

Chengara struggle: Critique of Land Alienation in a Caste Endowed Epoch of Kerala, South India.

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Abstract

This paper discusses the caste system and its influences over land and labour relations in the state of Kerala. This study reveals the grim reality of the land alienation of Dalits, who belongs to the lower stratum of the caste hierarchy and compelled to lent their labour power to the land lords in the history and land owning upper castes or plantation corporations now and live as a tenants, without ownership over cultivable land. Chengara struggle addresses the land question spanned in colonial and post-colonial period of Kerala state, where globally glorified land reforms have been taken place. The land reform policies spread glares to their life meanwhile failed in brining structural changes as well.

Introduction

Land use patterns in Kerala state have been drastically changed in recent decades. The early land relations shed lights over the socio-political structure of the economy rather than the caste system. There are a sort of economic and social factors including land reforms, commercialisation of agriculture, proliferated growth in population, disintegration of joint cultivation and left political movements that have played a vital role in transformations of agrarian relations (Scaria, 2010). It is directly allied with the social and economic life of the agrarians, who had to spend their lives as agrarian labourers for the landlords in accordance with their caste position in the hierarchical division and economic backwardness (N.Krishnaji, 2007). Struggles for getting ownership over land and acquiring wages in kind of cash rather than any material goods at various times reckoned Kerala history.

The caste system has been enhancing social disparities at its maximum by unequally distributing resources and opportunities among the different caste groups. The caste system has a kind of mythical conditioning, which headed over rationality and historical accounts. Apart from caste system, the land is inseparably related with Kerala mythology that the legend of *Asura* king Mahabali, at Indra's request, Lord Vishnu is born as *Vamana* and seeks a boon from Mahabali, land enough for three steps for conducting the *Ashwamedha yagna*. The king had been failed in that. Perhaps the real truth lies in the Aryan – Dravidian conflict. Brahmnis, the upper caste community, who are called *Namboodiris* in Kerala are in-migrants from different parts of India, could become one of the land owned dominant group in the history. Their Aryan features with glorified 'Brahmin Blood' helped them to access in Royal families and perused a new form of feudal land relationship that as custodians of land and Veda (Sacred texts). In Strangely, Kerala, the land associated with this unusual Hindu mythology, is unevenly solved and hitherto the struggles for land by the underprivileged Dravidians or the lower caste people are continuing.

In the colonial period, the land ownerships being legalised while traditional land structure of land lords and tenants turn into defensible. The left government took initiative in implementing land reforms in the state in 1969, which abolished landlordism and generous to tenants by treating them as virtual owners of the cultivating land (Ajith, 2002). The landless Dalits and Adivasis, who were the legatees, became owners of a tiny plot of three to ten cents of land. The mainstream literature over land relations and social movements in Kerala tries to understand through the lenses of development and political orientation towards the left. Kerala provides an appropriate setting to understand how far radical redistributive land reforms have succeeded in transforming inequity in land ownership (Scaria, 2010).

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She implies that the much-acclaimed land reforms have failed to provide land to the actual tillers of the soil - Dalits, who still stand at the bottom in permanent ownership over land. Rammohan (2008) points out that the landless Dalits of Chengara tries to address the drawbacks of glorified land reforms. It advocates the necessity to rework over the policies of the same to wipe out social disparities. For the Adivasi community, the struggle has been essentially about the restoration of their alienated land (Sreerekha,2010). It raises a political question that the left ideology is affluent and overpower in the state, where a good majority of Dalits and Adivasies pursuing identity acuity rather than class consciousness. The non-party political formations and grass root mobilisations provided a political alternative, opened up democratic space and transformed the nature of party from what Rudolph and Rudolph call 'command polity to demand polity'(A.Vaidyanathan, 1990) and Kothari calls 'politics of the classes to the politics of the masses'(Kothari, 1986).

This paper focused on two aspects –how far the paradoxical features of caste system influences the movement and how does alienation could be conceptualised in land relations. Qualitative interpretation makes this research more sounded. A handful of families from the Chengara struggle participated in the in-depth interviews and focused group interviews of different sorts were carried out in the research. Here, the respondents are encouraged to talk freely about his/her experiences and this further helps in bringing out the inner feelings, pain, and emotions which may not otherwise be possible. It was particularly designed to understand their socio-economic conditions and to evaluate the outcome of the movement so far. The interviewer felt free to move any direction of interest that may come up.

