



## IRRATIONAL LAND DISTRIBUTION AMONG DALITS AND TRIBES: AN ENIGMA BEFORE KERALA ECONOMY

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### ABSTRACT

Kerala stands as a model in the implementation of Land Reforms in India. In recent times, there is a growing discussion in the disparity between land reforms and equity in land ownership. The present paper tries to argue that even though land reforms become successful in Kerala by providing land to a minor proportion of people, it failed to give them economic independence. Because, through Land Reforms Act, it was given only a small piece of land for their shelter and it was quite impossible for them to depend completely on this plot of land for their livelihood. This becomes a vital cause for the continuation of backwardness of Dalits and Tribes in Kerala even after the introduction of Land Reforms and it is a paradox with Kerala's achievement in social development which is widely acclaimed as 'Kerala Model'. This shows that they are not included in the success story of Kerala. The Land Reform Movement failed to provide adequate land to them and also become responsible for the existence of various paradoxes like stagnant growth of agriculture and emergence of absentee landlordism. All these underline the necessity to address the issue of land reforms once again.

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### INTRODUCTION

Kerala's higher social sector development despite of a low economic development is widely acclaimed and this phenomenon has famously become known as the "Kerala Model of Development". The giant strides of social development climbed by Kerala in the past few decades are nationally and even internationally acclaimed by planners, administrators and development agencies. Nearly hundred percent literacy, higher life expectancy, low infant and maternal mortality, better public distribution system etc. in the midst of low economic development makes Kerala's development path a miracle. It is often said that essence of Kerala Model lies in providing the principle that more than the quantity of income of a country, its distribution and wise utilization contributes to the quality of life. Kerala is also glorified as the holy land of tourism or as "God's own country" – a slogan advertised for exploiting tourism potentials in the state. However, if one moves away from the glamorous world of tourism and other extolling factors, and penetrates deeper into the socio-political and economic structures that drive Kerala's society, what one gets to see is

the exclusion and marginalisation of the Adivasis (the indigenous communities), who constitute 1.45 per cent of the state's total population and the Dalits (the lowest group in the caste hierarchy), who constitute 9.1 per cent especially when it comes to the issue of land ownership (Census, 2011). The much proclaimed land reforms in Kerala did not yet help them to change their status from laborers to landowning farmers. More recently, scholars have drawn attention to the landlessness of Dalits and Adivasis that has rendered large segments of these social groups incapable of participating in the developmental process, and to the land struggles that have ensued as a result over the past decade (Aneesh, 2014). Land, forest and other natural resources provide a platform for livelihoods and abasis of socio-cultural and religious practices (UN Economic Commission for Europe, 2013). Secure tenure rights and equitable access to all relevant recipients are one of the means to eradicate hunger and poverty which, in turn, can support sustainable development and enhance the state of environmental protection. In this context, land reform refers to "the redistribution of land from those who have excess of land to those who have none, with the objective of increasing the income and bargaining power of the poor" in the rural areas

(Jain R, 2011). The human struggle for ownership of a plot of land is perhaps as old as humanity itself, and the situation isn't any different in Kerala. Struggles waged by the landless at Muthanga, Chengara and elsewhere for more than a decade indicate how Kerala's much-flaunted history of land reforms is becoming increasingly questionable. For the Adivasi community, the struggle has been essentially about the restoration of their alienated land. Every piece of law enacted towards this has failed or made to fail (Sreerekha, 2010). This article is about why Dalits and Adivasis are still not self-reliant even after the most celebrated land reforms in Kerala and the relevance of a second land reform movement in the present situation. The land reforms implemented by the Communist Party quenched the outcry of the landless agricultural laborer for the ownership of land. But it did not solve the bonded economic dependency of the tenures, since they were given only 10 cents of land even though the landlords possessed many acres of land. This created two types of citizens in Kerala, the upper caste landlords and the lower castes with less land. Thus the amended land reforms introduced by the government shattered the dreams of economic equality of the downtrodden community.

