

As a Dalit Woman: My Life in a Caste-Ghetto of Kerala

Maya Pramod¹

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Abstract

It is extremely significant to enquire how the lower caste Dalit people have read about the socio-economic and cultural aspects of Dalit colony life that have changed their life and society. I argue that these colonies serve as an index of their inferior social status. It serves more of their ghettoisation than for their empowerment. It further distances them from society and helps to appropriate their labour. This is the continuation of the age-old practice of caste discrimination and deprivation that kept them away from the mainstream while appropriating their labour for the general development of society. This paper focuses on the rereading of social norms which evolved through the author's probing of the social history of 'caste colony' as part of her research, especially on Dalit women.

Keywords

Dalit, caste colony, socio-cultural, discrimination, ghettoisation

Introduction

It's the 125th year since Ayyankali¹ in 1891 drove his bullock cart was a historical ride against caste discrimination and for the freedom to walk in public spheres. It is the 125th year of this Bullock cart strikes and Kerala has completed 63 years as a democratic self freeing it from the clutches of feudalism in the year of 2019. In this ambience, one has to look into what caste ghettos in Kerala have given to the life of the Dalits. For the supreme power agencies or the government, dalit democratic development means caste colonies. I make here an ethnographic study of how the history of colony life and the Land Reformation Act have eluded accumulation of capital formation for dalits in terms of the socio-economic and cultural aspects. This study is about the Dalit colonies in Kerala and is linked to my experience in these colonies.

Being a research scholar at the Research Department of Christ College, Iringalakkuda, affiliated to the Calicut University, and my probing of the social history of 'caste colony' as part of my research, are not accidental at all. The

¹Ph.D Research Scholar, Christ College, University of Calicut, Irinjalakuda, Thrissur, India
E-mail: mayapramodp@gmail.com

research materialized out of my personal experiences of being born into and growing up in government wastelands/colonies/rented houses. I don't know if the mainstream society of Kerala cares to know that the 2011 census among the 9.1% population in Kerala Dalits and out of this 7.9% are living in the Dalit ghettos which are 2 or 3 cents of allotted land and houses. I was born in one such caste-colony. For the next twenty-one years, that colony was my home.

Till I was ten, I had lived in Perunna Naalppathi Colony in Changanasseri, and after that in a 'shack' in the fields in Until. As a child, I had started schooling with an 'asaattiyamma,' a local teacher. To reach our classes, we would walk under the railway over-bridge and through the railway lines that lay close to the Naalppathi Colony. Beyond the railway over-bridge was the railway colony. In those times, Ezhavas, Muslims, and dalits lived together in those colonies. We played between the small houses, in the confined places that we had access to in the stifling three to four cents of land where the colonies stood. 'The sound of trains was a constant reminder of our witness to the horror of mangled bodies of the many who had chosen to end their lives under one of the passing trains, rather than continue to endure the suffering.' Every child raised in the railway colony would have those brutal childhood memories of witnessing severed bodies and chopped heads being patched and rolled up in 'pandan-leaf'²² mats. The insecurity that we endured in the schools was a shared feeling too. I studied till the eighth standard with no electricity in my house. We went to school mainly for the lunch that was provided. A teacher of seventh standard, who I clearly recall, led me by my hand, from the front bench where I sat, to one of the back-benches, saying, it had 'your folk.' I was short in stature and had scoliosis, a physical condition of curving spine. It was difficult for me to see the blackboard from the back-bench. It was then that I introspectively confronted the facts about who 'my folk' really were. Were they also dark like me? It is under this assumption that I had chosen a girl who was a friend and had invited her to my place, which could hardly be referred to as a house. But then she said: 'Maya if I come to your house in the colony where the scheduled caste people live, my father would rebuke me.' This led me to further introspection. How much would a girl of the seventh standard ponder over such questions? In my school days, the places for our recreation were the backyards of the houses where my mother used to work. From the clothes that they would give us, we would separate those that had not faded and would treasure them up in boxes. This could perhaps be why the children in these colonies, especially in the father-less homes, fancied colours.

