

**AGRARIAN PROBLEMS
AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND LITERATURE IN KERALA
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION
1934-1971**

Thesis (Abstract)
Submitted to Kannur University in fulfillment of the requirement
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the faculty of
Humanities

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December 2010

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**Submitted to Kannur University in fulfillment of the requirement
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The study involved making sense of the role played by media and literature in the agrarian question of Kerala with special reference to the period of 1934 to 1971 the period which witnessed the struggle of the peasantry against feudalism. The media and literature had played a crucial part in this struggle actively involving themselves in the struggle against feudalism.

Background

The Kerala society was known for the extreme rigidity of its caste system.¹ The outcastes were semi agrestic slaves up to the land while the land was owned by the upper castes who controlled the political institutions as well. Thus Kerala had a social system in which the ruling class could exert its power politically through the control of such institutions, economically by virtue of their monopoly over land and socially by virtue of the high place they had occupied in

¹ Balakrishnan. P.K. Jathivyavastayum Keralacharithravum, D.C.Books, Kottayam,

the caste hierarchy. This system was described as the *Jati Jenmi Naduvazhi Medhavitham* by E.M.S. Nambuthirippadu.² The feudal system of production was the backbone of this entire oppressive system. Any significant social transformation was impossible without breaking the back of the feudal mode of production. So the decades from 1934 to 1971 which were the decades of social transformation also witnessed the intense fight against feudalism. The fight against feudalism could be carried out by the peasantry which was unified against all divisive identities. Peasants or the tenants belonged to different castes. They had to forge a unity among themselves. The broad based unity which emerged among the petty peasants, agricultural labourers and the working class was also crucial in advancing the struggle against caste system. Necessarily thus the struggle against feudalism had to be combined with struggles against the caste system and attempts for social reform became an intrinsic part of it. Such a large scale transformation is difficult to be achieved without having the support of the media and literature. While saying this, the dialectical nature of this change has to be taken into account.

The struggle against feudalism and casteism marked the beginning of an emergence of public sphere or civil society in Kerala. The emergence of mass media was a significant development in this. Thus the media which emerged had to put up a fight with the old as they stood for the new world. The peasantry got a significant section of the media in their support in their struggle and this support played a crucial role in advancing their struggle.

Literature played a similar yet different role in this struggle. Media worked as a channel for communication while the literature played an important part in the construction of the social imaginary about the struggling peasantry.

Apart from elucidating the role played by the media and literature the study also analysed the role played the print media in the peasant struggle

² Namboodiripad, E.M.S. *Keralacharithram Marxist Vekshanathil*(Mal), Chintha Publishers Thiruvananthapuram. 1997.

against feudalism. What has been the contribution of the media in consolidating and advancing the struggle of the peasantry? Had the media been instrumental in constructing the identity of the peasantry as a class?

Was it instrumental in equipping the peasantry with ideas helping to produce a counter hegemonic discourse? This question raises some questions about the nature of the media itself as its natural corollary. Are mass media neutral? How far the characterization of Media as monolithic neutral platforms is valid? Is there any valid basis, to categorize the media into bourgeois media and the popular media? What is the role of literature in constructing the social imaginary of the struggles? How fruitful was the effort of conscious and openly political interventions in peasant agitations? How far the literature and society influence each other? Can there be literature which is neutral? These are the questions which this study raised and tried to answer.

Hypotheses

The thesis has the following the hypotheses

- 1) Media play a crucial role in consolidating and advancing a social movement.
- 2) The media become a channel for reflecting and forwarding the class interests.
- 3) In a media penetrated society, it will be crucial for the struggling classes to have their own popular media which will help them build up a counter hegemonic discourse.
- 4) Literature plays a crucial role in constructing the social imaginary of the peasantry and working class.
- 5) Popular literature can be source and site for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse.

The study starts with an introduction where the scope, relevance and the methodology of the study is elucidated. The introductory chapter deals with the basic question

The second has been titled Agrarian Problems in Kerala, 1934 – 1971: The Phase of Anti –Feudal Struggles. The region comprising the state of Kerala had a history of an oppressive caste system combined with a feudal landlordism. The later half of 19th and initial decades of the 20th century witnessed widespread upheavals in the society attempting to bring changes in the social, economic and colonial scenario. Before the advent of foreign powers Kerala constituted of a number of small principalities constantly in fight with one another. The coming of the Europeans and the consolidation of European suzerainty over the Indian soil had great implications for the Kerala society as well. The British after defeating the Tippu Sultan were able to bring the Malabar Province under their control and the local rulers of Cochin, Calicut and Travancore had to accept the suzerainty of the British crown.

