Agrarian Struggles and Land Reform Legislation in Kerala

Kerala began its history as a backward economy. The agricultural sector remained backward by following traditional methods for cultivation and was characterized by low productivity levels. Major agricultural products were produced and sold as agricultural raw materials in domestic and foreign markets. Majority of the farmers had very small, marginal or tiny agricultural holdings which made agricultural operations uneconomic. Land reform may be considered an important measure to bring about the right institutional framework in the agrarian society to ensure social and economic development. The abolition of intermediaries, the reforms of the tenancy and the imposition of ceilings on ownership of land and redistribution of surplus lands are the most important measures of land reforms envisaged in India.\(^1\)

The First Communist Government marked the beginning of a new phase in the agrarian history of Kerala.

According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* land reform means, “A specific integrated action programme to bring about more effective control and use of land for the direct benefit of the agricultural population and for the direct benefit of the community as a whole. For example, land reform includes, without widespread dissent, the redistribution of agricultural and among existing or new owners, including consolidation or subdivision, development or settlement of holdings, adjustment of rental charges, compulsory reimbursement of costs incurred by the tenant for improvements on the land he cultivates, increase in the security of tenure, adjustment of policy and

procedure in the taxation of agricultural land and the adjudication and registration of land and water titles”.\textsuperscript{2}

Land reforms would also include supporting measures to enable the beneficiaries of the reform to utilize the land properly. Thus agrarian reforms would also include establishment of co-operatives and other institutions for supply of agricultural credit and other inputs and processing and marketing of agricultural produce, establishment of agro-industries, agricultural extension and the provision of a variety of services for the benefit of the farmers and agricultural workers.\textsuperscript{3}

Land reforms have been on the agenda of mankind since the earliest of times. In the sixth century B.C the Athenian Statesman, Solon tried without success to regulate the accumulation of land in the hands of the rich. Some four centuries later, the Roman Statesman Tiberius Gracchus and his younger brother Gaius Gracchus tried again without much success to distribute land to small holders. All through history, measures of land reform have been controversial, often accompanied by political conflict and violence.\textsuperscript{4} Because of the stiff opposition by vested interests most attempts at reform could not produce the expected results. The more successful programmes have been those introduced in revolutionary situations. By far the most important instance of the effective implementation of land reforms in a revolutionary situation is the Chinese Land Reforms of 1949-52. Two cases of reasonably effective land reforms in Japan and Taiwan after the Second World War. The Japanese land reforms were formulated and implemented during the occupation of Japan by the allies. The principal objects of General Mac Arthur were to destroy the base of

Japanese feudalism. There was not much that the Japanese vested interests could do to thwart the reforms. In Taiwan the reforms were carried out after the route of the Kuomintang and their withdrawal from the mainland. Measures of land reforms were formulated and implemented with urgency to win over the support of the peasantry. Other cases of reform undertaken in normal circumstances generally failed to produce the expected results.

The agrarian structure prevailing at the time of Indian Independence had several features that inhibited agricultural growth. These were the existence of rent receiving parasitic intermediaries between the actual tillers of the soil at the bottom and the government at the top, great inequality in the ownership of land, concentration of agricultural land in the hands of the upper classes who shunned physical labour and took little personal interests in farming, widespread prevalence of insecure tenancies on extortionate terms inhibiting the optimum utilization of the tenant land and the extreme fragmentation and subdivision of holdings.

The two important strands of policy logic have led to advocacy of land to the tiller. One strand is normative and related to notions of social justice; the other is empirical and practical relating to observed failures in protecting the rights of tenants in a land-poor economy. The agrarian structure was also marked by great inequality in the ownership of land. A small minority of big landowners owned a substantial portion of the agricultural land, while millions of small peasants subjected to numerous abuses and weighed down by perpetual indebtedness and fragmented holdings employing primitive farming practices. And at the bottom there existed a

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vast number of landless agricultural workers whose social and economic status was even worse. A unique feature of the Indian agrarian structure was the close inter-relationship between the Hindu caste hierarchy and the agrarian structure. The big land owners invariably belonged to the so-called upper castes, the cultivators to the middle caste and the agricultural workers to the schedule castes, schedule tribes and other extremely backward castes.

Under the Indian Constitution land reform is a State subject. Land reform falls under entry 18 of the State list. That entry reads; ” Land, that is to stay, right in or over land tenures including the relation of landlord and tenant, and the collection of rents, transfer and alienation of agricultural land; land improvement and agricultural loans.” Therefore only the State legislatures have the power to enact land reform laws. Implementation is exclusively the responsibility of the State Governments. The Indian Parliament and the Government of India have no power under the constitution to enact and implement land reform laws or give directions to the State Governments.

The role of the Planning Commission in respect of land reform has necessarily been of an advisory nature. The Planning Commission could only lay down the general principles and guidelines for legislation and implementation. A major objective of planning of India is the economic upliftment of the small man. The land reform laid particular stress on the rehabilitation and welfare of the small man in the agrarian sector. By the small man we mean agricultural laborers including Kudikidappukars (hut dwellers) and small scale cultivators. The agricultural labour

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6 *The Constitution of India, Modified upto 1st November 1956*, Government of India, CSL, New Delhi, p.27.

class of Kerala may be grouped as those owning land and those without it. Kerala has the largest percentage of rural households without land in the whole of India. The basic problem confronting this category of people is that they do not have enough land to provide for a decent living nor enough work to keep them gainfully employed.\textsuperscript{8}

The modern agrarian movements in Kerala as in the rest of India were a response to the consequences of British rule on the agrarian society. The establishment of British rule in Malabar resulted in the loss of customary rights of the peasantry, alienation of land, enhancement of rent and pauperization. These created very great unrest among the peasants and tension between the tenants and landlords developed into violent eruptions in many places. Ernad and Valluvanad taluks (the present Malappuram district) in south Malabar became the centre of such tensions and violent actions.

The economic objectives of agrarian reforms are “redistribution of land, division of large holdings, abolition of tenancy, protection of tenants, lowering of tenancy rates, redistribution of land rent as important part of the gross national product, mobilization of the production potential of the farmer sector, intensification of production, waste land reclamation, abolition of all unproductive payments, streamlining of market channels, diversification of production etc.”\textsuperscript{9}

The lands in Travancore and Cochin may be classified into three – Jenmom, Sirkar or Pandaravaka and others.\textsuperscript{10} In Malabar the tenancy system was

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{9} Theodor Bergmann, \textit{Agrarian Reforms in India}, New Delhi, 1984, p.10.

\textsuperscript{10} M.A.Oommen, \textit{Land Reforms and Socio-Economic Change in Kerala}, Madras, 1971, p.29.
complex when compared to Travancore and Cochin. Land did not belong to any individual or group as private property. On the contrary different social groups had different rights and interests in it, which more or less corresponded to their position in their ritual and social hierarchies. In his report on the Malabar land tenures, William Logan has given a lucid account of this system. He observed that it was joint proprietorship in the soil that characterized the agrarian structure of Malabar until the second half of the eighteenth century. This joint proprietorship consisted of five broad hierarchical groups; the janmi, the kanakkaran, the verumpattakkaran, the cheruJanmakkaran (small birth right holder such as carpenter, blacksmith, washer man etc.) and agricultural laborers. According to him the first three groups divided the net produce of the soil equally among themselves, the rights and interests of all these groups were restricted and regulated by customary laws.  