Only when the results of the tenth standard board exams were awaited, I had to look up for my scores expectantly. I noticed that my house members and my region, far from being anxious about my result, were not even aware of the story. I had secretly gone to look up my result and had to double-check to confirm that it was my own score. With I have won the world by securing 290 marks in 600 for the SSLC examination, I had conquered the world. People in my house did not even believe it and my mother's eyes belied her feeling of doubt. The newspapers of the next day bore testimony. I had created history in school by having scored 47 marks out of 50 in social science. The words of my history teacher fueled my urge to learn and steer my life ahead. 'I had known and believed that you would get these marks and now you have repaid my faith with your success. You should never be a domestic servant like your mother. You should fly high to the world of education.' Someone had faith in me. And that was the fuel for all my onward journeys.

Later it is through the stipend system in the degree classes that I understood what it meant to be a resident of the 'caste colonies,' or, to belong to a scheduled caste community. This knowledge dawned through the popular assumptions and hearsay that the SC/STs were those who came to college to simply get the stipend money that the government gave and that they squandered and ate away the money. I was among the fifteen students of the class who lived through these contemptuous mockeries and who tried hard to hide it from the class. When the clerk would count Rs 6000 and hand it over, his jeering words would echo from the skies: 'Quite a sweep of easy money for the year, isn't it?' To avoid such jeering and to avoid the gaze of friends, half of us would stay away from classes for at least two weeks after the distribution of stipend. At the end of the degree course, there would be concerns and enquiries about being able to write the exams in Malayalam, because none of the Dalit students would have had English as the medium of instruction in school.

The present investigation tries to understand the (socio-economic) historical background of Dalits in Kerala. This is an exploratory study based on primary and secondary sources. It is intended to analyse the trends of the transformation of a Kudi³ (hut dwellings) to the colony. The findings of the present study are based on the results of field investigation in the selected area of Kerala. The data for the study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The major tools used by the investigator are the questionnaire and interview schedule. The questionnaire includes the social, economic, educational, political and cultural aspects of dalits in the colonies. Sometimes the use of the questionnaire as a tool would have been very difficult because of the illiteracy of people in the colonies. So, the investigator has used both structured and non-structured interview method for gathering data.

The secondary sources of data were reports and publications of various agencies, archival reports, information regarding the municipality on the socio-economic infrastructure that has been obtained from taluks,⁴ village office. The secondary data about the study area was an important constraint. Based on fieldwork tools the study will critically analyze the pattern of such transformation in land and Dalit Colony.

Discussion

These challenges were not isolated events. In effect, while these fifteen to twenty dalit students -who might have reached colleges after immense struggle -were trying to achieve something through education, every bit of their effort was also being simultaneously quashed, either deliberately or through pressure. This was how the cultural and social capital recourse that we were trying to procure was being denied to us. Upper caste colonisation of the dalit communities always happened in India by the colonisation of the brains through language. What needs to be noted is not just that the chances of writing exams in Malayalam and reaching universities for higher studies were fewer for the dalit students but that very few from the 'caste colonies' could reach the universities in the existing scheme of things. I am noting this for a particular reason. During my undergraduation period, I lived in Palathra Chira Colony near my mother's place in Changanasseri. Just five of us from the colony had reached college for under graduation and post-graduation, and four of us went on to technical institutes like ITI. This was the plight of education in colonies.

To know what that life is in the caste colonies one needs to understand the intricate power relations between land and caste that have existed in Kerala. Only then can the

ghettoization of an entire populace brought about and institutionalized through the so-called 'welfare schemes' be understood.⁵ If you look at the problem of land rights in Kerala you will clearly see how and when the dalits/*adivasis* and other backward classes got ousted from the exchanges of the symbolic capital. In every society, there are four types of capital: first is the social capital that is the services rendered by our fellow beings; second, economic capital that is income and assets one possesses; third; embedded capital that is emotions and memories that are aroused in terms of one's traditions and family pride; and fourth cultural capital, which is further of three types. These include i) academic benefits from school life, ii) the ancestral history of one's existence, and iii) the artistic and cultural life of individuals (Bourdieu, 1986). Among all these the cultural, social, and economic capitals can be acquired by anyone through their efforts, but embedded capital or symbolic capital is attributed by the society because it brings in the past power agency that one has in terms of caste. Thus many people are ostracised in terms of the symbolic and social capital in the society. Dalit, Adivasi (tribal), plantation workers, and fishermen communities are by and large the only communities that are still trapped into doing the work that has been forced on them through the dictates of caste. According to Government of Kerala statistics, there are 26,198 Dalit colonies, 8000 Adivasi colonies, 10000 'layas', and around 500 fishermen colonies (Parishid, 2006) all of which had only worsened the lives and sufferings of these local people and politically marginalized them into ghettos. In 1969 the Land Reformation Act was introduced. According to this, the Government of Kerala under the EMS Ministry promised that the 'Farmland belongs to the Farmer'. Nevertheless, many of the provisions of the Land Reformation Act had already been leaked before the execution of the Act. Therefore, a large number of high-caste communities who owned land had formed trustees and these lands were transferred under it. Then, the slogan that farmland belongs to farmers was changed to farmers should work in the farmland as tenants in the remaining forest land. Under the Act, these tenants who were working as farmers on the land became the landlord of the Agrarian Land Farmer. The Dalits, the original agricultural labourers, were taken to the settlement colonies of the floor two or three cents. Accordingly, every family in these colonies had rights to a paltry 2.34 to three cents of land. Majority of these dalit and adivasi colonies are constructed on the premise of caste. The entire inhabitants of such resettlement colonies were dalits and the tribal groups who are ostracised and made landless by the power agency. The actual statistics about the social divisions of per capita land ownership in Kerala speaks volumes about how caste discrimination persists through other means.

