CHAPTER VI

Subalternity and Political Discourse

Class as a Relational Process of Becoming in Keralam

"Society must be understood starting from its weakest link."

— Fitoussi & Rosanvallon

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In the Chapter V, we have analysed the ‘hardware’ of Classes and social groups i.e., by their economic position. We have also indicated their political orientation. Now let us turn to the ‘software’ proper of Class analysis i.e., in terms of Class struggle and Class consciousness. We would begin this chapter by touching upon certain theoretical elements that are specific to this chapter. This is followed by an attempt at identifying the dominant classes within the state through following a ‘Who gets what?’ approach of understanding the phenomena of corruption and tax evasion. This should be considered very much as an attempt at understanding Class as a relational phenomenon since the interests that have cornered massive undue economic benefits from the State could not have achieved this, had they not been dominant within the national formation. This would be followed by a section that seeks to theoretically understand the theory and practice of land reforms since we would consider that the land question to be of particular relevance for the dignified existence of the subalterns. Going by the dictum of Fitoussi & Rosanvallon (2002), “Society must be understood starting from its weakest link”, the next section follows a ‘bottoms up’ approach of looking at society. In the Kerala case, we would look at the case of Adivasi land question in the state to uncover the Class interests that underlie the contending political discourses around the issue. This constitutes the major part of this chapter. This section analyses the feasibility of the notion of ‘Adivasi’ identity, introduces the Adivasi land question in the state in the light of the suppression of the land struggle at Muthanga and a chronological depiction of the recent Adivasi land struggles in the state and goes on to analyse the contending discourses on the Adivasi land question in the state, namely, the policy orientation of the State, the Hindutva school, a conventional class approach of the mainstream left parties, the identity politics approach, the civil liberties perspective and the democratic rights perspective. Adivasis, the tribal people, as is widely conceded, today constitute the lowest bottom of the class
society in Keralam, as the 'poorest of the poor' in the state. The section on Adivasi land question is followed by a smaller section on Dalit land question in the state, with particular reference to a defensive land struggle that had taken place at Nainamkonam, a predominantly Dalit colony in Thiruvananthapuram district, bordering Kollam district. Our focus on the land question is of particular relevance given the enormous land hunger and ethnic identity-based political struggles of the deprived social groups in the state. If the Adivasis constitute a minuscule 1 per cent of the population of the state, the Dalits (Hindu) are numerically more potent with a strength of about 10 per cent. We have identified potential classes in Chapter V, which are basically economic classes. We would hold that the politically conscious classes are yet to come on their own. Nevertheless, we can already sense class struggle beneath the trappings of Adivasi or even Dalit identity-based struggles around the land question, in particular. Adivasi and Dalit communities, each separately or together are not taken to be classes per se but as marginalised social groups constituting important components within the subaltern classes. Before concluding the chapter, we also briefly deal with the question of custodial deaths in relation to the class reality within the state.

We believe that a 'bottoms up' approach such as this has the potential to offer revealing insights about society in general and the contending political discourses – concerning both the dominant classes and of the subaltern classes and social groups – that characterises it. Moreover, we hope, this approach could yield an understanding of society in its multidimensionality because Adivasis or Dalits by themselves do not constitute economic Classes. The vast majority of the Adivasis, the tribals find themselves in a Class situation such as of being landless, evicted from the forests, their traditional habitats, etc. and internal Class differentiations among them is somewhat non-existent. It should not be surprising, therefore that the articulations of their interests take on the dimensions of Class politics and Class struggle, although it had non-class specificities as well. Dalits are apparently a more differentiated category since a category of educated/employed elite has emerged from among them as a result of the policy of protective discrimination through reservation of seats in educational institutions and government employment that has been followed by the Indian State after the inauguration of the Constitution in 1950. And yet a vast majority of them find themselves in the lowest class and any class struggle analysis in the context of India, Keralam included, cannot overlook the Dalit question concerning the lowest bottom of the traditional Indian caste

Although the condition of landlessness among Dalits is more severe than even among the Adivasis, the former are traditionally skilled as agricultural labourers and could take benefit of the high money wages, particularly since the the post-Gulf boom phase, i.e., since mid-1970s. On the other hand, Adivasis who used to live apart in the forests have not been skilled agricultural labourers traditionally.
society. Dalit land question has particular significance since Dalits constitute a significant chunk of the ‘actual tillers’ on the land. The final section carries the general conclusions of this chapter. Our analysis in this chapter recognises the fact that ethnic identity based political struggles of the deprived sections such as Adivasis and Dalits, has been a significant trend in the state since early 1990s.¹

Ralph Miliband’s class struggle analysis and Ellen Meiksins Wood’s Class as a relation, rather than a structural location and Marx’s own understanding of ‘Class-for-itself’ demand that we look at the process of Class formation historically, i.e. over time and in terms of relationships with other classes and social groups and in terms of Class consciousness, i.e., political articulations of Class interest. In Chapter II, we have already examined how in a Third World society as that of India, a multiplicity of contradictions coexist in society and as such there is a ‘multidimensionality to the social being’,⁴ which may be better captured by the Gramscian term, ‘Subalternity’ rather than ‘Class’. It may be noted that we are falling back upon Gramsci himself rather than the later Gramscians, as in the Subaltern Studies collective particularly in the later period, who focused their attention on deprived non-class identities, to the exclusion of class issues and on the autonomous assertion of sections of people independent of the pan-Indian leadership.⁵

“[C]lass is always mediated by other social relations.”⁶ It would be reductionist and Eurocentric⁷ passé to speak of Class in the abstract sense, in its pristine isolation from the other social relations. “In concrete social reality, class and other social relations interpenetrate.”⁸ Age-old caste and gender structures in particular as well as social relations of community and tribe shape and determine the character of Class formation. Thompson rightly says, no other concept is available to understand “a manifest and universal historical process”.⁹ This is not to overlook the myriad ways in which the

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³ We have already noted in Chapter V that in recent years, women have also organised themselves into political struggles particularly against incidents of sex racket.

⁴ It may be argued that a great multiplicity of contradictions co-habit in any society where ‘imperialism’ has had its field of operation. ‘Imperialism’, being a ‘parasitic and decadent’ variety of capitalism in the Leninist sense, devoid of the radical propensities of classical capitalism, stultifies the further development of the social formation. It does so by articulating with the pre-capitalist modes of surplus expropriation, particularly feudalism, as many of the modes of production theorists have argued.

⁵ For a critique of the later trajectory of the Subaltern Studies, see Sumit Sarkar 1998: “The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies”, Writing Social History, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 82-108.


⁷ The ‘new world’ consisting of Americas and Oceana may be considered as cultural extensions of Europe in this sense.

⁸ Camfield 2004-05: 443.

⁹ Thompson 1978a: 149.
character of the National formation has a constitutive effect upon the Class formation within it.

**Ideology and Discourse**

'Discourses' denote historically specific fields of meaning. The term 'discourse' is used by us in the two-fold sense of "materiality and meaning." This approach seeks to combine the two theoretical perspectives which see social phenomena both as social constructions and objective "realities", as related to each other. Anna Lindberg, after Stuart Hall (1996), proposes to marry a neutral notion of 'ideology' – rather than ideology in the sense of 'mystification of truth' in Marx – with a postmodern/post-Marxist, non-Foucauldian notion of 'discourse.' Discourses are tools used to convey ideologies. So they are not identical with ideologies. Nevertheless, "they both operate at the same level – that of conveying meaning." The major difference for Lindberg (2001) between ideology and discourse is that the former is normative and more consciously articulated, whereas the latter operates at a more subtle level. We would also hold that discourse, unlike ideology, has the distinctive advantage of incorporating the aspect of 'discursive practices'. The critique of ideology may be extended to include competing and multiple subjectivities, putting less emphasis on distorted knowledge.

We do not use the term, 'discourse' in the sense in which Foucault (1989), Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1990) used it. In this view, "truth is something *produced*". They establish 'orders of truth', accepted as reality. Discourse, for them, constitutes the human subject and social 'reality' in its totality. In this sense, there is no 'truth' to be disclosed; no such thing as 'distorted knowledge' exists; there are only discursive practices. The Foucauldian framework of discourse rejects the historical materialist perspective. Nor do we use it in the 'reductive sense' that 'discourses are caused by economic structures.' Nevertheless, we would go along with the Gramscian analysis of Stuart Hall that ideologies "do arise from and may reflect the material conditions in which social groups and classes exist." We would further hold that human agency operating within a specific

12 The media researcher Norman Fairclough engages in discourse analyses of texts. For Anna Lindberg, speeches and stories *in everyday social interaction* are important components of discourse conveying meaning. It is everyday consciousness or in Gramscian vocabulary, "common sense" and "lived" experience, as in Althusser (Lindberg 2001: 40).
13 Lindberg 2001: 38, emphasis original.
16 Hall 1996: 42.
matrix of power relations and the cultural resources at the disposal of the agents in question play very important determinants in the process of ideological reproduction. As Norman Long and Magdalena Villarreal (1993) argue, there is centrality of power differentials and struggles over social meaning, which are interwoven with actors’ accumulated social experiences, commitments and culturally-acquired dispositions, as in the case of knowledge processes in Development interventions. As for discourses, they “are not reducible to class interests, but always operate in relation to power”, according to Hall.17 The Marxist notions of classes, contradictions, social relations of production – viewing it in all its multidimensionality, are not left out of purview in this approach.

I. IDENTIFYING THE DOMINANT CLASSES WITHIN KERALAM

Speaking of class relations, we need to speak of both the dominant classes within the state and the subordinate classes. Following a ‘Who gets what?’ approach of understanding the phenomena of corruption and tax evasion reveals the pattern of resource allocation to classes that hold dominant influence upon the State within the national formation.18 Illegal and undeserved resources allocated to certain interests may be indicative of their dominant influence upon the regional State. We could classify the dominant classes in the state into two sections: i) Pan-Indian dominant classes that hold dominant influence upon the regional state and ii) the ‘Regional Dominant Classes’ that are dominant within the national formation of Keralam but do not, mostly, have influence elsewhere.19 The former are represented in the state in the big-plantation companies such as Tata-tea (Tata Finaly group), R.P. Goenka, etc. and the Indian big capital that has set up mainly chemical industries, especially since the 1940s.

The RDCs in our classification is distinct from the notion of Intermediate Classes (ICs) in Kalecki.20 Like ICs, RDCs are also non-polar classes sandwiched between pan-Indian dominant classes and the basic producing classes but they are not as numerous as lower middle class and rich peasantry, the classes that Kalecki designated as ICs.21 Unlike Barbara Harriss-White, we do not argue that they, in contradistinction to the metropolitan

17 Hall 1993: 295.
18 The comprehensive reports of the Accountant General in the state could crucially be relied upon for this purpose.
19 We use the term, ‘Regional Dominant Classes’ used by Michel Kalecki but no implications are to be drawn of an intermediate regime at least in our case in Keralam because the metropolitan capital, particularly the Indian big capital definitely had dominant influence upon the regional state along with the Regional Dominant Classes.
capital (both Indian and global) thrive on rents (fraud and tax evasion) and engage in the politics of policy implementation rather than the politics of policy formulation, operating above all, in informal and black economies 22 because even the metropolitan capital thrives on rents and sabotages policies to suit their interests. Further, from our analysis of the RDCs, no implications are to be drawn of an intermediate regime, as with Kalecki, although we would like to emphasise the dominant influence of the RDCs along with the metropolitan capital (both Indian and global) upon the regional State. The pan-Indian dominant classes have the advantage of holding dominant influence both at the Centre and the states. It is true that the RDCs may, often, have to confine its manoevres to the ‘politics of policy implementation’ including quiet sabotage, 23 as the major policies are formulated at the Centre.

i) Pan-Indian Dominant Classes

Pan-Indian dominant classes in the state mainly comprise of the metropolitan capital, primarily, Indian big capital with huge stakes in the plantations and big industries in the state.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Lease-holders</th>
<th>Leased Land (in acres)</th>
<th>Annual Lease Amounts (Rs./acre)</th>
<th>Total Annual Lease Amount (Rs.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nellipamathy</td>
<td>Several landlords</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>1.50 - 5</td>
<td>32,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palakkad</td>
<td>V.T.K. Estate</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>A.V.T. Company</td>
<td>7,500</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>15,975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardamom hills</td>
<td>Several landlords</td>
<td>32,323</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devikulam</td>
<td>Tata Company</td>
<td>58,583</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11,71,660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,08,695</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>12,20,135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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It may, however, be noted that the RDCs also control big stakes in the plantations within the state. Let us take the case of the government land leased out to private parties by the

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23 Barbara Harriss-White 2003.
Government of Kerala. Table 6.1 shows that 1,08,695 acres of land was given on nominal lease amounts ranging from 1.50 rupees to 20 rupees. After a marginal revision of the lease amounts, Tata-tea Limited was required to pay only 50 rupees per acre, per annum for the 58,583 acres of land leased out from the government in the largest integrated plantation in the world that it held under its control.\(^{24}\) A.V. Thomas & Company was required to pay a revised lease amount of only 5 rupees 30 paise per acre, per annum.\(^{25}\) The disproportionate benefit enjoyed by these private companies can be understood when we consider that the State-owned Plantation Corporation is made to pay 1300 rupees per acre, per annum.\(^{26}\) The report of the Assurance Committee of the Legislative Assembly of Kerala in 1996, headed by Nalakath Soopy had estimated that non-implementation of revised leases in plantations continues to cause a loss of nearly 500 crore rupees each per annum to the state exchequer.\(^{27}\) The report of the seventh Assurance Committee, headed by A.V. Thamarakshan had endorsed this.\(^{28}\) Kerala Land and Leases (Modification of Right) Act, 1980 was further modified in 1990 and was published in a special gazette in 1990 after a full decade and yet the provisions are pending implementation.\(^{29}\) If the pending arrears on these nominal leases are collected for 25 years with effect from 1980 i.e., at the rate of 500 crore rupees per annum, it could yield the state exchequer not less than Rs.12,500 crore and if the arrears are collected for only 15 years from 1990, it could yield the state Rs.7,500 crore.

One typical instance of developmentalism as a discourse of accumulation that does not contribute to human welfare\(^{30}\) has been the case of Birla's Grasim industry, by the name Mavoor Gwalior Rayons at Mavoor near Kozhikode. The company was given initial sanction by the first ministry under E.M.S. Namboodiripad during 1956-59. This powerful industry group was able to hold out against the heavy odds posed by protracted popular agitations for several decades, presumably, owing to the dominant influence that it was able to exert upon the regional State. It was closed down only in 2001 in response to protracted agitations by local people against the company polluting the Chaliyar river. It was satirically commented upon that the company produced not only pulp and fibre but


\(^{25}\) Ibid, p. 39.


\(^{27}\) Government of Kerala 1996: Legislative Assurance Committee Report, submitted to the tenth Legislative Assembly, Thiruvananthapuram, 14 November.

\(^{28}\) Government of Kerala 1997: Legislative Assurance Committee Report, Submitted to the Tenth Legislative Assembly, Thiruvananthapuram, 29 July.


\(^{30}\) More on developmentalism in Chapter IV.
also cancer and asthma.\textsuperscript{31} Lakhs of tonnes of bamboo from Nilamboor forests were supplied to the company at subsidised rates of less than one rupee per tonne, all in the name of development.\textsuperscript{32} On 23 December 1999, Greenpeace, the environmental organisation of international renown revealed that the state government had transferred assets worth 28,000 crore rupees to the company until the year 1999.\textsuperscript{33}

It is generally recognised that Transmission and Distribution (T&D) losses in the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) in Keralam could be in a range that is not less than 35 per cent, half of which is theft. T&D losses in 1997-98 in Keralam was reported to be at 17.9 per cent. If, just 15 per cent only is taken to be the cost of corruption, it amounted to Rs. 33.7 crore. Kannan and Vijayamohanan say that a more sophisticated theft in collusion with the KSEB officials is to let huge energy bills mount up and then to get them written off as bad debts. In Keralam, the corruption on this front cost Rs. 175 crore in 1995-96, Rs. 198 crore in 1996-97 and Rs. 252 crore in 1997-98. The ‘bad debts’ written off by the KSEB during these three years were Rs. 11.8 crore, Rs. 12.5 crore and Rs. 14.8 crore, respectively.\textsuperscript{34}

The massive subsidies granted to and the huge unpaid arrears of power consumed by certain industries in the state\textsuperscript{35} could be viewed as another reliable indicator of their dominant influence upon the 'regional State'.\textsuperscript{36} It has been reported that the industrial units in the state have to pay to the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) a sum of 597.06 crore rupees, causing huge financial losses to this public sector enterprise.\textsuperscript{37} Presumably, these are, mainly, chemical industries that consume huge amounts of power and these are mostly under the ownership of the Indian big capital. They had set up these industries in the state during the 1940s, with an eye on the hydel power that was plentifully available in the state at the time.\textsuperscript{38} These industries had hardly any other forward-backward linkages to the rest of the economy of the state.

\textsuperscript{31} C. Sarathchandran and Baburaj [2001]: 'Bookkipatram [Balance-sheet]: Chaliyar the Last Struggle', documentary film in Malayalam on the agitations against Mavoor Gwalior Rayons. Eucalyptus trees planted in the now-infamous Muthanga forests were also supplied to the company.

\textsuperscript{32} C. Sarathchandran and Baburaj [2001].


\textsuperscript{34} K.P. Kannan and Pillai, N. Vijayamohanan 2002.

\textsuperscript{35} We would draw the important distinction here between Indian State and the regional States in the states (provinces) of India. The latter may better be termed as 'national State' since in India, they are mostly linguistic national formations but given the current use of terminology, it may create confusions.

\textsuperscript{36} Hindu 2005: “KSEB likely to turn around in two years", 11 February, Thiruvananthapuram edn., p. 4.

There have been allegations of corruption against power ministers and bureaucrats at various points of time. These instances of rent-seeking include, the case of energy resale to Karnataka in the Graphite company case, involving the United Democratic Front (UDF) minister of power in the state at the time. A vigilance probe has been in progress concerning a loss of Rs. 75 crore to the KSEB in the award of contract in the Brahmapuram diesel power plant. Moreover, this diesel plant has been making huge losses. Vigilance enquiry is on in the case of SNC Lavalin, a Canadian company involved in extension projects in which case, it is the Left Democratic Front (LDF) that has been the main accused. A proposed power project at Kannur was scuttled because the son of a minister [owing allegiance to the right-wing faction within the CPI-M] demanded a kick-back of Rs. 75 crore, according to the Chairman of the El Paso Energy International of the US, the co-promoter company in question. 39

Of greater concern should be what Kannan and Vijayamohan refer to as the “widespectrum collusion” of large-scale corruption involving the contracting company, the trade unions, the government and its agents, particularly in the power-irrigation projects taken up by the state government. 40 The contrast is obvious since Central public sector schemes of the NTPC and private sector hydro projects have been able to complete their projects well within scheduled time-limits. Such projects have been sarcastically designated as “milky” projects. This is done by letting time and cost overruns in the project by propping up labour militancy so as to serve the contractors’ demand for cost escalation. Labour militancy of this sort was not meant to serve the genuine interests of the workers [but apparently, of the trade union bureaucracy]. The loss on this account was estimated to be at Rs. 644 crore or Rs. 36 crore per project. It amounted to a whopping 60 per cent of the actual project cost, the rent having been shared by the four parties involved. In the case of the phase I of the Kuttiady hydroelectric project on which work started in 1994, with the contractor SNC Lavalin International Inc., the cost of corruption was nearly 80 per cent of the actual project cost. At current estimates, the cost of such modernisation is put at Rs. 1.25 crore per MW. 41 Even a new project would have cost only Rs. 2.5 crore per MW but this project came to cost Rs. 3.96 crore per MW. 42 It may be recalled that even the notorious Dhabol project in Maharashtra by Enron cost only 4.48 crore per MW. Notably, though a vigilance probe has been on against SNC Lavalin yet modernisation projects have been assigned to it in three more hydroelectric projects,

40 Ibid, pp. 394-96.
namely, Pallivasal, Panniar and Sengulam. All these projects to SNC Lavalin have been assigned through Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), instead of going through floating of international tenders as per guidelines. Consequently, the Account General’s report also was critical of the Lavalin deal for causing avoidable losses to the state exchequer. It is also alleged that 86 crore rupees which was supposed to be contributed by SNC Lavalin to a new cancer hospital in the Malabar region (northern Kerala) was diverted to unknown accounts.

The recent case of Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages Limited at Plachimada in Perumatty panchayat in Palakkad district is another notable instance. The company which set up its plant in March 2000 has been peacefully opposed by the local people, consisting mostly of Adivasis, for depleting the ground water and creating severe water shortage in the area, polluting ground water and soil and distributing as fertiliser toxic waste including known carcinogen cadmium, and lead that is fatal in children. In August 2003, following the controversy that arose on the report of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) in Delhi about unacceptable levels of pesticides found in soft drinks, including leading brands like Coke, a Joint Parliamentary Committee had also come to similar conclusions. The plant was initially sanctioned by the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government and the United Democratic Front (UDF) government that succeeded it in mid-2001 continued to extend its support to the company until 9 March 2004, when the state government came under pressure to temporarily suspend the operations of the company, following the direction to the company by the single bench of the High Court to seek alternative sources of water. However, on 7 April 2005, a division bench of the High Court ruled in favour of the company in an appeal filed by it, holding at par the right of the company to extract water and the right of the local people to do so, virtually permitting the company to resume operations. On 19 August 2005 Kerala State Pollution Control Board directed the company to stop production as high levels of cadmium was found around the plant. Subsequently, the Perumatty panchayat filed an appeal in the Supreme Court which was subsequently joined company by the state

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government. Sufficient attention has not been focussed on the activities of PepsiCo in Puthusseri panchayat within the same district for lack of struggles against it.

The tourism sector, including the international tour operators and luxury hotels in the state, enjoy apparently undeserved tax benefits. The rationale or interest that lies behind this policy orientation could be that tourism obtains foreign exchange earnings for the Government of India. The state government has hardly anything to gain in terms of tax benefits. Moreover, it also shows how influential the tourism lobby is in the power relations within the state.

ii) Regional Dominant Classes

Let us also take the case of the Regional Dominant Classes that are dominant within the national formation. They include gold merchants, liquor barons, forest mafia, education lobby, etc. A section that indulges in huge tax evasion is gold merchants. The sales tax revenue realised from gold is only 32 crores a year; it is estimated that it would have been five to six times this amount, had stringent tax vigilance been imposed. The major capital invested in the gold business, with its nerve centre in Thrissur town, comes from the traditional trading classes of north India, the local business is run by traders belonging to the Syrian Christian community, the major imports of gold come from Dubai in the Gulf region and traditional skilled workers in this sector are drawn from the Visvakarma community.

Abkari (liquor) barons are another major undeserved beneficiaries of resources. They have indulged in tax evasion worth hundreds of crore rupees, according to the Assembly Committee on Public Accounts of the Kerala state government.

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49 The beneficiaries include: the multinational tour operators, Thomas Cook and Kuani which had acquired both Travel Corporation of India (TCI) and Sita Travels. Package tours may result in the siphoning off of income generated by tourism back to the home countries of the tourists. Among luxury hotels, Leela and Taj groups are the major ones that have started operating in the state. Tourism sector is given massive tax benefits, possibly because it generates foreign exchange earnings for the Government of India.
51 K. Ravi Raman 2004, p. 37. George Varghese K. argues that liquor and gold are two gender-exclusive commodities in the state, both with a turnover of 12,000 crore rupees each. The annual consumption of gold in the state was estimated by him to be around 200 tonnes. An ethnography of these two commodities could yield results in quite a different direction to that of an analysis of value chains pertaining to particular commodities (George Varghese K., personal communication). Even while granting the non-productive nature of investments in gold, it cannot be gainsaid that gold has contributed, in some measure, to the economic independence of women within the household.
52 As reported in Hindu 2003: 12 February, Thiruvananthapuram edn.
The forest mafia has been denuding the forest cover on the Western Ghats over the years. Similar is the case of sand-mining lobby, involved in illegal mining of sand for construction purposes minting money at the cost of the environment.

The education lobby within the state needs specific mention. The 'aided' educational institutions within the state, including both schools, colleges and technical institutions are, for the most part, controlled by the caste/community organisations, namely, the Catholic Church and other Christian churches, Nair Service Society (NSS), Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) an Ezhava dominated organisation and Muslim Educational Society (MES). The major part of the expenses of these institutions, namely, salaries are met from the government exchequer and yet it is common knowledge that huge bribes are taken by these institutions in the appointment of teachers. Moreover, caste/community/gender identities and political affiliation determines the appointment of the teachers, where merit takes only a back-seat. Widespread corruption in the appointment of teachers has had a telling effect on the sorry state of affairs of education in a state renowned for its achievements in literacy, particularly in the secondary and tertiary levels. A sincere attempt to reform this state-of-affairs by asserting government control over these institutions was aborted in 1959 when the first ministry under E.M.S. Namboodiripad was dismissed under Article 356 of the Constitution under pressure from a reactionary mass movement euphemistically called, 'liberation struggle' launched by these caste/community organisations. To this day, the caste/community organisations, a legacy of the reform movements of the late colonial period, remain inordinately powerful within the state.

The mushrooming of self-financing colleges is the new scenario witnessed in the state over the first five years of the decade of 2000s. The rationale for their being permitted were the following: (i) The high demand for professional education within the state had led to moneyed parents buying their wards seats in the self-financing educational institutions in the neighbouring states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, paying capitation fees. (ii) The Kerala state government expressed its inability to foot the education bills of establishing new government colleges within the state. As a result, the number of engineering colleges in the state went up from just 12, five years back to 84 presently – 72 of them being self-financing. According to Economic Review - 2005 of the State Planning Board, 6 medical colleges, 6 dental colleges, 8 Ayurveda colleges, 17 pharmacy

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53 More on this in the section on land-grabs in Chapter V.
54 Apparently, sand mining on river beds adversely affects seepage of water underground, thus lowering groundwater tables. On these grounds sand mining was banned in recent years.
55 Men, who get appointed paying huge bribes ranging from rupees 10 to 25 lakhs in the case of college teachers, compensate their losses by taking huge dowries in marriages. The corrupting influence of the values imparted by these teachers to the young generation is anyone's guess.
colleges and 42 nursing colleges were established in the state over the last three years and all of them were self-financing.\textsuperscript{56}

The new inequalities that emerged between moneyed sections that are able to afford the exorbitant fees in these institutions and those unable to do so had resulted in serious protests from left wing student organisations. Rajani S. Anand, a student from Dalit background, who jumped to her death from atop the Commissionerate of Entrance Examinations in Thiruvananthapuram, for not having been sanctioned an educational loan, had sparked off serious protests. The management of self-financing colleges keeping the cut-off marks for admission very low, in order to promote buying of seats; and Pushpagiri college at Thiruvalla and Kolenchery Medical Mission College near Ernakulam, both under the management of the Catholic church, flouting the government-permitted ceiling of management quota seats of 50 per cent and trying to raise it to 75 per cent, have been issues that sparked off protests against the privatisation and commercialisation of professional education. The Supreme Court ruling in favour of the managements in this respect and the month-long serious student protests against it have made the Union government to go in for a legislation to regulate the managements of self-financing colleges.

