Chapter 9

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The major objective of the present study was to examine the changes in production conditions in agriculture taking place in the state in the past few decades. The market for agricultural labourers has been exhibiting a 'curious phenomenon' of shortage of labour amidst rising wages and unemployment. This has been taking place in a milieu of stagnant productivity, declining production and area under cultivation of paddy and dwindling employment. Changes were taking place in the agricultural practices and in the tenure conditions, manifested in the re-emergence of tenancy. We argued that the dynamics of labour, land lease market and agricultural practices were interrelated and their interrelatedness was examined in the background of paddy cultivation in Kuttanad.

The question of tenancy and its inter linkages in the Marxist and Neo-classical tradition and land reforms were examined. In the Marxist tradition, land lease market and the interrelated transactions were meant for surplus appropriation by the dominant class while for the dependants they were out of compulsions to meet their subsistence requirements. Such dominant / dependant relations were considered remnants of feudalism to be done away with. To the Neo classical, interlocked contracts were aimed at
allocative efficiency. The tenants enter into interlinked transactions voluntarily and not by any extra-economic coercion; they do not constitute a weaker party, and landlords a stronger one. In short, their relationship was symbiotic where both parties benefited.

One of the major defects of these approaches was the implicit assumption of a dichotomy between landlords and the tenants. Recent studies on tenancy have shown that big cultivators entered the market as lessees and small landowners as lessors – the phenomenon of 'reverse tenancy’. Moreover, it was seen that tenancy was by and large free from inter linkages. However, there were evidences that supported Marxist tradition of exploitation and inter linkages as well. Tenancy is pre-capitalist and not conducive to the development of agriculture. Therefore, the system has to be evolved to either capitalist or a peasant or collective system which could be achieved only through agrarian / land reforms. There are mainly three models of land reforms viz;

1) The tenure reform or intervention model (which aimed mainly at abolition of the abuses of property relations in land without altering the social organisation of production).

2) Re-distributive model (In this model a ceiling is imposed on the size of ownership and the excess is appropriated and redistributed so as to bring about equity and economic dynamism into the system).
3) **Land to the tiller model** (The major components of this programme have been abolition and prohibition of rent and landlordism, a very low ceiling on land ownership, redistribution of the surplus and conferment of land to the tillers. It aims at the alteration of basic system of landlord – tenant relations of production and considered to be the most radical or revolutionary).

We argued that the land reform models were premised mainly on social justice, economic efficiency and political stability.

Kerala state has the distinction of having conceived and implemented land reform measures of a radical nature. An attempt was made to examine the conditions of landlord – tenant relationship that existed in the three units of Kerala prior to the formation of the state and the land reform process and its impact. It was shown that land relations in these three units were broadly caste-based ‘janmi’ systems. Attempts at reforms during the colonial occupation brought out certain important changes in the land tenures of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar in the period when they were separate political units. However, there were differences in their effect due to difference in the political set-ups. In Travancore, the state being the largest holder of land made attempts in land reforms less arduous and more effective. ‘Pattom Proclamation’ of 1865 conferred titles of ownership to all the tenants of state land, made land a saleable and mortgageable commodity
and created a broad-based category of peasant proprietors. However, there was leasing in private land and lands on which ownership right was secured. Since the extent of state owned land was smaller in Cochin a similar proclamation did not produce results as in Travancore. In contrast, in Malabar, _janmies_ had the absolute ownership on land and the state ownership was too little. Most of the land was cultivated by the ‘tenants at will’. It was one of “the most oppressive and rack-rented region on the face of the earth”. This led to grave unrest and culminated in the Revolt of 1921. As a sequel to this fair rents were fixed and permanent occupancy rights were granted through the tenancy Act of 1921.

Various attempts at reforms prior to the formation of the state was that Travancore changed to a region of peasant properties holding and leasing in land. In contrast, Malabar was changed into almost an absentee land tract. Cochin stood in the intermediate position of proprietors-cum-absentee landlords.

Land reforms as legislated and implemented in Kerala were hailed as one of the great success stories. The state abolished feudal landlordism; it was able to achieve substantial reduction in landlessness by conferring ownership right to hutment dwellers, which raised the reserve price of labour; labour became free agents and created a broad labour market, which did not hitherto exist. Correspondingly attached labour system collapsed
and casual labour status, *a fait accompli*. Simultaneously the agricultural practices have also undergone changes.

Though not a direct impact of land reforms, the above-mentioned developments facilitated the labourers to organise under trade unions and politically. Those agricultural labourers who did not get the benefit of land reforms were brought under ‘One Lakh Housing Scheme’ and ‘Agricultural Labourers Pension Scheme’.