These types of tenures are seen in Travancore and Cochin but there are significant difference in regard to their incidents and characteristics.

The Namboodiri Brahmins, who enjoyed social and sacerdotal superiority over other castes, were also the landed aristocracy and were known as the Janmis or landlords. Immediately below the Namboodiri’s in the ritual and social hierarchies came the relatively numerous groups called the Nair’s. Though they occupied the middle stratum in the social and agrarian structures, they represented the upper stratum of the tenantry. Two kinds of tenancy had been in existence in the past in Malabar. The Kanam tenancy, mostly in the hands of the Nair’s and the verumpattam tenancy mostly with the Tiyyas, another major social group called the

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Harijans, who were considered to be a polluting caste has no land of their own.\(^\text{13}\)
While the Namboodiris were the real janmis, the artisans were also some sort of janmis but who depended for their livelihood mostly on their craft. This large class of peasantry in turn organized into a hierarchy in which Nair’s were at the top, Tiyyas and Muslims in the middle, with the Harijans at the bottom, forming as they did a large group of landless agricultural laborers or serfs.\(^\text{14}\)

The peasant struggles in Malabar was originally started by the Muslims but was later carried on by the Nairs and the Tiyyas. There was a special reason why struggle was started by the Muslims. They had come to enjoy temporary ownership of land during the Mysorean rule; when the Hindu Janmis fled the country to escape religious persecution and forcible conversion. When Malabar came under the British rule the Janmis rushed back to retrieve their lost land with the help of the British government and its law courts. In Ernad and Valluvanad taluks a vast majority of tenant cultivators happened to be Muslims and their landlords were upper caste Hindus like Namboodiri Brahmins. Thus the agitations of the peasants against their landlords very often took the form of communal riots and religious fanatics tried their best to develop these peasant struggles on Communal lines.\(^\text{15}\)

The occupation of Malabar by the English East India Company in 1792 brought about popular discontent among the people. The ruthless exploitation of the native resources by the company culminated in popular revolt against its authority. These revolts spontaneous and activated brewed in every part of the region and


disturbed peace and tranquility of the country for nearly ten years. Although the revolts had taken place among almost every section of the people, they were mostly restricted among the peasants.\(^{16}\) Members of the royal families, intelligentsia, trading communities and the military had also participated in these revolts against the authority of the company. Virtually these revolts were directed against the unscrupulous, revenue and commercial administration of the company.

Many important changes took place in the land tenure system of the Travancore, Cochin and Malabar regions during the pre-independence period. The population of Malabar in 1861 is estimated to have been about 1.71 million – of which possibly about two thirds were directly dependent on land. Out of the 1.5 million comprising the agricultural population the Jenmis numbered only 24,714. All the Jenmis together accounted for less than 2 percent of the total agricultural population. To these Jenmis constituting a significant minority of the agricultural population, belonged practically every right and interest connected with land in Malabar.\(^{17}\) The primary units of social organization continued to be in the case of most of the important communities, joint families organized under the leadership of their respective family Karnavars. In North Malabar, even among the lower castes like the Mappilas and the Tiyyas the matrilineal joint family system was the prevalent mode of social organization.

In Travancore, though the social structure was similar to that of Malabar in respect of family organization and caste grouping, new economic forces were

\(^{15}\) *International Congress on Kerala Studies Vol.5*, AKG Centre, Trivandrum, August, 1994, p.133.


released by the developments like land transfer. The influence of the Namboodiris and the large chieftain families was also less in Travancore than in Malabar. Therefore signs of new groups coming into the picture to exploit the opportunities that had been opened out. In 1854 the total population of the State was estimated as 1.26 million. At least two third of the population i.e., about 0.8 million must have depended on land. The number of Jenmis being very small, almost the whole of agricultural population consisted of tenants and farm servants.

According to the census of 1901 the agricultural laborers in Travancore were estimated to have been only about 10 percent of the total agricultural population. The availability of cultivable lands in plenty and the profitability of cultivation of government lands, were probably the main reasons for the small proportion of agricultural laborers in Travancore.\(^{18}\) It is unlikely that the percentage of the agricultural labor population was higher in the 1850’s. The most important point to note however is that Travancore government tenants had to pay only the land revenue assessment and nothing more. On the whole the agrarian situation in Travancore was far better than in Malabar and it was further improved by progressive State action in later period.

The land system of Cochin had the characteristics of both Malabar and Travancore. About 60 percent of the cultivated land was owned by the Jenmis according the Malabar pattern, the other 40 percent of the cultivated land and almost the whole of the waste lands, were with the State resembling State ownership of land in Travancore. The cultivators of these lands were in a deplorable position, on account of the unrestricted powers of the Jenmis over their lands and the State’s refusal to take

\(^{18}\) Ibid, p.38.
any action to control the landlord-tenants relationships. The tenants had no recognized
rights on these lands.

The population of Cochin in 1857 was estimated at 0.40 million. Only
half of the population was engaged in agricultural activities. The number of land
owner could have been only a few thousands, consisting of Jenmis and holders of
government kanam and cognate tenures. The rest of the agricultural populations were
tenants and agricultural laborers, distribution between them being almost equal. This
was similar to the position in Malabar and unlike that in Travancore. Travancore’s
small land owning families accounted for more than 20 percent of the State population
by the 1940’s i.e., 1.3 million people. In Cochin on the other hand, the same category
added up to only one lakh people i.e., seven percent of the population. And in Malabar
such people were fewest of all i.e., a little more than five percent.19 Because of State
policy of non-interference in the affairs of Jenmis and tenants, the cultivators were in
a deplorable position. Though land revenue was imposed on all lands, only a light tax
was collected from the jenmam lands. The British demand for a huge sum, in Cochin
they were forced to impose a very high rate of land tax on the cultivators. Thus even
by the end of the 19th century there was no significant improvement in the position of
tenants holding either pandaravaka or private jenmam lands in Cochin.20

With regard to the revenue systems in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar
E.M.S. Namboodiripad has stated, “The practice was that if the Revenue officer just
plant a stick in the land, that indicated default of tax payment and the ban imposed the
tenant from harvesting the crop. Thereafter he would be allowed to gather the harvest
only if the tenant cleared the arrears of tax which invariably would have accumulated

and would be more than what was actually due from the small piece of land he cultivated”. 21 Thus the question of tax affected the tenants.

The contradictions which developed within the rural society of Kerala during 19th and 20th centuries led to a series of protests and revolts particularly in the Northern region. The Moplah outbreaks which had began in 1836 and continued to recur at irregular intervals culminated in a mass insurrection in 1921, known as the ‘Moplah Rebellion’. This rebellion lasted for about eight months resulting in the death of thousands of people and which proved to be more violent and devastating than all the earlier outbreaks combined, marked the end of first phase of peasant struggle in Malabar. 22 In the revolt of 1921 also the participants were mainly drawn from the rural poor. C.S.Subramaniyan speaking in the assembly observed that, “there is one peculiarity of this rebellion is that, the better classes of men and men who own property are not in it ... I wish to draw particular attention to the fact that the men who are in jail, the men who have died, the men who have been arrested, the men in exile etc. are men with little property” 23 This impression is confirmed by the data available for a section of the rebels. The occupational status of the 1647 rebels indicated in the referred and appeal cases in the Madras High Court reveals that an overwhelming majority of them i.e., 1261 were laborers and cultivators and the remaining were also mostly from the poorer strata of the society. 24 After this the Moplahs receded to the background without having any major role to play in the

subsequent phases of the peasant struggles. The crushing of the Moplah power by the 
British troops was the reason for their less participation in any more serious 
agitations. This was one to an ideological change in the concept of peasant struggles.

