Caste and Landlessness in Kerala: Signals from Chengara

K T Rammohan

2008/9/13

Contents

Persistence of Colonial Patterns 3
Landless Many 4
Role of the Government 4

Kerala's celebrated land reforms of the 1970s had 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 landlesss 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 meagre 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 ricefields 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. It took little time for the fragmented fields to be recast as residential plots. This had serious implications for both the environment and the employment in the countryside. Many of the lower castes and artisan castes and the upper caste poor could move to the expanding construction sector, or alternatively, seek work in West Asia. Possessing almost no resources for themselves, most dalits could do neither.

Persistence of Colonial Patterns

The deficiencies of the 1970s reforms are manifested today in the persistence of the colonial pattern of landholding in the highlands and the continuing landlessness of the socially disadvantaged castes across the state. Even in the post-land reform period, the Sterling group James Finlay continued to be the biggest private agriculturalist in Kerala, controlling through lease grant the whole of Kannan Devan hills in Munnar that grew the best tea in the region. The authority over this vast tract of 227 square miles was a matter of dispute between the local chief of Poonjar and the king of Travancore in the 19th century. The pioneering British planters who were high officials, acting through the British resident of Travancore, however, acquired an unambiguous lease grant, inheritable and transferable, to be held in perpetuity and at a very low rate of tax. Through the past century and a half, the lease has passed through many hands – Finlay Muir and Company, James Finlay, and TataFinlay – and finally came to rest with Tata Tea Company in 1983. In 2005, Tata Tea Company, faced with a crisis of nearly 35 per cent fall in auction prices and rising overheads, and with a view of focusing on highly remunerative, retail marketing of branded teas – including the newly acquired Tetleys of UK – withdrew from production operations. The lease rights of 24,000 hectares spread over 17 estates, woods, and grasslands were transferred to the newly floated Kannan Devan Hills Plantations Company in which Tata Tea Company and Tata Tea Trust jointly have 25 per cent stake, the rest being held by managerial personnel and workers, present and former. Operating nearly as much plantation tracts but growing mostly rubber is the Harrisons Malayalam Plantations Company of R P Goenka. The company holds many long-period leases. These leases bear extremely low tax and were issued by the princely government to Sterling companies earlier, often upon pressure from the British paramount government. The economic might of the company in Kerala agriculture now as well as the gross inadequacy of the 1970s land reforms is illustrated by the fact that the land it now holds in lease – about 25,000 hectares – is greater than the extent of land distributed to the landless under the ceilings legislation in the whole of Kerala. The second tier of big landholders in highland and midland Kerala comprises local corporate groups and families, mostly of Syrian Christians. They own plantations but the extent of land bears

not even a distant comparison with the holdings of the all-India corporate groups. The Syrian Christian Church is a third mighty holder, owning both plantations and urban land. Garden-land growing a variety of crops including coconut and arecanut and wetland rice tracts on the coast and adjoining midland are mostly owned by upper caste Hindus, especially nairs, and by Syrian Christians, and to a much lesser extent by Muslims and ezhavas. The large populace of small holders in the state is also drawn from these castes and communities. Some of these castes and communities are also players in the real estate market, vigorously speculative consequent to housing boom and tourism.

Landless Many

By sharp contrast, the overwhelming majority of tribal communities and dalits in Kerala continue to be entirely landless. Most of the tribal people were, through the past few centuries, drafted into agrarian society as workers – bonded and otherwise. Through a much longer stretch of history, dalits have been the backbone of Kerala's wetland rice cultivation: initially as slaves, and following the ban on slave traffic in the mid-1850s, as attached labourers, and finally, with the advance of caste-based social movements and communist trade union organisation in the 1940s, emerging as "free" labourers. The creation of the rice-bowl of Kuttanad owes entirely to dalit labour. Relatively better initial endowments, adoption of Christian faith and resort to assistance from the missionaries, access to education, and state affirmative action have placed a few dalit castes and sections ahead, but on the whole there is a big hiatus between dalits – including dalit Christians – and the rest of Kerala's population in terms of economic development indicators, especially land and other asset holding.