Whenever the question of Dalit / Adivasi land issues comes up for discussion, we need to consider the fact that land is not just an economic asset. Any way one looks into it, it talks about politics too. It was only after the enactment of the Land Reformation Act that land became a powerful resource with respect to political power. When the Land Reforms Act was implemented on January 1, 1970, there was a ceiling on how much land a family could own as per the provisions of the Act. (Varghese, 1970) The basic provision was to consider the rest of the land as surplus land, take it up and distribute it to the landless. However, the plantation (cash crop) sector was cleverly ring-fenced so it, avoided the ambit of the law because majority of the land belonged in the plantation sector. So, the land acquisition that happened in Kerala was not one in which the Brahmins and the Nairs became landless. And more importantly, what was the reality of the land that was taken over?

Actually, the land acquired included a few paddy fields in the west and some in the interiors of erstwhile *Idanadu* and some barren land belonging to the Nilambur King⁶. It is actually this sort of land acquisition to which one minister in power had recently claimed that had caused 'great tragedy for the Brahmins even after 50 years.' This is an example of the underlying culture that still plays a role in perpetuating within mainstream politics the retention of caste-based power relations. If one were to go through the statutory land ownership data in Kerala published by the Kerala Shashtra Sahithya Parishath (KSSP).⁷ While the per capita land holding of the upper caste is 105 cents, the Dalit community has only 2.7 cents of land. The community-based statistics of the land ownership in Kerala (in cents) goes like - upper caste 105, backward caste 63, Christians 126, Muslims 77, and Dalits 2.7. This survey report was published by the Kerala Shashtra Sahithya Parishath. While the upper caste and the Christians share 231 cents of land, a Dalit's land is just 2.7 cents. And yet if there are poor people among the upper caste, then they definitely need a helping hand through the poultry - sheep development model of the much-acclaimed 'Janakeeyasoothranam'.⁸

When the question of where is our land is raised by the landowners as also the landless, it is not just about the land, but also a question about the existing power structure and the resource structure of Kerala and the status quo maintained by it. Land is not just a form of the asset; instead it is symbolic of power and agency and the politics that one holds. Thus caste exists as a power relation because land provides authority in all socio-cultural and economic spheres. The colonies that were created after the Land Reforms Act: Lakshamveedu colonies, coastal habitats, plantation looms, and the wastelands -- all of these convey just one thing loud and clear 'how the mainstream society stigmatises a dalit, an adivasi, and a backward caste in the public sphere of Kerala's life and culture. The existence of half a million colonies is direct evidence of that.

The Pulayar⁹, the Parayar, , the Kuravar, the Ulladans¹⁰ and the adivasis who were living in their *kudis* (huts) under the feudal system got displaced and 'dumped' into three cents and four-cent colonies through false promises following the implementation of the Land Reforms Act. The tragic story of the *Thiyars* who cultivated agricultural lease lands has been tenderly portrayed by Cherukadu¹¹ in his novel *Manninte Maaril*. However, the fact is that the condition of the Pulaya, who cultivated in the same land was equivalent of an animal ploughing in the soil. The slogan of 'Nammalu koyyum vayalellam nammudethakum painkiliye' (the land that we reap will be ours, oh dear), which meant that the land will be for those who till the soil, went in vain as the beneficiaries of the land were Nambuthiris, Nairs, Ezhavas, and Christians who were cultivating on leased land. The Parayan and the Pulayan who tilled the soil were not allotted any land. Not just that, a condition was made as per Section seventy five of the Land Reforms Act, which said that any dalit or adivasi who owned land of three cents and above shall not be provided with any further land. While the other sections could possess 50 cents to one acre, dalits and adivasis owning mere three cents of land were denied land. Therein lied the contradiction: The dalits and adivasi families were denied of surplus land by this encumbrance act because they were made landowners of three cents and ostracised from the mainstream even as the power agencies could have more areas of land by converting it for cash crops. Thus, the life of the dalits and adivasis was made miserable through the Act.

