

The Paradoxes of Land Reforms

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Summary: *Despite being touted as the state that most thoroughly implemented land reforms, Kerala faces the paradox of stunted agricultural growth. A continuation of plantation interests, exclusion of Dalits and Adivasis from land rights, and the rise of a rentier class, combine to perpetuate caste-feudal dominance.*

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Keralam is considered as the rare instance in India where land reforms were carried out thoroughly. Yet, it also stands out as a rarity for bucking the general trend of reforms leading to agrarian growth.

During 1955-56, there were 7.60 lakh hectares of paddy fields in Kerala. By 2016, it came down to 1.92 lakh hectares. That is not the only paradox. Year on year the extent of fallow land goes on increasing. Yet land is also being leased in; on an increasing scale. And not just for commercial crops. It is also seen in paddy cultivation.

Land reforms usually boost agrarian growth by acting at several levels. Eliminating the burden of rent borne by peasants, it allows for more surplus, and thus, more investment. Ensuring ownership of land, it incentivises improvement of land and agricultural practices. Why didn't this take place in Keralam?

Mainstream economists differ in answering this question. There are those who argue that though farmers were keen on boosting cultivation, they were put off by militant trade unionism and the opposition to timely mechanisation. Then there are those who dispute this. They argue that the failure to follow up on land reforms with necessary infrastructural development was the main reason. Neither of them addresses the real issue — *what was the predominant economic interest among the tenants who gained from the land reforms carried out in Keralam?*

T.C. Varghese's "Agrarian Changes and Economic Consequences", gives an approximate picture of the tenancy relations existing around the period the 1957 Agrarian Relations Bill was being debated. Nearly three fourths of the garden land in Thiruvithamkoor and half of it in Kochi were free of tenancy. But in Malabar most of it was still under tenure. Paddy lands in all the three regions were mainly leased in. All the landlord families who were collecting rent had entered new

avenues. Overall, a situation where agrarian and non-agrarian sources of livelihood were intermingled in family income had already emerged. One fifth of those who enjoyed some form of control over land were not dependent on agriculture.

The Land Reform survey of 1968 carried out by the Kerala government confirmed this picture. Only half of the tenant families were mainly dependent on agricultural income. Both among tenant families and owner cultivators, the proportion dependent on agricultural income, or with at least one member involved in agriculture, had gone down to a considerable extent. That is, most of the tenants who got land through the reforms were no longer reliant on agriculture as their main source of income. They were no longer peasants.

The transfer of land ownership to those no longer reliant on agriculture was one of the major factors underlying the failure of land reforms to trigger off agrarian growth. But that was not all. The reforms were almost completely limited to paddy lands. Rubber, tea and coffee plantations were exempt. Even a Gazette declaration announcing intention to convert a piece of land into a plantation was sufficient for this. Quite naturally commercial cropping got a big boost. Stagnant or decreasing growth was seen only in food crops, mainly paddy. Cropped area and production of all the main plantation crops shot up. This continues: To give an example, paddy production fell from approximately 13 lakh tonnes in 1970-71 to 5.60 in 2021-22. Over the same period, rubber went up from 88 thousand tonnes to 5.56 lakh tonnes. Evidently, the land reforms were a continuation of the colonial project of transforming this region into a plantation economy. The same interests ensured that the little dynamism seen in paddy cultivation during the initial years after reforms was quickly smothered. We must once again go back to data supplied by the 1968 Survey to understand this.

The Survey noted that in size classes above 2.5 acres, more than half of the tenant families were mainly dependent on agriculture. Excluding leased garden land, 70 percent of tenants cultivating above 5 acres were dependent on agriculture. 1.45 lakhs in number, they leased a big share of leased land. A quarter of the leased land was held by those in the size class above 10 acres. Having been rid of the burden of paying rent to the landlord and getting ownership of ample land for cultivation, shouldn't this section have taken it up in all earnest? In fact, that did happen. For a few years after the reforms both the acreage and production of paddy had indeed increased. But it couldn't be sustained. Landowners started exiting from paddy cultivation by the second half of the 1970s. Though they usually cite increased wages, the 'arrogance' of labour and crop failure as reasons, the main push came from the sharp fall in the price of paddy. Cheap Andhra rice started flooding the markets. Keralam was not slotted to be a food producing region in the plans of the Indian government and its foreign advisers.