Only receiving 10 cents of land, the Kudikidappukar got the title 'free Peasants'. But it is the naked truth that it was quite impossible for them to depend completely on their small portion of land for their livelihood. So again they need the mercy of rich landlords for using the latter's land for their livelihood. Spontaneously, it led to the economic dependence of backward communities in Kerala. The majority of the people, who were socially and religiously being looked down upon, lost a chance to get economic equality in the society. The Dalits, who were once 'the real owner' of the land, are now in a situation to struggle for a piece of land for their survival. This became a vital cause for the continuation of backwardness of the Dalit communities in Kerala. In order to build a classless, casteless society in Kerala, equal distribution of wealth is inevitable. To attain such a big dream, a second land reform movement is necessary.

### The Process of Transition of Society from Equality to Inequality

The very pertinent matter should be mentioned here is who the real owner of the land is. A historical narration may answer the question. During the period of I Chera Dynasty, the population was not divided into castes and communities. The Varna system had not taken a clear shape. Social exclusiveness and un-approachability were unknown. Communities such as the *pulayas* or *cheramars* (people or the caste of Chera kings) *Pana*, *Kuruva*, *Paraya*, and *Veta* were held in high esteem by the rulers. These people educated and enjoyed social freedom and equality. Many great poets of the Sangam age were *Panas*. The spirit of Dravidian culture was castelessness (Kunjanpillai, 1970). From the fifth century onwards there was an inrush of Brahmins from the north, who sought to spread *Chaturvarnya*. The most important development in the field of land tenure in this period is perhaps the gradual acquisition of thousands of acres of paddy land by the Brahmin village corporations through the process of *Attiperu* (Land owners donating sole proprietorship of land under the protection of the temple), *Kilitu* (Land owners placing their land under the protection of the temple) and outright purchase. Gradually this led to the domination of economic and social life by the Aryan settlers who succeeded in imposing their culture on Kerala

(Narayanan, 2013). By using logical and well-conceived fairy tales, the Brahmins were able to introduce their vested interest in the perpetuation of particular social systems and economic arrangements. The *Jenmis* and nobles of Kerala were able to convince the common people that the legends concocted by them to cement the feudal system. Its effects were unparalleled and extraordinary; the *Jenmis* could continue their exploitation for the centuries without the least opposition from the oppressed classes (Kunjanpillai, 1970). The historical reasons for this strange phenomenon were, first, the willingness of the intelligentsia to serve the feudal lords and their consequent failure to guide the common people to a correct appreciation of events and things, and, secondly the mental slavery that resulted from economic servitude. When the inscriptions from various temples from the 9th to 13th centuries A.D. are examined, it becomes clear, before that time most of the land was owned by *non-Nambudiris*. It is seen that during these centuries, many landowners bestowed lands on the *Nambudiris* and the temples. Thus from the *Pulayas*, *Idayas*, *Vedas*, *Villavas* and other agriculturists, ownership passed to the present class of landholders in the period from the 9th to the 13th centuries (Kunjanpillai, 1970). However, the Mysorean conquest in the middle of 18th century led to certain changes in land relations in Malabar. Large majority of the *Nampudiri Brahmins* were forced to migrate to the South and many Rajas fled to the mountainous regions. As one of the Mysorean motives was to extract large revenue from the land, they introduced direct taxation of land, which did not exist in Kerala until then (Menon., 2012).

### Land Reforms in Kerala

From 1950s onwards there were serious and sincere efforts in Kerala to get rid of the *Janmi-kudiyam* land-tenure system and to implement equitable distribution of land through land reforms. During the 1957 elections in Kerala, the question of redressing the grievances of peasants acquired prominence. The left front promised radical reforms in the agrarian front and they explicitly stated that all cultivable government waste lands would be distributed among landless and poor peasants and that all evicted tenants would be reinstated. The legislature passed subsequent land reform bills in 1960, 1963, 1964, and 1969. But the historical land reform act, which put an end to the feudal system and ensured the rights of the tenants on land, came into force on 1 January 1970. This Act abolished landlordism and other types of tenancy systems. The "Land to the Tiller" policy was carried out with a lot of enthusiasm. Landless labourers in the Panchayath areas were conferred 0.10 acres (10 cents) of land and those in the Municipal areas 0.03 acres (three cents) of land. The main initiatives carried out in Kerala during the land reform period are:

- Setting a cap (ceiling) on the absolute size of holdings and the excess would be distributed to those who did not have land previously;
- Abolishing the system of "rice land tenancy" which would lead to "the abolition of rental payments from actual operators to non-cultivating landlords". The reform aims at preventing landlords from throwing tenants off the land.
- "The abolition of tenancy in house garden lands and thus the abolition of rents to the landlords who held title to them. As with provision 2, eviction stays kept tenants from being thrown off the land"

The Kerala's land reform movement enables the 'Kudikidappukaran' to become a land owner. This term *Kudikidappukaran* refers to a person "who does not have an estate or any land exceeding five cents in value, and who has been allowed to use and occupy a small portion of land as his shelter by the lawful owner of the land, as owner or as tenant, with or without an obligation to pay rent" (Services, 2012). The land reform allowed the land users to compensate the land owners by paying only 25 % of the market value. The land occupants needed to pay only 50 % of the total value in 12 annual instalments, and the government took care of the balance 50 % (Franke, 1992). Here, the aftermath of land reform was not only for the landless and the poor to have a new piece of land to cultivate or an increase in their family income but also to acquire the ownership right of the farmstead where they have been living on for a long time.

However, the proper implementation of the Act is another story. All benefits of land reform have not been materialised due to many constraints and hurdles during the implementation process. The poor, the landless and the powerless still did not have sufficient land to cultivate and increase their standard of living due to legal loopholes. While the much proclaimed land reforms in Kerala fail to address some crucial issues, it also suffers from the following four major weaknesses:

First, it excluded the plantation sector. A vast geographic area – most of the highland and a good part of the midland – was thus put out of the purview of the reforms. The large plantations were all initially held by Sterling companies and subsequently passed on to Indian big capital. The exclusion of plantations from reforms legislation had adverse implications for plantation workers too; the question of their landlessness was overlooked. Second, the reform enacted for garden-land and rice-fields was primarily a tenancy reform with transfer of land to intermediate and small tenants. It left out the vast masses of landless workers, who were mostly of socially disadvantaged castes and communities. Third, the ceilings reform that was expected to yield land to the landless workers turned out to be severely inadequate. With plantations excluded and the landlords circumventing reforms through family partition well ahead, only a meager extent of land could be acquired for redistribution. Workers living on the landlords' garden-land were given a tiny plot of 10 cents around their hut or elsewhere in the plot as decided by the landlord but no meaningful extent of cultivable land was made available to them.

Fourth, in the absence of common systems of land and water-management and commonly agreed crops and agricultural calendar, the fragmentation of rice fields consequent to land reforms had adverse effects on production and environment. Coupled with other factors, like a rapidly expanding middle class and migrants' remittances flowing in from west Asia, fragmentation produced other chain-effects (Herring, 1980). Due to these draw backs what really happened was the landless and the marginalised did not really benefit from land reform significantly. The real beneficiaries were still upper class and land owners since they could find ways to be exempted from being a subject of the ceiling provisions. The plantation owners became a new class of landlords. Some communities were totally left out, such as the fishing community. Land reform activities could not improve agricultural productivity as there was no linkage between the distribution of land and development of infrastructure

facilitating agriculture. There was drastic declaim of paddy cultivation due to several difficulties faced by small farmers. There were problems with boundaries of surplus land because of procedural irregularity and loss of survey record and other administrative procedures.

### **Irrational Distribution of Land among Dalits and Adivasis**

The major deficiency of the 1970s reforms manifested today is the persistence of the colonial pattern of landholdings. The Tenancy Reforms Act passed in 1970, specifically meant for providing land to the landless, benefited a few, but a large majority were allotted few cents in the so-called "colonies" designed for them. The Tenancy Reforms Act of 1970 contributed to the process of creating Dalit and Adivasi colonies and recent studies show that there is a total of 12,500 Dalit and 4,083 Adivasi colonies in the state. What the Tenancy Act did for the Dalit community is permit them to own the homestead they lived in or grant them three cents of land in a colony, merely saving them from the fear of getting displaced. In the absence of any agricultural land or means of subsistence, the creation of colonies instigated a process of ghettoisation of the community. Prior to land reforms they were living as tenant. Land reform transits their life into 4 or 5 cent colonies like ghettos from landlessness (Rammohan, 2008). According to a survey conducted by KILA (Kerala Institute of Local Administration), 55% from the scheduled caste are living in an appalling condition. The study also revealed that 64.77% have education below 10<sup>th</sup> standard and just 0.09% got professional education. The literacy rates of tribal males and females is 64% and 56% respectively while male and female literacy rate in the rest of the Kerala stand at 96% and 92% respectively. ST constitute 3% of the total BPL population while the proportion of ST population is only 1.14%. It implies that the incidence of poverty among the ST is about three times that of the total population of the state.