While the first phase of the struggle was carried out by the Moplah 
peasantry, the bulk of who were verumpattam tenants whose demands were for 
mainly prevention of eviction and payment of compensation at the full market value. 
The second phase of the struggle was spearheaded by the kanam tenants who 
belonged mostly to the Nayar caste.\textsuperscript{25} While the Moplahs had waged their struggle 
alone, the demands of the kanam tenants were backed by the nationalist movement, 
which was quick to draw the peasants and workers into the struggle for independence. 
Moreover most of the national leaders themselves belonged to this group which as we 
have seen occupied the middle stratum of the social structure and the upper stratum of 
the peasantry. Thus a contrast to the religious flavor of the first phase, the second 
phase of the struggle acquired a political orientation.

The patronage which the political leadership gave to the struggle in its 
second phase is evident from the fact that practically in every regional political 
conference since 1920, tenancy reform figured as a major demand. At the fifth 
political conference held at Manjeri in April 1920, resolutions were passed demanding 
legislation for safeguarding the interests of the tenants.\textsuperscript{26} In the following years the 
first Kerala State Political Conference held at Ottappalam demanded the harmonizing

\textsuperscript{26} P.K.K.Menon, \textit{The History of Freedom Movement in Kerala, Vol.II}, Trivandrum, 1972, 
p.82.
of landlord-tenant relations. The formation of the Malabar Kudiyan Sangham (MKS) also known as Malabar Peasant Union at Calicut following the Manjeri Conference marked the beginning of the second phase of the peasant struggle. The Malabar Kudiyan Sangham organized peasant conferences at several places, mainly with a view for ventilating the grievances of the tenants politically.

The period 1926-30 witnessed the most active and vocal phase of the struggle. The Governor’s refusal to give assent to the Malabar Tenancy Bill introduced in the Madras Legislative Council in 1924 and passed in 1926 drew up the attention of the entire peasantry in Malabar. The bill which provided for occupancy right to all kanam tenants and qualified occupancy right to verumpattam tenants and which was a revised version of the earlier Kanam Tenancy Bill had been introduced on eve of the 1923 election to the council to get the support of the entire peasantry. Thus, the passing of the Malabar Tenancy Act of 1930 which while curbing the rights of the traditional Jenmis created a new class of landlords, marked the close of the second phase of the peasant struggle in Malabar.

In its third phase, the peasant struggle was carried forward mainly by the vast masses of the verumpattam tenants, most of whom belonged to the lower strata of the Hindu society. As the struggle was politicalised it was transformed into a broad-based social movement directed against not only landlordism but also the caste system on the one hand and the imperialism on the other. The role of the verumpattam

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30 Ibid.
tenants belonging to the polluting castes became especially spectacular in this fight against the social evils. This phase of the struggle was far better organized than the earlier phase.

The world economic depression had far reaching and widespread effects on the economy. The major consequences included the rapid price depreciation of agricultural products, the unprecedented increase in the rates of interest and debts, the unbearable wage cuts, irrational dismissal of the workers, widespread unemployment, poverty and famine. The Report of the Depression Enquiry Committee appointed by the government reveals the sordid state of the society during this period.\(^\text{31}\) For the majority of people the depression brought about unexpected misery and impoverishment. The fluctuation in the price level of coconut is a good indicator of how deep the crisis was for the coconut cultivators in the Travancore State. When the price of 1000 coconuts in 1928 was rupees 54, the price level took a nose dive to rupees 19 per 1000 in 1933. The phenomenal increase of revenue defaulters during the slump period further reflected the impoverished state of the cultivating groups.\(^\text{32}\)

The memorandum submitted by the Karshaka Sangham before the Sivaswamy Committee amply reveals how the depression affected Cochin State. The 1929-33 economic depression has brought in a multitude of problems for the peasantry. Hundreds of cultivators turned absolute paupers, many became just kudikidappukars and agricultural laborers. In Kodungallur taluk all families which


had sizeable properties degenerated. All those lands reached the hands of Ismail Sait, Karrikkulam Kasthuri vittukar and Manappadan. The intensity of economic crisis was quite unbearable. Similar assessment and observations also recorded by an economic survey conducted in a few villages in the Cochin State in 1936. It records the absolute pauperization of the tenant cultivators in those villages, who lived under the burden of debts and excessive rent payments to the landlords.

The condition of the majority, who were already hit hard by the depression, was further worsened by world war. The scarcity of rice became acute as the import of rice came to a standstill in 1942. As hereby the servants of India society claimed that this period accounted lot of deaths in Travancore. The phenomenon of migration to various parts of Malabar and outside India also got intensified during this period. These developments had their impact on the juristic-political superstructure of the society. It hastened the process of the destruction of the traditional society and precipitated its restructuring on new lines. The 1930’s and 1940’s in consequence, witnessed the emergence of a powerful middle stratum in the socio-political life of these native States. The middle stratum comprised the professionals, traders, commercial farmers, petty capitalists, new industrialists, western educated youngsters etc. The lower stratum comprised the working classes both in the traditional and

34 E.M.S.Namboodiripad, Kerala Society and Politics, An Historical Survey, Delhi, 1984, pp.75-76.
35 Serve India Kerala Relief Centre, Food, Famine and Nutritional Diseases in Travancore, 1943-1944, Coimbatore, p.105.
modern industries, the rural masses including mostly the peasants and artisan groups.\(^{37}\)

For the emergence of an organized peasant struggle, agrarian discontent is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. Without firm and effective leadership and a specific ideological direction, it could have been hardly possible to canalize this discontent and give it an organized expression. The large scale evictions, rack-renting and indebtedness caused by the steep fall in the prices of agricultural commodities especially of commercial crops during the depression years of 1929-33 and the steady rise in the revenue assessment rates due to the resettlement undertaken in 1929 led to mounting discontent and rendered the conditions for organizing the peasantry ripe and favourable.\(^{38}\) It was perhaps a coincidence that the national leaders released from jail after the suspension of the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1933 also gave a call to organize the peasants and workers and the Kerala Congress Socialist Party (KCSP) formed in May 1934 resolved to champion their cause. Meanwhile, at a meeting held at Calicut in November 1933 attended by a number of political leaders of Malabar, it was resolved to form the Kerala Karshaka Sangham for safeguarding the welfare of the peasantry. This was to be followed by peasant conferences as the beginning of an organized peasant struggle which soon struck deep roots at the village level and which was to put an end to the exploitation and oppression of the peasantry by the Jenmis.\(^{39}\)

Against the persecution of the landlords, resistance and protests were cropping up everywhere in the State. In July 1935 meetings of peasants were held in


the Bharatheeya building in Naniyoor in Kolachery Amsom of old Chirakkal Taluk. In that meeting the Kolachery Karshaka Sangham was formed with Vishnu Bharatheeyan as President and K.A. Keraleeyan as Secretary. By September 1935, Karivelloor Karshaka Sangham was formed which represented round Karivelloor, Velloor, Peralam and Kotakkad. With the formation of All India Kisan Sabha in 1936 a new front of struggle was opened in agrarian sector. The Hunger March led by A.K.Gopalan in 1936 July raising the demands of peasants imparted a new vigour to this sector. Following this a number of Karshaka Sangham were formed in Malabar. In 1936 November the first Karshaka Conference of Chirakkal Taluk was held at Parassinikkadavu. In 1937 All Malabar Conference of Karshaka Sangham was held in Kozhikode. This awakening among peasants prepared the ground for the advent of a new political movement.

