

Changes in Agrarian Structure and Land Tenures in Kerala: A Historical Review

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**(Published in State and Society, Vol.5, No.1, January -
March 1984)**

Republished By

Thiruvananthapuram Economic Studies Society

August 2017

Introduction

Contemporary and recent studies of Kerala history give glimpses of how agrarian structure and relations evolved on the southwest coast of India. Focusing on issues rather than details, this article attempts to review the main trends and gaps of research so that at least a hazy picture emerges linking the pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence periods.

In the absence of prehistorical or protohistorical data, the Sangam age, roughly the first five centuries of the Christian era, may be considered as the earliest known phase of Kerala history. Sangam literature in Tamil describes the society at the centres of civilisation and in those areas where settled agriculture and clan relations had evolved. Among the works on Kerala of the Sangam Age, the notable ones were written by P.N. Kunjan Pillai and K.K. Pillai.¹ Based on original historical sources, these provide a rough sketch of agriculture and the agrarian structure.

Kunjan Pillai was the pioneer who traced the origin of land ownership and Brahminical landlordism. According to him, private ownership of land began in Kerala before the Sangam Age. The owners were Pulayas, Idayas, Vedas and Valluvas either as cultivators or local chieftains. Neither the caste system nor untouchability had made its appearance. The system of inheritance was patrilineal. Land system such as *Brahmaswom* (Brahmin ownership) and *Devaswom* (of the deity or temple) did not come into existence till the end of the sixth century AD when ownership passed to the Brahmins.

From Tamil and Sanskrit inscriptions dating back to the ninth century, it appears that the main development of socio-political significance was the emergence of Hinduism consequent to Brahmin dominance. After Kunjan Pillai, those who examined the Brahmin impact are M.G.S Narayanan and Kesavan Veluthat.

Tracing the origin and growth of Brahmin settlements in Kerala, Kesavan Veluthat suggests that a process of migration and settlement might have begun as early as the Sangam Age. By the close of the eighth century, the Brahmin settlement had become a decisive economic factor. M.G.S. Narayanan and Kesavan Veluthat attribute the expansion of river valley cultivation to Brahmin migration.²

Brahmin Settlement and Landlordism

Kunjan Pillai also examined the emergence of Brahmin landlordism in Kerala. Under the influence of the settlers, Hinduism became the most powerful religion. Temples began to be constructed by about 750 AD, which performed the all-in-one functions of school, library, seminary, theatre and public park. When a temple was built it was usual to endow it with property the revenue from which would cover expenses of daily worship, festivals, schools and feeding places. Kings, *Naduvazhis* (governors) and even ordinary cultivators donated land to the temples. Management of temple property was vested with a council of *uralar* (local leaders).³

During the hundred years war between Cholas and Cheras in the eleventh century, the temple ceased to be the focal point of cultural, educational and economic activities. Properties under temple management continued as sources of income, but without

corresponding expenditure. Trustees began to act as real owners. Kunjan Pillai associates the term *janmi* with the office of trustee. In the beginning prominent persons were appointed for a fixed time. At a later period, it became the custom for them to hold office for lifetime. The lifetime right of trustees over property was called the *janmam* (lifetime) right.

It was also during the hundred years war that the custom started to appoint a trustee's legal heir as successor, thus making the office of trusteeship hereditary. In the twelfth century Brahmin trustees emerged as powerful landlords. *Marumakathayam* (matrilineal system) arose in conditions of a prolonged war characterised by the formation of *Chaver* (fighters unto death) troops to meet the Chola invasion threat, and legalisation of the Brahmin landlord practice of taking concubines from the lower castes. Though there is disagreement among historians, Kunjan Pillai's views on the hundred years war and the emergence of *Marumakathayam* support his contention on the origin of Brahmin landlordism in Kerala.⁴

According to M G S. Narayanan, under the Kulasekhara dynasty (800 to 1124 AD) ownership of land was vested with the Chera king whose feudatories, the *naduvazhis* and chieftains enjoyed land rights in the districts in return for paying tribute. Lands of the king or of the feudatories inhabited and cultivated by the native population were known as *Cherikkal lands*. Three kinds of rights, *Kanam* (proprietorship) *Karanmai* (tenancy) *Kutimai* (occupancy) were in existence during the period. An important development was the gradual acquisition of thousands of acres of land by Brahmin village corporations through *Attiper* (from landowners placing land under temple or Brahmin protection, or by outright purchase from them). Narayanan is of the view that the acquisition of large areas of land by the Brahmin corporations gradually led to the domination of economic and social life by the settlers who imposed their culture on Kerala. Kesavan Veluthat citing the inscriptions of the Tiruvalla copper plates confirms that the Tiruvalla temple had received vast land donations.