This reveals that, contrary to the imagination in most of the academic and policymaking circles, the land question is still unresolved in Kerala. There are other pointers too: the tribal agitation of 2003 in Muthanga wildlife sanctuary – fizzled out as much on account of repression by the earlier, Congress-led government as due to the romantic vision of naxalite vintage – and the subsequent mass entry of tribal people to the state agricultural farm in Aaralam, and the continuing occupation of a part of the Harrisons Malayalam Plantations in Chengara by over 7,000 landless dalit families. What is more, with the real estate boom, there are signs of the situation worsening for dalits and other landless sections – as it happened in Nainamkonam, where landless dalits inhabiting the commons for long were forced into resistance when real estate players usurped ownership and tried to evict them. These struggles of occupation and resistance clearly bring out that the land question in Kerala is unresolved and that, as in other parts of the country, it is as much a question of caste and tribe as class.

Role of the Government

What is the stance of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI(M), the ruling party and its government on the land question? The state secretary condemns any talk of a second round of land reforms as "gibberish radicalism". He is not exactly honest when he misrepresents the demand of the landless as a threat to the small holders. The chief minister is said to be more favourably disposed, but there has been very little evidence to this so far. The relative share of time spent by the high administration on discussions with multinationals and information technology (IT) companies and their brokers, with realtors and tourism magnates, contrasted with the the time spent on negotiations with agitating landless tribal people and dalits is a sad index of the government's social and economic priorities.

Despite the reported differences over the land question within the party, and between the party and the government, all are united in implementing a different kind of reform that aggravates inequities in land distribution. This reform comes under the guise of industrial development. Vast expanses of land are acquired by the state – often attendant with displacement – for special economic zones to accommodate

multinational and Indian big IT companies. Ecologically sensitive coastal land, backwater tracts and forest fringes are allowed to be passed on to hospitality capitalists to recreate "god's own country".

Indeed, because of the "Kerala model" and other "complicating aspects" of society, the party has been careful not to handle the land struggles the same way as it did in eastern India. All the same, the response to the over one-year old struggle of occupation by the landless dalit families in Chengara shows that the party bosses in Kerala are not far behind: raising allegations of foreign funding, involvement of NGOs, and prompting by naxalites; resorting to such tactics as kidnapping women agitators and sexually harassing them, and engaging saboteurs to beat up male agitators. It is not without party sanction that the powerful estate trade unions in the Chengara have laid siege to the dalit settlement. The agitating families – which include new-born babies and over 85-year old men and women – are denied not only of food and medicine but even drinking water. Medical professionals, media personnel, and human rights activists are prevented from meeting them. It is a political statement to the landless dalits: "You have no right to strike; only we the proletariat have". The estate trade unions have issued a stern warning to the agitating dalit families that they would be driven out if they do not vacate. The move has definitive support from the management of Harrisons Malayalam too. Struggles throw up strange oppositions and alliances: here, a curious situation where the proletariat and capitalists have joined to fight the landless dalits.

The signals from Chengara are clear. There is need for a land policy that engages with the serious deficiencies of the earlier land reforms. The reforms of the 1970s sought to address, even if partially, the class aspect of the land question. The present situation demands addressing its caste and community aspects. Given the marked asymmetries in land distribution and intensifying struggles by the landless tribal people and dalits, and the ploy of "absolute scarcity" may no longer work. Indeed, it is possible to make land available to the landless tribal people and dalits without disturbing the small and middle holders. Very large extent of land could be mobilised by not renewing the leases of big, corporate plantations. It might be possible to identify areas on the forest fringes that have little conservation value such as forests subjected to fragmentation and degraded by the state itself through "plantation forestry". Varied new, institutional forms, such as collective leases and people's cooperative forms could be thought of. The plantations in Munnar were transferred to the workers at the instance of, and for, the Tatas to move up the global tea commodity chain. Other plantations could be restructured at the instance of, and for, the present workers of these estates and landless tribal people and dalits so that they acquire at least some degree of social and economic mobility. The time to do these is now; before special economic zones and airports, hotels and resorts, malls and multiplex swallow up the last bits of space.

South Asian Anarchist Library

K T Rammohan
Caste and Landlessness in Kerala: Signals from Chengara
2008/9/13

https://www.jstor.org/stable/40277941

sa.theanarchistlibrary.org