With the formation of the All Malabar Karshaka Sangham in 1937 the Karshaka Sangham became a three – tier organization with the taluk Karshaka Sangham as the smallest unit, the taluk Karshaka Sangham above it and the All Malabar Karshaka Sangham as the apex coordinating body. The progress of the peasant struggle during the years 1935-40 was closely bound up with the emergence of the Karshaka Sangham as a strong peasant organization. The Karshaka Sangham fully exploited the prevailing discontent among the peasants and their opposition to the Jenmis and the government in organizing its activities. Massive peasant conferences at the village, taluk and regional levels, processions of peasants and youths singing revolutionary songs and shouting slogans were more or less regular features of the Karshaka Sangham.

39 Ibid.
A unique feature of the conferences organized by the Karshaka Sangham was massive inter-caste dining for which the peasants used to carry head loads of vegetables and rice. Another regular feature of these conferences was the staging of plays with revolutionary themes often highlighting the evils of landlordism and the exploitation of the peasantry. During the short period of five months between January and May 1939 as many as thirty three village conferences were organized. The astounding growth of the Karshaka Sangham during this period has also been noted by Robin Jeffry. According to him, “by the end of 1938, the All Malabar Karshaka Sangham had a paid up membership of about 30,000, of whom 5000 in Kasaragod taluk, 10,000 in Chirakkal taluk and the remaining in the rest of Malabar mostly in Kottayam and Kurumbanad taluks.” According to another account, there were more than 150 village Karshaka Sanghams and taluk Sanghams by the end of 1938.

The formation of the All India Kisan Sabha at Lucknow in April 1936 gave a new fillip to the peasant movement in the whole of India. Following this a number of hunger jathas were organized in different parts of the country. In Malabar also hunger jathas were organized of which the most popular has been the jathas led by A.K.Gopalan from Cannanore to Madras in July 1936. The organization of different sections of the society was not carried out separately. “The national movement could not be carried on inch forward by political workers who do not desire economic freedom or by those economic reformers who are not political” wrote P.Krishnapillai. This perspective was imbibed by the workers became clear when we analyze their movement. Apart from agitations for better wages and working

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conditions, the laborers participated in demonstrations against the Government of India Act of 1935, worked for the success of the Congress candidates in the 1937 elections and during 1939-40, participated actively in the anti-war, anti-recruitment campaigns.\textsuperscript{44}

The peasants were likewise mobilized around their immediate demands but this was done as part of the national movement. The enrolment of members to the Congress and the Karshaka Sangham went along with the formation of village Congress Committees and Karshaka Sangham units. In public meetings Congress Socialists characterized landlords as pillars supporting British imperialism. In joint meetings of the Congress and the Karshaka Sangham, it was stated that in order to abolish landlordism it was necessary to abolish British imperialism.\textsuperscript{45} The Congress in 1929 had come to the conclusion that great poverty and misery were due to the economic structure of the Indian society – not only to foreign exploitation. In 1936, it was agreed at Congress session that, “Urgent problem of the country was the poverty, unemployment and indebtedness of the peasantry which was fundamentally due to the repressive land tenure and revenue system.”\textsuperscript{46}

When the Congress party backed by the peasant organizations won the provincial elections in Malabar in 1937, its claim of championing the cause of the peasantry was fully exposed when it failed to provide any relief to the peasants other than the passing of the Agriculturalists Debt Relief Act. This betrayal on the part of the Congress leadership disappointed the leftists within its ranks and alienated the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{43} A.K.Gopalan, \textit{In the Cause of the People}, Bombay, 1976, pp.80-84.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} Andalat (mal), \textit{Sakkakkale Munnottu (mal)}, Trivandrum, 1978, p.285.
  \item \textsuperscript{45} Vishnu Bharateeyan (mal), \textit{Adimakal Engane Udamakalayi}, Trivandrum, 1982, p.107.
  \item \textsuperscript{46} \textit{AICC papers regarding annual sessions}, NMML, Teen Murti House, New Delhi, p.11.
\end{itemize}
entire body of peasantry which soon came to realize that any improvement in their conditions was possible only through their own organized strength. Accordingly, they resolved to launch a two pronged struggle against the janmis on the one hand and against the janmi dominated government on the other. Massive and militant jathas were taken to almost all prominent janmi houses throughout Malabar.47 The organized struggles of the peasantry against the janmis began to pay dividends since many of the janmis were forced to give up feudal levies, illegal exactions and also to switch over to the use of standardized measures.48 This was the major victory for the peasants and it brought them a new sense of power.

Towards the middle of 1937, new forms of propaganda like staging a skit were tried. Among such skits K.Damodaran’s “Pattabakki” (Arrears of Rent) was frequently staged. It depicted the plight of the poor and extolled them to organize themselves in Karshaka Sanghams and fight against landlordism. It was first staged in Ponnani conference and subsequently staged in many places and became a popular propaganda medium.49 Songs depicting the plight of the peasants and asking them to unite and agitate were written. These were sung by peasants during jathas and also during agricultural operations.50 By 1939 ‘Prabhatam’ was started as the official mouth piece of the Kerala Congress Socialist Party and peasant grievances and their demands could be raised through it. One of the important techniques of peasant mobilization was the organization of jathas to the houses of jenmis.

49 The Mathruboomi, dated 31st March, 1937.
In Kochi, peasant demands were raised during 1938 through Cochin Karshaka Sabha. The main demand raised by the Sabha was the granting of security of tenure to tenants at will. The propaganda jathas were organized throughout the Kochi State.\(^{51}\)

The struggle towards responsible government in Travancore began in 1938. This was welcomed by the Congress Socialist Party in Malabar. Three jathas expressing solidarity with the Travancore struggle were organized, the first of which was organized by A.K.Gopalan. They also provided leadership for the emergence of an independent working class movement in Travancore. Its most notable success was in Alleppy. In May 1939, a ‘radical group’ was formed with M.N.Govindan Nair, as the secretary. The group was to function as an organized socialist faction within the State Congress in Travancore.\(^{52}\) The growing militancy of the workers later led to the “Punnapra–Vayalar Uprisings” in 1946.