One recent instance was pointed out by the then Opposition leader V.S. Achuthanandan in the assembly that the Muthoot business group which had, of late, entered into a marital alliance with the then Chief Minister Oommen Chandy's family had encroached upon beach land at Kovalam in Thiruvananthapuram district and next to it, the clients of the then revenue minister K.M. Mani had made encroachments. He also pointed out how 24 illegal sandal wood factories had been functioning in the state while Shri K.P. Viswanathan was holding office as the minister of forests which used the sandalwood from Marayoor in Idukki district which was under government ownership.\textsuperscript{57}

An instance of the fact that RDCs that do not belong to the pan-Indian dominant classes may not be bounded by national boundaries, is to be had in the case of the 'river water lobby' in Tamil Nadu that apparently holds dominant influence upon the policy makers within the state. Thus many a time, the crops of the people of the paddy-growing areas of


\textsuperscript{57} As pointed out by him in the state assembly on 15 February 2006; telecast on \textit{India Vision} Malayalam news channel at 1.40 p.m. onwards. Interestingly, Shri K.P. Viswanathan who was reprimanded by the High Court got a ticket to contest the ensuing Assembly elections as a UDF candidate while several other heavyweights in the UDF could not, probably because he had contributed the money to the party fund rather than misappropriating it for himself. However, he lost the elections. Such instances cast a reflection on the character of the electoral politics in the state.
the Chittoor taluk of Palakkad district dried up, as in most years, the Tamil Nadu government refused to release the agreed 7.25 TMC of water under the Parambikulam-Aliyar project agreement. It is perceived that the Mullaperiyar dam in Keralam also unduely caters to the water requirements of the large farmers/water lobby in Tamil Nadu. Both Parambikulam-Aliyar and Mullaperiyar agreements have been perceived by at least a large section of the people of Palakkad district as discriminatory to the interests of the state. There have been struggles on this account in Chittoor taluk. The then leader of the Opposition, V.S. Achuthanandan, contesting from Malampuzha constituency in Palakkad district in the assembly election in April 2006 promised that if the LDF came to power, it would review both these agreements with a view to protect the state's water resources. There have even been instances of diversions of water from Keralam to Tamil Nadu through illegally constructed canals. It has been pointed out that without the nexus of corrupt politicians and bureaucrats in Keralam with the water lobby in Tamil Nadu, it could not have taken place.

An instance *par excellence* of how the bureaucrat capital of the State, supposedly in the 'public' sector, worked against the interests of the common people, can be had in the case of the endosulfan controversy in Kasaragode district. The State-owned Plantation Corporation of Kerala (PCK) had aerially sprayed the lethal pesticide endosulfan in its cashew plantations in about 30 villages for more than two decades but disowns the responsibility for the ailments of some 6000 people affected by it, particularly in Padre village. Gynaecological, psychiatric and epileptic disorders are reported to have come down after the spraying of the pesticide was stopped five years ago. However, little consolation has been offered to those with malformations, spastic disorders, cancer, and liver and hormonal problems attributed to the pesticide. Even a formal ban on the pesticide has not come into effect. There was only a promise from the then Chief Minister, Oommen Chandy for a ban on the basis of a court verdict. Curiously, both O.P. Dubey committee and C.D. Mayee Committee found no 'scientific' reasons to ban the pesticide as they found no link between the use of endosulfan and health problems of the people. The Director of the State Department of Agriculture, on its part, approved the C.D. Mayee Committee report without recording any dissent, notwithstanding the then

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Chief Minister’s promise for a ban. This can, apparently, be viewed as an instance of the 'entwinement/mutual validation of truth and power'. Apparently, the state government wanted to escape from the financial responsibility of funding the victims of the misdeed by the PCK under it.

These instances of undeserved cornering/allocation of public resources to powerful interests is, by no means, exhaustive but indicates the reality of class relations within the state. It is because these lobbies had the economic preponderance, the economic muscles to call the shots that they have been able to corner these resources even when it was through clearly illegal processes.

Corruption and misuse of public property by the PCK has also been alleged in instances of issuing permits on 1,100 acres of the PCK land on either sides of the Chalakkudy river to 11 persons for cultivation of vanilla in 2003. The PCK was also providing them with other necessary facilities, spending 4 crore rupees. Since vanilla cultivation at the time was highly profitable, the then Opposition leader had questioned why the PCK itself could not have taken up the cultivation. It is also to be noted that the PCK had in 1966 leased out 30,000 acres of reserved forestland until 2016, i.e., for 50 years and vanilla cultivation was permitted on part of this land.

The plausible links between election funding by these lobbies and the strings attached on the formulation and implementation of public policies is something that cannot be overlooked. According to Baran & Sweezy, in most capitalist countries, “votes are the nominal source of political power, and money is the real source: the system, in other words, is democratic in form and plutocratic in content”. There is no reason why this statement cannot be equally valid to the case of the liberal democracy in India. There is, indeed, an element of universality to the dictum, ‘The one who pays the piper, calls the tune.’ Election funding in this country is a process that occurs on the sly with little transparency and there is a real lack of studies in this respect. However, it may be safely said that the use of muscle power in elections, such as the physical prevention of sections of voters from exercising their franchise is much less in practice in Keralam as compared to states like Bihar and other remote parts of the country.

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62 In a Western country, the company in question would have had to shell out millions of dollars as ex gratia payment.


Another important aspect of the mainstream electoral politics is the polarisation on lines of caste and community that plays an important role in elections. It is vertical cross-class polarisation along caste and community lines that sustains the dynamics of political competition between the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Left Democratic Front (LDF). “Notwithstanding the high literacy and the political awareness, caste-community identity of the voters in Kerala tells you as much about their voting behaviour as it does in, say, Uttar Pradesh or Bihar. In fact, the entire balance of UDF and the LDF hangs on the caste-community arithmetic.” says noted election analyst, Yogendra Yadav.

Christians constitute about 19 per cent of the population of the state. Among the upper caste/dominant Syrian Christians, the UDF bags more than three-fourths of the votes, while the other Christians are evenly split between the two fronts. Despite some caste distinctions, Muslims comprising of about 23 per cent of the population of the state are somewhat united in their disinclination to vote for the Communists. The UDF gets anywhere between two-thirds to three-fourths of its vote through its constituent, the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML). Late E.M.S. Namboodiripad himself had acknowledged the inability of the left parties to inspire confidence among the two largest minorities. The upper caste Nairs, constituting about 15 per cent of the state’s population have also not, generally favoured the left. Thus Muslim and Christian communities and elite sections among Hindu castes, especially those affiliated to the caste/community organisations have been the traditional vote-banks of the UDF; and LDF has had its traditional moorings among the Hindu castes, particularly, the backward caste, Ezhavas consisting of about 22 per cent of the population of the state and Dalits who come to about 10 per cent. Alternatively, Yogendra Yadav also argues, “It could be argued that the pattern of voting in Kerala is not principally along caste-community lines; there is indeed a strong class pattern to voting for the two alliances on the expected lines: the lower the class, the higher the vote for the LDF. But that is mainly because different caste-communities are placed differently on the class ladder.”

This, however, is not convincing at least in the case of the Muslim community, which according to the recent survey of the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) has the second highest proportion, following Dalit and Adivasi sections, of poor people among castes/communities in the state. Alternative explanations need to be found in anti-Communist sentiments in contemporary Islam in the state dominated by traditional ulema.

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Thus Islam, for them, makes no distinction between politics and religion – quite the opposite of the notion of 'secularism'.

The processes of political identity formation needs to be traced back historically. In any case, we could say that the Enlightenment/renaissance ideas imbibed by the Ezhava caste through the Narayana Guru movement and those imbibed by the Dalit sections, to some extent, through the Ayyankali movement had made these social sections more receptive to the ideas propagated by the Communist movement subsequently. This was, however, not the case with Christian and Muslim or even Nair sections in the state, which could not take advantage of such a thoroughgoing influence of the social reform movement. Of late, sections of the Muslim community have been disenchanted with the UDF for its policy of soft Hindutva. The emergence of non-Muslim League political outfits like National Democratic Front (NDF) and People’s Democratic Front (PDP) from among the Muslim community has led to increased support for the LDF. Sections like Latin Catholics, mostly drawn from converts from the oppressed castes are also disenchanted with the UDF on issues such as the non-implementation of Narendran Commission report on reservation of jobs in the government sector. Rallies of mainstream political parties are a crucial and widely used tactic of mobilisation. Election rallies are a key to achieving the effects polarisation on the mass psyche. Apart from the core supporters of the party concerned, those mobilised in these rallies are ‘rally workers’, mostly daily wage earners who are paid attractive perks and incentives like booze and food. These are very important facts about the political process in mainstream electoral politics but are often overlooked as commonplace phenomena.

Herein, we have dealt with how caste/community identity operates in the vertical cross-class mobilisation in the mainstream electoral politics. We have also dealt in some detail with instances of resource allocation through illegal means. Now, whether or not, the strings attached are through funding of elections or not, our major contention is that

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68 This seems to have been reflected in the increased support for the LDF in the Lok Sabha elections of 2004.

69 This author has been an eye-witness to many such rallies passing through the Statue junction in Thiruvananthapuram, the state capital and had occasion to talk to the participants.

70 There are few studies on clandestine election funding in India.
massive undue benefits, often illegal, being cornered by certain powerful interests within the economy – without this pattern ever becoming a political issue in the state – could be evidence enough that these sections are dominant within Keralam as a national formation. We have argued that these dominant classes include both the pan-Indian dominant classes and the Regional Dominant Classes. In any case, it is not a single class that is dominant within the state but a range or coalition of classes who do have their internal contradictions as well. They include the higher echelons of the trade lobby, the plantation lobby, the abkari or liquor lobby, the luxury hotels, etc.

Capitalism is supposed to be a rule-based regime of accumulation. Even exploitation through perfectly legal means can be quite dehumanising. However, the widespread prevalence in the state of illegal means of appropriation and the occasional use of force points to a phenomenon that Marx had characterised as 'primitive accumulation', characteristic of early stages of capitalist development.71 The other aspect is that capitalism articulates with non-capitalist relations of production (as we have observed in Chapter II), in order to boost its surpluses. However, it does not seem to let us approximate the mode of production in the state as 'semi-feudal, semi-colonial'.72 The prevalence and accentuation of "semi-colonial" relations may be undeniable but given the predominance of the plantations in agriculture sector, the characterisation, 'semi-feudal' seems untenable.73

Having thus analysed the plausible contours of the dominant class formation in the state and before we embark on analysing the politics of the deprived classes and social groups from the angle of the land question which is of crucial relevance to them, let us briefly analyse the theory and feasibility in contemporary times of 'land reforms'.

II. LAND REFORMS: THEORY AND CURRENT RELEVANCE

For an analysis of the land question, it is important to understand the theoretical perceptions on land reforms and arguments for or against its desirability in the Indian context in contemporary times. Ronald Herring spoke of "the universally announced goals of agrarian reform" as "economic rationality and social justice".74

71 That 'primitive accumulation' is not merely characteristic of the early stages of capitalist development is clear from the fact that under capitalism of oligopolies in our present times, illegality and force are prominently employed in the process of accumulation. Gaining control over its oil resources and shifting the country back to dollar payments from euro payments are believed to be the possible motives for the illegal and widely condemned invasion and holding down of Iraq to this day by the United States (For more on 'primitive accumulation' in the context of Keralam, see the sub-section, 'Landgrabs' in Chapter V).
72 For such a characterisation in the context of Keralam, see Ajith 2002.
73 See our discussion on the Mode of Production in the state in Chapter V.
74 Herring 1983, p. 12
Productive efficiency as a rationale for land reforms has existed in policy advocacy around the time of the making of the Indian Constitution itself. "There cannot be any lasting improvement in agricultural production and efficiency without comprehensive reforms in the country's land system", says an AICC document in 1949.\(^75\)

Dreze & Sen explain the rationale for land reforms in terms of equity for the sake of growth. Their agenda is centred on land reforms, basic education and health care towards "facilitating fast and widely shared growth" by means of the market. Dreze & Sen seek to substantiate this point by indicating the example of the Philippines, and the Indian record which is even worse.\(^76\) On the basis of his analysis of the Farm Management Surveys conducted in India during the 1950s, Sen had, in 1962, already observed that small farms were more productive, thus refuting the conventional wisdom on grounds that economies of scale make the large farms more efficient.\(^77\) Such a view concerning land reform for growth is reflected in P.S. Appu as well. He says, "We have now stopped paying even lip service to the socialist or socialist ideal. So there is no point in continuing to talk about the role of land reform in ushering in an egalitarian social order."\(^78\)

An improvement in the incomes of the rural poor is a matter of high priority not just for altruistic reasons. Increased incomes mean increased purchasing power and a spurt in demand could foster industrial growth.\(^79\)

"The social justice-productivity dyad is linked concretely in policy logic to a third legitimation of agrarian reform: the threat of rural violence." So the theory assumes a three-fold dimension: "the claims of justice, productivity, and stability figure prominently."\(^80\)

In the liberal critiques of monarchism and feudalism, land reform is bound to usher in the structural features of a liberal State. In other words, it could be the strategic lever in the bourgeois revolution, ensuring economic dynamism in agriculture. Conservative reform sees reform as necessary to preserve the basic structure of society. On the other hand, transformational policy logic implies significant alteration of existing property and production relations.\(^81\)

\(^76\) Dreze & Sen 2002, pp. 79-80, 130.
\(^77\) Amartya Sen 1962: "On the Agricultural Front: An Aspect of Indian Agriculture", *Economic Weekly*, vol. 14, nos. 4-6, annual number, pp. 243-46.
\(^78\) P.S. Appu 1996, p. 220.
\(^79\) Ibid, p. 221.
\(^80\) Herring 1983, pp. 2, 3.
\(^81\) Ibid, pp. 8-10.
The normative logic of 'land to the tiller' is a classical peasant society and economy, says Herring. From a Marxist angle, 'land to the tiller' has been rejected on grounds of embourgeoisement as a reform could produce a politically conservative and economically stagnant peasant sector or "petit-bourgeois agrarians", in Leninist terms. This argument has been countered from within the Marxist angle itself on grounds that reform measures could give the rural underclass more security and thus potential for militant action and it was in any case necessary to meet the expressed needs and demands of the majority of the rural population. Moreover, a broad alliance for the abolition of parasitic rentiers and initiation of capitalist agriculture is seen as a progressive step in a country with vestiges of feudalism/semi-feudalism and domination by imperialism. Nevertheless, the debate on land reform also gives rise to the uncomfortable question on the character of private property as such, "If rents are illegitimate, are profits?" As non-land capital becomes increasingly important, the meaning of agrarian reform becomes even wider.

To speak of the current feasibility of land reforms, it is pointed out that the first round of land reforms, i.e., abolition of intermediaries [of the Raj] or the feudal rentiers was successful because they were few in number and had made themselves obnoxious by aligning with the colonial power. So the measure of abolition was easy enough and it was done without hurting them much. "But injuring the present class of landowners is an entirely different proposition." Thus P.C. Joshi points out that the second type of land reforms attacks not just the principle and practice of unearned property income ('non-cultivating landlordism'). Therefore, by offending their property instinct as well as their commercial drive, it provokes, a large section of the peasantry into a state of active or passive resistance.

P.S. Appu identified three streams of political opinion concerning the desirability of land reforms in the contemporary scenario. We may designate them as conservative, moderate and radical.

In the first stream are some scholars like V.M. Dandekar who believed that agrarian constraints in the old form do not exist any longer and argued for abrogation of both the ceiling laws and the restrictions on the leasing of agricultural land. Dandekar ruled out

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82 Herring 1983, pp. 8, 11, 192.
84 Herring 1983, p. 11.
85 Ibid.
the strategy of radical land reform for India because India had what Myrdal called a 'soft' government, without the political acumen required for this purpose and so it must work within the institutional framework of private property in land.\textsuperscript{49} We would hold that such a view serves to promote solely the concerns of production and growth to the total exclusion of the concerns of redistributive justice.

The second school of thought including M.L. Dantwala, C.H. Hanumantha Rao and V.S. Vyas argued for enforcement of the existing ceiling laws rather than scaling down the existing ceilings and advocated the removal of restrictions on leasing out of land and permitting clandestine tenancies to come to the surface.\textsuperscript{90} C.H. Hanumantha Rao says, "With population pressure on agricultural land persisting and there being, as yet, not enough evidence of economies of scale in Indian agriculture, there is little justification for doing away with the ceiling on the ownership of land at this stage....".\textsuperscript{91} M.L. Dantwala, believed that land reforms is now a lost cause and therefore, he urges a shift of emphasis "from re-distribution of land to a more equitable access to non-land resources, such as irrigation and other inputs like seeds, fertiliser and credit."\textsuperscript{92}

P.S. Appu does not share the optimism of the radical school. He himself may properly belong to the second school of middle-roaders. He recommends an intensive campaign for recording the rights of share-croppers on the lines of 'Operation Barga' in West Bengal. With regard to absentee landowners, P.S. Appu recommends the measure of laying down minimum standards of cultivation.\textsuperscript{93} He says, "If the restrictions on leasing are removed and government make an irrevocable declaration that the tenancy law will not be amended in future to confer ownership rights on tenants, quite a few absentee landowners will agree to lease out their land."\textsuperscript{94}

The third point of view represents the radical school in which figure P.C. Joshi, Pradhan H. Prasad and V.M. Rao. P.C. Joshi says, "Modern technology has made institutional reforms not only more important but also more urgent. Postponing institutional reforms clearly involves prolonging and widening the gap between the potential-actual lag in agriculture."\textsuperscript{95} V.M. Rao says, "The point is that, unlike in the immediate post-independence years, the need for land reforms is now far more pressing--since sustained

\textsuperscript{49} P.S. Appu 1996, p. 208.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{93} P.S. Appu 1996, pp. 211, 213, 214.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid, p. 214.
growth itself depends on them. This is not merely a radical viewpoint in favour of redistributive justice, couched in the language of productive efficiency for wider acceptability. ‘Social relations of production turning fetters on the forces of production’ has been an abiding concern in radical circles ever since Marx himself.

While accepting the arguments of the radical school, we would like to add a further dimension to it in the context of the experience under neo-liberal reforms. In several countries, neo-liberal reforms have given rise to currency crises, followed by all-round financial crises resulting from capital flights, leaving the economies in shambles. Against this backdrop, it becomes necessary for the preservation of the livelihoods of the broad masses of people and the health of the economies in question that common people have control over fixed productive assets like *jal, jangal* and *jameen* (water, forest and land resources) that are not vulnerable to capital flights. Land being the principal productive asset (and a fixed asset as well) in a peripheral country like India, one cannot fail to appreciate the vital importance of land struggles. This would add up to four criteria that could constitute the rationale for agrarian reforms in our view: social justice, productive efficiency, human capability building that could contribute impulses to further democratic transformation and the need for the popular classes and social groups to assert control over fixed productive assets, particularly in the context of neo-liberal reforms.

### III. CONTENDING DISCOURSES ON THE ADIVASI LAND QUESTION IN KERALAM

> Until justice rolls down like a stream
> And righteousness like a river that never runs dry

The continuing alienation, exclusion and exploitation of the Adivasis in the state is a thorn in the flesh for the ‘Kerala experience,’ of high social development, which has won international acclaim and is sometimes even termed as the ‘Kerala model’. Hunger and even starvation deaths stare on the face of the Adivasi people in the state today. Thus 32 starvation deaths were reported in July 2001.

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98 For a detailed discussion, see the section, ‘A reflection on the economic collapses of our times’ in Chapter IV.

99 Paraphrase of Amos 5: 24, *The Bible.*

100 It should be considered an irony of sorts that the ‘Kerala model’ or ‘God’s own country’ has denied justice to its ‘outliers’ – the Adivasis, the fisher people, the Dalits and women. T. Peter an activist from among the fisher people in the state ingeniously named the Adivasis as “children of the forests”, the fisher people as “children of the sea” and the Dalits as “children of the soil” (His speech at Thiruvananthapuram on 19 February 2005).
Apart from the ideological aspects in the policy orientation of the State and the classes that exert dominant influence upon it, we could identify variant streams of political opinion advocated towards the resolution of the Adivasi land question in the state. These are by no means considered exhaustive but representative, to some extent. Herein we would like to dwell on the political rather than the humanitarian perspectives. The major streams are listed below in a rather sketchy manner, along with brief analysis. The streams of discourses mentioned are: (1) The policy orientation of the State, (2) the Hindutva school, (3) a conventional class approach, (4) the identity politics approach, (5) civil liberties approach, (6) democratic rights approach that includes the Naxalite perspective of New Democratic Revolution (NDR). Before we go into the core of these debates, let us examine the very term, 'Adivasi', meaning, first dwellers or 'indigenous people' which itself is a very contested one, especially since the declaration by the United Nations of the year of the indigenous people in 1993. Moreover, in order to introduce the Adivasi land question in the state, we would also deal with: (i) The Muthanga land struggle and police firing and (ii) The recent land struggles of the Adivasi people in the state.

In defense of the 'Adivasi' identity

The term, 'Scheduled Tribes' used in the Constitution has hardly gained any popular appeal except in official usage. The term, 'Adivasi', meaning original people or 'indigenous people', gained wide currency only since the beginning of the twentieth century. Shereen Ratnagar feels that the designation of 'indigenous people' is not suitable to the Indian context as it “can cause strife, on false grounds”. It is not only because of conclusive evidence about the migratory movements of tribals themselves but also because it is unlike in the [new world] of Americas, Australia and New Zealand with

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101 'Naxalites' are those who uphold Marxism-Leninism-Maoism and wage a protracted people’s war. Today, the most important group among them is Communist Party of India (Maoist) which wages militant struggles in nine states of India today. They are popularly known as ‘Naxalites’ because they draw inspiration from the anti-feudal, anti-State uprising in Naxalbari village of North Bengal in 1967.


a recent history of conquest and even decimation of these peoples.\textsuperscript{104} Moreover, the term has the potential to rather undermine the very meaning of citizenship.\textsuperscript{105} She instead opt for the concept of ‘tribe’, which for her, is a kind of social organisation with no hierarchies like caste and class and is characterized by joint ownership of resources, wherein kinship functions as the relations of production. Nevertheless, the term, ‘Adivasis’ originally imposed from outside has now been internalised by the people themselves, giving the marginalised peoples a category for self-identification and assertion of their rights. Although it is popularly understood as meaning, original inhabitants, radical scholars in India have also used it in the alternative sense of people who may not necessarily be the original people but those who have shared a common destiny since the nineteenth century of having come to be dominated by traders, moneylenders and landlords under colonial administration and judiciary.\textsuperscript{106} This has been an historical process of dispossession (i.e., loss of control over resources), exploitation and marginalisation. We would like to retain the term in the latter sense, in that it lends self-esteem and pride to the historically marginalised sections.

A Prologue to the Adivasi land question in the state

i) The Muthanga land struggle and police firing

The Muthanga incident had shocked the popular conscience in Keralam and outside more than any other incident in the state in recent times. On 19 February 2003, armed police

\textsuperscript{104} At the second session in 1995 of the UN WGIP, the Special Rapporteur Jose Martinez Cobo provided a working definition as below which has been of considerable significance: “Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.” (http://www.globaled.org/curriculum/indigenous.html; http://www.atsic.gov.au/issues/indigenous_rights/international/draft_declaration/draft_dec_five_d.asp).

\textsuperscript{105} The Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1995) (http://www.usask.ca/nativelaw/ddir.html) has no definition as to who constitute the “Indigenous Peoples”. In the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations’ (WGIP) the view prevailed that definition is the concern of Indigenous peoples and not States. Similarly, the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, adopted by the General Assembly in 1992, provides no definition of its beneficiaries (http://www.atsic.gov.au/issues/indigenous_rights/international/draft_declaration/draft_dec_five_d.asp). ILO Convention No. 169 applies to: tribal peoples, peoples in independent countries and considered the self-identification as indigenous or tribal as a fundamental criterion for the convention to apply (ibid).

\textsuperscript{106} Ratnagar 2004; Xaxa 1999.

Xaxa 1999, pp. 3593-95.
force resorted to severe lathi-charge and firing on a group of Adivasi people agitating for land at Muthanga in Wayanad district of Kerala. The police firing resulted in the death of Jogi, an Adivasi person on the spot and also of a nine-month old baby thereafter.\textsuperscript{107} As the Adivasis resisted using rustic traditional weapons, a policeman was also injured and he succumbed to his injuries as the police force failed to provide to him timely medical aid. Subsequent custodial torture of Adivasi agitators by the police resulted in the death of three persons named, Njenan, Gopalan and Veruvan.\textsuperscript{108} About a thousand huts set up by the Adivasi people were set on fire. Hundreds of Adivasi people, including 46 children and many women and old men were jailed and are being tried on charges including that of murder, as an inquiry by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) subsequently found the agitators guilty.\textsuperscript{109} The arrested leaders of the AGMS, Ms. C.K. Janu and Mr. M. Geetanandan, were subjected to serious torture in custody. Even some non-tribals who assisted the struggle were arrested, tortured and jailed. The Muthanga police action has rightly been termed as having been akin to the war of conquest on an enemy people. The authorities evacuated the Adivasis who had set up their huts from the land on which they had traditional occupancy rights and ‘liberated’ the largely denuded forestland.

