CHAPTER IV

AGRARIAN QUESTION AND LITERATURE: THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF LITERATURE IN THE AGRARIAN PROBLEMS OF KERALA

Culture occupies a very important position in human life. So the intervention in the cultural sphere is crucial in any attempt for social change. Civil society is the space where various actors compete to get hegemony. In this struggle for hegemony which takes place in the civil society, it is not only the absolute ideologies and scientific thought that take place in this fight between new and old. The artistic forms like literature are also part and parcel of this struggle. The ideological struggle has two faces; one is of science and the other of art. Science and art, help the human being to make sense of the society and to find out and select his path of work. The science enters the realms of human rationality through inventions and actual facts while art stimulates the emotions and provides a sense of reality.\(^1\) While science conveys truth through the

abstract logic, art conveys reality through the concrete experience. Social changes are always reflected in the literature of the day and the literary efforts influence the pathways adopted by the forces of change in society. Thus it can be said that the relationship they share, is dialectical. Still literature like any other human creation need not be spontaneous. Human agency has a definite role in influencing social change and the writers through thoughtful interventions can play a strategic role in aiding the forces of change in a society.

As noted earlier, literature cannot remain aloof from human life and social realities. As human beings, no litterateur could ignore the developments in the society. The society of their time and their lived experiences inevitably get reflected in their creations unknowingly or consciously. As Friedrich Engels wrote: "I have learned more [from Balzac] than from all the professional historians, economists and statisticians put together."\(^2\)

Across the world throughout the history of the mankind literature has played a very significant role in ushering in social change. The role of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in the liberation of slaves in USA is widely acknowledged. The role which the Mother by Maxim Gorky played in Russian social transformation is well known. The progressive writers under the leadership of Maxim Gorky had played a very crucial role in the Russian revolution.

In India too, literature had a long history of serving the cause of the freedom movement with the progressive writers of the country upholding the ideals of nationalism and patriotism in their writings. In India, the Progressive Writers Association was formed in Lucknow in 1936 at the venue of the INC annual conference. It was started with the blessings of all the prominent poets and writers of India like Rabindranath Tagore and Munshi Premchand.³

**Malayalam Literature and Society**

The latter addressed the conference and stated that, “Our literary taste is undergoing a rapid transformation. It is coming more and more, to grips with the realities of life; it interests itself with society or man as a social unit. It is not satisfied now with the singing of frustrated love, or with writing to satisfy only our sense of wonder; it concerns itself with the problems of our life and such themes as have a social value. The literature which does not arouse in us a critical spirit, or satisfy our spiritual needs, which is not ‘force-giving’ and dynamic, which does not awaken our sense of beauty, which does not make us face the grim realities of life in a spirit of determination, has no use for us today. It cannot even be termed as literature.”⁴ The efforts of the progressive writers had left a great impact on the nationalist literature and it had influenced writers belonging to various linguistic groups of India including Malayalam.

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³ Souvenir, 6th All India Progressive Writers Conference, p.48, New Delhi, 1967,

The period from 1934 to 1971, was one among the most turbulent periods of the social history of Kerala. The strengthening of the national movement, the formation of the Congress Socialist Party, the emergence of the peasant movement, the growth of the Communist ideology and forces of social reform etc. produced a period of intense social change. The agrarian movement of Kerala, in the phase of anti feudal struggles stretching from 1934 to 1971, exerted a great influence upon the cultural sphere of the Kerala society. The movements which worked as the fundamental forces of social change had a dialectical relationship with the efforts in Malayalam literature.

Kerala witnessed a conscious literary effort on the part of a great number of writers in Kerala, many of them the stalwarts of Malayalam literature. It led to heated debates in the public sphere about the propriety of litterateurs dabbling in politics. But the growth of Malayalam literature had intense connections with the winds of social change which were blowing strongly. Whatever be the school various litterateurs represented, none of them could ignore the presence of such social upheavals. The period from 1930s to the 1970s witnessed a lot of changes in the Malayalam literature. Different literary schools came up and vanished. But the emerging peasant movement left their impact on all of them.

As noted earlier, it was a dialectical relationship with the peasant movement itself getting shaped in that process too. The Malayalam literature openly came up in support of the suffering peasants and gave voice to their
concerns. The progressive literature emerged in Kerala for the advancement of the cause of the peasant movement.

Literature is organically linked to human life. Human beings conveyed their emotions, hopes, pains and troubles through the medium of literature. From time immemorial, the songs which were sung reflected on the human emotions and conditions of life.

Malayalam literature has a rich history. The evolution of Malayalam as an independent language distinct from Tamil is marked by various literary works through the centuries. The Pattu Prasthanam, Manipravalam, Champoos, Attakathas of Kathakali, Thullal poems all these reflected the growth of Malayalam literature.\(^5\)

Apart from these classic works by erudite scholars and elites, there were many songs and literary forms created by the common people. These were the Vadakkan Pattukal and the Thekkan Pattukal which elaborated upon the heroic deeds of ancient warriors and the Thottam paatu, Padayanippattu and such songs associated with rituals which were sung during these performances.\(^6\)

There were a large number of folk songs which were sung by the labourers in the paddy fields and coconut groves of Kerala. They were the


\(^6\) Ibid.
creation of the toiling sections of the population who were denied all formal education and were tied to the land for life. These songs naturally reflected upon the sad conditions of life which they had to face every day.

The efforts of Thunchath Ezhuthachan and Kunchan Nambiar greatly helped in refining the language and taking it to the people. The period after Kunchan Nambiar, witnessed a lull in the literary production in Kerala.\(^7\)

There was the emergence of the *Venmoni Prasthanam*, which was a celebration of the feudal laid back life of the nobles of that period. The emergence of social reform movements, the spread of Western education and modern values brought changes in the sphere of literature as well. The national struggle for independence made many poets the harbingers of social change.