In between 1940-1950, big peasant struggles under the banner of the Kisan Sabha and the leadership of the Communist Party took place in various parts of Kerala. The Punnapra–Vayalar Uprisings were led by the working classes of Ambalapuzha and Cherthala taluks in October 1946. In this the rural masses joining hands with the organized trade unions and inspired by Communist ideology came into direct and armed confrontation with the State administration against the socio-economic ills of the society and the oppressive regime of Sir. C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer in Travancore.\(^{53}\) This revolt lasted for four days from 24\(^{th}\) October to 28\(^{th}\) October

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1946. Intense repressions and army firing resulted in the death of over 300 on the people’s side. The upsurge was suppressed in a few days’ time, but made important consequences in the political history of Travancore. The uprising was the culmination of a working class struggle which was unique in many respects. It was perhaps the only struggle in India in which all sections of the working classes – industrial, agricultural, agro-industrial and other joined together under a common banner.54 The Punnapra-Vayalar gave a new message to the workers and peasants in Malabar to activise their movement against feudalism and imperialism.

Following Punnapra – Vayalar a series of struggles were organized in different parts of North Malabar and Hosdurg sub taluk of former South Kanara district. The peasantry resisted the shifting of paddy by landlords in several places. The Communists gave active leadership to the peasants in such struggles. These struggles were activated in the rural areas particularly among the agrarian classes as a programme intended for the final struggle against the British power. The uprisings like “Kayyur Riot” and “Morazha Incident” are the examples of nationalist and peasant movements in this region.

After the war the Congress Party again came to power in Madras in mid 1946. But instead of bringing support to the suffering peasantry, it tried to crush the peasant struggles in Malabar, fearing that leftist insurgency would engulf it. However the Kisan Sanghams’s immediate concern was to combat the famine that was still raging. For this it designed two strategies’ – one was to curb hoarding and black marketing by preventing the movement of grain from one area to another and to get surplus levels at the fair price shops and the other was to cultivate all the available dry

54 P.K.V.Kaimal, Revolt of the Oppressed, Punnapra-Vayalar 1946, New Delhi, 1994, p.196.
and waste lands belonging to both the government and the jenmis, with a view to raising agricultural output. It also gave a call to the peasantry for forcible occupation of these lands if the government failed to make the same available to them before 15th December 1946. The attempts of the police and the jenmis to obstruct these schemes triggered off a series of violent incidents in different parts of Malabar. The wave of repression only temporarily succeeded in putting down the peasant struggle, which soon reemerged into a more violent manner.

After Independence as per the recommendations of the Economic Programme Committee, the Congress appointed an Agrarian Reform Committee headed by J.C.Kumarappa to examine and make recommendations about agrarian reforms arising out of the abolition of the Zamindari system in the light of conditions prevailing in the different provinces. The Committee also asked to consider and report on co-operative farming and methods of improving agricultural production, the position of small holdings, sub tenants, landless labourers and generally on improving the conditions of agricultural rural population. The report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee submitted to the President of the Congress Party in July 1949 was a moderately progressive document and it had considerable influence in shaping the land policies adopted since independence.

Until the formation of the State of Kerala, in Travancore and Cochin only minor laws concerning agriculture were enforced. The government introduced seven land reform bills dealing with tenancy, land tax, prevention of evictions of hutment dwellers, compensation for improvements made by tenants, abolition of special rights

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56 H.D. Malaviya, *Land Reforms In India*, New Delhi, 1958, p.82.
in land, restriction of possession and ownership of land.\textsuperscript{57} The last one was the most important and most controversial because for the first time in India it aimed for the introduction of a ceiling on land. In 1956, the Travancore – Cochin indebted agriculturalists relief act was enforced.

In Malabar, during the same period a strong agrarian movement pressed for new tenancy legislation. The Malabar Tenancy Act of 1930 was amended in 1951 on the basis of the recommendations of the Tenancy Committee of 1940.\textsuperscript{58} But many of the provisions such as depositing of one year’s rent as advance by the verumpattam tenants, eviction of tenants by the jenmis on a number of grounds and failure of the Act to protect the landless homestead tenants made the peasants even more furious. By the protest struggles of the Kisan Sabha, the Malabar Tenancy Act was again to make amendment in 1954. This Act meets the long-standing demands of the peasants in as much as it contained provisions for fixation of fair rent, qualified fixity of tenures, curbing jenmis’s right of eviction, protecting the rights of homestead tenants, abolition of depositing one year advance rent by the verumpattam tenants and a new rent court was created to deal with rent affairs.

After Independence, right from the First Five Year Plan, emphasis was laid on the reform of tenancy. The first FYP recommended that the landowners be allowed to evict their tenant at will and bring under personal cultivation land up to the ceiling limit prescribed in the State. Three important guidelines were laid down in the Five Year Plans: - First rent should not exceed one-fifth to one-fourth of the gross produce; second the tenants should be accorded permanent rights in the lands they cultivated subject to a limited right of resumption to be granted to the land owners and

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{57} Theodor Bergmann, \textit{Op.cit}, p.50.
\end{footnotesize}
the third in respect of non-resumable land, the landlord tenant relationship should be ended by conferring ownership rights to tenants.\(^{59}\) It was, however suggested that tenants of non-resumable land be given occupancy rights on payment of a price to be fixed as a multiple of the rental value of the land.\(^{60}\) The Second Five Year Plan diagnosed “the ignorance on the part of the people of legislative provisions regarding security of tenure, possible lacunae in the law, inadequate land records and defective administrative arrangements”.\(^{61}\)

Thus the programme of land reform implemented since independence did not lead to any significant re-distribution of land or the removal of all the obstacles to increasing agricultural production of the above, the laws for the abolition of intermediary interests were implemented fairly well, but in the case of tenancy reform and ceilings on holdings, the policies adopted were ambivalent and there were large gaps between policy and legislation and between legislation and implementation. Anyhow as a result of the implementation of the tenancy laws, tenants became owners of or acquired rights in only about 4 percent of the operated area. The enforcement of ceilings led to the redistribution of less than 2 percent of the operated area. Thus these two measures taken together led to the redistribution of only about 6 percent of the operated area. This is insignificant compared to the redistributive effect of the

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\(^{58}\) Ibid.


programmes of land reforms implemented after the Second World War in the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan.62

Table 2.1: Agrarian Livelihoods in Kerala, 1957-1958

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main source of Income</th>
<th>Percentage of Agricultural Households in Travancore</th>
<th>Percentage of Agricultural Households in Cochin</th>
<th>Percentage of Agricultural Households in Malabar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural labor</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenant Cultivation</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner Cultivation</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rents</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural land per capita</td>
<td>0.49 acres</td>
<td>0.29 acres</td>
<td>0.43 acres</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As demonstrated in table 2.1 above, the holdings are extremely small; a large percentage of “owner cultivators” and “tenant cultivators” must depend on agricultural labour for their livelihood. Even in the relatively owner-cultivator dominated Travancore area, more than a third of the agricultural families depended on field labour for their main source of income. Such pressure naturally permitted the exaction of onerous terms of exchange by landlords from tenants, as competition among the landless for tenancies was extreme. The rents varied between one-half and three-fourths of the gross yield and that land lords were able to collect to the last cent even in bad years.63 The agrarian problem enquiry committee observed “rack-renting”

precisely defined as a situation in which tenants, after paying cultivation expenses and rent, received no return at all for managing the land and often received no return for their labor, incurring debt to pay the rent.