Caste and Land Hierarchy

By the twelfth century the Brahmins were able to establish themselves as the most dominant group. According to Kunjan Pillai, their influence was so great that they even succeeded in persuading the royal families to accept the myth of Brahmin blood alone being capable of producing good kings. There were instances of Brahmins making the kings atone for the cardinal sin of giving them offence. They succeeded in introducing a hierarchical system with themselves at the top as the most superior caste. By virtue of religious leadership and temple management, Brahmins became powerful landlords by a gradual process of converting management rights to ownership rights. Kings and governors also possessed vast tracts of land as landlords. The feudal system in medieval Kerala showed a hierarchy of land rights and caste which displayed somewhat the following pattern:

<i>Janmam</i>	Rajas, Brahmins, Temples and <i>Naduvazhis</i>
<i>Kanam</i>	Nairs and sub-groups of Nairs
<i>Verumpattom</i>	Nairs, <i>Moplabs</i> (Muslims), Syrian Christians and Ezhavas
Agrestic Slaves	Pulayas, Cherumars, Parayas and others

Compared to the very early days, there is more information about eighteenth century land ownership, tenures and the agrarian situation in the northern part of Kerala. Among the descriptions of Malabar prior to the Mysorean invasion in 1766, the most mentionable is the report of Francis Buchanan who visited Malabar in 1800 at the instance of the colonial government.⁵ Till 1800, the land was owned by four categories of *janmis*: rajas, temples, Nambudiri Brahmins and *Naduvazhis*. The *Naduvazhis*, who kept Nair regiments of 200 to 3000 men and supported the king in times of war also held land in proportion to the strength of their armed forces. Tenancies were of three types: *Verumpattom*, *Kanam* and *Kuzhikanam*. Buchanan also identified that *Janmam*, *Kanam* and *Pattom* tenures were exchanged for slaves who did most of the agricultural work. The agrarian structure and relations stood in the way of farm productivity and agricultural development.

In the Malabar Area

William Logan also came out with his findings on Malabar land tenures prior to the Mysorean invasion.⁶ Citing land deeds executed as early as 1000 AD, Logan found the original system as one of sharing of produce, each sharer being permitted the free transfer of his interest in land. The *janmi* had no absolute ownership. With the Mysorean invasion, there occurred a disturbance of customary sharing of produce which had been prevailing till that time. With a weakened *janmi* domination ample opportunities were created, especially for Muslim tenants, to buy land at low cost or to seize the land vacated by fleeing landlords. The Mysoreans introduced a direct land revenue settlement with the *Kanakkars* (*Kanam* holders) superseding the customary sharing of produce. Among other source of information on the agrarian situation during the Mysorean dominance mention may be made of the writings of Ronald Miller and C.K. Kareem.⁷

With the establishment of colonial rule over Malabar in 1792, the British pursued a policy of maximising land revenue and creating a feudal class as agents. As a part of the exercise of administration a number of official studies were sponsored on various aspects of Malabar, the first being the Joint Commissioner's Report. Murdoch Brown's report dated 13 July 1798 to the Commissioner of Malabar is perhaps one of the earliest on land tenures in Malabar. During early nineteenth century, though a number of official reports briefly dealt with land tenures and allied matters those which gave a detailed discussion were those of Warden, Walker and Thackeray.⁸

Warden fully endorsed the observation made by Buchanan that the right of redemption was rarely exercised by the *janmi*. Without properly understanding the customary land relations for centuries, Walker put forward a theory that the *janmi* had absolute rights. Thackeray too had accepted Walker's theory and went a step further, comparing *janmis* of Malabar with landlords in England. Based on the Thackeray report, the Board of Revenue finally took a decision in 1818 to accept the *janmis* as the absolute owners of land. The traditional relations between *janmis* and tenants were snapped, depriving tenants of the shares

and rights they used to enjoy. The result was widespread tenant discontent which finally broke out in the series of *Moplah* revolts since 1836.