The crippling blow dealt to Keralam's agrarian sector didn't end with this. It was sealed with the expulsion of landless Dalits and Adivasis from all legal rights to the lands they had toiled on. These landless peasants had been the main agricultural labour force in this region. Caste-feudalism enforced adiyalatham on them. They could be sold, mortgaged or loaned by their Savarna owners. This was abolished during the colonial period. They now became kudikidappukar, bonded labour. Living in their huts built on some corner of a landlord's (janmam) or superior tenant's (kanam) land, they remained the main labour force. The kudikidappu system was not merely about residence. Landlords and kanam tenants forced the Dalit and Adivasi kudikidappukar's to set up their huts in uncultivated, uninhabited lands. Once those areas were made cultivable they

were forcefully evicted. Thus the kudikidappu system was an integral part of the expansion of cultivation. Moreover, the kudikidappukar were the repository of local, traditional, agricultural knowledge. As the main tillers of the land they should have been given prime right over the land. Instead, their right to land was reduced to homesteads, 10 cents in rural areas and 4 cents in urban ones. They now dot the land as rural slums, with five or six huts in each plot, the land divided with each passing generation. There are 26,342 SC Habitats/Colonies in the state. The landless were also assured a share in surplus land, that is excess land expropriated from landlords. Data on land transfers will show that this was a very, very small share. Land ownership data show that the extent of evasion by landlords before 1966 was 8.76 lakh acres. Just 1.99 lakh acres were given up by them after that. This is barely 23 per cent of what they managed to hide from land reforms and 14 percent of the land possessed by them in 1956!

In sum, the land reforms ensured growth of the plantation economy and further depletion of Keralam's food self-sufficiency. It transferred land to people who were no longer dependent on agriculture. Those most interested in farming, the landless Dalits and Adivasis, were barred from all legal rights to the land they had toiled on. Two prominent aspects of caste-feudalism — dominance of Savarnas in land ownership and exclusion of Dalits from it— were thus sustained in a restructured form. These reforms lie at the root of all the evils afflicting Keralam's agricultural sector today. Take the case of tenancy.

Though leasing out land for agriculture is banned by law it has been flourishing all along. Tenancy can be divided into two main categories. Among them subsistence tenancy is predominant. This is done by

landless, poor and even middle peasants to supplement their income from their main occupation. All three forms of tenancy – sharecropping, money rent and labour rent – exist and flourish. In the labour rent, tenants have to take care of saplings (usually coconut or rubber) for a fixed number of years while using the rest of the land for their own farming. Though rent is often computed along with other expenses of cultivation, it is actually a part of the surplus. When calculated as such, it ranges from one third to half. Cultivation on leased land as the main occupation is the other form of tenancy. Even in this case, the extent of land taken on lease is usually insufficient to generate a surplus allowing accumulation. Going by the opinion of a young farmer, engaged in tenant farming for several years in Kuttanad, one would need at least 50 acres to get a surplus sufficient to maintain middle class life standards. That means that even at that acreage it would not be leaving anything for accumulation.

At the time of the land reforms the total rent burden was estimated as 17 crores. Today it would easily come to hundreds of crores. The irony is that the government too is now paying rent to landowners willing to give out their land on lease. Out of the subsidy of Rs. 30,000 per hectare given to those willing to cultivate fallow lands, 5,000 is for the owner of the land as lease value! Another paradox – in this case land reforms leading to the official creation and sustenance of a rentier class!