The Adivasi people under the leadership of Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS) had already set up their huts at Muthanga for over a month and the government promises to distribute land to them has already been pending since the agreement reached by the Kerala government under the then Chief Minister, A.K. Antony with the Adivasi-Dalit Samara Samiti on 16 October 2001. Before the move to evacuate the agitators began, some so-called Greens including the poetess, Sugathakumari\textsuperscript{110} opposed the agitators for occupying ‘forestland’. In fact, Muthanga was supposed to be a ‘wildlife sanctuary’. A large part of it had been handed over to Birla and eucalyptus trees were planted there on a large scale, for use by Birla’s highly polluting Grasim industry, Mavoor Gwalior Rayons which was closed down on 30 June 2001 as a result of the protracted agitations by local people.\textsuperscript{111} Subsequently, the trees were also cut down and the land remained barren, lost of its bio-diversity. This was the land that the Adivasis had chosen for setting up their

\textsuperscript{107} Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS)/ Rashtriya Mahasabha (RMS) 2005: “Muthanga Dinaacharanavum Jogi Anusmarana Sabhayum” (Commemoration of Muthanga and Remembering Jogi - Malayalam pamphlet), 19 February, In front of the Secretariat, Thiruvananthapuram.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid; P.K. Prakash 2004: “Muthanga vaarshikathil uyarunna chodyangal”, (The questions that arise in the wake of the Muthanga anniversary – Malayalam), \textit{Madhyamam} weekly, 27 February, p. 23.

\textsuperscript{109} Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS)/ Rashtriya Mahasabha (RMS) 2005.

\textsuperscript{110} Sugathakumari is a known sympathiser of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the state. C. Sarathchandran & Baburaj [2001].

\textsuperscript{111}
huts. The Adivasis who set up their huts at Muthanga were largely those displaced from localities like Tholpetty.\textsuperscript{112}

According to the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha leadership, land at Muthanga was proposed to be sold out at the Global Investors Meet (GIM) at Kochi.\textsuperscript{113} It may also be recalled that traditional Adivasi areas like Muthanga, Nilamboor and Siruvaani were part of the Nilgiri biosphere reserve established in 1986.\textsuperscript{114} It was the first ever biosphere research project in India. Its area extended across the borders of Keralam, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. On 17 February, local goons, apparently abetted by the forest department officials, set fire to the forests at Muthanga in a bid to blame it on the Adivasi agitators so as to eventually evacuate them on this pretext. Some of these goons were taken into custody by the agitators. That is how the standoff began which culminated in the police lathi-charge and firing on 19 February 2003.

It has also been pointed out that repeated pleas to provide medical attention to Vinod, the injured policeman had fallen on deaf ears, although a doctor was available at the venue. The AGMS leadership alleged high-level conspiracy at work behind this as the news of the death of a policeman was said to have been telecast by a news channel, well before it actually took place.\textsuperscript{115}

It is notable that the mainstream political formations were unanimous in denouncing the Adivasi land struggle. The then Chief Minister, A.K. Antony leading a Congress-led government in the state, vowed to put down the 'armed uprising.'\textsuperscript{116} The then opposition leader, V.S. Achuthanandan denounced the government's kid-glove handling of the Adivasi occupation of the wildlife sanctuary for over a month and the failure to evict them without bloodshed and he alleged that Peoples War Group and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam had infiltrated into the Adivasi ranks, although the police themselves subsequently dismissed this allegation as baseless.\textsuperscript{117} BJP leadership stated that unlike the AGMS, they would struggle for the alienated land of the Adivasis and particularly pick on the Christian settlers for this purpose.\textsuperscript{118} But it was revealing how the BJP leadership


\textsuperscript{113} As stated by C.K. Janu on 22 October 2003 at the conference on “Adivasi land, politics and power” at the Department of Political Science, Kerala University. She said, ‘There is around 12,000 acres of land at Muthanga and around 6,000 acres should belong to the Adivasis.’

\textsuperscript{114} It is said to have involved eviction of tribes like Paniyan and Vetton.


\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{118} Hindu 2003f: “BJP to put its stake in Adivasi struggle”, 03 March, Thiruvananthapuram edn., p. 1.
was clamouring for the arrests of C.K. Janu and Geethanandan. ‘The unkindest cut of all’ came from the then speaker of the Kerala assembly, Vakkom Purushottaman who according to media reports stated that ‘in his opinion, the Adivasis who declared self-rule should have been shot dead or crushed’.

From the above narrative of the Muthanga episode, it should be clear to what extent the Adivasis in the state are at the receiving end of the State violence and social discrimination. The socio-economic and political marginality of the Adivasis in the state should be obvious from the fact that even their just struggle for livelihood and dignity were met with active hostility. On the other hand, when dominant social groups such as Syrian Christians engaged in landrabs as at the ecologically sensitive Mathikettaan evergreen forests in Idukki district during 1995-2002, with the patronage of the ruling coalition, they were evacuated only through gentle persuasion.\(^\text{119}\)

**ii) The recent land struggles of Adivasis in the state**

That Adivasis have resisted incursions of colonialism into their habitats, first for timber and subsequently to set up plantations, is clear from the fact that they had revolted under the leadership of king Pazhassi and destroyed a significant portion of the Ancharakkandy plantation and rose up in revolt again in 1812, after his death. Thalakkal Chandu and Panamarathu Kunkan were frontline leaders of the anti-colonial movement of the Adivasis in Keralam.\(^\text{120}\)

In recent history, the Adivasi belt in Wayanad had witnessed uprisings even before the Muthanga incident. In late 1960s and early 1970s, the militant Naxalite movement, particularly under the leadership of A. Varghese had significant popular appeal among the Adivasi tribes, so much so that Naxalite Varghese was honoured with the designation, “Peruman”, meaning the Chief of all the various tribes of Adivasis.\(^\text{121}\) Adivasis were purchased and sold as slaves at Valliyoor shrine (Vallyoorkavu) in Wayanad until the

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\(^{119}\) See the sub-section, ‘Landgrabs’ in Chapter V.

\(^{120}\) Iqbal 2002: “Kerala kaarshikahatana: Daaridrya vithakku pattinikkooythu” (The agrarian structure in Keralam: Sowing poverty to reap famines – Malayalam), pp. 5-6, 15, Munnanipporali, no. 81, January-February, p. 6; Madhavan 2002-03: “Adivasi mekalayil cheruthunipukal sakthamaakunnu” (Resistance grows stronger in Adivasi areas – Malayalam), pp. 3-6, Janavimukti Malayalam bi-monthly, p. 4.

\(^{121}\) It is notable that Varghese was the only non-tribal to have been honoured with the title, ‘peruman’, meaning, the chief of all the tribes of Adivasis. Varghese hailed from a migrant settler Christian background. He was killed in police custody in 1972.
1970s. It is the struggle under the leadership of Naxalite Varghese that is said to have abolished this practice. It was the Maoist movement since the Naxalbari revolt that brought the agenda of changes in land relations back onto the agenda and was instrumental in the pro-Adivasi legislation of 1975. The left sectarian tendencies of the 1970s combined with the repression unleashed by the State led to a situation where the Naxalite movement could not intervene creatively. Subsequently the newly emerged academic fashion of postmodernism set the trend of viewing the Adivasi, Dalit, women and environmental questions in isolation from the class question.

On 15 October 1993, the High Court ruled in favour of the Adivasis in a public interest litigation filed by Nallathampy Thera, a non-Adivasi activist on the question of alienated Adivasi land as under the 1975 legislation. The High Court verdict was to find a solution to the problem within six months i.e. by 30 September 1996. In the context of the favourable High Court ruling in October 1993, C.K. Janu, as Chairperson of the South Zone Adivasi Forum, a voluntary organisation, led land-grab agitations on vested forests at Ambukuthy near Maanathavady in 1994 and at Panavalli in March 1995. It was with the Panavalli land struggle in 1994 that Janu attracted the attention of the media. At Panavalli they had occupied 18.5 acres of government land in order to re-settle 48 Adivasi families. On the heels of the late 1993 verdict, a legislation was passed by the UDF government in 1996 with a view to nullify the 1975 legislation.

On October 4 1996, Ayyankaali pada· made captive of the Palakkad collector demanding the cancellation of the 1996 legislation on Adivasi land. This was of propaganda value and attracted all-India attention to the Adivasi land question in Keralam. Between 1995-98, the Adivasi Ekopana Samiti led by Salim Kumar and Janu, lobbied successfully against the new legislation and demanded implementation of the 1975 legislation.

In December 1999 during the LDF rule, Thiruvonappuram land struggle in Kannur district 9 landless Adivasi families settling down on 9.25 acres was the first initiative led

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121 Madhavan 2002-03, p. 3. It is also countered by others that technically, 'adiyaalar' among Adivasis were not slaves but basically bonded labourers. They were transacted for a price and made to take an oath before the deity, of loyalty to their master, usually, for a period of one year. 'Kaavu' is a sacred grove. Adiyaala system was basically, a practice of bonded labour, with elements of slavery in it as well. The adiyaalar were the main source of surplus under the traditional caste-jenni system. Surplus appropriation took place mostly through means of tenant cultivation (Ajith 2002, p. 36).


123 Madhavan 2002-03, p. 5.


by Geethanandan under the banner of Adivasi Vimochana Munnani (AVM). On 8 February 2000, at Kurichi colony in Kottayam district, Sreedharan, an elderly man from Dalit background committed self-immolation in protest against drawing 11 KV line above the colony. Issue-based unity of 71 organisations was forged in Kurichi struggle and the idea of a united front of Dalit/Adivasi organisations actively emerged for the assertion of their rights. In March 2001, attempted encroachment of Adivasi land to set up an engineering college at Kundala in Idukki district was foiled by Adivasi activists under the leadership of C.K. Janu and Geethanandan, although it led to some contradiction with the local people. It was a struggle taken up with the support of the Kurichi struggle solidarity front. With the assembly elections approaching, there was tacit support from the Congress and the UDF to this struggle. It was the physical assaults borne by Janu and Geethanandan and the hartal held in Kottayam and Idukki districts that led to the formation of Adivasi-Dalit Samara Samiti.\(^{128}\)

Following Kundala struggle, on 30 August 2001, the Onam festival day, the Adivasi-Dalit Samara Samiti began their 48-days long protest erecting ‘Adivasi refugee camp’ in front of the state secretariat. It ended on 16 October 2001, following the government assurances to distribute land and to declare scheduled areas which are partial self-rule areas in areas of Adivasi concentration. The ‘Adivasi refugee camp’ had the distinctive advantages of the intellectual inputs from Geethanandan, resource mobilisation from funding agencies and the universal acceptance of Janu.\(^{129}\) It was following the non-implementation of the agreement by the government that the AGMS embarked on land occupation struggles that led up to the Muthanga incident and the subsequent police atrocities.

Apart from the struggles led by AGMS, there were struggles initiated under the leadership of the Naxalite movements. Thus spirited struggles of Adivasis had emerged following the 35 starvation deaths of Adivasis during July to September 2001 under the leadership of the Wayanad Adivasi Vikasana Samiti. There were about one thousand landless Adivasis in Nelliampathy. In protest against the passivity of the government, about 500 of them set up huts on 360 acres of land at the uncultivated Orange farm at Nelliampathy under the leadership of Nelliampathy Adivasi Samudaya Sangham since 19 September 2002. Adivasi Samara Sangham conducted famine raids on PDS stores of the government. They organised mass protests against confiscation of land of Adivasis and other landless by Banks in league with private moneylenders.\(^{130}\)

\(^{129}\) Ibid.
\(^{130}\) Janavimukti 2002-03, p. 28.
Rashtriya Mahasabha (RMS) was initiated under the leadership of Janu and Geethanandan in early 2004, with a declared objective of securing space for the Dalits and Adivasis in the mainstream vote-bank politics.

The details of the demographic and landlessness profile of the Adivasis in Keralam was already provided in Chapter V. Viewing the question of land alienation from the Adivasis in the state historically, it was colonialism which in the first instance, initiated the 'predatory pattern of development' in general and the organised encroachment of Adivasi inhabited forestlands in particular. This encroachment which was initiated first, for procuring timber and subsequently the denuded land-areas were developed into plantations.

Migration of non-Adivasis to the Adivasi areas followed on the footsteps of colonial incursions. The period of migration to the Adivasi areas of north Keralam from the erstwhile princely state of Tiruvitamkoor is usually put as roughly from 1925 to 1970. "The ruin that the 1930s depression caused was reflected in the exodus of several thousands of families of poor peasants and landless workers from Tiruvitamkur to Malabar." In another sense, the settlers were the cast-aways: the economy and society did not want them anymore. The major wave of migration had somewhat subsided by around 1960.

Historically, it was the famine-like situation in south Kerala in the context of the Second World War that spurred a movement of land-hungry migrant peasant settlers to north Keralam who eventually made their fortunes good, resorting to cash crop cultivation. But for the most part, it was at the cost of the Adivasis who used to reside in the forests of northern Keralam.

The forestland left over from migration was taken over by the government by early 1960s as reserve forests and wildlife sanctuaries. The forest department of the state government is, by far, the biggest landholder in the state controlling around one-fourth of the total land and is thereby a major culprit in causing Adivasi land alienation. The instances of land-grabbing were mainly from the sections of Adivasis who had come to own some fragmented landholdings after around 1960.

The forest laws of the Government of India from 1865 to 1980 and further were prejudicial to the continued existence of the Adivasis within the forests. The State failed to restore the alienated land of the Adivasis under the 1975 legislation. Both the land

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131 Prakash 2002, pp. 11, 15.
reforms in 1970 and the nationalisation of private forests in 1971 failed to obtain land for the Adivasis. Displaced from the forests and deprived of land, Adivasis were forced to become wage labourers for the settlers in the countryside. Following the High Court directive in October 1993 to implement the return of alienated Adivasi land as defined by the 1975 legislation, latest by 30 September 1996, a new legislation was passed under the UDF government in 1996 with a view to nullify the 1975 legislation. The President of India returned the bill as being violative of the Constitution. In 1999, the left-front government passed another bill to substitute the 1996 bill. Except K.R. Gowriamma, a CPI (M) drop-out, all the MLAs in the 140-member legislative assembly voted in favour of the bill. The Kerala High Court nullified it as being violative of the Constitution and as the Kerala government having committed contempt of court. The Kerala government has filed a special leave petition as civil appeal in the Supreme Court.

In sad contrast to the assurances of the government on 16 October 2001 in the agreement following the ‘Adivasi refugee camp’, the much-acclaimed land distribution inaugurated by the Then Chief Minister at Marayoor in Idukki district in fulfilment of these promises on 2002 January 1 at Marayoor turned out to be a farce since the land was not cultivable and the government set forth conditions that the land should not be ploughed and trees should not be cut. It was against this backdrop that the agitation for land at Muthanga began.

The Policy Orientation of the State

The colonial forest department was set up in 1864. It was with the Forest Act of 1865 by the colonial central government that the government initiated the process of taking over the forests. In Malabar region, the practice of owning forestland in private was initiated by the Sultans of Mysore and continued by the Britishers. The jenmis who were allies of the Raj also became owners of private forests.

The recommendation of the U.N. Dhebar Commission appointed by the Central government, to declare all Adivasi majority areas as Scheduled Areas under Schedule V

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134 Madhavan 2002-03, p. 4.
135 Prakash 2002, p. 120.
of the Constitution, so as to prevent further land alienation came in 1960. The Commission had also recommended the return of all alienated Adivasi land since the inauguration of the Constitution of the country, that is, since 26 January 1950. The successive governments of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Left Democratic Front (LDF) have done little in the direction of implementing these recommendations.

The wildlife sanctuaries in Keralam account for 25 per cent of the total forestland. Building dams first and subsequently declaring the adjacent areas which are not submerged as wildlife sanctuaries has been the approach adopted by the government for encroaching upon Adivasi land by early 1960s. Thus government established both dams and wildlife sanctuaries at Neyyar, Peppara and Idukki, Chimmini. Adjacent to Kallada and Bhoothathankettan dams were built Chentharuni wildlife sanctuary and Thattekkaad bird sanctuary respectively.

After the formation of the state of Keralam, Kerala Forest Act of 1961 and the Kerala Girijan rules formulated under it deprived Adivasis of their traditional habitats.

Forestland was used for non-forest purposes by large companies and the Plantation Corporation of the government for building tourist resorts. Gwalior Rayons Company channelled crores of tonnes of eucalyptus and bamboo reeds to the company. Hindustan newsprint factory too gained exclusive privileges over forest resources.

Vesting of Private Forests Act of 1971 in the state of Keralam was an admission in principle of the right of Adivasis to stay inside the forests. The Act had envisaged that 50 per cent of the private forests thus recovered by the government should be allotted to the Adivasis. Encroachments on reserve forests in the Malabar region was comparatively less before the vesting of private forests Act in 1971. Encroachments on vested forests accelerated with nationalisation owing to the provision in the Act for exemption from nationalisation of forestlands which were "either cultivated or intended to be cultivated before 1971". There was no provision for appeals in the 1971 Act. In 1977, the Act was amended with the provision for appeal. A chain of litigations from erstwhile private forest owners followed in which the government let itself be defeated by putting up ineffective...

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138 Article 244 Clause 1 of the Part 10 of the Indian Constitution provides for Scheduled Areas under Schedule V and Tribal Areas under Schedule VI (Prakash 2002: 116; Prakash 2003, p. 17).
140 The wildlife sanctuary at Neyyar was established in 1958.
141 P.K. Prakash 2003, p. 15.
143 Prakash 2003, p. 16.
legal fight. Since T. Madhava Menon commission set up to expedite the implementation of the 1971 Act had already recommended legal rights for the traditional inhabitants within these forests, the private forest owners sensed the threat and evicted Adivasis on a large scale. As a fallout of the policies of the Mysore Sultans and under the direct rule of the British, most of the private forests were in the Malabar region. At length, except for some project lands like Sugandhagiri cardamom plantation, hardly anything was achieved for the Adivasis by the 1971 Act.

All these projects initiated in the name of Adivasi welfare in Keralam, namely, Sugandhagiri project in Wayanad with 1500 hectares, Pookkode dairy project with 1500 acres of land, Priyadarshini estate in Mananthawady taluk with 2500 hectares of land, Attappady farming society with 1040 hectares, etc. have endless tales of corruption to tell: The project money from Tribal Sub-Plan fund and other sources was utilised for maintaining corrupt officials and non-Adivasi employees and the Adivasis became daily-wage labourers who were left without even regular wages. Until late 1990s, the Government of Kerala had already squandered 25 crore rupees supposedly for 'Adivasi welfare' in Kannur, Wayanad, Palakkad districts, and yet the Adivasis are in the same old plight as ever. The Adivasi development projects implemented over the past 50 years have all failed because they were not suited to the culture and life-style of the Adivasis; these projects were sought to be implemented by alienating the Adivasis from the nature-economic system that they were living in for over centuries.

Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Control of land transfer and recovery of alienated land) legislation was passed by the C. Achyutha Menon ministry in 1975 i.e., during the emergency period. However, the rules for the Act passed in 1975 were formulated only after ten years, in 1986 and under these rules, 1982 was decided to be the year from which the Act would have its retrospective effect. The pro-Adivasi legislation of 1975 in the state, with retrospective effect from 1960, also met with a similar fate.

As the Forest Conservation Act, 1980 by the Union government made it illegal for Adivasis to stay inside the forests and they began to be physically evicted from the forests, displacement became a harsh reality staring on the faces of the Adivasi people

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144 Prakash 2002, pp. 78-80, 84.
145 Aralam farm in Kannur district was under the control of the Central government.
146 Prakash 2002, pp. 112-114.
147 Saram 1999: Organ of Adivasi Vimochana Munnani.
149 It was also included in Schedule IX as item number 150 so that it cannot be challenged in the courts of law (Prakash 2002, pp. 118-9). It is notable that it was during the relative absence of vote-bank politics under a dictatorial regime that a pro-Adivasi legislation was passed. Prakash 2002, p. 119.
who, until then, used to move into the interior of the forests. Apparently inspired by the World Bank as it was, the key motivation of the legislation seemed to have been to gain control over forest resources and biodiversity by the transnationals.\textsuperscript{151}

Nilgiri biosphere reserve was established in 1986, including traditional Adivasi areas like Muthanga, Nilamboor and Siruvaani. It was the first ever biosphere research project in India. Its area extended across the borders of Keralam, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Another biosphere reserve established in 1992 was based around Agasthya forests biological park famous for plant varieties such as \textit{aarogya pacha}.\textsuperscript{152} Since 1990s, the central government initiated participatory forest management.\textsuperscript{153}

Dilip Singh Bhuria Committee consisting of 16 MPs from ST background, submitted its report on 17 January 1995. It was constituted to suggest modalities for the extension of 73\textsuperscript{rd} and 74\textsuperscript{th} amendments to the fifth schedule areas not covered under it. With this, the fifth schedule got its substantive content. The gram sabhas in fifth schedule areas had the right to recover alienated land. All resources — land, forests, water would be under its control and land acquisition except for defence purposes, roads and railways, schools and hospitals should have the consent of the village committee.\textsuperscript{154}

The successive governments had not only failed to implement the pro-Adivasi legislation of 1975, but also passed with near unanimity, anti-Adivasi legislations in the state assembly both in 1996 and 1999.

The approach of the State today conspicuously lacks class perspective unlike during the past decades of land ceiling laws (1950s) and tenancy reforms (1970s). Thus the government provided exemption for the Adivasi lands grabbed up to 2.5 acres in the 1996 legislation in the state framed by the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) government. The 1999 legislation framed by the CPI-M-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government increased these ceilings up to 5 acres. In other words, ceilings were placed for the Adivasi lands grabbed, irrespective of how much land was owned by those who have grabbed these lands. Legal histories show that even the government used to

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\textsuperscript{151} Prakash 2003, p. 15; Going by available information, the proposed "The Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill 2005", seems to be in the direction of favouring Adivasi interests. Reportedly, it combines livelihood and conservationist approaches. It seeks to provide land rights to tribals in areas with no forest vegetation which were occupied by them before 1980 (The cut-off date of Ministry of Environment and Forests, however, is 1993). It seeks to provide the Adivasi nuclear families with 2.5 hectares of land each and make them active protectors of forests (Shah 2005).

\textsuperscript{152} Prakash 2003, p. 16.

\textsuperscript{153} Prakash 2002, p. 93; The motivation of the first world agencies in evincing interest in the forest management of the third world cannot merely be to make up for the carbon credit of the polluting corporations of the advanced capitalist countries but also to gain control of the crucial biodiversity, with a futuristic perspective.

\textsuperscript{154} Prakash 2002, pp. 117, 121-123.
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have some class perspective in this regard in the past. A circular from the Ministry of Environment and Forest\textsuperscript{155} provides that for those whose livelihood is dependent on it, legal rights may be granted to encroachments on forestland prior to the Forest Conservation Act of 1980. It also provided that even those who make a living out of forestlands encroached after 1980 should not be evicted unless they are provided alternative means of livelihood.\textsuperscript{156} There is ample evidence of the complicity of the State in the new mode of exploitation of the knowledge of the Adivasis of biodiversity in general and of medicinal plants in particular. The report of the central ministry for environment and forests in 2001-02 has a section, ‘Adivasi development project’, which recommends eviction of Adivasis from the forests.\textsuperscript{157} Similarly, the work report of Indian Board of Wildlife also recommended bringing traditional medicinal plant varieties under protected areas and exploitation of the traditional knowledge of the Adivasis through the Medicinal Plant Conservation Network funded by DANIDA.\textsuperscript{158} Contra Sreekumar and Parayil,\textsuperscript{159} it could not have been merely the ideological hang-ups of a ‘developmental State’ that stood in the way of implementing the pro-Adivasi recommendations and legislations. In normal course of behaviour guided by modern economic rationality, it is material interests that take precedence over ideological predilections. It has also been commonplace to blame the miserable condition of the Adivasis in Keralam upon vote-bank politics pandering to the ‘settler’ majority. Thus the journalist, B.R.P. Bhaskar says, “The reason why all the regimes have betrayed the Adivasis is because the Christian vote-bank behind those who alienated Adivasi land, has been very much larger than that of the Adivasis.”\textsuperscript{160} However, vote bank politics appeasing the benefit coalition of the numerically larger ‘settler’ sections may not be considered the sufficient reason for the State’s indifference towards the Adivasis. Thus the imperatives of vote-bank politics have not prevented the initiation of the whole host of apparently anti-people policies by the State during the neo-liberal reforms of over a


\textsuperscript{157} Prakash 2003, p. 16; Prakash 2002, p. 94; The Biodiversity Act of 2002 and the recent Land Acquisition Act of the Government does not seem to be particularly Adivasi-friendly, to say the least.

\textsuperscript{158} Prakash 2003, p. 16.


decade and even well before it. This callousness of the State may be more adequately explained with reference to the interests of classes that prevail upon the State in Keralam.

At Muthanga, once again, the government was committing a breach of its own promises made in the agreement reached on 16 October 2001 before ending the Adivasi refugee camp. Thus it was promised that land, not less than five acres would be provided to each of the Adivasi families at the government project sites of Sugandhagiri, Pookkode, etc. In other areas, land, not less than one acre was promised. Among other assurances, measures were also promised to declare areas of Adivasi concentration as Scheduled Areas.

In deference to the assurances made by the state government 16 October 2001, the then Chief Minister himself had inaugurated the much-acclaimed land distribution to Adivasis on 1 January 2002. Title-deeds were distributed for 1078 acres to 388 Adivasi families in Idukki district at Marayoor and Kundala. Marayoor, famous for its sandalwood forests and the only legal sandalwood depot in Keralam is the only place in Keralam which is a rain-shadow area, not receiving rains. The land at Marayoor was distributed on condition that it should not be tilled. It was sandalwood forests and rocky terrain which could not be utilised. The state forest department had opposed the distribution of land at Marayoor and staked claims for it soon after it was distributed. The legislative committee under the leadership of A. Sujanapal, MLA had found that at Marayoor all the costly trees in the land distributed to Adivasis at Marayoor were cut off. Not so different were the experiences at Kundala and Pooppaara.