Moplah revolts caught the attention of a number of scholars. Conrad Wood traced the historical background probing into the forces which led to the revolt. Stephen F Dale questioned the common notion that the outbreaks were solely due to economic grievances and agrarian discontent. Other studies are those of Ronald Miller, M Gangadhara Menon and Madhavan Nair. T.L. Strange who was appointed to make an enquiry discounted the agrarian discontent argument, considering *Moplah* fanaticism as the primary cause. He recommended severe repressive measures which were implemented by the authorities. The unrest persisted and the incidents continued without any let up.⁹

Following the receipt of an anonymous petition threatening further revolts in 1880, William Logan, a former Collector of Malabar was appointed as special commissioner to enquire into the land tenures. Logan traced *Janmam*, *Kanam* and *Kuzhikanam* tenures based on historical evidences and questioned the theory of *Janmi* as the absolute proprietor of the soil. His conclusion was that misinterpretation of traditional land tenures led to the break of the old customary relations between *janmi* and tenants. In the new set-up, *janmi* thrived at the expense of the *kanakkaran* and cultivator, resulting in widespread agrarian discontent. Logan's report, a painstaking study of land tenures in Malabar is one of the most original and authentic so far on the subject.

The Uprising

Logan's recommendations were not acceptable to government as it adversely affected landlord interests. The whole question was referred to the Madhava Rao Commission which recommended fixity of tenures to those who held land directly under the *janmi* for a definite period. In view of the strong criticism made by Charles Turner on Madhava Rao's recommendations, the government appointed another commission headed by Master.¹⁰ The Malabar Compensation for Tenant Improvement Act of 1887 came out of the Master Commission report providing compensation for improvements made by the tenants. This is perhaps the first land reform measure in Kerala. However, even the revised Compensation Act of 1900 proved to be too inadequate to provide relief to the majority of tenants. Absence of any further legislative action led to the formation of the Malabar Tenancy Association in 1915. KN Panicker concludes that in all land legislation since the second half of the nineteenth century, the unorganised ordinary peasant community consisting of small *kanakkar* and *verumpattakkar* were ignored because of the vested interests of the powerful big *kanakkar*.¹¹

Agrarian outbreaks culminated in the mass insurrection of 1921. Some of the most repressive steps were taken by government. Agrarian discontent, the Khilafat Movement, the freedom struggle, colonial administrative oppression, and the divide-and-rule policy or a combination of several of these have been cited as the major causes of the rebellion. Conrad Wood argues that the outbreaks were attempts by rural *Moplahs* in south Malabar to curb the power of high caste Hindu *janmis*, which in effect were a virtual challenge to British rule.

Robert Hardgrave identified a multiplicity of factors such as agrarian discontent, perceived threat to Islam, Congress-Khilafat agitation, inflammatory newspaper reports and provocation by government officials and the police.¹² Gangadhara Menon discusses the Yakub Hasan episode, the arrest of four leaders of the non-co-operation and Khilafat movements and other events leading to the rebellion.¹³ Other studies on the topics are those of Ronald E Miller and Sukhbir Choudhary.¹⁴

Peasant Movement

While the rebellion, and other acts of the *Moplah* peasantry (mostly *Verumpattom* tenants) failed to force land legislation, the newly organised *Kanam* tenants were able to exert pressure on the government to appoint the Malabar Tenancy Committee and pass the Act of 1930.¹⁵ It upgraded the *Kanam* tenants to the status of landlords while overlooking the case of the *Verumpattom* tenants. This was the setting for the emergence of peasant movements in Malabar under the leadership of the Congress Sociality Party.

History of the peasant movement in Malabar is a topic which attracted attention from many political activists.¹⁶ Among academic studies mention may be made of those by P. Radhakrishnan tracing the various stages of the peasant movements. K K N Kurup on Kayyur riots, and Prakash Karat on the peasant movements.¹⁷

Other studies which examined the overall agrarian change in Malabar during the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth were those of TC Varghese and Thomas W Shea. Varghese besides following the tenancy changes also examined the socio-economic developments affecting land relationship. Shea identified the barriers to economic growth in immobility of the caste structure, traditional occupational distribution of the elite, absence of systematic government in the pre-British period, pattern of land tenures, structure of family property laws and population growth during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Another notable study on the subject is that of AC Mayer.¹⁸

Travancore to the South

Before accepting British suzerainty in 1798, Travancore had emerged as a powerful state by subjugating all the local chieftains on its territory. Traditional hierarchy of land rights was upset, reducing the power of the *janmi* and strengthening the position of superior tenants. By the end of eighteenth century as a result of converting the lands of conquered chieftains into *Sirkar* (government) land, about half of the cultivated area became *Pandaravaka* (treasury-owned) under four different tenancies: *Pattom*, *Otti*, *Inam*, and *Viruthi*.

The rest came under three categories of *janmom* freehold, taxfree and *Rajabhogam*: the first held by members and relatives of royal households, the second by the temples and Brahmins and the third by the chieftains. Compared to the British in Malabar, the policies of the Government of Travancore were more conducive to agricultural development. The Royal

Proclamation of 1829 directed the High Court to disallow any action on eviction of genuine tenants without prima facie charge against them.

