

# Land Reforms and Marginalised Communities in Kerala

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## Abstract

Land Reforms played a significant role in Kerala. Kerala is one of the States where landlordism has been abolished by land reforms legislations. The age old institutions of caste and feudalism were inseparable in the society of Kerala. In order to eradicate caste structure Government adopted several measures. Kerala is now-a-days giving more attention to marginalized communities in Kerala. But Kerala's land reform movement failed to yield social equality. Kerala is one of the states with lowest tribal population. The tribes are original inhabitants of India who followed a life based on environment. There are tribals both landed and landless in Kerala. The Kurichyas, Kurumbars and Kanikars, are a prominent tribal group in Kerala. They had their own culture, identity and social systems. They were weaker sections both socially and economically. Tribals were cultivators therefore land is a great challenge for the upliftment of the marginalized group. The land reforms movement tended the marginalized communities to find the solutions of the problems they faced.

**Key words:** Tribes, land reforms, Kanikar, marginalized, Dalits, culture

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## I. Introduction

Kerala is one of the states where landlordism has been abolished by land reforms legislations. The age old institution of caste and feudalism were inseparable in the society of Kerala. In order to eradicate caste structure Government adopted several measures and gave more attention to marginalized communities. The current estimation is that only one lakh surplus land would be available for distribution.<sup>1</sup> Though Kerala's land reform movement was intended as a blow to high caste landlords, failed to yield social equality. In this present study the researcher analyzes Kerala's land reform movement from the perspective of social equality and shows that even after the much touted land reform, land inequality in the state stands very high, whether measured in terms of over - all distribution inequality or social inequality. The marginalised communities are still continue at the lower state of the society and also at the bottom of the land ownership yet the persisting inequality in land ownership has significant stakes in the upward mobility of the marginalized groups. The distribution of land and land ownership of marginalized communities is a notable factor affecting the educational level of household and the land reforms broadened the opportunities for occupational mobility among the marginalised people. Even the higher caste people used the land reforms Act to alienate the Adivasi from their native places.<sup>2</sup>

The abolition of landlordism was the first revolutionary step in Kerala along with land reform movement. Land reform movement had a great responsibility in improving social outcomes such as education and health in the state resulting in greater mobility of people on the whole. The impact of land legislation on marginalised communities in Kerala recently became a major question. The land reform in no way benefited marginalised communities like Dalits and Adivasis. The land reform left some serious gaps in terms of inter-group distribution of land holdings in the state, which, in turn had more serious consequences for the social mobility of marginalized. The chaos and confusion created by the Dalits and Adivasis depicts that Kerala's land question is still incomplete and unresolved.

Though Jenmy system was abolished in 1970, the impact of it was not swept off all of a sudden. The marginalized were deprived of land and the big plantations covered the vast areas of land. There are even concerns about increasing real estate activities and their role in perpetuating social inequality in land distribution<sup>4</sup>.The upper caste shared vast area of land and relegated the marginalized, particularly Dalits. The great social inequality in land ownership resulted in the creation of imbalance in education and occupation.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor Bergman, Agrarian Reforms in India, p.67, Agricole Publishing Academy, 1984 Delhi

<sup>2</sup> A.D.Dileep Raj, Kerala Samoohabhupadam Muthanga Samarathinushesham, p.19, D.C.Books, D.C.Books Kottayam 2003

In India, land reform became a catalyst to bring social mobility, by freeing lower caste people from various kinds of unfreedom and indignities. The second five year plan rightly identifies one of the two objectives of land reform: 'to establish an egalitarian society and to eliminate social inequality, land reform helps in upward social mobility in combination with other social and economic factors'. In Kerala land reform movement brought great achievements whether it had uniformity across all social groups is another question. Land was not distributed equally among the social groups. This inter-group differential in land ownership post-land reform has created a wedge between the mobility options of communities which gained from land reform and those which did not gain much<sup>6</sup>. The main reason for such social disparities are the unequal distribution of land among different social groups. Thus there's a tendency among landless to struggle for land and upliftment of social and economic status.

It is from the unresolved question of land reform in Kerala that the recent Adivasi, Dalit struggles are coming up.<sup>3</sup> The land question is a great challenge for the upliftment of the marginalized groups. But the problems faced by various marginalized groups are different land reform movement tended these communities to find solutions for the problems they face. And the struggle by them for land still continue. Dalits were relegated to the status of landless agricultural labourers and they demanded for land reclamation and the adivasis lost their land and their struggle against land alienation and displacement still continue.

### **Land problems of Adivasis in Kerala**

The word "Adivasis" means scheduled tribes, Adivasis were Land owners in ancient times. Gradually they were displaced because of the development of plantations in Kerala. The forest assets were looted and plundered and those who conserved the forest and lived by depending forest economy had to leave. Some of the big plantations in Kerala displaced the adivasis from their birth place. However large scale tribal displacement, took place with the development of plantations in Kerala.