However, it was argued that whether these reforms were able to do justice to the slogan “land to the tiller remains doubtful”. The provision of ‘personal cultivation’ to subsume ‘supervision’ also precluded the agricultural proletariat form the reform model. The take over and redistribution of surplus land was far below expectations; agricultural production actually registered a decline; expected increase in family-labour participation did not materialise; tribals were marginalized and most of all informal leasing re-appeared.

Changes in agricultural practices and labour relation were more pronounced in Kuttanad. It was shown that the paddy field in Kuttanad was unique. Known as the Holland of Kerala, its paddy field lies below the mean sea level. Since this region was proximate to the Vembanad lake and criss-crossed by rivers, paddy cultivation was highly vulnerable to natural
calamities. Paddy blocks were of two types viz, *padashekarams*, and *kayals*. Distribution of land was highly skewed in this region, which was glaring in *kayals*. *Kayals* were the result of reclamation of Vembanad lake from 1834 onwards. Reclamation was a highly adventurous task, which involved the use of huge amount of human labour and capital. Until World War I, the paddy fields were put under plough only once in two or three years, in part, due to the non-availability of labour. Before the advent of engine and later electric pumps, dewatering was done manually using water wheels. Agricultural operations were time bound. Application of labour in the right time and quantity was crucial. Such criticality of labour application and shortage of labour prompted farmers to keep labourers attached to them. They were mostly the hutment dwellers of the farmers. Intrusion of capital, in particular, the introduction of Green Revolution strategy brought changes in agricultural practices and to a smaller extent in the relations of labour.

It was argued that analogous to the traditional agricultural practices there prevailed a labour arrangement to suit the requirements of the practices in the paddy cultivation of Kuttanad. Such relations were shattered mostly by the organisation of labour and its political mobilisation.

Agrestic slavery prevailed in its worst form in Kuttanad. The agrestic slaves were mainly drawn from the *Pulaya* and *Paraya* communities. The
institution of agrestic slavery was spearheaded by the *Nampoothiris* and originally it was a wetland phenomenon. Rights over the slaves were similar to the rights over land. They could be sold or mortgaged or rented. Though the system was abolished, it was made to continue in a different form namely, attached labour. The bulk of the labour force in Kuttanad belonged to this category. The labourer together with his family was attached to a landlord. Along with the attached labourers there existed semi-attached labourers and free labourers drawn mainly from the Ezhava community.

The attached labour system collapsed mainly under the weight of the unionisation of agricultural labourers, facilitated *inter alia* by the proximity of a militant urban working class (in the coir and oil extraction factories of Alappuzha), and above all the scarcity of food and its high price and the refusal of farmers to pay wages in kind during the Second World War period.

The union addressed itself mainly to the issues of wages, security of employment, occupancy rights and against the eviction of hutment dwellers. Violence was often resorted to in the bargain; farmers often gave in bearing its brunt and also due to the criticality of labour application in *punja* cultivation.

Unionisation of labour brought better working conditions in terms of wages and working hours; it forced the government to confer ownership
right to hutment dwellers, succeeded in developing class consciousness among labourers and improving the dignity of labour and status and to introduce a pension scheme aiming at aged members of agricultural labour households.

It was observed that the trade union movement resulted in higher wages and better working conditions for the farm labourers. The increase in wages, however, was unrelated to growth in the farm income. Paddy cultivation had become problematic since the mid-seventies.

There existed two types of wage payments in paddy cultivation, money wages for ordinary operations and product sharing for harvesting. Remuneration for harvesting, therefore, is contingent on the sharing rate on the one hand and product price and yield on the other. The remuneration for harvesting and wages for other operations both in nominal and real terms were on the increase during 1962-74. Indices of farm income (real and nominal) moved ahead of the wage increase. For the field workers, the remuneration for harvesting was higher than that obtained in other unskilled activities. This attracted migrant workers around Kuttanad to the paddy field. The hitherto unemployed persons who considered paddy field work *infra-dig* and even school going children joined the labour mass. Labour market swelled and a period of intense struggle between farmers and
labourers ensued; strikes, hartals and police interventions were the order of the day.

However, this scenario underwent a sudden change in the mid-seventies. For the farmers, there had been stagnation in the yield and at times; a decline in it. Paddy price also did not rise sufficiently to compensate for the steep rise in wages. Wages were increasing to keep parity with that of the unskilled workers in construction, in an interrelated labour market. Though farm income increased in nominal terms, real farm income turned negative compared to the base year. In consequence, farmers showed a tendency to withdraw from active cultivation; area under rice and its production declined during this period.

A further deterioration of farm scenario was observed since the 90’s – the years of new economic policy. Growth in real farm income showed further decline. Nevertheless, the indices of wages went on growing. A further decline in the area under rice and its production was seen.