Total per capita land ownership of upper caste in Kerala is 231 cents which includes 105 cents of upper caste Hindus and 126 cents of Christians, while the per capita land

owned by Dalit community is 2.7 cents. You can imagine how many multiples of 2.7 can 231 be! Almost 100 times more! This is the prevailing condition even six decades after the Land- Reform Act (Peruvattur, 1995). For the communities that had been historically marginalised from dominant politics and resource availability, to stake their claim on them is a question of fundamental social justice. The Kerala model development and Land Reform Act has tied down and ghettoized the dalits /adivasis/ and other backward classes to the caste colonies of three to four cents of 'land' in government wastelands. Land and land ownership not only remain the key socio-economic and cultural capital but more significantly, land also still remains a caste capital in the pockets of a few 'upper-caste' communities. In the entire political game toward the expulsion of the dalit/adivasi communities from the realm of capital, the last step is that of what is referred to as the 'developmental programmes' rendered in the form of cattle, poultry, auto-rickshaw, and other meagre means of sustenance that are offered to compensate for the huge proportions of existing inequalities. The real victims of these 'developmental aids' are the local dwellers of the land namely the dalit/adivasi communities. And today, from the 'development' of owning three cents of land we are being uprooted into the insecurity and abject landlessness of flats and apartments.

According to K. Panoor¹² just in the district of Wayanadu, there are about 7000 adivasi families that have been evacuated and denied land which they were promised under the law. It is a matter of great concern. It will have to be understood that the objective of Section seventy five was to prevent any resource mobilisation for the livelihood of the most backward sections, in a society where caste-based social conditions pretty much exist. The dalit and adivasi families had been given three cents of land for possession and denied any surplus land. Whereas the landlords were given fifteen acres of land and they could possess more land by converting it into plantation fields. Power and wealth, and ownership rights of public capital, which ideally should have been distributed to everyone equally and equitably, languished at the hands of those who lived under the privileged caste values.

It is against this injustice and the oppression that the dalits and adivasis have been subjected to for centuries, that the Reservation policy acts as a guarantee that the marginalised people will be part of a fair distribution of common capital and wealth. It is only a constitutional mechanism to draw power into the hands of people who have been oppressed for centuries and denied representation in the power structure (Mohan, 1996). A decision has been made to introduce reservation for the economically weaker section of the upper caste in the appointments made by the Devaswom Board. This is besides giving more than the existing ten percent reservations for the SC / STs. The Constitution clearly states that the sole purpose of reservation is to address the socially and educationally backward sections of the society. That is, if social backwardness is evident in a state, such socio-political, economic and cultural aspects are analysed quite accurately and the Supreme Court has taken a position in favour of reservation by considering all this into account. Dr B.R. Ambedkar has said that 'reservation is not a benefit, but it's a debt payback. A reservation only aims at equality in social justice. It does not eliminate merit but further convinces us that merit is merely a social construct. It is the social discrimination and the inequalities which the oppressed sections like the Dalits, Adivasis and the Bahujans face even today, that the reservation attempts to solve.'

Six decades after the state of Kerala came into being, the number of dalit colonies in Kerala is 26,198 as per the official data of the Government of Kerala in 2010 (Administration, 2010). Unofficial records say that there are more than half a million such colonies in Kerala. Around 3,44,193 Dalit families live in these colonies. Since they own only three to four cents of land, it is true that a generation lives there who only have their kitchens as a place to bury their dead bodies. Among these, there are about 1,41,078 people who are homeless, and, there are also the scattered lives in the wastelands, coastal regions, and in the plantation sector (Table 1).