The folksongs deal with the plight of daily life of the labourers and the toiling sections of the society. One of these songs goes thus,

“When I went there
There was no *this* or *that*.
When I went there
They made me do the fence which was not there.
When I went there

\(^7\) Paramesawarapillai, Erumeli, Malayalasahityam Kalakhattangaliloode (Mal.), p.258, Prathibha books, Mavelikkara, 2006.
They made me dig the pond which was not there.

…………..

For half a pint of toddy
They drive me to death.
For half a tender coconut
They drive me to death." 8

It is quoted here only to show the spirit of protest, latent in the minds of the toiling sections. That latent spirit gave way to an explicit desire to throw away the yoke of colonialism and feudalism and progressive literature became the voice of that desire.

Malayalam literature had a large number of poets, story writers and persons of literary caliber whose works reflected on the plight of the society and sought to use their pen as a sword for advancing the struggle for social change. The poems written in the first half of the 20th century by many leading poets in Malayalam tried to promote nationalism and thereby effect social change in their contemporary society. 9 Thus the Malayalam literature has done immense contribution to the growth of national movement in Kerala 10.

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Trends in Malayalam Literature: Nationalism and Social Reform

The poems of Mahakavi Vallathol Narayana Menon had a distinct style and his poetry was a revolt against the hegemony of colonial culture and the suffocation imposed by that culture on the Malayalee mind. He wrote a poem entitled, ‘Higher and Higher’ (1923).

“My brothers, it is the glory of your struggle for freedom
That dances upon this flag of our Mother,
May this flag of glory shine high up in the sky.”  

The works of Kumaranasan, a social reformer himself, humanist and revolutionary strongly attacked the caste system, social oppression and orthodoxy. The powerful couplet,

“Change your law yourselves,
Or the laws will change you indeed.”

Was at the lips of a whole generation of Malayalees who wanted to bring a change in the caste ridden society of Kerala.


12 Ibid. p.66.
His poems *Duravasta* and *Chandalabhikshuki*, addressed the issue of caste. In Chandalabhikshuki, he questioned the very logic of caste system, asserting that human beings belong to one species.

Is the Chandala woman’s body

Infertile to the Brahmins’ seed?

Is the sacred thread or the tuft of hair

Or the mark of forehead

An adjunct of birth?

Does the Brahman get his learning

Without being tutored?\(^{13}\)

Even while extending support to the cause of political independence, Kumaranasan was shrewd enough to observe the impact of the divisiveness of caste on efforts to achieve political independence. In his well known poem, ‘Reflections of a Tiyya Boy’in 1908, he wrote thus

“Why should thou wail then, O Bharat?

Thy slavery is thy destiny, O Mother!

Thy sons blinded by caste, clash among themselves

\(^{13}\) Kurup, K.K.N. Nationalism and Social Change; The Role of Malayalam Literature, p.68, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Thrissur, 1998.
And get killed, what for is freedom, then?\textsuperscript{14}

In fact the political activists this period felt that there is a need for such literary creations which will leave long-lasting impressions in the hearts of the peasants and workers not only to inspire them for a fight but also to give them comprehensive picture about their day to day lives and the reasons for their sufferings.

Ulloor S. Parameshwara Iyer, one among the poets of modern Malayalam, too wrote actively for social change though his writings had their own limitations. In his poem \textit{Sukham Sukham}, he wrote with great optimism about the social change.

\begin{quote}
“The nightmare of oppression has ended
In which the millionaires trampled upon workers
Castes upon outcastes, men upon women
And the West upon the East.”\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

The consciousness that the literature has to address the problems of the people to be worth its name is something which started emerging in Kerala in the 1930s. It can be seen that the period from 1930 initiated an era of intensified

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. p.69.

\textsuperscript{15} Kurup, K.K.N. Nationalism and Social Change; The Role of Malayalam Literature, p.70, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Thrissur, 1998.
production of literature dealing with the burning question of the times, the question of the peasantry. The emergence of this consciousness can be observed in the fact that there was an article published in Prabhatham dealing exclusively with the need for literary creations which can address the cause of the peasants.  

The article written by SH titled as ‘An Aspect of Peasant movement: The need for plays which can create class consciousness among the peasants’, in Prabhatham elaborates the need for such artistic interventions, “Why the farmer should struggle against imperialism despite all odds? What is the utility of these struggles for his children? ….we are yet to translate these questions into pictures which will create deep impression in the minds of the peasants. The songs of that period contained only a clarion call for fight. So they waned away from the memory of the peasants once the struggle was over. The hunger and poverty are tormenting them more than ever…If there were literary works which could capture their plight; we could have generated enthusiasm and awareness in them.”  

The article is critical about this lack and goes on to say that it will affect the long term existence of the organisation. The article states that the mass organisations of other nations are showing us the right path in this matter. The mass leaders of China France and Spain focus their attention on the creation of plays, dramas and movies. The example of China which resisted the Japanese

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17 Prabhatham, 30th January, 1939.
invasion and aroused the national sentiment through cinema, radio, plays and dances is before us.\textsuperscript{18}

G Sankara Kurup wrote poems like Swatanthryageetham in 1943, which described the colonial rule as a period of darkness and he was optimistic about a dawn of freedom not only for India but for the whole of Asia.\textsuperscript{19}

Among poets who criticised the caste system strongly, were Mulur S Padmanabhanikkar, K P Karuppan and Sahodaran K Ayyappan and Pallath Raman. K Ayyapan himself was an activist and used his pen as sword against caste and superstition.\textsuperscript{20} His poems were carrying the messages of social reform.

KP Karuppan was a writer who wrote strongly against the colonial rule and caste system \textsuperscript{21} and his play, Balakalesam, attacked the colonial rulers as the one who will leave the country once they exploit the country. He wrote the Jatikkummi in 1905 which goes like

\begin{quote}
‘All these worlds belong to the God

All are his children, one caste
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} Prabhatham, 30\textsuperscript{th} January, 1939.

