was the sub-caste organizations and their innumerable leaders. Nobody can deny the role of B.R. Ambedkar and Ayyankali, who fought against injustice that had prevailed in a society where Manusmriti was the only law. They had succeeded in unifying the people, who were fragmented along four thousand caste titles, by convincing them their demands were the same. The ruling class understood the fact that the rights of the deprived sections have to be considered, otherwise, there might have been unified movements against the establishments. It was in this context that the ruling class recognised our demands. While the present generation not only failed to sustain the rights secured by our forefathers but also our caste leaders gave space for loosening of those rights in tune with the ruling class interests (Gopalan, n.d. a, pp. 11–12).

Laha's leadership was unacceptable to many Dalit intellectuals in Kerala. Even though few of them had supported the movement, they kept vigil not to highlight Laha's name in the discourses. At one point, Laha challenged the Dalit intellectuals to show their capacity to mobilize the people as he did in Chengara (Gopalan/Erumeli, 2014, pp. 22–25). Baby Cherippittakavu, State Secretary of SVSV, said 'many Dalit intellectuals were against the movement. If they were inspired and fought for the visions of Ayyankali and Ambedkar, there would have been one Dalit organisation. Because of the self-interests and the leadership aspirations of Dalit intellectuals that scattered our community' (Cherippittakavu, 2023). However, the unique feature of the Chengara movement was its inclusiveness. Leader Laha stood for all the deprived sections, the landless poor people, beyond parochial caste and sub-caste divisions (Babu, 2023). Harikumar, an active member from the upper caste Nair community, recollects his memory 'When the movement was at its most critical stage, we, nearly ten to fifteen people, had food from a single plate. This unity was only because of Laha's leadership. Nobody resisted his leadership. People were even ready to sacrifice their lives for social justice. Slogans about Ayyankali and Ambedkar were our only weapon' (Harikumar 2023). After Ayyankali, it was under the leadership of Laha Gopalan that the Dalit issues reverberated in the Kerala public sphere. He succeeded in mobilizing thousands of landless people from fourteen districts of Kerala towards Chengara. The movement not only bewildered the caste leaders but also the communist parties, especially the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M), self-imaged as the sole authority for

social mobilization and social transformation. Laha observed that CPI (M) was the only political party that had taken a negative approach to the Chengara movement. In his own words:

> The CPI (M) is being driven by the delusion that they have a monopoly over the Dalits in Kerala. If they accepted Laha's demand for land, the people who were chained in colonies with three cents land would recognize the fact that the party made them political slaves (Gopalan/Velam, Ashraf, 2009, p. 32).

Why did the CPI (M) oppose the Chengara movement is a valid question that reveals the fundamental shift that happened to the Party during the last couple of decades. There were four major reasons behind the policy deviation: 1) The paternalistic attitude of the Party in not recognizing the newest social movements; 2) The Party shifted from being a catalyst agent of social transformation to a pro-corporate agent of development; 3) The influence of a few workers in the Harrisons Plantations through the CPI (M)-led Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU); 4) If the movement succeeds under the leadership of Laha Gopalan, the CPI (M) was well aware that it would lead to a legitimacy crisis in the party. Therefore, the Chengara movement confronted challenges from various quarters such as the sub-caste leaders, the CPI (M) and Harrisons Company.

After four years of campaigning amongst the landless poor across Kerala, on August 15, 2005, SVSV started an open struggle in front of Pathanamthitta Civil Station. On January 2, 2006, the movement turned to a new phase, and began a blockade in front of the Civil Station. Nearly four thousand people participated. The transformation of the struggle from a few to a mass movement got political attention. Though the then Chief Minister of Kerala, Oommen Chandy discussed the issues with the leaders, however, his government failed to fulfill their demands. In the next general election, the CPI (M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government came to power. V.S. Achuthanandan was the Chief Minister. Achuthanandan had a popular image of a sympathizer of social movements. However, the paternalistic approach of his party forced him to take a harsh stand on the Chengara movement. The movement went through a new leap- on the night of January 21, 2006, under the banner of SVSV, nearly 4,000 families entered the government-owned Koduman Plantations and constructed huts with tarpaulin sheets. The government requested more time to resolve the issue, however not arrived at any definite solution (Gopalan, n.d., pp. 2-6). In this scenario, SVSV opened a new struggle site at Chengara, which was strategically and legally advantageous to the participants.