By 1850 about 80 per cent of the cultivated land had come under the *sirkar*. An important landmark in the history of Travancore land tenures was the *Pattom* Proclamation of 1865, by which government conferred full ownership rights on tenant cultivators of *sirkar* land and removed all restriction of transfer rights. Another major change was grant of occupancy rights and reliefs to *Kanam* tenants under the *janmis*. During the first half of the 20th century, the most important tenancy measure implemented was the *Janmi-Kudian* Amendment Act of 1932, which conferred absolute proprietary rights on the *kudian* (tenant-cultivator) with the obligation of yearly payment of *janmi* dues.

Compared to Malabar, literature on agrarian issues and developments in Travancore are meagre. As for the nineteenth century, a notable work is that of Samuel Mateer, an English missionary who was mainly concerned about the socio-cultural aspects of the important castes and briefly discussed the pattern of land ownership and agricultural practices. Vast areas of land were owned by the Maharaja and relatives of the ruler and the chieftains. Agricultural work was done with slave labour.¹⁹ Saradamoni's topic is the economic and social conditions of the Pulaya slave caste during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁰

State Manuals, one compiled by Nagam Aiya and the other by TK Velu Pillai give detailed accounts of tenures, settlements, taxation and revenue administration. Velu Pillai gives a comparatively wider coverage. Two academic studies of the agrarian situation are those of TC Varghese and Robin Jeffrey.²¹ Varghese gives details of government policies followed in the second half of the nineteenth century which, according to him, was helpful to the peasantry as well as for overall agricultural development. Jeffrey's work is an interdisciplinary analysis of the social and political history of Travancore from 1847 to 1908. The main focus is on matriliney, but social structure, land ownership and tenancy patterns of the 1850s are not missed out. Mention may also be made of the work of Abraham Koshy on the revenue administration and land reforms introduced by Dewan T. Madhava Rao.²²

Cochin in the Middle

In Cochin which lies between Travancore and Malabar, where earlier conquests of the chieftains coupled with subsequent takeover of land and property of 179 temples in 1812, brought 40 per cent of crop area under *Pandaravaka* state ownership. Of the three tenancies *Vetumpattom*, *Kanam* and *Inam*, *Verumpattom* was most common. The rest of the land was either *Puravaka* and *Janmom* owned by landlord who paid a nominal land tax to the state. Throughout the nineteenth century it was a policy of non-interference in the affairs of landlords and tenants. In 1905, *Pandaravaka* cultivators were granted ownership rights. By subsequent Acts in 1914 and 1938 fixity was conferred on *Kanam* tenants or *janmis* together with compensation for farm improvements made by them. *Verumpattom* tenants, let out of the purview of earlier legislations, were given permanent occupancy rights in 1943.

Literature is scanty on developments in Cochin. The State Manual compiled by Achutha Menon is a source of information on land tenures, land ownership pattern, land

revenue system, settlements and revenue administration of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²³ TC Varghese who gives a brief history of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth is of the view that although tenurial conditions in Cochin were more favourable than in Malabar, lack of transport facilities stood in the way of opening up new plantations and expansion of farming.

Subbarama Aiyar's study of a village of the 1920s (Nelluvaya in the northern most border taluk) may be considered as the first academic study of agrarian relations in Cochin.²⁴ There were three principal claimants of the produce: government, landlord and tenant ranging from definite ownership right to more tenancy-at-will. An economic survey of nine villages conducted in 1933 with the intention of generating background material for formulating effective rural uplift policies also gathered data on ownership patterns, fragmentation and agricultural indebtedness.²⁵ The survey highlights absentee landlordism and a tenancy which destroyed incentives to higher farm productivity.

After Independence (1947)

The Malabar Tenancy Act of 1930 was amended in 1951 with the purpose of abolishing tenancy renewal by *Melcharth* and providing fixity to all categories of renewable tenures. A second amendment in 1954 afforded fixity of tenure to all cultivating *verumpattakars* of more than six years's standing. At the formation of Kerala state in 1956, wide variations in the tenurial conditions gave rise to widespread discontent among Malabar peasants. The general election of 1957 returned the Communist Party of India to power which passed the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill in 1959. Following the dismissal of the communist ministry, a coalition government came to power, and passed a revised version of the bill in 1960. The Kerala High Court declared it *ultra vires* of the constitution. New legislation in the form of the Kerala Land Reforms Act of 1963 came into force from April 1964. What finally abolished landlordism in Kerala was the Land Reforms Amendment act of 1969 which was enforced on first January 1970.