\textsuperscript{19} Kurup, K.K.N. Nationalism and Social Change; The Role of Malayalam Literature, p.75, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Thrissur, 1998.


\textsuperscript{21} Indira, K.K. Kavithayum Samuhya Parivarthanavum (Mal.), p.81, Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 1992.
Impossible to keep the brother away

When god watches, oh! Yogic girl

Untouchabilty is wretchedness, O, girl of wisdom.²²

Pallath Raman, propagated intercaste marriage and his poem *Mishrakanthi*, a poetic work depicted the love of a fisher woman Suhasini with an Ezhava boy, Dharmabhatan. He depicted an intercaste marriage with the consent of the parents, with the older generation also accepting the forces of change.²³

There were many playwrights writing plays which made great impact on the society. The play ‘Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangatheykkku’, written by V.T. Bhattathirippad, was intended for the liberation of the women enslaved inside the orthodox Brahmin households. Playwrights like M.R.Battathiripad and Premji also took up themes of social reform in their plays ‘Marakkudakkullile Mahanarakam’ and ‘Ritumati’. Both these portrayed the oppression experienced by women in the Nambuthiri families. The story of the sufferings of the Nambuthiri women were presented on the stage and the decay of the traditional system was exposed.


²³ Ibid. p.77
The stories by Karur Nilakandapillai and Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, were also striking with their emphasis on the burning issues of the times. Basheer actively took up the cause of political independence in his writings. He critically analysed the use of police force and the incidents in which the political activists were subjected to inhuman torture in lock ups. He also reflected upon the need for social reform within and outside the Muslim community.24

It was very clear from the very beginning for the poets and writers that there needs to be literary interventions which will touch the emotions of the people directly. Literary creations were considered as an extended political activity and there was a strong assertion that art is for social progress and not for art’s sake.

Though this was the widely held position, there were many differences among the litterateurs regarding the function of literature. The growth of a communist movement and the emergence of progressive writers movement sharpened these differences and led to long drawn debates. Among the Malayalam writers, within the progressive school itself, three streams can be identified.

1. Revolutionary romanticism, the writings of this stream combines hard social reality with the dreams of a nice future. Many of the poems written

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by poets like Kumaranasan, Vallathol, and G Sankarakkurup fall into this category.\(^{25}\)

2. Critical realism

This school depicts the reality with a critical sense and instead of dreaming about future it will present the present predicament in its true colours. The impetus for change is implicit in these kinds of literary creations. Changampuzha Krishnapillai provides a good example for this kind of poetry in his poem *Devatha*. It does not put forward any solution for the prevailing injustice in society.\(^{26}\)


This constitutes the Third school in the progressive literature. The socialist stream developed with the growth of socialist thought and the movement for transformation to socialism transcending capitalism emerged. It took inspiration from literary works like *Mother* of Maxim Gorky. The socialist realism deposits immense faith in humanity and its capacity to create a new world. It idealizes the socialist culture and it believes in the invincibility of human beings and ever progressive nature of humanity. The poem *Vayalar Garjikkunnu* by P Bhaskaran, *Enikku Maranamilla* by


Vayalar Ramavarma and the poem *A Journey to Invincibility* by ONV Kuruppu all illustrate these qualities. The novel *Kannadi* by Kesavadev is a very good sample for socialist realism. The novel presents the life of the working class in the coir factories of Alappuzha. The novel does not have any larger than life heroes in it. The story is that of the working class moving ahead as a collective.\(^{27}\)

The socialist realism gave rise to collective efforts by the writers to promote progressive literature in the society. The progressive writers association formed at the national level in the 30s gave inspiration to the formation of Purogamana Sahitya Sangham in Kerala. In April 1937 at Thrissur, some of the intellectuals who were socialists formed an organisation named JeevalSahitya Sangham. EMS Nambuthirippadu, P Kesavadev, K Damodaran, K K Warrier and others were part of this attempt. In the second conference of the Jeeval Sahitya Sangham, KPG Nambuthiri was elected as the one of the office bearers. In a meeting at Payyannur, K Damodaran was elected as President. Social reformer and journalist of that time, Kesari Balakrishnapillai, supported the movement and he opined that Kumaranasan and Kesavadev are the progenitors of progressive writing in Kerala.

It was only natural for the literature of the period from 1934 to 1971 to be concerned about the agrarian question. These decades as noted earlier were the

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decades in which Kerala witnessed radical changes in the agrarian system. The poems, short stories, novels and plays written in this period extensively dealt with the plight of the peasantry. The peasant reeling under the yoke of feudalism was one of the perpetual themes of the literature of this era.

Agrarian Question and Poetry

The poetry of the period was rich with poems which were dedicated to the cause of the peasantry. Poets whether they were romantic or realists all of them tried to approach the peasant question sympathetically. The twentieth century including the period of this study witnessed the various type exploitations of tenants by the landlords. The tenants had no right to their agricultural production and even their hut. If they hesitated to pay the tax, they would be forcefully evicted from their land. There were 4703 yearly average eviction cases registered between 1916 and 1926 in Malabar. A total number of 32103 cases were disposed during this period.²⁸ There were a yearly average of 5294 cases reported in between 1940 and 46. The number of tenants evicted during this period were 20070.²⁹ The Poems of Changampuzha Krishna Pillai to those of KPG tried to address the plight of the toiling sections of the society.