According to the 2011 census, Adivasis constitute just 1.5 per cent of the total population in Kerala.<sup>6</sup> The question on land and Adivasis were different in different regions. The land problem affected landless adivasis of Malabar in greater measure in number than the landless Adivasis of Travancore and Cochin. In Travancore the Adivasis were given conferment of peasant ownership right which protected their land rights. Malabar migration from south created landless adivasis there. Adivasis also belonged to different categories of tribals and among them also there are considerable differences in the adivasis land ownership pattern. There are tribals both landless and landed in Kerala. Introduction of large plantations by the British and forest politics and large scale migration led to the loss of property rights in land and forest through privatization ultimately resulting in the marginalization and exclusion of the adivasis people. Most of the Adivasis were peasants and land alienation affected the state resulted in poverty and malnutrition. Kerala is noted for the incidence of land alienation of Adivasis compared to other states of the country. Adivasis were bound to give up their motherland by the non adivasi migrant settlers, cases of forgery and deceit also led to the land appropriation through land purchases by outsiders. Although there have been many Government attempts to restore the alienated land to the adivasis, none of them could change the situation in a major way.<sup>7</sup> Kanikars are a prominent group among tribals in Kerala. Kanikars are a wild but inoffensive hill tribe reside in South Travancore. They were characterised by a high standard of character, honesty and truthfulness<sup>4</sup>. It was latter when they submitted to a ruling chief, and made presence of honesty, cardamoms and ivory that they came to be known as Kanikar. Their language is the mixture of tamil and Malayalam languages.<sup>5</sup>

The another Tribe Kanikkars own land but how much they own is not obvious. Some families have more than one acres of land holding with them while others have marginal land holdings below twenty five cents. They do not have ownership deed. They only have possession certificate. All of them possess equal social status. There is a family likeness among all articles used by tropical people and this is accounted for by the uniformity in climate and environment.<sup>6</sup> They are allowed to sell the land to their sibilings and relatives. Legal restrictions are made regarding the sale of land in Kerala due to the illegal land alienation from tribes.

### **The Land question of Dalit in Kerala**

The Historical origin of Dalit land deprivation starts with Aryan invasion followed the establishment of Jenmi system in Kerala and the land rights occupied by the upper castes. The Dalits were pushed to become agrestic slaves, and many lands of unfreedom and indignities were imposed on them<sup>8</sup>. Even the abolition of

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<sup>3</sup> K.Venu,"Land Reforms in Kerala – Some Observations",p.117,(ed.) K.Raman Pillai A.P.H.Publishing Corporation,New Delhi,,2010

<sup>4</sup> Herman Gundert, Gundert's Nighandu, Kottayam,p,627

<sup>5</sup> Edgar Thurston, Ethnographic notes on Southern India,p.169

<sup>6</sup> Krishna Iyer L.A, Social History of Kerala,Vol.1, p.74

slavery could not improve their condition. The role of land in providing social mobility to Dalits became a subject only on the eighteenth century.

The Land reforms implemented in the pre and post-independence period were restricted to the Dalits in Kerala. The critiques of homestead land provision in the 1970 land reform remark that the tiny plots of land received under the scheme were too inadequate even to put up a house<sup>8</sup>. The area where Dalits lived was always called Cheri. From the land reform movement whatever tiny plots they received had to be shared again and again by intergenerational subdivision and fragmentation. The Dalits were deprived from evolving as land - owning peasants through legal denial of ownership and access to land. As Omvedt 1006 notes, the situation of Kerala's Dalits with respect to land ownership at the turn of the twenty - first century is not much different from what appears in the Travancore census of 1931.<sup>9</sup> The legal denial of land ownership among the Dalits seriously affects their mobility options. While the other landowning communities acquire the opportunity for migration to West Asia, Dalits lack this opportunities because of their landlessness.

Dalits lives in colonies with low standard of living. According to RIGHTS, a human rights organization, 60 percent of the scheduled caste (SC) population in Kerala lives in 26,109 Dalit colonies spread across the State<sup>10</sup>. "One Lakh Housing Scheme" programmers of the state settled the Dalits which came recast as colonies. When the population increased they were unable to live in the colonics and that made the lives of Dalits miserable. Land is becoming a valuable asset with the expansion of the real estate sector. Financialisation of the land market increased prices for land and that created blocking stones for the marginalized from the accessibility of land. Hence they can sell their land without any difficulties but they cannot afford to buy a piece of land. In 2001 Adivasi –Dalit Committee started strike to solve their problems like poverty and landlessness.<sup>7</sup> This strike had got historical importance too.

## II. Conclusion

The Land Legislation (Amendment) Act of 1975 and Dhebar Commission had given more attention to the restoration of alienated lands to the tribals. The adivasi families' basic need was land. There is an urgent need to provide cultivable lands in order to ensure livelihood sources for adivasis. The restoration of alienated lands to the original owners should be given more attention by Kerala government in the context of the upliftment of the Tribals in Kerala. Failure to redress the land problems and livelihood of tribals paved the way for the emergence of new organizations in different regions like Muthanga, the Aralam Farm and the Orange Farm. The state should keep the promises and win the confidence of tribal people. It cannot be ignored that the tribal people's long history of neglect and deprivation of the outcomes of the developmental projects implemented. The inequality in household land is the main problem and the land held by the big plantations is excluded from ceiling. Large plantations, mostly owned by large Indian capital due to land grabbing form an indispensable part of Kerala's current land question. Social inequality in Kerala is a concrete thing. Different religious groups also owned land for their religious and other purposes. It is clear that the depressed classes are victims of real estate boom and the privileged classes gained it. According to an estimate by the Kerala state Planning Board (2011), household ownership holdings constitute only one third of the total geographical area of the state. Even without the lands of big plantations, Kerala's land inequality is high even without the lands of big plantations,

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