Chengara Struggle: Glimpses of the Movement

Chengara land grab explains how far land reforms replicate social disparities in accordance with labour relations and land questions spanned in the colonial and post-colonial era. Here, the movement started by the Dalits against the government and civil society for getting permanent ownership on agriculture land and lively hood. Such situations indicate the need for immediate positive obligations from the state to provide fertile agricultural land in sufficient quantities, which the families in struggle could use an asset as well as a means of survival. In Desai's words, the civil and democratic rights of the people are not protected by the constitution (Manosmitha, Aruna, & Libina, 2012). Consequently, the movements for their protection have increased. The Dalits in Kerala occupies the least position in the caste and class hierarchy. Land reforms in the state did not bring any positional changes as from land labours to land-owning farmers. They persisted to live as wage labourers for years. Here in Chengara, the subaltern groups have been trying to make their own history through the resistance against the upper caste elites leading government and other state mechanisms.

Chengara is a village with hundreds of acres' rubber plantations, situated in Pathanamthitta district in Kerala. The village frequents the media due to a land struggle, popularly known as "Chengara Samaram" (Chengara struggle), which was led by Laha Gopalan, under the banner of Sadhujana vimochana samyuktha vedhi (the United Front of the Poor for Liberation) for a decade. Really the land struggle is not taking place in Chengara, but in Harrison's Malayalam Estate, part of the RPG group is the largest private land-holding company in Kerala. It has 33 estates (tea and rubber) of not less than 50,000 acres in six districts in Kerala, where the movement has been taken place, is 3km away from the Chengara but it is popularly known as Chengara estate. So it got the name "Chengara Samaram". A fact is that it is taking place on the *Athumpunkulam* (a village in *Konni*) border of the Harrison's Malayalam Estate. The Chengara estate is a rubber plantation of around 6000 acres which had been leased to Harrison's Malayalam by the government of Kerala. Harrison Malayalam was a British company and it was renamed as Malayalam Plantation of India in 1978. In 1984, it registered itself as Harrison Malayalam. At Chengara, Harrison's continues possession of land even after the land lease was exhausted and also occupies excess land. The government inquiries reveal that the Harrison estate failed to pay the lease for the land since 1996. Its lease timed out in 2009, and the company has possessed the land illegally. The hilly terrains at the southern plantation belt of the Pathanamthitta district in Kerala reverberated with a major land struggle of an unprecedented nature involving more than 3,000 families of the deprived sections of the society- Dalits(including Dalit Christians), Adivasies and OBC's (Manosmitha, Aruna, & Libina, 2012). These are the people left out in land reforms of Kerala, once lauded as a grand success. They demand land and labour to live. The movement by the Dalits demanding the restoration of alienated land. The number of huts of landless Dalits Adivasies and Dalit Christians has increased to around 14,000. The people in struggle continue in the same resoluteness and spirit that nothing can dissuade them from their goal of attaining land for a meaningful existence.

The movement for land acquisition in Chengara was started on 4th August, 2007, under the leadership of Laha Gopalan, in southern plantation belt of *Athumpunkulam* (Rammohan, 2008). They occupy around 500 acres of land. The civil society (in sociological discourses, which provided by the plethora of social movements and the role of the non-governmental organisations in socio-economic development) of Kerala react to it, when the hostile has been imposed on them by the trade union of permanent workers in the plantation (it includes CITU, INTUC and BMS) when they demand to ensure the immediate lifting of the blockade and sufficient supply of food, medicines and adequate health care to the protest camps.

Hithero, the land questions raised by the agitators remain unanswered. Whereas, the movement has relatively more significance in the history of agrarian struggles, while nothing could be disdain the sparkles over caste system, which beneath in land relations. Of course, there are many progressive alterations happened in the social and economic lives of the Dalits, meanwhile, the land relations and ownership over land keep untouched as well.

Redistribution and Rehabilitation

Even by the end of the land reform era, governments were not committed to distributing the surplus land to the landless or labourers did not possess land for cultivation. For decades now, the descendants of Dalits and Adivasis who were left out of the reforms have been living on government owned public land on the outskirts of cities and towns or in 'one lakh colonies' (Srerekha, 2012). While, the agitators started occupy government land, which is illegally possessed by a corporate company. Around 5000 families belongs to Dalits, Adivasis and a few OBCs encroached the land, which has been illegally possessed by the plantation owners. The participation of women is visible and vibrant among the occupants. They are demanding a minimum of one acre of cultivable land anywhere in Kerala. The movements are having the character of cultural pluralism, which deals with the changes in the life style and the reconstruction of the social structure.