Changampuzha Krishna Pillai was a poet of this period and he was known for his romantic way of writing; but his poetry always depicted the hard social reality. The story of a hut dweller who with almost nothing to call his own and


who is compelled to part with even the bunch of plantains which he cultivated in his home yard is narrated in a heart rending style in Vazhakkula. Vazhakkula narrates the story of a hutment dweller who plants a plantain in front of his hutment. He tenders the plant with great care and it grows into a big plantain. His children get excited about the fruits but the plantain is seen by the landlord who commands him to submit it as a tribute. The labourer who has no right over the land has to part with his produce and it is described in a heart rending manner.

The poem ends with the refrain,

‘Oh depressed! For all these, there would be a vendetta

From your own generations to come.’

The poem Innathe Nila (the present predicament )of Changampuzha questions the conscience of the elites of the day, who sitting on the back of the peasant who toils day and night to feed them do not even bother to think about the predicament of the peasant. The same poem expresses the deep anguish over the irresponsiveness of the elites towards the cries for help coming up from the lower strata of society. The poem Spandikkunna Asthimadangal(Pulsating graveyards), exhorts the people to unite against the fascist forces under the leadership of socialist forces and to stop fighting over religious differences.  


The poem Bhavathrayam,(The trinity of Bhava) gives an open call to end the inequalities. He tells that there should not be any competition but equality. The poem *Pattinikkar* (the starving people) by Changampuzha reflects similar sentiments. The poet wonders why there is a famine when the crops are plenty. Then he identifies the cause as the amassing of wealth by the rich. He says rhetorically,

O, Those who have immense wealth

Just show your granaries once

……..

Grain is decaying in your granaries

The hands which have harvested these

Are also decaying”.

The same poem goes on to condemn the landlord class which sucks the life blood peasantry and in connivance with the trading class earns immense profit. The poet urges the poor to fight for their right by breaking these bondages.\(^{32}\)

Vailoppilli Sreedhara Menon was a poet who made significant

contributions to Malayalam literature. His very first collection 'Kannikkoythu' (Maiden Harvest), which came out in 1947, marked the transition of the Malayalam poetry from romantic to the modern era. He was the first President of Purogamana Kala Sahitya Sangham, a forum of progressive writers led by leftist intellectuals and artists.

The Kannikkoythu published in 1947 contained poems like Kannikkoythu, Padayalikal, Assam Panikkar, Aryillanjittu etc. The poem Kannikkoythu, describing the plight of the paddy field labourers and their fight against all odds, declared its faith in the undoubting nature of life, the immense potential and strength of man to survive, struggle and go ahead.

The poem Ariyillanjittu (due to lack of rice) reflects upon the plight of a family which lost its head to starvation. When he died all the people came to his help. Finally when they demanded some rice to perform the last rites, the wife is crying out, “If rice was there, he would not have died.”

Assam Panikkar describes the mental disposition of the workers who leave Kerala and go to Assam in search of work. It provides a bleak picture of the Kerala society which was reeling under extreme poverty and unemployment.

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33 Leela C.P. Vailoppilli Nerinte Theepporul (Mal.), p.78, State Institute of languages, Thiruvananthapuram, 2008.
35 Ibid. p.36.
36 Ibid. p.86.
The song *Padayalikal* is about the agricultural labourers. *Padayalikal* in Malayalam means soldiers. Here the Dalits who were made to work in the paddy fields day and night without any respite are referred to as fighters. The spirit of the poem is the strength of these people which help them to tide over their miserable life.\(^{37}\)

The long poem *Kudiyozhikkal* (Eviction of the tenant) is one of his greatest works. The poem starts with the lines,

"*Punchiril Ha, Kuleenamam kallam.*

*Nenchu keeri njan nerinekkattaam"*

(The smile! Oh, it’s but a noble lie.

Let me tear open my chest and show you the truth).\(^{38}\)

The poem is about the thoughts which are going through the minds of a landowner who self critically looks at himself and finds out that his tenant holds the key to the future.

Edassery Govindan nair wrote poems which carried the spirit of the times. His famous poem *Panimudakkam*, deals with a workers’ strike. For the common masses daily life had become an unbearable ordeal. Cholera was everywhere


\(^{38}\) Ibid. p.165.
and people were losing lives.\textsuperscript{39} The factory owners exploited the workers denying them due wages. Yet the poet places his hope on the strength of the working class to struggle and go ahead. As the famous couplet in his poem goes,

“Kuzhi vetti mooduka vedanakal,

Kuthi kolka saktiyilekku nammal” (Let us bury our pains and march on to strength).

The poem, \textit{Puthan kalavum arivalum} gives a touching rendition of the plight of the tenant in the society.\textsuperscript{40} When the landlord defaults in the payment of taxes, the courts used to extract the taxes by auctioning away the crops of the tenant. This cruel and unethical practice and the response of the peasant to it is narrated. The peasant after an initial outburst controls his anger. The poem ends with the famous couplet.

“\textit{Adhikaram koyyanamadyam nam,}

\textit{Athinu melakatte ponnaryan}”\textsuperscript{41},

(We should reap power first, then the \textit{Ponnaryan} crop).

The poem underlines the need for self conscious and collective struggles to advance the cause of the peasantry.


\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. p.254.
K.P.G. Nambuthiri is a poet distinguished by his proletarian approach to literature. He firmly believed that poetry is for nothing but the advancement of the cause of revolution. So he wrote poems to give strength to the workers and the peasants. He wrote many songs which were intended to inspire people into action. These songs were often criticized for the lack of craft and he was chastised by the critic for being a propagandist. But KPG ignored these criticisms and the workers and the peasants accepted his poems as it cried out the truth about their lives. Some of his lines go thus,

“O, Those who write a new history of independent India

With their own blood

In the struggle of the downtrodden

The ones who make the red flag fly high

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Those who have the blood of the working class

Flowing through their veins

Let us unite in millions

And march ahead.”