Chengara or Cherupala land is surrounded by thick forest. Kallar River in the north-east, in the east the government owned teak forests, and in the west up to Puthikulam Harrison's rubber plantation. The only approach to Chengara is a small road connecting Athumbukulam Junction. Strategically the geographical position of Chengara helped to defend the land from external aggressions (Cherippittakavu, 2023; Prakkanam, 2009, pp. 42–43). Also, it was the land illegally possessed by

Harrisons Malayalam Plantations Ltd. after the lease period lapsed (Gopalan, n.d., p. 6). Therefore, the legitimate claims of the landless people on the illegitimately occupied government land was another unique feature of the Chengara land struggle (Sreerekha, 2012).

On August 4, 2007, over 5,000 families entered Harrison's illegally occupied land and began their lives without basic amenities. Harrisons sought judicial support, and the court issued a decree to evacuate the settlers within three months, without any physical force and bloodshed. On July 7, 2008, the first meeting with the Chief Minister was arranged. Laha said that the Chief Minister did not ask anything about the movement, their demands or possibilities for compromise, rather threatened the leaders, 'If you do not stop the struggle and leave Chengara, you would have to face fierce policing' (Gopalan n.d., p. 11). The government, in association with the CITU, employed every possible measure to evacuate the Chengara settlers. Hence, the people in Chengara followed a non-violent strategy of resistance,. On August 4, 2008, CITU in association with other trade unions started a blockade in Athumbukulam, the only entrance to Chengara. The blockade worsened the situation of the Chengara people. Many organizations, including the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), helped to deliver food to the site via dangerous forest routes. On September 3, hundreds of CPI (M) supported people marched towards Chengara. While the police blocked the party workers on their way to the struggle site, Laha observed that it was a strategic move of the government (Ibid., pp. 13–17). Moreover, it was also a victory of the civil society in Kerala. There was a mass 'online movement' titled 'Do not repeat Muthanga' that called for sending text messages to the Secretary of CPI (M) Prakash Karat requesting preventive measures to avoid an open confrontation between the party men and Chengara people.

In short, the Chengara movement successfully generated wider support from civil society. However, the CPI (M) was keen to sideline Laha Gopalan and his struggle. Finally, the LDF government unilaterally declared the 'Chengara Package' without any discussions with the leaders of the struggle. Laha observed that the Chengara Package was a betrayal of the landless poor in Kerala. The land allotted to the majority was not useful for cultivation and housing. Only sixty families got cultivable land and others who accepted the government's offer were cheated. Many people were not ready to leave Chengara. Therefore the struggle continued despite government negligence and efforts from the ruling class to thwart the movement (Gopalan, 2013). At one point, Laha was forced to leave the struggle site due to strong internal differences regarding his leadership. In an interview, the state secretary of SVSV admitted that 'we had mistaken Laha due to the maneuvers of some people. The movement had weakened in the absence of Laha' (Cherippittakavu, 2023). The state vice-president of SVSV, Rajendran said, 'Laha's initiatives helped us to study more about Ayyankali and Ambedkar that developed a feeling of self-respect and consciousness about ourselves' (Rajendran, 2023). After the demise of Laha Gopalan, Chengara still struggles and 'lack of coordination is the main issue' (Chandrakumar, 2023). P.K. Babu, the state treasurer of SVSV concluded from his experiences in the struggle: 'Laha stood for the