Thus, since the mid-seventies there had been a reversal of trend in the farm prosperity. During this period the rate of product sharing remained unchanged. It meant the money equivalent of product share had not been increasing at the same pace as the increase in money wage. This period also witnessed a sharp increase in the wages of unskilled workers in construction
and related activities, which emanated from the Gulf Boom (spending effect of ‘Dutch disease’). Such developments induced a partial withdrawal of male harvesters from the field accompanied by female labourers – ‘Pull’ of a favourable and ‘Push’ of an unfavourable situation.

Cultivators reacted to high wages by employing labour saving devices in cultivation. They reduced the number of days of employment available in the farm inducing further withdrawal of labour from the farm. However, the volume of labour required for harvesting could not be reduced, for, harvesting continued to be labour intensive and non-mechanised. Farmers in distress showed the tendency to migrate to more profitable investments by disposing of their land. Some of them kept their land fallow; a few others converted them to residential plots and for raising commercial crops; while others leased them out for rent.

Thus, three major developments took place in the paddy field. Tenancy, that was proscribed, re-appeared; emergence of a new peasantry from among the erstwhile agricultural labour class either by purchasing land or (and) taking it on lease and migration of farm labourers to non-farm activities. We tried to capture the magnitude of these tendencies through a field enquiry of the region. Firstly, we took up the question of tenancy and related issues.
Tenancy rather, land leasing was more extensive in *kayals* than in *padashekharans*. Community wise dominant sections of lessors were Christians followed by the high caste Hindus. (Nair community) Unlike other communities, it was seen that Ezhavas took the bulk of the lased land. They contributed their family labour to cultivation and, in general, were willing to undertake the risk associated with *kayal* cultivation and to cope with the labour problems. Since their ownership holdings were also significant (next only to Christians), they formed a dominant section of the farming community. We have argued that their elevation to this status has implications for the changed labour relations of the region, since they were mainly in the vanguard of the agricultural labour union and its political mobilisation. Recipients of surplus land who belonged to erstwhile attached labour class also leased out their land. But reasons for their leasing were different from those of other lessors.

Economics of leasing showed that the forces that determine rent in *kayal* was different from that in *padashekharans*. In the latter, there was a pronounced trend towards the inverse relation between rent and size of leasehold. The expected positive association between yield and rent did not exist in *kayal*; but it did exist in the *padashekharans*. This strange phenomenon was due to higher cost of cultivation in *kayal* caused by access cost; additional labour cost (both physical and psychic) and the risk cost that were unique to *kayal* cultivation.
The institution of emerging tenancy / leasing was significantly different from the traditional type. Neither, the dominant-dependant and the exploitative character of tenancy as expounded in the Marxist tradition nor the patron-client bond as in the neo-classical could be obtained. There also existed no evidence of inter-linkages of any sort. Pure tenancy (share cropping) was scarcely seen in the field. Rent was taken in cash and generally in advance. The present day contract approximated relations of a free market. The contract generally lasted for a crop and the conditions were set by word of mouth. In most of the cases the contract was mediated through brokers for which, they took a commission.

Preference for non-farm employment has been conspicuous and growing, aided by (a) growth and degree of commercialisation of agriculture, (b) developments in local, urban and foreign markets, (c) level of education of the employment seekers, (d) their asset base, (e) status associated with employment and (f) age group and gender differences.

The pattern of employment showed the predominance of non-farm sector, in general, and among the younger generations in particular, which is quite unexpected in a predominantly agrarian region. Two-fifths of the work force was farm labourers and about three-fourths of them, females. Most farm labourers were aged and less educated. Service sector dominated
the economic activities and within it, trade and commerce; and in the secondary, construction was the dominant.

The general inclination to non-farm employment was strong even among the wage labourers, since the remuneration was better and regular. The tendency to diversify was manifest among all the occupational categories. Even in the Farm Labour Households, about a quarter of the members sought employment outside; they had multiple occupational status. Those who stuck to farm were the aged and the less educated. Among the agricultural labourers a caste-occupation nexus was evident.

Thus, while the young, educated, forward community, workers with an asset base have gone for non-farm employment, the farm sector has become a receptacle of the aged, less educated, poor and the backward.

To sum up: shortage of labour and wage increase unrelated to farm income led to reduced use of labour and a decline in the area under rice cultivation. In consequence, production of rice, the staple food of Keralites, also declined. Food requirements of the state have been largely met by imports from other states. This was paused as a threat to the food security of the state. The changed agrarian scenario resulted in the emergence of a new peasantry by purchasing land or (and) taking land on lease. Tenancy contracts of today resemble relations in a market. A substantial section of
the new peasantry contributed their family labour to cultivation. Nevertheless, the problem of shortage remains unsolved. However, much of it would be eased if harvesting operations, for which shortage of labour is felt acutely, were mechanised. Most of the migrated workers in the construction sector and related activities were operating on a contractual basis resembling relations in a market. Marketisation of labour and its multiple occupational status and the emergence of a new peasantry eroded the militancy of labour and labour organisation. In consequence, the political mobilisation of labour is also at stake.