A survey of conditions of laborers in Kerala in 1956-1957 showed that though debt bondage was less prevalent than previously, the debt nexus was still important; of attached laborer families, 91 percent were indebted; among casual laborers, 77 percent were indebted. The agrarian underemployment remained severe, and was worse in Kerala than in any other Indian State. At the eve of the formation of State, due to wide difference in the tenurial conditions prevailed in Travancore and Malabar there were widespread discontent among peasants in Malabar compared to their counterparts in Travancore. 64 This led to the growth of peasant movements in Malabar and by fifties it gained considerable strength to force for radical reforms. In Travancore since the basic demands of superior tenants have already been met during the second half of the 19th century and early parts of 20th century, but the objective conditions for the rise of peasants were absent there. Instead the left movement in the commercialized economy of Travancore concentrated more on factory workers and the agricultural laborers.

The rise to power of the Communist Party in 1957 after the re-organization of the States in 1956 was a dream comes true to the peasantry of Kerala. The most important contribution of the Communist government was in the sphere of agrarian reforms. The approach of the government was guided by the understanding of the Communist Party that the peasant question stood as a foremost national question. The government passed much legislation to help the peasantry to solve their

64 P.P.Pillai (Ed), Agricultural Development in Kerala, New Delhi, 1982, p.79.
problems as well as redress different problems in agriculture, the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill being the most decisive step.

The statement of policy announced by E.M.S. Namboodiripad on 5th April, 1957 after taking oath as Chief Minister of Kerala explained the immediate aims of the Communist government on the agrarian question: "It is acknowledged by all that the agrarian question in our State is rather complicated. This question will, therefore, require consultations with the various sections of the people concerned for working out the details of agrarian reforms. Certain broad lines of policy have already been worked out which can provide the basis for such discussion. These are the lines of policy laid down by the Land Reforms Panel of the Planning Commission. They have secured the support of such all-India parties as the Congress, the Communist Party and the PSP as well as of several organisations representing the peasantry. Therefore, the above mentioned consultations need not take a long time, but can be finished relatively quickly. Within a short and definitely-fixed time-limit, we expect to prepare one or more bills fixing fair rent, giving fixity of tenure to the tenant, fixing a ceiling on landholdings in keeping with the peculiar conditions of Kerala, distributing surplus land above the ceiling fixed, giving such safeguards as are legitimate for those small landholders who stand to lose by the above-mentioned reforms etc. Since the peasants require some immediate relief while the above mentioned reforms are being worked out, it will be necessary to bring in emergency legislation staying all evictions."65

As promised in the Policy Statement, immediately after assuming power, the ministry passed the ordinance, Kerala Stay of Eviction Proceedings Act of 1957 on April 11, 1957 (just six days after forming the government) prohibiting all evictions of tenants, sub-tenants and occupants of homestead land on any ground including failure to pay rent. Furthermore, all court proceedings initiated by landlords against tenants, sub-tenants or occupants of homestead were stayed. The ordinance was issued as a prelude to the Agrarian Relations Bill that the government intended to pass. The ordinance was promulgated to prevent landlords and vested interests from resorting to those illegal practices. The Kisan Sabha and Agricultural Workers Union came to the forefront and actively intervened to stop all evictions, and wherever these organizations were weak, they gained strength and came forward to stop evictions. The law passed by the government and the active intervention by mass organizations, together protected the interests of tenants and occupants of homesteads.

E.M.S. Namboodiripad explained this process in his book, *The Communist Party in Kerala – Six Decades of Struggle and Advance* as follows: “The process of land legislation was a complicated one because different kinds of tenures existed in each of the three regions of Malabar, Cochin and Travancore. The minister who presided over the work of drafting the Bill spent sleepless nights and discussed the law with a very wide variety of persons who presented their points of view to the government for its consideration. The state committee of the Party, the Party legislature group and committees of the Kisan Sabha at all levels from state to the

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66 Ibid.
village were all engaged in the near interminable process of consultation, conflict and attempts at reconciliation. The process was so time consuming that it took place nearly two years between the introduction of the Bill and its final adoption in the Assembly."^69

The Kerala Stay of Eviction Proceedings Act of 1957 was a prelude to a drastic piece of land reform legislation, the” Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill “which was passed in the Assembly in 1959. For this bill the groundwork was done at the second annual conference of the Kerala Karshaka Sangham held in October 1957, which was attended by important peasant and communist leaders of Kerala including the Chief Minister, the Law minister, and the Revenue minister.?70 The Kerala ministry could pursue a radical land policy because it consisted of people who had grown out of the powerful Karshaka Sangham movement of the State, which was built up and developed by the Communist Party and which had fought many a glorious struggle for the vindication of Kisan’s rights.?71

Contrary to the land reform measures undertaken by the Congress State governments, the Agrarian Relations Act passed by the Kerala Legislative Assembly contained many important provisions to protect the genuine interests of tenants and occupants of homesteads. Other legislations defined the term ‘tenant’ so narrowly that large numbers of intended beneficiaries were excluded. But the new legislation introduced by the Communist government defined ‘tenant’ to include not only tenants but sub-tenants and every authorised or unauthorised occupant of a piece of land or a small patch of land on which a hut had been built. All such tenants were given fixity of tenure and they were not liable to be evicted for any reason whatsoever. The land


?70 Ibid.

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that was illegally evicted from certain tenants was also restored to them. The rent to be paid by the tenants was substantially reduced and they needed only to pay the fair rent fixed as per the provisions of the legislation. The tenant could purchase the proprietary rights of the land they cultivated by paying a comparatively lesser amount calculated on the basis of fair rent.

Considering the density of population and the shortage of land, the Agrarian Relations Act provided for a low ceiling of land and made provisions for distribution of ceiling surplus land to the landless and poor peasants through the involvement of popular Committees.\textsuperscript{72} The rights of the occupants of homesteads were protected. All transfers of land made to avoid the provisions of the law (after the publication of the Act on December 18, 1957) were made null and void. Protection was given to small owners and trusts without adversely affecting the genuine interest of tenants and agricultural workers. The other important provision of the law was that elected people's representatives would be involved in the proper implementation of the provisions of the law. Committees of the Communist Party, Kisan Sabha and Agricultural Workers Union at all levels from the state to the village level were engaged in the process of consultation, conflict resolution and reconciliation for framing the provisions of the law. It was the outcome of a genuinely collective and participative effort.