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161 Geethanandan 2001, p. 917; The Gazette notification by the Kerala government of 9 March 1999 had promised only 'land not exceeding one acre' to the Adivasis in the districts they live in. As per the 1991 Census, there were 69,441 Adivasi families in Keralam (Prakash 2002, p. 107). And there is an estimated number of more than 53,000 landless Adivasi families in the state. This is going by the Adivasi Masterplan Committee which says that 22,491 Adivasi families were landless and 30,981 Adivasi families owned land below one acre only (Prakash 2002, p. 129). Together landless Adivasi families and those owning below one acre of land add up to 53,472 families.


163 Ibid, p. 133.


165 Prakash 2002, p. 133.

166 K.M. Salimkumar 2003: “Adivasi karaarum Muthangayum rakshakanmaarum” (Adivasi agreement, Muthanga and the saviours — Malayalam), , pp. 33-37, Maadhyanam weekly, no. 269, vol. 8, 18 April. p. 34.


168 Prakash 2003, p. 11.

169 Salimkumar 2003, p. 34.
Adivasis could not take possession of the land at Kundala for which title-deeds were distributed. Kundala is located in the midst of the tea-plantation of Tata-tea. The Revenue department wrote to the Adivasis to return the land distributed at Kundala on grounds that the title-deeds distributed by the government were bogus.

It was alleged that in the second phase of land distribution at Chinnakkanaal in Idukki district, the ruling party leaders encroached upon the land distributed even before the Adivasis could take possession of the plots.

It was against the backdrop of the government’s flagrant violation of the agreement on 16 October 2001 that the land struggle at Muthanga began. What was witnessed at Muthanga was extra-judicial killings by the State, in violation of the right to life, a fundamental right, as provided under Article 21 of the Constitution. Having thrown to winds the Constitution and laws, the State, the lawgiver itself turned the outlaw in this case. Moreover, the police attack and the subsequent arrests and custodial violence were violative of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.

It was feared that the next target of attack after Muthanga could have been Nelliampathy in Palakkad district where nearly 950 Adivasis had set up their huts on 375 acres of uncultivated government land under the leadership of Nelliampathy Adivasi Samudaya Sangham since 19 September 2002. Despite the demands of the State-owned plantation corporation to evict them, in the aftermath of Muthanga, the stalemate there continues.

The government, which has received the first instalment of the “programme loan” (consistent with Structural Adjustment Programme – SAP) from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2003, is involved in the high profile ‘Modernizing Government Programme’ (MGP) under the ADB loan programme. One would wonder whether the repressiveness of the State that was witnessed at Muthanga is an indirect fall-out of the MGP, which today has its pervasive influence upon most aspects of government functioning in the state.

It would not be far-fetched to consider the Muthanga killings as an instance of how under globalisation, as M. Kunhaman says, ‘the State oppresses the marginalised even as the

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173 So then, characterizing Muthanga police action as an “ADB firing” may not be considered completely off the mark.
Market excludes them for want of marketable skills and resources'. Moreover, it could be an indication of how the State is turning increasingly repressive under globalisation. The Weberian notion of the State as arrogating to itself the ‘legitimate monopoly of violence in society’ may be useful in analysing such phenomenon. It may be recalled that under the policy of the so-called ‘State minimalism and market maximalism’ the State is withdrawing precisely from those areas which have direct bearing on the existence of subaltern [deprived] sections like women, Dalits and Adivasis.

An interesting aspect may be pointed out about the debate that led up to the police action and eviction of the Adivasis from Muthanga. The environmentalism as advanced by some Greens (like the poetess, Sugathakumari) and the government forest department in this case, suffered from the legacy of the dualistic thinking in the colonial notion of Nature – with its wild-life, flora and fauna – as contra-distinct from Human beings. On the other hand, the Adivasis historically considered the forests as their abode. So then, the question is not about the Adivasis’ ‘occupation’ of the forests but about their continuing eviction from the forests, ever since the colonial times. “The allegation that Adivasi has encroached upon forests is similar to the assertion that fish has encroached upon water.”

The dualistic thinking by colonialists and the Indian dominant classes who took over the mantle of power from the former, emerged out of solid material interests as they had great stakes in uprooting the Adivasis from the forests, severing their harmonious relationship with nature: The Adivasi belt was home to immense forest resources, mines, big dams and hydel projects, which the dominant interests wanted to exploit.

In Chapter V, in the section on the land question, we have explored how even as the government is not honouring its agreement with the impoverished Adivasis, it continues

175 Ibid, p. 44.
177 Zachariah 2003: “Adivasikalude kolachor vevikkunnavarodu” (To those cooking the death feed of the Adivasis – Malayalam), pp. 11-13, Kalakaumudi , 2 March, p. 11.
178 Gilbert Sebastian 2003: “Adivasi land rights”, frontier, vol. 35, no. 38, April 12-19. While evicting Adivasis from forests seems to have constituted the principal aspect of the State policy in this respect, both under colonialism and after the transfer of power, historical evidences have also emerged on instances where it was the need of the State and the exploiting classes to retain the Adivasi labour within forests for using them in the exploitation of forest resources – to engage them as forest guides, as guards against wild animals, as labour in timber work, etc. As against the colonial ethnographers who tended to emphasise on the relative isolation of the tribes from the mainstream society, native ethnographers like S.C. Ghurye, N.K. Bose and S. Sinha have tended to stress on the interactions and interrelations between the two (Xaxa 1999, p. 3589).
to favour the ‘rich, the powerful and the influential’. Today, land reforms is completely out of the ‘Vision documents’ (planning being out of question already) of the State in India. Yet, the fact that the land question is still on the agenda of the people in most states in the mainland India is evidenced by the fact of the massive support received by the Naxalite movement which has ‘land to the tiller’ as the main slogan of their struggle for ‘New Democratic Revolution’ today.179

Efficiency focused on production rather than distributive justice premised on welfare has been the focus of neo-liberal ideology being pursued by the State today.180 In contrast to the people’s movements that focus on redistributive justice, neo-liberal reforms are engaged in fiscal deficit constraining and mass income deflationary policies.181 Against a critique of re-distributive politics from the angle of developmental concerns, it may be argued that developmentalism itself may constitute a discourse of accumulation, not actually leading to human welfare.182

Based on the foregoing analysis, we could underscore the prime responsibility of the State and the dominant classes in the whole episode of Adivasi land alienation. So then, we could argue that the burden of resolving the issue also must lie primarily with the State, rather than creating further divisions and conflicts among sections of the common people. If the State could not provide legal guarantees to the Adivasis for the land on which they lived for centuries, does it not legitimately become the prime responsibility of the State to rectify the fall-outs of its own criminal passivity? We might recall the good old structuralist lesson that in the process of determinations, a principal determinant may produce only indirect results. After Sudipta Kaviraj, it may be said, “The cost of being fundamental is to have only indirect results”.183

The Hindutva School

The Hindutva school views the problematic of Adivasi land alienation in the state as essentially a communal question of minorities, particularly from Christian background, grabbing the land of the hapless “Vanavaasis” (vanavasis) who are basically considered

179 By refusing to recognise the importance of the land question, the State in India betrays an ostrich-like syndrome of sticking its head in sand and may be considered ideologically deluded.


182 The pauperised state of the workforce in Tamil Nadu despite widespread industrialisation may be an instructive instance in this respect.

Hindus. Thus P. Parameswaran, a most vocal ideologue of the Hindutva perspective says, “If ever there was something by the name, ‘Adivasi tradition’, it has already become part of the Hindu tradition by now”. Similarly, citing several instances of Hindu practices among tribals, Godbole argues, “In fact, the tribals are Hindus in their beliefs and modes of worship.”

Similarly, citing several instances of Hindu practices among tribals, Godbole argues, “In fact, the tribals are Hindus in their beliefs and modes of worship.” says he. He further says that it was the mischief of the British rulers and missionaries to label these Hindu ‘Vanavasis’ as animists and subsequently as ‘tribal religionists’ since the 1931 Census and detach them from the Hindu Society! According to him, the missionaries had popularized the term ‘Adivasis’ for the tribals to imply that the non-tribals (read Hindus) are immigrants and had chased these original inhabitants to the forests.

The concept of Vanavasi is traced back to the Hindu mythology wherein Rama and Pandvas were-banished for "Vanavas". The word Vanavasi has got the connotation of punishment or fine, going by the practice of many a traditional village community. But in the Adivasi culture of Gana system, the concept of ‘Vanavasi’ is totally absent. One of the Dalit viewpoints holds that the term “Vanavasi” is imposed on the Adivasis in order to deny them the status of indigeneity and to deny them their distinct identity, linguistically, genetically and in their Gana system outside the Hindu caste order. This term was first introduced by Balasaheb Deshpande, a disciple of Dr. Hedgewar and he had established a Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram on 19th December 1952. “We are indigenous not Vanavasi but mul niwasi”, meaning original dwellers, asserts this study. Even the term ‘Adivasi’ is looked upon with suspicion as it is derived from Sanskrit (of Aryan/Hindu origin) and is not found in any language spoken by the indigenous people. This Dalit perspective supports the usage, ‘indigenous people’ by the United Nations. The Hindutva school advocates the resolution of the issue of land alienation from ‘Vanavasis’, as a question of the assertion of Hindu pride, through re-establishing their rights over the very plots of land alienated ‘rather than placing additional demands on the State’. In early 2003, the two-day "Akhila Kerala Vanavasi Sangamam" was organised by the Sangh Parivar at

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185 Shreerang Godbole [2004]: “Conversion Of The Vanavasis”, http://www.atributetohinduism.com/articles_conversion/69.htm (29.08.2004). In Jharkhand attempts have been going on to Hinduise the legacy and imagery of Birsa Munda against the interests of Christian tribals. ‘Birsa’s’ radical appropriation of Hindu signs and signifiers could more plausibly be seen as an effort to contest the domination of British-raj sponsored Hindu landlords, and his embracing Vaishnavism as a bid to gain wide-spread political support. Yet Sangh parivar reads them as indications of ‘the heroic Vanavasi’s inherent Hinduness’ (Rycroft 2004).
186 www.dalitstan.org/books/patana/patana1.html.
187 Ibid.
188 Ibid.
Mananthavadi in Wayanad district, under the auspices of "Kerala Vanavasi Vikasa Kendram". It was a high-profile conference, inaugurated by RSS supremo, K. S. Sudarshan, at Valliyooravu in Wayanad and attended by a host of senior RSS-VHP top-brass.\textsuperscript{189}

The convention raised three slogans: (i) to restore the alienated land of the Adivasis under the 1975 Act, (ii) urging the state and the Centre to devise laws to prevent religious conversions, particularly among the tribal community after the model of the recent anti-conversion law formulated in Tamil Nadu and lauded it, (iii) urging Kerala state to develop a comprehensive tribal welfare plan.\textsuperscript{190}

It would be enlightening to examine the political-ideological posturings of the Sangh parivar alongside the sequence of their practice. On 14 January 2003, an American missionary, Joseph William Cooper was attacked in Thiruvanathapuram, just on the day prior to the two-day 'Vanavasi Sangamom' at Valliyooravu near Mananthawady on 15 January 2003.\textsuperscript{191} The Pentacost church at Cheengavallam, near Ambalawayal in Wayanad district, was totally burnt down on the intervening night of January 22-23. The Church was burnt down within one week of the Vanavasi Sangamom.\textsuperscript{192} Notably, the burning of the church took place within 48 hours of the two-day State Executive meeting of the aJP, held at Kanjangad in Kasaragode district, declared that its future action plan in Kerala would be to vigorously pursue Hindutva agenda with particular focus on the underprivileged sections in society.

The Hindutva combine has been seeking to extend its influence through persistent socio-cultural interventions. As a corollary, its voluntary activity has had a new focus in recent years: the underprivileged tribals, fisher people and Dalits of Kerala. Thus a 33-bed hospital at Kalpetta in Wayanad district, offers free medical services to the tribal people. The Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram has established its units in 52 tribal areas of the State and is now engaged in meeting the "challenge" of Christian missionary activity in those areas.

Vanavasi Ashram runs a school, Pazhassi Raja Vidyalaya at Periya by a single-teacher Dr. Nambiar, in Wyanad District since 1997.\textsuperscript{193} It has been receiving funds from agencies


\textsuperscript{190} Ramakrishnan 2003.

\textsuperscript{191} Viswanathan, et al 2004; Hindu 2003g; Ramakrishnan 2003.

\textsuperscript{192} Menon 2003.

\textsuperscript{193} www.idrf.org
such as, Asha, AID and IDRF. A total of $74,433 has been received by the Vanavasi Ashram in Kerala during 1998-2003 from overseas donors, Work an hour, Silicon valley, Stanford and NYC/NJ. Speaking of the Vanavasi Ashram at Periya, Wayanad, in a patronising tone, the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF) website says, "The main objective was to uplift the tribals especially in the field of education." (emphasis added).

It has been pointed out that in the years, 1994 to 2000, roughly 75% of the IDRF's total disbursements (over $3.2 million) went to the IDRF-designated organizations. And a vast majority (in excess of 80%) of the IDRF-designated funds were sent to organisations run by the Hindutva combine.

Instead of directing their demands towards the State in all its omnipotence, the Hindutva approach seeks to bail out the State from the primary responsibility for the whole issue of Adivasi land alienation. By their insistence on restoration of alienated lands, they pit the weak and powerless Adivasis who constitute merely over 1 per cent of the population of the state against the numerically and economically powerful migrant settler sections, this approach, apparently, goes against the interests of the Adivasi masses. Moreover, this cynical approach has the dangerous potential to vitiate the communal situation in the state. It distorts the reality of class/social oppression on the Adivasi masses by portraying it as a communal question. For these reasons, the Hindutva communal approach on the issue of Adivasi land rights may, in essence, be characterised as pseudo-radical.

The two areas where the problem of land alienation as a result of non-tribal migrations were the most intense in Kerala were Wayanad district and Attappady area in Palakkad district. The communal perspective naively and dishonestly forgets that if it was settlers from the Christian background who turned encroachers of Adivasi land in Wayanad district, it was Hindus from the Tamil Gounder caste who turned encroachers in the Attappady region of Palakkad district. Although Christians control landholdings in plantations, there are areas even in Wayanad district where the Nairs mainly hold ownership of paddy fields, as in the Vellamunda panchayat.

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194 www.aidprojects.org; www.ashanet.org
195 www.ashanet.org/projects/funding.php?o=229
196 www.idrf.org/dynamic/modules.php?name=Hncontent&pa=showpage&pid=207&b_name=hn_IDRF F%20Boston
198 See the section, 'Demographic and landlessness profile of Adivasis in the state' in Chapter V. According to activist sources, in the course of one year, 36 Adivasis, most of them women, have been killed in reactionary violence in Attappady area of Palakkad district alone (Murali 2003: "Muthangayil chithariya chorathullikal orikkalum paazhavilla" (The blood-drops spilt at Muthanga will never go in vain – Malayalam), Munnamipporali, March – April, p. 7). Pradeep Kumar K.G.: personal communication.
Elsewhere in India, as in Jharkhand and Tripura, those who occupied the land of Adivasis/tribals (often from a Christian background) were from the Hindu background. Historically, it was the same land reform measure of favouring the tenants that led to conferring legal ownership over land to tenants mainly from Ezhava and Nair backgrounds while leaving out the Dalits (Scheduled Castes) that was re-enacted in the hills where the settlers were favoured over the Adivasis. It could not have been considered a communal policy but a policy favouring tenants over both owners and tillers. All these indicate that the question of land alienation of the Adivasis cannot be considered a communal question but was essentially a class-tribe question.

The communal perspective demotes the Adi-vasis, etymologically, the original inhabitants of the land, to the position of “Vanavaasis” or forest-dwellers, although the major section of the Adivasis are now evicted from the jungles and have been integrated at the lowest bottom of the class society in the state. This demotion of Adivasis as Vanavaasis could be read in conjunction with the attempts in Hindutva historiography to designate Indo-Aryans as the original inhabitants of the land. Since Ram, the Aryan, Vaishanav cult god of Hindutva was banished to the forests, according to mythology, this could give an entry-point for inculcating Hindutva values into Adivasis who are also designated as Vanavaasis. Moreover, their life in the forests could be depicted as an undesirable state of existence in this schema. Ascribing Hindu identity to the Adivasis does not sound persuasive since the religious beliefs of the Adivasis had hardly anything to do with the mainstream traditions in Brahminical Hinduism. Moreover, socially most of the Adivasis were outside the traditional caste hierarchy. Wherever they were integrated into caste society, there has apparently been merciless oppression on them. Thus at Valliyoorkkavaaru, a Hindu shrine in Wayanad, Adivasis were bought and sold as adiyaalar and made to take an oath to the deity of loyalty towards the master.

In sum, the Hindutva outfits like RSS have been trying to downgrade tribals as Vanavaasis and impose on them ideas of savarna dominance. The communal perspective seeks to drive a wedge between sections of the masses and thereby serve the interests of the powers-that-be.

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201 See the section, ‘Demographic and landlessness profile of Adivasis in the state’ in Chapter V.
202 The religious practices of tribal peoples anywhere in the world (designated as ‘animistic’ in 1901 Census of India and ‘tribal’ in subsequent censuses), from Sub-Saharan Africa to the northeast of India, involving the worship of ancestors and the spirits of the dead, seem to have nothing to do with the Hindutva we know.
203 Savarnas are supposedly, the pure castes in the traditional caste order i.e. the top three varnas or castes in the four-fold caste order. The low caste, Sudras and the out-castes, Ati-Sudras (known as Dalits or ‘Scheduled Castes’ today) were considered to be ritually impure castes.
A Conventional Class Approach

A conventional class approach viewed the Adivasis as agricultural labourers, first and foremost rather than as Adivasis per se.204 Late E.M.S. Namboodiripad (1999), the chief ideologue of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) had expressly followed such a reductionist class approach. In their eagerness to distance themselves from the ‘foreign-funded’ NGOs, CPI (Marxist) and CPI-ML (Red Flag) have often argued in this vein. However, unlike with the CPI-M, the Red Flag stream was not non-committal about the Adivasi land question. Indeed, they have played an important role in bringing this issue to the centre-stage of Kerala politics.205 Yet the Red Flag tended to deny the non-class autonomy and specificity to the deprivation of the Adivasis and tended to project pure class struggle as the panacea. In reducing the Adivasi land question to a class angle and denying the non-class specificity of the deprivation, the CPI-M subsumed the question of the unique specificities of the oppression on Adivasis into merely a class standpoint and virtually equated it with the question of the deprivation of landless labourers in general. Liberation from class oppression is the long-term agenda of the Communists and so the uniqueness and urgency of the issue of Adivasi land alienation is lost herein. It cannot be denied that it was the continuing exclusion of the Adivasis, as Adivasis, that deprived them of the benefits of development. The marginalised social groups, in general, face social discrimination and oppression and on top of it, the lower classes among them, who often constitute the majority, also face the reality of class oppression. Thus there is a cumulative effect of multiple levels of oppression on social categories such as Dalit women of the lower classes. Of late, CPI (M) seems to be undergoing a metamorphosis towards becoming a ‘global civil society movement’ through initiatives such as the decentralised planning and in keeping with it, becoming more sensitive towards the concerns of deprived identities like Adivasis.

Over the years, the duplicity of the CPI-M on the question of Adivasi land alienation has been more than apparent. Clause 5 (1) (2) of the 1999 legislation framed by the CPI-M-led LDF government in the state had provided for the confiscation and return to Adivasis of land above two hectares (five acres)206 of Adivasi land encroached upon by ‘migrant settlers’, irrespective of the extent of land owned by the encroacher in question.207 The legislation was included in the category of agricultural legislation, so as to bypass the

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204 However, the question of eviction of Adivasis from the forests, their traditional habitat, ever since the colonial times, presents a situation that constitutes a qualitatively different kind of oppression compared to standard class oppression.

205 Sreekumar & Parayil 2002, p. 300

206 Up from one hectare in the 1996 legislation framed by the UDF government.

207 See the section, ‘The policy orientation of the State’ in this Chapter.
sanction of the President of India.208 CPI-M policy document on Adivasis in 2002 says, the CPI-M does not view the development of the hill people isolated from the problems of the non-tribals but on the basis of their mutual inter-relations.209 However, it has been noticed that in actual practice, it often turned out to benefit primarily the non-tribals, as was witnessed in Keralam over several tenures of LDF rule.

The document speaks about adherence to the Samata judgement in setting up business and industrial units in Scheduled Areas. But nowhere does the document speak about establishing Scheduled Areas in regions where they do not exist. In fact, the CPI-M-dominated Keralam and West Bengal and Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are the states that have not implemented the provision for Scheduled V Areas in tribal belts.210 It may be recalled that Keralam and West Bengal are states where the CPI-M) has been in power for several tenures. Instead, the document ambiguously demands, “In areas of tribal concentration in other states [non-sixth schedule states], self-rulled district councils have to be formed.”211 What is envisaged could be on the model of the Gorkha hill councils with which the Gorkhas are by no means a contented lot.

Although the CPI (M) document acknowledges the historical process whereby Adivasis were alienated from the forests, it does not hold the perspective that Adivasis are the rightful custodians of the forests and in order to resolve the ‘Adivasi issue’, all sections of the Adivasis who want to return to their habitats in the forests should be allowed to do so. The right to forests of the Adivasis is reduced to allocating the land laid barren through deforestation in forest areas to the tribal sections and permitting tribals to enter forests and collect their means of livelihood.212 Among the demands of the CPI-M is the demand to implement social management system and ensure popular participation in forest protection.213 This could be construed as a green signal for the ‘participatory forest management’ system already initiated by global capitalist institutions like the World Bank.

Following the Muthanga incident on 19 February 2003, Adivasi Kshema Samiti (AKS), sympathetic to the CPI-M staged land grabs within the limits of Chethalayam, Kalpatta

208 Prakash 2002, p. 120; Munnanipporali 1999: “Idathu sarkaarinte puthiya vanchana” (The new betrayal by the left government – Malayalam), Munnanipporali, no. 53, March.
212 Ibid, p. 17, clauses 2, 3 & 4.
and Meppaady forest ranges in Wayanad district.\footnote{Mathrubhoomi daily 2006: “Varshangal pinnidunnu; Adivasikal samarabhoomiyil thanne” (Years pass, yet Adivasis stay on in the struggle land -- Malayalam), 11 January, Wednesday, p. 6, Mumbai edition.} In the teak plantations that stood apart from the forest areas, more than 200 hectares of land has been targeted for setting up huts.\footnote{Mathrubhoomi daily 2006, p. 6.} When Mr. K. Sudhakaran was the minister in the state forest department under the UDF government, there were declarations for the eviction of these people, and yet no action has been taken, possibly, out of fear for the massive cadre-base of the CPI-M. With the political patronage of a CPI (M)-led government in the state, these Adivasi people continue to remain on these plots of land. However, it must be admitted that this land occupation was made possible in the wake of the Muthanga land struggle and the political ambience created by it. This land occupation by the CPI (M)-led Adivasi mass organisation has been criticised by those with leanings towards the Maoist/Naxalite movement on grounds that the CPI (M) could very well have distributed land through the village panchayats while they were in power in the state instead of engaging the Adivasis to stage land grabs upon government land.\footnote{Madhavan 2002-03: “Adivasi mekhalayil cheruthunilpukal sakhamaakunnu” (Resistance grows stronger in Adivasi areas -- Malayalam), pp. 3-6, Janavimukti Malayalam bi-monthly, p. 5.} Implicitly, the criticism is targeted against the attempts by the CPI (M) to gain political mileage and create mass base among the Adivasis by weaning away the cadre-base of the AGMS and the Naxalite organisations, in the wake of the hard-won political consciousness of the Adivasi land struggles that culminated in Muthanga, of which CPI (M) hitherto has not been a part. In any case, the enormous contribution made by the AGMS towards land struggles and identity formation of the deprived Adivasis cannot be dwarfed in comparison to the struggles by AKS because the latter apparently entered the struggle because of the organisational threat posed by AGMS. The CPI (M)-led LDF government came to power in early 2006 under the charismatic leadership of V.S. Achuthanandan on the promise to control the mafia that had sprung up in different walks of life during the preceding UDF regime, including those in sex rackets. One of the first measures taken up by the new government, was to withdraw cases on Adivasi rank and file. It is notable however, that the new government refused to withdraw cases against the AGMS leadership in the Muthanga case.\footnote{Hindu 2006: “Kerala: Tribal families to get title deeds on February 17”, 21 January 2006, http://www.thehindu.com/2006/01/21/stories/2006012108240300.htm.} In sum, the conventional class approach, particularly of the CPI-M has not been able to deliver justice and extend protective discrimination to the Adivasi people and has consistently indulged in double standards favouring the dominant sections of the ‘settlers’ over the Adivasi landless in the state.
The Identity Politics Approach

The identity politics approach and the perspective of ‘new social movements’ viewed the Adivasi land question basically as a contradiction between the ‘settlers’ and the Adivasis, mediated by the State, which more often than not, sided with the settlers. At times, Adivasi intellectuals themselves have also toed the line of identity politics. Thus K.M. Salimkumar says, “Forest encroachment is not a new thing to Keralam. .... Even in the case of the Mathikettaan forest encroachment case, armed police was not given the responsibility to ward off the encroachment. .... In all these places, forest encroachment took place with the backing of organised community groups. But against the Adivasis at Muthanga, UDF government had adopted a discriminatory and revengeful mode of retaliation as towards an alien race”. Understandably enough, such views could emerge from the tribal experience of oppression and the binary thinking of the Adivasis versus the rest.

The identity politics school is important in that it was the ideological line adopted by many a dominant funded Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working among the Adivasis in the state. They stressed on the autonomy of identity and cultural specificity of these marginalised social groups and tended to deny the need for integration of the struggles of these non-class marginalised social groups with class-based political movements. Thus Bijoy spoke of “non-adivasi migrant settlers who had, through deceit and cunning, grabbed the lands of adivasis.” Bijoy & Ravi Raman opined that the abolition of tenancies in 1970 did not benefit the “adivasis who merely lost more of their occupancy rights to the ‘settlers’ who had now become their ‘tenants’.” Bijoy and Ravi Raman say, “The post-second world war ‘grow more food’ campaign initiated by the government contributed considerably to this migration to the Malabar region.” They contested the view that implementation of the 1975 Act was “unjust to the ‘hard working’ migrants who had ‘developed’ the area economically and that the implementation of the Act at this juncture could create a potentially dangerous conflict between the adivasis

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219 C.R. Bijoy is himself a leading NGO activist. Incidentally, Bijoy is also one of the accused in the Mathikettaan forest encroachment case (P. Sujaathan 2003: “Muthangayil moodi vacha satyangal” (The hidden truths at Muthanga – Malayalam), pp. 7-10, Kalakaumudi, 2 March, p. 8).


and non-adivasis." They recommended that land be made available to the landless Adivasi families and that all Adivasi regions be brought under “Schedule V of Article 244, which assures social rights for a participatory self-rule and autonomy”.