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44 Deshabhimani, 8th May 1953.
The poem was sung by the struggling labourers and peasants across Kerala. His poem on a woman’s thought about the Soviet Union comparing it with India became controversial. The women named Nani, was thinking about USSR and she wanted to be part of that egalitarian society. The poem subscribed to the ideology of proletarian internationalism and for the nationalist elite the poem was anti national.\textsuperscript{45} When the controversy led to very heated debates, KPG replied with another song which declared that the ‘love which Nani has for USSR emanates from its virtues like egalitarianism, gender sensitiveness, social justice and right to life.’\textsuperscript{46} The poems by KPG were published in Prabhatham and such publications and provided inspiration to the working class and the peasantry.\textsuperscript{47}

The poem titled ‘\textit{Viplavam}’, by K A Keraaleyan reflects on the perception of the society about revolution. The hegemonic notion of revolution as something which introduces terror in the minds of the people should be countered.

“Revolution is that which gives relief to the worker

Who works for twelve hours a day.

Revolution is that which frees the peasant

Who toils in the field day and night

Yet sleeps with an empty stomach.

\textsuperscript{45} Nambuthiri, K.P.G. Naniyude Chinta. Prabhatham, 14\textsuperscript{th} January, 1939.

\textsuperscript{46} Nambuthiri, K.P.G. Naniyude Marupadi, Prabhatam, 28\textsuperscript{th} January, 1939.

Revolution is that which frees the students,

From an education which will make them nothing more than clerks and

Forces them to roam around in the town in a condition worse than dogs.  

T. S. Thirumunp was a poet who was honoured as the singing sword of the Peasant movement. Born in an aristocratic family, Thirumunp became active in the peasant movement from its initial days itself. He wrote many poems which enthralled the peasantry and enthused them to struggle for their basic rights. The facing page of Prabhatham, 1938 June 27 has the song titled The Red Flag Song.

“The Red Flag Song

“Rise, Rise to the high skies,

The bright red flag of ours.

……………………………..

O the peasants, the working class,

O the exploited and the dispossessed,

Come closer under this flag as one,

Let us be ready, and march ahead.

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To break the castles of exploitative capitalism,

To defeat the imperial masters,

To do away with the feudal system,

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If we are together, there is nothing impossible,

Lest we should know ourselves.  

Written by T S Thirumumbu, the poem became the flag song of the communist movement. The poem wrote by Thirumunp initially in Prabhatham with the title, Surrender, and later republished with the title My Youthhood, was an attempt to redefine the concept of youthhood. The poem said to have been written when he was denied permission to the Abhinava Bharatha Yuva Sangham on the argument that his age exceeded thirty. The poem goes thus,

“Graying of hair is not old age for me,

Hair being jet black is neither my youthhood,

The convention of counting the number of days from the date of birth,

Cannot define my youthhood"
(Means, for him youth hood should not be defined by physiological or chronological factors)

My youthhood is a heart

That'll not waver in any crisis.

My youth hood is the habit of

Not bowing head before authoritarian feudalism.

My youth hood is the habit not getting panicked,

Before the frowns of the arrogant rich class.\textsuperscript{52}

The poem goes on like that and ends with a threat to the landlordism and commanding it to surrender before the collective strength of the youth hood. Having deep philosophical undertones, the poem redefines the concept of youth hood as the fight against landlordism and colonialism. TS Thirumunp wrote poems which were strong weapons in the hands of the struggling peasantry.

Theruvathu Raman also wrote many poems and short stories on progressive themes about the lives of workers and peasants. \textit{Prabhatam} on 8\textsuperscript{th} August 1938 too had a poem in the facing page by KPG and Theruvathu Raman. The poem titled ‘\textit{Mushtikku Mushti}', (‘fist for a fist’), urges the working class to

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Prabhatam}. 20\textsuperscript{th} June, 1938.
fight against the factory owners who have taken their wealth away from them. The poem ends with the provoking question,

“What the bourgeoisie took away by an iron fist

Will it be returned if we kneel down before him?”

The poem Pattabakki, by Theruvathu Raman again narrates the plight of the peasants. The peasants who have lost their crop due to adverse climate, as they plead for some help the Jenmi shows no mercy and the law comes to the support of the Jenmi wielding the lathi at them. S.K. Pottakkad was a famous writer of Malayalam who started his literary career by writing for the peasantry and the working class. He wrote poems too. One of his poems published in Prabhatham deals with the worker’s strikes. S.K. Pottakkad addressed the working class of Alappuzha in this poem, where he declared that the revolution will not let the ruling classes survive for long. He exhorts the working class of Alappuzha and the 40,000 strong contingents of striking workers, to march ahead like an ocean of new humanity.

Premji wrote many poems in Prabhatham which exhorted the working class to fight. One of these songs is the song by Premji titled Unararayi, ‘It is time to wake up’.

53 Prabhatham. 8th August, 1938.
54 Ibid.
The song goes on thus

‘Our harvests are not anymore for the lords
Our harvests only for ourselves
In sunlight and rain while we work without interval,
In the paddy fields and groves,
The Jenmis laid back lazily oppress the tenants
Make their purses heavy.’

The poem urges for the creation of a socialist system where all pleasures and resources will be shared and where the workers who create the wealth in the society get their due.

The poem, ‘Vayalppattu' which was published in Prabhatham, was intended to be sung while working in the paddy fields, presents an analysis of the feudal oppression compounded with imperial exploitation. It puts the primary responsibility for the penury of the peasant on the colonial exploitation. To bring home the extent of this exploitation, the poem lists the hefty salaries and allowances enjoyed by the Viceroy and other officers of the British Raj. Then they point to their Jenmi who ‘sucks life out of the peasants and passes it on to the British Raj’. The poem ends with a call for a collective struggle urging all

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56 Prabhatham. 30th May, 1938.
peasants, women and men to join the Karshakasangham to fight the twin vices of colonialism and feudalism.\textsuperscript{57}

**Agrarian Question in Short Stories and Novels**

The Malayalam literature of that time was rich with a great number of stories and novels dealing with the issues of the peasantry and the working class. Thakazhi, P Kesavadev and SK Pottekkadu have written prolifically addressing the agrarian issues. The contribution of Cherukad is instrumental in this regard.