Table 1. Basic Informations in SC Colonies

Colonies	More Than 50 Families In Colonies	Population Men/ Woman	Own Land In SC	Won Land In Colonies	Land Givn By The Government	Right To Tenants	Surplus Land	Revenue -Land	Land Given By The Municipalities
26198	416	11.49 Lacks	59375	36085	1722	1878Acre	888Acre	413Acre	631 Acre
		12.03 Lacks							
Land Given By The SC/ST Department	LandlessFamily	Own Land / HomlessFamily	Unoccupied Houses In Colonies	single room Houses In Colonies	Double Room Houses	Unfinished Houses	Education In HighSchool	Education In Higher Secondary	Degree/ Masters/ Diploma/ITI/ ITC
333Acre	25408	15984	45959	123871	132378	67911	1.12	0.5	0.30 0.19
Education In B.TEC	M B B S	B A M S	B H M S	Mentally/ Physically Disabled Persons In Colonies	Mentally Disabled Persons	Average Poverty Line (APL)	Below PovertyLine (BPL)	Families Without Ration Card	Families With Ration Cards
1968	212	34	12	17441	7704	1.68 Lacks	3.10Lacks	0.80	4.78 Lacks

Source: Kerala Institute of Local A (KILA) 2009-10

This continuing situation has to be a matter of not just debates, but a political issue that the dalit /adivasi society should raise with respect to land. One thing to be noted here is that the ruling class has now come up with another scheme in the form of developing flats for these people when their real problem is that of land availability. The dalit /adivasi society must be cautious against this. Because this only puts the politics of apartment culture on the shoulder of a person who is trying to get out of his scattered life in his three cent colonies and destroys the actual opportunity of land as their means. Dalits and adivasis have to raise their voice louder than ever before as their necessity is agricultural land and rights on resources, and not any apartment or so.

The land struggles that have happened so far in Kerala have a great deal of relevance in the light of the above-mentioned land issues. The dalit /adivasi movements through their various campaigns have played a significant role in bringing up the issues of the right to access land and resources into the mainstream discourse. Kallara Sukumaran, a Dalit activist and writer put forward certain policies such as making atrocities against tribes as a national offence, giving land to the landless and to build a hostel for girls of scheduled tribes, and to make a law that provides land ownership of Dalits and Adhivasis, and to provide mid-day meals in schools. The dalit movements under his leadership following the 1950s and the tribal movements since the 1970s have been emphasizing that land is a political issue that needs to be settled, and also that problems created by the unequal land distribution are not merely political for the community. Muthanga, Aralam, Meppadi, Chengara and Arippa, all have been a result of those convictions. Muthanga in Wayanad, Aralam and Meppadi in Kannur, and Chengara in Pathanamthitta and Arippa in Kollam are places of land struggles led by the tribal and *adivasi* groups which turned futile because lands given to them were barren and useless. These agitators said to the society that they wanted land not just for their livelihood but also as an economic driver for the forward journey of their generation, as a right to resources, agriculture, and further transactions.

When the socio-political and economic issues of the dalits and the adivasis are discussed, it is important to understand that their decisive basis lies in capital formation and its distribution. Because simply put, capital formation is defined as resource mobilisation. It is by acquiring these resources and through their transactions that the upper caste secure their higher caste privileges in mainstream society; be it social, economic, cultural, or symbolic capital. However, a dalit and an adivasi have to constantly struggle against the society to acquire this capital and come forward (Bourdieu, 1986). Their caste becomes a negative capital for them. That is if he/she is an SC / ST, the stereotyping by mainstream communities is that the successes of the historically marginalised communities are due to the policy of 'reservation.' Renowned sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who developed the idea of social capital (1986), says that capital includes both economic and non- economic forms. Inequality and injustice are inevitable in a society having an unbalanced distribution of capital. It is exactly those unjustified acts that are taking place in Kerala and across India against the marginalised people. And it is such a Brahminical ideology, that encourages a minister in authority to state that 'Brahmins are the victims of the Land Reforms Act.' An interesting observation would be to ascertain how many Brahmins live in the three to four cents of land, or live Below Poverty Line, or how many Namboothiri's (an upper caste) are queued up in front of the Panchayats (village governing bodies) to avail benefits of welfare schemes such as poultry or cattle rearing or toilet construction schemes, under the Kerala Model Development that is boasted about by successive state governments.