The following criticisms can be raised against the identity politics approach as advanced by Bijoy and Ravi Raman:

i) They confine the crucial ‘land question’ to merely the implementation of the 1975 Act, a question of the recovery of only 7,640 hectares, by which only 5,553 applicants may become the beneficiaries. This is a far cry from providing land to each of the 53,000 landless Adivasi families and other landless agrarian sections in the state.

ii) Their emphasis is mainly on the implementation of Schedule V areas and the constitution of Adivasi identity. While the advocacy of application of Schedule V to all Adivasi regions is well-taken, it may not be considered a panacea. What is envisaged under Schedule V is only partial self-rule. And it should not be forgotten that there have been attempts during the period of neo-liberal reforms to undermine Schedule V. Moreover, the culpability of the State cannot be overlooked, in the non-implementation of Scheduled Areas in states like Keralam, long after it was recommended by Dhebar Commission in 1960.

iii) Adivasi identity is pitted against that of the ‘settlers’/‘encroachers’. The gross class divisions among the latter are disregarded.

At variance with Bijoy and Ravi Raman, it may be asserted that it was primarily the wrongful policies of the State that have led to the contradiction between the Adivasis and the ‘settlers’. By glossing over the historical reasons for the migration of non-tribals to tribal areas – many of them migrating there as economic refugees – and by not giving adequate emphasis to the right to livelihood of the small and medium peasant majority of the ‘migrant settlers’, this kind of perspective does not seem to do justice to this section of the masses.

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226 Soli Sorabjee as the Attorney General of India had recommended measures in this direction. A judicial case was filed against such moves by Samata, a voluntary organisation. There have also been reports of recent moves by the government to permit mining in Schedule V areas. (For instance, see The Hindu 2003: “Environmentalists oppose World Mining Congress”, November 2, Thiruvananthapuram edn., p. 8.)

Despite limitations, initiatives in decentralisation like the creation of ‘ooru koottangal’ (Adivasi congregations) could also be reformist welfare measures of State policy and might reduce bureaucratic hassles.

227 Do see the section, “Ideological aspects in the policy orientation of the State”.

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This is not to deny the plausibility of the peasant settlers gradually accumulating capital through a process of 'extended reproduction'\textsuperscript{228} and drawing in more and more of the Adivasi masses into the vortex of an exploitative network of social relationships. Nor do we intend to deny the processes involved of deceit and grabbing or more precisely of 'primitive accumulation'.\textsuperscript{229} SC-SCST Welfare Committee of the Kerala Legislative Assembly conducted a study in 1976 about how the migrant settlers had alienated land from the Adivasi people.\textsuperscript{230} Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act 1969 had left gaping loopholes, in effect, favouring migrant settler tenants over Adivasi landowners who had come to own fragmented landholdings. There were instances of non-tribals taking land on tenancies from Adivasis — who were mostly unaware of the legal intricacies — and subsequently claiming ownership under the land reform Act.\textsuperscript{231} 'Encroachers' could either have been powerful interests with political clout to flout the laws of the land or small holders taking advantage of the loopholes in government legislations. However, it would be wrong to believe that this has been the predominant pattern in the whole process of migration. It may be recalled that unlike in the new world where the 'indigenous people' were subjugated through violent conquest and by and large, decimated through a sort of ethnic cleansing, the processes of dispossession, marginalisation, assimilation into caste society and exploitation of the Adivasi people in India followed a different trajectory in India. Thus in Kerala, colonialism first made incursions into the Adivasi-inhabited forests and non-tribal peasant migrations to the Adivasi areas began under colonial rule since the depression of 1930s and the Second World War.

It should be recalled that in the traditional 'land surplus, labour-scarce Adivasi economy' of the past,\textsuperscript{232} there was no concept of private property over land nor had the Adivasis ever considered land to be a 'limiting factor of production'.\textsuperscript{233} It is rightly said that if the Adivasis had the mainstream notion of private property over land, they could, by now, have become owners of large tracts of land running into thousands of acres. As for the destruction of the forests by the migrant settler peasants in the process of turning them into cultivable land, it should also be recalled that mainstream environmental

\textsuperscript{229} Marx 1867 [1954], pp. 667-70.
\textsuperscript{230} Prakash 2002, p. 87.
\textsuperscript{231} Kunhaman 1985, p. 474.
\textsuperscript{232} Kunhaman 2002.
consciousness even at the world level came only in the 1960s by which time the migration to the eastern hilly terrain of the Malabar region had greatly subsided.\textsuperscript{234} As far as it can be gathered, the State had encouraged migration from a developmentalist perspective. The food shortages during the Second World War led the colonial government to decide on leasing out of forestlands for cultivation. The decision in this respect came on 20 October 1942. Leaving aside the ‘grow more food campaign’ since 1942, the net result of migration on the agriculture sector was apparently an enormous boost to cash crop production in the hills. Clearly, the powerful trading interests within Keralam benefited from the export of plantation products and export earnings swelled the foreign exchange reserves of the Government of India. Further, it has been pointed out that the Kerala High Court ruling that all forestland in the state should be considered agricultural land and conveniently used for cultivation was an added motivation for the state government to take over private forests in 1971.\textsuperscript{235} Viewed in this light, the State and the dominant classes cannot be absolved of the prime responsibility in the whole process of migration and Adivasi land alienation.

Another major failure by the proponents of identity politics is that they make no distinction of class between ‘large landowners’, and the ‘small and medium peasantry’ within the category of ‘settlers’/‘encroachers’. In fact, Adivasis in Keralam today, are a more or less undifferentiated category in terms of class formations. Therefore, it would be okay to speak about Adivasi identity but it is not so with ‘settlers’, which is a highly differentiated category, with sharp divisions into economic classes.\textsuperscript{236}

No distinction is sought to be made between ‘migrant settlers’ who moved in and cultivated forestlands for a livelihood and the villainous characters, from among the ‘migrant settlers’ or other powerful interests, who by hook or crook, grabbed land from the Adivasis and were ‘encroachers’ in the real sense. Land-grabbing and encroachments, especially of forestland, by powerful interests continue to this day. In any case, it is

\textsuperscript{234} Remember the work, Rachel L. Carson 1962: \textit{Silent Spring}, Other India Press, Mapusa – which was one of the early works in green writings in the west. As far as we know, there was no mainstream consciousness of the ill-effects of big dams before the publication of the report on Tennessee Valley River Water project in the United States.

\textsuperscript{235} Prakash 2002, pp. 78, 85.

\textsuperscript{236} Frankly speaking, the author himself was born into a lower middle peasant family within the category of ‘migrant settlers’. Although one’s birth is not a matter of one’s choice, there are various streams of thought invoking birth to be the marker of ‘collective guilt’, including the Christian notion of ‘original sin’ and the rioters of Gujarat. As a general principle, the social situatedness of the researcher does shape his/her interests/biases. But the determinism of social identity as necessarily determining one’s ideological stances is not convincing. Indeed, Naxalite Varghese had been a typical example of Lenin’s conception of ‘de-classed intellectuals’ from among the very migrant settler Christian community in Wayanad region. In any case, holier-than-thou approaches are not useful in such matters since it was the relatively privileged sections that did not have to become economic refugees.
important to make a conceptual distinction between 'migrant settlers' and 'encroachers'. Another important conceptual distinction to be made is between large landowners on the one hand and the small and medium migrant settlers on the other.

In this context, the concept of “benefit coalition” as advanced by Sudipta Kaviraj is a very useful one. He said that public policies often create ‘benefit coalitions’ which are vertical clientelist coalitions of the dominant classes with the subordinate classes. Such “benefit configurations” are real and are motivated by short-term calculations of political advantage, he said. Welfare programmes often created such short-term nexus of interest built up by directions of public policy. Thus the input subsidies (of fertilizer, electricity, etc.) in agriculture granted by the government during the period prior to the initiation of neo-liberal reforms in 1991 created benefit coalitions of ‘farmers’. During the reforms, the State has sought to curtail these subsidies as part of the policy of containing fiscal deficits, on grounds that these subsidies had mainly benefited the large landowners. Such benefit coalitions of the ‘farmers’ were useful during the pre-reforms period to avert the emergence of class-based political struggles. And today, they constitute a useful pretext for scrapping subsidies. We would say, these benefit coalitions may by no means be short-term or ad-hoc and might be able to pull on for a much longer period. We would argue that far from being a homogenous category, the ‘settler’ identity that is being counterpoised to that of the Adivasi identity has indeed been a ‘benefit coalition’ of a long-term character.

Bijoy and Ravi Raman wrongly pass off this ‘benefit coalition’ for an identity that may be more easily mistaken to be a homogenous category. Given the enormous political and economic clout of the large landowners among the ‘migrant settlers’ and ‘encroachers’, and the continuing land-grabs by them should indicate who have been the chief beneficiaries from within the benefit coalition of the ‘settlers’. Why put those ‘settlers’ who were forced to migrate to the hills of north Kerala as economic refugees and are still eking out a living from marginal holdings on the same plane with the large owners and encroachers? Why stop short of recognising the hard work put in by the poorer classes of the ‘settlers’ for decades on end in developing these areas? Why not call to account the large owners and encroachers who are still at large? If at one point of time,

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What comes to mind is the Malayalam proverb, ‘The chameleon and the crocodile uncle have together eaten up a goat.’

As mentioned earlier in the section, ‘The policy orientation of the State’ in this chapter. Devoid of class perspective, the stream of identity politics suffers from an inclination that is exemplified in the Malayalam saying, “The drain of elephants goes unnoticed; only the drain of mustard seeds is noticed.”
the State and the dominant classes encouraged migration by a section of the people, in order to effect ‘development’, at another point of time, the State cannot rightfully brand them ‘encroachers’ without itself taking the prime responsibility and making amends for its own acts and omissions in the past. The endgame of this predatory process of development is that today, the migrant settler peasants are victims of the price crisis under neo-liberal reforms.

We do not hereby mean to deny contradiction between Adivasi masses and the lower classes of ‘migrant settlers’. But in view of the concerns of justice, this contradiction is not to be considered an ‘antagonistic contradiction’ but rather a ‘non-antagonistic contradiction’ among sections of people.241 Certainly, pitting one section of the oppressed masses (the Adivasis, in this case) against another (the poorer majority of the ‘migrant settlers’), the identity politics approach and the Hindutva politics undermine the very notion of citizenship and the inclusive, non-partisan rights envisaged under it.242 The discourses of both Hindutva politics and Identity politics have the commonality of projecting to the centre-stage a non-antagonistic contradiction among the masses as the principal contradiction in this case. Further, the identity politics approach is, in this respect, amenable to a communal discourse in this case.

Often, identity politics, of the NGO variety in particular, isolates one or more contradictions from the rest of the contradictions, bringing the less determinant ones to the centré-stage. There is no recognition of the fact that at any given stage of social development, some contradictions are principal in that they shape and determine the character of other contradictions. As totality/the principle of primacy is missing from such approach, it turns out to be diversionary. Identity politics places exclusive emphasis on social liberation struggles that focus on intra-societal contradictions, as against militant class struggles and nationality struggles pitted against the State and the dominant classes.

Another major charge against ‘funded’ NGOs has been that they have been instrumental in bio-piracy of the knowledge of medicinal herbs and biodiversity of the Adivasis.243 Thus they had focused their activity around Nilgiri biosphere reserve. Solidarity, Highland Development Association (HILDA) and Adivasi Vikasana Pravarthaka Samiti

241 Mao Tse-Tung 1937 [1965]: “On Contradiction”, Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung, vol. 1, first pub. 1937, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, pp. 311-47. The Naxalite movement in Dandakaranya (parts of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Orissa) is known to have handled the contradiction between the Adivasis and migrant settlers from East Bengal (now, Bangladesh) non-antagonistically.


243 Madhyamam weekly (Malayalam) 2004: February 6 has carried an analysis of the reactionary activities of NGOs among the fisherfolk and Adivasis in Keralam historically.
during its early days have been NGOs that focussed on Keralam. In the U.N. Year of Indigenous Peoples in 1992, South Zone Adivasi Forum conducted the ‘Adivasi sangamam’ (Adivasi confluence) in Wayanad. In the context of the favourable High Court ruling on 15 October 1993, C.K. Janu, as Chairperson of the South Zone Adivasi Forum, a voluntary organisation, had led land-grab agitations on vested forests at Ambukuthy near Maananthavady in 1994 and at Panavalli in March 1995. By the end of 1980s, the crucial importance of ‘biodiversity’ was recognised by World Bank and other global capitalist agencies. The Joint Forest Management Programme with the help of the World Bank since 1970s was not effective enough. That is why the World Bank-initiated programme, “India Eco-Development Programme” being implemented in Keralam since 1998 envisaged a crucial role for selected Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The target was the Adivasis of Keralam through the Environment and Forests Ministry of the Government of Kerala. Clause 34 of the document demands the eviction of Adivasis from the forests. This is to be done with the help of NGOs undertaking welfare activities. Three per cent of the World Bank project funds are earmarked for NGOs. The Chennai-based Care Earth is entrusted with preparing the biodiversity programme for Keralam. Kalp vriksh, a Delhi-based NGO is working on suitably modifying the forest laws on World Bank lines. Biotech consortium, another Delhi-based NGO takes care of the administrative aspects. World Bank, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), European Economic Community (EEC) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) were the agencies that used to fund the NGO activities in the forest sector.

Periyar tiger reserve was one of the first seven World Bank projects since 1994 that evicted Adivasis from their domain for the sake of control over rare species of biodiversity in Thekkady forests. Mannaan, Paliyan tribes of Adivasis who used to depend on the Thekkady forests were evicted from the forests. 10 lakhs rupees of interest-free loan from the World Bank was expended for this purpose. The World Bank loan for rehabilitation of Adivasis at Marayoor also was meant for a similar purpose.

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244 Prakash 2002, p. 145.
245 Salimkumar 2003, p. 37.
246 The term, ‘biodiversity’ was coined only in 1985 and it became popular by 1988 and it was the focus of the earth summit of Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (Prakash 2002, pp. 91, 93).
247 Prakash 2002, p. 93-96; Another allegation against the NGOs is that they have cornered vast amounts of money from the Tribal welfare fund of the state government, without producing commensurate results.
248 Prakash 2002, pp. 96, 102, 92.
Let us consider another angle of the criticism against NGOs: Welcoming MNCs into tribal areas, siphoning off their resources in the name of development and culturally bringing them into the “mainstream” Hindu fold as through the debate on conversions ... are efforts towards marginalizing the tribals. \(^{249}\) NGOs have become overwhelmed with Provision for Extension to Tribal Areas Act (PESA) of 1995-96 in the tribal Scheduled Areas. It was then, known that the entire plan is for ‘devolution’ of power, that would benefit the industrialists to influence the local units of panchayat raj institutions. \(^{250}\)

Another perspective that fits into a minority communal brand of identity politics is the perspective of the Christian churches, which appears to be the very anti-thesis of the Hindutva approach and yet share common grounds with it, as both of them have the communal perspective. Thus many of the papers presented at a conference organised under the initiative of the Christian churches at Mananthawady in late 2003 argued that with the arrival of the Christian migrants, Adivasis were imparted modern education whereas the Hindus had subjected them to slavery as at the Valliyoor shrine. \(^{251}\) It is not emphasised that the migrants from Christian background had been instrumental in Adivasi land alienation in Wayanad on a wide scale. This view also turns a blind eye to prime role of the churches in Adivasi land alienation. That around 9 kilometre-stretch of prime land near Manathawady is held by the Catholic church is indicative of the role of the church in Adivasi land alienation.

‘Once again, it is of crucial relevance to underscore the prime responsibility of the State and the dominant interests rather than that of any undifferentiated social identity in the incidence of Adivasi land alienation and in the non-implementation of Schedule V in the state.

### Civil Liberties Perspective

The political struggles waged by Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS) under C.K. Janu and M. Geethanandan were for ‘Civil Liberties’ well within the confines of the Constitution, the laws of the land and government’s promises although it had an orientation towards transcending them. The leaders of AGMS, Janu and Geethanandan have declared time and again that unlike with the Naxalites, theirs is a fight for the

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\(^{250}\) In fact, the campaign for implementation of PESA was sponsored by OXFAM and Action Aid (both from UK). Forming self-help groups was part of the World Bank plan for mobilizing rural capital, rather than to aid the fight for resources and cultural identity of the local peoples (Sarangi 2004, p. 6).

democratisation of Kerala society that does not tantamount to a fight for 'new democratic revolution'.

Unlike those who insist on the implementation of the 1975 Act for 'recovery of alienated land' of the Adivasis, AGMS adopted a flexible approach with regard to alienated land. Thus Geethanandan says, "The quantum of land to be considered towards the restoration of alienated land is too little, only 7,500 acres as against our demand for a minimum of five acres each for landless families."252 AGMS demanded that alternative plots of land may be given by the government and has, on this count, often come in for criticisms from supporters and detractors alike. Such a demand addressed to the State was, on the one hand, an effective recognition of the prime responsibility of the State in the whole issue of Adivasi land alienation and was, on the other, helpful in avoiding a contradiction with the lower sections of the migrant settlers. Yet, retrospectively, to a certain extent, it turned the heat away from the large owners and encroachers, although the legal suit on alienated land pertaining to the 1975 Act is pending in the Supreme Court.

Yet there is one commonality today between the proponents of identity politics and actual struggles on the ground of Adivasis owing allegiance to AGMS and other deprived sections: As Michael Tharakan rightly pointed out, the most marginalized sections in the state – fishing communities or the Adivasis or, of late, farmers belonging to certain Christian religious sections are today "coming together on lines of ethnicity"255 demanding land rights. Conscious elements from within the Dalit community have also already begun to give the slogan, 'From colonies to agricultural land'.254

AGMS eschewed communal perspectives and operated within a paradigm of justice, democracy and dignified life. In fact, the political perspective of AGMS is based on the construct of a secular Adivasi identity, imbued with a sense of justice and having a

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252 A shift is seen in the perspective of K. Ravi Raman from supporting the Civil Liberties perspective of the AGMS (K. Ravi Raman 2002: "Breaking new ground Adivasi land struggle in Kerala", Economic and Political Weekly, 9 March) to advocacy for Identity Politics (Bijoy & Ravi Raman 2003). Thus in 2002, he wrote: "Probably, the ADSS's [Adivasi-Dalit Samara Samiti, predecessor of AGMS] biggest achievement has been its ability to break free of the spectre of 'restoration' [of alienated land]...." as against insistence on alienated land "by CPI (ML) Red Flag and BJP" (917). By contrast, there was greater emphasis on recovery of alienated land in Bijoy & Ravi Raman (2003, pp. 1975, 1979), who viewed it rather from the angle of a contradiction between Adivasi and 'settler' identities.


254 The 1970 land reforms favoured the tenantry mainly from Ezhava caste and failed to provide agricultural land to the Dalits who have been the actual tillers of the land. Dalits were provided only homestead land in colonies, as a compromise formulae.
perspective of Civil Liberties. During the land struggle at Panavalli [in 1994] Janu as the leader of Adivasi Vikasana Pravarthaka Samiti said, “Political, social, voluntary organisations had shared out the Adivasis. Now there is the consciousness that in order to resolve the problems of Adivasis, Adivasis themselves should come forward.”

Significant segments of the upcoming people’s political movements of the deprived in Kerala today have the orientation of Identity Politics, with a Civil Liberties perspective, as a matter of fact. This is unlike in the nine states in India – Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, West Bengal and Karnataka – where the Naxalite movement with a primarily class perspective has a militant presence. The Naxalite movement is also spreading out into the other states of the mainland India. The trend in Kerala is also unlike the trend in Kashmir and the Northeast of India where militant nationality movements are pitted against the Indian State.

What could be the plausible reasons for the emergence of ethnic identity based civil liberties movements of the deprived sections in contemporary Kerala? We list some of them below:

The disillusionment with the first wave of subordinate class politics in the state – as embodied in the mainstream left parties, the CPI and the CPI-M today – as a result of their failure to democratise society in favour of the deprived sections like Adivasis. Dalits, women and fisher people could have contributed to the rise of ethnic-identity based political struggles by these sections. Autonomous assertion of religious minorities in the state is also a significant trend in recent years, going by the indications of the emergence of non-Muslim League political formations within the Muslim community like National Democratic Front (NDF) and People’s Democratic Party (PDP) that combat fascistic Hindutva politics in India and imperialist aggressions on the world scale. The reverses faced by the Communist movement on a world-scale as a result of capitalist restoration under the dominant factions of revisionist/bureaucratic Communists could have further contributed to the loss of appeal for class politics as a political alternative to the deprived sections in the state, especially in the context of a highly ‘mediatised’ popular consciousness in the state.

Apparently, the State confers an aura of legitimacy to the identity politics stream as their participants are not considered extremists or are not repressed with a heavy hand, as the Naxalites were during the decade of seventies and early eighties. Moreover, these were

social liberation struggles akin to the movement of the blacks in the United States during the 1960s or of many a women’s movement during the post-second world war period. They were pitted against some oppressive social section(s) in society and were not militantly pitted against the State and the dominant classes. The State also sometimes extended its condescending patronage to these social liberation struggles, in its attempts to secure legitimacy for itself, provided these struggles were disjunct from the outlawed ‘extremist’ movements like revolutionary class struggles and nationality movements that adopted militant means.

The imagination of the identity, a political construction was already made possible from above and outside. Thus in the enumeration of the censuses by the Government of India, socially and culturally unconnected tribes were classified under a common rubric of ‘Scheduled Tribes’ (ST) and a large number of unrelated castes were classified under ‘Scheduled Castes’ (SC). Yet ‘ST’ and ‘SC’ remained sarkari (governmental) categories, with these sections identifying themselves as ‘Adivasis’ (in mainland India, not in the Northeast of India) and Dalits respectively. Geographical isolation, simple technology and condition of living, general backwardness, the practice of animism, tribal language and physical features were the criteria adopted for the classification of a tribe as ST by the Government of India. Colonial census of India 1901 had defined tribes as those who practised animism. In the subsequent censuses, animism was replaced by ‘tribal religion’. Relative isolation from the mainstream society has been another distinguishing feature of tribals according to colonial ethnography.

Another plausible reason for the emergence of identity-based political struggles in Keralam may be that the deprived social groups in Keralam have possibly benefited from the ideological resources of intellectual streams that critiqued Enlightenment/modernity. Thus postmodernism with its “incredulity toward meta-narratives” and support for plurality of perceptions and postcolonialism with its critique of Euro-centric perceptions, as in Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak lent legitimacy to the ‘little traditions’ like that of the Adivasis.

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256 It could be much like the imagination of the nation by the elites in Benedict Anderson.
257 For a political analysis of the term, ‘Dalit’, please see Section IV, under the sub-section, ‘Theoretical concerns’.
258 Virginius Xaxa 1999: “Tribes as indigenous people of India”, pp. 3589-95, Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 34, no. 51, 18 December, p. 3589; SCs are identified by the government as those castes that have historically suffered the disabilities of ‘untouchability’. The classification into SCs and STs has been done for the sake of protective discrimination (Ratnagar 2004).
259 Xaxa 1999, p. 3589.
The impediments to class formation from below, i.e. for the emergence of 'class for itself' in the Marxian schema, particularly age-old caste prejudices of the non-Adivasi, non-Dalit castes holding them back from striking alliances with the social sections at the lowest rung of the caste ladder could also have necessitated exclusivist mobilisations of these social identities. Thus class-conscious action by the lowest classes, including these marginalised social sections, has not yet materialised in contemporary Kerala society.

Yet another reason could be that the leadership of these identity struggles have, at times, benefited from the financial resources of 'funded' NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) or voluntary organisations.

Last but not the least, we would also like to hazard an “ad hoc hypothesis” that may involve a very crucial insight, that the rise of identity politics on the world scale during the post-Second World War years has greatly to do with the character of the oligopolistic global capitalism of our present era. Unlike in the case of capitalism of the classical free competition era, the decadent, rentier variants of capitalism – finance capitalism or imperialism since the end of the nineteenth century and colonialism dating further back – preserved even in a transformed form pre-capitalist social relations and did not democratise society in favour of the deprived sections. These plausible reasons may by no means be considered exhaustive.

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261 Thus C.K. Janu was the Chairperson of South Zone Adivasi Forum, a confederation of NGOs in early 1990s, although she distanced herself from it subsequently. And during the agitation erecting huts in front of the state secretariat in 2001, C.R. Bijoy, a prominent NGO activist played a crucial role in the agitation.

262 Paul Feyerabend opposed the “chauvinism of science” (Paul Feyerabend 1978: Against Method, Verso, London, pp. 12, 93) that inhibited progress in knowledge and strongly advocated for “scientific practice” as a playful activity. In this scheme, “ad hoc hypotheses” are important tools of analysis to begin with.

263 Summarising the five basic features of imperialism as enunciated by Lenin, V.I. (1917 [1986]: Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism, Progress Publishers, Moscow, p. 84), it may be said, oligarchy i.e., domination by a few transnational corporations and domination by an essentially rentier finance capital are the distinguishing features of imperialism. The contradiction between Imperialism and the oppressed nations and peoples may be conceptualised to be the principal contradiction on the world-scale, as it shapes and determines the character of the other social contradictions.