The colonialists, especially after the First war of Indian Independence increasingly adopted a strategy of appeasing the traditional elites of the Indian society so that they could retain their political control over the sub continent. Thus the colonial rule aggravated the miserable plight of the common masses as it extended extensive support to the elites while continuing its extraction of the resources of the subcontinent and advancing the process of deindustrialization. The process of deindustrialization which involved the deliberate destruction of the indigenous industries and livelihood in order to make India a market and cheap source of raw materials pushed the majority of the population into agriculture. The agriculture of the subcontinent was in the feudal mode with the upper caste land lords, lower caste tenants and the outcastes as agricultural labourers or agrestic slaves.

The coming of the British as has been observed earlier increased the strength of feudalism as the British had to depend upon the elites to survive in power in the face of the attempt by some of indigenous rulers and Indian people to overthrow the British rule. The British Malabar was a classic example of this condition.

The ceding of Malabar by Tippu Sultan and the establishment of the British control over Malabar was followed by an unprecedented rise in revenue extraction and the increase in the power of the landlords at the cost of the peasants. The following chapters of the study contain a detailed analysis of the situation. For the time being it is sufficient to state that the increased revenue extractions and the feudal oppression led to many social upheavals like the Moplah rebellion. The spread of Western education, nationalism, the inspiration from October revolution, the emergence of a mass based national movement which acquired popular character through the Civil disobedience and Non cooperation movement, the attempt of social reformers, the spread of socialist and communist ideals across the subcontinent, all these factors helped the emergence of a strong peasant movement in the state which was especially strong in Malabar.

The peasants were organised under Karshaka Sangham under the initiative of the congress socialist party and later under the leadership of the Communist party. They led a long drawn out and a fruitful struggle against colonialism and landlordism. It culminated in the legal abolition of landlordism in the state in 1971.

The third chapter titled, “Agrarian Movements and Mass Media: A Case Study of the Role of Print media in the Peasant Agitations of Kerala (1934-1971)”, traces a brief outline of the history of the print media in Kerala. Historically, the print media roughly fall into four categories. Those begun by missionaries, those begun by non missionaries or commoners, the newspapers for community interest and those which raised their voices for social and political transformation. The newspapers which fell into the last category played a very crucial role in the socio economic transformation of Kerala. They resisted the oppressive tactics of the ruling dispensation. The years from 1934 to 1971 marked a tumultuous period in the history of peasant movement in Kerala. It was the period of a long drawn out struggle starting from peasant agitation against the oppressive practices within land lordism culminated in the legal abolition of

landlordism in the state. It is impossible to make sense of this period without a perusal over the contribution of the print media in these struggles. For the purposes of the study, I have taken the newspapers, *Prabhatham*, *Deshabhimani* and some other relevant newspapers and have done a survey of the nature of their content that intervened in various ways into the peasant problems.

Prabhatham came at a time when Malabar was again getting into a rebellious mood after a short period of calmness. The exploitation by landlords and the British imperialists had reached its peak. The peasants were reeling under exploitation and they were getting organised into Sanghams. The working class was also getting organised and it started striking for more wages. The students across the country were also getting organised into their own organizations and most of them were anti imperialist in spirit. Amidst all this *Prabhatham* which came up, published a series of articles on the developments of these mass movements.³

The study intended to analyse the contribution of the media in consolidating and advancing the struggle of the peasantry. The study tried to understand the role which the media played in advancing the cause of the Peasantry. It should be noted that *Prabhatham* and later *Deshabhimani* which extended consistent support to Karshaka Sangham, the peasants' movement was instrumental in deciding the fate of the movement. Both these newspapers went beyond being a mere supplier of information to the peasants. Unlike other bourgeois media, *Prabhatham* used to play an active role as a catalyst for social change. *Prabhatham* served not only an announcer of party decisions but also gave voice to its readers. *Prabhatham* used to publish complaints raised by the peasants.⁴ The approach of *Prabhatham* towards capital accumulation and revenue collection is marked by its attempt to involve the public in the struggle against it. It was a distinctive feature of *Prabhatham* that it designated separate pages for the news regarding the working class and the news related to the

³ Namboodiripad, E.M.S. The Communist Party in Kerala; Six Decades of Struggle and Advance, p.19 , National Book Centre, New Delhi ,1994.