The left government announced Chengara Rehabilitation package to resolve the issue by giving agricultural land in different parts of the state to the landless ones in 2009. Government promised 50 cents to 832 participant Dalit families and one acre each for 27 tribal families 25 cents each to the landless others. The left front government has been addressed the issue with an inconsequential attitude, while they try to address landlessness rather than land relations. One of the downsides of the land reform in Kerala is that it could not address the caste boundedness in land relations properly (Ajith, 2002). When this policy grabs the attention as such a convenient method to reduce land alienation perhaps where social alienation is more manifested. Hence, the agitators came with a permanent solution for the landlessness. Many families left the site and settled in the land put forward by the government. More than half of them did not accept the offer and they complained that the land, which is given to them is not productive and liveable. And they believe that this package is just meant for call off the struggle and displace them in elsewhere in the state.

The families, whom are settled in the site, had divided the 500 acres of Harison Malayalam among themselves with 50 cents for each family and they started cultivation on the land. They are retaining the same problem as a labouring man of a capitalist economy that the land and products are seen over and against them, alien to them and no longer under their control. Alienating labourers from the cultivable land and accumulating these under the landlords in early years and corporate nexus in recently. Through this struggle, they prove that the marginalised people of the Kerala state demand cultivable land. They never treated land as a liquid asset, it's for their livelihood. In their opinion, they need it as a productive force as for cultivation.

Caste System and Land Alienation

In the current scenario, the value of land has been increasing not only in the market but also in terms of the production process. The present-day land struggles shed lights on the ignored aspects of land distribution as the redistribution of land, not to raise its productivity. The mere rearrangement of property among private players would have been treated with disdain. Dalits are alienated from the production process by keeping them away from the cultivation process. Man is not alienated because wage labour separates him from his general abstract species-being. Rather, he is a social being that creates and appropriates nature in the forms of objects according to his consciousness which is a result of social life. He is alienated when he is separated from his social relationships including nature from his livelihood. Alienation is a feature embalmed with capitalist mode of production, where the labour has been alienated from the product while the production gets over. The agriculture labours or actual cultivators have been alienating from the product and the farm land is a common phenomenon, which is justified with the caste position and social condition of caste system.

However, events in recent times reveal that there are no fundamental changes occurred in the actual condition of the downtrodden. Lack of access to the agricultural land and resources to earn a livelihood are the causes behind this. As land reforms are considered one of the outstanding achievement of the so-called Kerala model development, these are a set of economic practices, which takes place in Kerala with results like good infant mortality rates, high level of Human Development Index etcetera. In however the state has low industrial development and high levels of unemployment. The land reforms in Kerala are somewhat peculiar because of both landlordism and its archenemy, the peasant struggle. It has developed deep roots in Kerala resulting a being in the forefront of the land reform movement and land legislation. The state has been recommended by the Central government as a model for replication by other states. The Human Development Report of UN in the year of 1992 says that the Kerala Model Development is reaching to its natural death, in the sense that the rapid developments in social conditions without the parallel developments in Gross Domestic Product or in Per Capita Income are dialectical. So it should a buzz, not long living.

Conclusion

Whatever achievements could advert Kerala with internationally acclaimed features, caste, the retrograding component, is enough to darken the entire vividness. The backwardness and drastic health condition of the underprivileged ones is an eye opener for the so-called civilians of our society. Here, we are experiencing a larger amount of consumer character, when Chengara becomes a self-sufficient society with a large amount of vegetable production and becoming green in the map. It put forward a dynamic paradigm for land reforms and addresses land relations in a caste echoed society with an internationally acclaimed human development index.

When the passive citizens who were merely treated as the consumers of state welfare programs turns into active citizens, being aware of their oppressive social conditions and rights through an active civil society movement emerges at the grass roots level, transforms the nature of ownership on means of production. The land has not been treated only as a commodity with exchange value that made it dear to the Dalits, or only as a status symbol. It was also seen as connected with culture, identity and also livelihood.

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