264 In the initial pages of the Communist Manifesto Marx was full praise for capitalism [of the classical phase]: “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. ... All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify.” (Karl Marx & Frederick Engels 1848 [1977]: Manifesto of the Communist Party, , pp. 98-137, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels 1977: Selected Works, Progress Publishers, Moscow, p. 111). Similarly, Engels in Family, Private Property and the State spoke of how capitalism under an advanced mode of production had ‘freed’ serfs from bonded labour and conditions were created for women to move out of their homes and hearths for participation in ‘social production’ (Frederick Engels 1891: The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, Progress publishers, Moscow, 1977 print, first published 1884, p. 158).
Having thus analysed the plausible reasons that lie behind the emergence of ethnic identity-based political struggles of the deprived in the state, let us examine certain positive aspects of these political struggles that may be listed as below:

It is rather easy to mobilise masses on a large scale since the mobilisation is based on an identity that is already embedded in popular consciousness. It requires no painstaking sanitisation of the popular consciousness. Divisions into sub-castes/tribes or even elementary differentiation into class formations is rightly disregarded.

A non-violent, civil liberties approach may be useful for an exclusivist movement of a miniscule minority, rather powerless to take on the powers-that-be.265

They address the non-class aspects of the oppression on these traditionally deprived sections, particularly the social and cultural aspects. The resolution of the non-class aspects of oppression could pave the way for future class solidarity among the deprived.

If networked with the class struggles going on in the rest of the country, they could be considered as significant advances towards democratisation of society. Moreover, among deprived social groups with hardly any differentiation into classes within them, these could constitute the beginnings of authentic class struggle.

These political struggles have also been useful from the angle of the self-determination of the deprived social identities because the leadership in these struggles mainly hail from within these identities themselves. Moreover, such leadership has been able to articulate the concerns of the affected people in their own categories of analysis.

The negative implications of identity-based struggles should not be overlooked:

While positing the Adivasi identity against the ‘settler’ identity, it may be recalled that the latter is, by no means, a homogenous category. Viewing it as such is unjust towards the marginal peasant ‘settlers’ among them, although for now popular consciousness may be organised in this way.

The logic of identity politics is amenable to communal perspectives and may, directly or indirectly, benefit the fascistic communal movement in the state that is today dangerously advancing by leaps and bounds.266

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265 By contrast, Marx already indicated the tendency for ‘primitive accumulation’ in the colonies (Marx 1867 [1954], pp. 716-24); Lenin spoke of the parasitic and rentier character, of capitalism of the imperialist stage in general and also of the “rentier state” in the richest or most powerful nations (Lenin 1917 [1986], pp. 93-102,117).

266 Thus the movement of the blacks under the leadership of Martin Luther King in the United States during the 1960s followed a non-violent, civil liberties approach.
The rigid identity-barriers could turn out to be divisive of the oppressed masses and does not help to unite masses in the struggle against overarching oppressive social structures like a reactionary State, imperialism, native monopoly capital, feudalism and the like. Thus Manoranjan Mohanty says, "The problem of exclusiveness of the social movements is fairly serious in contemporary times."267

Another issue is the question of leadership. Leadership which emerges from within the same social identity can be very useful for the State and the dominant classes for their co-optive tactics. The co-option can be near total if the leadership belongs to the deprived identity itself because the rank and file would find it difficult to understand the dynamics of capitulation by the leadership.

Identity-based struggles address mainly the concerns of liberation from social oppression and not so much those of class oppression and national oppression that come into direct conflict with the State. As their concern is mainly with social liberation and often, 'civil liberties' that are already recognised under the laws of the land, they can turn out to be conservative vis-à-vis the existing system.

On the balance, certainly, we do not think that identity-based struggles of the most marginalised sections should be considered undesirable and opposed. On the other hand, these should be considered part and parcel of the ongoing social revolution in the country. Considering the specific conditions that necessitated the emergence of the ethnic identity-based political struggles in the state, networking these struggles with the struggles of the oppressed masses in the rest of India might yield desirable results. We would hold that given the dominance of petty bourgeois politics and culture in Keralam, linkages with the struggles of the oppressed masses in the rest of India may be considered beneficial to the deprived sections in Keralam in the interests of social transformation.

Emergence of Rashtriya Mahasabha and Its Implications

On the first anniversary of Muthanga firing on 19 February 2004, Rashtriya Mahasabha (RMS) was launched under the leadership of Janu and Geethanandan. Against the caste/community vote bank politics of the mainstream political parties, the RMS vowed to 'beat the political parties in their own rules of the game'.268

266 Of late, the rapprochement between the NSS (Nair Service Society), the caste organisation of the Nair community and the SNDP (Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam), the caste organisation of the backward caste towards Hindu unity, rallied against the Christian and Muslim communities is preparing grounds for communal polarisation in the future.


268 Hindu 2004c: 20 February, Thiruvananthapuram edn.

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"The Keraleeya lessons of renaissance is of community formation. It is the politics of social justice that it entails." RMS would strive to achieve political singularity of Dalits; and so also of Adivasis.

"Even as communities such as Nairs, Ezhavas, Christians have been provided the opportunity to transform themselves into communities and self-ruled entities and enter into the politics of civil society, the untouchable caste groups are being displaced from their living environs, resources and traditional belief systems by modernity and communism." RMS would have them cooperate in building the organic relationship between human beings and nature.

The whole effort of RMS is directed towards protecting the organic relationship between human beings and nature. RMS makes a trenchant critique of the so-called ‘Kerala model’ for alienating human beings from nature, commodifying human relations, alienating the marginalized sections from control over land and for initiating an anti-people economic exchange system, which is getting further pronounced with globalisation.

The RMS is wise enough to recognise that the structural adjustment in the Indian economy "places under a question mark the social security of untouchable sections, the protection extended to weaker sections, the control over resources and nature by the local peoples." During the era of globalisation, the State is increasingly becoming a tool of oppression. Moreover, it divides and fragments civil society in accordance with the interests of capital. Its ultimate aim is to destroy the social harmony between the numerous social identities in civil society and bring them under the sway of capital.

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Ibid, p. 20; On 22 October 2003, at the conference on "Adivasi land, politics and power" at the Department of Political Science, Kerala University, Geethanandan stressed on the political import of a renaissance movement among the Adivasis and expressed optimism at the transformation in the outlook of the Adivasis at the ground level, following the agitation setting up huts in front of the Secretariat. Thus there is a decline in the practices of untouchability by Kurichian tribals towards Adiyan and Paniyan tribals, with the proposition of a unified Adivasi identity.


Ibid, p. 2.

Ibid, p. 29.

RMS 2004, p. 12; original quotation in Chapter I.

Ibid, p. 17.

Ibid. Salim Kumar who was in the leadership of the Adivasi Ekopana Samiti between 1995-98, also along with Janu, had accused the RMS to be primarily anti-imperialist and not anti-caste on grounds that colonialism was somewhat beneficial to the deprived castes in a critique of the RMS Manifesto in early 2004, "The manifesto of primitive communism'. The focus of
The RMS Manifesto is also wise enough to recognise that the self-financing groups set up by the World Bank, NABARD, etc. and the NGO institutions that are constantly being created are oriented to structurally transform the political establishments that have hitherto emerged from within civil society.277

B.R.P. Bhaskar, a journalist who has been vocal in his support for RMS, says, "If the efforts at Dalit-Adivasi unity succeeds, Rashtriya Mahasabha would be able to act as a pressure group."278

As for the implications of the formation of RMS, it signals the beginnings of the entry of Adivasis and Dalits also into the mainstream electoral politics based on Caste/Community identities. RMS seems to overlook the experience of the reactionary character of identity politics among the Backward castes in which the elite within the community became richer and more powerful with the constitution of community identity.279

Competitive caste/community politics has created unhealthy divisions among sections of the masses and the castes/religious communities have provided a social basis for a peculiar variety of identity politics in Kerala, enabling cross-class mobilization in elite politics. Thus the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) banks on Christian and Muslim vote banks and Left Democratic Front (LDF) relies on a secular Hindu identity in general and Ezhava identity in particular, CPI-M being the largest Hindu party in the state. Of late, this mainstream identity politics is also taking a communal turn as is evidenced in the Nair-Ezhava rapprochement or more specifically, the NSS-SNDP rapprochement.280 The Adivasi-Dalit sections are late-comers to this dining table of elite politics. Moreover, the electoral arithmetic of vote bank politics and the mechanism of party funding in elections do not seem to favour them to any significant extent.

In view of the increasing ‘Dalitisation’ of the Adivasi tribes, activists like K.M. Salim Kumar have been advocating the consolidation of the Adivasi-Dalit solidarity to achieve greater competitive edge numerically vis-à-vis dominant castes/communities like Syrian Christians and Nairs. As per Census 1991, the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) in Keralam

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277 The RMS Manifesto is on the social contradictions of caste under the Brahminical system. Yet the Manifesto does not overlook the other contradictions.
280 NSS is the Nair Service Society and SNDP is the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, the caste/community organisations of the Nairs and the Ezhavas, respectively. They are controlled by the elite within these communities and have the potential to shift votes from one front to the other.
constitute 9.92 per cent of the population. Together with the 1.10 per cent of Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis), the political formation of the Adivasis and Dalits may seek to represent only 11.02 per cent of the population, significantly smaller than any other major caste/community formation in the state unless they link up with fisher people, yet another historically deprived section. Inclusion of Dalit-Christian section could raise this percentage marginally. In the light of previous experience of other political formations championing alternative politics and given the nature of electoral politics driven by populist and even communal demagogy and money power, it may be said that the benefits from such creation of vote-banks to these deprived sections may be trifling.

Apparently, there seems to be a shift of emphasis from the advocacy of AGMS in favour of the landless and impoverished Adivasis to that of identity politics of an electoral nature. Thus K.K. Kochu had earlier criticised AGMS as follows: "The formation resolution of AGMS says, "We are the descendents of the original dwellers who got scattered as a result of the greed of the urban society and by the authorities." This declaration rules out the participation in the organisation of Adivasis who are small property owners and those who have acquired education and culture through 50 years of reservation. As a result, while it became impossible to unite Adivasis as a social section, the organisation leadership tried to rally them in struggles in their status as landless." RMS seems to be a step in the direction that Kochu had recommended.

Although there is mention that global capitalist forces are being facilitated to plunder biodiversity resources, we would say that knowledge of biodiversity being a unique and precious resource of the Adivasis, emphasis on protection of this knowledge is lacking in this Manifesto.

"Capitalism, Marxism and Brahminism have provided human society political institutions that preserve race-caste divisions and caste and gender divisions and hierarchies." The divergent streams within Marxism are held equated and revisionism is also equated with Marxism herein. In fact, it was an organised political force like the Naxalite movement which has taken up the cause of Adivasis in Kerala – time and again. It has also produced legendary leaders like A. Varghese who is widely respected among the Adivasis.

"The main source of violence is the centralisation of authority. [It is a task of RMS] to train [people] to practise non-violence in all aspects of life and to reject the legitimacy of the violent state in social life." The utopianism inherent in this notion suffers from a

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284 Ibid, p. 20.
failure to recognise the fact that every political movement is an incipient State in the making and that State is, in the Trotskyian-Weberian sense, 'the legitimate monopoly of violence in society'.

Yet it is not an anarchist but a liberal reformist agenda of social democracy and federalism that RMS manifesto sets forth. Thus it says: There is need to nurture and develop a political-governance system in India that could synthesise the streams of tribal national struggles, social renaissance streams of Poykayil Appachan [Yohannan] and Mahatma Ayyankaali and develop the concepts of social democracy and federal democracy of Dr. Ambedkar.285

But for the illusions in the existing electoral democracy, the ADSS/AGMS/RMS has been an important force for democratic change that has, with some success, articulated the just demands for the civil liberties of a most deprived section within the state.

**Democratic Rights Perspective**

Democratic rights perspective was an advance over the civil liberties perspective in that it accepts as legitimate all those rights, of which the masses become aware of and struggle for, irrespective of whether or not they are consistent with the laws of the land. 'Land to the tiller' and 'self-determination of nationalities' may be counted in among such Democratic Rights in India today. On the Adivasi land question in Keralam, besides the perspective of 'New Democratic Revolution' by the Naxalites, the anti-imperialist historical perspective of P.K. Prakash may be categorised among Democratic Rights perspective.286

i) 'The History and Politics of Adivasi Land Alienation'  

As against the stereotype explanations that explain the issue of Adivasi land alienation in the state solely as resulting from migration, P.K. Prakash takes an historical detour. It was the commercial tree-felling by the British that set the trend of the encroachments into the Adivasi inhabited forestlands in Wayanad. After the Second World War, migration from south central Keralam also began on a large scale.287

He says, "The forest laws of 1864 and 1927, the forest policy of 1952, the wildlife protection Act of 1972, the Forest Conservation Act of 1980 and the forest protection policy formulated in 2002 are meant to evict Adivasis from the forests."288

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286 Prakash 2002; Prakash 2003.  
Colonialism has a crucial role in evicting Adivasis from their habitats, not only in Keralam but all over the world. And yet today, colonialism, in its neo-colonial state, has become a protector of the Adivasis by naming them 'indigenous people'. World Bank, United Nations and several non-governmental voluntary organisations (N.G.O.) have donned the garb of the protectors of Adivasis. This neo-colonial Adivasi protection has as its sole objective the exploitation of their traditional knowledge and genetic resources.²⁸⁹

Till the end of 1980s, wood was the main forest resource. The other resources were termed 'minor forest produces'. Even colonialism did not use to prevent Adivasis from collecting 'minor forest produces'. The new Participatory Forest Management promoted by the World Bank aims at restricting Adivasis from collecting non-timber products from the forests. The recent World Bank proposal of the "India Eco-Development Programme" recognises that 'India is home to 60 to 70 per cent of all biodiversity the world over'.²⁹⁰

The most systematic contribution towards world environment imbalance comes from the World Bank. The first loan of the World Bank to Keralam in 1984, was 59.9 crore rupees towards 'social forestry' project which was implemented through encroachment of the Adivasi habitations. The World Bank began its efforts through projects to achieve dominance over biodiversity resources in 1994, in the name of the protection of biodiversity. Out of the first seven project sites, Periyar Tiger Reserve was one very important site. What is sought to be achieved through the tenth plan is the extension of this programme to whole forest coverage in the country.²⁹¹

"The thrust of the new programme of the World Bank is the exploitation of the intellectual property resources of the Adivasis." Again, he says, "In the new mode of incursions of imperialism into the forests, it is the Adivasis who are, once again, being displaced."²⁹²

"Adivasi did not get his alienated land, nor did he get land through the land reforms, nor through the nationalisation of private forests. Of late, the land got allotted in his name is alienated even before he gets possession of it. Along with this, he is having to vacate from the forests in which he used to live for centuries. He is being sterilised...." ²⁹³

"Implementation of the declaration of Scheduled Areas, ensuring the rights of Adivasis over forest-resources and ensuring steps to make available good, cultivable land to

²⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 17.
²⁹⁰ Prakash 2002, pp. 91-93.
²⁹¹ Ibid, pp. 95-97.
²⁹² Ibid, pp. 98, 102.

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Adivasis is the sole means to save the Adivasis from extinction." Only by re-establishing the rights over forests and tribal self-rule to the Adivasis could a solution be arrived at.293

ii) The Naxalite Discourse of 'New Democracy'

The most notable among variants of the Democratic Rights discourse is the theory of 'New Democratic Revolution' as advocated and struggled for by the Naxalites.

The Naxalite perspective envisaged the democratisation of society and development of productive forces under the leadership of the basic producing classes - the working class being the leading class and the peasantry being the main force. Besides the two basic producing classes, the petty bourgeoisie and patriotic capitalists are supposed to come into the four-class revolutionary alliance.294 It believed that the bourgeoisie under imperialism (oligopolistic global capitalism) had lost the capacity to democratise society295 and develop the productive forces in the oppressed countries, as it allies with pre-capitalist social relations, particularly feudalism.296 The Naxalites propose to ameliorate the non-class aspects of oppression on oppressed nationalities, women, Dalits, Adivasis and religious minorities through a 'New Democratic Revolution' in India. In other words, the Naxalites held the view that first there should be democracy as a pre-condition even before we can build socialism. Feudalism, imperialism and comprador-bureaucrat capital are reckoned to be the 'three mountains'297 weighing down upon the Indian peoples and are therefore the targets of the 'New Democratic Revolution' in India.

Moreover, as against the path of 'peaceful transition to socialism' advocated by the revisionist stream, the Naxalites upheld the path of 'protracted people's war'.298

How far the characterisation of 'feudalism' is applicable to the mode of production in contemporary India is a matter of debate. Yet land struggles may be considered a crucial issue concerning livelihood in most parts of India for the majority of the population

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294 New Vistas Publications 2003: 30 Years of Naxalbari, Delhi, p. 4; All India Revolutionary Students Federation (AIRSF) 1996 (1993): Naxalbari is not just the name of a village!, published by Chandan Roy, Calcutta, first pub. 1993, p. 18.
295 On the contrary, in the classical phase of capitalist development, serfs were liberated from the bondage of feudalism and women were liberated from their homes and hearths to participating in social production.
297 Concentrated as it was in the backward regions of the country and having 'land to the tiller' as their main slogan for mass mobilisation, the Naxalite movement, rightly or wrongly, considered Feudalism to be a significant force to be reckoned with. As for 'Comprador-bureaucrat capital', the Naxalite viewpoint is well-articulated by Suniti Kumar Ghosh (2000). The bureaucrat capital of the State was hand in glove with the Indian big capital and helped boost its surpluses as was envisaged under the Bombay Plan of 1944. In the 1960s when it was conceptualised, Imperialism, for the Naxalites included both US imperialism and "Soviet social imperialism".
engaged in the agriculture sector. Indeed, control over the principal productive asset in a primarily agrarian country could indeed be considered the principal task of any movement for comprehensive social transformation in the country. It is to be noted that it is not a socialist revolution that the Naxalites, being adherents of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, wanted to achieve in the first place. Rather, it is an anti-feudal, anti-imperialist ‘New Democratic Revolution’. In other words, in the Naxalite perspective, there should be democracy in the first place, as a pre-condition even before we can build socialism. Even with the Naxalite stream, there has often been a tendency to reduce the struggles for the rights of the oppressed nationalities and marginalised social groups to the angle of an anti-feudal, anti-imperialist class struggle. Yet one clear advantage with this perspective is that it seeks to integrate the struggles of marginalised social groups into the overarching framework of anti-feudal, anti-imperialist class struggle.

iii) The Naxalite View on the Adivasi Land Question in Keralam

Similar to P.K. Prakash, the Naxalites (the Indian Maoists) view that historically, the colonial powers first initiated teak cultivation in forestland as in Nilamboor and subsequently they turned to plantations, as of spices at Ancharakkandy in Kannur district and coffee plantations in Wayanad region. The wild life sanctuaries initiated since the 1970s and declaration of reserve forests also displaced Adivasis on a large scale. As for the role of the State according to Naxalites, Tata-tea, Popson company, Veerendra Kumar and K.M. Mani who encroached on Mathikettaan, the last surviving rain-forests in Keralam have received full protection from the government. Going by the Naxalite perspective, “Adivasi issue is ultimately a class question.” Sectarian perspectives like Dalit ideology and Adivasi ideology isolate the struggling forces and constrain their reach within narrow confines. The Adivasi Samara Sangham (Marxist-Leninist) has been able to secure the confidence of Malayalee settler peasants also not because they have given up on the specificities of the Adivasi land question but because they followed the policy of uniting all exploited sections. The poor migrant peasants should be conscientised that it is the same forces that have compelled them to leave their own native

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300 Madhavan 2002-03: “Adivasi mekalayil cheruthunilpukal sakthamaakunnu” (Resistance grows stronger in Adivasi areas – Malayalam), pp. 3-6, Janavimukti Malayalam bi-monthly, p. 3.
301 Ayyankaalippada 2003: “Yuvathvam theruviliranguka” (Youthfulness, hit the streets – Malayalam), Statement in Munnanipporali, no. 82, March-April, pp. 10, 16.
302 CPI-ML Naxalbari 2003: Press statement, 1 March, as on Munnanipporali, March – April, p.16.
303 Murali 2003: “Muthangayil chithariya chorathulliikal orikkalum paazhaavilla” (The blood spilled at Muthanga will never go in vain), Munnanipporali, no. 82, March-April, p. 9.
places and seek livelihood elsewhere that are also preparing the grounds for the extinction of the Adivasi masses.\textsuperscript{305}

On the question of alienated land, the Naxalites hold that land in lieu should be provided not to the Adivasis whose plots were alienated but to the poor migrant settler peasants. The illegal land in possession of the biggest landowners in Keralam, Tata and Goenka would be sufficient towards such resettlement.\textsuperscript{306}

Naxalite perspective holds that the ‘Adivasi issue’ needs to be linked up to the quest for liberation of the whole people. The Naxalites have the perspective of forging a broad unity of Adivasis, landless-small peasants and plantation workers. They hold that the struggle has to be linked up to the militant struggle against the powers-that-be, the comprador big capitalists – including the owners of large plantations like Kannan Devan and Malayalam Harrisson – feudalism and imperialism.\textsuperscript{307}

\textbf{iv) ‘Land, Caste, Bondage’}

The caste-feudal system in Keralam had combined the \textit{adiyaala} practice (bonded labour which combined elements of slavery like purchase and sale) for Dalits and sections of Adivasis, with tenant cultivation by Sudras and other \textit{avarna} castes, and the monopoly over land by the \textit{savarna} castes. The transformation under colonialism released Dalits and Adivasis from the old \textit{adiyaala} system; the land reforms after the transfer of power implied a transition to \textit{kudikidappu} (hutment dwellings) yet they continued to be deprived of land and they continued to be the prime source of surplus extraction.\textsuperscript{308}

Ajith shows that Adivasi holdings owning above 7.5 acres of land had a decline in their land area by 13.6 per cent, that is, nearly 5 acres on the average during 1980-81 to 1985-86, perhaps, owing to land-grab from Adivasis by non-tribals using the provisions of the land reform legislation granting ownership to tenants.\textsuperscript{309}

Average land area of Adivasi holdings went down from 165 cents to 150 cents between 1980-81 to 1985-86 although the number of holdings and total area went up. The Dalit landholdings which were much smaller in average size (30 cents) also further went down

\textsuperscript{305} Munnanipporali, 2003b: “Vamsaadhipathyathe sovikkunna saampathika vaadam” (Economism that serves racial dominance – Malayalam), extracts from \textit{Munnanipporali}, no. 31, November 1996; as cited in \textit{Munnanipporali} no. 82, March-April 2003, p. 10.


\textsuperscript{307} Madhavan 2002-03, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{308} Ajith 2002, pp. 30-31, 44, 56.

\textsuperscript{309} Ibid, pp. 77, 221, 77.
to 25 cents during the corresponding period. As a natural outcome of their historically adiyaala status, the Dalits have greater proportion of landless among them as compared to the Adivasis.\footnote{Ajith 2002, pp. 221, 77, 192.}

And yet, landlessness among the traditional adiyaala tribes in the state is much more severe than among the Dalits. Thus 2.36 per cent of all the landless agricultural labourer families in the state are Adivasis although the population share of the traditional adiyaala tribes in Keralam may roughly be estimated as only 30 per cent of the total Adivasi population that is, roughly 0.33 per cent of the total population of the state. This shows how many times more than their proportion in the population are the landless among them.\footnote{Ajith 2002, p. 79, 192.}

After the states of Punjab and Haryana, Keralam has the highest number of landless families and Dalit-Adivasi landless rural-agricultural labourer families,\footnote{Ibid, p. 191-2.} possibly as a fallout of the capitalist development in agriculture.\footnote{Freeling the labourer under capitalism was in the Marxian dual sense of not only freeing them from feudal bondage but also from the ownership of the means of production (as cited in Ajith 2002, p. 84; f.n. 17).} Thus the percentage of landless households in Keralam in 1982 was 12.8 per cent; as shown by the National Sample Survey rounds.\footnote{Kurien 1994, p. 54.}

The higher percentage of Dalit and Adivasi landless in Keralam indicates the urgency of the land question among these sections. Thus among rural agricultural labour families, 79.24 per cent Dalits and 89.45 per cent Adivasis do not own cultivable land as compared to 75.70 per cent for as compared to All rural agricultural labour families.\footnote{Government of India 1998: \textit{Rural Labour Enquiry Report on General Characteristics of Rural Labour Households (50th Round of NSS), 1993-94}, Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour, pp. 38-40.} Non-economic coercion and new forms of deference continued as integral to the existence of poor, landless peasants, especially, Dalits and Adivasi tribes.\footnote{Ajith 2002, pp. 84-85.} After Marx, 'The
relationship between owners of the means of production and the direct producers is the inner secret of the whole social system... Ajith follows this dictum that the Mode of Production should be assessed on the basis of this fundamental relationship and Ajith tends to approximate the Mode of Production that characterises Kerala society as 'semi-feudal, semi-colonial'.

Before concluding this section, it is apt to have a word of caution here: The experiences of the countries where transition to socialism was attempted alert us to the possibility that once the Communist Party begins to exercise political power, it could turn against the very social base of whom they are supposed to be the vanguard. The party bureaucrats may come to have interests contradictory to those of the masses under the bureaucrat State capitalist regimes.

There are two lessons we learn from the failures and reverses of the peoples movements in general and the socialist movement in particular: Firstly, the broad masses of people should have effective control on the States that emerge through alternative political movements. The goal should be to transform the State into an instrument for popular mobilisation and the development of democratic capacities. Ways and means need to be devised towards this end. One of them could be to have independent civil and democratic rights organisations that would act as corrective forces for the alternative political movements. Secondly, the movements themselves should have effective two-line struggles and rectification efforts within them with a view to guard against degeneration within.

That Justice may Prevail:

From the foregoing analysis, we notice that it is the acts of omission and commission by the State and the powerful classes that propelled the development process that was primarily responsible for the land alienation of the Adivasis in the state. Reducing the question of Adivasis' land rights to merely a communal angle or to a question of conflict of identities devoid of class approach or reducing it even to a merely class angle could serve the class interests of certain dominant classes/social groups and are revolting to the concerns of justice.

320 See further discussion on this in Chapter VII.
Land rights, for the Adivasis, is not merely economic but also cultural as their traditional
culture was rooted to the land they lived on. Moreover, land is never a speculative asset
with the Adivasis. Therefore, the State needs to have the political will to return of
alienated land to the Adivasis. This warrants confiscation of alienated Adivasi land and
excess land from settler farmers with large holdings and resettlement of lower class
'settlers' on payment of adequate compensation for the several decades of hard work that
they have put in. However, given its past record, the State looks, by no means, inclined to
fulfil this task.