The combined Dalit and Adivasi population, including Dalit Christians, in Kerala is between 65 and 70 lakhs in a total of 333.87 lakh (Census Report, 2011). They constitute more than 80% of Kerala's landless. The extent of landlessness among Dalits is much above the all-India average. The proportion of landless Dalits (households that do not own land other than their homestead) is the highest in Kerala, Punjab and Haryana. The National Federation for Dalit Land Rights Movements (NFDLRM) reports that the percentage of Dalit landless households in Kerala (including the near landless or those who own just their homestead) is more than 90%, which at the all-India level is next only to Punjab. In Kerala Scheduled Castes constitute 9.6 % of the total population while the percentage of agricultural land they owned is 2.80%. Their average landholding was only 0.07 acres, which was significantly worse than the National average of 0.49 acres for Scheduled castes was significantly lower than that of the general population. Based on a study by Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad during 2004-05, Sunny Kapikkad points out that upper castes in Kerala own four times and Christians own five times more land than the Dalits. All these studies reveal that even after many decades completing the land reforms in Kerala the position of Dalits and Adivasis remain unchanged. Over the years several steps have been taken by the government to bridge the gap between these groups and rest of the population. For this government have introduced separate components in Five-Year Plans for supplementing their developmental needs. Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) for the Scheduled Tribes and a Special

Component Plan (SCP) for the Scheduled Castes are introduced to channelize the flow of outlays and benefits from general development sectors to these sub-plans, at least in proportion to their population, for the betterment of these sections. The programmes under SCP cover a wide area comprising education, economic and social welfare activities for the development of Scheduled Caste. Socio-economic development and protection of the tribes from all kinds of exploitation are the twin objectives of Tribal Sub Plan. The total plan provision set apart in Kerala Budget for the development of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes during 2014-15 is ` 1962 crore and ` 600.00 crore respectively. Year-wise details from 2010-11 onwards are given the figure (Economic Review, 2014).

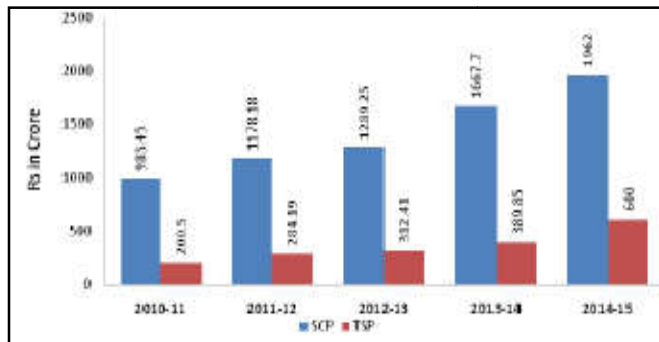


Figure 1. SCP/TSP-Year Wise Outlay

Even after spending large sum of money year by year for the development of Dalits and Adivasis their situation is still pathetic. Still the gap between them and the rest population persists and further efforts are needed. Most of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe people are still striving to attain basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. They also require better opportunities to live with dignity and self-respect. The backwardness of Dalits and Adivasis reveal that the land reform movement initiated by the government, with an aim to give them better living conditions and self-reliance, was not a total success in Kerala. Though the Act gave a large section of the people with a piece of land for building a survival shelter, it did not allow them to do the only occupation they know, that is, agriculture. Having no land for agriculture, they have been suffering terribly for many years. Right to land for cultivation is the basic right of human beings. This is very relevant in the case of Dalits and Adivasis as they are the indigenous people of Kerala. So it is the right time to launch 'Second Land Reform Agitation' immediately for this right. Strong political will is required to take necessary steps that would lead to a second land reform in Kerala which will benefit the Dalits, Adivasis and the marginalized.

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