The various ministries in Kerala initiated land reforms concentrating mainly on three points – fixation of ceilings, fixity of tenure to the tenant and fair rents. The difference as regards land reforms between the three main political parties in Kerala – Congress, the Communists and the Praja Socialist Party centered on minor

\textsuperscript{71} H.D.Malaviya, \textit{Kerala A Report to the Nation}, New Delhi, 1958, p.83.

points like what should be the ceiling on land – 30 acres, 20 acres or 15 acres? , what kind of tenant should be given fixity of tenure? And what should be the fair rent – 1/2, 1/3, 1/4 or 1/6 of the gross produce? In 1954 the PSP Ministry formulated seven land reform bills but before it implemented the ministry was thrown out of power. It tried to fix ceilings, give fixity of tenure to the tenants and fix fair rents.73

The Congress ministry under Panampally also passed certain land legislation. It ended the four freehold estates (edavagais) of Poonjar, Vanjipuzha, Kilimanooor and Edapalli and thus freed a total of 104925 acres. These were like the zamindaris in other parts of India (expect that they did not have to pay any kind of rent to the State). The Kanam Tenancy Act was another legislation enacted by this ministry, by which the holders of Kanam tenancies became absolute owners of land with transferable and heritable rights.74

As soon as the Communist Government came to power they announced that the re-organization of agrarian relations would occupy their major attention. The comprehensive Kerala Agrarian Relation Bill was introduced in the State assembly on 21st December 1957 by K.R.Gowri, the revenue minister. In the introductory speech, she said, “The bill mainly focused the farmers, who were secured 70 percent of our total population. The bill tries to assure permanent ownership right to tenant and also given maximum benefit to the middle class land owners”.75 The main provisions of this bill are fixity of tenure, fixing of fair rent, putting a ceiling on land and

75 *Speeches of K.R.Gowri (Revenue Minister) in the Assembly, dated 21st December, 1957*, KLAL, Trivandrum.
redistributing the surplus land. The aim of the Bill was said to be “to bring about a thorough change in the Agrarian Relations in Kerala, creating a large section of economically confident peasant proprietors and making the agricultural population stand up on their own legs”.77

The assembly decided to circulate the bill for eliciting public opinion. The publication of the bill was followed by discussions on the proposed measures among the peasants all over Kerala. Under the banner of Karshaka Sangham, the peasants gathered in their villages irrespective of their party affiliations to discuss various clauses in the bill and suggest changes.78 This was followed by a special session of the State Karshaka Sangham which suggested certain changes in the bill. This popular participation in the discussion of the bill is something unique, a parallel to which can hardly be found in any other Indian State.79

The bill closely follows the recommendations of the Land Reform Panel of the Planning Commission and contains necessary safeguards to protect the tenants from the machinations of landlords who may seek to evade the law and defeat the purposes of the Act. The bill gives due consideration to the differences in existing laws in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. The abolition of tenancy concerned, Malabar where as many as three quarters of agricultural households may have been tenants. In Cochin, the comparable figure was 50 percent and in Travancore 25

76 Kerala Agrarian Relation Bill 1957, KLAL, Trivandrum, p.11.
77 Ibid.
percent. However security for hut dwellers – landless agricultural laborers … the real “tillers of the soil” was much more a concern in Travancore.\(^{80}\)

In the assembly debate on the bill, PSP members spoke with different voices. While Chandrasekhar (PSP) saw nothing ‘progressive’ and ‘revolutionary’ in it and even felt that it was even more reactionary than the Malabar Tenancy Act\(^{81}\) and P.R.Kurup and C.G.Janardanan (both PSP) welcomed it. It shows that the PSP as a party had no considerable opinion of the bill. As for the Congress, none of its leading members took part in the debate. However, in the memorandum finally submitted on the bill, the Congress accepted the general principles which were based entirely on the recommendations of the Land Reform Panel of the Planning Commission.

The clarity and unambiguity of the Communist ministry’s approach to the land problem deserves comparison with the performances of Congress governments in other States of India since Independence. Indeed, again and again Prime Minister Nehru and Congress Working Committee have deprecated the delay in the implementation of land reform measures by Congress governments. On 30\(^{th}\) August 1957, the Congress working committee, ‘noted that the progress of land reforms since independence had been slow and that administrative weaknesses had led to widespread eviction of tenants.\(^{82}\) The Congress opposition in Kerala as well as the Congress government at the Centre was put on the horns of a dilemma when Kerala government prepared the agrarian legislations. On the one hand, their legislators being in full conformity with the declared policies of the Congress as an organization and of


\(^{81}\) *Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, Vol, VII*, KLAL, Trivandrum, 1959, p.4442.
Central Government and the Planning Commission, they could not raise any objection to them, on the other hand they could not enthusiastically support them or allow them to be passed and fully implemented.\textsuperscript{83} This was mainly because of the fact that they supported the policies of the landlords.

According to the Planning Commission Report of April 1958, only the abolition of intermediaries may be said to have been generally carried out, nearly Rs.82 crores having been till then paid as compensation and rehabilitation grants out of a total estimated amount of Rs.614 crores.\textsuperscript{84} It shows that the governments following the delayed tactics. As regarding the fixation of fair rents, only Bombay and Rajasthan have reduced the level of rent to one-sixth and the rents in other States continue to be high. As regards security of tenure, only Uttar Pradesh and Delhi have given full protection to tenants and sub-tenants. In Andhra, Madras, Orissa, Manipur, Madhya Pradesh etc. only some interim legislation for offering protection to tenants has been adopted. Madras and Mysore have given the right of resumption. The worst situation however exists on the issue of ceiling on land holdings. Hardly any State has adopted legislation fixing ceiling on existing holdings. The ceilings have been imposed only on future acquisition in Assam, Bombay, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Delhi.

No wonder, therefore that the Madras Revenue minister, M.A.Manickavelu, told the State assembly on 1\textsuperscript{st} April 1958, that ‘land ceiling is still a long way off’.\textsuperscript{85} It is also not surprising that Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{82} Statesman dated 31\textsuperscript{st} August, 1957, KSA, Trivandrum.
  \item \textsuperscript{84} The Indian Express, \textit{dated 23\textsuperscript{rd} April, 1958}, KSA, Trivandrum.
  \item \textsuperscript{85} The Indian Express, \textit{dated 2\textsuperscript{nd} April, 1958}, KSA, Trivandrum.
\end{itemize}
N. Sanjiva Reddi, took pains to point out to the press that the proposed land legislation in the State was ‘quite moderate’ and that ‘it would not affect anybody seriously’. When the report of the tenancy and agricultural land laws committee came up for discussion in the Mysore State Assembly, one after another the Congressmen got up to denounce the proposal for fixing a ceiling upon land holdings. Nagaratnamma thought that the slogan ‘land to the tiller’ was impractical and meaningless. G. Shivappa, K. Nagappa Alva and many others, all Congress MLAs denounced the proposal to fix a ceiling upon land holdings in uncertain terms. The press also reported that Congressmen on the land reforms committee of the government of Orissa failed to agree upon ceilings and considered it wise to keep mum on the subject. According to a report from Jaipur, Congress legislators were split in their views on the fixation of ceilings upon land holdings in Rajasthan. Diametrically opposite stands were taken by member of the ruling party, when the house resumed discussion on the ceiling committee report.