Given the prime responsibility of the State and the dominant classes in Adivasi land
alienation, and given the total disinclination of the State to implement a return of
alienated land, it might have been tactically correct for the Adivasi land struggles in
Keralam (both the civil liberties stream and the NDR stream) not to have gone into
confrontation with the lower class peasant settlers, who were also victims of the system
by the same token, on the question of alienated land. It was reasonable enough that the
Adivasis staked claims over government land and large land-holdings. It was rather just
and magnanimous on the part of the AGMS and the Naxalites, unlike the cynically
minded interests that wanted to pit the Adivasis against the poorer classes of settlers on
communal grounds or on grounds of identity. It was human that standing on the high
ground of justice, the dispossessed Adivasis are able to feel for another exploited section,
even when the latter have been instrumental in their marginalisation.

There have been inevitable conflicts of perspective amongst those who have genuinely
wanted the amelioration of the penurious conditions of the Adivasis in the state. Thus the
activists of Naxalite movement with NDR perspective considered the struggle by AGMS
as merely partial, economic struggles not linked up to the larger goals of fundamental
social transformation. The AGMS leadership charged the Naxalites with adventurism that
has been instrumental in police atrocities on Adivasis on suspicion that the Adivasis were
supporters of the 'extremist' movement, as in the case of taking hostage of the Palakkad
Collector in 1996.322 Differences in strategies and tactics apart, we would argue, there
could be common grounds in perspective between civil liberties approach, NDR approach
and even the identity-based struggles on grounds of Justice that could be acceptable to
liberal and Marxist streams alike.

It has been pointed out that the concept of 'Justice' is quite consistent with Marxism as
well. Having analysed capitalism, Marx did think it unjust. Moreover, Marx did imply a
broader conception of Justice linked to the analysis of materialist historical stages of

322 On October 4 1996, Ayyankaali pada made captive of the Palakkad collector demanding the
development and the potential agencies for change.\textsuperscript{323} "[A] concern with distribution is not intrinsically reformist."\textsuperscript{324} Of course, it is granted that revolution in Marxist parlance has to transcend the ethical concerns of distribution and has to do with the ownership of the means of production. Nevertheless, concerns of welfare and re-distributive justice for the masses cannot make a protracted wait until an alternative system emerges. It is only a mechanical Marxist view that would hold that the ripening of ‘objective conditions’ i.e., proletarianisation of the masses is in the interests of the revolution. Rather, ‘subjective forces’ – organisational strength and revolutionary consciousness – seem to be the primary determinants of radical transformation.\textsuperscript{325} Engaging in partial, economic struggles is not the major pitfall but the drawback lies in not linking up partial economic struggles to the larger goals of fundamental social transformation. Moreover, the Marxists (particularly of the conventional/revisionist streams) need to recognise the specificity and autonomy of the non-class oppression on Adivasis even as those of liberal persuasion need to concede the primacy of the role of the State and the dominant classes in causing Adivasi land alienation.

Our interaction with the leadership and cadres of Adivasi land struggles reveal that land is the first demand as far as the “subjective well-being”\textsuperscript{326} of the Adivasi masses in Kerala today is concerned. Control over productive assets apart, building of human ‘capabilities’\textsuperscript{327} could also lead to the amelioration of the conditions of Adivasis. Education may figure as the most important capability in this view as it may lead to greater upward mobility and other spin-off benefits like greater assertiveness. Geethanandan is of the view that education imparted to Adivasis need to be in tune with the specificities of the Adivasi way of life and yet it should be able to obtain recognition under the government schema so that Adivasis would not be denied upward social mobility. ‘Kanavu’ educational initiative under the leadership of Mr. K.J. Baby in Wayanad was able to take care of the former concern, not the latter.\textsuperscript{328} Another neglected

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{324} Norman Geras 1991, p. 276.
  \item \textsuperscript{325} Analysing the Great Indian Revolt of 1857, Marx rightly said that the revolt started not with the “dishonoured ryots” but with the sepoys “clad, fed, petted, fatted and pampered” by the British (Marx 1857: 4 September, in Susobhan Sarkar, “Marx on Indian history”, pp. 93-108, in P.C. Joshi (ed.) 1969: \textit{Homage to Karl Marx}, People’s publishing house, Delhi, Ahmedabad, Bombay, p. 103).
  \item \textsuperscript{326} ‘Subjective well-being’ may be described as well-being perceived as such by the masses themselves, as against the ‘objective’ indicators adopted by statisticians and econometricians.
  \item \textsuperscript{327} Jean Dreze & Amartya Sen 1995: \textit{India Economic Development and Social Opportunity}, Oxford University Press, Delhi, pp. 10-11. Capability herein is defined as “the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead”. Alternatively, Sen (1999, p. 75) had defined “Capability [as] a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles).”
  \item \textsuperscript{328} M. Geethanandan, personal communication, 19 February 2005.
\end{itemize}
aspect with regard to capability building of the Adivasi masses is concerning their extraordinary knowledge of bio-diversity and medicinal herbs. Unfortunately, these are today being pirated and patented. Had they been rewarded for such knowledge, they could, at least, have led a dignified life.

We would recommend that the operations of NGOs need to be stringently regulated in this respect. Awareness campaigns need to be conducted among the Adivasi masses about the dangers of losing control over their precious knowledge. Government could take initiatives in securing patents of which substantial proceeds could be devoted to the welfare of the concerned Adivasi tribes although there is as yet no provision under the World Trade Organisation for protection of collective knowledge systems. The patent of aarogya pacha for the Kaani tribe through the initiatives of Tropical Botanical Garden of India (TBGRI) could be critically emulated in this respect.\textsuperscript{329}

Sexual exploitation of Adivasi women by non-tribals and the question of unwed mothers is another area of serious concern.\textsuperscript{330} Moreover, as per their tradition, the Adivasi women in the state do not have property rights over land. It should be a reflection of the current plight of the Adivasi people in the state that mental illness, suicides and prostitution which were previously rare among tribal peoples are on the increase among them, particularly at Attappady. Indeed, traditionally the Adivasis have been out of the social mainstream with practices of dowry, communal conflicts, suicides, etc. They have also had a much more harmonious relationship with nature. That the Eravallan tribe at Plachimada in Perumatty panchayat of Palakkad district are now placed in contradiction with the multinational giant, Coca-cola, on the question of over-exploitation of ground water, is indicative of how new forms of exploitation are piling up on the already marginalised Adivasis apart from the traditional forms of dispossession and exploitation.

There is diversity in the life-style and means of livelihood of the various Adivasi tribes in the state. Among the 38 or more little Adivasi tribes in Keralam, not all of them engage in settled agriculture. And therefore, the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to policy-making is bound to boomerang, as the past experiences amply indicate. Cholanaickar, Kaattunaickar, Kurumbar, Kaadar, Korakar tribes are among “primitive tribes” and

\textsuperscript{329} TBGRI had acquired patent for ‘Jeevani’, a medicinal preparation from the ‘Aarogyappacha’ herb known to the Kaani tribe (Prakash 2002, p. 101). TBGRI had commercial transactions with Coimbatore Aryavaidya pharmacy to promote the product. But today, the product is also being sold by Nutriscience Innovations, a US multinational through their website.

\textsuperscript{330} Government of Kerala (GoK) 2000: Report of the legislative committee on the sexual exploitation of Adivasi girls, Kerala Legislative Assembly (chaired by C.P. Balan Vaidyar), 4 August.
admittedly, the most endangered ones who constitute 4.8 per cent of total tribal population of the state. Cholanaicker live in caves and survive by hunting and gathering, Kaattunaicker live by collecting minor forest produces. Kurumbar do shift cultivation in forests.331

Only Kurichiar, Malayarayar, Muthuvaan and Mullukkurumbar tribes are relatively better off with nominal amounts of landholdings. Only Kurichiar, Kurumbar and Malayarayar tribes engaged in agriculture traditionally. Adiyar, Paniyar, Iravaalan, Irular, Mudugar tribes became agricultural labourers after they were evicted from the forests.332

Kurichiar, Mullikkurumar and Irular of Attappady and the Malayarayar of south central Keralam (Idukki, Kottayam, Pathanamthitta districts) engage in agriculture including cardamom cultivation.333 Kaanikkar earn livelihood from agriculture and gathering forest resources, Ooralikkurumar live by making earthen pots with clay.334

For those that do not as yet engage in settled agriculture, the struggle could be for their legitimate rights over forestland. The proposed legislation by the Centre, Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Land Rights) Bill 2005 has been criticised on grounds that the tribals in need of transient gain may be used by vested interests to denude forests thus causing permanent loss to the forest cover in the country. Dense canopy forest area in the country is at present around 8 per cent and the Adivasi population in the country is around 7 per cent. If this forest is assigned to the tribals, the forest areas will have an average density of population of the country and could be a sure recipe for disaster. This is especially because a section of the Adivasis have imbibed modern social values and often, in league with forest mafia seek short-term material gains that could result in permanent ecological damage. Interestingly, others have proposed that the forest dwellers could contribute to the renewal of degraded forests, which constitutes around 10 per cent of the land area in the country. This proposal of gainfully employing the tribals for the renewal of degraded forests needs consideration and serious open debates involving the Adivasis themselves, considering the vast extent of the degraded forests. This proposal could sound patronising and lead to newer forms of exploitation of the Adivasi masses unless the crucial question of their self-determination in the form of self-rule is taken into account. In Keralam, the rich canopy of forests may be only less than 7 per cent and there could be another 7 per cent of degraded forests.335 The tribal population

331 Prakash 2003, pp. 103, 19.
332 Ibid, pp. 107, 108.
in the state is around 1.14 per cent. The situation, in this respect, is definitely better than that of the country as a whole.

Pressure must be brought to bear on the government to immediately allot agricultural land with state farms and large owners and encroachers to those Adivasis (tribes such as Paniyas and Adiyas) who are already integrated into class society as agricultural labourers. Needless to say, due consideration needs to be given to the wishes of the tribes concerned in allotting forestland or agricultural land. Moreover, implementation of Scheduled Areas under Schedule V of the Constitution should be brought into effect to ensure partial self-rule and prevent further land alienation. Following Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen in their well-known categorisation of ‘income poverty’ and ‘capability poverty’336, we would say that in order to ameliorate ‘income poverty’, land distribution could be the principal remedy and improvement of education could significantly alleviate ‘capability poverty’. The mainstream of Kerala society had gained education since the period of the social reform movements (since the latter half of the nineteenth century) and had benefited from land reforms subsequently (roughly during 1950-80). Sadly, the Adivasis had missed the bus during both social reform movements and land reforms. Economic backwardness should, however, be considered the main cause behind educational backwardness as well. And therefore, in an economy wherein agriculture is the principal commodity-producing sector, control over the principal productive asset, namely, land should be considered the key to the solution to the so-called ‘Adivasi problem’.

Indeed, during the globalisation of capital, with increasing mobility of oligopolistic capital and a ‘huge superstructure of speculative capital over the slender base of real productive capital’,337 capital flights and economic collapses have become the order of the day in many a country in the peripheries of global capitalism. Against this backdrop, class struggles for asserting control over fixed productive assets by the masses assume increasing importance under the new globalisation of finance capital. State’s retreat from social welfare responsibilities and the high degree of concentration of landholdings in Keralam and the high incidence of landlessness are added reasons to support the cause of land struggles. The marked decline in food grains production338 and the volatility of

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338 In Keralam, the area under food grains declined by 37 percent and output by 33 percent during 1990s (Kannan K.P. 2000: *Food Security in a Regional Perspective A view from ‘Food Deficit’ Kerala*, Working Paper no. 304, Centre for Development Studies, 395
prices in the plantation sector, particularly under an open economy indicate the need to move away from agriculture dominated by the plantations.

Adivasis who constitute only over one per cent of the population of the state, are also victims of the vote bank politics. In this context, a partial, economic demand could be for separate ‘Adivasi constituencies’ in the state. Marginal peasants instrumental in Adivasi land alienation may be resettled, but the large owners who turned land-sharks need to be called to account. It is genuine peoples political movements with a willingness to recognise the linkages of non-class oppressions with the overarching class divisions in society that are in a better position to pressurise the State to initiate policies that could impart justice to all sections of society, the most marginalised, in particular.

IV. Reflections on a Dalit Land Struggle in Keralam

‘Our consciousness of rights is rising like the Sun Would you be able to prevent the Sun-rises over this land?’

Even after the much-acclaimed land reforms in 1970, and in the midst of highly questionable projections about the ‘Kerala model’, the relative disparity in standards of life of the marginalised sections with the mainstream society presents a stark paradox in the ‘Kerala experience’. We focus herein on the question of landlessness and land hunger among Dalits, a major chunk of the marginalised sections in the state. It is to be noted that although Dalits constitute about 10 per cent of the population of the state, they are not politically organised even to the extent that Adivasis have been.

At the outset, let us mention the politics of naming the community. Dalits are the group of castes that come lowest in the five-fold system of varnas or the caste system. Traditionally, they were the untouchables or the outcastes who lived on the outskirts of...
the village. Today, the term ‘Dalits’ is gaining increasing currency all across the country, as a marker of identity and self-assertion of the traditionally ‘untouchable’ sections. M.K. Gandhi named them ‘Harijan’, meaning children of God. B.R. Ambedkar, considered to be the father of the Indian Constitution, himself a Dalit, resented the patronising overtones of the term, probably because Gandhiji had accepted the varna system and had adopted largely pro-savarna positions. Alternatively, Ambedkar named the ‘untouchables’ as ‘Dalits’. The terms, ‘untouchables’ or adiyaalar or slaves are not as much detested by the Dalits in designating their actual historical status. In the government terminology, they are ‘Scheduled Castes’ (SC), as they have been listed under this rubric in the Constitution of India and the Census documents. However, it gained no popular appeal, except in official terminology. The term, ‘Dalits’ (meaning, crushed people) with its origins in Marathi language is of rather recent origin, associated with the self-respect movement for Dalits led by Ambedkar and is widely accepted by the community in question and so we too would opt to stick to this term, since this term can be be considered a self-named category. The term, Dalit was used by no less a person than Ambdekar in his fortnightly called Bahishkrut Bharat. He used the category, ‘Pad Dalit’ while addressing his own social constituency, meaning those crushed under the feet of the Hindu system.342

Theoretical Concerns

At least three distinct shades of political opinion can be discerned concerning the land question of the marginalised sections in the state:343 Firstly, both the Union and state governments insist that land reforms is a closed chapter, even as the demand for land among deprived sections seems to be on the rise countrywide and statewide.344

Secondly, there has, of late, been some recognition of the acute problems of landlessness and marginalisation even by a few in the mainstream. Michael Tharakan argued for [second-generation] land reforms in favour of the marginalised ethnic identities. There has been a recognition herein that ethnic identity-based political struggles of the deprived

343 For detailed discussions on the theory and relevance of land reforms, see Section II of this chapter.
344 Maoist movement(s) in large tracts of the mainland India (excluding Kashmir and the North-East) have thrived on the basis of this single-most important issue. Over the last one decade, Adivasis in Kerala have been mobilised on a wide scale on the land question. The demand for land among Dalits, fisher people and other sections of the agrarian poor has been on the rise in the state.
has been a significant trend in the state in recent years. Nevertheless, where there was recognition of the issue, it was mostly limited to the level of a partial, economic issue and not a question of political struggle.

The third shade of political opinion takes the classical Maoist stand that what is called for is an Agrarian revolution, and not another round of reforms that might lead into greater dependency vis-à-vis imperialism. Highly skewed land relations as in plantations, the persisting relation between caste hierarchy and land relations, the landlessness of the actual toilers on land, land ownership without the need for engaging in agriculture, subsistence agriculture on leased lands, landlordism and extra-economic coercion, severe exploitation through usury and trade, etc. are given as the rationale for the agrarian revolution. A genuine agenda for alleviation of caste inequalities needs to focus on three aspects: Firstly, on the cultural aspects of caste discrimination, untouchability in particular, that has shown a declining trend ever since the colonial times. Secondly and more significantly, on the economic aspect of Production, particularly in relation to the historically handed down land question in an economy where agriculture still remains the principal commodity producing sector. And not least of all, on Re-production that focuses on inter-caste marriages as a route to the eradication of caste. The politics of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has, apparently, placed exclusive emphasis on the first aspect to the exclusion of the second and the third.

"In fact, the so-called dalit problem is the twin problem of economic deprivation and social discrimination." Land rights entail control over the principal productive resource in a primarily agrarian economy and could be central to the concerns of livelihood. As Kunhaman puts it succinctly, "Human rights for the dalits mean right to livelihood, which depends on the right to land." Given the fact that the skewed land relations has been intimately related to the caste structure in the traditional society, the land question was

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345 There has been considerable disenchantment among the non-class deprived social groups with the reductionist class discourse of the mainstream left parties that failed to provide justice to them.


347 The land question does address the principal aspect of the caste contradiction. Protective discrimination towards deprived castes like the policy of reservations in employment and education also comes under the economic aspect. However, an approach that views caste as merely 'feudal remnants', as is the practice with some Marxists, is not useful towards the amelioration of caste inequalities.

348 Ambedkar in The Annihilation of Caste focused on the cultural aspect. Marxist radicals have usually focused on the economic aspect of land question. Radical feminists have focused on the aspect of reproduction (For instance, Uma Chakravarti 2006: “Interrelationship of caste, class and gender”, Paper presented in the Convention against Caste Atrocities, 28 January 2006, New Delhi.).


350 Even the employment generation in agricultural or non-agricultural pursuits cannot have the centrality of importance of the question of land ownership.

also a question of the annihilation of caste, a fact that is not readily acknowledged by the proponents of caste identity politics.

Further, let us consider the implications of Globalisation for Dalits: Even while admitting that economic Globalisation poses dangers, Kancha Ilaiah notes how Globalisation has opened up some new avenues of deliverance for the Dalits in the cultural realm. In the caste-based social order, he says, “Productive culture was defined as impure and the ritual consumerist culture constructed as pure and great ... Cultural globalisation negates the Brahminic myth of purity and pollution and liberates the Dalit-Bahujans ... what is condemned at home becomes, in a globalised culture, a positive commodity for sale. Their condemned self becomes respectable.” 352 These may, however, be considered as the refractory effects of a process that is on the whole dehumanising.

Let us examine certain aspects of the Dalit question under globalisation, in the light of the subaltern perspective provided by Kunhamman (2002): The land question assumes added importance against the backdrop of the State, under neo-liberal reforms, withdrawing from the welfare functions that have a direct bearing on the existence of the deprived sections. Moreover, the repressive function of the State vis-à-vis the deprived gets further pronounced, if Muthanga and Nainamkonam provide evidence to go by. The market-system, on the other hand, has its exclusive focus on those with assets and purchasing power, and provides employment mostly to those possessing marketable skills. Thus on the economic front, if the dalits were exploited in the pre-SAP period, they are being excluded from the production process under SAP. In other words, “if market excludes the poor, the state oppresses them”, in a process of mutual reinforcement under 'liberalisation'. For Kunhaman, efficiency focused on production rather than distributive justice premised on welfare has been the bottomline of the neo-liberal ideology. Given the technology-driven nature of capitalist agriculture, the prospects of employment-generation are diminutive. 353

Another crucial question concerns how the forces of Imperialist Globalisation articulates with the historically handed down social hierarchies? In the political and cultural realms, a resurgence of the feudal-casteist culture is already in evidence with the emergence of fascistic Hindutva communal politics. 354 Falling back on the resources of the hierarchical

culture of the pre-capitalist society seems to help amate the emergent hierarchies of the new society as well. Does a process akin to itself in the economic sphere as well? On the theoretical plane, local money-trading capital on the one hand, and imperial capital on the other, were both concentrating on the circulation process more than on the productive process. 

So then, are we not, rather, witnessing an accentuation of the indirect domination by global monopoly capitalism since 1947 or in other words, of ‘semi-colonial’ relations under imperialist globalisation and a corresponding reinforcement of traditional hierarchies – the shape of things to come? It is quite important to mention as a note of caution that with rampant consumerism and capitalist cultural influence among a large middle class in the state, if we dig on the economic base without focussing on the transformation of the cultural and political superstructure, the latter could collapse back on to us.

Land struggles are conceded to have the primacy as Class struggle in a primarily agrarian country. They also have the advantage of striking at the root of the very economic basis of caste inequalities. Added to the sharp volatilities and capital flights encountered under the regime of globalised finance, for people to take control over fixed productive assets sake of preserving livelihoods.

The conscious leadership of Adivasi and Dalit sections in the state have given the incisive slogan, ‘From colonies to agricultural land’. It can only be taken to be a just demand considering the fact that the land reforms in 1970 provided only 10 cents or less of homestead land to the Dalits and land alienation of the tribals continues to remain a live issue to this day. Sections of Adivasis in southern Kerala like Vedaram and even certain sections of Dalits are landless to the extent of not being able even to bury their dead. Distressingly, this means the denial of the ultimate entitlement of a human person to

356 It is assumed herein that the retreat of colonialism and the transfer of power meant the transformation of the erstwhile colony into a ‘semi-colony’ indirectly dominated by several imperialist powers.
357 K.M. Pramod 2004: Spaces of Subordination: The Making of Dalit Colonies in Kerala, M.Phil. dissertation in Economics, School of Social Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam makes an historical survey of how the Dalit colonies in the state came to be established since the monarchical days of the 1930s in Thiruvithamkoor, with Dalits who have, until then, been living on the fringes of large joint family plots began to be evicted with the break-up of joint family property and how these colonies have eventually become constituted as spaces of geographical segregation and subordination of the Dalits.
his/her proverbial six feet of land!\footnote{In the famous 19th century Russian story by Leo Tolstoy, when the land-greedy peasant dropped dead, the landlord asked, 'How much land does the man need?' The answer came: 'Six feet of land.'} Let us consider the recent case of Nainamkonam land struggle that has not been known much to the world outside.

**The Case of Land Struggle at Nainamkonam Colony**

On 16 February 2005, with only three days to go for the second anniversary of the firing on Adivasi landless at Muthanga in Wayanad district, 20 houses situated on around 6.5 acres of land of Nainamkonam, a predominantly Dalit colony\footnote{The main occupations the colony residents subsist on are cashew work, fish-vending, running tea-shops and daily wage labour (Dr. P. Geeta, Dr. A.K. Ramakrishnan; K.M. Venugopal; T.K. Vasu (PUCL); I. Gopinath; K. Devi; Elizabeth Philip (Sahaja) 2005: "Nainamkonam kudiyirakku" (Nainamkonam evictions - Malayalam), People's Enquiry Report, 27 July, (unpublished): 2.1.1). To speak of the social composition of the colony, it consisted of roughly 300 plus families among whom about 150 belonged to the Dalit sub-caste of Kuravar, around 60 belonged to the Dalit sub-caste of Paanar and around 90 families belonged to other sections like the Backward Caste Ezhavas, Asari (carpenters & smiths) and low caste Muslims (with just around 12 families).} bordering Kollam district, located in the Naavaikulam village of Thiruvananthapuram district, were demolished with JCB and set on fire by a joint operation of the police and a large number of goondas armed with swords on their backs. They had the backing of an order for 'eviction' from the High Court but they came without the mandate for demolition of houses and without giving prior-notice.\footnote{The People's Enquiry Report noted that the court order was for eviction and not for the demolition of the houses (Dr. P. Geeta et al. 2005: 5.11). Even the tomb of the dead (in the courtyard of Shri Adichan) was not spared from being razed over.} C. Rajan (47), a colony resident and a head of the household, who was an eye-witness to the demolitions on 16 February 2005, died of sheer shock and fear, following the survey for further demolitions held on 27 March 2005, as his house was the first in the scheduled hit-list. Sandhya, a 17-year old girl became mentally deranged. Around 150 people were thrown out on the street. Omana, a woman who had passed barely five days after giving birth, with a new-born baby whose umbilical chord had not fallen off, was pulled out of the house and the house was demolished. Among the evicted was also Gowri, a mother with two grown-up daughters, who pleaded with the authorities to provide her at least one cent of land on which to put up a hut. However, her pleas went unheeded. These are instances of the extent of human distress involved in incidents such as these. The eviction was done for the sake of a long-time CITU leader in Thiruvananthapuram town, who is presently a Councillor in the municipal corporation, belonging to the Nair community and another social notable from the Muslim community. Yet another conspirator was the maternal first cousin of the CITU leader who is a Congress MLA allegedly close to the Then Chief Minister himself. This atrocity had taken place in Navaikulam village panchayat which had its President
from the CPI-M and in the reserved constituency of Kilimanoor where an MLA from the CPI held office. The colony was part of Chiranyinkeezhu parliamentary constituency with an MP from the CPI-M. This was perceived to be the beginning of the proposed process of eviction from 92.5 acres of land, of 300 impoverished families in the Nainamkonam-Maruthi hill colony, many of them without title-deeds. The oustees, Sathyan, Ravi, Babu, Bindu, Shyamala, et al had similar stories to tell. According to Sathyan, his family have been residents at Nainamkonam for four generations. Shyamala, said she had purchased her 5 cents of land paying cash, 25 years back. Just because she dared to protest vehemently, Shyamala's house was the only one that was spared from being bulldozed. For many of the evictees, it was a displacement from their very place of birth and even house of birth.

Braving arrests and repression, on 9 July 2005, the Land Struggle Committee organised a protest convention at Nainamkonam inaugurated by Ms. Mailamma, the local leader of the Plachimada anti-Coke struggle. They symbolically re-captured the land by placing the portrait of Rajan on the spot where the demolished tomb of the dead had stood. On the night of 12 July 2005, accompanied by the local Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader and a large number of men from outside the colony, the police came in full force and raided, tear-gassed, lathi-charged and threw grenades at a section of the colony-residents. The immediate provocation for it was that Binu, a BSP activist had turned hostile against the local BSP leadership, filing a complaint against them with the district DIG. The houses of the activists of the Land Struggle Front were broken into. Several of the women were beaten, thrown on the ground and kicked on their abdomens. S. Shyamala sustained injuries on her leg in the grenade attack and was hospitalised for five days. Sarada, an elderly woman said that her hand was fractured in the police action. The BSP men threatened to rape the women and hand them over to the police to be raped. There were no women police around when the women were attacked. The repression was rather fascistic. Around hundred people were arrested. Activists, including women were released on bail on condition that they regularly sign at the Kallambalam police station.