S.K. Pottekkad wrote many short stories in Prabhatham dealing with the life of the peasantry and working class. A story titled ‘Vesyavrithi’ (Adulteratio) by S.K. Pottekkad narrates the immorality and exploitation pervading the ruling classes and the exploitative society. The story is that of a worker who finds his wife having illicit relations with the moneylender. He beats her up and walks to the house of the money lender to take revenge. The money lender was not there while he finds the wife of money lender having illicit relations with the cook! Thus he goes back to his home saying that his wife is much better. It shows how a worker becomes aware of the hypocritical morality of the society.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{57} *Prabhatham*. 19\textsuperscript{th} December, 1938.

\textsuperscript{58} *Prabhatham*. 18\textsuperscript{th} July, 1938.
The story Nikuthikku Vendi,\textsuperscript{59} narrates the plight of a girl who had to get into prostitution to pay the taxes. The story reveals how the wealthy landlord is exploiting the downtrodden, yet retaining his gentlemanly image. The story ends with the words that the society killed a poor young girl for one rupee twelve annas and five paisa. The story \textit{Samudayadrohi} is a scathing critique of the existing legal system, where the role of the exploitative social system in creating individual criminals is analysed. The story is distinct by its craft at same time maintaining its commitment to political ideals.\textsuperscript{60}

The story published in \textit{Prabhatham} by Theruvathu Raman is on the workers strike. It is about the workers being lathi charged to death by the police for striking work. The police attempts to disperse the meeting held to condole their death. The story goes thus “to condole the death of the untimely loss of their comrades in arms, under an undulating red flag flying high on the mast thousands of workers thronged the open courtyard of the Lakshmi Vilasom Factory. A woman came forward from amongst that big crowd, the wife of martyr Kandan who lost his life in the lathi charge. That feeble woman- no she is not feeble – shouted at the top of her voice – Inquilab. A loud voice reverberated among that surprise stricken labourers Zindabad. Suddenly a Sub Inspector came up from the crowd and ordered: - This meeting should disperse right now. She asked in a grave tone, why? “There are various reasons, the meeting should

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Prabhatham}. 5\textsuperscript{th} December, 1938.

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Prabhatham}. 5\textsuperscript{th} December, 1938.
disperse immediately. “There is no way that we are going to be dispersed, this is condolence meeting, and we are not preparing for any violent activity. If we are acting violently, then you can make us disperse. She continued to the crowd, pulsating with unbound inspiration, Comrades……., Firing shots were heard. The police started firing at the crowd and bullets pierced the bosom of that courageous lady”. The story describing the martyrdom of Baava and Kandan ends thus. These stories with a seemingly simple narrative lacking any artistic sophistication served a political rather than a literary purpose. It served the cause of enthusing the workers and peasants to come up against the brutality unleashed by the police and authorities.

P. Kesavadev was one among the writers of Malayalam who gave great contribution to the stream of socialist realism in Malayalam literature. He wrote stories in Prabhatham and other publications. His stories were those which combined political commitment with the craft of writing. His stories challenged status quo in a big way, critically looking at the prevailing concepts of morality and legality. The story ‘Vesyalayathil’ by P. Kesavadev, presents a counter narrative about prostitution. The social circumstances which compel the young woman into prostitution are vividly described and the sincere genuine love of the worker of the factory is juxtaposed with the hypocrisy of the rich class. The widow of a young worker is induced into prostitution by the superior officer of her

62 Raman, Theruvath. ‘Panimudakkam’ (Mal.), Prabhatham, 31st October, 1938.
husband. In course of time, the very house owner under whom she had been a maid reaches as her client. The story thus demonstrates the hypocrisy of the upper-class and exposes the ideology of morality.63  

His famous work, Odayil ninnu (from the gutter) was published in 1944. Here Pappu, a Rikshaw puller brings up a fatherless girl, Lakshmi, educates her and finally gives her in marriage to a suitable husband but in this struggle, he becomes a T.B. patient. The novel illustrates the underlying humanity and sense of self sacrifice of Pappu.  

His famous novel, Kannadi (Mirror) portrayed the labour strike of Alappuzha in 1938. In a historical reflection, the historic strike is made into a fiction. The migration of a landless labourer to the town, his conversion into a factory labourer and his struggle for living is depicted vividly. Dev as a novelist describes the growth of class consciousness among the working class as a continuous process. The message which the novel declares is that the working class has no religion, no caste, no god and no country”. The characters like Neelakandam and Kattu (wind) were the two categories of leadership. One possessed only bookish knowledge while the other had the experience of living among the people and an intense knowledge about the daily struggles of a common labourer.  

63 Prabhatham. 4th July, 1938.
Cherukad was a writer who according to EMS has used his pen only for the cause of the movement. His literary efforts addressed the cause of the working class and the peasantry. The oppression of the state faced by the people has been highlighted well in his works. The novels like *Muthassi*, *Manninte maril* and *Shanidasa* and his short stories had agrarian relations and the emergence of a new peasant as its central theme.

His novel *Muthassi* contained a detailed representation of the social circumstances of the forties and it explains how the agrarian relations led to the emergence of the peasants’ and the teachers’ movement and the emergence of the Communist party. Teachers of the time were on many occasions were tenants. The novel contains a deep analysis of the social circumstances of that period. The novel describes the complex familial structure of the matrilineal society and its collapse in the modern times.