At the time when the Land Act was enacted, by diluting its provisions, purposefully or not, what the Brahmin or Nair communities did was that they converted and registered their lands as Trusts and Plantations, to prevent its acquisition as surplus land. The ten per cent reservation given to upper caste in terms of their economically backward condition shows the wide disparity constituted by law and power agencies as it showcases the contradictions of caste groups. Since the Brahminical Polity, which raises the pitch for economic-based reservation every now and then, is not a fictional one, the purpose of the Forward Development Corporation, brought by the previous state government, must also be looked as to safeguard the interests of economic reservations. According to the constitution of India reservation is given to those communities of people who are socially and educationally backward in a state. It is the right of the state to allot reservations for the caste groups for their upliftment. This is the most important aspect of the constitution. Secondly, in order to include any caste groups for reservation, there should be adequate material evidence for their under-representation in the government sector or any other sectors. This suggests that the unrepresented should be given reservation. But this has been violated by giving reservation to the economically backward upper caste groups. The sole purpose of that move by the Left Front government was nothing but to strengthen the social position of a particular community. Here, the symbolic capital that Pierre Bourdieu talks about in capital formation has a lot in play. Symbolic capital is something that is inseparable from one's historical and social background. It is something that later enables someone to acquire or grant contacts, positions, and influence by boasting about the contributions of their ancestors and the ranks acquired by it, through the narrative of mainstream history. Fortunately, the chairperson was able to ensure his cabinet rank and the position, but the chairperson of the Scheduled Caste/ Scheduled Tribes Corporation is just a chairperson with no additional rank or power as he does not have any such thing to boast about.

What Kerala needs now is a new political discourse of the dalit, adivasi, backward class minorities for tackling these issues of right to land and resources. There is a struggle that is emerging in Kerala with the aligning of several castes and sub-caste organisations, for a new Kerala that tosses the existing Kerala Model and land reforms that were enacted upside down. The Dalit community of Kerala has a responsibility to provide all kinds of support and ideology to such activities. Such a movement that is gaining momentum will certainly be able to create a history which the coming generations could learn and talk about.

Caste Ghettos and the Dalits

The history of 'colonies' as collective dwelling places begins with the Sachivothamapuram Colony in 1936 (Kochu, 2013). But Dalits were not the only inhabitants in this first settlement colony of Kerala. Ezhavas, Vilakkithala Nairs, and Viswakarmmajars also lived in this colony. It is after the formation of United Kerala, in 1959 when M K Krishnan was the Minister of Scheduled Caste Affairs, that the first colony for Dalits in Mukkada came up. After the Land Reform Act, from 1970 to 2010, most of the colonies that came up in Kerala were modelled as Scheduled Caste settlements. These caste ghettos had houses of 600 square feet each. They were also geographically located in places like hilltops, wastelands, uncultivable fields, shores of canals, and other such uninhabitable places that were visibly away from the coveted

social structures of possession. I can cite a personal example here. In 2006, my family which was dwelling in a rented house for more than 28 years was granted some money for occupying land and constructing a house through the municipality as per the VAMBAY (Valmiki Ambedkar AwasYojna).¹³ An amount of Rs 30,000 was given for land procurement. In our enquiries to find some land for that amount, the municipality officers led us to a 2.15 cent patch in a barren field in a place called Manjadikkara. As soon as we reached there, we found out that the land was marked with incomplete structures of at least twelve families who had started building foundations and walls for houses. In this way, any place where at least ten-odd Dalit families came to live became a Dalit dwelling and was inscribed as a 'Dalit Colony.' By the time we bought the land, filled it with soil, and laid the foundation, the money and our savings were exhausted. We also received the notice for confiscation in three years. That house thatched with sheets lies uninhabitable even in 2018.

It is from the 1970s that the concept called 'LakshamVeed' (houses constructed in a budget of Rs one hundred thousand) came up in Kerala. That was the initiative of M. N. Govindan Nair was the minister of the of fourth Kerala legislative assembly under the leadership of C. Achuthamenon. He was started the Laksham Veedu House Settlement Project 1977 for the resettlement of the landless Dalits and Adhivasis. This 'welfare' programme visibly marginalised the dalits from their natural rights to land and alienated them from other forms of development that happened in the society. Even drinking water is a burning issue in the dalit colonies. In Kerala, Palakkad district has the highest number of dalit colonies and Govindapuram is an example of water issue. It is a colony that has both Dalits and OBC (other backward caste) category. The OBCs restricted the dalits from taking water from the public pipe. The collector of the region resolved the issue by giving a huge tank with pipes on both sides under the condition that the Dalits should not cross the region of OBC. Another pressing problem is the lack of space during domestic occasions like death or marriage in the family. 'When deaths happen, the dwellers of these colonies have to demolish their kitchens or find narrow spaces between the houses in order to bury the dead. Every inhabitant of the colonies faces immense social and cultural injustice on a daily basis. If earlier the marriages were restricted within colonies, now marriages are happening across the colonies. The marriage restrictions are in fact reminiscent of the histories of Dalit struggles during feudalism. In olden times of feudal slavery, the lower caste families were violently dissipated in all the four directions by their feudal masters, as and when they deemed. The name of their respective 'illams'¹⁴ was whispered into the ears of the siblings at the time of separation so that they could recognise each other later in the event of their coming together. Thus, the Pulaya caste had 44 illams while Paraya caste had 12 illams. Due to the belief that those belonging to the same illams were siblings and since sibling marriage was taboo, such restrictions on marriages came into place.