⁴ *Prabhatham*, 13th June 1938.

peasantry. It had reserved two pages exclusively for publishing the news affecting the peasants titled *Karshaka Lokam*. The headers of *Prabhatham* were not passive titles; on the other hand they were exhortations to the masses. It contained articles which gave information about acts and bills. Whenever new bills and acts came up *Prabhatham* reported them in detail and carried articles which could inform the peasants in detail about the Bills.⁵

The role which the media have played in producing a counter hegemonic discourse has been examined. The study throws some light into the nature of the media itself. Some of the news reporting served the purpose of inspiring the farmers about what can be achieved by Collective action.⁶ Secularism and a class perspective was an enduring quality of the discourse generated by *Prabhatham*.⁷ One of the most significant aspects of the work of the *Prabhatham* is its emphasis on building up worker peasant unity.⁸ *Prabhatham* in its discourses always strived to promote the cause of unity of working class and peasantry. Notable is the support extended to the struggle by the Karshaka Sangham, thus reinforcing the peasant and agricultural workers unity against the land lord.⁹ It can be seen that the *Prabhatham* carried the details about the unionization happening among workers of various industries, teachers and others. It also took notice of the organisation of students and youths and most importantly it never missed to emphasize their role in advancing the cause of the peasantry by assisting their struggles.¹⁰

Prabhatham actively supported the attempts of social reform.¹¹ The reports of *Prabhatham* served the cause of enlightening the peasants that their

⁵ *Prabhatham*, 20th June, 1938.

⁶ *Prabhatham*, 31st October 1938.

⁷ *Prabhatham*, 21st November, 1938.

⁸ *Prabhatham*. 5th September, 1938.

⁹ *Prabhatham* 5th September, 1938.

¹⁰ *Prabhatham*, 14th November, 1938.

¹¹ *Prabhatham*, 21st November, 1938.

struggle was part of the larger struggle launched all across India¹². While *Prabhatham* gave attention to publish news across the country, it also gave space to international events.¹³ *Prabhatham* contained inspiring news about the struggles of workers and peasants across the world. They handled news from an international perspective. One of the most significant functions performed by *Prabhatham* was the ideological education it provided to the peasants through various writings.

Along with the representation of agrarian problems, *Prabhatham* served as a tool for the political education of the masses by C.S.P. *Prabhatham* used to publish articles as study material for party classes. The stories which were published in *Prabhatham* in almost all issues were intended to create political awareness and social sensitivity among the peasants.

The media can play a crucial role in introducing the changes which are happening across the world to the people. The 1930s with its undeveloped technology of communication and interaction, *Prabhatham* has performed this function in a remarkable manner.

Prabhatham served the cause of announcing and dispensing information regarding the functioning of the Congress socialist party.¹⁴

Some of the articles sought to elaborate on the organizational aspects of the Sangham itself, comparing it with various other movements especially the national movement. Apart from being a newspaper which reported local, regional, national and international events, and an educator in ideological and theoretical issues, *Prabhatham* carried a lot of literary writings.¹⁵ In fact, it became the platform for the initial writings of the many later stalwarts of Malayalam literature like S.K. Pottekkadu and Thakazhi Sivasankarapillai and P. Keasavadev. *Prabhatham* carried poems, stories and plays. All of them served the cause of

¹² *Prabhatham*, 20th June, 1938.

¹³ *Prabhatham*, 1st August, 1938.

¹⁴ *Prabhatham* 31st October 1938.

¹⁵ *Prabhatham*, 30th May, 1938.

inspiring the peasantry by deeply touching and awakening their emotions. The poems and songs published in *Prabhatham* became the March songs and slogans of the *Jathas* conducted by the Sangham. Many songs which were published in *Prabhatham* were the form of songs which were sung in the places of work. *Prabhatham* contained many stories. Most of these stories had a very simple plot and they were attempts to spread political education by the graphic illustration of the lives of the peasants.¹⁶

The stories with simple narrative vividly portrayed the transition from a peasant consciousness to that of a radical class consciousness. Stories in *Prabhatham* challenged the bourgeois notions of morality and dealt with the themes of prostitution and illicit sex with courage. *Prabhatham* also used to publish plays reflecting the plight of the working class and the peasantry and their heroic fight against the present system.