The BSP men and goondas from outside the colony prevented even Medha Patkar from entering the colony on 23 July 2005. Several of those who went to the area, including journalists, were thrashed by BSP men and handed over to the police who also beat them.

On being visited at the Attingal sub-jail on 19 November 2005, Shri Sathyan said to this author, "It is the jail outside that is a problem to us." Shyamala was a separated woman and belonged to the Nair community and was in a better position to voice her protest and be heard, as compared to the Dalit evictees. Grenades and shock batons are the latest addition to the armoury of the police force in the state to quell mass protests against government policies under Globalisation.

Dr. P. Geeta et al. 2005: 2.6.2.
up in the police station.\textsuperscript{365} Anyone who wanted to continue staying in the colony had to submit to the might of the BSP men.\textsuperscript{366} It is apparent that the beneficiaries of the evictions from the colony were able to influence the local leadership of the BSP and mobilise good many goondas from outside the colony. There was an effort to isolate Nainamkonam from the larger civil society through prohibitory orders. The fact-finding team under the leadership of Dr. P. Geeta wondered why the police who arrested the social activists from outside the colony did nothing to stop the entry of goondas from outside the locality.\textsuperscript{367} Clearly, these were in violation of the provisions of the Fundamental Right under Article 19 of the Constitution of the right to organise [against injustice] (19.iii) and the right to freedom of movement (19.iv). The demolition of houses and violence was in blatant violation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.\textsuperscript{368}

Let us take a retrospective view from our current scenario of Globalisation of monopoly capital. In the case of Nainamkonam, going by available information, historically, the land was granted to the Potti Brahmans of the local temple by the local princely state of Pandalam.\textsuperscript{369} Muhammed Kannu, who had returned with a good fortune from Singapore, having worked as the manager of a plantation there, rented in the land from the Brahmans who were, by then, facing economic decline. Eventually, he secured the land for himself by influencing the revenue authorities. The actual toilers who sweated it out on the land mostly belonged to the Dalit sub-caste of Kuravas who got only the jungles of the nearby Maruthi hill to set up their huts on. In the post-land reforms period, in the context of land

\textsuperscript{365} Thus Titus, the Kollam correspondent of the Malayalam news channel, \textit{India Vision}, was physically assaulted by BSP men and his camera destroyed during the attempted visit of Medha Patkar to the colony. Thulasid, a reporter of the Malayalam publication, \textit{Madhyamam} was also assaulted (Dr. P. Geeta \textit{et al.} 2005: 4.1). G. Haridas, Human rights activist; Kamal, theatre activist; Harish Kumar, correspondent of the Malayalam newspaper \textit{Mangalam} were handed over to the police by BSP men when they visited the colony on 13 July 2005 to enquire about the incident the night before (Dr. P. Geeta \textit{et al.} 2005: 2.6.3). On 20 July 2005, the clerk of advocate Stephen Rosario, Biju was arrested by the police from the court premises while trying to bail out the detinues. G. Haridas was tortured in custody. Porattom activists Jenny and P.J. Manuel were seriously tortured in police custody.

\textsuperscript{366} The local BSP unit had misled people into believing that they would solve the issue through the appeal filed by them in the Supreme Court. The fact, however, was that the case (SLP: 15363/05) was already rejected by the Supreme Court on 22 July 2005.

\textsuperscript{367} One would wonder if we should consider extra-economic coercion to the extent witnessed at Nainamkonam as an ironic contrast against or a fitting corollary to the fanciful motto, ‘At great speed to great lengths’ and ‘Transparent Keralam’ of the UDF-led state government under the tutelage of the Asian Development Bank?

\textsuperscript{368} Dr. P. Geeta \textit{et al.} 2005: 5.11.

\textsuperscript{369} According to a traditionally popular myth, Kerala was a landmass lifted up from under the sea by Parasuram, by hurling a divine axe, to be gifted to the Brahmans! Parasuram was one of the incarnations of \textit{Vishnu}, who defeated the Kshatriyas. A version of this myth is available in Buchanan (1807, p. 348). He called Potties as “petty chiefs” of Brahmans (p. 348). He indicated the situation at the start of the English colonial rule, pointing out that greater part of the land was \textit{jennm} or property of Namburi Brahmans (p. 360).
concentration and high land prices in the context of real estate business on land with the Gulf remittances pouring in, many more impoverished families, mainly from the Dalit sub-caste of Paanar who lost their land had come and settled in this colony roughly about forty years back.\textsuperscript{370}

The Land Struggle Front formed at the convention held at Changanassery in December 2003 took up the struggle at Nainamkonam. \textit{Poraattom} (meaning, ‘Struggle’), a constituent organisation of the Land Struggle Front, was a leading force in this struggle.\textsuperscript{371} State-wide campaign and especially in the Dalit colonies nearby\textsuperscript{372}, a well-attended march from the Nainamkonam colony to the Attingal taluk office demanding title-deeds, a sit-in and hunger-strike in front of the state secretariat\textsuperscript{373} and the like have been the specific activities taken up by the Land Struggle Front.

A temporary denouement to the Nainamkonam issue has been reached through negotiations with the District Collector. The claimants to the land are content to back out with some 'compensation' from the state government and the evicted were permitted to return to the colony lest the state government faces embarrassment during the Onam festivities in mid-September and the land struggle gathers further momentum, turning into a political struggle of wider ramifications. On 13 October 2005, the District Collector visited the colony and assured an amicable settlement within 40 days. The settlement included a re-distribution of about 13 acres of land, which is said to have been declared surplus around 28 years back in the vicinity of the colony and is now in the custody of the Panchayat President. Nevertheless, Nainamkonam continues to remain a flash-point. On 29 October 2005, after the evicted, accompanied by the leaders of the Land Struggle Front took out a \textit{yattra}, in order to return to the colony, four of them were arrested by the police on grounds of prohibitory orders against ‘outsiders’. On 8 November 2005, Prof. Varghese, member of the State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) visited the colony following the petition filed by M.M. Thaha, a district panchayat member to the SHRC to initiate measures to set up a common burial ground for the colony. This was following the incident of a colony resident, Panayil Chellappan (42) having been buried breaking the

\textsuperscript{370} One would also wonder whether Nainamkonam is not indicative of the fact that with greater incursions of transnational capital under globalisation, there are indications of a neo-landlordism thriving in the state and the descendents of erstwhile claimants of land are staking claims and finding support from the courts under the dispensation of a negative judicial activism in recent years.

\textsuperscript{371} \textit{Poraattom} is a mass organisation with Maoist sympathies. It had taken up militant struggles on crucial issues in recent times such as the incursion of ADB as a dominant force in the state and the operations of the Coca-cola company.

\textsuperscript{372} There are 21 Dalit majority colonies around Nainamkonam. Most of them are also Kurava majority colonies.

\textsuperscript{373} The protest continued despite the police removing first, the hut and subsequently, the tent put up by strikers.
floor of the kitchen in his house, as the household owned only three cents of land on
which their hut stood. The local leadership of the mainstream political parties proposed
a conversion of surplus land into burial ground but it was effectively resisted by the Land
Struggle Front on grounds that the surplus land is meant for redistribution to the landless
in the densely populated colony. The public hearing held on 05 December 2005 at
Kallambalam junction resolved to take out a protest march to Nainamkonam against the
attempts of the district police and administration to isolate the colony residents from their
allegedly ‘outside’ leadership and against the non-implementation of promises to
distribute surplus land. Another march is planned to Thiruvananthapuram corporation
office demanding suspension of its Councillor who is the prime offender in this case.

Several of the oustees from Nainamkonam possessed pattas. All of them had ration-cards
and [voter] identity card, receipts of electricity and water bills. They testified that before
every election, with an eye on the vote-bank, political parties kept promising that they
would provide pattas and they were equally consistent in breaking the promise.

The Land Question and the Land-Grabs

Presenting a stark contrast to the case of Nainamkonam, several title-deed award
ceremonies (pattaya melas) have been organised, over the years, for the benamis of
powerful land-grabbers of forestland on the Western Ghats, with the backing from the
highest levels in the state Revenue ministry itself.

The contrast to Nainamkonam is further obvious if we notice the fact that the Kerala
government is handing over 298.27 acres of prime land in Ernakulam to the multinational
firm, Dubai Internet City to set up a SmartCity information technology park, of which
100 acres is being given away absolutely free of cost on grounds that the company would
generate employment. The real-estate intent of the deal was rather apparent.

We have already dwelt at length in Chapter V on the extent of land-grabs in rural areas
taking place in the state. We would like to make one further point concerning these
land-grabs: If thousands of acres of forestland is being grabbed, it should be recognised
that these low profile scams in the far-flung and remote terrain of the state do constitute
much bigger scams than many of the scams that have raked up controversies at all-India

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374 Mathrubhoomi 2005.
375 This can well be designated as a typical case of 'the poacher turned game-keeper'!
376 Hindu 2005: "Smart City: Court asks Government to examine NGO's plea", 14 February, p. 4.
377 Subsequently, the LDF government under V.S. Achuthanandan scuttled this move.
378 See the section, 'Landgrabs' in Chapter V.
level. A plausible reason why these scams do not receive media attention is that they could lead to agrarian turbulence by classes and social groups low down in the social ladder, threatening the status quo.

**Democratic Deficit in the Mainstream**

It is a curious anomaly that even many of those who opposed the firing on Adivasis at Muthanga failed to respond sympathetically to the Nainamkonam land struggle. The Maoist sympathies of a section of the leadership was sufficient to debunk the whole issue. It may be remembered in this context that what is perfectly legal may not be just in many a case and there is the merit of the issue that by virtue of being citizens, the residents of the locality do have the right to live dignified lives. N. Subramanian, teacher and social activist rightly opined that it is also a reflection on the character of the mainstream identity politics and mainstream feminism that the leading proponents of these approaches failed to respond to these gross injustices, including violence against women belonging to the lower rungs of the caste-class hierarchy. This could be indicative of the democratic deficit in the social mainstream, permeated by caste- and class-consciousness. Moreover, the issue could not merely be posed as a question of identity because the State with all its instruments of violence was a party to the conflict. Nevertheless, it may be pointed out after a statement in the film, *Unlimited Girls* that ‘if you oppose one kind of inequality or oppression and not oppose the others, the logic remains incomplete’. In other words, partial perspectives are incomplete circles, leaving gaping loopholes midway. As usual, it was mostly the marginal voices that came to the support of those at the receiving end at Nainamkonam.

As for the local BSP leadership, it has been shown in practice that what ultimately matters is the politics, not the caste background of the leadership. The role of the BSP leadership

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379 See Appendices for the Table A.6: "[Recent Scams of Notoriety in India]" based on: www.arkitectindia.com (2005): ‘We Say India is a Poor Country. Is It So? Just look at these scams and think again’, Cross-posted by skdubevFoundation, Forwarded by A. Sankar, EMPOWER, Tuticorin.

380 The reason probably was that where militancy was an aberration rather than a long-term strategic means, militancy aimed at securing partial economic ends by a miniscule minority as at Muthanga was considered acceptable within the parameters of the system. The People’s Enquiry Committee that visited the colony on 20.07.2005 was categorical in pointing out, ‘... it was the police and the goons from outside the colony who had unleashed violence and terror in the colony. It is observed that those who led the struggle in the colony had employed entirely democratic means during the struggle. The concerned authorities branded them all as extremists and spread the misunderstanding that they were the ones who created violence in the colony.’ (Geeta, Dr. P. et al 2005: 5.6).

at Nainamkonam could also cast a reflection on the politics of BSP in general that what they seek after is not really the legitimate rights of the Dalit masses but a Dalit identity that would constitute a consolidated vote-bank in electoral politics. However, it needs to be acknowledged that it is the question of social discrimination of the Dalits that provides the cultural basis for mobilisations such as the BSP, even when it did not address the economic question of skewed land ownership, which can be viewed as the principal aspect of the traditional caste system.

The news concerning Nainamkonam evictions and atrocities was, at first, confined typically to the district pages of a couple of newspapers. Mainstream media found ‘news-value’ for this issue only after the statewide campaign by the Land Struggle Front gained momentum. Evidently, the media would have liked to keep under wraps the question of landlessness and land struggles of the Dalits and other impoverished agrarian classes in the state. The motivation could have been to confine the issue of landlessness as an ‘Adivasi issue’, concerning just 1.14 per cent of the total population of the state numbering around 32 million. Dalits constitute 9.81 per cent of the population in the state and if they initiate land struggles, the other landless sections like fisher people facing displacement along the coasts and others may join in and it could lead to a potentially explosive situation for the privileged classes.

We have already examined in Chapters I & V how there has been the Relative Deprivation of Dalits vis-à-vis the rest of Kerala society, in terms of human development although their condition is supposed to be better off vis-à-vis their counterparts in the rest of India.

**Dalits and the Land Question in Keralam**

Traditionally, the hutment dwellers (*kudikidappukaar*), mostly Dalits, traditionally *adiyaalar* have historically been the actual tillers of the land in wetland cultivation.
Foreign travellers. Barbosa in early 16th century and Buchanan in early 19th century had recorded the rigidity of the caste structure on the Malabar coast whereby Nairs were required to chop down low caste persons who came within the polluting distance. Several studies have shown the undeniable link between caste hierarchy and landlessness/land poverty. Further, our analysis based on Rural Labour Enquiry in Chapter V clearly shows how Dalits in the state have more representation among those engaged in agricultural work and the landless Agricultural Labour Households (ALH) than among All ALH and even Adivasi ALH.

Why then, didn’t land struggles come up from among the Dalits in Keralam even to the extent that it has from among the Adivasis? Land question, for Dalits, was not a question of dispossession as with Adivasis but of landlessness under the dispensation of caste-based feudalism since time immemorial. With the Gulf-boom since mid-1970s, agricultural work began to yield higher money wages in Keralam to Dalits, who were traditionally skilled as agricultural labourers. The marginalised Dalit-Adivasi-Fisher sections have not yet been constituted as an independent political identity in Kerala politics. Naxalite/Maoist politics could have been a possible avenue for mobilisation of these sections but for its failure to advance under sectarianism, left adventurism and State

Differences remained on the historical classification of the Dalit castes as primarily slaves or primarily serfs.

In most places, the tenants who were supervisors standing at the edge of the field, mostly from the Backward Caste, Ezhavas got the surplus land under the land reforms (V.C. Koshy 1976: The Politics of Land Reforms in Kerala, Ph.D. thesis, Centre for Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.). Speaking of Poleas (Pulayas), which is a major Dalit sub-caste today, Barbosa, a Portuguese traveller in early 16th century had said, "They are tillers of rice with baffaloes and oxen." (M. Gangadharan (ed.) 2000: The Land of Malabar: The Book of Duarte Barbosa, vol. 2, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, p. 68). In early 19th century, Buchanan (1807), an English traveller said, "...Brahmans never labour, and the Nairs or Moplays [Mappila Muslims] very rarely. (para) By far the greater part of the labour in the field is performed by slaves, or Churmar [Cherumar, meaning the lesser people]." (Francis Buchanan 1807 (1988): Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar, 3 vols., Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, first pub. 1807, p. 370). In 1908, C.A. Innes (1997), the English anthropologist wrote: "The principal representatives of the agricest serfs are the Cherumans or Pulyans." (C.A. Innes 1997: Malabar Gazetteer, Kerala Gazetteer’s Department, Government of Kerala, p. 133). Speaking of the other major Dalit caste, he says, "Malabar parayans are a low class of basket-makers and agricultural labourers." (p. 134), indicating some occupational differences among the Dalit castes.

repression. These could have been plausible reasons for the non-emergence of land struggles from among Dalits in Keralam.

The recent measures initiated by the state government at leasing out for contract-farming vast tracts of uncultivated land can be beneficial for advancing agricultural production but may be viewed as prejudicial to the interests of equity, if we consider that the actual toilers on land are still being denied ownership rights over land.

On its part, the state government under UDF has already taken pre-emptive measures against land struggles of the deprived by incorporating into the proposed Goonda Act (Kerala Felonious Activities (Prevention) Bill) that has already been brought out as an ordinance, provisions that enable the authorities to imprison up to six months anyone who encroaches on land. 389

As we have already discussed in the case of Nainamkonam, a process of accentuation of feudal and casteist values is in evidence and yet, as we have already observed in Chapter V, it would be inappropriate to approximate this state-of-affairs to the predominance of ‘semi-feudal, semi-colonial’ relations in the state. 390

Concluding Remarks

The Nainamkonam land struggle is a case of defensive land struggle. The land question of the Dalits and other deprived sections in Keralam has, for now, been confined to be an issue of local concern and a struggle with their backs to the wall in order to preserve their homes and hearths but the potential for a major social conflict on the land question lingers on. However, only if offensive land struggles are waged aimed at gaining new plots of land, can solution be found to the land question of the Dalits and other deprived masses. In this sense, Nainamkonam is not an isolated instance out of the blue. We could say that there are dozens of Nainamkonams smouldering all across Keralam. Those residing in these colonies are an important part of the basic producing classes in the state who could, in the days to come, determine the fate of the social transformation in the state.

In the past, the land question being a concerning the principal factor of production in a primarily agrarian society had its legitimate pride of place. The land question also had its rationale in concerns of equity and justice in general and the need to ameliorate the persisting linkages between caste system and the skewed land relations/denial of land rights to the panchamas or the outcastes, in particular. Moreover, keeping in view the

390 Ajith 2002 tends to approximate the mode of production in the state to a ‘semi-feudal, semi-colonial’ one.
concerns for an agrarian transition to the more acceptable capitalist mode from feudal or semi-feudal mode, a redistributive agenda on land has also been considered a question of economic rationality. While not negating the continuing relevance of these, one further dimension is to be added to this list: It may be in the fitness of things that in the era of 'fly-by-night capital' under imperialist globalisation, people assert control over locally available sources of capital in immovable or fixed assets like land, forest and water resources ('jal, jangal, jameen') towards building up more inward-looking/self-reliant national economies.

V. CUSTODIAL DEATHS AND THE CLASS REALITY WITHIN THE STATE

In fact, extra-judicial killings are more frequent and widespread in our country as compared to judicial killings which have been rare and far between. Listen to the statement of K. Karunakaran on 23 June 2004: “Today, there is hardly any reaction when the Chief Minister disclosed in the Assembly that 82 persons had died in the lock-up and that 64 incidents of communal violence had taken place over the last two years”.391 For a relatively ‘peaceful’ a state like Keralam, which is often projected as a ‘model’, this is a rather shocking revelation.392 At all India level, going by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) estimates during 6 months of 2002, it was reported that “4 die in custody every day”. Out of the 666 cases of police and judicial custodial deaths received by the NHRC in six months, Uttar Pradesh topped the list with about 100 cases, Keralam too had 22 cases of custodial deaths reported. Apart from these, there were 133 deaths in “homes”, Maharashtra alone accounting for as many as 123 of them.393 It would not be superfluous to point out that the higher ups in mainstream politics and economically powerful interests do not have to face custodial deaths even if they are clearly indicted. The class dimension of the issue is clear if we consider that most of the victims of these custodial/lock-up killings hail from the bottom rungs of social ladder.394

It may be noted that custodial deaths is a regular feature within the state, irrespective of the regime changes between the two political fronts. Insightfully, the difference on this count with liberal democracies of the West indicates that ‘the rule of law’ in general and ‘the procedure established by law’ in particular are not operative in our country, marking sharp distinctions within the genre of liberal democracy itself. In a country like the United States, struggle against judicial executions is recognised as a most important aspect of the

392 Moreover, it should be an ironic eye-opener for the democratic forces in Keralam that it took Karunakaran, the accused in the custodial murder of Rajan during the emergency to bring up this issue.
394 It is ironic that those who out of poverty resort to, say, stealing some coconuts are informally awarded capital punishment in the lock-ups whereas the high profile politicians and bureaucrats who rob public property worth crores of rupees through ‘scams’, ‘the great Indian robbery’ go unscathed even under the legal/judicial system.
class struggle whereas the same cannot be true in the case of India where the struggle against extra-judicial killings assumes far more importance from the angle of class struggle.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Our analysis within this chapter validates the broad-based definition of class struggles based on "community", "national bond" and "political organisation" that Marx himself had set forth. Despite the trappings of ethnic community identities of broadly defined deprived caste groups, we would view that the interests articulated are essentially class interests. There was near-total class-community overlap at the bottom rungs of the caste ladder, as in the case of Adivasis in the state. It is observed that ethnic identity-based political struggles of the deprived is a significant pattern that has emerged in the state, particularly since mid-1990s. Class struggle in the proper sense of the term is yet to come on its own. 'Class in itself' in the Marxian schema is not yet a functional category in contemporary Keralam as far as the class formations at the lowest rungs is concerned. Thus there have been hardly any 'class'-conscious actions in the state by the lowest classes, including the marginalised sections. It would take the efforts of the enlightened leadership of an organised collective to sanitise the consciousness and re-orient and interconnect these movements in the direction of social transformation and it would take an orientation that is devoid of exclusivism, even while recognising the specificity/autonomy of each of the contradictions. Nevertheless, it would be rather facile to look forward to 'pure' class struggles in the context of a society characterised by a multiplicity of unresolved contradictions – a situation typical of many societies that have undergone colonial rule and have not experienced the virtues of democratisation under an undistorted capitalist development.

The lower classes that constitute the majority within these marginalised social groups have to reckon with the simultaneity of discrimination, exclusion, exploitation and oppression. An agenda for social transformation needs to link the specificities of particular social contradictions to the overarching spatial and class divisions in society and pressurise the State in the interim period and focus on securing State power in the long term in order to deliver justice to the most deprived sections in particular. It should avoid the pitfalls of a 'promised paradise' that overlooks the concerns of immediate relief to the people in the lowest rungs of the social ladder and 'economism' that binds them up in endless partial struggles, with no effort for a resolution of the issues and consummation of the contradictions in question once and for all. If this is to be achieved, there is need to


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identify the principal contradictions/principal structures of demhumanisation at any given point of social development and understand how it is related to the other contradictions/structures of demhumanisation.

The positive and negative fallouts of these ethnic-identity based struggles, as we have mentioned, require careful consideration. Given the social context of the emergence of ethnic identity-based political struggles of the deprived, we would underline the need to network these struggles with those akin to it in the rest of the country against oppressive social structures as are represented in the State, metropolitan capital, semi-feudalism, caste system, patriarchy, etc. The communal stream has sought to pit one section of the masses against the other in order to advance their cynical goals. Whether with the communal stream or the identity politics stream, not recognising and acknowledging the prime role of the State and the dominant classes on the question of Adivasi land alienation served, in effect, to divert the issue from a class approach and positing the issue as a simple contradiction between the Adivasis and the settlers. Concerns of justice do provide common grounds in the approaches of the ethnic identity-based civil liberties stream and the democratic rights stream. Nevertheless, uncritical acceptance of the identity-politics approach is fraught with several problems from the angle of long-term social transformation. The ‘developmentalism’ of the State has been grossly unjust to the aspirations of the Adivasi masses where land and education have been their prime demands. People’s movements need to conscientise Adivasi masses and the State should be pressurised to adopt safeguards against newer forms of exploitation through bio-piracy of Adivasis’ precious knowledge of medicinal herbs. The Adivasi masses should be able to exercise their self-determination in matters of control over forest and land resources. Establishment of self-rule under Schedule V in Adivasi-majority areas is an urgent step required in this direction. The just resolution of the Adivasi land question in the state demands return of alienated land to the Adivasis and resettlement of the poor and marginal peasants on alternative plots of land. It also demands significant redistributive measures from the large owners and encroachers.

The dominant classes within the state include both the pan-Indian dominant classes and the Regional Dominant Classes. They are represented in the plantation lobby, traders lobby, education lobby, liquor lobby, forest mafia, etc. and they corner massive undue, often illegal and benefits from the State. They indulge in both corruption and tax evasion and even illegal/forcible appropriation. This in itself should be a marker for their dominance within the national formation. The pan-Indian dominant classes seem to be far more powerful since they have significant influence at the Union level and the states. The ‘bureaucrat capital’ of the State in the public sector also often served ends that were not in
the interest of the broad masses of people. Global metropolitan capital is also making increasing forays into the state. The electoral politics may not be considered a true indicator of democracy in the state because there is cross-class mobilisation by means of caste/community identity and the funding of political parties in elections or otherwise by the dominant interests is not a transparent process.

As for the land question, we would go by the view that the basic producing classes do have the right to claim their rights over the means of production, including ownership rights, irrespective of what the mode or relations of production is. Therefore, struggle for land rights is not something that should necessarily be confined to the feudal or semi-feudal modes or relations of production. Apart from concerns of human capability building, productive efficiency, advance over rentier modes of social relations, the focus on the land question is important from the angle of self-reliance of a peripheral economy. We would add a further dimension that people asserting control over ‘fixed productive assets’ is of vital importance as a safeguard against the huge volatilities of global finance under neo-liberal reforms. This is because ‘fixed assets’ like land, water and forest resources are not vulnerable to capital flights.

If for the Adivasis, the land question has been a question of dispossession, for Dalits, it has been a question of denial of land rights under caste-based feudal social order since time immemorial. Adivasis land struggles have had profound influence among the Adivasi masses. Dalits are also increasingly becoming conscious of their land rights, as the slogan, ‘From colonies to agricultural land’ indicates.

A significant segment of the economy in the state is characterised by the phenomenon of ‘primitive accumulation’. It is curious that thousands of acres of forestland, previously inhabited by the Adivasis, being grabbed by elements of the Indian big capital such as Tata or Goenka or other powerful interests within the Regional Dominant Classes does not become a political issue in the state. On the other end of the spectrum, Dalits or Adivasis being denied rights over the proverbial ‘six feet of land’ (especially in the southern parts of the state) too does not become a political issue in the state. Although we have not engaged in a detailed analysis of it, similar expressions of the class reality are also found in the extra-judicial custodial deaths that take place within the state. A focus on the issue of extra-judicial/custodial killings is important in the context of a country like India where the ‘rule of law’ does not operate in this respect unlike in the liberal democracies of the West. Indeed, these are expressive of the class reality in the state, which the dominant stream of scholarly thinking in the state prefers to overlook.