The political parties in Kerala have a vital role in the conditioning of the colonies and their status in society. The candidate of these colonies is the way through which the welfare schemes and programmes are implemented. Almost all the colonies have a strong political leaning toward CPM. With its cadre party system, the CPM has secured a strong vote base in the 50,000 odd colonies of Kerala. While the older generation consistently voted for the left, the new generation is closer to the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). This as far as I understand is also linked to the problems and questions of religion and faith. BJP has many associations linked to festivities like the Sabarimala season, the Ayyappan Vilakk donation camps, Karthika, Sreekrishna Jayanthi, and

several other temple-centred events. Women are also increasingly participating in these events now. Majority of these temple events are organised by the leaders of BJP or Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Even after 70 years of independence, to find a Dalit, the mainstream society, irrespective of its political creed, has to come to these colonies. In these ghettos, they find innocent lives that are born into the torture of debts; who live, give birth, die, and get buried as debtors. They don't own any land, or business, or institutions. The leaders across the political spectrum from the Right to the Left, rich enough to buy high priests of religions, also go to the colonies of people who have nothing to lay their claim on. They then tell these people how E.M. Sankaran Namboothirippad or A.K. Gopalan or /Gandhi or Savarkar have been instrumental in changing their histories. The 1990s in the Dalit colonies witnessed a political thought that was upheld by Ayyankali and Ambedkar. The efforts of various political parties in bringing dalit leaders could only rejuvenate their early history and leaders. While listening to such assertions, in order to speak about powerful democratic interventions, Dalit politics can call back from memory many of those unsung heroes like Mahatma Ayyankali who famously rode a *Villuvandi* (bullock cart) and rewrote history, Poykayil Appachan who gave a new life to the slave communities by singing, 'Can't see a word on my ancestry, while I see scores of histories of others,' Kandankulathil Kumaran, Pampadi John Joseph, and most importantly, the hero from whom the Dalit unity now blossoms and spreads across; the father of modern India; Dr B R Ambedkar. These re-calls would certainly question the political idols that the mainstream society has hoisted on its pedestals and would create a stronger alternative space for politics in the future.

The Celebrated Flat-Residence Project Model

In the flats or apartments that are under construction in the proposed model under the housing project called 'LIFE' (Livelihood Inclusion and Financial Empowerment) by the Kerala state government, the area of a flat is 350 sq.ft. It includes a small hall, a room, a toilet and a cramped kitchen. The flats cannot be owned by the families for 15 years. Even after 15 years, they cannot sell or rent out these flats. That means that the residents may stay in these spaces as rented property but there is no commodity value for them. Almost all of the flats that have been built under this project have now become 'caste colonies.' There are people who have been living in these flats for more than ten years without any title-deeds or ownership rights over their space. In these cramped units, there is not even enough space for one family to sleep comfortably. During marriages, these families are forced to take other places on rent to live for two or three months. As soon as they are married the younger generation is compelled to move out due to the stifling limitation of space. The Pinarayi government has decided to build flats for the 4,72,000 odd people who are landless and homeless. As the first stage of this long-term plan, 2018-19 it has been decided to build homes for one hundred thousand families and budget allocations for this purpose have been set aside.