The study could find that publications like *Prabhatham* and *Deshabhimani* represented the interests of the working class and the peasantry. As the organs of the Congress socialist Party and Communist Party, they stood by the struggles of the proletariat and peasantry. They constantly published news on peasant struggles and tried to counter the attempts by the bourgeois media to put their struggles into oblivion by either not reporting them or distorting them through exaggeration. *Prabhatham* served as a tool of political mobilization and organisation as it was the channel of communication for the vast majority of the peasantry which it attempted to reach out. *Deshabhimani* carried this tradition forward and went ahead to become a daily newspaper.

It can be noted that *Deshabhimani* carried forward the anti imperialist and anti feudal struggle and strongly assisted the peasant movement through the worst phase of state and feudal oppression. The effectiveness of the role played by *Prabhatham* can only be understood if its performance is compared with that

¹⁶ Raman, Theruvath. 'Panimudakkam', *Prabhatham*, 31st October, 1938.

of other newspapers of the time. Mathrubhumi, for instance, was one among the most prominent nationalist dailies of the time and it enjoyed widespread popularity.

The case study of the print media of revealed a perceptible difference in the way of functioning by various newspapers. It can be safely argued that the organs like *Prabhatham* and *Deshabhimani* assisted the peasant movement to a great extent in generating a counter discourse. It equipped the peasantry in its fight for hegemony with the strong ideas and a vision about the alternatives. This has helped the peasant movement of Kerala to change its self from that of class in itself to a class for itself.

The case study of the media reached the conclusion that, the dominant classes retain their dominance not only through the dominance of coercive apparatus, but also through the control exercised over the ideological apparatuses. *Prabhatham* and *Deshabhimani* and such organs were crucial attempts in countering the attempt of ruling classes by presenting a challenge to the ruling ideas

The agrarian movement of Kerala, in the phase of anti feudal struggles stretching from 1934 to 1971, has left great impact upon the cultural sphere of the Kerala society. The movements which worked as the fundamental forces of social change had a dialectical relationship with the efforts in Malayalam literature. Kerala witnessed a conscious literary effort on the part of a great number of writers in Kerala, many of them stalwarts of Malayalam literature. It led to heated debates in the public sphere about the propriety of litterateurs dabbling in politics.

The study could find that there was a dialectical relationship with literature and peasant movement. Many of the poets of Malayalam openly came up in support to the suffering peasants and gave voice to their concerns. A class of progressive writers emerged in Kerala who believed in employing their literary skills for the advancement of the cause of the peasant movement.

The study tried to analyse how fruitful was the effort of conscious and openly political interventions in peasant agitations. It could be seen that literature played a great role creating a counter hegemonic discourse. The widespread popularity and the potential to entertain ensured the message getting carried faster. It has to be noted that the participation of the poets, story writers, novelists and playwrights with a definite political goal was something which was achieved without effort. The intellectual domain of Kerala has witnessed fierce raging debates over the propriety of the litterateurs being part of such efforts. Many of the critics found that unpalatable. The art for art's sake and the arguments about form and style dominated the literary scene. But the emergence of the progressive writer's associations made a great difference in this situation. Once the writers under the banner started their collective efforts to promote the cause of the down trodden sections of the society, no poet could ignore its impact.

The study tried to understand how far the literature and society influenced each other. It could be observed in the study that there is no literature which can be held neutral. At least the experience of Malayalam literature, the case in point, shows that the collective efforts by a set of writers who kept close links with the people could create a counter hegemonic space. It can be held as the success of the progressive writers and their intervention that in Malayalam literature no poet could ever ignore the social realities.

The concluding chapter examines the validity of the hypotheses while listing the findings and suggestions of the researcher. The study comes to the conclusion that both media and literature played a very crucial part in advancing the cause of the peasantry. While it can be stated that there was a general atmosphere of support for the peasants, there was a very clear divergence in the support media extended to them based on the class which controlled the media. The media which were in the hands of the progressive forces could actively assist the peasant movement and their assistance was of great significance for the success of these agitations.