Literature on the post-independence period may be classified under three heads: tenurial developments; peasant movements, and implementation and impact of land reforms. Under tenurial developments, V.R. Pillai's study gives a detailed description of the Travancore and Cochin land tenures during early 1950s.²⁶ The Centre for Development Studies and MA Oomen follow what happened after 1947.²⁷ T C Varghese discusses landownership structure, socio-economic characteristics of rural households and ownership, and pattern of land transfers in terms of caste groups up to 1960. T K Oommen examines agrarian legislation and protest movements by classifying the period into four phases; pre-independence; 1947-56; 1957 to 1969; after 1970.²⁸ N. Jose Chander gave details of the legislative process involved in the Agrarian Relations Act 1960 and Land Reforms Act 1963: the historical background against which the bill was prepared and the role of pressure groups.²⁹

The movement of the peasantry attracted plenty of scholarly attention. History upto 1969 was traced by P.Radhakrishnan.³⁰ K C Alexander examined the changes in labour relations in the Kuttanad rice bowl and identified some of the main factors: role of the communists and other political parties; farmer's response to trade unionism in the organised form of the Kuttanad Karshaka Sangham; and labour policy of the communist government. Growth of the communist party, and its leadership of state administration in 1957 and 1967 also provided a favourable political environment for the growth of workers unions.³¹

T.K. Oommen also examined the relationship between agrarian legislation and movements. His hypothesis was that "A radical legislation will not be successful unless there is pressure built from below through militant protest movements". A study by TK Oommen covered the objectives, organisational structure, social composition of members, finance, physical facilities and communication patterns of the major farm labour unions in Alleppey district.³² A.V. Jose covers early peasant movements in Malabar and Travancore as a background to the emergence of agricultural labour unionism in the Palghat and Kuttanad regions after independence.³³

On implementation and impact of land reforms, Aiyappan's sociological survey of Mayur village in Ponnani taluk, though primarily intended to unearth the Ezhava community's reaction to social legislation, deals also with agrarian society, land ownership pattern, tenurial and economic conditions.³⁴ M.A. Oommen after evaluation of the land reform implementation in Kerala, concluded that although the measures helped to solve the tenancy problems to a great extent, rehabilitation of agricultural labourers still remained.³⁵ An official all India review contains sections on the progress of land reforms in Kerala till 1963.³⁶

A survey conducted by the Kerala government's Bureau of Economics and Statistics on tenurial conditions and the effect of the 1963 Land Reforms Act yields plenty of valuable information about agrarian classes, distribution, size and ownership of holdings, tenancy relations and land transfers.³⁷ Land reforms significantly altered the structure of ownership by abolishing the entire strata of rentiers and intermediaries, but the resultant redistribution turned out to be in favour of rich peasants owning 5 to 20 acres.³⁸

Ronald Herring examined the agrarian structure on the eve of the 1969 reform and found that here again the beneficiaries appeared to be rich peasants. Those who gained least were the poor peasants and agricultural labourers. He attributed this to the strategy and conceptualisation of the reforms.³⁹ Joan P Mencher in her evaluation of the Kerala model of development concluded on empirical evidence that the majority of farm workers did not derive any benefit. According to Mencher, legislation in Kerala gave to landless labourers something similar to the right on *Cheri* (Harijan Quarter) which the Tamil Nadu agricultural labourers had been enjoying for long.⁴⁰

Kerala's agrarian structure and relations attracted the attention of administrators, political activists and scholars right from the eighteenth century. With few stray patches, the pre-colonial period is an area of darkness. Under the British raj, however, plenty of

information was collected on Malabar for administrative purposes in the form of official reports on land tenures, land revenue and land settlements.

Compared to Malabar, material is scanty for Travancore and Cochin states relating to Nineteenth and the first half of the 20th century. Further investigation is called for on land distribution under the pre-independence period which seemed to favour rich and middle peasants. As for the post-independence period, there is a fairly good number of studies on agrarian issues.

One may get the impression that scholars and political activists confined themselves to a few pet topics: The *Moplah* revolts and the peasant movements were repeatedly examined one after the other with almost identical objectives of investigation. The information available provides a historical background, the outlines of which are hazy, but not too unidentifiable.

Notes:

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3. Historians differ regarding the caste of members of the council. P N Kunjan Pillai is of the view that the council, consisting of Brahmins and non-Brahmins in the early periods, was later exclusive to the Brahmins. MGS Narayanan argues that the members of the council were exclusively Brahmins. Kesavan Veluthat points out that they were only Brahmins and many families figuring in the records even survive today.
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15. Government of Madras, Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee 1927 -28, in two volumes 1928.
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