In Kerala, intervening in the Kerala assembly debate on the agrarian relations bill on December 1957, Chief Minister E. M. S. Namboodiribad said, “This bill ought not to be viewed with a motive to find whether it is revolutionary or progressive; the question is that we must face the problem in a practical way, taking into consideration the existing objective conditions in the country”. Emphasizing that it would be wrong to think that the last word can be said on land reforms today, E. M. S. Namboodiribad added that, “in the agrarian relations of our

86 The Times Of India, dated 3rd May, 1958, KSA, Trivandrum.
87 The Hindu, dated 28th March 1958, KSA, Trivandrum.
88 The Indian Express, dated 20th April, 1958, KSA, Trivandrum.
89 The Times of India, dated 26th April, 1958, KSA, Trivandrum.
country, social and economic forces are in motion, producing impacts everywhere, and new developments are taking place“⁹⁰

The Agrarian Relations Bill allowed the landlords to resume land for personal cultivation under extremely limited conditions; tenants from whom land was resumed were entitled to compensation, and tenants could not be left with less than a subsistence holding, unless the owner hold less than 5 acres. The special problems of these small owners were recognized and tribunals were to determine on a case by case basis, the enquiry claims of small landlords and their tenants. Arrears of rent were dramatically reduced, particularly for small tenants. Provisions were set for establishing ‘fair rent’ on all lands, varying between one-sixth to one-twelfth of the gross produce on dry lands and one-fourth to one-sixth on the wet lands.⁹¹

Although these provisions would abolish rentier landlordism, it is not clear that they would establish land to the tiller. “Cultivating” tenants were to be made owners, but “cultivating” was defined to include supervision of hired labour, a rather surprising provision. The finance minister C.Achutha Menon, wrote in his commentary on the bill. “If the slogan, ‘land to the tiller’ is to have any meaning, it is the person who actually cultivates the land either with his own labour or the labour of the members of his family who ought to get the benefit of land legislation, we have extended this a little and also included a person who personally supervises cultivation, although not doing actual manual labour because we thought it was necessary in the interests of production to

encourage such people also”. Achutha Menon admitted that the government had to steer a middle course between two provisions – one more prevalent in Malabar, favoring absolute commitment to the tenants right in land, the other more prevalent in Travancore, favoring the rights of established property in land.

However not everybody in the opposition was against the bill. The general secretary of the SNDP Yogam K.Sukumaran persistently opposed the anti-government agitation. From the initial appreciation of the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill he said that, “If any ministry improves the lot of workers and peasants it can only be the Communist Ministry”94 The Ezhava communities to which these leaders belonged moved to State wide agitations in support of the bill.

The main offensive was launched by the leaders of the two communities, the Christians and the Nair’s. The landed interests in Kerala were dominants in these communities. While the Christians were a fast rising group of landowners, the Nair’s remained the biggest group. The organizations of these communities radically opposed the land reforms. The Nair Service Society, led by Mannath Padmanabhan launched a crusade against the bill, because “the Nair’s are the principal land-owning community in the Travancore-Cochin province and the bill affected those most”.95 In April 1958 Mannath Padmanabhan made one of his first attacks on the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill, which led him one year later into an alliance with the church against the communist ministries. He said, “It will not be possible for them to save themselves by affecting some changes in the Education Act or the Land Bill

92 C.Achutha Menon, Commentary on the Agrarian Relations Bill, Trivandrum, 1958, p.20.
93 Ibid, p.23.
94 The Kerala Kaumudi, dated 10th May 1958, KSA, Trivandrum.
because our aim is to remove the Communist Government.....Let me declare that my mind will be set at rest only after sending these communists, bag and baggage, not merely from Kerala, but from India and driving them to their fatherland – Russia”. 96

However the Communist government did not succeed in enacting the legislation. The bill got through its third reading in March, 1959 and was sent for the approval of the President of India on 27th July 1959, four days before the State government was dismissed. But the Indian Union President on the advice of the Home Ministry refused to give assent to the Bill. Thus the most progressive Land Reform Legislation passed by any State in India could not be implemented due to the negative attitude of the Congress party and it’s government at the Centre.97 It was clear that the Government of India itself was interested in revoking its crucial policy on land.

In the elections held after the dismissal of the Communist Ministry the reactionary United Front consisting the Congress, Muslim League and PSP managed to get a majority in the assembly and formed the government in 1960. That government prepared a new Land Reforms Bill and got it passed in the assembly in 1963. This bill had given a number of concessions to the landlords and had taken away many benefit conferred upon the peasants in the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill of 1957. In 1967 elections a Communist led United Front Government again came to power and introduced the Kerala Land Reforms Amendment Act of 1969, which reduced the number of loopholes and expanded the Act in favour of small holders, poor tenants and hutment dwellers. Again, the new governments which came to power after 1969 make lot of amendments in the Agrarian Reforms Bill of 1963.

96 The Kerala Kaumudi, dated 10th May, 1958, KSA, Trivandrum.
Regarding the agrarian reforms in Kerala, T.K.Oommen, in his article “Agrarian Legislations and Movements in Kerala” has described that, “when legislation is followed or parallel by a social movement, the successful implementation of legislation depends on the nature and content of the opposition it faces”.\textsuperscript{98} This is a very opt description of the agrarian struggle by a Sociologist.

Thus by the implementation of Land Reforms Legislation, Landlordism was abolished in Kerala and within a period of ten years 35 lakhs of tenants and about five lakhs of Kudikidappukars were made the owners of their land. More than one lakh acres of land was declared as surplus land by enforcing the ceiling provision and this land was distributed among the agricultural laborers in rural areas.\textsuperscript{99} Lakhs of tenants and Kudikidappukars who were virtually slaves of the landlords got self-confidence and a sense of self-respect by gaining ownership on the land.

Some criticisms have been leveled against certain aspects of the Kerala Land Reforms Act. By making the tenants owners of the land a kind of capitalist class in rural areas who do not actually cultivated the land is created. The basic approach of this criticism is wrong because, in a capitalistic society the purpose of the land reform is not the abolition of capitalist mode of cultivation along with the abolition of feudalistic landlordism. By abolishing feudalistic landlordism, which is a parasite on

\textsuperscript{97} International Congress on Kerala Studies, AKG Centre, Trivandrum, 1994, p.134.
\textsuperscript{98} T.K.Oommen, Agrarian Legislations and Movement Sources of Change, EPW, dated 4\textsuperscript{th} October, 1975, p.1577.
society, the passage for the development of capitalist mode of production in agriculture is opened.

Another criticism is with regard to the exemption of plantation lands from the ceiling provision. While ceiling is made applicable to almost all agricultural lands including coconut and areca nut gardens, the question is raised why tea, coffee and rubber plantation owned by the very big companies and very rich people are exempted from the ceiling. It was mainly based on the interaction with the Home department of India; the Kerala Government temporarily withheld the plantations from the purview of the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill. It is not at all practical to take the land of these plantations and distribute the same at the rate of half acre or one acre among the landless people. In the first place there are more than two lakhs permanent employees working in these plantations. Another point is that even if you could manage to take away these lands and distribute it among the poor people, there is no guarantee that they will be able to cultivate tea, coffee or rubber in the lands they get. The result will be that production from these plantations will go down and that will adversely affect the total income from the agricultural sector.

The Ordinance, which prohibited evictions and the final Bill adopted in June 1959, marked a new stage in the economic and socio-cultural life of the people of Kerala. EMS Namboodiripad gave great importance to the Ordinance and the passing of Agrarian Relations Bill: “It ended the economic oppression and the socio-cultural domination by a small minority of the upper castes on the mass of the rural

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poor. The socio-cultural movements of over half a century that were directed against caste domination, outmoded systems of family organization and obscurantist beliefs and practices culminated in the release of the rural masses from every kind of exploitation and oppression.” Even if it had to its credit only the enactment of the Agrarian Relations Bill, the 28 month existence of the Communist government will find a place in the history of modern democratic Kerala.