It narrates the story of a tenant, a grandmother, who was otherwise so caring about her granddaughter, requesting her to sleep with the steward of the landlord once so that he will not torture them often. The novel depicts the extent of degradation and decay pervading feudal system where the tenant goes to the extent of permitting the sexual exploitation of her granddaughter. The novel also depicts the emergence of the reading rooms and libraries in the villages of Kerala and the positive changes which they have brought along with them. The

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protagonist, Nani narrates thus, “Violence in this region is the result of a laid back lifestyle, with no definite goal or vocation. The coming up of a new library resulted in the reduction in the number of ‘commentators’ as many of them started spending their precious time for reading, taking memberships, conducting public meetings and for involving in debates. A group of girls came forward under my leadership and their bathing *ghat* meetings became occasions for critically reviewing the characters like Soori Namboothiripadu of Indulekha, Colamb of Sharada, Ananda Padmanabhan, Subhadra, Madhavi, Parukutty of Marthandavarma etc. They also got some hints about Congress, Gandhi, Nehru, and Kelappan and about some national movements. The women’s liberation was also a major theme in *Muthassi*.

It has been noted by K.P. Sankaran, in his critique of the novels of Cherukad, that the name, *Manninte maaril*, (On the lap of the soil) which was the name of his first novel would have been fit for his other works as well since they are linked so closely to the raw earth. Mannintemaaril narrates the story of Konderan and his attempts to save his land from the landlord. The organic link of the tenant with the land in which he and his forefathers have been living is depicted in the novel. The tress which has been planted in memory of his forefathers made him resolute to resist any attempt by the landlord to capture his land.

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In the novel the congress activist, Gopalankutty Menavan, advises Konderan to vacate the land without trouble. Konderan reacts furiously and he declares that either he or his landlord, only one among the two would be alive. The Congress activist says that they want Ahimsa, nonviolence and so Konderan should peacefully vacate the land. Konderan reacts with hatred, “I won’t resist provided you retain the land with the tenants’. Gopalankutty Menavan had nothing to say back.67

At another place, the organic link which he has with his land is narrated. “Konderan stood on Thallikappara, testing the sharpness of his knife. His eyes fell on the jackfruit tree of his forefather. It is only the month of Chingam. Yet the tree has started bearing fruits. Inside the forest, the coconut tree planted by another forefather dances in the wind. The coconut and jackfruit trees standing in a row.

“Whatsoever might happen, I won’t give up Athikkodu to anyone”, he renewed his pledge.”

The story illustrates the inseparable affection which the peasant has for his land.

Thakazhi Sivasankarapillai was a prominent literary figure who employed his literary skills in the service of the peasantry and the working class. His novel Randidangazhi was a realistic portrayal of the life of agricultural labourers of

Kuttanad in the feudal period. These agricultural labourers who were influenced by socialist thoughts became part of the labour movement and rebelled against the landed aristocracy and the government for their rights. The novel gave the strong message that political message will not suffice and there is a need for ensuring economic rights to the depressed sections of the population. Published shortly after the Punnapra Vayalar struggles, the novel urged for a radical change.

The paddy fields of Kuttanad where the Dalits toiled the whole year half naked and starved formed the background of the novel. The suffering of the protagonists is described as the suffering common to the agricultural labourers and the multifaceted exploitation faced by the labourers is brought to light. This included apart from economic exploitation, the domination exerted by the land owners on the women labourers. The novel was instrumental in bringing about social change in the agrarian system and promoting class organization of agricultural labourers. The novel concludes thus, “The slogans were heard from the other side - Victory to Revolution, Victory to Union. Velutha raised his small fist and cried, Land to the tiller.”

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70 Pillai, Thakazhi, Sivasankara. Randidangazhi (Mal.), p.116, D.C. Books, Kottayam, 2009,
*Prabhatam* published many stories which carried the message of socialism to the working class. The story ‘Leninte Sathyam’ (Lenin’s truth) speaks about the attempt by two peasants to find out the truth. The story is said to be from Russian translated into Hindi and the translation of the Hindi version is given here. Two brothers were working under a landlord who exploited them mercilessly. They decided to search for the truth which would help them to lead life perfectly and happily. They went to another village where a landlord asked them to work hard in order to understand the truth. They worked hard in his field after which he told him that hard toil is the truth for them.

They ignored him and went ahead. They had similar experience from a priest and a merchant. At this point the younger one goes back to his farm, losing heart. The elder one goes ahead joining the factory. There he is made to meet with Lenin who had the *truth* with him. Lenin says to them, “It is good that you came to the factory and mill. The factory is a much better place to know the truth,” and he advises them to change the system which is highly exploitative.

The story with its simple narrative carefully portrays the transition from a peasant consciousness to that of a radical working class consciousness. The story must have served a great purpose to drive home the mindless exploitation engaged in by the various vested interests and the need for social change and revolution to bring a total transformation.

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The story published in Prabhatham, titled ‘Avante Katha’\(^\text{72}\) (His Story), written by Appanu narrates the experience of the soldiers who have been deployed to suppress the peasant rebellion. The soldier says that his job is to disperse the peasants by threatening them with the display of guns but the peasants move away from the guns and occupy fearlessly the place after a while. The soldier speaking out his heart says, “My officer was astonished by the fearlessness of the peasants and it made him nervous with fear. On one occasion he told me, “What a nuisance is this damned peasantry. It seems, they won’t subside unless they are fired at.”\(^\text{73}\)

A mono act play of Thakazhi titled ‘Anadha Mandirangal’\(^\text{74}\) (Orphanages), analyses the social conditions which results in the creation of orphanage. It takes a critical look at the notion of charity and finds it not as solution of the problems but as the result of exploitation and even a tool for advancing its cause.\(^\text{75}\)

**Agrarian Question in Plays**

Plays were one of the most popular media to drive home the ideas of social change to the public directly. The most popular playwrights of Malayalam were associated with the peasant movement and their plays dealt with the day to

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\(^\text{72}\) *Prabhatham*, 19\(^{\text{th}}\) December, 1938.