landless poor people beyond the caste, sub-caste divisions. This was the unique feature of this movement' (Babu, 2023). From a social movement perspective, the Chengara struggle has several credentials, its contributions are unique and offer important lessons to Dalit movements in India.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is pertinent to note that the Chengara movement was not the final word regarding the right assertions of the deprived sections in Kerala. It was one among many land struggles active in Kerala. However, the movement has provided important lessons to the protagonists of social movements from below, especially in the Indian context. The creative and generative features of the struggle were not spontaneous, but rather the outcome of a systematic understanding of the social mobilizations since Ayyankali. The most unique feature of the movement was its inclusiveness and the construction of a Dalit identity around the issue of land. The leaders of the movement recognised that the issue of land was the common denominator and the root cause of the marginalization of the Dalits in Kerala. The movement also succeeded in highlighting the land issue of the Dalits in the public sphere, and the movement got wider support from civil society. As an immediate result of the struggle, few families got cultivable land elsewhere in Kerala, but the majority of the people were cheated with rocky lands in remote areas. Few hundreds of families remained at the Chengara struggle site even without voter ID cards. They do not have house numbers and their names were not entered in the citizens register. In short, the government has not yet recognised the Chengara people as citizens of India. Thus, the assertions of the Chengara people are still alive.

Chengara represents the exclusionary side of the 'Kerala Model' and the failure of the Communist Party to pursue an inclusive social movement agenda. The Communist Party failed to address the specificities of social formation and power relations in Kerala. Capitalism developed in Kerala concomitant with the prevailing caste hierarchy, and the upper and middle caste sections and the influential religious minority groups reaped the benefits of postcolonial development at the expense of the historically vulnerable people. The indomitable unity of the upper caste sections at the top of the governance system systematically excluded the backward caste groups from the mainstream. There are two important reasons behind the failure of the Communist Party to address the Dalit question in Kerala: 1) The economic reductionism of Western Marxism put constraints on the Communist Party in understanding the influence of the ideational sphere in determining the material realities. Decades before Ambedkar rightly pointed out that: "If the sources of power and domination is, at any given time or in any given society, social and religious, then social reform and religious reform must be accepted as the necessary sort of reform" (1936/2013, p. 230). He viewed that without addressing the caste question, precisely without annihilating caste, a coordinated working-class movement in India could not be possible (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 232; also see Teltumbde, 2018). 2) As like many other institutions in the state,

the caste hierarchy influenced the Communist Party. The 'Secularized Casteism' is a general feature of both civil and political societies in Kerala (Devika, 2010, p. 802).

Another important reason behind CPI (M)'s antipathy towards the Chengara movement was the result of the transformation that happened to the Party under the neoliberal phase—the shift from the catalyst agent of social transformation towards an institutionalized mechanism for legitimate corporatization. The CPI (M), in association with the Harrisons Malayalam Plantations, tried their best to torpedo the movement. As far as the CPI (M) was concerned, many disturbing facts prompted them to blindly oppose the struggle. The mass mobilization of the landless people, irrespective of their caste and religious differences, challenged the monopoly of the CPI (M) over social mobilization. The Chengara movement also problematized the tall claims of the CPI (M) that the land issue was resolved with the erstwhile land reforms. If the movement succeeded, there would be a legitimacy crisis in the Party, because the major support base of the Party were the Dalits who were chained in the three cent colonies in the post-land reform period. As a response to the new consciousness developed among the deprived sections in the bottom line of society, the CPI (M) employed the usual strategy. It created organizations 'Pattika Jathi Kshema Samithi' (Scheduled Caste Welfare Organisation, PKS) and 'Adivasi Kshema Samithi' (Adivasi Welfare Organisation, AKS) to curb the outflow of the Dalits and Adivasis from the Party. Hence, it opened up new avenues of confrontation amongst the underprivileged sections in Kerala.

In short, since the inception of caste system, the ruling class scattered the deprived sections into numerous sub-caste groups. However, history showed glimpses of unified movements of the Dalits as we have seen in the reform movements of Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan, and also in Laha Gopalan-led Chengara land struggle. Such unified movements brought out remarkable changes in society. Therefore, a common platform around core issues of concern will certainly unite the people, and remarkably, such movements were possible only with the direction of a charismatic leader, who can sculpt the strategies to transcend the challenges posed by the ruling class.

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