The flats each covering 350 sq. ft (discussions are on to make this 400 sq.ft) as the project claims, prioritise the landless and homeless people. This also means that the adivasis and dalits may not even get the funds for the three cents of land that they were allotted early. Even after their decades-long - struggle for the ownership of the

land that they rightfully deserved, if the dalit/adviasi communities are being denied land and are being pushed into the new generation 'caste colonies' in the form of flats and apartments, it is a clear indication that the landless are being deprived of each one of their rights for land as well as any form of socio-cultural capital. The ownership of the apartment vests with the governing agency and it is only after 12 years that the ownership would be transacted. But this system is bringing in a congested lifestyle, and the claim of having land is denied to them. Rajamanikyam the Ernakulam District Collector, who was appointed by the government of Kerala. His reports said that about 58% (around 5 lakh hectares of land) of revenue land was held illegally by short plantation companies like Harison- Tata. This report was submitted in 2014. The Rajamanikyam Report had suggested that plantation lands that are being 'unlawfully' held by companies like Tata-Harrison through false title-deeds, should be taken over by the government through parliamentary intervention and redistributed among the landless. However, that report has been completely rejected by the government.

Conclusions

The Dalit/Adviasi communities were always denied their lawful rights over land and resources due to the structural 'monstrosity' called caste and its power relations. It is due to this exclusion from land and resources that they always stood outside the socio-political spaces of privilege. And it is to counter this injustice that they have been seeking redistribution of land and resources time and again.. When each of their claims have been turned down and they are getting ruthlessly ghettoized further and further into 'caste colonies,' it becomes evident that even at the core of the government housing projects for building flats and residential conglomerates, nothing but the centuries-old caste consciousness still prevails in Kerala. . In fact, the un-inhabitable places were first isolated and then normalised as colonies and handed over to Dalits. The entire process is a picture-book replica of how every other form of discursive capital in institutionalized social structures segregated people in terms of caste and alienated them.

The status quo of the social structure influences human life and also determines the norms for the distribution of land and resources. The caste-ridden structure of Kerala society and the capitalist system that constitutes it are equally contributing to the callous ghettoization of dalit communities. Needless to say, property, in India, always had a communal and casteist form. It is from such political expulsions of mainstream idols that the dalit communities have always understood that what they need is not mere ownership of a piece of land, but the absolute socio-political and cultural acceptance that has long been denied them. It is from such revelations that all historical protests over land rights had sprung up in the past. I strongly believe that the production and distribution of capital has a significant role to play in the socio-economic and political plight of every dalit/adviasi of Kerala including me. When the caste ghettos are getting 'upgraded' to the new housing projects and flats, the inevitable question of whether we need this, after all, should rise from us. For no colonies to come up further, we should demand the complete re-distribution of land. The caste colonies are the living form of the institutionalised caste system that thrives under every other elected government and marginalises communities in the garb of development.

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Endnotes

1. Mahatma Ayyankali was a social reformer who opened a democratic renaissance periods of Kerala through the movements for the downtrodden. Ayyankali fought for freedom to walk in public spheres, against slavery, for educational rights and conducted peasant strikes for the wages of their work which were never heard in our society at that time. From 1911 to a very long period he worked for the upliftment of untouchables, as a member of Sreemoolam Prajasabha.
2. A plant whose leaves are used as mats in Kerala
3. In the 19th century Dalit settlements were called, kudi’ and they never had ownership over these Kudi. It belonged to the landlord to whom they were slaves
4. Administrative units at the rural level.
5. Welfare schemes are development projects being implemented in the state for the upliftment of dalits and tribal communities
6. When the Land Reformation Act was implemented in Kerala, the land acquired by the EMS government at that time was the land of Nilambur Dynasty, a small princely state of Travancore and the fallow lands of Kuttanad. Most of Kerala’s land lies in the plantation sector and the plantation lands were excluded under the provisions of the Land Reformation Act
7. 19th century, the Subaltern movements had enabled the people of Kerala to initiate the movements. Thus, the movements in Kerela were not enabled by the Left Organisation however KSS is an organisation. They had conducted a census on land distribution in Kerala.
8. Kerala State Government introduced a complement legislation providing for Panchayats, Blocks ,Municipalities in the state.It is the people planning campaign held in 1996 in 9th five year plan.
9. Pulaiyar is the name of a caste that was a peasant slave in Kerala. Pulaiyan is the name used to refer to a person from that caste and they formed majority slaves in Kerala.

10. Pulayar, Parayar, Kuravar, Ulladans are dalits or lower castes that were involved in tilling the soil
11. Cherukad, a well known Malayalam language play writer, Novelist, Poet and political activist in Kerala
12. He is a journalist and the author of *Keralathile Africa*
13. A housing scheme of the central Government of India
14. *Illam* is a Malayalee lineage system used for classification and identification of castes in *Kerala*.