\(^\text{73}\) *Prabhatham*. 14\(^{\text{th}}\) November, 1938.

\(^\text{74}\) *Prabhatham*, 19\(^{\text{th}}\) December, 1938.

\(^\text{75}\) Ibid.
day life of the peasantry. Thus by virtue of the relevance of the subjects they handled these plays acquired immense popularity across Kerala.

*Prabhatam* also used to publish plays reflecting the plight of the working class and the peasantry and their heroic fight against the current system. The play titled ‘*Pattinippalayam*’ is on the attempt by the labourer to take the newspaper of the working class into the factory and the punitive action taken upon him by the supervisor. He was suspended by the factory clerk and consequently his family is forced into starvation and his child dies of hunger and illness. The play has a heart breaking end as the child dies and its mother cries pitifully and Thomas, the protagonist taking a knife runs in vengeance in search of the supervisor. The play intends to demonstrate the inherent brutality of the system and the challenges which they had to face to change it.\(^76\)

K Damodaran wrote a play titled Pattabakki which reflected upon the oppressive land tenurial relations under feudalism.\(^77\) The play was a big success as it was whole heartedly received by the peasantry and the working class. The play narrated the story of Kittunni who was a factory worker. Even after working throughout the day, he had to lead his life in penury. His family was facing evictions as they cannot pay the rent arrears. His sister had to beg for food from nearby houses to feed her younger brother. Finally she is forced into prostitution and Kittunni was imprisoned for theft. The friend of Kittunni, Muhammad, was

\(^{76}\) *Prabhatam*, 21\(^{st}\) November, 1938.

\(^{77}\) Damodaran, K. *Pattabaki* (Mal.), p.84, Prabatham, Thiruvananthapuram, 1958.
arrested for participating in a strike. Muhammad advises Kittunni as follows “To escape from all these troubles there is only one way. Today the authority is fully concentrated in the hands of the rich. We the peasants, workers and the middle class have to capture that authority and government after organised agitations.”

The play acquired such popularity that as part of the social imaginary, it found its place in the novels. The famous novel *Muthassi* by Cherukad had the protagonist Nani watching the play and reacting thus, “The play *Pattabakki*, performed at the public meeting generated an enthusiasm and enlightenment in the minds of all those who have assembled there. Watching the scene where Kunjimalu, throwing the broomstick on the face of steward, I saw my Balan biting the hand of Kunjunair.” That was the centrality acquired by Pattabakki in the hearts of the peasants and tenants. *Raktapanam* (Blood sucking) was another play written by K. Damodaran. It highlighted the exploitation of the working class by the capitalists.

*Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC)* was formed in 1950. K.P.A.C. and their plays had a very significant role in spreading the message of the peasant movement in the country. The plays were based on the everyday life of the working class and the peasantry. The playwrights took themes which were

simple and which contained strong political messages. Thoppil Bhasi played a crucial role in promoting these plays. His play Mooladhanam (capital) was forwarded to the memory of the martyrdom of the martyr Sooranadu. The play, Ningalenne Communistakki, (You Made Me a Communist), is about the self-realization dawning upon a middle class farmer Paramupillai who realizes that the feudalism is all about deceit and oppression and what is required at this moment is a spirited fight against landlordism. The story begins with him completely dubious about the possibility of peasants coming together and fighting for social change. According to him, all what is happening in life is due to his misfortune and he is strongly opposed to the attempts of his son to form Karshaka Sangham. But the turning point comes when the landlord Kesavan Nair, deceives him and sends him a legal notice to evacuate the house and land. Now Paramupillai has nothing to do. He is convinced about the oppressive landlordism. The last straw on the camel’s back was the incident in which his son gets badly beaten up by Kesavan Nair. Thus Paramu Pillai experiences a change in himself. He realizes that this flag is of the ‘have nots’. He takes the flag from the hands of a Dalit girl telling that, “I want to hold this flag high”! The play was more valued for the message it contained than its craft or artistic value. It played in hundreds of stages. The play was well received by the public of Kerala and the

Police of Cochin confiscated all copies of this work available in press as proscribed literature.

Thakazhi wrote a play in 1946, titled ‘Thottilla’ (never failed), adopting the theme of freedom struggle of Cochin.\textsuperscript{84} Aravindan was an activist who was the son in law of Peshkar. The Peshkar hated him for his political activities and his family life was made miserable by him. With all his political designs for a mass movement he died.\textsuperscript{85}

Thus the various genre of literature in Kerala from thirties to seventies had played an active role in advancing the cause of the peasantry and work force. It can be seen that the peasant movement of Kerala was immensely benefitted from the organic link which it was able to build up with the litterateurs. The mass movement of Kerala was successful in influencing the intelligentsia and using its powers and prowess to advance the cause of the peasantry and the working class. The presence of such writers and artists was crucial in advancing the struggle of the peasantry.

It has to be noted that the participation of the poets, story writers, novelists and playwrights with a definite political goal was something which was achieved without effort. The intellectual domain of Kerala has witnessed fierce raging debates over the propriety of the litterateurs being part of such efforts. Many of

\textsuperscript{84} Devadas, M S. Sahitya Pratibhayum Samuhavum (Mal.), p.143, Chintha publishers, Thiruvananthapuram, 1982.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid. p.145.
the critics found that unpalatable. The art for art’s sake and the arguments about form and style dominated the literary scene. But the emergence of the progressive writer’s associations made a great difference in this situation.

Once the writers under the banner started their collective efforts to promote the cause of the downtrodden sections of the society, no poet could ignore its impact. Nobody could speak about the shining moon in the clear blue sky without speaking about the vast humanity in seething trouble living on the earth. Thus the progressive literature emphasized the point that literature has to respond to the day to day perils of life whatever be its approach to it.